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Ecofeminism in Indian English Literature: A Study on the Selected Works
of Vandana Shiva, Shubhangi Swarup and Anita Nair

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between ecological crisis and gender oppression in Indian English literature through selected works of Vandana Shiva, Shubhangi Swarup, and Anita Nair. While Vandana Shiva's theoretical writings provide a strong ecofeminist critique of modern development and environmental exploitation, Shubhangi Swarup's novel *Latitudes of Longing* and Anita Nair's fiction offer narrative representations of the interconnectedness between human life and the natural environment. Using qualitative textual and thematic analysis, the study explores how these authors challenge dominant development paradigms, portray the relationship between women and nature, and suggest ethical engagement with ecological systems. The paper also highlights a gap in existing scholarship, noting that while Shiva's ecofeminist theory and Swarup's ecological narratives have received critical attention, the ethical ecological dimensions in Anita Nair's fiction remain comparatively underexplored. The study concludes that ecofeminist perspectives in Indian English literature provide valuable insights into environmental ethics, gender relations, and sustainable social practices in contemporary India.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Indian English Literature, Ecology, Gender Oppression, Environmental Ethics, Resistance.

Introduction

The Concept of Ecofeminism is a theoretical perspective that links environmental issues with feminist concerns. It argues that the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women are interconnected processes rooted in patriarchal and capitalist systems. The term "ecofeminism" was first introduced by Françoise d'Eaubonne in the 1970s, emphasizing the need to address ecological destruction alongside gender inequality.

In the Indian context, ecofeminism has developed through the influence of environmental movements, indigenous traditions, and socio-political struggles related to development and resource exploitation. Environmental activism and intellectual contributions from scholars such as Vandana

Shiva have significantly shaped ecofeminist thought in India. Shiva's work highlights the relationship between women, biodiversity, and sustainable ecological practices. She argues that modern development often leads to environmental degradation and undermines the traditional knowledge systems of rural communities (Shiva 23). Through her activism and scholarship, she emphasizes the importance of ecological sustainability and social justice.

In contemporary Indian English literature, ecofeminist ideas have also found expression through narrative forms. Writers increasingly depict nature not merely as a background setting but as an active force influencing human life and identity. Shubhangi Swarup's *Latitudes of Longing* explores the connection between human emotions and ecological landscapes, while Anita Nair's novels portray the experiences of women within social and environmental contexts. By examining these works together, this study seeks to understand how ecofeminist ideas are articulated across theoretical writing and creative literature. The paper explores how these authors critique environmental exploitation and suggests alternative ethical relationships between humans and nature.

Literature Review

Vandana Shiva's Theoretical Foundations – Shiva's *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* (1988) is often treated as foundational to Indian ecofeminist thought; it links women's marginalization, biodiversity loss, and development policies, critiquing "maldevelopment."

Ecofeminism Co-authored with Maria Mies – In *Ecofeminism* (1993), Shiva and Mies develop analyses of patriarchy, globalization, and the political economy of nature, contributing cross-cultural theory.

Shubhangi Swarup's *Latitudes of Longing* and Emotional / Material Geographies – Scholars such as Gaana Jayagopalan read it via affective ecocriticism, emphasizing its environmental aesthetics and trans corporeal interconnectedness between human and non-human worlds.

Materiality's of Water and Geological Faultline's in Swarup's work – Arunima Bhattacharya's recent reading emphasizes how *Latitudes of Longing* moves beyond predictable nation-time developmental narratives to engage "deep time," geological imperatives, and shared aims across species and terrains.

Anita Nair's Use of Nature and Environment in Her Novels – Some studies focus on how nature imagery functions in *Mistress*, *Ladies' Coupe*, *The Better Man*, etc., to reflect emotional states, gendered constraints, and cultural belonging.

Subjugation of Women in Anita Nair's *Mistress* as Ecofeminist Study – This article analyses socio-cultural constraints on women in *Mistress*, linking them to broader ecologies of domination.

Characteristics of Ecofeminism in India – Works such as "Characteristics of Eco-Feminism in General with a Special Reference to India" (Parmar) survey how Indian literature constructs the women-nature nexus, the heritage of rural knowledge, the critique of modern science, and the necessity of pluralism and ethics of care. While there is a substantial work on Vandana Shiva's theoretical writings and isolated critical readings of novel-texts (especially Swarup's *Latitudes of Longing* and Nair's *Mistress*), there remains a gap in the comparative study of how the imaginative narratives of Swarup and Nair extend, to complicate, or challenge Shiva's theoretical ecofeminism. In particular, the ethical implications of nature-human interdependence in fiction—beyond representation—are underexplored; also underexplored is the extent to which Nair's lesser-studied works provide ecofeminist frameworks that could inform environmental activism or policy. Finally, much critical work treats nature imagery as metaphor rather than as part of ecological systems that have agency in the narrative.

The main focus of this article is to compare and contrast the ecofeminist visions articulated by Vandana Shiva (theory/activism), Shubhangi Swarup (fiction), and Anita Nair (fiction). To explore how narrative works (Swarup, Nair) embody and possibly extend Shiva's Theoretical Ecofeminist

Concerns. To examine the ethical import of nature in these works: how nature is given agency, how its destruction is narrated, and what forms of resistance are proposed. To suggest how reading these works comparatively can provide insights for literary criticism, environmental ethics, and possibly policy or activism in India.

This study employs a qualitative, comparative textual analysis methodology. It analyses primary texts—selected theoretical works by Vandana Shiva (*Staying Alive, Ecofeminism* etc.), the novel *Latitudes of Longing* by Shubhangi Swarup, and selected novels by Anita Nair (e.g., *Mistress, Ladies' Coupe, The Better Man*). Secondary sources are drawn from peer-reviewed literary criticism, ecocriticism, and ecofeminist theory. The method involves close reading of thematic motifs (nature, development, gendered oppression, voice), narrative structure (how non-human nature is given presence or agency), and ethical implications (resistance, indigenous knowledge, alternative imaginaries). Comparative combination is used to highlight continuities and divergences between theory and narrative.

Vandana Shiva: Theoretical Ecofeminism, Development, and Maldevelopment

Vandana Shiva's works establish a framework: she critiques the dominant development paradigm, shows how it is gendered and colonial in origin, and links women's marginality with ecological destruction. The concept of *maldevelopment* is central: development projects that ignore local ecologies, indigenous knowledge, and women's labor often cause more harm than benefit. Shiva argues that rural and indigenous women are not merely passive victims but stewards of biodiversity, whose knowledge is crucial for ecological sustainability. The relationship between women and nature for her is neither romanticized essentialism nor unquestioning; it is material, practical, epistemic—about seeds, forests, water, and livelihood. (From *Staying Alive, Ecofeminism*).

Human-Non-Human Interconnectedness in *Latitudes of Longing*

Shubhangi Swarup's narrative pushes theory into imaginative embodiment. In *Latitudes of Longing*, the non-human: seas, geological fault lines, ghosts, yeti, flora and fauna are not mere settings but active participants shaping human experience. Environmental calamity, memory, myth, longing, and love intertwine. Critics have noted how Swarup uses "deep time" and materiality (e.g., water, geological ruptures) to disturb linear developmental narratives, bringing more holistic, ethical visions.

Nature, Voice, and Resistance in Anita Nair's Fiction

Anita Nair's works often depict female protagonists whose personal crises are mirrored in natural landscapes. Nature may act as refuge, as constraint, as memory, or as site of longing. In *Mistress*, for example, women's suppression is not only social/political but existential; natural imagery underscores what is lost, obscured. In *Ladies' Coupe*, seashores, paths, journeys suggest mobility, choice, longing beyond fixed domesticity. While Nair does not always adopt overt activism, her narratives often open space for critique of gendered norms, inviting readers to imagine alternative ecologies of relations.

Comparative Analysis: Theory and Narrative

When we juxtapose Shiva's theory with the narratives of Swarup and Nair, we see both alignment and deviation. Shiva's emphasis on indigenous knowledge, biodiversity, and grassroots resistance finds resonance in Swarup's attention to local ecologies and material geographies, and in Nair's use of landscapes and interruption of domestic norms. However, narrative works also complicate the theory: they show ambiguous agency (natural forces may be indifferent or even intimidating), hybrid identities (humans of multiple heritages, non-human presences), and unpredictable consequences of environmental degradation. The aesthetic choices (e.g., magical realism, myth, and multiple timelines) permit different kinds of ethical reflection than straightforward theoretical critique.

All three authors suggest alternatives- Shiva through activism, seed sovereignty, local knowledge, ecological sustainability; Swarup through narrative that invites empathy with non-human nature and recognition of entangled futures; Nair through characters who resist imposed limits, seek reconnection with nature, travel, or internal transformation. These alternatives are not utopian fixes but suggest ethical orientations: care, interdependence, relationality, respect for diversity (both cultural and biological), and responsibility. They also pose challenges: how to act in a world structured by capitalist, patriarchal, colonial power; how to avoid idealizing nature or burdening women with ecological duty; how to make literary imagination contribute to social change.

Conclusion

Literary criticism in India may benefit from more comparative ecofeminist work that treats narrative ecology not just as metaphor but as ethical stake, exploring how fiction might influence environmental awareness and activism. Writers and educators should incorporate environmental ethics and ecofeminist sensibilities in curricula; this could help in shaping public attitudes to nature, gender, and sustainable development. More field-based research on how readers, especially women in rural or indigenous communities, interpret and are affected by narratives that link gender and ecology might enrich understanding of literature's impact. Policy-makers should pay attention to indigenous women's ecological knowledge and narratives – especially those that are expressed in literature – as part of environmental planning, biodiversity protection, climate adaptation, etc.

Ecofeminism in Indian English literature provides an important framework for understanding the relationship between environmental degradation and gender inequality. The theoretical insights of Vandana Shiva and the narrative representations in the works of Shubhangi Swarup and Anita Nair highlight how literature can engage with ecological and social concerns. While Shiva critiques dominant development models and advocates ecological justice, the fictional narratives of Swarup and Nair portray the complex relationship between human life and the natural world. Together, these works demonstrate that ecofeminist perspectives in literature contribute to critical discussions on sustainability, environmental ethics, and gender justice in contemporary society.

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