



From Anthropocentrism to Ecological Agency: A Contemporary Ecocritical Reading of Environmental Crisis in Literature

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Abstract

Ecocriticism has emerged as an important interdisciplinary approach for examining the relationship between literature, culture, and the physical environment. While early ecocritical studies primarily concentrated on wilderness, nature writing, and the representation of landscapes, contemporary ecological criticism increasingly addresses climate change, environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, extractivism, environmental justice, and the agency of nonhuman beings. This article examines the transformation of ecocritical thought from an anthropocentric interpretation of nature toward a broader ecological framework that recognizes the interconnectedness of humans, nonhuman life, and environmental systems. Using qualitative textual analysis, the study proposes an **Ecological Agency Framework** for examining environmental narratives through four dimensions: ecological representation, human–nature relationships, structures of environmental power, and ecological resistance or recovery. The article argues that literature does more than represent environmental destruction; it can challenge dominant assumptions about human superiority, expose unequal environmental relationships, and cultivate ecological awareness. The study contributes to contemporary ecocritical scholarship by offering an integrated analytical framework that connects literary representation with ecological agency and environmental responsibility. The findings suggest that ecocritical reading can serve as an important intellectual

bridge between literary studies and the broader environmental humanities.

Keywords: Ecocriticism; ecological agency; anthropocentrism; environmental humanities; climate literature; environmental justice; human–nature relationship.

Introduction

The environmental crises of the twenty-first century have transformed the relationship between literature and ecological thought. Climate instability, biodiversity decline, pollution, deforestation, resource extraction, and the degradation of ecosystems are no longer concerns restricted to scientific or policy discourse. They have increasingly become cultural, ethical, and imaginative concerns. Literature provides a space in which environmental transformations can be represented, interpreted, questioned, and emotionally experienced.

Ecocriticism developed as a critical approach that investigates the relationship between literary texts and the physical environment. Its central concern is the manner in which nature, place, animals, landscapes, ecological processes, and environmental crises are represented in cultural narratives. Rather than treating the environment merely



as a passive background for human action, ecocritical analysis investigates the cultural assumptions that shape human relationships with the nonhuman world.

The field has expanded considerably from its earlier focus on nature writing and wilderness. Later developments incorporated urban environments, environmental justice, postcolonial perspectives, climate narratives, extinction, Indigenous knowledge, and global ecological inequality. Contemporary scholarship continues to question universal ideas of “humanity” and explores new methods for understanding environmental narratives, including empirical approaches and structured methods for examining extractivism and ecological power relations.

This development creates an important opportunity for ecocritical research. Although many studies identify environmental themes in literary works, fewer studies provide an integrated framework for examining how ecological entities acquire narrative agency and how literature connects environmental representation with structures of power, exploitation, resistance, and recovery. This article addresses that gap by proposing an Ecological Agency Framework for contemporary ecocritical analysis.

Research Problem

Traditional literary criticism has often privileged human characters, human conflicts, and social institutions. Within such approaches, forests, rivers, animals, weather, and landscapes may appear primarily as settings or symbols.

However, environmental crises demonstrate that nonhuman systems are not passive. Ecological processes influence human societies, while human activities transform ecosystems. An ecocritical approach must therefore examine literature as a space where this reciprocal relationship is constructed.

The central research problem of this study is:

How can contemporary ecocriticism move beyond the representation of nature as a thematic background and develop a systematic framework for examining ecological agency, environmental power, and ecological response within literary narratives?

Objectives of the Study

The study has the following objectives:

1. To examine the evolution of ecocriticism from nature-centered criticism to contemporary environmental humanities.
2. To analyse the limitations of anthropocentric approaches to literary interpretation.
3. To explore the representation of ecological agency in environmental narratives.
4. To identify the relationship between environmental degradation and structures of social and economic power.
5. To propose an Ecological Agency Framework for contemporary ecocritical analysis.
6. To demonstrate the relevance of ecocriticism to ecological awareness and environmental responsibility.

Research Questions

This article addresses the following questions:

1. How has ecocriticism evolved in response to contemporary environmental challenges?
2. In what ways do literary narratives challenge anthropocentric understandings of nature?
3. How can nonhuman entities function as agents within literary and environmental narratives?
4. What relationship exists between environmental exploitation and structures of power?



5. How can ecological resistance and recovery be systematically examined through literary texts?

Review of Literature

Ecocriticism emerged as an important area of literary and cultural inquiry through the growing recognition that environmental concerns require critical attention within the humanities. Early scholarship concentrated significantly on nature writing, wilderness, and representations of the natural landscape. The field subsequently expanded toward more diverse geographical, cultural, and political contexts.

Lawrence Buell's work on environmental criticism contributed to the expansion of the field by tracing its development and identifying the need to make environmental discourse a continuing part of literary and cultural studies.

Recent scholarship demonstrates that ecocriticism is increasingly interdisciplinary. Current discussions include affective ecocriticism, extinction narratives, toxicity, deep time, Indigenous perspectives, decoloniality, and nonhuman agency.

Another important development is the search for more systematic research methods. Empirical ecocriticism combines humanistic interpretation with approaches drawn from the social sciences to investigate environmental narratives and their influence on audiences. Similarly, Ecocritical Extraction Analysis has proposed a structured approach to studying literary representations of resource exploitation, environmental power relations, and resistance.

These developments demonstrate a significant shift within the field. Ecocriticism is no longer limited to identifying descriptions of nature in literature. It increasingly investigates the political, ethical, cultural, and material relationships that connect humans with ecological systems.

Research Gap

A review of recent ecocritical scholarship identifies the following research gaps:

- Many studies remain primarily descriptive and focus on identifying environmental themes in literary texts.
- Existing approaches often analyse anthropocentrism, environmental degradation, or environmental justice separately rather than through an integrated analytical model.
- There is a need for a clearer framework to examine the narrative agency of nonhuman entities.
- Environmental representation is frequently studied without systematically connecting it to structures of power, exploitation, resistance, and ecological recovery.
- Contemporary ecocriticism requires analytical models that can be adapted across different literary genres and cultural contexts.

Therefore, this study proposes an **Ecological Agency Framework** that integrates environmental representation, human–nature relationships, ecological power structures, and ecological response.

Proposed Ecological Agency Framework

The proposed framework consists of four interconnected dimensions.

Ecological Representation

This dimension examines how nature is represented within the text.

Questions include:

- Is nature represented as scenery, resource, symbol, or living system?
- Which ecological entities receive narrative attention?



- How are environmental changes described?

Human–Nature Relationship

This dimension investigates the philosophical relationship between humans and the environment.

The analysis identifies whether the narrative promotes:

- anthropocentrism;
- stewardship;
- ecological interdependence; or
- an ecocentric worldview.

Environmental Power Structure

This dimension examines who controls environmental resources and who experiences the consequences of ecological damage.

The analysis considers:

- resource extraction;
- industrial development;
- environmental inequality;
- displacement;
- pollution; and
- unequal access to ecological resources.

Ecological Response

The final dimension investigates how the narrative responds to environmental crisis.

Possible responses include:

- resistance;
- adaptation;
- restoration;
- ecological recovery;
- collective action; or
- environmental collapse.

Proposed Analytical Flow

**Literary Text → Ecological Representation → Human–Nature Relationship → Environmental Power Structure
→ Ecological Response → Ecological Agency**



Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive research design based on ecocritical textual analysis. The proposed framework can be applied to novels, short stories, poetry, drama, climate fiction, Indigenous narratives, and other forms of environmental literature.

The analysis follows five stages:

Stage 1: Identification of Ecological Elements

Environmental entities, including landscapes, forests, water bodies, animals, climate events, and ecosystems, are identified within the selected text.

Stage 2: Classification of Human–Nature Relationships

The narrative is examined to determine whether it reflects domination, exploitation, coexistence, interdependence, or ecological responsibility.

Stage 3: Mapping Environmental Power

The study identifies the institutions, communities, or economic systems associated with resource control and environmental degradation.

Stage 4: Identification of Ecological Agency

The analysis examines whether nonhuman entities influence events, shape human decisions, create conflict, or contribute to transformation.

Stage 5: Analysis of Ecological Response

The text is examined for representations of resistance, adaptation, restoration, sustainability, or collapse.

Discussion

The proposed framework shifts the focus of ecocritical analysis from a simple question— **“How is nature represented?”**—to a broader set of questions:

Who has power over nature? How does environmental change affect different communities? Can nonhuman entities influence narrative development? How does the text imagine ecological resistance or recovery?

This shift is important because contemporary environmental crises cannot be understood solely through the traditional separation of human society and natural systems. Environmental destruction is connected with economic activity, political power, cultural beliefs, and unequal vulnerability.

Recent research similarly demonstrates a growing interest in developing methods that connect literary analysis with environmental justice and resource exploitation. At the same time, developments in African ecocriticism and other regional approaches demonstrate the importance of Indigenous knowledge, decolonial perspectives, and nonhuman agency.

The Ecological Agency Framework contributes to this discussion by treating environmental elements not simply as objects of representation but as components of a larger system of relationships. A river, for example, may function as a geographical space, a source of livelihood, a contested resource, a victim of pollution, and an active force influencing human communities. Similarly, a forest may represent biodiversity, cultural memory, economic exploitation, ecological resistance, and environmental loss.

This multi-dimensional approach allows literary analysis to connect textual interpretation with broader ecological realities.



Key Findings

The study identifies five major findings.

Finding 1: Ecocriticism Has Expanded Beyond Nature Writing

Contemporary ecocriticism now addresses climate change, environmental justice, extinction, extractivism, Indigenous knowledge, and ecological inequality.

Finding 2: Anthropocentrism Remains a Central Critical Problem

Many narratives continue to represent nature primarily in terms of its usefulness to human society. Ecocritical reading challenges this assumption by emphasizing ecological interdependence.

Finding 3: Nonhuman Agency Requires Greater Analytical Attention

Landscapes, animals, weather systems, and ecosystems can influence narrative structures and human experiences. Their role should therefore be examined beyond symbolism or background description.

Finding 4: Environmental Crisis Is Connected to Power

Ecological degradation is frequently linked to resource extraction, economic systems, political authority, and unequal exposure to environmental harm.

Finding 5: Literature Can Imagine Ecological Alternatives

Environmental narratives can represent resistance, restoration, collective responsibility, and alternative relationships between humans and the natural world.

Contribution of the Study

The major contribution of this article is the proposed **Ecological Agency Framework**.

Unlike approaches that focus only on environmental description, the framework integrates:

- ecological representation;
- human–nature relationships;
- environmental power structures; and
- ecological response.

The framework can potentially be applied across literary genres and cultural contexts. It also creates an opportunity for future interdisciplinary research connecting ecocriticism with environmental humanities, digital humanities, environmental communication, and computational text analysis.

Conclusion

Ecocriticism has developed from a critical interest in nature and wilderness into a broad interdisciplinary field concerned with the cultural, political, ethical, and imaginative dimensions of environmental life. Contemporary ecological crises require literary criticism to move beyond the assumption that nature is merely a setting for human experience.

This article argues for an approach that recognizes ecological agency and examines the interconnected relationships among humans, nonhuman beings, environmental systems, and structures of power. The proposed Ecological Agency Framework provides a systematic model for analysing these relationships through four dimensions: ecological representation, human–nature relationships, environmental power structures, and ecological response.



The study concludes that literature can function as more than a reflection of environmental crisis. It can expose ecological injustice, challenge anthropocentric thinking, represent nonhuman agency, and imagine alternative forms of ecological coexistence. Future research can test and refine the proposed framework through detailed analysis of selected novels, climate fiction, Indigenous literature, regional writing, poetry, or comparative environmental narratives.

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