



## Landscapes, Memory and Morality in *The Ramayana* and *The God of Small Things*

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### Abstract

This paper examines the role of landscapes as sites of cultural memory and ethical reflection in Indian literature. Drawing on ecocritical theory, particularly concepts of environmental imagination and slow violence, the paper explores the sacred natural places in the *Ramayana* and compares them to the landscapes in *The God of Small Things*, which carry strong memories and emotional meanings. While the epic presents forests and rivers as sacred spaces for moral transformation and spiritual discipline, Roy's novel depicts natural spaces as sites of trauma, social inequality and historical memory. By comparing the two texts using comparative ecocritical analysis, the paper shows that landscapes function as active parts of the story. They reveal how human relationships unfold and expose the moral and social conflicts within the communities in these texts. By integrating mythological and modern narratives into dialogue, the study demonstrates that Indian literary traditions consistently assign ethical and symbolic value to the natural world. These portrayals show how the landscape, cultural memory and environmental imagination are connected in Indian literature.

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism; Landscape; Cultural Memory; Indian Epics; Arundhati Roy; Environmental Humanities.

### Introduction

"Environmental imagination begins when landscapes are understood not

merely as scenery but as sites of human history." -Lawrence Buell

In literature, landscapes rarely serve as mere background. Forests, rivers and

mountains often hold greater significance. They serve as stores of cultural memory where human experience, moral struggles and historical changes are preserved. In many stories, nature quietly witnesses human life, absorbing accounts of exile, desire, violence and resistance. These portrayals illustrate that literary landscapes are not simply descriptive elements but spaces filled with moral and emotional meaning. As Lawrence Buell suggests, literary works shape how readers envision the connection between human societies and the natural world (Buell).

This symbolic use of landscapes is especially notable in Indian literature. From the sacred forests of the *Ramayana* to the monsoon-drenched world of *The God of Small Things*, nature often plays an active role in storytelling. Rivers, forests and even abandoned buildings do more than frame events. They become places where memory, tension and meaning develop. Through these depictions, landscapes reflect social orders, emotional realities and historical processes within human life.

Recent progress in environmental humanities and ecocriticism has highlighted how literary landscapes operate at the crossroads of ecological, cultural and political meanings. Scholars like Ursula K. Heise stress the role of narrative in forming our understanding of the environment and our ethical awareness. While recent ecocritical studies have deeply explored modern portrayals of nature, fewer have looked at the continuity between mythological landscapes and current ecological narratives in Indian literature. Investigating this connection leads to a fuller understanding of how landscapes serve as cultural symbols throughout time.

This study examines how landscapes function as ethical and cultural agents in Indian narratives by comparing ecological symbolism in the *Ramayana* and *The God of Small Things*. Using an ecocritical approach, it argues that landscapes in both texts serve as narrative

witnesses, upholding cultural memory while exposing moral and social tensions. By connecting mythological and modern storytelling, the study emphasises the enduring importance of ecological spaces in shaping concepts of memory, identity and justice.

### Literature Review

The rise of ecocriticism as a distinct area of literary studies has strongly influenced how scholars view the relationship between literature and the natural world. Early ecocritical scholarship emphasises the importance of examining how literary texts portray nature. These portrayals shape cultural perceptions of the environment. One of the essential contributions to this field is the work of Cheryll Glotfelty. She defines ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment (Glotfelty). From this perspective, literary works do not simply portray natural settings as passive backdrops. Instead, they actively influence cultural attitudes toward nature and environmental responsibility.

Lawrence Buell builds on these ideas. He shows how environmental imagination helps create ethical connections between human societies and the natural world (Buell). In literary works, descriptions of forests, rivers and landscapes often reflect the intersection of ecological values with cultural identities and social experiences. Similarly, Ursula K. Heise emphasises the importance of cultural accounts in shaping environmental understanding. She focuses mainly on globalisation and contemporary ecological concerns (Heise).

Another significant development in ecocritical scholarship is the concept of environmental injustice and gradual ecological harm, which Rob Nixon calls "slow violence" (Nixon). Nixon's framework draws attention to forms of environmental damage that occur slowly and often remain invisible within dominant narratives. In literary contexts, this slow violence can be observed in landscapes

bearing the effects of social and ecological exploitation.

Recent work in environmental humanities has also explored the link between ecological thought and historical awareness. Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that literary and cultural stories offer important ways to understand the relationship between human history and environmental change (Chakrabarty).

Scholars working within postcolonial studies have further emphasised the ecological dimensions of colonial and postcolonial narratives. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin argue that environmental degradation and cultural exploitation are closely linked within colonial histories (Huggan and Tiffin). Their concept of postcolonial ecocriticism spotlights the relationships among ecological landscapes, political power and cultural identity.

Scholars have also examined how landscapes function as repositories of memory and cultural meaning. Cultural memory studies suggest that natural spaces commonly preserve traces of historical experience and collective trauma. This perspective is particularly relevant in Indian literature, where rivers, forests and sacred spaces have long shaped cultural imagination.

Recent studies of Indian fiction explore how contemporary stories engage with environmental concerns alongside social and political issues. In *The God of Small Things*, critics have noted how Roy uses natural settings to reflect caste hierarchy, colonial history and social marginalisation. Her depiction of the Meenachal river, the monsoon landscape and abandoned colonial spaces demonstrates how ecological environments can carry both personal memory and collective trauma.

At the same time, mythological narratives such as the *Ramayana* present landscapes as morally charged spaces where human actions are closely connected to the

natural world. Forests function as sites of exile, transformation and ethical testing, suggesting that nature plays an active role in shaping narrative meaning.

Recent scholarship in Indian ecocriticism has increasingly examined the relationships among landscape, culture and memory in both classical and contemporary texts. Scholars such as Nirmal Selvamony have explored indigenous ecological perspectives rooted in Indian literary traditions, while critics like Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee and Sharae Deckard have analysed the intersections of ecology, postcoloniality and social inequality in modern literature. Studies on *The God of Small Things*, in particular highlight how environmental spaces reflect caste violence and historical trauma. However, while ecocritical scholarship has addressed mythological and contemporary texts separately, relatively little attention has been given to a comparative study that brings these narrative traditions into dialogue. This gap provides the basis for the present study.

Reviewing these texts together offers an opportunity to explore how Indian literary traditions imagine the relationship among nature, cultural memory and ethical reflection. By placing the sacred ecological spaces of the epic alongside the socially charged landscapes depicted in Roy's novel, it becomes possible to examine how landscapes function as narrative sites where historical memory, moral conflict and ecological meaning intersect.

### Theoretical Framework

This study uses an ecocritical framework and relies on environmental humanities and cultural memory studies. It investigates how landscapes function as narrative agents in literature. Ecocriticism enables us to examine the relationship between literature and the natural world. It shows how images of nature reflect cultural ideals, ethical conflicts, and social institutions. According to Cheryll Glotfelty, ecocriticism studies the

connections between literary works and the physical environment. It prompts researchers to consider how texts shape human perceptions of nature and ecological responsibility (Glotfelty).

Environmental imagination is important in ecocritical theory, as explained by Lawrence Buell (Buell). Buell argues that literature's depictions of forests, rivers, and landscapes shape readers' perceptions of the human-environment relationship. Through narrative, natural landscapes become settings where ethical conflicts, emotions, and cultural identities intersect.

Another essential idea pertinent to this study is slow violence, which was established by Rob Nixon (Nixon). Nixon defines slow violence as a type of injury that occurs gradually and often goes unnoticed in dominant political and cultural narratives. In literary texts, landscapes frequently absorb and reflect such hidden forms of violence, including environmental exploitation, social inequality and historical injustice.

This study also draws upon perspectives from environmental humanities that emphasise the relationship between ecological narratives and historical consciousness. Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that literary and cultural accounts offer important understandings of the complex intersections between human history and environmental change (Chakrabarty). His work suggests that ecological transformations cannot be understood independently of cultural memory and historical processes.

Taken together, these conceptual perspectives provide a model for examining how landscapes operate as ethical and cultural agents within literary narratives. Using an ecocritical approach informed by environmental humanities, this study analyses the sacred ecological spaces depicted in the *Ramayana* alongside the socially charged landscapes portrayed in *The God of Small Things*.

These theoretical concepts are applied in the analysis of both texts to examine how landscapes function as narrative agents, particularly in relation to moral transformation, cultural memory and processes of slow environmental and social violence.

### Sacred Landscapes in the Ramayana

Landscapes play an important role in determining the moral and spiritual journeys of the *Ramayana's* protagonists. Forests, rivers and hermitages are more than just geographical locations. They also serve as sacred spaces for the narrative's ethical framework. The epic continually depicts nature as a place where human acts are examined, tested and altered. In this way, the landscape plays an active role in the story's unfolding rather than a passive backdrop.

The forest Rama encounters during his exile is one of the epic's most important ecological settings. When Rama, Sita and Lakshmana leave the kingdom of Ayodhya and enter the forest, the natural environment denotes a shift from the ordered world of royal authority to a domain governed by spiritual discipline and moral testing. In other words, the forest serves as the first important environment through which the characters are tested and transformed. The forest symbolises both physical hardship and ethical change. Many retellings of the *Ramayana* depict the forest as a place populated by sages and ascetics whose lives reflect spiritual restraint and harmony with nature. Rama's interactions with these hermit societies demonstrate how exile becomes a process of moral reflection rather than a form of political retribution. Living among sages, the banished characters find themselves in a milieu that promotes reflection and obedience to dharma.

For example, the stay at Panchavati marks an important turning point, as the calm of forest life is disrupted by events that lead to Sita's abduction. The meeting with Shabari shows another dimension of the forest, where

devotion and humility are valued beyond social divisions. Rivers such as the Godavari also appear at moments of transition, quietly accompanying the journey's changes. These instances suggest that the landscape is closely connected to how the story develops.

After proving the forest's value, it is necessary to explore another natural characteristic, the network of sacred rivers encountered along the way. Rivers like the Ganga serve not merely as physical boundaries, but also as symbols of purity and spiritual rebirth. Crossing a sacred river marks a shift from one stage of the story to the next, emphasising that natural spaces play a role in spiritual and ethical growth. According to ecocritical scholars such as Lawrence Buell, literary depictions of rivers often carry symbolic connotations that connect human experience to wider ecological and moral frameworks. In the epic tradition, rivers serve as quiet witnesses to the protagonists' ethical choices and transformations.

The presence of hermitages in forest landscapes adds to the sacred aspect of these natural spaces. Hermits and sages who live in the forest represent a way of life that values and harmonises with the natural environment. Their presence indicates that the forest is not a disorderly wilderness but rather a spiritual space where spiritual wisdom and ecological harmony coexist. The interaction of royal figures and forest-dwelling sages emphasises the ethical interdependence

between humans and the natural world. At the same time, the epic depicts the forest as a place where moral conflict is obvious. The abduction of Sita by Ravana takes place in a forest setting, revealing how significant spaces may also become sources of stress and disruption. The forest, therefore, serves a dual purpose. It functions as a spiritual discipline refuge as well as a space for moral challenges. Such narrative passages in the epic tradition

highlight the complicated link between landscape and human destiny.

These depictions imply that the natural environment in the Ramayana serves as a moral landscape that records and responds to human activities. Forests and rivers stand as quiet observers to exile, dedication, struggle and transformation. By depicting ecological places as ethically charged situations, the epic creates a cultural framework in which nature and morality are inextricably linked.

This depiction of landscapes lays a solid foundation for comprehending later literary works in which natural environments serve as stores of cultural memory. While mythological traditions highlight spiritual development in holy forests, contemporary narratives, such as *The God of Small Things*, depict settings scarred by social injustice and historical pain. The continuity of these narrative traditions indicates how Indian storytelling has long viewed nature as a meaningful and morally significant presence in human life.

### **Landscape and Memory in *The God of Small Things***

In contrast to the sacred and morally ordered spaces of the *Ramayana*, the natural environment in *The God of Small Things* is closely connected to memory, trauma and social inequality. The story is set in Ayemenem in Kerala, where rivers, monsoon rains and abandoned colonial structures become important symbols of both personal and collective memory. These spaces do not merely serve as background; they reflect the emotional tensions and social realities that shape the characters' lives.

One of the most important elements in the novel is the Meenachal River, which appears throughout the narrative. The river serves as both a physical and a symbolic space where childhood innocence, forbidden love and tragedy come together. At the beginning of the novel, Roy writes, "May in Ayemenem is a hot,

brooding month" (Roy 1), using natural imagery to create a sense of unease. For the twins Estha and Rahel, the river first appears as a place of

childhood inquisitiveness, formed by the monsoon's changing rhythms. However, as the story develops, the river becomes linked with darker memories, especially the drowning of Sophie Mol (Roy 186). What once seemed a place of wonder gradually becomes a quiet witness to loss and irreversible change.

The river is also connected to the secret relationship between Ammu and Velutha. Their meetings take place near the riverbank, away from the community's stringent social rules. At these moments, the natural setting gives a short sense of freedom from caste and family restrictions. Roy captures this moment by describing how they move "into forbidden territory" (Roy 203). Yet the same space that allows their relationship also becomes tied to the violence that follows. In this way, the river represents both possibility and danger, showing how fragile resistance can be within a rigid social system.

Another important setting in the novel is the History House, an abandoned colonial building near the river. It acts as a symbol of historical memory and colonial power. Although the building is in ruins, it still carries traces of its past authority. For the children, it first appears as a place of imagination, but later becomes the site of violence. Velutha's capture and death take place here, turning the house into an indication of social injustice and oppression. Through this setting, the novel shows how places can hold memories of past suffering. This can be understood through Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence," in which harm develops gradually and remains embedded in everyday spaces. The History House, in this sense, reflects the accumulation of social injustice and caste-based oppression over time.

Roy's description of the monsoon landscape further connects the environment

with emotion. Heavy rains, dense vegetation, and rising waters create a setting that reflects the characters' inner struggles. As ecocritical scholars such as Lawrence Buell suggest, literary representations of nature often reveal broader emotional and social tensions. In this novel, the changing seasons affect not merely the physical surroundings but also the story's psychological atmosphere.

Taken together, these settings show how the environment in Ayemenem acts as a space of cultural memory. The river recalls forbidden love, the History House reflects colonial violence and the monsoon landscape suggests recurring cycles of loss. These spaces quietly record the effects of caste, gender inequality and historical injustice. By connecting social tensions with the natural world, Roy presents the environment as an active part of the narrative.

The landscapes in *The God of Small Things* show how natural spaces can become sites of memory and injustice. Unlike the sacred environments in mythological narratives which reflect moral order, Roy's settings reveal the subtleties of modern social life. The river, the house and the changing seasons do not simply frame events; they shape the characters' experiences and preserve the traces of what has happened. Through this, the novel suggests that landscapes can remember, witness and reflect human life.

### Comparative Discussion

The *Ramayana* and *The God of Small Things*, though separated by centuries and belonging to different narrative traditions, both present environments that show clear thematic similarities. In both texts, natural spaces function as more than physical settings. They act as narrative spaces where cultural, moral and human experiences come together. These representations show how nature in literature can shape ethical imagination and cultural memory.

Forests and rivers are linked with sacred order and transformation in the epic tradition. During Rama's exile, the forest becomes a space where ethical questions are faced and values are tested. Sacred rivers further support this idea by symbolising purification and renewal. The natural world reflects a sense of balance in which human actions remain connected to a larger moral and ecological order. In this way, the environment guides the characters' spiritual journey.

In Roy's novel, the environment takes on a different meaning. The setting of Ayemenem does not represent harmony but reflects the realities of caste hierarchy, colonial history and gender inequality. The Meenachal river, the monsoon landscape and the abandoned History House carry memories of trauma, forbidden relationships and social violence. These spaces do not restore order. They make the tensions present in everyday life visible.

This difference becomes more noticeable when both texts are viewed together. In the *Ramayana*, nature is closely connected to moral order and often leads characters toward resolution. In contrast, Roy's narrative presents a world where such order is disturbed and does not fully return. The landscape here does not guide the characters in the same way but reflects the complexity of their situations. In this sense, nature functions differently in each text, either supporting ethical clarity or revealing social breakdown.

Even though they differ in some aspects, both texts suggest that natural settings play an important role in storytelling. As ecocritical thinkers like Lawrence Buell point out, literary representations of nature influence both ethical and emotional understanding. In the epic, forests guide characters toward moral realisation, while in Roy's novel, ecological spaces bring out the structures of social injustice. Nature influences both the

preservation of cultural memory and the shaping of emotional experience.

By comparing these two texts, one can see the continuing role of nature in Indian literature. Memory, morality and identity remain closely linked to natural spaces in both mythological and modern narratives. This recurring idea shows that Indian storytelling consistently gives ethical and symbolic meaning to the natural world.

The comparison between the landscapes in the *Ramayana* and *The God of Small Things* shows that natural environments are important in shaping the meaning of stories in Indian literature. Forests, rivers and places like the History House are not just background settings; they are symbolic spaces that stand for moral values, cultural memories and social issues. Both texts show how the environment contributes to the story's moral and emotional elements.

In the epic tradition, sacred forests and rivers are places where spiritual tests and moral changes happen. Rama's time in the forest is a key part of the story because it highlights ethical behaviour, spiritual reflection and adherence to dharma. In Roy's novel, the natural environment plays a different but equally important role. The Meenachal River, the monsoon season and the History House reveal the effects of social injustice, caste divisions and historical pain within the Ayemenem community. These places show how human actions and social structures have shaped the community's lives.

When both texts are examined together, it becomes clear that landscapes in Indian stories are not just backgrounds but active spaces where memory, morality and culture come together. The epic tradition shows how nature helps maintain moral order and foster personal growth. Roy's story, on the other hand, shows how nature reflects social problems and unfairness. This difference shows that one tradition sees nature as supporting ethical

values, while the other sees it as reflecting social breakdown. In both cases, nature acts as a witness to human experiences over time.

An eco-critical look at these works highlights how landscape, cultural memory and ethical ideas are connected in Indian literature. By showing how landscapes have their own narrative role, this study demonstrates how nature influences our understanding, memory and identity in literature. As environmental issues become more important in global discussions, these literary views encourage people to think about the relationship between human societies and the natural world. In this way, literary landscapes remind us that nature is deeply connected to the histories, conflicts, and memories of human communities.

This study is limited to comparing a single epic with a contemporary novel, and future research may extend this approach to a wider range of Indian texts and ecological contexts.

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