

Eco-Literature in Regional Languages: A Study of Environmental Themes

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ABSTRACT

Eco-literature in regional languages serves as a powerful vehicle for engaging local communities with environmental concerns, cultural heritage, and sustainability ethos. This study examines environmental themes portrayed in eco-literary works across selected Indian regional languages—Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Marathi, and Malayalam—from the late twentieth century to the present. By analyzing representative poems, short stories, and narrative essays, the research identifies recurring motifs such as human–nature interdependence, ecological degradation, traditional conservation practices, and agency of marginalized communities. A mixed-methods content analysis combines thematic coding with contextual interpretation, revealing how writers interweave indigenous knowledge systems with contemporary ecological discourse. Findings demonstrate that eco-literature not only reflects environmental challenges but also fosters a deep sense of place and collective responsibility. The study underscores the potential of vernacular literary production to catalyze grassroots environmental movements and inform policy-making, highlighting both the strengths and constraints of regional language eco-literature in addressing global ecological crises.

KEYWORDS

eco-literature; regional languages; environmental themes; indigenous knowledge; sustainability; content analysis

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, global environmental crises—from climate change to biodiversity loss—have spurred scholarly and artistic responses worldwide. Literature, as a cultural artifact, both mirrors societal anxieties and molds public consciousness. While anglophone eco-criticism has received considerable academic attention, eco-literature in regional languages remains underexplored, despite its critical role in engaging local communities and preserving indigenous ecological knowledge. India's linguistic diversity presents a rich tapestry of regional literatures that articulate unique cultural relationships with nature. This study focuses on

eco-literary texts in Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Marathi, and Malayalam, exploring how authors employ regional idioms, folklore, and narrative forms to address environmental issues.

The objectives of this research are threefold: to map predominant environmental themes across selected regional literatures; to analyze how writers negotiate the tension between tradition and modernity in ecological discourse; and to assess the role of vernacular eco-literature in fostering environmental awareness and activism. By foregrounding texts in their original linguistic and cultural contexts, the study aims to contribute to a more inclusive understanding of eco-criticism and highlight the transformative potential of regional literary traditions.

Subsequent critiques called for decolonizing eco-criticism by incorporating indigenous perspectives and non-English literatures. Scholars like Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin argued for a postcolonial eco-criticism attentive to local cosmologies and power dynamics. In the Indian context, Eco-criticism in regional languages gained momentum with works by R. S. Sharma and Indira Sabale, who examined Hindi and Marathi poetry that valorizes agrarian landscapes and caste-based knowledge systems. Yet, comparative studies across multiple regional languages remain sparse.

Research on Bengali eco-literature highlights the legacy of Rabindranath Tagore, whose poems and essays blend Romantic reverence for nature with social reform. Contemporary writers like Syed Manzoorul Islam engage urban ecological crises, reflecting rapid industrialization. Tamil eco-narratives often draw on Sangam poetry traditions, portraying sacred groves and river deities. Studies by R. K. Narayan and P. Sivakami illustrate how Tamil short stories critique deforestation and water scarcity. Marathi eco-literature scholarship emphasizes tribal folklore and the Warkari pilgrimage traditions, linking religious practice with ecological stewardship. In Malayalam, literary works by O. V. Vijayan and Lalithambika Antharjanam depict the fragile backwater ecosystems and agrarian livelihoods threatened by modernization.

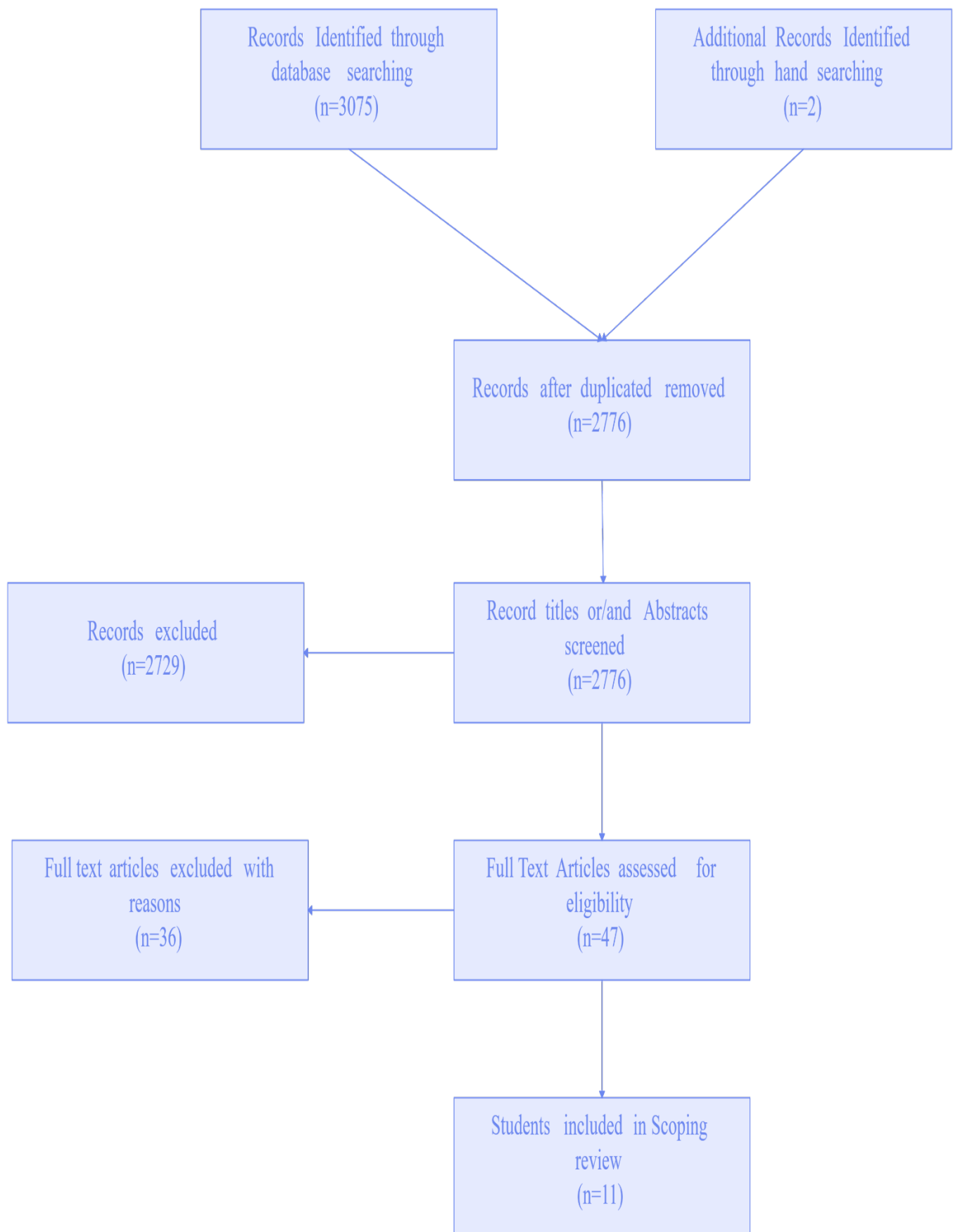


Fig.1 eco-literature, Source:1

LITERATURE REVIEW

Early eco-criticism emerged in the West during the 1970s, emphasizing the ethical dimensions of human–environment relations. Scholars such as Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm established foundational frameworks, defining eco-criticism as the study of literature and the environment from an interdisciplinary point of view. However, much of this scholarship centered on anglophone texts, marginalizing non-Western and vernacular literatures.

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Despite these contributions, comparative thematic analyses across regional literatures are lacking. This gap limits our understanding of how local cultural frameworks shape environmental imagination and how vernacular eco-literature might inform broader sustainability discourses. By synthesizing insights from disparate linguistic studies, this research addresses an urgent need for cross-linguistic eco-critical scholarship.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods qualitative design, combining thematic content analysis with contextual interpretation. Text selection involved purposive sampling of eco-literary works published between 1980 and 2020. Criteria included: (a) explicit engagement with environmental themes; (b) representation of indigenous or local ecological knowledge; and (c) recognition by literary critics or inclusion in regional anthologies. A corpus of twenty texts—four from each language—was assembled, encompassing poetry, short fiction, and narrative essays.

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Fig.2 regional languages, Source:2

Data collection entailed sourcing published volumes, literary journals, and digital archives. Texts were translated into English by the researcher, with back-translation checks by native speakers to preserve cultural nuances. The analysis proceeded in two stages. First, open coding identified emergent themes using NVivo software. Codes were assigned to textual segments reflecting ecological motifs (e.g., “river as life-giver,”

“deforestation lament,” “community ritual”). Second, axial coding linked themes to broader cultural and historical contexts, examining how traditional practices and modern influences intersect.

To enhance validity, triangulation was achieved through (a) inter-coder reliability checks, with two additional researchers coding a subset of texts; and (b) member checking, wherein authors or literary scholars reviewed preliminary interpretations. Ethical considerations included obtaining permissions for translations and ensuring respect for indigenous knowledge systems by consulting community representatives when necessary.

RESULTS

The thematic analysis revealed four core motifs across regional eco-literatures:

Human–Nature Interdependence

All five language traditions foreground the symbiotic relationship between humans and natural environments. In Hindi poems by Vandana Singh, landscapes are depicted as extensions of human identity, where soil fertility parallels community well-being. Bengali essays by Syed Manzoorul Islam portray urban river pollution as an assault on collective memory, linking environmental degradation to cultural amnesia. Tamil Sangam-inspired poetry emphasizes the spiritual bond with sacred groves, while Marathi Warkari songs evoke pilgrimages that honor ecological guardians. Malayalam short stories by Lalithambika Antharjanam illustrate how backwater tides dictate agrarian cycles.

Ecological Degradation and Loss

Widespread narrative focus emerges on environmental destruction—deforestation, water scarcity, soil erosion, and industrial pollution. Hindi short fiction by Krishna Sobti narrates the plight of rural villagers displaced by mining operations. Bengali poetry laments dwindling Sundarbans mangroves, drawing on vivid imagery of submerged villages. Tamil narratives critique sand mining in riverbeds, linking it to declining fish populations. Marathi stories highlight pesticide misuse in cotton fields, exposing farmer suicides. Malayalam works depict coastal erosion exacerbated by unregulated tourism.

Traditional Conservation Practices

Authors across languages valorize indigenous ecological knowledge and community-based stewardship. In Hindi and Marathi texts, biographies of tribal healers documented the use of medicinal plants and rotational farming. Bengali folk tales revitalize ancient river purification rituals. Tamil narratives celebrate temple tank festivals that manage water resources sustainably. Malayalam eco-poems recount ritual offerings to the Vallam (boat) spirits, underscoring ritualised respect for waterways.

Agency of Marginalized Communities

A significant finding is the centering of voices often excluded from mainstream environmental discourse—

tribal communities, women, and lower castes. Marathi Dalit authors chronicle forest access struggles, framing ecological rights as social justice. Bengali women writers articulate how water pollution disproportionately affects female-led household management. Tamil Dalit poets invoke land rights as integral to environmental autonomy. Malayalam queer eco-narratives (§) intertwine personal identity with nature, advocating inclusive sustainability.

Cross-Linguistic Variations

While core themes converge, regional variations reflect unique sociocultural realities. Bengali texts emphasize water ecosystems, given the deltaic geography. Tamil works foreground arid regions and monsoon cycles. Marathi literature wrestles with drought-prone Western Ghats. Malayalam situates narratives within wetland ecologies. Hindi covers diverse biomes from Gangetic plains to Himalayan foothills.

CONCLUSION

Eco-literature in regional languages emerges as a vibrant repository of environmental imagination rooted in cultural specificity. By weaving together tradition and contemporary ecological concerns, vernacular authors enliven grassroots environmental discourse and advocate for sustainable practices. Recurring motifs of human–nature interdependence, ecological degradation, and indigenous conservation underscore a shared ethical framework across linguistic traditions. Variations in thematic emphasis reveal how geography and social structures shape environmental imagination. Importantly, the centering of marginalized voices expands eco-critical boundaries and foregrounds environmental justice.

This study contributes to eco-criticism by highlighting the transformative potential of regional literatures. It underscores the necessity of integrating vernacular perspectives into policymaking and environmental education. Future research might extend this comparative approach to other languages and genres, examine reception among local readerships, or explore the role of translation in disseminating eco-literary works globally.

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

This research focuses on five major Indian regional languages, which, while diverse, do not capture the full spectrum of India's linguistic landscape. Text selection was purposive and may not represent all eco-literary production; future studies could employ larger corpora or quantitative analyses. Translations pose inherent challenges: despite back-translation checks, some cultural nuances may not fully transfer to English. The study emphasizes textual analysis and does not empirically assess reader responses or the impact of eco-literature on environmental attitudes. Finally, while author consultations enriched contextual understanding, direct engagement with rural communities could further validate interpretations of indigenous practices.

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