



## **Environmental Justice and Ecological Inequality in Contemporary Global Environmental Literature**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The theme of environmental justice has become an important topic in modern world environmental literature, which indicates the unequal distribution of ecological resources and environmental damages in societies. The marginalised people, especially the Global South and indigenous people, are disproportionately impacted and affected by environmental degradation, climate change, industrial pollution, and resource extraction. The modern environmental literary works address these injustices through emphasizing ecological inequality, social marginalization and the political structures that dominate the environmental decision-making. In novels, essays and ecocritical works, writers have begun to write more and more about environmental racism, climate injustice, and an ethical relationship between humans and nature. This research paper has looked at the way in which environmental justice and ecological inequality are presented in the contemporary global environmental literature. It examines key thematic trends including environmental racism, native ecological awareness, climate displacement, and the Global North South Divide.

**Keywords:** Environmental Justice; Ecological Inequality; Environmental Literature; Ecocriticism; Climate Change

### **1.INTRODUCTION**

The

The problem of environmental crises has become one of the characteristics of the twenty-first century. Climate change, deforestation, pollution, and loss of biodiversity are some of the issues that have heated the debate on sustainability and environmental responsibility across the globe. Nevertheless, not all communities are impacted by environmental issues. The literature of studies indicates that the poor and marginalized groups are disproportionately affected by environmental burdens like pollution, toxic waste, and disasters caused by climate.

Environmental justice was developed as a reaction against these inequalities. Environmental justice deals with fair distribution of environmental benefits and harms as well as seeing to it that the marginalized communities are involved in the making of environmental decisions. Environmental justice movements bring to light how race, class and geography structural inequalities affect environmental exposure and vulnerability.

These environmental inequalities have found their way to literature as a significant medium in exploring the same in recent decades. Ecocriticism Literary texts on the interaction



between human beings and the natural environment and the way, in which environmental issues overlap societal power structures, are the subject of environmental literature (which is frequently taught in ecocriticism). The literature on ecological injustice is increasingly becoming a recent phenomenon in contemporary world literature that deals with the issues of displaced populations, indigenous land rights movements, and socio-economic effects of environmental destruction.

This essay will discuss the subject of environmental justice and ecological inequality as represented in the modern environmental literature. It discusses how literature can be used to focus on ecological issues, create ecological awareness, and to question dominant economic and political systems that cause environmental inequity.

### **1.1 Theoretical Framework**

This study employs an interdisciplinary approach; that is, the theoretical framework of this research is grounded in ecocriticism, environmental justice theory, postcolonial ecology, and political ecology. These theoretical approaches assist to clarify how the modern global environmental literature can be discussed as the reflection of the ecological inequality, environmental degradation, unequal distribution of environmental resources and risks. The relationship between nature, society, and power structures as reflected in environmental literature is of a complex nature with the emphasis of environmental crisis as an ecological, social, and political challenge. In these views, a text in literature can be analysed on how environmental unfairness impacts the communities on the side and how literature is created to be aware of ecological responsibility.

Ecocriticism is the most important theory in study of the themes of environment in literature. It is dedicated to the connection of literature and the natural environment and its analysis of the way literary narratives describe nature, environmental crises and humans in connection with the ecological systems. Ecocriticism criticizes anthropocentric approaches and promotes the realization of the interrelation of humans and nature. With the help of this framework, modern environmental literature could be seen as cultural reaction to degradation of the environment and the way that contributes to the ecological consciousness and sustainability.

This framework is also supported through the Environmental Justice theory that stresses that the environmental risks and benefits are disproportionately spread among diverse social groups. The less powerful communities, especially those with low economic and political abilities, tend to be more exposed to pollution and effects of climate changes as well as resource loss. The environmental justice theory is useful in literary studies to examine texts that expose the results of environmental inequity, displacement, and fight against struggling groups that are victims of environmental harm.

The ecological theme of postcolonialism and political ecology also play a role in explaining environmental inequality in world literature. Postcolonial ecology is a study of the role played by colonial history and world economies in defining the tendencies of environmental exploitation and especially the developing world. Political ecology concerns the influence of political authority, economic gains, and institutions of resource access and environmental policies. These views, combined, offer a powerful paradigm through which the contemporary



environmental literature critiques ecological inequality and encourages a debate on the issue of environmental justice and sustainability.

### 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

**Agyeman et al. (2016)** analysed the changing aspects of environmental justice and stressed the transition of the classical discourse of environmental inequality to more inclusive notions of community welfare and fair sustainability. The authors examined the way in which the environmental justice movements had grown beyond the issues of pollution and exposure to toxicity and appealed to the ordinary environmental experiences, social fairness, and community involvement in environmental governance. Their work brought out the need to make sustainability and social justice a common feature, stating that the ecological protection should be coupled with enhancing the quality of life of marginalized populations.

**Anand (2017)** examined the international aspects of environmental justice specifically in how the Global North and the Global South were unequal. The paper examined the contribution of historical trends in industrialization, resource extraction, and globalization of the economy to skewed ecological costs among countries. Anand suggested that the developing countries usually had a serious environmental impact even though they were not the contributors of the global environmental degradation. The document highlighted the necessity of the global systems of environmental governance that would acknowledge the aspect of environmental equity and deal with the role of industrialized nations.

**Chakraborty et al. (2016)** took a review of modern dynamics in the study of environmental justice and specified new trends in the sector. They studied the way that the scholarship of environmental justice developed to embrace other topics like climate vulnerability, environmental inequality within cities, and environmental exposure-related health disparities. The authors indicated the growing application of interdisciplinary lines of inquiry between geography, public health, and social sciences to comprehend environmental inequity. They also found that the field of environmental justice studies had developed considerably and reached the point of considering intricate aspects of environmental hazards in connection to the socio-economic status and resilience of the community.

**Figuroa (2022)** examined the philosophical and ethical basis of environmental justice in the context of environmental ethics. The author investigated the conceptualization of environmental justice as a moral framework focusing on the incorporation of fairness in environmental decision making and the acknowledgment of the marginalized groups of the communities that were impacted by ecological degradation. Figuroa further stated that environmental justice had to focus on not only the equal allocation of environmental resources, but also respect the cultural diversity and the rights of the community. The contribution of the work led to the interpretation of environmental justice as a political and an ethical concept that determines sustainable and inclusive environmental policies.

### 3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND ECOLOGICAL INEQUALITY

Problems with the environment in the modern world are also being perceived as not just ecological problems but also as social justice and inequality. Societies do not all experience

equal effects of environmental degradation, climate change, pollution, and depletion of resources. Rather, communities that are vulnerable and marginalized tend to experience a higher proportion of risks associated with the environment and lack any access to benefits of the environment. In this respect, the notions of environmental justice and ecological inequality have gained prominence as a point of reference to how environmental conditions and social structures are related. These ideas can be used to understand how environmental burdens and resources are allocated in various communities and regions and how these patterns are shaped by economic, political, and historic factors. Investigating the concept of environmental justice and ecological inequality, researcher are able to comprehend the social aspects of the environmental issues and the necessity of more equal and sustainable environmental governance.

Table 1: Conceptual Dimensions of Environmental Justice and Ecological Inequality

<b>Concept</b>	<b>Key Components</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
Environmental Justice	Distributional Justice	Refers to the fair distribution of environmental resources and environmental risks such as pollution, clean water, and green spaces.
Environmental Justice	Procedural Justice	Emphasizes equal participation of communities in environmental decision-making and policy processes.
Environmental Justice	Recognition Justice	Focuses on acknowledging cultural identities, indigenous rights, and the experiences of marginalized communities affected by environmental policies.
Ecological Inequality	Unequal Exposure	Describes how poor and marginalized populations face greater exposure to environmental hazards such as pollution, toxic waste, and climate disasters.
Ecological Inequality	Resource Access	Refers to unequal access to natural resources such as land, forests, water, and biodiversity.
Ecological Inequality	Global Environmental Disparity	Highlights inequalities between developed and developing countries in terms of environmental responsibilities and impacts.
Ecological Inequality	Ecological Debt	Refers to the environmental burden placed on developing countries due to resource extraction and pollution caused by industrialized nations.

High-rate industrialization, urbanization, and extraction of resources have led to an increase in environmental pressure in most regions of the world and at the same time contributing to the socio-economic inequalities. Less economically endowed and politically less influential communities usually live in areas that are environmentally prone, e.g. in areas affected by pollution, deforestation, water scarcity or calamities. Consequently, the environmental issues are highly associated with the general problems, including poverty, health inequity, and



scarce access to natural resources. These circumstances point to the significance of examining environmental issues in terms of a justice-based approach, which acknowledges the disparity of environmental chances and hazards.

In addition, the process of globalization and economic development has introduced multifaceted environmental relations between developed and developing areas. The industrialized nations have been enjoying the advantages of high rate of resource use and massive industrial production, and numerous developing nations have been suffering dire environmental effects as a result of ecological degradation, loss of biodiversity and climate vulnerability. This imbalance has attracted concern in the fact that the world environment should be held responsible and environmental policies should be made fair. The environmental justice and ecological inequality concepts in academic discourse are thus important tools in the critical study of the interface of environmental issues with the social, political, and economic systems. These views help researchers to study the impacts of environmental governance, cultural values and policy choices on the sharing of environmental benefits and burdens between communities and regions.

### 3.1 Environmental Justice

Environmental justice can be defined as equitable allocation of environmental gains and harms as well as the involvement of all communities in decision making in environmental issues. This idea was formulated mainly by grassroot movements which protested against the concentration of hazardous waste disposal centres and industrial pollution in the deprived communities.

Environmental justice highlights three principles:

1. **Distributional justice** - Fair distribution of environmental resources and hazards.
2. **Procedural justice**- equal representation in environmental governance.
3. **Recognition justice**- recognition of cultural and social identities which are influenced by environmental policies.

The principles have been applied to the environmental policy discussions and have taken the centre stage in the environmental humanities and literary studies.

### 3.2 Ecological Inequality

The term ecological inequality denotes unequal spread of environmental risks, environmental good and natural resources among social groupings, regions and countries. It emphasizes the fact that environmental issues and environmental degradation are not perceived equally by all the members of the society. Rather, disadvantaged, marginalized and socially vulnerable communities tend to experience more exposure to environmental risks together with a little access to environmental resources and safeguards. The concept has taken a key concern in environmental sociology, political ecology, and environmental humanities as it shows how environmental concerns are tightly linked to the larger trends of social and economic inequality.

Ecological inequality can manifest itself at the local and national levels in the form of spatial distribution of environmental risks. The low-income communities and the marginalized groups are often found in the regions which are more susceptible to pollution, industrial



waste and environmental threats. To illustrate, some of the most common locations of hazardous waste centres, chemical plants, and landfills are usually located in economically underprivileged areas where the local inhabitants lack political power and the resources to act against such enterprises. Such societies are more likely to have increased levels of poor health on account of polluted air water and soil, as also being poorly equipped in terms of environmental facilities like clean water supplies, green spaces and waste disposal services.

The presence of ecological inequality is supported by a number of structural factors. There are economic structures where the focus of industrial development and profit maximization at the expense of the environment is common to seem indifferent of the environmental impact on vulnerable people. The policies of urban planning occasionally focus on locating the polluting industries in the localities where low-income earners live due to the fact that the price of land is lower and the reluctance of the communities concerned might be minimal. Also, access to political power may be unequal, and this will restrict the capacity of the marginalized communities to affect the process of making decisions on the environment. Consequently, the environmental burdens are likely to be concentrated in places that the inhabitants are more likely to call on environmental imbalances.

#### **4. ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN CONTEMPORARY ENVIRONMENTAL LITERATURE**

Issues of environmental justice and ecological inequality have been drawn into the contemporary environmental literature as the world has become more interested in the social aspects of environmental crises. The content of the earlier environmental writing has tended to centre on the aesthetic quality of the environment and the importance of its preservation; the modern environmental writing has broadened its content to include the way in which the marginalized communities and vulnerable areas are disproportionately impacted by environmental degradation. It has come to be understood by writers and scholars that environmental issues have been set in close relationship with political power, economic inequality and social marginalization.

Consequently, the current literary works often address the issues of environmental racism, the right to indigenous land, the climate displacement, and the unequal environmental interaction between the Global North and the Global South. Through depicting such intricate interrelations between ecological processes and social systems, environmental writings serve as an important critical space of knowledge about environmental injustice and motivation of wider debates regarding sustainability, responsibility, and fairness in the face of global environmental issues.

##### **4.1 Rise of Environmental Literature and Ecocriticism**

Environmental literature has also undergone a great development and change since the late twentieth century. The past manifestations of environmental writing were mostly concerned with appreciation and conservation of nature which often focused on the beauty of wild landscape and the ethical duty of human beings to conserve natural environments. Nature was glorified in many classical environmental texts as the domain outside the human society and forests, mountains, rivers, and wildlife became the symbol of the purity and harmony. These



publications often stimulated the idea of conservation and educated people about the need to ensure that natural ecosystems are not overexploited by people.

Nevertheless, the modern environmental literature has been slowly broadening its agenda further than mere preservation of the wilderness. There is a growing tendency of modern writers to consider the intricate associations of the concerns of the environment with social facts like inequality, economic development, migration, and cultural identity. Environmental issues have been perceived not only as environmental problems but also as closely tied to the social, political and economic systems. Consequently, the current environmental literature tends to emphasise experiences of the communities directly impacted by environmental degradation, pollution and climate change as well as exploitation of the resources. This move has enabled environmental writing to pose the questions of environmental justice and social responsibility more directly than was previously done by nature writing.

The emergence of ecocriticism as a discipline has served to influence study of environmental literature. Interdisciplinary approach to literature and nature ecology the ecocriticism is the interdisciplinary approach to ecology of the relationship between literature and nature. It reviews and analyses the portrayal of nature, ecological crisis, environmental ethics and human relations with natural world in the literary texts. Ecocritical analysis enables scholars to examine how literature is a reflection of human attitudes to environmental issues and how it contributes to them. Ecocriticism helps readers rethink the cultural presuppositions according to which people define their relationship to the nature and to realize the moral consequences of environmental exploitation.

Ecocritical theorists to read relationships between environmental themes and culture through literary narratives to comprehend how the environmental themes are produced, represented, and understood in cultures. They discuss the ecological destruction, climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental activism in texts. Meanwhile, ecocriticism is also interested in how literature reveals global interactions of power and social inequity. An example is that in literature, it can show the impact of industrialization on the society of the fringe, inequitable distribution of natural resources or how the environment is degraded disproportionately on the vulnerable. Through these representations, ecocriticism will help us understand that environmental issues are closely connected with social justice issues.

### **4.2 Environmental Racism and Marginalized Communities**

Environmental racism is one of the most important topics of modern environmental literature, where this term signifies policies, practices, or institutional choices that tend to put minority and marginalized groups in a disadvantaged position when it comes to exposure to environmental hazards. The concept underscores the tendency of environmental risks like pollution, toxic waste and industrial contamination to be clumped in regions where socially and economically disadvantaged people live. Environmental racism is directly connected with the wider racism discrimination, economic disparities, and political marginalization, whereby some communities do not have sufficient authority to oppose adverse environmental practices or have a say in environmental decision-making.



Environmental literature authors often depict how oppressed communities feel the disproportional effects of industrialization and environmental harm. Literary narratives tend to portray the scenario in which factories, mining, landfills, and waste disposal plants are located close to communities that have low political power or economic capabilities. Through these images, we can see how the environment policy and the economic forces often favor the industrial development at the expense of the health and welfare of the vulnerable citizens. Environmental literature does this through narration and symbolic representation to unveil the organizational injustices that enable environmental hazards to be localized in underprivileged areas.

### 4.3 Indigenous Ecological Knowledge and Resistance

The indigenous community is an important part of the environmental justice discourse, especially in the modern environmental literature aimed at emphasizing the unequal allocation of environmental resources and hazards. The Indigenous ecological knowledge, based on centuries of experience lived, cultural traditions that ensure the safe relationships with nature, is stressed in many literary works. Contrary to industrial strategies of development which focus on economic growth and extraction of resources, Indigenous knowledge systems tend to focus on harmony, reciprocity, and ecological balance in the long term. These views also define how the environmental literature presents the Indigenous communities not only as the victims of the environmental degradation but also as a treasury of good environmental knowledge, which can be applied in sustainable environmental practices.

Indigenous literature often opposes the mainstream Western paradigms of development that are largely based on massive industrialization, mining, deforestation, and exploitation of resources. In literary discourse, these prevailing developmental models have been frequently criticized because they ignore ecological boundaries and weaken the rights of Indigenous people. Most of the authors emphasize the fact that this type of developmental projects results in displacement, loss of traditional land, and destruction of the ecosystem that is the main source of Indigenous cultural identity and livelihood. Indigenous writers and environmental authors attract attention to these problems revealing the socio-political imbalances in the global environmental governance and development practices.

The other significant area captured in the Indigenous environmental narratives involves the functionality of traditional ecological practices that help in sustaining the environment and continuity of culture. Some of these practices are the management of resources as a community, the biodiversity respect, seasonal understanding of the ecosystem, and the spiritual interaction with the land and nature. Indigenous cultures in most cases do not treat land as a commodity or economic resource but as a living being that is closely interconnected with cultural identity, history, and well-being of the community. These practices are frequently described as substitutes to exploitative systems of managing resources, and as models of sustainable environmental management, in environmental literature.

### 4.4 Climate Change and Global Inequality



One of the most significant themes in the modern environmental literature has become climate change, as the effects of climate change have increasingly been of concern to the world. In the literary works, the concept of climate change is also depicted as a crisis that has a strong impact on human societies and especially those who are vulnerable. Numerous novels, essays, and stories are devoted to climate-related catastrophes like floods, drought, hurricane, and increase of sea level and excessive heat waves. Such literary manifestations frequently draw the focus to the fact that the effects of such catastrophes do not have an equal measure, with marginalized groups and economically deprived areas usually bearing the brunt of these disasters.

The literature on the environment has commonly pointed out the prevalence of climate change in magnifying already existing social disparities in various societies. The poor communities tend to be less equipped in terms of infrastructure, technology and the institutions to accommodate the changes in the environment. Consequently, the populations are more susceptible to loss of livelihoods, displacement, food insecurity and health risks related to climate related events. Literary stories hence show how climate change cuts across other problems like poverty, inequality in development, and political marginalization and how climate vulnerability is directly related to the larger social and economic factors.

An increasing amount of environmental literature falls into the genre of so-called climate fiction, often called cli-fi. The genre incorporates the potential social, political, and environmental impacts of climate change as a result of an imaginary narration. Numerous cli-fi stories portray the world as it will become in the future, driven by ecological disasters, where warmer climate, lack of resources, and ecological disturbances cause social stress, forces, and disputes. Certain works of literature give dystopian futures where there is environmental collapse and mass migration, resource wars, and societal instability. Other pieces are centered on the ideas of strength, collaboration, and unity in the fight against the environmental issues and advocacy of the sustainable plan.

#### **4.5 The Global North–South Divide in Environmental Narratives**

Increasingly, the contemporary environmental writings emphasize the unbalanced environmental association between the Global North and the Global South. The Global North and Global South are common terms used to explain the differences of economic development, industrialization, technological development, and political power in different parts of the world. The argument that most environmental writers and scholars put forward is that historical processes that include the expansion of colonies, industrialization and globalization have led to high levels of environmental inequalities between these regions. Consequently, modern environmental literature tends to depict how environmental degradation and climatic issues are not distributed uniformly in various regions across the globe, with the developing nations in most cases being the most affected.

The industrialized countries have also been the greatest contributors to the environment in the past in terms of mass scale of industrial production, emission of carbon, and extensive use of resources. Nonetheless, the greatest environmental effects are witnessed in developing countries characterized by climate susceptibility, destruction of ecological values and



inability to respond to the environmental changes. Modern literary works present this imbalance through their focus on the social and environmental issues of communities in Global South and also challenge the globally established systems of development and economic power that led to such inequalities.

The theme of resource extraction in developing nations is a common theme in the environmental discourse. Numerous literatures describe the exploitation of the natural resources like minerals and forests, oil and other precious resources in the developing world by multinational enterprises and international industries. These works usually cause the deforestation, land degradation, water pollution and the loss of biodiversity. Such projects often have the negative impact of the nearby communities, who get less economic advantages than the environmental damage and social disruptions of the extraction process. Through these stories, one can recognize the importance of taking care of the resources available and become more environmentally accountable.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The paper has explored the contemporary global environmental literature in terms of how it reflects the interrelated themes of environmental justice and ecological inequality. It demonstrated that contemporary environmental literature extends beyond the conventional nature literature to the extent that environmental harm, climate change, and industrialization impacts marginalized groups, especially indigenous people and places in the Global South disproportionately. Literary works put attention on the unequal distribution of environmental risks and resources across societies using themes such as environmental racism, indigenous environmental knowledge, climate susceptibility, and the Global North South divide. It was also found that current environmental discourse undermines official paradigms of development and stresses on the significance of moral environmental management, sustainability, and social justice. Altogether, the environmental literature is a vital medium to bring ecological awareness, to expose environmental injustices, and promote more participatory and equitable solutions to global environmental issues.

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