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Research Article

# An Ecocritical and Cultural Approach to Dhruv Bhatt's Select Novels

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## ABSTRACT

The scientific advancements and developments of the 21st century have been achieved at the expense of nature, and humans have lost harmony with it, putting themselves under threat to their own survival. Literature also explores these concerns and studies them through the theory of Ecocriticism that developed in the 1990s. The concept of Ecocriticism is a global discourse. In literature, the authors like Margaret Atwood, the Polish writer Stanislaw Lem, British-Turkish Elif Shafak, Indian Amitav Ghosh have meticulously raised the issue of the destruction of nature and the preservation of the same in their works. The human desire for controlling nature, gaining herculean powers, eternal strength and beauty etc. have created havoc, and therefore advocated nature and viewing the discourse of Ecocriticism from the non-Euro-Centric perspective is extremely needed. Writers like Ghosh and Bhatt have been talking about nature and Ecocriticism from the standpoint of the Global South. Ecocriticism focuses on the analysis of the man-nature relationship and also studies its reflection in literature. Thus, the study pinpoints the novels of Dhruv Bhatt by centralizing the Ecocritical theory and establishing the connection between the modern-day society and nature, or nature and human relation.

**KEYWORDS:** Ecocriticism, Human-Nature Relationship, Posthuman Gaze

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**FULL PAPER**

The study delves into the theoretical understanding of the discourse of Ecocriticism from the standpoint of the Global South, keeping in center the fictions of Dhruv Bhatt and exploring the concept of the interconnectedness of man and nature, rather viewing it as stark binaries/Cartesian dualism or as self and other.

**Objectives:**

- To analyse the universal concern towards nature with Ecocritical frame of reference,
- To highlight the damages took place through the human greed and hierarchies to control the nature,
- To advocate the coexistence and interdependence of environment and humans,
- To revisit the traditional wisdom towards environmental and human sustainability.

**Research Question:**

1. What are the customs and traditions depicted in Dhruv Bhatt's novels that contribute to the environment and human sustainability?
2. How do the narratives of Dhruv Bhatt portray the non-human elements of nature and existing phenomena and their Interconnectedness exemplified in *Akoopar*?
3. How does "*Oceanside Blues*" critique the capitalist destructive impact over nature and traditional coastal communities?
4. How does the river Narmada in "*That Thou Art*" serve as a catalyst for the protagonist's metamorphosis and symbol of antediluvian Indian non-anthropocentric wisdom?

**Literature Review:**

The term "Ecocriticism" is literary theory that inspects literature in light of environmental concerns. Ecocriticism is the multidisciplinary study of the connections between the environment and literature. To define the term Ecocriticism, Cheryl Glotfeltry in *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996): What then is Ecocriticism? Simply put, Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, Ecocriticism takes an earth-

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centered approach to literary studies. (xviii) The essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" written by William Rueckert in 1978 is credited with being the origin of the term "Ecocriticism." A combination of the terms "eco" and "criticism," Ecocriticism is a relatively new term. M. H. Abrams talks about the etymology of the term in his book *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, "Ecocriticism" was a term coined in the late 1970s by combining "criticism" with a shortened and everything that we can view with our own eye is within an ecosystem, so when we mention the term "eco," we're actually talking about ecology. In short, literally all existence in the universe contributes in some way to the entire ecosystem. The term "criticism," which makes up the second word in the term, explains the act of examining and interpreting a literary work with different critical approaches in order to extract its interpretations. It's an emerging field of literary criticism that's increasing rapidly today. It examines human-environment interaction in literary works.

The term first appeared twenty years prior to this by William Rueckert within his 1978 essay entitled "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." Rueckert advocated the "application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature," thereby establishing the field's interdisciplinary foundation from its inception (Glotfelty and Fromm 107). This interdisciplinary constitutes a permanent foundational principle, and scholars eagerly borrow from the natural sciences, ethics, politics, and philosophy to research the planetary environmental crisis. While Glotfelty's definition grounds the field within the field of literary studies, other foundational figures like Lawrence Buell define it by its "commitment to environmentalist praxis," adding a layer of political activism not inherent in all literary theories (Buell, *Environmental Imagination* 430). This tripartite identity—encompassing a literary theory, serving as an interdisciplinary conduit, and functioning as an activist movement has driven its development. It explores the connection between literature, cultural ethics and environmental ethics, and ecological concerns. Ecocriticism is unique among all the theories due to its proximity with the scientific field of ecology; it involves all the concerns like the conservation of the natural habitats, the relevance of caring relationships between the human and the nonhuman world, and concepts like ecology, Social Ecology, deep ecology, Ecocide, wilderness, Pollution, etc.

Ecocriticism emerged in response to the need to address the ecological crisis and save the planet of the 20th century, especially after the 1960s. It was the beginning of industrialization in the United States and Europe in the 18th century, and it reached its pinnacle in the mid-20th century. As a result, the newly produced insecticides, machinery, and industrial pollution damaged everything. Industrious filthy water was dumped into rivers, tainting the formerly pristine blue waters

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Even though Ecocriticism did not formalize until the 1990s, its intellectual antecedents can be tracked through the burgeoning environmental awareness of the post-war years. One seminal precursor to the Ecocritical movement is Joseph Meeker's 1972 work, *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology*. Here, Meeker advanced the idea of "literary ecology," arguing that the West's canon has preferred the tragic genre, which depicts the protagonist whose anthropocentrically framed ethical conflicts are deemed more important to the tragic hero than biological survival. By way of countervailing preference, Meeker called on the "comic mode" of "muddling through," arguing that it has more ecological worth because it is more about adaptation and survival and less about agonistic sacrifice. The most influential catalyst to the environmental movement and by extension to Ecocriticism was Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962). Carson's rigorously researched and elegantly written treatise on the destructive power of pesticides galvanized a generation of environmental activism and spurred seminal environmental legislation. For the study of literature, *Silent Spring* illustrated the immense efficacy of prose to secure environmental awareness and produce political action and provided an indelible paradigm to the field's activist impulse.

The emergence of Ecocriticism as an academically legitimate field took place during the early 1990s through the work of scholars who felt that the field of literary study did not adequately answer the burgeoning environmental crisis. Glotfelty and Harold Fromm remark upon this intellectual neglect in the introduction to the first edition by saying that if one's information is limited to the premier volumes within the field of the letter, "you would never suspect that the earth's life support systems were under stress" (Glotfelty and Fromm xvi). Its institutionalization took place through the establishing of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) in 1992 and the founding of its journal, *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*. One key moment within this development was the publication of *The Ecocriticism Reader* and the gathering together of the work of many contributors to consolidate the field within the university by defining the field's core questions: "How is nature represented in this sonnet?... In addition to race, class, and gender, should place become a new critical category?" (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii).

Dhruv Bhatt is a well-known writer in modern Gujarati literature. His works are embodied with human values and social satire; he portrays humanity in the lap of Nature. Since a human being has lost his connection with nature and despoiled it, no wonder modern-day writers not only portray the rift created in the relationship with nature, the loss of unity and peace, but also the yearning for the lost paradise of harmony. Modern writers have repeatedly reiterated the fact of the human being's lost innocence, which led him to the wanton destruction of Nature. They also based their efforts on the importance of the ecological system and the environmental balance.

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Dhruv Bhatt is one of those authors who, along with recent modern ecology issues, has represented diverse cultures in his writing. Indian mythology, culture, Veda, Puranas, and Upanishads influence him to coin the fictions. The paper focuses on the ecological destruction caused by man and brings forth the shift in the relationship between nature and human beings. Further, he analyses the role of nature in the lives of the tribals while exploring their indigenous eco-customs and traditions that have helped in sustaining their eco-centric approach to life.

Every living being on Earth is necessary to complete the great chain of being, but as we can see, the technological evolutions and inventions of the 21st century have been done by the destruction of the natural world, and human beings have lost their relationship with nature at risk of their existence. An article in the Times of India claims that India is the most vulnerable country to climate change. The same article also claims that this climate change could cut agricultural incomes and could hit the hardest areas with rising temperatures and declines in rainfall. Even at a conference, Ex-President Pranab Mukherjee expressed his views on climate change and said that "climate change has moved center-stage in policy formulation, and its ill effects are visible in the abnormal behavior of nature in recent times." Dhruv Bhatt is the recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award (2002) in Gujarati literature. His career as a writer spans innumerable novels and poetry collections. Some of his important novels, like *Oceanside Blues (Samudrantike)* (1993) *That Thou Art (Tattvamasi)* (1998), and *Akoopar*, etc., deal with the depiction of the man-nature relationship. The majority of his novels have been translated into English, Hindi, and other languages. He is a writer of remarkable talent. His works are both radical and fascinating.

### **Ecocritical Approach in Dhruv Bhatt's *Akoopar***

"Simply defined, Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment." (Chery11) *Akoopar* is set in and around the forest of Gir and portrays the people, places, and heritage of the region in various Kathiyawadi dialects. As in most of Dhruv Bhatt's regional novels, *Akoopar* is also the product of his extended stay in the region. It narrates the unique blend of the facts and fiction of the people and places that the author came across and observed. Dhruv Bhatt has awarded Gujarati literature with 'novel' titles that, on the one hand, have their origins in Indian myths and legends and, on the other, are contextual to the present times. *Akoopar* is the oldest living being on earth to witness the deeds of all those who have lived so long on the earth. In the novel, Dhruv Bhatt depicts the Gir forest, which is as ancient as *Akoopar*. The forest is home to a treasure of fauna and flora. It also gives shelter to mankind who depend directly or indirectly on the forest. The entire life cycle is to abide by the rules of nature. The forest quietly observes the actions of all living beings.

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**Environment at the central concern in *Akoopar***

The environmental concerns interwoven in the text are numerous to take into account of them exhaustively. Take notice of the human-wildlife dispute, lion hunting, forest land invasion, forest management stakeholders, forest livelihood issues, and appreciation of access to forest resources for survival, fears of lion extinction among wildlife conservationists, removal of some of the lions from Gir National Park, illegal mining, Biodiversity, coastal legislation, soil degradation, carbon sequestration, hill ecosystems, endangered species, ecosystem balance and many more. The solutions lie in the immunity that the characters inherit from traditional ways of life and the values they live with. Iiema, Sansai, and her ancestor Ravaata, along with other characters, reveal the hidden wisdom of the local people that is enchanting. The beginning of the novel with the colloquial expression 'Khamma' by Iema, 'Appi de-le (Give-take) or is so good that the context unfolds suspended at the very end to solve both environmental and existential contradictions and ends the work with the same blessing address.

The contemplative urban artist narrator reveals the knowledge from the usage of 'dhamma' used by Iema, the local traditional artist. In her reaction to a question during her art exhibition in Ahmedabad, 'Do you like to stay there in the jungle more than here in Amdavad?' And someone else also spoke, "To go outing is fine, but to stay! Without facilities, among the lions and leopards, fear of being killed or will be killed. What to live where there is no safety of life?" "My boys, all of you understand that no one is going to live forever staying in this pakka house. I have never heard that lion-leopard or scorpions ever killed the number of people killed by the cars and trucks and motorcycles on the roads." "We read daily in papers that don't people die in quarrelling for nothing? And yet does anyone have the time to say khamma to the earth?" (Bhatt 255 – 256)

**Presentation of the character who lives for and walks with nature in *Akoopar***

Akoopar's characters are very believable and true to reality. The protagonist, who visits Gir for his painting assignment, narrates the story. It is from his perspective that we see the series of events unfolding in the novel. Being a painter, he observes nature in its pictorial form. He also perceives the seen and unseen aspects of the forest in his painting. The women characters play significant roles in depicting the traditions and belief systems of the forest. Aima represents the collective intelligence of the forest of Gir. Aima has been living in Gayr since she was born and knows all about animals and nature. Aima is the eldest in the community, and hence, people care for her and listen to her advice. She shows concern over the growing urbanization. She felt that people had started to disrespect nature and its creatures. She used to roam all over Gayr and observe the changes that had occurred in Gayr. She was worried about the smallest issue that occurred in Gir, like the growing Kuvadio plant. Aima said, "I have

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never heard or seen since my birth that this plant of Kuvadio Is there in Gayr. Nobody told me that this has been there for the last two years. After having alighted from the vehicle on my way I found it everywhere." (Bhatt 90) Then Aima talked about the Kuvadio plant that none of the animals eats. Kuvadio is a plant that does not encourage other plants to grow, and thus Aima thought that it was due to a shift in the mindset of the people in the Gir that allowed Kuvadio to grow. Aima could see and feel everything around her alive. She never thought of considering animals as animals and nature as simply nature. For her, all the things' people were surrounded by within the forests of Gir were alive. She personified and filled any inanimate entity with life. She even felt that respect should be maintained for nature and animals if one is living in the air.

Sansai is also another leading female in the novel. She is one with nature and feels the pain-pleasure of the forest and all creatures of the forest. Her boldness of character and sternness of language surprises the protagonist and the reader alike. Lajo is drawn after her friend, Sansai. She, too, is straightforward and can see through things. When her beloved cow is hunted in front of her she feels ripped from within but lets the lions take her away. She does not curse the lions. Rather, she prayed for them and apologized to her cow, Girvan. The characters of Revtubha, Gopalbhai, and Dhanu are the real-life characters the author has come across while on his journey in the Gir forest. They represent the spirit of the people of Gir who lead disciplined and law-abiding lives.

#### **Coexistence of man with nature rather than man vs. nature in *Akoopar***

It is a master solution to all the environment debates possible – possible to be uttered only by one who finds no duality in the animate and inanimate world. The stray incidents of attacks by lions and leopards are marked to bring home the reality that even the beast respects humans, especially in the case of Dhannu. When the lion attacked Kiran but Dhanu saved him. During that time Dhannu's shoulder was attacked by a lion. Then, at the hospital, Dhanu said, "There are three proofs. One, "he did not hold me from the throat" Showing the second finger, he said, "he did not even shake his hand. Otherwise, he would have torn off my shoulder." And then, lifting the third, he said, "I was fallen, but he did not sit on me. Had he sat on me as he would done the kill, his weight would have..." Dhanu stopped talking and then once again said, "His intention was not to kill me." (Bhatt 183) He's attacked by a lion. While he says, he's in support of the Lions. He says that lions are always faithful and loyal animals ever created on the earth. This indicates Dhannu's love for nature and the lion

#### **Tribal Ecological Consciousness in *Oceanside Blues***

The daily interactions and tasks within the community emphasize the interconnectedness and daily reliance on one another in their daily interactions. They

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perceive their surroundings as a living part of their lifeblood. The sea is a metaphor for a deity, and in the enclosed community, no other element of nature is more divine as the sea. As Saboor states, "The sea would guide us all the way." (Bhatt 16) When calm, the sea guides the people, but when furious, it leads to destruction. The fisherman, Krishna, believes nature and the sea are in control of our lives as mere puppets, controlling our entry and exit from the water. The sea is a constant, implacable force, and none can defy its will. After the arrival of the narrator, the traditions and festivals celebrated by the people which also involve the sea became problematic, as he could not sail to the estate bungalow because no sailor was willing to set sail after the akhatrij because "after akhatrij the sea forbids sailing until the full moon after the monsoon when a coconut is offered to the sea." (Bhatt 3) During the no moon festival, people dip into the sea as a communion celebration. After a pilgrimage, the people gather to take a dip as a pretext to come closer to the ocean, the ocean that they worship as a deity and it plays a significant role in their lives, witnessing their happiness and sorrow. The festival allows people to form a communion with their Mother Nature. The narrator's special ceiling says: "The passage of time is indicated. All the indicators of the passage of time except dawn and dusk were meaningless here. The inhabitants scattered over this wilderness called the duration between two rainy seasons a year and that between two dawns a day. They did not complicate their lives by naming days of the week and counting dates of the month." (Bhatt 40) The inhabitants spared themselves the complicated markers of time that are followed by the world instead relating it to daily events. Adapting to these indicators of time, the narrator confides that, "Living in this atmosphere, I too have begun to do the same. It was dawn when a face could be seen clearly. Morning was the time to breakfast or when herds went out grazing in the pastures. Noon was the lunch hour, and it was dusk when the sky turned hazy by the dust kicked up by the hooves of the cattle hurrying home after daylong grazing. Godhooli! Cow-dust hour! Today I learnt that after-dusk darkness came at the gong hour when the villagers of Vishno's village congregated at the local shrine or temple for aarati, a tribute to the deities; village-folks tired after daylong toiling rested their aching limbs by sitting down at the temple for the dusk prayer. Finally, when total peace settled on the earth, it was called the night." (Bhatt 68)

The characters in the novel are the preserver of nature. They consider the sea a superior entity that must not be made angry to avoid any repercussions. Nature comes alive and has been frequently personified, a sage living in isolation talks with his surroundings. On the narrator's presumption of his lifestyle as 'lonesome and monotonous,' he says: "Look at the ocean. I've never seen it in the same form a second time..." "I'm not alone here...There's the ocean, the sand, the thorny thicket and above everything else, the stars glittering every night. I've formed a habit of conversing with them and I am afraid a single life is too short a duration to talk to them all." (Bhatt 45)0

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### The portrayal of the damage done by capitalism in *Oceanside Blues*

The novel *Oceanside Blues* provides a sketch of the people living near the seashore and how they survive in the harsh conditions of the natural climate. The unnamed narrator of the novel has designated the task of measuring the land for establishing the chemical factories in that area as it is not the fertile part of the land. But through the process and with the continual contact with people living there and also experiencing the joy of living in the surrounding nature changes the mind of the narrator and provides him with a view of his human side. The novel examines how nature becomes a crucial element in the survival chain of a living creature's growth, and how it also allows people to adapt to the constant changes in the environment and nature around them. The people seem to be happy even in their poorest conditions. This strength comes from the surrounding nature.

Once the narrator expresses his deep frustration about establishing the chemical factories in the area which would harm the surrounding nature; at the moment Bangali Baba asks him, "Do You think by writing your report you'd ruin this land, that by drawing up plans for changing face of this land, you'd be responsible for the outcome?" (Bhatt 119) Bangali Baba also tells him, "There was a time when the earth did not exist. Then, too, nature existed. When the earth was born, it was a ball of fire. Then came water, seaweed, and plants. They also perished, only to be reborn. Nature is always absolute, unconfined. No one can ever fetter it or foul it. Get that into your head." (Bhatt 120) This conversation between the narrator and Bangali Baba shows the conflict between nature and culture. Money and factories are human-made concepts, and thus, they will ruin the natural beauty of the place. Nature has been treated as a Capitalistic commodity, and plain rightly explains that "it is no coincidence that this view of nature took hold most strongly with the rise of capitalism, which needed to turn nature into a market commodity and resource without significant moral or social constraint on availability." (Plumwood 1993: 111). The novel explores the dependency of humans on nature.

### The Portrayal of the environment and the traditional wisdom in *That Thou Art*

*Tatvamasi* (1998), winner of the 2002 Kendriya Sahitya Academy, is a novel about a man who needs to explore himself. The novel is a tale of a young man who, by chance, goes into the forests on the banks of the river Narmada. He gradually became fascinated by the river, the tribes, and the people working there. There are many happenings, mysteries, and revelations, which keep the reader spellbound. "A quest for a fine balance between a traditional, non-scientific, faith-driven society and cynical, profit-driven economy." (Meghani.) Dhruv Bhatt draws on the Brihad Aranyak Upanishad to contextualize the Indian Ecocritical perspective in his works and address the emerging discourse of 'Ecology and Literature.' Ecocriticism is part of the theory,

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which explores the links between nature and culture, especially the cultural artefacts of language and literature. As a critical position, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theological argument, it negotiates with the person and the non-human. The Western notion envisions diversity of binary opposition in the relationship of 'human and the non-human' while the Indian vision contributes to the wisdom of oneness. To analyze and research writers such as Dhruv Bhatt is to talk about the interdisciplinary approach that Ecocriticism envisions; and to participate in environmental and cultural contributions in literature.

### **How the river became the reason for the transformation in the protagonist's life in *That Thou Art***

The protagonist was born in Mumbai, lived in Kutch for some time at Grandmother's place after the mother's death, then studied in the missionary school of Panchgani, and then lived in a foreign country for 18 years. The protagonist, who is an intellectual and deeply committed believer in human resources, came back to India at Rudolf's request to study 'tribal history.' Rudolf assigned the protagonist to go to India, to live among the tribals, to keep a record of the daily occurrences of their life in the dairy, and to submit him a copy of the diary. Returning to India after years for this assignment, the protagonist doesn't feel any attraction or pleasure for the motherland. But when the protagonist witnesses the 'Nature's enchanting form,' he feels enthralled. "The sun has gone well past the middle of the sky, and the great Narmada full of life was sparkling like a silver rope under the sun's rays. She seems to be a silver girdle adorning Earth's waist. I felt so relieved at the mere sight of Narmada. All the fear and worry seemed to have left me and I stood engrossed. (Bhatt 76) He is familiar with the love, devotion, gallantry, fearlessness, and confidence of innocent people who live a life of superstition, blind faith, and cruel poverty. Gradually, without his awareness, his thinking process begins to change. Even after such ego melting, "But I was not ready to believe anybody's telling anything about her actually showing herself, till Narmada herself did not tell me that she was Narmada." (Bhatt 219)

### **The physical existence of Narmada in *That Thou Art***

From the beginning to the end of the novel, the physical presence of Narmada and its materialistic rule remained in place. As the author has noted in the preface: "Among all the rivers Narmada is the dearest to me." The author has gone beyond the dimension of locale and natural beauty and presented Narmada as a symbol of an ever-flowing, alive culture. At the end of the novel witnessing Reva as a life-giving girl; not only represents the river but also symbolizes the culture. The liberated protagonist can be experienced as the one who is becoming a part of the culture that is ever flowing and ever shining like Narmada. He further praises: "Only such people can maintain a culture which is thousands of years old. They can maintain their traditions. They can

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maintain their unique way of life. From here they will take place a sweeping revolution in the world. The fear of a culture getting extinct will be felt not only here. It will happen all over the world. (Bhatt 107)

**Conclusion:**

We can say that Akoopar is an Ecocritical study of the harmonious co-existence of mankind with nature. Again, it is a fiction that represents the life and wisdom sought in Aranyakas as "I am Thou", at the micro-level and encompasses the wisdom of the sages of the Vedic period meditating on the basic inquiry of the evolution of life on earth. The concept of combining the five elements of fire, space, water, air, and matter that is a planet. Earth has integrated the other four. This insight or realization of oneness in everything inherent is the answer for the locals living in Aranyakas and struggling to hold the traditional knowledge alive, to convey it. The author tries to show that the man-nature relationship should be a balanced one and every creature is important. Every living creature has its sense of survival. Thus Dhruv Bhatt, here, is attempting to prove that nature not only sustains human life but impacts human emotions and psychology greatly. The people of the area treat natural aspects the way they treat humans. The only explanation behind their simplicity of approach and ability to succeed in any circumstance comes from "Nature! That was the only explanation." (Bhatt 157)

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