

**Nature as Protagonist: An Ecocritical Reading of Gopinath Mohanty's Novel
*The Dynasty of the Immortals***

First Author: Dilshad Ali

Research Scholar

Department of English and Foreign Languages

Maharshi Dayanand University, Rohtak (Haryana)

Email: faradrikdilshad29@gmail.com

Reg. no. 1818130038

Second Author: Dr Kavita

Assistant Professor

Maharshi Dayanand University, Rohtak (Haryana)

Email: kavita.eng@mdurohtak.ac.in

Abstract

Gopinath Mohanty's *The Dynasty of the Immortals* (2018), initially known as *Amrutara Santana*, is a significant contribution to Indian regional literature that presents an intricate bond between humans and nature. This study examines the novel as an ecocritical text, presenting nature not merely as a backdrop or setting, but rather as a vital and dynamic character that profoundly influences the tribal community's moral, emotional, and spiritual lives. Set in the green forests and serene hills of Odisha, Mohanty's narrative effectively depicts the Kondh tribe's relationship with nature, showing that ecology, culture, and faith are inextricably linked. By depicting the aspects of nature, Mohanty moves beyond the conventional stories of progress and civilisation that are anthropocentric, presenting the ecological system as an essential part of human identity.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, tribal ecology, postcolonial ecocriticism, tribal identity.

Introduction

Gopinath Mohanty (1914–1991), who received the Sahitya Akademi Award (1955) for *Amrutara Santana (The Dynasty of the Immortals)* and the Jnanpith Award (1974) for *Mati Matala*, is widely recognised as one of the towering personalities of Indian regional literature and of Odia fiction. As a novelist, short-story writer, and translator, Mohanty redefined Odia prose, enriching it with extraordinary psychological profundity, social realism, and a philosophical outlook. In fact, his narratives are a powerful portrayal of the Odia tribal and rural people's culture, their struggles, and spiritual endurance, which has remained an almost unexplored area in the Indian mainstream narratives.

Mohanty was born in Cuttack, Odisha, and joined the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) in 1938. His job took him to the tribal areas of Koraput and Kalahandi. This adventure had a profound impact on his artistic perspective. He observed the strong bond between the tribal people and nature—their ceremonies, myths, and ethics—and then he infused these revelations into his captivating fiction. His works, such as *Paraja* (1945), *Amrutara Santana (The Dynasty of the Immortals)*, (1947), and *Dadi Budha (The Ancestor)*, (1944), not only honor the age-old symbiotic relationship between man and nature, but also highlight the imperialist-induced cultural decay and the inevitable march of modernity.

The writings of Mohanty harmoniously combine lyrical and philosophical elements, revealing not only his deep concern for the less privileged in society but also his sharp understanding of common human problems. Additionally, his protagonists are so generically human and lovable that they ignore the social distinctions. Critics frequently compare his vast creative range to that of Premchand in Hindi literature and Thomas Hardy in English and point

out his intimate association with and understanding of rural life. Using powerful stories coupled with nature as a symbol, Mohanty not only becomes the voice of the tribal communities of Odisha but also anticipates the subsequent theoretical constructs of postcolonialism, ecocriticism, and subaltern studies.

Gopinath Mohanty's *The Dynasty of the Immortals* is a landmark in Indian English literature for its detailed and moving depiction of the profound interdependence of man with nature. The novel's anthropological aspect is evident from its setting among Odisha's forest-dwelling tribal people; additionally, it is a philosophical inquiry into the origin of life. It showcases the Kondh tribe, whose culture, ceremonies, and ethical standards are closely intertwined with the ecology that nurtures them. The author's engagement with tribal life elevates the text from a mere ethnographic account to a reflective examination of the spiritual and moral dimensions of human nature.

The Dynasty of the Immortals is a work that still holds an ecological vision relevant today, and it strongly resonates with modern-day environmental issues. In an era when the world primarily discusses the impacts of climate change, deforestation, and the exploitation of indigenous lands, Mohanty's novel serves as a poignant reminder of the timeless wisdom that remains integral to tribal traditions. The Kondhs' love of forests, rivers, and soil symbolises an environmental ethic that is not based on ruling but on mutual exchange. Their lifestyle is what ecocritics like Cheryll Glotfelty call it "the interconnectedness of all forms of life within the web of existence" (*The Ecocriticism Reader*, xviii).

Ecocriticism: A Theoretical Framework

Ecocriticism, a critical movement, emerged in the second half of the twentieth century in response to the environmental crisis resulting from the increasing degradation of the natural world. This major theoretical framework examines the relationship between literary production and the natural world. The term 'ecocriticism' was coined by William Rueckert in his 1978 essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism," where he put forward the idea of studying literary works in context to the ecological model. Rueckert believes that literature plays a crucial role as one of the primary transmitters of energy between human beings and the ecosystem, helping to increase human awareness about ecological issues (Rueckert 107).

However, a significant part of present-day ecocriticism has been developed by Glotfelty and Fromm's groundbreaking anthology, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996), which was the first to define and categorise 'ecocriticism' as a field of study. Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty and Fromm, xviii). Glotfelty points out that feminist criticism focuses on gender, while Marxist criticism examines class; similarly, ecocriticism is a nature-based criticism that views the environment as the primary lens for studying literature. Ecocriticism is opposed to the anthropocentric worldview and thus advocates for what Greg Garrard refers to as an "ecocentric" point of view, i.e., one that places humans as part of the larger ecological network rather than its controller (*Ecocriticism*, 5).

Lawrence Buell's influential work *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) expanded the scope of ecocriticism by introducing key principles for identifying environmental texts. To support his point, Buell indicates that an environmental text has to represent the nonhuman environment as a "presence" that evokes "human accountability and an ethical response directed

to nature” (7). In addition, he emphasises that literature has the power to foster “environmental consciousness,” which is the awareness of nature’s agency and fragility. Similarly, Patrick D. Murphy’s 1995 work, *Literature, Nature, and Other: Ecofeminist Critiques*, demonstrates the connection between ecocriticism and feminist theory. The author highlights the connection between the mistreatment of nature and the oppression of women, both of which stem from patriarchal and capitalist ideologies.

In a similar vein, critics such as Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin have developed the concept of ‘postcolonial ecocriticism,’ which examines the relationships between the ecological crisis and colonial power structures. Their book, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2010), identifies the root cause of environmental degradation in colonised areas as the double exploitation of both land and people by imperial powers. This idea is particularly evident in works that focus on Indian tribal and regional communities; one notable example is Gopinath Mohanty’s *The Dynasty of the Immortals*, which illustrates the tribes’ dependence on nature as a sustainable practice, sharply contrasting with colonial and capitalist globalised narratives.

In the Indian context, ecocriticism is closely linked to native ecological traditions and the concept of *prakriti*. According to R.K. Singh and S.K. Paul, Indian literature has been chiefly eco-conscious and has depicted the cultural tradition of loving and respecting rivers, forests, and animals as sacred (*Indian English Literature: A Critical Survey*, 87). Therefore, ecocritical readings of Indian texts are not simply importations from the West; rather, they restate the deeply rooted ecological spirituality inherent in the texts.

Nature as the protagonist in *The Dynasty of the Immortals*

Gopinath Mohanty, in *The Dynasty of the Immortals*, depicts nature not merely as the background of the Kondhs tribe but also as the main character of their world. Odisha's hills, trees, rivers, and mountains serve as the setting for the novel. For the Kondh tribe, nature is not merely the external environment but also the extension of their shared mind, the embodiment of god and fate. The animistic view of the world made nature the real hero of the story. The forest is closely tied to human life, as it lives, breathes, and regenerates. The community's strength and vibrancy enable the forest to flourish; however, when the community's religious beliefs weaken or violence erupts, nature suffers silently. Mohanty's narrative technique thus aligns with what Lawrence Buell describes as an "environmental text," one where "the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history" (*The Environmental Imagination*, 7).

Nature in Mohanty's novel is a source of morality and spirituality. The cycles of rain, drought, birth, and decay are a reflection of the moral rhythm of the Kondh people's lives. The earth, in their belief, is *Amruta*, the "immortal mother"; she provides life to all the creatures but, at the same time, asks for respect and self-control. Mohanty depicts the forest as a living being that communicates with its murmurs and quietness, which is a language that the people understand through their intuition: "The forest was alive—it heard, it saw, it remembered" (*The Dynasty of the Immortals* 32). These portrayals are examples of what Cheryll Glotfelty terms the "ecocentric vision" in literary works, where nature "possesses agency and deserves moral consideration beyond human utility" (Glotfelty and Fromm, xxii).

By illustrating the vibrant life of nature, Mohanty is saying that the planet follows a native ecological philosophy, which is entirely different from the modern, exploitative models of development. The Kondh people's rituals, such as the Meriah festival celebrating the Earth

Goddess, do not signify superstition but a recognition of the close ties between humans and nature (*The Dynasty of the Immortals* 5). Their extreme love for the earth, seeds, and seasons is a perfect embodiment of what Arne Naess calls "deep ecology," a concept that means all living things, even the smallest ones, have a value that comes from their very existence and not from the fact that they are helpful to humans (*Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, 28).

Mohanty, in his novel, depicts the life of the Kondh tribe, who live in the hilly areas of Koraput. Essentially, the story centered on Maniapayu, a small village in the Koraput district. After briefly describing Sarbu Sawant's clan, gotra, and caste at the beginning of the novel, the author then describes the village's location, which is surrounded by nature: “. . . there arose before him the peaked hills, obscured by shimmering veils of mists, in countless waves, with dales and caverns below them” (Mohanty 5). The scenic beauty of hilly areas is highly charming and attractive. The portrayal of the forest and the diverse flora and birds has contributed to the lively and charming ambience. The author illustrates the charm of Malaland as:

The *Mala* land was beautiful, very beautiful indeed, with multi-coloured hills, and crystalline streams. Everywhere, there was an abundance of *alasi* (linseed) flowers. The *alasi* honeybees were busy dangling honeycombs on branches and walls. There was all-pervasive enchantment here. (ibid. 3)

Further, describing the natural beauty of the surrounding landscape of the Maniapayu village, Mohanty writes:

From a height, you could see one side of the village. Half the length of the wooded hill was covered with caster plants. Beyond that lay dense forests. On one side below, under the dense, dark, almost bottomless forest ran a deep stream, on the other side, hills of

incalculable height, valleys for cultivation, and the village, going down towards the undulating cornfield, and then climbing again, up to the forest-laden hills. (ibid 8-9)

The Kondh people live a fearless life in the lap of nature, and despite their existence in this beautiful yet surprising and terrible environment, they consider happiness and sorrow to be part of their lives and have learned the virtue of tolerance from the mountain.

One can understand the connection of tribals with nature simply by observing their lifestyle and culture. In fact, one can take the example of the Mahua tree to understand how the Kondh and Paraja tribes' economics, social practices, religious festivals, dances, songs, and folklore are related to nature. The Mahua tree is an essential part of the social and economic life of the tribal people. A drink is made from Mahua fruits. Therefore, gathering and selling the Mahua fruits is their primary means of living.

The nature in *The Dynasty of the Immortals* is the one that guides the characters towards what is right. As tribal customs gradually change due to the influence of various factors—missionary intervention, colonial intrusion, and modern greed—nature also becomes affected. The droughts, failed crops, and changing climate not only signify ecological imbalance but also the disintegration of the culture. According to Jatindra K. Nayak, Mohanty's novel is concerned about the destruction of tribal ecology—a world where man's desecration of nature is closely linked to his loss of innocence (130). It is through nature's pain that the loss of the community's connection to its roots is revealed.

Mohanty metaphorically portrays nature as a 'mother,' showing the earth as both giver and taker. The hills and forests provide comfort and a sense of belonging to the Kondhs, yet they

also pose challenges to their survival. This complex relationship mirrors the Indian cultural notion of *prakriti*—the feminine creative force that nurtures life while testing human endurance. According to R.K. Singh, “In Indian writing, nature is seldom inert; it is a living force, part of the divine continuum that links man, god, and environment” (*Indian English Literature: A Critical Survey*, 87). Mohanty’s narrator adopts this idea, and even more so, he expresses it powerfully, almost like poetry, evoking the harmony and tension between humans and their environment.

Mohanty skillfully blends myth and ritual, transforming the spiritual celebrations of the Kondh and similar tribes into a dynamic form of eco-spiritual knowledge. The author does not depict these rituals as mere superstitions of an outdated culture; instead, he considers them environmental medical devices that help the community manage its relationship with nature through ceremonial performances (Mohanty 23). For example, the forest is not just the setting where they live: it is also the place of ancestral myth, ritual performance, and moral geography. One critic notes that in Mohanty’s earlier tribal novels, “life is predominated by specific beliefs, faith, and practices concerning nature, tradition, and culture ... oriented by the age-old traditional values and indigenous knowledge system” (23-24).

Myths in Mohanty's stories often elevate the earth and trees to the status of gods. The rocks, woods, rivers, and mountains are not lifeless; they are loaded with the past and the power of the ancestors. The ritual performances—harvest festivals, seasonal hunts, animal sacrifices, and the calling of gods—are, therefore, not just the culture of the community but the different ways through which the ecology reaches the human community (Virgil 2197). These ceremonies, which depict the cycle and continuity, also revive eco-spirituality and serve as a means of

identification for the tribal community with nature. As the folk-culture study notes of tribal Odisha, the tribal world is foregrounded in the physical domain of nature and the epistemological world of their religion and culture (“The Folk Culture of Odisha: Gopinath Mohanty’s *Paraja*” 15-16).

Ultimately, Mohanty makes nature the main character of his novel by giving it a mind, will, and feelings. The Kondhs’ survival, selfhood, and religious faith are closely tied to their relationship with nature. *The Dynasty of the Immortals* becomes not just a saga of people communing with nature, but a saga narrated by nature itself—a beautiful poem celebrating ecological balance, the wisdom of the tribals, and the sanctity of the earth. By this act, Mohanty revitalises Indian regional literature and becomes a part of the worldwide conversation on environmental ethics; thus, his novel can be seen as a pioneer of contemporary ecocritical thought.

Disruption and Ecological Crisis

Gopinath Mohanty portrays the tribal world as a system of biological interdependence, under the sacred mutuality of humans and nature. But this delicate balance started breaking apart due to the colonial intrusion, missionary intervention, and the arrival of modernity (*The Dynasty of the Immortals* 68-69). The Kondh tribe, which is a community of the forest living in a symbiotic relationship with nature, first gets dislocated from their land and then from their even cultural consciousness. Mohanty’s story chronicles this breakdown as a double crisis, environmental and ethical, which mirrors what Lawrence Buell calls “the simultaneous degradation of nature and of the human imagination” (*The Environmental Imagination*, 11).

Colonialism functions as a catalyst of ecological disruption in the novel. Along with it comes the introduction of exploitative land systems, new administrative controls, and commercial forestry that replaces the indigenous ethos of sustainable living with a capitalist model of extraction. The tribal forest, once a sacred heritage, has now become a site for resource exploitation. The colonial gaze transforms the living earth into what Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin call a “colonized ecology,” where “land and nature are no longer home but commodities for imperial control” (*Postcolonial Ecocriticism* 23). In this way, Mohanty’s depiction of the forest’s slow march to extinction is a metaphor for the conquest of both culture and the environment.

Modernity, in fact, exacerbates the ecological divide, as Mohanty writes, “The confusion in social life, which the impact of modernisation has destroyed, is similar” (*The Dynasty of the Immortals* 71). The arrival of the modern institutions—schools, churches, markets, and bureaucratic governance—produces a new social order that separates the tribe from nature. The sacrificial ceremonies become increasingly lifeless as trust in the ancestral ways diminishes. At one point, Mohanty describes the forest as getting more distant and quiet: “The trees stood still as if listening to a language they no longer understood” (ibid. 146). The disconnect between humans and nature is both physical and existential; people’s identities, once deeply intertwined with the earth’s rhythms, are now fragmented due to foreign values.

Such loss of ecological intimacy is a mirror of what environmental philosophers term disenchantment. According to Arne Naess, the detachment of the modern world from nature results in a shallow ecology, which only values nature for its use (*Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle* 29). Mohanty's novel elucidates this shift: outsiders forcibly impose an anthropocentric

viewpoint, replacing the Kondhs' eco-sacred system. Modernity now views the tribe's myths and rituals, which once provided resources for ecological balance, as the least developed. This ontological displacement transforms the tribe into a community estranged from both the land and spirit.

The ecological crisis in *The Dynasty of the Immortals* also represents a crisis of belonging. Nature's suffering is a reflection of human suffering. As a matter of fact, critic Jatindra K. Nayak points out, “Mohanty’s fiction transforms the forest into a moral landscape, where the decay of ecological order signifies the collapse of human values” (130). The merging of environmental and emotional losses is thus the basis for Mohanty’s eco-spiritual perspective; the survival of humanity relies on the return of lost harmony with the natural world.

Conclusion

Gopinath Mohanty's *The Dynasty of the Immortals* is an impressive combination of tribal myth, rituals, and ecological ethics. Mohanty, through the Kondh people's lives, elucidates the complex web that links human life with the natural world. His story goes beyond the limits of realism to bring forth what can be called an eco-spiritual vision—a vision of the world where nature is not just the setting of human exploits but a living entity, charged with spirit and power. The novel serves as a reminder to readers that for the tribals, nature serves as both a mother and a god, a boundless force that sustains and guides life.

On the other hand, Mohanty also documents the slow breaking of this holy bond due to the influences of colonialism, modernity, and cultural displacement. Outside forces transform nature from a place of harmonious coexistence to one of exploitation and estrangement. The

lively ceremonies that once united man with nature are fading as development takes over. Therefore, the novel uses ecological degradation as a metaphor to reveal hidden moral and existential decay. Mohanty's narrative becomes an elegy for a world in which spiritual harmony and environmental balance once sustained human life.

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