



Ecoprecarity and Literature: Reimagining Narrative and Ecology

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Abstract

This paper examines the concept of “ecoprecarity”—the condition of ecological vulnerability shaped by environmental degradation, socio-political inequality, and global capitalism—and its growing significance as a literary paradigm. Drawing on theoretical insights from ecocriticism, environmental humanities, and posthuman studies, the paper explores how contemporary literature reimagines the relationship between narrative and ecology. Through an analysis of selected literary texts and critical frameworks, the study argues that literature not only represents precarious ecological conditions but also becomes a space for rethinking agency, relationality, and planetary ethics. Ecoprecarity, therefore, emerges as both a thematic concern and a narrative strategy that destabilises anthropocentric worldviews and foregrounds interconnected, vulnerable multispecies worlds.

Keywords: ecoprecarity, ecology, narrative, anthropocentric worldviews.

I. Introduction

The accelerating ecological crises of the twenty-first century—climate change, species extinction, toxic pollution, resource scarcity, and the displacement of communities—have foregrounded new conceptual frameworks within the environmental humanities. Among them, ecoprecarity, a term advanced significantly by critics like Pramod K. Nayar, has emerged as a key lens to understand how ecological vulnerability is distributed unevenly across human and nonhuman lives. The term brings together “ecology” and “precarity,” signalling a condition in which life itself becomes exposed to harm due to environmental decline and political-economic systems that exacerbate vulnerability.

Contemporary literature has responded to these conditions by reimagining narrative forms, themes, and representational ethics. Ecoprecarity compels writers to rethink the relationship between humans and the more-than-human world, moving

beyond traditional environmental writing to foreground vulnerability and relationality. This paper examines how ecoprecarity functions as a conceptual and narrative tool in literature and how literary texts help articulate a planetary consciousness responsive to the fragility of life in the Anthropocene.

Defining Ecoprecarity: A Theoretical Framework

Precarity and Ecological Thought

The term “precarity” was initially developed within political theory, especially in the works of Judith Butler, to describe socio-economic vulnerability produced by neoliberal systems. When applied to ecology, the term extends this vulnerability to the environment and all life forms affected by ecological collapse.

Ecoprecarity thus refers to:

1. Material vulnerability—the exposure of bodies (human/nonhuman) to toxic environments, climate disasters, and scarcity.
2. Structural vulnerability—the ways in which political and economic systems render certain communities more at risk.
3. Relational vulnerability—the interconnected fragility of ecosystems where the suffering of one species or system ripples through others.

Pramod K. Nayar’s *Ecoprecarity: Vulnerable Lives in Literature and Culture* (2019) is foundational to this discourse. Nayar argues that ecoprecarity highlights “the shared but unevenly distributed vulnerability of human and nonhuman life,” urging a reconsideration of ethical and political commitments. This framework invites readers to acknowledge that ecological harm impacts marginalized humans disproportionately, and simultaneously devastates animals, plants, and ecosystems.



The Posthuman Turn

Posthumanist theory also informs the concept of ecoprecarity. Scholars such as Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti emphasise entanglement and relationality among species. The posthuman worldview undermines human exceptionalism and highlights the interdependence of life systems.

Literature shaped by this worldview often reveals:

- Nonhuman agency
- Shared suffering across bodies
- Hybrid ecological narratives
- Ethical openness toward multispecies communities

Ecoprecarity, therefore, is not merely a crisis; it is an epistemological shift that questions the response of narrative to fast changing physical environment.

Ecoprecarity as a Literary Theme

Climate Fiction (Cli-Fi) and Precarious Futures

One of the most prominent genres addressing ecoprecarity is climate fiction. Works such as Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* depict societies grappling with rising seas, collapsing ecosystems, and political turmoil. These texts intertwine environmental and human precarity, showing how climate disasters disproportionately impact the marginalized.

Toxicity, Slow Violence, and Environmental Justice

Rob Nixon's idea of *slow violence*—gradual environmental harm that is invisible yet devastating—is central to ecoprecarity literature. Texts like Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* reveal the long-term suffering produced by industrial pollution and resource extraction.

Such works foreground:

- The invisibility of ecological harm
- Biopolitical control over damaged communities
- The persistence of neoliberal exploitation

Multispecies Suffering and Shared Vulnerability

Contemporary literature increasingly portrays animals, forests, and landscapes as beings who suffer, resist, and experience trauma. Works like Richard Powers's *The Overstory* or Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* articulate multispecies precarities, insisting that ecological harm cannot be understood solely through human-centred narratives.

Ecoprecarity as a Narrative Strategy

Ecoprecarity not only shapes themes but transforms narrative techniques.

1. Nonlinear and Fragmented Structures

Ecological destruction is often slow, dispersed, and cumulative. To represent this, many texts adopt:

- Fragmented storytelling
- Polyphonic voices
- Multiple timelines

This mirrors the dispersed temporality of ecological harm and the interconnectedness of affected lives.

2. Collective Protagonists and Posthuman Agency

Ecoprecarity literature challenges individualistic heroes. Instead, it presents:

- Collective protagonists (communities, ecosystems)
- Trees, rivers, or animals as narrative presences
- Hybrid human-nonhuman consciousness

Such strategies decentralize human authority and foreground planetary interdependence.

3. Ethical Witnessing and Empathy

Literature becomes a space for witnessing ecological suffering. Narrative proximity to vulnerable bodies—human, animal, vegetal—produces an ethics of care. Evoking empathy across species lines is one of the most radical narrative shifts promoted by ecoprecarity studies.

Case Studies

Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement*

Ghosh critiques the failure of mainstream literary fiction to engage with climate change. His work itself becomes a meditation on how narrative forms must adapt to represent ecological precarity. Ghosh argues that the improbability of climate events challenges realist conventions. This resonates with ecoprecarity's call for new narrative modes.

Richard Powers's *The Overstory*

This novel embodies ecoprecarity by presenting trees as central actors. Powers weaves stories of human lives intertwined with arboreal existence, foregrounding slow violence against forests and the shared vulnerability of ecosystems. The novel's structure—sprawling, interconnected, and branching like a tree—demonstrates ecoprecarity as a narrative form.



Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*

Set in a fictional town modelled on Bhopal, the novel reveals chemical toxicity's long-term impact on marginalized communities. Animals, humans, and environments suffer together. The protagonist, whose body is deformed by toxic exposure, becomes a symbol of biopolitical abandonment and ecological injustice.

Indigenous and Local Ecologies

Indigenous literatures often inherently reflect ecoprecarity due to their historical experiences with colonial dispossession and environmental exploitation. Writers like Linda Hogan, N. Scott Momaday, and Northeast Indian authors (e.g., Easterine Kire) articulate ecological vulnerability as intertwined with cultural survival. Their narratives emphasize relationality, stewardship, and ecological ethics that predate contemporary environmental discourse.

Ecoprecarity and Ethical Reimagining

Planetary Ethics

Ecoprecarity literature insists that ecological harm cannot be compartmentalized. It calls for a planetary ethics that recognizes interdependence and vulnerability across species boundaries.

Environmental Justice

The uneven distribution of ecological harm correlates with caste, class, race, gender, and geography. Literature exposes these inequalities and advocates for systemic change.

Posthuman Ethics and Care

By centering nonhuman agency, ecoprecarity narratives cultivate forms of care beyond anthropocentrism. They reimagine ethical relationships based not on dominance but on shared fragility.

Ecoprecarity and Narrative Innovation

Ecoprecarity encourages experimentation with narrative techniques such as:

- **Eco-gothic tropes** (to represent fears of ecological collapse)
- **Speculative futurism** (envisioning alternative worlds)
- **Documentary realism** (integrating scientific, journalistic, and archival materials)
- **Multiform narratives** (maps, diagrams, indigenous storytelling patterns)

These innovations help literature capture the complexity of ecological crises.

II. Conclusion

Ecoprecarity has transformed contemporary literary and ecological thought. As a framework, it deepens our understanding of how environmental crises impact human and nonhuman lives, revealing vulnerabilities that are shared yet uneven. As a literary paradigm, it enables new narrative possibilities that foreground multispecies entanglements, ethical witnessing, and posthuman modes of being.

By reimagining narrative and ecology together, literature becomes a vital space for generating ecological awareness, planetary ethics, and socio-political critique. In an age of accelerating environmental collapse, ecoprecarity offers not only a lens to interpret the world but also a call to re-envision our place within it—vulnerable, interconnected, and responsible.

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