



Introduction

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Rooted in Culture, Connected to Nature: A Cultural Ecological Lens in the Select Works of Anita Nair

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Abstract

*Indian English fiction has consistently reflected the complex intersections of culture, gender, and environment, particularly in the works of contemporary women writers. Among them, Anita Nair occupies a significant place for her nuanced portrayal of women's experiences within culturally and ecologically specific contexts. This paper examines select novels of Anita Nair *Mistress* and *Lessons in Forgetting* through the combined theoretical frameworks of cultural ecology and ecofeminism. It argues that Nair foregrounds the intimate relationship between women and nature while simultaneously critiquing the disruptive forces of modernisation, globalisation, and patriarchal social structures. The study explores how environmental change, cultural displacement, and ecological degradation shape the emotional and psychological lives of her characters, particularly women. By situating female subjectivity within landscapes, climatic conditions, and cultural practices, Nair reveals how both women and nature are marginalised yet resilient. This paper demonstrates that Nair's fiction does not merely depict ecological concerns but embeds them deeply within cultural memory, identity formation, and gendered experience. Through close textual analysis and critical engagement, the study establishes Anita Nair as a significant voice in Indian ecofeminist and cultural ecological discourse.*

Keywords: *Cultural Ecology, Ecofeminism, Environmental Consciousness, Gender, Anita Nair*

Indian English literature has long served as a vital medium for articulating the socio-cultural realities of the subcontinent. From the colonial period to the contemporary era, Indian writers have employed fiction to explore identity, tradition, displacement, and resistance. In recent decades, increasing attention has been paid to ecological concerns in literature, particularly in response to environmental degradation caused by industrialisation, urbanisation, and globalisation. Literature has emerged as a powerful space to interrogate humanity's fractured relationship with nature and to expose the unequal consequences of ecological crises. Within this literary context, contemporary Indian women writers have made significant contributions by linking environmental concerns with gendered experiences. Anita Nair is one such writer whose fiction reflects a deep engagement with culture, ecology, and women's lives.

Her novels are rooted in specific geographical locations and cultural traditions, yet they resonate with universal themes of alienation, belonging, and resilience. Nair's narratives frequently foreground women who negotiate personal freedom within restrictive social frameworks while remaining intimately connected to their environments. Nature in her fiction is not a passive backdrop but an active presence that shapes emotional states, cultural identities, and ethical choices. The present study examines *Mistress* and *Lessons in Forgetting* through the lens of cultural ecology and ecofeminism. Cultural ecology emphasises the reciprocal relationship between human culture and the natural environment, highlighting how cultural practices evolve in response to ecological conditions. Ecofeminism, on the other hand, draws attention to the parallel oppression of women and nature under patriarchal and capitalist systems. By combining these perspectives, this paper argues that Anita Nair's fiction reveals how environmental degradation and cultural displacement disproportionately affect women, while also offering spaces of resistance and renewal.

Modernisation and globalisation are often celebrated as markers of progress; however, they have also contributed to ecological imbalance and cultural erosion. In Nair's novels, characters frequently experience psychological dislocation when removed from familiar cultural and environmental contexts. Through migration, travel, and cultural exchange, Nair illustrates the emotional consequences of environmental change and cultural hybridity. Women, in particular, emerge as sensitive indicators of these disruptions, embodying both vulnerability and strength. This paper seeks to demonstrate that Anita Nair's fiction aligns with contemporary ecological thought by presenting nature as inseparable from human identity and cultural memory. By examining her portrayal of female characters within culturally rich and ecologically grounded settings, the study highlights how Nair critiques patriarchal dominance while affirming the resilience of women and the enduring significance of nature.

Theoretical Framework: Cultural Ecology and Ecofeminism

Cultural Ecology

Cultural ecology is an interdisciplinary framework that examines the dynamic relationship between human cultures and their environments. It focuses on how cultural practices, beliefs, and social structures are shaped by ecological conditions and, in turn, influence the natural world. In literary studies, cultural ecology allows scholars to analyse how texts reflect environmental consciousness and cultural adaptation. Literature becomes a space where ecological realities are mediated through cultural narratives and symbolic representations. In Anita Nair's fiction, cultural ecology is evident in her detailed portrayal of landscapes, climatic conditions, and traditional practices. Villages, coastal regions, and domestic spaces are depicted not merely as settings but as formative forces that shape characters' identities. For instance, the village of Minjikapuram in *Lessons in Forgetting* represents a cultural ecosystem where memory, tradition, and nature coexist. Characters who return to or leave such spaces experience profound emotional and psychological transformations, underscoring the inseparability of culture and environment. Cultural displacement often results in alienation, a theme that recurs in Nair's novels. Characters who move across geographical and cultural boundaries struggle to adapt to unfamiliar climates, social norms, and ecological rhythms. These struggles highlight the limitations of global mobility, suggesting that physical movement does not necessarily translate into emotional belonging. Through such narratives, Nair critiques the homogenising tendencies of globalisation that disrupt culturally and ecologically rooted ways of life.

Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism is a critical framework that connects the domination of women with the exploitation of nature. It argues that patriarchal ideologies that justify the control of women also legitimise environmental destruction. Ecofeminist critics contend that women's

experiences and knowledge systems offer alternative ways of relating to the natural world—ways that emphasise care, sustainability, and interdependence. Anita Nair's novels resonate strongly with ecofeminist thought. Her female characters often experience marginalisation within patriarchal social structures while maintaining a deep connection to their environments. Women's bodies, emotions, and labour are frequently associated with natural processes, reinforcing the symbolic link between femininity and nature. At the same time, Nair challenges essentialist notions by portraying women as active agents who negotiate tradition and modernity on their own terms. In *Mistress*, the female character Angela undergoes both cultural and environmental transformation as she immerses herself in Indian traditions. Her physical discomfort and emotional vulnerability in a new climate reflect the broader theme of ecological and cultural adaptation. Similarly, in *Lessons in Forgetting*, characters such as Sarada and Smriti embody the tensions between societal expectations and personal freedom. Their struggles parallel the vulnerability of nature in a rapidly changing world. Ecofeminism in Nair's fiction does not present women merely as victims. Instead, it highlights their resilience and capacity for renewal. By aligning women's experiences with ecological rhythms, Nair suggests the possibility of healing through reconnection with nature and cultural memory. Her narratives thus offer a critique of patriarchal dominance while envisioning more harmonious relationships between humans and the natural world.

Cultural Ecology and Ecofeminism in *Mistress*

Anita Nair's *Mistress* offers a complex exploration of cultural displacement, emotional alienation, and ecological sensitivity through its central characters Koman, Angela and Christopher Stewart. The novel foregrounds the psychological impact of environmental and cultural transitions, particularly on women, thereby aligning itself with ecofeminist and cultural ecological concerns. Through travel, migration, and artistic engagement, Nair illustrates how characters negotiate identity in unfamiliar cultural and ecological spaces. Globalisation facilitates physical mobility, allowing individuals to cross national and cultural borders with relative ease. However, *Mistress* reveals that such movement often results in emotional and psychological dislocation. Christopher Stewart, a Western travel writer, journeys from England to India in search of authentic experiences. His engagement with India remains largely superficial, shaped by an outsider's gaze that romanticises culture without fully understanding its ecological and emotional depth. In contrast, Koman, a Kathakali artist, travels from India to England, carrying with him a deeply rooted cultural and ecological identity. His art form itself is inseparable from the environment and cultural traditions of Kerala, demonstrating how artistic expression emerges from specific ecological contexts.

Angela's character is central to the novel's ecofeminist discourse. A woman of mixed cultural heritage German and Spanish by parentage and English by upbringing Angela enters India as a researcher studying Kathakali. Her initial fascination with Indian culture gradually transforms into a deeper emotional and physical immersion. She adopts Indian attire, mannerisms, and rituals, symbolising her attempt to align herself with the cultural and ecological rhythms of her new environment. Nair's detailed description of Angela's appearance reflects this transformation: "She wore her hair like Malayali women do... Between her brows was a tiny red dot" (*Mistress* 361). This physical adaptation signifies not mere imitation but a desire for belonging within a culturally and ecologically distinct space. However, Angela's immersion also exposes the limits of cultural assimilation. Despite her enthusiasm and openness, she experiences physical discomfort and illness due to the unfamiliar climate and food. Her digestive problems and fatigue highlight the body's vulnerability to environmental change, reinforcing the idea that ecological displacement affects women at a deeply embodied level. From a cultural ecological perspective, Angela's suffering underscores the intimate

connection between the human body and its environment. The inability to adapt seamlessly reveals the psychological and physical costs of cultural transition.

Ecofeminist readings further illuminate Angela's position. Like nature, Angela is subjected to forces beyond her control expectations, cultural norms, and emotional dependency. Her relationship with Koman gradually becomes a site of emotional subjugation, where her individuality is compromised. Koman's insistence that she abandon Kathakali in favour of emotional devotion reflects a patriarchal pattern that prioritises male artistic ambition over female intellectual autonomy. Critics observe that Nair exposes how women's creative aspirations are often sacrificed within intimate relationships (Ghodke and Bhogle 407). Angela's illness symbolically parallels the ecological imbalance depicted in the novel. Just as nature reacts adversely to exploitation and disruption, Angela's body responds to emotional and environmental strain. Her refusal to attend Koman's performance despite his insistence indicates a moment of resistance, a refusal to perform emotional labour when physically and psychologically depleted. Through Angela, Nair critiques romanticised notions of cultural assimilation and highlights the gendered consequences of ecological displacement. The novel also interrogates the commodification of culture under globalization. Kathakali, a classical art form deeply rooted in Kerala's cultural ecology, becomes a spectacle for foreign audiences. Koman's performance in England reflects how traditional art is often detached from its ecological and cultural origins to suit global consumption. This detachment mirrors the broader ecological crisis, where nature is exploited as a resource rather than respected as a living system. Nair thus aligns cultural erosion with environmental degradation, reinforcing the ecofeminist argument that patriarchal capitalism threatens both culture and nature.

Cultural and Ecological Displacement in *Lessons in Forgetting*

In *Lessons in Forgetting*, Anita Nair extends her exploration of cultural ecology by situating personal trauma within specific environmental and cultural landscapes. The novel interweaves multiple narratives to examine how individuals respond to loss, displacement, and ecological change. Central to this exploration are the characters of Smriti, J. A. Krishnamoorthy (Kitcha), and Sarada, whose lives reflect varying degrees of connection to culture and nature. Smriti, raised in a Western cultural environment, arrives in India to pursue higher education and to reconnect with her ancestral roots. Her upbringing in a foreign land has distanced her from Indian traditions, which she has encountered primarily through stories and memories shared by her father. Cultural ecology becomes evident in Smriti's longing to experience the landscapes and cultural practices of India firsthand. Her desire to visit Minjikapuram, her father's ancestral village, reflects a search for identity grounded in place and memory. Smriti's struggle to adapt to Indian social norms highlights the tension between cultural freedom and societal expectations. Her interactions with male classmates, participation in social campaigns, and casual approach to clothing challenge conventional gender norms. When Rishi Soman advises her to dress "appropriately," Smriti's anger exposes the patriarchal impulse to regulate women's bodies. From an ecofeminist perspective, such regulation parallels the control exerted over nature both are expected to conform to socially sanctioned boundaries. As Arthi and Theresa note, Nair's women characters often confront moral policing that restricts their autonomy (28).

The scorching Indian climate further intensifies Smriti's discomfort. Her decision to unbutton her shirt to cope with the heat, a gesture acceptable for men but condemned for women, reveals the gendered double standards embedded in cultural practices. Nair uses this incident to critique the unjust association between women's attire and moral judgement. Smriti's confusion reflects the broader cultural clash experienced by women navigating multiple cultural frameworks. The campaign against female foeticide and dowry system situates Smriti within a socio-ecological struggle that links women's bodies to societal

exploitation. Her journey to Minjikapuram as part of the campaign allows her to reconnect with her ancestral land while confronting the harsh realities faced by women in rural India. The village becomes a cultural ecosystem where tradition, patriarchy, and resistance coexist. Through Smriti's experiences, Nair underscores the need for cultural reform rooted in ecological and ethical awareness.

Ecology, Memory, and Female Agency in *Lessons in Forgetting*

Anita Nair's *Lessons in Forgetting* reaches its ecological and feminist depth through the portrayal of Minjikapuram, a village that functions as a living cultural ecosystem. Unlike urban spaces marked by alienation and fragmentation, Minjikapuram is rooted in memory, tradition, and natural rhythms. The village is not merely a backdrop but an active participant in shaping the identities and emotional lives of the characters. Through this setting, Nair foregrounds the interconnectedness of culture, nature, and human experience, a key principle of cultural ecology. J. A. Krishnamoorthy, popularly known as Kitcha, embodies the ecological consciousness that emerges from a life shaped by nature. Though professionally successful as a cyclone expert in the United States, his emotional core remains tied to Minjikapuram. His memories of the village, its sea, landscape, and people represent an ecological nostalgia that contrasts sharply with the mechanised life of the West. Cultural ecology becomes evident in Kitcha's understanding that identity is inseparable from place. His return to India following Smriti's tragic accident reinforces the idea that nature serves as a site of emotional grounding and healing. Kitcha's reflections reveal how environmental attachment transcends physical distance. He associates Minjikapuram's vast ocean with continuity and resilience, qualities that mirror his own endurance through grief. Nair uses these associations to suggest that nature holds restorative power, particularly in moments of emotional rupture. This portrayal aligns with ecofeminist thought, which views nature as a nurturing yet vulnerable force subjected to exploitation and neglect.

Sarada: Woman, Nature, and Quiet Resistance

Sarada, Kitcha's mother, emerges as one of the most compelling ecofeminist figures in Nair's fiction. Her life reflects the intersection of gendered oppression and emotional endurance within a culturally and ecologically rooted setting. When her husband abandons the family to pursue a spiritual life, Sarada becomes the target of social blame. Society's response exposes the patriarchal tendency to hold women accountable for male choices, reinforcing women's marginalisation within cultural structures. Despite this abandonment, Sarada does not collapse into victimhood. Instead, she reconstructs her life through education and self-reliance. As a primary school mathematics teacher who pursues a B.Ed degree, she exemplifies quiet resistance against patriarchal dependency. Her professional journey underscores the ecofeminist idea that women, like nature, possess regenerative strength even after prolonged exploitation. Scholars have observed that Nair's women often resist oppression not through rebellion but through endurance and self-assertion (Agalaya and Mahalakshmi 2). Sarada's anticipation of her husband's return expressed through food, music, and domestic rituals reflects the deep cultural conditioning imposed on women. These acts symbolise a woman's emotional labour within marriage, a labour often rendered invisible. However, when Sarada receives her husband's letter renouncing familial responsibility, she experiences a moment of awakening. This realisation marks a turning point where she reclaims agency over her life. Her subsequent emotional detachment is not bitterness but self-preservation. From an ecofeminist perspective, Sarada's journey parallels the exploitation of nature. Just as nature is expected to give endlessly without recognition, Sarada is expected to sacrifice without acknowledgment. Her eventual emotional withdrawal signifies resistance against patriarchal consumption. Nair thus presents Sarada as a symbol of feminine resilience grounded in cultural continuity and ecological awareness.

Comparative Ecofeminist Reading: *Mistress* and *Lessons in Forgetting*

A comparative reading of *Mistress* and *Lessons in Forgetting* reveals Anita Nair's consistent engagement with ecofeminist and cultural ecological concerns. While *Mistress* focuses on cultural displacement and emotional alienation resulting from global mobility, *Lessons in Forgetting* emphasises rootedness, memory, and the healing potential of ecological connection. Together, the novels present a continuum of female experience shaped by environmental and cultural forces. Angela's struggle in *Mistress* represents the vulnerability of women navigating unfamiliar cultural and ecological spaces. Her physical illness and emotional dependency reflect the destabilising effects of displacement. In contrast, Sarada and Smriti in *Lessons in Forgetting* demonstrate how reconnection with cultural roots and natural environments fosters resilience. Smriti's journey to Minjikapuram allows her to confront societal injustices while rediscovering ancestral belonging. Both novels critique patriarchal structures that seek to regulate women's bodies, emotions, and ambitions. Whether through Koman's emotional dominance over Angela or society's moral policing of Smriti's attire, Nair exposes how cultural norms perpetuate gender inequality. These patterns mirror the exploitation of nature under patriarchal capitalism, reinforcing ecofeminist arguments about parallel oppressions. Moreover, Nair challenges the assumption that modernisation equates to progress. Globalisation, while enabling cultural exchange, often results in cultural dilution and ecological disruption. Through richly detailed settings and emotionally complex characters, Nair advocates for a balanced coexistence between tradition and modernity, one that respects both women's autonomy and environmental integrity.

Conclusion

Anita Nair's *Mistress* and *Lessons in Forgetting* offer profound insights into the interconnectedness of culture, nature, and gender. Through the combined lenses of cultural ecology and ecofeminism, this study has demonstrated how Nair foregrounds women's experiences within ecologically and culturally specific contexts. Her fiction reveals that environmental degradation and cultural displacement disproportionately affect women, yet also highlights their resilience and capacity for renewal. By situating female subjectivity within landscapes, climates and cultural practices, Nair challenges patriarchal ideologies that seek to dominate both women and nature. Her characters negotiate tradition and modernity while asserting individuality and emotional authenticity. Nature, in Nair's novels, functions as a living presence that shapes memory, identity, and ethical awareness. Ultimately, Anita Nair's work contributes significantly to Indian ecofeminist discourse by emphasising care, interconnectedness, and sustainability. Her fiction urges readers to reconsider humanity's relationship with nature and to recognise women's voices as central to ecological and cultural healing. In an era marked by environmental crisis and social inequality, Nair's narratives remain both relevant and transformative.

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