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Ecological Identity and Interbeing: A Deep Ecology Reading of Modern Narratives

Dr. Jaswinder Kaur
Email.jaswinder.rattan28@gmail.com

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Abstract: *Contemporary ecological crises have intensified scholarly attention toward philosophical frameworks capable of reshaping humanity's relationship with the nonhuman world. Among these frameworks, deep ecology—first articulated by Arne Naess—has emerged as an influential approach that challenges anthropocentric worldviews and advocates an ecological consciousness grounded in intrinsic value, interdependence, and biocentric equality. Parallel to these developments is the Buddhist-derived concept of interbeing, popularized by Thich Nhat Hanh, which posits that all forms of life co-arise through mutual dependence, dissolving the boundary between self and environment. This paper explores how the convergence of ecological identity and interbeing provides a productive lens for reading modern narratives that grapple with environmental degradation, posthuman subjectivity, and the reimagining of ethical life on a damaged planet.*

Analyzing selected novels, films, and narrative forms—including works by Amitav Ghosh, Richard Powers, and N. K. Jemisin—this study demonstrates how contemporary storytelling dramatizes the dissolution of the human-centric self and depicts characters undergoing ecological awakening. These narratives articulate identity not as a fixed essence but as an extended ecological field shaped by reciprocity with the nonhuman. As modern narratives increasingly foreground forests, oceans, animal life, climate-altered landscapes, and more-than-human agencies, they reconfigure the boundaries of subjectivity in ways that resonate profoundly with deep ecology's emphasis on "the self-realization of all beings" and interbeing's insistence on ontological entanglement.

The paper argues that modern narrative forms function as crucial cultural sites where ecological identity is imagined, contested, and ethically cultivated. Through thematic, philosophical, and ecocritical analysis, it shows that deep ecological reading practices illuminate the ways literature and film can foster ecological consciousness. Ultimately, such narratives challenge readers to inhabit a mode of being grounded in humility, kinship, and ecological responsibility—offering new pathways for collective imagination amid accelerating planetary crisis.

Keywords: *ecological identity, deep ecology, interbeing, modern narratives, ecocriticism, posthumanism*

Introduction

The ecological crises of the twenty-first century—climate change, species extinction, collapsing ecosystems, and environmental injustice—have made clear that the dominant human-centered worldview is inadequate for sustaining life on Earth. Philosophical, literary, and cultural discourses have therefore turned toward frameworks capable of rethinking the human's place within ecological systems. **Deep ecology**, articulated by Arne Naess in the

1970s, offers one such transformative perspective through its critique of anthropocentrism and its call for a more expansive sense of self grounded in ecological interdependence. Complementing this perspective is the concept of **interbeing**, elaborated by Thich Nhat Hanh, which emphasizes the relational nature of all existence.

At the same time, modern narratives—from climate fiction ("cli-fi") to eco-speculative literature, Indigenous storytelling, and environmental film—have increasingly taken up questions of human-nature relations, more-than-human agency, and environmental justice. These narratives serve as cultural laboratories where ecological identity is interrogated, revised, and reimagined. They offer imaginative spaces for confronting the limitations of anthropocentrism and exploring alternative ontologies aligned with ecological ethics.

This paper argues that **deep ecology and interbeing together provide a powerful analytical lens** for interpreting modern narratives because they illuminate the dissolution of the isolated human subject and the emergence of ecological identity as an ethical and ontological horizon. Through readings of key literary and cinematic works, the paper examines how narrative forms reflect and extend deep ecological principles, fostering what Joanna Macy calls the "greening of the self." The goal is to show how narrative imagination can help cultivate ecological consciousness and contribute to the broader cultural transformation required in an era of ecological precarity.

I. Conceptual Foundations: Deep Ecology and Interbeing

Deep Ecology's Rejection of Anthropocentrism

Deep ecology begins with a central provocation: that the ecological crisis stems not merely from poor resource management but from an anthropocentric worldview that positions humans as superior to, and separate from, the rest of nature. Arne Naess's distinction between "shallow" and "deep" ecology marks a philosophical shift toward recognizing the intrinsic value of all living beings (Naess 95). He argues for **biospheric egalitarianism**, the principle that all organisms have a right to flourish independent of their usefulness to humans.

Naess also introduces the concept of the **ecological self**, an expanded sense of identity that arises from identifying with the wider ecological community. Self-realization, in this framework, becomes inseparable from the flourishing of the Earth as a whole.Deep ecology, first articulated by the Norwegian philosopher **Arne Naess** in the early 1970s, is both a philosophical movement and an ethical call to reconfigure humanity's relationship with the natural world. Naess coined the term in his seminal essay "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movements," distinguishing between two fundamentally different approaches to environmentalism. The **"shallow" ecology movement**, as he described it, focuses primarily on pollution control, resource efficiency, and technological solutions for sustaining human health and prosperity. In contrast, the **deep ecology movement** seeks to interrogate and transform the underlying philosophical assumptions that govern human-nature relations. (Naess 95).

1. The Eight-Point Deep Ecology Platform

In collaboration with philosopher George Sessions, Naess later articulated the well-known **Eight-Point Deep Ecology Platform**, which outlines the core commitments of the movement:

1. **Intrinsic Value:** The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life have intrinsic value, independent of their utility to humans.
2. **Diversity and Vitality:** Rich biodiversity contributes to the realization of these values and is a value in itself.
3. **Human Interference:** Humans have no right to reduce this diversity except to satisfy vital needs.

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4. **Population Reduction:** The flourishing of life demands reduced human interference, which includes significant reduction of human population.
5. **Policy Change:** Present human practices must change drastically, touching economics, technology, and ideological structures.
6. **Life Quality over Affluence:** A shift toward appreciating life quality—dwelling in situations of inherent value—rather than material standard of living.
7. **Obligatory Change:** Those who subscribe to the points have an obligation to implement necessary changes.
8. **Ideological Shift:** The movement requires deep questioning of Western status hierarchies, human supremacy, and industrial growth models (Sessions and Naess 35–38).

This platform reveals deep ecology's commitment to challenging anthropocentrism at its core and replacing it with **ecocentrism**, a worldview that places the ecosystem—not the human—at the center of ethical consideration.

2. Ecological Self and Self-Realization

One of Naess's most influential contributions is the concept of the **ecological self**, a radical expansion of the idea of selfhood. Rather than viewing the self as an isolated individual, deep ecology proposes that the self can expand outward in widening circles of identification—family, community, ecosystem, planet—until one's identity encompasses the vast web of life. As Naess writes, "Through wider and wider identification, the self becomes the Self" (Naess 111).In this framework, **self-realization** is not an inward journey of personal fulfillment but an outward movement toward recognizing one's participation in the Earth community.

This echoes Indigenous worldviews and Buddhist thought, suggesting that deep ecology resonates with ancient traditions of relational ontology. The ecological self also underlies deep ecology's insistence on nonviolent living, biocentric equality, and humility toward other species.

3. Biocentric Equality and Ethical Implications

A cornerstone of deep ecology is **biocentric equality**, the idea that all living beings have equal right to live and flourish. This does not mean that all beings are identical or interchangeable but rather that no species—humans included—has inherent superiority.

The ethical consequences of this principle are profound:

- Humans must recognize their place *within* ecological systems rather than above them.
- Ethical decision-making must account for the interests and well-being of nonhuman species.
- Policies and lifestyles must shift toward minimal ecological impact.

This ethical stance has influenced environmental activism, ecofeminism, and political ecology, inspiring movements committed to wilderness protection, anti-extractivism, and regenerative ecology.

4. Critiques and Misconceptions

Despite its influence, deep ecology has faced significant critiques. Some scholars argue that:

- It risks **romanticizing nature**, ignoring that ecosystems involve predation, death, and conflict.
- Its calls for human population reduction may reproduce **eco-authoritarian** tendencies.
- Its universalist claims can overshadow **Indigenous ecological knowledge** and cultural differences (Guha 72).

Deep ecologists generally respond that the philosophy is not prescriptive about specific policies but rather aims to reshape consciousness and values.

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5. Deep Ecology as a Narrative and Cultural Framework

Deep ecology is not limited to environmental activism; it has become a powerful interpretive tool for literature, film, and cultural studies.

Narratives that depict the dissolution of the human-centered self, the agency of nonhuman beings, or the intimate interconnection of ecological systems resonate deeply with Naess's ideas. Modern eco-fiction, for example, dramatizes what deep ecology calls **"identification"**—moments when characters recognize their embeddedness in living systems. Meanwhile, the ethical and spiritual dimensions of interdependence in deep ecology align it with **interbeing**, making the two frameworks productive for reading contemporary narratives.

Interbeing: The Ontology of Co-Arising

Thich Nhat Hanh's concept of **interbeing** shares this emphasis on relational existence. To inter-be is to recognize that no entity exists in isolation: "the cloud is in the paper," he famously writes, meaning that even an ordinary sheet of paper depends upon clouds, rain, sunlight, soil, and human labor (Hanh 3). Interbeing is at once a spiritual practice and a philosophical ontology, dissolving the dualisms that divide human from nature, mind from body, self from other.

Interbeing, a term popularized by the Vietnamese Zen monk and peace activist **Thich Nhat Hanh**, is a philosophical, ethical, and spiritual framework that articulates radical relationality among all beings. Derived from the Buddhist doctrine of **pratītyasamutpāda**—commonly translated as "dependent co-arising" or "dependent origination"—interbeing insists that no phenomenon exists independently. Everything arises through an intricate web of causes and conditions that stretch across time, space, species, and elements.

1. Buddhist Foundations of Interbeing

In classical Buddhist philosophy, the doctrine of dependent co-arising expresses that all phenomena come into existence only through the convergence of multiple factors. This teaching undermines any notion of a fixed, autonomous self. Thich Nhat Hanh reinterprets this ancient insight for modern audiences, emphasizing that humans are composed of nonhuman elements:

- sunlight,
- rain,
- minerals,
- plants,
- ancestors,
- social and ecological conditions.

In *The Heart of Understanding*, Hanh famously writes, "If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper" (Hanh 3). The metaphor illustrates how the paper—and by extension, all things—contains innumerable non-self elements. A sheet of paper cannot exist without clouds (rain), trees, loggers, soil, sunlight, and an entire ecosystem of interdependent processes. To see the cloud in the paper is to recognize the world as an interwoven continuum.

2. Interbeing and the Nature of the Self

Interbeing challenges the Western concept of an atomistic, individualistic self. Instead, it views identity as **relational, dynamic, and permeable**. The self is not a single, isolated entity but a constellation of relationships. This view parallels contemporary ecological science, which emphasizes that organisms function as nodes within ecosystems rather than independent units. The concept of interbeing fundamentally revises how identity is understood:

- The self is a process, not an essence.

- The boundary between self and environment is porous.
- Identity includes the ecological networks that sustain life.

This relational ontology aligns closely with Arne Naess's notion of the **ecological self**, though interbeing roots the insight in centuries of Buddhist thought. Both frameworks highlight that the flourishing of the individual is inseparable from the flourishing of the larger ecological field.

3. Ethical Dimensions of Interbeing

Interbeing is not merely a metaphysical description—it is also an ethical orientation. Recognizing interdependence naturally leads to compassion and nonviolence. If one harms another being, one is in effect harming oneself, because one's identity extends into ecological and social networks. Hanh frequently notes that awareness of interbeing forms the foundation of mindful ecological living: "When we recognize the virtues, the talent, the beauty of Mother Earth, something is born in us, some kind of connection; love is born" (Hanh *Love Letter to the Earth* 8).

Ethically, interbeing encourages:

- ecological mindfulness,
- sustainable living,
- compassion for all species,
- reduction of harmful consumption,
- peaceful coexistence.

This ethical framework dovetails with deep ecology's call for biocentric equality and responsibility toward the entire web of life.

4. Interbeing and Modern Ecological Thought

Interbeing resonates with numerous contemporary theoretical movements:

- **Posthumanism**: which challenges the human-centered worldview.
- **New materialism**: which emphasizes relational ontologies.
- **Ecofeminism**: which critiques domination and separation.
- **Systems ecology**: which reveals interdependence at biological and geological scales.

Scholars such as Joanna Macy integrate interbeing into environmental activism, describing it as the "widening of the circle of compassion" that leads to the "greening of the self" (Macy 207).

5. Interbeing in Narrative and Literature

Interbeing offers a powerful framework for interpreting literature because many modern narratives dramatize interconnectedness between humans and more-than-human worlds. Characters often undergo ecological awakening when they realize their identities are interwoven with landscapes, animals, or ecological processes.

Examples include:

- The tidal ecosystem in *The Hungry Tide*, where human identity is shaped by water, storms, and river dolphins.
- The arboreal networks in *The Overstory*, which reveal communication among trees and humans.
- The geological interdependence in *The Broken Earth*, where Earth is portrayed as a sentient being connected to human fate.

These narratives echo the insight of interbeing: the self is always already in relation, and this relationality is both ecological and existential.

6. Interbeing as Practice

Unlike purely theoretical frameworks, interbeing is also a **practice**, expressed through:

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- mindfulness,
- deep listening,
- ecological awareness,
- breathing and walking meditation,
- rituals of gratitude for the Earth.

Hanh views these practices as essential for confronting ecological crisis, arguing that sustainability requires not only political and economic change but a transformation of consciousness.

While deep ecology emerges from Western environmental philosophy and interbeing from Buddhist traditions, both frameworks converge on the critique of individualism and the affirmation of ecological relationality. Their synergy offers a fertile ground for analyzing modern narratives that seek to reimagine identity and agency amid planetary crisis.

II. Ecological Identity in Modern Narrative Imagination

Narrative as Ecological Inquiry

Modern narratives often grapple with what Timothy Morton terms "the ecological thought," a mode of thinking that foregrounds interconnectedness and the uneasy intimacy between humans and nonhumans (Morton 7). Literature and film become spaces for staging encounters between characters and ecological forces, exploring how identity is transformed by contact with other species, landscapes, and earthly processes.

Much contemporary eco-fiction moves beyond depicting nature as mere backdrop, instead presenting it as a dynamic agent shaping the trajectory of human lives. The rise of **posthumanist** and **more-than-human** studies has further encouraged narratives that challenge human exceptionalism by portraying forests, oceans, storms, and geological forces as meaningful participants in ethical and ontological dramas.

Climate Fiction and the Disruption of Identity

Climate fiction (cli-fi), in particular, foregrounds the destabilization of identity under ecological pressure. Works such as Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and Richard Powers's *The Overstory* present characters experiencing moments of ecological awakening when confronted with nonhuman agency. These awakenings often take the form of shifts in perception—characters begin to see themselves as embedded within larger ecological systems rather than standing apart from them.

This shift mirrors Naess's concept of self-realization through identification with the natural world. Similarly, the entangled identities depicted in modern narratives reflect interbeing's assertion that the self is porous, relational, and continuously co-constituted by nonhuman forces.

III. Deep Ecology and Narrative Ethics in Selected Works

1. Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*: Interbeing in the Tidal Landscape

Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* offers a narrative immersed in the fluid landscapes of the Sundarbans, where human and nonhuman lives are shaped by tides, storms, and mangrove forests. The novel challenges anthropocentric modes of perception by foregrounding the agency of the environment itself.

The Sundarbans are portrayed not as a passive setting but as an active, sometimes dangerous presence that shapes identity and community. Characters such as Piya, a cetologist studying river dolphins, undergo a transformation of identity as they attune themselves to the rhythms and patterns of the ecosystem. Her scientific practice becomes a form of interbeing: she comes to understand her work as inseparable from the lives of the animals and the people who inhabit the tide country.

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Ghosh's narrative aligns with deep ecology's principle that understanding ecological systems requires a shift from domination to participation. The novel's insistence on relationality—between humans, animals, tides, and histories—embodies the ontology of interbeing.

2. Richard Powers's *The Overstory*: Forests as Subjects of Identity

Richard Powers's Pulitzer-winning *The Overstory* presents trees as central protagonists whose timescales, networks, and communicative capacities challenge human-centered narratives. The novel reveals the **arboreal intelligence** discovered in contemporary forest ecology, portraying trees as social, communicative beings.

The characters' lives become intertwined with trees in ways that reconfigure their identities. For instance, Patricia Westerford's scientific discoveries articulate a worldview that echoes Naess's deep ecology. Her realization that "to be alive is to collaborate" (Powers 142) captures the essence of interbeing. Trees become teachers, subjects, and kin, compelling the human characters toward ecological activism. *The Overstory* exemplifies how modern narratives use storytelling to cultivate ecological identity. The characters' journeys toward ecological consciousness mirror the "greening of the self" described by Joanna Macy.

3. N. K. Jemisin's *The Broken Earth* Trilogy: Geological Agency and Posthuman Identity

Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy extends ecological identity into speculative realms by portraying a world where the Earth itself is sentient. The novels challenge readers to imagine geological forces—fault lines, tectonic shifts, volcanic eruptions—as expressions of agency.

The protagonist, Essun, develops a relationship with Earth as a living, wounded being. Her identity becomes inseparable from the planet's trauma, dramatizing an interbeing that extends beyond the biological to the geological. Jemisin's narrative resonates with the deep ecological idea that all beings—organic or inorganic—participate in the unfolding of planetary life.

The novels critique human attempts to dominate natural forces and instead call for relationality rooted in respect and reciprocity. In doing so, they offer a radical reimagining of ecological identity in a speculative mode.

IV. Interbeing, Trauma, and Environmental Memory in Narrative Form

Ecological Grief and the Wounded Self

Modern narratives increasingly explore ecological grief—psychic responses to environmental loss. This grief is intimately tied to ecological identity. When characters experience the disappearance of species, forests, or landscapes, they undergo forms of mourning that reflect interbeing: they grieve not as detached observers but as participants whose identities are harmed by ecological destruction.

In Powers's *The Overstory*, characters mourn felled trees as though mourning kin. In Ghosh's work, the loss of land to rising tides becomes a form of communal trauma. These narratives reveal how ecological identity renders environmental grief both personal and collective.

Memory as Ecological Continuity

Narratives often depict memory as a means of sustaining interbeing. Environmental memory—embedded in landscapes, species, and communities—becomes a site where ecological identity is preserved. The remembrance of lost ecosystems serves as a call to ethical action, reinforcing deep ecology's emphasis on protecting the integrity of the Earth.

V. Narrative as Ethical Practice: Cultivating Interbeing Through Story

The Narrative Ethics of the Ecological Self

Modern narratives do more than represent ecological identity; they actively participate in shaping it. By inviting readers to empathize with nonhuman perspectives, narratives encourage a shift in consciousness aligned with deep ecology's call for ecological self-realization. This ethical dimension is central to interbeing. When readers experience the interconnectedness of characters and ecosystems, they are encouraged to recognize their own interdependence with the Earth. Literature becomes a practice of ecological mindfulness.

Toward an Ecology of Care

Narratives rooted in interbeing foreground ethics of care, humility, and reciprocity. They counter neoliberal narratives of extraction and control by offering alternative modes of being grounded in kinship with the more-than-human world. Such ethical orientations are essential for cultivating ecological responsibility in the face of planetary crisis.

Conclusion

Ecological identity and interbeing offer profound frameworks for understanding modern narratives. Deep ecology's call for the expansion of the self and interbeing's recognition of relational existence converge in narratives that challenge anthropocentrism and explore the possibilities of living more responsibly within the Earth community. By analyzing works such as *The Hungry Tide*, *The Overstory*, and *The Broken Earth*, this paper has shown how modern narratives dramatize ecological awakening and foster ethical orientations rooted in interconnectedness. These narratives demonstrate that ecological identity is not merely a philosophical abstraction but a lived, felt reality enacted through relationship with the nonhuman world.

As ecological crises intensify, narrative imagination becomes an essential tool for envisioning alternative ways of inhabiting the planet. Modern narratives aligned with deep ecology and interbeing invite us to reconsider who we are, how we live, and what responsibilities we carry as members of a vast ecological web. Through storytelling, we are offered not only reflection but transformation—a path toward ecological consciousness capable of shaping a more just and sustainable future.

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