

Across Rivers and Roots: Ethical and Ecological Worlds in the Writings of Nguyễn Ngọc Tu and Contemporary Indian Women Authors

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Abstract: This paper undertakes a cross-cultural literary analysis of select works by modern female authors from Vietnam and India—specifically Nguyễn Ngọc Tu’s *The Endless Field*, *Sông*, and *Water Chronicles*, alongside short stories and thematic fiction by Kiran Desai, Anjum Hasan, and Samina Ali. It explores the interwoven motifs of ethics, environmental awareness, and cultural values, emphasizing how these writers, informed by their regional identities, spiritual insights, and gendered perspectives, construct morally and ecologically charged narratives.

Nguyễn Ngọc Tu’s stories, deeply embedded in the life and lore of the Mekong Delta, depict lives shaped by environmental decline and the erosion of ancestral customs. Indian counterparts such as Desai, Hasan, and Ali articulate ecological consciousness through urban, religious, and gender-based struggles, reflecting transformations in social and cultural memory. Across both contexts, the female experience becomes a prism for interpreting shifting ecological and moral landscapes.

By employing close textual analysis and incorporating direct citations, this study examines how personal and collective suffering are reframed through narratives of ecological sensitivity and ethical depth. Comparative tables—detailing publication dates, literary forms, and textual dimensions—support the analytical framework and facilitate a structured transnational comparison.

The paper contends that these women writers, working across geographical and cultural boundaries, reimagine environments of displacement and resilience. Their literary worlds chart paths of endurance grounded in memory, myth, and moral reflection, contributing to a broader South and Southeast Asian dialogue on the interconnectedness of humanity, culture, and the natural world.

Keywords: Cultural Beliefs; Ecocriticism; Ethical Imagination; Gender and Environment; Postcolonial Literature; Short Story Comparison

Introduction

In recent decades, comparative literary studies have increasingly focused on transnational and transcultural approaches to understanding regional narratives of displacement, identity, and ecology. This paper contributes to that emerging discourse by examining select works of contemporary female authors from Vietnam and India, particularly through the lenses of ethical storytelling and environmental sensitivity. Women writers from these regions—shaped by complex histories of colonialism, modernization, and ecological disruption—have turned to fiction not only as a mode of expression but as an act of moral witnessing. Their literary landscapes speak across rivers and borders, rooted in local lifeways yet resonating with global themes of climate crisis, gendered marginalization, and the ethical reimagining of community.

Vietnamese and Indian literary traditions, though historically distinct, share postcolonial trajectories that foreground themes of survival, spirituality, nature, and justice. In the contemporary context, women writers have become particularly powerful voices, using narrative fiction to challenge patriarchal and anthropocentric paradigms. By invoking intimate geographies—from the muddy deltas of the Mekong to the urban and semi-rural topographies of India—these authors offer meditative responses to environmental degradation, displacement, and cultural loss. This inquiry explores how select Vietnamese and Indian authors map ecological trauma and moral questioning onto stories of personal and collective struggle.

Nguyễn Ngọc Tư is an acclaimed Vietnamese writer whose creative range spans short stories, novels, poems, and essays. However, this study focuses solely on her short stories and novels, especially *The Endless Field*—her most celebrated short story, adapted into a popular film—and her two novels, *Sông* (River, 2012) and *Water Chronicles* (2020). These works are compared with short stories or short story–derived content by Indian writers Kiran Desai, Anjum Hasan, and Samina Ali, all born in the 1970s and prominent in postcolonial literary discourse. To support comparative rigor, the following table provides basic bibliographic and quantitative data:

Author	Work	Genre	Approx. Pages	Year
Nguyễn Ngọc Tư	<i>The Endless Field</i>	Short Story	~70 pages	2005
	<i>Sông (River)</i>	Novel	~160 pages	2012
	<i>Water Chronicles</i>	Novel	~200 pages	2020
Kiran Desai	“The Sermon in the Guava Tree”	Short Story	~15 pages	1997
	<i>Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard</i>	Novel	~200 pages	1998
Anjum Hasan	<i>A Day in the Life: Stories</i>	Short Stories	~256 pages	2018
Samina Ali	<i>Madras on Rainy Days</i>	Novel	~290 pages	2004

Table 1. Comparative Bibliographic Overview of Selected Works by Nguyễn Ngọc Tư, Kiran Desai, Anjum Hasan, and Samina Ali.¹

Source: *Authors*, 2025

This table above presents genre, publication year, and approximate length of each text selected for the study, facilitating a balanced transnational comparison of literary scope and format.



Figure 1. Map overlay showing the Mekong Delta and urban regions of India (Bangalore, Darjeeling) featured in the texts

Source: *Authors*, 2025

Methodology

This paper adopts a comparative literary methodology, grounded in close textual analysis and thematic synthesis, to explore how selected female authors from Vietnam and India construct eco-

ethical narratives. Texts were selected based on literary merit, thematic alignment with ecological and ethical concerns, and representation of gendered perspectives. Quotations from primary sources are included to demonstrate narrative voice and stylistic nuance, while analytical commentary offers contextual and cultural interpretation.

The comparative lens allows for transnational cross-reading—highlighting convergence in narrative motifs, but also divergence in sociocultural framing. To enhance clarity, the analysis is supported by structured comparative summary tables arranged across five key dimensions: setting, themes, narrative style, cultural values, and socio-ecological transformation.

Analysis

A compelling moment in Nguyễn Ngọc Tư’s *The Endless Field* (2005) captures the intricate interplay between human morality and ecological vulnerability. In one poignant scene, Tư writes, “In a flash, he found himself slack, caught a piece of vase, he leaned against the ground. Outside the land of *Mut Ca Tha*, there seems to have been a big change” (Nguyễn, 2005, pp. 26–27). This passage



Figure 2. Geographic Anchoring of Literary Settings: A comparative literary map highlighting key settings in the works of Nguyễn Ngọc Tư (Vietnam) and contemporary Indian women authors—Desai, Hasan, and Ali—spanning rural, urban, and diasporic landscapes

Source: *Authors*, 2025

encapsulates the father's emotional collapse, framed against a backdrop of shifting terrain that mirrors both environmental decay and familial disintegration. The reference to *Mut Ca Tha* resonates on multiple levels—it is not only a geographic signpost but also a metaphor for the irreversible changes taking place within the physical and moral landscape. Through restrained yet evocative prose, Tu fuses the psychological fragmentation of her characters with the degradation of Vietnam's riverine ecology, inviting readers to see the land as a witness to, and participant in, human suffering and ethical reflection.

Kiran Desai's *The Sermon in the Guava Tree* (1997) offers a satirical yet insightful commentary on morality and societal perception. At one point, the eccentric protagonist advises, "If your child is playing with a dead smelly mouse... throw away the mouse and take your child indoors to wash his hands" (Desai, 1997, p. 90). Delivered from the vantage of a guava tree, this whimsical sermon exemplifies the absurd yet oddly profound guidance that the character imparts to his fellow townspeople. The simplicity of the metaphor cloaks a deeper critique of societal hypocrisy, suggesting that moral clarity often comes from outside conventional authority. Through this playful narrative, Desai subtly exposes the gap between public virtue and private behavior, while demonstrating how the natural world—here represented by the fruit-laden orchard—becomes a retreat from social artifice and a site for ethical reflection, however unorthodox.

In Anjum Hasan's short story "The Stranger," from *A Day in the Life: Stories* (2018), the protagonist reflects on the rhythms of his solitary days, noting: "I do try to give some kind of shape to my days—watching the blackbirds with my morning coffee; walking with the late afternoon sun when there is one; helping, because I was inveigled into it, the landlord's middle-school-going boy and girl with their homework; just sitting around reading in the evenings as I drink brandy with hot water, or bad wine, or whisky with ice on summer nights when it's really warm and I'm feeling like I might start to be sorry for myself" (Hasan, 2018, p. 4). This meandering, almost diaristic narrative voice reveals the character's quiet search for identity and meaning amidst the banalities of urban life. His routines—marked by birdsong, liquor, and reluctant tutoring—become a meditation on modern

alienation, where emotional inertia reflects the larger disconnection between self and society. Hasan's prose, observational and intimate, articulates the nuanced anxieties of post-liberalized India, portraying a world where environmental and emotional landscapes are equally unstable.

Samina Ali's *Madras on Rainy Days* (2004) presents a powerful meditation on gender, religion, and societal control through the lens of bodily discipline. Describing a rigidly patriarchal community, the narrator observes: "This was a Muslim neighbourhood, where women did not leave the house unveiled, not even girls as young as six, their bodies yet indistinguishable from boys" (Ali, S. 2004, p. 58). This observation crystallizes the early indoctrination of female modesty and the culturally enforced conflation of morality with physical appearance. By foregrounding the age at which veiling begins, Ali underscores the precocious burdens placed on female bodies within traditionalist frameworks. The neighbourhood, shaped by religious codes and social surveillance, functions as both a physical and ideological enclosure. Through Layla's conflicted navigation of faith and freedom, Ali weaves a narrative rich with environmental symbolism—particularly rain—as a cleansing and destabilizing force that mirrors the protagonist's internal transformation. Her critique is not of religion per se, but of how it can be co-opted into systems that limit feminine agency and ecological intimacy. To better understand the geographic and cultural milieus shaping these narratives, the following map visualizes the key literary settings explored in the selected works.

Thematic and Narrative Convergences

Nguyễn Ngọc Tư's *The Endless Field* paints a haunting portrait of a father and his children adrift in southern Vietnam. The emotional wounds they carry mirror the slow erosion of the Mekong Delta, suggesting an ecological grief entwined with human suffering. Tư's prose is simple, yet evocative, immersing readers in muddy waterways and broken silences. *Sông* and *Water Chronicles* expand this vision, presenting intimate vignettes of life on and beside rivers, shaped by climatic volatility and moral ambivalence.

In comparison, Kiran Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* offers a satirical yet poignant exploration of escapism and environmental retreat. The protagonist's withdrawal into nature is both

a rejection of societal norms and a desperate search for inner clarity. The guava orchard, lush and

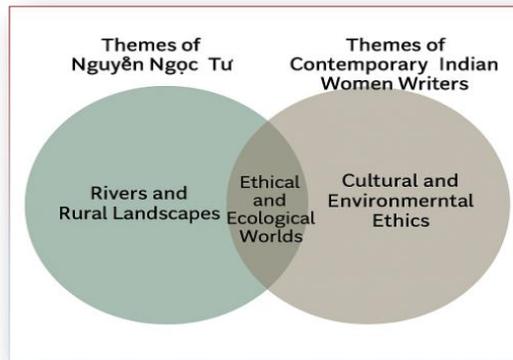


Figure 3. Thematic Convergences and Divergences in the Works of Nguyễn Ngọc Tư and Contemporary Indian Women Writers
Source: *Authors*, 2025

teeming, becomes a surreal sanctuary reminiscent of the pastoral worlds that Nguyễn depicts, albeit framed in postcolonial absurdity.

A Venn diagram illustrating shared thematic terrain—such as ethical and ecological worlds—while distinguishing Nguyễn’s focus on rivers and rural landscapes from the Indian authors’ emphasis on cultural and environmental ethics.

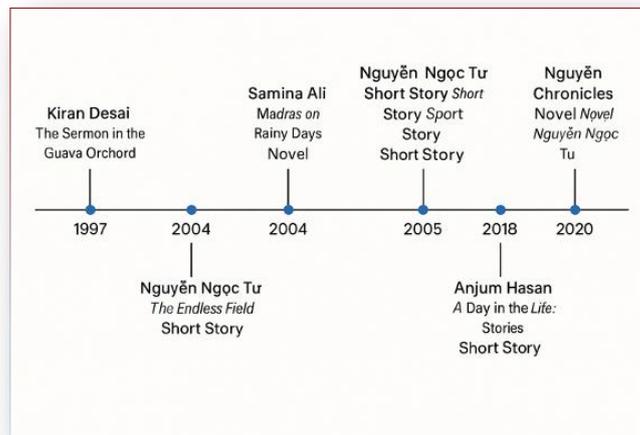


Figure 4. Publication Chronology of Selected Works by Nguyễn Ngọc Tư, Kiran Desai, Anjum Hasan, and Samina Ali
Source: *Authors*, 2025

Anjum Hasan's *A Day in the Life* navigates urban and semi-urban spaces in India, focusing on characters suspended between tradition and modernity. The collection is less rooted in specific landscapes but vividly captures internal dislocation that mirrors the outer world's instability. Hasan's prose is observational, almost cinematic, revealing the slow, grinding changes that transform identities and spaces alike.

Samina Ali's *Madras on Rainy Days* pivots toward diasporic and gendered experiences. Set in Hyderabad, the novel explores the friction between inherited Muslim traditions and contemporary womanhood. Rain, rituals, and bodily metaphors offer ecological and ethical textures to the narrative, linking Layla's personal awakening to a larger environmental and cultural awakening.

Cultural Beliefs and Environmental Ethics

These authors do not merely present ecological backdrops; they infuse cultural beliefs and environmental ethics into their storytelling. For Nguyễn Ngọc Tú, the landscape is alive with memory, superstition, and resilience. Her characters speak in whispers, metaphors, and silences that evoke Buddhist and animist traditions interwoven with a deep reverence for water. The rivers and canals are not just settings but moral participants.

Desai and Hasan use humor and irony to probe cultural contradictions. Their protagonists struggle under societal expectations but also inherit ecological sensitivities that appear in food, festivals, and weather patterns. Samina Ali goes deeper into faith-based ethics, exploring how Islamic tenets intersect with female agency and ecological consciousness. Her rain-soaked scenes pulse with sensual and symbolic life.

Differences and Divergences

Despite these thematic overlaps, the narratives differ in structure, tone, and ideological framing. Tú's minimalism and fatalism contrast sharply with Desai's playful absurdism and Hasan's modernist introspection. Ali's narrative is confessional and transformative, anchored in psychological realism. While Tú offers episodic glimpses of rural survival, the Indian writers are more invested in social mobility and psychological evolution.

Furthermore, Tu's focus on the Mekong Delta gives her work a grounded ecological specificity, whereas the Indian authors engage with diverse landscapes—from orchards to cities to ancestral homes—and use them as mirrors to evolving personal and collective ethics.

Toward a Shared Ethical Ecology

Together, these texts articulate a gendered, ethical ecology that transcends national boundaries. They challenge readers to consider how women writers from Asia conceptualize environmental loss, moral complexity, and cultural transformation. They also provide a space where ecological and ethical concerns are rendered in feminine and culturally rooted idioms, resisting homogenized global narratives.

These works demonstrate that literary engagement with nature is not merely nostalgic or symbolic but deeply ethical, questioning modes of consumption, community, and care. By doing so, they offer a framework for comparative literary ecocriticism that centers female voices and regional epistemologies.

To contextualize the comparative framework, the following timeline outlines the publication years of the selected texts, underscoring the temporal spread and socio-literary backdrop of each work. This timeline visualizes the chronological progression of the primary texts examined in this study, highlighting temporal patterns in thematic evolution and offering historical context for cross-cultural literary comparison.

Setting and Atmosphere

This table below outlines the geographical, cultural, and emotional environments of the narratives, highlighting how setting shapes mood, tone, and thematic direction in each text.

Author	Setting Highlights
Nguyễn Ngọc Tú	Rural Mekong Delta; floating homes, rice fields, environmental fragility.
Kiran Desai	" <i>The Sermon in the Guava Tree</i> " — whimsical orchard/treehouse in small-town India.

Anjum Hasan	“The Sermon in the Guava Tree” — whimsical orchard/treehouse in small-town India.
Samina Ali	“The Sermon in the Guava Tree” — whimsical orchard/treehouse in small-town India.

Table 2. Comparative Summary of Setting and Atmosphere in Selected Works by Nguyễn Ngọc Tư and Contemporary Indian Women Authors.

Source: *Authors*, 2025

Themes and Motifs

This table identifies and compares central thematic concerns—such as ecological loss, memory, gender, displacement, and cultural identity—demonstrating how each author uniquely articulates these motifs within their respective socio-cultural contexts.

Author	Themes & Literary Concerns
Nguyễn Ngọc Tư	Grief, ecological decline, gender suffering, spiritual detachment, rural survival.
Kiran Desai	Escapism, nature as refuge, critique of bureaucracy, gender roles, absurdity.
Anjum Hasan	Alienation, temporality, disillusionment, post-liberalization anxieties.
Samina Ali	Bodily autonomy, cultural duality, arranged marriage, religious ethics, water symbolism.

Table 3. Key Themes and Recurring Motifs Across Selected Works by Nguyễn Ngọc Tư, Kiran Desai, Anjum Hasan, and Samina Ali.

Source: *Authors*, 2025

Narrative Style and Techniques

This table compares the authors’ narrative structures, points of view, language choices, and use of symbolism or literary devices, illustrating how form enhances thematic delivery and reader engagement.

Author	Style Features
Nguyễn Ngọc Tư	Sparse, lyrical, metaphor-rich, atmospheric realism.
Kiran Desai	Satirical, whimsical, third-person omniscient with irony.
Anjum Hasan	Minimalist, observational, realist with poetic touches.

Samina Ali	Confessional, symbolic, emotionally intimate, spiritually rooted.
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Table 4. Narrative Styles and Literary Techniques in the Works of Nguyễn Ngọc Tú and Contemporary Indian Women Authors.

Source: *Authors, 2025*

Cultural Beliefs and Environmental Ethics

This table below explores how indigenous knowledge systems, spiritual traditions, and moral worldviews inform each author's portrayal of ecological responsibility and cultural continuity, emphasizing the ethical dimensions rooted in their storytelling.

Author	Cultural & Ecological Sensitivity
Nguyễn Ngọc Tú	Buddhist/animist influence; water as sacred, traditional roles, fatalism.
Kiran Desai	Satirical take on traditional beliefs, environmental retreat through humor.
Anjum Hasan	Irony toward modern Indian traditions; loss of ecological awareness in urban life.
Samina Ali	Islamic ethics, spiritual femininity, rain as moral cleansing, critique of patriarchy.

Table 5. Intersections of Cultural Beliefs and Environmental Ethics in Selected Works.

Source: *Authors, 2025*

Transformation and Urbanization

This table compares how each writer portrays the tensions between tradition and modernity, rural decline, urban expansion, and the shifting dynamics of identity, belonging, and displacement in a rapidly transforming socio-cultural landscape.

Author	Societal Observation
Nguyễn Ngọc Tú	Disintegration of rural life, youth migration, ecological commodification.
Kiran Desai	Urban-rural divide, critique of consumerism and governance.
Anjum Hasan	Lives of workers and students under modern pressures; cultural alienation.
Samina Ali	Tensions of tradition and diaspora, spiritual-modern identity negotiation.

Table 6. Depictions of Societal Change and Urbanization in the Works of Nguyễn Ngọc Tú and Selected Indian Authors.

Source: *Authors, 2025*

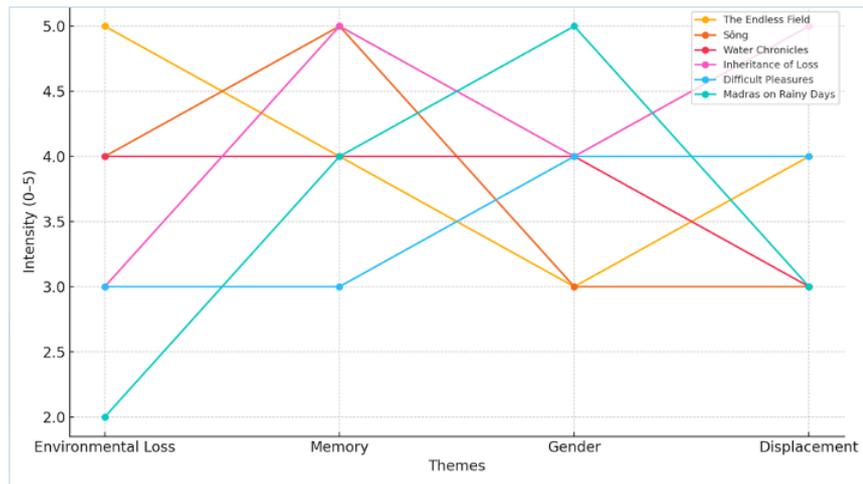


Figure 5: Thematic Intensity across Selected Works, illustrating the comparative presence of key themes (Environmental Loss, Memory, Gender, Displacement) in the six literary texts discussed.
Source: *Authors, 2025*

Feminine Subjectivity

Both Vietnamese and Indian narratives draw deeply from myth, ritual, and oral traditions to frame women’s experiences within culturally rooted yet evolving ethical landscapes. Nguyễn Ngọc Tư’s stories often echo Vietnamese folklore, where rivers, ancestral spirits, and the unseen world interact with human agency. This interweaving of myth and realism heightens the emotional and moral resonance of loss, longing, and resilience. Similarly, Indian writers like Desai and Ali invoke cultural memory—whether through colonial residues or nuanced portrayals of Muslim womanhood—to reframe feminine subjectivity as both rooted in tradition and actively renegotiating its boundaries.

Such literary use of cultural symbolism becomes a mode of reclaiming the marginal voice. Women in these narratives are not only characters but custodians of ecological memory—guardians of desecrated rivers, disrupted rituals, or fractured homes. They embody the contradictions of modernity and heritage, acting as moral witnesses to both ecological degradation and cultural transformation.

Conclusion

Through their distinct yet interconnected visions, Nguyễn Ngọc Tú, Kiran Desai, Anjum Hasan, and Samina Ali remind us that rivers, orchards, homes, and rains carry not only poetic resonance but also profound ethical and ecological significance. These physical and metaphorical spaces reflect both the fragility and resilience of cultures in flux, embodying a deep entanglement of memory, identity, and environment. The landscapes in their stories—whether submerged deltas, overripe orchards, urban apartments, or diasporic interiors—act as conduits for moral reflection, displacement, and survival.

In traversing different geographies—from the Mekong Delta in southern Vietnam to the urban sprawls of Bangalore and the diasporic enclaves of the Indian subcontinent—these authors reveal the shared struggles and aspirations of communities facing ecological degradation, patriarchal structures, and cultural dislocation. While each writer grounds her narrative in a specific cultural and environmental context, their thematic overlaps—especially in terms of gendered vulnerability, ecological memory, ethical imagination, and the search for rootedness—enable a transnational dialogue that is both timely and transformative.

The comparative method employed in this article has not only highlighted the convergent ethical concerns that animate these works but has also emphasized the importance of storytelling as a tool for ecological and moral witnessing. Literature becomes a terrain where the personal becomes political, where trauma can be reinterpreted through cultural myth, and where the feminine voice reclaims its authority in reimagining the world.

By bringing these voices together, this study affirms the power of comparative literature to forge intercultural empathy, deepen ecocritical awareness, and stimulate ethical engagement across borders. It bridges the Mekong with the Ganges, the orchard with the delta, the personal with the planetary, and memory with imagination. These women writers, in weaving tales of sorrow and resilience, do more than reflect the world—they reshape how we perceive the relationship between human lives and the landscapes they inhabit.

In a world increasingly defined by environmental uncertainty and cultural fragmentation, the literary visions of Nguyễn Ngọc Tư, Desai, Hasan, and Ali remind us that literature remains a vital, redemptive force—a river of meaning that flows across boundaries and nourishes a shared ethical ecology.

Limitations and Future Research

While this comparative study offers a meaningful cross-cultural exploration of ecological and ethical themes in the works of Nguyễn Ngọc Tư, Kiran Desai, Anjum Hasan, and Samina Ali, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the scope of primary texts is necessarily selective. Although the chosen works are representative of each author's broader thematic concerns, they do not encompass the full spectrum of their literary output. Other genres—such as poetry, memoir, or essays—were excluded, which may limit the interpretive breadth concerning gendered ecology and ethical imagination.

Second, the linguistic and translational dimension presents inherent challenges. Much of Nguyễn Ngọc Tư's work was accessed in English translation, potentially filtering out nuanced cultural and linguistic textures present in the original Vietnamese. While the Indian authors write primarily in English or have been widely translated, region-specific idioms and sociolinguistic depth may still be diminished in comparative cross-readings.

Additionally, the article's theoretical lens—grounded in ecocriticism and ethics—could benefit from expanded frameworks. Future analyses might incorporate intersectional feminist theory, postcolonial spatial studies, or indigenous ecological epistemologies to deepen the inquiry and open new interpretive avenues.

Future research could extend this comparative lens to include a broader corpus of Southeast and South Asian women writers, especially those from indigenous, rural, or marginalized linguistic communities. Such inclusion would further enrich the understanding of how ecological consciousness is shaped by local cosmologies, oral traditions, and subaltern worldviews. Interdisciplinary

approaches integrating literary analysis with environmental sociology, urban studies, or gendered geography may also yield valuable insights into the nexus of narrative, ecology, and lived experience.

Moreover, transmedia storytelling—such as film, visual art, or digital media adaptations—presents a fertile area for exploration. For example, the cinematic version of *The Endless Field* offers opportunities to examine how ecological and ethical motifs are reframed across platforms and audiences. Comparative studies that incorporate male voices or juxtapose literary representations with institutional and policy discourses on climate, gender, and sustainability could further illuminate the role of literature in both reflecting and challenging dominant narratives of development and resilience.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the interpretive complexity of literary symbolism itself. Each symbol within a literary work is a crafted aesthetic element that may carry layered and culturally contingent meanings. As such, understanding these symbols requires an immersion not only in the thematic concerns of the text but also in the writer's stylistic choices, creative tendencies, and broader artistic vision. As noted in Vietnamese literary discourse, “to discover the meaning of such symbols, we must really penetrate the style, creative tendencies, and the entire artistic world of the writer or poet” (Từ điển Wiki). This underscores the necessity for future research to adopt close reading practices sensitive to symbolic nuance and to engage with the literary worlds of these authors in their full artistic, historical, and cultural depth. The figure 6 illustrate the conceptual interlinkage between cultural beliefs, feminine subjectivity, environmental ethics, and narrative strategy.

Notes

1. Desai's short story acts as a foundation for her novel; Hasan's work is a collection of complete short stories; Ali's novel is cited for its thematic relevance due to lack of standalone short stories.

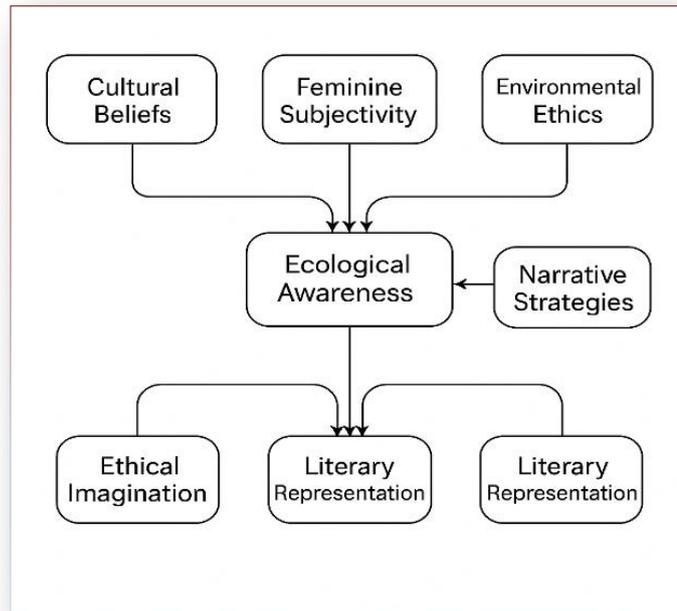


Figure 6: Conceptual Framework Diagram
Source: Authors, 2025

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