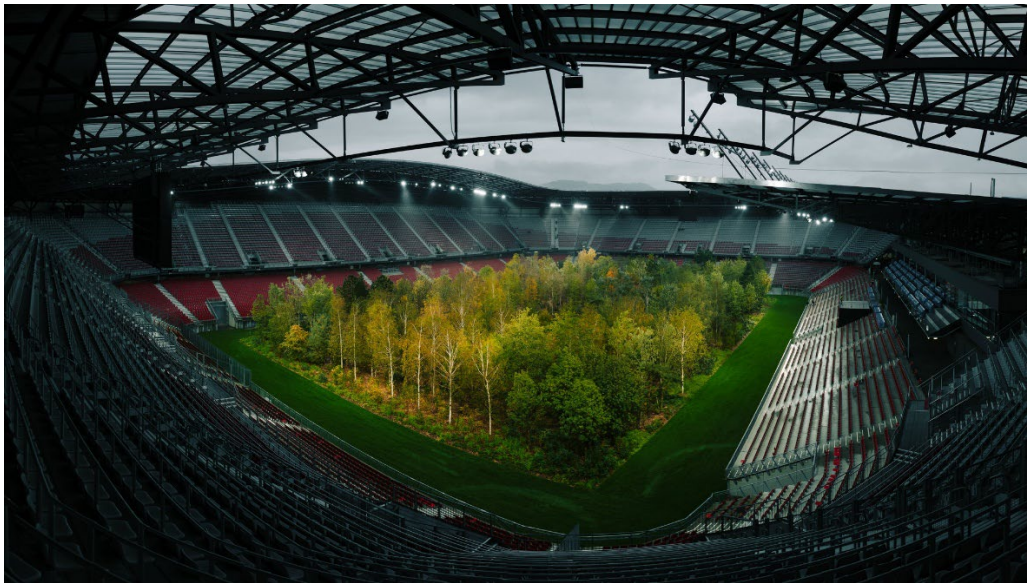


**“Staying Alive in the Times of Great Derangement”:  
Ecocritical Imagination in Contemporary Times**



*For Forest Installation in the Wörthersee Stadium, Klagenfurt, Austria, by Klaus Littmann*

*“The climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination.” -Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, 2016*

Ever since human beings have imagined the universe in their words, they have forged a dialogue between nature and the literature. Locating the human in a more-than-human world has led to thinking of and negotiating the relation between imagination, environment and ethics. This preoccupation has led to a literary imagination – from Hesiod’s pastoral ideas to the ecological dystopias of twenty first century – literature has become a champion of both ecological consciousness as well as critique of its degradation.

Within literary studies, this relationship is theorized by Lawrence Buell as ecocriticism, who famously defined it as “the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment” (Buell, 1995). Yet ecocriticism cannot be reduced to a singular “green” reading practice. It is historically contingent and internally contested – shifting between romantic idealism and dystopian despair, between anthropocentric ‘morality’ and posthumanist materialism. The evolution of European literary ecology unfolds from the pastoral imagination of Latin tradition, where nature served as both sanctuary and moral allegory, to the philosophical depth granted by Romanticism. Medieval and Renaissance writers reconfigured the pastoral through theological and humanist frameworks, portraying nature as moral structure and cosmic harmony integral to emerging individual consciousness. Romanticism, however, transformed nature from static backdrop to sentient organism, embodying what Buell (1995) terms the “environmental sublime”—a humbling yet exalting awareness of human finitude within vast natural systems. Yet this reverence coexisted with a deepening sense of estrangement, as industrial modernity fractured the pastoral ideal. The nineteenth-century rupture, captured in Zola, Goethe, Galdós, Dickens, among others, revealed both material and moral corrosion within industrial ecologies. With Haeckel’s 1866 formulation of scientific ecology, literature and science converged around notions of interdependence, reimagining nature as a dynamic system and ethical horizon.

While European literature, responding to these shifts, began to interrogate the very idea of “nature,” positioning literature as a counter-discourse to the rational and utilitarian logic of development, this trajectory is also enmeshed in Europe’s colonial enterprises. While European writers chronicled industrial upheaval at home, they often ignored—or were complicit in—the environmental violence abroad. The ecocritical turn thus reveals that industrial modernity was not merely a European rupture but a planetary process of ecological and cultural dispossession whose repercussions persist into the twenty-first century.

The twentieth century brought war, technology, and ecological devastation on a planetary scale. This, in turn, reconfigured the moral–ecological paradigm through the ideology of development under global capitalism. The rhetoric of progress, reconstruction, and modernization—emerging from the industrial West—transformed nature into an economic category, measurable through extraction, productivity, and consumption. In this framework, ecological value was subsumed under capital value, severing moral imagination from environmental accountability. As a result, the ethics of stewardship gave way to the logic of exploitation, and growth became a secular faith sustained by fossil economies and technological expansion.

Texts increasingly grappled with ecological collapse, technological acceleration, and the decentering of the human within vast, interconnected systems. Works such as Christa Wolf's *Störfall* (1987) and Ilija Trojanow's *EisTau* (2011) portray nuclear and climate disasters as intertwined with personal, societal, and planetary precarity, while Paolo Giordano's *Il contagio dei corpi* explores the ethical and material consequences of industrial exploitation and environmental degradation. This dystopian turn marks a transition from Romantic reverence or industrial critique to an awareness of systemic vulnerability, where humanity is both cause and casualty of ecological crisis.

However, the ecocritical perspective compelled the Global South gauge the modernist pursuit of development and to ask: what moral covenant sustains progress when it feeds on ecological exhaustion? Whose prosperity is secured, and at whose expense? If industrial modernity promised liberation, why did it so often yield dispossession and ruin for others? The Global South, bound by colonial and neo-imperial dependencies, has long borne the costs of this uneven progress—its lands mined, its waters poisoned, its people rendered vulnerable to climate precarity. Postcolonial and non-Western literatures from Latin America, Africa, and Asia confront these asymmetries, expanding and decolonizing ecocritical discourse itself. Writers such as José María Arguedas, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Mahasweta Devi, and Amitav Ghosh reimagine the natural world not as passive scenery but as a living archive of resistance, memory, and justice. How, these works ask, can we speak of planetary crisis without acknowledging that its roots lie in centuries of extraction, conquest, and epistemic violence? Decolonial ecocriticism thus challenges the moral neutrality of "development," insisting that any account of ecological collapse must reckon with the histories, voices, and cosmologies of those most deeply scarred by global environmental injustice.

Together, the European dystopian trajectory and Global South perspectives illustrate a plural, planetary ecocriticism. While Western literature dramatizes systemic collapse and posthuman vulnerability, non-Western and postcolonial literatures contextualize these crises within histories of extraction, dispossession, and cultural erasure. The intersection of these trajectories produces a richer ecological imagination—one that is at once cosmopolitan, historical, and ethically alert to the uneven patterns of environmental harm.

This exploration of ecological consciousness—from European Romantic and industrial literatures to dystopian and decolonial perspectives—reveals the transhistorical and plural dimensions of ecocriticism, reminding us that the story of nature in literature is inseparable from the story of humanity itself. We invite papers that further investigate these intersections for the upcoming Annual Conference organised by Department of Germanic and Romance Studies, University of Delhi on 19-20 February 2026, examining how literature mediates the ethical, cultural, and planetary challenges of our time.

Subthemes include but are not restricted to

1. Literature as mediator of ecological knowledge
2. Literary and Cultural Responses to Ecological Consciousness
3. Decoloniality and Global Ecocriticism
4. Environmental justice and postcolonial accountability
5. Urban and Industrial Landscapes in Literature
6. Magical Realism, Fantasy, and Eco-Mythologies
7. Dystopian and Posthuman Ecologies
8. Anthropocene imaginaries
9. Ecofeminism, social ecology, and ethical engagement

Interested participants to send their 250-word abstract along with their names, institutional affiliation, other details (email IDs and phone numbers) as well as a short bio-note by **20<sup>th</sup> Dec 2025** to the email [head@grs.du.ac.in](mailto:head@grs.du.ac.in)