

From Structural Violence to Environmental Displacement: Human Values, Memory, and Moral Imagination in Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, and Anita Desai

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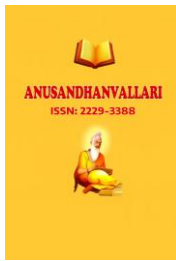
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Abstract: This paper examines the intersection of structural violence, environmental displacement, and ethical consciousness in contemporary Indian English fiction, with a particular focus on Amitav Ghosh (*Gun Island*, *The Shadow Lines*), Rohinton Mistry (*A Fine Balance*), and Anita Desai (*Clear Light of Day*). It contends that these texts foreground the vulnerability and fragility of human values in the face of systemic social injustice, bureaucratic oppression, and ecological crises. By employing narrative strategies such as fragmentation, intergenerational memory, moral reflection, and testimonial storytelling, the authors bring to light the profound psychological and ethical consequences of structural and environmental disruption. The novels demonstrate how ordinary human experiences of migration, displacement, domestic tension, and social marginalisation become ethical inquiries, highlighting the persistent struggle to uphold compassion, dignity, and moral agency. Key findings indicate that literature functions not only as a repository of collective and individual memory but also as a dynamic space for moral imagination, enabling readers to engage with ethical dilemmas, intergenerational responsibility, and social empathy. Furthermore, these narratives reveal how memory, storytelling, and imaginative engagement can resist dehumanisation and foster a reflective ethical consciousness. Ultimately, this study positions contemporary Indian English fiction as a vital site for exploring the ethical and moral ramifications of structural inequality, environmental displacement, and the human capacity to retain values amid prolonged adversity.

Keywords: Structural Violence, Environmental Displacement, Human Values, Memory, Moral Imagination, Contemporary Indian English Fiction

Introduction

Contemporary Indian English fiction in the twenty-first century has increasingly turned its focus to the lived experiences of individuals navigating structural violence, social inequality, and environmental displacement, emphasising how systemic oppression and ecological crises challenge the very foundations of human values. Writers such as Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, and Anita Desai move beyond grand nationalist or political narratives to portray the fragility of compassion, moral agency, dignity, and trust in contexts where everyday survival is marked by injustice, neglect, and environmental vulnerability. Ghosh's novels, particularly *Gun Island* and *The Shadow Lines*, reveal the ethical and moral consequences of ecological and social disruption, as he observes that "The tides of history, like the waters of the river, sweep away those who are least able to resist" (Ghosh 102), underscoring the vulnerability of human lives amid forces beyond their control. Similarly, Mistry's *A Fine Balance* depicts structural violence as an ingrained part of everyday life, noting that "The world seems full of people who can look without seeing, hear without listening" (Mistry 45), emphasising how prolonged exposure to social injustice erodes moral perception and ethical sensitivity. Desai, in *Clear Light of Day*, focuses on the domestic and urban spheres, illustrating how intergenerational trauma, memory, and relational ethics shape moral consciousness and influence how individuals navigate ethical choices in intimate and social contexts. Despite considerable scholarship examining trauma, political conflict, and state power in these works, there remains a critical gap in understanding how literature engages with moral imagination, ethical reflection, and the



preservation of human values in situations of structural and environmental adversity. This paper seeks to address this gap by examining how these authors use narrative techniques fragmentation, intergenerational memory, and moral reflection to transform ordinary human experiences into ethical inquiry, demonstrating that literature not only documents systemic and environmental crises but also functions as a space for sustaining moral consciousness, fostering empathy, and preserving human values in the face of prolonged social, political, and ecological challenges.

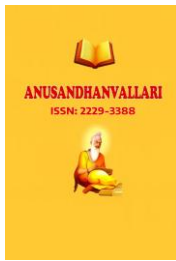
Literature Review

Critical discussions of contemporary Indian English fiction have increasingly emphasised how structural violence, social inequality, and environmental displacement shape ethical consciousness and human values. Amitav Ghosh's novels, particularly *Gun Island* and *The Shadow Lines*, have been examined for their exploration of the intersection of ecological crises, historical memory, and ethical responsibility. Bhattacharya argues that Ghosh's narrative strategy, which interweaves personal, historical, and environmental threads, positions memory as a repository of experience and a site for moral reflection (15). Ghosh himself observes, "The tides of history, like the waters of the river, sweep away those who are least able to resist" (*Gun Island* 102), emphasising how ordinary lives are caught in systemic forces beyond their control. Rao similarly highlights Ghosh's ethical focus, noting that the novels encourage readers to engage with questions of moral imagination and responsibility in contexts of displacement and ecological precarity (4). These readings collectively demonstrate how Ghosh situates human vulnerability at the intersection of structural and environmental forces, highlighting the fragility of moral and ethical frameworks in contemporary society.

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* has attracted critical attention for its portrayal of structural violence and everyday ethical dilemmas. Sorensen observes that Mistry's realist approach foregrounds the experiences of marginalised communities, showing how systemic oppression and bureaucratic neglect gradually erode ethical perception and human compassion (212). The novel itself reflects this erosion, with Mistry noting, "The world seems full of people who can look without seeing, hear without listening" (45), illustrating how prolonged exposure to injustice dulls moral sensitivity. Sunil and Baranwal further argue that the depiction of caste and class hierarchies underscores the structural constraints on ethical agency, compelling readers to consider how moral imagination can survive under systemic oppression (18). These analyses establish Mistry as a key chronicler of the moral and ethical consequences of structural violence in contemporary Indian English fiction.

Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* has been studied for its attention to memory, domestic space, and intergenerational trauma as factors shaping moral consciousness. Gopal observes that Desai's focus on intimate, domestic spheres allows readers to perceive how ordinary human relationships reflect broader ethical concerns, illustrating the role of memory in sustaining ethical awareness (145). Rao adds that by portraying domestic and familial spaces as ethical laboratories, Desai demonstrates the persistence of human values even amid social and historical constraints (9). Her work thus emphasises that moral imagination is not only a public or political matter but also rooted in personal and relational contexts.

Trauma theory has been central to interpreting these narratives. Cathy Caruth defines trauma as an "unclaimed experience that returns in haunting forms" (4), a concept widely applied to explain narrative fragmentation, repetition, and silence in literature dealing with displacement, structural violence, and historical crises. Dori Laub similarly stresses the ethical imperative of witnessing, noting that the act of bearing witness preserves moral awareness and restores human agency in the face of systemic injustice (69). Postcolonial and ecocritical perspectives further inform these readings. Ahmad emphasises how structural inequities and social hierarchies are embedded in political and historical contexts, shaping the ethical landscape of contemporary narratives (214). Kaviraj similarly argues that societal and territorial structures determine how systemic violence is imagined and represented in postcolonial literature (97). Ecocritical scholarship complements this by situating environmental crises and displacement as ethical as well as physical challenges, revealing how literature mediates questions of



responsibility, empathy, and moral consciousness (International Journal of English Studies 331; IJRAR 5). Despite this growing body of scholarship, a sustained focus on ethical and moral dimensions, on how structural violence and environmental displacement reshape human values, moral imagination, and everyday ethical choices, remains limited. Most studies prioritise political, historical, or ideological readings, often overlooking how literature transforms lived experience into ethical inquiry. The present study addresses this gap by examining how Ghosh, Mistry, and Desai employ narrative strategies: fragmentation, memory, and moral reflection—to preserve human values, foster moral imagination, and cultivate ethical awareness amid structural and environmental crises.

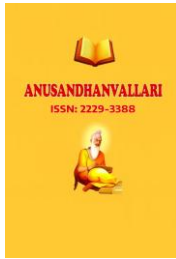
Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive literary methodology grounded in close textual analysis, aiming to uncover the ethical and moral dimensions of structural violence, environmental displacement, and human vulnerability in contemporary Indian English fiction. A multi-theoretical framework guides the analysis, integrating trauma theory, postcolonial studies, ethics of care, and ecocritical perspectives to explore how literature portrays the fragility of human values under systemic and ecological crises. Structural violence theory, as articulated by Galtung, provides a lens to examine the social, political, and economic inequities embedded in everyday life, highlighting the subtle and pervasive ways in which oppression shapes ethical experience (Galtung 171). Trauma theory, particularly Cathy Caruth's conception of trauma as an "unclaimed experience that returns in haunting forms" (4) and Dori Laub's emphasis on the ethical imperative of witnessing (69), informs the study of narrative fragmentation, memory, and the moral responsibilities that arise in response to suffering and displacement. Judith Butler's ethics of care and her notion of grievability further guide the examination of human vulnerability, emphasising how literature represents the moral and ethical stakes of lives rendered socially or environmentally precarious (Butler 38). Ecocritical approaches extend this ethical inquiry to environmental crises, illuminating how ecological disruption and displacement intersect with human responsibility, moral imagination, and social justice.

The study undertakes a comparative analysis of selected novels by Amitav Ghosh (*Gun Island*, *The Shadow Lines*), Rohinton Mistry (*A Fine Balance*), and Anita Desai (*Clear Light of Day*), tracing recurrent narrative motifs such as moral compromise, ethical reflection, memory, displacement, and the impact of social and environmental crises on everyday human experience. Passages depicting ethical dilemmas, human suffering, and environmental disruption were thematically coded and closely examined to reveal how literary form through intergenerational memory, narrative fragmentation, and moral introspection functions as a mechanism for preserving human values and fostering ethical consciousness. By combining multiple theoretical perspectives with close reading, this methodology enables a nuanced understanding of how contemporary Indian English fiction negotiates the complex interplay between structural injustice, environmental vulnerability, and the persistence of moral and ethical life.

Analysis

Amitav Ghosh's novels, *Gun Island* and *The Shadow Lines*, foreground the ethical and psychological consequences of environmental displacement and structural inequities, revealing how human values are strained in the face of systemic crises. In *Gun Island*, Ghosh writes, "The tides of history, like the waters of the river, sweep away those who are least able to resist" (102), illustrating the vulnerability of ordinary lives to historical, social, and environmental forces beyond individual control. The narrative's fragmented structure, which shifts across locations and generations, mirrors the dislocations caused by migration, climate disruption, and social inequality. Bhattacharya emphasises that Ghosh's intertwining of memory, history, and ecological crises functions as a form of moral reflection, inviting readers to engage with questions of responsibility, empathy, and collective ethical awareness (15). Similarly, Rao notes that Ghosh's novels cultivate moral imagination by using storytelling as a vehicle for preserving human values, showing that literature can mediate between past injustices and present ethical obligations (4). Through these narrative strategies, Ghosh demonstrates how memory, storytelling, and



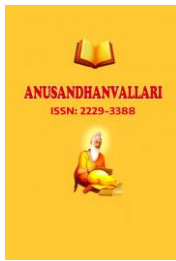
historical consciousness become tools for moral and humanitarian preservation, highlighting the fragility of ethical life under conditions of displacement and environmental uncertainty.

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* presents a starkly realist account of structural violence and its insidious effects on ethical consciousness. Mistry writes, "The world seems full of people who can look without seeing, hear without listening" (45), capturing how everyday exposure to caste, class, and bureaucratic oppression dulls moral sensitivity. The novel depicts the cumulative impact of systemic injustice on ordinary lives, showing how survival often necessitates ethical compromise and moral negotiation. Sorensen observes that Mistry's realist depiction foregrounds the ethical consequences of structural inequity, compelling readers to confront the fragility of empathy and the complexities of moral decision-making in environments dominated by oppression (212). Sunil and Baranwal further argue that Mistry's focus on caste and class hierarchies illuminates how social and structural forces shape moral perception, emphasising that ethical life is inseparable from the contexts in which it unfolds (18). The meticulous portrayal of everyday struggles ranging from domestic labour to forced migration—underscores that the ethical stakes in *A Fine Balance* are intimately tied to the lived realities of marginalised communities, revealing how prolonged exposure to structural violence erodes moral agency, compassion, and human connectedness.

Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* similarly examines ethical life within the domestic and intimate spheres, demonstrating how memory, intergenerational trauma, and relational ethics shape moral consciousness. By situating ethical dilemmas within household and familial contexts, Desai illustrates how ordinary interactions become sites where social histories, unresolved conflicts, and ethical reflection converge. Gopal notes that Desai's focus on domestic space foregrounds the moral dimensions of memory and relational responsibility, showing that ethical life persists not only in public or political arenas but also in everyday, personal interactions (145). Rao further observes that the novel demonstrates how ethical awareness is cultivated through reflection, memory, and the careful observation of others, emphasising the moral consequences of neglect, historical violence, and the intergenerational transmission of trauma (9). Through these domestic and relational lenses, Desai reveals that ethical life is continually negotiated, highlighting the moral vigilance required to sustain human values even amid broader social and historical disruptions.

Across these three authors, several recurring narrative strategies emerge as central to exploring human values and moral imagination. Fragmentation, intergenerational memory, testimonial narration, and moral introspection all function to reveal the ethical stakes of displacement, structural violence, and environmental crisis. Trauma and witnessing frameworks further enrich these readings: Caruth defines trauma as an "unclaimed experience that returns in haunting forms" (4), capturing how violence, displacement, and injustice manifest in narrative form, while Laub emphasises that bearing witness entails an ethical responsibility to acknowledge suffering and restore moral consciousness (69). These frameworks illuminate how literary representation transforms suffering into ethical reflection, showing that literature can act as a site for moral engagement, memory preservation, and humanitarian awareness.

Ultimately, Ghosh, Mistry, and Desai demonstrate that structural violence and environmental displacement do not merely produce physical or material consequences but also erode moral sensitivity, compassion, and ethical judgment. By depicting the cumulative effects of systemic oppression, social inequity, and ecological disruption on ordinary lives, these novels foreground the human struggle to maintain ethical awareness and moral responsibility. The texts show that memory, storytelling, and narrative form are not neutral but actively participate in moral deliberation, offering readers insight into the fragility, resilience, and ethical potential of human consciousness in the face of prolonged structural and environmental crises.



Discussion

The analysis of Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, and Anita Desai reveals that contemporary Indian English fiction not only depicts structural violence and environmental displacement but also interrogates their profound ethical and moral implications. Ghosh's novels, particularly *Gun Island* and *The Shadow Lines*, illustrate how environmental crises, historical disruptions, and migration destabilise ordinary lives, challenging readers to consider the ethical responsibilities of individuals and communities. As Ghosh writes, "The tides of history, like the waters of the river, sweep away those who are least able to resist" (*Gun Island* 102), a vivid metaphor for the fragility of human agency in the face of systemic forces. Bhattacharya emphasises that Ghosh's blending of memory, history, and ecological awareness allows literature to function as a moral archive, inviting reflection on human values and collective responsibility (15). Through narrative fragmentation and intergenerational memory, Ghosh foregrounds ethical consciousness as an active engagement with the consequences of displacement, climate change, and social marginalisation.

Mistry's *A Fine Balance* complements this focus by situating structural violence within the intimate and everyday sphere, demonstrating how caste, class, and bureaucratic neglect erode moral perception and ethical agency. Mistry observes, "The world seems full of people who can look without seeing, hear without listening" (45), capturing the psychological and ethical numbing imposed by systemic inequities. Sorensen notes that the novel's realist depiction of oppression foregrounds ethical dilemmas, compelling readers to consider how survival under structural violence entails moral compromise and ethical negotiation (212). Sunil and Baranwal further highlight that Mistry's nuanced portrayal of social hierarchies emphasises the inextricable link between moral reasoning and social context (18). The novel thereby illustrates that prolonged exposure to injustice diminishes compassion and reshapes everyday ethical life, revealing the insidious effects of structural violence on human values.

Desai's *Clear Light of Day* situates ethical inquiry within domestic and relational contexts, highlighting the subtle ways memory, intergenerational trauma, and social history shape moral consciousness. Gopal observes that Desai's focus on domestic space enables a reading of ethical responsibility grounded in relational awareness and reflection (145). Rao similarly notes that the novel portrays moral vigilance as a continuous process, where everyday choices, acts of care, and attention to relational histories sustain human values amid broader social and historical disruption (9). By centring the intimate and ordinary, Desai illustrates that ethical life persists even when structural systems fail, underscoring the interplay between personal reflection and social responsibility.

Across all three authors, several critical patterns emerge. Narrative fragmentation, intergenerational memory, testimonial voices, and moral reflection operate as literary mechanisms for preserving human values and fostering ethical awareness. Trauma and witnessing theories provide a conceptual framework to understand this dynamic: Caruth's definition of trauma as an "unclaimed experience that returns in haunting forms" (4) and Laub's emphasis on the ethical imperative of bearing witness (69) illuminate how literature mediates between suffering and moral consciousness. These frameworks underscore that literary texts not only document violence and displacement but also actively engage readers in ethical reflection, offering a space for moral imagination to confront structural and environmental crises.

The discussion demonstrates that contemporary Indian English fiction transforms ordinary human experiences into ethical inquiry. Whether through the ecological and historical awareness in Ghosh, the depiction of systemic oppression in Mistry, or the relational and domestic focus in Desai, these narratives reveal how memory, storytelling, and narrative form function as mechanisms for moral and humanitarian preservation. Importantly, they highlight that ethical erosion, manifested in the gradual loss of empathy, compassion, and moral clarity, is a pervasive outcome of structural and environmental crises. Yet, literature also offers avenues for resistance, reflection, and restoration of human values, asserting the moral significance of storytelling as a form of ethical engagement.



Conclusion

This study shows that contemporary Indian English fiction by Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, and Anita Desai deeply engages with the ethical and moral dimensions of structural violence and environmental displacement. Ghosh's works highlight how historical events, ecological crises, and migration disrupt human agency, creating situations where moral reflection and awareness of collective responsibility become essential for understanding lived experiences. Mistry illustrates how systemic oppression, social hierarchies, and bureaucratic neglect gradually erode compassion and ethical judgment, showing that survival under such conditions often involves difficult moral compromises. Desai, on the other hand, emphasises the role of domestic and relational spaces, demonstrating that memory, attentive care, and everyday reflection help sustain ethical consciousness even when societal structures fail. Across these authors, recurring narrative techniques such as fragmented storytelling, intergenerational memory, and testimonial narration emerge as powerful tools for preserving human values and fostering moral sensitivity. The study reveals that prolonged exposure to structural and environmental crises affects not just material conditions but also empathy, trust, and moral reasoning, underscoring literature's role in cultivating ethical awareness.

Overall, these narratives show that literature functions as a space for reflection, memory, and moral engagement, allowing readers to witness human vulnerability and resilience. Future research could further explore gendered experiences, climate-induced displacement, or the intersections of social, political, and environmental crises, highlighting literature's continued importance in shaping ethical understanding and humanistic engagement in times of adversity.

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