

ECOLINGUISTICS APPRAISAL OF ENVIRONMENTAL DISCOURSE IN
QURRATULAIN HYDER'S *RIVER OF FIRE*Humaira Ikram^{*1}, Dr. Liaqat Iqbal², Shah Saud Ikram³^{*1}MPhil Scholar, Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, Pakistan.²Associate Professor, Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, Pakistan.³BS English, Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, Pakistan.¹humairaikram78@gmail.com, ²liaqatiqbal@gmail.com, ³shahsaud.khan@icloud.comDOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21736183>**Keywords**

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Corresponding Author: *

Humaira Ikram

Abstract

Despite extensive scholarly attention to its historical and cultural scope, Qurratulain Hyder's *River of Fire* has yet to be examined through an ecolinguistics lens. This article addresses that gap, drawing on Arran Stibbe's six-parameter model of ecolinguistics analysis (ideology, framing, evaluation, erasure, salience, and transformation) to uncover how the novel constructs environmental meaning. Using a qualitative, close-reading approach, the study traces the novel's environmental narratives, its underlying ecological ideologies, and its treatment of non-human presence within the text, then connects these discursive patterns to present-day environmental debates. The analysis shows that Hyder's novel does more than chronicle socio-historical change. It embeds ecological perspectives that unsettle anthropocentric readings of human-nature relations and foreground their interdependence instead. Positioning the novel within an ecolinguistics frame, the study argues for literature's capacity to shape ecological awareness and to interrogate the ideologies that dominate contemporary environmental discourse. The findings contribute to a growing body of scholarship linking ecolinguistics to South Asian literary studies, opening space for further ecocritical readings of regional fiction.

INTRODUCTION

Rising environmental degradation and climate instability over recent decades have drawn attention not only from scientists and policymakers but increasingly from linguists and literary scholars, who point to language as an active force in shaping how societies understand and act toward the natural world (Barasa, 2018; Arnold, 2018). Within this broader turn, ecolinguistics has developed as a field examining how language constructs, reinforces, or contests ecological ideologies (Stibbe, 2021), moving beyond conventional textual interpretation to ask

how literature circulates environmental awareness, or normalizes ecological harm.

Qurratulain Hyder's *Aag ka Darya* (*River of Fire*, 1959) offers unusually rich material for such an inquiry. Spanning roughly a thousand years of subcontinental history, the novel is best known for its narrative ambition and its treatment of cultural and political change; critics have frequently likened Hyder's scope to that of Milan Kundera or Gabriel García Márquez. Less examined is the novel's sustained use of natural imagery: rivers, seasons, flora and fauna, which functions both as narrative setting and as a symbolic register for

continuity, transformation, and the cyclical nature of time. It is this second, largely overlooked dimension that the present study addresses.

Despite the novel's canonical status in South Asian literature, its environmental discourse (how it constructs ecological ideology, frames human-nature relations, and grants or denies agency to non-human entities) remains unexamined. Existing scholarship on the novel has concentrated on its historical and cultural dimensions, leaving its ecological register unexplored. This gap matters particularly in a South Asian context, where literary narratives are often deeply entangled with the region's ecological and social transformations.

This study addresses that gap by applying Arran Stibbe's (2015) six-parameter ecolinguistics framework, ideology, framing, evaluation, erasure, salience, and transformation, to identify the environmental narratives embedded in *River of Fire*, draw out the ecological ideologies they encode, and relate these to contemporary environmental concerns. In doing so, the study aims to demonstrate how literary language can construct, challenge, or reshape ecological consciousness, and to argue for the value of reading South Asian fiction through an ecocritical lens attentive not just to what a text says about nature but to how its language does the saying.

Literature Review

Ecolinguistics examines how language constructs, sustains, or contests understandings of the natural world. The field traces its conceptual roots to Haugen's (1972) *The Ecology of Language*, which framed language itself as embedded within, and shaped by, its social and environmental surroundings. Halliday's (1990) critique of "growthism," his term for the linguistic normalization of unlimited economic growth, pushed the field toward an explicitly ecological critique of discourse, arguing that language is never neutral with respect to environmental harm. It was Arran Stibbe who consolidated these threads into a systematic method. In *Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology and the Stories We Live By* (2015), Stibbe proposed that societies are held together by "stories," recurring narrative and

linguistic patterns circulating through media, politics, education, and literature, that quietly encode assumptions about the human-nature relationship. Alexander and Stibbe (2014) extended this claim beyond explicitly environmental texts, arguing that even discourse never mentioning nature directly (economic, educational, or political argument) can carry ecologically consequential ideologies simply by equating success with consumption or progress with industrial growth. Penz and Fill (2022) describe the field's subsequent move into a "transdisciplinary" phase, converging with environmental studies, cognitive linguistics, media studies, and literary theory around examining discursive power over ecological realities, promoting sustainability-oriented language, and developing language-based tools for ecological literacy.

A parallel strand of scholarship has examined how such language operationalizes ideology in practice. Drawing on Fairclough's (1995) critical discourse analysis, researchers have shown how institutional and corporate discourse routinely euphemizes environmental damage: "clean coal" recasting a polluting industry, "land development" standing in for deforestation. Stibbe (2015, 2021) identifies erasure and salience as key mechanisms in this process. Ecological costs are omitted from urban and technical discourse, or foregrounded selectively so that economic benefit dominates coverage while habitat loss recedes from view. Narrative framing, in turn, shapes behavioral outcomes: Schultz and Zelezny (1999) found that narratives emphasizing human-nature connection produce more durable pro-environmental behavior than fear- or guilt-based appeals, while Chawla (2006) links early exposure to nature-centered language and storytelling to long-term environmental attitudes. Carvalho (2007) argues that emergent terms such as "climate emergency" function not merely as description but as instruments of discursive and political mobilization.

Despite this expanding body of work, ecolinguistics scholarship has engaged only marginally with South Asian literary texts, even though the region's literature is saturated with

narratives of colonial and postcolonial ecological transformation.

The novel itself has attracted substantial critical attention, but almost none of it from an ecological angle. Sharma's (2014) study of the novel's historical revisionism reads it as a gendered counter-history, tracing how Hyder centers women's experience, including the partition-era upheavals faced by characters such as Champak, against dominant, male-centered historiography. Siddiqui, Madani, and Raza (2025) offer a sociological reading centered on the novel's depiction of women's subordination under South Asian patriarchal structures, while Nandi (2012) treats the novel as a deliberate counter-narrative to fixed, singular accounts of the subcontinent's past, emphasizing plurality over a unified national history. Baines (2024) turns to the novel's engagement with Buddhism as a lens on the constraints imposed on women by religious and social hierarchy, situating her reading within feminist and postcolonial scholarship.

This body of scholarship converges on questions of gender, historical revisionism, and religious identity, but none of it addresses the novel's environmental register: how it constructs ecological ideology, frames the relationship between human and non-human life, or encodes assumptions about nature through its extensive use of rivers, seasons, and landscape. That is the gap this study addresses.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Arran Stibbe's (2015) six-parameter model as its analytical framework, applying it to *River of Fire* to examine how the novel's language constructs, reinforces, or unsettles ecological ideology. Stibbe's model treats discourse, including literary narrative, as a site where six distinct but interlocking mechanisms operate.

Ideology refers to the taken-for-granted belief systems embedded in a text's language, particularly assumptions about the proper relationship between humans and the natural world. A text that presents nature as available for human use and domination encodes an anthropocentric ideology, typically without stating it outright.

Framing, following Lakoff's (2004) work as adapted by Stibbe, concerns how language structures which aspects of reality become visible and which recede. In ecological terms, framing determines whether nature appears as commodity, victim, partner, or sacred presence, a choice with direct consequences for how readers interpret environmental events.

Evaluation captures the judgments, implicit or explicit, that a text attaches to actions, entities, or events as good or bad. Praising "development" while omitting its environmental costs, for instance, evaluates short-term human gain over long-term ecological consequence.

Erasure identifies what a text omits: ecological damage or non-human presence that goes unmentioned, whether deliberately or not. Stibbe (2015) treats erasure as especially consequential in economic and political discourse, where environmental harm is frequently obscured behind technical language.

Salience works alongside erasure but focuses on what a text foregrounds rather than what it omits, which elements of reality are elevated to prominence (profit, productivity, efficiency) while their ecological costs recede to the margins.

Finally, beneficial stories (transformation) capture the model's constructive dimension: narratives, whether drawn from indigenous tradition, nature writing, or literary fiction, that promote ecological interdependence, restraint, and respect for non-human life, offering an alternative to extractive or anthropocentric narratives.

Applied to *River of Fire*, these six parameters provide a structured method for examining how the novel's treatment of rivers, seasons, and landscape functions ideologically, whether the text positions nature primarily as narrative backdrop and symbolic device, or grants it a more active, agentive role within the story's ecological register. The model's dual capacity for critique and reconstruction suits a text spanning centuries of socio-historical change, letting the analysis trace not only where ecological concerns are erased or subordinated to human drama, but also where the novel's imagery gestures toward a less anthropocentric understanding of human-nature interdependence.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist design, treating meaning in *River of Fire* as constructed through language rather than as objectively fixed, a stance consistent with ecolinguistics' broader concern with how discourse shapes, rather than simply reflects, understandings of the natural world. The interpretivist orientation supports close, contextual textual analysis over quantification, letting the study trace how ecological ideology surfaces through the novel's specific lexical and narrative choices.

The primary data source is the text of *River of Fire* itself; secondary data comprises the critical scholarship discussed above, used to situate and support the analysis. Data collection proceeded through a complete reading of the novel to identify passages carrying environmental discourse (references to rivers, seasons, landscape, and non-human presence), which were then annotated for lexical choice, metaphor, narrative framing, and the treatment of non-human entities.

Each identified passage was coded against Stibbe's (2015) six-parameter framework- ideology, framing, evaluation, erasure, salience, and beneficial stories/transformation- to categorize the ecological patterns present in the text. Rather than treating the six parameters as independent checklists, the analysis applies them jointly to reveal how the novel's environmental imagery functions ideologically across its narrative arc, from pre-colonial ecological continuity through colonial-era disruption to post-partition transformation.

Analysis and Discussion

Ideology and Framing: Rivers as Living, Sacred, and Cyclical Forces

Across *River of Fire*, Hyder's language consistently frames rivers not as passive geographical backdrop but as active participants in history: entities that outlast empires rather than simply witness them. Describing the Ganga in one of the novel's recurring set-pieces, Hyder writes that boats and barges continued sailing on its "gold-and-blue surface" while "songs rose from dugouts and dinghies, the hymns of yogis, the chants of fakirs"

(p. 108). The river is granted narrative agency rather than mere setting-status, an instance of what Plumwood (2002) calls the "decentering of the human," in which non-human entities acquire subjectivity and moral presence within a text. This framing recurs in the novel's treatment of the river as sacred: Hyder links the Ganga explicitly to Sufi devotional language, describing a character's yearning to be "one with the Divine" alongside his encounter with the river "gleaming through the rose-apple trees" (p. 89), an image that draws on South Asian traditions of river-veneration (the Ganges, the Jamuna) and, per Stibbe (2015), constitutes exactly the kind of "positive story to live by" that ecolinguistics identifies as ecologically constructive.

This ideological current is reinforced by the novel's treatment of time as cyclical rather than linear. Seasonal description recurs throughout the text as a structuring device: "Yellow Vaisakh, when the mustard bloomed... Rain-filled Sawan and Bhadon" (p. 99), positioning the rhythms of nature as a stable substrate beneath centuries of political rupture. This aligns with Plumwood's (2002) argument that ecological critique benefits from representing nature's own temporal agency as a corrective to anthropocentric, human-scaled historical narrative. Hyder's insistence on seasonal recurrence performs exactly this correction, subordinating dynastic change to a more durable ecological continuity.

That continuity is not depicted as untroubled. Where the novel turns to war and conquest, ideology shifts register sharply: a battlefield scene describes corpses "sprawled on the main street" while, just beyond the city, "a cool wind sang peacefully in the rose-apple trees," nature explicitly rendered "indifferent to human affairs" (p. 53). The juxtaposition stages an ideological contrast between ecological constancy and human violence, consistent with what Stibbe (2010) identifies as narratives of militarism and domination that ecolinguistics treats as ecologically destructive. Hyder extends this critique to empire directly, gesturing toward colonial infrastructure (diverted rivers, felled forests, fields drained for profit) in terms that resonate with Rob Nixon's (2011) concept of

“slow violence”: ecological harm that accumulates gradually, through sustained institutional neglect rather than singular catastrophe.

These ideological and framing choices construct a worldview in which rivers function simultaneously as sacred, agentive, and historically enduring, a stance that implicitly contests anthropocentric assumptions even as the novel documents centuries of human violence against the very landscapes it venerates.

Evaluation and Erasure: Appraising Nature, Silencing Ecology

Hyder’s evaluative language draws a consistent moral line between reverence for nature and its exploitation. Landscapes are typically appraised through markers of beauty and abundance, countryside where “flame-of-the-forest was in flower” and “the entire woodland seemed to be on fire” with blossom (p. 465), evaluative choices that, per the appraisal dimension of Stibbe’s model, position fertile landscape as a source of both survival and cultural flourishing. Colonial and industrial intervention receive the inverse treatment. A character lamenting British exploitation after Plassey describes Bengal, “once the richest province of Hindustan,” reduced to a “wilderness” through monopolized trade and taxation, with “famine” stalking a land whose “cargo boats are laden with foodstuff which has disappeared from the bazaars” (p. 139). This negative appraisal directly indicts extractive colonial economics, precisely the kind of resource-extraction critique Huggan and Tiffin (2010) identify as central to postcolonial ecocriticism.

Running alongside this evaluative pattern is a consistent operation of erasure: moments where ecological presence is crowded out of the narrative by human conflict. During the battlefield scene discussed above, the “dreadful din” of war-elephants and chariots leaves, in Stibbe’s (2015) terms, no discursive space for ecological voices. Nature’s presence is not merely evaluated negatively but rendered silent altogether beneath the “smoke” and violence of human combat (p. 53). A comparable erasure occurs through industrialization: Hyder describes the arrival of the railway as reducing “fields, groves, rivers, temples,

caravans, bulls, elephants” to irrelevance before the “hot-blooded monster” of the engine, an image in which the machine’s singular voice displaces the plural soundscape of the pre-industrial landscape, echoing Schama’s (1995) claim that landscape functions as a repository of cultural memory that industrial narrative actively impoverishes.

Erasure in the novel is not confined to nature alone. Hyder links ecological silencing to gendered silencing directly: a female character who “spoke of the river’s sorrow, of the trees that bent under unseen grief” is met with laughter, her concerns rendered “invisible” to the men around her (p. 224). This doubled erasure, of women and of nature together, aligns with the ecofeminist reading Plumwood (2002) offers, in which patriarchal ideology treats both as secondary to a male-centered pursuit of power. Even historiography itself performs this erasure, Hyder suggests, through its habit of counting the dead in conquest (“Sultan exterminated so and so many crores of men”) while remaining silent on the ecological cost of the same campaigns (p. 86), implicitly critiquing the anthropocentric bias of historical writing itself.

Evaluation and erasure operate as two faces of the same ideological process in the novel: nature is praised when it is visible, and its absence from the historical record is treated, implicitly, as itself a form of loss.

Salience and Beneficial Transformation: What Endures, What Is Foregrounded, and the Turn Toward Renewal

Not every ecological element in *River of Fire* receives equal narrative attention. Rivers and seasons are consistently made salient, foregrounded as the novel’s central organizing symbols, while everyday ecological practices (farming methods, resource use, incremental environmental degradation) recede into the background. A recurring address to the Jamuna, “How much water, how much water has flowed down since then... Rai Pathora’s Dilli came to be known as Tughlaqabad in the days of the Turks, today it is called Shahjahanabad” (p. 139), exemplifies this pattern: the river is positioned as the text’s primary marker of historical continuity,

doing narrative work that ordinary ecological detail is never asked to do. This selective salience is not without cost. Following Plumwood's (2002) caution that symbolic emphasis can obscure the material, everyday ecological practices that also shape sustainability or degradation, Hyder's novel is best understood as prioritizing the cultural-symbolic register of ecology over its material-practical one, a choice that shapes the kind of ecological consciousness the text is capable of producing.

Where the novel does foreground material ecological loss, it is typically colonial or industrial: canal-digging and road-building are described as the sum total of employment the British "promised" to Hindustanis (p. 185), an image that renders rivers no longer free-flowing but administratively "dug," appropriated into imperial infrastructure. This kind of salient loss, per Nixon (2011), makes otherwise-invisible slow violence visible to a reader.

The novel does not end in loss, however. Its most significant move, and the clearest instance of what Stibbe (2015, 2021) calls a "beneficial story" or "re-storying," lies in its repeated staging of ecological renewal after destruction. Following an account of an army swept away while crossing a river in flood ("Mother Jamuna. She was furious and in flood... All drowned," p. 99), the novel treats the river's refusal to be tamed by human military ambition as a demonstration of ecological resilience consistent with Naess's (1989) deep-ecology emphasis on nature's own regenerative capacity, independent of human intention. This same arc plays out culturally: a couplet mourning "a train of sorrows" carried along the waterway (p. 174) marks a shift from imperial and commercial glorification of the river toward reflective reverence, precisely the movement from exploitation to respect that Plumwood's (2002) ecofeminist framework treats as a necessary reorientation of human-nature relations.

By the novel's end, rivers function as vessels of both ecological and cultural memory, carrying forward not only water but names, dynasties, and collective identity across centuries (p. 178). The persistence of this imagery, even after cataloguing centuries of war, colonial extraction, and

industrial disruption, positions *River of Fire* as a text that does not merely document ecological loss but actively imagines, in Stibbe's terms, a more sustainable, less anthropocentric relationship between human history and the natural world it unfolds within.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how *River of Fire* constructs ecological meaning through language, applying Stibbe's six-parameter ecolinguistics framework to a text previously read almost exclusively through historical, feminist, and translation-studies lenses. The analysis shows that Hyder's novel constructs a coherent, if internally tensioned, ecological vision: rivers and seasons are positioned as sacred, agentive, and cyclically enduring, embodying an implicit critique of anthropocentrism, even as the same narrative documents centuries of war, colonial extraction, and industrial disruption enacted against those very landscapes. Ecological voices are shown to be repeatedly silenced by war, by colonial commodification, by the machinery of industrialization, and, in a further parallel the novel draws explicitly, by the same patriarchal structures that silence its female characters. Yet the novel does not conclude in erasure. Its recurring imagery of rivers surviving flood, seasons following devastation, and cultural attitudes shifting from exploitation toward reverence constitutes what Stibbe would term a "beneficial story," a narrative resource for imagining a less extractive relationship between human history and the natural world.

The study's primary contribution is to demonstrate that *River of Fire*'s ecological register is not peripheral to its historical and cultural scope but constitutive of it: rivers, seasons, and landscape function as sites of cultural memory in their own right, offering an entry point for reading South Asian literary history through an ecolinguistics lens rather than treating environmental description as mere setting. This extends ecolinguistics scholarship, which has so far engaged only marginally with South Asian literary texts, into a canonical work of the region's literature.

The study is limited in scope to a single text, restricting generalizability, and relies on qualitative close reading rather than a larger comparative or quantitative dataset; symbolic interpretation of this kind also remains open to variation across readers' cultural and interpretive positions. Future research might extend Stibbe's framework to other works by Hyder or her contemporaries, or combine ecolinguistics analysis with postcolonial ecocriticism and ecofeminist theory to further develop this line of inquiry.

River of Fire ultimately demonstrates literature's capacity to hold ecological loss and ecological hope simultaneously, cataloguing centuries of exploitation while still, through its enduring rivers and returning seasons, gesturing toward continuity, resilience, and a more sustainable relationship between human history and the natural world it unfolds within.

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