FROM PLOUGH TO PLATFORM: REPRESENTATIONS OF TECHNOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION IN INDIAN AGRICULTURAL NARRATIVES IN ENGLISH

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Abstract

Indian English literature has consistently returned to agriculture as a key site for negotiating questions of survival, ethics, and socio-economic change. Traditionally symbolised by the plough, agrarian life in literary narratives foregrounds manual labour, ecological vulnerability, and cyclical temporality rooted in seasonal rhythms. In contemporary India, however, agriculture is increasingly reshaped by mechanisation, digital platforms, data-driven governance, and emerging applications of artificial intelligence. Aligned with the policy vision of *Atmanirbhar Bharat*, technological innovation is promoted as a pathway to agricultural self-reliance and sustainability. This paper examines how Indian English literary texts register and critically negotiate this transition from the plough to the platform. Through close textual analysis of canonical and contemporary works—including Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, R. K. Narayan's *The Guide*, Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, and eco-critical writings by Amitav Ghosh—the study analyses technology as both material intervention and symbolic force. It argues that Indian English literature articulates an ambivalent response to technological modernity: while acknowledging its potential for empowerment and connectivity, these narratives simultaneously express anxiety over ecological degradation, social displacement, and the erosion of indigenous knowledge systems. Situated within postcolonial and ecocritical frameworks, the paper demonstrates how literature functions as a critical space for imagining a technologically enabled yet ethically and ecologically grounded future for Indian agriculture.

Keywords: Indian English Literature; Agriculture; Technology; Ecocriticism; Rural Transformation; *Atmanirbhar Bharat*

Introduction

Agriculture has historically occupied a central position in the Indian socio-cultural imagination, shaping economic structures, social relations, and literary expression. From colonial ethnographic accounts to post-independence realist fiction, Indian English literature has persistently returned to the village, the field, and the farmer to articulate narratives of survival, endurance, and transformation. Agrarian life in early literary representations is marked by labour-intensive practices, dependence on monsoons, and intimate relationships between human survival and ecological rhythms. The land is not merely an economic resource but a cultural and ethical anchor, shaping identity, community, and moral values.

Postcolonial Indian English fiction frequently presents the rural landscape as a space of vulnerability and resilience. Novels centred on agrarian life depict poverty, hunger, and uncertainty, yet they also foreground collective labour, ecological knowledge, and spiritual endurance. These narratives often resist linear models of progress, instead emphasising cyclical temporality and the fragility of human existence in the face of natural forces. The plough, as a recurring symbol, encapsulates this worldview, representing continuity, ancestral labour, and the ethical bond between human beings and the soil.

In the twenty-first century, Indian agriculture is undergoing a profound transformation driven by technological innovation. Mechanisation, digital marketplaces, precision farming, climate-smart agricultural practices, and artificial intelligence are increasingly promoted as solutions to agrarian distress. National policy frameworks such as *Atmanirbhar Bharat* foreground technology as a means of achieving self-reliance, productivity, and sustainability in the agricultural sector. This altered material reality necessitates a critical re-reading of literary representations of agriculture. The movement from the plough to the platform is not merely a technological shift but a transformation in agrarian consciousness, labour relations, and ecological ethics.

This paper addresses three interrelated research questions: (1) How do Indian English literary narratives represent the transition from traditional agrarian practices to technologically mediated agriculture? (2) In what ways do these texts critique or reimagine technological modernity through ecological and ethical lenses? (3) How does Indian English literature engage with contemporary policy discourse such as *Atmanirbhar Bharat* while retaining literary scepticism towards techno-solutionism? By examining a range of canonical and contemporary texts, the paper argues that Indian English literature provides a nuanced critique of agricultural modernity by foregrounding human vulnerability, ecological responsibility, and social justice alongside technological change.

Review of Relevant Literature

Critical engagement with agriculture in Indian English literature has evolved alongside changing socio-economic and environmental contexts. Early scholarship on postcolonial Indian fiction focused on rural realism and peasant suffering, reading village-centred novels as responses to colonial exploitation and post-independence disillusionment. Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* has been extensively analysed as a critique of industrial modernity intruding upon subsistence farming. Meenakshi Mukherjee argues that such novels construct the village as a moral and cultural core threatened by forces of change, thereby foregrounding ethical resistance to development-driven disruption.

Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City* provides a foundational theoretical framework for analysing literary representations of rural transformation. Williams contends that literature oscillates between nostalgia for agrarian life and critique of rural exploitation under modernity, a tension that remains central to Indian English narratives negotiating agricultural change. His insights have informed postcolonial literary criticism concerned with development, displacement, and cultural loss, enabling scholars to read agrarian fiction as a site of ideological struggle rather than pastoral idealisation.

Ecocriticism has significantly reshaped agrarian literary studies by foregrounding environmental ethics and human–nature relationships. Vandana Shiva's *Staying Alive* emphasises indigenous ecological knowledge, women's agricultural labour, and sustainable practices, challenging technocratic models of development. Greg Garrard's work on ecocriticism provides analytical tools for examining how literary texts represent nature, technology, and environmental crisis. Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* has further expanded critical debate by exposing the failure of modern narratives—including literary forms—to adequately address climate change and ecological catastrophe.

Scholarship on agrarian distress and neoliberal reforms contextualises contemporary representations of rural India. P. Sainath's journalistic narratives document structural inequalities affecting farmers, including indebtedness, land alienation, and farmer suicides, and critique techno-centric development models that ignore social realities. Feminist, Dalit, and indigenous studies further complicate agrarian discourse by foregrounding gendered labour, caste-based land relations, and ecological justice. Despite this extensive scholarship, limited attention has been paid to the symbolic and narrative implications of digital platforms, data-driven governance, and artificial intelligence in Indian English literature. This paper addresses this critical gap.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs an interdisciplinary theoretical framework combining postcolonial theory, ecocriticism, and critical studies of technology. Postcolonial theory facilitates an examination of uneven modernisation and the persistence of colonial land relations within contemporary agricultural discourse. Ecocriticism foregrounds ethical human–nature relationships and environmental sustainability, enabling a critique of development models that prioritise productivity over ecological balance.

Raymond Williams's concept of rural transformation provides a lens for understanding literary ambivalence towards modernity, while Vandana Shiva's critique of technocratic development underscores the importance of indigenous ecological knowledge. Technology is approached not as a neutral instrument but as a cultural and ideological force embedded within power relations and environmental consequences. This framework allows for a nuanced reading of literary texts that neither reject technology outright nor celebrate it uncritically.

Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research methodology based on close textual analysis and thematic interpretation. Primary texts include canonical and contemporary works of Indian English literature that engage with agrarian life and rural transformation. Secondary sources comprise critical essays, ecological theory, and studies of agricultural modernity. The analysis focuses on symbolism, narrative voice, imagery, and thematic concerns related to technology, ecology, and ethics. All citations follow MLA 9th edition guidelines.

The Plough and the Agrarian Past: Early Literary Representations

Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* remains one of the most powerful representations of traditional agrarian life in Indian English fiction. Narrated through the voice of Rukmani, the novel foregrounds subsistence farming, emotional attachment to land, and vulnerability to natural forces. Rukmani's assertion that "the land is all we have" (Markandaya 3) encapsulates the centrality of land as both livelihood and identity. The plough symbolises continuity and ancestral labour, binding human survival to ecological rhythms and collective memory.

Markandaya's language repeatedly emphasises cyclical temporality, as seasons of abundance alternate with famine and drought. The arrival of the tannery marks the intrusion of industrial modernity, disrupting ecological balance and social harmony. Rukmani's lament that the tannery has destroyed "the land and the peace" reflects literary scepticism towards development that prioritises profit over human and environmental well-being. The novel thus presents technology as an ambivalent force—capable of providing employment yet simultaneously eroding traditional agrarian ethics.

R. K. Narayan's *The Guide* similarly situates agrarian life within a moral and spiritual framework. The drought-stricken village of Mangala depends not on technological intervention but on ritual fasting and communal belief. Narayan's depiction of the villagers' faith underscores a worldview in which survival is mediated through ethical conduct and spiritual endurance. The absence of technological solutions highlights rural vulnerability while reinforcing the intimate connection between human life and natural cycles.

Mechanisation and Modernity: Negotiating Change

Post-independence agricultural reforms and the Green Revolution introduced mechanisation and scientific farming methods, transforming rural India. Indian English literature registers these changes with marked ambivalence. While mechanisation promises increased productivity and efficiency, literary narratives remain attentive to its uneven distribution and social consequences. As Williams observes, modernisation often produces displacement alongside development.

Literary representations suggest that technological progress disproportionately benefits large landholders while marginalising small and tenant farmers. Mechanisation emerges not as a neutral tool but as a contested force that reinforces existing inequalities. Indian English literature resists celebratory narratives of development by foregrounding ethical dilemmas and ecological costs associated with rapid technological change.

From Fields to Platforms: Digital and AI-Mediated Agriculture

Contemporary agricultural discourse increasingly emphasises digital platforms, data analytics, and artificial intelligence as solutions to agrarian distress. Although fictional representations of AI-driven farming remain limited, eco-critical and non-fiction writings gesture towards a technologically mediated rural future. Amitav Ghosh critiques extractive modernity and argues that the climate crisis demands new ways of imagining human–nature relationships. In *The Great Derangement*, he exposes the failure of narratives that separate technological progress from ecological responsibility.

Within literary discourse, the platform functions as a metaphor for connectivity, access to information, and potential empowerment. Farmers are increasingly imagined as knowledge-bearing agents capable of engaging with technological systems, aligning with the ethos of *Atmanirbhar Bharat*. However, literary texts caution against data abstraction that alienates communities from land-based knowledge, warning that digital mediation may reproduce existing inequalities.

Twenty-First-Century Perspectives on Agriculture and Technology

Twenty-first-century Indian English literature situates agriculture within globalised markets, climate change, and digital governance. Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* exposes the marginalisation of rural producers in a liberalised economy, revealing how technological and economic asymmetries sustain inequality. Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* reflects anxieties surrounding land, migration, and globalisation, implicitly critiquing systems that alienate communities from the soil.

Anuradha Roy's *Sleeping on Jupiter* associates rural ecological loss with moral decay, while Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* presents land as a living ethical entity rather than a productive resource. Feminist and caste-conscious narratives, including Meena Kandasamy's *Exquisite Cadavers* and Annie Zaidi's *Prelude to a Riot*, foreground invisible labour and structural violence, insisting that technological transformation must be socially inclusive to achieve genuine self-reliance.

Technology, Ethics, and Ecological Consciousness

Indian English agricultural narratives consistently foreground ethical concerns. Vandana Shiva warns against replacing indigenous knowledge with technocratic solutions, arguing that sustainability depends on ecological balance. Literary texts echo this caution, advocating a model in which technology complements rather than erases traditional practices. Ecocritical readings reveal resistance to uncritical technological optimism and emphasise biodiversity, soil health, and cultural memory.

Atmanirbhar Bharat and the Literary Imagination

The vision of *Atmanirbhar Bharat* promotes a technology-driven yet self-reliant agricultural sector. Indian English literature contributes to this discourse by offering nuanced, human-centred narratives of transformation. P. Sainath's non-fiction bridges literature and policy by documenting rural distress and challenging celebratory narratives of digital agriculture. Literary texts critique policy-driven development while simultaneously imagining inclusive rural futures grounded in ethical responsibility.

Digital Futures, Climate Governance, and Literary Imagination

The most significant contribution of contemporary Indian English literature to agrarian discourse lies in its ability to anticipate and interrogate the future of agriculture under conditions of climate crisis and digital governance. While policy documents increasingly frame technology as a neutral and inevitable solution, literary narratives insist on foregrounding ethical accountability, historical memory, and environmental vulnerability. The rise of digital agriculture—through satellite monitoring, algorithmic decision-making, and AI-assisted farming—reconfigures not only modes of production but also epistemologies of land and labour.

Literary texts respond to this shift by questioning who controls agricultural data, whose knowledge is valued, and whose labour remains invisible. The abstraction of land into datasets risks severing affective and ethical relationships between farmers and soil, a concern that echoes Raymond Williams's warning against the commodification of rural life. Amitav Ghosh's insistence that climate change represents a crisis of imagination becomes particularly relevant here, as digital governance often prioritises efficiency over ecological uncertainty and human vulnerability. Literature, by contrast, reintroduces narrative, emotion, and moral complexity into discussions of technological futures.

Recent Indian English writing suggests that meaningful agricultural transformation must integrate technological innovation with ecological wisdom and social justice. Indigenous and marginalised perspectives challenge universalist models of digital progress by asserting alternative relationships to land grounded in stewardship rather than extraction. In this sense, literature does not reject technology outright but repositions it within a framework of care, responsibility, and sustainability. The platform, these narratives suggest, must remain answerable to the plough, to soil memory, and to the lived realities of agrarian communities.

Conclusion

The movement from the plough to the platform encapsulates the broader transformation of Indian agriculture under technological modernity. Indian English literature captures this shift with complexity and caution, recognising technology's potential for empowerment while persistently warning against ecological degradation, social displacement, and the erasure of indigenous knowledge systems. From the subsistence farming depicted in *Nectar in a Sieve* to contemporary critiques of digital abstraction and neoliberal governance, agrarian narratives articulate a sustained ethical engagement with change.

Situated within postcolonial and ecocritical frameworks, these texts challenge linear models of development and techno-solutionism by foregrounding vulnerability, interdependence, and environmental limits. When read alongside the policy discourse of *Atmanirbhar Bharat*, Indian English literature offers a necessary counterpoint that humanises technological ambition and insists on inclusive, sustainable self-reliance. Literature thus emerges as a vital critical space for imagining the future of Indian agriculture—one in which technological innovation is balanced by ecological responsibility, cultural memory, and social justice.

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