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**Banaras Hindu University**  
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# Research and Criticism

New Series, Volume 11 (2025)

**Special Issue**  
**Literature and Environment**

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## Editor's Note

The Department of English, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, India, is delighted to present the latest special issue of its journal *Research and Criticism*, focused on the theme “**Literature and Environment.**” The journal was originally launched in 1965. This number is the eleventh issue of the New Series of the journal. We have maintained a steady publishing record, with only a brief interruption. We remain dedicated to sustaining regular publication and are committed to exploring emerging and evolving areas of research in each forthcoming issue.

This special issue focuses on the intersection of literature and the environment, under the expanding umbrella of the Environmental Humanities—an interdisciplinary field that brings together the arts, sciences, and humanities to address urgent ecological concerns. As the climate crisis accelerates, the role of literature in shaping environmental awareness and ethical responsibility has gained significant scholarly attention. Across the globe, universities are responding by establishing dedicated centres and programs that foster research in this crucial domain.

While, as the poet W. H. Auden once observed, “poetry makes nothing happen,” the imaginative possibilities opened up by literature and other forms of creative arts can serve as powerful catalysts for environmental awareness and critical reflections. Whereas artistic depictions of ecological harm may not be enough to change deeply rooted, environmentally destructive habits on their own, they can reignite concern for the planet and stimulate creative thinking about its future. Literature, with its rich capacity to reflect, critique, and reimagine human experience, has become a crucial tool in understanding our relationship with the natural world. From narratives of ecological loss and resistance to poetic meditations on landscapes and nonhuman life, literary texts provide nuanced insights into how cultures perceive and interact with their environments. Engaging with imaginative works allows us to reconsider the consequences of our choices and envision more

sustainable alternatives, offering a space where empathy, ethics, and ecological consciousness can intersect in meaningful ways.

This issue has submissions that explore these dimensions, using critical frameworks such as ecocriticism, ecofeminism, new materialism, and critical animal studies to deepen our understanding of texts across time and language. The aim is to uncover how literature not only represents environmental issues but also actively participates in the broader struggle for environmental justice and climate action. By situating texts within their socio-political and ecological contexts, contributors have examined how literature challenges dominant ideologies, reconfigures our relationship with the nonhuman, and inspires more sustainable ways of living. Ultimately, this special issue seeks to engage both scholars and general readers in a conversation about the transformative potential of literature in the age of ecological crisis.

Warm regards and best wishes to all our readers

Editor (s)

# Is Anti-War Literature Really Anti-Militarist? Anti-War Literature within the Scope of Eco-Criticism

*Eren Alkan*

## Abstract

This paper discusses the mainstream anti-war American literature in the twentieth century through eco-criticism. In the pieces chosen, it does research how anti-war literature defines the concept of war and anti-war by deciphering anthropocentrism which comes to the forefront in these literary texts. It tries to find out the nuclei of speciesism probing the approach of these pieces towards non-human beings and nature. The paper not only discusses how anti-war American literature alienates non-human beings while they are underlining how human beings are alienated by wars, but it also suggests anti-war literature authors that they integrate identity-related issues with non-human settings, as well. Using specific examples from World War I and World War II anti-war American literature, that redefining anti-war literature as a literary genre from an eco-critical perspective is a must will be the scope of the article adding the word *istory* to the academic fields of *history* and *herstory*.

**Keywords:** Eco-criticism, anti-war literature, 20<sup>th</sup> century American literature

## Introduction

Eco-criticism underlines the responsibility of both literary readers and poets and writers to protect the ecosystem. Using eco-criticism as background in examining anti-war literary works allows these works, which have the mission of showing the destructiveness of war and criticizing war policies, to be interpreted from a different perspective because it can be stated that anti-war works in twentieth-century

American literature place the individual at the center and describe the destruction that war causes on the ontological existence of the individual. In this respect, anti-war literature addresses universal peace specifically for the human species from a humanist and anthropocentric perspective.

In this context, it cannot be said that anti-war poems, stories, and novels make an effort to develop ecological awareness in their readers. The relationship between anti-war literary works and the ecosystem and biosphere is human-centered; hence, it does not allow detailing the damage caused by war to the *environment*, natural life, animals, plants, and all inanimate beings. Based on one of the very first eco-critics Cheryll Glotfelty's definition of eco-criticism, as used in the examined works of the poets and writers in this article, the metaphors about land are generally to indicate the belonging of the individual. Therefore, they are structured as *objects* that are "bought," "sold," "occupied," or "rescued."

In addition to investigating the representations of nature in the works examined, evaluating the "symbolic structuring of species" (Glotfelty, 1996, p. 28), which is the third stage of eco-criticism, is important in terms of showing how humans are centrally positioned within other living or non-living species and phenomena. In this respect, anti-war literary works reflect a human-centered perspective, as Arne Naess's concept of "deep ecology" (1994, p. 143) also indicates, and although these works seem to advocate peace, it is obvious that they reflect an exploitative attitude and are written in a way that highlights the superior side of humans. In the context of deep ecology -although the damage to the environment and non-human creatures is occasionally mentioned in some works- a general *self-awareness* cannot be mentioned in anti-war literary works. What is reflected here is rather a *shallow* ecological perspective. In the works, there is no example of a planetary or post-humanist anti-war stance in which the individual abandons his egocentric attitude, creates an equal life with all living things, and develops a *self* that respects nature and the physical *environment*. As a result, it can easily be said that the characters in the examined literary works lack an *eco-sophical* self.

### **Aim, Methodology, and Scope of the Study**

This article aims to investigate how anti-war literature is literally anti-war within the scope of all living species. Using various examples from 20<sup>th</sup>-century American literature, descriptive text analysis will be used as the main method with the help of the theories of eco-criticism. Based on the selected examples, the problem situation of the research has been determined as the emphasis on anthropocentrism in a significant part of mainstream anti-war literary works and the inequality between genres detected in the anti-war discourses of these works.

The starting point of the research is that these works criticize the destructiveness of war in the context of its effects on humans and society and that they deprive non-human creatures and the ecosystem of the attention they apply to humanity. At this point, the main discussion of the research will seek answers to the following questions:

- (1) Does anti-war literature indirectly contribute to the continuity of the existing system from an anthropocentric perspective and reproduce war discourse against

- non-humans by ignoring them in their anti-war discourse? If so, what are the motives and implementation practices behind the emergence of this problem? OR
- (2) Does anti-war literature have a post-humanist perspective? In this case, where should the suggestions for “how to move from an anthropocentric approach to a post-humanist approach” (Glotfelty, 1996, p. 33) be located in the literature?

To help answer these main questions, it is necessary to determine sub-questions. In this research, answers to the following sub-questions will be sought within the scope of the main problem above:

- (a) In anti-war literary works, is anti-war considered only in the context of harm to human beings/anti-war against humanity?
- (b) What is the attitude of anti-war literary works in the war against nature/*environment*?
- (c) How do writers and poets express their opposition to war in terms of ecocultural diversity, linguistic, and eco-critical attitudes?
- (d) Are there similarities between those who produce war literature and those who produce anti-war literature?
- (e) What is the approach of anti-war works towards non-human beings?
- (f) Can writers and poets take an approach beyond human rights in their works?
- (g) What kind of perspective do writers and poets have towards speciesism in the human-ecology-culture triangle, while reflecting power and hegemony relations between races and species using language and symbols in their works?
- (h) How do these writers and poets criticize war discourses in an eco-critical context?

In brief, how inter-species relations are reflected in anti-war literary works that display a “humanist” perspective and whether these works are truly anti-war in an eco-critical context, is a question that remains to be answered. The answer to this question will change perspectives on this literary genre from a non-anthropocentric post-humanist perspective and contribute to new readings and future definitions of anti-war works and anti-militarism.

Regarding the scope of the article, with relatively *new* theories such as post-humanism and eco-criticism, the scope of domination, power, and hegemony relations has expanded, and literary studies have escaped the narrowness of the humanist perspective and started to be carried out from a post-humanist perspective, which has enabled the works to be analyzed more broadly. At this point, research and analysis in this article will be carried out through an in-depth study of works within the scope of qualitative data, and answers to the questions will be sought through examples selected from mainstream American literature. These works consist of two novels, one story, and five poems; Angela Morgan’s *Battle Cry of the Mothers* (1915), Charles W. Wood’s *King of the Magical Pump* (1914), Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), *In Our Time* (1924), Robert Lowell’s *On the Eve of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, 1942* (1943), Randall Jarrall’s *The Death of Ball Turret Gunner* (1945), Louis Simpson’s poems *Carentan O Carentan* (1949), and Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* (1961). The main factor in choosing these works is that the twentieth century was the century of great wars, and the

most anti-war literary works were written in this century. It is also important because the works are included in mainstream literature and reach many readers, thus creating a kind of public opinion and awareness. To be more specific, since the most devastating wars in world history that affected the whole world took place in the twentieth century, and this century was thought to be the most appropriate period in terms of making the works discussed clearer and more comprehensive in drawing conclusions. Examining anti-war literary works will both contribute to the spread of the value of peace studies created to the discourse of *battle* against war and will better reveal the attitude of literature, which is one of the channels that most influence people on a mass basis, against wars. It is thought that examining the twentieth century, which we left behind and which is the most destructive century in human history, from this perspective will make a post-humanist contribution to revealing the parameters in the background of war discourses in the context of American policies, increasing the value of universal peace and protecting the right to life of all living species. In addition, this is important in terms of revealing the attitude of American literature regarding the sociopolitical and sociocultural attitude of the United States against war and war in the international arena. At this point, the works examined in the research were selected independently of genres. Selected works of poems, stories, and novels will also reflect American literature in general. This projection will be reflected theoretically by making use of eco-criticism with the effect of being multi-disciplinary. It is thought that the analyses carried out with these theories will go beyond anthropocentric perspectives and provide more opportunities for the researcher to obtain more comprehensive ideas and make inferences about anti-war literature. In this context, the potential problems and limitations of the article are that only some of the mainstream anti-war works written in the twentieth century and in the United States will be examined in the research. However, it is thought that the selected works cover the twentieth century in general terms and provide data saturation for this research with their scope.

### **Analysis and Evaluation of the Texts**

The main reference in the early anti-war works of twentieth-century American literature is to the First World War. As the destructiveness of the war affected many states and civilian populations, it also affected the American state and its people. The active involvement of the USA in the second half of the war expanded the perception of the war in the country and influenced almost everyone. In this context, it would be appropriate to analyze the anti-war works selected from the mainstream American literature about the First World War with the theories of ecocriticism. While selecting the works that fall within the scope of this research and are analyzed in the context of the First World War, the American poets and writers who are the most prominent among the works containing anti-war discourse were taken into consideration based on the mainstream WWI literature review. In his article “American Literature and the First World War”, Tim Dayton mentions that although there is a general perception in world literature that America is one of

the least affected countries among the countries affected by the war, the war is not perceived in American literature at all (2016). When the war started in Europe and before America was involved in the war, American writers began to express their opinions about the war. These ranged from writers who mostly advocated a position in favor of the Allies to a group of writers who opposed the war altogether. For example, in his poem “American Neutrality” (1914), poet and playwright Percy MacKaye argues for the justification of joining the war on the side of the Allies. He stated that neutrality was the wrong attitude, saying that peace was “divine” and that the goals of Britain and Belgium were equivalent to their own (p. 8). George Sylvester Viereck is another example who proposed joining the war in favor of the Central states. In his poem “German American to His Adopted Country” (2002), he states that “the Germans fought for freedom” and that Germany defended the whole world against “colonial Russia” (p. 55). In the defense of both sides, militarism is linked to ideology and historical affinity. Within this context, the works were written both in favor and against the war.

To begin with, “Battle Cry of the Mothers” (1915), the first of these works analyzed in this research, written by Angela Morgan (1875-1957), a member of the Women’s Peace Party, speaks of the need for women to oppose the war because their children are a part of their own lives. Although its structure is based on traditional biblical resonance and the use of regular rhyme and meter, it differs from the pro-war spirit of the period by adopting a non-traditional anti-war stance. First, the anti-war attitude in Morgan’s poetry is structured on the basis of the damage caused by war to humans and their sons within the context of maternity and blood ties. There is no clear anti-war attitude towards nature or the *environment* in the poem. In the context of the destructive effects of war, Morgan condemns war by putting human beings, particularly her own born child at the front, at the center:

Bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh,  
Fruit of our age-old mother pain,  
They have caught your life in the nations’ mesh,  
They have bargained you out of their paltry gain  
And they build their hope on the shattered breast  
Of the child we sang to rest.  
On the shattered breast and the wounded cheek – (171)

However, this is not to depict heroism but the rebellion of the soldiers’ mothers at the front against the war. The main similarity in this context is that the central positioning of the soldier/warrior individual in militarist works is also clearly present in the poem. The biggest proof of this is that there is no reference to any non-human being in almost the entire poem. While “emperors”, “kings”, “governors”, “ministers”, and other silent “women” are depicted as the ones responsible for the war in each stanza, it is emphasized that it is the *innocent* soldiers and their mothers who are harmed by the interests and policies of these people. Thus, although it can be said that Angela Morgan develops a discourse against militarism, it cannot be claimed that she is able to display an eco-critical approach beyond

human rights. In addition, the “fruit” in the second line, one of the rare nature symbols in the poem, is used as a tool to symbolize the son at the front as “the fruit of our age-long mother pain” (Morgan, 1915, p. 171). Here, with the implication that the female body is a life-giving tree, it can be inferred that the child is the fruit of this tree that nourishes life. The second use of nature-related symbols in the poem is “forest brutes” in the fourth stanza. The poet expresses that the governor and ministers do not care about mothers as much as forest savages: “You have bargained our milk, you have bargained our blood, / Nor counted us more than the forest brutes” (p. 171). Through this symbol, the poet integrates *wild* life with “brutes” and devalues it by complaining that human life is not *even* as important as *wild* life in the network of interspecies power relations. Morgan’s anti-war rhetoric is characterized by the words: “mesh”, “shattered”, “wounded”, “trampled down”, “pang”, “writhe”, “numb”, “sore”, “heedless”, “cry”, “pierce”, “bleeding”, “wreck”, and “ravage”. While word choices such as “agony”, “woe”, and “throe” contribute to the negative, pessimistic, and accountable tone that mothers feel about the death of their children due to war, from a post-humanist perspective, it can be stated that militarist motifs are reproduced in the poem. Considering all these, it is clear that although the poem uses anti-war language, this is not because war policies harm all living things. It can be said that the poem, as a poem in which mothers express this anti-war sentiment with the “motive” of protecting their children, is far away from deep ecological discourses.

Apart from women’s organizations, some poets who were members of socialist trade unions also wrote anti-war poems. For example, in his poem “King of the Magical Pump” (1914), Charles W. Wood uses alliteration and other figures of speech to ridicule the war, describing its absurdity and how economic interests go hand in hand with war. The poem contains a lot of invented words and slang. It describes the relationship between the “King of the Magical Pump” and his people in an imaginary country called “the Kingdom of Chumpetty-Chump”. The poem, which can be regarded as one of the early absurdist works, seems to predate the tone and language used in the works of absurdist writers such as Samuel Beckett, Dario Fo, and Eugene Ionesco with its word choices and diction. In the aforementioned kingdom, the only labor people work on is pumping. There is no reference to nature here. People are too busy mechanically pumping for the sake of the kingdom. They loudly declare “Amen” that the work their king has given them is a divine blessing (1914, p. 77). In fact, they do so much work that an oversupply situation arises due to overproduction. The King points to “foreign aggression” (1914, p. 78) as the reason for this and declares that “the foes” must be fought. “Then in joy and in laughter, they upped and went after / To fight for their country and King; / For their pumpty old country and King” (1914, p. 78). Here it is described that the workers in the factories in the crushing wheels of capitalism are mentally paralyzed and act according to the directives of the government. The fact that war is a tool used to legitimize the economic policies of the government exemplifies how militarism has turned into an organized structuring model among the people.

In this environment, the place is the factory where production is made, and there is no place for nature or the natural. Although one cannot speak of an “ecological wisdom” in Glotfelty’s term in Wood’s poem, the cynical Marxist criticism made by Wood can be given as an example of the use of “place” as a critical category in addition to *race*, class, and gender in the ecocritical context in terms of showing the corruption of social values. In the poem, place (the Kingdom) is the dominant element that affects people. The fact that there is no metaphor in the poem that could be an example of speciesism signals that the poem can be read from a more post-humanist point of view in terms of showing that the driving forces that ensure the *development* and continuity of a total country (the Kingdom) in the state system as a whole are “ignorant people” and war, beyond showing the destruction caused by the war on human beings by putting human beings at the center. However, this does not prove that Wood has an ecocritical sensibility.

Third, Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961), the Nobel Prize-winning American writer and one of the most prolific writers to use the First World War in his works and famous for his anti-war novels and stories, writes the destructiveness of war as one of the general themes in his story *In Our Time* (1924). In the story, which consists of eighteen chapters, each of which contains a brief description of the war situation, he presents sections from various cities in Europe. In the story, which does not have a specific plot, the effects of the war are projected to the reader in different places from the front line to the street, the house to the hospital, the hotel room to the bullfighting arena. The use of nature or animals is common in the description of the chapters. In the first chapter, the colonel is seen riding his horse in a drunken state. The second chapter depicts the matadors’ fight with a bull in an arena. A boy has to “kill five bulls” and one of them is said to be “just like him” and “a good bull” (p. 6). The killing of bulls in wrestling continues to be described in chapters twelve, fourteen, and sixteen.

In the third section, animals briefly show the difficulties experienced on the road by the people who were forced to migrate during the exchange in Adrianople. Here buffaloes, cattle, and camels are the figures used to carry people’s belongings. In the sixth chapter, while describing the murder of six cabinet ministers on a rainy day, “leaves” are used to darken the tone of the chapter: “There were wet dead leaves on the paving of the courtyard” (p. 10). In the thirteenth chapter, the animal appears to the reader as the object that forms a wine bottle with its skin. Finally, in the eighteenth chapter, the reader sees the queen of Greece pruning a rose bush in the garden. In general, Hemingway’s opposition to war in this story, although he reflects the war from different regions with a universal objectivity, the work is structured through the damage caused by war to humanity. Natural life and animals are the materials of fiction as literary symbols and extras, not the main characters. In this context, animals such as camels, cattle, and horses are auxiliaries for human use, while bullfighting is a backdrop created to visualize a lament for the atrocities of war. In this respect, Hemingway shows this opposition from the perspective of humanism by focusing his anti-war attitude on human beings. Although the war is

accepted in the country as a new crusade as a fight of civilization against barbarians, as is known from Woodrow Wilson's congressional speeches, Hemingway is one of the writers who meets this crusade with skepticism.

However, the traces of Hemingway's approach to non-human beings in the eco-critical context are more clearly seen in his novels. For example, in his novel *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), which stands out as an anti-war novel in canon literature, the author's test with speciesism can be analyzed through the discourse he reflects through the use of language and symbols. The novel also contains some inspirations from the author's life. The main character Frederic Henry, like Hemingway, is a soldier working in an ambulance at the front in Northern Italy. Catherine Berkley, the nurse Frederic falls in love with, is presented as a female character who symbolizes family unity under war and peace in the face of the destructiveness of war, as in the author's other novels. The plot of the novel consists of Frederic's struggle for life with other soldiers at the front, his love for Nurse Berkley, his injury at the front, and his efforts to seek silence, love, and peace by escaping from the front with his lover to Switzerland where there is no war. Thus, the author makes an in-depth analysis of events such as desertion from the army and abandonment of the front, which can be questioned both militaristically and socially in terms of morality. The psychological damage caused by the war on the individual, the feeling of fear, guilt, and nothingness, and the fact that the soldiers are just numbers are given through the dialogues of the characters; hence, the reader is expected to take a stand against the war.

When analyzed from an eco-critical perspective, it is noticeable that the novel begins with a description of nature. The dust rising from the roads traveled by the soldiers makes the leaves of the trees white, which is the first signal that the soldiers also transform the natural environment (1929, p. 11). Although the plain is very fertile and full of fruit gardens, the mountains beyond the plain are "brown and bare" (1929, p. 11). The guns are hidden by branches of trees, the cannon carts by vines, and the ammunition is carried by mules. Thus, it is seen from the very first chapter that trees and animals are used as means of transporting war materials and protecting them from the enemy (1929, pp. 11, 42). The fact that the mountains are bare makes the reader think that all the battles are fought in the mountains. Geography and settlements are the property *captured* and damaged by the troops:

The forest of oak trees on the mountain beyond the town was gone. The forest had been green in the summer when we had come into the town but now there were the stumps and the broken trunks and the ground torn up, and one day at the end of the fall when I was out where the oak forest had been I saw a cloud coming over the mountain. It came very fast and the sun went a dull yellow and then everything was gray and the sky was covered and the cloud came on down the mountain and suddenly we were in it and it was snow. (1929, p. 13)

The priest, who represents more common sense and moral views in the novel, advises Frederic to go to Abruzzi because it is hunting season. In the destructiveness of war against humanity, animal hunting stands out as a hobby of

men, not a speciesism that should be questioned. In short, from the point of view of common sense and the moral view, the destructiveness of war can be discussed to the extent that it affects human beings. However, the discussion on what war is and its consequences is constantly questioned by the soldier characters throughout the novel:

“Tenente,” Passini said. “We understand you let us talk. Listen. There is nothing as bad as war. We in the autoambulance cannot even realize at all how bad it is. When people realize how bad it is they cannot do anything to stop it because they go crazy. There are some people who never realize. There are people who are afraid of their officers. It is with them the war is made.”  
“I know it is bad but we must finish it.”  
“It doesn’t finish. There is no finish to a war.”  
“Yes there is.” Passini shook his head. “War is not won by victory. ...” (1929, p. 50)

Similar to the poem “The King of the Magic Pump” analyzed above, the emphasis on war as a policy of violence in which the state authorities use the civilian population as a means of making money, and the despair and absurdity it creates on the individual are also evident here. The necessity of war fails to convince even the “ignorant” villagers. In addition to this, the meaninglessness of war is depicted through the nothingness it leaves on human beings. The conversations between soldiers do not include the rights of living beings other than human beings. Horses are used as frontline equipment carrying officers, as a game of chance where money is won in races and bets are placed (p. 114), or as a means of transport for traveling (p. 99); flies land on ceilings and light bulbs as motifs to depict the boredom of the space (p. 66); pigs, anchovies, trout, pheasants, quail, and monkeys are foods consumed by officers at the front and behind the front, such as salami, sausages, grilled and boiled (pp. 100, 134, 167, 220); swallows are a natural backdrop that calms the soul (p.101); larks are a hobby tool that the Italians put mirrors in the fields to attract them and thus hunt them easily (p.132); sparrows are game animals that make time pass quickly and enjoyably (p.189); dogs are companions accompanying the peasants who have to migrate due to the war (p.173); cats, swans, gulls, seagulls, cormorants, wolves, and foxes are elements that warm the atmosphere of a romantic meal or a trip to the lake and soften the narrative (pp. 243, 251, 261). Sometimes the eating of animal flesh is also used as a joke among the soldiers:

The priest shook his head. The orderly took away the stew dish. “What are you eating meat for?” Rinaldi turned to the priest. “Don’t you know it’s Friday?”  
“It’s Thursday,” the priest said.  
“It’s a lie. It’s Friday. You’re eating the body of our Lord. It’s God-meat. I know. It’s dead Austrian. That’s what you’re eating.”  
“The white meat is from officers,” I said, completing the old joke. (1929, pp. 152-153)

In this example, it can be inferred from the fact that meat is not eaten because it is associated with a sacred figure that meat can only assume a sacred identity in the

context of human flesh. A post-humanist discourse on animal rights cannot be inferred from this joke. The forest, on the other hand, takes place at the beginning of the novel as well as in the following chapters as a spoil of war that will be captured together with the mountains and thus strengthen the mechanism of power. As in the examples the main character sees forests covered with mist, steep slopes, and there are forests that are quickly captured but not razed to the ground (p. 157) or “You take one mountain, the other one takes the other” (p. 159), the mountain, forest, or plain, which constitute geographical divisions, are seen as a “sacred” property to be fought for.

Towards the end of the novel, Frederic gives the emptiness of the meaning of words such as “sacred”, “glorious”, “sacrifice”, and “in vain” through the analogy of “stinky meat” and equates these concepts with the garbage dumps in the meat slaughterhouses industrialized for human consumption.

I did not say anything. I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain. We had heard them, sometimes standing in the rain almost out of earshot, so that only the shouted words came through, and had read them, on proclamations that were slapped up by billposters over other proclamations, no for a long time, and I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it. (1929, p. 161)

The saving power of nature is shown when Frederic is saved from being shot by a willow tree in the face of this destructive and uncaring attitude of man towards nature. However, this example also supports Hemingway’s opposition to war through the human focus in an eco-critical context.

In general terms, based on all these examples, it can be seen that in Hemingway’s *Farewell to Arms*, nature is in the position of a background that is barren due to war. The role of the physical environment in the plot of the novel is either depicted as desolate, grey, and dark or evolves into a colorful, peaceful, and bright environment, reflecting the mental states of the characters. The physical environment, with its vast landscapes, mountains, and forests, is portrayed as a hell in which the soldier tries to survive and damages this environment in his haste to survive. Although the novel emphasizes that war negatively affects the individual’s perception of life and makes him nothing with its anti-war discourse, it is clear that the novel is written in a literary style far from ecological wisdom. In the novel, the soil is perceived by the characters not as an entity to be respected for its own sake, but as the basic life provider of human beings. In this respect, Hemingway does not prefer to use the place as a critical category, although he analyses war politics from a class perspective. The place (frontline-behind the frontline) has only the task of setting the scene of the novel, and it is unthinkable at this point to analyze it independently of its relationship with human beings. As a male writer, Hemingway’s use of nature in the novel is quite patriarchal and heterosexist in the context of the sexual politics of meat, from hunting to eating practices, from metaphors to jokes.

In conclusion, it cannot be said that there is a self-awareness in terms of a deep ecological perspective in anti-war works about the wars in which America was involved in the first half of the century. The works that focus on how wars affected the individual, who was put at the center by the Age of Enlightenment after the Renaissance, in the twentieth century when modernity was destroyed, are far from any criticism of environmental sensitivity, non-human living rights, and the destruction of nature. In this respect, nature, animals, forests, and vegetation are either romanticized as the backdrop of fiction or used as metaphors that help to reflect the tension of the characters, as seen in the works examined.

### **Second World War, Anti-Militarism, and Eco-Criticism**

Anti-war poems were also written in abundance during the WWII. One of the most prominent of these poems is Louis Simpson's (1923-2012) "Carentan O Carentan" (1949). As a soldier who fought in Carentan on D-Day, Simpson's description of the war is very vivid and clear. The poem describes how Carentan was transformed from a place "[w]here lovers wandered hand in hand" (Simpson) to a front line of battle (1949). There is a description of the environment throughout the poem. After the main character says that the wound, he has received is similar to the wound he received during play as a child and that his mother should not be upset, he waits for the experienced officers around him to guide him on what to do and how to behave. However, he receives no response from the colonel, the senior sergeant, or the captain. He concludes the poem by saying with the manner of an innocent child that they knew neither death nor the meaning of losing a human being before they met Carentan on a clear June day:

Carentan O Carentan  
Before we met with you  
We never yet had lost a man  
Or known what death could do. (Simpson, 1949)

When the anti-war stance of the poem is analyzed from an eco-critical perspective, it is seen that the poem positions its stance against the war through the trauma caused by the war in the individual. The depiction of the environment appears as a way of showing the destructiveness of war in an ironic way by Simpson: "Trees in the old days used to stand / And shape a shady lane" (Simpson, 1949). But now it is not the trees that make the green, but the soldiers marching in double lines. The romantic and idyllic atmosphere of the natural environment where "lovers wandered hand in hand" (Simpson) is transformed into a dark and murderous atmosphere where the blue sky is filled with the sounds of rifles and death is rampant. The use of non-human elements in the poem is used in a supporting role to indicate the tone and rhythm of the poem, as in the examples of "[t]he watchers in their leopard suits/ Waited till it was time" (Simpson, 1949). In this respect, it cannot be said that Simpson takes an approach beyond human rights. In the poem, in which the destructiveness of war is compared with the good old days, the

presence of death is real in the place of war, unlike children's games, and in this respect, the place (Carentan) is used in the context of a critical category as a place where war makes the individual nothing. In this respect, there is a similar use to Mark Twain's story analyzed above; however, in Simpson, as in Twain, a view of planetary rights beyond human rights cannot be mentioned.

However, unlike Simpson, Randall Jarrell (1914-1965) can be said to have approached post-humanism to some extent. Like Simpson, Jarrell was a soldier in the Air Force, but he did not actively fight on the front line but worked in the workshop where war equipment was made. J. A. Bryant, Jr. says of Jarrell that the poet was sensitive to the lives of all living creatures, "plant, domestic, and wild animal, man, woman, and child" and that he respected all of them individually (1945, p. 51). One of Randall Jarrell's most famous war poems is the short poem "The Death of Ball Turret Gunner" (1945). Like the other poems analyzed above, this poem is written in the first person. This may be because the poets themselves had experienced the war, or it may be an attempt to show the reality of war more vividly, smoothly, and from the inside:

From my mother's sleep I fell into the State,  
And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.  
Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,  
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.  
When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose. (Jarrell, 1945)

In general, the poem dramatizes that the individual is nothing more than statistical data and an instrument in war. The protagonist of the poem, who identifies the turret he is in with his mother's womb, falls to his death by opening his eyes to the nightmare created by "fighter" planes and ground anti-aircraft guns from inside the turret, just as he fell from his mother's womb, which was a sheltered and safe environment for him, and opened his eyes to America (Jarrell). When he dies, the parts of his body adhering to the womb-like turret in which he fought in the fetal position are cleaned with a hose and the turret is prepared for another soldier to settle inside. This can be likened to the process of removing the fetus from the womb of a woman who has had an abortion. Here, the USA, as the motherland, is in the position of a mother whose soldier's life is terminated before he reaches adulthood. In this respect, both the mother and the homeland become two similar figures who, with a sense of nothingness, surrender the individual from the place where they are safe to the dangers, brutality, and cruelty of the outside world and recklessly acquire new fetuses/soldiers in its place. From an ecofeminist point of view, the identification of the territory of the homeland with women and women's fertility results in this anti-war poem being written with a sexist approach. Since the "falling" of the baby and its separation from the mother's body, whether due to birth, miscarriage, or abortion, is constructed in similar terms to the killing of a young warrior destroyed by the enemy, it can be inferred that the poem is written from a conservative perspective in terms of gender codes. Although Bryant states

that Jarrell is not a speciesist, we cannot see his love for animals, especially cats, in his poetry. In short, although Jarrell criticizes the alienation, trauma, and chaos caused by the war in a few lines, Jarrell's opposition to war reproduces militaristic language in an ecofeminist context.

Another anti-war poem is Robert Lowell's (1917-1977) poem "On the Eve of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, 1942" (1943). Displaying a stance against the Second World War and always questioning the rationality of war, Lowell continued this stance in his poems. Using a metaphysical style and abundant allusions in the poem, Lowell ironically combines the war policies of the American government with many religious and political figures from Western human history, placing the concepts of war and peace on a universal level. Lowell states that the bloody wars, from Cain and Abel to the important fronts of the Second World War such as the city of Bizerte in Tunisia, and from German concentration camps to Buna, are a "[s]ix thousand year[-old]" savagery that destroys all divine and graceful ideals of Plato ("Shall I wring plums from Plato's bush" [393]) and crushes "Utopian mind" (393). He expresses that for centuries, under the rule of Mars - the god of war - people have kneeled at the dust raised by the heel of Mars, licking it, and that at the place where the Romans and Huns kneeled, "Freedom and Eisenhower have won / Significant laurels" were gained, indicating that the rule of Mars - the wars - has been in effect for centuries (1943, p. 393). Those who died in Buna and Bizerte now represent the blood and body of Jesus, the wine and bread. Therefore, in this environment of war and massacre, the Virgin Mary, who stands out not with her innocence but with her beauty among the soldiers, does not symbolize immaculateness but takes on the typology of a "Celestial Hoyden" (1943, p. 394). In short, Lowell says in his poem that in the civilization history shaped by reason, science, and thought that has existed for thousands of years, the wars that have always conflicted with them have continued unchanged until contemporary times. In this war, there has been no obstacle or sanction for philosophy, science, and religion.

From an eco-critical perspective, it can be assumed that the poem is a satire on humanity. In this respect, the people and policies that create wars have been destructive since the beginning of human history. Religious and philosophical figures symbolizing a pacifist spirit, such as Jesus, Plato, or Mary, have always existed and have been crushed or destroyed under the destructiveness of Mars, one of the important gods of mythology. Here, Lowell's despair and pessimistic view of future can easily be understood from the metaphor of the "plums." The "plums" symbolizing hope in Western iconography have been crushed in concentration camps and war fronts. However, in the poem, the focus is not only on the destructiveness of wars on individuals but also on the damage they cause to the environment, nature, and other living beings. The use of non-human beings in the poem is at a symbolic level and has been used to strengthen the expression of figures of speech that contain allusions and metaphysical meanings. Non-human beings such as "bloodhounds", "sheep", "plums", and "[s]nake" (393-

394) appear in the poem as iconographic references to the Catholic denomination. From this perspective, it can be said that Lowell's anti-war discourses are constructed with an approach that is far from environmental ethics.

One of the most important anti-war novels about World War II is Joseph Heller's (1923-1999) work *Catch-22* (1961). The novel, praised by Harper Lee as "the only logical war novel I've ever read" (n.d.), was also acclaimed by contemporaneous authors such as Kurt Vonnegut, Norman Mailer, and Anthony Burgess. The term "Catch-22", as defined by Christopher Buckley, refers to "a situation in which the desired outcome or solution is impossible to achieve due to a set of inherently illogical rules and conditions" (8). Coined by Heller, the term describes one of the army regulations where a soldier is considered insane if he refuses to fly in combat, but if he requests to be relieved from duty, he is deemed sane and therefore ineligible to be relieved. The term "Catch-22" became so popular throughout America that it entered the dictionary as a term used to describe absurd and impossible situations and to illustrate the pitfalls of bureaucracy. After news anchor John Chancellor was inspired by the novel's protagonist Yossarian and printed bumper stickers with the phrase "Yossarian Lives," it eventually became a slogan for the anti-war movement.

Buckley notes that at the time the novel was published, people who had experienced World War II - one of the most devastating wars in history, resulting in the deaths of sixty million people worldwide, including 400,000 in America - embraced the humor of the book as readers in despair and shock. He also mentions that during the Vietnam War, it became a tool for protest embraced by the youth, and during the Afghanistan War, it provided a breath of relief for soldiers (9). In Jonathan Eller's article "The Story of Catch-22" (1992), the novel is described as capturing the feelings of helplessness and horror created by the dark side of the American dream, and the use of sarcastic language and elements of humor by Heller is seen as a technique to make the horror of war more convincing (608). Although the novel focuses on World War II, Heller, in his essay "Closing Time" (1977), states that *Catch-22* has an ideological structure that encompasses the wars that followed World War II, and he points out that it resonates with his contemporaries in capturing the spirit of the time.

In the novel, the word "they" is presented as a symbol that creates the greatest dilemma for individuals as the elements of society, bureaucracy, and the "military mind", as described by Studs Terkel (1961) in his article "There's Always a Catch, Especially in Catch-22". This militaristic mindset causes inconsistency in traditional standards throughout society, and the way to escape this inconsistency, survive, and maintain sanity is through a "morale of refusal" to develop and avoid going insane (Terkel, 1961, p. 636). Therefore, the protagonist Yossarian is an anti-hero. Heller, while portraying the relationship between war and private initiatives, capital, and the economy in the subtext, also works through the rejection of militarism for war policies, evasion of war and military service, and survival, highlighting the fundamental conflict between the economy and idealism (Brustein, 1961, p. 637).

The absurdity of wanting to be destroyed by hundreds of thousands of people unknown to oneself is reflected as a denial of civilization. It becomes clear that Heller's comedy is an artistic response to all-encompassing evil, as if laughter is the only way to escape from a malevolent world. When examined from a militaristic perspective, it is evident that the novel is anti-militaristic. From an eco-critical perspective, although it is understood that Heller's opposition to war focuses on the destructiveness of Western civilization on the individual, there is no clear message about how the environment and nature are affected by war. In terms of eco-cultural diversity and attitudes, the absence of non-human entities in Heller's novel indicates that it is not sensitive to environmental ethics. However, it should be emphasized that the similarities examined in other novels, whether romanticizing war or anti-war, such as Hemingway's, are not present in this novel. The approach of *Catch-22* to non-human entities in power and hegemonic relations between races and species, as reflected through the language and symbols in the novel, sets it apart from others. The use of animal, plant, and tree species in the novel, whether in a real or metaphorical sense, is minimal. The mention of animal species such as cats, dogs, insects, or fish as food in the novel is quite ironic. The metaphor here is about the alienation and fear of the unfamiliar. The use of violence against animals and the fear of them is related to the fear of confronting violence and the history of violence in humans. The practices of using violence are to increase pressure on another individual whom the perpetrator sees as weaker, whether on an individual, social, or national level. Yossarian's avoidance of intervening in violence against animals, just as he avoids the military to survive, can be related to his direct avoidance of confronting fear and the history of violence in humans. Both the dog and Yossarian are helpless, and the power that harms their physical and mental integrity is the one in control. In this respect, it can be said that although Heller's novel does not have a planet-centered perspective from an eco-critical point of view, it is far from reproducing militaristic discourses and even approaches post-humanist understanding at times, subjecting the system-civilization-militarism to a comprehensive critique.

As a result, just like in works critical of the wars of the first half of the century, in the wars of the Second World War and afterward, war opposition is largely carried out by writers and poets with a humanist perspective. It would not be wrong to make a generalization that a deep ecological perspective is not seen in the canonical anti-war works of this period.

### **Conclusion**

The texts above discuss the criticism of war in literature, focusing on the alienation, emptiness, and identity crisis created by states and armed forces on individuals and human communities, rather than questioning the contribution of war literature to the formation of environmental irresponsibility in domestic or international conflicts. They also mention that war literature often portrays a narrative where human life is considered more "valuable" than other living beings,

objectifying the lives of other species for the continuation of human life or pleasure. Furthermore, these literary works underline the urgent need for anti-war literature to adopt a planet-centered perspective, rather than solely focusing on human-centric anti-war sentiments. They also highlight the connection between war, gender discrimination, and environmental destruction, indicating that war literature often draws motivation from religious and male-centered political sources. These texts also delve into the historical and geographical context of the United States, emphasizing the role of natural resources and diversity in shaping the country's political and economic power, as well as the systematic killing of non-human living beings. It discusses how war, conflicts, and international relations have influenced American history, with Protestantism playing a regulatory and dominant role in this context.

Additionally, these anti-war literature poems, stories, and novels argue that anti-war literature tends to overlook the impact of war on nature, forests, soil, or animals, and instead focuses on the psychological trauma experienced by individuals on the front lines or in the aftermath of war. They also show that anti-war literature often objectifies non-human entities, similar to how it objectifies human characters, thus drawing parallels with speciesism. In conclusion, these works assert that anti-war literature, despite its anti-war stance, often fails to adopt a deep ecological perspective and environmental ethics, and therefore, labeling it solely as anti-war literature from a human-centered perspective is misleading. Therefore, further research should explore how war is depicted in nature writing and ethnic literature, and how a post-humanist approach could bring new perspectives to war literature. I would like to conclude the article saying that anti-war literature must definitely be redefined within the context of ecocriticism by emphasizing the use of *itstory* instead of his/herstory.

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# From Resistance to Remembrance: The Panamure Elephant's Story in Symphonic Theatre

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## Abstract

This article examines the intersection of literature, art, and environmental crisis through the lens of the Environmental Humanities, focusing on Sri Lanka's 'Panamure Tusker' and its artistic representation in the symphonic theatre production, *Panamura Kunchanada*. This large-scale work commemorates the elephant's resistance to captivity in 1950, an event that catalysed the prohibition of the brutal kraal system and remains a benchmark for environmental justice and multispecies coexistence debates. The article explores how the production transforms historical memory into environmental pedagogy, critiques colonial and patriarchal exploitation of nature, and models new forms of ecological consciousness. The historical context section details centuries of elephant exploitation, intensifying under colonial rule, and highlights the immense suffering inflicted during kraaling. The Tusker's resistance and death led to widespread public outcry, ending this practice. *Panamura Kunchanada* effectively engages audiences emotionally, fostering affective ecology and democratic engagement vital for environmental action. It acts as both a memorial and a call to action, linking personal and collective responsibility, cultivating the cultural and ethical capacities needed for transformative change in the Anthropocene, and advocating for a renewed sense of responsibility toward the more-than-human.

**Keywords:** *Panamura Kunchanada*, Elephant kraal system, Human-elephant conflict, Environmental justice

## Introduction

The intersection of literature, art, and environmental crisis is a central concern of the Environmental Humanities. Artistic interventions not only reflect but also shape

our understanding of ecological relationships and the ethical dimensions of human-nonhuman interactions. In Sri Lanka, the story of the ‘*Panamure* Tusker’<sup>1</sup>—an elephant<sup>2</sup> whose resistance to captivity in 1950 catalysed the end of the brutal kraal<sup>3</sup> system<sup>4</sup>—has become a benchmark for debates about environmental justice, colonial legacies, and the future of multispecies coexistence. *Panamura Kunchanada*<sup>5,6</sup>, a large-scale symphonic theatre (Marchenko et al., 2021) production involving over 200 artists, brings this story to contemporary audiences through a fusion of musical traditions, dance, and drama. Through its commemoration of the *Panamure* elephant’s sacrifice 75 years ago, the production demonstrates how literature and art can serve as vital mechanisms for environmental memory, resistance, and advocacy. This article explores how the production transforms historical memory into environmental pedagogy, critiques colonial and patriarchal exploitation of nature, and models new forms of ecological consciousness. In doing so, it demonstrates the power of art to foster ethical reflection and inspire collective action in the face of ongoing environmental crises.

### **Historical context: elephant kraals and colonial exploitation**

#### **The kraal system**

The story of the Panamura elephant emerges from a complex historical backdrop of human-elephant relations in Sri Lanka that spans centuries of systematic exploitation and commodification of wildlife. For centuries, Sri Lanka was renowned for its wild elephants (Olivier, 1978; D’Oyly, 1938), which were captured and tamed for royal processions, labor, and export (Pieris, 1920, p. 24; Widyarathne, 2016). The kraal system—large enclosures constructed from hardwood logs and ropes—was the principal technology for capturing entire herds (Katugaha, 2008). The kraal was both a physical and psychological trap. Elephants were driven into the enclosure, starved, harassed, and weakened until they could be subdued and tamed (Gamage, 2019; Jayawardene, 2014). The suffering inflicted during kraaling was immense. Historical records and photographs (Plate, 1890; Samarapala, 2023; Katugaha, 2008) show elephants weakened and bleeding with bruises all over their bodies, their sagging skin due to poor nourishment, a testament to the exhaustion and trauma they endured (Gamage, 2019).

#### **Colonial and postcolonial dimensions**

The kraal system persisted through successive colonial regimes. European powers, particularly the Dutch and British, intensified elephant capture for economic gain, integrating it into global networks of trade and spectacle (Wijesuriya, 2016).

The operation of kraals was embedded in broader systems of human exploitation. Thousands of villagers, often unpaid, were conscripted to build and maintain the enclosures, reflecting the intersection of class, caste, and environmental violence (Tisdell & Bandara, 2005; Olivier, 1978; Jayawardene, 2014). The spectacle of the kraal

attracted colonial officials and local elites, transforming animal suffering into public entertainment and reinforcing hierarchies of power (Gamage, 2019). By the mid-twentieth century, expanding agriculture and human settlements had drastically reduced elephant habitats in Sri Lanka (WWF, 2019), intensifying human-elephant conflict<sup>7</sup> (Gunawansa et al., 2023) and leading to increased captures. The kraal at Panamure, which had operated since 1896, became the site of a dramatic turning point in 1950 (Damithah, 2012).

### **The ‘Panamure Tusker’: resistance and sacrifice**

#### **The 1950 kraal and the elephant’s defiance**

On the night of August 9, 1950, (Wijayawardena, 2021) a herd of sixteen elephants, including three calves, was driven into the *Panamure* kraal<sup>8</sup> (Widiyathne, 2016). The youngest calf was only four months old (Wijayawardena, 2021).

Eyewitnesses describe how the elephant, despite starvation and injury, launched repeated attacks on the kraal’s fences, kicking up dust and trumpeting in defiance. Her resistance was not random but strategic: she tested the enclosure, sought weak points, and attempted to protect the calves and other vulnerable members. The elephant’s actions disrupted the capture process and forced a public reckoning with the brutality of kraaling (Gamage, 2020)

Ultimately, the elephant was killed (Perera, 2016; Katugaha, 2008), an act that shocked the nation and news was reported internationally (Muthumali, 2017). The event was widely reported (Arumugam, 2023), and the image of the charging elephant became an icon of resistance. The public outcry that followed led to the prohibition of kraals in Sri Lanka<sup>9</sup> (Ever Kind, 2023), marking the end of a centuries-old practice (Katugaha, 2008). This historical context reveals that the *Panamure* elephant’s resistance occurred within a system of institutionalised ecological violence that had operated for centuries.

#### **Interspecies agency and ethical significance**

The *Panamure* elephant’s resistance has been interpreted as more than instinctual reaction; it demonstrates agency, social cognition, and even ethical reasoning. Ethological research confirms that elephants possess complex emotional lives, social structures, and the capacity for empathy and strategic action (Poole & Granli, 2021). The elephant’s defense of his herd aligns with what critical animal studies describe as “entangled empathy”<sup>10</sup> (Gruen, 2015)—a cross-species capacity for care and moral action.

The incident also exposes the contradictions of colonial and patriarchal ideologies that justified animal exploitation while recognising their intelligence and sociality. The elephant’s sacrifice became a catalyst for change, challenging the legitimacy of human domination and prompting a re-evaluation of human-animal relations in Sri Lanka.

### **Artistic representation: *Panamura Kunchanada* and environmental memory**

#### **Hybrid genre artistic fusion**

*Panamura Kunchanada* brings the story of the elephant to life through a unique blend of Western classical, North Indian, Karnataka, jazz, Sri Lankan folk, and traditional and

modern dance forms and theatrical elements, creates a polyvocal artistic form that mirrors the complexity of human-environment relationships (Gamage, 2020).

This hybrid genre<sup>11</sup> (Levinson, 1984) approach mirrors the complexity of environmental issues, requiring diverse artistic languages to capture the ecological, cultural, and political dimensions of the story. This multigenre approach<sup>12</sup> suggests that environmental narratives require diverse artistic languages to adequately represent their ecological, cultural, and political dimensions.

The production involves over 200 artists, creating a collective artistic process that parallels the communal nature of both elephant societies and the historical kraal operations. The performance is structured to move between historical narrative, ritual, and contemporary commentary, collapsing temporal boundaries and inviting audiences to reflect on the ongoing relevance of the elephant's sacrifice. Gamage explains his creative effort as:

We have become accustomed to interpreting and depicting any event. This is a fundamental characteristic of art. Numerous events throughout history illustrate this tendency. It is important to convey such experiences from one event to another. Music, as a form of expression, has the capability to communicate complex ideas effectively. The focus of this *Panamura Kunchanada* project is to highlight support within the elephant family rather than the instance of an elephant being shot (Gamage, 2014).

Confirming Gamage's argument, several books, poems, and songs have been dedicated to this subject matter, leaving artists in a state of shock<sup>13</sup>.

### **Sonic and choreographic strategies**

*Panamura Kunchanada* musical score incorporates both traditional Sri Lankan percussion and innovative sound design to evoke the infrasound frequencies used by elephants for communication (N. Gamage, personal communication, June 2, 2025). This sonic ecology<sup>14</sup> creates an embodied experience for audiences, fostering empathy and emotional engagement (Atkinson, 2007). Field recordings of wild elephants are woven into the music, preserving endangered acoustic ecologies and challenging anthropocentric definitions of art. Choreographically, dancers mimic elephant movements, social behaviors, and herd dynamics, blurring the boundaries between human and nonhuman embodiment. The "dust-kicking sequence," which reenacts the elephant's final charge, uses ritual gestures and cyclical formations to transform individual animal resistance into collective cultural memory (Meckien, 2025; Assmann, 2011, pp. 1–69).

### **Environmental pedagogy and spiritual interpretation**

The production's thematic emphasis is on balance—between forests, nature, and human civilisation. It seeks not only to memorialise the past but to educate audiences about the ethical and ecological stakes of human-animal conflict. By integrating spiritual frameworks, the performance addresses the meaning crisis underlying ecological destruction, offering audiences a sense of respect and responsibility toward the more-than-human world (Buell, 2005/2009). This collective artistic process can be understood

as creating a form of environmental solidarity that counters the individualistic frameworks often associated with both artistic creation and environmental destruction. The production thus models alternative forms of human cooperation that might inform more sustainable relationships with the natural world.

## **Ecocritical and postcolonial analysis**

### **Decolonising human-animal relations**

The story of the *Panamure* elephant and its artistic representation invites a decolonial reading of environmental history. The kraal system exemplifies how colonial regimes imposed technologies of control on both human and animal bodies, reinforcing hierarchies of race, class, and species (Wolch & Emel, 1998). The production's incorporation of folk musical forms serves to preserve local knowledge and confront the predominance of colonial narratives. From an ecocritical perspective<sup>15</sup>, *Panamura Kunchanada* functions as what Lawrence Buell (1995) might term "environmental literature" - an artistic work that demonstrates "environmental commitment" and helps audiences "envision dwelling more sensitively within the biosphere." The production meets these criteria by centering non-human agency, critiquing anthropocentric development, and proposing alternative relationships between humans and nature. The choice to commemorate an elephant's resistance rather than human triumph represents a significant departure from anthropocentric narrative traditions that typically celebrate human dominance over nature. By foregrounding animal agency and multispecies solidarity, the performance aligns with postcolonial ecocriticism<sup>16</sup> (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015), which seeks to recover suppressed histories and epistemologies.

### **Environmental justice and slow violence**

*Panamura Kunchanada* narrative exemplifies what Rob Nixon (2011) calls slow violence<sup>17</sup> the gradual, often invisible forms of environmental destruction that disproportionately affect marginalised communities. The displacement of elephants through habitat loss and the suffering inflicted by kraaling are forms of violence that accumulate over time, shaping both ecological and social futures. The opera's educational focus on environmental justice connects historical patterns of exploitation to contemporary crises, such as deforestation, climate change, and ongoing human-elephant conflict. By making visible the histories of violence and resistance, the performance contributes to the broader project of environmental justice, which seeks to address both the distribution of environmental harms and the recognition of diverse ways of knowing and being.

## **Contemporary relevance: human-elephant conflict and climate change**

### **Ongoing conflicts**

Despite the end of the kraal system, human-elephant conflict remains a pressing issue in Sri Lanka. Habitat fragmentation, agricultural expansion, and infrastructural

development continue to push elephants into closer contact with human populations, resulting in frequent and often deadly encounters (Fernando et al., 2005). According to data, each year, hundreds of elephants and dozens of humans are killed in such conflicts (Begum, 2024; WWF, 2019).

Opera situates these contemporary challenges within a longer historical trajectory, emphasising the need for coexistence and the ethical imperative to protect both human and nonhuman communities. By invoking the memory of the *Panamure* elephant, the performance frames current conflicts not as isolated incidents but as the legacy of colonial and postcolonial environmental management.

### **Climate change and multispecies vulnerability**

The story of the *Panamure* elephant also speaks to the broader context of climate change and the Anthropocene<sup>18</sup>. Elephants, as keystone species, are particularly vulnerable to environmental disruptions, and their decline has cascading effects on ecosystems (WWF, 2021). The performance's emphasis on intergenerational and interspecies care offers ethical models for responding to the uncertainties and injustices of climate change (Gamage, 2019). By foregrounding the vulnerabilities of both elephants and rural communities, the production advocates for a holistic approach to environmental policy—one that recognises the interconnectedness of social, ecological, and ethical concerns.

Throughout various periods of human civilisation, actions by humans have inflicted considerable harm on the Earth's natural beauty and disrupted its harmonious rhythms. These disruptions are often viewed as evidence of the triumphs associated with the advancement of modern human civilisation. However, the question arises: can we restore the unified rhythm of nature that has been damaged and destroyed by our own activities? The *Panamura* opera emerges as a musical endeavor aimed at conveying the message of rediscovering this universal harmony to contemporary society, which has disturbed the balance between forests, nature, and human culture. It is our aspiration to disseminate this musical concept and its underlying message not only within Sri Lanka but also globally (Gamage, 2019).

### **Art, affection, and environmental advocacy**

#### **Emotional engagement and affective ecology**

One of the most significant contributions of *Panamura Kunchanada* is its capacity to engage audiences emotionally. Performance employs what ecopedagogy<sup>19</sup> theorists call affective ecology<sup>20</sup>, the use of art to foster empathy, grief, and hope in response to environmental loss (Barbiero, 2014). The production highlights the issues faced by elephants and their resistance, aiming to address the public's often detached response to environmental crises. The affective power of the performance is not merely emotional; it is mobilising. Audiences are invited to move beyond passive spectatorship and to consider their own roles in shaping ecological futures. The production thus functions as both a memorial and call to action, linking personal and collective responsibility.

### **Participatory learning and environmental democracy**

The collective nature of the production—its reliance on large ensembles, community participation, and public performance—models a form of democratic engagement necessary for environmental action. By creating spaces for dialogue, reflection, and shared experience, the performance fosters what environmental philosophers call ecological citizenship<sup>21</sup> (Reid et al., 2002). This participatory approach challenges the individualism of much environmental discourse, emphasising instead the need for collective action and solidarity across species and social boundaries.

### **Conclusion**

*Panamura Kunchanada* exemplifies the potential of art and literature to intervene in environmental crises by preserving memory, fostering empathy, and inspiring ethical reflection. By revisiting the story of the *Panamure* elephant, the production not only memorialises a pivotal moment in Sri Lankan history but also offers new models for understanding and addressing the challenges of the Anthropocene. Through its hybrid genre, multispecies, and multivocal approach, the performance challenges dominant narratives of human exceptionalism and invites audiences to imagine more just and sustainable futures. As climate change and biodiversity loss intensify, such artistic interventions are not merely supplementary to scientific and policy efforts; they are essential for cultivating the cultural and ethical capacities needed for transformative change. The legacy of the *Panamure* elephant—preserved and reimagined through contemporary performance—reminds us that environmental justice requires both remembrance and resistance, both mourning and hope. In honoring the sacrifice of the elephant, *Panamura Kunchanada* calls us to a renewed sense of responsibility toward the more-than-human.

### **Notes**

- 1 This animal, named the elephant king of *Panamure*, was an extraordinary elephant. About 9 feet tall and 25 years old, this female elephant was taller than all the other elephants in the stable (Ever Kind, 2023).
- 2 Despite being widely referred to as the “*Panamure* Tusker” in popular culture and some media reports, the elephant was not actually a tusker. This is a significant historical inaccuracy that has persisted in the popular narrative surrounding the event (Katugaha, 2008; M. Vidyapathy, personal communication, June 8, 2025; Muthumali, 2017). There is a misconception regarding the *Panamure* elephant’s gender; it is a female elephant (cow), not a male (K. Wijayawardena, personal communication, June 8, 2025; Roar, 2016)
- 3 Kraal is a Dutch Word signifying Enclosure for Cattle. The Sinhala Name is Gala, or as it is more commonly called Athgala, Elephant Penn or Enclosure (Pieris, 1920, p. 261)
- 4 The term Kraal refers to a method used historically for capturing wild elephants. It involves constructing a stockade, typically made of sturdy jungle timber, and designed in a triangular shape with a wide opening that narrows into a funnel-shaped passage. Within the stockade are timber enclosures, large enough to contain a group of elephants

driven into the structure. Once inside, the elephants are restrained, tamed, and trained. This method was first introduced by the Portuguese and later adopted by the Dutch and British in South Asia, particularly in South India and parts of Sri Lanka (Widyarathne, 2016). *Kraals* were utilised extensively for elephant captures, often leading to their exportation. Locations like *Labugama*, *Kurunegala*, and *Sabaragamuwa* in Sri Lanka were known for conducting such operations (Katugaha, 2008; D'Oyly, 1938).

- 5 *Panamura Kunchanada* symphonic theatre was first performed on May 30 and 31, 2014 at the Nelum Pokuna Theatre in Sri Lanka (Gamage, 2019).
- 6 *Panamura Kunchanada*, rooted in Sri Lankan cultural heritage, encapsulates a narrative interwoven with the country's musical traditions. This piece reflects on humanity's relationship with nature, addressing both the lamentable consequences of modernisation and the enduring hope for balance between wilderness and human culture. Musician Navarathna Gamage and the creative team aim to present this universal tragedy as a contemporary message, resonating across temporal and spatial boundaries, urging reflection on humanity's evolution and aspirations (Gamage, 2019).
- 7 Human-elephant conflict in Sri Lanka represents a critical conservation, socio-economic, and environmental challenge. As human and elephant populations grow rapidly, both face increasing difficulties in sharing limited land resources (Gunawansa et al., 2023).
- 8 *Panamure* kraals were held in 12 times, in 1896, 1898, 1902, 1907, 1912, 1914, 1918, 1922, 1924, 1929, 1944 and the last in 1950. This land was part of the 99,000-acre virgin forest belonging to Francis Molamure and was built around a natural water spring (Weerasooriya, 2014; Damithah, 2012).
- 9 The killing of the elephant spread to Parliament and was taken up by the left-wing MP, Dr N M Perera, who was the Leader of the Opposition. Within five Parliamentary meetings, a total ban was passed on the capture and killing of elephants and the holding of elephant kraals (Arumugam, 2023).
- 10 The Empathetic Elephant is the collaborative connector. You have exceptional emotional intelligence. Thanks to your ability to understand others on a deeply emotional level, you're able to forge strong connections (Gruen, 2015).
- 11 The term "hybrid genre" is used to describe works of art, music, and literature that combine elements of two or more genres. These works are sometimes called mixed genres, cross-genres, or multi-genres (Levinson, 1984; Salao, 2022).
- 12 Multigeneric Approaches involve blending diverse artistic and non-artistic disciplines. These concepts are deeply intertwined, as the complexity of ecology often demands that artists transcend traditional genre boundaries, employing hybrid forms like installation, performance, social practice, scientific collaboration, data visualisation, and activism to effectively explore, critique, and intervene in ecological relationships (Hanauer, 2003).
- 13 The famous poets and Lyricists like Chandraratna Manawasinghe, Ananda Rajakaruna and Sugathapala Malalasekara, composed lyrics and songs on this animal. Some of them appear as 'Elephant Hero of Panamure', 'Motherly love in elephant kraal' and 'Majestic elephant of Panamure' (Gamage, 2019).
- 14 Sonic ecology addresses urgent issues like human-elephant conflict, focusing on sound, space, and life (Atkinson, 2007; Katrice, 2015).
- 15 The ecocritical perspective in art moves beyond formal aesthetics to ask urgent questions about art's role in our ecological crisis and its potential for fostering ecological understanding, empathy, and change (Buell, 1995, pp. 83–114; Fromm & Glotfelty, 1996; Demos, 2017).

- 16 Postcolonial ecocriticism bridges the gap between environmental concerns and social justice, urging people to rethink our relationships with nature in the context of colonial histories and ongoing global inequities (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015).
- 17 Slow violence is often overlooked due to its lack of immediacy and spectacle, yet it is vital for environmental justice and equitable treatment, particularly for communities impacted by environmental degradation (Nixon, 2011).
- 18 The escalating tensions and interactions between humans and wildlife, driven by habitat destruction, climate change, and resource competition, reflecting the broader ecological disruptions and human dominance characteristic of the Anthropocene epoch (Lewis & Maslin, 2015).
- 19 Eco-pedagogy bridges education and environmental action, aiming to cultivate a generation of informed, proactive stewards of the planet (Gadotti, 2008).
- 20 Affective Ecology examines our connection with Nature through an interdisciplinary lens, based on biophilia and multiple intelligences theories. Biophilia is our innate ability to form healthy relationships with Nature, while naturalist intelligence is the skill to recognise, care for, and interact with living organisms. These concepts guide environmental education by emphasising mental energy and inborn potential to connect and empathise with Nature (Barbiero, 2014).
- 21 Ecological citizenship is an evolving practice which emphasises shared responsibility towards ecological sustainability and social equity.

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# Rethinking Nature, Solitude, and Entanglement: Agential Realism in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*

*Narinder K. Sharma*

## Abstract

Literary and cultural studies are now undergoing a shift in their approach when it comes to depicting nature, known as the new material turn. As a result, there has been a significant increase in the development of a detailed understanding of the connection between humans and non-humans, as well as the physicality and influence of the natural environment, concerning interdisciplinary scholarly interpretations of literary texts. Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) deals with the subtle intricacies of human emotions, interpersonal connections, and the natural world. This paper uses Karen Barad's agential realism to analyse the interrelationship and connecting patterns of 'intra-action' between individuals and their environment in the novel. Accordingly, this article explores the novel within this specific framework and investigates the complex paths taken by the characters, their environment, and the actions that shape their lives. Referencing the interconnected production of substance and meaning, this paper enriches the novel's exploration of memory, identity, alienation, relationships, and social injustice on the axis of concepts, viz., solitude, entanglement, intra-action, intra-active becoming, agential cuts, etc.

**Keywords:** Existence, Agential Realism, Intra-action, Agential Cuts, Entanglement, Solitude.

Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) deals with the subtle intricacies of human emotions, interpersonal connections, and the natural world. Desai's worldview predominantly paints the tragedy of human souls trapped in the pangs of existence. Thus, her emphasis on the intangible realities of life, the innermost

depths of the human psyche, the demystification of the chaotic underworld of the human mind, the dilemma of making a choice, and an individual's quest for a personal meaning in life gives her a distinct position in Indian English fiction. Interestingly, she deals with these issues by utilising innovative symbols, images, metonymic parallelisms, metaphoric condensations, ironic reversals, flashbacks, the method of objective correlative, and the stream of consciousness technique. Augmenting such ethos, *Fire on the Mountain* "presents a kind of emotional wasteland in which hardly anything happy or good takes place; in a rocky background where the landscape is barren, bare, and dismal with dust storms rising and complicating movements and helping the forest fires coupled with ominous howlings of jackals, sounds of cicadas, and strange, eerie, melancholy songs of the crickets that do not cease" (Tripathi, 1986, p. 83). It is in this larger context that this paper uses Karen Barad's agential realism to analyse the interrelationship and connecting patterns of 'intra-action' between individuals and their environment in the novel. Barad's paradigm effectively combines ideas from quantum physics with feminist theory, demonstrating how their interconnections influence both substance and meaning. Barad's idea of an intertwined performativity goes beyond an ordinary perception of reality, prompting a radical reconfiguration of the conceptual framework around the categories of environment and reality. Accordingly, this article explores the novel within this specific framework and investigates the complex paths taken by the characters, their environment, and the actions that shape their lives.

### **Introducing Barad's Agential Realism**

This framework mandates the decentering of humans because socio-material discourses shape reality. It is evident "through quantum experiments like the double-slit experiment, which tell us that the measurement of a particle fundamentally changes the nature of the particle (Barad, 2007, p. 97). The focus is on the natural world and how people participate in "flows, interchanges, and interrelations between human corporeality and the more-than-human world" (Alaimo, 2010, p. 142). In this sense, the characters in this novel represent humanity as "coextensive with the material world" (Barad, 2007, p. 172), subverting the boundaries between human identity and nature. By doing this, they showcase the potential for an alternative, less human-centered interaction with the broader universe. Thus, a performative and relational understanding of existence forms the foundation of agential realism. Crucially, it does not begin with resolvable distinctions like structure/agency, mind/body, nature/culture, and world/representations. Rather, the process begins with fundamental connectivity, or entanglement. Barad opines that realism "is not about representations of independent reality but about the real consequences, interventions, creative possibilities, and responsibilities of intra-acting within and as part of the world" (2007, p. 37). Thus, it emphasises the importance of "performative alternatives to representationalism, shifting attention from the correspondence between descriptions and reality to the *practical aspects*

*of actions and behaviours*” (Barad, 2007, p. 28, emphasis added). This conceptualization depicts the world as it appears and scrutinises the dynamic and ever-changing potentialities of material reality as it shapes itself through continuous *intra-actions*.

The agential corollary of matter does not reside in its inherent qualities but rather in its ongoing process of transformation. As a result, this procedure is a reference to Barad’s concept of ‘intra-actions,’ which foregrounds the division between our concept of entities and Barad’s concept of agencies. Notably, the notion “of intra-action recognises that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action” (Barad 33). In other words, this term “signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies” (Barad, 2007, p. 33). Therefore, entanglement, as conceptualised by Barad, does not imply the merging of separate entities with the possibility of future separation. Instead, “entangled agencies constitute a complex embeddedness in each other, and their mutual intra-action produces their existence as distinct agencies” (Fourquaran, 2022). It is through this process that agencies become meaningful to one another, and their qualities and characteristics are always evolving and transforming. Barad opines that each intra-action widens the scope of potential outcome changes and produces opportunities for other interactions. Interestingly, these intra-actions simultaneously limit and expand the potential for the process of perceptual signification.

In more detail, this framework is an “ethico-onto-epistemology that recognises the interconnectedness of ethics, knowledge, and existence” (Barad, 2007, p. 185), as the author adds ethical responsibility to agential realism. In this sense, the lack of a “strict or fixed boundary line dividing a scientific laboratory from the rest of the world [implies] humans can never observe the universe as though from outside of it” (Gamble et al., 2019, p. 122–123). This is how the ethical dimension of agential realism stands out. In other words, Barad’s approach situates humanity in a wider global context and acknowledges the mutual influence between humans and the nonhuman world. This perspective also calls for a fresh understanding of the concepts of responsibility and accountability. It clearly foregrounds the idea that it is difficult to fully separate or differentiate human and nonhuman forces because their ongoing intra-actions become intertwined. Hence, humans are constantly evolving, interconnected agents and are actively entangled with environmental potentialities. The preceding discussion highlights that agential realism is a conceptual framework that subverts the ideas of separation between human and non-human entities, along with the dichotomy of subjects and objects. As a result, it defies the binary opposition of nature and culture, object and subject, and substance and meaning to provide a more holistic account of reality.

### ***Entangled Solitude: Characters and their Environments***

The atmosphere of Kasauli, an Indian hill station, has a significant influence on the lives and experiences of the individuals depicted in Desai’s *Fire on the Mountain*. Augmenting agential realism, Nanda Kaul’s relationship with the world

is not only superficial or accidental but rather represents a deep and complex interconnectedness. Nanda, the widowed wife of a vice chancellor, lives in a remote ivory tower on a hill station, far from the crowds that are swarming around her. Her self-cultivated desperation to retain her *seclusion* and aversion to any intrusion is a result of her existentialist choice, which she defines as her longing for peace. This desire is a manifestation of a counter-reaction to her prior existence in the world, which consisted of ordinary participation in mundane worldly affairs. Jain opines, “all her life, the claims have been far too many submitted to the requirements of her husband’s status and his wishes” (30), and her “seclusion is a kind of protective shell” (Rani, 2002, p. 129). In other words, her departure demonstrates a defiant attitude against the absurdity, boredom, and aggravation that she experienced in her earlier life, which was monotonous and regular. Notably, she has the option of either submitting to the follies in a subdued manner or beginning a struggle against them and continuing her existence. She decides to live by herself in a universe based on her imagination. Nanda Kaul is projected as a character with all the problems, the agonies, the insecurities, and the indifferences of modern life. This is how the novel highlights the “...contrasted conditions of human consciousness pitted against an apathetic social reality and the quest for the realisation of ideal harmony” (Shahane, 2008, p. 121).

After her husband’s death, Nanda chooses to spend her remaining days at a lonely house on a hill station in Carignano for “stillness and calm” (Desai, 1977, p. 17). Carignano “...embodies the spirit of the place, which is absorbed by its occupants, whose expanding horizons of consciousness seem to share in the linkage of the house with the processes of ageing, barrenness, loneliness, decay, and death” (Shahane, 2008, p. 121). Further, the symbolic house at Carignano also “stands as a knoll, a meeting place for the three protagonists [Nanda, Raka, and Ila Das]” (Chakranarayan, 2000, p. 95). At this juncture, Nanda is self-assured that “everything she wanted was here... on the ridge of the mountain in the quiet house” (Desai, 1977, p. 3). In this sense, the act of creating a cocoon in the form of her new house at Carignano is a retreat, and it underscores her attempt to escape her facticity. Sharma opines, “her withdrawal stands for an emotional stativity, a kind of psychic frigidity, that refuses to take note of any movement around” (1981, p. 119). She wishes to be like “a charred tree trunk in the forest, a broken pillar of marble in a desert, a lizard on a stone wall” (Desai, 1977, p. 23). Importantly, she does not want to have any sort of disturbance in her static, unquestioning world. She prefers to maintain a protective shell of detachment. Desai aptly evokes the image of the garden of her new home to delineate Nanda’s existential predicament:

Like her, the garden seemed to have arrived, simply by a process of age, withering away and elimination at a state of elegant perfection. It was made up of very few elements, but they were as exact and germane as the strokes in a Japanese scroll. She no longer wished to add to them than she wished to add to her own pared-back, reduced, and radiantly simple life. (1977, p. 3)

Referencing agential realism, the way in which Nanda Kaul interacts with her home, Carignano, is a perfect illustration of the intimate connection that exists between personality and setting. Carignano, with its rustic splendour that is deteriorating with time, is a reflection of Nanda's inner situation. Nanda performs this connection both literally and discursively, making it more than a mere metaphor. Not only does the home, with its squeaking floorboards and overgrown yard, represent Nanda's sense of isolation, but it also actively contributes to her pursuit of solitude. Nanda's meticulous cultivation of her garden is a tangible and communicative activity that reflects her need for authority and organisation. This connection is reciprocal; the garden, which is inherently resistant to total domestication, serves as a metaphor for the aspects of her past and emotions that she lacks the ability to regulate. The conversations taking place inside Nanda's Carignano environment contribute to our understanding of the interconnectedness between her identity and emotional state. The house, a physical object that acts as a central point for Nanda's recollections and sentiments, has a substantial influence on both her identity and her comprehension of solitude.

The introduction of Raka, who is Nanda's great-granddaughter, marks the beginning of a fresh set of intra-actions that deepen the connections between the characters and their surroundings. Interestingly, Raka is herself "insecure and lonely, and yet she wishes to be left to herself" (Sengupta, 2006, p. 151), and she is "perhaps the most complicated and mysterious child character in the entire gamut of Indian fiction in English" (Chary, 2008, p. 88). Raka is enthralled by the wild and uncontrolled beauty of Kasauli. In stark contrast to Nanda's regimented way of life, she visits the hills on a regular basis and has a profound connection to the wild environments she encounters. Not only this, she also prefers to "stand apart from being loved, cared for, and made the centre of attention" (Desai, 1977, p. 79-80). Raka's acts are materially discursive; her trips and her obsessive concentration on the catastrophic mountain fire are evidence of her proactive capacity to deal with difficulties and stressful circumstances. The fact that Raka prefers the wild and has a propensity to flee into nature is a reflection of her desire to absorb the traumas she has experienced in the past. In terms of her emotional and psychological growth, her relationship with the world is not only a background but rather an active participant. Throughout the novel, the fire itself emerges as a crucial agential force. Symbolising Raka's inner turmoil and need for change, it acts as a depiction of both destruction and rebirth. The tangible embodiment of the fire, together with its influence on the environment and the lives of the characters, symbolises the close connection that exists between natural events and the emotions and experiences of individuals. It is worth extrapolating that the fire acts as a catalyst for change, bringing about modifications in the interpersonal connections of the characters and the individuals themselves. In light of the fact that the fire occurred and the following conversation that followed, it is clear that natural calamities have the potential to foster personal development and the establishment of new social bonds. Both natural catastrophes and those caused by humans have a

significant influence on society and the environment, which demonstrates the interconnection of these two aspects of life. In other words, the fire performs the role of a material-discursive actor, hence having an impact on the identities and experiences of the characters in the story.

Ila Das, a longtime friend of Nanda's, adds a social dimension to the narrative, signifying a vital intra-action node in the novel. On a critical note, her predicament is a painful reminder of the larger social and political background that has an impact on the lives of individuals. The sad events (rape and murder) that befell her and the harsh treatment that she underwent signify the material-discursive practices of gender, class, and violence that are prominent in the socio-cultural realms. Both the circumstances that transpired in Ila's life and the end that she reached highlight the interweaving of individual lives with larger socio-cultural influences. It is through her fight against social inequalities and her terrible death that the tangible repercussions of discursive practices that are related to gender and class hierarchy are brought to light. Ila's predicament dives into the unpleasant truths of societal inequity and demonstrates how these forces present themselves through particular behaviours within the real world. It is through Ila's *intra-actions* with both her environment and society that we get insight into the complex link that exists between personal reality and social reality.

Barad's framework also emphasises the connection and co-constitutiveness of material and discursive acts. These behaviours are skillfully embedded in the narrative and are evident through the interactions that the characters have with their surroundings and with one another. A close connection exists between Nanda Kaul's memories and the physicality of Carignano. Interestingly, these memories are not only abstract recollections. This is how the protagonist traverses between the distant past and the present, emphasising the performative conduct of memory and the continuing production of reality. It is the actual space of the home, with its concrete reminders of the past, that brings her memories into the present, highlighting "the limitation of female space to a small circle inside the house marked with confinement, anonymity, and exclusion" (Janic, 2008, p. 130). In order to illustrate how memory is a material-discursive process from Nanda's point of view, the objects that serve as physical anchors for her memories include old photographs, letters, and pieces of furniture. For instance, a specific piece of furniture or a specific location within the home can trigger memories, thereby bringing the past into the present in a tangible way. Participating in activities that include her relationships with the specific objects and places that are being scrutinised is something that Nanda does throughout the process of perpetually rewriting her identity and her perception of her history. In this sense, Nanda's solitude is not a plain state of being; rather, it is a condition that comes into being through her interactions with the environment and the people in her near proximity—a discursively generated state. Not only does she engage in behaviours that contribute to her need for isolation, but she also withdraws from her social life and retreats to Carignano, both of which are factors that contribute to her need for

solitude. Her day-to-day activities of maintaining the home and garden materialise this discursive construction, enacting her self-sufficiency. Carignano's physical isolation and Nanda's active attempts to separate herself from other people are examples of material-discursive practices that foster her sense of isolation and maintain it. Not only does she participate in these behaviours, but they are also closely linked to her identity and self-perception. This is how the process of self-construction is always changing and evolving for the protagonist.

The narrative also effectively brings to light the complex interplay between society and nature through the portrayal of the characters' engagements with their surroundings, obscuring the differentiation between the two. Raka's exploration of the hills and her engagement with the natural surroundings present a formidable obstacle to traditional notions of infancy and femininity, describing the intertwining and interdependence of nature and culture. Raka's practices, which include her affection for the outdoors and her rejection of the home sphere, are examples of behaviours that contradict the norms of the culture. An analogous transformation occurs as the fire that raged upon the mountain, an organic phenomenon, transforms into a significant cultural symbol throughout the narrative. It emphasises the inseparability of cultural and natural elements in the process of generating human experiences through the reflection of the emotional states and social situations of the characters.

Here, it is important to refer to Barad's concept of *agential cuts*, which elucidates how specific behaviours establish boundaries. These cuts are clear examples of how the characters in *Fire on the Mountain* identify themselves and interact with one another. By using agential cuts, Nanda can define who she is, isolating herself from her family and her history. This is how she engages in boundary-making techniques, such as the retreat to Carignano, to distinguish her current self from her previous roles as a mother and wife. However, her interactions with Raka, Ila Das, and other individuals within her own group constantly re-negotiate these limits. Nanda engages in behaviours that continually alter her limits as she interacts with her surroundings and other people. Ila Das's recollections and Raka's presence make it hard for her to be alone, showing that setting boundaries is a tricky phenomenon. Extrapolating further, these cuts are flexible, dependent divisions that alter with activities and exchanges. Raka's encounters with the natural world are also a representation of her own agential cuts, which are the sites where she comes to terms with her identity and limits. She participates in boundary conversations that call into question the conventional conceptions of childhood and the standard perspectives on gender. Her predisposition towards isolation and her interaction with nature help her define and set limits. These efforts, which are not only resistance, are integral to her identity formation and worldview. Not only this, Ila's life and death also highlight the social limits that are defined by the practices of material discourse. Her struggle against social injustices, along with her tragic end, illuminates the harsh realities of these limitations. However, these limits are not merely social constructions; they also have tangible consequences

that impact the lives and experiences of individuals. This is how her predicament represents the material-discursive nature of social institutions and the profound impact that such frameworks exert on individuals' existence, signifying the interdependence of individual and communal identities. Barad's idea of *intra-active becoming* also deals with how agencies evolve through intra-actions. Accordingly, both Nanda and Raka evolve as a result of their relationships. As she learns more about her great-granddaughter's experiences and needs, Nanda's aversion to Raka changes. Raka's lifelong encounters with Nanda and her environment shape her identitarian responses. This is how every character actively develops their identities through encounters, leading to reciprocal development and change. Raka's presence makes Nanda reassess her limits and self-perception, making her reexamine her seclusion. Thus, Raka's encounters with Nanda and the environment change her identity and worldview.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, Barad's framework informs a clearer understanding of the complex interconnections among the characters, their surroundings, and the socio-cultural realms that influence their perception of the world. By highlighting the interconnected production of substance and meaning, this approach enriches the novel's exploration of memory, identity, alienation, relationships, and social injustice on the axis of concepts, viz., solitude, entanglement, intra-action, intra-active becoming, agential cuts, etc. When seen through the lens of agential realism, *Fire on the Mountain* unveils itself as a deep narrative about a person's continuous metamorphosis of human and non-human, cultural and environmental, self, and other-related categories.

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# Exploring Climate and Water Injustice in Kaiser Haq's "The New Frontier": An Ecocritical and Hydrocritical Analysis

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## Abstract

Leading Bangladeshi English-language poet Kaiser Hamidul Haq, popularly known as Kaiser Haq, is famed for his postcolonial and cosmopolitan poems grounded in the culture and nature of Bangladesh. Using an idiosyncratic diction manifesting intellectualism, scholarship and humor, his poetry arouses thoughts, evokes memories, and provokes action. For example, his seminal poem "Ode on the Lungi—which critiques colonialism, neocolonialism and neoliberalism, celebrates national and local culture, and posits a decolonial/postcolonial praxis—has also motivated what is termed as "Lungi activism." The title poem of his latest book of prose and verse titled *The New Frontier & Other Odds and Ends in Verse and Prose* presents the climate change issues unfolding in the ongoing Anthropocene era. Due to global warming, the world is confronted with rapid melting of the polar and mountain ice deposits. This causes a steady increase in the seawater level, inundating the low-lying regions of the Global South including Bangladesh, Maldives, Indonesia, Caribbean islands, Micronesian and Polynesian countries, and parts of India. The continuous climate injustice exacerbates the already precarious situation as the melting Arctic unfolds as a new frontier for the global powers. Applying insights from different critical theories, mainly ecocriticism and hydrocriticism, and employing textual analysis of "The New Frontier," the title poem of the volume *The New Frontier & Other Odds and Ends in Verse and Prose*, this qualitative paper will endeavor to critique climate injustice and globalized capitalism, and explore the eco-pedagogical potential of the long poem.

**Keywords:** Environment, Climate Justice, Hydropolitics, Global South, Anthropocene, Capitalism

## Introduction

Prominent Bangladeshi English-language poet Kaiser Haq's *The New Frontier & Other Odds and Ends in Verse and Prose* (*The New Frontier*, henceforth) is "about the poet, his poetic predilections, and situatedness at this time of human existence" and it "articulates his present-day concerns in new and striking poetic measures" (Alam, 2024, para. 1). As "a collection of poems dedicated to the gradual, G8-organised demise of our planet" (Almond, 2024, p. 142), the volume seeks to open a new frontier of climate discourse in Bangladeshi as well as South Asian anglophone poetry. A poet reputed for his postcolonial and cosmopolitan poetry rooted to the culture and nature of Bangladesh, Haq cannot ignore one of the great challenges his motherland faces, namely the climate crisis. Ranging from the ordinary, daily tidbits to the transnational and the global issues, his poetry encapsulates the resonances of our contemporary times. Likewise, his recently released book of prose and verse titled *The New Frontier* bears his poetic trademarks and promises to open a window into a new territory: anthropogenic climate change and its consequences. In fact, the title of the volume "stems from a guiding interest in the "Emerging Arctic" [whose] receding ice caps are beginning to unveil – and the depressing variety of neo-colonial strategies the world's leading powers are employing to appropriate them" (Almond, 2024, p. 141). The Arctic, a subject-matter of the title poem, has been exposed to global warming for a long time now. As Hirsch says, "Since the late 1970s, warmer temperatures have caused the Arctic's perennial sea ice to shrink dramatically. Satellite images show the ice's decline. In 2012 the sea ice shrank to the smallest size ever recorded, just half the size it had been thirty years earlier" (2017, pp. 10-11). This book, especially the title poem, therefore, endeavors to navigate the crucial issue of climate change that underpins the transformation of the Arctic region against the backdrop of the ongoing Anthropocene.

Because of global warming caused and triggered mainly by different kinds of greenhouse gases entering the atmosphere from carbon-intensive industries, the world is encountering a wide variety of negative consequences manifested in terms of rapid melting of the polar and mountain ice sheets. This ultimately leads to an uptick in the seawater level inundating— or about to engulf— a vast swath of coastal and low-lying regions of the Global South, which includes Bangladesh and other South Asian nations, African countries, South Pacific and Caribbean islands. The dangerously evolving and increasingly uncontrollable climate change situations are, allegedly, historically caused by the industrially developed Global North and joined recently by some emerging nations looking towards economic potentials and obtaining geopolitical advantage. Despite their historical contribution in the ongoing climate catastrophe, the governments of the industrially advanced countries tend to overlook the interests of the Global Southern nations, who have insignificant contribution to global warming. The continuous climate injustice towards poorer nations with insignificant carbon emissions records has taken a new dimension as the melting Arctic unfolds as a new frontier, a new horizon for the global powers to explore and exploit. Increasing competition and rivalry between the mutually hostile

global geopolitical powers seem to be existentially threatening for the global subalterns, many of whom live in the Global North. Kaiser Haq brings forth this geopolitical development underscored by exploitation and injustice in a bid to register his frustration and protest. Characterized by pragmatism, pessimism, and a sense of ecological insecurity, a long poem titled “The New Frontier” and a prose piece in the volume expose the potentially dangerous battlefield, a deadly frontier, that is the Arctic. Applying insights from different critical theories, mainly ecocriticism, and hydrocriticism, and employing textual analysis of “The New Frontier”, this qualitative paper will endeavor to critique climate/water injustice and globalized capitalism. It will also seek to explore the eco-pedagogical possibilities of the poem in bringing forth the often-overlooked climate/environmental crises affecting the Global South. It must be noted that the paper does not intend to generate any bias against and negativity towards the people in the Global North. Rather, it tries to hold responsible the policies and actions taken by the powers that be— both in governments and corporate organizations—with significant impact on climate change as it is expressed in Kaiser Haq’s poem “The New Frontier”. I must add that as a Bangladeshi citizen living in one of the most climate change-affected Global South countries, I find myself motivated to speak on behalf of the Global South as I analyze the text, which itself addresses the concerns of the Global South people.

### **Theoretical Frameworks: Ecocriticism & Hydrocriticism**

“The New Frontier” qualifies as an environmental narrative, which “broadly defined, includes any type of narrative in any media that foregrounds ecological issues and human–nature relationships, often but not always with the openly stated intention of bringing about social change” (Weik von Mossner, 2017, p. 3). As “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty, 1996, p. xviii), ecocriticism is well poised to interpret and analyze the poem, which is underpinned by the notion of planet Earth in crises. Of all three waves of ecocriticism, the third phase resonates with the concerns put forward by “The New Frontier”. As we know, the “third wave” of ecocriticism stresses the need for a global understanding of ecocritical practice through issues like global warming and it melds elements from the first and second waves, aiming to go beyond Anglo-American ambit and “press for more cosmopolitan ways of understanding the work of ecodiscourse” and “include, in principle, any text whatsoever” (Buell, 2005, p. 27). In fact, the poem being studied encompasses an issue with a planetary reach, that is climate change. The consequences and manifestations of climate change are unevenly distributed between the Global North and Global South, and the latter stands as the worst sufferer. Kaiser Haq’s poem focuses particularly on the Global South, especially his motherland Bangladesh—a Global Southern nation.

In discussing “The New Frontier”, the term “planetary environmentalism,” coined by Rakibul Hasan Khan, can be pertinent. Planetary environmentalism can be defined as a kind of environmentalism, which addresses “the planetary crisis caused by climate change, demanding environmental justice both for humans and nonhumans

across the planet. It extends beyond any geographical boundary or border created by humans, as the concept of a border loses its meaning when the whole planet is threatened by climate change” (Khan, 2024, p. 2). Planetary environmentalism, rather than local or regional environmentalism, is significant here because issues like climate change transcend national borders, even species borders as they manifest. Climate change and global warming encompass the whole planet and disregard even the Global North-Global South kind of dichotomy. Given the planetary reach of the climatic events, planetary environmentalism can be harnessed to advocate environmental as well as multispecies justice. Now, it is pivotal to understand what climate change is and how it operates behind many of the present crises the world is confronted with. According to the 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (or UNFCCC), “‘Climate change’ means a change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods” (1992, p. 7). Climate change, as we experience it, is basically if not wholly a consequence of human actions. The contemporary era is called, among other things, the Anthropocene. This era signifies the emergence of humankind as “a geological force” (Chakrabarty, 2021, p. 7). In a paper titled ‘The New World of the Anthropocene’, Zalasiewicz et al. (2010, p. 2231), states that “the Anthropocene represents a new phrase in the history of both humankind and of the Earth, when natural forces and human forces become intertwined, so that the fate of one determines the fate of the other. Geologically, this is a remarkable episode in the history of this planet”. Thanks to industrialization, urbanization, colonial exploitation, and other unsustainable human activities underpinning the Anthropocene, climate change has been accelerated posing an existential threat to Planet Earth.

Global warming-induced melting of the polar ice caps is responsible for the subsequent emergence of the Arctic as a new frontier— an economically viable and contested territory. The rise of the Arctic is contemporaneous with the fall (submerging/destruction) of the low-lying territories of mainly Global South. The two phenomena are ontologically, integrally connected. The climate change-induced geographical alternation brings forward a whole host of repercussions of which the transnational climate refugee crisis is a highly sensitive development. As Samkaria says, “the act of crossing borders due to climate emergency is tantamount to the fact that climate change does not discriminate between geographical borders, nation-states, and living beings” (2022, p. 38). Inevitably, climate change raises a number of political crises in its wake. Climate change issues, particularly global warming, can be ecocritically analyzed to the extent they are reflected in literary and cultural texts. This paper seeks to ecocritically examine Kaiser Haq’s “The New Frontier” as the poem foregrounds the consequences and manifestations of anthropogenic climate change on Planet Earth in general, and Global South in particular.

Hydrocriticism, a newly emerged critical approach operating within the boundary of ecocriticism, has a particular focus on the relationship between water, literature/ culture, and the world. There is significant overlapping between ecocriticism and

hydrocriticism as water being a crucial element of nature and the environment remains a common factor in its multiple forms. While ecocriticism has a broader focus on all aspects of the environment, hydrocriticism intends to investigate how water plays a crucial role in our understanding of the planetary/local environmental crises and ecological equilibrium. Since much of climate change issues unfold in the waterscapes and directly or indirectly pertains to water, it is important to bring into consideration what the theory of hydrocriticism offers. Hydrocriticism can be defined as “an intellectual construct that captures and explores how human activities impact negatively on the ozone layer, which results into maritime and oceanic spin, whirl, turn, rise or growth in the sea level” (Enukora & Okolo, 2021, p. 74). According to Mabel Moraña, hydrocriticism is a critical and theoretical approach concentrating on different socio-cultural realities as well as forms of domination in which bodies of water play a crucial role, as the “medium for reaching and controlling people, lands, and/or natural resources” (Moraña, 2022, p. 1). She also says,

As environmental variables, bodies of water generate specific strategies for the exercise of power and resistance, and for the sustainability of life. Concurrently, collective imaginaries integrate in multiple ways liquid and territorial spaces and develop creative ways to articulate these domains both in material and symbolic manners. (pp. 1-2)

Hydrocriticism can be employed as a pertinent critical tool as it helps illustrate the many ways the anthropocentric projects such as colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, industrialization, urbanization and the Western mode of development—key reasons behind planetary climate change—are hydro-centric phenomena. Some of the major climate disasters manifest through and around waterscapes. For instance, cyclones, tornados, tsunamis, floods, erosion, the melting of icecaps and glaciers, droughts, and desertification are hydrological events, manmade or otherwise. In addition, the major political and historical events like colonialism and imperialism are primarily maritime affairs. The control, domination and conquest over the oceans and other water bodies translate to political subjugation of the colonies, world over. Colonialism, therefore, is virtually hydrocolonialism and it continues till date in this form or that. As the Arctic with its climate change-linked new incarnation is a *hydro-colony* of a few major global powers, leading to a continuation of that hydrocolonialism/hydroimperialism. Hydrocriticism, as a water-focused sub-category of ecocriticism, tries to study this hydrocolonialism/hydroimperialism.

While the actions and policies by the powerful quarters in the industrialized Global North are allegedly, largely responsible for climate change, the former colonies of European nations located in the Global South are the worst sufferers. Many Global Southerners lose homes, lives and livelihood as victims to climate events, most of which are hydrological. This turns them, I assert, into *hydrocolonial* subjects in the emerging new world order. Hydrocolonialism is defined by Isabel Hofmeyr as

(1) colonization by way of water (various forms of maritime imperialism), (2) colonization of water (occupation of land with water resources, the declaration of territorial waters,

the militarization and geopoliticization of oceans), and (3) a colony on (or in) water (the ship as a miniature colony or a penal island). (Hofmeyr, 2019, p. 13)

Of course, the indirect colonization of the Global South people happens through inundation or submergence of the homelands and the resultant destruction of the material conditions for their survival, posing threat to their national sovereignty, all due to climate change. This paper strongly contends that such climate change-related existential threats for the Global Southern peoples should be seen as a continuation of hydro-colonialism/imperialism since the responsible parties as well as the potential beneficiaries of the crises remain more or less the same.

The poem “The New Frontier” brings forth *hydronarratives* by featuring among those literary-cultural media such as “literary fiction, film, music, photography, museum exhibits, public art, landscape architecture, and other media” that “amplify silenced environmental epistemologies, that story frequently erased histories of exclusion and violence, and chart a transition to a more just, equitable world” (Henry, 2022, p. 6). Henry defines *hydronarratives* as “stories and cultural representations that imagine just water futures” (p. 6). He adds, “Amidst the global rise of the climate justice movement, demand for a just transition has become a rallying cry for frontline and fenceline communities most impacted by climate change and energy transitions” (p. 6). Julie Sze says that cultural productions are the potent sites to “compose a counterhegemonic soundtrack for a restorative environmental justice politics grounded in solidarity” (2020, p. 76). According to Anuradha Mathur and Dilip da Cunha, “Water is everywhere before it is somewhere.... It is a terrain that challenges assumptions, reminds us of our fallibility, accommodates complexity, and locates our horizon” (Mathur & Cunha, 2014, pp. x–xi). Most of the climate issues playing out in hydro-spaces must make us ponder seriously about our treatment of water as a vital element. The fact remains that water receives the brunt of most of the destructive human actions, be it contamination, acidification, waste disposal, hydrological engineering, over-extraction, or commodification. Hydrofictional texts as well as hydro-poetry, such as “The New Frontier”, are crucial to understand the neo-liberal politics, which is a continuation of century-old (hydro-)colonization as a responsible force behind the planetary climate catastrophes. As Pramod K. Nayar points out, “Greed and exploitation as a systemic condition engendered by the state is everywhere in contemporary hydrofiction” (Nayar, 2024, p. 31). This paper, through the lenses of ecocriticism and hydrocriticism, intends to unveil the corporate-driven neoliberalism as well as hydro-politics driving up planetary climate change, biodiversity crisis, and environmental refugee issues as portrayed in the poem “The New Frontier” by Kaiser Haq.

### **Critical analysis of the text: In light of ecocriticism and hydrocriticism**

This section will analyze the poem “The New Frontier” from ecocritical and hydrocritical perspectives. As most of the environmental and climate issues manifest through waterscapes, ecocriticism and hydrocriticism will converge in the discussion. It is already common knowledge that the unchecked climate change is making possible the submergence of coastal and low-lying regions of the Global South, not least

Bangladesh. The land located in the world's largest delta, namely Bengal Delta—which also houses the Eastern Indian state of West Bengal—is particularly vulnerable to the adverse consequences of climate change. The rise of sea level caused by the melting of the polar ice caps means the southern territories of the country are going to be engulfed by the sea. Millions of Bangladeshi citizens as well as Indian nationals (in addition to Global Southerners of other nationalities) will be rendered homeless and penniless acquiring the (de facto) status of climate refugees as “[b]ased on current climate scenarios, experts believe the twenty-first century will see migration on a massive scale, with more people on the move than at any other time in human history. Climate migration will touch the lives of everyone on the planet” (Hirsch, 2017, p. 19). The inhuman life they would have to live amidst the catastrophe and the law-and-order crisis created by such catastrophes is encapsulated in the following stanza:

The jostling of increasing numbers—the diminishing earth-  
The rising salt water- not to mention the threatened  
Shove from a big honcho's sidekick's gang of goons –  
They want to disappear you-  
Give them a helping hand –  
Disappear (Haq, 2024, p. 45)

The rise of right-wing populist politics across the globe, especially in the Global North, leads to further corporatization and neo-liberalization of the global economics, trade and commerce. Climate denialism, racism, anti-immigration policies, budget and funding cuts in areas of social welfare are some defining features of such regimes. Profit-oriented, money-minded and business-focused politics in many of the powerful and emerging nations means they have no respect for human rights of the wretched of the Global South affected by climate events. Their agents are active in the developing nations influencing the policy making establishments of those nations. Metaphorically, they represent the “gang of goons” under the “sidekick” (local agent) of the “big honcho” (powerful corporate/political leaders based in the Global North). They intend to make sure the suffering multitudes disappear, meaning they do not appear in the priority policy agenda. Again, the “gang of goons” can also symbolize the transnational criminal networks who thrive on the suffering of the people, especially those from the developing nations. Engaged in human trafficking, dealing in organ trades, sex racketeering, and modern slave trades, these criminals are adept at (forced) disappearance of the vulnerable people, who face violence, physical and mental assault in the hands of such criminals. The speaker, therefore, ironically suggests the climate victims do them the favor of disappearing themselves. The employment of irony here foregrounds the severity of the crisis beleaguering the common masses of the Global South.

Climate refugees must navigate through the new realities with much hardship as the “[i]nternational refugee law does not recognize climate migrants as refugees, a category that would grant them specific protections under the law, such as protection from forcible return to the area from which they fled” (Hirsch, 2017, p. 30). Many of

them would be desperate to cross the national boundaries ravaged by climate disasters for the Arctic, the new dream destination. However, this is not a straightforward process as many might pursue illegal channels to reach their destination. It entails crossing the borders guarded with barbed wire fences, travelling across mountainous terrains, deserts, and rough water channels by rickety and heavily crowded boats, paying ransom to human traffickers, bribing corrupt border security personnel, and facing police firing, imprisonment, adverse weathers, sexual harassment, starvation, and so forth. Dying, getting wounded, amputated, traumatized, and languishing in jails on foreign lands are part of the ordeal. The speaker of the poem dramatizes the desperate drive of his compatriots to flee the climate disaster-prone motherland in their popular attire of 'lungi'. The satirical undertone exudes typical Kaiserian wit and humor and reinforces the gravity of the otherwise unfunny situation. The speaker says,

THE ARCTIC IS THE NEW FRONTIER  
And that's where I'm headed- in my lungi- on my bicycle  
— waving my *gamchha* like a flag –  
Crawling under barbed wire – swimming smelly rivers –  
vaulting over walls –  
Praying to every god goddess demon devil demoness –wary  
of strangers yet learning to trust some – (Haq, 2024, p. 46)

This stanza is redolent of Kaiser Haq's most reputed poem "Ode on the Lungi" where he celebrates the popular attire of Bengali men and men in many other Global South nations. One key aspect of the poem is its dexterous use of humor in depicting the multiple uses of the lungi in a variety of situations, some extremely funny yet serious. In this poem, he humorously mentions how a man in lungi may use the cloth in a catastrophic deluge:

If your luck runs out  
and the monsoon turns into  
a biblical deluge  
just get in the water and hand-pump  
air to balloon up your lungi –  
now your humble ark  
When you find shelter  
on a treetop  
take it off',  
rinse it,  
hold it aloft –  
flag of your indisposition –  
and wave it at the useless stars (Haq, 2008, pp. 143-144)

However, the desperate effort of the lungi-clad men (from Bangladesh as well as other parts of the Global South) to migrate to the new frontier of the Arctic is squarely linked to the high-frequency of disasters battering their homelands. As Ghosh clarifies in his nonfictional work "*The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*," "Bangladesh, and the Bengal Delta more generally, is exceptionally vulnerable to

climate change[.] [. . .] [M]uch of the country lies less than one meter above sea level, and it has already lost a good deal of land to the rising waters” (2021, p. 155). Likewise, according to Douglas Causey, “The Arctic is the place that’s reacting the fastest and in the largest way [to climate change]” (as cited in Hirsch, 2017, p. 11). Then, the dilemma of these people is both ecological as well as hydrological.

The incisive criticism of the disaster capitalism by Kaiser Haq comes in the form of his attack on the use of language of advertisement of the new frontier as a new holy grail for fortune seekers. He decries the corporate organizations for their rapacious exploitation of the people suffering disasters. The speaker says,

A new term for the new frontier – The Circumpolar North  
- it fills the mouth like a gobstopper –  
I suck on it when I can’t cadge a meal – which happens rarely  
In the affluent northern parts of the northern hemisphere – (Haq, 2024, p. 47)

The promotional register of the Arctic verges on sensationalism geared towards attracting global consumers. The high-sounding term “The Circumpolar North” is quite appealing as it evokes a gustatory image with the speaker feeling like sucking on a “gobstopper”. In other words, the commodity value of the Arctic is augmented through sensational presentation of the region using captivating language—something which ecolinguists critique. The neoliberal mantra of unlimited consumption, one key factor behind planetary climate change, continues unabated through promotional endeavors including advertisements. The speaker says,

THE EMERGING ARCTIC  
(Courtesy of the Council on Foreign Relations)  
Spectacular natural beauty – high adventure – untold riches –  
WHOA! WOW! YAY! - (Haq, 2024, p. 48)

The language of the advertisement here promotes the spectacle the “natural beauty” of the new-look Arctic has on offer. It also appeals to the pleasure-seekers, adrenaline junkies, tourists and holiday-makers by promising “high adventure.” In the same vein, it endeavors to attract potential investors to channel their money into profitable enterprises as the Arctic is replete with “untold riches.” The exclamations in block capitals, that is “WHOA! WOW! YAY!” are employed hyperbolically to induce amazement, marvellousness, wonder, excitement, surprise, and similar strong emotions in potential consumers and investors to engage with the Arctic in different ways. However, such engagement entails, more often than not, ecologically destructive practices leading to further global warming as well as climate change. As the ecolinguist Arran Stibbe says, “The language of advertising can encourage us to desire unnecessary and environmentally damaging products...” (Stibbe, 2021, p. 1). However, the new cash cow, the Arctic region, is contested among the powerful nations which speaks of the victory of capitalism yet again. The speaker says,

So long encrusted in polar ice – now coming out –  
the new debutante –

Courted by a dozen states – soon ice-free summers will draw  
Billions in investment – O how I love these statistics –  
billions of dollars invested  
In shipping fishing energy- more gas more petrol –  
more global warming- (Haq, 2024, p. 48)

This economic horizon unfurled by the emergence of the Arctic firms up the hold of dollars, which delineates “a conviction of humankind’s irreversible moral decay probably more capitalist than Calvinist but no less irremediable for that” (Almond, 2024, p. 141). As Rob Nixon says, “Ours is an age of onrushing turbo-capitalism, wherein the present feels more abbreviated than it used to – at least for the world’s privileged classes who live surrounded by technological time-savers that often compound the sensation of not having enough time” (Nixon, 2011, p. 8). Governments and corporate conglomerates of the capitalist states, such as those “dozen states” mentioned by Kaiser Haq, have no time to waste in exploiting the new economic opportunity and they rush headlong into investing their capital in carbon-intensive industries. The immediate consequences on the life and livelihood of indigenous communities and the biodiversity are palpable as Dipesh Chakrabarty says, “The globe and the planet – as categories standing for the two narratives of globalization and global warming – are connected. What links them are the phenomena of modern capitalism (using the term loosely) and technology, both global in reach” (Chakrabarty, 2021, p. 4). The victimization of people and nonhuman species in the ongoing anthropogenic climate crisis is linked to how modern capitalism operates. The sarcastic tone in the speaker’s voice with regards to hapless victims of the capitalism-climate change nexus is obvious:

To hell with iconic wildlife – native communities go suck  
your thumbs –  
Besides they say it can all be done  
Sustainably and peaceably –  
Hallelujah  
Allahu Akbar (Haq, 2024, p. 48)

The existential challenge to the local indigenous people on the periphery of the Global North, caused by the radical transformation of the Arctic, is enormous as hydro-critics observe: “As the icy territories of Arctic Indigenous peoples dissolve into warming seas, they open new channels of exploitation” (De Wolff & Faletti, 2022, p. 20). Interestingly, the plight of the indigenous populace and wildlife is relegated to a marginal space in dominant discourses of sustainable development. As Amitav Ghosh asserts in *The Nutmeg’s Curse*: “systemic inequalities can exacerbate the impacts of the planetary crisis” (Ghosh, 2021, p. 140). The ubiquitous use of the buzzword “sustainability” dominates all climate discourses as a solution to the crisis. The term “sustainable development,” that is development aligned with environmental standards and protocols, comes increasingly under rigorous critical scrutiny for its inherent contradiction and hollowness. The use of the word then,

many accuse, is part of greenwashing. The speaker of the poem spotlights the hypocrisy of such high-sounding claims of sustainable and peaceable development by juxtaposing them with religious cries of “Hallelujah” and “Allahu Akbar.” The sacredness of the religious expressions, used usually in articulating wonder, surprise, gratitude, or the greatness of God by the faithful ones, has been employed here to stress the bogusness and falsity of the development narratives. Hence, “To hell with iconic wildlife” brings forth the hell imagery underscoring the intensity of ecocide. Ironically enough, the “thumb-sucking” advice, given by the speaker, doubles down on the helplessness of the marginalized communities whose rights to place and existence are ignored by the corporate and national authorities. The speaker of the poem, then, satirizes the concept of sustainability employing erotic lingo and takes a gibe at it in the Bakhtinian sense of profanity. He says,

An old friend from old Dhaka  
...  
Tweets that when you want to screw the earth  
at an obtuse angle  
You’ve got to keep cool and sport a sustainable erection – (Haq, 2024, p. 49)

The tweet has a Bakhtinian carnivalesque aspect to it. For Bakhtin “the unofficial carnival is people’s second life, organized on the basis of laughter” (as cited in Cohen, 2011, p. 178). An obscene language has been to equate official discourses of “sustainable development” as a solution to ecological degradation and climate crisis with the rape of the planet through “sustainable erection”. Thus, the very word “sustainable” is desacralized and rendered laughable. This stanza, therefore, resonates with a sense of resistance to the climate injustice perpetuated but often obscured by the corporatized, neo-liberal politics. Then the poet takes up a serious and straightforward tone in exposing the imminent danger lurking around the corporate takeover of the melting Arctic. He says,

All undecided about the next step – grave security  
risks abound  
Now that the big guys have come down on the  
defrosting Arctic – (Haq, 2024, p. 50)

Indeed, in the waterscapes of the Arctic unfolds the rise of a new geopolitical and economic front that privileges certain nations, “the big guys,” while exacerbating the already precarious conditions of the Global Southern subalterns facing multifarious threats emanating from disturbed water bodies surrounding them.

Whereas it is vitally important for humankind to treat ice with care and respect for its crucial role in the maintenance of ecological balance, we are making technological intervention and harnessing global warming forcing ice caps to melt or disappear. Stephanie C. Kane warns that “We have to make an ally of ice, understanding its shape-shifting formations and qualities and, most importantly, working with ice’s logistical powers of stabilization” (Kane, 2022, p. 58).

Since the Arctic appears as a new economic theatre, Global Northern countries seek to tap into the manpower pool provided by the poorer countries. Climate/environmental refugees are primed to provide the labor Arctic nations desperately need. Media clamors for the revision of immigration policies to import manpower or legalize the illegal (climate) migrants there in order to transform the Arctic region and make profit out of this catastrophic reality.

As Pramod K. Nayar considers catastrophic realism as “a materialist aesthetic, focusing on local change, material loss and ontological disasters affecting human and nonhuman forms, the living and the non-living” (Nayar, 2024, p. 26). He goes on to say that it “demonstrates how the material aspects of water systems become enmeshed in financial networks, producing entirely new evaluations of nature, which then break down” (p. 26). Already Malian, Syrian and Bangladeshi immigrants in Greenland, “wearing tartan serge lungis and/ layers of ponchos” lounging “at a little shop” launched by “a deshi bhai,” who sells “hot sweet milky deshi cha – pan – cigarettes –/ hard-boiled eggs –/ Coconut and mustard oil and odds and ends” (Haq, 2024, p. 50). The international constellations and contingents of environmental migrants, mainly illegal, trying to make a living in the Global North through odd jobs is a testament to the deplorable conditions of their climate change-affected home countries in the Global South. The speaker reveals,

CANADA NEEDS A NORTHERN IMMIGRATION STRATEGY  
Screams the Toronto Star –  
With the tundra ready for builders and ploughmen  
Desperate hands are wanted – and we are proof they are  
never in short supply –  
But it looks like we’ve got to go back home  
To start the paper work – very well – try again – fail again  
- fail for good –  
We board an ice raft big enough to last the voyage to the  
Bay of Bengal (Haq, 2024, p. 51)

The desperate climate refugees, who have made it to the Global North, perhaps, through illegal channels without valid travel documents, are required to do the paperwork in a bid to get advantage of the new immigration policies adopted by the host nations. The irony is that the journey back home will be an arduous one. The poet playfully depicts the desperation and highlights the utter helplessness of the illegal climate migrants by showing that a large ice raft able to sustain a voyage to the Bay of Bengal is required to bring this Bangladeshi climate destitutes back home. Again, the required paperwork is shown to be mired in bureaucratic red tapeism, and repeated applications and rejections. This bleak picture of the climate refugee issues, as portrayed in the poem, corroborates the concerns of climate activists and thinkers worldwide as to what to happen in the context of climate catastrophes affecting mainly the Global South.

Despite a humorous depiction of the gloomy reality befalling the climate-hit Bangladesh and other nations, Kaiser Haq does not mince words in illustrating the doomed future haunting the posterities. The pathetic condition of the global

wretched, including Bangladeshis, triggers the poet to term them as “a piece of shit” (Haq, 2024, p. 51). As the “salt water imperceptibly rises” forcing the speaker to “hitch up [his] lungi up” (p. 52), we get to realize the Global Southern identities of the climate victim since “Hundreds of millions/ from East Africa to Indonesia/ wear the lungi” (Haq, 2008, p. 140). In addition, “more stillbirths” occur due to the saltwater intrusion and other climate impacts, which compels people to harvest rainwater to avoid further casualties (Haq, 2024, p. 52). As the world turns into an “overcrowded swampland” thanks to an unchecked global warming, the Arctic or “The new frontier cannot be sealed off from the rest” of humanity (p. 52). In other words, although the climate crisis appears as a business opportunity for many corporate organizations in the Global North, the common people of the Global North cannot avoid some of the untoward consequences it engenders. The speaker wonders:

Will the torrents and hurricanes and furnace breath go back  
Like genies into the bottle out of which we let them out  
Like thoughtless children playing at devilry –  
Shall we live to witness the rewilding of land laid waste –  
Maybe –  
Maybe not (Haq, 2024, p. 54)

There emerge a whole host of uncertainties and climate anxieties related to recurrent terrible hydrological disasters like “torrents and hurricanes.” Although these disasters can occur as natural phenomena, anthropogenic climate change has aggravated the ecological processes thus increasing their intensity and frequency. The poet equates them with the proverbial genies whom the humankind has let out of the bottle “[l]ike thoughtless children playing at devilry.” The poet Kaiser Haq has offered an incisive self-critique of Homo Sapiens as a species capable of self-destruction underlined by a criminal lack of vision and maturity. The precarious situation of the planet, caused by human hubris, greed, and anthropocentric self-delusion, lays the ground for a dystopian future for the whole species, which is confronted with grave uncertainties. Hence, climate trauma or eco-trauma as in our pursuit of “a refuge from ecological catastrophes, and our quest to combat them, we can face a sensory overload—an experience also consistent with psychological trauma” (Narine, 2015, p. 2). Indeed, it is high time we fought for climate justice and engage in climate action to mitigate the pace of planetary warming. Since “Structurally, poetic modes are capable of enacting the unexpected and multiple phenomena of climate change and their connections” (Griffiths, 2017, p. 138), as exemplified by Kaiser Haq’s poem “The New Frontier” we should use climate change poetry to better communicate climate concerns.

### **Eco-pedagogical potentials of “The New Frontier”**

In the context of the ongoing planetary climate crisis, education can be harnessed to effect some positive changes. Therefore, education should be reconceptualized as “educational ecology” (Bartosch, 2021, p. 4). Literary education seems to be an effective tool in tackling climate change and environmental degradation as literature

offers “deep-time negative capability...inducting us into the strangeness of temporality that vastly exceeds both personal experience and intergenerational memory” (Farrier, 2019, p. 5). Literature’s pedagogical value lies in the “dramatization of the cultural processes by which climate change becomes cognitively and emotionally legible” (Garrard 2017, p. 122). Therefore, literary discourses and criticism can serve eco-pedagogy, a timely befitting mode of teaching and learning. Eco-pedagogy inspires/promotes “sustainability literacy,” which refers to “the skills, attitudes, competencies, dispositions and values that are necessary for surviving and thriving in the declining conditions of the world in ways which slowdown that decline as far as possible” (Stibbe & Luna, 2009, p. 10-11). It also highlights “contemplative activism” or “active contemplation” (Bartosch, 2021, p. 5). Bartosch says elsewhere, “There is an educational demand for reconfiguring our engagements not only with the world but with the cultural forms through which we make sense of our environments” (2019, p. 4). “The New Frontier” as a crucial poem dealing with climate change and its impacts, is a cultural form/text having the intrinsic capacity to fire up our imagination, pique our curiosity, shock us out of our complacency and galvanize us into action.

The evocative language, graphic detail, stylistic flair, and striking imagery of the poem are powerful enough to advance eco-/climate justice discourses. If studied critically along with other climate-focused literary texts, it can generate intellectual enthusiasm with regards to the ongoing and potential repercussions of planetary climate crisis on humankind in general and the Global Southerners in particular. As the German professor in Comparative Literature, Eva Horn, rightly puts it: “the discovery of anthropogenic climate change requires a new understanding of climate as a cultural force” (2018, p. 63). Due largely to its emotional appeal, shock value and imaginative strength, “The New Frontier” can inspire activists and intellectuals alike. For the students of literature and Humanities, this poem may come across as an invaluable text for a deeper critical and contemplative engagement with one of the biggest crises they navigate outside the classroom. This paper highly recommends this poem be included in English/Humanities departments across the world, especially in the Global South.

### **Conclusion**

The titular poem of Kaiser Haq’s *The New Frontier* has emerged as a result of a “Climate change-related project” from the collaboration of the University of Swansea and the Dhaka Literary Festival (Haq, 2024, p. 57). Concerned by the fact that “the wealthy countries were poised to capitalize on a global disaster” (p. 57), that is climate change, Haq pens this very thought-provoking poem. He vividly articulates his eco-anxieties emanating from a planetary crisis affecting millions of his compatriots and other nations in the Global South. He also registers his opposition and resistance to the dehumanizing capitalist system that seeks to profiteer at the miseries of the global subalterns. This paper has drawn on the insights from ecocriticism (addressing

ecological, environmental, and climate crises broadly) and hydrocriticism (investigating those crises as far as they manifest in waterscapes) to analyze the poem, which “delineates a desperation situation” (Haq, 2024, p. 59) confronting Planet Earth. The paper argues that Haq successfully exposes the nexus between corporate capitalism, climate change and climate refugee issues. It also contends that hydro(colonization) by Global North has been continuing in different incarnations, driving up myriad planetary crises, not least climate change, and profiting off them. As an eco-poetic text, “The New Frontier” is, hence, poised to open up a new frontier in literary studies that take up the issues of immediate and long-term concerns. As “In our damaged world, ecological awareness is a civic duty and a social responsibility; poetry a vessel to that” (Varutti, 2024, p. 230), Kaiser Haq’s poem is well-suited to ignite our imaginary and intellectual curiosities with regards to planetary issues and to motivate climate activism. To conclude, the paper acknowledges the potential of “The New Frontier” as a literary-critical tool to enhance advocacy for human rights and climate/environment/water justice, and considers Kaiser Haq as a voice of the Global South.

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# Romantic Idealization of Eve(lina) and Shakuntala: A Close Reading of the Narrative of Social Ecology and Feminine Will in Kalidasa's *Abhigyanam Shakuntalam* and Frances Burney's *Evelina*

*Baidehi Mukherjee*

## Abstract

The paper is a close estimate of a textual reading of Kalidasa's *Abhigyanam Shakuntalam* of the Classical Sanskrit antiquity and Frances Burney's eighteenth-century novel, *Evelina* in the light of understanding the representations of ecology that shape up the actions, circumstances and social mobility of the female protagonists, namely Shakuntala and Evelina. Social Ecology stands prominent in the context of the analysis build up here because both the women have been 'romantically idealised' by their respective creators, where nature unearths the constant cohabitation or rift between the bipolarity of the spaces of the rural and the urban. The cityscape of London is in stark contrast to the idyllic environment of Berry Hill in *Evelina*, where the protagonist of the novel was raised by her foster father, Rev. Arthur Villars. Kalidasa's play *Abhigyanam Shakuntalam* sees how the political realm of Hastinapur (symbolised by King Dushyanta) gazed and in turn became a subject of counter gaze by the simple idyllic hermitage of Sage Kanva in the forest, where Shakuntala was reared up. Both the women were raised by their celibate foster fathers, who were instrumental in instilling the spirit of the ecological space around to them. The study undertaken analyses the literary angles on the ground pertaining to how the environment in the literal sense affected the lives and the choices made by these women and whether that acted as an element of resistance in them.

**Keywords:** Social Ecology, Environment, Romantic Era, Kalidasa, Frances Burney, 18<sup>th</sup> c. English novels, Classical Sanskrit Theatre.

The paper aims to read and analyse how the environmental ethics shapes up the essential characteristic traits of Evelina and Shakuntala in the two works placed apart in terms of their geographical contexts and centuries in which they were published. Frances Burney, a woman novelist considered as a precursor to the novel as a 'genre' by a woman in the second half of the eighteenth-century England would be a stark contrast to the canonical Hindu male poet of the Indian Classical antiquity, Kalidasa. The nomenclature 'Evelina' - developing out of the quintessential Eve - the female companion to Adam and the symbolic harbinger of knowledge and death to mankind (in the Biblical analogy) channelised through the process of Temptation in/by the ecological environment around. Eve had her position secured alongside Adam in the idyllic Garden of Eden under the guardianship of the Almighty. Her betrayal resulting out of Temptation sets open the necessary quest for an argumentative reasoning that was way too ahead of its time. Her defiance was an outcome of the rebellious spirit of questioning the current position/status in the Garden of Eden. Adam is believed to have followed Eve in this process of Temptation, Reasoning and Rebellion but the underlying psychological framing was very different, which has been readily represented so by Milton in his epic describing "Man's first disobedience" (*Paradise Lost*). What costed mankind in lieu of the temptation was an exile/banishment to a different ecological space (the Earth) - an inhabitation to the planet Earth that subsequently sets the root for planetary studies henceforth. The bipolarity of the two places signified that the forced inhabitation to the Earth (in between the locales of the Heaven and the Hell) was connected to de-populating Heaven, restoring the latter space as essentially for the morally good and pure.

This idyllic space of the Garden of Eden leads us to the argument in the paper, where the primary target is to compare Evelina and Shakuntala's inherent speciality and the subsequent transitional location. The Romantic representations of the two women across genres (one a drama and the other a novel), ages (Classical Sanskrit and 18<sup>th</sup> c. England) and territorial differentiation of the idyllic forest of Sage Kanva on the banks of River Malini and the idyllic land of Berry Hill, where the clergyman, Rev. Arthur Villars reared up Evelina. Both the women were reared up by their foster (and not biological) fathers - Sage Kanva for Shakuntala and Mr. Villars for Evelina, after they were left abandoned (parentless). Interestingly, the two women were born as an outcome of a union that was sociologically unmatched - Sage Vishwamitra and the celestial nymph Menaka who were the biological parents of Shakuntala and Caroline Evelyn and Sir John Belmont, a rich aristocrat as biological parents of Evelina. Shakuntala's parents were not the dwellers of the worldliness of the world - father Sage Vishwamitra would never let his penances be compromised in the folds of domesticity, and mother Menaka would not compromise or made to compromise her duties at *Indrasabha* in *Swargaloka*. The birth of Shakuntala was the outcome of an agenda to which Menaka was an agency - to break the vow of penance of Sage Vishwamitra. Menaka, a dweller of the celestial world (*swargaloka*) had to renounce the earthly world (*martya loka*) and subsequently abandon the mortal baby, who was raised in the *ashram* of Sage Kanva, who took the role of the foster father. Evelina's birth on the

contrary is an extension to her mother's abandonment by her father and having severed all connections with her biological family. It is evident from the novel *Evelina*, specially from the opening letter exchanged between Rev. John Villars and Lady Howard. The readers of the novel encounter a tryst with the biological origin and the saga of Evelina's rearing up days from the initial letters exchanged. Her innocence is necessarily an outcome of the place in life that she is brought up by her foster father. An evident connection develops between Shakuntala and Evelina here, as both of them have been brought up in an otherwise idyllic but austere surrounding, as represented by a sage in the context of Shakuntala (Kanva) and a clergyman in the context of Evelina (Villars).

The trope of the idyllic environment speaks for an unhindered 'naive' upbringing of the two adolescent women who were at a stage of experiencing multiple emotional and physical changes as young maidens at the onset of the texts. Evelina's spatial transition calls for a transgression into the world of experience and maturity. The subtitle of the novel *Evelina* focusses and is successful enough in order to keep the focus of the novel throughout the subtitle that it was indeed about Evelina's 'entrance' into the 'world'. The subtitle: '*The History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World*' closely surveys the historicity of the layers of narrative underlying the family bonds and relationships surrounding Evelina's birth. Her transition from the idyllic world of Berry Hill to Howard Grove, which is a prototype of opening up avenues for Evelina, as she receives good company in the form of Lady Howard, Mrs Mirvan and Ms. Maria Mirvan. The world of London is a promise of societal and economic prosperity as well as the cultural hub of the eighteenth century literary and artistic growth. The Parisian world and the promise of economic growth coupled with French mannerisms, is a foil to the world of London. Madame Duval, Evelina's maternal grandmother is a representation of the aristocratic foppishness that the eighteenth century 'English' literature typically reflected.

The city life was a transgression and transition in the lives of both Evelina and Shakuntala, the crux of which has been placed as an argument before. Evelina being a part of the process of "Londonization" (Burney 21) alongside the Mirvans reflect her innocence, oblivious to the larger complex network that it sets. Shakuntala's passion for Dushyanta too reflects on a self-willed transgression - from the idyllic childhood/adolescence to the marital world of maturity, entering the prospect of the political domain that encompasses King Dushyanta's life. From the hermitage to the palace, Shakuntala is a part of the symbolic initiation (Evelina's "entrance into the world") to being the chief queen of King Dushyanta. Kalidasa's play describes the quintessential natural landscape of the unharmed virgin nature that has nurtured Shakuntala so far and is also the place where she is first encountered by King Dushyanta. Herein lies a stark difference between Kalidasa's and Burney's heroines, as Evelina and Lord Orville meet for the first time in the cityscape of London, which naturally puts a pressure on Evelina to act in accordance to the much more orderly fashion of the classy aristocratic balls of the posh society of London. Incidentally, the gardens of Vauxhall and Marybone act as an agency of threat to Evelina, where she unknowingly gets separated from the rest of the group and lands up in the company of some miscreants. This shift in terms of the

literal locale to the metaphoric space is a shift in the paradigm of human-nature interface. The pre-romantic era in English literature, as the novel was published in 1778, sees the French Revolution and the transition to the natural world in literature shortly. The upcoming Industrial Revolution in the western world brought in havoc implication on the Man-Nature relationship. On the whole, several Victorian literary texts evidently reflected a similar cultural ethos.

The crisis of existence in the midst of the rural and urban ecological debate spanned the eighteenth-century English consciousness. The representation of Evelina is essentially as a child of Nature. Whose beauty and virtues are undisturbed till her seventeenth year due to the circumstances under which she was raised. Her seeking permission from Rev. Mr. Villars for accompanying the Mirvans to London while at Howard Groove, raises concern as not just it justified a formal permission from her foster father / official guardian, but also the clergyman Rev. Mr. Villars and the world that he symbolised kept Evelina away from the snares of the city life (her biological father and her maternal grandmother) so far. Evelina's first meeting and the subsequent meetings with Lord Orville occurs quite logically in the absence of Rev. Mr. Villars, much in the strain of Shakuntala meeting King Dushyanta, their secret matrimonial alliance and resultant relationship required an official sanctioning from Sage/Father Kanva, which was however not done. The striking difference that we find between the two women here is probably that Shakuntala was very ahead of her times and did not (unintentionally) wait for the official sanctioning by her foster father and the master of the hermitage. Evelina on the contrary reflects on every action that she plans and narrates her course of action to her series of letters to Rev. Villars. As a matter of fact, Mr. Villars' initial inhibition about Lord Orville is cemented in Evelina's consciousness and she possibly never dreams of going beyond what her letters instruct her to. She exists predictably in those narrative frames of the letters.

As already reflected, the two foster fathers in each of the instances in the texts are responsible for shaping up the rural /country gaze of the women - natural, inherent, primordial and suited to view the symbolic 'outside' world (city/political life) in case of both Lord Orville and King Dushyanta. Rev. Mr. Villars considers his own condition right at the onset of the novel as "remaining unmolested" (Burney 9), a condition that was formed as a result of his will power to keep his ward Evelina away from the sneers of the 'polished' world, which keeps her "innocent as an angel, and artless as purity itself...." (Burney 15) The reference to "shopping" (Burney 21) indicates the dynamics of the transition that Evelina symbolically becomes a part of, after metaphorically segregating herself from the Berry Hill world. A close association with the novel *Evelina* will indicate that the date and place entries above each and every letter focuses not just on its epistolary form, but symbolically begins with the month of March - springtime. A parallel can be drawn to *Abhigyanam Shakuntalam* here as the focus is on the springtime - a vital motif to read and comprehend the forest and its beauty that runs parallel to Shakuntala's narrative. It may be argued that when Dushyanta sets his first gaze at Shakuntala, that was the time when she was clothed in the attire made of the 'bark of the trees' and watering plants at Sage Kanva's hermitage. The immediate

impact that this scenario has on Dushyanta - as he says: “the bark dress increases her charm - beauty finds its ornaments anywhere” (Miller trans. Kalidasa 94) - on the spectators of the drama, her association with the nature/environment around becomes a visual representation of her personality. The metaphor of hunting stands crucial to the context of the ecological balance and reading the environment around. Dushyanta is the ruler of Hastinapur - the seat of political power - as mighty as the name sounds, where the word ‘*hasti*’ in Sanskrit refers to an elephant. This implication is at the mightiness of the seat of political power, Hastinapur, which shall be the centre of the political conflict in *Mahabharata*. Dushyanta reaches to the forest on the banks of river Malini, possibly the location of the hermitage of Sage Kanva. Hastinapur is located on the banks of River Ganges, which is geographically known and mythologically represented. Therefore, the civilization of Hastinapur thrived on the Indo-Gangetic plain. River Malini, believed to have been located in the Pauri-Garhwal district of modern day, Uttarakhand, had an adjoining area of thick foliage, originating in the Kotdwar area and eventually merging with the Ganges. This is factually an ecological replica in the lines of Shakuntala and Dushyanta. It may be right to comment that like the river Malini, Shakuntala’s journey to King Dushyanta and Hastinapur was not an easy course.

The forest is that ecological zone where lot of sacred rites take place - making it a very appropriate location to be charted out for Kalidasa. Hunting as a motif (as mentioned before) is an act of transgression, an erosion of the privacy of pristine innocence of both the geographical locale and the woman representing that. The target of Dushyanta’s hunting was an antelope, as per the drama, but it gets substituted by Shakuntala, as the course of his passion progresses. He notes:

“I can’t draw my bowstring  
To shoot arrows at deer  
Who live with my love  
And teach her tender glances.” (Miller trans. Kalidasa 103)

The rivers have a vital role to play for any human habitation and that has been proven from the play. The ‘sacrifices’/sacrificial rites that take place in the hermitages, indicate an association of nature with the human belief system - like Wordsworthian Pantheism in English Romantic poetry. The ‘*kush*’ grass required for the sacrificial rites (Miller trans. Kalidasa 111) indicate a deep-seated connection between ritualistic practices and nature. Water, a basic component of the ecosystem - a primary element among the five elements or ‘*panch mahabhutas*’, alongside ‘*agni*’/fire (another vital component for ritual practices of purification), ‘*akash*’ (aether), ‘*vayu*’ (air) and ‘*prithvi*’ (earth). Water is instrumental for any curse to be bestowed as per tradition and the fulfillment of the same depended on that. Shakuntala’s unknowing ignorance about the presence of Rishi Durvasa made her the subject of the curse, the effect of which befell on her husband, King Dushyanta, and he (a prototype of the political seat of the state on the banks of river Ganges) forgot about the existence of Shakuntala (of the small hermitage on the banks of river Malini). In the event of the fateful incident, a fish accidentally

swallows the ring (emblematic of the political power) while Shakuntala was drinking water, that she had so fondly adorned on her finger, thereby making her be abandoned by her ruler-husband who was unable to recognise her or the matrimonial alliance under the effect of the curse. Dushyanta at a subsequent point, refers to “funeral waters” (Miller trans. Kalidasa 159) and “yearly libation” (Miller trans. Kalidasa 159) where the purificatory/purgatorial role of water as one of the purest base elements (of the ‘*panch mahabhutas*’) has been mentioned. In case of Hindu mythology, no curse is fulfilled by mere utterance on the part of the yogi (curse giver), rather it has to get transferred to the ‘cursed’ individual through the act of springling droplets of water. Shakuntala’s context calls for another vital observation that is key to the argument in this paper. In the light of the above mentioned curse, the impact of the curse falls on Dushyanta and his memory - for which he forgets his wife and the relationship - but it is (even if accidentally) incurred by Shakuntala. Her situation is very similar to that of the symbolic mother of womankind - the Biblical Eve. Eve was subjected to the temptation by the guile of Satan in the form of the serpent, which too had been a vital reflection of she being the agency of the curse that was ultimately targetted at ‘*man*’-kind (Adam/Dushyanta). This is quite a debatable point whether the woman was responsible for the fall of man in the natural/idyllic context - whether she was responsible for / instrumental in the larger context of the curse which goes beyond that of the texts, or was it that “Man’s first disobedience” (*Paradise Lost*) as Milton mentions targetted not just the flawed woman but also the man. Therefore the target of the curse was banishment for Adam (with Eve) and loss of the power of recollection of the incidents that the natural world of Kanva’s hermitage had been a witness too. Shakuntala’s character was brought to question like Eve’s motive behind mankind’s fall, Shakuntala’s attempt to restore the power of recollection to the king in the presence of the curse and the absence of the political emblem of the king’s ring (*mudra*) can be interpreted as her attempt to enlighten the Hastinapur monarch about what had occurred in the wilderness of the forest lands - far away. Her attempt may be compared to that of Eve’s will power to know the unknown, to taste the fruit of the forbidden tree of Knowledge, like the figure of Prometheus in Greek mythology for gifting the literal fire and the metaphoric knowledge of mankind.

Knowledge, power and enlightenment stand central to the argument here. In this strain, Evelina and her historical context can be comprehended . The antonym for knowledge (*abhigyanam* for Shakuntala) of any sort can be secrecy that played a pivotal role in the context of Kalidasa’s play and Burney’s fiction. Evelina’s parents had their marriage in secrecy where there was no formal sanctioning from the respective families. Caroline Evelyn and Sir John Belmont kept their marriage a secret and Evelina was given birth by Caroline in isolation, abandoned by her husband, only in the benevolent company of Rev. Mr. Villars. The lack of acknowledgement of the marriage on the part of Belmont and consequently abandoning his pregnant wife, stands similar in the context of Dushyanta and Shakuntala, as their marriage had a literal father/guardian in the form of Sage Kanva by the side of Dushyanta’s lack of recollection at a later point lead to no reunion in Earth, but in Heaven - a vital point to understand being that there was no reunion targetted at the political chaos of Hastinapur. The

continuation of the relationship for Shakuntala and Dushyanta took place at a point where the location was not anywhere in the peripheries of planet Earth, thereby protecting their union beyond the realms of the five base elements (*pancha mahabhutas*).

Evelina - 'the offspring of Nature in her simplest attire - according to Rev. Mr. Villars - is Burney's mannersism to understand the eighteenth century London society. Since Evelina was brought up with no knowledge (like Eve in her pre-lapsarian stage) of manners expected of her, her behaviour is without artifice. However the world of London and the prospects of going to Paris was arranged by her maternal grandmother, Madame Duval (much against Evelina's willingness) - were agencies of 'temptation' for her. Both Evelina and Shakuntala were reared up by single men - who never married and were replicas of the piousness associated with the respective places. Initially connected with "the amusement and occupations of the country" (Burney 32). The novel is a clear exploration of the ecosystem of the 18<sup>th</sup> c. London, particularly highlighting the delicate balance and potential dangers for a young woman navigating its complex social strata, which can be interpreted as a form of 'social ecology'.

To go back to the principal argument in this paper, Evelina and Shakuntala's feminine will stands central to the Romantic idealisation of the self. A formal summing up of the arguments placed will see how Nature has veritably caused and shaped up how both the women Evelina and Shakuntala were nurtured. For Evelina, it is the social mobility that caused her to meet Lord Orville and fall in love with him (at a later point). For Shakuntala, contrarily, the social mobility is an outcome of love. The respective biological background being hidden, they live up to establishing feminine choice and will and to clear out how that is instrumental in understanding their quest for knowledge and eradication of the darkness of the lack of knowledge. Evelina's backdrop of the Enlightenment sees revolutionary ideals in Burney, transferred to Evelina, who takes the narrative of her mother's story forward, much like how the manuscript of the 'History of Caroline Evelyn' was burnt by Frances Burney before she could contemplate on another manuscript and subsequently published novel, *Evelina*. The natural environment in which Evelina is brought up saw Dame Green as her wet nurse, however a minor character, has a major role to play in terms of being the biological mother to the imposter who was planted in Sir John Belmont's house as the biological child. In short, this act snatched Evelina's basic right to be acknowledged by her biological father, Sir John Belmont, hence proving that the latter was not at fault to have not inquired after his 'real' daughter so long. Evelina's unfortunate substitution by the imposter in Sir John Belmont's life indicates a situational crisis that she was made to face to evolve in her quest for legitimacy. Shakuntala's quest for legitimacy was more so for her marital relation with the king and to prove the legitimacy of the child in her womb.

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# “Kolleru Has Changed”: Ecological Entanglement, Hydrocolonialism, and Solastalgia in Akkineni Kutumbarao’s *Softly Dies a Lake*

*Indrajit Mukherjee*

## **Abstract**

From being the rulers of the universe at the pinnacle of the hierarchy of existence, we (humans) are becoming aware of the potential for a dreadful condition of being displaced in its pursuit of capitalist/materialistic glory in contemporary times. Our native landscapes are transforming from the Anthropocene to the demonic entity of the Cthulhucene at a rapid rate that allows us to observe the harrowing ecological devastation— particularly in cherished locations— within a single lifetime rather than across generations. Akkineni Kutumbarao’s *Softly Dies a Lake* (2014) weaves through the grotesque transitional phase of the Kolleru Lake due to the double oppression of the selfish inhabitants and the unholy nexus of the government and the capitalist-materialist enterprises. This text marks the dynamics of how the sensitive ecospace of the waterbody in South India has constituted a site for the application of biopower while concurrently being the essential origin of indigenous identity, interpersonal reconciliation, and pristine pastimes. Looking through Isabel Hofmeyr’s theorisation of the contours of hydrocolonialism, the following section sheds light on the colonisation of water to enquire about the subaltern struggles against the politico-economic power of authoritarian regimes and the perilous effects of radical climate catastrophe.

**Keywords:** Anthropocene, capitalist, ecological entanglement, hydrocolonialism, solastalgia.

## **Introduction**

The Anthropocene rings a devalued era in which “human agency has become a significant geophysical force at par natural forces, modifying the world’s

ecosystems with a greater rapidity than witnessed in any earlier period of human history” (Rangarajan, 2018, p. 1). As the Anthropocene reflects the often-destructive influence of unprecedented human actions on the long-term health of the ecosystems of our planet, “it seems to us more than appropriate to emphasize the central role of mankind in geology and ecology [...] for the current geological epoch” (Crutzen and Stoermer, 2000, p. 17). The consequences of human acts on natural resources have been far-reaching, affecting not only the environmental biodiversity but also the most vulnerable communities of human societies. The interplay between climate change, the hunt for sustainable communities, and persistent issues of waste and severe pollution is the primary focus of the twenty-first-century literary canon worldwide. The Telegu writer Akkineni Kutumbarao’s *Softly Dies a Lake/Kolleti Jadalalu* (2014), translated into English by Veteran feminist activist Vasanth Kannabiran in 2020, documents the continuation of the hyper-exploitative human forces. This ecological memoir chronicles the gradual decay of Kolleru Lake through the shards of childhood recollections of the protagonist (Srinivasa Rao alias Seenu). This narrative delves deep into how the deteriorating status of Kolleru Lake undermines the livelihoods of its dependent inhabitants and leads the villagers to lament the natural decline. This study begins with the holistic vision of the natural site of Kolleru Lake by enlightening the close kinship between the human and the non-human worldviews (i.e. ecological entanglement). Next, this article endeavours to discuss the representation of the hydrocolonial atrocities in this text to critique the multifaceted dimensions of morbid human impact on the lake and instil ecological consciousness in us in the lethal polluted world of climate drought and global warming, as well as the excessive modification of the earth. This research paper finally undertakes the environmental disruption of the picturesque Kolleru Lake in Pulaparru by applying the theoretical framework of solastalgia to warn us about the future.

### **Mapping Ecological Entanglements in *Softly Dies a Lake***

Situated between the West Godavari and Krishna River delta twenty kilometres away from the town of Eluru, Kolleru Lake in Andhra Pradesh is one of the deepest and largest lakes not only in India but also in South Asia. This resplendent waterbody stretches “across two hundred and sixty square miles” (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 10) and acts as a crucial flood-balancing reservoir for the Krishna and West Godavari rivers. This freshwater lake receives water from numerous rivers, such as Akkileru, Budaleru, Naguleru, and Sanniveru, and links more than sixty-eight inflowing channels, drains, and streambeds. This biologically diverse area has been a wildlife sanctuary of three hundred and eight km since 1999 and has been declared a wetland of international significance in the year of 2002. It provides a prevalent ecological interconnection in which villagers interact with and influence the nonhuman environs in the broader dynamics of South Indian society. For this, Kolleru Lake unpacks the efflorescence of a “*bioregion*” that is “literally and etymologically a ‘life-place’ — a unique region definable by natural (rather than

political) boundaries with a geographic, climatic, hydrological, and ecological character capable of supporting unique human and nonhuman living communities” (Thayer, 2003, p. 3).

Understanding the nuances of the environmental discourse requires a fundamental knowledge of the symbiotic relationships among living organisms in the natural habitat. This connection between humans and nonhumans is “used in ecocriticism as a synecdoche for a larger ideal of undisturbed natural harmony that is at best rare and at worst wholly fictional” (Garrard, 2009, p. 8). The cultivation of inter- and intra-species connections among plants and animals is fundamental to coming to terms with ecological entanglements that “highlights the complexity and dynamism of mutable ecosystems whereby there is no exterior being affected by active agents” (Taffel and Nicholas Holm, 2017, p. xiii). Ecological entanglement “forces us to abandon the idea that humans are separate from nature” and instead eritori that “we are entangled with the natural world in ways that have profound ethical implications” (Latour, 2017, p. 5). Rather than viewing the universe as composed of separate individual agents that merely interact, entanglement offers a more comprehensive perspective of existence— an evolving process in which human beings and nonhumans are integrally interrelated. This perspective calls for a shift from anthropocentrism to a more biocentric viewpoint, the importance of maintaining the balance between the close interconnections of human and nonhuman components “with respect for the differences between them” (Oliver, 2008, p. 102).

Kutumbarao’s *Softly Dies a Lake* churns up the ecological entanglement between humans and nonhumans through the memories of the sixty-five-year-old narrator (Srinivasa). The protagonist reflects on his childhood days, recalling a simple but divine rural setting intimately linked to natural objects in his Pulaparru village on the banks of the lovely Kolleru Lake. Kutumbarao (2020) remarks, “All the people in it are real. The village is real. Kolleru is real” (pp. xxi-xxii). Srinivasa’s reminiscence of the idyllic past years and experiences in the unspoiled territory traces the depredation inflicted upon the area and the necessity to restore the intricate relationship between humans and nature. He calls on how the lake was once replete with verdant grass, aromatic and vibrant blooming flowers, and other weeds that provided enough sustenance for the grazing cattle, as well as a beautiful cacophony of vibrant sounds from migratory birds, “blackbirds, storks, cranes, herons, hawks, snakebirds, cuckoos, mynas, red-legged storks, spotted-beak ducks, black bald hens” (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 10), aquatic life, and insects permeating the environment. As the buffaloes munched lazily and attempted to submerge the cranes in water, the birds perched upon them to catch fish and appeared to consume the ticks to clean the ears of cows. As this cautionary narrative records:

Flocks of quaking ducks floated alongside, overtaking them at times and being overtaken sometimes. Cranes would alight on the buffaloes and hunt fish from there. Laying their catch on the buffalo’s back they would peck at the fish and eat it [...] There were

so many birds chirping and circling the sky and creating a hullabaloo. The air was filled with the sounds of children minding the herds and calling out and warning each other. (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 5)

The perception of ecological entanglement pinpoints that earthly existence must be seen as a collaborative process to demonstrate the significance of human-nonhuman interactions. The two predominant communities of Pulaparru village, Kammadoras and Vaddirajas, rely on Kolleru Lake for their survival strategy in their day-to-day lives. While the Vaddirajas (fishermen) hinge on catching fish from the lake, the Kammadoras (farmers) nourish their cattle with the vegetation and weeds flourishing in its aquatic space. Kutumbarao (2020) summarises, “Each morning, the fishermen would go out on their palm rafts and bring back the trapped fish to shore. The women of each family would then heave the heavy baskets on their heads and set off at a brisk trot, swinging their arms as they walked” (pp. 13-14). Srinivasa discovers how calm waters cover with “flowers of many hues, a cluster of lotuses in full bloom and wild weeds and water plants [...], floating and swaying in the waters, slender creepers tracing patterns in the water and countless flocks of birds chirping away, bringing the lake to life” (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 2). Here, the children herd buffaloes to the lake, carry bundles of lotus roots, forage for delectable fruits, endure the persistent leeches, employ lake mud as a hemostatic agent, and contend with the thick foliage. While herding cattle near Kolleru, Srinivasa and his companions (Baby, Dasu, Kishtdu, Lakshmi, Pottodu, and Rajulu) indulge in delectable, fresh lotus fruits and drink straight from the stream. During the scorching heat of summer months, “countless birds from across the world would come like faraway travellers to brighten the land with their colours” and turn the “place vibrant with the sound of their music” (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 10). As this lake has been home to over twenty million birds, the trilling “songs of birds” and “calls of the fishermen” create a surreal site of “a hundred ragas and notes” (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 88). Therefore, Srinivasa’s memories outline the lost splendour of the nurturing ecosystem of Kolleru Lake that delivers a biologically prominent zone teeming with birds, buffaloes, fishes, and snails to bespeak an alignment between the lake and its nonhuman residents and territoria heteroglossic unity among all life forms. As Kutumbarao (2020) informs the reader:

There was no dearth of fodder in *Mothevarilanka*. There were water plants, bulrushes, grasses of every kind and long-stemmed lotuses. Because the green fodder was so plentiful the cattle that went there would graze as long as they could, then stand and chew the cud peacefully and when they got tired they began to play with each other, chasing and teasing each other. They would graze again and then go to the *Peddagundam* and drink water to their fill, play about in the water, and then come back to the island and take a last graze. (pp. 98-99)

Kutumbarao recreates the magnificence and vitality of the lost world of Kolleru through the lens of Srinivasa’s nostalgia to facilitate a localised connection between humans and nonhuman creatures. He adopts an intense ecological perspective to

attack neoliberal aesthetics that prioritise economic advancement at the expense of both human and nonhuman existence and contribute to climate change and environmental pillage. On the one hand, this kind of eco-nostalgia lays out an imaginative paradigm to restore the damaged nature to its former, authentic condition during periods of rejuvenation. On the other hand, it promotes place-based awareness as a means of self-preservation to offer methods for inspecting environmentally compromised, territorialized, and endangered natural places in territorialization. As we read:

The water was full of fish, crabs, snails, snakes, leeches [...] not just one but as far as one could see a range of different forms of water life. On the water a wealth of green grasses waving in the breeze. Feeding on these grasses the cattle, birds and insects. All living things depending completely on nature and mingling with nature in complete harmony, Kolleru seemed to reveal a great and miraculous truth. (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 101)

This sense of spatial belonging is crucial to understanding “topophilia” to explore the idea of ecological entanglement, the “affective bond between people and place or setting” (Tuan, 1974, p. 4) on the changing, troubled planet. Topophilia concentrates on a sense of spatial attachment to denote how addressing ecological issues necessitates acknowledging the emotional connections between individuals and their surroundings. Here, the lake not only intricately involves human thoughts and feelings but also blends the present with the unsullied, pastoral past and the future, inner with outer cycles, and private with the collective. This symbiotic relationship is “the nature of immediate experience and aesthetic appreciation; the nature we have destroyed and polluted and are asked to conserve and preserve” (Soper, 1995, p. 125).

### **Hydrocolonialism as a Disruptive Mode of Ecological Entanglement in *Softly Dies a Lake***

The precarious projection of Kolleru Lake in *Softly Dies a Lake* establishes hydrocolonialism as one of the most urgent threats to the erasure of human civilisation, as well as nonhuman organisms, here on Earth. The section attempts to analyse how the text virulently denounces the human-driven ecological infringements of Kolleru Lake by highlighting the oppressive mechanisms of hydrocolonial activities. Isabel Hofmeyr’s notion of hydrocolonialism is an emerging subfield within the rubric of postcolonial environmental humanities to accentuate how the constant pollution of waterbodies “signals a commitment to understanding a world indelibly shaped by imperial uses of water” (Hofmeyr, 2019, p. 13). The neological term “hydrocolonialism” combines the two words ‘hydro’ and ‘colonialism’ to produce a tool for interrogating hegemonic control of aquatic space, humans, and nonhuman others. The theoretical framework of hydrocolonialism “makes visible relations of power that have been shaped around water” (Hofmeyr, 2019, p. 13) and enables us to rearticulate and reread the narratives

of waterbodies. In pursuit of new routes within the academic discipline of oceanic studies, hydrocolonialism refers to the ongoing capitalist network, instrumentalisation, and resource extraction of the waters by national order or corporate houses. Hydrocolonialism acts as a hermeneutic for connecting to a growing interest in climate/blue humanities scholarship to “offer ways of defining literary regions and generic structures” (Hofmeyr, 2022, p. 17). As Hofmeyr (2022) describes hydrocolonial turn as a postcolonial discourse thus:

*Hydrocolonialism* riffs off the term *postcolonialism* and, like that concept, has a wide potential remit that could include colonization by way of water (various forms of maritime imperialism), colonization of water (occupation of land with water resources, the declaration of territorial waters, the militarization and geopoliticization of oceans), a colony on (or in) water (the ship as a miniature colony or a penal island), colonization through water (flooding of occupied land), and colonization of the idea of water (establishing water as a secular resource). (pp. 15-16)

“Hydrocolonialism”, according to Hofmeyr, unmoors “the literary implications opened up by overlaying the hydrological cycle” (Hofmeyr, 2023, p. 23) of the colonisation of water bodies in Third World countries. *Softly Dies a Lake* draws attention to the tearing down of the water bodies in the process of the neocolonial view of development in Pulaparru village, putting up how the charming lake becomes a phantasmagoric site in which the pernicious aftereffects of a hydrocolonial apocalypse can be located. This eco-memoir exposes how the capitalist-materialist tendencies of hydrocolonial acts within the ideological state machinery have turned Kolleru Lake into a dwindling waterbody that has sustained its inhabitants via agricultural outputs, fish, fibre, and fodder for a long time. The utilisation of renewable wealth for fundamental requirements, the establishment of fishing ponds, and the incursion of the unplanned industrial aquaculture sector have gradually made Kolleru a hotbed of vast pollution in a number of forms. Apart from these, the influx of industrial discharges from agrochemical plants, sugar factories, tanneries, paper, and rice mills, pesticides, various expanding sewage effluents from neighbouring areas of the municipal corporation and enterprises, and approximately eighteen thousand tons of inorganic fertiliser residues and organic debris from paddy lands via the Krishna Canal are also discharged into the water of the lake. These harmful elements have been destroying the site “full of greenery, grasses, bulrushes, fragrant flowering shrubs, and a wealth of other wild green weeds and colourful flowers swaying in the breeze” (Kutumbarao, 2020, pp. 4-5) for the last few decades. Since 1982, the Kolleru Lake Development Authority has been implementing multiple measures to restore the lake and its surrounding habitats, safeguard the environment, and enhance the aquatic flora and fauna.

Postcolonial hydrocolonialism is “both material and symbolic” in that “it works through a material-spatial separation of the resource and through the symbolic humiliation and discrimination perpetuated on the thirsty” (Nayar, 2024, p. 59). *Softly Dies a Lake* sketches how the local ecosystem of the fluid lake goes through a series of changes from grasslands into a diluted space infected with macrophytes

and eutrophication. At the same time, the nearby areas have been identified as hyper-eutrophic based on specific abiotic characteristics courtesy of the material conditions of mindless capitalist hydrocolonialism. The reduction of dissolved oxygen due to impediments to the unobstructed water flow and sporadic discharge of metabolite-laden effluents (mercury, arsenic, lead, cadmium, zinc, and copper) from fish ponds make the water of Kolleru Lake inappropriate for consumption. As Kutumbarao (2020) reveals:

Because the oxygen in the Krishna canal has gone down completely and it has emerged that the reason for it is that all kinds of waste are being led into it. From the fish food to the medicines everything is toxic waste. All that rots further and flows into the Kolleru. (p. 194)

This excerpt showcases a grim portrayal of the aquatic ecosystem to ponder over how the hydrocolonial acts indiscriminately defile natural resources of water bodies inhospitable to biological forms. As hydrocolonialism “has produced and will continue to produce a chaotic plurality of ecological disorders” (Hofmeyr, 2019, p. 13-14), the novel holds how the atmospheric pollution in Kolleru Lake has led to floods, diminished fertility of land unsuitable for agriculture, and a contaminated pond serving as a breeding ground for pathogens and hazardous trash. Hydrocolonialism becomes an alternative form of postcolonial ecocriticism to create a space for the materiality of the terrestrial water to emerge as an agential force against the imposed order of the totalitarian regime. Therefore, the text is an implicit, sharp critique of the eventual slow violence of the post-industrial consumerist and capitalist-technocratic structure that is “a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space” (Nixon, 2011, p. 2) by ensuring ‘biopower’ through the lives of the living in numerous ways.

Hydrocolonialism supplies “one route for engaging with this liquid violence, tracing the painful imaginaries that emerge as forms of imperial and neo-imperial power compel bodies onto, into, and under water” (Hofmeyr, 2023, p. 31). It can be looked upon as merely an aspiration towards hegemonic power politics detached from the macroscale of natural harmony to extend terrestrial domination on the water bodies and their landscapes. In this narrative, Srinivasa details how the hydrocolonial impositions of the “hands greedy for wealth” (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 2) consistently jeopardise the stability of the ecosystem of the lake, mainly how it wrecks the thirty-four thousand hectares of the Ramsar wetland in the procedure of the extensive land reclamation for agricultural purposes. The duplicitous administration and cunning politicians sought to undermine the protection of the wetland, enacting plans to “release the rest from Wetland Protection Act and take over the released fifty-five acres into their control” (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 195). They install irrigation hand pumps in the middle of the lake to extract water from five hundred acres of Kolleru demography and capture fish by destroying the rich underwater biodiversity of flora and fauna. Eventually, the insidious cyclicality of hydrocolonial power structure shatters aquatic life to claim ownership of a space that is not their own to inflict disproportionate harm upon the life forms, both

human and nonhuman, in the northeastern region of Andhra Pradesh. Of these heinous hydrocolonial actions, Kolleru Lake has desiccated the potential breakdown of natural food chains and the disappearance of diverse species in several parts of South India. These calamities from green crimes perpetrated by the joint operations of government and business entities in their reckless expansion and profit-seeking motifs have an indelible impact manifested as mental and physical defects that persistently affect individuals for generations. In the face of impending ecological disaster, they signal that “the Anthropocene has begun to loom on the horizon of our present” (Chakrabarty, 2021, pp. 35–36) and resonate with the collective “short—or medium-term psychological suffering as well as a permanent ontological crisis” (Rastogi, 2020, p. 215). These crimes also underscore how hydrocolonialism denotes the control of water bodies as a monstrous unnatural embodiment of erroneous human ‘development’ in Developing countries.

Hydrocolonialism locates subaltern struggles against the politico-economic power of autocratic regimes, as well as the pejorative effects of climate catastrophe on postcolonial subjects. This eco-narrative traverses how the local villagers’ pursuit of wealth has seriously harmed the aquatic ecosystem while the authorities have neglected the devastated ecologies it manufactures. Not only the capitalist infrastructure and governmental policies but also Vaddis’s hydrocolonial acts contribute to the depletion of the lake’s resources by controlling the fish populations that have historically sustained the residents. The ecology of the lake is deeply affected by collective agriculture of six years, mainly due to the greedy Vaddis’ laborious construction of hundreds of fishing ponds and their extensive bird hunting. Srinivasa expresses apprehensions over climate change and the erosion of traditional lifestyles, stemming not just from the degradation of natural ecosystems in the exercises of uncontrolled industrialisation but also from motivated human behaviours. He recognises the role of local people in persistent natural hazards, particularly the threats they pose to deteriorating aquatic ecosystems in their dominion over the environment in their insatiable quest for monetary gains. As the text narrates:

Our village *Vaddis* have flourished on much because of the fish ponds. Recently they put in a petition for an airport in our village because some fish were getting spoilt in the lorry. The Income Tax fellows came and raided their houses. In each house, they found gunny sacks filled with five hundred and thousand rupee notes under their cots. (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 191)

The Vaddis’ assertion of exclusive ownership over their catches of fish from Kolleru Lake instead of distributing them equitably among the local people results in a socioeconomic divide among marginalised villagers in Pulaparru. This distortion and militarisation of waterbodies lead us to look upon the ramifications of hydrocolonialism as comparable to territorial conflicts in a succession of ravages in South Asian countries. In the words of Kutumbarao (2020):

The collective farming went well for five or six years [...] As soon as everyone began to have some money each one thought he was a hero. These people began to say, why

should the Vaddis have the fish in Chinnagundam? The Vaddis said, not just the Chinnagundam but even the fish in the creeks you have made to let water into the fields belong to us. (p. 189)

It represents how hydrocolonialism signifies how various colonial forms of subjugation have persisted beyond colonial times to carry on with producing undesired effects on the ecology. From the perspective of a youthful interlocutor, the novel serves as a requiem for the environment of a lake that not only supports diverse flora and fauna but also invigorates the tightly-knit communities of Pulaparru village. These hydrocolonial activities spark eco-injustice against localised pollution and the widespread impacts of climate change that disrupt standard weather patterns and cause droughts and floods. Three natural elements—air, water, and soil— are now irrevocably intertwined with the repercussions of global, liberal capitalist modernity—plastic, petroleum, and hazardous chemicals. This pronounced accumulation of pollutants functions as a geological and manmade earth-altering force to compose the material embodiments of global and planetary histories in contemporary times. In *Softly Dies a Lake*, “the Government [...] could not even see these villages or these people. These people did not even know that there were governments and that their troubles could be ended” (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 157). It announces that the intricacy and magnitude of the environmental predicament, the disparity between production and consumption, substantial profits, and externalised costs connote those environmental injustices that often risk beyond comprehensibility.

### **Solastalgia as an Alternative Way of Grieving the Ecological Disaster in *Softly Dies a Lake***

This section indicates how ecological degradation, fabricated by the native people of Pulaparru, the political ideologies, and the capitalist worldviews, constructs solastalgia in *Softly Dies a Lake*. The notion of solastalgia “has much to offer those who seek clarification about the relationship between the state of human emotions and the state of the built and natural environment” (Albrecht, 2020, p. 9). It is an overarching hypothesis to address eco-anxiety and other emotional responses to climate pillage in its exhibition of longing for something that is either already gone or may be lost in the upcoming years. According to Glenn Albrecht (2005), “solastalgia” is the feelings of loss, anguish, and sorrow “caused by the loss or lack of solace and the sense of isolation connected to the present state of one’s home and territory” (p. 48). It is intimately linked to continuous environmental alterations, manifesting as psychological scars or existential sorrow in individuals after unforeseen changes in their surroundings exacerbated by an interstellar of modern science and capital-dense economies. It encapsulates “the recognition of that type of despair within an individual or a community connected to the loss of an endemic sense of place” (Albrecht, 2005, p. 46) while still living in it. In other words, solastalgia brings to the surface an innovative tool for looking

at a variety of socioeconomic contexts related to the deplorable encounter with the changing climate and its adverse effects.

This “place-based distress in the face of the lived experience of profound environmental change” (Albrecht et al., 2007, p. S96) includes not only the mourning of past losses but also the anticipation of future ruination. As climate disasters are connected to the neo-colonialist exploitation of resources, vulnerable groups in the Global South have been experiencing solastalgia, “a globally significant source of psychoterratic distress” (Albrecht et al., 2007, p. S98), for the last decades. Therefore, solastalgia is “an appropriate term to define and describe the loss of the sense of place, especially an endemic sense of place” in “local scale and regional desolation of the landscape seen as ‘home’” (Albrecht 2020, p. 13). The sublimation of solastalgia positions the landscapes we inhabit as more than just human environments; they are essential in shaping our psychological identities and those of others in a postcolonial society.

In *Softly Dies a Lake*, the perception of solastalgia and place-based sadness of the underprivileged inhabitants of Palaparru against the extensive effects of climate emergency and environmental degradation is recorded through the microcosmic depiction of Srinivasa’s act of acknowledgement. Acute climate plunder and insane ecological bulldozing result in the adverse state of solastalgia, characterised by feelings of desolation, wretchedness, dread, discomfort, fear, anxiety, and a loss of sense of self, belonging, and familiarity. As the novel comprises several eco-disastrous components that demolish the native “sense of place” and cause the inhabitants to lose “the potential for solace from their home environment”, the villagers are subject to “solastalgia” (Albrecht, 2020, p. 12). The protagonist begins the eco-memoir by contrasting the transitional realm lodged between past and present, as well as the delightful demography of Kolleru of his childhood days with the disjointed lake. Srinivasa’s planetary memories in this narrative prove to impart an evocative depiction of the conversion of Kolleru Lake from a cultivator of existence “dense with plants and creepers and flowers” (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 1) into a living inferno, “a filthy pond, a breeding ground for germs, a danger to the environment, a toxic net for birds” (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 2). His solastalgia gradually erodes the pleasure associated with returning to the aching joys of his childhood and adolescence while instilling a sense of terror about the traumatic transition of that familiar location.

This metamorphosis sums up a “poignant moment [...] of solastalgia” at the time “individuals directly experience the transformation of a loved environment” (Albrecht, 2005, p. 46). After observing this “image of destruction and death” (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 2), the sexagenarian narrator asks, “Where had the rows of ducks floating like streams of flowers gone? Where had the sounds of birds rising like scattered blooms gone?” (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 1). The fiction culminates in the distressing and lamentable recognition that Kolleru Lake of Srinivasa’s youth has vanished and erected into a desiccating waterbody of suffocating pollutants. As the noxious pollution of “the regional landscape (place) has [...] been a direct

cause of solastalgia” (Albrecht et al., 2007, p. S96), the novel advocates the need for a more profound understanding of solastalgia. It implies how the eco-novel deals with “the existential and lived experience of negative environmental change” (Albrecht, 2005, p. 39) about the experiences of local people in the climatic and territorial annexation. Therefore, solastalgia furnishes a platform to talk about the “conceptual clarification to the experience of people whose home environment was being changed in unwelcome ways” (Albrecht, 2020, p. 9).

As Kolleru has turned into a cesspool of filth and muck, draughts and floods have increased, and the deformations from ecological disturbances in the local people’s lives are now glaringly evident. The text spells out how Kolleru is likened to a financial commodity and how the constricting ideologies of pervasive neo-colonialist imperatives govern human interactions with nature. The capitalist effect is evident in the soundscape: it obstructs animal communication, compels birds to modify their sweet songs, and contributes to a myriad of psychosomatic ailments in people due to elevated noise levels. It conveys how solastalgia evinces “an emotional state that is increasingly being generated by the negative forcings of the Anthropocene, the era of human dominance over all Nature” (Albrecht, 2020, p. 19). As a location epitomises the conjunction of a community with nature, the obliteration of place within the supermodernity of an industrial-scientific paradigm designates feelings of alienation and a disassociated relationship with the waterbody. Many layers of solastalgia are most powerfully expressed in the author’s incisive condemnation of corporate avarice and the rampant abuse of the environment in the forms of subaltern outcries. The villagers “strongly empathise with the idea that the earth is their home and that witnessing events destroying endemic place identity (cultural and biological diversity) at any place on earth is personally distressing to them” (Albrecht, 2005, p. 49). They experience chronic anguish from solastalgia engineered by the loss of cherished locations and their spiritual ecology that has “connected to the alleviation of distress or to the provision of comfort in the face of distressing” (Albrecht, 2020, pp. 11-12).

As “solastalgia is the outcome of social and economic forces that are, in turn, the result of deliberate political policy” (Albrecht, 2020, p. 20), the protest movement of Srinivasa and Radhakrishna, along with the village elders, plays a pertinent role in this novel. Although these manufactured mutations dismantle the relationship between humans and nonhumans in the Kolleru Lake basin, villagers have little awareness of its detrimental, malignant effects at first. Srinivasa utters, “Today we have given up thinking responsibly or thinking about our villages at all. Not just us but everyone. We have all turned into voters but not responsible citizens” (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 196). His geo-samaritan acts symbolise the “resistance to the power and arrogance of both government and corporate bodies to silence and isolate public participation in the development approval and environmental monitoring processes” (Albrecht, 2005, p. 54). Experiencing solastalgia, these oppressed individuals retain affection for their spatial origins and want the restoration of its positive attributes to subscribe to their affirmative sense of place

identification and ecological alignment before the transition of spatiality. However, “all three elements of its etymology [solastalgia]—solace, desolation, and nostalgia—were made to have clear connections” (Albrecht, 2020, p. 14) to their grief about the demise of Kolleru Lake.

Kolleru Lake experiences a progression from meadows to rugged terrain, fostering a bioregional consciousness that transcends mere affection for nature and promotes a deeper mindful connection with the ecology. The “pining for *lost places*, for places we have once been in yet can no longer re-enter” (Albrecht, 2005, p. 43) in *Softly Dies a Lake* leads to a sense of place pathology. Such pain at losing the homelessness of one’s habitat generates “solastalgia”, particularly the moment “there is the lived experience of the physical desolation of home” (Albrecht et al., 2007, p. S96). As solastalgia stipulates emotional reactions to ecological alterations that disrupt our conjunction with nature, the helpless villagers grieve the violation:

That evening they looked at the Kolleru that had vanished and thinking of the enormity of the natural bounty that was destroyed with it forever they all grieved. They realised their wrong but realised it too late. Looking at the dry, barren, lifeless Kolleru one last time and thinking of the Kolleru of their childhood they set off for their homes. (Kutumbarao, 2020, p. 197)

These words inherently manifest the cataclysmic environmental consequences of human actions that transform their natural milieu into an unsettlingly familiar but distinctly horrific space. This quotation also points out how the trope of solastalgia acknowledges “the deep integration of humanity with nature [...] that human emotions such as grief and grieving are likely to follow from the desolation of that integration” (Albrecht, 2020, p. 13). This self-induced solastalgia is a prohibited longing for the glorifying past, marked by an idealised environment in Kolleru, as well as a forbidden desire for the hopeful future. It also suggests how solastalgia “offers hope in that damaged places can be repaired” (Albrecht, 2020, p. 15) as an alternative way of countering ecological exploitations to achieve environmental justice.

### **Conclusion**

*Softly Dies a Lake* interprets the ruthless collapse of the whole ecosystem through the depletion of a lake and, therefore, emphasises the need for humans to coexist sustainably with nature in the twenty-first century. The writer is concerned with the interconnections between oppressed communities and their bioregion to conduct a re-evaluation of the postcolonial method of the erection of the modern nation-state. Srinivasa’s physical and psychological connections to and reliance on the freshwater lake enable the land of Pulaparru to act as a repository of memory and a source of hope and resolution. It is also a “move towards a more biocentric worldview, an extension of ethics, a broadening of humans’ conception [...] to include nonhuman life forms” (Branch et al., 1996, p. xiii). This study elucidates

how the anchoring idea of solastalgia, theorised as a consequence of anthropogenic environmental change, displays the chaotic scenario of natural catastrophes in the water sphere of Kolleru. This article contributes to academic discussions on the psychosocial impact of climate crisis in a deserted landscape that seems to be a space devoid of human dignity, justice, and rights. It also demonstrates how the eco-memoir warns us about the upcoming eco-disaster and offers well-documented visions of hope to combat the apparent hopelessness of the subcontinental ecology. While analysing the reasons for eco-grief associated with the psyche of the villagers, *Softly Dies a Lake* negotiates with the planetary necessity of incorporating the ethics of ecological caring and reciprocity more than clinically illustrating environmental entanglements for the betterment of the future.

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# From Simile to Metaphor: Writing Life and Liberty

*Nimmi Nalika Menike*

## Abstract

Literature, as a space constructed through language, is often in harmony with nature to create a safe environment to accommodate all forms of life while offering a profound understanding of life and liberation, especially when the monotony of everyday life and language becomes unbearable with its innumerable desires for power, control, and ownership. Hence, this paper intends to delve into the idea of life and liberation offered by Shyam Selvadurai in the *Mansions of the Moon* sheltering Yasodhara left by Siddhartha. It also explores how Selvadurai employs nature and the environment to infuse Yasodhara with a deep sense of freedom from belonging and attachments.

**Key words:** literature, nature, environment, liberation, belonging

This I have heard, mitto: A woman, thinking a river calm and peaceful, enters it with a blissful mind, intending to cleanse and rejuvenate herself. Yet, once she has waded in, she finds herself caught in a strong current and swept along. Helpless, she watches her clothes on the shore become specks in the distance. Soon, the river narrows, the banks drawing close, and she sees grass, sawgrass, reeds, creepers and bushes, all hanging into the river. As she goes past the grass, she tries to cling to it, but it breaks off in her hands. She clings to the sawgrass next, but it cuts her hands. She clings to the creeper, the reeds, even the bushes, but nothing can withstand the current and she is carried along by the river. (Selvadurai, 2023, p. 359)

The above lines quoted from *Mansions of the Moon* by Shyam Selvadurai implies the impossibility of maintaining self-sameness due to the presence of the other. The otherness, both anterior and interior to the self, interrupts the continuity of

being with its fascination, obsession, and attachment to itself. This awareness of this impossibility, however, cannot stop self-desire for belonging. It instead creates, as Levinas (1969) argues, a war-like situation where the self-attempts to resist the other. This resistance can be multifarious and gets further complex when caught in language of words that fails to be exact of what it expresses, hence perpetually ridden with the guilt of betrayal (Blanchot, 1995; Derrida, 2005). Understanding many forms and means of resistance, therefore, is prerequisite not only to understand how it affects our desire to love, respect, and honour or to hate, desert, avenge and to murder another but also to realize and acknowledge how we approve of violence for our safety, comfort, and benefit. Selvadurai's *Mansion of Moons* delineates such unsettling complexity and contradiction operative in humans with a critical examination of how desire for belonging and power with its various ramifications become hindrance to human liberation from suffering.

### **Desire and Suffering**

Selvadurai begins a journey in language, writing (about) the journey of Siddhartha who stepped out from home in search of liberation. The journey without a destination is an attempt that does not assure success. Perhaps, success is not even a criterion or a measurement for someone like Siddhartha who walked into the void leaving behind everything that he had in his possession making him yet another agent of the discourse of power and success. Siddhartha's exploration of liberation, first of all, demonstrates his vulnerable exposure to the outside and readiness to accept what is *to come*. Such absolute openness in Siddhartha's attempt for liberty becomes fundamental to Selvadurai's desire to write *Mansions of the Moon* sheltering Yasodhara's suffering. His desire for writing is addressed by writing down the desires of Siddhartha and Yasodhara. Writing desire is a challenge that demands the writer's absolute submission to language. Such surrender is prerequisite to his liberation as a writer. Therefore, to write is to suffer in/from language for being and language "free of any center" (Foucault, 1987, p. 25).

Selvadurai's liberty with Siddhartha and Yasodhara happens through writing in which he is unconditionally exposed to the suffering pertaining to the very enterprise. Suffering is integral to writing. He opens *Mansions of the Moons* with Yasodhara's longing for two things; one is "the deluge" against "THE HOT SEASON"; the other is to join "the women workers in the raja's field" (Selvadurai, 2023, p. 1). However, none of them seems to be possible. Considering the former, she can do nothing but wait till the rain falls. Rain remains as a possibility though the knowledge about the exact time of its coming is impossible. In any case, there has been "an occasional drizzle" along with "thunder and rumbling in the skies" (Selvadurai, 2023, p. 1). Hence, the only thing she can do is wait for the rain *to come*. Yet, the latter is different in comparison to the former as it is a man-made condition, therefore, can prolong till her last breath unless *she* takes an initiative to challenge the constraints imposed on her. The novel informs us, on one hand, about the strict command of conduct and behaviour demanded from Yasodhara as

a widow for ten years since the disappearance of Siddhartha. It, on the other hand, hints at the possibility of inventing another condition against the one already operative under a rigid discourse of patriarchy. Therefore, *IF* Yasodhara desires to change her present condition, she is *capable of change*. Nevertheless, the question here is whether Yasodhara is ready to confront her present condition. Selvadurai offers us various approaches adopted by Yasodhara to bear life after Siddhartha's departure by metaphorically inventing her character with reference to a river—the water, the ripples, the currents, the depth, the size, the flow, the banks and the journey.

River as a metaphor is decisive in the novel as it evocatively presents and expresses the difference between nature and the human. Selvadurai's depiction of Yasodhara's indefinite longing for love, freedom, and stability for life communicates, on the one hand, her attachment to the future through the attachments to pleasure and pain in the past, and, on the other hand, her detachment from the present. She desires life against the one in the present *as if* there is another life *as such*, already exterior and to be achieved, and we see her longing to welcome and embrace *that* life against the one *now* and *here*. The writer attempts to write Yasodhara's condition, unknown and unexplainable even to herself, through an indirect expression of a metaphor. River, the "central metaphor" in the novel (Selvadurai, 2023, pp. xvii - xviii), is the only way not only for the writer to invent Yasodhara but also for the fictional character Yasodhara to invent her life, unavailingly though, against herself being a character of a story offered to be narrated by anyone including Siddhartha. Yasodhara in the *Mansions of the Moon* can be empowered for liberation only through a profound understanding of the sufferings that she endures being the closest woman in the tale of Siddhartha's life wherein Siddhartha's liberation from *samsaric* suffering is magnificently erected and venerated.

Yasodhara's voyage for liberation is presented through the self-analysis of her life where language becomes instrumental to self-pity. When she hears the news of the reappearance of Siddhartha in the city of Rajagaha, she erupts with anger, sadness, and frustration.

I wish he was dead, why is he alive, why?

[...]

In her room, she paces, fingers twisting the pleats of her dhoti, then sits on a stool, leaning forward, hands clasped tightly on her knees. "Yes, yes," she murmurs, "why isn't he dead, why?" Whatever ground she has gained in the last ten years, whatever little stability and happiness she has found, is slipping away from her. No—he, her former husband, has snatched it from her. (Selvadurai, 2023, p. 2)

### **Life in the River**

The commiseration often appears in the novel through Yasodhara's feelings resulting in the comparison of her life to a "seedpod" fallen to the river and carried by "river current" (Selvadurai, 2023, pp 67). It shows us two different things at the

same time, situating herself against a river: on one side, her approach to life; on the other side, her approach to the river. Considering Yasodhara's mind as depicted in the novel, the former becomes meaningful only when it is seen in relation to and with reference to the later. A seedpod is crucial for the growth and dissemination of some seeds. It is designed to contain another life within —the seed. The seed is attached to the inner wall of the pod until it is adequately matured to be independent of the pod. When the time comes, either the pod splits open releasing the seed(s) or just falls to the ground. In any case, it is destined to be separated from the thing that it creates, contains, nourishes, and protects and is deprived of claiming ownership to the same. Now, in the *Mansion of the Moons*, Yasodhara sees herself *like* a seed pod. Selvadurai's language of the simile evokes the natural and biological function of a female. It also, on the other hand, hints at the possibility of a dangerous gulf resulting from the act of comparison where language offers to present and describe one through another; so, doing, one is expected to be understood through the other, for which knowledge of the other is prerequisite.

Now, the knowledge of the other through comparison becomes problematic as it is based on the point of view of the self. Yasodhara's understanding through the comparison of her life to the seedpod fallen to the river is derived from her analytical skills applied on the empirical. The conclusion of the comparison is, first of all, a result of active participation of the self in seeing, reading, analyzing, recognizing, defining, naming, and locating the other. The nature and the function of the seedpod that appears in the language of comparison is thus no more the one in nature; it instead is the one moved in language — the one that of widowed Yasodhara in the *Mansion of the Moons*. Discussing the problematic of keeping ultimate reliance on the expressionability of/in language, Blanchot (1982;1985) and Derrida (2005) warn us against the possible betrayal of language as it cannot be exact in expressing the intended. It expresses either more or less without being exact. Hence, Yasodhara's approach to analyze life through comparison is already complex, perhaps even misleading since the gap between the things in comparison gets widened depending on how one locates him/herself against the other on the basis of the self-ability to see the other. The issue here is how far can one see even in the act of seeing? How can seeability define the difference between the two things under comparison? On the other hand, how can this comparison help Yasodhara to change the present condition of her life? As Derrida argues elsewhere, one does not have to compare one thing with another as the difference between the two cannot be eliminated at any rate. Therefore, Yasodhara's realization of her condition through the comparison can only aggravate her despair while underestimating her capacity to survive separations and detachments. As Selvadurai writes, Yasodhara continues with this knowledge gained through the method of comparison until she realizes the meaninglessness of the same. The distance between the two things in comparison continues despite the linguistically constructed link through the word *like*. The link collapses soon when the word is removed and they are free to move in any direction. Now, the challenge in front of

Yasodhara is whether she is ready to let go of the word that links her life in comparison to the seedpod fallen to the river. And, that does not happen effortlessly and overnight. Moreover, she should not wait until the word voluntarily resigns from the vocabulary; instead, she should try to find an exit from both the word and the desire that link her in comparison not only to the seedpod fallen to the river but also to all other nouns in language ready to be picked up to be compared to life.

The novel shows us how Yasodhara tries to find an exit from the stressful present by shifting places and people with the purpose of finding a better life. These shifts full of departures and arrivals exhaust her *like* the woman's character in a story that she had heard. The woman in the story,

thinking a river calm and peaceful, enters it with a blissful mind, intending to cleanse and rejuvenate herself. Yet, once she has waded in, she finds herself caught in a strong current and swept along. Helpless, she watches her clothes on the shore become specks in the distance. Soon, the river narrows, the banks drawing close, and she sees grass, sawgrass, reeds, creepers and bushes, all hanging into the river. As she goes past the grass, she tries to cling to it, but it breaks off in her hands. She clings to the sawgrass next, but it cuts her hands. She clings to the creeper, the reeds, even the bushes, but nothing can withstand the current and she is carried along by the river. (Selvadurai, 2023, p. 359)

A story can be fascinating. Similarly, one can be fascinated by a story to the extent that she/he may feel the urge to identify herself/himself with a character in the story. Yet, is it possible to identify oneself with a character that is found in a story or otherwise? The desire for identity can only continue as a desire which can never be fulfilled as a whole due to the unavoidable relationship between self and the other, wherein the arrival of the other and the otherness of the other cannot be predicted and identified in advance. Hence, the resistance initiated by the self against the other is futile for the self is unaware of how, what, when, and from where the other can come. Now, coming back to the novel, Yasodhara's desire to identify herself with reference to the woman's character in the story that she had heard is determined by how she had defined herself against the happenings of her life in terms of a simile in language - the seedpod. It is through the language of the simile of the seedpod fallen to the river that she is positioned against the river creating a distance between herself and the river. As discussed above, the distance is prerequisite to any simile instrumental to comparison, and the distance between the two things under comparison neither disappears nor does it get eliminated despite its contribution to create an understanding and knowledge regarding the same. The preposition *like* marks not only the distance and the proximity between the two things under comparison but also the fact that one is different from the other. Now, it is this difference, on the one hand, that is exhibited in Yasodhara's desire to identify herself with the woman's character in the story, and, on the other hand, the impossibility of identifying herself *as* the woman *in* the character. The difference-cum-gap is rewarding for both the women — Yasodhara and the character — as it enables them to become other than who and what they are to themselves

and to others. The reward is of and from language for women who are caught in a knowledge found through the language of comparison, and Selvarai leads the movement of empowering Yasodhara to make use of the difference between her and the character in the story for her liberation so that she could become more than a character in a story centered around Siddhartha.

### **Life-River**

The writer moves with Yasodhara from one place to another in language, and in each such movement is directed to outside and far from her comfort zone. The repercussion of the grave incident between the Sakiya and the Koliya is the last blow that hits Yasodhara hard leaving her with no option but to leave the husband's palace and the locality (Selvadurai, 2023, pp. 334 - 396). If not, she should decide whether to be in 'the courtesan houses or bonded slavery' (Selvadurai, 2023, pp. 346-347). Consequently, she decides to step outside both the palace and the locality, becoming a model for other women around her to follow her, if interested. As the writer suggests, it is a step taken into homelessness yet determined by the desire to be admitted to the Order of the Awakened one. She pursues her purpose despite several rejections by Siddhartha until the request is, at least, partially granted with "eight rules and all the others". (Selvadurai, 2023, P. 395)

Selvadurai's writing of Yasodhara stepping outside her shelter at the pinnacle of her sufferings as a daughter, wife, mother, and a widow is a writing step of/for liberation which, on the one hand, writes Yasodhara's endeavor for liberation from sufferings by dismantling her desire to find life outside the present moment, and on the other hand, enables the writer to liberate himself from the very thing that he writes so that, as Blanchot (1995) argues, he is free to write again. Therefore, the writing mo(ve)ment of liberation, which is also a liberating mo(ve)ment for both the character and the writer, is the present moment wherein the writer moves by *becoming* both language and writing at the same time while being the writer and the one in writing — the character and the creator. In this mo(ve)ment of writing, one becomes an-other without being aware of what it is becoming; it is a process without having anything to be processed. Hence, one is free to become anything or anyone without getting attached to any of that it becomes. It is such ultimate liberation that is desired by Yasodhara after her years of suffering due to her attachments to many things including her desire to understand herself in comparison to a seedpod fallen to the river — the simile. Selvadurai offers how her desire to be like the seedpod slowly drips away from her mind when she slowly yet attentively gives up on fighting against the present— the moment, **now** and **here**, which does not require any knowledge found upon analysis and comparison. The need for an identity and identification through the simile of the seedpod gradually becomes insignificant to Yasodhara when she becomes passive in front of the forces which are beyond her control. After many days of traveling from one place to another under adverse conditions in search of liberation, she does not have energy to resist anything any longer. All she can do is to accept life as it unfolds

without “expecting” it to be this or that. Selvadurai writes how Yasodara is delivered to a truth at the bank of a river with a response she gave to a question posed by Rahula.

“Amme,” Rahula says after a moment, “in all the time you’ve been here, my pita has never come to visit you.”

“Ah,” Yasodhara says, realizing for the first time the truth of this. “You are right, putha. And here I wasn’t even aware that he hadn’t come.” After a moment, she corrects herself. “Not unaware, but rather not expecting.”

She travelled for fifteen days, endured heat, bleeding feet, starvation, thirst, illness - even the Waterless Wilderness. She is no longer the girl of sixteen who married her cousin. She is not the wife who struggled to keep her husband in their marriage but failed. She is not even the same kind of mother she was a few months ago. One self-left Kapilavastu; a different self sits here on the banks of this river. And this new self is also changing — yes, she can feel it — becoming less seedpod and more river. (Selvadurai, 2023, P. 396)

Yasodhara’s inner transformation is a result of an inward journey that started happening along with her departure from the palace. Her wandering through fields and forests with a wounded body and a mind to meet the Awaken one for his approval of the entry of women to the Order takes her to the abyss of her being, granting her the opportunity to meet many different beings bearing the same name — Yasodara. Each Yasodara is related to the one in the present though the present one is different from the former ones. No method or language of analysis or comparison is adequate to identify and define the difference. On the other hand, it is not possible for Yasodhara to turn back from the journey both outward and inward at the same time. She is exposed to the unknown unconditionally. In a way, it is better to say, she is defenselessly open to accept the condition of the outside. However, her life within the shelters and the walls of any of her houses could not educate or train her adequately to be aware of the nature of the natural world. Similarly, her life as a female raised under the limits of various discourses of language and culture invented by humans did not allow her meet the crude being and crude word within — nature, the unconditioned. Had she been exposed to the nature of her inner being, she would have left the very desire to own a definition to define the one in flux; she would not have wasted her time and energy to define her form and function in comparison to another thing from nature — seedpod. Nevertheless, Selvadurai patiently takes time with Yasodhara until she realizes her delay in understanding, let alone the impossibility of claiming ownership for anything or anyone, the impossibility of belonging to herself. She understands her delay only when she is under the shelter of nature through which she is exposed to nature’s way. Among the many things of nature which exhibits nature’s way, she is perpetually fascinated by the way of rivers. Selvadurai writes the way of rivers in his flow of/in language. The constant flow is natural to the river. No river tries to go against the very thing that makes it river — the flow. Every river appears as the locus of freedom as it is free to flow aimlessly. It appears as it flows; similarly, it

flows as it appears. It presents itself all the time as fresh and different without being attached to the past or future. Thus, it is testimony for both **now** and **here**. This ever-changing nature of the river captures Yasodhara waiting for liberation from suffering. She slowly learns that freedom is not something that can be brought from outside. It is already there within if she is ready to free herself from the desire for belonging. The river passing by murmurs the freedom in its each drop, ripple, and flow, and Yasodhara in Selvadurai begins to free herself from the woman's character in the story who had compared her life to a seedpod fallen to a river. And, she is no longer the one being carried by the current of the river; instead, she is becoming the river — thought, language, life, and living.

Here, Yasodhara is certainly no longer available to herself as simile; instead, she is becoming a metaphor by becoming “more river” which is beyond comparison as she is perhaps not yet the river. There is something in between the actual river and her “becoming more river” that is unnamable and indefinable in the language of word, and it is perhaps through this narrow space between the two that Yasodhara realizes the ultimate bliss of being detached from the ties of all kinds. Nevertheless, the idea of freedom that emerges in Yasodhara is not, perhaps, the one suggested by the Awakened One, Siddhartha; rather, one that of Yasodhara offered by Selvadurai in language that is not conditioned by any given discourse of religion, gender, or community, hence, as Foucault (1987) argues referring to Blanchot's works, “free of any center, unfettered to any native soil” (p.25).

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# Han Kang and the Dendrocene

*Riccardo Gramantieri*

## Abstract

The recent award of the Nobel Prize in Literature to the South Korean writer Han Kang has drawn attention to her psychological novel *The Vegetarian* (2007), the story of a woman who refuses to eat. Although it has mainly been read from a posthuman point of view, or as a clinical case of an eating disorder, its strong symbolism lends itself to ecological considerations, especially when read together with the short story “The Fruit of My Woman” (2000), which represents a first, more fantastic and optimistic, version. In both stories, the woman stops eating in order to feed only on sunlight, like a plant. This symbolism of the tree allows us to share the ecofeminist interpretations made so far and, at the same time, to see the stories as an eschatology, a vision of a future geological era, which we can call the Dendrocene, in which plants will have replaced mankind and thus cancelled the power it exercises over nature.

**Keywords:** Dendrocene, Han Kang, “The Fruit of My Woman”, *The Vegetarian*, Trees.

## Introduction

The term Dendrocene, although not yet fully used, is not unknown in literary criticism: for example, Birgit Spengler used it in her analysis of *The Overstory* by Richard Powers (2019, p. 84); Laura op de Beke, Joost Raessens and Stefan Werning define it as an “age of the tree” in which “felling or even damaging trees has become [synonymous with] murder” (2024, p. 39). In this sense, we will read two texts by Han Kang, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2024. The author of some novels with a strong historical and social connotation, such as *Human Act* (소년이 온다, 2014) and *We Do Not Part Part* (작별하지 않는다, 2021), she is best known for *The Vegetarian* (채식주의자, 2007). Read primarily as a clinical case study of an eating disorder (MacSiniuc, 2017; Kim W-C., 2019; Almeida, Santos, 2020; Choudhury,

2021; Ratra, 2023), and at the same time as an example of posthumanism (Biscaia, 2019; Kim M., 2020; Tsimpauki, 2021; Zhang, 2021), and a critique of patriarchy (Bose, 2017; Beeston, 2020; O'Key, 2022; Finck, 2022; Tabor, 2024), the novel has a strong symbolic value that allows it to be read as an eschatology, a vision of a future age that we can call the Dendrocene, in which plants will have replaced humans. In awarding her the Nobel Prize in Literature, the Swedish Academy said about her “intense poetic prose deals with historical traumas and exposes the fragility of the human being”,<sup>1</sup> concentrating on two characteristic elements of her writing: the representation of the historical facts of her country and her style. The jury's choice speaks of human fragility, which is particularly evident in *The Vegetarian*, the story of a woman who does not become a vegetarian, as the title suggests, but who stops eating anything and feeds only on sunlight, like a plant, a fragile human being who feels forced to change. The interpretation of the novel as a story of refusal to conform to the domination of male society and the culture of meat consumption is only partial, and for this reason even the posthumanist and feminist readings that have been made examine only some aspects of the story, leaving out the ecological aspect, which is instead implied by the woman's transformation into a tree. In her intimate intentions, the woman wants to abandon the human condition and evolve to the state of a plant. A reading that is confirmed by “The Fruit of My Woman” (내여자의 열, 2000) from the novel is based on, the comparison of which allows us to read the text beyond the parameters of posthumanism and feminism, situating it within environmental theories, from ecofeminism and beyond, reading “The Fruit of My Woman” and *The Vegetarian* as a description of the transition from the current Anthropocene to the Dendrocene.

### **The story and the novel**

The story “The Fruit of My Woman” was published in Korea in 2000 and translated into English in the British online magazine *Granta* in January 2016. Divided into chapters, the first six told by the husband and the seventh by the unnamed protagonist, who ideally confesses to her mother, it is the story of the gradual transformation of a woman into a plant. It all begins with blue-green spots on the skin, which the woman thinks are bruises, and the urge to undress in the sunlight. She starts drinking a lot of water and “can't even manage half a bowl of rice in a whole day” (Kang, 2000, § 2). She also notices that she has a heightened perception of vegetal things, because even if she doesn't see them, everything seems “fresher, more alive” (Kang, 2000, § 7); he hears the sprouting of buds, the opening of petals in places near and far, and the larvae emerging from the cocoon. The husband is not frightened by this change: “My wife had never been so beautiful” (Kang, 2000, § 6). Gradually, the wife stopped speaking, her body turned completely blue-green and her legs began to cramp, preventing her from moving. She dreams of becoming a poplar, of breaking through the ceiling, of growing and soaring. When winter comes, her feet are put in pots, a bundle of roots sprouts from the inside of her thighs and dark red flowers bloom from her breasts. The arms

are branches. At the end of her life cycle, she ejects seeds as big as a pomegranate from her mouth. The husband collects them and plants them, hoping that the following spring the woman will be reborn by sprouting.

While the story is an intimate one in which the transformation is welcomed by her husband, *The Vegetarian* is a completely different tale. Whereas in the story the plant-woman continues to love her human husband while anticipating the evolution of the human species, in the novel the woman is indifferent to her husband and soon to the entire human race, which she sees as an increasingly violent species. Divided into three parts, the first narrated by the husband, the second by the brother-in-law and the third by the sister, as if the protagonist had never had a voice of her own, it all begins when Yeong-hye dreams of a deserted plain and a barn from which she escapes, stained with the blood of slaughtered flesh. From that moment on, she stops eating meat, a refusal that reaches its peak when the couple is invited to her parents' house and her father tries to force her to eat it. In rebellion, Yeong-hye slashes her wrists with a knife. The second part takes place two years later. Hospitalised for her injuries, she is transferred to a mental institution after being found topless in the garden, feeding on the sunlight. After her husband leaves her, she lives with her sister and her brother-in-law, a video artist. The latter is struck by the fact that Yeong-hye still has the Mongolian mark on her buttocks, a blue birthmark that usually disappears with development. This mark on her skin becomes an erotic obsession for him, and he imagines her painted with flowers, so he decides to make a video work with erotic content, painting her body and turning her into a real plant. Yeong-hye refuses to perform the sexual act for the video work, but when her brother-in-law has flowers painted on her body, Yeong-hye not only does not reject him, but even provokes him to have sex with her. Discovered by his sister In-hye, the man tries to jump off the balcony, but Yeong-hye is hospitalised instead. In the third episode, set a year after the previous one, she has stopped eating altogether and is admitted to the clinic, where she is diagnosed with a form of schizophrenia. Her sister, a woman well integrated into society and a professional, tries to understand Yeong-hye's motivations, as she is often found upside down, immobile, convinced that her arms are roots and her legs are branches. Destined to be fed through a tube and then sedated to prevent her vomiting, she is taken to the civil hospital to avoid death.

In many ways, the novel develops in the opposite direction to the short story. While "The Fruit of My Woman" is a fantasy story of transformation, *The Vegetarian* is realistic, and the transformation into a plant is described as a psychiatric delusion; in the story, the husband isolates himself from the world to remain close to his mutant wife, while in the novel Yeong-hye is abandoned by him; in the story, the epidermal photosynthesis is completely real, with the skin turning blue-green, while in the novel there is only the Mongolian spot to emphasize the difference from the normal epidermis, and the transformation into a plant is left to the brother-in-law's body art. What the two texts have in common is the

presentation of it is the idea that the human species can evolve into something else, real in the story and hallucinated in the novel.

### **The narrative of the dendrocene**

*The Vegetarian* has been widely read as a posthuman history in its various declinations (Bose, 2017); *Biscaia*, 2019; Kim W-C., 2019; Beeston, 2020; Kim M., 2020; Alós, 2021; Tsimpauki, 2021; Zhang, 2021; O'Key, 2022; Kim E., 2024; Tabor, 2024), a theoretical model that includes environmental considerations. It should be noted that the various “post” movements are in themselves post-anthropocentric, so it makes sense to include considerations of nature in a novel considered an example of posthumanism. The majority of critics who have dealt with it have highlighted the themes of complaint, the aspects that we could call “negative”, such as the lack of consideration for Yeong-hye from her husband and father, the lack of comfort from her mother and the lack of understanding from her sister. Instead, Rosa Moreno Redondo suggested, without going further, that Yeong-hye intends to “to change her nature and stop being human” (2019, p. 21), a consideration that can suggest a dendrocentric vision and a “positive” interpretation of history, including the acquisition of new and purposeful characteristics; a reading that highlights aspects of ecofeminism and, at the same time, proposes a different vision of the future environment.

The word Dendrocene is derived from the Greek δένδρον, dèndro (tree) and the suffix καινός, cene, (new, recent), the latter a word used as the second element of compound terms to indicate the geological chronology of planet Earth, such as Eocene, Miocene and the recent Anthropocene. With Dendrocene we can literally mean a post-anthropocene era in which plant life has replaced human life.<sup>2</sup>

A dendrocentric reading is therefore one that not only refers to the post-anthropocene, but also goes beyond the posthuman body and the post-human environment. Many critics who have read *The Vegetarian* have already emphasised the environment: Shilpa Bright spoke of an “ecofeminist novel” (Bright, 2021, p. 397), meaning that just as there seems to be no solution to the exploitation of women, there seems to be no solution to the exploitation of nature, as theorised by ecofeminism, which explains the causes of environmental degradation in terms of the need for male domination over nature. The term ecofeminism was first used by the novelist and essayist Françoise d'Eaubonne in *Le féminisme ou la mort* (1974) and popularised in the Anglo-Saxon world by Susan Griffin's *Woman and Nature* (1978). Kang's novel has been analysed from this perspective by Gizem Damla Çakmak (2021), *Christa Grewe-Volpp* (2024, pp. 48, 52), and *Rincy Chandran and Geetha R. Pai* (2017, p. 26) who equate the environment with the female body. Here we will try to go beyond the male-female dualism, that is, to go beyond the anthropos, to situate ourselves in the context of the non-human environment.

Yeong-hye rejects the violence of the human species and wants to become a plant, and Kang describes situations that are the antithesis of human. When her brother-in-law tries to seduce her, she rejects him and pushes him away, but when

he paints flowers on his body and becomes a plant-man, it is she who seduces him. In other words, she only becomes sexually receptive when her painted body is no longer human but a plant. Yeong-hye rejects the human. She is dehumanised (Kim E., 2024, p. 149). She gets rid of the human part of her person. Abhignya Sajja is one of the few scholars to emphasise not the flight from the human world, but the desire to become one with nature: “The Fruit of My Woman” “can be read as a metaphor urging the readership to strive to reach back to their roots, embrace nature and adopt ethical, peacefully co-existent modes of life. The gradual transition from human (woman) to plant is seen as a journey from being ruthlessly inhuman to becoming one with nature” (2021, p. 43), and the novel, though less explicitly, moves in the same direction. Fiona Joshi and Anishya Dani get to the heart of the novel when they write: “Yeong Hye’s veganism helped her to remain one with nature. The more she isolated herself from the society, the more she was united with nature” (2022, p. 40).<sup>3</sup> However, they do not develop the idea of Yeong-hye as alien to human society, preferring to focus on the theme of trauma.

The protagonists of Kang’s two stories become part of the environment. In “The Fruit of My Woman”, the unnamed protagonist unknowingly undresses completely and exposes herself to the sun on the veranda: “Not knowing if anyone could see me... and not even trying to hide myself... I mean, like I was some crazy woman!” (Kang, 2000, § 2). Crazy, that is, without human consciousness and at the mercy of a vegetative unconscious<sup>4</sup> in search of photosynthesis to mutate into a new species. Yeong-hye’s personality expands: she hears the leaves and insects moving. She even senses the growth of plants. While in the story the husband facilitates the transformation by planting his wife’s seeds in the vases, in the novel this evolutionary path to dendrocene is blocked by human action. Her husband, father, mother and sister all try in different ways to stop Yeong-hye’s evolution, but this does not mean that her transformation, even if only psycho-symbolic, has not begun. From the beginning, the woman is less and less human: When her husband finds her in front of the refrigerator, she is “motionless” (Kang, 2007, p. 7); the family members think that words are enough to make her eat (“just tell her not to follow this diet”, p. 28), says the mother-in-law to Yeong-hye’s husband) but she, a plant woman, is as if she doesn’t understand these words because they are human, and vice versa, the family members don’t understand the few words she says; In the morning, at breakfast with her husband, she kept “her lips pressed firmly closed as per usual, clearly not paying the slightest bit of attention to anything I might be saying” (pp. 31-32). Even in the second part of the novel there are signs of this dendrocentrism: the Mongolian bush is something ancient and pre-evolutionary (Marcati, 2020, p. 437), or a trace of photosynthesis. The woman’s voice “had no weight to it, like feathers. It was neither gloomy nor absentminded, as might be expected of someone who was ill. But it wasn’t bright or light-hearted either. It was the quiet tone of a person who didn’t belong anywhere, someone who had passed into a border area between states of being” (Kang, 2007, p. 63). She became like a landscape: “Rather than provoking lust, it was a body that made

one want to rest one's gaze quietly upon it" (2007, p. 65). After her brother-in-law has painted her with flowers, she demands that the paint never disappear: now that she is a plant, she wants to remain so, as if in a state of perpetual flowering. In the third part, when she escapes from the clinic, she is found in the woods: "Look, sister, I'm doing a handstand; leaves are growing out of my body, roots are sprouting out of my hands...they delve down into the earth. Endlessly, endlessly...yes, I spread my legs because I wanted flowers to bloom from my crotch; I spread them wide..." (2007, p. 107). While it is natural to think that trees stand with their heads (foliage) at the top and their legs (roots or feet) at the bottom, anthropomorphically, she, who is no longer human, correctly positions herself in reverse,<sup>5</sup> with her arms in the earth to collect nourishment and act as roots, while her legs, spread apart from which the sprouting foliage emerges, stretch towards the sun. She says: "I'm not an animal anymore, sister, [...] I don't need to eat, not now. I can live without it. All I need is sunlight" (2007, p. 128). And again: "Sister...all the trees of the world are like brothers and sisters" (2007, p. 144). She already belongs to another species and the drugs have no effect on her.

### **Conclusions: the revealing dream of the dendrocene against human power**

According to psychoanalysis, dream interpretation, and therefore the dream itself, is "The royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind" (Freud, 1900, p. 608); that is, it reveals what has been repressed and forgotten. There are many dreams in both "The Fruit of My Woman" and *The Vegetarian*, and several critics have identified their function within the narrative (Kim W-C., 2019; Raimy, 2020; O'Key, 2022). The interpretations so far have been Freudian, and the dream of weeping would be evidence of a repressed trauma. Becoming a plant would therefore be a reaction to something unpleasant that one does not want to remember. A dendrocentric interpretation, on the other hand, requires a vision not of the past but of the future. The psychological models proposed by psychoanalysts such as Carl Gustav Jung and the post-Freudian Wilfred R. Bion can support the dendrocentric thesis.

Jung did not believe that dreams were necessarily the expression of a trauma that had been repressed because it was unpleasant; rather, he believed that they were the description of a meaning that was not clearly given and that stemmed from an unsolved problem. At the same time, he believed that they were a compensatory dream representation in terms of the attitude of consciousness, and that they were teleological, that is to say, predictive in the sense that they gave meaning to a situation that was incomprehensible in the present but would be so in the future. On his part, Bion theorises something similar when he writes that the dream corresponds to a process of digestion of the truth, which produces knowledge and contributes to the creation of a kind of déjà-vu, which he calls *memoir of the future*,<sup>6</sup> that is "Prophecy without foresight. Prophetic hindsight" (Bion, 1992, p. 392).

In "The Fruit of My Woman" there is a dream at the origin of everything: "I

dream that I'm growing tall as a poplar. I pierce through the roof of the balcony and through that of the floor above, the fifteenth floor, the sixteenth floor, shooting up through concrete and reinforcing rods until I break through the roof at the very top. Flowers like white larvae wriggle into blossom at my tallest extremities. My trachea sucks up clear water, so taut it seems it will burst, my chest thrusts up to the sky and I strain to stretch out each branching limb. This is how I escape from this flat. Every night, mother, every night the same dream" (Kang, 2000, § 7). Even in *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye's dreams do not represent a trauma from the past, but rather foreshadow a future state. More specifically, the dawn of the age of plants, the Dendrocene. It is true that the forest can be a symbol of impenetrability (traumas removed, therefore invisible), but it is also true that the plant, the tree, is also a symbol of the vital content of the unconscious, since it is rooted in the earth. Yeong-hye, who penetrates the earth with her arms, is the human being who sinks into the mineral and inanimate world in order to become part of it. Yeong-hye dreams "Dark woods. No people. The sharp-pointed leaves on the trees, my torn feet. This place, almost remembered, but I'm lost now. Frightened. Cold" (Kang, 2007, p. 16). At first, she is afraid, but in a later dream, "I was alone, the only thing remaining in all of infinite space" (2007, p. 22), aware of a different role in a post-anthropocene world where there are no animals or humans. The protagonists' dreams describe an ancestral link between the distant past and the distant future (non-human eras), Dendrocene eras where there were and will be no carnivores, only the sun and water necessary for plant growth. As Yeong-hye explains to her sister: "Well, I was in a dream, and I was standing on my head...leaves were growing from my body, and roots were sprouting from my hands...so I dug down into the earth. On and on...I wanted flowers to bloom from my crotch, so I spread my legs; I spread them wide... [...] I need to water my body. I don't need this kind of food, sister. I need water" (pp. 123-124). Dreams prefigure future behaviour, and Kang's two texts describe a world in which human domination is cancelled out by the silent domination of plants, a situation that "The Fruit of My Woman" assumes to be utopian (there is no resistance from the husband) and *The Vegetarian* assumes to be dystopian (the men - the husband and the father - reject Yeong-hye's change; the women do not understand it). This is a speech that will become typical of Kang, who will address the theme of silent resistance, against life itself in *Greek Lessons* (희랍어 시간, 2011) and against power in *Human Acts*.

### Notes

- 1 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2024/oct/11/tell-us-what-does-nobel-laureate-han-kangs-literature-mean-to-you>
- 2 This is a theme that is symbolically present in many literary works. For example, in the "Dialogue between a Folletto and a Gnome" in Giacomo Leopardi's *Operette Morali*, a gnome is sent by his mother to find out why men "haven't bothered us for a while, and in his whole kingdom there's not a single one to be seen". After meeting

an elf, he reveals that they are all dead. The gnome is initially concerned, fearing that the world will end without human things to mark the time, but the elf tells him that this is not the case. It is true that the humans thought “For not only did they believe that there was no other reason for everything in the world to exist, except for their personal use and benefit, but they also thought that, in comparison with the human race, it all was of no consequence whatsoever” (Leopardi, 1824, p. 93), but it is also true that, just as in ancient times there were other species of animals that no longer exist, the world still exists, and “the Earth doesn’t feel that there is anything missing” (p. 95).

- 3 Fiona Joshi and Anishya Dani refer to Attention Restoration Theory (ART) developed by Rachel and Stephen Kaplan: “the time spent with nature or admiring nature can improve the mental fatigue and concentration of people. It can also relieve people from stress and help them lead a peaceful life. In this novel the protagonist experiences unexpected stress which revolves in her in the form of dreams and memories of childhood violence. Therefore Yeong-Hye tries to become one with nature which relieves her guilt of violence. For her, nature acts as the only cure which would relieve her from all the emotional torments” (Joshi, Dani, 2022, p. 41).
- 4 That the elements of the environment (trees) are connected with man is a bold hypothesis by Jung, who in the fourth conference of his seminars on Zarathustra in 1935 said: “the tree being a plant represents a very different kind of life from an animal; usually warm-blooded animals have red blood for instance, so the plant must represent a life which is really quite strange to what we would call life. And since such a symbol is used and always has been used by the collective unconscious, we must assume that we have some notion within of a kind of life in ourselves which is not animal life. This is of course a very bold hypothesis, but what do we know, after all? [...] Now, if you assume that the life of the collective unconscious is life in general, not only the life of the human species but perhaps also of animals, monkeys, horses, elephants, snakes even, then why not go further and include the life of plants? Why not assume that they are at the very foundation of our life, engrammes or archetypes which contain also the potentiality of plant life?” (Jung, 1934-1939, p. 515-516). A Jungian interpretation of the tree symbolism in Kang’s work is developed in Gramantieri (2024).
- 5 In Eastern belief: the *ævattha* tree has roots above and branches below. As in the principle of yoga, it tends inwards (arms into the earth): “outward things no longer affect an ego-bound consciousness, thus giving rise to mutual attachment, but that an empty consciousness stands open to another influence. This “other” influence is no longer felt as one’s own activity, but as that of a non-ego which has the conscious mind as its object. It is as if the subject-character of the ego had been overrun, or taken over, by another subject which appears in place of the ego” (Jung, 1939, § 890)
- 6 *A Memoir of the Future* is also the title Bion gave to his trilogy written during his Californian period. It consists of *The Dream* (1975), *The Past Presented* (1977) and *The Dawn Of Oblivion* (1979).

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# Cultural Ecological Knowledge in IFA Poetry and Yoruba Spirituality

*Kehinde Oyetimi*

## Abstract

This study investigates the rich environmental symbolism within Ifa poetry, focusing on its literary portrayal of Yoruba ecological wisdom and its broader implications for sustainability and conservation. In Yoruba cosmology, nature is not merely a physical entity but an interconnected web of spiritual, ethical, and ecological significance, where every element of the environment holds intrinsic value and a functional role in maintaining balance. This paper explores specific verses within Ifa poetry where natural elements such as trees, rivers, animals, and seasons serve as potent symbols that communicate principles of environmental harmony, ethical land stewardship, and sustainable resource management. For example, in the Odu Ifa of *IrosunMeji*, the iroko tree is revered as a sacred entity embodying resilience, stability, and equilibrium, symbolizing the Yoruba belief in respecting old-growth forests, preserving biodiversity, and recognizing the wisdom embedded in ancient natural landscapes. Another critical verse from *OyekuMeji* underscores the cyclical nature of water and its spiritual significance, portraying rivers as ancestral entities that sustain life, demand reverence, and must be protected to ensure the community's survival and prosperity. Additionally, the study examines *Obara Meji*, which employs the tortoise as a metaphor for patience, wisdom, and foresight, reinforcing the value of long-term planning, sustainable resource use, and environmental stewardship in Yoruba tradition. By interrogating these verses, the paper reveals how Ifa poetry encapsulates a form of ecological wisdom that advocates for a respectful and reciprocal relationship with the environment, aligning with contemporary discussions on conservation and ethical ecological practices. This analysis contributes to the field of ecocriticism by positioning Ifa poetry as an indigenous literary tradition with profound environmental ethics, demonstrating that oral traditions are not only cultural artifacts but also repositories of ecological knowledge. In doing so, it highlights the enduring relevance of Yoruba environmental consciousness in shaping sustainable practices, offering valuable insights into how cultural heritage can inform modern environmental discourse and policy.

**Keywords:** Environmental symbolism, Ifa poetry, Yoruba ecological wisdom, Ecocriticism

## Introduction

Ifa poetry, an essential component of Yoruba oral tradition, serves as both a spiritual guide and a cultural archive, encapsulating the wisdom and beliefs of the Yoruba people. Rooted in the ancient divinatory practice of Ifa, this poetry represents a comprehensive system of knowledge that encompasses philosophy, history, ethics, and natural science. In the Yoruba worldview, nature is not seen merely as a physical landscape but as an interconnected web of life, rich with spiritual energy and meaning. Ifa poetry, thus, plays a pivotal role as a repository of ecological wisdom, imparting values that emphasize balance, sustainability, and reverence for the natural world.

Within the Yoruba cosmology, nature is imbued with spiritual significance, seen in the sacred regard for rivers, forests, animals, and other elements as embodiments of orisha (deities) and ancestral spirits. Ifa verses often highlight these elements, using symbolic language to convey ecological principles and ethical relationships with the environment. The iroko tree, for instance, symbolizes resilience and the importance of conserving biodiversity, while rivers represent continuity and the necessity of water conservation for communal survival. Through its richly symbolic language and cultural metaphors, Ifa poetry educates listeners on the principles of harmony and reciprocity with nature, urging a lifestyle that aligns with the natural cycles and spiritual rhythms of the earth.

In the context of ecological wisdom, Ifa poetry can be seen as a powerful medium of indigenous environmental knowledge. It offers insights into sustainable practices, such as the preservation of sacred groves and the responsible use of natural resources, underscoring the Yoruba belief in the interdependence of all living things. This research aims to critically examine the environmental symbolism embedded in Ifa poetry and its profound reflection of Yoruba ecological knowledge. By situating the symbolic representations of natural elements such as trees, rivers, animals, and seasons within selected verses of Ifa poetry, the study seeks to uncover how these elements convey principles of sustainability, environmental ethics, and harmonious coexistence with nature.

The scope of this research extends to analyzing the cultural, spiritual, and ecological dimensions of Ifa poetry, situating it within the broader framework of indigenous environmental knowledge systems. Through a focused exploration of specific Odu Ifa (divinatory verses), such as IrosunMeji, *Oyeku Meji*, and *Obara Meji*, this study will highlight the interconnectedness of Yoruba cosmology and ecological wisdom. It will also explore the relevance of these teachings in addressing contemporary environmental challenges, emphasizing their potential contributions to global discourses on sustainability and ethical environmental stewardship.

This study employs ecocriticism and indigenous ecological knowledge (IEK) as complementary theoretical lenses for analyzing Ifa poetry. Ecocriticism, as a literary theory, explores the intricate relationship between literature and the environment, emphasizing how texts reflect, critique, and engage with ecological themes and human interactions with nature. It provides a framework for

understanding the environmental symbolism within Ifa poetry, focusing on how its verses articulate sustainable practices, ecological balance, and reverence for natural elements (Glottfelty & Fromm, 1996). This approach allows for the interrogation of Ifa poetry as a cultural expression that addresses broader ecological concerns while emphasizing the interdependence of humanity and the environment.

Indigenous Ecological Knowledge (IEK) refers to the rich reservoir of traditional environmental wisdom, practices, and worldviews that indigenous communities develop through sustained interactions with their ecosystems. It acknowledges that indigenous knowledge systems, such as Yoruba cosmology, encapsulate ethical principles for environmental stewardship and sustainability. Through the lens of IEK, Ifa poetry is positioned as a repository of Yoruba ecological wisdom, wherein natural symbols like rivers, trees, and animals embody ethical relationships with the environment and highlight sustainable practices grounded in cultural values (Berkes, 2018).

Together, these frameworks illuminate how Ifa poetry intertwines cultural identity, spiritual beliefs, and ecological ethics, offering insights into the relevance of Yoruba ecological knowledge in addressing contemporary environmental challenges. By combining literary analysis and ecological perspectives, this study underscores the universality and applicability of indigenous knowledge systems in fostering global sustainability discourses.

### **Yoruba Cosmology and the Interconnectedness of Nature**

In Yoruba cosmology, nature transcends the physical realm, embodying an interconnected system where the spiritual, ethical, and ecological dimensions coexist harmoniously. The Yoruba worldview envisions the natural world as a sacred and dynamic entity, integral to maintaining cosmic equilibrium. This holistic perspective is deeply rooted in the cultural belief that every element of nature, whether animate or inanimate, is imbued with spiritual essence and intrinsic value. Consequently, natural elements are revered not merely for their utilitarian purposes but for their roles in sustaining both human life and spiritual balance (Falola & Akinrinade, 2017).

Nature serves as a vital conduit for communication between humans and the divine in Yoruba thought. Rivers, mountains, forests, and animals are often perceived as manifestations of *òricà* (deities) or symbolic representations of spiritual principles. For instance, *Òcun*, the river goddess, is venerated not only as a source of water but as a divine embodiment of fertility, nurturing, and healing, underscoring the interdependence of human life and natural resources (Adejumo, 2018). Similarly, the *iroko* tree, often featured in sacred Ifa verses, represents resilience, continuity, and protection, epitomizing the Yoruba philosophy of maintaining balance within the ecosystem (Olajubu, 2020).

This spiritual connection to nature is further reflected in Yoruba ethical practices. Central to this worldview is the principle of reciprocity—humans are expected to treat the environment with respect and reverence, recognizing its intrinsic value

beyond exploitation. Acts such as deforestation, pollution, and overextraction of resources are viewed not merely as environmental degradation but as moral and spiritual violations that disrupt the delicate equilibrium of the cosmos (Ajibade, 2019). For instance, the Yoruba adage, *Aiyeloja, orunnile* (“The earth is the marketplace; the spirit world is home”), emphasizes the transient nature of human life and the importance of living harmoniously with the environment to ensure spiritual and communal prosperity (Abimbola, 2006).

The role of Ifa poetry in preserving and transmitting these beliefs cannot be overstated. Embedded within its verses are profound ecological teachings that advocate sustainable practices and emphasize humanity’s reciprocal relationship with nature. For example, Ifa poetry often personifies natural elements, imbuing them with agency and highlighting their role in sustaining both physical and spiritual well-being. This perspective challenges reductionist and anthropocentric approaches to environmental management, advocating instead for an integrative model that respects the interconnectedness of all life forms.

In Yoruba culture, Ifa poetry holds a central place as both a spiritual and ethical guide, embodying a deep reservoir of wisdom that extends beyond the religious and cultural spheres into practical aspects of life, particularly the environment. The verses of Ifa, as revealed through the *Odu Ifa* (sacred texts), provide not only spiritual direction but also serve as ecological blueprints, offering insights on how to maintain harmony with the natural world. This dual function of Ifa poetry—spiritual guidance and ecological sustainability—stems from the Yoruba belief that nature is a divine creation and that human survival and prosperity are inextricably linked to how we interact with the environment (Adejumo, 2018).

At its core, Ifa poetry articulates a worldview in which nature is sacred and imbued with spiritual significance. In this framework, natural elements are not seen as mere resources to be exploited, but as sentient beings that must be treated with reverence. Rivers, trees, animals, and even the seasons are revered as manifestations of divine energy or *òricà*, each with specific roles in the cosmic balance. Through its verses, Ifa emphasizes that the natural world is a dynamic and interconnected system where every element plays a role in sustaining life (Falola & Akinrinade, 2017).

For example, in the *Odu Ifa* of Irosun Meji, the iroko tree is extolled as a symbol of strength, longevity, and spiritual resilience. This tree, revered in Yoruba cosmology, is not just a physical organism but is recognized as an ancestral entity with profound symbolic significance. The preservation of the iroko tree, therefore, becomes an act of maintaining spiritual balance and ecological harmony. Ifa verses encourage the respect and care of such trees, aligning ecological preservation with spiritual practice (Olajubu, 2020). In this sense, Ifa poetry becomes a practical guide for maintaining biodiversity, illustrating the necessity of protecting sacred flora to uphold both ecological and spiritual well-being.

Similarly, Ifa verses frequently underscore the importance of rivers as spiritual and life-giving forces. The *Òcun* river, dedicated to the goddess of fertility, is highlighted in the verses of *Oyeku Meji* as both a physical and spiritual resource.

In Yoruba tradition, the river is not only the source of water but also a life-sustaining deity whose protection is paramount. Ifa poetry thus urges the preservation of clean water sources, not only for physical survival but to ensure spiritual prosperity and communal harmony (Adejumo, 2018). Such teachings underscore an ecological ethic that goes beyond environmental conservation, emphasizing a reciprocal relationship between humanity and the natural world.

The verses of Ifa also advocate for the sustainable use of natural resources. The Obara Meji verse speaks to the wisdom of the tortoise, which symbolizes patience, foresight, and strategic planning. The tortoise's deliberate and measured movements serve as a metaphor for sustainable resource management. The lessons imparted in these verses encourage individuals to practice long-term planning and to engage in responsible stewardship of the environment. Just as the tortoise's slow and thoughtful movement ensures survival, the careful and respectful use of nature's resources guarantees the continued flourishing of future generations (Ajibade, 2019).

Thus, Ifa verses function as a practical guide for living in harmony with nature by offering ecological wisdom embedded within spiritual teachings. These verses convey that to disrupt nature—whether through deforestation, water pollution, or unsustainable resource use—is not only an ecological offense but a moral and spiritual violation that impacts the community and the universe as a whole. In this regard, Ifa poetry fosters an integrated understanding of ecology, ethics, and spirituality, teaching respect for the natural world as a sacred, interconnected entity (Abimbola, 2006).

### **Environmental Symbolism in Ifa Poetry**

Environmental symbolism in Ifa poetry reflects the deep connection between nature and spirituality in Yoruba cosmology. Natural elements such as rivers, trees, animals, and the earth serve as metaphors for wisdom, transformation, and divine intervention. Through these symbols, Ifa poetry conveys moral lessons, societal values, and the dynamic relationship between humans and their environment.

#### **i. Trees as Symbols of Resilience and Balance**

The Iroko tree, known as “*irókò*” in Yoruba, is one of the most significant trees in Yoruba cosmology and Ifa literary traditions, symbolizing resilience, stability, and spiritual authority. In the Odu Ifa *Irosun Meji*, the Iroko tree is deeply embedded within the metaphysical and ethical teachings of Ifa, serving as a bridge between the human and spirit worlds. The tree's towering presence, deep roots, and longevity make it a potent metaphor for endurance, ancestral wisdom, and balance in the Yoruba worldview. The verse from *Irosun Meji* illustrates this connection:

*“Odo to gun titi ko see faya, Iroko  
nlaniiboju wo / A kì í jìyàtí a kì í rí rì /  
Iroko nimogbé / Iroko kì í wílogbo.”*

("The river that stretches far cannot be easily crossed, the great Iroko watches over / We do not suffer without gaining wisdom / I stand by the Iroko / The Iroko does not wither with age.")

This excerpt from *IrosunMeji* conveys the symbolic power of the Iroko as a guardian, a source of wisdom, and a symbol of resilience. The Iroko is often associated with Orunmila, the deity of wisdom, who teaches that human existence is a journey requiring patience, adaptability, and spiritual fortitude, much like the tree itself, which stands tall despite the changing seasons and external pressures.

In Yoruba cosmology, the Iroko tree is not merely a physical entity; it is believed to be inhabited by powerful spirits, including the enigmatic "Iroko-man" (Oni Iroko), a spirit that is said to appear to those who attempt to harm the tree without due reverence. This belief has led to various taboos surrounding the cutting of Iroko trees, reinforcing their sanctity in Yoruba cultural spaces. The tree is often left undisturbed in sacred groves, ancestral shrines, and village centers, signifying its role as a mediator between the earthly and spiritual realms. In many Yoruba communities, it is customary to make offerings to the Iroko tree when seeking blessings, protection, or justice.

Beyond its spiritual reverence, the Iroko tree also symbolizes resilience and balance, qualities that align with the teachings of *IrosunMeji*. In the verse, the reference to the Iroko's unyielding nature serves as a metaphor for human endurance. Just as the Iroko withstands storms, droughts, and human interference, individuals are encouraged to remain steadfast in the face of life's adversities. The Iroko tree's deep roots further emphasize the necessity of staying grounded in tradition, wisdom, and moral values despite external influences.

The reverence for the Iroko tree also has significant implications for environmental conservation and biodiversity. Because of its sacred status, many Yoruba communities have historically preserved old-growth forests where the Iroko and other significant trees thrive. These forests function as ecological sanctuaries, fostering biodiversity and maintaining the balance of the ecosystem. The intertwining of spiritual belief and ecological preservation underscores the depth of indigenous environmental consciousness embedded in Ifa traditions. Sacred groves, such as those found in Osun-Osogbo and other Yoruba heritage sites, remain protected primarily due to cultural and religious reverence, ensuring the conservation of various plant and animal species.

In contemporary discussions on environmental conservation, the traditional Yoruba perspective, as encapsulated in *IrosunMeji*, offers valuable insights. By viewing nature as an extension of the divine and recognizing trees like the Iroko as bearers of wisdom, Yoruba cosmology advocates for an ethics of sustainability that modern environmentalists continue to emphasize. The respect accorded to the Iroko tree serves as a reminder of the interconnectedness of human existence and nature, reinforcing the need for balance, conservation, and sustainable living.

The symbolism of the Iroko tree in IrosunMeji extends beyond mere metaphor; it represents resilience, spiritual authority, and environmental wisdom. Its towering presence in Yoruba culture underscores the importance of endurance in the face of adversity, the necessity of maintaining spiritual and moral equilibrium, and the imperative to respect and conserve nature. The Iroko is more than a tree; it is a living testament to the Yoruba worldview, one that harmonizes the spiritual, ethical, and ecological dimensions of existence.

## ii. Water as an Ancestral and Cyclical Element

The Odu Ifa *Oyeku Meji* contains profound references to water, particularly rivers, as symbols of life, ancestral connection, and spiritual renewal. In Yoruba cosmology, water is not merely a physical resource but a vital force that sustains existence, bridges the realms of the living and the dead, and serves as a conduit for purification and transformation. *OyekuMeji* emphasizes the dual nature of water—both as a giver of life and as a force that demands respect and careful management.

One of the key teachings in *Oyeku Meji* is the acknowledgment of water as the origin of life, a belief deeply rooted in Yoruba ontology. The verse states: “*Omi ni a fi da l’aiye, omini a fi da orun* (Water was used to create the earth, water was used to create the heavens)”. This passage underscores the primordial nature of water, positioning it as the fundamental element of existence. In *Oyeku Meji*, rivers are depicted as sacred, living entities that embody the continuity of life. Just as rivers flow perpetually, so too do ancestral lineages persist through time. This connection between water and ancestry is evident in Yoruba rituals, where offerings are made to rivers to seek the blessings of departed ancestors.

The verse: “*Odo ni a fi i pe okuwa, omini a fi ibaara e wa so oro* (It is through the river that we call upon our dead, it is with water that we speak with our kin)” reinforces the idea that rivers serve as spiritual conduits, allowing communication between the living and the departed. This belief encourages a deep reverence for rivers, which translates into communal efforts to preserve water bodies as sacred and protected spaces.

The theme of renewal is also central to *Oyeku Meji*. Water is associated with cleansing, healing, and rebirth, both physically and spiritually. Ritual purification with river water is common in Yoruba traditions, as it is believed to wash away misfortunes and restore balance.

The verse: “*Omi lo l’áyè, omi lo l’ara* (Water owns the earth, water owns the body)” suggests that just as the human body depends on water for sustenance, the world itself must be cared for through responsible water management. This perspective aligns with traditional Yoruba water conservation practices, such as the prohibition of wasteful water use and the protection of sacred rivers from pollution.

In practical terms, the reverence for water in *OyekuMeji* has historically reinforced respect for communal resources. Yoruba communities often manage water collectively, with rules governing usage to prevent depletion. Taboos against

contaminating sacred rivers serve as early environmental regulations, ensuring that water sources remain pure for both spiritual and practical needs.

*Oyeku Meji* presents rivers as more than physical landscapes—they are life-giving forces, ancestral linkages, and sites of renewal. The symbolic weight given to water in Yoruba cosmology promotes conservationist attitudes, as maintaining clean and flowing rivers is not only an ecological necessity but also a spiritual obligation. This traditional wisdom remains relevant in contemporary discussions on sustainable water management, emphasizing the intersection of cultural heritage and environmental responsibility.

### iii. Animals as Ethical Guides for Sustainable Living

In the Ifa literary corpus, the tortoise (*Ijapa*) is a recurring symbol of patience, foresight, and strategic thinking, particularly in *Obara Meji*. The Odu presents the tortoise as an archetype of wisdom, embodying the virtues of careful planning and endurance. Yoruba oral traditions frequently depict the tortoise as slow-moving but highly intelligent, relying on cunning rather than brute force to navigate challenges. These qualities make the tortoise a powerful symbol of long-term sustainability, particularly in relation to environmental stewardship and resource management.

A verse from *Obara Meji* reflects the tortoise's careful approach to life:

*"A kì í fí esẹ̀ sẹ̀wòrò,  
K'amábàasunwòròTí a kòbá la tí, a  
kògbòn*

(One does not walk carelessly to avoid  
missteps / Without patience, wisdom  
cannot be gained.)"

It highlights the importance of caution and deliberation, qualities embodied by the tortoise. In Yoruba cosmology, wisdom is not merely about intelligence but also about understanding the rhythms of nature and acting in ways that ensure longevity and balance. The tortoise's slow and steady movement serves as a metaphor for sustainable living—avoiding reckless exploitation of resources and instead making careful, calculated decisions that benefit both present and future generations.

The connection between the tortoise and environmental sustainability is evident in traditional Yoruba agricultural practices, which emphasize measured use of land and natural resources. Just as the tortoise does not rush but progresses steadily, Yoruba farmers historically adopt rotational farming, allowing soil to regenerate before replanting. Similarly, traditional fishing and hunting practices incorporate seasonal restrictions to prevent overexploitation. These principles align with modern ecological ethics, which advocate for sustainability through mindful consumption and conservation.

In *Obara Meji*, the tortoise also represents resilience, demonstrating how slow but steady efforts yield long-term rewards. Another verse states:

*“Tí a bádágbére-gbère, a o  
sègbèSùgbòntí a bá fi sùúrùse, a o rí ire  
(If we rush recklessly, we will fail / But if  
we act with patience, we will reap  
goodness.)”*

This teaching is particularly relevant to environmental conservation, where short-term exploitation often leads to ecological destruction. The tortoise’s wisdom lies in understanding that sustainable progress requires patience—whether in reforesting depleted lands, protecting endangered species, or preserving water sources for future generations.

The role of animals as teachers in Yoruba ecological ethics further reinforces the connection between Ifa wisdom and environmental responsibility. Animals like the tortoise, often featured in folklore and divination narratives, serve as moral exemplars, teaching humans how to coexist with nature. By observing the tortoise’s deliberate actions, humans learn the value of restraint, strategic thinking, and ecological balance. This aligns with the broader Yoruba belief that all elements of nature—rivers, trees, and animals—possess intrinsic wisdom and should be treated with reverence.

The tortoise in *Obara Meji* is more than a trickster figure; it embodies patience, foresight, and the wisdom of long-term planning. These attributes make it an enduring symbol of environmental sustainability, advocating for careful resource management and respect for nature’s delicate balance.

### **Ifa Poetry and Ecological Responsibility**

As a sacred oral tradition, Ifa not only offers guidance on human existence but also establishes principles of environmental stewardship, emphasizing the interdependence between humans and nature. Yoruba cosmology, as reflected in Ifa, does not perceive nature as an external or subordinate entity; rather, it recognizes the environment as a living force with which humanity must maintain a reciprocal relationship. Through poetic verses, Ifa teaches respect for land, water, animals, and plant life, reinforcing the need for conservation and sustainable resource use.

One of the central ecological themes in Ifa poetry is the recognition that human survival is tied to the well-being of the natural world. This idea is explicitly stated in the verse:

*“Aiyel’oja, orunnile  
Omi ni a fi i gbe aye  
(The earth is a marketplace; the afterlife  
is home / It is water that sustains the  
earth.)”*

It underscores the transient nature of human existence and the necessity of caring for the environment while on earth. Water, as a life-sustaining force, must be preserved to ensure continuity. Such wisdom encourages Yoruba communities to

protect rivers and streams from pollution, recognizing their sacred and life-giving properties.

Furthermore, Ifa poetry often portrays nature as possessing agency, reinforcing the belief that trees, rivers, and animals have spiritual significance. The Odu *IrosunMeji*, for example, cautions against the indiscriminate felling of trees, particularly the Iroko, which is believed to house powerful spirits:

*“Igibígbonibàbáigigbogbo? nití o bá  
da l’ókèl’ókèniyóòr’èsèrè  
(The great tree is the father of all trees /  
Whoever cuts it recklessly will bear the  
consequences.)”*

This verse promotes an early form of environmental conservation, discouraging deforestation and advocating for the preservation of old-growth forests. It reflects the Yoruba understanding that trees are not mere resources but guardians of balance, providing shelter, medicine, and oxygen. The sacredness attributed to specific trees has historically functioned as an ecological safeguard, preventing the destruction of vital ecosystems.

Additionally, Ifa poetry highlights the ethical obligation of reciprocity in human-nature relationships. The principle of *'bí* (sacrifice) extends beyond spiritual offerings to include acts of environmental responsibility. In *Osa Meji*, the verse states:

*“Ti a ba ran ni n’ise, ti a ko dupe, bi a  
se tan ni a n gbagbe  
(If one is given a gift but does not show  
gratitude, it will soon be taken away.)”*

This proverb, when applied to ecological responsibility, warns against the exploitation of nature without giving back. Traditional Yoruba societies understood this through agricultural practices such as crop rotation, controlled hunting, and river rituals to maintain balance. These practices ensured that resources were not depleted, embodying sustainability long before contemporary environmental discourse.

Moreover, Ifa poetry addresses the consequences of environmental neglect. In *OyekuMeji*, drought, famine, and disease are depicted as outcomes of human disregard for ecological harmony: *“Omi a dánù, ayé a bàj’i* (If water is wasted, life will be ruined.)” This cautionary verse serves as an admonition against wasteful practices and environmental degradation. The Yoruba worldview emphasizes that the mistreatment of nature results in both physical and spiritual consequences, reinforcing an ethic of responsibility toward the environment.

### **Taboos and Sacred Spaces as Conservation Practices in Ifa Verses**

Ifa oral traditions play a crucial role in shaping indigenous conservation practices, particularly through the use of taboos (*eewo*) and the veneration of sacred spaces. These elements function as regulatory systems that preserve biodiversity and maintain ecological balance. Within Yoruba cosmology, nature is not seen as an inert resource for exploitation but as a living entity that demands reverence and responsible interaction. Many Ifa verses provide direct injunctions against the reckless destruction of forests, water bodies, and animal populations, framing these prohibitions within spiritual and ethical contexts.

One of the most significant conservation practices embedded in Ifa is the protection of sacred forests (*igboibile* or *igboàbà*). These spaces are considered the dwelling places of deities (*orisa*), ancestral spirits, and powerful natural forces. The Odu Ifa *Odu Meji* states:

*“Igbo ni a fi nj?, igboni a fi nmi  
Eni ti o ba dana sun igbo, ire a o mo o  
(The forest provides food, the forest provides  
breath / Whoever destroys the forest will not  
know prosperity.)”*

This verse highlights the fundamental role of forests in sustaining life and warns against their indiscriminate destruction. Sacred forests, such as the Osun Sacred Grove in Nigeria, have been preserved for centuries due to their spiritual significance. This has inadvertently contributed to biodiversity conservation by preventing deforestation and habitat loss.

Similarly, taboos serve as powerful deterrents against environmental degradation. For instance, in *IrosunMeji*, a strict prohibition is placed on cutting certain trees, particularly the Iroko (*Milicia excelsa*), which is believed to house powerful spirits:

*“Iroko kiiwo 'gbo  
A kì í wóigbó Iroko  
(The Iroko tree never withers / One  
must not cut down an Iroko tree.)”*

This verse emphasizes the sacredness of the Iroko tree, leading to its protection in many Yoruba communities. The ecological impact of this belief is significant, as the preservation of such large, old-growth trees contributes to carbon sequestration, biodiversity maintenance, and microclimate regulation.

Water bodies are also protected through taboos, ensuring their cleanliness and sustainability. In *OyekuMeji*, rivers are described as sacred entities, and polluting them is strictly forbidden:

*“Odo kii se ibiidoti  
Ti a ba da omiru, o di wahala fun  
gbogboaiye  
(The river is not a place for filth / If  
we pollute the water, it becomes  
trouble for the whole world.)”*

This verse reinforces the communal responsibility of keeping water bodies clean, a practice that aligns with contemporary efforts to combat water pollution. Yoruba traditional communities enforce these taboos through social and spiritual consequences, ensuring that members adhere to sustainable water management practices.

Furthermore, certain animals are protected through Ifa-sanctioned taboos. In *Ose Meji*, the killing of certain species, such as the python (*’jo*), is forbidden, as these animals are believed to be messengers of the deities:

*“Ejokiiseeran Ejoniorisa  
(The python is not meat / The python is a  
deity.)”*

By discouraging the killing of specific animal species, such taboos contribute to species conservation and prevent overhunting. This principle mirrors modern conservation strategies that emphasize the importance of keystone species in maintaining ecological balance. These verses embed ecological wisdom within cultural and spiritual frameworks, ensuring that conservation is not merely a scientific endeavor but a deeply ingrained moral and religious duty. Venerating sacred spaces and enforcing taboos against destructive environmental practices have historically sustained biodiversity and ecological balance. These indigenous practices provide valuable insights for contemporary environmental conservation efforts, demonstrating how cultural beliefs can be harnessed to promote sustainable coexistence with nature.

### **Conclusion**

Ifa poetry serves as a profound repository of Yoruba ecological wisdom, embedding environmental symbolism that emphasizes the sacredness of nature, the interdependence between humans and the environment, and the necessity of ecological balance. Through verses that highlight the significance of water, forests, and sacred animals, Ifa conveys an ethical framework that promotes conservation and sustainability. The reverence for the Iroko tree in *IrosunMeji*, the depiction of water as life-sustaining in *OyekuMeji*, and the protective taboos surrounding certain animals in *Ose Meji* illustrate a worldview that prioritizes ecological responsibility. These insights demonstrate how Yoruba oral traditions function as an indigenous system of environmental ethics, preserving biodiversity, promoting resource conservation, and reinforcing sustainable land and water management practices.

Above environmental preservation, Ifa poetry also underscores the vital role of cultural heritage in shaping sustainable practices. The integration of spiritual beliefs with ecological consciousness reveals how environmental stewardship is deeply ingrained in Yoruba traditions. As modern environmental challenges escalate, the insights found in Ifa poetry provide valuable lessons for contemporary sustainability efforts. Recognizing and incorporating indigenous ecological knowledge into conservation strategies can offer alternative and culturally grounded solutions to environmental degradation, particularly in regions where traditional beliefs still influence community behaviors.

Future research on Ifa's ecological symbolism could explore comparative studies between Yoruba environmental wisdom and other indigenous traditions worldwide, particularly in African, Asian, and Native American contexts. Additionally, scholars could investigate the practical applications of Ifa's ecological principles in contemporary environmental policies, including afforestation programs, biodiversity protection, and sustainable agriculture. By bridging the gap between indigenous ecological knowledge and modern sustainability frameworks, researchers can contribute to a more holistic and inclusive approach to global environmental stewardship.

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# Ocean Ecologies and Environmental Justice: An Ecocritical Reading of *Reef*

*Asima Gogoi and Anurag Bhattacharyya*

## Abstract

This paper examines Romesh Gunsekera's (1994) *Reef* through the lens of ecocriticism, foregrounding the novel's engagement with oceanic destruction and its intersection with class and ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. While contemporary ecocriticism has predominantly focused on land-based ecologies, *Reef* offers a significant intervention by centering marine degradation, particularly the disappearance of coral reefs in the Indian Ocean. The novel, narrated by Triton, a Sri Lankan expatriate in England, reflects on his past in the household of a marine biologist, Ranjan Salgado whose study of reef destruction highlights the detrimental effects of human activities on marine ecosystems. By juxtaposing environmental degradation with the socio-political realities of ethnic violence and class disparity in Sri Lanka, the novel presents the reef as both a literal and symbolic site of crisis. The paper explores how *Reef* critiques anthropogenic damage to oceanic ecosystems, exposing the unequal distribution of environmental risk, the extractive practices of modern industry, and the neglect of indigenous and working-class interests. Through an ecocritical and environmental justice perspective, this study argues that *Reef* challenges dominant narratives of development, advocating instead for a more inclusive and symbiotic relationship between human and non-human communities.

**Key Words:** Ecocriticism, environmental justice, ocean ecology, reef, class conflict.

Water, as an indispensable element of human life and society, has held a significant place in literary texts since ancient times. According to Patrick Murphy (n.d.), water has both literal and symbolic significance in literature. In literal level, water may appear in the setting or background of a story as rivers, seas, oceans, lakes, precipitation etc. In symbolic level water can be a destructive force, a life force or

a purifying force. Gentle water such as calm river is seen as a life force. It is the symbol of strength and flows of life. But water can also be destructive and fatal. So water is used as a symbol of destruction and death, as well. Again water is often used as a symbol of purity since it is a purifying and cleansing agent. It also symbolizes rebirth in the sense that all the sins of the previous birth are washed away by water. Apart from this, water sometimes appears as a character in a literary text. In such texts, water is not a mere object, but an agent that plays a crucial role in the development of the plot.

Sidney I. Dobrin (2021) in his book *Blue Ecocriticism and the Oceanic Imperative* argues that there is an “ocean deficit” in contemporary ecocriticism (p. 9). According to him, ecocriticism by far is centred mainly on land-based ecology, and despite the abundance of literary works featuring the ocean, there is still remarkable lack of attention in ecocriticism towards the oceanic representations. This paper is going to touch this often neglected area of water-related ecocriticism through a reading of Romesh Gunesequera’s (1994) *Reef* which addresses the growing destruction of the Indian Ocean, as reflected in the gradual disappearance of coral reefs. Set in the island country of Sri Lanka, *Reef* is preoccupied with an ocean sense, a sense of attachment and connection with the ocean and marine ecology. Through the character of Ranjan Salgado, the marine biologist in the novel who studies the destruction of the coral reefs on the South coast of Sri Lanka, the novel warns us against the harmful human activities which are disturbing the equilibrium of the ocean water inviting danger both for the marine ecology and human society. Told from the perspective of Salgado’s servant cum cook- Triton, the novel draws sufficient attention towards oceanic destruction which is subtly blended in the novel with the issue of class conflict and ethnic violence in Sri Lanka.

Romesh Gunesequera is a Sri Lanka-born British author who started his writing career in 1992 with a short-story collection called *Monkfish Moon*. *Reef* published in 1994 is his first novel which was followed by *The Sandglass* (1998), *Heaven’s Edge* (2002), *The Match* (2006), *The Prisoner of paradise* (2012), *Noon Tide Toll* (2013) and *Suncatcher* (2019). Except *The Prisoner of Paradise*, all his novels are set in his home country Sri Lanka. The rich biodiversity of the island, the scenic seascape, Sri Lankan culture and its socio-political history find ample space in his novels. However, his writings are often accused of exoticizing Sri Lanka, and *Reef*, too, is not exempted from this charge. According to Walter Perera (1995), “*Reef* is guilty of recuperating and of perpetuating certain myths and stereotypes about Sri Lanka in its often-jaundiced depiction of characters, class and politics” (p. 76). Similarly, Ruvani Ranasinha (2013) argues that *Reef* “recreates the foreign culture in accordance with Eurocentric attitudes that pre-exist in the target western “audience” ...” (p. 28). Yet, there is sufficient applause for this novel among international readership for its lucid style, grasping narrative and most importantly for its ecological consciousness. One pioneering reading of the novel in the light of its ecological orientation is “Jungle Tide, Devouring Reef: Postcolonial Anxiety and Ecocriticism in Sri Lankan Literature” by Sharae Deckard (2010) in which she

praises *Reef* for its uniqueness in bringing out the “ecological dimension of the current conflicts” referring to the ethnic violence in Sri Lanka which according to her is the outcome of the same socio-political-economic structure that also leads the path to environmental destruction (p. 18). Deckard (2010) argues that reef in the novel is “an ambivalent symbol in which the signifiers of ecological crisis and class inequalities are repressed and overwritten with the signifiers of ethnic violence and political conflict” (p. 80). In this study, however, we are going to focus more on the “repressed” signifiers of “ecological crisis and class inequalities” in order to foreground the water politics in the novel.

*Reef* is narrated through the mouth of a Sri Lankan expatriate in England, a restaurateur, who once was a house boy to a rich marine biologist in Sri Lanka. The novel begins at a petrol station in England where the narrator, Triton who has been in the country for long twenty years meets another boy, a reflection of his own, from his home country that has been ravaged with ethnic violence. Ironically, the boy turns out to be a Tamil whereas Triton himself is a Sinhalese, the two of them thus belonging to the two opposite ethnic groups who are in conflict in their home country. This awkward encounter reminds Triton of his growing years in Sri Lanka and leads the reader back to Mister Salgado’s Colombo house, where Triton was sent as a servant after a childhood mishap. Soon he became the sole caretaker of Salgado’s house and his kitchen, and grew up perceiving the world through his master and his associations. Like all the people living in coastal areas, the sea occupies an important place in Triton’s life; but more so in his case because he lives in the house of a marine biologist. Triton looks at his master with awe and reverence as he studies “mosquitoes, swamps, sea corals and the whole boated universe” (p. 24). Salgado writes long articles about “the legions under the sea, the transformation of water into rock- the cycle of light, plankton, coral and limestone- the yield of beach to ocean” (p. 24), as Triton informs the reader. Salgado is particularly obsessed with the endangering coral reefs in the country’s sea scape and takes up a government project to study the impact of human activities on polyp life. Unfortunately, he fails to complete his project on time and cannot come up with a definite conclusion regarding the reason behind the coral-death. Then after a while he takes up a job in England and shifts there with Triton, although it is Triton who finally remains there alone while Salgado returns to Sri Lanka after some years.

Through this apparently simple bildungsroman of a Sri Lankan boy, the novel draws attention to serious issues like environmental destruction and ethnic violence. Though Triton is the narrator and we get to know the story from his perspective, most of the time it is his master Salgado who is at the center of action and Triton always remains in the periphery. Triton is fascinated by his master. Therefore most of Triton’s narration consists of Salgado’s life, his activities, his words, his beliefs etc. Gunsekera’s choice of a marine biologist at the centre of action indicates his intention to make the novel an ecologically oriented text. In his conversation with his friends, Salgado often talks about the impending danger caused by the

destruction of the coral polyps in the country's sea sphere. In one such conversation with his friend Dias, Salgado talks about the threat to Sri Lankan polyps and he hypothesizes that such destruction of the coral reefs will increase the coastal erosion and will eventually engulf the island.

'You see, surveys have been done since the 1880s, but I don't think they have any real understanding of what is happening. Coral grows about as fast as your fingernails, but how fast is it disappearing? Nobody knows!'

'What, from dynamiting and all?'

'Anything! Bombing, mining, netting.' ... 'You see, this polyp is really very delicate. It has survived aeons, but even a small change in the *immediate* environment—even *su* if you pee on the reef—could kill it. Then the whole thing will go. And if the structure is destroyed, the sea will rush in. The sand will go. The beach will disappear. That is my hypothesis. (pp. 47-48)

Coral reefs are an important oceanic eco-system that consists of thousands of coral polyps. The coral polyps co-inhabit with Zooxanthellae, a microbial which provides the polyps with food and colour. When there is any change in the ocean water, the Zooxanthellae leaves the polyp, thereby depriving the corals of their nutrition and colour. This incident is called coral bleaching and this is a threat to polyp life. The coral reefs are in danger of extinction worldwide due to several factors like global warming, overfishing and destructive fishing, irresponsible tourism practices etc. Popularly known as the rainforest of the sea, the coral reefs give shelter to thousands of species in the ocean. Moreover, it acts as a natural barrier against the waves protecting the coastal population from the sea. Salgado's concern over reef destruction and coastal erosion is, thus not an imaginary or fictional problem, rather it is a pressing environmental issue and refers to the material reality of the island. In fact, the tsunami of 2004 proved Salgado right in his fear of destruction by the sea. A study says that "If Sri Lanka still possessed as many natural defenses as it did before its sand dunes and coral reefs had been mined, then the tsunami may have done far less damage" (as cited in Erney, 2020, p. 161).

Destruction of coral reefs and other marine animals by the anthropocentric activities of human beings is described several times in the course of the novel. During his first visit to Salgado's observatory, Triton notices "skull-heaps of petrified coral—five-foot pyramids beside smoky kilns... tomorrow's cement fodder" (p. 59). This is an obvious reference to coral mining that is done in order to produce lime to support the construction industry. Coral is the principal source of lime for Sri Lanka's construction industry. Traditionally, only relic reefs were collected from the beaches. But with the rapid expansion of the construction industry, new sources of corals are exploited that includes collecting live coral from the sea. The sight of coral pyramids near smoky kilns noticed by Triton, Salgado and Dias in their journey to the observatory near Gala South Coast, was a common scene by the roads in certain parts of Sri Lanka until coral mining was

declared illegal in the country in 1983. Even after passing of the law, illicit mining practices are going on in large scale. According to a survey done in 1984 by the Coast Conservation Department (CCD) in the south western and southern coastal areas of Sri Lanka, about 18,059 tons of coral is supplied annually to the lime industry and about 58% of it is collected illegally (Lowry, 1994, p. 8).

The novel's title as well as the descriptions of large-scale reef destruction in the story is read by many critics on the light of the civil war and ethnic violence witnessed by the island for long twenty six years from 1983 to 2009. Malcom Sen (2013), for example opines that the dying reefs in the novel are "metaphoric of the expanding political violence in Sri Lanka with an ever increasing number of human casualties" (p. 489). Melanie A. Murray (2009), similarly, writes, "the erosion of the coral reef by the ocean can be understood as symbolically erasing the island and its identity" (p. 217). While such symbolical significances are abundantly available in the novel, a close reading of the literal and physical description of the reef is equally important in order to understand the environmental implication of the socio-political phenomenon of the country. Hans-George Erney (2020) focuses on the novel's "earthliness"-its complex interaction with its physical environment" and calls it foolish to insist that a reef in a novel must necessarily be read metaphorically (p. 161). According to him, such a focus on the novel's earthliness will provide us insight into its "moral extensionism" (p.161). He writes: "with Reef, Gunsekera manages to create an exceptionally wide circle of concern by inviting the readers to imagine themselves as being part of one huge ethical community (including the non-human environment), without recklessly anthropomorphizing nature. In *Reef*... what hurts the reef,... hurts us; we are the reef" (p. 162). Drawing from Aldo Leopold's famous essay "Thinking like a Mountain", Erney (2020) argues that Gunsekera's novel urges the readers to think like a reef, i.e. "conceiving of the people and the reef as part of one ethical community" (p. 166).

Todd Kuchta (2020) develops on Erney's call to focus on the novel's "earthliness" by historicizing the novel's theme of environmental destruction. He connects Salgado's research on the vanishing reef of the island with real time research on the topic. Kuchta points out that the first massive mass bleaching occurred in 1980s, almost fifteen years after the time Salgado was doing his research in the novel. Around the time Gunsekera started writing his novel, mass bleaching had caught global attention; many awareness programmes were also conducted by UN around that time. So, it is obvious that reef in his novel does not only serve as a metaphorical tool to talk about the socio-political history of violence, rather it is equally related to the ecological realities of the country. Going one step further to Erney's argument, Kuchta (2020) notes that "if Gunsekera's novel thinks like a reef, it does so through Triton" (p. 8). Kuchta (2020) argues that although Salgado fails to draw any conclusion regarding the reason of coral bleaching, it is Triton who achieves the ultimate ecological vision of the novel who "slowly but surely comes to fathom what Salgado fails to grasp: carbon emissions are killing the reef"

(p. 5). On the light of these arguments we can make an environmental justice ecocritical reading of *Reef* by focusing on the unequal distribution of risk related to oceanic destruction.

One major threat to the corals and to the whole oceanic ecosystem, is the practice of overfishing. With the increasing demand and growth of the export industry of sea food, the traditional methods of fishing have been transplanted by modern fishing methods such as dynamiting, trawling etc. This has resulted in massive decline in the stocks of many species of fishes and other aquatic animals in the Indian Ocean. In *Reef*, there is a description of a fish market located on the beach near Salgado's observatory to which Triton accompanies Nili. The fish market scene is full of detailed description of slaughtering of aquatic animals:

There was a terrific thrashing on the ground and I saw the fat, grey body of a reef shark twisting as a fishmonger hacked at it with a cleaver. Blood spurted. The creature flapped and writhed. The man brought the cleaver shining down again and again like a hammer. Smart, fat thunks punctuated by the sharper sound of the blade sparkling off the concrete beyond the shark's beady eyes. It didn't die until the head had been severed, and the man stood up with its curved slit of teeth smiling in his hand. Thick, black blood pumped out of the body on the floor, forming a pool.

We walked along the gallery and I pointed out the fish neatly arranged in rows on wooden tables. Their eyes like buttons and their mouths wide open in 'O's of surprise at being lifted from the sea, gagging and drowning on a moon of warm air, their stomachs turning before being ripped open and gutted. (pp. 117-118)

These descriptions explicitly indicate the violence going on upon marine ecology in the name of sustenance and livelihood. Obviously these scenes perform dual acts of critiquing ecological destruction and bloodshed in the name of ethnicity and race. Yet, to look at them only as signifiers of human pain and struggle will definitely mean to put a blind eye to a burning ecological issue.

The scenes at the fish market make Nili sick. When she sees them selling a dolphin, she asks in utter disgust "Why dolphins? What next?" (p. 118). This question, although raising concern over the ever escalating exploitation of the natural world by human beings, also carries a hidden irony because Nili is disappointed only when she sees a dolphin as a catch. Otherwise she is "fascinated" at the sight of heaps of crabs and crayfishes "waiting to be plunged into boiling water" (p. 118). Dolphins like other large animals such as tigers and elephants are always considered first for conservation programmes whereas abuses on species like fish, crab, coral etc. often get overlooked. Notably, the day before the fish market visit, Nili was excited to see a parrot fish bought by Triton from a fisherman on the beach and had a happy meal with it. Noteworthy point is that Parrot fish plays an important role in maintaining the health of coral reefs and thus impacts the overall ecosystem of the sea. Parrot fishes eat the algae in reef that helps corals grow and thrive. So, the irony hidden in Nili's reproach of the fisherman lies in the fact that the demand for exotic sea food comes from the affluent classes of both

home and abroad, of which Nili is also a part. Thus they are also indirectly responsible for the overfishing and destructive fishing going on in Sri Lanka.

The most important factor that impacts the Ocean ecology is, however, climate change and global warming which is a result of various local and global activities. A researcher at the centre for Climate Change Research at the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology in Pune, says that climate change and resultant ocean warming leads to decline in food chain under the ocean. "All of the state-of-the-art climate models unanimously project that the Indian Ocean will continue to warm under increasing greenhouse gases. This will result in a further decline of the phytoplankton in the Indian Ocean, exaggerating the stress on the marine ecosystem and the fish, which are already affected by overfishing" (Perera, 2016, para. 13). Another researcher from the same institute comments that rapid warming in the Indian Ocean "may cascade through the food chain, potentially turning this biologically productive region into an ecological desert" (Perera 2016, para. 6). This will take a heavy toll on the coastal population that lives mainly on the fishing industry. With the rapid downfall in the fish population they will be deprived of their livelihood. Triton is informed by some local fishermen on the beach that they do not find plentiful of fishes on the sea like they earlier used to do: "Sometimes we go all night and there's nothing. Not like in the old days when they used to fly into our hands" (p. 114). These people are the direct victims of harmful activities on the ocean, although they have least contribution towards global warming. While being asked about the reason for such decrease in fish stocks, the fisherman replies sarcastically: "What do you expect with this government?" (p. 114). The conversation indicates their total disillusionment with the government who has shown more interest in reviving the inland seas instead of protecting the ocean that gives livelihood to majority of the citizens.

Soon after this visit to the South Coast, Triton informs the reader that Mister Salgado's coastal project has passed its zenith. In spite of his concern regarding reef destruction, he somehow lacks the drive to take an active part in creating awareness among the masses or to warn the government against it. "[H]e should have been drawing his conclusions together in some big report but, rather than analysing and writing, he procrastinated" (p. 119). Engrossed in his romantic relationship with Nili and being busy in entertaining his growing social circle of urban elites, Salgado forgets about his responsibility as a scholar. Most importantly, Salgado's ecological vision never includes the ecosystem people. For example we can talk about his dream of creating a sea sanctuary: "If only we could make the whole coast like Yala. A sea sanctuary, with not a soul there. A real refuge" (p. 161). His words are a reflection of the Western model of conservation that deep ecology advocates. But as Ramachandra Guha (1989) famously argues such a model is not appropriate for a third world country where ecological problems cannot be seen in isolation from the issues of poverty and class. A sea sanctuary without a soul will mean depriving thousands of people of their livelihood, whereas the greatest threat to the marine ecology is not these ecosystem people rather the

technologically advanced modern fishing techniques and growing tourism industry. Ironically, his dream of a sea sanctuary includes blue glass-bottomed boats and a floating restaurant (p. 177). So, ultimately it means to be a 'refuge' for tourists and rich people like him, whereas the local fisherman and other ecosystem people will be deprived of their age-old living.

Another dimension of environmental justice found in the novel is the politics surrounding big dam schemes. While Salgado's coastal project on reef destruction has been suspended, the government invests on developmental schemes such as the Mahaweli Irrigation programme. Triton describes Salgado and his beloved Nili being excited about the inauguration ceremony of the Mahaweli Irrigation scheme and both of them attending the same as special invitees. It is described in the novel as "A giant leap into inland irrigation not seen for a thousand years. The diversion of the biggest river in the land" (p. 121). Mahaweli scheme is considered the largest national developmental programme in Sri Lanka which was started in 1961 with the fund of UNDP and World Bank. The main purpose of the programme was to provide irrigation facility to the dry zone areas of the country and to produce hydroelectric from the water of Mahaweli Ganga. Although the scheme involved great promises of development and prosperity, it turned out to be just another example of neo-colonialist development in the third world countries. Sharae Deckard (2010) lists the ecological consequences of the Mahaweli Scheme as "siltation and increased salinity, destruction of habitats in a biologically rich region, and a disastrous reduction of the great river's watershed to eight percent of its former capacity, leaving the entire region vulnerable into flood and erosion" (p. 82). Besides, large numbers of people were resettled in the process of setting up the dams, and this is considered by some as "a prime cause of the unrest that saw tens of thousands dead..." (Pearce, 1992, p. 155). Minoli Salgado (2007) writes:

The Mahaweli Project – Sri Lanka's most expensive irrigation project, made possible through massive foreign loans in the mid-1970s – was promoted on the basis of nationalist rhetoric that compared it to the ancient irrigation systems of Sinhalese kings. This project was enforced through resettling nearly 130,000 families – including 100,000 Sinhalese peasantry into Tamil-dominated areas – and also resulted in the dramatic cultural and material dispossession of the indigenous forest dwellers of Sri Lanka, whose dwelling space and hunting lands were made into a national park. (p. 14)

In the novel, while Salgado was indifferent towards the potentially dangerous consequences of the scheme on the ecosystem of the island, Triton registers the hypocrisy involved in the political discourse of development through artificial tanks and dams while ignoring the protection of the sea that surrounds the island: "Meanwhile [when Salgado's project passes its zenith] a nationalistic concern for inland sea grew as politicians invoked the spurious visions of ancient kings. All our engineers, trained in London and New England, suddenly saw great advantages in reviving the traditional skills of irrigation", Triton informs the reader (p. 119). As a servant, Triton sees from the bottom the socio-environmental implication of the

developmental schemes that Salgado fails to grasp from the height of his social position as a rich elite. In fact, it is not Salgado but Triton who is the mouth piece of the author in the novel. In his introduction to the novel, Gunsekera (1994) writes, "As I looked through Triton's eyes everything became coloured by what he knew, by what he believed, and by what he felt in his heart. His politics, his history, his language" (para. 7). Gunsekera's choice of the name for his narrator is also notable in this context. In Greek mythology, Triton is a sea god, the son of Poseidon and Amphitrite. In English literature, he is often depicted as the messenger of Poseidon, the sea god. Unlike his father who is fully anthropomorphic in ancient art, Triton appears as a merman, half human and half fish. He is also depicted as possessing a conch shell which he blew like a trumpet to calm or raise the waves. Gunsekera's naming of his narrator thus indicates the centrality of the ocean and marine life in the novel. Gunsekera perhaps envisions Triton as the mediator between the sea and human society. He acts as a herald conveying the pathos of the lives under the sea to the human society, registering at the same time the suffering of his fellow human beings.

But despite his name, that suggests that he is the guardian angel of the sea, Triton is always seen uncomfortable near the ocean. During his first visit to Salgado's observatory situated on the beach, he is terrified by the sea. He describes his experience in the following words:

It was like living inside a conch: the endless pounding. Numinous. You couldn't get away from it. No wonder Mister Salgado said the sea would be the end of us all. During those two nights we spent on tour I felt the sea getting closer; each wave just a grain of sand closer to washing the life out of us. They say the sea air makes you feel better, but I reckon that must be to lull us to sleep; it made me feel helpless. After a while it terrified me. (p. 60)

Here, the sea appears as a destructive agency. It takes us back to the novel's epigraph "Of his bones are coral made" taken from Ariel's song in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. In the famous Shakespearean play, Ariel in his song laments the death of Ferdinand's father (though actually he was not dead) during a shipwreck and who is now believed to lie at the bottom of the sea.

Full fathom five thy father lies;  
Of his bones are coral made;  
Those are pearls that were his eyes:  
Nothing of him that doth fade,  
But doth suffer a sea-change  
Into something rich and strange.

The sea here appears as a symbol of redemption through transformation that changes the human body into its primordial form and unites it with the natural world- changing the bones into corals and the eyes into pearl. The epigraph also refers to the interspecies relationship between human beings and the corals. These

ideas suggested by the epigraph resonate throughout the novel. Especially, Salgado's warning that "the sea would be the end of us all" is an expression of the belief that whenever there is too much evil on the earth, the sea floods in and washes away all the sins (p.172). Talking about the Great Flood, Salgado once says to his friend circle "...But then the earth was corrupted and the sea flooded in" (p. 84). So in this age of the Anthropocene too, the sea will be the ultimate rescue to restore the lost ecological balance of the earth.

The redemptive power of the sea is also reflected in the words of Wijetunga, Salgado's assistant in the reef project, who gradually becomes rebellious influenced by the growing class tensions and ethnic conflict in the country. When Triton meets Wijetunga for the first time in the observatory, the later tells him: "... You know brother, our country really needs to be cleansed, *radically*. There is no alternative. *We have to destroy in order to create*. Understand? Like the sea, whatever it destroys, it uses to grow something better" (p. 11). Here the sea's transformative power is linked with the discourse of ethnic violence. Wijetunga's words mirror the growing conflict during the time between different groups or classes of people living in Sri Lanka. Like the sea, Wijetunga and other revolutionaries want to change the land radically and revive the past ethnic heritage of the island.

Triton, however, replies naively to Wijetunga's call: "But I am only a cook" (p. 111). He has not been touched by the revolutionary zeal of Wijetunga, being confined safely in the kitchen of his master. But, towards the end of the novel, we see Triton gradually being influenced by the prevailing tensions in his contemporary society. He willingly disobeys one of Salgado's friends who calls him 'Kolla' and 'bugger' at a card party, and it acts as a kind of epiphany for him that reminds him of his class status and the words of Wijetunga comes back to his mind: "Something in the night air infected me too. Too much was going on. Wijetunga on the beach had worked it all out. I wished I had finished my school certificate. Stupid, stupid boy. Stupid Kolla... Inside me, everything was burning up" (p.154).

According to Todd Kuchta (2020), Triton's budding class consciousness is linked with his growing ecological understanding. He comes to the realisation that it is the bourgeois class of the island that is destroying the country's economy and ecology by their luxurious life style that includes automobiles which is one of the chief causes of global warming. As the party ends and the guests left on their cars, he walks down to the main road and watches the traffic "going from nowhere to nowhere". He feels "the ocean pressing around us" (p.164). The traffic on the road reminds him of the growing pollution in the air that is absorbed by the sea and affects the delicate polyps. The fear of the ocean sweeping away the country thus, struck him again.

In this way, Gunsekera's novel subtly fuses the theme of ecological destruction with that of class conflict and ethnic violence. These two significant issues are placed in the novel at a parallel level, so that none can be seen in isolation. Mutual respect and acceptance of the 'other' as part of the same ecosystem are essential

to stop violence of any kind whether on nature or among human beings. Mr. Salgado realises this later in his life, as he says towards the end of the novel: “The urge to build, to transform nature, to make something out of nothing is universal. But to conserve, to protect, to care for the past is something we have to learn” (p. 178). The novel urges us to care for the weak and vulnerable, and this includes not only the reef but also the fishermen, the displaced group and the ethnic minorities. Like the reef, we must learn to live in a symbiotic relationship with the others around us, including both human and non-human entities in order to maintain the equilibrium in our society and in the environment.

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# Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*: Biophilia or Spiritualism?

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## Abstract

Henry David Thoreau, an American transcendentalist, is one of the predecessors of environmental justice movements. This movement unravels the unevenly distributed environmental harm to communities of colour and the marginalized. His radical commitment to justice emanates from nature piety. Nature, woods, for Thoreau is a place of peace where he opens himself to people of colour and the poor. He acknowledges the strangeness of society in Nature and actively engages with new set of relationships in *Walden*. Thoreau's writings resist the emaciated vision of materialistic progress and economy. He thinks that justice comes not from outside but from within when men set the relationship right. Thoreau endorses a kind of relational justice that is to be worked out between human and non-human. Thoreau's vision of justice in which relational setting matters includes human relationships to the natural world. Thoreau, "American environmental saint", notes Laurence Buell, has inspired many to rethink their relationship with society and the natural world. Thoreau's *Walden* proffers environmental ethics that links environmental protection to human happiness. Thoreau advances experimental ethical virtues, judgements and possibilities. The paper explores Thoreau's belief that human beings can progress in the real sense only when they follow a prudential approach to Nature. The internal sauntering at Concord that elevated Thoreau spiritually while he walked in the woods opens up new vistas and envisages environmental ethics necessary for progress of man as well as society.

**Keywords:** Environment, Ethics, Nature, Transcendentalism, Environmental Justice, Eco-consciousness, Self-discovery, Spirituality, Man, Values

Transcendentalism, a significant intellectual movement in mid-nineteenth century, exercises a vitalizing effect on art, literature and development of democracy in

America. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Whitman Hawthorne, Melville and many American Renaissance writers record transcendental experiences. Transcendentalism emerges from dissatisfaction with emotional and spiritual sterility of Unitarianism as well as acceptance of Lockean sensationalism to renew religious idealism. American transcendentalists use the terms of Immanuel Kant. Emerson in essay, "The Transcendentalist" insists on distinct ideas and imperative forms owing origin to intuitions of mind. He denominates these as transcendental forms. The act of intuitive perception, for transcendentalists, results in mystical union between Nature and soul. The ecstasy accompanying this union provides not only experiential confirmation but also validity to views of man and nature. One of the five senses initiates transcendental experience in the thinkers. Thoreau records the effect of nature on a passive perceiver who is primarily a listener, as in "Sounds" of *Walden*. Sound, primary medium of Thoreau's correspondence with nature, allows him to achieve mystical union with a spiritual reality (Reynold 148-150). The dynamics of transcendentalism extends beyond individual expression to echo a call for social transformation. The immanent political dimension of transcendentalism nurtured by Henry David Thoreau in his writings envisions a new democratic society. He maintains an ethereal approach and emphasises on immaterial attitude that is contrary to materialism (Constantinesco 3-7). Thoreau studies the divine in nature and an individual pursuit of divine in the natural world. His system of belief grapples with relationship between God and humanity. Thoreau's ideology aids man's efforts to cope with the inexorable advancement of civilization (Willsky-Ciollo 553).

Transcendentalism focuses on ideas that emerge from belief in immanent presence of the spiritual. These ideas transcend the sphere of external senses and reiterate the supremacy of mind over matter. Transcendentalists explore relationship between individual and state as well as relationship of human with environment (Malachuk 285). Several and severe environmental problems have spurred the emergence of environmental ethics. Environmental ethics specifies duties to and values in the natural world. The writings of Henry David Thoreau, an individualist, apolitical American transcendentalist, offer environmental ethics. His writings fall in the categories of social (as in anti-slavery essays) and individual (as in *Walden*) ethical values. He is an important link between Jeffersonian agrarian republicanism and environmentalism. Thoreau, like Jeffersonians, focusses on political economy of citizenship, personal independence and simplicity. Thoreau rejects Jeffersonians' idea of conquest of wilderness and economic industriousness as he espouses preservation of nature. He regards nature as a community deserving respect. He believes that economic industriousness promotes destruction of environment and greed (Cannavo 101). Thoreau's *Walden* affirms environmental virtue ethics. It links environmental awareness and protection to human progress and pursuit of excellence. He recognises the value of nature. He assumes that by restraining physical consumption human beings can lead healthy and enjoyable lives. By devoting to higher pursuits and acting in enlightened self-interest, human beings

can also promote the conditions in which the future generations live. Such a living, espouses Thoreau, greatly benefits many species (Cafaro68-70). Thoreau maintains a naturalist's focus on minute, unseen, unnoticed resemblances or differences among concrete objects to establish a cosmic empathy. He is clearly committed to biodiversity and has protective attitude for all life forms. His biophilic philosophy is buttressed by conviction in nature's plenty. He articulates a global land ethic and believes that nature is inexhaustible (and caters to the needs of diverse inhabitants) (Saunders 7-14).

Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) documents his stay in the woods near Concord, Massachusetts. He records his experiences in journals which eventually finds place in *Walden* after a decade. While living in a tiny house by the shores of Walden Pond, Thoreau grew beans, read books and walked in the woods. He invests the Pond with human characteristics like 'neighbour' and 'bed-fellow'. Thoreau, 'saint of woods', integrates piety of nature with radical political commitments to voice his concerns about economic and racial justice in *Walden*. Thoreau investigates man's relationship to nature. His profound affinity with the natural world provides an ecocritical paradigm that examines living earth. While describing his "life in woods", Thoreau identifies nature as a source of human vitality and contentment. He describes his experiment of living, house by a small pond. The pond, he tells, lies in the midst of reforested area. He describes his daily walks and the area that abounds with plant and animal life. He discusses the importance of habitat evaluation in "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For". Thoreau reports on behaviour of wildlife in the area. This includes mice, squirrels, ants, jays, muskrats, ducks and loons. Conducting experiments to discover facts about freezes and thaws, Thoreau refutes the myth that Walden is a bottomless pond. *Walden* reveals Thoreau's conviction that having knowledge about environment and living creatures elevates the very concept of life (Saunders 1-4). Thoreau also complains about those landowners who put up fences and interrupt his walking routes (Balthrop-Lewis 1-6). Thoreau challenges conventional ethics in *Walden*. He asserts the intrinsic value of non-human nature, trees, woodchuck and Walden Pond. Thoreau endorses the idea that human beings derive greater benefits by recognizing value of nature and living accordingly."He read nature on daily basis in his native Concord and then translated its revelations onto the page," writes Willsky-Ciullo (566). He provides a detailed account of various fishing "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack". The description accurately brings out the appearance, behaviour, feeding, migrations and habitat preferences of the fish. While describing the different species of fish, Thoreau puts forth the otherness and closeness of fish to human beings. He alludes to these wonderful creatures as, "our funny contemporaries in the Concord waters" and part of the landscape. Thoreau also refers to the plight of the shad and other anadromous migratory fishes. Making his moral concern explicit, Thoreau pens the plight of the Shad, which migrates each year up the river only to meet the Billerica dam.

The fish is not capable of “petition for redress” to unjust treatment. Dams, according to Thoreau, are not only inexpedient for fishermen and human beings but also are inappropriate for Shad because of wrong effects. This injustice is enough to justify a new kind of civil disobedience, opines Thoreau. He calls for a non-anthropocentric ethics. Deploying many fish puns, Thoreau argues that fish may have virtues of their own. Thoreau suggests that certain piscine qualities are virtues. This belief parallels with attempts of environmental philosophers to justify intrinsic value of non-human beings. Natural qualities of sentience, intelligence and goal directedness, claim the environmental philosophers, make them good-in-themselves. Shad do possess knowledge as they return to their native spawning grounds. Some environmental cues do send them from one river to another. Dams unjustly obstruct fish, ruin the fishing and limit contact of man with wild nature. Hence, Thoreau moves from facts to values, asserts fish virtue and demands interspecies justice (Cafaro 71-72). He argues that men must steer the course between uncritical anthropomorphism and hypercritical reductionism that undervalues the qualities of others. Human beings, according to Thoreau, should work to know nature and transcend superficial views that exhibit their selfishness.

Thoreau critiques hunting, fishing and meat eating in the chapter “Higher Laws”. This calls for a new understanding about existence of the human and non-human. In this chapter Thoreau illuminates the dual nature of human beings (part spiritual and part animal). He writes, “We are conscious of an animal in us, which awakens in proportion as our higher nature slumbers” (206). He believes that the good in men distinguishes them from brute beasts. No man, opines Thoreau, past his boyhood would murder any creature. He perceives within men an instinct that takes them to a higher spiritual life. Thoreau appreciates the existence of non-human life and equates true humanity to greater sympathy for all creatures of nature. No benefits that outweigh loss of life, he opines, by killing animals can be attained. Thoreau moves beyond a concern to avoid killing of animals to a concern for preserving animal habitat and the wild landscape in the chapter “The Bean-Field”. This concern epitomises a true environmental ethics which transcends animal rights ethics. Thoreau plants beans on two and a half acres of Emerson’s lot to feed himself and earn livelihood during his stay near the Walden Pond. His labour all summer to make portion of the earth’s surface yields blackberries, and the like, before, sweet wild fruits and pleasant flowers. While others see only questions of economic expediency, Thoreau perceives ethical issues in the landscape. He sensitises humanity to the moral issue of appropriating part of the landscape and displacing other who is also of an intrinsic value. Though he asserts that Thoreau must produce this pulse to keep his own pulse going, he focuses on minimizing the displacement of nature for fulfilling human needs. He advocates simple living and exhorts human beings to distinguish their true needs from superfluous wants.

Thoreau suggests that human beings should appreciate nature. He leans on his hoe and pauses to listen to brown thrashers singing in the trees while working

in the fields. Thoreau regards the sounds and sights of thrashers, nighthawks, salamanders as part of inexhaustible entertainment. This appreciation of intrinsic value of nature allows man to recognise the higher uses of nature. Thoreau firmly believes that cultivation leads to improvement in yields and pausing while cultivating leads to a different accounting. The method of appreciation of nature moulds human conduct. Only superior reason and intellect can justify limited human appropriation of wild nature. "Reason in service to unnecessary consumption is no longer a superior faculty, and justifies nothing" (Cafaro 76). Thoreauvean environmental ethics is quite evident from the transcendentalist's new perspectives. He writes:

While I enjoy the friendship of the seasons, I trust that nothing can make life a burden to me. The gentle rain which waters my beans and keeps me in the house today is not drear and melancholy, but good for me too. Though it prevents my hoeing them, it is so far more worth than my hoeing. If it should continue so long as to cause the seeds to rot in the ground and destroy the potatoes in the lowlands, it would still be good for the grass on the uplands, and being good for the grass, it would be good for me. (131)

Thoreau believes that happiness comes to those men who play a part in the cycles of seasons. A feeling of gratitude for gifts of the Earth and belief in the rightness of nature can enable men to be in harmony with the landscape. Thoreau shuns the entrepreneurial attitude that makes man modify the landscape for maximum yield and profit.

Thoreau's *Walden* also celebrates simple sensual experiences in nature. The simple messages to run, walk, sweat and swim have great significance for all times. Mindful of the fact that brain and body must work and rest together, Thoreau's sauntering explores not only outer surroundings but also inner mindscape. Walking and the internal sauntering, according to Thoreau, keep body fit and sharpen mind. As physical vitality enhances mental acuity, Thoreau affirms that walk induces powerful sublime thoughts. He practices his beliefs. "Walking stimulated and fostered special kind of thinking/spiritual intuitions" remarks David C. Smith (134). Thoreau observes in his journal that walks initiated free thinking in him. The city and temporal thoughts blocked intuition; concerns about the affairs of men impeded the quest to saunter within, opines Thoreau. It is the responsiveness of internal state to the external environment that enabled man to enjoy the beauty and tranquillity of nature. Thoreau could plunge deep into the interior of his mental ocean in quietness and solitude of nature to gain insights (135-136). These Insights not only provided him with ecstatic spiritual state but also transformed him greatly. "Thoreau's approach to walking as spiritual discipline offers a pattern for self-discovery open to the modern walker" (139). He observes:

They who never go to the Holy Land in their walks, as they pretend, are indeed mere idlers and vagabonds; but they who do go there are saunterers in the good sense, such as I mean. . . . For every walk is a sort of crusade, preached by some Peter the hermit

in us, to go forth and reconquer this Holy Land and the hands from the hands of the Infidels. (Thoreau 205-206)

Thoreau's words inspire men to purge of mundane concerns and use physical energy for reaping fruits of spiritual renewal. The pastoral and wild nature is source of transformative spiritual experience and psycho-spiritual growth (Gould 171).

*Walden* documents Thoreau's success in attaining personal fulfilling relationship with nature. He recounts his love for nature and pursuit for knowledge in "The Ponds". He describes the varied inhabitants and explores the personal, mythological and historical aspects of pond. Pond, for him, is symbolic of beauty, purity and inexhaustible fecundity of nature. Thoreau's sustained efforts to know and appreciate nature set him apart from "flowery nature fakers" and "anemic postmodern literati" (Cafaro 80). The complex ecological system of the pond in the earth and the pond in the book in "The Ponds" constructs the understanding of readers about pursuit of truth and goodness of nature. Thoreau delves into the stream of life, articulates inchoate ideals, finds his voice and makes philosophical achievements.

"Wild Fruits" and "Higher Laws" bring out the challenges to environmental ethics. Market-oriented society, lucrative trade, materialism, over-consumption and preference for artificial alternatives have greatly contributed to environmental damage. Insensitivity to landscapes and negligence towards preservation of nature have broken man's bond with nature. *Walden* does not advocate withdrawal from society, as construed by critics. Rather, it envisages environmental ethics that furthers genuine flourishing of all life forms and envisions a way of life for better existence. *Walden* outlines limits to human appropriation of wild nature and evokes deep ecological thoughts for better Earth. Thoreau advocates a modest way of living. *Walden* celebrates nature and brings out Thoreau's message that happiness is in experiencing as well as knowing nature and not in consuming, owning or transforming nature.

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# Reclaiming the Sacred Green: Indigenous Ontologies and Ecological Consciousness in Achebe and Vedic Thoughts

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## Abstract

Contrary to dominant narratives that situate ecocriticism within recent Western academic discourse, precolonial worldviews, articulated through oral narratives, cosmological texts and ritual practices, have long sustained biocentric ethics rooted in relationality, reverence and reciprocity with the natural world. Through a comparative analysis of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and the Vedic vision of Rta, the essay demonstrates how both the Igbo and Vedic cosmologies reject anthropocentric hierarchies in favour of animate, moral ecologies where the Earth, sky, animals, and deities form a sacred continuum with human life. Achebe's novel is situated not only as a cultural response to colonial dispossession but as an ecological archive preserving indigenous knowledge systems erased under colonial modernity. The narrative's moral order, anchored in the Earth goddess Ala (the oracular authority of nature and taboo ethics), foregrounds an environmental justice framework where cultural and ecological rupture are inseparable. Similarly, Indian philosophical texts and classical Sanskrit literature portray nature as divinely animated and spiritually indispensable to ethical life. By placing these two traditions in conversation, the paper challenges Western binaries of nature and culture, human and non-human, and proposes a decolonial reorientation of ecocriticism. Ultimately, in the face of accelerating climate crises and the ongoing violence of the Anthropocene, environmental humanities must draw from these older, marginalised ontologies. Reclaiming them is not a gesture of nostalgia, but an ethical and political act, restoring a planetary imagination grounded in kinship, humility, and sacred ecological continuity.

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism, Indigenous Ontology, Postcolonial Ecology, Vedic Cosmology, Chinua Achebe, Environmental Justice, Anthropocene, Literature and Nature

The ontology of ecocriticism is as ancient or as recent as human consciousness itself. In early Indian thought, especially among the Aryans, nature was held in deep reverence. The Vedic worldview did not regard the environment as a mere backdrop but as an active moral and spiritual presence. *Rta* was the term for the cosmic law that governed both natural rhythms and human morality, binding the universe in a shared ethical order. The natural world was portrayed not as inanimate but as responsive and sentient. The lotus flower, keeping its vigil through the night, opened with devotion to the sun. The bee and flower performed their dance of mutual delight. Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntalam* presents a moment of collective grief as birds, trees, and deer mourn the departure of Shakuntala. Likewise, Indian epics speak of creatures like the swan who conveys Damayanti's message to Nala, or Jatayu, the valiant bird who sacrifices his life trying to save Sita from Ravana. These portrayals are not romantic embellishments but reflections of a worldview in which nature is kin, deeply woven into the human emotional and spiritual fabric.

Similarly, the Igbo worldview depicted in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (Achebe, 2001) presents nature as fully alive. The Earth goddess Ala, the Sky, and even snakes are seen as moral and communicative beings whose will must be respected. This cosmology challenges the Western separation between nature and culture or human and animal, a dualism that has historically justified ecological exploitation (Rueckert, 1996; Nixon, 2011). In both Indian and African indigenous systems, nature is not placed outside human life; it is embedded in ethics, rituals, cosmologies, and kinship (Chakrabarty, 2021; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017).

Returning to the ecological wisdom of these traditions is not a retreat from theory, but a reframing of it. It means paying attention to insights long silenced or overlooked. The disruptions brought by colonial modernity did not always arrive with violence; more often, they unfolded as slow, cumulative losses. Rob Nixon (2011) describes this as "slow violence," a kind of harm that is "gradual and out of sight," spreading across generations and landscapes. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe depicts such losses not through grand catastrophe but through quiet erasure: the fading of sacred stories, the desecration of groves, and the disappearance of names that once resonated with Earth and Sky. Achebe's novel does not mourn the past for nostalgia's sake. Instead, it captures a world built on relationships with gods, seasons, ancestors, and land that begins to unravel not only through colonisation but also when care and reverence are withdrawn. What was once sacred becomes superstition; what was ritual becomes sin. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2021) urges us to see the climate crisis not simply as an environmental issue, but as a deeply historical one. It carries within it the legacies of colonialism, economic injustice, and the idea of a human subject imagined as separate from nature (pp. 15–17). The Anthropocene, therefore, is not only a story of carbon. It is a story of forgetting: the first lands broken, the first gods dismissed, the first voices silenced.

If the Anthropocene is defined by this forgetting, then ecological restoration may begin with acts of remembrance. María Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) calls this "care," not a mere feeling, but a rigorous, ongoing practice of tending to the

world's fragility and interconnectedness. "Care," she writes, "is about maintaining, continuing, and repairing the world so that all can live as well as possible" (p. 89). From this perspective, the rituals in *Things Fall Apart* and the hymns of the *Rigveda* are not cultural remnants. They are expressions of ecological care, rooted in soil, story, and relationship. They teach us that ecological wisdom does not always speak in declarations. It may whisper in a proverb, breathe in a prayer, or unfold in a daily act of tending.

Bringing indigenous worldviews into global ecological discourse is not about validating them through modern theory. It is about expanding theory's boundaries to walk beside other ways of knowing. In a time of planetary crisis, these older, earth-connected ontologies offer guidance not by promoting mastery over nature, but by emphasising respectful relationships. Colonialism did more than seize territory or impose laws. It fractured the very grammar of being. Western ecological thought, shaped by Enlightenment rationalism and Cartesian dualism, rendered nature lifeless and inert, a thing to be calculated, controlled, and used. The human self, imagined as rational and autonomous, was placed above the natural world. Earth, stripped of spirit, was reduced to raw material for human use.

Raymond Dasmann (1972) echoes this urgency in *Planet in Peril*, writing, "It is the business of those who direct the activities that will shape tomorrow's world to think beyond today's well-being and provide for tomorrow." Unfortunately, contemporary civilisation often acts as though the Earth exists only to meet human needs. This anthropocentric mindset has led us to the brink of ecological collapse. In contrast, the *Atharva Veda* proclaims:

स्वस्थास्मै भूयास्म रोगमुक्ताः,  
दीर्घायुषो जागृवांसः स्याम।  
त्वां वहाम श्रद्धया हविर्भिः,  
मातर्भूमे सौम्यया सुषेवा  
पृथिवी माते! सौम्या संनधा मां,  
दिवा सह सानुभ्यां सुखेना  
श्रीमन् ध्रुवं धारय मां कृपया, प्र  
ज्ञया तेजसा चाभिरक्षा

Be of our welfare, free from sickness and waste,  
Wakeful through a long life, we shall become bearers of tribute to thee.  
Earth, my mother, set me securely with bliss in full accord with heaven.  
O wise one, uphold me in grace and splendor. (Atharva Veda 12.1.12–14)

Such hymns remind us of a time when Earth was seen as animate, conscious, and sacred. This vision has inspired modern ecological thinkers like William Rueckert (1996), who describes literature as a renewable energy source. He compares poems to green plants, absorbing and storing the energy of imagination

and returning it to readers. “If poets are suns,” he writes, “then poems are green plants” (p. 108). Eugene Odum (1963) builds on this by emphasising that ecology is concerned not just with individuals but with populations, communities, ecosystems, and the biosphere. Barry Commoner’s (1972) first law of ecology, “Everything is connected to everything else,” calls for a shift away from individualistic and extractive thinking. Ian McHarg (1969) reinforces this ethic in *Design with Nature*, urging each individual to take creative and cooperative responsibility for the biosphere.

Literature can act as a wellspring of cultural memory and ecological energy. As Scott Russell Sanders (1996) laments, “What is missing from much recent fiction... is any sense of nature, any acknowledgement of a nonhuman context” (p. 183). While this may be true of mainstream literature, African American and Indigenous Indian fiction remains deeply rooted in the land. Even when their themes appear unrelated to nature, their narratives return us to a world where ecological awareness is not loud but intimate, inscribed in story, character, and rhythm. The cosmologies of the Vedas and the Igbo traditions see the land not as a resource but as a relative. The goddess Ala is not a metaphor but a living force demanding harmony between spirit and matter. *Rta* binds river, breath, speech, and season in moral rhythm. To live well is not to transcend the world, but to dwell responsibly within it.

The appearance of the African novel written by Africans, with Africa as its central landscape, began to take shape in the 1950s. These writers, emerging in the wake of colonial rule, sought not only to deconstruct the Western misrepresentations of Africa but also to reclaim their past and rewrite their own narratives. One method of achieving this reclamation was the rediscovery of Africa’s precolonial history through careful historical and cultural research. As Carroll (1990) explains, “In this process they tried to gather the remained pieces of information about Africa’s history and create its real history before the colonialism” (p. 7). Achebe’s (2001) *Things Fall Apart* is particularly significant as both a cultural document and an ecocritical text. The novel actively counters the portrayal of Africa by European author Joseph Conrad, whose *Heart of Darkness* famously presents the continent as the heart of evil and nihilism. Walter Allen (1967) notes that Conrad’s title refers simultaneously to “the heart of Africa, the heart of evil, everything that is nihilistic, corrupt and malign; and perhaps the heart of man.” Achebe, having lived under colonial rule and educated within its institutions, stood at the crossroads of two cultures: a Christianised, Western-facing Nigeria and the indigenous Igbo traditions that surrounded him. This unique vantage point shaped his voice as a writer committed to cultural restoration.

Achebe believed that literature should serve society. In his essay “Chinua Achebe,” he emphasizes the writer’s responsibility to educate readers about their history and identity, stating that the purpose of writing is not just artistic but pedagogical: “Any good story, any good novel, should have a message to deliver” (Achebe, 2007, p. 103). In societies where communal solidarity takes precedence

over individualism, the didactic function of literature becomes even more essential. Within this framework, *Things Fall Apart* emerges not only as a postcolonial text but also as a profoundly ecocritical one. The novel portrays an African society whose values and rhythms are intimately tied to the natural world. Children learn moral lessons through animal fables and nature-based myths. One such tale tells of a quarrel between Earth and Sky, where Vulture is sent to plead with Sky for rain to end a seven-year drought. These stories are not merely folklore; they are ecological allegories that emphasise balance, respect, and interdependence between humans and nature (*Things Fall Apart*, 2001, p. 39).

Nature in Achebe's work is far from silent. It communicates, listens, and responds. A snake is not called by its name at night, "because it would hear. It was called a string" (*Things Fall Apart*, 2001, p. 8). This animistic worldview sees the Earth, Sky, and animals as moral agents, just like in the Igbo cosmology, where Chukwu (the supreme god) is mediated by deities like Ala, the Earth goddess, who governs fertility, morality, and the boundary between life and death. Respect for Ala is mandatory; to insult the Earth through unjust actions is to threaten the well-being of the entire community: "The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase, and we shall all perish" (*Things Fall Apart*, 2001, p. 23). In this worldview, humans are not masters of nature but its children and stewards. Warfare itself is subjected to ecological and moral scrutiny. As Achebe (2001) writes, Umuofia does not go to war unless its Oracle (the voice of the hills and caves) deems the cause just (p. 10). Justice and sustainability are not separate; they are intertwined.

This sacred regard for the land is also echoed in African American literature, particularly in Toni Morrison's (1999) *The Bluest Eye*. Morrison links human sin and natural infertility when Claudia remarks: "There were no marigolds in the fall of 1941... We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow" (p. 4). What first appears as a child's superstition deepens, across the novel's arc, into an ecological lament—a recognition that the soil itself has registered the weight of human sorrow. The barrenness of the earth is not simply the absence of growth, but a silent testimony to unspeakable violence. The marigolds do not fail due to mere neglect; they wither under a world "Quiet as it's kept," where innocence and dignity are denied room to take root. This subtle convergence of trauma and ecological sterility mirrors, in a profound way, the quiet unravelling of moral order in Achebe's (2001) *Things Fall Apart*. The disappearance of marigolds in Morrison's Ohio echoes the vanishing of sacred groves, rituals, and cosmological kinships in Achebe's Umuofia. In both cases, violence, whether colonial or domestic, institutional or intimate, leaves traces not only on human bodies, but on the land itself. The earth becomes both witness and participant in the unfolding grief.

"We live in peace with our fellows to honour our great goddess of the earth, without whose blessing our crops will not grow," warns one elder. "The evil you have done can ruin the whole clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted

may refuse to give us her increase, and we shall all perish” (*Things Fall Apart*, 2001, p. 23).

Where Igbo cosmology emphasises harmony with the unseen order of the earth, through rituals, oracles, and communal festivals, Okonkwo resists that rhythm. His strength, so celebrated in a younger, warrior-centred generation, becomes brittle in a time that calls for listening, adaptation, and care. His preference for force over dialogue, control over vulnerability, isolates him not just from his community, but from the earth itself. Even his ultimate act of suicide is rendered not as heroic defiance but as transgression: “It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offence against the Earth” (*Things Fall Apart*, 2001, p.147). Achebe (2001) does not make Okonkwo a villain. He makes him a man who cannot hear the changes in the wind. The novel moves through cycles: seasons, generations, festivals, planting and harvest. It is not just to mark time, but to situate human life within something larger and alive. The narrator, too, seems to bear witness not only to cultural loss but to an ecological silence slowly spreading across the terrain. The voice is restrained, almost elegiac. It does not shout; it remembers.

To read *Things Fall Apart* ecocritically, then, is to see Okonkwo not only as a tragic figure in the historical sense, but as a man severed from the moral ecology of his world. His downfall is not merely political. It is cosmological. And in the quiet ruins left behind, Achebe (2001) invites us to listen again: to the folktales, the winds, the Earth goddess, and the language that still carries the memory of balance.

Joseph Meeker, in *The Comedy of Survival*, argues that comedy aligns with the logic of the biosphere. It values adaptation, flexibility, and the instinct to survive over abstract ideals. Comedy’s heroes, like weeds and rats, can endure because they adapt, not because they dominate. Meeker’s (1996) model urges us to value stories in which life, however humble, finds a way to continue. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, too, Lord Shri Krishna offers a vision of the cosmos in which life is not only interwoven but sacred. He reveals a world alive with divinity, where every element bears the imprint of the eternal:

"रसोऽहमप्सु कौन्तेय प्रभास्मि शशिसूर्ययोः।

प्रणवः सर्ववेदेषु शब्दः खे पौरुषं नृषु॥

गन्धोऽस्मि पृथिव्यां चैव तेजश्चास्मि विभावसौ।

चन्द्रमसि मनश्चाहं।"

“Hey Kaunteya! I am the rasa (essence) in water,  
the light of the sun and moon,  
the syllable OM in all the Vedas,  
And the strength of men.  
I am the calmness of the moon,  
the essence of the earth,

the heat of fire, and  
the sound in the sky.” (Bhagavad Gita 7.8–10)

Here, the universe is not inert matter, but vibrant with spirit. Creation is not separate from God, but an unfolding of His own being: a breathing, living totality. To dwell in such a cosmos is to live with reverence, to listen for divinity in wind, fire, water, and stone.

Among all living forms, Lord Krishna honours the Peepal tree. Called *Ashvattha*, the everlasting, and *Ichhapurti*, the fulfiller of desires, it stands as a silent sentinel of life. Unlike trees that sleep at night, the Peepal exhales oxygen even in darkness, offering breath to the world while others rest. Its shade is gentle, its medicine ancient. Its leaves heal the body; its presence calms the spirit. Like a sage who gives without asking, it becomes a living emblem of selfless offering. The *Rigveda* opens with fire, not merely as physical flame, but as the first divine presence, the priest who mediates between humans and gods. From this fire, all cycles flow. The seasons, the rains, and the offerings of grain are all rituals that nourish the world.

अग्निमीळे पुरोहितं  
यज्ञस्य देवम् ऋत्विजम्।  
होतारं रत्नधातमम्॥

“I praise Agni, the chosen priest,  
God, minister of the sacrifice,  
the hotar (invoker), the bestower of treasures.” (*Rigveda*, Mandala 1, Sukta 1)

This is not a symbolic metaphor; it is ecological theology. To light a fire is to sustain a bond between realms. To break that bond, as modernity often has, is to fracture the rhythm of life.

Rivers, too, are not just watercourses; they are mothers. Their generosity is not framed in metrics of utility, but in ethics of kinship. The Ganga, the Yamuna, and the Sarasvati are not “resources” but deities who flow with memory and moral weight. Their desecration is not simply pollution; it is sacrilege. Hence, the Gita warns us:

"यज्ञशिष्टाशिनः सन्तो मुच्यन्ते सर्वकिल्बिषैः।  
भुञ्जते ते त्वघं पापा ये पचन्त्यात्मकारणात्॥"

“Those who cook food only for themselves truly eat sin,  
while the pious who partake of what remains after sacrifice  
are freed from all wrongdoing.” (*Gita*, 3.13)

Sacrifice here is not destruction, but reciprocation. It is the refusal to take without giving back. The cycle of food, rain, and human action is not mechanistic but sacred. Each link is dependent on dharma. Rain depends on *yajna*; *yajna* on right conduct; conduct on divine order.

To return to the Peepal is to return to this deeper ecology. It does not ask for anything, yet it gives continuously. The *Gita* praises it not just for its physical form, but for its rootedness, endurance, and silent compassion. So too with the Tulsi plant, venerated in homes across India, its leaves held to be potent in healing the body and steadying the mind. These are not superstitions but expressions of a worldview where healing, holiness, and ecology are entwined.

In this cosmology, the divine is not above or outside creation, but within it. To exploit nature is to violate the sacred. To honour it is to walk in dharma. In the *Mahabharata*, the world is described not as a resource but as a residence: the dwelling place of the divine. Every species, every river, every mountain has its place in the sacred architecture of the cosmos. The land is not owned; it is inhabited with care. This way of seeing, as shared by many indigenous cultures, is not nostalgia, but ethical clarity. It reminds us that to live well on Earth is to live in rhythm, not rupture. In this, Krishna's voice echoes Achebe's: both remind us that the loss of relation, whether ecological or cultural, is a wound to the world's balance. And it is in our stories, our rituals, and our remembering that healing may begin.

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# Progress or Peril? Human and Ecological Cost in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*

*Seema Dash and Ashutosh Singh*

## Abstract

This study looks into the notion of progress in the novel *Animal's People* (2007) by Indra Sinha, considering it from historical, psychological and socio-cultural perspective along with environmental sustainability. This research highlights how the novelist reinvents progress in order to create existing paradigms and advocates possible frameworks based on justice and sustainability through the characters. The study employs an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that includes postcolonial theory, ecocriticism and trauma studies. Postcolonial theory emphasizes the exploitative tendencies of industrialization and globalization, especially in the global south. Ecocriticism contextualizes the novel's environmental deterioration and anthropocentric perspectives. On the other hand, trauma studies illuminate the personal and communal wounds suffered by the disaster survivors. These perspectives taken together offer a comprehensive prism to examine the novel's critique of development.

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism, Progress, Postcolonialism, Resistance, History

“Bhūmeḥ sutānivanānīnadya  
Girayaścagiri-gahvarā ica,  
Sarvā yetānibhaginyah pr thivyāh  
Tasyā pīd anammasādhumanye.”

In the above shloka from Valmiki's *Ramayana* (Kiskindha Kanda 1.9), Aadi Kavi Valmiki expresses great ecological awareness. He anthropomorphizes nature by depicting forests (vanāni), rivers (nadyah), mountains (Girayah), and caverns (giri-gahvarāni) as Earth's offspring (sutāni) and sisters (bhaginyah), creating an emotional and moral connection between humanity and nature. He warns that damaging any of these natural elements is comparable to injuring Earth itself (prthivyāh), which he clearly

rejects as immoral (nasādhumanye). This ancient perspective represents ‘deep-ecology’, which acknowledges the intrinsic value of all natural forms, not just for their benefit to humans, but also as crucial, interrelated elements of a sacred whole. Valmiki’s view is especially relevant in today’s setting of ‘progress and peril’

As the cornerstone of modernity, human progress is commonly understood as the advancement of civilization through science, technology and rationality. The term progress reveals itself as a double-edged narrative, one that empowers and marginalizes, creates and destroys. However, this progress frequently jeopardizes ecological balance: deforestation, river pollution, mountain mining and the destruction of pristine ecosystems are all activities that Valmiki warns against in the shloka. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer warn saying, “what men want to learn from nature is how to use it in order wholly to dominate it” (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1997, p. 4). The novel, *Animal’s People* (2007) by Indra Sinha serves as a powerful critique of the cost of industrial progress, simultaneously revealing the devastating impact on human lives, social structures and the environment. Set in the fictional city of Khaufpur- as mentioned by the author in the editor’s note as a model of Bhopal- the novel is a fictionalized account of the long-term aftermath of a chemical disaster similar to the Bhopal Gas Tragedy of 1984. The novel highlights the exploitative aspects of corporate industrialization, especially in the Global South, where profit is valued above sustainability and justice, through its intensely personal yet politically charged narrative.

### **Industrial Modernity and the Myth of Progress**

The narrative of industrial modernity believes that technological innovation and industrial development are undeniable signs of human progress. This idea, which is extensively established in Enlightenment thought, proposes a linear trajectory in which cultures progress from primitive to advanced phases by means of industrialization. However, this approach has been severely looked into and disputed by a number of environmental activists and literary experts such as Timothy Morton, Rob Nixon, Amitav Ghosh, Vandana Shiva, Naomi Klein, Edward Goldsmith and many more. They argue that this type of perspective frequently ignores the associated social and environmental consequences.

The novel *Animal’s People* (2007) is set in Khaufpur, the fictionalized version of Bhopal, India, where a Union Carbide leak released 27 tons of methyl isocyanate into the night sky above a sleeping metropolis. The worst industrial accident in history resulted in at least 9000 deaths. According to *Bhopal Gas Tragedy Information* (Union Carbide Corporation, 2025), estimate death toll have risen to 25,000 with half a million people exposed to the deadly gas for decades. The novel confronts the myth of progress by exposing the human and ecological toll of industrial expansion.

In *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideas in America*, Leo Marx investigates the conflicts between pastoral environment and the development in the industrial technology. He identifies a repeating motif in American Literature in which the peaceful natural setting is interrupted by the unexpected arrival of machinery, which reflects the assault of the pastoral ideals. Marx (1964) says, “within the lifetime

of a single generation, a rustic and in large part wild landscape was transformed into the sites of the world's most productive industrial machine" (p. 343). This statement of Marx is formed explicit in Sinha's tale as the rusty remnants of the Kampani's chemical plant sit at the heart of Khaufpur like a festering wound, an abandoned symbol of global capitalism's failed promises. Animal, the protagonist, takes us on a sensory tour of this ruin:

The factory lies dead in the heart of the city. Its chimneys stand like tombstones, the building are black with soot. Vines and weeds grow through the walls. Bats hang in flocks like rags from the roofs. When the wind blows from that direction, the stink is like rotten eggs mixed with burnt hair. But worse than the stench is the poison that seeps from the ground into the wells, into the river, into our bones and dreams. (Sinha, 2007, p. 45)

This evocative portrayal is more than just environmental imagery. It represents the entropic underside of modernity, what Walter Benjamin refers to as the 'storm' of development, which leaves its ruin in its wake. Khaufpur has become a necropolis of failed development, with new infrastructure serving solely as a tomb for the impoverished.

Animal's physical transformation represents this critique of the industrial society. After the gas leak, Animal becomes twisted by its effects; he describes his own existence with scathing irony as follows:

I'm what people call unusual. Not just because I walk on all fours and have a face like a snout. Not just because my back is twisted into a question mark, or because people cross the street to avoid me. I'm unusual because I remember. I remember everything. The night of the accident, the screams, the burning eyes, the smell of death in the air. I was not even born then, but I remember. It's in my body. (Sinha, 2007, p. 18)

His deformed physique is a tangible and figurative representation of progress gone wrong. Animal, by symbolizing the gas calamity, rejects memory erasure and sanitized myths of development that disguised its victims. His self-identification as a non-human 'I'm Animal, I bite' is a kind of defiance against the dehumanizing powers of both industrial capitalism and humanitarian paternalism. This argument is consistent with Rob Nixon's concept of 'slow violence' in which environmental harm occurs gradually and quietly, disproportionately harming those who are pauper and politically marginalized. Nixon (2011) in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* contends that such aggression is "typically not viewed as violence at all" due to its time postponed and spatially shifted effects (p. 2). Animal perfectly describes it by describing the new-born babies having 'eyes like fish, their fingers webbed and their lungs weak like old people.' He becomes irascible listening people saying, 'Time heals everything.' But, he feels that time instead of healing is making things worse. A mother, who came to Dr. Elli, for the check-up of her child says, "our wells are full of poison. It's in the soil, water, in our blood, it's in our milk. Everything here is poisoned. If you stay here for long enough, you will be too." (Sinha, 2007, p. 108). The continuation of toxicity, both chemical and political, highlights the hollowness of post-industrial redemption narratives. Rather than alleviating the misery of Khaufpur's people, time

reveals the enduring colonial ethos of disposability that underpins modernity. With time, many foreigners come to Khaufpur to take evidence of the devastating consequences of 'that night' like the journalist, who asked Animal to document his experiences over these years in tapes and Eli, the doctor, who assumes to be more beneficial to the survivors with her medical knowledge. Nevertheless, instead of all these attempts and promises what the Khaufpuris want is the justice, the Kampani itself to compensate for the damages. What they want is 'someone' who will listen their plights. The failure of these initiatives exemplifies what Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak (1988) warns against: suppressing the subaltern with the pretence of humanitarian rescue (p. 285).

#### **Ecoprecarity and the Persistence of Toxicity:**

Many works have looked at how Sinha's account of *Animal's People* opens up the fundamental imbalances perpetuated by global capitalism. Alam examines the subject matter of "ecological rifts," emphasizing how the novel depicts the breakdown of natural and social systems caused by industrial exploitation. He observes that the disaster in Khaufpur is an example of how "global capitalism perpetrates [disaster] over time and distributes [them] unevenly" (Alam, 2023, p. 19). This approach is consistent with the description of the ongoing environmental and health challenges experienced by the people of Khaufpur in the novel. The toxicity lingers in the air, water and the bodies of the community. Animal, the narrator, gives a description of illness embedded in their daily lives. He says, "in jhuggis we all cough. The old, the young, even babies just out of their mothers. We all cough and burn inside. The Kampani's poison is in our lungs, our bellies, our bones" (Sinha, 2007, p. 53). Aliya has inflamed lungs, Pandit Somraj has too difficulty in breathing, Shambhu can hardly breathe and many more victims are there who are suffering from the catastrophe of that night. David Williams (2018) points out the abject body of the narrator Animal, his deformed spine functions rhetorically to present 'slow violence' and long term bodily degradation (p. 587). Rob Nixon (2011) argues, "slow violence is neither spectacular nor instantaneous but incremental, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales" ( p. 2). This portrays the sufferings of the residents of Khaufpur as ongoing and structurally overlooked by both national and international authorities. One very dramatic literary example is when Animal describes how the government and international bodies respond to the aftermath of the industrial disaster:

All these years we've been waiting for justice, for compensation, for proper treatment. What do we get? Report after report, court date after court date. Meanwhile, people die every day. The factory stands there, still leaking poisons into our wells. The Kampani has run away and no one lifts a finger. (Sinha, 2007, p. 89)

This comment demonstrates that the suffering of Khaufpur inhabitants is not only persistent, but that the response processes are performative, bureaucratic, and disconnected from the victims' lived realities. The repetitions 'report after report' and 'court date after court date' conjures judicial paralysis- a hallmark of what Rob Nixon

refers to as 'slow violence', in which harm occurs gradually and is consistently neglected due to the invisibility of minority suffering. Zafar remarkably gives a scathing commentary on global accountability. He says,

You think the people of Khaufpur will get justice from courts in Amrika? You think the Kampani will be dragged here in chains? They are too rich, too powerful. They buy governments, they buy silence (Sinha, 2007, p. 102).

Zafar demonstrates how structural neglect is integrated into the legal and political response due to both domestic corruption and international lawlessness. The Kampani, which represents Union Carbide/ Dow Chemicals, is depicted as being above the law, reflecting actual global justice failures.

Furthermore, the concept of 'hyposubject' (as proposed by Patranobish) defines the novel's subaltern characters who navigate and resist the toxic landscapes placed on them. She claims that Khaufpur inhabitants rethink pollution and poison beyond the rules of silencing, providing "alternative decolonial and anti-capitalist configurations" (Patranobish, 2007, p. 233). This viewpoint emphasizes the agency of underprivileged populations in combating environmental injustices. Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) presents a similar illustration, showing how the poisonous landfills and dumps of Delhi also result in areas of living death for underprivileged people. Living close to a trash facility and cremation cemetery, a character of the novel refers to the area as a "morgue of industrial ambition" (p. 234). Both the novels establish a literary continuity in postcolonial ecocriticism by depicting the environment as a place where the living are gradually dying. Through the extended image of Khaufpur (as quoted below) Sinha depicts it as a lived necropolis offering a direct parallel to Arundhati Roy's portrayal of Delhi's toxic wastelands, establishing the literary continuity in postcolonial ecocriticism of settings transformed into 'zones of living death.' Sinha here collapses the boundary between human and animal, past and present, death and life underscoring a total ecological precarity. The narrator Animal describes Khaufpur as:

Khaufpur has become a city of the dead. Not those who lie buried in graveyard, but the living who breathe poison every morning. Our wells are graves- water that kills, not quenches thirst. The ground is strewn with the bones of animals that drank it, their carcasses rotting in the sun. Every day I walk through streets where children cough up blood, where old men stumble blind with poisoned eyes. This is our cremation ground and landfill all in one- a single landscape of death in slow motion. (Sinha, pp. 52-53)

The novel's toxic substances constitute more than just a backdrop; it is an active, insidious force that changes the socio-political environment. Williams (2018) analyses how Sinha uses the abject to emphasize the material realities of the victims, arguing that the novel "foregrounds the body as a crucial rhetorical element in a contest between marginalized people and the gargantuan powers that oppose and oppress them" (p. 587). This perspective emphasizes the embodied nature of environmental trauma, as well as the struggle for acknowledgment and justice. The notion that 'time

heals' is called into question when children born following that cruelest night gas leakage have serious malformations and developmental delays. Animal says that "the new ones come into the world already broken, their bodies twisted, their minds clouded" (Sinha, 2007, p. 147). The protagonist, Animal, represents the physical repercussions of environmental neglect and industrial misconduct. His physical defects, which are the result of harmful chemical exposure, demonstrate the disaster's long-term impact. Animal's self-identification reinforces his alienation when he says, "I no longer want to be human, I want to be an animal, turn me into a dog, a pig, anything that is not human." (p. 15)

The way that medical bureaucracy functions as a neo-colonial apparatus that acts without actually documenting is reflected by Zafar, the local activist. He encapsulates this betrayal in his critique of the so-called health camps. He criticizes, "These health camps are a joke. They test our blood, our lungs, write down results, but we never see the reports. It is all for the record books, not for our bodies" (Sinha, 2007, p. 111). Achille Mbembe (2019) refers to the residents of Khaufpur as "necropolitical subjects"-those whose lives are permitted to deteriorate due to corporate impunity and abandonment (p. 21). These health camps turn into symbolic rites in which the victims receive just minimal recognition to maintain their legal and medical invisibility. By doing this, Sinha criticizes colonial governance systems that classified, documented and governed colonial bodies without providing care, in addition to corporate negligence. Gayatri Spivak's fundamental query, '*Can the subaltern speak?*,' is echoed in Zafar's dissatisfaction. The subaltern does speak in this instance, but only as data, not as a person deserving of justice or healing. This is consistent with Patranobish's (2024) findings, which imply that the characters in *Animal's People* become 'hyposubjects'-being less than human status whose pain is documented but never addressed meaningfully (p. 233). Their presence in the system is acknowledged, but then administratively eliminated. In Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010), set in the oil polluted Niger Delta, villagers face respiratory problems, infertility, and contaminated water diseases. A doctor states, "The air we breathe here is enough to kill a healthy man in five years" (Habila, 2010, p. 94). Like Khaufpur, these communities suffer from environmental exploitation, where oil and chemicals symbolize both wealth and death. Both the novels stress the bio political abandonment of regions sacrificed for industrial profit.

### **Resistance and the Re-imagination of Progress:**

Despite the overwhelming sufferings depicted in *Animal's People*, the novel also portrays resistance as a means of redefining progress. The people of Khaufpur refuse to accept the position of passive victims. They mobilize politically, organize protests, reject simplistic answers and create a discourse of justice that goes beyond legal settlements and monetary compensation from the Kampani's attempts to evade accountability. The protagonist known only as Animal, and Zafar, a local activist, are the focal points of this rebellion. Zafar, the leader in particular, represents Antonio

Gramsci's concept of "counter-hegemony"- a challenge to prevailing ideologies by subordinated classes striving to reform society's intellectual systems (Gramsci, 1971, p. 245). His rallying cry, "We don't want their money, we want justice" (Sinha, 2007, p. 221) is remarkable. This rejection of corporate compensation in favour of systemic change challenges capitalist notions of progress, which often reduce justice to financial settlements rather than structural reforms. T. S. Eliot's reflections on broken modernism and spiritual desolation strike a deep connection with the novel's setting. He writes,

"What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow  
Out of this stony rubbish?" (*The Waste Land*, 1976, lines 19-20)

The above lines put a query reflecting Khaufpur's degraded and ruined ecology. While Eliot's figurative barrenness also conveys the spiritual emptiness of development paradigms that forsakes ethics in the name of progress, the 'stony rubbish' becomes apparent in Sinha's poisonous cityscape.

Gramsci's counter hegemony is more than just opposition; it is a rearticulation of values and meanings. This is shown in Khaufpur inhabitants, where people residing in Khaufpur imagine a future based on accountability, remembrance, and ecological sustainability rather than economic development or foreign investment. Zafar's rejection to accept the Kampani's offer of compensation exemplifies a widespread refusal to legitimize injustice through institutionalized forms of closure. In this setting, compensation becomes a technique of forgetting, a tool for erasing transactional firms' ethical commitments. As such, the novel contributes a broader postcolonial critique of global capitalism, in which development is frequently forced rather than negotiated.

*Development as Freedom* by Amartya Sen provides a complementary theoretical framework. Sen contends that development should be measured not by income or industrial output, but rather by the amount to which it increases people's talents and freedoms. This perspective is supported by the novel of present discussion by Sinha, which depicts development as inextricably tied to health, environmental justice, and participatory government. Despite their economic hardship, Khaufpur inhabitants have a strong political consciousness (due to Zafar's efforts) and a sense of local mutual support and respect. These characteristics allow them to criticize and fight mainstream paradigms of advancement that prioritize infrastructure and capital over human experiences and rights.

This ethical dimension of resistance is also evident in the novel's ecological sensibility. The poisoned environment of Khaufpur becomes a metaphor of what Nixon (2011) refers to as 'slow violence' – the cumulative, invisible environmental devastation that disproportionately influences underprivileged groups (p. 2). In their resistance to this aggression, Khaufpur does not seek to return to a pre-industrial condition; instead, the people seek acknowledgment, compensation for moral injury, and long-term future alternatives. This is in contrast to the frequently technocratic rhetoric of development, which views the environment as an externality rather than a lived and contested area.

The re-imagining of progress in *Animal's People* also challenges the epistemologies of international humanitarianism. The novel comments on the paternalistic frameworks of aid and global health that frequently serve to reinforce neo-colonial power dynamics. For instance, health camps established in the aftermath of the disaster are described as performative: they collect data without offering real care. Importantly, the novel transforms the concept of development from a Western-centric, technocratic ideal to a dialogic, locally based goal. For in Khaufpur, progress is measured not by GDP or technological advancement, but by ethical responsibility, ecological balance, and human dignity. In this regard, the novel serves as a literary counter development, providing a relational, historical and thoroughly lived vision of social justice. This view is consistent with the ideas of Arundhati Roy's postcolonial ecocritical novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), which criticizes the environmental deterioration and bureaucratic indifference faced by India's underclasses. Both the novels (*Animal's People* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*) depict regions of environmental death and social abandonment as sites of resistance, where new political subjectivities develop. In doing so, they add to a growing body of literature attempting to decolonize environmental rhetoric and reframe development in terms of justice rather than exploitation.

### Conclusion

Beyond the stark dichotomy of "progress and peril," *Animal's People* proposes a third way of thinking- one that neither mindlessly praises modernity nor dives into nostalgic romanticism. This alternative path, expressed in Khaufpur's grassroots resistance, represents a dialogic, participatory vision of development based on the lived experience of the oppressed. It asks not what can be built, but what needs to be remembered, healed, and safeguarded. Sinha's story resonates as both contemporary and timeless in today's global context, where industrial disasters, climatic emergencies and ecological displacements are no longer anomalies but rather permanent realities. The gas leak in Khaufpur is not an isolated tragedy; it represents the systematic failings that continue to plague the interaction between capital, the environment, and the disenfranchised. In this light, the novel's ethical imagination becomes a mirror of our current situation. How can we listen to the communities most impacted by environmental disaster? How can justice be achieved without reinforcing power structures?

The story of Khaufpur encourages the reader to rethink not only development programs, but also the metaphors we use to define progress. The metaphor of the 'leak'- a rupture, a creeping seepage, a lack of containment- aptly represents the failings of accountability and the permeability of institutional boundaries in restraining corporate power. These metaphorical and material ruptures are where literature comes in: to give form to what official histories erase, to name the silent, and to bring disparate suffering together. Similarly, the characters in *Animal's People* are more than just victims; they are also narrators of resistance. Animal, with his twisted spine and irreverent speech is a physical and narrative distortion of conventional bodies and official narrative.

His voice, which is frequently comical and genuine, rips beyond sanitized humanitarian jargon to regain agency via storytelling. In doing so, the novel becomes a form of resistance- a literary insurgency against the reduction of people to data points, casualties, or legal footnotes.

The pervasive toxicity of Khaufpur- chemical, institutional and psychological- reflects a world in which progress has lost its moral compass. Yet it is in this decaying terrain that new solidarities form. As a result, the reader is faced with an ethical imperative rather than despair. We are challenged to reconsider our own culpability, our understanding of justice, and our ability to envision otherwise. What does it mean to build a world in which progress is measured in terms of clean air, dignified labour and fair healing rather than megawatts or market share? Can we imagine a world in which technological advancement promotes ecological restoration rather than extraction? In addition, most importantly, can the long ignored voices of Khaufpur become the architects of a truly inclusive future? These are not rhetorical inquiries, but blueprints for a new critical consciousness. *Animal's People* does not supply simple answers, instead, achieves something far more powerful: it destabilizes inherited narratives, creating opportunity for new ones to arise. T. S. Eliot's lines below amplify the core message of the current study that in our rush towards progress, we often lose the wisdom of restraint, the ethics of care and the humility to listen.

“The endless cycle of idea and action,  
Endless invention, endless experiment,  
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;  
Knowledge of speech, but not of silence.”

(Choruses from *The Rock*, 1934)

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# Of Festivals and Nature: The Anthropocene and Planetary Sustainability in Tagore

*Mausumi Sen Bhattacharjee*

## Abstract

In 1928 during the *Brikhsharopana* festival in Santiniketan Rabindranath Tagore penned most of his poems in the collection that he later named *Bonobani* (The Message of the Wild). Nature for Tagore has been in many ways a trope to engage with the otherwise anthropocentric universe - it has been a tool for the critic/poet to participate in the discourse of an irrational and indiscriminate oppression of the Mother Earth. If we go by the mantra of 'live and let live' his *Bonobani* poems and especially his critical essay "The Message of the Forest" may be seen as a prologue to this very nascent issue of the anthropocene that has finally come upon us as an *anagnorisis*. But unfortunately, as always is the case with South Asian intelligentsia, it is getting disseminated into the academic thought and society at large vis-à-vis the theoretical scaffold of the west.

This essay aims to analyse these texts by Tagore to study their relevant nuances. It proposes to show how Tagore detects through the ritualistic performances and involvement of nature festivals (both in his works and praxis as in his Santiniketan asram project) is celebrated not merely to achieve the mediating connectedness with his Upanishadic idea of the Supreme One, but to reassert that Mother Earth is meant for all living beings equally. Subsequently it aims to show how Tagore offers a subtle critique against these oppressive practices of the human way back in the early 1920s. In the process my paper also aims to illustrate how through the selected texts Tagore was already theorising the tenets of planetary sustainability even before it could be conceived by the canonical thinkers from the west. Hence his plea for the planetary through the selected works is iconoclastic in its own unique way.

**Keywords:** anthropocene, planetary, deep ecology, festivals, asram culture.

Amidst the rising concerns of environmentalism and climate changes, the anthropocene has almost been a password to tackle these concerns in a rational way. The anthropocene, whether one addresses it as a geological epoch or as a working term to measure the anthropogenic changes humanity has promoted on this earth, has been a compelling motif to assess and review literature on the environment. The dissemination of the idea of the anthropocene into literary studies as a term may be assessed by the following:

The recent coinage of the term ‘Anthropocene’ by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and biologist Eugene Stoermer (Crutzen and Stoermer, 2000) has highlighted how important it is to explain the prominent role of humans in driving geologic, atmospheric and geomorphological changes. The coinage is an analogy with the construction of other recent geological epochs, such as the Holocene, the epoch we are commonly assumed to be within, starting around 12,000 years ago following the last glacial period. The construction of the term anthropocene is a suggestion that we need to take seriously the idea that the transformations we have caused as a species have had such a significant effect that we need to think of our role as triggering a new geological phase distinct from the last.

The argument is now being made that we are being threatened with a mass extinction event the likes of which has occurred only five times in the last 540 million years or so (Barnosky et al., 2011) and that this mass extinction should be associated with human activity. This has triggered the suggestion that anthropology now needs to think of what it means to be writing culture in the anthropocene (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010), a suggestion that is part of a broader move in the humanities and social sciences. (Irvine & Gorji, 2013)

Furthermore, its intensity may be fathomed in how Dipesh Chakrabarty reflects on the emergence of the concept of anthropocene

the wall between human and natural history has been breached. We may not experience ourselves as a geological agent, but we appear to have become one at the level of the species. And without that knowledge that defies historical understanding there is no making sense of the current crisis that affects us all. (Chakrabarty, 221)

My task here is to bring Rabindranath Tagore to the fore as a writer, reformer and activist for whom social history and observations of the natural world were intricately combined and through his work he offers us a way of thinking about the challenge put forward by Chakrabarty as early as in the 1920s. Tagore’s capacity to hold human and natural history in view simultaneously in his writings offer an alternative way to deal with the anthropocene. In this paper I will analyse Tagore’s *Bonobani* collection of poems (1928), his essay “The Message of the Forest” (1922) and his Introduction to Elmhirst’s essay “The Robbery of the Soil” (1928) in the light of assessing Tagore not merely as a poet of nature rejoicing in its bountiful manifestation, but also as a seer and activist whose literature was enabling a praxis of cleansing the human tainted nature to revitalise the symbiosis between Mother Earth and the human through his asram culture at Santiniketan. In these writings

are adumbrated vital echoes of our very contemporary ideas of the anthropocene, deep ecology and planetary sustainability that enable us to review him as an environmental prophet much ahead of his times.

According to Ramchandra Guha “environmentalism must be viewed as a social program, a charter of action which seeks to protect cherished habitats, protest against their degradation, and prescribe less destructive technologies and lifestyles”. (Guha, 2000) Beginning with the forest movements of Australia and America in the early nineteenth century and finally manifested with a big bang with Rachel Carson’s publication of *Silent Spring* in 1962, environmentalism in the west did take a new turn accommodating serious concerns of the impact of chemicals upon bio life. It moved further with Arne Naess’s platform for “deep ecology” concern in respect of saving the wolves. This movement as Guha sums up “fights for ‘biocentric equality’, that is, the placing of humans on par with and not above other species”. (Guha, 2000) The eight principles as cited by Guha from David Rothenberg’s “Is it too Painful to Think? Conversations with Arne Naess” to unite the deep ecologists worldwide may be considered here. The 1993 version reads like this:

1. The flourishing of human and nonhuman living beings has intrinsic worth. The worth of nonhuman beings is independent of their usefulness for human purposes.
2. Richness and diversity of life forms on earth, including forms of human cultures, have intrinsic worth.
3. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity, except to satisfy vital needs.
4. The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantially smaller human population.
5. Present human interference with the nonhuman world is excessive and the situation is worsening.
6. The foregoing points indicate that changes are necessary in the dominant way humans until now have behaved in their relation to the earth as a whole. The changes will, in a fundamental manner, affect political, social, technological, economic, and ideological structures.
7. The ideological change in the rich countries will mainly be that of increased appreciation of life quality rather than high material standard of living, in this way preparing [the way for] a global state of ecologically sustainable development.
8. Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation, directly or indirectly, to try to implement the necessary changes by nonviolent means. (Guha, 2000)

These tenets of “deep ecology” are almost all applicable to Tagore’s thinking and the way he has presented his concerns in his writings. Tagore’s environment writings have been in many ways a trope to engage with the otherwise anthropocentric universe – it has been a tool for him to explore, navigate and subvert the discourse of irrational and indiscriminate oppression of the Mother Earth. To introduce his collection of poems, *Bonobani* (The Message of the Wild) Tagore manifests

The language of Nature is the eternal language of creation. It penetrates reality to reach the deepest layers of our consciousness, it draws upon a language that has

survived thousands of years with the human ... it is the musical instrument of nature, it replicates the rhythm inherent in life itself. If we listen carefully, we will be able to trace within them the murmurs of eternity where the spirit of liberation, peace and beauty lurk, it reminds us of the sea that is '*santam, shivam, advaitam* ... it reminds us of the bond with the world ... if we can accept this music of the wild within us, we can perceive the great music of oneness ... in this hotel of Vienna, I thus fondly remember the flora and the fauna of my household at Santiniketan. (Sen & Sarkar, 2018)

His response to nature is strongly infused with the Upanishadic philosophy of monotheism as he visualizes the Divine Spirit within all creation and its manifestation is reflected in the manifold richness of nature. As commented by Apurva Biswas

The wide variety of nature with the changes of seasons and the dance of time permeated his poetry to a great extent ... the change of seasons was not for the poet a change in the external manifestations of nature – each represented a phase, an insight into life which Rabindranath grasped intuitively. (Biswas, 1996)

This 'insight into life' is related to what Naess would view as "deep ecology and it is evident in the poems of *Bonobani* especially in "Debdaaru", "Amraban", "Nilmanilata", "Kurchi" and "Sal" varieties, in his celebration of the change of seasons – rejoicing in their blossom. Acknowledging and celebrating their fall, revival and renewal are the sources of Tagore's idea of the festival. He introduces his last poem of the collection "Basanta Utsav" with the following introductory lines that may be considered in this regard.

This year dolpurnima befell crossing the Chaitra at the advent of Falgun. The blossom of the mango flowers is over, no honeybees in the mango groves, the palash flowers are gone, the Simul flowers bowed adieu after bequeathing their last drops of honey for the ants. The bowers were almost empty except for the Sal flowers still shining in their inflorescence. In the dawn of the festival the girl students of the asram danced around the throne of nature and decked them with colours while laying garlands in the Sal shades. At the advent of early dawn when the full moon was about to take leave and the first ray of sunlight was about to emerge, then I penned this verse offering for the festival of spring. (Tagore, 1986, translations mine)

Listing each detail of the presence and absence of seasonal flowers, their colours participating in the celebration of seasons is characteristic of Tagore's perception of nature and his idea of the festival is intuitively and consciously secularised and segregated from the mythical fables to attune their vibrance with the seasonal cycle. Hence Holi for Tagore and the Santiniketan asramites have always been "Basanta Utsav" and not the mainstream festival centering around the Hindu myths. Furthermore, if we investigate the last lines of this poem, we note the subtle union of the human and nonhuman life:

Our affection for you silent friend,  
Receive my song offering in this spring.

In this festival of joy the voices of the children,  
Mingle with the songs of the koel,  
Dressed in the happiness of your aroma  
This offering is replenished on this holy occasion. (Tagore, 1986, translations mine)

The festival of spring thus, here for the poet, announces not only a marriage of all lives from plant to animals and human but a complete coordination of each with the other that resuscitates and rejuvenates life on earth. The synesthetic effect created by a deliberate fudging of the tactile senses here in the poem only expedites this subtle union and it sings of the fulfilment and flourishing of both human and nonhuman life through the celebration of spring.

In his poem “Briksharopana Utsav” the poet deifies a tiny sapling alluring care, respect and worship. The poem seems to pay homage to each force of nature, and they all participate in this macrocosmic process of life making.

Let the flag of victory over dreariness  
Flutter, o great force of life!  
Bless these particles of dust today  
With the softness of your grace:  
The songs of the silent earth  
Will sing to the tunes you craft,  
Awakening blossoms all around us.  
Bless us O beautiful life!

Fellow travellers, in the green shade  
Let us relax for a moment;  
Come to us O playmate of the wind  
Make the azure sky radiant!  
Awake the first light with hope  
Let the last rays of dusk settle,  
Compose the nest of mighty repose  
O generous life!

O child of nature, let the force of life fill you!  
Gather the blessings of light and wind  
To attain the sap of youth;  
I welcome you today with the depth of my wishes  
Be our neighbour, be our friend! (Sen & Sircar, 2018)

William Rueckert’s proposal that “green plants are among the most creative organisms on earth. They are nature’s poets” (Rueckert, 1996) become very relevant while reading the way Tagore represents their reality in the above lines.

The worshipping of trees is with what the collection opens. This collection of poems has “Briksh- Bandana” as its opening poem. It manifests life’s triumph over all dreariness and the emergence of the tree as the redeemer hero that shares its life bonding intuitively with Mother Earth:

From the deep bowels of the earth you heard  
The call of the Sun, O Tree, you witnessed  
The first beat of life, you uttered  
The call of life in the dreariness.

Brave son of the earth, you declared  
War to liberate the soil from the  
Sterility of the desert; the battle continues  
To establish the throne of the green  
On every page of rock  
You extend your path to every space.

Your life and shade sustain me  
I come forward, a messenger of Man;  
Dressed in your garland I offer,  
My poetry to you as my humble offering.  
Dressed in your garland I offer,  
My poetry to you as my humble offering. (Sen & Sircar, (2018)

Often such writings have provoked a comparison with Wordsworth's writings. One striking difference between Wordsworth's approach to nature and that of Tagore as evident in these poems is that Wordsworth and his 'egotistical sublime' is more anthropocentric in seeing a conflict between man and nature. Human for Wordsworth is the agent that enables recognition of nature, and it foregrounds human centered issues. By contrast, Tagore is consistently more into the anthropocene. While Wordsworth sought nature for

...aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,  
In which the burthen of the mystery,  
In which the heavy and the weary weight  
Of all this unintelligible world,  
Is lightened: (Wordsworth, 1970,1975: 36-41)

or to hear the "still sad music of humanity", for Tagore it is foregrounding of nature, and he is "dressed in your garland" and his poetry is a "humble offering". Here we can infer how Tagore's views are more eco-centric and has a spiritual proclivity than being anthropocentric. This is in keeping with the propositions of Arne Naess and his definitions of the "deep ecology".

The function of poetry, says Francis Ponge in *The Voice of Things*

is to nourish the spirit of man by giving him the cosmos to suckle. We have only to lower our standard of dominating nature and to raise our standard of participating in it in order to make the reconciliation take place. When man becomes proud to be not just the site where ideas and feelings are produced, but also the crossroad where they divide and mingle, he will be ready to be saved. Hope therefore lies in a poetry through which the world so invades the spirit of man that he becomes almost speechless, and later reinvents language. (Ponge, 1974)

This can be validated in the way Tagore explores and celebrates nature and nonhuman lives in these poems. Interestingly, *Bonobani* also has a poem called “Jagadishchandra” dedicated to the scientist who took the contemporary society by storm proving plants also live. Here we notice Tagore’s play with the metaphors of the silent and voiceless that subtly become explicit in Ponge’s suggestion.

...O hermit you wholeheartedly  
Gave voice to the silent, have heard alone  
The inner pain of the wilderness  
The cry of the silent life  
Have enervated life in the Mother Earth’s breast...  
The voice of desire from the inner chambers of the silent  
Emerge from darkness to vision’s light  
In your enlightened soul speaks  
About a bonding between the plant and human soul  
That testifies the ancient most and primitive of all relations. (Tagore, 1986, translations mine)

This acknowledgement of the eternality of the bonding with plant life and the human testifies Tagore’s strong affinity with the anthropocene.

“The Message of the Forest” based on the Bengali essay “Tapoban” was reproduced in *The Modern Review* in May 1919 and was first read out on the opening of the Festival of Fine Arts in Bangalore on 12<sup>th</sup> January 1919. Here Tagore deifies the forest as a socio-temporal space containing our proper environment. For that he relates the forest to its representation in the classical tradition in Sanskrit epics

under the sublime shade of those ancient forests; and, in the forest, the most intense pathos of human life found its background in the greatest of our romantic dramas. The memory of these sacred forests is the one great inheritance which India ever cherishes through all her political vicissitudes and economic disturbances. (Sen & Sircar, 2018)

What interests us here is not merely the idealisation of the forest but also his locating in it “lives and the Grand Life that permeates the Universe”. (Sen & Sircar, 2018) Here Tagore is having in mind the Upanishadic concept of the emancipation of the soul. In his later essay “The Religion of the Forest” from *Creative Unity* collection (1922) he begins with: “our soul lies in its realising the ultimate truth of unity”

*Ishāvāsyam idam sarvam yat kinch jagatyam jagat.  
Yçna tyaktēna bhunjetha mā gradha kasyasvit dhanam.*

(Know all that moves in this moving world as enveloped by God; and find enjoyment through renunciation, not through greed of possession) (Das, 1996)

He moves on to discuss how the “ideal of perfection preached by the forest-dwellers of ancient India runs through the heart of our classical literature and still dominates our mind”. He also attempts to highlight the uniqueness of India through the Upanishadic conceptualisation of finding divinity in nature:

India holds sacred, and counts as places of pilgrimage, all spots which display a special beauty or splendour of Nature. These had no original attraction on account of any special fitness for cultivation or settlement. Here man is free, not to look upon Nature as a source of supply of his necessities, but to realise his soul beyond himself. The Himalayas of India are sacred and the Vindhya Hills. Her majestic rivers are sacred. Lake Mánasa and the confluence of the Ganges and the Jamuna are sacred. India has saturated with her love and worship the great Nature with which her children are surrounded, whose light fills their eyes with gladness, and whose water cleanses them, whose food gives them life, and from whose majestic mystery comes forth the constant revelation of the infinite in music, scent and colour, which brings its awakening to the soul of man. India gains the world through worship, through spiritual communion; and the idea of freedom to which she aspired was based upon the realization of her spiritual unity. (Das, 1996)

By associating the forests with spirituality their elucidation as part of the spiritual entity is reiterated. Furthermore, India is represented to the west as the land where this unique bonding is possible. Hence it is an emphatic postcolonial response to west's hegemony on the politics of the anthropocene.

In one of his earlier poetic-plays *Prakritir Pratishodh or The Ascetic* (1921) Tagore deals with the ascetic who renounces nature as a deterrent to philosophical wisdom and epistemic pursuits.

What pain you have given me  
O demon of Nature in your trap!  
... I had promised to revenge myself  
To free from your bind. (Sen & Sircar, 2018)  
However, he returns to a reconciliation with nature's regenerative cycle in his manifestation,  
I throw away the vestige of *Sanyas*(renunciation)  
I inhale the joy of living  
With the great vessel of the world floats  
I submit to its motion - I live  
With the millions who travel on it. (Sen & Sircar, 2018)

We see how in "The Message of the Forest" for his illustration Tagore uses the metaphor of the tree while relating the human to history and reiterating its organic nature.

I would rather insist on the inexhaustible variety of the human race which does not grow straight up, like a palmyra tree, on a single stem but like a banian tree spreads itself in ever-new trunks and branches. Man's history is organic and deep-seated life-forces work towards its growth. It is hopeless to cater to some clamorous demand of the moment, by endeavouring to fashion the history of one people on the model of another. (Sen & Sircar, 2018)

Here we are reminded of the analogy of Dipesh Chakravarty cited before. If not a "geological agent", Tagore here implores to bridge the divide and insistently attempts to mend "the wall between human and natural history" when he refers to

the “deep-seated life-forces” working towards its growth. Anthropocene in terms of its historical progress receives a sustained connotation in such views.

But with his fine-tuned environmentalism, Tagore did not stop at bare theorisation. “The Message of the Forest” and “The Religion of the Forest” (1922) may be viewed as deliberate interventions anticipating some of the fundamental premises of the literary discourse of ecocriticism. His Santiniketan asram or hermitage project finds a practical shape and in many ways is a pragmatic realisation of the *tapovana* he intellectually conceived. It simultaneously will fulfil his pedagogic projects too.

Tagore’s mission of founding a school at Santiniketan in late 1901 was no doubt instigated by the *swadeshi* (Nationalist) activity in Bengal and other parts of India around the turn of the century. As Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson points out in their *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore* collection:

His aim was to establish a modern version of the *tapovan* (forest hermitage) of ancient India, apart from Calcutta and its fleshpots and away from the lure of the West... Rabindranath was disillusioned with the *swadeshi* movement and role of *Brahmo Samaj* and concentrating in building up Bengal educational, artistically and economically. ... But by 1907 the movement degenerated and precipitated in Hindu-Muslim riots. Disillusioned, Tagore withdrew and shifted his efforts on establishing his school and improving the condition of the peasants on his estates. (Dutta & Robinson, 1997)

To increase his academic aids in this Santiniketan-project he sent his son Rathindranath Tagore and son-in-law Nagen Ganguly to be trained in agro-sciences from the University of Illinois. They would be of immense help for his subsequent rural development and Sriniketan project. Further, it may be noted how Tagore was pioneering the interdisciplinary in his academic approach. In his letter to Nagen Ganguly, his daughter, Mira’s husband in Illinois, dated 14 Ashwin, 1314 BD (1 October, 1904 in English Calendar) he writes: “It is vital that in addition to the principles of agriculture you discuss English literature and so on... otherwise your education will become narrow”. (Dutta & Robinson This suggests how Tagore was already practising the precepts of the anthropocene in his education policy that prioritise an interdisciplinary approach for a holistic academic training. In both the essays discussed here, he reinstates nature to its central position thereby subverting the anthropocentric assumptions and foregrounds what Naess would later term “biotic community”. According to Arne Naess, “biotic community” is a concept acknowledged to be influenced by the Buddhist ideology of tolerance where human and non-human entities are symbiotically as well as nonviolently interconnected to each other. Its balance must be preserved to secure the future ecosphere. (Naess, 1989) This, thereby, suggests that the human history is implicated in the natural history. Tagore’s establishment of the *Brahmacharyāsrama* seems to create an alternative cultural and biotic community where pupils were educated to harmonise with nature and not harm its balance in anyway. Here we may cite

Tagore's self-composed song of the *âsrama sangeet* itself to elucidate intuitive sensitivity of this symbiotic bonding:

The stillness of her shades is stirred by the woodland whisper;  
her amlaki groves are aquiver with the rapture of leaves.  
She dwells in us and around us, however far we may wander.  
She weaves our hearts in a song, making us one in music,  
tuning our strings of love with her own fingers;  
and we ever remember that she is our own, the darling of our hearts. (Sen & Sircar, 2018)

Education at Santiniketan was a mode of attaining this union and not mechanically an end. Such an organic way of thinking, reading, writing and finally implementing it to his hermitage / asram project in an age that was suffering, fast transitioning with the post world war angst, industrialisation and mechanisation, speaks so much about his pragmatic environmentalist approach that is so vital especially, in the present context of global warming and climate change of the twenty-first century. In this sense with his Santiniketan project, Tagore may be seen as a pioneering guru of disaster management as well.

The Santiniketan project has its roots in the Indian Gurukul system while incorporating the idyllic natural ambience of Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*, *Ritusamhara*, and *Kumara-Sambhava* - the *tapovana* idea where we can resuscitate the "varied harmony of nature's sympathy". Simultaneously, what Tagore does not openly acknowledge (but was too aware) is the Platonic idea of the *academé* (critiqued on different lines for denying conjugal love / marital bliss as evident in Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost* for instance) is combined with the notion of the Vedic *Brahmacharyaâsrama*. Here we may also note the confluence between the East and West in conceptualizing pedagogy.

Tagore elaborates on the forest life as an ideal and links it up with the uniquely Indian way of life

Our *tapovana* was just such a vital centre of our social body. In it throbbed the rhythm of our life's ebb and flow: it gave truth to our thoughts, right impulse to our feelings, and guiding force to our work. We distinctly see from the works of our poet, that the teaching of the forest was not towards the inertia of passivity, but towards true heroism and victory ... the ideal hermitage of ancient India was not a theatre where the spirit should wrestle with the flesh, or where the monastic order should try conclusions with the social order,- it was to establish a harmony between all energies and the eternal reality. That is why the relations of Indian humanity with beast and bird and tree had attained an intimacy which may seem strange to people of other lands. (Sen & Sircar, 2018)

This "relation" cited by Tagore is a peaceful accommodation of all species, acknowledgement of biodiversity, a symbiotic bonding that is in cohort with the idea of "deep ecology" as well as the anthropocene. Planetary sustainability will never be ruptured in this idyllic space as "*tapovana* is *Shantarasapadam*, - that the emotional quality peculiar to the forest retreat is Peace, the peace which is the emotional counterpart of perfection". (Sen & Sircar, 2018).

The idea of the festival emerges from existence in this idyllic *tapovana*. His fascination in considering festival (*utsava*) as a confluence both cultural aspects of humanity and the natural cycle is embedded and emergent from the life of perfection when each life from human to nonhuman are in peaceful coexistence. Tagore's notion of the *utsava* was no less than a celebration of the whole humanity, or *manabsamaj*, where at least the possible meaningful creative sharing and global cooperation would exist

Combined with this was the notion of the importance of forests that are, indeed, storehouses of biodiversity. The biodiversity of the forest teaches us lessons of democracy, of leaving space for others while drawing sustenance from the common web of life. In his "The Message of the Forest" essay Tagore writes:

Indian civilisation has been distinctive in locating its source of regeneration, material and intellectual, in the forest, not the city. India's best ideas have come where man was in communion with trees and rivers and lakes, away from the crowds. The peace of the forest has helped the intellectual evolution of man. The culture of the forest has fuelled culture of Indian society. The culture that has arisen from the forest has been influenced by the diverse processes of renewal of life, which are always at play in the forest, varying from species to species, from season to season, in sight and sound and smell. The unifying principle of life in diversity, of democratic pluralism, thus became the principle of Indian civilization. (Sen & Sircar, 2018)

It is this "unity in diversity" as Vandana Shiva points out,

that is the basis of both ecological sustainability and democracy. Diversity without unity becomes the source of conflict and contest. Uniformity without diversity becomes the ground for external control. This is true of both nature and culture. The forest is a unity in its diversity, and we are united with Nature through our relationship with the forest.

In Tagore's writings, the forest was not just the source of knowledge and freedom: it was the source of beauty and joy, of art and aesthetics, of harmony and perfection. It symbolised the universe. (Shiva, 2011)

In his Introduction to L.K. Elmhirst's book *The Robbery of the Soil*, that was an extension lecture at Visva Bharati in Calcutta on 28<sup>th</sup> July 1922, Tagore links the village and city as complimentary halves of the metaphorical body of the organism with reference to the planetary resources of water:

Streams, lakes and oceans are there on this earth. They exist not for the hoarding of water exclusively each with its own area. They send up the vapour which forms into clouds and helps in a wide distribution of water. Cities have a special function in maintaining wealth and knowledge in concentrated forms of opulence, but this should not be for their own exclusive sake... They should be like the lamp post, for the light it supports must transcend its own limits. Such a relationship of mutual benefit between the city and village remains strong only so long as the spirit of cooperation and self-sacrifice is a living ideal in society as a whole. When some universal temptation overcomes this ideal, when some selfish passion finds ascendancy, there is a gap

formed and widened between them. The mutual relationship between city and village becomes that of exploiter and victim. This is a form of perversity in which the body becomes its own enemy. The termination is death.

... Our object is to try to flood the choked bed of village life with streams of happiness. For this the scholars, the poets, the musicians, the artists as well as the scientists have to collaborate have to offer their contribution. Otherwise, they live like parasites, sucking life from the country people, and giving nothing back to them. Such exploitation gradually exhausts the soil of life, the soil which needs constant replenishing by the return of life to it, through the completion of the cycle of receiving and giving back. (Sen & Sircar, 2018)

While introducing L.K. Elmhirst to his Santiniketan community he elucidates the significance of the “art of agriculture” through the legend of King Janaka. This analogy justifies his awareness of the need of the village and rural reconstruction. It also brings home the unbiased union of the thinker and the farmer breaking preconceived notions of class, caste and religion:

One of the highlights of our Indian tradition is the legend of King Janaka who is reputed to have combined his quest for the highest truth (*Brahma*) with his knowledge of agriculture. For this wonderful synthesis that he achieved in the days of yore between the heavenly and the earthly, he is still considered to be the ideal monarch. It is in such context of the highest human ideal that we must regard the art of agriculture. If we fail to do so, this noble pursuit loses all its dignity... But when a kingly sage like Janaka puts his hand to the plough there can be no question of stultification or enslavement of the mind. When the time comes for our thinkers and intellectuals to take agricultural activities under their responsibility, the schism that at present exists between the hand and the brain for a large section of our population, will vanish. (Sen & Sircar, 2018)

Among the festivals celebrated with great pomp in the asram, *Basanta utsava* or the festival of Spring was the most striking and environment conscious in multifarious ways. Tagore not only secularises it, but also links it up with the seasonal cycle. Once again, he was reiterating in his own ways the Upanishadic ideology inherited by his father Devendranath Tagore. As a festival of colours, it celebrates *Basanta* or the blossoming of spring. *Bonobani*'s poems also are a testimony for this poetic celebration. As a lyrical pageantry of recitations of poems, songs, dance and dance-dramas performed by the students and teachers and an exchange of colours that were prepared beforehand by the students and teachers and the other âsramiks, this festival foregrounded nature's fulfilment and our fulfilment in nature. The colour for this purpose was not the popular chemicals that had already entered the Indian market in colonial Bengal but made from dried flower petals (merrigold and palash, to name a few). Even the yellow saris worn by the girl students of Santiniketan on this occasion were coloured by the dyes extracted from the above-mentioned flowers and indigenous seeds readily available in the laterite soil belt of Birbhum, the Bengal district that houses Santiniketan.

The corporate tag of “ecofriendly” nowadays, minting money from the elite consumer society and capitalistic market economy had its quiet and humble initiation here at Santiniketan, far from the bustling cries of nationalist movement, partition, colonial oppression that ransacked contemporary Bengal with Calcutta as its gory centre. The cottage industry and handloom movement of Gandhi could nowhere else have a better manifestation.

In July 1927, Tagore observed the festival of the earth through *Briksharopana* (tree planting) and *Halakarshana* (ploughing) *utsava* thus incorporating also agro-economic concerns. This was “*phire chal matir taney*” – an environmental awareness gesture to restore lost values and reassert them in his “modern” hermitage called Visva Bharati:

Yatra visvam bhavatya eka nidam (Where the world makes its home under a single nest). This is the motto of Tagore’s university.

The awareness of the anthropocene in the light of this analysis, thus, is not essentially a white / west project – Tagore cites and establishes its lineage to our Vedic and Upanishadic culture. Ecological concerns in his alternative vision were interwoven with ethical perspectives because nature for him was a manifestation of the Upanishadic Supreme One. But with his Santiniketan (literally meaning “a haven of peace”) venture he far excels the western ideology and stands out as a visionary much ahead of his times. He is such a thinker-activist who rightfully deserves not only the title *Visvakabi* but possibly something further. My humble suggestion would be *Visvamanab* (may be translated as the ‘universal human’) and not only *mahamanab* (to borrow from Tagore’s own terminology).

Tagore combines ecological concerns with moral and ethical issues. “*Yatra visvam*” is not merely a West/East cultural conglomeration in Tagore’s thoughts. More intrinsically, it is a diverse “biotic community” symbiotically generating a communion between nature, human and its other millions of living organisms. But Tagore himself says in “The Message of the Forest”, “For India to force herself along European lines of growth would not make her Europe, but only a distorted India”. (Sen and Sircar, 2018). Here he is propounding his nation building project as well and Santiniketan for him was a microcosmic world order imbibing all these natural and ethical values. In such an endeavour to save the natural resources and seek rural reconstruction to deify the village, he emerges as a predecessor harbinger of a unique conceptualisation of the anthropocene. His plea for planetary sustainability through his writings, songs, poems and social and pedagogic projects of Visva Bharati being one, he was the unique bard from the east who appealed much earlier to usher in this planetary awareness of sustainability in his own unique way.

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# An Ecocritical Study of the Representation of Jadav ‘Molai’ Payeng, the ‘Forest Man of India’

*Recho Benjamin Teron*

## **Abstract**

Environmental activism necessitates the creation of heroes among mortals, saviours to rescue fallen humanity from environmental collapse leading to destruction of human civilisation. Like the Noachian flood, climate change and global warming seem to prophecy of another imminent worldwide flood that would wipe the planet off if archetypal heroes do not rise up and lead the masses to stem the tide. This prophecy of destruction has been made proper through the collective force of literature and mass media in a highly imaginative twenty-first century civilisation and therefore humanity seeks salvation. The collective unconscious that Carl Jung theorises, that of the present age, sees the need of such kind of Jungian archetypes who would rise up to lead the charge for the masses to mend the gaps in the walls of civilisation, to batten down the hatches, strengthen the gates, and to restore paradise. One such figure is Jadav “Molai” Payeng, a simple Mising tribe village man from rural Assam, a cowherd who was discovered tending his own forest planted by his own hand by a journalist and celebrated as a hero for environmental activism in literature and mass media. The Mising tribe has a rich traditional performance ecology and their villages stand under threat of eviction due to floods and erosion and need someone like Jadav Payeng. Such a simple village man with little education, untainted by the world, captured the imagination of the whole nation of India being later dubbed as the “Forest Man of India” and even crossing borders to be recognised worldwide as an environmentalist is a testament to the fact that the people are looking to such persons as a return to the native basics to save the world from destruction, rather than modern complicated solutions.

**Keywords:** ecocriticism, Jungian archetype, environmental activism, collective unconscious.

## **Introduction**

“The best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago.

The second-best time to plant a tree is now. — Proverb” (Gholz, 2019, p. 2)

This is how the children’s book, *The Boy Who Grew A Forest: The True Story of Jadav Payeng*, written by Sophia Gholz and illustrated by Kayla Harren begins. The reiteration of a popular age-old proverb in the minds of children to drive home a moral lesson to save the environment is an apt beginning for the book based on a beloved environmentalist, Jadav Payeng. From a rural part of the state of Assam, India, Jadev Payeng was a simple indigenous villager who lived by farming and livestock rearing, but his dedication to planting trees day after day, year after year to make his own larger than 550-hectare forest, a phenomenal modern-day achievement, elevated him to national prominence. Looking at how articles, books, documentaries and films were written about Payeng, it can be seen that his work in creating a forest is a feat that is held in adulation in the larger public domain by the public psyche. An ecocritical examination of such works on Payeng will lead to a greater understanding of environmental activism in the present times.

Carl Jung, in his remarkable book, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, published in 1959, puts forward his theories of the archetype and how the collective unconscious is related to it. In Jungian theory, archetypes are inherited mental images or ideas passed down in the unconscious of the individual who is part of the collective unconscious. The collective unconscious is the common human link in the individual unconscious that draws from human history and experiences to produce shared mental concepts. He says: “Archetypes are like riverbeds which dry up when the water deserts them, but which it can find again at any time.” (Jung, 1939, p. 395) This line is coincidentally and meaningfully related to the topic at hand. The present environmental degradation and collapse in the earth has worked on the collective unconscious to present an apocalyptic view of the future. The search for a Jungian archetype to stop this environmental apocalypse is necessary to prevent annihilation. This is where an Indian village man, Jadav Payeng steps into the picture as a hero for environmental activism. In the history of environmental activism in India, we have the man Sunderlal Bahuguna, one of the earliest environmentalists in modern India. The man behind the Chipko Movement, Sunderlal Bahuguna passed away last year on May 21, 2021 due to COVID complications. A pioneer environmental activist from India, this man from Uttarakhand desired to protect the Himalayas and rallied the entire nation to the cause. But the baton had been passed. The man Jadav Payeng is the new and larger-than-life saviour.

## **Jadav Payeng — the archetype**

The creation of an environmental saviour is necessitated by the theory of climate change, that the climate of the world is changing rapidly over time due to change in the environmental greenery ratio as well as destruction of animal species. Rachel Hartnett quotes: “Global climate change has been called the single greatest threat to human

civilization. It threatens to kill or displace millions or even billions of people and will irrevocably change the lives of practically every human being on the planet.” (Hartnett, 2021, p. 139) Beginning from Al Gore winning the Nobel Peace prize with his call to the arms against climate change, the world started to sit up and take notice. The world will drown in a flood if the glaciers melt and the rising temperature is left unchecked. The horror of the Titanic is but a miniscule representation of the horrors of a worldwide flood.

“Successful ecocriticism must focus on the tangible political consequences of environmental policy that are undoubtedly destroying the planet... Oftentimes it takes images of planetary annihilation to motivate people into action after years of sitting idly by watching things slowly decay. In reality it takes awareness of impending disaster to compel policymakers to enact even piecemeal reform. On the screen it takes the actual appearance of ecological apocalypse to set the plot in motion.” (Schatz, 2012, p. 20)

JL Schatz points out the need to ring the apocalyptic alarm bells by scholars in ecocriticism in order to effect change in the world. However, in this case it is not a well learned man from the halls of learning that rises up to take the charge, but a barely literate tribal man from a remote village. It is not the university-educated, politically conscious, materially equipped, tech savvy, first world person who emerges as the hero, but a simple cowherd from a remote tribe and people, a Mising man- Jadav Payeng. Do the warning sirens of a worldwide flood ring a bell? In the Judeo-Christian tradition, it was the prophet Noah who was said to have preached for a hundred years calling people to repentance or else a worldwide flood would destroy the earth. Noah is the Jungian archetype, the righteous man who saves the progeny of the human race by building an ark that saves not only himself, his wives, sons and daughters in-law but two of every animal, bird and creeping thing. In Jung’s theory of archetypes we find Noah, a perfect Biblical archetype. The creation of Noah as an archetype was necessitated because of the prophecy of worldwide destruction by flood.

In the twenty-first century and that same apocalyptic prediction of imminent destruction by worldwide flood is shouted out from the ‘rooftops’, by environmental activists everywhere. Literature and mass media plays the role of the sirens as article after article is churned out regularly by the believers of this apocalyptic prediction. The Bible has the book of Revelation to warn people of the end times through its apocalyptic message. The post-modern world has shifted its focus from the pages of the Bible’s apocalyptic prophecies to a more postmodern nihilistic megaphone that blares out warnings of destruction by flood across the world. Trees are cut, glaciers are melting, temperature is rising and therefore another Noachic level flood is going to destroy human civilization. This feeling of apocalyptic dread is scary for many as they protest and cry out against environmental degradation. The modern day prophets are many, echoing that same Biblical call of repentance that Noah offered thousands of years ago. The biblical practice of urging people to change their ways and repent of their misdeeds if humanity is to survive destruction is repeated in a postmodern era in a

more sophisticated manner and age. Modern day Biblical archetype prophets range from Al Gore to a more recent student climate activist Greta Thunberg. These modern-day prophets lay bare the statistics gathered from climate experts and through their speaking prowess usher in a dreaded apocalyptic advent.

The apocalyptic prophecies of climate change and a worldwide flood usher in a panicked populace who are desperately looking for salvation. There is an ark to be built, and the need of another Noahic archetype to rise up and save humanity. The need for a saviour to save humanity from environmental collapse has been the distress call in the collective unconscious that Carl Jung theorises. Furthermore, the collective unconscious inadvertently seeks the saviour-figure, the environmental hero who understands the need of the hour and delves in to prevent the apocalyptic flood. One such figure is Jadav 'Molai' Payeng. The environmental hero who stands as a Jungian archetype, who by his exploits is seen as a modern day Noah, saving flora and fauna by his relentless efforts."It may only be by considering climate change through a postcolonial lens and utilizing indigenous resistance that the damage of this new form of climate imperialism can be undone." (Hartnett, 2021, p. 138) Climate imperialism, as termed in the field of ecocriticism, such where "empire and imperialism have contributed to, and continue to shape, the ever- looming threat of global climate crisis, especially as it manifests in the tropics"(Hartnett, 2021, p. 138), can only be undone and rescued by such "indigenous resistance" led by a 'man of the soil' as Jadav Payeng.

Jadav Payeng was born and brought up in the Mising tribe in rural Assam, a North-eastern state of India. The Mising tribe is a Sino-Tibetan indigenous ethnic group that occupied the villages around with its rich culture and tradition reverberating through the Brahmaputra river valley. The name Mising itself is an endonym, a common native name for this group of people, which, translated from their language means "man of the soil". And truly their performance ecologies point to the significance of that endonym, the traditional Mising tribals with their indigenous practices genuinely embodied their being sons and daughters of the soil. Their performance ecology is vibrant, the greatest example includes the Mising tribe's age-old festival, the Ali-Ayé-Lígang, which marks the beginning of the sowing and planting season. 'Ali-Ayé' in the native language is stated to mean 'seeds/seedlings in a line/row' while 'Lígang' is translated to mean 'sowing/planting of the seeds/seedlings'. Thus this lively festival that is famously celebrated among the whole Mising populace and also inviting the other surrounding tribes gives true meaning to the roots of these people who share a tremendous relationship with the natural environment in the Brahmaputra valley. That an environmental saviour is stated to rise from such a tribe seems to be a prophetic fulfillment. Jadav Payeng therefore seems to give true meaning to the term Mising because he is truly a 'man of the soil', he is the one who gives true expression of Ali-Ayé-Lígang by his single-handed planting marathon where he plants countless branch cuttings, saplings and seeds into the barren wasteland to sow into the dead soil and resurrect it into life is true fruition of the Mising tribal ideology. From his childhood days, Jadav Payeng was associated with farming and rural livelihoods, living off the land. An erstwhile unknown figure, living amidst the rural hinterland, he was suddenly

rose to fame after an eager journalist who rightfully exalted his previously unrecognized efforts. That the world could find an environmental saviour to come from such a tribe and such a backward area is true testament to the indigenous Mising traditional ecologies. Jadav Payeng is the indigenous “crowning achievement” for the environmentally conscious populace.

The North-eastern states of India are some of the most densely forested areas in the country, known for its mountains, hills, rivers, its greenery and indigenous culture. Very different from the rest of India, located on the borders of China, Bhutan and Myanmar, the North-east is sometimes neglected by the mainland because of cultural, linguistic differences and its backwardness. However, national and international significance has been awarded to the man Jadav Payeng who was hidden for years in the northeastern hinterland. The idea of an environmental saviour rising from a neglected part of the country is a rags to riches story, fascinating to the world. The collective unconscious brought the man Jadav Payeng to the level of a Jungian archetype, coming from the remote hinterland to present humanity an ‘ark’ to save from the incoming annihilation. Jadav Payeng’s ‘ark’ rests near the largest river island in the world, floating over the largest river in India, the Brahmaputra.

Majuli, the river island approximately 40 km where Payeng did his mammoth work, which seems to be a microcosm of a sinking earth. The threat of its existence is imminent with acres of lands eroded every year due to excessive flooding in the Brahmaputra. Inhabited mostly by the Mising tribe, the tribal villagers have to face eviction year after year as the flooding increases. The planting of a huge forest single-handedly seems to be an answer to that pressing problem. Similarly, the increasing of afforestation all across the globe seems to be the need of the hour to prevent an environmental collapse. And the hero to stem that gap is none other than Jadav ‘Molai’ Payeng. The book *The Boy Who Grew A Forest: The True Story of Jadav Payeng*, written by Sophia Gholz and illustrated by Kayla Harren, is an example of the way Payeng is transformed into an archetype.

In that children illustrated book, the writer and the illustrator transforms the real life story of Payeng into a fable. The didactic approach is intentional, the children are to look at Payeng as a hero, an exemplary figure, the legendary feat performed by him is a tale of the ages. The book can be termed as a hagiography, the story of the life of a modern-day saint. As with most hagiographies, the story begins with Payeng’s childhood and the illustrations depict him as a child. Granting a person mythical status requires embellishment of the actual details. As we delve into the children’s book, though the age is not mentioned specifically, the illustration of Payeng is that of a pre-adolescent to adolescent kid in order to create an aura of an extraordinary childhood. An extraordinary childhood is the recipe for many hagiographies and the portrayal of Jadav Payeng in the book is no different. The real-life Payeng, crosses adulthood and is reported to have started his environmental endeavours at the age of 19 years way back in 1979, when he first started his planting spree with bamboo seedlings. However, the drawings in the children’s book illustration seems to show the little Payeng beginning his plantings at an earlier age than reality, contributing to the hagiographic characteristic

of the book. The sensitivity to the environmental degradation at an early age is very saint-like and the relentless effort to stem the tide of environmental collapse is shown to be extraordinary. Payeng is said to be saddened over the stranded animals in the sandbars of the Brahmaputra and therefore, he starts planting trees. The writer narrates: "He feared that if animals withered without trees, people would too". (Gholz, 2019, p. 5) The line symbolises the creation of an archetype, a saviour of humanity is at hand. Payeng did not have the whole world's fate in his hands, but as time passed, literature and mass media have thrust the fate of the world in his hands. In a feat of recognition he has been dubbed as the "Forest Man of India" by former Indian president, late Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, and that epithet has stuck. Being awarded the Padma Shri, the fourth highest civilian award in India, Payeng has been turned into a legend. He has also been awarded honorary doctorate degrees and referred to as a "forest scientist". "The boy was proud of his work, but he worried it wouldn't be enough to stop the swelling river or to provide shelter for animals". (Gholz, 2019, p. 12) Such tender empathy from a young Jadav Payeng is hagiographic in character. Looking into William D McMaster's Cannes awarded documentary titled "Forest Man", we come across another example of Payeng as a Jungian archetype. Jadav Payeng is showcased as the one and only 'Forest Man' unparalleled in modern history.

The documentary begins with this line flashing in the screen: "Since 1979 Jadav Payeng has single-handedly planted a forest in the middle of a barren wasteland. His forest is now larger than Central Park." (Forest Man) The emphasis is on one man of single-minded determination and single-handed, almost superhuman feat. He stands out from the rest of us mortals, like an immortal among mortals. Central Park is a mark of collective human achievement in the cacophony of modernity, where modern development and old world natural scenic environment can exist side by side. That the Molai forest, named after Jadav Payeng, is bigger than Central Park is mentioned right at the beginning of the documentary, is a testament that Payeng has achieved a feat bigger than the foundation of Central Park and therefore is a work of global proportions. Payeng's achievement eclipses the example set by Central Park, which was achieved via collective human labour whereas the more than 550 hectares Molai Forest was done by one man. In the many archetypal figures across time, we find the grandeur of their works manifested in their single-handed heroic completion, one man out of the many and only that man had the makings of the archetype and therefore none else had the audacity to fill that gap. This depiction aligns closely with Jungian theory as author Susan Rowland in *The ecocritical psyche: Literature, evolutionary complexity and Jung*, says:

Jung contributes to ecocriticism by taking the three ways we understand nature, as totality, a binary with culture, and as spectacle, into making consciousness that can be incorporated into literary reading and writing via symbols. The Jungian psyche, as well as literature as a whole, and in genres, can all be regarded as evolutionary complex adaptive systems. (Rowland 250)

The effect of such a depiction of Jadav Payeng in literature and film is an adaptive work of symbolic resistance to environmental degradation. The narrator of the documentary,

Jitu Kalita, the photographer who discovered Payeng in the beginning narrates: “Majuli was a place of wonder for me. ....To me, Majuli is heaven...” (Forest Man) Jitu Kalita found paradise in Majuli from his childhood, but that heaven was no more, it started degrading, paradise was lost and as the desire to see paradise regained and restored to its former glory, led him to find that one man who would restore heaven, their beloved island Majuli. As the story of the world runs, the beginning of it all was paradise. Majuli, the place of the environmental archetype, Jadav Payeng, from ancient times, was a place of natural beauty, unique cultural diversity and was a ‘place of wonder’, like Jitu Kalita said. But the story further continues with the fall of man: “Scientists recently announced that in 15-20 years Majuli island could be completely gone” (Forest Man) Man, by his disobedience and sins has lost paradise. The destruction of the planet is inevitable. Just like the flood in the times of Noah, the sins of the people have caught up to them. The apocalyptic prediction is here, Majuli is doomed to be lost to the flooding waters. The climate change brought on by human destruction of greenery has eroded heaven away. The collective unconscious is worried and is looking for an environmental saviour. And as soon as Jadav Payeng was discovered, he was elevated to be the Jungian archetype that the world was looking for. The documentary narrator further narrates:

One day, in 2009, I was exploring a barren part of the Brahmaputra by boat, when I saw something strange. It looked like a forest far in the distance. I began walking towards it and when I reached it, I couldn't believe my eyes! I had found a dense forest in the middle of a barren wasteland. When I left the forest, I saw a man far in the distance, so I began following him. I found him by the riverside. At first, he thought I was a poacher and tried to attack me but he stopped when I told him I was just a photographer. I asked him what he was doing in the forest. He explained that he was planting trees and that he had been since the 1970s. He told me his name was Jadav Payeng. (Forest Man)

This is reminiscent of the making of the ark in Noachic times. The Bible records that there was no rain on the earth, no likelihood of flood, yet out of the barrenness towered the ark that Noah built. Archetypes are pioneers, they are stand-alones who make their own prints on the barren land. In the midst of the barren sandbars floats the Molai forest, just like Noah's ark floated carrying the world's animal species, saving the world from complete annihilation. Payeng's forest was the restoration of a bit of the former paradise that Majuli was. The description of the discovery of Molai forest is almost mythical, a place of paradise, rising out of the barren wasteland, what was just a huge empty sandbar that showed the desertification of greenery in the area, was stopped in its tracks and a miraculous apparition occurs. Payeng builds an ark, a veritable fort single-handedly that will save us from the apocalyptic flood, and like Noah, who is said to have taken around 120 years to build his ark from the time of the apocalyptic prediction, Payeng takes almost 30 years of painstaking almost demigod-like effort to breathe life into the barrenness. The barren bones are breathed into with creative force via Payeng's hands as life springs up in the desert not only of the thousands of trees, but the many birds, animals and creeping insects that have flocked to Payeng's ark. They have found refuge from the destructive deluge in Payeng's life-giving forest. The

saviour has saved lives through his superhuman-like feat. It is no mean labour and he is unparalleled. As the collective unconscious was in the search of a saviour, they have found their environmental saviour archetype and have latched on to him for dear life. “When I discovered Jadav Payeng and his forest, I wrote an article about it in a local newspaper. Soon after, he became known throughout India.” (Forest Man) In the grand scheme of things, the northeastern part of India is some of the greenest places of the country, with greenery and beauty of the likes not found anywhere in the Indian subcontinent, and therefore, there was no dire need of saving from environmental destruction like in the mainland of India. Assam has a fairly balanced cover of greenery and animal diversity, and apart from the monsoon floods, land erosion and some animal poaching, there is no red-light warning. However, the national and global collective unconscious, desperately looking for an environmental saviour archetype, a superman, picks out a tiny man looking to solve a local problem and launches him to a towering height of such magnitude as to handle global proportions of the environmental apocalypse.

The prophecy of destruction was mostly negatively oriented with Nietzsche nihilism grabbing hold of the postmodern populace. Those born in the bed of postmodern philosophy have grown with the existential crisis of the planet, the nihilism that has arisen out of the apocalyptic prophecies of global warming, climate change and the likes. The future is bleak, gloomy, unhelpful. The problems of overpopulation have burdened the planet so much that the birth rate is at an all time low, even China had to change from a one-child to a two-child policy in order to stem the downhill tide. If there is no hopeful future to be had, then what is the point of eagerly welcoming a child into the world? Abortion is rising at an alarming pace. Paradise is lost and there seems to be no hope of paradise to be regained. However, in the midst of this apocalyptic darkness comes out a tiny shimmer of hope from the Molai forest. Heaven can be restored; ecology can be fixed and there is this Jungian environmental saviour archetype that has risen up in the time of need. From the local, he is made into the archetype figure who is now a global symbol of environmental restoration. The narrator further encapsulates: “Sometimes I wonder what ten Payengs or hundred or thousand Payengs could do. He once told me ‘I worry about the fate of the world just like everyone. I see bad things happening on my island and I do what I can to help. I am just a simple man, there are many just like me. When I asked him if he thought Majuli could be saved, he replied, ‘Yes’.” (Forest Man)

In this search for an archetype, the collective unconscious settles on the form of the hero- the Payeng. When the narrator wonders about the difference it would create to the planet if there were ten, hundred or a thousand Payengs, this is the creation of a proverb based on Payeng’s hagiography. It is extremely rare to find someone like Payeng and across history there are only few who come somewhat close to his feat. And therefore, the collective unconscious looks to the inspiration set by Payeng, and wonders what a thousand Payengs could do even if finding ten Payengs looks like an impossible dream. The children’s books based on the true story of Jadav Payeng look to inspire kids to be Payeng-like. The documentary by William D McMaster offers that

call through this narration: “Payeng has already shown the example that if one person can, at his own effort, can do this plantation, then why not others?” (McMaster, 2014) There was only one David who killed Goliath in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Similarly, there is only one Jadav Payeng. But there can be many people who can take inspiration from Payeng and make a considerable effort in afforestation. Jadav Payeng has further been invited to other countries who have taken up reforestation programs based on his work. Payeng says: “My dream is to fill up Majuli and Jorhat Island with forest again. I will continue to plant until my last breath. I tell people cutting those trees will get you nothing. You must cut me down before cutting my trees!” (McMaster, 2014) The words of an archetypal environmental hero echo in the documentary, taking the example of heroes of the bygone ages who have uttered similar words of sacrificial dedication. The idea of sacrificing oneself for family, country or the world is deeply ingrained in the psyche of the hero. Payeng indicates his heroic characteristic, that he is willing to spend his entire existence, his efforts till his last breath to mend the broken environment is essential to his archetypal character. The prospect of dying before letting trees be cut has always been the clarion call of environmental activists, preceded many years before in the likes of Sunderlar Bahuguna and the Chipko Movement where people hugged the trees to prevent them being cut down.

In another children’s book “Jadav and the Tree-Place” by Vinayak Varma, the beginning illustration is that of Jadav Payeng hugging a tree which has a stark flashback to the tree huggers of the erstwhile Chipko Movement, a preeminent environmental protest of the people. Jadav Payeng follows in that legacy. Payeng weeps over the environmental collapse. The book shows him weeping over the dead animals in the barren sandbar. This is an archetype who weeps for the land, who then rises with unwavering determination to save. That children’s book is also like another hagiography of Payeng. He is put on a pedestal before the next generation, the Jungian environmental saviour archetype. The writer in that book states: “So, he grabbed his bags of seeds and started walking across the world. And as he walked, Jadav started planting the seeds in all the no-tree-places he saw. And he planted. And planted. And planted.” (Varma, 2016, p. 17) The writer gives Jadav Payeng superhuman capabilities, he starts walking across the world. He becomes a mythical, legendary hero. He walks across the world planting his seeds in all the barren places to create more forests. This is no ordinary man, from the local, he enters the global arena because the collective unconscious has made him the archetype for environmental restoration. In the prophesied nihilistic future, he creates a dent that gives hope to the next generation. And he doesn’t stop till all the barrenness is no more. His relentless work ethic is made legendary. The book ends with an illustration of Jadav Payeng planting saplings in a barren wasteland and the whole book centers in two words: “Jadav plants.” (Varma, 2016, p. 18) The Payeng environmental saviour archetype is the perpetual planter, who stands alone between the speedily onrushing desertification and the remnant of the green planet and as he plants, he is preventing the apocalyptic destruction of the planet. The environmental saviour figure is Jadav Payeng the tree planter - the Forest Man.

In a film named *Kadaan* (translated *Forester*) in Tamil, written and directed by Prabhu Solomon and released in 2021, the fictional protagonist was based on Jadav Payeng. Released as *Aranya* in Telugu and *Haathi Mere Saathi* in Hindi, the movie fictionalises a Jadav Payeng based character who protects the forests and elephants from destruction due to a large corporate development project in the forest in which he resides. The English subtitles of the movie translate in this description of the Forest Man: “He grew up with these animals. Even the animals consider him a part of their family. Since he’s been awarded the title of The Forest Man of India by the country’s president, people call him *Bandev* (Forest God)” (Solomon, 2021) The title The Forest Man of India has been conferred on none other than Jadav Payeng from then President Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam in real life and the protagonist takes that same title. The movie further goes on to add another sobriquet to the Jadav Payeng-based hero, that of ‘*Bandev*’ or ‘*Forest God*’. This is symbolic and significant in many ways. India is a country of crores of gods and goddesses. In this land of many gods and goddesses, cinema fictionally adds a Forest God- *Bandev*, an environmental hero. Through this film, Payeng is transformed into a god-like character, he is ushered into the pantheon of the Indian gods. A land that seeks to worship and adore many exemplary characters as gods, it is no wonder that a Payeng-based character is turned into a Forest God.

Ecocritical theory will term the creation of the Molai forest by Payeng as the creation of an ‘*ecotopia*’, a term coming from *Ecotopia: The Notebooks and Reports of William Weston*, a utopian novel by Ernest Callenbach, which points to a utopia which is ecologically perfect and an ideal for the world. Manheim writes, “Utopia, on the other hand, emerge when particular individuals or social groups envision and enact sets of ideas in practice, thereby shattering the existing social situation” (Mannheim, 1939, p. 192)

Thus, when books and movies elevate environmental activists like Jadav Payeng to the level of a god, it is what Heather Alberro terms an “*ecotopian expression*”. These “*ecotopian expressions*” arise out of “*Anthropocene decline*” (Alberro, 2020, p. 1) to restore paradise from the ashes of civilization. The deification and “*apotheosis*” of Payeng, represented by *Bandev* in the movie *Kadaan*, i.e., turning a mortal environmental activist like Payeng into a god, is a similar story of indigenous South Indian literature. Famous mythologies like the ancient Tamil epic *Cilappatikaram*, deal with apotheosis of mortals, like *Kannagi* who, by the power of one’s integrity and chastity, stand up against injustice and therefore becomes elevated to divinity. This indigenous expression stemming from ancient tradition is applied in a similar manner to the environmental saviour who stands up against the destruction of the environment. He becomes the God of the forest by his sheer hardworking handiwork. As we proceed forward in the movie *Kadaan*, with sneering disbelief, the person from the development firm quips: “If humans are not allowed, then who are you? God? ‘*Bandev*’” (Solomon, 2021) *Bandev* treads where humans are not allowed. He is one with the forest. The Forest Man of India is God-like in the sense that he also treads through the barrenness and breathes life by creating a forest single-handedly. *Bandev* himself says: “I planted 100,000 trees singlehandedly. And I sowed them with my blood. It’s not just roots and soil that are

holding these trees in place. It's my sweat and blood. They must go through me first before touching them" (Solomon, 2021) This is reminiscent of Jadav Payeng telling in William D McMaster's documentary *Forest Man*, "You must cut me down before cutting my trees!" (McMaster, 2014) The life of Jadav Payeng flows through the forest he planted, fittingly named as Molai forest after him, his sweat and blood being given through the decades to make it what it is, a green paradise. The movie further adds to the hagiographic characters given to what can be called the Payeng archetype, that he is no less like a Forest God.

### **Conclusion**

The Payeng archetype is created through the collective unconscious, this archetype is the environmental saviour, the green hero, who prevents the environmental apocalypse. William Douglas McMaster's documentary 'Forest Man' which was awarded the Best Documentary prize at the Emerging Filmmaker Showcase in the American Pavilion at the 2014 Cannes Film Festival has 7.1 million views as of late, with a 7.8/10 IMDb rating, which shows that the world has sat up and taken notice of the man and turned him into an archetype. Not only that, popular Youtuber Nas Daily, made a YouTube short on Jadav Payeng which racked up 16 million views till date. There are also other documentaries made on Jadav Payeng by many other documentary filmmakers with thousands of views. Payeng has further been signed an agreement with a Mexican NGO Fundacion Azteca, to plant 7 million trees in Mexico. Payeng has slowly become what popular culture calls a 'global phenomenon' and his legend continues to grow. The Payeng archetype is essential for the planet.

In the Judeo-Christian worldview, the book of Genesis which details the story of creation and the making of man by God's own hand from the dirt, reports this mandate given by God to Adam and Eve: "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground." (NIV, 1973, Gen. 1:28) The Bible further records: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." (NIV, 1973, Gen. 2:15) The creational mandate of man has always been to rule over the flora and fauna with God's authority for good. Furthermore, the Garden of Eden was planted by God and given to man to live in it, and as written, 'to work it and take care of it'. When it is not done properly by man, goodness disappears, man is kicked out of the Garden of Eden, thrown out of paradise and brings about his own downfall and suffering. Jadav Payeng is fulfilling part of that God-given mandate. He is restoring paradise by creating his own forest garden, like the Garden of Eden planted by God and is atoning for humanity's sins. The act of planting in a barren patch of land is an act of restoring paradise and this is what Payeng does. He is restoring paradise single-handedly. The Payeng archetype is an absolute necessity for humanity's survival. This is a modern-day archetype of Biblical proportions, and this is an archetype that promises to save humanity from the impending apocalypse ushered by environmental degradation.

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# Reclaiming The Arboreal: Sumana Roy's Critique of Eurocentric Ontologies and Reimagining Ecological Selfhood in *How I Became A Tree*

Madhulina Choudhury

## Abstract

The most conventional way of understanding life is associating it with motion, privileging movement and action as the requisites of existence. This Eurocentric perspective, aggravated by the deep-rooted Anthropocene's emphasis on human activity as the impetus behind environmental change, has led traditional ecocritical discourse and narratives to concentrate on nature in terms of crisis and conservation. In Hegelian terms, plants "have another self-outside themselves, an outside unity towards which they tend and on which they depend" (Illetterati 156), and hence plants lack what Hegel calls 'subjectivity' and are conceived as 'incomplete organisms'. (156) This deeply entrenched prejudice has historically situated plants as inferior to humans and animals, postulating that movement and communication are the defining attributes of ontological superiority. This paper argues that Sumana Roy's *How I Became a Tree* (2017) unsettles these conventional discourses and proposes an arboreal alternative to ecological resistance and ontological and epistemic reality. Drawing from the theoretical framework of decoloniality, ecocriticism, posthumanism, vegetal ontology, and transcorporeality, this paper argues that Roy's work challenges the Eurocentric paradigms of progress, time, and modernity, and in her yearning to 'become a tree', she reimagines an alternate identity and selfhood.

**Keywords:** Anthropocene, ecology, decoloniality, modernity, ontology

## Introduction

The Anthropocene's emphasis on human activity has reinforced a Eurocentric ontology that prioritizes human agency, mobility, action, and progress as the

quintessential characteristics of existence. This embedded prejudice, shaped by the Enlightenment philosophy, Cartesian polarity, and Hegelian influences, has historically rendered non-human agencies as inferior. Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature* (1842) reinforces a hierarchical view of nature, positioning plants as replaceable, inferior entities. In contrast, by dint of their mobility, humans and animals embody a higher level of subjectivity, inwardness, and self-awareness, representing a more advanced stage of natural development. (pp. 101-02) This Euro-Anthropocene world view has led traditional ecocritical discourse and narratives to concentrate on nature in terms of crisis and conservation, treating nature as a resource to be studied, exploited, or tamed, thereby marginalizing non-human entities, particularly plants, as passive and incomplete beings. Hall highlights a relevant point:

Nature, often perceived as an intangible and marginal force, is deeply entrenched in the existence of plants, entities so fundamental to life that they have become almost imperceptible in their ubiquitousness. Within the imprecision of the term nature, the global dominance of the plant kingdom is seldom recognized. In a plant-dominated biosphere, it is possible that nature has become so amorphous and peripheral because of the way that plants (synonymous with nature) are themselves perceived. (Hall, 2010, p. 3)

European capitalism and scientific development turned 'nature from terra mater into a machine and a source of raw material; with this transformation, it removed all ethical and cognitive constraints against its violation and exploitation.' (Shiva, 1988, p. xiv) The paper explores Sumana Roy's radical intervention and critique of this human-centric approach presented in her book *How I Became a Tree* (2017). Blending philosophy, art, history, personal reflections, music, and literature, Roy subverts this Eurocentric obsession with progress, speed, and movement and offers an alternative rethinking of ecological relationships in the Anthropocene.

In his systematic exploration of plant-human relationship, Matthew Hall (2011) posits—"Most places on Earth which contain life are visibly *plantscapes*...Human life is contingent upon the existence of plants." (pp. 3-4) Matthew Hall's recognition of plants as sentient beings redefines human-plant relationships, emphasizing mutuality, respect, and interrelation, which resonates with Roy's philosophical and meditative stance in *How I Became a Tree*. In pursuing a more embodied existence, the author embarks on a journey of self-discovery, of 'becoming' a tree— 'a subtle, more ordinary process of becoming' (Baishya, 2017, para. 4). Roy 'loved the way in which trees coped with dark and lonely places while sunlessness decided curfew hours for me. I liked too how trees thrived on things that were still freely available—water, air, and sunlight; and no mortgage despite their lifelong occupation of land.' (Roy, 2017, p. 3) This yearning to 'become' a tree is not a capricious fantasy but a reflective critique of humanity's alienation from nature—a realm that is overwhelmingly dominated by the vegetal kingdom, yet often rendering them a strange invisibility and relegating them to the periphery of human consciousness as inactive or unreceptive rather than active, vital forces shaping

the world. Roy, in her book, challenges this perceptual blindness towards the plant world by advocating an alternate model of existence—of being that trees can offer in their silent resilience, rootedness, and interconnections. Throughout this thought-provoking work, Roy questions the anthropocentric prejudices that have shaped colonial modernity and the cultural, ethical, and philosophical underpinnings of anthropocentrism. The author’s dissatisfaction with fast-paced modern life and its temporal values is captured from the very beginning of the text as she aspires to become a tree for its ability to defy human conceptions of linear time—‘So, when I look back at the reasons for my disaffection with being human, and my desire to become a tree, I can see that at root lay the feeling that I was being bulldozed by time’. (Roy, 2017, p.3)

### **Decolonizing Modernity, Progress, and Time: The Arboreal Alternative**

The book begins with Roy’s ‘disaffection with being human, and my desire to become a tree’ (Roy, 2017, p.3). This offers a unique perspective on time—the linear, conventional concept associated with modernity, development, and progress. In *How I Became a Tree*, Roy expresses a deep longing to transcend the temporal frameworks that dictate human life. She envies ‘the tree, its disobedience to human time (Roy, 2017, p.3) growing silently in their own slow, natural pace—her desire to live in what she calls ‘Tree Time’ (Roy, 2017, p.4) is a strong critique of ‘coloniality of time’ (Mignolo, 2021, p. 152), which values speed and efficiency over slow pace and interconnectedness of existence. Mignolo posits that the Western conceptualization of time is “caught and woven into the imaginary of the modern/colonial world system”, (Mignolo, 2021, p. 152), and argues “as far as for Western (since the Renaissance) cosmology “time” is one, singular and universal, you have no way out: you are trapped in a universal time that is owned by a particular civilization.’ Decoloniality instead opens up to the multiple times of cultures and civilizations upon which Western Civilizations impose their conceptualization of time. The ‘de-’ indicates above all the need and the goal of the re-epistemic reconstitutions, re-emergence, resurgence, re-existence. That is, neither new nor post.” (Interview - Walter Mignolo/Part 2: Key Concepts 3) Katharina Hunfeld (2022) reflects similar sentiments and argues—“The colonization of time, a process within which the time of the European colonizers was institutionalized, created a discourse of otherness through time that helped to construct the racial and cultural inferiority of non-Europeans as well as the marginalization and suppression of non-European ways of narrating and relating to time.” (p.101) One of the most radical facets of Roy’s narrative is her denunciation of modern, mechanized, linear temporality that valued productivity, speed, and exploitative labour. Trees, she believes, in contrast, embody a temporality that is cyclical, unhurried, and deeply unified with the natural world. Roy’s aspiration to ‘become a tree’ is a critique and an act of resistance against colonial modernity and its glorification of perpetual motion, ambition, and economic productivity. Her orientation with arboreal immobility and tranquillity destabilizes Western teleological progress, offering an

alternative paradigm where growth is not defined by capitalistic expansion but by kinship and interconnected existence, echoing indigenous ontologies that view trees as perceptive beings rather than commodities. Roy beautifully captures this in the following lines:

All around me were estate developers sending their fleets of workers to construct skyscrapers to tight schedules. The trees they planted in the gated communities annoyed them—they would grow at their natural pace. It was impossible to rush plants, to tell a tree to ‘hurry up’. In envy, in admiration and with ambition, I began to call that pace ‘Tree Time’....I was tired of speed. I wanted to live to tree time. (pp. 3-4)

This resonates with Vandana Shiva’s (1988) notion of progress and development encouraged by the Western thought process:

The Age of Enlightenment, and the theory of progress to which it gave rise, was centred on the sacredness of two categories: modern scientific knowledge and economic development. Somewhere along the way, the unbridled pursuit of progress, guided by science and development, began to destroy life without any assessment of how fast and how much of the diversity of life on this planet is disappearing. The act of living and of celebrating and conserving life in all its diversity - in people and in nature - seems to have been sacrificed to progress, and the sanctity of life been substituted by the sanctity of science and development. (p. xii)

Roy’s narrative also critiques language, literature, and culture, reinforcing hierarchical structures and norms inherited from colonial discourse and indigenous traditions. Her resistance to the metaphor of women as inactive, passive and serving decorative purposes like flowers and her attempt to reframe herself as a ‘tree’ rather than a flower can be interpreted as an act of decolonial reclamation—a bold attempt to subvert inherited cultural narratives and creating identities beyond imposed frameworks of societal standards and norms. Quijano (2024) argues that coloniality extends beyond political colonization into culture, identity, and epistemology (pp. 169-70), and to resist coloniality does not only mean rejecting exterior forces of oppression but also questioning internalized frameworks that shape our thought, identity, language, culture, and traditions. In rejecting the conventional paradigms of beauty and femininity, the author interconnects beauty standards and stereotypes with colonial modernity’s obsession with make-up, jewellery, whitening creams, and sunscreens. She finds herself “unable to wear earrings—I have the sensation of someone hammering a nail through tight tree bark” (Roy, 2017, pp. 10-11)—this is a symbolic rejection of rituals performed to enhance women’s beauty just like while trimming her hair, “she begun to feel the violence of seasonal pruning and cutting that was inflicted on plants and trees.” (Roy, 2017, p. 10) The deep-seated unease of Roy, with the dominant paradigms of modernity/coloniality and human supremacy is captured in one evocative passage in the book: “Both the hairdresser and the gardener seemed to believe in the value of snips and cuts for a better future, and in this I began to see the kinship of my

undisciplined hair with the wayward branches of trees.” (p.10). Although uncomplicated in its observation, this moment opens a rich ground for decolonial interpretation. The metaphors of hair and ‘wayward branches’ defy normative aesthetics and challenge deep-rooted colonial concepts of order, discipline, and development. The author’s identification with the ‘undisciplined’ and the ‘wayward’ hints at a silent and subtle rebellion against the controlling practices entrenched in colonial modernity. The metaphor of ‘snips’ and ‘cuts’ mirrors the colonial obsession with regulating the unregulated, with disciplining what is undisciplined—here, the seemingly ordinary acts of grooming and pruning become symbolic of colonial modernity’s civilizing mission. (Quijano, 2024, p. 90) Decolonial scholar Mignolo (2021) rightly asserts that:

Colonization and Westernization are two different ways of referring to European expansion since 1500: the first refers to control and management, the second to schooling. Colonization carries the image of violence and force; the second suggests the double project of disseminating Western values and their acceptance by governments and people beyond the West in their effort to emulate or at least to follow the lead of Western dictates. (p.315)

Roy’s reflections on the ‘epidemic of fairness’ (Roy, 2017, p.11), the fascination with skin-whitening products, turning ‘the sun into a tormentor’, and the need to discipline hair and trees can also be understood as the broader distinction between colonization and Westernization as two interconnected but discrete modes of European extension. While colonization is to control not just land and people, but also minds, bodies, and knowledge, Westernization is a subtle process that operates by adopting and internalizing Western norms, often believing them to be universal or superior. The ‘double project’ of Westernization involves both universalization and acceptance of Western standards. Roy’s critique of the ‘epidemic of fairness’ and the transformation of the sun into a torturer illustrates an internalization and a quest for Western ideals of beauty.

Roy’s work endorses a decolonial rejection of ‘the value of snips and cuts for a better future’—a future that lies in the very ‘process of restructuring of power, on the one hand, in capitalist and urban social relations and nation-states; and, on the other, in the colonization of the rest of the world.’ (Quijano, 2010, p. 175) Her refusal becomes a powerful example of ‘a delinking that leads to de-colonial epistemic shift and brings to the foreground other epistemologies, other principles of knowledge and understanding and, consequently, other economy, other politics, other ethics’ (Mignolo, 2007, p. 453) and other alternative ontologies of being.

### **Beyond Anthropocentrism/Zoocentrism: Selfhood and the Desire for Arboreal Becoming**

In *How I Became a Tree*, Sumana Roy’s yearning for ‘becoming’ a tree challenges the normative human identity by voicing a desire to live, feel, and exist like a tree. In a world structured by the ideals of modernity, Roy questions the

speed, violence, and demands of human life. This desire to ‘become’ a tree can be understood as reimagining subjectivity, which aligns closely with Matthew Hall’s arguments in *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany* (2010). Hall challenges ‘the refusal to acknowledge any aspect of agency, sensitivity, or mentality in plants’ (Hall, 2010, p. 25), as a ‘deliberate political ploy’ (p. 25) of Western modernist thought process asserting that plants, like humans and animals, deserve ‘moral consideration’ (p. 2) and should be ‘regarded as beings that are capable of flourishing and of being harmed.’ (p.10) Hall challenges the hierarchical relation between the plant world and the human and non-human world, and argues against the ‘predominance of zoocentric perspectives, (p. 6) and the Western ‘drive toward separation, exclusion, and hierarchy.’ (p. 6) The primary tenet of his argument that plants are ‘fundamentally autonomous, volitional, communicative, relational beings’ (p. 11) resonates with Roy’s radical desire for embodying trees.

A striking affinity between Roy’s stance on tree life and Hall’s central argument of plants as persons lies in their emphasis on the kinship between the plant world and the vegetal world. When Roy describes ‘a need to return to slow time’ (Roy, 2017, p. 62) or for ‘tree language’ (p. 62), she is subtly engaging in what Hall (2010) advocates:

This acknowledgement of plants as persons is based on and in turn strengthens the recognition of plants as kin. Indeed, personhood is expressed and galvanised within specific kinship relationships between individual plants and humans. These specific, local kinship relationships are accompanied by obligations of responsibility, solidarity, and care. Therefore, they are one of the most important aspects of inclusive human-plant relationships. (p.100)

By reconceptualizing human-plant relations as interpersonal rather than hierarchical, both authors emphasise that ‘by distancing ourselves from plants and denying their autonomy, we jeopardize a true sense of human identity, situatedness, and responsibility. Only in the company of others do we arrive at the true sense of our own personhood and ecological identity’. (Hall, 2010, 100). Roy’s refusal of progress, speed, and capitalist development can be read as a representation of Hall’s ‘philosophical botany’, which destabilizes human-centric approaches and makes room for other ontologies. Matthew Hall’s engagement with Val Plumwood’s dual approach of ‘(re)situating humans in ecological terms and non-humans in ethical terms’ (Hall, 2010, p. 2) offers a crucial theoretical lens through which to comprehend *How I Became a Tree*. Roy’s text enacts this very ethical stance through its philosophical and meditative engagement with vegetal life. She resituates not only the ecological being, but also the human by rejecting mainstream anthropocentric ideals of autonomy, rationality, violence, and hierarchy and embracing an ethical reorientation of the self within an ecological framework—one marked by slowness, rootedness, and stillness. Concurrently, she confers ethical consideration to nonhuman beings, especially plants:

If plants had agency, if they could move, raise flags, cause bloodshed in humans, and if humans had not suffered from plant blindness for centuries, an ailment where we

see and do not see plants because, like the sky, they are there and yet not there, they would not be treated the way they have been. If trees operated on the eye-for-an-eye ethic, for every felled tree there would be a human corpse. (Roy, 2017, p. 166).

The intersection of Hall's and Roy's ideas is specifically significant from a decolonial perspective, as both authors, in their critique of Western botanical knowledge, bring attention to the plant-centered Indigenous and non-Western sources. According to Hall, 'Indigenous sources provide the most significant material to contrast with worldviews that seek to exclude plants.' (p.10). Both writers try to reclaim indigenous epistemologies suppressed by colonial modernity. Roy draws on various sources—from botanist Jagadish Bose to Tagore, from oral traditions of folkloric stories to Buddhist beliefs on ecology, whereas Hall relies mostly on Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu traditions to provide an epistemic alternative, thus performing what Walter Mignolo terms 'epistemic disobedience' (Mignolo, 2024, p. xxi)—a deliberate refusal of adhering to anthropocentric epistemologies and ontologies, thereby granting personhood and subjectivity to plants. This repositioning aligns with posthumanism's focus on resituating subjectivity beyond human limits, emphasising interdependence and interconnectedness—'I take the posthuman predicament as an opportunity to empower the pursuit of alternative schemes of thought, knowledge and self-representation. The posthuman condition urges us to think critically and creatively about who and what we are actually in the process of becoming.' (Braidotti, 2013, p.12)

### **Posthuman Subjectivity and the Indigenous Lineage**

Posthumanism, as theorized by scholars like Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, and Cary Wolfe, 'introduces a qualitative shift in our thinking about what exactly is the basic unit of common reference for our species, our polity and our relationship to the other inhabitants of this planet.' (Braidotti, 2013, p.12) and emerges from an 'all too human concern about the kind of knowledge and intellectual values we are producing as a society today'. (Braidotti, 2013, p.12) It challenges 'human as the universalized format of humanity' (Braidotti, 2013, p.26) and the 'unitary subject of Humanism, including its socialist variables, and to replace it with a more complex and relational subject framed by embodiment, sexuality, affectivity, empathy, and desire as core qualities'. (p.26) Roy's work contributes to this critique by rejecting the rational, modern, and utilitarian subjectivity. Her meditative reflection on tree-life and longing to 'become' a tree echoes with posthumanist ideas of decentering the human as the focal point of the meaning-making process. Roy's critique of the culture driven by violence, competition, consumption, and control resonates with Braidotti's concerns about the 'kind of knowledge' and 'intellectual values' (Braidotti, 2013, p.10) that the society is built upon. It can be rightly argued that Roy's work reconfigures subjectivity through a posthumanist lens, underscoring interdependence and kinship in the Anthropocene.

A riveting moment in the book is her chapter on Rabindranath Tagore. The chapter focuses on the overlooked facets of Tagore's life: 'I have never seen or

heard anyone commending the way in which at least three generations of Tagore's nurtured plant life in an inhospitable space.' (Roy, 2017, p. 88) Roy details how Tagore cared for trees, baptized them 'with new names', missed them, and wrote about them in letters. In the Summer of 1933, he wrote a letter to his daughter Mira inquiring about his trees, imbuing human-like characteristics to the subject: 'At last my *madhumaloti* has acquired some health. Do not forget to cool her down with your bath water from now on... The spire from the temple that's been broken, keep that in a corner of my garden and get the *jhumkolata* to climb on to it.' (Roy, 2017, p. 89) Roy further accentuates this tradition by building on classical and folkloric sources from the Indian subcontinent. She draws on Ellison Banks Findly's example of the *Vrikshayurveda*, where a flowering '*Shyama* creeper looks like a damsel' (Roy, 2017, p. 115), underlining the affective relationality between plant and human. In Kalidasa's *Abhijnana Sakuntalam*, a jasmine vine and a mango tree are envisioned as a married couple, symbolizing vegetal subjectivity and physical intimacy. A Naga folktale represents similar ideas where a princess befriends—and ultimately falls in love with a *peepul tree*, highlighting not only fantasy but a culturally sanctioned understanding of human-plant kinship. Another example she cites is from A. K. Ramanujan's 'A Flowering Tree' where a woman transforms into a tree. (Roy, 2017, p. 115). These narratives affirm an understanding of plant life and human-non-human kinship that precedes Western ecological and posthumanist discourses.

Roy's chapter "The Buddha and the Bodhi Tree" (Roy, 2017, p. 183) deepens this posthumanist engagement by foregrounding the spiritual and philosophical relationship between the tree and enlightenment. Roy reflects on the Bodhi tree not merely as a metaphor but as a participant in the Buddha's awakening. The tree's quiet presence, warm shade, and stillness initiate a transformative moment that redefines existence in which 'Buddha allows a tree to be a convenient substitute for himself.' (Roy, 2017, p. 185). In addition, Hindu scriptural sources like the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Mahabharata, and the Ramayana offer a philosophical foundation in which the plant, animal, and human worlds are interrelated through the cycle of rebirth or reincarnation. Plants are not seen as passive decorative beings, but as fully sentient, capable of mental, moral, and spiritual significance. Jainism, building upon the ideas of non-violence, institutionalizes *ahimsa* in practical communications with the plant world. This whole spectrum of culturally embedded practice that Roy provides exemplifies a posthumanist ethic long preceding Western theoretical frameworks. Roy's invocation of indigenous culture thus helps discover an Indian lineage of posthuman thought—one that values kinship, care, and ethical predicament with the more-than-human world. Roy's work, it can be well argued, is both posthumanist and decolonial in its invocation of indigenous cultures that resituate the vegetal within an Indian knowledge system that resists Western frameworks of utility, progression, and capitalism. In the context of the present study, Indigenous lifeways may "offer insights that may

help dominant societies unlearn some things and become open to other ways of knowing the world.” (Hall, 2010, 99)

A key principle of posthumanism is the dismantling of the belief that humans are ontologically superior to other forms of life. Braidotti (2013) posits:

A materialist politics of posthuman differences works by potential becomings that call for actualization. They are enacted through collectively shared, community-based praxis and are crucial to support the process of vitalist, non-unitarian and yet accountable recomposition of a missing people. This is the ‘we’ that is evoked and actualized by the post-anthropocentric creation of a new pan-humanity. It expresses the affirmative, ethical dimension of becoming-posthuman as a gesture of collective self-styling. It actualizes a community that is not bound negatively by shared vulnerability, the guilt of ancestral communal violence, or the melancholia of unpayable onto logical debts, but rather by the compassionate acknowledgment of their interdependence with multiple others, most of which, in the age of anthropocene, are quite simply not anthropomorphic. (pp.100-101)

Braidotti’s (2010) ‘potential becomings’ (p.110) refers to the possibilities of non-human subjectivities which must be ‘actualized’. Roy’s admiration for trees and her radical yearning to ‘become’ a tree or everything like a tree, not only blurs the line between subject/object, but also hints towards an arboreal subjectivity. This is noteworthy because it overturns the usual mode of empathy. Instead of positioning trees like humans, she desires to become ‘like trees’, thereby subverting the colonial and anthropocentric gaze. Roy says: ‘I wanted to become, grass, moss, weed, something that would not draw attention to itself, something that was of no use to humans, something almost nameless except as some footnote in a sincere botanist’s dull diary.’ (93)

### **Rethinking Embodiment: Vegetal Ontology and Trans-corporeal Kinship**

Roy’s sense of being is rooted in her interconnectedness with the vegetal, the atmospheric, and the soil. She sees the body as porous, ordinary, and vulnerable, yet entrenched in coexistence. Her longing to be a tree, when situated within the frameworks of vegetal ontology and transcorporeality, reveals a critique of dominant ontologies of being, productivity, and embodiment. Michael Marder’s (2013) vegetal ontology, as elaborated in *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*, challenges Western metaphysical traditions that position plants as passive, inane, and ontologically substandard. Marder argues that ‘the limit to the kinship of traditional thought with vegetal proliferation is precisely this: the metaphysical project bent on leaving the darkness of mere life behind undercuts the conditions of its own existence.’ (Marder, 2013, p.143) Roy’s alignment with plant-being—her desire for slowness, rootedness, and coexistence reverberates Marder’s call to rethink the ethical and ontological position of plants. Roy chooses a being that is non-teleological, that grows without aims and competition, that does not stay up ‘all night to become a successful examinee the next morning’ (Roy, 2017, 3), she wants to live in tree world that ‘remained unaffected by changes in governments and

results of cricket matches' (p. 4) While reflecting on the modes of existence of plants, Marder emphasises on three ontological dimensions—'temporality, freedom, and wisdom.' (Marder, 2013, para. 3) In *How I Became a Tree*, Roy deeply aligns with this vegetal temporality. Marder's presupposition that 'the plant is an entirely spatial, extended being, excluded from the order of temporality,' (Marder, 2013, para. 2) finds affinities with Roy's yearning to live in what she calls 'tree time'—'a life without worries for the future or regret for the past' (Roy, p.6) a time 'would surely seem too leisurely to post-industrial humans'. (Roy, p. 61)

Michael Marder (2013) conceptualizes plant-thinking, as a mode

traversing the axis of possibility–impossibility, as opposed to potentiality–actuality, will bring to the fore the temporal “truth” of vegetal life uncoupled from the teleological actualization of the seed's hidden potentialities. In so doing, it will cast off the metaphysical negation of becoming, endorse the immanently historical—which is to say, contingent—self-presentation of truth and glimpse the elusive time of plants. (para. 1)

This 'traversing' reframes subjectivity toward the 'axis of possibility-impossibility', a space where 'becoming' and subjectivity, is not goal-oriented. In *How I Became a Tree*, Sumana Roy's philosophical contemplation symbolizes this shift by resisting the teleological expectations imposed by modernity and its narratives of development, efficiency, and progress. She writes, 'I was tired of speed' (2), thus prioritizing a non-linear, slow-paced temporality analogous to what Marder calls the 'elusive time of plants'. (Marder, 2013, Part II, para. 2) Roy's desire to 'become a tree' is driven by a slow surrender into a state of being where change is subtle and gradual, rather than forced and determined. Roy's interest in unconventional life forms like dead trees, cacti, and weeds subverts human-centric notions of temporality and purpose. This vegetal temporality, indifferent to haste or outcomes, sustains Marder's (2013) vision of truth as 'contingent' and 'immanent.' (Marder, 2013, Part II) Roy's vegetal longing, therefore, is not for change but for unbecoming—a kind of philosophical and meditative withdrawal from human narratives of time. She embodies the rootedness she aspires for, which in turn becomes a symbol of silent, vegetal resistance. Her tree-desire is thus a call to reconceptualize embodiment as deeply interconnected with the more-than-human world.

While Marder's vegetal ontology offers a philosophical revision of plant life, Stacy Alaimo's (2010) concept of transcorporeality offers a way to rethink the human body in relation to the more-than-human world. In *Bodily Natures*, Alaimo emphasizes that 'human corporeality is ultimately inseparable from "the environment"' (Alaimo, 2010, p. 2) Stacy Alaimo's theory of transcorporeality, as elaborated in *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, (2010) offers a powerful framework for comprehending the porousness of bodily limits and the interconnection of human and non-human. Alaimo challenges Cartesian binaries, proposing instead a materialist ontology where bodies are never

autonomous but always intertwined with the environment. (Alaimo, 2010, 13) Sumana Roy's *How I Became a Tree* embodies a deep affinity with this premise as it explores the author's longing to escape the demands and anxieties of human subjectivity and instead become part of the vegetal world. Roy's text enacts transcorporeality not only through its central theme of 'becoming a tree' but through its ethics, aesthetics, and epistemology rooted in profound kinship.

Alaimo (2010) asserts:

... thinking across bodies may catalyze the recognition that the environment, which is too often imagined as inert, empty space or as a resource for human use, is, in fact, a world of fleshy beings with their own needs, claims, and actions. By emphasizing the movement across bodies, trans-corporeality reveals the interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures. But by underscoring that trans indicates movement across different sites, trans-corporeality also opens up a mobile space that acknowledges the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors. (Alaimo, 2010, p. 2)

This assertion stresses the material and ethical 'interchanges and interconnections' between various bodies, revealing the porosity of bodily forms and how ecological relations are reciprocal rather than exploitative. This framework radically resituates the environment, 'not located somewhere out there, but is always the very substance of ourselves' (Alaimo, 2010, p. 4) –the environment as not merely a passive background or resource to be extracted but as a potential agent.

Roy's longing to become 'grass, moss, weed... almost nameless except as some footnote in a sincere botanist's dull diary' (Roy, 93) is a clear rejection of the impermeable human self—her vegetal aspiration can be interpreted as a reclamation of the fluidity of bodily forms reiterating what Alaimo suggest for the 'toxic bodies'—' they encourage us to imagine ourselves in constant interchange with the environment and, paradoxically perhaps, to imagine an epistemological space that allows for both the unpredictable becomings of other creatures and the limits of human knowledge.' (Alaimo, 2010, p. 22)

Roy's appreciation of dead trees—' looking for the perfect angle that would capture the beauty of their branches, actually the beauty of the geometry of a dead body. This beauty of bareness I began to see later as the beauty of barrenness, say, the beauty of a desert, for in being shorn of flowers and leaves', (Roy, 31) can be read as an affirmation of the fluid body of 'dirt' which, according to Alaimo 'demonstrates an agency without agents, a foundational, perpetual becoming that happens without will or intention or delineation. And yet, dirt, a rather nondiscrete substance, is necessary for the emergence of less diffuse life forms,' (Alaimo, 2010, 143)—a key idea in transcorporeality that dissolves the boundaries between life and decay, human and non-human, form and formlessness.

Roy's evocation of mythic and folkloric tales—such as the princess who falls in love with a peepul tree or Kalidasa's vision of the jasmine and mango as a

married couple, as argued earlier, dismantles clear-cut differences and offers a relational ontology that precedes and even surpasses Western philosophical models. These narratives help articulate what Alaimo calls a posthuman trans-corporeal subjectivity that 'is always an agent of change and always already within and without the permeable membrane of the human.' (Alaimo, 2010, p.154). Alaimo further uses Susan Squier's concept to define this trans-corporeal subjectivity: "language helps structure our sense of possibilities," but that "material conditions shape and reshape what we can put into words". (Alaimo, 2010, p. 9).

### Conclusion

To conclude, 'this sense of trans-corporeality may best be understood as posthuman in that material agencies reconfigure the very boundaries of the human as such' (Alaimo, 2010, p. 154), in that material agencies — whether in the form of trees, weeds, dead trees, and dirt, reconfigure the very boundaries of what is known as the human. Roy's aspiration to embody a tree represents a profound shift from anthropocentric conventions and humanist hierarchies to a subjectivity that is fluid and relational. Timothy Morton's long quote from *The Ecological Thought*, (2010) sums up what Roy's book stands for:

The ecological thought is a virus that infects all other areas of thinking...ecology isn't just about global warming, recycling, and solar power-and also not just to do with everyday relationships between humans and nonhumans. It has to do with love, loss, despair, and compassion. It has to do with depression and psychosis. It has to do with capitalism and with what might exist after capitalism. It has to do with amazement, open-mindedness, and wonder. It has to do with doubt, confusion, and skepticism. It has to do with concepts of space and time. It has to do with delight, beauty, ugliness, disgust, irony, and pain. It has to do with consciousness and awareness...It has to do with ideas of self and the weird paradoxes of subjectivity. It has to do with society. It has to do with coexistence. (2010, p. 2)

Roy's meditative journey, her course of 'becoming', her engagement with folk tales, indigenous and non-Western spiritual narratives, her 'wilful commitment to inactivity' (Bhattacharjee, 2022, p.79) further disrupts conventional epistemological frameworks by providing alternative modes of knowing that are rooted in intimacy, care, and ecological ethics. This can be read as an ontological and epistemological rebellion, blurring the line dividing human and the non-human and positioning itself within ecocritical discourse while offering a unique perspective on time, decoloniality, and alternative ontologies. In doing so, *How I Became a Tree* becomes a posthumanist and decolonial critique of colonial modernity. To become a tree, in Roy's vision, is thus 'to become this, liberated of identity tags.' (Roy, 12) Her work reminds us that radical posthumanism is not just about decentralizing the human, but about reimagining life where the human and the vegetal are not oppositional categories but interconnected and interdependent modes of being, rooted in care, kinship, and ethical recognition of the more-than-human.

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