



MERIDIAN

Open Access, Online-Print, Peer Reviewed Biannual Multidisciplinary Journal

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Biannual Multidisciplinary Journal

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Message from the Editor

It is with great pleasure that we present this special issue of Meridian, the biannual interdisciplinary research journal of MES Asmabi College, P. Vemballur featuring a selection of seventeen peer-reviewed papers presented at two significant academic events organized by MES Asmabi College during 2026.

The first set of contributions originates from ESPLORO 2026 – International Research Conclave on Resilience and Responsibility: Scientific, Literary and Economic Dimensions, organized by the Research Departments of Botany, English, and Commerce, MES Asmabi College, on 24–25 March 2026. The conclave served as an interdisciplinary platform that brought together researchers, academicians, and scholars from diverse fields to deliberate on contemporary challenges and innovative solutions from scientific, literary, and economic perspectives. The papers selected for publication reflect the breadth of research and the collaborative spirit that characterized the conclave. This issue also includes selected papers presented at the Two-Day National Seminar on Cultural Studies at the Crossroads: Rethinking Power, Identity and Representation, organized by the Research Department of English, MES Asmabi College, in collaboration with the Kerala Sahitya Akademi, on 22–23 January 2026. The seminar fostered critical discussions on evolving paradigms in cultural studies, exploring questions of identity, power, representation, and social transformation through diverse theoretical and interdisciplinary approaches.

The manuscripts included in this volume have undergone a rigorous editorial and peer-review process to ensure academic quality, originality, and relevance. We believe that the published papers make meaningful contributions to their respective disciplines while encouraging interdisciplinary dialogue and further research.

The Editorial Board expresses its sincere gratitude to all authors for their valuable contributions, the reviewers for their meticulous evaluations and constructive suggestions, and the organizing committees of both events for their dedication in making these academic programmes a success. We also acknowledge the unwavering support of the management, Principal, faculty members, and all stakeholders of MES Asmabi College in fostering a vibrant research culture. We hope that this special issue of Meridian will serve as a valuable resource for researchers, educators, and students, inspiring continued scholarly inquiry and collaboration across disciplines.

Dr. Sameena Kalathodi

Editor in Chief

Meridian

MES Asmabi College, P. Vemballur

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INCARCERATION, TRAUMA AND RESILIENCE IN MARINA NEMAT'S PRISONER OF TEHRAN: A MEMOIR

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ABSTRACT

Iranian memoirs narrate the horrific experiences of people in Iran during and after the Islamic Revolution. The memoirs are mostly written by female authors because they have endured brutal, physical, and psychological trauma under a highly oppressive system. They struggle to find a platform for expressing their indomitable spirit of resilience and story of survival. These memoirs have always served as a paradigm to the rest of the world. These can be viewed as real and raw testimonials for understanding Iran since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The Revolution acted as a catalyst by providing the courage and energy essential for the writers to pen down the darkest experiences witnessed by them. Marina Nemat, an Iranian-born author and human rights activist, is a former prisoner of conscience. She was arrested at the age of sixteen for opposing the Islamic regime's policies and sent to Evin Prison where she was inhumanly tortured. Her memoir titled *Prisoner of Tehran: A Memoir* (2007) records her lived experiences of violence and betrayal that shape futures, relationships and self-perception. The brutality of political and ideological repression and the subsequent imprisonment is reflected in the memoir. The study examines the systemic injustices and brutality where basic human rights, freedom and peaceful co-existence is curtailed. This paper discusses how despite facing criticisms and her ideologies and writings being tagged as Orientalist discourse, Nemat regains her perspicacity and true self from the traumatic experiences by writing about it.

Key Words: *Memoirs, Islamic revolution, political prisoner, physical torture, psychological trauma, resilience and survival.*

The tormenting experiences and horrendous encounters during the period of Islamic Revolution, the Iran- Iraq war and also the shift of power forms the core of memoirs written by Iranian female writers. The period was highly challenging for women as they were silenced by the regime. They suffered under a highly noxious power and wanted the world to know how it felt like to live under their regime. The ideas of rebellion and liberation stirred up the minds of the women for a long time. But they never found a platform to let it out. The 1979 Revolution fueled the spark and women realized the need to be empowered. The revolution administered courage in them to speak against the detrimental power and let the world know about their near-death distressing experiences.

A tremendous advancement in the writing of memoirs by Iranian women could be traced since the 1979 Revolution, *Prisoner of Tehran* by Marina Nemat is a memoir that deals with the narrator's personal experiences of political and ideological repression. The memoir narrates her life, before arrest inside Evin Prison and after her release. Nemat was arrested at 16 for questioning the policies of the Islamic regime at school. The physical and mental trauma endured by Nemat, her friends and other co-prisoners inside Evin Prison is brought to light through this memoir. The darkest and bitter truth is the violation of human rights inside the prison and this happens to both men and women. This was observed during the 1980s and continues till date. The violations of Human Rights are reported by prisoners worldwide. The abuse they face can be listed as physical, emotional and mental. Nemat was taken by the guards of the Iran Revolutionary regime from her home on January 15, 1982. She was accused of being involved in political activities that spread ideas against the ideologies propagated by the Islamic

government in Iran. Similar accusations were also charged upon many young students, both male and female, and were arrested during the same period for revolting against the Islamic government led by Ayatollah Khomeini. Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of Islamic revolution, was also a radical cleric. His new rule and laws implemented under it have undone the laws implemented under the revised law: mandatory hijab for women, which was previously not practiced. The Islamic government made plans to exert strict control over its female population by making hijab mandatory for them. And intensified enforcement for violations of dress code.

Apart from the strict dress code enforced upon women; laws limiting judicial and political roles of women were also put in action. Strict gender segregation in public places was followed by law. Women were also restricted by imposing travel bans, family law reforms and restrictions in the workplace. They also have to suffer long years of incarceration for taking part in revolutionary activities. These newly enforced restrictions were strict contradictions to women's freedom, empowerment and advanced upgrades on gender initiated by the Shah government. These were the early indications of nullifying the advancement of women who were taking prominent steps backwards. Nemat was born to a Russian- Iranian orthodox Christian family in 1965. Split between her home in Tehran and summers by the Caspian Sea, she lived a peaceful childhood. She loved to read English books and novels and usually got it secretly from the nearby book store. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 disrupted her studies as her schooling was uprooted. Nemat noticed that the school has become a mere place for moral policing. It has been changed into the mouth piece of the Islamic government and started to spread their ideas among students. Academic activities, teaching and learning no longer happened at school. This change forced Nemat to question one of her teachers. Later, she even took part in a student-led protest at school. The Head of the school reported Nemat's and her friends' names to the government guards. She was arrested on political charges and was interrogated and imprisoned in the notorious Evin Prison. A death sentence was also imposed upon her.

Men and women who publicly protested against the autocracy were imprisoned by the Khomeini rule. They were viewed as possible threats to their power. The Khomeini rule's power structure was designed in such a way that it held certain cultural and gender-based beliefs. Regarding women in the country. The head of these Institutions and other authorities were also blind followers and practitioners of these ideologies. Thus, it became far easier for the State to exert its control throughout the country. Imprisonment, torture and murder was the tool used by the highly repressive government to silence its enemies and protestors. The imprisonment takes place in the Evin prison located in the Evin neighborhood of Tehran in Iran. The prison was established in 1972 but became notorious during the Islamic revolution of 1979 as it became the most infamous detention facility of the Islamic Republic. Nemat could never keep herself away from the harsh memories of Evin even after her release. She realized that writing about the period could actually help her come out of the trauma:

The past was gaining on me, and I couldn't keep it at bay; I had to face it or it would completely destroy my sanity. If I couldn't forget, perhaps the solution was to remember. I began writing about my days in Evin-Tehran's notorious political prison- about the torture, pain, death, and all the suffering I had never been able to talk about. My memories became words and broke free from their induced hibernation (2).

Nemat's only hope to overcome her fear was to write it by remembering each and every moment she lived inside the prison. She felt the need to share her experience in Evin; thus, her memories became words. Trauma is stated as an intensely painful encounter. This can be very hurtful that the person might not be capable of cases the victim may. Even forget about the event. Normal discursive language cannot be used effectively to discuss trauma. Whereas

imaginative literature can be used for the same. Joshua Pederson analyses the assertions made by Caruth, that the victim may be unable to describe the traumatic experiences in words if the memories return after the incident. He asserts, "Hence her theory of trauma is a ringing endorsement of the testimonial power of literature" (34). Kristen L. Zaleski in an article postulating Judith Herman's Trauma Theory discusses how Herman discloses "remembrance and mourning" to be second the stage of therapy for trauma. "In this stage, the survivor has regained control over her hyperarousal and will begin to tell her story of trauma and transform the traumatic memory so that it can be integrated into the survivor's life story" (385).

Nemat shares nostalgic remembrance of pre-revolutionary Iran where she lived happily as a child worried about no political restrictions. She juxtaposes images of two women in the street of Iran where one wears a fully covering attire from head to toe while the others wear a mini skirt and a tight T-shirt. It was the time of Shah and women need not dress according to the Islamic rules. Earlier, Marina could read Western novels of her choice from the book store but soon possession of Western novels was taken by the guards as evidence of her activities against the Islamic government. She was arrested and taken to Evin. "Evin had been a political prison since the time of Shah. The name brought fear to every heart: it equaled torture and death. Its many buildings were scattered across a large area north of Tehran at the foot of the Alborz Mountains. People never talked about Evin; it was shrouded with fearful silence" (7). The very thought of the prison evoked deadly fear in the people as they believed that escape from the walls of the prison was nearly impossible. Long hours of torturous and mind-numbing sessions of interrogation under the presence of male prison guards and senior interrogators were the most traumatic of all episodes described in the memoir. Nemat was handcuffed both the hands in a single cuff, dragged to bed and fastened to the metal headboard. The soles of her feet were whipped with a black cable and the interrogators went on counting the lashes as if it was a bet. She had no secrets regarding the revolutionary agencies to tell them but still had to endure violent treatment. "We just needed to know more about you, and you proved to us that you're an enemy of the revolution. You're a danger to Islamic society" (35). Nemat was labelled as an enemy to the revolutionary government.

Nemat was later sent to the women's dorm in Evin 246. Every time when taken out of the interrogation room she was blind folded like all the fellow prisoners. On reaching the room she realized from her roommates that her name was marked on her forehead, which later turned out to be the sign for death sentence, from which she was rescued by Ali. Many of her friends were arrested by the police and Gita was executed for not speaking up the name of other revolutionaries. Nemat recalled how she lost Arash, her first love, as he was involved in revolutionary activities against the Shah. "He explained that he had been supporting the Islamic movement against the Shah to the best of his abilities, and he was well aware that what he was involved with was dangerous. He wrote that he had never been very courageous, but now he felt he had put fear aside, and he understood that he could lose his life for his beliefs" (84). After being brutally lashed, Marina felt that it might be "the line that separated life and death," because it was a near death experience for her. The prison is ignominious for pathetic and inhumane conditions imposed on political prisoners and dissidents since 1979. Survivors of the prison reported systemic torture, severe overcrowding, lack of basic amenities and medical care, sexual and psychological abuse and much more. Food was limited and the tea was mixed with camphor everyday as it is believed that camphor stopped female prisoners from menstruating. This is done in prison because sanitary pads were expensive. Most females in the prison didn't get their periods at all and those came with side effects including swelling of the body and depression.

Rape was a form of torture against females in Evin prisons. A couple of girls in the prison told Nemat that they were raped and threatened by the guards that if they informed anyone

about it, they would be executed. Taraneh said that she had once heard that before executing girls, guards raped them, because they believed virgins went to heaven when they died. One of the prisoners named Sheida, twenty years old, was pregnant, but her execution had been postponed because it was against the laws of Islam to execute a pregnant or breastfeeding woman. Nemat exposes how one of the fellow prisoners named Sarah attempts to commit suicide. The intense emotional and physical suffering along with a pervasive feeling of hopelessness has led to this incident. However, this event snatched away the last bit of hope that was left in her. "It was spring, and the air was light and carried the fragrance of blossoms. Life was going on outside the walls of Evin" (118). Fear increased day by day as executions became frequent in Evin. Ali appeared to be a savior for Nemat as he rescued her from being executed and cancelled her death sentence by using his influence with Ayatollah Khomeini. She still faced trial and continued to be in Evin. Nemat was interrogated by two guards in Evin prison named Hamehd and Ali. Hamehd used every opportunity he got to torture Nemat but Ali was sympathetic towards her. It is later revealed that Ali was influenced by her fearless nature and physical charms and was interested to marry her. In return, he asked her to marry him after converting to Islam leaving behind her faith in Christianity. He threatens to execute her lover Andre and arrest her parents when she initially refuses.

To save her parents and Andre, Nemat had to marry Ali and convert to Islam. Even though Ali loved her and assures her that it was not a temporary marriage or a passing physical attraction and also was very considerate towards her by arranging for all basic needs and requirements, Nemat had no love for Ali because the marriage was not done out of affection but to save her parents and her lover, with no other choice left. She was forced to spend her time in prison as the secret bride to Ali, for satiating his physical desires, and had to keep it a secret from her prison mates. It was not less than a rape as she was forced each time to be with him. Ali never felt that it was a mistake on his part to never ask for Marina's consent or take her resistance towards the act seriously. He wanted Marina to get used to it. For Marina it was nothing but rape. The concept of marital rape is not legally recognized as a crime under Iranian law. The law considers all sexual relations within marriage as consensual.

... He came toward me. I took a few steps back and bumped into a cabinet. Even if Iran, I couldn't go for. He grabbed my arms, and his fingers dug into my flesh

"You're hurting me," I said.

"Am I hurting You?"

"Yes. You've been hurting me since I first saw you. And you've been hurting other people, and you're been hurting yourself" (196).

Vibha Yadav asserts that, "more than hundred countries across the world have made marital rape, an offence against the fairer sex" (137). She further adds the reality of how marriage is viewed as a license for sexual intercourse by men. "... As per this theory, a woman "belongs" to her father before marriage, and is her husband's property thereafter. Since the owner of the property is empowered to use his property to his own needs, the question of a husband raping his wife does not arise" (139).

Shadi Sadr and Shadi Amin report the reality of sexual abuses in the prisons of Iran based on testimonials of victims, survivors, witnesses and experts. It also analyses the parallel processes of authority and the heinous way in which Iranian security officials raped and tortured female prisoners those were about to face execution or forced prisoners into marriage as a barter for their life. Prison marriage between prison interrogators or prison officials and female prisoners were common during the 1980's. In such cases, the consent of the woman prisoner is gained under threat, enforcement or harassment. "Hence these prison marriages must be treated as

forced marriage. Any sexual relation that stemmed from such a marriage should be considered as rape" (95). One of the most brutal practices of all were the rape of young virgin girls. Young girls were raped by the guards the night before their execution. They use the religious term "siqih" to justify this act. It is believed that young virgin girls attain paradise after death. "Siqih"- the temporary marriage and rape was to take away their virginity. These actions and practices are fanatical and assures the male prison guards that the female prisoners would never cross their limits and would never take part in any anti-revolutionary practices in the future.

The marriage of Ali and Nemat was short lived. Ali was shot to death by his enemies, Nemat was left injured in the accident. She was eight weeks pregnant then and lost the baby after the incident. Her life once again took a drastic change. Nemat felt, "Now, there was another life that was affected: an innocent child" (222). Hopes appeared again after Ali's death. The Will left by Ali a few days before his death reveals the goodness in him. Ali left everything he had to be inherited by Nemat. He wanted his father Mr. Moosavi to help Nemat to return to her parents if he ever died in an accident. Nemat was released after many trials and pleas and Ali's family helped her in every stage. She returned to her parents and finally got reunited with her lover Andre. They got married a year later. "I realized that although my time in Evin felt like a lifetime, it had only been two years, two months, and twelve days" (243).

The Iran-Iraq war still continued to affect the life of Iranian people after the revolution. Nemat and Andre made efforts to escape the country but Nemat's passport was denied in Evin. Andre got a teaching job at the university in Zahedan and both became parents to a boy child. Even after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini the reign of terror continued under the leadership of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Finally, after many struggles Nemat was issued a passport and was permitted to leave the country on-paying 500,000 tomans; about 3,500 American dollars, as a deposit to guarantee her return. She migrated to Canada. Nemat shares the story of Zahra Kazemi, a Canadian, who died in Evin on July 11 2003. She was arrested in June during a student-led protest in Iran and was soon reported to be in a coma. Later her death was reported and due to external pressure, an internal investigation was made. Even though Canadian foreign affairs officials and Kazimi's son demanded the return of her body to Canada, she was buried in Iran. On March 31, 2005, the horrific details regarding Kazimi's death were made public by Dr. Shahram Azam. It appeared that Zahra was brutally raped, scratched and bruised, had two broken fingers, a broken nose, three broken and missing finger nails, a skull fracture, a crushed left toe, and flogged feet. Marina happened to read Zahra's story in the newspaper and decided to finally speak up the truth about Evin by not letting her fear hold her captive any longer.

Zahra's story was known to the world just because she was a Canadian. Hundreds of thousands of Iranian women prisoners suffer in Evin and they are nobody to this world. Marina, gaining inspiration from Zahra, decides to speak up for the rest of the prisoners. Terry A. Kupers discusses how the equation of rape and gender works in prison. "Rape is not about sex; it is about power and domination. I can't claim that insight, which many have had. But it's true in prison, and in society as a whole. Men use their superior strength to objectify, abuse and dominate women. And in prison, those with power, on average, use their power to abuse those with less power" (433). The brutality encountered by political prisoners in Iran has no limits. Female prisoners in detention facilities like Evin have shown sustained resistance against the autocratic regime's oppressive actions and brutality. Political protests, hunger strikes, public defiance are all examples of their resistive actions. The very recent "Women, Life, Freedom" movements were also examples of Iranian women's persistent struggles through which they question the mandatory Hijab laws, executions and gender-based violence. Their courage persists despite receiving brutality and injustice including torture, rape, beating and death sentences. Even though the narratives of the political detainees explain the complexities between the prison administrative

system and the female prisoners, the autocratic rule of the religious masters have altered and disrupted the normal living conditions of women living in these countries. The memoirs of prisoners, both men and women, exposes the systemic injustices and brutality of life under authoritarian rule, raising questions about morality, complicity and survival in oppressive environments.

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AMBIENT CATASTROPHE: CLIMATE ANXIETY AND EVERYDAY NEGOTIATION IN *WEATHER* BY JENNY OFFILL

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how climate anxiety and the accompanying dread permeates daily life, subtly invading everyday rhythms, routines and social interactions. The protagonist Lizzie Benson, a librarian, begins managing the email inbox of a climate change Podcast after reconnecting with her old college professor. This intensifies her preoccupation with climate apocalypse and survival and she strains to balance her personal life- her husband, son and struggling brother- with the ever-growing anxiety of surviving on a planet that keeps growing warmer. By drawing on the concept of 'solastagia' developed by Glenn Albrecht, eco-anxiety and through the lens of Henri Lefebvre's theory of 'everyday life' the paper argues that the ambient presence of the anticipated climate crisis infiltrates ordinary, mundane life. The anxiety of witnessing the negative environmental changes in one's familiar surroundings causes extreme distress and guilt. The study aims to understand how this state of helplessness in the face of an anticipated catastrophe makes daily existence dreary and quietly changes the interactions of the people with themselves and the increasingly warming world. Lizzie's ineffectual efforts to sustain normal routines and keep a clear head aggravate the anxiety that pervades her daily existence. This unsettled consciousness in the wake of anticipated ecological loss is also mirrored in the novel's fragmented, almost tweet-like chains of thought. Thus, the paper attempts to explore how climate anxiety and existential dread, a condition that accompanies living in the anthropocene, reshapes everyday life and examines the human attempt to regulate ordinary life while anticipating collapse.

Key Words: *Climate Anxiety, Solastagia, Anthropocene, Ecological Responsibility*

As things currently stand with the UN officially declaring that the world has entered an era of "global water bankruptcy", conversations about the accelerating climate change and environmental justice to prevent the oncoming ecological collapse becomes crucial and unavoidable, one that is now being copiously depicted through the emerging genre of climate fiction (cli-fi). But these novels often feature an apocalyptic setting where people try to sustain themselves on a planet they have actively destroyed, with little focus on the psychological impacts the loss of one's familiar environment can have on an individual. *Weather* then becomes a sort of record of individual psychic and emotional response to living on the eve of a catastrophe – the feeling of being lost and unmoored. In a world of planetary disasters, extreme weather, rising sea levels and ice sheet collapse, anxiety and dread about the coming apocalypse is justified. This social, economic, environmental and humanitarian emergency has come to pervade every aspect of human existence causing our consciousness to be constantly overwhelmed by the looming threat of extinction. With media and IT globalization bringing the global events of climate crises and suffering to the living room, people are forced out of the "sepulcher of oblivion".

The attritional violence against the environment, "a violence of delayed destruction", which was out of public sight and consciousness for a long time has now become increasingly hard to ignore as the calamitous repercussions of our greed is becoming more and more conspicuous. The casualties are no longer postponed, regions are turning uninhabitable and climate change has become irretrievable. The progressively tangible "death by indirection" makes it ever more

difficult to comprehend the world we live in. As one's identity and understanding of self is inextricably linked to one's sense of place, these incremental changes in one's familiar environment can severely disrupt a coherent sense of self and identity. This brings about a state of disenfranchised grief and anxiety as one, confronted with their inability to do anything substantial to reverse the damage and prevent the accelerating degradation is paralysed into inaction. This fact of one's helplessness in the face of a climate catastrophe causes extreme mental anguish. In this age of hypercapitalism, there is a consensual sense of the clock ticking, that the present has been truncated and compressed. This interminable experience of a fast-forward life, combined with the cognizance of an onrushing apocalypse, plummeting ecosystem productivity and irreparable destruction of the biosphere induces a gripping climate anxiety that derails normal functioning and interaction. Global environmental shifts and regional ecological decay are increasingly interwoven with everyday experience, triggering visceral psychological and emotional reactions (Cunson and Ellis). This demonstrates that humans possess an innate ability to develop 'affective ties' across a multitude of settings (urban, natural, personal, communal) which further highlights how land and ecosystems function as vital assets in fostering mental well-being, community thriving and cultural identity. Hence in this world, on the brink of a global catastrophe, how we live, work, love, endure and care for each other can be severely altered.

How do we live on a planet we are constantly ravaging? How do you maintain optimism amidst a sinkhole of crises? How do you cope with your own mortality and that of your loved ones? What happens when the alarm of climate change becomes too loud to ignore or escape? How do you maintain purpose and hope without falling into despair and nihilism, when only the wealthy can afford total disengagement? What is the optimal way to face the impending apocalypse? Would you choose to be a 'climate defeatist' retreating from society while making plans for your 'doomstead' or would you confront it communally, engaging in collective and collaborative actions to mitigate the disaster? The paper examines through Lefebvre's everyday life and Albrecht's 'solastagia' and the concept of eco-anxiety how daily life becomes a juggling act as one is perturbed by these unanswerable questions. As a core component of social reality, 'everyday life' is defined by familiar routines, habitual actions and predictable patterns that offer meaning, direction and sense of safety by providing a comforting order and stability. Everyday life is thus ingrained in an individual's culture, social interactions, relationships and experiences with all their differences and conflicts, awareness of which only arises by tediousness or disruption. Henri Lefebvre in his *Critique of Everyday Life* argues that daily life is influenced by larger societal forces and that true freedom is impossible as these forces control our everyday existence- our routines, habits and consumption patterns. The human being stops being human and instead "becomes a thing to be used by another thing". In *Weather*, the worsening climate becomes the totalizing force, the fulcrum, that determines the character's everyday life as they attempt to balance domestic concerns amid anxious predictions of a global climatic collapse. The weather becomes the 'urban' that disrupts the perceived, conceived and lived social space of the residents as the same era that brought incredible advancements in daily technology has also seen a profound decline in the quality of daily life for the average person. Thus the entire fabric becomes compressed to this ambient weather; every aspect of everyone's life feels threatened, every decision an intense duel, continually oscillating between individual survival and collective action. When the 'lived experience of the space' is disrupted especially with the media bringing increased exposure to the cause of the distress (climate crisis), for the coping individual "the trivial becomes extraordinary, and the habitual becomes 'mythical' " (*Critique of Everyday Life* 14).

Lizzie Benson, a middle aged – underqualified librarian, experiences a complete subsumption

of her daily life by the looming specter of the ecological collapse. Faced with the disorienting reality of her own corporeal limitations, she obsesses over the mundane in face of tectonic shifts—a desperate attempt to escape the pervasive anxiety that define the anthropocene. As the boundaries between her domestic life and the outside world of imminent chaos becomes increasingly porous, she grapples with the question of how to “keep tending your own garden once you’ve seen the flames beyond its walls?”. Burdened by the psychological weight of the climate crisis, anticipatory dread and exhaustion, and overwhelmed by her whirlwinding interior landscape, her “everyday life is defined by contradictions: illusion and truth, power and helplessness, the intersection of the sector man controls and the sector he does not control” (Critique of Everyday Life 21).

This feeling of pervasive anxiety and uneasiness of living in the anthropocene is what Albrecht called ‘solastagia’, the lost comfort (Latin solacium) and the mounting distress from seeing one’s familiar environment changing due to climate crisis. Different from nostalgia, ‘solastagia’ is a form of anxiety that develops when a person’s accustomed setting turns hostile and progressively uninhabitable. “It is the ‘lived experience’ of the loss of the present as manifest in a feeling of dislocation; of being undermined by forces that destroy the potential for solace to be derived from the present” (Albrecht 5). The individual panics as “the place, which was considered essential for the emotional and physical survival of the individual and their community, is endangered” (Ferrarello). As the physical gap between the individual and the anxiety trigger is closing, they often experience a sense of paralysis unable to translate such a fear into action. This eco-anxiety and melancholia is clearly exhibited by each of the novel’s main characters – Lizzie, Sylvia and Henry.

Lizzie’s average life – working an unfulfilling, routine job and resigned to the fact of her dull, disappointing existence – takes the turn for the paranoid and conspiratorial as she is obligated to navigate a world that feels increasingly disquieting and precarious. After reconnecting with her old mentor, Sylvia Liller, who recruits her to answer the emails she receives from the listeners of her podcast ‘Hell and High Water’, Lizzie gets more and more involved with doomsday prepping, climate survivalism and evangelical doomsayers and spirals into a state of chronic climate anxiety. She tries not to “spill the full cup”, struggling to balance her domestic life (the mundane) with the rising anxiety and dread. The numerous seminars, emails concerning disorienting questions of safety, bioengineered bodies, survival tips and regular engagement with the hopeless and detached, she also becomes caught in the doomer-prepper state – “There are fewer and fewer birds these days. This is the hole I tumbled down an hour ago” (Offill 49) – which becomes too much for her sensitive mind to handle. But unlike the defeatists, Lizzie can’t run away or retreat. She has a son to provide for, an elderly mother to worry about, a recovering drug addict brother to care for and a straining marriage to fix. Carrying the baggage of all these identities makes her hooked to responsibility as she becomes a personal therapist for those around her which causes her husband to remark, “I wish you were a real shrink... then we’d be rich” (Offill 8). After all the talk about the “invisible horsemen galloping towards us”, she must return home to bills, fliers and chores that define her daily life. While attending a Zen meditation class to assuage her anxiety she is asked to let go of everything she loves, which only raises her fear of not being able to protect her family from the coming doom. “The pieces of glass from a wedding were meant to be saved. If the husband died first, the wife prepared his body for burial by weighting his eyelids with the shards. If the wife died first, it was the husband’s job to do this. I wish I had known this. I wish I had kept those shards” (Offill 66).

In the absence of a beginner’s course on how to cope and distressed by doubts about her parenting, marital and familial relationships, Lizzie attempts to carry on through wry humour, research of survival tips, mapping a doomstead and doubling as an ‘unofficial shrink’ for people

around her. Growing increasingly paranoid—“Now when I see my neighbors the voice in my head gets all Jesusy. One of you will betray me. But which? Is it you Mrs. Kovinski?”(Offill 60) – and confronted with the truth of her frailty –“Then one day I have to run to catch a bus. I am so out of breath when I get there that I know in a flash all my preparations for the apocalypse are doomed”(Offill 90) – she even came close to having an affair with Will, a wilderness survival instructor and photographer. But no matter how meticulously she prepares for the crisis, she is forced to confront her powerlessness, “Do you really think you can protect [your family]? In 2047?” Sylvia asks. I look at her. Because until this moment, I did, I did somehow think this...“Then become rich, very, very rich,” she says in a tight voice”(Offill 63). The true scale of things scare her and her bid to not think of the ‘bigness and smallness’ of things always fail—“My #1 fear is the acceleration of days. No such thing supposedly, but I swear I can feel it”(Offill 14). Meanwhile, her brother Henry with whom she’s in a co-dependent relationship, lapses into drug use crippled by the mounting anxiety of being a good father in a world that is turning increasingly dangerous. His self-destructive attitude prompted by bizarre and unsettling dreams and visions destroys his marriage and makes him incapable of normal human interactions.

Sylvia, on the other hand, though having started the podcast with a vision of “rewilding half the earth” grows more hopeless as she failed to protect her soul from the ubiquitous dread—“No more campaigning, no more fund-raising, no more obligatory notes of hope...all she wants now is to go somewhere quiet and dark”(Offill 90). Burnt out she realizes the futility of trying to delay the apocalypse by reasoning with the complacent evangelists, doomsayers and de-extinction maniacs. She becomes a doomer herself as she succumbs to despair and isolates herself—“There’s no hope anymore, only witnesses”(Offill 67).

This omnipresent anxiety manifests in ‘other characters’ as well—anxious Ben, the ‘doomed adjunct’ and the blonde who frequents the library, the perfection-obsessed Catherine, the local bodega owner- whose lives are equally lost and destabilized. Individuals usually navigate hurdles through familiar routines and adapting their experiences to the changes within daily life. The frantic oscillation between the stifling daily pressures and the looming shadow of a global catastrophe will have people dazed and reeling in the fatiguing modern age of information overload. The response of an average individual to the rising tide of the climate crisis is ‘eco-paralysis’—“... it’s a myth that people panic in emergencies. Eighty percent just freeze. The brain refuses to take in what is happening. This is called the incredulity response”(Offill 31). This growing senselessness of the world is also mirrored in the novel’s incohesive narration, the fragmented tweet-like form, and the non-sequential jumping from one event to the next. The text, peppered with doomer-prepper tips, proverbs, quotes, jokes and mails is jarring, reflecting the disorientation of the individual experience.

As the domestic space becomes saturated with the knowledge of the coming collapse, ‘solastagia’ manifests as anticipatory grief— grief associated with anticipated future losses— which “. . . generate an emotional blockage between individuals, their environment and their place”(Ferrarello). Daily life becomes a site of conflict— a ham sandwich raises moral concerns, packing your kid’s schoolbag reminds you of how you will fail to protect him during the life-altering temperatures of 2047, cleaning reignites anxiety of generating indisposable waste. This eco-anxiety can also be visible in insomniac behaviour—“He’s not doing well with this sleep deprivation. There’s a reason it’s used as a tool of torture. But still, everyone I know is trying to sleep less”(Offill 62). Stressed about their future, this hopelessness and grief pervades their private and public life which comes to be defined by the prepper acronym ‘FUD’- Fear, Uncertainty, Doubt. But “In everyday life the actor becomes committed, compromised; it is a serious business. The parts must be acted out until the end”(Lefebvre 136).

So how does one respond to such paralysing anxiety and terror of the oncoming destruction? Should one like Lizzie gather survival tips—tuna can candle, t-shirt fishing— hatch plans of a doomstead carefully assessing people to bring along and get ‘enmeshed’ in other’s life forgetting oneself; like the evangelists treat the collapse as god’s will; like the fatalists succumb to despair and gloom and retreat believing it too late to stop the crisis; or like the techno-optimistic populace devise plans of inhabiting Mars or genetically modifying bodies to adapt?—“ . . . eventually all those who are unnerved by what is falling away will be gone, and after that, there won’t be any more talk of what has been lost, only of what has been gained”(Offill 23). The reason most will be inclined towards passivity in the face of an ecological crisis is because they are complicit, enjoying the comfort of modern life. Since it requires real physical sacrifice to stop participating in the slaughter of the planet, it becomes easier to wait for the rapture than actively engage in preventive actions. This conflict is precisely captured in Lizzie’s dilemma between convenience or rightness. “ I take the car service home because I’m ridiculous”(Offill 35). Hence this daily life where the scales shift every few minutes, there arises the burning question of ‘does intense psychic pain make one more empathetic to other’s suffering or blind to the pain of others outside individual experience?’

Lefebvre suggests that the only remedy for such “terror-enforced passivity”, the only escape from the perpetual pendulation of one’s acts having little or colossal impact, is channeling it into action— spontaneous and utopian. “Action and action alone can bring this healthiness and this elementary equilibrium, this ability to grasp life in its varied aspects, without being deliberately gloomy or abstractly optimistic . . . either looking at life on the black side or through rose-tinted glasses”(Lefebvre 186). To break with this monotonous taxing everyday, a massive redrafting of life is essential, brought about by change in society and space, as rumination can only immobilize. No one has a clue on how to deal with the coming doom, as even the most optimistic of scientists support limiting climate change and adapting to the pillage but not reversal. Feeling threatened but choosing to remain passive won’t stave off the calamity. Sylvia’s dystopian attitude, recognising the problem without a reliable solution only causes more worry. The trans-humanist outlook of fixing one’s biological form to adapt to the warming planet or terraforming Mars after making a perfectly good planet uninhabitable is not a feasible answer. Nor is prioritizing oneself over collective survival as it is foolish to assume one’s wealth and wit can make them immune to the catastrophe, ignoring the interconnected existence of living beings. The epiphanic realization that “the core delusion is that I am here and you are there”(Offill 96) and recognising that it is a collective crisis where we’re all responsible for each other, can be a helpful first step. A major positive response to climate anxiety is engaging in collective conservation, restoration and revitalization of one’s own environment. As Thunberg said “ no one is too small to make a difference” and extensive changes always start with something small—minimalistic lifestyle, fighting unchecked pollution, donating to organisations, caring for marginalised and severely affected communities and maintaining a climate-forward approach. But one must carefully guard one’s soul and mind as when surrounded by dread, hopelessness and pessimism since “the world continues to end” can make one weary and to eventually stop caring. “What it means to be a good person, a moral person, is calculated differently in times of crisis than in ordinary circumstances”(Offill 15).

To avoid this one can apply the ‘loss-proofing’ method mentioned in the novel—‘to think of the group first in order to survive as it gives one purpose, providing the necessary strength one needs to withstand an emergency’. It can be taxing to take the first step, feeling anxious and lost as one is in the Anthropocene. But what if you are “walking past my own search party by not allowing myself to join any collective enterprises?”(Offill). Like Lizzie, we are all in the “twilight knowing” wherein an individual is aware of uncomfortable and destabilizing truths but chooses

to remain in denial. Yet “with practice...one may learn to accept the feeling of groundlessness without existential fear”(Offill 61). Even if we cannot all organise protests or conduct scientific enquiry, if we all work together we can make great progress in preserving this doomed planet. As the novel concludes, Lizzie with her brief rendezvous with Will ending, realizes the fallacious notion of trying to save only oneself, discerning that she must rejoin the community for collective action and slowly learn to manage the multiple dimensions of her lived experience. This is further highlighted by the quote Ben pins on his desk, “You are not some disinterested bystander/Exert yourself”(Offill 94). Since the enemy is ourselves and our wasteful practices, Offill provides a website “Obligatory Note of Hope” that enables access to practical resources to join climate movements, uplifting insights and profiles of inspiring “People of Conscience” to remind one of doing one’s part however small.

Hence the paper examines how the novel *Weather* delineates individual existence in a toxic world, in the heart of the uncertainty of a global collapse (unknown in its form or time) and explores the individual effort “to commit to the next day, the next hour, the next minute even”(Offill 83) as the concurrency of daily life and climate disaster produces a paralysing fear of “dying early and ignobly.”The paper thus highlights through ‘solastagia’ and everyday theory the importance of collective action for positive change by seeing the many unconnected individuals as one big family, each responsible for the other.

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GREEN NARRATIVES OF CATASTROPHE IN MALAYALAM CONTEMPORARY CINEMA: A READING OF 2018 AND MALAYANKUNJU

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ABSTRACT

Green narratives focus on the deep and diverse relationship between humans and nature. The various interpretations regarding this relationship are brought out through different genres including contemporary cinema. The visualisation of natural disasters and catastrophes in cinema has had a great impact on human minds. Therefore new areas of discussions examine the association between the power of man and the supremacy of nature. This has led to the critical analysis of environmental instability and anthropocentric fragility as significant dimensions of life. Ecological catastrophes however intensify the notions and emotions expressed through the analysis. Contemporary Malayalam cinema visualises how disasters and catastrophes interrupt human lives, dreams, emotions and belief systems. This paper examines the films *2018* and *Malayankunju* which depict flood and landslide as catastrophic events that expose the vulnerability of human life in the face of destabilising ecological forces. The study explores eco critical perspectives, Anthropocene discourse and environmental justice reflected in the films. The films picturise ecological catastrophes and project the themes of human fragility, social boundaries and possibilities for social transformation. In this context, ecological catastrophes emerge as sites of moral and social reflection that challenge anthropocentric assumptions and invite a reconsideration of human – nature relationship.

Key Words: *Eco criticism, anthropocene, environmental justice, ecological catastrophe, contemporary Malayalam Cinema.*

INTRODUCTION

With the increasing global concern about environmental crisis and ecological instability, we have been able to see a growing presence of environmental themes in literature and cinema. Green narratives examine the relationship between human beings and the natural world, highlighting the many ways in which people interact with and depend upon their environment. They emphasise that nature is not merely a backdrop to human life but an essential force that sustains it. Disaster narratives, by contrast, focus on the experiences of individuals and communities during catastrophes, exploring the physical, emotional, and social consequences of such events. When these catastrophes arise from ecological or environmental causes, disaster narratives also become a form of green narrative by drawing attention to the close and often fragile relationship between humanity and the natural environment. The films, *2018* and *Malayankunju* fall under the category of green disaster narratives as both the films explore human experiences in the background of ecological disasters. The film *2018* brings to us the painful scenes of a devastating flood that swallowed the state of Kerala in the year 2018. It closely examines human interactions and community survival through the experiences of people from various spheres of life. *Malayankunju*, however, is based on a landslide that echoes a real disaster in Kerala. The film explores how a catastrophic event reshapes human attitudes, beliefs, and relationships. It presents human vulnerability not merely as a condition of suffering but also as a starting point for moral transformation. Drawing inspiration from real events, both *2018* and *Malayankunju* portray the emotional struggles and responses of people from different social backgrounds. This study analyses the films through the perspectives of ecocriticism,

Anthropocene discourse, and environmental justice. Together, these frameworks highlight the importance of human interdependence while drawing attention to the social realities that emerge during ecological crises. The study also considers how these films enrich contemporary Malayalam cinema's engagement with green disaster narratives and invite viewers to reflect more deeply on the relationship between humanity, society, and the natural world.

The flood in 2018

The film *2018*, subtitled 'Everyone Is a Hero', displays the unity and heroism of ordinary people, especially local fishermen, during the massive flood. The movie is directed by Jude Anthony Joseph who co-wrote the screenplay with Akhil P Dharmajan. Through a cinematic recreation of a catastrophic event, the movie brings together multiple individual narratives of survival during the crisis. The film however turns out to be a tribute to the people of Kerala. The film is categorised as a hyperlink film as it connects multiple and desperate story lines that merge during the 2018 Kerala floods. It does not focus on a single hero but centers on collective action that takes place during the disastrous events. The varied storylines together form a prism of experiences that disperses different colours of the disaster from diverse angles. The depiction of the slow creeping rise of water which later turns into a violent rush depicts the accelerating fear and panic that fills the atmosphere. The flood water overwhelms the manmade infrastructures, breaking through homes and shelters. It washes away every trace of human certainty, leaving people confused and questioning the very order of existence. As one disastrous event follows another, the visuals depict the destruction of homes, shelters, and personal belongings, forcing people into a state of despair. The film *2018* opens with news reports and references to the devastating Kerala floods of 1924. By recalling this earlier ecological disaster, it draws attention to the condition of rivers, dams, and the changing environment. These news reports and conversations encourage viewers to reflect on the relationship between human activity and nature, an idea closely associated with the Anthropocene. The floodwaters are presented as a terrifying force, sweeping through roads, houses, and public spaces. Everyday routines collapse within moments, and the sudden loss of safety and possessions throws life into confusion.

Before the flood strikes, the film also introduces the social divisions that shape everyday life. Through the experiences of its different characters, it exposes inequalities based on occupation and social status, particularly the way fishing communities are often undervalued. Once the flood intensifies, thousands of people become trapped inside their homes with no safe escape. Nature overwhelms human planning as rescue routes disappear beneath the rising waters. Cries for help fill the air, while the visuals repeatedly emphasise the limits of human control. At the point when technology and conventional rescue efforts prove inadequate, the fishermen arrive with their boats. Their intervention marks a turning point in the narrative, bringing compassion and courage to the foreground. Battling dangerous currents, they risk their own lives to save strangers. The film therefore presents the fishermen—long treated as a marginalised community—as the true heroes of the disaster, demonstrating how moments of crisis can reshape social perceptions and inspire collective solidarity.

The landslide in *Malayankunju*

The film *Malayankunju* is directed by Sajimon Prabhakar and written by Mahesh Narayanan. Released in 2022, *Malayankunju* portrays a devastating landslide to explore the extent of human dependence on nature. Set in a rural mountainous region of Kerala, the film captures the fear, confusion, and shock that follow the sudden disaster. The landslide transforms a peaceful landscape into a place of destruction and becomes the event around which the narrative develops. Unlike *2018*, which follows the experiences of several individuals and communities, *Malayankunju* centres on the inner world of a single protagonist, Anikuttan. As the story unfolds

through his perspective, greater attention is given to the psychological and emotional dimensions of survival. When the landslide strikes without warning, human strength, social status, and material possessions are shown to be insignificant before the overwhelming power of nature. Everything gets destroyed and Anikuttan suffocates under the broken infrastructural remains. The scene develops its pace of terror as he struggles to move and breathe. The ordinary social world before the disaster captures images of the rural environment, which include early morning scenes of workers walking in rubber plantations. Anikuttan is presented as a mechanic who works from home. The story unravels through the emotional turmoils of Anikuttan, who carries deep prejudice and trauma of the past within him. His father committed suicide after his sister had eloped with a man from a lower caste. This incident happened on the day of his sister's marriage that was arranged by the family and since then Anikuttan has not been able to find peace of mind. He appears isolated, angry and emotionally withdrawn, the trauma of his father's death shaping his worldview and his resentment turning into rigid caste prejudices. He gets irritated and annoyed when his neighbour's baby cries during nights. The neighbours belong to a lower caste and this leads to conflicts and confrontations within the boundaries of the ordinary life. His rigid beliefs seem to be unchangeable. However, the landslide destroys the stubborn walls of rigid beliefs and encroaches human life with utmost terror and fury. The ecological catastrophe challenges Anikuttan's beliefs and disaster forces him to confront both nature's power and his own social prejudices. It disrupts the social boundaries and alters his worldview.

Nature becomes an overwhelming ecological force as continuous rainfall destabilises the terrain and suddenly breaks into a landslide that destroys houses and the surrounding landscape. Nature appears as unpredictable and uncontrollable, and this projects the fragile relationship between human habitation and the environment. The scenes focus on the helplessness of humans before natural forces. It also projects the collapse of human confidence in controlling nature. This relates to the Anthropocene idea that human systems are fragile before ecological events. Anikuttan gets trapped beneath debris and undergoes a physical and emotional struggle. The darkness, the mud and the claustrophobic atmosphere suffocates him. The lack of mobility intensifies his fear and uncertainty about survival. He calls out for his mother, but gets no response. Here, we witness a collapse of his inner walls of beliefs. He then hears the cry of the neighbour's baby named Ponni. He calls out her name loudly. The tears in his eyes and the concern in his voice reflect the shift from individual survival to responsibility toward another life. He searches for the child. His loud cry sends reverberations of loss and belonging, both at the same time. After his tireless search, he finds Ponni, takes her in his arms, protects and carries her through the debris. Now this scene contrasts with the earlier scenes which showed his strong caste prejudice. He risks his life to save the child of the very family he once despised. Ecological disaster thus creates a moment of moral transformation. This reflects an eco-critical understanding of environmental crisis where ecological events reveal both human vulnerability and ethical responsibility. Nature's disruption or catastrophe forces individuals to reconsider rigid social divisions and realise the interdependence of human lives. The ecological catastrophe becomes the arena where human nature relationships are re-evaluated. Caste divisions dissolve in the face of ecological catastrophe as the landslide breaks both physical and mental walls. Ecological disaster transforms hostility into empathy and solidarity.

Theoretical Perspectives

The study draws on certain theoretical perspectives of ecocriticism, Anthropocene discourse, and environmental justice, which indeed help to interpret ecological catastrophe and social transformation. Cheryl Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as the "study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment", while Lawrence Buell defines it as the study of the

relationship between literature and environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmental praxis. Greg Garrard also defines ecocriticism as the “study of human and non-human relations throughout history of human culture and involves a critical analysis of the term ‘human ‘itself’”. Ecocriticism therefore explores the relationship between literature and environment and projects nature as an active presence and not just a background. In the films *2018* and *Malayankunju*, we watch how nature influences human life and becomes part of their experiences and social transformation. The term ‘Anthropocene’, literally translated as the ‘Age of Human’ is used to refer to a geological era where humanity has become a planetary force of change, that is, a phase where human activity significantly affects the planet. Paul Crutzen, a Nobel Prize winning atmospheric chemist, coined the term ‘Anthropocene’ in 2000 alongside biologist Eugene Stoermer to define a new geological epoch where human activity dominates Earth’s natural systems. He proposed this concept to signify that global impacts such as carbon emissions and land transformation has fundamentally altered the plain since the Industrial Revolution. Accordingly, natural disasters become more complex due to human impact, which leads to environmental imbalance and climate crisis. The Anthropocene perspective thus reveals that natural disasters are often shaped by complex interactions between natural forces and human activities. Environmental degradation and developmental interventions can increase the fragility of ecological systems. The flood in *2018* and the landslide in *Malayankunju* expose incidents that reveal the limits of human control over nature. Catastrophic disasters occur within ecologically fragile landscapes shaped partly by human activity.

The concept of environment justice tends to explore how environmental crisis affect communities differently. The environmental justice movement was heavily influenced by the US civil rights movement and gained prominence in the 1980s. Dr. Robert Ballard, often referred to as the father of environmental justice, is a sociologist who pioneered research on environmental racism in the 1970s and 1980s. His study brought out the idea that the marginalised communities often face greater environmental risks. As we see in the film *2018*, the character who is addressed Raviyetten, a blind man is almost ignored or forgotten amidst rescue efforts. His disability makes evacuation difficult. His blindness makes him unaware of the flooded danger around him, so he becomes vulnerable in a way others are not. Similarly, there is a disabled boy addressed as Undapi, who faces more challenges than the others. Undapi and his parents were among the last to be rescued. They face extreme physical risk and challenges as their survival becomes uncertain during the flood. Here we realise that disaster has a greater effect on the marginalized. The marginalized people undergo more stress during disasters. Their sufferings are intensified with the flood and its consequences. The initial scenes of *Malayankunju* also talks about caste prejudice and hatred exposing the suffering of the marginalized. Anikuttan hates his neighbours who belong to a lower caste. During the landslide however he saves the neighbour’s child from death and thus undergoes a moral transformation.

CONCLUSION

The films *2018* and *Malayankunju* bring meaningful insights regarding how natural disasters shape human experiences. Through different depictions of human struggles, emotions and experiences the films expose how vulnerable the social systems are. The analysis of these events also remind us how much we depend on the nature for our survival. The analysis also aims at social reflection as we realise that catastrophes lead to the collapse of the social walls of caste, ego and prejudice. Both the films foreground the importance of interdependence of humans in a society. Disaster narratives thus function as reminders of humanity. Social awareness and responsible behaviour can reduce the intensity of the natural calamities. Understanding the dangers of isolation should help people realise the need to stay together in spite of differences

in caste, region or occupation. Green narratives, therefore encourage ecological awareness and social solidarity. The adaptations of green narratives in cinema encourage viewers to rethink human nature, relationships and social harmony. In this context, *2018* and *Malayankunju* stand as significant examples of contemporary Malayalam cinema that underscore ecological catastrophe and its ethical implications.

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ECOLOGY, CASTE, AND GENDER: AN ECOFEMINIST INTERSECTIONAL READING OF *PAPILIO BUDDHA* BY JAYAN K. CHERIAN

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses Jayan Cherian's 2013 film *Papilio Buddha* through the theoretical frameworks of ecofeminism and intersectionality. The film being set in ecologically rich landscape of Wayanad in the Western Ghats of Kerala, foregrounds the systemic violence experienced by Dalit communities, women, and the natural environment. Through an ecofeminist lens, the study probes into how the exploitation of land parallels the marginalisation of the female bodies within a patriarchal and caste-based social order. Drawing on Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, the study argues that environmental injustice in the film cannot be understood independently of caste oppression, gender marginalisation, and the struggle for Dalit land rights; instead they must be understood as a united single entity. The reading also gently focuses on how the Malabar Banded Peacock butterfly, referenced in the title of the film, symbolically represents transformation and resistance. Additionally, it examines the postcolonial implications associated with the butterfly being collected by a foreign researcher, suggesting a correspondence between the extraction of natural resources and the exploitation of local landscapes and communities. By examining the relationship between marginalised communities and their ecological surroundings, the paper argues that *Papilio Buddha* presents the landscape not merely as a background but as an intrinsic part of the struggle for land and identity. Ultimately, the study argues that ecological destruction in the film is closely connected to the social struggles of marginalised communities.

Key Words: *Ecofeminism, Intersectionality, Exploitation, Marginalisation.*

INTRODUCTION

The correlation between humans and the environment has become a substantial apprehension in contemporary literature and cinema. Cinema, as a powerful medium of visual representation, enables the portrayal of ecological spaces in a flamboyant manner and *Papilio Buddha* is no exception. The film opens not with characters but with the beautiful landscape of the untamed nature. Written and directed by Jayan K. Cherian, the film focuses on the atrocities committed against Dalits, women, and the natural environment. The narrative transpires in a fictional space called Meppara in Wayanad, picturing the beauty of the Western Ghats through striking visual imagery. Within this landscape, the film explores how environmental spaces form a setting for social hierarchies and structures of power. The title referring to the Malabar Banded Peacock butterfly found in the Western Ghats, symbolically connects to the region's biodiversity. This paper therefore examines *Papilio Buddha* through the theoretical frameworks of ecofeminism and intersectionality in order to analyse how ecological exploitation intersects with caste oppression, gender marginalisation, and struggles for land and identity.

The paper uses ecofeminism to apprehend how the oppression of women is linked to the exploitation of nature. "The new relationship of man's domination and mastery over nature was thus also associated with new patterns of domination and mastery over women" (Shiva xv). Ecofeminist thinkers like Vandana Shiva argue that the domination of women and nature are interconnected processes rooted in patriarchal and hierarchical structures. This outlook is distinctly relevant to *Papilio Buddha*, which has been primarily studied only through the lens of

caste. An ecofeminist reading reveals that the film not only critiques caste oppression but also highlights the parallel exploitation of ecological spaces and women. The natural landscape and the female body are both depicted as sites for control and domination. The paper also utilizes the theory of intersectionality, a concept introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, which refers to the interaction and cumulative effects of multiple forms of discrimination that shape an individual's life. As Crenshaw argues, "Intersectional subordination need not be intentionally produced; in fact, it is frequently the consequence of the imposition of one burden that interacts with preexisting vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of disempowerment" (Crenshaw 1249). Thus, systems of oppression do not operate independently but intersect in complex ways. This framework is particularly relevant to *Papilio Buddha*, where gender, class, and caste intersect to sustain the marginalisation of communities. The film demonstrates that these structures of inequality are interconnected, with individuals experiencing layered forms of oppression rather than a single, isolated form of discrimination.

Thus, the concepts of ecofeminism and intersectionality operate together in *Papilio Buddha*, contributing to the marginalisation of both nature and the indigenous people of Meppara. These forms of oppression are interconnected and function simultaneously, resulting in the exploitation and dispossession of both ecological spaces and marginalised communities. The character of Manjushree in the film can be understood as one of the victims of these intersecting structures of power, including patriarchal domination, caste-based marginalisation, and the systemic displacement of indigenous populations. The film begins with a variety of visual sequences of the lush landscape of Wayanad, a tool that Cherian uses to establish the ecological narrative as central to the text. This is followed by Shankaran, the protagonist carrying a dead peacock from a bushy area to the top of a mountain and lying beside it. The dead peacock thus turns into a visual representation of the ecological degradation which is prevalent not just in the fictional place Meppara but also around the world. The visual of the peacock feathers resting on Shankaran's face adds on a layer of intimate connection between nature and individual.

To understand how the female characters in the movie are exploited, it is important to analyse the different ways in which violence targets both indigenous women and the natural environment, and how these two threads run side by side. Cherian visually juxtaposes shots of degraded hills and landscapes with moments of explicit violence against women. In one such sequence, images of environmental degradation are immediately followed by police raiding two indigenous women. The police officers do not hold back, instead they humiliate the women with language loaded with sexual threats. This incident is not just a dramatic choice of Cherian but a key to ecofeminism. The film leans into an ecofeminist stance, showing that patriarchal power doesn't just dominate nature or women in isolation. It ties the two together, so the ruined landscape and the abused bodies both end up as sites of control and exploitation.

The character of Manjushree offers a significant example of gendered oppression within the film. As a woman who earns a living by driving an auto-rickshaw, she openly defies traditional gender roles, this results in hostility from male drivers. A targeted campaign of sexualized verbal abuse similar to the earlier treatment of indigenous women follows. However, she refuses to be a passive subaltern; she actively resists the aggressors by confronting one of the men. Her realisation becomes explicit when she tells Shankaran, "I thought his problem was me being an auto driver. Now I realize, it is because I am a girl" (35:16–35:20). This moment highlights how her identity as a woman becomes the basis of her marginalisation. When Manjushree shares her experience of harassment to Shankaran, he responds by reducing it to her body, aiming to say that such attention is inevitable because of her physicality. This response reveals how the female body is seen as something to be desired, used and consumed rather than respected. Manjushree does not hold back her anger at such kind of objectification. The entitlement and tone of

consumption that the male figures in the film embody reflect a larger pattern, where nature too is considered as something to be taken, used and controlled. The female body and environment are exploited without consent.

Further, outsiders who claim to support indigenous struggles often view the landscape merely as a site of visual beauty to be captured through the camera, reducing nature to an object of aesthetic pleasure. In a similar way, Manjusree and the other indigenous women are subjected to the patriarchal gaze, where they are viewed as objects for voyeuristic pleasure. This parallel becomes striking in the scene where an earth moving machine removes the last tree from a hill, symbolising the violent stripping of the environment. Just as how the environment is valued only for its resources and beauty before being stripped of its dignity, women too are stripped away of all their identity and dignity. The brutal gang rape of Manjusree within the bushy fringes of the forest serves as the film's most visceral metaphor for the dual exploitation of nature and the marginalized body. By staging this assault in a natural space that has been rendered 'unprotected' by the state, Cherian establishes a direct parallel between the desecration of the topography and the violation of the female subject. The act of the attackers urinating upon her is particularly significant; it functions as an act of abjection, reducing the woman to the status of 'waste' or 'dirt' in the same way that the industrial-patriarchal state treats the landscape as a site for toxic disposal and extraction.

Cherian utilizes the image of a tribal pregnant woman being brutalized to illustrate the intersectional vulnerability of the displaced subject. As the woman intervenes to prevent the extrajudicial 'dragging' of her husband into a police vehicle, the officer's boot to her stomach symbolizes the patriarchal State's desire to abort the resistance movement itself. Within an ecofeminist framework, the bleeding of the pregnant mother mirrors the 'bleeding' of the Wayanad soil; both the maternal body and the earth are treated as sites of extraction and disposal. The police officer's violence highlights a chilling reality: in the eyes of the hegemony, the indigenous womb is a threat that must be disciplined, while the indigenous man is a criminal for demanding his right to the soil. Ultimately, the ecofeminist trajectory of *Papilio Buddha* establishes the idea that the degradation of the Meppara landscape and the systemic violation of female bodies are two branches of the same patriarchal tree. By visually putting together the excavation of the hills and capturing the Dalit land with the sexualized disenfranchisement of indigenous women, Cherian argues that the state's developmental agenda is essentially for extracting the fertility of the earth and the autonomy of women. The film suggests that the rape of the land and the rape of the woman are part of a singular, phallogocentric logic of conquest.

Intersectionality is another important theoretical framework that can be traced throughout the film. Although Kimberlé Crenshaw primarily developed this concept in relation to African American women, it is equally relevant in understanding the experiences of indigenous communities in *Papilio Buddha*. Intersectionality highlights how multiple forms of oppression operate together rather than separately. As Britannica notes, "Crenshaw introduced the concept to address experiences of oppression that could not be adequately understood as the result of ordinary patterns of discrimination" (August Samie). In the film, caste, gender, ethnicity, and class collectively contribute to the marginalisation of individuals and communities. The experiences of Manjushree, as discussed earlier, demonstrate how indigenous women are not oppressed solely on the basis of gender but through multiple, overlapping factors. While she faces harassment as a woman, her marginalised social background and economic condition further intensify her vulnerability, "the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If ... the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is more deeply in the shadow" (Spivak, 2013). Class, in particular, plays a significant role in shaping her lived reality. Her economic circumstances compel her to take up work as an auto-rickshaw driver, a profession

dominated by men, where she continues to face hostility and discrimination. "I want to make a living too. I am struggling to run that school. They all want to have me" (35:21 – 35:29) is what she says to Shankaran.

Being a Pulaya woman becomes yet another reason for marginalisation in the film. "Gender relations are circuitous in a subaltern community with women double oppressed and occupying liminal spaces within the caste-entrenched patriarchal society." (Raj et al. 10) In the film *Manjusree* is subjected to the voyeuristic gaze of male auto drivers, not just because she is a woman but also because she belongs to a marginalised caste. Her body is considered as accessible within this social hierarchy. The brutal rape inflicted upon her and the denial of justice highlights how caste intensifies gendered oppression. Ethnicity functions a major role in intersectional Marginalisation within the film. Because the residents of Meppara are ethnically and culturally distinct from the dominant state apparatus, the land rights activism is frequently re-coded as terrorism and insurgency. This is evident in the dialogue by a politician: "The Dalits of Meppara has put the government in crisis" (1:25:26- 1:25:28). This reframing enables the state to impose a criminalizing gaze, where the simple act of inhabiting ancestral land is transformed into trespassing state-controlled forest spaces. Cherian argues that this erasure is deliberate, "In *Papilio Buddha*, we captured visually the horror of this ecocide in a region where Adivasis and the Dalit population were leading an environmentally-friendly life. These were people whose living depended on the forest" (Misrahi-Barak and Thiara 6). By portraying these lives as inherently disposable, the state ensures that "The state-sanctioned deforestation and ecocide go hand in hand with the genocide of the people who were displaced from their habitat" (Misrahi-Barak and Thiara 6). Thus, ethnicity is not a simple axis in intersectionality but as a specific site in which the state enacts its dual destruction of human life and environmental heritage.

The Postcolonial dimension adds yet another layer to the already existing intersectional framework. In a scene, Shankaran is seen attempting to capture a rare butterfly for a foreign researcher, which underlines the commodification of nature. The act of taking a butterfly which is endemic to Western Ghats points to the colonial practice of appropriating indigenous biodiversity and knowledge for the benefit of outside systems of power. For the foreign researcher the Meppara land is not valued for what it means to the people who live within it but for the resources that he can capture away from the place to benefit the foreign knowledge system. This is what Rob Nixon identifies as slow violence — harm that is "dispersed across space and time," where "casualties are deferred across generations and the agents of destruction remain difficult to name" (Nixon 14). The harmful effects of capturing an endemic species can only be understood later as time passes. The researcher's gaze over Meppara land replicates the colonial surveyor's gaze. This extractive behaviour has a historical root in Wayanad. Colonial forest policies systematically displaced the indigenous communities from their land, reclassifying their ancestral lands as state-controlled reserves. The state's present-day criminalisation of Dalit-rights movements is not a new one but a continuation of the old colonial one that frames demand for ancestral land as terrorism. This dimension deepens Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality. Nixon notes that such violence haunts the lives of those "immiserated, abandoned, and humiliated by authoritarian rule and by a purportedly postcolonial new world order," where slow violence "coupled with direct repression, can ignite tensions, creating flashpoints of desperation" (Nixon 29). This is precisely what *Papilio Buddha* shows, the Dalit- Adivasi communities of Meppara are not just marginalised by one aspect but are entrapped in a loop of marginalising factors.

Consequently, an intersectional approach shows that the oppression in *Papilio Buddha* is not singular but a systemic one. The film shows how caste hierarchy, colonial extraction, gendered objectification, economic marginalisation, and ethnic othering work together to render the

Dalit-Adivasi subject expendable. By tracing how these forces converge upon the lives of the people of Meppara, Jayan Cherian challenges the idea of oppression as a singular or uniform experience. Instead, the film demonstrates that the state's criminalising gaze operates through the intersection of these multiple forms of marginality. Consequently, the resistance depicted in the film moves from mere land-rights activism to a radical ontological shift toward Ambedkarite-Buddhism. This is a profound recognition that one cannot dismantle the ecocide of the Western Ghats without simultaneously dismantling the intersectional power structures that facilitate it. The film suggests that the ecological destruction of the Western Ghats cannot be addressed without also confronting the social and political systems that sustain it.

In conclusion, *Papilio Buddha* serves as a powerful articulation of both ecofeminist and intersectional concerns. The final sequence acts as a striking realisation of how the system of power prioritises capital over the marginalised and the natural environment. Cherian's choice of a silent tone as the residents of Meppara succumb to state power is a profound cinematic mourning. As the displaced trek through the lush jungle and emerge into the stark, degraded landscapes scarred by the dominant system, the film visually maps the transition from organic belonging to industrial alienation. From an ecofeminist perspective, this forced exodus signifies the breaking of the deep connection between body and land, where the suffering of the people parallels the degradation of the environment. At the same time, an intersectional reading reveals how the Dalit-Adivasi community is rendered expendable within structures of caste, class, and state power. The fragile *Papilio Buddha* butterfly, once a symbol of ecological richness, becomes a metaphor for the precarious existence of both nature and marginalised lives under such systems. The film ultimately suggests that the destruction of the Western Ghats is not merely an ecological crisis, but also a social one, involving the systematic displacement of those who have historically lived in harmony with the land. In its final moments, the film leaves the viewer with a stark realisation: without meaningful resistance to these intersecting structures of power, both the environment and the communities that depend on it face an uncertain and diminished future.

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THE GREEN ALPHABET:DECIPHERING THE BOTANICAL SYNTAX OF SELECT MALAYALAM CINEMA AND LYRICS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the vital intersection of Environmental Humanities, Cinema Studies, and Linguistics to explore the "Vegetal Soul" of Kerala's cultural output. In Kerala's unique geography, plants are not passive scenery but central components of regional identity, and the region's literature and cinema function as a "living archive" of its biodiversity. The paper traces a transition within Malayalam cinema and lyrics from treating flora as decorative backdrops to recognizing them as active participants possessing "Vegetal Agency." Through the lenses of Phytocriticism and Ecolinguistics and Michael Marder's philosophy of non-conscious intentionality, the study spans a longitudinal arc from the domestic gardens of the 1950s to the hyper-real psychological textures of contemporary film. Central is the tension between the "Coloniality of Botany", the industrial monocultures of Rubber and Eucalyptus plantations and the indigenous "Polyculture" of the Kavu (Sacred Grove). Through readings of Aranyakam, Ennu Swantham Janakikutty, Oru Cherupunchiri, Churuli, Aadachayi and selected film lyrics, the study identifies a crisis of "Botanical Amnesia": as specific species names succumb to "semantic bleaching," the cognitive tools needed to protect the natural world are eroded. The preservation of Kerala's botanical vocabulary is presented as a vital act of linguistic and ecological conservation. Keywords: Phytocriticism, Haritha Cinema, Botanical Amnesia, Ecolinguistics, Malayalam Lyrics, Vegetal Agency.

Key Words: *Phytocriticism, Haritha Cinema, Botanical Amnesia, Ecolinguistics, Malayalam Lyrics, Vegetal Agency.*

INTRODUCTION

Malayalam has always spoken in flowers. The couplet Omana thinkal kidavo / nalla komala thamara poovo ; "O tender crescent moon, O soft and lovely lotus blossom" is not merely a lullaby. This is, in many ways, a declaration of the language's most intimate syntax. When the thamara — the lotus, *Nelumbo nucifera* — appears in Malayalam verse, it does not arrive as mere ornament. It enters as a specific botanical presence, trailing its centuries of theological meaning, its habit of opening only at dawn, its quiet insistence on rising from murky water toward light. For the better part of a century, Malayalam film lyrics sustained this botanical syntax with extraordinary sophistication.

The great lyricists of Malayalam cinema's golden age were, before anything else, poets who knew the plants. G. Sankara Kurup, P. Bhaskaran, Vayalar Rama Varma, O. N. V. Kurup, Bichu Thirumala, Sreekumaran Thampi, and Kaithapram Damodaran Namboothiri did not reach lazily for the word poo — flower — when they needed nature to speak. They reached instead for mullappoo, the jasmine (*Jasminum sambac*) with its small white insistence; for parijatham (*Nyctanthes arbor-tristis*), which falls at night and perfumes the morning ground; for chembakam (*Magnolia champaca*), tall and temple-bound; for chembarathi (*Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*), bright as a prayer; for konna (*Cassia fistula*), which turns Kerala golden every Vishu; for pala (*Alstonia scholaris*), whose fragrance arrives before you see the tree; for the roadside humility of thumba (*Leucas aspera*); for the quiet blue of kannanthali (*Exacum tetragonum*); for

kaayampoo (*Memecylon umbellatum*) clustering in violet; and for ilanji (*Mimusops elengi*), whose scent carries across an entire evening.

Two questions drive this study, and together they shape everything that follows. The first is constructive: drawing on Michael Marder's *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (2013),

it reads the botanical syntax of classical Malayalam film and lyrics as performing what Marder calls non-objectifying attention to vegetal life — a mode of encounter that honors plants' particular modes of being, their temporality, their fragrance, their ecological situatedness, without assimilating them to human categories of beauty or longing (Marder 10-13). It borrows the linguistic concept of semantic bleaching to track something that has quietly been happening to Malayalam song lyrics over the decades — the slow erosion of that precise botanical vocabulary is the second inquiry. When they bleach — when kaithapoo is reduced from the specific sensory-ecological-mythological complex of pandanus odorifer to a generic signifier of femininity, or when poo in contemporary lyrics functions as an all-purpose romantic intensifier; that memory bleaches too.

Section 1: Marder's Plant-Thinking — Vegetal Life and Lyrical Attention

Michael Marder's *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (Columbia UP, 2013) is the most sustained philosophical rehabilitation of plants in recent Western thought. Tracing the history of the philosophical repression of vegetal life from Aristotle's nutritive soul to Hegel's indifferent nature, Marder argues that plants exhibit their own forms of intentionality, temporality, freedom, wisdom, and memory, differing from their animal and human counterparts not in degree but in kind, and demanding philosophical frameworks adequate to their difference (Marder 1-15). Throughout Western philosophy and science, plants have been approached as objects, symbols to be decoded, backdrops to be appreciated aesthetically, resources to be instrumentalized. Non-objectifying attention requires philosophical humility: a willingness to let the plant be what it is, to attend to its particular temporality, its specific fragrance, its ecological embeddedness. This is the philosophical analogue of what a precise phytonym does in language: it names without reducing, attends without appropriating.

When ONV Kurup names not simply a flower but indupushpam, the flower of the moon; he performs what Marder would call a moment of non-objectifying attention in language: the flower is honored in its specificity, its name bearing the weight of its ecological and cultural being. When Vayalar Rama Varma insists on pala and not simply maram (tree) or poo (flower), he makes a philosophical commitment: the *Alstonia scholaris*, with its nocturnal fragrance, its association with the yakshi, its particular place in Kerala's ecology, cannot be replaced without destroying the meaning the song is attempting to make. Konna (*Cassia fistula*) blooms specifically at Vishu; thumba (*Leucas aspera*) flowers during Onam; parijatham blooms at night and sheds its petals by morning, its name already encoding the melancholy of beautiful things that cannot last. Marder's concept of vegetal memory adds a third dimension: against memory as mental representation, plants exhibit a somatic, non-imagistic memory written in bodies, growth patterns, and chemical responses (Marder 104-109). This botanical memory is irreplaceable and it is precisely what semantic bleaching erodes.

Section 2: Ecocritical Rhizomes — Phytocriticism, Semantic Theory, and the Lyrical Plant

The rhizome of Deleuze and Guattari, which consists of an underground stem system that spreads laterally without a fixed focal point, that "has no beginning or end" but always a "middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo," serves as an adequate model for the kind of thinking that botanical syntax requires (Deleuze and Guattari 25, 29). What makes this figure so generative for reading botanical language is not its strangeness but its accuracy: it describes

how plants actually move through meaning. The dominant tendency in literary interpretation has long been arborescent — rooted, vertical, hierarchical. Rhizomatic thinking, by contrast, attends to the lateral connections, unexpected adjacencies, and multiple de-centered meanings that emerge when one follows the phytonym through its actual uses in songs, ritual, folklore, medicine, and seasonal celebration.

John Charles Ryan's phytocriticism provides this orientation with a specific methodology for cultural texts. Ryan defines phytocriticism as "an ecocritical practice that foregrounds vegetal life, plant subjectivities, and the cultural dimensions of human-plant relations" (Ryan 3). A phytocritical reading of Malayalam film lyrics asks not what the flower symbolizes conventionally, but what this specific flower, this species, with these ecological properties, blooming in this season, makes possible in the lyric that no other flower could achieve. The phytocritical reading always asks: what do we lose when the particular species is called the flower in general?

The third criterion for the discussion here is a term called Semantic bleaching. This process is the bending of the meanings of a term to become ill-defined and broad from frequent use (Traugott and Dasher 94–97; Brinton and Traugott 71–74). Applied to phytonyms, it describes the erosion of botanical specificity as plant names are detached from their ecological referents and redeployed as affective intensifiers or generic romantic markers. It breaks down use of a word to lose its meaning when a word is used to mean something other than its original ecological or biological context. In traditional lyrics, mullappoo is a reference to a small flower of *Jasminum sambac*, which is associated with the humid Kerala evenings and bridal garlands and the threshold of homes and temples of Kerala. The phytonym, as A. V. Superanskaya's pioneering work has rightly established, is not a mere word, but a cultural and ecological record: it carries the accumulated history. When phytonyms bleach in song, this map fades: a progressive retreat from the specific to the generic, from the ecological to the symbolic, from the plant as being to the plant as backdrop.

Section 3: The Golden Age of Botanical Lyricism — ONV, Vayalar, Bhaskaran, and Bichu Thirumala.

In the era of 1960's to 1990's Malayalam movie songs' golden age trace a good number of botanical lyrics. A succession of extraordinary poet-lyricists produced work in which specific phytonyms named flowers and plants with full ecological particularity served not as decorative ornament but as primary vehicles of meaning, philosophical depth, and cultural memory, practicing, in their own medium and cultural resources, something remarkably close to what Marder calls non-objectifying attention to vegetal life.

O. N. V. Kurup (1931–2016), winner of the Jnanpith Award and the Sahitya Akademi Award, explicitly refused to distinguish between his film work and his literary poetry, a refusal that speaks to the philosophical seriousness with which he approached the lyric. His nature imagery is not decorative but constitutive: plants, birds, rivers, and skies are not backdrop but agent, not symbol but subject. P. Soman notes that ONV's poetry takes "a bird's eye-view of the diversity of approaches beginning with earth-as-mother, to 'words' as signifiers of Kerala's nature and culture" (Soman qtd. in Kurup et al. 47). The song *Indupushpam Choodi Nilkkum* from *Vaishali* (1988), for which ONV received the National Award for Best Lyrics, exemplifies his method: *Indu* (moon) combined with *pushpam* (flower) creates a compound that is at once a name for a specific flower type and a cosmic metaphor, the flower that carries the moon's light and participates in the lunar temporality of bloom and fade. ONV's *Kaattupookkal* "wild flowers" announces a phytonymic philosophy: not cultivated flowers, but *kaattu* (wild, of the forest) + *pookkal* (flowers, plural), flowers growing outside human cultivation, a form of vegetal freedom

in the fullest Marderian sense. His environmental elegy *Bhoomikkoru Charamageetham* — "An Obituary for the Earth" mourns specific ecological losses in specific landscapes, performing what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence" by making it visible through botanical specificity: naming what is being lost, plant by plant, river by river (Nixon 2).

If ONV's botanical lyricism is rooted in the earth, Vayalar Rama Varma's (1928–1975) is haunted by the supernatural ecology of Kerala, the world in which plants are thresholds between the human and the otherworldly. Vayalar's most characteristic botanical signature is the pala tree — *Alstonia scholaris*, known in English as the devil tree whose presence in his yakshi songs is one of the most precise and irreplaceable phytonymic deployments in Malayalam film music. The pala's small white flowers release a fragrance of extraordinary intensity at night described in Malayalam folklore consistently as maddening, overwhelming, disorienting. Yakshis are said to haunt pala trees specifically because the tree's fragrance creates the dissociative, intoxicated state in which the yakshi can exercise her power over a solitary traveler (Old Malayalam Cinema). The phytonym carries the supernatural meaning with it; the supernatural emerges from the plant's own ecological properties, Marder's non-objectifying attention operating at the level of supernatural ecology.

P. Bhaskaran (1924–2007) was among the first major lyricists to understand Kerala's specific botanical geography as a lyrical resource. The AIDEM describes him as having "an intimate native grasp of the geography, the topography, the botanical cornucopia, the cultural arabesque, of Kerala," with lyrics "permeated with the mild fragrances of wild flowers" (The AIDEM). His song *Kaayalarikath Valyerinjappol Valakilukkiya Sundari* from *Neelakkuyil* (1954) establishes the characteristic mode of his botanical lyricism: the landscape of Kerala — the kayal (backwater), the surrounding vegetation, the particular light and water of the region is not backdrop but constitutive element.

Bichu Thirumala (1945–2020) represents golden-age botanical lyricism at its most Onam-inflected and consciously Kerala-ecological. His lyrical imagination was shaped decisively by the seasonal festival calendar of Kerala particularly Onam, whose central visual and botanical symbol is the *pookkalam*: the elaborate flower-carpet made from carefully gathered wildflowers, requiring intimate knowledge of which flowers bloom in the *chingam* month (August–September), which can be gathered from which habitats, and how different species can be combined for color and effect.

Section 4: Semantic Bleaching in Contemporary Malayalam Cinema Lyrics

The contrast between the botanical syntax of the golden age and the lyrical vocabulary of much contemporary Malayalam film music is stark. Beginning in the late 1990s and accelerating through the 2000s, 2010s, and 2020s, the specific phytonyms that had been the grammatical foundation of Malayalam film song gave way to a generalized and increasingly generic floral vocabulary. In their place came simpler, vaguer words: *poo*, *pookkal*, *pushpam*. A rich vocabulary was being swapped for a generic one. Linguists have a term for this: semantic bleaching. . The general trajectory constitutes a textbook case of semantic bleaching at work in a specific linguistic-cultural domain.

Phytonyms function differently from common nouns because they carry a specific referent with a complex bundle of properties: botanical identity, ecological behavior, seasonal timing, cultural associations, mythological meanings, sensory profiles (Superanskaya qtd. in Konovalova 67). But when *mullappoo* gets used again and again in ordinary love songs with no attention to any of this, those layers of meaning slowly peel away. The same thing has happened to *thamara*, *chembarathi*, *parijatham*, and *konna* — each one reduced from a living botanical presence to a decorative label. . This bundle of meanings is grounded in the actual plant's ecological properties

and the centuries of human-plant cohabitation deposited around the plant's name. The depletion of this semantic bundle is well-described by Traugott and Dasher's model: when a word is repeatedly used in contexts where only a subset of its meanings is relevant, those irrelevant meanings begin to fade (Traugott and Dasher 94-97). Repeated use of mullappoo in generic romantic contexts progressively detaches the word from its specific botanical referent. This phenomenon extends across the full range of classical phytonyms, *thamara*, *chembarathi*, *parijatham*, *konna*, each increasingly deployed as a calendar or emotional marker rather than as a botanical presence with ecological and cultural specificity.

This shift reflects a deeper cultural change: as Kerala has urbanized, as the specific plants of its agricultural and forest ecology have become less directly present in daily life, and as English-medium education has replaced Malayalam botanical vocabulary with the generic category "flower," the ecological literacy that once made specific phytonyms immediately intelligible to mass audiences has eroded. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle: decreased ecological contact renders phytonyms less accessible; lyricists replace them with generic vocabulary; as generic vocabulary replaces specific phytonyms, the cultural transmission of botanical knowledge through song is interrupted; and as that transmission is interrupted, ecological contact with specific plants further decreases, producing not merely a linguistic change but a genuine ecological cultural impoverishment.

The arc of this shift can be mapped chronologically: in 1960–1980, *thulasi* anchored the domestic garden, equating feminine purity and ancestral sanctity; from 1980–1990, the mystical wild dominated through *pala* and *kavu*; a place the *Pala* marks the precise threshold where the civilized village ends and the *Kavu* (Sacred Grove) begins. These *Kavu* are "eco-theological" spaces—ancient, undisturbed pockets of biodiversity where the wild and the divine meet. In 2000–2010, fragile ecosystems and vanishing landscapes appeared nostalgically. Modern "Phyto-centric" narratives like *Churuli* and *Bougainvillea* utilize high-definition textures—moss, ferns, and thorns to mirror internal trauma and fractured psychological states. But the picture is not entirely bleak. Lyricist Kaithapram has held onto botanical precision as a quiet act of resistance. His *Ambilipoovattam Ponnuruli* from *Ennu Swantham Janakikutty* places *ambilipoo* against the golden arc of the moon — a specific flower in a specific ecological and cosmic relationship. The films of contemporary ecological cinema; *Kishkindha Kaandam* (2024), *Ekō* (2025), *Aadachayi* (2025) *churuli*; maintain greater botanical specificity than commercial romantic films, suggesting that ecological cinema functions as a preservation mechanism for phytonymic vocabulary even as generic floral vocabulary dominates elsewhere. As someone once put it: "In the old days, a flower in a song was a prop for the heroine's hair. Today, the flower is the heroine's internal monologue—fragile, blooming, or withered by the environment."

Section 5: Films as Lyrical Environments — Phytonyms in Cinematic Ecology

The Malayalam films that constitute *haritha cinema* (green cinema) or Kerala's ecological film tradition are not simply films about nature; they are films whose entire sonic and lyrical architecture is built around the specific botanical worlds of Kerala. To read them as visual texts alone attending only to images of forests, rivers, and paddy fields is to miss the dimension in which they are most ecologically sophisticated: their lyrics, in which specific phytonyms constitute a parallel ecology, a semiotic landscape that interacts with and deepens the visual landscape onscreen. The films examined here; *Aranyakam* (1988), *Oru Cheru Punchiri* (2000), *Ennu Swantham Janakikutty* (1992), *Kishkindha Kaandam* (2024), *Ekō* (2025), and *Aadachayi* (2025) are read as sonic environments in which botanical names circulate, accumulate meaning, and undergo the processes of attention and bleaching that the preceding sections have theorized. *Aranyakam* (1988), directed by Hariharan from M. T. Vasudevan Nair's screenplay takes

its title from the Sanskrit *aranya* ; forest, the space beyond cultivation. The film's world is one in which the ecological world of the Western Ghats presses against the human drama, shaping its possibilities and limits. ONV Kurup's lyrics deploy botanical vocabulary with characteristic precision, treating the forest not as generic "nature" but as a specific botanical ecosystem ; a world of particular trees, particular streams, particular light-qualities at particular times of day. The songs function as a lyrical ecology parallel to the visual ecology of the film: specific phytonyms anchor the film's emotional world in a particular botanical landscape, preventing the forest from becoming a generic romantic backdrop. *Oru Cheru Punchiri* (2000), with its gentle, elegiac exploration of an aging couple's relationship with their garden, offers botanical cinema at its most philosophical. The film's slow, observational pace is itself a form of vegetal temporality: it moves at the speed of a garden, not a thriller. The songs reflect this pace, botanical songs in the deepest sense whose entire temporal structure is shaped by the kind of time that plants inhabit, representing the classical phytonymic tradition at its most mature and philosophically grounded. *Ennu Swantham Janakikutty* (1992), with Kaithapram as both music director and lyricist, offers the most explicit meditation on the relationship between botanical naming and emotional memory in Malayalam film music. The film's central character inhabits a world in which the specific plants of his environment are continuous with his emotional life; Kaithapram's lyrics map this botanical-emotional ecology with precision, positioning the human drama within a specific astronomical-botanical moment — *ambilipoovattam ponnuruli* the moon-flower in its golden orbit, simultaneously cosmic and botanical, emotional and ecological. The contemporary films of Dinjith Ayyathan , *Kishkindha Kaandam* (2024) and *Ekō* (2025) represent the most ambitious recent attempt to bring ecological cinema into dialogue with contemporary Malayalam culture. *Kishkindha Kaandam*'s setting a wild, overgrown garden at the heart of an urban residential space is both a literal botanical environment and a figure for the persistence of the vegetal world against urban erasure. *Ekō* (2025) constructs its entire lyrical world around the specific ecosystem of a particular Western Ghats forest; its lyrics function as environmental documentation as well as aesthetic experience, naming specific species in specific habitats in ways that carry the weight of the environmental crisis within the lyric's beauty. This is what this article means by phytonymic revival: not a nostalgic return to the classical tradition, but a renewed commitment to botanical specificity as an ethical and ecological act, a refusal to allow the phytonym to bleach into the generic poo.

Aadachayi (2025), set in Kerala's mangrove and coastal ecology, deploys a botanical vocabulary specific to coastal and aquatic ecosystems mangrove plants, coastal grasses, salt-tolerant vegetation rarely heard in Malayalam film music, which has traditionally centered on the hill-country and garden ecology of the interior, representing an expansion of the phytonymic repertoire toward a coastal Kerala the classical tradition largely overlooked.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the botanical syntax of Malayalam film and lyrics the practice of naming specific flowers and plants with ecological precision constitutes a philosophically significant tradition that deserves to be read not merely as poetic ornament but as a form of linguistic vegetal attention, a lyrical practice that at its finest performs what Michael Marder calls the non-objectifying recognition of plant being. The great phytonymic lyricists of the golden age — ONV Kurup, Vayalar Rama Varma, P. Bhaskaran, Bichu Thirumala, Sreekumaran Thampi, and Kaithapram — were ecological poets in the fullest sense: writers who understood the grammar of Kerala's botanical world and who deployed *mullappoo*, *parijatham*, *chembarathi*, *sheema konna*, *kaithapoo*, *pala*, *thumba*, and *kanikonna*, *kannanthali*, *pullanji*, *pavizhamalli*, *sankupushpam*, *neelolpalam*, *chembakam*, *kaatukurinji*, *vakapoo*, *ilanji*, *ezhilampala* and many more with a precision that honored the specific being of specific plants rather than dissolving

them into generic romantic backdrops.

The central theoretical contribution is the application of semantic bleaching theory to phytonyms in song: the trajectory from classical botanical precision to the generic floral vocabulary of much contemporary Malayalam film music is not merely an aesthetic change but an ecological one — a progressive erosion of the linguistic structures through which a community maintains its attentiveness to its botanical world. When mullappoo becomes merely "feminine purity" and thamara merely "tenderness," these are events in the history of a community's relationship with its environment, marking the withdrawal of an ecological intimacy; the capacity to be in relationship with a specific plant as a specific being now available only as heritage, nostalgia, and the deliberate aesthetic choice of filmmakers and lyricists who consciously position themselves in dialogue with a tradition they cannot take for granted.

The films examined in Section Five; from the classical haritha cinema of the 1980s and 1990s to the contemporary ecological cinema of Dinjith Ayyathan, suggest that the Malayalam film tradition retains the resources for phytonymic revival: the deliberate renewal of botanical precision is a genuine counter-movement against the bleaching tendency, one that deserves critical attention. The stakes extend beyond film studies and linguistics: as Kerala faces rapid urbanization, climate change, and the erosion of its extraordinary biodiversity in the Western Ghats, the capacity to name plants specifically is not a trivial cultural luxury but a form of ecological practice, a way of keeping the botanical world present and particular in the cultural imagination even as it recedes from everyday life.

Marder argues that non-objectifying attention to plants is the first ethical demand of plant-thinking: the willingness to encounter the plant in its specificity without immediately reducing it to a human category (Marder 10-13). In the domain of language and song, this ethical demand takes the form of the specific phytonym: the commitment to say pullanji and not merely poo, to say parijatham and not merely malar, to say pala and not merely maram. To attend to phytonymic syntax in song is to practice, in the domain of cultural criticism, the same non-objectifying attention that Marder demands at the level of philosophy: to honor the specific being of specific plants, to resist their reduction to generic categories, and to insist that the particular matters — that the kaayampoo is not the same as the poo, and that the difference is not merely aesthetic, but ecological, philosophical, and ethical.

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THE BURDEN OF TRANSGRESSION: PERPETRATOR GUILT AND SHAME IN E. SANTHOSH KUMAR'S *TAPOMAYIYUDE ACHAN*

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the theme of guilt and shame in E. Santhosh Kumar's *Tapomayiyude Achan*. Through a close reading of the novel, the paper examines how memory is created and erased to deal with trauma. Memory is often suppressed and erased to hide the guilt and shame. The character, Gopal Barua, seeks the help of a forgotten/secret language to hide his memory from the outside world. His remorse over a momentary failure in his life decided the future of his life. Since guilt and shame are moral emotions, moral transgressions in the life of an individual can haunt him for the rest of his life. This paper is an attempt to analyze the complexconundrum of memory, guilt and shame in *Tapomayiyude Achan* through the lens of memory studies.

Key Words: *Guilt, Shame, Trauma and Memory*

Guilt and shame are two distinct, yet different concepts. Trauma Studies has long before incorporated discussions on the guilt and shame experienced by the victim. However, studies on the perpetrators' guilt, shame, remorse and disgust have been a rather recent area of study. It is important to understand that Trauma studies has expanded its boundaries to incorporate the trauma of the perpetrator. This paper is an attempt to study how memory is often created and erased to deal with guilt and shame. E. Santhosh Kumar's award winning Malayalam novel, *Tapomayiyude Achan* discusses the life of Gopal Barua and his attempts to deal with his guilt and shame. Tapomayi Barua, son of Gopal Barua, runs a charitable organization called Shelter, for refugees. During one of his bureaucratic ventures, Tapomayi befriends the narrator. During one of their conversations, Tapomayi mentions his father's interest in ancient scripts and code languages. The narrator, who shares similar interests, is fascinated by this piece of information and it helps him bond with Gopal Barua. Gopal Barua is a refugee from Eastern Bengal, who resides in Kolkatha. Through his conversations with Gopal Barua, the narrator gradually learns about Barua's insecurities and apprehensions.

Gopal Barua has always been in love with Sumana. But Shyamal, an elderly relative of Gopal marries Suman, breaking Gopal's heart. At one point, following a genocide, Shyamal, Sumana and Gopal, along with their fellow villagers had to leave their village and settle on a deserted riverine island. Though they were able to build a life there for a while, they had to flee that island as well. During a rainy season, the river overflows and threatens to drown their island. Realizing they have no other choice, the inhabitants of the village decide to leave the village. Since the available boats cannot accomodate all the villagers at once, Shyamal Da volunteers to stay back on the island, taking care of their possessions, until Gopal comes back to fetch him. Though Gopal goes to save him, in a moment of passion, Gopal decides to leave Shyamal Da behind him, since he believes that Shyamal is the reason for his unrequited love. However, the memory of this action torments him till his death.

After the death of Shyamal, Sumana comes to live with Gopal. Soon, Gopal realizes that Sumana loves Shyamal and Tapomayi is the son of Shyamal. To add to his distress, he realizes that Sumana knew about his betrayal. His remaining life is an attempt to cope with the guilt and shame resulting from his actions. As an act of purging himself, he begins writing his memoirs.

However, he is not courageous enough to write about it in plain language and he uses a code language to write memories that he wants to hide from the public eye and he lives in fear of someone deciphering his secret messages. Shame and guilt are moral emotions. They are among our most “private, intimate experiences” (Tangney and Dearing 2). Though people use these two terms interchangeably, they are different concepts. Mid-20th century anthropologists popularized an assumption that “certain kinds of situations lead to shame whereas other kinds of situations lead to guilt. For example, there is a long-standing notion that shame is a more “public” emotion than guilt. Shame is seen as arising from public exposure and disapproval of some shortcoming or transgression, whereas guilt is seen as a more “private” experience arising from self-generated pangs of conscience” (Tangney and Dearing 14). Tangney and Dearing quotes Gehm and Scherer’s observation, “shame is usually dependent on the public exposure of one’s frailty or failing, whereas guilt may be something that remains a secret with us, no one else knowing of our breach of social norms or of our responsibility for an immoral act” (14).

Guilt and Trauma are two self-related concepts that surface following a traumatic event. Gopal Barua’s failure to save Shyamal can be termed a traumatic event since “To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (Freud qtd. in Caruth 9). Gopal Barua’s trauma can be primarily attributed to the feeling of guilt that results from leaving Shyamal Da to drown to death, who had always loved and taken care of him. Following the death of Gopal’s father, Shyamal provided them with financial assistance. On those days, Shyamal worked as a cook, he brought them leftover food, which in Gopal’s words, were the days he ate well. Acceptance of having done wrong seems to be an important precondition of feeling guilty. Though Gopal has been successful in erasing the memory of his failure to save Shyamal for a while, he was questioned by Sumana bringing his forgotten memories to the fore. This exchange between Gopal and Sumana unearthed those hidden memories and along with it, his guilt. An individual usually endures his guilt or guiltiness in secret, while that individual tries to hide their transgressions from others. Trauma poses unique challenges to understanding as traumatic experiences may result from events which have social, cultural, political and ethical dimensions. The present study brings forth the ethical dimension of trauma.

Though Tapomayi is not his biological son, Gopal loves him and Gopal does not want Tapomayi to know his misdeeds. This could be interpreted as the reason behind his fear of Tapomayi reading his memories and diaries. In one of his conversations with the narrator, Gopal asks, “Has Tapomayi taught you these?” (77). The question reveals his fear of Tapomayi learning his secrets. In another conversation, he asks, “Don’t people think of inventing a script which only they can decipher?” (74). Gopal’s keen interest in ancient scripts and code language was not just a passion for him. It was a ruse that helped him to secure his secrets safely. Gopal Barua’s traumatic memory is a constant reminder of his inaction. His memory functions as an affective archive, repeatedly staging his guilt and shame even when he attempts to forget it. The memory of letting Shyamal die cannot remain in the past. It returns and intrudes into the present binding him to his unresolved guilt. “Memory can serve as a double edged sword; it can be a source of healing, but also a reminder of pain, influencing how stories are told and remembered across generations.” Guilt, shame and memory are intertwined in *Tapomayiyude Achan*. On one hand, Gopal’s memory is an instrument of pain. It does not allow him to forget. On the other hand, he is scared of losing his memory since it meant him forgetting the location of his memoirs and secret diary. Gopal Barua is worried about things going missing from his house. He has something to hide. He remarks, “My memories are wandering off. I used to keep all my documents safely. I used to carry it wherever I went. . . I searched a lot for that diary. I pray that I get my diary back even if I lose those ancient artefacts, paintings and sculptures. But, I wonder who took them?” (204) (Trans. Self).

Gopal Barua is the perpetrator of violence here. Since he is not inherently a bad person, his failure continues to torment him. Value must be placed on the shame experienced by Barua as it is a form of moral judgement and an important source of potential moral action. From this perspective, shame displayed by Gopal Barua is a proof of instinctual human morality, a proof that human beings are inherently good. Gopal Barua's attempts to help Tapomayi's cause can also be read as an attempt for redemption. To understand the trauma of the perpetrator is to understand the traumatic experience that affects the perpetrator. It is important to look at the early life of Barua to understand it. Gopal's father committed suicide leaving him and his mother financially and emotionally vulnerable. When Gopal's mother dies, Gopal practically becomes an orphan having no one to love him. It is his yearning for love that led to his moral failure. In the novel, the rain functions as an instrument that brings forth his guilt. He says, "The rain that I watch is not new. . Even now, I watch an age-old rain, a primeval rain" (157) (Trans.Self). He adds, "The rain is endless and it is inside my mind" (158) (Trans.Self). Rain is not a soothing memory for Gopal. It reminds him of the flood and his selfish moral failure. His remorse over his moral failure turns into a traumatic memory and a cause of shame.

Shame and guilt stem from our inner sense of right and wrong. Shame targets our self image when we fail to meet personal and social standards. When Sumana confronts Gopal and questions him of his betrayal, he is devastated. She asks him, "Did you see him from the boat?" (314) (Trans. Self). This question uncovered a lot of memories which he desperately wanted to forget. He tried to defend himself stating that he hadn't done anything wrong. However, he and Sumana know that it was his inaction-not his actions- that bore culpability. Gopal says, "What did I do? I consoled myself saying that I did not do anything. But isn't that itself the reason for my pain? I could have done it easily. But I didn't." (287) (Trans.Self). His moral sense criticizes him as his action does not align with his moral and ethical principles. Tangney et al. avers, "Shame is typically the more painful, disruptive emotion because the self, not simply one's behavior, is the object of judgement. When people feel shame about the self, they feel "small," worthless and powerless" (2). Gopal Barua's inner self of morality and ethics torments him, reviving the memory of his moral failure. As Tangney and Dearing remarks, "Guilt involves a sense of tension, remorse, and regret over the "bad thing" done. People in the midst of a guilt experience often report a nagging focus or preoccupation with the transgression- thinking of it over and over, wishing they had behaved differently or could somehow undo the deed" (19). Though Gopal could have easily sailed towards Shyamal and saved him, he chose not to do so. A decision which cost him a moment destroyed his entire life.

"One moment! Just one moment. But that moment decided my remaining life. Its heaviness suffocates me. An island guarded by shrubs was erased forever from the face of earth. Two shadows standing on its highest point, awaiting death." (314) (Trans. Self). The image of Shyamal and his pet dog is a recurring nightmare for Gopal. Memory is not just a passive archive of past events, but an active force that sustains guilt and shame. In events of ethical and moral failure, memory returns the individual to the moment of moral choice, rekindling the emotional weight of that moment. Each return to the remembered past, serves as a moment of conscience, in which the individual experiences responsibility for their choice.

Gopal's melancholic life was obvious to his friends and his associates. His friend Dr. Tapas Sarkar instructs him to write down his 'problems' in a diary. Gopal follows this instruction, however, he uses incomprehensible scripts to guard his secrets. The question, "Did you see him from the boat?" functions as the key to his secret life. When Gopal realizes that his memoir has gone missing, it scares him. He does not want Tapomayi to read it and understand that Gopal is not his biological father and he is the reason for the death of his father. Since the narrator is familiar with the ancient scripts and he could read them, Gopal tries to extract a promise from

him. Gopal suspects that his diary has ended up in the hands of the narrator. He says, “My dear friend, I don’t know from where you get these messages. You may even have my diary with you. If it is not so, it may soon be in your possession. In such a situation, do me a favour. . . . Please destroy it. Burn it. . . . And never try to read it” (207) (Trans. Self).

The concept of humanity is based on a set of values, norms and behaviour. Transgressions of these concepts challenge the idea of humanity itself. Shyamal was a compassionate man, who helped others without any expectations. He helped Gopal and Sumana and their families in times of need. Betraying such a person is an inhuman act. Theisen-Womersley avers, “A significant source of shame is the loss of continuity in upholding culturally defined values, norms and respected patterns of behaviour – and the self-consciousness over disappointing others within one’s social network and embedded within one culture”(211). Gopal realizes that he has disappointed Sumana. The realization becomes the reason for their estranged relationship. Gopal finds even her death a consolation, as her presence was a constant reminder of his moral failure. When Tapomayi expresses his desire to marry Parveena, a refugee, Gopal Barua discourages him. He says, “She is not a person. She is just a shadow. It is difficult to live with a shadow” (185)(Trans.Self). Though he made this observation about Parveena, it is applicable to his relationship with Sumana. She became a shadow in their relationship. Sumana was a lively girl in her childhood and teenage days. It was her mother who forced her to marry Shyamal. Though she was the wife of Shyamal, she cherished a strange bond with Gopal which helped her to understand him. Even when there was no witness to what Gopal did, it is because of this that Sumana came to learn about it. Once she realized she carried Shyamal’s child in her womb, she wanted to protect it at all costs. At the same time, she wanted to hide the paternity of the child from Gopal. When Gopal raised his doubts regarding the paternity of the child, she said, “Children belong to God.” However, only later did he realize the God mentioned was Shyamal, a compassionate human being whom he betrayed. Sumana and Tapomayi function as the living reminders that transformed his momentary inaction to a long lasting trauma.

In conclusion, *Tapomayiyude Achan* discusses the fragility of human emotions and its potential long lasting implications. A brief moment of inaction results in a lifetime trauma. Trauma does not always result from an exposure to extreme violence or a catastrophe, it may also arise from a single moment in which the individual fails to act. Memory transforms it into a persistent affective presence. Trauma, here, functions as an internalized, self-inflicted injury, sustained through the individual’s memory. The resultant guilt and shame is intensified by counterfactual memory- the persistent imagining of what could have been done in that moment. In this way, the memory sustains trauma by negative closure and renewing and reopening moral accountability. Gopal Barua’s guilt and shame over his momentary inaction is sustained through his memory and transforms it into a lasting moral burden.

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HASHTAGS AND HASTHAKSARAMS: YOUNG WOMEN'S DIGITAL NARRATIVES OF PROTEST AND SOLIDARITY IN KERALA

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the emergence of digital feminist activism among young women in Kerala, focusing on how hashtags and handwritten narratives, or "hasthaksarams," act as tools of protest and solidarity. Drawing upon landmark movements such as the Kerala Women's Wall and the Indian #MeToo campaign, this study uses cultural and feminist literary theory to examine how these digital spaces enable young women to negotiate power, identity, and representation. The analysis foregrounds Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model to understand meaning-making within hashtags, Judith Butler's performativity to conceptualize digital gendered self-representations, and Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity to explore multilingual and transcultural feminist identities. These narratives constitute a transformative cultural politics reshaping feminist activism in Kerala's intersecting social hierarchies.

Key Words: *Digital Activism, Feminist Studies, Cultural Politics, Feminist activism*

INTRODUCTION

Digital platforms have fundamentally transformed feminist activism globally, enabling young women in Kerala to seize representational space and political agency against a backdrop of entrenched patriarchal structures, despite the state's celebrated progressive indicators—96.2% female literacy, highest female-to-male workforce ratios, and leftist mobilization histories juxtaposed with persistent dowry practices, religious policing of female bodies, caste-based exclusions, and domestic coercion. In this distinctive socio-cultural matrix, hashtags and "hasthaksarams" — personal protest narratives digitized for viral circulation — emerge as innovative strategies contesting these hierarchies while forging hybrid feminist identities resonant across local, national, and diasporic contexts. The 2025 resurgence of #Avalkoppam following an eminent actor's acquittal in the 2017 Malayalam actress assault case exemplifies this potency: despite convictions of six assailants, the allegations of judicial bias, evidence tampering, closed-door trials, and elite influence sparked nationwide outrage, with the hashtag trending at over 500,000 mentions in 48 hours and endorsements from Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) and other similar organizations for gender rights.

Cultural Studies provides the indispensable theoretical architecture for dissecting these practices. Stuart Hall's seminal encoding/decoding model reframes hashtags not as passive metadata but dynamic circuits where organizers encode political intentionality (#Avalkoppam signifying solidarity against impunity), participants produce and circulate meanings through shares, and antagonistic audiences generate oppositional decodings via counter-hashtags like #Ayalkkoppam celebrating "money power" (Hall 15-27). Judith Butler's gender performativity theory elucidates how digital disclosures—tweets naming abusers, Instagram narratives detailing assaults—constitute iterative, subversive performances that destabilize normative gender regimes and dismantle patriarchal silencing mechanisms (Butler 519-39). Homi Bhabha's postcolonial hybridity framework illuminates the liminal identities forged through Malayalam-English code-switching in these texts, challenging binaries of tradition/modernity, local/global, and secular/religious (Bhabha 95-114).

Complementing these, Gayatri Spivak's incisive subaltern critique underscores the strategic

essentialism Kerala women employ to amplify systematically excluded voices; like that of Dalit survivors inserting caste grievances and Muslim women contesting communal policing — while navigating risks of co-optation by dominant discourses (Spivak 271-313). This interlocking theoretical lens frames the paper's central inquiry: How do hashtags (digital communities) and *hasthaksarams* (personal narratives) function as contested cultural sites enabling young Kerala women to negotiate power, identity, and resistance within intersectional hierarchies amplified by celebrity impunity and platform algorithms? This paper addresses three interrelated questions: First, how do these digital practices disrupt hegemonic gender discourses rooted in Kerala's matrilineal-orthodox paradox? Second, what representational strategies facilitate navigation of caste, class, religious, and now celebrity fault lines, as seen in #Avalkoppam? Third, what structural paradoxes emerge from corporate platforms and judicial systems that simultaneously empower feminist voices while exposing them to surveillance, disinformation, and perceived elite protection?

Contextualizing Digital Feminism in Kerala

Kerala's socio-political terrain constitutes a paradoxical matrix for feminist activism, interweaving impressive human development metrics—96.2% female literacy, India's highest female-to-male workforce participation ratio, and legacies of Nair matrilineality and leftist mobilization—with persistent patriarchal kinship structures, dowry persistence, religious orthodoxies across Hindu, Christian, and Muslim communities, and caste stratifications that systematically constrain women's public agency and bodily autonomy (Abraham 45–60; Kerala Sahitya Akademi). Digital feminism emerges precisely within these fault lines, leveraging social media affordances to contest structural inequalities, forge solidarities across social divides, and reclaim narrative authority from institutional silencing. The 2019 Kerala Women's Wall represents a watershed: mobilizing 3.2 million women across 620 kilometers in response to the Supreme Court's Sabarimala verdict permitting women's temple entry, it directly challenged patriarchal religious norms and communal polarization, generating 1.8 million #WomensWall hashtag mentions within 96 hours. The Women's Wall serves as paradigmatic alongside #MeTooKerala and #Avalkoppam, where embodied protests converged with viral amplification generating millions of interactions (Abraham 45–60; "Vanitha Mathil").

Sunnykutty Abraham conceptualizes the Wall as performative spatial rupture, with women occupying highways conventionally reserved for male political processions, thereby contesting gendered cartographies of public space and encoding gendered unity transcending caste-religion divides (Abraham 45-60). Stuart Hall's circuit of culture framework illuminates this dynamic where organizers encoded the event as a symbol of secular feminist solidarity. Participants consumed and reproduced meanings through 2.1 million selfies, videos, and live-streams, while conservative audiences generated oppositional interpretations framing it as moral violation and anti-Hindu conspiracy. Parallel to the Wall, Kerala's #MeToo iteration unfolded primarily through Instagram Stories and Facebook posts, where college students, journalists, adjunct faculty, and young professionals shared "*hasthaksarams*" detailing institutional harassment, workplace predation, familial coercion, and domestic violence—strategically bridging digital ephemerality with material permanence to resonate with Donna Haraway's valorization of situated, embodied feminist epistemologies contesting patriarchal universals (Haraway 581-98).

The 2017 Malayalam actress sexual assault case marks another pivotal flashpoint, catalyzing the original #Avalkoppam movement. The survivor—a prominent figure in Malayalam cinema—was abducted and molested in a moving car by assailants allegedly as retaliation for her Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) advocacy against industry sexual exploitation. Launched

primarily by WCC members to counter slut-shaming and victim-blaming, #Avalkoppam ("With Her") fused Malayalam solidarity with global #MeToo grammar, proliferating amid survivor threats and media trials. The December 2025 verdict reignited it explosively: while six perpetrators received punishment, the acquittal of a major actor alleged to be the mastermind of the assault, prompted statements decrying evidence tampering, denied open trials, judicial bias favoring elites, and human rights violations.

Reading Gayatri Spivak and her subaltern analytics could probably reveal how Dalit, Muslim, and lower-caste women tactically appropriated mainstream hashtags like #Avalkoppam and #WomensWall, inserting caste-specific grievances—temple entry discrimination, communal policing of hijab and dress codes, workplace casteism—into broader gender discourses, thereby challenging upper-caste feminist hegemonies and exposing intersectional modulations of digital risk (Spivak 271-313). Gayatri Spivak's reflections on subalternity and strategic essentialism are crucial for understanding how Dalit, Muslim, and lower-caste women inhabit Kerala's digital feminist spaces. While broad feminist hashtags risk reproducing upper-caste and middle-class dominance, subaltern women tactically appropriate common tags to insert caste-specific grievances, religious policing, and workplace casteism into wider gender debates. This practice constitutes a form of strategic essentialism where "women" is deployed as a provisional political category that can foreground shared gendered vulnerability while still allowing for the articulation of deeply unequal caste and community locations. At the same time, Spivak cautions that subaltern voices can be absorbed, diluted, or overwritten by more powerful actors within feminist spaces, a risk that is amplified by algorithmic hierarchies and platform logics.

Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding paradigm proves analytically useful for dissecting these dynamics: WCC organizers encoded explicit solidarity against elite impunity into the hashtag's syntax; grassroots users—students, journalists, cinema workers—decoded through participatory hasthaksarams naming "industry predators" and demanding accountability; while antagonistic audiences generated oppositional meanings via rival #Ayalkkoppam ("With Him"), celebrating the male actor's "money power triumph" and projecting his cinematic comeback with fan-organized bus protests halting film screenings. Judith Butler's performativity theory frames the survivor's disclosures and supporters' posts as citational ruptures: iterative speech acts like "justice betrayed by closed doors" subversively reconfigure disclosure from private trauma to public indictment, interpellating digital publics as ethically obligated witnesses (Butler 519-39; 530).

Homi Bhabha's hybridity manifests vividly in code-switched formulations such as "#Avalkoppam അവൾക്ക് നീതി വേണം" ("She needs justice"), blending English universality with Malayalam relationality to navigate insider/outsider audience dynamics through "sly civility"—strategic mimicry accommodating platform moderation while smuggling region-specific critiques of celebrity impunity (Bhabha 95-114; 107). Donna Haraway's cyborg ontology extends to these hybrid texts: hasthaksarams blending corporeal handwriting with algorithmic circulation embody woman-technology coalitions contesting phallogocentric regimes that protect powerful perpetrators (Haraway 581-98; 584). Ethnographic documentation reveals post-verdict hasthaksarams proliferating on kraft paper at Kochi court barricades — with viral specimens declaring "അവൾക്കൊപ്പം എനും" ("With Her, Always") naming "conspiracy of power structures," shared by 20,000+ users—materializing digital ephemerality while evoking palm-leaf manuscript traditions. Quantitative circulation analytics underscore #Avalkoppam's disruptive scale: peaking alongside #MeTooKerala calls for movie industry reforms, it prompted solidarity from prominent figures from Malayalam Cinema. Sunnykutti Abraham conceptualizes these as "digital thira" (protest songs), reviving folk

resistance aesthetics within algorithmic feeds to maximize affective resonance amid judicial disappointment (Abraham 45-60; 48). The whole movement could be seen to highlight Kerala's evolving digital feminist grammar where justice denied becomes justice mobilized.

Hashtags as Sites of Feminist Meaning-Making

Hashtags in Kerala's digital feminism transcend organizational metadata, functioning as semiotic engines propelling contests over gender justice, resistance, and community formation across movements like #WomensWall, #MeTooKerala, and #Avalkoppam. Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding paradigm remains analytically central: organizers encode explicit political intentionality into hashtag syntax—#Avalkoppam signifying solidarity against celebrity impunity and judicial betrayal; grassroots participants decode through multimodal content production including selfies, videos, live-streams, and text narratives; while conservative and celebrity-aligned audiences generate oppositional interpretations via counter-hashtags like #Ayalkkoppam, memes celebrating "money power," and organized disinformation campaigns (Hall 15-27; 24). Sunnykutti Abraham conceptualizes these responses as "digital thira" (protest songs), strategically reviving folk resistance aesthetics—intricate Malayalam calligraphy evoking temple inscriptions—within algorithmic feeds to maximize affective resonance and cultural continuity amid technological rupture (Abraham 45-60; 48). Judith Butler's performativity theory elucidates their citational force: iterative speech acts such as "#MeTooKerala അവൾക്ക് നീതി വേണം" ("She needs justice") or "#Avalkoppam" subversively reconfigures the illocutionary function of disclosure from private confession to public indictment, destabilizing normative gender regimes and mechanisms of patriarchal silencing through repeated, collective enunciation (Butler 519-39; 530).

Homi Bhabha's hybridity framework manifests vividly in these code-switched formulations, blending English universality ("#MeToo") with Malayalam relationality ("അവൾക്കൊപ്പം") to navigate complex insider/outsider audience dynamics through "sly civility"—strategic linguistic mimicry that accommodates platform moderation protocols while smuggling region-specific critiques of caste, religion, celebrity power, and judicial bias (Bhabha 95-114; 107). Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity sheds light on the linguistic and cultural negotiations embedded in Kerala's digital feminisms. Hashtags and hasthaksarams frequently combine Malayalam and English, mobilising what Bhabha describes as "in-between" spaces that unsettle binaries such as tradition/modernity and local/global. Donna Haraway's cyborg ontology further extends to these hybrid artifacts: hasthaksarams (handwritten/handwriting-like), inscribed corporeally on kraft paper then digitized via smartphone optics for Instagram carousels and Stories, embody partial woman-technology coalitions contesting phallogocentric epistemic regimes that protect powerful abusers from accountability (Haraway 581-98; 584). These dynamics underscore hashtags not merely as connective tissue but contested battlegrounds where Kerala's young women engineer resilient meaning-making amid existential algorithmic and judicial antagonism.

The Paradoxes of Digital Platforms

Corporate digital platforms embody acute structural paradoxes for Kerala's feminist movements, simultaneously amplifying marginalized voices while facilitating unprecedented surveillance, algorithmic fragmentation, and organized backlash ecologies intensified by celebrity power dynamics. Judith Butler cautions that public gender performances inevitably invite interpellation by disciplinary power (Butler 519-39; 528). Stuart Hall's encoding framework illuminates platform-mediated hegemonic rearticulation (Hall 15-27; 21). Feminist hashtags like #Avalkoppam trigger outrage algorithms privileging polarizing replies—trolls, counter-hashtags like #Ayalkkoppam—from elite fanbases, generating feedback loops that submerge solidarity

signals within noise amplification. Hall's model thus illuminates the contested nature of Kerala's hashtag publics as ongoing struggles over signification rather than stable communications from sender to receiver.

Paromita Pain's quantitative analysis of #MeTooKerala and #Avalkoppam confirms 72% of posts encountered hostile engagement, with platform algorithms systematically surfacing troll content over supportive amplification, particularly penalizing vernacular Malayalam by 3.8x visibility reduction versus English/Hindi equivalents—materially reproducing linguistic hierarchies isomorphic with caste and class stratifications (Pain 857-873). Facebook dominates Kerala connectivity with millions of users, monetizing attention via engagement metrics that favor manufactured controversy over nuanced discourse, while infrastructural asymmetries—rural 2G/3G coverage gaps, prohibitive smartphone costs for subaltern households—systematically exclude Dalit, Adivasi, and working-class women from digital publics, compounding geographic marginalization. Ultimately, platforms constitute double-edged terrains where Kerala's digital feminists engineer resilience amid existential precarity, contesting not merely gender hierarchies but the very architectures of algorithmic capitalism intertwined with celebrity impunity and judicial opacity.

Narrating Experience and Reclaiming Narrative Authority

Narrative reclamation forms the affective-political core of Kerala's digital feminism, transmuting individualized trauma into collective ethical indictment and systemic critique, particularly evident in #MeTooKerala and #Avalkoppam testimonies that bridge personal violation with institutional betrayal. These disclosures instantiate Judith Butler's illocutionary performativity paradigm. They transcend mere description to constitute performative ruptures, interpellating digital audiences as ethically obligated witnesses demanding institutional redress, judicial transparency, and elite accountability (Butler 519-39; 530). Judith Butler's theorisation of gender performativity helps frame #MeTooKerala and #Avalkoppam disclosures as reiterative performances that challenge normative femininity, silence, and shame. When survivors and supporters post testimonies, name perpetrators, and articulate demands for justice, these acts do not simply describe injury but performatively enact new subject positions—fighters, witnesses, and political agents—within digitally mediated publics. Kerala's rich literary heritage indelibly shapes these practices, forging continuities between digital and analog resistance. Malayalam OTT platforms host feminist "digital thira" sessions reviving 1980s protest balladry; hasthaksarams echo Kamala Das's confessional erotics, embodying raw vulnerability defying bourgeois respectability protocols while linking to historical satyagraha scrolls from 1930s temple-entry movements (Abraham 45-60). Sunnykutti Abraham traces genealogical lineages from Vaikom Satyagraha women's handwritten petitions to deities—imploping divine intervention against caste barriers—to contemporary digital petitions naming academic predators, judicial enablers, and celebrity conspirators with institutional precision (Abraham 45-60).

Yet narrative reclamation demands agonistic negotiation of profound tensions: pseudonymity safeguards familial honor and personal safety versus full nomenclature risking retaliation and doxxing; graphic specificity mobilizes empathy but precipitates vicarious traumatization for both survivors and witnesses. These constitutive tensions illuminate digital narration as praxis—agonistic worldmaking constituting feminist publics amid existential precarity, where justice denied becomes justice rearticulated through persistent hasthaksaram testimony.

Toward Digital Feminist Futures

Kerala's digital feminism demands urgent infrastructural, policy, and theoretical interventions to expand equitable access, fortify against platform precarity, and critically theorize entanglements with celebrity impunity and judicial opacity, building on the resilient counterpublics forged through #WomensWall, #MeTooKerala, and #Avalkoppam. Donna Haraway's cyborg manifesto inspires "feminist server collectives"—autonomous, decentralized platforms prioritizing Malayalam content curation, ethical moderation protocols, and data sovereignty against Meta's extractive architectures (Haraway 581-98; 584). These archives could integrate and enable Gen Z interaction with calligraphic protest poetry and amplify vernacular #Avalkoppam evolutions beyond algorithmic censorship. Hashtags and hasthaksarams herald emergent feminist imaginaries—not utopian digital escape but grounded utopia-work engineering digital ecologies where Kerala women author intersectional multiplicities: matrilineal daughters traversing caste barriers, code-switching cyborgs negotiating platform precarity and judicial betrayal, survivors and supporters scaling "car assault" testimonies to industry reckonings. Cultural studies scholarship must track these trajectories longitudinally, theorizing digital feminism as Kerala's contemporary chapter in gendered worldmaking praxis continuous with historical satyagrahas. These practices transform justice denied into justice mobilized, constituting Kerala's hybrid feminist grammar where handwritten defiance endures as viral permanence.

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NARRATING AGAINST NUMBERS: MEMORY AND MEASUREMENT IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE HUNGRY TIDE*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between environmental quantification and gendered invisibility in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004). It argues that the novel offers a sustained critique of conservation regimes structured through numerical measurement and statistical visibility. In the Sundarbans delta, endangered species such as tigers and river dolphins become objects of enumeration, scientific tracking, and institutional protection, while the gendered ecological labour of subaltern women remains structurally unrecorded. Drawing on ecofeminism, feminist economics, biopolitics, and postcolonial ecocriticism, this study demonstrates that quantification functions not merely as a scientific method but as a political technology that produces hierarchies of value. Through its polyphonic narrative form and its reconstruction of the suppressed history of Morichjhapi, the novel exposes the ethical consequences of privileging measurable biodiversity over uncounted human survival. By contrasting statistical abstraction with embodied memory and lived experience, Ghosh challenges the assumption that environmental governance is neutral or purely technical. Instead, *The Hungry Tide* positions literary narrative as an alternative mode of accounting that restores visibility to marginalized lives and redefines ecological value beyond enumeration.

Key Words: *Environmental governance, ecofeminism, biopolitics, gendered labour, postcolonial ecocriticism.*

The Politics of Enumeration

Environmental governance in the twenty-first century increasingly relies on numbers. Species survival is tracked through population data, ecosystems are mapped through satellite imaging, and vulnerability is predicted through statistical modelling. Quantification is often associated with clarity, efficiency, and objectivity. However, numbers do more than describe reality; they shape it. To count is to prioritize, and to measure is to assign value. Forms of life that fall outside measurable frameworks frequently remain marginal within institutional systems. Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* situates this logic of counting within the shifting ecology of the Sundarbans, a delta defined by tides, storms, and fragile coexistence between human communities and wildlife. The novel places scientific research on endangered river dolphins and official tiger conservation policies alongside the uncertain lives of displaced refugees and subsistence communities. This juxtaposition reveals a significant ethical tension. Animal populations are carefully enumerated and protected through legal frameworks, while the labour that sustains everyday human survival, particularly the work carried out by women, remains largely unrecorded.

This paper argues that *The Hungry Tide* presents environmental quantification as a form of political power that shapes visibility and value. Drawing on ecofeminist thought, feminist economic critique, biopolitical theory, and postcolonial ecocriticism, the analysis demonstrates how conservation practices may protect biodiversity while overlooking forms of social inequality. Through its layered narrative structure and attention to memory and lived experience, the novel offers a different way of understanding ecological value, one grounded in relational ties, embodied knowledge, and historical consciousness rather than numerical

abstraction.

Ecofeminism and the Gendered Ecology of Survival

Ecofeminist scholarship has long drawn attention to the interconnected forms of exploitation that link environmental degradation with the marginalization of women. Thinkers such as Vandana Shiva argue that dominant models of development frequently displace subsistence economies while overlooking the ecological knowledge and labour carried out by women. In a similar vein, Maria Mies shows how unpaid domestic and subsistence work forms an unseen foundation of modern economic systems. In *The Hungry Tide*, this form of invisibility appears through the life of Kusum. As a refugee in Morichjhapi she participates in the everyday work that sustains both family and community. Her labour includes cultivating land, gathering resources, and maintaining fragile relationships with the surrounding environment. Such work is immediate and material, rooted in the rhythms of the delta. However, it does not enter official records. It remains absent from the forms of knowledge through which institutions measure value and productivity.

The observations of Marilyn Waring offer a useful framework for understanding this absence. Waring demonstrates that national economic systems exclude unpaid domestic labour from formal accounting practices. A comparable pattern appears in conservation discourse. Tigers are counted and therefore become visible within global environmental frameworks. The subsistence labour performed by women, however, remains outside measurable categories. By foregrounding these neglected experiences, *The Hungry Tide* challenges dominant assumptions regarding environmental value. The novel suggests that ecological systems cannot be understood solely through scientific observation or satirical measurement. Equally important are the everyday practices through which individuals negotiate their relationship with the natural world. Through Kusum's story, Ghosh draws attention to forms of ecological knowledge embedded in lived experience and community life. The novel's engagement with ecofeminist concerns ultimately extends beyond a critique of gender inequality. It raises broader questions about the criteria through which societies assign value and recognition. By juxtaposing visible forms of conversation with invisible forms of human labour, Ghosh reveals how systems of measurement often fail to account for the relationships that sustain both communities and ecosystems. In doing so, he invites readers to reconsider the boundaries of environmental responsibility and to acknowledge the contributions of those whose labour remains hidden beneath the surface of official narratives.

Biopolitics and the Governance of Life

The relationship between knowledge and power occupies a central position in contemporary discussions of environmental governance. Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics provides a useful framework for understanding how modern institutions regulate populations through systems of observation, classification, and management. For Foucault, political authority increasingly operates not merely through laws or coercion but through the administration of life itself. Within *The Hungry Tide*, this dynamic emerges through the conservation policies governing the Sundarbans. The region is represented as a space where environmental protection and state authority intersect in complex and often contradictory ways. Wildlife populations, particularly tigers, occupy a privileged position within official conservation discourse. Their endangered status justifies extensive monitoring programmes, legal protections, and territorial regulations designed to preserve biodiversity. The significance of Morichjhapi lies not only in the violence of displacement but also in the manner in which that violence is represented. Official narratives often frame the episode as a necessary administrative response to ecological concerns. Such representations transform political decisions into seemingly objective technical requirements.

Timothy Mitchell's analysis of modern governance is relevant here. Mitchell argues that bureaucratic systems frequently present historically contingent political choices as matters of scientific necessity.

Slow Violence and the Work of Memory

Environmental harm does not always appear through dramatic events. The scholar Rob Nixon describes the concept of slow violence as the gradual and often unnoticed destruction experienced by vulnerable communities. The history of Morichjhapi reflects this pattern. The violence surrounding the settlement unfolds through administrative decisions, forced evictions, and political silence rather than sudden catastrophe. Because such violence unfolds slowly, it rarely receives sustained attention. Official documents record environmental protection, while the suffering of displaced communities fades from public memory. Within the novel, narrative becomes a way of resisting this erasure. Kusum's story, preserved through Nirmal's journal, allows personal memory to challenge institutional silence. Postcolonial ecocritical scholarship has frequently noted that conservation initiatives can reproduce earlier colonial ideas about wilderness. Land becomes defined primarily as protected nature rather than as a space of human habitation. In *The Hungry Tide*, the Sundarbans is presented as ecological habitat first and human homeland second. This shift in perspective enables the removal of communities whose histories remain deeply tied to the landscape.

By placing suppressed memories within its narrative structure, the novel questions the authority of bureaucratic records. Storytelling becomes a means of restoring voice to those excluded from official accounts where institutional systems simplify reality through numerical data, narrative perspectives, complexity and human experience.

Narrative Form and the Ethics of Relationality

The Sundarbans functions as more than a geographical setting within the novel. It becomes a dynamic space characterized by uncertainty, transformation, and interdependence. The constant movement of tides, the shifting boundaries between land and water, and the unpredictable behaviour of both humans and animals resist efforts at fixed categorization. Such instability stands in contrast to the logic of scientific management, which often depends upon classification, measurement, and predictability. As a marine biologist studying the endangered Irrawaddy dolphin, Piya initially approaches the Sundarbans through the methodologies of scientific observation. Her work depends upon documentation, data collection, and empirical analysis. Scientific research undoubtedly provides valuable insights into ecological processes, and the novel does not dismiss its importance. Nevertheless, Piya's experiences gradually reveal that scientific knowledge alone is insufficient for understanding the complexities of the region.

Fokir emerges as an alternative source of ecological understanding. Unlike Piya, he possesses no formal education and no access to scientific institutions. His knowledge derives from lived experience and continuous interaction with the environment. Through years of navigating the rivers and waterways of the Sundarbans, he has developed an intimate understanding of tides, currents, weather patterns, and animal behaviour. Ultimately, the novel suggests that meaningful ecological understanding cannot emerge from detached observation alone. It requires attentiveness to the relationships that connect people, landscapes, histories, and non-human life. By privileging narrative complexity over numerical reduction, Ghosh offers a vision of environmental responsibility that acknowledges both scientific knowledge and the lived experiences that exceed the boundaries of measurement.

Climate Governance and Contemporary Relevance

Although *The Hungry Tide* was published in 2004, the questions it raises have become increasingly significant in the context of contemporary climate governance. Across the world, environmental policy is now shaped by an expanding reliance on numerical indicators. Carbon emissions are measured through complex accounting systems, biodiversity is assessed through statistical indices, and climate adaptation strategies are evaluated through quantifiable targets. One of the central concerns of contemporary environmental humanities is the relationship between measurement and justice. Quantitative indicators often provide valuable information regarding ecological change, yet they cannot fully capture the social realities experienced by communities living at the frontlines of environmental vulnerability. Climate change is not merely a scientific phenomenon; it is also a social, cultural, and political condition that affects different populations in unequal ways. The Sundarbans itself has become one of the regions most frequently discussed in relation to climate vulnerability. Rising sea levels, intensified cyclonic activity, coastal erosion, and ecological instability continue to reshape the lives of those inhabiting the delta. Against this backdrop, *The Hungry Tide* acquires renewed relevance. The novel encourages readers to consider how environmental crises are experienced through everyday acts of survival rather than through abstract data alone. It directs attention toward the lived realities that frequently disappear behind statistical representations of climate risk.

Furthermore, Ghosh's narrative challenges the tendency to separate environmental concerns from questions of history and memory. Contemporary climate debates often focus on future projections and predictive models. While such approaches are necessary, the novel reminds readers that environmental futures are shaped by historical experiences of displacement, exclusion, and inequality. The memory of Morichjhapi demonstrates how past injustices continue to influence present relationships between communities, states, and ecological landscapes.

Counting Differently

The Hungry Tide offers a powerful exploration of the limits of numerical ways of knowing the environment. Set within the complex ecological landscape of the Sundarbans, the novel reveals how systems of measurement shape perceptions of value, visibility, and responsibility. Through its engagement with conservation practices, refugee histories, and everyday struggles for survival, Ghosh demonstrates that what is counted often acquires legitimacy, while what remains uncounted risks exclusion from public recognition. The novel's critique extends beyond environmental policy to broader questions concerning knowledge and power. Conservation programmes, statistical models, and administrative frameworks may provide important tools for ecological management, yet they cannot fully represent the complexities of human experience. The history of Morichjhapi, the labour of women such as Kusum, and the experiential knowledge embodied by figures like Fokir all reveal dimensions of ecological life that exceed the boundaries of quantification.

Drawing upon ecofeminist perspectives, biopolitical theory, and postcolonial ecocriticism, this study has argued that Ghosh exposes the unequal distribution of visibility within environmental governance. Certain forms of life become recognizable because they fit within institutional categories of measurement, while others remain marginalized despite their significance. The novel therefore challenges readers to reconsider the assumptions underlying dominant systems of environmental knowledge. In an age increasingly governed by data, metrics, and predictive models, *The Hungry Tide* reminds us that ecological understanding must remain attentive to those dimensions of life that cannot be fully measured. The pursuit of environmental justice, the novel suggests, requires not only counting carefully but also listening

closely to the stories that numbers leave behind.

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HUMAN BODY, ECOLOGICAL METAMORPHOSIS AND SPECIES BOUNDARY: REIMAGINING HUMAN-NONHUMAN RELATIONS IN A. K. RAMANUJAN'S *A FLOWERING TREE* AND KRISHAND'S *AAVASAVYUHAM*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines ecological metamorphosis and species boundaries in *A Flowering Tree* retold by A. K. Ramanujan and the Malayalam film *Aavasavyuham* directed by Krishand. It uses an ecocritical approach to explore how both works challenge human dominance over nature. In *A Flowering Tree*, a woman transforms into a tree, and her body becomes part of the natural world. This transformation shows a close link between humans and plants. It also reveals how greed and patriarchy exploit both women and nature, turning the female body into a resource. Ecology and gender are therefore deeply connected. In *Aavasavyuham*, identity shifts across species and time, and the human figure appears unstable and fluid. The film questions the idea that humans are superior to other forms of life and presents existence as interconnected and evolving. Nature is not a background but an active force shaping life. Both works blur the boundary between human and nonhuman existence, though they do so differently. The folktale uses myth and sacred change, while the film uses modern cinematic language and evolutionary thought to rethink humanity within an ecological framework.

Key Words: *Ecocriticism, Anthropocentrism, Ecofeminism, Human–Nature Relationship, Myth and Ecology, Environmental Humanities.*

INTRODUCTION

Across cultures, transformation between human and nonhuman forms appears as a recurring narrative pattern in mythology, literature, and folklore. These stories challenge rigid boundaries between species and suggest a worldview in which humans exist within, rather than above, the natural world. Classical mythology provides well-known examples in the works of Ovid, particularly in *Metamorphoses*, where humans transform into animals, plants, or natural elements. The nymph Daphne turns into a laurel tree to escape the pursuit of Apollo, while Arachne becomes a spider after challenging Athena (Ovid 25-29, 160). Such narratives reveal a symbolic understanding of metamorphosis as a way of expressing power, punishment, transformation, or escape. Similar motifs also appear in South Asian folklore. In the realm of Kannada folklore, a young woman gains the ability to transform into a flowering tree, illustrating the intimate connection between human life and the vegetal world.

A. K. Ramanujan compiled and translated a wide range of Indian oral narratives in his collection *Folktales from India*, which is also published under the title *A Flowering Tree and Other Oral Tales from India*. This collection brings together diverse folkloric traditions from across regions and languages, preserving the richness of India's oral storytelling heritage. The tale "A Flowering Tree," included in this volume, exemplifies Ramanujan's interest in narratives that blur the boundaries between the human and the natural, the sacred and the everyday. By situating such stories within a broader cultural archive, the collection highlights how folklore encodes ecological consciousness, social values, and symbolic meanings through seemingly simple narrative forms.

A comparable reimagining of species transformation appears in the Malayalam film *Aavasavyuham*, directed by Krishand R. K. Unlike mythological narratives where transformation is often magical or divine, the film presents a more fluid and ambiguous movement across species and time. The protagonist's identity appears to dissolve into different forms of life, challenging the idea of a stable human identity. Through its experimental narrative and ecological imagery, the film questions anthropocentric assumptions and suggests that human existence is intertwined with other biological forms. This paper attempts a comparison between these two works, which appear different at first glance, but at a deeper level share similar ecological concerns and ideas. While "*A Flowering Tree*" centres on the mythical and folkloric tradition, *Aavasavyuham*, on the other hand, belongs to a contemporary cinematic context, but both texts share or interrogate the relationship between human and nonhuman life. They challenge the assumption of human superiority, anthropocentric view of nature, and instead present existence as interconnected and fluid.

ANALYSIS

The idea of metamorphic transformation in *A Flowering Tree*, retold by A. K. Ramanujan, appears mythical and sacred at the surface level. The woman's ability to become a tree is framed as a ritual act, requiring careful preparation and specific gestures that mark it as culturally and spiritually significant. However, at a deeper level, this transformation reveals an ontological continuity between human and natural life. The boundary between body and environment dissolves, suggesting that the human is not separate from ecological existence but embedded within it. The folktale, rooted in Kannada cultural traditions, also grants a form of agency to the female figure. By selling the flowers produced through her transformed state, she participates in an economic system that emerges directly from her bodily connection to nature. Yet this agency is not uncomplicated. The same transformation that enables autonomy also exposes her to exploitation, as her body becomes a site of extraction and control. The ritualistic dimension of the transformation further intensifies this tension, as sacred practice coexists with material use, revealing a complex interplay between reverence and consumption within the human–nature relationship. The idea of transformation into a *flowering tree* is detailed in the story and the transformation repeats three or four times, each time differing the purpose of transformation. At first, the young girl transforms into a flowering tree to support her family and her instructions are clear: Sister, I'll sit under this tree and meditate. Then you pour the water from this pitcher all over my body. I'll turn into a flowering tree. Then you pluck as many flowers as you want, but do it without breaking a sprout or tearing a leaf. When you're done, pour the water from the other pitcher over me, and I'll become a person again. (Ramanujan 111)

Here, the girl functions as an economic provider for the family. Her ability to transform into a flowering tree marks a symbolic crossing of the boundary between human life and the natural world. This metamorphosis allows nature to be directly integrated into systems of livelihood. By selling the flowers plucked from her transformed body, she generates income and supports the material needs of the household. At one level, this suggests a form of autonomy, as her unique ability becomes a source of economic agency. However, this autonomy is deeply ambivalent. The same act that enables survival also reduces her body to a productive resource, aligning it with the logic of extraction. Thus, the transformation not only overcomes the perceived divide between nature and culture but also exposes how that very connection can be shaped by material demands and structures of control. The very agency and power later turns into exploitation of resources as the story progresses. She becomes a subject for massive exploitation from her husband and sister-in-law, which turns her ability to a curse as they repeatedly ask her to perform the transformational ritual. The husband loots her of her ability in the guise of

conjugal bliss and she was repeatedly asked for the transformation to the tree. This becomes a tiresome exploitative ritual: They spread the flowers, covered themselves with them and went to bed. They did this again and again for several days. Every morning the couple threw out all the withered flowers from their window. The heap of flowers lay like a hill. (Ramanujan 114)

Later, this process is repeated by the sister-in-law and her companions, but without the care and ritual discipline that originally governed the transformation. As a result, the woman is left physically and emotionally devastated. The focus shifts entirely to extracting as many flowers as possible, while her wellbeing is ignored. What was once a sacred and controlled act becomes a site of unchecked exploitation. This moment is crucial, as it exposes the collapse of the ethical balance between human and nature. Her body, already aligned with the natural world, is treated as a limitless resource, mirroring the logic of overconsumption. The narrative thus reveals how easily reverence can turn into violence when desire for material gain overrides respect for both the human and the ecological. In their greed to get flowers, they tore up the sprouts and broke the branches... They poured the second pitcher of water at random and ran away. When the princess changed from a tree to a person again, she had no hands and feet. She had only half a body. She was a wounded carcass. (Ramanujan 115)

The pouring of water “at random” indicates not only haste but a loss of knowledge and responsibility. When she returns to human form, her mutilated state, “a wounded carcass”, becomes a literal inscription of violence on the body. This is not merely physical damage; it is the consequence of treating a living being as an inexhaustible resource. The scene exposes how greed erases the distinction between use and abuse, turning sacred metamorphosis into ecological destruction. In this sense, the broken body stands as a powerful metaphor for a damaged ecosystem, where the disruption of balance leads to irreversible loss. Violence over the transformed body also hints at the ecological destruction for the material gains and resources from nature which leads our ecology to a state of “mutilation.” The body, now indistinguishable from the natural world, bears the marks of this excess, suggesting that ecological systems, when subjected to unchecked consumption, are similarly reduced to a state of damage and fragmentation. The repeated plucking of flowers from the transformed body has become a site for extraction. It is mediated by structures of power, particularly patriarchy. The tree-body is not merely symbolic of harmony with nature, it is also subjected to mutilation. It suggests that ecological interconnectedness under existing social conditions is marked by violence and commodification.

On the other hand, *Aavasavyuham* presents human-to-nonhuman transformations in a more lucid and convincing manner. The narrative flow of the film reminds of a documentary on scientific subjects. The film centers around Azhikode, Puthuvype regions of Ernakulam where the rare ecological species were once abundant. Saraswathy Nagarajan rightly observes on the theme of the film as follows: The film revolves around an enigmatic man, essayed by Rahul Rajagopal, who has a mystifying relationship with all creatures and nature. On a nature trail in 2015, elusive amphibians and snakes respond to the strange noises he makes. While fishing at Azhikode and Puthuvype, he has a knack for attracting shoals of fish and crustaceans. Called Joy in one part of the film, he symbolises man’s innate bond with nature and her creations. (Nagarajan) This ecological intimacy, however, is not merely a celebration of the natural world, rather it also introduces a deeper tension into the narrative of *Aavasavyuham*. Through the character of Joy, the ecological balance between human and nonhuman world is questioned. The protagonist, Joy, resists a stable categorization. His presence is marked by ambiguity, he is at once human and something beyond the human. The film is structured into different chapters and tells the story of Joy and his predicaments in different ecological parts in Ernakulam, particularly Puthuvype and Azhikode, where people live a life dependent mainly on fishing from

sea and backwaters.

Joy's mysterious arrival changes the life of Raghavan, a poor fisherman who struggles to earn a living because he cannot catch enough fish. After Joy comes, there is a sudden increase in the fish catch, which improves their situation. Because of this, Joy quickly becomes a favorite member of the family. The whereabouts of Joy remain hidden, it is believed that Joy was a Srilankan refugee. But there is no confirmation. He had a peculiar scent, like wearing a perfume made of dried fish. Perhaps that smell is unpleasant to everyone. I have always found him with that scent. Whenever he is near me, he smells of dried fish." (00:22:43-58)

As Lissy Raghavan recollects in a documentary interview on Joy, clearly mentions Joy's affinity with the natural world, especially aquatic species. His affinity with water and its species has given Joy a kind of power over them. They come when he makes some peculiar sounds. This power is not a kind of subjugation. Or it does not hint at the 'anthropocenic' thought. Here, Joy is being treated as a 'fellow creature' among themselves. Later, as in "*A Flowering Tree*," Joy's abilities are similarly exploited for profit by Susheelan Vava, a shrimp farmer in Puthuvype who rescued Joy from a dire condition. Just as the woman in the folktale is repeatedly forced to undergo transformation into a flowering tree for economic gain, Joy too was also forced to use his tricks to attract the fish and increase productivity. In both cases, what initially appears as a gift or unique ability becomes a site of control and extraction, where the individual is reduced to a functional resource. Call them from both sides, strange sounds you make... Get all the crabs. Your call should reach all the cracks and fissures... I think you're betraying those little ones. Even though we are in profit, the little ones come out of hiding to your call. We are in profit anyway so ignore... Hurry up, call the crabs. (00:46:52–00:47:30)

In a way, Joy was also becoming a part in the exploitation of those species as his sounds attract the fish and crabs. He became a kind of bait for the 'predators' to exploit the species. This realization strikes Joy as he tries to withdraw from such activities or at least tries to be unavailable for such exploitations. As the film moves to the climax, the tension and confusion around Joy increases. The film from its title itself is clear that it centers around 'an amphibian hunt.' This hunt is both symbolic and literal. In one sense it may hint at the hunt of Joy who is repeatedly exploited or rather become a tool for the people to exploit nature. And in literal sense as the film progresses to the climax it is revealed that Joy is literally 'tamed and hunted' for being an amphibian in human form, a frog man— a name repeatedly used in the film. This astonishing transformation as in '*A Flowering Tree*' has consequences. Though it doesn't fetch any positive outcomes, it has clearly brought in the negative ones. Joy's complete transformation into an amphibian happens in the house of Madhusmitha, a Puthuvype native. She works in a Kudumbashree unit, and earns a livelihood by making pickles. Her husband was killed in the Iraqi Wars, and her son tragically died in the Okhi Cyclone. She lives alone in the secluded swampy region of Puthuvype where the backwaters attract wide varieties of species from the sea including dolphins. As she narrates the incident of confronting Joy as 'a creature' in her house, in the very intimate space of her home, she screams for life. This attracts a wider audience to her house as they think it was a kind of 'dolphin' that has trapped inside her house. (01:231:10)

From this point onwards Joy is treated as 'a thing,' which people try to exploit or even make money out of it, by imposing 'tickets' to witness such a miracle as a 'frog-man.' In a way, *Aavasavyuham* presents a striking inversion of the familiar fairytale motif of a frog transforming into a prince through the kiss of a princess. Instead of an upward movement toward idealized humanity, the film stages a reverse trajectory, where the man mutates into a "frog-man," or more precisely, an amphibian (Anna, 2022). Rather than affirming human superiority, the film gestures toward a de-centering of the human, where identity becomes fluid and entangled with other

species. The amphibian figure, existing between land and water, further embodies liminality, suggesting a state of being that resists fixed categorization and reinforces the collapse of rigid species boundaries.

CONCLUSION

The comparison of *A Flowering Tree*, retold by A. K. Ramanujan, and *Aavasavyuham*, directed by Krishand R. K., shows two different but related ways of understanding the body and its connection to nature. In *A Flowering Tree*, transformation is presented as something sacred and ritualistic. At the same time, the story shows how this ecological body becomes vulnerable when it is exploited for profit and controlled by others. The damage done to the woman's body reflects the damage done to nature when human greed crosses natural limits. In contrast, *Aavasavyuham* takes a different approach. It does not focus on a single transformation but shows identity as fluid and changing. The film questions the idea that humans are separate from other forms of life. Here, the body is not fixed but constantly shaped by its environment and by its connection with other species. Together, these works challenge the idea that humans are superior to nature. While *A Flowering Tree* warns about the dangers of exploiting nature, *Aavasavyuham* goes further by questioning what it means to be human. Both suggest that humans and nature are connected, and that this relationship should be based on care and understanding rather than control.

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NARRATING THE ANTHROPOCENE: CLIMATE CRISIS IN *GUN ISLAND* BY AMITAV GHOSH

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ABSTRACT

In the contemporary world, climate change has transformed into one of the most frequently discussed areas of research. Various disciplines such as science, economics and literature explore how anthropocentric actions have contributed to the advent of the Anthropocene. Literature being the mirror of society plays a crucial role in portraying the drastic changes in our environment and its effects on our planet. Green literature in particular focuses on the ethical responsibility that human beings must uphold in the Anthropocene. Science and related fields tackle the issue by using various scientific approaches and policies to mitigate the effects caused by it. Literature on the other hand brings out the immediacy and humane dimension of the impending catastrophe by incorporating narrative and subjective language. This paper analyses the powerful green literature text *Gun Island* by Amitav Ghosh to explore how the Anthropocene and the crisis of climate change are represented in literature. The novel set in the volatile background of the Sundarbans shows a vision of the near future where climate change becomes a global crisis affecting millions of people. Ghosh combines mythology and history to warn humanity about the deadly consequences of their anthropocentric behaviour. The concept of "great derangement" developed by Amitav Ghosh, "slow violence" by Rob Nixon and "hyperobjects" by Timothy Morton is used in this paper to analyse how the pressing issue of climate change is represented in literary narratives. In this technologically advanced era, literature supplements scientific discourses by infusing subjective sensibility to warn humanity of its impending destruction.

Key Words: *Anthropocene, green literature, great derangement, slow violence, hyperobjects*

"The climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination".

- Amitav Ghosh

The phenomenon of climate change is the long-term shifts in the average weather patterns experienced both regionally and globally. The overall rise in temperature leads to widespread environmental disasters including floods, droughts and hurricanes. With time, the intensity of their occurrences becomes unpredictable and unmanageable. The earth is experiencing an unprecedented rate of rise in temperature as never before. The sensitive balance of weather patterns in nature is drastically altered by this drastic rise in temperature. This jeopardises the life of all the living beings on the planet. As the repercussions of climate change are yet to manifest, people often tend to dismiss it as an exaggerated idea. This fixation of people with their present time and their dismissal of the future has been pointed out by various experts in the field, including the widely acclaimed American journalist and author Elizabeth Kolbert, who critiques the tendency of the people to focus only on the here and now. They demand tangible proof of climate change, but once it becomes evident in daily life it indicates that human beings have failed to manage its effects, and this will eventually lead to much worse climate related disasters. The ongoing discourses related to climate change asks human beings as a collective to be aware of the immediacy and urgency of anthropogenic climate change.

Climate migration is one the most significant effects of climate change in the contemporary era. It refers to the movement of individuals and communities from their native spaces because

their land has become inhospitable due the adverse effects of climate change. Various natural disasters such as floods, hurricanes, wildfire, desertification, droughts and rising sea levels force people out of their homelands. Unlike the other groups of migrants, such as economic migrants who move to other lands for better opportunities and economic resources, climate migrants are the victims of the destruction of their immediate environment. Anthropogenic climate change is the primary cause of the evolution of the Anthropocene. It refers to an unofficial unit of geological time in the most recent period in Earth's history when human activity started to have a significant adverse impact on the planet's climate and ecosystems. The Anthropocene forces human beings to reevaluate their anthropocentric activities and to reflect on its adverse effect on the natural world. Long term debates have been going on regarding the relationship between human beings and nature. Some contend that human beings and their natural world are both separate arenas, while some argue that human beings should develop an ethical responsibility towards our natural world and should act as its guardians. Another vantage point is that the environment should be left alone and nature will thrive on its own. Despite all these contending viewpoints the intrinsic link between human beings and nature has been substantiated undeniably through scientific research.

Literature, while giving much significance to aesthetic sensibilities, also plays a crucial role in addressing the social changes in any given time in history. Many writers have incorporated the problem of anthropocentric climate change in their fictional narratives. Green literature, as a genre in particular, is dedicated to explore the themes of environmental degradation, ecological concerns, and human beings' relationship with nature. The genre is instrumental in reflecting the development of environmental consciousness among people. It also weaves together a network of writers who are strong advocates for ecological conservation and peaceful coexistence between human beings and nature. Green literature also emphasises how storytelling can be used as an effective medium to raise concerns regarding ecological degradation and how it can evoke a sense of ethical responsibility towards environmental conservation.

This paper analyses how Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island* (2019) explores the critical problem of climate change through fiction. The protagonist of the novel is the rare books dealer Dinanath Dutta (Deen Dutta) who is settled in Brooklyn. Upon his arrival in Kolkata, he gets fascinated by the Bengali folklore of The Gun Merchant (Bonduki Sadagar). Piyali Roy and Nilima Bose persuades him to delve deeper into the folklore as it is his area of interest. He visits the shrine of Manasa Devi which is located in the Sundarbans. This shrine is intrinsically linked to the folklore, and his visit sets in motion various events that blends myth and reality. Deen resolves to solve the mystery of the folklore along with his Italian friend and historian Cinta. The novel emphasises the urgent problem of climate migration through various characters such as Tipu and Rafi. Both of them flee from the Sundarbans to Europe due to the extreme weather patterns of their land. It also portrays the drastic adverse effect of anthropogenic climate change by illustrating natural disasters such as cyclones and wildfires. It highlights how human beings and other species are forced into climate migration due to the destruction of their immediate environment. Ghosh sets the novel in the major locations of the globe such as West Bengal, Venice and Los Angeles to underscore the universal effects of the climate crisis faced by humanity.

The paper employs the concepts of "the great derangement" by Amitav Ghosh, "slow violence" by Rob Nixon and "hyperobjects" by Timothy Morton to explore how *Gun Island* explores the problem of climate crisis. In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Ghosh contends that modern civilization is in a state of "derangement"; a collective irrational failure to comprehend or act upon the climate crisis. He argues that modern literature, politics and history dismiss the reality of extreme weather patterns as an improbable condition. He observes that "when novelists do choose to write about climate change, it is almost outside of fiction" (Ghosh

8). Modern novelists are hesitant to weave the urgent reality of climate change into fictional narratives. In this aspect *Gun Island* becomes exceptional by blending myth and reality to address the modern reality of the climate crisis. Ghosh uses the Bengali medieval folklore of Bonduki Sadagar and illustrates how the characters' life parallels with that of the characters in the 21st century novel. The novel emphasises how storytelling is a powerful medium for conveying urgent messages to human society. Ghosh argues that no one should underestimate the potential of stories. The unfathomable and fundamental aspect of storytelling is a gift to human beings. He contends that the gift of storytelling is what segregates us from animals.

In the text *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh explores the problem of climate migration faced by people residing in ecologically sensitive regions. He states that his ancestors were also ecological refugees even before the invention of the term. He calls the Sundarbans "the great mangrove forest of the Bengal Delta". He portrays it as a volatile space which experiences constant shifts in weather patterns leading to natural disasters such as cyclones that destroy the lives of the people and their lands. The people of the Sundarbans are forced to become climate migrants because of its extreme weather patterns. Ghosh portrays the harrowing imagery of the Bhola cyclone using vivid imagery. On each outing they saw horrific sights: hamlets obliterated by the storm surge; islands where every tree had been stripped of its leaves; corpses floating in the water, half eaten by animals; villages that had lost most of their inhabitants. The situation was aggravated by a steady flow of refugees from East Pakistan. For several months people had been coming across the border, into India, in order to escape the political turmoil on the other side; now the flow turned into a flood, bringing many more hungry mouths into a region that was already desperately short of food (Ghosh 14).

He makes a clear distinction between those who had to migrate to India for political reasons and those who had no other choice than to flee their land for survival. The natural disasters in the Anthropocene leave the victims with only the choice of escape. Ghosh also underscores that the marginalised communities are the primary victims of anthropogenic climate change. "The Anthropocene has reversed the temporal order of modernity: those at the margins are now the first to experience the future that awaits all of us; it is they who confront most directly what Thoreau called 'vast, Titanic, inhuman nature'" (Ghosh 63). Ghosh uses the character of Tipu to highlight how the climate crisis affects the marginalised groups. Tipu sees the natural disaster-prone Sundarbans as an area of immense opportunities. He becomes an entrepreneur in the "people-moving" industry, where he helps the marginalised people to migrate to various European countries. Tipu's job highlights the helplessness of the marginalised people and how their vulnerability is exploited for monetary profits. What I'm doing is I'm offering an essential service. In these parts, there's a whole bunch of dirt-poor, illiterate people scratching out a living by fishing or farming or going into the jungle to collect bamboo and honey. Or at least that's what they used to do. But now the fish catch is down, the land's turning salty, and you can't go into the jungle without bribing the forest guards. On top of that every other year you get hit by a storm that blows everything to pieces. So what are people supposed to do? What would anyone do? If you're young you can't just sit on your butt till you starve to death. Even the animals are moving — just ask Piya. If you've got any sense you'll move and to do that you need someone who can help you find a way out (Ghosh 65).

Ghosh emphasises on the global impact of climate change by arguing that a majority of people still live under the misconception that the aftereffects of climate change will not impact their bourgeois life. Through the novel, he dismantles these notions by illustrating how the elite localities of the world will also face the same consequences. "I am in a nice lounge, in a big chair—my flight is delayed because of some flood somewhere" (Ghosh 26). Deen's Italian friend Cinta dismisses her situation of being stranded in a Venetian airport as a mere inconvenience. Similarly,

her cousin Gisa expresses her disbelief when their dog dies of snake bite on a seashore. "I don't believe it. The dog is dead, of a snake bite! Here in LA" (Ghosh 145). Spotting a yellow-bellied sea snake on a beach in southern California is considered as improbable by Gisa. Piya later explains the reason for such a strange occurrence as; These snakes generally lived in warmer waters, to the south, but sightings in southern California had become increasingly common: their distribution was changing with the warming of the oceans and they were migrating northwards. This was bad news for southern California because yellow-bellies were indeed extremely venomous — but fortunately fatalities were vanishingly rare. My friend's dog had been very unlucky (Ghosh 147-148). Subsequently, people express their utter disbelief when they learn that an extreme weather condition has developed in Italy. The relative sense of security felt by the western countries is shattered by the report on extreme weather patterns; Soon we learnt that the strange weather was not just a local phenomenon: all of Italy had been affected in different ways. Some northern cities had been deluged with rain and hail; many parts of the country had been struck by gale-force winds; in the mountains of the Sud Tirol entire forests had been flattened; elsewhere too trees had been knocked down, damaging houses and blocking roads (Ghosh 276).

Later, Gisa's house gets destroyed as a result of a storm, and their family seeks refuge in the house of their acquaintances. "Can you believe it? In Rome – of all places! - my family have become refugees" (Ghosh 278). Through these instances Ghosh emphasises that the situations which were dismissed as "improbable" and "uncanny" by the bourgeois classes are now manifesting before them as extreme weather patterns and species migration. In the Anthropocene the unchallenged lives of human beings, irrespective of spatial and class distinctions, get shattered by the impact of the climate crisis.

Rob Nixon in his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, explores environmental harms that occur gradually and invisibly, including deforestation, toxic drift and climate change. "By slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space" (Nixon 2). *Gun Island* depicts a slow ecological degradation occurring in the Sundarbans. "The islands of the Sundarbans are constantly being swallowed up by the sea; they're disappearing before our eyes" (Ghosh 19). He emphasises that climate change has the potential of erasing an entire geographical region. The human activities that happen "out of sight" lead to the gradual destruction of the earth's delicate ecosystems.

In the novel a refinery in the Sundarbans dumps industrial waste into the water bodies, which in turn develop into an ecological crisis. The oceanic dead zones are created as a result of contamination of water bodies due to industrial run off. Piya explains the adverse effects it has on the delicate marine ecosystem; Have you heard of oceanic dead zones? No? Well they're these vast stretches of water that have a very low oxygen content — too low for fish to survive. Those zones have been growing at a phenomenal pace, mostly because of residues from chemical fertilizers. When they're washed into the sea they set off a chain reaction that leads to all the oxygen being sucked out of the water. Only a few, highly specialized organisms can survive in those conditions — everything else dies, which is why those patches of water are known as "dead zones". And those zones have now spread over tens of thousands of square miles of ocean — some of them are as large as middle-sized countries (Ghosh 104).

By expanding on slow violence, Nixon contends that it will lead to long term conflicts where sustaining healthy living conditions becomes extremely difficult. The novel illustrates how the young generation of Sundarbans are migrating in masses towards better living conditions; Making a life in the Sundarbans had become so hard that the exodus of the young was accelerating every year: boys and girls were borrowing and stealing to pay agents to find

them work elsewhere. Some were slipping over the border into Bangladesh, to join labour gangs headed for the Gulf. And if that failed they would pay traffickers to smuggle them to Malaysia or Indonesia, on boats (Ghosh 53). Ghosh illustrates the migration of Bonduki Sadagar in the mediaeval times due to drought to highlight the pervasive nature of climate change. This establishes the core theme that humans of all times have been prone to the detrimental effects brought by climate change. Through Deen Dutta, Ghosh bridges the gap between the past and the present where climate change becomes the focal point of his reality as well as the folklore; He remembered vividly, for example, the disaster that had forced the Gun Merchant to flee his homeland: a drought so terrible that the streams, rivers and ponds had dried up and the stench of rotting fish and dead livestock had hung heavy in the air. Half the people had died of starvation; parents had sold their children and people had been reduced to eating carcasses and cadavers (Ghosh 60).

Timothy Morton's concept of hyperobjects gives a more nuanced vantage point on the problem of climate change. It is a phenomenon that is massively distributed in time and space. Viscosity or its ever-present nature is one of the primary characteristics of hyperobjects. In the novel Deen flees from the Sundarbans to escape the wrath of its volatile landscape to Brooklyn, which is relatively secure. But the abrupt manifestation of extreme weather conditions shatters his illusion of safety. He is informed about the breakout of a wildfire as he boards a flight for Los Angeles. "Now, looking at my smartphone, I learnt that massive wildfires had been raging around Los Angeles for several days. Thousands of acres of land had been incinerated and tens of thousands of people had been moved to safety" (Ghosh 126). The wildfire triggers a sudden realization in Deen that no geographical location on the globe is safe from the threat of natural disasters and climate change.

The weirdness of things is another important characteristic of a hyperobject. The occurrence of certain events begins to seem strange and improbable. When Deen finds a spider on his table in Venice, it is regarded as uncanny and weird because it does not belong there. Climate change forces people to confront the "weird" in their everyday lives. Piya explains how spotting a brown spider in Venice is directly associated with climate change; Larry says this is the first time he's heard of one turning up so far north. But he's not surprised either. He says the brown recluse has been increasing its range very quickly because it's getting so much hotter in Europe. And there's a related species, the Mediterranean recluse, that's already widespread across Italy (Ghosh 223).

When extreme weather patterns begin to manifest in relatively safer geographical spaces of the globe, it is met with bewilderment as well as terror. Deen experiences a hailstorm in Venice, and his reaction to it shows just how strange the event itself is; Running to the side of the square, I took shelter under the awning of a café. There were some other people there and we watched in astonishment as the hailstones came hammering down, shattering windows and cracking shopfronts. Then someone shouted, "*Guarda! Attenti!*", and I looked up to find that the awning above had filled up with hail and was sagging dangerously downwards. I managed to move away just as the awning tore open, sending down an avalanche of hailstones (Ghosh 268). Thus, Morton's concept of hyperobjects reveals that climate change has evolved into a powerful entity which can adversely affect the entire planet. As human lives are intrinsically linked to their natural world, it is impossible for human beings to evade the detrimental effects of anthropogenic climate change. The extreme weather patterns which were once dismissed as improbable and uncanny are gradually manifesting in the daily lives of people.

In conclusion, Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* is a powerful reminder to humanity that the fate of human beings rests at the mercy of nature itself. Even in an era of unprecedented technological

innovations and developments, human beings fail to realise that climate change is one of the most potent threats that they are facing in the modern era. Ghosh effectively blends the folklore of BondukiSadagar into the narrative to highlight the pervasive nature of climate change. The novel serves as a powerful reminder that the ultimate destruction of our ecosystem is not a distant threat but a highly probable event. Climate change is a hyperobject that is constantly reshaping our worlds. The problem of climate migration is also highlighted by Ghosh to show that communities across the globe are forced out of their homelands due to climate change and extreme weather patterns. The novel reminds humanity that in an interconnected world, no one is immune to the adverse effects of environmental degradation caused by climate change. Storytelling, thus, becomes an effective medium for emphasising environmental stewardship and recognising the persistent need for a collective global response to the climate crisis.

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PERFORMING GENDER IN GLOBALIZED WORKSPACES: A CULTURAL READING OF *ONE NIGHT AT THE CALL CENTER*

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the dynamics of gender performance, negotiation, and challenge within the globalized work environment depicted in Chetan Bhagat's *'One Night at the Call Center'*. Set against the backdrop of a call centre characterized by Western corporate influences, technological reliance, and night shifts, the narrative creates a cultural hybrid where traditional Indian gender roles intersect with contemporary professional expectations. Drawing on theories of gender performativity and cultural analysis, the research delves into the experiences of female characters as they navigate issues of autonomy, emotional labour, workplace bias, and societal judgment, all while experiencing newfound economic and social mobility. Concurrently, male characters grapple with the demands of productivity, authority, and the preservation of traditional masculinity. The interactions among the employees illustrate both the subtle and overt reinforcement, negotiation, or resistance of gender norms within an ostensibly modern and equitable setting. The paper posits that Bhagat's work highlights the complexities introduced by globalization in gender performance, as it blurs the lines between public and private realms, shifts power relations, and transforms interpersonal dynamics. Ultimately, this analysis reveals that the novel not only mirrors the changing gender roles in contemporary Indian corporate culture but also emphasizes the broader cultural conflicts and identity challenges arising in rapidly evolving global workplaces.

Key Words: *Gender performance, negotiation, productivity, authority, masculinity.*

INTRODUCTION

The novel's portrayal of gender performance in the context of globalized work, as found in India's call center sector, is explored in this paper, which investigates how both characters reenact and question what has been prescribed in accordance with pressures for cultural assimilation in this instance of the west and the demands of corporation. This analysis will examine how these characters gender in the context of a culturally positioned, fluid way—displacing traditional roles due to the transnational conditions of work (Castaing, 2013:19). This response accepts gender's mutability and its cultural particularity instead of aggression. This response recognizes the changes in gender rather than aggression itself and the cultural particularities of gender performance, especially when there is an overlap of expectations from people from different cultures (Castaing, 2013, p. 19). Moreover, this study seeks to problematize the concept of women's empowerment in this particular situation, to see if the concept of subversion of gender roles is really suggesting a degree of participation in and empowerment over women's identity or if it is a simple coping mechanism to the necessity of the globalized economy (Chakraborty; Adhikari, 2020 p. 1).

The novel also offers a critical insight into the complexities of cultural invasions and colonial legacies and their impact on the changing role of women in Indian society (A & Christopher 2024, p. 566). This analytical framework will explore the relationship between perceived empowerment of women in call centers and the incorporation of new aspects of labour exploitation and social stigma while at the same time providing economic independence (Dube

et al, 2012, p. 4). The focus of this exploration will therefore be on the existing scholarship of the role of constructions of gender in the formation and maintenance of national identity and the enforcement of social hierarchies, especially in South Asian contexts, where representational and material practices have been strictly established of what is 'feminine' and 'masculine' and how women are supposed to behave (Lazzari, 2020, p. 49). This paper will focus on how the characters in Chetan Bhagat's "One Night @ the Call Centre" deal with these signposts that exist in a pervasive environment that, at the same time, promises freedom and presents new signposts (Southmayd, 2013). The investigation will also explore the novel's exploration of the intricate links between individual agency and systemic pressures, as well as contestation of gendered expectations to characterise the female characters (Chakraborty & Adhikari, 2020, p. 2). The question of gender identity negotiation and refiguring within traditional modulations of Indian society in the background of globalization of call center work also gets addressed in this exploration (Chakraborty & Adhikari, 2020: p. 10; Matos, 2018: p. 3). By using an Indian philosophical approach, this analysis will shed light on the negotiation behaviours the characters engage in and how they can be explained by how cultural and gender aspects are intertwined in the employment relationship, thereby highlighting the inter-sectionality of each one of them (Christensen & Vendelø, 2021, p. 1413). This paper will show that, although there are some moments in the novel where women take control of themselves and revel in challenging patriarchal norms and structures in its context, these instances are inevitably shaped by the inherent power dynamics of both the call center and the larger society, providing a nuanced portrayal of empowerment within the framework of post-liberalization India (Chakraborty & Adhikari, 2020, p. 1; Rana & Rana, 2017, p. 547). This vital gaze also reflects scholarship that has suggested that there is doubt over whether more access to occupational achievement actually means more autonomy for women in themselves or more subtle rearticulation of female subordination (Chakraborty & Adhikari, 2020, p. 8).

Furthermore, the research will evaluate the relationship between the gender in the novel and the general topic of national identity as well as the cultural effects of the economic globalization (Matos, 2018, p. 160).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Scholarly discussions on gender, globalization, and workplace culture have expanded significantly with the rise of transnational labor spaces such as call centers. Researchers across disciplines have examined how globalization reshapes identities, particularly gender identities, by introducing new economic opportunities alongside subtle forms of control and exploitation. This section reviews key theoretical and literary studies relevant to gender performance, globalized workspaces, and Chetan Bhagat's *One Night at the Call Center*. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity remains foundational to contemporary gender studies. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler argues that gender is not a natural or fixed identity but a repeated performance shaped by cultural norms, social expectations, and power structures. This framework has been widely applied to workplace studies, where professional behaviour, communication styles, and emotional labor are understood as gendered performances rather than innate traits. Butler's concept enables scholars to analyse how corporate environments demand specific gendered behaviours, often reinforcing normative femininity and masculinity under the guise of professionalism.

Feminist scholars examining globalization argue that global capitalism restructures gender relations rather than dissolving them. Chakraborty and Adhikari (2020) observe that women's participation in globalized labor markets often produces a paradoxical condition: increased economic independence coexists with intensified surveillance, emotional labor, and social

stigma. Similarly, Dube et al. (2012) highlight how call centers in India provide employment opportunities for young women while simultaneously exposing them to moral policing and cultural anxiety rooted in patriarchal values. These studies emphasize that empowerment in globalized workspaces is frequently conditional and constrained. Postcolonial perspectives further enrich this discourse by situating globalized labor within histories of colonial power. Scholars such as Matos (2018) and Hegde (2019) argue that call centers function as postcolonial sites where Western norms of language, accent, and professionalism dominate. The requirement to adopt Western names and “neutral” accents reflects a continuation of colonial hierarchies, where cultural authenticity is subordinated to market demands. This linguistic and cultural adaptation becomes a form of identity performance that affects both gender and class positioning.

Literary critics have increasingly turned to Indian English fiction to explore these socio-economic transformations. Contemporary novels set in urban and corporate spaces reflect the anxieties and contradictions of post-liberalization India. Srinivasan (2018) and Vats (2023) note that such narratives foreground youth, employment, and globalization as central themes, highlighting how individuals negotiate traditional values within modern economic structures. These studies recognize literature as a critical medium that captures lived experiences often overlooked by purely sociological research. Chetan Bhagat’s *One Night at the Call Center* has attracted scholarly attention for its depiction of India’s outsourcing industry and its impact on identity. Mukherjee (2017) interprets the novel as a commentary on cultural alienation produced by global capitalism, emphasizing the emotional and psychological costs of call center work. Hegde (2019) similarly examines the novel’s portrayal of accent training, night shifts, and temporal dislocation, arguing that these elements symbolize deeper conflicts between local identities and global demands. Gender-focused readings of the novel emphasize the differentiated experiences of male and female characters. Chakraborty and Adhikari (2020) analyze how female characters in the novel appear empowered through financial independence but remain constrained by societal expectations regarding respectability and morality. Their study suggests that the workplace enables limited agency while reinforcing patriarchal surveillance. In contrast, male characters experience a crisis of masculinity, as their authority and traditional gender roles are destabilized by feminized service labor and corporate hierarchies.

Studies on emotional labor further illuminate gender performance in call centers. Scholars such as Cameron (2008) and Matos (2018) argue that communication skills, politeness, and empathy—often coded as feminine—are central to call center work. This feminization of labor devalues emotional skills while simultaneously exploiting them for profit. Such analyses are particularly relevant to Bhagat’s novel, where both male and female characters must perform scripted emotions to satisfy customers and management. Despite the growing body of scholarship on globalization and gender, limited studies focus on literary representations of gender performativity within Indian call centers using an integrated feminist and postcolonial framework. Most existing research either prioritizes sociological data or offers general thematic readings of globalization. This gap highlights the need for a focused literary analysis that examines how gender is performed, negotiated, and contested within fictional representations of globalized workplaces. The present study contributes to this scholarly conversation by applying gender performativity theory to *One Night at the Call Center*, situating the novel within feminist and postcolonial context debates on globalisation. By foregrounding both male and female experiences, this research seeks to demonstrate how globalized corporate spaces simultaneously enable and restrict gendered identities, thereby offering a nuanced understanding of empowerment, identity, and cultural conflict in contemporary Indian English fiction.

AIM AND OBJECTIVES

Aim:

To study gender as performance in a globalized workspace

Objectives:

- To analyze male and female identity negotiation
- To examine globalization's impact on gender roles
- To question empowerment versus control

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Frameworks: Gender, Performance, and Globalization

This section outlines the theoretical underpinnings guiding the analysis, focusing on Butler's concept of gender as a performative act and its relevance to understanding identity construction within globalized workplaces (Schwarzkopf et al., 2021, p. 872). This framework will also incorporate theories of postcolonialism to analyze how historical power imbalances and colonial legacies continue to shape gendered experiences within the Indian call center industry. It will also draw upon feminist critiques of globalization, examining how the transnational flow of capital and culture impacts local gender dynamics and the formation of new forms of subjectivity (K, 2024, p. 15). The study will also integrate postcolonial feminism to illuminate the often-overlooked challenges faced by marginalized women in postcolonial nations, particularly within the context of globalized labor (J & Alan, 2024, p. 122). Furthermore, the analysis will consider how these theoretical lenses provide a robust framework for understanding the complexities of gender performance as a response to both local and global pressures (D'Enbeau et al., 2015; Just & Muhr, 2021, p. 689). Specifically, it will explore how the concept of "speaking voices" for the silent Orient, as identified in postcolonial discourse, manifests in the call center context, questioning whether the required Westernized voice represents genuine Indian agency or a new form of silencing (Gardner, 2012). This nuanced perspective is particularly relevant when considering the "third world feminist scholarship," which seeks to move beyond commodity-centered, patriarchal approaches to embrace a more gender-neutral, "mental-metric view" of individual potential (Chakraborty & Adhikari, 2020, p. 2).

This approach acknowledges the fragmented developments in social mobility for women in post-national eras, aiming to decipher how female characters navigate and, at times, diverge from prescribed social reforms (Chakraborty & Adhikari, 2020, p. 2). This analytical lens allows for a comprehensive examination of how individual performances of gender within the call center environment are intertwined with larger societal structures and postcolonial transformations (A & Christopher, 2024, p. 568; Aroopala, 2016). By extending Butler's theoretical root in poststructuralist feminism, this study also adopts a post-structuralism research lens, which emerged from the decolonization process and critically examined Western-centric discourses (Liu et al., 2020, p. 104136). This perspective allows for a deconstruction of how dominant narratives around globalization and gender are constructed and perpetuated, especially concerning the agency and representation of women in postcolonial settings (Grosser & Moon, 2017, p. 335).

Moreover, a transnational feminist perspective will be employed to dissect the power asymmetries inherent in globalization processes and the enduring influence of colonial discourses on the experiences of marginalized women, particularly in the Global South (Lee, 2024, p. 9). This approach underscores the importance of amplifying diverse voices and acknowledging the particularities of their historical trajectories and cultural frameworks within

the broader context of digital inequalities and the challenges faced by women in engaging with the AI economy (Digital Divide, Artificial Intelligence, and Women's Labour Inequality in India: Evidence from PLFS Data, n.d., p. 2; Gendered Racism: Definition, Origin, and Development, 2025, p. 26; Zhao, 2024). This research will further explore how digital technologies, particularly in the call center industry, contribute to the commodification of gendered labor, often through the managed manipulation of voices (Matos, 2018, p. 4). This analysis will specifically investigate how these manipulated vocal performances contribute to the construction of "digital flesh," a concept highlighting the ontological structure of digital organizations and their embedded gender biases (Guschke, 2021, p. 278). This includes an examination of how toxic masculinity can be embedded in the development and implementation processes of digital interfaces, potentially leading to the de/sexualization of gendered labor (Pors, 2021, p. 270). This approach acknowledges the intersectionality of gender, technology, and power, providing a framework to analyze how women in globalized workspaces negotiate their identities amidst these complex forces (Bagdogan, 2021, p. 429; Liu et al., 2020, p. 104137).

Theories of Gender as Performance

Drawing upon Judith Butler's seminal work on gender performativity, this section will delve into how gender is not an inherent attribute but rather a stylized repetition of acts, gestures, and discourse that coalesce to form the illusion of a stable gendered self (Sandberg et al., 2021, p. 232). This theoretical lens is particularly pertinent for understanding how individuals within the call center environment are compelled to perform specific gendered roles, often aligning with Westernized expectations of professionalism and communication, which can paradoxically perpetuate existing inequalities (Foka, 2024, p. 3). This performance extends to the concept of "Digital Flesh," where the digital organizations themselves, through male-biased data and gender performativity, contribute to the de/sexualization of labor, particularly impacting women (Just & Muhr, 2021, p. 257). This study further examines how these digitally mediated performances not only shape individual identity but also reflect and reinforce broader societal norms and power structures, often to the detriment of marginalized groups (Schwarzkopf et al., 2021, p. 826). This theoretical grounding enables an exploration of how the prescriptive gendered scripts within call centers, informed by globalized economic demands, necessitate specific vocal performances that may compromise authentic self-expression (Matos, 2018, p. 161).

The examination of "voice attractiveness" in this context is crucial, as it reveals how neoliberal market expectations intersect with cultural dynamics to encourage the self-commodification of vocal sexualization, reflecting both macro-level financial pressures and micro-level psychological drivers where vocal attractiveness is perceived as a form of power (Chen & Chen, 2025). Consequently, this research aims to unpack the ways in which these performative aspects of gender within the call center industry contribute to the formation of "gender capital," a concept that illustrates how workers strategically deploy gendered attributes to navigate their occupational roles and challenge or reinforce existing power dynamics (Matos, 2018, p. 167). This "gender capital" often materializes within the labor process itself, embedding production tasks and valorization devices within asymmetrical conceptions of masculinity and femininity (Matos, 2018, p. 160).

Globalization and the Transformation of Work

The emergence of globalized workplaces, particularly in the call center industry, has profoundly reshaped traditional notions of labor, creating new avenues for economic participation while simultaneously introducing novel forms of exploitation and gendered stratification (Ge, 2025). These transformations are often characterized by the institutionalization

of gendered skill redefinitions, which are grounded in a cultural grammar that subordinated women and femininity while valorizing masculine superiority (Matos, 2018, p. 11). This redefinition often manifests as the commodification of gender, where the gendering of work products becomes deeply intertwined with local gender ideologies and neoliberal socioeconomic shifts, impacting the reconfiguration of social classes and employment within the European economic context (Matos, 2014). This dynamic illustrates how call centers, as sites of intense globalization, become crucibles where gender is actively performed and negotiated, often under the duress of economic precarity (Matos, 2018, p. 168). Specifically, the pervasive tendency within this industry is for language commodification to be overtly shaped by a strong feminization of the discursive frameworks governing telephonic interaction (Matos, 2018, p. 163). This feminization often involves the linguistic regulation of agents' speech, enforcing specific rules for language use that can significantly influence their interactional styles and self-presentation (Cameron, 2008).

This linguistic regulation, while often framed as a means of ensuring customer satisfaction and brand consistency, can also be interpreted as a mechanism for reinforcing existing gendered power structures within the workplace, potentially contributing to the feminization and devaluation of call center labor for male operators (Matos, 2018, p. 160). Moreover, this systematic feminization extends beyond linguistic prescription to the broader organizational practices, where the feminized skills are devalued, while masculinized skills are valorized, enabling a strategic commodification of feminine subordination and masculine authority within the call center's value extraction regime (Matos, 2018a, p. 3, 2018b, p. 163). This process results in a complex interplay where gendered labor is both performed and strategically deployed to meet the demands of a globalized service economy (Matos, 2018, p. 168).

Cultural Studies Approaches to Literature and Society

In examining the novel *"One Night at the Call Center,"* a cultural studies framework allows for an interrogation of how literary texts reflect and actively construct understandings of gender, work, and globalization within contemporary Indian society. This approach enables an analysis of how fictional narratives, such as this novel, illuminate the intricate power geometries of time-space compression and the distinct relationships different social groups and individuals have with global flows and interconnections (Hegde, 2019, p. 249). This analytical lens is crucial for deciphering how the novel portrays the complexities of identity formation and the negotiation of cultural anxieties amidst India's rapid integration into the global capitalist system (Srinivasan, 2018). By focusing on the lived experiences of call center agents, the novel provides a nuanced perspective on how individuals navigate the demands of a globalized service economy while confronting shifting national narratives and a complex symbolic economy (*"A Nation on the Line Call Centers as Postcolonial Predicaments in the Philippines,"* 2018, p. 200).

One Night at the Call Center: A Synopsis and Context

One Night at the Call Center thus serves as a compelling narrative through which to explore the intricate interplay between individual agency and systemic pressures in the context of globalized labor (Vats, 2023). The narrative offers a critical insight into the often-gendered and racialized global processes that shape perceptions of skill and value, consequently influencing the social construction of class identities both locally and transnationally (Ale.rta, 2023, p. 5). The novel thereby functions as a lens through which to examine how individuals grapple with the commodification of their labor and the imposition of a "neutral accent," which often masks underlying cultural tensions and power differentials inherent in transnational work (Hegde, 2019, p. 251). This enforced linguistic conformity, as explored in scholarly works, frequently underscores broader arguments concerning global transformations and the disruption of

conventional understandings of inclusion and exclusion in outsourced labor contexts (Hegde, 2019, p. 250). This often creates a temporal oscillation, where workers' lifestyles are misaligned with their circadian rhythms, further complicating their experiences within these evolving global workplaces (Hegde, 2019, p. 249). This temporal inversion, alongside the adoption of Anglicized names and accents, further highlights the complex identity negotiations undertaken by call center employees as they mediate between their indigenous cultural identities and the demands of their globalized roles (Hegde, 2019, p. 250).

Plot Summary and Character Introduction

Chethan Bhagat's *"One Night at the Call Center"* centers on six employees—Shyam, Priyanka, Vroom, Radhika, Military Uncle, and Esha—working the night shift at Connections, a call center in Gurgaon, India, providing technical support for a U.S. appliance company. This setting immediately establishes a transnational dynamic, where the characters' daily lives are dictated by the demands of a Western clientele and corporate structure, highlighting the spatial and temporal dislocations inherent in such outsourced labor models (Lardinous, 2021, p. 9). The narrative unfolds over the course of a single night, during which a series of personal crises and professional pressures converge, culminating in a mysterious phone call from God that prompts the characters to re-evaluate their lives and choices (Vimal & R, 2024, p. 220). This divine intervention serves as a literary device to explore themes of identity, alienation, and the search for meaning within the often-dehumanizing environment of the call center (Alearta, 2023, p. 6). The novel, a prominent work set in Gurgaon, meticulously details the emergence of this burgeoning urban landscape, which has been described as a futuristic space birthed by global capitalism (Hillion, 2021, p. 58). In this specific context, the novel provides a vivid portrayal of the sociocultural dimensions of metropolitan youth culture, illustrating how characters grapple with academic pressures and societal expectations within India's evolving educational and economic landscape (Vimal & R, 2024, p. 1299).

The narrative further emphasizes the profound impact of globalization on local contexts, particularly through the "reversed temporalities of work" experienced by these agents, who must align their schedules with Western time zones, thus disrupting their social integration and personal lives (Anesh, 2009, p. 364). This temporal dissonance often necessitates a transformation of identity, as agents adopt new names and accents to better serve their clientele, reflecting a complex form of cultural mimicry (Alearta, 2023, p. 6). This adoption of a hybrid identity, marked by both assimilation and resistance, underscores the intricate negotiation of selfhood in a globalized workforce (Hegde, 2019, p. 250). The novel thus offers a critical examination of how individuals navigate the complexities of their assigned roles, often adopting Americanized names and accents to cater to their clientele, which inevitably leads to a sense of detachment from their authentic selves (Mukherjee, 2017, p. 187). This performative aspect of call center work, characterized by the adoption of alternative personae and the suppression of genuine cultural expressions, illuminates the broader phenomenon of cultural commodification within the global service industry (Mukherjee, 2011).

The Indian Call Center Industry: A Globalized Landscape

This industry rapidly expanding in countries like India represents a significant facet of contemporary globalization transforming local economies and individual lives through the integration of distant labor markets. The rise of the call center industry especially in India exemplifies the profound shifts in post-millennium literature where authors increasingly explore the intersections of individuality culture and society within the context of globalized labor (Sujantha et al 2024). This literary trend captures the evolving dynamics of identity formation and cultural adaptation in response to the pervasive influence of transnational capitalism (Iyer 2024

p 229; Vats 2023). It further highlights how Indian English literature has evolved to represent complex cultural interactions and cross-cultural engagements influenced by globalization moving beyond mere reflection to active participation in these global dialogues (Vats 2023). The industry's growth is often driven by cost efficiencies with Indian companies offering services at significantly reduced rates compared to Western counterparts (Mukherjee 2017 p 189).

Performing Gender in the Call Center: Analysis of Characters and Narratives

This section will delve into how gender is constructed performed and challenged by the characters within the confines of the call center exploring the nuanced ways in which employees navigate gendered expectations and power dynamics in their professional and personal lives. Specifically it will examine how the demands of customer service particularly the need to adopt neutral accents and personas intersect with and sometimes exacerbate existing gender roles and stereotypes (Hegde 2019 p 251). The pressure to conform to Western customer expectations including linguistic and cultural norms often forces individuals to suppress their authentic gendered expressions leading to a complex interplay between performativity and personal identity within the workplace (POSTER 2007). Moreover this analysis will explore how call center employees particularly women navigate the micropolitical dynamics and power imbalances inherent in these transnational work environments often reflecting broader societal prejudices and challenging unfulfilled promises of globalization (Medhavi 2024 p 1). This examination reveals how the globalization of labor while purporting to offer economic advancement frequently introduces new forms of social and gendered subjugation that necessitate complex adaptations from the workforce (Doğangün 2023 p 7).

The critical lens applied here aims to unravel these layers of performance revealing the strategies employed by characters to negotiate their identities amidst the dual pressures of globalized corporate culture and indigenous societal norms (Rajendran & Patel 2024 p 1538). This includes an investigation into how the workplace redefines masculinity and femininity often through subtle pressures to conform to idealized customer service archetypes that may conflict with traditional gender roles (K 2024 p 13). Such performative adaptations while enabling economic participation frequently generate internal conflicts for employees who must reconcile their prescribed professional identities with their personal understanding of gender and self (Mankekar & Gupta 2016). The adaptations are further complicated by the increasing prevalence of work-from-home setups which while offering flexibility can paradoxically reinforce traditional gendered expectations particularly for women by blurring the lines between professional and domestic responsibilities (Braun & Clarke 2006).

Masculinities in Crisis and Adaptation

The male characters in the novel navigate a complex terrain where traditional notions of masculinity are challenged by the feminized labor of call center work and the often-devalued nature of the service industry (Matos, 2018, p. 11). This section will explore how they reconcile their aspirations for upward mobility with the perceived emasculating aspects of their jobs, often through compensatory behaviors or the adoption of new identities. These adaptations can manifest as a struggle to assert dominance in interpersonal relationships or a strategic embrace of hybrid identities that allow them to navigate the ambiguities of their professional roles (Dapis, 2025). This tension often results in a redefinition of masculine identity within the call center setting, where traditional patriarchal structures clash with the demands of a globalized service economy that prioritizes emotional labor and client satisfaction over conventional displays of power (Djaković, 2019, p. 485). For example, male call center operators may leverage their technical expertise to signify social mobility, especially when their work is perceived by family members as not "real work" (Matos, 2018, p. 165). Conversely, some male employees strategically

cultivate relationships with superiors to access higher-status positions outside the call center, thereby transforming their workplace experiences into a form of cultural capital (Matos, 2018, p. 9).

Feminine Identities: Negotiation and Resistance

This section explores the multifaceted ways in which female characters negotiate and resist prevailing gender norms within the demanding environment of the call center, often through both subtle and overt acts of agency. These negotiations often involve a careful balance between conforming to customer service expectations and asserting personal autonomy, leading to innovative expressions of identity that challenge both corporate and societal gender constructs. The novel examines how women construct differing, even conflicting, forms of identity in the workplace (Pujolar, 2001, p. 55). This can involve deploying femininity as a form of cultural or symbolic capital to enhance their professional standing (Matos, 2018, p. 166). Alternatively, their resistance may manifest as a refusal to be recognized in ways that reinforce their perceived lower class or feminized status, particularly when confronted with familial or societal expectations (Matos, 2018, p. 166). This negotiation is particularly salient given the cultural context of many call centers, where traditional gender roles often intersect with the demands of a Western-centric service industry, creating unique pressures and opportunities for women to redefine their positions ("A Nation on the Line Call Centers as Postcolonial Predicaments in the Philippines," 2018, p. 45).

The Role of Language and Accent in Gender Performance

This section will analyze how the prescribed linguistic practices and accent neutralization within call centers contribute to the performance and perception of gender among employees. Specifically, it will investigate how the adoption of standardized accents, often modeled on Western English dialects, impacts the vocal performance of gender, potentially masking or reifying existing stereotypes (Hultgren, 2017). This linguistic conformity not only influences how gender is expressed but also how it is perceived by callers, frequently leading to an internalization of these linguistic norms that subtly reshapes employees' self-perception of their gendered identities (Pinkevičienė, 2022, p. 41). Furthermore, this linguistic assimilation can position workers in states of conflict regarding regional and cultural authenticity, thereby contributing to an ideologically constructed hierarchical order of both accents and languages (Harrington, 2018, p. 199).

This linguistic re-education thus becomes a critical site for the performance of a globalized gender identity, often at the expense of an individual's native linguistic and cultural heritage. This further extends to how linguistic prowess, particularly in English, can become a significant form of cultural capital, allowing individuals to navigate and even redefine their social standing within globalized workplaces and beyond (Chen & Chen, 2021, p. 163). This capital, however, is often intertwined with complex power dynamics, as workers frequently encounter colonial power dynamics in their efforts to make sense of the offshore informatics industry ("A Nation on the Line Call Centers as Postcolonial Predicaments in the Philippines," 2018, p. 46). The commodification of language within this context is particularly shaped by a feminization of communication styles, where preferred ways of speaking are symbolically coded as feminine, even for male employees (Matos, 2018, p. 6). This dynamic underscores how language, far from being a neutral tool, becomes a crucial arena for the performance and negotiation of gender, profoundly influencing workplace identities and opportunities (Wang et al., 2014, p. 36).

CONCLUSION

This concluding section synthesizes the preceding analyses, reiterating how the novel

powerfully illustrates the intricate interplay between global economic forces and localized gender performances. It underscores the ways in which individuals in globalized workplaces actively construct and negotiate their gendered identities, often challenging and reshaping traditional norms in response to the unique pressures of their professional environments (Bora & Kumar, 2025; Gonibeed & Saqib, 2022, p. 1243). The study thus contributes to a broader understanding of how gender is performed and reconfigured within the transnational flows of capital and culture, particularly within the burgeoning service economies of the Global South. Future research could further explore the intersection of gender performance and socioeconomic mobility within these contexts, especially considering the differing power dynamics between local and international corporate trainers ("A Nation on the Line Call Centers as Postcolonial Predicaments in the Philippines," 2018, p. 46). Additionally, investigating how gendered emotional labor is explicitly taught and internalized by new recruits, particularly concerning the performance of empathy and resilience under duress, would provide deeper insights into the subtle mechanisms of control exerted by these transnational corporations.

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FROM ITIHASA TO INTERVENTION: ADAPTIVE REVISIONS OF RAMAYANA

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ABSTRACT

"History is written by the victors." Winston Churchill, in this quote, emphasized how history is the product of Victor's interpretation. This can be applied to all kinds of narratives, whether history or myth. The dominant always plays a major role while narrating any event. The vanquished are never provided with any voice. Even if some author presents the vanquished voice, it becomes pertinent to understand whether it justifies their voice or not. Also, how the victor's voice superseded the vanquished's voice in the given text. But what happens if a space is provided to the voice of the vanquished? Does the post-modern era cherish that space? This paper will analyse Anand Neelakantan's *Asura* and *Valmiki's women* by applying Linda Hutcheon's idea of adaptation as both a product and a process of creative repetition. These works retell India's great epics by shifting the focus from well-known heroes to figures often ignored or silenced, such as Ravana, and the women in the stories. Through this paper, the researcher would highlight how these revised adaptations reshape cultural memory and break down the division between good and evil.

Key Words: *Adaptation, Ramayana, Linda Hutcheon, Cultural Memory, Vanquished Voices, Retellings*

INTRODUCTION

Ramayana and *Mahabharata*, being the major sources for Indian authors, provide a vast space for the narratives of victors and vanquished. Mythological fiction as a theme is a pathway that brings forth this enormous space of narratives in contemporary Indian English fiction. Intermingling fictional elements with mythic elements provides authors with a space to represent a mythical character in myriad forms. The representation of the various characters shows how society is changing. Myth fulfills an indispensable function in primitive culture: it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces practical rules for the guidance of man (Bronislaw Malinowski 101).

The social anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski suggested that for him myth was neither explanatory nor etiological, to emphasise the social value of myth. Myth, he argued, is not symbolic but a direct statement of its subject matter, not an explanation in terms of satisfaction or of profound religious desires, moral longings, social subjections, assertions or even practical needs. Hence, he is reflecting on the point of how myth is not just a mere symbol, but rather it shapes and provides a way of living to people. Indian writers continue to experiment with myths by refashioning the meanings and perspectives of their legendary characters. Refashioning as a postmodern technique has been developed and used frequently in literature and other genres of art.

"Whenever I use the term retelling as an equivalent of rewriting, I mean a precise, detailed, deliberate, and ideologically driven retelling of formerly written narratives" (Christian Moraru 17).

Whenever an author is trying to revisit former narratives, they add some elements, experiment with characterization, modernize the theme, etc. A lot of Indian authors are refashioning and creating new texts. Authors such as Amish Tripathi, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kavita Kane, Aditya Iyengar, and Anand Neelakantan brought new avatars of mythological characters, and their portrayals bear relevance to contemporary Indian Society. Amish Tripathi

has provided a humanized version of god. Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy revolves around the philosophical question, i.e., "What is Evil?" His god, i.e., Shiva, smokes and swears a lot. Author tend to relate the character not to humans but to 'modern man'. Another author is Chitra Banerjee Devakaruni who has told *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* from a female perspective in her novels, '*The Forest of Enchantments*' and '*The Palace of Illusions*' respectively. She has presented the voice of other female characters from these myths, pertinently asking questions about women's position in contemporary society. A similar concern with recovering neglected women's voices is evident in Kavita Kane's retellings. In *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* centers around the voices of lesser-known female characters and raises questions about how the silenced female characters do not get a space of their own. Aditya Iyengar adopts a different approach to mythological retellings. In his novels, *The Thirteenth Day*, *Palace of Assassins*, *The Conqueror*, and *Bhumika*, put the pain and suffering of mythical characters without considering them as supernatural beings but rather as humans. Hardas Ranabhai Galchar, in his thesis, *Rewriting History through Mythological Characters in the Novels of Amish Tripathi*, has studied how all mythical characters are rewritten and how the philosophical concepts are explained to relate to contemporary society. Also, it is an attempt to understand how the author, i.e., Amish Tripathi, experimented with Indian Myths.

Several researchers have worked on these contemporary writers, trying to understand the mythic elements, representation of the female characters, contemporary elements in the text, and space provided to the other. But there is a gap in the study when it comes to the deconstructive reading of the vanquished. The question arises with Anand Neelkantan's *Asura* and *Ajaya*, where we are just not providing the space to one of the biggest villains in mythology, but also changing the narratives. It raises a valid question of whether this reversal of roles in the narrative, where not victors but losers are providing us the narrative, opens areas for the other voice. Are readers accepting these narratives? How does refashioning the meaning of a mythical character reflect contemporary society? How do contemporary situations provide a platform for such narratives? How does this revisionism impact the ethical and moral values of society?

'Adaptation is an act of appropriating or salvaging, and this is always a double process of interpreting and then creating something new.' (Linda Hutcheon 20)

Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation provides a framework for understanding this phenomenon. She discussed adaptation as "repetition without replication" and how these repetitions are creative reinterpretations influenced by new cultural, ideological, and historical contexts. In her view, adaptation constitutes both a product and a process. The new modern mythological retellings can be studied as a part of the cultural process and should not be interpreted as mere reproductions. In this paper, Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* and *Valmiki's Women* are discussed. These books challenge the epic's moral ideas by showing characters as outsiders or antagonists. It has resulted in questioning the authority of traditional stories and blurs the line between good and evil. Although Neelakantan writes in a narrative style, his works remain aware of the *Ramayana*'s oral and performative tradition which connects readers who already know the cultural background of the epic.

Adaptations, as Hutcheon reminds us, are always shaped by "who adapts, why, and for whom." The ideological shift has emphasized the ethical ambiguity that is told through contemporary mythological retellings. The retellings point out the change in inherited value systems and creates interpretive spaces for marginalized perspectives. Thus, functioning as cultural critique. Hutcheon's *Theory of Adaptation* (2010) provides a useful lens for reading texts like *Asura* and *Valmiki's Women*. Her framework positions the work as dialogical interventions that compare the politics of representation embedded in the *Ramayana*. And also, dramatize the act of retelling as

a form of resistance.

The *Ramayana* and the Politics of Narrative Authority

The *Ramayana* has traditionally been read as a moral epic that upholds dharma through the figure of Ram, an exemplary king and son. In these tellings, Ravan serves as the moral opposite of Ram and a symbol of adharma. His knowledge, devotion, and political abilities receive comparatively little attention. Within these retellings, the women in the epic- Sita, Surpanakha, Mandodari- are largely confined to roles shaped by patriarchal expectations. Their emotional lives and decision-making remain largely unexplored. As a result, these representations offer an approach to the dominant narrative in which the victor's voice becomes representative of moral certainty. Ravana's fall is celebrated as cosmic justice while women's suffering is treated as an inevitable outcome of heroic ideals. Rather than accepting the epic's ethical framework as self-evident, postmodern retellings expose its historical and ideological foundations. They raise questions about whether righteousness is universal or context-dependent, whether heroic identity necessitates the silencing of others, and whether binary moral frameworks can sustain complexity. The *Ramayana* thus becomes a text that invites multiple readings rather than demanding a single authoritative interpretation.

Asura: Tale of the Vanquished

Asura: Tale of the vanquished is the debut novel of the author, wherein he attempted to reverse the roles of Ravana and Ram. Ravana is not presented as evil. Ram, being an ideal husband, brother, son, fair king, and supreme being, is the protagonist, and Ravana, the chief antagonist of the epic, is considered evil, multi-headed, aggressive, etc. Their characters create binaries. One represents 'the presence,' and another represents 'the lack. At the same time, Ravana is considered a god in some countries. He is an educated Brahmin with knowledge of Vedas and Upanishads and a great devotee of Shiva. As represented in the novel the point of view of Ravana is shown and it makes us wonder about that side of the story. The work comes beyond the binaries. A different meaning is produced when one looks from this perspective. There will be an attempt to understand the discourse of the other's voice. It is prevalent to silence the alternative voice present in a text. But, here the author has made an attempt to help the audience listen to the voices of not only the antagonist of the epic but also the voice of the marginalised. Bhadra's narrative runs parallel to the narrative of Ravana. The marginalised are doubly oppressed, and they are only considered to be commodities used by the main characters of the stories. The term 'Asura' impacts their life in such a way that their self-representation is neglected in narratives. Narration of Bhadra helps to comprehend the life of marginalized in the society. The story is deviated from the traditional telling of the *Ramayana*. Therefore, the story becomes an example of adaptation as a process of cultural negotiation rather than mere retelling. The novel not only offers a counter-narrative to the canonical text but also explores themes such as political power, patriarchy, and caste issues. It highlights modern issues through different type of power struggles. Ravana's belief in dictatorship made him oppose the democratic council in the Asura Kingdom. He believed society needs a strong leader for development. He build a society unaware that he is also exploiting the lower class people.

Valmiki's Women

Valmiki's Women is another novel by Anand Neelakantan. The novel retells the story of female characters. He highlights the experiences of those who are often not provided a space to portray their narrative. He reimagines figures such as Sita, Surpanakha, Mandodari, and Ahalya as complex individuals possessing desires, fears, and agency. A lot of writers provided space to the women at the center. But, the women at the periphery are silenced. The women who stand

against the stated rules of being an ideal woman are looked upon with contempt and evil. 'Naari dharma' becomes the factor to decide whether a woman's voice should be heard or not. Women who exist outside the sphere of the epic's principal have received comparatively little critical attention. The novel addresses that absence by bringing characters like Shanta, Manthara, Tataka, and Meenakshi from Ramanya. Hence, the novel becomes the space of strong-willed women rather than a minor character ruled by societal norms. They no longer remain peripheral characters. The question is the dominant voice of the traditional narrative. Also, how the narration has given these strong-willed women a platform to express themselves would be analyzed. To interpret the author's discourse, it is essential to examine the peripheral characters. The space is not just a platform for evil's voice but for women's voices that are not heard amongst the dominant voice. The counter-narrative will be revisited, focusing on the themes, motifs, and symbols used in the text. By telling the epic from women's points of view, the novel changes how the story is remembered and questions the original story's values.

Adaptation as Cultural Memory and Intervention

These retellings of Asura and Valmiki's Women by Neelakantan function as interventions in cultural memory. Adaptations play a key role in the process of reshaping the cultural memory. The adaptations has done the same while reshaping the meanings of traditional narrative. However, Neelakantan's works do not seem to replace the canonical text. It rather creates a counter meaning that acts as a dialogical relationship between the traditional text and adaptation. This co-existence is consistent with Hutcheon's assertion that adaptations are inherently relational and derive meaning through their interaction with canonical text. These adaptations encourage audiences to re-evaluate the epics. When the distinctions between protagonist and antagonist, virtue and vice blur it results in expressing contemporary concerns with plurality, empathy and social justice. Another central characteristic of these adaptations is their resistance to binary oppositions. We observe a clear distinction between good and evil to reinforce moral authority in the traditional narratives. But, Neelakanatan's adaptations embrace the ambiguity. For example, Ravana's life from birth to his death is narrated to acknowledge his understanding of power, society, discrimination on the basis of caste and class; also, Bhadra's narrative helps to understand a common Asura view of society. In Valmiki's women, the narrative shifts from moral judgment to the exploration of the emotional and ethical complexity of the characters. These narratives provide a platform for reinterpretation that encourages readers to engage with the mythological tradition.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary adaptations reveal how myth, memory, and ideology remain deeply entangled. Novels like Asura and Valmiki's Women suggest that adaptation is both a product and a process that creates new stories while rethinking the earlier ones. These retellings do not simply oppose the *Ramayana*. They engage it critically and inquire into the authority of the canonical text and intervene in its rigid moral binaries. The voice of marginalized or defeated characters highlights the need for inclusive narratives honoring the richness and complexity of human experience. The works acknowledge the complexity of ethical considerations. Therefore, these adaptations do not question the significance of the *Ramayana*; rather, revitalize the epic and sustain its relevance within a pluralistic and reflective society.

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ECOLOGIES OF MEMORY AND GENDER: AN ECOFEMINIST READING OF TEMSÜLA AO'S *LABURNUM FOR MY HEAD*

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to explore the portrayals of nature, gender and cultural memory in Tamsüla Ao's *Laburnum for My Head* (2009) using an ecofeminist perspective. Situated within the socio-cultural landscape of Nagaland, the collection reflects indigenous ecological consciousness and oral traditions that perceive nature as a living, animistic presence imbued with spiritual meaning and ancestral memory. The stories feature natural features such as laburnum trees, rivers and forests not simply as scenes, but as protagonists that influence the human experience and collective identity. Ao's stories bring into focus the significance of Northeast Indian women's lives in maintaining ecological equilibrium and cultural heritage by foregrounding their close bond with the environment. This study takes into consideration the ecofeminist theories presented by Françoise d'Eaubonne and Vandana Shiva, to show how the text creates a parallel between the domination of women in the society and the exploitation of nature. The research focuses on Ao's critique of patriarchal structures and anthropocentric attitudes, symbolized in landscape, burial and experiences of intergenerational women. In the title story, Lentina refuses to place a tombstone over her grave, and has instead decided to be buried under a laburnum tree. Similarly, "Three Women" is a metaphoric representation of Lipoktula, Medemla and Martha, representing seed, seedling, and soil, respectively, and the ecological balance, continuity, and renewal of womanhood. This paper explores Ao's narratives through close textual analysis as a means of imagining nature as a place for cultural memory, a place of female agency, a place to experience an ecofeminist vision of reimagining the relationship between women, community, and nature.

Key Words: *Ecofeminism, Indigenous Ecology, Female Agency, Cultural Memory, Northeast Literature, Nature and Gender.*

INTRODUCTION

Ecofeminism is a critical approach that sees the corruption of nature and environment and the domination of women as interrelated. Ecofeminism, which came into being in the late 20th century, believes that patriarchal power systems have historically justified the oppression of women and nature. This subject has highlighted by scholars the parallel between ecological degradation and gender oppression, both rooted in structures of domination within social, political and economic systems. Karen J. Warren states, "Ecofeminism is the idea that there are important connections between the two forms of domination, women and nature" (Warren 3). Therefore, ecofeminist thinking aims to dispute these hierarchies and bring to the foreground other ways of living together that are based on care, interdependence and ecological balance. As Vandana Shiva, an Indian ecofeminist scholar, points out, "The violence to nature, which seems intrinsic to the dominant development model, is also associated with violence to women..." (xvi). From this point of view, women's ecological knowledge and experiences put them at a crucial place in maintaining environmental balance.

In the Indian literary context, especially for the literature of the Northeast region, ecofeminism has become a valuable lens to view literary perceptions of landscape, culture, and gender. The Northeast has a rich diversity of flora and fauna, traditional practices and customs, and a rich oral

tradition. The landscape is often depicted as an active character, influencing social interactions, cultural heritage and identity, as is common for writers from the region. Meanwhile, the area has been subjected to political strife, modernization and environmental changes that have affected the literary imagination of a number of writers. In the Northeast Indian literature, such a strong sense of ecological awareness is often present, emphasising the close relationship between people and their land and the traditional knowledge of the local population. One of the most renowned writers from this area is Temsula Ao, whose literary works delve into the intricacies of Nagas' lifestyle, culture, and history. Her works are frequently inspired by the traditions and oral histories of Indigenous people, and examines issues of memory, violence, identity and environmental consciousness. What makes the short story collection *Laburnum for My Head* (2009), which won the Sahitya Akademi Award, so remarkable is its eight short stories on the daily lives, tribulations and emotions of people living in Nagaland. Through the stories the reader gets insight into the interweaving of earthy life and earthy culture of the area.

In many of the stories, nature is not only a context, but also a symbol and an emotional point where characters wrestle with their memory, identity and home. Nature, trees and forests are symbolic and cultural and could be a reflection of the inner world of the characters. As noted by the ecofeminist thinker Vandana Shiva "Women in India are an intimate part of nature... nurtured by the feminine to produce life and provide sustenance" (Shiva 38). This view aligns well with Ao's storytelling, which often portrays women as beings intimately tied to the natural cycles and cultural traditions. This paper analyses *Laburnum for My Head* in an ecofeminist way, looking at how the collection establishes connections between women, nature, and memory. The study proposes that Ao's stories undermine male power and reinterpret nature as a space of the feminine, cultural heritage, and ecological balance.

Ecofeminist Critique Of Patriarchal Modernity

The movement of ecofeminism was developed by Françoise d'Eaubonne in *Le Féminisme ou la mort* (1974) as a combination of the feminist and environmental movement. As she famously argues, "the struggles of environmentalism and feminism are not so different," (Ranc), and she makes the point that patriarchal domination is responsible for both ecological devastation and women's subordination. Her work seems to indicate that "parallels exist between the patriarchal suppression of women and the suppression of nature," (Ranc), and that this double oppression leads to "environmental destruction." This became the basis for a systematic critique of hierarchical thinking and patriarchal ideology, as developed by subsequent ecofeminist scholars. Karen J. Warren defines ecofeminism as "the position that there are important connections—historical, symbolic, theoretical—between the domination of women and the domination of nonhuman nature" (Warren 125). Warren also asserts that these relationships are based on a "logic of domination", a structure which supports the control of one group over another via a hierarchical way of thinking and values dualisms like mind/body, culture/nature, man/woman. In this context, superiority is justified as a means to domination and exploitation.

Likewise, Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva describe the modern science and capitalism as "sanctioned the domination of both nature and women," a domination that is "inherently violent" because it "subjugates and dispossesses them" of their life-giving integrity (Mies and Shiva). Their ecofeminist analysis is based on the concept of dualisms: human/nature, man/woman, reason/emotion, and the rigid polarization that presents domination as natural, inevitable and unquestionable. Ecofeminist theorists also challenge the western philosophical streams that establish hierarchical relations between culture and nature. This logic is a "network of dualisms" that underpins Western thinking, where reason is paired with masculinity, and where nature is written as an inferior and feminised Other (Plumwood 2–3). Val Plumwood also claims that

dominant culture has “systematically inferiorised, backgrounded and denied dependency” on both women and nature, revealing how patriarchal systems sustain ecological destruction through hierarchical thinking (21). Also, Rosemary Radford Ruether, who is another important ecofeminist theologian, contends that there can be no ecological liberation without breaking the cycle of male domination. Ruether argues that “there can be no liberation for women and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination” (Ruether 204). This suggests that feminist and ecological issues must be dealt with together if one is to question the structural causes of oppression.

The scholars from India have by far expanded the field by considering the gender–environment relationship as a historical and socio-economic phenomenon. Vandana Shiva asserts that modern development is what she terms as the “exploitative vision of progress” of patriarchy. Shiva terms Western development “maldevelopment... synonymous with women's underdevelopment... and nature's depletion (deepening ecological crises)” (Shiva 5). She also states that a patriarchal system creates a hierarchy of dominance whereby the domination and mastery of man over nature is correlated with the domination of women. (Shiva xvii).

Agriculture, preservation of seeds, and subsistence labour are areas of everyday involvement of women, which places them as central agents of ecological sustainability, and Shiva emphasises their ecological knowledge in this regard (Shiva xvii – xviii). She also claims that the eco-practices and opposition to destructive development of women is essential to solve environmental problems and sustain their lives (Shiva xviii). Her work focuses on highlighting grassroot environmental movements like the Chipko movement in which the rural women physically stood up against deforestation. On the other hand, feminist researchers in India have challenged the universalized nature of ecofeminist assertions of women's “natural” relationship to nature. Bina Agarwal critiques purely symbolic ecofeminist interpretations by grounding women–nature relations in material conditions, noting that “women... are victims of environmental degradation in quite gender-specific ways,” while also functioning as “active agents in movements of environmental protection and regeneration” (119). In view of this, Agarwal suggests the idea of “feminist environmentalism” that emphasises gendered division of labour, land rights and access to natural resources in women's environment.

Scholarship on the Northeast literature written in recent years has highlighted the strong ties between ecological issues in the region and the region's indigenous oral and cosmological practices. It has been suggested that literature from Northeast India is an ecological discourse that depicts the landscape and features “images of rivers, trees, hills, tradition, culture, myth, and legends” (Dumenil 1296). Ecology is also used in such texts to claim identity, to challenge dominant cultural discourses (Dumenil 1297).

Indigenous Ecologies And Environment Consciousness

The role of vegetation is very noticeable in the title story, *Laburnum for My Head*, because of the constant reoccurrence of the laburnum tree. The protagonist's attachment to the tree originates in a deeply affective perception of its physical form: she “yearned for some laburnum bushes in her garden” because “the way the laburnum flowers hung their heads earthward appealed to her because she attributed humility to the gesture” (Ao 2). The laburnum is more than a decorative plant; its drooping flowers remind the protagonist of humility and quiet dignity. The tree slowly becomes a living symbol that represents personal emotion, ecological consciousness, and cultural symbolism. In *Laburnum for My Head*, Tamsüla Ao builds an ecological mosaic that gives life and memory to nature. Ao immediately connects Lentina with the laburnum tree: its “striking yellow flowers” remind her of “womanliness and humility” and she

perceives the blossoms to be so significant that the “way the laburnum flowers hung their heads earthward appealed to her because she attributed humility to the gesture” (Ao 2). Lentina's family don't know what to make of her love for the tree, she is “inwardly hurt by [their] seeming insensitivity to beauty around them” (Ao 3), and her love of the laburnum is a different value system. From an ecological point of view, the laburnum is a substitute for Lentina's freedom and rootedness: caring for it, caring its continuity is opposed to the utilitarian perception of nature of other people who surround her.

The story is also a testament to the way human attempts to fix memories often go against ecological rhythms. Confronted with the imposing gravestones that dominate the cemetery landscape, Lentina observes that “This consecrated ground has thus become choked with the specimens of human conceit” (Ao 1). These are gigantic stones, symbolizing humanity's struggle against death by physical endurance. Ao takes this up, offering an alternative to this thinking, one that is based on ecological continuity. She refuses to have a stone monument set up, saying instead that “all she wanted was a place where a laburnum tree would flower every May; a place to be buried with it” (Ao 7, 11). The laburnum tree thus makes the cemetery into a space of death, but also of renewal. The regular bloom turns into a non-ambiguous and social manner of recalling, which is perceptible for everybody who watches it. Environmental care becomes a cultural practice, in that the care of plants, trees and landscape is a way to mark life on the land.

Following her husband's death Lentina refuses to accept the traditional male burial practices openly. The ground is also “choked with the specimens of human conceit” (Ao 1) again in the cemetery. She will not compete for monuments with others, but instead will plant a living memorial. “And I have not spent anyone else's money...you need not worry about any headstone for me” (Ao 11); she will be buried where only a laburnum tree will grow: “all she had craved for was a spot to be buried where a laburnum tree would bloom every May” (Ao 14). In this decision, the emphasis is on the observer's action, turning the memorial practices upside down. No longer is granite the key to permanence; this time it's about seasonal blooms. The end of the story is that the laburnum isn't pulled up, a silent victory for ecological ethics. To perpetuate her memory not as a stone monument but as a living tree, Lentina chose to plant a tree. Nature will be her ally and witness. The cemetery turns into a grove: “flowering trees and not headstones... erected on the gravesites” (Ao 12), a community which is not held together by human pretension but by the force of nature, Lentina's bond with the earth.

In this story Ao asks the reader to adopt a more holistic ecological perspective within a larger web of meaning that connects humans, plants, and spirits. The laburnum flowers are not only for the beauty, but also for the message of ancestral wisdom and cultural continuity. Lentina's memory is to be symbolized by a living tree, making her metaphorically a part of the earth's cycles.

Water and rivers are also places of collective memory and culture in the collection. In the story “Three Women,” water becomes intimately connected with experiences of shame, trauma, and survival. The protagonist is brutally beaten and then remembers that he “sits in the water for a long time, as if to wash away the sense of shame and guilt now overtaking me” (Ao 57). The river here is a witness and a part of the emotional experience of the character. The water is a reminder of the healing and cleansing power of the elements of water, but it also indicates that trauma is not something that can be completely erased. The river, as if to wash away the memory, recalls the event. The scene places Lipoktula's trauma right in the middle of nature. The river becomes a confidant that absorbs her suffering. In “Three Women,” nature becomes more than a setting, it becomes a place to experience emotional memory, to heal. The river does not take away Lipoktula's pain but is part of her emotional process and helps to keep her story alive.

The story exemplifies a larger indigenous ecological frame of mind in which people are not removed from the environment in which they live. Rivers, forests and animals may have spiritual meaning and moral agency in Naga culture. The world is seen as a dynamic network of living organisms that can influence human experience. These serve as Ao's stories of the world, in which nature responds and communicates. Trees are symbols of remembrance, rivers of human grief and forests of punishment. The metaphorical construction in "Three Women" is also related to the ecological dimension. Ao explicitly associates women with natural cycles, metaphorically. "Woman is involved in the cycle of life as seed, seedling, and then part of the soil," (Zeleny) writes Beth Zeleny. This metaphor is in the middle of the story. Lipoktula is the "seed" which gives birth to Medemla, despite the adverse conditions of her pregnancy. Later, Medemla takes Martha, a child orphaned by her natural father, and is a "seedling" growing in Lipoktula's line of strength. Then Martha is a symbol of the next generation in this generational cycle.

This ecological sense of belonging is reinforced with the story's end. Ultimately, Martha does not want to return to the village where she grew up stating, "I belonged with them and that I was not in any way different from them" (Ao 51). This moment is an ecocritical sense of place-based identity. Belonging is a feeling that extends beyond bloodlines, to belonging to the land, culture, and community. By this connection, Ao proposes that ecological and cultural continuity are not distinct.

Women, Ecology, And The Inclusion Of Ecological Worlds

Through Ao's story, it becomes easier to appreciate the connection between women's experience and the environmental work that helps care for the environment and challenges patriarchy, which is well connected to the ecofeminist theory. *Laburnum for My Head* is a story about the vulnerability of women and nature, and the ecofeminist concept that the deterioration of the environment is inextricably linked to the oppression of women. This laburnum not only serves as a natural symbol, but also as a symbol of female agency. Lentina's love for the Laburnum tree is an incognito gesture of rebellion. Her family reacts to her desire as a "strange unhealthy fetish," but she is "inwardly hurt by their seeming insensitivity to beauty around them" (Ao 3) and also has "never given up her hope of having a full-grown laburnum tree in her garden someday." Her tenacity is a different way of life, one that places the emphasis on beauty, humility and environmental stewardship rather than social recognition. This visualisation is very close to ecofeminist thinking. Vandana Shiva argues that women's ecological knowledge and practices are important for environmental sustainability; those rural women "embedded in nature... have conceived and initiated processes to arrest the destruction of nature and begin its regeneration" (Shiva xvii–xviii). A care for the laburnum tree is just such an ethic of reciprocity with nature, as Lentina's does.

Cultural ecofeminism also highlights the link between women and caring for the environment. Cultural ecofeminists, Carolyn Merchant points out in *Radical Ecology*, have a "higher appreciation for intuition, an ethic of caring, and human-nature interrelationships" (193). This is the way Lentina sees things, with the nurturing bond she shares with the laburnum tree. She is claiming agency in a Patriarchal society who is denying her desires by planting and nurturing the tree. Her botanical wish therefore is a symbolic challenge to the patriarchy. From a feminist perspective, her wish to be remembered by a blooming tree is a protest against patriarchal constructs and her resolve to be connected with nature. The ecological perspective conveyed in "Three Women" is also consistent with ecofeminist views of environmental ethics. *Three Women* examines the interdependencies of patriarchy and ecology through the lives of Lipoktula, Medemla and Martha. In the light of cultural ecofeminist theory, Lipoktula's submersion in the river could be understood as a symbolic return to the earth. As A. Savitha

Pressy explains, cultural ecofeminism “tends to value qualities identified in women and their reflection in action” (Pressy 10). particularly women’s intuitive relationship with nature. The quiet strength of Lipoktula is, thus, a feminine ethic of bearing and attending to.

The continuity and nurturing of ecofeminist ideas are also emphasized by the generational structure of the story. This is what Medemla demonstrates with Martha. The moment of connection is portrayed as if a “lone hand” is “forging a bond” between her lonely self and this “abandoned child” (Ao 53), emphasizing the strength of maternal love to hold life together even in “oppressive” social situations. When a man rejects his baby girl, as Martha’s biological father does, patriarchy’s image shines bright. [...] she who has killed my wife” (Ao 53). This dismissal is a manifestation of the dichotomy of masculine and feminine archetypes, where nurturing attributes are considered feminine and thus weaknesses. Ao turns this order on its head with Medemla’s reply. Her rescue of the cast-out child is a manifestation of compassion; it turns rejection into rescue. Ecocritics such as Janis Birkeland argue that patriarchal systems privilege rationality and domination while devaluing care and nurturing traits. As ecofeminist theory notes, dominant culture has historically “devalu[ed] whatever is associated with women, emotion... and nature,” while elevating masculine-coded values (Gaard 5). Medemla’s care for Martha reflects the ecofeminist belief that women are often the true “custodians of earth-health” (Shiva 128).

Lipoktula’s secret trauma is another example of the ecofeminist focus on the challenge and confrontation of violence. Lipoktula is concerned about the “terrifying spectre of an incestuous marriage” between Medemla (Ao 58) and himself. When she tells the truth she says, “I knew that my dark secret had at last surfaced...” (Ao 57). This is a symbolic act of purification in the form of a confession. Restoring ecosystems means recognizing or naming environmental harm, and social healing means naming invisible violence. In the end, “Three Women” is a film about the connections between women’s suffering, renewal and caring. In Ao’s narrative, women take on the role of cultural memory and ecological values through Lipoktula’s endurance, Medemla’s compassion, and Martha’s rooted identity.

CONCLUSION

Ao’s stories re-imagine landscapes, rivers, forests and trees as more than just stage-sets; as agents of human experience. They are the elements of the ecology as places of memory, affect, continuity, thus imbuing human life with a wider environmental awareness. Especially the laburnum tree, which appears as a pivotal ecological emblem that reframes memory and identity in a process of renewal, displacing the static and patriarchal forms of memory. The stories also describe the ways in which ecological spaces are the sites of trauma and survival. Nature is a repository of human and cultural and emotional histories, absorbing, reflecting and retaining suffering. These make possible Ao’s efforts to represent women’s experiences in a way that breaks down the boundaries between humans and nonhumans and situates them within an indigenous ecological worldview. This is a vision of interconnectedness which foregrounds the unavoidable connection between cultural memory and environmental belonging.

The ecofeminist perspective brings to light the critique of systems of domination that at the same time oppress women and exploit nature. Vandana Shiva makes an argument, that “the violence to nature... is also linked to violence to women” (Shiva xvii). This formulation could be particularly relevant to Ao’s fiction, where patriarchy operates as an oppressive force for women and as the cultural drive of controlling, disciplining and monumentalising nature. Ao’s tales are then about the links between ecological destruction and gender subjugation in the same ideological frameworks. Ao’s female characters speak other moralities that are grounded in care, nurture and ecological interdependence, in contrast to this ethos of domination. They are

connected to nature and live in a continuity rather than permanence and reciprocity rather than control. The ethics of care is at the heart of these relationships and makes women and nature the protagonists who support life and community. Lastly, *Laburnum for my Head* is an ecological imagination that imagines nature as a living archive of memory, resistance and regeneration. The exhibition demonstrates indigenous knowledge and exposes the power dynamics of patriarchy, presenting another moral narrative, one that is more interdependent and sustainable.

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RELATIONAL ECOLOGIES AND NARRATIVE RESPONSIBILITY: TRADITIONAL AND INDIGENOUS ECOLOGICAL WISDOM IN CANADIAN AND INDIAN LITERARY TRADITIONS

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ABSTRACT

In the age of multiple global environmental crises, old and indigenous knowledge, which is frequently grounded in the nature-human relationship, is being re-explored for its unique approaches and practices for non-extractive human living in/on the earth. An exploration of Indigenous ecological knowledges in Indian and Canadian literary traditions. By examining several Canadian Indigenous stories, together with traditional Indian Adivasi and oral stories, the concept of land as animate, divine, inseparable from community, identity, religion and memory is deconstructed. The stories brought into this discussion highlight an ecological consciousness in which human-nonhuman reciprocity is valued above all else. As opposed to nature-as-commodity/resource understanding that stems from human perceptions, these knowledges describe a system and understanding derived from a circular notion of time, co-management and nonhuman co-existence. Oral narratives, myth and the act of storying in community function to preserve and maintain Indigenous knowledges, in the face of continued colonial dispossession and the continued commercialisation of nature. In undertaking a comparative analysis, this paper makes a claim for both similarities and differences within the Canadian and Indian readings of the land and its management, and also makes the assertion for sustained engagement with Indigenous storytelling in entering the contemporary talk of nature-ethics.

Key Words: *Indigenous Ecological Wisdom, Relational Ecologies, Narrative Responsibility, Traditional Knowledge Systems, Environmental Ethics, Comparative Indigenous Studies, Canadian and Indian Literatures*

INTRODUCTION

Recent times in literature and culture have also taken an interesting turn, and accordingly, such critical practices as ecocriticism and environmental humanities push us to re-centre our vision and focus on the environment not only in terms of science and politics, but also of culture and narrative. This essay explores the idea of indigenous ecological wisdom using literary traditions from India and Canada. In direct opposition to the master narrative of the human-nature relationship as primarily extraction and dominance, we have the stories and storytelling traditions—particularly the oral tradition of indigenous peoples, but also indigenous-inspired narratives—which present an environment that contains human beings as part of a life-giving interdependence with the environment. Through exploring the narratives from these two contrasting cultures, we can examine whether and how an ecological ethic can be useful and even possible in literature as a counter-force against the hegemonic/extortory narrative. In conclusion, we examine how indigenous narrative traditions function within the framework of environmentalism. One that is based on anti-dualism and relationality, that includes nature and environment as constituents of community identity and survival.

Recently, literature and culture have seen a shift, prompting a new sensibility and its practices (ecocriticism, environmental humanities) that urge us to rethink our relationships to the environment, not merely as science or policy, but as culture and narrative. In direct opposition to

the dominant narrative of the human-nature relationship being based on the extraction of natural resources and dominance, are the indigenous and indigenous-inspired storytelling traditions that focus on an environment that includes human beings as components with which it shares a life-supporting relationship, an interdependence. In this paper, the concept of indigenous ecological wisdom will be examined through literary traditions of India and Canada. Although the history and cultures are different, the two traditions share the common theme of relational thinking. By reading narrative traditions from these two distinct cultures, we will explore the relevance and possibility of an ecological ethic in literature and its role in countering hegemonic/exploitative narratives. In the conclusion, we will consider the role of indigenous narrative traditions in environmentalism.

Theoretical Framework: Indigenous Epistemologies and Relational Ecology

There are, and can be, alternative ways of indigenous knowing that are as far removed from Western knowing as can be. Alternative ways of knowing the natural world exist. Ecological knowledge is passed through day-to-day life and ritual, where it is known and lived, not lived through distinct disciplines and compartments, as it may be in Western ways of thinking, which may separate disciplines but are holistic as they draw ecological knowledge, culture, spirit and ethics together. Instead, the Western approach of separating humans from the world emphasises learning not just with the mind but in experience so that balance can be maintained. Traditional knowledge, discussed by Vandana Shiva and others, not only challenges nature as a commodity but also honours it for its own intrinsic worth. This knowledge system emphasises experience, wisdom, lifestyle, and as such questions the adoration of power over nature, and objectivity as dominant ways of knowing. Most traditional and indigenous cosmologies do not conceive of the world as an objective thing, but a subjective experience imbued with a spirit, a repository of memories. Indigenous ways of knowing emerge from everyday life and community, rather than the thinking mind. They are transmitted through ordinary daily life, rather than through the exclusive result of abstract thought. Ecological knowledge is passed down through everyday life, including daily activity and ritual, where it is acquired and inhabited through being, rather than lived through in separate, isolated disciplines, as it can be in Western thinking, which may compartmentalise disciplines, but is holistic as it relates ecological knowledge, culture, spirit and ethics. These ways of knowing value wisdom and lifestyle, rather than what is learned, thus questioning the glorification of objectivity and the power over nature as a primary way of knowing. This is relational ecology; considering human beings and nature as inextricably interconnected, rather than being distinctly separate phenomena. It challenges human/non-human divisions. Coupled with stories, this kind of knowledge serves as a kind of stewardship.

Canadian Indigenous Literary Traditions

An instance of this way of looking at ecology in Canadian Indigenous literature may be found in the works of King and Maracle in their examination of land, identity and community in such an intertwined manner. These authors confront and repudiate notions of private land ownership as posited by the European tradition and argue instead for land that exists as a sentient being to which cultural memory and spiritual connection are preserved. In King's *The Truth About Stories*, he asserts that stories are much more than entertainment but are imbued with a certain authority. Another strand in the Canadian indigenous literary tradition, narrative itself is characterised by the fact of its stories-as-resistance and the preservation of knowledge, myth and stories which are not texts in themselves but part of the discourse within which rearticulation of self and voice occurs after colonisation.

A further example of a strand within Canadian indigenous literary tradition is the narrative's

characteristic of story as resistance and continuation of knowledge, myth, and story, all of which are found not as mere text, but as the context of the rearticulation of self and voice after colonialism. By reclaiming connections denied to them by colonialism, indigenous literature and memory also reaffirm and re-establish the relationships people have to the land, and the relationship people have to history, thereby also making storytelling both an act of politics and of ecology. In turn, indigenous practices are also about colonial histories, the dispossession of indigenous peoples, the slavery of indigenous peoples and the suppression of indigenous peoples and allow for a redefinition of ecological discourse within an indigenous context based on indigenous practices of the re-establishment of oral tradition, showing how deeply linked culture and ecology are. Indigenous traditions also address the colonial historical experiences, the displacement of Indigenous peoples, and their enslavement and oppression, enabling the redefinition of ecological discourse based upon indigenous attempts to reinstitute oral tradition, demonstrating that ecology is inextricably linked with culture.

Indian Adivasi and Traditional Ecological Narratives

The aspect of storytelling as both a form of resistance and as continuity of culture is another prominent theme within Canadian Indigenous literatures. Stories are orally told, and they convey the relationship between humankind, the forest, the river, and the soil. It is through traditional stories such as these that man may learn to live more sustainably, as they represent culture and contain ecological knowledge. And indeed, many authors like Vandana Shiva argue that there cannot be any domination of humans who live in an ecological relationship with their surroundings. The legends and stories of Adivasi folk heroes definitely illustrate the forest as being a shared entity for both man and nature. These tales defy the commodification of nature to be used up and advocate co-existence. Another salient theme in Canadian Indigenous literatures is the element of storytelling as a form of resistance and as continuity of culture. It is this practice, it seems, which binds writing to land and to history and self. In the indigenous stories, the distinction between literature and acts of resistance fades out as the author regains her/his language and identity from the colonisers. Stories and myths mingle history and fiction, memory and imagination. Thus, they provide a new dimension to define a truth. These stories, told by Canadian Indigenous writers, connect memories to lands, which have been fractured and disconnected as a result of the colonial invasion. Therefore, storytelling is equally a political act and an ecological act. This very act connects the writer to land, the self, and history. It negates the interpretation of land as just another resource.

From traditional Indian stories, we can gather many clues that suggest time is cyclical and humans live in harmony with nature. Farming, seasonal festivals and local celebrations are associated with nature. These traditional stories are cultural expressions and hold ecological wisdom that could guide humans to achieve sustainability.

Comparative Analysis: Convergences and Differences

It can perhaps be accepted that the basic premises of Canadian Indigenous and Indian Adivasi ecological thinking have some common ground; however, it should be made clear how each ecological thought system is stated differently and thus developed along different lines through different political circumstances. We claim no being 'boss over nature,' we argue that we are 'one part of a greater totality.' The stories of the Indian Adivasi are as much a product of the experience of colonialism as of the ongoing struggle over land alienation resulting from developmental activities and ecological justice within the postcolonial Indian state.

In fact, comparison, and specifically the very disjunction of comparison, instead of nullifying it, has helped increase the comparative project, since it shows how thought, situated in a

relational ecology, is alert to discrete political predicaments without dependence on morality, on which it relies, but at the community. Storytelling is universal across all traditions for transmitting lore to other generations. The stories here reflect minor variations of this across all traditions, depending on each story's individual history. What colonial changes have been brought to the world? That is what is asked in Canadian native stories. Stories of struggle to access land are what are told in Indian Adivasi stories. While it must be admitted that there are certain similarities underlying Canadian Indigenous and Indian Adivasi ecological thought, how their respective ecological thought appears must be considered in light of their unique histories. Canadian Indigenous stories are informed by the lived experience of settler colonialism and the reclamation of voice through both oral and literary forms. Indian Adivasi stories draw on the lived experience of colonisation, but also the ongoing struggles over displacement because of development and ecological justice within the postcolonial Indian nation-state. This diversity of responses doesn't negate the benefits of comparing, but rather they are necessary for comparison to occur, and illustrate within ecology how thinking is reacting to different political pressures, employing community morals. The narratives do respond, nonetheless, to the current growth-based paradigms and their associated ecologies.

Narrative Responsibility and Contemporary Relevance

Thinking about narrative responsibility is relevant as we consider the relevance of Indigenous narrative today. Stories are not just the backdrop to conversation: stories continue to form the ways in which we relate to land. The Indigenous narrative is a narrative of care; we must take care of the earth and hold it safely and not exploitatively. These are the issues, of an ethical kind, that are most relevant now, given the ecological crisis: for, while our own ecological debates are almost exclusively about science and politics, the Indigenous story offers both a cultural and ethical element to them. In other words, it's an ethical challenge to science discourse, and it asks that sustainability also be a matter of culture and ethics, not just science and politics. Nevertheless, it's not just the ethics that matter: the stories redefine the relation between speaker and receiver in ecological discourse. Storytelling is not just speaking words from one to another; a story is the living conduit from one generation to the next, and it embodies an ethic from speaker to receiver. This is an ecological discourse in which storytelling is considered; in it, it's assumed that the reader/listener is not a passive transmitter but someone who perpetuates the ecological balance. What this represents, then, is a critique of many of the most fashionable critical readings of much contemporary literature, which have provided the frame of many projects in cultural studies: critical readings which see texts as the thing itself to be deconstructed, rather than event and living discourse. The moral concern for the story and that creates a duty of relation between the reader/speaker makes us wonder about the reader's ethics, as well as about our own role, within a broad notion of ecology. Story becomes ecology: ecology is conceived as an activity. Learning ecology from the indigenous means to use literature and cultural studies in order to construct a comprehensive notion of an appropriate response to the earth.

CONCLUSION

Not only are traditional and indigenous stories ornaments, but the "roots" of a new ethic of ecology, and understanding thus cannot only be studying these stories; understanding means, in effect, re-conceiving the worth attributed to various knowledge forms. Now of all times when ecology has become so fragile, they represent a new kind of ecological responsibility. They offer a path towards the formation of new ecological practices, even at this moment of ecological fragility. Through the contrast of these voices, it is apparent that this tree-sky form of human-nature relations could help us avoid each of our critical environmental issues today.

Through the use of the cross-cultural comparison, the author has provided adequate proof for the above claim: that there is no strictly native or local knowledge of the environment and that the indigenous knowledge of the environment does indeed lend itself to the total relatedness and relationship with the environment. The comparison between the Canadian indigenous and Indian Adivasi literatures helps to establish the fact that diverse voices from diverse cultural contexts are expressing a common related ecology and an ecological ethic. What we find at the heart of all traditional and indigenous wisdom is that any authentic response to the ecosystem cannot escape from universalisation; it requires moving out from a technology-driven and politics-oriented modernity, which has been touted as the only way out.

Traditional and indigenous stories are no longer accessories, but the source of a new ecological ethic, and thus understanding cannot mean only studying them; it means rethinking the valuing of different knowledge systems. At this particular juncture, when ecology has turned so vulnerable, they stand out as a new responsible ecological practice.

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AN ECOFEMINIST INTERSECTIONAL READING OF *LABURNUM FOR MY HEAD* BY TEMSÜLA AO

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at *Laburnum for My Head* by Temsula Ao as a story that highlights the linked pain of women, nature and indigenous communities in a place with a lot of presence. The story shows violence as affecting both the environment and women where the way land is treated reflects how women's bodies and lives are treated. Nature is not a background but a quiet observer that feels the pain, sadness and memories and it helps us understand the moral and emotional parts of the story. The main point of this paper is that the text talks about ecofeminism by showing how men's power and political fights together cause harm to the environment and make women more vulnerable. The problem this research tries to solve is that people often think it's normal to harm the environment and women in stories about conflicts in stories about India's Northeast, where these connections are not studied enough. The goal of the study is to understand *Laburnum for My Head* as a story that criticizes violence by using nature, death and silence in a way. The method used combines ideas from ecofeminist theory using Vandana Shiva's ecofeminist ideas, with analysis of stories from postcolonial times to study how the story is told, the portrayal of land, and the care for others in the text. A short look at existing research shows that while Ao's work is often read through regional lenses, its environmental and gender parts have not gotten much attention. This paper therefore sees the story as an ecofeminist work that shows how women and nature are equally hurt under systems that dominate them.

Key Words: *Ecofeminism, violence, against women, nature, memory, literature.*

INTRODUCTION

Temsula Ao is a voice in Indian English literature. Her works show what life is like in Northeast India. People there face conflict. Her short story *Laburnum for My Head* is about Lentina, a widow. Lentina wants a tree on her grave. This is her choice and it shows who she is. Most people follow burial practices. Lentina wants a living tree instead of a stone marker. This shows she loves nature. She thinks differently about life, death and remembering people. The story is simple but has big ideas. It is about being yourself, what society expects, and how people connect with nature. This paper looks at the story from an ecofeminist and intersectional perspective. It uses ideas from Vandana Shiva. She says "women and nature are often controlled in systems". Lentina's character is interesting because her life reveals different aspects of her identity and how people treat her unfairly. Her bond with the laburnum tree shows care and harmony. Her choice challenges what people expect. It shows a connection between taking care of the earth and women's rights. Personal choice can be a way to resist. Nature is not just background; it is part of life and memory.

Woman and Nature Connection

The connection between Lentina and the laburnum tree in *Laburnum for My Head* is really deep and meaningful. It shows how a woman and nature can be closely connected, which clearly determines what ecofeminist thought is all about. Lentina likes the laburnum tree more than a gravestone because it is alive and reminds her of peace and life. The laburnum tree is special because it blooms at times of the year and is very quiet which says a lot about Lentina and what

she values. This connection between Lentina and the laburnum tree can be understood through the idea that women and nature have a bond that is often not valued enough in societies clearly controlled by men. Vandana Shiva says that “women know a lot about nature because they interact with it every day and this relationship is based on caring for nature and not controlling it”. Karen J. Warren also points out that “people have used the connection between women and nature to justify controlling women. It can also be a source of strength for women”. In this story nature is not a pretty background. It is like a friend that remembers things and feels emotions. Lentina wants to be buried under the laburnum tree. It feels like the thing to do. It reminds her that death is not the end. It is a part of nature's cycle. This idea is what ecofeminists believe. They think people are connected to the world. They are not separate from it. The laburnum tree and Lentina's wish to be buried under it shows this connection. People and nature are linked and ecofeminists believe this. The laburnum tree symbolizes how things can continue and be taken care of, which is different from ways of burying people that are rigid and not natural. Through Lentina's choice the story shows a way of living. It values remembering in harmony with nature more than having things that last forever. It suggests that women and nature are both strong and can keep life going even when it is not easy to see. Lentina and the laburnum tree show that it is possible to live in a way that values peace and life and that is what the story is really about. The laburnum tree and Lentina are connected in a way that shows how women and nature can be strong and resilient together.

Resistance to Patriarchal and Social Norms

Lentina made a decision about her burial in *Laburnum for My Head*. This decision can be seen as an important act of resistance against the rules that society and men have made for women, rules that control what women can and cannot do even after they die. In the community people usually follow burial practices that have been around for a long time and these practices are often decided by men. This does not leave room for women to make their own choices. Lentina wanted a tree instead of a regular grave marker. This shows that she wanted to be in charge of her life and death. She did not want to follow the rules. Her choice was not a protest but a quiet and firm decision to do things her own way. This makes her resistance more powerful.

This is similar to what some ecofeminists think. They believe that society should not control women and nature. Maria Mies said that “men often try to control women and the natural world and treat them like objects that can be used”. Lentina's decision goes against this. She does not want others or rules to control her body and memory. She wants to be in charge of her death and how people remember her. She wants to make her choices, about her death. She chose a way of remembering that's personal and connected to nature. This can also be linked to what Karen J. Warren said about the “logic of domination”. This makes some people feel they are superior to others and should be in control. They use this mindset to justify dominating women and the environment. By choosing a living tree Lentina resists the control of men. Also questions the values that society thinks are important such as permanence and status. Her choice to be quiet is a way of fighting. It shows she has values and beliefs. This act says women can think for themselves and make their decisions. Even when society tries to limit their freedom women can still be, in control. She is making a point that you do not have to make a lot of noise to stand up for what you believe in. It is a way of saying no to things that go against her values. Her actions show that being quiet can be a way to resist. It also shows that women can be free. She makes her choices. It shows resistance can be quiet. Lentina's decision is an example of this. Lentina and her decision about Laburnum, for My Head show that true autonomy and freedom can exist and that Lentina and her actions can inspire others to think about Lentina and her choices.

Theme of intersectionality

Lentina's character in *Laburnum for My Head* is better understood when we consider her identities. Her life is shaped by her age, gender and social class. As a widow she is expected to be passive and dependent.. Her actions show she is quietly changing this role. She talks to the gardener, who's from a lower social class. Their relationship is based on respect, not status. This is like what Kimberlé Crenshaw says, "that types of inequality intersect and shape our experiences in complex ways". In the story Lentina wants to make her decisions even when others expect her to be passive. She shows she has control over her life despite her age and being a widow. She refuses to accept the role people give her. She decides how she wants to be buried resisting others' influence. Her connection with the gardener shows she values people over hierarchy. The story shows that our identities are shaped by things like age, gender and class. It also shows we can have control over our lives within these structures. This supports the idea that systems of power are connected and we can challenge them.

Ecology as Legacy and Sustainability

The laburnum tree in *Laburnum for My Head* is a symbol. It shows a way of thinking about memory, death and legacy. This new way moves away from material things and it goes towards an eco-friendly and sustainable view. Lentina chose to plant a living tree on her grave. She did not want a stone marker. This choice shows she wants to be connected to nature. She does not want to be separate from it. The laburnum tree grows, changes, and helps the environment. This is different from grave markers that stay the same. The tree suggests a way of remembering that's positive and helps new life grow. This idea fits with ecofeminist thinking. Vandana Shiva is an ecofeminist who says we must respect nature's cycles. She says human life and the environment are connected. Lentina's choice is a rejection of some common practices. These practices value being permanent and showing off over being kind to the environment. Her wish shows she understands nature as a place of life. In nature life keeps going even after someone dies. The laburnum tree blooms every season and this is a reminder that life continues. It is not a reminder of someone's absence. This way of thinking about legacy changes the focus. It moves away from death being the end. It sees death as a change within nature's cycle. The story presents an understanding of sustainability. In this view human life is not separate from nature but it is a part of nature itself. This fits with the ecofeminist idea that harmony comes from living not controlling. The laburnum tree and Lentina's choice show this idea. The story hence strongly supports this ecofeminist view.

CONCLUSION

Laburnum For My Head by Temsula Ao is a book that talks about women and their relationship with nature and society. The book shows how women are connected to the world around them. It also shows how women can challenge the rules of society. Women are very important to society and this story clearly explains the same. The book *Laburnum For My Head* by Temsula Ao is about women and how they can make a difference in the world around them by challenging the rules of society that affect women. The protagonist, Lentina, is an example of this. She makes choices that go against what people expect from her from men and those in power. Her relationship with a tree is special. It shows that she really cares about our planet and gets how everything is linked. Lentina makes her own choices about living and dying that prove she is in charge. She doesn't have to battle anyone to be free; she just has to be honest with herself. The story mixes in themes, like gender, age, social class and the environment, which makes it pretty well-rounded. It shows how these things intersect and shape our experiences. Lentina's actions are not what people typically expect from a woman. The woman is independent. She has her own dignity. The laburnum tree is a symbol of continuity and renewal. It shows that we can leave a

lasting legacy that's good for the world. The story says that being empowered is not about fighting against people. It is also about changing how we see the laburnum tree and the world and our place in the world. We can care for the world and live in balance with nature. The laburnum tree shows us that we can live in harmony with the world. The book *Laburnum for My Head* presents Lentina and her laburnum tree as examples. Lentina and the laburnum tree show us a way to live and be. The laburnum tree is important to Lentina. It is a symbol of empowerment.

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THE STATUS OF WOMEN LED MSMEs IN INDIA AND THE CHALLENGES FACED BY THEM

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ABSTRACT

Women led Micro, small and medium enterprises are a rapidly evolving economic sector in India with over 2.2 crore registered units comprising roughly 20-26% of all MSMEs. Most of the sectors are concentrated in rural areas as these initiatives help in job creation and economic growth particularly in labourintensive sectors like textiles, handicrafts and food processing sector. The enterprises are heavily supported by government schemes and policies providing collateral free loans up to 20 lakhs for women entrepreneurs. Despite support and growth this financial sector face significant obstacles in the form of financial accessibility, digital divide and lack of proper training or guidance. This paper delineates the status of women led MSMEs in India and the challenges faced by them.

Key Words: MSMEs, Enterprises, Financial access, Entrepreneurs, rural, economic growth

INTRODUCTION

Indian economy is of a mixed economy in nature that is mainly inclined towards a liberal economic policy. Both the private and public owned enterprises follows a neoliberal governance structure to attain the goal of VIKSHIT BHARAT by 2047. India's neoliberal trajectory in reality has undermined or focused less on the manufacturing sector [secondary sector], removal of trade barriers, fiscal conservatism that discouraged public investment and lack of opening of the economy to foreign capital both productive and financial capital. In total these have sustained a pattern of growth that depends on credit and financial flows but stagnated without robust industrialization and autonomous technological developments. In order to develop the manufacturing sector the government has introduced various ease of doing business initiatives, schemes to encourage MSMEs [micro, small, medium enterprises]. The MSME sector is a major contributor for the socio-economic development of the country. The sector has immensely contributed the entrepreneurial spirit especially in the semi-urban and the rural regions. According to the latest data, around 7.16 crore MSMEs with an employment of 31.33 crore has been registered with the udyam registrationportal. The Union ministry of MSMEs has received an allocated amount of 23,168 crore FY26 union budget, an increase of 4.6% from the previous

year. Under Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana as of April of 2025 around 33 lakh crore were sanctioned under 52 crore mudra loans for the SME sector particularly those belonging to the marginalized sections of societ FY26 has increased the allocated amount around 2.5 times, particularly the new limits are as follows (Table 1):

As of November 2025 Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu continue to dominate the MSME landscape. Majority of the registered enterprises are trading

Classification	Investment limit	Turnover
Micro	2.5 crore	10 crore
Small	25 crore	100 crore
Medium	125 crore	500 crore

Table 1: Investment limits

services while manufacturing and services stood third and second respectively. The government is actively encouraging MSMEs to market their products and services through Government e market places. Women led micro, small and medium enterprises [MSMEs] play a crucial role in India's economy creating jobs, driving innovation and empowering communities. Studies reveal that msme led by women created 63 percent of employment. In spite of all these msme sectors are facing systemic barriers and investment hindrances that limit their growth and sustainability. Addressing these challenges requires a collaborative approach that involves stakeholders, financial institutions, NGOs, MNCs, civil society groups and above all favourable policies and schemes by the government. Over the last decade goal oriented policies such as Udhayam Shakti portal and technological interventions like UPI [Unified payment interface] and gender neutral supporting environment can help in overcoming barriers in the long run. Success stories of women led enterprises breaking into innovative and future startup ventures highlight the great potential of these sectors that can contribute to economic and social progress.

Women led MSMEs in India

India has 63 million of MSMEs of which only 20% of them are owned or led by women. Women led sectors provide nearly 22 to 27 million people. Studies suggest that by encouraging and investing on women's entrepreneurship we can create around 150-170 million jobs. Global Entrepreneurship Monitor [GEM] shows women's early state entrepreneurial activity [TEA] are often high in low income countries. In case of India GEM reports that majority of women in India gets into entrepreneurship due to job scarcity other than for creating a valuable business or for earning profits. Based on data available from NITI Ayog's Women Entrepreneurship Platform [WEP] and Ministry of MSME report, women entrepreneurs are majority concentrated in service and micro manufacturing sectors with high participation in textile and apparel industries, personal services, Handicrafts, health and fem-tech.

Governmental schemes and measures for supporting women led MSMEs:

Government schemes for women led enterprises in India offer financial assistance in the form of loans and subsidies for women owned ventures and also provide training and skill development initiatives for upskilling and reskilling them. Major initiatives include PMEGP, STAND UP INDIA, MUDRA yojana and TREAD providing specialized support for women entrepreneurs.

- PM Vishwakarma: Provide skill training with stipend, entrepreneurial training, financial and digital literacy and providing marketing support including e-commerce onboarding for artisans and craftspeople
- Coir vikas yojana-upgrading the skills of women artisans in the coir sector
- Procurement and market support scheme-providing 100% subsidy for women entrepreneurs for participating in trade fairs
- Yashaswini campaign -campaign to raise awareness and inform women entrepreneurs about various MSME schemes
- Udyogini scheme-focuses on empowering women by offering financial assistance to start or expand an enterprise. This scheme supports wide range of industries, especially in rural areas and provides loan at concessional rates
- Stand up India scheme-this scheme aims to support women, SC and ST entrepreneurs by offering 10 lakh to 1 crore loan. This initiative helps women in establishing enterprises in manufacturing, trading and service sectors
- Annapurna scheme-this scheme is exclusively for women who want to start food based

businesses lending loans upto Rs 50,000 to purchase raw materials and equipment. This promotes women led businesses in food industries making them financial empowered

- Mudra Yojana scheme-most popular scheme for women empowerment offering collateral free loan to small ventures. Loans are provided under three categories-Shishu, Kishore and Tarun-depending upon the stage and scale of the business.
- Mahila Udhyam Nidhi scheme-offered by SIDBI supporting women entrepreneurs in setting up new ventures or expanding businesses. The scheme provides financial assistance up to 10 lakhs with flexible repayment option encouraging innovation and business growth for women entrepreneurs among MSME sectors
- Pradhan Mantri Rozgar Yojana-offers financial assistance to unemployed women to start their own ventures. It provides loans up to 2 lakhs for enterprises in manufacturing, trade and services. This is a step towards curbing unemployment and fostering entrepreneurship among women.
- TREAD[Trade related Entrepreneurship Assistance and development]-this scheme is to support women from economically weaker sections. This initiative provides financial assistance, skill development and counselling sessions to help women establish their business.

The benefits of these schemes mainly help in empowering women financially and knowledgably. Access to affordable credit, providing financial subsidies, enhanced market access, skill development, technological upgradation, export promotion and ease of doing business are instrumental in driving economic growth and fostering a dynamic and inclusive economy. Fig. 1 shows the share of women owned enterprises by sector wise distribution and Fig. 2 shows the percentage of agricultural and non-agricultural enterprises led by women. Around 65% of women are non agricultural enterprises and 35% of them are agricultural enterprises. Fig 3 shows top 5 states with highest WMSMEs and Fig. 4 shows the status of women led MSMEs by size. Around 72% are micro sized enterprises, 19% small and 9 % medium enterprises.

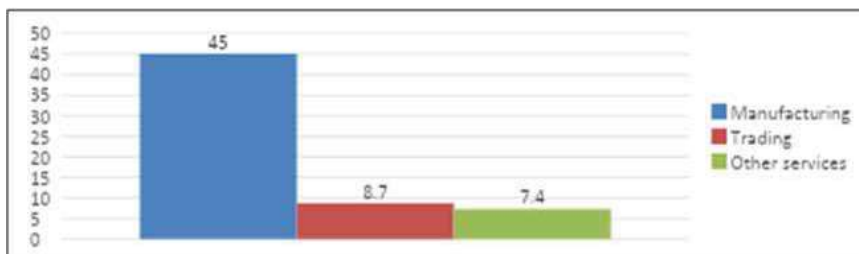


Fig. 1: Share of women led enterprises by sector wise distribution. The manufacturing sector is the majority area led by women.

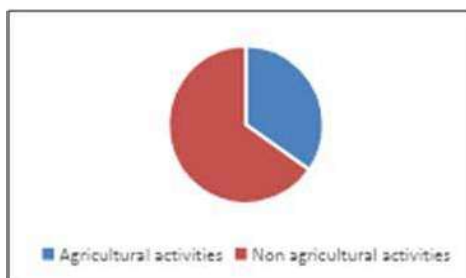


Fig. 2: The percentage of agricultural and non-agricultural enterprises led by women.

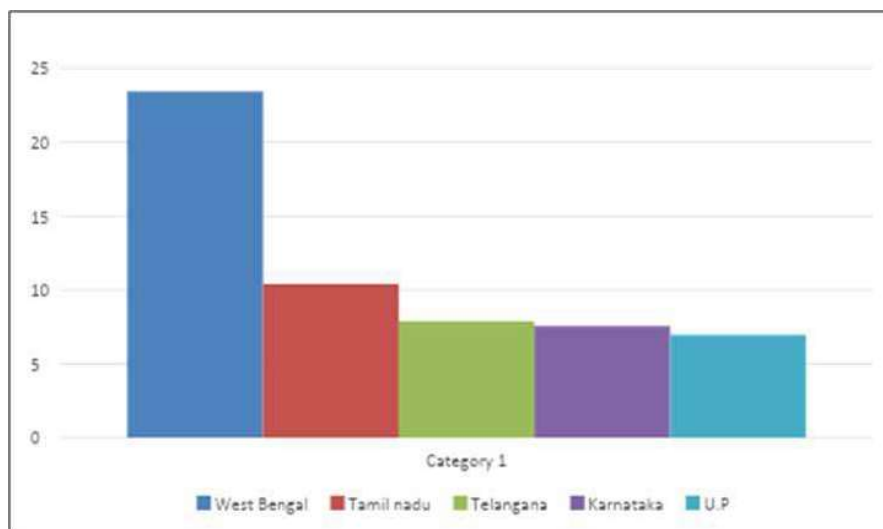


Fig. 3: Top 5 states with highest WMSMEs-source: MoMSMEs annual report 2021-2022

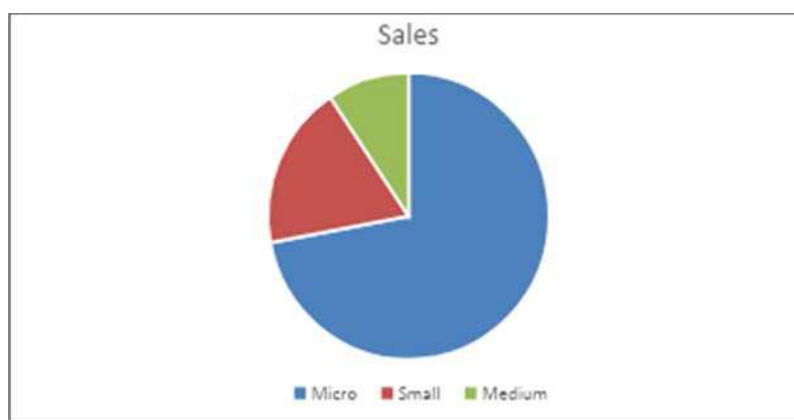


Fig. 4: Status of women led MSMEs by size.

In India, women-led MSMEs are 90% seasonal and only 10% of them are enduring. A contemporary Standing committee on finance has reported that MSME sector has a credit gap of around INR 20-25 trillion. GEM reported that women entrepreneurs in India and Republic of Korea face immense obstacles compared to their male counterparts due to lack of collateral or tangible assets. Majority of the women led enterprises are household based and informal in nature having narrow exposure to market places and consumer demands. Women entrepreneurs also have to involve in unpaid care works, face logistical and domiciliary obstacles and lack of digital and technological skills will again be barriers to their entrepreneurial growth. There are infrastructural, technical, economical, familial and psychological barriers to the women led MSMEs.

The main structural barriers are as follows:

- Financial exclusion: Schemes such as Pradhan Mantri's Employment generation program provide a substantial percentage of subsidies [25% in urban and 35% in rural areas] but poor execution, collateral requirements and lack of credit guarantees make them excluded.

- Gendered environment and market prejudice: most of the women owned enterprises are in manufacturing and labour intensive sectors like textile, apparel or beauty services while men dominate technical fields. Exclusions from networks and unions, associations makes them isolated and vulnerable. Worse, some firms misuse women specific firms by registering under a female family member and diverting the financial resources for their advantage.
- Limited ownership of properties for women and lack of awareness of governmental schemes and policies again make women entrepreneurs backward and less competitive.
- Family and societal pressure: Balancing traditional gender roles, home chores and care duties often burn out and face limited time for self growth and development
- From fig1 it is clear that women led enterprises majorly are in the manufacturing sector that are labor intensive and time consuming which may make them excluded from technologically advanced manufacturing sector
- Women are almost negligible In trading as it can lead to gender bias and prejudice.
- Digital divide- A report by NASSCOM has found that limited adoption of digital record keeping and e commerce, with only 17.6 percent women using digital methods for customer review and relationship management highlighting a significant gap
- According to a study by Micro, Small and Medium enterprises only 14 % of women entrepreneurs had access to formal training and mentorship programs as lack of support hinders their ability to scale and access markets
- Women led msme in agricultural sectors often face climate changes and only a fraction of them are able to access climate adaptation financing

Addressing the challenges faced by women-led MSMEs in India requires an comprehensive -based approach that acknowledges the complexity of barriers these enterprises face. No single funder,shareholder or angel investor can effectively and comprehensively resolve issues such as access to finance, climate adaptation, optimistic mindset, nurturing environment and digital inclusion. A collaborative and a bottom up approach are indispensable bringing together fund raisers, policymakers, nonprofit organizations, entrepreneurs, and other stakeholders to create an accelerating environment for these commerce to thrive.

CONCLUSION

Women led Micro, small and medium enterprises are a rapidly evolving economic sector in India with over 2.2 crore registered units comprising roughly 20-26% of all MSMEs. Most of the sectors are concentrated in rural areas and semi urban areas as these initiatives help in job creation and economic growth particularly in labour intensive sectors like textiles, handicrafts and food processing industries. The enterprises are heavily supported and subsidized by government schemes and policies providing collateral free loans up to 20 lakhs for women entrepreneurs. Despite support and growth this financial sector faces significant barriers in the form of financial attainability, misinformations, digital divide and lack of proper training or guidance. India's neoliberal trajectory in reality has undermined or focused less on the manufacturing sector [secondary sector], removal of trade barriers, fiscal conservatism that discouraged public investment and lack of opening of the economy to foreign capital both productive and financial capital. The MSME sector is a major contributor for the socio-economic development of the country. The sector has immensely contributed the entrepreneurial spirit especially in the semi-urban and the rural regions. Women led micro, small and medium enterprises [MSMEs] play a crucial role in India's economy creating jobs, driving innovation and

empowering communities. Studies disclose that MSMEs led by women created 63 percent of employment. In spite of all these msme sectors are still facing systemic barriers and investment hindrances that limit their growth and sustainability. From this study we can conclude that women led enterprises in non agricultural sectors are around 65% far more than agricultural sectors and around 72% are micro sectors owned and led by women. To promote women led enterprises the government and various other stakeholders should encourage and create opportunities holistically to promote women led enterprises and therefore for a Vikshit Bharat 2047.

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TOXIC LANDSCAPES AND SILENCED VOICES: ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at how postcolonial literature addresses environmental justice by highlighting the uneven distribution of ecological damage in regions that were formerly colonized. Using ideas from Rob Nixon and Edward Said, the study examines how environmental harm often continues colonial exploitation. Nixon's idea of "slow violence" is key to understanding how toxic waste dumping, resource extraction, deforestation, and climate vulnerability hit marginalized communities in the Global South the hardest. By closely reading selected postcolonial texts, especially *Oil on Water* by Helon Habila and *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh, the paper shows how these literary works highlight communities impacted by oil spills, rising sea levels, and ecological destruction. These stories demonstrate that environmental harm is deeply linked to histories of imperialism, corporate greed, and government neglect. The landscapes depicted are not just backgrounds but contested spaces filled with resistance, survival, and memory. The paper claims that postcolonial green narratives push back against Eurocentric environmental ideas by focusing on indigenous knowledge, local struggles, and grassroots activism. They broaden the view of ecological responsibility to include social fairness, historical awareness, and justice for past wrongs. In the end, literature serves as an important way to rethink environmental justice as both ecological sustainability and decolonial resistance.

Key Words: *Environmental Justice, Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Slow Violence, Decolonial Ecology, Global South.*

INTRODUCTION

The modern world faces environmental crises as its most urgent environmental crisis. The world faces problems with climate change and pollution and deforestation and biodiversity loss which impact every country. The environmental issues which affect different areas of the world impact different regions with different levels of intensity. The Global South countries experience higher levels of environmental harm because of their historical colonial exploitation and economic inequality and the operations of multinational companies. Environmental justice seeks to address this imbalance by examining how environmental harm is distributed unevenly and how marginalized communities are often forced to bear the greatest ecological burdens. Postcolonial literature offers an important perspective for understanding these issues. Authors from regions that experienced colonization write about landscapes which reflect the impact of colonial resource extraction and industrial development and worldwide capitalist growth. The literary works show that ecological destruction results from both imperial conquest and economic exploitation. The postcolonial authors use storytelling to express the perspectives of communities that mainstream environmental discourse often overlooks.

Rob Nixon developed the concept of slow violence which helps people study environmental injustice through its framework. Nixon defines slow violence as a form of violence that occurs gradually and invisibly, often unfolding over long periods of time (Nixon 2). Slow violence occurs through toxic pollution and oil spills and deforestation and climate change which create environmental destruction. Global media outlets often ignore these environmental destruction methods, but they can cause irreversible damage to ecosystems and human communities.

Postcolonial theory demonstrates how environmental exploitation began with historical events that first established forest conservation as a military resource. Edward Said argues that colonial discourse constructed non-Western lands as spaces available for control and economic extraction (Said 65). The colonial mentality assumed that colonized territories existed solely as resources which Western powers could exploit without establishing any connection to indigenous ways of life. The existing economic systems in postcolonial countries still show the same effects which colonial powers introduced during their time in those regions.

The study investigates environmental justice by analysing the two books *Oil on Water* and *The Hungry Tide*. The two novels show how communities deal with both environmental destruction and their increased vulnerability to ecological threats. The study demonstrates that postcolonial literature defines environmental justice through its portrayal of toxic environments and underrepresented communities and their local efforts to resist.

Postcolonial Ecocriticism and Environmental Justice

Postcolonial ecocriticism represents an academic field which unites environmental research with postcolonial research methods. The research studies how colonial pasts have created patterns of environmental resource destruction and how literary works from postcolonial nations respond to ecological emergencies. Colonizers regarded their territories as permanent resource reserves which they used for their economic advantage. The colonial economy required deforestation for plantation development and mineral extraction for industrial needs and river diversion to create economic systems. The environmental impacts of these operations resulted in ecological damage and the forced migration of native populations. The multinational corporations and international economic systems which operate in postcolonial countries continue to extract natural resources from these nations despite their political sovereignty. The operations for mining and oil extraction and industrial agriculture choose to maximize financial returns instead of protecting environmental resources. Local communities experience ecological destruction and declining animal populations and eviction from their traditional homelands.

Scholars such as Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin argue that postcolonial ecocriticism highlights the connections between ecological destruction and colonial history (Huggan and Tiffin 3). The worldwide environmental crises which exist today require investigation into the historical patterns of resource extraction that occurred during colonial times. Postcolonial literature serves as a vital tool for demonstrating the links between environmental destruction and the systems which control state power and economic interests. The concept of slow violence further deepens this understanding. Environmental damage from pollution and deforestation and climate change presents immediate non-catastrophic effects which build up to create severe environmental destruction. The gradual environmental destruction which affects communities living near polluted rivers and contaminated farmland and disappearing coastlines continues to impact them throughout their entire existence. The public remains unaware of these long-term destructive processes because they occur beyond their visual range. Literary narratives have the power to make slow violence visible. Writers use their precise landscape and daily life descriptions to show how environmental destruction impacts communities throughout different time periods. Postcolonial literature reveals how ecological exploitation impacts human life by examining the experiences of marginalized communities.

Environmental Destruction in *Oil on Water*

The film *Oil on Water* showcases the environmental destruction which affects Nigeria's Niger Delta region. The novel follows two journalists, Rufus and Zaq, who travel through the delta while investigating the kidnapping of the wife of a British oil company employee. The travellers

must pass through the area which contains villages that oil pollution has destroyed and which militant groups use to battle multinational companies and which residents try to be alive in their polluted surroundings. The Niger Delta is one of the most oil-rich regions in Africa, yet it is also one of the most environmentally damaged. The oil industry has extracted resources for decades which resulted in thousands of oil spills and gas flaring incidents and extensive pollution that affected both rivers and farmland. The environmental disasters have created severe damage to the fishing and farming communities which depend on these activities for their economic survival.

The author Habila presents to readers his description of landscapes which show rivers that the oil companies have polluted, and which industrial activities have damaged the natural forests. The land which once sustained life now presents a dangerous situation because it contains hazardous materials. The author uses detailed descriptions to show how industrial extraction operations cause environmental harm which leads to slow violence as Nixon describes in his work. The environmental damage in the Niger Delta developed through multiple years of pollution and abandonment because it needed time to build up its impact. The novel reveals political and economic systems which lead to environmental destruction. The region suffers from resource extraction by multinational oil companies who operate there while local communities gain no advantages from their activities. The corporations operate without punishment because government corruption together with weak environmental laws enables their operations. The situation leads to local people experiencing three major problems which include poverty and disease and loss of their homes.

The novel shows environmental injustice through its depiction of militant groups who use their existence to resist against this injustice. The community shows their discontent through their actions because they have been neglected for many years. Habila uses these stories to show that when people exploit the environment through their actions, it creates violent public demonstrations which result in governmental chaos.

Ecological Fragility in *The Hungry Tide*

The Hungry Tide presents ecological research which shows environmental challenges facing the Sundarbans, a region which contains tidal islands and mangrove forests situated between India and Bangladesh. The Sundarbans area contains multiple unique biological species, but its environment exists as one of the most endangered ecosystems throughout the globe. The region experiences dangerous weather conditions because cyclones and floods together with changing tides continuously modify its natural environment. The novel tells the story of multiple characters who include Piya a marine biologist who researches river dolphins and Fokir a local fisherman who possesses deep knowledge of the region's waterways. The narrative studies how scientific research and environmental protection and local communities interact through the characters' experiences.

The Hungry Tide environmental challenges emerge from both natural phenomena and governmental actions, which differ from the industrial pollution shown in *Oil on Water*. The Sundarbans population faces three major threats, which include rising sea levels and climate change and conservation policies. The Morichjhapi massacre of 1979 stands as the most important historical event which the novel brings to reference. Government officials conducted a forced removal of refugee settlers who had built a community on a Sundarbans island. The episode shows how state policies which protect environmental resources or exercise political control create human rights violations against marginalized communities. The novel by Ghosh demonstrates that environmental protection needs to address the requirements of the people who live in nearby communities. Environmental activists and local residents will experience

conflict when conservation initiatives disregard existing local economic activities. Fokir demonstrates indigenous ecological knowledge through his ability to navigate the dangerous tides and rivers of the Sundarbans. His knowledge shows how local ecological traditions receive neglect from contemporary scientific methods.

Landscapes as Sites of Memory and Resistance

Postcolonial literature uses landscapes as more than physical locations because they serve as sites that preserve historical events and cultural traditions. The native people of an area have fought against colonial control which has left its mark on the rivers and forests and coastal regions of their territory. The writers use these particular landscapes to show how environmental changes and political events have produced enduring impacts throughout history. The Niger Delta resource extraction activities which have taken place throughout history find their representation through the polluted rivers and destroyed villages inside *Oil on Water*. Environmental injustice takes witness through the landscape which stands as proof of its existence. In *The Hungry Tide*, the Sundarbans islands demonstrate how human societies maintain a delicate connection with their natural surroundings.

The literary landscapes of this work create an opposition to Western environmental narratives which treat nature as an independent existence that exists outside of historical times. Postcolonial writers demonstrate how political systems and economic structures and historical confrontations shape environmental spaces. The environment becomes a contested space where struggles for justice, survival, and identity take place.

Indigenous Knowledge and Decolonial Ecology

Postcolonial environmental literature shows its second main theme through its acknowledgment of indigenous knowledge systems. Traditional communities have created sustainable ways to interact with their surroundings which they developed over multiple centuries. Their knowledge originates from ongoing study of natural cycles which they learned through their deep cultural connection to the land. Modern environmental policies and development projects tend to disregard these knowledge systems. The scientific methods from the Western world get applied to situations which lack understanding of local environmental knowledge. Indigenous environmental knowledge provides essential value which postcolonial writers use to demonstrate their argument.

Through his character Fokir *The Hungry Tide* shows how Fokir understands the complete Sundarbans ecosystem. His knowledge of tides, animals, and weather patterns enables him to survive in a dangerous environment. The communities in *Oil on Water* depend on their traditional fishing and farming methods which have been disrupted by oil pollution. Ecosystem destruction results in both community identity loss and cultural tradition disappearance. Environmental protection functions as an ecological matter which also includes cultural and social dimensions. Indigenous knowledge recognition serves as a necessary step for creating environmentally sustainable policies.

Environmental Advocacy Through Literature

Literature functions as a mechanism which helps people understand environmental injustice. Writers use storytelling to create awareness about ecological crises which would remain hidden from worldwide audiences. Postcolonial novels establish their main theme through environmental awareness which explains how ecological damage affects human beings. The works of Helon Habila and Amitav Ghosh demonstrate how fiction can function as a form of environmental advocacy. Their narratives show how corporations abuse power while

governments fail to protect their citizens because of historical economic systems.

The novels show how communities which suffer from environmental injustice can develop strength. These communities resist exploitation while fighting for ecological protection despite their challenges with pollution and displacement and economic difficulties. Literature acts as an effective instrument which helps to raise environmental awareness and social justice.

Conclusion

Postcolonial literature offers a strong method to study environmental injustice through its literary texts. The analysis of *Oil on Water* and *The Hungry Tide* reveals how literary narratives establish links between ecological destruction and colonial history and social inequality. The concept of slow violence helps explain how environmental damage gradually harms marginalized communities, often without attracting global attention. The postcolonial theory shows how contemporary environmental resource exploitation derives from colonial resource management practices. These literary works challenge Eurocentric environmental perspectives by emphasizing indigenous knowledge, local struggles, and grassroots resistance. The environmental justice movement requires readers to understand that its two components historical accountability and social equality must combine with ecological sustainability. Postcolonial environmental narratives encourage people to understand ecological responsibility through their recognition of marginalized communities and their commitment to solving environmental issues caused by colonial and capitalist exploitation.

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