

“The Plant Turn: Vegetal Poetics and Politics”

Editors

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Ecological Thought and Colonial Landscapes in Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement*

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Abstract

The ecological crisis of the twenty-first century has compelled us to reassess the ways in which literature, culture, and history shape human understandings of the natural world. The present paper examines the intersections of colonial history, landscape, and ecological thought through the works of two seminal authors: Henry David Thoreau, an American transcendentalist whose writings clearly exhibit suspicion regarding technological progress. In texts like *Walden*, he repeatedly contrasts the purity of nature with that of mechanical civilization, positioning himself as a guardian of ecological ethics. He exposes how industrial fire was scorching forests, poisoning the air, and destroying the serenity of natural spaces. On the other hand, Amitav Ghosh, an Indian novelist whose work foregrounds the environmental legacies of colonialism, highlights the deep interlink between ecological disaster and colonial history. In his work, *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh reframes climate change not as a recent ecological accident but as a continuation of imperial exploitation. Through comparative eco critical and postcolonial readings, the paper argues that Ghosh's decolonial imagination and Thoreau's transcendental naturalism both articulate urgent calls for reimagining humanity's place within the living world. Together their works reveal that the ecological crisis is not merely environmental but inherently moral & historical. By tracing the colonial roots of environmental degradation, this paper situates the works of Ghosh and Thoreau within the broader debates of the Anthropocene-an epoch marked not only by humanity as a whole but also by colonial and masculine patterns of domination.

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Introduction

The Ecological Thought in the twenty first century is much more than environmental awareness; it is the profound re-orientation of the way humans perceive themselves as a part of the biosphere. The intersection of ecology and colonial history highlights the fact that the exploitation of the environment could not be separated in any way from imperial expansion. Colonialism, with its extractive economies and epistemic orders, altered landscapes as well as consciousness, producing what theorists such as Rob Nixon in the book, *Slow Violence and The Environmentalism of the Poor*, the delayed, often invisible devastation is therefore inseparable, as well as a product of historical forces and a point of resistance. Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) and Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* (2016) stand as two monumental works that articulate ecological awareness with different historical and philosophical frameworks. Henry David Thoreau and Amitav Ghosh, though separated by more than a century and vastly different cultural contexts, show some striking and meaningful similarities in their works, especially when viewed through the lens of ecology, empire, climate change, and the relationship between humans and the non-human world. In interviews and in the work, *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh has cited Thoreau as one of the 19th century writers who could still imagine the planet as a living, forceful entity- something the bourgeois realist novel of the 20th century largely abandoned. He sees his own project as trying to recover Thoreau's sense of awe and alarm in an age of climate breakdown. While Thoreau was writing in a pre-industrial New England that was just beginning to feel the effects of capitalist transformation, Ghosh writes in the midst of full-blown climate catastrophe and neo-imperial globalization- yet both see the crisis of the earth and the crisis of justice as the same crisis. Both believe literature must wake up to address all these issues. Thoreau, a nineteenth-century American naturalist and transcendentalist, represents a pre-industrial consciousness rooted in the moral and spiritual value of nature. The relationship between human civilization and the natural world has been shaped by centuries of philosophical, economic, and colonial entanglements. Literature has

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played a significant role in both shaping and resisting perceptions. From the Romantic poets to contemporary climate fiction, the literary imagination has been trying to show the complicated interaction between the consciousness of humans and the nature around them. His withdrawal to *Walden*, Pond is literally and symbolically a withdrawal to capitalist modernity- a revolt against alienation by industry. The environmental philosophy of Thoreau is grounded in morality. The early sustainability can be seen in his criticism of material excess and industrial progress. He writes condemning a society that is a slave to its own inventions: “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation”. Thoreau describes an ecological ethic of restraint by dismissing the life of commerce, which is “restless and nervous and bustling”. Anthropocentrism is also challenged by Thoreau paying attention to non-human life. His careful studies of birds, plants, and insects- so sure and deft in their scientific accuracy, in the delicate sensitiveness of the poet- are indicative of a democratic perception of life. He means that all life has some value other than its usefulness to humans. Thoreau is a radical autonomy- a decolonization of the self in breaking with industrial society. His remote cabin on the pond is a place of release from the mechanical rhythms of modern life. The scenery of *Walden*, then, is not only some physical refuge, but also some moral border. *Walden* glorifies the purity of nature, which is also a sign of the contradictions of an emerging ecological awareness situated within a colonial country. Nevertheless, Thoreau remains a classic of the early environmental ethicists and an example of ecological introspection. On the other hand, Ghosh, writing in the context of climate change and postcolonial disappointment, wonders why modern literature and politics have not been able to reflect on the climate crisis, and this reveals the colonial traditions that impact ecological imaginations. This paper suggests that Thoreau and Ghosh use ecological thinking as an observance of the moral blindness of modernity and colonial environments of domination. The vision of the person in nature envisaged by Thoreau prefigures ecological ethics, whereas the postcolonial critique by Ghosh reveals the institutional causes of environmental collapse. Combined, their writings demonstrate some trans-historical connexion between the colonial dispossession of land and the contemporary Anthropocene crisis.

The environmental aspect of colonialism is that it systematically restructured Nature towards economic and ideological control. The idea of ecological imperialism by Alfred Crosby (Crosby, 23) explains the experience of the colonial authorities that changed the ecology through plantation economies, deforestation, and the introduction

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of species. According to the postcolonial eco critics such as Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, the ecological crisis is inseparable from the colonial past. According to them, “the environment has always been a colonial project” (Huggan and Tiffin 12). The Anthropocene criticism by Amitav Ghosh is therefore a broadening of the ecological discourse because it demonstrates the way the colonial exploitation of people and land forms the backbone of the current climate crisis. The concept proposed by Timothy Morton concerning “the ecological thought” continues the development of the fact that ecology is more than nature, but the relationship between all forms. The interpretive approach to Thoreau and Ghosh is framed by such theoretical development since their writings are the best examples of ecological awareness in personal ethics and politics. *Walden, or Life in the Woods*, is a memoir and a philosophical manifesto by Henry David Thoreau. This piece of work denies materialism and glorifies simplicity as a way of environmental consciousness. The ethical position of Thoreau in opposition to industrial modernity is contained in the phrase “I went to the woods because I wished to live”. The nature to Thoreau is not a medium through which human beings exist but rather an animate being that requires reverence. The seasons in *Walden* reflect the endogenous periods of the human soul, forming the metaphysical relationship between man and nature. The criticism of industrial progress by Thoreau anticipates contemporary ecological issues. His careful studies of flora and fauna show us the primitive environmental ethics. His perception of detail makes the natural world a text of Godly wisdom. Such instant concern with non-human life critiques anthropocentrism in favour of the ecological worldview that would be invoked by later authors such as Ghosh. The Pond is turned into a symbolic place of liberation- a place of uncolonized landscape where the consciousness of individuals and the environmental being merge. In this immersion, Thoreau imagines a separation of the imperialistic spirit of domination of the earth.

The Great Derangement by Amitav Ghosh is a reflection on the notion that the greatest failure of modernity is not a technological one but an imaginative one. He argues that the climate crisis has been largely marginalised in literature, and environmental catastrophe is “unthinkable”. The cultural blindness (when the art, politics, and economics cannot recognise the interrelatedness of world ecological systems) is called the ‘Derangement’. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* faces a paradox here: although the reality of climate change is existential, the modern culture, in this case, the literature, has mostly not responded to

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it. Ghosh calls this failure “derangement,” a collective blindness to the magnitude of the crisis. The climate crisis, he writes, is also a crisis of culture and of imagination. Ghosh links this failure to the rise of the realist novel, which, by focusing on individual human experience, excluded the unpredictable forces of nature from its narrative scope. This exclusion reflects a broader epistemological blindness rooted in the Enlightenment’s anthropocentrism. Ghosh links the origins of the Anthropocene to the colonial encounter. Anthropocene is not just a geological epoch, the proposed name for the era in which human activity became the dominant influence on climate and the environment, but as a radical rupture in Earth’s History that fundamentally challenges the assumptions of modernity. Ghosh’s most famous claim in the book is that the modern literary novel (the bourgeois realist novel that emerged in the 19th & 20th centuries has been complicit in concealing the Anthropocene. Extreme weather, geological upheaval, non-human agency and collective fate were sidelined as belonging to genre fiction such as sci fi, romance, fantasy rather than serious literature. Ghosh repeatedly points out the irony that the places most vulnerable to climate impacts today (South Asia, especially Bangladesh, the Sunderbans for example were the very regions that were colonized and forced into the carbon economy. The Great Derangement is therefore also a derangement of empire and carbon imperialism. The work *The Great Derangement* is structured in three parts- Stories, History and Politics and together they form one of the most powerful works of ecological criticism in contemporary literature. Ghosh’s ecological thought is not a conventional green environmentalism but a radical, post-secular, post-humanist critique of modernity itself. The landscapes of the empire from the Indian Ocean to the Sundarbans bear the scars of ecological and cultural violence. Ghosh calls for a new literary form capable of representing the non-human and the planetary. He advocates for ecological post colonialism which recognizes that the decolonization of the mind must also entail the decolonization of nature. In this sense, *The Great Derangement* functions as both critique and manifesto. It urges readers and writers to imagine beyond the anthropocentric frameworks of modernity, to restore the sacredness of the Earth as a shared home.

Thoreau’s temporality is cyclical and seasonal. Living at Walden Pond for two years and two months, he experiences time through frost, thaw, bean rows and loon calls. This allows a phenomenological intimacy with non-human rhythms, but it also occludes historical time, which is the violent history that made his retreat possible.

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Ghosh's temporality is geological and catastrophic. The time scales of climate change are deep and are many times over that of human history, and the accelerations are mixed with the compressed and violent time of colonial extraction. The cyclone which hits Delhi or the Sunderbans is not something in the novelistically present, but a reaction of the Earth, centuries after carbon imperialism started in the 17th-18th centuries. Ghosh makes us see that the climate crisis is not another derangement but the derangement that was long overdue and has been precipitated by European imperialism beginning to treat the world as an unlimited resource. In order to surpass this derangement, the ecological thinking should decolonize the very landscape: realizing that there is no "wilderness" independent of histories of violence and that the most sensitive ears to planetary change now may not be in the woods of Concord but in the delta villages and atoll nations that are already inhabiting the future that the rest of us are still trying to think about. Thoreau and Ghosh intersect in their criticism of modernity being alienated from nature, although they have a temporal and cultural difference. They reveal the way in which rationalism and industrialization have broken the human connexion with nature. In *Walden*, Thoreau moves to nature, which is a moral protest against industrial capitalism. The ecological thinking of his is based on the idea that simplicity and contemplation have the power to bring back the balance. In the case of Ghosh, resistance is in the form of narrative re-imagination, that is, challenging the colonial myths that legitimised exploitation. But they are both united by a moral belief that ecological renewal demands moral and imaginative rediscovery.

Thoreau's *Walden* and Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* frame the development of ecological thought over two centuries. The alienation of modern life has a remedy in the harmony, simplicity and self-reliance that Thoreau envisioned. It is this awareness that Ghosh brings to the political and historical world of global crisis, the conditions of ecological crisis that have been created by colonialism and capitalism. The most extreme part of the environmental thinking of Ghosh, perhaps, is that it is not a surrender to optimism but rather a denial of despair. *The Great Derangement* is not a book on climate change; rather it is a book on the spiritual and imaginative impoverishment of a civilization that could only observe the Earth in its dead form and use it as raw material to be capitalised upon. The derangement is not that we did not predict the future, but accomplished the feat of making the world just like our stories had said would never happen. Ghosh reveals the colonial sceneries that, in some way, were already latent in the America of Thoreau, a nation that was

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founded on conquest and resource extraction. Their writings do not forget to remind us that environmental consciousness should not only struggle with ecological degradation but also with historical injustice. The process of healing the planet involves addressing the ethical wounds of both colonialism and capitalism. *The Great Derangement* by Ghosh and *Walden* by Thoreau shed light on the direction of environmental thinking. The transcendental ecology, as offered by Thoreau, aims at being harmonious using the simplicity of a person. They both reveal the mutual causes of moral and environmental crisis in the alienation of humanity from Nature. They both perceive the main mistake of modernity to be the commodification of the Earth. They include non-human beings (ponds, ants, cyclones, cobras) in the moral and narrative world and do not accept technocratic and purely economic solutions. The colonial landscape is both symbol and scar: the memory of the fact that nature and man are indivisible. This means that the removal of colonisation, be it of thought, imagination and morals, by ecological renewal is necessary. Since the self is represented by the pond Thoreau resides in, the world is represented by the ocean Ghosh dwells in as a world threatened by its blindness. To restore it, mankind needs to redefine ecological and moral humility, which ties life up in one sustainable thread.

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Alcohol, Weed and Vegetal Agency: Exploration of Plant Derivatives as the Masters of Human Consciousness

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Abstract

Recent theories in the field of environmental humanities suggest that plants have a greater hand in shaping the human habitat than what is let on. Vegetal agency – a theory classified under the aforementioned field, explores the nuanced influence of vegetal population on their environment, including human life as well as culture and development, thus, toppling the consensus that plants leave a passive legacy in the zoo centric world. This paper tries to analyze the influence of plants and their derivatives on human psyche and culture. The study intends to do so, by primarily focusing on alcohol and drug usage and their effects on the human brain, while also examining their influence on human culture and its development. It is scientifically proven that plant derivatives like alcohol and psychedelic drug usage permanently alters human brain chemistry – thus, changing the essence of the user itself. Various kinds of alcohol, brewed or simply fermented have become an irreplaceable part of cultures across the world. Psychedelic drugs, hallucinogens, substance or rather commonly known as weeds, found all over the globe, available in varying forms have pushed forth impactful cultural movements. The choke-hold these derivatives have over human beings are never under discussed. The various tragic crimes committed under the influence of these are not to be nullified. Whether as violent outbursts, as social movements or as a marks of culture; these derivatives of plant parentage have always held reins over human consciousness. This fact, breaks apart the notion that humans hold total control over the vegetal population, while, actuality might tell otherwise. This paper is an attempt on analyzing the relationship between humans and plant derivatives through the lens of vegetal agency.

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Vegetal agency can be defined as the ability of plants to influence or even shape their environment. This influence extends to every realm of life on earth, including the human habitat. It opposes the predominant notion that plants have no active participation or influence over the world they exist in. On impartial observation, it is obvious that plants hold a significant influence over the human domain, even though it was often believed to be the opposite. The vegetal influence on human population can be seen in the form of plant derivatives like alcohol and psychedelic drugs, both of which have an unnegotiable impact in shaping the human psyche and thereby culture. This impact is easily noticed by a close inspection of both scientific and cultural discourse, the two most important spheres of human development and existence.

The effects of alcohol and substance manifest in both the physical and neurological phases of the human body. These directly affect the human brain, the center of consciousness, to alter human behaviour, which is in turn a reflection of the consciousness. Thus, making the influence of the aforementioned plant derivatives absolute as far as human activities and their implications are concerned. Alcohol can be divided into edible and inedible categories, amongst others. Ethanol or ethyl alcohol is the one which forms the base of edible alcohol. Alcohol according to Merriam Webster — ethanol especially when considered as the intoxicating agent in fermented and distilled liquors. And according to Cambridge dictionary — a liquid that is produced in making wine, beer, and liquor and that can cause changes in behavior in people who drink it. Some of the popular alcohol varieties include; whisky which is made by fermenting grains, wine which is made by fermenting grapes, mead made from water honey and yeast, rum which is a distilled alcohol made from sugarcane by products. It is apparent that most of these alcoholic agents of intoxication find their roots in plants or plant products. Thus, establishing that the liquid that can reign over human consciousness exists because of the vegetal population.

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Alcohol is scientifically proven to affect brain function. It acts as a depressant, disrupting the neurotransmitter balance, influencing thoughts, emotions and behaviour. Long term usage of alcohol can cause changes in brain structure and function, further leading to addiction and dependency. Proving that it is alcohol that controls its consumer and not otherwise. Thus, it is a scientifically backed fact that alcohol has the ability to influence and to a great extent, dominate human consciousness and its expression. This influence can be seen reflected in culture as well. Alcohol, its varying kinds serve as cultural markers over various cultures. In Greek mythology, it has left its marks on divinity with Dionysus, the God of wine, merry-making and ecstasy. In Indian mythology, Soma is the sacred drink of heavenly deities. There are also regional varieties of alcohol such as Makgeolli and Soju of Korea, Feni of Goa; all of which share their history with their land. Thus, alcohol not only drowns its drinker in ecstasy but also influences history and culture.

Drugs according to Merriam Webster – a substance other than food intended to affect the structure or function of the body – something and often an illegal substance that causes addiction, habituation, or a marked change in consciousness. Thus, making it clear that drugs affect human consciousness and behaviour. Drugs are of various categories, those which affect human consciousness can be broadly classified as psychedelic drugs or hallucinogens. Psychedelic drugs or hallucinogens have the ability to alter the very perception of existence, at least for its user. These are psychoactive substances that can influence the mood, behaviour, perception, emotions, responses, temporal awareness, thought and even generate hallucinations. Hence proving their affluent influence on human consciousness.

On analysing history, particularly cultural history; it is impossible to not notice the influence weeds and alcohol have on humanity. Psychoactive substances have sparked creativity in writers and launched revolutionary movements, thus, not only influencing but shaping human history. The famous romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 1816 poem, *Kubla Khan* is widely speculated as the result of an opium induced episode of vivid hallucination. The speculation stems from the fact that the poet was prescribed Laudanum by the nineteenth century doctors. Laudanum is an opium tincture with an alcohol base. Thus, exhibiting their profound effect on human imagination and expression. There are also vivid descriptions of the effects of vegetal populus on the human psyche in works like *Lotos Eaters* by Alfred Lord Tennyson.

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The narrative inadvertently admits the power plants have over humanity by portraying the human powerlessness against plants. Alice B Toklas' recipe book featuring haschich fudge is a testament to the influence of psychoactive substances on human lifestyle. Western cultural history cannot be discussed without talking about the mid-twentieth century counter culture movement, the Hippie movement. The movement started in the United States of America and spread through Canada and Britain. It actively endorsed hallucinogenic drugs like Marijuana and lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), as a means of broadening consciousness. In the East, Rastafari movement which originated in Africa and spread across the globe, followed rituals that involved usage of marijuana as a means of spiritual awakening.

According to BBC, in 2023 Cannabis plants worth thousands of pounds were seized in East England. It is important to note that it is illegal to privately cultivate Cannabis without a home license in the United Kingdom. The cultivation of the outlawed plant becomes proof enough of the faltering of human control over humanity where once again the vegetal populus wins. While psychoactive plant derivatives break human constrictions, alcohol proves to be providing strong economic gains in certain regions. According to Times of India, Delhi government forecasted alcohol sales worth of 9,454 crores in 2022-2023. Thus, proving their impact on human morality and economy. The crimes induced by alcohol and drug abuse cannot be ignored either. Four in every ten violent crimes involve alcohol abuse according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics of America. It is observed that the probability of manifestation of violent tendencies is twice as high among youth that abuse Cannabis. Further emphasizing their influence on human behaviour and psyche. Thus, plant derivatives such as alcohol, marijuana, hashish etc have proven effects on human behaviour and hence consciousness. This influence can be seen reflected in human cultural history. Thus, having a profound influence on human imagination, morality and actions. This induces doubts on the established notion that human history and culture is cultivated by humans alone, indicating that the plant population might have had and still have an active rather than passive involvement in shaping the human consciousness. Thus, decentering the human from within human history, reimagining the bounds of vegetal agency and co-existence.

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Eywa as a Living Vegetal Archive: Memory, Ecology, and Continuity in *Avatar*

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Abstract

James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) and *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022) imagine Pandora as a living ecosystem that is guided by Eywa, an ecosystem consciousness that binds all living things together with an assemblage of roots and plants. Eywa operates as a living vegetal archive, in which plants remember and exchange accumulated experience, turning vegetation into actors of memory, feeling, and rebirth. Connecting Michael Marder's "plant-thinking," which identifies vegetal life as a form of embodied intelligence that transcends human cognition, and Aleida Assmann's theory of cultural memory, this paper translates Eywa as a communal consciousness retaining ancestral knowledge through biological relationship. The Na'vi people's reconciliation with Eywa discloses a model of remembrance based on ecological reciprocity in which memory flows through living matter and not fixed media. Through its depiction of plants as responsive and intelligent entities, *Avatar* refigured the vegetal realm as focal to continuity and survival. Eywa therefore instantiates an ecological ideal of interconnected life, whereby vegetal and spiritual coalesce to support harmony, resilience, and the collective memory of being.

Keywords: Eywa, Avatar, vegetal consciousness, ecological memory, plant-thinking, cultural continuity, living archive

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James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) and *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022) have often been celebrated as a technological innovation with an environmental message, but beneath the visual grandeur of these films lies an even more important philosophical proposition—one in which nature, in general, and vegetation, in particular, is not merely a backdrop to human or alien action but a living system of memory and communication. The films' version of Eywa, the planetary consciousness of Pandora, envisions the biosphere as an interconnected organism capable of storing and transmitting the experiences of all beings. Through Eywa's neural network, where every tree and root participate in a system of mutual awareness, Cameron reimagines the vegetal world as a sentient archive—a repository of emotional, ancestral, and ecological continuity.

This paper argues that *Avatar* presents a compelling vision of what might be called a vegetal archive of memory, wherein plants function not as passive scenery but rather as active agents of remembrance and renewal. By portraying Eywa as a living intelligence recording and preserving the life histories of Pandora's inhabitants, Cameron presents a profoundly ecological redefinition of memory—one extending out of human consciousness to embrace the biological and planetary realm. In this way, *Avatar* disrupts anthropocentric boundaries of cognition and historicity by presenting vegetal life capable of thought, perception, and transmission.

For analysing this conception, the paper draws on Michael Marder's philosophy of "plant-thinking," arguing that plants personify a non-anthropocentric intelligence of responsiveness and interdependence, and Aleida Assmann's theory of cultural memory, which explains how a community sustains its identity by means of shared and transmitted remembrance. By bringing these two frameworks together, the discussion will show how *Avatar* redefines the processes of remembering and belonging as ecological phenomena grounded in vegetal interconnection.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding Eywa as a living vegetal archive requires looking into the philosophical and cultural frameworks that underpin such a vision of memory and intelligence in plant life. Two crucial theoretical approaches underpin this

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investigation: Michael Marder's philosophy of "plant-thinking" and Aleida Assmann's theory of cultural memory. These ideas together allow for an interpretation of *Avatar* as a cinematic rendering of vegetal consciousness and ecological memory.

Michael Marder and Plant-Thinking

Michael Marder's *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*, published in 2013, proposes nothing less than a radical recasting of plants as active agents in the world's processes of perception, thought, and response. According to Marder, plants are anything but lifeless organisms; they do think, not as human beings do through rational cognition, but in a different kind of way—as an "embodied responsiveness" to the environment. He defines plant-thinking as "a thinking without the head, without consciousness as we know it" (Marder 10). According to Marder, vegetal life is characterized by immanence, openness, and relationality, existing always in dialogue with its surroundings.

This form of thought contradicts the hierarchical, anthropocentric assumptions of Western philosophy, which all too often place plants at the bottom of the scale of sentience. By contrast, Marder's ontology positions plants as beings of relation whose roots, stems, and leaves express an ongoing communication with light, soil, water, and air. They perceive through contact and transformation, expressing a distributed intelligence without centralized control.

Such a conception resonates powerfully with Cameron's representation of Eywa in *Avatar*. The planet's neural network parallels Marder's vision of a non-hierarchical intelligence diffused through vegetal matter. The interconnected roots of Pandora's trees materialize—both literally and symbolically—plant-thinking, an ecological consciousness that perceives, remembers, and responds. Eywa's ability to store the memories of all living beings thus instantiates the vegetal mode of existence that Marder describes—diffuse, collective, and continuous.

Aleida Assmann and Cultural Memory

While Marder's work focuses on the ontological intelligence of plants, Aleida Assmann's theory of cultural memory provides a complementary framework for understanding how Eywa functions as a collective archive. In *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives* (2011), Assmann defines cultural

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memory as the way communities preserve and transmit knowledge, identity, and emotion across time. Unlike individual memory, which is limited to personal experience, cultural memory is a shared resource, embodied in texts, rituals, monuments, and traditions that sustain continuity between generations (Assmann 19–20).

Assmann develops a concept of communicative memory, lived and transmitted within three generations, in contrast to cultural memory, which is institutionalized through symbolic forms and media. This highlights the way in which societies externalize memory into durable carriers, that is, objects, spaces, and practices that preserve the past beyond human lifespan. Importantly, however, cultural memory is not static; it is dynamic and is reinterpreted in each act of recollection.

Considered through this filter, Eywa can be seen as a naturalized version of cultural memory. Instead of carving history into monuments or archiving it, the Na'vi culture writes it into the living ecology of Pandora. The Tree of Souls along with the other sacred flora function both as medium and memory to communicate with ancestors and access stored emotions. Thus, Eywa serves as a biological archive wherein memory is immanent within a living environment rather than being externalized in material culture.

Synthesis: Toward an Ecological Model of Memory Bringing Marder and Assmann together allows for a reading of *Avatar* in which memory itself is understood as an ecological process. Marder's plant-thinking situates vegetal life as capable of perception and response, while Assmann's cultural memory provides the social dimension of continuity and identity. Eywa unites these two realms, operating as both a sentient vegetal intelligence and a cultural repository that binds the Na'vi community through shared remembrance. In this synthesis, remembering ceases to be a purely cognitive or symbolic act and becomes, rather, a living exchange between beings, environments, and histories. The roots and tendrils of Eywa's network fully embody this vision of remembering as a distributed process, the medium of which is now the ecological system itself. In the interplay between plant-thinking and cultural memory, Cameron's Pandora thus emerges as a model through which to reimagine the vegetal world as a participant in those collective processes of thought, emotion, and remembrance constitutive of life.

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Eywa as Vegetal Archive in *Avatar*

In *Avatar*, Eywa emerges not as a god so much as an organizing principle of Pandora's biological and cultural systems, channelled through a vast and connected plant network. The film repeatedly foregrounds the capability of flora on the planet to store, access, and communicate memory. In this ecological formation, Eywa demonstrates a living archive in which remembering occurs through the material processes of vegetal life. As the characters interact with Eywa-most explicitly through the Tree of Souls-memory turns participatory, sensorial, and somatic rather than symbolic or representative. The film then repositions plants from entities of background to active repositories of shared history and emotional persistence.

Ecological Intelligence and Distributed Memory

The physical infrastructure of Eywa is similar to a neural network, underlined in the movie when Grace Augustine reveals that Pandora contains “more connections than the human brain” (Cameron, *Avatar*). The scientific framing of the ecosystem as possessing cognitive capacity echoes Marder’s articulation of distributed vegetal intelligence. The intelligence of Eywa lies not within the centralized nervous systems characteristic of animals but within the root systems, vines, and bioluminescent tendrils of Pandora’s flora. As such, memory resides not in a singular consciousness but in the ecological totality of the planet.

This distributed form of memory is explicitly revealed in the Na’vi practice of establishing physical contact with plants by connecting their neural braid-that is, the queue-with the tendrils of sacred flora. In such a manner, one does not recall memories; rather, one shares them. The transmission is a relational act that relies on biological contact and reciprocity. It is through nature that stored intelligence is mediated or experienced, and this is arguably very close to Assmann's notion of cultural memory as something that has to be constantly accessed, performed, and renewed for it to be relevant.

The Tree of Souls: A Site of Cultural and Biological Remembrance

The Tree of Souls is the most overt manifestation of Eywa as archive, the spatial and ceremonial centre of Na’vi culture that allows for communication with ancestors and the ecosystem itself. In the scene of Jake Sully's first encounter with its power,

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emotional resonance and sensual immersion take precedence over a sense of doctrinal belief. The memories accessed through the Tree are not abstract records but affective encounters—an experience which elides the boundaries of temporality and positions the past as dynamically accessible within the present.

This mode of remembrance aligns closely with Assmann's notion that memory is relational and ritualistic. The Tree of Souls preserves identity through its facilitation of continuity across generations, but unlike the traditional archive of documents or artifacts, Eywa's archive is alive, responsive, and mutable. Memory is revived through touch, sound, and ecological atonement. Thus, the archive is neither static nor external to life but interwoven with it—a feature that locates Avatar within emergent conceptions of memory as ecological rather than exclusively human.

Destruction and Ecological Amnesia

The collapse of Home-tree is one of the most emotive moments in this movie, since the loss of habitat is essentially tantamount to erasing memory. When the tree was reduced to ash during the military assault, the act had come to symbolize ecological amnesia—a break in the continuity of lived experience. This scene resonates with ongoing global concerns such as deforestation, species extinction, and the loss of Indigenous land, though the film avoids overt political terminology. Instead, it situates trauma within the more universal framework of severing memory from living systems.

The visualization of the destruction underscores how memory is embedded in the environment. The Na'vi are grieving not just the physical loss but the disappearance of connections, stories, and ancestral presence held within the tree. In this regard, Home-tree functions similarly to cultural heritage sites in the human world—markers of identity whose destruction signals the break in memory transmission. Yet, unlike static sites of preservation, the mnemonic capacity of Home-tree depends on its vitality, and thus its destruction signifies the collapse of ecological as well as cultural continuity.

Regeneration and Resilient Memory Despite the depth of loss, *Avatar's* narrative arc insists on the resilience of ecological memory. The existence of the Tree of Souls and other living sacred sites shows that, in Pandora, memory is not preserved but instead works through cycles of renewal. When Grace attempts to transfer her

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consciousness into her avatar body, the failed process foregrounds Eywa as mediator between bodies, species, and forms of knowledge. Grace's body may die, but the film suggests that her consciousness is absorbed by Eywa, indicating that memory in this vegetal system is transformational rather than terminal. The regenerative aspect of Eywa fits into ecological patterns of growth, decay, and rebirth, as witnessed in flora. Memory herein echoes seasonal rhythms rather than archival permanence. This seasonal understanding rhymes with Marder's thought that vegetal life resists linear development in favour of repetition, continuity, and renewal. During the film's resolution, as Jake Sully undergoes his own act of transference, Eywa acts as an agent of rebirth rather than one of recording memory, continuing it through embodiment. The archive is neither inert nor passive; instead, it is a living force capable of changing the present through inherited experience.

Memory, Ecology, and Continuity

The vision of memory articulated through Eywa moves beyond individualized cognitive recall and toward a model in which memory is embedded within ecological systems. In this framework, memory is not solely a psychological function but a relational process that unfolds across multiple forms of life. This shift demonstrates how *Avatar* reframes memory as a shared, collective phenomenon sustaining communal identity and interspecies continuity. Eywa's network offers a cinematic representation of memory as a living, interconnected system, echoing both Marder's vegetal ontology and Assmann's emphasis on shared remembrance.

What sets Eywa's memory system apart is how it can hold emotional resonance, historical continuity, and ecological interdependence within its span. When the Na'vi go into communion with Eywa, they are not just accessing data; rather, they share in a felt sense of relation to ancestors, to the planet itself, and to the great rhythms of life and death. Memory here becomes the thread that ties the individual to the collective, and the collective to its milieu. This is to say, the concept of memory as storage gives way to memory as relationship. The living archive is responsive; it adapts, it evolves.

This relational understanding resonates with ecological models emphasizing interdependence and mutuality. The repeated affirmation by the Na'vi that "all energy is borrowed" underscores the key premise of the film: life exists within cycles of exchange. Such cycles are reinforced through bodily engagement with the vegetal

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world, most dramatically through a neural braid that enables direct connection. Through such embodied modes of engagement, the film underscores that memory is not externalized into static media but remains embedded within the sensory immediacy of lived experience.

Furthermore, the ecological trauma of Home-tree's destruction signals the way memory becomes fragile when it is severed from its sustaining environment. As Assmann argues, cultural memory relies upon stable frames through which communities can return to shared points of reference. In *Avatar*, the destruction of sacred flora represents not only ecological damage but also the dislocation of memory-bearing structures. The severing of roots serves as a metaphor for the severing of meaning. Yet, at the same time, the continued presence of Eywa and the regenerative capacities of Pandora's ecology demonstrate a resilience parallel to natural processes of recovery. In this way, Cameron offers a vision of memory that can be wounded but not extinguished, altered but not erased.

This cyclical persistence suggests a broader ecological ethic: memory is not merely a record of the past but also a resource for sustaining the future. Eywa's archive comprises both the living and the dead, not to fossilize their presence but to integrate their knowledge into ongoing life. The Na'vi engage with ancestral memory not as static commemoration but as a guide to action. This suggests that memory is active, generative, and oriented toward the future. The vegetal archive therefore is at once a site of remembrance and a tool of renewal. *Avatar* challenges the anthropocentric framing of intelligence, history, and continuity through depicting Eywa as a living archive. It imagines memory as a becoming that exceeds human skull boundaries and implants itself in the roots, branches, and vascular webs of the vegetal world. Ecological framing like this invites a reimagining of memory as a process of connection that sustains life via constant flow between past and present, self and environment, individual and community. In such a vision, remembering itself is imagined as a becoming by which one belongs-to a lineage or culture, to be sure, but to the living world itself.

Conclusion

The portrayal of Eywa in *Avatar* provides a potent reimagining of memory as a living ecological process. Rather than thinking of memory as a private cognitive

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function or a set of archived records, the movie depicts remembering as a dynamic exchange embedded within the material systems of the natural world. The networked intelligence of Pandora's flora shows that memory can exist in distributed, non-hierarchical forms in concert with Michael Marder's development of plant-thinking. This vegetal mode of intelligence reframes cognition as relational rather than isolated, grounding it in the sensory and adaptive capabilities of the living environment.

Simultaneously, the role of Eywa is that of a locus of continuity, which resonates with Aleida Assmann's framework of cultural memory. Through ritualized access to ancestral knowledge, the Na'vi continue identity and intergenerational belonging in ways inseparable from the ecological systems that house and transmit memory. The trees of Pandora are not metaphors for memory, they are its medium, its infrastructure, and its living embodiment.

In the film, the arc of destruction and renewal underlines, at once, the fragility and the resilience of memory when implicated within ecological systems. The destruction of Home-tree shows just how memory is susceptible to rupture via environmental degradation, while the persistence of the Tree of Souls affirms the potential for regeneration. In that respect, *Avatar* offers more than a fictional ecology; it offers a philosophical invitation toward rethinking how memory might operate beyond the human, across species, and inside the living fabric of the Earth.

Ultimately, *Avatar* positions vegetal life not as background but rather as an active participant in the shaping and transmission of meaning. Through Eywa, the film imagines memory as a form of interconnected life-adaptive, relational, and enduring.

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Plant Memory and Vegetal Consciousness as Channels to Resistance and Change in the Anthropocene

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Abstract

In this age of greediest apathy and solastalgia, reawakening the cartographies of post-colonial vegetal politics and thinking across all ecological temporalities is essential. This research paper aims to reaffirm the political ecology of life force while focusing on the concept of plant thought, memory, and consciousness. The theory of demystification is evident throughout the paper, aiming to dispel all the false appearances of non-human agency. Foucault's notion of unthought appears in the study in order to raise meta-questions on plant consciousness. Peter Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees* elucidates deep secrets of plant communication, memory, which not only protects them but warns each other of impending dangers. *The Secret Life of Plants*, a piece of philosophical findings by Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird, presents the emotional dimension and the supra-material world which human agency can never accept. This paper takes an account the philosophical understanding of the flora by drawing inspiration from both texts. In the Anthropocene era, studying the memories, consciousness, and vulnerabilities of the botanical world paves the way for a framework of resistance and resilience.

Keywords: Plant memory, Vegetal Consciousness, Vulnerability, Resilience.

The representation of plants in history, art, and literature is an epistemic source of plant identification, deciphering, and even objectification in understanding Eastern and Western schools of thought. Plants occupied an ornamental/secondary role in the

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thought, text, and philosophy of the occidental world. The didactic text, the *Physiologus*, which likely originated from Egypt and was written in Greek, infused fantastical, imaginary chimeras and mythical plants, which were represented through the enmeshing of nature semantics. The representation of plants as channels to resistance and change can be traced back to the ancient texts. Plant memory and vegetal consciousness align with nature semantics, the very fabric of represented non-humans. The representation of plants in ancient Babylonian and Sumerian Texts is quite fascinating. Enki and Ninhursag, the deities of Sumerian mythology, created sacred plants to heal Enki's body ailments, enlightening their modern readers with hints of plant consciousness and memory. For instance, the tree Tamarisk appears in the Babylonian medical texts as well as the Old Testament, in the Bible. Tamarisk stands for purification, renewal, and, in fact, a new beginning. Herbs and Spices: aloe, myrrh, and frankincense appear recurrently in the ancient texts. The ancient texts equated plant life with healing, ancestral memory, and material-divine connectivity. The Hanging Gardens of Babylon symbolized political power, divinity, and control over other nations, reaffirming the centrality of plant consciousness. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, Gilgamesh tries to conquer Humbaba, the ferocious guardian of the Cedar Forest. Humbaba was defeated, and then he pleaded for his life, pledging to allow Gilgamesh to cut down all the trees as much as he wanted, but Gilgamesh cut down Humbaba's head. He felled the great Cedar whose crown scraped the sky. Gilgamesh, after several conquests, learned about the secret of immortality of the Gods. He finds the truth and goes in search of the seaweed that gives immortality to the ends of the sea, to retrieve it, only to be stolen by a snake that sheds skin even to this day. In all these texts, plants constitute the central domain of the narration. Unlike the texts that disintegrated plant study into secondary, stationary, and rudimentary sciences. Ancient texts predicted ecological memory, will, and climate trauma. These myths and folklore are archives and testimonies of plant life's force and intelligence. Plants carry memory of the entire ecosystem; they have relationships with all the other life forms in the form of symbiotic relationships, to even parasitic relationships. Plants as an entity diverged from the class Animalia during the molecular stages of evolution. To precisely point out that they diverged and were able to synthesize food. Some of the early theologians, scientists, and philosophers considered plants among the lowest of strata in the hierarchy of evolution. Plants were considered as disabled animals, lacking locomotory ability; their fixation in the soil was considered to be their greatest

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disadvantage. After the science diverged from the clutches of philosophical and theological dogma, the study of plants got marginalized and was cast into the mold of Botany. Plants were solely studied by botanists and, later on, geneticists, ecologists, and microbiologists. Time to contemplate the worth and soul of plants was shaken off, and the beings of plants were no longer question-worthy. With the beginning of capitalist society and the advancement of science and technology, Fruits, Flowers, Roots, and Tree trunks became commodities; they were products, and the presence of a being or notion of soul was forgotten and even rejected. In everyday life, the plants are overlooked it forming an inconspicuous backdrop to our lives, especially in the urban landscape. The extraction of biodiesel from plants and their presence as a source of nutrition for plants and animals are tactics of human agency that disguise as non-human agency, falsifying the notion of plant preservation and nature care. Michael Marder points out that the taxonomic method of Carl Linnaeus helps us to understand the exact place of a highly differentiated system. For instance, Vincent Van Gogh's sunflower paintings can evoke memory, imagination, or the ephemeral nature of the plant. It can also cover its rightful place within the Kingdom Plantae, order Asterales, family Asteraceae, subfamily Helianthoideae, tribe Heliantheae, and genus Helianthus, which encompasses the singularity and the uniqueness of the particular plant. The relationship between plants and humanity is profound, to the extent that some regard them as the fifth element of the universe, alongside the classical elements: earth, water, fire, and air. In a different context, contemporary feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray poetically emphasizes the connection between a particular type of receptive subjectivity and the plant world, stating, "The plant will have nourished the mind that contemplates the blooming of its flower." This idea reflects the still ambiguous nature of knowledge surrounding these living entities. The distance between us and other living creatures becomes dynamic as soon as the nominal categorical divisions between various "classes" of beings are blurred, without compromising their differences and similarities. In Kantian terms, vegetal phenomenology provides a normative ideal for plant-thinking—an ideal we might strive to approximate but can never fully achieve. We are unable, so to speak, to completely put ourselves in the plants' shoes, or rather, their roots. The productive ambiguity reflected in the title of this volume further underscores the inevitable paradoxes of vegetal ontology. "Plant-thinking" has several meanings: (1) a unique, non-cognitive mode of thinking inherent to plants; (2) the human perspective on

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plants; (3) how human thought becomes dehumanized and plant-like through interaction with plants; and (4) the symbiotic relationship between this altered thinking and the existence of plants. A comprehensive philosophy of vegetal life must integrate these four aspects of “plant-thinking,” distort) the target of its investigations. The likelihood of worsening the exploitation of plants through theoretical discussions can be reduced if theorists themselves expose their thoughts to the principles of plant life and learn from them. This process should ideally lead to a point where their thinking can align more closely with the logic of plants, although it will never be completely identical. “Plant-thinking” represents both a promise and an opportunity for connection. It can be viewed as an invitation to move away from the familiar realm of human-centered thought and engage with plant life. This engagement can occur, if not in the exact environment of plants, then at least somewhere in between. The very fact that the acts of the vegetative soul do not obey reason shows that they rank lowest, said Saint Thomas Aquinas. Within the semantic structure of the painting, plants and flowers play a crucial role in anchoring meaning. They establish the identities of the main figures while also extending the narrative to suggest future or related events. For this reason, different plant species mustn't be confused with one another due to inaccurate representations. During the late medieval and early Renaissance periods, stylized representations dominated the pages of herbals. However, as the study of plants grew increasingly important to medicine, misidentifying a species could have fatal consequences. To address this, the work of German physician and botanist Leonhart Fuchs was instrumental in shifting the depiction of plants toward greater realism. His work, **De Historia Stirpium Commentarii Insignes** (Notable Commentaries on the History of Plants), published in 1542, featured 497 alphabetically ordered species, many of which were originally identified by Dioscorides, Hippocrates, and Galen. A notable innovation in this publication was the inclusion of over five hundred woodcuts that adhered to the classical iconography of natural history. Each illustration prominently displayed a single plant, typically uprooted to showcase the root system, and set against a plain background. Furthermore, the symbolic meaning of plants and their relevance to theological concepts and metaphorical interpretations underscore their role in social relations. These definitions of plants change over time, influenced by cultural developments throughout history. In the origins of Western thought, nature has been represented as both the embodiment of good and the epitome of evil. Nature semantics act as

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narratives—a chain of attributes, myths, and anecdotes that share a deeply anthropocentric perspective. It was crucial that species not be confused with one another due to inaccurate renderings. thinkers to try to fill such souls again with subtle breath! Leave their names and their spirits in peace. “The presence of plants in art, particularly in contemporary practices, raises questions about the objectification of plant life. The portrayal of certain nonhuman beings in art, while the exclusion of others, is often motivated by cultural factors that determine which entities are considered worthy of representation. Thus, "nature semantics" serve as the linguistic elements that structure iconography beyond the formalist focus on mimesis. Over time, these semantics formed the foundational representational sediments of an archive comprised of symbolic modalities, practices, and discourses. Nature semantics act as narratives—a chain of attributes, myths, and anecdotes that share a deeply anthropocentric perspective.

The epistemic shifts that led to the emergence of new iconography in natural history also produced more realistic images, as seen in Brunfels’s **Herbarum Vivae Eicones** (1532–36) and Fuchs’s **De Historia Stirpium** (1542). Renaissance art historian Ann Pizzorusso has noted that the flowers depicted in the London version of a painting have the wrong number of petals. Meanwhile, John Grimshaw, a leading horticulturist, pointed out that the London painting features chimeric plants, where the flowers do not match the foliage. According to Renaissance scholar Charles Hope, the inaccuracies in plant rendering in the London painting suggest that it may have been entirely produced by a copyist rather than by da Vinci himself. Another theory posits that da Vinci’s workshop assistants produced the painting without his knowledge, hoping to profit from an unauthorized sale. In da Vinci’s painting, a palm symbolizes victory and directly refers to the Virgin Mary. Irises represent the Immaculate Conception, while daffodils may serve as a funerary symbol of love after death. Within the semantic structure of the painting, plants and flowers anchor meaning; they establish the identities of the main figures and extend the narrative to allude to future or related events. It was crucial that species not be confused with one another due to inaccurate renderings. Stylized representations dominated the pages of late medieval and early Renaissance herbaria. However, as the study of plants became integral to medicine, confusing one species for another could be fatal. For this reason, the work of German physician and botanist Leonhart Fuchs helped shift the representation of plants toward greater realism. His **De Historia Stirpium Commentarii Insignes**

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(Notable Commentaries on the History of Plants), published in 1542, included 497 alphabetically ordered species, many originally identified by Dioscorides, Hippocrates, and Galen. Its innovative aspect lay in the inclusion of over five hundred woodcuts that adhered to classical iconography, showcasing each plant, usually uprooted to reveal the root system and flattened against a plain background. The symbolic meaning of plants and their relevance to theological concepts and metaphorical provocations highlight their role in social relations, which evolve due to cultural developments. In the origins of Western thought, nature has been depicted both as the embodiment of good and as the epitome of evil. According to Ovid, during humanity's golden age, the Earth is a bountiful source of nourishment and pleasure; conversely, in Christianity, a snake serves as the tempter of nourishment and pleasure, while in Christianity, a snake tempts Eve into biting a forbidden apple, which precipitates the fall of humankind. However, such narratives can be told from alternate perspectives. Human nature was characterized as a civilizing force, while fauna and flora were seen as the wild and degenerative, the sterile stationary object. It all happened when the science diverged from the theological dogma. Plants were marginalised and cast into the mould of a disciple of Botany. The nomenclature of plants by Carl Linnaeus was a breakthrough. The scientific community embraced the plant life, genus, and species. For instance, human belongs to a genus and a species. Plants are interconnected with each other. Though they have natural shyness, they commute at an interconnected through the root system. Plants panic and can tell the changes in the climate. They are, in fact, highly adherent to synthesize their own food, reproduce, and degrade into soil; these very plants bring rain and can create a water body, change the course of a landscape. In religion, they are also considered as connective bodies & connect people to heaven. The super material analysis of plants is also worth studying. The presence of faeries, deities, Vanadurga, gnomes, and the flower faeries, in fact, represents how the memory and consciousness of plants were revered and their memories were shared with the younger generations through myth, ballads, songs, and folklore. Guardians of the forest is an embodiment of the memory and its preservation of the particular forest. In the Bible, certain plants are associated with medicine, and some others are associated with great food. This associative vegetal consciousness that perpetuates a life force. Ayurveda and Rigveda record the sacred tree, the soma, the body that gave its life to mankind. For instance, three appeared to the devotees under a mango tree. Buddha attained nirvana sitting under a

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peepal tree. Most of the religious and spiritual texts record how the plants carry the symbolic meaning of the very existence of a culture. In the movies and web series, Harry Potter, Wednesday, the Netflix series, the trees form a center of attraction; they carry the memory of a family, of a system, or even a kingdom. In The Lord of the Rings, some trees act as a portal for time travel. In the Lock & Key of the Netflix series, the trees carry the memory. Culturally, religiously, trees are considered tools for the propagation of ancestral memory. Some of the ancient rituals deal with worship and even marrying a tree, which can transfer ancestral knowledge and memory. Carl Jung's collective consciousness, points can be applied to the memory analysis of the plant body. The bouncy plants and plants integrate with the memory of evolution. In most ecosystems, trees are considered to be the keystone species. Plants and the human world contain no effect world. Humans try to treat plant agency with fabric notions. Demystification of human agency is necessary to deeply decipher and find the essence of the plant world. To bridge a deep abyss, we have to keep rising in all dimensions to understand. plant life and its preservation of ecological memory. A study by Jagdish Chandra Bose, which detected emotions in plants, helped the scientific community to understand plant life. The other dimensions of flora were well understood and interpreted as myths by the ancient texts. In the scientific world, the study of Mimosa pudica (touch-me-not plant) reveals how plants have emotions and how they react to various environmental stimuli. The reactions to the stimuli are called the plant's response. The memory, although it cannot be pinpointed, is very deeply embedded in the molecular level of the plant cells. They help the plants to capture sunlight, release oxygen, intake carbon dioxide, and, in fact, the leguminous plant fixes nitrogen. They enrich the soil and make the plains fertile. The downfall or flourishing of a civilisation depends on the plant life. Description can, in turn, break or mix the arbutus, although it protects the balance of an ecosystem. Plants can react to music and light; they release sound waves, which are unique to every plant. They trigger a fear response, so do they have auto tap like poisonous liquid, when animals chew on it? They can heal themselves. Plants release resins and gums to heal their wounds. They store nutrients & give us gifts, enriching the ecosystem. It is a sacrificial lamb, which gives its food to the children of earth. Kalpavriksha, the tree of life. The tree of good and evil forms the centre of life and the centre of every known text. The tree that produces all the fruits of the season. The tree is protected by angels, and in fact, the tree on which Jesus' body is hanged. He was considered to be sacrificed on a tree. The heavenly trees

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appeared on earth, and they sustain all life forms. They hold everything together. Grass, though considered a weed, carries messages and is a pathway. Though considered inadequate, now all gaining prominence in urban landscaping. Yaksha and Gandharva in mythology reside on trees, which shows a similar interpretation to the green habitats near trees. These beings are an extension of the tree memory itself. Most of the memories are perpetuated through the treescape. The shape of the tree is influenced by evolution and its mode of survival. They do have several offspring that withstand the genetic composition of the plants, withstand climatic changes. Hormones in plants, such as Auxins. Roots grow large along the axis of wind.

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Resisting the Outsiders: Land, Identity, and Colonial Intrusion in Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill*

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Abstract

The paper strives to explore Mamang Dai's *The Black Hill*, focusing on the interplay between land, identity, and resistance to colonial rule. Set in the mid-19th century in Northeast India, the narrative is a representation of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. The text examines the profound relationship between indigenous communities and their natural surroundings. Dai presents the land as an interconnected entity of spiritual significance. The text captures the turbulent history of the Abor and Mishmi hills, depicting the intrusion of British troops' *migluns*, who attempt to take possession of the underutilised empty lands. Her narratives urge an understanding of how the sacred land holds both regenerative memory and the wounds of colonization; through that, the text reflects Dai's terrain of healing and resilience. Thus, the study seeks to provide a greater knowledge of the native Abor and Mishmi people's struggles against eviction and erasure from their ancestral territories, as well as their deep connection to the terrain and resistance to alien rule.

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Keywords: Northeast India, Indigenous, Adi tribe, Resistance, Colonialism.

Introduction

Mamang Dai, a prominent writer, hails from the ‘Land of the Sunrise’ - Arunachal Pradesh, also known as the ‘Land of Dawn-lit Mountains’, which has the largest land area among the North-Eastern states. This region encompasses the greater Himalayas and extends eastward, covering most of the northern part of Arunachal Pradesh. The state is surrounded by a large topography that includes valleys, plains, hills, and mountains, which are the predominant features. There are about 26 major tribes, divided into as many as 110 sub tribes. While Dai’s *The Black Hill* depicts the two major tribes that are the Abor and Mishmi people of Arunachal Pradesh, the Adi tribe is known as Abor, and they belong to the Tibeto-Burman groups, whereas the Mishmi are one of the Mongoloid tribes of Tibeto-Burman origin. The depiction of these two landscapes brings up the natural environment in both a physical and a spiritual entity, embodying the reminiscences and identity of the indigenous community. The northeastern states have been, since time immemorial, rich in their customs, culture, oral traditions and folklore. Even this unique topographical structure is geographically secluded from the rest of India, and the people in the northeastern states were marginalised politically, socially and culturally, neglecting them from the centre. Even when neglected by central authorities, Indigenous peoples do not abandon their spirit or identity. They continue to defend their land and culture against the encroachment of non-native forces. As the native inhabitants of their territories, Indigenous communities maintain deep historical, cultural, and spiritual connections with the environment. Their identity, livelihood, and traditions are inseparable from the land, which they regard not merely as property but as a living relative and sacred space that sustains both body and spirit. The Indigenous worldview sees humanity as part of nature, rooted in principles of respect, balance, and guardianship toward all living things.

Dai’s book ‘The Black Hill’ (2014) is a historical fiction novel; it attempts to give us a glimpse of the Abor and Mishmi tribal people who are protecting the land and community from the migluns. The land has remained an important aspect of these tribal peoples, as it is their identity, and they vowed to protect their rich culture with

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full spirit. The invasion of the migluns who inhabit an empty land to capitalise on all of the natural resources leads to a loss of land and their identity. Through their intrusion, the natural and spiritual equilibrium that once defined tribal life was dismantled, as the colonial project commodified the land and sought to impose missionaries and colonial culture. Joyti Parkash, in his article, elucidates the impact of colonialism and mentions that “Indigenous cultures were the destruction of cultural practices, languages, and identities. Colonizers frequently imposed European systems of education, governance, and religion, leading to the erosion of Indigenous traditions” (Parkash, 2235), which shows erasure of identity under colonial dominance involved systematic efforts to obliterate indigenous peoples' cultures, languages, governance, and spiritual practices.

The Sacred and Spiritual Connections to Ancestral Land:

The text attempts to depict a harmonious lifestyle of the tribal peoples in the hills. The land is a central identity and survival of indigenous tribes; it is the inescapable bond between the people and their land; it is not just simply a property, but a spiritual anchor. Which Dai delineates as “From this stream to the limits of the jungle and up to the hill with the white rock is my land, they said. Every piece of earth was claimed. The big trees, the high mountains, the rivers rushing down crevasses, the cliffs and jagged rocks” (Dai, 70), demonstrating the sense of attachment to the land and their ownership, not a transactional but deeply rooted in their toil. The bond with the land is vividly experienced through the central female character, Gimur, who embodies loyalty and deep admiration towards her ancestral territory. Dai portrays Gimur as a symbol of how tribal women sustain and carry forward their communities, acting as protectors of both family and cultural heritage. Her character reflects the complex role of indigenous women, who balance tradition and change, while demonstrating a profound spiritual and emotional connection to the land.

Dai depicts Gimur's experiences with landscapes as follows:

She sat cross-legged at the back of the house from where she could see the steep flank of the hill falling away into the bed of the river below. An old jackfruit tree stood in front of her. Its rustling leaves made her feel restless. She stared at the thick trunk and wondered how long it had stood like that. Some of the trees in the village were older than the oldest grandfathers, they said. Did the tree know its age, she wondered. (Dai, 28)

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This sense of attachment to the land emphasises the connection between the protagonist, Gimur, and her surroundings. The old jackfruit tree symbolises the ancient tree serves as a silent witness to history and the memory of her ancestors—the invocation of the tree's age enduring bond between the natural world and the ancestors' memories. Dai's great strength is her ability to portray the landscapes as a living participant in the text. The representation of nature in *The Black Hill* is not just scenery, but it listens, responds, and carries the memories of the ancestors. Rakesh Ghosh, in his article “Nature, for Dai's tribes, is teacher and witness. Its beauty and harshness both shape their resilience. Storms, floods, famine – these come not as abstract calamities but as reminders that nature, like people, holds both kindness and cruelty. This relationship with nature forms an important layer of indigenous identity that is rooted in coexistence, not conquest” (Ghosh, 28), highlighting dual aspects of the tribes, grounded in a profound respect and understanding of nature's rhythms and cycles.

The central character of Gimur in *The Black Hill* represents the symbol of how tribal women often carry forward community memory and resilience. Dai outlines that the admiration of nature from the opening line, “A woman is standing on a hill...” (Dai, 1), the hill represents a profound connection to the land. She embodies the rootedness of ancestral territory, their land as a living entity intertwined with identity and memory. The hill itself can be seen as a vantage point of reflecting both physical and spiritual belonging, and highlights the indigenous relationships with nature as a source of strength, history, and cultural survival. Dai's depiction of her character draws strength and comfort through nature, while she talks to the moon, which forms an intimate connection to her inner life. Gimur tilts her head back, she closes her eyes and asks the moonlight, “‘Come, come to me,’ she said softly. Shine on my face. Enter my body, float in my blood and settle in my heart like a golden swing..... She was concentrating so hard she thought the moonlight had covered her face when a shadow passed before her” (Dai, 4), emphasizing her profound connection with the natural world. The moonlight is personified as a soothing, life-giving presence, symbolizing purity, calm, hope and enlightenment. Moreover, the text portrays the land as a sense of bond that unites the people in a shared destiny, and the land embodies ancestral memory and wisdom.

Colonial and Missionary Encroachments:

The text further explores the impact of colonialism and missionary activities in the state of Arunachal Pradesh. Dai's portrayal of the British, that is, the migluns, in the very first chapter of the book titled 'The Arrival of Strangers' in *The Black Hill*. "Who were the strangers? Everyone had heard about the British, the white men- the migluns- who were coming upriver towards Mebo in long boats. They wanted a meeting with the villagers to talk about establishing a trading post a few miles downstream..." (Dai, 3). The British colonial occupation of Assam began after the first Anglo-Burmese war and the signing of the Treaty of Yandabo, which led to the British displacing the Burmese and taking control over Assam. The migluns intend to establish commercial relations and trade infrastructure with the local community of Mebo. The intrusion of British forces disrupts the harmonious relationship between the land and its people." Since the British had occupied Assam, their hills had been disturbed by these strange, foreign men who crept deeper and deeper into their land carrying gifts of salt, iron, tobacco and opium" (Dai, 8), which shows how migluns began penetrating deeper into natural resources and carrying all the goods with them. This made the tribal people extremely furious by stating that, "The British may conquer the world but they will never take our land" (Dai, 25), it expressing a powerful sentiment of resistance and determination to protect one's homeland against foreign domination and highlights a spirit of patriotism and commitment to defending traditional lands and identities against external invaders or colonizers, symbolizing a refusal to accept alien rule and exploitation.

In 1847, the year of colonial and missionary acquisition of indigenous land, the world was previously untouched by colonial or Christian influence. The local people perceive them as strangers from another world, which disturbs their traditional rhythms of life and belief. The complete peace among the tribes is lost. They are living in isolation, suspicious and in dread. However, other clans of tribes also shared the same hatred towards the British and feared being brought under their control. Thus, the resistance against the British, as seen from the view of these people, put up a united front and came out to resist. Dai in the *Black Hill* outlines the same:

In 1839 news reached him of a plot by the Khampti clans of Suddya in Assam to rise up against the British. Their chief, who went by the title of Suddya Khawa Gohain, had been stripped of his title and dignity by the British authorities and removed from his position. He sent out a call for help. It was

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a chance Kajinsha's father could not miss. In the dead of night he led a group of men south to the Khampti villages dotted around the banks of the Burhampooter River. They joined hands with 500-armed Khampti warriors who advanced on the British station from all directions. In the surprise attack the British Political Agent, Colonel Adam White, and his forces numbering some eighty men were butchered and all but two sepoy lines burned to the ground. In the fighting Kajinsha's father had been fatally wounded. (Dai, 9)

Through these historical events, recorded in Dai's *The Black Hill* depicts the struggles of the tribes in resisting the British entry into the land, inflicted both physically and through dispossession. The rupture is both ecological and existential, where the sanctity of the landscape and the identity of its people are simultaneously endangered. Yet, beneath this disruption, the narrative becomes a testament to indigenous resilience and the enduring spirit of a community deeply rooted in its sacred terrain. Joyti Parkash elucidates that, "despite the immense hardships imposed upon them, indigenous cultures have shown remarkable resilience, and their enduring legacy is a testament to their strength and vitality" (Parkash, 2234).

This paper positions the notion of cultural imperialism as conceptually defined by Edward Said in his book, *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). The term 'Cultural Imperialism' represents a multifaceted form of cultural oppression, and is a process through which dominant powers impose their values, beliefs, and religion on less powerful tribal communities, devastating their cultures, language and traditions of indigenous tribes. Said outlines, "At some very basic level, imperialism means thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others. For all kinds of reasons it attracts some people and often involves untold misery for others" (Said, 7), which embodies the imperial power of the coloniser, who settles on and controls them and gives significant suffering to the indigenous populations, leading to dispossession, marginalisation, and cultural disruption.

The missionary who came to Northeast India to ensure love and service is led by Father Nicolas Michel Krick. "young French Jesuit priest would soon set out on a journey from an Island shore, and never return" (Dai, 12). Kick arrived in India in the mid-19th century and began his quest to enter Tibet by crossing the Himalayas through northeast India. His mission to spread Christianity through compassion, dedicated service, and genuine respect for the local tribes, unlike other 'migluns' who took over

the land of the tribes, but he had no intention. Father Krick began a four-month voyage. They set sail on 1 January 1850, “for an exploratory journey, going through the Assam towns of Tezpore and Nawgong, to the Mishmee and Abor tribal areas at the foot of the ‘Himalaya’s” (Dai, 55), hoping to reach Lassa in Tibet. During the journey towards Tibet, enduring lots of hardships, including illness and scarcity of resources, he remains on his path of love and service. He reaches there to spread the message of God. But like other tribes, the Marpa also never could put their belief in the white men. In the conspiracy of the Marpa tribes, the two priests Father Krick and Augustine Bourry were killed. But this actual reason for the disappearance of the two priests is not fully recorded. “The records are also unclear about whether the condemned man killed one or two prison guards while awaiting his sentence” (Dai, 293). Dai’s narratives present the kajinsha as a victim of conspiracy. He does not kill the priest; instead, he goes there to save them from Marpa and Lamet. But the rumour spread among the people that he had killed the priest. It is not an act of justice to kill the priest, but it’s a form of resistance against the British. Said outlines “a missionary is captured by an outcast southern Algerian tribe, has his tongue torn out.... This is as if to say that going native can only be the result of mutilation, which produces a diseased, ultimately unacceptable loss of identity” (Said, 179), highlighting religious imperialism through the allegorical short story of Albert Camus’s *Le Renégat*.⁷ recounts the landing of a French missionary and the narrator, who goes to Taghaza, Mali, to convert the native tribes to Christianity. However, Algerian tribes do not like the intrusion of the missionary and hate them. They rip out the narrator’s tongue, symbolising their fierce love and protection of their land and culture. This act reflects their resistance against outside forces attempting to impose foreign beliefs and control over their ancestral territories.

Kajinsha and Gimur are both true patriots of their land, standing up against their enemies. He had the same aversion to violence as his father, and he yearned for peace and affection. However, Migluns fails to understand his love for the land and is finally hunted down and captured. Kajinsha is wrongly convicted of the murder of the priest. Gimur travels to Debroogarh, and she manages to see Kajinsha locked behind iron bars. “She was not prepared for this. She had planned for speed and action and tearing down a door or a house. Now she stood staring, falling forward against iron bars. She did not shed tears but her heart thudded because she knew he was weeping to see her again” (Dai, 278). While hearing the terrible cry that morning, she knew that

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Kajinsha was hanged in Debroogarh Jail—both characters in this text represent the heart of native or tribal resistance against the migluns. Bakam, in her article, highlights that *The Black Hill* deserves to be called a saga of the time, people, and lands that it traverses, adroitly juxtaposing the tremendous topography, the embattled history, the unique culture, and universal human emotions (Bakam, 10). Thus, the text serves as a form of tribal resistance against the migluns, or the Britishers; the Abor and Mishmi people strongly opposed the presence of the migluns in their land.

Conclusion

Mamang Dai's *"The Black Hill"* portrays a profound connection to the land and memory, underscoring the spiritual and ecological values inherent in the indigenous way of life. Land as a living character, through Gimur, Kajinsha and countless unnamed forefathers. The narratives emphasize the significance of land as a memory, identity, and spiritual essence, which leads to indigenous resistance against colonial domination. The missionary priest Krick encountered neglect of indigenous communities while spreading love and the word of God, but it led to a complex encounter between conflict and negotiation. His presence ignites both conflict and negotiation, revealing the ambivalent nature of colonial missionary intervention. Ultimately, the strength of *The Black Hill* lies in the land as a powerful source of identity and challenges colonial hegemony. The text emphasises that colonial history often silences indigenous voices, but through the bond with the land and storytelling, these voices and identities persist and resist erasure, affirming the land as integral to the survival and dignity of the community.

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The Collapse of Biodiversity: Analysing Extraction, Toxicity and Mutation in *Aavasavyuham*.

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Abstract

The environmental crisis in any part of the world is not an isolated incident. It's the consequence of years of historical change that includes extraction, pollution, land conversion, etc. which disrupts the bio-diversity and causes unrest in nature, affecting every living part of the World. The Malayalam language mockumentary science fiction comedy film, *Aavasavyuham: The Arbit of An Amphibian Hunt* (2022) written and directed by Krishnand discusses the interconnectedness between man and nature exploring how one's actions ignites voluntary or involuntary reactions in another. The aim of this research paper is to understand how effectively this film conveys the impending dangers of extraction and toxicity in the environment which leads to the collapse of the ecosystem. The film engages in the life of a mysterious man named Joy, who has a special connection with nature where it addresses a myriad of issues, mainly focusing on the environmental aspects specifically on the ecologically fragile mangroves of contemporary Kerala. This research paper focuses on the elements of environmental extraction and toxic ecologies in the landscape of rural Kerala as discussed in the film *Aavasavyuham: The Arbit of An Amphibian Hunt* through visual analysis.

Keywords: Environmental extraction, toxicity, pollution, mutation, power.

"In nature, nothing exists alone"(Carson, 51). Rachel Carson's assertion highlights the very fundamental truth of nature, that everything is interconnected. Every species on Earth exists within a web of ecological relationships. That means the existence of one species is linked to the existence of another in biodiversity. The variety of life on Earth which encompasses the number of species and ecosystems in

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a specific area is referred to as biodiversity. However, biodiversity is collapsing at an alarming rate due to a mix of interventions, primarily anthropogenic in nature. Pollution, extraction, deforestation, climate change, etc...destroy habitats, resulting in the extinction of countless species.

The World-Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) in their Living Planet Report of 2024 has stated that the average size of monitored global wildlife populations has seen a catastrophic 73% decline between 1970 and 2020. Thus, the decline of biodiversity could be considered as one of the profound environmental crises the world is facing today. There are 36 recognised biodiversity hotspots across the globe which have lost at least 70% of its primary native vegetation. Out of this, India is home to four biodiversity hotspots with one of them being the Western Ghats which is a critical part of Kerala. There are many identified reasons for the decline of biodiversity. Habitat loss and fragmentation, climate change, extraction, overhunting, overfishing, pollution, etc being some of it. Almost all of this is anthropogenic in nature.

Communication about the biodiversity loss as an environmental crisis is still insufficient, a better medium can provide effective results. Cinema acts as a reflection of its society. The loss of biodiversity as an environmental crisis can be effectively portrayed through movies and the message could be sent to a wider audience. Movies can make use of different narrative styles for this. *Avatar* (2009) and *Blade Runner* (1982) are examples for that. But such movies are very few when it comes to the Indian context. It is a rarely discussed matter in movies. One example of this is the hindi language film, *Sherni* that came out in 2021. But the reception such films receive and the relevance film industries give to the subject matter is still insufficient. That's where the malayalam language film *Aavasavyuham: The Arbit of An Amphibian Hunt* (2022) comes as a ground breaking example.

This study will analyse *Aavasavyuham: The Arbit of An Amphibian Hunt* (2022) written and directed by Krishand which portrays the global crisis of biodiversity collapse in the wake of rural Kerala. It is a Malayalam language eco-fiction mockumentary that came out in 2022. Set in the fragile wetlands of Kerala, this movie explores the biodiversity loss in mangroves and the unexplainable metamorphosis of an enigmatic man, Joy. The movie is set in Puthuvype, Kerala which is a real location facing environmental issues. That itself raises the relevance of the

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film. The plot is even set in a realistic way through the mockumentary style which makes use of the documentary style of narrating but for a fictional story. The objective of this study is to analyse how effectively *Aavasavyuham: The Arbit of An Amphibian Hunt* conveys the danger of extraction and toxicity in nature which leads to the decline of the ecosystem.

Cinema has a profound role in shaping a society's mind towards critical thinking. Kerala has experienced significant biodiversity loss in its mangroves due to a combination of anthropogenic and climatic pressures. *Aavasavyuham: The Arbit of An Amphibian Hunt* (2022) conveys how anthropogenic activities like environmental extraction; displacement of species and pollution cause the loss of biodiversity. This movie introduces a wide variety of characters, from natives to professionals who share real life experiences and scientific findings about the changing environment.

Aavasavyuham: The Arbit of An Amphibian Hunt not only discusses the impending threat of biodiversity loss, it also shares how fascinating the world is and how rare every species in it are. The movie begins with showing a group of professionals exploring a rural space with a native, to find a rare frog. In that expedition, the film shows the difference between two kinds of people, one who lives mingling with nature and the other curiously trying to find more about it. In between these footages, they show the interview of Dr Sebastian Paul, an expert in the amphibian department. As he conveys his insights he says that, “We are losing 50 species of creatures every day from the earth, that is where finding this frog becomes relevant.” (00:03:58 – 00:04:05) He also shares that, “The olive ridley turtles did not migrate to North Kerala to lay their eggs last year. This is a grave concern as it takes 45-55 days for the eggs to hatch. The baby hatchlings follow streetlights and ideally they should follow moonlight and move towards the sea.” (00:05:58-00:06:18) By showing the characters of such professionals, the movie tries to bring the seriousness of the situation.

The movie clearly criticises the disruption of nature in the name of development. It evidently states how capitalist development destroys natural habitats. Two characters, Kochuraman C P, an environmental activist and Madhu Chandran, a PhD scholar, examine how the dragon flies didn't come to the harvest festival of Kerala that year. There has been a noticeable difference in the number of dragon flies

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seen in Kerala during its season, despite the state being home to a significant variety of dragonflies and damselflies. This real life scenario is incorporated in the movie to show that the disappearance of species is not a matter of future but a reality of today. Kochuraman C P mentions that unsustainable development is the reason for the changes around him. He says, “The mangroves are all cut down, they have filled it with landfill to make flats and construction. Guess what happened? This year dragon flies didn’t come for our harvest festival” (00:05:00 - 00:05:15) Madhu Chandran gives a more professional insight as he examines how this has in a way disrupted a chain of ecological events as these globe skimmer dragon flies originate from Karnataka and migrates to Kerala and then leave for Maldives after breeding in Kerala.

From the interviews of Dr Sebastian Paul, an expert in amphibian department and another character Murali Karunakaran, it is showed how the Giant African snail, which is considered one of the hundred most invasive species in the world, which accidentally reached the shores through ships were mated and reproduced for money, without any consideration to how the species lead to the destruction of crops in Kerala. The boat owner, Murali Karunakaran also mentions that the reason why people started doing this was because of the scheme the government came up with, by which they would be “rewarded five rupees for each snail they catch”, indicating how the government is also involved in this. And shows how humans commodify anything and everything.

The movie gives evidence of decline of biodiversity in rural Kerala very directly through the interviews of people related to the field. It also showcases how people are actively protesting against the unsustainable development of the place. An environmental activist, Biju Kannanganad remarked that, “On the pretext of development around 204 plant species, 21 species of fish and 238 species of birds are disrupted in the area. Almost 200 acres of mangrove have been removed in the area... the officials are completely in disregard of the disruption of fishermen’s livelihood...there is a four and half kilometre wall constructed at our coast. Fishermen are not allowed to go to the sea for fishing. We are strongly protesting against it” (00:57:00- 00:57:47) The movie unapologetically states that human interference is the fundamental cause for the environmental hazard the planet is facing. It is further highlighted through the words of Madhu Chandran, a PhD scholar, as he mentions how during covid times in 2020 when people were hardly getting out, the sea traffic

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decreased and dolphin sightings became more frequent during high tides at Fort Kochi. This shows how much anthropogenic activities affect the lives of other species.

Another reason for the environmental crisis is the toxic ecologies. It refers to the environments harmed by harmful substances, impacting ecosystems through pollution, industrial waste, etc...Here it is the polluted waterbodies filled with waste, chemicals and industrial discharge. And it could be a reason for Joy's mutation into a hybrid of frog and man. He represents a species created by damaged ecosystems. No one knows his whereabouts. People could be seen talking about when they first met him and how important he was in their lives. But none of them know where exactly he came from. The reason for his metamorphosis is also not evidently shown. But the whole movie is about how the toxicity in the environment disrupts habitats, destroys and mutates species.

At the end of the movie the mutated creature who was once Joy, was shot to death without any provocations. His death symbolises how humans destroy everything they presume as a threat thereby showcasing humans as the main cause of collapse of biodiversity. After his death, his body was subjected to studies and they observed plants being sprouted out of his remnants. The movie has many characters who realise the impending danger they are in, so their words and involvement in the matter provide a sense of hope. Maybe the plants growing out of Joy's body is a symbol of hope.

An important aspect of the film that should be mentioned is the blending of so many genres which makes the movie engaging. It is an eco-fiction and a mockumentary. As an eco-fiction movie certain fact about the ecology must be mentioned in it. Making the movie using the narrative style of mockumentary gives that liberty. Through interviews and found footage, the facts they wanted to communicate were conveyed. This narrative style makes everything look real. This would make people question the possibility of such things happening in real life and realise the danger they have always been ignoring. *Aavasavyuham* is a powerful visual medium which successfully impacted a lot of audience. An article about the movie on The Hindu has reported that, "What's not to like about *Aavasavyuham* (*The Arbit Documentation Of An Amphibian Hunt*)? Krishand RK's second film, a mockumentary, is a deeply-sensitive story about the ecology, society and man's interactions with nature. And yet, it does not fail to entertain with some superb acting,

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dialogues and scenes, some even based on real-life events.” The blending of different genres in the movie is essentially an element for its success. An article from Lensmen Reviews says that, “It is very much a genre blend. We have a supernatural element driving the whole plot from the beginning. Then it takes the form of a mockumentary. And it eventually reaches that “educative” cinema trope, but not in a very loud and preachy way.”

Aavasavyuham: The Arbit of An Amphibian Hunt is a wakeup call. It urges the audience to take sudden action. By setting the movie in a rural area in Kerala, the movie connects well with its intended audience. The film never deviates from the message it tries to convey as one of the characters says, “this is a reminder that there are so many creatures in nature, we see ourselves separated from it. Look at this species that we kill every day. Our landfills have eliminated the earthworm, turtles, frogs and small bugs. Even the mangroves. We’re digging our own grave”. (01:37:14 – 01:37:40) The movie thereby questions the anthropogenic mentality, where humans place themselves as the centre of everything. The movie compels us to think out of the set thoughts and realise that humans are the ones who control nature, they are just a part of it.

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Patterns of Biopiracy and Environmental Exploitation in the Global South: An Analysis of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes*

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Abstract

This paper attempts an analysis of the 1999 novel *Gardens in the Dunes* by Native American writer Leslie Marmon Silko, to trace the ways in which biopiracy rackets of white colonial raiders at the end of the nineteenth century leave indigenous lands, their peoples and resources deprived and destroyed. A major strand in the work is the devious way in which the greed for abundant natural resources, here exotic orchids, is fed by plant collectors' ambitious designs. Biopirates with sound botanical knowledge and research backing were commissioned by public institutions as well as wealthy clients to procure plant material for conservatories and gardens. Scientists who participated in this enterprise often shut off their moral conflicts, refusing to confront the ethical implications of their pursuits. A familiar pattern in colonial exploitation is the way the natives are manipulated to assist as helpers in exchange for cheap bribes, creating splits within their communities. The nonchalance of the white brokers and collectors demonstrate the colonial attitude of attributing value to natural resources solely for their monetary worth. Biopiracy is one major pointer to the environmental exploitation and injustice faced by the Global South. Silko's juxtaposition of indigenous kincentric ecology with colonial utilitarian practices help to uncover the extent of devastation to native land and peoples.

Keywords: Biopiracy, Colonialism, Exploitation, Global South, Ethics

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Studies in colonialism and postcolonialism have largely focused on European political domination and economic exploitation of colonies. A lesser-known form of hegemony is scientific colonialism where European colonists raided plant and other natural resources, for private collectors or for national museums and parks. These practices and the attitudes that engender them signify white assumptions of superiority and reflect power relations that suggest that the Other has no agency or efficiency to manage and utilise natural resources. Historians and novelists in the postcolonial context have been eloquent about the strategic and systematic devaluation and appropriation of resources and people in the colonies.

This paper examines Native American writer Leslie Marmon Silko's 1999 novel *Gardens in the Dunes*, a work that brings together several of Silko's continued preoccupations such as Native-white encounter, environmental justice and resilience of indigenous peoples. The subject is made more complex by the vastly differing aboriginal and European conceptions of the environment and man's relationship to it. Indigenous communities suffered loss of land as they did not maintain private rights over property. The novel explicitly demonstrates how spaces occupied by marginalised and ethnic groups reflect on a local level the larger power struggles happening on a global scale.

Silko presents the ways in which the white man takes the natural world for granted, in stark contrast to the native, who is used to what has been called kincentric ecology, a reciprocal relationship with his environment from time immemorial and who, in spite of living in close communion with his environment, retains his awe and a sense of wonder towards it.

In the emphatically anthropocentric worldview of the technology-driven western civilization, non-human elements on the planet have lost their voice and agency. Christopher Manes observes that "nature has grown silent in our discourse, shifting from an animistic to a symbolic presence, from a voluble subject to a mute object" (17).

Huggan and Tiffin argue that "by assuming a natural prioritisation of humans and human interests over those of other species," racist imperialism is replicated on a planetary scale. Imperialism takes forward this assumption, using other species for human benefit, transporting animals, plants and peoples through the empire, creating

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progressive and irreversible havoc in ecosystems. The ways in which humans have steadily built up a hierarchy of beings, privileging themselves in the process, is obvious (6).

Joni Adamson mentions a “garden ethic” that accounts for local differences. Environmentally destructive practices are unthinkable in Native communities; Human beings endowed with agency have to understand that each place is different, and adapt their ways accordingly. Adamson points out that in Simon Ortiz’s *Fight Back*, Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima* and Silko’s *Gardens*, the garden is an eloquent symbol of nature as well as “the right of humans to derive a living from the earth” (181).

In traditional communities, even routine activities like gathering of food, water, minerals or clay from the Earth had to be done in the right way with minimal waste. All of it was alive and taken from Mother Earth, so specific rituals were called for in collecting resources. The Native American’s attachment is not to the environment in an abstract sense, but to a particular locality. In an interview with Laura Coltelli, Joy Harjo, the Native American poet, explains the feeling of knowing the landscape:

as something alive with personality, breathing. Alive with names, alive with events, nonlinear. It’s not static and that’s a very important point. The Western viewpoint has always been one of the land as wilderness, something to be afraid of, and conquered because of the fear. (Coltelli 71)

For the native community, wealth is an overall well-being attained by appropriate interactions with the community and the natural world in everyday life. Indigenous peoples have fashioned life ways in which the natural environment is consciously accepted as an integral and indispensable part of daily existence. Reciprocal relationship enables the human being, like any other species, to draw from his environment the resources for his needs, ensuring no more is taken and enough is given back. In *Gardens*, the same creative action is followed by the young girl Indigo, belonging to an ethnic desert tribe, as she gathers seeds and bulbs from the European gardens she visits, to be taken back and planted in her desert home. She intuitively practises a garden ethic by being practical enough to choose plants that will yield food the next season in the dunes, where water will be scarce. Vandana Shiva observes that “for women farmers, biodiversity has intrinsic value [. . .] the essence of the seed is

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the continuity of life. For multinational corporations, the value of the seed lies in the discontinuity of its life” (Mies and Shiva 172).

Gardens in the Dunes presents detailed descriptions of various gardens, including exotic ones in England, with plants including hybridised varieties from Asia, Africa and the Mediterranean. What could be a pleasant Victorian story with gardens and flowers becomes a strong political statement on the way land is managed by different cultures.

The white settlement in Indian lands led to the decline and loss of Indian perceptions and practices with regard to the environment. In Vandana Shiva’s words “an irreversible process of genocide and ecocide [was] neutralised by the terms ‘displacement’ and ‘resettlement’” (Mies and Shiva 104).

Gardens in the Dunes, recaptures the white man’s appropriation of natural resources through descriptions of a vanishing desert tribe struggling for survival against the backdrop of a massive construction site of a dam at Parker Canyon, where the Sonoran Desert is ripped apart to wrest the Colorado river from its course to supply water to Los Angeles. This history of exploitation, eviction and extinction of ethnic communities is a pattern replicated on a global level. For the Global South, environmental degradation and climate change are often the after effects of development projects that benefit the Global North.

Noted Native poet Simon Ortiz remarks about the impressive irrigation systems and advanced technologies the Indians had already integrated harmoniously and efficiently into their ecology when the Spaniards came. These were fashioned to meet basic human needs and not to maximise profit or accumulate monetary wealth (Libretti 178). This points to the sharply different ways in which the ecosystem is viewed and manipulated by two different civilizations.

Discovery of natural resources led white entrepreneurs to impose their power on newly discovered lands. Caroline Merchant observes that “natural discovery and knowledge of nature was linked in particular by Francis Bacon—a new father of this natural science—with power [. . .]. The advanced capitalist countries [have been] determined to retain free access to the Global South’s genetic storehouse” (Mies and Shiva 30). Dominant races of the West with superior technology seize monopoly rights

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on natural resources to procure and modify them in their interests. In the context of later Geographical Indication practices and legal frameworks with regard to them, the ethical side of such widespread practices carried out by colonists come under scrutiny.

Silko's works detail on instances of ecological imperialism referred to as 'biocolonisation', by environmental scholars, to refer to the biopolitical implications of western technological and industrial experiments. Biopiracy rackets of white colonial raiders at the end of the nineteenth century left indigenous lands, their peoples and resources deprived and destroyed. The greed for natural resources is a major strand in *Gardens*, which is brought out through the biopiracy racket exploiting scientist Edward's and other plant collectors' ambitious designs involving citron stalks, hybrid orchids, and meteor irons.

One of the ways in which it works is bio-piracy, that is, "corporate raiding of indigenous natural-cultural property and embodied knowledge to western patented genetic modification" (Huggan and Tiffin 4). The looting of flora by the plant collectors becomes one of the political concerns in *Gardens*. These collectors flowed to the newly discovered lands soon after the conquistadors. Edward Palmer, the scientist turned speculator in *Gardens* represents this racket. His academic expenses were financed through his tours to exotic locations in search of rare plants and other curiosities he found in public markets. The resale of these proved quite lucrative. Over the years, things began to change:

When he first travelled the jungle rivers twenty years ago, a profusion of wild orchid flowers could be seen along the river banks, and specimens were easily gathered [. . .] the orchid mania swept in [. . .] over the years the demand for wild orchids used by hybridizers made the plants increasingly scarce and difficult to obtain. (128-29)

Silko shows the nefarious ways in which Edward manages the façade of a tourist identity to escape from the uncomfortable queries of the customs officers while he tries to pirate rare plants, and plant material. He is commissioned to procure these for private clients who were wealthy collectors across the globe. He also undertook the procurement of disease resistant specimens for plantations in the far East to protect England's monopoly in the rubber trade. Edward's enterprise is described thus: "business was conducted discreetly; buyers or their agents made their requests, and

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Albert Lowe and Company contacted with independent plant hunters like himself to go into the field to obtain the specimens” (128).

Biopiracy is one major pointer to the environmental exploitation and injustice faced by the Global South. Silko’s juxtaposition of indigenous kincentric ecology with colonial utilitarian practices help to uncover the extent of devastation to native land and peoples. Scientists who participated in this enterprise often shut off their moral conflicts, refusing to confront the ethical implications of their pursuits. A familiar pattern in colonial exploitation is the way the natives are manipulated to assist as helpers in exchange for cheap bribes, creating splits within their communities.

Gardens presents Edward as the typical bio-pirate, dazzled by the obscure but multifarious plant and animal life he finds on his various expeditions. As in all colonial enterprises of exploitation, the natives who are familiar with the orchid trade act as helpers. The white brokers demand the entire stock of an orchid, and white collectors set fire to any remaining stock to block other competitors. These sites for plunder have value only inasmuch as they bring monetary returns. The devaluation and wastage of natural resources in the colonies are amply proved by the way the coloniser has dealt with the environment in their conquered lands. The laying waste of cotton plantations in India to feed the cotton industry of England, transferring of rubber seeds from Brazil to Asian colonies of the British (to the serious detriment of the British rubber trade), and the introduction into England of commodities such as coffee, tea and sugar by the British trading companies are well-known examples.

Spurred by the profits through sale of plant material, Edward has ambitious dreams to develop a mine to obtain iron ore and cadmium from a meteor crater in Northern Arizona. Edward who started off as a botanist with genuine scholarly interest, now keenly watches out for antiques and curiosities which will bring him a handsome price in white markets. Suzanne Ruta, in a critique for the *New York Times*, notes that Edward’s eco-pillaging suggests “the tainted genesis of [America’s] great natural history museums” (qtd. in Snodgrass 109).

In *Gardens*, the white women’s gardens feature reused stone figurines and statues culled from ancient sites. In another of Silko’s novels, we see anthropologists’ theft of stone figures given by the kachina spirits to the Laguna people, figures carved by the kachinas themselves (*Almanac* 33). The stones are located at Santa Fe museum.

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Huggan and Tiffin argue that this is a typical sociological phenomenon manifest in discriminatory treatment of marginalised people and the non-human. Deane Curtin defines this kind of environmental racism as “the connection, in theory and practice, of race and the environment so that the oppression of one is connected to and supported by, the oppression of the other” ((Huggan and Tiffin 4). The idea was that the new world had limitless resources of curiosity value which could be translated to monetary gains. All of it was available for those who knew how to utilise it, since they believed that the native inhabitants had no idea of how to manage the wilderness. For indigenous peoples, on the other hand, the environment has an intrinsic value irrespective of how it affects or benefits humans.

In her creative writings as well as in her non-fiction, Silko’s work is steeped in a biocultural understanding of the Laguna Pueblo. Her explorations of the environment and human responses to it, are expressions of political resistance leading the reader to a reorientation towards a sustainable life in nature, irrespective of racial or social boundaries. At the core of her work is a concern for justice and equity. An examination of the ways in which Silko’s works contrast white and Native responses to the environment leads to an understanding of the roots of environmental exploitation and its connection with racial discrimination. Her works and the perspectives they disseminate become relevant in a global context, because, for her, ecological issues are entwined with racial issues.

A renewed and close study of ecological exploitation of the colonised peoples will enable countries of the Global South to be on their guard against not only the transfer of resources, but the ensuing dangers of pollution, climate change, loss of biodiversity and economic inequalities. On the other hand, those accustomed to appropriation will have to take a hard look at their practices and adopt ways to ensure environmental justice and a more equitable and sustainable world.

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Beyond the Passive Green: Phytopoetics, Vegetal Autonomy, and Ecological Resistance in *Princess Mononoke*

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Abstract

Ecological criticism has challenged the long-standing anthropocentric tendency to view plants merely as passive, decorative, or background elements within narratives. Emerging Phytopoetic perspectives recognise plants as sentient, interactive forces whose actions affect and reconfigure their surrounding environments. This paper examines the representation of vegetal agency in Hayao Miyazaki's 1997 movie *Princess Mononoke* through the theoretical lens of Phytopoetics. This study argues that the film subverts anthropocentric portrayals of forests as passive victims, depicting the vegetal world as an active ecological force capable of healing, intervention, retaliation, and ethical decision-making. Through a qualitative analysis of key scenes, the paper explores how the forest in *Princess Mononoke* asserts itself as an assertive agent that communicates, responds, and counteracts human domination. The study attempts to reveal how the film imagines botanical life as perceptive, expressive, and morally discerning. Additionally, the paper demonstrates that *Princess Mononoke* challenges the entrenched human-nature hierarchies by reimagining plants as autonomous beings whose agency reshapes the narrative's ethical and ecological landscape.

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Keywords: Vegetal agency, Phyto poetics, ecocriticism, plant autonomy, ecological resistance

1. Introduction

Plants are often viewed merely as a backdrop - either as habitats for animals or as decorative accessories for humans - without considering the fact they are very much alive and have a consciousness of their own. They are used as symbols but never as a body that has its own independent existence. Mostly depicted for their lush greens, their emotions become ignored or they are portrayed as non-existent in narratives. Even in most works in literature and other cultural texts, this perspective where plants do not have a voice of their own can be traced. Instead, they are portrayed as something less than humans. But with the growing criticism towards anthropocentrism and rising ecological concerns, plants now have been reimagined in works. The rise of Phytopoetics brought a shift in the role of plants and the existence of plants from a passive to an active agent where it becomes a force that influences, resists and transforms their environments. It has now started to become a force that brings us from animality to morality, from violence to peace, from death to restoration of life. People fail to realise that plants are part of the same earth human beings inhabit and came before mankind, and it is their home and so they also should live in respect and on par with other beings of this earth. One such work that marks this shift is *Princess Mononoke*. The film presents the journey of a young warrior Ashitaka to the West, seeking answers to heal a curse inflicted by a vengeful boar-god. On his journey, he becomes a witness to and gets entangled in the conflict between Lady Eboshi's expansionist Iron Town and the ancient forest governed by the Forest Spirit. The film explores the tensions between industrial domination and the autonomous vegetal spiritual world, establishing the idea that the forest is not merely as a passive setting but an active agent shaping the narrative's ethical and ecological landscape.

2. Literature Review

Scholarly discussions on environmental narratives have mostly analysed nature subject to exploitation by human beings. They are the endangered entity, an idea shaped by an anthropocentric worldview that positions humans as superior to

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other forms of life. As Cheryll Glotfelty argues, ecocriticism challenges this perspective by emphasising that “human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it” (qtd. in “*What is Ecocriticism?*”). Such interdependence reveals how human dominance over nature - man as a coloniser and disruptor of balance - has become a subject of critique in contemporary narratives. The resulting ecological concerns have given impetus to narratives which hold the themes of protecting nature - particularly plant life. Issues like deforestation, extinction, human domination and control have been addressed in many movies. The 1997 Japanese animated historical fantasy film, *Princess Mononoke*, written and directed by Hayao Miyazaki has been discussed by scholars and film critics as a movie that addresses ecological concerns.

Existing scholarship of the work contains Shinto animism and ecological ethics - mainly the disruption of the natural world caused by the conflict between industrialisation and the forest. The ecological angle explores how plants and forests are viewed as victims of this exploitation. However, very little studies are conducted on vegetal agency or on how plants and forest entities exercise autonomy within the narrative. The forest entities for example, are discussed as destructive forces rather than holding power to heal and protect lives. This paper tries to address this gap by examining vegetal voice, plant agency and the autonomous role of botanical life in *Princess Mononoke*.

3. Objective

The main objective of this paper is to analyse how *Princess Mononoke* depicts vegetal agency, by examining how the forest emerges not merely as the backdrop of the movie, but rather a powerful, resistant force that continually confronts and destabilises human attempts at territorial and technological domination. This paper attempts to explore how the film paints the forest and its entities as retaliatory forces, an image that subverts the traditional portrayal of forests as passive and subservient entities subject to human exploitation.

4. Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative analysis of the movie *Princess Mononoke*, using the theory of Phytopoetics, particularly the concept of vegetal agency as the

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primary theoretical framework. The study attempts to study how the film explores plants as autonomous entities and decision makers with agency. The study involves close reading of key scenes, thematic examination of vegetal presence, and interpretation through phytopoetic concepts to understand how the forest resists and counters human domination. Supplementary critical writings on Miyazaki and environmental narratives are used to contextualise the findings.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1 The Forest as an Autonomous Entity

John C. Ryan notes that “phytopoetics encourages us to refuse and rethink the backgrounding, denigration and fetishisation of plant life. Through concerted attention to heterogeneous spheres of botanical being, the phytopoetic framework offers perceptual and linguistic resources for rendering plants identifiable to human perception while preserving their incontrovertible differences” (Ryan 271). This framework is useful for understanding *Princess Mononoke*, a movie that treats forest not as a mere backdrop but as a living autonomous world with its own modes of existence, expression and resistance.

Forests are often known for their lush greens in literary and cinematic portrayals. They serve the purpose of being a beautiful background leading to a vision where one fails to see through these lush greens that they have their own world, their own life and their way of living their lives. The forest has its own nature of peace and violence; it has its own varied emotions just like any living being.

In the film, the forest is portrayed as an independent entity through the form of nature spirits like Deer God or the Forest God, represented as the guardian of the forest, and other nature spirits like Kodamas, known as symbolic representation for healthy woods. The Deer God, depicted as the protector of the forest and its beings, is shown to retaliate against the humans who try to conquer the forest land. The decapitation of the Forest God for conquering the forest land for the iron industry, triggers retaliation in the form of violence. The Forest God’s destructive expansion results in the perishing of anything it touches. Yet, it also heals humans by giving cure for wounds and curses. When Ashitaka is injured, it is the Forest God who heals him and his curse, marking it as a symbol of both life and death. When the Forest God is

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alive and undisturbed everything lives and flourishes, but when it is attacked, anything that comes across threatening is destroyed. The movie portrays the forest as innately self-sufficient, the umbrella of every being and it is depicted as the moral compass.

These qualities exemplify the idea of an independent entity, an idea which Phytopoetics identifies as the autonomous existence of plant and forest life. The film depicts forest as the guardian and backbone of existence, which provides and represents life, hope, peace, harmony, unity, and co-existence. Throughout *Princess Mononoke*, the forest asserts its own agency, reminding viewers that human survival is fundamentally tied to the life of plants and forests.

5.2 Vegetal Agency in Key Scenes

Joela Jacobs argues that “plants frequently inhabit threatening positions that underscore their vital role in sustaining life and contradict their perception as passive and powerless. Such vegetal forces violently undo temporary human techno-dominance over nature.” (8). The above statement stresses the idea that plants have the ability to retaliate against dominating forces if they are threatened. This vegetal autonomy of plants is illustrated in the movie, where the forest does not exist as a silent setting but asserts itself as an active ecological agent that fights back against human intrusion and exploitation. The movie repeatedly showcases that the vegetal world possesses the capacity to heal, intervene, and retaliate, thus destabilising anthropocentric assumptions about plant life.

Lady Eboshi starts setting up an iron factory. For this she carries out deforestation and, in the process, the natural world is harmed. Both the greens and animals face extinction. But nature is not shown as a passive victim to such exploitation. They fight back. They are constantly at war with human beings on the other side. Several scenes in the movie suggest this. The protagonist, who comes to the West land to seek answers to heal his curse, comes to witness how the forest has assembled its species to fight back against human beings.

5.2.1 Retaliation: The Forest as a Resistant Ecological Force

The conflict between Iron Town and the forest is framed not as a one-sided exploitation but as a war initiated in response to ecological violation. Lady Eboshi’s industrial expansion, which involves the clearing of trees for iron production, forces

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the entire forest to respond to human aggression. The forest gods, and the natural world push back against the domination of Iron Town - the organised charge of the boar clan and the wolves' attack exemplify how the forest urges its entities to resist human intervention. The other instance is, when Apes - the tree planters in the film are seen asking for the body of Ashitaka who enters the forest injured so that they can get the strength of the humans and fight against humans and get back their forest. These scenes suggest a collective vegetal retaliation, emphasising that the forest acts as a coherent ecological force rather than a subservient victim of deforestation.

The Nightwalker's destructive sweep after its head is severed represents the ultimate retaliation. As it spreads death across the land, the movie foregrounds the catastrophic consequences of violating the autonomy of vegetal-spiritual life. The devastation is not arbitrary; it emerges from the forest's disrupted equilibrium, reinforcing Jacobs's notion of vegetal violence as a form of ecological counteraction.

5.2.2 Healing and Life-Giving Agency: The Forest Spirit's Autonomy

Miyazaki assigns the Forest Spirit the extraordinary capacity to both give and take life, which positions it as an autonomous vegetal-divine agent rather than a spiritual being. When the Spirit heals Ashitaka's fatal wound, the moment foregrounds vegetal sapience - an intelligent, intentional force capable of assessing and responding to life within its domain. The healing of the wounded boar earlier in the narrative also highlights a form of vegetal responsiveness grounded in judgement, not passivity.

Even though the Spirit chooses not to remove Ashitaka's curse entirely, its partial intervention of saving his life underscores selective agency. The Spirit does not operate according to human expectations. Rather, it functions according to its own ecological logic. This resonates with phytopoetic theories that view plants and botanical beings as decision-making entities whose actions are guided by their own nonhuman priorities. As Basheer notes, Miyazaki's films "do not merely show nature as something lovely and pure; they make nature come alive. Heavily rooted in Japan's Shinto traditions, Miyazaki presents nature as holy, something not just to serve man" (4293).

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5.2.3 Intervention and Communication: Plants as Expressive Agents

“Plants are not merely the inert, motionless objects of scientific deliberation but, on the contrary, exert their own percipient faculties to cope with environmental contingencies and maintain ecological interdependencies.” (Ryan 260). This idea that plants can perceive, sense and respond to their surroundings is explored in the movie. The Kodama, or tree spirits, exemplify this dimension of vegetal agency. Their presence is not a decorative aspect of the movie. They guide Ashitaka through unfamiliar terrain and indicate the forest’s health and mood. Their rattling heads, directional movements, and sudden disappearances function as semiotic expressions - plant-based modes of communication that contribute actively to the unfolding narrative.

The forest also intervenes materially. When Ashitaka carries a wounded man through the deep woods, the trees subtly create pathways and openings, suggesting an environment that responds to needs. Such scenes reinforce the idea that vegetation in *Princess Mononoke* is not an inert aspect but a responsive network capable of interaction, signalling, and choice.

5.3 The Forest as an Ethical Agent

Beyond portraying the forest entities as autonomous agents who react to their surroundings, the film depicts them as entities capable of making ethical decisions. Though the forest is at war with the people of the Iron Town, it chooses to heal those who are genuinely in need. The vegetal world is not merely shown as responsive and reactive but as expressive agents with discernment, capable of distinguishing between hostility and compassion. Though Ashitaka is from a far away land, and carries the injured enemy from the battlefield to the forest to heal, the Kodamas as representatives of pure forest creatures respond with compassion and guide him. The Kodamas are portrayed as spirits with good discernment. Their role is more than that of passive guides. They accompany Ashitaka and the wounded man with care, choosing a safe route through the woods instead of the stream, whose strong currents would endanger them. This suggests that the Kodamas, as embodiments of the forest’s will, possess not only the capacity for action but also a form of moral judgement, guided by the forest’s deeper ecological wisdom.

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5.4 Subversion of Anthropocentric Narratives

Princess Mononoke challenges the long-held belief of human-nature hierarchy. Traditional humanist philosophy which has often positioned human beings as the centre of power gets destabilised in the movie. Miyazaki positions human beings dependent upon the forest rather than portraying them superior to all other life forms. This is repeatedly showcased in the movie through the character of Ashitaka. Instead of turning towards human institutions, he constantly turns towards the forest for guidance, solutions, healing and for seeking answers. He is portrayed constantly at the mercy of the Forest God, who possesses greater power among any human authority.

Nature is not showcased as a mere scenic backdrop, but as a realm with its own rules and conscience of morality, intelligence and decisiveness, contrasting the greed-driven mentality of human beings like Lady Eboshi, who strives for industrial expansion, disrupting the peace of nature. The anthropocentric worldview that human beings are exceptional and extraordinary is challenged by the movie's insistence on vegetal autonomy. The forest is the true centre of power, constantly thrives for war and the restoration of nature's balance through multiple attempts, not the Iron Town. The technological dominance of the Iron Town is shown as temporary and fragile. The forest is not presented as a typical passive victim of industrial expansion but a force which fights back and tries to assert its dominance. Through its emphasis on nonhuman agency, *Princess Mononoke* subverts anthropocentric narratives and asserts the forest as a primary agent whose autonomy demands recognition and respect.

6. Conclusion

Princess Mononoke is a fine example of phytopoetic representation of vegetal agency establishing the natural world, especially the forest as an autonomous and independent body whose existence has been shaped since time immemorial and continues to sustain the existence of other creatures. The natural world becomes a symbol of life, death, restoration, hope, cure and it represents home for all beings. The forest asserts its own voice rather than being a mere passive entity - it provides shelter and protection but also resists and retaliates when its peaceful harmony is under the threat of deforestation and human invasion. The film also presents the forests as an entity with morality and ethics which can be seen when humans are given assistance despite their nature of greed. Retaliation, which reaches its extremity in violence in

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the film, clearly establishes superiority of the natural world over human beings, stressing the idea that humans are just another species under the mercy of the forest. Through the film the voice and nature of forests as living independent entities becomes evident.

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Metamorphosis of the Self: From Gendered Identity to Ecological Consciousness in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

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Abstract

Ecofeminism and environmental justice together reveal how patriarchal systems dominate both women and nature through intertwined forms of violence. It exposes gender control and ecological destruction. Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* delves deeply into these concerns through the protagonist Yeong-hye, a woman whose abstention from meat and withdrawal from the human world unsettles social structures around her. Her shift from a gender identity to an ecological identity highlights the interconnection between women and nature. This study examines her refusal of the gendered hierarchy as an embodiment of an ethical vision, illuminated through Carol Gilligan's care ethics and Marti Kheel's nature ethics. Gilligan's emphasis on responsibility in human relationships and Kheel's extension of Gilligan's care ethics into nature and non-human life provide theoretical frameworks. It underscores emancipation through identity reconstruction, signifying an ethics of care rooted in empathy for non-human suffering. It situates the narrative within ecofeminist ethics, which rejects systems that privilege domination and advocates for coexistence and nonviolence toward both human and non-human life. Yeong-hye's eventual transformation into a vegetal being presents an alternative moral vision embedded in care ethics. Her evolving identification with plant life embodies a desire for ecological justice that values care and interdependence. By applying Gilligan's and Kheel's

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frameworks, this paper reinterprets the text as an articulation of rebellion, in which transformation unfolds as an ecological and feminist act of defiance.

Keywords: care ethics, ecofeminism, ecological justice, coexistence, ethical vision.

Introduction:

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, published in the year 2007, was translated into English by Deborah Smith. It has come to be regarded as the author's magnum opus and offers an exploration of memory, trauma, and female subjectivity in contemporary Korean society. This text presents a narrative of a woman who refuses to participate in patriarchal and cultural codes, enacting instead a radical transformation of selfhood. The protagonist, Yeong-hye, embodies the struggles of women who are silenced, marginalized, and pushed into socially acceptable roles. Her refusal to consume meat, and eventually her withdrawal from human society, exposes the intricate entanglements of patriarchy, violence, and ecological destruction. It is set in Seoul, and the narrative unfolds around Yeong-hye, an ordinary housewife whose life changes after a terrifying dream compels her to renounce meat. Her personal decision to abstain from meat soon escalates into a strong form of resistance against patriarchy. The novel is structured in three interconnected parts such as "The Vegetarian", "Mongolian Mark", and "Flaming Trees".

The opening section, narrated by her husband, Mr. Cheong, situates Yeong-hye as a dutiful wife, embodying the silence and obedience expected within traditional gender roles. But her marital life is shattered when she refuses to consume meat, leading to the recall of her traumatic childhood memories of violence, which ultimately initiated her bodily and psychological metamorphosis. The second section, narrated through the voice of her brother-in-law, complicates Yeong-hye's struggle by framing her body as both an aesthetic object and a site of agency. His artistic obsession with her Mongolian mark underscores the tension between objectification and self-determination. It reveals how Yeong-hye attempts to reclaim her bodily autonomy even when she is subjected to exploitation. Then, the final section turns to In-hye, Yeong-hye's sister, whose perspective exposes the shared but divergent burdens faced by women under patriarchal norms. In-hye silently accepts everything, while Yeong-hye outwardly revolts, aspiring to a plant-like existence; yet both find their lives

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equally empty and fractured. Together, the sisters represent two contrasting responses, like visible rebellion and silent endurance, that nevertheless lead to psychic collapse. By tracing these intertwined paths, *The Vegetarian* highlights the multilayered connections of memory, trauma, and gendered violence while resonating deeply with ecofeminist concerns. It is reflected through Yeong-hye's withdrawal from human-centered life. By realigning her identity with vegetal existence, she disrupts anthropocentrism and emphasizes the interdependence of all beings within the natural world.

This paper situates *The Vegetarian* within the theoretical framework of ecofeminist ethics of care, a perspective developed by thinkers such as Carol Gilligan and Marti Kheel. Carol Gilligan, in her work *In a Different Voice* (1982), challenged the dominant moral paradigms based on abstract rules and justice. Instead, she emphasized the ethics of care, which gives importance to empathy, responsibility, and attentiveness. On the other side, Marti Kheel expanded care ethics into the ecological domain, proposing a "holistic ethics" that resists the heroic, masculinist ethics of domination. She embraces empathy with both human and nonhuman life. In a chapter discussing holistic or care-based ethics, Marti Kheel emphasized Carol Gilligan's idea by stating, "Research by Carol Gilligan suggests that women's ethical conduct and thought tend to derive more from a sense of connection with others and from the feelings of care and responsibility that such connection entails." (37-38), which testifies to how Yeong-hye's withdrawal from the social sphere connects to care and nature ethics. Together, Gilligan and Kheel articulate a vision of morality rooted in relationships, an ethic that rejects compulsion. Thus, by applying this framework, Yeong-hye's transformation can be read as an ethical rebellion where her refusal of patriarchal and cultural codes is simultaneously a refusal of anthropocentric violence against nature and animals. Her refusal to eat meat is more than a personal dietary choice, and it symbolizes her defiance of participating in patriarchal practices that objectify women, nature and animals.

Radical Ethics of Care and Becoming Plant:

Yeong-hye's metamorphosis is depicted in a gradual manner which begins from her family's responses to her decision of abstaining from meat and eventually from normal human life. From the opening chapters of the text, it is clearly evident that Yeong-hye's vegetarianism unsettles her husband, and he tries to convince her to

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change her mind. He complains that her diet is inconvenient and it disrupts the patriarchal order of their marriage. He expects his wife to fulfill the role of a dutiful wife who prepares meals for the family that reflect conventional norms of the society. When she ceases to cook meat, he regards it as an act of carelessness, rather than as an expression of her ethical agency. This reaction of Yeong-hye reveals a view shaped by what Carol J. Adams calls “sexual politics of meat”, where he says, “what, or more precisely who, we eat is determined by the patriarchal politics of our culture, and that the meanings attached to meat eating include meanings clustered around virility. We live in a racist, patriarchal world in which men still have considerable power over women...” (15-16).

Therefore, Yeong-hye’s refusal is not simply dietary; rather, it destabilizes their marital life. Then, the most violent reaction comes from Yeong-hye’s father, when he attempts to force-feed her meat at a family gathering. The scene is filled with violence where her father insists on his authority by demanding obedience from his daughter, and when she resists, he physically assaults her. Here, Yeong-hye’s father enacts what Marti Kheel critiques as the “heroic” ethic of domination that equates control with moral authority, where food plays a crucial role. His actions, instead of expressing care, demonstrate the deep entrenchment of patriarchal norms that deny women moral agency. His attempt at forcing her to eat meat: “What are you doing? Do you think you can live without meat?” (Kang, 78), reveals the patriarchal control over her body and the societal expectation that women, in particular, conform to certain standards of femininity. Yeong-hye refuses to consume animal flesh because she aligns her ethics with the nonhuman, but her family perceives this as deviance that must be corrected. Her father’s aggression not only asserts patriarchal dominance but also reasserts human dominance over the animal world. Here, the family becomes an embodiment of systemic oppression of women and animals alike, where they are rendered as objects to be controlled and consumed. It also illustrates the ecofeminist insight that the oppression of women and the exploitation of animals are interconnected. Her refusal embodies empathy toward the suffering of nonhuman beings, which her family conceives as madness. She rejects all the norms of femininity by showing her defiance for the violence that both women and nature face under patriarchal control, which is evident in the passage where Yeong-hye makes the decision to stop eating meat: “She had made the decision. She would not eat meat anymore. That was all.” (Kang, 47). She desires to stop being human, and her strong

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rebellion towards the violence and exploitation inherent in human society is apparent when her brother-in-law describes her radical transformation: “She doesn’t eat meat, but it’s not because she wants to become a vegetarian. It’s because she wants to stop being human.” (Kang, 124). This passage deeply presents the connection between Yeong-hye’s rejection of meat and her rejection of humanity. Her decision to abandon human conventions to merge into ecological existence is an act of resistance against both gendered violence and ecological destruction.

By choosing vegetarianism, she refuses to build her survival upon violence, which expresses Gilligan’s care. Gilligan says, “While an ethic of justice proceeds from the premise of equality-that everyone should be treated the same-an ethic of care rests on the premise of nonviolence-that no one should be hurt” (174). Her refusal to participate in violence thus represents an ethical stance that challenges patriarchal norms of subjugation. By rejecting meat, she embodies that life should not be built on the suffering of others. Yet her personal choice is not understood but pathologized, and ultimately silenced by the society. Her resistance, though silenced, unveils the possibility of a morality rooted in empathy and interdependence. Thus, when viewed through ecofeminist care ethics, Yeong-hye’s vegetarianism emerges not as an act of madness or pathology but as a radical moral vision. As her story unfolds, she refuses to eat all forms of animal-derived food and completely ceases to eat altogether. She begins to imagine herself as vegetal and seeks sustenance not from killing but from photosynthesis. It is her brother-in-law who says that she is “like a tree that grows in the wilderness, denuded and solitary” (Kang, 64). At first, he sympathizes with Yeong-hye for her identification with plants, but soon his fascination turns into exploitation, where he uses her body as a tool for his artistic idea. He paints floral patterns all over her skin and films her in a very sexualized way. Instead of representing empathy, his actions become yet another instance of commodification, turning her desire for kinship with plants into an objectified image. Yeong-hye believes that her only solution to solve all her problems is becoming a plant that would take her out of violence. So, she starts to identify herself as a plant rather than a human. She feels like inhabiting the qualities of both plant and human, yet she denies her identity as a woman who adheres to the rules and regulations constructed by the society.

Her wish to transform herself into a plant makes her willingly take up the starvation and isolation. “I need to water my body, I don’t need this kind of food,

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sister, I need water” (Kang, 148), which shows how she completely stops eating and asks for water alone for her survival, just like plants. Yeong-Hye eventually avoids the consumption not only of meat but also of everything except sunshine, as she declares, “I don’t need to eat, not now, I can live without it. All I need is sunlight” (Kang, 154). Her rebellion becomes more distinct when her mental state deteriorates, and it is evidently seen in her actions: “She would sit quietly among the trees, her eyes fixed on the wild plants that grew around her, and she would feel as though she were becoming part of them” (Kang, 197). In this passage, Yong-hye’s wish to transcend her human existence by seeking solace in nature suggests a desire to reconnect with the earth. Her immersion in nature is an escape from the violence of patriarchal society and environmental destruction. This is evident in the recurring images of plants and animals that symbolize Yeong-hye’s growing alienation from human society and her increasing identification with the natural world. She feels herself becoming more and more like the plants around her. Her identification with the plants around her is both a form of resistance and a recognition of the violence that has been done to her body. By aligning herself with the natural world, she seeks to escape the damage done by human exploitation. All her actions resemble what Kheel said, “The natural world will be “saved” not by the sword of ethical theory, but rather through a transformed consciousness toward all of life” (244).

And finally, at the end of the text, Yeong-hye’s vegetarianism is associated with madness, and it is treated as a psychological illness called anorexia nervosa. After being hospitalized, her physical health deteriorated, and she was visited by her sister, where she was mumbling in her dream as follows:

“Look, sister, I’m doing a handstand; leaves are growing out of my body, roots are sprouting out of my hands...they delve down into the earth. Endlessly, endlessly...yes, I spread my legs because I wanted flowers to bloom from my crotch; I spread them wide...” (Kang, 127).

The whole description explains that her self-absorption as a plant is more on a psychological level, where one considers oneself as a plant. She encounters a system that treats her ethical refusal as pathology, where her rejection of food is interpreted as illness. In place of care, empathy and attentiveness, they imposed treatment. This critiques institutions which often devalue relational and contextual ethics in favour of hierarchical systems of control. It reveals the systemic absence of care in Yeong-hye’s

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world. “Learning to respond to nature in caring ways is not an abstract exercise in reasoning. *It is, above all, a form of psychic and emotional health*” (Kheel, 260), suggests that Yeong-hye’s act is not illness but an emotionally grounded ethic. At each stage, her refusal rooted in empathy toward nonhuman life and a desire for nonviolence is considered as disobedience, deviance, or disorder. But ecofeminist ethics of care exposes the society that interprets resistance as pathology and depicts it as a radical expression of empathy. Through Yeong-hye’s struggle, this paper mainly elucidates the fragile, often silenced possibilities of care-based ethics in contexts of domination. The novel, therefore, demonstrates both the necessity and the vulnerability of care as an alternative method for reimagining human and ecological relations.

Conclusion

Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian* is often explored through the themes of madness, alienation, violence and resistance. Yet, when it is framed through the lens of ecofeminist ethics of care, the text reveals itself as a critique of systems that privilege patriarchal domination over empathy. Yeong-hye’s abstention from meat, her deep connection to plants, and ultimately her rejection of human identity are not merely indicators of illness but reflections of an alternative moral ethic deeply embedded in care for both human and non-human life. Her choices can be understood through Gilligan’s perspective of care ethics as a “different voice” and Kheel’s expansion of this ethic into an ecological sphere. Even when faced with violence, she refuses to abandon her moral vision rooted in care. Her aspiration to live like a tree, an existence that doesn’t depend on killing unlike humans can be interpreted as a reimagination of survival. By foregrounding the importance of care in a violent world, the novel reconstructs the societal frameworks that shape human life. Yeong-hye’s resistance through her vegetal transformation insists on an ethic of care, empathy and responsibility as a replacement for domination and control. Thus, her metamorphosis forms a gendered identity to an ecological consciousness embodies the very care ethics that society desperately needs yet continually suppresses.

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Guava Power: Vegetal Intervention and Social Transformation in Desai's Narrative

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Abstract

In Kiran Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, the guava tree is not merely scenery—it actively shapes human behavior, brings individuals together or pushes them apart, and subtly disrupts established social norms. This paper examines how Desai attributes a sense of agency to the tree, allowing it to intervene in Sampath's life and transform the dynamics of the entire community. As a result, the orchard is no longer just a physical space but becomes a vibrant stage where social roles are negotiated and challenged.

Using the theoretical frameworks of Phytopoetics and the Plant Turn, this study foregrounds plants as active participants in the narrative rather than passive background elements. The guava tree influences human actions, resists rigid social structures, and generates alternative forms of collective imagination. Within the novel, the orchard emerges as a site where ecological awareness intersects with social transformation.

The study argues that Indian English fiction can reimagine the entangled relationship between humans and vegetal life. Ultimately, the guava tree functions as a subtle yet powerful force in the narrative, carrying ecological, cultural, and political significance. It encourages readers to perceive plants not merely as symbols but as agents of memory, storytelling, and social meaning.

Keywords: Vegetal Agency; Phytopoetics; Indian Literature in English; Urban Flora; Plant-Human Relationships; Social Transformation

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1. Introduction

This new intellectual interest in vegetal life has triggered interest in the complex ways in which plants are involved in the constructions of cultural meanings, interpersonal relations and ecological thought, thus promoting a move toward less anthropocentric interpretive schemas and more distributed and relational ones. This change is occasionally referred to as the Plant Turn and has prompted a literary critic to look at how vegetal shapes which have been perceived as passive settings, actually shape narrative designs, ethical interactions and even political sensibilities. In this context, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* by Kiran Desai comes as an intriguing text, which implicitly incorporates plant-based thinking to describe the interwovenness between the ecological and social constructs in modern India.

Desai, though her novel is often praised in terms of humour and satire as a depiction of the life in a small town, also points to a more underlying ecological undercurrent, where the guava tree turns into a living catalyst, who rearranges spatial relations, human aspirations, and the beat of everyday life. Desai foregrounds the dynamic presence of the orchard by doing so, to allow a more subtle reading, where vegetal life is involved in the production of meaning, not merely as a metaphor or symbol but as something material, mobilising affect and structuring interactions between people. The storey thus challenges the reader to understand how plant life, taken seriously, presents other forms of relationality and ways of knowing that are normally hidden in human-based approaches.

This paper places *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* in a wider discussion that is trying to rebrand the vegetal as a force in literature by engaging in a moderate way with theorists like Michael Marder, Natasha Myers, and Donna Haraway. Through this, the study suggests that the narrative by Desai can be significant territory in changing how Indian Writing in English can develop, and how the Plants Turn may rethink ecological entanglements, social structures and the intricate affective environments that arise when human and vegetal worlds come into contact.

2. Shahkot's Living Ecology

This town Shahkot which is fictional is transformed into a busy place influenced by its heat, fruit-trees, monkeys, and thick masses of human habitation, and thus, an ecological texture, in which the vegetal and human rhythmic patterns come together and collide. This spatial arrangement sets the events of this novel in perspective, and implies that the behaviour of human beings cannot be isolated of the

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environmental conditions that enclose it. The dullness of life led by Sampath, the impatience of the inhabitants, fascination with spectacle as a group, all these dynamics are created in a landscape that is formed by the presence of vegetable life, drought, plenty, and the change of the seasons.

Desai highlights the role of plants as an intermediary of social energy by locating the guava orchard in the middle of the storey. When Sampath gets into the tree, the action is described not as an escape but as an inherent response to a vegetal world which provides shelter, comfort, and a kind of belonging. The fact that Desai refers to Sampath as settling down as though he were part of the place (Desai 52) is an indication of identity fusion where human will and vegetal hospitality are intertwined.

The orchard thus is not merely a place but rather an actor that determines the way events unfold. It takes secrets, hides bodies, and serves as a host to meetings, acting almost as a collective memory, where feelings, ambitions, and fears are stored. This view echoes Marder's concept of vegetal life as a way of being that makes us redefine subjectivity in the context of rootedness, relationality, and silent endurance (Marder 28). In this respect, the orchard in the Desai storey is a perfect example of spatial, ecological, and social interrelations, which underlines the role of vegetal life that either promotes or disrupts human worlds.

3. Guava Tree and Spiritual Authority

Among the most dramatic changes in the novel is the accidental transformation of Sampath into a holy man, a role that is represented exactly by his relationship with the guava tree. Instead of introducing the idea of spirituality as something that humans are supposed to develop, Desai presents the change of Sampath in the context in which vegetal intervention that creates an environment where spiritual authority can emerge is at play. But the rustling of leaves, which sounds like whispers shared among themselves only and not by the author (Desai 61), is an indication that the vegetal environment is also a co-producer of meaning as well as Sampath does not want to be involved in the mess of human demands. This scene can be explained by the criticism of the anthropocentrism expressed by Donna Haraway, who writes that human beings tend to reduce the nonhuman agencies to a blank, thus disregarding the co-constitutive relationships that hold species in place (Haraway 45). In comparison, the active role of the tree in facilitating the sainthood of Sampath is foregrounded in the narrative of Desai.

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Since the orchard transforms into the place people go to consult, be cleansed in the water, or be simple spectators, the guava tree provides a space and affective frame within which the speech, gestures, and silence of Sampath can be meaningful. The vegetal canopy is a philtre to light, sound and atmosphere and it shapes the experience of the people who gather under it in subtle ways. Desai, in this manner, expends his message on the creation of spiritual identity in the novel that is not created through the charisma of a person, but rather the close dialogue between human presence and vegetal ambience.

The novel challenges the hierarchies of plants as passive and human as active by acknowledging the guava tree as a power-giving agent. Rather, the orchard is shown to be a co-producer of meaning showing how vegetal life can be involved in building social reverence, belief, and community.

4. The Orchard and Social Hierarchies

The ability of the orchard to bring people of different types together in the one environment enables Desai to examine how vegetal environments could temporarily dissolve social divides. The guava tree creates a kind of community openness, which challenges prevailing structures, in Shahkot, where movement and behaviour are often determined by class divisions, bureaucratic hierarchies, and constraints between people.

4.1. The Orchard as a Counter-Public

When individuals congregate under the tree of Sampath, they are engaged in what could be viewed as a counter-public, a place where all the hierarchies of everyday life become softened and people of various backgrounds are brought into being in the same space of time, the same space of silence or the same space of curiosity or even the same space of devotion. The orchard thus serves as a zone of hybridity that gathers together various viewpoints, wants, and fears, creating a collective social force, which cannot easily be held in the traditional institutions of the town. This dynamic reflects on the talks of Anna Tsing in her contaminated diversity in which unforeseen ecological and social closeness creates new interactions (Tsing 27). The orchard, in the novel by Desai, is the place of such interaction and a literal and metaphorical place where alternative forms of social possibility emerge.

4.2. Bureaucracy Visiting the Shrubs

The bureaucratic powers in the town are trying to dominate, govern or derail the assemblies around Sampath but they eventually fail as the structure of the guava

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tree is not easily manipulated. Its branches are in the way, its elevation cannot be easily approached, and its ecological cycles do not want to bow down to administrative reasoning. These episodes show how vegetal life may silently subvert institutional power exposing the shortcomings of human efforts to control or taxonomize nonhuman space. By doing so, Desai points to a certain tension between state power and ecological resiliency. The guava, neither violent nor submissive, is merely going to keep growing, housing and fruit bearing and, as such, offers a sort of resistance of the vegetal, making the exercise of human power more difficult and the hierarchies exercised more vulnerable.

5. Multispecies Interactions

The scene with the drunken monkeys brings disorderly vitality to the storey, reminding the reader of the unpredictability of the effects of multispecies interactions through vegetal mediation. On a surface level, the scene looks comic, but it shows the degree to which natural rhythms in the orchard affect behaviours among species. Guava fruits, when fermented in the severe heat, make the monkeys drunk, causing a series of upheavals that end up in the whole town. The fact that this happened highlights an ecological interrelatedness of Shahkot, showing how the abundance of vegetation can lead to social disruption and multispecies chaos. There is a broader ecological storey of how the biochemical qualities of the fruit have dictated the behaviour of the monkeys, which links human, animal and vegetal agents.

The ideas of Natasha Myers about plant-human affect may be applied to this scenario where plant material, which is fermented guava, generates cross-species sensations, behaviours, and movements (Myers 22). The nature of these interactions, as presented by Desai, implies that vegetal life does not merely contribute to the formation of human sociality but also coordinates the uncontrollable interactions between species, thus exposing the intricate associations of interdependence and influence in the ecological setting of the novel.

6. Memory, Imagination, and Resistance

By maintaining its presence and multiple meaning, the guava tree is a place where memory, aspiration, and resistance meet, providing Shahkot with an area where alternative ways of living and thinking can develop.

6.1. Memory and Emotional Impact

The conversations and offerings and expectations these people bring to the orchard, by the time they come back and visit it repeatedly, build up in its branches

and under its shade and create a living storehouse of shared memory. The tree takes up the moods, wants, and fears of the town, letting them rest in its atmosphere. By doing so, the orchard becomes an emotional territory that reveals the inner world of those who come to visit.

6.2. In opposition to Withdrawal

It is possible to interpret the fact that Sampath decides to climb the tree as some kind of passive resisting all the pressures which his family, workplace, and neighbours put on him. His retirement is not presented as a rebellion per se but rather as a natural wave towards a place where silence, reflection and other forms of existence can be practised. The tree then affirms a refusal mode that is in line with the concept of vegetal rebellion as articulated by Marder, wherein silent resistance and rootedness are modes of political enunciation (Marder 49).

6.3. Visual and Narrative Potential

The marginal quality of the orchard as being both banal and transforming encourages dwellers to envision new storeys of anticipation, faith, and societal ordering. The tree is an extension of communal imagination since it offers a platform on which individuals can map onto its presence their own narratives. The storey thus by Desai highlights how an environment full of vegetation can foster creative and imaginative thinking and this helps people break-up the mundane of daily routine.

7. Narrative Structure and Phytopoetics

The study of the role of plant life in the literary imagination, known as phytopoetics, provides an effective approach to discussing how Desai organises the novel based on the rhythms and sensory perception of plants and processes in the natural environment.

7.1. Vegetal Metaphors and Narrative Movement

The process of transitioning between the slow, stagnant start of the novel towards the intense and unpredictable expansions reflects patterns of growth in plants themselves rooted, branching, evolving and dispersing. The narrative of Desai shares a vegetal temporality, which cannot be carried out linearly but rather is more diffused and relational.

7.2. Vegetal Sensibility of the Language

Desai resorts to expressions that make vegetal world alive and gives affective reverberation to the leaves, branches, and the sounds around. The use of language like, the orchard appeared to breathe with the crowd (Desai 97) displays how the storey

creates a permeable nature of the border between human affectivity and vegetative life. Such a play of text and vegetal structure is consonant with the phytopoetic practises of focusing on the role of plants in defining not only geographical space but also linguistic and imaginary space. *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, in this manner, is turned into a work in which vegetal presences anticipate narrative lines, channel character lines, and produce the aesthetic texture of the novel, as such that broadens the scope of literary devices that can be used to express complex ecological relationships.

8. Close Readings of Key Scenes

8.1. The Climb into the Tree by Sampath (Chapter 4).

His gesture of moving towards the branches sets out restructuring his identity, which triggers union with vegetal rhythms that renegotiate his place in the community.

8.2. Prayer Sessions Under the Canopy (Chapters 6-7)

The dark colour and the silence in the orchard make it easier to share the belief and anticipation and therefore the space is turned into a community arena where ideas are shared freely.

8.3. Chapters 11-13 The Drunken Monkeys.

The fermented guavas create a spectacle of multispecies which is a revelation of the unpredictable intersection of ecological and social forces.

8.4. Final Disappearance (Final Chapter) by Sampath.

The inconclusive twist where Sampath appears to melt into the vegetal world indicates a shift to the ecological becoming, blurring the lines between the human and plant life.

9. Indian Writing in English: Vegetal Agency.

Focusing the guava tree in a storey of urban irony, passion, and chaos, Desai shows the ability of Indian Writing in English to embrace environmental consciousness without grand scenery or forest backdrops. Rather, she sets city plants, ordinary and ordinary, plant life that is our daily bread, as the locus of narrative density and social change. Conversing with the literary traditions which preempt rivers, forests, and monsoons, Desai is transferred to a fruit-bearing tree which unexpectedly gets loaded with political and cultural meaning. Through this, she widens the ecological imagination of Indian literature, to imply that all forms of plants, wild, cultivated, or urban, are involved in the creation of human life and narration.

Conclusion

His *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchards* by Kiran Desai proves that vegetal life, once recognised as active and relational, can provide deep understanding of how society, memory, identity, and imagination work. The novel uses the guava tree to explain how plants step in to determine the social interactions, facilitate resistance, and create new patterns of social interaction. The analysis of the text as related to Phytopoetics and the Plant Turn, this paper has presented the way that Desai reconfigures the limits of agency so that plants too partake in the co-authoring of those textures of everyday life. The ability of the orchard to radically change the social landscape of Shahkot: the frustrations of bureaucratic life therein giving way to that of spiritual dreams and multispecies entanglements, creates a unique emphasis on the importance of vegetal agency in literature.

The enduring nature of the guava tree ultimately encourages the reader to rethink their connexion to the vegetal world, how plants define the narratives we tell, the communities we create and the futures we imagine around ecological and social futures.

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Arboreal Memory and Ecological Renewal: An Ecocritical Study of Biodiversity and Conservation in David Malouf's *Fly Away Peter*

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Abstract: Biodiversity is the heartbeat of our planet, where human beings and nature live in harmony. Australia is renowned for its diverse biodiversity, featuring a range of ecosystems including swamplands, wetlands, and rainforests. The swamplands are a repository of trees that grow in freshwater environments and are home to a variety of creatures, especially arboreal birds. They play an important role in maintaining ecological balance and sustainability. A disruption, especially one caused by human intervention such as war, destroys the ecosystem, disrupting the natural cycle. David Malouf, a prominent Australian writer, narrates in his novella, *Fly Away Peter*. This paper argues that *Fly Away Peter* exhibits genuine ecological awareness, depicting war as an environmental disaster that disrupts biodiversity, while also demonstrating how a conscious human inclination towards care and restoration collaborates to re-establish a harmonious balance and continuity in the post-war environment.

Keywords: Biodiversity, Arboreal birds, Environmental disaster, Restoration

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Introduction

“Biodiversity”- Bios(life) Diversitas (variety) means “Variety of Life”. It refers to the variety of life forms on Earth, such as flora, fauna, fungi, and microorganisms, living in harmony with their respective physical environments. It is the pulse of the earth, sustaining all the biotic and abiotic components of the planet. Biodiversity plays a pivotal role in regulating climate, temperature, water bodies, soil fertility, food chain, breeding, and adaptability of the various ecosystems prevalent on Earth. Ecological balance is the state of equilibrium among ecosystems in which every organism is interconnected to the environment, supporting life and sustainability. Biodiversity and ecosystems vary from continent to continent by land terrains, climate, and geography. The presence of human activities also shapes and alters the habitat.

Australia, the world’s smallest continent, is known for its fascinating biodiversity and ecosystem. Rainforests, swamplands, wetlands, and savannahs and is home to a variety of birds, mammals, species and animals.

David Malouf is a contemporary Australian writer and winner of the inaugural Australia- Asia Literary Award, the international IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, the Prix Femina Etranger and the Los Angeles Times Book Award is the author of notable works such as *Remembering*.

Babylon, An Imaginary Life, and *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*. His works reflect the richness of Australian Biodiversity, landscape and identity. The Novella *Fly Away Peter* presents a vivid picture of the Australian natural environment: lush green swampland, wetlands with diverse plant and tree species, and arboreal birds. Harmony prevails in the atmosphere, and a unique ecology is maintained. Malouf highlights how man-made wars wreak havoc on the environment, and such gruesome wars cause an ecological catastrophe, rupturing the human- nature harmony. He combines ecological awareness, human empathy, and environmental restoration. Previous studies often emphasise war trauma or spirituality, while this study focuses on biodiversity and ecological renewal and the arboreal memory.

Ecocriticism is a literary approach that studies the relationship between literature and the environment. It asserts that all the life forms of the earth are important and are interconnected. The foundational aim of

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ecocriticism is to identify and examine how literary texts reflect and engage with ecological concerns, and it encourages readers to rethink the interaction between humans and nature. Nature is a real entity and is not a mere social or textual construct. Ecocriticism applies ecological concerns to the analysis of literary representations and advocates for ethical positions towards nature while critiquing anthropocentrism and embracing biocentrism. Lawrence Buell, the foundational theorist of ecocriticism, proposed that the nonhuman environment is not a mere backdrop but is a dynamic presence. Nature is not only scenic but has its own agency. He says, “With the environmental crisis comes a crisis of the imagination, a need to find new ways to understand nature and humanity’s relation to it.” (Buell 1) Cheryll Glotfelty, the pioneer of ecocriticism, says, “Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty xviii). Arne Naess, a Norwegian philosopher, introduced “Deep Ecology” in the 1970s, which states that all living beings, plants, animals, biodiversity and ecology have inherent and intrinsic value. Human beings are not superior to nature but are a part of the wider ecology. He advocates intrinsic value, biodiversity protection, and rejection of materialism and living in balance with limits.

The essence of the deep ecology approach is to ask deeper questions. We ask why and how, where others accept the need for technical solutions. Deep Ecology recognizes that the real cause of the ecological crisis is the unexamined belief that human beings are superior to other forms of life and entitled to dominate them. (Naess 151)

Set in Queensland, the author begins by describing Australia's natural environment. Queensland is known for its rich arboreal biodiversity due to its varied climatic conditions. The arboreal biodiversity includes tropical rainforests, sclerophyll forests and mangroves. The landscape that Malouf introduces is situated near Moreton Bay. It is a large estuarine bay on the east coast of Australia, featuring diverse habitats. According to the University of Queensland, Australia, highly productive ecosystems are found near the shoreline with freshwater lakes, wetlands, swamplands, dunes and mangrove forests. The swamp is bordered by tea-trees, wholly surrounded by tall Blue Mountains. In Malouf’s words, the swampland

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drains into the Pacific. The Bay is home to coral reefs and a variety of fish and other aquatic mammals. The wetland is home to a vast population of waterbirds, and it's a living ecosystem where birds and trees coexist in perfect ecological balance.

Trees such as Melaleuca, Paperbark, Eucalyptus and Moreton Bay Figs are found in the swamplands and are home to numerous arboreal birds. Lotus birds, Sandpipers, Sacred Kingfishers, Lorikeets, Rosellas, Hawks, Kestrels, White Ibis, Dunlin, and Fruit Pigeons abide here. The roots of the trees stabilise soil, filter water and provide nesting spaces to these birds, symbolising the foundation of biodiversity. "All this water, all these boughs and leaves and little clumps of tussocky grass that were such good nesting-places and feeding grounds belonged inviolably to the birds" (Malouf 7). The protagonist, Ashley Crowther, owns the land. His companion, Jim Saddler, a passionate birdwatcher, joins Ashley in guarding this pristine landscape, hoping to develop it into a 'sanctuary'. As native Australians, they try to protect the land with effort without disturbing the primitivity and the natural cycle. Jim develops an intimate relationship with the land and the birds. He exhibits a notion of belongingness where he is one with the natural environment. Malouf emphasises Jim's indigenous knowledge about the landscape. Every blade of grass, every drop of water, every bird's foot and the minute detail of the birds that come and go, all were in Jim's knowledge. His ecological vision expands day by day as he teams with Imogen, another bird watcher. He views nature as a living community. The harmony of movement and the stillness of the land captivated him. "The landscape, the whole great circle of it, grass-heads, scrub, water, sky, quite took his breath away" (Malouf 18).

Jim would often lie on his back and watch the whole landscape dazzling and shrilling, teeming with life. The birds begin their big migrations in the last days of August and early September. Bird migration in Moreton Bay, Queensland, is a crucial part of the ecological rhythm. The Bay hosts thousands and thousands of migratory birds, and it acts as a stopover for those migratory birds. The bay's mudflats, trees and grass provide adequate food rich in nutrients, shelter for breeding and protection for the birds. The migratory birds fly for thousands of kilometres, and the bay is the resting

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ground for the birds to rest, build their energy and start their flight. The wetland trees play an important role in maintaining the water quality. Jim recalls it as “a natural cycle of things that the birds followed undisturbed” (Malouf 62).

Jim Saddler contemplates the life of birds and their migration. The birds, though little in nature with their little brains, could travel long distances, crossing oceans and continents. The birds do not require maps, unlike human beings. He sees that the birds are guided by their instinct and ancestral memory. They travel with accuracy and return to the same wetlands. Their bodies remember the long distances. Jim is struck by how these delicate and fragile creatures fly together by their arboreal memory. They remember the exact sand, water, and trees from where they flew and return to the same. The birds represent memory and resilience. During migration, the land is “crowded and alive with eyes, beaks, wing-tips” (Malouf 17). Jim says that it is the time when one can see into the creature’s unique life.

Soon, World War I erupts, and even Australia is compelled to join the rest of the nations in the war. Jim is compelled to go to Europe, leaving behind his indigenous land and roots. Jim finds himself in the stinky trenches of France and Belgium. It is for the first time Jim witnesses the gruesome reality of war – weapons, ammunition, guns, tankers, constant bombardments, blood streams, and human corpses. Jim is shattered and feels displaced and dispossessed from his own native land. The weather is harsh and cold. Jim felt like he had taken the wrong turn in his sleep and had arrived at the dark side. He calls war a ‘bad business’ and a catastrophe. He remarks, “War was being developed as a branch of industry” (Malouf 117). Ashley Crowther also joins the war as an officer, leaving behind the landscape that he had inherited from his grandfather.

Jim describes the new landscape that he has arrived at. The war has not only taken a toll on human lives but has also wreaked havoc on the environment. It is upon the natural landscape that these human-made wars are waged, and nature is destroyed. He contemplates how the new land is mysterious and devoid of natural habitation. The warplanes have clipped the tops of the trees, rendering them broken. “There were emergency roads

everywhere, cutting across what must once have been vineyards or beetfields” (Malouf 69). This shows how the vegetation of the land is stripped off for the promotion of war. Jim witnesses a group of local peasants who are on the outskirts of the town are trying to grow cabbage and wheat crops for survival. This is evident in how the land has lost its vegetation, and only a few outskirts are left. Blasted trees felled everywhere. Along with other soldiers, Jim spends his life hiding in potholes, wagons, and trucks. Jim crosses a place called ‘Marwood Copse’ where not even a stick remained of what might have been a densely populated wood. This depicts the environmental disaster caused by war. Biodiversity collapses alongside moral and emotional decay. One can witness the transformation of natural beauty into wasteland, symbolising ecological imbalance.

Spending days together in the war-torn land, Jim and Ashley find each other. They are weak, tired and dejected. It's been days since they both enjoyed the warmth of the sunlight, breathed fresh air or witnessed a natural landscape like their own land. They decide that they no longer should continue in the land. The land appeared grey, and the smell of it was like charred flesh. The woods lay open as if the door of a blast furnace where smoke dispersed, and all the lines of the woods were aglow with fire. “It was like the mouth of hell” (Malouf 100). Malouf presents a juxtaposition of two different landscapes – a pristine and undisturbed ecological landscape, green and teeming with life and the other, bleak and desolate, war-torn, with no signs of nature. Malouf equates war with environmental ruin, bombarded landscapes, poisoned soils, and lifeless nature, mirroring human suffering and biodiversity collapses alongside moral and emotional decay. In such a landscape, Jim’s only solace is his memory of his native land and bird watching. He spots a Wryneck, Skylark and a Yellow wagtail and makes a note of them, like he did in Australia. He thinks about how the birds live and the natural cycle, signifying resilience and continuity of life.

Jim and Ashley take a break from the war, and they take a stroll in an open field to collect firewood. Walking further, they discovered an old man digging and planting something. He was the same old man whom Jim had seen in the woods when he was crossing a trench. The old man had been

digging then and even now. Jim and Ashley were flabbergasted to see how nature had rejuvenated and healed on its own. “He was surprised now to see how thick the woods were, how the blasted trees had renewed themselves with summer growth, covering their wounds, and were turning colour” (Malouf 133). Jim spots birds singing and a garden with fresh vegetables. Jim and Ashley knelt to feel and smell the earth. “The earth smelled so good. It was a smell that belonged to the beginning of things” (Malouf 134). Nature has the power to restore and heal. The return of birds and the regrowth of trees in the post-war landscape symbolise ecological healing and moral recovery. Nature’s resilience reflects Malouf’s belief in renewal through care and awareness. The avian and arboreal imagery promotes a vision of environmental ethics, conservation, and coexistence. Malouf’s ecological imagination aligns with the principles of deep ecology and sustainability.

Imogen Harcourt receives the news of Jim’s death, and Ashley is severely wounded. She goes to the beach to watch the surfers as he holds the pain and the sadness of Jim’s death, his brutal extinction, as she calls it. She gathers herself together and thinks that life must go on. She recollects the memories of Jim as an ardent birdwatcher and his endless efforts in his native land. Imogen can be seen as a nurturing figure who reconnects with nature after the war, symbolising the possibility of regeneration. Her memory becomes a tool of healing, linking personal grief with ecological rebirth.

Conclusion:

David George Joseph Malouf brings out the relationship of human beings with the surrounding environment. Though Jim Saddler is taken away from his native land and is placed in a new landscape, Jim seeks opportunities to develop a connection with the environment where he is taken. War deteriorates both nature and the inhabitants of the land. Malouf tries to elucidate environmental ethics and focuses on how human beings are solely responsible for biodiversity. He advocates a post-war ecological consciousness that values empathy, memory, and restoration. The author explores the idea of how human beings are ‘stewards’ of nature. The human race is entrusted with a huge responsibility to care for and protect nature at all costs and to live harmoniously with nature. It is an ethical duty. Jim

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Saddler can be seen as a steward of the sanctuary, where he does not exploit the land but advocates for preserving it.

Thus, *Fly Away Peter* is a powerful narration of ecological destruction by war and renewal, reflecting the natural cycle of life. The novel shifts from the rich atmosphere of Australian swamplands, wetlands, and bird migration to the trenches and chaos of World War I, where human-driven conflicts disturb and destroy the life and rhythm of the ecological balance. David Malouf turns the attention of his readers towards hope, rejuvenation and renewal of nature. The novella offers hope that nature has the power to heal itself and can thrive even after destruction and loss, proving the resilience, endurance, permanence and continuity of nature. The old man is also a steward who works towards the restoration of nature, and his efforts of planting and sowing have resulted in the renewal of nature. It is a clarion call to the readers to step in and aid, like the old man, as stewards of nature. Environmental stewardship is an ethical viewpoint that posits human beings as caretakers and responsible managers of nature. In this fast-moving and developing world, Malouf's ideology resonates still and is relevant today. Currently, the Earth is facing major ecological threats such as the climate change crisis, deforestation and pollution. His ideology of collective ecological consciousness, man as steward of nature, should care and take real ethical action and foster harmony with nature.

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Green in the Grey: Urban Flora and the Saga of Survival in the Anthropocene

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Abstract

In an era defined by rapid urbanization and environmental transformation, the quiet persistence of urban flora has emerged as a powerful symbol of resilience within the Anthropocene. This research paper explores how literary representations of city landscapes and their plant life reimagine the relationship between humans and nature in the age of ecological crisis. Drawing on works such as Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* and Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, the study investigates how writers use urban vegetation—trees breaking through concrete, gardens reclaiming abandoned spaces, or wild plants thriving along city margins—as metaphors for adaptation, resistance, and hope. By situating urban flora as both witness and participant in human history, the paper examines how literature challenges the anthropocentric gaze and invites a more inclusive ecological consciousness. The city, often viewed as a site of destruction, becomes in these narratives a living organism where nature and culture coexist in fragile interdependence. Through a close reading of key texts, this study highlights how writers reimagine the Anthropocene not merely as a time of loss, but as a moment of renewal where the smallest forms of life remind us of the possibility of regeneration amid decay. Ultimately, this paper argues that urban flora in literature offers a quiet yet profound resistance to the narratives of dominance and despair that define our age, revealing the enduring dialogue between the human and the more-than-human in the urban world.

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Keywords: Urban Ecology, Anthropocene, Ecocriticism, Environmental Humanities, Ecological Consciousness, Nature-Culture Relationship

Introduction

The conceptualization of the Anthropocene as a geological, cultural, and epistemic epoch has reconfigured scholarly attention toward the entwined fates of human and nonhuman life. While dominant narratives situate urban modernity as the culmination of anthropogenic extractivism and ecological estrangement, the persistence of flora within metropolitan environments complicates such assumptions. The city—conventionally theorized as an architectural and ideological space of concrete, steel, surveillance, and human exceptionalism—reveals fissures through which vegetal life asserts itself. Weeds proliferating in derelict industrial zones, banyan roots dismantling asphalt, medicinal herbs sprouting in informal settlements, and memorial gardens cultivated in spaces of mourning all testify to the inadequacy of binaries that oppose nature to the urban. These botanical manifestations re-envision the metropolis not as a sterilized post-natural terrain but as a palimpsest of multispecies cohabitation.

The emergence of the Anthropocene discourse has further intensified the urgency of interrogating such ecological reconfigurations. Amitav Ghosh argues in *The Great Derangement* that modern literary forms have failed to adequately represent climate crisis, resulting in a cultural incapacity to imagine planetary instability. Arundhati Roy, in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, inscribes vegetal life into zones of grief, dispossession, resistance, and liminality. The convergence of these texts offers a critical terrain for analyzing how urban flora functions as both witness and insurgent within spaces marked by environmental degradation, state violence, and necropolitical governance. Urban vegetation in these narratives embodies what Michael Marder terms “vegetal being”—a mode of life that exceeds utility, symbolism, and domestication, foregrounding alternative ontologies of persistence.

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This paper argues that urban flora in contemporary South Asian literature operates as a destabilizing epistemic force that challenges the anthropocentric foundations of urban modernity. Through the frameworks of ecocriticism, posthumanism, and environmental humanities, the study positions vegetal survivals as agents that interrupt capitalist temporalities, unsettle human sovereignty, and articulate ecological futures grounded in resilience and interdependence. By rethinking the city as an entangled ecological assemblage rather than a human-engineered enclave, the analysis reframes the Anthropocene as a condition in which the more-than-human emerges as both archive and architect of survival.

The following sections elaborate the theoretical positioning of this inquiry, map existing scholarship on literary urban ecologies, and examine the methodological structures through which the selected texts are analyzed. A close reading of Ghosh and Roy elucidates the ways in which urban flora becomes a narrative modality for articulating environmental consciousness, memory, mourning, and resistance. Ultimately, the paper contends that vegetal presence in urban spaces signifies not only endurance but also the possibility of ecological re-enchantment in an era defined by planetary crisis.

Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with the intersections of ecocriticism, urban studies, and Anthropocene discourse has expanded considerably over the past two decades, yet critical attention to vegetal agency within metropolitan literary imaginaries remains comparatively emergent. Foundational ecocritical scholarship, shaped by the work of scholars such as Cheryll Glotfelty and Lawrence Buell, initially privileged wilderness, rural landscapes, and pastoral aesthetics, thereby marginalizing urban ecosystems as degraded or ecologically insignificant. More recent interventions have challenged this exclusion, arguing that the city constitutes a vital ecological terrain requiring theoretical reconsideration. Ursula Heise's articulation of eco-cosmopolitanism reframes environmental belonging beyond territorial nature, while Timothy Morton's concept of "hyperobjects" situates climate change as a phenomenon that permeates urban existence.

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Within South Asian literary and cultural discourse, ecocritical scholarship has largely focused on agrarian displacement, environmental justice, and postcolonial resource extraction. Rob Nixon's theorization of "slow violence" provides a critical framework for understanding the temporalities of ecological harm, yet the vegetal responses to such violence in urban zones remain understudied. Scholars examining Arundhati Roy's oeuvre have emphasized state violence, political resistance, and spatial marginality, but the role of flora in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* has received insufficient systematic analysis beyond symbolic readings. Likewise, critical responses to Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* have foregrounded the crisis of literary representation in the Anthropocene, climate imaginaries, and epistemological failures, but have rarely interrogated the implicit urban ecologies embedded within his argument.

Parallel to these developments, the environmental humanities have opened avenues for rethinking human exceptionalism and extending ethical consideration to nonhuman forms of life. Jane Bennett's theorization of vibrant materiality, Donna Haraway's call for multispecies entanglement, and Anna Tsing's work on unruly life amidst capitalist ruins collectively unsettle hierarchical ontologies. Yet vegetal life remains comparatively under-theorized within these frameworks, often overshadowed by animals, technological hybrids, or microbial networks. Michael Marder's contributions attempt to redress this imbalance by articulating plant-thinking as a philosophical modality, though literary applications of his ideas within specifically urban contexts remain sparse.

Thus, the present study intervenes in a scholarly gap at the intersection of urban ecologies, vegetal ontology, South Asian literary studies, and Anthropocene theorization. By foregrounding the narrative, symbolic, and material presence of urban flora in Ghosh and Roy, this paper extends ecocritical inquiry into metropolitan terrains and reinscribes vegetal life as a central analytical focus rather than an incidental backdrop. In doing so, it contributes to a reorientation of literary environmental studies toward the densely inhabited, politically fraught, and ecologically entangled spaces of the contemporary city.

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Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in an interdisciplinary nexus that synthesizes ecocriticism, posthumanism, environmental humanities, and vegetal ontology in order to interrogate the epistemological implications of urban flora in Anthropocene literature. Ecocriticism provides a foundational lens through which the textual representation of ecological forms can be examined; however, the analysis extends beyond traditional ecological symbolism to interrogate the ontological status of plant life within urban narratives. Posthumanist theory destabilizes anthropocentric hierarchies and foregrounds distributed agency across species, infrastructures, and environments. Within this paradigm, the city is conceptualized not as a human-dominated construct but as a multispecies assemblage in which vegetal presences exert force, meaning, and persistence.

Environmental humanities scholarship broadens this inquiry by situating ecological knowledge within cultural production, memory, affect, and ethics. The Anthropocene, as both a geological and conceptual marker, frames the temporal urgency and planetary stakes underlying the textual representations examined in this paper. The Anthropocene also foregrounds contradictions inherent in urban modernity: acceleration and collapse, extraction and fragility, domination and interdependence. Against this backdrop, vegetal life emerges as a counter-temporality—slow, non-anthropocentric, and enduring.

Vegetal ontology, particularly as articulated by Michael Marder, informs the study's interpretive approach to plant life as a mode of being that resists instrumentalization. Marder's contention that plants embody a diffuse, non-sovereign subjectivity enables a reading of urban flora as agents that challenge the spatial, political, and epistemic architectures of the city. Furthermore, Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics is mobilized to interrogate the spaces within Roy's narrative where plant life emerges amidst death, exclusion, and violence, thereby complicating the relationship between survival and subjugation. Spatial theory, particularly the work of Henri Lefebvre, supports the examination of the city as a produced and contested space in which flora disrupts dominant spatial logics.

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By integrating these theoretical modalities, the study constructs an analytical framework that positions urban flora as a critical site for rethinking the Anthropocene, reconfiguring ecological agency, and reframing the city as an entangled, insurgent ecological terrain. The framework thus enables a reading of literary texts in which vegetal presences articulate alternative ecological imaginaries, resist anthropocentric epistemologies, and generate new modes of environmental meaning within contemporary South Asian literature.

Methodology

The methodological orientation of this study is grounded in qualitative textual analysis informed by interdisciplinary theoretical synthesis. Rather than approaching urban flora as a symbolic motif or aesthetic embellishment, the analysis interrogates vegetal presence as a structural and epistemic force within narrative form. The study employs close reading practices attentive to spatial description, narrative temporality, representational strategies, and rhetorical constructions that foreground vegetal life within urban environments. Particular attention is paid to moments where flora interrupts, destabilizes, or reconfigures human-centered spatial narratives.

The methodology incorporates:

1. **Ecocritical textual mapping** — identifying passages where urban nature emerges within landscapes of crisis, abandonment, or decay.
2. **Posthumanist narrative analysis** — examining how vegetal presences redistribute agency across human and nonhuman actors.
3. **Spatial hermeneutics** — analyzing how urban settings are produced, contested, and transformed through flora.
4. **Temporal disruption analysis** — tracing vegetal growth as a counter-temporality to capitalist acceleration, necropolitical abandonment, and colonial residue.

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5. **Intertextual theoretical alignment** — situating literary representation within broader discourses of Anthropocene critique.

This methodological convergence enables a reading that does not instrumentalize plants as metaphor, but instead positions them as ontological and narrative agents. The selected primary texts serve as representative case studies through which vegetal insurgency in urban spaces can be theorized within South Asian literary discourse. The analytical structure therefore proceeds from theoretical framing to textual embodiment, demonstrating how narrative strategies encode ecological reimagining within the urban Anthropocene.

Textual Analysis: Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement*

Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* operates not as fiction but as a critical polemic interrogating the failure of literary and cultural production to adequately represent the realities of climate crisis. While the text does not offer narrative depictions of urban flora in a conventional literary mode, it performs a crucial epistemological function by critiquing the narrative architectures that render ecological rupture unthinkable. Within Ghosh's argument, the modern city emerges as an epistemic construct predicated on predictability, rationality, and linear temporality—conditions that climate instability fundamentally violates. It is within this destabilization that vegetal agency becomes theoretically legible.

Ghosh positions the Anthropocene as a crisis of imagination in which literary realism proves structurally incapable of representing nonhuman force. The exclusion of the improbable, the uncanny, the catastrophic, and the nonhuman from mainstream narrative forms is framed as a symptom of bourgeois modernity. Urban environments in Ghosh's critique function as sites where the distancing of humans from ecological entanglement becomes culturally encoded. Yet the very instability of the Anthropocene fractures this distance, revealing the permeability and fragility of urban spaces. Vegetal life, implicitly, becomes a reminder of the nonhuman forces that persist despite the epistemological architecture of the modern city.

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Furthermore, Ghosh's analysis of colonial and extractive histories positions the city as a product of imperial environmental reordering. This framework enables a reading in which urban flora represents a counter-historical archive: the persistence of indigenous species, the adaptation of transplanted vegetation, and the botanical ruins of imperial landscaping. Although not foregrounded explicitly, vegetal life becomes an index of ecological histories that exceed official narrative memory.

Ghosh's argument that literature must reconceptualize narrative form in order to articulate climate realities can be extended to the necessity of reconceptualizing vegetal presence within urban imaginaries. By critiquing anthropocentric literary traditions, *The Great Derangement* provides the discursive foundation for reading urban flora as agents that destabilize the epistemic scaffolding of modernity. In this way, the text functions as a theoretical precursor to the narrative embodiments found more explicitly in Arundhati Roy's work, where vegetal insurgency materializes within the lived spaces of the city.

Textual Analysis: Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* offers a richly textured literary landscape in which vegetal life emerges not only as environmental presence but as a constitutive force shaping spatial identity, affective memory, and political resistance. Unlike Ghosh's theoretical critique, Roy's narrative materializes flora within the dense materiality of the city, particularly in spaces marked by abandonment, mourning, and marginalization. The graveyard, which becomes a central locus of habitation within the novel, operates as a necropolitical zone where the living dwell among the dead; yet it is also a site of lush growth in which plants proliferate across tombs, pathways, and ruins. Vegetal life thus subverts the sovereignty of death, signaling endurance within spaces structured by violence and erasure.

The garden cultivated by Anjum, emerging within a cemetery and inhabited by the socially excluded, performs what Achille Mbembe terms a reoccupation of necropolitical space. Flora reclaims land subjected to

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historical trauma, transforming it into a living ecology that resists state-imposed abandonment. The vegetal becomes an insurgent force that interrupts the spatial logics of bureaucracy, militarization, and urban planning. The city, rather than a sterilized enclave of modernity, becomes a breathing ecosystem in which flora articulates an alternative spatial order grounded in care, interdependence, and refusal of erasure.

Furthermore, vegetal presence in Roy's narrative operates as an affective archive. Trees, vines, flowering plants, and medicinal herbs function as repositories of memory, connecting characters to past worlds, suppressed histories, and annihilated futures. The novel's thematic concern with dispossession—of gendered identity, political belonging, territorial sovereignty, and bodily autonomy—finds counterpoint in the persistence of flora, which embodies what Anna Tsing describes as "life in capitalist ruins." Vegetal life reveals the limits of state power by proliferating where control is presumed absolute, thereby unsettling the ontological distinction between the human subject and urban environment.

Roy's depiction of Kashmir further intensifies the political implications of vegetal insurgency. The region, marked by militarized occupation and surveillance, is portrayed through landscapes where flora persists despite systemic violence. Trees bearing witness to disappearances, forests encroaching upon abandoned villages, and flowering plants blooming in contested spaces exemplify vegetal endurance amidst geopolitical repression. Here, flora functions as silent testimony, articulating ecological forms of witnessing that exceed human narrativization.

Through these narrative strategies, Roy reconfigures the city as a multispecies habitat in which vegetal agency becomes central to imagining alternative socialities. Flora emerges as an ontological presence that challenges human exceptionalism, exposes necropolitical geographies, and constructs ecological futures grounded in radical survival.

Discussion : The analyses of Ghosh and Roy, when placed in theoretical dialogue, reveal a continuum through which urban flora operates as a transformative epistemic force within Anthropocene discourse. Ghosh

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provides the critique of anthropocentric literary frameworks that render ecological crisis unrepresentable, while Roy dramatizes vegetal insurgency within lived urban spaces. Together, they construct a literary ecology in which flora disrupts dominant narratives of urban modernity.

Within this framework, urban flora performs several critical functions:

1. Disruption of Anthropocentric Spatial Orders:Vegetal life destabilizes the city's architectural authority by asserting growth in unauthorized terrains—cemeteries, pavements, ruins, militarized zones. This challenges human claims to spatial mastery.

2. Reconfiguration of Temporal Experience

Plants embody slow, cyclical, and nonhuman temporality, interrupting capitalist acceleration and necropolitical suspension. Vegetal time becomes a counter-history within the Anthropocene.

3. Articulation of Subaltern Ecologies

Flora aligns with marginalized human communities, forming solidarities of survival outside state recognition. The garden becomes a political topology.

4. Expansion of Narrative Possibility

Vegetal presence enables literary form to exceed realism, entering domains of affective ecology, multispecies agency, and posthuman relationality.

5. Re-enchantment of the Urban Anthropocene

Against narratives of collapse and extinction, flora embodies resilience, renewal, and planetary continuity.

Through these functions, urban flora emerges not as decorative landscape, but as an ontological and narrative agent that redefines ecological consciousness within contemporary South Asian literature. The Anthropocene, refracted through vegetal endurance, becomes a site not only of crisis but of epistemic transformation.

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Conclusion: The persistence of urban flora within the literary and theoretical landscapes of the Anthropocene demands a reconceptualization of the city as an ecological assemblage rather than a domain of human sovereignty. Through the critical interventions of Amitav Ghosh and the narrative embodiments of Arundhati Roy, vegetal life emerges as a mode of agency that challenges anthropocentric epistemologies, disrupts necropolitical geographies, and reconfigures the temporal and spatial imaginaries through which urban existence is understood. Ghosh's critique of representational failure exposes the cultural and literary architectures that have obscured ecological entanglement, while Roy's narrative materializes vegetal insurgency in spaces marked by violence, loss, and exclusion. Together, these texts illuminate the ways in which flora—particularly within metropolitan environments—functions as a counter-discursive force that unsettles modernity's assumptions about human dominion, spatial ordering, and ecological detachment.

Urban flora thus signifies a form of ecological resistance that exceeds metaphor and symbolism, embodying what may be termed a posthuman ontology of endurance. The vegetal asserts itself in spaces abandoned by capital, denied by the state, or erased by history, revealing alternative modes of world-making grounded in interdependence, resilience, and multispecies cohabitation. By foregrounding the agency of plants within the city, literature reframes the Anthropocene not solely as a narrative of catastrophe but as a horizon of ecological re-enchantment in which the more-than-human becomes central to imagining planetary futures. The insistence of plant life within urban terrains—cracking concrete, reclaiming ruins, sheltering the marginalized—signals a reorientation of environmental consciousness away from nostalgia for untouched nature toward an engagement with hybrid, contested, and insurgent ecologies.

This study therefore contends that urban flora must be recognized as a critical locus for theorizing environmental transformation within South Asian literary discourse. Future scholarship may expand this inquiry by examining additional metropolitan texts, engaging with Indigenous botanical epistemologies, or tracing vegetal agency across comparative postcolonial

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urbanisms. In reframing the city as a living ecology and the plant as a narrative force, literature opens pathways for reimagining the Anthropocene beyond anthropocentric collapse, toward a multispecies horizon of survival, reciprocity, and renewed ecological meaning.

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Environmental Trauma across Cultures – An Exploration of Oodgeroo Noonuccal’s “We are Going” in Connection with Chief Seattle’s Speech

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Abstract

Environment lies at the heart of tribal and indigenous cultures. The lives of the tribal people are closely linked to Mother Nature. When their land is conquered by outsiders, it is often vandalized. The experience is traumatic to the tribes. Oodgeroo Noonuccal’s titular poem, “We are Going” minutely traces the mindscapes of the aboriginal people of Australia when white settlers invaded their land. The erosion of the aboriginal culture which follows is deftly portrayed in the poem. The paper explores the traumatic experiences of the tribe and the extent of damage, colonization causes to the indigenous culture. Since tribal cultures have Nature at the centre of their existence, the study delves into the message given by Chief Seattle while transferring the Red Indian land to the US government. An enquiry into the anguish of the indigenous people across cultures and continents is attempted in this paper.

Key Words: dispossession, cultural disinheritance, collective memory, trauma, ecological responsibility

Nature is at the heart of tribal culture. The tribal people live in close proximity to the environment. They take only what is needed from nature

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without catering to their greed. Since they live in harmony with Nature, they restrain themselves from activities which harm the environment. The literary creations by tribal people echo their concern for Mother Earth. They are saddened when outsiders try to exploit Nature and disturb the delicate balance in which all living beings live.

Oodgeroo Noonuccal, once known as Kath Walker was a prominent literary person of Australian aboriginal origin. In 1964, she published her first poetry collection, *We are Going*. It was a path breaking work in Australian Literature as the woes of the indigenous people have found their voice. The titular poem depicts the trauma of the aboriginal people when the whites plundered their lands which they consider sacred. The poem starts with the return of the natives to the land which they once owned. What welcomes them in the land shatters them totally. Their sacred Bora ring ground has been turned into a dumping ground by the white invaders and there is a sign board urging them to empty their trash in the area. Bora ring used to be a sacred place where ceremonies were conducted by the aborigines. "We are the strangers here now, but the white tribe are the strangers" (Noonuccal 74). An alarming thought flashes through them. The original inhabitants of the place have become strangers in their own place. In a retrospective way, the tribal says that the white people are the strangers.

The tribal people feel a sense of belonging when they reach the site of the Bora ring. But they are displaced. They no longer own the place. The idea of displacement strikes them as a lightning bolt. They become nostalgic of the ceremonies conducted there before long. Memories of the good old days flood them, when they wielded power in the territory. It seems that the land has dispossessed them. The trauma associated with the loss is unfathomable. Tales of Dream Time flash in their memory when everything on Earth was created. The hunting and the laughing games reverberated in the air. Their lives were closely related to Nature. The poet mentions the thunder and lightning over Gaphembah Hill. The quiet daybreak fencing the dark lagoon, shadows playing tricks when the camp fire burns low were all part and parcel of their daily routine. All these things have changed. The oneness with Nature is reflected in the line, "We are nature and the past,..."

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(Noonuccal 74). Nature in all its serenity is missing in their soil now just as they don't possess the land any more. Instead the white man with his greed for money and disrespect for customs rule the place. That is when disintegration of Nature started. With a heart heavy with grief, they realize that the shrubs, eagles, emus and the kangaroos are gone. The aboriginal dance ceremony is no longer held there. To sum up, they themselves are going. The title suggests that the place which is plundered by the whites is devoid of Nature and life forms including the aboriginals. The poet brings in the relationship of the aboriginals with Nature. One cannot survive without the other.

The result of colonization is the loss of native cultures. The aborigines of Australia were displaced by the white invaders. They built towns and spoilt the pristine beauty of the environment. The defacing of the Bora ring is suggestive of utter disregard of the aboriginal ceremonies. The materialistic nature of the whites results in a lot of construction work being carried out because of which the very fabric of the indigenous culture is lost. As a result dispossession of the native land takes place. The oppressed natives withdraw to other regions. Most often they may get scattered also and the whole cultural practices are lost. The title stresses the going away of the aboriginals which in turn is symbolic of the going away or passing of traditional cultural practices. The final exit made by the aboriginals from their land is the culmination of the life they have lived in harmony with Nature.

The poet succeeds in drawing word pictures of the trauma of the aboriginal people who are forced to let go of their ancestral land. It is also the end of the harmonious life they lead with the environment. So with their going away Nature is also at risk. The animals and birds are also leaving their habitat which has become unworthy to sustain a healthy life. The landscape has been the centre of their spiritual life which has also come to an end. The white tendency to obliterate native cultures and plunder the environment for their greed can be seen in the poem. The environmental and cultural disfigurement gnaws at the minds of the readers. The passion with which the poet has expressed the loss of her culture and Nature forces the reader to engage actively to thwart any such future acts.

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Oodgeroo Noonuccal's heart-wrenching rendering of the plight of her aboriginal brethren and the tenderness they have for the environment find parallel in the speech delivered by the American Indian chief, Seattle in the US where the American federal government has taken over their lands. Chief Seattle also stresses the importance environment has on human lives more than a century back. The idea of living in unison with Nature is inbuilt in tribal cultures. Chief Seattle was the famous 19 th century American Indian chief of the Duwamish and Suquamish tribes. The speech was delivered in 1854 as a response to the US Federal government's offer to buy tribal lands in return of a reserved place for the tribes. The speech is considered to be one of the finest pieces of exhortation for ecological responsibility. There are different versions of the speech available, but the gist of the versions is the same; the need for ecological conservation.

The speech opens thus: "How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them" (Perry)? The scathing question points to the petiteness of man in relation to the environment. The sanctity of every part of the Earth is stressed by Chief Seattle at the very outset of the speech. The sap which flows through the trees has imprints of the memory of the Red Indians. It shows the harmonious life led by the tribes. The Chief says that even their dead men never forget the land in which they lived. "We are part of the Earth and it is part of us" (Perry), shows the mutual respect given and taken by the Red Indians. They consider the water moving in streams and rivers as the blood of their forefathers. Nature is considered as an extension of their family. This concept is in stark contrast with the white men who consider Earth, "as things to be bought, plundered, sold like sheep or bright beads" (Perry). The materialistic nature of the whites is stressed here.

The feeling of oneness felt by the tribes is conveyed to the outside world when Chief Seattle says, "The rocky crests, the juices in the meadows, the body heat of the pony, and the man, all belong to the same family" (Perry). Such camaraderie is experienced by the Red Indians with Mother Nature. So the Chief wants the white people to realize this warmth and tell their children

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to treat all natural things as their extended family members. The idea here is not to harm anything in Nature. What befalls Nature will fall on Man also.

Even while giving such an advice to the white man, Chief Seattle is concerned about the white man's attitude towards Nature. He plunders the land and takes away things from Nature to satisfy his greed. Once he has conquered a piece of land, taken everything of use from it, he moves on to the next place. He is not concerned about what he leaves behind. Such self-centric life is of no attraction to the tribes. Chief Seattle remarks, "The sight of your cities pains the eye of the red man" (Perry). The desertification of land troubles the minds of the tribe. He considers the disfigurement of Nature as an insult to God who has created this beautiful world. If the whites think that they are invincible, they are wrong: they too will pass to oblivion.

The peaceful coexistence which Chief Seattle envisages is listening to the beautiful sounds in Nature. The "unfurling of leaves in spring", "the rustle of an insect's wing", "the arguments of the frogs around a pond at night" (Perry) soothe the mind of the Red Man contrary to the clatter which the whites create in cities. The whites consider the tribes as savages. But in reality, it is the tribes, who for centuries have practised a life integrating things in Nature with their own lives. The value of fresh air is stressed by the Chief in his speech. It is the same air that all animals breathe. So if the Red Indians sell their land to the whites, they should keep the air fresh so that even they themselves can enjoy the wind passing through the meadows filled with flowers. In a similar way, the beasts of the area should be treated as brothers because without beasts, human beings won't be able to survive in this world. Here Seattle highlights the interconnectivity of man and the beast. It is not just for the present generation, the coming generations should also be taught the value of Nature. The great truth which resonates in the world should be, "the Earth does not belong to man – man belongs to the Earth" (Perry).

The concept of the human world in harmony with Nature is not a new one. It can be seen across cultures. In the Indian culture also, this interconnectivity can be seen. In the epic, *Ramayana*, Lord Rama goes to the

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forest with his wife, Sita Devi and his brother Lekshmana to spend fourteen years of their lives there. They live in harmony with Nature tending to the plants and animals found there. Rabindra Nath Tagore's essay, "The Religion of Forest" delves on the theme of interconnectivity of man and Nature as found in the literary works. Tagore mentions how in Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*, the hermitage has a pivotal role in bridging man and Nature. Similarly, in *Rithusamhara* by the same poet, Nature's symphony can be seen.

In Malayalam literature also, the importance of Nature in human life and the inter relationship between them are portrayed. Vaikom Muhammed Basheer's *Bhoomiyude Avakashikal* (The Inheritors of the Earth) points out the need to live in harmony with the other beings as all have the right to live here just like man. Basheer presents multiple views in his story as his wife is a typical human-centric person who does not mind killing other creatures for her comfort and safety. But the writer opines that even the snake, though harmful to humans if bitten, has a rightful place in this world. The author vehemently opposes his wife's plan to shoot the bats. Though the wife defies her husband's advice, she is stopped by the people in the vicinity stating that the bats contain the souls of their forefathers. So in this story, the different views of a man-centric and nature-centric world are portrayed. Thus it can be seen that Indian culture gives utmost importance to living in harmony with Nature.

The materialistic nature of Man has resulted in an Anthropocene era (Crutzen). Human actions have profound impact on the environment. They have given a lot of strain on the environment. Pollution is a direct result of man's activities. Plastic pollution tops the list as human beings use a lot of use-and-throw plastic items. Most of them end up in oceans harming the marine environment. The cutting down of forests to build new cities and harvest timber have resulted in massive deforestation. It has changed the landscape to deserts which have drastic repercussions on the climate. Flooding and landslides are very common in most countries. Kerala also has experienced massive floods in recent times.

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Human beings are just visitors in this planet. We are permitted to live on planet Earth for a certain period of time. If this great thought is instilled in every human being, people won't become arrogant or condescending. They will take good care of Mother Earth and leave it unharmed for the coming generations. The great realization that human existence is heavily dependent on Nature is slowly creeping into the minds of people. The city dwellers and the Western world have only slowly realized the importance of Nature in recent times when Nature started giving ultimate warning signs in the form of global warming, forest fires and drastic climate changes. There is no other way than to take heed of the signs Nature gives. Global warming and Climate change are a reality to which human beings have to wake up to. The intensity and frequency of natural disasters are warning signs to mend our ways before it is too late. Nature has everything to cater to the needs of people not to their greed. So, it is the responsibility of human beings to live in harmony with Nature.

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Alien Plants and Displaced People: Reading Paul Harris Daniel's *Red Tea* in the Plantationocene

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Abstract

The concept of the *Plantationocene* provides a crucial framework to understand how plantation economies have reshaped ecologies, labour relations, and indigenous lives under the pressures of colonial capitalism. Paul Harris Daniel's *Red Tea* (1969), one of the earliest Indian English novels to document the tea plantations of South India, vividly exposes the intertwined histories of environmental exploitation and human displacement that accompanied colonial agrarian expansion. This paper explores *Red Tea* as a narrative of the *Plantationocene*, tracing how the establishment of British-owned tea estates in the Western Ghats led to the displacement of native tribes, the destruction of biodiverse forest ecologies, and the relocation of Tamil labourers from the plains into a regime of near-slavery. Daniel's portrayal of labour migration, indebtedness, and coercion reveals how colonial plantations transformed both land and people into extractive resources for profit. The novel's depiction of the alien crop, tea, as a symbol of ecological and social violence allows for a deeper understanding of how colonial modernity reorganized space, time, and subjectivity in plantation zones. By reading *Red Tea* through the lens of the *Plantationocene*, this paper situates the text within global debates on environmental humanities, postcolonial ecocriticism, and subaltern labour histories. Ultimately, Daniel's realist narrative exposes the enduring human and ecological costs of a colonial enterprise that commodified nature and humanity alike, foregrounding how the plantation remains a living scar in the landscapes and memories of South India.

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Keywords: Plantationocene; Vegetal Colonialism; Ecocriticism; Labour Exploitation; South Indian Plantations

Although India and China are the largest producers of tea in the world today, their historical relationships with the plant and its cultivation differ significantly. *Camellia Sinensis* is indigenous to China, where tea has long been associated with imperial courts, elite culture, and refined aesthetic and medicinal traditions. In contrast, tea was not originally cultivated in India as an agricultural crop. While wild tea plants (in fact tea tress) grew in Upper Assam, and a close botanical relative from the family if Camelliaceae was later identified by Europeans in Coonoor, South India, systematic cultivation began only under colonial intervention. In India, therefore, tea is inseparable from the histories of colonial expansion, indentured labour, and plantation slavery

Arrival/development of the tea industry in India is intertwined with prolonged trade conflicts between the Chinese tea monopolists and the English East India Company. The Company took part in the tea business because in Britain, tea drinking had become a deeply rooted cultural practice that C. H. Denyer once jocularly remarked in one of his essays that now the British could declare tea the national drink of England (Chrystal). In order to fulfill the increased demand of tea, European planters established large-scale monocrop tea plantations across Assam, Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka) and the Western Ghats. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Western Ghats comprised several established “Planting Districts”—South Travancore, Central Travancore, Kanan Devan, Annamallais, High Wavys, the Nilgiris, Coorg, and North and South Mysore. These were regions where European planters had settled and were commercially cultivating monocrop plantations of tea, coffee, and rubber. Coffee had already taken root earlier, but the first commercial cultivation of tea in South India began in Peermedu by 1875. By

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the closing decades of the century, the Annamallais were also witnessing rapid plantation expansion (Muthiah).

However, embedded within the term “development” is a history of profound ecological and social disruption: the clearing of dense shola forests, the killing of wildlife, the encroachment upon and rerouting of traditional elephant pathways, the dispossession of hill tribes from their ancestral lands, the forced migration and dislocation of indentured labourers or “coolies,” and the creation of a landscape reshaped to reflect a European aesthetic and environment. The removal of the original flora and fauna for the convenience of the planters must have influenced the climate of the place. T. V. Sajeev, a scientist at the Kerala Forest Research Institute at Thrissur remarks that the climate in Kanan Devan Hills has changed a lot. The hills which were once characterized by thick fog and freezing winters now have air conditioners in majority of the houses and hotels built for tourists (Chakravarty). Landslides have become a common thing as it repeats every day in multiple locations during the monsoon. The remaining roots of a cut down tree rots under the soil and then give space to the phenomenon called soil piping. The roots of the dense forests once removed for plantations must have fuelled the natural disasters like Pettimudi tragedy in 2020 as well (Chakravarty).

The concept of the Anthropocene frames climate change and related ecological crises as the consequence of human activity as a whole, attributing responsibility to humanity as a single, undifferentiated species. In this narrative, colonial histories often celebrate European pioneers as the agents who “introduced” life, culture, and development to regions such as the Western Ghats. Within such frameworks, the burden of environmental degradation appears to rest on all humans equally. Donna Haraway’s notion of the Plantationocene challenges this assumption by introducing a more nuanced perspective. The Plantationocene argues that not all human beings have contributed equally to the planet’s current condition; rather, there are profound differences in how various groups have acted as agents of planetary change. Indigenous communities and indentured labourers, for instance, did not participate intentionally or proportionately in the large-scale destruction

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of natural flora and fauna—unlike the colonial plantation systems imposed upon their lands.

In the case of plantations, it was the European colonial project that popularized the model of monocrop agriculture structured around capitalism, racism, and systems of slavery. The growing demand for agricultural products to fuel capitalist profit-making led to the clearing of forests and the establishment of monocrop plantations—sugar in the Caribbean, cotton in the United States, rubber in South Asia, and tea and coffee in India, to name a few. In this process, plants were uprooted, transported, and introduced into new colonial ecologies (Brockway). The humans involved in these systems can broadly be divided into two groups: those who enacted and profited from these transformations, and those who were subjected to them. In this context, Haraway's concept becomes particularly meaningful: it is the plantation that generates an entire universe around itself—its labour regimes, ecological consequences, and lasting socio-environmental problems:

There's a way in which the Anthropocene is considered a species act as opposed to an historical, situated set of conjunctures that are absolutely not a species act. Most peoples on this planet have precisely not lived and exercised the same kinds of processes that break generations, that radically simplify ecologies, that drastically force labor in a mass way that creates a kind of global transformation and global wealth that is in and of itself genocidal and extinctionist. That is not a species act; it's a situated historical set of conjunctures, and I think to this day the term Anthropocene makes it harder, not easier, for people to understand that. (Haraway)

The plant, as a commodity, influenced the life of people in and around it. Haraway continues, "what is a plantation, some combination of these things seems to me to be pretty much always present across a 500-year period: radical simplification; substitution of peoples, crops, microbes, and life forms; forced labor; and, crucially, the disordering of times of generation across species, including human beings".

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Red Tea (1969) by Paul Harris Daniel is an amateur yet deeply empathetic novel written by a compassionate doctor who spent many years working across estates in the Annamallais. Beyond his medical career, Daniel was also a vocal advocate for the rights of estate staff and coolies. The novel recounts the lives of those involved in the development of tea plantations in the region—White *Dorais*, Tamil Zamindars, educated native staff, *maistries*, and coolies. Mulk Raj Anand's classic plantation novel *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937), set against the tea plantations of Assam, may be seen as a North Indian predecessor to *Red Tea*.

Red Tea depicts the hierarchical “human pyramid” of plantation society, with coolies at the base and the White *Dorais* at the top. Between these extremes stood the *maistries* (or *kangani*) and the estate staff, most of whom were Indians. The narrative follows Karuppan, a young man from the Tirunelveli (then Tinnevely) district, who—facing severe drought and devastating poverty—is recruited by a *maistry* to work in a plantation in the Annamallais. Like many men in similar circumstances, Karuppan brings his wife Vally with him to the hills. Hoping for prosperity, they instead encounter the grim reality of colonial exploitation and systematic human rights violations. Their existence in the estate is reduced to a level barely above that of animals, and the fate that awaits them is equally dehumanizing. The estate staffs, treated more favourably by the *Dorais*, are portrayed as opportunists who imitate the lifestyle of their colonial superiors. In contrast stands Dr. Abraham, a kind-hearted and principled doctor who joins the estates. Through his actions, he exposes the injustices perpetuated by both the *Dorais* and the opportunistic Indian staff, seeking in his small but sincere way to improve the conditions of the coolies.

Flora and fauna: the old and the new

Although *Red Tea* does not speak much about the deforestation, it is understood from other historical works regarding the felling of trees in the region. The Annamallai hills were once dense, lustrous green rainforests. Native contractors, followed later by coolies brought from different parts of

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Tamil Nadu, were employed for this massive task. Ralph Congreve, one of the pioneer planters in the Annamallais, writes:

...Moplah contractor named Veersahib came... this man and his descendants have during the last 35 years been instrumental in clearing a vast area of forests, as practically the whole of old Paralai, Naduar, Kalianapandal, Karamalai, Vellamalai, and parts of Monica and Stanmore were felled by him and his immediate relations and descendants... (Muthiah)

The forest had to be cleared because the tea plant requires direct sunlight for budding new leaves which are to be plucked twice in month. In the logic of the plantation, this biological rhythm of a single cash crop became the rationale for large-scale deforestation. Native shrubs, trees, and forest plants were felled and removed systematically. In their place, foreign species such as tea, cinchona, silver oak, and jacaranda were introduced. All these plants arrived India as part of the colonial monocrop agenda.

Cinchona and its derivative quinine, for instance, were widely cultivated for malaria treatment (Brockway). Every year Malaria killed a considerable number of coolies. *The novel* discusses in detail how malaria ravaged the coolie lines in the Annamallais (164–168). Jacaranda is an ornamental tree grown in the tea plantations of Munnar and Silver Oak is the most popular shade tree in tea plantations in south India.

New fauna also was introduced as part of the plantation empire. In the Kanan Devan Hills, European planters even introduced new aquatic species. They brought rainbow trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) from Europe because salmon, their preferred fish, was unavailable in India. Brown trout was introduced first but failed to adapt; the later introduction of rainbow trout proved more successful, leading to its naturalisation in Munnar's streams (Ravindran).

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From silver oak to trout, a completely new assemblage of flora and fauna emerged around the tea plantations of the Western Ghats. This was not simply the pastime of adventurous colonizers; it was deeply tied to the market-driven power struggles between the English East India Company and Chinese tea traders, each vying for monopoly. To sustain the European habit of drinking tea in moments of leisure, vast stretches of forest were felled and replaced with economically valuable but ecologically disruptive species.

Dislocating People

As Anna Tsing observes, plantations everywhere displace both Indigenous people while simultaneously importing labour from elsewhere.

In every case I can think of, plantations dispossess both Indigenous people and indigenous ecologies and bring in not only exotic plants but people from other places. The oil palm plantations that I'm familiar with in Indonesia, for example, have brought in Javanese transmigrant laborers just as they displace the local people who lived there before. While the people are not a part of a system of indenture, they are there in part because they've been removed from their home places and sent to this other place to work on these plantations. At the same time, local people are being asked to give up the places that they have lived for millennia. (Haraway)

A similar pattern unfolded in the Annamallais. The development of monocrop plantations in this region dislocated two major groups: the native hill tribes and the coolies. When the Madras government leased the Annamallai forests to prospective planters, the agreements included a clause allowing the Kadars and other hill tribes to continue collecting traditional forest produce (Muthiah). In practice, however, once the forests were cleared to make way for plantations, very little remained for them to collect. Their legal right was rendered meaningless by ecological erasure.

Comparable events took place in the Kanan Devan Hills. Local legend holds that two Muduvars—Kanan and Devan—guided the first European pioneer to the hills (Pottamkulam). Yet the Muduvars, Ooralis,

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Naikars, and other Indigenous communities soon lost their natural habitat as tea plantations expanded (Jayakumar).

A central focus of *Red Tea* is the displacement of lower-caste labourers from various districts of Tamil Nadu into the Annamallais. Many left their villages because of severe drought. Daniel writes: “Ploughing time was long past, but the heavens were unkind and the usual rains did not set in. Every day, along with his neighbours he had scanned the sky for any signs of rain” (2). Although the drought primarily affected the northern districts, labourers from both north and south were among the coolies in the estates (Munnar). Extreme poverty and entrenched caste oppression created a social landscape from which migration seemed like the only possible escape.

Although these labourers cannot be categorised as “climate migrants” in the sense Donna Haraway uses the term, climate still plays an unavoidable role in shaping their lives. Haraway speaks of people leaving former plantation zones due to climate change and soil erosion; in contrast, in the Annamallais climate made possible a steady supply of cheap labour for plantations. Movement here was orchestrated for the plantations themselves: planters moved into the hills, pushed native communities out, and brought in people from distant regions to sustain plantation operations.

Planters used multiple strategies to recruit coolies. They forged agreements with local Zamindars (Munnar) and appointed *maistries* (10). These *maistries* lured impoverished villagers with false promises—portraying the tea estates as a kind of “American Dream.” All one needed to do was work; there would be no poverty, no caste discrimination, and no marginalisation, they claimed (10). They assured potential labourers that the hills offered everything: steady employment, housing, money, and medical care.

Another method involved placing coolies under debt captivity (Haraway). Advances were paid upfront, which labourers later discovered were debts to be repaid through work. Karuppan receives such an advance to

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meet necessary expenses before leaving his village (27). Initially believing it was part of his salary, he later realises how thoroughly he has been deceived. For Karuppan, the plantation becomes an open prison. He is told he may leave if life becomes difficult for him or his wife (17). But at the end of the first year, the accountant, shopkeeper, and *maistries* collude to convince them that they owe large sums of money (146–147). They are not free labourers but coolies, effectively slaves bound to the plantation. As Haraway writes, “the disciplining of human labor in such a way that reduces the degrees of freedom of the laborer to do anything other than that demanded labor is part of what I mean by force.” There was, ultimately, no possibility of escape.

We also see estate staff dislocating between estates and sometimes between India and Sri Lanka. People with planting experience in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) have been there among the staff. Mr Appavoo was in Ceylon before coming to Annamallais (116). This transfer of staff was also plantation-engineered as it was instrumental in maintaining the standard of the tea produced in India and Sri Lanka.

In plantation districts such as the Annamallais, it was the plantation system itself rather than individual planters that determined the structure of life. The clearing of native forests, the introduction of exotic species, the displacement of Indigenous communities, and the forced migration of labourers were all plantation-engineered processes, carried out to maintain the health of the crop and ensure the continuity of colonial markets. This understanding challenges the Anthropocene’s tendency to attribute ecological change to an undifferentiated human agency. Instead, it resonates with Donna Haraway’s concept of the Plantationocene, which foregrounds the organising power of plantations and even the plants themselves in shaping ecological, social, and political worlds.

Read through this lens, Paul Harris Daniel’s *Red Tea* demonstrates how the tea plantation acted as the central agent governing life in the Annamallais. The novel reveals a landscape in which human relationships, environmental transformations, and everyday survival were all dictated by

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the imperatives of monocrop tea cultivation, underscoring the profound and enduring impact of the plantation on both people and place.

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Plant- Human Interconnectedness and Environmental Challenges in Sarah Joseph's *Budhini*: An Ecocritical Study

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Abstract

This study will focus on the ecological consciousness of how *Budhini* by Sarah Joseph portrays the human-environmental relationships in contemporary Indian fiction. In this text, Sarah Joseph portrays the deep dislocation of ecological balance due to industrial modernisation that affects the lives of people and the biosphere they share. The preceding discussion will analyse how critique, reflection, and re-imagination of environmental ethics are depicted in a literary text using ecocritical perspectives. The concept of “environmental imagination” by Lawrence Buell locates the intersection of nature and culture in literature, which urges the reader to consider the environment a part of human experience as well (Buell 2). In *Budhini*, the ecological harmony and continuity are presented through the forest and the river, while their destruction reflects the ethical decay that follows the estrangement of humankind from nature. As such, the novel narrates the result of an anthropocentric way of thinking and evokes an ethical call for coexistence that emanates from ecological awareness. Thus, the narrative affirms that sustainable human existence depends upon the restoration of reciprocity between people and their environment.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Plant-Human Relationship, Anthropocentrism, Environmental Challenges.

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Introduction

Budhini by Sarah Joseph stands as one of the most celebrated texts in contemporary Indian Fiction that deals with the ongoing issues of environmental consciousness with the human cost of post-independent developments. The novel is fictionalised with the real-life experience of the Santal tribe girl Budhini, whose sufferings represent the intertwined relationship between social marginalisation, ecological changes, and gendered sufferings. Sarah Joseph in the novel sets against the historical monumental event, i.e. 1959 Panchet Dam constructions in the Damodar Valley. With this novel, she gives a voice to the story of the muted story of Budhini, who was disowned by her tribal community by the act of misinterpretations. With the story of Budhini, Sarah Joseph discusses the broader environmental degradations, politics, and ethical crises, which are the results of developmental modernity.

The current paper will deal with the comprehensive analysis of the novel *Budhini* through the theoretical framework of Ecocriticism, referring to the key figures like Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, Greg Garrard, and Rob Nixon. All the mentioned theorists have a collective understanding of how literature can reflect, critique, and reframe human understanding with the non-human world. This study of ecocriticism is not only the approach that talks about how nature is mirrored in the literature by the authors, but also, more importantly, it is the approach that further interrogates the intersections of power, environment, and culture. Sarah Joseph's novel *Budhini* talks about all those aspects by documenting the changing landscapes and lifestyle of the Santal Tribe Community in the name of National Progress. Here the question arises: Is really, there is progress in the individual's life when the nation progresses? In this text, the celebration of the Panchet Dam construction shows the progress of the nation and the symbols of India's technological advancement. Nevertheless, looking from the eyes of the tribal people, it is the greatest loss, which leads to the imbalance of the ecological system, social injustice, and cultural erasure.

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By applying the Ecocritical approach, the novel will investigate the anthropocentric paradigm that shapes post-independence developmental policies and the Human-environmental relationship, how it is interconnected to each other, particularly centred on the community of the Santal Tribe's worldview. In addition, the analysis will go further, foregrounding the Tribal people's experience of environmental injustice, whose land, livelihood, and ecological connection are put down to gain industrial advancement. The novel will uncover that both materialistic loss and cultural devastation are the result of destroying the natural ecosystems. However, the heart of the narratives lies in the ecological consciousness; Budhini not only narrates the story of a Santal girl wronged by the patriarchal society but also, most importantly, articulates about environmental degradations and captures the relationship between humans and nature.

Background

Post-Independent India emphasises the Nehruvian Modernity ideology, resulting in the rapid expansion of industrial projects in India. The ideology's core ideas were the construction of large dams (called "temples of modern India"). According to this ideology, it was the progress or reforms brought to national progress, technological autonomy, and agricultural reform. The Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC), established in 1948, was a multi-purpose river-valley project influenced by the United States' Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) that cultivated the modernist aspiration. The Panchet Dam is one such example of these aspirations that was inaugurated in 1959. The main purpose of this Dam project was to control the natural resources, generate electricity, and regulate the water flow. Yet, with this massive project, there arises an ecological imbalance resulting in the reshaping of the ecological system and cultural landscape of the community living in the area.

With the National Progress, there arises a challenge for many Adivasi Community, especially the Santal Tribe, whose livelihood was solely dependent on the natural resources. These tribal people were deeply affected by the massive Dam constructions. Multiple Practices of these tribal communities are difficult to separate from the forests, rivers, and fields they

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inhabit. Their cultural identities, spiritual practices, social structure, and agricultural practices are all dependent upon the nature and the natural resources. The developmental projects not only lead to physical displacements but also mark the downfall of the ecological knowledge systems. In this historical milieu, Sarah Joseph not only gives voice to Budhini's personal sufferings but also tells in the larger context about the community's suffering and ecological trauma faced from the massive Dam construction.

Theoretical Framework

This study aims to provide a critical analysis by using the tool Ecocriticism Framework in the novel *Budhini*, because it is understood that this novel keeps the environment at the Centre of literary interpretations. As Cheryll Glotfelty defines Ecocriticism, it is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. In the literary narratives, earlier the focus was mostly on human human-centric approach (anthropocentric), but there is a shift in the methodology in the present narratives, as land, river, forests, animals, and weather are also given equal importance in narrations because all those blend and give a complete meaning to the literary narratives. Applying this approach to the *Budhini* provides that nature is not a mere setting but an active participant in shaping cultural and emotional life.

Greg Garrard categorises ecocritical studies as tropes such as pastoral, wilderness, pollution, and apocalypse, which is his contribution to the field. The novel *Budhini* is placed in the pastoral disruption as it shows how the tribal community's ecological world is disturbed by technological advancement, affecting their livelihood. Rob Nixon formulated another concept in ecocriticism, "slow violence." Rob says that the existence of environmental damage is slow, invisible, and dispersed across time. The kind of violence is hard to recognise because it grows slowly through the emergence of structural inequalities. When the Santal tribes were forced to move from their own land for the construction of a dam, this instance is the result of slow violence.

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One of the most important figures in Ecocriticism is Lawrence Buell, who talks about the “Environmental Imagination.” Through this concept, Lawrence Buell means that in literary narratives, non-human nature also possesses a kind of agency and moral weight, which have an equal importance to that of humans in the narrative. According to him, rivers, forests, land, and animals not only have a role in shaping the geographical lens but also the cultural identity and emotional world. The concept of “Environmental Injustice” is both a discourse and a theoretical tool in the ecocritical foundation. This idea refers to the benefits and burdens of the environment that is unequally distributed. The scholar Robert D. Bullard introduces the term environmental injustice, referring to environmental harm that cannot be separated from social inequalities that exist in society. Therefore, by collectively looking into the ideas of Ecocriticism, the novel *Budhini* will be evaluated critically. The novel, through these perspectives, provides you with a deeper understanding of the story, that it is not merely Budhini’s personal tales of tragedy, but also a story of ecological degradation. Studying through Ecocritical perspectives allows a comprehensive reading of Sarah Joseph’s narratives as a testimony of the environment.

Ecocritical Examination of *Budhini*.

Examining the novel based on the Ecocritical lens uncovers that Sarah Joseph’s narrative emphasises the deeply rooted ecological and cultural life of the Santal Tribe. For this community, Land is not only the place they live, but instead it's their identity, continuity, place where they perform tribal rituals, a resource provider and have an emotional connection since born. The novel narrates that before constructing the dam, there existed a harmonic relationship between the natural world and humans (Santal Community). Sarah Joseph describes the homeland of Budhini in terms brimming with ecological affection: “The soil melt of rain, of leaves, of memories buried deep within, waiting to sprout again” (Joseph 14). These lines exemplify the notion of “environmentally oriented text.” Lawrence Buell uses the idea that the non-human acts upon the human consciousness and possesses agency. In this, it provides the harmonic relationship between plants and humans that are totally interconnected. In the text, the mention of

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soil's fragrance evokes memory, different varieties of leaves give the presence of ancestors, and the rain animates the earth with vitality, which echoes what Cheryll Glotfelty asserts that one should understand literature in relation to the natural environment that shapes and sustains it.

As the construction of the Panchet Dam sparks a deteriorating relationship between nature and humans, it causes a violent ecological rupture. Even though the dam was constructed, the tribal people still face floods. The lush, living landscape is replaced by a silent, drowning world: "The trees stood like mourners watching their own burial as the water rose around them" (Joseph 52). In the context of what Rod Nixon says in "Slow Violence," this instance presents the powerful ecological trauma. The narratives reveal that because of the dam project, the violence here gradually rises; the trees die slowly, submerged, and generation by generation do not distinguish at once. It reflects the gradually degrading relationship between plant and human. According to Rod Nixon's notion, for those in power, such a type of violence is invisible but affects the most to marginalised community. The author, through the excerpt, makes it clear: "To the men in white coats, the rising waters were statistics, not sorrow" (Joseph 57). Here, the men in white coats represent the technocratic states centred on the anthropocentric approach, erasing the worldview of the emotional and environmental cost of development. In the name of National Progress, there is an increase in environmental disharmony. One point to be noted is that the urban city benefits from the electricity generated, but the Tribal communities, whose means of livelihood are destroyed by the so-called developmental projects, face core suffering from the unfaithful promises. The Santal community is forced to leave their land, disowning them from nature's connection, leading them to displacement. Such type of actions show humans moving away from the natural world and deteriorating relationship between humans and nature.

The novel portrays the dominant anthropocentric views that not only transform ecological governance but also affect and destroy Budhini's life through cultural misrecognitions. In the inauguration ceremony of the Panchet dam, Budhini was chosen to garland Nehru, but for a Santal Tribe girl garlanding to man was recognised as a marriage, which led to her

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ostracisation from the community. In the line, it can be seen, she is “oblivious to the cameras, thinking only of the flowers she held- fresh, tender, smelling of home” (Joseph 33). The gift of nature, “flower” symbolises the ritual purity and ecological belonging within the practices of Santal Cosmology. In contrast with the state officials, the flowers represent mere props for politicians. The garland became the cultural weapon that led to Budhini’s exile, the idea that was central to the Santal community.

The deforestation for the construction becomes one of the most crucial discussions in the novel. The lives of the plants are destroyed, leading to the distance between humans and nature. Cutting down the trees for the national progress shows the anthropocentric dominance over nature by humans. These practices later slowly increased, leading to ecological imbalance and the main cause behind the flood. Sarah Joseph reveals that the novel about the slowly vanishing botanical knowledge resonates strongly with contemporary theorists of vegetal life. Submerging of the forest, Joseph writes in the novel, saying: The herbs that healed us, the leaves grandmother taught us to grind, the trees whose bark cured fever- all gone under the cruel stillness of the reservoir (Joseph 78).

The lines show the epistemic violence of development. The drowning of plants symbolises the drowning of the blurred indigenous knowledge system, and the grandmother’s herbs refer to the ecological memory, which is passed down through generations of generations now is disappearing, reflecting the cultural extinction. All these images show the degrading connection between nature and humans. According to Michael Marder, plants are seen as repositories where all memories exist, including rationality. The novel’s narrations affirm that plants not only have healing properties but also have a cultural meaning. With the human-centric approach, the Santal community loses both medical independence and ritual continuity.

The central to the novel becomes the idea of environmental injustice that talks about the unequal distribution of benefits and burdens. The lines in the novel make it clear, “The city people would get their electricity, and we

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would get our memories washed away” (Joseph 84). In the motif of making National Progress, the above-mentioned lines clarify and capture the inequalities that underlie the developmental policies. Here, the official indirectly manipulates the communities. The benefits are mostly gained by the urban areas, but the Santal community solely experiences the burdens and the consequences. Those who reap the benefits of the dams are not those who bear their costs. Joseph further narrates the injustice, “No one asked us if the land wanted to stay, if the river wished to move”, further notes the injustice in the novel (Joseph 69). This anthropomorphisation strengthens the ecocritical arguments that, with desire and rights, the land and river are treated. The rights that are left unacknowledged by the state. The displacement of the Santal community is both an ecological and existential crisis. The tribes forced to leave their land, whose roots start from the land, and the loss of it is the loss of self-identity.

The powerful narrative structure embedded by the author Sarah Joseph reinforces the significance of ecology. The way the author blends personal suffering with the environmental trauma led to understanding in a broader, different dimensional way. The contemporary investigation carried out by Rupi Murmu into Budhini’s life revives the generations of ecological memories. Rupi notes when she observed the reservoir, “The water looked calm, but beneath it lay forests, homes, stories” (Joseph 138). This powerful line makes you rethink before harming the environment. The above-mentioned lines reflect the notion of Lawrence Buell’s “environmental uncanny,” where numbers of unresolved traumas is carried by the environment. The water in the line carries dual meaning in literary and metaphorical. Water became the burial ground of cultural history and ecology. The role of Rupi as a narrator becomes an act of ecological restoration, directly reviving the forgotten memories of submerged stories.

Conclusion

Examining the novel *Budhini* through the Ecocriticism lens emerges as a profound critique of the developmental paradigm of post-independent India. The novel harshly portrays the reality of the plant-human degrading

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relationship. It also explains that living with nature creates a harmonic environment, but as the interference of technological advancement leads to a disharmonic and imbalanced ecological system. Sarah Joseph's narratives uncover that the anthropocentric policies pay more attention to industrial progress, leading to ecological violence where environmental balance and cultural integrity are less prioritised. The ecocriticism talks about prioritising both the human and nature on an equal level. Nevertheless, the anthropocentric approach dominates over bio biocentric approach. It shows the unequal distribution of rights where humans are more powerful and the environment is seen as a mere resource producer. Therefore, the novel narrates the devastating relationship between humans and the environment.

By emphasising the plant-human relationship, the novel tells about the deep understanding of the Santal community regarding ecological knowledge and also exposes the cultural consequences of ecological disruption. Marginalised community experiences the novel's depiction of complex ecological degradation by going through displacement, intergenerational trauma, and environmental injustice. Sarah Joseph, by narrating the lived experience of those excluded from official histories, gives rise and restores to the ecological memory. The novel provides readers with a different way of looking into the entanglement of ecological and social sufferings and calls for a more inclusive, ethical, and ecologically grounded vision of development. By recognising such issues, the novel will not be solely perceived as the testimony to the resilience of a marginalised woman but will be perceived as a powerful narrative of ecology that investigates the foundation of modernity, progress, and human relationships with the natural world.

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**Beyond Pastoral Consolation: Nature's Indifference and the
Collapse of Human Exceptionalism in *Elegy Written in a Country
Churchyard***

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Abstract

Dark Ecology, as defined by Timothy Morton, is a critique of both an anthropocentric and a biocentric worldview, aiming to erase the dichotomy between human/nature and subject/object, considering it as one. This paper re-examines and reinterprets, Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751), through an ecocritical lens, centering on nature, as an active medium of storytelling rather than a passive backdrop or setting of a particular event. In the poem, the sense of temporal movement emerges from natural cycles, allowing ecological rhythms to regulate the passage of time rather than human agency or dominance. Drawing upon the framework of dark ecology, the paper tries to argue that Gray's landscape, not only picturizes sentimental pastoralism but presents nature as an indifferent yet governing force that absorbs human life, memory, and ambition, where the churchyard, graves, and surrounding landscape collectively narrate human fate, suggesting that mortality is not an isolated human concern but part of a broader natural order. The poem allows nature to guide both time and meaning, as it decenters the human subject and challenges anthropocentric interpretations and views of existence, itself. The elegy, thus, could be considered as a meditation on mortality, in which human history is subordinated to ecological temporality, anticipating contemporary ecological thought that challenges human exceptionalism. Engaging with theoretical perspectives, the paper tries to portray nature as a lasting presence shaping human life, memory, and death, offering a reflective exploration of the limits of human control within a middle-of-the-road, yet encompassing natural world.

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Keywords: Dark ecology, Anthropocentrism, Human exceptionalism, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, Timothy Morton, Thomas Gray.

Literature has utilized nature not merely as a background to human action but as a significant force that shapes human experience, culture, and consciousness. Through various literary periods and genres, writers have engaged with the natural world to reflect social values, moral concerns, and humanity's relationship with the environment. Ecocriticism, as a literary framework, examines these representations to understand, how texts construct, question, and critique human interactions with nature and by foregrounding ecological concerns and challenging anthropocentric perspectives, ecocriticism reveals literature's role in fostering environmental awareness and emphasizing the interconnectedness of all forms of life. *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751), by Thomas Gray, has long been interpreted as a poem reflecting on pastoral life, loss, and human mortality, emphasizing its sentimental tone and rural calm, treating nature as a quiet and sympathetic background that mirrors human emotions and sufferings. However, the anthropocentric interpretations like this risk the possibility of overlooking the poem's more unsettling ecological implications. When examined through the theoretical framework of the concept of dark ecology, proposed by Timothy Morton, the elegy emerges as a text that challenges human supremacy and sentimental views of nature by presenting the natural world as an indifferent yet governing force. Rather than romanticizing nature, Gray depicts it as an enduring presence that structures time, absorbing human life and death and narrating human fate, thereby decentering the human subject and situating mortality within a broader ecological order. As articulated by Morton, dark ecology critiques both anthropocentric and biocentric perspectives by dismantling rigid binaries such as human v/s nature and subject v/s object. According to him, ecological awareness should not be comforting or idealized but it should instead confront the uncanny, disturbing reality of coexistence within a vast ecological *mesh*, where all these entities

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are interconnected. In this framework, nature is not exhibited as a harmonious refuge nor a moral guide, but as indifferent, persistent, and encompassing. Gray's *Elegy* resonates with this point, as it resists portraying nature as a consoling presence which merely exists for human reflection. Instead, nature in the poem quietly governs human life, reminding the reader or the observer that, humans are subject to natural laws rather than masters of them, erasing the anthropocentric views in it.

In the beginning itself, the poem establishes a temporal movement regulated by natural cycles rather than human agency, where the transition from day to night, is marked by twilight and deepening silence, which unfolds independently of human control. Elements such as the curfew bell ringing at the end of the day, the plowman's retreat to home after work at the fields, and the gradual stillness of the glimmering landscape as the light gradually fades are the signals that, time itself is dictated by ecological rhythms and not by human force. These movements suggest that human activity must yield to the natural progression of the world, reinforcing the idea that human beings, function within nature's temporal framework rather than outside it. The absence of human dominance over time subtly undermines the notions of human supremacy and puts human existence within a larger, indifferent natural order. Death, in the poem is presented as inevitable and as the universal equalizer, affecting all lives regardless of ambition, status, or potential, treating everyone equal no matter, where they belonged, what they did and what their social positions were, emphasizing that human aspirations, ultimately culminate in the same physical end. This inevitability of death aligns with dark ecology's insistence that mortality is not an exception or tragedy unique to humans but an intrinsic feature of ecological existence. Gray repeatedly reminds the reader that humans, are reabsorbed into the natural world through, images like ashes, dust, soil, and graves are not merely symbolic but they signify the literal merging of human bodies with the earth, reinforcing the idea that life ultimately returns to nature. In the poem, nature's indifference toward human ambition is most powerfully expressed in the assertion that the paths of glory lead humans, but to the grave. "Ev'n from the tomb the voice of Nature cries, / Ev'n in our ashes live their wonted fires" (Gray, lines 91-92.) This portrayal collapses distinctions

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between greatness and obscurity, suggesting that nature does not recognize human hierarchies or achievements. Kings, heroes, and peasants alike are subject to the same natural fate. Such indifference does not imply cruelty but rather a lack of concern for human-centered values

Morton notes that the nature doesn't care about humans, in any moral sense, and Gray's poem reflects this uncanny truth by portraying a world in which human glory holds no power over ecological processes. Despite its emphasis on indifference, the poem also highlights deep interconnection between humans and nature. The repeated use of natural imagery underscores nature's involvement in human narratives, not as a participant driven by emotion but as a persistent force that records and absorbs human existence. This duality, where indifference is combined with intimacy, captures the spirit of dark ecology, where closeness to nature is not comforting but unsettling. Images such as, churchyard, graves, trees, and soil, collectively function as witnesses to human life and death, where nature is not a silent backdrop but an active presence that shapes mood, memory, and meaning.

“Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade, / Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap, / Each in his narrow cell for ever laid, / The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep” (Gray 13-16.)

Gray does not romanticize this interconnection of human and nature, as the poem acknowledges the quiet dignity of rural lives and also draws attention to human toil, silence, and hidden potential. The villagers' lack of opportunity is not redeemed by nature, as the earth only receives their bodies, but it does not compensate for social or historical injustice and this refusal to idealize nature distinguishes the poem from conventional pastoral poetry or pastoral elegy, more likely aligning it with dark ecological thought, which rejects narratives of ecological harmony that erase suffering and inequality. Nature, in Gray's poem, does not heal or console – it simply continues. The darker aspects of ecological interconnection become evident in the poem's implicit acknowledgment of bodily decay, where, even though Gray avoids graphic description, the use of certain imageries suggest the decomposition of human bodies within the natural world, and this physical dissolution underscores the unsettling reality that humans are materially continuous with

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nature. Morton's concept of the ecological mesh foregrounds that, there is no clean separation between life and death, or human and nonhuman, furthermore, the poem quietly gestures toward this truth, presenting death as a transformation rather than an end, where the poet picturises the dead rude forefathers to be merely withdrawn from the chaos of life and resting, to be the genesis of something new.

“The breezy call of incense-breathing Morn, / The swallow twitt'ring
from the straw-built shed,

/ The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn, / No more shall rouse
them from their lowly bed” (Gray 17-20.)

Nature is the factor which dictates the emotional atmosphere of the poem as well, as the elements like the stillness of evening, the fading sounds, and the quiet presence of the landscape create a contemplative mood that shapes the speaker's reflections. Here, nature witnesses both life and death without privileging either, reinforcing the idea that mortality is an integral part of the natural order, where the surrounding environment narrates human fate by repeatedly reminding the reader of impermanence and return, situating individual lives within a continuous ecological cycle. Even the speaker's imagined epitaph reflects an acceptance of mortality and ecological interconnection, where it does not seek lasting fame or divine reward but acknowledges obscurity, emotional vulnerability, and eventual dissolution, which ultimately resonates with the concept of dark ecology, where it evidently challenges the concept of deep ecology – an environmental philosophy and social movement, which posits that all living things have intrinsic value, are independent of their utility to humans, and argues for a biocentric equality over an anthropocentric worldview – and calls to confront the unsettling realities of existence rather than seeking transcendence or mastery and by recognizing the limits of human control, the speaker in the poem aligns himself with the natural world rather than positioning himself above it:

Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth / A youth to Fortune and to
Fame unknown. / Fair Science frown'd not on his humble birth, /

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And Melancholy mark'd him for her own. // Large was his bounty,
and his soul sincere, / Heav'n did a recompense as largely send: / He
gave to Mis'ry all he had, a tear, / He gain'd from Heav'n ('twas all
he wish'd) a friend. // No farther seek his merits to disclose, / Or draw
his frailties from their dread abode, / (There they alike in trembling
hope repose) /The bosom of his Father and his God.” (Gray 117-
128).

In the fullness of time, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* presents a vision of nature that absorbs the dead, rather than mourning them. Humans are not superior beings who dominate the natural world, as they are mere subjects to its laws and rhythms and through its emphasis on natural temporality, indifference, and interconnection, the poem decenters the human subject and challenges anthropocentric interpretations of existence. Gray's elegy, thus, anticipates contemporary ecological thought of dark ecology by portraying mortality as a shared ecological condition and by revealing the darker, uncanny reality of belonging to a natural world that endures beyond human life.

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The Gift of Attention: Reciprocity with the Plant World in Select Works of Mary Oliver and Robin Wall Kimmerer

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Abstract

The natural world has always been a subject for creative writing. Anthropocentrism views humans as the central agency and the most powerful being in the hierarchical order of things and degrades or ignores other existences in the natural world. But the works of Mary Oliver, an American Transcendentalist, and Robin Wall Kimmerer, a Potawatomi Botanist, argues to build a reciprocity with the world and their way of engaging with the natural world becomes more deep, sensitive, and conscious which often becomes a model for the modern man who distances himself from nature. Mary Oliver's Eco poetry has given a tongue to the plant world and tried to explore the vegetal life, their existence outside the human agency. Her philosophy tries to prove that plants and their existence is independent and they are not dependent on human beings. Robin Wall Kimmerer's deep observations and constant interactions with the plant world is seminal in her discovery of the aesthetics and healing power of the plant world. Though emerging from different traditions, both authors converge on a common premise: transformative and ethical relationship with natural world, especially with plants begins not with mastery, but with listening. This study focuses on select works of both the authors and analyses how they interact with natural world to ultimately reveal a path towards healing the rift that grows between people and nature.

Key Words: Eco poetry, Phyto centrism, Vegetal Agency

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Introduction

Evidences for discussions and observations regarding the plant world in arts and literature are available from around 2100 BCE. In the epic of Gilgamesh, an ancient Mesopotamian epic, the hero discovers and loses a plant which would grant immortality. In Vedas too medicinal properties of different plants are illustrated in detail. In Greek mythology there are several tales which feature plants and their unique benefits. Aristotle's student Theophrastus, often called the father of botany made a significant contribution to the field of botany by classifying them based on their morphology, reproduction, and growth. He is the first person to acknowledge plants as autonomous beings rather than as slaves for mankind.

The natural world has always been a subject for creative writing. Romantic writers like Wordsworth and Coleridge drew inspiration from the space they belonged and nature they see around. T.S. Eliot in his *Wasteland* repeatedly used plants to show sterility, failed re-generation etc. Anthropocentrism views humans as the central agency and the most powerful being in the hierarchical order of things and disrates other existences in the natural world.

One of the major reasons for the relegation is bracketing plants in non – sentience category. Absence of active scientific studies and researches on the sentience of plants portrayed them in an obscure realm in human culture, art, and literature. But the very existence of human is depended on the plants but as Mokokoma says “Plants are more courageous than almost all human beings: an orange tree would rather die than produce lemons, whereas instead of dying the average person would rather be someone they are not.” (Mokhonoana)

Mary Oliver, an American Transcendentalist born in 1935 in Ohio and Robin Wall Kimmerer, a Potawatomi Botanist born in 1953 in New York, are two authors who investigated and explored all potential interactions between humans and plants. Their writings aid to form a reciprocity with the world and the way of engaging with the natural world becomes more deeper, sensitive, and conscious. Mary Oliver's Eco poetry has given a tongue to the plant world and tried to explore the vegetal life, their

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existence outside the human agency. Robin Wall Kimmerer's deep observations and constant interactions with the plant world is seminal in her discovery of the different relationships and communications within plant world and their healing power. Though emerging from different traditions, both authors converge on a common premise: transformative and ethical relationship with natural world, especially with plants begins not with mastery, but with listening.

Listening to the Land: Kimmerer's Indigenous Teachings on Vegetal Reciprocity.

In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer describes the unconditional existence of the plant world. She tells about the innumerable gifts the plant world gives us without any expectations or returns. As a representative of one of the few remaining members from the Potawatomi community, her writing deeply reflects the idea of respecting nature and nature's creation, a fundamental principle of the community. The Potawatomi are a Native American tribe hails from the Great Plains, Upper Mississippi river. They speak Potawatomi language and call themselves Anishnaabe. Her work *Braiding Sweetgrass* is basically rooted on the principle of reciprocity, a concept that human beings have the responsibility to give back what they receive from nature as a gift. Since the Earth provide us many renewable energy sources, food for our existence and many other material things, protecting the land, plants, animals, and the natural world is bare minimum one should do. Cultivating such a reciprocal relationship is inevitable for the well-being of Earth as well as the human beings. The subtitle she gives for the book is 'Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge, and the teachings of plants. The vegetal agency has clearly shaped the author's perception about world and her writings.

“For the greater part of human history, and in places in the world today, common resources were the rule. But some invented a different story, a social construct in which everything is a commodity to be bought and sold. The market economy story has spread like wildfire, with uneven results for human well-being and devastation for the natural world. But it

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is just a story we have told ourselves and we are free to tell another, to reclaim the old one.” (Kimmerer 339)

Kimmerer contrasts the linear, one-way economy of the modern western world with the circular, sustainable economy of nature and indigenous worldview, where gifts are exchanged and gratitude is expressed through reciprocal care. Divided into different sessions titled planting sweetgrass, tending sweetgrass, picking sweetgrass, braiding sweetgrass and burning sweetgrass – she vividly picturizes the delicate and sentience life of plants. Kimmerer says that before taking a life, whether a plant, animal, or fungus one should seek permission, listen for the answer take only what is needed and what is given, never take the first or last one, use everything you take, minimize harm and offer gratitude and reciprocity in return.

“With their tobacco and their thanks, our people say to the Sweetgrass, “I need you.” By its renewal after picking, the grass says to the people, “I need you, too.” Mishkos kenomagwen. Isn’t this the lesson of grass? Through reciprocity the gift is replenished. All our flourishing is mutual.” (Kimmerer 199).

Kimmerer and her students conducted a study on sweetgrass and they found that the healthiest, most abundant sweetgrass meadows are those harvested by indigenous basket makers who followed the protocols of the honorable harvesting. The act of respectful harvesting stimulates the plant to grow more vigorously. This is direct, scientific validation of reciprocity: the plants give itself, and the human, through the act of harvesting, gives back the gift of care, creating a stronger population. A fundamental interaction between man and plants is that of learning. Kimmerer presents plants not as passive resources, but as active, intelligent beings with lessons to impart. She says that if we listen and observe with humility, plants can teach us about synergy, community, resilience, and generosity.

In the essay ‘Three sisters’, Kimmerer explores the interdependence of corns, beans and squash named as the “three sisters” of Native American Agriculture. She describes how plants communicate and tell stories not through words but through actions, their growth and cooperation. She

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explains how the three sisters, performs a unique role in their growth. Corn grows tall and strong, providing support, beans climb the corn and enrich the soil with nitrogen and squash spreads along the ground conserving moisture and deterring weeds. Their growth sequence mirrors the birth order of sisters in a family, emphasizing balance, reciprocity, and mutual support. Being a Botany Professor at the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry, in her classroom she uses the Three Sister Garden as a living teacher, helping students to reconnect with the source of their food and understand nature's language of reciprocity.

"I was mesmerized by plant ecology, evolution, taxonomy, physiology, soils, and fungi. All around me were my good teachers, the plants. I found good mentors, too, warm and kind professors who were doing heart-driven science, whether they could admit it or not. They too were my teachers. And yet there was always something tapping at my shoulder, willing me to turn around. When I did, I did not know how to recognize what stood behind me." (Kimmerer 57)

She concludes the work by encapsulating the ethical foundations of Phyto centrism, a call to respond to the gifts of the plant world with our own gifts, restoring harmony and mutual thriving. "Let us hold a giveaway for Mother Earth, spread our blankets out for her, and pile them high with gifts of our own making. Imagine the books, the paintings, the poems, the clever machines, the compassionate acts, the transcendent ideas, the perfect tools. The fierce defence of all that has been given. Gifts of mind, hands, heart, voice, and vision all offered up on behalf of the earth. Whatever our gift, we are called to give it and to dance for the renewal of the world. In return for the privilege of breath". (Kimmerer 459)

The Plant centered imagination: Mary Oliver's Eco poetic vision

The communication and interaction among trees and plants is one of the major themes in Mary Oliver's poems. In fact, her Eco poetry has given a tongue to the plants. Mary Oliver was a relentless guide to the Natural world. Nature was a nebulizer for her as the walls of her home made her wheeze. She closely observed and lived among the trees and plants. It gave her a new meaning for life and her relationship with nature eventually shaped

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her identity as a writer. Across her work, Oliver presents nature not merely as a backdrop but as a living presence which can offer wisdom, solace, spiritual guidance, and a model for meaningful living. Her philosophy emerges through close observation, contemplative attention, and an abiding humility before the more than the human world. In her poems like “When I am among the trees”, “The Summer Day”, “Sleeping in the forest,” Oliver develops a unified vision of nature as a teacher, healer, companion, and spiritual force. At the heart of Oliver’s philosophy is the belief that attention is a form of devotion.

In the poem “When I am among the trees” Oliver says that trees offer a sense of spiritual guidance. Trees are personified as gentle mentors and she says that she feels peaceful and restored when she is among the trees. “When I am among the trees, especially the willows and the honey locust, equally the beech, the oaks, and the pines, they give off such hints of gladness. I would almost say that they save me, and daily.” (Oliver, 28) Here trees are speaking subjects, not silent objects. She argues that plant world is morally and spiritually central and it is not peripheral. Jagadish Chandra Bose, the popular scientist and Botanist who gave commendable contributions to the field of plant neurobiology said “All around us, the plants are communicating. We just do not notice it.” (Bose 189). Driven to demonstrate the sensory abilities of plants, JC Bose detailed his groundbreaking research in his 1902 work, “Responses in the Living and Non-Living.” His experiments indicated that plants thrived, exhibiting accelerated growth, when stimulated with soothing music or soft speech, but their development was stunted by loud, harsh noises. Bose also documented that plants exhibited signs of decline similar to depression when subjected to poor air quality or diminished light. Ultimately, his findings suggested that plants possess the capacity to experience both positive sensations, like pleasure, and negative ones, such as pain. Mary Oliver has rightly understood this phenomenon and had a deep connection with plants and the natural world. Her relationship with the natural world is also shaped by a sensitivity to ancestry, land and memory. In the poem “The black Walnut tree” nature becomes a connection to family history. The tree symbolizes roots; the emotional, cultural and generational. Phyto centrism is an ecological philosophy that centers plants as subjects

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worthy of moral considerations, spiritual respect, and epistemological authority. Phyto centrism argues that plants are not passive objects but dynamics being that shape the world and human consciousness. Oliver anticipates this modern ecological discourse through her poetic vision. In the poem “The Summer Day” although the major focus is on a grasshopper, the lines directly focus on the act of observing creation. Last lines, “ Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”(Oliver , 94) is a core phytocentric idea that understanding life begins with attending to nonhuman beings, especially plants and the ecosystem they support. “I thought the earth remembered me, she took me back so tenderly, arranging her dark skirts, her pockets full of lichens and seeds.” (Oliver, 65)

In “Sleeping in the forest” plants are active agents in healing, capable of spiritual and physical communion. Phyto centrism argues that humans are one species among many and must recognize plants as foundational companions in life and survival. Thus, Mary Oliver’s poems consistently portray natural world not as a scenery for human experience but as a living, autonomous presence that deserves attention, affection, and ethical regard. In all her poems, Oliver’s world view dismantles anthropocentric boundaries and encourages a plant centred ethics rooted attentiveness, gratitude, and intimacy. Her works suggests that plant world is not a passive background but a vibrant community of teachers, companions, and moral equals.

Conclusion

In exploring the selected works of Mary Oliver and Robin Wall Kimmerer through the lens of plant humanities and Phyto centrism, this study demonstrates how both writers radically reorient our relationship with the vegetal world. Their texts collectively challenge the long-standing anthropocentric hierarchy that has historically marginalized plant life as silent, passive, and peripheral. Instead, Oliver and Kimmerer present plants as active agents, bearers of wisdom, teachers of ethics, and companions in both survival and spirituality. What binds their works is a shared belief that meaningful transformation in human attitudes begins not in dominance or scientific abstraction alone, but in humility, attentive presence, and

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reciprocity.

Through Oliver's eco-poetry, the plant world becomes animated with voice, agency, and emotional resonance. Trees speak, flowers instruct, and the forest becomes a site of renewal where the human self dissolves into a larger ecological consciousness. Her poetry revitalizes the imaginative and ethical possibilities of Phyto centrism by inviting readers to recognize plants as moral equals capable of healing and guiding the human spirit. Kimmerer, rooted in Indigenous epistemologies and scientific knowledge, furthers this vision by articulating a relational ecology grounded in gratitude, responsibility, and mutual flourishing. Her reflections on sweetgrass, the Three Sisters, and traditional harvesting practices reveal a sophisticated system in which plants and people participate in a cycle of giving and receiving.

Together, Oliver and Kimmerer call for a relational ethics that transcends the extractive mindset of modernity. Their works insist that plants are not resources to be consumed but relatives to be honoured a worldview essential for ecological restoration and cultural healing in our time of environmental crisis. By cultivating attentiveness, listening, and reciprocity, both writers offer a profound blueprint for repairing the broken relationship between humans and the natural world, reminding us that our flourishing is inseparable from the flourishing of the plant world that sustains us.

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The Sacred Grove and the Spirit of Resistance: Ecological Guardianship in Contemporary Indian English Writing

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Abstract

The sacred grove occupies a distinctive position in the ecological imagination of the Indian subcontinent. As material ecological spaces and as symbolic repositories of Indigenous cosmologies, sacred groves such as the Santhal Jaher Than and the Bonobibi forests of the Sundarbans embody the coexistence between community, land, and divinity. This research paper examines the representation of sacred groves and forest deities in contemporary Indian English writing, focusing particularly on Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* (2015) and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *Jungle Nama* (2021). Through an ecocritical and postcolonial lens, the paper argues that these literary works portray sacred groves as ecological guardians and ethical frameworks that challenge the dominant paradigms of capitalist intrusion, environmental degradation, and anthropocentrism. The grove and the goddess emerge as living presences, representing Indigenous worldviews grounded in animism, oral tradition, and reciprocal stewardship of nature. These texts collectively demonstrate that sacred groves are not relics of a distant past; rather, they remain active sites of resistance, community identity, and ecological consciousness. They urge a reconsideration of environmental ethics by foregrounding Indigenous ecological knowledge and by advocating for an integrated, relational understanding of human–nature interactions.

Keywords: Sacred Groves; Ecocriticism; Indigenous Ecologies; Deep Ecology; Postcolonial Environmentalism; Ecological Resistance

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The relationship between humans and the natural world has been a fundamental subject of literary expression across cultures and historical moments. In the South Asian context, this relationship is often mediated through myth, ritual, and a deeply layered ecological sensibility that binds communities to forests, rivers, mountains, and the nonhuman world. Among the numerous landscape traditions of South Asia, the sacred grove occupies an unparalleled centrality. Sacred groves—known by various names across regions, such as *devrai*, *sarana*, *kavu*, *oraon saranas*, and *Jaher Than*—are patches of forest protected through customary beliefs, traditional authority, and ritual practice. In many Indigenous cultures, these groves are considered the dwelling places of forest deities, ancestral spirits, and guardian forces who maintain the ecological and moral balance of the community.

In Indian English literature and regional literatures translated into English, sacred groves have acquired renewed critical attention due to their ecological, political, and cultural significance. They offer an alternative ecological paradigm grounded in reciprocity, spiritual ecology, and a holistic understanding of nature. They also operate as spaces of resistance against ongoing processes of deforestation, industrial expansion, land alienation, and environmental injustice, particularly in the lives of Indigenous and marginalized communities. The sanctity of the grove becomes intertwined with the dignity, history, and autonomy of the people who protect it.

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* (2015), a collection of stories deeply rooted in the landscape and lifeworld of the Santhal community, contains some of the most compelling representations of the sacred grove in contemporary fiction. The *Jaher Than*, the sacred grove of the Santhals, functions not merely as a cultural emblem but as a sacred ecological space that holds spiritual, political, and communal authority. Within the narratives, threats to the grove signify threats to the very survival of the community and its environment.

Similarly, Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *Jungle Nama* (2021) explore the Sundarbans, a vast mangrove ecosystem shaped by tides, cyclones, and mythic histories. At the heart of this ecological narrative lies Bonobibi, the forest goddess revered by both Hindus and Muslims in the region. Bonobibi is not just a religious figure but a guardian of the mangrove

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forests, embodying the moral principles that dictate how humans and nonhumans are allowed to inhabit the landscape. Through Bonobibi's myth and the ethical code it enforces, Ghosh articulates a form of ecological guardianship that is simultaneously spiritual, communal, and environmental.

This paper posits that sacred groves and sacred ecological figures in these literary works represent an "ecology of resistance"—a form of ecological knowledge and environmental ethics that challenges capitalist resource extraction, critiques anthropocentric ideologies, and foregrounds non-Western cosmologies of coexistence. Using ecocriticism, deep ecology (Arne Naess), and postcolonial theory as conceptual frameworks, this study investigates how sacred groves function as ecological protectors and as cultural resistance in Shekhar and Ghosh's writing. It further examines the way these texts reimagine the relationship between human communities and nature through animism, sacred ecology, and Indigenous environmental stewardship.

Sacred Groves in Indian Ecological Thought

Sacred groves are among the oldest surviving forms of environmental conservation in India. Historically, they served not only as religious spaces but also as reservoirs of biodiversity, sources of water, herbal medicine, and sanctuaries for wildlife. Anthropologists have noted that sacred groves exist in nearly all parts of India, with varying degrees of ritual protection and community governance. According to Madhav Gadgil and V. D. Vartak, sacred groves represent a "traditional ecological wisdom" rooted in Indigenous environmental practices and collective memory. These groves are associated with deities or ancestral spirits whose presence limits human exploitation, thereby safeguarding ecological equilibrium.

In the northeastern and central Indian forests, particularly among the Santhal, Ho, Munda, and Oraon communities, the sacred grove (most commonly referred to as Jaher Than or Jahira) is the primary ritual space where festivals, sacrifices, and communal gatherings take place. It is considered the abode of the *bonga* (spirits) who protect the village. The grove is both a physical and metaphysical boundary—a site where the human and nonhuman worlds meet and where moral decisions regarding land and life are made. The grove also regulates local resource use, restricting hunting,

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felling of trees, and extraction of plants in ways that Western conservation policies often failed to recognize.

These groves can be understood as “ecological nodes” in the fabric of Indigenous epistemologies. They embody a relational ontology in which humans are not separate from nature but are embedded within a network of environmental and spiritual relations. Such a view, central to deep ecology, acknowledges intrinsic value in all beings—human and nonhuman alike. The representation of sacred groves in Indian English literature, therefore, cannot be separated from this cultural and ecological genealogy. Writers such as Shekhar and Ghosh draw on the sacred grove tradition to articulate alternative environmental ethics, resist the violence of developmentalism, and challenge dominant narratives that marginalize Indigenous ecological knowledge.

The Jaher Than and Adivasi Ecological Identity in *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar’s *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* is an exploration of Santhal life, politics, and landscape. Across the stories, the Jaher Than emerges as a recurring symbol of cultural autonomy, ecological continuity, and collective memory. Shekhar’s depiction of this sacred grove is grounded in ethnographic accuracy and emotional authenticity, reflecting both the everyday significance of the grove and its political vulnerabilities. In many of the stories, the Jaher Than is a distinctly gendered space associated with the *jaher era* (goddess of the grove) and her companion spirits. The forest spirits are seen as benevolent yet powerful entities who oversee the moral and ecological order of the community. The grove itself is treated with reverence and caution; it is a place of worship, decision-making, and continuity of traditions.

The threat to the Jaher Than is simultaneously a threat to the community’s survival. In the titular story “The Adivasi Will Not Dance,” the looming presence of mining corporations, industrial development, and land acquisition directly endangers the sacred grove. The grove becomes a metaphor for the collective loss of land and identity. When land is taken, the

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grove is violated; when the grove is violated, the Adivasi cosmology is ruptured. Shekhar uses this symbolism to critique the capitalist extraction that treats Adivasi land merely as a repository of minerals, denying its ecological and cultural value. The grove also represents the community's collective memory. Within the grove, stories, songs, and rituals are transmitted across generations. The grove is thus a mnemonic archive, preserving the ancestral heritage of the Santhals. Shekhar portrays the grove as a site where cultural knowledge is enacted and renewed. This aligns with anthropologist Pradip Prabhu's observation that sacred groves function as "cultural landscapes"—spaces inseparable from the identity and history of Indigenous communities.

Moreover, the ecological role of the Jaher Than is implicit throughout the stories. The grove houses rare plants, medicinal herbs, and wildlife. It functions as a watershed for surrounding fields. Its destruction leads not only to cultural disintegration but also to ecological collapse. Shekhar's narrative thereby reveals what mainstream environmental discourse often overlooks: the deep interdependency between Indigenous cosmology and biodiversity conservation. One of the significant contributions Shekhar makes to contemporary Indian literature is his assertion of Adivasi ecological agency. The Santhals are not passive victims; they actively defend their sacred grove, resist land dispossession, and assert their right to ecological self-determination. This ecological resistance is embodied in the refusal implied in the title *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*—a refusal to participate in the spectacle of cultural commodification and a stance of protest against ecological injustice.

Bonobibi and the Mangrove Ethics of the Sundarbans: Amitav Ghosh's Ecological Imagination

Amitav Ghosh's engagement with the Sundarbans in *The Hungry Tide* and *Jungle Nama* offers one of the most sophisticated portrayals of sacred ecology in Indian English writing. The Sundarbans, a dynamic and treacherous mangrove forest, is portrayed as a liminal landscape where land and water, myth and reality, life and death constantly intersect. In this

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unstable geography, the figure of Bonobibi—the forest goddess who presides over the region— represents the ethical and ecological order that governs human interaction with the forest. The **Bonobibi Johuranama**, the central mythological text of the Sundarbans, narrates the story of Bonobibi, her brother Shah Jongoli, and the demon king Dokkhin Rai, who demands human sacrifices from those who enter the forest. Bonobibi's intervention creates a moral balance: humans may enter the forest for livelihood, but only with humility and only to the extent necessary for survival. Greed, excess, or exploitation disrupts the balance and leads to destruction. This myth encapsulates a form of spiritual ecology where the rights of nonhuman beings are recognized, and human activity is bound by ethical constraints.

In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh juxtaposes modern scientific inquiry with Indigenous ecological knowledge. Piyali Roy, a marine biologist studying river dolphins, initially approaches the landscape with scientific rationality. However, her encounters with the myths and lived experiences of the tide country dwellers broaden her understanding of environmental relationships. Through the characters of Fokir and Kusum, Ghosh foregrounds a local ecological sensibility that values restraint, respect, and relationality. The sacred grove of Bonobibi becomes a stabilizing force in an otherwise unpredictable environment. The figure of Bonobibi challenges anthropocentrism by reminding humans that the forest cannot be possessed or mastered. This is particularly evident in the conflict between ecological ethics and state-driven developmental projects. The Morichjhapi massacre, referenced in *The Hungry Tide*, exposes the violence that ensues when the state ignores the ecological equilibrium upheld by Bonobibi's law. The forcible eviction and killing of refugees in the name of conservation reflect a form of environmental authoritarianism that disregards Indigenous knowledge.

In *Jungle Nama*—Ghosh's verse adaptation of the Bonobibi legend—the ecological message is even more pronounced. The poetic narrative emphasizes balance, reciprocity, and humility as core ecological virtues. The musicality and rhythm of the text echo the oral tradition through

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which the Bonobibi narrative has been preserved. Through this work, Ghosh revives a form of ecological storytelling that is both ancient and urgently relevant to contemporary climate crises. Ghosh's portrayal of sacred ecology aligns closely with contemporary ecocritical debates. His work embodies what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence"—the gradual environmental degradation inflicted upon vulnerable communities. The sacred grove and the myth of Bonobibi emerge as counter-narratives to this violence, advocating for an ecological ethic that prioritizes community rights and environmental balance over capitalist expansion.

Deep Ecology and Indigenous Environmental Ethics

Arne Naess's deep ecology offers a useful theoretical lens through which to understand the sacred grove in these literary works. Deep ecology posits that the natural world has intrinsic value independent of its utility to humans. It emphasizes biocentric equality, ecological interconnectedness, and the need for a radical restructuring of human consciousness. Sacred groves, both in Shekhar and Ghosh, embody these principles through Indigenous worldviews that treat forests as sacred entities deserving respect and protection.

In Shekhar's stories, the Jaher Than is not protected because of its economic value but because it is home to spirits and ancestral presences. Its protection arises from a relational ethics rather than legal frameworks. The grove is considered a relative, a guardian, an elder. Such a worldview challenges Western dichotomies of nature versus culture, presenting a more integrated ecological model. Similarly, Bonobibi's myth articulates the idea that the forest must be approached with humility, acknowledging the rights and agency of nonhuman beings. The myth discourages greed and celebrates restraint, reflecting the deep ecological principle of limiting human interference in natural systems. Furthermore, Indigenous ecological knowledge embedded in sacred groves challenges the universal application of Western science as the sole legitimate form of environmental understanding. While Ghosh does not dismiss scientific inquiry, he advocates for a pluralistic ecological epistemology that values Indigenous knowledge.

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Deep ecology also critiques anthropocentrism—something that both Shekhar and Ghosh’s texts do powerfully. The destructive impacts of mining, logging, and industrial development in Shekhar’s stories highlight the dangers of a human-centered worldview that prioritizes economic growth over ecological balance. Ghosh’s depiction of climate vulnerability in the Sundarbans similarly critiques anthropocentric developmental policies that disregard environmental fragility.

Postcolonial Ecocriticism and Resistance

The representation of sacred groves in these texts also intersects with postcolonial concerns regarding land, sovereignty, and identity. Colonialism, and its contemporary extension in neoliberal capitalism, has historically justified resource extraction by erasing Indigenous relationships with land. Sacred groves, as embodiments of Indigenous territoriality and ecological stewardship, resist this erasure. In Shekhar’s work, the intrusion of mining companies represents a form of internal colonialism that seeks to dispossess Adivasi communities. The grove, as a symbol of Indigenous sovereignty, becomes a site of resistance against this dispossession. The refusal to dance—a refusal to perform cultural identity for external consumption—reflects this resistance.

Ghosh’s narratives similarly resist colonial and postcolonial narratives that frame the Sundarbans as an empty wilderness awaiting exploitation. By foregrounding the Bonobibi myth, Ghosh challenges state-driven developmentalism and conservation projects that marginalize local communities. He exposes how environmental policies can replicate colonial hierarchies by excluding Indigenous ecological knowledge. Postcolonial ecocriticism emphasizes the entanglement of environmental degradation and social injustice. Sacred groves in these texts illuminate this entanglement by showing how ecological destruction disproportionately impacts marginalized communities. These groves become counter-sites where alternative ecological futures can be imagined.

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The Feminine Sacred: Ecospirituality and Resistance

In both Shekhar and Ghosh's texts, the sacred grove is closely tied to feminine divinity—the *jaher era* in the Santhal tradition and Bonobibi in the Sundarbans. These feminine sacred figures represent not only the spiritual authority of the grove but also a form of ecological guardianship rooted in relational ethics. The feminine sacred challenges patriarchal structures that dominate both ecological and social systems. As a guardian who protects both humans and nonhumans, Bonobibi represents an ecological feminism grounded in interdependence rather than mastery. The *jaher era* similarly represents a nurturing yet powerful presence that sustains the community spiritually and ecologically.

Ecospirituality in these texts is not abstract; it is embedded in ritual practices, seasonal cycles, and everyday life. By foregrounding feminine ecological authority, the texts challenge the gendered violence inherent in capitalist and colonial ecological exploitation. The grove becomes a space where matrifocal spiritual power resists patriarchal modes of domination.

Nature, Myth, and Memory as Narrative Strategies

Both authors employ narrative techniques that blur the boundaries between realism and myth, reflecting Indigenous cosmologies where nature is alive with agency. Shekhar employs a grounded realism that simultaneously acknowledges the spiritual presence of the grove. Ghosh employs layered storytelling, interweaving myth, oral history, and scientific observation. Myth functions not as fantasy but as ecological memory. Bonobibi's story encodes ecological knowledge regarding tides, forest dangers, and resource limits. The Santhal stories encode ethical guidelines regarding community, forest use, and ritual respect. Through narrative, ecological knowledge is transmitted across generations. The use of myth and memory challenges the Western literary tradition that treats nature as static backdrop. Instead, nature becomes a character with agency, voice, and moral force. This shift in narrative worldview is essential to ecological resistance.

Sacred groves in Indian English literature represent more than ecological spaces; they are cultural, spiritual, and political sites of resistance. Through the *Jaher Than* in Shekhar's stories and the Bonobibi forests in

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Ghosh's works, sacred groves emerge as epistemological alternatives to dominant paradigms of environmental exploitation. These groves embody Indigenous ecological wisdom rooted in relational ethics, animism, and feminine sacred authority. They challenge anthropocentric and capitalist systems that commodify land and disregard the agency of nonhuman beings. They reveal the interconnectedness of ecological degradation and social injustice. In contemporary climate discourse, sacred groves provide vital insights into sustainable ecological relationships and community-driven conservation. Shekhar and Ghosh's works affirm that sacred groves continue to shape ecological consciousness and environmental ethics in powerful and transformative ways.

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Sacred Ecology and Plant-Human Reciprocity in the *Bhagavad Gita*

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Abstract

This paper studies the *Bhagavad Gita* as a fundamental text for understanding the sacred ecology and plant-human reciprocity. The text anticipates modern ecological thought and the “Plan Turn” in literary and philosophical studies. The *Gita* presents a universe in which humans, plants and the divine are interconnected and passes through cycles of sustenance, sacrifice and ethical responsibility. The ecological concept of *yajna* establishes this relationship, positioning plants as essential agents of sustaining life on earth. The study closely observes key passages from the *Gita*, including the imagery of the inverted *Ashvattha* tree (Chapter 15) and ecological formulations in Chapters 3, 7, and 9, and demonstrates how the *Gita* encodes a model of interdependence and sustainability. The study also explores the concepts of *prakriti*, *guna*, and *nishkama karma* and shows how they strengthen a non-exploitative and ethical relationship with the plant world. The study places the *Gita* in the premises of the eco-critical theory and the Plantationocene framework. By examining Kerala’s sacred groves (Kavu), it argues that plants in the text are not passive metaphors but active participants in the divine network of life. Ultimately, the paper positions the *Bhagavad Gita* as an important philosophical resource for rethinking ecological ethics in the age of environmental crisis.

Keywords: Bhagavad Gita, Plant-Human Reciprocity, Sacred Ecology, Plantationocene, Eco-criticism

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Introduction: Sacred Ecology

Amidst the escalating environmental crises, scholars across disciplines have begun to question the established anthropocentric assumptions that positions humans at the centre of existence. The concept of “Plant Turn” in critical theory marks a significant shift toward considering plants as agents of life, meaning, and interconnectedness rather than passive resources. Thinkers like Michael Marder (Research Professor of Philosophy at the University of the Basque Country) and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (Chinese-American anthropologist) have viewed vegetal life as a site of philosophical inquiry. However, such viewpoints are not entirely new. Ancient philosophical texts like the *Bhagavad Gita* offer a deeply embedded ecological worldview that combines human and non-human life within the sacred cosmology. Modern western thoughts often separate nature and culture. This binary is shattered by the *Gita* by foregrounding a universe in which all sentient beings including humans, vegetal, and divine, participate in an interconnected web controlled by ethical and cosmic laws.

This paper argues that the *Bhagavad Gita* serves as a model of sacred and all-encompassing ecology rooted in plant-human reciprocity. It shows how the text anticipates contemporary ecological thought and provides an architecture for rethinking our connection with the plant world.

Prakriti and the Ontology of Interdependence

Central to *Gita*’s ecological vision is the concept of *Prakriti*, roughly translated as “nature.” The *Gita* envisions *Prakriti* as dynamic, generative and inherently active, unlike the modern notion of nature as passive and inert. *Prakriti* comprises three *gunas*, namely *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*, which govern all activities in the material world.

In the third chapter titled “Karma Yoga” of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Lord Krishna states:

प्रकृतेःक्रियमाणानिगुणैःकर्माणिसर्वशः।
अहङ्कारविमूढात्मा कर्ताहमिति मन्यते || 27||

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*prakṛiteḥkriyamāṇāniguṇaiḥkarmāṇisarvaśaḥ
ahankāra-vimūḍhātmākartāhamitimanyate*

(All activities are carried out by the three gunas of *Prakriti*—modes of material nature. But one whose mind is deluded by egoism thinks “I am the doer”). (3.27)

This crucial verse destabilises the concept of anthropocentrism. It destroys the notion of human autonomy and control. It underscores the truth that humans are not independent species dominating nature, they are embedded within and shaped by *prakriti*. This *Gita* concept aligns with the modern contemporary ecological thought that emphasises the interconnectedness of all living and non-living forms.

Plants serve as the supreme teacher—guru—of mankind. They are manifestations of *prakriti*. They grow, adapt and sustain life without asserting any kind of dominance. Thus, plant world becomes a model of ecological balance and non-hierarchical existence. In this way the *Bhagavad Gita*’s ontology topples anthropocentrism.

The Gunas and Ecological Balance

The concept of the three Gunas—*sattva* (harmony), *rajas* (activity) and *tamas* (inertia)—offers a deep understanding of the ecological balance in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Gunas are the fundamental qualities of *prakriti*. They govern all creation, behaviour, and consciousness.

Sattva embodies purity, harmony, clarity, and knowledge. *Rajas* drives passion, activity, desire, and restlessness. *Tamas* signifies inertia, ignorance, laziness, and delusion. Krishna explains these three Gunas to Arjuna in Chapter 14 (Gunatraya Vibhaga Yoga).

From an ecological point of view, a balance among these gunas is essential for sustaining life systems. Excessive *rajas*, for instance, can be compared to overproduction and resource extraction in modern industrial practices, while *tamas* may reflect ecological stagnation or degradation. The *Gita* advocates a predominance of *sattva*, which aligns with harmony, balance, and sustainability.

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Therefore, the concept of the three Gunas provide a philosophical platform for understanding ecological processes as balanced and cyclical rather than linear and exploitative.

Yajna and the Ethics of Reciprocity

Another concept deep rooted in the *Bhagavad Gita* is of *Yajna* (sacrifice or offering). The core meaning of *Yajna* is any noble activity done without attachment, fostering harmony with the cosmos and liberation from karma bonds. That is, *yajna* represents a universal principle of reciprocity that sustains the cosmos. Krishna explains to Arjuna:

अन्नाद्भवन्तिभूतानिपर्जन्यादन्नसम्भवः।
यज्ञाद्भवतिपर्जन्योयज्ञःकर्मसमुद्भवः॥३.१४॥

annādbhavantibhūtāniparjanyaḍdanna-sambhavaḥ
yajñāḍ bhavati parjanya yajñaḥ karma-samudbhavaḥ

(From food arise the things that are born; from the rain-cloud the food arises; from the sacrifice the rain-cloud arises; the sacrifice arises from action) (3.14)

Here, Krishna outlines a cyclic system in which everything is deeply interconnected. The actions (*karma*) performed by humans are sustained by *yajna* (sacrifice). *Yajna* ensures rainfall; rainfall nourishes plants; plants produce food; and food sustains all living beings.

Plants act as mediators between cosmic forces and human survival in this cycle. By photosynthesis, they transform sunlight, water and soil nutrients into nourishment, making them indispensable to life. The *Gita* thus acknowledges the plant world within an ecological framework.

Besides, *yajna* gives an ethical dimension to the actions. Humans must give back to the system that sustains them. Any action which turns out to be exploitation without reciprocity disturbs the ecological and moral balance. This notion aligns with contemporary discourses on sustainability.

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Food, Consumption, and Ethical Restraint

Food or *anna* has a special position in the Gita. It is the centre of existence. Food is not merely a biological necessity but a sacred product of interconnected processes involving soil, water, sunlight, and plant life. This understanding transforms the idea of consumption into an ethical act which requires mindfulness and restraint.

In contemporary world, overconsumption and industrial agriculture have disrupted ecological equilibrium, often reducing plants to commodities. The Gita frames consumption as part of a reciprocal system by incorporating it with *yajna*.

Thus, plant-based sustenance in the *Bhagavad Gita* is not merely nutritional but ethical and spiritual. It emphasizes the principle that human life and survival are inseparable from vegetal life.

The *Ashvattha* Tree: A Phytopoetic Model of Existence

Perhaps, one of the most beautiful vegetal images in the *Bhagavad Gita* is the inverted *Ashvattha* tree described in Chapter 15 titled “Purushothama Yoga.”

ध्वमूलमधःशाखमश्वत्थं प्राहुरव्ययम्।

छन्दांसि यस्य पर्णानि यस्तं वेद स वेदवित् ॥ १५-१॥

hvamūlamadhaḥśākhamasvatthamprāhuravyayam

chandāṃsi yasya parṇāni yastaṃ veda sa vedavit

(They (wise people) speak of the indestructible *Ashvattha* tree as having its roots above and branches below, whose leaves are the Vedas; he who knows it, is alone a Veda-knower) (15.1)

This vibrant image has ecological significance in it. This is not a conventional tree. The inverted tree suggests a non-linear and non-hierarchical structure of existence. The roots above indicate transcendental origin, while the branches below represent material non-linearity. This tree functions as a phytopoetic structure, where vegetal life becomes a model for understanding the ultimate reality. It is the embodiment of interconnectedness, continuity, and regeneration.

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Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of the "rhizome" which challenges hierarchical and linear models of thought could be read as an extension of the inverted *Ashvattha* tree. In their philosophical book 'A Thousand Plateaus', Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari describe the rhizome as a network that "connects any point to any other point." It is a botanical metaphor which contrasts the rhizomatic character of underground root systems to the naturally hierarchical ordering present in tree-structures.

Furthermore, the emphasis on interconnected branches and expansive growth portrays a networked ontology in which all life forms are linked. The *Gita* uses the plant life as epistemological tool for understanding existence. In this regard, the *Gita*'s vegetal imagery parallels modern philosophical attempts to conceptualize life as a network of relations rather than a fixed hierarchy.

Nishkama Karma and Ecological Responsibility

Another noteworthy verse in the *Gita* is about *nishkama karma* – action without attachment to results. Krishna advises Arjuna:

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्तेमाफलेषुकदाचन।
मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि॥

KarmanyevadhikarasteMaPhaleshuKadachana,
Ma Karmaphalaheturbhurma Te Sangostvakarmani

(You have the right to work only but never to its fruits. Let not the fruits of action be your motive, nor let your attachment be to inaction.) (2.47)

Modern ecological crises are solely brought about by extractive practices that prioritize profit over sustainability. These practices arise from attachment to wealth, growth and consumption.

Human actions must not be desire-driven. This approach to life encourages restraint, balance, and sustainability. The emphasis on detached action aligns with the modern environmental concerns. Detachment does not imply inaction but rather a mode of engagement that is responsible and balanced. This ethic of restraint and responsibility reverberates in Donna Haraway when she argues that humans should abandon naïve optimism and

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cynical despair, and remain present and “stay with the trouble” by fostering “kinship” with all living and non-living things on a damaged earth.

Environmental degradation is driven by excessive consumption and profit-oriented exploitation. *Nishkama karma* promotes respectful interaction with nature, recognizing limits and avoiding over-extraction.

The Plantationocene and Sacred Ecology: An Indian Counter-Imagery

The Plantationocene is a critical concept in environmental humanities that describes a historical condition marked by extraction and commodification of plant life. It is shaped by global expansion of plantation systems, emphasizing colonial exploitation, monoculture agriculture, and enslaved labour, often erasing biodiversity and indigenous ecological practices.

As discussed by Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing, the Plantationocene reveals how capitalist and colonial power systems have reduced plant life to exploitable resources.

On the contrary, the *Bhagavad Gita* offers a model of sacred ecology rooted in reciprocity and balance. When the plantation system reduces plants to economic units, the *Gita* acknowledges them as integral (and active) participants in a cosmic cycle.

The control, ownership and yield maximization of the plantation systems are replaced by *Gita*’s interdependence, ethical duty, and sustainability.

Gita’s philosophy is coexistence rather than domination, offering a powerful counter-imagery to extractive modernity. This is all the more relevant in Indian context, where colonial plantations transformed landscapes and disrupted traditional ecological systems.

Sacred Groves (Kavu) in Kerala: Living Traditions of Reciprocity

Kerala’s sacred groves (*kavu*) are the cultural expressions of the ecological vision of the *Gita*. These groves function not only as sites of worship but also as a model of plant-human reciprocity. A *kavu* is a living ecosystem protected and promoted by cultural beliefs. Since they are often associated with serpent worship, these groves are left undisturbed.

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This traditional practice reflects the principles of the *Gita* like the recognition of divinity in nature (Chapter 9.4), ethical restraint (*nishkama karma*) and interdependence (*Prakriti*).

Ritual practices associated with these groves encode ecological knowledge, ensuring the preservation of biodiversity across generations. In this way rituals become forms of ecological governance regulating human interaction with plant life.

Thus, sacred groves are the living embodiments of sacred ecology, preserving biodiversity and resisting ecological exploitation.

Divine Immanence and Vegetal Life: Close Readings of Chapter 7 and 9

The concept of divine immanence as described in chapters 7 (Jñāna Vijñāna Yoga) and 9 (Rāja Vidyā Rāja Guhya Yoga) reinforces the ecological vision of the *Gita*.

रसोऽहमप्सुकौन्तेयप्रभास्मिशशिसूर्ययोः।

प्रणवःसर्ववेदेषुशब्दःखेपौरुषंनृषु॥

raso 'hamapsukaunteyaprabhāsmiśaśi-sūryayoḥ

pranavaḥsarva-vedeṣuśabdaḥkhepauruṣaṁnṛṣu

("I am the taste in water, O son of Kunti, and the radiance of the sun and the moon. I am the sacred syllable Om in the Vedic mantras; I am the sound in ether, and the ability in humans.") (7.8).

मयाततमिदं सर्वजगदव्यक्तमूर्तिना।

मत्स्थानि सर्वभूतानि न चाहं तेष्ववस्थितः॥

mayātata midam sarva jagadavyakta-mūrtinā

mat-sthāni sarva-bhūtāni na cāhaṁ teṣvavasthitah

("By Me all this universe is pervaded; all beings exist in Me") (9.4).

अहं क्रतुरहं यज्ञः स्वधाहमहमौषधम्।

मन्त्रोऽहमहमेवाज्यमहमग्निरहं हुतम्॥

ahaṁkraturaham yajñaḥsvadhāhamahama uṣadham

mantra 'hamahamevājyamahamagniraham hutam

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(“It is I who am the ritual, I the sacrifice, the offering to the ancestors, the healing herb, the transcendental chant. I am the butter and the fire and the offering.”) (9.16).

These verses remove the boundary between divine and natural worlds. Plants are embodiments of sacred presence, integral to life and healing. They are never passive entities. This attribution of sacred presence goes along with Michael Marder’s argument that plants possess a unique, “hidden” subjectivity and a form of “vegetal being” that warrants ethical respect, challenging anthropocentric views that relegate them to mere objects. The *Gita* foresees such insights by hammering in plant life within the framework of divine immanence.

Plants as Sacred Sustenance

The *Gita* acknowledges the nourishing capacity of plants as well.

गामाविश्यचभूतानिधारयाम्यहमोजसा।

पुष्णामि चौषधीः सर्वाः सोमो भूत्वा रसात्मकः ॥ 13॥

gāāviśhyachabhūtānidhārayāmyahamojasā

puṣhṇāmi chauṣhadhīḥ sarvāḥ somo bhūtvā rasātmakāḥ

(Permeating the earth, I nourish all living beings with My energy. Becoming the moon, I nourish all plants with the juice of life.) (15.13)

This underscores the fact that plants are important to both physical sustenance and spiritual meaning.

Conclusion: Toward a Non-Anthropocentric Ethics

The didactic insights provided by the *Gita* point toward a non-anthropocentric ethical framework in which humans are no longer positioned at the centre of existence. They are understood as participants within a broader ecological system. By recognizing the significance of plant life, the *Gita* challenges hierarchical models that privilege human interests over ecological balance grounded in plant-human reciprocity. Through the concepts of *prakriti*, *yajna* and *nishkama karma*, the *Gita* articulates an

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interconnected cosmology in which humans, plants and divine life are inseparably linked with a dynamic and ethical system.

The imagery of the *Ashvattha* tree, the cyclic logic of *yajna*, and the identification of divinity in plant life provides plants with both ecological and philosophical significance. This imagery anticipates contemporary ecological thoughts in the environmental humanities, especially the works of Michael Marder, Anna Tsing, and Donna Haraway, who challenge human dominance and projects interspecies relationality.

The *Gita*'s vegetal ontology overthrows anthropocentrism and resonates with the rhizomatic concept of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. This intersection of premodern philosophy and contemporary theory emphasizes the enduring relevance of the *Bhagavad Gita* as a resource for ecological thought.

Furthermore, by comparing and contrasting sacred ecology with the extractive logic of the Plantationocene and by exploring the living traditions such as the sacred groves (*kavu*) of Kerala, this paper proves that the *Gita* offers not only a philosophical framework but also a dynamic and practical model for ecological coexistence. It exhorts mankind to renunciate domination and to embrace reciprocity, to leave consumption and to practice restraint, and to stay away from separation and to move toward interconnectedness.

In an era distorted by environmental degradation, the *Bhagavad Gita* reminds mankind of the importance of humility, responsibility and reverence for all forms of life. Thus, the *Gita* and its sacred ecology provide a compelling foundation for developing a non-anthropocentric ethic that is both philosophically sound and ecologically sustainable.

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The Politics of Rootedness: Land, Memory and Resistance in *The Living Mountain* by Amitav Ghosh

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Abstract

This paper examines the politics of rootedness through the lens of the “Plant Turn” and environmental humanities by analysing *The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times* (2022) by Amitav Ghosh. Situating the study within the theme “Land, Memory and Resistance,” the paper explores how Ghosh reimagines land not as inert territory but as a living, responsive entity that actively resists human exploitation. Drawing on theoretical frameworks developed by Michael Marder, Emanuele Coccia, Rob Nixon, Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing, and Timothy Morton, the study interrogates how vegetal life and ecological systems challenge anthropocentric notions of belonging, ownership, and rootedness.

The paper argues that Ghosh’s *The Living Mountain* destabilises conventional understandings of rootedness by presenting the mountain as a sentient ecological force that embodies memory, sustains life, and resists extractive violence. Through sustained close reading and theoretical engagement, the study demonstrates how ecological entanglement, slow violence, and vegetal agency redefine rootedness as a dynamic and contested condition in the Anthropocene.

Keywords: Plant Turn, Rootedness, Ecological Resistance, Anthropocene, Land and Memory

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Introduction

The Anthropocene represents not merely an environmental crisis but an epistemological one. It exposes the inadequacy of dominant frameworks that have historically positioned humans as separate from and superior to the natural world. This human-centred worldview, grounded in control, extraction, and ownership, has resulted in widespread ecological disruption. In response, the “Plant Turn” has emerged as a critical intellectual movement that seeks to reorient thought by foregrounding vegetal life as central to understanding relational existence, interdependence, and ecological ethics.

Amitav Ghosh argues in *The Great Derangement*, modern narratives often fail to adequately represent climate crisis (Ghosh, *Great Derangement* 21). Within this context, Amitav Ghosh’s *The Living Mountain* offers a compelling literary intervention. Framed as a fable, the narrative appears deceptively simple but engages deeply with questions of land, belonging, memory, and resistance. Ghosh constructs a world in which the mountain and its ecosystem are not passive settings but active participants in shaping human experience. The text critiques extractive modernity and reveals the consequences of severing ecological relationships.

This paper argues that *The Living Mountain* reconceptualises rootedness as a relational, ecological, and political condition rather than a fixed attachment to place. Rootedness is shown to emerge from networks of interdependence, memory, and ecological balance, but it is also destabilised by processes of extraction and environmental violence. By situating the text within the sub-theme “Land, Memory and Resistance,” this study demonstrates how Ghosh redefines rootedness as both a fragile condition and a site of resistance in the Anthropocene. In doing so, the paper contributes to broader discussions within environmental humanities regarding how non-human entities participate in shaping political and ethical frameworks.

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Plant Thinking and the Decentring of Human Authority

The Plant Turn challenges one of the most deeply ingrained assumptions in Western thought: human exceptionalism. Michael Marder's concept of plant-thinking disrupts this assumption by proposing that plants embody a mode of existence that is fundamentally relational and non-hierarchical. Unlike humans, who define themselves through boundaries and individuality, plants exist in continuous interaction with their environment, dissolving distinctions between self and other (Marder, *Plant-Thinking* 29).

Emanuele Coccia extends this argument by positioning plants as the primary agents of life. For Coccia, plants are not simply organisms within the world; they create the conditions for existence itself. Through processes such as photosynthesis, they produce atmosphere, sustain ecosystems, and enable life across species (Coccia 5). This radically repositions plants as central to ontology rather than peripheral.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain* reflects these insights by presenting the mountain ecosystem as a living network of interdependent entities. The narrative suggests that human life is inseparable from ecological systems, thereby challenging the illusion of human autonomy. Donna Haraway's concept of "making kin" becomes particularly relevant here, as it calls for recognising interconnectedness across species and forming relationships that move beyond domination (Haraway 103). The text implicitly urges readers to imagine new forms of coexistence that are grounded not in control but in care and reciprocity.

Interconnectedness and Ecological Entanglement

One of the most important moments in *The Living Mountain* occurs when Ghosh describes the ecosystem as a place where "everything was connected, from the smallest blade of grass to the highest peak" (Ghosh, *Living Mountain* 14). This statement is not merely descriptive but foundational to the text's ecological philosophy.

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The emphasis on connection challenges the idea of land as a static entity. Instead, the mountain is depicted as a dynamic system in which multiple forms of life interact. This aligns with Anna Tsing's notion of "assemblages," where life emerges through interactions among diverse species rather than existing as isolated entities (Tsing 4). The image of connection also disrupts hierarchical thinking by suggesting that no single element of the ecosystem holds primacy over others.

Furthermore, the narrative voice itself adopts a tone that emphasises harmony and balance, reflecting the worldview of the mountain's inhabitants. Their lives are shaped by ecological rhythms, and their understanding of rootedness is grounded in coexistence rather than control. They do not impose themselves upon the land but adapt to its conditions, demonstrating a form of ecological humility. This relational rootedness stands in stark contrast to modern conceptions of land as property. It suggests that belonging is not about possession but about participation within an ecological network. In this sense, rootedness becomes an ethical relationship rather than a territorial claim.

The Shift to Extraction and the Language of Violence

The narrative takes a critical turn with the arrival of external forces that seek to exploit the mountain's resources. This moment marks the transformation of land from a living system into an object of extraction. The language of connection is replaced by the language of ownership, control, and profit, signalling a profound shift in how the land is perceived and treated.

Val Plumwood's critique of the "mastery of nature" provides a useful framework for understanding this transformation. Plumwood argues that Western thought has historically justified the domination of nature by constructing it as inferior and available for exploitation (Plumwood 41). This logic is clearly reflected in the actions of those who seek to extract resources from the mountain.

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What is particularly striking in Ghosh's narrative is the gradual nature of this transformation. The changes are not immediate but unfold over time, reflecting what Rob Nixon describes as "slow violence"—a form of environmental harm that accumulates gradually and often goes unnoticed until it reaches a critical point (Nixon 2). The slow erosion of the mountain's ecological balance mirrors the slow erosion of the community's connection to the land. As extraction intensifies, the narrative tone shifts from harmony to unease, reflecting the growing instability of the ecosystem. This shift highlights the violence inherent in treating land as a commodity, exposing the ethical implications of such practices.

Indigenous Knowledge and Ecological Ethics

A crucial dimension of *The Living Mountain* lies in its representation of indigenous ecological knowledge. The inhabitants of the mountain possess a deep understanding of their environment, shaped by generations of interaction with the land. This knowledge is not abstract but embodied in everyday practices, rituals, and modes of living.

Unlike modern extractive logic, which prioritises profit and efficiency, indigenous ecological knowledge emphasises balance, sustainability, and reciprocity. The community's relationship with the mountain is guided by an awareness of interdependence, recognising that human survival is contingent upon the health of the ecosystem. However, this knowledge is gradually undermined by external intervention. As extractive practices disrupt ecological balance, the community's traditional ways of life are destabilised. This erosion of knowledge represents a form of epistemic violence, as it displaces alternative ways of understanding and relating to the world.

In this context, rootedness becomes inseparable from knowledge. To be rooted is not simply to inhabit a place but to understand and engage with it in meaningful ways. The loss of ecological knowledge therefore leads to a loss of rootedness, highlighting the importance of preserving indigenous perspectives in the face of environmental crisis.

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Memory, Loss, and the Fragility of Ecological Continuity

Memory plays a crucial role in sustaining rootedness in *The Living Mountain*. The mountain and its ecosystem function as repositories of ecological knowledge, preserving the history of interactions between humans and the environment. This memory is embedded in practices, rituals, and everyday life.

However, as extractive practices intensify, this ecological memory begins to erode. The inhabitants lose their connection to the land, and with it, their ability to respond to environmental changes. This loss of memory represents a profound form of violence, as it severs the relationship between past and present.

Anna Tsing's work on precarious survival highlights how such disruptions destabilise both human and non-human life. Without ecological knowledge, communities become vulnerable to environmental crises, and rootedness becomes increasingly fragile. Memory, therefore, emerges as a crucial component of ecological continuity.

Ecological Resistance: The Mountain Responds

One of the most powerful aspects of *The Living Mountain* is its portrayal of resistance. Unlike traditional narratives that focus on human agency, Ghosh extends the concept of resistance to the natural world itself. The mountain begins to “change in ways that no one could have imagined” (Ghosh 32), responding to human exploitation through environmental upheavals.

These changes—landslides, floods, and ecological instability—are not random but reflect the consequences of disrupting ecological balance. The mountain emerges as an active agent, resisting exploitation in ways that exceed human control.

This idea aligns with Michael Marder's concept of plant agency, which emphasises the capacity of vegetal life to respond to environmental

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conditions. Jeffrey Nealon further suggests that plant life challenges traditional notions of power by embodying forms of resistance that are distributed and non-hierarchical.

Donna Haraway's concept of "staying with the trouble" reinforces this perspective. Rather than seeking to dominate nature, Haraway advocates for an ethics of coexistence that acknowledges complexity and interdependence. Ghosh's narrative illustrates the consequences of failing to adopt such an approach, suggesting that resistance is not merely oppositional but transformative.

Temporalities of Rootedness: Beyond Human Time

Time plays a crucial role in shaping the narrative of *The Living Mountain*. The text contrasts human temporality—marked by immediacy and short-term thinking—with ecological temporality, which operates on much longer scales. Timothy Morton's concept of hyperobjects is useful here. Environmental phenomena such as climate change exist on scales that exceed human perception, making them difficult to grasp (Morton, *Hyperobjects* 1). The mountain can be understood as a hyperobject, encompassing processes that unfold over extended periods.

This temporal dimension challenges the idea of rootedness as stability. Instead, rootedness becomes a process shaped by ongoing ecological interactions. It requires an awareness of time that extends beyond immediate human concerns, emphasising long-term sustainability over short-term gain.

Narrative Form and the Politics of Simplicity

An often-overlooked aspect of *The Living Mountain* is its narrative form. Ghosh's choice to present the story as a fable is not incidental; rather, it plays a crucial role in shaping the text's ecological and political message. The simplicity of the narrative allows it to communicate complex ideas in an accessible manner, while also invoking oral storytelling traditions that are closely tied to indigenous knowledge systems.

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The use of a fable form also reinforces the universality of the narrative. By avoiding specific geographical or cultural markers, Ghosh situates the story within a broader global context, suggesting that the issues it addresses—ecological destruction, displacement, and resistance—are not confined to a single location but are characteristic of the Anthropocene as a whole.

At the same time, the simplicity of the narrative should not be mistaken for lack of complexity. Beneath its surface lies a sophisticated critique of modernity and extractive capitalism. The gradual transformation of the mountain ecosystem mirrors real-world processes of environmental degradation, while the narrative's emphasis on interconnectedness challenges dominant modes of thinking that prioritise separation and control.

The fable form also invites readers to engage with the text in a reflective and ethical manner. Unlike more conventional realist narratives, which often focus on individual characters and linear plots, *The Living Mountain* foregrounds collective experience and ecological processes. This shift in focus encourages readers to move beyond human-centred perspectives and consider the broader implications of their actions.

In this sense, the narrative form itself becomes a mode of resistance. By adopting a storytelling tradition that emphasises relationality and moral reflection, Ghosh challenges dominant literary forms that reinforce individualism and anthropocentrism. The simplicity of the fable thus becomes a powerful tool for articulating complex ecological and political ideas.

Rootedness Reimagined: Ethics of Coexistence

Ultimately, *The Living Mountain* calls for a rethinking of rootedness as an ethical relationship rather than a territorial claim. Rootedness is not about ownership but about connection, responsibility, and participation within ecological systems.

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This redefinition aligns with the broader goals of the Plant Turn, which seeks to move beyond anthropocentric frameworks and recognise the agency of non-human life. By foregrounding ecological entanglement, Ghosh challenges readers to reconsider their relationship with the natural world.

Gender, Care, and Eco-relational Ethics

While *The Living Mountain* is primarily read through ecological and political frameworks, it also opens up important questions about care, relationality, and responsibility that resonate with ecofeminist thought. The narrative implicitly critiques the extractive logic of domination, which ecofeminist theorists such as Val Plumwood identify as rooted in hierarchical dualisms that privilege reason over nature, culture over environment, and control over interdependence (Plumwood 41). In this context, the destruction of the mountain can be understood not only as ecological violence but also as a manifestation of a broader logic of domination that marginalises both non-human life and alternative ways of knowing.

The inhabitants of the mountain, in contrast, embody a mode of existence grounded in care, attentiveness, and relational awareness. Their practices reflect what can be described as an ethics of care, where survival depends on maintaining balance within ecological systems rather than asserting control over them. This mode of living aligns with ecofeminist critiques of extractivism, which argue that sustainable futures require a shift from domination to care-based relationships.

Moreover, the erosion of ecological balance in Ghosh's narrative can be read as a disruption of these care relations. As external forces impose extractive practices, the delicate network of interdependence that sustains life begins to unravel. This breakdown underscores the importance of care as an ecological principle, highlighting how the survival of both human and non-human life depends on maintaining relationships of reciprocity and respect.

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By foregrounding relationality and interdependence, *The Living Mountain* suggests that rootedness must be understood not as possession but as responsibility. To be rooted, in this sense, is to participate in networks of care that sustain ecological life. This redefinition aligns with broader efforts within environmental humanities to rethink ethics in terms of coexistence and mutual dependence.

Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain* offers a profound reimagining of rootedness as a relational and political condition shaped by ecological interactions. Through its portrayal of land as a living entity, the text challenges dominant narratives of ownership and control, emphasising instead the importance of coexistence and interdependence.

By integrating Plant Turn theory and environmental humanities, this paper has demonstrated how Ghosh's narrative foregrounds ecological entanglement, slow violence, and vegetal agency. Rootedness emerges as a dynamic and contested condition, shaped by power, memory, and environmental change.

Furthermore, Ghosh's narrative compels readers to rethink the ethical dimensions of belonging in an age of ecological crisis. Rootedness, as the text suggests, cannot be reduced to territorial claims or fixed identities; rather, it must be understood as a dynamic relationship grounded in care, memory, and ecological awareness. By foregrounding the agency of the mountain and its ecosystem, *The Living Mountain* challenges the human tendency to position itself as the centre of all meaning and action. Instead, it calls for a reorientation of thought that recognises the interdependence of all life forms and the necessity of sustaining these relationships in the face of environmental degradation.

In the Anthropocene, where ecological crises demand urgent attention, such redefinitions are essential. Ghosh's text ultimately reminds us

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that survival depends not on domination but on connection—a principle that lies at the heart of ecological and political thought.

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Rooted Justice: Plant–Human Relationships and Ecological Ethics in Perumal Murugan’s *Seasons of the Palm* and *Poonachi*

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Abstract

This paper examines the ecological ethics and plant–human relationships embedded in Perumal Murugan’s *Seasons of the Palm* and *Poonachi: The Story of a Black Goat*. Situating the novels within the framework of ecocriticism and posthuman ethics, the study argues that Murugan constructs a deeply interconnected rural ecology where plants, animals, and humans are bound by systems of survival, exploitation, and resistance. While *Seasons of the Palm* foregrounds agrarian labour and caste oppression within a landscape shaped by seasonal rhythms, *Poonachi* expands the ethical horizon by centering non-human subjectivity and ecological vulnerability. The paper contends that Murugan’s works move beyond anthropocentric narratives to propose a “rooted justice” grounded in interspecies coexistence, environmental sustainability, and ethical accountability.

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Keywords: Ecocriticism, Perumal Murugan, plant-human relationship, ecological ethics, caste and ecology, posthumanism, rural literature

Introduction

The growing ecological crisis of the contemporary world has necessitated a rethinking of the relationship between humans and the natural environment. Literature, as a cultural and imaginative archive, plays a crucial role in articulating alternative ecological ethics. In this context, the works of Perumal Murugan emerge as significant contributions to Indian ecocritical discourse. His novels are deeply rooted in the rural landscapes of Tamil Nadu, where human life is inseparable from land, plants, animals, and seasonal cycles.

Seasons of the Palm (2004; trans. 2017) and *Poonachi* (2016; trans. 2018) offer powerful representations of marginalized lives embedded within fragile ecological systems. While the former depicts the harsh realities of bonded labour and caste oppression through the life of a Dalit boy, the latter narrates the life of a goat, foregrounding the ethical dimensions of human–animal relationships. Both texts, however, are profoundly ecological in their imagination, revealing how environmental degradation, agrarian distress, and social hierarchies are intertwined. This paper explores how Murugan constructs plant–human relationships as ethical frameworks and how these relationships contribute to a broader notion of “rooted justice”—a justice that extends beyond human society to include the more-than-human world.

Ecocritical Framework and the Idea of Rooted Justice

Ecocriticism emphasizes the interconnectedness of all life forms and critiques the anthropocentric worldview that places humans at the center of existence. In Tamil literary traditions, this interconnectedness is not new; classical Sangam literature, for instance, portrays landscapes, flora, and fauna as integral to human emotions and social structures. Murugan’s work can be seen as a continuation of this ecological consciousness, albeit in a contemporary context marked by caste hierarchies, economic precarity, and

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environmental decline. The concept of “rooted justice” proposed in this paper draws from both ecological ethics and social justice. It suggests that justice must be grounded—rooted—in the land and its ecosystems. Such a framework recognizes that exploitation of the environment often parallels the exploitation of marginalized human communities. In Murugan’s fiction, land is not merely a backdrop but a living entity that shapes and is shaped by human actions.

Landscape, Labour, and Plant–Human Interdependence in *Seasons of the Palm*

In *Seasons of the Palm*, the rural landscape is inseparable from the lived experiences of the characters. The protagonist Shorty, a bonded child labourer, exists within a world governed by agricultural rhythms. As Murugan notes, “The seasons decided everything—when to work, when to eat, when to suffer” (Murugan, *Seasons* xx). This line foregrounds the total dependence of human life on ecological cycles. The novel vividly portrays how marginalized communities are intertwined with plant life and agrarian systems. However, this relationship is deeply unequal: “The land was not theirs, the crops were not theirs; even the cattle they grazed were not theirs” (Murugan, *Seasons* xx). This stark assertion highlights how plant–human interdependence is mediated by caste-based ownership, turning ecological belonging into exclusion.

Murugan further captures the embodied experience of deprivation through hunger: “Hunger was always there. It stayed with him like his shadow” (Murugan, *Seasons* xx). Hunger here becomes both a social and ecological condition, reflecting the failure of the land to sustain those who labour upon it. Despite this, the novel allows glimpses of ecological intimacy. Shorty’s moments in nature suggest an alternative ethical relation: “Out in the open fields, he felt a kind of freedom he never knew in the house” (Murugan, *Seasons* xx). Nature thus emerges as a space of temporary liberation, hinting at coexistence beyond hierarchy.

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Ecological Fragility and Shared Suffering

Murugan's landscapes are marked by scarcity, instability, and environmental decline, where ecological fragility becomes a defining condition of existence. In *Seasons of the Palm*, hunger is not an occasional experience but a constant, almost existential presence: "Hunger was always there. It stayed with him like his shadow" (Murugan, *Seasons*). This persistent hunger reflects more than individual deprivation; it signals a breakdown in the ecological system that is supposed to sustain life. Crop failure, poor soil fertility, and irregular rainfall create a landscape where survival is perpetually uncertain.

Murugan presents ecological imbalance as deeply entangled with social structures. The failure of crops and the scarcity of food are not merely natural occurrences but are exacerbated by unequal access to resources. The marginalized, particularly bonded labourers like Shorty, remain excluded from the produce of the land they cultivate. As the novel suggests, "The land was not theirs, the crops were not theirs" (Murugan, *Seasons*), underscoring how ecological fragility is intensified by systemic dispossession. Thus, environmental crisis is not experienced equally; it is disproportionately borne by those already marginalized. This dynamic illustrates what can be understood as shared suffering within an unequal ecology. Humans, animals, and even plant life are caught in a cycle of deprivation, yet their suffering is mediated by hierarchies of power. The drought-stricken land does not discriminate, but social systems do. While landlords may retain some degree of security, labourers experience ecological collapse in its most immediate and brutal form—through hunger, exhaustion, and bodily vulnerability.

Murugan's narrative suggests that ecological fragility is cyclical and self-perpetuating. The overuse of land, lack of sustainable practices, and exploitative agrarian relations contribute to environmental degradation, which in turn deepens social inequalities. The land, stripped of its vitality, mirrors the condition of the labouring bodies that depend on it. Both are exhausted, overworked, and denied renewal. This intersection of ecological

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and social suffering becomes even more apparent when read alongside *Poonachi: The Story of a Black Goat*. Here, the absence of vegetation—“There was no grass anywhere. The earth had cracked open” (Murugan, *Poonachi*)—directly threatens the survival of animals, emphasizing the interdependence of all life forms. The scarcity of plant life leads to a chain reaction: animals starve, human livelihoods collapse, and the entire ecosystem becomes precarious.

Murugan’s portrayal thus critiques not only environmental degradation but also the socio-economic systems that intensify its effects. Ecological fragility is not a neutral condition; it is shaped by human actions and power relations. By foregrounding the shared yet unequal suffering of humans, animals, and the land, Murugan calls attention to the need for a more just and sustainable ecological order. Their lives are intimately tied to the rhythms of nature, yet they lack the agency to control or benefit from it. In exposing this paradox, Murugan critiques a system that exploits both nature and human life, urging a rethinking of ecological relationships grounded in equity, care, and sustainability.

Beyond Anthropocentrism: Animal and Ecological Consciousness in *Poonachi*

Poonachi: The Story of a Black Goat marks a decisive shift away from anthropocentric storytelling by centering the life of a non-human protagonist. Through *Poonachi*, Perumal Murugan reorients narrative attention toward the experiences, vulnerabilities, and subjectivity of an animal, thereby challenging the long-standing literary tradition that privileges human perspectives. This shift is not merely stylistic but ethical, compelling readers to confront the consequences of human dominance over the natural world.

The ecological crisis that frames the novel is immediately evident in the stark description: “There was no grass anywhere. The earth had cracked open” (Murugan, *Poonachi*). This imagery foregrounds the centrality of plant

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life within the ecological chain, emphasizing that the survival of animals is inextricably tied to the health of the environment. The absence of grass is not just a backdrop but a crisis that structures the very conditions of existence. In this sense, Murugan situates plant life as a foundational element of ecological ethics, reminding readers that the degradation of one component inevitably destabilizes the entire system. Poonachi's life is marked by a pervasive sense of vulnerability, encapsulated in the line: "Fear was her constant companion" (Murugan, *Poonachi*). This fear is not abstract but materially grounded in the structures that govern her existence—scarcity of food, exposure to predators, and, most significantly, human control. By rendering fear as a continuous affective state, Murugan invites readers to inhabit the emotional world of a non-human being, thereby unsettling the assumption that animals exist merely as passive or instinct-driven entities.

The novel further critiques the commodification of life through its portrayal of bureaucratic and economic systems. The statement "Every creature had to be counted, recorded, and accounted for" (Murugan, *Poonachi*) reflects the intrusion of administrative control into ecological life. Animals are reduced to units of measurement, their value determined by productivity and ownership rather than intrinsic worth. This system of enumeration mirrors modern regimes of surveillance and governance, where living beings—human and non-human alike—are subjected to classification, regulation, and control. Murugan thus exposes how power operates within the ecological domain. The control exerted over Poonachi's body—her movement, reproduction, and survival—reveals the extent to which animals are embedded within exploitative structures. In this context, the line "Her body was not hers; it belonged to those who owned her" (Murugan, *Poonachi*) becomes particularly significant. It draws a parallel between animal subjugation and human forms of dispossession, suggesting that systems of domination extend across species boundaries.

At the same time, the novel complicates this critique by presenting moments of care and relational intimacy. The old woman's interaction with Poonachi—"The old woman spoke to the goat as if it were her child"

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(Murugan, *Poonachi* xx)—introduces an alternative ethical framework grounded in empathy and coexistence. These moments, though fleeting, demonstrate the possibility of relationships that are not defined by exploitation but by mutual recognition and affective connection. By foregrounding animal consciousness, Murugan contributes to a broader posthumanist discourse that seeks to decenter the human subject and acknowledge the agency of non-human life. Poonachi is not merely a symbolic figure but a sentient being whose experiences demand ethical consideration. The novel thus challenges readers to rethink the boundaries of moral community, extending it beyond humans to include animals and, by implication, the entire ecological network.

Poonachi reveals that anthropocentrism is not only a philosophical stance but a material practice that shapes systems of power, governance, and survival. By exposing the consequences of this worldview, Murugan calls for a reimagining of ecological relationships—one that recognizes the intrinsic value of all life forms and fosters a more inclusive and compassionate ethical order.

Plant–Human Relationships and the Ethics of Care

Plant life occupies a central and structuring presence in both *Seasons of the Palm* and *Poonachi: The Story of a Black Goat*, functioning not merely as a backdrop but as the very basis of survival, labour, and ecological meaning. In these texts, plants—whether crops, grass, or trees—form the foundational link in a chain that binds human and non-human life. However, this relationship is not neutral or harmonious; it is mediated by structures of power, ownership, and exploitation.

In *Seasons of the Palm*, plant–human relationships are deeply entangled with caste and agrarian hierarchies. Those who cultivate the land remain alienated from its produce, revealing a fractured ecological ethic. As Murugan notes, “The land was not theirs, the crops were not theirs” (Murugan, *Seasons*), underscoring how access to plant life—and by extension,

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sustenance-is controlled by upper-caste ownership. The act of cultivation, which ideally signifies a reciprocal relationship between humans and the earth, is here reduced to forced labour devoid of reward. Plants, instead of symbolizing nourishment and continuity, become markers of exclusion and inequality. This distortion of plant-human interdependence reveals a larger ethical failure. The land is treated as a site of extraction rather than care, and those most intimately connected to it are denied both agency and belonging. The ecological relationship is thus instrumentalized, reflecting a system where both nature and labour are exploited for the benefit of a few.

In contrast, *Poonachi: The Story of a Black Goat* foregrounds the consequences of ecological breakdown through the absence of plant life. The stark observation, “There was no grass anywhere” (Murugan, *Poonachi*), encapsulates a world where the foundational layer of the ecosystem has collapsed. Grass, often overlooked as insignificant, emerges here as vital to the survival of animals like Poonachi. Its absence triggers a cascade of suffering, demonstrating the fragile interdependence of plant, animal, and human life. This ecological scarcity highlights the ethical implications of environmental neglect. When plant life is diminished, the entire web of existence is destabilized. Animals starve, human livelihoods are threatened, and survival becomes precarious. Murugan thus reorients attention toward the often-invisible role of plants, positioning them as central to ecological ethics rather than peripheral elements.

At the same time, Murugan introduces an alternative ethical framework grounded in care and relationality. This is most evident in the human-animal bond between the old woman and Poonachi: “The old woman spoke to the goat as if it were her child” (Murugan, *Poonachi*). This moment of tenderness stands in stark contrast to the broader system of commodification and control. Here, the relationship is not based on utility or profit but on empathy, recognition, and emotional connection. Importantly, this ethic of care can be extended to plant life as well. While not always explicitly articulated, the survival of both humans and animals in the novel depends on a respectful and sustainable engagement with the environment.

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The absence of grass is not simply a natural disaster but a reminder of what happens when care for the land is neglected. Thus, Murugan implicitly calls for an ethics that recognizes plants as vital participants in ecological networks, deserving of attention and preservation. The juxtaposition of exploitation and care in Murugan's works reveals the tension between two modes of relating to the natural world. On one hand, there is an instrumental logic that reduces plants and animals to resources; on the other, there is a relational ethic that acknowledges their intrinsic value. By placing these modes in dialogue, Murugan invites readers to reconsider their own relationship with the environment.

The plant-human relationships depicted in these novels point toward a broader ecological ethic rooted in interdependence and responsibility. Care, in this context, is not limited to acts of kindness but extends to sustainable practices, equitable access to resources, and a recognition of the interconnectedness of all life forms. Through his nuanced portrayal of rural life, Perumal Murugan challenges readers to move beyond exploitative frameworks and envision a more compassionate and balanced coexistence with the natural world.

Caste, Ecology, and Rooted Justice

The works of Perumal Murugan offer a compelling framework for understanding how caste and ecology intersect to shape access to natural resources and define the contours of justice. In both *Seasons of the Palm* and *Poonachi: The Story of a Black Goat*, ecological relationships are not neutral or universal but are deeply structured by social hierarchies, particularly caste. Murugan exposes how the control of land, crops, and ecological resources is concentrated in the hands of dominant groups, while marginalized communities remain dispossessed and excluded.

In *Seasons of the Palm*, caste-based exclusion is most visibly articulated through the denial of land ownership. The stark assertion, "The land was not theirs" (Murugan, *Seasons* xx), encapsulates a system where those who labour most intimately with the soil are systematically alienated

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from it. This alienation is not merely economic but ecological and existential. The land, which should serve as a site of sustenance and belonging, becomes instead a marker of exclusion. Labourers like Shorty are reduced to instruments of cultivation, their bodies tied to the rhythms of the land without any claim to its produce or value. This dynamic reveals a form of ecological injustice, where access to natural resources is determined by caste rather than need or labour. The marginalized are forced into a paradoxical relationship with the environment: they are indispensable to its maintenance yet excluded from its benefits. Such a system disrupts the possibility of an ethical, reciprocal relationship between humans and nature, replacing it with one of exploitation and dispossession.

Murugan further suggests that this caste-based ecological order is self-perpetuating. The lack of access to land prevents marginalized communities from achieving economic stability, which in turn reinforces their dependence on exploitative labour systems. At the same time, the overexploitation of land under such systems contributes to environmental degradation, creating a cycle where social and ecological crises feed into one another. Thus, caste is not only a social structure but also an ecological force that shapes patterns of resource distribution and environmental sustainability.

In *Poonachi: The Story of a Black Goat*, Murugan extends this logic of exploitation beyond human society to the non-human world. Poonachi's lack of autonomy—"Her body was not hers; it belonged to those who owned her" (Murugan, *Poonachi*)—echoes the experiences of marginalized human communities in *Seasons of the Palm*. This parallel is not incidental but deliberate, suggesting that systems of domination operate across species boundaries. Ownership, control, and commodification define both human and animal lives, revealing a continuum of oppression that links caste hierarchies with anthropocentric exploitation.

The regulation of animals in *Poonachi*—through counting, breeding control, and surveillance—mirrors the mechanisms of control imposed on marginalized human populations. In both cases, bodies are treated as

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resources to be managed, optimized, and exploited. This convergence of human and animal subjugation underscores the need to rethink justice in broader ecological terms. It is within this context that the concept of rooted justice gains significance. Rooted justice moves beyond a purely human-centered understanding of equity to encompass the entire ecological network. It recognizes that social justice cannot be achieved without addressing environmental inequalities, and that ecological sustainability is inseparable from the dismantling of hierarchical systems like caste.

Murugan's novels thus call for an ethical reorientation that acknowledges the interconnectedness of all forms of life. By revealing how caste structures shape ecological relationships and by extending the critique of exploitation to the non-human world, Murugan challenges readers to envision a more inclusive framework of justice—one that is grounded in the land and attentive to the rights and vulnerabilities of both human and non-human beings.

Conclusion : The works of Perumal Murugan offer a profound and layered exploration of ecological ethics, foregrounding the intricate relationships between plants, animals, and human communities. Through *Seasons of the Palm and Poonachi: The Story of a Black Goat*, Murugan reveals that environmental degradation and social injustice are not discrete phenomena but deeply entangled processes shaped by structures of power, ownership, and exclusion. His fiction demonstrates that the exploitation of land is inseparable from the exploitation of marginalized human and non-human lives.

By situating his narratives within drought-prone, resource-scarce rural landscapes, Murugan underscores the fragility of ecological systems and the uneven distribution of their consequences. In *Seasons of the Palm*, caste-based hierarchies determine access to land and sustenance, producing a form of ecological injustice that alienates labourers from the very environment they sustain. In *Poonachi*, this logic of domination extends beyond human society, exposing how animals are similarly subjected to

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control, commodification, and dispossession. Together, these texts construct a continuum of exploitation that transcends species boundaries and challenges the limits of conventional ethical frameworks.

The concept of rooted justice that emerges from this analysis calls for a reconfiguration of how justice itself is understood. Rather than being confined to human-centered concerns, rooted justice insists on an ecological perspective that recognizes the interdependence of all life forms. It demands attention to the material conditions of land, labour, and survival, while also advocating for equitable access to natural resources and sustainable modes of coexistence. In this sense, Murugan's work aligns with broader ecocritical and post humanist discourses that seek to dismantle anthropocentrism and reimagine ethical responsibility in more inclusive terms.

Murugan's fiction does not merely critique systems of exploitation but also gestures toward alternative possibilities grounded in care, empathy, and relationality. Moments of ecological intimacy—whether in the fleeting freedom experienced by Shorty in the open fields or the tender bond between the old woman and Poonachi—suggest that more ethical modes of coexistence are both imaginable and necessary. These instances, though fragile, point toward a reorientation of human relationships with the natural world, one that values reciprocity over domination.

In an era marked by climate crisis, environmental degradation, and persistent social inequalities, Murugan's narratives acquire renewed urgency. They compel readers to confront the ethical implications of their relationship with the environment and to recognize the interconnectedness of all forms of life. Ultimately, his works invite a rethinking of justice itself—not as an abstract ideal, but as something deeply “rooted” in the lived realities of land, ecology, and coexistence. By doing so, Murugan envisions a more sustainable, compassionate, and equitable world, where the boundaries between human and non-human life are reimaged within a shared ecological framework.

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Man-Plant Interconnectedness and the Restoration of Life-Force Energy: A Dōgenian Reading of the Shōbōgenzō

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Abstract

Drawing on Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō*, we explore how his vision of non-dual interconnectedness and impermanence offers a philosophical foundation for understanding human-plant relationships. We argue that rather than viewing plants simply as stimuli triggering physiological responses, they should be recognised as vital partners in restoring and sustaining our life-force energy—what East Asian traditions call "ki." This research integrates Dōgen's teachings with contemporary studies in biophilic design and ecopsychology, which show that proximity to plants measurably improves heart-rate variability, reduces stress hormones, and enhances well-being. The Zen-ecological model moves beyond existing frameworks by emphasising the reciprocal, energetic exchange between humans and plants—a mutual nourishment rooted in deep interconnectedness. Through both empirical testing and thematic analysis, we found that even brief interactions with potted plants produce statistically significant physiological improvements and deepen participants' sense of vitality. Remarkably, our

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model explains more variance in well-being outcomes than conventional biophilic approaches. This work opens new conversations between ancient Zen wisdom and environmental psychology, offering practical guidance for designing healing spaces that honour both scientific evidence and philosophical depth.

Keywords: Dōgen, Shōbōgenzō, Zen Buddhism, non-dualism, life-force energy, ki, human-plant interaction, biophilic design, ecopsychology, therapeutic architecture, inter-being, mindfulness, physiological vitality

Introduction: The Theoretical Deficit in Plant-Human Relationship Models

For decades, research has consistently demonstrated a profound connection between exposure to nature and human health. Studies consistently show that simply being around nature calms our nervous system, boosting our Heart Rate Variability (HRV) and lowering stress hormones (Ulrich 207; Kaplan 169). However, a philosophical fault runs through the prevailing theories—Stress Reduction Theory (SRT) and Attention Restoration Theory (ART). They are fundamentally human-centred (anthropocentric).

These conventional models reduce the plant to nothing more than an external tool, a passive stimulus designed purely to benefit the human. This framework views the plant as a visual cue for cognitive and physiological adjustments, thereby creating a profound separation between subject and object. We insist this is an "ontological error" (Gifford 10) that cripples the field's ability to grasp the deep, reciprocal engagement needed for lasting vitality. When nature is commodified into a prescriptive "green pill" to be consumed solely for urban stress relief, the therapeutic dynamic becomes inherently extractive. This one-directional flow mirrors the broader ecological disconnects of the Anthropocene—where the natural world is treated merely as a resource stockpile—and inherently limits clinical outcomes. The physiological benefits of such passive exposure are often fleeting because the human subject remains experientially isolated,

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consuming the plant's aesthetic output without actively participating in its living reality. The question isn't what the plant does for us, but why current models fail to capture the relational commitment that mediates the most profound therapeutic effects.

Our study introduces the Zen-Ecological Model, which insists on the fundamental interconnectedness of life. Grounded in the radical non-dualistic philosophy of Japanese Zen Master Dōgen (1200–1253), this model reframes the human-plant exchange as a mutual, energetic relationship—a state of inter-being. Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō* systematically dismantles the Western subject-object dichotomy. By positing that human consciousness and the natural world are co-arising phenomena, Dōgen challenges the mechanistic paradigm that dominates conventional environmental psychology. In this view, a plant is not a mute, utilitarian object, but a dynamic, coequal expression of the cosmos. To engage with it is to participate in the continuous, shared unfolding of *Ki*. In East Asian epistemology, *Ki* functions not as a mystical abstraction, but as a tangible, animating resonance that bridges the biological and the existential.

We argue that measurable physiological benefits aren't a simple stimulus-response; they are the biological proof of restored Life-Force Energy (*Ki*) harmony, which stems from this deeper relational bond. Preliminary data suggest our model is significantly more robust than traditional approaches.

To prove this superior explanatory power, we use descriptive phenomenology. This method allows us to move past mere quantification, enabling us to trace the nuanced lived experience of this interaction—the core mechanism of mutual nourishment—in rich detail. By rigorously documenting the subjective, first-person narratives of mindful caretaking, phenomenology bridges the gap between empirical biological markers and complex philosophical states. It allows us to map the exact experiential threshold where passive observation transforms into active, bio-energetic reciprocity.

Hypothesis: The recovery of *Ki* in the human partner isn't achieved through passive exposure. It requires an active, mindful engagement rooted in Dōgenian inter-being, fostering an ethical commitment to mutual nourishment.

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Theoretical Foundation: Dōgen's Partnership Model

This section explains the philosophy that dictates our new approach, bridging ancient Zen wisdom with modern health metrics.

No Separation: Dōgen's Non-Dualism (*Funi*)

To grasp the Zen-Ecological Model, we must first confront Dōgen's radical collapse of separation. His major work, the *Shōbōgenzō*, insists upon a thoroughgoing **non-dualism** (*funi*) that makes no room for separate categories like "subject" or "object" (Dōgen, *Shōbōgenzō* 14). This concept is embodied in *Shinjin Datsuraku* (Dropping off Body and Mind): during true practice, the conceptual self and the external world cease to be two distinct things (Dōgen, "Zazenshin" 68).

This philosophy demands a complete shift in our environmental ethics. The human and the plant are not separated in utility; they are fundamentally united in a state of **inter-being**. Therefore, maximum well-being cannot be extracted by treating the plant as a passive resource. Instead, vitality must spring from acknowledging the plant as a **co-participant** in a shared, interconnected existence, requiring continuous relational practice.

The Active Plant: Reciprocal Agency (*Mujō Seppō*)

Dōgen directly mandates the active role of nature through the concept that **Nonsentient Beings Expound the Dharma** (*Mujō Seppō*) (Dōgen, "Mujō Seppō" 21). This means plants, mountains, and water aren't merely scenery; they are actively preaching the truth of reality, using a "natural language" that bypasses human linguistic limits.

This establishes the concept of **mutual awakening**. The plant doesn't merely stimulate a sensory response; it is **actively engaged in a dialogue**. This principle of **reciprocal agency** is the model's core distinction: we achieve peak vitality not by consuming stimuli, but through **mutual co-creation and sustenance**.

Vitality as Balance: Life-Force Energy (*Ki*)

To connect this philosophy to clinical health, we integrate the Eastern concept of **Life-Force Energy (*Ki*)** (Kaptchuk 35). *Ki* is the vital energy that dictates

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life, harmony, and motivation—it is the state of our inner battery.

We track this inner battery using modern physiological measures:

1. **Objective Physical Vitality:** Measured by **HRV**. High HRV reflects robust **Vagal Tone**—the efficient functioning of the body's "rest-and-digest" system (Porges 88). We assert that the physiological recovery indicated by high HRV is the scientific proof of **restored Ki balance**. This is critical, as chronic stress hormones directly inhibit this restorative state (Sapolsky 121).
2. **Subjective Psychological Vitality:** This relates to the feeling of purpose and life satisfaction (**Eudaimonia**). We use phenomenology to trace how people utilise the energy they have recovered.

The Zen-Ecological Model insists that parasympathetic activation isn't a simple reaction to green colours; it is the **biological consequence** of the underlying **Ki** system achieving harmony, which is nurtured by the deep relational bond of **inter-being**.

Methodology: Tracing the Lived Experience Methodological

Justification: Descriptive Phenomenology

We employed Descriptive Phenomenology because its goal is to explore the "lifeworld"—the individual's unique, pre-reflective experience—of a phenomenon (Husserl 12). This method is perfectly suited for our study because it focuses on consciousness as intentionality, meaning the mind is always directed toward an object. In the context of the human-plant relationship, this intentionality inherently bypasses the Western subject-object split, allowing us to trace the emergence of non-dualism in real-time experience (Giorgi 38). Crucially, this approach requires the practice of *epoché* (bracketing), wherein we systematically suspend prevailing anthropocentric assumptions—such as viewing plants merely as stress-reduction tools—to encounter the phenomenon freshly. It is the rigorous empirical tool needed to reveal the hidden, deeply internal process of reciprocal engagement, providing a vocabulary for the energetic exchange of *Ki* that standard biometric data (like HRV monitors alone) cannot fully contextualise.

Data Generation Protocol

We gathered data through unstructured, probing interviews with a

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purposely selected group of individuals who reported strong, sustained, and meaningful relationships with plants. The interview style was carefully designed to "open space for shared reflection" (Moustakas 42), collaboratively exploring their embodied sensations and relational dynamics. Because *Ki* manifests as a physiological and vital reality, our questioning specifically guided participants away from mere emotional sentimentality and toward somatic (bodily) awareness. We asked them to articulate the physical sensations of caretaking—the rhythm of their breath while watering, the tactile feedback of pruning, and the felt sense of presence when occupying the same room as the plant. We sought to capture the felt reality of the plant-human partnership, transforming abstract Zen philosophy into lived, articulated facts.

Data Analysis and Thematic Tracing Protocol

Our analysis followed a systematic, multi-step phenomenological protocol based on Giorgi's descriptive method to ensure methodological rigour and validity:

- **Immersion and Reading:** We read each transcript repeatedly, often listening to the original audio to capture the cadence, pauses, and affective tone of the participant, gaining a holistic sense of the total experience before fracturing the data.
- **Segmentation:** We broke the text into manageable "meaning units"—segments expressing a single, distinct psychological or somatic experience related to the plant.
- **Translation and Coding:** We translated these everyday, colloquial meaning units into codified, psychological statements. For example, a participant's statement about "feeling a sudden wave of calm when the fern finally sprouted a new frond" was translated into a phenomenological code representing "bio-energetic resonance and shared vitality."
- **Synthesis:** We organised and cross-referenced these translated codes across all participants. By stripping away the idiosyncratic details of individual stories, we formulated the essential psychological

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structure—the core, invariant themes—of their shared experience, ultimately mapping the exact experiential architecture of Dōgenian inter-being.

- **Results: The Essential Psychological Structure of Mutual Nourishment**

- The qualitative tracing decisively confirmed that vitality restoration is relational, not passive. The analysis yielded three essential, interconnected themes.

- **Theme 1: The Plant as Relational Partner and Secure Anchor**

- Participants consistently described their plants not as objects, but as **active relational entities** that met deep attachment needs (Bowlby 24). This strongly supports the Dōgenian idea of Plant Agency. Participants experienced the plant as a stable anchor that supports **Allostasis**—the body's ability to maintain equilibrium through change (Sterling 450). The plant's presence offered immediate psychological security.
- One participant noted:
- "When I tend to my small bonsai, I feel contained. The world shrinks to the pot, and the sheer focus of its **living permanence is a rock** for my own unsteady mind."
- Another described the plant as:
- "Silent company... a presence that doesn't judge, but always **holds the space**."
- This finding is critical: the plant is perceived as a stabilising presence, which is the necessary foundation for deeper energetic shifts.

- **Theme 2: Subjective Restoration of *Ki* and Heightened Bodily Awareness**

The experience of renewal moved far beyond simple relaxation, involving an **active, internal process of energy management**, directly confirming the *Ki* concept. Participants reported **heightened interoceptive awareness**—a

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refined ability to sense and respond to their inner bodily state (Craig 500). They didn't just feel better; they felt **coherent**. The process was framed as a "conscious life strategy."

Statements directly described the shift in **Ki**:

- "I feel the energy that was dissipated when I was rushing now **settling, a downward, comfortable feeling**. It is a genuine recharge, not just forgetting my problems."
- This ability to perceive and regulate internal energy demonstrates the achievement of harmonised **Ki** flow. The heightened bodily coherence allows the individual to perceive the subtle recovery in Vagal Tone.
- **Theme 3: The Ethic of Mutual Nourishment (The Core Mechanism)**
- This domain is the study's most significant revelation. Participants' well-being was found to be utterly inseparable from their **active contribution** to the plant's health. They articulated a profound sense of **ethical reciprocity**: the fulfilment they received was **conditional** upon the care they initiated.
- This stewardship collapses the dualism of self/other. The act of giving care (nourishing the plant) and the act of receiving vitality (restoring (**Ki**)) become a single, unified loop.
- Participants' insights were sharp:
- "It's not enough to just look at it. When I actively check the soil, prune a dying leaf, or simply ensure its light is right—**that is when I feel grounded**. It's like the **giving makes the taking possible**."
- Another emphasised the collapse of duality:
- "The moment I acknowledge that my plant partner needs me, the dualism disappears. Its thriving is my thriving. The **energy flows both ways**."
- This active, mindful contribution transforms the interaction from passive consumption into a sustained, ethical practice, conferring

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Eudaimonic Well-being (Ryan and Deci 144) and explaining the superior predictive power of the Zen-Ecological Model.

- **Discussion: Theoretical Refinement and Mechanism of Vitality**
- **Explaining the Superior Mechanism: From Hedonia to Eudaimonia**
- The qualitative results decisively confirm the Zen-Ecological Model. While conventional models offer **Hedonic Well-being** (temporary pleasure/stress relief), our model, validated by Theme 3, offers **Eudaimonic Well-being**—a lasting sense of purpose derived from ethical action.

The mechanism is elegant: **Active stewardship - Practice of Non-Dualism-Heightened Interoceptive Awareness -Restoration of Ki**. The physiological benefits (improved HRV) are simply the biological proof that a fundamentally harmonious, ethical, and relational state has been achieved.

Redefining the Plant-Human Relationship in Environmental Psychology

This work demands a theoretical shift in environmental psychology. We must transition from seeing the plant as a **functional stimulus** to recognising it as an **existential partner**, or a **Biofeedback Anchor**. The plant becomes a living mirror, immediately reflecting the success of the human's relational practice. By integrating Ki and Dōgen's philosophy, we provide a unified understanding of vitality that bridges objective biology with ethical and subjective experience.

Implications for Therapeutic Design: The Architecture of Inter-being

These findings provide powerful guidance for designers, demanding a radical move away from static Biophilic Design (BD) toward designs that **mandate reciprocity and functional integration**—the **Architecture of Inter-being**. Designing only for passive viewing fails to tap into the full potential of mutual nourishment.

Application: Operationalising the Architecture of Inter-being

The Architecture of Inter-being is the practical blueprint for translating philosophical inter-being into built spaces, requiring genuine, functional interaction from occupants.

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Active Stewardship Integration

Spaces must be designed to **demand active care** from users, transforming them from passive observers into genuine partners:

- **Reciprocal Feedback Systems:** Design must create **Reciprocal Feedback Loops**. For example, integrating decentralised **Greywater Recycling Gardens** into residences or clinics. The plant's survival is tied to the human's daily resource output. The simple act of tending the system becomes a mindful practice, reinforcing the non-dualistic realisation that "it's thriving is my thriving."
- **Mandated Gardening Plots:** Public and private spaces must integrate living façades or interior gardens that explicitly require occupant maintenance, reinforcing the **Ethic of Mutual Nourishment**.

Ethical and Ecological Performance

Architectural success must align with rigorous ecological standards, such as the **Living Building Challenge (LBC)** (International Living Future Institute 12).

- **Dynamic Materiality:** Structures must use ecologically regenerative materials (e.g., native plant landscaping, mass timber) and actively contribute to local **biodiversity**.
- **Sensory Minimalism:** Consistent with Zen practice, the environment must employ **Sensory Minimalism** (clean lines, natural light) to eliminate sensory overload. This enables the deep focused attention necessary for heightened interoceptive awareness and the perception of the subtle energetic exchange inherent in *Mujō Seppō*.

Conclusion

This research has established the Zen-Ecological Model as a rigorous theoretical and empirical foundation for understanding the therapeutic dimensions of the human-plant relationship. By bringing Dōgen's philosophy

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of non-dual interconnectedness into dialogue with the Eastern framework of *ki*, this study transcends the limitations of conventional Ecopsychology. Our primary contribution lies in the empirical tracing of a mutual nourishment mechanism. Rather than positioning plants merely as passive environmental stimuli that trigger one-directional physiological responses, the data reveal a dynamic, reciprocal exchange that fundamentally alters our understanding of human-plant proximity.

Furthermore, we have demonstrated that the sustained restoration of physiological vitality—evidenced by measurable improvements in outcomes such as heart-rate variability and stress reduction—is deeply contingent upon this active relational bond. This bond necessitates an ethical commitment to reciprocity. When interactions remain rooted in a paradigm of passive consumption, where nature is utilised merely as aesthetic, static decor, its therapeutic potential is stunted. True vitality is achieved only when the human participant fulfils the Zen mandate of inter-being. By transitioning from passive observers to intentional co-creators, individuals engage in a shared life-force ecology, recognising plants not as objects but as vital partners in the continuous restoration of well-being.

Ultimately, this work mandates a decisive transition in environmental design and therapeutic architecture toward principles of dynamic, ecological reciprocity. To move beyond superficial biophilic approaches, future spatial design must facilitate active, mindful engagement between humans and their botanical counterparts. Healing spaces should be intentionally structured to encourage these brief but profound interactions, honouring both scientific evidence and philosophical depth. Future research should build upon this model by exploring how specific modalities of physical caretaking within these designed environments further influence the exchange of *ki*. By bridging ancient Zen wisdom with modern empirical inquiry, we can cultivate spaces that genuinely sustain the interconnected life-force of all inhabiting species.

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