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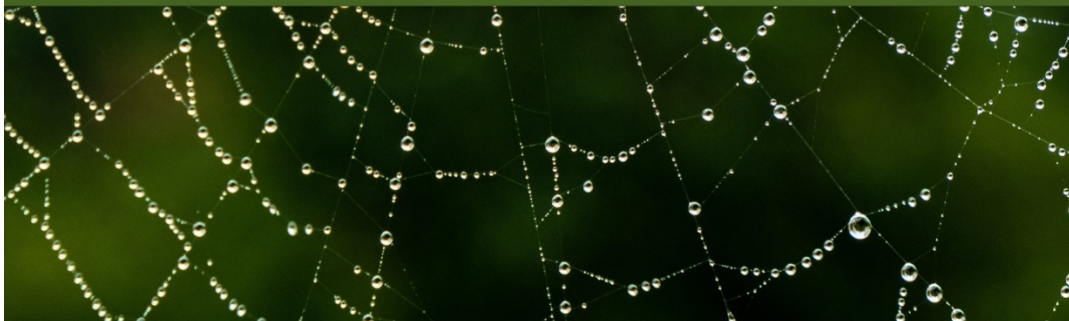
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF FEAR STUDIES

Theme: Navigating Ecofear through Diverse Cultures



Guest Editors: RAYSON K . ALEX, SACHINDEV P. S.

Senior Editor: R. MICHEAL FISHER



International Journal of Fear Studies:
Interdisciplinary & Transdisciplinary Approaches

is an open-access peer-reviewed online journal. *IJFS* was founded in 2018 by R. Michael Fisher, Ph.D. (Sen. Editor).

Its purpose is to promote the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary study of fear. It is the first journal of its kind with a focus on the nature and role of fear and on innovations in methodologies, pedagogies and research inquiries that expand the fear imaginary beyond what is commonly assumed as how best to know and manage fear. *IJFS* is an open-access journal stored in PRISM, University of Calgary, AB, Canada.

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International Journal of Fear Studies:
Interdisciplinary & Transdisciplinary Approaches
Vol. 3, No. 1, 2021

Navigating Ecofear through Diverse Cultures

Guest Editors: **Rayson K. Alex & Sachindev P. S.**

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Senior Editorial: Investigations from the Deep

-R. Michael Fisher

(Canada)

With this issue the *International Journal of Fear Studies* certainly takes a leap in its development. I was so pleased that Dr. Rayson Alex approached me well over a year ago with a proposal to Guest Edit the next issue (Vol. 3, No. 1). It was a timely request as I was ready to take a break from my Sen. Editorial duties. The fact that he had a theme and had a co-editor, ensured the care that this issue shows, as it emerged from an idea and passion for ecofear studies. I feel grateful for their team efforts and close working with the authors, as I am intrigued by the diversity that this work introduces from the far East, with a strong representation of women's voices, and mostly from the worlds of Literature, Humanities, Arts, Environmental Studies. It brings something new to most *IJFS* readers.

There is a lot of deep cultural infusion in these articles. As a Westerner, it'll be enjoyable to spend time reading these pieces more carefully in the months ahead. There is a particularly strong emphases on Indigenous ways and cultural strategies towards fear management. I took initiative to finally edit the pieces to reflect a distinction: (a) *indigenous*, without a capital would refer to the more generic use of that term whereby people of any type might see themselves as 'indigenous' to an area because of a long history of dwelling there, including their ancestors and, (b) *Indigenous*, with a capital letter as a more specific designation to peoples who are distinctly practicing the 'old ways' of ancient peoples who are often called 'natives,' 'primitives,' aboriginal and/or original peoples, etc. I thought Indigenous to be the most respectful designation. It carries with it the sensibility of dignified and wise peoples, who live(d) closely with the land and nature. I utilize Four Arrows' (2016) Indigenous-based scholarship in particular for the universal characteristics of such people of the 'old ways,' who practice an Indigenous worldview—while, at the same time, acknowledge no generalizing ought to be done without due caution, as it is too easy for colonizers especially, to lump all Indigenous people into one generic category without realizing the beautiful uniqueness of many of their cultures and traditions.

What seems clear is that *IJFS* creates a 'nest' for creative people to come to and feel they get a fair hearing and a place to hang their work. This includes junior scholars and others who are looking for a place to publish and get their writing careers off to a good start. Of course, *IJFS* also is delighted to have more mature works by senior scholars. But besides building this next, this journal is also meant to be a place of dialogue with those who agree and disagree with the contents and approaches to Fear Studies that are found in these pages. This means there's still a lot of work to do theoretically and philosophically in regard to detailed critical analysis of articles. It would be a pity to merely see articles read and no follow-up interactions with the authors. I'll support this intellectual community however I can. I encourage people to contact each other and continue discussions of the best ways we can understand the nature and role of fear—and, in this issue,

ecofear and eco-anxiety are at the forefront. You can send dialogues, rebuttals, etc. to me and they may get published in the next Fall issue.

Our planetary ecosystems and human cultures have a lot of work to do—in sorting through what is going to be the best ways to not only understand fear but manage fear. All of our inputs are needed both from the conscious, subconscious and unconscious—from the individual and from the collective—from the human and the ‘greater-than-human’—the challenge is great but the opportunities even greater. Let’s not waste time.

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Four Arrows (*aka* Jacobs, D. T.) (2016). *Point of departure: Returning to a more authentic worldview for education and survival*. Information Age Publishing.

“The ecophobic unconscious is a dangerously maladaptive human behavioral condition that promotes Anthropocene waste, and it is characterized by appetites we consciously choose *not* to control...”.

-Simon Estok
The Ecophobia Hypothesis (2018), p. 136

Editorial

Naturecultures, Ecofears, Cultural Texts

Alex, Rayson K. & P. S., Sachindev

(Guest Editors, from Goa & Hyderabad, India)

“Is there one central fear like the trunk of a tree, though it has many branches, and if you could understand that single root of fear you have understood the whole network of fear? How do you approach this, from the periphery or from the centre? If the mind can understand the root of fear then the branches, the various aspects of fear have no meaning, they wither away. So what is the root of fear? Can you look at your fear? Please look at it now, invite it.”

J. Krishnamurti

In a divided world of humans and environments, ecological humanists and social scientists are trying to establish an imagined culture of integration—an integration of nature and culture. In ecohumanities and ecosocial sciences disciplines, theoreticians challenge the established epistemology of the divide between nature and culture, pointing to a better world for diverse organisms to live and flourish. Donna Haraway’s naturecultures is one such scholarly inquiry which “recognizes their [nature’s and culture’s] inseparability in ecological relationships that are both biophysically and socially formed” (Malone and Ovenden 1). Naturecultures to Haraway is an integrative philosophy of life and place that constitutes mutuality (Brown 217). There is a sense of inclusivity here which is not based on elements of separation or duality.

“Disconnection with the environment is the cause of fear.”

The overarching and dominant epistemology of duality is based on fear. A feeling of connection to a place nullifies fear. However, familiarity plays an important role in nullifying this fear. In her popular article titled “Nature and Culture” Jules Pretty, while discussing the natureculture interconnections of the traditional Kogi Indian community with respect to their immediate environment, says “disconnection leads to feelings of biophobia and a fear of the outdoors, perceiving it to be a wild and unfamiliar environment” (Pretty).

The argument of Pretty can be extended to other contexts as well. Disconnection with the environment is the cause of fear. It is this human fear that creates dichotomy, duality and disconnection with nature. For example, a conflict between a dog and a cat/human is a confrontation—a “life or death” conflict. Such kinds of conflict situations are fear-based. Whether there is violence or avoidance of it, both are fear-based. The conflict might be for various reasons—power, instincts, natural resources and so on—but everything originates from a fear-induced context. Even though R. Michael Fisher defines ecofear as “Human-Nature-Fear (*aka* Eco-Fear Problem)” —a fear that human and other beings experience due to a hyphenate relationship between them, ecofear, unlike the concept of naturecultures is based on an epistemology of disconnect between humans and the rest of nature (Fisher, “Eco-philosophy of Fearism and Ecocriticism”11). As much as the ecofear and ecophobia theorists believe that these feelings or

conditions should be overcome, Fisher thinks that fear is a useful construct in the 21st century to understand the fear-experiences of human individuals and communities, and of other beings (Fisher, “Fearanalysis and Ecocriticism” 10). Ecofear, in that sense, is a critical framework (read Fisher’s concept of Fearanalysis) to analyse cultural texts. In various cultural contexts, concepts such as *oikophobia* (fear of home, as defined by Roger Scruton who coined the term in his 2004 book titled, *England and the Need for Nations*) and *ecophobia* (proposed and popularised by Simon C. Estok; see his 2018 book titled *The Ecophobia Hypothesis*) can be employed as theoretical frameworks for literary and cultural analysis.

Ecofear is a culture-specific trope. The spectrum of fear may vary according to the agencies, context of interactions, and the various reasons for the fear, depending on the cultures in discussion. The fears that connect/disconnect humans from nature have various dimensions that could be studied from a multi-, inter-, and/or transdisciplinary approach—sociological, cultural, economic, political, philosophical, theological, artistic and of course, psychological lens. These fear-dimensions that could be understood through diverse disciplines explore multi/transmethodologies to arrive at realistic conclusions. For instance, the film *Crawl* (2019), set in Florida, a hurricane-prone state, contextualizes a world where natural disasters are an accepted reality but the antagonist(s) (alligators) engage in a “war” with humans—an explicit human-animal conflict that is primarily caused by fear (of various kinds) and also invokes fear in the audience. Augustina Baztericca’s novel, *Tender is the Flesh: If Everyone Was Eating Human Meat, Would You?*, which many readers assert as the most horrifying novel that is set in a world where cannibalism is normalized after a global epidemic which wipes out the animal population. The film as well as the novel, could be read as an aftermath of human anxiety situated in a world that they are actively destroying. Fear is at the centre of both the works. Ecofear propositions by R. Michael Fisher, and/or Desh Subba and Simon C. Estok provide a befitting framework to analyse such literary and cultural texts.

“...there is certainly fear in the air...slow-fear.”

The recent Farmer’s upheaval is another mega-event that could be analysed from an ecofearistic angle. There are a few dominant and explicit agencies in the protest scene such as various organizations of the farmers, onsite governmental machineries such as police and military, groups and individuals with solidarity to the farmers, media persons and so on. Though there is certainly fear in the air, the conflict which is not evident, we would refer to as slow-fear. Fear may not be evidently visible (in most cases) in the form of conflict/violence. However, slow-fear has only a thin line between “peace” and violence. Quite invisible and implicit are the corporate agencies such as Reliance and Monsanto in the Farmer’s protest scene. The political ideology and power are also invisible and in most cases deceptive. Ironically, the fear that these subtle agencies induce are enormous, immediate and evident. This is fast-fear. The entire event of the farmer’s protest could be primarily looked at from an environmental crisis framework. The defence to Disha Ravi, a climate activist who was arrested in connection with the Greta Thunberg toolkit case, said “There’s a cause of environment, of agriculture and interlink between them” (“Disha Ravi says”). That the government officials are not commenting or making public statements is yet another slow-fear inducing factor. Along with the cultural texts aforementioned, social “texts” such as this could be looked at from various ecofearistic points-of-view.

This Issue of *International Journal for Fear Studies* focuses on various kinds of ecofears experienced by humans and other animals in different cultural texts and contexts apart from the various explorations of the consequences and manifestations of ecofear, and the several ways to attain ecofearlessness. The issue is divided into two parts: Part A: Critical Essays and Part B: Creative Works. In the Critical Essays part, the editors have included ten critical essays from a humanities' point-of-view. Two experiential fictional stories, three poems and a film constitute the Creative Works section.

Meera Baidur's essay titled "Ecofear as Visible and Invisible: Conceptual Underpinnings of The Southern Reach Trilogy by Jeff VanderMeer" looks at the posthuman scenario of relationship between nature and fear through an ecocritical reading of Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach Trilogy (2014) titled *Annihilation, Authority, and Acceptance*." In stark contrast, the essay titled "Ecoanxiety: A Philosophical Investigation from the Early Buddhist Perspective," written by Gyan Prakash, explores the "Buddhist ethical perspectives of ecoanxiety, with special reference to early Buddhist thinker Buddhaghosa" to argue that Buddhist ethical teachings are beneficial in understanding ecoanxiety. Two essays that critique the representation of ecofear in film texts are Tiffany Deater's "Navigating Women Scientist & Unnatural Selection Though: *The Nest* (1987) and *Splice* (2006)" and Pragnaparamita Biswas' "Narrativizing Ecoterrorism in the Indian Film *Irada*." Deater's essay discusses an ecofeministic fear and argues that "the stereotype of female scientist as portrayed in *The Nest* and *Splice* is destructive to the cultural progress of women. In addition, [she argues that] both the films assert that women scientists are at fault for changes in the natural world and thus have a negative effect on humanity's ability to survive." Biswas, in her essay, employs the concept of ecoterrorism to "map the nonhuman agencies which operate in the socio-economic environment" of the 2017-Bollywood film *Irada*. Sinjini Ray, Sanchar Sarkar and Swarnalatha Rangarajan, and Ramji Timalsina have written about Bengali and Nepali communities' fear of natural elements such as land and water. Ray's essay titled "Rivers as the Site of Fear: Flood and Drought Through the Lens of Ritwik Ghatak's *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam*" contextualizes the severe droughts in history of Bengal to discuss the ecofear in "Ritwik Ghatak's film *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam (A River Called Titas)* for its portrayal of people's dependence on the river with their fates tied up with that of the river."

Sarkar's and Rangarajan's essay, "Of Devouring Waters and Unforgiving Lands: An Analysis of Premonition Ecology in two Wetland Narratives from West Bengal" "articulate[s] the pervading sense of 'ecopremonition,' a term [they] have coined to describe the anticipatory fear of ecological collapse caused by rapid and unpredictable changes in the geomorphology of places like Sundarbans and East Calcutta." The last three essays employ indigenous ecofear to throw light on a reverential fear that aids an interconnection between humans and naturecultures in specific cultural contexts. Sadhana Swayamsidha, in her essay titled "Trepidation of Change: Analysing the Somatic De-recognition of Mother Nature in Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja*," "explore[s] how somatic de-recognition [inability to experience a sense of belongingness with place] with a place forms the locus of indigenous ecofear" "...which [the community] fear[s] would lead to the gradual degeneration of human beings." In the essay titled "Culture of Fear and Conservation of Nature: Critiquing the Construction of *Sarppakavu* in Kerala," Monisha Mohan and Gigy J. Alex critique William Logan's *Malabar Manual* to argue that "*sarppakavu* in Kerala is an epitome of human-nature-culture co-existence practised among non-indigenous communities, managed through the culture of fear-appeasement." Rithwik Sankar A. in his essay titled "An Analysis of

Reverential Ecofear in Theyyam: A Ritualistic Performance of North-Malabar” examines the case of Theyyottukavu, a sacred grove in the district of Kannur, Theyyam and certain Theyyam myths in the light of the concept of ecofear.

A section of Creative Works that, implicitly or explicitly, deals with fear and ecology are added to the volume. Two experiential fictional stories, one by S. Susan Deborah, titled “Hydrophobia—The Water That I dread!” a first person narrative of a companion dog named Feni and his fears, and Vidya Sarveswaran’s titled “From Dust to Dust...,” narrating her own fearistic experiences of living in the desertic landscape of Rajasthan where she teaches environmental humanities. Along with the stories, there are three poems: Nithya Mariam John’s titled “Precaution,” Harishankar Muppurala’s and Asrani Manisha’s titled “The Bird’s Plight, Takes a Flight” and Shourya Pathak’s “The Lock-down Burg.” A recent short film directed by Tiffany Deater titled “Tornado Lake” also features in this section to stimulate the readers’ viewing fear-experience.

This volume, though it presents a rich consortium of ecofears in various cultural texts and other contexts, is a continuation of the prominent works done by fearologists such as R. M. Fisher and Desh Subba, and ecocritic Simon C. Estok. The volume is evidence to the expansion of the theory of ecophobia and ecofearism, particularly in the Global South. It is the need of the hour for Fear Studies/Ecophobia Studies to be the centre of humanities and social sciences scholarship across the world to address the growing ecological crisis in the Anthropocene. Let all the readers of the Issue begin/continue to work on Fear studies within their primary disciplines to further expand the scope of the area.

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“Disha Ravi says if highlighting farmers’ protest is sedition, it’s better to be in jail; court reserves order on bail plea.” *The Indian Express*. 20 Feb. 2021. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/disha-ravi-bail-hearing-greta-thuberg-toolkit-case-farmers-protest-delhi-police-7197022/>.



Ecofear as Visible and Invisible: Conceptual Underpinnings of The Southern Reach Trilogy by Jeff VanderMeer

Baindur, Meera
(India)

Abstract

Human response to ecophobia and ecofear have been mitigated through belief in science and technology that are supposed to establish knowledge and control over nature. This essay will look at the relationship between nature and fear through an ecocritical reading of Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach Trilogy (2014) titled *Annihilation*, *Authority*, and *Acceptance*. The first novel *Annihilation* is written from a biologist's view of an ecozone known as Area X in which there is a continuous situation of unknowability and invisibility of the environment that is subjected to study and control in the plot. The second novel carries ecophobia into the very organisation 'Southern Reach' that is investigating Area X. Here the encounter between the protagonists and Area X is mediated by data and the politics of human beings working together, yet keeping secrets from each other. In the third novel, the climax reveals the intelligence that is Area X, yet at the same time masking its intention and the future of human beings and their interests. While analysing the different types of ecofear, I posit that it is possible for a certain kind of literature to evoke a horror of ourselves and transform ecophobia-within our attitudes. This essay concludes with the significance of self-abnegation and a collapse of human arrogance at both the epistemic level and identity-separateness for being with nature. I posit that this kind of novel, a sort of ecologically inspired fiction, renders the human interest invisible, against bio-interest resulting in a foundational shift in our attitude to nature and ourselves.

Keywords: Ecophobia, Ecofear, *Southern Reach Trilogy*, Topophobia, Topophilia, Topophobia

Introduction

Ecofear, a fear of the environment we are in, could be an affect arising out of many factors including threat to survival or aversion to nature and the nonhuman that can be termed as ecophobia. In another way we can say ecophobia is a term used to describe 'fear of the environment,' an attitude that leads to the psychological state of ecofear. This attitude or state of being not only is a state of psychological fear but it also leads us away from caring for or loving our environment. As Simon C. Estok ("Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness" 219) points out, much has been written about our love for environment but less about the negative dislike of the natural world that has permeated a society divorced from nature and its unmediated experience/encounter.

Estok defines ecophobia as an irrational fear or hatred: "Broadly speaking, we may define ecophobia as an irrational and groundless fear or hatred of the natural world, as present and subtle in our daily lives and literature as homophobia and racism and sexism" ("Reading Ecophobia" 4).

In another paper, he suggests that ecocriticism takes account of this phenomenon when he suggests that philosophically addressing ecophobia requires us to understand evil and how “badness in nature” is represented (“Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness” 6-7). One can understand that fear of this “bad” nature and its representations in literature, media and writing in some sense is foundational to ecophobia. While it is easy to theorize ecophobia within texts that are perpetrators of this fear, there are also contradictory texts where the portrayal of nature as avenging or more powerful than human has an ethical intention. While fear itself may lead to dislike, fear also serves as a warning. In his essay on gothic literature and nature, Tom J. Hillard suggests: “... literature matters because it both reflects and shapes values in the “real world” outside of literary texts. Thus, if the canonized texts associated with the development of our modern environmental movement teach us one history of values, we can also learn different histories—ones slightly less encouraging—by studying those that reveal anxieties about nature” (694). He further suggests that the gothic genre already is replete with horror and fear and analysing these fears would only help us understand the role such fears play in the way we treat our environment (694).

“Whenever nature ceases to be invisible...it is possible that some form of ecofear manifests itself.”

I believe ecophobia can be theorized as not only a dislike or fear of nature or other non-human species, but it can also refer to the apathy or disinterest shown by people towards the natural environment and its preservation. Just like in sexism or racism, wilful ignorance, and apathy are also subtle forms of the same hatred or dislike—a disinterest that manifests because of non-inclusive thinking. But this apathy is a constant sense of unease about the non-human other; it is not a neutral position. This unease has perhaps not yet been manifest, but it prevails, as a background to thinking and doing. Nature is rendered invisible in our thinking and attitude. It is a backdrop to human activity and presence. Whenever nature ceases to be invisible, and foregrounds its presence to us, it is possible that some form of ecofear manifests itself.

Another aspect of the environment that humans deny is the presence of humans in nature. Humans are blind to the enormous effects of our human footprint on this planet. It is here that the concept of Anthropocene reminds us of the way we have altered the environment. Timothy Morton (1) points out that Anthropocene is a condition of the human world where human actions have had intense adverse effects on the earth. While the earth is affected so much by ecological disasters such as global warming and climate change, newer forms of fiction are emerging that reflect, represent, and build on the political and cultural transformations of this historical epoch (Trexler 5). How does the literary genre represent the complex ecological and political issues without falling into typical dystopian narratives of human destruction?

Adam Trexler critically examines Anthropocene fiction and posits the difficulty of classifying this serious fiction into a category:

...the narrative difficulties of the Anthropocene threaten to rupture the defining features of genre: literary novels bleed into science fiction; suspense novels have surprising elements of realism; realist depictions of everyday life involuntarily become biting satire. For these reasons, novels about the Anthropocene cannot be easily placed into discrete generic pigeonholes. (14)

The novels of *Southern Reach Trilogy (SRT)* written by Jeff VanderMeer may be posited as an example of Anthropocene fiction. They received critical feedback for surrealism and their invocation of the effects of Anthropocene (Coby 15). Besides being acclaimed for following the style of Lovecraft's work (Weinstock 178), these novels also fall under the literature subgenre called the "New Weird." This genre is discussed by Jeffery Weinstock in his essay "The New Weird" where he suggests that this is a kind of literature that engages with real world issues in fantasy worlds where normalcy is challenged (186) and human autonomy is rendered powerless (196). According to the writers, Benjamin Noys and Timothy S. Murphy "The New Weird can be characterized as a new sensibility of welcoming the alien and the monstrous as sites of affirmation and becoming" (125). The monstrous and the alien for them is treated as a form of "subversion" to "power and subjectivity."

These novels are also mentioned with reference to horror literature under the category, "eco-horror." Elizabeth Parker suggests that there is a new way of deconstruction by which environmental themes are explored in horror literature (56-61). "This is representative of an increasing sense that humans have severed themselves from the natural world, which they are consciously—and continually—destroying. In this battle of humans vs. nature, it is clear that people, collectively, are the monsters" (60). The *SRT* consists of the novels titled *Annihilation*, *Authority*, and *Acceptance* in that order. The plot of the novel-series is that there is an unusual event in a coastal region of the United States after which an "Area X" has been created that is different from the nature or the culture that we are familiar with. A boundary has formed, and humans quickly move in to cordon off the area, announcing it as a place of ecological disaster. A secret organisation called Southern Reach has been set up to investigate the phenomenon that is simply known as Area X. Many expeditions of experts are sent, and it is noticed that technology fails within the Area X. Though the expeditions continue, the humans have been unable to understand very little about the area and very few of them return safely to the other side.

The novels and stories in this framework suggest a dark and weird universe that seems to be hidden by a thin veneer of normalcy. The writers such as Miéville, VanderMeer, Kiernan and Barron seek to unravel the horror and give us an experience of fear of "the other and othering effect" (Weinstock 195). While the idea of nature as avenging suggests itself in the novels of *SRT* many times, the protagonists fail to overcome and control the new nature that is Area X. Is it a new form of evolved nature? Is it an alien intelligence? There are no answers for the human characters in the book or for the readers who identify with them, only descriptions of encounters with new realities or 'weird' which renders the human condition powerless.

Estok in his essay "Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness" states that "ecophobia is rooted in and dependent on anthropocentric arrogance and speciesism" (216). A part of this arrogance comes from the scientific study of nature, an epistemic conquest of nature and another from conquering ecofear through confrontation and winning through survival. The category of new weird novels is closely related to the taking down of human hubris, thereby creating a rich field of narratives that also deal with the otherness of nature and wilderness in a different way. We become so insignificant that the nature is truly biocentric. "Would that not be the final humbling of the human condition? That the trees and birds, the fox and the rabbit, the wolf and the deer... reach a point at which they do not even notice us, as we are transformed" (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* Ch.5).

A review of the books by Tompkins suggests that this genre of literature captures the “Weird Ecology,” a merger of the natural and unnatural. This trilogy draws our attention to the ecology of present, the irreversibility of our situation in the Anthropocene. We have turned ourselves helpless in the face of the very Anthropocene monsters we have created. This helplessness could be the first step to create an attitudinal change in us. The beauty of the books is that they let the other side win. They offer a collapsitarianism in reverse. Area X represents not ecological collapse but rather human collapse—or, better said, human transmutation. Area X cleanses its territory of anthropogenic poisoning, then sets to work on people themselves. (Tompkins, para. 23)

Anil Narine writes of the phenomena of Ecotrauma and suggests that novels, and movies have an ethical impact on our attitude to the destruction of the environment:

Such creative cultural forms, in their best incarnations, prompt us to consider our quickly evolving subject positions, characterized by oscillating feelings of agency and helplessness in the face of contemporary ecological traumas. The narratives that represent future ecological challenges often aim to do more than merely titillate viewers and readers. (9)

It is easy to misread nature in this book as avenging and read these books as yet another instance of ecophobia-inducing dystopian fiction. However, the trilogy by its subtle nuances and plot allows nature to contact us in alternative ways through the book. In a passage in *Acceptance*, a sample of a plant from Area X that is growing from a dead mouse is found by the new director, Control, in his chaotic office. We read how it seems immortal and does not respond to experimentation. The frustration of the scientists is evident:

The plant will not die.
No parasites will touch the plant.
The plant will not die.
No extremes of temperature will affect it. Freeze it, it will thaw. Burn it, it will regenerate.
The plant will not die.
No matter what you try, no matter the experiments performed on it in the sterile, the blinding white environs of the storage cathedral...the plant won't die. (*Acceptance* Ch.14)

In this above passage one can feel the power of existence of the plant that refuses to bow down to any violent human action. The plant is not attacking or threatening the humans. In that sense its revenge as “nature” is not aggressive. But in a significant move, its resistance to being an object of study, an object that cannot be killed is its revenge. This passage is reflective of the way ecofear in these novels is not generated from hatred of the environment but through a suggestion of human inability to understand or control nature. It is a Baconian reversal as it were. As we read the novels of *SRT*, we find that the fiction continuously invokes ecofear within the characters in the novel and then transposes that phobia into us for our condition, a reminder of our own displaced relationship with the environment.

The novels also rely on the horror created by Area X, the strange fungus like moss that is luminous, a huge creature that chases humans in the reeds. As with Gothic fiction,¹ this genre also relies on evoking different types of horror and fear. Gry Ulstein also writes of the New Weird fiction and its monsters, relating to the way monsters help us rethink the binary of nature and culture.

... it is in the conceptualized, tension-fraught space between that which is (perceived as) “real” and “normal” and that which is (perceived as) “imagined” and “weird,” that “Anthropocene monsters” can be found. (Ulstein 73)

The monsters in the novels represent the non-human. While their form is monstrous and weird, we understand that these moaning creatures were once human. Losing humanity is to lose our Anthropocene selves which transforms us.

Ulstein further adds how the change caused by Area X is actually a merciful act (92-3). It transforms humans into creatures more than human, releasing them from the cage of destructive activity. This intent of the intelligence referred to again and again as that which guides and is present in area X creates ecofear. This language of fear generated by viewing ourselves as the other, as the monsters can encourage us towards a new language of understanding that is not based on the significance of the human. Ulstien further suggests “that words are only words until their message becomes powerful enough to change minds, broaden scopes, and transform reality” (93).

The Novel *Annihilation* is related through the perspective of a biologist who enters the area with three other experts, a psychologist, a surveyor, and an anthropologist. One important feature of the novels is that we rarely know the names of the characters. They are given nicknames or sometimes just known by their function and role.

The biologist, who remains unnamed in the novels, survives her encounter with the alien intelligence that is at Area X apparently, a foreign lifeform. The second novel *Authority* shifts focus to a few years in the future where the biologist, who calls herself by the nickname “Ghost Bird” is incarcerated in a mental health facility and is undergoing treatment for loss of memory and simultaneously being questioned for her input on Area X. The humans still know very little about Area X, most of the data collected is fragmented and what happens to the people who enter Area X is still a mystery. The protagonist we follow this time, is John Rodriguez, known as “Control,” who has come to replace the previous director who, we are told, has gone missing. He is confronted at every step by the actions and non-cooperation of Grace, the disgruntled assistant director. The prevalence of Area X’s affect even outside of its boundary is made clear through its artefacts and traces even within the scientific institution. The third of the series, *Acceptance* sees Ghost Bird, Grace, and Control move into Area X together. In this final part of the *SRT*, the past and the present narratives intertwine to reveal to us the final possibility of what the mystery of Area X could be without giving us a clear solution or resolution.

There are many forms of ecofear demonstrated in the novel. Firstly, there is one kind of ecofear that arises from encounters of the expedition members with unfamiliar places such as wilderness and/or because of a threat to life. We could call this a kind of displacement anxiety theorised by the concept of topophobia. The second is a fear arising from ecophobia that is demonstrated by the character Control, caused by inability to control or manipulate nature

physically. Another unique type of ecofear which would be of interest to our discussion would be the one that arises from what I call the loss of epistemic control—a failure of the human to understand and the failure to dominate nature through the act of knowing. And a fourth type of ecofear that arises from the actual possibility of being one with nature in an experiential way—a fear of self-abnegation. Let us examine some of the ways in which these types of ecofears are described in the *SRT* narratives.

Strangeness and Fear: A Geocritical Exploration

In his description of a place-mindedness that humans seem to engage with in literature, Robert T. Tally Jr. uses the word ‘topophilia.’ He writes:

Topophilia characterizes the subjective engagement with a given place, with one’s sense of place, and with the possible projection of alternative spaces. Moreover, it requires us to consider the apparently objective structures and systems that condition, not to say determine, our perceptions and experiences of space and place. (23)

He chooses to use the term topophilia, to convey the sense of anxiety and unease that always permeates our estrangement. This unease is heightened in the novels of *SRT*, in the situations when the humans are within Area X. The region draws us into its landscape effect. Tally’s topophilia includes both topophilia and topophobia together and he explains that in literature, this concept goes beyond the mere relationship between a writer and a landscape: "Rather, topophilia suggests the degree to which all thinking is, in various ways, thinking about place, which also means thinking about the relations among places, as well as those among subjects and places, in the broadest possible sense" (23). He further argues for a geocritical reading of texts. I follow his suggestion that "A geocritical approach to reading these narrative maps enables us to sense more emphatically the ways that space, place, and mapping condition our lives, attitudes, thoughts, and experiences, as well as our more critically distant claims to knowledge about them" (12). When we combine reading the landscape of the novel with the reading of the sources of ecofear in both the protagonists and its effect on us as readers, we realise that not only Area X but our own world has also become a source of anxiety for us. The geocritical examination of the novels indicate that ecofear is also created by landscapes, those that are forms of ‘atopia’ or non-places. In his book *Landscapes of Fear*, Yi-Fu Tuan recounts how certain places can cause anxiety and alarm. He points out “every human construction—whether mental or material—is a component in a landscape of fear because it exists to contain chaos” (6).

The landscapes of the novels are drawn from the author’s own experience of trekking in wildlife reserves. In an interview to Mandelbaum (2020) published online, he says:

All of the details of the natural world are from hiking at the St. Marks Wildlife Refuge and other places in Florida, in the Southeast, and even the West Coast. Although strange things happen in them, the bulk of the books are composed of details from our real world. (VanderMeer, “*Annihilation* Author Jeff VanderMeer Tells Us How He Makes His Sci-Fi Feel Authentic”)

This state of ecophobia from landscape as described in this novel spring from two registers of reference, one being the loss of a sense of emplacement or feeling unfamiliar with a place that is threatening and another from our discomfort with boundaries/transition zones.

Unlike stable landscapes that are ecologically classifiable outside, within Area X's boundary, the landscape is not comprehensible as a particular ecotype. This is an important technique by which the author destabilises landscape of the fantasy world he is creating for us within Area X. "The map had been the first form of misdirection, for what is a map but a way of emphasizing some things and making other things invisible?" (VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, Ch.02). The novel begins with the discovery of the tower that is unmarked on the maps. The tower is not marked on it though it is a prominent feature (VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, Ch.01). The landscape that is transitional and uncategorizable, creates a sense of unease—fear of the unfamiliar.

While the psychologist convinces herself that it was a storm that uncovered the entrance, the biologist is not so sure in her mind. She calls it a tower, yet physically it is a tunnel that burrows underground. So, the sense of unease pervades the explorers on this discovery. The fear of the unknown feature is certainly described as a fever: "The entrance to the tower leading down exerted a kind of presence, a blank surface that let us write so many things upon it. This presence manifested like a low-grade fever, pressing down on all of us" (VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, Ch.01). The features that are causes for fear are not the landscape but these unusual structures in the landscape—the land itself has become an Anthropocene monster.

Another feature of the landscape that causes the discomfort and fear for the protagonists is the border. The Area X is sought to be enclosed by boundaries that are human-made, for instance, military zones, fences, barriers and perimeter checks. But the Area X itself has created a transitional zone for itself and the boundary keeps shifting and expanding northwards. Edward S. Casey describes the nature of a boundary in contrast to the idea of 'limits.' He writes: "To be a boundary, by contrast, is to be exterior to something or, more exactly, to be around it, enclosing it, acting as its surrounding. As such, a boundary belongs to the container rather than to the contained" (63). Though the humans enclose it within a perimeter, the Area X owns the boundary. Thus, in the novels, the boundary of Area X is not its containment but its reach, its expanse.

On the side adjoining the human borders, the Area X intelligence seems to be humouring the scientists. The border does not move forward and when it does, we do not know if the boundary was actually present or if Area X had already expanded far beyond its limits.

Wilderness, Threat and Fear of Monsters

Another trope that reveals itself with relation to the landscape of Area X is the idea of wilderness. The contemporary narratives of wilderness are like that of the idea of paradise and are supposed to provide sublime experience. But it was not always so. The idea of nature as wilderness is derived from the older biblical narratives. Cronon points out that earlier versions of wilderness were considered to be barren or a desert or a wasteland. He writes: "Wilderness in short, was a place to which one came only against one's will, and always in fear and trembling. Whatever value it might have arose from the possibility that it might be "reclaimed" and turned towards human ends—planted as a garden, say or a city upon a Hill" (473). Nature in paradise was perfect but

with the banishment of humans to the earth, nature was no longer benign and became wilderness (Cronon 473).

The interesting aspect of the literary geography of Area X is that in contrast to a landscape of a completely fictional world or an unknown fantasy land (such as Tolkien's middle earth), is that it is the nature we are familiar with on earth. We are perceiving the landscape through the scientific eye of the biologist, a member of the expedition. She (nick named Ghost-Bird later in the novels) becomes our alter ego, giving us a superior epistemic advantage as agents because we can "know" the living presences in the ecosystem that is Area X. So, the wilderness becomes a comforting presence for us, though it is not benign and any less dangerous. The biologist herself is an oddity, a human with deep sympathy for nature. In the end of the first novel as she realises that she is turning into something not so human, she writes in the journal that her loss of humanity would be such a bad thing, given that nature is being restored to a pristine condition in contrast to its damaged and altered state outside (*Annihilation*, Ch.05).

The ecofear caused by threat is similar in many instances. Like all humans who face an animal in the wild, the protagonists display fear of confronting something that can cause them bodily harm. As we read the story, in the beginning, we are exposed to the thrill and horror of facing these creatures. For instance, when the protagonist of *Annihilation* encounters the threatening creature and situations of Area X, she is afraid and runs away. There are moaning sounds in the reeds and creatures that chase them through the area. It is a natural human reaction to the wild to be afraid of predators.

I hesitated for just a moment. Some part of me wanted to see the creature, after having heard it for so many days. Was it the remnants of the scientist in me, trying to regroup, trying to apply logic when all that mattered was survival? If so, it was a very small part. I ran. It surprised me how fast I could run—I'd never had to run that fast before. Down the tunnel of blackness lined with reeds, raked by them and not caring, willing the brightness to propel me forward. To get past the beast before it cut me off. (*Annihilation*, Ch.04)

But this is only one of the very few instances in the novel, of seeing nature as a malevolent being. For most part, nature of Area X does not actually kill or hurt the humans deliberately, instead we see that the members of the expedition turn on each other and become more dangerous than the landscapes. The narrative points to the opinion that humans are more violent. The psychologist hypnotises the anthropologist and forces her to undertake a suicidal mission. The biologist falls prey to the surveyor's ambush and is injured by a gunshot. We come to know that Control's mother sends him in to Area X so she could understand if the institution Southern Reach had been compromised by alien doppelgangers.

The way Area X invades and threatens the world is explained through the story of the biologist. After she has been invaded in her body by the alien species from Area X, she gradually transforms into a huge being, a monster. At the same time, a shadow self of the biologist is created, a doppelganger who is an improved biocentric human being who calls herself Ghost Bird. Nature even recreates a better human. According to Ulstein, Ghost Bird is endowed with a better

empathetic imagination towards nature, in a sense a better nature-centric human who has been redesigned by the alien entity (87).

The first encounter of fear with the monster is when the biologist faces the Crawler. The Crawler is a being that creates scribbles on the wall of the tower, an unknowable entity who fascinates and scares the biologist. When the biologist faces the Crawler, there is both fear and fascination expressed. As something that cannot be grasped by senses, the Crawler is perceived only as distorted vision, through variations of light and sound, baffling the human by its unknowability and by being unclassifiable. In *Annihilation*, (Ch.04), the biologist attempts to describe this creature's form and ends her note by admitting that it overruns boundaries both in space and time as something that is a shape that spreads across where it should have not been, an amorphous presence that couldn't be pinned down to a form or a particular shape.

Fiction in the Weird genre (and by extension the New Weird) deals with monsters metaphorically, following the tradition of Lovecraft, suggests Ulstein. They (the monsters in the stories) are responses to cultural tensions (81-82). The VanderMeers in their introduction to an anthology suggest that: "The Weird can be transformative—sometimes literally—and it entertains monsters while not always see [sic] them as monstrous. It strives for a kind of understanding even when something cannot be understood and acknowledges that failure as sign and symbol of our limitations" ("The Weird: An Introduction").

When the members confront the biologist, who has become a part of Area X, a large being, herself a monster now, there is only weirdness in the new creature, a curiosity about its intelligent form and being. The language used to describe the monster attends to its intelligent design that is adaptive to the environment, a design better suited to live in nature than the human form and intelligence.

Nothing monstrous existed here—only beauty, only the glory of good design, of intricate planning, from the lungs that allowed this creature to live on land or at sea, to the huge gill slits hinted at along the sides, shut tightly now, but which would open to breathe deeply of seawater when the biologist once again headed for the ocean. All of those eyes, all of those temporary tidal pools, the pockmarks and the ridges, the thick, sturdy quality of the skin. An animal, an organism that had never existed before or that might belong to an alien ecology. That could transition not just from land to water but from one remote place to another, with no need for a door in a border. (*Acceptance*, Ch.11)

The reaction of the better and more than human doppelganger Ghost Bird to this form of the biologist is surprising. She makes physical contact and stares into its eyes, unafraid. This shows how the monster is not a monster but a vaster intelligence, both in design and form for a human. She is confronted by her own original, realising she is but a shadow, a copy. In contrast to the experience of the first encounter of the human biologist with the Crawler, the encounter with the doppelganger of the biologist with her trans-mutated original is one of enchantment. Ghost bird then becomes the medium through which the reader encounters the monster without fear as enchanting or weird.

While a clear idea of transgression and invasion can be found out by humans by checking if the border has advanced evenly on all sides, it seems that the Area X invades the very humanity by biologically taking on the human shape, infiltrating the species in the real world. In a reversal of humans imitating and saturating nature, nature has begun to saturate the human world in ways that cannot be understood. The human containment of Area X fails, time and again. In fact, we discover that the alien/nature intelligence has created doppelgangers to replace humans of different expeditions and sent them on the other side into the normal world, transgressing the safety perimeter created by the borders of Area X.

In the second book of the *SRT* series, *Authority*, a new director of the organisation, John Rodriguez, known to us as “Control” is appointed to replace the earlier director, a woman who has gone missing. He fails to make sense of the data on Area X left by his predecessor and sometimes strange objects and incomplete notes turn up in his office and desk. Confoundment and lack of information, inability to recognise nature, fills the other characters in Southern Reach organisation with irrational fear. Wilderness, even within an institution cannot be conquered with human effort. Nor it is benign enough to be worshipped on a pedestal of detachment. Control represents the rational, organisational and political character in the novels. His fear springs from ecophobia. The inability to control Area X or the chaos in his office both represent for him a challenge. When faced with the same leviathan presence, of the biologist monster, Control experiences the fear of extreme rejection (*Acceptance*, Ch.13).

A sensation of loss of control and yet of worthlessness assails Control on during the encounter with the biologist’s many-eyed form. He is shaken but still tries to plan a way ahead to neutralise the Area X. This may be because he seemed to be rejected by the new biologist being, instead of the usual response to his inability to control his environment. The ecofear arising from inability to master nature has two sides, one is loss of control and the other, unable to belong or unite with nature, a fear of alienation.

Knowing Nature, Invisible Presence and Oneness

According to Bruce Foltz, nature is only an exteriority for modernity. Such exteriority, he suggests, is relational to the “knowing subject” (331). That means when we try and understand what nature is, we are only able to grasp nature that is given to us through our own perspectives of how it should be rather than what it is. In the novels of *SRT*, the knowing subjects, the protagonists such as the expedition members or the officials of the institution, treat nature as an object and consider that nature should be malleable to human machinations. When humans in the novel discover they cannot control or contain Area X, or even understand its intent purpose or its characteristics, they experience a continuous wariness. Estok in his essay “Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness” also remarks on the idea that our interference in nature and our interest in trying to control it and its subsequent failure results in ecophobia (208).

In the *SRT*, (*Acceptance* Ch.03) the Anthropocene has been reversed in Area X, humans are excluded and devoid of agency. This message comes across in the response of Area X to the effects of human artefacts such as technology and buildings. They are rotted and there was a sense of erasure of all things made by humans.

Area X actively depollutes and degrades the human impact on nature, restoring it to a pristine state. Though nature is threatening and dangerous for the human in these novels, the agency given to Area X somewhat reverses the ecophobic stance in these novels, the stance that Estok refers to: "...ecophobic stance, a stance whose enthymematic assumption presupposes that it is ultimately the human (not the nonhuman natural) that takes ethical and ontological priority and has agency" ("Painful Material Realities, Tragedy, Ecophobia," 132). The idea that ecocritics suggest is that controlling the environment doesn't actually work that easily but the more we seem to try and control the environment, the lessor we are actually able to (Estok, "Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness," 208; Tally 5).

One of the ways to control nature is through science. Understanding, categorising, naming labelling, measuring, describing in language are all parts of a human process to control nature through knowing, through epistemic superiority. Historically the purpose of science was visualised by Francis Bacon who regarded nature as existing for and because of humans (Estok, "Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness," 210).

As humans are subject to the utter failure of "making sense" of the events transpiring in Area X, science and control cannot provide humanity with familiarity and concreteness in terms of the events that unfold. One confronts the absurd represented in the novels by the alien lifeforms and monsters of Area X. We see the protagonists confronted with the evolved trans-mutated intelligence, the monster that was the human biologist earlier, there is a loss of "*res cogitans*," the human ability to make sense of what is in front. The reader who has been introduced to the Ghost Bird doppelganger as the same protagonist realises the original biologist has actually transformed into a non-human. This creates a state of ecofear where a confrontation with nature, as a mere object of our scientific enquiry is no longer possible. As with the indestructible plant or the crawler in the novels, science and rationality fail to make sense of these creatures or events. As the novels progress, the purpose of Area X to reverse the human effects on the environment becomes clear. It is only when the humans become nature that the total cleansing is possible. The protagonists (and by extension the readers who identify with them) cannot deal with the tension between staying separate or merging into a collective ecosystem, a threat of identity loss. The more the humans try and grasp Area X, the more they experience themselves as humans who are becoming invisible.

Such unease of not being able to know or make sense of something creates a kind of cultural tension. A part of this unease is also what inspires people to learn and know about the natural world and overcome the ignorance. Human beings describe, catalogue, and document nature. On the other hand, the surrealism projected in these novels make it possible for the author to highlight the failure of human understanding when confronted with the interiority of nature. When a subject confronts nature that is no longer a mere exteriority, and faces its interiority, there is an experience of a breakdown of the boundaries. Foltz writes for instance: "Nature is substance, self-subsistence that is exterior to knowing, standing opaquely on its own over against the self-transparency of consciousness" (331). Yet, such encounters have been common to human experience.²

When one encounters nature as the other, one can have two reactions. As the biologist does in the novel, we can feel enchanted. We do often say, "I feel a part of nature," but what we actually mean is we feel that we are 'inside nature,' nature surrounds us, and our boundary of self is cocooned within an environment. Writing about the way ecological writing has concentrated on

our relationship to nature so far, Morton suggests that the narrative of being “embedded in nature” imagines nature as an envelope around us 4-5). Surrounding mediums are never clearly definable or graspable, creating an ambiguity that is detrimental to the environmental discourse. He explains that ecological writing cannot capture nature except as an object of veneration and the narrative ends up in a form of dissociated romantic worship that is hypocritical.

On the other hand, in such an encounter, when we let our boundaries drop, we lose ourselves. We could experience some exhilaration if we are prepared for it. However, it is likely against the background of ecophobia, we usually experience panic and fear, born out of an existential threat of dissolving boundaries of the self. We do not like to be invisible in the presence of nature.

“What if you become the very thing you fear?”

Is it possible for nature to be visible when we do not become invisible? The author seems to suggest this. In these novels, the writer VanderMeer suggests a unique resolution to our own hubris. In the surreal world of Area X we stop being with Area X, as humans, when we have become Area X. The self-abnegation is complete, there is only acceptance. In a strange way, we are made to realize that we are the monsters, the intelligence of nature is more evolved than us as readers who have identified with the human protagonists. In giving up our own monstrosity as humans who have destroyed nature, we inhabit not only the quasilocal wilderness given by literary imagination of *SRT*, but we are also made aware of the real world of phenomenological inhabitation—nature is rendered visible to us. In this state the divide between the human non-human breaks down. The monsters that is a human becomes a monster that is natural.

In the last novel, the invisible fear of losing control, the subtle presence of the intelligence of nature in Area X is revealed. The biologist represents, for us, the readiness to give up control. Both as a knower and as someone who seeks to retain her humanity. In a letter written to the survivors, the biologist recounts her unwillingness to merge with nature: “But this encounter did affect me in one way. I became resolved not to give into the brightness, to give up my identity—not yet. I could not come to terms with the possibility that one day I might put aside my vigilance and become the moaning creature in the reeds. Perhaps this was weakness. Perhaps this was just fear” (*Acceptance* Ch.02). The visible letting go of control, accepting the evolution of herself into a more than human entity becomes the way to overcome the ecophobia. What if you become the very thing you fear? This unique kind of Ecofear that is overcome of this sort is a representation of our own fear of change. We are vigilant about our identity as human, as different from nature. We strive to be visible against nature, careful not to lessen or our importance even as we venerate living with ecophilia. In some way this fear to a lesser degree even represents reluctance we have for the kind of smaller changes we are likely to make in our life that are pro nature. It is not fear of nature, a direct fear but a fear of the changing perspective. We may fear for instance if we do not use plastic how will we keep things waterproof? The way nature is represented in these novels challenges both our affiliation and fear of nature. Area X, as the new nature is both within and without the humans. It is an ecotone, a place where ecosystems merge and emerge as new zones of experience. It is what we would call a boundary-place, a place where one transitions. This ecofear would be beneficial from the perspective of ecophobia that yields unto us a mirror into our own condition as very powerful, yet very powerless in front of the nature.

Conclusion

The analysis of *SRT* suggests for us a new direction of thought around ecological fear. The descriptions of the types of ecofear do make for an interesting reading but I have attempted to articulate a different function of ecofear that may not relate to ecophobia causally, particularly in novels like *SRT* where the purpose is to create awareness of ecological issues in a provocative way. While predictive fiction and dystopian novels sometimes portray nature as a villain and support the creation of ecophobia (Estok, "Painful Material Realities, Tragedy, Ecophobia," 133), the *SRT* novels have a contrary effect. Through the stylised form of the new weird fiction and through symbolic destruction of human importance, materially and intellectually, in these books, a different outcome awaits the reader. The ecofear generated does not fall under the fear that causes ecophobia. Instead, we could say that it is possible to experience a sort of ecofear when we shift perspectives from an anthropocentric to a biocentric view. Area X represents the collapse of the human. Unlike the Anthropocene where human activities create monsters in nature, here a reversal happens, nature creates monsters by transmutation of humans. It cleanses the anthropogenic effects establishing a new order—a new control, a new intelligence. The monster created by Area X from the human is unlike our monsters, it is a monster whose semantics force us to relook at fear at ourselves as human. We are the monsters.

The shifting of our perspective results in a vague and irrational fear as we come to terms with a new way of looking at things. As we lose our protection of hubris and control, our knowledge of nature as an object fails, we render ourselves invisible and small, allowing nature to overwhelm us. Far from directing our phobia towards an avenging nature, the types of fiction that we can call "Anthropocene fiction" (Adam Textler) in any genre tend to push us towards a self-horror, a disgust towards humankind, shifting our foundations of ecological ethics. Our interests are rendered invisible against the interest of the nonhuman, displacing ecophobia.

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Notes

¹ For more on gothic fiction, fear, and ecophobia see Hillard, 2009.

² There is scholarship on the idea of oneness with nature and ecological-self put forward by the Ecophilosopher, Arne Naess. I deliberately avoid that philosophical perspective here, preferring to stay with the realm of feelings and sensations of a normal experience.



Ecoanxiety: A Philosophical Investigation from the Early Buddhist Perspective

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Abstract

Ecoanxiety has been described as a fear caused by the climate crisis or environmental degradation. In religious and ethical studies, the emotion of fear is significant because it plays a role as a motivating factor or achieving necessary mental state to get to the ultimate goal in religious life. Fear is often caused by the consequences of an event. However, the dysteleological nature of early Buddhist thoughts does not contribute significantly to environmental problems but construe the fear. This paper is an attempt to explore the Buddhist ethical perspective of ecoanxiety, with special reference to the early Buddhist thinker Buddhaghosa. In this paper, I argue that Buddhist ethical teachings have an immediate beneficial effect on ecoanxiety.

Keywords: Ecoanxiety, Buddhist philosophy, Buddhaghosa, Fear Visuddhimagga

Introduction

The word *ecoanxiety* refers to a mental state related to an ecological system. Panu Pihkala (2018) has argued that the term is referred to as “various difficult emotions and mental states arising from environmental conditions and knowledge about them” (546). However, ecoanxiety cannot be separated from the other types of anxieties. For instance, a person is feeling anxious because of his/her loneliness, but at the same time, he/she is also worried about the future because of ecological disaster (Pihkala 546). It is significant to note that early Buddhist philosophy is dysteleological in nature, which does not give importance to the result of the action. Teleological philosophies such as Sankara’s and Vedic-Upanishad system are more goal-oriented. Harris (1994) has argued that in Buddhist philosophy (similar argument can be read in 1995 as well),

There are difficulties in determining how best to act with regard to the natural world unless that response has been specifically authorised by the Buddha. The problem here is twofold. In the first place, few of the Buddha's injunctions can be used unambiguously to support environmentalist ends, and in the second, the dysteleological character of Buddhist thought militates against anything that could be construed as injecting the concept of an "end" or "purpose" into the world. (Harris 53)

Early Buddhist philosophy is dysteleological in nature and, therefore, does not talk about the natural world. The main concern of Buddhist philosophy is human suffering and its solution. Here,

human suffering does not refer to the social issues. It argues for the subjective world works as the individual is inclined towards something. According to the early Buddhist philosophy, one is in pain because of one's ignorance and this ignorance can be removed with right knowledge. Here right knowledge refers to knowledge which leads to liberation. Buddha has discussed in great detail human suffering, its cause and its final solution. That is why it is difficult to talk about environmental issues from a Buddhist point of view. However, there is an argument on how Buddhist ethical teaching can benefit the ecological disasters (Prakash, 2018, 217-18; 2020, 205). I will not examine the early Buddhist attitudes towards the environmental crisis *per se* in this paper. This paper's focus is more about the sentient beings who are anxious about the natural world, and thus ecoanxiety is reasonably significant for Buddhist studies. For instance, in *majjhima-nikāya*, one of the texts of Buddhist Pāli canon, it is mentioned that the disciple approaches the Buddha and expresses his wish to go alone in the dense forest for meditation practices. The main concern was that how a meditator can live in such awe-inspiring, horrifying abodes such as orchard shrines, woodland shrines, and tree shrines. And while practicing the meditation there, a wild animal can come up to the meditator, or a peacock can knock off a branch, or the wind would rustle the leaves (Nanamoli 4). In *Visuddhimagga*, Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa has also addressed the same concern about how a meditator can protect himself from the different types of fear inducing agencies in the forest [i]. He writes, "*Creeping things* are any long creatures such as snakes and so on that move by crawling. Contact with them is of two kinds: contact by being bitten and contact by being touched. And that does not worry him who sits with a robe on. So he uses it for the purpose of protection from such things" (Nanamoli 1: 87).

In this text, the story encourages the meditator to follow the rules and manage and transform his anxiety. The text offers the significance to meditation practices undertaken in the forest because these practices advantage meditators to obtain unattained concentration, abandon attachment to life, and become free from anxiety (Nanamoli 2: 54). However, this concern of the disciple is addressed by Buddha, which I will be taking on in the last section of this paper. My intention to bring this instance here is to substantiate how ecoanxiety is an important concept in Buddhist studies. In this paper, I will take up the early Buddhist elucidation of fear and anxiety and elucidate the application on ecology. This paper is focused on the early school of Buddhism which consist of Sarvastivada and Sautrantika schools of thought. More precisely, I will be focusing on the early Buddhist text *Visuddhimagga* (The Path of Purification) written by Buddhaghosa. It is significant to note that *Visuddhimagga* systematically presents the interpretation of Buddhist teaching contained in Pali text.

The Emotion of Anxiety

There is no word for emotion in Buddhist psychology, but Buddhist thinkers have elucidated various emotions. Emotion is considered to be the effect of individual judgment (De Silva 42); this is true with any emotion. For instance, a pleasant feeling (*sukha*), a painful feeling (*dukha*), greed, hatred, anxiety, and so on. These emotions occur when an individual comes to a judgment. I will take up this issue in detail in the last section of the paper. However, it is significant to note that the difference between fear and anxiety can be drawn to some extent. De Silva has argued that "Fear generally arises as a response to a specific danger, whereas anxiety arises as a reaction to a danger which is not clearly seen" (De Silva 46). De Silva argues that emotion/anxiety is caused by the attachment or connection with one's self (De Silva 44). Vasubandu argues that the emotion of fear

arises when an individual expects or undesires an event. He writes that the “unpleasant consequences” or undesired events are called Kārikā (*bhaya* or fear) because they engender fear (AKB II: 32b). Fear arises when one person has a strong attachment with a particularly valuable object and does not want to lose it. For instance, if I am concerned about my kids that they will not have a good life after an ecological disaster, my concern for their well-being will turn into an emotion of fear. However, in Buddhist psychology fear and anxiety are the same. The early Buddhist text *Samyutta-nikāya* elucidates how the qualities of anxiety are also seen in the emotion of fear. In a simile, a wise man consoles a sick woman who is anxious about the well-being of her family. The wise man argues that anxiety will not help in anyway, so she should abandon her anxiety (SN 11: 54(4) III).

In this instance, a monk consoles an individual who is anxious over his mother and father. Here it is coherent to argue that the features of fear are in anxiety as well; therefore, it is difficult to argue that fear and anxiety are two different emotions. De Silva argues, “some forms of anxiety or vague apprehension under clear analysis can be seen to be specific fears” (De Silva 49). For instance, the above mentioned metaphor where an individual, who is on death bed, feels anxiety regarding the family. This sense of vague apprehension is based on how their family will survive after his death. But analysis of this vague apprehension can lead us to explicit causes. Therefore, anxiety has the same feature as fear. The Buddhist thinker, Buddhaghosa, does not differentiate between fear and anxiety (Nanamoli 322). In many places in *Visuddhimagga* (is a Buddhist treatise on Buddhist practice and Theravāda Abhidhamma written by Buddhaghosa) he has used these words in one sense.

Buddhaghosa and Ecoanxiety

Anxiety is interwoven with attachment, which can produce pleasure. De Silva argues that the identification of the five aggregates in Buddhism (such as form, sensations, perceptions, formations and consciousness) as a construction of a permanent ‘self’ gives rise to fear and anxiety; ‘self’ according to him is fluid (De Silva 49). Before elucidation of the emotions of anxiety and fear, it is significant to discuss the notion of the five aggregates, as mentioned in early Buddhist philosophy. In early Buddhism, there is an emphasis on the relation of *mind-matter*, as it does not bifurcate the phenomenal into matter and mind, or body and mind, as two separate entities. Mind, as humans have maintained, is not an independent entity. The sensations are inherently located in the sense-faculties. The sense of faculties has been recognized as internal. These are the seats of respective sensations. Again sense faculties are constituted by *Rupa* or matter. Thus, the bottom line is that in early Buddhism, one *cannot* separate mind from the body.

In the Western philosophy, David Hume also claimed that the self is nothing more than a bundle of perceptions. Thus, I would submit that the Buddha and Hume have used the “bundle” theory (proposed by Hume). Here, it is significant to note that Buddhism makes a metaphysical claim though Hume makes only an epistemic claim. Hume writes in his well-known work, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, that we do not actually experience anything which can substantiate the belief in the self and/or made by the self. Wherever we try to experience our self, we experience a continuous flow of perceptions that replace one another in rapid succession. “I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the

perception” (Hume 525). For Hume, self or person is not the other that is a “bundle of impressions.” It is fascinating to note that for the early Buddhists as well as for Hume there is phenomenologically no thinker or perceiver but thoughts and perceptions. “When we talk of *self* or *substance*, we must have an idea annexed to these terms. Otherwise, they are altogether unintelligible. Every idea is derived from preceding impressions, and we have no impression of self or substance, as something simple and individual. We have, therefore, no idea of them in that sense” (Hume 631). For Hume, to have an idea, we must have a corresponding impression, but in real life, we do not have an impression of idea of self. Therefore, we have no idea of self. The idea of self is arguably a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity and are in constant flux and motion (Hume 252).

Correspondingly, in early Buddhism, a person is nothing more than five aggregates [ii]. In Buddhism, the word '*Nama*' has been used in the same sense. One should not understand *Nama* or *Mind* as 'formless' like a soul that enters in a body at the time of birth. Buddha refused to accept a notion of a formless and eternal self. Buddha's explanation is the abolition of ambiguity. It is not to shift the soul to the mind. In early Buddhism *Nama* represents all activities of the body [iii]. Therefore, in early Buddhist philosophy, an individual is not more than the five aggregates.

In this section I am discussing the conception of anxiety or fear from a Buddhist point of view. Buddhaghosa has elucidated the notion of fear with a simile. He gives the simile of a woman whose three sons have received a charge of capital punishment. The King has ordered to cut off their head. The woman visits the place of execution where she finds the King had already ordered to cut off the eldest son's head and is about to cut off the middle son's head. After seeing the execution of the first two sons, the women give up hope for the youngest son. She started believing that the youngest son will also face the same fate (Nanamoli XXI: 30.). In another simile, Buddhaghosa explicates a pregnant woman's simile who has already given birth to ten children. She has lost all the children because of her infected womb. Therefore, she assumes that she would also lose the child in the womb (Nanamoli XXI: 31). Buddhaghosa has termed this as the appearance of terror. The woman's fear of the past bitter experiences constantly create a fear in the new context as well. Buddhaghosa, through this simile, shows how the appearance of terror takes place in the mind. He argues that when an individual sees the cessation of formation in the past and the cessation of formation in the present, rather than based on these experiences, the individual believes in the cessation of the future formation. The fear arises in the response of the real dangers (assuming that there are imagined dangers as well) (Nanamoli XXI: 37; De Silva 46).

He states the simile of a man who sees the three charcoal pits at a city gate and, based on his experiences, forms a judgment that whoever falls into the charcoal pits will not suffer from pain (Nanamoli XXI: 32). In another example, he argues that a man is looking on three spikes in a row. The first one is acacia spike, the second one is an iron spike, and the third one is a gold spike. He is not afraid of these spikes because he is aware that falling on a spike will not cause any pain (Nanamoli XXI: 32). Therefore, the terror does not appear in his mind. Buddhaghosa writes that "it is called 'appearance as terror' only because formations in all kinds of becoming, generation, destiny, station, or abode are fearful in being bound for destruction, and so they appear only as a terror" (Nanamoli XXVI: 33). Whenever we judge—accurately or inaccurately—some situation which is dangerous for us, it leads to provoking the actual fear or anxiety (emotion) as experience. According to Nanamoli:

In order to contrive the means to deliverance. Here is a simile: a man thought to catch a fish, it seems, so he took a fishing net and cast it in the water. He put his hand into the mouth of the net under the water and seized a snake by the neck. He was glad, thinking, "I have caught a fish." In the belief that he had caught a big fish, he lifted it up to see. When he saw three marks, he perceived that it was a snake and he was terrified. He saw the danger, felt dispassion (revulsion) for what he had seized, and desired to be delivered from it. Contriving a means to deliverance, he unwrapped [the coils from] his hand, starting from the tip of its tail. Then he raised his arm, and when he had weakened the snake by swinging it two or three times round his head, he flung it away, crying "Go, foul snake." Then quickly scrambling up on to dry land, he stood looking back whence he had come, thinking, "Goodness, I have been delivered from the jaws of a huge snake!" (XXI: 49)

Through this simile, Buddhaghosa elucidated how a meditator can get rid of the problem of fear. Comprehending the simile, the meditator's knowledge of appearance as terror is like when the man was frightened. Knowledge of contemplation of danger is like the man's seeing the danger. Knowledge of contemplation of dispassion is like the man's dispassion (revulsion) for what he had seized. Knowledge of desire for deliverance is like the man's deliverance from the snake. The attribution of the three characteristics to formations by knowledge of contemplation of reflection is like the man's contriving a means to deliverance. For just as the man weakened the snake by swinging it, keeping it away and rendering it incapable of biting, and was thus quite delivered, so too this meditator weakens formations by swinging them with the attribution of the three characteristics, rendering them incapable of appearing again in the modes of permanence, pleasure, beauty, and self, and is thus quite delivered. That is why it was said above that he discerns them in this way "in order to contrive the means to deliverance" (Nanamoli XXI: 50). However, Buddhaghosa argues that there are three main gateways to achieve liberation or one can do away with anxiety:

(1) *To the seeing of all formations as limited and circumscribed and to the entering of consciousness into the signless element* (Nanamoli XXI: 67): Buddhists theorize in momentariness where they argue that everything appears for just a moment. According to early Buddhist theory, everything in this world is made of a simple element or *dhamma*. This element or *dhamma*, by nature, is temporary, and it can continue to exist for a single moment. But each *dhamma* perishes conditioning the next moment of *dhamma*. In the Buddhist context, a moment is like a row of lamps sending flashes one after the other, thus producing a moving light illusion. Motion consists of a series of immobility. A lamp's light is a common metaphorical designation for the uninterrupted production of a series of flashing flames. When this production changes its place, one says that the light has moved, but in reality, other flames have appeared in other contiguous places. Therefore, early Buddhists argue for the impermanence of everything.

However, based on theory, Buddhists argue as ethical prescription that we should see all the formation or moment as limited and circumscribed. Limited means that all formations are limited by rising and fall because there was no existence of the present form before the rise, and it will also vanish with the fall. Therefore, contemplation of the impermanence of a formation will help apprehend the formation in a more sensible way (Nanamoli XXI: 68). Buddhaghosa writes,

“When he brings [them] to mind as impermanent, formations appear as liable to destruction. When he brings them to mind as painful, formations appear as a terror. When he brings them to mind as not-self, formations appear as void” (Nanamoli XXI: 69). Again signless liberation should comprehend as the noble path that has occurred by making *Nibbana* its object through the signless aspect. Signless refers to a state where mind does not find any sign of permanence and eternal self.

(2) *To the stirring up of the mind with respect to all formations and to the entering of consciousness into the desire-less element* (Nanamoli XXI: 67): Early Buddhist recommends that one should comprehend all the formation as desire-less or one should not attach the desire with any formation of the object. Buddhists argue that desire is the main cause of our bondage and pain and acts as a major hurdle to achieving liberation. Desire or attachment is one of the causes of the cycle of birth and rebirth or endless pain, i.e., living a fear-based life. Therefore, it is significant ethically to refrain from the attachment.

(3) *To the seeing of all things (dhamma) as alien and to the entering of consciousness into the void-ness element.* (Nanamoli XXI: 67): It is recommended that one should comprehend all things as alien or different from us. Here, void-ness means that there is neither self nor any other things which can take the position of a self. The text says, "*nāhaṃ kvaṇi kassaci kiñcanat' asmiṃ na ca mama kvaṇi kismiñci kiñcanat' atthi* (I am not anywhere anyone's owning, nor is there anywhere my owning in anyone) (Nanamoli XXI: 53). It means that the meditator does not see the self anywhere, even not in others. Here it is significant to note that self only refers to an eternal entity that enters the body at the time of birth and leaves at the time of death. Buddha does not accept any permanent entity. Buddhaghosa argues that this way, one can abandon fear and terror.

These three gateways to liberation lead to the removal of suffering from life. This path of fearlessness will help us to achieve a state where fear and anxiety cannot bother one's mind or the world around that mind. However, In *Majjhima nikaya*, there is a chapter where the whole discourse is about the emotion Fear and Dread (*Bhayabherava Sutta*). This discourse has taken place between the Buddha and Brahmin Jāṇussoṇi where Buddha gives a discourse on fear as emotion. He faced these emotions when he was practicing meditation before his enlightenment.

There are the especially auspicious nights of the fourteenth, the fifteenth, and the eighth of the fortnight. Now, what if, on such nights as these, I were to dwell in such awe-inspiring, horrifying abodes as orchard shrines, woodland shrines, and tree shrines? Perhaps I might encounter that fear and dread. And later, on such especially auspicious nights as the fourteenth, the fifteenth, and the eighth of the fortnight, I dwelt in such awe-inspiring, horrifying abodes as orchard shrines, woodland shrines, and tree shrines. And while I dwelt there, a wild animal would come up to me, or a peacock would knock off a branch, or the wind would rustle the leaves. I thought: 'What now if this is the fear and dread coming?' I thought: 'Why do I dwell always expecting fear and dread? What if I subdue that fear and dread while keeping the same posture that I am in when it comes upon me?' (Nanamoli 4: 20)

In his discourse, he argues that how a person who is not purified in verbal conduct, unpurified in mental conduct, and unpurified in livelihood, they evoke unwholesome fear and dread (Anālayo

1524; Nanamoli 4: 5-7). Further, he says, recluses who go into the forest for practice and are devoid of wisdom evoke unwholesome fear and dread (Nanamoli 4:19). He elucidated how he faced fear and dread. Whenever he faced fear and dread, he always subdued the fear and dread in the same position. My main intention here is to show how Buddha has signified the notion of wisdom, where he argues for the purification of mind and body, which is the only way to get fear-free, authentic mindfulness. Mindfulness will help one to overcome fear and anxiety. Let's comprehend the significance of purification of mind in detail with the help of a simile. Buddhaghosa has given twelve different similes to elucidate how to bring wisdom to the mind. I will be discussing a few significant similes in this paper.

In Buddhaghosa's first simile of the fruit bat, he gave an example of a fruit bat who ascends on a honey tree with five branches to get good fruits or flowers. The fruit bat investigates all the branches one after another but fails to achieve taking fruits or flowers and realizes that this tree is barren. Thus, she lost interest in the tree and flew away (Nanamoli XXI: 91). By the same token, the meditation should take the five aggregates as the objects of clinging as the five branches of fruit tree [iv]. The meditator should see all aggregates as not worth taking after the comprehension. The meditator becomes dispassionate towards five aggregates because of its impermanence characteristic as fruit bat develops a dispassion towards the fruit tree. However, it is coherent to say that a fruit-bat has different causes to feel dispassionate towards the fruit tree, but here the comparison is made in terms of dispassion, a mindful attitude towards emotions. After developing the disinterest in five aggregates, the meditator uses a path of knowledge for his final liberation, which is the fruition of his knowledge.

In another simile, Buddhaghosa gives an instance of a man and his burning house. A house owner who is taking rest after finishing his dinner found that his home is on fire. Seeing the house on fire, he was frightened. Here the shrewdest act would be to get away from the house and be at a safe place (Nanamoli XXI: 95). Similarly, when the meditator realizes the amount of pain in life, he should go for a safe place through the right knowledge. Going for a safe place refers, analogically, to the achievement of the ultimate reality (In Buddhism, *nirvana* is considered ultimate reality. The notion of ultimate reality is a reality which does not depend on the experiences of persons as it is not subject to change.) This simile substantiates that the right knowledge and practice can help individuals face fear and anxiety. Buddhaghosa argues that an individual must fully, *via* unattachment, comprehend the situation and respond accordingly as the house owner did in this simile.

It is significant to see the application of Buddhaghosa's explanation of the three gateways regarding ecoanxiety. According to Buddhaghosa, one can control one's emotion of fear or anxiety through the three gateway of liberation because virtuous action cannot be performed with this emotion. Buddhaghosa argues that the path of the saint is to work for everyone because all the sentient beings are equal. Buddha, according to the text, advised practicing virtues such as fearlessness, non-attachment, etc. because it leads to non-remorse (Prakash, "The Path of a Saint: Buddhaghosa's Argument" 207). Therefore, Buddhist ethical teaching, though it is dysteleological, has significant impact on potentials for a sustainable development. Early Buddhist philosophy gave importance to all sentient beings and argued that one should act for others' welfare. For instance, one cannot ethically exploit natural resources if one is aware that other living beings are dependent on them. Principally, it is correct to say that Buddhist philosophy talks about the greater good for

human beings with ecology. Swearer termed it as “ecology of human flourishing’ (133). Buddhist ethical teaching gives importance to individual pain and suffering and suggests that the path for purification or removal diminishes fear of the pain and fear itself. As I have argued above, following the path of liberation or working for a solution of one’s own pain/fear and body-mind can lead to other sentient beings’ wellbeing.

Conclusion

This paper is an attempt to examine the notion of ecoanxiety and its solution from the early Buddhist perspective. Early Buddhist philosophy argues that the right knowledge and practices are significant to conquer the pain and suffering, fear and terror. In this process, forest dwellers’ meditative practices, as an example, are significant to achieve difficult concentrations, relinquish attachment, anxiety, etc. Here eradicating anxiety is a result of mindful practices. A meditator who is about to dwell in the forest faces in all likelihood an initial relationship with some form and some extent of ecoanxiety. The Buddhist text invoked in this essay has argued how the right knowledge and practices can help face and eliminate ecoanxiety. In this paper, I argued that how Buddhist philosophy sees attachment as the main cause of ecoanxiety or any type of anxiety for that matter, thus, offers the right practices that can help individuals re-orient their inner relationship to anxiety—and, likewise, re-orient their exterior relationships to all beings (including the environment itself). Mindfulness and meditation practices in the right course may offer immediate benefits and have a long-term benefit for the mind and body of all sentient beings.

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Notes

i One must be wondering here about the definition of forest. Buddhaghosa discusses the concept of forest in detail with the reference of other Buddhist texts. It says, "Forest," according to the Vinaya method firstly, is described thus: "Except the village and its precincts, all is forest" (Vin III 46). According to the Abhidhamma method, it is described thus: "Having gone out beyond the boundary post, all that is forest" (Vibh 251; Paṭis I 176). But according to the Suttanta method, its characteristic is this: "A forest abode is five hundred bow-lengths distant" (Vin IV 183). That should be defined by measuring it with a strung instructor's bow from the gate-post of a walled village, or from the range of the first stone's throw from an unwallled one, up to the monastery wall (VSM 2:49).

ii There are five aggregates (*khandh*): matter (*Rpa*), feeling (*Vedan*), perception (*Sa*), volition (*Saôkhra*), and mind (*Viā*).

iii The Buddha does not accept the soul as a permanent, substantial entity because he defends his position on the reality of moral consciousness and the efficiency of *kamma*. Keith writes, "The Buddha, we are to believe, was eagerly seeking for a theoretical basis on which to establish morality, and he was willing to accept from the Eternalists the doctrine of a gradual accumulation of spiritual merit through a series of progressing existences, but he was averse to their doctrine of an eternal spiritual principle. He was, it seems, deeply impressed by the contradiction of assuming an eternal principle which must have been, for incomprehensible reasons, polluted by all the filth of mundane existence in order later on to revert to its original purity. He was thus led to the denial of any permanent principle and to regard matter and mind as split in an infinite process of evanescent elements (*dharmas*), the only ultimate realities, besides space and annihilation." (Keith 1985, 393-394)

iv I have elucidated the notion of five aggregates above. For Buddhism, a human personality is not more than five aggregates.



Navigating Women Scientist & *Unnatural* Selection Through *The Nest* (1987) and *Splice* (2006)

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Abstract

The Nest (1987) and *Splice* (2006) use fear as a method of generating anxiety, helplessness, and even hostility towards its subject—the female scientists. This character stereotype is the source of treacherous and destructive acts that jeopardize the future of the environment and the human race. These female villains have desires deemed unnatural by traditional conservative society, are destructive to the environment, and operate outside the norm of both social and biological ecology. This paper argues that the stereotype of female scientist as portrayed in *The Nest* and *Splice* is destructive to the cultural progress of women. In addition both films assert that women scientists are at fault for changes in the natural world and thus have a negative effect on humanities ability to survive. Ultimately humanity will fail to exterminate the unnatural species we have created and we must adjust and accommodate for a new existence.

Introduction

I clearly remember the first horror film which terrified me and kept me awake at night for over a month. I was seven, and the film was Terence H. Winkless's *The Nest* (1987). One of the main characters, a woman scientist named Dr. Hubbard, had collected a fish tank full of flesh-eating cockroaches (her genetic experiment gone wrong) which she kept in her lab. To examine the roaches she wore a thick rubber glove and reached into the tank to inspect the insects by hand. The roaches were so fierce that they chewed through the rubber glove and began to consume Hubbard's arm. Rather than pull her arm out of the glove, Hubbard smiled and stared in wide-eyed fascination. Her face reflected this horrible insane delight. She "enjoyed" watching her arm being consumed by insects. She was so engrossed in watching the roaches eat her flesh that a colleague had to grab her arm and pull it from the glove only to reveal a bloody mess. It was not the situation that I feared, then, but rather Hubbard's reaction to the situation. Hubbard defied the laws of nature, finding more enjoyment in her own destruction than in survival.

Re-watching the film now, (thirty years later, pregnant with my first child, and a PhD candidate in Environmental Biology), the film alarms me in a way that my seven-year-old self did not understand. The current state of my body and being has made me highly aware of the stereotype of my own existence and encouraged my exploration into the topic of fear of female scientists. In films such as *The Nest* and *Splice* (2006) fear functions as a way to create feelings of anxiety, helplessness, and even hostility towards its subject, in this case the female scientists. *The Nest* and *Splice* use the character of the female scientist as the source of treacherous and destructive acts that jeopardize the future of the environment and the human race. These female villains have

desires deemed unnatural by traditional conservative society, are destructive to the environment, and operate outside the norm of both social and biological ecology. According to Eva Flicker, author of *Between Brains and Breast* (2003),

The mass media, including film, have a central function in the creation of opinion and myth. Film functions as more than a simple mirror, it also works as social memory and cultural metaphor. In contrast to purely linguistic media, film creates pictures that continue as social myths. (2)

The Nest and *Splice* perpetuate the “social myth” that women scientist are selfish, arrogant and reckless to the point of creating environmental degradation. The images produced by these films linger in the mind of the viewer long after the film has ended, such as Hubbard’s wide-eyed fascination with the mutant roaches and scenes of her blatant disregard for human life. These films portray female scientist as destructive to social order – they occupy traditionally masculine professions, are emotionally unavailable, and reject the conventional role of motherhood. In addition, their research becomes their means to procreation. They bring to life, or “birth” unnatural creatures defying the laws of natural selection and disrupting the natural order. For Hubbard this is the creation of genetically modified cockroaches and for Elsa Kast (*Splice*) this is the creation of a human-animal hybrid, which she uses her DNA to produce. This representation of female scientist disseminates what Simon Estok theorizes in his text, *Ecomedia and Ecophobia* (2016) as “ecophobia; a term used to analyze human action as an opposing force to the natural environment. Estok notes that media language often perpetuates the idea that “nature (and women) are to be controlled” (130).

Both Hubbard and Elsa challenge women’s roles in the social order as their research breaks down the natural order – their existence representing a double threat. This paper argues that the stereotype of female scientist as portrayed in *The Nest* and *Splice* is destructive to the cultural progress of women. In addition, both films assert that women scientists are at fault for changes in the natural world and thus have a negative effect on humanities ability to survive. Ultimately humanity will fail to exterminate the unnatural species we have created and we must adjust and accommodate for a new existence.

The Nest and *Splice* are not the first (nor will they be the last) media to cast progressive female characters as villains. Some of the first fictional evil female scientist appeared during the emergence of the *New Women* feminist movement in the late 19th century. During this time women began to focus on education and career over marriage and family, attending university and pursuing studies as doctors, professors, and scientists. Feminism became associated with evil women, because female liberation was seen as threatening to the social order and traditional way of life. Women who could rival men intellectually were seen as a menace and thus produced a new type of fear—a fear centered on loss of control and a changing way of life. One way of responding to the new women was the creation of negative female stereotypes such as the mad, or evil scientist. In his text *Daughters of Frankenstein: Lesbian Mad Scientist* (2015), Steve Berman writes, “the fictional female mad scientist was one of the many negative fictional reactions to the New Woman. Most novels of the 1890s portrayed the New Woman as coming to bad ends, and the novels with fictional female scientists are one version of this reaction” (6). *The Nest* and *Splice* maintain the

harmful stereotype of women scientists by portraying the characters of Hubbard and Elsa as mad or evil, and their progressive scientific endeavors ultimately leading to “bad ends.”

Although the past one hundred years have seen significant progress in the advancement of women’s rights, there is still much to be desired. In a 2019 study published by Isabelle Régner et al. titled *Committees with Implicit Biases Promote Fewer Women When They Do Not Believe Gender Bias Exists* “...the gender stereotypes of scientist are still considerably significant. However convinced we may be that science is not just for men, the concept of science remains much more strongly associated with masculinity than with femininity in people's minds” (198). Media characters such as Hubbard and Elsa help to further perpetuate the association of masculinity with science. According to Flicker one of the prominent stereotypical portrayals of women scientists in feature films is the *male woman*. “This woman scientist is a member of a male team and stands up for herself. She has learned to be assertive within a male environment, has a rough, harsh voice, dresses practically and from time to time succumbs to an unhealthy lifestyle” (311).

Hubbard and Elsa are strikingly assertive in their male dominated environments (as will be further discussed) to the point of alienating and disenfranchising their male counterparts. In addition to their masculine roles, they also exemplify the stereotype of the evil female scientists, bringing her to a new level of maliciousness with disregard for scientific morals and human life. Hubbard and Elsa are young, beautiful, intelligent, and determined to push the limits of modern science even if it jeopardizes the existence of humanity. Rather than use their looks and sexual prowess to achieve their goals (another stereotype of the female scientist) both women show contempt for their male counterparts, forcing aside male relationships to focus on their research. Hubbard alienates her male associates when she says “I so admire these nymph cockroaches, their ability to reproduce without the contribution of their male counterpart” (*The Nest* 0:30:53-01). Hubbard’s statement plays upon fears of misconstrued feminism, and the idea that women desire to be more powerful than men. Elsa finds Clive’s request for a future with children “unreasonable” as she will be “the one who has to have it.” Elsa argues that she “doesn’t want to bend my life to suit some third party that doesn’t even exist yet” (*Splice* 0:17:44-52). This scene supports the false narrative that feminists are career women who do not support motherhood.

Like nymph cockroaches, both women find a way to create life without the assistance of men. Clive supports Elsa in bringing forth her creation, but ultimately it is Elsa’s assertion and DNA that make it happen. Both films argue that women scientists, who shun motherhood and desire to create unnatural organisms, are “unnatural” themselves. That is to say that they go against biological programming. Hubbard exhibits lack of self-preservation and a willingness to sacrifice herself to further her scientific goals. Elsa displays the inability to nurture natural offspring and also the willingness to sacrifice herself for scientific progress. Flicker argues that these stereotypes of female scientists represent the

“...ambivalent relationship of society and science. This stereotype presents a mistrust of scientific research, and emotional categories and according to traditional assignments of gender, is tied to female roles. This depiction of the role of the woman scientist thus contributes greatly to the discordant social image of science.” (313)

The evil female scientist stereotype propagates mistrust of science and constructs a state of ecofear. Both Hubbard and Elsa secretly use their research to permanently alter the planet, bringing about ecological destruction and threatening the wellbeing of future generations. This ecofear is the result of not understanding how ecology and the environment will change, and how humanity will move forward. The films offer no answers, but function as fear generators with their open endings and contemptuous predictions. The films promote the ambivalent relationship between society and science by reinforcing mistrust and fear, but also provide a source for that fear: evil women scientists.

Women's rights and the advancement of science are paramount issues that have long remained at the forefront of world conversation. Despite the importance of these social concerns, few films generate a discussion of the combined issues. According to Kendall Philips, author of *Projected Fears: Horror Films and American Culture* (2005), some films are able to "combine familiarity and shock—resonance and violation—in such a way that audiences left the theater feeling that each film was both vitally important and disturbingly new" (8). *The Nest* and *Splice* offer social commentary on the changing role of women in society coupled with scientific advancements in genetic research, thus equaling something "disturbingly new." These films combine fear of female empowerment and fear of unnatural selection in a way that produces a state of ecofear. This fear arises from humanity's inability to comprehend the world's changing political and environmental existence. Filmatic images of female scientist manufacturing unnatural organisms works to bring the unsettling fear of our changing environment to consciousness. Career oriented Hubbard and Elsa challenge the role of motherhood by creating progeny through scientific endeavors rather than traditional copulation. Their "evil" or "mad" actions generate ecological fear as they push scientific boundaries, creating new and uncontrollable organisms. These organisms are the result of human selection, rather than natural selection—a demonstration that humans have the power to alter biology. Hubbard and Elsa's hacked organisms ultimately lead to environmental devastation and threaten the future of the planet.

According to Timothy Morton's *Ecology Without Nature* (2007),

When you mention the environment, you bring it into the foreground. In other words, it stops being the environment. It stops being That Thing Over There that surrounds and sustains us. When you think about where your waste goes, your world starts to shrink. (1)

The Nest and *Splice* offer commentary on nature, ecology, and the role of women scientist as a way for viewers to think about their place in a rapidly changing world. Unfortunately, what could be a constructive conversation about women, scientific progress, and environment, is instead a platform for the dangers of science and women scientists as culprits. Both films pursue female empowerment as a harmful ground for society and the scientific community, resulting in research gone awry and the inevitable destruction of the natural environment.

The Nest

Darwin's theory of natural selection is the "process through which populations of living organisms adapt and change. Individuals in a population are naturally variable, meaning that they are all different in some ways. This variation means that some individuals have traits better suited to the environment than others" (Natural Selection). This genetic struggle acts as the regulating factor that determines the evolution of a species. Advancements in science and genetic technology have resulted in natural selection being replaced by human selection, or *unnatural* selection. This concept contributes greatly to fear and anxiety surrounding ecology, the environment, and the future of the planet. These unsettling emotions leave people with a sense of helplessness and a struggling ability to cope.

The Nest proliferates ecofear by conceptualizing on filmatic encounters with genetically modified animals and ecosystem destruction. The film's premise is that of a young female scientist, Dr. Morgan Hubbard, and her attempt to find an alternative to chemical pesticide by genetically engineering a species of cockroach to consume other roaches. "Good intentions" result in the creation of a manageable new species intentionally released into the environment. Only after release does Hubbard realize she is unable to predict the roaches' ability to adapt and survive. This new species is uncontrollable and quickly multiplies, bringing death and destruction to each ecosystem it invades. Rather than feel remorse, Hubbard is fascinated by the roaches' ability to survive and acclimate. She decides to study and understand, rather than destroy the creatures she has created.

The film's very introduction of Hubbard indicates that she is going to be a "challenging" character. Hubbard arrives via plane to be greeted by the town's mayor, Elias. She steps off the plane and confidently extends her hand, and says in greeting "Mayor Elias." Elias responds with "Oh, no, please just call me Elias. We're not very formal here, on the island." Hubbard smiles, and offers her title as "Dr. Hubbard." Hands on hip, Elias responds "Of course, we could change that" (*The Nest* 0:23:48-59). Hubbard refuses to drop formality, preferring to be addressed by the title of doctor; a decision which is met with contempt from Elias. Her reserve and assertiveness portray her as a problematic woman - she does not conform to the male authority or the social "rules of the island." The ominous non-diegetic sound upon Hubbard's arrival signals that the viewer should be apprehensive of Hubbard as well, queuing us in to a secret deception. This scene lays the groundwork for future encounters with Hubbard. Neither Hubbard, nor her scientific research are to be trusted. She is cold and distant and her research secretive. Hubbard is an ideal evil scientist; harsh voiced, masculine and smartly dressed in a suit. The viewer is told to fear her and her research—she is the unknown, the problematic. Hubbard produces a psychological ecofear resulting from her unknown intentions and incomprehensible, yet implied, changes to the environment.

Hubbard's evil character is further illustrated in a later scene when she begins her investigation by inspecting the carcass of a dog. Mayor Elias and Sherriff Tarbell (the film's male authorities) exchange eye contact behind Hubbard's back as she kneels to inspect the carcass without hesitation. Their facial expressions signify that Hubbard's actions are strange and repugnant. They question her behavior by asking if she has "ever owned a dog" to which she

replies “I do now” (*The Nest* 00:25:24 -31). Hubbard’s dark wit further solidifies her cold and callous nature.

Hubbard’s cruelty is later extended to the use of a cat as “live bait” to lure the flesh-eating roaches into a glass tank. Hubbard’s trap works, and in a horrific scene, the cat withers in agony as it is consumed alive by roaches. Hubbard’s lack of empathy for animals demonstrates her absence of compassion and nurturing; traditional “womanly” traits. Her depraved and unethical behavior is used as justification for scientific progress. Her actions exemplify fear that lives will be sacrificed in order to push forth scientific research, bringing to consciousness our own inability to intervene with progress. Hubbard’s behavior and the creation of her roaches leaves the viewer to feel powerless in preventing ecological disaster. Our planet, our home, is threatened and there is not going back. Humanity must adjust and accommodate for a new existence, while dealing with the emotional devastation of ecofear.

Hubbard’s fascination and interaction with the roaches serves to enhance the complexity of her character. The roaches are the only organisms that Hubbard shows both concern and affection for. They are her creation, her progeny and her legacy. She treats her human counterparts with contempt, and is prepared to sacrifice their lives in order to safeguard her experiment. According to Davis Skal, author of *Screams of Reason: Mad Science and Modern Culture* (1998) “our prevalent, hyperbolic images of the madly overreaching scientists may be a half conscious balloon-popping response to the perception—correct or not—that too much of modern life is controlled by arrogant and irresponsible science-related structures and systems” (27). Hubbard’s disregard for the law, and overall lack of morals and concern for human beings allows her to conduct her experiments without fear of consequence. Even after the death of several characters, Hubbard’s arrogance and desire to continue her study leads her to assure the townspeople that she has control of her experiment. In reality, Hubbard understands she has lost control, but desires more time to collect and study the roaches. Again this leads to scientific progress and profit valued over human life and the environment. Hubbard does not recognize significance in human life, and she shows no remorse or concern for the deaths she has caused. Her scientific research advances recklessly without thought of the potential impact, resulting in disastrous effects on humanity and the environment. This unrestrained scientific progress leads to fear of our own adaptability and capacity to survive.

Hubbard’s overconfidence and captivation with the roaches ultimately leads to her death when she comes face to face with her experiment outside the protection of the lab. In the film’s most horrific scene of violence and gore, Hubbard’s arm is torn from her body and her head bitten in half. Like the New Women, Hubbard is met with a “bad end” as punishment for her scientific endeavors and working an occupation outside of the conservative norm. Her gruesome death serves as justification for her wants and desires. Hubbard has violated the boundaries of what is morally and socially acceptable behavior for a both a women, and a scientists. This scene serves as a warning to not push boundaries, to recognize ones societal position, and to adhere to the social norm.

Hubbard’s death leaves the remaining characters to deal with the situation; science has abandoned them and they must find a way to survive on their own. The film’s protagonist, Sherriff Tarbell, attempts to eradicate the unnatural offspring and save the island, but fails to do so.

Hubbard's creation is outside Tarbell's understanding and he is powerless to stop it. What remains is a new world of change and a future of uncertainty. The genetically modified roaches cannot be exterminated, and the survivors are left to adjust and accommodate for their existence. The film's depiction of science as unreliable and uncontrolled resonates within the viewer, rousing emotions of ecofear. The final scene of *The Nest*, features an image of a squirming cockroach, suspended under the bright light of a microscope. There is no way to eradicate the new species and the world has been forever altered. Humanity must find new ways to survive and move forward, for there is no going back.

Splice

Vincenzo Natali's Frankenstein-like film *Splice* explores the moral and social concern of unrestrained science in areas of genetic research and gene mutation. Like Victor, the young intelligent scientist Elsa Kast, pushes the boundaries of modern science along with her partner Clive. Together they produce Dren, the world's first human-animal hybrid. Like Frankenstein's monster, Dren is a patchwork of different organisms, but rather than a collection of human corpses she is crafted from an assortment of DNA. Dren's existence creates emotions of ecofear surrounding ethical boundaries of scientific research that must not be trespassed. Elsa is fixated on making scientific history to the point of irresponsibility. Early in the film Elsa refuses to put her half complete genetic experiment into storage claiming "biotechnologies most startling breakthrough in decades...on ice" (*Splice* 0:12:42-46). In a scene of reckless abandonment Elsa locks Clive from the lab (he calls her out on "emotional hijacking") and injects a genetically modified egg into a giant mechanical ovum. Like Hubbard, Elsa's boldness is received with disdain from her male counterpart. Rather than showcasing her decision as brave and innovative, she is shown as uncontrolled and selfish. Later it will be revealed that Elsa has tricked her intelligent male companion, by having inserted her own DNA into the experiment. Elsa showcases another trait of the evil female scientist stereotype, what Flicker refers to as the *evil plotter*,

Remarkably attractive and young, this woman scientist is a scrupulous egoist ready and willing to cooperate with evil forces. She is corrupt and uses her sexual attraction to trick her opponent with a "woman's weapons." Even the cleverest male scientists fall into her trap. (7)

Before injecting the egg into the mechanical ovum, Elsa manipulates Clive with a speech about how their experiment is a moral obligation to help humanity. We later learn that Elsa is not concerned with either morals or serving humanity, but rather in pushing her own scientific agenda. She is reckless to the point of evil, willing to jeopardize the lives of others in order to make her own scientific mark on the world.

Elsa's experiment results in the organism, Dren, will become Elsa's research and offspring—a child produced from the desire to push the limits of science and free herself from the traditional role of motherhood. Dren becomes an ideal child for Elsa, whose own traumatic past leaves her emotionally disinclined to produce biological children. Again we see the misrepresentation of feminism in that career orientated Elsa shows disdain for motherhood. Like Hubbard, Elsa is portrayed as cold and callous, lacking the warm nurturing qualities that are deemed necessary for traditional conservative women. This supports the idea that both Hubbard and Elsa

lack the biological necessities of women. This outdated argument stems back to J. McGrigor Allan “*On the Real Differences in the Minds of Men and Women*” (1869), where he writes:

Her pleasures and duties are widely distinct from those of man. She is content, in most instances, to let others think for her, and trusts to that faculty, where she is really superior—her intuition—to discover the most proper person to do so. Nature has declared, in language which cannot deceive, that woman's chief mission is maternity. Woman craves to be a mother, knowing that she is an imperfect undeveloped being, until she has borne a child. There is a grand physiological truth expressed in the pathetic words of Rachel to Jacob: “Give me children, or else I die.” (8)

Elsa's reckless scientific pursuits stem from her “womanly emotions” and her biologic shortcomings in her desire to be a mother. Clive (the voice of reason) chastises Elsa for creating Dren, exclaiming “Why the fuck did you want to make her in the first place? Huh? For the betterment of mankind? You never wanted a normal child, because you were afraid of losing control. But an experiment, that's something else” (*Splice* 1:23:01-29). This scene illustrates Clive's levelheadedness and emotional stability. Like Sherriff Tarbell, Clive is the male authority and the voice of scientific reason in the world of chaos created by women scientist.

As the film progresses, Elsa discovers she is unable to separate her experiment from her child. In one scene Elsa is nurturing and affectionate to Dren, treating her as a human child by dressing her in clothes and applying makeup to her face. In a later scene Elsa treats Dren as animal, violently stripping the clothes from her body and strapping her naked to an examination table. Elsa's conflicting nature supports the stereotype of the emotional and irrational woman. Elsa is ill-equipped at being a scientist and a mother—two occupations that the film demonstrates conflict with one another.

Elsa's emotional instability leads her to make these reckless scientific endeavors. Elsa's behavior breeds an erroneous fear of feminism, implying that women are incapable of objectivity and rational decision making, and therefore should not be in positions of scientific authority. In addition to the fear of feminism, Elsa's actions bring to consciousness the ecological fear of science gone morally and ethically wrong. Like *The Nest*, scientific progress is carried out by self-interested scientists who lack regard for both social and moral law. Elsa and Hubbard reflect a fear that science works outside the constraints of modern society, and that scientist make decisions based upon progress and profit. This idea is illustrated by Elsa and Clive's decision to carry out their genetic research in secret. According to Elsa “scientists push boundaries—at least the important ones do.” A mixture of arrogance and intelligence, Elsa feels confident in her ability to objectively study a human-animal hybrid. But after the creation of Dren, both Clive and Elsa discover they are unprepared for the emotional conflict they encounter. Unlike Hubbard, Elsa and Clive struggle with the morality of their creation. This internal conflict leads to extreme interactions with Dren. Clive recognizes Dren as human and engages in sexual intercourse with her. Elsa identifies Dren as animal, and mentally and physically dehumanizes her in a horrific rape-like scene. Elsa and Clive's conflicting interactions with Dren demonstrate that this area of genetic research is a realm of scientific advancement that scientists themselves are emotionally unequipped to deal with.

Like the townspeople from *The Nest*, Elsa is abandoned by science and there is no path to redemption. Ultimately Elsa loses control over Dren, the situation, and herself. This argument becomes even more clear when Dren metamorphosizes into male and escapes into the woods. According to biologist Tillmann J. Benfey's *Effectiveness of Triploidy as a Management Tool for Reproductive Containment* (2016):

The only way to ensure that transgenic animals can have no environmental impacts is to make their escape or intentional release into the wild a complete impossibility, something which can never be assured. (266)

Dren's escape leads to the death of several characters, including Clive, and the rape of Elsa. The transgenic Dren is better suited for survival than his human counterparts, and he becomes a dangerous new species unleashed on the earth.

"The planet has been permanently altered and there is no recovery."

Splice concludes with a scene of Elsa and her round stomach displaying the unborn child within. Like Hubbard, and the enlightened New Women who came before, Elsa is met with a "bad end" as punishment for her behavior. She becomes another progressive woman used as a scare-tactic stereotype to manipulate public opinion about the conservative role and place women should occupy. This is demonstrated through Elsa's forced role into biological motherhood. From the film's very beginning, Elsa clearly states her views on motherhood and it would seem likely that she has taken action to assure there is no unwanted pregnancy. The film strips away Elsa's authority over her own body, forcing her to carry a child she never wanted.

Like Hubbard, Elsa appears cold and emotionless towards other human beings, to the point of willingness to sell her unborn baby to a research institution. Her decision to allow the creation of another human-animal hybrid shows little regret and remorse for the environmental damage she has already caused. The human deaths are seen as casualties of science, a necessary sacrifice in order to achieve global leadership. As Elsa stares out the window overlooking the seemingly endless city streets below, life continues as normal for the unsuspecting community: people are unaware of the danger so close to their daily lives. "What's the worst that could happen?" (*Splice* 1:39:12-14). Elsa whispers. The worst that could happen is the underlying question that stems a physiological state of ecofear. The planet has been permanently altered and there is no recovery. The unnatural organism persists and humanity must acknowledge this permanent change and adapt. A new understanding of nature will develop, one in which humankind adjusts and accommodates for the existence of unnatural species. This ecofear arises from the actions of evil female scientists who are at fault for changes in the natural world and thus have a negative effect on humanity's ability to survive.

The Nest and *Splice* perpetuate these stereotypes and ultimately hinder the cultural progress of women. According to Lauren Padilla, author of *Inspirational film depictions of women in STEM* (2019) "Representation matters. Studies have shown that a major factor driving young women away from STEM careers is the lack of female STEM characters in modern media" (1). It is past time to depict women scientists as positive leaders and contributors to the world. There exists real and serious concern of ecofear, such as global warming, pollution, species degradation, and natural

disasters, all of which effect the future of the planet and cause anxiety in our daily lives. By continuously holding women to these stereotypical characters, society discourages future generations of potential women scientist. The roles and performance of women scientist in media can shape our cultural identity and transform gender inequality. Humanity is at the point of acknowledging what is happening to the planet and what needs to be done to save it. It is only through equality, compassion, and partnership can we rise as to meet this challenge.

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Narrativizing Ecoterrorism in the Indian Film *Irada*

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Abstract

Concentrating upon the concept of Ecophobia propagated by Simon C. Estok and David Sobel, this paper intends to explore the Indian movie *Irada* (2017, dir. Aparnaa Singh) which narrativizes the substantial environmental impacts of chemical toxicity including water pollution and subsequent disruption of aquatic ecosystem caused by the Green Revolution in Punjab. Usually, Ecophobia is a fear of ecological problems in the natural world originating either by climate change or by human-made environmental hazards which tolled about trillion lives in the last two decades. Situating the dangerous nexus of waste, water, and corporatization, the movie captures the increasing reality of the notion of terror in the lives of the inhabitants in a fully industrialized locale. Also, the movie investigates the responsibility of media to instill indignation that evokes action for betterment of nature.

Keywords: Ecophobia, Ecoterrorism, waste, ecofilm, *Irada*

Introduction

The meteoric growth of ecological crisis felt throughout the globe directs the human being toward a “culture of terror” (Taussig). The ubiquitous existence of ecophobia in modern industrial society is apparently unrecognizable which eventually pushes the mass to ecoterrorism¹. While ecophobia is a subtle, complex, omnipresent and marketable thing, ecoterrorism which follows the theoretical outline of ecophobia, defines a transitional phase that charts the conditional shifting from naturalism to an anthropogenic milieu. Ecoterrorism, like the Estokian concept of ecophobia, maps the nonhuman agencies (like corruption, political nexus and man-made disasters) which operate the socio-economic environmentalism in a larger scale.

The select movie *Irada* (2017, dir. Aparnaa Singh) narrativizes the substantial environmental impacts of chemical toxicity, including water pollution and subsequent disruption of aquatic ecosystems, caused by the Green Revolution in Punjab. Situating itself into the nexus of waste, water, and corporatization, the movie captures the increasing reality of the notion of a presence of terror in the lives of people in industrialized nations. The movie thus, depicts how the anthropogenic society trivializes nature and turns it into a mere dumpsite.

The Estokian Ecophobia: Defining Ecoterrorism

In his 1988 article entitled as “The Politics of Ecophobia” the American journalist George F. Will defines the term ecophobia simply as “the fear that the planet is increasingly inhospitable” (quoted in Estok 10). For David Sobel, “ecophobia is more a fear of the environmental effects of human actions (quoted in Estok 10). Ecophobia, an irrational and groundless hatred of the natural

world, signifies how human beings continuously exploit nature for their material benefit without realizing that such nonchalant greed will destroy them too. So, ecophobia has two dimensions: it is *both* the hatred for nature *and* an alarm for humans. The functional pattern of ecophobia is like a wake-up call for humans.

Ecophobia is not a holistic claustrophobic fear; rather it draws a thin line between fear and hope. Actually, it denotes the symptomatic thin line between fear and an alarming situation where the nonhuman matrix of environments shows signals to be careful about nature. Like feminism, it is a consciousness-raising process towards nature. Ecophobia as a discourse is beneficial for human development but should be critical about the diverse ecophobia in a highly industrialized society. The multilayered term ecophobia has been used pervasively in different contexts and purposes. Being a uniquely human psychological condition, ecophobia has largely derived from modernity's irrational fear of nature and hence has created an antagonism between humans and their environment. Writers, social scientists and especially industries often perpetuate ecophobia through their unwitting representations of it, much as they have done with sexism, classism, racism and homophobia. In brief, ecophobia denotes environmental oppression.

Ecoterrorism has been used as a strategy to stop companies, organizations and governments from damaging or altering the fundamentals of environment. As the functional pattern of ecoterrorism follows the theoretical blueprints of the Estokian ecophobia, it is logical to theorize ecoterrorism *via* ecophobia. Estok's ecophobia clearly talks about the economical nexus between political and administrative sections that purposefully slow down the environmental crisis so that it exists for a longer period of time. Ecophobia can be involved in the transference of aggressions against the environment to the people who protect it. Simplistically, Estok tries to define ecophobia in tandem/compare with tragedy and terrorism.

The multiple attacks of terrorism throughout the world in the last two decades snatch millions of lives that instill a fear in people, just like natural disasters and the upsurge global warming. Ecocritic Patrick Murphy argues that "environmentally aware storylines do have the potential to contribute to the increasing public awareness of real environmental issues" (Murphy 35). Movies usually look for social justice and political progress in terms of natural amelioration, but ignore the need for the development of sustainable agricultural practices and ecological farming infrastructure. In most cases, the 'personal tragedy or a particular meteorological catastrophe that affects a particular community' (Murphy 35) needs to realize the fathom of impediment. The select movie *Irada* visualizes how the environmental exploitations bring the personal tragedy and en route the vengeance into motivation to make a generational change for a community.

An Ecophobic Analysis of the Fictional Film *Irada*

Set in the locale of Bhatinda², Punjab, the movie *Irada* critiques the problem of ground/drinking water that has been contaminated by waste. After the triumph of Green Revolution (1965) in Punjab, Bhatinda witnesses the politico-economic transition with the shift from the agricultural to an industrial society. Sarcastically, the movie introduces its lead characters, decorated Army officer *cum* motivational speaker and writer Parabeet Walia (Nasseruddin Shah), Chief Minister (henceforth CM) Ramandeep Braitch (Divya Dutta), journalist Maya (Sagarika

Ghate), business tycoon Paddy Sharma (Sharad Kelkar) and NIA³ officer Arjun Mishra (Arshad Warsi) in an award ceremony where the anthropogenic agent Paddy Sharma is felicitated with the Green Global Award for “his decade long commitment to sustainable business practices” (Singh 2017).

“...some areas of Punjab are so vulnerable that at least one cancer patient can be traced in each home...”

In the opening scene, the morning view of the locale has been projected as a blur to indicate the pollution. The obscure chimneys visible through smog simultaneously represent the industrial progress as well as ecological disruption. Right from the beginning, the assassination of Maya’s fiancé, RTI activist Aniruddh and the premature death of Riya (Rumana Molla), the daughter of Parabeet Walia, interweave with major issues of water pollution, chemical hazard and a broken health system that form the kernel of cinema narrative. All these major issues are intertwined with systematic corruption that creates nonchalance to nature. Both Maya and Walia hatch the vengeance against their personal losses, but they want to eradicate the systematic corruption and injustice from the very primary levels. Paddy’s illegal reverse boring in PPFPL (the name of a Paddy company mentioned in the film) and blood donation camps through Life Foundation Lab appears to be at the epicenters of those scams. But a sudden blast at PPFPL exposes all his hidden businesses that eventually marked him as ‘chemical mafia.’ Though CM Ramandeep is aware of the illegal dealings of Paddy, but in terms of party funding Paddy owns the state. She deploys Mishra to investigate the blast of PPFPL and to fabricate this news as terrorist activities to compensate the insurance money for Paddy. Riya Walia, who aspires to be a pilot, has been rejected in the UPSC⁴ examination due to physical unfitness. Unknowingly, she develops terminal cancer from the canal water she has been gulping regularly during swimming and now is waiting for her doomsday. Here, Riya’s state of mind can be compared with ecophobic anxiety as hydrological malfunction causing her immature demise and also signals the human indifference to nature. Subsequently, Aniruddh managed to capture the original blood samples and reports from the pathological laboratory run by Paddy. This path-lab deploys hired technicians to suppress the presence of Uranium that purposefully conceals the cause of cancer which spreads like an epidemic in the locale of Bhatinda. While Aniruddh decided to expose the genuine blood reports that may unmask Paddy, pushes him into a cold-blooded murder. If the personal tragedies of Maya and Parabeet Walia instigate them to protest against ecoterrorism, then CM Ramandeep and Paddy’s trepidations provoke them to do more atrocities to nature/state. By provoking fear, hatred and disgust, *Irada* as an artwork displays some scenes that evoke the sense of ecophobia.

Discovering the grim reality in their respective investigations, Parabeet and Maya realize that the deaths of Riya and Aniruddh exemplify that “both blood and water are owned by Paddy” (Singh 2017). The poisonous groundwater in Punjab consists of Uranium, Selenium, Chromium, and Cadmium infused in the blood of people causes cancer. The groundwater used both for irrigation and drinking purposes has been the viable source of Uranium. Maya’s rigorous research and collections of classified documents about the illegal dumping, testing of toxic soils, water and analysis of its effects upon public health reflect how an environmental journalist can translate the scientific data into a simple one for public comprehension. It attests that some areas of Punjab are so vulnerable that at least one cancer patient can be traced in each home due to this Uranium mishap and it becomes the cancer belt of India that tolls the lives of nearly seven million people

annually. Tragically, there runs a train popularized as ‘Cancer Train’ that usually carries the cancer patients from Bhatinda² to Bikaner⁵, Rajasthan, seeking treatment at the cancer hospital there. *Irada* tries to capture this fatal health crisis through the scam of blood testing agency. Probably, the most iconic as well as terrific scene in the movie is the train journey that puts Arjun Mishra transmogrified. Usually, in local or mail trains, the hawkers sell toys, biscuits and water bottles, but unfortunately, the ‘cancer train’ hawks blood pouches and insurance packages among passengers as the buyers are either cancer patients or their relatives, so they require the blood for their transitional living and insurance to protect their families after deaths. Zümre Yılmaz argues that aesthetic representation of the nonhuman that maintains cultural mastery marks the version of ecophobia (419), therefore the hawking of such nonhuman things (here blood and insurance) qualifies for the same. Gazing at such a phobic scene as a part of cinematic representation, the viewers find themselves comfortably distanced from the nonhuman world. Exhibiting the results of real suffering (the unbearable pain of patients in hospital and train displayed in the movie) or to perform the so-called excesses (here, blood, cough, premature hair loss) of the body is ecophobic, but promoting ecophobic indulgence for its viewers cannot always be treated as discouraging or negative, rather it could be positive and as well preventive. As mentioned earlier, these nonhuman matrixes of environment shows signals to be careful about nature.

In terms of cinematic representation, the movie *Irada* provides an ideal lens to envisage the triangle relationship of waste, water and ecophobia focusing upon this landscape. Dumping garbage in the form of reverse boring and channelizing chemical waste into fields and canals gradually makes the groundwater toxic. It also pushes us to understand that “various kinds of waste ... raise fundamental questions about how we understand ourselves and our place in the natural world” (Anderson, 36). Christopher Anderson further suggests that “garbage exists on the border between the natural and the artificial, and by extension between human culture and wild nature” (35). It is important to recognize the cultural valence of waste. Ecophobic unconsciousness enhances the waste which not only increases the probability of climate change but also clarifies the fact that humans are defined by what they reject. So, nature for us becomes trash. Garbage is precisely alarming as it reflects the unpredictable and potentially dangerous agency of a thing that was once controlled by human being. Waste is thus central to a growing corpus of ecophobic visions that posits the polluted natural world as an angry agent set on destroying humanity and also set the backdrop of the said film. The movie *Irada* is situated where the natural environment has been used as a dumpsite. The kind of ‘indifference’ that Estok defines in terms of ecophobia has been well compared with the nonchalant corruption the movie showcases. The environment intentionally becomes the key antagonist and human ingenuity and indifference becomes the solution.

The movie provides visual imagery of anthropogenic environmental destructive agents. It addresses the broken health system of a state that most environmental film-texts prefer to escape. Positing the film under anthropogenic influence, it gives a lesson that governmental emphasis on corporate analysis for health management in tandem with unscrupulous functionaries, rather than on sustainable adaptation to environmental changes tolls millions of young lives in cancer. Director Singh criticizes the idea that industrial pollution combined with tech-chemical-based agriculture will destroy the biosphere rapidly. The denial of anthropogenic forcing replacing with significant ecological idea opens the premise for sustainable development. The slice of the city portrayed in the film is not the result of natural process but of anthropogenic delusion that depicts a clear linkage between the greedy industrialist Paddy and his illegal dumping of the carcinogenic

industrial waste from thermal power plants. Both reverse boring and industrial contamination are considered as criminal offences but he owns the state in terms of funding the ruling party.

Steven Hartman and Patrick Degeorges argue that when state becomes the hegemonic form of human political organization, ecophobia becomes enshrined in the myth of nature's adversarial role in an incessant anarchic war against civilized humanity (Hartman and Degeorges 461). Again, the inclusion of humans in the political order of a state is achieved through the exclusion of all ecological, cultural and ethical bonds from their roots. Paddy's parallel business in reverse boring and the pharmaceuticals cause chemical contamination that is the potential reason for cancer in a certain geographical locations. Aniruddh's assassination demonstrates the influence of domestic politics and the vested interest of local industrial community that actually manipulates the environmental policies for their own belief. The end credit of the movie discloses shocking statistics which articulate the menace of environmental terrorism that retards the growth of Punjab. Terrorists only kill a few thousands of people, but this organized ecological butchery destroys the lives of generations with poison. Estok's idea of ecophobia wants to flag out this grass-root economical causes that lead towards generational destruction. Walia's exoneration by Mishra tries to establish this fact that ecological concern is not always planting tree or advertising 'save nature,' but also to destabilize the economic power that blatantly suck commoners. The collective attempt to fight against socio-ecological injustice can only be effective if the State apparatus (Mishra and Walia) and media (Maya) work together. Estok thinks that it is essential to focus on the unacknowledged ethics in our everyday consciousness that contribute to environmental problems, ecophobia ethics in human consciousness of which we are simply unaware and therefore powerless to control it (Estok 141). The Press Conference scene in the movie highlights the possibility of good intentions. CM Ramandeep's resignation and Paddy's exposure before camera not only confirm the annihilation of systematic corruption but also indicate the elimination of anthropogenic disruption. The poetic justice to Maya manifests in the form of environmental justice.

Conclusion

Raising awareness of ecophobia as a genuine social issue addresses the crisis necessary for a systemic change and preventing the catastrophe at-large. The emerging trends of ecofilms that released in India during the first decade of 21st century show their courage to visualize the threatening ecological disruption that relegates the environmentalism and human health to the periphery before the mounting pressure of politicized corporatization. Implementing the idea of ecoterrorism, Singh's cinematic venture envisages the urban development that fails to provide a holistic approach to development, which should be prevented collectively. Situating into the suture between fear and hope, *Irada* visualizes the horrified plight of nature caused by excessive human avarice but at the same time projects few good Samaritans who ultimately save the ecology, usher positivity and remind the viewers about their socio-civic responsibilities.

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Notes

¹ David N. Pellow defines the concept of ecoterrorism put forward by Ron Arnold as a term that "invites and courts confusion, misinterpretation, and misuse." (<https://keywords.nyupress.org/environmental-studies>)

² Bhatinda: it is a city situated in the South-western part of Punjab, India.

³ NIA: National Investigation Agency. It is India's counter-terrorist task force.

⁴ UPSC: Union Public Service Commission. It is the central recruiting agency for conducting examinations and appointments of All India Services.

⁵ Bikaner is a city situated in the northwest part of Rajasthan, India

Peter: ***"I am leading to the notion of social control. To the requirement of every sovereign state to exert control over the behavior of its citizens....To keep them paying taxes....we know that social control is best managed through fear."***

Evans: ***"Fear."***

Peter: ***"Exactly. For fifty years, Western nations had maintained their citizens in a state of perpetual fear. Fear of the other side....Then, suddenly, in the fall of 1989, it was all finished. Gone, vanished. Over. The fall of the Berlin Wall created a vacuum of fear. Nature abhors a vacuum. Something had to fill it."***

Evans: ***"You're saying that environmental crises took the place of the Cold War?"***

[excerpt from *State of Fear*, a novel by Michael Crichton 2005, Avon Books]



Rivers as the Site of Fear: Flood and Drought Through the Lens of Ritwik Ghatak's *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam*

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(India)

Abstract

India and Bangladesh since the very advent of their formation have been known to be heavily dependent on their rivers for resources of livelihood. The rivers, of both East and West Bengal are often addressed as 'mother', providing for everything necessary to live on. At times however, these very rivers acquire frightful shape wreaking havoc on and causing absolute jeopardy to the lives of the people depending on them. This frightful state of the rivers may occur both in forms of flood as well as drying up of river beds, causing drought. Bengal has been through some of the most severe droughts in history and in this paper, I shall try to look back at the catastrophes that they were. In this context, I would also like to discuss Ritwik Ghatak's film *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam (A River Called Titas)* for its portrayal of people's dependence on the river with their fates tied up with that of the river. Ghatak, in his movie, uses heavy symbolism to denote the role the river played in the characters' lives and how it influenced the sustenance of civilization around it.

Keywords: Disaster, fear, Ritwik Ghatak, River Titas

Bengal, both east and west, have been almost entirely dependent on their rivers for their livelihood. So deep has been the impact of the rivers on the lives of the people in these regions that Bengal prides itself in being called 'nadimatrik,' meaning, "a land that is cradled by the rivers as a mother." It is the abundance of water that the rivers carry, along with the rich alluvium tract and the bright sunlight that rendered Bengal ecologically productive and agriculturally prosperous. The Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna river system constitutes an intricate drainage network which is one of the most dynamic hydro-geomorphological units of the world. The rivers often moves to and fro in this vast alluvium tract, creating new ridges and waterways. This dynamism naturally causes destruction and devastation. The Ganga, in Bangladesh, in fact, changes its course so frequently that it is called 'Kirtinasha,' meaning "the destroyer of creations." This phenomenon of avulsion of the rivers causes catastrophic floods submerging hundreds of acres of land—destroying thousands of lives. Almost every monsoon, the water limit exceeds critical level. Vast acres of agricultural land along with villages and colonies are inundated and the local embankments prove to be little effective in preventing them. The rivers of Bengal, therefore, impact the lives of its people in immensely diverse ways.

Ritwik Ghatak's 1973 film *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam*, focuses on river Titas², a tributary of river Meghna, and narrates how it creates this impact on the lives of the fisher community inhabiting its banks. Ghatak seems to echo the idea of R. Michael Fisher, who in his essay,

“Ecocriticism, Ecophobia and Indigenous Criticism”, suggests that humans, in the contemporary world, share a “conflictual love-hate” relationship with the “natural” or the “wild”. He referred to Simon C. Estok in pointing out that the fear of Nature has been present in human history for a very long time which influences the relationship we share with Nature.

This conflict of perception towards the river emerges effectively in Ghatak’s portrayal of the fisher community and their relationship with the river as it induces a fear among the people of the fisher community who perceive the river as a formidable force of nature; its ways are arbitrary. Humans are subject to its whims and can only accept what the rivers bestow on them—prosperity or destruction. The havoc caused by the rivers has become a part of the lives of the communities on the banks who have hence learnt to live with the fear and anxiety of the frequently raging fluvial forces.

While the abundance of water in the rivers brings about destruction through flood, drying up of the rivers probably causes greater calamity. Scarcity of water in place of bulging tides strip people who are depended on the rivers for their resources of their chief occupation, their identity and wipe out entire civilizations. It therefore, becomes a figure of both reverence because the river provides them with their livelihood and dread, because it can bring about destruction at any moment. Ghatak also uses the river metaphorically to depict degenerating human relationships and the power politics that gradually seep into the lives of people. They generate fear and uncertainty as much as the wild untamed river does which hence becomes the appropriate metaphor for their portrayal. The river also becomes a symbol of the wretched subaltern life that especially the women are subjected to. In a way, therefore, the aspect of ecofeminism can also be traced in Ghatak’s brilliant method of storytelling. Titas becomes a character in the story interacting with and directly acting upon the fates of the people.

Ghatak’s film is one of the earliest examples of hyperlink cinema where the style of storytelling follows an unconventional pattern. It is an epic style of narrative where several characters with seemingly unrelated stories appear within the narrative, crudely hopping from the story of one character to another. The only factor that unites the characters throughout the film is the river Titas, to which all their fates are tied. The film, based on the autobiographical novel by Bangladeshi author Advaita Malla Barman, depicts the tale of the Malo tribe living on the bank of the River Titas in Brahmanbaria, Bangladesh. The film begins with Kishor, a young fisherman who embarks on a fishing trip with his friend Subol. During their short visit to another village, Kishor is married off to Rajar Jhi. The first incident of horror happens on the following day when Kishor and Rajar Jhi leave for the former’s home and Rajar Jhi is abducted by bandits on the way. She escapes, but they are separated and Kishor, believing that his wife is killed, loses his sanity.

Although the film does not feature the Sunderbans, one of the largest deltaic forests in Asia formed by the confluence of Ganga, Brahmaputra and Meghna, the short yet significant appearance of the rural pirates point us towards the same. The Sunderbans is a curious space. It is a space where earth submerges into and re-emerges from the water, where numerous rivers intermingle and meet the sea. The wilderness is in constant conflict with inhabited areas. Such places beget their own beings. The water pirates are a product of this conflicted space. The tales of these pirates are legendary and told throughout these regions, from Hingalganj in the east to Satjelia in the west. They used to be armed with daggers, knives and later even guns. They would take fishers hostage

and capture their boats along with everything that they had procured—fishes, crabs, stocks of honey and wood. The pirates were mysterious men and were shrouded with mythical tales. The local people claimed that they came from the other side of the borders as if to completely dissociate themselves from these bandits. They were persons of an alien kind. Yet, attacks by these pirates were common for the fishers of the Sunderbans who perceived them as matter-of-fact occurrences. The pirates treated their captives whimsically; at times they would give in to their pleadings and let them go after looting them and at times kill them mercilessly. Consequently, they created an ambience of fear and trauma in the minds of the local people who shared a strange relationship with them.

The appearance of the pirates thus marks the first incident in the film that reveals that river Titas that is so endearing to the villagers also contains certain factors that terrifies them and puts their lives in jeopardy. Although, it is understandable that it is not actually the river that is harming the people, the identity of the pirates can hardly be separated from it and hence they become an inevitable part of the river. The “love-hate” relationship of the Malos with the river is hence established where they are forced to live in conformity to fear, intimidation and mistrust, as Fisher states, while staying connected to the river.

In Ghatak’s film, the pirates appear for a glimpse but their action turns the trail of the story. Kishor assumes that he shall not see his newly married wife ever again; a woman whose face he could barely recall because one fleeting night of intimacy is all they had had. He returns to his village a deranged man living amidst but secluded from society. Parallel to this, runs the tale of Basanti, the second protagonist of the film, who has also lost her husband to the sea. Basanti, who, as a child, yearned to be married to Kishor when she grew up, was married off to Subol instead, because Kishor had lost his sanity. But Subol, also a fisherman, died the day following their marriage. It is unclear as to what caused his death, but the common assumption follows that he drowned in the water of Titas. Basanti, therefore, wanders through the woods adjacent to the river silently pining for her loss. The river thus becomes an agent of sundering and loss for the people of the Malo community.

“...it is for the ones who watch the film to comprehend the undertone of fear.”

Their helpless dependence on the river hence acts in their disfavour. While the characters are all deeply connected with the river and cannot survive without its resources, a constant ominous fear that it destroys lives as much as it provides for runs undercurrent to the narrative. The fear and distress stem out from the loss of agency and control to Nature. The Malos are recurrently made aware of their vulnerability and helplessness to the environment they dwell in that is vast and formidable. They have absolutely no power over it, whereas the river, the entire ecology around them controls their lives thoroughly.

The inhabitants of the bank of Titas, nevertheless, do not consciously perceive the river as fearful or malicious. The dangers it poses have become a part of their fate, hence, reminding us of Augustine’s notion that nature can never be evil, because evil is a human construct, one relative to our imagination. Instead, it is for the ones who watch the film to comprehend the undertone of fear. Ghatak, in this end, artfully situates every event of devastation in his film somewhere on the

bank of the river. Rajar Jhi meets with her long lost husband years later by the bank of the river, but neither of them recognises each other. While Rajar Jhi still pines for her husband, the deranged Kishor is however, once again able to gather her affection. There is, however, hardly any room for romance in Ghatak's world. Just as we are drawn into believing that their relationship might at last subsist into happiness, Ghatak shatters the illusion. Kishor is beaten to death by a mob of angry men for touching Rajar Jhi in public. Malla Barman's narrative reaches the heights of irony with this scene where the mob beats up Kishor for touching a woman who is not his wife while being unaware that Rajar Jhi is actually Kishor's wife. In the moment prior to his death, Kishor is able to recognise Rajar Jhi, his young wife whom he had lost to the river pirates, years ago. Losing her husband for the second time, Rajar Jhi dies next to him. The breath-taking poignancy of the scene reverberates through our minds as the two lie dead on the bank of the river, its mellow waves touching their lifeless bodies. The large frame with a vast sky and the expansive river spread around them indicating a nonchalant and ruthless nature indifferent of the people's fate.

It is impossible to ignore Titas whose passive presence prevails at the backdrop of this catastrophe since the river bank is virtually the only place brimming with public presence at all time. John Burroughs in his article, "Is Nature Cruel?" reflects upon this matter and arrives at the conclusion that "Nature as seen in animal life is only *sanguinary*, but only man is *cruel*." (Burroughs 559). He further states that nature "in the action of her mechanical and chemical forces as they go their way about us, is apparently as indifferent to man as to all other forms of life" (Burroughs 560) and it is this indifference that Ghatak captures through his lens. It is Nature's seeming indifference to life which causes us to charge her with cruelty. Burroughs elaborates on this idea:

Our minds can take in but a fraction of the total scheme of things, and what we do take in we make a personal application of to ourselves. We humanise when we should generalise. The love of the Eternal for man appears not to be that of a father for his son; or of a mother for her child; it is more like that of a general for his army; he is going to lead that army through toil, agony and death, but he is going to lead it to victory. (561)

This indifference that Burroughs talks about, acts in contrary to our expectation of our environment. Nature functions according to its own course that is unaffected by our individual troubles and despairs. However, our embittered hearts seek consolation and the nonchalant flow around us instigates a certain hatred of Nature. Since ecophobia grows from an irrational hatred of nature, it becomes clear why the vast sky and the river propel an uncanny sense in our mind. As audience, we are made aware of the triviality of our lives. The unperturbed course of nature around us irrationally vexes us.

The river's association with the people dwelling on its bank is so personal that it becomes difficult to visualize it on a larger and a rather general level. Malla Barman humanises Titas in his tale because it is a tale of its relation with the people of the Malo community; their per diem life intricately associated with it. Ghatak, through his rendition, refuses to let us forget of the broader scheme of nature as she silently watches the Malos live, die and go mad on the whelmed up waves of Titas.

Simon C. Estok in his essay “Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia,” pointed out that “historically things have been thought to be right when they have allowed us to flourish and wrong when they have hindered, threatened, or hurt us” (7). This is exactly what Ghatak portrays in his film. The Malos’ dependence on Titas and its resources appear perfectly wanted, but the disruption caused by the same river in their lives seems extraordinary. It seems unfair that they have to suffer through such perils which causes us, as the audience, to vilify nature.

Yet, Estok’s view does not completely correspond to how people respond to the calamities of the river in Bengal. As discussed already, people of Bengal have always been subjected to destructions propelled by the rivers and accepted them. Hence, the presence of the crowd on the river bank becomes significant. The miseries brought about by natural forces are received with compliance. Miseries inflicted by humans are the ones that cause much vexation. It is the actions of the people within the community and outside that ultimately represent cruelty and malevolence in various ways that give rise to the fear of destruction. These destructions and perils are mostly inflicted on women and here is where Ghatak blends in the aspects of ecofeminism in his film through this approach because rivers in Bengal are traditionally conceived as feminine, thus putting the fate of Titas in sync with the shattered fate of the women of the Malo tribe.

Rivers in India are as abused as the women are. Ghatak highlights the abuse of women and the river subsequently suffers accretion and death. The interconnection of nature and women is apparent. As ecofeminism argues, in order to realize the causes of the destruction of nature the oppression and subordination of women is to be realized because the image of a society is also the image of the nature surrounding it. The film begins with Ramproshad, an elderly fisherman, who watches a young Basanti and utters that both Basanti and Titas are in their youth now and soon they will decay as nothing stays the same forever. This actually turns out right. Although the Malo tribe seems to be mostly governed by women, it is later revealed that it is the upper-class Thakurs who dominate the villagers. The women are also dominated within the tribe by a patriarchal system. The women are deprived of several fundamental rights. Rajar Jhi could not go in search of her husband or his village out of the fear of ignominy because she was abducted by pirates. While she verbally articulates her sexual desires to Basanti (who is also forced to lead a celibate life), the forceful repression of her urges become evident. Basanti, an otherwise headstrong woman, is also denied reproductive rights because of her widowhood. She craves for a child throughout her life and desperately tries to find a sense of motherhood in caring for Ananta, Rajar Jhi’s son. The gradual yet subsequent accretion of the river that happens as the women face humiliation symbolically relates the river with the women (Basanti and Rajar Jhi). The deprivation and humiliation of the women are apparent and shown in the film, but the ecological degradation of the most important aspect of the place—Titas—goes unnoticed by the people until it is too late.

Ghatak takes a considerable length of the reel-time to depict the gradual degradation of the society. The Malo community, despite all its flaws, was still an accommodating and harmonious society in the beginning. The people were kind and a natural sense of amity flowed among everyone. As the plot advances, the innocent cordiality of the people is polluted by the arrival of the Thakurs and their exploitative means who begin to collect loans from the villagers. The people of the tribe were always destitute, struggling hard to meet their ends, but there was peace. Gradually, they decline into a quarrelsome, chaotic and violent lot. As times, it become harder and

poverty escalates; they are unable to identify the root of the problem instead become increasingly unsympathetic to each other. Intolerance and hostility seep in making the previously sympathetic souls belligerent. Ananta is loathed by Basanti's family for being a burden on them and Basanti drives Ananta away from her home. Parallely, the river starts to decay and degrade. This degradation of the river also goes unnoticed by the villagers until it is too late. Thus the moral degradation of the Malos symbolically presents the natural destruction resulting from human exploitation of the nature.

“The defilement of the ecology of Bengal was a part of the same colonial programme.”

The themes of separation—of being uprooted and alienated from one's original homeland is recurrent in Ghatak's cinema. The Partition of Bengal in 1947 had such a profound effect on him that he could never really abandon it as the pivotal theme of his films. Although *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* does not directly deal with the Partition, the themes of alienation and bereavement are constant. The destruction of ecology in semblance with the disintegration of communal harmony wherein the ever-familiar habitat of one's life changes drastically also seems to be the reflection of the same psychological trauma that Ghatak suffered through the Partition. He captures this sense of alienation and helplessness in *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* as well. It is reflected in the film through a fear of changing surroundings. The ecophobia emerges from the horror of having to lose all the natural resources that the people knew as their own and being forced to vacate their own lands. The entire ecology they were so thoroughly accustomed to changes which brings about an alarming sense of fright, distress and agony.

The Partition was a colonial gift to the Indian sub-continent that ruined millions of lives on both sides of the newly imposed border. As a massive exodus of people followed from the Eastern to Western Bengal and vice versa, the horror of being uprooted from one's own country and having to think of it as a foreign land devastated the masses. The railway tracks that were once viewed as a symbol of union between loved ones now became the symbol of severance. The defilement of the ecology of Bengal was a part of the same colonial programme.

The colonial programmes of modernity that sought to make the administration simpler to govern and promised an easier life for us, in fact, worked to destroy our ecology. The reason might be that the widely diverse and intense ecological design of this country was beyond the capacity of foreign powers to understand. Kalyan Rudra in his book, *Rivers of Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna Delta* explains this predicament that the colonial rule engendered. The more they tried to control it, the more perilous situations emerged. The aim was to control the destruction caused by the floods every year in the adjoining plains of the river that overflowed during the monsoon. The colonial river management plan, however, propelled serious damage. The colonial venture to control their effusion only resulted in severe damage of the drainage tracts and caused the many channels to decay. The plan to manage them with earthen embankments aggravated the peril. The construction of linear embankments to prevent regular floods proved to be futile and breaches in the embankments became usual. The environmental jeopardy caused due to these embankments were manifold but most significantly, the agricultural lands became deprived of the fertilizing silts. Conditions were further aggravated when roads and railway tracks were built on these embankments so that communication remained uninterrupted even during the floods. They dried

up the water channels which eventually turned into swamps, breeding malarial mosquitoes. Malaria and several other diseases spread following the tracks of railway and the highways. These railway tracks and highway roads were often built on narrow culverts and ran across the river ways in both north and south Bengal which created congestions in the drainage systems and consequently degraded the agricultural productivity of the lands. The rivers and canals connected to them suffered accretion and several of them dried up entirely. Quite evidently, it affected agriculture and fishing across Bengal. People lost their only source of income and more importantly, they silently watched their precious environment, full of rich assets gradually die.

In *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* as well, the people of the Malo clan have to migrate to other places in search for livelihood. The story of migration, therefore, does not end bringing a shadow of the horror of Partition. The story of the Malo community, hence, can be viewed as a microcosmic version of the story of the refugees of Partition who had to migrate to foreign lands, leaving behind their own country in search of home and identity. Like the refugees of Partition, the Malos lose their identities because it was the water of Titas that provided them with the same. Now that it is gone, they find themselves strangers in their own village. In fact, for the people of Bengal, the rivers provide a significant part of their identity. Naturally, their omnipresence seeped into the art of the region as well. Everything from myths and legends; from poetry to paintings, Bengal carries the presence of its rivers. In the words of Advaita Malla Barman as quoted by Parineeta Dandekar in her article for South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People titled “Titas Ekti Nadir Naam: Swan Song of a River”:

The bosom of Bengal is draped with rivers and their tributaries, twisted and intertwined with tangled locks, streaked with white foamy waves. The verdant land is like a maiden in the embrace of an ancient sage, held to its immense chest, locked in his wet kiss, his dense hair and beards tumbling in sinuous complexity over her youthful body and flowing on beyond. All these tangled grey locks are river.
(Dandekar)

This level of intimacy with the rivers is habitual for the people of Bengal because of their perpetual presence and influence in their lives. This influence is directly reflected in the cultural fabric of the region as well.

An estimated number of seventy-one novels have been written concentrating on the rivers of Bengal and Bangladesh. Bangladesh’s obsession with rivers can also be fathomed from the number of “riverine” movies produced there, with *Chitra Nodir Pare* (On the banks of River Chitra), *Nodir Naam Madhumati* (River’s Name is Madhumati) and *Dhire Bohe Meghna* (Quiet flows Meghna) to name a few.

“...historical consciousness and vision combined [and marked]...an epoch in Indian filmmaking.”

Ghatak’s movie stands out in its postcolonial approach of storytelling and rendition of ecological catastrophe. He creates a sharp contrast in the landscape of the film which turns into a desert towards the end. While the village of the Malos on the bank of Titas had a perpetually moist

climate from the beginning, it gradually turn dry, emerges into a desert and the river vanishes away. The people watch in terror, despair and confusion as the water of the river diminishes and disappears at the horizon. As intense scarcity of water and food takes over, the ones who can fly to other places leave the village. The most destitute ones, including Basanti are left behind to starve and perish. The final ground of fear thus takes shape not because of the river's presence in the Malos's lives but because of its absence that vanquishes the last hope of life for them.

This throttling of rivers and canals still continue and along with that continues the extinction of the fisherfolks of India. Each time a dam comes up, the conditions turn detrimental for the people who have lived with the rivers for hundreds of years. Riverine fish species are also declining rapidly which many of them suffering complete collapse. Regions that once brimmed with fishes are now forced to import them from other states. The fishers oppose, protest and finally give up. They are soon forgotten. A fragment of their tales of deprivation is accounted in Ghatak's film.

Ghatak, thus, through his unique style of narrative sets forth an ecocriticism which was unprecedented in Indian cinema. Mani Kaul, in his 2016 interview with Chanel 4 TV called it an epic form of storytelling where the narrative is thin and spread out. At every stage it develops and acquires a wider perspective. Indeed, Ghatak's chief motive behind making this movie was the depiction of the Malo life; their struggle for existence through various odds. It might be difficult to follow the narrative at times but on looking discreetly, the shots of boats, the rain, nature and archetypes of mother, all add up to the representation of the different facets of the Malos' lives.

Ghataks' historical consciousness and vision combined with an exceptionally complex style of presentation marked an epoch in Indian filmmaking. His eco-critical sensibility too, perhaps emerged from the same concern of the troubles and sorrows of the people who were displaced from their homeland. The aspects of the river that bring about disaster and propel fear among the villagers of Brahmanbaria come in various shapes and forms. While the river pirates separates the lovers forever, the vast, lush nature around them remain nonchalant and indifferent to their shattered fates. Although the Malos share an almost intimate and cherished relationship with the river, the formidability of the vast environment haunts them with its silent presence at all times. The accretion and slow death of Titas is ignored by the people until there is nothing left to be done. The horror of having to witness a place nurtured by a river turn into a dessert has to be suffered by the Malos as they perish on its swathe. Ghatak's dissent against the partition of Bengal along with the dread and affliction caused by it is captured by him, wrapped in the metaphor of environmental disaster. His film, thus, makes us aware of a lost time and a way of life that helps us comprehend our history better. People of Bengal have faced adverse conditions and atrocities both in the forms of natural disasters and political distress. Ghatak's narrative points towards a legacy of dissent and resilience in the face of catastrophes along with the hope of redemption and rejuvenation. Like the swaying field of rice plants that Basanti hallucinates at the end, the ecosphere as well as the subaltern communities shall keep envisioning a bright future devoid of conflicts and desolation.

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Notes

¹ Titas originates in the hills of Tripura and flows through Bangladesh as one of its trans-boundary rivers. It falls into the Meghna at the south of Ashugang.



Of Devouring Waters and Unforgiving Lands: An Analysis of Premonition Ecology in Two Wetland Narratives from West Bengal

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Abstract

Biren Sasmal's *Jolkor (The Water Tax)* (2019) and Dhrubajyoti Ghosh's *The Trash Diggers* (2017) are anthropocene narratives that vividly detail the degradation of aqua-littoral wetland ecosystems of the Sundarbans and East Calcutta wetlands in West Bengal, India. Sasmal's fiction written in Bengali and Ghosh's anglophone nonfiction forcefully engage with the inequalities of speciesism and the implications of urban indifference regarding the 'ecosystem people' inhabiting these ecologically sensitive threshold regions. This paper will articulate the pervading sense of 'ecopremonition', a term we have coined to describe the anticipatory fear of ecological collapse caused by rapid and unpredictable changes in the geomorphology of places like Sundarbans and East Calcutta. This paper expands the framework of fearism proposed by Subba in his work, *Philosophy of Fearism* where he defines fear as the "director of life and civilization" (Subba 11) by proposing the concept of ecopremonition that calls for a heightened engagement with environmental degradation in new ways that use fear as a proactive tool to promote greater earth stewardship and sustainability.

Keywords: Ecopremonition, fearism, geomorphology

Literary narratives that offer insights into the habitat destruction and biodiversity of littoral ecosystems play a vital role in understanding anthropogenic transformations that are responsible for endangering these global habitats. These liminal water-landscapes that, "are hybrid and multivalent...a continuum between terra and aqua" (Howarth 520) are essential to the health of the planet because of their capacity to regulate water cycles, aid carbon cycles and moderate climate change. The threat faced by littoral ecosystems is vital to the understanding of the transformation and degradation of wetlands that are global habitats. Wetlands serve as biodiversity markers and are essential for ensuring the survival of mangrove forests and other species that thrive in these coastal habitats. This paper analyses two wetland ecosystem narratives from the Southern districts of West Bengal, India, that map the denigration of natural wetlands into manufactured anthropocene-scapes ravaged by excessive human 'terrigoing' (Pak 284) and encroachment. Biren Sasmal's novel, *Jolkor (The Water Tax)* (2019), written in Bengali and Dhrubajyoti Ghosh's non-fictional narrative, *The Trash Diggers* (2017) are representative works of specific endangered ecosystems in West Bengal. These narratives eloquently comment on the repression of the 'ecological unconscious' by the city dwellers who live in proximity to the wetlands and yet choose to ignore the dire environmental impacts on these places.

This paper attempts to map the denigration of natural wetlands through contemporary regional narratives that highlight the multiple ways in which ecosystem damage leads to disequilibrium in human lives and livelihoods. These narratives depict how the encroachment of urbanisation and development-related activities like extensive mining, saltwater aquaculture and untreated sewage disposal play a crucial role in the collapse of ecological balance and slow decay of the lives of people whose material realities are inextricably intertwined with these fragile environments. This paper defines *ecopremonition* as a corollary of ecofear, a term we have coined to describe the task of environmental augury or prophecy.

Ecopremonition can be understood as foreboding or apprehension of place/life threatening conditions that disrupt the harmony of ecosystems. Rooted in affective ties to the bioregion, it involves the understanding of the socio-geographical and climatic (of people, landscape and climate) situations of a particular region and its people who subconsciously feel an uncanny and compelling sense of fear. The fear of ecocatastrophe is triggered by sudden, abrupt environmental changes that reconfigure the spatio-material and temporal relationships between humans and their environment. In this sense ecopremonition gestures at the tipping point of gradual, ongoing environmental damage and also at human fear of nature and natural catastrophes that have their origin in an excess bred from mindless cornucopianism. These novels do not use ecopremonition as an apocalyptic tool to magnify the fear and panic caused by environmental trauma. On the contrary, ecopremonition has a distinct advocacy function which forces the characters to look both inwards as well as outwards to identify the ‘dark ecology’ (Morton 5) and detritus of their habitats.

The paper will contextualize the concept of ecofear in these narratives by defining the idea of ecopremonition regarding specific places like Sundarbans and the urban wastelands of Dhapa adjoining the east Calcutta Wetlands and how it is intuited in the everyday lives of people who witness the gradual decay and transformation of these life-places. It will also articulate how ecopremonition mediates the pervading pessimism and apprehension of fear by focusing on the conditions of social coherence and coordination with respect to specific environments. It reinforces the idea that the fear that portrays the possibilities of human extinction from hostile environmental conditions should also act as a constructive catalyst that helps create and cultivate a new paradigm of symbiotic coexistence.

Ecopremonition follows an intense experience of geomorphological affect: “nontechnologically mediated experiences of affective and fearistic energy that causes people to feel with the land” (Arnold 97). Premonitory fear caused by geomorphological affect generates “latent ecological energies” (Arnold 97) triggering “the connective tissues that exist between interdependent webs of human and other than human life form” (Arnold 97). Premonition and solastalgic fear emanating as a result of close contact with distressed ecological scapes are intertwined states of cognition that materialize into dominant forces of influence when they interact with the spatio-temporal realities of fissured earthscapes. Ecopremonition is an initial stage in the process of experiencing ecofear. However, it is not an alternative mode of defining ecofear. It is a transient but continuous experience that is a feature of diseased environments and one of the different manifestations of fear in which individuals are instilled with an uncanny sense of foreboding about an impending ecocatastrophe that can severely affect their existence.

Yi-Fu Tuan's influential work, *Landscapes of Fear* (2013) which explores specific places ravaged by severe ecological conditions like droughts, floods and cyclones that devastate the lives and livelihoods of the inhabitants hints at ecopremonition. It highlights various instances of supernatural visions by soothsayers and witches who predict ecocatastrophes and interpret them as agents of nature's vengeance meted out as fitting punishments for human hubris. For the inhabitants of Sundarbans and Dhapa, the fear of their environment stems from different sources. The deltaic coastlines of Sundarbans are battered by the relentless seawater that encroaches the land and establishes new boundaries whereas in the east Calcutta wetlands adjoining Dhapa, the uncontrolled disposal of garbage contaminates the soil, water and air. Both the places face an ecosystem decline due to large human ecological footprints and uncontrolled acts of "environmental despoliation" (Fisher 16). Premonition functions as a pervasive element which heightens the existential crisis of the people before nature's wrath. This paper will analyse how fear, predicted by premonitory consciousness, acts as an interlocutor in the understanding of the ecological reality which is advertently linked to human actions.

In *Jolkor*, ecopremonition is mediated through the complex liminal figure of Bishu 'pagol' (Bishu, the mad man) whose visionary bardic fervour is the source of many grim forebodings about the fate of the land. Bishu's apocalyptic outpouring is not without reason since the salt-saturated landscape of the Sundarbans, induced by the emerging 'bheri' culture (salt water aquaculture for tiger prawn cultivation), has lost its fertility and the capacity to resist erosion. The other threat is the urban waste-water discharge from Kolkata that has accumulated in the marshlands thereby contaminating and destroying the mangrove roots that aerially spread over an extensive region around the delta. Bishu predicts a terrible catastrophe that will decimate the Sundarbans archipelago and erase it from the face of the Earth unless humans cultivate an ecological awareness and take steps to stop the 'slow violence' (Nixon 6) meted out to these biologically diverse waterlands.

Sasmal's narrative progresses with intermittent spaces where Bishu's character oscillates between premonition and reality. Bishu's imagination is fundamentally premonitory as his experiences of the delta's ecosystemic condition in reality projects an apocalyptic future of deluge and destruction. *Jolkor* interprets how the recent developmental projects in Sundarbans are constantly focusing on raising the economic standards of its people and thereby mindfully deviating from the issue of preserving the balance of this fragile deltaic ecosystem. It represents the consciousness of the island dwellers who are in dire need of financial stability and are equally worried about the conservation of the delta. The novel explains how the new industrial endeavours aided by urban and corporate investments is gradually affecting the geomorphology of the place. There is a conscious but subdued element of fear for one's surrounding environmental collapse in this narrative that is surpassed by the prevailing strides of industrialisation and development. The sense of fear is reinforced by Bishu's premonitory monologues that reveal the humans as the primary agents who are facilitating the collapse of the delta. Deforestation of mangroves and sand draining enterprises are weakening the natural defence barriers of the delta from frequent cyclones. The ecofear in Sasmal's novel cannot be identified as an exclusive fear of hostile environmental conditions. It is also a fear of the human element that is involved in the creation of circumstances where nature is impeded from defending what it chooses to.

Ecofear in *The Trash Diggers* is embodied and metastasized in the extensive wastelands of Dhapa, an urban waste disposal land at the margins of Kolkata, that severely affect the East Kolkata wetlands that was created in 1879 with the objective of revisioning solid waste management practices. Central to this garbage scape are the ‘trash diggers’ or the waste pickers who stand testimony to the manufactured landscape shaped by garbage that is produced in and transported from Kolkata. This manufactured wasteland of Dhapa offers testimony to Timothy Morton’s idea of ‘dark ecology’ (Morton 5) where the garbage mountains are enmeshed within the memory of the trash pickers by ‘perpetually interconnecting’ (Alaimo 476) with the corporeal dimensions of their reality which in turn generates a pervading sense of ‘ecophobia’ (Estok 2). Ecopremonition comes naturally to the waste pickers whose lives are submerged in the landscape of trash. Their livelihood battles are characterised by the explicit fear about their health and the deterioration of the adjoining wetlands.

“The denizens of this waste scape are inheritors of an ecology that is subjected to many mutations...”

The Dhapa wasteland is a typical example of a landscape that has undergone relentless repetitive modifications from a self-sustaining wetland-community based on recycling biodegradable solid waste to a mountain of stench and trash. The degradation of the East Calcutta Wetlands in the course of the last century has a discernible effect on the population who reside in the adjoining areas of Dhapa. The uncontrolled garbage disposal has transformed the soil into a garbage substrate filled with chipped bricks, stones, glass pieces, nails and plastics. There are instances where trash diggers are sucked into the garbage gyres and their corpses are discovered after days. The transformation of this wetland ecosystem into a wasteland ecosystem evidently indicates the immediate effects of urbanization in Kolkata that encroaches on specific natural landscapes that had been once looked after by sensible and insightful people striving to maintain the ecological balance and biodiversity at the margins of the city. Ghosh’s depiction of the trash diggers negotiating in multiple ways with their bounded universe of trash powerfully resonates with the idea of ‘storied matter’ advanced by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann in their work, *Material Ecocriticism* (2014). Hence the story of trash is “matter’s “narrative” power of creating configurations of meanings and substances, which enter with human lives into a field of co-emerging interactions. [M]atter itself becomes a text where dynamics of “‘diffuse’ agency and non-linear causality are inscribed and produced” (Cohen 10).

Garbage as matter in the east Calcutta wetlands with its attendant meanings of visual and geomorphological transformation is constantly juxtaposed with the idealism that informed the preservation policies about the place in the past. The centrality of waste subsumes the narrative to such an extent that it blots out former memories of the landscape and acquires the status of a permanent reality that constantly impinges on the spatio-cognitive understanding of the waste pickers and evokes fear. *The Trash Diggers*, therefore, becomes a cautionary tale that predicts that these large mountains of garbage that will materialise into ‘dark artefacts’ (Hudson 82), that symbolise a periodic gesture of the anthropocene and also leave behind a legacy for the future earth community to study the material, spatial and temporal relations between the environment and humans. The trash diggers of Dhapa live in fear of their fellow humans who lack the imagination to enter into the squalid, stench-filled lives of the people who recycle, live and survive

in the wastes that they never created. The denizens of this waste scape are inheritors of an ecology that is subjected to many mutations and dark metamorphoses in which the things we take for granted like the visibility of soil, grass and a vista leading to the horizon are clearly absent.

“Beware! Can’t you hear something coming?”: Ecofear in Biren Sasmal’s *Jolkor*

Biren Sasmal’s *Jolkor* focuses on the slow death of the wetlands amidst the constant flux that the Sundarban islands are subjected to. In fact the element of fear in this novel is closely linked with the degenerate conditions of the delta’s ecology that stand in sharp contrast to the newfound financial prosperities of the island dwellers. These two opposing drives, namely the devolution of the ecocentric and the evolution of the anthropocentric, rupture the societal fabric of coexistence and shared wellbeing. Nicole M. Merola lists a whole spectrum of Anthropocene affects, of which fear is a major emotion, that characterise contemporary cultural forms.

The “avowal of the eco-unpleasant” (Merola 32) is therefore an important Anthropocene maker and these fear-based emotions create a ‘solastalgia’ (Richards 266), an affective emotional response of “free floating-mobile energy” (Arnold 97), an existential lament for irreparable loss when faced with attenuated environmental conditions. In these narratives it becomes an inherent characteristic in the collective consciousness of the deltaic population. The expansion of industrial activities erodes the delta’s soil and weakens the coastline thereby continuously exposing the land to the constant battering of the sea waters. There is a serious visual repercussion that is linked to the image of the sea moving closer to the interiors of the island. Surrounding atolls and deltaic lowlands frequently vanish due to minor cyclones that reinforce the sense of Sundarbans’ total submergence in the near future. It is in this context that a premonitory consciousness emerges in the figure of Bishu, a soothsayer who is tormented by the environmental exploitation in Sundarbans. Bishu’s incoherent ramblings comprise of truths and realities incomprehensible to the everyday human preoccupied with quotidian life,

... you are all a bunch of ingrates! Do you protect your Mother? ... All you do is ask. Give! Give! Sometimes you need to give back. How many of you have entered into the Sundarbans forest? What have you seen? ‘Bonbibi’ is suffocating...she cannot breathe. Ministers, bureaucrats and the ignorant rich intoxicated with greed are transgressing her holy sanctum. She is dying....Can’t you see? Can’t you choose to see? (Sasmal 66)

Bishu predicts an apocalyptic future of a natural catastrophe in which the delta will be deluged beyond recovery. Bishu is the spokesperson for the suffocating deltaic wetland of Sundarbans of which he is an organic extension. He stands at that crucial juncture in the environmental history of the archipelago where his grim auguries about the transformation of Sundarbans’ wetland ecosystem into a wasteland is more a material reality than a figment of a diseased imagination. The novel’s point of entry into the spreading environmental degradation of the Sundarbans is through the ‘bheri’ culture (commercial prawn aquaculture) practised across the islands of Sundarbans as a new profit making initiative. In order to meet the demands of a burgeoning international market extensive land areas used for agriculture were being converted into ‘bheris’ through a process wherein the salt water from the bay was channelled through pipelines into fertile lands turning them into breeding grounds for tiger prawn eggs. This renders

the once-fertile land unfit for agriculture and the image of lush rice fields is violently replaced by a beehive of emerging brickfields and quarries that dot the landscape of the archipelago with alarming intensity.

A brief fact file about the Sundarban's fragile ecosystem reveals, among other things an alarming rise in human population and a rapid disappearance of large areas of agricultural land. The increased levels of salinity in the topsoil, infiltration of salt water into fresh water ponds and a visibly weakening soil profile are the key factors that add to the inability of the Sundarbans to withstand storms and waves that frequent the deltaic coastline. The noxious cause-effect chain of the pollution scape is outlined by Visakha, a character in the novel, who has a keen sense of place since she is witness to the widening arc of the degradation process. She is a witness to the anthropogenic harm in the area that expresses itself in the multiple enterprises surrounding the delta like mines, quarries and salt water embankments.

These activities require huge amounts of sand and clay to lay the base for brickfields and embankments. Large pipelines are constructed along the deltaic coastline that extract sand from the coast and transport it to the site of operations. Visakha witnesses the withering and eroding coastlines giving way to the bay water that enters into the mainland. Although Visakha is a mere housekeeper and helper in the laboratory where Nilratan, the ichthyologist works, she has the capacity to educate Nilratan about the links in this pollution chain. She explains how the brickyard chimneys dominate the landscape of the coastline like parasitic nostrils of a mammoth beast which devours the sand and soil from the flood plains. The brickyard chimneys contaminate the air surrounding the mangroves and dispose of substantial waste into the shallow waters that severely affect the biodiversity of the wetlands. This untreated sewage water is dumped into the Bidyadhari river which has been the major drainage system in the districts of Kolkata and North 24 Parganas. The Bidyadhari is responsible for carrying untreated urban wastes from Kolkata into the estuarine rivers like Raimangal and Kalindi that surround the Sundarbans archipelago. This staggering quantity of urban wastes that is dumped into the Bidyadhari has destroyed the mangrove ecosystem of the Sundarbans.

The suburban expansion of Kolkata was another major deterrent since it blocked the flow of the Ganges, the only source of fresh water into the estuarine rivers like the Raimangal and Bidyadhari. Due to rapid urbanization new courses were charted for these rivers that increased siltation and decreased their capacity for carrying fresh water from the Ganges. The insufficient amount of freshwater in the estuaries around the delta caused a massive imbalance in the salt and fresh water ratio which in turn adversely affected the survival of the mangroves and the wetland habitat.

The Sundarbans is located at a close proximity to the Bay of Bengal and the alarming rise of the seawater is consequently followed by the increase of salinity in the deltaic soil. In the later part of the novel, Bishu gives a speech at the conference of the Indian Waterworks Association where he shares his experience of witnessing the decaying mangroves that have perished due to high amounts of sea salt absorbance. Bishu points out that plankton, which play an important role in the marine food chain, are vanishing due to the incursion of urban wastewater into the wetlands. As a result, the other participants in the estuarine food-web that feed on planktons will gradually perish resulting in the dismantling of the entire mangrove ecosystem.

Sasmal's *Jolkor* is a perfect example of a Global South wetland narrative which is transforming into an unthinkable site of ecological disruption and continued human neglect. The profiteering prawn mafia and their cruel methods of extracting agricultural lands from poor farmers for 'bheri' culture completely ignore the ecological requirements for maintaining the balance of the wetland ecosystem. This form of 'terragogic' despotism and extractive practices have created a mercantile section in the population of Sundarbans who invest in the commercially successful ways of utilizing the soil and water without considering the adverse impact on the future of the delta and her ecosystem. The farmers and the fishers who live at the edge of these deltas are influenced by the corporate firms to give away their lands for salt water aquaculture.

Lack of foresight and the promise of abundant monetary gain lure the common landholders into selling their ancestral lands. These myopic human activities create a condition of contamination that insidiously destroys the health of natural wetlands and mangrove tracts around Sundarbans. The rampant destruction of mangroves that acted as a natural defence system against raging cyclones creates havoc across the archipelago. As a result, Sundarban's biodiversity is at an ecological threshold where a small change can trigger a cataclysmic fallout. The ecological uncanny embodied in Bishu's mad visions invokes a fear of the unknown since the not-too-distant possibility of the submergence of the Sundarbans also signals the loss of home and dwelling in the place. Bishu remembers a wetland that embraced a practical example of sustenance, interconnectivity of lifeforms and a symbol of an interstitial ecosystem that had endured its existence at the edge of land and water due to the once sensible human understanding about the difference between preservation and mindless utilitarianism. Bishu's poetic monologues confront humankind with an unsettling realization about our true place in the grand scheme of things. His presence evokes an eerie detachment to the vanity of human exceptionalism and a self-assumed anarchic dominance that is far less obvious than anyone can imagine.

In fact, Bishu's character plays an integral role in identifying the Sundarbans within a socio-ecological structure where the geomorphological and climatic changes evokes fear and highlights premonitory conditions in the population. As a flood and cyclone prone delta, Sundarbans can be the exemplary material site to articulate and substantiate the concept of 'ecofear' in a wetland ecosystem.

In this novel, ecopremonition is instrumental to the understanding of a much required sensitization about conserving and preserving nature that is expressed through the premonitory monologues of Bishu. In his first conversation with Dr Nilratan, the ichthyologist, Bishu says,

This biodiversity that surrounds us across the 102 islands of the delta is extremely fragile. It can fall apart at the slightest flick of a finger, just as a glass breaks when it is hit by a pebble. A cyclone can literally suck these islands into its whirlpool and decimate their existence forever.

Inform Everyone! Tell them everything they have and everything they have seen will all be lost by the year of 2050. Ring the bells! Beware!"
(Sasmal 30-31)

Bishu's jeremiads use fear as a corrective and warning to rouse the ignorant island dwellers who will be the first to incur Nature's wrath. Bishu is the interpreter of Sundarban's malady and he understands how the deltaic wetland has evolved into a withered and eroded stretch of landform that will soon be consumed by rising waters. Bishu rambles before inspector Mazumdar at the local police station, "Can you hear? Something is coming! Beware! Listen carefully" (Sasmal 111).

Bishu says that the tree trunks resemble the parched, dry and eroded bones of the corpses. He also questions Mazumdar if he had ever inhaled the air of the primitive forest and listened to the lamentations of the rivers, air, soil and water in Sundarbans. The novel concludes with the surreal picture of dead fish being washed ashore as an apocalyptic deluge devours Sundarbans and the surrounding townships and coastal villages. Although Sasmal's narrative deals with the socio-historical background of Sundarbans from a diachronic perspective, it transforms into an environmentally apocalyptic text at its climax. The dead fishes poisoned with pesticides and the lashing waves from the sea creates an uncanny image where nature, subjected to slow decay by human activities, retaliates with an unreckonable primitive force.

The conclusion evokes a strange reality; surreal and uncanny, that intensifies the deluge in an unfathomable dimension. Apocalyptic narratives are essentially linked with the idea of complete destruction of civilization. But they also reinforce positive sensibilities that help in mitigating the hopelessness that hinders the much needed changes for creating new trajectories of environmental preservation. The manifestation of destruction in apocalyptic narratives are inherently fear-inducing as they uproot the possibilities of a sustainable future. Similarly, Sasmal's narrative goads and shocks the reader into a deeper understanding of the ecological reality of the Sundarbans that is gradually on the verge of total submergence. This is best expressed by Bishu Pagol's reprimanding tone when he is about to be driven out from the police station when he exhorts with great clarity, "No! I am not mad. You people are mad—mad after so many things! But not mad after the health of the delta" (Sasmal 109).

"Rotting garbage and billowing smoke": Anthropogenic fear signatures in Ghosh's *The Trash Diggers*

Waste narratives create a topographical defamiliarization and a new mode of understanding fear that relate to the lived experiences of people belonging to a specific place. Wastes are post-purpose objects that act as potential signifiers of the fear caused by anthropogenic signatures on the face of the earth. Waste can alienate and also defamiliarize everyday objects and landscapes, dismantling them and reassembling them in ways to shock and jolt the human mind into the recognition of earth's terrifying altered reality. A striking example in this context is the photography of Edward Burtynsky who in his documentary, *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch* (2018), attempts to portray the exponential accumulation of plastics, concrete and techno-fossils has left an 'indelible human signature' on the earth's processes. Burtynsky's photographs are witness to the strange realities of the twenty-first century phenomenon where the spatio-material dimensions surrounding human existence are constructed or shaped by garbage.

There is a distinct element of fear that manifests in the photographs portraying extensive areas extracted by mining and quarrying. There are photographs showing extensive areas filled

with electronic wastes and used tyres. These abandoned landscapes are perfect representations of waste-scapes that completely lack the presence of humans and anything that is considered natural. These wastelands resemble the postapocalyptic landscapes that will inherit the earth unless humankind understands the urgency of a targeted change in their perception. In a similar way, Dhrubajyoti Ghosh's photographs in *The Trash Diggers* (2017) depict a Global South garbage-scape in the dump site of Dhapa, Kolkata, and narrates the unimaginable lives of the waste pickers who are the permanent residents of the place. This dumpsite overlooking the 'East Calcutta Wetlands' is the largest waste disposal site in Kolkata and is also known for its recycling and solid waste management system.

Ghosh's narrative portrays mountains of trash, essentially non-biodegradable, accumulated in heaps around the site. Layers of trash disposal have created garbage substrates from which one cannot differentiate the soil. The premonitory undertone in this narrative runs parallel to the transformation of the landscape and it materializes at the end through the visualization of a dark ecology completely bereft of life. This prediction of witnessing an unending expanse of waste that devours nature and civilization aligns Ghosh's narrative with the idea of ecopremonition. Ghosh believed that garbage, its production and accumulation acts as an indicator of the "progress of civility of a community" (Ghosh 12). While elaborating on the difference between 'waste recycling communities' and 'wasteful communities,' he points out, "To what extent a community, a race, a nation, a country is civilized depends upon the amount of waste it has to throw away" (Ghosh 12). The concept of transcorporeality is essential to the understanding of the new forms of human entanglement with the wastes that shapes their everyday realities and aspects of existence. Stacy Alaimo defines 'transcorporeality' in a "materialist and posthumanist sense of the human as substantially and perpetually interconnected with the flows of substances and the agencies of the environment" (476). This entanglement is the inclusive whole of disparate elements which are forced to unite in a 'plastisphere' (Eriksen 153) or human-made plastic environments. The trash diggers are the residents of this exclusive ecological space without nature.

Landscape is imbricated in the understanding of culture since it is a vital element of the memory which identifies, interacts and coalesces to form the basis of nature and human relationship. Ghosh's narrative on garbage-scapes elaborates on this connection and explicates how garbage is not exactly 'a matter out of place' (Douglas 36) but an extension of the socio-material reality of people and the way in which they treat their places of existence. In her photographic essay, "Misplaced Matter" Cindy Godden-Bryson describes her experience in a 40 year old dumpsite located at the inner suburban area of Phnom Penh, Cambodia. It was a glaring instance where people were 'juxtaposed against the background of rotting garbage and massive trucks billowing smoke' (Bryson 84).

Bryson and Ghosh have both portrayed similar characteristics of dumpsites at the edge of two metropolises (Phnom Penh and Kolkata). Their documentation of the waste pickers and their surrounding environment is a witness to Global South garbage-scapes that are directly linked to the socio-materialist and consumerist realities of the urban dwellers in those cities. In the Introduction to her essay Bryson describes garbage affect as "Looking at the flattened mountains, a noxious miasma filling my nostrils, I was awestruck. Hundreds of waste pickers were sorting through rubbish, sometimes dangerously close to the rumbling trucks and menacing bulldozers" (84). Ghosh also puts forward identical experiences during his observation and research period at

the Dhapa dumpsite. He mentions the incident of 20 February, 2015, when Kalyani Mondal, a garbage picker was ‘crushed to death under a bulldozer while working on the Dhapa dumpsite’ (Ghosh 4).

The author’s shocking experience of looking at the vast, almost unending stretches of garbage heaps and mountains of trash looming dangerously over the everyday lives of the waste pickers became a highlight on the cover design of his book. The cover highlights Ghosh’s statement, “I saw her at the dhapa waste disposal ground. Chipped bricks, stones, wooden and glass pieces, nails and yet, she was working barefoot. It is a garbage substrate, we know-and still. I was bewildered... elephants walk barefoot. They have a callous layer of skin at the bottom of their feet. But humans?” (Ghosh 9). This bewilderment that Ghosh experiences is characterized by shock and fear. Ghosh observes the explicit erasure of the demarcation between the human and the non-human.

The dump site at Dhapa is an existing testimony of the rampant urban consumerism of Kolkata. This post-purpose detritus-scape is the representation of the social and collective sensibility of the city dwellers who revel in deluded cornucopian ideas of nature. The dumpsite abound in inorganic plastic wastes that give way to self-combustion due to high heat and humidity thereby causing caustic smoke to drift away from the plastic garbage heaps and contaminate the atmosphere surrounding the wetlands. All these factors are responsible for serious health hazards faced by the waste pickers who live in the middle of these inhuman conditions. Dhapa’s dumpsite ignites topophobia or fear of specific topographical features in the waste pickers when they come face to face with the giant heaps of garbage that blocks the clear view of the horizon. The quantifiability of waste, its mass and extension act like a devouring mechanism that gradually overshadows the lives of the waste pickers. This matter regardless of its composition and its materiality percolates into the life processes of the waste pickers. This garbage in its sheer magnitude becomes a cause of fear that someday can devour the miniscule lives who inhabit around it.

Fear in this narrative is highlighted by the normalization of this dreadful reality as a continuing way of life which will degrade the east Calcutta wetlands and take over the health and wellbeing of the waste picking population. The unending waste accumulation that occurs in the dumping yard conjures an image of conspicuous consumption which sets in motion perennial cycles of consumer regurgitation and acquisition. Individual acts of consumption may not appeal to our ecological conscience, but the augmentation of every isolated act of consumption proliferates into a shocking picture of the uncontrolled and widespread degeneration of the natural world. The photographs in Ghosh’s novel portray urban consumption and evaluate waste statistics that ‘visually connects’ with a fearful trajectory that projects a garbage ecology that supplants the ecosystemic balance in the area at the cost of a select population who act out of compulsion and unavailability of alternatives. The view of the east Calcutta wetlands and the Dhapa dumpsite portrays an unusual juxtaposition where the mammoth heaps of garbage almost resemble the waves of Tsunami that will engulf the wetland areas located at its proximity. Recent urban developments have shown a considerable encroachment of extensive wetland areas including salt marshes, meadows, sewage farms and settling ponds.

This situation is by far one of the most crucial examples of ecological disruption in a third world metropolis like Kolkata. A bird's eye view of this garbage landscape overshadowing the wetlands is a witness to the ever increasing footprint of the humans that can devour the wetland ecosystem and the processes of sustainable development practised among the wetland dwellers in east Calcutta. Ghosh's narrative invokes a sense of the ecological uncanny by highlighting the sense of ecofear that characterises the lives of the trash diggers in the plastic-scape, a spatio-material accumulation of anthropogenic disposal, a rapidly expanding hyper-object that devours and lays waste to the surrounding natural landscapes. It premonizes a dreadful reality where a non-natural force can obliterate the coexisting links between humans and their ecology.

This sea of garbage is an anthropogenic deluge that has the potential to reshape the environment and our understanding of natural landscapes. The plastic wastes in the Dhapa dumpsite can erase the traditional concept of what land looked like in the first place. According to Saari and Mullen, place-based pedagogy regarding 'dark ecological' (Morton 5) places "brings to the surface the short-circuits, objects and sources of anxiety inherent in ecological awareness, thereby challenging our notions of 'place' as bounded, identifiable and (intellectually) safe" (Saari and Mullen 1471). Hence these wastes are like material 'hyperobjects' (Morton 11) that run contrary to notions of place as homogenous, relational or knowable.

Sasmal's *Jolkor* and Ghosh's *The Trash Diggers* can be described as narratives of resistance, resilience and change that critique the foundations of anthropocentric consumerism. They actively engage with ecopremonition and ecofear as mediators to reconfigure the existing socio-ecological perception that can mitigate the complexities of sustaining and maintaining a balanced ecosystem. These novels are part of the Global South narratives that highlight the issues of environmentalism and ecological disruption. The authors have revisioned the current material realities of West Bengal's wetlands through their writings in order to sensitize the reader to the possibilities of real-time ecological fallouts and the attendant feeling of ecofear that characterises the lives of the poor who are dependent on the wetland ecosystem and the trash landscapes for their livelihood. Functioning as a deterrent to mindless consumption, ecofear becomes "a radical hyperobject" of sorts (Fisher 7) that complicates any easy connection between subject and object that reorients and questions complacent assumptions about our place in the world and the ways in which we forge our relationships with ourselves and non-human nature.

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Ecofear in Mohan Koirala's *Ambassadors of the Wetland*

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Abstract

People who are conscious of the impact of environmental degradation become fearful of its consequences. They deal with this issue in their creations. Such creative works including literature function to make the readers both aware of the possibility and fearful of the consequences. As a result, these ecoconscious people will be ready to work for the preservation of the environment. This bifurcated idea of ecofearism (generation of the fear of the impact of environmental degradation through consciousness, and the resultant readiness to preserve the ecology) can be seen in the epic *Simasaarakaa Raajdut* [*Ambassadors of the Wetland*] composed by a modernist Nepali poet Mohan Koirala. Written on the poet's deathbed and published posthumously, the epic deals with the fear of the protagonist about the destruction of the flora and fauna of the Nepalese plains. It depicts the fate and fear of the birds and bird conservers. The epic symbolically connects the fear of the poet and the protagonist with the increasing fear of ecoconscious human beings about the possible annihilation of human civilization if the depletion of ecological balance continues in the same extent as it is going on now. In this context, this article interprets the epic to throw light on the connection among growing human consciousness, fear, growing ecological imbalance and the poet's appeal for the preservation of nature. For this qualitative research, the ideas of ecofearism developed by Simon C. Estok, and R. Micheal Fisher and other growing ecofearists have been used as a theoretical perspective. The step-wise formula of ecofearist studies "Life-Consciousness-Knowledge-Eco-Crisis-Eco-Fearism" has been referred to in the development of the paper.

Keywords: Annihilation, ecoconsciousness, ecology, fear, poetry

Introduction: Ecoconsciousness in Koirala's Writings

Mohan Koirala is a modernist Nepali poet. His contribution is noted for various experiments in Nepali poetry. Bishnubibhu Ghimire claims that Koirala is the most powerful poet of his time (156). Tulasi Bhattarai gives a detail of Koirala's creations and reports that Koirala started his poetic journey from 1943. However, his notable modernist creation was a poem "Ghaate Yuga" ["Wounded Age"] (1960) that dealt with the end of democratic freedom in the nation and the consequent impact on the life of the people (138). The title itself shows Koirala's focus on the impact of human activities on the life of innocent people.

Many of Koirala's poetic creations are connected with nature. Some of the titles themselves establish the poet's interest on nature: *Himachuli* [*Mountain Peak*], *Gajapath* [*Elephant Trail*], *Leka* [*Mountain Slope*], *Noona Shikharamaa* [*On the Salt Peak*], *Hritu Nimantran* [*Invitation to the Seasons*], *Nilo Maha* [*Blue Honey*], *Nadee Kinaaraakaa Majhee* [*Boatsmen on the Riverbank*], *Himachulee Raktima Chha* [*The Himal Peak is Reddish*], *Yatika Paailaa Khojdai* [*Searching for Yeti's Footsteps*], and his popular poem "Pharseeko Jaraa" ["Pumpkin Root"]. All these titles connect nature and the people in the margin. Tulasi Bhattarai reports that *Leka* [*Mountain Slope*] is Koirala's first long poem, and it gives a beautiful picture of nature and the life in the margin

(139). His “Pharseeko Jaraa” [“Pumpkin Root”] and “Saarangee” [name of a musical instrument] have connection to nature and rustic life images, and thematically they are the satires on the city life that has forgotten nature and humanity. *Nilo Maha* [Blue Honey], according to Bhattarai, is a picture of life in the Nepalese Himalayan region (140) with its highlight on nature and the marginalized people. These poems display that nature is intrinsic in Koirala’s creations.

His last poem *Simasaarakaa Raajdut* [Ambassadors of the Wetland] (2008) shows how nature and the life of the people in the margin are closely connected and the characters fear that if they cannot preserve nature, their existence falls into crisis. Tulasi Bhattarai discusses the background of the creation of this poem. Its ideas and details were collected during the Jungle Literary Festival organized by Chitwan National Park in April 2005. Koirala visited different spots of Sauraha area in the National Park and took a detailed note of the flora and fauna available there. He visited, with a keen interest, the Tharu museum there and collected the details of how the Tharu people were embedded with nature for their livelihood (142). Ghimire opines that the poem “Ambassadors of the Wetland” reads like a jungle of images and symbols that demand the readers’ own preparation to navigate its theme and style. Ghimire claims that the readers need to be sensitive enough in terms of language and theme while reading Koirala’s poetic pieces including this one. He stresses that language is not enough to express the emotions and experiences of this poet (157). These observations of Koirala’s close friends, who are themselves writers and critics, make us think about the connection of the poet and his poem with the ecology, environment and marginality of the Nepalese plains.

Govinda Raj Bhattarai, the editor and preface writer of “Ambassadors of the Wetland,” highlights the poetic sensibility and ecoconsciousness of the poet as expressed in this long poem. Bhattarai mentions that it was the creation on the poet’s deathbed and was published posthumously. And so there is enough connection with death and decay in this poem (1). Bhattarai connects Koirala’s consciousness with the important global theme and trend of literature in the time—ecoliterary scholarship (4). This orientation, as Bhattarai believes, gives an incomparable height of newness and experiment in Nepali poetry (5). Bhattarai further stresses on the fact that the poem is full of conflict, envy, war, terror, bloodshed and suicide. It symbolically covers the seven-decade long history of Nepal as well (12). Finally, Bhattarai claims that this poem presents the conflict between traditional profit-based thinking and recent human thought of the need of protecting the environment (14). This discussion connects the poem with the theme of ecology.

While reading the poem and going through the critics’ views on it, a question that occupied my mind was: Why does the poet use so much destruction in the poem? Similarly, the next question was: Does the poem give expression to the poet’s fear of his death and the decay of the environment in the world? This article is an attempt to search for the answer to these questions.

Ecofearism as an Approach to Literary Studies

The fearist thinkers believe that fear is “basic to human nature and in general to animals’ instinct” (Adhikari, Kalu and Subba xiii). They connect it with the growing problems in ecology: “The eco-turbulence has become much more dangerous than any other natural calamities like earthquake, volcano, tornadoes, cyclones and the like” (li). Linda Buzzell and Craig Chalquist argue that “[s]immering eco-anxiety had been with us for years but now we had entered the realm of eco-fear and full-blown eco-trauma” (5). They further highlight the growing ecoanxiety on the

globe: “Many of the emotional conditions we’ll talk about are already familiar to us in their non-environmental forms, but the “eco” in front of their names creates newly-specific meanings that relate them to the environmental causes of the current disorder” (7). They argue that it is good to replace the term “ecoanxiety” with “ecofear” because “the first term implies a cause within the mind, whereas the second recognizes this fear to be a genuine and realistic response to outer crisis” (8). Finally, they conclude that ecofear is “completely normal and useful, even if profoundly disturbing” (9). This article argues that these ecofearist concerns are expressed in Koirala’s poem “Simasaarakaa Raajdut” [“Ambassadors of the Wetland”].

Ecoconsciousness is naturally connected with fear in the sense that this consciousness is the result of the growing depletion of environmental resources in the earth. As the word ‘eco’ in English has its Greet root “oikos” that means *home*, the destruction of the environment is connected with the destruction of our home. And “[w]hen our home is threatened, fear is natural and even healthy, just as it is in a burning building.” Thus, “[t]he fear in eco-anxiety is the body’s healthy response to a frightening situation, a signal that something must be done and action must be taken.” After all, “if [one’s] home is on fire, fear and then actions are the appropriate responses” (Buzzell and Chalquist 10). In this connection, R. M. Fisher argues that “the *ecology of fear* construct and dynamic is inevitably constructed in a co-emergence with the *ecology of risk* construct and dynamic in systems” (“Further” 6).

Fisher contextualizes ecocriticism in connection with the ‘culture of fear’ and reports that the scholarship goes back at least to the mid-1980s, although “the dynamic had begun much earlier” (“Ecocriticism” 13). Conclusively, he argues that “to focus on the context of the Eco-Fear Problem” is to take account of “all the other major problems, including environmental crises, ecophobia, racism, sexism, etc.” (13). This idea of ecofearism is connected even with the survival strategy of an organism, for example in this case, primarily that of the human beings. It is argued that the long-term survival of the species “depends on the ability to learn from, and optimally respond to, a potential or real threatening stimulus (Mobbs, Hagan, Dalgleish, Silston and Prévost 6). It means that the fear connected with ecological depletion is a fear connected with the existential crisis of the organism.

As ecofear is consciousness and need-based, its nature is different from place to place or community to community. It is claimed that ecofear is,

...a culture-specific trope. There could be various reasons for ecofear like climate change and the resultant floods, devastating cyclones, extensive wildfires and even a viral pandemic. The spectrum of fear may vary according to the agencies, context of interactions, and the various reasons for the fear, depending on the cultures in discussion. (Concept Note 1)

Ecofear connects humans with nature and at the same time disconnects them from nature; and so relates itself with the context of human-made calamities.

Adhikari, Kalu and Subba believe that “the present global ecological decline can also be properly addressed by the help of positive fear imposed in the minds of the people on time” (40). They argue that “[i]f we become able to do so, then it is possible to save the devastating condition

of the ecological and environmental situation of the globe” (40). Thus, the ultimate goal of ecofear studies is to make people aware of the present condition of ecology and environment and to motivate them for the preservation of nature.

Koirala’s poem “Ambassadors of the Wetland” has presented the scenes, characters and actions that make the readers aware of the critical situation of the balance in nature. The poem displays the poet’s ecoconsciousness; and consequent ecofear that has been portrayed throughout the poem. The following sections discuss how the poem is guided by ecoconsciousness and ecofear. The quotes from the poems are my free translations of the lines in Nepali.

Pro-nature and Anti-nature Characters

The poem “Ambassadors of the Wetland” presents contrasts between pro-nature and anti-nature characters. It also shows how the nature is threatened by human-made culture. Out of about one dozen characters in the poem, a few of them are birds, too. Here, one type of bird, whatever is their number, is calculated as a single character. There are many ducks, many cranes and many other species of birds. The roles of ducks and cranes are dominating and symbolic. This use of birds as characters shows how human beings look at the world of nature. Each bird may have their specific lifestyle that distinguishes it from the rest. But human thought is developed in such a way that all birds are similar. After all, these birds represent the force of nature that is usually calm and moves in its own way until it has to resist against threat upon natural balance. In the last section of the poem, the birds attack the human beings and show how the encroachment into the nature results into a fearful situation for the human beings themselves.

The human characters in the poem are of two types: pro-nature and anti-nature. Durgam Mahato is the leader in the anti-nature camp. His name ‘Durgam’ itself has some cacophonous connotation. The word ‘durgam’ in Nepali means some place that is very difficult to reach. Though reached, it is not easy to accommodate there. In the poem, this character exhibits a similar attitude. It is very difficult to get him convinced on the value of nature for human society. For him, immediate material benefit is everything. He is fighting to register the jungle in his name as a personal property so that he would grow rich and can rule all species in the jungle. The poet mentions that if he wins the case in the court, he will make the birds his labourers in the field. This intention of Durgam is symptomatic of the characters of the modern human world that plans to capture nature and use it as a personal property.

Durgam develops a special relation with the people of the capital city of the nation to fulfil his objectives. He is ready to accept a lady who is impregnated by someone else so that the relation with the family of the powerful will be beneficial for him in the days ahead to achieve his objectives. This connection with the city is symbolic of his connection with the culture of profit, treachery and enjoyment at any cost with the use of money and power. This lady is his fourth wife and the only one who tries to help him in his plan. There are very few people in his support; but all the rest cannot speak in front of him because of his wealth, power, connection and control.

On the other hand, there are characters whose sole motive of life is to protect the ecology. Karatab Chaudhary is the lead character in this group. His name ‘Karatab,’ in the Tharu tone of speaking Nepali, means duty. The poet symbolically means that it is our duty to preserve the nature. He is from the aborigine community of Nepalese plain unlike Durgam Mahato who belongs

to the immigrant community from India to Nepal. It also indicates the connection of the aborigine people with the nature as they are embedded with it. Karatab is devoted to establish a hospital for birds. He has seen many birds being wounded and sick in the wetland. He can feel their pain because he has been close to them from his childhood. But Durgam does not have such feelings and attachments. He is an immigrant and wants to collect as much as possible. For Karatab, the land is for all flora and fauna; whereas, for Durgam, the land is just a means of profit. This attitudinal difference is the major focus of the poem.

Karatab's supporters are his wife, daughter and some innocent villagers who cannot speak against Durgam and his destructive attitude and activities. Robert Mack, an Australian tourist, is also in Karatab's support. All these people are from the margin. Their creative struggle is the struggle against the destructive mainstream. All of these characters are working with unselfish motives; whereas, the characters in the opposite camp are all greedy and treacherous. Govinda Raj Bhattarai argues that all these characters, who work for the preservation of nature, represent freedom and democracy that is always under threat by the profit-minded people. Bhattarai stresses that the focus of the poem on the history of the bird's civilization has highlighted the profit-oriented and the cruel human mentality (15) developed as the common culture in modern cities. Thus, the poem shows how the pro-nature characters (by implication the people in the rural society) fear the loss of ecological balance; whereas the anti-nature characters do not fear and so continue to destroy the flora and fauna. It further indicates that ecofear is connected with ecoconsciousness.

Human Induced Destruction: A Scene

The penultimate section of the poem is "Samhaaraleelaa" ["Drama of Apocalypse"]. This section of the poem begins with a sad tone: "He who was never defeated, has been defeated now" (117). When everything in the process of the establishment of the birds' hospital was on the way, an unthought-of incident occurs. One morning, suddenly, all birds in the area are found dead. The devastation in the bird community was found to have happened in a dawn: "The night not ended, the day has not started." The speaker in the poem comments that "the scene exhibits the defeat of undefeatable." It was something unthought-of; but it happened:

So many cranes are dead in a single group
Corpse upon corpse, bird's corpse upon bird's corpse
Crane upon crane
The paddy field is white, filled with fallen cranes
There is no place to speak; there is no place to think of. (117)

The scene of destruction is described further. There are some birds that are about to die. Some are in deep pain. Some are already dead.

The poet describes the horror spread around: "Even the fear is fearful." As hundreds of birds are dead at a place, "nobody has dared to touch any of them/nobody has dared to lift them up." The speaker comments: "It must be late for the hotel/It must be late for the restaurant" (117). These verse lines present the cause of the destruction: the business-minded and consumption-oriented people have planned for this destruction. The poem indicates that Durgam has done it to curb Karatab's attempts of preserving the birds.

The poet symbolically uses the atmosphere of the day to indicate that it is a terrible and man-induced destruction of the nature: “The light has not been able to come because of shame/the dump and dump of fog has not stopped covering the ground” (117). Here, the poet indicates that this is the crime against nature; and must be induced by men: “landscape of crime, geography of crime, line of crime.” Humans have been causing such destruction for ages; this is not the first instance. The poem further mentions that “the more the sun comes up, the more the time is added/the more birds are added dead” (119). It is not only that the number of dead birds increase with the progress of that particular day, but also it symbolically means that with the progress of human civilization the destruction of nature and natural lives have been increasing. The scene has shown that human being is a destroyer.

The scene is even more detailed. On this day, there is no place where the dead duck is not found; they have filled all the ponds. In each house, in each yard, in each verandah, in each child-care centre; there are dead birds everywhere. The scene shows that the old strategies for the preservation of birds do not work now. So, it is necessary for the birds/nature and the nature-lovers to develop a new “survival intelligence as the organism’s ability to master its environment by minimizing local threats and adapting to novel threats in changing ecologies” (Mobbs, Hagan, Dalgleish, Silston and Prévost 2). The new dangers and its “[t]hreatening stimuli” demand the “on-going behaviors to cease” and finally such situations “lead to freezing and the orientation of attention toward the threat” (9). Such a new development in the field causes *ecorage*, i.e., “anger at those we perceive as responsible for the ecocide. Frustrated at not being able to stop the bad actions of others, we may strike out” (Buzzell and Chalquist 19). The people who have been working for the preservation of the ecology get to the point of *ecorage*. Here, Karatab develops such a psychology.

But Durgam is virtually fearless of the consequences of the destruction of nature. It is because “[*faux*] fearlessness is a negative quality, too, if possessed by the so-called elite class who are governing the world economy and committed to destroy the planet through rampant and careless resource extraction in the name of wealth generation” (Adhikari, Kalu and Subba xiv). If the *faux* fearlessness of such elites goes on growing, it is very difficult for the conservationists to go ahead. And this is a very sad moment for the entire humanity. The poem finally indicates this grave reality.

Poet’s Fear of Apocalypse/Ecofear

The crux of the poem is in its last section “The Moment of Suicide.” Here, after the destruction of the birds’ community, i.e., the nature, the human suffering and ultimate destruction in the human world is described. This section begins with a character called Gambheerman’s thought and fate. He is the single person who has foolishly entered into the scene of this destruction to collect the dead birds. He wants to collect as many birds as possible and sell them to the hotels and restaurants to earn a lot. This symbolizes the foolish and materialistic human intervention into nature. As nature is always ready to passively accept any actions against it, humans are encouraged to misuse it for their benefit. But the situation does not remain the same forever.

“If humans do not end their destructive behaviour, there will be nobody to sympathize with them...”

When the human induced destruction crosses the limit, nature turns back at humans. The poem describes that the birds have grown fearless today. No bird is afraid of Gambheerman. Suddenly, the birds begin to attack him:

The ducks perched on Gambheerman's body and began to tear it with teeth.
Gambheerman fell onto the ground; but the ducks did not stop tearing up his body
Now, they began to scratch his cheeks and eyes
The ducks did not stop tearing his body;
It was the anger of the ages.

This shows how fiercely the nature retorts if humans cross the limit. The speaker adds at this point: "Human beings, do you have any spot that pains, too!" (122).

This is a really piercing point: a surprise in the syntax of a question. It indicates the level of human insensitivity. Humans have grown so cruel that they have lost all feelings. As a result, when it comes to its own destruction, there is nothing that will sympathize with humans: "The ducks ask: Gambheerman, why are you screaming uselessly! Do not scream, there is nobody to listen to you now/ Was there anybody to scream for the ducks when you killed it?" (122). This is a serious warning of the poem to the human world. If humans do not end their destructive behaviour, there will be nobody to sympathize with them at the time of apocalypse.

The poem also indicates that the fear is growing among the conscious people about the possible end of humanity on the earth. It exemplifies the process of the growth of ecofearism: "Life-Consciousness-Knowledge-Eco-Crisis-Eco-Fearism" (Adhikari, Kalu and Subba 46). At first, the poem presents the way of life in the modern world: people running after material benefits and pleasure. Durgam's life is an example in case. Slowly, the growth of the consciousness about the need and condition of nature is described. Karatab's consciousness represents this phase of growth towards ecofearism. His activities help to increase the knowledge about the human-nature relation in the world. His conflict with Durgam is a source of knowledge for the people in his village and for the readers of the poem. Even the process of the poet's understanding of the problem is the same. The poet, a conscious individual, looks at life and acquires the knowledge of the reality.

Slowly and gradually, ecocrisis is revealed in the poem. The problems in the birds' world are symbolic of this situation. The final destruction of the birds is its climax. All these realities have grown fear in the poet. It is how a conscious person acquires the fear of the collapse of the nature that ultimately harms the human world. This is a terrible fear in the mind of the poet, i.e., a conscious and sensitive person who is worried about the future of the world. The fear that the destruction of the ecology leads to the destruction of the human world is ecofear. It is very effectively presented in this poem.

The next aspect of ecofear is presented at the end of the poem. It is not only the birds that are destroyed, but Jhumka, Karatab's daughter and the winner of Miss Tharu competition, is also found dead. It can be assumed that she has committed suicide. The title of the last section "The Moment of Suicide" indicates it, however. There is no other cause for her demise than the failure in the accomplishment of her commitment to help her father in the establishment of the hospital

for birds. Her death is not only the end of a girl's life, but it is also the end of a young spirit of the 'Miss Tharu' who has committed her life to make the world a beautiful and inclusive place for all living species. This is the suicide of the human spirit of preservation and balanced ecology. This is also a symbolic act of the society that compels the nature lovers to die in the lack of support. This is the greatest fear of the poet and that of ecoconscious people in the world at present.

Jhumka has gone through ecodpression, i.e., "melancholy and even despair if we don't support people and help them find new joy and purpose in life" (Buzzell and Chalquist). "Eco-despair is the most serious form of eco-depression" (27) that leads to ecosuicidality, i.e., the individual's condition that shows them "so upset about the state of the environment that they are suicidal" (28). Jhumka has committed suicide because of the same. This aspect and incident in the poem is related to the cause of ecofear.

This poem, thus, is an example of the logic that the fear problem "is inter- and transdisciplinary in nature, and cannot be reduced to simple notions of "fear" as a problem in the psychological and psychiatric sense" (Fisher, "Eco-criticism" 18). It further shows that "ecophobic content or their rebuke of it is an obvious yet under-utilized strategy for ecocriticism scholars and other professionals to bring more public attention to society's deepest misdirected fears and anxieties" (Estok 381). At the same time, it exhibits that "representations of ecophobia are culturally nuanced and determined" (Estok 381). As Estok maintains that ecophobia is contextual, "excavating the past is important for understanding ecophobia" (383).

This poem, thus, exhibits the capacity of gathering sympathy in favour of the preservers of nature despite their stark failure in achieving their mission. It has great meaning in relation to the poet's fear of apocalypse. The speaker is able to make the readers realize that the misuse of nature is sure to call upon our ultimate destruction. Such an ecofear can be helpful in the protection of nature as exemplified with the case of Karatab's attempts. Here lies the success of both the poem and that of ecofear studies.

Conclusion

Mohan Koirala's poem "Simasaarakaa Raajdut" ["Ambassadors of the Wetland"] exhibits how ecofear of the poet can take a universal form. Combined with the poet's fear of personal death and the death of human consciousness with the decay of ecological balance on earth the poem details how a society in the Nepalese plains loses an ecoactivist and how that loss leads to despair in the ecoconscious people. The conflicts between nature and culture, village and city, ecodestroyer and ecopreserver, and materialistic and nature-lovers have been presented in the poem with the employment of specific characters and their activities. The scene of the death of all the birds in the location shows the result of the dominance of human activities. Similarly, the nightmarish scene of the dead birds tearing the poacher's human flesh is a warning of the poem about the possible apocalypse in case we do not preserve the nature before it is too late to do so. In conclusion, this poem deals with the causes and consequences of materialistic and anthropocentric encroachment into nature. Reading this poem, one grows conscious about the need of the preservation of nature and fearful of the possible fate in case the human world disregards this need of the hour.

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Trepidation of Change: Analysing the Somatic De-recognition of Mother Nature in Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja*

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Abstract

Gopinath Mohanty's novel *Paraja* depicts the deracination of the Paraja tribal community of Odisha and the simultaneous disintegration of their indigenous percipience of ecological maintenance. The conceptualization of ecofear is not an exclusive fear of de-recognition with the natural environment for the Paraja tribe; on the contrary, it is a distinct sense of synesthetic fear that is comprehensive and interlinked with the fear of being catapulted into a transformed nature that propagates a feeling of alienation and estrangement. This paper will articulate how the synesthetic fear conceives the loss of the quintessence of indigenous life at the heart of nature. With the advent of the new modes of perceiving land in terms of its utilitarian use, there has been a considerable reduction in the subtle experiences of sensing the land and identifying with it on a symbolic level. This evolving relationship with land with humans is of prime concern in the context of its consequences in the 21st century. This paper will attempt to explore how somatic de-recognition with place forms the locus of indigenous ecofear. Somatic de-recognition refers to the inability to experience a sense of belongingness with place of habitation that holds within it the history of ancestors. This paper will also explicate the indigenous perspective on the trajectory of environmental adjustments, which they fear would lead to the gradual degeneration of human beings.

Keywords: Sense of Place, Ecofear, Topophilia, Indigenous community, Identity, De-recognition

The environmental emergency of the present times vividly corroborates the massive imbalance and collapse of ecosystems worldwide. The acceleration of environmental calamities as a consequence of unrestrained anthropogenic interference in the ecological cycle has aggravated the human's fear of nature. This deep fear of nature in the contemporary era is cultivated with the consciousness of the human inability to artificially control the imbalance in the ecosystem through technologies.

The anthropogenic period articulated ecophobia by projecting nature as 'the enemy of human civilisation' (Fisher 7). Simon C. Estok, in his *The Ecophobia Hypothesis*, defines ecophobia as "a uniquely human psychological condition that prompts antipathy toward nature" (qtd. in Oppermann). He establishes that ecophobia can embody fear, contempt, indifference, or lack of mindfulness. In her review of Estok's *The Ecophobia Hypothesis*, Serpil Oppermann notes Estok's view on ecophobia "as an irrational fear of nature and a groundless hatred of the natural world human beings seem to have adapted and are suffering from whether they consciously recognize it or not" (Oppermann 325).

Ecofear or the deep fear of nature has existed since eons in different forms and perspectives. In the Indigenous groups ecofear is often embedded in their cultural and religious practices that accentuated on an ethical bond between human and natural world. R. M. Fisher, in his essay, “Ecocriticism, Ecophobia and Indigenous Criticism,” points to the Indigenous values in which the “fear of Nature is paradoxically situated with love of Nature” (Fisher 3). He advocates that the often unconscious worldviews and perceptions often affect our manner of understanding nature and the fear associated with it. Fisher vividly distinguishes the fear-based ideology of the dominant worldview from the love-based Indigenous worldview(s). The fear-based perception promotes the feeling of hatred and animosity towards nature on the other hand, while the love-based worldview defines the fear in terms of an ethical and reverential communion.

In their essay “Ecophobia, Reverential Eco-fear, and Indigenous Worldviews” Rayson K. Alex and S. Susan Deborah have articulated ecofear as a “cultural tool that can be used traditionally to establish the interconnection between humans and ecology” (Alex and Deborah 423). They have highlighted on the gradual “degeneration the indigenous reverential eco-fear ethical paradigm into ecophobia, which they contend is a result of cultural and economic colonization of indigenous communities in India by non-indigenous mainstream Indian society” (Estok 382).

The lack of moral relations and conscious comprehension of nature is fuelled by the usurping of land through private ownership and by forceful eviction of the tribal stewards who identify with the topographical realities and place-based relation with the land. This paper will accentuate on land relations of the Paraja Tribe in the Koraput district of Odisha and explore how the contemporary degeneration of the community brought about by exploitation of the landscape has materialised their ecofear. The sublime contemplation of land by the Paraja community reflects both their holistic cognition of the world and their sustainable way of life that fosters their interconnection with the land.

The post-independent India observed an enhancement in the emergence of materialization of nature that denied any ethical approach to land and this new anthropocentric perspective became instrumental to the “epochal consciousness” (Chakrabarty, 03:15–05:21) of modern sensibility. This alteration of ideology in society traumatized the Indigenous communities and threatened their spatio-material balance with nature. Human encroachment and incursions have remained oblivious to the significance of Indigenous communities' wisdom and their contributions to the timeless coexistence of human beings and nature where humans participate in the narrative of nature instead of becoming a resource extracting gyre of utilitarianism. The ignorance of “rational fear” embedded in the Indigenous knowledge has led way to the contemporary “irrational fear” of nature. The oral narratives have projected ecofear as an ethical fear that propagates a deep sense of place and limits human actions on natural resources.

Gopinath Mohanty's novel *Paraja* (1945), written in Odia and translated into English by Bikram K. Das renders an evocative image of the strenuous struggle of the Paraja people for protecting their land and sustaining their existence in a new world where mercantile aspirations and profit-marketeering penetrate the pro-ecological sensibilities of land ethics. Written decades earlier, *Paraja* forewarned the commencement of a materialized era marked with an in-human ethos that would disrupt the entire web of relations in the ecosystem. This paper will define the

concept of ecofear in the novel from an indigenous perspective and evaluate how these experiences become a petrifying part of native existence.

“Their [tribal] resistance is an expression of their ecological perturbations and fear of the retaliation of the formidable force of nature...”

Indigenous ecofear specifies the foreboding of the collapse of not just the physical space but predominantly of the identity and culture that constitutes the very essence of any community or individual's life. The construction of manufactured landscapes and extraction of resources by multinational companies in the pretence of development induces in the culturally rich Paraja tribe the fear of being deracinated and uprooted from their land, labour, and livelihood. Ecological consciousness of the Paraja tribe forms the centre of their cultural and religious values. The tribe perceives that it is the divine grace of their supreme deity *patrabuda* and his companion *Jakar*, the earth goddess, that endows the clan with food for life, and thus they have high regard for them.

This deferential attitude towards earth and its elements prevents the tribe from viewing nature as a mercantile entity. The absence of proper connectivity in these secluded areas had protected the Paraja adivasi tribe and their environment from the civilized world's gluttonous eyes. Modernization and social developments have immensely affected the cultural, social, and economic scenario of the tribe. The area's rich land has attracted giant conglomerates to convert it into a resource extracting hub, and thus the natives stay in the constant fear of being displaced and de-territorialized from their origins.

The introduction and coalition of the outside world and civilized values through these socially refashioned situations have posed a threat to the unique cultural identities of the Paraja community. The lack of proper economic means has made the Paraja people victims of impoverishment. The desperate youths of the tribe are forced to cross the ethnic and cultural threshold and become a part of the mainstream world. The government has set up certain provisions for the tribe but that doesn't restrict the gradual loss of the ethnic heritage and cultural legacy. The trials and tribulation of the tribes brought about by civilized development can be related to P. Sainath's concept of misplaced development. It exposes how development initiated to aid in the protection and growth of tribes in actuality degrades their condition.

Paraja centres on the character of Sukru Jani, a Paraja tribe member, whose ideas are based on an intimate connection with nature, and also on the character of Ramachandra Bisoi, the *sahukar* (moneylender), who for the author, is an embodiment of an all-engulfing materialistic civilisation. Translator Bikram. K. Das perceives *Paraja* as a speculative sight of the commencing doomed future of the tribes and the “gradual corrosion of innocence by a creeping, crawling, lurking evil is as maddening as any modern method of torture: it not only destroys but debases and humiliates” (Das vi- vii). The novel vividly explicates the biophilic attributes of the tribal community and their reverence towards nature and how their displacement from ancestral land and commodification of the natural resources infused in them a sense of foreboding of an unrestrained ecological crisis. Their resistance is an expression of their ecological perturbations and fear of the retaliation of the formidable force of nature in response to the human transgressions and unnatural alterations.

Place of habitation serves to establish fundamental synergy between human beings and nature. Sense of place extends the concept of physical space and reckons it as a living embodiment of life, purpose, memory, identity, and imagination of human beings. It reveals a deep emotional attachment and loyalty towards the land we live in. Sense of place explicates an intense form 'Topophilia,' a term coined by Yi-Fu Tuan to define the affective bond between human beings and the land they inhabit. In his work *Space and Place*, Yi-Fu Tuan has highlighted how "human experience with space and place has influenced, in particular, the development of human geography" (Olsen 2). Tuan advocates that the concept of sense of place can also generate the feeling of fear of landscape in human beings. In the Indigenous communities, the concept of ecofear is integral in values that encourage an emotional communion with landscape. Through myths and folktales these communities maintain that the unpredictable and furious forms of nature can be avoided by establishing an affective and ethical bond with nature. Thus the Indigenous ecofear can also be comprehended as the fear of losing an affective connectivity with place.

Place, for the Indigenous community, forms the locus of their identity and history. Living with the land for them means to remain rooted in their heritage and "smell and taste the flesh of land" (McGinnis and McGinnis 1). Celebration of landscapes by Indigenous communities in all corners of the world highlights the universality of land-based relations. Like Gopinath Mohanty, land-based writers such as Leslie Marmon Silko, Linda Hogan, Joy Harjo, Mahasweta Devi also portray the sense of place in the Indigenous lands that resonate through festivals, rituals, and religious practices. They also expose the decline in this sustainable culture through forceful injection of modernisation in these lands.

The transformation of land through its domestication erases the memories of these topographically inclined communities with their spatio-heredity and history and thus, they constantly endeavour to protect their place from outside intervention. Cherokee writer Diane Glancy in her *Pushing the Bear* delineates the Cherokees' intense agony and anguish in the trails of tears and their sufferings on being uprooted from the land of their origin. The natives view nature as a celestial force and believe any restructuring with a gluttonous purpose would infuriate the spirits of the land. This fear of nature-spirits is marked with a great sense of reverence; reverence for the land that nurtures life. Rayson K. Alex and S. Susan Deborah term this Indigenous fear of nature, marked with an intimate attachment and adoration, as "Indigenous Reverential Eco-fear" (Alex and Deborah 423). They note that "Indigenous Reverential Ecofear" or IRE is "an ethical contract of reverence and a transcendental connection with the materiality of the world" (Alex and Deborah 423). IRE is predominantly manifested through the worship of natural elements such as stones, trees, groves, streams, and mountains.

In Mohanty's *Paraja*, the tribe perceive that the divine beings design all human actions and fate, and thus, they seek their blessings before any event or festival that is important to the tribe. The advent of spring in the community is "signalled by the call of three barking-deer in the forest" (Mohanty 144). The villagers walk together in a procession into the forest to invoke the goddess of spring who dwells deep in the woods, along with *Basumati*, the Earth goddess, *Jhakar*, the god of all seasons and *Bagh- Debata*, the tiger god. For the Parajas the shrine of spring goddess is an "ancient and enormous mango tree" and the sight of such rugged beauty, wilderness and magnanimity of the tree inspires "awe and devotion" (146). The invocation song for "the mighty god of spring" (146) marks the beginning of a new time in the lives of the tribe;

time that is delineated not in terms of months or years but experienced through the change in season and harvest of crops. The song includes their sacred pledge to celebrate the rites “every year in the month of Chaitra” (146) to welcome the spring god whose grace would endow the hill with prosperity. It exposes the material fear embedded within their prayer to the gods of seasons, such as the trees being barren, loss of harmony in the forest.

The community's existence, availability of resources, and environmental balance in their place are all dependent on the grace of the spirits of nature. The invocation and the rituals performed before the commencement of celebration is an ethical action on the part of the tribe to facilitate the flow of nature that controls life. The ecofear explicated in this song is the fear of poverty, fear of living on barren earth, the fear of being prey to the wild animals and the fear of losing love from the community. For instance, mortgaged land inflicts in Sukru Jani the perennial fear of losing it forever. For him, the land is a link that connects individuals with their ancestors and losing the land would mean being haunted by the ancestral spirits even after death. Sukru Jani's inability in maintaining the ethical contract of reverence with the land instigates in him a deep sense of ecofear.

The desolated and dispirited ambiance of Sukru Jani's house during the festival marks the impending doom of his family. Sukru Jani did not understand the civilised concept of conservation but he was aware of the permanence of land and thus wanted it to be passed on to all his generations to come. His fear of losing the bond with his ancestors formed through the land and consequently estranging his future generations from their sense of place. This anticipation of a disrupted bond with nature in the present that injects fear of having obliterated past and, evolving into an obscure future can be construed a heightened form of IRE.

Sukru Jani becomes an embodiment of all the tribal and Indigenous communities whose place is threatened by the capitalist world's encroachment. The deep connection of the tribes formed with nature is based on a cognitive understanding of ecological interrelations. Contemporary environmentalists perceive Chinese Buddhist TuShun's interpretation of the 'Jewel net of Indra' to be significant in comprehending nature's integration and interconnectedness. The Jewel net of Indra, also referred to as the net of Indra, is made up of glittering jewels and all the jewels are connected to form a spider web-like structure. The jewels of the net reflect each other's image and thus “in one jewel there are all other jewels” (Shun 59) and all jewels are there in each jewel. The jewel net of Indra renders a picture of an indefinite and integrated world. It creates the notion of trans-self by connecting the Cartesian dualism of self and the other. This understanding of a larger self or trans-self by the Paraja tribe is evident in their communal way of living. Indigenous communities believe in the holistic form of nature, and thus their fear for the loss of natural integration is an implicit fear for internal dispersion. For Sukru Jani and the Paraja people the land was not just mere soil, but part of their bodies and soul and they rebelled in their ways to protect it from the intrusion of outsiders who had no regard for their land.

Gopinath Mohanty's works reflected his concern for the social issues of his time. Being a civil servant in the Koraput district, he was aware of the indigenous tribes' life experiences. His works *DadiBudda (The Ancestor)*, *Paraja*, *Amrutara Santana (The Dynasty of The Immortals)*, thematically presented the Indigenous tribes' lives. Mohanty's place in the government did not hold him back from exposing the reality of situations and how the government and the officials detrimentally contributed to the tribes.

In *Paraja*, Mohanty's foresight, comprehending environmental discrimination as a major social issue retains the novel's contemporariness. In *Paraja*, environmental discrimination is presented through the denial of tribal access to the land by the power structures. The power structure then exemplified by the landowners is represented by government and resource extracting conglomerates in the contemporary period. The struggle to maintain a livelihood and protect the inhabited place and the fear of losing human rights through land-loss continues till today. For instance, the proposal of British-based mining company Vedanta to extract bauxite from the Niyamgiri hills of Odisha has terrorised the native Dongria Kondh tribe. The Kondhs, who revere the hills as their god, live with the constant fear of losing their life and livelihood. The sense of ecofear in them becomes evident in their fear of losing the hills, which maintains the biodiversity of the Western Ghats, and the bauxite that enables continuous flow of perennial streams in the place. In the post-independence period, lands belonging to the tribes were captured by money lenders through manipulation and threats.

Private corporations are now attempting to capture these lands from the tribes to make the rich resources embedded within it consumable in the market. *Paraja* gives a vivid picture of the tribal fear of the legal system and perceived it to be a vast system that would engulf innocent beings. "The tribesman had a natural horror of law" (Mohanty 122) and were afraid to do anything unlawful. When Sukru Jani and his son Mandia approached the judicial system against the tyranny of the moneylender, they became the victims of the law. They were mistreated and never freed from the fetters of their debt no-matter how much they worked or how much they paid back. The novel also shares a glimpse of contamination of the indigenous culture by the change in values enforced by the outside world. The Construction Supervisors' money and gifts tempt the *Paraja* people to be a part of the construction project.

This inclination towards material gain not only meant abandoning their ancestral culture of agriculture but also leaving the land and dissociating them from the community and communal way of living. Sukru Jani's daughters Jili and Bili perceived that working in a construction site would be an opportunity for them to have a good life and a relief from poverty. This dilution of indigenous values, culture and lifestyle petrified the tribal community as this would detach them from their place and would infuriate the divine spirits. The contamination is not limited to culture but extends to the land and agricultural practices. The orange trees planted in the mortgaged land by the moneylender for mercantile benefits injected fear in Sukru Jani. He was conscious that these capital methods of agriculture would decline the fertility of his land. The modern market agencies removed the tribes from their land ownership and assigned them as tillers with no right on the land or its produce.

Paraja portrays a counter hereditary aspect of an individual's link with the place of his existence. This aspect is functioning as a psychological reprogramming in Sukru Jani's mind as he is undergoing the swift movements of change in terms of his land, family psychology and all that he assumed to be a conventional reality. Sukru Jani's confrontation with change is inevitably linked with the idea of an uncertainty; not only in terms of his material concerns but also in terms of his bewilderment with a new relation that will be established between nature and human beings. His land becomes a micro unit in the visualization of a macroscopic scenario where the farthest stretches of Mother Nature will be hindered by human's mercantile requirements. This sense of uncertainty for Sukru Jani consequently changes into a fear that plays an instrumental role in affecting the foundational belief system of an unconditional and

irreplaceable bond with land. Hence the ecofear in *Paraja* is experienced through an epiphanic realization that occurs in a diachronic plane where Sukru Jani's past, present and future collide and coalesce in a strange reality of being and consciousness.

“...the novel is not a fear of cataclysm and destruction; on the contrary, it is an unusual and uncanny sensation of visualizing the past and the future based on [the] present...”

Mohanty's narrative charts the trajectory of the nature-culture binary that is embedded in the images of nature and the human's reaction to it. This novel exclusively becomes an embodiment of an era which can be identified as a narrative at the threshold of the rise of the anthropocene and ecophobia. Sukru Jani stands at the edge of this new-found sense of human development and almost in a flash-forward foresight is catapulted to a murky and desolate future in the anthropocene that longs to go back to an era which had been decimated by apparently disconnected small scale land and nature utilization procedures. This exponential change of the ecology that is entangled with complex ecomaterial situations is a real time concern for the tribal consciousness that incites a fear from an unknown 'ecology without nature' (Morton).

Mohanty's narrative articulates the trepidation of change that follows with transformation. The characters in the novel are victimized by an uncertainty that creates a visual and psychological lacuna in the linearity of their historio-material and spatio-temporal understanding of land-based relation.

The fear that pervades in the novel is not a fear of cataclysm and destruction; on the contrary, it is an unusual and uncanny sensation of visualizing the past and the future based on present day anthropocentric exploitation of land. It is a realization that can be termed as a time-lapse experience, which predicts a flash forward into the barren future of the anthropocene, who have denied their gods and their origins in order to extract and improvise. It implies an abandoned landscape that will remain as a wasteland when the tribal origins and stewardship obviates from the face of the earth. This is the vehemently staggering fear of ecological disruption that will in turn reconfigure the real time subjectivity of humans inhabiting in any landscape across time. As Dipesh Chakraborty mentions in his *The Climate of History: Four Theses* that humans are a geological force who reorient the comprehensive living relationship with nature into a new form of existence that is unsettling, Mohanty's narrative implies the similar context from a grass-root level back in time where humans are actually inventing ways to terraform the planet for their own species-centric interests.

Mohanty's novel is a precursor of the 21st century narratives that represent and engage with the issues of environmental readjustment. Mohanty's *Paraja* presupposes the contemporary treatment of nature by portraying the radically evolving attitudes of the human toward their environment. He critiques the new trajectory of species (human) exclusivity, aided by newfound aspects of commercialism and utility perspectives that deviate them from the age old tradition of environmental stewardship. Other than performing the role of an indigenous character, he embodies everything that can be considered the last vestige of the human reverence to mother-nature. Sukru Jani's fear of a changed landscape is intensely ontological as it comprehensively

affects his entire being by witnessing a new emerging reality of human-nature relationship that is based on transaction and exploitation.

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Culture of Fear and Conservation of Nature: Critiquing the Construction of *Sarppakavu* in Kerala

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Abstract

This paper critiques the culture of fear accredited to *sarppakavu* in Kerala, through an investigation of William Logan's *Malabar Manual*. *Kavu*, the regional variant of sacred groves in Kerala, a state in Southern India, in the traditional sense is a consortium of trees devoted to various deities and *sarppakavu* is a variant that is dedicated exclusively to the worship of serpents. An ecozone guarded in the interest of a presiding deity, human intrusion into *kavu* is prohibited through a strategic amalgamation of myths and taboos. As a symbiotic space permeated by nature (forest) and culture (deity), it has undergone tremendous transformations. The paper argues that *sarppakavu* in Kerala is an epitome of human-nature-culture co-existence practised among non-indigenous communities, managed through the culture of fear-appeasement. It foregrounds that Logan analysed this culture of fear-appeasement from a religious perspective that delimited the sacred space of *kavu* and overlooked the role of ecofear in enhancing nature-human cohabitation through the construction and conservation of *sarppakavu*.

Keywords: fear, *kavu*, ecozone, culture, conservation, culture of fear

Introduction

The concept of *fear* plays a crucial role in the life of the people of Kerala. A small state located at the southern tip of the Indian peninsula, the region is separated from the mainland by the Western Ghats on the east and the Arabian Sea at the west. The area, covered by the vast expanse of dense forests, remained scarcely populated owing to its peculiar geography, mainly categorised into the climatic zones of highlands (rugged terrains of Western Ghats), midlands (hills and valley) and low lands (coastal plains) (Mannarasala 13). It's a largely agrarian civilization that flourished near the coastal plains and river banks formulated a distinctive cultural tradition rooted in fear of nature and supernature.

The fear extends from the forces and spirits of nature to the spirits of deceased ancestors which demand constant appeasement through ritualistic performances. These solemnities of fear-appeasement that centred on *kavukal*¹ or sacred groves formed the crux of Kerala's religio-ritualistic tradition. To surmise, the religiosity of the region developed from a distinctive form of fear culture interlinked to nature. The paper argues that the fear of the 'unknown,' especially the mystery of nature and death, formed the keystone of Kerala's indigenous religiosity. It also explores the function of fear dynamics in the conservation of nature through the institution of

sarppakavu, particularly in nineteenth-century Kerala, by analysing the vignette of snake worship in William Logan's *Malabar* (1887).

Logan's Hinduism: A Consolidation of Regional Religiosity in *Malabar Manual*

Popularly known as *Malabar Manual*, the text is termed as a 'guide' to Malabar, a district under the erstwhile Madras Presidency of British India. Initially published in two volumes, Logan compiles the work commissioned by the Government of India during his tenure as the Collector of Malabar. An exhaustive treatise on the geography and people (caste, religion, language and culture) of Malabar, it is often regarded as a historical document of the region. His experience with the native culture and proficiency in the regional languages of Malayalam, Tamil, and Kannada had enhanced the quality and quantity of the volumes. However, as a typical gazetteer commissioned during the imperial era, the book is an explicit example of an oriental text that projects the Colonial perspectives, achievements and propaganda to glorify the imperial influence in civilizing the people of Malabar. The text also suffices as an excellent specimen of the colonial attempt to construct the unified religion of Hinduism by coalescing the people belonging to various castes and creed into the Hindu pantheon.

This study focuses on the *Malabar Manual* because of two reasons: (1) the earliest literary text to document *kavu* and (2) its dichotomous reflection of this (*kavu*) phenomenon. Logan describes *vishattum kavu* (poison shrine) with respect to the culture of fear associated with snake worship in Malabar (184). Since the *kavukal* in Kerala venerate numerous gods, goddesses and ancestral spirits broadly classified as *Ammadeivakavukal*,ⁱⁱ *Purushadevakavukal*,ⁱⁱⁱ *Mrigadeivakavukal*^{iv} and *Pretakavukal*,^v^{vi} the exclusive documentation of serpent groves exhibits a subjective act of selection and omission. Intriguingly, from the multifarious *kavukal*, Logan chose only to document those groves devoted exclusively to the worship of serpents whereas a conspicuous silence is maintained towards the groves dedicated to other deities.

Furthermore, the sketches of *vishattum kavu* on a brief segment in the sub-section of "Hindus" (179) under the gambit of Religion delimits the heterogeneous existence of the phenomenon of *kavu*. The opening remarks on Hinduism as "the strange medley of cults and religions" (179) is an explicit criticism of the eclectic and primitive form of religiosity practised in the region. It displays the aggression with which he indulged to expunge and systematize the diverse traditions exercised in the locality under the tenet of Hinduism. Throughout the section, Logan's evaluation of native religiosity is impaired and confounding. He often interlinks Indigenous and diverse caste-based practices and intermittently misstates the same.

Logan traces the regional religiosity of Malayali Hindus to "aboriginal cult" or "animism," wherein the people confide in afterlife and troth in "the propitiation of evil spirits" (179). Apparently, his animism corresponds to the system of ancestral worship practised by the indigenous inhabitants of Kerala [Menon (1967), Uchiyamada (2003), Vadakkiniyil (2004), Payyanad (2014), Tarabout (2015)]. He unveils a society of sophistry overwhelmed by supernature wherein the people placated the deceased spirits by offering materialistic things such as "weapons, the cooking pots, the oil receptacles, the lamps, the ornaments and implements which they used when during life" (179) to deflect the "unhappiness" the spirits would invoke on the living (179). Despite using the term "aboriginal cult" (179), the text indisputably fails to elucidate the identity

of the aboriginal inhabitants and the illustrations are limited to the death rites, and fear-appeasement practised among the Nayar, the Ezhava and the artisan castes of Malabar. According to his observations, these people set apart a portion of the southern-side homestead gardens to bury the burnt bone of the deceased ancestor (179). Strikingly, the taboos concerning the defilement of these burial sites correspond to those that surround *kavukal*.

Nevertheless, he compares and establishes a correlation between the rites of obsequies to the system of sepulchral urns and fertility cults^{vii} (179, 182). He analogises the urn to the “womb of Mother Earth” (182) and discerns that the hole at its bottom emblemize the cervical canal of the uterus (“*os uteri*” 182). Thus, the death rites are interlinked to the fertility cults. Next, he conjoins the loosely described traditions of obsequies to the credo of snake worship through the culture of fear-appeasement. Here, he identifies irrational fear of supernature as the key factor upon which both the traditions are built. Likewise, the consociation of snake worship with phallic, *sakti* (feminine power) and tree worship also lacks cohesion since the cult of venerating tree and mother goddess (*sakti*) are the immanent aspect of Indigenous religiosity observed with respect to the *kavu* tradition. Whereas, the worship of the phallus and androcentrism are non-indigenous elements that infiltrated Indigenous religiosity with the establishment of Vedic Brahminism in the region. Unfortunately, the traditional systems of worships concerning *kavu* are non-existent from Logan’s account.

Another arresting facet involves the disconcert surrounding the categorisation of Vedic Brahminism (along with Jainism, Buddhism and Vedantic religion of Sankaracharya) as a foreign influence upon the native religiosity and professing the aboriginal, non-traditional and Brahminic practices in an entangled manner. Here, Logan equates diverse texts of regional religiosity against the dogma of Christianity and attempts to codify the indigenous worship systems under Hinduism. Remarkably, the Indigenous inhabitants who practised the ancestral and fertility cults within the sacred space of *kavukal* is conspicuously absent from his account. This absenteeism is problematic and indicates the zeal with which the colonialist ceaselessly engaged to eliminate the aboriginal or untouchable existence from his oriental text. The extent of this conundrum is apprehensive from the fact that he not only borrowed the indigenous traditions but also accredited the hierarchically privileged (Nayars/Ezhavas/Artisan) castes as its practitioners in his treatise. Thus, he consciously erased the corporeality of untouchable castes to construct the religiosity of Hinduism founded on the indigenous culture of fear-appeasement pertaining to the *kavukal*.

A *kavu* is a thicket with a water body that guards a particular deity. This ancient phenomenon of animism universally practised during the prehistoric times is closely associated with the cults of the tree and, mother goddess worships [Menon (1943), Rajagopal (2004), Payyanad (2013)]. It is a heterogeneous, tempo-spatial process that continually redefines itself with respect to the human relationships forged in each milieu (Vadakkiniyil 84). According to the indigenous belief system, the spirits of nature and ancestors inhabited certain trees which were venerated (Uchiyamada 70 & 75, Tarabout 28). A. Sreedhara Menon, also comments on the harmonious co-existence of the indigenous inhabitants with nature (83). The indigenous communities revered nature as an enigma from which life emerged and considered it to be the repository that offered shelter and food. For the humans, the mysticism of nature or the first home, inspired an admiration intermixed with a fear of the unknown. This awe and fear crystallised into the cult of nature and ancestor worship among the indigenous communities. Thus, the concept of

ecofear or the fear of nature tends to play a decisive role in revising Kerala's religio-ritualistic tradition.

Dynamics of Fear

Fear is an emotion triggered in response to stimuli that is often unpleasant and casts a lasting impression on behaviour and physiology. The term derived from Middle English *fere* and Old English *faer* signified "calamity, sudden danger, peril", and traces its origin to Proto-Germanic *feraz* which denoted "danger" ("Fear"). The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* describes fear as "an unpleasant emotion caused by the threat of danger, pain or harm" and archaically defines it as "a mixed feeling of dread and reverence" or "regard (God) with reverence or awe" (518). Although fear can be surmised as an emotional state that triggers anxiety, this personal experience stretches from the immediate social state (family, community, state, nation), to the global. It is a universal experience that is personal and generic.

Fear has been studied from various perspectives including psychology, ethology, biology, neurobiology and theology (Gray 1987; Archer 1976; Adolphs 2013; Gracia 2017; Ohman & Mikena 2001). However, a philosophical inquiry on fear emerged in the late twentieth century when Desh Subba introduced the theory of fearism in his seminal book, *Philosophy of Fearism* (2014). According to Subba, fear is an integral aspect that conducts, guides and controls everyday human life. Therefore, he approaches fear as an inherent facet of human existence that can be positively channelized for personal benefits (Fisher & Subba, 2016, 10-11). In the twenty-first century, the study of fear or fearology emerged as an academic, albeit outsider, discipline in the aftermath of 9/11. This new area of critical enquiry is a holistic transdisciplinary approach towards understanding the nature and interactions of fear with all systems and entities (living or non-living, visible or invisible), which also aims to explore the ways through which fearlessness can be achieved. R. Michael Fisher, a main exponent of fearology, defines fear as a phenomenon of universal *pattern* in human experience which is culturally constructed through conditioning ("Introduction" 19). He compares and contrasts fear with love and postulates fear (i.e., 'fear') as a "disease" that invokes a series of negative emotions such as "toxicity, distress, hurt, non-self-regulation" ("Introduction" 9), which indicates "suffering in human beings" ("Introduction" 7). According to Fisher, dominant societies unleash the disease of fear to terrorise and govern their subjects. Therefore, he defines fear as "the dominant symptom of hurting, that is traumatized, human beings living in oppressive societies" ("Introduction" 19).

The process of instrumentalizing and commodifying fear as an oppressive means to control a society creates a culture of fear. Otherwise, sometimes known as "climate of fear." The culture of fear refers to an individual's or an institution's potential to induce fear in the public sphere to accomplish political or work environment objectives through emotional predispositions. Initially developed as a sociological construct in the early 1980s, by the late 1990s Frank Furedi developed the conception in a first book on the topic (Frazer 710-712), it was soon promoted by Barry Glassner (quoted from Klaehn 23-24). Fisher defines it as "the attempt to manage fear by using fear based means, which creates more fear than less" (cited in "Ecocriticism, Ecophobia" 13). Therefore, the culture of fear can be delineated as a fear-based mechanism that governs through the propagation of toxic fear(ism).

The institution of Religion is an excellent instance of this fear culture. Bertrand Russell in his 1927 lecture, "Why I Am Not a Christian" (delivered to the National Secular Society, south London), argues that religious beliefs are primarily founded on fear. He identifies a reciprocal relationship between religion and fear and demonstrates religion as a "symptom of fear" and *visa-versa* (Carlisle). According to him, "Religion is based primarily and mainly upon fear. It is partly the terror of unknown and partly the wish to feel that you have a kind of elder brother who will stand by you in all your troubles and disputes. Fear is the basis of the whole thing- fear of mysterious, fear of defeat and fear of death" (qtd. from Carlisle).

The Indigenous religiosity of Kerala is largely founded on this aspect of a culture of fear, conquered through the rituals of appeasement. The people feared the "unknown" entities which were beyond the realms of their comprehension. The mystery of nature and death were two significant aspects that troubled them the most. They mastered this fear through deification of their fear and formulated rituals (of oblation). However, this culture of fear-appeasement differs from the general presumptions of the climate of fear. The Indigenous fear culture is established such that an ethical understanding is entrenched between the humans and their natural environment to promote human-nature cohabitation.

The fear of Nature is a universal pattern that is integral to humanity. Fisher terms this "deep fear of nature" as *ecofear* (quoted from Alex and Deborah, 422) and distinguishes it from *ecophobia*. He argues that the human beings share an antipodal relationship of "deep fear" and "deep love for Nature and things wild" ("Indigenous Criticism" 4) and employs the "Indigenous worldview" to explain its conflicting correlation ("Indigenous Criticism" 6). He postulates the difference (fear/love) arises from the disparity between the Western (anthropocentric) and Indigenous (biocentric) worldviews ("Indigenous Criticism" 11-12).

Detached from nature, Western civilization is dominated by an extreme toxic fear of it. On the contrary, the Indigenous communities nurture rational healthy fears, wherein the thrust is laid on nature, and the members are encouraged towards a harmonious cohabitation. Such 'balancing' within the Indigenous worldview minimizes the destructive ecophobic impacts. Discriminate use of nature and its conservation is the keystone upon which the indigenous myths and cultures are developed. This worldview arises from a deep understanding of nature as the life source or the home essential for survival. The wisdom originates from the ethical awareness that nature is a shared space, a continuum constituted by diverse elements including human beings and its exploitation in any form jeopardizes the ecobalance. Therefore, fear in the form of reverence and sacralization of natural entities are sought by the indigenous communities to ensure a sustainable lifestyle where they inculcate fear and deep love towards nature.

Expanding on Fisher's "rational fears" and "deep love" that Indigeneity fosters for nature, Rayson K. Alex and Susan S. Deborah address the issue in their seminal essay, "Ecophobia, Reverential Eco-fear and Indigenous Worldview" by introducing the theory of 'Indigenous Reverential Eco-fear' (IRE). Here, they distinguish ecophobia from the *ecofear* promulgated by the Indigenous communities. According to them, *ecofear* is an "integrative ideology" (422) wherein the people maintain their innate links with nature through the sacralization of natural and cultural entities. This process of sacralization "manifest as fear, awe, and/or reverence" and construct a concatenation of "nature-culture-sacred" (422). Alex and Deborah define IRE as the

fear *cum* reverence that Indigenous inhabitants nurture towards nature. They describe it as an “ethical contract” which maintains humans’ “deep connection with the material nature” (423) and argues that the indigenous communities instrumentalise ecofear in the form of fear-reverence as a cultural agency to preserve human-nature interconnectedness, and portray sacred groves as an instance of nature-culture-sacred manifestation among the non-traditional communities. Thus, the fear that Kerala’s traditional and non-traditional communities foster towards *kavu*/Nature is reverential ecofear. *Sarppakavu* or serpent groves in Kerala is the typical example of human-nature co-existence found among non-indigenous communities.

***Sarppakavu*: Manifestations of Ecofear**

Sarppakavu denotes a sacred grove that is devoted to the worship of serpent deities. Worshipped in various parts of the world, including some regions of India, the veneration of serpents with a sacred grove is unique to Kerala and is distinctively found among the *tharavad*^{viii} (ancestral home) or homestead gardens of Nayers and Brahmins (Jayakumarikunjamma 15, Jayakrishnan 29-30, Mannarasala 24). One of the ubiquitous forms of *kavu*, it is marked by strict conventions that bar human intrusion through the medium of myths and taboos. The term derived from the Sanskrit “*sarp*” denotes a snake whereas “*kavu*” in the regional language of Malayalam traces its origin to the Dravidian dialect ‘*kakk-*’ which means ‘to guard’ (Freeman 261). Therefore, the institution of *sarppakavu* is a sacred space ‘guarded’ exclusively for the use of the serpent deities by the caste hierarchy.

Compared to the other *kavukal* which are public and follows a community-based worship system, the institution of *sarppakavu* is a privately owned sacred space exclusive to the castes Nayers and Brahmins (Jayakrishnan 30). Utmost purity of mind and body is a requisite to enter this sacred space and delinquency presumes a series of misfortunes (Jayakumarikunjamma 20). The snakes are anthropomorphised as irascible divine entities who inflict diseases (Jayakrishnan 27) if its conventions are violated, especially the desecration of *kavu*. Rich in trees and climbers, this ecozone is protected by small compound walls that usually mark its sacred boundary. Its iconolatriy comprises a parapet upon which the serpent icon/stones, with(out) *chitrakootakallu*^{ix} (granite stone) are consecrated. This sacred space constituted by a *kavu* (forest), pond and *chitrakootakallu*, symbolise the three areas in which snakes reside—trees, water and earth (Jayakumarikunjamma 18-19).

However, the system of worship differs depending on the caste to which the grove belongs. The customs are comparatively rigid if owned by a Brahmin family. Here, the priestly and ritualistic performances are mediated by a Brahmin. Previously, the strict observation of caste-based purity-pollution restricted the Indigenous inhabitants’ participation (Jayakrishnan 26-27). The solemnities are comparatively relaxed if the groves belonged to the Nayar *tharavad*. Here, the ritual experts of Pulluva^x (subaltern) caste presides over the propitiation ceremonies (Jayakrishnan 26-27) and the Nayers oversee the ceremonies. Nevertheless, this cult shares a resemblance to the reverential ecofear and appeasement associated with *kavu*.

A *kavu* is an ecozone marked culturally through sacralization. Evolution of this eco-cultural space paralleled the progression of the Indigenous inhabitants over the millenniums and continues to the present. This continuity or the constant expansion makes it a unique phenomenon that has

transgressed the test of time. The primitive form of nature reverence initiated through the tree and ancestral worship among the Indigenous communities transpired to fertility cults with the rise of 'agri' culture'. Nature in the form of 'land' that nurtured 'life' became the 'new' sacred and the era witnessed the transition of humans from consumers of natural products to small scale producers. Gradually, the agricultural land with its fertility and elements of moderate climatic conditions was sacralized. This act of sacralizing a natural entity is termed as "nature-culture-sacred continuum," by Nirmal Selvamony (quoted from Alex and Deborah 425) as it reinstates the nature-human interconnection through an ethical understanding of the environment.

The process of sacralization reflects the Indigeneity's innate urge to conquer their fears through reverence. The unsophisticated form of worship accrued sophistry when society became agrarian. Here, the Indigenous communities projected their fear of nature's unpredictability in the form of a mishap reflected as a poor yield due to extreme weather (excessive rain/heat/wind) or lack of fertility. This fear prompted the modification of the existing worship system into a ritualistic tradition rooted in fear-appeasement. However, the expansion of agriculture threatened the existence of the sacred forests, disrupted the human-nature exchange and necessitated the demarcation of the sacred space of worship from deforestation. Thus the 'land' cleared for cultivation marked the boundary between nature and culture. The origin of *kavu* can be hypothesized to this juncture in the agrarian period, when the sacred space inside the forest was culturally shielded from destruction through myths and taboos. The active human involvement intended to preserve *kavu* ('*kakku-*' or 'to guard') elucidates its meaning as a geographically marked sacred forest guarded against destruction. Thus, *kavu* gained its current definition as a 'protected forest.' Sacralization of *kavu* bridged the gap between nature-culture materiality, and the reverential ecofear rekindled the human connectedness with nature which makes it a distinctive system of worship rooted in Indigenous Reverential Ecofear.

The next phase of *kavu* is forged from a society of refinement which was immoderately materialistic. The age classified by the establishment of the caste system by the Vedic Brahmins culminated in depriving the Indigenous inhabitants of their dignity, freedom and religion, and dissipation from their ancestral land. The caste hierarchy comprising the feudal Brahmins and Nayar (warlords) feared the Indigenous *kavu* on account of the ancestral worship practised within it (Uchiyamada 115-116, Vadakkiniyil 77). They deemed the Indigenous spirits to be invincible and noxious. Thus, *kavu*, which is the sacred space of the Indigenous inhabitants mutated to a formidable space for the casteist.^{xi} Yasushi Uchiyamada defines a *kavu* as "sacred and fearful place, which is also dangerous and a powerful place haunted by jealous, greedy and capricious ghosts, demons, ancestors, demigods and demigoddesses who intervene in the lives of the living" (119). Consequently, the casteist not only reserved the *kavukal* but also held its propitiation rituals periodically to deflate the misfortunes inflicted by pernicious spirits. This resulted in the construction of a religiosity ingrained in the fear-appeasement of "alien ghost" (Gough 463).

Kathleen Gough validates this phenomenon through her investigation on the death rites observed among the Nayars. She identifies three cults of deceased-spirit-worship practised by the Nayars. The credo of "alien ghosts" is particularly striking; this caste regarded the premature deaths of former soil-slaves (from "epidemic, accident, murder, or suicide") as a "misfortune to the living" in the forms of "sickness, madness, female barrenness, cattle deaths, house fires, or poltergeist activities" (463). Consequently, these ghosts were enshrined within the homestead

gardens and were offered oblations^{xii} (464). Here, it may seem that the fear of supernature (alien spirits) and its immolation replaced Indigenous reverential ecofear, but the actuality reveals a counter narrative.

The fear of the spirits' wrath in the form of an adversity prevented the casteist from destroying the *kavu* or Nature. Although the society laid excess thrust on oblation, they meticulously managed the nature or the ecosystem of *kavu* as they believed that the human intrusion into this space would infuriate the spirits. Here, ecofear is used as a cultural tool to maintain human-nature nexus (Alex and Deborah 423). In this context, the reverential ecofear inherent to the Indigenous *kavu* appear as irrational fears of supernature among the caste hierarchy. Here, it is the IRE that is extended to a culture of fear rooted in covetousness. Therefore, the casteist attempted to deflate the 'misfortunes' believed to be inflicted by vindictive spirits through the rites of fear-appeasement performed within the *kavukal*. The cultural tool of sacralization sustained *kavu*'s ecosystem from destruction. Hence, the people feared to destroy the Nature of *kavu* and consciously engaged in nature conservation. Thus the culture of fear (ecofear) associated to *kavukal* enabled nature preservation.

Similar scenario persisted with the *sarppakavu* in Kerala. Corresponding to the fear of alien ghosts, the avaricious society feared the misfortunes that the mighty snakes administered in the form of death by poison, "barrenness, skin and eye diseases" (Jayakrishnan 27). In order to attain health, wealth and prosperity, and to flatten the evil cast by the temperamental snakes, these communities engrossed in fear-appeasement by setting aside a portion of their homestead garden which came to be known as *sarppakavu*. Although this cult is of relatively unknown origin, some sources trace its antiquity to the system of tree worship, while other studies associate to the institutions of Jainism and Buddhism practised in Kerala.

One of the studies expostulates the genesis of serpent worship to Jainism, and cites the Nagarajaswami Temple of erstwhile Travancore (and present-day Nagarkovil District in Tamil Nadu) as an instance of validation. Currently, a temple that observes *tantric rites*^{xiii} (esoteric tradition) under the superintendence of a Brahmin *tantri* (Vedic religious head) from Vetticode Nagaraja Temple,^{xiv} it is the site from which six idols of Jain deities were discovered (Jayakumarikunjamma 30). Furthermore, the structure of the serpent icons within a serpent grove shares resemblance to the figurines worshipped by the Jains and Buddhists. This depicts the Brahminic influence in the annexation and appropriation of Jainism. Therefore, *sarppakavukal* is an institutionalised system of worship that was absorbed and moderated by the Brahmins. Remarkably, it is the only form of *kavu* maintained by a Brahmin homestead.

The Brahmins in Kerala is an immigrant group of people who infiltrated the region through the south Carnatic pass from 4th-8th century A.D. Before this insinuation, they called the region as *ahibhoomi* or the land (*bhoomi*) inhabited by serpents (*ahi*) (Jayakumarikujamma 13), due to the presence of diverse varieties of both venomous and non-venomous snakes. Thus the Western Ghats received its local name *Sahiyadri* (*s* + *ahi* + *adri*) or the mountain (*adri*) encompassing (signified by the prefix *sa*) serpents (*ahi*) (Jayakumarikujamma 13, Jayakrishnan 31). The Brahmin settlers, unfamiliar to the ways of the land, feared the snakes which dominantly populated the region. The element of fear is one of the key facets interlinked to snakes. The snakes are quick to inject their venom in self-defense and its unique structure, peculiar motion, omnipresence and the capacity to

induce fatality caused dread in the settlers. They conquered their ecofear by sacralizing the serpents and engaging in appeasement rituals which are inherent to a *kavu*.

Intriguingly, the Brahmins did not worship the venomous, corporeal snakes that inhibited the region. They correlated the snakes to the divine *Nagas*^{xv} (divine serpents) of the *Vedas* and the *Puranas*, consecrated them within their homestead garden and engaged in its veneration. However, the act of sanctification through idol consecration distinguished a *sarppakavu* from the general phenomenon of *kavu*. Although, *kavukal* are sacralized for exclusive use of the presiding deity, it follows *kudiyiruthu* (inhabitation). It is a space of communion, a sacred platform within which the devotee invoked the independent deity and the deity manifested before the devotee, whereas, the practice of idolatry and fear-appeasement established *sarppakavu* as a hybrid institution formulated through the amalgamation of various traditions including Vedic Brahminism, Indigenous system, Jainism and Buddhism. Thus it epitomises a hegemonic space where the power relations were negotiated through the appropriation of Dravidian religiosity and culture by the Brahmins. Thus *sarppakavu* manifests the nature-culture materialism found among non-indigenous communities, managed through the rituals of fear-appeasement. Therefore, Logan's exclusive documentation of serpent groves or *vishattum kavu*, exhibits the selective representation of an institutionalised system of worship that was absorbed and accultured by the caste hierarchy. Analogous to the erasure of the untouchable identity as discussed earlier, Logan intermittently clubs the Nayar and Brahmin custom of worship and obscures the caste identity of its practitioner with the phrase "respectable Malayali Hindus" (184).

Logan and *kavu*

Logan distinguishes fear-appeasement of the deceased spirits as the primary religiosity of Malayali Hindus in Malabar and his analysis of the native religiosity, encompassing the indigenous system of ancestral worship and diverse caste-based customs, is delimited to the ritualistic observation of fear-appeasement. He offers a paradoxical illustration of *kavu*. The description that commenced with an aesthetic display of wilderness—"trees luxuriantly festooned with graceful creepers," commutes to a "waste spot" wherein the hood of a cobra is consecrated (184). His account critiques the superstitious fear nurtured by the Malayali Hindus who equated both natural calamities and misfortunes to the wrath of serpents. Through the selective description of "*vishattum kavu* (poison shrine) or *naga kotta* (snake shrine)" found in the "south-west corner" of "all respectable Malayali Hindu" homestead gardens, he demonstrates the culture of fear expressed towards snakes (184).

However, Logan's documentation of snake worship circumscribes to the fear of supernature but excludes ecofear. He illustrates a society in which the people believed, "The snake...to exercise an evil influence on human beings if their shrines were not respected" (184). This exposition elucidates a community wherein the people superstitiously feared the snake shrines rather than the snakes. Logan projects the irrational fear of supernature instead of examining how an ethical contract of harmonious nature-culture cohabitation was devised and maintained in a worldly society. The people acknowledged the existence of this sacred space and treated it with reverential fear. Nature in the form of shrine/*kavu* was culturally protected through the means of reverential ecofear. Thus, the underlying facet of *kavukal* including *sarppakavu* is not the fear of

supernature but Reverential Ecofear. Through the cultural mechanism of ecofear, the casteist were taught to respect and conserve nature in the form of *sarppakavukal*.

Any misfortune that affected the family was associated to a human misdemeanor that triggered the deity's wrath. Therefore, this system ethically guided the human conduct and misconduct was nullified through penance. *Sarppakavu* manifested a sacrificial space wherein the casteist propitiated the serpent deities to ward off the evil. A culture of fear is constructed around *sarppakavu* due to which neglecting a *kavu* was considered a severe offence. This taboo may have evolved with the rise of materialism when people shifted from lives lived in communion with nature to urban life. Materialism separated the humans from nature and this guilt of 'apathy' resurfaced whenever an ill befell the family. *Kavu* thus evolved as the site wherein penance was offered. They venerated the serpents by offering them a habitat and this gesture of sanctification represents a kind of sharing wherein the humans returned a portion of their homestead to nature for it to reclaim. The fear of nature in the form of serpents thus rekindled their connection with nature. Thus, through this institution they shared their home with nature and retained the human-nature-sacred continuum. Therefore, the space of *sarppakavu* with its rituals symbolise human-nature interconnectedness.

It is interesting to observe how the culture of fear led to the construction of *sarppakavu*. Logan mentions that any family, within the caste hierarchy, that was devoid of a serpent grove searched its homestead gardens to find some remnants of a *kavu* so as to construct a wild spot which is left at the disposal of nature. This tendency represents the construction of *sarppakavu* and its emergence as an indispensable symbolic space where penance was offered through oblations. They believed that the deity of the wilderness would ensure the family's wellbeing and prosperity. As a result, people left a portion of their homestead for nature in the form of *sarppakavu*. Thus the ecofear conquered through the propitiation rituals led to the development of a culture of fear-appeasement among the caste hierarchy that aided the conservation of nature through the institution of *sarppakavu* in the nineteenth century Kerala.

Conclusion

Kavu is the epitome of Kerala's regional religiosity that evolved from human-nature connectedness. Although this institution has undergone annexation, its ritualistic traditions of fear-appeasement offered resistance and conserved it from destruction. The biocentric cohabitation among the Indigeneity was such that the foreign Brahmins had to appropriate this tradition into the Vedic pantheon to ascend the social ladder and *sarppakavu* is the finest example of this cultural appropriation.

The Indigenous wisdom of understanding nature as the life source and a continuum initiated the tradition of ancestral worship. They feared nature's enigma and its unpredictability and conquered this fear through its sacralization. Although the caste hierarchy annexed the indigenous land and deities, the institution of *kavu* and its powerful ritualistic tradition of fear-appeasement instilled the fear of supernature in the caste hierarchy. This culture of fear prompted them to sacralize *kavu* and culminated in the construction of *sarppakavu* in the nineteenth century Kerala among the caste hierarchy. Consequently, any family without a serpent grove, entangled in the culture of fear-appeasement, reserved a portion of their homestead garden as wilderness to worship

and propitiate the serpents and inadvertently contributed to the conservation of nature. Thus the institution of *sarppakavu* retained human-culture-sacred continuum and its construction became a vogue among the caste hierarchy in nineteenth century Kerala.

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Notes

i *Kavukal* is the plural form of *kavu*.

ii The groves dedicated to the worship of *amma* or mother goddess such as *Bhagavthi*, *Kali*, *Neeli*, *Chamundi*, etc.

iii Those groves that worships male (*Purusha*) gods such as *Ayyappan*, *Vettakkorumakan*, etc.

iv The groves devoted to the worship of animals (*Mrigam*) such as serpent, leopard, etc.

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- v The groves that worships ancestral spirits (*Pretam*) such as *Muttan*, *Mutti*, *Appoppan*, *Yakshi*, etc.
- vi The first three categories are formulated by E. Unnikrishnan in his seminal text, *Uttarakeralathile Vishuddha Vanagal*, whereas the latter is an observation of the researcher as there exists various groves that are solely dedicated to the deceased spirits.
- vii The urn is symbolic of the womb or “os uteri” therefore a hole is made at the bottom which represents the return of the deceased soul to the Earth or to nature.
- viii Home unique to the casteists in Kerala (Nayars, Amabalavasi and Namboodiri Brahmins) especially associated with the joint family system.
- ix Miniature mole of a Malayali house consecrated along with the serpent icons in *sarppakavu* that symbolise its home.
- x Pulluvan is a scheduled caste in Kerala renowned for their ritual expertise in exorcism and magic. Pulluvas are sub-divided into *Nagampatikal* (people who sing snake-songs) and *Pretampatikal* (people who sings ghost-songs).
- xi The term refers to the Brahmin and/or Nayar castes.
- xii Gough states that the propitiation rituals conducted annually was presided over by the Nayar tharavadu. However, the performer, often a family member of the deceased, belonged to the subaltern castes of Parayas or Pulayas.
- xiii Ritualistic right possessed by a *tantri* (priest) over the consecration of a deity within a temple.
- xiv <http://www.vetticodenagarajatemple.com/>
- xv Mythical semi-divine beings who are half-human and half cobra.



An Analysis of Reverential Ecofear in Theyyam: A Ritualistic Performance of North-Malabar

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Abstract

Theyyam is a ritualistic performance in the North-Malabar region of Kerala, India. It carries ritualistic elements such as worship and penance along with the convergence of various forms like dance, painting, and music. The legendary and mythical characters in Theyyam performances are acted out by artistically skilled men of the exploited sections of the society including Malayas, Pulayas, Vannans, Velans, and Thiyyas. Though the performance of Theyyam by the subaltern communities signals the fearless resistance against the prevailing hierarchies and hegemonies in the society, it also has been used by the system as an ideological means to contain the oppositions or resistance from its subjects. The ritualistic expression of fear and respect forms the basis of each Theyyam performances. Often, people's fear of nature is ritualistically manifested through Theyyam performance. People's fear is concerned mainly with the matters of diseases, reproduction and yield in agriculture. These concerns are well articulated in different folk narratives including Kothamooriyattam, Kaliyanattam and the Theyyam performances including Muchilottu Bagavathi and Pulimaranja Thondachan Theyyam. The knowledge about nature acquired through a keen observation of natural cycles and other changes in nature by the ancient people is manifested in these ritual performances. This paper critically examines the influence of fear, using the concepts of ecofear and ecophobia, in the formulation of goddesses in Theyyam worship and the connection between the paraphernalia of Theyyam with nature. It examines the case of Theyyottukavu, a sacred grove in the district of Kannur in the light of the concept of ecofear. The paper also, analyses Theyyam and certain Theyyam myths by incorporating the theories of fear studies formulated by the fearologist R. M. Fisher.

Keywords: Ecofear, Ecophobia, Ritual, Theyyam, Mother Goddess, Myth

Theyyam is a ritualistic performance in the North-Malabar region of Kerala, India. It carries ritualistic elements such as worship and penance along with the convergence of various forms like dance, painting, and music. The legendary and mythical characters in Theyyam performances are acted out by artistically skilled men of the exploited sections of the society like the Malayas, Pulayas, Vannans, Velans, and Thiyyas. The word 'Theyyam' can be an appropriation of the word *daivam*, meaning 'god'. The critic E. P. Rajagopalan in his article titled "Theatre in North Malabar" says that, "Theyyam offers parallel world view as its performers are those belonging to the traditionally marginalized communities. It is said the term 'teyyam' is a local variant of 'daivam' (Sanskrit) or bhuto (Tulu). And this form represents in its fullness, the pre-modern history, geography and aesthetic patterns of North-Malabar and thereby becomes space-specific. Modernity could not wipe out this tradition as the natives find a kind of self-expression in the aesthetic and social stances that teyyam forms seasonally offer" (27). In a society where

inequalities and injustices exist, Theyyam has been and continues to be a form of resistance, raising the voice of the subaltern—who has been often subjected to violence from the upper classes and castes. Though the performance of Theyyam by the subaltern communities, who are part of the indigenous worldview (i.e., the love for nature), signals the fearless resistance against the prevailing hierarchies and hegemonies in society, it also has been used by the system as an ideological means to contain the oppositions or resistance from its subjects. As M. Sahira stated in her article titled, “Folk Performances: Reading the Cultural History of the Thiyya Community in Kerala,” “the ritual performance is a form of sacralized folk theatre and in effect becomes an embodied vessel of folk history and memory” (162).

“...people’s fear for the unpredictability of nature in turn created a worship system...”

The ritualistic expression of fear and respect forms the basis of each Theyyam performance. “In indigenous communities, the deep relationship between the people and their land is maintained through sacralization of cultural and natural materials...the process of sacralisation of a natural/cultural material is manifested as fear, awe, and/or reverence creating a nexus of nature-culture-sacred” (Alex and Deborah 422). Theyyam worship can be categorized into the worship of heroes, mother goddess, ghost or dead people, ancestors, animals, and serpents. Theyyam encompasses the goddesses of war and illness including Angakkulangara Bagavathi, Kotteve, Vasoorimala, Puthiya Bagavathi and Muchilottu Bagavathi. The goddess Cheerma or Sree Kurumba is a goddess of illness, who sows the seeds of sickness on humanity. The sickness of the people will be cured when the people repent for their sins. These goddesses come under the title of mother goddess in Theyyam performances. They are worshipped by people for curing illness and for a better yield in agriculture. In short, people’s fear for the unpredictability of nature in turn created a worship system in the society. Often, people’s fear of nature is ritualistically manifested through Theyyam performance. Puli Theyyams (Theyyam related to the leopard) such as Pulikandan, Pulimaruthan and Pullooru Kali, and the serpent goddess Nagakkanni are the examples of this close relationship between Theyyam and nature. The nature knowledge acquired through the keen observation on nature cycles and other changes in nature are manifested in these ritual performances.

This paper critically analyses the influence of fear in the formulation of goddesses in Theyyam worship. The study also focuses on the connection between the paraphernalia of Theyyam with nature. This article also examines the case of Theyyottukavu, a sacred grove in the district of Kannur, in the light of the concept of ecofear introduced by Fisher. Fisher calls this in his article titled “Ecocriticism, Ecophobia and Indigenous Criticism” as a “deep fear of nature” (4).

The cult of mother-goddess worship evolved from the people’s belief in the deity’s power to bless and curse. The concept of culture of fear discussed by Fisher in his article titled “Ecocriticism, Ecophobia and the Culture of Fear: Autobiographical Reflections,” can be better adapted here as it is an attempt to manage fear by using fear-based means, which creates more fear and which, on the cultural grounds, is more evident in these ritual practices (13). People

attempt to propitiate nature, as the nature has either the power to create destruction or to ensure prosperity, to overcome their fear of nature.

People's fear is mainly concerned with the matters of diseases, reproduction and yield in agriculture. These concerns are well articulated in different folk narratives including Kothamooriyattamⁱ and Kaliyanattamⁱⁱ. The ritual song titled "Vithupolippaattu" (song of seeds) in Kothamooriyattam includes the description of 18 types of seeds of rice cultivation. Ritual art like Kothamooriyattam is performed mainly to bring prosperity to each household. The song which describes the invitation of the holy cow Kamadhenu (a symbol of prosperity) to earth by offering flowers to it, is also included in Kothamooriyattam. This song also describes a ritual day called Pooram, where the maidens take penance to worship Lord Kama for getting good husbands in future. M. V. Vishnu Namboothiri states in his volume titled *Folklore Nihandu* that, in North Kerala, there is a ritual performance called Kaliyanattam performed by Pulaya community to alleviate evil spirits and to bring prosperity to each household. In Kaliyanattam, the goddesses named Kaliyan and Kalichi are considered to be the goddesses of evil spirits. Kaliyanattam is performed to appease these deities to bring prosperity in agriculture and cattle rearing (190). People fear that infertility can bring disaster to their life. As Nature is the ultimate symbol of fertility and reproduction, the human beings realized the importance of worshipping it. The creation of ritual performances like Pooram, Kaliyanattam and Kothamooriyattam, thus, remarkably point to people's fear of nature.

Theyyottukaavu: A Ray of Hope and the Emerging Sense of Ecophobia

The creation of sacred groves depends mainly on the nearness of water bodies. Sacred groves, water bodies and women are always associated with each other and they represent fertility cult. Theyyottukavu, a sacred grove situated at Alappadamba, in the border of Kannur-Kasaragod districts, is still showing its resistance to the changes of modern times. The lighted torches made out of coconut leaves are very common during Theyyam performances. But today the use of lighted torches are minimal with the entry of tube light. Theyyottukavu is different in this case as it does not permit electricity in its performing yard and continues the traditional use of lighted torches.

Muthalalar is the central deity of worship in Theyyottukavu. During the last days of Theyyam performance in Theyyottukavu Kaikkalon, a ritual performance that represent the deity named Muthalalar visits the nearby houses to alleviate bad spirits and offers protection from all evils and diseases. To ensure the prosperity of the region, the people welcome the deity by offering it agricultural products. The deity is worshipped under a tree and there is no particular shrine for this deity to reside. "Traditional indigenous communities employ values, such as reverence and respect, as a cultural tool aiding physical connectedness with nature" and "there are evidences of non-traditional communities having sacred manifestations of nature-culture materials, such as beliefs in sacred groves and specific trees" which can be called Indigenous Reverential Ecofear (Alex and Deborah 423). The protection of Theyyottukavu from modern cultural changes is significant in this regard. E. Unnikrishnan said that, "the existence of a strong bond between a village and the village deity cannot be seen anywhere in North Kerala except in the relation of a village in Alappadamba with the central deity of Theyyottukavu. They imagined a goddess as the protector of the village and they believed that the dooms and boons experienced by the village are

caused by the power of this goddess. They protected Theyyottukavu as a sacred grove until now to appease the deity” (1) (translated by the author).

The belief system as well as the worship system act as the protective layers to the sacred groves. The presence of deities would protect the land from all kinds of pollution and destruction. But the system in the form of renovation is now attempting to change the foundation of ecology. The transformation of kavu or sacred grove into the temple affected the ecological balance as it started and progressed by disturbing the ecological balance. The irrational fear of the civilized society towards nature thus transforms itself into the form of ecophobia, a concept introduced by Simon C. Estok. He defined it in his work titled *The Ecophobia Hypothesis* (2018) as “...a phobia that has largely derived from modernity’s irrational fear of nature and hence has created an antagonism between humans and their environments” (1). The fear of Brahmanical culture is evident in their actions to change the natural settings of Theyyam performances. They are afraid of the ritualistic manifestation of natural power through Theyyam performances. As they occupy a higher position in the caste hierarchy and also they control power with their expertise in ritual matters, the proponents of Brahmanical culture are afraid of being questioned. The process of separating the ritual art Theyyam from its natural premises/contexts and confining it to the concretized Theyyam performing yard are part of this cultural invasion. The process of cultural assimilation of the dominant ideology of the system will also take place along with this. “The cultural assimilation of the indigenous communities into the mainstream dominant worldview has resulted in a catastrophic transformation of their culture” (Alex & Deborah 426).

Ecofear and Theyyam Myths

By keeping alive the Indigenous reverential ecofear (IRE) through the ritual art Theyyam, the people of North-Malabar attempts to build resilience and offers resistance to the ethical degeneration which happens due to the process of ecophobia. They worship nature by bringing this cult into the ritualistic framework.

The people who closely belong to nature and land like the Malaya, Pulaya, Vannan communities, also known as the subaltern castes, created these performances. The society is afraid of unpredictable calamities or disasters in the form of diseases and crop failures. Theyyam is often performed to bring welfare and wellbeing to all the communities and societies. The terms like "polika" (prosperity to all) and "gunam varanam" (wellbeing to all) are evidence to this belief. The mother goddess in Theyyam, which represents the fertility cult, is thus a way of bringing wellbeing to every field. The fear of diseases and natural disasters ultimately led people to worship certain deities. It is evident in the worship of Puthiya Bagavathi, Muchilottu Bagavathi, like mother goddesses in North Malabar. These deities were assigned to protect people from all the difficulties. Thus, people believed that the absence of a mother goddess in the village or their fury towards people in the society would ultimately bring disaster to the land.

To appease these deities through performing ritual art like Theyyam in North-Malabar is a clear example of the indigenous reverential ecofear. Clearing the premises of a kavu (sacred grove) and its related ecosystem in the name of belief and development indicate the process of society’s departure from nature. Thus, the formation of a ritual art and the related belief system in the modern-day society through the indigenous reverential ecofear are oriented towards profit and are

totally different from the indigenous world view, which centres more on the selfless love towards nature. All these worshipping systems are aiming to create wellbeing and prosperity of the land. However, the human world is expecting a benefit or profit out of worshipping the deity due to its close relationship with the modern culture influenced as well as appropriated by the dominant world view. As Fisher quoted Four Arrows in his article titled “Ecocriticism, Ecophobia and Indigenous Criticism”, only “(o)ur worldview, not our technologies, can save us” (8).

“...loss of virginity is a trick employed by patriarchy...”

Mother Goddess has a very prominent space in Theyyam performance. It invokes fertility and prosperity. Some historians point out that the root of the worship of the mother goddess can be found in ancient Western Asia, Egypt like countries but it gained eminence in primeval India. The worship of the Divine Mother is typical in India. There are goddesses related to war, death, illness and some are mother and village goddesses. M. V. Vishnu Namboodiri in his work titled *Theyyam Thirathottangal: Oru Padanam* stated that Bhagavathi, Kali, Chamundi like Theyyam are being worshipped as a mother goddess and the thottamsⁱⁱⁱ like 'Thiruvarkatt vanarul moola thaye' ('the mother residing at Thiruvarkattu), 'Muchilakodamarnnaruleedumamme', (the mother showering blessings from Muchilottu) 'Kannangadamarmoolathayikitha kai thozhunnen', (bow you mother dwelling at Kannamgadu) and 'Pramanjerikkavamarnnoramme sharanam thaye' (bow you mother residing at Pramenjeri kavu), proves the above statement (80). 'Bless everyone with good fortune' is the first and foremost priority and duty of all deities. Protection and punishment, mitigation of illness and offer prosperity are considered to be the major functions of the goddesses.

Muchilottu Bagavathi

The Theyyam Muchilottu Bagavathi, mostly performed in the Kannur and Kasargod districts of Kerala, is the *paradevatha* (central deity) of Vaniya community. The popular myth of Muchilottu Bagavathi is related to the life-story of a virgin woman named Uchila from a Brahmin community. As a scholarly woman, she participated in a scholarly debate and defeated all the scholarly men gathered there. She defended the dignity of her village. Uchila answered all the questions that are asked including the one related to sexuality and labour pain. They accused her of her loss of virginity and excommunicated her from the village. She travelled and reached a place called Theekkuzhichal, where she decided to set up a funeral pyre. She asked for the help of a young man from the Vaniya community. He assisted Uchila in her self-immolation by providing coconut oil. Uchila was impressed by the act of this man and blessed him with prosperity. Uchila became a goddess and was named Muchilottu Bagavathi who became the central deity of the Vaniya community.

Accusing women of their loss of virginity is a trick employed by patriarchy to deny her agency. Because it is interesting to see as Estok said, "how men imagine the agency of women—sexual, emotional, intellectual, political (and how they fear what they imagine)" (384). The result of this imagination can be seen in the myth of Muchilottu Bagavathi. Uchila, a virgin scholarly woman from the Brahmin community is excommunicated because of her scholarship in the patriarchal society. Muchilottu Bagavathi is a mother goddess and is worshipped mainly for the prosperity of the village. The popularity of Muchilottu Bagavathi across North-Malabar signifies the deity's importance among people. A different myth of Muchilottu Bagavathi states her

presence in Dayaramangalam family, situated near Nileswaram. The presence of the deity brought prosperity to the land and agriculture. The people worshipped this deity to mitigate their fear related to diseases, fertility, and prosperity.

A nature-human integration can be seen in one of the myths of Muchilottu Bagavathi. As people are afraid of unknown diseases from nature, they started practising indigenous medicines to cure the illness. Along with the practice of worshipping the goddesses to mitigate illness through the ritual performances like Theyyam they integrated into it the natural elements that have medicinal value. The myth of Muchilottu Bagavathi among the Kurichiya community in the Kannavam region in the Kannur district brilliantly integrates the aspect just mentioned above. Kannavam region is famous for its cultivation of turmeric and the use of turmeric powder as an offering from the goddess in Theyyam performances, especially in Muchilottu Bagavathi, points to the importance of this nature-human integration. The conflicts experienced by the tribal community due to the increase in the number of diseases and the lack of treatment for these caused the creation of this narrative, says EP Rajagopalan in his work titled *Poovum Maravum Pooravum* (55). Finding solutions from nature to the problems caused by nature is well manifested in this Kurichiya myth of Muchilottu Bagavathi. They found it as a reliable narrative to tackle their fear of nature.

The nature-culture divide evident in the myth of Puli Theyyam and Karinthiri Nair is significant in this regard. The myth goes like this. Lord Shiva and the goddess Parvathi took the forms of leopard and were known by the names Pulikkandan and Pullikkarinkali respectively. They have children named Kandappuli, Marappuli, Kalappuli, Pulimaruthan, Puliyoorkali and Puliyoorkannan. They were in search of food and could not find it in the forest. They found a cattle shelter in the village and ate all the cattle there. When the owner discovered his cattle to be missing, he sought the help of Karinthiri Nair to kill the leopards. Karinthiri Nair failed to eliminate those leopards and fell victim to their attack. Karinthiri Nair became a goddess after his death and the leopard goddesses took him with them. The owner of the cattle, a local lord, then decided to worship these leopards by performing them as Theyyam.

When humans started expanding their territory by clearing forests the animals and other creatures have lost their shelter as well as their means of living. The entry of wild animals into human habitation for food and shelter is thus a result of ecological imbalances caused by human beings. People are afraid of nature and natural beings. In the myth, the intrusion of the leopards into the areas of human settlement signals the scarcity of food resources in the forest. Here, the cattle shelter ostensibly works as a symbol of culture and signifies the nature-culture divide. The employment of Karinthiri Nair to hunt down the leopards shows people's fear of nature. The transformed existence of Karinthiri Nair as a divine figure after death in the myth as well as his transformation as a companion to the leopard goddesses signal the importance of human-nature integration. The performance of leopard goddesses as Puli Theyyam in the ritual performances is thus a clear manifestation of ecofear.

Pulimaranja Thondachan Theyyam

Pulimaranja Thondachan Theyyam explores the tireless attempts of Kari, the son of Virundhi and Karimban, who were the tenants of Paaraanthaattu local king. Though he belongs to the Pulaya

community, Kari was sent to study Ezhuthu, Poythu and Mantras (All forms of knowledge including writing, martial arts, and chanting mantras). Later, he became a scholarly person and his mastery over Kalari, the martial art of Kerala, made him famous. The system encompassing the higher castes were afraid of a learned subaltern. This fear of authority visibly made its entrance in the form of 'madness' of the lord of Alladam. The madness of the lord of Alladam and Kari's transformation into the leopard to cure the illness can be read as the conscious effort from the higher castes to disarm an able, powerful lower caste person.

A strong determination and fearlessness are needed in the transformation oneself into the leopard form. Acquiring the skill of transforming of oneself into the other form, is considered a higher achievement. When Kari was asked to fetch the leopard-milk, he chose the form of a leopard, a symbol of fearlessness, though Kari had to end up in the leopard form. As Fisher argued, a 'culture of fear' is conditioned by the system. Culture of fear is an "...attempt to manage fear by using fear-based means, which creates more fear rather than less" (13). This system of fear is normalised in the society through different narratives by the State. As Fisher states in his article "Ecocriticism, Ecophobia and Indigenous Criticism," "we are so fear-based *via* oppression-repression dynamics today in a "culture of fear" context that we cannot even find a reference point for where to turn and imagine Fearlessness, or Love in the largest sense..." (13).

Pulaya community, one of the indigenous tribes of Kerala, is related mainly with land and agriculture. They have their root in nature. Though Kari attained wisdom from his subaltern background and mastered Kalari, (the martial art), he does not move away from nature. His choice of leopard form is an evident example of this. Kari's transformation into a leopard form signifies Kari's return to nature. The system which is afraid of nature does not want a person who has the ability to connect either with nature or culture. In the myth of Pulimaranja Thondachan, everybody knows Kari's transformation into a leopard form to mitigate the illness of the lord of Alladam. He told his wife Vellachi to practice a trick which transforms Kari into the human form, when he returns in the form of leopard. He asks Vellachi to dip the broom into the starch (rice) water and has to sprinkle on Kari's transfigured form of leopard. But she fails to fulfil her duty as she is afraid of Kari's appearance as a leopard. Here, the starch water and broom are the symbols of culture.

Vellachi's failure denotes the community's estrangement from nature. Vellachi's act more or less symbolizes the society's unwillingness to accept a person from nature. Kari's leopard form is a clear manifestation of nature. Thus, the society's fear of Kari suggests its fear of nature and they overcame this fear through the deification of Kari. The act of venerating a subaltern deceased spirit was a common practice among upper caste, especially the Nayar. According to Kathleen Gough, "Nayars believe that the spirits of persons of any caste who died prematurely from epidemic, accident, murder, or suicide can bring misfortune to the living...The misfortunes they inflict include many kinds of sickness; madness, female barrenness, cattle deaths, house fires, or poltergeist activities" (463). Here, the elite society by worshipping Kari as a Theyyam named Pulimaranja Thondachan is defying in turn their fear of nature. On the other hand, each performance of Kari as Pulimaranja Thondachan by a performer from Pulaya community brings them back to nature.

Though Kari couldn't change the system with his human form he destroyed those who are responsible for this ill fate with his leopard form. Kari's ability to transfigure into a natural entity shows the relationship that the indigenous people have with nature. In this myth, the ultimate goal of challenging the authority is done with the assistance of nature. The authority is afraid of Kari, the subaltern, who is scholarly as well as powerful. Kari's transfiguration into the form of leopard is also a nightmarish thing to the authority and this transformation is symbolic of the power one would attain if one collaborates with nature. In short, the system's fear of a learned subaltern and the culture's fear of nature is well manifested in this myth of Pulimaranja Thondachan.

Thottumkara Bagavathi

The myth of Thottumkara Bagavathi is as follows. A woman, without showing her heart-breaking grief for the loss of all her children, was reading Ramayana loudly. A local landlord happened to hear it and summoned her to his palace. He saw the great emotional strength of that woman and considered it a threat to the society. He ordered her execution by putting fire on her head. Her corpse was discovered beside a stream and she was deified as "Thottumkara Bagavathi." However, this myth is absent from the thottampattu of Theyyam.

Thottumkara Bagavathi is a memoir of a woman, who was brutally murdered by the feudal patriarchal setup. The patriarchal concept of "femininity" as weak (both mentally and physically) and delicate are mismatched here in this myth. Though the myth of Thottumkara Bagavathi has nothing to do with any of the ecofear ideas it is well connected with the idea of the agency of women by Estok (384). In this case, a scholarly subaltern woman and her strong will power (also emotional superiority) are becoming a threat to the agency of patriarchy in public. Thottumkara Bagavathi is also known as Kariyanthottu Bagavathi and Kariyandanchal Bagavathi. Here, these names establish nature connection as 'thottu' and 'chal' that means small connecting streams. These water bodies are spread throughout the landscape or topography of Kerala surrounding which the settlement and agriculture flourished. Naganthattukuri, the facial makeup of Thottumkara Bagavathi, which is similar to the facial makeup of Puthiya Bagavathi, is symbolic of nature. 'Naganthattukuri' is named after 'Naga' or the serpent. Here, the artist adapts various elements including the design of facial makeup from nature.

Love for Nature and Theyyam

Love for nature by the Indigenous communities (i.e., their worldview) is significant. "Indigenous worldview is not one of promoting fear/hatred of Nature (or, anything else for that matter)" (Fisher 12). This love for the nature of the Indigenous communities can better be understood by analyzing its reflections in ritual art like Theyyam. The sustenance of Theyyam depends mainly on nature and the sacred groves as the centres of Theyyam performance is also significant in this regard. Here, a strong connection is established between "a transcendental belief and a material ecological entity. The existence of the community owes to the reverence given to the sacred grove, a belief and action that function to conserve the rich bio-diverse patch of land" (Alex 424). For instance, the long head-gear of Theyyam looks like the leaf of the Banyan tree and this head-gear is made out of areca palm.

The relation of Theyyam with nature is inseparable for many reasons. Some Theyyam possesses head-gear with many lighted torches in it and this is symbolic of the sun. The use of tender coconut leaves for the costumes, and the use of natural items like coconut, rice, flowers etc. are essential in the performance of Theyyam. In the past, most of the makeup items and their materials came from nature. At present, some chemical products are also added to it. Even today, the midribs are used as brushes for makeup in Theyyam. Each facial pattern (Mukhathezhuth) in Theyyam adds significance to the Theyyam performance. Most of these patterns are well adapted from nature and carry the names (Narikkurichezhuth, Mankannezhuth) that signify the importance of nature. More or less, the movements of Theyyam can also be traced back to the physical movements of peacock and hen. Thus the movements, as well as the paraphernalia of each Theyyam performances, are largely influenced by nature. The resources from nature are well adapted into the symmetry of Theyyam performances. This is the huge lesson that these communities provide through Theyyam to the public. And this ultimately projects to the Indigenous perspective on nature that, ‘there is no genetic, no inherent, not inevitable, “need” to fear Nature- and, thus to hate Nature...’ (Fisher 12).

In the new ‘Fear Studies’ curriculum (and its assumptions, propositions)—there is basically a claim that human beings are always doing “fear management” in some way, especially as they feel distressed, traumatized, and thus live in a context of a culture of fear, a post-traumatic culture, or as Estok wrote, an “Age of Terror” (Fisher 18). The dominant system of power has different means of managing the fear. Mystifying the dominant ideology is one among them.

In the case of Theyyam, the class which owns the power including the patriarchal system would try to suppress all the resistance against the system through physical or ideological—i.e., not always overt or obvious but ‘hidden’—means. The physical—i.e., overt—suppression of the subaltern class often results in the death of people. For example, the subaltern heroes in Theyyam performances such as Mandhappan (Kathivannoor Veeran), Pulaya (Pottan Theyyam), Vishakanda (Vishakandan Theyyam), Uchila (Muchilottu Bagavathy), a Thiyya woman (Thottumkara Bagavathi) and Neeli (Neeliyar Bagavathi) are capable of bringing significant social changes with their lives. But they all become the victims of the power politics of caste and gender hierarchy in the society.

The narratives that give emphasis more on the victimization of these heroes and sheroes are also capable in hiding the role played by the system of power in this victimhood. These narratives, capable of bringing ideological mystification of this kind, are also capable of creating a collective social psyche where the lives of subalterns have lesser importance. Here, in this case, fear transcends its position as an emotion or a feeling to the state of an ideology (Fisher 15).

On the other hand, the fear of nature by society is managed through its ritualistic articulation. The Indigenous lifestyle and the worldview are shaped by this fear of nature and it did not attempt to romanticize nature, as it worshipped nature (even in its fierce form) as a whole. The myths of different Theyyam performances discussed above are clear examples of the functioning of ecofear among Indigenous communities. Moreover, the ritual art Theyyam has importance as it is the ritualistic documentation of the human-nature relationship. Each performance reminds of one’s existence in nature. Later, a worship system that emerged out of a community’s ecofear gave its way to ecophobia. Thus, nature witnessed drastic changes in its

ecological balance. The community's concern towards the emerging influence of ecophobia is articulated in the discussion of Theyyottukavu. Though the dominant system of power always hides its fear and works to disturb the ecological balance, the ritual art performance including Theyyam in North Malabar stays as a ray of hope which builds resilience by keeping its love for nature intact.

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Notes

- i Kothamooriyattam is a ritual art performed by Malaya community in North Malabar.
- ii Kaliyanattam is a ritual art performed by Pulaya community. it is performed mainly in the Malayalam month of Karkkidakam.
- iii Thottam or Thottampaattu is an evocative song which details the myth of the Theyyam performance.



B. CREATIVE WORKS

Experiential Fictional Stories

Hydrophobia—The Water That I Dread!

Deborah, S. Susan

In the rainy and stormy monsoon season of 2018, I found a home when I was barely 33 days old. It's a lovely memory if not for the monsoons which always evoke a sense of dread in me. It's monsoon now and though I enjoy my walks with my curly-haired mamma, I detest the puddles which appear and reappear in the course of our walks. My inherent child-like human seems to be fascinated with water and somehow forces me to either jump on the puddle or walk through it; my adult-self's nemesis! My human pappa who is also equally fond of water like my mamma takes special glee in threatening me with bathing every time he feels like it. Mean! I mean they know that our species has a certain disdain for water and overhearing the human read from her black box,(Laptop) that it is enough that I am bathed once a month. But my human parents don't pay any heed to that and bathe me or at least force-bathe me once a week!

My bath times are a blur. I am carried by force after trying to escape the clutches of my human (either man or woman). After all, where could I run, except round and round the drawing room which is no daunting task for my humans. But I must admit that I enjoy it when they carry me and I wish it was forever! But alas! The bathroom—cold and watery—drives me into a great dread! How I dislike water! Thankfully my humans use warm water which makes it bearable for me. Imagine cold water being poured over the body. I patiently await the bathing time to be over. But no! Shampoo once, then again and then scrubbing—prolonging the time of my misery. And in case it's my pappa, I have to wait until he bathes me with warm water. I wait for him to rub me with a dry towel which seems like forever. Fighting off my claustrophobia, I bide my time till the bathroom door opens. Once open, I run out of the bathroom into freedom and wriggle myself free of the water droplets. When my human parents took me to Kerala with them, there was a cage kept for the likes of me. I'm glad that I wasn't put into it. I think the bathing experience inside the closed bathroom doors would seem like that cage I had seen in Kerala. I'm happy that my parents don't lock me into that closed space. I would rather move about freely at home in Goa.

Autonomy is confined in the way I choose my position while sleeping but that comes with limitations as well—while I could choose my sleeping position, the place is not what I could possibly choose—I would love to snuggle in the bed along with my humans but alas, that is something I don't get too often and if I do get, I have to compromise on my position.

These days I have the company of my human parents almost always and that is something I wholeheartedly enjoy albeit a small fear of regular bathing. But I guess I can be assured that bathing me regularly is not a priority in their agenda as much as cooking and cuddling me is! But if at all, I'm carried off for bathing, it is a warm and long one which is enjoyable and fearful in equal measures. I enjoy the soaping and shampooing part while hugging my human tight but still afraid of the water that would be splashed across my body. But something else has been added to my routine these days—after our walks, my mamma washes my paws with something added to water. This is something which I don't like but now it has become a usual process. I bear this since it is only my paws and not my entire body! Listen to this. Two days ago my humans were curiously discussing an article of 'Rajapalayam dogs.' I perked my ears up to listen carefully. And what do I hear?—"Rajapalayam dogs don't like water and detest bathing." See, see, I was right all along. All along I had been imagining that I was the only one hydrophobic but this article showed the light. BUT my parents don't understand this. My fear means nothing to them. All they could possibly recognize in this bathing situation is my peculiar smell and colour which does not sit well with them.

"...not subject to bathing, the bathroom seems like a safe space..."

The monsoon is long gone and my walks are becoming something that I look forward to given the dry roads and no puddles. I have started resuming my air-sniffing and butterfly chasing alternatives to continually navigating puddles and muddy waters. I've even started socializing with Brownie, Leo, Tofu, Nira and Bolu, who are my human parents' friends' dogs on the campus. Though I like seeing them, when they get close to me, I don't enjoy it; thus, retreating by growling and barking.

It's February now and the weather is pleasant but it did rain one evening. In February, I cannot imagine rain but when I went for a walk with my mamma, I loved the cool breeze and the wet roads. These days I even venture into the bathroom—once my dreaded space, to check on my mamma and for hidden treats which my papa places to make me forget my fear of the bathing space. As long as I'm not subject to bathing, the bathroom seems like a safe space for me because of my papa who often hides treats there and I go there to find and eat them.

My human parents are quite busy these days which in one way is good for me because there is paucity of time for my time-consuming bathing. I'm enjoying the relaxed ambience without danger of being drenched in water, hoping that these blissful days would remain forever. However, I am cheated into consuming water by my parents. Ask me how? They seem to be adding a lot of water to my food and even milk—I love food and perhaps they find that is one way of feeding me water! Of course, I cannot complain because I am not forced to walk or bathe in water and that is something that I cherish.

Until the next bathing—I'm happy.

From Dust to Dust...

Sarveswaran, Vidya

I am just beginning to hear the murmurs of a dusty morning. I drag my creamy white chair, a little bit off to one side so I can get a better view of the sun dappled skies from my balcony. This has become my lockdown morning ritual. The serene face of the Buddha painted on the coffee mug, comes alive as I filled it with fresh coffee. Seeing his face is meditation enough for me. I know I need the borrowed calmness to get me through the rest of the day.

Summers in this desert village are the days of heat, dust and nothing. Living on an academic campus, of about eight hundred odd acres, thirty kilometers away from civilization, teaches you to be both pliable and resilient, especially to dust. I dread the dust here. I am allergic to it. But, the dust here is singular. Both Aeolian and fugitive as environmentalists would say. But I think it is like poetry. Layered and metaphorical. First a thin smooth base like caramel swirls on cappuccino, followed by a second topping of shiny granular gravel. You got to get both right if you need to crack it. Dust is like a palimpsest in my house. I sweep, swab, wipe and mop, but the desert insists on bringing it back with a vengeance. Dust in this desert is my karmic pattern. I write, rewrite every story on it without a cut, edit, copy or paste! Today will be another new story, a dark tale, as I can see. The horizon before me threatens a burnt orange—orange and red horizons are most appropriate for Elizabethan theatre, not for the Thar Desert. That simply means, that there is a dust storm that will drop by to disrupt my life, a short while from now. The lukewarm coffee tells me that much time has gone by. That soon, last evening's Lysol sterile mopped, larger than life house, will be raped by apocalyptic dust makes me angry and helpless.

Teaching, Webinars, Research, chores, cooking, coordinating lives of loved ones in another city, and the lack of domestic help of any sort has made most life vulnerable in these surreal times. My inner Buddha tells me, I am a wee bit spoilt. Perhaps, I am. I desperately need a normal—not a *new normal*. I have begun to secretly detest the word. I know I do not have any more physical and mental energies for more dusty encounters. The perfectly arched berms—that surround the campus are the first line of defense against the dust storms. I can see them from my balcony. Town planners, architects and civil engineers call them an architectural marvel. Built from indigenous stone, the berms on campus are one of its kind in the country. The berms are a dramatic spectacle

to witness. Much like the Nazi architecture of intimidation, they are fortified and timeless as they seem. But the dust transcends the berms, space and time, and ends up perfectly in every unsuspecting ledge and nook in my house. As for the berms, they are easily smothered by the relentless dust. Dust plays an Othello on them. The masks that the dust wears is violent and sudden. I am shaken.

“I am terrified of the sneeze. Is it a dust sneeze or a covid sneeze?”

The lack of raucous humans has made the campus naked and stark. The air hangs dense with peace and silence in the mornings. Suddenly, there is a chirpy but boisterous break to my dusty thoughts. Brown, speckled house sparrows land on my wall and cling to the bricks. I have never seen so many clingers—cliff hangers; all my eight years on this campus. They hover around in little circles, suddenly cuddle up together and in an instant earth-dive, off the wall. My Instagram instinct tells me, I have no time for a DSLR. I quickly get them on my phone. Looking at the shot, I see the uncanny resemblance they bear to dust. They are grubby, brown and plain, like fleeting dust bunnies. Little feathered children of dust, their simplicity moves me. House sparrows have become my shamans during the lockdown. They mediate between my earth and their heavens. There are eight of them, I notice. An angel number as they say. Every morning these days, I need no phone alarms to wake me up. These dust babies have become my avian-circadian rhythm keepers. Belligerent sparrow chirrups, have replaced my Night Flute ringtones. And I don't seem to mind their intrusive conversations. I see them feelingly. In fact, sparrows and dust have become my entangled karmas. Every sneeze from the dust sends me running to smell coffee seeds. Coffee seeds are olfactory neutralizers. I am terrified of the sneeze. Is it a dust sneeze or a covid sneeze? I am desperate for smell. The desert offers no smells unlike the oceans. The sneeze has transmogrified into a desert landscape where one can die without a trace. Layered, dust storm deaths. *Loos* as the locals respectfully address the dust storms—more out of fear than of reverence. With magnificent sunsets and Van Gogh night skies, the desert is a silent killer and can bury anyone with all of its layered footprints in the endless dunes of dust and time.

My coffee is completely cold now. I have no time for another cup. I leave my chair to go in, and now I know that *I got to go from dust to dust*. I still look forward to the Dharma—an elixir in the Desert. Because petrichor in the desert still smells like hope. -The End

Poems

Precaution

She lost her shack to the seething, gurgling waters.
That slithering night still raises its hood in her dreams.
Her man beats on his chest and cries, "Curse of the Mother Earth!"
Maybe the earthworms,
Which had thrived for generations on the hilltop-
*displaced by human greed, transported in
heaps of sand,
piled on trucks
and driven off,
from atop the hill-*
had cried out to the heavens for vengeance!

Floods are divine tears washing away the sins of our land,
her toothless grandmother mumbled.
This time it effaced
her one-room shed,
washing away with it, the memories of the family.

Two years...
and now the two of the four, who had come of her womb,
somehow survive the memories of the youngest ones-
the twins,
who were inseparable even when the deadly chariots sped across the land.
Yesterday,
she spent the last of her monthly savings to buy two bottles of hand sanitisers and N 95 masks
from the town-
her womb and breasts cannot afford another loss this year. Schools have reopened, partially.

*At night, like the earthworms,
her heart wriggles for her lost homeland,
which now recur as sand dunes in her dreams.*

- **John, Nithya Mariam**

The Bird's Plight, Takes a Flight

I woke up to cracking shells and
dim chirps of mum flapping her wings in joy
while I lay cocooned in soft feathers and twigs,
this polluted air-breathing life in my frail claws.
My smile turned into a frown when
a creature came close with a shiny bowl of sun
“these are grains, and this is a boy
You needn't be afraid of him, son.
He's kind and generous just like
How you'll grow up to be.”

The boy comes in days multiples of 2
he hops and chirps, waits for me to fall
asleep in his soft palms while his mother
calls him back to her nest.

My mum says that humans are sad as
they cannot fly, is that also
the reason they're mad?
I heard the human-dad scream at the boy
“you better leave the birds alone
We're lost relatives of bats
stay away, we have the virus.”

The boy now comes in days multiples of 5
with no grains and a downturned smile.
My mum coos soothing songs,
songs that make her feel safe
on days she breaks her wings on pink strings,
on days she's blind with smoke,
on days she's afraid to take flight,
on days the nest plummets down with the tree.
This is the world she grew up in,
a world where she's afraid to live in.

I wonder if mum lied 'cause I see
blue skies, with parked cars, humans with
no noses walking alone like lost ants.
My mum says this is 'cause we're healing and healing is never without
loss—
lost homes, lost smiles, lost time.
Mother nature purges the hurt she's stored
in her belly for centuries now.
The world is never gonna be the same

but it's okay; it's all for the better now.

My mum says I'm ready so I stand
on the edge I fly-fly-fly high
with birds from other towns.
They tell me stories of more breadcrumbs
on terrace tops, concerts on golden windowsills,
nectar blooming in sunflowers,
and trees swaying in heaven. I tell them
about the kind boy and we pray together
at dusk, we pray for a new pair of wings
so that one day he could fly with us too.

-Muppirala, Harishankar & Asrani, Manisha

The Locked-down Burg

With lockdown over the world,
And no throng gathering around,
Birds singing in clear skies,
Was ones dominated sooty smokes.

Humans locked, the crows too small,
No signs of life, none at all,
Amidst this the nature heals,
That's what impeccable rills reveal.

Humans trapped in their home,
Now freely can animals roam,
Where ones the jalopy was found,
Now only strays surround.

The boy, capsulated in his house,
Sees the world through the tinted casement,
Sees the playground where he used to play,
Is daunted with emptiness all day.

The boy dreams of going,
Outdoors to play,
But vicious virus,
Haunts all the day.

Factories closed, business slammed,
Down goes the economy,
Forests getting greener day-by-day,
And alas, there is no one to recognise!

Now, when the world is at rest,
It's time to hold a bit and reflect,
Time to think and act with wit,
And control his cataclysmic and catastrophic acts.

-Pathak, Shourya

Short Documentary Video by Tiffany Deater

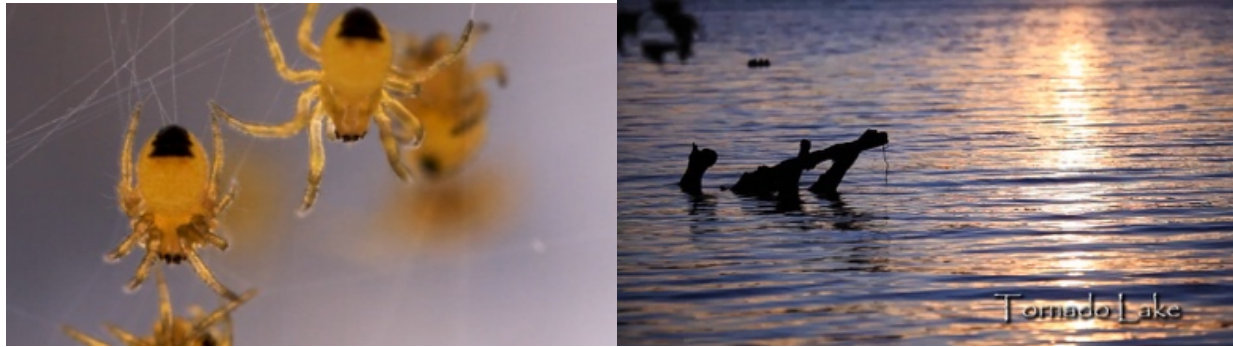
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1sqQW_KJ_HWBzzm3Hyec5fAat2n6PdW1R/view?usp=sharing

About *Tornado Lake*

Tornado Lake explores the complex relationship between humans, insects and “undesirable” animals. Using fragments of found footage, selected text, and original footage, the film weaves together a story of human-animal interactions in an attempt to connect us to the thoughts and ideas of what it means to be human.

Through my video work I seek to connect the viewer with other forms of life, sometimes journeying through their perspectives seeking to answer the questions: how do we connect and empathize with other animals? What insight can we gain from their world? The purpose of my work with animals and environment is twofold; (1) to create a series of nature videos that challenge the current standard of wildlife film production and (2) to use images of animals and landscapes as a way to explore ideas about existence, longing, hopes and fears, and the limits of human knowledge.

I believe the means to understanding human motivation lies at the intersection of the humanities and science, and that the ways we create cinematic encounters with animals and the environment helps us to communicate cultural, social, and individual identities.



Photos by Tiffany Deator

Bionotes of the Creative Writers

Nithya Mariam John, Ph.D. in English, is a poet by passion and a teacher by profession. Her scribblings have come in three collections titled *Bleats and Roars* (2014), *Reflections & Ruminations: A Pinch of Poetry & Perspectives* (2020) and *Poetry Soup* (2021). A few of her poems, stories and translations have found space in Kendra Sahitya Academi's *Journal of Indian Literature*, Kerala Sahitya Academi's *Malayalam Literature Survey*, Indian Ruminations, Muse India, Twist & Twain, samyukthapoetry.org, ourpoetryarchive.com, interactionsforum.com, induswomanwriting.com and cerebration.org. She has edited a volume of poems titled *Pen-ink* (2019) and a collection of short stories, *Vaidehiyude Cherukathakal* (2020). When not engaged in critical discussions with her students, she tries to counter her ignorance by reading, and pouring her heart on her blog Mizhi (nmjs.in/).

Harishankar Muppurala is a Mechanical Engineering undergraduate student at Birla Institute of Technology and Science, Pilani. His interests span through metaphysical ideas and scientific philosophy with a love for juxtaposition and rhetorical statements.

Manisha Asrani is a Medical student at Pramukhswami Medical College with a zeal for creative expression. Her ideal day is being wrapped in sunlight while she reads with a warm cup of green tea keeping her company.

Shourya Pathak is a second year engineering student pursuing a graduate degree in Electronics and Instrumentation from BITS Pilani, K.K. Birla Goa Campus. He is a nature lover and photography and poetry are some of his hobbies. Having a consistently good academic record, he won a prestigious scholarship from Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL). After graduation Shourya plans to attend top management schools and pursue a career in Financial Management.

S. Susan Deborah, Ph. D., is Assistant Professor in the Department of English, M. E. S. College of Arts & Commerce, Goa. She is one the editors of *Ecocultural Ethics: Critical Essays* (2018), *Ecodocumentaries: Critical Essays* (2016) and *Culture and Media: Ecocritical Explorations* (2014). She is the recipient (along with Rayson K. Alex) of ASLE-USA Media Subvention Grant, for creating an interactive video space for ecocinema scholarship. Her interests lie in Ecocriticism, Ecomedia, Gender Studies and Food Studies.

Tiffany Deater is currently an Assistant Professor of Environmental Film & Literature at the State University of New York at Oswego. She works as an independent filmmaker creating wildlife documentaries and experimental videos. Her works have screened internationally at various film festivals and art exhibitions such as the *International Nature Film Festival Gödöllő*, Hungary, *The Feminist Border Arts Film Festival* in New Mexico, the *SunChild 8th International Environmental Festival* in Yerevan, Armenia, and the *EKOTOPFILM International Film Festival Earth Talks* in Prague, Czech Republic. She has won several awards for her film work, including *Best Animal Behavior and Ecology* film at the *University of Idaho Fish & Wildlife Film Festival*, the *Best Short Film Award*, at the *Wildlife Conservation Film Festival* in NYC, and was

nominated for the *Best Experimental Film* at the *Wellington Independent Film Festival* in New Zealand.

Vidya Sarveswaran is Associate Professor of Literary Studies in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at IIT Jodhpur. With a PhD from IIT Madras, Vidya works in the field of Environmental Humanities. She was a Fulbright Fellow from the United States and a Rachel Carson Fellow from Germany. She has worked as a script writer for several documentary and corporate films. An avid reader, Vidya loves travelling, photography, music, making documentaries and biking. *Under another sky* is her debut film as a director. She looks forward to working on more documentaries around environmental themes and planetary change.



Bionotes of the Authors of Critical Essays

Alex, Gigy J. is an Assistant Professor from the Department of Humanities, Indian Institute of Space Science and Technology (IIST), Thiruvananthapuram, India. Her area of interest includes Food and Cultural Studies, Science Fiction, Resistance Literature, Comparative Literature, Cultural Studies, Genre and Gender Studies.

Baindur, Meera is an educator, researcher, and writer in Philosophy and environmental humanities. She was formerly an associate professor at Manipal Centre for Philosophy and Humanities, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, India. She is currently working as an ethics expert and online course designer for a Geneva based organization called Global ethics.net. She has recently taken over as editor for a philosophy website called barefootphilosophers.org.

Biswas, Pragnaparamita graduated from Banaras Hindu University (2013), Dr. Biswas's doctoral work was on the Indian feminist theatre focusing upon the women dramatists and their works. She is currently a Research Fellow of Indology at The Asiatic Society, Kolkata, India. She has published with Springer, *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, *Muse India*, *The Theatre Times* and *Atlantic Critical Review*. She has been involved in reviewing/editing works with two journals namely *The Criterion: An International Journal in English* and *Scholar Critic: An International Journal of Language, Literature and Cultural Studies*.

Deater, Tiffany is an Assistant Professor of Environmental Film & Literature at the State University of New York at Oswego. She is also a Ph.D. candidate in Environmental Biology from SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, and a recent graduate from Syracuse University where she studied Video Art. She works as an independent filmmaker creating wildlife documentaries and experimental videos.

Mohan, Monisha is a Research Scholar (Ph.D.), at the Department of Humanities, Indian Institute of Space Science & Technology (IIST), Thiruvananthapuram, India. Her area of interest includes literature in general, Culture and Media Studies, Ecocriticism, Folklore (Kerala), Gender and sexuality studies and Psychoanalysis.

Prakash, Gyan is an Assistant Professor of Indian Philosophy at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT (ISM) Dhanbad. His work focuses on Early Buddhist Philosophy, Emotion, Metaphysics and Indian Religion. He is also an Associate Fellow at Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla.

Rangarajan, Swarnalatha is Professor of English at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Madras and is passionate about environmental humanities. She is the founding editor of the *Indian Journal of Ecocriticism* (IJE). Her academic publications include *Ecocriticism: Big Ideas and Practical Strategies* (2018) and co-edited works titled *Ecoambiguity, Community, and Development* (2014) and *Ecocriticism of the Global South* (2015). She is the co-translator of *Mayilamma: The Life of a Tribal EcoWarrior* (2018). She is one of the series editors for the “Routledge Studies in World Literatures and Environment” and the co-editor of the *Routledge Book of Ecocriticism and Environmental Communication* (2019). Her debut novel, *Final Instructions* was published by Authorspress in 2015. She has co-edited a collection of interviews with Contemporary Women Writers from Tamil Nadu titled *Lifescapes* which was published by a leading feminist press, Women Unlimited in 2019. She is currently working on a book project that straddles the domains of ecocriticism and medical humanities.

Ray, Sinjini is a PG student at the Department of English, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India. She has presented papers at various national and international conferences. Gothic and Horror literature and films are her primary areas of interest.

Sankar A., Rithwik is a research scholar at Indian Institute of Space Science and Technology (IIST), Trivandrum, working on the ritual performing arts of North Kerala.

Sarkar, Sanchar is a research scholar (Ph.D.) at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences in Indian Institute of Technology Madras. He is currently pursuing his Ph.D. in environmental humanities under the supervision of Prof. Swarnalatha Rangarajan. His interest lies in the field of ecospeculative fiction and he is also passionate about visual narratives that represent and engage with the insights of environmental consciousness.

Swayamsidha, Sadhna is a research scholar (Ph.D.) at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Madras. She is currently pursuing her Ph.D. in environmental humanities. Her interest lies in the area of place studies and ecoethical narratives.

Timalsina, Ramji is a researcher of poetry and diaspora, and lecturer of English in Tribhuvan University, Nepal. He has earned his Ph.D. Degree on “Exploration into the Use of Rasa in Nepalese Diasporic Poetry” and is presently the chair of Center for English Teachers’ Research and Pedagogy, Nepal. He is currently working on the transnational approach to Nepali Diaspora and its literatures. His latest book is titled *Nepalese Diaspora and its Literature: Emotion and Expression* published from Lambert Academic Publishing, Germany.

Bionotes of Guest Editors

Rayson K. Alex is currently Assistant Professor at BITS-Pilani, K. K. Birla Goa Campus. He is the secretary of tiNai [formerly, Organisation for Studies in Literature and Environment-India (OSLE-India)], a pioneering academic body in India promoting the area of ecocriticism. He is one of the editors of *Essays in Ecocriticism* (Sarup and Sons, New Delhi; 2007), *Culture and Media: Ecocritical Explorations* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, UK, 2014), *Ecodocumentaries: Critical Essays* (Palgrave Macmillan, USA and UK, 2016), and *Ecocultural Ethics: Critical Essays* (Lexington Books, USA, 2017). He has directed/co-directed a few ethnographic video-documentaries of which the popular ones are *The Story of Mudugar, Narikuravar* (Life of a gypsy community in Tamil Nadu) and *Jenukurubar* (Life of a tribal community in Karnataka). He is the Founder and co-Director of tiNai Ecofilm Festival.

Sachindev P. S. is at the Department of Film Studies and Visual Culture, English and Foreign Languages University. He is one of the editors of *Culture and Media: Ecocritical Explorations* (2014). Formerly an advertising creative, he has shot and directed documentaries, one of them screened at the International Documentary and Short Film Festival (IDSFFK 2014).