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Words for Water: Wetland Lexicons, Flood Memory and Ecolinguistics in Kerala Fiction

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Abstract

In August 2018, Kerala's worst floods in nearly a century were measured against an older disaster remembered by name: "the flood of ninety-nine," the great flood of 1924, called after its year in the Malayalam calendar. Taking this linguistic survival as its starting point, the essay argues that Kerala's literature of water works as a lexical and narrative archive of ecological knowledge. Recent criticism of climate fiction has emphasised the gap between human-sized narration and planetary process. This essay proposes that a regional language offers an intermediate scale, larger than any individual and older than any lifetime, through which environmental memory is carried. Drawing on ecolinguistics (Einar Haugen, Luisa Maffi, Arran Stibbe), Robert Macfarlane's work on place-words and Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence, it reads three texts: Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's short story "Vellappokkathil" ("In the Flood"), Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things (1997) and Sarah Joseph's Malayalam novel Aathi (2011; translated by Valson Thampu as Gift in Green). It shows how these works preserve a vocabulary of floods, paddy fields, canals and embankments that encodes how water moves and how communities have lived with it, and how they register the degradation of wetlands and rivers as a loss of language. The essay concludes that an ecolinguistic reading, attentive to vocabulary, translation and community storytelling, can recover forms of environmental knowledge that criticism focused on English and on planetary scale tends to miss.

Keywords:- Ecolinguistics, Kerala Floods, Wetlands, Malayalam Literature, Place-Words, Translation, Slow Violence, Climate Fiction, Thakazhi, Arundhati Roy, Sarah Joseph

Introduction

In August 2018 Kerala experienced its worst floods in nearly a century. More than four hundred people died, hundreds of thousands were moved to relief camps, and large parts of Kuttanad, Chengannur and the Periyar basin remained under water for days. When journalists and residents searched for a comparison, they reached not for a statistic but for a name: thonnootti onpathile vellappokkam, "the flood of ninety-nine," the great flood of 1924, remembered by its year in the Malayalam calendar (1099 ME). The older flood had survived for almost a century less as a hydrological record than as a phrase, carried in speech, in family stories and in literature. When the waters rose again, it was that phrase that gave the new disaster a measure.

This small linguistic fact points to a larger argument. Criticism of climate fiction has tended to concentrate on scale and form: on how the novel can represent processes that exceed

individual perception. Rose Mary Philip's recent essay in this journal frames the genre's achievement in exactly these terms, as a "scalar disjuncture" between human-sized narration and planetary process (Philip 98). A companion essay on South Asian environmental fiction has argued that this disjuncture looks different when environmental harm is located in particular bodies and communities. The present essay extends that argument to a further level, the level of words. It asks what happens to environmental memory when it is stored not only in plots and characters but in a regional vocabulary of water, field and embankment, and what literature does when that vocabulary, and the landscape it names, begins to disappear.

The essay reads three works from Kerala that span almost a century of writing about water. Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's short story "Vellappokkathil" ("In the Flood"), set during the flood of 1924 in Kuttanad, is told largely from the perspective of a dog abandoned on a submerged roof. Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things (1997) makes the Meenachal river at Ayemenem a boundary of caste and desire, and records its later degradation. Sarah Joseph's Malayalam novel Aathi (2011), translated by Valson Thampu as Gift in Green, imagines a wetland village resisting the reclamation of its waters. Read together, these texts suggest that Kerala's environmental literature works as a lexical archive. It preserves words that encode ecological knowledge, and it registers the loss of that knowledge as a loss of language. The argument draws on ecolinguistics, the study of how language shapes and reflects human relations with the environment, in order to show that the "form of attention" Philip attributes to climate fiction (Philip 104) is, in this regional tradition, also a form of naming.

Theoretical Framework: Ecolinguistics and the Lexicon of Place

The idea that language and environment are bound together has a long history in linguistics. Einar Haugen's influential essay "The Ecology of Language" proposed that a language should be studied in relation to its environment, by which he meant chiefly the society that uses it, and the minds of its speakers (Haugen). Later work broadened this metaphor into a literal claim. Luisa Maffi and her collaborators argued that linguistic, cultural and biological diversity are interrelated, since the places richest in species are often also richest in languages, and since the knowledge needed to live in a particular ecosystem is held largely in local speech (Maffi). When a community loses its language, or the specialised vocabulary through which it understands land and water, it loses a store of ecological knowledge built over generations.

Arran Stibbe's Ecolinguistics gives this insight a critical edge. Stibbe examines the "stories we live by," the frames, metaphors and patterns of wording that shape how a culture understands the natural world, and asks which of them encourage care and which encourage destruction (Stibbe). His method is especially useful for reading development discourse, in which wetlands appear as "wasteland" awaiting "reclamation," and rivers as "resources" to be "harnessed." Such terms are not neutral descriptions. They prepare the ground, sometimes literally, for landfill and concrete.

Robert Macfarlane's Landmarks adds a more literary dimension. Macfarlane collects regional words for terrain, weather and water from across Britain and Ireland, arguing that the loss of precise place-words is both a symptom and a cause of a thinning attention to the land (Macfarlane). He notes, as one sign of this thinning, the removal of common nature words from a children's dictionary. His project, part glossary and part elegy, offers a model for reading literature as a reservoir of such words. Lawrence Buell's account of place in environmental criticism supports this view. For Buell, place is not simply a location but a site of attachment and memory, made through experience and narrative over time (Buell).

These frameworks can be connected to the arguments about slow violence discussed in the earlier essay. Rob Nixon describes how the gradual destruction of environments is often accompanied by a destruction of the knowledge needed to recognise it (Nixon). When paddy fields are filled for housing and canals are blocked for roads, the words that named their

functions begin to fall out of use. The next generation may never learn that a particular low field was where floodwater used to go. The flood then appears as a sudden natural disaster rather than as the delayed consequence of a forgotten landscape. Literature that preserves such words is therefore doing something more than adding local colour. It keeps alive the conditions under which slow violence can be seen.

The Flood of '99: Thakazhi's "Vellappokkathil"

Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai is best known for his novels of Kuttanad, the low-lying rice-growing region south of Vembanad lake, where farmers cultivate fields that lie below sea level behind earthen bunds. "Vellappokkathil" is one of his most widely read stories and remains a staple of Malayalam school syllabuses. It is set during the flood of 1924, when the waters of Kuttanad rose over fields, homes and temples. As the agricultural labourers flee in boats, a dog is left behind on the roof of a hut. Much of the story follows the dog as it waits for its owner, endures hunger and fear, and watches the flooded world around it, until it finally dies in the water.

The choice of a dog as the centre of consciousness is the story's most striking formal decision, and it anticipates in a modest way the decentring of the human that Philip finds in contemporary climate fiction (Philip 101). Yet Thakazhi's purpose is not to replace human with nonhuman agency. The dog's abandonment is a measure of the conditions of the poor. The labourers who flee are themselves vulnerable, living in huts on the margins of fields owned by others, with little to carry and nowhere secure to go. The flood exposes a social order in which both the labourer and his animal are expendable. The nonhuman perspective does not lead away from human politics; it brings its harshness into view from below.

The story also shows how a disaster becomes part of collective language. The flood of 1924 is not narrated as an abstract hydrological event but as a lived catastrophe in a named landscape of fields, bunds, canals and roofs. Thakazhi's Malayalam is rich in the vocabulary of Kuttanad's waterscape, a vocabulary that his readers would have recognised from daily life. Much of this precision is lost in English translation, where field, canal and embankment flatten distinctions that Malayalam keeps. The difficulty of translation here is itself evidence for the ecolinguistic argument: the knowledge of how Kuttanad's water moves is embedded in the words that name it.

When the floods of 2018 revived memories of the flood of '99, Thakazhi's story was one of the texts through which that memory had travelled. Its endurance in the school curriculum meant that generations of Malayali readers had encountered the earlier flood through literature, long after the last eyewitnesses had died. In this sense the story functions as a cultural archive of disaster. It keeps a flood in living memory not through records but through a narrative and a name.

A River Reduced: The God of Small Things

Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things is not usually read as environmental fiction, but its structure depends on a river. The Meenachal flows past the Ipe family home in Ayemenem, and it divides the novel's world into permitted and forbidden spaces. Across the river lies the abandoned "History House"; it is the river that Velutha, a Paravan carpenter, crosses at night to meet Ammu, defying the caste rules the novel calls the "Love Laws"; and it is in the river that the visiting English cousin Sophie Mol drowns, setting off the catastrophe that destroys the family (Roy). The river is thus the medium through which the novel's social and moral boundaries are both crossed and enforced.

The novel's account of the river changes between its two time-frames. In 1969, the year of the central events, the Meenachal is a powerful, living river, dangerous in the monsoon. By 1993, when the adult Rahel returns to Ayemenem, it has been reduced. Roy describes how a

saltwater barrage built downstream, in exchange for the votes of the paddy-farming lobby, has altered the river's flow, so that it has become sluggish and polluted, and how the History House has been turned into a luxury hotel where shortened Kathakali performances are staged for tourists (Roy). The two degradations, of the river and of the art form, are presented side by side. Both are effects of a development model that converts living systems, ecological and cultural, into commodities.

This double movement makes the novel an early literary record of what Nixon calls slow violence. No single event destroys the Meenachal. Its decline is the cumulative result of engineering, agricultural policy, tourism and neglect, spread over two decades and largely invisible to those who cause it. The novel registers this change through a return: Rahel, coming back after years away, sees a difference that those who stayed have absorbed gradually. The structure of returning across time functions here much as Philip suggests the diary functions in Butler's Parable of the Sower, as a way of making slow change visible through comparison (Philip 102-03).

Roy's language contributes to this effect. The novel's English is famously experimental, full of compound words, capitalised phrases, children's wordplay and Malayalam terms left untranslated. This hybrid idiom resists the smooth, standard prose in which development is usually described. It insists that Ayemenem has its own words, its own ways of naming things, and it shows those words under pressure from English, from tourism and from the language of progress. The novel's attention to small things, which its title announces, is also an attention to small words: the local, the particular and the easily overlooked, which the large narratives of nation and development tend to erase.

Stories against Landfill: Sarah Joseph's Aathi

Sarah Joseph's Aathi is the most explicitly environmental of the three texts, and its focus is the wetland itself. The novel is set in an imagined village called Aathi, surrounded by water, whose inhabitants live by fishing, farming and close knowledge of the tides and seasons. Their way of life is threatened when a man who had left the village returns with money and plans for development: land filling, construction and the conversion of the wetland into real estate. The conflict that follows sets the village's understanding of water as a shared and living presence against a vision of it as empty space awaiting profit (Joseph, Gift in Green).

The novel's central formal device is storytelling. At regular gatherings the villagers tell stories to one another, and many chapters are built around these tales, which range across myth, history and personal memory. These embedded stories serve a function that the ecolinguistic frameworks make clear. They are the means by which the community remembers its relationship with water, transmits ecological knowledge and articulates its values. In Stibbe's terms, they are counter-stories to the dominant story of development, offering a different way of living with the environment (Stibbe). When the developers' language of progress, investment and reclamation enters Aathi, it does not only threaten the wetland. It threatens to replace the stories through which the village understands itself.

Aathi was written against the background of real struggles in Kerala over the conversion of paddy fields and wetlands. The Kerala Conservation of Paddy Land and Wetland Act of 2008 was passed in an effort to slow such conversions, and the debates surrounding it made the fate of the vayal, the paddy field, a matter of public concern. Kerala's wetlands, including the Vembanad-Kol system, which is listed under the Ramsar Convention, perform functions that are easy to overlook until they are lost: they absorb floodwater, recharge groundwater and support fisheries. Joseph's novel gives these functions a human and narrative form. The wetland is not a backdrop but a community's memory, and its destruction is presented as an act of forgetting.

The novel's English translation, Gift in Green, raises the same questions of translation encountered in Thakazhi's story. Joseph's Malayalam draws on a dense vocabulary of water, fish, rice and seasons, and some of this inevitably thins in English. Yet the translation also extends the novel's reach, carrying its argument to readers who have never seen a Kerala wetland. This tension, between the local knowledge carried in a regional language and the wider audience reached through translation, runs through all the texts discussed here. It is also the tension at the heart of environmental literature in India, where the most detailed knowledge of particular landscapes is usually held in languages that metropolitan criticism rarely reads.

Discussion: A Lexicon at Risk

The three texts span the period from the 1924 flood to the eve of the 2018 floods, and together they trace a change in Kerala's relationship with water. In Thakazhi, the flood is a natural catastrophe whose harshness is shaped by social inequality. In Roy, the river is degraded by engineering and tourism. In Joseph, the wetland is targeted for erasure by real estate. Across this sequence, what is threatened is not only the landscape but the language used to understand it. Table 1 sets out a small part of the Malayalam vocabulary of water and field that these texts, and the landscapes they describe, depend on.

Table 1. Some Malayalam words of water and field, and the knowledge they carry

Malayalam term	**Approximate English gloss**	**Ecological knowledge encoded**	**Present pressure**
Vellappokkam	Flood	Memory of past floods, named by year (the flood of 1099 me)	Memory fading as eyewitness generations pass
Vayal	Paddy field	Low land that holds floodwater and recharges groundwater	Filling for housing and roads
Kayal	Backwater, lagoon	Brackish mixing of river and sea; fisheries	Reclamation, tourism, pollution
Thodu	Canal, small stream	Drainage paths linking fields and rivers	Blocking and encroachment
Chira	Earthen bund, embankment	Collective management of water levels	Breaching, replacement by concrete
Punja	Kuttanad's dry-season rice crop	A farming calendar timed to water levels	Altered salinity and flood regimes
Pokkali	Salt-tolerant rice of coastal wetlands	Rotation of rice and prawn with the tides	Declining cultivated area

Each of these words names not just a thing but a relationship. A chira is not merely a wall of earth; it is the outcome of a collective practice of managing water levels across many fields. Pokkali is not merely a variety of rice; it names a system of rotating rice and prawn cultivation adapted to the tidal salinity of coastal wetlands. When such systems decline, the words begin to drift out of everyday use, surviving in literature, in agricultural records and in the speech of older people. The landscape loses its legibility for those who no longer know what a low field, a canal or an embankment was for.

This loss had material consequences in 2018. Analyses of the floods drew attention to the role of encroached floodplains, filled paddy fields and blocked drainage channels in worsening the damage, alongside extreme rainfall and the management of reservoirs. The

details remain debated, but the general point was widely accepted: some of the land that flooded had once been understood, and named, as land that floods. A vocabulary that encoded where water should go had been weakened along with the landscape it described.

The floods also revealed the value of practical, local knowledge. Among the most celebrated rescuers were fishermen from Kerala's coastal communities, who brought their boats inland and used their knowledge of water to reach people whom official teams could not. Their skill was not written down in manuals; it was held in practice and in the vocabulary of their work. In this respect the floods enacted, in reality, the argument these texts make in fiction: that local knowledge of water, carried in language and in community, is a form of environmental intelligence that development discourse ignores at its peril.

For literary criticism, this suggests a refinement of the scalar model. Philip argues that climate fiction mutates realism in order to register processes larger than the individual (Philip 104). The Kerala texts suggest that one of the most important scales between the individual and the planet is the scale of a regional language. A language is larger than any single speaker, older than any lifetime and closely tied to a specific landscape. It can carry memory of a flood across a century, as the phrase "the flood of ninety-nine" did. Attending to this scale means reading environmental literature not only for its plots and images but for its words.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that Kerala's literature of water functions as a lexical and narrative archive of ecological knowledge. Thakazhi's "Vellappokkathil" kept the flood of 1924 alive in the collective memory through a story read by generations of schoolchildren. Roy's The God of Small Things recorded the slow degradation of a river and showed how a hybrid literary language could resist the smooth idiom of development. Joseph's Aathi made storytelling itself the means by which a wetland community defends its water and its memory. In each case, the work of literature includes the preservation of words: names for floods, fields, canals and embankments that encode how water moves and how people have lived with it.

The relevance of this argument extends beyond Kerala. In many parts of South Asia and the global South, the most detailed knowledge of local environments is held in regional languages and oral traditions that are themselves under pressure. Environmental criticism that reads only in English, or only at the scale of the planet, risks missing that knowledge altogether. An ecolinguistic approach to literature, attentive to vocabulary, translation and the stories communities tell about their places, offers one way to bring it into view. For a journal of linguistics, language and literature, the point is perhaps especially apt. Before a landscape is lost, the words that name it often go first, and literature is one of the places where they can still be found.

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