INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LINGUISTICS LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE (IJLLL)
(Open Access, Double-Blind Peer Reviewed Journal)
ISSN Online: 3049-3242 ISSN Print: 3139-1990

Toxic Bodies, Drowning Islands: Slow Violence and Vernacular Ecologies in South Asian Environmental Fiction

Rini Joy

Research Scholar, Sree Shankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady, Kerala, India

Article information

Received: 6th July 2026
Received in revised form: 4th August 2026
Accepted: 11th September 2026
Available online: 7th October 2026

Volume: 2
Issue: 4
DOI: https://doi.org/10.63090/IJLLL/3049.3242.0041

Abstract

Recent criticism of climate fiction has framed the genre's central problem as one of scale: the gap between human-sized narration and planetary process. This essay argues that such a framing, built largely on Euro-American novels, leaves out a second and equally formative problem, which is the problem of location. In South Asian environmental fiction, the Anthropocene seldom appears as an unrepresentable totality. It arrives instead as poison in a particular body, salt water in a particular village, and a pesticide sprayed over a particular hillside. Drawing on Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence, the "environmentalism of the poor" theorised by Ramachandra Guha and Joan Martinez-Alier, and Stacy Alaimo's account of trans-corporeality, the essay reads four texts: Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide (2004), Indra Sinha's Animal's People (2007), Ambikasuthan Mangad's Malayalam novel Enmakaje (2009; translated by J. Devika as Swarga, 2017), and Mahasweta Devi's novella "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha" (translated from Bengali by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in Imaginary Maps, 1995). It identifies three formal strategies th rough which these works narrate environmental harm: the damaged body as narrator and archive; the vernacular, multilingual texture that ties ecological knowledge to local speech; and the conflict between conservation and survival, in which the nonhuman is never innocent of human politics. The essay concludes that South Asian environmental fiction does not so much resolve the scalar disjuncture of the Anthropocene as relocate it, measuring planetary process against the endurance of the marginal body.

Keywords:- Slow Violence, Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Environmentalism of the Poor, Trans-corporeality, Indian Fiction, Malayalam Literature, Endosulfan, Climate Fiction, Subaltern

Introduction

In a recent essay in this journal, Rose Mary Philip argues that the achievement of climate fiction lies in its formal reorganisation around the impossibility of representing environmental catastrophe directly. Reading six novels, among them Richard Powers's The Overstory, Jeff VanderMeer's Annihilation and Kim Stanley Robinson's The Ministry for the Future, she identifies the genre's defining problem as a "scalar disjuncture" between human-sized narration and planetary-scale process (Philip 98). Her account is persuasive, and its central claim, that realism in these novels is mutated rather than abandoned, offers a useful corrective to Amitav Ghosh's pessimism about the modern novel in The Great Derangement. Yet the archive on which the argument rests is telling. With the exception of Ghosh's Gun Island, the novels are North American, and the problem they share is framed from the vantage of a reader for whom climate change is, in the first instance, an abstraction that must be made perceptible.

This essay begins from a different vantage. For a great many people in South Asia, environmental harm is not abstract at all. It is lodged in the deformed limbs of children born near pesticide-sprayed plantations, in lungs damaged by gas that leaked from a factory decades ago, and in islands that are slowly eaten by the sea. The difficulty such harm poses to narrative is not that it cannot be seen, but that it is seen by those whose testimony carries little weight, in languages that rarely reach metropolitan readers, over periods too long to sustain public outrage. The representational problem, in other words, is one of location as much as scale: of where, and in whose body, environmental violence becomes visible, and of who has the authority to say so.

The essay pursues this argument through four South Asian texts: Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide (2004), set in the Sundarbans; Indra Sinha's Animal's People (2007), a fictional rewriting of the Bhopal gas disaster; Ambikasuthan Mangad's Enmakaje (2009), a Malayalam novel about endosulfan poisoning in Kasaragod, Kerala; and Mahasweta Devi's "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha," a novella of famine and dispossession among Adivasi communities. Only one of these, Ghosh's novel, is usually shelved as climate fiction. The others concern toxicity, industrial disaster and famine. Including them is deliberate. In postcolonial contexts, the boundaries that Euro-American criticism draws between climate change, pollution and development-induced dispossession are hard to sustain, since all three fall most heavily on the same people and operate through the same structures of extraction. I argue that these texts develop three formal strategies for narrating such harm: they make the damaged body a narrator and an archive; they root ecological knowledge in vernacular and multilingual speech; and they stage conflicts between conservation and survival in which the nonhuman is never a politically neutral protagonist. Together, these strategies do not dissolve the scalar disjuncture that Philip describes. They relocate it, so that planetary process is measured against the endurance of the marginal body.

Theoretical Framework: From Planetary Scale to the Environmentalism of the Poor

Rob Nixon's Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor is often cited in discussions of climate fiction for its account of tempo, of harm that unfolds gradually and out of sight. Philip uses it in precisely this way, as one of three theories, alongside Timothy Morton's hyperobjects and Dipesh Chakrabarty's species history, that together describe the Anthropocene's excess over the human-sized story (Philip 99). But Nixon's book has a second emphasis that is easily lost when it is placed in that company. Its subtitle names the poor, and its central concern is not only that slow violence is hard to see but that it is unevenly distributed and unevenly witnessed. The people who live with its effects, Nixon argues, are frequently those whose suffering is least likely to be recognised by states, corporations and media, and whose resistance is least likely to be called environmentalism at all (Nixon 2-4). One of his most extended readings, notably, is of Sinha's Animal's People.

Nixon draws here on an older debate. In 1989 Ramachandra Guha criticised the American wilderness movement for exporting a model of conservation that, applied in India, displaced forest-dwelling communities in the name of protecting nature (Guha 71-83). Guha and Joan Martinez-Alier later developed the idea of an "environmentalism of the poor": a body of struggles, such as the Chipko movement or resistance to large dams, in which ecological concern arises from livelihood and survival rather than from aesthetic or recreational attachment to untouched nature (Guha and Martinez-Alier). This tradition matters for literary analysis because it changes what counts as an environmental narrative. A story about a fisherman's right to fish, or a mother's search for an explanation of her child's illness, may be as central to environmental literature as a story about a forest or a melting glacier.

Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, in Postcolonial Ecocriticism, describe the convergence of postcolonial and ecological criticism as productive but uneasy, since the first

has tended to prioritise human justice and the second the nonhuman world (Huggan and Tiffin 1-3). Pablo Mukherjee's Postcolonial Environments addresses the same tension through Indian fiction, insisting that environment and empire must be read together as material histories rather than as separate themes (Mukherjee). To these I add Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality, which describes the human body as permeable to its environment, so that toxins, chemicals and pollutants cross the boundary of the skin and make the body a site where environmental history is written (Alaimo 2). Trans-corporeality is particularly useful for reading fiction about poisoning, because it treats the body neither as a symbol of damaged nature nor as a merely private sufferer, but as the material point at which the global and the local meet.

Taken together, these frameworks suggest a revision of the scalar model. Morton's hyperobject withdraws from perception; Chakrabarty's species cannot be the subject of experience. But the poisoned body is a subject of experience, and its experience is shaped by forces, transnational corporations, state agencies and global commodity chains, that are every bit as distributed as a hyperobject. The South Asian texts examined below make that body the hinge between scales.

Conservation and Survival: The Hungry Tide

Philip reads Ghosh's Gun Island as a deliberate test of the claims made in The Great Derangement, a novel that rehabilitates coincidence and myth as instruments for registering planetary process (Philip 100-01). Ghosh's earlier Sundarbans novel, The Hungry Tide, approaches the same delta from another angle. Its concern is less the improbable event than the long, contested history of who may live in the tide country and on what terms. The novel brings together Piya Roy, an Indian-American cetologist studying the endangered river dolphins of the delta; Kanai Dutt, a Delhi-based translator and businessman; and Fokir, an unlettered local fisherman whose knowledge of the waters far exceeds Piya's instruments (Ghosh, Hungry Tide).

The novel's central formal device is the juxtaposition of two timelines. The present-day narrative of Piya's survey is interleaved with the notebook of Kanai's late uncle Nirmal, which records the events at Morichjhapi in 1979, when refugees from Bangladesh who had settled on a forested island were forcibly evicted by the state government, in part on the grounds that the island was a protected reserve. The notebook form functions much as the diary does in Butler's Parable of the Sower, which Philip reads as a way of accumulating slow catastrophe entry by entry (Philip 102-03). Here, however, the accumulation is historical rather than projective. The violence it records is the violence of conservation itself, carried out against the poorest residents of the delta in the name of protecting tigers and forests.

This is where The Hungry Tide departs most sharply from the redistribution of agency that Philip finds in The Overstory. In Powers's novel, as she reads it, the decentring of the human is an ethical and formal advance, a corrective to the anthropocentrism of conventional plot (Philip 101). In Ghosh's delta, the nonhuman is never so innocent. Tigers kill villagers every year, and when villagers kill a tiger in retaliation, Piya is horrified, while Kanai points out that the lives of the poor are routinely valued below those of protected animals. The novel refuses to resolve this disagreement. It neither endorses the villagers' violence nor allows the cosmopolitan scientist's moral clarity to stand unchallenged. Mukherjee reads this refusal as Ghosh's acknowledgement that environmental questions in postcolonial India cannot be separated from questions of class, caste and the state (Mukherjee). In formal terms, the nonhuman is decentred not in favour of a wider ecological field but in favour of an unresolved political conflict over that field.

Language is the second register of this conflict. Piya speaks neither Bangla nor the dialect of the tide country; Fokir speaks no English. Their collaboration depends on gesture,

shared attention to the water and, at crucial moments, on Kanai's translation, which the novel shows to be partial and self-interested. The legend of Bon Bibi, the protective goddess of the forest whose story Fokir sings, carries a body of ecological knowledge, about where one may fish and how much one may take, that is encoded in vernacular performance rather than in Piya's data sheets. When Fokir dies shielding Piya during the cyclone at the novel's climax, the plot appears to honour this knowledge, yet it also leaves the local man silenced and the scientist as the one who continues his work. The ending thus registers the persistence of the asymmetry it sets out to criticise. What The Hungry Tide finally offers is not a resolution of the scalar problem but a demonstration that, in the tide country, the question "who speaks for nature?" is inseparable from the question "who is allowed to speak at all?"

The Body as Narrator: Animal's People

If the hyperobject, in Morton's account, can be registered only through its local effects, Indra Sinha's Animal's People takes that insight to its most literal conclusion: the local effect becomes the narrator. Set in Khaufpur, a thinly fictionalised Bhopal, some two decades after a chemical leak from a factory owned by an American corporation referred to simply as "the Kampani," the novel is told by a young man known only as Animal. Exposed to the poison as an infant, Animal has a spine so twisted that he walks on all fours, and he insists that he is no longer human. His story is presented as a transcript of tapes recorded for a foreign journalist, whom he addresses throughout as "Jarnalis" and whose expectations of a pitiable victim he mocks from the first pages (Sinha).

The framing device is the novel's most important formal decision. Philip observes that the most ambitious climate novels refuse the bounded individual protagonist in favour of nonhuman, collective or distributed agents (Philip 98). Animal's People appears at first to do the opposite: it is narrated in the first person by a single, insistently embodied voice. Yet Animal's body is itself a record of distributed agency. The chemicals that deformed him were manufactured according to decisions made in another country, stored in a plant whose safety systems had been allowed to decay, and spread across the city by the wind. Read through Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality, his spine is a document of transnational corporate history, written in bone (Alaimo 2). The individual body here does not stand against the planetary; it is the place where the planetary becomes legible.

Nixon reads the novel as a response to the problem of "slow violence" in its fullest sense: not the night of the leak itself, which the novel largely leaves offstage, but the decades of illness, poisoned groundwater and stalled legal proceedings that followed (Nixon 45-67). The tape-recorded form suits this temporality. Animal's narration is digressive, profane and comic, moving between the everyday business of survival in the slums around the abandoned factory and the slow political campaign, led by the activist Zafar, to bring the Kampani to court. Catastrophe is not an event to be depicted but a condition to be lived inside, much as in Butler's diaristic dystopia. The difference is that Sinha's condition belongs to a documented past and present rather than a projected future.

The novel also turns the question of witnessing back on its readers. Animal's refusal to perform the role of the grateful victim, and his suspicion of the American doctor Elli Barber who opens a free clinic in Khaufpur, unsettle the humanitarian gaze through which metropolitan readers tend to encounter disasters in the global South. The Jarnalis, and by extension the reader, is accused of wanting the suffering of the poor packaged as a story. When, near the end, Animal is offered the chance of surgery that might allow him to walk upright, he declines it, choosing to remain as he is among the poor of Khaufpur rather than become one more ordinary person. The choice is the novel's sharpest formal statement. It refuses the narrative of individual rescue and insists that the damaged body belongs to a collective, an "animal's people," whose claim cannot be settled by repairing one of them.

Vernacular Ecologies: Enmakaje and the Endosulfan Tragedy

Ambikasuthan Mangad's Enmakaje is one of the most significant environmental novels in Malayalam, and its reception history is itself part of the story it tells. The novel concerns the villages of Kasaragod district, at the northern edge of Kerala, where the pesticide endosulfan was sprayed from the air over state-owned cashew plantations for more than two decades. Residents had long linked the spraying to a high incidence of congenital deformities, neurological disorders and cancers. The campaign against the pesticide, carried by local activists, doctors and journalists, contributed to the national debate that preceded India's Supreme Court ban on endosulfan in 2011, the same year the chemical was listed for global elimination under the Stockholm Convention. Mangad's novel appeared in the middle of that struggle, and J. Devika's English translation, published as Swarga: A Posthuman Tale, brought it to readers outside Kerala (Mangad).

The novel follows a couple who withdraw from urban society to live in the forested hills near the village of Enmakaje, seeking a life apart from a world they find corrupt. What they find instead is a community in which children are born with enlarged heads, twisted limbs and other disabilities, and in which the cause of this suffering is both widely suspected and officially denied. The plot thus reverses the pastoral retreat. The couple's flight toward "nature" brings them face to face with a landscape already saturated by state-sponsored poison, and their private search for purity becomes a public engagement with activism. In Philip's terms, the hyperobject is not withdrawn from the scene; it falls, quite literally, from the sky onto the hillside (Philip 99).

The novel's most distinctive formal feature, and the one most relevant to a journal of language and literature, is its vernacular density. Kasaragod is a linguistic borderland where Malayalam, Kannada, Tulu and other languages are spoken side by side, and Mangad's narrative absorbs this plurality, along with local myths, ritual forms and the oral history of the region. Central among these is the myth of Jadadhari, the deity of the local hill, whose worship encodes a sense of the land as sacred and inhabited by powers that must not be violated. The novel sets this mythic knowledge against the official discourse of plantation management, toxicology and state reassurance. Like Bon Bibi in The Hungry Tide, the vernacular myth carries an ecological ethic that scientific and administrative languages either ignore or translate into risk assessments. Recent work on translingual writing in South Asia, including Rakhi Ramachandran's study of code-switching in this journal, treats such linguistic crossing as structural rather than decorative (Ramachandran 70-73). Enmakaje extends this insight to ecology: the multilingual texture of the novel is a record of a place, and the threat to the place is also a threat to the knowledge carried in its languages.

Devika's subtitle, A Posthuman Tale, draws attention to a further dimension. The novel repeatedly questions the boundary between the human and the nonhuman, not in the celebratory sense of distributed vegetal agency that Philip finds in Powers, but through the bodies of children whom the poison has placed outside the norms of human form. Here again trans-corporeality is the operative concept. These bodies are evidence: of chemical drift, of bureaucratic denial, of a development model that treated a remote and politically marginal district as expendable. The novel makes them neither monstrous nor merely pitiable. It asks readers to see them as the most accurate archive of what happened in Kasaragod, an archive the state was slow to read. For a Kerala readership, the novel carries an additional charge, since it unsettles the image of the state as a model of social development and shows that this model, too, had its sacrifice zones.

The Limits of Witness: Mahasweta Devi's "Pterodactyl"

Mahasweta Devi's novella "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha" predates most of what

is now called climate fiction, but it anticipates its central formal problem with unusual clarity. The journalist Puran Sahay travels to Pirtha, a remote Adivasi village suffering from prolonged drought and famine, where government relief has failed and children are dying. There he learns that a boy, Bikhia, has seen a creature that the villagers understand as the soul of their ancestors and that Puran recognises, with disbelief, as a pterodactyl. The creature cannot be reported, explained or published. It lives briefly, dies, and is buried by the community, and Puran leaves with the knowledge that the story he came for cannot be told in the language of his newspaper (Devi).

The pterodactyl is the closest thing in these four texts to a hyperobject in Morton's sense: a presence that exceeds every frame in which the outsider tries to place it. But Devi's interest is not in the creature's planetary vastness. It lies in the gap between Puran's metropolitan, print-based ways of knowing and the community's own, and in the impossibility of bridging that gap through good intentions alone. The prehistoric animal condenses the deep time of the land and of the Adivasi relationship to it, a time that the developmental state, with its famine relief schemes and statistical reports, cannot register. Spivak, in the translator's preface and the accompanying essays in Imaginary Maps, emphasises Devi's refusal to let the sympathetic outsider claim to represent the subaltern (Spivak, "Translator's Preface").

This refusal offers an important counterweight to the strategies discussed earlier. Philip concludes that climate fiction's achievement is to change "the form of attention itself" (Philip 104). Devi's novella agrees, but it adds that attention is never neutral. The journalist who arrives to bear witness is part of the apparatus that has already failed Pirtha. The ecological catastrophe of drought and the social catastrophe of dispossession are one event, and the outsider's narrative, however well meant, can only register its own inadequacy before both. In this sense "Pterodactyl" is a precursor to the self-reflexive witnessing of Animal's People, where the Jarnalis is similarly placed under suspicion, and to the asymmetries of translation that structure The Hungry Tide.

Discussion: Relocating the Scalar Disjuncture

Read together, the four texts share a set of formal strategies that differ in emphasis from those Philip identifies in Euro-American climate fiction. Table 1 summarises them.

Table 1. Formal strategies in the four texts

Text	**Damaged body as archive**	**Vernacular and multilingual knowledge**	**Conservation versus survival**	**Form of witnessing**
The Hungry Tide (Ghosh)	Bodies of tiger victims and refugees	Bon Bibi legend; Bangla and tide-country dialect	Morichjhapi eviction; tiger killings	Notebook and partial translation
Animal's People (Sinha)	Animal's twisted spine as narrator	Hindi-inflected, profane English	Corporate profit versus the poor	Tapes for a distrusted journalist
Enmakaje (Mangad)	Children with congenital disabilities	Jadadhari myth; Malayalam, Kannada, Tulu	Plantation economy versus villagers	Outsiders turned activists
"Pterodactyl" (Devi)	Famine-stricken bodies	Adivasi cosmology beyond translation	Developmental state versus Adivasi land	Journalist who cannot report

Where Philip's corpus redistributes agency toward the forest, the unknowable zone or the institution, these texts concentrate it in the damaged human body and in the community to which that body belongs. This is not a return to the bounded individual protagonist of bourgeois realism. Animal, the children of Enmakaje and the people of Pirtha are not autonomous selves pursuing private destinies. They are bodies through which corporate, state and global processes pass, and their stories are collective by necessity. If Chakrabarty is right that the species cannot be the subject of a story, these texts suggest that the poisoned and dispossessed community can be, and that its experience offers one of the few vantage points from which planetary processes are actually felt.

The second difference concerns language. Philip notes the translingual dimension of Gun Island as a feature linking linguistic and ecological migration (Philip 100). In the South Asian texts studied here, language is not only a mirror of ecological connection but a repository of ecological knowledge, and a site of its loss. Bon Bibi's songs, the Jadadhari myth and the untranslatable cosmology of Pirtha are forms of knowing that official and scientific discourse cannot fully absorb. Translation, in these novels, is never transparent. It is the point at which power decides whose knowledge counts.

The third difference concerns the nonhuman. Euro-American climate fiction, as Philip reads it, often treats the decentring of the human as an ethical good. The South Asian texts are more cautious. The tigers of the Sundarbans, the reserves of Morichjhapi and the cashew plantations of Kasaragod are all places where claims made on behalf of nature or development have been used to displace or poison the poor. These texts do not reject nonhuman agency, but they insist that it is always entangled with the politics of who benefits and who pays.

Conclusion

Philip's account of climate fiction as a poetics of scalar disjuncture identifies a real and central problem: the difficulty of narrating planetary processes within human-sized forms. This essay has argued that the problem looks different from South Asia. Here the Anthropocene is rarely an absence around which narrative must reassemble itself. It is a presence, lodged in particular bodies, villages and languages, but one whose testimony is systematically disregarded. The formal challenge for these writers is therefore less to make the invisible visible than to make the visible credible, to give narrative authority to those who already know, in their own bodies, what slow violence does.

Ghosh, Sinha, Mangad and Devi meet this challenge through the damaged body as archive, through vernacular and multilingual textures that carry ecological knowledge, and through an unflinching account of the conflicts between conservation, development and survival. Their work does not abolish the gap between human and planetary scale. It relocates that gap to the point where a poisoned spine, a drowned island or a hillside under a spray plane meets the transnational systems that produced them. Including such texts in the study of climate fiction does more than diversify an archive. It changes the genre's central question, from how the planet can be narrated at all to whose experience of the planet is allowed to count as its story. For readers and scholars in Kerala, Enmakaje is a reminder that this question is not distant. The Anthropocene has already been written, in Malayalam and in the bodies of Kasaragod's children, and literary criticism has only begun to read it.

Works Cited

Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Indiana UP, 2010.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. “The Climate of History: Four Theses.” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2009, pp. 197–222.

Devi, Mahasweta. “Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha.” *Imaginary Maps*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Routledge, 1995.

Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. U of Chicago P, 2016.
---. *Gun Island*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019.
---. *The Hungry Tide*. HarperCollins, 2004.
Guha, Ramachandra. "Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique." *Environmental Ethics*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1989, pp. 71–83.
Guha, Ramachandra, and Joan Martinez-Alier. *Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South*. Earthscan, 1997.
Huggan, Graham, and Helen Tiffin. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. Routledge, 2010.
Mangad, Ambikasuthan. *Enmakaje*. DC Books, 2009.
---. *Swarga: A Posthuman Tale*. Translated by J. Devika, Juggernaut, 2017.
Morton, Timothy. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. U of Minnesota P, 2013.
Mukherjee, Upamanyu Pablo. *Postcolonial Environments: Nature, Culture and the Contemporary Indian Novel in English*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard UP, 2011.
Philip, Rose Mary. "Narrating the Anthropocene: Scale, Agency, and Form in Climate Fiction." *International Journal of Linguistics, Language and Literature*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2026, pp. 98–105, https://doi.org/10.63090/IJLLL/3049.3242.0037.
Ramachandran, Rakhi. "Translingual Writing and Code-Switching in South Asian Anglophone Literature." *International Journal of Linguistics, Language and Literature*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2026, pp. 70–73.
Sinha, Indra. *Animal's People*. Simon & Schuster, 2007.
Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Translator's Preface." *Imaginary Maps*, by Mahasweta Devi, Routledge, 1995.