



Subaltern Ecologies and Environmental Resistance in Contemporary South Asian Fiction

¹Mr. M. Ganesh Kumar, ²Dr.K. Muthu Rajan

¹Ph.D. Full- Time Research Scholar, Department of English, V.H.N.S.N. College, (Autonomous), Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University, Virudhunagar, Tamil Nadu, India 626001.

²Associate Professor, Department of English, V.H.N.S.N. College, (Autonomous), Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University, Virudhunagar, Tamilnadu, India 626001.

Abstract: Ecological degradation is accelerating at an unprecedented rate, driven by human activities like deforestation, intensive farming, and industrial pollution. This rapid environmental decline has led to societal marginalization through threatened food security as well as vulnerable communities worldwide. The paper identifies this trace in the four prominent Asian novels: *The white tiger*, *The inheritance of loss*, *The god of small things*, and *Gift in green*. Through the lens of the eco-subaltern framework, the study explores the intersection of degradation of ecology and social marginalization. The paper argues that environmental destruction and societal oppression function as parallel reinforcing systems which exploit the marginalized across these texts. With the help of the concept of Rob Nixon's slow violence, the study unveils the fact that nature is not merely a background setting but an attention space where caste, class, and gendered based suffering become visible. The findings of the study reveals that societal marginalization of these novels cannot be understood through a lens of caste and class discrimination, but must be traced as a convergence of environmental and gendered based exploitation.

Keywords: Eco-Subaltern, Slow Violence, Subaltern Theory, Postcolonial Ecocriticism, South Asian Fiction, Marginalization, Resistance

1. Introduction:

Ecological degradation and social marginalisation have become two of the most pressing global crises of the twenty-first century, and their intersection has become a central concern for scholars in the fields of environmental studies, postcolonial theory and literary criticism. The rapid destruction of natural ecosystems through deforestation, intensive agriculture, industrial pollution, and climate change does not affect all communities equally; rather, the consequences are most acutely felt by communities that are already marginalised through caste, class, gender, and colonial history. For centuries literature has been a space of ethical imagination and social critique, of exploring, contesting, and making visible to readers who might not otherwise know about the slow, systemic violence that shapes the lives of the powerless. The present study analyses four major South Asian novels through the lens of what is termed in this paper as an Eco-Subaltern framework. The novels are Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Sara Joseph's *Gift in Green* (2011, translated from Malayalam). All four texts, from different regions, languages and social contexts within South Asia, are united in their concern with the lives of those who live at the margins of society and whose vulnerability is heightened by their proximity to a natural world that is itself under threat. Collectively, they provide a rich literary archive through which to examine the workings of ecological degradation and social oppression as co-constitutive forces in the contemporary South Asian imagination.

This research draws on an eco-subaltern approach based on two fundamental theoretical traditions. The first is Rob Nixon's concept of Slow Violence (2011), which refers to the slow, dispersed, and often invisible destruction wrought on marginalised communities by environmental degradation — forms of violence that do



not have the spectacle of sudden catastrophe but that add up over time and space to produce devastating consequences for those least equipped to withstand or escape them. Nixon's concept of slow violence in terms of magnifying the vulnerability of poor, disempowered and often involuntarily displaced people is a useful perspective to examine the ecological aspects of the four selected novels. The second theoretical tradition is the tradition of Subaltern Studies, and specifically Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's foundational interrogation into the conditions under which the subaltern, those at the lowest rungs of the social hierarchy, can be said to speak, and the structural mechanisms that silence them (Spivak, 1988).

What makes this study important is its comparative and cross-linguistic perspective. Existing scholarship has looked at individual novels or partial combinations through the lens of ecology or subalternity, but none has unified all four texts under a common Eco-Subaltern framework that connects Indian English and Malayalam literary traditions. The inclusion of Sara Joseph's Malayalam novel alongside three canonical Indian English texts fill a major gap in comparative South Asian literary scholarship. The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature, Section 3 presents the theoretical framework, Section 4 provides a thematic analysis in three parts, Section 5 discusses the wider implications of the findings, and Section 6 concludes with a summary and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature Review

Since the publication of Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), which laid the intellectual groundwork for exploring the points where environmental justice, postcolonial history and literary representation meet, the field of postcolonial ecocriticism has expanded significantly. Huggan and Tiffin's *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* (2010) offered an earlier framework for understanding the ways in which colonial and postcolonial power structures shape both environmental attitudes and ecological outcomes, arguing that the exploitation of nature and the exploitation of colonised peoples are interrelated processes, both historically and ideologically. C. (2024) These theoretical interventions have generated a growing body of scholarship on South Asian fiction in particular, including Mukherjee's *Postcolonial Environments* (2010), which examined how nature and environmental degradation were addressed in the Indian novel in English.

Recent scholarship has taken these frameworks in fruitful new directions. Sankaran's *Women, Subalterns, and Ecologies in South and Southeast Asian Women's Fiction* (2023) is an important intervention that explores the effects of ecological crises on subdominant groups including women across more than thirty ecofictions from twelve countries, and creates a localised critical idiom that qualifies some established theoretical assumptions. Mola and Shaw (2024) A detailed review of literature published in the *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* (2025) has traced intersections of postcolonialism, ecocriticism, and feminism in Arundhati Roy's novels. The author reports substantial gaps in intersectional studies that consider the relationship between environmental justice, gender, and caste. The author advocates comparative studies that place Roy's work in the company of other postcolonial writers. Dzüvichü and Yhome (2024)

In recent years there has been a proliferation of studies on the individual novels under consideration. In *ISLE Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, Khan's 2024 study examined *The White Tiger* through the lens of climate coloniality, arguing that Balram understands his own subalternity through the subalternity of the caged tiger, and that the novel's temporal and spatial context is determined by colonial histories of underdevelopment and anti-environmental development. Vani, in a 2023 study in *IJELLH*, constructed a subaltern worldview of *The White Tiger* from a socio-political perspective. In a 2024 study published in the *Journal of Indian Languages*, Johnson Sangeetharaj explored the relationship between women and nature in *Gift in Green*, seeing women as critical guardians of the land with deep ecological knowledge. Kuey, *Gift in Green*, 2025 This study, analysed through an ecopolitical lens, reveals the novel's questioning of ecological exploitation and imagining of pathways to sustainable coexistence. Dzüvichü and Yhome (2024) there is a still a lacuna in the existing scholarship. No attempt has been made to bring all four novels under a single Eco-Subaltern umbrella. Besides, cross-linguistic comparative studies of Malayalam fiction with Indian English texts are still



rare. A 2024 study of ecofeminism in contemporary novels did include both *Gift in Green* and *The God of Small Things*, but not Adiga and Desai, and did not take a specifically Eco-Subaltern approach. The present study, therefore, addresses these lacunae directly, providing a comparative reading that is theoretically consistent and linguistically inclusive. Longchar and Imsong (2023)

3. Theoretical background

This study is built on an Eco-Subaltern framework, a combination of two theoretical traditions, that is Slow Violence by Rob Nixon and Subaltern Theory by Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak. Nixon defines slow violence as “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). This notion is particularly useful in reading the ecological dimensions of South Asian fiction, where environmental destruction is not usually a sudden catastrophe but rather the slow degradation of soil, water, and air that sustain the livelihoods of the rural poor and the urban working class. As Nixon argues, slow violence is inflicted on those who lack the resources to leave areas suffering the consequences of toxic pollution, that is to say, the subaltern.

Spivak’s seminal question “Can the subaltern speak?” interrogates the structural conditions that deny the marginalised access to the discursive frameworks through which claims to justice and recognition are made (Spivak, 1988). Through her analysis, Spivak shows how caste, class, gender and colonial history intersect to produce subjects whose suffering is systematically rendered invisible or unintelligible within dominant discourse. When applied to literary criticism, the framework developed by Spivak brings up questions of narrative voice and representation: whose perspective is the text taking, whose suffering is made visible, and what formal strategies does the text deploy to make the subaltern legible to readers outside the community being represented. The synthesis of these two frameworks, Eco-Subaltern analysis is based on the insight, developed by scholars such as Di Chiro (1998) and Martinez-Alier (2002), that ecological and social oppressions are not parallel but co-constitutive forces. The poor are more vulnerable to environmental degradation and are more likely to live in environments degraded by the economic activities of the powerful, and less likely to have access to the legal, political and economic resources they need to seek redress or escape. The co-constitution of ecological and social vulnerability is the central analytical focus of the present study.

4. Analysis of Themes

4.1 Ecology of Slow Violence: Nature as a Site of Subaltern Oppression.

In each of the four novels, the natural environment acts not as a pastoral refuge or a neutral background, but as an active space where subaltern oppression is inscribed and perpetuated. This dynamic is most clearly developed in Sara Joseph’s *Gift in Green* where the island community of Aathi represents a self-sustaining ecosystem where the social, spiritual and economic lives of the marginalised are inseparable from the land they inhabit. The Aathi villagers practise farming and fishing using traditional methods that are in ecological harmony with their environment. The community is organised according to principles of interdependence and sustainability that directly oppose the individualising and commodifying logic of industrial capitalism. When an industrial developer wants to turn Aathi into a factory township, the destruction of the natural environment also destroys the community’s social fabric, cultural identity and means of subsistence. As Johnson Sangeetharaj (2024) has noted, *Gift in Green* places women as the primary custodians of the land who have intimate ecological knowledge and a sustaining relationship with natural systems that is threatened by external capitalist forces.

In *The White Tiger* of Adiga, the ecological dimensions of subaltern oppression operate through a different logic. Balram’s village of Laxmangarh is portrayed as a space of ecological and social fatigue, sucked dry of life by generations of feudal exploitation. The land that supported the community has been so damaged that it cannot supply a livelihood. The result is a mass migration to the cities that enriches landlords and employers



while rendering the migrants themselves vulnerable to new forms of exploitation. Khan (2024) has argued that the novel's setting is shaped by colonial legacies of underdevelopment and anti-environmental development. Moreover, Balram's consciousness of his own subalternity is heightened by his identification with the caged white tiger, whose confinement mirrors the entrapment of those caught in the Rooster Coop of class society. The ecological degradation of the village is not the background of this story of class oppression, it is one of its structural causes, an instance of Nixon's slow violence that has accumulated across generations to produce the conditions of absolute poverty that Balram escapes through violence.

In Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, ecological vulnerability is framed in a larger meditation on postcolonial loss and the uneven geography of globalisation. Kalimpong's Himalayan landscape is depicted with grandeur and melancholy its natural beauty is a constant reminder of a world that has been irrevocably altered by colonial intervention, while its gradual deteriorationthe overgrown gardens, crumbling infrastructure, eroding hillsidesenacts Nixon's slow violence in a specifically postcolonial register. For characters like Biju, who migrate to New York in search of economic opportunity, loss of ecological connection to home is experienced as a kind of spiritual amputation that cannot be compensated by the economic gains of migration. The novel asserts that the destruction of ecological and social communities in the global south is inseparably tied to the prosperity of the global north, because slow violence moves on the same paths as capital.

Roy's *The God of Small Things* is perhaps the most symbolically rich work on nature as a site of subaltern oppression. The Meenachal River, running through the backwaters of Ayemenem, is both a concrete reality and a potent metaphor for the social boundaries created by caste. The river banks are a space of transgression and forbidden desire, where Ammu and the Dalit carpenter Velutha meet in secret, where Velutha is finally beaten to death by the police. The river is a witness to this violence, but it also drinks it in and carries in its currents the history of social violence. Roy's persistent revisiting of images of the pollution and contamination of the river suggests that ecological and social degradation are symptoms of the same underlying system of exploitation, a connection that ecofeminist scholars have found to be central to the novel's critique of caste and colonial modernity.

4.2 Caste, Class, and Gender as Intersecting Hierarchies

One of the most important contributions of an Eco-Subaltern framework to the reading of these four novels is its ability to shed light on how caste, class and gender do not operate as separate systems of oppression but as concurrent and mutually reinforcing hierarchies that magnify the vulnerability of those at the lowest rungs of the social order. In none of the four novels is a character's marginalisation inscribed along a single axis; rather, subalternity is always multiply determined, conditioned by the simultaneous operation of caste discrimination, economic deprivation, gender inequality, and ecological precarity.

Class is the central axis of Balram's oppression in *The White Tiger*, but Adiga shows how class inequality in contemporary India is inextricable from the caste hierarchy that has historically naturalised the servitude of the lower orders. Balram's servanthood is not simply an economic factit is a social and cultural formation sedimented over generations, shaping not only the material conditions of his life but also his psychological relation to authority, ambition, and possibility. Safdar, Naqvi and Naseem (2023) have recorded the way in which class difference creates an inferiority complex in Balram which the novel follows with unflinching attention. Vani (2023) has shown how the novel creates a subaltern worldview that questions India's booming prosperity from within its own logic. The ecological aspect of this analysis is important Balram's class position is partly the result of the ecological impoverishment of his village, which has deprived him and his family of the economic basis that could have enabled an alternative trajectory.

Gender plays a significant role in the eco-subaltern identity in both *The God of Small Things* and *Gift in Green*, with women bearing the brunt of the ecological and social suffering portrayed in the novels. In Roy's novel



Ammu's status as a divorced woman returning to her natal home puts her beyond the social structures that protect women within the patriarchal order, and her love for Velutha is a double violation of gender and caste norms. The novel situates Ammu's desire and its violent repression at the intersection of gender-based and caste-based oppression, suggesting that no single framework is adequate to account for the complexity of her experience. The ecological dimensions of this complexity are palpable in Roy's ongoing metaphorising of the natural world as a space of potential and peril a space in which the social rules constraining Ammu's life are temporarily suspended, only to be re-established with deadly seriousness.

The ecofeminist dimensions of Sara Joseph's vision are most clearly expressed in *Gift in Green*. The women of Aathi are not only represented as victims of ecological and patriarchal exploitation but also as the custodians of the ecological knowledge and spiritual life of the community. Their relationship with the land is reciprocal and caring; they understand the ecological systems that sustain the community in ways that the men around them and the external forces that threaten to destroy Aathi do not. According to a 2025 study in Kuey, Joseph employs indigenous epistemologies as systems of political knowledge to resist capitalist modernity. *Gift in Green* is positioned as a critique of environmental degradation and a vision for sustainable coexistence based on women's ecological knowledge. This reading is consistent with the larger ecosubaltern framework the women of Aathi are subaltern in many ways, but their subalternity is not a denial of their agency but rather the grounds for a form of resistance that is fundamentally ecological and communal.

4.3 Types of Resistance: Ecological Agency and Counter-Discourse

The focus of this paper is to document the forms of ecological and social oppression presented in the four novels, and to explore the modes of resistance and agency that the texts offer their subaltern characters. This is a question which is of particular importance in relation to Spivak's framework which has at times been read as closing down the possibility of subaltern agency. The novels under analysis suggest a more complicated picture in which resistance is not absent, but is enacted in partial, ambivalent ways, limited by the very structures of power it is attempting to challenge.

In *The White Tiger*, Balram's murder of Ashok is the most dramatic, and the most morally complex, act of subaltern resistance in any of the four novels. Balram's own narrative voice his epistolary address to the Chinese Premier can be understood as a formal act of resistance a subaltern who not only speaks but addresses himself to the most powerful audience imaginable, thus performing the very kind of discursive agency that Spivak's framework implies is structurally unavailable to the subaltern. But Adiga does not let this formal transgression count as a mere victory. Balram's liberation comes at a great cost and his subsequent entrepreneurial success replicates the logic of exploitation from which he has escaped. The irony of the novel is that the man who resists a system that is fundamentally unjust cannot change that system at best, he can change his place in the hierarchy that already exists.

In *Gift in Green*, resistance is collective and communal, in a way that presents a more truly transformative vision. Women of Aathi like Shailaja gather to defend their land against the industrial development project, employing their ecological knowledge and their profound sense of kinship with the natural world as sources of strength and solidarity. Joseph's characters such as Shailaja, Johnson Sangeetharaj (2024) argues, embody an ecofeminist position where the nurturance of women is aligned with the conservation of nature, and women's collective action is an ecological form of stewardship with direct political implications. This vision of resistance is both practically grounded – it emerges from specific ecological knowledge and community relationships and spiritually informed, drawing on indigenous epistemologies that understand the land as a living community rather than a resource to be exploited.

In Roy's *The God of Small Things* the social order of the novel both necessitates and makes impossible resistance. Velutha's love for Ammu is an act of resistance to caste hierarchy his skilful craftsmanship is a form



of subaltern agency that the novel valorises even as it records its destruction. The novel's circular, non-linear narrative structure its refusal to tell its story in the sequential order that dominant historical discourse would impose can be read as a formal enactment of resistance in itself, insisting that the past cannot be left behind, and that history returns to demand reckoning even when the powerful prefer it buried. Desai's vision in *The Inheritance of Loss* is the most pessimistic Biju's return to Kalimpong without his American earnings suggests that individual migration cannot counter the structural forces of globalisation. But the novel does not close the door completely to resistance. The enduring presence of human solidarity and love in conditions of extreme vulnerability indicates that the eco-subaltern consciousness, once awakened, cannot be completely extinguished.

5. Discussion

The thematic analysis above uncovers several key patterns that have implications beyond the individual texts and pose broader questions regarding the connection between ecological degradation and social marginalisation in South Asian contexts. Longchar and Imsong (2023) First, in all four novels the environmental crisis and the social crisis are shown to be structurally linked, not just analogous: the same systems of power exploit the labour of the poor and the natural resources on which they depend; Nixon (2011) has conceptualised this structural link as the environmentalism of the poor the realisation that those who suffer most from ecological degradation are also those who are most immediately and least mediately dependent on healthy natural systems for their survival.

Second, the analysis shows that gender is not an additional axis of eco-subaltern identity, but a central one. The novels consistently demonstrate that women are disproportionately affected by ecological degradation, both because women's livelihoods are more directly linked to the natural world in many South Asian contexts, and because patriarchal structures of household and community life position women as the first absorbers of ecological shock. This finding is in line with the emerging scholarship on gender and ecological vulnerability in South Asian fiction, including Sankaran (2023), who has shown that women in South and Southeast Asian eco-fictions are consistently portrayed as both the primary victims of ecological crisis and the primary agents of ecological resistance. This insight is extended in the eco-subaltern framework developed here to show how caste and class-based vulnerability to ecological vulnerability is compounded by gender-based ecological vulnerability to produce forms of double and triple marginalisation that cannot be adequately captured by individual analytical categories.

Third, the cross-linguistic aspect of this study (its inclusion of Sara Joseph's Malayalam novel along with three Indian English texts) demonstrates that eco-subaltern concerns are not restricted to any one literary tradition in South Asia, but permeate the literary imagination across linguistic and regional boundaries. The fact that the Malayalam novel *Gift in Green*, set in the coastal backwaters of Kerala, shares fundamental thematic and structural concerns with English-language novels set in Bihar, Kalimpong, and the river valleys of Kerala suggests that the intersections of ecological degradation and social marginalisation are experienced and imagined across the region in ways that transcend linguistic boundaries. This finding suggests new directions for comparative South Asian literary scholarship that remain to be explored in depth.

These outcomes also have implications for the theoretical frameworks used in this study. The synthesis of Nixon's *Slow Violence* and Spivak's Subaltern Theory is more productive than either of the frameworks alone. While Spivak's framework is mostly social and discursive and does not take into account environmental aspects of marginalisation, Nixon's framework provides a vocabulary for understanding these aspects. Similarly, Spivak's framework provides the analytical tools for understanding the ways power structures silence the subaltern's ecological testimony. They develop an Eco-Subaltern approach that is genuinely intersectional in its ability to keep multiple axes of oppression (ecological, social, gendered, caste-based) in simultaneous analytical focus.



6. Conclusion

The paper has studied four major South Asian novels with the Eco-Subaltern framework, arguing that ecological degradation and social marginalisation are parallel and mutually reinforcing systems of oppression. This analysis, rooted in Rob Nixon's concept of Slow Violence and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's Subaltern Theory, has shown that in Adiga's *The White Tiger*, Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Joseph's *Gift in Green*, nature is not just a background but a site of action where caste, class and gender-based suffering is played out and where the most vulnerable suffer the most ecological damage.

Three main findings have been identified through thematic analysis. First, the ecological degradation in these novels always works as a kind of slow violence of Nixon, slowly and invisibly wearing away the conditions of subaltern survival while remaining invisible to those with the power and resources to escape its consequences. Second, the overlapping hierarchies of caste, class and gender produce especially acute modes of marginalisation for characters simultaneously occupying multiple subaltern positions, and these modes of double and triple marginalisation cannot be understood through any single analytical framework. Third, the modes of resistance illustrated in the four novels are varied and often partial, but they demonstrate that eco-subaltern consciousness, an awareness of the co-constitution of ecological and social vulnerability, can generate forms of agency and solidarity that endure under conditions of extreme constraint.

The cross-linguistic scope of this study makes an important contribution to comparative South Asian literary scholarship. The presence of Sara Joseph's Malayalam novel among three Indian English texts suggests the pervasive presence of eco-subaltern concerns in South Asia's literary imagination across languages, and opens up new possibilities for comparative research, which this paper has only just begun to explore. Future scholarship might extend the Eco-Subaltern framework to other South Asian literary traditions such as Tamil, Bengali, Telugu, Urdu, where similar intersections of ecological and social marginalisation are likely to be found. The framework is also usefully applied to recent South Asian fiction that addresses specifically climate change, and that explores how the intensifying ecological crisis of the twenty-first century is transforming the literary representation of subaltern vulnerability and resistance. Those most vulnerable to climate change are always among the marginalised and poor (Sankaran 2023). Literature that makes this connection visible serves a vital ethical and political function that scholarship has a responsibility to acknowledge and amplify.

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