

DYING WATERS AND DISPLACED LIVES: A COMPARATIVE ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF *SOFTLY DIES A LAKE* AND *DWEEPA*

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a comparative ecocritical reading of *Softly Dies a Lake* by Akkineni Kutumbarao and *Dweepa* by Na. D'Souza, examining the texts through the lens of Rob Nixon's theory of slow violence. While *Softly Dies a Lake* traces the ecological decline of Kolleru Lake through an intimate ecological memoir, *Dweepa* presents the trauma of displacement wrought by dam construction in India's caste-stratified rural society. Both narratives critique the systemic and structural neglect of environmental degradation and development-induced displacement. The paper explores how the exploitation of land and water resources for modernization and profit marginalizes rural and tribal communities and disconnects them from their environments and livelihoods. These texts serve as critical ecological documents that resist the invisibilization of environmental violence and urge a return to more sustainable, equitable, and culturally rooted modes of existence.

Keywords:

Environmental degradation, climate change, ecological memoir, displacement, ecocriticism, biodiversity

I. INTRODUCTION

Environmental degradation and displacement are not merely ecological or economic phenomena; they are also literary, cultural, and philosophical realities that demand nuanced exploration. In regions like rural India, where nature is intimately tied to everyday life, ecology and culture are interwoven into the fabric of social existence. Literature becomes a potent medium through which these entanglements are expressed, mourned, and remembered. Contemporary literary narratives increasingly respond to ecological destruction and forced displacement not only by documenting these injustices but by reimagining alternative relationships with the environment. These narratives offer forms of resistance, recovery, and resilience through memory, metaphor, and critique.

Two compelling Indian literary texts—*Softly Dies a Lake* by Akkineni Kutumbarao and *Dweepa* by Na. D'Souza—embody this approach. Both works, while stylistically different, share a deep engagement with themes of environmental transformation, marginalization, and cultural loss. *Softly Dies a Lake*, structured as an ecological memoir, records the slow death of Kolleru Lake through the intimate and nostalgic recollections of its narrator, Srinivasa Rao. The narrative is rich with ecological detail and oral tradition, portraying Kolleru not just as a geographical location but as a living presence—one that nurtures human and non-human life and forms the heart of communal identity. The degradation of the lake, therefore, signals not just an environmental crisis, but the erosion of an entire way of life.

On the other hand, *Dweepa*, a Kannada novella translated into English as *Island*, foregrounds the systemic violence wrought by large-scale development projects such as dam construction. The narrative follows Ganapayya and his family, whose lives are upended by state-led infrastructural expansion. Through its stark portrayal of bureaucratic apathy and the human cost of progress, *Dweepa* critiques how modernity, under the guise of national development, often displaces the most vulnerable—Dalits, tribals, and marginalized farmers—rendering them voiceless and invisible. The flooded island and rising waters become powerful symbols of submerged identities and lost histories.

Both texts can be read through the lens of Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence," which he defines 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). In *Softly Dies a Lake*, the slow, almost imperceptible degradation of Kolleru over decades exemplifies this form of violence—one that evades media spectacle but leaves irreversible ecological and cultural damage. Similarly, in *Dweepa*, the displacement of entire communities, though justified as a necessity for development, represents a kind of violence that unfolds incrementally, depriving people of their land, livelihoods, and dignity.

This paper undertakes a comparative ecocritical study of *Softly Dies a Lake* and *Dweepa* to analyze how each narrative articulates the human costs of environmental degradation and forced displacement. It examines how the texts construct ecological memory, interrogate socio-political hierarchies, and challenge dominant narratives of progress and modernity. Through the interweaving of personal memory and collective trauma, both works illuminate the lived realities of slow violence and foreground the voices of those who are most profoundly affected—yet most often unheard—in the discourse on environmental justice in India.

II. MEMORY AND LOSS IN *SOFTLY DIES A LAKE*

Softly Dies a Lake, originally written in Telugu as *Kolleti Jadal* by Akkineni Kutumbarao in 2014 and translated into English by Vasanth Kannabiran in 2020, is a poignant ecological memoir that bridges the personal with the political, the nostalgic with the tragic. At its core lies the memory of Kolleru, a once-thriving freshwater lake in Andhra Pradesh, now reduced to a degraded and dying ecosystem. Narrated by Srinivasa Rao, a 65-year-old man returning to the lake of his childhood, the memoir maps a stark contrast between a vibrant past and a decaying present. Through the act of remembering, Srinivasa attempts to preserve not just his individual past, but the collective memory of a community that once lived in harmony with nature. The memoir thus becomes a site of ecological mourning—a literary witness to environmental decline.

Kolleru, in this narrative, is far more than a physical locale. It is a living, breathing presence—a maternal force that nurtures, feeds, and shelters the village and its people. Through Srinivasa's deeply evocative descriptions, the lake emerges as a character in its own right. Its "rows of ducks floating like streams of flowers," the chorus of birds, the freshness of its fish, and the abundance of edible fruits and vegetation form an ecosystem teeming with life. Srinivasa's recollections are infused with the sights, smells, and sounds of a biodiverse paradise, forming what environmentalist Glenn Albrecht terms "solastalgia"—the distress caused by environmental change to one's home or territory. The reader is invited to inhabit the narrator's deeply felt connection with the lake, making its decline feel not only ecological, but also profoundly emotional and cultural.

However, over the course of six decades, this symbiotic relationship between humans and nature is progressively eroded. The transformation is gradual yet devastating. The shift begins in the 1970s with the advent of commercial aquaculture, a capitalist venture that reorients the lake's function from communal sustenance to private profit. Borewells are dug to draw saline water from the lakebed, chemical fertilizers and waste from fish ponds pollute its waters, and toxins from nearby towns flow unchecked into its once-pristine ecosystem. This systematic degradation is not sudden or spectacular—it is incremental, dispersed across time and space, and largely invisible to the outside world. It exemplifies what Rob Nixon terms slow

violence—"a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all."

What makes this form of violence especially insidious is its invisibility in dominant discourses of progress. Unlike floods or earthquakes that demand immediate response, slow violence hides in plain sight, camouflaged by statistics, policy language, and bureaucratic indifference. The death of Kolleru is neither reported in headlines nor addressed through adequate policy interventions. Instead, it is experienced in the intimate loss of biodiversity, the dwindling of edible fish, the disappearance of birds, and the inability of villagers to draw clean water from the lake. It is also seen in the spiritual and cultural disconnect that the new generation feels from a lake they no longer know or understand. For Srinivasa Rao, this transformation is not only a loss of nature, but a loss of memory, identity, and community.

The memoir's power lies in its structure and voice. Told in the first person, the narrative flows like the lake once did—organic, meandering, reflective. Srinivasa's memories are not merely individual but collective, encompassing his parents Rangayya and Lakshamma, village elders, childhood friends, and even the non-human denizens of the lake. Through his eyes, we witness traditional ecological knowledge—practices of wet farming, community-based flood management, and ritual relationships with water. As Kolleru's health deteriorates, so does the moral and emotional fabric of the village. This interdependence of environmental and human well-being underscores a central tenet of eco-critical thought: the fates of people and ecosystems are inseparably entwined.

Moreover, *Softly Dies a Lake* addresses the disjunction between urban and rural environmental perceptions. For urban readers, detached from natural landscapes and insulated from ecological degradation, the memoir functions as a window into a vanishing world. It challenges anthropocentric assumptions and economic rationality by reminding us of what is lost when development disregards sustainability. The lake that once quenched thirst, nourished soil, and inspired cultural practices is now a polluted ghost of its former self—its demise a silent tragedy with loud implications.

In conclusion, *Softly Dies a Lake* is a moving testament to memory, mourning, and ecological consciousness. By anchoring the narrative in the deeply personal yet profoundly political act of remembering, Kutumbarao transforms Srinivasa Rao's individual journey into a universal lament for lost ecologies. The memoir not only bears witness to slow violence but also becomes a form of resistance against it. It insists that remembering is a political act—that documenting the gradual death of a lake is as crucial as protesting its destruction. In doing so, the text adds an urgent voice to the growing archive of environmental literature that seeks to reckon with the price of progress.

III. SLOW VIOLENCE IN *SOFTLY DIES A LAKE*: THE EFFICACY OF AN ECOLOGICAL MEMOIR

The memoir opens with a haunting image: a 65-year-old Srinivasa Rao standing at the edge of a desolate, shrinking lake—once the lifeblood of his community, now reduced to a polluted expanse of stagnant water. His reflective question—"Where had the rows of ducks floating like streams of flowers gone?"—serves as a literary portal into the irreversible devastation that environmental degradation has inflicted upon Kolleru Lake. This moment is both literal and metaphorical, capturing the emotional weight of ecological loss and symbolizing the deep rupture between memory and reality. Akkineni Kutumbarao's narrative project in *Kolleti*

Jadalu (translated as *Softly Dies a Lake*) is not merely to recount a personal history, but to confront the silencing of environmental suffering through the power of ecological memory. The memoir acts as both an archive and a lament, simultaneously preserving the lake's past vitality and mourning its present decay.

Rob Nixon's theory of slow violence is instrumental in understanding the form and function of Kutumbarao's memoir. Nixon defines slow violence as a form of environmental harm that is "neither spectacular nor instantaneous but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales." This form of violence is insidious precisely because it lacks the immediacy that characterizes more visible disasters like floods, tsunamis, or forest fires. In *Softly Dies a Lake*, the slow violence unfolds not through explosive events, but through the accumulation of seemingly small acts: the digging of borewells, the introduction of pesticides, the construction of fish tanks, and the bureaucratic neglect of water conservation policies. Each act chips away at the ecological balance of Kolleru, leading to a cumulative catastrophe that remains underreported and inadequately addressed.

Kutumbarao's decision to frame this environmental decline through the intimate lens of memoir is a powerful narrative strategy. Unlike journalistic exposés or technical reports, the memoir personalizes the consequences of ecological collapse. It draws the reader into the emotional and cultural world of the narrator, forging an empathetic bond that transforms abstract data into lived experience. Through Srinivasa's eyes, we do not merely observe the lake's death; we feel it. We mourn with him the vanishing of ducks, the silence of birds, the disappearance of edible aquatic plants, and the loss of traditional fishing practices that once defined the community's way of life.

The structure of the memoir is also worth analyzing. It oscillates between past and present, memory and observation, nostalgia and critique. This temporal fluidity mirrors the way slow violence itself operates—dispersed across time and often unrecognized until its effects are already embedded into the landscape and psyche. The lush descriptions of childhood—of swimming in the lake, eating wild fruits, and watching birds—are constantly juxtaposed with present scenes of pollution, mechanization, and loss. These narrative shifts perform a kind of cognitive dissonance that forces the reader to confront the magnitude of what has been lost.

Moreover, the memoir critiques not only environmental negligence but also socio-political apathy. It is sharply critical of how state institutions, under the guise of development, have commodified and privatized common ecological spaces. The shift from a subsistence-based economy to one driven by commercial aquaculture reveals the intrusion of neoliberal ideologies into rural ecologies. Local communities, which once enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with Kolleru, are gradually alienated from their environment. Land is seized or repurposed for profit-driven ventures; traditional knowledge systems are rendered obsolete; and the lake, once a commons, is transformed into a site of ecological extraction. In this sense, *Softly Dies a Lake* is not just an ecological memoir—it is a powerful indictment of environmental injustice and an elegy for the commons.

Importantly, Kutumbarao avoids romanticizing the past. The rural life of Srinivasa's childhood was marked by hardships, poverty, and struggle. Yet, it was a life lived in ecological equilibrium. The loss that the memoir mourns is not merely that of a beautiful landscape, but of an ethical and sustainable way of being in the world—one that prioritized balance, respect,

and interdependence over profit and exploitation. The destruction of Kolleru is thus not just environmental; it is cultural, moral, and existential.

Through *Softly Dies a Lake*, Kutumbarao reclaims narrative space for voices often silenced in discourses of development and modernity. By centering the lived experiences of a rural protagonist, the memoir challenges dominant paradigms that equate progress with industrialization and environmental conquest. It positions memory as a form of resistance, enabling readers to bear witness to violence that is otherwise obscured by distance, time, and bureaucracy. In doing so, the text enacts what Nixon calls “writer-activism”—a form of literary engagement that amplifies marginalized ecological perspectives and calls for environmental accountability.

In conclusion, *Softly Dies a Lake* exemplifies the efficacy of the ecological memoir as a literary form capable of capturing the emotional and ethical dimensions of slow violence. It turns personal recollection into political testimony, situating the loss of a lake within broader debates on environmental degradation, rural disenfranchisement, and ecological justice. The memoir is not only an act of remembrance but also a call to conscience—urging readers to recognize that the slow death of ecosystems like Kolleru is neither inevitable nor invisible, but the result of choices that can and must be contested.

IV. DEVELOPMENT AND DISPLACEMENT IN *DWEEPA*

Na. D’Souza’s *Dweepa* (translated into English as *Island* by Susheela Punitha) is a searing narrative that interrogates the human cost of development in post-independence India. Set on a small river island in Hosamanehalli on the Sharavathi River in Karnataka, the novella chronicles the impending submergence of the village due to a state-sponsored dam project. D’Souza’s text is deeply concerned with how development-driven infrastructure, particularly dams, disproportionately affects rural, caste-marginalized, and economically vulnerable populations. Through the lens of displacement, *Dweepa* critiques the asymmetrical distribution of progress, where the benefits accrue to urban elites while the burdens are disproportionately borne by the rural poor.

The central character, Ganapayya, a devout, lower-caste farmer, anchors the narrative’s critique of state apathy and caste-class injustice. Unlike other families who reluctantly accept compensation and evacuate the island, Ganapayya refuses to leave the ancestral land that his family has cultivated for generations. His attachment to the land is not merely economic but ontological—rooted in a spiritual and existential relationship with nature. As the waters of the Sharavathi reservoir rise with the monsoon rains, the state’s promises of resettlement remain unfulfilled, leaving Ganapayya and his family trapped in an unfolding ecological and humanitarian crisis. His eventual death—drowned in the very water meant to symbolize development—serves as a tragic indictment of the bureaucratic callousness and structural violence embedded in India’s developmental paradigms.

In contrast to *Softly Dies a Lake*, where environmental degradation unfolds gradually and imperceptibly, the violence in *Dweepa* is immediate, physical, and catastrophic. Yet, both narratives are unified by a common thread: they expose how environmental destruction is

mediated through power, privilege, and systemic inequality. Nixon's concept of *slow violence* can be extended to *Dweepa* by recognizing that even sudden disasters like dam-induced flooding are often preceded by years of ignored warnings, manipulated policies, and the marginalization of vulnerable voices. The "suddenness" of Ganapayya's death is made possible by a slow buildup of structural neglect—a failure of representation, justice, and empathy that renders certain lives expendable in the pursuit of national development.

D'Souza also foregrounds how displacement operates not just as a physical event, but as a psychic, cultural, and spiritual wound. The loss of land entails the loss of ritual practices, folk memory, ancestral ties, and intergenerational identity. For marginalized communities, especially Dalits and Adivasis, the land is not merely a productive asset but a repository of knowledge, history, and resistance. Forced relocation fractures these deep-rooted associations, rendering displaced individuals stateless within their own nation. The novella captures this alienation with poignant detail: the crumbling of houses, the uprooting of temples, and the deafening silence that accompanies the rising waters.

Moreover, *Dweepa* destabilizes the celebratory discourse of development propagated by postcolonial nation-building ideologies. The dam, often hailed as a "temple of modern India," is revealed to be a structure of dispossession, silence, and death. The novella questions the ethical legitimacy of progress that necessitates the sacrifice of the most voiceless citizens. It positions Ganapayya not as a figure of stubbornness or backwardness, but as a moral compass whose resistance illuminates the moral bankruptcy of state-driven modernization. His death, far from being an individual tragedy, becomes a symbol of collective loss—of the erasure of rural ecologies, indigenous practices, and socio-cultural integrity.

The narrative style of *Dweepa* further amplifies its political resonance. D'Souza employs a sparse, restrained prose that mirrors the starkness of the island's landscape and the gravity of its predicament. There are no romantic flourishes or sentimental diversions; instead, the novella maintains a taut focus on the material and emotional precarity of its characters. This minimalism intensifies the affective impact of displacement, allowing the landscape itself to become a narrative force—shrinking, drowning, resisting.

In addition, *Dweepa* opens up critical conversations about environmental justice and postcolonial developmentalism in India. The novella anticipates contemporary debates about the ethical and ecological consequences of mega-projects, questioning the legitimacy of state policies that equate national progress with environmental exploitation. It aligns with the growing body of literature and activism that calls for participatory, inclusive, and ecologically sustainable models of development.

In conclusion, *Dweepa* serves as both a powerful literary document and a political critique. By centering the lived experience of Ganapayya and his family, D'Souza dismantles the dominant narrative of technological progress and offers a counter-history of development—one that foregrounds the voices of those displaced, erased, and forgotten. Like *Softly Dies a Lake*, *Dweepa* transforms individual grief into collective resistance, urging readers to re-evaluate the

true cost of progress in a country where the waters of development often drown the lives of the most vulnerable.

V. COMPARATIVE ECOCRITICAL ANALYSIS: HUMAN-NATURE DISCONNECT AND LITERARY RESISTANCE

Softly Dies a Lake and *Dweepa* operate in distinct narrative modes—memoir and fiction, respectively—but are united in their ecocritical concern with the rupture between human communities and their ecological surroundings. Each text bears witness to the consequences of environmental degradation and displacement, foregrounding the often-invisible suffering that results when natural ecosystems are sacrificed on the altar of development. Through different literary forms and stylistic choices, both Akkineni Kutumbarao and Na. D'Souza confront the growing human-nature disconnect, and in doing so, offer powerful forms of literary resistance against ecological amnesia and systemic injustice.

In *Softly Dies a Lake*, the relationship with nature is memorialized through the personal lens of Srinivasa Rao's childhood recollections. The lake, Kolleru, is not merely a body of water—it is a living, breathing entity, a maternal force that sustains the villagers, their animals, and their cultural practices. Nature is sacred, nourishing, and communal, integrated into the rhythms of daily life. The memoir thus becomes an act of environmental remembrance, a narrative archive of what was lost not simply in terms of biodiversity, but also in human intimacy with the nonhuman world. The lake's degradation, wrought by borewells, prawn farming, and chemical intrusion, symbolizes a broader erosion of ecological ethics, wherein greed supplants gratitude and connection.

By contrast, *Dweepa* dramatizes a more immediate and violent dislocation. The river in the novella, once a silent witness to rural life, transforms into a destructive force as state machinery invades with the promise of hydroelectric power. While the violence in *Softly Dies a Lake* is slow, cumulative, and largely invisible until it becomes irreversible, the violence in *Dweepa* is abrupt, conspicuous, and lethal. Yet both are manifestations of what Rob Nixon terms "slow violence": the delayed, dispersed, and often disregarded forms of ecological harm that disproportionately affect the disenfranchised.

Importantly, both texts emphasize that environmental destruction is neither accidental nor inevitable—it is political. The degradation of Kolleru and the flooding of Hosamanehalli are the outcomes of deliberate policy decisions rooted in capitalist logic and indifferent governance. These events reveal how environmental harm intersects with caste, class, and regional inequalities. In *Dweepa*, the dam project prioritizes industrial advancement at the expense of a few remote, rural lives deemed expendable. In *Softly Dies a Lake*, the unchecked aquaculture economy, enabled by state neglect, erodes a once-thriving ecosystem and its cultural heritage. In both cases, the so-called "costs of progress" are disproportionately borne by the voiceless and the vulnerable.

These texts also resist the dominant developmentalist narrative that equates modernization with improvement. In *Softly Dies a Lake*, modernization arrives not with dignity but with decay: borewells poison the groundwater, commercial fisheries suffocate biodiversity, and chemical pollutants replace the purity of rainwater-fed lakes. Similarly, in *Dweepa*, modern infrastructure emerges as a tool of exclusion and disempowerment. Far from being temples of progress, the dams are sites of sacrificial violence—devouring not only homes and fields but also memories, identities, and histories. Both texts, therefore, function as counter-narratives to the celebratory discourse of development, exposing its human and ecological toll.

Moreover, each narrative underscores the precarity of marginalized communities—those who are closest to nature and most reliant on its resources, yet paradoxically, the least protected. The villagers of Pulaparru and Hosamanehalli are not merely passive victims; they are rendered voiceless by systemic structures that neither consult them nor compensate them meaningfully. Through their literary representations, Kutumbarao and D'Souza return voice and agency to these communities. *Softly Dies a Lake* articulates the pain of loss through remembered songs, rituals, and local wisdom, while *Dweepa* constructs a quiet resistance through Ganapayya's moral refusal to abandon his land. Both authors preserve cultural memory as a form of ecological resistance, suggesting that storytelling itself can be a mode of survival and protest.

Additionally, both works align with broader ecocritical discourses that emphasize the need for sustainable and just environmental practices. They call for an ethic of care, not only toward nature but also toward those who coexist most intimately with it. By situating their narratives within rural, non-urban geographies, Kutumbarao and D'Souza de-center the dominant urban-industrial imagination of Indian modernity, instead prioritizing grassroots experiences and subaltern ecologies.

In conclusion, *Softly Dies a Lake* and *Dweepa* are powerful ecological texts that challenge dominant paradigms of progress, development, and human exceptionalism. They reveal that the disconnection from nature is not simply a philosophical or emotional loss, but one with profound material and ethical consequences. Through their poignant portrayals of disappearing lakes and drowning villages, these works transform grief into resistance, nostalgia into testimony, and personal memory into political critique. As literary interventions, they compel readers to reckon with the invisible costs of environmental decline and to imagine more inclusive, sustainable futures where development is redefined through the lens of justice, equity, and ecological harmony.

VI. CONCLUSION

Softly Dies a Lake and *Dweepa* stand as compelling ecocritical narratives that confront the destructive legacies of unchecked development, environmental degradation, and forced displacement. These texts resist the hegemonic discourse that equates development with progress, revealing instead how such narratives obscure systemic injustices and ecological loss. By focusing on the lived experiences of communities intimately tied to land and water, both

works make visible the often-unseen dimensions of environmental violence—what Rob Nixon terms “slow violence”—and its deep entanglement with caste, class, and political neglect. Through the memoiristic reflections of Srinivasa Rao and the fictional, yet hauntingly real, struggles of Ganapayya, the authors inscribe into the literary imagination the landscapes of grief, loss, and survival. These narratives are not merely accounts of ecological catastrophe but are also acts of cultural and political testimony. They articulate the emotional, spiritual, and socio-economic costs borne by those at the margins—fisherfolk, farmers, Dalits, and tribal communities—whose voices are rarely heard in policymaking or mainstream discourse. Crucially, both texts serve as repositories of ecological memory. They preserve not only the sensory richness of vanished ecosystems and vanishing traditions but also the moral urgency to remember, resist, and rethink. As literary interventions, *Softly Dies a Lake* and *Dweepa* challenge us to reconsider our relationship with nature—not as dominators or developers, but as participants in a fragile and interdependent ecological web. They urge a shift from anthropocentric paradigms to more inclusive, relational, and justice-oriented approaches to environmental ethics and governance.

In an era marked by climate change, biodiversity loss, and widespread displacement, the relevance of such literature cannot be overstated. These narratives remind us that environmental issues are not confined to scientific or technical domains—they are profoundly cultural, historical, and affective. Literature, then, becomes a crucial space for articulating alternative visions of sustainability, justice, and coexistence. By giving voice to the silenced and bearing witness to the unacknowledged, *Softly Dies a Lake* and *Dweepa* illuminate the path toward a more humane and ecologically conscious future.

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