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When Rivers Speak: Critiques Of Big Dams In South Asian Fiction

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Abstract
In South Asia, rivers – traditionally revered as vital sources of life and sustenance – have increasingly become contested terrains, reshaped by large-scale dam projects and industrial developments introduced from the West since the colonial period. In the post-independence era, this process has intensified, as land, environment, and cultural values continue to transform under the postcolonial discourses of development. This article critiques one of the most iconic symbols of this developmentalist agenda: the big dam. Focusing on the Indus and the Mahaweli rivers – ancient waterways supporting rich biodiversity and rural livelihoods – this study examines how contemporary South Asian fiction challenges postcolonial modernity by revealing the ecological and socio-economic consequences of large-scale river engineering. Through an ecocritical reading of Uzma Aslam Khan's Trespassing (2003) and Romesh Gunesekera's Reef (1994) and Heaven's Edge (2002), this paper argues that these texts articulate literary resistance to environmental degradation, displacement, and threats to sustainability caused by dam projects. It highlights how such narratives reimagine rivers as living archives of cultural and ecological memories, contesting anthropocentric notions of development and envisioning alternative, relational modes of coexistence.

Keywords: *rivers, big dams, postcolonial developmentalism, ecocriticism, South Asian fiction, environmental justice, sustainability*

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I. Introduction: Development, Modernity, And The South Asian Imagination

The forces of industrial modernity, imported from the West, have reshaped South Asia's landscapes, cultures, and economies since the colonial period. In the global imagination of modernity, big dams have long stood as monuments of progress – symbols of human mastery over nature and postcolonial nations' developmental ambitions. Yet, the narratives surrounding such monumental projects in South Asia reveal a counter-discourse – one that exposes the violence, displacement, and ecological degradation masked by developmental rhetoric. This paper explores that counter-discourse through three South Asian novels – Uzma Aslam Khan's *Trespassing* (2003) and Romesh Gunesekera's *Reef* (1994) and *Heaven's Edge* (2002) – to examine how fiction critiques the ecological and socio-cultural fallout of dam-building by articulating a literary resistance to the anthropocentric logic of developmentalism.

Recent scholarship has highlighted how contemporary South Asian fiction engages with ecological concerns, portraying rivers and landscapes as sites of cultural and environmental significance. Contemporary analyses of Uzma Aslam Khan's *Trespassing* foreground the Indus River both as a symbolic and ecological agent, illustrating how rivers witness industrialization, state intervention, and human vulnerability (Rahman, 2011; Irum, 2025). Deckard (2010) explores how Sri Lankan literature, including Gunesekera's works, uses ecological settings to reflect postcolonial anxieties, showing how landscapes and waterways become layered sites of socio-ecological history and cultural memory. Similarly, Jain (2012) analyzes Romesh Gunesekera's *Reef* and *Heaven's Edge*, arguing that these novels foreground Sri Lanka's rivers and coastal ecologies, highlighting the intersection of environmental fragility and socio-political instability. Such studies demonstrate that South Asian fiction provides a critical lens for examining environmental issues, portraying natural landscapes not merely as backdrops but as active agents in human and ecological narratives. However, relatively little critical attention has been devoted to how South Asian fiction engages with dam-building as a nexus of ecological and political violence. Even fewer studies have systematically compared the Indus and the Mahaweli narratives to trace regional patterns of ecological disruption and literary resistance. This scholarly neglect underscores a significant gap in postcolonial ecocritical inquiry within the South Asian context.

This study addresses this gap through three guiding research questions: (1) How do Khan and Gunesekera represent rivers as ecological and ethical agents within the context of large-scale developmental projects? (2) In what ways do these narratives critique the social and environmental consequences of postcolonial modernization, including displacement, environmental degradation, and loss of sustainability? (3) How can literary engagement with rivers inform alternative, relational frameworks for understanding human-nature coexistence in South Asia? These questions orient the analysis toward both ecological and socio-political dimensions of development, while foregrounding literature as a site of ethical reflection and resistance.

Methodologically, this article adopts a postcolonial ecocritical approach, integrating insights from environmental history, literary studies, and postcolonial theory. Close readings of *Trespassing*, *Reef*, and *Heaven's Edge* are conducted with attention to narrative strategies, ecological imagery, and representations of human-nature interrelations. By combining textual analysis with historical and ecological contexts, this study situates contemporary fiction as a critical interlocutor in debates on postcolonial development, environmental justice, and sustainability.

II. Ecocritical Perspectives: Rethinking Development Through Postcolonial Ecology

The *big dam* occupies a central place in South Asia's developmental imagination, inheriting both the ambition and violence of colonial resource management. Projects such as the Indus Basin Development and the Mahaweli Scheme reproduce a technocratic logic that views nature as an instrument of national progress rather than a living system. In post-independence developmentalist discourse, these hydraulic monuments came to signify sovereignty and modernity, yet they also perpetuated patterns of displacement, ecological disruption, and class inequality rooted in colonial governance. Reading the dam as both infrastructure and ideology reveals how the rhetoric of progress continues to mask enduring forms of environmental domination in the postcolonial state.

Large-scale dam projects have not realised their projected status as markers of human mastery over nature and modernity. Increasingly, it has become evident that these structures often produce outcomes antithetical to their stated objectives. The long-promoted development rhetoric - framed as "Local Pain for National Gain" - has been critically exposed as a myth concealing profound social and ecological costs (Roy, 2002, p. 58). In this context, postcolonial ecocriticism offers a crucial lens for understanding how environmental degradation is entwined with histories of empire, capitalism, and uneven modernity. As Huggan & Tiffin (2010) argue, postcolonial ecocriticism exposes "the continuing forms of imperialism in the global environmental crisis" (p. 12). The ecological violence unleashed by big dams in South Asia can thus be read not merely as environmental mismanagement but as a continuation of colonial patterns of resource extraction and centralised control, now reproduced by postcolonial nations under the banner of development.

Early ecocritical works are often criticised for being predominantly Western, anthropocentric, and inattentive to questions of race, class, and empire. Responding to these limitations, a wave of scholarship since the 2000s has worked to *decolonise* ecocriticism, giving rise to what is now known as *postcolonial ecocriticism*. This subfield interrogates the legacies of imperialism and global capitalism in shaping ecological degradation, arguing that environmental crises are inseparable from colonial histories of domination and resource extraction.[1]

This study adopts a postcolonial ecocritical framework to interrogate the entanglements of ecology, power, and literary imagination in South Asian fiction. Drawing on Nixon's (2011) notion of *slow violence* and Huggan and Tiffin's (2010) formulation of postcolonial ecocriticism, the analysis foregrounds how environmental degradation is inseparable from histories of imperial extraction and uneven development. The approach also considers rivers – the Indus and the Mahaweli – not merely as settings but as dynamic agents that register cultural memory and ecological trauma. By reading them as narrative forces, this study positions South Asian literature as a site where environmental critique and decolonial ethics converge.

III. Choked Waters, Silenced Voices: The Indus And Marginalised Communities In *Trespassing*

In *Trespassing*, Uzma Aslam Khan elevates the Indus River from a narrative backdrop to a living archive that bears witness to the ecological and historical violences inscribed in the project of postcolonial progress. Set against the backdrop of Pakistan's shifting political and ecological landscape from the 1970s to the 1990s, the novel dramatises how the state's efforts at modernization – embodied in irrigation schemes, dam projects, and agrarian re-engineering – disrupt both environmental balance and human belonging. Through the interwoven stories of individuals from diverse social classes and regions, Khan depicts the Indus as both life-giver and casualty of state violence. Its diminishing flow becomes emblematic of the moral and ecological desiccation that accompanies unchecked developmentalism. While centring on Karachi, *Trespassing* evokes the

[1] Huggan and Tiffin (2010) was foundational in articulating this intersection, showing how ecological harm often parallels the cultural and political marginalization of colonised peoples. Similarly, DeLoughrey and Handley (2011) situates environmental discourse within histories of migration, plantation economies, and resource politics, particularly in the Global South.

tragic tale of the historic Indus River and the suffering it has brought to its estuarine ecosystem and the local fishers of Sindh. Salaamat, a boy uprooted from a fishing village, and Dia, the daughter of a wealthy Karachi family, both experience, in their own distinct ways, the river's dying agony.

The existence of three million hectares of the Indus delta – home to a complex network of swamps, streams, and mangrove forests, as well as a rich biodiversity –depends on the river's natural flow. What is politically promoted as an effort to prevent the *wastage* of unused water into the sea through damming is, in fact, a death knell for the entire delta ecosystem, as well as for the local marginalised communities that have relied on this lifeline for generations (Mangi, 2018). From Inam Gul, the cook in *Trespassing*, Dia learned of the Indus's glorious past: "princess like Sassi[2], dwelling in the glorious lakhy bagh on the banks of the river, surrounded by music, fountains and burnished horses" (p. 97). Today, however, "its banks teemed not with Sassi's pavilions, but with some of the nation's deadliest gangs" (p. 97). Her disillusionment during the drive to the farm near Thatta is thus articulated:

For most of the drive, the land was stripped and parched, dotted with occasional bands of drooping mesquite. The route led straight to the mighty Indus, about 100 km east. Riverbeds ought to teem with life, thought Dia, each time she passed through here – especially a riverbed as old as this. But except for a kingfisher poised regally on a wire, hinting at the proximity of water, there was no evidence of the fabled grandeur of the Indus (p. 97).

This stark contrast between Dia's present-day observations and the river's historical vitality underscores the profound environmental and social transformations the Indus has undergone over the past century.

Before the development of the Punjab canal colonies and the construction of barrages between 1932 and 1960[3], the Indus discharged an average of over 5,660 cubic metres per second into the Arabian Sea through more than a dozen distributaries and creeks, which became part of the political and navigational history of the Indian, Arabian, and African coastlines, and of the folklore of lower Sindh (Hasan, 2012). Environmental scholars now categorise large dams as unsustainable developments, posing significant threats to riverine biodiversity as well as to the wetlands and estuarine ecosystems of deltas. In the article "The slow and dangerous death of Pakistan's Indus river delta," Maria Thomas et al. (2022) assess the extensive damage inflicted upon the delta, a critical component of Pakistan's coastline:

It is […] home to 97% of the country's mangrove forests. But the drying creeks and rising salinity are setting these forests up for a major ecological disaster. The dwindling river flow had already led to the loss of about 86% of mangrove cover between 1966 and 2003, according to data from the Coastal Environmental Management Plan for Pakistan. (para. 3)

From the Pakistani government's perspective, constructing additional dams appears to be the only viable solution; however, this approach threatens the livelihoods of communities along the Indus River and its delta. The Indus, home to the world's largest arid-climate mangroves, sustains a fragile ecosystem vital to Pakistan's fisheries. Rising salinity, shrinking mangroves, and reduced freshwater flow – caused by dam construction for irrigation and hydroelectric power – have sharply depleted fish and shrimp stocks, endangered seventeen major creeks, and triggered both ecological and socio-economic crises (Thomas et al., 2022).

In *Trespassing*, Salaamat's attempt to run away from the insurgents' camp takes him to the Mohana village, further up on the Indus. Hameed Bhai, the eldest boatman of the marginal Mohana fishing tribe, while taking Salaamat down the river, reveals their woe. "He [Hameed Bhai] spoke of how his people had built their lives around the river for thousands of years, but now were forced to find other means. It was always the same story. Always the same fight. And it was just so trivial" (p. 401). While rowing his boat on the Indus, Hameed Bhai points some places out to Salaamat and regrets: "The river would feed that lake over there. But the Mohanas who live on it weep now. The lake has grown salty. It is stagnant, filthy" (pp. 401-02). Hameed Bhai, like a true son of the historic waterway, further laments: "Dead are the freshwater fish: kurero, morakho, thelhi. And what are the people to drink? We were born to water. We drown on land" (p. 402). Through Hameed Bhai's voice, Khan here transforms the Indus from a mere setting into a symbol of historical dispossession, where environmental degradation mirrors the erosion of cultural memory and the displacement of riverine identities in postcolonial Pakistan. By embedding the Mohanas' suffering within the larger narrative of political turmoil and ecological collapse, the novelist exposes how modern nation-building projects – rooted in control and extraction – render both people and rivers expendable in the pursuit of progress. Hasan (2012) laments that riverbank pastures have become barren, and the silt that once stabilised the coastline has diminished, threatening mangrove ecosystems that served as nurseries for numerous marine species. The loss of silt has depleted essential nutrients for marine life, while dams and barrages now obstruct migratory fish from reaching upstream spawning grounds.

[2] The Sufi poet, Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai (1689-1752) narrated this folkloric tale in his poetry, which tells the story of eternal love.

[3] "Between 1932 and 1962, four major barrages were built on the Indus at Sukkur, Kotri, Taunsa and Guddu" (Hasan, 2012).

Salaamat can relate to the crisis very well, as his "village too had teemed with talk of this. There were fishermen who depended on fish that in turn depended on the mangroves that once flourished in the estuaries. With the fresh water cut off, the trees were withering, and the fish dying. Many of these villagers too had had to leave, and, like Salaamat, bow to those who displaced them" (p. 359). Through Salaamat's recognition, Khan emphasises how ecological degradation is inseparable from social displacement, showing that the destruction of the Indus's mangroves and fisheries is not only an environmental loss but also a profound rupture in the livelihoods, memory, and identity of the riverine communities. The human dimension of the Indus crisis becomes even more pronounced in *Trespassing*, where individual voices embody the larger struggle over ecological and political domination. Fatah in *Trespassing*, though an insurgent with doubtful ideals, seems to sound correct when he talks to his comrades: "They've stolen our Sindhu… Once we called it the life of the lower valley. What valley? This is a desert. What life? We're being buried alive" (p. 383). Salaamat listens to Fatah's rhetorical eloquence: "We are what we are because we've lived on it for thousands of years. Once it had pride. Now it has a cuff around it. It's been bent and beaten and the blood's been shut off. It dangles impotently. To stand erect, it has to break free" (p. 359). "Salaamat knew by blood, Fatah meant the Indus. He'd spoken many times of the dams in the Punjab that were choking off the supply. That province teemed with life from five opulent rivers but it had to have more… In much of Sindh, the Indus had dwindled to a trickle" (p. 359). It has thus become a focal point of regional political and ethnic tension, exemplifying a common phenomenon in developing regions: ecological conflict between state authorities and local communities over unequal access to natural resources. Khan underscores this tension when Fatah angrily complains: "More is what the Punjab is all about… More food, more water, more wealth, more hideously fat men like that Handsome…" (p. 359). Through these impassioned voices, Khan exposes how the struggle over the Indus becomes a microcosm of postcolonial inequities, where environmental degradation intertwines with provincial politics, class hierarchies, and the moral bankruptcy of development rooted in exploitation. The river's silenced flow thus mirrors the silencing of Sindh's marginalised communities, whose dispossession is both ecological and epistemic.

These local struggles, as Roy (2004) argues, resonate with broader patterns in the Global South, where forces of capitalism and imperialism do not always manifest as overt military invasion, as in Iraq, Afghanistan, or Vietnam. Instead, they appear in more localised forms: the loss of livelihoods, the cutting off of water supplies, forced evictions, and the uprooting of communities – all overseen by the machinery of the state, including police, the army, and the judiciary. These patterns of dispossession and displacement underscore how so-called development initiatives, particularly large dams, frequently produce more harm than benefit for the communities they claim to serve:

There was a time when everybody loved Big Dams… They began as a dream. They've ended up being a nightmare. It's time to wake up. All over the world there is a movement growing against Big Dams… The fact that they do more harm than good is no longer just conjecture… For all these reasons, the dam-building industry in the First World is in trouble and out of work. So it's exported to the Third World in the name of Development Aid... (Roy, 2002, pp. 57-58)

The Indus' gradual silencing, caused by reduced sediment and dammed waters, serves as a metaphor for what Nixon (2011) terms the *slow violence* of environmental degradation: "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (p. 2). The effects of dam construction – salinization of soil, loss of biodiversity, and forced migration – are forms of violence that rarely make headlines yet define the lived reality of Pakistan's agrarian poor. The state's pursuit of hydraulic modernity arguably replicates colonial patterns of extraction, treating both land and people as resources to be managed. The novel's recurring imagery of drought and dust underscores the irony that projects, meant to *tame* the river, ultimately render the land barren. But, government rhetoric in Pakistan has increasingly conflated patriotism with support for dam construction, portraying any criticism of such projects as opposition to the nation itself (Mangi, 2018). Khan's critique of dam-building responds to this nationalist discourse, situating it within the broader postcolonial anxiety over nationhood and development. *Trespassing* showcases both a violation of boundaries and an act of resistance. On one hand, the damming of the river represents humanity's transgression against natural limits; on the other, the novel's characters trespass against social and political constraints in their search for connection and belonging. This is what Guha and Martinez-Alier (1997) define as the *environmentalism of the poor*, which cannot be explained through post-materialist or anti-materialist values, as in many First World conservation movements; rather, it is inseparable from struggles over livelihood, subsistence, and sustainability (pp. xiv–xv). This parallel between ecological and human trespass situates Khan's narrative within a broader discourse of environmental justice, where the domination of nature reflects the marginalization of the powerless.

IV. The Tragedy Of The Mahaweli: Ecological Dispossession In Romesh Gunesekera's *Reef* And *Heaven's Edge*

Romesh Gunesekera's fiction occupies a liminal space between memory and loss, intimacy and displacement, ecology and politics. Both *Reef* and *Heaven's Edge* are set in Sri Lanka, a nation whose postcolonial identity has been deeply shaped by developmental modernity and environmental transformation. The novels can be read as complementary meditations on the island's changing relationship with its natural world – *Reef* capturing the subtle decay of ecological and moral equilibrium in a postcolonial society struggling with the legacies of empire, and *Heaven's Edge* envisioning a dystopian future of environmental collapse and political authoritarianism. At the center of both works lies the Mahaweli River, the site of the massive Mahaweli Development Programme[4], which, like Pakistan's Indus Basin Scheme, became a postcolonial symbol of *national progress* and *hydraulic sovereignty*. Gunesekera's fiction transforms this developmental narrative into an allegory of ecological and moral decline, exposing the violence concealed within technocratic visions of progress.

In *Reef*, though in a light-hearted and oblique manner, Mister Salgado in his vibrant Christmas party alludes to the old tank irrigation of ancient time invented by their visionary ancestors:

You know our tanks? The great reservoirs? Inland seas, really. That is why we say muhuda. These were engineering feats done in two hundred BC, in the golden age of the cities of Anuradhapura and then Polonnaruwa. Some were done even earlier. Huge areas were put under water through a hydraulic system that required our yakkha engineers to measure a half-inch change of water-level in a two-mile stretch of water… All for water: the source of our life, and death. (pp. 84-85)

Salgado's nostalgic account of ancient tank irrigation highlights a sophisticated, ecologically attuned hydraulic knowledge, subtly contrasting ancestral environmental stewardship with the disruptive, technocratic ambitions of postcolonial projects like the Mahaweli Development Programme. It frames water as both life and moral responsibility, underscoring Gunesekera's critique of modernity's ecological and ethical costs. This tension between traditional ecological knowledge and modern infrastructural ambition is not only theoretical but also experienced personally, as seen in the younger generation's sense of loss and dislocation. Even Triton, a village boy relocated to the city, resents this transformation, recalling at Mister Salgado's house that he "missed the closeness of the tank – the reservoir," as "a tank or a river provided a place with a kind of majesty" (p. 33). These traditional tanks, now neglected, once held profound cultural and ecological significance, illustrating how modern dams and reservoirs can cause not only environmental harm but also cultural alienation. For example, Stegeborn (2010) writes that the Wanniya-Laeto, Sri Lanka's last indigenous hunters and gatherers, were displaced from their ancestral forests in the 1980s to make way for hydroelectric, irrigation, and conservation projects. Their traditional swidden agriculture and foraging practices had sustained local biodiversity, yet government and international policies prioritised development and tourism over indigenous rights. Forced into resettlement villages, they experienced dietary, health, and cultural declines. Their experience illustrates the conflict between conservation, economic development, and the survival of indigenous cultures.

The postcolonial political myth of national progress, nevertheless, drew an analogy with the great irrigation technology of the ancient Dry Zone kings to popularise and legitimise the Mahaweli Scheme. Later in the narrative, Mister Salgado and Miss Nili attend one important party that celebrates "the inauguration of the era of the Mahaweli Scheme": "A giant leap into inland irrigation not seen for a thousand years. The diversion of the biggest river in the land" (pp. 120-21). This moment encapsulates how the novel intertwines personal and national histories, using the spectacle of development to critique the hubris and ethical blindness underlying Sri Lanka's modernization project. The governmental "machinations pass in a haze", as "a nationwide concern for *inland* seas grew as politicians invoked the spurious visions of ancient kings" (Gunesekera, 1994, p. 119). In *Reef*, Mister Ranjan Salgado's friend Mr. Dias once reminds him: "All they [the politicians] want are some success stories. To show this country is finally joining the twentieth century" (p. 49). This conflation of technocratic ambition with mythic historiography exposes the ideological mechanisms through which the state legitimises its developmental agenda, thus preparing the ground for Gunesekera's broader interrogation of how political mythmaking permeates individual consciousness and ethical perception. Such an ideological configuration resonates with what Sharae Deckard identifies as a new development paradigm of "catch-up modernization," in which monumental architecture, rapid industrialization, and technological gigantism signify the acquisition of modern power and the repudiation of the rural and preindustrial (p. 40).

[4] The operational plan was formulated and formally endorsed on 12 October 1964 by representatives of the Government of Ceylon, the United Nations Special Fund, and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, which acted as the executing agency. The Mahaweli Development Programme is administered under the authority of the Mahaweli Authority of Sri Lanka, established in 1979 through an Act of Parliament (Mahaweli Authority of Sri Lanka, n.d.-a; n.d.-b).

A study of such political myth and ecological crisis in modern Sri Lanka highlights how post-independence nationalism transformed colonial visions of hydroelectric development into a state-sanctioned mythology of progress, with large dams symbolizing modern power and evoking the ancient irrigation achievements of the Dry Zone. However, these projects exerted unprecedented pressure on the region's fragile ecosystems, radically altering the ecology of the north-central Dry Zone and displacing or resettling up to a million people (Deckard, 2010). This ecological and social disruption, compounded by the authoritarian politics of state ownership and control, has been implicated in fueling ethnic tensions, as marginalised minority communities mobilised against the government in pursuit of a separate Tamil state (Peebles, 1990). In *Heaven's Edge*, these historical and environmental tensions are reflected in the narrative's depiction of both the land and the communities under pressure, with ecological transformation serving as a lens through which the novel explores the moral, social, and political consequences of state-led development. The character of Marc embodies this ethical and ecological awareness: he seems to hear the "phantom voice" of his deceased father (p. 176), which criticises the construction of large river dams and champions the millennia-old, sustainable tank irrigation systems. This spectral presence does more than evoke personal memory; it functions as a moral conscience, reminding Marc – and the reader – of the enduring wisdom embedded in traditional ecological practices. The voice's insistence that "[n]o, they must not flood the valleys, the old tanks will do. No, they must not destroy the forests, the animals must live too" (p. 177) dramatises the ethical and ecological costs of modernization, linking environmental degradation directly to broader questions of justice, responsibility, and intergenerational accountability. Yet, while the ethical and ecological benefits of these traditional systems are clear, in practice they have often been undermined by bureaucratic neglect. Although small village tanks are a cost-effective and sustainable irrigation method, bureaucratic oversight has left their development largely neglected. Lack of regular maintenance – such as removing silt and repairing tank bunds – hampered paddy cultivation and contributed to the degradation of wetland ecosystems (Tennakoon, n.d.). This disconnect between ancestral ecological knowledge and modern administrative priorities exemplifies the real-world consequences of the tensions dramatised in Gunesekera's narrative.

In both novels, the Mahaweli River functions as an absent presence – a spectral reminder of what has been lost. Its disappearance signals not only ecological collapse but also the erosion of memory and identity. Like Khan's Indus, the Mahaweli is both a literal and metaphorical river: it flows through the text as history, desire, and mourning. The river's metaphorical absence in the narrative thus resonates with its physical degradation in contemporary Sri Lanka, where ecological disruption has followed large-scale river diversion. Sivaramanan (2015) finds that diverting river flows for hydroelectric power has led to wetland loss and altered water distribution, eliminating significant riverside biota – approximately half of the high-quality wildlife habitat in the Mahaweli floodplain has been lost due to reduced flows. These changes have also caused soil degradation and nutrient loss, particularly during dam and reservoir construction, alongside large-scale soil extraction. The disruption of natural sediment and water cycles has destabilised geological structures, increasing landslide and flood risks in southern lowlands, while salinity intrusion has been recorded in the lower reaches of the Mahaweli and Maduru Oya rivers. Such environmental disruptions extend beyond habitat alteration to threaten species survival. The destruction of natural habitats can be as catastrophic as poaching[5] in driving species toward extinction. This stark reality raises urgent ethical questions: "Can any dam really be worth wiping out a species from the face of Planet Earth? How can any development ever account for or measure such a loss?" (Dutt, 2014, p. 55). This underscores the ethical and ecological dilemmas inherent in large-scale developmental projects, highlighting the irreversible costs of prioritizing infrastructure over biodiversity. In Gunesekera's fiction, this tension between development and conservation is mirrored in human reflection on ecological responsibility. Probably, that is why Mister Salgado in *Reef* sighs: "The urge to build, to transform nature, to make something out of nothing is universal. But to conserve, to protect, to care for the past is something we have to learn" (p. 178). Salgado's observation underscores a central ethical and ecological dilemma. By foregrounding the waterway as agents of ethical and ecological reflection, the texts challenge anthropocentric models of progress and propose alternative frameworks for understanding human-nature coexistence. This reflection underscores that true progress requires a balance between creation and preservation, suggesting that human advancement is ethically meaningful only when it is accompanied by a conscious commitment to conserving both natural and cultural heritage.

V. Rivers Of Resistance: Reimagining Sustainability And Coexistence

Taken together, the novels of Uzma Aslam Khan and Romesh Gunesekera illuminate the intertwined fates of humans and rivers in South Asia, demonstrating how literature can serve as a critical site for understanding the ecological and social consequences of postcolonial modernization. Both the Indus and the Mahaweli emerge as active participants in the narrative, registering the *slow violence* of development while also

[5] Bahar Dutt (2014) criticises the popular media for focusing stories on poaching mainly, ignoring the loss of habitat.

sustaining forms of resilience and interconnection. In this sense, literary engagement with rivers becomes a mode of resistance – one that critiques the developmentalist imagination and envisions more sustainable, relational futures. Both authors transform rivers into narrative agents, offering readers a relational lens through which to perceive the interdependence of ecological and human life. In doing so, both writers link ecological narratives to the lived realities of power and dispossession. Environmental crises in South Asia – whether the damming of the Indus or the diversion of the Mahaweli – cannot be understood apart from the socio-political dynamics of postcolonial nationhood, class hierarchy, and global capitalism. The novels under discussion reveal how ecological degradation is inseparable from social injustice: the submerging of villages, displacement of indigenous communities, and silencing of local knowledge systems all point to the *environmentalism of the poor* – a resistance grounded in survival rather than aesthetic appreciation of nature.

This analysis demonstrates that literary representation of rivers can articulate resistance to the anthropocentric and technocratic logic of development. The novels reveal how large-scale infrastructural projects – celebrated in national rhetoric as engines of progress – often entail the erosion of ecosystems, the displacement of communities, and the loss of culturally and ecologically embedded knowledge. Khan and Gunesekera expose the limits of state-led modernization and challenge readers to consider the ethical ramifications of environmental transformation. At the same time, these texts do not merely register loss; they imagine alternative modes of coexistence and sustainability. Rivers function as ethical and ecological interlocutors, mediating relationships between humans, nonhuman species, and the broader landscape. Through close attention to natural processes, seasonal cycles, and community practices, the novels envision relational frameworks of engagement in which human survival is inseparable from the health of the environment. This approach foregrounds principles of care, resilience, and interconnection that challenge anthropocentric notions of development and invite readers to reconceive their ethical responsibilities toward both rivers and communities. This vision emphasises that genuine progress necessitates a harmonious integration of innovation and preservation, implying that human advancement attains true sustainability only when grounded in a deliberate commitment to safeguarding both natural and cultural heritage.

VI. Conclusion

At the center of this triadic analysis lies the paradox of postcolonial modernity: the simultaneous aspiration to sovereignty and complicity in ecological exploitation. This complicity is identified by Rob Nixon (2011): “Many politicians – and indeed many voters – routinely treat environmental action as critical yet not urgent. And so generation after generation […] politicians add to the pileup of deferrable actions deferred” (p. 9). Nixon’s observation underscores the temporal politics of neglect, where the deferral of responsibility becomes a hallmark of postcolonial governance. The only hope lies in a positively sensitised public capable of setting itself against incumbent power – international, national, provincial or local ruling parties and institutions – that support and serve Empire (Roy, 2004). Here, Roy’s (2004) insistence on collective awareness and resistance gestures toward an alternative modernity, one grounded in ethical rather than extractive relations with land and community. The rhetoric of development that once promised liberation from colonial dependency instead reproduces imperial logics of extraction and control. Thus, the postcolonial state’s pursuit of modernity becomes indistinguishable from the very imperial enterprises it seeks to transcend.

From a theoretical perspective, the postcolonial ecocritical lens employed here illuminates the structural and historical forces shaping environmental crises. By situating literary texts alongside the historical realities of the Indus and the Mahaweli development schemes, the study underscores the persistence of colonial-era extractive logics in post-independence states. At the same time, it demonstrates the capacity of literature to render visible what conventional policy analyses often obscure: the lived, ecological, and ethical dimensions of development that unfold gradually over space and time. In doing so, these novels operate as both critique and intervention, translating the complexities of environmental degradation into humanly and ethically resonant narratives. By reasserting rivers as ethical and ecological actors, the novels suggest alternative modes of coexistence that challenge anthropocentric models of growth. In doing so, they position literature as a vital site for negotiating postcolonial environmental futures – one in which sustainability, relationality, and social justice are inseparable from cultural and ecological awareness.

Taken together, the literary engagement with rivers in Khan and Gunesekera offers a model for thinking about postcolonial development that is at once critical, ethical, and ecologically informed. They resist both Western environmental romanticism and technocratic developmentalism, proposing instead an ethics rooted in intimacy, care, and interdependence. By highlighting the slow violence of dams, industrial agriculture, and infrastructural expansion, and by imagining relational alternatives, these texts challenge dominant narratives of progress and suggest that sustainability, social justice, and ecological awareness are inseparable. Contemporary South Asian fiction thus emerges not only as a repository of cultural memory but as a crucial interlocutor in debates about development, environmental ethics, and the intertwined futures of human and nonhuman life. Recognizing the agency of rivers – both as ecological entities and narrative forces – opens

pathways for rethinking South Asia's developmental trajectories, offering a vision of modernity that is attentive, relational, and deeply attuned to the ethical imperatives of ecological stewardship.

Ultimately, the ecological imagination emerging from South Asian fiction is one of renewal rather than resignation. Even amid ruin, these narratives recover fragments of hope: the possibility of restoring connection, of listening to rivers, reefs, and forests as repositories of wisdom. They invite readers to perceive the environment not as external terrain but as a living archive of shared histories. In doing so, they participate in a broader global discourse on environmental justice – one that recognises the uneven geographies of vulnerability shaped by colonialism, capitalism, and climate change.

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