

Exploring the Ethical and Aesthetic Representations of Wetlands in Literary Texts: A Comparative Ecocritical Study

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ABSTRACT

Literary texts, often products of social structures, influence the way people live and shape society. They affect the way we view and interact with living beings as well as non-living elements. Texts possess great potential to fashion people's geographical imagination. Wetlands such as swamps, marshes, and mangrove forests, for example, have varied significances in different temporal and spatial spectrums, but critical scholarship around ethics and representation of wetlands is largely unexplored. This paper, therefore, will primarily seek to analyse textual representations of wetlands in John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress (1890), H. D. Thoreau's Walking (1997), Aldo Leopold's Marshland Elegy (2001), Amitav Ghosh's Gun Island (2019), and Sarah Joseph's Gift in Green (2011). By comparing and contrasting these depictions by writers from the Global North and Global South across centuries, we seek to demarcate a clear line of distinction as well as overlaps in the behaviour and feelings of human beings towards the wetlands. The paper emphasises ethical and aesthetic representations of wetlands through the lenses of ecocritical and bioregional theories of Rob Nixon, Simon Estok, and Tom Lynch. Therefore, socio-political analysis and cultural significance conveyed by these depictions may present insights concerning resentment, adoration, aestheticism, commodification, survival, divinity, and fear.

Keywords: ecocriticism; environmentalism; Global South; landscape ethics; wetlands

INTRODUCTION

From Shakespeare's Venice and Thomas Hardy's Wessex to R. K. Narayan's Malgudi, literary spaces are central to scholarly discussions because it is widely believed that social structures influence literary output. Seen in this way, literature serves as a model to fashion society's outlook. Likewise, the representation of spaces in literary works is significant in shaping readers' geographical imagination. In Homer's writings, a large part of the globe becomes a site for human exploration and the quest for glory (Lateiner, 1992), while Shakespeare's Forest of Arden serves as a representative of a romantically beautiful space (Paterson, 2022). Wordsworth's description of Lake District depicts the divine in natural spaces, whereas R. K. Narayan's Malgudi integrates a smooth flow of rustic life (Kumar, 2011; Wordsworth, 2022). By associating feelings and emotions, literary spaces, therefore, become sites for imaginative analysis and discussions. Wetlands, a significant part of our geography, are variedly portrayed in literary works of fiction and non-fiction. While scientific studies have discussed ecological functions, literature is significant in moulding popular perceptions of wetlands and the environment in general. As Jain (2007, p. 3) points out, literary works are "both the products of culture and producers of culture. How do we look at these mirrors that reflect us and at the same time shape us?" (p. 3). Precisely because the dynamic landscape of wetlands has been the subject of literary portrayals across

centuries and continents, this warrants an examination of these representations that shall reflect the multifaceted meanings, values, and cultural significance associated with wetlands. John Bunyan's 'Slough of Despond' in his religious allegory, *Pilgrim's Progress* (1890), H. D. Thoreau's therapeutic swamps in his non-fiction work, *Walking* (1997), Aldo Leopold's Marshland in his *Marshland Elegy* (2001), Amitav Ghosh's 'Sundarbans' in *Gun Island* (2019), and Sarah Joseph's 'Aathi', a village surrounded by wetlands in *Gift in Green* (2011) are scrutinised in this article. Thus, because the texts accommodate different representations of wetlands in terms of geographical locations and time, a comparative analysis might raise a nuanced environmental consciousness of wetlands and ethics through these depictions.

The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands advances a broad definition of wetlands which includes "lakes and rivers, underground aquifers, swamps and marshes, wet grasslands, peatlands, oases, estuaries, deltas and tidal flats, mangroves and other coastal areas, coral reefs, and all human-made sites such as fishponds, rice paddies, reservoirs and salt pans" (Ramsar, 2018, n.p.). Often referred to as the *kidneys of nature*, wetlands possess immense ecological value for their role in curbing floods, filtering out impurities from water, and sustaining a great deal of natural biodiversity. When viewed scientifically, wetlands harbour a vast amount of natural biodiversity. These spaces absorb noxious wastes and settle sediments. However, in the context of cultural representations, wetlands have generally been treated with aversions. William Howarth articulates this bitterness: "For thousands of years, the human attitude towards wetlands was consistently negative: they were read as dangerous, useless, fearful, filthy, diseased, noxious" (Howarth, 1999, p. 513). He lists probable causes for such abhorrence. Firstly, wetlands are seen as wild and unpredictable, for they do not offer clear vision or grand views and, consequently, induce claustrophobia. Secondly, these spaces produce divided values as they are neither land nor water, "a continuum between terra and aqua" (Howarth, 1999, p. 520). Political complexity emerges from the nature of wetlands because, on the one hand, wetlands are neither dry land that can be privately owned; on the other hand, wetlands are not water-bodies that can be considered public resources (Vileisis, 1997). Also, these spaces resist human control as they are not solid enough to allow farming or building civilisation. Hillary Eklund (2020) further argues that the depictions of wetlands have oscillated between an untameable wilderness and a bygone pastoral utopia. Meanwhile, in the Global South, wetlands are a vital part of everyday life for around three million indigenous people (Ramsar Bureau, 2002). Cultural expressions and festivals of reverence associated with wetlands flourish in Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar, just to name a few (Ramsar Bureau, 2002).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The centrality of wetlands can be seen in the Global North. Olga Huckins, a newspaper editor in the 1950s, reported to her friend the horrific sight of dozens of birds being poisoned by the spraying of DDT on a patch of wetland (Vileisis, 1997). Outraged by this account, that friend, Rachel Carson, composed the seminal work *Silent Spring* (2002), which inspired environmental activism and ecocriticism work to this day. Wetlands' ecosystem services, from water supply to flood control and climate change mitigation, embody the agrarian dream of America's founding fathers. For example, in *Letters from an American Farmer* (2009), Crèvecoeur (2009) equates the wetlands with untamed wilderness and celebrates its conversion into romantically beautiful meadows: "to examine how the world gradually settled, how the howling swamp is converted into a pleasing

meadow, the rough ridge into a fine field” (p. 63). Ann Vileisis (1997) chronicles the dwindling wetland, from 221 million acres to 102 million acres in North America, attributing this to anthropogenic pressures (p. 333). Authors Kingsolver and Belt (2002) collaborate to celebrate the patches of wild, untamed America through both words and pictures in *Last Stand: America's Virgin Lands* (2002). The first section of this non-fiction by National Geographic deals with wetlands and critiques the government projects of draining swamplands in service of an agrarian future. Finally, Kiviat (2021) illustrates human ambivalence towards wetlands and exhibits how these landscapes are most often associated with discord, danger, decay, and sex (Kiviat, 2021). Rod Giblett (2016) evaluates the historical, ecological, and symbolic significance of wetlands across cities in Europe and North America, examining how wetlands have been exploited, drained, and marginalised due to urbanisation and industrialisation. Hillary Eklund (2020) examines three historical texts that narrate the dwindling of wetlands, particularly the decline in wetland covers, by analysing the socio-cultural significance of Leopold's *Marshland Elegy*.

Meanwhile, the significance and representations of wetlands and the environment in general differ substantially in the Global South. The rubric of Global North environmentalism arises from full pockets and filled bellies, which can visualise nature as a place of a recluse (Guha & Alier, 1997). They argue that the adoration for a pristine environment implies segregation of humans and non-humans, while the peasants of the South cannot afford the luxury of staying isolated from the environment. Human-nature interactions are not based on aestheticism or relaxation; rather, they are aimed at fulfilling necessities and sustenance. The Ramsar Bureau emphatically posits that wetlands are indispensable to millions of lives in the South (Ramsar Bureau, 2002, n.p.). These spaces have permeated into the cultural conscience in Asian regions, where people celebrate water bodies and wetlands through festivals. The edited volume, *Wetland Science: Perspectives From South Asia*, is an attempt to develop the discipline, ‘wetland science,’ through research on various wetland issues. The book cites case studies on wetlands' biodiversity, climate change impacts, community dependency, and ecosystem services. Luca Raimondi's chapter, “Black Jungle, Beautiful Forest: A Postcolonial, Green Geocriticism of the Indian Sundarbans”, examines the fictional and nonfictional representations of one of the largest wetlands, Sundarbans. The author exposes the neocolonial attitudes of the Global North authors and even characters written by them who have, in general, portrayed the Sundarbans as “the rightful home of monsters and phantasms” (Raimondi, 2016, p. 122).

This literature review points out that only the wetlands in America and a few in Europe and their representations have been studied extensively. There is a void in the literature concerning wetlands elsewhere, especially in the Global South. Most of the depictions exhibit only the inherent sinister and ambivalent qualities of the wetlands. Furthermore, the rubric of human interactions with this landscape has been limited to the exposition of wetlands' exploits. That is, these discussions have merely centred on human-induced hamper upon wetlands, but very little has been examined concerning its consequences on biodiversity, human communities, and the broader Global South.

METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative and builds on a comparative analysis of the following texts: John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, H. D. Thoreau's *Walking*, Aldo Leopold's *Marshland Elegy*, Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green*, and Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*. The existing literature suggests that the general mood towards wetlands in the Global North representations has been either melancholic or utterly aversive. It also indicates a lack of analysis of the wetlands in the Global South. Although Ramsar presents data about the importance of wetlands in millions of tribal lives, there has been negligible discussion on how these lives are influenced. The connotations around wetlands, like utilitarianism, aestheticism, commodification, sublimity, survival, divinity, and violent ferality are neglected or haphazardly discussed. These gaps navigate the research direction. The data is collected by closely reading these texts' portrayal of wetlands. The study aims to unveil nuanced perspectives on wetlands within these literary works by examining the ecological, cultural and socio-political dimensions across centuries and continents. The research employs a qualitative approach and content analysis to interpret the portrayals of wetlands in each work. A comparative framework is used to study the variations and commonalities in the representations that would exhibit the evolving perceptions of the wetlands across various literary traditions.

This research builds on the divergent ethical perceptions and treatments of wetlands in these texts that span centuries and continents, reflecting the societal consciousness around the landscape and environment in general. Renowned 20th-century philosophers Dewey and Tufts (1908, p. 1) define ethics as "the science that deals with conduct, in so far as this is considered as right or wrong, good or bad". They explain that the conception of good and bad evolves over time, and this flux can be pertinent to environmental ethics as well. The juxtaposition of wetland representations shall unveil the shifting and varied ecological perceptions of people from different continents and centuries. The study's theoretical base is informed primarily by postcolonial ecocriticism and bioregionalism. The splitting demarcated by postcolonial criticism on the construction of Self and Other, right or wrong, is implemented on ecocritical ideas to gather findings that demonstrate how the depicted wetland spaces communicate feelings of sublime, survival, detachment, horror, and/or belongingness. Ramachandra Guha's postcolonial ecocriticism presents a systematic gap among the environmental experiences across the globe through his book *Varieties of Environmentalism* and differentiates the contrasting rationales behind adoring nature in Global North and South, which are the pursuit of aestheticism and struggle for sustenance, respectively. Gadgil and Guha (1995, p. 142) elaborate on "ecosystem services" in *Ecology and Equity*. This is crucial in delineating the range of benefits that wetlands confer on humans, such as daily provisions, protection from disasters, and cultural services. Postcolonial ecocritic Rob Nixon's idea of "ecosystem people" talks of people who are dependent upon their surrounding ecological niche for survival and are contrasted with communities from the Global North who can draw from a global repository of resources. His book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* and the mentioned concept are employed to study the representations of human-wetland relationships. Bioregionalism proposed by Lynch et al. (2012, p. 4) argues that "human identity may be constituted by our residence in a larger community of natural beings" instead of political or arbitrary bases of identity like state, nation or ethnicity. This concept, built upon one's proximity to one's own bioregion, is applied to comprehend the interconnectedness of humans and non-humans within specific geophysical contexts. The study presents a systematic examination of the textual representations exploring how authors and communities across time and space have engaged with wetlands as spaces endowed with sin,

therapeutic properties, utilitarian capacity, horror and divine agency. The variations in the environmental experiences in the Global North and South are crucial in facilitating the comparative analysis. The loci of comparison are utilitarianism and commodification against aestheticism, visualising sublimity vs. eking out sustenance, glorifying pristine wilderness against realising the unforgiving front of wetlands and the overall difference in human-wetland relationships in Global North and South. The ecological concerns, cultural ideals and postcolonial dynamics associated with the mentioned wetland portrayals are highlighted in the following discussions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section is divided into two major segments. The first segment discusses the wetland portrayals by the global North authors John Bunyan, Henry David Thoreau, and Aldo Leopold, and the second one deals with the global South writers Amitav Ghosh and Sarah Joseph. The presentations are compared and analysed in these sections, and then the comparisons are synthesised in the third bit.

UTILITARIANISM AND AESTHETICISM OF THE GLOBAL NORTH

SINFUL, FILTHY AND UNUSABLE SLOUGH OF DESPOND

John Bunyan's 1678 religious allegory *Pilgrim's Progress* professes the Puritan doctrines that fed the psyche of many British people. The command in the book of Genesis (Genesis 1:26) that humans are to 'have dominion' over the earth is interpreted as an entitlement endowed by divinity. The Puritan outlook has resorted to objectifying nature and reducing it to a symbol of divine instruction. The purpose of any landscape has been seen to be useful to humanity (Pradhan & Kumar, 2023a, p. 86). As wetlands resist human utility owing to their hybrid state, they are treated with contempt. This attitude is expressed in Bunyan's 'Slough of Despond'. It is a swamp in the text that represents confusion, hopelessness, lethargy, and lack of will. Bunyan instructs his readers to abandon feeble will and sin through the 'slough of Despond'. The character embodying helpfulness, 'Help' defines the 'Slough of Despond' in a manner that highlights the inherent sin, corruption, and badness associated with swamps:

This miry slough is such a place as cannot be mended; it is the descent whither the scum and filth that attends conviction for sin doth continually run, and therefore it is called the Slough of Despond; for still, as the sinner is awakened about his lost condition, there ariseth in his soul many fears and doubts, and discouraging apprehensions, which all of them get together, and settle in this place. And this is the reason for the badness of this ground.

(Bunyan, 1890, p. 32)

The swamp serves as a metaphor for all the sin and filth in the world. Christian and Pliable get stuck in this 'filthy quagmire', and Help has to pull the prior one out. In addition, the swampy landscape is perceived as useless for human beings and, therefore, inherently bad. This exhibits the colonial temperament that posits the wetland as something that requires being 'civilised'. The text points towards the swamp's resistance to human efforts to redeem it as a useful place.

It is not the pleasure of the king that this place should remain so bad. (Isa. xxxv. 3,4) ... it might have been mended, but it is the Slough of Despond still, and so will be when they have done what they can.
(Bunyan, 1890, p. 32)

These extracts explain the aversion towards the swamp. It is beyond the king's dominion and cannot be 'mended' (Bunyan, 1890, p. 32). Edward Said discusses the postcolonial anthropocentric ethic of mastering a space in *Culture and Imperialism*, "Imperialism after all is an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control" (as qtd in DeLoughrey & Handley, 2011, p. 3). It is this imperialist attitude that presents swamplands as an unconquered part of nature and a symbol of impurity to the Puritan mind. The wetlands are unsuitable for cultivation or smooth movement. The anthropocentrism is evident as the ecological value and the role of wetlands in sustaining biodiversity have been altogether ignored. The colonial undertone is exposed that whatever cannot be controlled ought to be treated with contempt.

SELF-DISCOVERY AND TRANSCENDENCE IN THE DEPTHS OF UNTOUCHED SWAMPS

Henry David Thoreau's works deviate from the earlier utilitarian treatment of wetlands. His essay *Walking* (1997) presents the act of walking as a means to transcend the mundane patterns of daily life and mechanical city dwellings. For him, walking into the depths of untouched landscapes, forests, and swamplands rejuvenates one's mind, body, and soul. The ethics suggested by Thoreau can be paralleled with Yi-Fu Tuan's concept of 'topophilia', which he defines as "the affective bond between people and place or setting" (Tuan, 1990, p. 4). In other words, it is the love of a place. Thoreau is greatly moved by the swampland, and he muses about its therapeutic properties and his love for the swamps.

When I would recreate myself, I seek the darkest wood, the thickest and most interminable and, to the citizen, the most dismal swamp. I enter a swamp as a sacred place—a *sanctum sanctorum*. There is the strength, the marrow, of nature. The wildwood covers the virgin mould,—and the same soil is good for men and for trees. A man's health requires as many acres of meadow to his prospect as his farm does loads of muck.
(Thoreau, 1997)

Swamps' spiritual value, for him, represents the antithesis to the monotonous and tiring din and bustle of industrial life. The modern, mechanical city life represents decadence, whereas the untouched swamps are the epitome of beauty. Thoreau's vision of swamps highlights their meditative and transformative properties. He has visualised the swampland as a paragon of pastoral beauty, a recluse from the turmoil of civilisation, which underlines the fixation with aesthetics of the American imagination. Thoreau articulates his feelings, "Hope and future for me are not in lawns and cultivated fields, not in towns and cities but in impervious and quaking swamps" (Thoreau, 1997, n.p.). Although his portrayal of swamps differs from earlier rancorous portrayals, his ethics around the landscape is to celebrate its 'wilderness experience'. He glorifies the inherent aesthetic value in swamps: "...if it were proposed to me to dwell in the neighbourhood of the most beautiful garden that ever human art contrived, or else of a dismal swamp, I should certainly decide for the swamp" (Thoreau, 1997, n.p.). Hannes Bergthaller (2017) critiques the romanticised fascination with pristine nature, which he argues to be a prime feature of American ecological imagination. The critic brings forth the American notion that nature is a:

space where the individual confronts a more authentic dimension of being, is cleansed of the artificial accretions of culture, and achieves a broadened consciousness of his (or her – not all inflexions of this narrative are masculinist) position in the cosmic order.

(Bergthaller, 2017, p. 3)

The wetlands become a mere metaphor or stage to act out individual human roles, a mode to achieve broader consciousness. The swamp is discounted by its ecological and natural agency. It becomes a tool for pondering upon philosophical musings.

CHERISHING THE WILDERNESS IN MARSHLAND ELEGY

Aldo Leopold, a patron of the modern American wilderness system, in his essay “Marshland Elegy” (2001), mourns the human intrusion into the swamplands and consequent disruption in the natural cycles of vegetation, water, and fauna. He adores the pristine and wild wetlands like Thoreau. However, his writings don’t search for transcendental properties in the swamps. For him, “the ultimate value in these marshes is wildness” (Leopold, 2001, p. 164). His essay ascribes great value to wetlands. But the adoration still centres around its ‘wilderness experience’ as pointed out by Bergthaller. Leopold laments the dwindling and draining of marshes and encourages their conservation. Nevertheless, the purpose and motivation behind the conservation of marsh is only to ‘cherish’ its wilderness. He expresses his grief: “But all conservation of wilderness is self-defeating, for to cherish we must see and fondle, and when enough have seen and fondled, there is no wilderness left to cherish” (Leopold, 2001, p. 164). This American ecological ideal focuses on preserving and enjoying the aesthetics of “the wilderness, the virgin lands, and anything untrodden by the human being” (Jana & Padmaja., 2023, p. 65). Leopold aligns his environmental ethic with this ecological tradition and celebrates the untouched glory of the swamps. While it is never a fault to cherish the wilderness, it is far from the ‘ultimate value’ associated with it. The preservation of the pristine wilderness has been the dominant trope in American environmentalism since its genesis (Guha & Alier, 1997; Nixon, 2011). This perception disregards the diverse human experiences with ecology around the globe. The intention of preserving a natural space from corrupt human hands essentialises human-non-human interactions. A major part of the world’s population in the Global South can’t afford to stay isolated from their surrounding environment. These natural spaces play a major role in their daily conduct and sustenance. With limited access to a narrow resource base, they rely upon the immediate surrounding ecosystems for their survival (Nixon, 2011). The imposition of the Northern environmental perception institutes a forcible separation between the entangled humans and non-humans.

STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL, UNTAMED WILDERNESS AND VENERATION TOWARDS NATURE IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

The environmental experience in the Global North is primarily driven by goals of amenities and aesthetics. With the majority of material needs fulfilled, the richer population can afford to romanticise natural places for their pristine glory (Gadgil & Guha, 1995; Guha & Alier, 1997). *Varieties of Environmentalism* by Guha and Alier argues that convenient access to greater quantities and qualities of resources helped the North to conquer, tame and ‘civilise’ the wilderness. Such subdued nature has become a place of relaxation and leisure for the workaday world. Both Bunyan and Thoreau point towards the fact that wetlands remain untamed and unconquered by

human beings. The former considers this to be a matter of lamentation, while the latter celebrates its unadulterated wilderness.

Both the ideas around untouched nature are concerned with the environmental experience of the North. These ideals are irrelevant in the context of the economically and socially unstable Global South. Ramachandra Guha questions the American obsession with the preservation of unspoiled wilderness for the sake of its aesthetic value. The wealthier population in the North is opportune enough to “simultaneously enjoy the material benefits of an expanding economy and the aesthetic benefits of an unspoiled nature” (Guha, 1989, p. 79). Such models of interaction with the environment neglect the environmental issues within the Global South and prove to be inequitable, where nature and human lives are intricately intertwined. Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee (2010, p. 5) argues that the environment in the Global South is an integrated network of human and non-human agents and, therefore, the intertwining of ‘postcolonial’ and ‘environment’ is unavoidable. Geography and human lives are knit closely and are mutually dependent on inclusive development. Accordingly, the ethics around the adoration and usage patterns of landscapes are widely different in the South.

SUSTENANCE VS COMMODIFICATION IN *GIFT IN GREEN*

In Sarah Joseph’s novel *Gift in Green* (2011), the village Aathi, a place dotted with water bodies, marshland, and slush, is the primary setting. The novel talks of the decline in the cover and value of the wetlands and reflects the environmental justice movements that have taken place in the southern Indian state of Kerala. The original inhabitants of this village made a covenant of mutual respect and care with the surrounding environment. The people of Aathi largely depend on the water bodies and swamps to make a living. Their needs and actions are driven by the quest for survival. They represent the ‘ecosystem people’, conceptualised by Gadgil and Guha (1995). This dependence makes the people of Aathi study and adapt knowledge of subsistent farming effective in salt waters and swampy conditions. The salt waters and marshes prove to be an obstacle in cultivation. This leads to the rise of a unique bioregional culture that stems from the recognition of “natural limits and potentials of the region” (Thayer Jr., 2003, p. 3). They learn to grow a special breed of ‘Pokkali paddy’, which can be cultivated in such swampy conditions. The author hints at the rise of an adaptive environmental ethic owing to the natural limitations of the bioregion. This ethic stems from the cultural conditioning set up on the fabled covenant between people and the region they inhabit. Rice farming, fish cultivation and catching crabs and mussels from the marshland are their primary livelihoods. Although this portrayal parallels the utilitarian outlook advanced by Bunyan, it varies from the allegorical narrative, which views wetlands as inherently evil, for they don't offer any service or profit to human beings. The villagers don't entertain a greedy mindset. They catch and consume not more than necessary: "Why gather more, as though there was no tomorrow?" (Joseph, 2011, p. 47). The fishermen release baby fish and prawns that ensure future regeneration. The prosperous coexistence of the people and the wetland is highlighted by such indigenous practices that help preserve the swamps and water bodies. The indigenous environmental ethic of the community in Aathi is built upon the close ties with the wetlands in the vicinity. Like Thoreau and Leopold, they too adore the landscape but not only for the 'wilderness experience' set up on glorifying pristine nature. The villagers love and respect the swamps, for they sustain their lives.

The flourishing coexistence of wetlands and human beings lasts until Kumaran, a character well versed in the urban-industrial modes of development, returns to Aathi with plans of material profits and growth. He rejects the traditional and adaptive practices and landfill the swamps to make them cultivable or useful for construction works. The mangrove forest 'green bangle', which secured Aathi from floods and provided food and livelihood, is burned down. The water beds are converted into dump yards for toxic pollutants. The village is choked with toxicity. The asphyxiation is expressed, "There began a procession of the dead, the decomposing, the fly-catchers and the disease-breeding, arriving one after another" and "Days and nights were smothered in stink" (Joseph, 2011, p. 207). Kumaran's extractive plans of neoliberal development seize the agency of non-humans and uphold the notion of human superiority. In "Green Postcolonialism", Tiffin and Huggan (2007) posit that the human sphere has excluded itself from the sphere of nature. The departure of ethical responsibility and care is one of the consequences that allows for non-humans to be treated instrumentally. The author highlights the grave repercussions of violating the natural balance and attempts to foster an environmental ethic based on respect, careful use, and conservation, especially in the Global South, where most of the lives are already tough thanks to a dearth of resources. The local men are forced to leave their traditional lives and homes. The delicate balance between nature and human culture is disturbed, the sacred bond is broken, and everyone suffers- be it the people of Aathi or the swamps, mangroves, and rivers. Thoreau and Leopold's narratives long to preserve the wetlands to enjoy their pristine glory. But these landscapes have much different and urgent relevance in the Global South. The dwindling of wetlands is undesirable anywhere, but the implications are much graver in such regions of the Global South.

THE DIVINE PRESENCE IN SWAMPS

Nonetheless, natural elements are not to be valued merely according to their utilitarian capacity. For ages, Indian culture has professed to treat nature in all forms with veneration. The veneration comes from associating divinity with various natural elements. The reverence towards the non-humans makes the local inhabitants "incorporate natural entities into their sense of a moral community" (Lynch et al., 2012, p. 12). In her interview with Valsan Thampu, the translator of the novel, Sarah Joseph, states, "In the scheme of things in Aathi, human life is only as important as the life of the fish, the butterflies, the waterfowl, the mangroves, the water-beds, the sludge, and so on" (Joseph, 2011, n.p.). In the discussed novel, the people of Aathi had made a sacred bond with the island they lived on. Their methods of livelihood never caused any serious harm to the surrounding ecosystems. "As the non-human community benefits the humans in various ways, the villagers reciprocate through restrained use, protection, and veneration" (Pradhan & Kumar, 2023a, p. 89). The magician of the village elucidates the divine presence in the swamps through a mythic story. He lures the village's children with a cartload of sweets but dumps them into a swamp. As those sweets submerge, the kids agree that they would prefer a dry surface. The magician then speaks of the water goddess of rice and fish dwelling in the wet marsh. According to the folk legend, if the wetland dries, the goddess would leave, bringing about her wrath upon the villagers. Trees and animals would perish, and the swamp would exhale toxic gases, forcing the people to suffer and leave. As the magician puts it, "Marshes are meant to be wet and slushy, not dry and compact. There is a reason for this" (Joseph, 2011, p. 102). The association of marshland with divinity compels the local inhabitants to conserve the sanctity of the local ecosystems. The conservation ethic rooted in the village is fashioned upon the veneration towards

the natural environment. The departure of these beliefs and practices results in a complete disruption in the human-nature balance. The once beautiful wetland area is choked and filled with toxicity, ultimately leading to the waning lives and dwindling landscapes of the region.

Similarly, *Gun Island* too asserts the association of the divine with natural forms. This entails the reverence of local people towards every living and non-living being in the Sundarbans. The shrine located deep inside the thick mangroves and web of rivers is dedicated to 'Manasa devi', translated as the goddess of snakes. In contrast to the usual association of snakes with devilish danger, this goddess is believed to be the protector of the local people from the risks of wild animals and natural calamities, both frequently encountered in the region. The legend associated with Manasa devi is crucial to the entanglement of humans and nature inside the Sundarbans. Mythical narratives often serve as models of coexistence that reflect and maintain sustainable relationships between humans and natural environments (Pradhan & Kumar, 2023b). The legend clarifies that "snakes were not so much as her (Manasa devi's) subjects as her constituents" (Ghosh, 2019, p. 152). The myth situates natural entities at par with the divinity. Such an expression of natural life compels the inhabitants of the region to regard every creature and entity with reverence.

Both *Gift in Green* and *Gun Island* assert a Godly presence in the wetlands. However, the latter differs in its portrayal of the swamps. In the earlier novel, swamps stand as a stage to act out the human struggles against unabated urbanisation. But in *Gun Island*, the Sundarbans are not merely a façade for characters to act out their roles. The swamps have a marking presence with agency and being. Ghosh not only hints towards the intrinsic worth and cultural significance of these swamps but also vocalises their material value and ecosystem services for the local inhabitants. Sundarbans absorb the impact of frequent cyclones and floods. Rafi, Horen and several characters represent the 'ecosystem people' discussed earlier who tend to manage with a narrow ecological resource base. The frequent natural calamities and complex ecosystem of the Sundarbans have germinated unique bioregional cultures. The inhabitants have learnt to farm with little access to fresh water and modern equipment. Like Thoreau and Leopold, Ghosh too condemns the violation of wetlands' purity. While Leopold laments the loss of wetlands to agricultural expansion, Ghosh highlights the disruptions through anthropogenic intervention of draining toxic waste. However, he underlines the consequent marginalisation of both the environment and the human beings entangled with it. The landscape and humans are forced to further oppression. As the wetlands serve not just as places of a pristine recluse but as repositories of livelihoods and cultures in the Global South, their degradation has severe implications.

UNTAMED WILDERNESS IN *GUN ISLAND*

Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island* paints a scientifically accurate picture of the swamps and mangroves of the Sundarbans. The significance of wetlands in themselves and their indispensability in the lives of the region's inhabitants find beautiful portrayals. Ecology is at the forefront of the narrative, and Ghosh ascribes agency to the non-human entities and landscapes in the novel.

In the narration of Thoreau's *Walking*, readers view a pure and pristine picture of wetlands with therapeutic properties. That piece of landscape lies far from the corrupt human touch. This picture can be argued to be highly romanticised when compared to the real wilderness and complexities offered by the swamps inside the Sundarbans. In his essay 'Wordsworth in the Tropics' (2022), Aldous Huxley points towards the adoration for serene nature in Wordsworth's

poems. This essay articulates that a temperate and tamed nature excited the childlike love in Wordsworth. Huxley argues:

A voyage through the tropics would have cured him of his too easy and comfortable pantheism. A few months in the jungle would have convinced him that the diversity and utter strangeness of nature are at least as real and significant as its intellectually discovered unity.

(Huxley, 1964, p. 10)

Huxley also mentions that natural forms are not only lovable but also capable of inducing fear, hatred, and struggle. Ghosh's novel reflects this untamed and unforgiving side of nature. The dense mangrove forests, flooding rivers, ever-changing riverways, and wild animals compel readers to question the North's blind adoration of nature. Dinanath, or Deen, as he likes to be addressed, is the narrator of the novel, and he is a true product of Northern elitism. Most of his life is spent in economically and socially sound nations. He can be viewed as a manifestation of Huxley's Wordsworth, ignorant of the grim and cruel side of nature. 'The ecophobic condition', Estok (2018, p. 1) notes, "exists on a spectrum and can embody fear, contempt, indifference or lack of mindfulness". The bleak and complex nature of wetlands is presented in its first interaction with Deen. His shock is evident, and the expression is far from beautiful, romantic, or therapeutic, "...the riverbank ahead of us snaked away into the distance like a towering wall of mud, topped by an impenetrable tangle of leathery leaves and spidery roots" (Ghosh, 2019, p. 65). His description is rather fearful. The inhabitants of the region are at the mercy of the natural forces. The terrifying descriptions of the floods and their aftermaths clarify that "weather conditions are beyond human control" (Amzah et al., 2023, p. 298). Characters like Rafi, Tipu, and Horen constantly struggle to make a living in harsh conditions. The struggles of the local population to build a life are expressed:

Sometimes, said Moyna, it seemed as though both land and water were turning against who lived in the Sundarbans. When people tried to dig wells, an arsenic-laced brew gushed out of the soil; when they tried to shore up embankments the tides rose higher and pulled them down again. Even fishermen could barely get by; ...

(Ghosh, 2019, p. 49)

The Sundarbans are depicted as the "frontier where commerce and wilderness look each other directly in the eye" (Ghosh, 2019, p. 8). Ghosh seeks to develop an ethical position that situates nature in its truest form, free from the romanticised glorification of a benign nature. A wetland, in essence, is neither land nor water. It is a liminal space that rejects concrete categorisation. The border separating India and Bangladesh passes through the Sundarbans. The geo-political boundary becomes arbitrary because of the region's inaccessibility. Such a place is very difficult to guard, and consequently, the impenetrable swamps become breeding grounds for illegal activities. Tipu explains that it is nearly impossible to seal the border that runs through the region, and he executes his illegal deed of transporting people without necessary documents. Thus, the wetland finds a true-to-life depiction in the novel with all of its wild, chaotic, and complex intricacies.

WETLANDS IN LITERATURE ACROSS TIME AND SPACE

A study of wetlands' literary representations across centuries and continents provides a thorough comprehension of the changing cultural perception and environmental imagination that shape the human-environment relationship. There are several discernible motifs, thematic overlaps, and contrasts that underline the multifaceted significance of wetlands in the literature of the Global North and South. John Bunyan's Puritan allegory presents the marsh 'Slough of Despond' as a symbol of moral and spiritual decadence, whereas Thoreau's wetland portrays a romantic wilderness that transcends oneself to a higher conscience. While Bunyan highlights the inherent sin within the swamp that resists human utility, Leopold mourns the loss of untouched marshlands to human intervention in the form of agrarianism. Thoreau invites his readers to bask in the pristine glory of wetlands, whereas Leopold laments the growing human activities. The thematic continuity in these textual representations of wetlands from the Global North is the apparent anthropocentrism where "human well-being is recognised as the ultimate objective" (Amzah et al., 2023, p. 305). The resentment for the marsh in *Pilgrim's Progress* stems from its rejection of human control. Thoreau loves the swamp as it provides a therapeutic recluse from the city's bustle, and Leopold adores the wetland for its wilderness experience in human lives. The ethical and ecological imagination of marshlands centres around their utility in human lives. Although Thoreau's and Leopold's narrations encourage the conservation of the environment, they do so by appealing to the untouched aesthetic worth of the landscape. Amitav Ghosh and Sarah Joseph exhibit the human-environment entanglement in the Global South and discard this romanticised longing for a landscape without human presence. They present postcolonial environmental ethics where humans and non-humans are knit in a web of interdependencies. Human beings in the Global South adore and care for the wetlands not because of their aesthetic value but because their existence depends upon it. They survive through ecosystem services like gaining food and livelihood, climate regulation, and protection from floods. The dearth of resources and lack of technological expertise has built an ethic of careful utilisation and bioregional adaptations. Swamps are also crucial in the Global South for their cultural significance. The vitality of wetlands in the sustenance and association of numinous value compels the populace to cherish and conserve the landscape. Ghosh's depiction of the Sundarbans departs from the rest of the portrayals of a calm and benign natural environment. He dismantles the static and soothing presentations of wetlands and demonstrates the Sundarbans as a space of constant flux, fierce storms, floods, and wild animals. However, such a depiction of a fear-inducing wetland accords respect to the sanctity of the environment, and it varies from that of *Pilgrim's Progress*, which incites resentment and antagonism.

CONCLUSION

Wetlands and their representations offer varied meanings and significance in the writings of people from various backgrounds, cultures, and time periods. The current analysis juxtaposes literary representations of wetlands across centuries and continents to compare and contrast divergent and recurring themes. The questions behind the research are centred around components of ethics associated with wetlands and how they have evolved through generations across the globe. In most of the American environmental imagination, swamps are the rearmost remaining landscapes untouched by corrupt human hands. To the Northern fancy, they need to be protected from human

intrusion and cherished for their aesthetic worth. Swamps become a symbol of confusion, hopelessness, and sin in the Puritan narration of John Bunyan. Thoreau portrays the therapeutic transcendence offered by a pristine landscape. The swamps represent the untouched glory of the wilderness in Leopold's *Marshland Elegy*. Although the depictions by the Global North authors are different, they are inherently anthropocentric, for they primarily focus on wetlands' pertinence in human lives and psyche. Nonetheless, Leopold speaks at length about the need to preserve the unsullied condition of the wilderness but falters when he argues that the celebration of the untouched nature is essentially for human entertainment. However, the presentations of wetlands in the North tend to isolate natural landscapes from the human touch. The indispensability of nature in human culture is more prominent in the South, as expressed in the works of Sarah Joseph and Amitav Ghosh. Also, the association of numinous values to natural spaces is an exclusive feature that often helps in protecting the environment. A good wetland ethic can thus teach everyone about our entanglements with our environments. The analysed texts show that the adoration towards the swamps can be a common thread through the majority of these works, although the motivation behind the adoration may be widely divergent. The differing attitudes present new insights in the form of evolving perceptions of the environment over centuries and how human beings have interacted with it in different regions. This comparative scrutiny shall add to the scholarship of understanding the important yet ignored landscape. This study shall be instrumental in fostering attitudes and ethics for better human-nature relationships in the future. No matter the case, the celebration of pristine wilderness experience, the quest for self-discovery, or even the reverence and honouring the prosperous coexistence of swamps and human beings, it is beyond discussions that we might better develop an ethic of care and love towards the natural environment. Tiffin and Huggan (2007) call for postcolonial environmental ethics, where humans must break out of the imperial and anthropocentric subjugation of natural spaces. This approach to ethics informed by respect, conservation, and careful use is needed for the complex and fragile ecosystem of wetlands. As nature's wrath has confronted every human being through climatic upheavals and depletions, one might better identify and acknowledge the disparate environmental experiences of the Global North and South, embodying respect to the non-human world.

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