

A Study of Eroding Ecologies: Lake, Life and Ethics in *Softly Dies a Lake* by Akkineni Kutumbarao and trans. by Vasanth Kannabiran

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Abstract--- *The novel Softly Dies a Lake, originally published in Telugu and translated into English by Vasanth Kannabiran, is an eco-memoir-novel that examines the devastation of Kolleru Lake in Andhra Pradesh, India, on several levels, especially with regard to its effects on human and non-human species. This article identifies the ethical consequences of the relationships between the multispecies through the novel chosen for the study, focusing specifically on the ways in which anthropocentric exploitation has rendered multispecies entanglements as unrecognisable. In addition, this article connects the work to current issues about the nature of environmental ethics, human exceptionalism, and indigenous ecological knowledge. By applying eco-criticism, post-humanism, and multi-species justice theories as frameworks for analysis, the narrative advocates for an ethical outlook that acknowledges the interdependence of all creatures, challenging the dominant anthropocentric worldview.*

Keywords--- *Human-Nonhuman Relationship, Multispecies Ethics, Eco-Criticism, Kolleru Lake, Environmental Degradation*

I. INTRODUCTION

The growing issues of climate change, biodiversity loss, and freshwater depletion have raised some moral concerns regarding the way humans relate to non-human life and ecosystems [2]. Works of literature are particularly apt for this process of examination since they detail the emotional, cultural, and physical dimensions of ecological relations. In Akkineni Kutumbarao's eco-memoir novel, *Softly Dies a Lake*, the Kolleru Lake is one of Asia's largest freshwater lakes. It is portrayed as in a state of slow dying, and through this death, it depicts the very strong ties between human residents and their non-human environment [6]. Thus, the novel serves as both a descriptive account of an environmental catastrophe and a challenge for readers to reflect on the nature of ethics. In Indian Eco-Critical Literature, Kutumbarao's novel, *Softly Dies a Lake*, provides an essential literary avenue for expanding discourses of environmental justice rather than dualistic models of nature and culture [4]. This paper argues that the novel not only recounts the impact of ecological loss but also represents

an ethical challenge to anthropocentric notions and proposes awareness of relational ethics within the larger context of the ecosystem.

Narrative devices weaponised through the Ecocritical view are used to highlight the ethical implications of environmental degradation and the power of inequities, as opposed to serving as a physical background for the stories being told. *Softly Dies a Lake*, as an example of Ecocritical elegy, focuses on the capitalist exploitation of Lake Kolleru and how this has led to the disconnection between the local population and their environment [8]. Ecological studies have suggested that this narrative addresses both the environmental degradation of the Kolleru region and the loss of the interdependence that had previously sustained it as a healthy ecosystem.

Eco-critical and post-humanist theories view water bodies as an important aspect in the landscape of relations or connections. Scholars. The study emphasised how water can erode the established differences between humans and nature and also promote the continuous interaction of species through hydrological networks [5]. In addition, freshwater ecosystems, such as Kolleru, can be understood as knots of connection where the lives of all forms exist together in both emotional and material forms. In this novel, the narrator reflects upon Kolleru as a living entity, similar to a 'Mother' that sustained multi-species populations and continues to do so. The fragmentation of Kolleru represents not only the loss of a resource but also the collapse of the relational field that supports all life.

In Post-Humanist Theory, the certainty of human sovereignty is challenged. Some critical thinkers, advocate for an ethics that recognises non-human agency, which calls for human and animal life to be co-constituted [1][3]. Post-humanist ethical thought extends ethical obligations beyond humans to all beings that occupy our habitat. In this understanding of ethics, ecosystems are no longer merely viewed as resources but as relational networks among humans and other agents, where humans are active participants. Morality is no longer defined or contained within humanity, but instead incorporates animals, plants, waterways, and all other microbiotic populations as moral agents deserving of

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consideration. Theorists of ecological justice, also support hope-based ethics that include the rights of ecosystems [7]. Multi-species ethics also considers the vulnerability that all species share in their interdependent nature, while recognising the value of species and ecological processes that have not been considered in Western ethical systems. It also encourages readers to consider nonhuman agents as active subjects rather than passive objects. In literature, this shift is present in texts that illustrate the interrelatedness of species, leading to ethical outcomes that involve all living species on equal balance.

The Lake as a Living Entity and Nonhuman Agent

Kolleru Lake is not simply a resource to be exploited, it is an active, dynamic and living agent. Throughout the novel, Kutumbarao has given the lake a breath of life, a sense of power and vulnerability through his consistent use of poetic language, recalling memories and revealing the lake through the senses. The rise of a relational ontology, where human and nonhuman are co-constituted from the denial of the centrally placed human in the world. The lake has been recognised as a co-species of humans and is shaped by human interaction. Kolleru Lake satisfies the fishermen's needs, provides a habitat for migratory birds, and also helps to regulate the climate of the human settlements. The life-giving feature of Kolleru Lake thus reverts to an ethical framework which recognises the value of the non-human beings. The gradual death of the lake is not only environmental degradation but also moral failure, a sin of human greed, the laziness of government and militant capitalism without the consent of the people. At the beginning of the novel, the lake is like a living and giving character. Besides the insects, it also feeds fish, birds, and water plants. It regulates the weather and seasons. It satisfies the needs of grazing animals, fishing, and the fishing communities. Water levels, fish migration, and bird seasons are a few of the rhythms of the lake that determine human lifestyles. It is not the lake that serves humans; they are the ones who adapt to the lake. Such anthropomorphism of the lake does not romanticise nature but, on the contrary, resists the mainstream development rhetoric that reduces all ecosystems to mere commercial units. A canon of environmental literature advocates for ethical accountability and environmental issues through the use of nonhuman phenomena as moral characters in this novel.

The Lake as a Multi-Species Habitat

Kolleru focuses more on portraying a human home rather than a human possession. It also sets the scene for how fish brood and depart depending on the quality of the water. Animals that migrate, especially birds, use the surroundings to figure out the timing of their arrival and departure. And the lake portrays the image of buffalo, snails, plants, and microbes thriving together in a subtle balance. It facilitates communication between different species, thus making it possible for those species to interact with each other, which otherwise would have been impossible. The lines described as:

The water was full of fish, crabs, snails, snakes, leeches...not just one but as far as one could see a range of different forms of water life. On the water a wealth of green grasses waving in the breeze. Feeding on these grasses the cattle, birds and insects. All living things depending completely on nature and mingling with nature in complete harmony,

Kolleru seemed to reveal a great and miraculous truth (Kutumbarao 101) [4].

When the lake dies, it's not just one species but an overall multi-species ecosystem that collapses. One of the most striking parts of this novel is how the lake creates emotion, joy and surprise in childhood, comfort and belonging, then anguish, remorse, and mourning. The lake acts an emotional agent that moulds human inferiority. In multi-species studies, the ecological relationship refers to the strong emotional connection between all living beings. And the human activities of pollution, aquaculture, and chemical waste increase as the lake begins to deteriorate. The novel represents this as deceptive brutality, of the gradual poisoning of water, declining biodiversity, the extinction of birds and fish, and the silence of environmental sounds.

As far as the eyes could see, Kolleru was full of greenery, grasses, bulrushes, fragrant flowering shrubs and a wealth of other wild green weeds and colourful flowers swaying in the breeze. Shrubs like the swallow-wort and Jammu grew in dense thickets filled with birds chirping (Kutumbarao 5).

This reaction of the lake towards human exploitation involves diseases, seclusion, and collapse. This is a material reaction to human pains and reflects the material agency of the lake. The death of the lake is not metaphorical; rather, it is more biological and moral in nature. Kolleru Lake is an embodiment of powerful non-human agency in the novel *Softly Dies a Lake*. The author directs the narrative of the novel with the life of the phase of life, suffering and the gradual death of the lake. By reflecting the multi-species worldview in which the human lives are inextricably tied to the non-human life.

The characters in the novel *Softly Dies a Lake* are never depicted as solitary people; instead, they are embedded in dense networks of ecological relationships. Fishermen, farmers, herders, and villagers rely on the lake's rhythms for their livelihoods, cultural customs, and collective memories. The author begins the novel as "Where had the rows of ducks floating like streams of flowers gone? Where had the sounds of birds rising like scattered blooms gone?" (Kutumbarao 1). It focuses on how traditional knowledge structures have addressed the long-term co-existence between the people and the lake. This view of relationships aligns with multi-species ethics that inspire coexistence instead of the division between them. These divisions are not caused by humans harming others, but by other influences outside themselves as new settlers arrive.

The author does not idolise human communities as ecological gods. Rather, this novel reveals moral ambiguities and some locals are driven by economic compulsion to exploitive practices. This uncertainty foregrounds an important dimension of environmental ethics and ecological damage is often systemically produced rather than a consequence of individual moral failure. This interdependence underlines the ecological relationships in which species are not autonomous, but it's a co-participant in a living world. *Softly Dies a Lake* portrays life around Kolleru Lake as a web of interdependence in which human survival, culture, memory, and identity are inextricably interlinked with nonhuman actors such as water,

fish, birds, plants, animals, and even microorganisms. The novel interrogates the human-nature binary by depicting life as relational rather than hierarchical. Within the narrative, the human lives are centred upon the lake. The water levels and seasons dominate their lives as they engage in fishing, taking baths, grazing, cooking, and playing. Furthermore, monsoon seasons, fish mating, and bird migrations define their time, which depends on their ecological time. Additionally, the lake influences their work, leisure, and relaxation. They include all these events as instances of ontological interdependence, which clearly affirms the idea that, to be human, one has to survive with the help of this lake. As such, the narrative keenly presents an account of humans and their symbiotic relation with the lake, which emphasises the villagers sustaining their lives and economy. The buffaloes, for example, feed on the lake's vegetation, which in turn fertilises the soil. Vegetations and snails support food chains. This symbiotic relation between nature and humans echoes care and consideration for one another. However, their relation becomes crooked by modern aquaculture, thereby turning interdependence into dependence.

Birds, fish, buffalo, and aquatic species are some of the important players in *Softly Dies a Lake*. As modernisation occurs, even the Migratory birds that were abundant in number hardly visit this place now, as wetlands shrink and pollution mounts. The dwindling fish adversely affects the humans' livelihood as well as the ecological balance. Buffaloes that ran freely around the lake are losing their home and their access to the lake. It is not the case that these nonhuman species are mere background components of this narrative; they are victims of an environmental injustice. Their displacement underscores a multispecies ethical frame that pays attention to the sufferings of species. Hence, the development model has adopted, it transfers animal existence to expendable entities and questions the moral validity of anthropocentric progress myths. In the novel, Kolleru Lake is presented as a common multispecies. Fish, birds, insects, plants, animals, and bacteria, along with human beings, all lived together, and they are all interconnected. When a single species goes extinct, the whole system is disrupted. There is a description of a zone, a location where the lives of animals overlap and affect each other. This is precisely what multi-species theories have proposed: that all species are presented as different forms of life. There are constant reminders of relationships with the bodies of individuals. This theory presents the evidence of the fluidity of human bodies and how they are related to the environment as permeable and ecological. *Softly Dies a Lake* is a novel that addresses the influence of the state's actions and commercial enterprises on the acceleration of ecological disaster. Illegal fish tanks, on one hand, and, on the other hand, the political patronage and administrative corruption lead a lake to force of exploitation rather than nurturing.

II. DISCUSSION

The novel challenges readers to rethink human exceptionalism. The reader can see an ethical concern of responsibility for all beings and for our earth through the narrator's suffering. This study promotes an ethical consideration of interconnected lives of different species in water, earth, and culture are interconnected with each other. It

is an ethical consideration in modern multi-species studies and ecocritical studies, in which literary texts promote an ethical concern of rethinking human engagement with non-humans. The novel presents an ethical account of counter-anthropocentrism, characterised by ethics of coexistence, interdependence, care, and responsibility between two or more species. This paper describes the ethical implications of neglecting multi-species ethics with regard to the predictable death of Kolleru Lake. By taking a position on animal rights law or environmental laws, this novel suggests concern, mutualities, dependency, cooperation, and reciprocity, which are consonant with indigenous and subaltern environmental ideologies emphasising cooperation over domination. This is an ethical mourning, as understood in the context of multi-species studies, where such grief is an act of ethical recognition. Hence, this lake dies silently, not with a loud outcry. And silence often involves greater ethics. So, the novel thus establishes a place for ethics in literature.

III. CONCLUSION

Softly Dies a Lake represents an important literary intervention into the debate about ethical relations with human and non-human entities. As an anthropocentric examination, these novel critiques anthropocentric ideologies and underscores the ethical value of exploitive and exploitable environmental degradation. Focusing on ecological degradation and multi-species ethics, this study re-establishes an understanding of ecological coexistence. Finally, the text shows the potential of writing as an ethical medium, not only representing the ethical challenges posed by the environment but also shaping the ethical imagination. Thus, at a time when the rate of environmental destruction is fast approaching disastrous levels, such tales provide crucial guidance for promoting awareness across species in favour of a much more equitable future. The story serves as a literary declaration regarding the shared destiny of all species, given that the well-being of water, species, and humans is intimately linked and inseparable. The basic ethics in a multi-species context concerning caring, mutuality, vulnerability, and responsibility are explicitly presented in the novel. The destruction of Kolleru Lake is portrayed as a moral warning where the human failure to act with responsibility in a multi-species context leads to the destruction of non-human life, and therefore the human moral existence's ethics. This study found that this novel is a significant contribution to blue humanities and ecocritical discourse, demonstrating that the loss of water bodies is not just a physical disappearance but a collapse of the entire lifeworld. Hence, the lake functions as a living entity and cultural archive. The narrative reveals deep emotional bonds between people and water. The study concludes that the gradual erosion of the lake in the novel is not merely an environmental issue but a multi-layered crisis that intertwines ecology, culture and human emotions.

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