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Slow Violence And The Disguise Of Revival: Ecological, Cultural And Political Erosion In Johal's Saraswati

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Abstract

The degradation of environment that we face in the contemporary world is not a sudden disaster, but a slow destruction that is accumulated over time. This paper examines the environmental crisis in Saraswati (2025) by Gurnaik Johal using the theory of slow violence as formulated by Rob Nixon, who defines environmental destruction as a form of delayed and invisible violence that disproportionately affects minority groups and ecologies The novel reinvented the sacred river Saraswati as a symbol of ecological degradation as well as the cultural displacement to reveal the fact that the rhetoric of modernity and revival hides other moral and ecological degradation. This paper uses the framework of slow violence by Nixon in a postcolonial ecocritical perspective to examine how the novel develops environmental degradation as a slow cycle of depletion, and how it links spiritual and cultural erosion. The research approach is a close textual analysis of the major episodes and symbols in the novel including dry wells, engineered rivers, drowned shrines through the environmental theory of Nixon and the concept of sacred ecology developed by Fikret Berkes. The study adds to postcolonial environmental criticism as it shows that the ecological crisis turns into an erosion of faith, memory, and moral loss in the novel, which proves that modern restoration may be a set of reproducing the same violence that it claims to heal.

Keywords: Saraswati, Slow Violence, Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Sacred Ecology, Environmental Degradation, Cultural And Moral Erosion, Rhetoric Of Revival

INTRODUCTION

Environmental degradation is no longer a far-fetched issue but a current crisis that is slow and unevenly distributed all over the world. In contrast to wars or natural calamities, ecological damage can sometimes be performed in an unspectacular way, step by step, invisible, and normalized in normalcy. According to Rob Nixon, such a phenomenon is known as slow violence: a violence of delayed destruction, which is distributed across time and space. According to him, such violence is disproportionate to marginalized communities, as well as ecosystems: it is invisible in the mainstream political and media discourse

Contemporary fiction and more specifically postcolonial literature has become a major source to unveil this invisibility and to narrate the emotional, cultural and temporal dimension of environmental loss. Amitav Ghosh (2016) maintains that our creative and narrative structures cannot understand the gradual process of climate change. The Saraswati (2015) by Gurnaik Johal is an enticing re-enactment of this gradual, attritional destruction. The novel is set in India and then expanded to other world locations of ecological ruin to reinvent the sacred river Saraswati, who used to symbolize a divine flow and knowledge into a metaphor of depletion, myth-making, and moral burnout. The story of drying aquifers, industrial agriculture, and the state as a means of revival of the river as published in novel provides an example of how modernity reformulates ecological destruction as national pride and renewal. Saraswati (2025) dramatizes the consequences of human intervention in nature that is causing not only physical degradation but spiritual and cultural displacement as well

through the convergence of the sacred and the technological in the novel.

This study applies the theory of slow violence created by Rob Nixon as the main analytical tool to interpret the ways in which the novel by Johal depicts the process of environmental destruction as a long-term, almost unnoticed disaster. It also discusses how the story further projects the ecological notion of Nixon into the symbolic and ideological space disclosing the cultural and political aspects of slow violence. Though previous ecocritical work has concentrated on ecological calamities that are observable, or colonial resource exploitation, in Saraswati, the loss is long-term as to be seldom noticed such as cultural erosion, loss of faith as well as rivers are turned into tools of state mythology. This therefore makes the novel an essential piece of literature to be analyzed against the most widespread reality of the Anthropocene, that destruction frequently presents itself as restoration.

Research Objectives

The objectives of the study are:

To analyze how Saraswati is a symbolic representation of environmental degradation as a latent, slow violence.

To examine how the novel exposes the cultural, spiritual and political aspects of slow violence by demonstrating how the rhetoric of modernity of revival masks more intrinsic moral and ecological decay.

Research Questions

How the environmental degradation is exposed in Saraswati as a slow, invisible violence in the Anthropocene?

What does the novel tell us about the cultural, spiritual, and political aspects of slow violence, revealing the process of appropriation of faith, heritage, and revival by modern spectacle?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Saraswati (2025) by Johal is a relatively new novel, so there is no actual existing scholarly work or published criticism on the novel so far. Thus, this part will examine theoretical and contextual literature which informs the interpretive basis of this study especially the concept of the slow violence by Rob Nixon, the emergence of postcolonial ecocriticism, and the knowledge presented by sacred ecology on human-nature relationships within Indian culture.

In their book, Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment (2015), Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2015) build on the framework of slow violence developed by Rob Nixon to demonstrate that environmental degradation and colonial exploitation have always reinforced each other. According to them, land exploitation and people exploitation were never separate colonial projects. To Huggan and Tiffin, colonialism worked on a two-fold mechanism of domination over nature and domination over human communities in the form of extractive relation that persists in postcolonial societies through industrial development, extraction and ecological inequality. Their contribution emphasizes the fact that ecological harm is not a crisis, but a continuation of the past imperial powers.

In Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment, Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George Handley (2011) also predict the interrelation of empire and ecology. They discuss the way in which postcolonial literature tends to suggest a sense of ecological

belonging amidst imperial displacement and discuss this in the context of the so-called transoceanic ecologies, in which colonial histories of trade, migration and environmental mining are inseparable. Their comparison places environmental crisis in the context of the planet, following the flow of goods, people, and environmental damage in an empire to the contemporary global ecologies.

Another context in which ecological crises are placed is by Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee (2010) in Postcolonial Environments. According to him, the issue of environmental degradation in the postcolonial world is inseparable with its political economy, which in most cases reflects an extractive logic of empire. On the same note, Amitav Ghosh (2016) in The Great Derangement finds a narrative breakdown in modern literature the inability to portray gradual and accumulative ecological devastation. He argues that contemporary narratives are attracted to spectacularity and disregard gradual and attritional crises.

As Nixon and postcolonial ecocritical writers highlight the time and political aspects of environmental destruction, the Sacred Ecology by Fikret Berkes (2018) offers an ethical and spiritual side. According to Berkes, sacred ecology is a knowledge-practice-belief complex which combines ecological knowledge with cultural and spiritual systems. He posits that the destruction of such systems is not just a destruction of the environment, but also a destruction of culture- a break in the system of moral ideas on which mankind needs the environment to rely. The viewpoint of Berkes widens the theory of Nixon by presenting the fact that slow violence functions at the belief and ethics level as well.

Arpita Chattaraj (Mukhopadhyay) (2021) explores the spiritual, cultural, and ecological aspects of river worship in India in Sacred Water and Cultures of Worship: Some Observations on the River in India, and traces the way rivers have been used as a sacred entity both in myth and ritual and in lived practice. She notes that the assumption that the divine is in nature is among the spiritual discourses of the religions of antiquity (Chattaraj, 2021) because rivers like the Ganga, Yamuna, and Sarasvati are both physical and divine at the same time. Through hymns in the Vedas, classical mythologies, and the local practices, Chattaraj shows how the sacredness of rivers is used to show a long-standing form of a religious ecology where nature and divinity are closely intertwined. She, however, also recognizes a strong contradiction in contemporary India in which the very sacred waters are threatened by industrialization, pollution, and urbanization.

According to her, this contradiction is a paradox to the divine purity of the rivers (p. 180) which highlights the conflict between piety and usury. The conclusions of her work eventually demand a recovery of indigenous, place-based practices of river worship, based on what Madhav Gadgil (1985) has termed as ecological prudence, implying that such practices may serve as an exemplar in more ethical and sustainable environmental awareness. This perception is further corroborated by Diana L. Eck in the book India: A Sacred Geography (2015), in which the writer described the Ganga as the symbol of divine presence, which combines the physical geography of India. Equally, Sudipta Sen (2019) in Ganga: The Many Pasts of an Indian River highlights the role of rivers in the past through which the ecological and spiritual life was mediated by its deification.

The respect given to water as a source of livelihood and symbol implies that ecological damage in the Indian context cannot be isolated of cultural and metaphysical imbalance. Although there is an increasing overlap between ecocriticism

and postcolonial studies, there is no prior literature to apply the theory of Nixon to the Saraswati of Johal. This paper thus bridges that gap by integrating the postcolonial and the sacred ecological approach to understand the novel as a recreation of the slow violence as both environmental and spiritual. Thus, it is part of a growing body of research that connects ecological loss to moral disconnection in revealing how the process of loss of sacred ecology resembles the slow and invisible violence of modernity.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

This paper uses an ecocritical approach based on postcolonial theory and slow violence as proposed by Rob Nixon to analyze Saraswati (2025) by Gurnaik Johal. Through the analysis of the text within the framework provided by Nixon, the study shows how ecological destruction is a slow, normalized process, not a sudden disaster, and how the rhetoric of restoration and development masks even more significant trends of moral and environmental decline. The concept of sacred ecology conceived by Fikret Berkes also enters the picture, associating the ecological loss with the moral and spiritual degradation.

Postcolonial Ecocriticism

The study employs the post-colonial theory and environmental criticism to investigate how the history of the empire and neocolonialism continues to influence world ecologies. According to Cheryle Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (1996), it is the study of the interaction between the physical world and literature, and they indicate that the human culture is tied into the physical world, being influenced by it and influencing it. This focus renders literature an excellent place to look not only at the harms done to the environment but also at the cultural and ideological leanings that perpetuate it. Elaborating on this, Mishra (2016) refers to ecocriticism as the criticism of the house-the environment- as it is presented in the literature, emphasizing the idea that landscapes and nature are not inert settings, but systems that are influenced by and have an impact on the human culture.

Marland (2013) further mentions that ecocriticism examines concerns of the destructive effects of humans on the biosphere. Concisely, the discipline is a critique of the way economic and development practices, including think industrialisation to agrarian modernisation, have propelled ecological crises through time. The conflict between the anthropocentric (shallow ecology) and the biocentric (deep ecology) ideas is central to ecocritical thinking. According to Mishra (2016), the anthropocentric model places humans at the top of the human-verses-nature dichotomy. Deep ecology, however, questions human hegemony and demands that all in the environment has an intrinsic value and nature has its own right to live. The post-colonial context is concerned with this shift since colonial attitudes viewed people and nature as conquest.

The ecocritical turn of the post-colonial emerged in the 1990s to address the ecological legacies of colonialism as well as the neocolonialism of the present. The authors Mason et al. (2014) urge us to remember that the effects of colonialism resonate to the twenty-first century and particularly indigenous people. According to Vital (2008), post-colonial ecocriticism is an entirely new environmental concern, sensitive to the histories of unequal development and numerous forms of

discrimination. It is agreed that the environmental degradation cannot be reduced to the natural processes as it needs to be interpreted through the history of extraction, labor, displacement, and unequally distributed environmental burden.

According to Huggan and Tiffin (2015), land exploitation and people exploitation were always a part of the same colonial project. The empire logic deprived communities of labor, land, and culture and imposed new rules on the use of resources and changes of environment. Post-colonial ecocriticism demonstrates that this legacy manifests itself in neocolonial economies where companies and development initiatives led by the state still exhibit enclosure, displacement, environmental damage and erasure of culture.

One of the significant works in South Asia is that of Ramachandra Guha (1990) and his contribution with Joan Martinez-Alier (1997) in Varieties of environmentalism. Guha indicates how the rural and the marginalized peoples particularly in India struggle to resist deforestation, mining and industrial pollution since it is necessary to remain alive and not a hobby. He mentions the poor are the real environmentalists since their livelihood depends on the local ecology (Guha and Martinez-Alier, 1997). Their wars represent the environmentalism of the poor, which is a politics of material vulnerability and not the abstract global conservation. The concepts are consistent with ecocriticism and environmental justice and provide a strong ground to understand the contemporary references to ecological loss in literature.

Through a post-colonial and ecological lens, the present paper interprets the work of Saraswati as an account of ecological and cultural colonisation in which the contemporary projects of reviving traditions tend to conceal the ecological destruction, and the sacred space is transformed into a political instrument. The artificial rivers, submerged shrines, artificial spectacles and the displaced community in the novel are a strong resonance of the unremitting imperial logic of neoliberal modernity.

Nixon's Theory of Slow Violence: Temporal and Ethical aspects

This paper relies on Rob Nixon's theory of slow-violence in Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor (2011) to further develop the eco-psychology of post-colonial ecocriticism. Nixon refers to slow violence as a violence which took place over a long period of time and by which it is not noticed, a violence of delayed destruction that was distributed over time and space. Slow violence is unlike headline-grabbing violence in that it is attritional, the effects of which accrue unseen, and become part of everyday existence.

The global economy treats its poor, displaced and environmentally marginalised as dispensable allowing them to be the main victims of it. Nixon identifies two issues related to the idea of slow violence: its unacknowledged temporality and its inability to be represented. Harm will not be easily framed by the story or statistics because it is intergenerational, multi-year and multi-decade. Nixon refers to it as a representational challenge, a non-spectacular, non-instant violence.

State-corporate complicity is also a part of slow violence. According to Nixon (2011), this violence is usually perpetrated using policy, legal frameworks, and the infrastructural systems in which responsibility is hidden (p. 85). It flourishes in the long-term resource exploitation, dam-building, depletion of groundwater, and other massive developmental construction works, in which responsibility disintegrates through bureaucracy. According to Nixon, slow violence is most manifested in the so-

called resource enclaves (pp. 85-86), areas of extraction that are physically and imaginatively sealed off against communities around them and ecological ethics.

The theory of Nixon also overlaps with the biopolitics and necro politics. The concept of biopolitics that Foucault (1978) introduces means that the state mechanisms control life and populations in ways that prioritize some life over others, making them dispensable. This is brought to the level of necro politics as was developed by Achille Mbemba (2001) which entails determining who will live and who must die, but it is not always the exhibition of outright killing but rather a gradual biological destruction of the body.

According to Mbembe (2001), colonial power did not kill the colonised but rendered them alive but injured. Nixon finds in this lineage the slow violence: a late-modern variant of necropolitics in which neocolonial and corporate powers usurp imperial states to continue the work of their predecessors: ecological depletion, dispossession, and marginalisation to continue causing injury. Furthermore, Nixon also places slow violence in the context of the global movement of the environmentalism of the poor, which is similar to the concept provided by Guha and Martinez-Alier (1997) as to the fact that ecological opposition is frequently produced by marginalised groups. These societies suffer environmental destruction as short term livelihood crises, as opposed to global crises which are abstract. Their plight sheds light on the intersection of environmental politics in the context of justice, ethnicity, class and survival.

More importantly, Nixon (2011) highlights the importance of creative literature to depict slow violence. Since gradual damage is frequently invisible or has no instant effect, narrative art is crucial towards making visible what is invisible and dramatizing what is gradual. Delayed destruction can be humanised through fiction because of its temporal richness and emotional impact.

Divine Ecos and Traditional Memory

Although the framework developed by Nixon focuses on temporal and structural aspects of environmental violence, the story of Saraswati also makes it possible to open the door to a spiritual-cultural dimension, which can be best explained using the concept of sacred ecology. Arpita Chattaraj (Mukhopadhyay, 2021) focuses on the concept of how rivers, such as the Ganga, Yamuna and Sarasvati are narrativized in a discourse of sacredness, and the subsumption of their corporeality by metaphorical, mystical and transcendental associations in her essay Sacred Water and Cultures of Worship: Some Observations on the River in India (p. 169). She states that Indian religious ecology does not simply perceive rivers as flowing water but as manifested the divine, a mixture of ritual, memory, culture and identity. Chattaraj also recognizes Sarasvati as a transformational deity, who was a river in the Rg Veda and was subsequently promoted to a level of a speech goddess, knowledge and culture (p. 175).

The material loss of the river had not weakened its sacredness, on the contrary, it made it even more symbolically powerful. This contradiction provides a strong interpretive point of contact to the disappearance of the river in the novel: the loss of the river to ecological and cultural extinction becomes symbolic. This framework explains the environmental decline in the novel as a spiritual and cultural casualty in addition to a spiritual and cultural violence as it aligns the concept of sacred ecology with slow violence introduced by Nixon. The drying river is not merely an ecological event because it is the washing away of the memory of the people, ritual process,

building of morality and embodied moral relation to land. Sacred waters are desecrated and this is a kind of moral violence.

Fiction as Activism and Moral Testimony

The last aspect of this theoretical approach regards the ability of literature to be an ethical witness and resistance. Nixon (2011) holds that the imaginative writing can offer the alternative form of witnessing: of what is not seen. Literature can oppose the short-term politics, grand imagery of a world that is made through spectacularity by writing about slow, mundane damage and anticipating marginal reactions. Saraswati works in this mode: it leaves behind the dramatic stories of disasters, and stays in the silent noiselessness of drought, the insidious poisoning of land, and the dying of rituals. It asks the reader to dwell in slow-moving times.

The concept is significant as it fits the description of environmental injustice not necessarily making headline-worthy news- but experienced throughout decades of displacement, debt, poor soil and cultural dislocation. When literature incorporates these into story, it forms a sort of moral investigation and cultural memory. The novel can therefore be seen as the theoretical vision of slow violence which requires creative strategies to manifest itself and calls on the moral involvement of the reader instead of just the informational response.

To conclude, a combination of the Postcolonial Ecocriticism, the theory of slow violence developed by Nixon, and sacred ecology represents a powerful, multidimensional way of evaluating Saraswati. The Postcolonial Ecocriticism places the novel in the greater context of imperial extraction, resource appropriation and culture displacement. Slow violence by Nixon offers the temporal, ethical and representational rhetoric to explore how the harm is produced slowly, invisibly and between generations. Sacred ecology leads to the contemplation of the spiritual and cultural aspects of environmental destruction- why the destruction of a river is not only a material but also a symbolic, moral and existential phenomenon.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Environmental Degradation as Slow, Invisible Violence

Saraswati (2025) does not focus on environmental breakdown through spectacle but by accretion which Nixon (2011) argues is a violence that is slow and invisible. Through its geographies, the Indus floodplain and artificial river valleys of New Lothal the novel documents ecological damage as something banal, bureaucratic, and continuous. The analysis given below dwells on some chosen scenes that clearly demonstrate the process of slow violence in three forms, which are interrelated, including: depletion and mechanization, imperial displacement and ecological destruction and engineered nature as modern mythology.

The novel presents environmental degradation as a silent disaster, the one that will develop rather not through spectacle but through perseverance. It inhabits the very texture of what Rob Nixon (2011) defines as “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight” (p. 2). The sceneries that Johal envisions stretch all the way out of the Punjab countryside to the artificial canals of New Lothal are characterized by exhaustion, where the hope of progress that modernity brings hides the gradual loss of ecological/moral life.

The account of rural Punjab given in the novel is extremely startling. The narrator notes, “The farms around Hakra relied on electric pumps to survive, which were

lengthened every few years to reach the ever-receding groundwater – perfect, plastic roots" (Johal, 2025, p.1). The picture of the plastic roots emphasizes the fact that today the machinery imitates nature, and the survival is reorganized as a kind of extraction. This indicates that wells which were previously sustained are receded so much that they have to be excavated now, drilled deeper, and fitted with cables.

At another point in novel, the shortage of underground water is highlighted as: "the weight of the water across the state causing the ground to depress over the exhausted aquifer" (Johal, 2025, p.1). This is not the fruitful burden of irrigation but the actual bulk of earth sinking in the burden of excessive exploitation. The subsiding land becomes a literal symbol of exhaustion what Foucault (1978) may refer to as the biopolitical control of life which, in the process of trying to maximise existence, destroys it. This has made the world to be a place where life-support systems become the tools of destruction.

This development is poisonous and manifests itself in episodes, which once appeared pastoral. "A soft breeze cut across the golden crop, lifting the acrid scent of pesticides with a sound like the hissing of mustard seeds blooming in oil" (p.2) The phrase has a sensual effect: the sibilant play of the hissing causes the air itself, which at the beginning symbolized the rural bliss, to appear infected with poisons. Johal puts it still more into the word: "The water looked like oil." In those six words, she sums up a hundred years of industrial revolution, food becomes commodity, the glitter of profit obliterates the prospect of life. The lustre of water now appears to be some dust of plenty.

Destruction is ritualised during the mechanised farming scene which is explicit in these lines: "In an effort to reduce water stress, the government tied the sowing of rice paddy to the coming of the first rains… No method of stubble-clearing was as efficient as fire" (p.25). This starts as policy logic and becomes a ritual. "The fire began to move, turning the stubble black, then white, then black again… sacrifices to some ancient god" (p.25). The shifting colours are reminiscent of the cyclic agrarian cycle and its bloody distortion. The regulation and necessity force the farmers into unwitting party in a sacrifice ritual to efficiency itself. Fire, that was cleansing, now is the instrument of gradual self-destruction.

Moreover, the novel extends outside Punjab to trace the postcolonial existence of empire and the environmental destruction of the world. The representation of the geography between the Chagos Archipelago and the North American reservoirs, creates the mosaic of the displacement of the environment. According to Nixon (2011), environmentalism of the poor cannot be discussed outside of the histories of empire and displacement.

In one of the most vivid historical memories, Johal narrates it as follows: "The fact that all the Chagossians were brutally rounded up by the British in 1976 and forced into an illegal exile that was yet to end … never to live on their own land again" (Johal, 2025, p.69). The entire centuries of the cruelty of the empire are condensed into one sentence, and its ellipsis reflects the infinity of exile. This is literally slow violence, an injury that has no cure. The frame broadens in the following line: "Diego Garcia … was then rented to the US military for the establishment of a strategically located base, named Camp Justice, from which the Americans could bomb much of the eastern world" (p.70). The parody of Camp Justice reveals the perversity of morality underlying global modernity in the disguise of destruction in the name of safety. The environment is made a by-product, its desecration is bureaucratized by

lease and treaties.

The concept of 'Invasion' is described not only on the political but also on the ecological fronts in novel. The story is then changed to that of the story of the yellow crazy ants whose growth represents the ideal image of unregulated capitalism. "When they arrive in a new ecosystem, they decimate it… They eat everything, spitting out this acid. … It's growth without end" (p.70). The endless spread of the ants is a hideous reflection of human desire. The monotony of complete consumption, destruction as continuity is captured in the repetition of everything and end. Even an effort to exterminate them carries on the same reasoning. "She went up in one of the Seabees' choppers and used the university's dispersal machine to spray the tropical forest below with AntOff… It would look like volcanic ash" (p.73). Here, science can be called as the new coloniser, whose ways cannot be differentiated with the destruction it tries to do away with. A struggle against what was previously war against pests turns into war against the planet.

The initiators of change - scientists, warriors, strategists, bring devastation using the instruments that are intended to curb the same. This is planetary, unseen, normalized, slow violence, as Nixon describes it, but is not visible. The story does not localise guilt; the shadow of the empire is all over the world. The most constant element in the novel is water; it serves as the archive of this attritional history. The novel recalls: "Even the shrines they had, you know, where they'd pray for rain, even they were underwater… He took us so close to the church spire that you could reach out from the boat and touch the cross" (p.130). The visuals are a mix of religion and destruction, with the cross emerging out of water as a remnant of a past era. The sacred has been left to merely live as spectacle, reminding us that in the Anthropocene sense of the word, holiness can only be observed and not experienced.

Furthermore, the emptiness itself speaks in these lines: "Mead, which had once been America's largest reservoir, was now empty… It showed a kind of ghost lake, a trace of what had been" (p.162). The ghost lake expression is full of haunting silence, with nothingness turning to something. This finding conforms to Nixon (2011) who discusses this type of disappearance as slow violence whereby destruction is counted not in a sudden disaster but rather in a slow deprivation. The next image deepens that stillness: "Across the arid lake bed, the skeletal remains of sunken ships stuck out at dramatic angles, seeming to burst forth from the ground like the first bones of the rising dead" (p.162). Shipwreck remains represent a historical image of the human exorbitance, the artifacts of a culture that has emptied its own sources. The irony is that the progress leaves behind its own fossils, it reminds that what used to be floating lies now on the shore. Instead of implying the idea of rebirth, this image of emergence describes the continuity of decay that human industry makes natural life a ruin and monument at the same time.

The climax of this gradual decline comes in the sight that Johal has of the new Saraswati: "He stepped down on to the concrete ghats… the water was a similar colour to the roads, too … It was all concrete" (p.264). The repetition of word "concrete" suggest that river has changed its nature altogether, that was once flowing is now static and designed. The river is thereby converted into a utility piece. The wording eliminates divisions- between road and river, nature and architecture, life and infrastructure. It summarizes the nature of what Huggan and Tiffin (2015) refer to as imperial mastery over nature recoded as national pride, in which technological mastery replaces ecological belonging. The sacred has not been revived as it has been

reproduced to become the monument of progress. The fires of stubble of Punjab, the drowned shrines of remote shorelines, all these instances represents major events of attrition. Such detached formulations allow these moments of fragmentation to speak to each other, and the way localized acts of destruction, over-pumping, burning, diversion, etc., are a part of a global narrative of loss.

The peculiarity of the Saraswati is that it does not provide any resolution. Nothing catastrophic happens to the novel but exhaustion. Even during its erosion, its world is still operating. The pumping out of aquifers, the contamination of rivers, the concrementing of sacred spaces all this happens without spectacle, and is absorbed by the processes of progress. Johal continues to linger on these silent changes such that the reader can experience the blunt insistency of environmental degradation. It is not the killing of life at a single stroke but the gradual loss of life itself. It is clear that progress weighs down on the land, and on the water, and on the people, without their being aware of it, until it becomes normal. The most disturbing aspect of the story is this ordinariness. It hints at the fact that the world will come to an end not in a sudden crash, as Johal believes it will, but a slow sinking, a disappearance, that is not pointed out, but rather a gradual disappearance under the waters of the banal.

The Spiritual and Cultural Dimensions of Slow Violence

Gurnaik Johal makes the tale of a river in Saraswati (2025) a reflection on the ways in which environmental degradation is creeping into the cultural and spiritual aspects of life. The strength of the novel is that it reaches to a conclusion that ecological damage is not physical only but also emotional and moral. What comes out is an image of society that puts restoration on top of progress and spectacle on top of salvation.

The novel begins with these lines: “Still, on some evenings, Bibi would walk to the dead well at the corner of her square plot, and that summer Satnam would follow. She would light the candles sheltered in a small makeshift shrine on one side of the well” (p.2).

The picture is muted, near religious. Making lit candle ritual around a dead well is one of mourning and piety in one in the form of belief in the unresponsive nature. The empty well symbolizes object of recollection. This gesture of Bibi maintains a connection with the land which cannot be destroyed. Slow violence is here expressed not through spectacle but silence, where damage is done not by violence but by lack. This ritual, though, is of a world that will fade away. Johal introduces the generational split that will be the moral terrain of the novel in the following moment:

“‘Tradition,’ his mum said; ‘Superstition,’ his dad. It was about honoring ancestors, they agreed, remembering the dead” (p.2).

There is the whole reason of modernity between those two terms, tradition and superstition. The piety that has historically bound people to the land and the lineage is transformed into being unreasonable and its purpose is lost under the words of progress. The shrine, such as the well, is there, but has lost its sanctity. The image demonstrates how cultural memory is rewritten by the disenchanted modern vision. Drying up of the river is unreservedly linked to drying up of faith.

However, the novel continues with this theme by the use of objects that are still memory when the world has lost the memory of them. The phulkari dupattas, the pattern showing crops, fields, the branches, roots: seven rivers coming from one source, the geography of Punjab is sewed into the thread of the dupattas. They are not so much an art, they are hereditarily cosmological, a memory sense of interwove

rivers that once caused the earth and the people to be alive. Their colours gleam like a reflection of the waters they are reminding when Satnam hangs them out to dry. Johal spins aesthetics and ecology in those fabrics; the embroidery turns out to be an elegy as well as testament to the loss. A similar haunting surrounds the red cloth in Gyan's family home: "A small section of that red cloth was framed above Gyan's parents' mantlepiece… She felt a sense of vertigo: to think this rectangle of material had touched so many hands, all in a direct lineage. To think it might all end with her" (p.187).

The silence of the cloth turns domestic space into some sort of a memorial. That the living ritual has become display is indicated by its retention in a frame. Johal is a witness to the process of a different generation fading away in the indifference of the modern world, and this fading away is captured by the quiet panic of being the last one in a chain of touch. This scene suggests that the holy has been domesticated, put in storage and turned into consumable material. These facts constitute the cultural rubbish of the novel. The loss of faith does not occur in any dramatic sense but through the routine reallocation of the meaning. Religious art turns into art, and rites turn into routine and spirituality becomes tradition, something to be written about, but not experienced. The style of Johal resembles the slow violence of Nixon: the damage that is built up unnoticed to such an extent that it becomes the air of the life.

The religious downfall in Saraswati (2025) is not a problem collective to specific households. It disseminates in sceneries that were once holy and have now been changed in the hands of development: "Even the shrines they had, you know, where they'd pray for rain, even they were underwater" (p.129).The line concludes with silent destruction. It is no cry, it is the dull inevitability of extinction. The drowning of shrines is a symbol of the demise of a moral world, in which nature and divinity were united. It is not only that the flood destroys but it exiles the sacred of geography itself.

The assault on sacred spaces is more direct in other locations: "To climb the mountain would be to disturb the destroyer's peace, to trespass upon the sacred" (p.86). In this case, the very process of ascending, which used to be regarded as the embodiment of spiritual struggle, is repackaged into an act of intrusion. The Holy Mountain, which was deemed untouchable, turns into a conquest, tourist, and controlling location. The sacred distance with which the divine was safeguarded has fallen.

Meanwhile, the characters themselves are starting to feel some internal form of this erasure, "My friend, I am living the life of a ghost" (p. 85), one of them confesses. This is the emotional debris of gradual violence the manner in which the ecological degradation places human beings in a state of half-alive, suspended between worlds.. "It's like the whole country is looking for something it's lost" (p.150), another voice echoes. These existential dislocations carry the ethical burden of the novel: a civilization that is stumbling through its ruins, which does not remember what it was worshipping and revering.

The gradual degradation of the holy which Johal's novel Saraswati presents is cumulative, personal, and unstoppable. What starts as the environment starts failing ends up a culture disintegrating, the gradual draining away of meaning itself. This process, as seen through the prism of Nixon, is the best example of the invisible consequences of modernity, the accretion of moral casualties in the wake of a progress which cuts off its own spiritual roots.

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The Politics of Revival and the Spectacle of Restoration

The Saraswati River restoration turns into a nationwide act-a myth, a kind of propaganda, in which the state transforms the destruction of the environment into political re-creation. The political representation of the spiritual and cultural decay of the novel is achieved in this process. The rhetoric of restoration starts with the speech that seems religious and militaristic:"'We understand how our mother river disappeared, yes? An earthquake sent her underground. Now think of the Mughal invasion as that quake… But we are bringing that river to the surface. She is our ecological answer to centuries of foreign rule. Of India becoming Bharat again!" (p.246).

The speech reduces myth, science and nationalism into one story of coming back. The loss of the river is compared to the historical conquest; its restoration is redemption. The sacred is forced into political service.Immediately after, there is the scientific confirmation: "'The Saraswati is running beneath the ground, through palaeochannels that date back millennia!" (p.29).

The palaeochannel appeal provides belief with the bureaucratic powers and turns divine resurrection to geological discovery. Here technology takes the position of priesthood. The act parodies ritual but is control when the prime minister ceremoniously drinks water out of the new river as he is inaugurated, "India's new prime minister… was sworn in, drinking water from the newly surfaced Saraswati River" (p.76). In this way, this sacred act is transformed into government exercise. Johal extends this convergence even further by the language of spectacle: "They'd superimposed the river on to a map of his land… After that were several GIFs of farmers grinning with abundant harvests" (p.27).

"The film would release to coincide with the official opening of the Saraswati River… hundreds of people, all looking one way at one thing: SARASWATI" (p.248). The first restoration in these scenes is done on a screen. The river does not reappear in water but in pixels, its stream is emulated by computers and animation and patriotic cinematography. The audience observes their faith projected on the screen but not pilgrimage. According to Johal, the modern world does not feel the sacred it consumes the image of the sacred. The sudden change of the media: the revival of the river and the media coverage of the rocket launch, even, connects two acts of modernity: one facing backward to the myth, the other upward to the heavens, both out of touch with the ground beneath them. Through this spectacle, a voice of protest is heard murmuring in the background: "'A river is a natural thing, no? So this is no river. It is a glorified canal… Seeing the Sikhs prosper, seeing the Muslims on the other side of the border prosper, it cannot work for this government'" (p.179).

The people feel a form of dispossession to what the state celebrates as restoration. The price of resurrection is seen when Johal writes that water was being diverted into the Saraswati and the Indus was dead. The life of a river is dependent on the death of another river, a moral relationship that brings out the necro politics of development. The success of the government conceals the silent death of both the ecological and balance. This illusion of progress is most shocking in religious obedience: "He set fire to a twig and held it up to the low branches… They took their seats in the marquee a few minutes before the event finished, clapping along with everyone else" (p.47).

In this case, devotion is performance. The fire is both an offering and destruction, it burns ambiguously with morality. The applause of the crowd makes the violence into ceremony. It is a state of total anesthetization, when the spectacle of union suppresses

the feeling of conscience. The final images of Johal are a catharsis of the recurring themes of spectacle, myth and erasure in the novel. "'Today, we change the weight of the earth… our future unspeakably richer'" (p.43).

The rhetoric of victory and the vision of catastrophe come in conflict in these lines. There was a "blurry clip of a concrete dam exploding. White water burst out of its centre" (p. 151). A dam is burst, and the whole country is celebrating, and the screen is white with the blood of the developments. The river which started as sacred memory is turned into commodity and the nation which tried to reborn receives only repetition of loss. Through these events, the novel shows that modernity reorganizes belief, which is manipulative. The restoration of the river is not the recovery of some religious ecology, but the last domestication of the river, a means of draining the spiritual charge, of tapping into the symbolic value. The result is an ecological and moral economy in which faith is branding and heritage becomes propaganda.

CONCLUSION

This work aims at an exploration of how Saraswati symbolizes environmental degradation in a slow and insidious kind of violence that occurs in the everyday rhythm of the modern progress. Through the analysis of the slow annihilation of rivers, territories, and sacred places, the paper reveals how the novel by Johal renders narrative to what Rob Nixon has outlined as a violence of delayed destruction that is usually invisible and accepted as normal. The textual analysis of the selected textual passages like the sinking aquifers, burning stubble and the concreteness of ghats presents the convergence of development, policy and technology that destroys the ecological and moral equilibrium of the life. This silent loss, which is performed by the advancement and repetition, becomes the prevailing form of violence in the Anthropocene.

This paper is primarily concerned with the notion of slow violence as coined by Rob Nixon (2011) and its interplay with another notion known as sacred ecology of Fikret Berkes. The framework created by Nixon assists in finding environmental destruction not as an event but as a process that spans time and generations, whereas the idea of sacred ecology brought forth by Berkes on the same process explains how it destroys the moral and spiritual connection between human beings and nature. In this perspective, the drying of the river Saraswati is not just an ecological loss, but an allegorical one, the loss of divine order and shared memory. This attritional violence is reflected in the slow rhythm and disintegration of the narration of the novel that show how damage oozes into everyday life and goes undetected but constant.

In Saraswati (2025), the erosion of sacred ecology is also a commentary on cultural and spiritual decay. The loss of sanctity of ecology is also a criticism of the culture and spiritual corruption in Saraswati. The image of Bibi setting up candles by a dry well, the displayed dupatta with family embroidery, and the underwater shrines represent the erosion of faith. Tradition, which used to be a symbol of connection with the divine, is revamped to mean superstition; the sacred is turned into spectacle. That the river is turned into a glorified canal is symbolic of moral contradiction of modernity in which creation and destruction exist side by side in the rhetoric of progress.

The analysis also shows that the story of Saraswati (2025) links ecological violence to the cultural and political ones. The dispossession of the poor, the denial of history, and the disappearance of the sacred place are all discussed as the results of the identical

historical logic of domination which proceeds since the colonial extraction up to the neoliberal modernization. The normalization of depletion that Nixon identifies with the invisibility of slow violence is reflected in the vernacularization of the representation of the ghost lakes, dead wells and concrete ghats. The misery of ordinary individuals, their mute perseverance and ritual continuation are equivalent to the so-called environmentalism of the poor that Guha and Martinez-Alier (1997) identify.

All in all, Saraswati makes a deep consideration of the morality and eco-costs of development. The novel by Johal shows that the most dangerous thing is not the obvious one which is the destruction of nature but its silent acceptance. The violence of the present-day world is not born in a vacuum as it grows, diffuses, and becomes a part of the commonplace. The dried river becomes a grave and a mirror because it demonstrates how the attempt of human beings to revive the sacred turned into a process of forgetting. Johal makes the story of Saraswati a permanent witness to how the revival of modernity is its slow violence, by revealing this silent ecological desertion and spiritual loss in the novel.

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