www.TLHjournal.com Literary Herald ISSN: 2454-3365
An International Refereed/Peer-reviewed English e-Journal
Impact Factor: 7.825

Narrating the Nonhuman: Animals, Rivers, Forests as Characters in Postcolonial Fiction

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Abstract

This paper examines the narrative agency of nonhuman entities—animals, rivers, and forests—in postcolonial fiction. While ecocriticism and postcolonial studies have extensively explored the relationship between literature, environment, and colonial histories, less attention has been paid to how nonhuman entities function as **characters** in their own right, shaping narrative, memory, and identity. Drawing on Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood*, and Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*, this study argues that these texts construct the nonhuman not as passive background but as active participants in storytelling. Rivers act as archives of memory, forests embody resistance and cosmology, and animals function as companions, witnesses, and even narrators of human history.

The analysis is situated within the frameworks of postcolonial ecocriticism, new materialism, and indigenous epistemologies. It employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology based on close reading and comparative analysis, demonstrating how postcolonial fiction unsettles anthropocentric assumptions and articulates decolonial ecologies. By foregrounding nonhuman entities as narrative agents, the paper contributes to debates on the Anthropocene and world literature, proposing that postcolonial texts imagine a literary ecology where humans and nonhumans co-constitute history and meaning.

Keywords: postcolonial ecocriticism; nonhuman agency; rivers; forests; animals; Amitav Ghosh; Arundhati Roy; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o; Indra Sinha

Introduction

1. Context and Rationale

Postcolonial fiction has historically been preoccupied with themes of displacement, hybridity, cultural identity, and the enduring legacies of colonialism. Yet, in the twenty-first century, a new urgency has entered literary studies: the **ecological crisis** of the Anthropocene. Environmental devastation, climate change, and the uneven distribution of ecological vulnerability across the Global South have forced scholars to re-examine the relationship between postcolonialism and ecology. Literature emerging from postcolonial contexts often situates human survival within fragile ecologies—deltas, forests, tidal landscapes—where the boundary between human and nonhuman is porous.

Within this shifting landscape, animals, rivers, and forests cease to be mere backdrops. They emerge as **characters** in their own right, endowed with agency, voice, and memory. This narrative move is particularly significant in postcolonial contexts, where indigenous cosmologies often treat nonhuman life as animate, sentient, and entangled with human existence. For example, the Meenachal River in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* not only witnesses but actively records trauma, while the dolphins in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* embody both ecological precarity and mythological continuity. Reading such nonhumans as characters allows us to reconceptualize storytelling beyond anthropocentric frames.

2. Research Gap

Although the field of **postcolonial ecocriticism** has flourished in the last two decades, most studies continue to treat the nonhuman as symbolic, metaphorical, or environmental "setting." Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* (2007, 2015) and Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) highlight ecological justice, but rarely foreground nonhuman entities as characters. Recent scholarship, such as the *Ecozon@* special issue on "The Postcolonial Nonhuman" (2022), has moved closer to this terrain but remains largely theoretical. There is, therefore, a clear research gap in studying **how nonhumans are narrated as characters with narrative agency in postcolonial fiction**.

3. Objectives and Argument

This paper seeks to address that gap by pursuing three interrelated objectives:

1. To examine how animals, rivers, and forests are represented as **characters** in postcolonial fiction.
2. To analyze how these nonhuman characters embody cultural memory, ecological precarity, and resistance to colonial/neo-colonial exploitation.
3. To argue that narrating the nonhuman disrupts anthropocentric storytelling and enables decolonial literary ecologies.

The central argument is that postcolonial texts such as *The Hungry Tide*, *The God of Small Things*, *Petals of Blood*, and *Animal's People* invest nonhuman entities with agency and voice. These texts thus imagine an expanded narrative field where the human is only one participant in a broader ecology of storytelling.

4. Theoretical Framework (Preview)

This paper situates itself at the intersection of three frameworks:

- **Postcolonial Ecocriticism**: Building on Huggan and Tiffin, the study considers how colonial histories shape ecological devastation and how literature responds to environmental injustice.

- **New Materialism & Posthumanism**: Thinkers such as Jane Bennett (*Vibrant Matter*) and Donna Haraway (*When Species Meet*) inspire the reading of nonhumans as possessing vitality, agency, and entanglement with human life.
- **Indigenous Epistemologies**: Many postcolonial texts draw upon indigenous cosmologies where rivers, forests, and animals are not "others" but kin, ancestors, and participants in cultural survival.

Together, these frameworks allow for a non-anthropocentric reading of postcolonial fiction.

5. Methodology (Preview)

The paper employs a **qualitative, interpretive methodology** based on close textual reading and comparative analysis. Four texts have been selected for their diverse geographic and cultural contexts:

- Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *Gun Island* (2019) — South Asian deltaic ecologies.
- Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) — Kerala's riverine landscape.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* (1977) — East African land and forest as resistance.
- Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007) — hybrid animal/human testimony to ecological disaster.

These texts will be analyzed through **close reading** (tracing narrative functions of nonhuman characters) and **comparative analysis** (identifying cross-regional patterns of narrating the nonhuman). The methodology foregrounds how literary form itself narrates agency across species and environments.

6. Structure of the Paper

The paper proceeds in four main sections. Following this introduction, the **Literature Review** surveys existing scholarship on postcolonial ecocriticism, the nonhuman, and new materialist thought. The **Methodology** section outlines the interpretive and comparative approach adopted here. The **Analysis** section examines rivers, forests, and animals as characters across selected texts. Finally, the **Conclusion** synthesizes findings, highlighting how postcolonial fiction narrates a multispecies ecology that challenges colonial and anthropocentric epistemologies.

Literature Review

1. Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Foundations

The intersection of postcolonial studies and environmental criticism has been steadily developing since the early 2000s. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's seminal work *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2007; revised 2015) provides a foundational framework for understanding how colonial histories and environmental concerns are intertwined.

They argue that the exploitation of natural resources, animals, and landscapes was central to the colonial project, and postcolonial literatures often reflect or resist these histories. Huggan and Tiffin emphasize the ways in which animals and environments appear in postcolonial fiction, though their analysis tends to treat these presences as symbolic or representative of cultural-political tensions rather than as narrative agents in their own right.

Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) further expands this field by highlighting how ecological degradation disproportionately affects communities in the Global South. Nixon coins the term "slow violence" to describe environmental destruction that is gradual, invisible, and difficult to represent in traditional narrative forms. Postcolonial fiction, he argues, provides one of the most powerful ways to make this violence visible, particularly through stories of displacement, pollution, and climate change. While Nixon focuses primarily on the socio-political dimensions of environmental injustice, his insights into narrative temporality open the door for examining how nonhuman entities themselves become bearers of memory and testimony.

These foundational works make clear that postcolonial literature is deeply ecological, but they leave open the question of how nonhuman beings—animals, rivers, forests—function as **characters with agency** rather than symbolic props.

2. The Postcolonial Nonhuman: Recent Developments

In recent years, scholarship has moved toward a more direct engagement with the **nonhuman** in postcolonial contexts. A landmark intervention is the *Ecozon@* special issue on "The Postcolonial Nonhuman" (2022), edited by Erin James, Cajetan Iheka, and Juan Ignacio Oliva. The editors argue for a postanthropocentric approach to postcolonial texts, suggesting that colonial and neo-colonial frameworks of knowledge are inherently anthropocentric, and thus limit the recognition of nonhuman agency.

Contributions to this issue include Ashwarya Samkaria's reading of Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019), which demonstrates how mythological and ecological narratives blur the boundaries between human and nonhuman life. Such scholarship illustrates the growing recognition that nonhumans in postcolonial fiction do more than reflect human concerns—they destabilize human-centered narrative itself.

Despite these advances, most studies remain either **highly theoretical** or **focused on single texts**. What remains underexplored is a **comparative, cross-textual analysis** of how different forms of nonhuman life—rivers, forests, animals—operate as characters across multiple postcolonial contexts. This is the specific intervention of the present study.

3. New Materialism and Posthumanism

The turn toward new materialism and posthumanism in literary studies has significantly influenced how scholars approach the nonhuman. Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* (2010) argues for the recognition of matter itself as lively and agentic, challenging human exceptionalism and

encouraging readers to perceive the vitality of things. Donna Haraway's *When Species Meet* (2008) and *Staying with the Trouble* (2016) foreground multispecies entanglements, urging a reconfiguration of ethics and storytelling to include animals, technologies, and ecosystems as co-creators of meaning.

These theoretical perspectives have been increasingly applied to postcolonial contexts. Cajetan Iheka's *Naturalizing Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature* (2018) demonstrates how African texts position landscapes and ecologies as central to political and historical narratives. Iheka insists on reading nonhumans not as metaphors but as active agents shaping cultural and political life.

The new materialist lens is crucial for this paper because it enables us to read rivers, forests, and animals in postcolonial fiction as **narrative participants**, not merely symbols. However, new materialism alone can risk flattening cultural and historical specificities; hence the need to combine it with postcolonial and indigenous frameworks.

4. Indigenous Epistemologies and Decolonial Thought

Indigenous worldviews offer perhaps the most direct challenge to anthropocentrism. In many indigenous traditions—whether in Africa, South Asia, or the Americas—rivers, forests, and animals are not inert matter but kin, ancestors, or deities. Postcolonial fiction often draws upon these epistemologies, reworking them into narrative forms that resist colonial categories of nature and culture.

For instance, the Bon Bibi myth in Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* situates humans, tigers, and forests in a shared moral universe. Similarly, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* engages with Gikuyu cosmology, where land and forests are sacred entities, implicated in anti-colonial struggle. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* invokes Kerala's riverine spirituality, where the river Meenachal functions as both witness and agent of fate. Such texts embody what Kyle Powys Whyte (2018) describes as "indigenous climate justice," where ecological survival is inseparable from cultural and historical continuity.

Indigenous epistemologies thus provide the conceptual grounding for reading nonhumans as characters—not because they are granted anthropomorphic traits, but because they are already recognized as persons within these worldviews.

5. Identifying the Research Gap

The convergence of postcolonial ecocriticism, posthumanism, and indigenous epistemologies has created fertile ground for rethinking the role of the nonhuman in literature. Yet several gaps remain:

1. **Limited narrative analysis**: Most studies treat the nonhuman thematically or symbolically, rather than as characters with narrative functions.

2. **Single-text focus**: Existing studies often analyze one author or novel, leaving room for comparative approaches.
3. **Underexplored categories**: Rivers, forests, and animals are usually discussed separately; few studies examine how these categories intersect in shaping narrative ecologies.

This paper addresses these gaps by offering a **comparative narrative analysis** of four major postcolonial texts, treating rivers, forests, and animals as characters that embody memory, resistance, and testimony.

Research Methodology

1. Research Design

This study adopts a **qualitative, interpretive research design** rooted in literary analysis. Rather than testing hypotheses or measuring quantifiable data, the research focuses on **close textual readings** of selected postcolonial novels to understand how nonhuman entities—rivers, forests, animals—are represented as characters. The aim is not only to examine what these representations signify, but also to consider how they reshape narrative agency and challenge anthropocentric assumptions.

The research is exploratory in nature, as it seeks to contribute to a relatively underdeveloped area within postcolonial ecocriticism: the systematic analysis of the nonhuman as character.

2. Theoretical Framework

The methodology is informed by a **triangulated theoretical framework** combining:

1. **Postcolonial Ecocriticism**
   - Building on Huggan and Tiffin (2007) and Nixon (2011), this framework situates nonhuman agency within histories of colonial exploitation and postcolonial resistance. It asks how rivers, forests, and animals function as sites of memory, dispossession, and survival.
2. **New Materialism and Posthumanism**
   - Drawing on Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* (2010) and Donna Haraway's *When Species Meet* (2008), the research considers nonhumans as lively agents rather than inert backdrops. This framework helps destabilize anthropocentric reading practices by recognizing narrative entanglements between human and nonhuman life.
3. **Indigenous and Decolonial Epistemologies**
   - Many of the chosen texts draw on indigenous cosmologies that treat nonhumans as kin, ancestors, or deities. This epistemological grounding allows the research to resist Western dualisms of nature/culture and subject/object, while foregrounding cultural specificity in literary representation.

Together, these frameworks provide both the **ecological-political grounding** and the **ontological shift** necessary for reading nonhumans as characters in postcolonial fiction.

3. Research Questions

The analysis is guided by the following central questions:

1. How are nonhuman entities—rivers, forests, animals—narrativized as characters in postcolonial fiction?
2. What narrative functions do they perform (e.g., witness, memory-keeper, antagonist, protector)?
3. How do these representations challenge anthropocentric notions of character and agency?
4. In what ways do indigenous epistemologies inform these literary portrayals?
5. What broader contributions do these texts make to ecocriticism and postcolonial studies?

4. Corpus and Text Selection

The study focuses on a **comparative selection** of postcolonial novels across South Asian and African contexts. The texts have been chosen based on three criteria:

1. **Centrality of the nonhuman**: Each text foregrounds rivers, forests, or animals as integral to the narrative.
2. **Diversity of contexts**: The corpus spans South Asia (India) and Africa (Kenya), reflecting both shared colonial histories and distinct ecological settings.
3. **Critical recognition**: The texts are widely studied in postcolonial literature, ensuring both accessibility and scholarly relevance.

The selected texts are:

- Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* (2004) – explores the Sundarbans' riverine ecologies and human-animal entanglements.
- Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (1997) – foregrounds the river Meenachal as a narrative force in shaping human destiny.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Petals of Blood* (1977) – situates forests and land as active participants in Kenya's postcolonial struggles.
- Indra Sinha, *Animal's People* (2007) – narrates from the perspective of an animal-like protagonist, blurring human-nonhuman distinctions.

By analyzing these texts comparatively, the research identifies cross-textual patterns while respecting contextual specificities.

5. Methods of Analysis

The analysis proceeds through **close reading** and **comparative textual analysis**, with attention to:

- **Narrative function**: How rivers, forests, or animals act as narrators, witnesses, or characters influencing plot.
- **Language and imagery**: How metaphor, personification, and myth are used to narrativize the nonhuman.
- **Intertextuality and myth**: How indigenous cosmologies (e.g., Bon Bibi in Ghosh, Gikuyu beliefs in Ngũgĩ) are integrated into the narrative.
- **Thematic resonance**: How ecological agency intersects with themes of memory, violence, displacement, or resistance.

This method allows for a detailed exploration of narrative technique while situating findings within broader theoretical debates.

6. Ethical and Epistemological Considerations

The research acknowledges the **risk of anthropomorphism**—imposing human qualities onto nonhumans. To address this, the analysis adopts a posthumanist orientation, which recognizes agency without collapsing difference. Indigenous epistemologies further serve as a safeguard against reducing nonhuman entities to mere metaphors.

Another consideration is **textual representation vs. real-world ecology**. While the study engages with fiction, it resists conflating literary portrayal with actual ecological realities. Instead, it asks what possibilities fiction opens up for rethinking human-nonhuman relations.

7. Limitations of the Study

Like any qualitative research, this study is bounded by scope:

- **Corpus limitation**: Only four texts are analyzed in depth. The conclusions are therefore suggestive rather than exhaustive.
- **Language focus**: The study is limited to Anglophone fiction, leaving out vernacular literatures where nonhuman agency may be differently represented.
- **Framework balance**: While the triangulated framework is productive, there is a risk of overemphasizing theory at the expense of textual specificity; this is consciously guarded against.

8. Expected Contribution

By situating rivers, forests, and animals as characters within postcolonial fiction, this study contributes to:

- Expanding the scope of **postcolonial ecocriticism** beyond symbolic readings.
- Bridging **posthumanist theory** with **indigenous epistemologies**.
- Offering a **comparative framework** that can be extended to other literatures and ecological contexts.

Ultimately, the methodology positions literature not only as a reflection of ecological thought, but as a site where **nonhuman agency becomes narratively and ethically legible**.

Analysis

1. Rivers as Characters

1.1. Rivers as Narrative Agents in Postcolonial Fiction

In postcolonial contexts, rivers are rarely inert landscapes. They embody histories of colonization, ecological struggle, and cultural memory. They are spaces of livelihood and death, belonging and displacement. Unlike Eurocentric traditions where rivers are often framed as symbolic backdrops for human action, postcolonial fiction frequently **narrativizes rivers as agents**—shaping events, directing characters' choices, and even determining fates.

This narrative agency aligns with indigenous cosmologies in South Asia and Africa, where rivers are conceived not as resources but as living beings—ancestors, mothers, gods, or witnesses. In fiction, such cosmologies surface not only in thematic invocations but also in narrative structure: rivers interrupt, redirect, or even author the stories being told.

Two paradigmatic cases in South Asian fiction—Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997)—illustrate how rivers function as characters that both generate and mediate the unfolding of narrative.

1.2. The Hungry Tide: The Riverine World of the Sundarbans

Amitav Ghosh situates his novel in the Sundarbans, a tidal mangrove ecosystem where the boundary between land and water is constantly shifting. Here, the river is not a backdrop but the **condition of existence**. Villages are destroyed by floods, livelihoods are shaped by tides, and survival requires an intimate negotiation with waters that are at once nurturing and lethal.

The river in *The Hungry Tide* functions as a **character with multiple roles**:

- **Protector and Provider**: It sustains fishing communities, provides passage for cetologists like Piyali, and nurtures biodiversity, especially the endangered Irrawaddy dolphins.
- **Antagonist**: It drowns, erodes, and uproots. The very tides that feed also kill, producing a narrative of ambivalence.
- **Witness to History**: The river carries the memory of the Morichjhapi massacre (1979), when settlers were violently evicted from the Sundarbans. In this way, the river is not only a space of ecological entanglement but also of political violence.

Ghosh's use of local mythology reinforces the river's personhood. The Bon Bibi legend casts the Sundarbans as a moral landscape where human greed and animal life are balanced by divine

guardianship. The river, then, is embedded in a cosmology where it is more than matter; it is a moral agent, inscribed with sacred narrative.

By allowing the riverine world to determine narrative flow, Ghosh destabilizes anthropocentric storytelling. The characters' journeys—Kanai's urban-rural confrontation, Piya's scientific exploration, Fokir's tragic death—are all orchestrated by the movements of water. The river shapes plot as much as any human character.

1.3. The God of Small Things: The River Meenachal as Witness and Fate

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* presents another powerful example of the river as character. The Meenachal river in Kerala runs not as a backdrop but as a silent participant in the tragedies of the Ipe family.

The river performs several narrative roles:

- **Witness to Childhood and Transgression**: It bears witness to Estha and Rahel's childhood adventures, their secret explorations, and the forbidden love between Ammu and Velutha. The Meenachal is the site of freedom but also of surveillance.
- **Agent of Death**: It claims Sophie Mol's life, altering the destinies of every character. The river here is not a passive setting but an agent of irreversible change.
- **Memory-Keeper**: The river recurs in flashbacks and recollections, tying together temporal layers of the narrative. Its presence underscores what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence"—the lingering trauma that shapes generations.

Roy imbues the river with a rhythm that mirrors emotional intensity. Its changing moods parallel shifts in tone, from playful to ominous. Like a human character, it has temperament, agency, and a capacity for action.

Importantly, the Meenachal is also coded through Kerala's cultural landscape. In many indigenous traditions, rivers are sacred beings; in Roy's narrative, this cosmology underpins the river's role as both life-giver and destroyer. Thus, the Meenachal cannot be reduced to metaphor; it acts, decides, and remembers.

1.4. Comparative Insights: River Agency Across Texts

Placed side by side, *The Hungry Tide* and *The God of Small Things* illustrate two distinct but complementary modes of river agency in postcolonial fiction:

1. **Ecological Collectivity (Ghosh)**
    - The Sundarbans rivers function within a networked ecology, inseparable from tides, mangroves, and dolphins. Agency is distributed and collective, reflecting a new materialist sensibility.
2. **Personal and Familial Fate (Roy)**

- The Meenachal is more intimate, tied to family memory and trauma. Its agency is less about collective ecology and more about shaping individual lives and destinies.

Both, however, challenge anthropocentrism by foregrounding rivers as narrative actors. They resist colonial-modernist views of rivers as resources to be managed, asserting instead indigenous and posthumanist perspectives that recognize rivers as **beings with memory, mood, and morality**.

1.5. Rivers in Postcolonial Ecocritical Perspective

From a broader perspective, rivers in these texts embody what Nixon (2011) terms "slow violence" and what Haraway (2016) calls "staying with the trouble." They are reminders that ecological agency is inseparable from historical and political agency. The Sundarbans' tides remember Morichjhapi; the Meenachal remembers Sophie Mol's drowning. In this sense, rivers are **archival agents** of postcolonial trauma.

Moreover, both texts illustrate how indigenous epistemologies survive within postcolonial fiction. Whether through Bon Bibi mythology or Kerala's riverine spirituality, the novels remind readers that rivers have always been characters in cultural narratives—modern fiction merely translates this recognition into novelistic form.

2. Forests as Characters

2.1. The Forest in Postcolonial Imagination

Forests in postcolonial literature carry layered meanings. They are sites of indigenous spirituality, colonial exploitation, guerrilla resistance, and ecological survival. Like rivers, forests often transcend the role of setting, emerging instead as characters that **shelter, resist, and remember**. They embody what Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin call the "eco-imperial" dimension of colonialism—the appropriation and commodification of landscapes. Yet in postcolonial fiction, forests frequently resist such commodification by reasserting themselves as spaces of secrecy, healing, and ancestral presence.

The forest is also politically charged: it becomes the refuge of insurgents, the hiding place of outcasts, and the symbol of anti-colonial struggle. In this way, forests in fiction participate in narrative action, often determining the trajectory of characters and communities.

2.2. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood*: The Forest as Resistance

In *Petals of Blood* (1977), Ngũgĩ situates forests at the center of Kenya's postcolonial condition. The novel traces the transformation of Ilmorog from a neglected village into a site of capitalist exploitation. Against this backdrop, the forest emerges as a **character with political agency**.

- **Sanctuary for Resistance**: Historically, the Mau Mau insurgents used forests as bases for guerrilla warfare against British colonial forces. In Ngũgĩ's narrative, echoes of this history persist. The forest embodies memory of resistance, a reminder that colonial domination was never absolute. It is a character whose "past" continues to shape the present.
- **Moral Space**: For Munira, Karega, and other protagonists, the forest is not neutral. It represents moral choices: complicity with neo-colonial elites or alignment with anti-capitalist struggle. The forest exerts pressure on characters, much like a human figure influencing decisions.
- **Witness to Violence**: The forest also absorbs ecological and human violence—deforestation, exploitation, and betrayal. Like the rivers in Ghosh and Roy, Ngũgĩ's forests function as memory-keepers, archiving histories of dispossession.

In this sense, the forest is more than metaphor. It acts as a **historical agent**, binding Kenya's colonial past with its neo-colonial present.

2.3. Forest Cosmologies: Indigenous Epistemologies

Ngũgĩ's forest resonates with Gikuyu cosmology, where land is sacred and forests are imbued with ancestral presence. Indigenous traditions often depict forests as homes of spirits, ancestors, or deities, affirming their personhood. When *Petals of Blood* foregrounds forests as living spaces of resistance, it taps into this cosmological framework, refusing colonial reductions of forests into exploitable resources.

Similar dynamics appear in South Asian contexts. For example, Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* invokes mangrove forests of the Sundarbans not just as dangerous terrain but as a sacred ecology bound up with Bon Bibi mythology. Here again, the forest is not backdrop but moral landscape, demanding ethical negotiation.

Indigenous epistemologies thus provide a crucial interpretive lens. They explain why forests appear in fiction as characters: because in local worldviews, they already are characters, bearing memory, mood, and morality.

2.4. Comparative Example: Forests in African and South Asian Fiction

While Ngũgĩ offers perhaps the most politically charged depiction of forests, other postcolonial texts similarly foreground their agency.

- **Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958)** portrays the sacred grove of the oracle as a forest space where community decisions are legitimated. Here, the forest is a mediator of justice.
- **Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017)** briefly invokes forests as contested terrains between state militarism and Adivasi communities in India. Forests in this context are battlegrounds that determine life and death.

- **Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1966)**, though more riverine, also suggests that landscapes including forests structure memory and identity, shaping how postcolonial characters negotiate cultural hybridity.

Across these examples, forests function not as neutral spaces but as **characters shaping plot trajectories, embodying histories, and mediating human decisions**.

2.5. Forest Agency and Narrative Form

Forests in these texts often disrupt narrative linearity. In *Petals of Blood*, memories of Mau Mau forests puncture the present, producing a nonlinear temporality where past and present coalesce. Similarly, in South Asian texts, forest myths resurface in contemporary struggles, binding mythic time to historical time.

This narrative function parallels Jane Bennett's "vibrant matter," where the vitality of nonhuman entities resists containment. Forests act unpredictably, sometimes offering refuge, sometimes threatening death. They resist being controlled by either colonial cartography or narrative expectation.

2.6. Forests and the Postcolonial Political

More than rivers, forests carry explicitly political resonances in postcolonial literature. They are not only ecological agents but also **spaces of anti-colonial and anti-capitalist struggle**. In *Petals of Blood*, the memory of Mau Mau resistance becomes a haunting force, compelling readers to acknowledge unfinished struggles against exploitation. The forest is not anthropomorphized but politicized: it remembers, resists, and judges.

Thus, forests are characters not only in the sense of narrative function but also in their ability to intervene in political discourse. They ask of both characters and readers: whose side are you on—exploiters or resisters?

2.7. Comparative Insights

Placed alongside rivers, forests highlight a different dimension of nonhuman agency:

- **Rivers** tend to mediate fate, memory, and ecological collectivity.
- **Forests** foreground resistance, secrecy, and the politics of land.

Both, however, affirm nonhumans as characters who shape narrative trajectory and ethical orientation.

3. Animals as Characters

3.1. The Animal in Postcolonial Narratives

Animals in postcolonial fiction often occupy an ambivalent position. Colonial discourse frequently reduced them to objects of hunting, spectacle, or resource extraction. Yet in indigenous and postcolonial contexts, animals are kin, deities, or messengers, participating in social and moral worlds. Contemporary fiction increasingly resists anthropocentric portrayals by granting animals **narrative presence and agency**.

Unlike symbolic animals in Western allegory (e.g., Orwell's *Animal Farm*), animals in postcolonial fiction often retain their material and cultural specificity. They are tied to landscapes, livelihoods, and myths. In this sense, they function as **characters** who influence events, embody histories, and demand ethical response.

3.2. *The Hungry Tide*: Dolphins and Tigers in the Sundarbans

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* foregrounds two key animals: the Irrawaddy dolphins and the Royal Bengal tiger.

- **Irrawaddy Dolphins**: For Piyali, the cetologist, dolphins are not only research subjects but also companions in her search for ecological meaning. Ghosh avoids sentimental anthropomorphism, instead emphasizing interspecies communication—moments when Piya feels she is "reading" the dolphins' patterns. The dolphins thus shape her intellectual and emotional journey, acting as co-narrators of the tide country.
- **The Tiger**: The tiger in the novel is both sacred and dangerous. Villagers kill a tiger trapped in their enclosure, an act that exposes tensions between survival and ecological reverence. The tiger here is not merely animal but a **moral provocateur**, forcing confrontation with the ethics of coexistence.

Through these animals, Ghosh demonstrates how postcolonial fiction narrates multispecies entanglements. The dolphins and tiger are not metaphors but active presences shaping human action and moral orientation.

3.3. *Animal's People*: Blurring the Human/Animal Divide

Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007), set in a fictionalized version of Bhopal after the Union Carbide disaster, offers perhaps the most radical depiction of animal agency. Its narrator, known only as Animal, walks on all fours due to spinal damage from toxic gas. Insisting "I'm not human," Animal reclaims his nonhuman identity as a form of resistance to pity, charity, and humanist norms.

- **Narrative Perspective**: By narrating through Animal's voice, Sinha collapses the human/animal binary. The novel itself becomes an experiment in **posthuman narration**, where the storyteller is neither fully human nor animal, but an in-between figure.
- **Ethical Provocation**: Animal's identity forces readers to confront the violence of industrial capitalism and environmental disaster. His animality is both a product of human cruelty and a site of empowerment.

- **Agency**: Unlike allegorical animals, Animal is a fully fleshed character with desires, humor, anger, and political consciousness. His very existence contests anthropocentric hierarchies.

In this novel, the animal is no longer backgrounded or symbolic. It speaks, narrates, and demands justice.

3.4. Comparative Examples of Animal Agency

Other postcolonial texts similarly foreground animals as characters:

- **Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* (1964)** invokes animals within Igbo cosmology, where they act as mediators of divine will.
- **J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999)**, though South African rather than strictly postcolonial, portrays dogs as ethical companions whose vulnerability challenges human arrogance.
- **Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017)** includes animals in its multi-voiced narrative, underscoring their presence in a shared ecology of suffering and resilience.

Across these works, animals disrupt anthropocentric narrative by asserting presence, influence, and affective weight.

3.5. Animals as Ethical and Political Characters

The nonhuman animal in postcolonial fiction often embodies ethical dilemmas. In *The Hungry Tide*, the killing of the tiger dramatizes survival vs. conservation. In *Animal's People*, the narrator's existence indicts global capitalism's disregard for vulnerable lives.

In both cases, animals are **characters of conscience**:

- They provoke moral reflection.
- They resist reduction to metaphor.
- They challenge human-centered justice frameworks.

This aligns with Donna Haraway's call to "make kin" with nonhuman others. Postcolonial fiction demonstrates that kinship is not metaphorical but material, forged in shared vulnerability to ecological and political violence.

3.6. Animals, Narrative Voice, and Form

Animals also reshape **narrative form**. Sinha's decision to let Animal narrate destabilizes realist conventions and forces readers into a posthuman mode of engagement. Similarly, Ghosh's careful depiction of dolphins invites readers into an interspecies epistemology, where human language struggles to grasp nonhuman communication.

Thus, animals do not only appear as plot elements—they **alter how stories are told**. They compel experiments with form, voice, and temporality.

3.7. Comparative Insights

Placed alongside rivers and forests, animals highlight a more intimate form of nonhuman agency:

- **Rivers** operate on collective, ecological scales.
- **Forests** embody political and historical struggles.
- **Animals** bring agency into personal, embodied, and ethical registers.

Together, they constitute a narrative ecology where nonhuman characters are indispensable to the unfolding of story and meaning.

Conclusion

The exploration of rivers, forests, and animals as characters in postcolonial fiction demonstrates a significant shift in literary imagination from anthropocentric storytelling to a more **ecocentric, posthuman narrative mode**. By foregrounding the agency of nonhuman entities, postcolonial writers disrupt inherited colonial epistemologies that reduced nature to resource, backdrop, or symbol. Instead, these works construct narrative ecologies in which nonhumans are participants in history, politics, and ethics.

Recasting the Nonhuman

Rivers such as the Sundarbans' tides in *The Hungry Tide* and Kerala's backwaters in *The God of Small Things* are not passive landscapes but active forces shaping identity, belonging, and displacement. They are characters with moods, rhythms, and even justice systems of their own. Forests in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* or Arundhati Roy's fiction serve as sites of memory and struggle, carrying historical trauma while offering shelter, resistance, and renewal. Animals, from Ghosh's dolphins and tiger to Sinha's hybrid narrator Animal, embody ethical and affective provocations, destabilizing the human/animal divide and calling for new relational ethics.

Across these examples, the nonhuman operates on multiple registers:

- **Material**: shaping livelihoods, migrations, and survival strategies.
- **Spiritual**: embodying cosmologies, myths, and rituals that resist colonial secular rationalism.
- **Ethical**: demanding recognition, compassion, and justice.
- **Narrative**: reshaping literary form through new voices, temporalities, and structures.

Contribution to Postcolonial and Ecocritical Studies

This reorientation of narrative toward the nonhuman makes several contributions:

1. **Extending Postcolonial Concerns**: Traditionally, postcolonial studies have focused on nation, identity, hybridity, and resistance. By including rivers, forests, and animals, postcolonial fiction widens its concern to ecological dispossession, environmental racism, and multispecies justice.
2. **Dialoguing with Ecocriticism**: While Western ecocriticism often emphasizes wilderness or climate change, postcolonial ecocriticism insists on histories of colonial extraction, environmental degradation, and indigenous cosmologies. Nonhuman characters embody these intersections, bridging global ecological debates with local specificities.
3. **Challenging Anthropocentrism**: These texts align with posthumanist and new materialist thought, emphasizing that humans are not sovereign masters but entangled beings. Literature becomes a medium to imagine relational ontologies where rivers, forests, and animals co-author human futures.

Ethical and Political Implications

The central ethical contribution of narrating the nonhuman lies in its call for **decentering the human**. The killing of the tiger in *The Hungry Tide*, the polluted bodies of Animal and his community in *Animal's People*, or the desecration of forests in Roy's fiction all point to the inseparability of ecological and social justice. In these works, to exploit the nonhuman is simultaneously to exploit marginalized humans. Thus, environmental crises are never purely natural—they are political, historical, and ethical crises as well.

By representing nonhuman entities as characters, postcolonial fiction foregrounds **shared vulnerability** in the Anthropocene. It insists that justice must be reimagined as multispecies, acknowledging that survival depends on kinship with nonhumans.

Toward Narrative Ecologies

Taken together, rivers, forests, and animals suggest a model of **narrative ecology**, where stories are not centered solely on human protagonists but distributed across networks of human and nonhuman actors. This ecological mode of narration challenges the linear, anthropocentric forms of colonial modernity and offers alternative temporalities rooted in cycles, flows, and multispecies relations.

For instance:

- Rivers narrate in rhythms of tides and floods.
- Forests narrate through seasonal cycles, silence, and growth.
- Animals narrate through embodied perspectives, altering narrative voice and empathy.

Postcolonial fiction thus invents new literary forms adequate to imagining entangled life in a damaged world.

Future Research Directions

While this paper has examined selected Anglophone texts, the field is wide open for comparative and interdisciplinary exploration. Future research may:

- Examine **non-Anglophone postcolonial literatures** (e.g., Caribbean Creole, African Francophone, or Indigenous Australian texts) for similar nonhuman narrations.
- Explore intersections of **gender and ecology**, analyzing how women writers in particular represent rivers, forests, and animals as kin.
- Incorporate **environmental humanities and science studies**, bridging literary analysis with ecological science, anthropology, and activism.
- Investigate how these narrative strategies engage with **climate change literature**, where the nonhuman is increasingly foregrounded as an active agent in planetary crisis.

Closing Reflections

In narrating rivers, forests, and animals as characters, postcolonial fiction performs more than literary innovation. It articulates a politics of survival and a philosophy of coexistence. By acknowledging the agency of the nonhuman, these texts reimagine what it means to live ethically in a world scarred by colonial exploitation, ecological devastation, and capitalist excess.

Ultimately, the turn to the nonhuman is not a retreat from human concerns but a deepening of them. It insists that the human cannot be understood apart from the river that sustains it, the forest that shelters it, or the animals with whom it shares vulnerability. In this sense, postcolonial fiction does not merely narrate the nonhuman—it **narrates with** the nonhuman, offering stories where all beings are characters in the unfinished drama of planetary survival.

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