TIDES OF GRIEF: WATER, MEMORY, AND LOSS IN RUSKIN BOND'S *ANGRY RIVER* AND COASTAL ANDHRA SHORT FICTION

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Abstract

The paper examines the emotional and ecological dimensions of water in Indian literature through the lens of Blue Humanities, an emerging field that foregrounds oceans, rivers, and other water bodies as active agents of culture, memory, and trauma. Drawing on two thematically parallel yet geographically distinct texts, Ruskin Bond's short novel *Angry River* and Kethu Viswanatha Reddy's Telugu short story "Neellu" (Water), the present study interrogates how water serves both as a metaphor and a medium for conveying sorrow, impermanence, and collective memory.

Set in a Himalayan town, *Angry River* portrays the haunting effects of river flood on the life of a young girl and the lingering sorrow suffered by the narrator. Contrary to this, "Neellu" offers a realistic portrayal of post-disaster distress in a coastal Andhra village, where a community faces displacement, caste dynamics, and ecological vulnerability. In spite of their differing topographies, both these narratives consider water as a powerful emotional and narrative force capable of evoking tenderness, destruction, and change.

By engaging with eco-critical theory, cultural geography, and postcolonial environmentalism, the paper argues that these works enrich the discourse of Blue Humanities in Indian literary studies. It also stresses the importance of incorporating such texts into the Indian classroom to cultivate environmental sensitivity and cultural awareness among learners. Ultimately, the study affirms that the literary imagination of water, whether as flood, tide, or river, serves as a profound site for understanding grief, memory, and human-nature entanglements in contemporary Indian fiction.

Keywords:

Blue Humanities, Eco-criticism, Grief and Memory, Indian Literature, Water Narratives

Introduction:

The Blue Humanities, an emerging interdisciplinary realm of study, provides ways to think about the ecological, emotional, and cultural meanings embedded within the world's waterscapes. While grounded ecological criticism has examined land-based geographies, the "oceanic turn" of the Blue Humanities casts water rivers, oceans, estuaries, deltas not just as setting, but as living, narrative agents informing, and informed by, human histories, traumas, and memories. As Steve Mentz argues (Mentz 2015, 5), "The ocean resists containment." By focusing on the water as a language of fluidity and drift, we may reconnect the entangled narratives of loss, transformation, and survival as a craftable narrative problem in literary texts.

Water has been many things in India historically: sacredness, nourishment, extermination and displacement. The Ganga and Godavari Rivers are worshipped as divine and are representations of the cultural anchor of Indian civilization, but they also annually kill hundreds if not thousands through floods and cyclones. The seas and tributaries of coastal Andhra Pradesh provide nourishment for agricultural and fishing communities, but they also provide unpredictable monsoons that threaten inundation and destruction from cyclones. Water sentimentalizes, it nourishes, it laments, it recollects. More and more, the conflicting feelings around water are being captured in Indian literature (including local language regional writing) that are trying to write accounts of water that are affective and politically motivated.

This essay investigates two contextualized narratives about their portrayals of grief, memory and ecological fragility: Ruskin Bond's *Angry River* and Kethu Viswanatha Reddy's '"Neellu" (Water). Bond's *Angry River* (1990), situated in a Himalayan town, narrates the flood-related death of a young girl that is rendered through the narrator's muted but longing mourning: "Even now, I see her in my dreams, half in sunlight, half in mist" (*Angry River*, 34). The river is not only a site for loss; but it acts as a conflation of time, trauma and temporal movement. Meanwhile, Reddy's "Neellu", situated in a flood-ravaged village in coastal Andhra, offers a true representation of a community, grappling with the impact of flooding and their displacement, caste, and emotional trauma. One character in the novel states, "Water has entered our bodies. It will never leave. It will keep reminding us" (Neellu, trans, 2008, 92). Water has no poetic resonance here; it is embodied distress that has swamped both the psychological and social terrains of the people living in the village.

While both the texts taken for study differ geographically and stylistically (Bond's lyrical minimalism and Reddy's down-to-earth realism), they employ water as a force, both narratively and emotionally. Using a close reading approach to these works, this paper will contribute to the emerging domains of Blue Humanities, ecocriticism and trauma studies. The paper will make obvious how water in Indian fiction carries the double function as both witness and memory, as both bearers of personal grief and collective loss. This study will also consider the educational significance of these narratives for developing environmental awareness and emotional literacy as both authors ask something of their readers, in particular, as learners in regions of increasing vulnerability to climate turmoil.

This paper contrasts Bond's Himalayan river and Reddy's coastal floodplain to demonstrate how water as a twice written over palimpsest of memory and feeling, shapes both the unfolding of the plot and the reader's epistolary political and ecological entanglement with ideas of loss as a collective human experience.

Theoretical Framework:

This study uses an interdisciplinary theoretical approach incorporating the Blue Humanities, ecocriticism, memory and trauma studies, and cultural geography, to examine how water functions as an ecological agent and emotional archive in *Angry River* and "Neellu".

Central to this exploration is the concept of the Blue Humanities, a new area of inquiry that reframes bodies of water as active agents rather than passive spaces of cultural and literary creation. As Steve Mentz (2015) notes, the sea, river, or flood is an overwhelming hoard of narratives, disruptions, and histories: "Our stories about water are never placid; they shift, swell, and submerge" (p. 7). The river in *Angry River*, exemplifies this, quietly taking the narration and leaving behind echoes of loss, as Bond writes, "The river was flowing, strong and full, washing the rocks smooth. She had gone with it" (*Angry River*, p. 26). The river is both the perpetrator and confessor, a river of memories and mourning in its flow.

Extending this framework, Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2007) argues that coasts and islands represent a space where colonial/postcolonial pasts and histories of ecological trauma are intimately entangled. Her concept of "oceanic intimacy" allows us to unpack "Neellu", in which water is not just an autonomous natural force but a socially disruptive one. Instead, village death is a consequence of underdevelopment, exacerbated by caste inequality, economic neglect, and political apathy. The natural disaster is more than a tragic, senseless act of capital-nature metonymy: it uncovers an ingrained societal vulnerability that is layered over class and geography.

From an ecocritical status, Amitav Ghosh's notion of "environmental amnesia" (2016) is an important component. Ghosh critiques the writing world for not fully being able to articulate a representation of the cultural and ecological catastrophes that are occurring in the world. In an attempt to address this issue of amnesia, one of the ways Reddy systematically takes action is to narrate a personal account of a larger ecological crisis in "Neellu". Reddy's character observes, "Even the earth quakes as the waters rise," which captures the visceral fear and continuity of environmental trauma that is mentioned earlier (Neellu, p. 89). Therefore, water is no longer a component of a symbolic status as it becomes a testimonial space for militant ethical action.

Trauma theory – especially as articulated by Cathy Caruth (1996) – enriches the analysis as well. Caruth characterizes trauma as "an experience that is overwhelming and is not fully known when it occurs, but returns later" (p. 11), which is evident in the case of Sita in that the narrator cannot evidently fully take in Sita's death; the flood becomes a metaphorical rupture that interrupts linear time and emotional closure. Marianne Hirsch's idea of postmemory, which is when a traumatic memory is inherited, presents us with another entry point. In "Neellu", the younger generations carry the burden of the collective memory of the preceding floods, and it is a material and lived experience they inherit, synthesizing their understanding of the specific land and their future.

Finally, building off of cultural geography, specifically Yi-Fu Tuan's *Space and Place* (1977), both texts can be read as establishing "storied spaces," as physical landscapes become laden with memory and meaning. In *Angry River*, the river is a liminal zone--between life and death, and past and present. The floodplain, in "Neellu", becomes a social palimpsest layered with grief, caste, and resilience.

Combined, these frameworks provide a stratified reading of water in Indian fiction not as the backdrop, but as an active character, bearing the emotional, cultural and ecological burden of the narratives in which it flows.

Comparative Textual Analysis: "Water (Neellu)" by Kethu Viswanatha Reddy

Kethu Viswanatha Reddy's "Water (Neellu)" offers a regional, realistic and politically situated counter-narrative to Ruskin Bond's *Angry River*. "Water", set in a coastal village in Andhra Pradesh recovering from flooding, dramatises the collective distress of marginalised rural populations affected by bodily, caste, class, and ecological vulnerabilities. Whereas Bond's narrative is intimate and lyrical, Reddy's narrative is collective, political, and

documentary, clearly articulating that grief in areas of ecological fragility is never simply individual, it is structural.

The setting in "Neellu" is not passive; it is charged with memory, displacement, and systemic neglect. The flood-affected village becomes a storied landscape what Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) calls "place made meaningful by experience" (*Space and Place*, p. 6). The river and sea, once integral to livelihood, now mark destruction. As one inhabitant of the village observes in the novel: "Water has entered our bodies. It will never leave. It will keep reminding us" (Neellu, trans. 2008, p. 92). Here, water is portrayed as embodied trauma and an inescapable archive of suffering that continues long after the disaster ends.

The author of "Neellu" interrogates natural fury and its interaction with human-created vulnerabilities. The rural people, who are mainly the subaltern Dalits and backward caste groups, are victimized by a system that ignores them in the post-disaster relief, resettlement and rehabilitation. Elizabeth DeLoughrey's notion of "archipelagic thinking" assists in situating this as a part of a larger postcolonial environmental injustice, where the coastal regions are seen as sites of exploitation and dispossession (*Routes and Roots*, 2007, p. 28). The recurring floods that happen across the Indian subcontinent are not only ecological but also political disasters.

Women in "Neellu" face an unfair brunt, and Reddy depicts it with great stoicism. These rural folks are the caretakers of food and water and familial bonding, and their compounded trauma is the result of scarcity, silence, and sacrifice. A mother mourns her child's hunger, not with outrage or protest, but with numbness, and resilience to survive and feed her child. Marianne Hirsch's "postmemory" - the passing on of trauma to future generations is relevant here: the children are not just inheriting flooded homes but flooded histories, and these histories will influence how they think about land, water, and belonging (*Family Frames*, 1997, p. 22).

In terms of style, Reddy's stark realism mimics the emotional detachment of the characters. There is no sentimentality here; suffering, in all of its realism, is rendered without any added emotional heft. The realism the author employs in the story does not alienate the reader, but underlines systemic neglect that is prevalent. The water does not whisper or moan; it screams from deprivation, loss of land, and bureaucratic indifference. Reddy's water contrasts with the watery abstraction and lyricism of Bond's river; Reddy's water is muddy, thick, and accusatory.

Although their tones differ, *Angry River* and "Neellu" intersect in deploying water as a narrative actor—not scenery, but force. In *Angry River*, the river is an introjection of personal

loss and grief, while in "Neellu" it represents collective loss and suffering, both corporeal and psychic. Collectively, the two texts contribute to Blue Humanities which can be taken as an Indian contribution and brings out the global relevance of regional literature.

Reddy's "Neellu" politicizes what Bond's *Angry River* personalizes, allowing for a regional-global dialectic that affirms that literary water narratives, be they Himalayan or coastal, private or collective, are indispensable to understanding grief, memory, and ecological grief in the 21st century.

Textual Analysis: *Angry River* by Ruskin Bond

In Ruskin Bond's *Angry River*, the river serves as a striking emotional presence and the novella, written in a minimalist style, is a remarkably powerful testament to river life. The novella is set in a riverside town in North India and speaks to life's fragility when positioned against the power of nature. The river, while quiet, looms and represents both a physical and mental presence, flowing throughout the reader's landscape in tandem with the characters' experiences, and flow, is a metaphor for loss, temporariness, and unanswered questions.

The novella begins with a subtle indication of danger. "If the river rises higher… then go up into the peepul tree" (Bond, *Angry River*, p. 14), Sita's grandfather tells her. The advice is routine, yet it holds generations of experience - respect for water's twofold capacity for nurturing and obliteration. That advice would prove useless. As the floodwaters consume the island, Bond offers: "The world was one vast river" (p. 15), absurdly turning something recognizable into a maddening abyss of loss. This imagery complements a developing interest in Blue Humanities scholarship, particularly seen in Steve Mentz's observation that water "reminds us that no boundaries are ever stable" (*Shipwreck Modernity*, 2015, p. 18) - the dissolution of not only geographies, but emotional contingencies.

Sita's silent suffering is conveyed with muted lyricism. The care for the old lady in the story "She had done her best to look after the old lady" (Bond, p. 15) is an emblem of innocence in chaos. When the flood takes her doll, Mumta, it is not merely a child's toy that is swept away, nothing less than a loss of security, childhood and comfort. The flood is an agent of irrevocable change that alters both the worn physical world and Sita's world of the mind.

What remains decidedly haunting is the story's silence regarding Sita's fate. Bond's text avoids dramatization or even rescue. The tragedy is stated but not shown: "Even now, I see her in my dreams, half in sunlight, half in mist" (p. 34). This image, and Cathy Caruth's (1996) definition of trauma, which is "that which returns, belatedly and disruptively"

(*Unclaimed Experience,* p.11), are not far apart. The narrator is not healed, and the trauma is archived in memory, rising again and again in dreams and silence.

Bond's stylistic choices convey the silence of grieving. Short sentences, thin dialogue, and tangible imagery of nature create an emotional landscape devoid of absence. The peepul tree, that once lived proudly, is uprooted. "The tree gave way and it, too, was taken by the river" (Bond, p.16). The symbolic destruction is representative of not only an environmental destruction and an ecological vulnerability but also as a symbol of the limitations of human ability to defend against nature's disregard for our presence on this land.

From the perspective of Blue Humanities, the river in *Angry River* is more than simply a risk; it exists as an emotional geography - a convergence of memory, loss, and ecology. Bond's narrative illustrates that water does not forget; it records and bears the residue of life and death. In *Angry River*, grief is not resolved; grief stays submerged but continues to remain in the background - like the river. The novella reminds us that emotional resolutions are not as permanent as we tend to think; memory like water itself is a flowing, shifting, and tenacious thing.

Comparative Discussion: Water as a Cultural and Emotional Signifier in *Angry River* and "Neellu":

Both *Angry River* by Ruskin Bond and "Neellu" (Water) by Kethu Viswanatha Reddy place water as a key cultural and emotional signifier, but they deploy diverse narrative strategies and cover different geographies. In Bond's Himalayan novella, the river has a melancholic nature, flowing through memory and grief quietly. Reddy's drought-stricken Rayalaseema, by contrast, has water represented by glaring absence, representing a collective loss of rainfall and crops with minimal systemic accountability. Both Bond and Reddy do not represent water as simply an environmental backdrop, but rather as a useful metaphor to examine loss, memory, gendered loss, and socio-ecological vulnerability.

In *Angry River*, the river serves not only as witness, but also participator, in the narrator's individual trauma. Bond's lyrical minimalism communicates the emotional significance of place: "Even now, I see her in my dreams, half in sunlight, half in mist" (*Angry River*, p 34). The river becomes a site of memory, its stillness sitting in concert with the unpredictable nature of Sita's death. That early warning from the narrator's grandfather: "If the river rises higher... then climb into the peepul tree" (p14), is informed knowledge of the river's unpredictability, yet, he was not able to save her. After all, the peepul tree--the symbol of safety--came down as well: "The tree gave way, and the river took it too" (p 16). Bond seizes

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nature as indeterminate--as both healing and hurt, as noted by Steve Mentz, that water "works against containment", and is "a space of disruption" (*Shipwreck Modernity* 2015, p 7).

In contrast, "Neellu" traces the absence of water and its material effects. Reddy's depiction shows villagers grappling with dry wells and parched ground, but this reveals more than environmental degradation: it reveals structural amnesia. One inhabitant of the village mentions, "water has come into, in universal or particular form, to our bodies. It's water, in its full life-promising substance, but it won't go inside… it will always remind us" (Neellu, trans. 2008, p. 92). This highlights the distress that is internalized in such a way that remembering melds inside a process of aqueousness. The realism of the story won't thaw into poetic abstractions, but rather illuminates caste rankings, gendered norms, and the heart-breaking failings of the state in intervening for disaster relief. Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2007, p. 28) explains that coasts and deltas, or "archive of environmental injustice" pushes the water scarcity to make visible the injustices made invisible through social arrangements.

The role of gender in both narratives adds further complexity to their emotional geographies. Sita is not a speaking protagonist; her narrative is mediated through a male narrator who laments for her with a light sorrow. "Neellu", on the other hand, places women as active bearers of suffering. They fetch water, they manifest silence, and they represent agency—as victims of drought but also as subjects of systemic suffering. Hirsch's conceptualization of "postmemory" (1997, p. 22) is clear when women pass on their trauma not as memory, but inheritances that become collective rather than wounds.

Although Sita is contemplative and elegiac and Neellu is confrontational and communal, both texts come together in their contention that water is always political. Whether flowing gently through valleys of the Himalaya or absent from a parched Andhra soil, water becomes a medium for indicating loss, yearning, and lived resistance. As literary representations of the Blue Humanities, *Angry River* and "Neellu" remind us that water, whether present or absent, is an abiding marker of human vulnerability, resilience, and interrogating climate in relation to survival.

Pedagogical Implications:

Including *Angry River* and "Neellu" in college curriculum opens up strong pedagogical possibilities for aiding students understand the cultural, emotional, and ecological aspects of literature. Both texts treat water as more than a resource--they use water as a symbol in complex ways: *Angry River* uses the river to engage memory and grief in potent manner; "Neellu" emphasizes systemic injustice through its depiction of the multifaceted impact of

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drought on the lives of the people. These starkingly contrast approaches can allow educators to showcase comparative literary analysis and investigate how imagery of water is used in different regions and languages. The texts also provide avenues for interdisciplinary learning and can provide links to environmental studies, gender studies, and social justice. For example, "Neellu" has real-world significance through which to discuss water politics, caste-based inequities, and women's labour in rural India. Each of the texts would also be well-suited to experiential and critical pedagogies.

Without a doubt, Bond's *Angry River* allows students to probe narrative voice, unreliable memory, and lyrical prose with the emotional interiority and narrative restraint of the text. Reddy's dissociation, beauty and stark realism in "Neellu" nurtures conversation around representation of rural struggles, activist literature, and ethics of storytelling. Moreover, both texts allow for empathetic engagement and invite learners to consider how literature affects and reflects human experience with nature and loss.

Both texts are also valuable to English language learners as they use rich, and yet accessible, vocabulary and promote collaborative learning by engaging learners in discussion around reflective writing, role-play, and debate. Perhaps most importantly, these texts provide opportunities to facilitate socio-emotional learning and critical thinking whilst empowering students to link real-life challenges beyond the literary narrative to wider cultural and ecological issues pertinent to the 21st-century citizenship.

Conclusion:

Whether flowing, standing still, or missing altogether, the metaphor of water in Indian literature runs deep and wide, unencumbered by geography, language, and genre. Water acts as emblematic figure in both regional and pan-Indian narratives; it is often an emblem for memory, yearning, trauma, and hope. These forms of symbolic inscriptions are infused with lived realities for a people with worship-worthy rivers from which to pollute, and where drought and flood sit uncomfortably exist as two sides of the same coin. The contemplative river in Ruskin Bond's *Angry River* is not far removed from dry wells seen in Kethu Viswanatha Reddy's "Neellu", each representing a distinctly cultural and emotional register for water—a site of mourning and a call for equity.

In the context of deteriorating climate change, the record and reading of such water narratives becomes the need of the hour. These texts not only describe and depict the environmental devastation of climate change but also discuss the effects on the social and psychological aspects of our life. They indicate the ways in which communities—especially marginalized

ones—relate to nature in visceral, embodied, and affective ways. Consequently, these pieces of literature act as repositories of ecological memory and moral imperative.

There remains an urgent need to expand Blue Humanities in Indian literary studies, which explores water's emotional, spiritual, and cultural dimensions. Indian contexts offer better frameworks than those of the West, and call for an intersectional perspective with caste, class, gender, and regional ecology shaping the literary significance of water.

Bringing such texts into regional school and college curricula can foreground the distance between literature and the lived experience of the reader, help build ecological sensibilities and a sense of cultural rootedness and empathy, and make literature not simply a reflection of the world, but reflect the world as it can be. In listening to the voices of water in Indian literature, we are not just reading stories; we are remembering, mourning, and preparing to heal.

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