

The Architecture of Eco-Dread: Technocratic Alienation and Material Survival in Contemporary Western and Indian Fiction

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Abstract: *This article examines the divergent stylistic and thematic paradigms of comparative ecocriticism in contemporary Western and Indian literature. By contrasting Don DeLillo's *White Noise* with Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, we investigate how geographic and economic positioning shapes narrative responses to environmental collapse. Western eco-literature employs a minimalist, detached irony to depict the technocratic alienation of the Global North, evading Rob Nixon's framework of "slow violence." In contrast, Indian eco-literature utilizes rich, mythic, non-linear, and trans-corporeal forms to confront the visceral crises of community survival, embodying Joan Martinez-Alier's "environmentalism of the poor." This article expands on these frameworks by integrating Malcom Ferdinand's decolonial ecology and the energy humanities' concept of petrophonics. It critiques the global literary marketplace's commodification of postcolonial environmental trauma, arguing that literature provides the essential "human metrics" required to critique technocratic governance and expand international climate policy.*

Keywords: *Comparative Ecocriticism, Slow Violence, Environmentalism of the Poor, Decolonial Ecology, Petrophonics.*

Introduction: The Geopolitical Fractures of Ecological Representation

Don DeLillo published his landmark novel *White Noise* on January 21, 1985, establishing a foundational baseline for the Western paradigm of simulated eco-dread and postmodern environmental anxiety. Since the year 1985, this literary benchmark has defined how post-industrial societies conceptualize ecological collapse through the lens of media saturation, technological abstraction, and administrative simulation. The historical arrival of DeLillo's narrative was immediately shadowed by a real-world catastrophe: only weeks prior, on the night of December 2, 1984, the Union Carbide pesticide plant in Bhopal, India, vented forty tons of highly toxic methyl isocyanate gas, instantly exposing hundreds of thousands of marginalized people to a visceral, lethal reality. While the disaster in Bhopal was marked by its immediate, somatic materiality—a sudden, lethal intrusion of corporate negligence into the physical bodies of a disenfranchised population—the fictional railcar derailment in *White Noise* is experienced primarily through television screens, car radios, and bureaucratic tracking models. This stark contrast, persisting since the year 1985, exposes a profound geographic and economic divide in environmental representation: while the Global North frequently conceptualizes environmental collapse as an intellectualized, simulated spectacle, the Global South experiences it as an immediate, ongoing struggle for bodily and community survival.

Since the year 1985, literary scholars have turned to *White Noise* to trace the emergence of "toxic consciousness" and "toxic discourse" in the contemporary American imagination. Toxic consciousness represents a fundamental shift in national identity, wherein the natural world is recognized as permanently compromised by industrial capitalism, turning the landscape into a source of pervasive existential dread. The "Airborne Toxic Event" in

DeLillo's narrative, characterized by the release of the fictional chemical Nyodene D., operates as a direct literary precursor to contemporary ecological anxieties. Published just a year before the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster, the novel acts as a hairline prophecy of an era where human-made hazards are characterized by invisible, atmospheric toxicity that resists traditional sensory detection. To theorize this geographical divergence, environmental humanities scholars deploy Rob Nixon's framework of "slow violence" and Joan Martinez-Alier's concept of the "environmentalism of the poor". Brought into conversation, these theories reveal how the Global North utilizes technological abstraction and economic insulation to defer the recognition of gradual environmental erosion, while the Global South is forced by economic necessity, colonial legacies, and state neglect into an immediate, bodily confrontation with planetary change.

Comparative Realities of Atmospheric Assaults and Respiration

The physical realities of chemical exposure expose a profound division in how human bodies interact with environmental hazards. Both the Bhopal disaster and the fictional Airborne Toxic Event in *White Noise* represent profound assaults on respiration, yet they unfold along radically asymmetrical political and economic axes. This structural divide is further illuminated by comparing these events with other historical assaults on respiration, such as the "World Trade Center aerosol" (WTC aerosol) produced during the September 11 attacks, the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, and the COVID-19 pandemic. In these instances, corporate and state authorities engaged in denial, contesting the science of damage to control the boundary between recognized sufferers and non-sufferers.

Analyzing these atmospheric crises reveals stark structural differences:

- Bhopal Gas Tragedy (December 1984): Inhalation of uncontained methyl isocyanate (MIC) gas caused immediate suffocation, stinging eyes, coughing, and catastrophic acute mortality. The administrative response was defined by ignored calls for justice and corporate negligence shielded by transnational legal deferral.
- Airborne Toxic Event (Fictional, 1985): Atmospheric drift of Nyodene D. over an affluent suburb caused minor, radio-prompted symptoms and simulated panic managed through SIMUVAC tracking models, radio broadcasts, and computerized data systems.
- Chernobyl Nuclear Disaster (April 1986): Fallout of radioactive isotopes (Cesium-137, Iodine-131) caused long-term cancers, cellular degradation, and genetic mutations, met with state denial and official containment zones.
- World Trade Center Aerosol (September 2001): Inhalation of toxic particulate matter and pulverized white dust led to respiratory distress and progressive chronic illnesses, structurally obscured by media framing that focused on a sudden theological spectacle.
- COVID-19 Pandemic (Emergence 2019/2020): Inhalation of airborne SARS-CoV-2 pathogens caused acute respiratory distress and systemic inflammation, managed via digital dashboards, lockdowns, and contested regimes of epidemiological truth.

Technocratic Alienation and the Biopolitical State in the Global North

In *White Noise*, the sterile, hyper-mediated insulation of suburban America is structurally embodied by the protagonist, Jack Gladney, a professor of "Hitler Studies". Jack's entire existence is anchored in a belief that his class, race, and academic status shield him from environmental precarity, dismissing the toxic Nyodene D. cloud as a threat reserved for the poor in low-lying areas. When the evacuation forces his family into their station wagon, this illusion of safety is dismantled by a digital intrusion. Subjected to a medical evaluation,

Jack's physical body is transformed into a digital data-point. The technician processes his history through a computerized database, informing Jack that his survival prospects are defined by a "massive data-base tally". This transition from physical organism to statistical representation demonstrates the emergence of neoliberal "biological citizenship". The state captures his privacy, reducing his existential dread to a digital dashboard and rendering him a passive consumer of safety statistics.

This biopolitical control extends domestically through his wife, Babette, and her secret use of the experimental drug Dylar. Babette participates in an unauthorized, exploitative clinical trial to chemically suppress her fear of death. Dylar parallels the town's reliance on SIMUVAC; both outsource somatic perception to administrative or chemical intervention. This somatic outsourcing is met with systematic gaslighting by Jack, who continuously minimizes and corrects Babette's self-understanding into a simplified version. This patriarchal control echoes Aldous Huxley's *Ape and Essence*, where environmental collapse is bound to reproductive control, gendered suffering, and the ritualized exploitation of women by a technocratic, patriarchal order. Through Babette's clinical subjugation, DeLillo demonstrates how capitalism commodifies the very fear of death it generates, turning existential crisis into a marketable, chemical transaction.

Soundscapes of Petromodernity and the Energy Unconscious

To analyze the post-industrial subject's sensory disorientation since 1985, energy humanities scholars David Janzen and Reuben Martens conceptualize "petrophonics". Petrophonics are defined as the highly specific forms of noise and vibrational byproducts of fossil fuel dependency that pervade contemporary soundscapes, operating as materialist acoustic forces that condition human culture and psychology. These sounds—traffic noise, pipeline hums, combustion engines—exist independent of active, conscious audibility, yet they exert a material, physiological, and psychological impact on humans and non-humans. Phenomenologically neutral, they become affectively powerful when observed, interpreted through the observer's social, cultural, political, and economic predispositions.

The physical reality of petrophonics is felt directly: field research near heavy transit corridors like Whoop-Up Drive in Lethbridge, Canada—constructed specifically to transport coal—reveals how vehicular vibrations physically travel through the earth, disrupting noise-cancelling headphones and exposing the illusion of technological isolation. This conditioning is organized across a four-tiered petrophonic spectrum:

- Level 1: Extraction Noise: Generated by refineries, chemical plants, and derailments, sublimating chemical threats into distant, aestheticized visual spectacles (e.g., Jack Gladney watching the Nyodene D. cloud through binoculars).
- Level 2: Structural Noise: Generated by pipelines, municipal grids, and SIMUVAC data systems, prompting absolute reliance on institutional, data-driven safety parameters (e.g., computerized database tallies reducing Jack to the sum total of his data).
- Level 3: Consumption Noise: Generated by combustion engines and highway drones, normalizing fossil-fuel dependency while escalating existential dread (e.g., the Gladney family's evacuation amidst highway noise).
- Level 4: Derivative Noise: Generated by synthetic appliance hums and car radio signals, inducing a somatic outsourcing where physical symptoms are dictated by external media feeds (e.g., the Gladney children displaying physical symptoms in sync with radio broadcasts).

The Environmentalism of the Poor and Decolonial Ecology

In Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), nature is represented not as a simulated spectacle, but as an active, volatile force demanding a profound somatic literacy for physical survival. In the Sundarbans, land is fluid—constantly disappearing and reappearing with the shifting tides, presenting a physical environment that actively resists technocratic capture. This conflict is dramatized through Piya, a Western-trained cetologist equipped with a GPS monitor, and Fokir, a local subaltern fisherman. The fluid geography renders Piya's digital maps obsolete, forcing her to rely on Fokir's intuitive navigation. Fokir reads the environment as a living network, calibrating global scientific models through localized, sensory awareness of salinity, currents, and animal behavior. This interaction highlights a necessary symbiosis: global scientific models must be grounded in and calibrated by the local ecological knowledge of subaltern communities.

This perspective aligns with "material ecocriticism," which conceptualizes nonhuman matter as an active, meaning-generating agent. In *The Hungry Tide*, tidal movements speak a silent language that disrupts human designs. In *The God of Small Things*, the Meenachil River is represented as a "corporeal palimpsest," carrying the ecological and historical trauma of upstream industrialization. By 1993, the river has become a choked, toxic sewer, shrinking "like a wounded creature"—an ecological deterioration co-constitutive of the social violence inflicted upon the Untouchable Velutha and the marginalized protagonist Ammu.

To conceptualize this body-land continuum, postcolonial ecocriticism must engage with Malcom Ferdinand's "decolonial ecology" and the "colonial and environmental double fracture". Modernity is structured by a fundamental divorce between the environmental fracture (ecosystem devastation) and the colonial fracture (struggles against imperial domination). Ferdinand challenges this double fracture utilizing the metaphor of the slave ship, illustrating how global ecological crises do not affect humanity uniformly: while some occupy secure, insulated upper decks, subaltern populations are shackled inside the hold, positioned as expendable assets.

This body-land continuum is theoretically grounded in four distinct conceptual frameworks:

1. **Decolonial Ecology:** Integrates anti-colonial struggle with ecological preservation, critiquing "colonial ecology" models that treat subaltern bodies as expendable debris, represented by the "Maroon" framework of localized resistance and living off the land.
2. **Somatic Literacy:** Demands a visceral, sensory reading of volatile physical environments, directly rejecting an absolute reliance on digital, technocratic instruments (e.g., GPS failures during Fokir's intuitive navigation of tidal shifts).
3. **Trans-corporeality:** Conceptualizes the human body as an open, porous site intermeshed with its environment, tracing how toxic accumulation is co-constitutive of social and historical violence (e.g., the Meenachil River shrinking like a wounded creature alongside subaltern suffering).
4. **Environmentalism of the Poor:** Focuses on resource conflicts centered on immediate local survival and livelihoods, critiquing Global North "wilderness preservation" models that violently displace local communities (e.g., Fokir's community resisting displacement caused by tiger conservation policies).

This double fracture also operates within the Global North, where slow violence dispo-

portionately impacts working-class communities, as shown in Ann Pancake's *Strange as This Weather Has Been* (Appalachia's devastation by mountaintop removal) and Richard Powers's *Gain* (corporate toxicity in Illinois causing cancer). These narratives illustrate that the "writer-activist" plays a crucial role in making invisible, slow-moving toxicity legible, fostering a domestic solidarity that aligns with the environmentalism of the poor.

The Political Economy and Commodity Paradox of the Global Literary Marketplace

When postcolonial eco-criticism enters the global literary marketplace, it encounters a profound commodity paradox. While novels like *The Hungry Tide* and *The God of Small Things* critique global capitalism, they rely on multinational publishing houses to achieve international reach. In this market, marketing strategies frequently commodify environmental trauma, packaging it into a romanticized spectacle for metropolitan readers through the "postcolonial exotic". This selective commodification is further driven by "spatial charisma," which concentrates attention on highly attractive, charismatic landscapes, rendering uncharismatic terrains of slow violence and everyday industrial decay invisible.

This uneven cartography is compounded by the "NGOization of literature". Following the structural adjustment policies of the IMF and the World Bank, local publishing infrastructures in the Global South collapsed, leaving writers dependent on Western NGOs, philanthropic donations, and European literary festivals. This donor dependency promotes "extroverted" narratives facing outward toward Western readerships, utilizing human rights narratives as forms of racial governance that profit metropolitan publishers while alienating local audiences through high book pricing.

This dynamic is parallel to a broader "cultural climate consensus" of environmental absence in contemporary high-brow fiction. Matthew Schneider-Mayerson's empirical study of short fiction published in *The New Yorker* between 2014 and 2023 reveals a striking systemic avoidance of ecological crises in mainstream Western literature. The study analyzed a total of 474 original short stories using the Strategic Environmental Narratives codebook, establishing a representative baseline:

- **Total Stories Analyzed:** 474 original short stories, establishing a comprehensive, representative baseline of contemporary high-brow literary output.
- **Climate Change Inclusion:** Only 10.1% of published stories included climate change at all, reflecting a stark "cultural climate consensus" of strategic absence and avoidance.
- **Broader Environmental Crisis Mention:** 20.9% of published stories mentioned any major environmental problem (including pollution, deforestation, species loss), demonstrating that the vast majority of mainstream fiction serves to distract readers from planetary collapse.
- **Systemic Environmental Absence:** Over 90% of published stories exhibited a complete systemic absence of environmental content, segregating ecological crisis as a niche, exotic specialty, and reinforcing the dangerous illusion of post-industrial insulation.

Even when environmental issues appeared, they were often minimized, mentioned only in passing, or entirely detached from human responsibility. This systematic absence in mainstream fiction reinforces the illusion of post-industrial insulation, allowing readers in the Global North to treat climate change as a distant or non-existent phenomenon.

Synthesis and Decolonial Recommendations for Global Policy

The comparative analysis of Western and Indian eco-literature demonstrates that the global environmental crisis is a profound crisis of representation, imagination, and geopolit-

ical inequality. Don DeLillo's *White Noise* maps the technocratic alienation of the post-industrial North, where nature is replaced by simulation and environmental risk is buffered by petrophonic normalization and bureaucratic mediation. Conversely, Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* ground their narratives in the visceral, immediate crises of the Global South, utilizing material ecocriticism, trans-corporeality, and temporal loopings to perform a necessary somatic literacy. Ultimately, these texts achieve what international policy frameworks cannot: they provide the vital "human metrics" of ecological collapse. While global climate governance operates through abstract data models, carbon offsets, and top-down conservation strategies that often displace vulnerable populations, literature forces an encounter with the lived, somatic reality of environmental degradation.

To navigate this landscape and foster true environmental recovery, international environmental policy must systematically transition away from "colonial ecology" models that prioritize abstract preservation over human livelihoods. Conservation efforts must integrate the somatic literacy and local ecological knowledge of subaltern communities, recognizing that human survival and ecosystem health are co-constitutive. Furthermore, global climate governance must move beyond green capitalist frameworks, such as carbon offset markets, which often exacerbate inequalities and allow high-emitting nations to buy their way out of structural change. True environmental justice requires addressing the unequal ecological exchange and resource extraction that target marginalized territories. Simultaneously, academic and policy institutions must actively resist the "NGOization" of the environmental humanities. This requires supporting independent, localized publishing networks, domestic readerships, and community-led research initiatives within the Global South, thereby dismantling the intellectual hegemony that exports first-world environmental concepts to post-colonial spaces. Finally, future researchers must deploy "decolonial ecology" as a unifying framework to bridge the double fracture of modernity. This means analyzing environmental crises as historical continuities of colonialism, racism, and gendered extraction rather than treating them as sudden, ungrounded geological events. By embracing these pathways, the international community can move toward a truly global, eco-cosmopolitan model of environmental justice—one that de-centers Western technocracy and calibrates global science alongside the material survival and ancestral wisdom of the global subaltern.

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