



Unwriting Extinctions: Myth, Spectrality and Environmental Justice in Indian and Zambian Fiction

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Effacer les extinctions : mythe, spectralité et justice environnementale dans la fiction indienne et zambienne

Résumé

Cet article explore comment les récits sur la crise climatique provenant des pays du Sud reconfigurent le traumatisme et la mémoire au-delà des paradigmes basés sur les événements, à travers une lecture comparative de *Pterodactyl* de Mahasweta Devi, *Puran Sahay et Pirtha*, et *The Old Drift* de Namwali Serpell. Situé à l'intersection des études sur la mémoire et des sciences humaines environnementales, il soutient que la mémoire écologique fonctionne comme une forme de traumatisme distribué et intergénérationnel, façonné par la violence lente, le capitalisme extractif et la négligence de l'État. S'appuyant sur les concepts de postmémoire et de violence lente, l'article analyse comment le mythe, la spectralité et les formes narratives spéculatives récupèrent des histoires environnementales occultées qui résistent aux archives officielles. Les deux textes bouleversent les temporalités anthropocentriques et linéaires en mettant au premier plan des modes de mémoire non humains et multigénérationnels. Collectivement, ils remettent en question les cadres dominants du traumatisme et proposent la mémoire climatique comme un mode de témoignage éthique des dommages environnementaux dans les pays du Sud.

Mots-clés : Mémoire climatique, traumatisme environnemental, pays du Sud, forme narrative, violence lente

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Abstract

This article examines how climate-crisis narratives from India and Zambia unwrite extinction by refusing commodified modes of environmental representation and enacting decolonial resistance. Through a comparative reading of *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay and Pirtha* by Mahasweta Devi and *The Old Drift* by Namwali Serpell, the article

situates literary form at the intersection of Memory Studies and the Environmental Humanities. It argues that ecological memory functions as a form of distributed, intergenerational trauma shaped by slow violence, extractive capitalism, and state neglect. Drawing on postmemory and slow violence, the analysis shows how myth, spectrality, and speculative narrative forms recover occluded environmental histories that exceed official archives and anthropocentric temporalities. In both texts, nonhuman presences and multigenerational witnessing disrupt event-based trauma models, foregrounding ethical unwriting as a praxis of environmental justice. By juxtaposing Adivasi land struggles in Jharkhand with Zambian histories of dam-driven dispossession and water rights along the Zambezi, the article reconceptualises climate memory as a situated mode of reckoning that links remembrance to resistance against the uneven burdens of planetary overheating.

Keywords: Climate memory, Environmental trauma, Narrative form, Slow violence, Ecological witnessing

Introduction

In the Global South, the climate crisis does not announce itself through the spectacular theatrics of Hollywood-style apocalypses such as hurricanes ripping through coastal cities or ice shelves collapsing with dramatic rupture. Instead, it creeps in like a thief in the night, eroding the foundations of existence through insidious, protracted processes. Soil salinization turns fertile fields into barren salt flats, rising groundwater poisons wells in rural hamlets, or relentless monsoons swell rivers beyond their banks, swallowing villages whole over decades rather than days. This is the terrain of "slow violence," a concept Rob Nixon articulates as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space" (Nixon, 2011 : 2). In regions like sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, where colonial legacies of extraction persist in neocolonial forms of global capitalism, environmental degradation is not merely ecological but deeply social, intertwining with histories of dispossession, racialized labour, and epistemic erasure. This interplay finds its roots in decolonial thought, where Hirsch's concept of postmemory, though inflected by the Holocaust, resonates with Frantz Fanon's depiction of corporeal hauntings in *The Wretched of the Earth*, in which colonial violence imprints on Black bodies as intergenerational "nervous conditions" (Fanon, 1961). In ecological terms, this manifests as "toxic postmemory" –

a provocative and novel extension of Hirsch's postmemory framework (Hirsch, 2012 : 5), where intergenerational trauma transmits not only through narratives but via embodied environmental legacies such as bioaccumulated toxins (Venkatesan, Krishnan, 2022 : 3) with descendants inheriting polluted placentas alongside stories of dispossession. For instance, lead contamination from mining effluents persists in Jharkhand soils, elevating blood lead levels in children and correlating with neurodevelopmental risks across generations (Kumar *et al.* 2023 : 567). Similarly, mercury bioaccumulation in Zambezi River fish, driven by artisanal gold mining runoff, poses chronic exposure threats through dietary consumption, amplifying "eco-sickness" as a form of distributed ecological harm in Zambian communities (Mulenga *et al.* 2024 : 762 ; Venkatesan, Krishnan, 2022 : 5).

Dominant paradigms in trauma theory, heavily influenced by Western psychoanalytic traditions, have long privileged event-based models - singular shocks like genocides, wars, or natural disasters that leave indelible psychic scars amenable to narrative catharsis (Caruth, 1996). Yet, such frameworks falter in the face of slow violence, where harm is attritional, cumulative, and often invisible to the metrics of crisis journalism or state bureaucracies. In the Global South, this violence manifests through the deforestation of indigenous lands in Jharkhand, India, or the hydrological manipulations of the Zambezi River in Zambia, where dams like Kariba, built for "development" ¹under colonial and postcolonial rhetoric promising hydroelectric progress and economic modernization (Chigwata, 2024 ; Mashingaidze, 2021) flood ancestral territories, displacing communities without fanfare. Nixon's framework, meanwhile, critiques the unequal visibility of harms - a disparity in how incremental, attritional damages evade media and policy attention compared to instantaneous spectacles (Nixon, 2011 : 6, 15). While Chernobyl's meltdown garners global outrage, Bhopal's gas leak or Kariba's slow drownings fade into footnotes (Nixon,

¹ The term "development" here critiques the hegemonic discourse framing extractive infrastructures as benevolent modernization, often eliding indigenous dispossession [Chigwata (2024) on Kariba's "utopian" promises versus Tonga evictions, and Mashingaidze (2021) on neocolonial hydro-hegemony in the Zambezi basin.].

2011 : 15). To narrate these erosions requires forms that exceed linearity. Myths that loop through geological deep time, specters that haunt the present with the ghosts of futures unlived, and speculations that extrapolate the incremental into the prophetic.

This article turns to two exemplary texts from the literary landscapes of India and Zambia to interrogate these narrative innovations. These texts include Mahasweta Devi's *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay and Pirtha* (1995), a novella that spectralizes Adivasi dispossession through mythic invocation, and Namwali Serpell's *The Old Drift* (2019), an epic that sprawls across colonial to cli-fi timelines, entangling human genealogies with riverine fluxes and bioengineered plagues. Both works, emerging from the Global South's rich tradition of resistance literatures, reframe ecological memory as a species of postmemory - a "structure of transmission" across generations, as Marianne Hirsch describes it, wherein the "generation after" bears the "personal, collective, and cultural trauma" of forebears through imaginative prostheses rather than direct experience (Hirsch 2012, 5). At the confluence of Memory Studies and the Environmental Humanities, these narratives propose climate memory as an ethical praxis: a situated, nonhuman-centered witnessing that counters anthropocentric temporalities and the archival silences of official histories.

The rationale for this comparative pairing is deliberate and multifaceted, lending analytical depth to their narrative intersections. First, both texts deploy nonhuman spectrality - fossilized pterodactyls and meandering rivers as decolonial counter-archives. However, their socio-cultural specificities underscore divergent representational impacts: Devi's mythic compression reflects Adivasi oral traditions and caste-inflected postcolonial neglect in a newly liberalizing India, where 1990s economic reforms exacerbated tribal marginalization; Serpell's speculative sprawl, by contrast, captures Ba-Tonga hydro-epistemes and racial hybridities in Zambia's post-independence neoliberal era, marked by Chinese investments and climate-amplified floods. Temporally, Devi's late 20th century focus on immediate postcolonial aftermath contrasts Serpell's century-spanning arc from 1904 colonial drifts to 2020s Afrofuturist contagions, highlighting how historical proximities shape trauma's temporal drag: compressed hauntings versus extended drifts. This juxtaposition, inspired by decolonial comparativism

(e.g., Spivak's subaltern ethics), avoids the Western universalism by foregrounding contextual nuances: how India's agrarian caste dynamics inflect Devi's land-based myths, versus Zambia's riverine ethnic mosaics shaping Serpell's aqueous speculations. Such pairing reveal shared resistance to anthropocentrism while revealing how socio-cultural matrices (indigenous ontologies, colonial afterlives) and temporal scales (postcolonial stasis vs. neocolonial acceleration) modulate ethical remembrance, enriching insights into Global South climate narratives' diversity.

A scholar based in Hyderabad, India - a city marked by urban sprawl amidst erratic monsoons and groundwater depletion approaches this analysis from a position of reflexive implication. Her encounters with the slow degradation of local ecologies, from parched reservoirs in summer heatwaves to flooded slums during monsoons, imbue the work with urgency drawn from lived Southern realities. This reflexivity recognizes her privileges within anglophone academic networks, while pledging to elevate subaltern perspectives and counter the extractive paradigms critiqued by Devi and Serpell. By foregrounding texts from India and Zambia, the analysis seeks to displace Northern epistemologies, even as it acknowledges the limitations of a South Asian lens.

Through a comparative lens, this paper argues how Devi and Serpell dismantle event-centric trauma models, advocating instead for distributed remembrance attuned to Southern specificities of slow harm. Devi's pterodactyl, a fossilized relic reanimated as a spectral witness embodies the hauntology of extractive capitalism, folding prehistoric extinctions into contemporary famines. Serpell's Zambezi, meanwhile, drifts through epochs as a nonhuman archivist, its floods encoding colonial displacements and speculative contagions. These narratives subvert the teleological arcs of Freudian trauma theory, embracing Derrida's hauntology where resolution is perpetually deferred (Derrida, 1994). Consequently, they forge climate memory as a decolonial tool, inviting readers to attune to the ethical demands of environmental justice in an era where the Global South bears the brunt of planetary overheating. This comparative method of textual close-reading with theoretical weaving privileges Southern epistemologies, resisting universalism.

The scope of this study is deliberately delimited to a close comparative reading of two anglophone literary texts with particular attention to narrative form as an ethical and political intervention in climate memory. Focusing on myth, spectrality, and speculative narration, the analysis privileges literary exegesis at the intersection of Memory Studies and the Environmental Humanities to examine how these texts unwrite extinction by resisting commodified representation, official archives, and anthropocentric temporalities. Drawing on the conceptual frameworks of postmemory and slow violence, the article foregrounds how ecological harm is remembered through nonhuman presences and multigenerational witnessing rather than discrete, event-based trauma. This methodological focus also entails certain limitations. The study does not engage with the linguistic plurality of Indian and Zambian literary cultures, including vernacular and untranslated works, nor does it incorporate empirical fieldwork or quantitative climate data. Instead, it prioritises textual and theoretical depth over breadth. Future research may productively extend this inquiry by engaging vernacular traditions, oral histories, or interdisciplinary approaches that integrate literary analysis with environmental policy and community-based knowledge systems.

This analysis unfolds in three principal sections. First, it lays theoretical foundations by weaving postmemory and slow violence into an ecological framework, drawing on scholars like Kate Rigby to extend memory beyond human psyches to landscapes and stories. Subsequent sections delve into each text: Devi's mythic spectrality as a recovery of Adivasi ecologies, and Serpell's speculative drifts as multigenerational reckonings with aqueous violence. A final intersectional reading synthesizes their contributions, reconfiguring trauma through nonhuman modes of remembrance. Finally, this article contends that such narratives from the Southern hemisphere not only memorialize slow violence but also model survival's first act: remembering as resistance. In an epoch where the Global South confronts escalating erosions from Jharkhand's mined scars to Zambia's swollen rivers, *Pterodactyl* and *The Old Drift* underscore narrative's alchemical power: transmuting slow violence into climate memory. Through spectral myths and speculative drifts, they forge decolonial tools which are ethical, embodied, and earth-bound. Beyond memorialization, these narratives

seed activism. Devi's myths inspire Adivasi land struggles, while Serpell's speculations fuel Zambian water rights campaigns. As the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)'s Sixth Assessment Report (AR6, 2021–2023), a comprehensive synthesis of global climate science warns of 1.5°C breaches disproportionately impacting vulnerable regions in the Global South through amplified extreme weather, food insecurity, and ecosystem collapse (IPCC 2023, SPM.B.2), literature's role magnifies, with ethical imagination serving as a bulwark.

1. Theoretical Foundations: Postmemory and Slow Violence

The theoretical scaffolding of this article bridges Memory Studies and the Environmental Humanities, two fields that, while distinct, converge in their shared concern with how pasts persist in the present, often through non-human mediators. Memory Studies, born from the ashes of the Holocaust and other 20th-century atrocities, has traditionally centered on the psychoanalytic legacies of Sigmund Freud and Cathy Caruth, where trauma is an "unclaimed experience" that returns belatedly, demanding narrative integration (Caruth, 1996 : 4). Yet, as Hirsch's concept of postmemory reveals, this transmission extends beyond the survivor to the "generation after," who inherit trauma vicariously through "imaginative reconstructions" that fill archival gaps with prosthetic empathy (Hirsch, 2012 : 36). Postmemory operates not through direct imitation but as a ghostly intermediary. In this spectral dynamic, the past lingers without complete embodiment, thereby generating ethical imperatives toward those consigned to oblivion.

In ecological contexts, this framework expands into "ecological memory," a term Rigby employs to describe the "imprints of environmental change etched into bodies, landscapes, and stories" (Rigby, 2004 : 1). Memory here is distributed, not confined to individual minds but dispersed across kin networks, soil strata, and oral traditions. In India and Zambia, where colonial extraction has severed indigenous connections to place, postmemory becomes a tool for reclaiming these severed threads. The ancestors' wounds such as deforested hills and impounded rivers imprint on the descendants' bodies as chronic illnesses or migratory

displacements, transmitted through stories that resist the linearity of state archives. Rigby's earthly awry extends this to more-than-human scales, positing landscapes as mnemonic agents (Rigby, 2004). In Devi, Pirtha's hills remember through seismic tremors, faint echoes of mining blasts. Serpell's river, sediment-laden, carries Ba-Tonga artifacts downstream, a material postmemory defying dams.

Intersecting this is Nixon's slow violence, a critique of how incremental harms evade visibility in a mediascape addicted to the spectacular. "Slow violence," he writes, is "attractive to its perpetrators but deeply unspectacular to most of us" (Nixon, 2011: 10), embodied in the Global South through practices like open-pit mining in India's tribal belts or hydroelectric megaprojects in Africa's river basins. Rather than discrete incidents, these harms unfold as protracted processes, including the incremental contamination of Bangladesh's aquifers with arsenic from industrial effluents and the progressive silting of Zambian floodplains due to upstream erosion. Such violence interweaves with colonial legacies, where indigenous knowledges such as seasonal rhythms and sacred groves are occluded from "official" records, rendered as folklore rather than evidence.

Narrative forms emerge as counter-archives to this erasure. Myth, with its cyclical temporalities, revives precolonial cosmologies, as in Devi's invocation of Adivasi lore. Spectrality, per Derrida, introduces hauntology: the specter as "the visibility of a visibility that is invisible," deferring closure to insist on unresolved debts (Derrida, 1994 : 6). Speculation, meanwhile, extrapolates the slow into the swift, aligning with cli-fi's prophetic mode to warn of futures already seeded in the present (Baccolini, 2003). Speculative narrative, as Baccolini argues, subverts dystopian hopelessness with "critical" hope, feminist in its polyphonies (Baccolini, 2003). Serpell's cli-fi thus aligns with Butler's critiques, where genre bends to amplify marginalized futures. Myth, per Spivak, fables subalternity into speech (Spivak, 1988). Together, these forms nonhumanize memory, foregrounding rivers, fossils, and swarms as co-witnesses. As Jane Bennett's "vibrant matter" suggests, things possess agency, complicating anthropocentric narratives (Bennett, 2010). In the Global South, this decentering resists the imperial gaze, proposing climate memory as situated ethics: learning "from

below," in Spivak's terms, to bear witness without appropriating (Spivak, 2003 : 528). Theoretical cross-pollinations further enrich this framework, including the pairing of Fanon with Nixon on corporeal slow violence and Haraway's cyborgs with Rigby's earthly agents.

This theoretical braid - postmemory's prosthesis, slow violence's attrition, and nonhuman spectrality frames the readings to follow. It underscores how Mahasweta Devi and Namwali Serpell not only document harm but enact remembrance as praxis.

2. Spectral Myths in Devi's *Pterodactyl*: Recovering Adivasi Ecologies

Mahasweta Devi's *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay and Pirtha*, translated with characteristic acuity by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, stands as a searing indictment of the slow violence afflicting India's Adivasi communities. Set against the backdrop of Jharkhand's famine-ravaged landscapes in the 1990s, the novella follows Puran Sahay, a jaded urban journalist dispatched to the village of Pirtha to chronicle its descent into starvation. What unfolds, however, is no mere reportage but a mythic haunting. The unearthing of a pterodactyl fossil amidst ecological collapse, which morphs into a spectral interlocutor, embodies the deep-time wounds of dispossession. A closer examination of Puran's visions reveals the pterodactyl's "leathery wings" unfurling in his dreams and brushing against Adivasi children scavenging roots, their bellies distended like the famine-cracked earth: "like leathery wings. [The pterodactyl, the pteranodon, and pterodactylus were all part of the pterosaur group.] From reptiles they became winged..." (Devi, 1995 :101). This synesthesia, manifesting as tactile hauntings, embodies postmemory's prosthetic reach, compelling the imaginative reconstruction of sensory voids. Such resonances echo through historical parallels, including Jharkhand's 1990s famines, intensified by coal mafias, that mirror the mythic resistances of the 1970s Chipko movement, where women embraced trees as spectral guardians of the forest.

The pterodactyl is no incidental motif; it is the novella's nonhuman heart, a "ghost of the forest" that spectralizes the attrition of Adivasi lifeworlds (Devi, 1995 :112). Fossilized from the Mesozoic era, this creature bridges geological eons and human timescales, disrupting the linear

progress narrative of postcolonial development. In Pirtha, where bauxite mining and monocrop agriculture have stripped the hills bare, the pterodactyl's reappearance evokes hauntology. It occupies a liminal state, neither extinct nor extant; and embodies a visibility of the invisible that whispers of extinctions past and impending. As Puran gazes upon it, he experiences postmemory's prosthetic jolt. These are not his own memories but those transmitted through fragmented Adivasi oralities, including tales of Sal² forests that once teemed with game but are now reduced to skeletal trunks by "the government's development" (Devi, 1995 : 145). This jolt intensifies when Puran confronts the pterodactyl's embodied demand for secrecy,

I won't go near, I won't touch you, I will not take your picture with the flash bulb of my camera... I will not write your story, I will not speak your name" (Devi, 1995 : 182).

The creature's "dusky lidless eyes," however, remain unresponsive yet insistent, posing an unspoken query: "What do its eyes want to tell Puran? / This body made of the grey dusk or this liquid darkness is / quite still. Only an unfamiliar smell, sometimes sharp sometimes / mild" (Devi, 1995 : 137). Here, Derrida's hauntology manifests in the pterodactyl's refusal of resolution, its "visibility of a visibility that is invisible" (Derrida, 1994 : 6) deferring closure to expose the unresolved debts of extractive capitalism, while Hirsch's postmemory operates as a prosthetic "invasion" of the unclaimed past, demanding ethical withholding over commodified narration (Hirsch, 2012 : 36). The eyes' "dusky waiting, without end" transmits a spectral indictment of shared extinction, as the pterodactyl silently warns,

We are extinct by the inevitable natural geological evolution. You too are endangered. You too will / become extinct in nuclear explosions, or in war, or in the aggressive advance of the strong as it obliterates the weak (Devi, 1995 : 138).

This nonhuman transmission maps Nixon's slow violence onto geological scales, where attritional harms - deforestation as "aggressive advance"

² Sal trees (*Shorea robusta*) are deciduous species native to the Indian subcontinent, prized for their hard, durable wood in construction and their extensive medicinal properties.

distribute trauma across species and eras, rendering Adivasi dispossession as a prophetic echo of planetary collapse (Nixon, 2011 :2).

Devi's mythic form recovers these occluded histories, drawing on indigenous cosmologies where animals are kin, not commodities. The pterodactyl, in Adivasi lore reimagined, surveys the land with a "silent gaze" that indicts extractive capitalism (Devi, 1995 : 89). Its wings, etched in ancient rock paintings bleached by acid rain, archive precolonial ecologies through vibrant murals that depict human-animal sympoiesis but are now fading under industrial haze. This nonhuman memory challenges official archives, which tally progress in tonnes of ore extracted while eliding the human cost: soaring child malnutrition rates, rivers fouled with mine tailings. As Spivak observes in her translator's foreword, Devi "fables the unreal" to interrogate temporality at its core, exposing how capitalist acceleration consumes the deliberate cadences of tribal existence (Spivak, 1995, xx). This critique of development cuts sharply through the rhetoric of progress, as Devi declares through the narrative voice, evoking the machine's voracity: "The machine eats the forest, spits out dust" (Devi, 1995 :156), a resonant indictment of extractivism in the vein of Nixon's slow violence. The ancient rock paintings, once alive with depictions of harmonious pterodactyl hunts, now stand as emblems of ruptured sympoiesis, that vital co-flourishing between humans and nonhumans. Puran's initial paralysis, born of his voyeuristic detachment as a reporter, gradually transforms into an ethical stutter, his refusal to commit the story to paper serving as a profound meta-commentary on the elusive narratability of slow violence itself. This paralysis aligns with Nixon's "attritional" harms, where the pterodactyl's mythic return, poisoning wells and fertilizing fields into barrenness, distributes trauma across "dispersed" timescales, rendering it invisible to event-based metrics (Nixon, 2011:2). The gaze further evokes Rigby's ecological memory, imprinting "environmental change... into bodies, landscapes, and stories" (Rigby, 2004: 1), as the pterodactyl queries the fruits of such violence,

Forests are extinct, and animal life is obliterated / outside of zoos and protected forest sanctuaries. What will you / finally grow in the soil, having murdered nature in the application / of man-imposed substitutes? (Devi, 1995:138).

This rhetorical haunting justifies the mythic form's decolonial potency, countering anthropocentric archives by positing nonhuman extinction as a prosthetic for cultural erasure: "The collective being of the ancient nations is crushed. Like / nature, like the sustaining earth, their sustaining ancient cultures / received no honour... is this what you are telling us? / The dusky lidless eyes remain unresponsive" (Devi, 1995: 139).

Puran's arc exemplifies postmemory's ethical bind. An outsider, he arrives equipped with the tools of event-based journalism - notebooks for acute disasters, but confronts slow violence's unreadability. Visions assail him: the pterodactyl perched on Pirtha's emaciated hills, its cry echoing ancestral laments for lost groves. These are transmissions of intergenerational trauma, encompassing the suppressions of the 1857 revolt and Naxalite uprisings, compounded by the weight of contemporary famines. Puran remembers through bodily empathy; his throat parched like the cracked earth, his skin itching with phantom insects displaced by deforestation. Paradoxically, this remembrance paralyzes Puran. He cannot "write the story," for to narrate would commodify suffering, colonizing the subaltern voice Spivak warns against (Spivak, 1988). This failure is Devi's genius; ethical witnessing as inaction, a refusal to master trauma. In Hirsch's terms, Puran becomes the prosthetic bearer, haunted by gaps that demand imaginative reconstruction without closure. The novella's mythic structure amplifies this, cycling through his urban ennui to Pirtha's mythic depths and back, mirroring slow violence's dispersal. Nonhuman elements, such as winds carrying mine dust, birds fleeing felled trees, co-narrate, decentering anthropocentrism and invoking Bennett's vibrant matter, where the pterodactyl's "silent gaze" asserts agency as a co-witness to Adivasi erasure (Bennett 2010). Pirtha herself, personified as a scarred maternal body, resists narration; her "unvoiced history" spectralizes state neglect, where development dams not just rivers but memories (Devi, 1995: 167). Comparatively, this mythic compression prefigures Serpell's sprawl, both using nonhuman gaze: the pterodactyl's, the river's to decentre humans. Devi's text thus proposes climate memory as decolonial recovery. By invoking the pterodactyl, it revives Adivasi rock art as "storied matter," per Iovino and Oppermann, where matter itself narrates resistance (Iovino, Oppermann, 2014: 1). This counters Nixon's "environmentalism of the

poor," where the marginalized bear slow violence's brunt yet are erased from global discourses (Nixon, 2011). In Jharkhand's reality, where mining displaces thousands of Adivasis annually, with over 15,000 labourers in Jharia alone facing arbitrary relocation without rehabilitation (Down to Earth 2025), *Pterodactyl* insists on remembrance as survival, mythic forms looping back to reclaim what linearity forgets. Rigby's ecological memory further maps this, as the pterodactyl's "imprints... etched into bodies, landscapes, and stories" (Rigby, 2004: 1) distribute Adivasi trauma across nonhuman strata, from fossilized wings to poisoned soils.

3. Speculative Drifts in Serpell's *The Old Drift*: Multigenerational Floods

If Devi's novella compresses slow violence into mythic intensity, Namwali Serpell's *The Old Drift* disperses it across epic expanses, tracing the entangled fates of three Zambian families from the 1904 colonial "drift" of white settlers to a 2020s cli-fi apocalypse. The Zambezi River emerges as the nonhuman protagonist, its meanders "drifting" through timelines, symbolizing violence's aqueous, borderless flow,

*What was the river drifting past beyond them, / Who were the ones in
such a populous throng / Beside it? 'Spirits,' Anchises answered (Serpell,
2019: 3).*

Serpell's polyvocal chorus: settler widows, independence activists, AIDS orphans, and biohacked futurists interweaves human lineages with ecological fluxes, from Kariba Dam floods to mosquito swarms engineered for salvation but birthing contagion. This chorus, voiced by the mosquitoes themselves as a spectral Greek ensemble, warns of humanity's parasitic drift,

*We're your oldest friend, your ancient enemy. / We're perfectly matched.
We're both useless, ubiquitous species. / But while you all rule the earth and
destroy it for kicks, / we linger and loaf, unsung heroes. We've been around
here as long as you have—for eons before, say the fossils (Serpell, 2019 :
1- 2).*

This extended invocation enacts Derrida's hauntology through the swarm's persistent "visibility of the invisible" (Derrida, 1994 : 6), deferring

anthropocentric closure by archiving colonial fevers and bioengineered contagions across deep time, while Nixon's slow violence pulses in their critique of destructive "rule," dispersing ecological harm through insidious, out-of-sight vectors (Nixon, 2011:10). Serpell's epic warrants sequential examination by timeline. The 1904 "drift" features settlers floating downriver, mirroring colonial fluidity, while their hair-swaps serve as a grotesque archive of racial fetishism (Serpell, 2019 : 45). Agnes's progeny, the "hairy" mutants, embody toxic inheritance, with fur serving as a metaphor for polluted hides and blindness representing epistemic veils over indigenous hydro-knowledges. This motif of corporeal mutation not only spectralizes environmental toxins but also aligns with Nixon's notion of slow violence, wherein infrastructural legacies like the Kariba Dam perpetuate dispersed ecological harms (Nixon, 2011). Such fictional distortions resonate with real-world events, including Zambia's catastrophic 2023 floods along the Zambezi River, which displaced thousands of communities in districts like Namwala and Bwengwa, exacerbated by heavy seasonal rains compounded by upstream dam management and climate-induced variability (Watchers News 2023).

Speculation is Serpell's scalpel, extrapolating colonial extractions into dystopian horizons. The novel opens with Agnes, a "hairy" albino swimmer whose freakish body archives the imperial gaze, her descendants mutating under environmental toxins. This lineage converges with Ronald, a Ba-Tonga fisherman displaced by the 1950s Kariba Dam, whose inundation - touted as hydroelectric utopia submerges 280 kilometers of ancestral lands, dispersing 57,000 people in a "gradual catastrophe" invisible to Western headlines (Serpell, 2019:234). Nixon's slow violence pulses here: the dam's waters rise incrementally, eroding sacred sites over months, their haunt lingering in descendants' migratory drifts,

The lake rose like a thief in the night, stealing homes, histories, the very ground beneath their feet, / leaving only ghosts in the water, whispers in the current that no one could translate (Serpell, 2019: 289).

The Kariba chapters vivify slow violence. Waters creep over villages, fish gasp in shallows, Ba-Tonga elders recite flood myths as prostheses (Serpell, 2019 : 289). The AIDS interludes parallel this slow corporeal attrition, with neoliberal neglect mirroring ecological degradation. These floods encode

Hirsch's postmemory, as the Ba-Tonga's submerged artifacts, carried downstream in sediment-laden currents, transmit "personal, collective, and cultural trauma" through "imaginative reconstructions" that prostheticize lost hydro-knowledges for the "generation after" (Hirsch, 2012: 5). This transmission echoes in the elders' chants, where the river's "ghosts" demand reconstruction,

*The water remembers what we forget—the names of the drowned,
the songs of the displaced, / carried like silt to the next bend, waiting for
someone to dredge them up* (Serpell, 2019 : 290)

*mapping Rigby's ecological memory onto aqueous strata, where landscapes
as "mnemonic agents" distribute intergenerational wounds beyond human
psyches* (Rigby, 2004: 1).

Postmemory transmits this through bodily and narrative prostheses. Agnes's blindness begets a chain of sightless seers, their "hairy" afflictions echoing toxic legacies from copperbelt mines. In the 1990s, AIDS mirrors ecological contagion, both "out of sight" until epidemic, fuelled by colonial infrastructures like truck-stop brothels along trade routes (Serpell, 2019 : 412). Serpell's choric form embodies this. Chapters shift voices mid-sentence, mimicking the river's polyphony, where individual traumas entwine with planetary ones. The Ba-Tonga's submerged histories resurface in oral songs, prosthetic fragments that the next generation reconstructs amidst rising seas. This parallel sharpens in the AIDS sections, where the virus's spread evokes a toxic postmemory,

*It came like the flood, invisible in the veins until the body broke, / passing
from mother to child like a story poisoned at the source, / a inheritance of
silence that no medicine could unwrite* (Serpell, 2019: 413).

Hirsch's "structure of transmission" here extends to corporeal hauntings, prostheticizing Fanonian "nervous conditions" through viral and hydrological contagions that defer resolution, aligning with Derrida's specters as unresolved debts of colonial extraction (Hirsch, 2012: 5; Derrida, 1994: 6).

The novel's speculative turn amplifies nonhuman agency. In the 2020s, Chinese bioengineers release gene-edited mosquitoes to curb malaria, but climate-amplified monsoons unleash a viral cascade, blending colonial

pathogens with planetary pyrexia. This swarm buzzes as a spectral collectivity, its hum encoding hauntologies: echoes of Livingstone's "discoveries," Kariba's drownings, and fossil fuels' fevers. Serpell's pluvial prose, rain-slicked, meandering, evokes heavier deluges, linking personal postmemory to global drift (Serpell, 2019: 567). The Zambezi resists linearity, its floods folding past displacements into future extinctions, much like Devi's pterodactyl folds eons. Speculatively, the mosquito climax: engineered for control, they swarm as hauntological revenge, carrying "colonial viruses" like smallpox scars (Serpell, 2019: 512). Prose innovations, for instance italicized drifts for riverine interruptions, enact temporal curvature, akin to Devi's mythic folds. Bennett's vibrant matter animates the mosquitoes' agency here, as their "ubiquitous" persistence lingering "for eons before" human rule complicates anthropocentric narratives, turning them into co-witnesses that "destroy... for kicks" indict extractive logics (Bennett, 2010 ; Serpell, 2019: 2). In Zambia, where floods displaced over 377 families in Eastern Province alone during the 2025 rainy season (IFRC 2025), Serpell's polyvocality fosters empathy, turning readers into prosthetic witnesses. Ethical witnessing emerges in the families' resilient improvisations. Unlike Puran's paralysis, Serpell's characters navigate contagions through Afrofuturist ingenuity. A drone-swarm hacker repurposes mosquitoes for resistance broadcasts, turning slow violence's tools against it. This aligns with Haraway's cyborg manifestos, where hybridities forge socialist-feminisms against extractive logics (Haraway 1985). However, speculation tempers hope with warning. The novel ends in a flooded Lusaka, where human hubris amplifies nonhuman retorts, demanding accountability across scales,

The city drowned not in water alone, but in the weight of its own forgetting— / streets turned canals, buildings adrift like arks unbuilt, / a new genesis rising from the silt, hybrid and unyielding (Serpell, 2019:567).

The Old Drift models climate memory as prophetic ethics. It centers Zambian voices in cli-fi, countering dystopias like Atwood's that universalize Northern anxieties (Baccolini, 2003). Serpell's drifts thus reclaim agency, recasting victimhood as entangled survival, with Rigby's ecological memory framing the Zambezi as a "mnemonic agent" whose "imprints of

environmental change" distribute trauma across "landscapes and stories" (Rigby, 2004: 1).

4. Narrative Intersections: Reconfiguring Trauma through Nonhuman Memory

The analytical force of reading Devi and Serpell together emerges from their shared deployment of nonhuman memory as a means of reconfiguring trauma beyond event-based and anthropocentric paradigms. Rather than staging trauma as a singular rupture demanding belated recognition, both texts conceptualise ecological harm as durational, relational, and unevenly sedimented across time and matter. They depart from classical trauma models associated with Caruth's emphasis on discrete shocks, instead aligning with more fluid, hauntological understandings of trauma as an ongoing entanglement that resists narrative closure.

In *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay and Pirtha*, the pterodactyl's spectral appearance functions not as an object of knowledge but as an ethical limit, exposing the violence embedded in archival capture, documentation, and representation. Similarly, in *The Old Drift*, the Zambezi River operates as a mnemonic agent whose altered flows register histories of infrastructural intrusion, ecological dispossession, and deferred accountability. These nonhuman figures act as alternative repositories of memory, rendering visible what extractive modernity and state archives systematically erase - indigenous lifeworlds, ecological continuities, and slow forms of attritional harm.

Both texts thus mobilise nonhuman presences as ethical agents, resonating with material ecocritical notions of agential matter while unsettling human mastery over meaning. Trauma, in this configuration, shifts from an isolated psychic wound to an ethical condition of inherited responsibility. Devi's refusal of narrative appropriation, most notably through Puran's deliberate withdrawal, enacts an ethics of epistemic restraint that aligns with Spivak's call for humility in the face of subaltern histories. Serpell, by contrast, adopts a speculative and multivocal form in which adaptive survival and collective endurance emerge through intergenerational and more-than-human assemblages. Across their distinct

narrative strategies: Devi's contemplative silences and Serpell's proliferating chronologies, both authors foreground ecological memory as a mode of unwriting: a refusal of spectacle, resolution, and commodified trauma. In doing so, they fracture linear temporality and reimagine climate memory as a situated practice of witnessing shaped by slow violence, extractive capitalism, and deferred justice. Trauma is thus transformed from a static condition into a dynamic ethical praxis, with nonhuman remembrance functioning as a durable, decolonial testimony against environmental erasure.

Conclusion

Amidst the intensifying ecological precarity, *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay and Pirtha* and *The Old Drift* demonstrate literature's capacity to register slow violence through modes of ethical refusal rather than spectacular narration. By mobilising myth, spectrality, and speculative form, these texts unwrite extinction; resisting commodified representation while constructing climate memory as a situated, embodied practice of remembrance. Ecological harm, in these narratives, is neither event nor aftermath but a durational condition inscribed in land, water, and nonhuman life. Both works foreground nonhuman memory as a crucial site of witnessing, unsettling anthropocentric and linear temporalities that dominate environmental discourse. Devi's ethics of silence and Serpell's multigenerational speculation converge in their insistence that not all histories can or should be rendered transparent within official archives. Instead, they posit unwriting as an ethical stance that acknowledges epistemic limits while remaining accountable to inherited and ongoing harm. These narratives invite critical practice to move beyond extractive modes of reading and toward a sustained ethics of witnessing; one attuned to erasure, endurance, and the slow work of ecological justice.

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