

From Stagnation to Flow: Lacustrine and Riverine Ecologies in Indian Fiction

Nani Mallavarapu

Postgraduate Student, Department of English, Central University of Andhra Pradesh

Paper Received on 03-03-2026, Accepted on 05-04-2026

Published on 07-04-26; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.11.01.72

Abstract:

This paper advances the development of Blue Humanities by proposing a materially grounded framework to differentiate Blue Ecologies through a comparative study of lacustrine and riverine spaces in Indian literature. Although the literature on the Blue Humanities has focused on the oceanic and the movement and flow that it enables, the lacustrine and riverine spaces have not received the same level of attention and theorisation. This study seeks to address this lacuna by examining the novel *Softly Dies a Lake* and Manik Bandopadhyay's *The Boatman of the Padma* to show that different hydrological forms produce different ecological temporalities, affective structures, and modes of identity.

The lake, with its closed systems and stagnation, is characterised by ecological decline and thus aligns with Nixon's idea of slow violence. The effects that the lake produces are those of grief and nostalgia, and the delayed realisation of ecological damage. The river, with its constant flow, erosion, and cyclical instability, produces a sense of displacement and resilience and a fluid identity that always anticipates change rather than mourns.

Through such a comparative discussion, the study proves that water cannot be considered a homogeneous analytical category. Instead, a more differentiated model of water is offered, which takes into account its specific materiality as well as its specific narrative and cultural effects. In such a manner, the study extends the scope of the discipline of Blue Humanities beyond its primarily ocean-centric orientation. Moreover, it contributes to broader debates in environmental humanities, ecocriticism, and postcolonial literary studies by highlighting inland waters as a critical site of ecological experience.

Keywords: blue humanities, ecological temporality, lacustrine ecology, riverine ecology, slow violence

1. Introduction

Rethinking Blue Humanities through Inland Waters

The advent of Blue Humanities, therefore, signals a significant reorientation in the field of environmental literary criticism, from a land-oriented focus typical of early ecocritical scholarship to a focus on water as a dynamic and agentive force in literature and life. Buell argues that environmental texts should represent the nonhuman environment as an active presence rather than a passive backdrop (Buell). There were still notable forests, wilderness, and pastoral landscapes in early ecocritical scholarship, with water often serving symbolically to illustrate terrestrial concerns.

The imbalance is corrected by Blue Humanities, which places oceans, seas, and maritime systems at the centre as spaces of mobility, flow, and change. In fact, Steve Mentz, a prominent theorist, has stated that water destabilizes land-based assumptions of permanence and fixity (Mentz). Another important contribution of the environmental humanities has been to highlight the role of water systems in redefining historical, cultural, and environmental understandings (Bergthaller et al. 261; Castree 233). These interventions have played a significant role in moving land out of the centre of analysis.

Nevertheless, this critical contribution of Blue Humanities has, in turn, led to a conceptual limitation in its development, namely, its focus on oceanic and maritime space. This is because, in its conceptualisation of water, the ocean, as a vast and constantly in motion expanse, has emerged as a paradigm of water in general. This focus on crossings, currents, and tides is consistent with a broader discourse on globalisation, migration, and transnationalism. Nevertheless, such a focus on constant motion and change might overlook the variety of aquatic forms and their unique ecological logics.

Inland water bodies, such as lakes and rivers, have, in fact, remained relatively unstudied in their own right. This is, however, not merely an absence but a conceptual limitation, because lakes and rivers are fundamentally different from oceans in their physicality, time scales, and ecological processes. A lake is a closed system with limited circulation and a high potential for stagnation, while a river is fundamentally a flowing system of erosion and constant change. To speak of a general

category of water is to overlook the specificity of aquatic forms by which human experiences are shaped.

This limitation takes on greater significance when viewed in relation to Indian literature, given the importance of inland waters to Indian culture, society, and economy. For example, rivers such as the Ganga, Padma, and Brahmaputra have been crucial in shaping settlement patterns, economic activities, and even belief systems. Lakes, too, have been important in shaping Indian society, serving as centres of ritualism, memory, and urban ecology. In such contexts, water cannot be seen as an abstract entity but as a materially present entity. As Sunil Amrith has convincingly demonstrated, South Asian histories cannot be conceived without reference to the dynamics of water systems, which have shaped South Asian history in terms of political formations, migrations, and ecological histories (Amrith 12).

Thus, a more nuanced understanding of water is needed, one that goes beyond a homogenised view. This study attempts to provide such a nuanced understanding by discussing two different forms of water: lacustrine (lake) and riverine (river), through a comparative reading of *Softly Dies a Lake* and Manik Bandyopadhyay's *The Boatman of the Padma*. Rather than treating these texts as isolated case studies. The analysis places them in dialogue to reveal how different hydrological structures generate distinct narrative and cultural effects.

The main idea of this analysis is that there are distinct ecological temporalities, affective responses, and identities associated with lacustrine and riverine ecologies, which call for a rethinking of what we mean by Blue Humanities. The lake, as depicted in *Softly Dies a Lake*, represents an enclosed, stagnating, and deteriorating environment. This ecological process of accumulation and enclosure results in what Rob Nixon refers to as "slow violence", a form of environmental degradation that is incremental, diffused, and often imperceptible (Nixon 2). This creates an affective landscape characterised by loss, nostalgia, and delayed recognition.

On the other hand, the river, as depicted in *The Boatman of the Padma*, represents an environment of flux and change. This ecological process of flow, erosion, and deposition constantly transforms the landscape. This creates a cycle of displacement and rebirth. Rather than slow accumulation, the river represents a

process of constant disruption. This creates a different affective response, one characterised by resilience, adaptability, and fluid identity. Steve Mentz argues that aquatic environments resist a static sense of belonging by incorporating flux as a primary aspect of existence (Mentz 3).

By comparing these two types of ecologies, this study aims to develop the idea of differentiated Blue Ecologies. This idea counters the common tendency in the environmental humanities to think of water as a single analytical entity, underscoring the importance of paying attention to material specificity, i.e., acknowledging that different types of water generate distinct experiences.

At the same time, this study also joins other debates in environmental humanities on the relationship between human and non-human histories. Dipesh Chakrabarty has proposed that the phenomenon of climate change challenges the division between human and natural histories, acknowledging their entanglement:

“Climate change, in other words, requires a new form of historicization of human culture, a new form of thinking about the human in a way that is entangled with the nonhuman, with the natural world.” (Chakrabarty 197). Though Chakrabarty’s idea is generally on a global scale, the literary works under analysis show the entanglement of human and non-human histories at the level of daily experience, as embodied in the lake’s gradual decline and the river’s instability.

Crucially, this study does not aim to supplant or substitute oceanic Blue Humanities but to augment and expand them. Thus, while the ocean is an important locus of investigation, especially in relation to global flows and climate change, an overemphasis on oceanic mobility might overlook other forms of aquatic experiences, which are equally vital and important in their own right. This paper, therefore, by incorporating inland waters in its analytical framework, aims to expand and broaden the Blue Humanities.

The structure is informed by this comparative approach to Blue Humanities. Thus, the first section examines lacustrine ecology in *Softly Dies a Lake*, focusing on enclosure, stagnation, and slow violence; the second section examines riverine ecology in *The Boatman of the Padma*, focusing on flow, erosion, and fluid identity; and the third section synthesizes both analyses to develop a framework of

differentiated Blue Ecologies, with a concluding section discussing its implications for environmental humanities and literary studies.

Finally, this study argues that water in Indian fiction is not a homogeneous backdrop, but rather a variety of distinct ecological agents, such that lakes and rivers are not merely different in form, but in fact, they are different in kind, creating different worlds, different temporalities, and different affective structures, and so on, and that to grasp this is to begin to think towards a more nuanced and materially grounded understanding of the relationship between literature and environment.

2. Lacustrine Ecology: Stagnation, Slow Violence, and Ecological Grief

In *Softly Dies a Lake*, the lake is not simply a setting in the form of a scenic backdrop but a materially complex ecological system in a process of gradual degradation that informs the form of the narrative as well as its affective dimensions. In the context of the Blue Humanities, water is seen as a dynamic and agentive substance rather than a mere backdrop or setting (Mentz 3; Buell 7). The lake, however, challenges this notion of water as a fluid and moving substance. While the ocean and the river are defined by their fluidity and movement, the lake is defined by its stillness and its enclosed form. The stillness of the water, however, belies a complex system of ecological processes that take place beneath its surface.

The material nature of the lake plays an important role in its vulnerability. The lake, as a hydrological system, requires a limited amount of water input, rain, and groundwater. The ability to flush out pollutants from the lake is very limited compared to a river. This leads to the accumulation of pollutants in the lake, causing a gradual ecological imbalance. These processes are subtly indicated in the narrative through sensory details rather than technical jargon. The initial descriptions show the lake as clear and full of life: "The water shimmered clear enough to mirror the sky." However, as the narrative continues, the lake turns murky:

"A green film spread across the surface, thick and unmoving." This subtly describes the process of eutrophication-the enrichment of water by nutrients-in an implicit manner without directly referring to it. The change in the material nature of the lake can be understood through the change in colour, texture, and smell.

Material ecocriticism can be seen as an appropriate tool in understanding such transformations. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann argue that matter

carries narrative meaning and agency (Iovino and Oppermann). In such a manner, the lake can be seen as a text inscribed by ecological narratives. The presence of algae, the smell of rot, and the floating corpses of fish cannot be seen as mere descriptive elements but as inscriptions of ecological crises. When the narrator states, "fish floated belly-up near the reeds," the lake's matter inscribes a sense of toxicity. The lake's ecosystem can be seen as a narrative agent.

The temporality of the environmental change is also significant. Unlike other environmental disasters, the environmental change in the lake is gradual, which is consistent with the idea of "slow violence." Slow violence, according to Rob Nixon, is "a gradual, long-term, low-intensity, and diffuse violence" that is "often invisible" (Nixon 2). The narrative also stresses the gradual nature of the environmental change: "The waterline slipped back each summer, but no one thought it was strange at first." The gradual nature of the environmental change is not necessarily visible until later, which is a characteristic of slow violence. The change is continuous, but it is realised later.

The words "softly dies" capture this logic of time. Death is not instantaneous but a gradual process, a gradual decline rather than a sudden fall. This type of decline is resistant to conventional ideas of crisis, which often involve elements of drama and suddenness. Environmental change initially appears as seasonal variation rather than structural decline. Only retrospectively does its cumulative impact become evident. This delayed recognition is a defining feature of slow violence. Damage occurs continuously, yet its significance is realised belatedly. As Nixon states, "Slow violence is often difficult to see, and to this extent, it is not visible" (Nixon 2). This is certainly true of the lake's gradual transformation.

The confinement of the lake to an urban setting heightens the impact of slow violence. Urbanisation brings pollutants such as sewage, runoff, and plastic, which gradually build up in the lake. The comment in the novel that "drains emptied into corners no one looked at" underscores the impact of invisibility in relation to ecological decline. Unlike a river, which might carry pollutants out to sea, a lake is a closed system, and anything that enters it stays there, leading to a type of ecological suffocation, where oxygen levels fall, biodiversity is reduced, and an imbalance occurs.

This physical decline is not possible to consider without reference to the larger phenomenon of urban modernity. The urbanisation of the environment, the construction of concrete buildings, the redirection of drainage systems, and the urbanisation of the shoreline represent the anthropocentric paradigm that Buell states “treats the environment as a resource rather than an agent” (Buell 7). The narrator’s description of “concrete creeping closer each year” personifies urban expansion as a predatory force. The urbanisation process seems to engulf the lake, the opposite of the typical dynamic between water and urbanisation.

Sunil Amrith’s study of South Asian water systems provides a useful backdrop for the urbanisation process that the novel depicts. Amrith shows that water systems have historically shaped social and ecological relations in South Asia (Amrith). The novel depicts this disruption on a local level, with the lake becoming more and more marginalised and urbanised.

The ecological decline of the lake also has significant effects. There is a strong nostalgia in the text for a time in which the lake was a space of intimacy and continuity. Childhood memories of swimming, communal events, and rituals serve to make this lake an effective space. Eco-affective theory, as outlined by Jane Bennett, argues that environments play a significant role in determining emotional and ethical responses (Bennett 62). In this text, the lake is an environment that evokes emotional response, an attachment to it, based on sensory experiences of light on water, immersion in water, and so on.

However, with the decline of this lake, there is a transformation of this attachment to one of ecological grief. The text states, “I did not realise I was mourning until I stopped walking by the shore.” This statement is a clear indication of ecological grief, which is not always a conscious response to ecological decline but one that is gradually recognised as absence becomes apparent. There is a disorienting effect from the decline of birds, lack of clarity, and biodiversity. What was once familiar is no longer so.

Nostalgia is an important aspect of this transformation. There is a contrast between the past and the present in this story, such as “lamps floated across the surface like constellations” and “plastic bottles snagged in the reeds.” This contrast between past and present, or between abundance and decay, produces a form of

nostalgia that may be understood as temporal dissonance, and it functions as a powerful means of conveying ecological loss. Environmental change, in this context, reshapes historical consciousness by altering how the past is remembered and experienced in relation to a degraded present. The transformation of the lake thus affects not only present ecological conditions but also the way the past is perceived and narrated.

The idea of a lake as a biocultural landscape is an important one in understanding this transformation in this story. As Buot and Chandrasekaran discuss, a biocultural landscape is a landscape in which ecological and cultural processes are inextricably linked (Buot and Chandrasekaran). This lake is a landscape in which there is a ritual of immersion, fishing, household labour, and socialising. All of these processes require a stable ecology, and so, with a deteriorating water quality, they cease to exist.

The absence of non-human life heightens the feeling of loss. The author observes, "The birds stopped returning one monsoon." This was a moment of ecological imbalance. Buell's emphasis on environmental literature's need to portray the non-human world as an active presence (Buell 7) is pertinent in this context. The absence of birds was not just a metaphor. Rather, it was a symptom of an imbalance in ecological relationships. The lake's degradation was impacting a variety of species. This was a reflection of the interconnectedness of human and non-human life.

Climate change adds another layer of complexity. The author's nuanced allusions to irregular rainfall and long summers imply a broader environmental trend. Dipesh Chakrabarty's observation on climate change's ability to erase the distinction between human and natural history can be seen as relevant in this context (Chakrabarty 197). While the lake's degradation was clearly a result of factors like pollution and urbanisation, it was also a part of a broader climatic trend. Less rainfall and increased evaporation were contributing to the effects of pollution and overuse.

Significantly, there is no dramatic action. The death of the lake happens quietly and gradually. The emotional responses to the death, such as grief, nostalgia, and guilt, also develop gradually, mirroring the slow process of ecological decline. The words "softly dies" are also meant for the emotional experience as much as for the lake.

The lake's quietness or stillness, which in most environments would be associated with calmness, also becomes complex. There are continuous processes of decline and disharmony happening beneath the surface. Blue Humanities scholars have also pointed out that movement, such as currents, tides, and crossing, is the key characteristic of aquatic environments, as argued by Mentz in his work *At the Devil's Gate*. However, *Softly Dies a Lake* adds to the paradigm by arguing that stagnation is also a form of aquatic dynamism. Chemical reactions, microbial activity, and ecological shifts occur in the absence of visible motion. The lake is active precisely in its apparent stillness.

Thus, the lacustrine ecology in the novel may be characterised by the notions of enclosure, accumulation, and decline. The temporality of lacustrine ecology in the novel is consistent with the concept of slow violence, the affective structure is built around the notions of grief and nostalgia, and the cultural importance is based on the idea of biocultural interdependence. The novel *Softly Dies a Lake* subverts the ocean-centric approach to the Blue Humanities and underscores the necessity for a more differentiated approach to the study of aquatic ecosystems.

3. Riverine Ecology: Flow, Erosion, and Fluid Identity

Thus, if the lake in *Softly Dies a Lake* represents a space of enclosure, stagnation, and slow violence, the Padma River in Manik Bandyopadhyay's *The Boatman of the Padma* represents a fundamentally different ecological formation—a formation of movement, instability, and constant reformation. As discussed within the context of the Blue Humanities, water represents a space of fluidity and movement (Mentz 3). However, the river takes this logic a step further, making movement a constitutive element not just of the environment but of work, self, and narrative form as well. The Padma River is not a backdrop against which human life occurs. Rather, it represents an active role in reorganising the conditions of existence.

At a more tangible level, the key feature of the river as an environmental form is flow. Unlike the closed system of the lake, which remains static, the river represents an open system in constant movement. This movement results in a space that remains inherently unstable. Riverbanks erode, fields slide into the river, and new land emerges elsewhere through deposition. While such movements may occur within the lake, they are not constitutive elements of its form. In the river, such movements are constant.

Environmental histories of Bengal have highlighted this fluidity as a feature of the structural landscape rather than an exception. In his work, Rohan D'Souza shows that the rivers in eastern India have been characterised by monsoonal surges, migration of sediment, and channel shift, thereby constantly redefining the geography of habitation. Bandopadhyay's novel has captured this reality with remarkable authenticity. There is fluidity in habitation, homes are temporary, and land is constantly disappearing.

The river does not simply define the space of human habitation but invades it. Such fluidity creates a specific temporal structure. While the decline of the lake has been a gradual process of accumulation, the temporal structure of the river has been one of constant disturbance and rebirth. There have been floods in a cyclical pattern, erosion has been a sudden event, and sedimentation has also been a sudden event. Hence, time in the world of the river has been cyclical. There has been no finality to loss but only a repetition of loss within a larger pattern of destruction and rebirth.

This cyclical temporality challenges the notion of slow violence, as proposed by Rob Nixon, since riverine events like the collapse of the riverbank seem to be sudden and dramatic, but they are also underpinned by long-term processes of sedimentation and hydrological change (Nixon 2). The violence of the river, therefore, seems to be immediate and cumulative at the same time. A house, for instance, can be destroyed overnight, but it is a cumulative effect of months or years of gradual undercutting. The river, therefore, seems to have a hybrid temporality where slow and sudden events are intertwined.

The uncertainty of the river also creates a situation of constant precarity, where the boundaries of the river are not fixed, unlike the lake, where the boundaries are fixed despite the quality of water in the lake. The boundaries of the river change, and therefore, land ownership is also challenged, as it is subject to the river's authority.

The relevance of Steve Mentz's theory that water environments undermine the notion of fixity and permanence, as understood in a terrestrial setting, is also pertinent in this situation (Mentz 3). The river undermines the notion that land can

provide a foundation for identity and social organisation, and instead, it offers a logic of change where stability is temporary and dependent on conditions.

The implications of this environment on labour are significant, especially in The Boatman of the River Padma, where economic activity is deeply connected to the hydrology of the river. The success of a fishing trip depends on the depth of the water, the speed of the water, and the change of seasons. Boatmen must navigate the changes in the river's course and water flow, and labour is a form of ecological knowledge, a form of embodied experience of the river's behaviour.

The notion of a "biocultural landscape" is one that helps to shed light on this dynamic. As Buot and Chandrasekaran put it, "ecosystem and culture are mutually constitutive" (Buot and Chandrasekaran). Within this riverine world, labour is not imposed upon the environment, but is instead one that emerges from it. The fisherman reads from the surface of the water, while the boatman reads from the currents and eddies.

Such a dynamic of dependence also breeds a unique social structure. Economic hierarchies are defined by one's access to boats, fishing gear, and trade routes. However, there is also a level of egalitarian instability brought about by the unpredictable nature of the river itself. All people, regardless of their position in society, must contend with the fluctuations of this environment. Flood and erosion are indiscriminate forces, affecting entire communities in their paths.

The most significant effect of riverine instability, however, is displacement. Communities are displaced by erosion and flooding. Houses are built knowing that they may not be permanent. This cycle of displacement challenges conventional ideas of settlement and belonging. Identity becomes a fluid concept, shaped by movement rather than permanence.

The idea of a boatman represents a fluid identity. His existence lies between two worlds: one on land and one in water. His identity cannot be categorised. His work demands movement, change. His expertise is based on flux. His existence cannot be categorised as either on land or in water. This liminal state represents a broader cultural idea: an identity shaped by negotiation with flux. Dipesh Chakrabarty's idea of climate change dissolving the line between human and natural

history helps to contextualise this idea. This blurring of boundaries represents a broader idea of identity shaped by negotiation with flux. In the riverine context, such a blurring of boundaries is obvious. Human existence cannot be separated from hydrological processes. The river influences not only the environment but also society, economic activity, and identity.

The affective qualities of this ecology are quite different from those found in the lake. In *Softly Dies a Lake*, environmental degradation creates feelings of grief and nostalgia. This reflects a loss of a once-stable environment. In *The Boatman of the River Padma*, anticipation and adaptation are key affective qualities. Fear is a primary affective response. The unpredictability of the river, such as floods, storms, and erosion, creates a constant awareness of vulnerability. This fear, however, does not translate into isolation from the environment. Rather, it exists alongside a sense of resilience. This resilience creates a practical response to coping with an unstable environment. This is not a heroic response but one of accommodation to environmental conditions. Jane Bennett's eco-affective theory sheds light on the relationship between fear and attachment (Bennett 62). This river is a site of fear and a site of attachment. While it creates fear through its unpredictability, it also provides livelihood. This duality creates an affective landscape of ambivalence rather than loss. There is no mourning of a disappearing river. Rather, there is a direct engagement with a powerful, unpredictable river.

The attachment to the river, despite being displaced from it repeatedly, is rooted not in stability but in familiarity with change. This river remains a constant precisely because it remains in a state of flux. This attachment to flux, therefore, creates an emotional bond rooted not in stability but in familiarity. This distinction points to a major difference from lacustrine ecology. While attachment in the lake was rooted in stability, attachment in the river is rooted in adapting to flux. This emotional response, therefore, centres on survival rather than loss. Finally, the form of the narrative in *The Boatman of the Padma* reflects the ecological condition. This narrative takes the form of episodes of movement-journeys across water, changes in season, changes in settlement. There is no climactic event. Instead, the narrative flows in episodes of disruption and adaptation. This form parallels the flow of the river, echoing the parallel between river flow and narrative form.

The idea that environmental presence can influence narrative organization, as Lawrence Buell argues, is especially relevant to this case (Buell 7). The river not only dictates the content of the narrative but also dictates the form of the narrative itself. Just as the river's currents control the flow of physical movement, it also dictates the flow of narrative movement.

The riverine world also prefigures contemporary debates on climate change and vulnerability. Sea level rise, increased monsoon activity, and flooding are all likely to increase the instability that is already a feature of riverine systems. While the novel itself was written before these changes, it is clear that the riverine world prefigures contemporary debates on climate change.

Where the lake's crisis was one of gradual decay, the river's crisis is one of constant change. The river does not accumulate its problems in the same way, but rather distributes them spatially and temporally. Land that is lost in one place is gained in another. This complicates the narrative of decline, as the river is at once destructive and creative, blurring the lines between decline and creation, loss and gain.

Therefore, the riverine ecology in the novel *The Boatman of the Padma* is marked by flow, erosion, and instability. This results in a mode of identity that is fluid, adaptable, and relational in nature. The affective structure of riverine ecology is marked by fear, resilience, and the need for change. The novel, therefore, increases the scope of the Blue Humanities by showing that the aquatic environment cannot be understood by a singular notion of fluidity but rather in relation to its own material and temporal conditions.

4. Comparative Framework: Differentiated Blue Ecologies

The contrast between lacustrine and riverine ecosystems in *Softly Dies a Lake* and *The Boatman of the Padma* indicates an inherent flaw in current Blue Humanities research, which is based on an understanding of water as a homogenous analytical term. Although Blue Humanities research has clearly advanced in its attempt to overcome terrestrial-centric thinking and highlight the importance of aquatic ecosystems, its focus on maritime mobility and fluidity overlooks the complexity of water itself (Bergthaller et al. 261; Castree 233). As this discussion of contrast indicates, however, different forms of hydrology, such as lakes and rivers, have unique ecological processes, temporalities, affectivities, and identity constructions

that require a transition from a general Blue paradigm to a more particularised understanding of Blue Ecologies.

At the most basic level, there are structural differences between lacustrine and riverine systems. The lake is an enclosed or semi-enclosed system in which there is limited circulation, while the river is an open system in which there is continuous flow. This structural difference is not merely descriptive; it leads to fundamentally different ecological dynamics. In the lake, there is an accumulation. The pollutants, nutrients, and organic matter are retained within the system. This leads to stagnation and gradual degradation. In the river, there is redistribution. The nutrients, sediments, and debris are carried away. This leads to erosion and deposition.

The structural differences between lacustrine and riverine systems also lead to fundamentally different temporalities. The lacustrine system operates on a gradual or accumulative time scale in which change is incremental and imperceptible. The degradation of the lake in *Softly Dies a Lake* happens through slow violence, in which there is a delay in recognition and normalisation of environmental degradation (Nixon 2). The time scale in the lacustrine system is linear and diffuse. Each moment contributes to a trajectory that can be seen only in retrospect.

In contrast, the riverine system has a cyclical and event-based time structure. In "The Boatman of the River Padma," floods, erosion, and sedimentation are repetitive events, creating a rhythm of dislocation and re-creation. This is not a linear but a recursive time structure. There is no finality to loss but rather a repetitive cycle of loss and re-creation. As suggested by Huebener, environmental time must be conceived of as plural rather than singular, reflecting the unique time structure of each environmental system (Huebener 327). The riverine system, for example, has a complex time structure that balances long-term trends with event-based changes. The different time structures lead to the formation of different affective structures. In the lacustrine system, the gradual and cumulative nature of loss leads to a form of ecological grief and nostalgia. The loss of environmental quality is a loss of a once-stable and meaningful environment. Memory is a significant aspect of environmental grief and nostalgia, where the abundance of the environment in the past is contrasted with the degradation of the environment in the present.

In the riverine environment, the cyclical and unstable quality of change leads to fear, resilience, and adaptive attachment. The uncertainty of the river causes fear, but the fear is also mitigated by a sense of familiarity with change. There is a recognition of change and a recognition of the means to cope with it. The affective relationship to change is therefore focused on resilience rather than loss. As Bennett notes, the affective relationship to the environment is determined by material conditions, and different environmental structures lead to different affective orientations (Bennett 62).

Identity formation is also determined by environmental conditions. In the lacustrine environment, identity formation begins with a sense of place. The lake is a fixed reference point for collective memory and culture. However, as the lake changes, this fixed identity formation begins to destabilise. The lack of ecological integrity causes a lack of belonging to a place, leading to a transition from a sense of rootedness to a sense of displacement.

In the riverine system, there is an inherent fluidity to identity. The nature of the landscape's instability precludes the possibility of attachment to land. In fact, there is an emphasis on the construction of identity in relation to movement, accommodation, and negotiation in the face of change. The boatman's character illustrates this concept of fluid identity. His existence and knowledge are tied to his ability to work in the face of instability, not in opposition to it. This concept mirrors Mentz's assertion that aquatic environments disrupt traditional notions of selfhood by incorporating mobility as an essential aspect.

These distinctions can be synthesised into a comparative model:

Ecology	Structure	Temporality	Affect	Identity
Lake (Lacustrine)	Enclosed, cumulative	Gradual, linear decline	Grief, nostalgia	Rooted, destabilized
River (Riverine)	Flowing, redistributive	Cyclical, event- based	Fear, resilience	Fluid, adaptive

This model demonstrates that water is not a homogeneous category but a set of materially differentiated systems, each producing its own ecological and cultural logic. The implications of this insight extend beyond the specific texts analysed here. First, it contests the oceanic focus of Blue Humanities. Oceans are marked by global connectivity and large-scale circulation, yet they are limited in their ability to

encompass all of aquatic experience. Other bodies of water, such as lakes and rivers, have their own unique scales and processes. Blue Humanities' focus on oceanic mobility might be seen to privilege certain forms of fluidity over others. For example, the lake offers a form of aquatic experience that is defined by stagnation and containment, rather than mobility and flow. The river offers a form of fluidity that is local, rather than global, and material, rather than abstract.

Second, this notion of Blue Ecologies and their differentiation speaks to broader debates in environmental humanities, particularly concerning issues of material specificity. Castree argues that one of the key issues with regard to understanding human experiences of the Anthropocene is an attention to the ways in which environmental processes differ from one context to another (Castree 233). A notion of water in general, therefore, is limited in its ability to offer a precise level of understanding of human experiences of ecological systems.

Third, there are implications for literary analysis. A comparison of *Softly Dies a Lake* and "The Boatman of the River Padma" shows that the form of the ecology affects the form of the narrative. The gradual decline of the lake results in a narrative that is more contemplative and memory-focused, whereas the constant flux of the river results in a more episodic and movement-focused narrative. As suggested by Buell, the environmental presence is not just thematic but rather structural, and it affects the form and progress of the narrative (Buell 7). A more precise analysis is made possible by the recognition of the unique forms of ecology.

Fourth, the idea of the unique form of the Blue Ecology provides new avenues for the analysis and understanding of the environmental experience, specifically in relation to climate change. Lakes and rivers have unique responses to climatic change. Lakes are more vulnerable to evaporation, eutrophication, and pollution, resulting in gradual degradation. Rivers, conversely, are more vulnerable to climate change due to alterations in rainfall patterns, glacier melting, and sea-level rise, resulting in alterations in river flow and increased flooding.

Finally, the comparative framework that is established in this piece reinforces the significance of scale in understanding the lake and river environments. As a lake, there is a certain level of localism to this environment, and change is often only discernible over time. As a river, there is a larger level of spatial and temporal scale,

and this connects various elements of the river with other elements of a larger hydrological system. This further complicates any attempt to generalise about “water” in a singular form.

In light of all of these issues, there is a potential in the notion of differentiated Blue Ecologies to build upon and enhance Blue Humanities, rather than rejecting the field and its various insights out of hand. This is because it is possible to introduce a level of specificity and nuance to this field, while still recognising that water is a primary feature of environmentalism, yet not all water is created equal.

By highlighting the distinctions between lacustrine and riverine systems, this illustrates that water environments facilitate the creation of multiple and even contrasting forms of experience. The lake and river are not merely variants of a similar idea; rather, they are two distinct environmental worlds, each with its own temporality, affectivity, and life processes. The recognition of these environmental diversities is vital in creating a more comprehensive and accurate notion of the interplay between literature, environment, and human experience.

5. Conclusion

This study has claimed that a comparative approach to the ecologies depicted in Indian fiction texts involving lacustrine and riverine ecologies underscores the need to rethink Blue Humanities in relation to material specificity. In doing so, it has demonstrated that an examination of *Softly Dies a Lake* and *The Boatman of the River Padma* highlights the ways in which different hydrological forms support different ecological processes, timescapes, affective systems, and identities. The lake and river are not equivalent instantiations of an overarching aquatic experience; rather, they are fundamentally distinct ecologies that support human experience in fundamentally distinct ways.

In contrast, the riverine ecology of "*The Boatman of the River Padma*" is characterised by flow, erosion, and cyclical instability. The temporality of the riverine world is not linear but rather recursive and characterised by repetitive cycles of disruption and renewal. This creates a different kind of environmental experience in which change is not only anticipated but also welcomed rather than opposed. The affective structure of the riverine world is characterised by fear, resilience, and adapted forms of attachment. Rather than being nostalgic for a lost stability,

communities find ways of living with instability. The self is fluid and characterised by movement and negotiation with the environment.

Through this dialogue between the two ecological formations, this study has developed the idea of differentiated Blue Ecologies, which could serve as a means of developing and refining the idea of Blue Humanities. This is because, rather than understanding water as a singular entity, this model encourages a focus on the need to consider the material and structural differences between water formations. This is not a matter of lakes and rivers being different in scale or look, but rather they have different temporalities, affects, and cultures that need to be considered for a precise understanding of water's role in shaping humanity.

There are also some broader implications of this intervention for the environmental humanities as a whole. The most important of these is that this intervention addresses a conceptual limitation of Blue Humanities itself. Blue Humanities has been instrumental in helping to decentre terrestrial perspectives, but its emphasis on the importance of the ocean as a site of mobility has also run the risk of marginalising other kinds of aquatic experience. The oceans, with their vastness and mobility, have come to be the dominant metaphor for the way that we think about water as a whole, but the way that lakes and rivers work is different and cannot be adequately conceptualised through the lens of the ocean.

Secondly, the framework of Blue Ecologies that are differentiated also feeds into the current conversations about materiality, particularly in the field of ecocriticism, where scholars such as Iovino and Oppermann have emphasised the narrative potential of matter, suggesting that ecological processes have meaning (Iovino and Oppermann). This study extends this idea by suggesting that different kinds of matter, that is, different kinds of water, produce different kinds of narrative. The lake "tells" one kind of story, the story of accumulation and decline, while the river "tells" another, the story of movement and transformation.

Third, this study points to the significance of literary works as a mediator for environmental knowledge. This is supported by the argument by Buell that literature is a key factor in the construction of the environment (Buell 7). The literary works under investigation not only portray the environment; rather, they portray the environment as an experience. This is because the works under investigation portray

the environment through the sense of touch. Fourth, the comparative approach can be useful for the discussion on the effects of climate change. Lakes and rivers react differently to climate change; therefore, the two environments are vulnerable to climate change in different ways. Lakes are vulnerable to evaporation, pollution, and eutrophication; therefore, the environment around the lakes gradually deteriorates. Rivers are vulnerable to precipitation change, glacier melt, and sea rise; therefore, the environment around the rivers is vulnerable to increased cases of flooding and displacement. The literary works under investigation offer insights into the effects of the crisis on the environment at the level of the individual.

Lastly, this study contributes to the study of Indian literature by emphasising the importance of water as a structuring element. In both texts, water is not merely a backdrop for the narrative; rather, it is a dynamic element that influences the narrative, identity, and social structures. The lake is a structuring element for memory and loss; the river is a structuring element for movement and adaptation. Such portrayals are also a reflection of the cultural and historical realities in which Indian society has developed, with water systems at their core. By engaging with these texts through the lens of the Blue Humanities, this study emphasises the contribution that Indian literature might make to global discussions on the environment.

In conclusion, the discussion on lacustrine and riverine ecologies has revealed that water should not be considered a unified concept; rather, it is a heterogeneous set of systems that are differentiated in material form. Such a differentiated understanding of water is crucial for the development of the Blue Humanities and environmental literary studies more broadly. It enables a movement away from abstraction toward specificity; away from generalisation toward nuances; away from metaphor toward materiality.

To think of water in this way is to see that different water spaces produce different modes of being in the world. The lake and the river are not merely different forms of the same water element, but they articulate different modes of ecological being. A materially engaged Blue Humanities, therefore, needs to attend to this difference, celebrating the multiplicity of water rather than trying to unify it as a singular category. Only then will it be able to fully capture the complex and multifaceted relationships between the environment, culture, and humanity.

Works Cited

- Amrith, Sunil. *Unruly Waters: How Rains, Rivers, Coasts, and Seas Have Shaped Asia's History*. Basic Books, 2018.
- Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke University Press, 2010.
- Berghaller, Hannes, et al. "Mapping Common Ground: Ecocriticism, Environmental History, and the Environmental Humanities." *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 5, 2014, pp. 261–276.
- Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Buot, Inocencio E., and M. Chandrasekaran. "Biocultural Landscapes: An Integrative Approach to Understanding Human–Environment Relations." *Biodiversity and Conservation*, vol. 25, no. 5, 2016, pp. 847–860.
- Castree, Noel. "The Anthropocene and the Environmental Humanities: Extending the Conversation." *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 5, 2014, pp. 233–260.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*. University of Chicago Press, 2021.
- D'Souza, Rohan. *Drowned and Dammed: Colonial Capitalism and Flood Control in Eastern India*. Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Huebener, Paul. "Timely Ecocriticism: Reading Time Critically in the Environmental Humanities." *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2018, pp. 327–345.
- Iovino, Serenella, and Serpil Oppermann, editors. *Material Ecocriticism*. Indiana University Press, 2014.
- Mentz, Steve. *At the Devil's Gate: Sea Fictions, Storms, and Ecological Crisis*. University of Minnesota Press, 2015.
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011.

How to Cite this Article?

Mallavarapu Nani. "From Stagnation to Flow: Lacustrine and Riverine Ecologies in Indian Fiction." *Research Journal of English (RJOE)*, vol. 11, no. 2, Jan.–Mar. 2026, pp. 1–5, Oray's Publications, doi:10.36993/RJOE.2025.11.02.72.