

## A Study of Water Crisis and Ecological Decline in *Softly Dies a Lake* by Akkineni Kutumbarao

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### Abstract

*Softly Dies a Lake* is written in Telugu by Akkineni Kutumbarao, and was translated into English by Vasanth Kannabiran in 2020. It is a recollection of nostalgia and eco memoirs on Lake Kolleru in Andhra Pradesh. It is an ecologically thought-provoking novel, probing one of the contemporary issues of this 21st-century degradation of water sources. The novel explicitly depicts the lives of people whose culture draws its meaning from the Lake Kolleru. Water is often read as a metaphor in literature, as it symbolises purification, flux, or emotional depth. In *Softly Dies a Lake*, water operates on several aspects as ecological, cultural, historical, and material. The Kolleru lake was once a glorious lake where the livelihood of an entire village depended on it. It was not only a place where people cropped, grazed their cattle and caught fish from the lake but also seized nature in its whole form. Kolleru Lake interblended the villagers for shared purposes. This novel lays an emphasis on creating a well-balanced ecosystem by regulating the eco-friendly relationship between humankind and water sources. Examining through the eco-critical perspective, the thought of slow violence argues that the lake functions as a living archive. It stores communal memory relating to environmental harm, which conserves disaster narratives. This paper concludes by reflecting on the novel's contributions to the blue humanities and ecological justice. Lawrence Buell argues, nature in literature often operates as an “active presence rather than a passive stage” (Buell 25). The representation of water scarcity, migration and loss of balance of nature draws the reader's attention to the field of blue ecology. The lives of individuals are rendered meaningless without water.

**Keywords:** Human lives, aquatic ecosystems, ecological degradation, culture, blue ecology, interdependence, water, humans.

### Introduction

Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary field that examines the relationship between literature and the environment. It studies how novel the representations of nature, ecological crises, landscapes, animals, climate change, water bodies and human-non-human relationships. Besides being both ecological and economic phenomena, environmental deterioration and displacement are literary, cultural, and philosophical realities that demand thorough research. Ecology and culture are intertwined into the fabric of social existence in places like rural India, where nature is closely linked to daily life. These entanglements are communicated, mourned, and remembered through literature, which becomes a powerful medium.

*Softly Dies a Lake* is an ecological narrative that chronicles the gradual decline of Kolleru Lake through the personal and sentimental memories of its narrator, Srinivasa Rao. The story depicts an ecological detail and an oral tradition that highlights Kolleru as a living presence that promotes both human and non-human existence and serves as the centre of communal identity. Therefore, the lake's deterioration is a sign of both an environmental crisis and the decline of a whole way of life. Rob Nixon's definition of slow violence: “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (Nixon 2). The gradual, nearly invisible deterioration of Kolleru over decades in *Softly Dies a Lake* serves as an example of this type of violence, which avoids public attention but causes permanent harm to the environment and culture. Rob Nixon states that the slow violence connects directly with this novel and portrays the gradual, invisible and long-term destruction of Kolleru Lake as it precisely reveals the kind of violence Nixon's theory. The drying of Kolleru Lake does not happen overnight. It occurs through the decades of encroachment, accumulation of pollutants, slow silting, and the steady loss of biodiversity. Slow violence is often unseen; the author says this violence blends into everyday life.

The eco-critical analysis of *Softly Dies a Lake* examines how each story expresses the human costs of forced relocation and environmental deterioration. It looks at how the texts challenge current perspectives of modernity and development, critique socio-political inequalities, and create ecological memory. The two works highlight the voices of people who are most deeply impacted yet typically ignored in the conversation around environmental justice in India and throw light on the lived reality of slow violence through the interweaving of individual memory and communal trauma. Recognising how water's aphysical characteristics, infrastructures, regulations, and discourses interact with one another is made easier by research that views water as socially produced, the hydro-social perspective. The novel clearly depicts hydro-social entanglements: the lake's shifting moods are entwined with canals, fishing rights, tourism, ritual, and regional laws. Focusing on using aquatic settings as a background, blue ecology highlights them as key ecological and cultural actors. Instead of using aquatic environments as a backdrop, blue ecology promotes them as key ecological and cultural actors. It examines how water-weathered traditions impact identities, economy, and political battles while shifting focus from terrestrial to aquatic ecologies. Lakes, rivers, and oceans are therefore essential locations because they contain sedimentary traces of human activity and ecological change, and they mediate cultural practices that focus on memory and survival.

The poignant ecological novel *Softly Dies a Lake* connects the tragic with the nostalgic and the political with the personal. The nostalgia of Kolleru lake, a once-thriving freshwater lake in Andhra Pradesh, is now reduced to a ruined and dying ecology. The memoir is told from the perspective of 65-year-old Srinivasa Rao, the protagonist is returning to the lake. The lake reveals a sharp contrast between a flourishing past and a deteriorating present. By the recollection of his past, Seenu aims to preserve not only his personal history but also posits the collective memory of a people that once survived peacefully with the natural world. As a result, the memoir becomes a literary witness to environmental degradation and a place of ecological depression. In this novel, Kolleru is not just a lake but also a living, breathing presence that provides the community and its people with food, shelter, and caring. An ecology overflowing with life is created by its "rows of ducks floating like streams of flowers, the song of birds, the freshness of its fish, and its abundance of tempting fruits and lush vegetation" (Kutumbarao1). The sights, sounds, and fragrances of a biodiverse paradise pervade Srinivasa's memories, prompting what ecologist Glenn Albrecht calls solastalgia, that is, the agony brought on by environmental changes to one's home or territory. By enabling the reader to experience the narrator's emotional bond with the lake, the decline is made to feel not only ecological but also deeply cultural and emotional. Kolleru lake it is vivid and persistent across the entire text as:

"The water was full of fish, crabs, snails, snakes, leeches...not just one but as far as one could see a range of different forms of water life. On the water, a wealth of green grasses waved in the breeze. Feeding on these grasses are the cattle, birds and insects. All living things, depending completely on nature and mingling with nature in complete harmony, Kolleru seemed to reveal a great and miraculous truth." (Kutumbarao 101)

Every living thing, both human and animal, dependent on Kolleru, just as an infant is dependent on its mother. The Kammadoras, who were farmers, and the Vaddirajas, who were fishermen, made up almost all of the community of Pulaparru. Both groups depended on Kolleru for their livelihoods; the farmers used the plants and weeds that grew in the lake's waters to feed their livestock and buffaloes, while the Vaddis relied on the fish found there. Everyone was monitored by Kolleru. The lake appears frequently throughout the narrative, and the people's lives revolve entirely around it. The narrative opens with five-year-old Seenu, as Srinivasa Rao, driving the cattle into Kolleru to feed and cleanse them with the support of his companions Kishtudu, Pottodu, and Dasu. There is ample evidence of both an almost utopian coexistence of beings and a strong and flourishing ecology. The freshwater lake is filled with aromatic and colorful blooms, rich green grass, and a variety of weeds that provide the grazing cattle plenty of food.

The animals seen in the novel, *Softly Dies a Lake*, seem to be involved and engaged rather than passive. The birds sit on the cattle to catch fish as they graze slowly, and when they are done, they appear to thank the buffalo. The animals get into mischief; the cranes escape just in time when the buffaloes seek to drown them in water. The ticks that clung to the bodies of cows and buffaloes were ingested by sparrows and other smaller birds, who even cleaned their ears. Kolleru attracts a variety of migratory birds from throughout the globe in along with cattle from several villages. Seenu and the other children are also taken care of by the lake. The presence of Kolleru makes a potentially demanding activity like driving and feeding the cattle enjoyable and leisurely, and children never have to pack any food when driving the animals. Seenu, Kishtudu, Pottodu, Rajulu, Dasu, Lakshmi, and Baby feast on the delicious and fresh lotus fruit, kalekayalu, allikayalu, cheemidi kayalu, etc., and drink directly from the stream while the cattle eat to their hearts' content. A seamless mixture of lively noises, including those of young children, various birds, aquatic life, and insects, fill the landscape in plenty of colorful and energetic moments throughout the text. In Kolleru and the village of Pulaparru, nature comes to life.

Kolleru is well-known for its temper in as well as providing nourishment, like a mother does. Its anger and temper make all the farmers' and fishermen's hopes and labor seem insignificant. Kolleru is more than a lake that fulfils human and animal needs. It seems to have a distinct mind. On the one hand, it acts as a mother to people, animals, and plants; on the other, it floods with hatred. Kolleru was entirely and mercilessly destroying the life of the cattle and other animals it otherwise feeds, as well as the year-long labor of the farmers. The villagers' statement underscores how the freshwater lake is more than just a resource to farmers and fishermen. The people have now been reminded of how weak and helpless in the heart of nature's force. A single unexpected flood in Kolleru destroys all of the dreams of farmers of making a happy living. Even though they had laboured day and night in expectation of a crop, it ended in a loss of harvest. After all, the wealthy Kolleru has soaked up all accounts of animals and harvests.

One can just feel the farmers' dependence on natural resources and the overwhelming power of nature. For the villagers, Kolleru is both a mother and a monster, and the villagers have a saying that "There is no count of the harvest in Kolleru or the bullocks that die there" (Kutumabaro 13). We get a reminder of the real instability of farming. Even if one worked tirelessly, it wouldn't have any impact if the weather was not favorable. The common farmer will be impacted greatly as a result of unstable weather cycles driven by climate change and rising global temperatures. When Kolleru floods again, Kakayyagaru, Rangayya, Lakshamma, and other villagers witness their crops being ruined by the freshwater lake, making it heartbreaking.

Purushottam, one of the villagers, puts his towel in his mouth and starts crying during the second flood. These farmers depend on the crop as their primary source of income, thus its destruction places them in an unstable state of extreme poverty and famine. For villages like Pulaparru, there is little help: "The Government that should come to their aid could not even see these villages or these people. These people did not even know that there were governments and that their troubles could be ended. Who could do anything?" (Kutumbarao 157). Eventually, the flooding problem in Kolleru is temporarily solved, all thanks to Atluri Pitcheshwar Rao's clever scheme and the careful planning of the entire community. The entire village works together to construct a five-hundred-acre bund and engage in wet farming within it. This is a major milestone, but everyone in Pulaparru contributes selflessly to make it happen, and happily, even if temporarily, to get the advantages. The elders, the village, and Kolleru are left on their own when the majority of the young people including Pitchayya, Madhu, Seenu, Kishtudu, and Jhansi have left Pulaparru to obtain higher education in hopes of finding a better future.

The few people who are left are the ones who receive the least attention from the government, but they would be the first to suffer greatly from the smallest amount of pollution and climate deterioration. They have made the least contribution to environmental destruction, pollution, and exploitation. The indigenous people treat Kolleru, their cattle, and the environment with reverence and kindness throughout the memoir. Although animals and natural resources are essential to their survival, they never take them for granted. Rangyia, Seenu's father and a farmer in Pulaparru, acutely states:

For the sake of this harvest, the farmer kills many living things...Not just snakes and scorpions, here many hundreds and thousands of lives coexist. Not just the water insects that we see, there are so many that we can't see. We deprive the ones who need water and wet the ones who don't need water. It is after committing all these sins that the farmer grows this harvest. This harvest provides food for the people of this world (Kutumbarao 180).

The author frequently focuses on relics found from the lakebed, such as broken ceramics, rusty utensils, and bones that serve as sedimentary archives. These things evoke memories of fishing from Seenu's youngster and a seasonal celebration with an elder. The novel implies that the lake itself saves social time in the same way that sediments store geological time by frequently enacting the recoveries as acts of nostalgia. The water changes into an image with visible traces of human history. Recollections of scenes of excess, such as flooded banks, fish-filled streams, and communal swimming, had now been depicted as contrasting the moments of unfertile lands and separation with descriptions of cracked mud, heat-hazed afternoons, and the lack of frogs.

The ordinary life is portrayed as entwined with water, probably its most striking effort. The story *Softly Dies a Lake* depicts how the lake's seasonal moods shape livelihood, diet, cleanliness, and relaxation. The plot focuses on implicit knowledge, such as how elders perceive wind patterns across the lake, how children learn to walk on wet rocks, how nets are repaired, and how anchors can be evaluated by feel, rather than portraying these processes as background colour. The emphasis on embodied knowledge shows how human competency and lake dynamics are interconnected.

These events give rise to the lake's agency. Instead of being sentimentally idolised, agency is scattered. The lake's currents determine the fisher's catch; a flood changes property borders; and algal blooms change labour cycles and flavour. Characters are acted upon by water, not the other way around. This reciprocity is consistent with new-materialist assertions regarding non-human vitality: surroundings and objects have the ability to influence human actors, which in turn reorganises social life.

The method of distribution of the lake is made clear in the novel through two formal ways. First, harmonic focus: The scenes alternate between human viewpoints and personal, vivid descriptions of the lake that resemble views from others, and how the surface is reminded as storms. Second, temporal rhythm: to correlate reader perception with hydrological time, the story's pacing slows during tidal or seasonal shifts. By using these methods, the novel fosters reader empathy for complex living situations. The novel experiences the lake's physical constraints and its benefits.

Water serves as a reminder device several times in this novel. Traumatic events have repeated in ripples over the years, and memories of characters are deposited like silt in this fiction. The lake turns into a storehouse for love, loss, and forgetfulness. In contrast to realist fiction, which frequently uses physical environments such as buildings or monuments to preserve human memory. This novel utilises the lake's dynamic surface and depth to reveal how memory is both stable and flexible.

One of the primary theme of the novel is homecoming, as individuals throw objects into the lake (such as a ring, an image, or a promise) and later have to deal with the moral and practical consequences when the items come back or are revealed by a youngster. The ethical value of forgetting and remembering the relations have been overstated by these returns. The lake promotes societal reflection when it retains a possession. Therefore, the novel argues that human groups plan for the moral and ethical dimensions of actions on hydrological processes and that waterways have moral memory. Similarly, this fiction reveals how water mediates intimacy and separation on an

emotional level. Characters in the novel reveal secrets when lake is submerged or notice that the lake's limits symbolise social rejection during moments of bathing or crossing. At transgressive moments, such as betrayals, confessions, and drowning attempts, the image of submersion comes back to the villagers. It illustrates how the penetrability of water reveals characters as both danger and connection. Therefore, identity in the novel is a relational formation that is sensitive to the moods of the lake rather than an inward possession.

Informal barter networks, fishing cooperatives, and the religious maintenance of communal moorings all seem to be acts that preserve interdependence in ways that traditional groups overlook. These activities are shown as robust socioecological strategies rather than as sentimental holdovers. Thus, the novel lightly criticises both state authority and economic enclosure, proposing territorial, location-based governance that is mindful of reciprocity and complexity in its place.

As *Softly Dies a Lake* uses the lake as an archive, a character, and a place of mourning, it provides an engaging paradigm for blue eco-critical work. Water was used to describe symbolic sadness and pay respect to local knowledge. The novel insists that hydrological loss is not only ecological but also historical and ethical. The lake serves as a reminder that tells the stories of grief, labour, and belonging that are found in water and Kolleru Lake in the novel.

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#### **Conflicts of interest**

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper

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