



Ecologies Of Remembrance: Trauma, Landscape, And Environmental Violence in Nilanjana Roy's Black River

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ABSTRACT

This study explores Nilanjana Roy's Black River through the intersecting lenses of eco-memory, environmental violence, and trauma theory. Positioned within contemporary Indian climate fiction, the novel represents ecological degradation not as isolated catastrophe but as an accumulative and historically embedded process. The polluted river, fractured terrains, and disrupted human communities function as mnemonic landscapes that preserve traces of ecological harm. Drawing upon theories of slow violence and narrative trauma, this paper argues that Roy constructs an aesthetic of environmental remembrance in which land and body reflect each other's wounds. The novel's fragmented narrative form mirrors the psychological disorientation produced by ecological collapse, foregrounding the inseparability of human and nonhuman vulnerability. Ultimately, Black River redefines remembrance as an ethical and political act, asserting that landscapes retain histories of violence even when dominant systems attempt to erase them.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary climate fiction has emerged as a crucial literary mode for engaging with ecological crisis in the twenty-first century. In the Indian context, such narratives frequently intersect with histories of



industrial expansion, displacement, and environmental injustice. Nilanjana Roy's *Black River* exemplifies this convergence by presenting environmental degradation as inseparable from cultural memory and psychological rupture.

Rather than dramatizing climate catastrophe as sudden apocalypse, Roy foregrounds gradual ecological deterioration. The river's contamination, the erosion of once-thriving landscapes, and the quiet abandonment of communities signal a prolonged form of violence embedded within developmental modernity. Environmental harm in the novel unfolds incrementally, accumulating across time and shaping both physical space and human consciousness.

This paper proposes that *Black River* constructs what may be termed an "ecology of remembrance." In this framework, landscape is not a passive setting but an active bearer of memory. Ecological destruction becomes inscribed into terrain, bodies, and narrative structure. By integrating eco-critical thought with trauma theory, the novel reveals how environmental violence disrupts temporal continuity, fragments identity, and reconfigures collective memory. Roy ultimately suggests that remembering ecological harm is not merely reflective—it is resistant and ethically imperative.

ECO-MEMORY AND SLOW ENVIRONMENTAL VIOLENCE

Recent developments in environmental humanities emphasize the need to rethink the relationship between memory and ecology. Eco-memory extends traditional memory studies by recognizing that landscapes themselves function as repositories of historical experience. Environmental damage leaves material traces—polluted water, barren soil, altered ecosystems—that endure long after their initial causes.

The idea of gradual environmental harm, conceptualized by scholars as "slow violence," is particularly relevant here. Such violence does not erupt dramatically; instead, it accumulates quietly, often escaping immediate public attention. In Roy's novel, the river's blackened surface symbolizes this obscured yet persistent damage. Its contamination is not a singular event but the outcome of sustained neglect and exploitation.

The novel also resonates with trauma theory's understanding of belatedness and repetition. Psychological trauma frequently manifests through fragmented recall and intrusive memory rather than coherent narrative. Roy's disjointed storytelling reflects this pattern. Environmental destruction is revealed in fragments—through recollections, sensory impressions, and recurring imagery—rather than linear exposition. The form of the novel thus enacts the very instability it represents.



Roy's recurring description of the river establishes it as a living archive of violence:

“The river did not shimmer anymore; it moved like a dark vein through the land, thick and sluggish, carrying what the city had chosen to forget.” (Roy 37)

This description foregrounds the river as both physiological and mnemonic entity. The metaphor of the “dark vein” collapses distinctions between body and landscape, suggesting that the river functions as the circulatory system of the region. Yet the phrase “carrying what the city had chosen to forget” transforms the river into a repository of suppressed histories. Pollution here becomes materialized memory. The water does not merely flow; it bears witness.

The sluggishness of the river reflects Rob Nixon's idea of slow violence—damage that accumulates gradually, without spectacle. Roy's imagery emphasizes obscurity rather than explosion. The violence is ongoing, embedded, and normalized.

By synthesizing these perspectives, Roy portrays ecological degradation as both physical injury and mnemonic residue. The land itself appears to remember.

LANDSCAPE AS MNEMONIC TERRAIN

In *Black River*, the environment operates as an archive of accumulated violence. The titular river, rendered opaque and darkened by pollution, serves as the novel's central metaphor. Its altered state signifies more than contamination; it evokes obscured histories and suppressed accountability. The river's flow carries not only water but the sediment of past exploitation.

Roy's language frequently aligns ecological imagery with bodily metaphor. Forests are described as diminished and stripped; soil appears fatigued; air feels suffocating. These descriptions collapse the distinction between environmental and corporeal vulnerability. By attributing wounded qualities to the land, Roy invites readers to perceive ecological damage as an ethical injury rather than a neutral process.

Abandoned settlements and degraded riverbanks further intensify this effect. These spaces function as material witnesses to displacement and economic extraction. Even in silence, they testify to what has been lost. Landscape becomes a site of residual presence, where absence itself speaks.

Roy frequently renders the environment in corporeal terms:

“The forest had thinned into a skeleton of trees, their branches brittle as broken fingers against the sky.” (Roy 27)



The skeletal imagery suggests depletion and death. By likening branches to “broken fingers,” Roy anthropomorphizes the forest, positioning environmental degradation as bodily mutilation. This metaphor establishes an ethical equivalence between harm inflicted upon land and harm inflicted upon human bodies.

The sky backdrop further heightens the visual starkness of loss. The forest does not merely decline—it is rendered skeletal, an image that connotes memory of a once-living fullness. The skeleton becomes a reminder of absence, reinforcing eco-memory as a process of remembering what has been stripped away.

Through such imagery, the novel challenges anthropocentric narrative conventions. The environment is not background scenery but an agent bearing memory and consequence.

EMBODIED ECOLOGICAL TRAUMA

Environmental degradation in the novel is internalized within human bodies. Illness, anxiety, and exhaustion emerge as somatic responses to toxic surroundings. The permeability between environment and body underscores shared vulnerability: polluted water enters bloodstream; contaminated air shapes breath.

The psychological dimensions of trauma are equally significant. Characters experience disorientation and recurring memory flashes that mirror the instability of the ecosystems they inhabit. Time becomes fractured. Past and present intermingle, reinforcing the sense that ecological damage cannot be confined to a singular historical moment.

Notably, silence operates as a recurring motif. Ecological silence—the absence of birds, the quieting of once-vibrant habitats—parallels narrative silence, where words fail to fully articulate suffering. This dual silence amplifies the haunting atmosphere of the novel.

The novel also portrays environmental violence as internalized suffering:

“She could taste the river in her mouth even miles away, metallic and bitter, as though the water had entered her blood.” (Roy 32)

Here, ecological damage crosses bodily boundaries. The contamination is no longer external; it infiltrates the character’s sensory and circulatory systems. The metallic taste evokes toxicity and industrial residue.



This passage illustrates the permeability between human and nonhuman systems. The phrase “entered her blood” suggests irreversible incorporation. Environmental harm becomes embodied trauma. The body acts as an extension of landscape, reinforcing the novel’s rejection of anthropocentric separations.

Roy’s depiction of embodied trauma thus dissolves the boundary between human and nonhuman experience. Environmental violence reverberates across species and systems, destabilizing any illusion of separateness.

NARRATIVE FRAGMENTATION AND THE ETHICS OF REMEMBERING

The novel’s nonlinear structure is not merely stylistic; it reflects the epistemological instability produced by ecological crisis. Fragmented chronology mirrors fractured ecosystems. Just as habitats collapse unpredictably, narrative continuity disintegrates.

Memory in *Black River* operates collectively as well as individually. Personal recollections intersect with communal histories of displacement and loss. The narrative resists closure, suggesting that environmental harm remains unresolved. There is no cathartic restoration—only continued awareness. The novel’s nonlinear narrative reflects trauma’s temporal dislocation:

“The past did not stay buried; it rose like silt from the riverbed whenever the water shifted.” This metaphor encapsulates eco-memory. Just as silt resurfaces unpredictably, traumatic memory disrupts present stability. The riverbed symbolizes suppressed history; movement of water triggers recollection.

The simile reinforces the inseparability of natural process and memory. Environmental disturbance produces narrative disturbance. Roy’s structure thus mirrors the ecology she depicts—unstable, layered, and sedimented with past violence.

By refusing resolution, Roy foregrounds remembrance as ethical obligation. To remember ecological violence is to resist normalization of destruction. The novel positions storytelling itself as a counterforce to erasure.

POLITICAL ECOLOGY AND DEVELOPMENTAL CRITIQUE

The environmental degradation depicted in the novel is inseparable from political and economic structures. Industrial expansion and developmental rhetoric mask long-term ecological costs. Roy exposes how such narratives marginalize vulnerable communities while privileging profit.



Environmental harm disproportionately impacts those with limited agency. Displacement and contamination are unevenly distributed, revealing the intersection of ecological crisis and social inequality. In this sense, the novel engages with political ecology, emphasizing that environmental violence is never purely natural—it is structured by power.

Roy’s depiction of ecological silence intensifies the theme of loss:

“There were no birds at dawn anymore. The mornings arrived quietly, as if afraid of their own emptiness.” (Roy 2)

The absence of birds signals biodiversity collapse. Dawn—traditionally associated with renewal—is stripped of vitality. The personification of mornings as “afraid” conveys unease and vacancy.

Silence becomes symptomatic of ecological devastation. The lack of birdsong mirrors narrative gaps and emotional suppression within the characters. Ecological silence thus parallels psychological trauma. What is missing speaks as loudly as what remains.

By foregrounding memory, Roy challenges celebratory accounts of modernization. Remembrance becomes a form of dissent, preserving histories that dominant discourse seeks to obscure.

CONCLUSION

Nilanjana Roy’s *Black River* offers a compelling meditation on ecological remembrance in the Anthropocene. Through polluted waterways, scarred terrains, and fragmented storytelling, the novel illustrates how environmental violence permeates both landscape and psyche. Ecological harm is not confined to visible destruction; it lingers as memory, silence, and embodied anxiety.

By conceptualizing landscape as mnemonic terrain, Roy expands the scope of trauma beyond the human subject. The novel insists that the environment retains traces of exploitation, even when institutional narratives attempt to efface them. In doing so, *Black River* positions remembrance as a vital ethical practice. To acknowledge ecological trauma is to resist its repetition.

In an era marked by accelerating climate crisis, Roy’s work reminds readers that the earth remembers—and that literature plays a crucial role in ensuring that such remembrance endures.

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