
Becoming with the River: A Posthuman Ecological Reading Adwaita

Mallabarman's *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam*

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Abstract

This paper examines *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* through the critical framework of posthuman ecology by situating the novel within contemporary debates in environmental humanities. Moving beyond anthropocentric interpretations, the study foregrounds the river *Titas* as a nonhuman agent that actively shapes the socio-cultural and existential conditions of the *Malo* fishing community. Drawing upon the theoretical insights of Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, and Bruno Latour, the paper argues that Mallabarman anticipates a relational ontology in which human and nonhuman entities are deeply entangled. The gradual ecological transformation of the river leads not only to environmental degradation but also to the collapse of a cultural ecosystem by revealing the inseparability of ecological and social systems. By examining river ontology, subaltern ecology, and the decentering of the human subject, this study demonstrates how the novel critiques human exceptionalism and articulates a proto-posthuman ecological vision. The paper also foregrounds how the text underscores the urgency of reimagining relationships of human and nature in an era marked by ecological crisis.

Keywords: Posthuman Ecology, Anthropocentrism, River Ontology, Subaltern Ecology

Introduction

Titas Ekti Nadir Naam (1956), written by Adwaita Mallabarman, is widely recognised as one of the most powerful narratives of marginalised riverine life in Bengali literature. The novel portrays

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the *Malo* fishing community whose identity, livelihood, and cultural practices are inseparable from the river *Titas*. While the text has often been read through sociological and caste-based lenses, its ecological dimension opens up new interpretive possibilities, especially within the framework of posthuman ecology. Posthuman ecology challenges the anthropocentric worldview that places humans at the center of existence and emphasises the agency, vitality, and interconnectedness of nonhuman entities. The river in the novel is not merely a setting but a dynamic force that shapes human lives, identities, and histories. Its gradual drying signals not just environmental change but the dissolution of an entire socio-cultural world. This paper argues that *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* anticipates posthuman ecological thought by presenting a relational ontology in which humans and nonhumans co-constitute each other. Through a close reading of the text, within the theoretical frameworks of Haraway, Braidotti, and Latour, the study demonstrates how the novel dismantles human exceptionalism and foregrounds ecological interdependence.

Theoretical Framework: Posthuman Ecology and Relational Ontology

“Posthumanism comprises both a state of existence and a process of transformation” (Dhar & Mallick 1). In this context, Pramod K. Nayar argues that Posthumanism marks the end of the human as a sovereign, autonomous subject (2). Posthuman ecology emerges from the broader field of posthumanism, which critiques the concepts of the autonomous, rational human subject. Scholars such as Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, and Bruno Latour have been instrumental in articulating this paradigm shift. Haraway’s concept of “naturecultures” emphasises the inseparability of nature and culture by arguing that humans and nonhumans exist in a state of co-evolution. In *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), she advocates for “making kin” with nonhuman entities, thereby challenging hierarchical distinctions between species (103). Braidotti’s formulation of the posthuman subject highlights relationality, embodiment, and embeddedness within ecological systems. In the book, *The Posthuman* (2013), she argues that the human is not a self-contained entity but part of a network of interdependent forces (49). Latour’s Actor-Network Theory (ANT) further dismantles the division of nature and culture by treating humans and nonhumans as “actants” within networks of relations (72). In *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991), he contends that modernity’s separation of nature and society is an illusion, and that reality consists of hybrid assemblages (10). Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a framework for

understanding Titas Ekti Nadir Naam as a text that decenters human agency, recognizes the agency of the river, emphasises ecological interconnectedness and challenges the binary of nature and culture.

The author presents the river not as a passive backdrop, but as an active force that shapes the lives, emotions, and fate of the *Malo* community. The author writes, “তিতাস শাহী মেজাজে চলে। তার সাপের মত বক্রতা নাই, কৃপনের মতো কুটিলতা নাই। কৃষ্ণপক্ষের ভাঁটায় তার বুকের খানিকটা শুষিয়া নেয়, কিন্তু কাঙ্গাল করে না। শুক্লপক্ষের জোয়ারের উদ্দীপনা তাকে ফোলায়, কিন্তু উদ্বেল করে না” [Titas flows with a regal grace. It has neither the winding curves of a snake nor the crookedness of a miser. During the ebb tide of the dark fortnight, it dries up a little, but does not leave itself destitute. In the rising tide of the bright fortnight, it swells with energy, but does not overflow] (Mallabharman 13, trans. mine). From the perspective of Bruno Latour’s Actor–Network Theory, the river can be understood as a nonhuman actant, an entity that participates in a network of relations. The river *Titas* determines the rhythm of everyday life. The livelihood of the *Malo* fishermen depends entirely on its flow, depth, and seasonal changes. When the river is full, it sustains life by providing fish, mobility, and a sense of continuity. When it begins to dry up or shift its course, it brings uncertainty, hunger, and displacement. In this way, the river is not just “there”; it acts, it enables, restricts, nourishes, and destroys. Human agency, therefore, is not independent but deeply conditioned by the behaviour of the river. This relational dynamic reflects what Donna Haraway calls “naturecultures”, where nature and culture cannot be separated. The customs of the *Malo* community emerge in direct response to the presence of the river. Their identity is shaped through continuous interaction with *Titas* by suggesting a process of “becoming-with” the river. The river is not external to human life; it is entangled with material, emotional, and cultural level.

The river resists human control, which challenges the idea of human superiority. Its unpredictable currents and gradual silting demonstrate that it possesses its own agency, independent of human needs or desires. This aligns with Rosi Braidotti’s notion of the posthuman subject, where humans are no longer central but are embedded within a larger ecological system of interdependent forces. The characters in the novel do not master the river; rather, they adapt to

its changing conditions. It is also important to note that the river functions as a connective force within a broader ecological network. It links human lives with fish, boats, weather patterns, and the surrounding landscape. This interconnected system illustrates that existence in the novel is not individual but relational. The decline of the river leads to the disintegration of the community by showing how deeply human survival is tied to nonhuman processes. Thus, the river *Titas* operates as a powerful nonhuman actant that destabilises anthropocentric assumptions. It reveals a world where agency is distributed, boundaries between nature and culture are blurred, and human life is inseparable from the non-human environment. Through this portrayal, the text offers a deeply posthuman ecological vision, where the river is not merely a setting but a co-creator of life itself. In Mallabarman's novel, the river *Titas* functions as a central actant in the Latourian sense. It is not a passive backdrop but an active force that shapes the narrative. From the perspective of Actor-Network Theory, the river participates in a network that includes humans, fish, boats, seasons, and sediment. These elements interact to produce the conditions of existence for the *Malo* community. The agency of the river becomes evident in its transformation. The gradual silting and drying of the river disrupt the network that leads to the collapse of the community. This process is not controlled by humans; rather, it reflects the autonomy of ecological systems. Latour's notion of distributed agency is particularly relevant here. Agency is not located in individual actors but is distributed across the network. The river, therefore, is not simply acted upon; it acts. The author writes:

সবগুলি নদীই মানুষের প্রাত্যহিক জীবনের কাজে আসে। কিন্তু এ কাজে আসার নানা ব্যতিক্রম আছে। বড় নদীতে সওদাগরের নৌকা আসে পাল উড়াইয়া। উহার বিশালবুকে জেলেরা সারাদিন নৌকা লইয়া ভাসিয়া থাকে। নৌকায় রাঁধে, খায়, ঘুমাইয়া থাকে। মাছ ধরে। সব বিষয়ে একটা কঠোর রূপ এখানে প্রকটিত। তীরে তীরে বালুচর, তাল নারিকেল সুপারির বাগ। স্রোতের খরায় তীরের মাটি কাটে, ধসে। ঢেউয়ের আঘাতে তীরগুলি ভাঙ্গিয়া খসিয়া পড়ে। গৃহস্থালি ভাঙে। খেত-খামার ভাঙে, তাল-নারিকেল, সুপারির গাছগুলি সারি বাঁধিয়া ভাঙিয়া পড়ে। ক্ষমা নাই! ভাঙ্গাগড়ার এক রুদ্র দোলার দোলনায়- করাল এক চিওচঞ্চল, ক্ষিপ্ত আনন্দ... সে-ই এক ধরনের শিল্প!

All rivers are useful in the everyday lives of human beings. However, there are many differences in the ways they serve. In large rivers, merchants' boats arrive with their sails unfurled. Fishermen drift with their boats all day long upon its vast water. They cook, eat, sleep, and catch fish in their boats. In all these activities, a certain harshness becomes evident. Along the banks stretch sandbars and groves of palm, coconut, and betel nut trees. During strong currents, the river erodes the soil of the banks, causing them to collapse. Under the assault of the waves, the riverbanks crumble and break away. Households fall apart. Fields and farmlands are ruined, and rows of palm, coconut, and betel nut trees fall in succession. There is no mercy! In the fierce swing of destruction and creation, there is a terrible, restless, and intense joy... that itself is a kind of art. (Mallabharman 20, trans. mine)

This passage from offers a powerful example of how the river can be read through a posthuman ecological lens, where nature is not passive but active, dynamic, and agentic. The river is presented as a nonhuman force with agency. It supports human life, fishing, movement, and daily survival, but at the same time, it destroys. The description of banks collapsing, homes breaking, and fields being washed away shows that the river is not under human control. This aligns with Jane Bennett's idea of "vibrant matter," where material entities possess their own force and capacity to act. Hence, the river is presented as powerful, capable of shaping human destiny. The passage reflects Bruno Latour's concept of Actor Network Theory, where both human and nonhuman entities function as "actants" within a network. The *Malo* fishermen, their boats, the fish, and the river are interconnected. Human life depends on the river, but the river also reconfigures that life. Agency is therefore distributed, not centered in humans alone. The dual nature of the river, nurturing and destructive, challenges the anthropocentric view that nature exists only for human benefit. The line "ক্ষমা নাই!" (there is no mercy) emphasises that the river operates according to its own rhythms, not human needs. This resonates with Donna Haraway's idea that humans and nature are entangled but not hierarchically ordered. The river is part of human life, yet it also exceeds human control. The description of destruction as a form of "art" introduces a deeply posthuman aesthetic. The "fierce swing" of creation and destruction suggests that ecological processes are not purely negative but part of a larger, dynamic system. This reflects a worldview in which change, instability, and transformation are natural and inevitable. In this

context, human suffering becomes one element within a broader ecological process rather than the central concern. The existence of the *Malo* community is entirely tied to the river. When the river erodes the land, it simultaneously erodes human stability, livelihood, and culture.

Haraway’s “Naturecultures” and the Malo Community

Donna Haraway’s concept of “naturecultures” helps us to understand that nature and culture are not separate domains but are always intertwined (1). This idea is particularly useful in reading *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam*, where Mallabarman portrays the *Malo* community as living in deep, continuous relation with the river *Titas*. For the *Malos*, the river is not an external natural resource; it is part of their social, cultural, and emotional world. The everyday life of the *Malo* community reflects this inseparability. Their rituals and songs are not merely cultural expressions but are shaped by the rhythms of the river. Festivals, oral traditions, and collective practices often emerge from their dependence on water, fishing cycles, and seasonal changes. Through these practices, the river becomes a living presence within their cultural imagination, not just a physical entity. Their knowledge systems are also deeply ecological. The *Malos* possess an intimate understanding of the currents of the river, behaviour of fish, patterns of weather, and seasonal shifts. This knowledge is not abstract or scientific in the modern sense but is developed through long-term interaction. It demonstrates a form of intelligence that arises from being embedded within the environment, what Haraway would describe as a co-evolutionary process between humans and nonhumans.

The river is associated with memory, identity, and belonging. It shapes personal and collective experiences, joy during abundance, grief during loss, and anxiety during ecological decline. The *Malos* do not stand apart from the river; they feel with it and through it. This emotional entanglement reinforces the idea that human life is not autonomous but relational. Moreover, this relationship challenges the rigid boundary between nature and culture that is central to modern thought. In the *Malo* worldview, the river participates in shaping community, social relations, and even moral values. Human existence is thus co-constituted by the river by reflecting Haraway’s argument that beings come into existence through their relationships. In this way, the *Malo* community exemplifies “naturecultures” in practice, a mode of living where ecological, cultural, and emotional dimensions are linked with each other. Hence, the novel presents a world in which

humans and the river are mutually embedded by offering a powerful critique of anthropocentric thinking and a vision of life grounded in interconnectedness. This inseparability of nature and culture challenges the modern dichotomy that separates human society from the natural world. The *Malo* community embodies what Haraway describes as a “sympoietic” system that is collectively produced through interactions among multiple entities (58). Hence, the decline of the river represents not only an environmental crisis but also the disruption of the dichotomy of nature and culture. The loss of the river entails the loss of identity, memory, and belonging.

Braidotti’s Posthuman Subject and Vulnerability

Rosi Braidotti’s idea of the posthuman subject focuses on vulnerability, interdependence, and the fact that humans are always connected to their environment. She argues that human beings are not independent; instead, they exist within a network of ecological, social, and material relations. This perspective helps us better to understand the condition of the *Malo* community in the text. The *Malos* clearly embody this posthuman condition. They are economically marginalised, relying on fishing for survival with very limited resources. At the same time, they are ecologically dependent, as their entire livelihood depends on the flow of the river, fish population, and seasonal cycles. Their lives are also socially vulnerable, as they occupy a lower position within the broader social structure, which further limits their ability to adapt to change. This vulnerability becomes most visible when the river begins to dry up. As the ecological balance collapses, the *Malos* are forced to leave their traditional occupation and take up unfamiliar forms of labour. The author writes, “সে কি জানে না তিতাস নদী শুখাইয়া গিয়াছে, মালোরা জলছাড়া মীনের মত হইয়াছে।” [Does he not know the Titas River has dried up, and the Malos have become like fish out of water. They cannot get anything to eat. Their heads are not right either] (Mallabarman 335, trans. mine). This shift not only creates economic hardship but also leads to a deep sense of alienation and loss of identity. Their connection to the river is not merely economic; it is cultural and emotional. When that connection weakens, their sense of belonging and community also begins to break down. Braidotti emphasises that recognising such vulnerability is important for developing an ethical relationship with the environment. Instead of seeing humans as dominant over nature, her theory encourages us to see humans as part of a shared system where all beings are interconnected. The novel reflects this idea by showing that human life cannot be separated from ecological conditions. The *Malos*’

suffering is not just a social issue; it is also an ecological one. Through this portrayal, the text challenges the belief that humans are autonomous. The decline of the river reveals how fragile human life actually is when separated from its ecological support. In this way, *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* offers a powerful example of Braidotti's posthuman thought, where vulnerability is not a weakness but a condition that connects humans more deeply to the world of nature.

Ecological Catastrophe and Cultural Extinction

In the novel, Mallabarman presents the drying of the river as not only an environmental crisis but also a deeply human and cultural tragedy. The gradual decline of the river leads to the slow but irreversible collapse of the *Malo* community. The most immediate impact of this ecological change is the loss of livelihood. Fishing, which once sustained the community, becomes increasingly difficult and eventually impossible as the river loses its depth and vitality. Without fish, the *Malos* lose their primary source of income and food. This economic breakdown forces them into unfamiliar and often degrading forms of labour by highlighting their vulnerability in the absence of ecological support. The novel portrays the disintegration of social structures. The *Malo* community, once bound together by shared work, rituals, and collective identity, begins to fragment. Traditional roles weaken as individuals struggle to survive in changing conditions. Community bonds, which were earlier strengthened by a common dependence on the river, are gradually dissolving under pressure. The ecological crisis also leads to an erosion of cultural practices and traditions. Songs, rituals, and oral traditions that were deeply connected to the rhythms of the river begin to lose their meaning. Cultural expressions that once celebrated harmony with nature become irrelevant in a context of scarcity and loss. In this way, the decline of the river results not only in material deprivation but also in the fading of cultural memory and identity. The author articulates:

এখনো জোয়ার আসে। চরটা তখন ডুবিয়া যায়। সারা তিতাস তখন জলে জলময়। নদীর দিকে দৃষ্টি প্রসারিত করিয়া মালোরা ভাবিতে চেষ্টা করে: এই তো জলে-ভরা নদী। ইহাই সত্য। একটু আগে যাহা দেখা গিয়াছিল ওটা দুঃস্বপ্ন। কিন্তু ভাঁটা আসিলেই সত্যতা নগ্ন হইয়া উঠে। মালোদের এক একটা বুকজোড়া দীর্ঘ-নিঃশ্বাস বাহির হয়। তিতাস যেন একটা শত্রু। নির্মম নিষ্ঠুর হইয়া উঠিয়াছে সেই শত্রু। আজ সম্পূর্ণ অনাত্মীয় হইয়া গিয়াছে। এতদিন সোহাগে আল্লাদে বুক করিয়া রাখিয়াছে। আজ

যেন ঠেলিয়া কোন গহীন জলে ফেলিয়া দিতেছে! যেন মালোদের সঙ্গে তার সম্পর্ক চুকাইয়া নিষ্করন কণ্ঠে বলিয়া দিতেছে, আমার কাছে আসিও না। আমি আর তোমাদের কেউ না।

The tide still comes. Then the sandbar submerged. The entire *Titas* is then full of water. The Malos try to extend their gaze toward the river and think: this is the river full of water. This is reality. What they had seen just a while ago was a nightmare. But when the ebb comes, the truth is laid bare. Each of the Malos lets out a long sigh. The *Titas* seems like an enemy. That enemy has become cruel and merciless. Today it has become completely alien. For so long it had embraced them with love and delight in its heart. Today it seems as if it is pushing them into some deep water! As if severing its relationship with the Malos, it is telling them in a clear voice: do not come near me anymore. I am no one to you anymore. (Mallabarman 332, trans. mine)

This passage vividly illustrates the river *Titas* as a nonhuman agent with its own power, autonomy, and affective presence. From this perspective, humans are not the sole actors; instead, they exist within networks of interdependent relations with the river and other ecological forces. Here, the river alternates between generosity and hostility. During the high tide, the river “fills with water” and seems abundant, giving the *Malos* a sense of hope and connection. Yet, the ebb tide exposes the river’s capacity for destruction and alienation, leaving the *Malos* vulnerable, hungry, and destabilized. The description of the river as “a cruel enemy” underscores that the environment is not a passive backdrop but an actant, a force with its own agency capable of shaping human lives as Bruno Latour’s Actor–Network Theory.

Another significant consequence is migration and displacement. As the river can no longer sustain life, many members of the *Malo* community are forced to leave their ancestral homes in search of survival. This displacement creates a sense of rootlessness and disconnection, as people are separated from both their environment and their cultural heritage. Migration, therefore, is not just a physical movement but also an emotional and cultural rupture. Through this portrayal, the novel illustrates that ecological catastrophe cannot be understood in isolation. It directly affects social relations, cultural continuity, and human identity. The collapse of the *Malo* community demonstrates that when the environment is damaged, entire ways of life can disappear with it. In this sense, the text offers a profound reflection on the fragile and interconnected nature of

ecological and cultural systems. This collapse can be understood as a form of ecological grief, a concept increasingly discussed in environmental humanities.

Subaltern Ecology and Environmental Justice

In the text, Mallabarman brings forward the experiences of the *Malo* community as a subaltern group, whose lives are shaped by both ecological dependence and social marginalisation. The *Malos* occupy a lower position within the caste hierarchy and suffer from economic deprivation, which makes them especially vulnerable to environmental change. Their struggles show that ecological crises are never purely “natural”; they are deeply connected to social inequalities. The drying of the river affects everyone, but its impact is distributed. The *Malo community*, who depend directly on the river for survival, suffer the most. They lack the resources, social mobility, and institutional support to adapt to ecological disruption. The novel, though written earlier, anticipates this contemporary concern by showing how environmental loss intensifies existing social vulnerabilities. By focusing on the *Malo* community, Mallabarman contributes to what can be called “subaltern ecology.” This perspective shifts attention away from dominant narratives and highlights the voices of those who are often ignored. It foregrounds marginalised voices by allowing the *Malos* to speak through their own experiences rather than being represented from outside. It reveals the unequal distribution of ecological risks by showing how environmental crises affect different groups in different manner. It challenges dominant ideas of development, which often ignore the cost paid by vulnerable communities in the name of progress.

Decentering the Human: Narrative Form and Structure

The narrative structure of *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* itself plays an important role in decentering the human subject. Instead of focusing on a single protagonist or a linear storyline, the novel adopts a form that reflects the complexity and interconnectedness of life around the river. The narrative is episodic rather than linear. Events unfold in fragments, often without a clear beginning or end. This structure mirrors the flow of the river, sometimes continuous, sometimes interrupted. It suggests that life cannot be fully controlled or understood through a single, orderly narrative. Instead, it unfolds in multiple, overlapping moments shaped by ecological conditions. The novel is community-centered rather than individual-centered. There is no single hero; instead, the focus remains on the collective experiences of the *Malo* community. This shifts attention away from

individual human agency and highlights the importance of shared existence. Through its form as well as its content, the novel challenges anthropocentric ways of storytelling. It presents a world where humans are not at the center but are part of a larger network of relationships involving nature, community, and environment.

Conclusion

Titas Ekti Nadir Naam offers a profound meditation on the relationship between humans and their environment. Through its portrayal of the *Malo* community and the river Titas, the novel anticipates key ideas in posthuman ecology. By drawing on the theoretical insights of Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, and Bruno Latour, this paper has demonstrated how the text decenters the human subject, recognises the agency of nonhuman entities, emphasises ecological interconnectedness. Hence, the novel challenges anthropocentric assumptions and calls for a reimagining of human–nature relationships. In an era of ecological crisis, its insights remain urgently relevant.

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