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Usurping Nature: An Ecocritical Study of Pankaj Sekhsaria's *The Last Wave* (2014)

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Abstract

This paper explores the ecocritical and postcolonial approach of The Last Wave by Pankaj Sekhsaria and questions the contradictions between development, ecology, and the survival of the natives in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. It poses critical questions of the research: What does the novel do to challenge the mainstream discourses of eco-tourism and developmental progress? How does it manifest as environmental degradation and its effects on the indigenous communities? And what does it do to reconfigure the human-non human world relationship in the Anthropocene? This paper claims that the novel breaks the myth of the islands being pristine and it reveals the ecological violence of state-initiated infrastructural projects and tourism growth. It also shows that Sekhsaria anticipates the weakness and ecological savvy of indigenous peoples such as Jarawas, as they are not relics of the past, but as crucial agents of vulnerable ecosystems. The novel makes ecological damage translocal by connecting local ecological crises to global trends of environmental exploitation. Finally, the paper argues that The Last Wave is a literary critique and ethical appeal to sustainable coexistence, to reconsider the development paradigms that disregard ecology and indigenous lifeworlds.

Keywords: *Ecocriticism; Anthropocene; Indigenous Communities; Environmental Degradation; Sustainable Development.*

The novel, *The Last Wave* is set in the ecological zone of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, occupying a paradoxical position in India's postcolonial imagination. In the name of Eco-tourism, the islands have long been portrayed as pristine tropical landscapes that enrich the country's natural capital. However, over time, the islands have been subjected to unmanned expansion, tourism-compelled development and strategic intrusions that not only pose a threat to their fragile ecosystems but also endanger the lives of indigenous inhabitants. This large-scale environmental degradation in the region is frequently justified through discourses of national interest and economic growth, thus placing the long lineage of indigenous histories and ecological vulnerabilities on the margins of policy debates. The recent *Green Tribunal* clearance to the *Great Nicobar Island* mega infrastructure project speaks volumes of what Romulus Whitaker calls the "…disturbing story of how we are treating our fragile islands" (Sekhsaria 2017).

While rooted in the geography of the islands, *The Last Wave* consistently references broader national and global development paradigms, highlighting the translocal nature of environmental harm. The Andaman and Nicobar Archipelago support nearly 40 mammal, 95 bird, and 23 reptilian species (Sekhsaria 2001). The novel draws attention to several endemic

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species, including the dugong (sea cow), leatherback turtles, and the Nicobar megapode, all of which face precarious futures due to habitat destruction and human interference. These species exemplify the region's ecological vulnerability. Additionally, the islands are home to six indigenous tribes: the Shompen, Nicobari, Great Andamanese, Jawara, and Sentinelese. (Rangarajan 2). In his book *Islands in Flux*, Pankaj says, "Officials admit privately that the move to move tourism via the LTC route in the aftermath of the tsunami is backfiring. Evidence of this lies in the fact that the administration recently refused permission to the Indian Railways to include the island as part of the LTC schemes. Other tourism promotions like the 2005 agreement to twin Port Blair with Thailand Phuket, 500 km away- have been abandoned following protests by academics and activists that this could have negative social and environmental impacts in the Andamans" (150). He further argues, " The larger question that needs to be looked into is the long-term and larger implication of this for the people, environment and biodiversity of these islands" (202).

The novel extensively discusses the depletion of biodiversity, ecological alteration, and the vulnerability of the Jarawa community. It highlights the damage caused by these mega projects and questions the accountability of governments, communities, and policymakers to the island's flora, fauna, and indigenous communities. "… log by log, tree by tree, forest by forest. They may look impregnable, powerful, un-destroyable-but just see how fragile they really are, how easily they can be decimated" (192). While these modernising and developmental projects seem promising in a globalised world, in reality, they interfere with the place's ecology by impairing the "web of life" (Chakraborty 2019; Ghosh 2021) that sustains it.

The writer, Pankaj Sekhsaria, proclaims that *The Last Wave* … is a story embedded in the history, ecology, and people of the islands (30). [It] is a story of lost loves, but also of a culture, a community, an ecology poised on the sharp edge of time and history" (31). While drafting the novel, he not only placed the characters in an ecologically tense setting but also afforded prime importance to the ecology in the narrative. In fact, the genesis of his writing a fictional tale came from the reading of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide,* which, after reading, brought upon the thought "…if there was another form of communicating the issues and telling the story that would reach out to more people or at least differently to the same set of people" (35). Pankaj, while drafting the novel, felt the need to tell the story to compensate for his disappointment with activism. All his preceding work, his research articles, interviews, and journalistic columns, affirm his sustained environmental activism aimed at preserving the unique endemism and protecting the fragile ecology of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Hubert Zapf writes, "Literature is thus, on the one hand, a sensorium for what goes wrong in a society, for the biophobic, life –paralyzing implications of the one-sided forms of consciousness and civilizational uniformity, and it is, on the other hand, a medium of constant

cultural self-renewal, in which the neglected biophilic energies can find a symbolic space of expression and of (re-)integration into the larger ecology of cultural discourses" (ECELS 138). Neil Evernden in his essay, "Beyond Ecology" writes, " …the question of the role of the environment in the life of the individual is now transformed. Rather than thinking of an individual spaceman who must slurp up chunks of the world-"resources"- into his separate compartment, we must deal instead with the individual-in-environment, the individual as a component of, not something distinct from, the rest of the environment" (97). The novel engages this ecocritical aspect from two different perspectives. Firstly, by bringing to the fore the causes driving environmental change, thereby affecting the lives of humans and non-humans on the island. Secondly, the consequences of climate change, including disasters such as cyclones and tsunamis. In fact, the title *The Last Wave* is indicative of the Tsunami that devastated coastal areas of India, including the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, in 2004. Therefore, Sekhsaria relates the Anthropocene to eco-precarity to depict the impact of human-induced climate change on all living beings on the planet. In the novel he mentions, "See, what's basically happening is that the evergreen forest here is slowly changing. It is becoming' he passed, 'actually, it's being forced to become deciduous, more like a forest in Central India on the mainland- it's becoming dryer, more brown, and with that, the associated forms of small plants and animals are also changing, even disappearing" (185).

Water plays a symbolic and literal role in *The Last Wave*, reflecting both the vitality of the Andaman Islands' ecology and the impending threats to its survival. The ocean, rivers, and monsoons are integral to the life and culture of the islands, yet they are also under siege from pollution, overfishing, and climate change. Sekhsaria uses water to emphasise the interconnectedness of life on the islands. To maintain the graceful movements of dugongs, the nesting habits of sea turtles, and the prosperity of coral reefs, the health of marine ecosystems is crucial. The novel's narrative sheds light on the vulnerability of these ecosystems to human activities, providing a stark reminder of their fragility, including coral bleaching caused by rising sea temperatures and the overexploitation that leads to dwindling fish stocks. The title, *The Last Wave*, evokes a sense of foreboding, indicating a potential ecological tipping point from where coming back may be an impossible road. It warns the readers that, "if ecosystems collapse, so will economies and cultures" (Curry 16).

The narrative of the fictional tale revolves around the protagonist Harish, who, after his failed marriage, reaches the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to seek refuge in an ecological assignment. Here, he meets expert biologists, ornithologists, and marine scientists who propel the ecological backdrop of the story further by mentioning the rich biodiversity of the islands and, at the same time, showcasing the real-time damage done by chains of development in the area. Wrapped in the grain of a love story, the novel traces the interactions of the main characters, with the island as the subject of major conversations. In her letter addressed to

Harish, Seema writes, "And if you ask me, beyond a point I don't think it's about Jawara anymore. It is about me. About us. It's about what we believe in, what we do, and what we want to do" (278). It is the island that has brought them together, and it is the island that finally separates them. The purpose of this love story is simply to add context to the island's story; the chains of growth, when taut, break at the slightest pull, leading to nature's final reclamation of the island. This fight between man-made development and natural development ends when nature itself intervenes, as the water, in the form of a furious Tsunami, claims its land, knocking down all promises of growth and development like a house of cards. The novelist pens it as, "The water gushed deep into the forest beyond… Right before them, a giant evergreen tree went soaring into the sky-once unshakeable, resolute, now gone in a split second, snapped like a matchstick…The entire landscape before them altered dramatically even as they watched. … the thin strip of the coastal forest about 20 m wide had been flattened. Not a tree was left standing and the sight before them had turned even more ominous" (263).

As in *The Hungry Tide, which* challenges the exotic prism in the Sunderbans, *The Last Wave* dispels the myth of exoticism to reveal the ugly and naked truth of developmental projects in the region. Graham Huggan argues in *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, the 'exotic' is not an inherent quality of a place but a constructed aesthetic designed to commodify cultural and environmental difference. In a similar vein, Shubhangi Swarup's *Latitudes of Longing* (2018) uses the protagonist's journey to challenge anthropocentricism and promote a biocentric view of existence. In fact, most eco-social environmental narratives from India relating to the tribal populations like C.K. Janu's life narrative *Mother Forest*, or Mahasweta Devi's fiction are "set in a fractured Indian forestscapes [that] foreground the troubled history of state domination and also explore the contradictions and ambiguities that emerge in the tribal relationship with nature" (Rangarajan 442). Like many contemporary tribal environmental justice narratives, Sekhsaria's island narrative also falls under this category of a "new forest text", a 'nava aranyaka' – a term used to distinguish these ecosocial narratives from the traditional 'aranyakas' or Vedic texts that were written to prepare the seeker for the pursuit of transcendence in the solitude of the forests (Rangarajan 442). In the novel, Panjak Sekhsaria takes it a step further and shows that when the exotic can't be managed, the hegemonic race decides to make it vanish altogether. In one of the scenes, the local politician asserts, "…they are travelling people, the settlers too much now there is no security and nobody can stop them. …they are becoming a big nuisance and some step has to be taken… I am going to propose to the administration soon to save these poor Jawara people and save our people too… I am suggesting so that all the Jawaras- they are only about 300 of them anyway- should be collected and taken away to some other Island" (215).

The novel revolves around the construction of the Andaman Trunk Road. Built in the 1970s, this 343 km ATR connects Port Blair through South, Middle and North Andaman to Diglipur, revolutionising transport but slicing through the Jarawa tribal reserve. In the story, it symbolises encroaching development, enabling outsiders' access to Jarawa lands and accelerating cultural disruption for the tribe. This 50 km Jarawa stretch highlights tensions between connectivity for settlers and isolation for indigenous groups while also posing the question of what constitutes development and at what cost. In the novel, David Baskaran, the director of the Institute for Island Ecology, refers to the five-kilometre-wide, two-hundred-kilometre-long Jarawa Reserve as "one of the biggest anomalies in the island" and "one of the last frontiers still standing…" (Sekhsaria 37). The artificial boundary demarcated by the Andaman trunk road cuts through the 1,000 sq km forest reserve. This reserve is home not only to indigenous tribes like Jawara but also to numerous endangered species. It seemed suspiciously convenient that the Jawaras were sidelined, a move meant to keep them from using the forest on the right-hand side of the road. The narrative vividly captures the anthropogenic threats to the indigenous species. For instance, the loss of mangroves due to coastal development disrupts breeding grounds for marine life, while illegal poaching endangers flagship species like turtles. The very character of the forest is changing along the Trunk road that cuts across the Jawara Reserve. In one of the researches mentioned in the novel, the presence of PT flowers shows the effects of reducing canopy of unadulterated rainforest. One of the scientists in the novel, Dr Kutty explains this, "If you drive beyond the mud volcano in Baratang, you pass through a badly degraded natural forest interspersed with row after endless role of exotic teak, filmsy stands that extend as far as the eye can see- planted many years ago as a commercial enterprise, now huge failures… They don't belong here and the quality of the tree shows. It's an apology of a teak tree, even and insult to a tree that is nothing less than magnificent in the habitat where it belongs. But not here! Those forests, if you will call them that, have a dead feeling about them. The brown of the trees, particular in the dry season, seems to merge with the brown of the soil that was once rich with hummus and life. Now it is completely eroded, dead and sterile. This is where PT flourishes, even running riot in an eerie manner; hundreds of these delicate, pink flowers, swaying gently, very beautiful, but it's like an offering at a funeral. That part of Baratang like a furnace, and the villagers there have a serious water problem. It is not just the forest that suffer, people do too-the entire hydrology of the area changes… " (189). By bringing both the beauty and fury of nature face to face, the author brings forth the idea that it will take only a few seconds for nature to claim what is its own if humans do not take accountability for the ecological harm caused by them. His detailed descriptions of the acts of eco-violence evoke a sense of urgency; thus, compelling the readers to confront the ecological costs of human activity.

Another prominent theme of *The Last Wave* is the relationship between indigenous communities and their environment, highlighting their intimate understanding of the land and sea, cultivated over centuries of coexistence with nature. The novel portrays the Jarawas, one of the indigenous groups of the Andaman Islands, as custodians of deep ecological wisdom whose traditional practices, like rotational hunting and resource sharing, stand in stark contrast to the exploitative tendencies of outsiders. Sekhsaria's nuanced portrayal of the Jarawas steers clear of labelling them as exotic stereotypes that stand either as savages or obstacles to progress. Instead, he highlights their role as stewards of the environment, whose survival is intertwined with that of the islands' ecosystems. By drawing attention to the marginalisation and displacement of these communities, the novel underscores the need for an inclusive conservation approach. "On the one hand, the traditional structure of forest resource use was shattered by the new forest laws; while, on the other, the Andamans became part of the world capitalist economy" (Krishnakumar 109). Vishvajit Pandya refers to the Jarawa inhabitation as a "placeless place, "a place that belongs to nobody, created by the colonial administration located in Port Blair, which tried to invade and tame the encompassing wilderness by employing prisoners from India and Andamanese tribals who acted as forest guides (Pandya 12). This place perpetuates the tribes' location in a placeless place – like the place between two mirrors, which can be reflected to infinity – a place that is there without really being there. (20) These patterns of interaction have continued since colonial times, across boundaries where the meaning of contact is constituted by continuous efforts of non-tribals to 'move in' and Jarawas to 'move out'. In post-colonial times, these boundaries have remained but have acquired an additional meaning: a place where 'gifts' may be deposited and left for the Jarawas. (22) Pandya writes that these practices continued to flourish in postcolonial India with the objective of bringing the tribals into the mainstream and winning their trust, whereas in reality the meaning of contact was "constituted by continuous efforts of non-tribals to 'move in' and Jarawas to 'move out'" (11). The plight of the Andaman indigenes can be seen as a typical example of the "dominant culture subsuming a marginal one" in stages played out in virtually every corner of the globe (Madhushree Mukherjee xix). In the novel, the narrative brings forth the point that the Jawaras are changing "because everything around them is. … As long as the forest is there, they'll manage, but what when the forests are gone?...They are changing too, behaving like brats, getting used to tobacco, alcohol, to do what have you" (198).

The writer uses Harish's journey in *The Last Wave* as a metaphor for humanity's potential to reconnect with nature and adopt a more ecologically conscious worldview. Though at the start of the novel, Harish views the topography of the island as an outsider or a tourist who admires the beauty but knows little about the fragile ecosystem; his gradual transformation from a spectator to the one who is immersed in the eco-awakening makes the readers sit up

and pay attention to the ecological problems of the land. Through Harish's reflections, Sekhsaria explores how human actions are inscribed onto the landscape, and every act of eco-violence causes a ripple effect that may lead to major events like Tsunami, thus destroying the lives of thousands of islanders. Harish's photographs are an attempt to document and preserve the pristine ecology of the islands and register their cultural heritage, highlighting the power of art to inspire environmental advocacy. "Just ten days, Harish thought as he turned the page of the calendar, and what a learning this has been. … He had been on a parikarma both of the islands and of himself. If his emotions had betrayed him, they had also brought him a measure of acceptance-of his faults and his failures" (235-26). These reflections allow him to take charge of his life and finally fight for what is right. By helping the Jawaras, who now live at the brink of existence, Harish is able to find direction and purpose in his life, too. Thus, the forest while creating an eco-awakening in him, also empowers him to positively affect the lives of the "original people [who] were on their way to becoming the had-beens" (236).

The novel also critiques the unprecedented march of urbanisation and tourism on the islands, which not only threatens the ecological balance but also poses a grave threat to the cultural identity of these indigenous groups. Modernity and development emerge as dual-edged swords in *The Last Wave*, where, while unmanned infrastructure development and haphazard tourism policies promise economic growth, they also point towards irreversible ecological damage. The novel illustrates the ecological consequences of projects like logging, road construction, and resort development. The narrative of the story urges readers to sit up and smell the irony of exploiting the natural beauty of the Andaman Islands at the cost of short-term gain. While destroying the aesthetic elements of nature, ones that attract thousands of tourists, the novel raises questions about the complex interplay of government policies and mercenary diplomats that refuse to take into account the unique ecology of this island and the fate of these original inhabitants (Dutta-Asane).

The story also raises questions about accountability and governance, both at the level of governments and at the local levels, where people exploit the exotic to earn quick bucks from tourists. Through subtle commentary, Sekhsaria critiques the complicity of political and corporate interests in perpetuating environmental harm. He highlights the challenges of enforcing conservation laws and the inadequacy of policies that fail to balance development with ecological preservation. Thus, the coming together of ecocritical and postcolonial frameworks in Sekhsaria's island narrative highlights what Guha and Martinez-Alier famously refer to as the 'environmentalism of the poor' (1997), distinct from the "environmentalism of the affluent." The materialist angle in Global South ecosocial contexts is inevitable due to "the interpenetration of nature and history, the differentiation and struggle in human society in relation to environment as a specific mode of capitalism" (Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee 74). Speaking in an interview about "the tradition of

unconsulted displacements of peoples in the name of natural preservation" Nixon considers slow violence that is characterized by "invisibility, the absence of spectacle, the difficulty of finding narrative and imagistic forms of communicating profound damage that is diffuse and scattered across time and space" to be an important component of ecological imperialism (Christensen 3). These narratives dismantle familiar stereotypes of the islands, such as a 'tropical indigenous paradise', 'natural prison', 'terra nullius', by employing a collaborative approach connecting "the past with the present, the colonial with the post-colonial, indigenous tribal communities with settler communities, and the Andaman Islands with the Indian mainland" (Aufschnaiter 2).

In his seminal work *The Environmental Imagination*, Lawrence Buell defined "environmentally oriented work as one in which the non-human environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history" (7). Here, the non-human environment refers to the narrative's landscape and setting. Pankaj Sekhsaria's novel *The Last Wave* is not just a piece of fiction but a commentary on the current ecological scenario of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The novel opens discussions on the problematic of development and how it undermines the existence of tribal communities on the island, who, in turn, have been instrumental in maintaining the island's ecological health. The novel, thus, offers a powerful commentary on the paradigm shifts in the treatment of ecology and culture in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. By examining the novel through an ecocritical lens, this paper brings forth the urgency of preserving the fragile ecosystems and cultural heritage of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. This fictional work serves as a call to action, reminding readers of the ethical imperatives of conservation and the need for sustainable coexistence.

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