Nature as Resistance and Renewal: An Ecocritical Study of Siddhartha Sarma's *Year of the Weeds*

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Abstract

Ecocriticism examines the relationship between literature and the physical environment, foregrounding ecological concerns, environmental justice, and the ethics of human interaction with nature. Siddhartha Sarma's *Year of the Weeds* presents a compelling narrative situated in the tribal village of Deogan, where indigenous Gond communities confront the encroachment of state power, corporate mining interests, and ideological violence. Through the metaphor of 'weeds', Sarma articulates a critique of ecological destruction, cultural displacement, and the systemic marginalisation of indigenous populations. This paper explores how *Year of the Weeds* functions as an ecocritical text by analysing its representation of land, environmental ethics, resistance, indigeneity, and ecological consciousness. It argues that Sarma redefines weeds not merely as invasive growth but as symbols of colonial capitalism, political domination, and ecological imbalance, while simultaneously affirming indigenous ecological wisdom as a form of sustainable resistance. Furthermore, the paper explores how *Year of the Weeds* contributes to Indian English eco-literature by articulating a localised yet globally relevant ecological consciousness. The study situates the novel within contemporary Indian environmental discourse and contributes to broader ecocritical debates on development,

displacement, and environmental justice. Ultimately, this paper positions *Year of the Weeds* as a significant literary intervention that urges readers to reconsider notions of progress, control, and ecological responsibility in an era of environmental crisis.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Environmental Justice, Indigenous Ecology, Development, Mining, Siddhartha Sarma, Indian Environmental Literature

The accelerating environmental crisis of the twenty-first century has necessitated a reorientation of literary studies toward ecological consciousness. The growing urgency of environmental degradation, climate change, and ecological injustice has transformed literature into a crucial space for environmental reflection and ethical inquiry. Ecocriticism, as a critical framework, interrogates how literature represents nature, environmental degradation, and the socio-political structures that govern human-nature relationships. Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xviii). In postcolonial contexts, environmental concerns are inseparable from histories of exploitation, displacement, and unequal power relations. Within this framework, literary texts become sites where environmental ethics, ecological insights, and socio-environmental conflicts are negotiated.

Indian environmental literature occupies a distinctive space in global ecocriticism due to its intersection with postcolonial histories, indigenous struggles, and developmental conflicts. Siddhartha Sarma's *Year of the Weeds* emerges as a significant contribution to this discourse. Set in the Gond tribal region of Odisha, the novel narrates the experiences of Korok, a young Gond boy, as his community confronts the looming threat of displacement by mining corporations and state authorities. The narrative unfolds against the sacred landscape of Devi Hills, a space imbued with ecological, cultural, and spiritual significance. The story evolves across seasonal cycles, reflecting an ecological sense of time rooted in natural rhythms rather than industrial schedules.

The title itself foregrounds the ecological metaphor of ‘weeds’, a recurring motif that encapsulates invasion, resilience, disruption, and transformation. While weeds traditionally signify unwanted growth, Sarma complicates this notion by juxtaposing botanical weeds with invasive political and corporate forces. The ‘Company’, the state, and extractive capitalism function as ecological weeds, disrupting indigenous harmony with the land.

This article argues that *Year of the Weeds* functions as an ecocritical text that critiques anthropocentric development and foregrounds indigenous ecological ethics. By employing the metaphor of ‘weeds,’ Sarma exposes the invasive logic of extractive capitalism while simultaneously affirming resilience, adaptability, and ecological balance. The novel highlights environmental injustice, the criminalisation of ecological resistance, and the erosion of sacred landscapes, offering a nuanced critique of modernity’s impact on marginalised communities. *Year of the Weeds* operates as an ecocritical narrative that critiques environmental exploitation, highlights indigenous ecological knowledge, and exposes the entanglement of ecological destruction with political oppression. Through close textual analysis, the study explores the novel’s ecological symbolism, representation of land, environmental justice concerns, and the ethics of resistance embedded in Gond cosmology.

Ecocriticism gained prominence in Western literary studies in the late twentieth century, but its application to postcolonial contexts reveals additional layers of complexity. In India, environmental conflicts are inseparable from histories of colonial extraction, neoliberal development, and indigenous displacement. Ramachandra Guha and Joan Martínez-Alier observe that environmentalism in the Global South often emerges as “environmentalism of the poor,” rooted in survival struggles rather than aesthetic conservation (Guha and Martínez-Alier 3). In India, environmental conflicts frequently involve tribal communities whose lands are targeted for mining, dams, and industrial development.

Sarma's narrative aligns with this framework by depicting environmental conflict not as an abstract ecological crisis but as a lived reality for marginalised communities. The Gonds' protest against mining is not merely environmental activism; it is a struggle for survival, cultural continuity, and spiritual preservation. The sacredness of Devi Hills underscores the indigenous worldview in which land is not property but kin, memory, and identity. The villagers' resistance is not framed as abstract environmental activism but as a struggle to protect their home, culture, and sacred landscape. Devi Hills, which the government intends to mine, is not merely a resource-rich site but a spiritually significant space embedded in Gond cosmology.

Unlike Romantic ecological writing that idealises untouched wilderness, *Year of the Weeds* presents a lived-in landscape shaped by cultivation, ritual, and interdependence.

> 'What do you call this herb?' 'This one? Senna. We call it senna. It grows all over the hill,' said Korok, pointing at Devi Hills in the distance. 'It is a medicinal plant? What is it good for?' 'Oh, many things,' said Korok, ... Senna took nearly a year to grow and the plant was very difficult to tame. You had to keep turning the soil around and make the top layer very loose … Senna oil was a common gift at Gond weddings ... Of course, the oil, like all the other gifts, had to be blessed by the pen, the local god first … 'You get all these plants from the hill?' … 'All the plants and all the flowers. Some of them you can find in other places. But some, like that one—' he pointed at a row of bristly red flowers in the next bed, 'you only find on the hill.' (25-26)

The Gond community's agricultural practices, medicinal gardens, and reverence for ecological spirits reflect what Vandana Shiva terms "earth democracy," an ethic grounded in biodiversity, sustainability, and indigenous knowledge (Shiva 9).

The metaphor of weeds operates as the central symbolic framework of the novel. Anchita's observation that corporations are "like weeds" (Sarma 112) encapsulates the invasive nature of extractive capitalism.

> 'This hill and surrounding areas has bauxite in it. You know, aluminium? The government is going to lease it to a big Company. We are surveying it … On being asked by Anchita, Sunglass Man licked his lips. 'It means the Company will dig the bauxite from the hill and wherever else it is. A lot of things will happen, big machines, many, many people will come and stay here. They will clear these villages, build roads … (33-34)

Weeds spread aggressively, choke native growth, and alter ecosystems—paralleling how mining companies encroach upon indigenous lands, disrupt ecological balance, and displace communities.

However, Sarma complicates the metaphor by acknowledging the ecological complexity of weeds. Korok reflects that weeds are not uniformly destructive and possess diverse ecological functions.

> 'They are like weeds,' Anchita had said. Ah, she was a city girl and didn't know much about gardening. Weeds don't just take over a flower bed or a garden. It might look like that to an outsider, but it is a complex process. They don't just appear one morning and choke the flowers. They don't make conspiracies and hide plans and things. And all weeds are not the same. They do not grow or multiply or destroy the soil in the same way. They are as different to one another as flowers are. (Sarma 48)

This reflection destabilises binary oppositions between native and invasive, suggesting that ecological narratives must recognise nuance, adaptation, and resilience. The novel thus performs a double move: Weeds as symbols of invasion – representing corporations, state

power, and ideological violence and weeds as symbols of survival – embodying resilience, adaptability, and persistence.

This duality aligns with Timothy Morton's concept of "ecological thought," which resists simplistic moral binaries and acknowledges entangled ecological realities (Morton 15). The Gond community, like weeds, persists despite systemic attempts at erasure.

Land in *Year of the Weeds* is not a commodity but a sacred entity. Devi Hills is described as spiritually significant, watched over by protective spirits and ancestral presences. "… this is our home. Devi Hills is sacred for us" (Sarma 47). This sacred ecology reflects an animistic worldview wherein nature is alive, sentient, and morally significant. Humans are not masters of the land but participants in a reciprocal ecological relationship.

The Gond cosmology challenges modern anthropocentrism by positioning humans as participants within ecological networks rather than masters over them. The proposed mining project represents a violation of this sacred ecology. The state's failure to recognise the spiritual significance of the land exemplifies an anthropocentric approach that reduces nature to a resource. This conflict highlights the clash between indigenous ecological ethics and capitalist modernity. The destruction of sacred landscapes is not only an environmental loss but also a cultural and spiritual rupture.

The mining project represents a violation not only of environmental integrity but of spiritual order. This resonates with indigenous ecological ethics worldwide, where environmental destruction is perceived as cosmological imbalance.

The state's disregard for this sacred relationship exemplifies what Rob Nixon terms "slow violence"—environmental destruction that unfolds gradually, invisibly, and disproportionately affects marginalised communities (Nixon 2), as the harm inflicted upon Deogan unfolds gradually through bureaucratic processes, misinformation, and legal

manipulation. The arrests, misinformation campaigns, and political manipulation against the Gonds reveal how ecological conflict becomes criminalised and delegitimised.

Sarma's narrative is marked by silences—silences imposed upon indigenous voices by state machinery, media distortion, and bureaucratic power. From an ecocritical standpoint, silence itself becomes an ecological marker, representing erasure of both land and people. Rob Nixon's theory of 'slow violence' is particularly relevant here, as the violence against Deogan is gradual, bureaucratic, and normalised rather than spectacular.

> … you will announce that they (the Maoists) have been here because the villagers want to start a war with the government. You will … enter the villages, and arrest the leaders of this protest ... who have been talking to reporters. Anybody in the villages who is educated … [as] are the dangerous ones ... If there are still any reporters in town, tell them these Gonds have been arrested because they were in touch with Maoists and were planning something violent. Then you put them in jail' … Solution to tribal protests: accuse the leaders of being in touch with militants and arrest them ... people who read these newspapers and post things on social media are supporting these villagers. Why? Because these villagers are ... innocent people who were sitting at home till the government and the Company came here and tried to kick them out. But what happens when these innocent villagers are shown to be working with the terrible Maoists, militants who want to destroy the country?'... the villagers will lose their image of being innocent and good … 'It doesn't matter whether they are actually in touch with militants or not. What matters is image ... Arrest all the leaders. Then we will get some people to write in newspapers that these innocent villagers are perhaps not so

innocent. That is how you change public opinion. Not by beating people up. That is the old way.'

The arrest of Gond leaders and the labeling of protestors as Maoists illustrate how environmental resistance is criminalised. Literature thus becomes an archive of resistance, recording stories that official histories erase. The narrative exposes the convergence of environmental degradation with political oppression. The arrest of Gond leaders, false accusations of Maoist affiliations, and media misrepresentation illustrate how environmental resistance is framed as subversive or criminal.

The novel foregrounds environmental justice by exposing the unequal distribution of environmental harm. The Gonds bear the ecological and social costs of development from which they derive little benefit. Mining promises economic growth, yet its consequences include displacement, ecological degradation, and cultural erasure. This reflects broader patterns of environmental injustice in India, where marginalised communities disproportionately suffer the impacts of industrial projects. For instance, tribal resistance against mining projects in regions such as Niyamgiri, Bastar, and Jharkhand has been met with state repression. The novel thus functions as a fictionalised ecological testimony, documenting the lived realities of environmental injustice.

Environmental justice, as articulated by scholars such as Lawrence Buell, emphasises the unequal distribution of environmental harm and the ethical imperative to amplify marginalised voices (Buell 140). Sarma accomplishes this by centering Gond perspectives, particularly through Korok's consciousness, which remains rooted in ecological attentiveness rather than political abstraction.

Korok's perspective introduces an ecological innocence that contrasts with bureaucratic cynicism. His intimate relationship with gardening, medicinal plants, and seasonal rhythms reflects an embodied ecological knowledge. Childhood in the novel

becomes a site of ethical imagination, where alternative ways of relating to nature remain possible. The presence of Anchita, with her "kompitar" (43), symbolises modern technological mediation of environmental knowledge. While technology provides access to information, it also distances lived experience from ecological immediacy. The tension between Korok's experiential knowledge and Anchita's digital mediation highlights competing epistemologies: indigenous ecological wisdom versus technocratic rationality.

Unlike linear capitalist time driven by deadlines and productivity, Sarma structures the novel around seasons—April to March—mirroring ecological cycles. Korok's understanding of time is rooted in growth, decay, and regeneration rather than clocks and calendars. This temporal structure reinforces an ecocentric worldview and challenges industrial modernity.

Year of the Weeds can be productively read alongside Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide and Mahasweta Devi's short fiction, where indigenous ecology and state violence intersect. Like Devi's tribal characters, Sarma's Gonds resist through endurance rather than overt rebellion.

The novel ends without absolute resolution, reinforcing ecological realism. Weeds, like power, return. Yet Sarma suggests that sustainable futures depend on local knowledge, community solidarity, and ethical restraint. Ecological survival, the novel argues, is inseparable from social justice.

Year of the Weeds emerges as a powerful ecocritical narrative that interrogates development, displacement, and environmental ethics within contemporary India. Through the metaphor of weeds, Siddhartha Sarma exposes the invasive logic of extractive capitalism while affirming the resilience of indigenous ecological consciousness. The novel critiques anthropocentric modernity, foregrounds environmental justice, and reclaims sacred ecology as a site of resistance.

By centering Gond perspectives, Sarma resists dominant developmental narratives and restores narrative agency to marginalised ecological subjects. The text contributes to Indian ecocritical discourse by intertwining environmental concerns with postcolonial critique, indigenous epistemologies, and ethical reflections on coexistence.

In an era of accelerating ecological crisis, *Year of the Weeds* reminds readers that sustainability is not merely technological but cultural, ethical, and relational. The survival of ecosystems is inseparable from the survival of communities who have lived in reciprocal harmony with the land. Like weeds, such communities persist, adapt, and resist erasure – rooted in the soil of memory, resilience, and ecological belonging.

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