

Sacred Hills, Extractive Capitalism, and Indigenous Rights: A Decolonial Ecological Reading of *Year of the Weeds*

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Abstract

The mineral-rich areas in Odisha have also been home and sacred spaces to distinct tribal communities. These landscapes have long been targeted by extractive capitalist forces that mine resources and generate profits. Year of the Weeds (2018), a novel by Siddhartha Sarma, follows the tribal resistance and assertion of rights when a mining company targets the Gond tribe's sacred hills for the extraction of bauxite. This study aims to explicate the sacred Devi hills in the novel as a site of indigenous epistemology facing disruption due to the developmental logic introduced through the mining project. It also positions the novel as a counter-narrative that critiques the dominant power structures legitimising extractivism. The study employs the theoretical lens of decolonial ecology to analyse the novel, and the methodology used is qualitative textual analysis. The results reveal that the Devi hills are not merely a geographical site for the Gond tribal community in the novel, but a space embedded with spiritual and ancestral significance. The findings demonstrate that in Sarma's text, the sociopolitical sphere is inextricably linked to capitalist interests through the dismissal of indigenous knowledge systems and the systemic neglect of tribal rights until faced with resistance.

Keywords: Sacred Groves, Extractivism, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Decoloniality, Ecocriticism, Tribal Resistance

Introduction

Sacred groves are valuable stretches of environmental landscapes that are safeguarded by local communities, who hold cultural and spiritual ties to a particular geographical location (Marak). Hence, they are rich in biodiversity due to the absence of interfering activities. Most communities, especially tribal, consider the groves sacred because nature is revered and worshipped in their relational worldviews. Their sustenance, traditions, and beliefs are highly place-based, “gained through continuous, intergenerational engagement” with their natural environment (Bala and Roy 4; Bhandari and Kaur 38). However, despite their significance to tribal communities, the sacred spaces and various indigenous epistemologies in India are presently disturbed due to human activities and the advent of developmental projects, resulting from neo-liberalisation and industrialisation. Development-induced displacement not only uproots communities from

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their generational lands but also marks the death of place-based existences and practices. This threat to tribals and their sacred landscapes is borne from the colonial-capitalist view of tribals as uncivilised and development as an “imperative for improving their quality of life” (Bala and Roy 7).

The above-mentioned precarious plight is the lived reality of various tribes in Odisha, a state abundant in mineral resources, making it a target of extractive capitalist forces. The tribal people often assert their land rights and resist, but they do not solely fight the capitalists. In addition, they also struggle against the state and its apparatuses, since, as Das and Padel note, “Third World governments and mining companies collude in displacing people” (17). The landmark case of the Niyamgiri hills in 2013 has been a popular example of indigenous assertion. The Niyamgiri hills, considered sacred by the Kondh tribal community of Odisha, became the target of a proposed mining project by Vedanta Resources Ltd. The people were to be ousted to make way for the mining operations. After facing vehement resistance from the Kondhs and the filing of petitions by activists against the project, the Supreme Court of India upheld indigenous rights by granting village councils the authority to vote for and against mining the hills (Chakraborty and Yates 128). The court blocked Vedanta’s activities after all the villages targeted by the company voted against the mining of Niyamgiri (128). This “unexpected victory” of a “disadvantaged group” against the “nexus between the corporate houses and government” served as the inspiration for Siddhartha Sarma’s 2018 novel titled *Year of the Weeds* (Sarma, “Why a Journalist”). As stated by the novelist himself, the novel is a “story of corporate greed, but it is also a story of how the state structure . . . has preyed on the people” (Sarma, “Why a Journalist”).

Year of the Weeds is a young Adult (YA) novel set in Deogan village of Odisha’s Balanagiri district. Readers aged twelve to eighteen are the audience of young adult literature, capturing “protagonists in their adolescence, with storylines often closely associated with coming of age” (Mukherjee et al. 59). The contemporary YA fiction, particularly in India, has moved away from myths and morals to the themes of “gender, caste, disability, environmental concerns and emotional well-being” that resonate strongly with readers “navigating the transition between childhood and adulthood” (Khatoon). Accordingly, Sarma’s novel follows the Gond tribal community’s fight against the state-capital nexus, which targets their sacred Devi hills for mining bauxite. Korok, the fourteen-year-old protagonist, presents a clear picture of the Gonds’ epistemology rooted in nature, highlighting a worldview often dismissed under the carpet of progress. The text is a strong counter-narrative as it resists the dominant discourse of development. Sarma also explicitly critiques the role of the state’s dominant power structures in the facilitation of tribal dispossession for mining. The readers get attached to the Devi Hills through Korok’s emotional attachment to the hills. This emotional investment of the readers converts the subsequent environmental destruction into a personal loss rather than just a political or ecological issue. Through Korok’s perspective, the novel takes on the pedagogical role of creating socio-political awareness and empathy towards indigenous communities and their environmental concerns.

This paper aims to analyse Sarma’s text through the lens of decolonial ecology. The objectives of the study are as follows:

- Explicate the novel’s sacred Devi hills as a site of indigenous epistemology facing disruption due to the developmental paradigm introduced by mining;
- Contend that the novel constructs a counter-discourse that upholds tribal land rights by critiquing the state-capital nexus, which legitimises extractivism

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

Since the paper aims to study the text's representation of indigenous epistemology and positions it as a counter-narrative against extractivism, a qualitative textual analysis approach is employed. The selection of textual evidences depended on the novel's depictions of the Gonds' relational worldviews, the threat of displacement due to mining, and tribal resistance. These depictions are examined using the theoretical lens of decolonial ecology. The concept of decoloniality, defined as the refusal and resistance of the "legacies and ongoing relations and patterns of power established by . . . colonialism" (Walsh 16), forms the base of decolonial ecology. Malcolm Ferdinand's decolonial ecology positions the current environmental crises in relation to colonial legacies of domination. It was the positioning of man over nature and the European race over other races that led to the exploitation of the environment and Eurocentrism, respectively (Ferdinand 4, 6). The continuity of this logic even after independence, defined as coloniality, is a major contributing factor to environmental injustices. The idea of economic growth gained momentum in postcolonial India, consequently leading to various development projects, including mining, which extracts the land of its richness for monetary benefits. Hence, decolonial ecology guides the paper to establish the significance of indigenous sacred sites and way of life, which faces erasure due to extractive capitalism in Sarma's novel.

Sacred Hills of the Gonds: Indigenous Epistemology Under Extractivist Threat

Epistemology refers to the "ways through which knowledge is constructed and validated by a cultural group" (Vaditya). In *Year of the Weeds*, the knowledge system of the Gonds is constructed in relation to their environment, especially the sacred Devi hills, a single hill with three peaks, which the Gonds revere as a goddess. It is seen as a life-sustaining sacred entity overflowing with goodness. The tribals attribute the growth of medicinal plants on the hill to its sacredness and consider the streams that flow from it as "sacred water" (Sarma, *Year* 26). Owing to their sacred ties with the Devi hill, the Gonds from the surrounding villages personally took care of the hill. These details demonstrate that the Gond existence is place-based and relational in nature, centred on a respectful relationship with the environment for the sustenance it provides. The Gonds' indigenous epistemology is in complete contrast with the dominant Euro-modern epistemology, which heavily relies on the binary division of humans versus nature. As Escobar states, the nondualist construction and comprehension of their world lead to a harmonious and holistic existence with nature (15).

In addition to its sacred goodness, the Devi hill is a living archive of spiritual entities and ancestors. The hill is dotted with representations of *pens*, meaning "little local gods," that look over specific places (Sarma, *Year* 154). They are often tied to trees and trails, and touching them is taboo. Hence, all "forms of vegetation . . . are under the protection of the reigning deity" (Gadgil and Vartak 152). The taboo protects the space from human intervention, leading to biodiversity preservation. The Gonds venerate the Saja tree in particular, "treated as a living embodiment" of *Persa Pen*, their central deity (Kala). The "first pillar that goes up" while building a Gond house is made of *Saja* wood (Sarma, *Year* 30). The tree carries associations with divinity, death, and maternal protection ("Gondi"). Gond ancestors are laid to rest surrounded by holy *Saja* trees in a memorial site in the hill. According to Korok, the tribal protagonist, a person's life departs to the sky, while their memories or *hanal* stay in the stone erected in their memory at the *hanal kot* (Sarma, *Year* 24-25). This literary representation closely aligns with real-world Gond epistemology, where the *jiv* or the life force returns to God, and the *hanal* or "the departed himself with all his characteristics minus the bodily frame" is left in the earthly realm to be taken care of by the mourners (C. Fürer-Haimendorf and E. Fürer-Haimendorf 364). Korok notes that everyone visits the memorial site to talk to their deceased

loved ones. Hence, the epistemology of the novel's Gond community is centred on "territory, kinship, spirituality, ritual, the arts, and relationships with the environment" (Escobar 15). For the Gonds, their lands and hills are not properties with monetary values to be extracted and exploited. Instead, they are spaces of confluence, where humans, nature, deities, and ancestors co-exist, with interconnections of life, death, and memory. This argument is accentuated by the fact that the Gonds had a large clearing near the hill for their communal gatherings. It served as a space for meetings, festivities, weddings, and rituals of birth and death. This reveals that their identity is inextricably linked to their land and their community, moving away from the "individual-community dichotomy," a product of Euro-modernity (Escobar 16, 81).

However, the relational and communal living of the Gonds face disruption when surveyors from the government mark the hill and its surrounding villages as the "'Property of Government of Odisha'" (Sarma, *Year* 27). The surveyors classify the area as a "site" rich in bauxite for a proposed mine (59). The shift in referring to the sacred hills as a commodity which can be probed and monetised disregards the significance of the hills to the Gonds completely. They experience disbelief when they learn that the government will be responsible for moving the tribals out and acquiring the lands for a mining company, which in turn will pay the "government from the profit it gets after digging up the metal" (39). The state-capital nexus's introduction of a mining project threatens the Gonds with displacement and their place-based epistemology with erasure. It is set to transform a region of high biodiversity into what Macarena Gómez-Barris formulates as an "extractive zone" for "capitalist resource conversion" (xvi).

Rath, assistant to the district collector, pacifies the concerned Gonds by claiming that the project will provide them with jobs and "develop" the place (Sarma, *Year* 47). Rath's framing is a great example of the ongoing coloniality because it was the European colonisers who brought forth the idea that other communities were backward, in dire need of development (Mignolo 110). The dominant power structures adopt this notion in the present and use it to mask their economic greed, as developmental projects are touted as improving the living conditions of the people. On the contrary, from the Gonds' perspective, the advent of extractive capitalists signals maldevelopment, which is the "violation of the integrity of organic, interconnected and interdependent systems" (Shiva 5-6). If the company turns the Devi hills and the villages into extractive zones, it would lead to what Boaventura de Sousa Santos designates as epistemicide, meaning the "murder of knowledge" (92). Rath promises that the people will be moved to a better forest, while failing to comprehend the loss of sacred groves, deities, ancestral sites, memories, and communal living that the Gonds will experience. He does not understand that the world can be a pluriverse, proposed by Escobar as a place where multiple "partially connected but radically different" worldviews co-exist (27). He places the notion of unilinear development over Gond ways of knowing and being. His casual attitude towards development-induced displacement highlights his ignorance of the fact that the Gonds' generation-old traditions and beliefs will end with the mining of the hill and cannot be recreated somewhere else. Through Sarma's specificity of narrative details regarding Gond epistemology, it is evident that "the shill was more important than any mine" because their identity and existence are deeply intertwined with the Devi hills (Sarma, *Year* 50). Hence, the extractivist threat to their sacred hill prompts the Gonds to resist the dominant power structures.

Indigenous Rights, State-Capital Nexus and Counter-Discourse

Sarma constructs a detailed counter-discourse by exposing how the country's dominant power structures actively marginalise its own indigenous communities. Firstly, the novel lays bare the reframing and reclassification of legal protections to support extractivist capitalist interests in the name of development. According to the Gonds, the Devi hills and the surrounding villages

come under a protected forest area. Despite the prohibition of human intervention in forest areas, the Forest Rights Act empowers tribal communities to live in the forest and access its resources (Sahu 277). However, Rath declares that the “government had removed Devi Hills from its list of forest areas” (Sarma, *Year* 47). The same state that granted protection to the forests and the tribals dismantles the conditions under which the law can be exercised. This enables and legitimises the acquisition of the sacred space for extraction by the mining company and the displacement of the tribals. As Gómez-Barris notes, extractivism works within the framework of coloniality, where “corporate entities and states are indistinguishable in their economic interests and activities” (xviii). This indistinguishability is visible in the text as the state reclassifies a protected forest area into a resource-rich site ready for extraction. Coloniality, in the novel’s context, operates through the adoption of the “European way of achieving economic prosperity, that is, by exploiting nature” (Sai Deepak).

The second aspect Sarma exposes is the systemic violence against Gonds who resist the state-capital nexus. When a group of experts come to survey the Devi hills for bauxite, escorted by the Superintendent of Police, Patnaik, they find the Gonds blocking their path and restricting their convoys from entering the area. They form a “human barricade” to block the road (Sarma, *Year* 61). Here, the Gonds engage in what Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier designate as the environmentalism of the poor. This kind of resistance relies on peaceful, “community-based techniques of direct action . . . and traditional forms of protest” (Guha and Martinez-Alier 17). While their mode of protest is non-violent, the reaction it triggers is repressive violence. Patnaik, a representative of the state’s repressive apparatus, orders a violent lathi charge to quell the protest.

In Sarma’s Deogan, Gonds of all ages, including children like Korok, are hit by police officers. They are strategically contained in jails until the experts survey the hills. Many Gonds are falsely accused of contacting armed insurgents and posing a threat to national security, which illustrates how the state criminalises the Gonds for expressing disapproval regarding the mining of their sacred hills. Their dissent against the loss of their sacred hills in the face of extractivism is immediately framed as a threat and silenced (Gómez-Barris xix). By associating the Gonds with insurgents, the state-capital nexus also manufactures a false narrative to legitimise their criminalisation. The nexus treats the Gonds as “disposable components that must be eradicated for the benefit of market capitalism” (Karmakar and Pal 404). As a result, repression, through law and police, the state’s apparatuses of coercion, unfolds as a default response to tribal resistance, ensuring the uninterrupted operation of extractive capitalism.

In addition to the state’s reconfiguration of records regarding forest areas and the state violence against indigenous resistance, the novel also unmasks the systemic neglect of the tribal people by the state and the media. The lathi charge prompts the publication of a newspaper article headlined “Police attack defenceless Gonds over sacred hill!” (Sarma, *Year* 81). Consequently, politicians, journalists, news reporters, and activists flock to Deogan. Their arrivals are not out of genuine concern for the Gond cause. The politicians take the opportunity to campaign for their own parties, whereas media personnel visit to extract sensational stories from the issue. This demonstrates what Rob Nixon declares as the “media bias toward spectacular violence” (4). While the attack amasses national interest and spectacle, the lack of basic amenities in the villages remains invisible. According to Padel and Das, anthropologists who have personally interacted with the tribals, tribal people consider the provision of irrigation, healthcare, and education as permanent markers of development, rather than “destroying mountains that are millions of years old” (41, 29). However, the novel recurrently records that Deogan’s school has been non-functional for four years, the villages lack proper water supply, and the trader’s shop sells fake, low-grade products to the people (Sarma, *Year* 20, 72, 74). The politicians and

media had selectively ignored these systemic neglects. Yet, a sensational event draws their attention to the tribal villages for their own agendas. This selective neglect hinders the Gonds' access to health, education, and basic infrastructure for sustenance. It keeps them marginalised and enables the active production of the image of underdevelopment in tribal areas. Ultimately, the nexus strategically constructs the introduction of development projects, including mining, as interventions that would uplift the tribals by providing them with employment opportunities. Finally, the novel demonstrates how the Gonds maintain their land rights through legal assertion. Jadob, a Gond with formal education, files a petition in the country's supreme court on behalf of the villagers with the help of his activist acquaintances (Sarma, *Year* 145). They request the right to vote on two questions, namely (145):

Whether they want to move out of their villages?

Whether they want the Devi hills mined?

The court approves the Gonds' petition seeking voting rights, after A.K. Mishra, Principal Secretary of the Ministry of Environment and Forests, submits a report detailing how the "government had taken away all their rights a long time ago" (203). As a result, twenty villages collectively oust the state-capital nexus by voting against the mining project. This legal provision to vote against mining closely resembles the 2013 Niyamgiri case, where the court empowered the Khond tribal community by enacting the Forest Rights Act and Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act (Sahu 277, 283). Under the PESA Act, "the gram sabha needs to be consulted" regarding the land acquisition for developmental projects (277). By petitioning for their say on the mining of Devi hills and the resultant displacement, the Gonds engage in what Escobar proposes as pluriversal politics. The notion of pluriversal politics moves away from Eurocentrism and involves "making visible the existence of multiple worlds" (Escobar 27). Instead of passively accepting the mining project, the Gond community defend their sacred hill by asserting their epistemological connection to it. In doing so, they dismantle the colonial-capitalist logic of exploiting nature for economic growth by disallowing the hill to be treated as a commodity. The novel serves as a strong counter-discourse because not only are the land rights of the Gonds upheld, but also their tribal epistemology.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates how colonial worldviews persist in a postcolonial setting through the logics of development and extractive capitalism, employing a decolonial ecological reading of Sarma's text. Through the analysis of the young protagonist's perspective, the findings ascertain the Gonds' Devi hills as an epistemological space completely devoid of the Eurocentric binary between humans and nature. It further highlights how the state-capital nexus commodifies nature and reframes it as development for the tribals they label as uncivilised and underdeveloped. The paper unravels Sarma's explicit critique of the legal removal of Devi hills and the surrounding villages from the protected forest area, the systemic violence against peaceful resistance, and the systemic neglect that contribute to tribal underdevelopment in the true sense. Consequently, it establishes the novel as a counter-narrative which exposes the marginalising condition under which the nexus legitimises extractivism and vouches for pluriversal politics to reassert indigenous epistemology.

The study contributes to the broader field of environmental humanities by demonstrating how fiction makes visible the epistemicide and the transformation of the sacred hills into an extractive zone while successfully masking economic greed. Sarma's exposure of the epistemic and material violence against tribal worldviews and sacred spaces underscores the significance of decolonial Young Adult literature in creating ecological awareness and indigenous solidarity amongst young readers. While the study does not oppose development itself, it

addresses the issues of promoting development while disregarding ecological sustainability and indigenous survival. Moreover, the study has its limitations, and hence, future studies can focus on a comparative reading of Sarma's text with other literary texts linking extractivism with tribal dispossession. The novel can also be analysed comparatively with real-world instances of indigenous marginalisation and resistance. Additionally, studies can engage with other theoretical frameworks and interdisciplinary approaches to offer varied interpretations regarding the dismissal of tribal worldviews in the face of development.

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