



Toxic Oceans and Ecological Emergencies: Exploring Slow Violence in Romesh Gunsekera's *Reef*

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Abstract:

Romesh Gunsekera's 1994 novel *Reef* examines the sociopolitical discord experienced by Sri Lanka in the aftermath of its independence. The narrative is predominantly scrutinised through the lens of war and conflict. Nonetheless, this paper attempts to redirect the analysis away from political violence and towards the representation of slow violence, specifically through an exploration of environmental degradation as depicted in *Reef*. Rob Nixon, in his seminal text *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, articulates his notion of slow violence by differentiating it from conventional forms of violence, emphasising that it often escapes recognition due to its subtle, incremental, and passive characteristics. This concept will be elucidated through the persistent motif of the deteriorating coral reef within the narrative. The reef not only symbolises the consequences arising from diverse anthropogenic factors but also highlights the commodification of natural resources.

Keywords: slow violence, environmental degradation, anthropogenic factors, coral reef, toxic oceans.

Introduction

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Rob Nixon sets the tone for his significant work, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, with two influential quotes. The first one is stated by Arundhati Roy about globalisation, which she describes as a light shining brighter on a few while eliminating the rest of humankind and this group of people over time becomes unnoticeable. The other one is Lawrence Summers' opinion about the economically rational disposal of substantial quantities of hazardous waste from developed countries into poor African nations, which he justifies by noting that they exhibit a remarkable degree of under-pollution compared to major cities like Los Angeles, which would boost the economies of the US and Europe and lessen the discontent of Western environmentalists (1-2).

Taking into consideration the two quotes, Nixon works on the notion of violence. Violence as a broad concept may be construed as the deliberate infliction of harm or injury. It incorporates various forms, including but not limited to physical, psychological, sexual, and others. On a collective level, violence is usually viewed as synonymous with conflict and warfare. For Nixon, this type of violence is immediately visible in its phenomenal effects. However, Nixon believes that there is a need to invoke a distinct form of violence, one that is neither spectacular nor immediate but instead gradual and cumulative, with its devastating consequences manifesting across various temporal dimensions. This is where he introduces the idea of slow violence, declaring it as “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” and designates a multitude of gradually emerging environmental disasters as constituting slow violence (2).

Nixon's work also addresses the important concept of the environmentalism of the poor, highlighting that it is primarily economically disadvantaged communities that suffer the most

severe repercussions from ecological changes; he states, “it is those people lacking resources who are the principal casualties of slow violence” (4). The third issue that Nixon concerns himself with is the role of the writer in highlighting this whole predicament and discusses the importance of writing in voicing the “relative invisibility of slow violence” (2) and identifying various authors who have actively participated in this discourse and imaginatively defined the issues at stake.

The theme of Romesh Gunsekera's novel *Reef* aligns closely with Rob Nixon's model. Primarily analysed through the lens of conflict in post-independence Sri Lanka, this paper shifts the discussion from conflict-related violence, which he describes as “immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and erupting into instant sensational visibility” (2), to the “gradually and out of sight” occurring slow violence in the marine ecosystems of the nation. The paper explores how Gunsekera's writing can represent invisible forms of environmental change through imaginative narratives by “helping counter the layered invisibility that results from insidious threats” (16). Gunsekera uses the symbol of a reef to emphasise the destructive impacts of anthropogenic influences, resource exploitation, and a failure of governance that adversely and invisibly affect ecological systems. This paper also attempts to redirect attention from Mister Salgado's scientific expertise to the servant boy Triton, a marginalised individual who demonstrates a heightened awareness of his master's research endeavours. Gunsekera also foregrounds the disproportionate experience of slow violence among economically disadvantaged communities.

Climate Crisis and Role of the Environmental Writer

In his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon asserts that it is essential to engage with and depict environmental concerns from various perspectives to help address the urgent global environmental catastrophe. The discourse surrounding this matter is prevalent in political, scientific, and social contexts. The overwhelming presence of extensive data sets, complex statistics, and media reports frequently obscures and overshadows the information pertaining to these significant issues. Nonetheless, there exists a necessity to interact with this crisis on cultural dimensions such as literature, as it possesses the capacity to resonate with the imaginations of a broader audience, as “the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of imagination.” (Ghosh 12) The proficiency of the writer allows them to tackle these concerns and elevate them from “the local to the global” (Buell et al., 422).

Similarly, Rob Nixon discusses the role of environmental writers as one of the key focuses in his work, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. He concentrates his attention on confrontational authors who have used “their imaginative agility and worldly ardor to help amplify the media-marginalized causes of the environmentally dispossessed.” (5) Nixon believes that writer-activists can assist in comprehending threats that are imperceptible to the senses. In the current scenario infused with subtle yet invisible violence, imaginative writing has the power to make it visible. The fictional creations of writer-activists may provide an alternative form of witnessing of the unseen phenomena (15). He works with geographically diverse writers who, often in intricate collaboration with social movements, have developed strategies to combat ongoing crises affecting disadvantaged communities (5).

Romesh Gunsekera's novels are not strictly classified as environmentally oriented. However, he makes use of the natural landscape as a setting for his novels, as they are “filled with descriptions of such topological features, which help us to identify the landscape of Sri Lanka...

plantation landscapes, valleys, ocean, etc.” (Daimari 50). His novels contain underlying themes and ecological elements. In addition to the coral devastation in *Reef*, already discussed above, Gunesekera’s *Heaven’s Edge* explores the consequences of war and colonial resource exploitation on an island, resulting in a devastation that contrasts with the protagonist’s perception of the location as Eden. Shalini Jain states that “*Reef* and *Heaven’s Edge* demonstrate the real and potential damage of neglecting this fragile relationship between humans and nature” (31).

Highlighting a writer’s capacity to render invisible ecological processes perceptible, in an interview titled “Identity, Politics and Ecology in Postcolonial War-Torn Society: An Interview with Romesh Gunesekera”, conducted by Somasree Sarkar and Goutam Karmakar, Gunesekera has articulated his concern for ecological concerns and the urgency that characterises his writing, especially concerning the “vulnerable political situation” (3) and the “fragile island ecosystem” of Sri Lanka. More importantly, the responsibility of a writer is to bring the hidden consequences of the intertwined consequences of conflict and environmental degradation to the forefront through fiction, as Gunesekera says that “to write about it, I found this was the most powerful way I could” (5).

Gunesekera’s observations in the novel, through the perspectives of Mister Salgado and Triton regarding the representation of coral reef systems, have been supported by scientific research, which is discussed in the next section of the paper. This demonstrates that the motif of reef functions beyond mere symbolism and holds a broader ecological significance. Gunesekera’s writing on coral reefs has been well-researched, as he asserts in an interview, ‘An Island is a World’, with Susheila Nasta that “At one point, I realised that I had read everything that had been published on coral reefs during the time the novel is set. I went to university science libraries, I

wrote to research institutions. I even managed to get to marine conservation areas where you could see how things could be made better.” (76)

Gunesequera's prowess as a storyteller enables the reader to engage with a subject one would typically view in retrospect. His attempts to fictionalise coral reefs can help mobilise audiences and raise awareness about them. One might have a basic understanding of coral reefs as a geographical entity, but it is after reading *Reef* that one truly comprehends the impending threat of their extinction. It is the ability of fiction writing to allow such facts to move beyond the realm of science and into the reader's consciousness.

Anthropogenic Activities and Environmental Degradation: Navigating Toxic Oceans in Romesh Gunesequera's *Reef*

Romesh Gunesequera's 1994 novel *Reef*, narrated from Triton's perspective, serves as a coming-of-age novel for him. The novel follows his growth from a servant boy in Sri Lanka to a restaurateur in England. Triton works for Ranjan Salgado, a scientific researcher with expertise on marine ecology, with the text calling him “*the expert on the south coast. The authority*” (127). The plot revolves around the household's ordinary, everyday routines as Triton grows and demonstrates skill in housekeeping. Simultaneously, Salgado is appointed to a project to undertake research on coral reefs in southern Sri Lanka. What starts as an enthusiastic endeavour falls into neglect as Salgado's social circle widens and socio-political transformations take place in the country, resulting in his becoming oblivious to the entire scientific investigation. As the narrative progresses, political tensions gradually escalate, the coral project is dropped, and the novel ends with Salgado and Triton moving to London to escape the violence and turmoil engulfing the nation.

Providing a brief history of the conflict in Sri Lanka that frames the events of the novel, Jonathan Spencer traces its roots to “the single most obvious factor in the decline into political crisis has been the failure of successive governments to settle the grievances of the minority Tamil population in a way that is nevertheless acceptable to the majority Sinhala population” (1). Spencer further adds that the newly established coalition in the country ascended to power propelled by a surge of Buddhist nationalism that advocated, among other objectives, for the Sinhala-Buddhist majority to obtain its rightful allocation of public employment opportunities. Within a matter of months following its electoral victory, two significant developments occurred: legislation was enacted designating Sinhala as the exclusive official language, and violent communal unrest erupted between the Sinhala and Tamil populations in the eastern region of the nation (2). The outcome was a violent and devastating civil war that lasted for two decades, leading to tens of thousands of fatalities.

The novel, in its opening moments, refers to this conflict as Triton encounters a fellow countryman in London. He informs him about the cycle of violence and warfare back home: “Very bad war now back there. ... a landmark for gunrunners in a battle zone of army camps and Tigers.” (Gunsekera 2) The narrative’s cursory references to political instability, economic distress, assassinations, disappearances, and deaths of people like Salgado’s close friend Dias turn into a full-blown civil war toward the end of the novel. In the novel Triton documents that “[b]ack home that April, in 1971, the first of the insurgencies erupted in a frenzy of gunfire and small explosions. Bands of zealous young guerrillas roamed the villages and townships staking out their place in a crude unending cortege. Thousands were killed in the reprisals.” (172) At another instance, the novel states that “in the summer of 1983, mobs went on the rampage in Colombo” (178), detailing

the violent brutality of the war that lasted for decades. There are also brief references to the Sinhala-Tamil divide in the novel, the underlying cause of the whole conflict.

Romesh Gunsekera has used the titular symbol of the reef to serve a dual purpose: primarily highlighting the devastation Sri Lanka's marine ecosystem has been witnessing and additionally echoing and symbolising the country's growing restlessness and anxiety. This growing instability is mirrored in Salgado's uncertainty about reaching a conclusion in his investigation into the loss of coral reefs in Sri Lanka. In the context of the narrative, this is yet another impending threat the nation faces. Salgado embarks on the project with urgency, as he believes that a loss in the coral reef will result in the sea encroaching upon the land. He observes that "if the structure is destroyed, the sea will rush in" (Gunsekera 48). However, over time, he loses the impulse to acquire a more profound understanding of things. The plot unfolds against the historical backdrop of Sri Lanka's protracted and violent civil war. However, in the backdrop are the "gradually and out of sight" (Nixon 2) changes occurring in the reef ecosystems. Nixon's concept of slow violence is pertinent here because this destruction is taking place unnoticed. The significance of this context is further enhanced by the limited grasp of the subject matter during that era, as Salgado states, "I don't think they have a real understanding of what is happening" (Gunsekera 47). Similarly, Gunsekera, in the interview with Susheila Nasta, talks about the time around which the novel has been set, asserting that "People were just beginning to be aware that coral reefs were vulnerable and might easily die. But no one quite knew what would happen as a result of their degradation" (76), highlighting the fact that these changes are occurring silently and out of perception, thereby constituting slow violence.

Gunsekera's novel *Reef* is generally analysed with reference to the earlier-stated context of conflict and turmoil of the Sri Lankan civil war. However, this paper seeks to shift focus from

political violence in Sri Lanka to the depiction of slow violence through an analysis of environmental degradation and rising toxicity in the sea, leading to a state of ecological emergency. The theme of the disintegrating coral reef in the novel will be explored through the character of Mister Salgado, who is a marine scientist surveying the corals for a government project. Coral reefs are marine ecosystems composed of polyps, which form colonies that serve as habitats for numerous species of flora and fauna, culminating in a comprehensive ecosystem. They also act as carbon sinks, absorbing small amounts of carbon dioxide from the oceans and thereby helping reduce carbon emissions. Corals are also known for providing livelihoods and sustenance to coastal communities, as well as raw materials for the processing of secondary materials used in fields such as medicine, construction, and others. Maragos et al., in their article, describe corals as comprising diverse organisms and serving as a foundation for highly diverse ecosystems globally; hence, they are referred to as the rainforests of the marine realm (84). They further explain that corals not only represent a significant reservoir of biological diversity and productivity, but they also form the crucial aspects of coastal protection, tourism, and subsistence economies (87). Coral reefs support vibrant, diverse marine life, providing them with a vital habitat. Gunsekera presents a vivid description in the novel of the coral reef ecosystems while stimulating readers' visual imagination; "[t]he shallow water seethed with creatures. Flickering eyes, whirling tails, fish of a hundred colours darting and digging, sea snakes, sea-slugs, tentacles sprouting and grasping everywhere. It was a jungle of writhing shapes, magnified and distorted" (176–177).

Coral reefs are a vital part of the ocean ecosystems. However, over the years, significant damage has been caused to them, particularly due to climate change and an increase in the concentration of greenhouse gases, which trigger issues such as the warming of ocean water and ocean acidification. This phenomenon has, in turn, led to what is commonly known as coral

bleaching, in which these organisms lose their colour and turn white, eventually resulting in the loss of coral cover. Similarly, human interventions such as exploitative resource extraction and tourist activities have contributed to their depletion. During the initial mention of Salgado's preoccupation with the island's coral reefs, the readers are made aware of their fragility:

‘Anything! Bombing, mining, netting.’ Mister Salgado dropped the file on the side table. ‘You see, this polyp is really very delicate. It has survived aeons, but even a small change in the *immediate* environment—even *su* if you pee on the reef—could kill it. Then the whole thing will go.... You see, it is only the skin of the reef that is alive. It is real flesh: *immortal*. Self-renewing.’ Mister Salgado threw up his hands, ‘But who cares? (48)

Salgado attempts to associate coral devastation with various anthropogenic factors that are turning the oceans toxic. Scientific research on coral reefs validates his assumption. According to Maragos et al., coral reef ecosystems are undergoing significant degradation in isolated regions. Harmful fishing methodologies, including the use of explosives and toxic substances, and other anthropogenic impacts on coral reefs include runoff from land-use changes such as deforestation, agriculture, and urban development; coastal construction and industrial activities causing similar detrimental discharges; overfishing and harmful fishing practices altering ecological dynamics; coral mining; and excessive tourist and recreational use (88-89).

Triton's narrative offers further perspective on this when he witnesses the ravaged coral reefs for the first time during a trip with Mister Salgado. He describes it as “we came to the skull-heaps of petrified coral—five-foot pyramids beside smoky kilns—marking the allotments of a line of impoverished lime-makers, tomorrow's cement fodder, crumbling on the loveliest stretch of the coast.” (Gunsekera 59-60) As mentioned earlier, coral reefs provide raw material for the construction industry. However, these resource-extractive procedures are negatively impacting the

environment. The above images depict the devastation of the reef and how it is gradually reduced to a commercial product for profit. An article titled “Impacts of Reef Related Resource Exploitation on Coral Reefs: Some Cases from Southern Sri Lanka” by Kumara et al. provides details about coral mining, an ancient method carried out in the Sri Lankan coasts, providing lime for construction and agricultural purposes. It also provides figures from a 1984 survey, revealing that “18,000 tons of coral was supplied annually to the lime-producing industry” obtained by blasting large areas of coral reefs with dynamite, resulting in their destruction as well as that of the marine ecosystem. (24)

On a similar occasion, Triton, when accompanied by Miss Nili, Salgado’s romantic partner, notices “[s]mall pieces of bleached white coral marked the municipal parking lot” (118). Sharae Deckard comments on the dead coral, stating that it signifies the ecological crisis driven by capitalist global modernity in Sri Lanka. Approximately half of Sri Lanka's populace resides in coastal regions, where poverty exacerbates fishing and coral mining for concrete. Giving further insight, Deckard explains that historically, sustainable traditional fishing practices and coral mining existed in Sri Lanka; however, the government's shift toward an export-driven economy has prioritised new technologies over conservation. The reef is being compromised to fulfill the necessities of impoverished landless communities, including lime producers, fishers, and market vendors struggling in the global economy (257–258).

Guneskera provides a literary depiction of a similar concern arising from the deterioration of coral reef ecosystems, a point highlighted in the novel through a conversation between Triton and the three fishermen hauling their boats after returning from their sea venture. Triton is quite thrilled to see a blue-striped fish, but on the contrary, the fishermen were quite disappointed by the meagre catch, as they tell Triton that ““Sometimes, if we are in luck, we might catch a shark or

something bigger. But you really need a Johnson motor to go far enough for that, beyond the reef, and be sure of getting back in time.’ ‘Sometimes we go all night and there’s nothing. Not like in the old days when they used to fly into our hands.’” During this conversation, Triton learns from the fishermen about the scarcity of fish in the ocean, as they tell him that “[t]hese days the fish are not plentiful” (114). This can be attributed to the use of mechanical fishing methods, which lead to the exploitation of this resource and lead to a decline in fish populations. These methods are financially inaccessible to the poor coastal communities, as they rely on traditional methods. This is particularly harmful for the local fishermen given their dependence on it for survival. In this context, Kumara et al. assert that almost all fish collection methods used in coral reefs are highly destructive and not sustainable, and as a result some of the most important and ecologically sensitive fish species are highly threatened and in danger of local extinction (24).

In the novel, Salgado believes that the fragile coral reef is susceptible to severe damage even by the slightest environmental change. The coral reefs not only act as natural barriers against the roaring sea, but they also protect against sand erosion, as he observes in the novel that “if the structure is destroyed, the sea will rush in. The sand will go. The beach will disappear” (48). Research validates Salgado's predictions, showing that coral reefs, with their unique structures, act as natural protective barriers. These features reduce the kinetic energy of waves as they approach a coral reef, thereby preventing their direct impact on the shoreline at their full intensity. Because of its natural ability to dissipate waves, shorelines are stabilised and coastal areas are protected from erosion (Gracia et al. 4).

In terms of geography, Berg et al. state that the island of Sri Lanka has a clearly delineated coastline extending approximately 1550 kilometres, which supports highly productive ecological systems. Nearly fifty per cent of the seventeen million inhabitants reside in coastal regions, and a

significant proportion of the nation's economic hubs are located in proximity to the shoreline (627). Therefore, a significant portion of the population, particularly the weaker sections, depends on the coastal sector for their economic sustenance and overall well-being. Substantial alterations in the coral ecosystem could adversely affect the economic viability of coastal communities. The above observations elucidate how slow violence is interconnected with the economically disadvantaged section of society, specifically those who experience a lack of resources. This is what Nixon points out when he affirms that it is the marginalised communities who predominantly suffer the consequences of slow violence and how it “permeates so many of their lives” (4).

During the course of the novel, we find that Salgado is trying to ascertain the whole scenario of the decaying reef. In a discussion about the coral reef with his close friend Mr Dias Liyanage, he puts forward his concern: “I don't think they have any real understanding of what is happening. Coral grows about as fast as your fingernails, but how fast is it disappearing? Nobody knows!” (47-48). Having great admiration for the coral reef ecosystems, Mister Salgado is acutely conscious of the threats facing Sri Lanka's coral reefs and tells Dias that “it's all going. I must take you before it all vanishes” (47). Moreover, he exhibits apprehension and skepticism regarding the influence of corrupt power and authority, which may lead to political exploitation and the degradation of the situation: “if this becomes anything, some political bigwig will want his fat hands on it. Then every day I'll be asking for favours and doing favours.” (48) Starting the project with commitment and enthusiasm, we observe Salgado eventually turning apathetic towards the coral phenomenon. As Triton points out that “Mister Salgado's coastal project passed its zenith; he should have been drawing his conclusions together in some big report, but, rather than analysing and writing, he procrastinated. From time to time he would ask Wijetunga to produce more data, but he never studied the results.” (119)

Romesh Gunsekera, in the interview with Susheila Nasta, calls Salgado “a sort of accidental marine biologist. One of those obsessive people who couldn’t quite direct his obsessions; he gets obsessed with coral and then with Miss Nili and so on.” The implementation of the Mahaweli scheme gives this oblivious attitude by Salgado further momentum: “A giant leap into inland irrigation not seen for a thousand years. The diversion of the biggest river in the land.” (Gunsekera 121) Throughout the ancient times, Sri Lanka has had a history of similar irrigation and agricultural schemes: “You know our tanks? The great reservoirs? Inland seas... These were engineering feats done in two hundred BC” (84–85). The reason for reintroducing the “visions of the ancient kings” (119) was to boost the agricultural productivity of the nation. This situation, however, was accompanied by negative social and economic factors as well as long-lasting detrimental environmental impacts. The narrative acknowledges it as an additional factor diverting focus from the deteriorating coral reef. It appears that not only governmental authorities but also Salgado become sidetracked from his objective of accumulating scientific insights and applying his research effectively: “Mister Salgado let all their machinations pass in a haze. None of it mattered to him then.” (119)

The motif of the reef operates with a dual role, encompassing both literal and figurative interpretations. In a literal context, it accentuates the ecological challenges faced by the nation. Conversely, it also fulfils a metaphorical role, as the narrative reflects the escalating discontent and socio-political unrest within the country through the reef emblem. This is particularly evident in the introductory chapter, wherein Gunsekera utilises ecocritical imagery to underscore the paradoxical representations: “I could see a sea of pearls. Once a diver’s paradise. Now a landmark for gunrunners in a battle zone of army camps and Tigers” (2). As the narrative unfolds, one encounters images such as “the sea will rush in” (48), “the encroaching sea,” The roaring sea”

(86), and “the ocean pressing around us” (154), “as the coral disappears, there will be nothing but sea and we will all return to it” (172) along with “staggering brutality that came wave after wave”, coupled with “the Reign of Terror” culminating in rolling bodies “washed in by the tide and beached by the dozen” (173), thereby elucidating the discord prevalent within the nation.

Environmentalism of the Poor

The other concern Rob Nixon highlights in his work is that impoverished communities endure the most severe impacts of slow violence and environmental change. Their survival and sustenance depend directly on natural resources. As a result, these communities are spearheading the environmental resistance movement. Nixon draws on the concept of the ‘environmentalism of the poor’ advanced by Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier. Their work attempts to contrast the “empty-belly” environmentalism of the poor, which arises from the need to access resources on which the survival of marginalised individuals depends, with the “full-stomach” environmentalism of the rich, which emerges from an obligation to protect the environment. They believe that the former arises from social conflicts regarding access to and control of natural resources, such as disputes between agrarians and industry over forest resources or between rural and urban communities concerning water and energy. Numerous social disputes frequently possess an ecological dimension, as the impoverished strive to maintain control over natural resources endangered by state takeover or the expansion of the global market system (xxi). Guha and Martinez-Alier further add to it by describing it as a conflict between the population they call the “ecosystem people”, who are “those communities which depend very heavily on the natural resources of their own locality” (12) and the resource consumption by the “omnivores”, who are the “individuals and groups with the social power to capture, transform and use natural resources”. Therefore, they conclude that ‘environmentalism of the poor’ can be interpreted as the struggle

carried out by marginalised communities against the capture and control of resources by “omnivores”, as exemplified by tribal movements and peasant struggles.

In the novel, the characters of Salgado and Triton illustrate the above contrasting positions. The socioeconomic hierarchy between them emerges through Triton's description of Salgado as “a product of modern feudalism” (Gunsekera 6). Salgado exemplifies a scientific disposition while investigating corals and their degradation. However, it is noteworthy that his comprehension appears to be confined solely to a theoretical grasp of the entire scenario. Salgado gathers samples and data; nevertheless, he is unable to use this knowledge constructively. Instead, he turns oblivious towards the research, delays action, turns his attention to social pursuits, loses his funding and ultimately abandons it, as Gunsekera describes him as “a sort of accidental marine biologist. One of those obsessive people who couldn’t quite direct his obsessions” (Nasta 76). Likewise, the government ignores and shifts its focus from mitigating coral destruction to implementing the Mahaweli plan. The invisible and out-of-sight character of the coral issue diminishes its urgency, which would otherwise necessitate attention.

Conversely, Triton, employed as a servant boy, demonstrates a pragmatic comprehension of diverse issues. He is not only immersed in indigenous knowledge, culture, and cuisine, but throughout the novel, we witness his concern about Salgado's neglect of the coral assignment entrusted to him. Near the conclusion of the narrative, Triton seems to develop an interest in coral reefs, despite lacking a scientific outlook and perspective. As Todd Kuchta explains, Triton cultivates this ability not through Salgado's scientific guidance or an innate connection with nature but through his servitude, which provides him with a more profound insight into Salgado than Salgado possesses. Triton, disenchanted with his slavery, articulates his sorrow, impotence, and fury through imagery of disintegrating reefs and bleached coral (8–9). Kuchta concludes that it is

Triton who succeeds in “tracing the ultimate cause of Ceylon’s dying reefs to the faraway production of fossil fuels” (8).

Triton’s perspective also highlights the predicament of the marginalised characters in the narrative, who originally relied on coastal activities to underscore this conflict. An instance of this scenario from the novel is Triton’s description of the coast as “five-foot pyramids beside smoky kilns—marking the allotments of a line of impoverished lime-makers” (Gunasekera 59). As discussed earlier, coral reefs have been exploited for the production of limestone and related materials. However, technological improvements jeopardise traditional practices, causing hardships for these coastal inhabitants who depend on diverse marine activities for their livelihoods. In a similar instance, two fishermen express their distress to Triton about their inability to catch a sufficient number of fish, contrary to the earlier situation: “Sometimes we go all night and there’s nothing. Not like in the old days when they used to fly into our hands.” (114). They hint that modern methods, such as using a “Johnson motor”, exploit resources and render traditional methods obsolete. It is these resources that such people are primarily dependent on. The narrative also references “What do you expect with this government?” (114), suggesting the escalating political and economic tensions in the country during the period in which the novel is set. Therefore, the marginalised people become the agency upon which the forces of capitalism, technology, and authoritarian failures inscribe themselves. In context, regarding the sustainable coral and fishing practices in Sri Lanka, Deckard has pointed out that “the government’s transition to an export-oriented economy has promoted new technologies at the expense of conservation. The reef is being sacrificed to meet the needs of the impoverished landless classes, the lime makers, fishers, and stall-keepers who cannot survive in the global market.” (258)

It is Triton's observational ability that allows him to discern what others fail to notice. His peripheral status within Salgado's social circle enables him to foreground the challenges faced by the socially disadvantaged communities as discussed above. Despite Salgado's primary engagement with the coral reefs, it is Triton who senses an impending threat throughout the narrative and ultimately establishes its underlying cause. Regardless of Salgado's elite social and scientific status, he is unable to take effective action to prevent the coral reef decline, as it is the vulnerable communities who grapple with the consequences of slow violence, as Nixon asserts, "it is those people lacking resources who are the principal casualties of slow violence. Their unseen poverty is compounded by the invisibility of the slow violence that permeates so many of their lives." (4)

Conclusion

Gunasekera's novel *Reef*, frequently interpreted as a reflection on the Sri Lankan civil war and its attendant conflicts, also addresses the ecological violence inflicted on the nation's vulnerable marine ecosystems. In this regard, the motif of the deteriorating coral reef within the narrative functions as a locus of slow violence. As Nixon articulated, this form of violence is not conventionally recognised as such, owing to its imperceptible, gradual, and passive nature. Consequently, the reef serves as a symbol of the repercussions of various anthropogenic influences and the commodification of natural resources and calls for measures to address this ecological emergency which has gradually unfolded through slow violence. In his novel *Reef*, Gunasekera has dexterously coalesced the spectacular and cataclysmic violence of war-ridden Sri Lanka with the "long emergencies of slow violence", turning them "into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention" (Nixon 3).

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