

The Pulse and the Pain: Vernacular Knowledge and Solastalgia Among Irrawaddy Alluvial Agrarians

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Abstract

This study explores the lived experiences of alluvial agrarian riverine communities in Myanmar's Irrawaddy Delta, who navigate intersecting forms of suffering: political oppression, economic strangulation, ecological exploitation, and capital-driven disasters. Drawing on life-story interviews and digital ethnography, this research reveals that these communities endure not only physical hardship but also solastalgia (Albrecht, 2005): a profound climatic and ecological distress triggered by the degradation of their beloved landscapes.

In the absence of governmental support and accountability, these communities rely on localized survival tactics, confronting river-related disasters through collective effort and vernacular knowledge embedded in social cohesion. This study highlights how moral guidance is rooted in daily life through the Burmese proverbs "Ko-Htu-Ko-Hta" (self-reliance) and "Kaing-Kyun-Myi-Kyun-Khaing-Myi" (interspecies mutual interdependence). Crucially, and contrary to mainstream eco-modernist discourse, flooding is not viewed as the primary threat. While the annual flood pulse is embraced as a natural, fertile gift from a generous river, riverbank erosion and landslides are identified as the most significant dangers.

The study concludes that the suffering of Irrawaddy agrarian communities stems from "capitalogenic" exploitation and technofix eco-modernist solutions that prioritize market development over human life. To foster community resilience, it is urgent to sustain the mosaic of eco-social relations within multispecies (shared and contested) worlds. This requires grounding interventions in vernacular knowledge and the daily practices of communities whose subsistence is intertwined with the river. Without recognizing the river as a living entity and honoring place-based attachments, existing eco-social relations will face further deterioration and eventual collapse.