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THE GREEN DESERT: Plantationocene Ecologies, Slow Violence, and the Anti-Forest in Assam's Tea Fiction

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ABSTRACT

The representation of South Asian tea estates has long been shaped by an idealised pastoral image of green hills, misty landscapes, and peaceful agricultural labour. This paper challenges that myth by examining the colonial and postcolonial tea plantation (*bagan*) as an engineered anti-forest and green desert, where biodiverse subtropical rainforests were systematically cleared to establish commercial monocultures. Focusing on Rasna Barua's Assamese novel *Seuji Pator Kahini* (R. Barua, 1963) and Arup Kumar Dutta's historical novel *Leaves No Longer Green* (Dutta, 2026), this study integrates Donna Haraway's (2015) concept of the Plantationocene, Rob Nixon's (2011) framework of slow violence, Val Plumwood's (1993, 2002) ecofeminist critique of the Master Model, and Michael Marder's (2013) critical plant studies. Through comparative ecocritical textual analysis grounded in Assam's agrarian and epidemiological history, the paper demonstrates how the arboricultural truncation of wild tea trees (*Camellia sinensis* var. *assamica*) into perpetually juvenile, two-dimensional plucking tables mirrors the spatial enclosure, penal discipline, and somatic exhaustion of indentured Adivasi labourers. It further interrogates how the plantation regime links vegetative manipulation with the racialised and sexualised subjugation of female workers, exposing how the seductive aesthetic of the green leaf (*seuji pat*) conceals intergenerational attrition, epidemic mortality, and ecological degradation. Ultimately, the paper argues that both novels function as vital literary counter-archives that dismantle colonial monoculture pastoralism and connect nineteenth-century plantation extraction to contemporary socio-ecological crises in Upper Assam.

Keywords: Plantationocene, slow violence, anti-forest, green desert, eco-feminism

INTRODUCTION

For over a century and a half, the tea plantation (*bagan*) of Upper Assam has occupied a privileged, deeply aestheticised niche in the colonial and national imagination (Sharma, 2011). In travel memoirs, corporate marketing, visual culture, and popular fiction, the plantation appears as a serene Eden of geometric order: a verdant carpet of emerald bushes nestled against subtropical hills, tended by diligent female pluckers. This visual tradition manufactures monoculture pastoralism, an ideological aesthetic that equates agrarian regimentation with peace and uniform greenness with ecological vitality (M. Barua, 2023; Dey, 2018).

Beneath this pastoral image lies an ecological and human rupture. After Britain annexed Assam through the Treaty of Yandaboo (1826), imperial capital sought to challenge China's monopoly in the tea trade (Guha, 1977; Sharma, 2011). The Assam Waste Land Rules of 1838 and Old Assam Rules of 1854 enabled the conversion of forests and village commons into commercial monocultures (Behal, 2014; Guha, 1977). The plantation therefore functioned as an anti-forest: an artificial production space designed to suppress ecological succession and replace diverse habitats with uniform crops (M. Barua, 2023; Dey, 2018).

This ecological erasure accompanied the coercive recruitment of uprooted workers. When local Assamese peasants resisted low wages and imported Chinese tea-makers proved costly, planters recruited labour from Chotanagpur, the Santal Parganas, and Central India (Guha, 1977; Sharma, 2011). *Arkattis* and *sirdars* transported Adivasi workers to Assam through deception and coercion (Behal, 2014; Behal & Mohapatra, 1992; Kalita et al., 2026). Penal contracts, including the Transport of Native Labourers Act of 1863, criminalised workers' departure and strengthened planters' powers over them. Families were confined in disease-ridden coolie lines marked by epidemic mortality and physical abuse (Behal & Mohapatra, 1992; Dey, 2018).

This paper examines how Assam's tea fiction exposes the *bagan* as an anti-forest and a site of socio-ecological violence. It compares Rasna Barua's *Seuji Pator Kahini* (Barua, 1963) with Arup Kumar Dutta's *Leaves No Longer Green* (Dutta, 2026), asking how the novels challenge monoculture pastoralism, connect botanical manipulation with labour confinement, represent attritional mortality through Nixon's (2011) concept of slow violence, and reveal the gendered exploitation of Adivasi women through Plumwood's ecofeminist critique of the Master Model (Plumwood 1993; 2002).

LITERATURE REVIEW: HISTORIANS, ECOLOGIES, AND TEA FICTION

Colonial tea production in Assam has been rigorously examined across labour historiography and environmental history. Early foundational scholarship by Amalendu Guha (1977), Rana P. Behal and Prabhu P. Mohapatra (1992), and Behal (2014) dismantled the colonial narrative of benevolent agrarian modernisation, demonstrating how

the Planter-Raj operated through state-sanctioned land enclosures, extra-legal physical coercion, and penal indenture laws that depressed wages well below free-market rates (Kalita, 2022; Liu, 2017). Jayeeta Sharma's (2011) *Empire's Garden* expanded this historiography into the cultural sphere, tracing how British colonial ideology racialised indigenous groups, casting local Assamese peasants as lazy natives while essentialising Chotanagpur Adivasis as hardy jungle labourers and women pluckers as possessing nimble fingers suited for low-paid leaf harvesting. More recently, Arnab Dey's (2018) *Tea Environments and Plantation Culture* shifted the analytical lens toward agrarian environments, revealing how monoculture expansion disrupted regional hydrology, bred lethal disease ecologies including malaria and cholera, and normalised high worker mortality as an acceptable cost of commercial enterprise (Kalita, 2022).

Literary narratives from Assam offer a counter-discourse to colonial archives and planters' memoirs. Das and Dey (2020) show how tea-tribe literature records displacement, bodily trauma, and resistance. Rasna Barua's (1963)*SeujiPator Kahini* moves inside Naharani's estate, while Dutta's (2026)*Leaves No Longer Green* revisits the industry's nineteenth-century beginnings and the conflict between British capital and indentured workers. Both writers, however, speak as sympathetic Assamese intellectual witnesses rather than from within the Adivasi community, a distinction that matters when considering representation (Das & Dey, 2020; Kalita et al., 2026). Existing studies often treat the plantation environment as a backdrop to human conflict; this paper brings botanical manipulation, environmental philosophy, and plantation literature into closer dialogue (M. Barua, 2023).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study combines comparative close reading, bilingual translation context, postcolonial history, and environmental philosophy. It examines spatial metaphors, colour imagery, and representations of bodily suffering in both novels; reads them through Haraway (2015), Haraway et al. (2016), Tsing (2015), Nixon (2011), Plumwood (1993, 2002), and Marder (2013); and situates the analysis within plantation history and research on health and ecology (Behal, 2014; Bedamatta & Sarma, 2025; Dey, 2018; Guha, 1977; Kalarivayil et al., 2024; Parida et al., 2023).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To theorise the entanglement of botanical manipulation and human subjugation in the *bagan*, this study deploys a quadripartite theoretical framework integrating the Plantationocene, slow violence, ecofeminist dualisms, and critical plant studies. First, Donna Haraway (2015), Anna Tsing (2015), and Haraway et al. (2016) conceptualise the Plantationocene as an epochal mode of ecological and social reorganization characterised by the radical simplification of multispecies assemblages, the long-distance relocation of germplasm and coerced labour,

and the substitution of autonomous local ecologies with disciplined, scalable monocultures designed for capital accumulation (M. Barua, 2023).

Second, Rob Nixon's (2011) concept of slow violence captures the temporal and perceptual dimensions of plantation harm. Defined as a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, slow violence illuminates the unspectacular and attritional lethality of Assam's tea estate, manifesting in chronic malnutrition, waterborne diseases, maternal exhaustion, and generational landlessness that rarely register as sensational historical events (Bedamatta & Sarma, 2025; Nixon, 2011).

Third, Val Plumwood's (1993, 2002) ecofeminist critique of the Master Model exposes the conceptual architecture underlying this twin exploitation. Plumwood argues that Western imperial reason operates through hierarchical dualisms (culture and nature, reason and body, master and slave) through which the dominant Master subject hyper-separates himself from non-human nature and racialised Others through backgrounding and instrumentalisation, licensing both forest liquidation and the commodification of Adivasi women (Hazarika, 2025; Plumwood, 1993, 2002).

Fourth, Michael Marder's (2013) *Plant-Thinking* provides the botanical lens necessary to read *Camellia sinensis* as a material agent and victim of plantation modernity. Marder argues that capitalist regimes deny plants their ontological autonomy and seasonal rhythms by reducing vegetal life to pure quantitative yield. Read alongside Haraway (2015), Nixon (2011), and Plumwood (1993, 2002), Marder's (2013) critical plant studies reveals how the arboricultural violence inflicted upon the wild Assam tea tree, sheared, decapitated, and locked into a perpetually juvenile plucking surface, is structurally homologous with the penal surveillance and bodily mutilation of the indentured workforce (M. Barua, 2023).

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

1. Constructing the Anti-Forest: From Living Jarani to Green Desert

In both novels, the birth of the tea garden is marked not by gentle agrarian cultivation, but by violent ecological annihilation. Colonial ideology routinely dismissed Assam's dense subtropical rainforests as chaotic and miasmic wastelands awaiting European rationalisation (Dey, 2018; Sharma, 2011). Fuelled by the speculative tea mania of the 1860s, planters transformed Upper Assam into a state-backed laboratory of forest clearance, penal indenture, and epidemic mortality (Behal, 2014; Behal & Mohapatra, 1992).

In *Leaves No Longer Green*, Dutta (2026) presents young English pioneer Henry Esscombe entering Assam to establishDhanboa Tea Estate. From the colonial perspective, biodiversity is an obstacle to capital: Esscombe clears nearly a hundred acres in the first years and plants seeds and seedlings from different sources (p. 11). This exemplifies the Plantationocene's simplification of diverse forests into scalable monocultures (Haraway, 2015; Haraway et al., 2016; Tsing, 2015; M. Barua, 2023). In *Seuji*

Pator Kahini, Barua (1963) preserves memories of Naharani's lost jungle (*jarani*). Older workers recall felling giant trees, sometimes requiring fifteen to twenty labourers to work all day with axes, while sacred cobras and other wildlife were killed or displaced (pp. 58-60). This destruction disrupted indigenous relationships with forest life (Banerjee et al., 2024). The plantation becomes a green desert: its orderly rows thrive, in the novel's image, by sucking workers' blood (Barua, 1963, p. 63). The erasure of the forest thus parallels the uprooting of Adivasi workers.

2. The Mutilated Shrub and the Disciplined Body

Once the rainforest is liquidated, the plantation regime subjects both the tea plant and the indentured labourer to the same brutal geometry of biometric control. Left undisturbed in its native rainforest habitat, *Camellia sinensis* var. *assamica* grows into a robust canopy tree reaching up to fifty feet. Within the Plantationocene, however, colonial agronomy uproots both flora and human beings into alienated units of extraction (M. Barua, 2023; Haraway et al., 2016). Drawing on Marder's (2013) philosophy of vegetal life, the plantation's treatment of *Camellia sinensis* constitutes profound ontological violence against plant-thinking, suppressing vertical striving, seasonal dormancy, and reproductive flowering in favour of forced, perpetual juvenility at waist height.

Barua (1963) makes this botanical violence explicit in *Seuji Pator Kahini* during the winter pruning season (*kalam diya*), where workers wield curved, hooked pruning knives (*kalmi katari*) to slash across the lined-up bushes in a visceral scene that resembles the mass decapitation of sacrificial offerings (p. 321). Crucially, the novel reveals that the workers who execute this arboricultural mutilation are themselves captives of an identical disciplinary violence. In *Leaves No Longer Green*, Dutta (2026) traces how human beings are uprooted from their indigenous social ecologies through predatory recruitment networks in which *arkattis*"lure, kidnap, coerce, or blackmail coolies, shipping them off to distant Assam in a most brutal manner" (p. 23). Once confined within the estate, workers' bodily postures and movements are policed with the same rigid precision applied to the tea rows. As then experienced planter, Buckingham instructs the novice David in Dutta's novel: "never allow the buggers to sit while you're around, and never permit them to intermix with local villagers, or even to leave the garden perimeters" (Dutta, 2026, p. 172).

The *hazira* (daily task), *ticca* (overtime), and *nirikh* (piece-rate quota) systems placed workers under relentless pressure (Behal, 2014; Behal & Mohapatra, 1992; Guha, 1977). Their bodies were bent to the height of the plucking table, while missed quotas could bring wage deductions, flogging, or humiliation. Nixon's (2011) slow violence helps explain the cumulative bodily damage, including ulcers, respiratory illness, and premature ageing (Bedamatta & Sarma, 2025), which parallels the exhaustion of monocultural

soil. Barua's bush that thrives by "sucking" the coolie's blood (1963, p. 63) echoes Dutta's depiction of workers forced to labour under threat of the whip (2026, p. 23). Plumwood's (1993, 2002) Master Model clarifies how plants, soil, and racialised workers become expendable instruments. As Barua writes, the plantation has "no place for old age" (1963, p. 159).

3. Ecofeminist Interrogations: Gender, Labour, and Bodily Extraction

Nowhere is the ideological machinery of Plumwood's (1993, 2002) Master Model more starkly exposed than in the plantation's exploitation of Adivasi women. Colonial tea marketing persistently romanticised the smiling female plucker through essentialist tropes of nimble fingers that allowed estates to depress family wages (Hazarika, 2025; J. Sharma, 2011). In *SeujiPator Kahini*, Barua (1963) shatters this pastoral artifice, revealing that women's songs amidst the bushes are desperate survival mechanisms against abject poverty, monitored constantly by estate overseers (pp. 183-185).

The plantation's racial and patriarchal hierarchy extended control over the landscape to sexual domination of indentured women. In *Seuji Pator Kahini*, Soniya is born after a British manager sexually violates her mother. European planters' wives stigmatise her as an impure coolie girl, while educated Assamese men such as Prabin desire tea-garden women privately but reject marriage to preserve caste respectability (Barua, 1963, pp. 137–148, 356). Soniya links her degradation to the plantation and longs to uproot the tea bushes and burn the sahib's bungalow (p. 346). In *Leaves No Longer Green*, Lachmi submits to her British employer's sexual coercion to protect her husband and family from retaliatory torture (Dutta, 2026, pp. 129-131). Both narratives expose the intersection of racial power, gender, and economic dependency.

Adivasi women also bear the cumulative burden of slow violence (Nixon, 2011; Hazarika, 2025). In *Seuji Pator Kahini*, women face racist abuse, gruelling quotas, and meagre pay; domestic violence compounds their suffering (Barua, 1963, pp. 67, 279-280). Barua compares repeated pregnancies to the continual new shoots of pruned tea bushes (p. 172). Sohagi returns to plucking only three days after childbirth because she cannot afford the loss of wages (pp. 180-181). In Dutta's novel, seventeen-year-old Chameli works until she dies in childbirth (Dutta, 2026, pp. 382-384). The novels show how plantation productivity depends on women's reproductive and physical exhaustion (Hazarika, 2025; Plumwood, 1993).

4. Chromatic Deconstruction: Unmasking the Irony of "Green"

Viewed through the Plantationocene (Haraway, 2015) and slow violence (Nixon, 2011), both authors deploy deliberate chromatic irony to strip green of its pastoral innocence. In colonial iconography, the green leaf (*seuji pat*) signifies agrarian abundance. For displaced Adivasi migrants, however, the *bagan* quickly reveals itself as a carceral

mirage. Dutta (2026) captures this disillusionment through oral laments:

The sirdar says, work, work,
The babu says, catch and bring him here,
The sahib says, whip the skin off his back,
Oh, you heartless God,
You betrayed us when you brought us to Assam ... (Dutta, 2026, p. 145)

Similarly,Barua (1963) juxtaposes the vibrant emerald canopy against the red of subaltern lifeblood, observing that the tea bush grows lush only by drinking the blood and sweat of coolies (p. 63). In Dutta's (2026) historical reconstruction, this chromatic inversion extends to nineteenth-century epidemiological horrors (Dey, 2018). Denied clean water and medical care, workers at plantations like Dhanboa and Bihguri were decimated by cholera and kala-azar (Dutta, 2026, pp. 146-147). Ultimately, when physical torment crossed the threshold of endurance, the hidden red of slow attrition erupted into the overt red of anti-colonial insurrection at Bihguri (Dutta, 2026, p. 379).

5. Spatial Enclosure and Generational Slow Violence

Finally, Nixon's (2011) concept of slow violence illuminates how plantation architecture enforces generational degradation through spatial segregation. As Hélène Frichot (2024) notes, plantation space is rigidly partitioned to naturalise racial hierarchy. In *Seuji Pator Kahini*, Barua (1963) contrasts the sprawling *bura*(master's) bungalow on breezy hillocks with claustrophobic coolie lines in damp, malarial lowlands lacking windows or ventilation (pp. 222, 267). Bound by penal contracts and watched by *chowkidars*, workers were prohibited from foraging in adjacent forests (Behal, 2014; Kalarivayil et al., 2024). Historical demography confirms this lethality: between 1863 and 1866 alone, over 35,000 of the approximately 85,000 labourers imported into Assam died on transit steamers or inside estate lines (Behal, 2014; Behal & Mohapatra, 1992; Guha, 1977). In Barua's (1963) novel, this acute lethality mutates into intergenerational slow violence etched onto aging workers' bodies (p. 159). Barua draws a devastating parallel between botanical and human obsolescence: just as old tea bushes are uprooted and replaced, spent elderly labourers are cast aside once their physical capacity for plucking is exhausted, their flesh and grief becoming the silent humus keeping empire's tea leaves perpetually green (Barua, 1963, pp. 229-230).

DISCUSSION: TOWARD A POSTCOLONIAL ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES OF THE *BAGAN*

By unmasking the *bagan* as an anti-forest, *SeujiPator Kahini* (Barua, 1963) and *Leaves No Longer Green* (Dutta, 2026) actively dismantle the pastoral tropes imported by British colonial writing and perpetuated by contemporary heritage tourism and corporate greenwashing (Dey, 2018; J. Sharma, 2011). Through Val Plumwood's (1993, 2002) ecofeminist critique of the Master Model, monoculture pastoralism can be recognised as a dual ideological mechanism of backgrounding and instrumentalisation:

colonial aesthetics celebrate the scenic geometry of the tea garden while systematically denying its material dependency on the liquidated rainforest (*jarani*) and the subjugated Adivasi body. Decolonising the South Asian environmental imagination therefore requires recognising that a uniform carpet of green shrubs is not an index of ecological health, but the violent outcome of Tsing's (2015) and Haraway's (2015; Haraway et al., 2016) Plantationocene simplification (M. Barua, 2023). Moreover, placing Michael Marder's (2013) critical plant studies in dialogue with postcolonial labour history (Behal, 2014; Liu, 2017) advances South Asian ecocriticism beyond anthropocentric frameworks. Rather than treating flora as a mute stage set for human tragedy, Barua (1963) and Dutta (2026) reveal how the arboricultural mutilation of *Camellia sinensis* var. *assamica*, sheared from a wild rainforest canopy tree into a flat and perpetually juvenile plucking table, operates through the exact same disciplinary logic as the spatial confinement and gendered exploitation of the indentured workforce.

Where colonial ledgers record acreage, exports, and mortality, fiction recovers the plantation's embodied histories (Behal & Mohapatra, 1992; Das & Dey, 2020). In *Seuji Pator Kahini*, Soniya's sorrow and anger reveal the gendered dispossession and alienation of workers beneath the pruned bushes (Barua, 1963). *Leaves No Longer Green* revisits the industry's nineteenth-century origins through cleared forests, cholera, and Adivasi resistance (Dutta, 2026). Together, the novels work as counter-archives, showing how literary memory challenges planter-centred histories and restores workers' struggles to the story of Assam's tea industry (Frichot, 2024; Kalita et al., 2026).

Nixon's (2011) concept of slow violence also connects the plantation's colonial past to continuing inequalities. Descendants of indentured workers still face insecure land rights, exclusion from Scheduled Tribe safeguards in Assam, low wages, and poor health outcomes (Bedamatta & Sarma, 2025; D. P. Sharma, 2015; Government of Assam, 2025; Kalarivayil et al., 2024; Labour Welfare Department, Government of Assam, 2023). Women remain especially vulnerable to wage stagnation and household food insecurity, making economic diversification important (Hazarika, 2025; Uthai, 2025). Chemical exposure adds another layer of harm despite regulatory frameworks (Ahmed et al., 2025; Singh & Medhi, 2023; Tea Board of India, 2026). Satellite analysis records a 78.71% expansion of monocultural tea patches in Upper Assam between 1990 and 2022, associated with forest fragmentation, soil erosion, declining fertility, and human-elephant conflict (Parida et al., 2023; Athira et al., 2026; Banerjee et al., 2024). These findings suggest that the present socio-ecological crisis is connected to the plantation system's historical foundations.

CONCLUSION

By reading Rasna Barua's *SeujiPator Kahini* (Barua, 1963) alongside Arup Kumar Dutta's

Leaves No Longer Green (Dutta, 2026), this study has dismantled the colonial myth of monoculture pastoralism to unmask the Assam *bagan* as an engineered anti-forest and green desert. Integrating the Plantationocene (M. Barua, 2023; Haraway, 2015; Haraway et al., 2016; Tsing, 2015), slow violence (Nixon, 2011), the ecofeminist Master Model (Plumwood, 1993, 2002), and critical plant studies (Marder, 2013) demonstrates four interlocking conclusions: the tea plantation was founded upon the catastrophic liquidation of primal rainforest biodiversity; arboricultural truncation of *Camellia sinensis* directly mirrors the penal disciplining of the Adivasi workforce; patriarchal and racial dualisms rationalised the sexualised violation of female workers; and sustained chromatic irony exposes how the lush green leaf is nourished by subaltern blood and resistance.

Addressing these legacies requires structural social and ecological change. Priorities include secure land rights and constitutional safeguards for Tea Tribe communities (D. P. Sharma, 2015; Government of Assam, 2025; Kalarivayil et al., 2024), living wages and livelihood diversification (Hazarika, 2025; Labour Welfare Department, Government of Assam, 2023; Uthai, 2025), and occupational protections against agrochemical exposure (Ahmed et al., 2025; Bedamatta & Sarma, 2025; Singh & Medhi, 2023; Tea Board of India, 2026). Ecological measures should include bio-inputs, shade-grown agroforestry, and restored wildlife corridors (Sorongpong et al., 2025; Parida et al., 2023; Athira et al., 2026; Banerjee et al., 2024).

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