



LIVING ON THE EDGE: ECOLOGICAL DISPLACEMENT AND CLIMATE PRECARITY IN BIMALENDU HALDER'S "NEADER"

Tarif Sardar 

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Author Details:

Research Scholar, Department of
English, University of North Bengal,
West Bengal, India

Corresponding Author:

Tarif Sardar

Abstract

Bimalendu Halder's "Neader" offers a compelling literary representation of climate-induced displacement in the Indian Sundarbans, foregrounding the intricate relationship between ecological degradation, forced migration, and social marginalization. Rather than depicting floods and cyclones as isolated natural calamities, the story reveals how recurring environmental disasters dismantle livelihoods, destabilize cultural belonging, and expose the structural inequalities that shape the lives of marginalized communities. This article examines "Neader" through the interdisciplinary frameworks of environmental humanities, ecocriticism, political philosophy, and anthropology. Drawing on the theoretical interventions of Rob Nixon, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Lawrence Buell, Gaston Bachelard, Edward Said, Zygmunt Bauman, Tim Ingold, James C. Scott, Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, Achille Mbembe, Victor Turner, and Judith Butler, the article argues that ecological displacement in the narrative is not merely an environmental crisis but a political condition produced through the intersection of climate vulnerability, state neglect, and precarious citizenship. It further demonstrates how indigenous ecological knowledge, collective solidarity, and adaptive labour practices enable the displaced community to negotiate an increasingly unstable environment while remaining vulnerable to bureaucratic exclusion and environmental injustice. Ultimately, the short story emerges as a powerful literary archive of climate precarity that challenges conventional understandings of migration by situating displacement within broader questions of environmental justice, belonging, and the right to inhabit a rapidly changing world.

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Introduction

The Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove ecosystem, has increasingly become a symbol of the unequal consequences of climate change. Characterized by recurrent cyclones, rising sea levels, riverbank erosion, saline intrusion, and embankment failures, the region has witnessed continuous environmental degradation that has profoundly affected the lives of its inhabitants. For the marginalized communities dependent on agriculture, fishing, honey collection, and forest resources, ecological instability is not merely an environmental phenomenon but an enduring socio-economic reality that compels repeated displacement, livelihood insecurity, and forced migration. Consequently, the Sundarbans occupies a significant place within contemporary environmental humanities as a landscape where climate change intersects with poverty, state neglect, and environmental injustice.

Literature from the Sundarbans has increasingly documented these transformations by foregrounding the lived experiences of communities whose histories are often excluded from dominant environmental narratives. Bimalendu Halder's short story "Neader" is one such intervention. Rather than presenting ecological disasters as spectacular events, Halder portrays displacement as an ordinary yet devastating condition that gradually reshapes everyday life. The narrative follows Palan, Manti, and other displaced families who, after repeated floods and cyclones, establish temporary settlements on government land, only to confront eviction, bureaucratic indifference, and the persistent uncertainty of belonging. In doing so, the story reveals that environmental disasters do not end with the receding floodwaters; instead, they produce prolonged experiences of homelessness, economic precarity, and political exclusion.

This article argues that “Nader” reconceptualizes climate-induced displacement as a multidimensional crisis where ecological vulnerability is inseparable from questions of citizenship, environmental justice, and social inequality. Employing an interdisciplinary framework that draws upon environmental humanities, ecocriticism, anthropology, and political philosophy, the study examines six interconnected dimensions of the narrative: the Sundarbans as a landscape of slow violence; climate-induced displacement and the crisis of home; ecological knowledge and everyday survival; the relationship between state power, citizenship, and environmental injustice; and the emergence of community under conditions of precarious mobility. Through the theoretical insights of Rob Nixon, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Lawrence Buell, Gaston Bachelard, Edward Said, Zygmunt Bauman, Tim Ingold, James C. Scott, Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, Achille Mbembe, Victor Turner, and Judith Butler, the article demonstrates that “Nader” transforms ecological displacement from a local experience into a broader critique of climate precarity in the Anthropocene. Ultimately, Halder’s story challenges readers to recognize that the gravest consequences of climate change are not only environmental but also profoundly political and ethical, exposing the unequal distribution of vulnerability, belonging, and the right to inhabit place.

The Sundarbans as a Landscape of Slow Violence

In “Nader”, the Sundarbans functions not merely as a physical setting but as an active ecological force that shapes the lives of its inhabitants. Rather than portraying environmental catastrophe as a singular event, Bimalendu Halder represents it as a prolonged process of erosion, displacement, and insecurity. The recurring floods, storms, and embankment failures gradually dismantle livelihoods, forcing people into perpetual cycles of migration and resettlement. This environmental condition is aptly understood through Rob Nixon’s concept of ‘slow violence’, which he defines as “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space” (Nixon 2). Unlike spectacular disasters, slow violence unfolds incrementally, disproportionately affecting those who are economically and politically marginalized.

Halder foregrounds this gradual devastation from the opening pages of the story: “But cruel nature, through storms, wind and flood had thrown them out of their land and homes and turned them into landless, poor vagabonds” (Halder 1). The emphasis here is not on the immediacy of disaster but on its lingering consequences. Equally significant is the narrator’s observation that “A severe storm could, within seconds, blow away all of this and torrential rain or flood could bring everything down and leave these people homeless again” (Halder 1). The word again encapsulates the cyclical nature of ecological precarity, revealing displacement not as an exceptional occurrence but as an enduring condition of existence. The story thus exposes how climate-induced disasters repeatedly erode the possibility of stable habitation.

The ecological crisis in “Nader” also resonates with Dipesh Chakrabarty’s argument that climate change has fundamentally altered the relationship between human history and the natural world. As Chakrabarty observes, “humans have become a geological force” (Chakrabarty 58). Although Halder does not explicitly invoke the discourse of climate change, his portrayal of recurrent flooding, river erosion, and environmental instability captures the lived realities of a region increasingly vulnerable to planetary ecological transformations. The Sundarbans emerges as a space where environmental change is experienced through everyday struggles rather than abstract global debates.

Beyond material destruction, ecological displacement also entails the erosion of memory and belonging. Palan’s nostalgic recollection of his ancestral home beside the Matla River underscores the intimate relationship between landscape and identity. His emotional attachment to the river, the fields, and the banigachh reveals that home is not simply a physical dwelling but a lived space saturated with memory and cultural continuity (Halder 3–4). This resonates with Lawrence Buell’s observation that place functions as “a repository of memory, identity, and value” (Buell 63). Consequently, the loss of home signifies not merely the loss of shelter but the fragmentation of personal history and the rupture of one’s relationship with place.

Read through Nixon’s theory of slow violence, Chakrabarty’s conception of the climate crisis, and Buell’s environmental criticism, “Nader” reveals the Sundarbans as a landscape where ecological degradation, social marginalization, and cultural dispossession converge. Halder transforms the delta into a literary archive of slow violence, demonstrating that the most devastating consequences of environmental crisis are often not sudden catastrophes but the gradual erosion of home, livelihood, and the possibility of a secure future.

Climate-Induced Displacement and the Crisis of Home

One of the central concerns of “Nader” is the profound crisis of home precipitated by climate-induced displacement. In the story, the recurring floods, cyclones, and river erosion of the Sundarbans do not merely destroy physical dwellings; they dismantle emotional attachments, cultural rootedness, and the very possibility of belonging. Home ceases to function as a stable geographical location and instead becomes a fragile aspiration repeatedly interrupted by ecological uncertainty. Halder thus represents displacement as both a material and an affective condition, where survival necessitates continual mobility while memory remains anchored to a landscape that can no longer sustain life.

This crisis of home is most poignantly embodied in Palan, whose nostalgic recollections of his ancestral village sharply contrast with Manti’s pragmatic acceptance of displacement. Remembering his former life, Palan visualizes “their two-storeyed mud and thatched house, the small courtyard, the old banigachh, and the moonlit waters of the Matla River before tears overwhelm him”

(Halder 3–4). These memories reveal that home extends far beyond the physical structure of a dwelling; it is an affective space where identity, memory, and everyday experience converge. This representation resonates with Gaston Bachelard's observation that "the house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace" (Bachelard 6). Bachelard's phenomenology of dwelling illuminates Palan's attachment to place, suggesting that the destruction of home constitutes not simply material dispossession but an existential rupture that fractures one's relationship with the self.

In contrast, Manti recognizes that ecological degradation has rendered return to the Sundarbans increasingly untenable. Her firm declaration, "This time I shall not leave this place for the Sundarbans" (Halder 2), reflects neither indifference toward her homeland nor a voluntary rejection of it. Rather, it signifies an acute awareness that recurring environmental disasters have transformed home into an uninhabitable space. Through this contrast between Palan's nostalgia and Manti's pragmatism, Halder demonstrates that climate-induced displacement compels individuals to negotiate the painful tension between emotional attachment and ecological reality. The homeland survives in memory even as environmental instability renders permanent return impossible.

The narrative's portrayal of displacement also recalls Edward Said's understanding of exile as "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place" (Said 173). Although Palan and Manti remain within the geographical boundaries of Bengal, they experience a form of ecological exile produced by environmental catastrophe rather than political banishment. Their displacement is internal rather than transnational, yet it generates a comparable sense of estrangement. The homeland continues to exist as an emotional and cultural presence, while everyday life unfolds in temporary settlements devoid of permanence, legal security, or emotional continuity. Halder thereby expands the concept of exile beyond geopolitical boundaries to include those displaced by ecological crises.

The precarious existence of the roadside settlement further reflects Zygmunt Bauman's conception of liquid modernity, wherein stability gives way to perpetual uncertainty and movement. Bauman argues that "being modern means to be unable to stop and even less able to stand still" (Bauman 28). For the displaced inhabitants of "Neader", however, mobility is not a marker of freedom or opportunity but a condition imposed by environmental destruction and institutional neglect. The narrator observes that "Almost every other year, homeless and destitute, they made their homes beside roads provided by the government or on any abandoned high grassy plot of land" (Halder 1). Mobility thus becomes cyclical, involuntary, and deeply precarious, reducing home to a temporary refuge continually threatened by both ecological forces and bureaucratic eviction.

By foregrounding the emotional, cultural, and spatial consequences of ecological displacement, "Neader" reconceptualizes home as a fragile and contested category rather than a fixed geographical location. Read alongside Bachelard's poetics of dwelling, Said's reflections on exile, and Bauman's theory of liquid modernity, the story demonstrates that climate-induced displacement erodes far more than houses and livelihoods. It unsettles memory, identity, and belonging, revealing that the gravest consequence of environmental precarity lies not only in the loss of shelter but also in the gradual dissolution of the human capacity to inhabit a place as home.

Ecological Knowledge and Everyday Survival

In the short story, survival is sustained not through state assistance or institutional intervention but through an intimate, embodied knowledge of the environment. The displaced inhabitants negotiate an unfamiliar landscape by interpreting its ecological rhythms and transforming its resources into means of subsistence. Fishing in rivers and canals, collecting snails, gathering palm leaves, weaving mats and brooms, and using dried paddy stalks as fuel are not incidental details; rather, they constitute an indigenous ecological intelligence that enables survival under conditions of environmental precarity. Halder therefore represents the Sundarbans not only as a site of ecological vulnerability but also as a lived archive of environmental knowledge accumulated through generations of interaction with the deltaic landscape.

This reciprocal relationship between humans and the environment can be understood through Tim Ingold's theory of dwelling. Rejecting the Cartesian separation between humans and nature, Ingold argues that people come to know the world "not by residing inside it, but by moving through it" (Ingold 229). Knowledge is thus not abstract or detached but generated through continual engagement with the environment. Manti exemplifies this ecological intelligence when she outlines a detailed plan for survival: "Then catch fishes, prawns in the river and the canals and sell them in the market. You can collect leaves from fan palm trees around and make hand fans, brooms and mats... I shall dig into this bheri and collect snails" (Halder 2). Her understanding of the landscape emerges from everyday practice rather than formal expertise. Rivers, canals, fields, and vegetation are perceived not as passive elements of nature but as dynamic participants in sustaining human life. Halder thus challenges anthropocentric conceptions of nature by depicting the environment as an active collaborator in the struggle for survival.

The narrative further demonstrates this environmental literacy through Manti's careful evaluation of the roadside mound before the family settles there. She observes that "The earth is hard here. No amount of rain would wash away the earth... There are endless paddy fields on the other side. At the end of a field is a small river and a canal" (Halder 2). Her assessment reveals an ability to interpret the landscape according to its ecological resilience, accessibility, and productive potential. Such place-based knowledge becomes indispensable in the Sundarbans, where environmental instability continually reshapes patterns of habitation

and livelihood. Survival, therefore, depends less on ownership of land than on the capacity to read and respond to the ecological possibilities embedded within it.

Halder's portrayal of everyday subsistence also resonates with James C. Scott's concept of *metis*, the practical knowledge acquired through lived experience rather than institutional expertise. Scott defines *metis* as "a wide array of practical skills and acquired intelligence in responding to a constantly changing natural and human environment" (Scott 313). The displaced families rely precisely on this localized intelligence to rebuild their lives. Their livelihoods emerge from an intimate familiarity with the ecology of rivers, fields, canals, and vegetation—forms of knowledge that remains largely invisible within bureaucratic systems. Ironically, while the state later criminalizes their settlement, it fails to recognize or support the ecological competence that enables their survival. Halder thereby exposes the epistemic gap between centralized governance and the experiential knowledge of marginalized communities.

Nevertheless, the narrative resists romanticizing indigenous ecological knowledge. Although such knowledge enables resilience and adaptation, it cannot insulate the community from recurring floods, forced displacement, or bureaucratic violence. Their environmental literacy facilitates endurance but does not dismantle the structural inequalities that perpetuate vulnerability. Read through Ingold's theory of dwelling and Scott's concept of *metis*, the story ultimately demonstrates that ecological knowledge is not a pathway to empowerment but a fragile strategy of survival, continually negotiated within a landscape shaped by climatic uncertainty and state neglect.

The State, Citizenship, and Environmental Injustice

While the story foregrounds the ecological vulnerability of the displaced inhabitants of the Sundarbans, it simultaneously reveals how environmental precarity is intensified by state neglect and bureaucratic violence. Halder demonstrates that displacement is not simply the outcome of floods, cyclones, or river erosion; rather, it is perpetuated by institutional indifference that denies vulnerable communities secure habitation and meaningful citizenship. The story therefore exposes environmental injustice as a condition in which ecological risks are unevenly distributed and disproportionately borne by socially and economically marginalized populations.

This convergence of ecological catastrophe and state power becomes evident when officials from the panchayat arrive to conduct the census and verify the voter list. Instead of recognizing the humanitarian crisis of displacement, they declare the settlement illegal and order its immediate eviction: "It is illegal to settle here on the mound like this... They would have to leave this mound as soon as possible" (Halder 5). The irony is striking. The state identifies the inhabitants as citizens through bureaucratic enumeration while simultaneously denying them the fundamental right to inhabit the land on which they struggle to survive. Citizenship thus becomes a conditional status regulated through administrative procedures rather than a guarantee of rights or protection.

This paradox can be understood through Michel Foucault's concept of biopower, whereby modern states govern populations by regulating life through institutions of surveillance, classification, and administration. As Foucault argues, sovereign power increasingly operates through the capacity to "make live and let die" (Foucault 138). In the story, the census, voter registration, and eviction notice function as biopolitical technologies that classify and monitor displaced populations without ensuring their welfare. Rather than safeguarding life, these bureaucratic mechanisms produce differentiated forms of citizenship in which marginalized communities remain permanently exposed to insecurity. Administrative recognition, therefore, coexists with political abandonment.

The settlers' precarious existence also recalls Giorgio Agamben's notion of bare life, wherein individuals remain subject to state authority while being excluded from the substantive protections of political community. Agamben contends that "the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power" (Agamben 6). The inhabitants of the roadside mound exemplify this contradiction. Although they are counted during elections and censuses, they possess neither secure housing nor enforceable rights. Their citizenship is reduced to bureaucratic visibility, rendering them politically recognizable yet materially disposable. Halder thereby reveals the gap between legal recognition and lived citizenship, exposing how environmental displacement often produces populations that exist simultaneously inside and outside the protection of the state.

This contradiction is further articulated through Palan's bitter reflection that "the law of the land was not meant for the poor and indigent—it was to beat them and rule over them" (Halder 6). His statement captures the profound alienation experienced by communities whose encounters with state institutions are defined not by welfare but by coercion. The government's failure to reinforce embankments, rehabilitate displaced families, or provide secure settlement transforms ecological disasters into enduring political crises, where vulnerability is reproduced through administrative neglect.

Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics further illuminates this process by examining how sovereign power determines which lives are protected and which are rendered expendable. Mbembe argues that sovereignty ultimately resides in "the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations" (14). Although "Nader" does not portray spectacular state violence, it depicts a slower and more insidious form of disposability. The neglect of environmental infrastructure, the absence of rehabilitation, and the repeated threat of eviction compel the displaced to inhabit

spaces where survival itself becomes precarious. Their exposure to both ecological catastrophe and bureaucratic coercion reveals a politics that normalizes vulnerability rather than alleviating it.

Read through Foucault's theory of biopower, Agamben's conception of bare life, and Mbembe's critique of necropolitics, "Neader" demonstrates that environmental injustice is produced as much by institutional structures as by ecological forces. Halder ultimately argues that climate-induced displacement is not merely an environmental crisis but a political condition in which the struggle for survival is inseparable from the struggle for citizenship, recognition, and human dignity.

Community, Mobility, and Precarious Belonging

Despite chronic displacement and environmental insecurity, the story demonstrates that community emerges as an indispensable resource for survival. Deprived of legal ownership, institutional protection, and permanent habitation, the displaced inhabitants of the roadside mound cultivate a fragile sense of belonging through cooperation, mutual dependence, and collective resilience. Halder thus shifts the narrative from the loss of home to the creation of alternative forms of sociality, suggesting that belonging is not exclusively anchored to territory but can also be constituted through shared experiences of ecological precarity. Yet this collective identity remains fundamentally unstable, continually threatened by recurring environmental disasters and the coercive interventions of the state.

The formation of this provisional community becomes evident when the settlers collectively resolve that "if they face any danger, they have to save each other and come together to brave it. They have all agreed and have elected Manti their 'neader'" (Halder 4). This moment transforms a scattered population of displaced individuals into a community bound by reciprocity and mutual care. Leadership here does not derive from legal authority or political legitimacy but from collective trust forged through shared vulnerability. In the absence of state protection, social solidarity itself becomes a vital strategy of survival. Halder therefore reimagines community not as a pre-existing social structure but as an adaptive response to environmental displacement.

This emergent social formation can be fruitfully understood through Victor Turner's concept of *communitas*, which describes the egalitarian bonds that arise among individuals inhabiting liminal conditions. Turner defines *communitas* as "a relationship between concrete, historical, idiosyncratic individuals" characterized by immediacy, equality, and shared humanity (Turner 131). The displaced settlers occupy precisely such a liminal position. Having lost their homes yet denied permanent settlement elsewhere; they exist between belonging and exclusion, citizenship and dispossession. Their solidarity does not originate in kinship, caste, or institutional recognition but in a common experience of ecological displacement. The roadside mound consequently functions as a liminal social space where conventional hierarchies are temporarily suspended in favour of collective survival.

Nevertheless, Halder refuses to romanticize this sense of *communitas*. The arrival of the panchayat officials and the subsequent eviction order immediately fracture the fragile social cohesion established on the mound. The threat of renewed displacement transforms solidarity into uncertainty, revealing that community itself remains contingent upon the possibility of inhabiting space, however temporarily. Ecological instability and bureaucratic intervention repeatedly interrupt the process of social consolidation, rendering belonging perpetually provisional.

This precarious form of sociality resonates with Judith Butler's reflections on vulnerability and relationality in *Precarious Life*. Butler argues that "we are, from the start, given over to the other" (20), emphasizing that human existence is fundamentally constituted through relations of interdependence. In the story, survival depends precisely upon this ethics of mutual dependence. Deprived of institutional care, the settlers recognize that their vulnerability can only be mitigated through collective responsibility. Their community is therefore not founded upon shared identity but upon a recognition of shared precarity. At the same time, Butler reminds us that precarity is politically distributed, with certain populations rendered disproportionately vulnerable through social and institutional structures (25). Halder's displaced community exemplifies this differential precarity. Their mobility is involuntary, their settlement legally insecure, and their future continually subject to ecological catastrophe and bureaucratic eviction. Even the solidarity they cultivate cannot guarantee permanence or protection.

Ultimately, the story reconceptualizes community as an adaptive and relational practice rather than a fixed social or territorial entity. Read through Turner's notion of *communitas* and Butler's ethics of precarity, the story suggests that ecological displacement simultaneously dissolves conventional forms of belonging and generates new modes of collective existence grounded in shared vulnerability. Yet these communities remain inherently fragile, reminding readers that under conditions of climate precarity, belonging itself becomes contingent, mobile, and perpetually vulnerable to both environmental disruption and political exclusion.

Conclusion

"Neader" offers a profound literary meditation on the lived realities of ecological displacement in the Sundarbans, demonstrating that climate precarity extends far beyond environmental catastrophe to encompass social exclusion, political neglect, and the erosion of belonging. Rather than presenting floods and cyclones as isolated natural disasters, Halder portrays them as recurring forces that gradually destabilize homes, livelihoods, and community life. The narrative thus reveals that environmental crises are inseparable from the structural inequalities that determine who is most vulnerable to their consequences.

Through the experiences of Palan, Manti, and the displaced settlers, the story foregrounds the human dimensions of climate-induced migration. The loss of home emerges not merely as physical dispossession but as the fragmentation of memory, identity, and cultural continuity. Simultaneously, the community's adaptive strategies—its ecological knowledge, informal labour practices, and collective solidarity—demonstrate remarkable resilience in the face of adversity. Yet, Halder avoids romanticizing this resilience, emphasizing instead that survival remains contingent upon unstable environmental conditions and indifferent state institutions. The recurring threat of eviction illustrates that ecological vulnerability is reinforced by bureaucratic exclusion, transforming displacement into a permanent social condition rather than a temporary humanitarian crisis.

The story emerges as a compelling critique of environmental injustice and climate precarity. It reveals that the most devastating consequences of climate change are not only ecological but also political and ethical, exposing how marginalized communities are systematically denied security, recognition, and the right to belong. Ultimately, Halder transforms the Sundarbans into a literary archive of slow violence, compelling readers to recognize that climate displacement is fundamentally a question of environmental justice, citizenship, and human dignity.

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