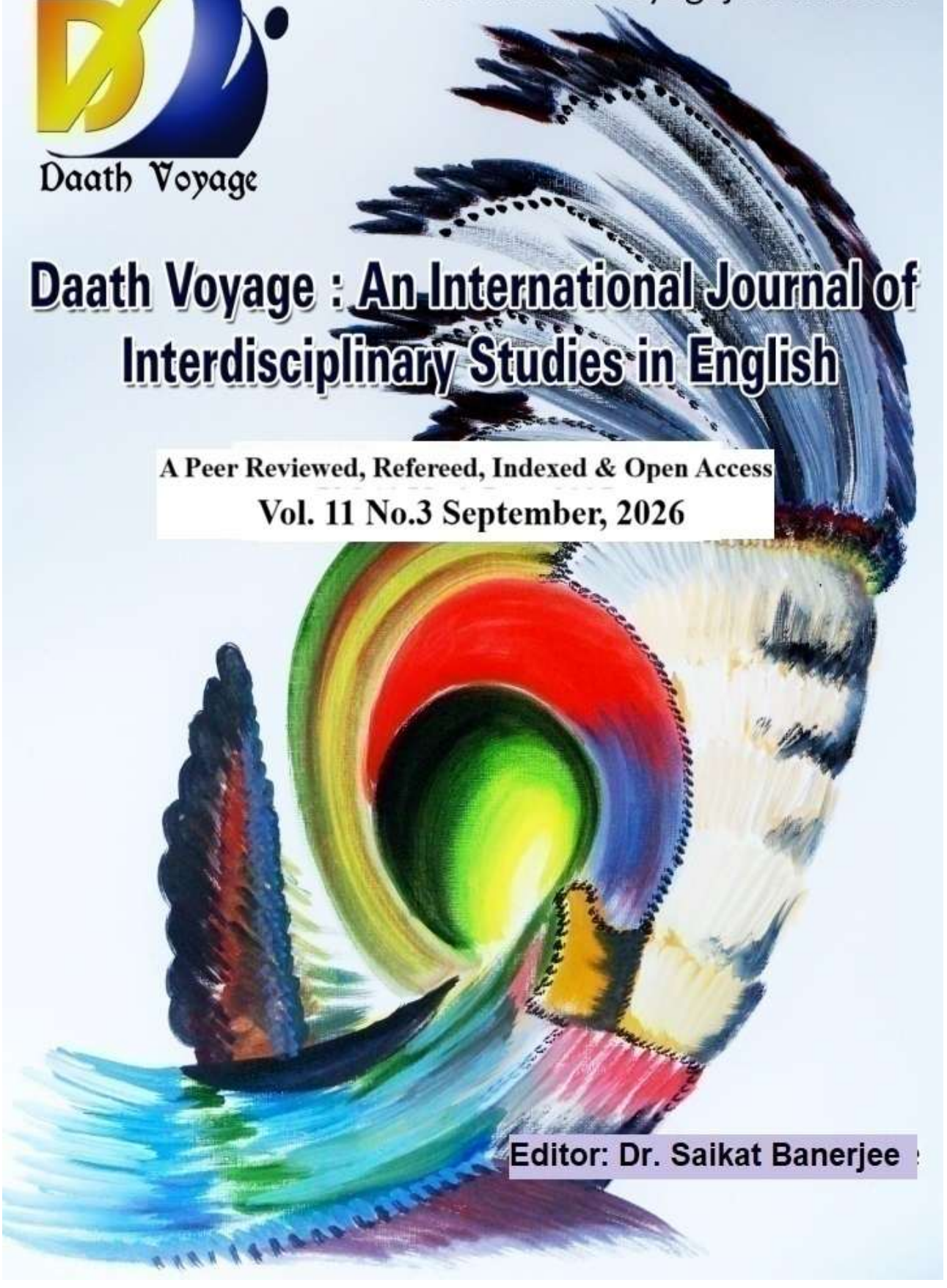
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The Rupture of Tinai: Neo-tiNai relations and Ontic Continuity in Romesh Gunesekera's *Reef*

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Abstract: Neo-tiNai or Oikopoetics is a philosophical idea conceptualized by Professor Dr. Nirmal Selvamony that has its roots in ancient Tamil literature. He argues that oikos or *tinai* studies the continuous relationship among the human, natural, and spirit rather than solely studying human and nature, as in Western ecocritical concepts. He classifies Neo-tiNai relations as integrated, hierarchic, and anarchic based on the interconnectedness between human and non-human entities. Selvamony calls this interconnectedness as ontic continuity. Romesh Gunesekera's *Reef* (1994) is about Triton, his memory of an untainted paradise of his master Salgado's house in Sri Lanka, later disturbed by political insurgencies that led to their voluntary exile to England. This is potent for ecocritical study, as Romesh not only uses the damage to coral reefs as a metaphor for the civil disturbances in Sri Lanka, but also highlights the threat to coral reefs because of anthropic interventions. This study uses Selvamony's neo-tiNai concept to study the neo-tiNai relations in the novel and attempts to determine whether an ontic continuity prevails among them by closely reading the text. The results show that Triton's tinai is transferred from integrated paradise to anarchic destruction.

Keywords: Neo-tiNai, Integrated Tinai, Anarchic Tinai, Ontic Continuity, Reef, Sri Lanka.

The Neo-TiNai philosophy has its foundation laid by Professor Dr. Nirmal Selvamony as early as the 1980s from his discussion group called "*Tinai*". Earlier, it was termed Oikopoetics based on the Greek term *oikos* meaning place or habitant. Oikopoetics studies the relationship between oikos, which represents human, nature, and spirit. (Selvamony and et al. xxviii). Later, it was termed Neo-tiNai, as he derived this from the Sangam Tamil Literature concept *tinai*. Neo-tiNai poetics is used as an ecocritical theory to study literature. Recently, Selvamony created a philosophical and social framework called Tinai

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Philosophy to provide an alternative ethics, moral, and living based on the harmony between species by promoting *kāṭci* (philosophical trait) and *aṉpu* (love) (Selvamony *Tinai Philosophy*). This study uses Neo-tiNai as an ecocritical concept to examine the novel *Reef* by Romesh Gunesekera.

Reef is a Booker Prize shortlisted novel written by Sri Lankan-born-British writer Romesh Gunesekera. This novel narrates the journey of the protagonists Triton, a young servant, and his master Ranjan Salgado, a marine biologist, from Sri Lanka to their voluntary exile in England. The novel's premise is the memory of Triton, who looks back on his journey after meeting a Sri Lankan Tamil man in London. He reminisces about his life from his little village to Salgado's house in Colombo, his transformation from a mere help to being a cook and later a companion to his master Salgado, Salgado's experiments with coral reef and his relationships and friendships, the surmounting civil war, their migration to England, and ends with Triton becoming a restaurant owner.

The available literature shows that the novel Reef has been studied from various perspectives. The bildungsroman aspect of the novel, highlighting Triton's self-discovery through the domestic space as a servant (Vázquez) and the difference between personal memory and national history, has been discussed in earlier discussions of the novel (Murray). Ecocritical perspectives have been continuously used to engage with the text, such as studying how the agencies related to sea and reef in affecting the lives of the main characters (Çetin); scrutinizing Gunesekera's descriptions of the material landscape of Sri Lanka in the novel (Daimari); studies also criticizes the novel for eroticizing the island rather than highlighting the need for nature conservation (Jain) and emphasizing the danger posed to the ocean due to the misuse of natural resources (Ghosal). All previous studies have used a Western ecocritical perspective to examine the novel. Hence, this study uses Nirmal Selvamony's (Tamil) Indian concept of neo-tiNai to assess the novel's interconnectedness between human, nature and supernatural entities.

In the introduction of *Essay in Ecocriticism*, Selvamony defines oikology as the study of the interrelationship between the oikos, which represents the human, nature, and the unquantifiable spirit. The criticism of oikos is oikocriticism (Selvamony and et al. xx). He also finds interrelations between the oikos, that is, the being of one member is transferred to the being of another member, which he defines as ontic continuity. These interrelations were integrative in tribal societies. He argues such interrelation could be hard to find in stratified societies (Selvamony and et al. xx–xxi). Hierarchic state societies could not be integrative, and anarchic tinai represent the ruins of interrelationships (Selvamony and et al. xxvi–xxvii).

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Oikocriticism was later renamed Neo-tiNai, and oikos was renamed *tinai.* This study uses the idea of Neo-tiNai relations to analyze the interrelations between the oikos present in the novel *Reef.*

The Integrative Microcosm

Triton is a young boy who comes to Salgado's house to be a house help. He thinks that Salgado's house is a universe around which the whole world revolves. He admires the del trees, red-beaked parrots, and other birds that fly to Salgado's garden to sing. The house is self-contained, as all the vendors come there directly to sell vegetables and meat (Gunesekera 17). The habitant or the place plays a vital role in Neo-Tinai philosophy. Triton's relationship with Salgado's house shows how he is immersed in the house's environment.

Nirmal Selvamony in his lecture on Neo-tiNai states that reality is constructed based on the triadic relations between human, nature and supernature (Selvamony "Neo-tiNai Poiesis" 00:19:07). Triton being the human, his relationship with human, nature and supernature constitutes the basis for the current analysis. His relationship with Salgado can be viewed as an interconnectedness between humans. Even though Triton arrived at home as a mere help, the bond between Salgado and Triton changed. He becomes an integral part of Salgado's life after the departure of the abusive cook Joseph. He takes care of the whole house by himself and started learning cooking, which helped him create an identity for himself. He remained in a microcosm where his cooking, housekeeping, and care for Salgado remained untainted by the horrors of the outer world. He expresses this as follows: "All over the globe revolutions erupted, dominoes tottered and guerrilla war came of age, … and I learned the art of good housekeeping" (Gunesekera 45). Apart from Salgado, he maintained a good relationship with Nili, Salgado's love interest. He reveals that she treats him as an equal, not like other masters who treat servants as subpar humans (Gunesekera 72). Hence, Triton's relationship with Salgado and Nili shows the interconnectedness between them.

Triton's cooking acts as a cultural expression of the land. His dishes range from string hoppers, *seeni sambol* and *pol sambol*, *pol kiri badun*, and stuffed crabs to the foreign turkey. He finds that hard cooking showcases his dedication to cooking and his relationship with the indigenous ingredients native to Sri Lanka. He valued the lives around him, whether human or non-human. When Salgado hits a crossing cow, he is angry with the laughing Salgado's friend Dias and silent Salgado. "It was not auspicious to smack a cow, the source of milk and labour" (Gunesekera 55). In Neo-tiNai, spirits or the supernatural are studied

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together with humans and nature. Triton, as a young boy, believes in supernatural beings. When Joseph abuses Triton, he prays that some alignment in the star chart will bring a mishap on Joseph and an upper hand for Triton in the household. He thinks that his divine will help him to take revenge on Joseph, "... I had a *deviya's* divine ability to control my dreams, and so each night I would dream of revenge" (Gunesekera11).

Salgado is the master of Triton. He is a marine biologist who likes studying the ocean and the organisms in and around it. Triton admires Salgado for his knowledge: "To him, there were no boundaries to knowledge. He studied mosquitoes, swamps, sea corals, and the whole bloated universe" (Gunesekera 24). He has a specialized ongoing experiment for the study of coral reefs. When his friend Dias comes over, Salgado explains how delicate the coral reefs are and how even the smallest disturbance can destroy the life of it. We also examined how coral reef damage poses a danger to the sea and, in turn, destroys humans. "'Coral grows about as fast as your finger nails, but how fast is it disappearing? Nobody knows!' 'What, from dynamiting and all?' 'Anything! Bombing, mining, netting' ". (Gunesekera 48). When Salgado takes Triton and Nili to his laboratory, he suggests that Nili go skin diving to see the coral reefs. He mentions how these sea creatures are prehistoric and greater than humans (Gunesekera 109). When Robert, the American, brings a reporter to write a report on the south coast of Sri Lanka and Salgado's research, Salgado refutes it. Even though Salgado has a personal hatred of Robert because of Robert's advances towards Nili, his opposition to the reporter reflects his disagreement with popularizing or commercializing the south coast for tourism (Gunesekera 131). Even though Salgado acts rationally and approaches things scientifically, it is understood he has a connection with the coral reef and tries to safeguard it.

Selvamony classified the relationship between human and nonhuman subjects into three types. They are integrative, hierarchic, and anarchic. He claims that tribal societies are an example of integrative tinai, when humans lived in harmony with nature and the supernature. Then came the state societies with their dominance and control over humans, such as the Indian caste system; he calls state societies hierarchic tinai. With the advent of industrialization, the uniqueness of every entity has been destroyed, and everything has been commercialized. The present era of the Anthropocene is an anarchic tinai where the attempts to dominance are failing. The role of the critic is to identify these neo-tiNai relations in the work of art. He mentions there can be one or more mention of tinai relation in a work of art (Selvamony *Neo-*

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tiNai Poiesis 00:22:45-00:42:00). With this being said, Triton's relationship with Salgado and Nili, his cooking based on the ingredients of the habitant, his respect towards the cow and other animals, and his beliefs in the supernatural prove an interconnectedness between the human, nature, and the supernatural. Even though the novel is set in an anarchic era, Triton's life in Salgado's home has an ontic continuity that is the interconnectedness between human and nonhuman entities. Hence Triton and his life at Salgado's home proves to be integrative tinai microcosm.

Rupture and Eco-spatial Displacement

Selvamony defines anarchic tinai as a society that is the result of failed dominant relations. The failed dominant relationship of humans over humans and humans over nature, and rationality over supernature (Selvamoy "Neo-tiNai Poiesis" 00:23:00). When the inner world of Triton and Salgado is integrative, the country is in an anarchic state. The novel happens during the years from 1960s to the 1970s, when the civil war in Sri Lanka was surmounting. When humans try to assert their dominance over one another. Triton notes how violence was becoming common during those days, and how the country's earlier peace was being destroyed due to the violence, "In my childhood no one dreamed of leaving a body to rot where it has been butchered, as people have had to learn to do more recently" (Gunesekera 32).

The novel is often criticized for not covering the entirety of the civil war insurgencies. But there are some mentions of the beheadings of a billionaire like Palitha Alugoda, changing governments of Bandaranaike and uprising of the revolutionaries like Dr. Tessa and Wijetunga. These were just coming in between the chats between the Salgado's guests, this shows their elitist mindset. Wijetunga is a lab assistant who works with Salgado in studying the coral reef. When Salgado informs them about his disappearances lately and him becoming a revolutionary, they judge him by questioning his need for joining revolution, even after having a job (Gunesekera 151). The violence between humans showcases how their need of asserting dominance over the other failed and led to the sabotage of peace and created a greater catastrophe.

Likewise nature is exploited because of human greed and their anthropic interventions in the natural system. Salgado highlights how damages to coral reefs will result in the rise of sea levels, "You see, this polyp is really very delicate. It has survived aeons, but even a small change in the immediate environment … could kill it. Then the whole thing will go. And if the structure is destroyed, the sea will rush in" (Gunesekera 48). He also informs that if coral reefs disappear, nothing will remain, as the world will be filled with water and humans will go extinct. When the reporter came with Robert wanting to write a report

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on Salgado's research, he found the motive behind them is not concern but to commercialize the south coast and to bring unwanted attention to the inhabitants of the area. Studies show underwater mining for limestone and sedimentation destroys the coral reefs in the Indian ocean (Columbia University). The novel showcases this when Triton and Salgado go over to the coast where Salgado's experiment took place, they notice the dead coral reefs near the limestone making kilns (Gunesekera 59). These violence between humans and the exploitation of nature showcases the rupture of the integrated tinai, by which it is known the environment of Sri Lanka in the *Reef* novel is an example of anarchic tinai.

One time Salgado enquires Triton about the Angulimala story. It is about a prince named Ahimsaka, who is cursed to collect thousand bleeding fingers to complete his studies. In the process, he started to love blood, got greedy and went on a killing spree. The story is cut off without Triton telling the ending, the deliverance of Ahimsaka by Buddha. This story is the metaphor to the violence happening around the country, how the violence is getting out of hand, and there is no saviour to give deliverance to the country. After the story, it is known Dias, Salgado's close friend, is killed by drowning. This is the final strike for Salgado who was already grief stricken because of his separation from Nili. So, he planned to move to England (Gunesekera 165–68). As mentioned earlier, habitation is important in Neo-tiNai, due to the unrest around them, Triton and Salgado are forced to leave their eco-space. Triton mentions his displacement is saddening, he says even the birds sound like they are crying for his "uprooted lives" (Gunesekera 172).

The Move Towards Symmetrization

Selvamony constructs an idea called symmetrization in poiesis. He explains that attaining ontic continuity results in a symmetry. He elucidates art should be the one thing that creates symmetry. This symmetry is either used in the action or central idea of the art work, and should either be presented or developed in the action (Selvamony "Development Poetics: A tiNai Aesthetic View" 232–33). Through this idea, let's view the novel *Reef*. At first the ontic continuity is present in the beginning as a microcosm in Triton as his relationship with human, nature and supernature is interconnected, it is also seen in Salgado's relationship with the coral reef. Triton and Salgado's ontic continuity is tainted by the anarchic outer word, so they get displaced from their tinai, that is they are displaced from Sri Lanka to England. Towards the end, Salgado returns to Sri Lanka to see Nili and Triton stays back in England with his new snack bar and tries to find connection with England with his cooking. Triton expresses this new change as

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his new beginning, "The nights would be long at the Earls Court snack shop with its line of bedraggled, cosmopolitan itinerants. But they were the people I had to attend to: my future" (Gunesekera 180). The novel ends with the protagonists trying to fix their relationships, this showcases how the novel ends with hope of ontic continuity and symmetrization.

The present study used Nirmal Selvamony's Neo-tiNai ecocritical concept to analyse the novel *Reef* written by Romesh Gunesekera. Neo-tinai denotes that reality is built with the triadic relation between human and non-human form. Ontic continuity means the interconnectedness between those three entities. There are three noe-tinai relationships classified by Selvamony, they are integrative, hierarchic and anarchic. With that, the study pointed out the relationship of Triton with human, nature and supernature has ontic continuity, hence Triton's life in Salgado's house is the integrative microcosm present in the novel. Then this study moved on to identify the anarchic tinai relation of the country by highlighting the violence during the civil war and the anthropic inventions to coral reefs. Then it showcased the eco-displacement that happened to Triton and Salgado because of the civic tensions surrounding the country. Later it discussed how the novel ends with the hope of ontic continuity and symmetrization. Hence the study exemplified the Neo-tinai triadic relationship, integrative and anarchic relation, ontic continuity and symmetrization present in the novel, by doing so the study put forth the need of Neo-tinai living needed in this era of anthropocene and the importance of art in returning us towards the ontic continuity.

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