

Decolonizing the Wild: Ecocritical Perspectives on Postcolonial Environmental Narratives

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Abstract:

This article applies the tools of ecocriticism and postcolonial theory in relation to environmental stories from postcolonial places. Looking through a decolonizing perspective, the book inquires into how literary depictions of nature, wilderness, inter-human relationships with environment have been informed by colonial histories of environmental thought and discourse. The research contends that postcolonial environmental narratives provide additional critical lenses through which to understand the aftermath of colonialism by reframing issues of sustainability, land tenure, and ecological stewardship. Through an examination of primordial, postcolonial literary texts from different continents, particularly South Asia, Africa and the Caribbean, the essay reveals how these defy stereotypical environmentalist approaches. The article also emphasises the significance of revitalising indigenous ecological knowledge systems and its influential power on reorientating environmental practices and policy. Drawing on ecocritical analysis, it highlights the need for an undermining decolonial environmentalism that is non-Western centric and centres the voices and experiences of subalterns.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Postcolonialism, Environmental Narratives, Decolonization, Indigenous Knowledge.

I. INTRODUCTION

Postcolonial environmental narratives offer a special optics into how environmental problems and colonial histories intersect. These stories commonly deal with the aftereffects of colonialism as it pertains to native territories, resources therein and the environment. The Western "imperial gaze," Sassoon says, turned human beings and the environment into mirror images of itself, recurving land and ecosystems in fashions that may still be seen today. The environmental ruination, land grabbing, and displacement of indigenous peoples are some of the lasting effects of centuries of colonial domination. Postcolonial environmental narratives represent an essential terrain for reconfiguring the relationship between humans and nature, unveiling possibilities for alternative narratives of environmental justice and sustainability. Together, they offer alternative sites of comparison that allow dissenting voices from the periphery to question Western models of environmental management and conservation, contributing to the development of an environmental discourse that is more inclusive and less colonial.

As a critical modality, ecocriticism is instrumental in reading literature in such postcolonial contexts. It promotes a sophisticated appreciation of the manner in which literature speaks to nature and the environment, highlighting the social and historical forces that mold the representation of the non-human world. In the colonized world, ecocriticism also clarifies the environmental impact of colonization and the extent to which colonized peoples were coerced into new relations with the land, often with severe ecological and cultural consequences.

The persistence of colonial histories and legacies in environmental stories is a pressing site of scholarship. Colonial practices informed how nature, wilderness and Indians were conceived and managed, defining frameworks still evident in modern environmental thought. These colonial inheritances are not only etched in the natural world, but also in the cultures that reside within it. In postcolonial regions, environmental perceptions, conservation practices and understandings of wilderness mirror colonial regimes of thought, which tend to elevate western epistemology over indigenous or local knowledge systems. The challenge, then, is to critically consider the ways in which these colonial histories continue to inform and structure environmental stories and practices today.

This paper's main intention is to consider how through the discursive engagement with postcolonial environmental stories we can apply ecocritical theory. Through an ecocritical reading of texts, the article seeks to reveal how these stories pattern colonial environmental practices. Ecocriticism provides resources for dismantling master narratives and foregrounding the value of alternative, indigenous ecological knowledges – many of which have typically been marginalized by Western environmental thinking. Additionally, the paper aims to explore critically the function of postcolonial literature for a decolonization of environmental attitudes and actions. Through an analysis of selected post-colonial texts, the article will demonstrate how literature plays a role in articulating strategies to dismantle colonial environmental discourses and to imagine the potential for reclaiming ecologies that are sustainable, just, and culturally appropriate. This essay seeks to show that postcolonial fiction not only criticizes the past, but also constructs not a model, but an ideal, of future postcolonial ecology, beyond what remained of colonial rape.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Ecocriticism is a discipline that is based on the intersection between literature, culture, and nature. It has its roots in poststructuralism and postmodernism, although developing in the 1990s, and using concepts from ecocriticism, political ecology, environmental history and cultural studies, as well as the epistemologies of all of these and of writing itself, this is a critical approach that comparatively examines how nature is represented in a broad array of literary texts (Garrard, 2012). The central theoretical bases for ecocriticism are the critiques of anthropocentrism—namely, the human-centred notion of existence—and to a lesser extent (though often indirectly), modernity. Notable figures in ecocriticism include Lawrence Buell, who discusses how ecologically oriented texts stress the link between humanity and the environment and Ursula Heise, who examines globalization's impact on environmental consciousness (Buell, 2005). Ecocriticism asks us to consider the way that environmental issues tend to be structured by stories that we tell, and to reflect on how we've affected other creatures and the environment of which we are a part.

Postcolonial ecocriticism also engages with environmental justice, a location of enquiry that is concerned with the unequal distribution of environmental costs in societies, including in postcolonial societies, for the most part disproportionately borne by marginalized groups. A history of environmental injustice the historical origins of environmental injustice are found with colonialism, when imperial powers plundered both the land and labour in colonized territories. Lack of consideration for traditional and indigenous ways of knowing about ecosystems, the utilization of natural resources, the uprooting of indigenous communities, and the application of Western environmental governance principles have had a long-term impact on the ecological terrain, resulting in ecological degradation, extinction of species, and climate risks. Ecocriticism in the discourse of postcolonialism attempts to grapple these concerns by critically evaluating how colonialism has shaped and continues to shape both the environment and the human beings who cohabit that environment.

To decolonize environmental thought means restoring indigenous knowledge systems suppressed or marginalized by colonial powers. Indigenous peoples have long exercised advanced environmental practices rooted in sustainable land use, conservation and a profound awareness of the delicate balance of ecology. But Western environmental routines imposed by colonial powers had little concern for indigenous attachments to the land, resulting in the devastation of the ecology and obliteration of cultural practices connected to nature (Garrard, 2012). In recent decades, decolonization has been a major emphasis for scholars and activists and is the centre of indigenous environmental movements that are looking to reinsert their knowledge and practices against ecological destruction. Through contesting the Western centrism of environmental

discourses, decolonization contributes alternative approaches to comprehension and resolution of current environmental issues.

The Creation of oppositional movements, such as ecofeminism, indigenous environmentalism, and the postcolonial challenge to so-called First World environmentalism has transformed the discourses of ecology. Ecofeminism, for instance, draws attention to the relationship between environmental exploitation and women's oppression, particularly in postcolonial societies where women bear the brunt of ecological devastation (Mies, 1993). Indigenous environmentalism employs indigenous cultural understanding and practice to defend the ecological sustainability and the cultural well-being of places. This resistance challenges the Western perspective, which often romanticizes conservation and biodiversity while ignoring or devaluing local, traditional ecological knowledge. Postcolonial critique deepens this analysis by showing how Western environmental movements have frequently dismissed or even harmed Indigenous environmental practices in their efforts to promote global sustainability

Colonialism has influenced nature and environment as seen and presented in literature. In the versions of colonialism, the wilderness is a place of conquest and domination; a wild and uncontrollable land that is to be brought to heel for the use of she/he who claims it for his/her own (Buell, 2005). This constructed nature as "other" served to support the mentality of the colonial masters and to rationalize the appropriation of both land and labour in colonized territories. "Wilderness" came to be associated with colonial expansion and destruction of indigenous presence and knowledge. This colonial exploitation of nature's resources, and the postcolonial counter-narratives that appropriate and propose alternative uses of the land that was once owned by indigenous peoples, which continue to inform environmentalist rhetoric, is frequently critiqued in postcolonial literature.

Postcolonial literatures from India, Africa and the Caribbean are replete with examples of the way colonialism informed environmental relationships. In India, the colonial imprint on the landscape can be seen in the form of deforestation, resource extraction and imposition of Western agricultural practices. Likewise in Africa, the flee-resistant colonial resource extraction from the land while disadvantaging local people is still felt, which is exhibited in post/colonial literatures in a description of the environmental and social implications of its derivatives. These case studies highlight how postcolonial literature functions as an incisive critique of the colonial environmental legacy and envisions more just and sustainable futures for postcolonial nations.

III. METHODOLOGY

In this context, ecocriticism offers insight into the portrayal of nature and the environment in literature and its connection to, and shaping of, human-environment relations (Garrard). In this study, some ecocritical tools and terms will be used to test the texts under consideration. A central idea here is anthropocentrism, an ideology that regards human beings as the most significant entity of the universe. Not only does this belief system foster human-centered attitudes and behaviours toward the natural world, it serves to discredit or dismiss other-than-human presences and is complicit with the exploitation and degradation of other-than-human life. Biocentrism, by comparison, highlights the inherent worth of all living things, and calls for an ethical view that prioritizes the welfare of life itself (Garrard 2012). These conflicting stances will act in this section as analytical filters with which to pursue the way postcolonial literatures upset or reproduce centred on the human narratives and possible biocentric alternatives they provide.

Another useful instrument for ecocritical work is nature writing, which is a form of literature that represents nature in a manner that looks at the relationship of human beings to their environment, focusing on issues such as conservation, environmental degradation, and spiritual or ethical relationships between human beings and the environment (Heise, 2008). Wilderness discourse will also be an important point of reference in the analysis, in so far as the analysis discusses how wilderness is represented in the literature, and particularly in postcolonial situations in which wilderness is frequently made out to be an uncivilized, exotic "other" which must be civilised or exploited (Buell, 2005). It is this discourse indeed that is particularly useful in approaching the history of the way colonial stories helped shaped the modern environmental imagination, currently dominated by the idea of the wilderness as conquered space rather than culturally and ecologically rich space.

This research will take a postcolonial perspective on the ecological effects of colonialism, and especially, the impacts this has on displaced communities and environments. Postcolonial ecocriticism challenges how the

colonisation project imposed Western environmental management policies that sidelined indigenous ecological wisdom and caused ecological degradation. This lens will provide a stronger understanding of colonial legacies that inform present environmental challenges, and how postcolonial literature depicts these injustices written across the environment. It will also look at how colonized communities in postcolonial contexts fight to reclaim and/or sustain a relationship of land, using literature as a vehicle for criticism of lasting effects of colonialism on the environment and on society.

The themes with which this paper is concerned are issues raised against colonial environmental practices in postcolonial fiction. The selected texts will facilitate a wide-ranging investigation into how postcolonial writers engage the interface between ecology, postcolonialism, and identity. Moreover, they were chosen for their varying geographical and cultural territories and their complicated engagement with colonial and postcolonial environment perceptions.

In *The Hungry Tide* (2004), Amitav Ghosh intricately explores the deep connections between human communities and the delicate ecosystem of the Sundarbans, a biodiverse yet fragile region in India. Through his narrative, Ghosh examines the ecological and social consequences of colonialism, showing how it not only displaced communities but also disrupted long-standing, sustainable relationships with the natural world. He contrasts Western conservation practices with Indigenous ecological knowledge, highlighting how colonial legacies continue to shape environmental management in ways that marginalize those who have lived in harmony with nature for generations. A striking example of this is the Marichjhapi massacre—a postcolonial tragedy rooted in colonial land policies—where displaced people were forcibly evicted in the name of environmental preservation. Characters such as the local fisherman represent generations of embodied ecological wisdom, often disregarded by scientific and bureaucratic systems influenced by colonial thought. In contrast, Piya, a marine biologist trained in the U.S., initially approaches the Sundarbans through a scientific lens, viewing it primarily as a field site for research and data collection.

Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) also offers valuable insight into the environmental and socioeconomic impacts of colonialism on Zimbabwean communities. While the novel primarily explores themes of gender and education, it subtly reveals how colonial systems not only oppressed indigenous populations but also contributed to environmental degradation that compounded their hardships. One key aspect is the alienation of native people from their land—a process central to the colonial agenda. The stark contrast between Tambu's rural homestead and the mission station where Babamukuru resides symbolizes a shift in land use: from traditional subsistence farming grounded in communal cultural practices to institutional spaces shaped by colonial ideologies. This shift underscores the replacement of indigenous relationships with the land by Western notions of private property and economic exploitation. Moreover, the novel explores the theme of ecological alienation through the impact of colonial education. Tambu's schooling leads to both a physical and psychological detachment from her ancestral land, illustrating how Western education systems promote values that devalue indigenous environmental knowledge. Nature, once seen as sacred and interconnected with community life, becomes reframed as a resource for control and exploitation—mirroring the broader colonial worldview.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* (1977) offers a powerful critique of environmental degradation in postcolonial Kenya, using the novel as a platform to expose the devastating effects of both colonialism and neo-colonial capitalism. A central theme is the dispossession of land—a recurring concern in African postcolonial literature—which Ngugi portrays as a driving force behind ecological and social decline. The quote, "They stole the land. Then they brought roads to take away what remained,"(14) succinctly captures the shift from land as a shared, life-sustaining resource to a commodity exploited for capitalist gain. The novel highlights the environmental consequences of this transformation, including deforestation, soil erosion, and diminishing agricultural productivity, all resulting from profit-driven development initiatives. Despite its bleak portrayal of environmental destruction, *Petals of Blood* also gestures toward hope through the theme of reconnection with the land. Recollections of communal labour, collective harvests, and reverence for nature evoke a pre-colonial ecological balance, suggesting that reclaiming traditional relationships with the land can serve as a form of resistance to ongoing exploitation.

The social-historical perspective underpinning the texts themselves is analysed as it is fundamental to the understanding of nature-related issues representation. The works are in colonial-exploited areas which, in their representation of the environment, may as well be seen as a history of colonialism and its long-lasting aftereffects. For instance, the representation of the Sundarbans as a space of ecological abundance as well as ecological fragility in Ghosh's works is informed by the historical legacy of colonial domination in the region that led to the annihilation of local ecosystem to propagate colonial industries (Ghosh, 2004). Dangarembga and Ngugi also express their criticism against the postcolonial governments of their own states, arguing that the behaviour of pre-independence and post-independence governments dishonour the land as 'neocolonial' for the benefit of one group or the other, therefore, emphasising on the dichotomy between development and preservation of the environment.

IV. ANALYSIS

Representations of the 'wild' or the 'wilderness', in postcolonial literature is a notable theme in understanding how colonial rooted modes of thought have influenced the way nature and the environment has been perceived. Often, colonial powers imagined the wilderness as an immense and untamed space that was meant to be conquered, exploited, and subdued. This mindset rendered indigenous peoples subhuman and the land as a colonial resource. In postcolonial and postmodern literature, the wilderness has often been seen by critics as a source of solace for colonised peoples, a place of nature unspoilt by man. Writers counter the colonial perspective that perceived nature as a void, exploitable emptiness with a vision of landscapes fundamentally inscribed with the meanings and identities of human culture.

In Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004), the Sundarbans is portrayed as a place of environmental wealth and colonial pillage. Ghosh condemns the colonial inheritance that broke indigenous people's relationship with the land, once ruled by strategies of maintenance and spiritual relationships with nature. The representation of nature stressed the interplay of human beings and their natural environment, demonstrating how colonialism ruptured these interactions. In postcolonial imagery, the wilderness is also re-conceptualised as a space of human excess, but it is one which holds a crucial stake in cultural and ecological equilibrium. Further, such literary works provide a window onto environmental narratives that run counter to colonial constructions. Postcolonial writers in their narratives reclaim indigenous modes of representation and ecological knowledge to cast local communities, not as resources to be exploited, but as stewards of the land. This reversal of colonial categories will stimulate renewed consideration of the significance of indigenous peoples in the defines of the environment and the pursuit of sustainability.

Postcolonial literature that has had ecological concerns at its centre has built around a renaissance and reclaiming of the indigenous knowledge systems (IKS). The indigenous food model provides lesson on sustainable land use, resource management and environmental equilibrium that are learned over time along with the land, through intimate understanding of the land. These systems were commonly attacked and marginalized by colonialism in favor of western knowledge systems that emphasized scaling or industrialization and exploitation over sustainability.

Postcolonial literature often represents the re-empowerment of local knowledge as a source of environmental healing post-colonial degradation. The potential role those traditional ecological knowledges may play in modern environmental debates is immeasurable, particularly as it also provides valuable information for sustainability, conservation and biodiversity. One obvious example is Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013), a book that examines the elaborate interconnections between native peoples and the natural world. Kimmerer shows how environmental problems can't be erased with a Black wing on top of a brown body, and that knowledge is important not only because it can contribute to sustainable living and ecological stewardship, but also as a path to addressing ecological challenges created by colonial and industrial systems.

Kimmerer's work is rooted in the idea of reciprocity, a human understanding of not just separating ourselves from the natural world, but of being among these larger relationships that we deserve and need to tend to with respect and care. In incorporating native knowledge within environmental discourse, postcolonial literature questions the Western model of nature as something that is to be conquered or used in economic terms. By contrast, it speculates that the nature will be reimagined as a conversational partner in a conception of mutual caring and respect, in which the human species and environment coadapted successfully.

Decolonising nature means transforming the relationship with the environment from one of nature being an object to be conquered, to one which places the living environment at the centre of things. Colonial ideologies frequently framed nature in extractive terms, as a resource to be taken by the coloniser, in stark contrast to the inherent worth of ecosystems and the cultural practices of indigenous communities that had coexisted with nature for generations. That's why to decolonise we need a moratorium on mining and a complete reframing of the way we value native plants and animals - an end to taking an invasive interest in the bodies and lives of others and an embrace of an ecological basis for human-Earth relations.

In postcolonial literature, decolonization is commonly suggested as a recuperation of native epistemologies and ways of being with the environment. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* (1977) and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988), address its environmental impact, not only because of territorial exploitation, but also as a matter of the conquest of traditional knowledge. These texts subvert the dominant Western environmentalism, which tends to ignore the roles of subaltern communities, highlighting the significance of land rights, sustainable living, and environmental equilibrium.

The contributions of postcolonial literature to rethinking sustainability is therefore central within the wider discourse on the environment. Through emphasizing the struggle over land, postcolonial works focus on the environmental and social inequalities caused by escheat. They further manifest a more embracing ecological vision that acknowledges the role of indigenous peoples and working-class communities in environmental conservation. Positioning the environment as a partner instead of resource to be exploited, postcolonial literature introduces 'other' models of sustainability that highlight the importance of local ecological knowledge in community-led models of environmental management.

As such, postcolonial literature is central in processes to decolonise environmental thought by disrupting colonial environmental ideologies, rehabilitating indigenous ecological knowledge and promoting sustainable and just environmental management. These works provide powerful explanations about how colonial legacies inform the contemporary environmental crisis and hopeful visions of how indigenous knowledge and decolonized perspectives can create a more just and sustainable world.

V. CONCLUSION

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* showed how these texts dismantle colonial nature as discourse, and wilderness as a site for development. These texts express the enduring ecological impacts of colonialism, and indigenous displacement or marginalization, in environmental management. These texts highlighted the fact that postcolonial narratives provide alternate environmental paradigms that challenge colonial ideologies by privileging indigenous epistemologies and advocating more harmonious, equal relations with nature.

Re-transforming these "chimerical landscapes" into their 'indigenous genealogies' through an ecocritical postcolonialism is vital for subverting conventional environment discourses which have habitually excluded indigenous voices and ecological knowledge. In debunking colonialist nature and landscape representations, the postcolonial ecocriticism disarticulates the natural situation that outlasted western ideologies of human dominion over nature. This strategy promotes the central role of indigenous peoples in the protection and sustainability of the environment and proposes an environment more inclusive and diverse in its discourse.

The significance of this research is in its potential to provide understanding to illuminate the nature of how colonialism has influenced environmental practice and policy, to the detriment of environmental conditions and the lives of those living at its margins. Through re-reading environmental concerns through postcolonial literature, this study underscores the urgency for decolonial perspectives to be included in contemporary ecological formation, which can bypass failure to consider the long standing anthropocentric and extractives criteria that has dominated environmental thought.

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