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A Comparative Postcolonial Ecocritical Study of Selected African and South Asian Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Postcolonial Eco criticism is one of the rapidly emerging fields in literature which is gaining the attention of writers and research scholars due to its focus on environmental justice. This study aims to compare the selected novels to examine the environmental problems of Africa and South Asia and their link with neocolonialism. The researcher relies on Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's (2010) framework of Postcolonial Eco criticism for the analysis of the selected texts. The analysis, carried out through textual analysis, revealed that the neocolonial economic activities of the West are responsible for the environmental destruction of both postcolonial states. Moreover, the West through the use of different techniques such as the myth of development and state vampirism, carries out its exploitation missions, leading to the environmental deterioration of these regions. The findings indicate that the environmental degradation caused by neocolonialism deeply affects the marginalized indigenous people, leading to their displacement and loss of livelihood. This research is significant for policymakers and environmentalists to advocate for equitable and inclusive environmental policies and developmental projects that do not come at the cost of the environment or the well-being of the indigenous people.

Introduction

Postcolonial Eco criticism is an interdisciplinary field of research that combines Eco criticism and post colonialism. It amalgamates postcolonial and ecological concerns to challenge the imperial practices of social and environmental exploitation (Majumder, n.d.). This field examines the effects of the environmental devastation on marginalized indigenous people, culture, lands, animals and plants. Postcolonial Eco criticism explores how colonial legacies are responsible for contemporary environmental problems. Therefore, it assesses the ways in which

Western led capitalism is responsible for the environmental destruction of the formerly colonized and Third World countries.

Postcolonial Eco criticism offers a fresh perspective on literary analysis and the creation of a peaceful, sustainable society by integrating insights from both postcolonial literature and Eco critical studies (Zhou, n.d.). It posits that all environmental problems such as deforestation, pollution, land degradation and species extinction are closely linked with colonialism. Additionally, it asserts that societal and environmental justice are so completely intertwined with each other that it is impossible to achieve one without achieving the other (Roy, 2016). Growing environmental deterioration creates numerous societal problems that negatively affect the lives of indigenous people (Khan & Mustafa, 2023).

This study aims to understand the environmental problems of Africa and South Asia caused by the neocolonial economic practices of the West. These regions have formerly remained under the colonial rule for decades, during which their people and resources were ruthlessly exploited by colonial powers, causing serious environmental harm. However, even after the official end of colonial rule, neocolonialism persists and the resources of these regions are exploited in various ways which leads to environmental deterioration of these postcolonial states. Therefore, the current study explores postcolonial Eco -criticism in African and South Asian fiction. Imbolo Mbue's novel *How Beautiful Were* (2022) and Uzma Aslam Khan's *Trespassing* (2003) have been selected for the analysis.

Imbolo Mbue is among the most prominent figures in African literature who addresses the current ecological crisis of Africa. Through her novel, she highlights the environmental deterioration caused by oil drilling conducted by multinational corporations and its devastating impacts on the indigenous people whereas, Uzma Aslam Khan is a famous Pakistani novelist and one of the few South Asian writers who highlights environmental concerns. Through all her five novels, Khan sheds light on the environmental problems stemming from capitalism brought on by neocolonialism, industrialization and foreign interference. Both writers, through their writings, brought to light the various environmental problems of their respective countries and its detrimental effects on the indigenous populace.

Huggan and Tiffin's theory of Postcolonial Ecocriticism has been considered for this study. Their book, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*, published in 2010, is regarded as a seminal work in the field of Postcolonial Ecocriticism. It focused on the relationship between humans, animals and environment in literature. Postcolonial Ecocriticism examines the relationship between colonialism and ecological/environmental crisis. Huggan and Tiffin (2010), drawing on Robert Young, state that postcolonial ecocriticism, like eco-materialism "looks at how contemporary postcolonial crises are inextricably connected with ecological crises" (p. 14). Huggan and Tiffin (2010) believe that while analyzing the ecological crisis, critics should also consider matters concerning colonial history, racial issues and the hegemony of Western Empire. The current research also deals with the environmental problems

related to neocolonialism in Africa and South Asia. Thus, the researcher has taken Mbue and Khan's novels to explore the theme of postcolonial ecocriticism.

Statement of the Problem

Environmental issues are among the most pressing challenges faced globally today. The environmental concerns of developed countries have always been spotlighted in the research, while those of postcolonial states like Africa and South Asia are less explored and are often pushed to the periphery. This study explores the emerging field of postcolonial ecocriticism by shedding light on the ecological problems in Africa and South Asia exacerbated by neocolonialism. It examines the profound impact of these issues on the indigenous people in these postcolonial states, thereby fostering a more comprehensive understanding of environmental justice issues in a global context.

Significance of the Study

This research is significant because by comparing African and South Asian fiction it explores the relation between neocolonialism and the environmental destruction prevalent in Africa and South Asia in the contemporary era. Although many studies have been conducted on the subject of postcolonial ecocriticism, this study goes further by bringing to light the different tactics employed by the West to further their exploitation agendas in the formerly colonized regions and its adverse effects on the indigenous people.

Literature Review

This part of the research study examines the previous studies conducted in the field postcolonial ecocriticism.

Wani and Ganaie (2022) in their paper explored the effect of colonialism on the culture and environment of Africa. The research emphasized that colonization not only effects the people but also the environment and culture. The people of Umuofia had a very harmonious relation with nature before the arrival of colonialism. But the colonizers adversely affected the relationship between people and their environment. Under the guise of development and progress, the colonizers exploited nature on a large scale and used it to gain their political and economic motives. Gradually, they succeeded in their mission, causing the indigenous people broke apart from their culture and natural surroundings. The native people surrendered before the colonizers, began to adopt their ways and also failed in protecting their natural habitats.

The research conducted by Ango (2021) on Mendacious conservationism and poetic justice in Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist*: A postcolonial ecocritical reading highlights the adverse effects of the apartheid regime on the environment and the marginalized black people of Africa. The apartheid rule declared that the black people have no sense of how to take care of nature because they are barbaric, uncivilized and thoughtless. So, the new policies designed by the government mainly seize all the land from the black people and gave it to the white people so

that nature can be conserved by them. The black people were displaced from their lands and were exploited by their white masters. But the white people had no connection and reverence for the land; they only exploited it for their personal gains and used it for showoff their power. So, the research revealed that under apartheid regime, black people and nature was ruthlessly exploited by white people, leading to environmental degradation in the region.

One of the important works of postcolonial ecocritical analysis conducted on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is by Saikia (2014). In her paper, she examined the complex relationship between ecological issues and the dynamics of colonial power. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's theory of Postcolonial Ecocriticism (2010) has been used as a framework by the researcher. The study showed that a comprehensive analysis of a text from the lens of postcolonialism remains incomplete without incorporating the exploitation endured by the indigenous land. Under the pretense of civilization and development, the colonizers plundered all the natural resources for their own commercial gain, causing massive environmental harm.

Another research paper has studied the environmental destruction brought on by the economic practices of the colonizers. In the work, Alharbi (2023) focused on the harmful effects of the economic activities like grape wine plantations, ostrich farms, the tourism industry and oil drilling. All these projects were started under the pretense of development and progress by the colonizers. However, these projects only benefited the colonizers at the expense of environment and livelihoods of local people. The grapevine and ostrich industries largely destroyed the environment of Africa. Huge acres of arable lands were used for vineyards and the indigenous people also got addicted to wine. The tourism sector also contributes to environmental degradation of Africa, as foreign tourists pollute beaches, severely harming marine life. The oil industry in Nigeria also led to an environmental catastrophe. Frequent oil spills and gas flares have resulted in air and water pollution, land despoliation, spread of numerous diseases among the people, loss of livelihoods, economic inequality and displacement of millions of people from their lands. Therefore, all these developmental projects were merely myths, used by the colonizers to entice the local people. In reality, these projects only benefited the colonizers and led to the destruction of the environment and local people.

Chatterjee (2021) stated that imperialism has left a deep mark on the colonized countries. The imperialist ideologies are so much ingrained in indigenous people that they followed the way of the colonizers and exploit nature for economic gains. The fishermen are using nylon nets for fishing, these nets are not only catch fish but also the eggs of other marine life, causing an environmental apocalypse. Additionally, fishermen catch endangered species like prawns for profit. This ruthless exploitation of the nature is leading to an environmental catastrophe.

Research by Kashyap (2021) examines the text of Romesh Gunsekera's novel *Reef* (1995) to explore the devastating effects of imperialism on formerly colonized countries. The research mentions that these countries couldn't disentangle themselves from colonialism, which still continues in the development projects. Projects initiated by local governments, often

supported by former colonizers, are severely harming the environment. The colonized people together with the colonizers are exploiting the sea for their personal benefits which is resulting in the depletion of marine ecosystem. The colonizers under the pretext of development and progress are furthering Huggan and Tiffin. The purpose of the research was to highlight the current ecological crisis that strangle India and its devastating repercussions on indigenous people, animals and plants. Mandal (2018) found that the various developmental projects and technologies introduced by the West are destroying the environment of India on a large scale. Projects like that Narmada dam project have led to the displacement and pauperization of millions of people, endangering animal species, causing extinction of birds like sparrows and vultures, loss of sustenance of the indigenous people, air and water pollution. These developmental projects are clear indication of neocolonialism and imperialism in India, with minimal benefits to the local population and severe environmental consequences.

Environmental concerns are among the most challenging problems faced by the world today. Bhandari (2024) conducted research on Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*, focusing on the environmental degradation of Africa brought on by oil companies and the local governments. The researcher details the repercussions of oil drilling in Niger Delta, which poses one of the biggest threats to the indigenous people in Nigeria. The government along with the multinational corporations plunders the oil resources of Niger Delta resulting in environmental apocalypse in the region. Oil leakages have resulted in water and air pollution, extinction of species, land despoliation, the spread of diseases, and loss of livelihoods for local people and displacement from their lands. While multinational corporations profit immensely from oil drilling which has led to an environmental catastrophe in the region.

Theoretical Framework

Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's framework of *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* (2010) is used to analyze the link of the current ecological crisis with neocolonialism. Huggan and Tiffin (2010) claim that it is difficult to combine postcolonial studies and eco/environmental studies because the two fields are poles apart and have different ideologies and methods of interpretation. They believe that the most proper way to recognize this idea is that "the proper subject of postcolonialism is colonialism, and to look accordingly for the colonial imperial underpinnings of environmental practices in both 'colonizing' and 'colonized' societies of the present and the past" (2010, p. 3).

According to Huggan and Tiffin (2010), the myth of development and state vampirism are the most common tactics used by the West to maintain their hold on the colonial nations, exploiting their lands and resources for financial gain. The Third World critics see development as "little more than a disguised form of neocolonialism" (Huggan and Tiffin, 2010, p. 27), which serves Western political and economic interests while luring indigenous people with promises of progress, civilization and prosperity. Therefore, Huggan and Tiffin (2010) claim that such development often leads to environmental degradation. They advocate for an approach based on

equality that prioritizes the well-being of both humans and the environment, avoiding harm to either. State Vampirism is another strategy the West uses to continue its exploitation of the formerly colonized or Third World countries. Local corrupt state governments collude with the West for their own financial benefits and, in turn exploit the people and environment. The term "state vampirism" was originally used by Andrew Apter (1998) to describe how neo-colonial elites exploit local governments and leaders to maintain their hold on less developed nations. The colonizers maintain their grip on power in the formerly colonized nations by utilizing the native governments and dishonest leaders as mere puppets.

The main objective of the study is to highlight the link between neocolonialism and the environmental destruction of Africa and South Asia in the selected fiction of Mbue and Khan for which the researcher has mapped out the following research question.

- How is the environmental deterioration of Africa and South Asia linked with the neocolonial economic practices of the West as presented in the selected texts?

Materials and Methods

The current study is qualitative in nature. Qualitative research employs a naturalistic and interpretive approach to data interpretation, making it well-suited for this study (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Moreover, interpretive paradigm has been selected. This particular paradigm is considered appropriate for the study because it aids the researcher in interpreting and assigning meaning to the chosen content, facilitating a deeper understanding of the world (Bhattacharjee, 2012). Additionally, content analysis has been selected as a research design. It has been selected for this study because it focuses on examining textual material and uncovering deeper meanings (Smith, 2015).

The data for this study has been collected from one African novel and one South Asian novel. The novels are *How Beautiful We Were* (2022) and *Trespassing* (2003). These novels were selected because both novels belong to the climate fiction genre and share a similar theme. They are set in the formerly colonized regions and vividly depict the environmental problems of Africa and South Asia. The researcher has used non-random purposive sampling technique to collect data from the selected novels. A total of twenty excerpts from both novels have been singled out for this particular study. Ten excerpts from each novel were selected and analyzed from the lens of Postcolonial Ecocriticism (2010) by Huggan and Tiffin.

Results and Discussions

The analysis of both novels is as follows:

How Beautiful We Were

Africa is one of the most beautiful regions of the world, known for its dense vegetation, lush greenery, rich natural resources, abundant wildlife and diverse ecosystems. However, its

rich natural resources such as oil, bauxite, ivory tusks, minerals and gas have always been exploited by the colonizers for economic benefits, causing significant harm to the environment. Even after the official end of colonialism in Africa, it is still under the strong hold of the colonizers who continue to exploit its resources in various ways, resulting in environmental deterioration. *How Beautiful We Were* talks about the environmental crisis in Africa due to oil drilling by an American oil company, Pexton. The Kosawa village is on the brink of environmental disaster, symbolized by the description “the sky began to pour acid and rivers began to turn green” (Mbue, 2022, p. 03). In her novel, Mbue highlights the role of multinational corporations in causing environmental degradation in Africa. Huggan and Tiffin (2010) believe that the “bellies of these corporations are never full” (p. 90) and view this as the most terrible form of colonialism because they not only deplete natural resources but also cause environmental destruction. The oil company extracts oil without taking into consideration its adverse effects on the environment. Mbue also brings to light the devastating effects of environmental damage on the indigenous people, land, plants and animals. Junejo & Shaikh (2022) argue that the ruthless extraction of resources by multinational corporations in Africa not only leads to environmental damage but also results in economic inequality, land despoliation and water contamination.

Many years ago, the villagers were approached by state representatives and Pexton, who lured the naïve people of Kosawa with the promises of “civilization”, “development” and “progress” in return for the oil under their ground. The gullible villagers were unaware of the true nature of this development but cherished the thought that their village would progress rapidly and they will also live in brick houses. Huggan and Tiffin (2010) oppose “this kind of development that panders to global-corporate interests” because “it is largely filtered through economic myths of progress: ‘amenity’, ‘benefit’, ‘improvement’” (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010, p. 71), while possibly neglecting other important aspects such as social and economic equality, culture preservation and environmental protection. Thus, the oil drilling by Pexton did not brought any type of development for the people of Kosawa but only resulted in environmental degradation and numerous associated problems.

The neo-colonizers also used State Vampirism as a tool to continue their exploitation missions in Africa. The kleptocratic government run by His Excellency backed Pexton and crushed any resistance from the villagers with an iron hand. So, Pexton and the corrupt government integrated with each other for their mutual benefit. His Excellency signed a secret contract with Pexton and handed over Kosawa to the oil corporation without consulting the villagers. He fully supported Pexton and suppressed any type of resistance from the villagers, even hanging four villagers including Thula’s uncle Bongo, for kidnapping Pexton’s representatives. The country governed by a military dictator is subjected to domestic colonialism, leaving people exposed to ‘abject poverty, slavery, dehumanisation and [potential] extinction’ (Saro-Wiwa, 1995, p. 97). Thus, the state vampires play a major role in destroying the environment by furthering the agendas of the colonizers and draining the blood of their own people whom they have sworn to serve.

The indigenous people are in a desperate state because they have to live amid severe environmental degradation. Constant oil leakages and gas flares have contaminated the drinking water, rendered the land infertile, and polluted the air. All these environmental problems have resulted in numerous diseases among the people and have led to the deaths of many village children. The native people depended on nature for their sustenance, but the environmental degradation caused by Pexton has also resulted in the loss of their livelihood. The loss of fish in the river profoundly affected the fishermen, who “broke down their canoes and found new uses for the wood” (Mbue, 2022, p. 32).

At last, the state soldiers attacked the village and killed Thula along with her five friends for kidnapping the Pexton overseer and his wife. The villagers were expelled from their homes and the entire village was burned on the orders of His Excellency. He designated the village as a restricted area and deemed it unfit for human habitation due to its deteriorating environment. His Excellency handed over Kosawa to Pexton for more oil drilling.

Trespassing

South Asia is known for its arable land, high mountain ranges, biodiversity, rich minerals, gorgeous landscapes and natural resources. However, it has long remained under the colonial rule, during which its natural resources were exploited. This exploitation continues today through various neocolonial economic activities that severely harm the environment. *Trespassing* brings to light the environmental problems of Karachi, Pakistan. This novel also contains instances of postcolonial ecocriticism. Here, the main character, Salaamat suffers greatly from environmental degradation caused by neocolonial economic activities such as foreign encroachment on their land, the operation of foreign trawlers in their sea and the establishment of the foreign factories in their village. Salaamat is a boy who lives in a village near the sea with his family. For generations, his family has been traditional fishermen, relying solely on fishing for their livelihood. However, the arrival of foreign trawlers in their sea has harmed the environment and created several problems for the indigenous community. These trawlers operate in the sea of the local people and use by-catch fishing methods, resulting in the disappearance of fish and damage to the marine ecosystem. The uncontrolled fishing by the foreign corporate trawlers has led to many problems for the local fishermen. “Fish once abundant close to shore are now disappearing even in the deep” (Khan, 2003, p. 02), preventing the local fishermen from catching any fish as they lack the modern technology to compete with the foreign trawlers. Consequently, the local fishermen are deprived of their only source of livelihood. Salaamat's uncle lost his life while trying to fish off the coast. Huggan and Tiffin (2010) assert that the colonists' resource exploitation led to the “livelihoods of local (subaltern) people being simultaneously put at risk”. As a result, the native people were forced to move to cities to seek a livelihood.

The trespassing of foreigners on the land of the indigenous people also poses a threat to the local community and animals. The turtle residing on the shore is scared of the foreign

intervention. While laying her eggs on the shore, she is constantly afraid of the foreign intrusion into the natural habitats and remembers how secure it once was when the local fishermen owned the coastline. She is afraid of the increasing number of foreigners encroaching on the land and the trespassing of trawlers into the sea. A foreigner stole the turtle's eggs and broke all of them by pelting them at Salaamat, who was trying to protect them. The stealing of eggs by the foreigners represents the disregard for animals and their exploitation of them for financial gain, resulting in species extinction and biodiversity loss.

Furthermore, the establishment of foreign factories in the name of development and advancement has also deteriorated the environment. These factories serve the interests of the West but harm the local environment and exploit local labor with meagre pay. Salaamat's mother also has to work in one of these foreign factories after his father lost his livelihood from fishing. She is forced to work in the foreign factory even though she doesn't want to because her family has no other means of support. The factory takes advantage of her, paying her five rupees in exchange for cleaning one kilogram of shrimp that they caught from the sea belonging to the local people. By disposing of their toxic waste in rivers and emitting noxious smoke in the air, these factories severely harmed the environment. The emission of poisonous gases has caused many health issues for the local people, such as respiratory problems.

The state is also involved in causing environmental degradation by supporting the neo-colonizers in pursuit of their objectives. The state issued licenses to the foreign trawlers to operate in the sea belonging to the local people. Additionally, the government supported the establishment of foreign factories on indigenous land which severely harmed the environment of the region. Saro-Wiwa (1995) believes that these corrupt governments act in the interests of the colonizers for their economic benefits. The combination of State Vampirism and neocolonial intervention depleted natural resources, harmed the environment and disrupted the indigenous people's traditional way of life.

Environmental deterioration in South Asia also occurs as a result of imperialism. The unquenchable thirst of Western powers for control of natural resources, such as minerals, oil and gas leads to global wars. As Dia told Danish, the American bombardment of oil fields in Iraq caused severe harm to the environment, with effects extending beyond the war zone and affecting all surrounding regions. The consequences of the oil bombing were so severe that in Pakistan, the air remained thick with smoke for several months and caused extensive damage to the mulberry trees, resulting in the depletion of the food supply for silkworms.

Findings

The above analysis of both novels reveals that the neocolonial economic practices of the West have a profound impact on the environment and indigenous people of both postcolonial states. Mbue and Khan depict how neocolonial exploitation in Africa and South Asia has severely harmed the environment, disrupted the lives of the indigenous people and led to cultural

disintegration. Environmental pollution has contaminated the water, degraded the land and severely affected the health of the indigenous people.

The comparative analysis of both novels provides deep insight into the ecological problems of postcolonial states and highlights the similarities and differences in the environmental issues depicted in both novels. A few differences have emerged in the comparative analysis of these texts. Firstly, the novels are set in different geographical areas; Mbue's novel is set in Africa, while Khan's novel is set in South Asia. Secondly, the environmental problems faced by both postcolonial states differ significantly. Africa faces an environmental catastrophe due to the oil drilling of a multinational corporation, while South Asia confronts an environmental disaster caused by foreign encroachment, the operation of foreign trawlers in local waters, the establishment of foreign industries on indigenous lands and global wars.

Several thematic and contextual similarities have also emerged, highlighting the ways in which postcolonial and ecological concerns are intertwined across diverse geographical contexts. Both novels highlight that neocolonial exploitation is the main cause of environmental degradation in both Africa and South Asia. The ruthless exploitation of resources by the West has resulted in an environmental apocalypse in both regions, deeply affecting the lives of the indigenous people who are closely connected to nature and depend solely on it for their livelihood. The myth of development is also used by the West in both postcolonial states as a tool to lure indigenous people and continue their exploitative activities. Developmental projects initiated in the name of progress and civilization have led to economic inequality and environmental degradation. The "State Vampires" in both postcolonial states align for their economic benefits with the neo-colonizers, supporting developmental projects and activities initiated by the neocolonial elites that exploit resources and lead to environmental deterioration. Environmental destruction in both postcolonial regions has resulted in the loss of indigenous livelihoods, extinction of various species, biodiversity loss, depletion of resources, land degradation, water contamination, air pollution and displacement of indigenous people from their lands.

Conclusion

This study explored the themes of environmental degradation, cultural disintegration, indigenous displacement and economic inequality due to the neocolonial economic exploitation in the contemporary era. It highlighted the various types of environmental problems faced by both postcolonial states due to the neocolonial economic practices. The novels presented the adverse impacts of environmental destruction on marginalized indigenous communities, who bear the repercussions of devastation. The researcher has used Huggan and Tiffin's framework to establish the link between neocolonialism and the environmental problems prevalent in Africa and South Asia. The two novels selected for the study align with Huggan and Tiffin's theory. They not only portray that the neocolonial economic activities were responsible for the current

environmental problems in Africa and South Asia but also illustrate how myth of development and state vampirism were used by the West as strategies to exploit resources, leading to an ecological crisis.

Future Implications

This research is crucial for environmental activists and policy regulators in formulating equitable environmental policies that consider all people, regardless of race and class. It can also help them support only those developmental projects that are sustainable and do not harm either people or the environment.

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