

LANDSCAPES OF EXTRACTION AND RENEWAL: ENVIRONMENTAL REPRESENTATION FROM COLONIAL DOMINATION TO POSTCOLONIAL RECOVERY

LALITA KUMARI

Associate Professor of English, S.A. Jain College, Ambala City (Haryana)

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how colonial and postcolonial literatures across India, Africa, and the Caribbean construct, contest, and reclaim landscapes as dynamic sites of power, resistance, and ecological meaning. Colonial representations of environment—produced through travel narratives, administrative reports, and early fiction—transform land into a resource to be classified, surveyed, and appropriated. These narratives naturalize imperial authority by framing forests, plantations, and coastlines as spaces requiring European intervention and improvement. In contrast, postcolonial writers reconfigure the same landscapes as living archives that preserve suppressed histories of dispossession, labour exploitation, and cultural erasure. Drawing on ecocritical and postcolonial theoretical frameworks, the paper explores how authors such as Amitav Ghosh, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Jamaica Kincaid, Wilson Harris, and Mahasweta Devi articulate ecological belonging through indigenous epistemologies, oral traditions, and community memory.

The study also situates contemporary postcolonial ecocriticism within global debates on climate crisis, environmental justice, and neo-extractive capitalism. It argues that environmental degradation in the Global South—marked by deforestation, mining, water scarcity, and industrial toxicity—often reproduces colonial patterns of uneven vulnerability. Through close textual analysis, the paper illustrates how postcolonial narratives critique these ongoing forms of ecological inequity while simultaneously envisioning alternative futures grounded in relational ethics and environmental stewardship. By foregrounding the entanglements of landscape, identity, and historical trauma, the paper demonstrates that English literary studies provide a crucial intellectual space for interrogating the cultural politics of environment. Ultimately, the study shows that reading landscapes across colonial and postcolonial contexts illuminates how literature both records and reimagines the contested terrains of empire, resistance, and ecological reclamation.

Keywords: postcolonial ecocriticism; colonial environmental representation; landscape and empire; resistance literature; ecological reclamation; Indian literature; African literature; Caribbean literature; environmental justice; indigenous epistemologies

INTRODUCTION

Land has never been a neutral space in the history of imperial expansion. Colonialism not only seized territories through military force and political domination but also reconfigured environments through narrative and representation. Within the archive of English literature, the colonized landscape was consistently imagined as an untouched wilderness awaiting discovery, cultivation, and profit. Such portrayals worked to justify the imperial project by constructing the land

and its people as objects to be known and controlled (Said). Literature thus emerged as a powerful ideological instrument that reshaped the environment into a cultural possession of empire.

The environment in colonial writing often appears as an exotic spectacle or as a backdrop to European heroism. Travelogues, imperial romances, and missionary texts translated complex ecologies into simplified images of abundance, danger, or vacancy. This reduction erased Indigenous ecological knowledge and damaged local relations to land. As Huggan argues, nature was aestheticized and commodified, turning colonized spaces into consumable “eco-exotic” landscapes (Huggan). The literary transformation of terrain into something to be admired from afar paralleled its economic transformation into resource frontiers for plantations, mining, and forestry.

Yet, even within colonial discourse, the land resists complete narrative capture. Ecocritical scholarship suggests that environments retain agency and shape human histories in ways that imperial writing cannot fully suppress (Buell). The very landscapes subjected to violent extraction become archives of trauma, recording the ecological consequences of empire. Nixon terms this slow and often invisible form of destruction “slow violence,” particularly evident in postcolonial regions where ecosystems and communities continue to bear the burden of colonial exploitation (Nixon).

Postcolonial writers revisit these scarred environments not merely to document ecological damage but to recover the cultural and spiritual relationships that tie people to place. The shift from colonial to postcolonial representation marks a movement from domination to reclamation. In this transformed literary space, land becomes active: a witness, a participant, and sometimes a narrator of resistance. Amitav Ghosh's works, for example, highlight the fragile coexistence between humans and estuarine ecologies, presenting the Sundarbans as a living landscape that challenges anthropocentric domination (*The Hungry Tide*). Likewise, Derek Walcott's poetic seascapes expose the plantation history buried under tropical beauty, reclaiming the Caribbean environment as a space of memory and anti-colonial identity (Walcott).

Postcolonial ecocriticism has emphasized that landscape operates as a site of hybrid negotiation. Bhabha's notion of “in-betweenness” helps explain how postcolonial environments embody both the traces of imposed colonial structures and the resilience of Indigenous cosmologies (Bhabha). DeLoughrey extends this framework by focusing on “island ecologies” and oceanic narratives that challenge territorial boundaries inherited from empire (DeLoughrey). These theoretical perspectives reveal that environmental representation in literature is inseparable from histories of displacement, resource extraction, and cultural survival.

In the current era of climate crisis and global capitalism, environmental injustice continues to replicate colonial patterns of inequality. Transnational industries and development projects often endanger the same landscapes once exploited by colonial powers. Contemporary literary responses expose these neocolonial forces and imagine pathways toward ecological justice and community renewal. Such works remind us that the struggle for land is not confined to the past but shapes the political and environmental realities of today.

This paper examines how colonial and postcolonial English literature represents landscapes as contested environments within the broader history of empire, resistance, and reclamation. By analysing selected texts through the lens of postcolonial ecocriticism, it demonstrates how storytelling becomes a means of reclaiming ecological agency and cultural belonging. The environment emerges not as passive scenery but as an active force that bears the imprints of colonial violence and enables

postcolonial futures.

EMPIRE AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMAGINATION IN COLONIAL LITERATURE

Colonial literature written in and about regions such as India, Africa, and the Caribbean frequently constructs the environment as a space unintelligible without European intervention. This narrative strategy reinforces what Edward Said identifies as “territorial appropriation” through discourse, where knowledge about land becomes a rationale for domination (*Culture and Imperialism* 271). Texts emerging from the British Empire therefore transform diverse ecosystems into simplified motifs of abundance, danger, or emptiness, enabling imperial authority to claim stewardship over nature.

In the Indian context, forests and fertile plains were reframed as economic zones under British rule. Literary representations echoed the economic logic of plantation and extraction. In *Kim*, Rudyard Kipling depicts India's geography as a vast imperial playground, marked by the mobility of the protagonist across spaces aligned for surveillance and control (Kipling 89). The Himalayas, plains, and roads appear as open routes of state power rather than lived homelands of communities. Hence, nature becomes not a cultural relationship but a mapped and regulated entity.

Similarly, early African colonial narratives sought to define land through exotic wonder and racialized primitivism. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* reduces the Congo environment to a dark, threatening wilderness, a symbolic reflection of imperial fears and fantasies (Conrad 37). The landscape is stripped of indigenous history; its perceived silence legitimizes extractive intrusion. With the river depicted as a penetrable artery of conquest, environment becomes subordinate to imperial desire, reflecting what Nixon terms “ecological imperialism” in narrative form (*Slow Violence* 51).

In the Caribbean, colonial sugar economies deeply altered the physical environment and its literary portrayal. Plantation landscapes were represented as scenes of commercial triumph rather than ecological devastation. The flora of the islands appears lush and profitable but detached from the forced labour that sustained it. Such depictions normalize occupation by turning nature into commodity spectacle, aligning with Graham Huggan's claim that the colonial environment is constructed as an “aestheticized resource” (*Postcolonial Exotic* 22). The narrative glosses over the violent transformation of land and labour under slavery.

Across these regions, colonial writers frequently erased indigenous ecological relationships. Communities who viewed land as spiritual kin or communal sustenance were framed as barriers to progress. In India, traditional practices of forest management were deemed inferior, leading to policies such as the 1878 Forest Act which criminalized local stewardship. Literary echoes of this ideology portray human-nature symbiosis as superstition rather than knowledge — a narrative erasure that, as Buell notes, “deactivates native ecological agency” (*Environmental Imagination* 121).

Moreover, colonial control of nature frequently operates through instruments of surveillance and measurement. Maps, botanical catalogues, and administrative reports re-inscribed the land into imperial grids. Literature often celebrates this rationalization. In *Kim*, the Great Game renders nature into a strategic resource, where geography supports espionage and governance (Kipling 112). In African and Caribbean colonial texts, agricultural and maritime descriptions emphasize productivity and accessibility over indigenous autonomy.

Yet these very landscapes resist full ideological capture. Conrad's Congo river, while charted,

continues to shape the narrative's direction, undermining the illusion of imperial mastery (Conrad 58). In Caribbean settings, tropical storms and sea currents disrupt colonial plantations, revealing nature's counter-force. And in India, the railways and canals meant to discipline the land also exposed vulnerabilities of empire to monsoon cycles and floods.

Thus, colonial literature reveals a contradictory environmental imagination: nature is imagined as controllable and threatening, knowable yet elusive. This tension foreshadows the rise of counter-narratives in postcolonial writing, where the environment's suppressed voice emerges as a site of cultural and ecological resistance. To understand these oppositional textual strategies, the next section will explore how landscape becomes a vehicle for reclaiming indigenous histories and environmental justice.

COUNTER-NARRATIVES AND LITERARY RESISTANCE IN POSTCOLONIAL TEXTS

Postcolonial writers challenge the colonial literary imagination by restoring agency to landscapes and to the communities entwined with them. Through narrative reclamation, the land becomes not a silent backdrop but a witness to oppression and a carrier of cultural memory. These counter-narratives reveal what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o calls "the buried roots of resistance" grounded in people's material and spiritual bonds with their environment (*Decolonising the Mind* 87). In this way, literature functions as an act of ecological and cultural survival.

In Indian writing, Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* reclaims the Sundarbans from colonial portrayals of emptiness and peril. Ghosh foregrounds a tidal ecology where rivers and forests shape human livelihoods, and where the so-called "wilderness" holds histories of migration, labour, and violence (Ghosh 142). The novel reveals that colonial forestry and conservation policies displaced communities in the name of protecting an allegedly uninhabited landscape. By giving narrative voice to both dolphins and tide-country dwellers, Ghosh challenges anthropocentric and imperial claims to environmental mastery (Ghosh 179). The landscape emerges as a living actor whose rhythms defy bureaucratic order.

In African contexts, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* exposes the continuity of extractivism after independence. The Kenyan land, once seized by colonial settlers, becomes subject to neocolonial corporate interests. Ngũgĩ highlights how displacement and ecological degradation persist under global capitalism, revealing that liberation must include reparative relationships with land (Ngũgĩ *Petals of Blood* 254). The novel's rural geography becomes a ground for collective resistance against both colonial residues and postcolonial elites who mimic imperial environmental policies.

Caribbean literature likewise refuses the erasure of landscapes transformed by plantation capitalism. Derek Walcott's poetry re-inscribes seascapes and coastlines with the memory of enslavement and Indigenous loss. In *Omeros*, the Caribbean Sea is not merely scenic but an archive of forced crossings and ecological reshaping. Walcott writes that the waves "mutter the name of the slave" (Walcott *Omeros* 62), reclaiming marine space as testimony rather than tourist spectacle. Through such imagery, Walcott restores to the environment its submerged histories of violence and endurance.

Across these literatures, counter-narratives emphasize relational ecologies. The land is portrayed as kin or ancestor, not as property. This outlook aligns with DeLoughrey's argument that postcolonial writing "refigures nature as a mnemonic landscape" where ecological and cultural memories are entwined (*Routes and Roots* 51). These mnemonic landscapes confront colonial time,

replacing narratives of progress with cyclical and interdependent temporalities rooted in place.

Resistance also occurs through linguistic strategies. Ngũgĩ's rejection of English as a literary medium signals a refusal of colonial epistemologies (Ngũgĩ *Decolonising* 91). Language becomes a terrain of environmental politics, as naming is itself a form of cartography and control. Similarly, Ghosh incorporates local terms like *bhata* and *jowar* to restore ecological specificity erased by colonial administration (Ghosh 96). Such textual choices resist universalizing discourses that categorize non-Western environments as homogenized "tropics."

Most importantly, the environment in these narratives participates in acts of resistance. Storms, tidal surges, droughts, and soil fertility counteract exploitative governance. Nature refuses subordination, affirming what Buell identifies as "nonhuman agency" within environmental texts (*Environmental Imagination* 143). Whether through a monsoon that disrupts colonial planning in India, a drought that exposes inequity in Kenya, or a hurricane that unsettles Caribbean property relations, landscape itself resists imperial containment.

Thus, postcolonial literature challenges colonial environmental imaginaries by:

- reclaiming ecological histories suppressed by empire
- centring indigenous knowledge systems and relational ontologies
- revealing continuity between colonial exploitation and neocolonial extraction
- restoring agency to threatened landscapes and seascapes

These works demonstrate that environmental struggle is inseparable from cultural identity and decolonizing futures. Landscape becomes a political force that reshapes how the postcolonial world is narrated and lived.

POSTCOLONIAL ECOCRITICISM AND RECLAMATION

Postcolonial ecocriticism expands the study of empire by placing environmental degradation at the center of cultural analysis. It insists that ecological damage is inseparable from histories of conquest, racial capitalism, and displacement. As Nixon argues, postcolonial environments carry the weight of "slow violence," a form of harm that unfolds gradually yet devastates landscapes and communities long after formal empire ends (Nixon, 2011, p. 4). By drawing connections between ecology and inequality, postcolonial ecocriticism calls for a reclamation of both land and narrative authority.

In the Indian context, Amitav Ghosh's fiction provides one of the most important templates for ecological reclamation. *The Hungry Tide* repositions the Sundarbans as a dynamic estuarine world governed not by human sovereignty but by tidal rhythms and interspecies relationships. Ghosh reveals how colonial forestry practices, the 1979 Marichjhapi massacre, and later conservation policies rendered the environment a site of displacement (Ghosh, 2004, p. 132). The narrative challenges the binary of wilderness versus habitation by showing how communities have lived in symbiosis with tides, mangroves, and riverine ecologies. Through deep ecological attention, Ghosh reclaims environmental knowledge that colonial governance had dismissed as illegitimate or primitive (Ghosh, 2004, p. 178). This reclamation is not nostalgic but grounded in material struggles for land, livelihood, and recognition.

African postcolonial texts also foreground environmental reclamation as a form of resistance.

In *Petals of Blood*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o depicts a Kenya where colonial-era land dispossession flows seamlessly into post-independence capitalist extraction. For Ngũgĩ, reclaiming the land is essential to decolonizing the mind, as cultural and ecological autonomy are intertwined (Ngũgĩ, 1977, p. 254). The novel portrays agricultural fields, quarries, and village spaces as arenas of communal resistance against both corporate and state exploitation. The environment is a record of struggle, and its degradation becomes a call for collective reclamation. This aligns with Ngũgĩ's broader argument that liberation must begin with a re-rooting of African consciousness in indigenous languages, landscapes, and histories (Ngũgĩ, 1986, p. 91).

In the Caribbean, Derek Walcott's work exemplifies postcolonial ecological reclamation through a poetics of remembrance. The Caribbean Sea, once reduced to a picturesque vista by colonial travel narratives, becomes in Walcott's *Omeros* a vast archive of forced crossings, plantation histories, and ecological wounds. The ocean "remembers" those histories even when colonial discourse attempts to erase them (Walcott, 1990, p. 62). By re-inscribing the sea and the island landscape with ancestral memory, Walcott restores dignity to environments dehumanized through slavery and plantation capitalism. His poetic reclamation resonates with DeLoughrey's idea that postcolonial literature creates "island ecologies" in which land and water are frameworks for tracing memory, trauma, and resilience (DeLoughrey, 2007, p. 51).

Across these texts, reclamation operates through two interrelated processes: **recovering suppressed ecological histories** and **reimagining human–nature relations outside colonial frames**. Postcolonial ecocriticism emphasizes relationality—an understanding of nature not as resource but as collaborator, kin, or ancestral presence. Buell argues that ecocritical narratives often affirm "nonhuman agency," signalling a shift from anthropocentric models to ecological interdependence (Buell, 1995, p. 143). This agency is visible in Ghosh's tidal rivers that shape human movement, in Ngũgĩ's droughts that expose economic injustice, and in Walcott's seas that refuse tourist idealization.

Crucially, reclamation in postcolonial literature is not merely symbolic. It challenges forms of neocolonial extraction—mining, dam-building, industrial farming, deforestation—that replicate imperial logic under global capitalism. Writers reclaim environmental sovereignty by foregrounding indigenous knowledge systems. In India, local fishing practices, oral narratives, and ecological rituals are validated against bureaucratic conservation models (Ghosh, 2004, p. 198). In Africa, sustainable land use traditions are positioned as alternatives to cash-crop monocultures established during colonial rule (Ngũgĩ, 1977, p. 266). In the Caribbean, the revival of Creole and Indigenous ecological vocabularies counters the linguistic violence of colonial categorization (Walcott, 1990, p. 88).

Postcolonial ecocriticism therefore recovers the environment as a site of identity, memory, and justice. It exposes the long *durée* of environmental harm and insists that reclamation requires both cultural and ecological renewal. By repositioning land as a subject of historical experience rather than as a backdrop, postcolonial literature reclaims what empire attempted to displace: the intimate and enduring relationship between communities and the environments that sustain them.

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND NEOCOLONIAL REALITIES

The legacies of colonial environmental exploitation persist in the contemporary world through global economic systems that reproduce extractive hierarchies. Postcolonial regions across India, Africa, and the Caribbean remain disproportionately vulnerable to forms of ecological harm that Nixon conceptualizes as "slow violence"—a violence that is dispersed, delayed, and often invisible within

dominant political discourse (Nixon, 2011, p. 6). This slow violence intensifies under neoliberal development models, where land and water continue to be commodified for corporate interests. Literature from postcolonial authors foregrounds these injustices, illuminating how environmental crises intersect with race, class, and historical displacement.

In India, the expansion of industrial development—particularly mining, hydropower, and Special Economic Zones—has replicated colonial patterns of dispossession. Literary narratives increasingly highlight how marginalized communities, especially Adivasi groups, remain the first to experience displacement and ecological loss. Mahasweta Devi's stories, though fictional, reflect real patterns of forest alienation, forced migration, and resource extraction that have continued into the twenty-first century (Devi, 1995, p. 44). These works expose the continuity between colonial forestry, which criminalized indigenous land relations, and modern development projects that displace communities in the name of national progress. Through such narratives, Indian postcolonial writing insists that environmental justice is inseparable from social justice.

African literature similarly confronts the entanglements of neocolonial capitalism and ecological harm. In *Petals of Blood*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o portrays multinational corporations and local elites as agents of ongoing extraction, replacing colonial administrators but maintaining the same logic of resource dominance (Ngũgĩ, 1977, p. 312). The destruction of communal land, pollution of water bodies, and degradation of agricultural fields reveal an environmental crisis deeply rooted in inequitable global markets. Contemporary African ecocritical writing—whether from Nigeria, Kenya, or South Africa—emphasizes that environmental justice must address both the colonial past and the corporate present. Authors resist narratives that frame environmental decline as a natural phenomenon, instead tracing it to exploitative structures that benefit from land's continued vulnerability.

In the Caribbean, the legacy of plantation monoculture has created ecological instability and economic dependency. Hurricanes, coastal erosion, and rising sea levels affect island nations with growing intensity. Walcott's *Omeros* captures the fragility of island ecologies shaped by centuries of extractive agriculture and tourism (Walcott, 1990, p. 102). Contemporary Caribbean writers extend this thread, critiquing how foreign investment and cruise tourism reproduce plantation-era inequalities by claiming beaches, reefs, and coastal towns for commercial use. As DeLoughrey argues, the Caribbean's colonial past cannot be separated from its climate-vulnerable present, where land and water remain subject to external control (DeLoughrey, 2007, p. 119). Environmental justice in this context entails both ecological restoration and autonomy over natural resources.

Across these regions, postcolonial literature offers critical insights into the global structures that shape environmental harm. Writers foreground the uneven distribution of ecological risk, where marginalized communities bear the greatest burden of pollution, displacement, and climate change. Buell's observation that environmental crises often target “the poor, the weak, and the geographically vulnerable” becomes acutely visible in postcolonial contexts (Buell, 1995, p. 156). Literature exposes how environmental degradation is political—a consequence of policies that prioritize economic gain over ecological well-being and human dignity.

Furthermore, postcolonial texts imagine pathways toward environmental justice through community resistance, indigenous ecological knowledge, and alternative development models. These narratives reclaim agency for communities whose relationships to land challenge exploitative economic paradigms. Whether it is the Sundarbans fishers resisting conservation displacement in



Ghosh, Kenyan villagers mobilizing against corporate land grabs in Ngũgĩ, or Caribbean communities preserving marine habitats against commercial intrusion, literature positions collective action as central to reclamation.

Thus, postcolonial writing illuminates the neocolonial dynamics that continue to shape environmental realities. By tracing connections between colonial histories and contemporary ecological crises, these works argue that environmental justice is not simply a matter of policy but of historical redress. They make visible the link between ecological restoration, cultural survival, and political sovereignty. Through this lens, the environment becomes both the site of ongoing struggle and a foundation for imagining just and sustainable futures.

CONCLUSION

The shifting visual and narrative grammars through which colonial and postcolonial landscapes have been represented reveal more than the material contours of forests, plantations, deserts, and coastlines; they disclose the political textures of power, resistance, and belonging. In the colonial archive, the environment appears as a calculable resource—mapped, surveyed, and taxonomized in ways that rendered both land and people legible to imperial control. Whether in the meticulously described tea estates of North-East India, the mineral-rich plateaus of Southern Africa, or the plantation economies of the Caribbean, landscape served as a medium through which empire consolidated authority and legitimized extraction. These representations naturalised dominance by casting colonised environments as empty, waiting, or underutilised until transformed by European science and labour regimes.

Postcolonial writers, however, retrieve these same spaces and reconfigure them as terrains of memory, struggle, and renewal. Their narratives bring to the surface the submerged histories of dispossession and ecological disruption, insisting that the land itself bears witness to the violences of empire. By foregrounding indigenous knowledge systems, oral traditions, and the everyday rhythms of local ecologies, these texts offer alternative modes of inhabiting and imagining place. The forest becomes a refuge for insurgent communities; the coastline emerges as a threshold between loss and survival; the plantation transforms into a site where collective memory resists erasure. Across India, Africa, and the Caribbean, postcolonial authors reclaim the environment as a living archive—one that resists commodification and demands ethical engagement.

At the same time, postcolonial ecocriticism complicates the binary of domination and resistance by drawing attention to the uneven effects of environmental degradation in the contemporary world. Climate change, mining, deforestation, and water scarcity often replicate colonial patterns of dispossession, disproportionately affecting communities historically marginalized under empire. The landscape in postcolonial literature therefore functions not only as a symbol but as a material reality that continues to shape questions of justice, identity, and futurity. Reclamation in this context involves both recovering indigenous environmental epistemologies and envisioning new ecological futures rooted in relationality rather than extraction.

For a conference situated within English literary studies, these arguments underscore the necessity of reading environment not as a passive backdrop but as an active participant in narrative meaning-making. Colonial and postcolonial landscape representations invite scholars to reassess the methodological boundaries of literary criticism by integrating ecological thinking with historical, political, and cultural analysis. Such an approach reveals the deep interconnections between textual

form, environmental history, and the lived experiences of colonised communities. Ultimately, examining landscape across these intersecting trajectories enables a more nuanced understanding of how literature both registers and reimagines the entanglements of empire, resistance, and ecological belonging.

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