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Environmental Postcolonialism in Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* and Fatris MF's *Merobek Sumatra*

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Article Information

Received : November 21, 2024

Revised : December 6, 2024

Accepted : December 9, 2024

Published: December 11, 2024

Keywords

Environmental postcolonialism;
ecocriticism; indigenous
community; nature exploitation

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Abstract

This article discusses environmental postcolonialism practices and the impacts on the environment and indigenous people in William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* and Fatris MF's *Merobek Sumatra*. *Go Down, Moses* describes the story of land grabbing from the Chickasaw and Choctaw communities and land conversion into cotton plantations in the Southern United States. On the other hand, Fatris MF's *Merobek Sumatra* captures the expropriation of the customs territory of Anak Dalam communities and land conversion to oil palm plantations in Sumatra. The writers apply the postcolonial ecocriticism approach by Huggan and Tiffin. The data is analyzed through the qualitative method and the result is presented using the descriptive method. The result of the analysis found that there are three practices of environmental postcolonialism in *Go Down, Moses* and *Merobek Sumatra*, which are: (1) Dualistic thinking on environment; (2) Land grabbing from indigenous communities, and (3) Nature exploitation. It is also found that these practices have negative impacts on nature and the indigenous people as represented in both books.

INTRODUCTION

In the world of literature, nature and the characters in literary works are described in a dialectical manner, having a dynamic relationship with each other which Cronon emphasizes that people and all non-human species are an integral part of "what should be understood as an environment (Cronon, 1996, p. 301)." The culture of the characters in the literature toward nature and the environment can be seen from the way they treat nature. The setting in this context contributes not only influencing the thoughts and behavior of the characters but also as an absolute entity that balances human life.

Environmental literary criticism (ecocriticism) is based on the condition that nature and humans can coexist in harmony (Garrard, 2004; Hapsari & Fajar, 2016). As Glofelty & Fromm says, "all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it (Glofelty & Fromm, 2009, p. xix)," the concept of ecocriticism is used to see the phenomenon of the relationship between nature and the environment in literary works. Glofelty states that environmental literary criticism is a theory that studies the relationship between nature, the physical environment, and humans (Garrard, 2004, p. 52).

Ecocriticism has the concept of anthropocentric and ecocentric dualism. Anthropocentrism assumes the basis that human interests are the main priority that takes

precedence over the interests of nonhumans (Buell, [2005](#), p. 109). Nonhumans refers to things other than humans, including the environment and its contents. While the ecocentric view is the ecosphere plays an important role, humans must adhere to the principles of environmental ethics. So, individual interests are put aside first (Buell, [2005](#), p. 137).

Postcolonial also has the concept of "self-other" dualism as well as ecocriticism. Huggan & Tiffin explained that the main subject of postcolonialism is colonialism, while the basic concept is 'colonizing' (colonizers) and 'colonized' (colonized). Both are fundamental in this concept. The anthropocentric view of humans is said by ecocritics as perpetrators of environmental damage (Huggan & Tiffin, [2009](#), p. 3).

Environmental postcolonialism is a theory that criticizes literary works published in the postcolonial era in relation to nature. Literary works are seen as a representation of the issues of natural destruction caused by colonial domination. Literary research using environmental postcolonial theory focuses on conflicts and natural damage that occurs as a result of the expansion of capitalism carried out by immigrants. This phenomenon, according to Benton-Short & Short, indicates that humans ignore the physical environmental aspects of cities and emphasize social, political, and economic aspects rather than ecological aspects (Benton-Short & Short, [2008](#), p. 5). Accordingly, environmental postcolonialism preserves the aesthetic function of the literary text while drawing attention to its social and political usefulness, its capacity to set out symbolic guidelines for the material transformation of the world (Huggan & Tiffin, [2009](#), p. 14). As Huggan & Tiffin says, "Postcolonial ecocriticism is paradoxically driven-as is this book-by the impossibility of its own utopian ambitions: to make exploitation and discrimination of all kinds, both human and nonhuman, visible in the world; and, in so doing, to help make them obsolete" (Huggan & Tiffin, [2015](#), p. 16).

In *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, Clark argues that entering the era of capitalism in the current post-colonial environmental debate, modern environmentalism has capitalism. Vast tracts of land are used for "national parks" or to replace rural areas with development-friendly urbanization. He goes on to say, "Since 1980s the world has witnessed a weird alliance between the first-world environmentalist and the fourth world people fighting to defend the indigenous way of life" (Clark, [2011](#), p. 121).

Settled in a fictional county in the Southern United States, Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* narrates the relationship of man to nature (as embodied most specifically in the story of Isaac McCaslin and Sam Fathers), the idea of property and ownership (both of land, as in the McCaslin plantation, and of human beings, as in the McCaslin slaves). This novel also describes the process of land grabbing by white Americans from native Indians. On the other hand, Fatris MF's *Merobek Sumatra* narrates the story of land grabbing in Jambi, Sumatra by the Indonesian government, and the private sector from Anak Dalam community. Thus, a comparative study will be conducted to grasp how both novels portray migrants who marginalize the natives and then exploit nature to obtain economic benefits wrapped in the term modernization. Several comparative studies have been conducted to analyze literary works published in the postcolonial era in relation to nature. Sudmeyer conducted a postcolonial ecocritical exploration of Mozambique novel and United States of America novel. It is revealed that both novels propose a "reinhabitation" of damaged lands (Sudmeyer, [2013](#)). However, both authors portray the nature differently:

"...for while Boyle predicts that as humans continue on their course of consumerism and personal gratification there is no other end possible but environmental apocalypse; Couto, on the other hand, reveals a worldview that regards the land and the animals as intrinsic parts of the experience of being human, a way of being in the world that is threatened, quickly disappearing along with the death of generations and their cultural memories..." (Sudmeyer, [2013](#), p. 135).

Dutta conducts the most recent research in the realm of ecocriticism and postcolonial theory. Dutta compares both *Sky Is My Father* by Easterine Kire and *Aranyak* by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay. It is revealed that both novels portray policies and after effect on the native people of India in relation to the ecological disruption as the impact of Britain's expansion (Dutta, [2022](#), p. 130).

Recent studies on *Go Down, Moses* focused on William Faulkner's environmental awareness expressed in the novel using Aldo Leopold's *Land Ethic* (Agustin & Najma, [2021](#)) and the discourse of environmentalism (Wittenberg, [2019](#)). Ichsan focuses on the rural life represented in *Go Down Moses* using both Pastoral and ecocritic theory (Ichsan, [2022](#), p. 70). Other studies on *Go Down, Moses* as conducted by Nolé focuses on Faulkner's representation of the inequalities in social mobility and the American "uneven national movement toward industrialization, urbanization, and consumerism (Nolé, [2021](#), p. 121)." On the other side, previous studies on *Merobek Sumatra* have not been found yet. In the same context, previous studies on environmental postcolonialism have taken the practices of environmental postcolonialism into account as the relationship between post-colonial land and humans, and the role of nature in the lives of the tribals (Umamy & Faqihuddin, [2018](#); Afzal, [2017](#); and Paliwal, [2020](#)). Despite having explored the environmental postcolonialism issues, these recent studies have not considered the impacts of environmental postcolonialism practices in different places. For further discussions, we underscore the environmental issues in the Southern United States and Indonesia based on the time and context of the story in both books. By doing so, this study contributes to the development of ecocriticism studies in the Southern United States and Indonesia in the context of environmental postcolonialism and its impacts on nature and the indigenous community. This study also aims to raise people's awareness of the disadvantage of nature exploitation and its impacts on nature and the indigenous people in the world.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative method applying the environmental postcolonial approach by Huggan and Tiffin. It is a theoretical framework used to analyze and understand the colonial activities that are now being undertaken by capitalists, and neocolonizers to fuel their profit-driven ventures damaging and destroying the environment. The data sources of this research are the novels *Go Down, Moses* by Faulkner and *Merobek Sumatra* by Fatris MF.

Data collection technique in this study is library research. To obtain the data contained in the novel, the researcher first read the novels *Go Down, Moses* by Faulkner and *Merobek Sumatra* by Fatris MF. By reading, researchers can determine the desired data. After the prose of the two novels was read and data was obtained, then the data was recorded. The library technique is data collection that uses written sources to obtain data. The related data that has been obtained was then written on the data card. After the data in accordance with the research focus was collected, the data was then analyzed.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on the research objectives that have been determined, the results and discussion of this study describe the practices of environmental postcolonialism in the novels *Go Down, Moses* by William Faulkner and *Merobek Sumatra* by Fatris MF by applying the theory of environmental postcolonialism from Huggan and Tiffin.

Environmental postcolonial practices in *Go Down, Moses* and *Merobek Sumatra*

There are three forms of environmental postcolonialism found in these two novels, they are Dualistic Thinking on the Environment; Land Grabbing from Indigenous People; and Nature Exploitation.

Dualistic thinking on the environment

In the process of environmental postcolonialism, the newcomers had the opposite perspective from the native people. The newcomers had an individual perspective on nature. In contrast, the natives had a more communal outlook. In *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft et al. suggests that “The dialectic of place and displacement is always a feature of post-colonial societies whether these have been created by a process of settlement, intervention, or a mixture of the two (Ashcroft et al., [2003](#), p. 9).” Using the same perspective, newcomers tended to have an anthropocentric view, including believing that humans as the center and the natural surroundings should be utilized optimally for the benefit of humans. This contrasts with the natives who have an ecocentric view, where they believe that nature has cycles and limitations. In *Native Liberty: Natural Reason and Cultural Survivance*, Vizenor suggests, “Native survivance is continuance of stories (Vizenor, [2009](#), p. 62).” Native stories are inherently subjective, intuitive, and personal, instinctive, and profound message to the world.

The difference in perspective on the environment between newcomers and native people is described in the novels *Go Down, Moses* and *Merobek Sumatra*. In the novel *Go Down, Moses* and *Merobek Sumatra*, it is described that the preservation of nature and the living creatures in it cannot be separated from the role of the indigenous people who highly appreciate nature. This appreciation can be noticed in the attitude of the indigenous people who do not have an excessive desire to use nature. For the natives, nature has been generous by providing results for the fulfillment of human needs. Therefore, nature must be respected, protected, and preserved. This is in accordance with the views of the natives that nature is the center of human life.

In *Go Down, Moses*, Faulkner explains that, in contrast to the white colonies, native Indians (Chikasaw and Choctaw) held the land communally without any claim to property rights (Faulkner, [1942](#), p. 44). Faulkner views that this method is wiser than the land ownership system that gives humans superiority. *Go Down, Moses* also gives an overview of the plantation which is the main source of livelihood there. The South is famous for its fertile soil. For this reason, the white colonies believe that this is a divine blessing that must be utilized, including by making it a source for farming.

Faulkner conveyed the idea of land conversion the tradition of passing on land from generation to generation. Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin, Ike’s grandfather, bought land from native Indians. He then ordered his slaves to plant the land to get “a reasonable profit too (Faulkner, [1942](#), p. 254).” This land will later become a large plantation that he will pass on to his children and grandchildren.

The same goes for wilderness. The plantation also has a vital role in *Go Down, Moses*. Plantation symbolizes the wealth of a family, giving it various privileges in society, including enslaving blacks. In the novel, Ike is told to inherit a large plantation belonging to the McCaslin family from his father's side and a neighboring plantation belonging to the Beauchamp family from his mother's side. Although Ike is described as an idealist who repudiates his heritage, *Go Down, Moses* somewhat presents nature as a source to be utilized and made into a plantation by humans.

This demonstrates that land is considered as a source for growing crops for old Carothers McCaslin. Besides, using the land to become a cotton plantation is indeed a southern white culture. This was also supported by slavery which increased rapidly there in the early 19th century. As explained by Davis in his book entitled *Southern United States an Environmental History*, as cotton production in the South flourished, so did slavery (Davis, [2006](#), p. 211). Slaves and their owners collectively razed the ground, cut down large forest areas, robbed the soil of essential nutrients, and changed the ecological composition of large areas in the South in less than two centuries (Davis, [2006](#), p. 212). Land cultivation is also beneficial for many people, including the workers on the land.

Fatris MF, in *Merobek Sumatra*, describes the different views between indigenous people which is Anak Dalam tribe and modern Indonesian people who are encroaching on the forests where they live. Anak Dalam communities are tribes that really appreciate nature and all creatures in it without exception. In *Merobek Sumatra*, Fatris MF recalls how they taught him about what plants can be eaten and what not, what can be cut and what not. They even told him “There is a type of wood that should not be cut and if it is cut down, the fish in the river will die. The water will be poisoned by the wood sap (MF, [2021](#), p. 109).”

Fatris MF also explained that they respect the river as a source of life, so defecating in the river is prohibited. To pollute the river means to pollute the source of life itself “They eat the game as needed (MF, [2021](#), p. 109).” This balance contrasts with the view of modern Indonesian society towards nature and how to use it, as conveyed by Fatris MF through the following narrative: “When rubber prices soared and palm oil was discovered as a plantation crop that produces a lot of oil, large-scale deforestation of Sumatra began (MF, [2021](#), p. 115).”

Modern society, which is in fact the newcomers, sees forests and nature as objects to be dredged to obtain economic benefits through any means. They insist that humans are in control of nature. Therefore, they feel entitled to do anything to nature. They did not pay attention to the sustainability of nature as the center of human life by destroying and even destroying nature. This view is contrary to the perspective of the indigenous people who use land with a communal system, utilize it sparingly, and maintain the balance and goodness of all living things.

Land grabbing from indigenous people

The practice of environmental postcolonialism always begins with the expropriation of land by newcomers from indigenous people. The mechanism of taking land in the southern United States within Indonesia has a slight difference. In the Southern United States, the government took over land from Chickasaws and the Choctaws through an agreement mechanism by offering compensation for land in Oklahoma. “...That happened by treaty, which president Jackson established with the Chickasaws and the Choctaws, in which they would take the land in Oklahoma in exchange and were paid for it...” (Faulkner, [1942](#), p. 43). In practice, however, the compensation was never given to the Chickasaws and the Choctaws. “...They were compelled to leave it...” (Faulkner, [1942](#), p. 43).

Faulkner sets the novel in the context of the American South, a region deeply scarred by the history of European colonization, which involved extensive land theft from Native American tribes. The McCaslin plantation, a central setting in the novel, symbolizes the systemic appropriation of indigenous lands for economic gain.

The narrative references the displacement of Native Americans, such as the Choctaw and Chickasaw tribes, who were forcibly removed from their ancestral lands through policies

like the Indian Removal Act (Alexander, [2007](#), p. 115). This historical backdrop highlights the ongoing legacy of dispossession and cultural erasure.

Meanwhile, the acquisition of land in Sumatra from Anak Dalam Community has never been through any compensation mechanism or agreement. Their land was confiscated in a more subtle way without going through any discussion "...The dense jungle of displaced forests is their only last defensive fortress." (MF, [2021](#), p. 99).

When forests are cut down and one hectare of land is converted to oil palm, they move to find new places to live "That used to be our land too. Where we hunt. And now where are we going when this narrow forest is gone? (MF, [2021](#), p. 116)."

In the end, both the indigenous communities, either native Indians (Chikasaw and Chocktwas) or the Anak Dalam community were evicted from their own homes, where their ancestors were born and settled hundreds of years ago.

Nature exploitation

The success of the newcomers in marginalizing indigenous people and taking over their land further strengthens their domination of nature. The white colonies in the Southern United States began to convert land into cotton plantations, while modern Indonesian society converted land into oil palm agriculture.

Go Down, Moses powerfully depicts the landscape changes in the South as a result of urban expansion. It started when Major de Spain refused to keep the land as a hunting preserve. He prefers to sell the land to a timber company. Since then, wildernesses have been slowly being destroyed and replaced with windmills for the sake of huge profits for the company. While visiting the wilderness for the last time before being logged, Ike realized that the logging train was the end of the wilderness (Faulkner, [1942](#), p. 306).

Faulkner critiques the colonial mindset that treats the land as a resource to be owned, exploited, and profited from. This perspective is embodied by the McCaslin family, whose wealth and status are derived from the plantation economy, built on the appropriation and degradation of land.

Ike's rejection of land ownership signifies a moral and ethical stance against the commodification of nature. He recognizes that the land is not something to be possessed but respected and preserved, reflecting a shift toward a more sustainable and harmonious relationship with the environment (Short, [1994](#), p. 17).

The wilderness in *Go Down, Moses* serves as a counterpoint to the exploited plantation lands. Faulkner's detailed and evocative descriptions of the forest and its wildlife underscore the beauty and complexity of the natural world. It is portrayed as a space of purity and continuity, resisting human attempts to dominate and control it. Characters like Sam Fathers and Isaac find solace and spiritual renewal in the wild, suggesting an alternative way of relating to nature based on reverence and respect.

The same thing happened in Sumatra, after Anak Dalam community was evicted from their land, "oil palm plantations lined up as long as the eye could see. The Bukit Barisan Forest in Sumatra is increasingly being felt by plantations (MF, [2021](#), p. 112)." Fatris MF also explained how the forest on this island is getting narrower by plantations. In the name of this plantation, millions or even thousands of millions of hectares of forest are cleared every year to the extent that the forestry service does not have exact data, how many hectares of forest "Sumatra has been transformed into oil palm plantations, a commodity that is very water-hungry and known to be very environmentally unfriendly (MF, [2021](#), p. 112)."

The impacts of environmental postcolonialism in the novels

The environmental postcolonialism described in both novels has a negative impact on nature also on the indigenous people. Nature becomes damaged and loses its balance because the forest has been cut down and converted into agricultural land. In addition, the practice of environmental postcolonialism also has negative impacts on the indigenous people.

In *Go Down, Moses*, William Faulkner's portrayal of environmental postcolonialism reveals the multifaceted impacts of colonialism on both the environment and the marginalized communities intertwined with it. It is visible through decline of the land's fertility and destruction of natural habitats.

The McCaslin plantation, a focal point in the novel, symbolizes the ecological degradation resulting from exploitative agricultural practices. Over-farming, deforestation, and the pursuit of short-term profits lead to a gradual decline in the land's productivity and health, illustrating the unsustainable nature of colonial exploitation.

The novel highlights the destruction of natural habitats through the stories of hunting and deforestation. The relentless hunting of Old Ben, the legendary bear, symbolizes the broader assault on wildlife and the disruption of ecological balance. Faulkner's vivid descriptions of the once-abundant wilderness being depleted reflect the broader environmental impact of colonial practices.

Children in the community, as described in *Merobek Sumatra* faces difficulties after their land is converted. They are forced to move because their land has been converted into oil palm land. They lost their homes, sources of food, and medicine "And they, the tribe of the "stronghold", the tribe of Anak Dalam – had to move. I don't know where else in the jungle, or in the deepest forest" (MF, [2021](#), p. 119).

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of *Go Down, Moses* by William Faulkner and *Merobek Sumatra*, it can be inferred that the portrayal of dualistic thinking on the environment in both *Go Down, Moses* and *Merobek Sumatra* is served to highlight how it leads to the practice of land grabbing from indigenous communities. Furthermore, the negative impacts on both nature and indigenous people elucidate the depiction of nature exploitation.

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