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Eco-Eroticism: Desire, Land, and the Colonial Body in Natalie Diaz’s “The First Water Is the Body” and Warsan Shire’s “For Women Who Are Difficult to Love”

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the relationship between land, body, and power in the contemporary postcolonial poetry and the ways in which eco-eroticism, the connection of the desire to nature, manifests. The research employs the theory of colonial desire by Robert Young and the ideas of transcorporeality and material feminisms presented by Stacy Alaimo in order to examine how women and landscapes have been eroticized and controlled in colonial discourse through the use of desire. The two poems used in the analysis, namely, from “The First Water Is the Body” and “For Women Who Are Difficult to Love”, address the concern of how the texts disrupt colonial and patriarchal fantasies of domination. The research identifies that both poems distort conventional erotic imagery into a form of resistance, kinship, and ecological interrelation. In the former poem, the river is a speaking, desiring subject whose association to the speaker breaks down divisions between human and nonhuman bodies. The second poem is the voice of the female who rejects the efforts to civilize or tame her down as she re-takes her fierceness as a decolonial self sovereignty. By integrating this theoretical method, the study establishes that eco-eroticism is an effective model to analyze the ways modern authors transform discourses of desire, land, and agency, expressing in the end a promotion of ethical, reciprocal, and decolonial relationships between bodies and environments.



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Key words: Eco-Eroticism; Colonial Desire; Transcorporeality; Material Feminisms; Postcolonial Poetry; Environmental Embodiment; Feminized Land; Desire And Power; Decolonial Agency; Human–Nonhuman Relations

Introduction

The intersection of land, body, and power within the literary text is the topic that is becoming more popular in the area of postcolonial studies and ecocriticism in recent years. However, there is an area that has not been developed yet, and that is the relationship between desire and environmental representation, or, to be more precise, the way in which the erotic imagination fosters the colonial and postcolonial relationships with the land. The present research occupies this gap by looking at eco-eroticism, a concept that approaches desire as a mode that connects human and nonhuman bodies, and also reveals how the colonial systems eroticized and regulated both women and landscapes. This study has employed the theories of transcorporeality and material feminisms developed by Stacy Alaimo to examine how modern poetry reinvents the long history of colonial domination that was imbued with sexuality. Traditionally, the land could be feminized, passive, and possessible in colonial writing. As Young describes the logic of colonial desire, the colonized body and the colonized environment were structures of penetration, taming and extraction. This sexualized image was not merely a manifestation of power; it assisted in its creation. Nevertheless, the writers in the postcolonial world begin to question this representation by providing land agency, voice, and emotionality. Eco-eroticism allows desire to be a means of domination but a way of healing, kinship, and revival. In this research, the concepts are utilized on two modern poems, including: “The First Water Is the Body” and “For Women Who Are Difficult to Love”. Despite the dissimilarity in tone and setting, the two poems possess strong imagery of lust, scenery, and embodiment to challenge the colonial and patriarchal necessity that the land and women should be subjugated. The river of the first poem becomes an alive relative, an object of desire, who has material existence with the speaker. The woman in the second poem is defiant of domestication and against efforts to be softened, tamed or made useful to the male gaze. The combination of these poems undermines traditional colonial discourses and shows that one can use desire as a form of transformation and ethical encounter instead of oppression. The study combines both colonial desire and transcorporeality, which makes the research a subtle reading that highlights the nature of power structures and material relationships. It states that eco-eroticism is an important prism through which modern poems redefine the connections between land, gender, desire and colonial history. Finally, the analysis indicates that these poems express decolonial vision in which bodies, both human and nonhuman, are equal in their relationships, in emotional saturation, and vulnerabilities.

Literature Review

The interplay between colonial desire and ecological representation has been discussed across a number of strands of criticism, but it is a little-examined field of eco-postcolonial literary studies. The seminal text *Colonial Desire* by Robert Young (1995) has been a foundation of the interpretation of how even the discourse of colonization is full of sexualized images, not necessarily of the colonized bodies, but also, implicitly, of the land itself. According to Young (1995), colonialism is being couched in terms of penetration, seduction, and possession that the eroticization of people colonized is correlated to the eroticized conceptualization of space and natural resources. This framework offers a critical point of departure on how the natural world was traditionally



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handled as a feminized, sexualized object, which was subject to ownership, exploitation, or control, which is highly reflective of the dynamics of power, desire, and territory. Subsequent authors such as McClintock (1995) have explored the sexual aspects of the imperialism, especially with regard to gender, race, and hybridity. According to McClintock (1995), this eroticized image of colonized women and lands played the leading role in ensuring the colonial power hierarchy. On the same level, Dissanayake and Wickramagamage (1993) point out that natural sceneries were frequently confused with eroticized femininity in colonial literature, which implied that the aestheticization of the environment was closely related to the fantasy of control and mastery. All these studies point to the fact that there was a reciprocal reinforcing of the expression of sexuality and power as well as ecological representation within the colonial discourse.

In contrast, the modern eco-criticism has been mainly concerned with environmental ethics, sustainability, and human-nature connection that has overlooked the role of the colonial desire on ecological imagination. The frameworks of the study of nature in literature offered by Buell (2005) and Garrard (2012) focus on the environmental responsibility, anthropocentrism, and nonhuman agency. But these studies to a great extent do not highlight how the eroticization of land and feminization of land in the colonial discourses still prevail in the postcolonial ecological thinking. On the same note, ecocritical studies are postcolonial, like in the case of Heise (2008), which makes the linkage between culture and environment, but seldom include the aspect of desire as a force behind the colonial and postcolonial imaginary of land. It is to this gap that the idea of eco-eroticism has come to offer a viable theoretical approach. Such researchers as Gaard (2000) and Alaimo (2010) point out the fact that desire and sensuality may be used as means of ecological consciousness, with the accentuation on the close, physical relationship between human and nature. This is elaborated further by the transcorporeality concept introduced by Alaimo (2010) by demonstrating the fact that the body of a human being and the environment are connected both materially and ethically, i.e. flows of matter, energy, and desire between the human being and the nonhuman world cannot be separated. The given lens enables the researcher to examine ecological desire as not being only metaphorical, but as being both physically and ethically real, with agency of both body and landscape. Literary works have lately started the introduction of eco-erotic in post-colonial situations. As an example, the studies of Anita Desai (*Fire on the Mountain*, Desai, 1977) and Ngugi wa Thiong' (*A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi, 1967) show the introduction of the cultural and emotional subtext into the landscapes, which is typically related to female experience and colonial history of land exploitation. Equally, *Animal peoples* (2007) by Indra Sinha portrays the natural environment and nonhuman animals as dynamic agents in the stories of pain, struggle, and passion. These works indicate the possibilities of the fusion of eco-criticism with the postcolonial approach, where the ecological and human desires overlap.

Although researchers have already examined eroticized colonial discourses and eco-postcolonial reclamation, there is a scarcity of research that integrates the idea of colonial desire with eco-erotic land images. Majority of eco-critical work revolves around sustainability, environmental ethics or anthropocentrism and postcolonial work tends to discuss sexuality or gender without relating them to ecological representations. The modalities of how land itself is turned into a subject of eroticised domination or reclaimed as maternal and sacred, have not been studied methodically, especially in recent poetry that predicts the intimacy between the body and the environment. This paper aims to address this gap by investigating the expression of eco-erotic desire in the recent postcolonial poetry, and in this regard, the paper will examine the eroticization of



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land and opposition to this objectification. This study will examine both ethical, aesthetic, and political aspects of human-land intimacy by integrating the theory of Young of colonial desire with the theory of Alaimo of transcorporeality and material feminisms in order to show how poetry can resist colonial fantasies and assert ecological and bodily agency. The importance of the study is also that it contributes to the interdisciplinary literature criticism by connecting eco-criticism with postcolonial theory, on one hand, and exploring how the poetic imagination can reclaim the land and body under the colonial and patriarchal structures, on the other hand.

Theoretical Framework

Based on the concept of Colonial Desire by Robert Young (1995) and the theories of Transcorporeality and Material feminisms by Stacy Alaimo (2010; 2014), this research uses a two-fold theoretical framework to explore eco-erotic representations of land, desire, and the colonial body in modern postcolonial literature. This structure enables a stratified reading where both the historical sexualization of domination of the land and body can be viewed as well as the material and ethical entrapment of human and nonhuman life.

Robert Young and Colonial Desire

Robert Young (1995) comes up with the term colonial desire to explain how the discourse of colonialism becomes entangled by sexualized images and fantasies. The concept of colonial desire is based on the metaphors of penetration, seduction, and possession, which are applied to the conceptualization of the colonized body and the colonized land. Young states that the colonial imagination is erotic and the people who were colonized are dangerous, seductive, and available simultaneously. In the same way, the landscapes and territories are feminized and eroticized, changing land into a sexual conquest and economic exploitation metaphor object. The colonial desire therefore applies the same sexualized forms of human interaction to the natural, and thus domination over land and resources is an act of penetration both metaphorical and literal (Young 181-82). Within the literary field, the framework by Young enables analyzing how authors create eroticized or feminized images of land as the aspect of colonial and postcolonial power relations. Colonial literature tends to represent forests, rivers, and other scenery as being fertile or virginal, and extends fantasies of control and domination onto this scenery as it is onto colonized bodies. Using the theory by Young in relation to modern day poetry, this research explores how eco-erotic imagery reproduces or subverts the dynamic of the past patterns of desire and ownership. In one example, the speaker in the poem “The First Water is the Body” talks of the river as intimate, as alive, as sensual whereby she establishes a mutual relationship of desire and not the conquest process of the river and this can be seen as a reconfiguration of eco-erotic power in a postcolonial manner. In the same manner, “For Women Who Are Difficult to Love” deals with human desire and intensity in a manner that cannot be contained and dominated, just as the ethical reclaiming of land in the eco-postcolonial thought.

Stacy Alaimo: Transcorporeality and Material Feminisms

Stacy Alaimo has created a complementary analysis of eco-eroticism through transcorporeality (2010). Transcorporeality focuses on the fact that the human bodies and environments are highly intertwined and they are constantly exchanging matter, energy, and influence. Bodies are not closed or independent but porous and subject to flows of ecologies, such as rivers, soil, air and other nonhuman agents. Through this idea,



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anthropocentrism is undermined and the moral obligation of human beings to the material world is emphasized on due to the intertwining nature of human and nonhuman lives. In material feminisms, the point of view is enhanced by claiming that matter (nonhuman matter) possesses its own agency, meaning, and narrative power. Rivers, landscapes, animals and ecosystems do not just exist, they influence humans and create experiences, wishes and narrations. Taking matter as agentic and interactive, material feminisms makes it possible to read the eco-erotic desire which does not objectify nature but sees its livingness, its responsiveness, its ethical importance. Therefore, applied to my chosen poems, transcorporeality and material feminisms make it possible to examine how the human desire enters and comes out of the world of nature. In “The First Water is the Body”, the speaker associates herself with the river, drinking it, crying into it and feeling desire as human and as water. Such a fluid interconnection is an illustration of transcorporeality that demonstrates the body and the environment as co-constitutive. Likewise, material feminisms assists in defining the river and its components as active contributors of creating desire, emotion, and identity and not passive symbols. The frame suggested by Alaimo can be used in “For Women Who Are Difficult to Love” in the metaphorical meaning of the words: the force, self-reliance, and strength of the female subject are similar to the material agency of the land. Equally to the transcorporeality emphasis on the ethical and physical enmeshing of humanity in nonhuman matter, the poem's uncontainable desire resembles the resistance to objectification and domination, just as reclamation of land in eco-postcolonial narratives.

Through the synthesis of Young and Alaimo, this research differentiates the past and present views of eroticized power and ecological embodiment. Young offers an understanding of the way that colonial desire shapes eroticized and feminized land by showing tendencies of domination and objectification. Alaimo makes it possible to read eco-erotic desire as two-way, ethics-interested, and material-entangled. These frameworks combined allow the exploration of the remnants of colonial fantasies and the potential of ecological and bodily agency of postcolonial poetry. This combined structure can be very useful in studying eco-erotic poetry as it grasps: The history of passion and ownership (Young). The material and moral interrelations between human beings and nonhumans (Alaimo). The domination to reciprocity and resistance of desire (Eco-erotic lens). In this perspective, the study investigates the means of how the current poets question the colonial patterns of desire, feminization, and eroticization of the land and proposes new approaches to eco-postcolonial ethics, intimacy and agency.

Analysis

This section compares the two poems, “The First Water Is the Body” and “For Women Who Are Difficult to Love”, based on the integrated structure of the colonial desire of Robert Young, transcorporeality and material feminisms of Stacy Alaimo, and the general theme of eco-eroticism. Combined, these theories allow bringing out the complex functioning of desire, land, and the body resisting the colonial and patriarchal domination and providing new patterns of relationality, intimacy, and ecological ethics.

Feminized Land and Feminized Bodies: Both poems start by acknowledging their historical connection between femininity and nature, and the conventional discourses of colonialism and patriarchy. In the colonial desire as interpreted by Young, land is feminized, eroticized and made as passive land to be conquered. This is confronted in the first poem. The river is not only a feminized scenery, but also a sister, a daughter, a mirror, a speaking being: The river says, “Open your mouth to me, / and I will make you more”. This is not a very colonial line but rather sensual; the river is not penetrated or



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consumed, it is rather the river who dictates and the colonial fantasy of colonized land is turned the other way round. The river is an active desiring subject. Just as in “For Women Who Are Difficult to Love”, the woman is likened to natural powers; a horse running alone, an impossible highway, a burning house. These images are traditionally the symbol of wild, uncertain nature but in this instance, they are not offered as its drawbacks. Rather they are an indication of an opposition to feminization in a colonial fashion. She is wild, ruthless and beyond taming, not gentle, not on demand and not within walls. Her instinctive vigor resembles the strength of scenery that is not colonial.

Desire as Domination vs. Desire as Reciprocity: The idea of colonial desire that is proposed by Young relies on the level of ownership, penetration, and taming. This reason is evident in the second poem.

“He tries to tame you,”
 “tried to be softer,”
 “less volatile.”

The need of the man is grounded on control. He desires a body that is colonial in nature—controllable, enclosed, submissive. His possession ambition turns into business of ownership, which reminds the colonial endeavor of turning the wild land into tamed territory. Desire in the river poem, on the contrary, is a two-way and transformational one. As the speaker opens her mouth to the river, the river gives a promise, “I will make you more”. Conquest is not desire here but expansion. It is not the river that is in the possession of the human but the human river that is enhancing the identity of the speaker. It is an environmental connection and not domination that the poem reinstates intimacy. By so doing, it directly refutes colonial patterns of desire, providing instead a postcolonial, ecological intimacy with both parties, human and nonhuman, co-creating meaning.

Resistance to Colonial Erotics: In the two poems, domination is strongly rejected. The first poem states, “I am both—the river and its vessel”. This is a radical claim. Colonial logic relies on the distinction between the land and the body, the subject and the object, the owner and the object. The speaker rejects the option of colonizing her or her land-body by rejecting that separation. She is inaccessible to the colonizers since she cannot be separated by merging with the river.

The second poem expresses resistance by the means of letting go: “and if he wants to leave / then let him leave”. This is not loss but not to be possessed. The last lines, “terrifying and strange and beautiful” are a straight denial of patriarchal colonial fantasies. She is not to be domesticated or feminized to lure the needs of a superior being. The refusal that she gets turns out to be a decolonial resistance.

Land as a Site of Colonial Violence and Ecological Harm: A clear reminder of the destructiveness of the colonials on the environment is the line, “even a river can die of thirst”. Extraction, pollution and depletion, the legacies of colonial exploitation, kill rivers. The solitude of the river is an indication of abandonment, a personification of a land deprived of its caretakers because of the displacement and coerced assimilation. The poem demonstrates the eco-erotic sense of intimacy with the land as it is suffering. Desire is not romantic, it recognizes environmental insecurity brought about by colonial regimes. In the second poem, colonial violence is shown as a metaphor with the features of emotional depletion. The woman attempts to transform herself, as much as colonized land is subdued to silence, deprived of its natural manifestation. This is psychological violence as opposed to environmental violence and the reasoning is that domination needs to drown out that which is bright, wild and abundant.

Eroticized Territory:



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Conquest vs. Intimacy: Colonial language tends to use sexual metaphors to characterize land opening, entering, penetrating. This is inverted consciously in the river poem. The river is put in the active voice in the invitation “Open your mouth to me”. The river instead of being penetrated is the initiator of desire. This inverts colonial erotic metaphors and creates a new eco-erotic contact in the form of dialogue, as opposed to challenge. Even the erotic metaphors in the woman poem carry resistance. Her flesh crams his mouth and his teeth yearn with recall of taste. Sensual power is evident in these metaphors but he fails to contain and even drink her up. The desire of eroticism brings about hunger which reveals his weakness. He knows he cannot own her unlike the colonizers who feel that they can own land.

Body–Environment Entanglement (Alaimo’s Transcorporeality): The idea of transcorporeality as portrayed by Alaimo is vivid in the poem of the river. The speaker states:

“The river is my sister—I am its daughter...
It is my hands... my eye... my desire...”

In this case, the body of man is absorbed in water. The river takes on a human body and the speaker a hydrological creature. The bodies are not hierarchically ranked in terms of identity. Such is the spirit of transcorporeality, that bodies are porous, fluid and related. The woman in the second poem is also, however, characterized environmentally, horse, highway, burning house. She turns into a terrain of moving substance. That the man can never live up to the woman in his head is indicators of not comprehending bodies as interconnected and powerful as opposed to passive and controllable. The intensity of hers is material agency.

Nonhuman Agency: River as Speaking, Desiring, Acting: Material feminisms is a philosophy that instructs that matter is agentic. The river talks, orders, lusts, grieves and even is lonely. It is not a metaphor, it is a living, acting being. This reinstates land against the objectification of colonialists by giving it back its voice and independence. The woman also has nonhuman agency. She is a force of nature, “frightening”, “dizzying”, “a burning house” erratic and alive. She is not personified nature; she is nature in the human world. This is a break of the colonial tradition of human and nonhuman division of life.

Desire as Flow, Not Ownership: The desire in both poems is fluid like water or fire- it flows, reshapes and grows. The poem in the river depicts desire that is felt like “a yucca bell” and glittering “like copper wire”, which is desire as energy and not property. In the woman poem, desire “dizzy[s] him” and is unbearable since it cannot be held back. The two poems are opposed to both colonialist and patriarchal models of ownership of desire.

Ethical Entanglement and Mutual Responsibility: Ecological ethics is demonstrated by the vulnerability of the river (“even a river can die of thirst”). The speaker understands the needs and loneliness of the river. It is a mutually caring relationship which is ethical. The second poem also has an ethical aspect in the denial of possession of the woman. She is not going to permit love to turn into the property. It is a self-preservation, self-autonomy, and decolonial freedom ethics.

In both poems, the desire can either repeat the destructive trends of domination or become an effective weapon of ecological and feminist struggle through Robert Young and Alaimo transcorporeality. The eco-eroticism that the poems do is turning intimacy into recognition with the environment, identification and independence. Rather than having land or women as something to be conquered, they become the subject that, in turn, is alive, opposing the colonial and patriarchal fantasies and providing other templates of relationships based on reciprocity, care, and freedom.



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Conclusion

This paper aimed to examine how eco-eroticism through the lens of Robert Young and Stacy Alaimo, in terms of their theories of colonial desire and transcorporeality and material feminisms, can be used to alter a new perspective on desire, land, and the body in the modern postcolonial poem. In the analysis of both poems, “The First Water Is the Body” and “For Women Who Are Difficult to Love”, poets rewrite the colonial scripts of eroticized control through transfer of full agency to bodies, both human, and nonhuman, as well as the presentation of desire as an ethical connection and not domination. The framework by Young aids in revealing how the colonial logic feminizes and eroticizes land and women and objectifies them as objects to be penetrated, tamed or owned. The two poems do not conform to these historical trends, however. The river in the first poem talks, yearns, saddens and alters the speaker marking the material connection between the environmental and human bodies. The woman of the second poem declines efforts at making her sharpness domesticated, reclaiming her body as a wild, strong and uncolonizable one. Alaimo transcorporeality also reinforces this interpretation by showing how desire passes through bodies and spaces and the strict divisions that colonial power relies on are broken. It reveals in the poems that the real intimacy is not based on ownership but on mutual vulnerability, reciprocity, and admiration. On the whole, this paper has shown that eco-eroticism is a potent critical tool to be used in the study of how modern-day poetry is rebelling against colonial and patriarchal fantasies. The combination of environmental attachment and bodily power projects the poems envision the new, decolonial desire that values both the land and the self.

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