

Invisible Wounds, Colonial Scars: Slow Violence and Eco-Orientalism in South Asian, Malay, and Arab Fiction

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Abstract

The paper explores intersections of slow violence, eco-orientalism and colonial ecologies in fiction work in three postcolonial literary traditions: South Asian, Malay and Arab. Based on the work of Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011b), it examines the way in which postcolonial authors describe the gradual environmental degradation by colonial and neo-colonial powers. A methodological comment is pertinent: Abdelrahman Munif wrote *Cities of Salt* in Arabic, and the fact that it has been translated to English by Peter Theroux (1987) is indicative of cultural mediation and Anglophone circulation politics. Through close readings of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2005) and *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021), Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007), Tan Twan Eng's *The Garden of Evening Mists* (2012), Yang-May Ooi's *The Flame Tree* (1998), Munif's *Cities of Salt* (1984/1987), and Omar El Akkad's *American War* (2017), this paper argues that these texts collectively challenge Western-centric environmental discourses and expose the eco-orientalist construction of Global South landscapes as degraded or ecologically marginal. The paper also critically assesses the Nixonian framework in terms of its limitations, especially the danger of idealising indigenous ecological knowledge, but develops the discussion between postcolonial literary studies and the environmental humanities.

Keywords: slow violence, eco-orientalism, postcolonial ecocriticism, colonial ecologies, Global South literature

1. Introduction

The twenty-first century has witnessed an unprecedented convergence of ecological crisis and literary imagination. With climate change, depletion of resources and environmental degradation becoming a commonplace in world politics, postcolonial literature has become a crucial place of questioning the disparity in environmental damages. Whether it is the polluters or the polluted who are the burden bearers of ecological destruction and whose pain is seldom visible to mainstream environmental discourses is at the core of what Rob Nixon (2011b) has described as "slow violence", a concept that underpins postcolonial ecocriticism. Nixon describes slow violence as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (p. 2). This is a formulation that questions the Western media privileging of spectacular and instantaneous disaster over long-term dyings that overburden communities in the Global South.

This paper presents a comparative-thematic postcolonial ecocritical study of fiction across three separate, yet interrelated literary traditions, examining how novelists recount the confluence of colonial history, environmental degradation, and ecological resistance. The analysis extends Nixon's slow violence framework through two additional concepts: eco-orientalism—the manner in which Western environmental thought constructs non-Western lands and peoples as ecologically damaged, passive, or requiring Western-led rescue (Davis, 2007; Said, 1978)—and colonial ecologies, the material and epistemic legacies of colonial resource extraction and Western conservation models that continue to shape postcolonial environmental realities. The study is comparative-thematic rather than strictly regional: it does not seek to establish typologies of South Asian, Malay, or Arab environmental fiction, but instead traces structural homologies and formal divergences in how postcolonial writers across these traditions respond to shared conditions of colonial ecological harm. The theoretical framework established in Section 2 is applied through sustained close reading in Sections 3 to 5, with the aim of demonstrating how analytical categories are embodied, contested, and complicated within specific literary texts.

A terminological clarification is necessary before proceeding. This paper is more precisely a study of postcolonial fiction circulating in English than of "Anglophone fiction" in the strict sense of original English-language composition. Abdelrahman Munif composed *Cities of Salt* in Arabic; its availability to Anglophone academic criticism was made possible by Peter Theroux's 1987 translation. This paper engages with Munif's novel in English translation while acknowledging that the stylistic qualities attributed to him—his naturalistic pacing

and the rhythm of ecological transformation sequences—are present in English as a product of both Munif's compositional choices and Theroux's translatorial decisions. The politics of this linguistic mediation is analytically significant: that a novel offering a sustained indigenous critique of oil extraction had to be translated before reaching Anglophone audiences replicates, at the level of literary circulation, the unequal linguistic hierarchies through which eco-orientalism itself operates. Accordingly, Section 5.1 refers to Munif's work as "Arab-world fiction circulating in English" rather than as "Anglophone fiction," a distinction maintained throughout this paper. Omar El Akkad, by contrast, writes in English as his primary literary language, and the Anglophone designation applies to his work without qualification.

The paper continues as follows. Section 2 provides the theoretical context, developing the idea of slow violence in Nixon, the critical genealogy of eco-orientalism, and introduces the notions of postcolonial ecocriticism as a scholarly field. It includes the critical responses to Nixon that have made his original concept a difficult target. Section 3 explores English (South Asian) Anglophone fiction in the works of Ghosh and Sinha, and finally, provides a lengthy discussion of the novel *The Nutmeg's Curse* by Ghosh as a theoretical climax of the colonial ecology's argument. In section 4, the Malay Anglophone fiction is addressed via Tan Twan Eng and Yang-May Ooi. Section 5 deals with Arab-world fiction by Munif and El Akkad. Section 6 provides an authentic synthetic comparative analysis that discovers convergences and fruitful tensions between the texts. Section 7 ends with the reflections on the implications of postcolonial environmental humanities.

1.1 Methodological Approach

This paper employs a comparative, theoretically guided close reading methodology, working across seven primary texts drawn from three postcolonial literary traditions. Text selection was governed by four criteria: each work engages substantively with ecological destruction, environmental transformation, or ecological resistance as a central narrative or thematic concern; the corpus represents geographical and cultural diversity spanning South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Arab world; all texts circulate in English, whether as original compositions or in Anglophone translation; and each text employs a formally distinctive strategy for representing environmental harm, collectively illustrating the range of literary responses to slow violence. The analysis proceeds in three stages: (1) individual close readings applying Nixon's (2011b) slow violence framework to examine how the concept's temporal, spatial, and representational dimensions are activated, complicated, or contested by each literary text; (2) application of the eco-orientalism framework (Davis, 2007; Said, 1978) to analyse how each text positions Global South landscapes and communities within or against Western environmental epistemologies; and (3) a comparative synthesis in Section 6 that maps convergences and productive tensions across the three traditions, resisting reduction to a single interpretive conclusion. The analytical procedure foregrounds textual evidence at each stage, using theoretical categories as interpretive lenses rather than as templates to be confirmed: wherever a text strains against or complicates the framework, this friction is treated as analytically productive rather than as a problem to be resolved.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Nixon's Slow Violence: Temporality, Visibility, and Environmental Justice

Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor (2011b) is an important contribution to postcolonial environmentalism. Nixon evolves his idea in response to a basic representational crisis: how can we visualize environmental destruction that is transpiring over decades, which is below the threshold of media attention, and which is disproportionately impacting communities with the least access to media power? In the discussion of the book, Nixon (2011b, p. 2) observes that "Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility." The notion works on the basis of three intersecting issues. First, Nixon (2011b, pp. 8–14) foregrounds the temporal dimensions of environmental violence, arguing that contemporary media culture's "digitally speeded up time" impedes narratives of intergenerational environmental legacies. The "long dyings" created by the toxic exposure, climate change, deforestation, and resource extraction do not support the demand of the spectacular catastrophe. Second, he focuses on the environmentalism of the poor as formulated by Guha (2000) and discussed by Guha and Martinez-Alier (1997) that holds that the major victims of slow violence are the communities whose poverty makes them more susceptible to environmental degradation and their less representation in mainstream discourses. Third, Nixon (2011b, p. 67) defends the so-called "writer-activist" who uses literary form to render visible otherwise invisible environmental crises.

The framework by Nixon has not been spared of academic criticism. LeMenager (2014) and Moore (2015) claim that slow violence creates the danger of losing sight of the systemic economic structures, namely, the capitalist world-ecology, which generates environmental damage, and replacing structural analysis with representational solutions. According to Emmett and Nye (2017), the framework used by Nixon retains some of the Americanism assumptions in that the "writer-activist" model is privileged. These criticisms do not disqualify the framework but indicate that the framework is most effective as an analytical instrument amongst others. The current research takes Nixon as a major prism and is nonetheless keen to the points where the framework is overstretched by the burden of the texts it sheds light on.

2.2 Eco-Orientalism: The Discursive Construction of Degraded Landscapes

Eco-orientalism takes the critical framework of Said (1978) and applies it to the sphere of environmental politics. Said argues that the western systems of knowledge have created the Orient as a passive, static, and inferior Other, which guides eco-orientalism in recognizing the ways western environmental thought constructs non-Western landscapes and their inhabitants as ecologically degraded or requiring western scientific intervention, a construction that justifies continued extraction. Research on colonial North Africa by Diana K. Davis (2007) has been especially significant in its tracing of how the French colonial administrators created narratives of the North African

subjects as passive subjects who caused degradation of the environment. Davis (2011, p. 7) extends this, showing that the arid landscape was framed as a space that "needed to be revitalized and saved by modern and progressive Western scientific knowledge and technologies."

This criticism has been applied to the modern environmental politics by recent scholarship. According to Hamouchene and Sandwell (2023), the attitude of the West towards the MENA region recreates an environmental form of orientalism in which green grabbing seizes land and resources in the name of creating something sustainable, but in fact, fulfills the needs of European energy. Alghamdi (2025) shows that modern Arab Anglophone authors contest mainstream ecological discourse which constructs Arab geographies as passive or ecologically peripheral, by showing the embodied memory, affective disruption, and formal experimentation. The paper uses the framework of Alghamdi and places it in a larger comparative context, which examines its assertions against particular textual evidence and does not take them as definitive findings.

2.3 Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Bridging Two Fields

The development of postcolonial ecocriticism as an independent critical discipline has been both required and contested. As Nixon (2011a, para. 11) observes, environmental literary studies and postcolonial studies have developed largely along parallel lines, their relationship "dominated by reciprocal indifference or mistrust." Historically, environmentalism has been seen as an elite Western concern by postcolonial critics, including Said himself, as Nixon (2011a, para. 20) records, it was rejected as an indulgence by those who have no proper cause--as ecocriticism grew with a strong Americanist bias based on transcendentalist and wilderness cultures that are largely irrelevant to postcolonial experience. DeLoughrey and Handley (2011) can be taken as one of the significant attempts to overcome this gap, and the ecocritical studies and postcolonial studies are brought into conversation. This is echoed by Huggan and Tiffin (2010) who demand that environmental literary criticism should pay attention to the ways that colonial histories still influence the ecological realities of the Global South. The powerful definition put forward by Mukherjee (2010, p. 5) that postcolonial ecocriticism should proceed to "provincialize the global and globalize the provincial" thus embodies the paradoxical need to reveal the concealment of specific power relations in the universality of environmental discourses, and to show the ways in which local struggles are echoed by global ecological injustices. *The Great Derangement* by Ghosh (2016) adds to this picture by asserting that it was not only capitalism that led to the global environmental dysfunction, but the unequal processes of the empire, and Ghosh (2016) points out that since very early days, the carbon emissions were strongly linked to power. The study by Heise (2008) on risk perception shows that the global ecological consciousness cannot be achieved by annihilating the local difference but by introducing a new form of relationship between the local and planetary scale.

3. English (South Asian) Anglophone Fiction: Toxic Landscapes and Corporeal Testimony

3.1 Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* (2005): *The Sundarbans as Colonial Palimpsest*

The Hungry Tide by Amitav Ghosh is set in the ecologically sensitive Sundarbans, which is the largest mangrove archipelago of the coast of the Bay of Bengal, India and Bangladesh. The novel is intertwined with the narratives of an American-born cetologist, Piya; a translator, Kanai, who is based in Delhi; and a local fisherman, Fokir, whose embodied understanding of Sundarbans is in stark contrast to both Western scientific models and postcolonial bureaucratic rationality. The historical centre of the novel is the Marichjhapi massacre in 1979, when East Pakistani refugees occupying the island of the Sundarbans were forcibly removed by the West Bengal government in the name of protecting the environment-- a postcolonial tragedy based on colonial land policies.

The novel is an example of the temporal intricacies of slow violence through the prism of Nixon (2011a). The ecological weakness of the Sundarbans is not a historical phenomenon but rather a result of colonial activities such as clearing forests to establish revenue plantations, disturbance of tidal cycles through building embankments and displacement of communities whose ecologically friendly practices ensured the ecological balance. The narrative structure of Ghosh that alternates between the present journey of Kanai and the historical journal that his uncle Nirmal records of the events of Marichjhapi events what Nixon (2011b, p. 8) describes as the temporal "outsourcing" of environmental harm: the effects of colonial ecological intervention will become felt decades later, in a form that is difficult to attribute. The Marichjhapi eviction can be seen as a violent clash where refugees, and women in particular, seek to challenge the state progression thus revealing the human price of conservationism displacement (Ghosh, 2005). The eviction is an instant spectacle; the ecological violence that comes before and after it is slow.

The novel questions eco-orientalist representations of the Sundarbans by subverting them with Fokir, who has an unmatched multi-generational understanding of dolphin habitats, tidal paths, and seasonal fish migrations, which is always far out of reach of scientific equipment used by Piya. Critically, Ghosh is not romanticizing Fokir; the description of the novel runs the risk of aestheticizing the subaltern ecological knowledge by way of the admiring gaze of Piya (Mukherjee, 2010, pp. 88–93). Such a contradiction between the ecocritical aspirations of the text and its possible orientalizing narrator is itself a component of what makes *The Hungry Tide* a complicated, not exactly progressive, text. The Sundarbans is not a passive background but acts as a force of narration, which is in line with postcolonial ecocriticism that insists on de-centering the human and focusing on entanglements of human and more-than-human worlds (DeLoughrey & Handley, 2011, pp. 3–8).

3.2 Indra Sinha, *Animal's People* (2007): *Bhopal and the Embodiment of Slow Violence*

Animal People by Indra Sinha challenges slow violence by the deformed body. The novel is written based on the 1984 gas disaster of Bhopal, the disastrous leakage of the Union Carbide pesticide plant that killed thousands of people on the spot and has been causing death through toxic exposure over the decades. The story is being told through the eyes of Animal, a young man whose spine was twisted because of his

prenatal exposure to chemicals, which compelled him to walk on all fours. The fictional city of Khaufpur stands as one of the most powerful literary representations of what Nixon (2011b, pp. 2–3) calls “the long dyings”—the staggered and discounted casualties of industrial catastrophe. The narrative approach of Sinha denies a distinction between environmental destruction and corporeal experience: the body of Animal is both the witness of ecological crime and the channel in which the ecocritical argument of the novel is promoted. Sinha introduces the deserted factory as a perpetual source of damage by revealing that even after the company has taken off Khaufpur, the impacts of the industrial catastrophe are still felt (Sinha, 2007). This description, the factory is empty, yet still deadly, is an exact representation of the time pattern of slow violence: damage that continues to exist long after the apparent source of that damage is eliminated. The pollution of the soil and groundwater, the high cancer rates, the birth defects that keep occurring decades after the first disaster, which cannot be divided out of the continuous suffering of people (Sinha, 2007) which is a metaphor where human and nonhuman deaths are intermingled.

The novel also stages a critique of what Nixon (2011b) identifies as the protracted, convoluted vapor trail of blame that enables the perpetrators of slow violence to evade accountability. The Kampani, the fictional character of Sinha that plays the Union Carbide role, is a spectral corporate entity whose accountability is continually deferred through legal manoeuvres and the passage of time. The first-person narration of Animal is a form of reverse mediation: instead of Western experts addressing the victims of Bhopal, the victim himself speaks back in a voice that is unresponsive to the register of legitimate suffering. The hybridized English of Sinha, where he intertwines Hindi, Urdu, and French words and phrases, is in opposition to the colonial language hierarchies that help to make subaltern environmental testimony incomprehensible to a metropolitan audience. The difficulty of postcolonial environmental representation as Heise (2008) puts it is to render locally specific suffering readable across cultural and linguistic borders without losing its specificity: a difficulty Sinha achieves by creating linguistic heterogeneity through intentional linguistic heterogeneity.

3.3 Amitav Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021): *The Plant-as-Colonial-Victim and the Ontology of Extraction*

Amitav Ghosh's *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (2021) extends the colonial ecologies argument by taking a nonhuman subject—the nutmeg tree of the Banda Islands—as the primary victim of colonial extraction. Where earlier novels examined in this paper trace slow violence as it registers on human bodies and communities, *The Nutmeg's Curse* theorizes botanical life itself as the target of a violence that is simultaneously ecological, epistemological, and ontological. Ghosh (2021, p. 8) frames colonial ecological destruction as a form of violence that is not spectacular but incremental, distributed across time and space, whose heaviest effects fall upon those least responsible for causing them—a formulation that resonates directly with Nixon's (2011b) foundational framework.

The Nutmeg's Curse is structured around the genocidal Dutch East India Company (VOC) conquest of the Banda Islands in 1621. The Bandanese had cultivated nutmeg within an ecological and trade network that acknowledged the plant's agency and religious significance. The Dutch killed an estimated fifteen thousand Bandanese, enslaved the survivors, and reorganized the islands into plantation monocultures. Ghosh (2021, p. 44) frames this not as a singular atrocity but as the paradigmatic model of a “mode of governance that would become terrifyingly familiar in the centuries to come.” The contrast between the Bandanese relational ecology and the Dutch extractive reorganization of the island's marks, as Sharma (2023) observes, the boundary between the vitalist and mechanistic worldviews that *The Nutmeg's Curse* takes as its central critical opposition.

At the core of Ghosh's argument is the contrast between “vitalist” and mechanistic worldviews. Ghosh (2021, pp. 10–12) describes the Bandanese as operating within a vitalist ontology in which nonhuman beings possess agency, intentionality, and communicative capacity. European colonialism, following what Ghosh, drawing on Merchant (1980), terms the “death of nature,” imposed a mechanistic worldview that reduced the natural world to inert matter available for extraction. The consequences of this epistemological shift are encapsulated in one of the text's most incisive formulations: “It was the rendering of humans into mute resources that enabled the metaphysical leap whereby the Earth and everything in it could also be reduced to inertness” (Ghosh, 2021, p. 67).

Where Nixon (2011b) focuses primarily on the temporal invisibility of environmental destruction, Ghosh adds an ontological dimension: colonial violence does not merely destroy but reconceptualizes what is destroyed, stripping it of relational meaning and agency. This totality is crystallized in Ghosh's concept of “omnicide” (2021, pp. 33–34): the colonial project targets not individual beings but entire systems of life, meaning, and relation, directed at “not just a group of people but also the land, the water, the plants, and the animals.” Karmakar and Chetty (2024) identify this argument as a claim for “cognitive justice”—the legitimization of non-Western knowledge systems as valid frameworks for understanding ecological relations—a concept that supplements Nixon's primarily temporal analysis with an epistemological dimension.

The Nutmeg's Curse serves as a theoretical anchor for the comparative readings that follow. The loss of Sundarbans mangroves, the chemical poisoning of Bhopal, the colonial redefinition of the Malaysian highlands, and the petro-transformation of the Arabian Peninsula are all manifestations of the extractive paradigm whose historical origins Ghosh locates in the Banda genocide. By connecting Nixon's temporal slow violence to the ontological violence of colonialism, *The Nutmeg's Curse* provides the comparative framework with a genealogical depth that the close readings of individual postcolonial novels cannot achieve in isolation.

4. Malay Anglophone Fiction: Gardens, Forests, and the Ecologies of Empire

4.1 Tan Twan Eng, *The Garden of Evening Mists* (2012): *Colonial Memory and Cultivated Nature*

The Garden of Evening Mists (shortlisted in the Man Booker Prize) by Tan Twan Eng is a reflection upon colonial memory, revitalizing the environment, and landscape politics. The plot of the novel is set mostly in the Cameron Highlands of Malaysia in the late 1980s, with

flashbacks to the Japanese occupation (1941–1945) and the Malayan Emergency (1948–1960), and is based on the life of a retired Malaysian Chinese judge, Yun Ling, who comes back to the highlands to document her memories before falling into aphasia, and whose story focuses on her post-war apprenticeship with Japanese gardener Nakamura Aritomo.

The novel, through the framework of Nixon (2011b), unveils the functioning of slow violence based on the landscape itself. The Cameron Highlands, originally constructed by the British as a colonial hill station, with extensive tea plantations taking the place of native forest, is the palimpsest of colonial ecologies. According to Wiyatmi et al. (2022), ecological fiction of this era tends to depict the landscape as a victim and witness of historical violence, which is exactly how Tan has characterized the Cameron Highlands forest, in which the forest is burdened with the burden of colonial memory. The most striking ecological image in the novel is the tea plantation viewed overhead: "row upon row of tea bushes, clipped and regimented as an army on parade" (Tan, 2012, p. 47), a simile that visualizes the military reasoning that informs plantation agriculture.

The Japanese garden, Yugiri, serves as a highly contradictory symbol: aesthetic cultivation created by a former imperial agent in the territory of colonization, with the traditions of one colonizer using to change the land that had already been shaped by another. As Tan (2012, p. 134) has Yun Ling's glimpse: "Every garden is a display of ambition...the garden-maker says: I will make this land obey me." The logic of colonial terraforming is replicated in smaller scale in the urge to dominate nature, even when aestheticized. The apprenticeship of Yun Ling is seen as a kind of "greening postcolonial memories" (Tan, 2012, p. 201, in Yun Ling's own formulation) - of applying the ecological system of growth and season to the process of colonial violence, without entirely abandoning the aesthetic ideology that colonialism generated. In contrast to the colonial tradition to interpret the Malayan forest as primitive wilderness, the novel displays the highlands as a site of multiple cultural meaning and historical memory, implying an ecological aesthetics that is founded on the understanding that human cultures and natural environments are indistinguishably bound together- an understanding that forms the foundation of the postcolonial ecocriticism (DeLoughrey & Handley, 2011).

4.2 Yang-May Ooi, *The Flame Tree* (1998): Grassroots Environmentalism and the Politics of Land

The Flame Tree by Yang-May Ooi directly addresses the environmental politics of post-independent Malaysia and recounts the grassroots campaigns against deforestation that have the imprints of colonial legacies and the neo-colonial capitalism. Poland (1991, p. 143) identifies in such Malaysian fiction a tradition of the "eco-hero" who "seeks and nurtures diversity and complexity and fights against all forms of pollution, class hierarchy, and outside threats to bioregional autonomy"—a tradition that *The Flame Tree* both participates in and complicates, as its activist protagonist must navigate corrupt postcolonial state structures.

The novel, through the prism of Nixon (2011b), sheds light on how the deforestation of Malaysia is a form of slow violence and that its roots are in colonial plantation economics. British colonialization transformed Malaysian forests into rubber and palm oil plantations, which created land-use patterns to be continued to date. According to Deckard (2015, p. 37), this phenomenon can be described as "the regime of nineteenth-century plantation ecology" that "stretches into contemporary times and structures the ecologies" of postcolonial nations—precisely what Ooi describes as the temporal dynamic. The colonial plantation is no longer there, but its spatial logic and its epistemological heritage, that land is a resource to be optimized rather than a community to be inhabited, persist. The focus of the local resistance and community-based environmentalism of Ooi is what Nixon (2011b, p. 4), following Guha and Martínez-Alier (1997), calls the "environmentalism of the poor"—environmental movements grounded in the material needs of communities whose survival depends on environmental well-being. Poland (1991, p. 156) observes that the shift in the eco-hero in Malaysian environmental fiction "from a solitary figure to group solidarity" is a response to the fact that environmental justice cannot be achieved alone. Instead, it will have to be gained through collective action, which is dramatized in *The Flame Tree* by the gradual mobility of village communities into action against the logging interests that threaten their forests.

5. Arab-World Fiction: Petrofiction, Speculative Dystopia, and Environmental Memory

5.1 Abdelrahman Munif, *Cities of Salt* (1984/1987): Petrofiction and the Dissolution of Place

There is a need of methodological clarification. *Cities of Salt* was a novel by Munif written in Arabic and translated into Anglophone publication by Peter Theroux in 1987. In attributing to Munif the stylistic qualities that this paper will regard as the "naturalistic detail" of this novel, the rhythm of its ecological transformation sequences. It does so with the caveat that they are present in English as a result of not only the compositional decisions made by Munif, but also the translatorial decisions made by Theroux. The politics of this mediation is applicable to eco-orientalism: the fact that a novel containing a sustained indigenous critique of oil extraction had to be translated before it could find its way into the Anglophone academic criticism replicates, in a smaller scale, the linguistic hierarchies that eco-orientalism is reproduced through. This native novel that condemns the extraction of oil had to be translated before English-speaking academics could pay attention to it. Thus, it ends up strengthening the same unequal language structure that eco-orientalism relies on. Munif's Saudi citizenship was revoked and he resided in exile because of his political activism and writings that make it particularly ironic that his writing is now considered an "Anglophone" literature.

The first in a five-volume series about the metamorphosis of the Arabian Peninsula after the discovery of oil, *Cities of Salt* is perhaps the most detailed literary treatment of the environmental and social impacts of petroleum drilling in world literature. As Munif puts it, "Cities of salt means cities that offer no sustainable existence. When the waters come in, the first waves will dissolve the salt and reduce these great glass cities to dust" (cited in Ghosh, 1992, p. 30), an ecological metaphor that imagines petroleum modernity as necessarily corrosive of the natural and social structures it replaces.

Nixon (2011b, pp. 68–70) has a direct involvement with *Cities of Salt*: the novel is an exemplar of how petro-capitalism generates a particular kind of slow violence that appears across generations. The immediate violence, the bulldozing of the oasis, the displacement of Bedouin communities, the destruction of traditional water systems, is described with a precision that is quite startling:

"...recalling those days are the tractors which attacked the orchards like ravenous wolves, tearing up the trees and throwing them to the earth one after another, and leveled all the orchards between the brook and the fields. After destroying the first grove of trees, the tractors turned to the next with the same bestial voracity and uprooted them" (Munif, 1984/1987, p. 106).

What is more important about Munif, however, is his capacity of portraying more gradual changes: the dissolution of communal bonds and values, the displacement of native ecological knowledge, and the formation of what Ghosh has termed the quintessential state of "petrofiction": the historic experience of contact between Western and Arab worlds, which is now mediated through the logic of extraction entirely. The eco-orientalist aspects are especially noteworthy here: the American engineers perceive the desert through a purely extractive lens as an empty space with valuable resources, reproducing the colonial construction of arid landscapes as "barren" and awaiting development, which is precisely the frame that Davis follows in French colonial texts about North Africa and that Said, in turn, determines as the Western construction of Eastern space. The counter-narrative of Munif exposes the desert as a terrain of highly developed ecological adaptation whose degradation is not only a crime against the environment, but also an epistemological one.

5.2 Omar El Akkad, *American War* (2017): *Speculative Dystopia and the Reversal of Eco-Orientalism*

Omar El Akkad in his *American War* deals with ecological violence through speculative dystopia. In a future world of the United States ravaged by climate change and a second civil war over banning of fossil fuels, the novel reverses the traditional geography of environmental disaster, with ecological disaster becoming the core of the Western world. In the hypothetical future of El Akkad, sea levels rise and the Florida coastline is under water, as the southern US is itself transformed into a refugee-producing area, and the process of climate migration re-creates, in America itself, the displacement and dispossession patterns that have historically defined the North-South relationship.

This narrative technique is what Alghamdi (2025) refers to as one of the typical ways in which Arab Anglophone fiction has been involved with eco-orientalism namely the deployment of speculative form to disrupt the dominant ecological discourse of presenting Arab geographies as passive or ecologically peripheral. El Akkad uproots the eco-orientalist belief that the ecological disaster happens to other people, in other countries, by situating environmental disaster in America, the largest American per-capita carbon emitter in history. According to the framework of Nixon's (2011a), *American War* can be interpreted as a reflection on the consequences of slow violence taking on a rapid pace. The novel by El Akkad is a use of what could be referred to as anticipatory slow violence: the aesthetic method that injects the current environmental policies into a given future. This pushes the temporal horizon of Nixon's (2011a) beyond the past-into-present into the present-into-future, implying that slow violence can be told not only retrospectively, but speculatively as well. The speculative realism of El Akkad also presents a challenge to the framework: in the event that slow violence is characterized by its invisibility and its gradual time, what happens when speculative fiction makes it suddenly and cataclysmically visible? *American War* threatens to repeat the logic of the spectacular violence that Nixon argues against--staging ecological disaster as spectacle instead of as incremental buildup. This conflict between the ecocritical aspirations of the novel and the genre conventions is not resolved but belongs to what makes it a challenging and generative text.

6. Comparative Synthesis: Tensions and Convergences in the Transnational Literature of Slow Violence

When one reads these seven texts simultaneously one can see not only common issues but also fruitful tensions that can be lost in a simple synthesis based on a superficial comparison. The above paragraphs have defined the common promises of these texts which are their questioning of the temporal presumption of mainstream environmental discourses, their revelation of eco-orientalist structures, their consideration of colonial histories of ecological reconfiguration. This section points out four points of divergence of the texts in instructive respects, which are analytic friction instead of comfortable synthesis.

6.1 The Politics of Epistemological Alternatives

Each of the seven texts celebrates non-Western ecological knowledge as a remedy to extractive epistemologies- but in significantly different registers. *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021) by Ghosh bases this valorization on recent plant science, aiming at rapprochement of indigenous vitalism with post-Cartesian Western biology. The Bedouin communities of Munif are depicted as not needing outside confirmation; what they know is their knowledge and its destruction is wrong. The environmental consciousness of Fokir in *The Hungry Tide* is refracted through the admiring (and possibly exoticizing) Western gaze of Piya (Mukherjee, 2010). The most extreme antithesis to any romanticism is Sinha's Animal who has intimate knowledge of the toxic geography of Khaufpur, not as tradition but as the embodied end result of chemical poisoning: his ecological wisdom is that of a survivor, not a sage.

6.2 The Question of Formal Adequacy

Nixon (2011b, p. 6) states that the problem of slow violence is both a formal problem and for this reason, the writings here address it using vastly different aesthetics. *The Hungry Tide* (2005) by Ghosh is written in dual-narrative and historical palimpsest; *The Nutmeg's Curse* is written in the essayistic genealogy. Sinha uses corporeal testimony by the disabled narrator. Tan is developing the garden as the symbol of ambivalence. Gradual collective resistance is the focus of Ooi. Munif also employs naturalistic pacing to pace narrative time to the beat of ecological change. El Akkad employs speculative projection to render the future violence in an imaginary manner. The variety of these

formal strategies implies that no one literary form is sufficient to slow the representation of violence—a conclusion that conforms to the eclectic interests of Nixon (2011a) himself—and that every formal decision has an ideological investment in it.

6.3 *The Scale of the Political Imaginary*

There is a substantial tension between those texts that conceptualise environmental justice as a collective, communal project and those that conceptualise it as an aesthetic or intellectual project. *The Flame Tree* by Ooi and *Animal's People* by Sinha both focus on collective human action, organizing the community, solidarity networks, as the main means of environmental resistance. Ghosh leans in the non-fiction to the individual writer-intellectual as the agent of ecological re-enchantment. The garden novel by Tan, with its emphasis on the personal memory and aesthetic apprenticeship, presents the narrowest political imaginary of the ones that we are going to consider here. These variations are indicative of actually divergent theories of social change and a comparative reading that reduces the ideological plurality of the corpus to one progressive environmental politics.

6.4 *The Limits of Nixon's Framework across Different Textual Contexts*

Nixon's (2011a) concept of slow violence applies most straightforwardly to Sinha's Bhopal novel, where the industrial disaster and its long aftermath fit the framework almost paradigmatically. It applies somewhat less cleanly to Munif's novel, which depicts violence that is in some respects dramatically rapid—the bulldozing of Wadi al-Uyoun takes days—even if its ecological and social consequences unfold slowly. It strains most under El Akkad's speculative scenario, which imagines violence at an accelerated, spectacular scale. As LeMenager (2014, p. 68) argues, slow violence's emphasis on temporal gradualness can inadvertently naturalize the pace of harm. Munif's and El Akkad's texts—the one depicting rapid colonial rupture, the other imagining catastrophic acceleration—collectively suggest that the temporality of environmental destruction is not uniform and that an adequate postcolonial ecocriticism requires a more varied vocabulary than Nixon's singular concept provides.

7. Conclusion

This paper has argued that fiction from English (South Asian), Malay, and Arab-world literary traditions—with appropriate qualification of the term “Anglophone” in Munif's case—offers important resources for understanding the entangled histories of colonialism, environmental degradation, and ecological resistance. These texts provide a window through which the temporal, spatial and representational aspects of environmental injustice that are habitually obscured by dominant discourses can be seen in the light of the slow violence of Nixon. Critiques of eco-orientalism serve to question the persistent portrayal of Global South environments as either damaged or ecologically deficient. This representation, in turn, justifies the continued exploitation of resources and absolves colonial powers of accountability for the environmental crises they initiated. By focusing on colonial ecologies, they illustrate how material and epistemic legacies of empire persist to influence the environmental realities even after official decolonization.

Incorporating Ghosh's *The Nutmeg's Curse* into this examination has yielded particularly insightful results. Ghosh (2021), by conceptualizing the plant as a casualty of colonialism and by charting the historical roots of extractive violence within a mechanistic epistemology, offers a valuable analytical structure. This framework effectively connects the different colonial environments explored in the three literary traditions. The concept of “omnicide” is an extension of slow violence that Nixon proposes into the nonhuman world, whereas the recuperation of vitalist ontologies is a counter-story to the eco-orientalist vision of colonized landscapes as passive and empty.

The paper has also critically interacted with the framework of Nixon with its limitations and strengths. The gradual change of the framework fails to take into consideration all types of environmental degradation that are reflected in these writings. Its notion of the “writer-activist” also assumes a specific model of literary politics that some of these works do not support. In addition, its limited treatment of structural economic forces—a limitation noted by Moore (2015) and LeMenager (2014)—means it must be supplemented by insights from political ecology and ecocritical Marxism. These limitations are productive rather than damaging; they point toward the next generation of scholarship that the present paper can only gesture toward.

Several limitations of the present study merit acknowledgment. First, the comparative corpus is linguistically constrained: despite its transnational scope, this paper is grounded primarily in texts that circulate in English—whether as original compositions or in translation—a condition that risks reproducing the very Anglophone circulatory logic that eco-orientalism operates through. The environmental fiction of Arabic, Malay, Tamil, and Hindi literary traditions substantially exceeds what becomes visible through Anglophone circulation, and future comparative work should engage those traditions on their own terms. Second, the geographical scope, though broad, excludes African Anglophone fiction, Caribbean literature, and Pacific Island writing, all of which engage with slow violence and colonial ecologies in ways that would enrich and challenge the framework developed here. Third, the analysis foregrounds Nixon's slow violence supplemented by eco-orientalism as its primary interpretive lens; political-ecological, decolonial, or feminist ecocritical frameworks would illuminate dimensions of these texts that the present reading necessarily forecloses. These limitations are not incidental but structurally embedded in the conditions under which transnational comparative scholarship is currently produced, and they underscore the need for multilingual, collaborative, and intercultural research in the postcolonial environmental humanities.

This analysis provides a number of research directions that can be followed in the future. Other literary traditions, such as African Anglophone fiction, Caribbean literature, Pacific Island writing, would enhance the comparative framework. Focus on non-Anglophone literature of these same areas, Arabic, Malay, Tamil, and Hindi fiction, would complicate and extend the analysis by considering the environmental narratives generated in non-circuitous Anglophone publishing. Besides, it would prevent the linguistic bias that this paper, in

spite of its own self-consciousness, has not entirely avoided. The connection between the literary representation and the environmental activism is also worth examining further: how do these texts serve not only to be representations of environmental crisis but also to intervene in the environmental politics? The idea of the “writer-activist” by Nixon leads to a starting point, but there is limited theory on how the work of literary texts can aid environmental justice movements.

What is still evident is that the environmental humanities cannot risk overlooking the literary imagination of the Global South-or appropriating that imagination into its current patterns without a form of critical self-reflection. According to Nixon (2011b), imaginative writing can render the intangible visible and thus it is made real by making the protracted calamities accessible to the human sense of touch. The texts analyzed in this paper do exactly this: they make the abstract statistics of environmental degradation a tangible experience, the invisible process of slow violence visible and powerful narrative, and the marginalized knowledge of colonized peoples a resource to reconsidering how we all relate to the earth. Yet they do so in ways that are neither consistent nor straightforward. These are ways that call on the critic to bring the same rigorous attention to difference, tension, and particularity that environmental politics itself demands.

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