



An Eco-Cultural Interdisciplinary Reading of Tania James's The Tusk That Did the Damage (2015)

Marwan Maho Abdi

Lect./ English Department / College of Languages/
Duhok University

Hogar Najm Abdullah

Lect./ College of Languages
/ University of Duhok

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Correspondence:

marwan.abdi@uod.ac

Abstract

Tania James's *The Tusk That Did the Damage* (2015) is a contemporary fiction with high ecocritical concerns. The novel portrays the life of a baby elephant, later named as Gravedigger, and his development of an antagonizing attitude toward the human species. As a calf, he witnesses how poachers kill his mother only to cut off her tail for witchcraft purposes and another male elephant for his tusks. He is kept captive to be raised for entertainment that requires him to go through extensive abusive training sessions. He eventually manages to break the chain and reclaim his freedom, but with a different attitude toward humanity. Even though the novel is being narrated from different perspectives by various characters, mainly humans, applying first person narration, yet the main focus of the novel is on Gravedigger. The current research, taking an eco-cultural interdisciplinary standpoint toward the respective novel, attempts to tackle ideas such as post-colonial eco-political hypocrisy, interspecies conflict, and ecocritical biocentrism in narration. The research concludes with the respective novel as a rich platform to explore and experiment ecocritical contemporary concerns in a colonially infected setting.

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قراءة بيئية ثقافية متعددة التخصصات من تانيا جيمس الخرطوم الذي تسبب في الضرر (2015)

هوكر نجم عبدالله**

مروان محو عدي*

المستخلص :

رواية "الخرطوم الذي فعل الضرر" لتانيا جيمس (2015) هي رواية حديثة تتناول قضايا بيئية عالية الأهمية. تصوّر الرواية حياة فيل صغير، يُطلق عليه لاحقاً اسم "حفار القبور"، وتطوره لاتجاه معادٍ تجاه الجنس البشري. في طفولته يشهد حادثة قتل أمه على يد صيادين ليتم قطع ذيلها لأغراض السحر وقتل فيل آخر ذكر لأنثابه. يتم احتجازه ليتم تربيته للترفيه مما يتطلب أن يخضع لجلسات تدريب مسبقة للغاية. ينجح في النهاية في كسر السلسلة واستعادة حريته، ولكن بموقف مختلف تجاه البشرية. على الرغم من أن الرواية تُروى من وجهات نظر مختلفة من خلال شخصيات مختلفة، في الغالب بشرية، باستخدام السرد من الشخص الأول، إلا أن التركيز الرئيسي للرواية هو على "حفار القبور". تهدف الدراسة الحالية، من خلال وجهة نظر انسجامية بيئية-ثقافية نهجية نحو الرواية المعنية، إلى معالجة أفكار

* مدرس / قسم اللغة الانكليزية / كلية اللغات / جامعة دهوك

** مدرس / كلية اللغات / جامعة دهوك

مثل النفاق السياسي البيئي ما بعد الاستعماري، والصراع بين الأنواع، والبيوسنترية البيئية في السرد. تختتم الدراسة بالرواية المذكورة كمنصة غنية لاستكشاف وتجريب القضايا البيئية الحديثة بنهج مصاب بالاستعمار في الإعداد.
الكلمات المفتاحية: النقد البيئي، الثقافة والطبيعة، السياسة البيئية، الصراع بين الأنواع

Introduction

The nuanced inter-relatedness between humankind, culture, and the natural world has long intrigued scholars, sparking ongoing debate and exploration. Within this complicated tapestry, the undeniable connection between the aesthetic qualities of our surroundings and the psychology of those individuals who inhabit them has been extensively documented, highlighting the enormous impact of natural environment on human experience. Modern and postmodern consumerist politics' approaches to nature, especially in third-world countries, are due to the deterioration of the economic conditions of the working-class stratum, following the previous western colonial activities in their region. This has led to various contemporary post-colonial provincial environmentalist writings such as Indian environmentalism addressing struggles "faced by forest dwellers who have been traditionally dependent on local natural resources" (Zapf, 2016: 422).

In the realm of contemporary literary discourse, Tania James's fiction titled *The Tusk That Did the Damage* (2015) as a seminal narrative tackles the complicated aspects of human-nature reciprocation, inner-species conflict, and the authorities' hypocrisy toward finding proper resolutions to the problems caused to nature as aftereffects of colonialism. James's novel, with its intricate cultural motifs mixed with profound ecological concerns, mirrors all the characteristics of a testament to the world's network of being and human's position in creating a natural trauma through an unfair interspecies conflict that unfolds within a colonially disturbed environment. Being set in Post-colonial India, the course of the novel goes around the life of a baby elephant and his gradual changing attitude toward human beings, from an innocent baby calf to what the locals name him later; a Gravedigger.

The novel tackling its seminal themes through the life of a baby elephant from different perspectives, portrays not only the elephant but also the locals as victims of their own actions, their historical colonial past, and political and governmental hypocrisy and irresponsibility; people whose agricultural products are not being supported by their government and have no other means to meet their economic needs but to turn to the poaching culture that has a profound root in their colonial past. In brief, James's novel is a lens through which her readers view the scars left by the convergence of colonial ambition and ecological negligence.

Approach and Methodology

The current study, adopting an interdisciplinary approach, attempts to engage the most pivotal concepts of ecocriticism and postcolonialism to observe the eco-critical and cultural aftereffects of colonialism as presented in Tania James's novel. Postcolonialism, having intensive focus on post-colonial concept of culture, intersects profoundly with ecocritical theory and its discursive inclination toward human-nature interconnectedness and ecological ethics. Huggan and Tiffin (2010) state that "What the postcolonial/ecocritical alliance brings out, above all, is the need for a broadly materialist understanding of the changing relationship between people, animals and environment" (12). On the other hand, as Bartosch (2013) affirms a materialist postcolonial eco-critic approach to literature is not an irrelevant tendency since "politics and biology are, in fact, one (231).

Applying the interdisciplinary lens of eco-postcolonialism not only provides a researcher with a better understanding of the concept of oppression from an anthropocentric viewpoint but also the paradigm of othering that has extended its reach into the realm of the natural sphere (Garrard, 2004: 177). Being silent, yet the loudest voice in the world, nature posits the central concern, exploring from the bilateral lens of postcolonialism and ecocriticism to single out and dismantle James's ecological narrative and the value it gives to cultural identity. Dealing with the most prominent thematic inclinations of the novel, the study takes a contextual analytic stance to appraise the flow of post-colonial eco-political hypocrisy throughout the course of the narrative. Shedding light on Spivak's theory of subaltern, the study also navigates through concepts of interspecies conflict in the way it presents nature as a subaltern marginalized entity attempting to reclaim her colonially manipulated identity during the post-colonial era; a historically extended manipulation that eventually led to the nature's fragmented and silenced attribution through human being's anthropocentric hegemonies (Roos & Hunt, 2010: 132). Glotfelty and Fromm (1996), shedding light on the voicelessness of nature and its subaltern trait, assert that:

If the domination of nature with all its social anxieties rests upon this void [Subalternized voiceless nature], then we must contemplate not only learning a new ethics, but a new language free from the directionalities of humanism, a language that incorporates a decentered, postmodern, post-humanist perspective (17).

Through exploration and navigating the narratives that are fundamentally conglomerated around nature's voice and biocentrism, this study aspires to articulate a comprehensive analysis of nature's own tale and the way it reciprocates with other anthropocentric tenets.

Being mainly concerned with the aftermath of colonial materialist philosophy and its practice on regions, societies, and identities, and culture postcolonialism unveils the aftereffects of the practice not only on colonized nations but also the profound deteriorating impacts on nature. In other words, as claimed by Iovino and Oppermann (2014), "Material ecocriticism traces the trajectories of natural-cultural interactions" (6). The practice is tightly associated with the concept of commodification of natural resources due to the colonial consumerist culture [as an offshoot of Marxist theory], a process that its effects extends to the post-colonial time within a broader socio-ecological and cultural landscape of previously colonized regions, especially the oriental ones (Clark, 2015: 190). First being introduced by Nixon (2013), the concept of slow violence has become a widely applied notion to analyze the environmental degradation that often happens in a concealed manner, yet inevitably pervasive in previously colonized regions (2). This particular type of violence, imposed upon nature incrementally imperceptible, mirrors colonialism's deceptive legacy post-colonially where environmental disturbance is inflicted in its extended converged forms such as ecological negligence or anthropocentric assertion toward nature.

Post-colonial Eco-political Hypocrisy

The Tusk That Did the Damage (2015) by Tania James mirrors all the characteristics of intricate eco-political issues in a post-colonial setting. James's novel has successfully managed to portray a blunt panoramic tableau of the grim reality of natural conservation that is often intermingled with the bureaucratic corruption and imperialist remnants. Conglomerated around such seminal universals, elements of communal needs, personal greed, and political dysfunctionality and hypocrisy darkly outshine in the novel. Through touching narratives of the poacher, the elephant, and the filmmaker, the novelist has

managed to construct a comprehensive eco-critical discourse tackling a tight and bloody interspecies' battlefield where intentions sound sensible, yet actions are brutally hypocritical (James, 2015: 73).

Such eco-political multi-dimensional aspects of the novel are presented to the readers through the devastated economic livelihood situation of the local people, who after the decline of agriculture in the region due to the imperial activities and lack of agricultural support by the government. Explaining the main reason of the region's agricultural decline and locals' tendency towards tusk industry and poaching elephants, Manu, the younger brother of a poacher, states that "Our father was a rice farmer. He came from a time when to farm was a noble profession, when people sought our *gandhakasala* and our *rosematta* for their earthy fragrance superior to the stuff that now comes cheap from Vietnam" (James, 2015: 6). Accordingly, locals are forced to turn back to nature to meet their life needs.

On the other hand, natural meeting of fundamental life needs is in direct clash with animals, stimulating their survival instinct. Geographical traits and plantation in the southern parts of India, especially Kerala where the chain of the story's incidents are fabricated, have led to an exceptional regional zoology and environmental wildlife characteristics, providing elephants with a heavenly life platform. Despite their religious significance in India, particularly as Lord Ganesha, and the fact that many Indians don't consume elephant meat, elephant tusks remain a valuable commodity, especially in certain international markets influenced by high-demand luxury goods. Hence, hunting down elephants for their tusks, starting as a colonial phenomenon and later becoming an economy-based regional culture, is an act that has profound roots in western colonial commodification of the exotic oriental nature and an instant postmodern imperialist gaze of the world towards third-world countries and their environmental wealth. Manu commenting on the concept of commodification states that:

How well I recall the world in that narrow room. Two long tables covered in a forest of white figurines [made of elephants' tusk]. A troop of tiny elephants. Bangles smooth and stacked. And in far corner a giant Nataraj with one sleek limb raised, all in ivory (James, 2015: 49).

James's narrative is a post-colonial critique, as much as it criticizes the colonial disturbance of the region's wildlife and its people's cultural patterns. Throughout the course of the novel, James has attempted to portray the extended impact of colonialism in her country and the way it has depleted the Kerala region's natural resources and disturbed the zoology of the area. On one hand, Ranger's controversial perspective about his duty to protect the elephants, and expressing his genuine sorrow about locals' bad financial situation, mirrors his inner conflict as a post-colonially subjugated character who is being subalternized by a bureaucratic corrupt government to stand against his own people against his real will. Hiring protecting jungle rangers whose main job is to protect elephants from poachers is one of the greatest hypocritical politics of the state's government. This is due to the fact that, instead of solving the problem fundamentally through supporting the internal agricultural products by giving farmers subsidy, it attempts only to create a temporary answer for the western ears that are actually the main reasons for all the post-colonial geocentric, biocentric, and anthropocentric dislocations.

Furthermore, part of James's novel narrative is conveyed to a western filmmaker who is casting a documentary about locals' abusive treatment of the elephants. In this documentary movie, he mirrors the international Eurocentric media and its idealistic, rather than pragmatic approach, to the region's ongoing ecocritical concerns and the interspecies conflicts. Illustrating such Eurocentric idealist gaze towards the 'exotic' oriental wildlife, in an occasion Emma the American filmmaker states;

I knew the way to the calves, which turns to take, a sharp left at the bale of new-cut grass, wire fences trailing ahead on either side. But once I reached the calves, I lost the will to film. Instead I rested the camera on a fence post and watched them, for the first time, without any equipment attached to my ears or eyes (James, 2015: 110).

Such western perspectives are often superficial, disregarding the post-colonial depth of the problems surrounding natural conservation and neglecting the main economic reasons behind it. The novelist's application of multiple voices in her masterpiece has bestowed the fiction with a neutral yet rigorous approach to the contemporary eco-postcolonial concerns of India. Gravedigger, representing nature, Emma, as an American filmmaker who represents the occidental idealist voice, and Manu, who becomes the mouthpiece of the local people's economic concerns, all together clearly conceptualize the depth of ongoing ecocritical issues, government's hypocrite approach to the problem, economic desperation of the local people, and the shallow and superficial perception of the western mindset towards the ongoing problems.

Surprisingly, unlike all the characters who directly articulate their concerns and viewpoints about Gravedigger in first person narration, Gravedigger represents the silent voice of nature. The parts of the story that are conveyed from the Gravedigger's perspective are articulated in third person narration. This silent trait of the elephant well-places him in position of an environmental subaltern state, representing the suffering of the exploited land and pieces. This multilayered method of narration skillfully reveals the hidden paradoxes in the regions' ongoing eco-political discourses that place any reader in an alerted and critical position to experiment each stakeholder's approach and reciprocation toward the physical environment and natural identity (James, 2015: 110).

Finally, *The Tusk That Did the Damage* (2015) essentially revolves around the overarching theme of an interspecies conflict. James, instead of taking a biased position of pure androcentric or biocentric, experiments the ethical concerns of human-wildlife conflict through post-colonial ethos. Rather than providing her readers with a polarized viewpoint, the author adapts an approach that has situated a rather a blurred, yet mutual, trauma that both animals and humans are imposed to bear as a result of their colonial history and their post-colonial survival conflicts. She examines the interrelation and reciprocation of economic, cultural, and ecological places where elephants, symbolizing wild-life, are both protected and hunted; revered and feared. Even though the Gravedigger was protected as calf by the forest rangers after his mother was killed by the poachers, the purpose behind protecting him was not primarily to preserve the wildlife but to train him entertain the locals and amuse them. Though such de-romanticization and avoiding vilification, the author implants the conception of post-colonial eco-political hypocrisy, where strive for human-nature coexistence is in direct relation with moral compromises and contradictions.

Inter-species Conflict

All the current events in James's novel are conglomerated around the dominant theme of interspecies conflict in which the author has successfully managed to fund upon the bedrock of the violent collision of human beings, meeting their economic needs, and nature striving to keep itself sustained. This constant rivalry over the shared resources and living spaces is placed at the very central core of the conflict that fundamentally fuels an existential fight. James digs deep into the structural causes affecting the ongoing interspecies conflict, revealing the more subdued types of conflict that eventually results not

only a brutally physical face off, but also the sufferings and pains that each species inflict upon the other according to its actions and behaviors. The multilayered and intricately complicated web of relationships and human-nature reciprocation, as presented in James's novel, emphasizes the fact that even though each species is naturally independent, yet due to the intersection of their territories, disastrous results sprung by constant struggles are inevitable. On this regard, Manu, a poacher's younger brother states that "I will show you the day it [the Gravedigger] first laid its foot on our scrawny lives. Then you tell me who was hunter and who was hunted" (James, 2015: 6).

Throughout the novel, James has presented the concept of interspecies conflict through the intersecting perspectives of an aggressive elephant known as Gravedigger by the local inhabitants of Kerala, a western documentary filmmaker named Emma, and Manu, the son of a local farmer whose brother is a poacher due to the regional economic instability. Gravedigger, being a victim of human's greed and traumatized by the loss of her mother killed by them, becomes known for his severe antagonism and the graveyard he has dug for the humans. This places the animal in a revolutionary position, representing nature and wildlife, against human's encroachment and cruelty fueled by the locals' post-colonial economic severed situation and the authority's imperial perspective toward nature.

On the other hand, countrymen's strive with continuous economic hardships along with the fear of the elephant raiding their farming lands illustrates the depth of the colonial aftereffects of nature's disturbance and the way it encompasses later cultural alterations post-colonially. The fear and frustration that is embedded within James's novel demonstrates the visceral mirroring of a broader conflict over survival and a resilient cohabitation within a shared environment with limited natural resources. Hence, through her immediate postmodern storytelling techniques and the thematic inclinations of the narrative, the novelist has managed to influentially underscore how interspecies conflict is not a mono-dimensional quality of isolated events, rather a broader ongoing concept of struggles profoundly implanted in the lives of all the living beings.

What drives the motif of interspecies conflict in the novel is an intricately complex topic that has to be dealt from an interdisciplinary lens, deserving to be tackled from an interdisciplinary lens that would encompass a wide range of essential factors such as ecological traits of the area, economic situation of the villagers, and also the socio-cultural stimuli. Even though human-wildlife competition has been existed historically, yet the conflict has become more brutally severe since humankind decided to enhance his inhabitation into the wilderness to have a wider living space and meet his vital life needs. Poaching, being conducted by the poor villagers due to its luring lucrativeness, contributes to ongoing circle of human-wildlife conflict. Moreover, Indian cultural standpoints viewing elephants as either divine beings or hazardous pets, has led to divergent methods to deal with the common environmental issues in the novel. James presents these factors as interrelated, illustrating the complexity that underlies both environmental regulations and human behavior. By describing these forces, she exposes how interspecies conflict is a fundamental part of post-colonial civilizations that are struggling to maintain their identities in a place that is changing quickly.

James's novel provides its readers with a rare insightful account of environment's consciousness presented through the Gravedigger's perspective. The narrative device applied by the author has made her in a dominant position of challenging the anthropocentric worldview and to emphasize on the psychological and emotional toll of interspecies conflict on animals. Gravedigger's perspective on

humans that is being projected through his life experiences and painful past memories mirrors a life that is marred by loss and tragedy. Through bestowing agency and cultural identity to nature, James successfully manages to challenge her readers' concept of morality toward nature and his responsibility to nature which requires deep understanding and apathy from the readers. Gravedigger's tragic story is a touching counterbalance to human's dominant voice, ensuring that wildlife's silent suffering under mankind's dominion is both tangibly sensed, thus bestowing a more holistic image of nature's struggle to self-sustain and survive against human's antagonism. In other words, the elephant is on the other side of the inter-species conflict equation, trying to survive the human greed and consumerist gaze at the nature, a gaze that is fundamentally a souvenir from the colonial history of the region.

The human figures in James's novel encompass a wide spectrum of approaches to nature and wildlife, from exploitive to seemingly protective. Despite of knowing well about the depth of damages he inflicts on nature and wildlife via his poaching culture, the poacher's poor socio-economic situation and lack of governmental and administrative support from the authorities leaves no other choice of livelihood to survive. On the other hand, the seemingly conservationists' protective approach to wildlife does not sound efficient since the government that supports them is removed from the harsh socio-economic situation of the villagers and attempts to solve such a controversial issue with temporary idealistically empirical solutions, rather than taking pragmatic steps. Through such polarization of characters and their motivations approaching nature and wildlife, and avoiding the common naïve concept of pure evil and pure good, the author fabricates a more comprehensive portrayal of conflict and independence.

Nature's Narrative and Biocentrism

Tania James's novel portrays nature as an active narrator with a loud voice rather than a silent backdrop. The author elevates the physical nature and its wildlife with high articulating consciousness empowered through the character of Gravedigger. This is a revolutionized ecocritical approach to narratology that provides readers with a new biocentric perspective of natural world where human being and wildlife are in constant reciprocation and coalescence. Such approach to ecocritical narratology goes behind portraying nature as a mere constituent of setting, rather an active agent and a dynamic entity with tales of her own. *The Tusk That Did the Damage* (2015), elucidates the exceptional voice of nature in fostering thematic concerns of such quest for identity in both humans and other constituent species in relation to each other, within a broader ecological sphere they mutually inhabit. The author allocating a big part of her story emphasizing on the elephant's perspective on human beings and their cruelty, even though in third person narration, fabricates a narrative that articulates universal concepts of suffering and survival, tangling animal human destinies into a single thread.

The elephant protagonist in James's novel represents the rage of the whole ecological system that is constantly being consumed due to the anthropocentric perspective of the imperial system of the post-colonial era. It is through the animal and his traumatized perspective that the reader discovers the ongoing psychological turmoil and emotional rage imposed on him since his childhood through human beings exploiting nature and its constituent wildlife. Gravedigger not only plays the role of a separate and real character, transcends such trait and becomes a visual allegory of an ecological voice; a raging reflection of loss, displacement, and retaliation. His memories are constructed by the painful childhood memories of humans poaching his mother and killing other male elephants in his herd for their tusks. Through

Gravedigger, James manages not only to attract an international empathy towards nature and wildlife, but also to compel her readers to celebrate the critical prominence of the independent agency of wildlife.

Biocentrism, as experimented in James's novel, underlies a stark confrontation to the traditional and pervasive anthropocentric perspective to the world. In her work, the author questions the ethics and moralities of human dominion over the physical world and the wilderness through presenting conscious non-human creatures and their associated existential rights and ecological values. The biocentrism is embedded within the textual qualities of the author's narration, prominently through the nuanced sentient characteristic of the elephant and his certain rights to live and being an autonomous ecological entity. Doing so, she challenges the readers' traditional worldview to nature as a mere empirical supporting life resource or developmental obstacles, but rather as an entity with its own autonomous worth. Though the application of biocentrism, she attempts to question the established cultural traditions and set norms such as humans' advancement into the nature, hunting down elephants for their tusks, and conservation that are inherited from a dark colonial past. Commenting on disturbing the elephants' ecosystem due to the deforestation process, the third person voice narrative which speaks out the elephant's inner voice states that "No sight was stranger than the treeless swaths through which he and his clan used to cross, taking shady refuge beneath the ribs of the tree. Little remained of the rosewood and aanjili, only stumps like rivets in the earth" (James, 2015: 152). Such alteration in viewpoints requires a profoundly rigid re-evaluation of our reciprocating roles and responsibilities toward nature; an urge of transformation from domination to coexistence.

Through giving nature a loud voice and a narrative opposing arc to the traditional human anthropocentric stories, the author puts biocentrism into practice and a pragmatic applied mode. Such novel approaches to literature and its relation to ecology undermines the previous marginalization of environmental problems. The novel particularly focuses on the fact that all environmental entities possess their own conscious tales deserving to be heard and respected. Through the embodiment of nature as an autonomous character with legit survival drives, the author drags nature to its originally central place mainly to shed light upon its existentially vital prominence and previously unappreciated interconnectedness of all ecosystem entities. Through giving significance to such original viewpoints, she attempts to impose a sense of fostering position to her readers and making them understand the ethical responsibilities they have towards nature and preserving their harmonious pace toward it (James, 2015: 152).

Conclusion

The Tusk that Did the Damage (2015) illustrates all the characteristics of a postmodern literary work with ecocritical concerns, portraying the ongoing post-colonial arena of interspecies conflict within a colonially disturbed ecosystem. The touching tale of Gravedigger, a raging traumatized elephant, Tania James's narrative tackles prominent themes such as post-colonial eco-political hypocrisy, interspecies conflict, and biocentrism. The author, through applying multiple layers of narration from different viewpoints has managed to bestow her literary work with a high quality of rigor. Through her human narrators, primarily applying first person narration, and the third person narration portraying the elephant's worldview and psychologically traumatized state, James successfully has managed to originally experiment the post-colonial human-wildlife interaction and reciprocation within a mutually shared environment that is brutally exploited due to the post-colonial and imperially infected economic

deteriorated situation of the locals. The novel performs as a mirror to confront its addressees with the ethical and environmental implications of their behaviors, invites its readers to re-evaluate their approach toward the physical world and the organic wildlife. In light of this, future research in the field of eco-cultural studies could be conducted to explore the potential of narrative techniques to foster empathetic connections between humans and non-human entities, particularly in post-colonial eco-political contexts. Additionally, investigating the psychological consequences of interspecies conflict, as portrayed through the trauma of characters like Gravedigger the elephant, could provide a deeper understanding of the enduring impacts of colonialism on wildlife well-being. By building upon the themes and narrative innovations of *The Tusk that Did the Damage*, future research can contribute to more profound understandings of cultural attitudes towards nature, hence paving the way for more sustainable and ethical relationships between humans and the environment.

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