



A Postcolonial Ecocritical Analysis Of Sujata Bhatt's 'A Different History'

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Abstract

This study offers a nuanced examination of Sujata Bhatt's poem 'A Different History' through the lens of postcolonial ecocriticism. By analysing the intricate interplay between language, nature, and cultural identity in Bhatt's work, this research illuminates how the poet challenges Western epistemologies while advocating for a more harmonious human-nature relationship. The article argues that Bhatt's poem serves as both a critique of colonial legacies and a call for environmental stewardship and cultural preservation. Through close textual analysis and engagement with contemporary theoretical frameworks, this study reveals how Bhatt's poetry navigates the complex terrain of postcolonial identity and environmental consciousness. By situating 'A Different History' within the broader context of postcolonial ecocriticism, this research contributes to our understanding of how literature can address the intertwined issues of cultural and ecological sustainability in the aftermath of colonialism. Ultimately, this analysis underscores the importance of integrating cultural and environmental perspectives in literary studies, offering valuable insights for scholars in postcolonial studies, ecocriticism, and contemporary poetry.

Keywords: Sujata Bhatt, postcolonial ecocriticism, environmental literature, cultural identity, linguistic imperialism

Introduction

The convergence of nature, culture, and postcolonialism within literary studies has garnered considerable scholarly interest in recent years, particularly through the intricate framework of ecocriticism. This burgeoning theoretical perspective delves into the multifaceted interplay between literature and the natural environment, offering a profound exploration of how narratives shape and are shaped by ecological contexts. Scholars in this field frequently emphasize the consequences of human actions on ecological systems, scrutinizing the ways in which literary texts reflect and critique environmental degradation, climate change, and the exploitation of natural resources (Glotfelty, 1996). Furthermore, ecocriticism often intersects with postcolonial studies to examine how colonial histories have impacted both cultural and natural landscapes, revealing the enduring legacies of colonial exploitation and environmental injustice in formerly colonized regions. This interdisciplinary approach not only enriches our understanding of literary texts but also prompts critical reflections on contemporary environmental issues and their socio-political dimensions.

In response to the pressing need for a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of environmental issues within postcolonial contexts, postcolonial ecocriticism has emerged as a vital scholarly approach. This interdisciplinary perspective recognizes that environmental degradation and exploitation are deeply intertwined with colonial and neocolonial practices, which have historically marginalized and disadvantaged native populations while depleting natural resources and disrupting ecosystems (DeLoughrey & Handley,

2011). By combining the critical lenses of postcolonial theory and ecocriticism, scholars can rigorously examine how literary texts navigate and articulate the complex interrelations between cultural identity, social justice, and environmental sustainability in the aftermath of colonialism.

Sujata Bhatt was born in Ahmedabad, India, in 1956, and later moved to the United States with her family. She pursued her MFA at the University of Iowa and currently resides in Germany with her husband and daughter. Bhatt's transnational experiences deeply inform her poetry, which often navigates multiple cultural identities and languages. Her works have been praised for their lyrical intensity and profound exploration of memory, language, and identity. Critics like John Thieme (2001) have observed that "Bhatt's poetry often bridges cultural divides, creating a syncretic space where the sacredness of nature transcends cultural boundaries" (p. 45). Sujata Bhatt's poem 'A Different History' serves as a compelling text for exploring these themes. Bhatt, an Indian poet with a global perspective, frequently addresses issues of displacement, cultural hybridity, and linguistic diversity in her work. 'A Different History' is particularly noteworthy for its nuanced portrayal of the cultural and environmental upheavals wrought by colonialism.

Analysing literature through the lens of postcolonial ecocriticism allows for a deeper investigation into how colonial legacies continue to shape contemporary environmental policies and practices. This approach often reveals how these legacies perpetuate inequities and ecological harm in formerly colonized regions. By examining narratives that resist dominant environmental discourses and foreground indigenous knowledge systems, local ecologies, and alternative modes of living, postcolonial ecocriticism challenges exploitative practices. Ultimately, this interdisciplinary framework not only enriches literary studies but also fosters critical dialogues about the intersection of environmental and social justice, encouraging a more holistic approach to addressing the global environmental crisis.

Main Thrust

Nature and Culture: A Symbiotic Relationship

In 'A Different History,' Sujata Bhatt intricately weaves the themes of nature and culture, presenting them as inextricably linked. The poem opens with an invocation to Pan, the Greek god of nature, who is repositioned within an Indian cultural context. This invocation serves as a powerful metaphor for the universality and adaptability of natural reverence, transcending cultural boundaries. Bhatt writes:

"Great Pan is not dead;
he simply emigrated
to India" (lines 1-3).

This line underscores the fluidity and resilience of cultural symbols when transplanted into new environments, suggesting that nature itself can serve as a bridge between diverse cultural identities.

Critic John Thieme (2001) supports this interpretation, noting that "Bhatt's poetry often bridges cultural divides, creating a syncretic space where the sacredness of nature transcends cultural boundaries" (p. 45). The poem continues to emphasize the sacredness of nature and knowledge in Indian culture through references to Indian deities and symbols. For instance, Bhatt writes:

"the sin of disrespecting a book" (line 13),

highlighting the cultural reverence for knowledge, which is often considered as sacred as nature itself. This symbiotic relationship between nature and culture is central to understanding Bhatt's critique of colonial practices that disrupt this harmony.

Postcolonial Hybrid Identities

The concept of hybrid identities is central to postcolonial discourse and is vividly illustrated in Bhatt's poem. The poet herself embodies this hybridity, being an Indian-born poet who has lived in multiple countries, including the United States and Germany. This multicultural background informs her work, as seen in the seamless blending of Western and Eastern symbols in 'A Different History'. Bhatt's invocation of Pan

alongside Indian deities illustrates the coexistence of multiple cultural identities within a single narrative framework.

Ania Loomba (1998) contends that “Postcolonial literature often grapples with hybrid identities, reflecting the complicated realities of individuals who exist between cultures” (p. 117). This is evident in Bhatt’s portrayal of linguistic and cultural hybridity. The poem’s line:

“Which language has not been the oppressor’s tongue?” (line 16),

captures the tension between the multiple linguistic and cultural identities that postcolonial subjects often navigate. The imposition of the colonizer’s language becomes a site of struggle, as it simultaneously offers a means of communication and serves as a reminder of cultural subjugation.

Colonialism and Cultural Displacement

Bhatt’s poem poignantly addresses the cultural displacement wrought by colonialism. The line:

“Which language has not been the oppressor’s tongue?” (line 16),

serves as a powerful critique of the colonial practice of imposing the colonizer’s language on the colonized. This imposition often results in the marginalization of indigenous languages and cultures, leading to a sense of alienation and cultural loss. Bhatt captures this sense of displacement through her exploration of linguistic colonization, where the colonizer’s language becomes a tool of oppression.

According to Homi K. Bhabha (1994), “Colonialism not only disrupts the cultural and social fabric of the colonized society but also leaves a lasting impact on the identities of the colonized people” (p. 112). This lasting impact is evident in Bhatt’s portrayal of the intergenerational effects of cultural displacement. The poem’s imagery of books and language serves as a metaphor for the broader cultural erasure that occurs under colonial rule. The reverence for books, seen in the line:

“the sin of disrespecting a book” (line 13),

contrasts sharply with the violence of cultural imposition, highlighting the deep cultural trauma caused by colonialism.

Colonial Violence and Environmental Degradation

Bhatt’s poem also alludes to the violence inherent in colonial practices, both against people and the environment. The lines:

“You must learn how to turn the pages
gently
without disturbing Sarasvati,
without offending the tree
from whose wood the paper was made” (lines 15-19),

can be read as a critique of the exploitative relationship between colonizers and the natural resources of colonized lands. The reference to Sarasvati, the Hindu goddess of knowledge, coupled with the plea to respect the tree from which paper is made, underscores the sacredness of nature and the interconnectedness of cultural and ecological systems. Rob Nixon (2011) argues that “environmental degradation is often a form of slow violence that disproportionately affects the marginalized” (p. 2). Bhatt’s lines poignantly capture this notion, highlighting the colonial exploitation of natural resources and its lasting impacts on both the environment and indigenous cultures.

Ecological and Cultural Resilience

Despite the profound disruptions caused by colonialism, Bhatt’s poem conveys a sense of resilience and continuity. The reverence for nature and cultural heritage persists, suggesting a form of ecological and cultural endurance. In the poem, Bhatt writes:

“the gods roam freely,
disguised as snakes or monkeys” (lines 4-5),

emphasizing the enduring presence of cultural symbols within the natural world. This resilience is further echoed in the concluding lines of the poem, which evoke a sense of adaptation and survival despite historical attempts at cultural erasure.

Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2010) argue that “Postcolonial ecocriticism seeks to uncover the ways in which colonial histories continue to shape present-day ecological and cultural realities” (p. 3). Bhatt’s poem exemplifies this approach by highlighting the ongoing impact of colonialism on both the natural environment and cultural identities. However, the poem also celebrates the resilience of these cultural and ecological systems, suggesting that they can adapt and endure despite the challenges posed by colonial histories.

Conclusion

A postcolonial ecocritical analysis of 'A Different History' by Sujata Bhatt reveals how the poem critiques colonial legacies while promoting environmental awareness and cultural preservation. By interweaving themes of language, nature, and cultural identity, Bhatt challenges Western epistemologies and advocates for a more harmonious relationship between humans and the environment. This analysis contributes to the expanding body of literature examining the intersection of postcolonial studies and environmental criticism, underscoring the importance of considering both cultural and ecological factors in literary analysis.

Bhatt’s work serves as a poignant reminder of the lasting impacts of colonialism, not just on cultural identities but also on our natural world. Her poetry invites readers to reflect on the interconnectedness of these issues and to recognize the need for a more integrated approach to understanding our past and present. By highlighting the resilience and adaptability of cultural and ecological systems, Bhatt encourages a perspective that honours both heritage and the environment.

In a time when environmental degradation and cultural erosion are pressing global issues, Bhatt’s poem offers a vision of hope and renewal. It calls for a reclamation of lost histories and a reinvigoration of cultural and ecological consciousness. Ultimately, Bhatt’s 'A Different History' is not just a critique but also a testament to the possibility of healing and coexistence, making it a significant work for both literary scholars and environmental advocates alike.

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