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[Racialized Nature, Racialized Labor: Reading Ecological Imperialism in *The River Between* and *Moby-Dick*]

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[Abstract] *This comparative study examines how colonial and capitalist systems exploit nature through racialized extraction in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's* The River Between *and Herman Melville's* Moby-Dick. *Through postcolonial ecocriticism, the analysis demonstrates how both novels critique ecophobia and ecological imperialism. Colonial authorities disrupt Gikuyu ecological knowledge, while industrial whaling manifests capitalist excess and ecophobic domination. Both novels expose how extractive systems appropriate Indigenous knowledge while denigrating its sources. Yet they document resistance: communities maintain land connections, Indigenous wisdom survives, and nature refuses total domination, preserving alternatives that dominant systems attempt to erase.*

[Keywords] *ecological imperialism; ecophobia; English literature; postcolonial ecocriticism*

[1] Introduction

In 2023, the Lamaleran people of Indonesia's Savu Sea confronted an escalating crisis. For centuries, their sustenance and cultural identity have depended on *lefo*, a traditional whale hunt governed by customary law and spiritual protocols. They now face a dilemma: industrial fishing fleets deplete whale populations while international conservation frameworks threaten to criminalize their practices, dismissing Lamaleran ecological knowledge as primitive (Maukar 77). Rising sea levels and state-backed development projects simultaneously displace coastal communities, eradicating generational environmental stewardship (Wiryani et al. 954)this transition was unfortunately not accompanied by a rearrangement of land ownership to allow the practice of land-grabbing inherited from the New Order regime to persist in contemporary Indonesia. This article examines the reasons behind the failure of the agrarian transition in Indonesia, by focusing on case studies in Tegalrejo Village, Malang Regency and the Pamona indigenous peoples, Poso Regency. We argue that the modus operandi of land-grabbing practices is highly dependent on state power and weak protection of communal land rights. By explaining these two factors, this article provides recommendations to strengthen the community's position in dealing with land-grabbing practices by limiting the power of the state and encouraging land reform aimed at securing community land rights. (Wiryani et al. 954. Their sovereignty is denied in the name of progress and conservation – a dynamic continuous with their colonial past, not reminiscent of it.

This violence has deep historical roots. Industrial capitalism and colonial expansion converged in the nineteenth century, establishing a planetary system of extraction that racialized both nature and Indigenous peoples (Crook 6-8). The 1850s saw a particular escalation: American whaling fleets industrially extracted Pacific resources, while the British colonial administration in East Africa seized ancestral lands and imposed foreign agricultural systems – not discrete regional events but interlocking expressions of racial capitalism, justified by ideologies that portrayed "savage" nature and "primitive" peoples as obstacles requiring domination (Oppermann 180; Plumwood, "Decolonizing" 53).

Novels written during and after periods of intensified extraction do more than reflect this violence. They expose the internal contradictions of extractive systems and envision alternatives grounded in Indigenous knowledge and resistance (Beinart and Hughes 3–4). Two novels offer critiques that, when read conjointly, clarify the planetary scale and lasting effects of ecological imperialism: Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*; *or*, *The Whale* (1851) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* (1965).

Moby-Dick emerged at the apex of American industrial whaling, when Nantucket and New Bedford merchants generated vast wealth from multinational crews subjected to brutal labor. The novel follows Ishmael, a sailor driven to sea by financial desperation, aboard the Pequod, commanded by the monomaniacal Captain Ahab in his obsessive hunt for the White Whale that severed his leg. Ahab's drive to master and destroy what he cannot control manifests what Estok calls ecophobia: an irrational compulsion to dominate the natural world. Nevertheless, the text registers resistance. Queequeg, the Indigenous

harpooner whose practical knowledge the crew mocks and depends upon in equal measure, crafts a coffin that ultimately saves Ishmael after the Pequod's destruction, while the White Whale itself embodies nature's refusal to be conquered. Lawrence Buell observes that Moby-Dick captures the moment when the world was coming under the regime of global capitalism (205) while simultaneously revealing that regime's limits and violence.

Written a century later, *The River Between* is set among Gikuyu communities in Kenya's Central Province, where two rival ridges – Kameno, guardian of ancestral tradition, and Makuyu, aligned with Christianity – face each other across the Honia River. The novel's central crisis is female circumcision: when Muthoni, daughter of the Christian elder Joshua, chooses to undergo the rite to belong fully to both worlds, her death tears the community apart and destroys Waiyaki, the young leader who believed education could reconcile tradition with modernity. Land dispossession, forced labor, and colonial taxation press throughout, and Ngugi links ecological disruption – broken seasons, eroding soil – to white settlement, though always tentatively, as background pressure.

This paper reads that pressure as its primary concern: where the novel's surface drama is circumcision, religion, and intra-community fracture, the analysis excavates the ecological logic structuring those conflicts – the seizure of ancestral land, the dismantling of Gikuyu environmental knowledge, and the imposition of extractive agricultural systems – which the novel registers but does not explicitly theorize. Where Melville depicts oceanic extraction serving American capital, Ngugi traces terrestrial seizure serving the British Empire. Both expose the same logic: domination requires constructing nature and Indigenous peoples as primitive obstacles to civilization.

The distance between these novels – a century, an ocean, distinct literary traditions – might seem to make comparison unworkable. *Moby-Dick* belongs to the American Renaissance; *The River Between* emerges from African anticolonial literature. However, their differences are precisely the point. Both depict extraction – oceanic versus terrestrial, industrial capitalism versus agricultural imperialism – yet both expose the same underlying logic: environmental exploitation requires and produces racial ideology. In *Moby-Dick*, Indigenous and Pacific Islander crew members perform the most dangerous work while their knowledge is simultaneously exploited and denigrated, positioned, as Ishmael notes, as "the muscles" to the white officers' "brains" (Melville 167). In *The River Between*, colonial authorities equate the Gikuyu people with the land they inhabit, treating both as primitive resources that require civilization and cultivation. Missionaries denounce sacred groves as pagan superstition even as colonial administrators seize those lands for taxation and export agriculture.

Land seizure in colonial Kenya and marine extraction in the Pacific both served nineteenth-century capital expansion, and the contempt for uncontrolled nature that Estok terms ecophobia adapted to each context while maintaining its core structure. So did resistance: Queequeg's knowledge survives him in the coffin that saves Ishmael; the White Whale destroys the machinery hunting it; the Gikuyu sustain bonds to land that dispossession cannot fully sever. As LeMenager et al. argue, environmental criticism transforms literary study by insisting on "historical and spatial contexts" that

disciplinary boundaries typically obscure (23), and it is precisely those connections this comparative reading pursues.

Serpil Oppermann's theory of ecological imperialism, Simon Estok's ecophobia, and Val Plumwood's critique of dualistic thinking – developed in the Theoretical Framework below – together provide the analytical tools. The analysis then moves through ecophobic justifications for extraction in both novels, forms of resistance across terrestrial and oceanic contexts, and a concluding section on the contemporary struggles these nineteenth- and twentieth-century texts illuminate.

[2] Theoretical Framework

Postcolonial ecocriticism emerged in the early 2000s from a shared recognition: environmental criticism and postcolonial studies address overlapping forms of violence. Huggan and Tiffin describe the field as fundamentally "politically oriented," refusing to separate environmental concern from power, race, and historical injustice (9). It inherits from postcolonial studies an account of how colonialism extracted resources while justifying domination through racialized hierarchies, and from ecocriticism a challenge to worldviews that treat nature as purely instrumental (Cilano and DeLoughrey 84; Nixon 236). This analysis draws on three interlocking frameworks within the field: Oppermann's ecological imperialism, which accounts for the material mechanisms through which colonial powers restructured ecosystems; Plumwood's master model, which explains the ideological architecture making those mechanisms feel natural; and Estok's ecophobia, which identifies the affective dimension – fear and contempt for uncontrolled nature – sustaining both.

[2.1] Ecological Imperialism and the Master Model

Ecological imperialism, as Oppermann develops it, describes the deliberate exploitation of ecosystems in the service of colonial economic interests, accompanied by ideologies that naturalize that exploitation (184). European expansion physically restructured local ecologies: land clearance, resource extraction, and the introduction of non-native species produced biodiversity loss and long-term environmental disruption on a global scale (Crosby 25). This material violence operated through racial violence. Colonial powers dehumanized Indigenous populations by equating them with the nature they inhabited, positioning both as primitive and requiring civilization – a logic that legitimized the marginalization of colonized peoples alongside the extraction of their environments. The two operations were mutually enabling: to justify seizing land, colonizers had first to construct its inhabitants as incapable of managing it.

Plumwood's "master model" names the ideological architecture sustaining this logic. Inherited from European Enlightenment thought, it organizes reality into hierarchical binaries: culture over nature, reason over emotion, civilized over primitive ("Decolonizing" 54). Whatever falls on the subordinated "nature" side – women, colonized peoples, Indigenous communities, non-human life – becomes available for exploitation by those

who claim the "culture" side (Plumwood, "Environmental Ethics" 251). Environmental racism and colonial domination share this structure: both associate subjugated peoples with nature, then justify exploitation because nature requires mastery.

The framework explains not merely that colonizers denigrated Indigenous knowledge, but also why such denigration was ideologically coherent – and why it extended simultaneously to land, bodies, and ritual practice. The convergence of colonial, patriarchal, and environmental control over female circumcision in *The River Between*, and the simultaneous exploitation and dismissal of Indigenous maritime knowledge in *Moby-Dick*, both follow master-model logic.

[2.2] Ecophobia

Where Oppermann and Plumwood account for how environmental exploitation operates materially and ideologically, Estok's concept of ecophobia addresses why it persists at the level of affect. Estok defines ecophobia as "an irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world, as present and subtle in our daily lives and literature as homophobia, racism, and sexism" (*Ecocriticism and Shakespeare* 3) encompassing fear, contempt, and indifference toward nature in ways that make domination feel not merely profitable but morally necessary. Nature, figured as threatening when it defies human control, becomes what must be subdued. Benton links this fear to perceived threats to human authority, noting its continuity with colonial anxieties about the wild and the primitive (39). Estok characterizes the resulting historical pattern in stark terms:

> Human history is a history of controlling the natural environment… of first imagining agency and intent in nature and then quashing that imagined agency and intent. Nature becomes the hateful object needing our control, the loathed and feared thing that can only result in tragedy if left in control (as in King Lear or Katrina). (*Ecocriticism and Shakespeare* 3)

This colonial ecophobia intersects with the racial and environmental dynamics that Oppermann and Plumwood identify: Indigenous peoples, perceived as closer to nature, were consequently figured as irrational and threatening, rendering colonial intervention a matter of fearful necessity rather than mere greed (Estok, *The Ecophobia Hypothesis* 12).

This framework nonetheless requires critical scrutiny. Is fear of nature the primary driver of colonial violence, or does ecophobia risk psychologizing what are fundamentally structural systems of racial capitalism (Adams 20)? Its analytical strength lies in explaining how extractive ideologies become naturalized at the level of common sense – how domination comes to feel justified, even heroic. Nevertheless, the concept must be held alongside the materialist analysis that Oppermann and Plumwood provide, which shows how economic systems incentivize exploitation regardless of individual psychology. Both novels illuminate this dialectic precisely: characters express ecophobic fear and contempt, but those affects serve extractive economies requiring constant expansion. Neither dimension fully explains the other, and the analysis that follows holds both in tension.

[3] Ecophobic Justifications for Extraction

Both novels expose the same mechanism: nature and Indigenous peoples must be constructed as threatening or primitive before their exploitation can appear justified. However, both also reveal the contradiction this produces – the systems claiming to master nature depend on Indigenous knowledge that they simultaneously denigrate. At the same time, the communities they sought to dominate were already fractured by forces predating colonial contact. Ecophobia, in both novels, is not an individual pathology but a systemic ideology – one that ultimately undermines the systems it serves.

[3.1] *The River Between*: Land, Knowledge, and the Limits of What the Novel Shows

The novel registers colonial ecological disruption as background pressure rather than foregrounded argument. The accumulating weight of dispossession is felt throughout: "The conquest of the hills was well underway. Some people were already working on the alienated lands to get money for paying taxes" (Thiong'o 13); "People wanted to move forward. They could not do so as long as their lands were taken, as long as their children were forced to work in the settled ridges, as long as their women and men were forced to pay hut-tax" (22); "All at once he felt more forcefully than he had ever felt before the shame of a people's land being taken away, the shame of being forced to work on those same lands, the humiliation of paying taxes for a government that you knew nothing about" (26).

The novel does not explain the administrative mechanisms behind this condition. British colonial land policy in Kenya involved systematic alienation of Gikuyu territory, hut and poll taxes designed to compel African labor, and the replacement of subsistence agriculture with cash crop cultivation (Beinart and Hughes 3-4). The novel registers the human weight of these policies; Beinart and Hughes document their institutional form. The ecological disruption the Gikuyu experience is not cultural friction but the deliberate consequence of a colonial agricultural system imposed on land it did not understand.

What makes this ecophobic is the ideological framing that accompanied it. Iskarna documents how Christianity's introduction caused most traditional Gikuyu customs to vanish (189), not merely as a cultural loss but as a precondition for colonial appropriation: by constructing Indigenous relationships to land – sacred groves, seasonal ceremonies, communal agricultural knowledge – as primitive superstition, colonial and missionary discourse rendered those relationships available for replacement. The novel's opening establishes precisely what this discourse had to suppress. The Honia River is introduced as possessing "a strong will to live, scorning droughts and weather changes" (Thiong'o 1 – a cosmology in which land has agency, reciprocity, and subjectivity wholly incompatible with the colonial requirement that territory be passive, measurable, and alienable. As Temonen observes, in Gikuyu tradition "nature is the origin of culture" (13); colonial ecophobia required an inversion of this relationship, a construal of nature as the object of culture rather than as its ground.

The sharpest articulation of colonial contradiction in the novel comes not from the colonizers but from Chege. Charged with transmitting Gikuyu ecological and spiritual knowledge to his son, he instructs Waiyaki: "Learn all the wisdom and all the secrets of the white man. But do not follow his vices" (Thiong'o 20); this is the posture not of a victim but of strategic navigation. Nevertheless, the instruction also reveals the contradiction at the heart of the colonial knowledge economy. The system that dismisses Chege's botanical and ceremonial understanding as superstition simultaneously depends on Gikuyu labor to make the "alienated lands" productive – labor requiring knowledge of local soil, seasonal rainfall, and appropriate crops that is inseparable from the very cosmological frameworks colonial discourse is destroying. Colonial extraction demands this wisdom's effects while dismantling its conditions. As Kosche notes, this is not merely extractive logic but metaphysical impossibility (213).

Waiyaki inherits this impossibility. His tragedy lies in attempting to preserve Gikuyu culture through the very institutions designed for its erasure. Education, he finds, is transformative in ways he cannot control:

> Education was an irreversible process. It brought about a change in a person, in his outlook. The people had put their faith in him. He had to do something. But what? What could he, a mere boy, do against these forces, already sweeping the whole country, forces that were backed by a Government whose means he could not even guess? (Thiong'o 75)

Schools, churches, administrative offices, and taxation systems make Indigenous lifeways materially unsustainable while offering the extractive economy as the only alternative. His failure is not personal but structural: the contradiction Chege identified cannot be resolved from within the system producing it. The ecological consequences – broken seasons, eroding soil – are examined in the following section.

[3.2] *Moby-Dick*: Industrial Ecophobia and Its Discontents

Where *The River Between* registers ecological disruption as a community's subtext, *Moby-Dick* places extractive violence at its narrative center. Maritime capitalism required ecophobic ideology to function: the ocean had to be constructed as a hostile wilderness before industrial slaughter could present itself as a rational enterprise. Ishmael's decision to ship out is itself ecophobically ambivalent – "whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul...then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can" (Melville 3). The ocean is simultaneously escape and threat, resource and terror – nature must be fearsome enough to require mastery, yet productive enough to justify investment (*Ecocriticism and Shakespeare* 3). The Whaleman's Chapel makes the system's human costs legible: memorial tablets record crew members "towed out of sight by a Whale" (Melville 35) in language that naturalizes death as an occupational hazard. The passive construction performs ideological work – losses recorded, mourned briefly, folded into the enterprise (Mentz 3).

Moby-Dick concentrates this logic. Melville constructs the White Whale as a mythic embodiment of nature's indifference – "a Sperm Whale of uncommon magnitude and malignity" (Melville 242), a source of "consternation to every other creature in the sea" (244) – so that Ahab's obsession registers as something beyond commercial ambition. Monstrous figures have long embodied projected anxieties about nature (Hassouneh and Al-Khalili 8-9). Melville uses this tradition to make Ahab's ecophobia legible as psychic compulsion rather than mere greed. Ahab wants to destroy what he cannot control. As Schroeder and Farmer argue, this obsession ultimately unmakes him, transforming a domineering figure into a broken one (3) – illustrating what Estok calls "the horror of an invasive and hostile nature" (*Ecocriticism and Shakespeare* 210): destruction recast as heroic necessity.

The novel refuses to distribute this ecophobia uniformly. Ishmael ships out not from ideological conviction but due to financial desperation – "having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore" (Melville 1). Ordinary sailors participate in extractive violence due to economic necessity; maritime labor was among the few options available to poor and racialized men. Ahab's madness is the ideology of mastery pushed past rational profit to its logical terminus – the point at which contempt for nature's agency destroys the vessel carrying it. The whale's refusal and the ocean's indifferent power are taken up in the section that follows.

While *The River Between* depicts ecological imperialism through territorial seizure, Melville's *Moby-Dick* reveals its oceanic modality: the industrial conversion of global waters for American capital. Written during the apex of 1850s American whaling, the novel exposes how maritime capitalism required ecophobic ideology and extractive infrastructure. The former constructed the ocean and whales as threats requiring domination; the latter commodified marine life while exploiting racialized labor. The Pequod's voyage functions simultaneously as a rational, profit-maximizing enterprise and as a stage for ecophobic obsession, where Captain Ahab's hatred overwhelms economic calculation. This tension exposes the fundamental contradiction of extractive systems: they rely on nature's productivity yet express contempt for its agency.

[4] Resistance to Ecological Imperialism

Both novels refuse romanticization. Resistance takes multiple forms – nature's refusal of mastery, preservation of Indigenous knowledge, individuals navigating colonial institutions without surrendering to them – yet it rarely triumphs. Communities fracture, extractive systems persist. The question is not whether resistance succeeds but what forms it assumes, what alternatives it preserves, what survives defeat. Nature appears not as a passive victim but as an active agent: ecosystems respond to exploitation through degradation, species resist through evasion, and landscapes withdraw productivity when mismanaged.

The River Between's most direct register of ecological disruption is also its most ambiguous figure of resistance. The community perceives, tentatively, a link between

white settlement and environmental breakdown – "perhaps it had to do with the white men and the blaspheming men of Makuyu" (Thiong'o 67). What Beinart and Hughes document as the material consequence of colonial land alienation and imposed monoculture agriculture (57–62) – soil depletion, disrupted rainfall patterns, loss of generational farming knowledge – the novel renders as cosmological withdrawal:

> In the past few years, things were changing; the pattern of seasons was broken. It no longer rained regularly. The sun seemed to shine for months and the grass dried. And when it fell, the rainwater carried away the soil. The soil no longer answered the call and prayers of the people (Thiong'o. 67).

The language is simultaneously spiritual and material. Soil that once "answered the call" now refuses to do so – reflecting Gikuyu cosmology recognizing land's subjectivity while describing biophysical processes: broken rainfall, erosion, declining fertility from colonial practices that ignored local conditions. The soil's "refusal" is both spiritual withdrawal and material consequence.

But this resistance is double-edged. Soil failure harms Gikuyu communities far more immediately than the colonial administrators, who import food and seize new land when old land degrades. Ecological withdrawal exposes extractive unsustainability, while its costs fall on the dispossessed. Crowley observes that Ngũgĩ presents the Gikuyu ridges as a "contested place of multiplicity and change" (16) – a space already internally fractured, in which ecological withdrawal intensifies existing divisions rather than producing unified opposition. Resistance and suffering are not separable here; they arrive together.

Against this ambiguous, costly form of ecological refusal, the Honia River offers a different mode of resistance: not withdrawal but endurance. Where the soil fails under colonial imposition, the river persists. The novel's opening establishes it as possessing "a strong will to live, scorning droughts and weather changes" (Thiong'o 1). It continues flowing regardless of missionary denunciation, maintaining its role in Gikuyu spiritual life through sheer persistence rather than opposition. Colonial administration lasts decades; rivers flow for millennia. This contrast maps two modes of natural resistance: one that costs the community in the short term, one that simply outlasts the system attempting to suppress it.

Where the Honia River resists through endurance, *Moby-Dick*'s white whale embodies violent refusal. The whale's destruction of the Pequod operates as both literal event and symbolic revelation: nature possesses power overwhelming human technology and refuses subordination. Yet Melville avoids romanticization. Moby Dick is neither a benevolent protector nor a malicious destroyer – as Starbuck recognizes, he is "a dumb brute…that simply smote thee from blindest instinct!" (Melville 164). The whale's violence constitutes self-defense, not aggression.

The final chase emphasizes the whale's defensive agency without attributing human intentionality to it. On the first day, Moby Dick destroys boats: "The three boats, in the first fury of the Whale's headlong rush, bumped the German's aside" (Melville 619). The "fury" and "rush" describe powerful defense, not calculated attack. On the second day: "Diving beneath the settling ship, the whale ran quivering along its keel" (622). Quivering

suggests a frightened animal, not a confident predator. When Moby Dick finally destroys the Pequod, Melville depicts nature's agency as an inevitable consequence of ecophobic overreach – Ahab demanded absolute dominion over what cannot be dominated.

The ocean itself extends this resistance through a different mode – not violence but indifference. Having constructed the sea as a hostile wilderness requiring conquest, the ecophobic ideology sustaining the whaling enterprise encounters what it cannot defeat: conditions that exceed human mastery. The typhoon in "The Candles" – arriving as the crew pushes further into the Pacific in pursuit of the whale – makes this indifference material:

> Towards evening of that day, the Pequod was torn of her canvas, and bare-poled was left to fight a Typhoon which had struck her directly ahead. When darkness came on, sky and sea roared and split with the thunder. (Melville 570)

The storm does not attack the ship; the ship encounters the storm. This distinction carries the section's central argument about oceanic resistance: the ocean does not oppose whaling in the way that the whale opposes Ahab. Oceanic conditions exceed human mastery, making extraction dangerous and ultimately unsustainable without reference to any intention or agency on nature's part. This form of resistance – indifference rather than opposition – may be more powerful precisely because it cannot be personalized, defeated through violence, or incorporated into a narrative of heroic conquest.

Human resistance operates differently: through knowledge that survives its bearer. The harpooneers – Queequeg, Tashtego, Daggoo – are described in Chapter 34 as "stark, sturdy, and savage; the crew, perhaps, generally not so" (Melville 163), a primal force existing apart from the white officers. They are the Pequod's most essential and most denigrated crew members: their expertise underwrites the entire enterprise, while the labor hierarchy positions them as "muscles" to the white officers' "brains." Yet it is Queequeg's knowledge – not Ahab's certainty, not the merchants' capital – that generates the novel's only survival. The coffin he builds in anticipation of his own death, decorated with tattoos encoding his people's cosmological knowledge, becomes the life-buoy that saves Ishmael. Indigenous wisdom does not triumph over the system; it outlasts it.

Land's resistance in *The River Between* – soil failing, seasonal patterns breaking – operates slowly, harms communities first, and constrains extraction only in the long term. The ocean's resistance in *Moby-Dick* – the whale's violent self-defense, the typhoon's force – is immediate and directly destructive of the extractive enterprise. Nevertheless, both exceed the temporal scale of human political systems: the land outlasts colonialism, the ocean outlasts industrial whaling, and the knowledge embedded in Gikuyu cosmological practice and Queequeg's tattooed skin outlasts the institutions that suppressed or exploited it.

Human resistance shares this quality of survival under suppression rather than triumph. Chege's instruction – learn the colonizer's wisdom without adopting the colonizer's values – is strategic and partial, preserved in transmission even when it fails in application. Waiyaki's tragedy is that the institutions through which he acts are already

compromised; the knowledge Chege entrusted to him survives the tragedy as the novel's unresolved question. Queequeg's coffin performs a parallel function: it is cultural knowledge that the dominant system cannot fully appropriate because the system cannot fully understand it; it persists as survival equipment in the wreckage of the enterprise that denigrated it. What extractive systems most need to destroy is precisely what they cannot fully reach.

[5] Ethical Implications and the Novel's Contemporary Relevance

The patterns this paper traces have not receded into history. They have migrated into new institutional forms – postcolonial states, conservation frameworks, development ministries – while maintaining the same logic: Indigenous ecological knowledge is appropriated while its bearers are excluded from governance, and the rhetoric of environmental protection now does the work that colonial seizure once did openly. Indonesia is not an arbitrary frame for this argument. It is where both extractive logics the paper has analyzed – terrestrial and marine – converge in the present, and where the Lamaleran hunters introduced in the paper's opening face the same epistemological dismissal that the Gikuyu face in Ngugi's novel and the Pacific Islander crew members face aboard the Pequod.

In 2018, Indonesia's Forestry Ministry forcibly relocated the Sedulur Sikep community from ancestral lands in Central Java to establish a teak plantation. Officials cited environmental protection and economic efficiency. The displaced families had maintained complex agroforestry systems integrating rice cultivation with forest management for generations. State agronomists appropriated their botanical knowledge – which species prevent erosion, which planting patterns maintain soil fertility – while dismissing the ritual frameworks transmitting this knowledge as superstition (Kontesa and Fernando 962). Relational knowledge was extracted from its cosmological context and incorporated into an administrative system that simultaneously declared those practices obsolete. This is not a metaphor for colonial violence. It is colonial violence, operating through institutions claiming postcolonial legitimacy.

The River Between exposes the specific ideological moves that make such violence legible as progress. British administrators dismissed Gikuyu agricultural practices while depending on Gikuyu workers who understood local ecology, revealing the extraction's core contradiction: appropriating relational knowledge while destroying relationality itself. Contemporary Indonesian officials are repeating this pattern. They treat Indigenous land management as an inefficient tradition requiring modernization while simultaneously needing that "inefficient" knowledge to prevent the erosion and soil depletion that monoculture teak plantations inevitably produce.

The River Between traces the roots of this incapacity. As Indriyanto et al. argue, "slow violence succeeds through the systematic erasure of Indigenous epistemologies that

could name, resist, and prevent ecological collapse" (122). Extraction requires land to be treated as a mechanism and knowledge as data – a fragmentation that renders relational wisdom unintelligible within administrative logic. Chege's botanical understanding cannot be reduced to transferable data; it is inseparable from the cosmological framework that colonial discourse suppresses. However, this is precisely what extraction demands: the effects of relational wisdom without the relationships sustaining them. When Ngugi depicts soil withdrawing from colonial agriculture – "no longer answered the call and prayers of the people" (Thiong'o 67) – the novel refuses the comfort of treating environmental degradation as a technical problem. It insists that land responds to relationships and withdraws from systems that sever it. Indonesian soil makes the same refusal through erosion, declining fertility, and increased drought vulnerability – processes that Sedulur Sikep agroforestry previously mitigated. The question the novel forces is epistemological: can environmental collapse be read as the consequence of severed relationality, or only as technical failure requiring more intervention?

The Lamaleran whale hunters face a precise contemporary version of the contradiction *Moby-Dick* documented in 1851. Conservation organizations justify their exclusion from marine protected area governance through scientific management rhetoric that positions Indigenous maritime knowledge as anecdotal rather than rigorous (Maukar 89).

Moby-Dick traces this contradiction's origins. American whaling presented itself as a rational enterprise converting marine resources into industrial products through advanced technology and coordinated labor. However, the Pequod's success depended entirely on Indigenous expertise: Queequeg's harpooning skill, Tashtego's ability to read weather and whale behavior, and Pacific Islander knowledge of oceanic currents and migration patterns. Melville documents how industrial capitalism simultaneously exploited and denigrated this knowledge, positioning Indigenous crew as "primitive" muscle serving white officers' "civilized" brains (Pfeiler 107).

Contemporary marine conservation repeats this structure. International organizations appropriate Indigenous ecological knowledge of which waters whales frequent. Yet Paulus et al. document that Lamaleran fishing knowledge directly informed the boundaries of Indonesia's Savu Sea National Marine Park—the same knowledge that was subsequently used to restrict Lamaleran access to the waters it mapped (8-9). Academic researchers document this knowledge for peer-reviewed journals; conservation NGOs incorporate it into management plans; yet the communities producing it are deemed insufficiently scientific to govern the territories they have managed for centuries (Braverman 49; Aini et al. 350). Smith terms this "epistemological extractivism": knowledge travels across institutional boundaries while authority stays concentrated in metropolitan centers (24).

Melville traced this structure to its origins as seen in his description of the Pequod's harpooners in Chapter 34, in which they are presented as both indispensable and yet also denigrated in the same breath. Their expertise in reading whale behavior, oceanic currents, and weather was the practical foundation on which the entire enterprise rested. However, the novel's labor hierarchy positioned them as primitive muscle serving white

officers' civilized judgment. Contemporary marine conservation repeats this positioning with bureaucratic precision. The knowledge is taken; the knowers are excluded.

[6] Conclusions

What this comparative reading reveals is not simply that colonial patterns persist – that much is documented elsewhere – but that they persist through the same epistemological mechanism across radically different geographies and centuries: the systematic construction of relational knowledge as primitive, which simultaneously enables its appropriation and forecloses recognition of what is lost in the taking. Single-text analysis can identify this in one context. Reading *The River Between* and *Moby-Dick* together shows it operating as a planetary logic, adapting from Kenyan ridges to Pacific oceans to Indonesian conservation law while maintaining its structure intact.

Both novels refuse to depict domination as total. The coffin Queequeg builds outlasts the ship that exploited him; Gikuyu communities maintain bonds to land that colonial administration cannot fully sever; the Honia River flows past the political systems erected on its banks. These survivals are partial and costly – Waiyaki fails, Queequeg dies, the soil still erodes – but they preserve what extractive systems most need to erase: the knowledge that land and ocean are not resources but relationships. That knowledge, and the literary forms that carry it, remain the most precise instruments available for reading what the administrative and scientific paradigms of extraction are structurally unable to see in themselves.

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