



Environmental Awareness in Hermann Schulz : An Eco-Critical and Postcolonial Analysis of the Novel *Auf dem Strom*

Cédric Djatcho Emaleu (University of Dschang)

Abstract

This study conducts an in-depth examination of the complex interplay between nature and environment in Hermann Schulz's novel *Auf dem Strom* through the combined lenses of eco-critical and postcolonial theory. The research integrates frameworks from postcolonial literary criticism alongside eco-critical perspectives to elucidate the interrelations between humans and the natural environment within a specific historical and cultural context. Employing these theoretical approaches reveals underlying hierarchies, cultural constructs, and societal overlays. Furthermore, the incorporation of ecological concerns and ethics facilitates a critical reflection on anthropocentric viewpoints and ecological dissonances. The analysis demonstrates the intricate ethical and moral nexus linking literature and environmental themes, thereby situating Schulz's work within a multifaceted discourse pertinent to contemporary debates.

Keywords : eco-critical analysis, postcolonial literary criticism, environmental awareness, historical-cultural context, ethical-moral nexus

Introduction

The ongoing environmental crisis and the enduring legacies of colonial domination have emerged as central axes in contemporary literary and cultural studies. Within this critical landscape, literary representations of nature and environment are increasingly scrutinized not merely as aesthetic devices, but as sites of negotiation between historical trauma, ecological entanglement, and cultural memory. The intersection of postcolonial discourse and ecological critique has thus given rise to a fertile terrain of inquiry, demanding analytical frameworks capable of engaging with both textual complexity and socio-historical embeddedness¹. The present study positions itself at this confluence by exploring *Auf dem Strom*, a novel by

¹ Huggan & Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*, Routledge, 2010, pp. 1–5

Hermann Schulz, through the dual lens of postcolonial literary criticism and ecocritical analysis. The aim is to elucidate how Schulz's narrative articulates the dynamics of human- environment relations within a postcolonial context, where cultural constructions of landscape, memory, and displacement converge.

This investigation adopts an interdisciplinary methodology that integrates literary analysis with critical frameworks derived from postcolonial theory and ecocriticism. In doing so, it seeks to expose the narrative mechanisms through which notions of nature, territory, and identity are constructed, disrupted, or reinscribed. Postcolonial criticism, drawing on foundational works such as Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*², interrogates the lingering presence of colonial power structures in textual representation, particularly through depictions of land, territory, and belonging. In *Auf dem Strom*, the landscape is not a neutral backdrop, but a politically charged space interwoven with histories of mobility, erasure, and symbolic reclamation. The study further draws on Graham Huggan's insights on "green postcolonialism"³, to underscore how environmental narratives can simultaneously reflect ecological tensions and post-imperial anxieties. From an ecocritical standpoint, theorists such as Timothy Morton⁴ and Ursula Heise provide crucial tools for analyzing how literature mediates the ethical and epistemological reorientation of human-nature relations in the Anthropocene⁵.

Through close textual analysis and theoretical synthesis, this study examines the representational strategies that render nature a contested and narratively productive field. The postcolonial dimension of this inquiry interrogates the relational fabric between environmental imagination and the residues of imperial thought, particularly in regard to hierarchical spatializations and the symbolic appropriation of ecological motifs. The ecocritical dimension, by contrast, invites a reconsideration of anthropocentric epistemologies, probing the affective, ethical, and narrative contours of Schulz's environmental portrayals. As Rob Nixon observes, the notion of "slow violence"⁶ is pivotal in understanding how environmental degradation and colonial exploitation converge in invisible, temporally extended forms of harm. In *Auf dem Strom*, such convergences materialize through a textual ecology that stages the environment as both a witness to and an agent of historical processes. By engaging the intersection of

² Said, E., *Culture and Imperialism*, Vintage Books, 1993, pp. 31–61

³ Huggan, G., *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, 2010

⁴ Morton, T., *Ecology without Nature*, Harvard University Press, 2007, pp. 15–35

⁵ Heise, U., *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*, Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 49–74

⁶ Nixon R., *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Harvard University Press, 2011, pp. 2–10

ostcolonial critique and ecological consciousness, the study foregrounds a nuanced understanding of how literary form, environmental representation, and historical discourse coalesce. Ultimately, this exploration contributes to a broader epistemological shift in the humanities, one that insists on the inseparability of environmental thought and socio-cultural critique.

1. Hermann Schulz and the Ecological Memory of the Postcolonial: Contextualizing Authorial Position and Narrative Intentions

1.1 Biographical Foundations and Intellectual Orientation

Born on July 21, 1938, in Nkalinzi, Tanzania, Hermann Schulz occupies a distinctive position in contemporary German literature, not only due to the geographic specificity of his origins but also because of the thematic continuity that permeates his literary production. As former director of the Peter Hammer Verlag (1967–2001), Schulz's editorial and literary activity has consistently engaged with voices from the Global South and with histories marked by colonial entanglement. His oeuvre, primarily published by Carlsen Verlag, reflects a continuous interrogation of colonial legacies, environmental displacement, and the ethical stakes of narrative representation.

Schulz's biographical trajectory, shaped by the transcontinental traces of Germany's colonial past, constitutes more than a mere contextual backdrop; it infuses his writing with a critical awareness of imperial histories and their ecological ramifications. Drawing on the theoretical prism articulated by Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism*⁷, Schulz reconfigures literary space as a site of counter-memory, where landscapes become palimpsests of violence, longing, and exile. His personal history—inscribed in the entangled geographies of Africa and Europe—furnishes him with a unique positionality from which to address the nexus between environmental degradation and cultural dislocation. In *Auf dem Strom*, this position finds concrete expression in the exploration of environmental transformations as symptoms of colonial extraction and migratory disruption⁸. Moreover, Schulz's engagement with literature as a space for ecological consciousness aligns with developments in German eco-literary discourse, particularly with what Axel Goodbody has termed “narratives of environmental memory” (*Nature, Technology and Cultural Change in Twentieth-Century German Literature*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, pp. 45–60). His literary stance therefore not only critiques the epistemologies of colonial domination but simultaneously foregrounds the moral urgency of narrating environmental fragility in an era of ecological crisis.

⁷ Said, E., Op. cit. p. 7-19

⁸ Nixon, R., Op. cit., pp. 12–22

1.2 Symbolic Architectures and Narrative Strategies in *Auf dem Strom*

The novel *Auf dem Strom* exemplifies a sophisticated narrative architecture, constructed across three interwoven temporal levels, each mapping distinct yet overlapping trajectories of personal loss, ecological transformation, and historical rupture. Central to this structure is the motif of the journey, which operates on both literal and metaphorical registers. Schulz's protagonist, Friedrich, traverses not only geographical landscapes but also affective and mnemonic terrains, invoking what Paul Ricoeur refers to as “narrative time”⁹, wherein lived temporality and historical consciousness intersect through storytelling.

The following passage encapsulates this dual movement between space and memory:

Das Boot trieb in die Strömung und gewann an Fahrt. Über dem Wasser lag samtener Morgennebel... Man entscheidet sich manchmal gegen das, was man liebt... Es ist wie nach einem Sündenfall, man kann die Zeit und das, was geschehen ist, nicht mehr zurückdrehen.

The boat drifted into the current and gained speed. A velvet morning mist hovered above the water... Sometimes one chooses against what one loves... It is like after a fall from grace; one cannot turn back time or undo what has happened.

In this excerpt, the evocation of the “velvet morning mist” and the remembered “blue fog over the fields” foregrounds Friedrich's sensorial and emotional attachment to his homeland. The tension between presence and absence, memory and loss, configures nature as a mnemonic interface through which the protagonist processes his alienation. From an ecocritical

⁹ Idem, pp. 12–22

standpoint, as proposed by Greg Garrard in *Ecocriticism*, this journey may be interpreted as a narrative of ecological estrangement, emblematic of the broader human severance from the natural world in the wake of industrialization, war, and forced migration¹⁰.

The metaphor of the “fall from grace” functions here as an allegory for anthropogenic rupture— an irreversible crossing of ethical boundaries in the relationship between human societies and their ecological environments. In this sense, the irretrievability of time operates as a critique of modernity’s relentless forward momentum, wherein memory of the land is replaced by extractive imperatives and loss becomes structural.

From a postcolonial perspective, the involuntary nature of Friedrich’s departure (“man hat keine Wahl”) evokes the constrained agency characteristic of subaltern displacement. His decision “against what he loves” reflects the structural conditions that force individuals into exile, echoing Homi Bhabha’s articulation of “unhomeliness”¹¹. Thus, Schulz’s protagonist becomes an emblem of postcolonial subjectivity—fractured, dislocated, and environmentally disinherited.

1.3 The River as Allegorical Topos of Transience and Regeneration

The river, as the novel’s central symbol, embodies a multiplicity of meanings—temporal flux, existential uncertainty, and the cyclical logic of renewal. Through layered figurative language and symbolic density, Schulz renders the river not merely as setting but as a dynamic agent in the protagonist’s ontological evolution.

Consider the following scene:

Als er die Mitte des Flusses erreicht hatte, hob er seine Hand... »Ich komme wieder«, rief er, aber das gurgelnde Wasser vor dem Boot schluckte seine Worte... Dann entschwand der Landesteg des Missionshauses im dunklen Grün des Ufers seinem Blick.

¹⁰ Garrard, G., *Ecocriticism*, Routledge, 2012, pp. 82–96

¹¹ Bhabha, H., K., *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, 1994, pp. 9–13

As he reached the center of the river, he raised his hand... “I will return,” he shouted, but the gurgling water before the boat swallowed his words... Then the jetty of the mission house disappeared in the dark green of the riverbank from his view.

Here, the protagonist’s gesture of farewell is subsumed by the acoustic and visual immensity of nature, rendering human will ephemeral. The river, ever-flowing and indifferent, underscores the transitory nature of existence—a motif resonant with Heraclitean philosophy as well as with the eco-spiritual dimension described by Lawrence Buell in *The Environmental Imagination*¹². The fluctuating motion of the boat, gaining speed without the protagonist’s intervention, becomes a metaphor for life’s inescapable current, carrying individuals toward uncharted territories both literal and symbolic.

Simultaneously, the leopard’s spotted fur, glimpsed fleetingly from afar, introduces a note of the untamed and the unknowable—an emblem of nature’s irreducibility to human design. In this brief appearance lies a cryptic reminder of the wild, a theme extensively examined by Kate Rigby, who links such moments to the “eco-

gothic”¹³ undercurrent in postcolonial ecopoetics. The riverbank’s dense green, swallowing the departing figure, serves as a visual metaphor for both erasure and renewal—a threshold between histories relinquished and futures imagined.

In sum, Schulz’s narrative deploys the river as a polyvalent symbol—a conduit for memory, a medium of transformation, and a space of philosophical reflection. The protagonist’s surrender to the current is neither resignation nor defeat, but rather an enactment of ecological humility—a recognition that human agency is entangled within, and subordinate to, the larger rhythms of nature. This portrayal advances an ethics of embeddedness that challenges the modernist illusion of control and underscores the interdependence of narrative, environment, and subjectivity.

2. Nature and Environment in the Novel

2.1 Analysis of Naturalistic Depictions and Their Interpretive Layers

In *Auf dem Strom*, nature is portrayed not only as a counterpoint to human civilization but also as a reflective surface for internal human struggles. The rendered descriptions of pristine forests

¹² Buell, L., *The Environmental Imagination*, Harvard University Press, 1995, pp. 86–101

¹³ Rigby, K., *Topographies of the Sacred*, Bloomsbury, 2004, pp. 131–139

and expansive rivers stand in stark contrast to the confined and artificial spaces of cities and factories, thereby accentuating humanity’s alienation from the natural world.

Nature is anthropomorphized and imbued with human emotions, as exemplified in the following passage: *Jetzt brach der Regen stürmisch und mit peitschenden Wogen über sie herein. Der Sturm war ohne Vorwarnung gekommen und trieb Regenmassen vor sich hin...* (p. 128)

"Now the rain broke in stormy sheets and whipping waves over them. The storm had come without warning and drove masses of rain before it..."

Here, the onset of rain transcends a mere meteorological phenomenon, manifesting instead as a potent expression of untamed wrath abruptly overwhelming the protagonists. The vivid imagery of lashing waves and violent storms imparts a formidable sense of nature’s overwhelming power, which seems to dominate the scene through its fury. This anthropomorphic representation of nature as an active, emotive agent intensifies the dramatic impact and immerses the reader in the vitality and emotional charge of the natural environment¹⁴.

The symbolic dimension of the storm and rain is further accentuated by the interactions between characters under extreme duress. Ganse’s desperate search for shelter for himself and Gertrud, coupled with his protective instinct to shield her under the soaked felt hat, reveals human traits of unwavering care and devotion. These qualities gain heightened prominence when juxtaposed against the relentless natural spectacle, highlighting the intimate entanglement of human vulnerability and nature’s formidable forces¹⁵.

2.2 The Dynamic Interplay Between Humans and the Natural Environment in the Novel

Within the postcolonial hermeneutics of nature in Hermann Schulz's *Auf dem Strom*, the natural environment is not simply a passive backdrop for human activity; rather, it emerges as an active participant engaged in a complex interplay with the human figures:

¹⁴ Buell, L., Op., cit., pp. 47–49

¹⁵ Heise, U., Op., cit., pp. 23–27

»Nicht alles, was wir hier machen, ist Zauberei«, sie lächelte bei diesen Worten, »die Natur hat viele Kräfte und es ist Gottes Wille, dass wir sie nutzen.« Friedrich war unsicher... (p. 80-81)

'Not everything we do here is witchcraft,' she smiled at these words, 'nature has many powers and it is God's will that we use them.' Friedrich was uncertain..."

The protagonist's interlocutor affirms that not all phenomena can be reduced to superstition; she emphasizes the manifold forces inherent in nature and conceives their utilization as divinely ordained. This statement underscores the profound embedding of the characters within their natural milieu and gestures towards a spiritual comprehension that transcends superficial interpretations.

Friedrich's hesitation about the religious affiliations and faith practices surrounding him mirrors the complex nexus between human relations, nature, and spirituality. His reflections on communal prayer—and his inability to propose it in this context—evoke critical questions of identity, belief, and cultural entanglement. This signals that nature operates not as mere scenery but as an agent intricately woven into the socio-spiritual fabric of the narrative¹⁶.

Auf dem Strom thus stages a nuanced portrayal of nature as an active force that shapes not only the physical surroundings but also the behaviors, convictions, and relational dynamics of its characters. Through the interlacing of spiritual beliefs, natural surroundings, and human conduct, Schulz crafts a richly textured representation of the human–nature interface, inviting the reader to engage with underlying meanings that transcend conventional literary depictions.

Moreover, the natural environment in the novel functions as both a mirror and a catalyst for the characters' in¹⁷ner conflicts and transformations. Schulz adeptly establishes nature as a metaphorical locus for colonial experiences, presenting it as an autonomous and potent force that acts upon—and is acted upon by—the protagonists:

(...) die Frau öffnete den Schrank und holte Bündel von Kräutern hervor. Männer schleppten einen eisernen Kessel mit dampfendem Wasser in den Raum... (p. 108-109)

¹⁶ Spivak, G., *Can the Subaltern Speak ?* Macmillan, 1988, pp. 24–27

¹⁷ Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History*, University of Chicago Press, 2009, pp. 48–51

"(...) the woman opened the cupboard and took out bundles of herbs. Men carried an iron kettle with steaming water into the room..."

In this excerpt, nature emerges as a discursive element laden with metaphorical resonance for colonial histories. Schulz weaves a complex web of relational dynamics between characters and their environment, reflecting both the tangible and symbolic dimensions of colonization¹⁸.

Nature is depicted not as a static backdrop but as an engaged actor influencing events decisively. The use of herbs, steaming water, and the forest setting denotes a profound entanglement of humans and their environment, extending beyond physicality to encompass resilience and adaptability necessitated by colonial conditions.

The portrayal of women as healers and caregivers attending to the sick child, alongside men bearing the heavy iron kettle, intimates a colonial gender hierarchy wherein women embody knowledge and nurturance, while men assume more passive or supportive roles. This dynamic mirrors the asymmetrical power structures inherent in colonial frameworks.

Furthermore, nature is conceptualized as a source of healing and solace—a sanctuary for colonized subjects. The interaction with the natural world becomes a form of resistance against the alienation and oppression embedded in colonization. Schulz thereby invokes the subversive potential of nature as a realm of regeneration and refuge from colonial impositions.

3. Eco-Critical Reflections on the Novel

3.1 Critical Engagement with Anthropocentric Perspectives in *Auf dem Strom*

Hermann Schulz's *Auf dem Strom* exhibits a distinctly pronounced anthropocentric viewpoint that fundamentally shapes the portrayal and interpretation of the environment. The narrative's emphasis predominantly rests on the human protagonists, their motivations, actions, and interpersonal conflicts, frequently relegating nature and ecological awareness to a marginal status. This privileging fosters a dominant anthropocentric gaze that tends to relegate the environment to a mere backdrop or resource serving human interests.

¹⁸ Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, Routledge, 1989, pp. 84–87

The following excerpt epitomizes this staged symphony of human activity :

Das Boot war für die Abfahrt vorbereitet. Auf dem Boden lagen zwei Bündel, gefüllt mit Fleisch, gekochten Wurzeln, Orangen und Kürbisgefäßen mit den Getränken... (p. 75)

*"The boat was prepared for departure. On the floor lay two bundles filled with meat, cooked roots, oranges, and pumpkin vessels containing drinks..."**

Here, nature acts only as a passive agent, facilitating the protagonists' needs and projects. The detailed depiction of Gertrud's bedding, laden with fresh, mint-scented plants and renewed palm fronds for sun protection, illustrates humanity's intrusion into and domestication of nature—subjugating it to human convenience and control. Such representation accentuates the instrumentalization of natural resources for human comfort, effectively diminishing nature's autonomy and intrinsic beauty¹⁹.

A particularly salient symbol in this tableau is the rifle positioned on the boat seat, embodying human dominion over the environment. It simultaneously signifies protection and the latent capacity to master perceived threats, implicitly casting nature as a danger to be subdued and controlled. The literary portrayal thus exposes the fragile and subjective nature-human relationship, reducing the environment to a utilitarian function while marginalizing its independent existence and aesthetic value²⁰.

Through a meticulous examination of human–nature interactions, subtle indicators of hierarchical valuation and exploitation of the environment emerge, embedded implicitly within the narrative fabric. This anthropocentric orientation manifests in the pronounced focus on human characters, their emotional states, and conflicts, while the natural environment frequently appears merely as decorative, justified only insofar as it supports or highlights human experiences. Consequently, the environment becomes somewhat dehumanized and reduced to instrumental utility, distorting its inherent worth.

Consider the following passage, illustrating this perspective: Ganse brannte darauf, Fragen zu stellen, aber Kaguma nahm ihn am Arm und führte ihn hinaus... (p. 110-111)

¹⁹ Buell, L., Op., cit., pp. 53–57

²⁰ Heise, U., Op., cit. pp. 35–38

"Ganse was eager to ask questions, but Kaguma took him by the arm and led him outside..."

The setting surrounding Ganse is modest: a smaller neighboring house dimly lit by candles, old clothing, and an outdoor hearth. This scene evokes a return to elemental human needs and a reduction to essentials. The use of animal materials—furs and meat—underscores a close relationship with nature, albeit in a purely utilitarian frame. The meal's description, with boiled yuca roots and dripping meat served on banana leaves amid the sight of bloodied animal heads and wet pelts, accentuates nature's role as a raw material depot exploited for human subsistence. This depiction reflects an instrumental view that strips nature of its intrinsic value as an autonomous, complex ecosystem²¹.

3.2 Exploration of Ecological Concerns and Ethics in the Novel

To thoroughly interrogate the ecological concerns and ethical dimensions woven into Hermann Schulz's *Auf dem Strom*, it is indispensable to elucidate the nuanced interconnections between literary elements and environmental themes. Analyzing the depiction of nature and environment within the narrative structure reveals crucial insights into the work's ecological messages and moral paradigms.

The following passage invokes a poignant memory that foregrounds the protagonist Friedrich's moral conscience: Ein Vogel, der sich einen kleinen Augenblick lang auf die Bordwand setzte... (p. 43-44) "A bird that rested briefly on the gunwale..."

This recollection of boys throwing stones at a dove, which Friedrich accidentally hits, exposes not only human violence toward fauna but also Friedrich's inner turmoil and awareness of his actions' repercussions. The vivid description of the dove lying with a bloody head encapsulates the brutality inflicted upon an innocent creature. Friedrich's feelings of guilt and unease reveal a moral ambivalence; though admired for his marksmanship, he

experiences no pride. Only the prospect of using the bird for medicinal soup offers him a tenuous justification, highlighting a utilitarian approach to nature and the compromises humans make to satisfy their needs²². *Auf dem Strom* further articulates a symbiotic relationship between narrative progression and the natural environment, constituting a core element of its ecological ethos. The environment emerges not merely as backdrop but as an active participant imbued with deeper meaning, reflected in the delicate landscape portrayals that function as mirrors of human action and emotion: Das Feuer auf dem Platz brannte wieder... (p. 48) "The fire on the square burned again..."

²¹ Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, Op. cit., pp. 92–95

²² (Buell, L., Op., cit., pp. 29–33

The intimate entwinement of characters with their natural surroundings underscores human proximity and dependence on nature. Through protagonists' interactions with their environment, ecological principles and values are conveyed, challenging anthropocentric paradigms. Emphasizing sustainability, reverence for nature, and responsibility toward future generations permeates the novel's narrative, elucidating the salience of ecological ethics in understanding its dramatic dynamics.

Conclusion

Taking into account the multifaceted depiction of nature and environment in Hermann Schulz's *Auf dem Strom*, a nuanced conclusion emerges: the in-depth examination of the novel through the lenses of postcolonial literary tradition and ecocriticism transcends superficial readings, illuminating the profound entanglements between human agency, natural worlds, and their embedded historical-cultural frameworks. By employing an interdisciplinary methodology—integrating literary analysis, postcolonial theory, and ecological critique—this study has facilitated a comprehensive interrogation of the text. This approach has enabled a meticulous exploration of the novel's historical, social, ecological, and cultural strata, unraveling the intricate dynamics at the confluence of postcolonial thought, nature representations, and literary form.

The interrogation of *Auf dem Strom* within its historical and theoretical contexts offered a panoramic view of postcolonial criticism and ecocriticism as intersecting paradigms, elucidating nature as a politicized and culturally constructed entity while probing the complex interplay between humans and their natural environments in postcolonial settings. Such an analytic frame fosters a deeper appreciation of the novel's intricate interweaving of postcolonial ideology, environmental discourse, and aesthetic creativity as a unified, critical endeavor—thereby affirming the indispensability of multifocal perspectives for a holistic literary understanding.

Bibliography Primary sources

SCHULZ, Hermann (2012) : *Auf dem Strom*, 4th edition, paperback edition, München : Carlsen Verlag, 2012.

Secondary Literature an Theoretical Texts

ASHCROFT, Bill – GRIFFITHS, Gareth – TIFFIN, Helen (1989) : *The Empire Writes Back*. Routledge.

BHABHA, Homi K. (1994) : *The Location of Culture*. Routledge.

BUELL, Lawrence (1995) : *The Environmental Imagination : Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Harvard University Press.

CHAKRABARTY, Dipesh (2009) : *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*. University of Chicago Press.

GARRARD, Greg (2012) : *Ecocriticism*. Routledge.

HEISE, Ursula K. (2008) : *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet : The Environmental Imagination of the Global*. Oxford University Press.

HUGGAN, Graham – TIFFIN, Helen (2010) : *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. Routledge.

MORTON, Timothy (2007) : *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Harvard University Press.

NIXON, Rob (2011) : *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press.

RIGBY, Kate (2004): *Topographies of the Sacred: The Poetics of Place in European Romanticism*. Bloomsbury.

SAID, Edward (1993) : *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage Books.

SPIVAK, Gayatri Chakravorty (1988) : *Can the Subaltern Speak?.* In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Macmillan.

