

Postcolonial Taxidermy: Animal Narrators and the Decolonization of Nature in British Mid-Century Fiction (1945–1975)

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Abstract

This article develops “postcolonial taxidermy” to describe how empire fixed colonized peoples and nature as static, knowable objects, and argues that mid-century British fiction contests this logic through non-human narration. Reading Ballard’s *The Drowned World*, Lessing’s *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, and Berger’s *King*, it shows how animal and environmental perspectives destabilize anthropocentric and colonial authority. Drawing on postcolonial theory, ecocriticism, narratology, and animal studies, the article contends that these texts collectively propose an alternative, multispecies epistemology. Non-human voices emerge as decolonial literary practices that challenge imperial taxonomies of species, race, space, and knowledge, especially amid ecological crisis.

Keywords: *postcolonial taxidermy, animal narrators, ecocriticism, decolonization, British mid-century fiction, non-human narration*

Introduction

In the postwar decades, Britain faced a dual crisis: the external collapse of empire and the internal erosion of the ideological certainties that had justified colonial rule, including faith in European superiority, the rational human subject, and nature as mere resource. Literature registered this upheaval in many ways, notably through fiction that granted narrative authority to non-human entities—animals, ecosystems, and elemental forces—rather than to human rationality. While postcolonial studies and ecocriticism have separately explored race, identity, and representations of nature, their intersection in non-human narration and decolonial politics in mid-century British fiction remains underexamined. This article fills that gap by proposing “postcolonial taxidermy” and reading Ballard, Lessing, and Berger as restoring agency and historical presence to non-human life against colonial epistemology.

Aims and Objectives

The primary aim of this study is to establish postcolonial taxidermy as a critical framework for reading the intersection of non-human narration and decolonial politics in British mid-century fiction.

The specific research objectives are as follows:

1. To theorize “postcolonial taxidermy” as a conceptual framework that links colonial knowledge production to the literary politics of non-human narration.
2. To investigate how J.G. Ballard, Doris Lessing, and John Berger deploy non-human perspectives to critique colonial extractivism, epistemic violence, and species hierarchy.

3. To situate these literary strategies within the broader intellectual contexts of postcolonial theory, ecocriticism, and animal studies.
4. To contribute a methodologically integrated approach to the emerging field of postcolonial ecocriticism, bridging narrative theory, environmental humanities, and decolonial thought.
5. To identify the decolonial political significance of multispecies storytelling as a formal and ethical practice in the selected literary texts.

Literature Review

Postcolonial criticism has examined how Western epistemologies turn colonized peoples into objects of knowledge rather than historical subjects (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988), but has been slower to extend these insights to non-human beings. Postcolonial ecocriticism (DeLoughrey & Handley, 2011) addresses this gap by showing how empire organized both people and environments through shared classificatory logics, rendering them knowable, manageable, and extractable. Nixon's (2011) "slow violence" clarifies how environmental harm accumulates over time, shaping the ecological catastrophes in Ballard and Lessing. Animal studies further unsettle human exceptionalism: Haraway's (2003) "companion species" and Derrida's (2008) "animal gaze" model entangled, vulnerable cross-species relations. Huggan and Tiffin (2015) and Connor (2024) bring these insights to literary form, reading animals and decentered narration as ideological sites. Together, these works ground the article's concept of "postcolonial taxidermy," which theorizes how mid-century British fiction uses non-human narration to undo imperial taxonomies of life and knowledge.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative design based on close textual analysis, reading literary form in relation to its historical and ideological contexts. It adopts an interdisciplinary methodology, combining narrative theory, postcolonial criticism, ecocriticism, and animal studies to link formal features with political meanings. The primary texts—Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962), Lessing's *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971), and Berger's *King* (1999)—are selected as a purposive sample for their non-human narration and engagement with imperial legacies. Genette's (1980) theorization of focalization and Lanser's (1992) work on narrative voice guide the formal analysis, supported by historical research on imperial natural history and colonial taxonomy.

Discussion and Analysis

Postcolonial Taxidermy as a Critical Concept

Taxidermy preserves by arresting: it produces the semblance of life while eliminating its animacy. Colonial natural history performed an analogous operation on the environments it catalogued and the peoples it governed, rendering both as static, available for classification, display, and appropriation. As DeLoughrey and Handley (2011) demonstrate, the organization of the natural world into discrete, hierarchically ordered categories was inseparable from the racial and cultural hierarchies through which empire governed human populations. Postcolonial taxidermy names this double operation and, crucially, the literary resistance to it: narrative strategies through which mid-century British fiction reanimates what imperial epistemologies sought to fix.

Ballard and the Return of the Repressed Ecology

In *The Drowned World*, Ballard figures ecological catastrophe as the return of what colonial civilization suppressed. Tropical lagoons submerging London reverse imperial geography: former colonial “jungle” now engulfs the metropolis. As Kerans’s rational consciousness dissolves, narrative authority shifts from human subject to non-human landscape. Iguanas, dragonflies, and dense vegetation act as agents of a prior biological order that precedes colonial modernity. Nixon’s (2011) “slow violence” clarifies this crisis as the deferred ecological consequence of centuries of imperial extraction.

Lessing and the Epistemology of the Non-Human

Lessing’s *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* radically challenges anthropocentric epistemology. Professor Watkins’s visions—his experience as a rat, his communion with crystalline entities, his memory of a pre-human civilization—are pathologized by psychiatry as mental illness. This pathologization constitutes epistemic violence, suppressing knowledges that exceed Western rational humanism. Haraway’s (2003) insistence that animals are not merely surrogates for theory resonates: the rat’s sensory world, suffering, and intelligence expose a dominant colonial episteme that enforces rationality on both colonized peoples and the natural world.

Berger and the Ethics of Non-Human Witnessing

This article theorizes “postcolonial taxidermy” to link colonial classificatory violence against people and environments with literary form. Through Ballard’s *The Drowned World*, Lessing’s *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, and Berger’s *King*, it shows how non-human narrators and perspectives reanimate what empire sought to fix, challenging anthropocentric, racial, and epistemic hierarchies. Drawing on postcolonial theory, ecocriticism, narratology, and animal studies (Said, Spivak, Nixon, Haraway, Derrida, DeLoughrey and Handley, Huggan and Tiffin), it proposes multispecies, decolonial storytelling.

Conclusion

This article has argued that a significant strand of British mid-century fiction deploys non-human narration as decolonial literary practice. Through postcolonial taxidermy, it has shown how Ballard, Lessing, and Berger dismantle epistemological hierarchies of species, race, and knowledge that organized the natural world under empire. *The Drowned World* figures ecological catastrophe as the return of imperial repression; *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* exposes the epistemic violence of Western rationalism toward non-human ways of knowing; and *King* positions the animal as privileged witness to systemic dispossession, demonstrating how multispecies narration can unsettle colonial power at its epistemic foundations.

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