

Ecological Justice and Subaltern Voices: A Decolonial Reading of Okri's *Every Leaf a Hallelujah*

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Abstract

The research explores the contributions of subaltern voices in formulating environmental activism. It reimagines equitable futures through ecological practices and defiance of environmental degradation based on colonial exploitation. The research critiques colonial legacies that facilitated epistemic and ecological violence. Drawing on the decolonial framework by Catherine E. Walsh and Walter D. Mignolo, the study highlights the resilience and agency of marginalized communities. To explore how subaltern narratives articulate environmental concerns, the analysis incorporates literary work by Ben Okri. Using textual and critical discourse analyses of the selected novel, the research uncovers the exclusion of subaltern perspectives in dominant environmental discourses. The study highlights the transformative potential and underscores the importance of incorporating subaltern ecological wisdom into global policies. The research advocates for a future grounded in ecological justice, resilience, and shared hope by amplifying subaltern voices.

Keywords: subaltern voices, shared hope, sustainable future, environmental activism, ecology

Introduction

Environmental degradation and climate change disproportionately impact marginalized communities all over the world. However, these unique perspectives and practices are essential for ecological sustainability. These marginalized groups, often excluded from mainstream environmental discourses, contribute invaluable perspectives to the study. Ecological wisdom, cultural traditions and life experience of the marginalized offer alternative paradigms for addressing the intertwined challenges of environmental degradation and social inequity. To examine the role of subaltern ecological practices in encountering environmental degradation and resisting colonial exploitation serves as the primary focus of the study.

While focusing on subaltern agency as transformative, the research critiques the enduring legacies of colonialism over ecological exploitation through Walsh and Mignolo's decolonial frameworks. Subaltern ecological knowledge has been historically disregarded. So, decoloniality necessitates the tearing down colonial and capitalist structures (Mignolo 12). This approach highlights how localized ecologies may subvert prevailing environmental narratives and promote alternate sustainability models.

The investigation centres on Ben Okri's novel *Every Leaf a Hallelujah*, published in 2021, articulating eco-imagination. By fusing environmental awareness and subaltern viewpoints, Okri's work exemplifies how literature can motivate ecological action and envision equitable futures. Through the protagonist Mangoshi, Okri offers a strong description of the relationship between humanity and nature. She set out to rescue her mother and her people's sacred wood. The narrative challenges the readers to reflect on their engagement with nature by celebrating and criticizing indigenous ecological knowledge and environmental exploitation. This research explores thematic discussions such as the historical connection between colonialism and environmental exploitation, subaltern acts of resistance and ecological resilience, and the transformative power of hope in envisioning an inclusive and sustainable future. The research promotes the recognition

and inclusion of subaltern voices into global environmental governance through the intersection of literary narrative with activism in the real world. Specifically, it asserts that attaining ecological justice means appreciating subaltern inputs. These contributions are central to re-establishing humans' position on the planet and securing a sustainable future.

Critical Discourse Analysis of *Every Leaf a Hallelujah*

Every Leaf a Hallelujah by Ben Okri tells the story of Mangoshi, a young girl determined to save her ailing mother and her community's sacred forest in the face of exploitative forces. In her first journey into the forest, Mangoshi realizes the mystery and vitality of the forest. She senses that wildlife is diminishing and trees are fading. Through the guidance of an old and wise baobab tree, she learns that the first is suffering stems from logging operations. Mangoshi's journey in the novel blends the form of an environmental fairy tale with a political critique of colonial and capitalist logics. It addresses pressing contemporary issues of resource extraction. Okri's story, as a whole, reflects decolonial ecological consciousness, restores agency to subaltern perspectives and subverts profit-driven environmental discourses.

Under colonial regimes, the sacred forest was historically dismissed, erased, or appropriated and became a symbol of indigenous ecological knowledge. Intergenerational transfer of wisdom is shown in Mangoshi's journey and encounter with the wise Baobab tree. It stands in sharp contrast to exploitative capitalist agendas. Environmental stewardship is also reframed under the tree's leadership and guidance, as a relational and reciprocal practice that necessitates responsibility of the communities instead of extractive gain.

The portrayal of corporate actors intent on "levelling the forest" reflects historical continuity between modern environmental exploitation and colonial land dispossession. Okri, through Mangoshi's defiance, foregrounds the transformative power of subaltern ecological agency. The text becomes a site of decolonial activism by dismantling the systems perpetuating environmental injustice and advocating for preserving ecological heritage. In this way, the novel offers an alternative vision of ecological governance. Through its dual function as literature and resistance, the story brings in the indigenous values and communal care.

Critique of Colonial Legacies: Environmental and Epistemic Violence

Ben Okri critiques the colonial matrix of power that upholds both environmental exploitation and epistemic violence in *Every Leaf a Hallelujah*. It aligns well with Walter Mignolo's decolonial framework. The loggers' actions echo the historical patterns of colonial resource extraction. "There is no modernity without coloniality" (Walsh and Mignolo 4). They also highlight that environmental exploitation is fundamentally linked to the colonial histories of dispossessions rather than an accidental phenomenon. Though framed as an economic necessity, the ecological and cultural significance of subaltern landscapes is ignored in the action. The lament of the fallen iroko tree: "Human beings came and cut me down to sell me and make money" (Okri 55), perfectly captures this commodification. The capitalist mindset that reduces forests to mere profit-generating commodities is exposed through the sorrow of the iroko tree. These capitalist mentalities deprive trees of their intrinsic value. The voice also stands as a metaphor for the marginalized communities, who have historically borne the brunt of ecological destruction, and the silenced natural world. Walsh and Mignolo identify it as the "naturalization of life" under the coloniality of power (10).

The loggers dismiss Mangoshi's bond with the forest as childish and irrational. Okri extends this critique to epistemic violence, and Walsh and Mignolo term it "political-epistemic violence of modernity" (2). The logging manager tells her she is a child and does not understand certain things (Okri 62). Through this action, he embodies the colonial attitude favouring industrial and utilitarian logic. This rhetoric reinforces

the colonial legacy of parasitism, where profit is prioritized over ecological stewardship and devalues indigenous and subaltern knowledge systems (Niroula).

The pivotal moment in the novel occurs when Mangoshi confronts the loggers. She refuses to yield, and her defiance mobilizes community members, journalists, and even government officials. This illustrates the ability of subaltern organizations to challenge established power structures (Folke et. al, 20). This moment in the novel foregrounds indigenous voices' resilience in resisting ecological exploitation. It also asserts their centrality in promoting solidarity and environmental justice.

Mangoshi's resistance to the grief of the iroko tree is contrasted in the narrative. A multi-layered critique of colonial, racial, and capitalist exploitation is offered through Mangoshi's account. A transformative potential of solidarity, resilience, and indigenous ecological knowledge (Folke et. al, 20) is affirmed. By weaving these ideas together, Okri's narrative advances the vision of decolonial ecological justice. This vision is rooted in re-centring and interdependence of subaltern voices, and according to Gendreau, it is needed to create a sustainable future.

Conclusion

By serving as both political intervention and literary work, *Every Leaf a Hallelujah* by Ben Okri tries to remove the lingering structure of colonial exploitation that continues to damage marginalized communities and ecosystems. Mangoshi's quest, drawing wider attention, becomes an act of re-existence and redefines the village's relationship with the ecosystem. The narrative thus asserts that environmental stewardship is essential for human survival. Mangoshi's resistance and her father's wisdom envision a future grounded in resistance and re-centring of marginalized voices. Ultimately, Okri's novel outlines the decolonial vision and replaces it with stories of reciprocity, hope, and solidarity by exposing the epistemic violence that diminishes indigenous knowledge.

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