

THE ECOCRITICAL ROLE OF SACRED TREES IN LITERATURE: COMPARING C.S. LEWIS' THE MAGICIAN'S NEPHEW AND DJOKOLELONO'S SETAN VAN OYOT

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Abstract

Though C.S. Lewis' *The Magician's Nephew* and Djokolelono's *Setan van Oyot* are literary works separated by culture and age, they are unified by a common denominator that is essential to develop an ecological awareness, which is their use of sacred trees. It has been observed that narratives containing embodiments of nature such as supernatural tales of forest guardians or sacred trees are among the most effective methods in intentionally voicing or unintentionally reminding humanity's ecological obligations. *The Magician's Nephew* possesses the 'Tree of Protection', while *Setan van Oyot* has the Indonesian weeping fig tree named, 'Kiyai Oyot'. This paper will look into the ecocritical role surrounding both fiction's sacred trees. By using the qualitative descriptive method, this paper has found *first*, the protector role of both trees. *Second*, both trees function as the first bulwarks against the fiction's antagonists which are labelled as a foreign destructive force.

Keywords: Comparative Literature, Ecocriticism, Setan Van Oyot, The Magician's Nephew

Introduction

Throughout the last 50 years, there has been a surge of academic interest attempting to explore the connection between humans and nature, all embodied in the term called ecocriticism. Its inception as a concept is largely agreed to have happened in the 1980s with the help of ecological philosophers such as Michael P. Branch, Cheryll Glotfelty, and Karl Kroeber. A common denominator shared between their works— such as, "Ecocriticism: The Nature of Nature in Literary Theory and Practice", "'Home at Grasmere': Ecological Holiness", and *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*— is the necessity to revise the current human-nature relationship (Branch, 1994; Glotfelty & Fromm, 1994; Kroeber, 1974). The necessity for such revision was caused by a plethora of aspects, the 'amalgamation of worries' that followed World War II and the Cold War, such as; nuclear concerns, environmental crises, overpopulation anxiety, and resource scarcity (Garrard, 2004). By the 1990s, there were works that prioritised on advocating human integration with nature, such as Jonathan Bate's *Romantic Ecology* and Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism*. And by today, the message of ecological consciousness has permeated throughout the majority of society.

In Indonesia, ecological consciousness has found its way through the medium of poetry and novels, creating narratives that revolve around the nation's literary tradition and geography. Poets and novelists in Indonesia communicate connections between humanity and nature while imbuing nuance from the archipelago's diverse landscapes and culture. Writers like Chairil Anwar, Joko Pinurbo, and Putu Wijaya are among the ones that have contributed significantly to this discourse. They took advantage of language's aesthetic aspect as a tool to connect readers with the environmental dimension. Joko Pinurbo used nostalgia in his poem

“Hutan Karet” to invoke a universal ecocritical awareness in Indonesian people (Pinurbo, 1990). In the short story “Merdeka”, Putu Wijaya warned readers about an incoming disconnection between the major economic powers and nature (Wijaya, 2010). This disconnection is shown by how the rich’s subjugation of nature that ends with floods, pollution, and societal disintegration. Implicated throughout the short story, is the necessity to fight back this human-nature ‘absence’.

From Indonesia’s relatively young ecocriticism front, there has been clear endeavours at improving the subject by enriching the discourse. The mimetic and cathartic nature of ecocriticism has been explored in Thirman Putu Sali’s poem “Sunrise di Bukit Manglayang”, showing that ecocritical literary works may act as reflections of the real society and providers of relief. Analysis of the poem also shows that ecocritical analysis requires or at least may benefit from understanding multiple disciplines (Khomisah, 2020). This echoes Garrard’s propositions in which a complete understanding of environmental problems can only be achieved by analysing its cultural and scientific dimension. Especially in today’s era of postmodernism, where the polarization of ideas and ‘void’ it creates necessitate humanist researchers to work even harder in order to better communicate their ideas (Dewi, 2017). We have witnessed how ‘cornucopians’, are able to shift environmental awareness to be lightly viewed by claiming that unrestricted capitalism is the main benefactor for an improving society and therefore erases the need to worry about ‘fear-mongering environmentalists’ (Garrard, 2004). This void created by the cornucopians must be quickly occupied by environmentalists and ecocritics in order to restore balance in the environmental discourse.

Within the vast expanse of ecocriticism, trees emerge as symbols that signify the essence of ecological interconnectedness. Trees become powerful metaphors in literature serving as sources for reflections on life, growth, and interconnectedness. In this context, sacred trees, with their spiritual and cultural significance, stand as embodiments of the symbiotic relationship between humanity and the natural world. They serve as narrative tools, capturing the essence of ecological consciousness within the context of culture and literature (Tatay & Merino, 2023).

In Indonesia, trees play a crucial and multifaceted role in shaping the country’s environment, culture, and economy. The nation’s vast and diverse tropical forests harbor an extraordinary array of plant and animal species, contributing significantly to global biodiversity. Indonesia’s rich cultural heritage is deeply intertwined with its forests, as many indigenous communities rely on the resources derived from trees for their traditional practices and livelihoods. Moreover, the forest sector is a key pillar of the country’s economy, providing employment opportunities. However, the nation faces challenges such as deforestation, illegal logging, and forest fires, which threaten the sustainability of this resource (Nugroho & Prasetyo, 2019). Sustainable forest management practices and conservation efforts are crucial in ensuring that the role of trees in Indonesia continues to be a positive force for both the environment and the people. But this starts with a form of ecological consciousness.

In Indonesia, trees carry deep supernatural significance deeply rooted in the country’s rich cultural and spiritual traditions. The beliefs of many indigenous communities in Indonesia give spiritual qualities to various elements of nature, with trees being prominent among them (Saputra, 2020). Certain trees are believed to be inhabited by spirits or deities, and these sacred groves are revered as places of spiritual power. In Balinese Hinduism, for example, the sacred banyan tree, is considered a dwelling place for spirits (Artini, 2022). Villages often have

designated sacred trees, and offerings are made to these trees during ceremonies and rituals to appease the spirits residing within them. The connection between trees and the spiritual realm is also evident in other Indonesian cultures, where certain trees are believed to serve as gateways to otherworldly dimensions. Moreover, the practice of Hinduism in Indonesia involves venerating natural elements, including trees, as religious importance (Sujarwo, Caneva, & Zuccarello, 2020). Highlighted in the practice is the sin of intentionally hurting nature (Dewi, 2020). Such beliefs contribute to the conservation of sacred forests and groves, as cutting down or harming these trees is often considered taboo due to the perceived spiritual consequences (Tatay & Merino, 2023). In Indonesian folklore and mythology, trees are frequently featured as symbols of protection or as homes for mystical beings.

In the Western world, trees similarly hold significant ecological, cultural, and economic importance. In North America and Europe, forests contribute substantially to biodiversity, carbon sequestration, and water regulation. Trees are integral to the identities of many Western cultures, with ancient trees often holding historical and cultural significance (Stara & Tsiakiris, 2019). Additionally, urban trees provide numerous benefits, including improved air quality, shade, and aesthetic value. Sustainable forestry practices are emphasized in many Western countries to balance the economic benefits of timber production with the need to preserve biodiversity and ecosystem health.

In the realm of literature, the convergence of ecocriticism and the symbolism of trees creates a rich tapestry that reflects our evolving understanding of the environment. The narratives of C.S. Lewis' *The Magician's Nephew* and Djokolelono's *Setan van Oyot* exemplifies this fusion, transcending cultural and temporal boundaries. *Setan van Oyot* is about a young Dutchman who ventures to Java to find his father, a beautiful native woman with ambitions of becoming a Dutch lady, and a corrupt politician, all involved in a web of tragedy around a village that has a 'protector' which takes the form of a beringin tree (Djokolelono, 2019). Meanwhile, *The Magician's Nephew* is about two children traveling through worlds and also the creating of the world of Narnia (Lewis, 2008). Through the exploration of the 'Tree of Protection' and 'Kiyai Oyot,' this study unveils the enduring power of sacred trees as conduits for ecological reflection. These literary works, separated by culture and age, converge on a common ground, a shared narrative rooted in the interconnectedness of humanity and nature. In doing so, they contribute to the broader discourse on literature's role in shaping ecological consciousness, emphasizing the enduring relevance of both ecocriticism and sacred trees in our contemporary understanding of the world.

Method

This paper is a comparative analysis which focuses on ecocritical aspects of two stories with different cultural backgrounds. Comparative literature is a methodology that examines literary works from diverse cultures, languages, and epochs with the aim of seeking the resemblances, distinctions, and connections between them (Hutchinson, 2018b). It transcends the confines of individual national literary works, and encourages a more expansive, global outlook on literature. Ecocritical is the adjective form derived from ecocriticism, a form of criticism that focuses towards the representation of the natural world.

Hutchinson likens comparative literature to the Rorschach's inkblot test, where two mirrored images present an abstract or undefined object. When individuals observe the inkblot, their natural inclination is to draw comparisons with another set of structures (Hutchinson,

2018a). The inkblot on its own does not contain meaning. Only when the individual compares the image with an object they saw before, the image starts to make sense. Similarly in comparative literature, the comparatist will draw parallels between one literary work with another in order to comprehend the significance of both works. The approach in comparative literature involves treating the histories, cultures, and other aspects of literary works as individual dots and then attempting to establish connections among them to construct a coherent pattern. Another way to look at it, comparative literature regards literary works as fragments that require organization to unveil the complete picture. Summarizing these information, comparative literature stands as an interdisciplinary field dedicated to establishing connections and making reasoned comparisons among various elements found within literary works.

This paper will focus on ecocritical common denominators that will be examined by using qualitative descriptive approach in order to elaborate its points. This methodological choice is driven by the need for an in-depth exploration of the cultural and symbolic dimensions associated with both text's sacred trees. Passages are chosen while keeping in mind a diverse representation ecocritical aspects. With a focus on extracting relevant passages and explaining how their cultural and symbolic aspects point out towards ecocriticism, this paper will hopefully offer a useful analysis.

Lastly in this section, is a brief explanation on ecocriticism, which is the orientation that the passages will be explored through, and also a presentation on how ecocriticism will be used. Ecocriticism is a study on how nature is represented in literature (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1994). An ecocritic's tendency is to develop an ecological consciousness in readers. One way to achieve that is to focus on ecocritical aspects. These ecocritical aspects or keys can further localize the ecological discussion, consequently, making a more concentrated analysis. Ecocritical aspects might include concepts such as balance, growth, or sustainability. Because of this study's focus on sacred trees, the ecocritical aspect of this paper will focus on how the trees function as protectors and indicators of the presence of a non-ecologically oriented ruling power.

Findings and Discussion

In *Setan van Oyot*, the protective role of its sacred tree, Kiyai Oyot, is highlighted in multiple parts of the story. The very first instance for this can be seen in the first chapter, when the character Mbok Kromo warns her husband on being *kuwalat*, during their quarrel over his worsening tendencies of looking perversely towards their daughter, Tinah. *Kuwalat* or *kualat* is a Javanese term which is commonly associated with being cursed. In practice, it used as noun to rebuke someone who had violated, is violating, or has the tendency of violating a spiritual or heavenly principle. In the case of Mbok Kromo's husband, Pak Kromo, the *kualat* is less located in the fact that his sexual gaze is directed towards her daughter, but rather because his gaze is directed toward a child who is 'gifted' by Kiyai Oyot. Implicitly in the chapter, is Mbok Kromo's belief that Tinah's body is bestowed by the tree a set of protective charms, that of which will dispense a *kualat* upon a person who sees herself with malintent.

In fact, malintent, or malevolence, is the general problem both Kiyai Oyot and the Tree of Protection seem to be repelling. The title *Setan van Oyot* can be literally translated to 'Devil from the Root'. It is the combination of Javanese and Dutch. The decision to combine both languages makes sense and is quite straightforward, this is because the story takes place in

1930, during a time of Dutch rule in East Java. But the interpretation of the title can go in two directions. Firstly, it can mean a malevolent spiritual force, signified by the word *Setan*, originating from the root part of a tree. In the first meaning, the tree is the source of malevolence. But in the second meaning, the *oyot* or root can be interpreted in more general manner. This will alter the title's meaning into 'malevolence has penetrated to the roots of the story's society'. In support for the first meaning are most Indonesian people. As of today, there are a lot of superstitious Indonesians, moreover, reviews of the book show that readers expected a horror story before reading the whole book. But the story itself does talk about this spirit in form of an embodiment of nature, the sacred tree. We later know that it is in fact a spiritual force, although not necessarily malevolent. The second interpretation of the title is supported by some of the characters. A common form of malevolence shared by some of the characters is greed. This has penetrated through them deeply; 'found root' in them, is another way to describe it. It is the sacred tree's characteristic to repel this malevolence which is embodied in the second definition. Meanwhile in *The Magician's Nephew*, the Tree of Protection's purpose is to repel the malevolence which is embodied in what Aslan calls as the 'force of evil', Jadis.

An intriguing fact on how Kiyai Oyot detects malevolence can be seen by how the sacred tree responds to injustices. Wlingi, the village in which the fabula propagates, is home to men & women, locals & newcomers, field workers & businessmen, scientists & spiritual gurus, and also the colonized subject & colonizers. While there are these striking binary oppositions, some order is maintained, in the sense that while the story has progressed far enough, bloodshed has yet to be spilled. Injustice prevails in form of psychological colonization, internal colonization, and objectification of women. Injustice is a variation, or possibly product, of malevolence that should have been detected by the tree. These injustices align with the second interpretation of the title's meaning; they are the 'devils' in the 'roots' of Wlingi. Yet, Kiyai Oyot seemingly does nothing to protect the village from these injustices.

One interpretation for this is that Kiyai Oyot's malevolence detection is not human-centred. In the case for complex societal intricacies, the job is left to humans. Without justifying the injustices, one can see how the characters did their part in maintaining some form of equilibrium. The workers of *Giethoorn* befriended and assimilated the Dutch gentleman, Thijs, into their East Javan culture until he was practically indistinguishable with them. This happened despite the local's hate towards the Dutch. Respect between workers and higher-ups were maintained to an extent. There were plans on creating a riot, brewed by workers and youth groups, but they never succeeded, nor did they claim any lives. Even in one of the instances where death of a character could have been a solution, the route of killing was not chosen. This refers to Nodoro Sinder's preference of exiling Mbah Benjol as opposed to assassinating him. In general, almost all possibilities of chaos were met with some form of order which outcome was the survival of all characters. Only when the characters disturbed Kiyai Oyot the malevolence was detected, equilibrium was destroyed, and the deaths took place.

This seemingly egotism of nature is a misdirected interpretation on how Kiyai Oyot's protection works. The protection of Kiyai Oyot comes from the people of Wlingi. This has tendency of protection coming from sacred sites has been observed in studies, in which religious or sacred sites tend protect the site itself and the area around it. To add to this, never in the fabula did a supernatural entity protected a character, or even interacted with them. This

is because *Setan van Oyot* is a novel imbued with realism and comedy, as opposed to a supernatural story. The sacredness of the tree was created by the locals by constructing stories around its sacredness. This lies in line with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis which claims that individual's language, or this case stories, shape the perception of the world (Lucy, 2001). A tree with no power other than that which is biologically capable, is able to maintain the order of a village, and in some cases protect the society around it.

The Tree of Protection in *The Magician's Nephew*, seemingly contrasts Kiyai Oyot, as it comes from a fictional story setting in which magic is possible. But how the tree protects its society bears similarities with its Indonesian counterpart. The method of how the Tree of Protection protects is by producing a scent which smells good for Narnians with good intentions but foul for sources of malevolence. While the tree is physically preventing Jadis from entering Narnia by using its scent, it also acts as a reminder for Narnians who pass it. The mere fact that the tree exists provides order. This sacred tree is similar to that of the panopticon; that a higher power is observing them, requires them to act in some sort of harmony.

When it comes to non-ecologically oriented powers, both stories have their own set of sources of chaos which interestingly come in form of a queen. In Kiyai Oyot, the queen is not personally present in the story. She is the Queen of Netherlands known as Sri Ratu. Sri Ratu doesn't seem to directly order the cutting down of Kiyai Oyot, but her influence requires her subordinates and assistants to provide a space for the celebration of her birthday. Event organizers decided that the place under the tree was the perfect place for such event. After all, the chocolate plantation near the place has been compared to *Giethoorn* of the Netherlands, and the surrounding landscape was extremely beautiful. Meanwhile, Jadis, the self-proclaimed Queen of Charn, destroyed her own world in order to prevent her sister claim the throne.

Sri Ratu, embodies a form of indirect influence that emanates from a distant source. Despite her physical absence, her impact is visible through the actions of her subordinates and assistants. The decision to create space for her birthday celebration under the sacred tree, leading to its unintended destruction, underscores the far-reaching consequences of external influences. Sri Ratu becomes a symbol not only of the Dutch colonial power but also of the unintended consequences that can arise from seemingly innocuous decisions made in her name. The juxtaposition with Jadis, adds a layer to the exploration of chaos. Unlike Sri Ratu, Jadis is not a passive influence. She actively engages in the destruction of her own world. This deliberate act of annihilation, driven by a desire to maintain control over the throne, contrasts sharply with the unwitting chaos caused by Sri Ratu's influence. Jadis's character introduces a more overt form of power and agency, where the queen herself becomes the instrument of chaos, choosing to sacrifice her entire realm for her personal ambitions. Jadis's character is marked by the determination to thwart her sister's claim to the throne. The act of annihilating Charn by using the Deplorable Word is not merely an impulsive outburst, but a calculated move, a manifestation of her unyielding will to rule. This deliberate and destructive choice sets her apart as a queen who doesn't shy away from extreme measures, be it the destruction of the entire ecology of her world, in order to secure her dominance. Both queens are not wary of the ecological problem caused by their power and they serve as cautionary characters in the narrative. This absence of the ecological consciousness brought the suffering of the society around the sacred tree.

Conclusion

In the narratives of *Setan van Oyot* and *The Magician's Nephew*, the stories revolve around the protective roles of sacred trees, Kiyai Oyot and the Tree of Protection, respectively. *Setan van Oyot* combines Javanese and Dutch elements, emphasizing the societal and environmental contexts of Wlingi, the title “Devil from the Root” invites dual interpretations either a malevolent force emanating from the sacred tree or malevolence penetrating the roots of society. Kiyai Oyot’s protection, however, is revealed to be a construct shaped by local beliefs and stories. In contrast, *The Magician's Nephew* introduces a magical setting where the Tree of Protection utilizes a scent to physically deter malevolence. But *The Magician's Nephew's* sacred tree also acts as a maintainer of order, similar to Kiyai Oyot. Both stories underscore the importance of preserving cultural and natural heritage, caution against unchecked ambition, and the requirement for an ecological consciousness.

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