Wah Academia Journal of Social Sciences
Volume 4, Issue 1, Jun 2025, pp. 1545-1555
ISSN – E 2958-8731 P 2958-8723
https://doi.org/10.63954/WAJSS.4.1.66.2025

Climate Apartheid: Exploring Urban Political Ecology in the Age of Rising Inequalities in Mohsin Hamid's Moth Smoke

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Abstract

The study intends to shed light on the intricate relationships that exist between environmental injustice, nature's retaliation, and the socioeconomic hardships of underprivileged groups as they are portrayed in Mohsin Hamid's novel Moth Smoke. Drawing on political ecology, the study will investigate how environmental exploitation and the material circumstances of people's lives, which are influenced by the unequal distribution of resources, perpetuate a cycle that exacerbates the plight of marginalized populations and furthers environmental degradation. This loop encourages retaliatory reactions from the environment and impacted communities while maintaining social and economic inequality. The analysis will investigate how environmental injustice and nature's retaliation disproportionately affect underprivileged communities, who are already affected by systemic socioeconomic injustices. These communities are particularly vulnerable to environmental catastrophes because they are frequently denied access to necessary resources, political clout, and resilience. Their socioeconomic difficulties are thus made worse by the fact that they are unable to endure and recover from such calamities.

Keywords: climate apartheid, socio economic marginalization, urban political ecology, environmental injustice, nature's revenge

Introduction

Within literary and cultural studies, the rise of postcolonial eco-criticism is a noteworthy advancement. Understanding the intricate relationships between colonialism, post-colonialism, and the environment is crucial as the global community struggles with the most severe environmental issues of the twenty-first

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century. A critical perspective for analyzing the environmental aspects of colonial and postcolonial literature, culture, and discourse is offered by postcolonial eco-criticism.

The understanding that environmental concerns are inextricably linked to issues of power, history, and identity necessitates postcolonial eco-criticism. Ecosystems and societies all across the world have been profoundly impacted by colonialism, which was typified by resource extraction, land dispossession, and the imposition of Western conceptions of nature. According to Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, the post-colonial "green" movement was essentially an acknowledgement by academics that it was impossible to study contemporary colonialism and imperialism without considering the enormous amount of environmental destruction they involved in (2). Huggan highlights the ongoing conflicts and fruitful exchanges between ecocriticism and postcolonial criticism by contending that the blending of these disciplines serves as a kind of reciprocal correction, with ecocriticism pushing postcolonial studies to focus more intently on ecological justice and postcolonial criticism drawing attention to ecocriticism's propensity to ignore racial and cultural issues (702). The convergence of the two scholarly domains has mirrored the transformations in political and historical discussions surrounding the environment, making it increasingly challenging in the early years of the twenty-first century to consider the term in isolation from the historical arcs of imperialism, colonialism, and the diverse forms of resistance that have emerged in response (Mukherjee 40).

In "Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor" (2011), Rob Nixon explores how underprivileged groups in the Global South are disproportionately affected by environmental deterioration. A postcolonial approach to environmental study that takes into consideration the past and present effects of colonialism on the environment and oppressed groups is desperately needed, as Nixon's work makes clear. Pablo Mukherjee claims that the "global south" is characterized by a unique type of poverty that has its origins in the contemporary history of colonialism and empire (31).

This third type of class conflict, which Guha and Alier refer to as the "environmentalism of the poor", begins as a dispute over productive resources (18). They restate that unbridled economic expansion damages the poor by causing pollution and resource depletion (75). Mukherjee tries to draw attention to a crucial

aspect of global capitalism, namely its propensity to simultaneously create pockets of extreme wealth and vast swaths of poverty on a local, national, and international level, while Guha and Alier specifically discuss the dualism between the global North and South in terms of the South being poor and the North being the affluent (32). This is in line with political ecology's fundamental goals, which include identifying and combating the environmental and social injustices that are supported by prevailing power systems. Notwithstanding its wide-ranging interdisciplinary focus, political ecology is primarily impacted by two major theoretical currents: ecological analysis, with its more expansive understanding of bio-environmental relationships, and political economy, with its insistence on connecting the allocation of power with productive activity (Greenberg and Park 1). Political ecology, according to Joan Martinez Alier, is the study of ecological distribution conflicts. He refers to disputes over ownership and access to natural resources, especially as a source of income, as well as the consequences of environmental degradation (Escobar 8).

Methodology

The study, which draws on political ecology, looks at how resource inequality and environmental exploitation feed a vicious cycle in Mohsin Hamid's novel Moth Smoke that not only worsens environmental degradation but also sets off nature's retaliatory reactions. Building on Alier's definition of political ecology as the study of ecological distribution conflicts and Rob Nixon's concept of "Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor", the study explores how these ecological repercussions disproportionately affect marginalized groups, thereby sustaining social and economic inequality. It draws attention to the vicious circle that environmental injustice feeds. Pollution and resource depletion are examples of environmental injustices that lead to ecosystem degradation and the retaliation of nature. The study explores how environmental injustice and nature's retaliation disproportionately impact vulnerable populations, which are already weighed down by social and economic injustices. These communities' socioeconomic struggles are exacerbated by the fact that they frequently lack the resilience, political clout, and resources necessary to deal with and recover from environmental disasters. Furthermore, the novel's focus is on the urban political ecology, which aids in our comprehension of the relationship between cities and the environment, because it is set in the urban city of Lahore. The field has become even more difficult as a result of increased urbanization, which has made individuals more mindful of the subject's complexity.

Analysis and Discussion

The novel highlights an ecocritical viewpoint in which the environment opposes anthropocentric dominance by revealing how human vulnerability, exploitation, and fragility are inextricably linked to the agency of the natural world through its many depictions of nature's toll on humans. The temperature is "rising" (33), and a coating of dust is covering everything. A filthy sky entirely blocks out the sun. Neither wind nor clouds are present. Even at night, the dust makes it hard to discern a single star through the night veil. The weather is "cloudless but not clear" (33). Although the core of political ecology research is a knowledge of the changes that have taken place in urban environments, these changes must inevitably be understood in light of the social, political, and economic dynamics that have contributed to these changes.

Economic activity and overconsumption in cities cause ecological imbalances, environmental deterioration, and the eviction of underprivileged and indigenous groups from resource-rich places. The excessive and careless use of resources is evident in the rise in traffic on the roads, which not only uses gasoline but also contributes to air pollution and noise, both of which are harmful to human health. Furthermore, widespread use of air conditioners and rampant cigarette and drug usage have contaminated the atmosphere to the point where the natural air is now excessively hot. As a result, the transformers are subjected to high load, which causes significant load shedding during the hottest summer months and plunges most of Lahore into darkness. Additionally, it raises summertime electricity costs, which forces Daru and others who have been trying to move up the social scale to give away their earnings. Daru laments that "due to privatization and the boom of guaranteed profit, project-financed, imported oil-fired electricity projects, power prices have been rising faster than a banker's wages the last couple of years." (67)
The neo-liberal and capitalist policies that have increased the gap between the rich and the poor are also contributing to this environmental deterioration. In "Urban Political Ecology, Justice and the Politics of Scale", Swyngedouw and Heynen contend that the unequal nature of the capitalist economy makes it difficult for the urban population to share resources equally. People who experience unfair resource allocations are less likely to anticipate redistribution in their favor given the power structure that determines allocation decisions (911).

Examining the unequal allocation of resources, services, and environmental amenities among various socioeconomic groups in metropolitan environments is a crucial component of urban political ecology. This includes having access to green areas, clean water, sanitary facilities, reasonably priced housing, and other necessities. In urban environments, the gap between the rich and the poor is frequently glaring, with low-income districts and marginalized people facing substandard infrastructure, pollution, and restricted access to environmental benefits. The regions designated for the rich and the disadvantaged make this disparity in infrastructure quite evident.

The fact that the impoverished cannot directly enter the world of the wealthy emphasizes the growing gap between the two social strata. You must get "access" (14) to their realm, just like Daru did by becoming friends with Mumtaz and Ozi. Small homes perched atop shoulder-high boundary walls make up the neighborhood where Daru resides. The place is plain, unlike some of the "pink-painted, column-sporting mini monstrosities" (20) nearby. "A gray cement block, more or less, with rectangular windows, a couple of balconies too narrow to use, and the best bloody tree in the neighborhood: a banyan that's been around forever and covers most of the dust patch that Daru calls his front lawn" (20). On the contrary, Ozi's house comprises of high walls and the driveway, made of brick and was in better condition than most roads in the city.

Swyngedouw emphasizes that a number of environmental and urban factors negatively impact certain social groupings while favoring others (901). Their use of air conditioners and access to them demonstrate this. Through their access to air conditioning, one of the characters in the book Julius Superb very successfully illustrates the class divide in Pakistani society. According to him, there are two social strata in Pakistan: the masses, who are "large and sweaty" (92), and the elite, who are smaller in number but "exercise vastly greater control over their immediate environment" (92). He declares that control over a crucial resource, i.e. air conditioning, is the basis for differentiating between members of these two groups. Without leaving the parched subcontinental plains, the elite have succeeded in reproducing the quality of life in Sweden for themselves. The fact that they live in a world that is artificially chilled unites them as a diverse group. They drive air-conditioned automobiles to air-conditioned offices, have lunch in air-conditioned restaurants, and then return home to their air-conditioned lounges to unwind after waking up in air-conditioned homes.

In contrast to Aurangzeb, who tried to "master his environment" (94) and "couldn't care less about the country" (94), Daru, who, as a result of his economic collapse owing to the national financial crunch, suffers the shift from the cooled to the uncooled. Aurangzeb loved ACs and insisted that his father install central air-conditioning in their new house, and that the system be supported by a dedicated back-up generator, and that he has a master remote control for the entire upstairs portion.

This emphasizes the concept of environmental injustice, in which the wealthy constantly compete with one another to control their surroundings by overusing the resources at their disposal, leaving the poor to bear the repercussions of their deeds. In order to shield themselves from the heat, the wealthy have installed air conditioners everywhere, creating alternative resources for them. Ironically, the vast majority of marginalized people cannot afford this luxury, and the excessive usage of these air conditioners makes the temperature even more intolerable. This illustrates how individuals who contribute to climate change are the ones most impacted, while those who contribute to climate destruction are the ones who suffer the least.

By contrasting the extravagant consumption patterns of the wealthy with the precarity of the disadvantaged, the story highlights the glaring differences across socioeconomic strata. For example, the rich are said to have their sushi flown in from Karachi, bragging about their "exotic air-transported meal" (70) at parties with no regard for the environmental cost of their pleasure. What ecocritical theorists refer to as "privileged mobility"; a phenomenon in which wealth shields the wealthy from the tangible effects of environmental collapse, is exemplified by their capacity to take a summer vacation in Santorini (Heise 10). Such examples illustrate how class privilege enables the elite to externalize ecological degradation while ignoring environmental problems and the socioeconomic realities of their home country, in accordance with an eco-Marxist criticism (Foster 163). Therefore, the anthropocentric and consumerist mentality that the wealthy represent perpetuates environmental injustice.

On the other hand, the working class's actual experiences highlight the disastrous connections between capitalism, globalization, and government incompetence. The emergence of yellow taxis in Lahore, which were hailed as a sign of progress, caused the rickshaw industry to collapse, leaving drivers with steadily declining earnings.

This instance is a prime example of what postcolonial ecocriticism refers to as the cruelty of "developmentalism", in which initiatives presented as advancements threaten the subsistence economies of underprivileged populations (Nixon 8). In addition to maintaining structural inequality, the state's disregard for these lived realities while developing economic policies also eradicates indigenous knowledge and survival techniques (Guha 72). Hamid emphasizes how power politics worsens socioeconomic and environmental problems by driving the disenfranchised into illegal enterprises as a way to survive during unstable economic and ecological times.

Moreover, the novel also places these injustices in the geopolitical framework of nuclear testing and its catastrophic outcomes. The subcontinent is trapped in what Rob Nixon refers to as "slow violence" (2), where the effects of militarism and environmental destruction occur gradually but destroy both land and life. This is illustrated by the grotesque metaphor, "a summer of great rumblings in the belly of the earth, of atomic flatulence and geopolitical indigestion" (58). In addition to the direct health risks to the populace, nuclear testing causes economic instability by driving up the price of necessities and doubling the price of gasoline. The impoverished suffer the most from economic collapse, while the wealthy protect their possessions by exchanging rupees for dollars and sending them elsewhere. For the rickshaw drivers, whose clients are now compelled to walk because they cannot afford transportation, the issue is especially severe. "My customers are worried about food prices," (191) notes Murad Badshah. They like to walk.

When considered collectively, these instances demonstrate how state inefficiencies, environmental deterioration, and international power politics combine to sustain systemic aggression against underprivileged groups. Thus, the novel illustrates the main points of eco-Marxism and postcolonial ecocriticism: that the environmental crisis is inherently linked to histories of exploitation, unequal development, and the systematic favoring of the wealthy over the poor, and that it is never neutral or evenly distributed.

The story illustrates the interconnectedness of social injustice, economic precarity, and ecological deterioration, with the climate itself acting as both a backdrop and an active force in influencing human behavior. For example, Daru's personal demise is closely associated with Lahore's repressive environment. After a confrontation with Malik Jiwan, a rural landlord "with half a million U.S. in his account" (21), he

loses his job at the bank. Due to his car breaking down, Daru has to walk "half-kilometer or so to the station" (21) in the intense heat, which inevitably aggravates his mood and makes him less patient with the client. After being fired from the bank, he experiences more financial hardship, which ends with his electricity being turned off because of unpaid bills. These scenarios demonstrate how socioeconomic circumstances, made worse by severe weather, drive people to take desperate actions. Daru's eventual descent into criminality serves as an example of the novel's larger commentary on the connections between poverty, the environment, and survival.

The story presents this as a part of a vicious cycle of events that includes the deterioration of Lahore's climate due to human carelessness in protecting the environment, the compounding effects of nuclear testing that further destabilize the climate and economy, and the demise of small businesses like Murad Badshah's rickshaw business. In the end, these changes drive the disenfranchised to commit crimes like boutique robberies, which Murad defends by claiming that "when disparities become too great…the very poor have the right to steal from the very rich" (59). These portrayals align with eco-Marxist criticisms that highlight how the working class is disproportionately affected by environmental disasters, while the wealthy protect themselves with air conditioners and international travel (Foster 163).

The majority of the characters in the novel show little care for the risks their actions cause to the ecosystem, even in the face of widespread ecological destruction. Shahzad Ali points out that an instrumentalist mindset that views nature as a disposable resource rather than an interdependent system is reflected in humanity's violent and exploitative interaction with it (Ali 54). The novel uses the theme of nature's retaliation to highlight this dynamic, implying that when unsustainable behaviors harm the natural world, it reacts in ways that cause human society to become unstable. However, because of their economic and geographic mobility, ecocritics like Ursula Heise contend that people who cause the most environmental harm are frequently the ones least impacted by its effects (Heise 10). Ramachandra Guha also critiques the unequal global distribution of ecological costs, where the poor bear the consequences of affluent consumption (72). The poor, animals, and marginalized communities are instead the ones who face the full force of climatic upheaval, whether in the form of electricity shortages, unbearable heat, or economic ruin.

The andhi (dust storm) scene makes this unequal burden clear. Normally, a sign of respite following a protracted hot spell, the storm arrives with devastating force, leaving Daru hurt and overpowered. The harsh vitality of nature itself is shown by the detailed depiction of dust, trash, and a powerful wind: "The andhi builds, pushing me back a step, screaming in my ears, bending my outstretched arms as I stand my ground. It flings sand at me, sends leaves hurtling into me, but the tree breaks their force and I feel only brief touches on my skin" (90). An embodied reminder of what Rob Nixon refers to as 'slow violence'; an attritional, delayed kind of environmental degradation whose impact is unequally dispersed among populations, the storm represents nature's revenge against human excesses (Nixon 2).

Likewise, the eagerly anticipated rains bring devastation rather than fertility: "a crime wave to Lahore and flooding to the Punjab" (182). The first "nuclear monsoon" (187) turns what was formerly hailed as the monsoon season into "a time of festering, not rebirth" (187). Murad Badshah's rickshaw business is devastated by the flooding, leaving cars stranded in flooded streets. The stench of burning rubbish, which is described as "like burning skin" (191) is also an example of how urban ecological failure directly translates into bodily fragility. As Erik Swyngedouw reiterates, "urban areas populated by marginalized residents will bear the brunt of negative environmental change, whereas more affluent areas will enjoy increased quality of environmental resources", such instances reaffirm that urban environmental change is never distributed equally (910).

The novel emphasizes the unequal distribution of environmental distress, arguing that ecological concerns are inextricably linked to issues of power, prejudice, and social inequality. Here, environmental deterioration serves as a structural factor that influences social interactions, moral decisions, and economic survival rather than just serving as a background. Both eco-Marxism and postcolonial ecocriticism find resonance in the text's dramatization of this intersection of politics, poverty, and climate, which shows how the exploitation of the poor and the exploitation of environment are interdependent processes. Therefore, the argument emphasizes how urgently we need to work together, change policies, and adopt environmentally just behaviors that respect the rights of both the natural world and oppressed populations.

Conclusion

In the end, the novel shows that environmental deterioration cannot be comprehended without reference to the political and socioeconomic systems that create and maintain it. The story highlights the unequal distribution of ecological hardship by showing how the hot weather in Lahore, along with nuclear testing, official neglect, and unbridled capitalism, drives marginalized people like Daru and Murad Badshah into poverty and criminality. The impoverished are left to bear the combined consequences of social exclusion, economic collapse, and climate change while the wealthy protect themselves with air-conditioned comfort, privileged mobility, and international vacations. This disparity recalls postcolonial ecocriticism's contention that programs of "progress" frequently prolong dispossession (Nixon 2; Swyngedouw 910) and eco-Marxist claims that environmental problems are inextricably linked to class conflict (Foster 163).

Through dust storms, nuclear monsoons, and floods that disrupt ecosystems and livelihoods, nature in the novel retaliates against human exploitation rather than existing as a passive backdrop. The idea of "nature's revenge" is reminiscent of Shahzad Ali's claim that humankind's reckless dominance over nature eventually leads to its own demise (Ali 54). However, the text makes it apparent that the effects of this vengeance are not equally distributed, with the main sufferers of environmental degradation rarely being those who are most accountable for it. Climate and ecological collapse impose the greatest costs on the excluded, who are already burdened by economic precarity.

By placing the story in the contexts of eco-Marxism and postcolonial ecocriticism, it is made clear that environmental injustice is a problem that affects social inequity, power, and survival in addition to ecological issues. As a result, the novel pushes readers to acknowledge the intricate relationship between nature and civilization and to imagine a time where social justice and environmental stewardship are inextricably linked. A more equitable and sustainable coexistence can only be achieved by breaking the cycle of exploitation and revenge by collective action, egalitarian legislation, and a rethinking of human–nature relations.

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Article Information:

Received	*2-Apr-2025*
Revised	29-May-2025
Accepted	11-Jun-2025
Published	15-Jun-2025

Declarations:

Author's Contribution:

- **Conceptualization, and intellectual revisions**
- **Data collection, interpretation, and drafting of manuscript**
- The author agrees to take responsibility for every facet of the work, making sure that any concerns about its integrity or veracity are thoroughly examined and addressed

- **Conflict of Interest**: NIL

- **Funding Sources**: NIL

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