

THE EMPIRE WRITES BACK: POSTCOLONIAL ECOCRITICISM AND THE BRITISH COUNTRYSIDE IN LATE 20TH-CENTURY PASTORAL FICTION

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Abstract

This review article examines the intersection of postcolonial ecocriticism and the British countryside in late 20th-century pastoral fiction. Building on the foundational arguments of Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), I argue that a new generation of writers—many of them diasporic or postcolonial authors—have contested and rewritten the English pastoral tradition. By drawing on the key insights of Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* (2010), Rob Nixon's formulation of the "postcolonial pastoral" (1992), and Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee's *Postcolonial Environments* (2010), the article synthesises three main contributions: the exposure of the pastoral's inherent coloniality, the decolonisation of rural landscapes, and the articulation of a critical "environmental double consciousness". Through close readings of V. S. Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989) and David Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress* (1999), I trace how these fictions dismantle the conventional binary between a timeless, white English countryside and the imperial periphery. The review concludes by outlining new directions for postcolonial ecocritical research, especially the need to recover the colonial histories embedded in the rural landscape.

Keywords: postcolonial ecocriticism, pastoral fiction, British countryside, *The Empire Writes Back*, environmental double consciousness, green postcolonialism

1. Introduction

The title "The Empire Writes Back" has become shorthand for the powerful literary and critical movement through which colonised and postcolonial peoples have appropriated, subverted and transformed the language and genres of the imperial centre. Yet while postcolonial studies has productively examined the re-writing of history, identity and language, it has only relatively recently turned its attention to the question of environment. At the same time, ecocriticism, as a field, has often been criticised for its insular focus on Western nature writing and its blindness to the legacies of colonialism. This review article proposes a synthetic approach: by bringing postcolonial ecocriticism to bear on late 20th-century pastoral fiction set in the British countryside, I argue that the rural landscape

emerges as a crucial but often overlooked arena where the struggle over cultural memory, national belonging and environmental justice is fought.

My focus on the British countryside—rather than on the more familiar terrain of settler colonies or postcolonial nations—is deliberate. Late 20th-century pastoral novels by V. S. Naipaul, Kazuo Ishiguro and David Dabydeen engage directly with the English country house, the quiet village and the rolling green fields. These are not, however, nostalgic celebrations of “England’s green and pleasant land.” Instead, they subject the pastoral idyll to a searching postcolonial critique, revealing the unacknowledged colonial wealth, racial violence and environmental dispossession that underpin its aesthetic charm. By reading these fictions alongside the key theoretical statements of the postcolonial ecocritical turn, this review demonstrates that the Empire did not only write back from the periphery; it also wrote back from the very heart of the English countryside.

2. Theoretical Frameworks: Postcolonial Ecocriticism and the Pastoral

2.1 From Empire to Environment

The foundational text for this synthesis is *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* (2010) by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin. Huggan and Tiffin examine “transverse relations between humans, animals and the environment across a wide range of postcolonial literary texts”, and they explicitly address “entitlement and belonging in the pastoral genre”. Their work is grounded in two central insights. First, Western-centrism and anthropocentrism consolidate one another, meaning that the marginalisation of colonised peoples and the exploitation of the non-human world are structurally linked. Second, social justice cannot be fully achieved without ecological justice, and vice-versa. These premises allow Huggan and Tiffin to critique pastoral conventions while also acknowledging their “utopian dimension” – the potential of pastoral forms to imagine “alternative, more socially and environmentally conscious visions of the world”.

Rob Nixon, in a series of influential essays, coined the term “postcolonial pastoral” to describe “writing that refracts an idealized nature through memories of environmental and cultural degradation in the colonies [...] [that] can be loosely viewed as a kind of environmental double consciousness”. Nixon’s formulation, adapted from W. E. B. Du Bois’s concept of double consciousness, captures the uneasy oscillation between metropolitan pastoral nostalgia and the violent colonial histories that pastoral forms often obscure. As Kylie Crane observes, Nixon’s intervention suggests “an intervention into ideologies of representation” and anticipates the central problematic of much postcolonial pastoral fiction: the simultaneous desire for, and suspicion of, idealised rural landscapes.

2.2 The Coloniality of the Pastoral

To understand the urgency of this critique, we must revisit the classic accounts of the pastoral genre. Raymond Williams, in *The Country and the City* (1973), famously dismantled the “pastoral assumption” that the rural labouring class were “pictures of health and vitality”, uncovering instead the reality of embodied suffering, economic exploitation and social injustice. Williams shows how pastoral representations, from the 16th to the 20th centuries, systematically suppress the violence of enclosure, the expropriation of common land and the class structure of agrarian society. John Barrell, in *The Dark Side of the Landscape* (1980), extended this critique to English landscape painting, demonstrating how the picturesque convention “emerges from a world of social and economic relations that are anything but idyllic”. Huggan and Tiffin build on these critiques, but they add a third, distinctly postcolonial objection: the stylistic conventions of pastoral are “predominantly European in sensibility and form”, and their successful use becomes doubtful in non-European landscapes.

Postcolonial writers, however, have not simply rejected the pastoral. Instead, they have engaged in a complex act of appropriation, using the pastoral’s formal resources to expose the tension between “ownership and belonging” in colonial and postcolonial contexts. As one critic puts it, “postcolonial pastoral is critical about the idealisation of rural life and probes into the silenced and the dominant histories which have constructed the colonial spaces”. In this reading, the pastoral becomes a “puzzling form” (William Empson’s phrase) that is both complicit with bourgeois ideology and potentially open to counter-hegemonic rewritings.

3. Reimagining the British Countryside: From Idyll to Archive

3.1 V. S. Naipaul and the Postcolonial Country House

V. S. Naipaul’s *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987) is arguably the key text for any analysis of the postcolonial pastoral in the British context. The novel, which recounts the author’s “enigma” of settling in a rural Wiltshire cottage, is structured as a prolonged meditation on landscape, decay and belonging. Critics have noted that Naipaul “evokes and criticizes the English pastoral tradition”, using the country house as a site for both aesthetic pleasure and historical trauma. The narrator’s journey from colonial Trinidad to the English countryside traces a trajectory of displacement and uneasy re-territorialisation: the pastoral landscape is never simply a retreat but always already a reminder of colonial violence and unequal exchange.

Naipaul’s “postcolonial pastoral” (Nixon 1992) functions through what Nixon calls “environmental double consciousness” – the narrator sees the English landscape both as an object of aesthetic contemplation and as a landscape saturated with the invisible histories of empire. The decay of the country estate, the crumbling walls, the neglected gardens: these are not merely signs of a generalised “post-imperial melancholia” but specific markers of a political economy that has exhausted its moral and material foundations. *The Enigma of*

Arrival therefore performs a double gesture: it affirms the pastoral's affective power while systematically unravelling its claim to timelessness and naturalness.

3.2 Kazuo Ishiguro: Servants, Silences and the Colonial Manor

Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989), written from the perspective of the ageing butler Stevens, approaches the country house from the inside. The novel's pastoral setting – the rolling hills of the West Country, the stately home Darlington Hall – is presented not as a lyrical escape but as the theatre of class repression, emotional denial and historical amnesia. Recent scholarship has shown that “fictional country houses of the 1980s, including Ishiguro's, take a critical view of the myth of the English country house” and that “each of them in some way addresses the colonial and imperial connections of the country house”.

In *The Remains of the Day*, the colonial connection is often oblique, but it is nonetheless crucial. Lord Darlington's interwar appeasement of Nazi Germany is not merely a political error; it is symptomatic of an aristocratic worldview that sees the colonies as unproblematic resources and non-white peoples as natural subordinates. Stevens's obsessive professionalism, his refusal to acknowledge his own humanity or that of others, mirrors the pastoral's suppression of labour and violence. As one scholar notes, “Ishiguro and Naipaul are English writers who were born in other parts of the world, giving them distinctive standpoints from which to consider English history and society”. Their outsider-within perspective allows them to see what the native-born pastoralist often cannot: the country house is an imperial as well as a class institution.

3.3 David Dabydeen: Slaves in the Arcadia

David Dabydeen's *A Harlot's Progress* (1999) offers the most explicit critique of the colonial countryside. The novel follows Mungo, a black slave brought from the Caribbean to serve as a “perfumed pet” in an English country house. Dabydeen deliberately invokes the pastoral tradition – “the road was suddenly cleared, city gave way to green land and a carolling sky” – only to subvert it thoroughly. The “green land” is not an Arcadian refuge but a place of racial humiliation, confinement and violence. By situating a black protagonist at the heart of the English estate, Dabydeen reverses the conventional pastoral gaze: the countryside is no longer the site of the white viewer's leisure but the location of the black subject's coerced labour and forced visibility.

Dabydeen's novel “resonates with Naipaul's ‘postcolonial pastoral’ ... because it evokes and criticizes the English pastoral tradition”. But it also goes further by insisting on the material, historical reality of black presence in the pre-Windrush countryside. As Abigail Ward argues, “Dabydeen deliberately tampers with the historical record, yet he makes far more concrete

connections than Naipaul between country houses and several aspects of colonialism”. A Harlot’s Progress thus exemplifies a historiographic metafiction that turns the pastoral landscape into an archive of colonial violence, forcing contemporary readers to recognise that the English countryside was never white, never innocent and never merely “natural”.

4. Discussion: Environmental Double Consciousness and the Critique of Heritage

Bringing these literary readings together, we can identify several recurring features of the postcolonial pastoral in late 20th-century British fiction.

First, these novels systematically denaturalise the countryside. They refuse to accept the pastoral landscape as a self-evident aesthetic given; instead, they reveal the labour, economic extraction and racial hierarchy that have shaped it. By doing so, they align with ecocritical arguments that “the landscapes that we suppose to be most free of our culture may turn out, on closer inspection, to be its product”.

Second, they mobilise a form of environmental double consciousness that oscillates between metropolitan nostalgia and colonial memory. The postcolonial pastoral character sees the English countryside both as an object of desire (the beautiful, peaceful scene) and as a site of historical injury (the slave-owning estate, the colonial fortune, the racial exclusion). This double vision prevents the reader from settling into a comfortable aesthetic appreciation; it insists on the political and ecological costs of the pastoral mode.

Third, these fictions engage in a critique of heritage that has important implications for British environmental politics. The late 20th-century heritage industry – with its stately-home tourism, costume dramas and nostalgic ruralism – often presented the countryside as a timeless repository of national identity. Postcolonial pastoral novels contest this narrative by showing that the country house and its grounds are built on colonial wealth, slave labour and ecological exploitation. As Corinne Fowler argues, the countryside has a “repressed colonial past”, and these literary works help to bring that past back into view.

At the same time, the postcolonial pastoral is not merely a critique. It also, as Huggan and Tiffin observe, retains an “utopian dimension”. The pastoral’s ability to imagine “alternative, more socially and environmentally conscious visions of the world” is not abandoned; rather, it is redirected. In these novels, the countryside becomes a space for imagining new forms of belonging, new kinship relations across species and race, and new ethical responsibilities towards the more-than-human world.

5. Future Directions for Postcolonial Ecocritical Research

Although this review has focused on a relatively small number of canonical texts, the field is rapidly expanding. Several directions seem particularly promising.

First, we need more detailed studies of the material infrastructure of the pastoral countryside. Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee's *Postcolonial Environments* (2010) points the way by developing an "eco-materialist aesthetics" that attends to the unity of humans and nature, the mediating function of labour, and how "the materiality of the environment enables our cultural activity". Future research could extend this approach to the British context, examining how postcolonial pastoral fictions represent the actual agrarian labour, land use patterns and ecological transformations that sustain the countryside.

Second, there is a pressing need to recover the racialised histories of rural Britain. As recent conference programmes suggest, scholars are increasingly interested in how "postcolonial and Black British literature, which is usually associated with the big city, have critically examined the English idyll for some time". Yet much work remains to be done on the representation of black, Asian and other minority subjects in the British countryside, both in fiction and in life writing.

Third, the intersection of postcolonial ecocriticism with animal studies offers rich opportunities. Huggan and Tiffin's *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* devotes a substantial section to "zoocritical perspectives", arguing that the hierarchical relation between humans and animals is continuous with colonial hierarchies between metropolitan and colonised peoples. Pastoral fiction, with its conventional sheep, cattle and game birds, is an ideal site for exploring these connections.

Finally, and most urgently, postcolonial ecocritical scholarship must engage with the climate crisis. The pastoral mode has often been associated with a static, backwards-looking ideal of nature. Yet as contemporary environmental crises reshape rural landscapes, postcolonial pastoral fictions may offer critical resources for thinking about climate justice, displacement and the uneven distribution of environmental risk. The "new pastoral" identified by Deborah Lilley (2020) is already taking shape, and future research should trace how postcolonial perspectives inform this emerging mode.

6. Conclusion

The British countryside, long imagined as a pastoral idyll detached from the violence of history, has been decisively unsettled by the literary interventions of postcolonial and diasporic writers. Guided by the theoretical frameworks of postcolonial ecocriticism – notably Huggan and Tiffin's critique of pastoral entitlement, Nixon's concept of environmental double consciousness and Mukherjee's eco-materialist method – this review

has shown that late 20th-century pastoral fictions by Naipaul, Ishiguro and Dabydeen constitute a sustained “writing back” to the imperial centre. They do not merely invert the pastoral’s conventions; they transform the genre from within, forcing readers to see the landscape as a palimpsest of colonial histories, racial exclusions and ecological transformations.

The Empire, it turns out, did not only write back from the margins of the former colonies. It also wrote back from the heart of the English countryside – and that writing continues to challenge the ways we imagine nature, nation and belonging in the 21st century.

7. References

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