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Original research paper

POSTCOLONIAL ECOLOGIES: REPRESENTING SLOW VIOLENCE IN *DARI RAHIM OMBAK* AND *THE HOUSE OF MANY GODS*

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Abstract: This article examines how *The House of Many Gods* (2007) by Kiana Davenport and *Dari Rahim Ombak* (2015) by Tison Sahabuddin Bungin expose slow violence by connecting environmental destruction to colonial legacies, military occupation, and state neglect. Both novels document long-term ecological damage—nuclear contamination in Hawai'i and coral reef destruction in Indonesia—that persists through institutional indifference and normalized exploitation. Drawing on Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence, this study analyzes how these texts challenge mainstream environmental narratives that marginalize Indigenous knowledge and obscure the political dimensions of ecological harm. Davenport demonstrates how U.S. military infrastructure displaces Native Hawaiian communities and violates sacred landscapes. Bungin traces how economic pressure and corruption perpetuate destructive fishing practices that devastate marine ecosystems. Both authors present resistance through local practices that preserve cultural identity while protecting natural resources. This comparative analysis reveals how postcolonial fiction reframes environmental crisis as fundamentally linked to questions of political sovereignty, economic justice, and cultural survival.

Keywords: *Indigenous resistance; maritime literature; postcolonial ecocriticism; slow violence; Global South literature.*

1. Introduction

The Anthropocene represents a geological epoch in which human activity reshapes planetary systems, with damaging effects slowly unfolding in ecologically vulnerable regions (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000). Environmental harms such as coral bleaching, toxic runoff, and biodiversity loss are incremental

and often imperceptible, rarely attracting political urgency because they lack dramatic visibility (Afiff & Lowe, 2007; Budiman, 2024). Rob Nixon describes this as "slow violence"—harm that is "gradual and out of sight... dispersed across time and space" (2011, p. 2). Its invisibility complicates not only its recognition but also its representation and redress.

The invisibility of slow violence presents a challenge for representation, as mainstream media gravitates toward immediate, visible crises. Fiction works differently. Yet what exactly does literature accomplish that other forms cannot? Nixon himself worked closely with affected communities, grounding his theory in lived experience. But his analysis treats slow violence primarily as a problem of temporal dispersion—harm that accumulates gradually over time. Our study argues how slow violence succeeds through the systematic erasure of Indigenous epistemologies that could name, resist, and prevent ecological collapse. Fiction proves essential not because it narrates long durations, but because it can restore suppressed knowledge systems alongside the environmental damage those systems were designed to address. As Huggan and Tiffin argue, postcolonial environmental literature "opens imaginative spaces for transformation" (2010, p. 11) by reconfiguring how nature, history, and justice are understood. Through these narrative strategies, literature functions as a counter-discourse to ecological violence.

This article examines two contemporary novels that explore slow violence in postcolonial maritime settings: *Dari Rahim Ombak*[1] (2015) by Indonesian author Tison Sahabuddin Bungin and *The House of Many Gods* (2007) by Hawaiian writer Kiana Davenport. Both authors write from within Indigenous and Global South positionalities, grounding their narratives in lived experience rather than external observation. While rooted in distinct oceanic geographies, the novels depict how extractive practices and state neglect—manifesting as military occupation in Hawai'i and ecological exploitation in Indonesia—undermine local ecologies and cosmologies. Davenport draws on Native Hawaiian epistemologies such as Aloha ʻĀina (love and obligation to the land) to portray the consequences of U.S. nuclear testing and military occupation, which have undermined Native land rights and ecological integrity through Hawai'i's strategic role as military zone and tourist commodity (Dessouky, 2011). Bungin traces how economic pressure and institutional corruption perpetuate destructive fishing practices in Bajo communities. Both novels align with what Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martínez-Alier describe as "the environmentalism of the poor" (1997)—politics rooted in survival, subsistence, and cultural continuity rather than technocratic solutions.

The environmentalism of the poor describes ecological resistance rooted in the lived experiences of marginalized communities, particularly in the Global South. Unlike mainstream environmentalism in the Global North—which often centers on wilderness conservation or technocratic climate policy (Freyfogle, 2007), this framework emerges from material struggles over land, water, and survival. Guha and Martínez-Alier argue that communities dependent on

[1] Literally translated as From the womb of the waves.

natural resources often act as environmental stewards out of necessity rather than ideology. This model contrasts with U.S.-based ecological justice, which emphasizes racial and minority claims within a national context (Caminero-Santangelo, 2011, p. 147). Critics have noted tensions within this framework: it can romanticize subaltern agency or obscure how state development projects co-opt local environmental discourse. Yet it remains valuable for examining how survival imperatives generate ecological knowledge and practice. Nixon connects slow violence to these conditions, noting that "those people lacking resources" are often "the principal casualties" (2011, p. 4). Environmentalism of the poor thus names both resistance and survival strategy—forms of ecological action that emerge from prolonged, unrecognized harm.

By examining two postcolonial maritime novels, this article reveals how fiction makes slow violence visible while documenting Indigenous resistance rooted in place-based epistemologies. The analysis proceeds through two case studies, each examining how a novel renders slow violence within a specific postcolonial context. The first examines Kiana Davenport's *The House of Many Gods,* which critiques U.S. militarization in Hawai'i by revealing how nuclear contamination and land appropriation produce long-term ecological and cultural harm. Drawing on Native Hawaiian epistemologies such as aloha 'āina and wahi pana (sacred, storied places), the novel reclaims militarized landscapes as sites of memory and resistance. The second analyzes Tison Sahabuddin Bungin's *Dari Rahim Ombak*, which portrays environmental collapse in a Bajo fishing community, tracing how reef bombing, economic coercion, and institutional complicity erode ancestral ethics. Framed by Nixon's concept of slow violence, both readings show how literature confronts extractive systems through localized, relational forms of resistance.

2. Representing Slow Violence and Resistance in *The House of Many Gods*

Kiana Davenport is a Native Hawaiian writer whose fiction explores the impact of colonialism, militarization, and displacement in the Pacific. Describing herself as a "portraitist of Pacific peoples caught in the prevailing winds of change" (Ralph, 2018), she situates Hawaiian struggles within broader postcolonial contexts while preserving local cultural specificities. *The House of Many Gods* centers on the Wai'anae Coast of O'ahu, examining U.S. militarization's impact on Indigenous Hawaiian communities through two primary focalizers: Ana, a Native Hawaiian woman, and Niki, a Russian filmmaker documenting nuclear radiation's effects across the Pacific. The novel depicts how "homestead youngsters raised on Welfare" face lives "circumcised by landless, poor education, drugs" (Davenport, 2007, p. 15). Following Nixon's framework, the novel addresses nuclear radiation as slow violence—a form of harm that inflicts long-term damage on land and people while remaining largely invisible.

The House of Many Gods examines how visible and invisible environmental harm from U.S. military activities continues to affect Native Hawaiian communities, portraying the enduring consequences of occupation. Following

World War II, Hawai'i became a crucial military hub during the Cold War, with extensive base construction and nuclear testing across the islands. The U.S. military controls over 236,000 acres—nearly 6 percent of Hawai'i's total land area (Ireland, 2011, p. xii). Visible violence manifests in forced family displacement, valley bombing for artillery practice, and the use of Kaho'olawe Island as a target range. These actions desecrated sacred land and forcibly removed Indigenous communities (1997, p. 407). Political activist and Hawaiian nationalist Haunani-Kay Trask condemns this as an American military invasion, asserting that U.S. actions constitute an ongoing "military occupation of Hawai'i" (1993, p. 31).

A more insidious form of militarism manifests in its lasting environmental and health impacts, especially through nuclear and toxic waste exposure across Hawai'i and the Pacific. The U.S. and its allies used sites like the Marshall Islands for extensive atomic testing, rationalized by Western notions of the Pacific as an isolated "contained space" (Firth & Strokirch Von, 1997; Taitingfong, 2019). Pacific Islands were systematically constructed as remote and uninhabited territories, framed through what Plumwood terms "virgin, romanticized nature," (2003, p. 52). Contemporary scholarship has documented the extensive scope of this environmental militarism. Jon Mitchell's *Poisoning the Pacific* (2020) reveals the systematic contamination across Pacific military installations, identifying 142 military properties and multiple polluted sites in Hawai'i alone. At Pearl Harbor Naval Complex, contamination sources include underground fuel tanks, dry cleaning operations, and electrical transformers containing carcinogenic polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) (Mitchell, 2020, p. 105).

Davenport employs the character of Lopaka, a Kānaka/Native Hawaiian activist, to expose the systematic concealment of nuclear contamination beneath Hawai'i's constructed image as an unspoiled tropical paradise. Through ideological confrontations with Ana, Lopaka challenges what Trask (1993) theorizes as the "nuclearized paradise"—revealing how U.S. military infrastructure, particularly Pearl Harbor, operates through strategic invisibility. Classified operations and sanitized public representations conceal radioactive contamination and chemical pollution. Lopaka's ideological confrontations with Ana serve as a narrative mechanism to illuminate this concealment strategy.

Lopaka slowly turned to her. "You think we're safe? The U.S. military is our biggest industry."

—So? That makes our islands safer.

—No. It makes us potential victims. Right now we've got two dozen nuclear subs homeported here in Pearl Harbor. You think they don't; have accidents on those ships? Millions of gallons of radioactive waste from those subs have already been dumped into the harbor (Davenport, 2007, pp. 82–83).

Ana's defense of military presence—"That makes our islands safer"—reveals how economic dependency shapes environmental perception. Her response reflects a material reality where military infrastructure provides employment, healthcare, and regional stability. This exchange exposes how slow violence operates through discursive capture. Ana speaks the language of national security—what Dessouky identifies as neocolonial justification that

frames military occupation as protection (2011, p. 257).

Nuclear contamination in *The House of Many Gods* unfolds as a form of "delayed destruction"—gradual, cumulative harm that remains imperceptible until its effects are irreversible. As Lopaka explains, the real danger lies in the "day-to-day stuff": radioactive water seeping "into our soil," into the fields they work in, and into "the grass our dairy cows and pigs eat" (Davenport, 2007, p. 83). The military's disregard for ancestral Kānaka traditions is further underscored by its appropriation of Makua Valley, a site once revered for its sacred heiau—temple ruins that marked it as a place of worship. This spiritually significant landscape has since been desecrated by military occupation and is now called by the locals as Death Valley.

It's a twelve-acre site in the mountains behind Mākua Valley, part of those four thousand acres the Army took from us. That's where they openly burn spent ammunition. Spent rockets. Even Chinook choppers carrying nuclear-weapons parts that exploded up there on takeoff. Pilots, their clothes, everything. All carefully incinerated, so there's no proof. They either bury it or burn it (Davenport, 2007, p. 120)

The House of Many Gods demonstrates how military environmental practices function as mechanisms of postcolonial domination through the systematic obliteration of evidence and memory. Davenport's depiction of military waste management exemplifies what Mary Louise Pratt (1992) theorizes as "anti-conquest," a colonial strategy that asserts territorial control through administrative order while denying the violence of that control. In Pratt's framework, anti-conquest presents colonial domination as rational management rather than aggressive appropriation. This systematic erasure exemplifies the settler-military complex's denial of Indigenous sovereignty.

Postcolonial reading of *The House of Many Gods* shows how Davenport employs narrative to confront Indigenous dispossession and environmental harm. As DeLoughrey and Handley argue, political and ecological systems are interwoven (2011,p.13). The destruction of Kānaka life parallels the degradation of the ʻāina, revealing environmental harm as a key mechanism of colonial control. Nuclear contamination affects both the environment and Indigenous communities, yet remains largely unseen. As illustrated in the following passage, the narrative brings this slow, silent violence into view.

…radioactive water from the harbors and rivers seeping into our soil. The stuff we stand in, in our fields. Stuff that seeps into the grass our dairy cows and pigs eat. The Navy has even admitted its hazard zone is two and a half miles in radius. That means all those farmers and kids could be contaminated (Davenport, 2007, p. 93).

The passage traces contamination's path from harbor to soil to grass to bodies. Said's critique of imperial power helps frame this as a slow, normalized form of domination—the "quiet of unseen power" (1994, p. 135). Military infrastructure naturalizes harm through bureaucratic procedures: contamination zones receive official designations, exposure becomes a condition of residence, and the Navy admits hazards without remediation. Slow violence thus operates

through administrative channels that make ecological damage appear routine rather than catastrophic.

Yet Davenport's narrative also foregrounds resistance by reimagining the relationship between people and place. Concepts such as Wahi Pana Aloha ʻĀina reassert Indigenous knowledge and reclaim militarized spaces as sites of memory and care. Ioane articulates Wahi Pana Aloha ʻĀina as a unified ethic of resistance—an Indigenous epistemology that affirms sacred relationships to land while reclaiming sovereignty over ancestral geographies (2022, p. 6). She insists that decolonization is not merely political but spiritual and ecological, requiring a re-centering of *ʻāina* as sacred, storied, and inseparable from Kānaka identity. This becomes especially urgent in the case of Mākua Valley, a traditionally revered site transferred to federal control by executive order in 1964, becoming a zone of military occupation and violence (Menton & Tamura, 1999, p. 317). Davenport dramatizes the desecration of wahi pana through Ana's perspective, who experiences the bombings not as abstract events but as intimate trauma. Explosions ravaging Mākua Valley are personified as violence against Mother Earth. She "felt the breath of Mākua," watched the land erupt, and saw it "bleed" with each explosion (Davenport, 2007, p. 154). The valley becomes a living presence—wounded by the devastation.

The novel links Native Hawaiian resistance to real-world movements like Protect Kahoʻolawe ʻOhana (PKO) and Mālama Mākua, grounding its narrative in the lived struggle for land and sovereignty[2]. Davenport shows how military occupation and nuclear contamination not only damage the environment but also sever spiritual ties to ʻāina. This rupture is voiced through Lopaka, who tells a U.S soldier, "These lands are our lands… You're storing nuclear weapons here… You think this is what I fought for? To watch my homelands blown to bits?" (Davenport, 2007, p. 93) His words reflect a broader protest against colonial dispossession and the betrayal of Native service members. In the novel's depiction of resistance, Hawaiians chant in Ōlelo Hawaiʻi/Hawaiian language and offer aloha and mālama to Mākua, affirming their connection to the land. The valley responds— "Mākua… was telling them she knew. She saw" (Davenport, 2007, p. 167). Defending wahi pana becomes both political and sacred obligation. Protecting ʻāina represents not ownership but honoring memory, responsibility, and Indigenous survival.

3. Slow Violence and the Poetics of Resistance in *Dari Rahim Ombak*

Dari Rahim Ombak explores how environmental degradation disrupts kinship and ecological ethics in a coastal Bajo community on Sumbawa Island, Indonesia. The novel centers on blast fishing and the forces that drive it: economic hardship, state neglect, the erosion of traditional marine practices. Bungin structures the

[2] Protect Kahoʻolawe ʻOhana (PKO), a predominantly Kānaka but inclusive grassroots movement, led sustained activism from 1976 to 1993 that successfully ended over five decades of U.S. military weapons testing on the sacred island of Kahoʻolawe. Mālama Mākua, founded in 1996, advocates for cultural preservation and public access to Mākua Valley, which has remained under U.S. Army control since World War II. As of 2023, the U.S. Secretary of Defense and Secretary of the Army formally declared the valley free from future live-fire military use.

narrative around three siblings—Katir, Anjul, and Jurmini—whose diverging paths reveal how violence and resistance operate on different temporal scales. Katir's descent into reef bombing unfolds through repetition. Daily runs, routine payoffs, habitual destruction. Ecological collapse becomes ordinary. Anjul and Jurmini work differently, within cyclical time marked by ritual practice, seasonal restoration, intergenerational memory. The sea functions as both witness and victim. Its degradation registers through shifting imagery: abundant coral gardens give way to barren, silent seabeds. Bungin translates Nixon's concept of violence "dispersed across time and space" into narrative structure itself. Gradual ecological death becomes visible through contrasting rhythms—one extractive and linear, the other regenerative and cyclical.

The narrative focuses on blast fishing's impact and how economic hardship and state neglect undermine traditional marine practices. The environmental degradation depicted parallels broader ecological crisis in Indonesian marine ecosystems. The Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries reports that blast fishing and cyanide use have destroyed up to 50% of hard corals in shallow zones, with each bombing incident damaging over 12 square meters of reef and economic losses in critical coastal areas exceeding USD 300,000 per square kilometer (Razak et al., 2022). Bungin's 2015 novel proves grimly prescient: arrests in Alas as recently as 2025, involving homemade explosives and specialized diving equipment, confirm that organized fishing networks continue to operate a decade after the novel's publication. These destructive practices persist despite enforcement efforts in the Sumbawa region encompassing Bungin, Alas, and Teluk Saleh. Structural poverty, limited livelihood alternatives, and exploitative supply chains drive the operations.

Dari Rahim Ombak grounds its ecological vision in the Bajo community's spiritual relationship with the sea, expressed through rituals and taboos that regulate marine conduct**.** The novel depicts Nampoh Tawar, a departure ritual where community elders anoint seawater with olive oil before vessels depart, seeking the sea's blessing and protection through this ceremonial act (Bungin, 2015, p. 66). These customs reflect what Whyte (2018) calls "systems of responsibilities," relational ethics rooted in restraint and reverence. These norms prohibit actions like reef bombing and shark hunting, believed to bring spiritual and ecological harm (Bungin, 2015, p. 66). However, the novel traces the erosion of these traditions under economic pressure. As poverty deepens, destructive practices replace customary ethics. Community members abandon sustainable practices in favor of destructive fishing methods.

Bungin portrays environmental devastation as structural complicity, not individual desperation. Destructive fishing practices persist through collusion between political elites, law enforcement, and economic actors. Local officials function as "stockists and distributors" of explosives stored behind their residences. Law enforcement officers prove "more obedient to the young commander/Katir than to the state" (Bungin, 2015, p. 226). As a result, any opposition to bombing is framed as defiance of authority, reinforcing what Pellow (2018) identifies as state-sanctioned environmental violence—harm legitimized or enabled by

those in power. But Bungin shows how such systems operate at the intimate scale of village politics. Katir becomes "young commander" not through formal appointment but through the explosive economy he controls. The novel reveals that environmental destruction requires bureaucratic infrastructure: storage networks, protection schemes, complicit silence. This infrastructure extends into daily life through practices like pamirroko—young locals collecting stunned fish near explosion sites for payment (Bungin, 2015, p. 13). Youths monitor bombing boats after school, transforming ecological harm into after-school work. The repetition makes destruction ordinary. This exemplifies what Nixon calls "attritional lethality"—harm that accumulates gradually while becoming socially invisible through routine.

The novel demonstrates how normalized slow violence leads to total ecological collapse. Years of reef bombing deplete fish stocks, causing fishers to report empty dives and sensory disorientation as "there were no fish left," with some bombers experiencing hallucinations while scanning the seafloor (Bungin, 2015, p. 262). This outcome exemplifies Nixon's framework of violence that builds gradually until it becomes irreversible. Ecological loss creates immediate economic consequences as food supplies decline and household reserves shrink, leaving "kitchen stocks [to] shrink drastically" while daily survival becomes precarious (Bungin, 2015, p. 262). Resource depletion increases fatal accident risks, with the narrative documenting multiple injuries and deaths, including Katir's maiming during a failed bombing attempt. Slow violence thus culminates in bodily harm and economic ruin through cumulative, structural damage rather than sudden devastation.

While *Dari Rahim Ombak* reveals the long-term harm of slow violence, it also presents forms of resistance grounded in survival and community ethics. Anjul embodies what Guha and Martínez-Alier describe as the "environmentalism of the poor," where environmental protection arises from the need to sustain life rather than ideology (2014, p. 430). He rejects extractive practices and draws on the teachings of his parents, who urged him to "seek knowledge for the sea... for the coral reefs" (Bungin, 2015, p. 30). This guidance links education to ecological responsibility. Anjul acts on this ethic by constructing artificial coral habitats from discarded waste—"one solution for two problems" (Bungin, 2015, p. 166). His decision to remain in place as a bomb is ignited nearby—"willing to defend the coral" despite personal risk—illustrates his refusal to abandon marine life (Bungin, 2015, p. 214). This action illustrates how the poor resist ecological destruction through care, innovation, and obligation to the environment.

Anjul's resistance gains further momentum through Jurmini, a marine conservationist whose activism is grounded in relational care and ecological ethics. Her approach reflects ecofeminist principles, rejecting control in favor of interdependence. "The sea must not be conquered... only listened to" (Bungin, 2015, p. 270) she asserts, framing the ocean as sentient rather than extractable. This ethic aligns with Gaard's view of ecofeminism as a shift from "mastery to mutuality, control to respect" (2011, p. 28). Jurmini blends ecological knowledge with local cosmology, using stories like the *Legend of Kareo and the Shark* to

affirm marine life as sacred. Her leadership, shaped by Indigenous practice and gendered experience, positions women at the center of ecological resistance. In returning to Bungin, she connects reef restoration to food security and survival—"many rice plates await the coral's return" (Bungin, 2015, p. 331). Her work reflects the environmentalism of the poor: resistance rooted in material need, cultural continuity, and collective care.

Read together, *The House of Many Gods* and *Dari Rahim Ombak* reveal how Indigenous epistemologies function as both memory and method in resisting slow violence. Both novels demonstrate that ecological resistance in postcolonial contexts operates through what Whyte calls "systems of responsibilities"—obligations encoded in place-based knowledge that predate and outlast colonial violence. U.S. military discourse frames Hawai'i as strategic territory. Capitalist logic treats Indonesian reefs as commodities. Against these extractive frameworks, the novels foreground relationality over ownership. Resistance emerges not through asserting property rights but through renewing specific practices: wahi pana storytelling that restores land as storied space, Nampoh Tawar rituals that maintain reciprocal relationships with the sea. These practices refuse to separate ecological health from cultural survival. They demonstrate that environmental restoration requires epistemic restoration—reinstating the knowledge systems that colonial violence worked to eliminate.

4. Conclusion

This article demonstrates that *The House of Many Gods* and *Dari Rahim Ombak* expose slow violence through Indigenous and local knowledge systems. Both novels reveal environmental harm as inseparable from colonialism, militarization, and state failure. Davenport traces the prolonged effects of U.S. military occupation in Hawai'i; Bungin documents ecological damage caused by destructive fishing practices in Indonesia. Each text connects environmental degradation to the erosion of cultural practices, ethical systems, and community resilience, reflecting the environmentalism of the poor.

Reading these novels together extends Nixon's framework. Slow violence operates not only through temporal dispersion but through active erasure of Indigenous epistemologies that could name and prevent ecological collapse. Both Davenport and Bungin show that resistance emerges through practices Nixon undertheorizes: ritual maintenance, intergenerational memory, kinship networks, embodied care. The study argues that environmental degradation cannot be separated from epistemic violence. They transform degraded landscapes from sites of inevitable loss into contested ground where different futures remain possible.

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