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Environmental Toll of Colonial and Neocolonial Exploitation: A Postcolonial Ecocritical Study of Intizar Hussain's *Basti*

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Abstract

Colonial exploitation and environmental degradation are inherently interconnected, with colonial powers profoundly impacting the ecological health and sustainability of colonized territories, leading to significant disruptions in the natural balance. "The relationship between colonialism and environmental degradation is a complex and often overlooked aspect of our global ecological crisis" (Bhandikeri, 2024, para. 1). This research paper investigates environmental toll of colonial and neocolonial exploitation in Intizar Hussain's *Basti*, using a postcolonial ecocritical framework. *Basti* critiques environmental consequences of imperialism and its neocolonial aftermath, exploring how these forces have altered the relationship between humans and nature. By tracing the disintegration of ecological harmony, the research paper highlights the cultural and environmental repercussions of historical and ongoing exploitations. The novel shows how colonial policies not only imposed tyranny on people but also set the environment ablaze with unsustainable practices. This research paper argues that the colonial and neocolonial forces exerted and continue to exert the main forces of environmental exploitation, and also that environmental awareness plays a great role in understanding the postcolonial state of affairs. It deploys sustainable development as a way to decolonize environmental practices by providing a critical insight into how imperial shadow still affects both people and environment.

Keywords: Intizar Hussain, *Basti*, Colonialism, Neocolonial Exploitation, Environmental Degradation, Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Ecological Impact, Sustainable Development.

Introduction

The rise in environmental damage in the contemporary era is undeniably contributed to by the exploitative behaviour of colonialists during the colonial era. This was supported by the many colonialists in the colonial era who adhered to views of superiority and ethnocentrism, thus making themselves feel entitled to exploit the colonial territories and their inhabitants. (Karim & Suyitno, 2024, p. 233)



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“Postcolonial ecocriticism is a theoretical framework that examines the representation of nature, environment, and ecology in literature within the context of post-colonial literature” (Akram et al., 2023, p. 646). Postcolonial ecocriticism integrates theoretical perspectives from both postcolonial studies and ecocriticism to examine the enduring impact of colonialism on environment, culture, and literature within postcolonial settings. This approach draws extensively from ecocriticism, a critical framework that analyses the interplay between literature and the natural environment, focusing on how literary works portray environmental concerns and human-nature relationship. By merging these two disciplines, postcolonial ecocriticism critically addresses how colonial histories have shaped ecological degradation and cultural shifts, while also exploring how literature reflects and critiques these environmental legacies in postcolonial societies. “Postcolonial ecological critique explores the complex relationship between colonial subjugation and environmental degradation” (Rahman et al, 2023, p. 454). Both ecocriticism and postcolonialism share a common objective in their examination of human-environment relationships. Huggan and Tiffin (2015) argue that postcolonial studies increasingly acknowledge the deep interconnection between environmental issues and European colonial endeavors of conquest and global dominance. These ecological concerns stem from imperialist and racial ideologies that historically upheld colonial expansion. Indigenous populations were often treated instrumentally, akin to animals, as they were regarded as part of nature. Over time, these groups were forced to adopt Western viewpoints on the environment, thereby hindering efforts toward cultural and ecological restoration.

Postcolonial ecocriticism is a relatively recent critical framework employed in the study of ecosystems and climate change, particularly those springing from colonization. Human activities have caused major changes to climate and land systems and imperial colonization stands as a primary driver of modern ecological along with social damage. The traditional scope of postcolonial assessment dedicated itself to exploring human issues whereas its ecocritical version broadens its investigation to document destructive human-caused environmental harm. Postcolonial work presents the integrated colonial effects that link human populations with natural environments and calls for combined thinking about social justice and environmental justice in postcolonial research. As Isiguzo (2017) asserts, “Postcolonial ecocriticism is a re-imagining of Postcolonialism and Ecocriticism and demands urgent attention in establishing how racism and colonialism affect both humans and the environment” (p. 50). Furthermore, Huggan and Tiffin argue that “the effects of colonialism on the environment are mostly detrimental, and they can result in the displacement of not only humans, but other living beings as well” (Zandi & Barekat, 2022, p. 99). Literature acts as a conduit for understanding colonial behavior, highlighting how it not only disrupted social and political structures but also ruptured the harmonious relationship between humans and nature. “The colonialists’ exploitative practices towards the environment can be traced through literary texts” (Karim & Suyitno, 2024, p. 234). Intizar Hussain’s Urdu novel *Basti*, translated into English by Frances W. Pritchett, offers a compelling portrayal of postcolonial ecocritical issues. Hussain has produced an extensive body of work encompassing drama, travelogues, criticism, journalism, calligraphy, sketch writing, and translation. While he pursued journalism as a profession,



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storytelling remained his true passion. Born in the small settlement of Dibai in the Bulandshahr district near Aligarh, Hussain spent the first eleven years of his life there, an experience that greatly influenced his literary development. His time in Dibai's peaceful rural setting allowed him direct contact with nature which developed his awareness about environmental issues. *Basti* connects the wounds of displacement to environmental destruction caused by colonial and neocolonial powers as he follows the path of natural resource exploitation throughout history. The novel examines how material resource exploitation and indigenous ecological knowledge destruction occur through development and civilization rhetoric. Hussain (2007) uses Zakir to depict how colonial and neocolonial forces directly caused both natural destruction and displacement trauma. He criticizes Western development plans that focus on economic expansion instead of environmental protection because this approach causes ecosystem breakdown and species extinction. Through Zakir's memories of the vibrant natural world he recalls the devastating effects of urbanization combined with warfare and colonialism on ecological balance. The birds and trees from his childhood serve to show how colonial thinking turned diverse landscapes into empty resource-depleted areas which caused habitat destruction and wildlife extinction.

“Colonialism has been the cause of many environmental challenges since its origin. The impacts of colonialism are present in today's society with the interconnectedness between environmental degradation and colonialism past and present becoming more evident” (Smith, 2024, para. 1). This research paper investigates the environmental toll of colonial and neocolonial exploitation in Hussain's *Basti*, using a postcolonial ecocritical framework. It critiques the environmental consequences of imperialism and its neocolonial aftermath, exploring how these forces have altered the relationship between humans and nature. By tracing the disintegration of ecological harmony, the research paper highlights the cultural and environmental repercussions of historical and ongoing exploitation. It intertwines displacement trauma with environmental destruction, exposing colonial and neocolonial resource exploitation and the erasure of indigenous ecological knowledge under the guise of development. The research paper concludes that the novel critiques the neocolonial notion of progress and development, which perpetuates ecological destruction. Through its vivid portrayal of the natural world's decline, *Basti* presents a powerful critique of colonial exploitation, offering insights into the broader environmental crisis fueled by the pursuit of capitalist growth.

Review of Literature

Asim and Alam (2019) analyze *Basti* as a narrative centered on the trauma of partition, emphasizing memory, nostalgia, and identity in shaping migrant experiences. The protagonist, Zakir, embodies the psychological scars of displacement, reflecting Intizar Hussain's own migratory experiences. The novel's fragmented structure mirrors the emotional and spatial dislocation of migrants, juxtaposing an idealized past with the violence of partition. Zakir's post-partition disillusionment underscores the decline of aspirations for renewal, while his father's desire to be buried in the homeland signifies an enduring connection to the past. His retreat into memories highlights the psychological burden of exile, resonating with Edward Said's insights on displacement.



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Through Zakir's journal, the novel engages with both personal and collective trauma, while the use of Urdu asserts cultural identity. Symbolic elements, such as Zakir's attachment to keys and his father's lost belongings, further illustrate the persistent impact of partition. Ultimately, the novel suggests that migration's trauma leaves deep psychological scars, perpetuating a cycle of loss and disillusionment due to both personal struggles and political failures.

Basti, therefore, is an account of a broken reality, a testimony to the suffering underlining the creation of Pakistan. In a conversation with Rakshanda Jalil, Hussain recounts the experience of displacement in the contemporary context, by stating the heart-wrenching hollowness created by the fall of ideals. He appears to be of the view that people should learn from their mistakes in the past. (Asim & Alam, 2019, p. 14)

Dubey (2021) argues that Intizar Hussain's literary contribution to the discourse on Partition occupies a distinctive position within the vast body of works, addressing this monumental historical event. His narratives transcend a narrow focus on the violence and trauma typically associated with Partition, situating it instead within the broader historical and cultural context of the subcontinent. By centering the experience of migration, or *hijrat*, Hussain highlights the significance of the *muhajir* (immigrant) figure and the enduring consequences of displacement. His novels examine the aftermath of Partition, exploring shifts in identity, memory, and cultural belonging, while acknowledging the trauma embedded in this historical rupture. In doing so, Hussain's works engage with the long-term impacts of Partition as a transformative experience that shaped the lives of survivors, framing the narrative in terms of resilience, adaptation, and the slow, often painful process of reconstructing a sense of self and community.

Both *Basti* and *The Sea Lies Ahead* are deeply personal novels that also speak to the universal conditions of displacement and exile; the nostalgia they engage with is not simply an obsession with the past but a reconceptualisation of the idea of home and belonging. (Dubey, 2021, p. 71).

Gautam (2020) contends that *Basti* by Hussain explores the theme of Partition as a complex interplay of memory, through the protagonist Zakir, a historian, grappling with the trauma of the 1947 Partition and the disillusionment following the 1971 war and the creation of Bangladesh. The narrative interweaves personal and collective memories with significant historical events, shedding light on the dislocation and violence experienced by communities during Partition. Zakir's nostalgia for his lost village symbolizes a quest for cultural continuity and identity. The novel merges subjective memory with broader historical and cultural narratives, covering key Muslim historical milestones, from the 1857 uprising to the 1971 division of Pakistan. Through Zakir's existential crisis, *Basti* explores themes of cultural disorientation, loss, and fragmented identity, reflecting the psychological scars of migration. The memories Zakir confronts are likened to a "forest" of entangled thoughts, symbolizing the intricate nature of the Partition experience. Written in 1979, *Basti* reflects on the emotional consequences of Partition and employs myth and memory to examine both personal and collective upheaval. "Basti (1979), one of the significant texts in the genres of Partition literature, though, involves displacement and uprooting of people, it mainly emphasizes on the predicament of those who remain anchored to their pluralistic past" (Gautam, 2020, p. 7). The novel thus portrays not just displacement but the struggle of those who remain tethered to their complex



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cultural histories. Charan (2021) notes that “*Basti* is a narrative of remembrance and memories. During turbulent times of war, Zakir remembers his childhood days more frequently. In order to survive in the present, the narrator relives and retires to his past experience” (p. 5).

Nanaware (2019) points out that *Basti* is a well-known novel by the Pakistani author Intizar Hussain. The work garnered significant international attention upon its English translation by Frances W. Pritchett. It deals with the reclamation of the past through the protagonist’s reminiscences of the pluralistic culture of his community prior to the Partition. Hussain’s narrative serves as a profound exploration of the psychological and emotional ramifications of Partition, delving into its impact on human lives. Through the character of Zakir, who migrated to Pakistan from India in 1947, the novelist highlights the experiences of Indian Muslims during this mass migration. A reading of *Basti* brings to the fore the complex issues surrounding migration and its associated physical and psychological consequences. These effects give rise to a profound sense of loss, frustration, and disillusionment within the characters, cultivating an enduring feeling of displacement and a loss of both homeland and self. As Nanaware (2019) observes, “The novel ‘*Basti*’ broadly explores the recapture of past through the reminiscence of a pluralistic culture of the community before Partition. It is a sincere inquiry into the psychological and emotional approaches of the partition and its’ impact on human lives” (p. 427).

Hassan et al., (2024) assert that Intizar Hussain (1923-2016), a distinguished Urdu writer, is renowned for exploring themes of memory, nostalgia, displacement, and the loss of cultural heritage, shaped by his personal experience of migrating from India to Pakistan in 1947 after the Partition. His novel *Basti* (1979), set against the backdrop of South Asia’s sociopolitical upheavals—particularly the 1947 Partition and the 1971 Bangladesh war—delves into the human condition in post-Partition Pakistan. Through vivid imagery, complex characters, and dramatic prose, Hussain examines issues of identity, memory, and belonging, using metaphors and literary devices to enhance the emotional depth of the narrative. As noted by Hassan et al., (2024), “Hussain skillfully creates a narrative tapestry that probes deeply into the sociocultural fabric of a nation undergoing transition through vivid images, complex characters, and dramatic prose” (p. 37).

Regmi (2024) contends that *Basti* is a seminal partition narrative that focuses on the psychological scars of displacement and the alienation of survivors. Through Zakir’s story, the novelist critiques the socio-political rationale behind divisions like Partition, exposing their devastating human cost. He portrays trauma as a persistent phenomenon, with Zakir’s experiences reflecting the enduring psychological and emotional wounds of communal violence and forced migration. Memory emerges as both a repository of pain and a tool for understanding, urging readers to confront the human toll of these events. Zakir’s fragmented identity and search for belonging exemplify the cyclical nature of historical trauma, where past events reverberate through personal and collective lives. By intertwining Zakir’s journey with broader historical forces, Hussain critiques colonialism, nationalism, and societal division, showing their role in shaping fractured identities and communities.

Zakir’s narrative exposes that displacement is the most pertinent effect of partition in a newly-born Pakistan which still traumatizes the people. In a state of



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confusion and uprooting, the narrator loses physical, spiritual, and psychological power. The trauma of the 1947 partition appears in a diary, memoirs, and letters. (Regmi, 2024, p. 65)

While existing studies on Intizar Hussain's *Basti* focus on themes like partition, identity, migration, and trauma, there is a lack of ecocritical analysis regarding colonial and neocolonial environmental exploitation. The relationship between colonial urbanization, industrialization, and long-term ecological degradation remains underexplored. This gap offers an opportunity to examine the intersection of environmental and cultural colonialism and their lasting effects on environment.

Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This research paper is informed by postcolonial ecocriticism to analyze the environmental consequences of colonization and neocolonization in Intizar Hussain's *Basti*. By conducting a close textual analysis, the research paper examines themes of colonialism, environmental degradation, and the socio-political effects of partition, grounded in the historical context of colonial policies that fueled ecological destruction through resource extraction and land-use changes. The research paper integrates critical perspectives from foundational theorists including Huggan, Tiffin, DeLoughrey, Handley, Shiva, Nixon, and Guha to build a cohesive argument about the intersection of colonialism, neocolonialism, and environmental degradation.

Postcolonial ecocriticism examines the ways in which colonial and neocolonial forces, driven by capitalist motivations, exploit and degrade environment for profit. It highlights how colonial practices not only exploited but also harmed environment, emphasizing the long-lasting ecological consequences of these exploitative activities. It links colonial legacies, environmental degradation, and global capitalism, where nature is commodified for profit. Colonial exploitation and environmental degradation are deeply intertwined and cannot be separated, as the actions of colonial powers have had a profound impact on the environmental sustainability and health of colonized territories, significantly disrupting the ecological balance. Shiva (2015) highlights the connection between colonialism and environmental destruction. She asserts, "The colonial project [is] always about the control of land, water, and resources" (Shiva, 2015, p. 18). Colonial powers established a global infrastructure system underpinned by the Western cultural belief that nature lacks agency, which justified the degradation of the natural environment and contributed to ecological collapse. "Global capitalism continues this legacy, transforming nature into commodities and indigenous people into disposable entities" (Shiva, 2015, p. 18). Nixon (2011) asserts that environmental destruction in postcolonial regions unfolds slowly, tied to global capitalism. He describes this as "slow violence," where the effects—such as radioactive aftermaths of wars, acidifying oceans, and environmental catastrophes—manifest gradually, often evading immediate representation or action (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). Guha (2000) critiques Western environmentalism for neglecting the impact of war, modernism, and capitalist exploitation on postcolonial environments, emphasizing that capitalist economies "have been made possible only through the economic and ecological exploitation of the third world" (p. 95). This oversight, he argues, is central to understanding the environmental challenges faced by postcolonial regions.

Exploitation and manipulation of nature were central to colonialism, affecting



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not just the environment but also the human and cultural landscapes in lasting ways. Colonialism transformed nature through the mobilization, transplantation, and consumption of resources, profoundly impacting human societies and cultures by reshaping bodies through altered diets and disease exposure, while national cultures adapted through exploitative economies and labor systems. DeLoughrey and Handley (2011) argue that “to speak of postcolonial ecology is to foreground the historical process of nature’s mobility, transplantation, and consumption. The new material resources of the colonies literally changed human bodies and national cultures” (p. 13).

Colonialism achieved its desired aims through development projects. Huggan and Tiffin (2015) critique “developmentality,” an ideology that justifies environmental harm in the name of economic growth, serving colonial interests and leaving lasting environmental scars. They contend that the colonial and neocolonial discourse of “development” is, at best, a form of strategic altruism, in which technical and financial aid from the self-designated First World primarily serves its own economic and political interests (p. 28). Developmentalism, with its emphasis on economic growth, disregards environmental consequences, perpetuating resource extraction and marginalization of indigenous communities even after decolonization. The exploitation of natural resources remains a central objective of both colonialism and global capitalism. DeLoughrey and Handley (2011) emphasize that the development programs implemented by Western organizations in the postcolonial world have caused considerable ecological damage. They stress that the enduring legacies of colonialism have created an environmental disparity between the global North and South: “Critiques of capitalism, technology, neoliberalism, modernization, biopiracy, and empire demonstrate that environmental concerns are not the exclusive prerogative of the privileged north ... Modernization schemes ... [have] radically altered postcolonial environments” (p. 16). This disparity manifests in environmental damage caused by wars, conflicts, and postcolonial militarism, where natural resources are commodified as strategic assets.

A central aim of postcolonial ecocriticism is to challenge Western development ideologies, often aligning with radical Third-World perspectives that critique development as a disguised form of neocolonialism. Huggan and Tiffin (2015) argue that development is defined by economic narratives of progress, characterized by terms such as ‘amenity,’ ‘benefit,’ and ‘improvement’ (p. 73). These narratives marginalize local peoples, exploit ecosystems, and impoverish agricultural communities under the guise of progress. The focus on resource-driven corporations has severed the bond between nature and local communities. Development, as conceptualized by Western priorities, favors capital over nature and sustainability, leaving the Global South disproportionately affected by ecological degradation. Postcolonial ecocriticism rejects such exploitative models, advocating for indigenous and ecological approaches to development. By deconstructing the colonial myth of development, it seeks to restore agency to marginalized communities and promote sustainable solutions that harmonize human and environmental needs. As Shiva (1999) asserts, “Capital now has to look for new colonies to invade and exploit for its further accumulation” (p. 5). This critique highlights the need to rethink development paradigms and prioritize ecological sustainability over capitalist profits.

In sum, postcolonial ecocriticism offers a vital framework for understanding the



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interconnected legacies of colonialism, neocolonialism, and environmental degradation. By foregrounding the historical and ongoing exploitation of nature under global capitalism, it challenges Western ideologies of progress and advocates for localized, sustainable alternatives. Through its emphasis on justice and ecological resilience, postcolonial ecocriticism envisions a future where human and environmental well-being are no longer subordinated to profit-driven agendas.

Textual Analysis and Discussion

Intizar Hussain's Urdu novel *Basti*, translated into English by Frances W. Pritchett, offers a compelling portrayal of postcolonial ecocritical issues. It weaves together the traumas of displacement with environmental destruction wrought by both colonial and neocolonial forces, tracing the legacy of colonial exploitation of natural resources and environmental degradation. Through the character of Zakir, Hussain (2007) critiques the materialistic exploitation of resources and the destruction of indigenous ecological knowledge, often framed within the rhetoric of development and civilization. Zakir, the novel's narrator, demonstrates a profound appreciation for nature's beauty. Reeling from the trauma of physical displacement, he nostalgically recalls the pastoral tranquility of his childhood in Rupnagar, where he nurtures a mystical belief in nature's unifying power—an essential force of balance amid the political upheaval of South Asia during his time. Hussain (2007), the novelist, positions the degradation of nature as a metaphor for the degradation of society, drawing a contrast between Zakir's reverence for nature and Anisah's embrace of the Western model of development. While Zakir finds solace in the green canopy and flowing streams of his memories, Anisah embraces the disarray and vigor associated with industrial progress, highlighting the tension between colonial/Western ideologies of development and a more harmonious existence with the natural world. Their ideological divergence highlights a potential clash between wildlife preservation and the so-called improvement promised by the colonial and postcolonial development agendas. In a conversation with Afzal, Zakir reminisces about the pristine, unspoiled environment of his past and reiterates his unwavering commitment to nature: "Fellow! Don't you know how much of my time is spent in the company of birds and trees? I don't have time for love. You make love, I'll pray for you" (Hussain, 2007, p. 77). Zakir's recollections and his deep connection to nature articulate a belief that the natural world is not a mere luxury but a necessity. His environmentalism and grief over the destruction of nature echo the concerns of ecocritics.

"Destroying forests means threatening the survival of living creatures. Forest destruction is a form of human imbalance with nature. Destroying forests means posing a threat to life" (Karim, & Suyitno, 2024, p. 240). Hussain (2007) foregrounds the disappearance of vast forests due to the commodification of environment, leading to the extinction of many birds and animals endemic to these landscapes. This theme resonates with postcolonial ecocriticism, particularly Handley's (2011) argument that colonial and neocolonial development prioritize economic growth over environmental sustainability, a process driven by Western ideologies that perpetuate ecological destruction. Zakir, the protagonist, feels a deep connection with the natural world, perceiving birds as divine gifts that he strives to preserve and shelter. He fondly recalls a pair of "bulbuls" that visited his home each summer to feast on ripened guavas, a



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memory encapsulated in the phrase, “regular ‘guests’” (Hussain, 2007, p. 115). However, these colorful songbirds have not returned in recent years, a loss attributed to wars and urbanization. Their absence serves as a poignant reminder of all that has been lost amid the political turmoil. Once teeming with life, the land now sees fewer visitors among its remaining trees, a silent suffering that mirrors the struggles of the people. Zakir is reminded of the birds’ departure: “But where are those bulbuls now? On the first morning of the war...their beaks were exploring the ripening guavas—when a plane passed overhead with a tremendous roar. Both birds...left the guavas and flew off” (Hussain, 2007, p. 115). This connection between Zakir and the birds symbolizes a sustainable human-animal relationship, wherein the departure of the birds signifies the disruption of human-nature harmony and the loss of shared existence due to the ravages of colonialism and the neo-colonial emphasis on development without regard for environmental consequences. Zakir’s relationship with the animals and birds is not merely nostalgic but represents a rapidly disappearing recognition of the mutual coexistence between humans and nature. The novel’s portrayal of this ecological destruction aligns with DeLoughrey’s (2011) perspective on the harmful environmental impacts of colonial and neocolonial developmental projects, which disrupt the natural environment for economic and political gain.

Western colonialism significantly impacted the physical landscape of colonized territories in multiple ways. The colonized peoples experienced their ecosystems being forcibly altered by the introduction of foreign flora and fauna within colonial borders. This ecological imperialism disrupted indigenous sustainability in a destabilizing manner, as “settlers arrived with crops, flocks, and herds, and cleared land, exterminating local ecosystems” (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010, p. 7). Such changes led to the loss of biodiversity and the degradation of soil, exacerbated by monocultural framing. This transformation disrupted the symbiotic relationship between colonized cultures and their unique environments. Exploitation of natural resources, through deforestation and mining operations, along with infrastructure projects like rail links, port construction, and the urbanization of resource-rich cities, has further compounded the ecological damage. According to colonial logic, lands flourishing with indigenous crops were deemed barren wastelands simply because they failed to maximize productivity or generate revenues. *Basti* is a portrayal of the environmental degradation resulting from colonial exploitation, focusing on the extinction of biodiversity and the destruction of natural habitats. Through his narrative, Hussain (2007) contrasts the vibrant and beautiful natural world Zakir recalls from his childhood with the barren and decimated environment wrought by modern developmentalism. Zakir’s childhood world was teeming with animals, forests, and a deep connection to the land, a world he remembers with awe:

When the world was still all new, when the sky was fresh and the earth not yet soiled, when trees breathed through the centuries and ages spoke in the voices of birds, how astonished he was, looking all around, that everything was so new, and yet looked so old. Bluejays, woodpeckers, peacocks, doves, squirrels, parakeets -- it seemed that they were as young as he, yet they carried the secrets of the ages. The peacocks’ calls seemed to come not from the forest of Rupnagar, but from Brindaban. When a little woodpecker paused in its flight to rest on a tall neem tree, it seemed that it had just delivered a letter to the Queen of Sheba’s



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palace, and was on its way back toward Solomon's castle. When a squirrel, running along the rooftops, suddenly sat up on its tail and chattered at him, he stared at it and reflected with amazement that those black stripes on its back were the marks of Ramchandar-ji's fingers. And the elephant was a world of wonder. When he stood in the entry hall and saw an elephant approaching from the distance, it looked like a mountain moving. The long trunk, the huge ears waving like fans, the two white tusks sticking out and curving like scimitars -- when he saw it all he ran inside, wonderstruck, and went straight to Bi Amma. (Hussain, 2007, p. 2)

Colonial exploitation and environmental degradation are inextricably linked, as colonial powers have profoundly affected the ecological sustainability and well-being of colonized territories, causing significant disruptions to the natural balance. "Colonial powers, in their quest for resources and dominance, have often exploited the environments of colonized regions, leading to significant ecological changes and displacement of both human and non-human entities" (Akram et al., 2023, p. 646). Hussain (2007) focuses on the lingering effects of colonial mismanagement, as local villagers grapple with a changing climate and a degraded environment left in the wake of extractive colonial occupation. The resource appropriation and cultural disruption instigated by colonial forces sowed seeds that continue to impact environment. Hussain (2007) illustrates this through the disappearance of monkeys in Rupnagar: "The monkeys vanished so completely that for weeks not one was to be seen on any wall, roof, or tree" (p. 29). This environmental degradation serves as a metaphor for the broader social displacement caused by colonial exploitation. Colonization often justified the "depletion of natural resources under the guise of their utilization" (Rawat & Gurav, 2023, p. 405), and this process led to the disturbance of ecological systems in the name of modernization and progress.

Colonial powers imposed technologies such as electricity, combustion engines, and asphalt infrastructure on the territories they controlled, fundamentally altering both the physical and ecological landscapes. For Zakir, the protagonist, nature is a timeless, almost mythical force, intimately connected to his spirit and culture. However, over time, nature becomes something that can be controlled and exploited. The advent of electric poles in Rupnagar, initially celebrated as a sign of progress, reflects this transformation. These poles "grew as the heaps of stone chips" and became part of the "dust-choked landscapes" (Hussain, 2007, p. 6), symbolizing the broader environmental degradation caused by developmentalism. This imagery mirrors the global tension between modern development and the preservation of nature. Hussain (2007) portrays the electrification of Rupnagar as detrimental to the coexistence of humans and wildlife: "Rupnagar, offering up its three monkeys as a sacrifice, had entered the age of electrification" (p. 29). This suggests that the cost of modernization is often borne by the natural world, which is sacrificed in the name of development. The introduction of electrification to Rupnagar exemplifies the heavy price of colonial development. The transformation of the region's infrastructure—replacing outdated power sources with electricity—came at the expense of local wildlife, particularly the monkeys who once populated the area. These monkeys, who had once scampered across walls and perched in trees overlooking the landscape, vanish as their natural habitats are displaced by modern technology. This disappearance symbolizes the environmental disruptions that modernity



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imposes upon both nature and its vulnerable inhabitants in the pursuit of progress. The novel's depiction of environmental degradation—such as the disappearance of wildlife and the destruction of habitats—embodies Huggan and Tiffin's (2010) critique of ecological imperialism, which highlights the fallout of colonial and neocolonial exploitation.

“Colonialism prioritized infrastructure development, such as roads, bridges and plantations, which was often carried out without considering local residents' environmental impact or welfare” (Karim, & Suyitno, 2024, p. 244). The introduction of motorized vehicles and the construction of coal-tar roads in colonial territories further exacerbated the ecological degradation. Hussain (2007) describes the arrival of motorbikes in a way that highlights both the technological transformation and the environmental consequences: “Rubber-tired horse carts ran along the smooth roads, with an occasional buggy, an occasional motor-car, among them. And beyond those roads, beyond the bazaars and neighborhoods, that dark, smooth, oiled-looking coal-tar road, on which the lorries ran all day” (Hussain, 2007, p. 27). Motorbikes revolutionized mobility in colonial regions and intensified environmental degradation through air pollution, fossil fuel reliance, and resource exploitation. This shift mirrored colonial patterns of ecological harm and unsustainable development. Hussain (2007) highlights the ecological toll of colonial modernity, depicting the train's arrival as a symbolic disruption of landscapes and indigenous life. Through vivid imagery, he highlights the profound environmental and cultural impact: “The train came along, blowing its whistle from afar and belching out smoke...Then suddenly, from the shelter of the trees, the coal-black rushing engine came into view” (p. 28). The train, described as a “coal-black rushing engine,” serves as a metaphor for the colonial mission's encroachment on indigenous lands, heralding the arrival of mechanization that consumes everything in its path. The image of the engine “spewing its blackened lungs into heaven” evokes a sense of environmental destruction as the machine relentlessly traverses the land, smothering nature with its toxic emissions. Hussain (2007) critiques the environmental toll of colonial modernity, with the train symbolizing the disruptive impact of imperial progress on local ecosystems and indigenous communities. This development mirrors the broader colonial project, where technological advancements like trains, hailed as progress, served as tools of empire, ravaging landscapes and displacing communities to fuel capitalist agendas. The train's arrival in *Basti* exemplifies colonial and neocolonial developmentalism, prioritizing natural resource extraction for imperial gain, irrespective of environmental costs. Machines such as trains and motor vehicles, often viewed as progress, are also agents of destruction, dismantling ecosystems and displacing cultures in pursuit of economic growth. Hussain's (2007) depiction aligns with critiques by Huggan and Tiffin (2015), Shiva (1999), and DeLoughrey and Handley (2011), who argue that colonialism's capitalist-driven modernization fosters environmental degradation. Fossil fuel-dependent transportation systems exacerbate the commodification of nature, invading and overwhelming pristine ecosystems. The train in *Basti* thus embodies the destructive nature of colonial modernity, illustrating how technological advancement, driven by capitalist objectives, compromises environmental integrity and cultural sustainability.

...the former colonial powers imposed a Euro-centric capitalist model of modern



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development on their colonies, often to the detriment of these regions. The rise of modern industrial economies in Europe and America led to extensive environmental degradation and social disruption. The long-term outcomes of this imposed global capitalist system are now evident in climate change, which affects the entire planet. (Mohiuddin et al., p. 1)

Guha (2000) critiques Western environmentalism for neglecting the impact of war, modernism, and capitalist exploitation on postcolonial environments, emphasizing that capitalist economies “have been made possible only through the economic and ecological exploitation of the third world” (p. 95). Hussain (2007) focuses on the environmental devastation wrought by the militarism of colonial and neocolonial periods, offering a sobering critique of how wars not only ravage human communities but also turn the natural world into a casualty of conflict. He demonstrates how colonial and neocolonial violence, in addition to displacing human populations, also exploits and degrades the natural environment, turning it into a weapon in the pursuit of political and economic gains. The imagery of fire and burning pervades *Basti*, serving as a metaphor for the destruction of both the human and natural worlds during times of war. Zakir’s reflection that “so much had already burned, so much burning now...” (Hussain, 2007, p. 170) highlights the profound and enduring damage caused by conflict, signaling that the environmental harm of war is often as significant as its human toll. Fire, in this context, becomes a potent symbol of both the literal and metaphorical devastation wrought by war. For example, the description of bombing as “the roof beams were burning the way a forest burns” (Hussain, 2007, p. 166) links the destruction of human structures to the consumption of nature itself, turning forests, homes, and lands into nothing more than fuel for the fires of war. The natural environment is systematically exploited, wasted, and discarded, stripped of its inherent value during violent times. The destruction of the land in *Basti* is not just a byproduct of conflict; it is an integral part of the process, with nature itself becoming a tool of destruction and a victim of militarism. As Zakir moves through the ruins of what was once a vibrant community, he observes the collapse of structures and the transformation of once-pure natural resources into remnants of destruction: “Wells of cold sweet water have been filled with dust ... [and] choked with the corpses of virtuous women” (Hussain, 2007, p. 174). The entire city is depicted as a “desolate wasteland,” a “house which is burning on all four sides” (Hussain, 2007, p. 174), emphasizing the complete erasure of both cultural heritage and ecological integrity.

“The environmental consequences of war are for the most part deleterious” (Westing, 2009, p. 312). Hussain (2007) highlights the long-lasting environmental toll of militarism by presenting war as not only a human tragedy but also an ecological one. Wars driven by political and economic agendas, particularly in postcolonial contexts, do not merely harm human bodies but also irreparably scar the landscapes upon which communities depend. This portrayal of environmental destruction through the lens of war is a powerful commentary on how colonial and neocolonial powers, in their pursuit of dominance, have treated both people and environment as expendable resources. Zakir’s trauma, which stems from his experiences during the Partition and the violence of war, is compounded by his witnessing the ruination of the land he once knew, amplifying the sense of loss and dislocation that characterizes the postcolonial



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condition. The destructive capacity of war is portrayed as a force that irreversibly disrupts the harmony between nature and society. The novel's portrayal of the aftermath of the Indo-Pak War of 1971, especially through Zakir's reflection, illustrates how conflict obliterates the once-thriving ecosystems and landscapes, leaving them desolate and silent. The imagery of the road being "empty for a long distance, and also so full," with "all was silent except for the distant echo of bombings" (Hussain, 2007, p. 174), emphasizes the scale of devastation that extends beyond human lives, deeply affecting the natural environment. This silence in the midst of war reflects not only the absence of human life but also the erasure of the once-vibrant landscapes that were integral to the community and ecosystem.

Since time immemorial the environment has been a silent victim of warfare. From salting the enemy's land, to poisoning water sources, to scorched earth policies, the environment has historically been both target and weapon. It has suffered both deliberate and incidental damage and it has suffered not only during but also in preparation for, and in the aftermath of, armed conflict. (Rayfuse, 2014, p. 1).

Hussain (2007) critiques the disregard for nature during times of war, highlighting the profound interconnectedness between human suffering and ecological destruction. He suggests that the consequences of war extend beyond the immediate human losses, inflicting long-term damage on the natural world, and leaving scars that may never fully heal. In this way, he challenges readers to reconsider the broader implications of war, not just on people but on the very environment that sustains them. The devastation caused by wars, as portrayed in *Basti* (2007), transcends human suffering and reaches deeply into environment, transforming once-thriving ecosystems into barren wastelands. Hussain (2007) uses the imagery of fire to powerfully convey the catastrophic consequences of conflict, emphasizing how wars consume not only homes and cities but also the natural world. Zakir's lament on the burning scars of the city is symbolic of the broader destruction wrought by war, with fire acting as both a literal and metaphorical force. It represents the violent erasure of nature, as ecosystems are ravaged, and the land, once rich with life, is reduced to ashes. This relentless destruction highlights how warfare commodifies and depletes nature, treating it as expendable—something to be consumed, violated, and ultimately destroyed. In this context, *Basti* resonates with Shiva's (1999) critique of how capitalist and militaristic ideologies regard environment as a resource to be exploited for short-term gains.

Conclusion

Basti serves as a powerful narrative that intertwines the trauma of displacement with the environmental destruction caused by both colonial and neocolonial forces. Through the character of Zakir, Hussain (2007) illustrates how the degradation of nature parallels the degradation of society, critiquing the materialistic exploitation of natural resources and the erosion of indigenous ecological knowledge. The novel challenges the Western developmental agendas that prioritize economic growth at the expense of environmental sustainability, shedding light on the long-lasting consequences of colonial exploitation and the persistence of neocolonial ideologies. "Humanity's activities, particularly industrialization and deforestation, have drastically altered natural processes, intensifying climate change" (Mohiuddin et al., p. 1). Hussain (2007) depicts the



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transformation of once-thriving landscapes into barren, resource-exploited territories, symbolizing the destructive legacy of colonialism and the harmful effects of industrialization on ecological harmony. Environmental crisis portrayed in *Basti* highlights the interconnectedness of social, cultural, and ecological issues, emphasizing the need for an urgent re-evaluation of developmental practices that prioritize short-term economic gains over long-term environmental sustainability. By drawing on postcolonial ecocriticism, this research paper reveals that *Basti* critiques the colonial notion of progress, urging readers to reconsider the true cost of development and the lasting environmental and societal impacts of colonial legacies. Hussain (2007) offers not only a reflection on the past but also a cautionary tale about the future, urging contemporary societies to confront environmental crisis exacerbated by capitalist growth and colonial histories. Thus, *Basti* emerges as an important literary contribution to postcolonial ecocriticism, providing profound insights into the environmental challenges that continue to shape postcolonial societies today.

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