



**Kai Cheng Thom's *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars:*  
A Critique of Colonialism**

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**Abstract**

Ecological concerns demand recognition at this point of the Anthropocene epoch. There is a grave threat that European imperialism has caused what Rob Nixon calls 'slow-violence' to the environment. Kai Cheng Thom's, *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: A Dangerous Trans Girl's Confabulous Memoir* (2016) is a work that intermingles elements of magical realism, ecocriticism, trans literature and postcolonialism. Using Postcolonial Ecocriticism as a critical lens, this paper aims to uncover the link between colonization and the ecological crises. The use of magical realism as a literary technique is analyzed to highlight the ways in which this tool helps transgress rigid binaries. The paper attempts to point out the impact of colonization in erasing cultures, communities and biodiversity in order to find a better way forward.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Magical Realism, European Imperialism, Settler Colonialism, Ecological Crisis.

The global ecological crisis is one of the most pertinent issues that life on earth faces today. The adverse effects of human activities on the natural environment in the Anthropocene epoch are blatantly evident. Ecocriticism is a field of literary criticism that explores the intersection of literature, culture and the environment; it is an area of study that takes, "...an earth-centered approach to literary studies" (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii), and moves away from an anthropocentric view. In her work, *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: A Dangerous Trans Girl's Confabulous Memoir* (2016), Kai Cheng Thom, a Canadian writer and a recipient of the Dayne Ogilvie Prize for LGBTQIA+ emerging writers, combines magical realism with postcolonial insights to highlight the ecological crisis that this planet faces today. Both magical realism and a postcolonial approach are allies to ecocritical thinking, as is made evident in the works of Ben Holgate, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin.

It is this intersection between postcolonial ecocriticism and magical realism that the present paper explores while highlighting the strong ecological concerns reflected in the text under study.

The use of the literary technique of magical realism as the defining feature of postcolonial literature, is fairly manifest in the chosen text as it presents magical or otherwise unrealistic phenomenon as completely believable and real, and allows writers who challenge existing power dynamics to create a reality that can challenge the norms. In this context, Homi K. Bhabha comments that magical realism has become, "...the literary language of the emergent post-colonial world" (7), while Christopher Warnes remarks that, "...it is in its postcolonial incarnations that magical realism fulfils its creative and critical potential to the fullest" (28-29). But this technique is equally favorable for ecocritical writing as Holgate comments:

Magical realist fiction re-evaluates different knowledge systems that have generally been rejected within dominant Western discourse through its realistic depiction of myths, metaphors, dreams and belief in the supernatural or magical. In this manner, writers utilise magical realism in order to reimagine the world, to reveal alternative realities that challenge readers' assumptions about what is actually real. When authors deploy the narrative mode as environmental discourse, they typically reimagine the world within another integrated context, emphasising a biocentric, holistic view that acknowledges the interconnectedness of all things in the universe. (9)

*Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: A Dangerous Trans Girl's Confabulous Memoir* verifies these claims through its skillful use of magical realism to focus on colonization's role in bringing about the current state of ecological crisis. The writer creatively chooses to name the protagonist's hometown as Gloom and describe it with such dark imagery as, "a place...where the sky is always grey and the rain is always falling" (Thom 7). This dull and dreary representation of a town that is aptly named Gloom points to the dark past of this place as the text mirrors the colonial exploitation that directly led to this state of affairs. The protagonist emphasizes this while alluding to the history of this town:

Gloom was built on the edge of the sea, on land that was once inhabited solely by several Indigenous nations to whose peoples the land and the water are sacred. For thousands of years they lived in this place without external invasion, until white people came from Europe with guns and diseases and their hearts full of conquest. These white people built a city of stone and glass as a monument to their victory, and because they had won it in so corrupt a fashion, the sky and the ocean have been sad ever since. This is why the city is called Gloom. (Thom 7)

The description of the town puts European imperialism in sharp focus, and compels an inquiry to ascertain the damage caused by European colonization. As Alfred Crosby puts it, "The rude process of European conquest began in 1402, a date we might take as the birth year

of modern European imperialism” (81); he adds that while there have been many instances where other groups of people have resorted to committing, “...acts of imperialism” (2), but the scope of their actions was limited in terms of geographical distance, meanwhile, “Europeans, in contrast, seem to have leapfrogged around the globe” (Crosby 2). The impact of this expansive and incessant exploitation of land, people and resources has not only changed the face of many civilizations, but continues to show lasting effects of the violence that has been inflicted. The resulting deprivation of land or a kind of dispossession of land reveals the vicious and horrendous dimensions of settler colonialism:

The concept of landlessness implies a person who has become landless, exiled from their land. Landless means land loss, land lost. ‘Becoming’ landless depends on your relation to the land. Nomadic people were never in possession of the land in a European sense, which is how colonists were able, following the 17th-century English philosopher John Locke, to declare the land empty, ‘terra nulla’... (Young 51)

Historically, many indigenous communities have been known to live in harmony with nature, nomadic groups did not see land as something to be owned or possessed, as Young points out:

...the European...brings with him and her a notion of property and the proper, of ownership and possession, that are fundamentally at odds with those who cannot be assimilated into such a system. The nomad works the land, has an intimate relation to the land, but does not affiliate him- or herself to it in a relation of property or ownership. The relationship is rather a sacred and ancestral one. (52)

However, the colonizers had a different relationship with nature, one where there was a clear binary of owner and owned, ruler and ruled, human and animal/nature, white and indigenous, master and slave. The mercenary approach of the colonizers caused many of the ecological problems that shroud the planet today.

The environmental changes depicted in retelling the history of the place called Gloom in the text alludes to the link between colonization and climate change, as Eyal Weizman rightly notes in the work *The Conflict Shoreline* (2015), “The current acceleration of climate change is not only an unintentional consequence of industrialization. The climate has always been a project for colonial powers, which have continuously acted to engineer it” (10). It was only in April 2022 that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released its sixth assessment report, in which it clearly stated colonialism as one of the leading causes of the climate crisis as well as, “...an ongoing issue that is exacerbating communities’ vulnerability to it” (Funes). The selected work underlines this theme and highlights the nefarious role of colonization in erasing indigenous cultures and triggering the climate crisis. Furthermore, colonization stubbornly persists on in the form of what Rob Nixon calls ‘slow violence’ and

defines it as, "...a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). The violence that was inflicted in that dark period in history where white supremacist ideas and European imperialism burgeoned on to destroy natural and cultural diversity, has left scars and open wounds on the planet that need to be acknowledged and addressed.

The price that was heavily paid by indigenous populations and ecological systems to fulfill the greed of imperialistic powers, are still experiencing the brunt of the trauma that was inflicted upon them through colonization. Daniel Macmillen Voskoboynik describes colonialism as a system of subjecting a triple violence namely, "...cultural violence through negation; economic violence through exploitation; and political violence through oppression" (33). There are many examples of the harmful exploitation of people and natural resources at the hands of colonizers, commercialization of agriculture in India, Spanish colonialism in Mexico, settler colonialism in North America and Canada, to name just a few. To attain an objective distance from the people and resources that were exploited in order to achieve the material requirements of the colonial state, colonizers engaged in the process of dehumanization of indigenous populations along with the acquirement and further exploitation of land and other resources by adopting an outlook that served their purpose. For example, the Latin phrase 'terra nullius' which means nobody's land or land belonging to no one, was a principle that was often used in International law to justify claims to a territory that was acquired through colonizing; this ideology showcases the sheer disregard to indigenous populations of the lands that were colonized by imperial powers, and a further disregard of the natural resources available in the colonies as explained in these lines, "Since there was always more land to conquer and acquire, sustainability was irrelevant. The model was simple: exhaust the land, abandon it and clear new land" (Voskoboynik 37). It is evident that the trauma inflicted through the process of colonization still remains and the impact of colonization is felt through structural racism, climate change, extinction and systemic oppression.

Magical Realism becomes a powerful weapon in the arsenal of postcolonial and ecocritical writers to create an alternative view that can challenge a prevalent and unidimensional perspective, as pointed out in these lines:

Magical realism enables writers to portray alternative intellectual paradigms, ontologies and epistemologies that typically contest the scientific rationalism derived from the European Enlightenment and the exploitation of natural resources associated with both capitalism and imperialism. (Warnes, *Climate and Crises*)

In the selected text, the author employs this tool and it creates the possibility to transgress the human-animal binary. In one such instance, the protagonist of the selected work mentions the day that the mermaids died. Here, mermaids, which are mythical sea creatures, are presented as real entities in the framework of the selected text. The author leaves no room for doubt about their existence as it is portrayed as an indisputable fact within the reality presented in the text, "...a school of mermaids had made their home in the gulf off the coast upon which the city of Gloom stood" (Thom 11). It is a classic trait of magical realism to present unrealistic elements as entirely realistic, as Holgate comments, "The only factor that remains fixed is magical realism's solitary trait: the representation of the magical or supernatural in a quotidian manner that is embedded within literary realism" (21). The text breaks down the, "...human-animal binary" (Holgate 2) as the mermaids often come up to the harbor to flirt with sailors, until one day an entire mer-clan, about sixty of them, came up to the shore with the high tide and heaved their dying bodies on to the sand. The protagonist sarcastically remarks, "To this day, not a single scientist has come up with an explanation for this—except, of course, that we had poisoned the seas with our oil and trash, and that it was the end of the world, which everyone knew already" (Thom 11). These lines clearly call out the role of humans in exploiting natural resources and polluting the planet. As the mermaids lay dying on the shore, some people, including the protagonist and her sister, attempted to save them by pouring sea-water over them, and trying to roll them back. But their efforts were futile, the text describes the scene of the dying mermaids with vivid imagery and the use of pathetic fallacy as the environment is fused with a sense of death and decay, "The sky was grey, like it always is in Gloom, and the air was filled with the stench of the sea and dying flesh and the farewell songs of the mermaids—a sonorous, wordless keening" (Thom 13). Despite the efforts of the few humans, the mermaids could not be saved, a striking remark on the few environmental activists whose efforts cannot make up for the disregard of the ecological crisis shown by a majority of people, governments and industries.

In describing the dying bodies of the mermaids, the text surpasses the boundary between human and non-human, as can be seen in these lines:

...the turquoise scales of her tail were beginning to flake off and fall onto the sand. Her seaweed-coloured hair was a fading tangled mass, and she looked at us with huge golden eyes that never blinked. The gills at the sides of her head fluttered slowly, making a rattling, hissing noise that sounded like death itself. (Thom 13)

The book under scrutiny engages in a distinctive portrayal of non-human elements in magical realism writing as Holgate remarks, "In magical realist texts humans may metamorphose into

animals, inanimate beings or the environment, while animals or natural elements (like mountains, lakes or rivers) may be literally endowed with human or animate characteristics” (4). The sad look in the mermaids’ eyes as she looked at the protagonist clearly transgresses the human-animal binary and moves away from an anthropocentric view and embraces an ecocritical perspective, as pointed out in these lines, “In rendering literal – not just metaphorical – the intermingling of organic and inorganic, human and nonhuman realms, magical realism proves highly amenable to the ecocentric and biocentric agendas” (Benito Jesús et al. 199). When the mermaids used their voice to say, “Eeeeeerrrgghhhnuuuurrghfff” (Thom 15) using their vocal chords which were, “...never meant for human speech” (Thom 15), the text incorporated another layer of personification which reached its peak when, “...all over the beach, the rest of the mermaids were thanking the humans who were trying to save them, and telling them enough. There was nothing we could do now to fix the mistakes we had made” (Thom 15). The engagement between the human and non-human, the symbolic value of the mer-clan dying in portraying mass extinctions, and the role of water pollution, toxic waste and mismanagement of resources are all important areas in ecocritical writing.

The death of the mermaids on the shore is not only a gripping ecocritical element of the text, but it also deeply resonates with the sad event of, “...an estimated one billion sea creatures dying on the coast of Vancouver...” (Shivaram) due to a heat wave. In this regard, scientists have shown concern that while the dead mussels which had cooked to death in their shells on the coast of Vancouver were visible because they were on land, scientists warned that it was just a tip of the iceberg as it could not be ascertained what more could have transpired underwater which is not in plain sight. In foreshadowing this awful incident, the selected work surpasses a major hurdle in ecocritical writing where the slow impact of the ecological crisis could be captured with a sense of urgency that the matter undoubtedly deserves. As Rob Nixon shared the difficulties in creating a text that portrays and engages with ecocritical concerns accurately, “A major challenge is representational: how to devise arresting stories, images, and symbols adequate to the pervasive but elusive violence of delayed effects” (3), yet the selected work addresses these concerns and presents an opportunity to truly assess the damage, and acknowledge the reasons behind this state of affairs. To do so, it is important to face up to the imperial past.

The process of European imperialism involved white supremacist and racist ideas, colonization became a process of erasing other cultures and communities, exploiting land and other natural resources from the colonies, and abusing people and resources to serve the

colonizers. Ecological imperialism can be understood on the same lines, as it is rooted in this form of hegemonic thinking, and to understand this perspective it is important to acknowledge its philosophical basis that views, "...nature and the animal 'other' as being either external to human needs, and thus effectively dispensable, or as being in permanent service to them, and thus an endlessly replenishable source" (Huggan and Tiffin 4). The implications of such a view can be paralleled with ecological racism which Plumwood terms as, "hegemonic centric" (99), which can be explained as, "...the self-privileging view...underlying racism, sexism and colonialism alike, all of which support and reconfirm each other, and all of which have historically been conscripted for the purposes of exploiting nature while minimising non-human claims to a shared earth" (Huggan and Tiffin 4-5). Colonization also targeted diverse gender expression and gender identities that were prevalent in several indigenous cultures, as pointed out in the work *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2015), "Not only were other people often regarded as part of nature – and thus treated instrumentally as animals – but also they were forced or coopted over time into western views of the environment..." (Huggan and Tiffin 6). By enforcing the gender binary, colonization has contributed greatly in creating unsafe circumstances for queer and trans people, especially those who are people of colour. As the ecological crisis accelerates, not everyone will experience the brunt of it equally. There is a great divide in terms of the distribution of wealth and resources, added to that systemic oppression of certain groups makes it that much harder for them to survive the effects of the ecological crisis.

The selected text highlights the lived realities of trans women who live on the Street of Miracles, where people come looking for a temporary escape from their lives while its permanent residents grapple with housing inequality, employment disparity, cissexism and hate crimes. At one point in the selected text, in an attempt to save a fellow trans woman who was cornered by a bigoted cop who was going to shoot her out of spite, the protagonist accidentally killed the cop. What happened next is a beautiful amalgamation of all of the concerns of the text coming together to create a scene of harmony. As the two of them panicked over the dead body of the cop, the vines covering the courtyard began to move, uncovering the fountain and taking hold of the body to pull it into the fountain. The two of them looked in amusement when they saw what the vines had revealed the center of the fountain, where a statue stood tall over a plinth. It was the statue of the first femme who was murdered by a client, as bystanders watched silently. She was legend on the Street of Miracles, it was believed that her bones still lay there and it was her spilt blood that brought

the perpetual night time to the Street. She became a symbol of resilience, a goddess who beckoned trans women to come to her and live freely, at any cost. As the statue revealed itself, the vines continued to recoil, until the body was pulled deep inside the earth. Here, the statue of the first femme and the natural elements that secured it, worked together to protect the young trans women by hiding the body of the dead cop:

Water begins to run down her stone cheeks, in a trickle at first, then in rivulets, then steady streams. It gushes over the curves and valleys of her body, and into the well, which fills up impossibly quickly. The fountain bubbles and gurgles as the water continues to flow, and the vines draw deeper and deeper into the earth. (Thom 116-117)

While the statue acts as a symbol of trans lives lost to transphobic violence, the natural aspects of the water and the vines add to the nature imagery as well as the unison of human and non-human elements. This powerful scene also speaks strongly for two groups, namely trans people and nature, who have been othered and exploited to make things easier for the colonizers. As the water trickles down the eyes of the statue, it creates a sense of mourning over the condition both the groups have been left in. While, the body of the cop who represents bigotry and cissexism is returned to earth, symbolic of oneness with nature, despite the role one plays or which side one takes. It is another instance of transgressing the human/non-human binary.

In conclusion, this work brings some important insights on ecological concerns, the colonial past and its lasting impact. This work is a perfect example of what Vital says is, "...a new kind of concern for the environment emerging in the post-colonial era, one attuned to histories of unequal development and varieties of discrimination" (90). In this context, the author of the selected text comments on the intersectional approach she has taken in her writing as this work is layered and explores different kinds of marginalities:

I do try to instill intersectionality into my writing...we can't afford to only write about our own kind of marginality in a binary way, in the manner of "us and them." It's much more important to write about different kinds of marginality in conversation with one another, because this is where a deeper kind of truth lives. (Róisín)

In this sense, through the co-mingling of human/non-human; the exploration of the role of colonization in erasing cultures, communities and gender identities; and the use of magical realism, the work trespasses binary thinking and gains new perspective. This paper has attempted to explore this alternate perspective in finding the link between colonization and the ecological crisis, discussing which groups are left most vulnerable through the process of colonization, and what is at stake if things go unchanged.

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