

Humans, Rivers, and Environmental Ethics: A Study of Six Contemporary Indonesian Short Stories

Nabilla Silmi^{1*}, Else Liliani²
Yogyakarta State University

Corresponding Author: Nabilla Silmi nabillasilmi.fbs@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of environmental ethics and the relationship between humans and river ecosystems in six contemporary Indonesian short stories. Using a literary ecocriticism approach, this qualitative research applies a descriptive-analytical method to analyze manifestations of anthropocentrism, ecocentrism, and mythological-spiritual human-nature relations. The data sources consist of six short stories published in print and online mass media between 2020 and 2024. The findings reveal three patterns. First, anthropocentrism appears through destructive river exploitation, pollution, and the rationalization of greed that results in ecological and social collapse. Second, ecocentrism emerges as resistance, shown through character solidarity against environmental destruction, ethical restraint in using nature, and narratives of nature's retaliation. Third, human-river relations are represented through myth and spirituality, portraying the river not merely as a material object but as a sacred subject preserved through rituals and local wisdom.

INTRODUCTION

Literature is a blend of the author's reality and imagination. Everything expressed by an author in a work of fiction is the result of experiences, contemplation, and knowledge that are creatively processed. Literature does not merely function as aesthetic entertainment mediated by language, but also narrates various issues of human life in relation to the environment, fellow humans, and spiritual dimensions. The author's sensitivity to social dynamics often positions literary works as both spiritual reflections and critical responses to the ecological realities surrounding society (Saputra & Abror, 2024).

Many literary works emerge from the author's anxiety, restlessness, and dissatisfaction with social and ecological conditions. The use of nature-related diction such as rivers, trees, water, and waves indicates that nature is not merely employed as a narrative background but is often elevated as a central theme. Environmental themes have increasingly become an important concern for fiction writers as a form of contribution and awareness toward ongoing ecological crises (Larasati & Manut, 2022). In this context, nature functions as a medium through which authors construct imagery, atmosphere, and profound social criticism.

The paradigm that bridges literary studies with environmental issues is known as ecocriticism. This approach examines how nature is represented in literary texts, how humans interact with the natural world, and how literary works can stimulate ecological awareness among readers. Zulfa (2021) explains that ecocriticism emerged as an interdisciplinary effort to examine environmental representation in literature and to analyze human ethical attitudes toward their living spaces. Similarly, Sutisna (2021) emphasizes that ecocritical analysis aims to uncover the complex and reciprocal relationship between literary imagination and ecological reality.

More broadly, ecocriticism intersects with the discourse of environmental ethics, a moral framework that regulates human behavior toward ecosystems. Ramadhan et al. (2023) argue that ecologically oriented literature frequently voices criticism of environmental degradation caused by human exploitation of nature. Within environmental ethics, two paradigmatic perspectives often influence the depiction of human-nature relationships in literary narratives, namely anthropocentrism and ecocentrism (Munir, 2023).

The anthropocentric paradigm places humans as the center of existence, where the value of nature is measured primarily by its usefulness for human economic and pragmatic interests. In contrast, the ecocentric paradigm views all entities within the ecological community – both abiotic and biotic – as possessing intrinsic value. The shift from anthropocentric to ecocentric perspectives in literary discourse reflects the development of society's ethical awareness and moral responsibility toward environmental sustainability (Munir, 2023).

Among the natural elements frequently represented in Indonesian literature, rivers occupy a particularly significant position. As vital ecological entities, rivers function not only as economic resources but also as cultural and mythological symbols within many communities. In contemporary Indonesian short stories, rivers are often depicted not merely as romantic landscapes but as

narrative spaces that reflect environmental pollution, ecological degradation, and the erosion of local wisdom.

Previous studies on literary ecocriticism have generally examined environmental representation and ecological awareness in literary texts. Zulfa (2021) discusses how literary works portray environmental crises and reveal ethical attitudes toward nature, while Sutisna (2021) highlights the role of literary narratives in cultivating ecological awareness among readers. Likewise, Ramadhan et al. (2023) emphasize that ecologically oriented literature often serves as a critique of environmental exploitation. However, these studies tend to discuss environmental issues in literature in a broad and general sense. Research that specifically examines the representation of river ecosystems in contemporary Indonesian short stories remains relatively limited. Furthermore, earlier studies rarely analyze the ethical paradigms underlying human-nature relations, particularly the tension between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism, within river-centered narratives. The mythological and spiritual dimensions of rivers as ecological subjects in contemporary short fiction also remain insufficiently explored.

This research therefore seeks to address this gap by focusing on six contemporary Indonesian short stories published in mainstream media over the past five years that prominently feature narratives of rivers and nature. These texts include "Seekor Buaya di Sungai Karang Tambak" by Tjak S. Parlan (Kompas, 2023), "Kejadian di Tambang Pasir" by Ranang Aji SP (Kompas, 2023), "Bagaimana Sebuah Kampung Menuju Kematian" by Sandi Firly (Kompas, 2024), "Ikan Sungai Bejoe" by Dul Abdul Rahman (ruangsastra.com, 2020), "Datuk Muara Sungai" by E. Widodoantoro (ruangsastra.com, 2020), and "Genosida Para Ikan" by Mawan Belgi (ruangsastra.com, 2021). Initial readings of these texts indicate that the river is positioned not merely as a narrative setting but as a storytelling subject that conveys ecological messages, reflects socio-cultural change, and becomes a witness to environmental exploitation driven by anthropocentric human attitudes.

Therefore, this study contributes to the development of literary ecocriticism in several ways. First, it expands the scope of ecocritical studies by focusing specifically on river ecosystems as narrative subjects in contemporary Indonesian short stories. Second, it provides a systematic analysis of the interaction between anthropocentric and ecocentric paradigms in literary representations of environmental ethics. Third, this study highlights the aesthetic, mythological, and spiritual dimensions of human-river relationships, revealing how rivers function not only as ecological spaces but also as cultural and symbolic entities within contemporary Indonesian literature.

Based on this background, this study aims to examine contemporary Indonesian short stories through the analytical lens of literary ecocriticism. Specifically, this research aims to: (1) describe and analyze the manifestation of the anthropocentric paradigm; (2) describe and analyze the manifestation of the ecocentric paradigm; and (3) analyze the aesthetic and critical relationship between humans and rivers as represented in these literary works.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Literary ecocriticism operates as an interdisciplinary field that highlights the intersection between fictional texts and environmental ecology. Jannah and Efendi (2024) explain that ecocriticism fundamentally examines how literature captures the emotional intimacy of humans with nature, as well as how language is used to respond to ecological crises affecting the environment. Furthermore, ecocritical analysis seeks to explore the reciprocal relationship between the behavior of fictional characters and their living spaces. Literary works are therefore evaluated not only for their aesthetic qualities but also for their ethical implications regarding ecosystem sustainability. Ecocriticism has thus developed as a critical framework that studies the relationship between literature and the physical environment while emphasizing ecological awareness in literary representation (Schliephake, 2022).

Within contemporary scholarship, literature is also regarded as a cultural medium capable of shaping environmental awareness and ecological responsibility among readers. Susilawati, Winda, and Lismayanti (2024) assert that literary ecology is closely related to the author's effort to awaken the collective consciousness of society in maintaining ecological harmony that is gradually eroded by modern interventions. In this context, literary narratives often function as a reflective space through which environmental concerns are articulated and communicated to broader audiences. Foundational ecocritical scholarship has emphasized the importance of literary texts in shaping environmental imagination and ecological awareness (Buell, 2005). Similarly, Ryan (2020) argues that ecocritical perspectives position literature as an important medium for cultivating ecological awareness and encouraging ethical attitudes toward environmental preservation.

In representing the relationship between humans and nature, literary texts frequently display the tension between two major paradigms of environmental ethics: anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. These paradigms serve as conceptual frameworks for evaluating the moral stance of human characters toward natural entities and ecosystems within literary narratives. Alfien and Sultoni (2024) explain that the anthropocentric perspective measures the value of natural entities such as rivers, forests, and animals primarily based on their pragmatic usefulness and economic benefits for humans. In literary constructions, this paradigm often appears through exploitative characters, the arrogance of land domination, and a lack of empathy toward the suffering of both terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems (Karlina, 2025). Such anthropocentric attitudes are frequently criticized within ecocritical scholarship because they position humans as the dominant center of environmental value (Gaard, 2010).

Conversely, the ecocentric paradigm recognizes that nature possesses intrinsic value independent of human interests. Yuliati, Kadaryati, and Setyorini (2025) highlight that ecocentric-oriented literature depicts nature as an entity whose existence is equal to that of humans within ecological systems. This paradigm emphasizes the responsibility of humans to maintain the balance between abiotic and biotic elements of the ecosystem. Ecocentric perspectives in

literature therefore stress the interconnectedness between human and non-human entities within the broader ecological community (Abolfotoh, 2021).

Beyond material and ecological interactions, ecocriticism also acknowledges that human relationships with nature frequently involve spiritual and mythological dimensions. In many cultures, natural elements such as rivers, forests, and mountains are perceived as sacred entities inhabited by spiritual forces that influence human behavior toward the environment. This perspective is closely related to the concept of ecospirituality, which emphasizes the spiritual interconnectedness between humans and the natural world and encourages ethical responsibility toward ecological preservation (Taylor, 2010). Similarly, studies in sacred ecology highlight that traditional beliefs, myths, and ritual practices often function as cultural mechanisms that contribute to environmental conservation by embedding ecological values within community traditions (Berkes, 2018). Through such perspectives, nature is understood not merely as a physical resource but as a spiritually meaningful entity that shapes ecological ethics and human responsibility toward the environment.

Nature, particularly aquatic ecosystems such as rivers, occupies a significant position in the narrative structure of Indonesian literature. The use of river landscapes in short stories is not merely a decorative narrative element but often reflects the author's concern regarding environmental degradation and ecological crises. Budiman, Wahyuni, and Setiyawan (2023) note that environmental representation in literature frequently emerges as a form of resistance against policies that threaten local ecological systems. In many green literature narratives, the river is portrayed as a narrative subject that records traces of history, culture, and ecological tragedy caused by human greed. Widyaiswara et al. (2023) add that authors frequently employ strong ecological diction to reveal the critical condition of living spaces. In line with this perspective, Helmiani, Juanda, and Saguni (2021) conclude that the depiction of environmental damage in fiction ultimately aims to restore readers' environmental ethical awareness and encourage the cessation of exploitative practices.

METHODOLOGY

This research is a qualitative study utilizing a descriptive-analytical method. A qualitative design is employed because the analyzed data consists of texts (words, phrases, clauses, sentences, and paragraphs) rather than numbers. Fadli (2021) states that a qualitative research design aims to understand phenomena in depth through the collection of narrative data and the interpretation of meaning. The approach used is literary ecocriticism, which specifically focuses on dissecting the content of environmental ethics (anthropocentrism and ecocentrism) and the relationships between human characters and river ecosystems in works of fiction.

Data collection techniques utilize literature study (document study) combined with the read-and-note technique. Creswell and Creswell (2018) assert that in text-based qualitative research, public and private documents are primary sources of information that do not require the researcher's direct intervention

with human subjects. The data collection procedure is carried out through the following steps: (1) reading the manuscripts of the six short stories comprehensively and repeatedly (close reading); (2) identifying text segments containing elements of river ecology and environmental ethics; (3) marking and recording the data corpus into a data inventory table in accordance with ecocritical theory indicators.

Data analysis is conducted using the qualitative interactive analysis model. Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2018) divide the flow of qualitative analysis into three concurrent stages, namely data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing.

To maintain the validity of the research data, theoretical triangulation and persistent observation techniques are employed (Sugiyono, 2022). Persistent observation is carried out by rereading the short story manuscripts meticulously to ensure no ecological meaning units are missed. Meanwhile, theoretical triangulation is applied by testing the qualitative data findings using more than one recent theoretical journal perspective related to environmental ethics, ensuring the researcher's interpretation is objective and free from subjective bias.

The coding system uses alphabetical symbols to represent each short story (A-F), followed by numerical sequences indicating the specific textual segments identified during close reading. The identified data were then categorized according to ecocritical indicators of anthropocentrism, ecocentrism, and spiritual relations between humans and rivers.

RESULTS

Based on the analysis of the six short stories, data regarding the manifestation of environmental ethics was found, which is divided into two main paradigms: anthropocentrism and ecocentrism, as well as the forms of human relations with rivers through ecocritical myths and spirituality. The following is the presentation of the research data in the form of frequency distribution tables.

The Manifestation of Anthropocentrism in Contemporary Indonesian Short Stories

Anthropocentrism in these short stories emerges in the form of human domination over nature. A total of 45 data points were found indicating anthropocentric attitudes.

Table 1. Manifestations of Anthropocentrism in Contemporary Indonesian Short Stories

No.	Manifestation of Anthropocentrism	Variation of Emergence	Data Code	Frequency	Percentage
1.	River Exploitation	Using environmentally unfriendly tools/chemicals (poison/electricity)	A.005, A.015, A.017, A.021, E.002 - E.006,	16	35.55%

No.	Manifestation of Anthropocentrism	Variation of Emergence	Data Code	Frequency	Percentage
			E.008 - E.014		
		Being greedy and rationalizing exploitative actions	A.018, A.020, A.022, A.026	4	8.88%
		Massive sand mining	B.001, B.002, B.016, B.017	4	8.88%
2.	River Water Pollution	Polluting the river with industrial waste	A.006, A.007	2	4.44%
		Disposing of household waste into the river	C.002, C.004	2	4.44%
3.	Organized (Illegal) Nature Exploitation	The presence of protectors ("backing") for illegal mining	B.007	1	2.85%
4.	Environmental Destruction	Changes in the river's condition making it barren (loss of vegetation)	B.021	1	2.85%
		Greed towards the river's natural wealth	B.005, B.013, B.019	3	6.67%
		Prioritizing personal interests without considering conservation	D.010, D.012, D.013	3	6.67%
5.	Natural Resource Exploitation	Deforestation altering socio-economic conditions	C.001, C.005, C.007, C.010, C.013	5	11.11%

No.	Manifestation of Anthropocentrism	Variation of Emergence	Data Code	Frequency	Percentage
		Building swallow nests on the riverbank	C.011	1	2.85%
6.	Social Inequality	Forest exploitation without local community welfare	C.008, C.009, C.014	3	8.57%
Total				45	100%

The Manifestation of Ecocentrism in Contemporary Indonesian Short Stories

Conversely, the manifestation of ecocentrism represents a view that places nature as having intrinsic value equal to humans. A total of 35 data points reflecting the principles of ecocentric environmental ethics were found.

Table 2. Manifestations of Ecocentrism in Contemporary Indonesian Short Stories

No.	Manifestation of Ecocentrism	Variation of Emergence	Data Code	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Non-interference with Nature	Using eco-friendly fishing tools	A.001, A.002, A.003, A.010, A.011, A.012	6	17.14%
2.	Living Simply & Harmoniously	Utilizing natural resources sufficiently	A.004, A.009	2	5.71%
		Making nature a part of life	C.006, C.016, D.001, F.004	4	11.42%
		Utilizing resources according to basic needs	C.012	1	2.85%
3.	Responsibility	Providing waste containment	A.008	1	2.85%
4.	Compassion & Care	Maintaining biodiversity	A.013	1	2.85%

No.	Manifestation of Ecocentrism	Variation of Emergence	Data Code	Frequency	Percentage
		Caring for the local living environment	C.015, C.017, C.018	3	8.57%
5.	Solidarity	Preventing pollution and exploitation (protests/reprimands)	A.016, A.019, A.023, B.003, B.004, B.008, B.009, B.012, B.015	9	25.71%
6.	Respect for Nature	Acknowledging the equality of nature and human life	A.024, A.025, A.027, B.014, C.003, E.001	6	17.14%
7.	Justice	Considering the needs of future generations	B.018, B.020	2	5.71%
Total				35	100%

The Manifestation of Human Relations with the River

Human relations with the river in contemporary short stories are not only physical but also transcendental. The findings are categorized into ecocritical myths and ecocritical spirituality.

Table 3. Human Relations with the River in Contemporary Indonesian Short Stories

No.	Relation Category	Variation of Emergence	Data Code	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Ecocritical Myths	Old trees inhabited by astral beings	A.014	1	4.16%
	(Natural signs as societal truths)	The appearance of a pocong as a sign of nature's anger	B.006	1	4.16%

No.	Relation Category	Variation of Emergence	Data Code	Frequency	Percentage
		River welfare maintained for unseen inhabitants	B.010, B.011	2	8.33%
		Mount Merapi and rivers inhabited by spirits	B.022	1	4.16%
		Sacred/magical fish	D.002, D.015	2	8.33%
		Heavy rain as a sign of rejected offerings	F.007	1	4.16%
2.	Ecocritical Spirituality	Blessing rituals (before mining/holding events)	B.023, B.025, B.026	3	12.50%
	(Transcendental rituals and beliefs)	Merapi as the spiritual center of Java	B.024	1	4.16%
		Belief that the Masapi fish grants wishes	D.003, D.004, D.008	3	12.50%
		Tying white cloth ritual (fulfilled wishes)	D.009	1	4.16%
		Specific locations for offerings (trees/estuaries)	D.007, D.011, D.014	3	12.50%
		Belief in Datuk/Ngah Saad as wish-granters	F.001, F.002, F.003, F.006	4	16.67%
		Floating offerings as intermediaries	F.005	1	4.16%
Total				24	100%

DISCUSSION

Literature has a highly strategic potential to awaken human conscience regarding environmental crises without having to be patronizing or trapped in rigid propaganda narratives. Through fictional texts, authors can capture ecological anxieties and convey them narratively to readers. The six contemporary short stories serving as the object of this research brightly represent the idea of green literature (ecocriticism). The following is an argumentative elaboration on the manifestations of anthropocentrism, ecocentrism, and the spiritual relationship between humans and rivers drawn from the textual analysis.

The Domination of Human Interests: The Representation of Anthropocentrism

Conceptually, the anthropocentric paradigm views humans as the absolute center of the universe's system, where nature is valued purely as a tool to fulfill needs. In the views depicted in these short stories, perpetrators of environmental destruction consider any demands regarding moral obligations and responsibilities toward environmental preservation to be excessive and irrelevant.

a. Destructive River Exploitation and the Rationalization of Greed

The most dominant manifestation of anthropocentrism is river exploitation (53.33%). In the short story "Seekor Buaya di Sungai Karang Tambak" by Tjak S. Parlan, this exploitation is depicted vulgarly through the actions of the characters Matosen and Matayib, who use pesticide poison (thiodan) to catch fish en masse. This action represents pragmatic human greed; they desire an abundant catch with minimal effort, regardless of the collapse of the aquatic ecosystem. Worse yet, this anthropocentric paradigm breeds a "rationalization" or justification for the destruction of nature. Matosen defends himself under the guise of fulfilling his family's economic needs: "I sell those fish. You know, I have to feed my three younger siblings..." (A.026). He even assumes that natural resources are inexhaustible ("After all, the fish in this river will never run out!" - A.022), a logical fallacy typical of an exploiter.

A similar condition, but on a more structurally massive scale of exploitation, is captured in "Kejadian di Tambang Pasir" by Ranang Aji SP. Exploitation is carried out using heavy machinery upstream of the river on the slopes of Mount Merapi. The Village Head (Kepala Desa) character represents an anthropocentric capitalist who measures everything solely through the lens of economic circulation and profit ("stomach contents"). He ignores warnings of landslides, hollowed riverbanks, and the loss of supporting trees for the sake of smooth business and sand deposits (B.013, B.017).

On the other hand, the narrative of exploitation driven by human arrogance is evident in the short story "Genosida Para Ikan" by Mawan Belgi. When the fish in the river refuse to take the bait upon realizing the presence of human-made hooks, the group of anglers feels toyed with. They eventually unleash their selfish anger by pouring chemical exterminating powder into the river current (E.010). This ecological massacre, which results in the river being covered in dead fish (E.014), serves as argumentative proof that anthropocentric humans will act highly destructively when their dominance over nature is no longer acknowledged or obeyed.

b. Ecological Destruction Triggering the Death of Social Spaces

Exploitation does not merely result in the death of aquatic biota but also triggers structural environmental damage and social inequality within local communities. This condition is vividly illustrated in the short story “Bagaimana Sebuah Kampung Menuju Kematiannya” by Sandi Firly. The narrative depicts the massive exploitation of Borneo’s forests in the past, when timber companies floated large quantities of logs through the river as part of the logging industry (C.009). At first, this activity created an illusion of economic vitality for the village. However, the benefits were temporary and failed to produce sustainable infrastructure or long-term welfare for the indigenous community. Once the forests were completely logged and the river was no longer filled with floating timber (C.007), investors and migrant workers abandoned the area. The village that once appeared economically active eventually transformed into a deserted and stagnant social space (C.010; C.014).

This narrative demonstrates that anthropocentric exploitation operates through a short-term extractive logic that prioritizes profit while ignoring ecological sustainability and social resilience. As a result, environmental degradation is inevitably followed by social decline, leaving local communities trapped in poverty, isolation, and ecological ruin. The story thus reveals a paradox of anthropocentrism: the same exploitative practices intended to maximize human benefit ultimately destroy the ecological foundation that sustains human life itself.

Harmony and Ecosystem Restoration: The Representation of Ecocentrism

In contrast to anthropocentrism, the ecocentric paradigm in these short stories extends the scope of moral ethics to the entire ecological community, both biotic and abiotic. Nature is shown to be worthy of respect not just for the sake of human interests, but because it possesses its own existence and right to live.

a. Ecological Solidarity and Resistance Against Destruction

The principle of ecological solidarity occupies a significant position in the findings (25.71%). This solidarity is manifested through acts of resistance and moral reprimands directed toward individuals who damage the natural environment. In the short story “Seekor Buaya di Sungai Karang Tambak”, the character Amir Sareh embodies this ecological awareness. Rather than remaining a passive observer, he openly condemns Matosen and Matayib for poisoning the river: “How can people fish if they do it this way? You are indeed scumbags!” (A.019). Amir Sareh’s protest represents a moral stance against environmentally destructive practices and illustrates the role of humans as ecological guardians who defend natural entities that are unable to voice their own suffering.

A similar form of ecological solidarity appears in “Kejadian di Tambang Pasir”, where resistance emerges from an intergenerational perspective. The son courageously urges his father, the Village Head, to stop the sand mining activities occurring upstream (B.003; B.004). His objection is not rooted in the mystical fears shared by the miners but in a rational awareness of ecosystem preservation and the principle of intergenerational justice: “Then what will be left for my children and grandchildren if everything is destroyed?” (B.020). Through this dialogue, the narrative exposes the ethical consequences of environmental exploitation,

revealing how the greed of the present generation effectively steals ecological resources from future generations.

Taken together, these narratives demonstrate that ecological solidarity in literary texts is not merely expressed through sympathy toward nature, but through active resistance against practices that threaten environmental sustainability. By presenting characters who defend rivers and ecosystems, the stories construct an ecocentric ethical framework in which humans are positioned as responsible protectors of the natural world rather than its exploiters.

b. Nature's Retaliation as a Manifestation of Equality

Respect for nature is often articulated in literary narratives through the motif of "nature strikes back." The tragedy of Matayib being killed by a crocodile (A.024) is not merely constructed as a sensational plot device or a horror episode involving a wild predator, but rather as a symbolic representation of ecological cause-and-effect. The crocodile's aggression occurs after a human action, Matayib poisoning the river and killing the fish that form the crocodile's food chain (A.027). By destroying the aquatic ecosystem, Matayib indirectly threatens the survival of other species that depend on the river.

Within an ecocritical perspective, this event illustrates how environmental imbalance inevitably generates consequences that extend beyond the initial act of exploitation. The crocodile's attack therefore functions as a narrative mechanism through which nature restores disrupted ecological equilibrium. The story thus challenges anthropocentric arrogance by demonstrating that humans do not occupy a superior position within the ecosystem. Instead, humans are merely one component within a broader ecological network in which every disturbance can trigger a natural corrective response. In this sense, the crocodile's retaliation becomes a symbolic reminder that ecological harmony depends on mutual coexistence between humans and non-human entities.

c. The Ethic of Restraint and Compassion

The manifestation of living in harmony with nature is strongly represented through wisdom in utilizing natural resources. Amir Sareh catches Nile fish only to meet his dietary needs, employing a simple traditional fishing rod and ant egg (kroto) bait that does not damage the river ecosystem (A.001–A.003). This method reflects a subsistence-based interaction with nature, where resource use is limited to what is necessary rather than driven by accumulation or commercial exploitation. The ethical peak of this attitude appears when Amir Sareh catches a small badar fish; instead of placing it in his catch basket, he consciously releases it back into the river current (A.013).

Within an ecocritical framework, this act illustrates an ethic of restraint that prioritizes the sustainability of the ecosystem over immediate human gain. By allowing the juvenile fish to return to the river, Amir Sareh indirectly protects the reproductive cycle of aquatic life and maintains the ecological balance of the river. The narrative therefore portrays a model of ecocentric ethics in which humans interact with nature through moderation, respect, and responsibility rather than domination.

The Transcendental Bridge: Human Relations with the River

In Indonesia, a river is not merely a geographical landscape or a physical body of water, but the lifeblood of a culture that records transcendental values. These contemporary short stories prove that the collective memory regarding the sacredness of rivers is still fertile preserved.

a. Ecocritical Myths as Traditional Conservation Fortresses

Data analysis reveals that myths function not merely as supernatural beliefs but as cultural mechanisms of social control that contribute to environmental preservation. In the analyzed texts, various mythological elements appear as ecological warnings embedded within local wisdom. Beliefs that old trees possess unseen guardian entities (A.014), that the river's upstream is protected by invisible beings closely tied to the preservation of water springs (B.010, B.011), or the myth of the magical Masapi fish (D.002) all function as symbolic systems that regulate human behavior toward nature.

Within traditional societies, such beliefs operate as informal ecological regulations that limit destructive exploitation of natural resources. By attributing sacred or supernatural significance to certain natural elements, communities construct cultural boundaries that discourage excessive interference with rivers, forests, and other ecological spaces. This mechanism becomes evident when miners flee in terror after witnessing the apparition of a pocong (B.006), an event interpreted within the narrative as a sign that "nature is angry."

From an ecocritical perspective, these myths function as cultural strategies for environmental conservation. They create moral and psychological constraints that protect ecological spaces from uncontrolled exploitation, especially in contexts where formal environmental regulations are weak or ineffective. Consequently, myths in these narratives operate not simply as folklore or superstition, but as culturally embedded ecological ethics that safeguard rivers, forests, and the broader ecosystem.

b. Ecocritical Spirituality: Rituals and the Acknowledgment of Nature's Dignity

This transcendental relationship is further explored through spiritual environmental practices. Humans bridge their relationship with the river through rituals laden with the meaning of submission. In "Ikan Sungai Bejoe", people with wishes approach the river not to destroy it, but to present offerings, unroll white cloth, and tie it to a shady tree on the riverbank (D.004, D.008, D.009). Similarly, in "Datuk Muara Sungai", the character Ngah Saad floats offerings to the Tanjung Nipah estuary purely to ask for permission, protection, and safety from the ruler of nature (F.005, F.006).

The phenomenon of rituals in these works serves as a powerful closing argument that, ontologically, nature, especially aquatic ecosystems, is never viewed purely as a dead commodity. The river is believed to be a spiritual subject with the authority to protect, reject, or grant human hopes. Even though in practice these rituals are sometimes manipulated for anthropocentric exploitation (such as the Village Head holding an incense ritual so his miners aren't haunted - B.025), the fundamental essence of this spiritual environmental behavior ultimately leads to humanity's acknowledgment and submission to the grandeur and sacredness of the universe.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Anthropocentrism in contemporary Indonesian short stories is represented through human domination and exploitation of river ecosystems for pragmatic and economic interests. The most prominent form appears in destructive practices such as poisoning fish and large-scale sand mining. These exploitative actions not only damage river ecosystems and biodiversity but also lead to broader social consequences, including the collapse of local ecological balance and the decline of community welfare.

As a counterpoint to environmental destruction, ecocentrism is reflected through characters who demonstrate ecological awareness and resistance to exploitative practices. This perspective appears in acts of environmental solidarity, ethical restraint in utilizing natural resources, and the use of traditional methods that maintain ecological balance. Narratively, ecocentrism is also expressed through the motif of nature's retaliation, symbolizing the equal relationship between humans and the natural world.

Human relationships with rivers are portrayed not only through physical interactions but also through spiritual and mythological dimensions. Local myths about supernatural guardians and sacred fish function as cultural mechanisms that limit environmental exploitation. In addition, spiritual practices such as rituals and offerings reflect the belief that rivers possess sacred value, positioning nature not merely as a material resource but as a respected spiritual entity within the ecological and cultural worldview of society.

FURTHER STUDY

This research on literary ecocriticism in contemporary Indonesian short stories still has a number of limitations, particularly in its focus on river ecosystems and the dichotomous division of anthropocentric and ecocentric paradigms. Therefore, future researchers interested in deepening the study of literary ecology are recommended to expand the material objects of research beyond the short story genre by applying ecocritical studies to novels, poetry anthologies, stage plays, or children's literature, which can offer varying complexities in representing environmental issues.

Furthermore, future studies should explore other critical living landscapes in Indonesia, such as marine and coastal ecosystems, peatland deforestation, or even urban ecological problems like air pollution and spatial planning crises. To achieve a more interdisciplinary analysis, researchers can also employ advanced theoretical frameworks, such as Ecofeminism to examine the correlation between nature's exploitation and the marginalization of women, or Postcolonial Ecocriticism to dissect how the legacies of colonialism and global capitalism drive local ecological destruction.

Finally, conducting cross-generational comparative research, such as comparing New Order era literature with contemporary works, or cross-media studies that juxtapose literary texts with environmental documentaries or music can significantly enrich the academic literature on ecological awareness campaigns in Indonesia.

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