

Defining Nature: Exploring the Human vs. Nature Opposition

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Abstract

This paper explores the question of what is nature. What can we know about nature given that the concept has many definitions? This paper argues that language has skewed the way humans perceive the word nature to the point where we associate the material world around us with ourselves. That is, we define nature from within the limits of our anthropocentric biases. Postcolonial ecocriticism attempts to explore both the environment and the social issues arising from the legacy of the imperial era; but how do we explore the two, nature and society, in relation to one another when postcolonialism focuses on the past and nature appears to be timeless? Humans need to seek justice for nature. But often we pursue conservation and preservation of landscapes not because nature is suffering but because of our own idea of what nature should be. We assume that nature and humans interact with one another, and while humans do interact with nature, nature does not necessarily reciprocate human desires. Arguably, the reciprocal interactions of humans with nature are the result of misconceptions brought about by how we define nature. This paper focuses on Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) and explores the division between nature and humans and the tendency to impose our perception onto nature. *The Story of an African Farm* poses an interesting question: who owns the land on which the farm was built? And essentially, who owns the farm - Em or the aboriginal inhabitants of the land? This paper examines the role the natural environment plays in the text and how Schreiner asserts her own ideas of what nature should be.

Keywords: Olive Schreiner, *Story of an African Farm*, Nature, Imperialism, Waldo, Landscape



Fig. 1 Karoo National Park, South Africa. By Photograph by Mike Peel (www.mikepeel.net), CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=34106873>.

One way to explore the complicated relationship between human beings and the natural environment is through postcolonial ecocriticism – a field that combines environmental concerns such as conservation with postcolonial issues such as slavery and colonialism. In his article “Postcolonial Ecocriticism and Victorian Studies,” John Miller quotes Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, who assert that there can be “no social justice without environmental justice; and without social justice – for all ecological beings – no justice at all” (476). This statement suggests that issues of the environment (such as deforestation and animal depletion) arise from imperialism and are, therefore, connected directly to the colonial history of domination over nature. This paper explores the question of how we define nature and argues that language has skewed the way humans perceive the word “nature” to the point where we associate the material world around us with ourselves. Postcolonial ecocriticism posits that the social legacy of imperialism cannot be thought apart from environmental concerns. However, this position means postcolonialism ecocriticism must negotiate the highly fraught and ambiguous history of definitions contained within the concept of nature. However, any meaning we attribute to nature is limited by the partial knowledge

of language itself and therefore humans and nature will always remain separate entities. In *The Story of an African Farm*, Olive Schreiner attempts to situate nature as though it were an active participant in the happenings of the farm. But this is *anthropocentric* because our human perception of nature is informed by our limited human thoughts. Schreiner therefore imposes her own ideas of how nature should be, act, and respond as though nature were neutral. Schreiner shapes her fiction of nature much the way humans tend to shape landscape generally—by their own anthropocentric perception.

In *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams states that “nature is perhaps the most complex word in the language” (219). Language itself helps create the problem because it is the medium of interpretation and fosters how people perceive things. How does one begin to explore nature when we cannot completely define the concept? When we use the word “nature,” to what do we refer? To further complicate this discussion, as Rob Nixon notes, if postcolonialism looks expressly at the past (Miller 477), how do we begin to explore nature when social history and language are human abstractions? Nature itself is not bound to humans or our idea of history which makes it difficult to look at human history through an environmental point of view and vice versa. G.R. Collinwood explains that what we consider the history of nature is actually the history of humans (Johnson 38). This brings to mind the age old question: does the tree fall in the forest if you are not there to not hear or see it? The answer is yes, because the tree still falls even though no one is there to see it or record it happen. Defining nature also raises the question of who can speak for nature or if we can even speak for nature. The contact between nature and humans is complicated and problematic, as humans are fundamentally different from nature despite the confusion that language causes. To say humans are a part of nature disregards the way language works. Language skews the way people perceive the concept of nature (and, consequently, history). How do we explore the past in the way postcolonial ecocriticism would have us do when recorded history is a human concept, bound by language, unable to grasp the timelessness and inexpressibility of nature?

In order to examine how we can define nature in a postcolonial and ecological context, we must first explore the basic definitions of nature. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), the word nature has many meanings. Most definitions are used to describe a human trait, as in “[t]he inherent

dominating power or impulse in a person by which character or action is determined, directed, or controlled” (“nature”, n). Other definitions point to human nature, and the idea of innate character, disposition, or quality. The OED also defines nature as “[t]he phenomena of the physical world collectively; *esp.* plants, animals, and other features and products of the earth itself, as opposed to humans and human creations” (“nature”, n). These definitions are important to our reading of the idea of nature because they remove humans and human creation from the equation. The signifier (nature) in itself does not matter and neither does the object labelled as nature; however, it is of consequence that there is something to signify the material world and its separation from humans. Note how our current environmental use of the word nature describes the material world’s separation from humanity. In the *OED*, the word refers above all to human nature, overshadowing any other definition of nature. It is understandable that, with so many different meanings, humans seem to have developed an heightened perception of nature.

When William Cronon states that “[w]hat we mean when we use the word “nature” says as much about ourselves as about the things we label with the word” (cited in Miller 477), he mixes up the meanings of the word nature, and applies one definition of nature to the other. The same can be said for Jason Moore in his book, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, who asserts that there “is nature as us, as inside us, as around us” (3). The problem with Moore’s claim is that he relies on unexamined assumptions about the nature of language to define the relation of nature and society. Moore uses the definition of nature as it pertains to human impulse and character and blends the concept of human nature with nature as the material world around us. We often use the word nature for abstractions other than nature. For example, when we say “human nature,” or “natural biological functions,” we associate the word “nature” with human beings—which we are used to doing. When we use these terms, we locate ourselves in nature and this misconception is due to our language. Nature, the signifier, is used to point to multiple other signifiers and it is in this way that language skews our perception of what nature ought to be. We are used to linking nature with ourselves because we occasionally employ the same word to describe characteristics of ourselves. However, we also refer to nature as something physically aside from humans. We exist alongside nature but we are not a part of nature. Nature is in fact neutral in

any discussion, which is why the definition of nature as indifferent to humans is perhaps the most accurate of all.

To further this analysis of the human versus nature question, we examine *The Story of an African Farm*, where Olive Schreiner portrays nature as an active participant in the story even though nature is other than a character and exceeds the limits of language. Schreiner asserts her own biases and perceptions on nature, as humans tend to do. At the beginning of the novel, Schreiner imposes her own beliefs on nature when she names the “African moon” (47). She then goes on to say “all were touched by a weird and an almost oppressive beauty as they lay in the white light” (47). This is a very particular way of describing the effects of the moon on the people. When Schreiner refers to the moon as being African and having an oppressive effect on those that lay in its “white” light, the author is transferring her thoughts and motives onto nature. Designating the moon as African, the narrator is right to say it looks oppressed, as that was the state of most of Africa under European colonialism – and Schreiner had a front view seat of the operations of imperial power, being from what is now South Africa (Berkman). Nature does not function as a character or a place, however, because nature does not exist in the same way we do; nature has a history but it does not have the same history as humans. When the narrative of the text focuses on nature, we get an interesting comment: “‘We,’ said the stars, ‘have seen the earth when it was young. We have seen small things creep out upon its surface—small things that prayed and loved and cried very loudly, and then crept under it again. But we,’ said the stars ‘are as old as the Unknown.’” (Schreiner 123). Nature is timeless, while humans are not, and Schreiner suggests that the stars are aware of this discrepancy. While she demonstrates the complexity of nature in her text, we should be aware that this is still her construction of nature’s history (drawn from Victorian evolutionary and geological theory) and that we, as humans, can never see things from the perspective of nature, because we are outside nature in this sense.

Waldo also suffers from the problem of defining nature in *The Story of an African Farm*, as he tries to find meaning in nature, even going as far as to replace God with nature. As Williams notes in his entry on nature in his text, *Keywords*, this was but one possible interpretation of nature. Williams explains that “it was orthodox in medieval European belief to use both singular absolutes but to define God as primary and Nature as his minister or deputy. But there was a recurrent tendency to see Nature in another way, as an absolute monarch” (221). Nature

takes the place of God for Waldo and, by the end of the novel, seems to have dominion. As Waldo inches closer to death, nature embodies a divine as well as a motherly sense, when Schreiner writes that nature “shows herself to you. So near she draws you” (281). Nature takes the place of God for Waldo and “she” becomes what Waldo is focused on. Nature is active Waldo’s life, but Waldo’s perception of nature’s dynamic presence represents his and, to some extent, Schreiner’s wish to make sense of things. Nature does not feel anything--and keep in mind, our idea of feeling and emotions are also human concepts. If nature is a part of us, as Schreiner portrays it, then nature plays an active role. However, the role of nature (in this scene) is based on Waldo’s perception of his environment. It is also important to note that, like other depictions of nature in the novel, Waldo and Schreiner’s perception of nature is but one, partial perception; however, there must always be a wide range of individual perceptions because human perception is subjective, multiple, and often contradictory. As Rob Nixon notes, it is typical for environmental activists to perceive nature as pure, and this perception motivates advocacy for the preservation of natural environments (Miller 477). Again, this is a human perspective on nature, and therefore has nothing to do with the natural world as a whole.

If we accept the theory that nature is separate from humans, then who can speak for nature? In *The Story of an African Farm*, who owns the farmland? Arguably, nature is indifferent to land claims, whether those claims originate from the African peoples, the Boers, or Em. Raymond Williams notes the historical shift of the meaning of nature from an absolute monarch to a “constitutional monarch, with a new emphasis on natural laws” (221), but there is no such thing. Nature is indifferent to human beings, despite the fact that the word “indifferent” is socially constructed. There are no natural laws that decree the land on which the Boers now reside is not theirs--or that it is. With regard to land, there is no one possessor even if one claims private property rights. Nature belongs to no one--or to everyone--despite man’s many and often violent claims to possess specific pieces of land. Neither Em nor the local African inhabitants possess the land entirely--though both belong to it in different ways historically. Whatever abstraction or idea we impose on the land, it derives from history, culture, and society rather than nature. Postcolonial ecocriticism focuses on the theme of destruction and conservation of nature, while also trying to take account of the imperial legacy. History, however, is also a human concept. R.G. Collingwood argues for the

autonomy of history, and he observes that “all history is the history of thought” (Johnson 38). That is, even the idea of history is a concept made up by humans. Dipesh Chakrabarty expands on this idea:

Croce’s idealism... does not mean that rocks, for example, ‘don’t exist’ without human beings to think them. The rock does not exist simply because humans say it exists and the same goes for the rest of nature. Nature has its history whether we record it or not. Apart from human concern and language, they neither exist nor do not exist, since ‘exist’ is a human concept that has meaning only within a context of human concerns and purposes. (203)

Everything, including the perception of nature, is an abstraction created by humans themselves. Language is an abstraction informed by the meanings we have attached to a word and those meanings are never neutral.

Applying ecocriticism presents a problem for postcolonialism because nature is not directly involved in human issues, despite society’s unceasing exploitation of natural resources. Postcolonial ecocriticism faces potential complications because nature is a bystander in the issues explored by colonial literature, such as slavery and colonization. Does this mean the ideas of postcolonialism and the environment cannot work together? Not necessarily, as humans do live alongside nature; however, our interpretation of nature should take into account that nature and humans are not the same. Schreiner’s treatment of nature in her text can therefore be seen as an imposition of her own perception onto nature. The question of who owns the farm, given the idea of natural law, is important, and many agree that the natives of the land are the rightful owners. On the other hand, if we understand that nature has no real affiliation with humans or rational thought and plays no role in any decision, we might also argue that nobody owns the land. Our idea of nature is a human conception and has no direct relation to the material world around us. Our idea of nature results from our own abstractions and is an imposition on the environment of our perception of time, history and feelings.

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