

Nature and Memory in Tan Twan Eng's Novels: An Ecocultural Perspective

Liu Jia¹, Hamoud Yahya Ahmed Mohsen², Revathi A P Gopal¹, Ruzy Suliza Hashim³

¹ English Language and Literature Department, Faculty of Languages and Communication, Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia

² Department of English Language and Literature, AbdulHamid AbuSulayman Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia, Malaysia

³ School of Humanities and Fine Arts, University of Economics and Human Sciences, Warsaw, Poland

Correspondence: Hamoud Yahya Ahmed Mohsen, Department of English Language and Literature, AbdulHamid AbuSulayman Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia, Malaysia. E-mail: hamoud@ium.edu.my

Received: May 12, 2024

Accepted: July 8, 2024

Online Published: July 30, 2024

doi:10.5430/wjel.v14n6p380

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v14n6p380>

Abstract

Eco-culturalism, as a literary approach, is a growing field that examines the interconnectedness of culture and the environment. It underscores the symbiotic relationship between humans and the natural world, emphasizing the profound impact of ecological concerns on cultural practices, values, and narratives. This literary approach seeks to address critical environmental issues through storytelling, infusing literature with ecological awareness and promoting sustainable practices. Analyzing eco-culturalism in Tan Twan Eng's narrative, including *The Gift of Rain*, *The Garden of Evening Mists* and *The House of Doors*, this article offers profound insights into the dimensions through which eco-culturalism manifests in Tan's novels, illuminating the symbiotic relationship between culture, ecology and memory. Tan Twan Eng's novels are exquisite embroidery woven with intricate threads of culture, identity, and the natural world. From ecological values to ecological identity, and finally to ecological memories, these elements serve as both narrative tools and windows into the hearts and minds of his characters. Eco-culturalism is intricately woven into the narrative fabric, evolving across the three novels, further enriching Tan's narrative, and proving the power of literature in connecting culture and nature. The combination of eco-value and sustainable practice illustrates the deep connection between culture, ecology, memory, and human prosperity, allowing readers to more deeply appreciate Malaysian cultural diversity, especially the valuable exploration of identity, belonging and meaning in a nature-centered multicultural society.

Keywords: Eco-culturalism, Multiculturalism, Identity, Eco-Postcolonialism, Novels, Tan Twan Eng, Malaysia

1. Introduction

In the contemporary literary landscape, the intersection of ecology and culture has emerged as a significant thematic terrain, providing fertile ground for exploration and discourse. At the heart of this intersection lies the concept of eco-culturalism, which encapsulates the intricate relationship between humanity and the natural world, intertwined with cultural heritage and memory. Tan Twan Eng is a prominent Malaysian novelist, was born in 1972 in Penang and of the Straits Chinese descent. Growing up in a postcolonial society made his works with strong sense of history and multicultural features. As one of a new generation of Malaysian writers, Tan only wrote 3 novels in English till now from 2007 to 2023 and have been translated into more than 25 languages. *The Gift of Rain* (2007) brought him onto the international literary stage. *The Garden of Evening Mists* (2012) made him the first Malaysian writer to win the Man Asian Literary Prize. As the newly published novel, *The House of Doors* (2023) has its literary value and significance in the contemporary literature need to be further examined. Excellent narrative art and the profound excavation of Malaysian colonial history and multicultures made Tan the first Malaysian to be recognized by all three awards including The Man Booker Prize, Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction and the Man Asian Literary Prize. Tan Twan Eng's literary works have contributed greatly to the representation of Malaysian and Southeast Asian voices in the global literary sphere.

Tan's contributions in the Malaysian literary context highlight his significant role in shaping the eco-postcolonial culture and memories in Malaysian context. He navigates this terrain with profound insight and sensitivity in his literary works. Renowned for his evocative prose and intricate narratives, Tan weaves a vivid scenery of eco-cultural themes that resonate deeply with readers, inviting them to ponder the interconnectedness of nature, culture and memory. Tan's literary corpus serves as a testament to Malaysia's natural landscapes and cultural heritage. Against the backdrop of Malaysia's diverse ecosystems: from lush rainforests to pristine coastlines – Tan crafts narratives that delve into the intricate symbiosis between human existence and the natural world. His protagonists often find themselves immersed in landscapes that pulsate with life, where the rhythms of nature intersect with the echoes of history and tradition.

Tan's novels not only explore the complexities of cultural identity, shed light on the historical, social, and political realities of the Malaysian experience, but also incorporate postcolonial ecocritical perspectives and elements of cross-cultural fusion. Through his narratives, he offers a unique perspective that resonates with readers and contributes to the broader discourse on postcolonialism, identity,

and cross-cultural interactions. Tan's exploration of memory adds another layer of complexity to his eco-cultural narratives. Memory, both personal and collective, serves as a prism through which characters grapple with the legacies of the past and their implications for the present and future. Eng's novels are imbued with a sense of nostalgia for bygone eras, intertwining personal reminiscences with broader historical narratives. Through his meticulous attention to detail and lyrical prose, Eng transports readers across temporal and spatial boundaries, inviting them to traverse the green bridges that connect past, present, and future.

Three English novels *The Gift of The Rain*, *The Garden of Evening Mists* and *The House of doors*, stands as a poignant testament to the intricate relationship between culture, ecology, and the legacy of colonialism. Tan Twan Eng paints a vivid picture of Malaysian lush landscapes and intertwines them with the cultural diversity of its inhabitants, creating an elaborate painting where eco-culturalism serves as a foundation for the characters' lives and interactions. His narrative navigates the complexities of identity, love, betrayal, and survival, all while exploring the broader implications of colonialism and ecological consciousness. Through his novels, Tan constructs bridges that span the divide between the natural environment and human consciousness, linking the tangible landscapes of Malaysia with the intangible realms of memory, history, and culture. By analyzing *The Gift of The Rain*, *The Garden of Evening Mists* and *The House of doors* through an eco-cultural lens, this article seeks to understand the complex interrelations between culture and nature in contemporary fiction and encapsulates the essence of Tan's eco-cultural exploration. This introduction sets the stage for an in-depth analysis of Eng's eco-cultural themes, elucidating the ways in which his narratives serve as conduits for exploring ecological consciousness, cultural identity, and the enduring resonance of memory. The subsequent sections will engage with specific aspects of the narrative to unravel the eco-cultural complexities woven by Tan Twan Eng in his literary creations.

2. Literature Review

Literary studies in our age exist in a state of constant flux. Ecocriticism has stepped from periphery to the center and leaped a hot study in western literary criticism. Ecocriticism has developed into a stage to "reconsider, rediscover, reissue "the traditional texts about nature (Buell, 2001). Nowadays the environmental problems of technocratic-industrial societies are beginning to be seen as manifestations of what some individuals are calling "the continuing environmental crisis" (Devall and Sessions ix). Ecology has been one response to the continuing crisis and it has realized a transition from shallow ecology to deep ecology to reawaken our understanding of Earth wisdom more than just to reform. Arne Naessl says that "what we need today is a tremendous expansion of ecological thinking" (Session, 2018), and we need especially to cultivate a deep ecological consciousness. Huntington, an American political scientist, once said in the preface to the Chinese version of his book "the Clash of Civilizations and the Reconstruction of World Order "that arousing people's attention to the danger of the clash of civilizations will help promote the dialogue of civilizations in the whole world. (Huggan, 2018)"

Ecocriticism and eco-culturalism are closely related fields within the broader realm of environmental humanities. Eco-culturalism encompasses a broader scope that extends beyond ecocritical analysis. It emphasizes the intersection of ecology and culture, investigating how cultural values, beliefs, and practices shape human-nature relationships and environmental stewardship (Curran, 2015). Eco-culturalism considers not only ecological perspective but also various forms of cultural expression, such as art, folklore, religion, and indigenous knowledge systems.

Eco-culturalism is a system of values that embodies the spiritual force of harmonious coexistence between human society and the natural world. It crystallizes and perpetuates humanity's finest achievements in understanding and transforming nature through cultural forms, constituting a synthesis of human thought, comprehension, and practical experience. The anthropocentric worldview has led to environmental degradation, depletion of natural resources, and frequent ecological disasters, severely hindering the continued development of human society. Consequently, humanity has begun to reevaluate the relationship between humans and nature, integrating the intrinsic values of human existence with those of nature, thus forming the fundamental values of ecological culture. Eco-culturalism challenge anthropocentric perspectives that prioritize human interests over the well-being of the natural world. They advocate for a shift towards more ecologically sustainable and harmonious relationships between humans and nature, promoting respect for biodiversity, ecosystems, and the intrinsic value of the non-human world.

Eco-culturalism has deep concern for environmental themes in literature, employing interdisciplinary approaches to critically analyze human-nature relationships and advocate for environmental stewardship and sustainability (Celik,2019). Frameworks in eco-culturalism prioritize the analysis of environmental themes, such as human impacts on nature, ecological consciousness, environmental degradation, and the significance of place and landscape in literature. They explore how these themes are represented, negotiated, and interpreted in literary texts, reflecting broader cultural attitudes towards the environment. It examines how cultural narratives, myths, symbols, and representations shape perceptions of nature and influence environmental attitudes and behaviors. They analyze how literature reflects and reinforces cultural norms, values, and ideologies related to the environment, as well as how it can challenge and subvert dominant narratives to envision alternative ecological futures.

Scholars like Goh (2018) have scrutinized narrative style in Tan's novels from various perspectives, and the element of reincarnation. However, Goh's exploration doesn't delve into the intersection among religion, history and even to identity and culture. Holden (2018) highlights the ambiguity of characters' cultures and identities in Tan Twan Eng's novels. In Rigby, K. (2016)'s article "Ecocritical Explorations in Literary and Cultural Studies," he sheds light on the complexities of the narrative and conducts a meticulous analysis of

characters' traumatic condition, focusing on elements such as memories, narrative style, and the theme of reincarnation in Tan's novels. However, Holden's exploration is notably confined to the examination of the psychological impact, leaving unexplored the intricate interplay between traumatic memories, cultures, and identities. In a parallel vein, Tan C. S.'s examination of cultural identities in Tan's novels primarily revolves around the defensive strategies employed by the protagonists to safeguard their own identities under Japanese hegemony. Despite this insightful exploration, Tan C. S. tends to perceive these actions as defensive mechanisms rather than avenues through which reconstructing one's cultural and identity landscapes (Tan,2021).

Tan Twan Eng has been interviewed by the BBC several times. One of the most notable interviews took place in 2013 when his novel *The Garden of Evening Mists* was nominated for the Booker Prize. During this interview, Tan discussed his creative inspirations, the historical and cultural contexts behind his novels, as well as his views on eco-culturalism. He emphasized the importance of preserving natural landscapes and ecosystems while also exploring the cultural significance of these environments. He highlighted how eco-culturalism involves a deep appreciation for the interconnectedness between nature and culture, advocating for sustainable practices that respect both ecological diversity and cultural heritage. Tan Twan Eng's insights shed light on the delicate balance between environmental conservation and cultural preservation in his novels, demonstrating his commitment to promoting eco-awareness through literature (Tan,2019). In essence, Tan Twan Eng's novels serve as green bridges that span the chasm between humanity and the natural world, memory and oblivion. Through representations of Malaysian nature and profound insights, Tan invites readers to embark on a journey of discovery, where the verdant landscapes of Malaysia become portals to deeper ecological awareness and cultural understanding. As we delve into the pages of Eng's novels, we are reminded of the interconnectedness of all life forms and the enduring power of memory to transcend time and space.

3. Eco-Culturalism as a Lens

The eco-culture, originating from the era of human totems, has evolved into modern ecological civilization through the passage of time. Totemism represents one of the earliest cultural phenomena of humanity, grounded in the primitive state of societal productivity and the inherent ignorance of primitive societies towards nature. Totems were utilized to interpret myths, classical records, and folk customs (Heise,2016). In primordial societies, tribes or communities maintained close relationships with the flora and fauna of nature during the gathering of life necessities, comprehending and addressing relevant issues through primitive cognition. They believed that certain plants, animals, or even mythical creatures shared a kinship with themselves, thus deserving reverence. The totems revered by different ethnic groups are diverse, encompassing plants, animals, and various combinations thereof. For instance, the Chinese totem predominantly features the dragon, while in Russia, reverence is directed towards the bear. Indians venerate the elephant, Japanese totems include the chrysanthemum and cherry blossom, and Koreans and North Koreans revere the hibiscus, among others.

The ecological culture of Malaysia constitutes a vibrant amalgamation, encompassing elements from various ethnicities and cultures, primarily manifested in the reverence and conservation of nature, stemming from its diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. Within Malaysia's ecological culture, there may exist reverence for various natural totems, contingent upon the traditions of different ethnic groups and regions. Trees hold significant prominence in many Malay cultures, being perceived as the fount of life and the link between humanity and nature. Certain trees may be regarded as sacred entities, revered and protected (Glotfelty&Fromm, 2014). For instance, the colossal banyan trees within vast tropical rainforests might be deemed abodes of souls, around which altars are erected or ceremonial activities are conducted. Water sources also hold pivotal positions within Malaysia's ecological culture. Rivers, lakes, waterfalls, and other bodies of water may be revered as sacred entities, worshipped as sources of life and abodes of spirits. Ceremonies and rituals may be held near water sources to show respect and gratitude. Certain animals are considered totems within Malaysia's ecological culture. For instance, the Malayan tiger, the national animal of Malaysia, serves as a significant totem, symbolizing courage and strength. Other animals such as elephants, monkeys, snakes, among others, may also hold special status within local cultures, being worshipped and respected. Totems are products of human-nature relationships, reflecting early environmental perceptions in human subjective consciousness. Malaysia's ecological culture embodies respect for nature and the idea of harmonious coexistence with nature, with totem worship being one of its integral components.

As the population gradually increases and human understanding and capacity to transform nature strengthen, the original hunting-gathering culture can no longer meet the needs of human survival, thus ushering in the agricultural era. During this transition, human society evolves from tribes to nations, giving rise to a diverse array of ethnic cultures (Glotfelty,1996). However, ecological culture remains in a narrow sense. It is when ecological culture transitions from a narrow to a broad sense that the stage is set for the transformation of ethnic culture into scientific culture. Upon entering the industrial society, driven by relentless pursuit of material comforts, the world finds itself deeply entrenched in the torrents of resource and environmental crises. Humanity, after indulging in the sweetness of social progress, is confronted with the bitter fruits of its actions: exacerbated greenhouse effect, ozone layer depletion, acid rain, extensive destruction of forest resources, soil erosion, desertification, water crises, environmental pollution, and frequent natural disasters (Bate, 2000). These increasingly severe problems facing contemporary humanity awaken the green consciousness inherited from our ancestors. Humanity is compelled to create a new civilization to salvage its continued existence and development. This new civilization is ecological civilization, also known as green civilization, supported by the cultural theory termed ecological culturalism (Garrard, 2012).

Eco-culturalism in literature is a burgeoning field that examines the interconnectedness of culture and the environment. It underscores the symbiotic relationship between humans and the natural world, emphasizing the profound impact of ecological concerns on cultural

practices, values, and narratives (Boyd,2019). This literary approach seeks to address critical environmental issues through storytelling, infusing literature with ecological awareness and promoting sustainable practices. Eco-culturalism in literature is underscored by its ability to transcend the boundaries of traditional literary analysis. It prompts readers and scholars to explore the intersections of culture, ecology, and identity, fostering a deeper understanding of the environmental challenges faced by societies across the globe (Bell, 2019). Within this context, Tan's English novels offers a compelling narrative canvas upon which the intricate dance between culture and nature can be vividly portrayed and critically examined.

One of the primary strengths of applying eco-culturalism to Tan's works lies in its holistic perspective. It offers a potent framework for analyzing Amy Tan's novels, providing insights into the intricate interplay between human cultures and their ecological environments. This approach underscores the interconnectedness of cultural identities, social dynamics, and environmental contexts within Tan's narratives. By considering both cultural and ecological dimensions, this framework enables a nuanced understanding of characters' experiences and motivations. Tan's portrayal of immigrant communities grappling with cultural assimilation, generational conflicts, and the loss of ancestral connections resonates deeply within eco-cultural discourse. Her narratives highlight the ways in which environmental landscapes shape cultural identities and vice versa, illustrating the complex web of relationships between humans and their surroundings.

Most importantly, Tan's evocative descriptions of landscapes and ecosystems serve as focal points for eco-cultural analysis, offering vivid portrayals of the connections between culture and environment. Whether depicting the lush rice paddies of Malaysia or the bustling streets of Penang, Tan's settings serve as symbolic microcosms of broader ecological themes (Zainal, 2020). By immersing readers in these richly textured environments, Tan fosters a deeper reflection for the complex relationships between culture, ecology, and identity. Eco-culturalism also provides a lens through which to examine the socio-political implications of environmental degradation and resource exploitation depicted in Tan's novels. Issues such as pollution, deforestation, and urbanization intersect with questions of power, privilege, and marginalization, reflecting broader ecological injustices within society. Through her narratives, Tan invites readers to contemplate the ethical dimensions of human interactions with the natural world and the implications for future generations.

4. Analysis and Discussion

THE ECO-CULTURAL ASPECTS IN TAN TWAN ENG'S NOVELS

Tan Twan Eng's novels are exquisite embroidery woven with intricate threads of culture, identity, and the natural world. Through the lens of eco-culturalism, her works offer profound insights into the intricate interplay between human societies and their environments. Here, I delve into the dimensions through which eco-culturalism manifests in Tan's novels, illuminating the symbiotic relationship between culture, ecology and memory.

ECOLOGICAL VALUES

In Writing "Across Cultures: Narrative Transculturation in Latin America", Rama points out that a country's traditional culture is not passive or destined for great losses and inferior to the foreign culture that comes in (Rama, 2012). On the contrary, If the community is alive, it will select elements from both foreign and traditional cultures, including traditional cultures that are destroyed or lost (Rama, 2012). Thus, the community's primitive values that have almost been forgotten could be rediscovered. Moreover, Holden further claims that the rediscovery of primitive values can strengthen its defence against the foreign culture. Hence, the damaging impact of transculturation could be resisted and the community could go through a combinatory system, where new things are invented to suit the cultural system's own autonomy. In short, Rama believes that transculturation involves losses, selections, rediscoveries, and incorporations (Holden, 2020).

The natural landscapes depicted by Tan Twan Eng serve as a canvas where cultural elements are inscribed. The flora, fauna, and geographical features become symbolic representations of the cultural ecology specific to the Malaysian context. Nature, in this context, is not just a backdrop but an active participant in shaping cultural identity. The lush rainforests, serene gardens, and distinctive geographical features reflect the diversity of Malaysian cultural identities. Cultural elements are intricately woven into the natural settings, reflecting the symbiotic relationship between cultural identity and the environment. Traditional practices, rituals, and beliefs become integral components of the natural world. In the novel *The Gift of Rain*, Tan vividly depicts a mysterious and magical temple called The Temple of Azure Cloud. This is how it is described:

"Endo-san was fascinated by the Temple of Azure Cloud, where hundreds of pit vipers took up residence, coiled around incense holders and the eaves and crossbeams of the roof, inhaling the smoke of incense lit by worshippers. A bell tolled, and through the smoke I heard the chanting of monks. A cobra uncurled itself from a pillar and slithered across the uneven tiles, swaying to the drone. Its tongue stabbed out to taste the air, its scales shining like a thousand trapped souls (Tan,2007: 62)."

The Temple of Azure Cloud, mentioned in the passage, is depicted as a sanctuary where the natural and the spiritual worlds intertwine, embodying the essence of Eco-culture within the cultural landscape of Malaysia. This temple, with its resident pit vipers coiling around incense holders and architectural elements, serves as a profound symbol of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, a key aspect of ecological consciousness. The cultural landscape of the Temple of Azure Cloud reflects a unique eco-cultural synthesis where religious practices are integrated with reverence for the natural world. The practice of offering eggs to snakes and the peaceful cohabitation with these potentially dangerous creatures highlight a cultural landscape where respect for all life forms is paramount. This setting illustrates how cultural traditions can foster a deep connection with the environment, promoting a sense of stewardship and

ecological balance. The various gods and goddesses housed in the temple, observed by the protagonist with a sense of unfamiliarity, signify the rich tapestry of spiritual beliefs that guide human interactions with the environment. The presence of cobras, revered and integrated into the worship practices, symbolizes the acceptance and respect for nature's potency and mystery. This interaction between the sacred and the serpentine offers a vivid example of how eco-culture encapsulates a holistic understanding of life, where even the most feared aspects of nature are embraced with reverence.

The natural landscape is a vital component that reflects and shapes the cultural landscape and histories of the characters. Tan's second novel, *The Garden of Evening Mists* uses the natural landscape to explore the intersections of eco-culture, showing how nature can embody and express cultural values and memories.

"That night he sets down on paper the principles and beliefs that had guided him all his life, the *Tao the Ching*." Aritomo paused for a second. "Heaven's way is like the pulling of a bow, bringing down the high and raising up the low. It takes from what is excessive, and gives to what is lacking. The way of Man is the opposite."

"After he had finished writing it", I said, "Did he turn around and head back home?"

"At daybreak, the old sage gave everything he had written to the young man. Pulling his buffalo by its rope, he went through the gate and out into the wilderness. No one ever saw him again." He stopped. "Some people think he never existed, that he was just a myth." "But here he is, fixed in water and paper for eternity. The palest ink will endure beyond the memories of men, my father once said to me (Tan, 2012:154)."

The narrative of Laozi departing into the wilderness after imparting his wisdom encapsulates the Taoist ethos of living in harmony with nature. It highlights the lasting impact of cultural teachings on human relationships with the natural environment. The remark that "the palest ink will endure beyond the memories of men" highlights the enduring power of wisdom to influence future generations. Through the dialogue, Tan Twan Eng suggests that ancient philosophies like Taoism offer valuable insights into how individuals and societies might navigate the challenges of the modern world, including environmental degradation and loss of cultural identity. The principles of the Tao, with their emphasis on harmony, balance, and respect for the natural world, can inspire a cultural landscape, which advocate for living in harmony with nature, not only enrich the novel's thematic depth but also offer readers a model for engaging with the world in a more balanced and sustainable way, underlining the potential for ancient wisdom to inform contemporary ecological thought and practice.

Tan meticulously crafts a space in *The House of Doors* that is emblematic of an interwoven cultural and ecological identity—this is the essence of Eco-culture. The library serves as a microcosm of colonial Malaysia, illustrating the blending of Western and Eastern elements, which is a distinctive feature of the region's hybrid culture.

"The room, located on the eastern side of the house, was spacious and bright. The oil landscapes and the photographs, the floor-to-ceiling teak wood bookshelves and the pair of studded leather wingback chairs made him think that he was back in the Athenaeum's reading room. The illusion was marred only by the Straits Chinese porcelain displayed in corners and niches around the room: lidded pots and plates and vases in gaudy pinks and greens and yellows, decorated with dragons and phoenixes and peonies." (Tan, 2023:41)

In this passage from *The House of Doors*, we witness a space that is a confluence of Eastern and Western aesthetics, reflecting the cultural and ecological consciousness present in the unique hybrid culture of the Straits Chinese community. This blending of styles and motifs exemplifies the concept of eco-culture within the novel, suggesting a deep-seated integration of environmental elements into everyday life, traditions, and customs. The oil landscapes and photographs evoke the Western tradition of art and suggests an environment that is steeped in the literary and cultural traditions of the West. The teak wood bookshelves and leather chairs indicates colonial aesthetic that is often associated with power, prestige, and a bygone era of British colonialism. However, the Straits Chinese porcelain disrupts this Western tableau with its vivid presence. The colours—gaudy pinks, greens, and yellows—and motifs of dragons, phoenixes, and peonies are profoundly emblematic of Chinese culture and art. These objects serve as a cultural counterpoint to the Western furnishings, highlighting a fusion of identities and traditions that is typical of the Straits Chinese or Peranakan culture—a culture that emerged from the intermarriage between local Malays and Chinese immigrants.

The passage portrays an eco-cultural dialogue between different traditions and ways of engaging with the world, showing how culture is not only defined by human history but also by how cultures relate to and represent the natural environment. This attentiveness to eco-cultural elements within one's living environment serves to reinforce an individual's connection to their cultural heritage and natural surroundings. Such integration become part of the narrative that people use to define their relationship with the world, carrying an inherent ecological wisdom about coexistence and sustainability. By adopting these elements, the characters and by extension the readers are reminded of the importance of harmonious living with nature, the cyclicity of life, and the enduring value of embedding ecological consciousness into daily existence. Tan's depiction not only provides a window into the Straits Chinese eco-culture but also serves as a metaphorical reminder of the interconnectedness of life, culture, and the environment, shaping an ecological culture that respects and perpetuates the principles of natural harmony and ecological balance.

ECOLOGICAL IDENTITY

Ecological identity refers to the way individuals and communities define themselves in relation to the natural world. It encompasses the values, beliefs, and behaviors that align with ecological principles and the sense of belonging to a particular landscape or ecosystem (Iovino,2016). In his three English novels, Tan could cultivate eco-identity through different narrative strategies. Tan's characters navigate

complex landscapes of identity, where ecological surroundings play a pivotal role. Through the characters' interactions with landscapes, flora, and fauna, Tan highlights how ecological settings shape individual and collective identities. Characters are deeply intertwined with their ecological surroundings. These cultural ecologies reflect not only a reverence for nature but also the ways in which cultural identities are shaped by and shape their environments. The complexity of human-environment interactions in Tan's narratives may resist easy categorization within traditional eco-cultural frameworks, necessitating a nuanced approach that acknowledges the fluidity of cultural identities and environmental dynamics (Wong,2017).

The following passage from Tan's *The Gift of Rain* encapsulates the intricate journey of self-discovery and identity formation experienced by Philip, the protagonist, who is torn between his British and Chinese heritages. Born into a world where he belongs to neither fully, Philip's existential struggle is further complicated by the historical context of the Japanese occupation of Malaya.

"With China, or with England. I was a child born between two worlds, belonging to neither. From the very beginning I treated Endo-san not as a Japanese, not as a member of a hated race, but as a common man, and that was why we forged an instant bond. I would row across to the island while it was still dark and traces of stars could still be seen hiding behind the veil of the sky. Inevitably Endo-san would be already waiting for me" (Tan,2007: 40)."

The phrase "a child born between two worlds, belonging to neither" vividly illustrates Philip's initial state of cultural and personal dislocation. Yet, it is precisely this liminality that allows him to approach a Japanese, Endo-san, not as a representative of "a hated race" but as an individual. This perception shift marks the beginning of Philip's transcultural experience, where learning aikijutsu under Endo-san's tutelage becomes more than the acquisition of martial skills; it is a transformative process of self-discovery and identity formation. The natural setting of their meetings—on an island, under the cover of pre-dawn darkness, with the last stars of night—serves as a metaphor for Philip's internal journey from darkness (ignorance, confusion) to light (knowledge, self-awareness). Philip embarks on a journey of eco-identity formation that is deeply entwined with the natural world.

An excerpt in *The Garden of Evening Mists* brings to light the role of language and colonial education in shaping eco-identity. The protagonist's family's preference for English over Mandarin and the disdain from both the non-English speaking Chinese and the Straits Chinese highlight the colonial impact on personal and communal identities. This linguistic divide demonstrates the adaptability and hybridity inherent in eco-identity, suggesting that identities are not static but evolve in response to changing environments and social dynamics.

"We spoke English at home, garnished with Hokkien, the dialect of the Chinese in Penang. My father had studied in an English missionary school when he was a boy and had not been taught to speak or read Mandarin, deficiencies he would pass on to his children: my brother went to St. Xavier's, while Yun Hong and I studied at the Convent Girls 'School. The Chinese in Malaya who could not speak English looked down on us for not knowing our own ancestral tongue. In turn we Straits Chinese laughed at them for their uncouth ways and pitied them their inability to get good jobs in the civil service or to rise in our colonial society. There was no need for us to know any language other than English, my father had often told us when we were growing up, because the British would rule Malaya forever (Tan, 2012:258)."

The mutual disdain between the English-speaking Straits Chinese and the Mandarin-speaking Chinese in Malaya illustrates the social stratification fostered by colonialism. This division is not just linguistic but also socio-economic, with language skills directly affecting one's position within the colonial society. Such stratification reflects how colonial legacies can fragment communities, creating artificial divides that impact social cohesion and identity (Huggan,2018). The characters embody hybrid identities, shaped by both their colonial education and their Chinese heritage. This hybridity reflects the complex eco-identity of individuals in post-colonial societies, where the "ecosystem" includes not only the natural environment but also the cultural, linguistic, and historical landscapes (Neill, 2019). Tan illustrates how eco-identity in a post-colonial context is not merely about one's connection to the natural environment but also involves the intricate web of language, culture, history, and social structures. Through the lens of eco-identity, we see how individuals and communities strive to find a sense of belonging and coherence in a world shaped by the forces of colonialism, globalization, and cultural exchange, seeking a balance that honors both their heritage and their present circumstances.

Furthermore, Tan explores the essence of eco-identity in *The House of Doors* through the intertwining of language, architecture, and food within the context of Penang, Malaysia. This blending of diverse cultural elements into a unique local identity underscores the broader principles of ecological postcolonialism, emphasizing the importance of cultural diversity, ecological sustainability, and the interdependence between human societies and the natural world.

"This was the best meal I've ever eaten in the East. This evening, I tasted flavours I had never...known existed. 'You won't find anything like it anywhere in the world 'I said. 'Over the centuries Penang has absorbed elements from the Malays and the Indians, the Chinese and the Siamese, the Europeans, and produced something that's uniquely its own. You'll find it in the language, the architecture, the food. 'I cast a cool eye towards Robert (Tan, 2023:113)."

Language is a powerful medium through which cultural values, traditions, and ecological knowledge are transmitted across generations (Rigby, 2016). In Penang, the melding of various languages reflects the region's rich multicultures. This linguistic diversity is not just a matter of communication but also an embodiment of eco-consciousness, as it carries the wisdom and practices related to the local environment, agriculture, and natural resource management. The amalgamation of different languages in Penang signifies a living eco-identity that celebrates cultural and ecological diversity.

The architecture in Penang is a testament to its multi-layered history, showcasing influences from Malay, Indian, Chinese, Siamese, and European styles. This architectural diversity is a physical manifestation of Penang's eco-identity, illustrating how different cultural perspectives can coexist and enhance the relationship between humans and their environment. Traditional architectural elements, such as the bat-shaped air vents mentioned earlier, not only serve practical purposes like ventilation but also embody cultural respect for nature and biodiversity. Through its architecture, Penang presents a model of sustainable living that integrates ecological principles with cultural heritage.

Penang's cuisine is a vibrant expression of its eco-identity, combining flavors and ingredients from Malay, Indian, Chinese, Siamese, and European culinary traditions to create a unique gastronomic experience. This culinary diversity reflects the island's ecological richness and the sustainable use of local resources. Food in Penang is more than sustenance; it's a celebration of the island's ecological and cultural abundance, promoting an awareness of the origins of ingredients and the importance of preserving local ecosystems for future generations.

The synthesis of language, architecture, and food in Penang, as described in *The House of Doors*, provides a compelling narrative of eco-identity. This narrative highlights the importance of cultural and ecological diversity in fostering a sustainable and harmonious relationship between humans and the natural world. Through its rich tapestry of cultural influences, Penang embodies a living example of eco-identity, where ecological awareness and cultural heritage converge to create a unique and sustainable way of life. This approach to eco-identity offers valuable insights into how communities can embrace ecological postcolonial principles to create resilient, diverse, and sustainable cultures.

ECOLOGICAL MEMORY

Ecological memory refers to the collective knowledge, experiences, and practices embedded within ecosystems and landscapes over time (Westling, 2021). It encompasses the accumulated wisdom of how ecosystems function, the relationships between species, and the historical interactions between human communities and their environments. In the context of eco-culturalism, ecological memory plays a crucial role in shaping cultural identities and practices. Human societies draw upon ecological memory to inform their cultural traditions, rituals, and ways of life (Rumens, 2019). For example, indigenous communities often possess intricate knowledge of local ecosystems, which influences their hunting, gathering, and agricultural practices. This knowledge is passed down through generations, becoming integral to cultural identities and resilience.

The ecological world in Tan's narratives reflects the broader themes of postcolonialism, including the disruption of traditional ways of living, the imposition of foreign landscapes, and the struggle for ecological and cultural survival. The natural and ecological settings within the novels often bear the scars of colonial exploitation, serving as sites of memory that contain both the beauty of the natural landscape and the violence of its alteration. This duality points to the ecological world's function as a narrative space where the histories of colonization can be explored and contested, and where the characters seek to forge a new relationship with the land that acknowledges its past and imagines a sustainable future (Hamoud, 2023). Memory, both individual and collective, is deeply rooted in ecological landscapes in Tan's novels. The ancestral lands serve as repositories of cultural memory, where the past intertwines with the present. Tan masterfully weaves ecological elements into her narratives, illustrating how the land itself holds memories, stories, and legacies passed down through generations.

In this poignant scene from *The Gift of Rain*, Michiko reflects on the devastating ecological impact of the atomic bombings through the disappearance of fireflies (botaru) from her hometown. The absence of these creatures, once a symbol of the natural beauty and ecological health of the region, serves as a stark indicator of the environmental destruction wrought by the bombings.

"She blew gently onto her palm, drying the firefly. It flew off into the flurry of blinking lights that swirled around us. "I have not seen such a large number of botanias for a long time", she said. "I returned to the river near my home a few years after the war, but the fireflies had all disappeared, as though blown away by a terrible storm (Tan, 2007: 89)."

The phrase "as though blown away by a terrible storm" is a powerful metaphor that captures the overwhelming force and destructive power of the atomic bombings. This "storm" alludes to both the physical explosion and the subsequent fallout, which together decimated the natural environment. It highlights the catastrophic impact of nuclear weapons, extending beyond the immediate human toll to encompass the long-term traumatic memories and ecological consequences. By eco-memory focusing on the disappearance of fireflies, the author implicitly condemns the indiscriminate destruction of war and the use of nuclear weapons. The lament for the lost fireflies serves as an advocacy for peace and environmental stewardship, calling attention to the need for harmony between humans and nature. It reflects a broader eco-cultural value that advocates the preservation of natural habitats and biodiversity as essential components of a healthy planet.

In *The Garden of Evening Mists* by Tan Twan Eng, nature holds within it the complex layers of trauma and memory that span historical, personal, and environmental dimensions. The use of natural motifs extends beyond the garden to the broader landscape of Malaya, which as a silent witness, despite the scars of colonial exploitation and wartime atrocities, continues to thrive and regenerate. The natural world can evoke strong emotional responses, becomes a living memory cape.

"I went to the window and opened the shutters. Cold, moist air hit my face. The storm had weakened for the moment; the clouds over the mountains were swirls of silver and grey. I felt like a pearl diver on the ocean floor, looking at the soundless waves pounding the rocky

shoreline far above me (Tan, 2012:288).”

The passage describing the cold, moist air hitting the face of the protagonist as they open the window post-storm, with clouds over the mountains depicted as swirls of silver and grey, serves multiple symbolic functions. First, the storm’s aftermath can represent the turbulent historical and political climate of Malaya during and after Japanese occupation, mirroring the protagonist’s personal turmoil and the collective trauma of the land and its people. The imagery of swirling clouds-silver and grey-conveys a sense of dynamic change, suggesting the fluidity and uncertainty of both personal and national identity in the face of historical forces.

The comparison of the protagonist to a pearl diver on the ocean floor, observing soundless waves far above, evokes a sense of isolation and depth. This metaphor could be interpreted as the deep dive into the self that is required for healing and understanding one’s past traumas. The ocean’s depth and the silence under the waves signify the subconscious, where memories and emotions are buried. The pearl diver’s act of searching the ocean floor parallels the protagonist’s journey through personal and collective memories, seeking pearls of wisdom and moments of clarity amidst the murky waters of the past.

The following passage from *The House of Doors* presents a layered and evocative image of eco-memory, interweaving historical, cultural, and natural elements through the depiction of a wooden panel with a painted hawk and a quatrain of Chinese calligraphy. Analyzed from an ecological postcolonial perspective, this scene encapsulates themes of loss, memory, and the enduring power of nature amidst human actions.

“As we left the dining Romilly’s attention fell upon a wooden panel hanging in the passage. The panel measured one and a half feet wide by six feet long. Painted upon it was a hawk drifting over a misty gorge, the bird no larger than a child’s palm.

“It’s the left leaf of a pair of doors,” I said. The paintwork was faded, leaving blank patches in the mists. Emptiness swirling within emptiness.” Taken from a clan house in Penang. Late eighteenth century. “Lesley picked it up in an Armenian Jew’s shop in town.” Robert flicked a questioning glance at me. ‘Got it for a song too, didn’t you, darling?’

Willie pointed to the quatrain of Chinese calligraphy above the hawk, its brushstrokes as delicate as new bamboo shoots. “What do they say, do you know?”

“Evanescent path of dreams/
in the summer night/
O Bird of the mountain/
carry my name beyond the clouds”

“Brushing my palm lightly over the panel, I recalled the other morning when I had done the same on the doors of another house.”

“A Japanese warrior composed it, just before he killed himself (Tan, 2023:60-61).”

The hawk drifting over a misty gorge, painted on the wooden panel, serves as a potent symbol of eco-resistance. Hawks, as predators, are often seen as symbols of freedom and resilience in nature, embodying the untamed aspects of the natural world that persist despite human encroachment. The misty gorge adds a layer of mystery and suggests the ineffable depth of nature’s resilience. The panel, originating from a late eighteenth-century clan house in Penang and acquired from an Armenian Jew’s shop, encapsulates a narrative of cultural exchange, colonial histories, and the commodification of cultural artifacts. Its journey from a clan-house to a personal collection symbolizes the intersection of history, colonialism, and the preservation (or loss) of cultural identity.

The Chinese calligraphy, translating to a poignant reflection on the ephemeral nature of dreams and a yearning for transcendence through the bird’s flight, introduces a theme of resistance against the finality of death and the limitations of human existence. A Japanese warrior composing the quatrain before his death suggests that even in the face of destruction, there can be moments of beauty, remembrance, and a reach for something beyond the immediate.

The wooden panel scene from *The House of Doors* embodies eco-resistance through its depiction of natural resilience, the complexities of historical and cultural exchanges, and the human quest for meaning amidst transience. It suggests that eco-culturalism can be found in the preservation of cultural memories, the acknowledgment of nature’s enduring power, and the recognition of our intertwined destinies with the natural world. This layered narrative prompts a deeper reflection on how we understand, value, and engage with the natural environment and our cultural heritages within the context of ecological postcolonialism.

5. Conclusion

Beyond being narrative devices, Tan Twan Eng’s incorporation of eco-cultural influences serves as a means of conveying profound and complex ecological thoughts. His adept incorporation of eco-cultural influences in his novels transcends mere cultural representation. From ecological values to ecological identity, and finally to ecological memories, these elements serve as both narrative tools and windows into the hearts and minds of his characters. Eco-culturalism is intricately woven into the narrative fabric, evolving across the three novels. *The Gift of Rain* initiates the exploration of eco-reconciliation, as characters begin to appreciate the natural world and strive to repair their damaged relationship with it. This process involves confronting past environmental harms and integrating traditional ecological knowledge into their lives, reflecting a fusion of cultural heritage with environmental stewardship. *The Garden of Evening Mists* advances this theme, portraying characters actively engaged in practices that restore and uphold ecological balance. Through

storylines centered on landscape restoration, sustainable agriculture, and biodiversity protection, Tan emphasizes the interconnectedness of all life and the necessity for a harmonious human-nature relationship rooted in cultural wisdom. Finally, in *The House of Doors*, Tan presents a culmination of eco-culturalism, depicting a state of mature eco-harmony where the equilibrium between human activity and the natural environment is not only attained but perpetuated. Here, the integration of cultural values with sustainable practices sustains this harmonious coexistence, illustrating the profound connection between culture, ecology, and human flourishing. Eco-culturalism enriches his storytelling, offering readers a deeper appreciation of Malaysia's cultural diversity. Through the lens of eco-culturalism, Tan Twan Eng's novels stand as a testament to the power of literature in bridging culture and nature, and specially makes valuable explorations of identity, belonging, and the search for meaning in a nature-centered multicultural society.

Acknowledgments

We greatly appreciate the valuable contributions of our community advisory committee members. We would also like to thank the Head Department of English Language and Literature and colleagues for their invaluable critical insights that help us complete this manuscript successfully.

Authors' contributions

Liu Jia was responsible for data collection and data analysis as well as drafting the the whole manuscript and Hamoud Mohsen and Revathi Gopal were responsible for study design and revising. Professor Ruzy Hashim was responsible for editing and proofreading. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding

Not applicable

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

Open access

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

References

- Bate, J. (2000). *The Song of the Earth*. Harvard University Press.
- Bell, S. (2019). *Ecology and the End of Postcolonialism*. Routledge.
- Boyd, B. (2009). *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction*. Harvard University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674053595>
- Buell, L. (2001). *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment*. Harvard University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674029057>
- Celik, A. (2019). *Eco-Cultural Networks and the British Empire: New Views on Environmental History*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Curran, C. (2015). *The Ecology of Postcolonial Literature: Animal, Human, Other*. Routledge.
- Fincham, G. (2014). Ecology, Ethics, and the Future: Tan Twan Eng's *The Garden of Evening Mists*. *English Academy Review*, 31(2),

125-137. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10131752.2014.965425>

- Garrard, G. (2012). *Ecocriticism*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203806838>
- Glotfelty, C., & Fromm, H. (Eds.). (1996). *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. University of Georgia Press.
- Glotfelty, C., & Fromm, H. (Eds.). (2014). *The Companion to Literature and the Environment*. Cambridge University Press.
- Goh, R. B. H. (2016). *Ecological Imaginations in the World Religions: An Ethnographic Analysis*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Grace V. S. C., & Mohammad, A. Q. (2021). The Postcolonial Millennium: New Directions in Malaysian Literature in English. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 57(5), 583-592. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2021.1982120>
- Hamoud, M., Othman, W., & Raihanah M. M. (2023). Engaging Malaysia: Greening Postcolonial Memories in Tan's Novel *The Garden of Evening Mists*. *Alicante Journal of English Studies*, 39(1), 129-144. <https://doi.org/10.14198/raei.2023.39.06>
- Heise, U. K. (2016). *Imagining Extinction: the Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species*. University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226358338.001.0001>
- Huggan, G. (2018). *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. Routledge.
- Iovino, S., & Oppermann, S. (Eds.). (2016). *Environmental Humanities: Voices from the Anthropocene*. Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Liu, J. (2024). Out of Shadow: Tan Twan Eng in the Malaysian Literary Context. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 14(3), 674-682. <https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1403.07>
- Neill, J. (2019). *Ecocriticism and Indigenous Studies: Conversations from Earth to Cosmos*. Routledge.
- Parham, J. (2018). *The Colonial Lives of Property*. University of Chicago Press.
- Rama. (2012). *Across Cultures: Narrative Transculturation*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Rigby, K. (2016). *Ecocritical Explorations in Literary and Cultural Studies: Fences, Boundaries, and Fields*. Lexington Books.
- Rumens, N., & Jones, M. (Eds.). (2019). *Ecology and Ethnography of Muslim Habitats*. Springer.
- Tan Twan Eng. (2007). *The Gift of Rain*. Myrmidon.
- Tan Twan Eng. (2012). *The Garden of Evening Mists*. Myrmidon.
- Tan Twan Eng. (2023). *The House of Doors*. Myrmidon.
- Westling, L. (2021). *The Green Breast of the New World: Landscape, Gender, and American Fiction*. University of Georgia Press.