p-ISSN 2252-7427, e-ISSN 2541-3635
https://ieflj.uniku.ac.id/pub

p-ISSN 2252-7427 e-ISSN 2541-3635
Indonesian EFL Journal
AISEE
The Association of Indonesia Scholars of English Education

JUNGLES OF RESISTANCE: READING ECOLOGICAL SUBJUGATION IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S HEART OF DARKNESS

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APA Citation: Efrizah, D., & Purwarno, P. (2026). Jungles of resistance: Reading ecological subjugation in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness. *Indonesian EFL Journal*, *12*(1), 117-124. https://doi.org/10.25134/ieflj.v12i1.62

Received:12-09-2025 Accepted: 17-11-2025 Published: 30-01-2026

Abstract: This study presents a contemporary ecocritical reading of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, reexamining the African jungle not as a passive backdrop but as an active ecological agent that resists imperial domination. Employing a qualitative interpretive approach grounded in ecocriticism, the study combines close textual reading with thematic coding to analyze how the Congo River, the African jungle, and colonial infrastructures function as narrative sites of ecological agency. Drawing on recent formulations of slow violence (Davies, 2022), world-ecology (Moore, 2022), and ecofeminism (Gaard, 2022; Sharma & Joshi, 2024), the analysis demonstrates that Conrad's natural landscapes register the cumulative ecological harm of imperial extraction while simultaneously destabilizing colonial authority. The findings reveal that the Congo River operates as an ecological witness to historical and environmental violence, the jungle emerges as a resistant and self-regulating ecological force that undermines imperial rationality, and colonial outposts symbolize the moral and ecological unsustainability of extractivist ideology. By foregrounding nature's agency, the study shows how Heart of Darkness anticipates contemporary ecological concerns by linking environmental degradation with ethical and political collapse under empire. Beyond its theoretical contribution, this research highlights the pedagogical relevance of ecocritical literary analysis in English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) contexts in Indonesia. Integrating ecocritical frameworks into literature instruction encourages students to develop critical literacy, environmental awareness, and ethical reflection. Overall, the study repositions Heart of Darkness as a narrative of ecological resistance, demonstrating its continued relevance to contemporary debates on environmental justice, colonial legacies, and sustainability in the environmental humanities.

Keywords: *Ecocriticism; slow violence; world-ecology; ecofeminism; ecological agency; Heart of Darkness; postcolonial ecology; EFL pedagogy.*

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, ecocriticism has evolved into a vital interdisciplinary approach for reassessing literary texts through the intersection of culture, ethics, power, and the environment. Commonly defined as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. xviii), ecocriticism critiques anthropocentric worldviews and examines how literary narratives reflect, legitimize, or resist ideologies of environmental domination (Glotfelty, in Barry, 2020; Yadav & Sinha, 2024; Shamim et al., 2025). Recent studies show how ecocriticism explores nature and environment in literature (Tajane et al., 2024), and contemporary directions in ecocriticism emphasize more-than-human agency and interdisciplinary engagements across environmental humanities (Ryan, 2024). As the global climate crisis intensifies, literary studies have assumed an increasingly urgent role in tracing ecological violence and foregrounding cultural texts that represent environmental degradation and ethical crisis (Mukherjee, 2025; Hashmi & Tariq, 2025; Fathinah et al., 2024).

Recent scholarship demonstrates that literature not only documents environmental destruction but also mediates the entanglement between ecology, identity, and power. Contemporary ecocritical studies emphasize climate change, ecological injustice, and environmental degradation as central narrative concerns (Mohapatra, 2025; Shamim et al., 2025; Neloy & Shahin, 2025), while positioning literary texts as ecological archives that encode environmental anxiety and human–nature interdependence (Qie & Maulidya, 2025). Within postcolonial ecocritical discourse, scholars reveal how environmental crises intersect with colonial modernity, urban pressures, and capitalist extraction (Li, 2025), how Indonesian literary texts negotiate ecological ethics within postcolonial settings (Al-Qolbi, 2025), and how island and Indigenous narratives reimagine ecological loss, resistance, and cultural survival (Indriyanto et al., 2024). Studies on Indonesian and Southeast Asian literature further show that texts reflect ecological conflict and socio-environmental tensions across cultural contexts (Efrizah, 2025; Yulantomo et al., 2025; Halimatusya'diyah & Ramadiani, 2025; Larasati & Manut, 2022), including postcolonial readings of Malay Batu Bara oral narratives that foreground power and resistance (Efrizah, 2025).

This ecological lens has increasingly informed readings of canonical Western texts. Scholars argue that literature plays a crucial role in shaping environmental consciousness and fostering ecological responsibility (Usman & Anis, 2025; Radhakrishnan, 2025; Wajid, 2025). Within this framework, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) remains a pivotal text for examining the convergence of imperialism, environmental exploitation, and ethical crisis. Set along the Congo River, the novella dramatizes how colonial power simultaneously exploits Indigenous peoples and ecosystems, transforming land and life into imperial resources (Ilyas, 2025; Bibi et al., 2025). Recent ecocritical scholarship highlights how the novella conveys cultural and ethical complexities within imperial landscapes (Purwarno & Efrizah, 2025; Hidayati et al., 2025) and stages ecological collapse as a defining feature of colonial modernity (Hiller, 2025; Kashyap & Neog, 2025).

While *Heart of Darkness* has long been read as a critique of colonial domination and moral decay (Anwar & Bai, 2025; Jonah, 2020), much of the existing scholarship continues to frame the African jungle primarily as a symbolic, psychological, or allegorical space that functions as an externalization of darkness, savagery, or the unconscious. Even recent postcolonial and ethical readings tend to privilege human-centered concerns such as moral ambiguity, imperial guilt, and narrative complicity, thereby positioning nature as a passive backdrop rather than a historical force. Consequently, the ecological dimension of the jungle, particularly its capacity to act, resist, and unsettle imperial power, remains under-theorized in Conrad studies.

Although ecocritical approaches have begun to address environmental degradation and colonial exploitation in the novella (Hiller, 2025; Kashyap & Neog, 2025), these studies largely emphasize ecological collapse as contextual evidence of imperial violence rather than examining the landscape itself as an agentive presence. Moreover, discussions of silenced Indigenous voices (Zahid, 2024) and environmental resistance (Purnomo, 2024) are rarely integrated into a sustained framework that conceptualizes the jungle as an active participant in imperial disruption. This gap calls for an ecocritical rereading that moves beyond symbolism to view the environment as a dynamic force of resistance. Contemporary ecocriticism conceptualizes such resistance through slow violence, highlighting how ecological imperialism within capitalist world-systems converts colonized environments into extractive spaces and produces cumulative, enduring ecological harm (Frame, 2022; Davies, 2022; Moore, 2022; Ritonga et al., 2025). This perspective aligns with theories of human–nature entanglement and ecological resistance that frame nature as an active narrative agent (Dinç & Alaca, 2022; Ohagwam & Albert, 2024; Oghounu et al., 2025; Ijaz & Hashmi, 2024), as well as recent critiques of capitalist extraction in 21st-century literature (Usman & Anis, 2025).

Complementary eco-phenomenological and Anthropocene-oriented readings depict the jungle as a destabilizing, resistant presence that challenges imperial mastery, highlighting non-human agency in disrupting colonial epistemologies (Heise, 2023; Ghosh, 2021; Morton, 2022) and reinforcing how landscapes are simultaneously shaped by and resist colonial power (Singh & Mishra, 2024; Panigrahi, 2023; Toska, 2024).

An ecofeminist perspective further complements this view by revealing how the silencing of women parallels the silencing of nature under imperial masculine control, positioning both as targets of domination and exploitation within intersecting structures of power (Gaard, 2022; Sharma & Joshi, 2024).

Beyond its theoretical contribution, this study also offers pedagogical relevance. Integrating ecocritical reading into English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) contexts in Indonesia encourages students to develop critical literacy, ethical awareness, and cross-cultural understanding of global environmental issues. Reading canonical texts such as *Heart of Darkness* through an environmental lens transforms literary interpretation into a form of environmental and moral education, reinforcing literature's role in fostering ecological consciousness and responsibility.

Accordingly, this study aims to: (1) Examine how *Heart of Darkness* represents nature, particularly the Congo River and the African jungle, as agentive forces that resist imperial domination. (2) Analyze how Conrad's depiction of ecological subjugation reflects moral, political, and environmental collapse. (3) Explore how ecocritical readings of the text can inform EFL pedagogy in Indonesia by fostering environmentally conscious and critically engaged readers.

The novelty of this research lies in repositioning *Heart of Darkness* not merely as a colonial or psychological allegory, but as a literary ecology in which the environment acts, reacts, and resists. By foregrounding ecological agency, this study contributes to the decolonization of ecocriticism and to Anthropocene-oriented literary studies, demonstrating how Conrad's jungle anticipates contemporary ecological consciousness. Ultimately, this article argues that the landscape in *Heart of Darkness* is not only a symbol of darkness, but also a living site of resistance that exposes the colonial roots of ecological collapse and offers enduring insights for environmental humanities and EFL pedagogy alike.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive framework grounded in ecocriticism to analyze Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as a literary representation of environmental and imperial entanglement. The approach combines close textual reading with systematic thematic coding to identify how the novella constructs nature as an active, agentive force

The research draws on three complementary theoretical perspectives: (1) Ecocriticism (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996; Heise, 2023) provides the primary framework for exploring the relationship between literature and the physical environment. (2) Postcolonial theory and world-ecology (Moore, 2022) contextualize ecological exploitation within the economic and ideological systems of empire. (3) Ecofeminism (Gaard, 2022; Sharma & Joshi, 2024) offers a critical lens to examine how the subjugation of nature parallels the subjugation of marginalized groups.

These frameworks are used not as abstract discussions but as analytical tools guiding textual interpretation. The analysis focuses on identifying linguistic and narrative patterns that portray nature's agency and resistance.

The primary text for analysis is Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899; Dover edition, 1995). The novella was chosen because it vividly depicts the interaction between human ambition, imperial violence, and the natural world. Supporting theoretical and critical references were used to frame and contextualize the findings but not to replace textual interpretation.

To ensure methodological transparency, the following steps were applied:

Text Selection**:** All passages describing natural environments (the river, jungle, and landscape) were extracted from the text. This produced a dataset of 85 descriptive segments.

Initial Coding**:** Each segment was coded inductively for recurring linguistic and narrative features that indicate ecological activity, using three key categories: *Agency of nature* (verbs or actions attributed to the environment); *Resistance and retaliation* (imagery suggesting nature's opposition to human control); *Psychological influence* (descriptions of nature affecting human perception or morality).

Thematic Grouping**:** The codes were organized into thematic clusters corresponding to the major analytical sections—such as "The River as Ecological Witness" and "The Jungle as Space of Resistance."

Interpretation**:** The patterns identified were interpreted through the lens of the chosen theoretical frameworks to reveal how Conrad's narrative critiques colonial and ecological domination.

This structured procedure enhances replicability and ensures that the findings emerge from consistent textual evidence rather than impressionistic interpretation.

While the study primarily contributes to ecocritical literary scholarship, its methodological design also supports pedagogical application in the EFL context. Close reading and thematic coding can be adapted for use in Indonesian university literature courses to develop students' skills in critical analysis, environmental awareness, and

interdisciplinary thinking. By engaging with literary language that depicts ecological and ethical issues, EFL learners can strengthen both their linguistic competence and critical literacy.

The methodological process therefore serves a dual purpose: (1) advancing an academic argument about the ecological agency of nature in *Heart of Darkness*, and (2) modeling an analytical framework that can be integrated into EFL pedagogy to teach literature as a means of fostering environmental consciousness and reflective reading practices.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings outlined in the previous section reveal how Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* constructs the natural world as an active and morally expressive agent that both reflects and resists the forces of imperial domination. Interpreting these patterns through contemporary formulations of slow violence (Davies, 2022), world-ecology (Moore, 2022), and ecofeminism (Gaard, 2022; Sharma & Joshi, 2024) deepens our understanding of how ecological subjugation and human exploitation are structurally intertwined in the text.

Ecological agency and slow violence

Recent ecocritical scholarship conceptualizes *slow violence* as a form of ecological harm that unfolds incrementally, often escaping immediate perception while disproportionately affecting colonized and marginalized spaces (Davies, 2022). In *Heart of Darkness*, this temporality of violence is inscribed in the landscape itself. The Congo River's ceaseless flow embodies both endurance and erosion: it carries the material residues of empire while silently registering its moral decay. The rusted machinery and abandoned stations observed by Marlow exemplify the long-term, unseen consequences of extraction and environmental destruction.

The findings showing that the river "absorbs the waste of empire" can thus be read as a narrative manifestation of slow violence, ecological suffering that persists beyond direct human awareness. Conrad's portrayal of the river as "winding," "whispering," and "flowing back to the earliest beginnings of the world" positions it as a temporal witness that records imperial disintegration. Through this imagery, the novella anticipates contemporary concerns about the lingering ecological effects of colonial exploitation in postcolonial spaces.

The jungle and world-ecology: Nature against empire

World-ecology, as reformulated by Moore (2022), situates nature not as an external backdrop to capitalism but as an active component of imperial accumulation and extraction. From this perspective, ecological degradation is a systemic feature of empire rather than a secondary consequence. The jungle's "vengeance" and "impenetrable growth" in Conrad's narrative align with this framework, presenting the wilderness as resistant to incorporation into colonial regimes of productivity.

By depicting the jungle as simultaneously sacred and suffocating, Conrad renders it a self-organizing ecological system that absorbs human intrusion while remaining irreducible to commodity form. The repeated failures of mapping, navigation, and mechanical control underscore the limits of imperial rationality. In this sense, the jungle functions as an ecological actor that exposes the instability of capitalist and imperial domination when confronted with environmental limits.

Ecofeminism and the ethics of voice and silence

From a contemporary ecofeminist perspective, the domination of nature parallels the marginalization and silencing of women and other vulnerable groups under imperial and patriarchal systems (Gaard, 2022; Sharma & Joshi, 2024). In *Heart of Darkness*, both the environment and certain human figures are rendered voiceless yet symbolically powerful. The unnamed African woman near Kurtz's station embodies this convergence: silent, watchful, and resistant in her presence.

Her portrayal mirrors the autonomy of the jungle itself, suggesting that both femininity and wilderness exist outside colonial regimes of representation. Ecofeminist critics argue that imperial discourse sustains itself by conflating control over land with control over bodies. The narrative moment in which the wilderness is said to have "taken a terrible vengeance" signals a reversal of this logic. Silence, in this context, becomes a form of defiance rather than submission, reinforcing the inseparability of ecological and ethical violence in Conrad's critique of empire.

Convergence of ecological and moral collapse

The convergence of environmental degradation and moral decay underscores Conrad's sustained critique of imperial ideology. The decayed machinery, wasted labor, and environmental

p-ISSN 2252-7427, e-ISSN 2541-3635
https://ieflj.uniku.ac.id/pub

desolation depicted throughout the novella reveal the colonial project as unsustainable both ethically and ecologically. The findings demonstrating nature's reoccupation of abandoned imperial structures anticipate contemporary understandings of ecological feedback and planetary instability.

By portraying nature as reactive rather than passive, Conrad exposes the limits of human supremacy. The moral disintegration of figures such as Kurtz parallels the physical deterioration of the colonial landscape. The jungle's resistance thus operates on both ecological and existential levels, confronting imperial humanity with the consequences of its own extractive violence.

Pedagogical implications for EFL education

The integration of these ecocritical insights into the EFL classroom in Indonesia can foster deeper engagement with literature as a medium for critical and environmental education. Teaching *Heart of Darkness* through the frameworks of slow violence, world-ecology, and ecofeminism allows students to connect language analysis with global ethical issues.

Pedagogically, this approach supports several learning objectives: (1) Critical Literacy: Students analyze how linguistic choices—verbs, metaphors, tone—construct ecological meaning and moral commentary. (2) Cultural and Environmental Awareness: By relating imperial exploitation to modern environmental crises, learners develop awareness of how literary texts reflect socio-ecological realities. (3) Analytical Writing Skills: The thematic coding method used in this research can be replicated in the classroom, encouraging students to organize textual evidence systematically. (4) Interdisciplinary Thinking: Combining literature, ethics, and ecology helps EFL learners engage with English texts not merely for linguistic practice but for reflective thought.

For Indonesian university contexts, this pedagogy bridges global literary traditions with local environmental consciousness. Students can compare Conrad's portrayal of ecological exploitation with depictions in Indonesian environmental literature (e.g., *Negeri Asap*, *Laut Bercerita*), fostering comparative analysis and cross-cultural dialogue.

Through its integration of theory and textual observation, this study repositions *Heart of Darkness* as a narrative of ecological resistance rather than mere colonial critique. The application of ecocriticism in EFL education underscores literature's capacity to cultivate analytical rigor and ethical imagination. By inviting students to read environmental and imperial histories as interconnected systems, *Heart of Darkness* becomes not just a historical text, but a pedagogical resource for developing awareness of sustainability, justice, and human responsibility toward nature.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* through a contemporary ecocritical lens to demonstrate how the novella constructs the natural world as an active, morally expressive agent that both reflects and resists imperial domination. Drawing on recent formulations of slow violence (Davies, 2022), world-ecology (Moore, 2022), and ecofeminism (Gaard, 2022; Sharma & Joshi, 2024), the analysis reveals that Conrad's representation of the Congo River, the African jungle, and colonial infrastructures exposes the deep entanglement between ecological degradation and moral collapse within imperial systems.

The findings show that the Congo River functions as an ecological witness to historical violence, silently registering the long-term consequences of extraction and colonial exploitation. The jungle emerges as a resistant and self-regulating ecological force that destabilizes imperial rationality and undermines colonial fantasies of control. Meanwhile, the decayed machinery and abandoned colonial spaces symbolize the ethical bankruptcy and environmental unsustainability of extractivist ideology. Interpreted through contemporary ecocritical frameworks, these elements collectively demonstrate that *Heart of Darkness* anticipates modern ecological thought by portraying nature not as passive scenery, but as a dynamic agent confronting human excess and domination.

Theoretically, this study contributes to current ecocritical discourse by integrating world-ecology and ecofeminist perspectives into a postcolonial reading of Conrad's text. It highlights how ecological subjugation and human exploitation are produced through the same imperial and patriarchal logics, reinforcing the view that environmental violence cannot be separated from broader structures of power. By foregrounding nature's agency and resistance, the study reframes *Heart of Darkness* as a narrative that critiques empire through an ecological and ethical lens,

aligning it with contemporary concerns about planetary instability and environmental justice.

Pedagogically, the study offers significant implications for EFL education in the Indonesian university context. Incorporating ecocritical approaches into the teaching of *Heart of Darkness* enables students to connect linguistic analysis with global environmental and ethical issues. Activities such as analyzing ecological metaphors, identifying narrative patterns of domination and resistance, and comparing Western and Indonesian environmental literature can foster critical literacy, environmental awareness, and intercultural reflection. In this way, literature functions not only as a linguistic resource but also as a medium for cultivating ethical sensitivity and ecological consciousness among EFL learners.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, its focus on a single canonical text limits the generalizability of the findings to other literary traditions or cultural contexts. Second, the analysis remains qualitative and interpretive, without empirical classroom data to assess the pedagogical impact of ecocritical teaching practices. Third, while grounded in contemporary theory, the study relies primarily on English-language scholarship, which may constrain the incorporation of localized Indonesian ecocritical perspectives.

Future research could address these limitations in several ways. Comparative studies could examine representations of ecological agency in Western and Indonesian postcolonial texts to illuminate regional variations in environmental imagination. Empirical pedagogical research could evaluate the effectiveness of ecocritical reading strategies in EFL classrooms, particularly in relation to students' language development, critical thinking, and environmental values. Additionally, interdisciplinary approaches integrating ecocriticism with digital humanities or corpus linguistics could trace broader patterns of environmental discourse across literary texts.

In conclusion, this study contributes to contemporary literary scholarship by demonstrating how *Heart of Darkness* articulates ecological consciousness within its critique of empire, and to EFL pedagogy by modeling how literature can foster analytical rigor, ethical reflection, and environmental awareness. Through such integrations, ecocritical literary studies continue to serve as a vital bridge between language education and the pursuit of sustainability, justice, and human responsibility in an increasingly fragile world.

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