



RESEARCH PAPER

**Epistemic Disruptions of the Place-Thought Harmony:
History is Fiction and Fiction is History**

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the disruption of place thought harmony in Indigenous and postcolonial societies through the introduction of colonial epistemology based on the human nature divide. It argues that colonial knowledge systems transformed relations between humans, land, and nonhuman life by separating thought from place and knowledge from lived experience. The article first approaches this disruption from a decolonial perspective, focusing on Indigenous critiques of colonial epistemology and the violence produced by the separation of humans from nature. It then turns to the postcolonial context to show how colonial education, language, history, and literary hierarchies reshaped local ways of knowing. By bringing Indigenous place thought into conversation with postcolonial experiences of epistemic disruption, the article shows that colonial epistemology produced related forms of damage across settler and postcolonial societies.

Keywords: Indigenous Thought, Environmental Philosophy, Colonial Epistemology, Decolonization, Environmental Ethics

Introduction

It is assumed that environmental crises are best understood through the language of technology, economics, or policy, yet the underlying philosophical assumptions that organize human relationships with the natural world remain comparatively underexamined. Modern Western thought has historically rested upon a series of dualisms that separate humans from nature, mind from body, and knowledge from the places in which it emerges. These divisions have shaped colonial-capitalist extraction, and contemporary development by presenting the natural world as an object available for mastery and exploitation. Such assumptions have also displaced alternative traditions of knowledge that understand humans and nature as fundamentally interconnected.

This article argues that the expansion of global colonial rule required transforming how knowledge was understood by replacing place-based and relational ways of knowing with a universalizing framework that detached thought from land. This place-thought binary legitimized environmental exploitation while simultaneously marginalizing Indigenous cosmologies, oral traditions, and lived philosophies that refused such separations. Decolonizing environmental thought therefore requires questioning the epistemological foundations that continue to sustain colonial relationships with nature.

To develop this argument, the article first examines how Cartesian dualism and colonial epistemology produced the place-thought divide before turning to Indigenous philosophies that understand knowledge as inseparable from land and lived practice. It then situates these debates within the colonial history of Punjab by reading Sufi poetry as a sophisticated epistemological tradition that preserved relational understandings of human and nonhuman life against the colonial reordering of knowledge. In doing so, the article argues that recovering place-thought harmony, more than an exercise in cultural nostalgia,

is a necessary step toward challenging the colonial logics that continue to shape environmental destruction today.

Literature Review

The making of the place-thought binary, its power, and exploitation of nature

“In place of that speculative philosophy taught in the schools, it is possible to find a practical philosophy, by means of which, knowing the force and the actions of fire, water, air, the stars, the heavens, and all the other bodies that surround us, just as distinctly as we know the various skills of our craftsmen, we might be able, in the same way, to use them for all the purposes for which they are appropriate, and thus render ourselves, as it were, masters and possessors of nature” (Descartes, 1998, p. 35).

Rene Descartes, in his philosophy of cartesian dualism, called for the separation of mind and body as two distinct substances (Copplestone, 2003; Kenny, 2006) and laid the foundation for the human-nature divide in modern Western thought. This divide was essential since, in Indigenous epistemologies, human, land, and the natural world stand interconnected and unified (Wildcat et al., 2014; Simpson, 2014; Craft, 2013; Dei et al., 2022; Watts, 2013). This unification of humans and nature meant that humans cannot extract resources from nature for their exploitative purposes. If the land is to be taken as a mother out of which humans have evolved (Puhakka, 2014), there will, of course, be a certain moral impediment in appropriating the same mother for human convenience. Cartesian dualism solved this moral dilemma and called for man to be a ‘master and possessor of nature.’ It could be said that modern western thought laid the theoretical grounds for the practical destruction that ensued in the form of appropriation of the cheap nature of the last few centuries.

The human-nature conflict presented in early modern thought equipped humans with the needed tools to fight nature. This fight provided the necessary rational justification for colonial settlements. Conflict rather than harmony became a new way of perceiving human-nature relationships. And not only this, “fighting nature” in the earlier colonial times was replaced with a new category “fighting poverty” (Escobar, 1995) in the post-WWII scenario to strengthen further the imperial agendas. From the human-nature divide which provided the required impetus to settler capitalism of the earlier colonial times to Friedman’s Neoliberal economics and its trickle-down exploits of the past four decades (Klein, 2007; Harvey, 2005; Davis, 2018), one thing that has remained unchallenged is the cheap appropriation of nature, without which the capital cannot function (Foster, 1999; Moore, 2016; Malm, 2016; Harvey, 2014). The function of capital, thus, has needed a total rejection of Indigenous epistemologies, cosmologies, and environment-friendly ecologies all over the world combined with a reformation of the human-nature relationship to expand itself. Western colonialism manufactured “an epistemological system that legitimized its uses of nature” (Mignolo, 2011, p. 13).

As is evident, in colonial epistemology, the subject is given the right to exploit and extract from nature for its benefit. Rejection of such a human-nature divide is the first and the most fundamental step to counter the colonization of knowledge and the world. Therefore, a critique of this human-nature divide is essential to decolonizing knowledge. Colonization corrupted the Indigenous forms of knowledge which were based on place-thought harmony rather than division (Watts, 2013). This divide is the product of the Western formation of knowledge and its dualistic framing in which knowing and living are two separate things (Inoue & Moreira, 2016; Behera, 2007; Rudy & White, 2014). The subject is the knower, and nature is an object to be known. Unsurprisingly, the place-thought

duality elevates thought to a superior position which then defines and rationalizes the place in which it operates.

It could be said, Indigenous knowledge formation is pre-epistemological if epistemology is to be taken in its Westernized form as it operates today. In Indigenous knowledge formation, there is no difference between place and thought, nature and humans, and land and its inhabitants. Thought develops organically with its relation to the land. Thought is the product of the land (Simpson, 2017). There is, thus, no difference between ontology and epistemology, between knowledge and being, between thought and the place in which it operates. Leanna Simpson's account of her time with the elders of her community is a brilliant account of this. She shows how the elders of her community lived their philosophies. For them doing produces knowledge. Thinking in "isolation" from the experience and dislocating thought from "movement" cannot be considered knowledge. This is their "grounded normativity", a place-based practice-oriented knowledge system (Simpson, 2017, pp. 11-25).

For the successful imposition of colonial epistemology, this grounded normativity had to be displaced. Therefore, the belief and thought structure of Indigenous people were ruthlessly targeted (Pihama & Lee-Morgan, 2019; Smith, 2021). Indigenous cosmologies, which were depictions of realities, were reduced to convenient and useful myths. These cosmologies were treated as anything but real events. The land was reduced from its position of being alive and thinking to a position of a passive object ready to be manipulated by an active perceiver subject. Indigenous people possess complex theoretical frameworks which are not just useful, beautiful myths but realities (Watts, 2013). Their theoretical framework is not separate from their praxis.

When Indigenous people believe that land is conscious, their relational responsibility towards it is reflected in practice (McGregor et al., 2010; Salmón, 2000). Everyone and "everything carry this responsibility and has duties to perform" (McGregor 2004, p. 76). Maintaining communication with the land is an aspect of that responsibility (Whyte, 2021). Thus, praxis and thought are inseparable. Indigenous belief system maintains that human and non-human species are *equally active*, conscious, and reciprocal participants in the relationships, responsibilities, and complex web of life (Wildcat, 2009; Whyte et al., 2018; Whyte, 2021; Kimmerer, 2013; Pierotti & Wildcat, 2000). Consequently, this complex web of life was reduced to shambles by introducing simplistic narratives of development under the capitalist economy. And it had to be done if the settler goals of colonizing the land were to be achieved.

Colonialism with its global and expansionist ideals carved a philosophy the basis of which was changing the land and transforming the earth (Davis & Todd, 2017). As mentioned above, changing the land, or transforming the earth wouldn't be possible under the Indigenous belief structure which depends on the land not only for its material and spiritual purposes but also for its intellectual ones. The intellectual practice of an Indigenous community is vacant unless it comes through the land (Simpson, 2017). The land is a part of their ontological makeup (Burkhart, 2019). Transforming the earth is akin to transforming life, and the belief structure on which it depends and flourishes. The nuances of this belief system were ignored by the settlers. They pursued their inherently exploitative philosophical ideals which depended on the exploitation of nature for man's survival. The place-thought harmony, hence, was disrupted.

History is Fiction and Fiction is History

During the pre-colonial as well as the early stages of colonial rule of the British Empire in India, there was a rich tradition of Punjabi Sufi poets- like Bulleh Shah, Baba Farid, and Shah Hussain among others, who stressed viewing humans as part of nature and vice versa (Rizvi, 1997; Smith, 2013;). They repeatedly professed that reality is one, there is no

nature-human divide, and there is no self- as in human-centric ego. Their message was that the human-centric self is an illusion and we are all a part of the whole. We should perceive things in totality rather than in duality. This totality, with human-nature/Spinozistic monism at its center, sees the creator or God as a major part or center of its reality. One Sufi poet Khwaja Ghulam Farid says:

Reality is but one
and he who perceives duality in oneness
is an unbeliever/heretic

Khawaja Ghulam Farid, like many of the popular Sufi poets of the Punjab of his time, is trying to argue in the above-mentioned verse that there is no human-nature divide. God, nature, human, nonhuman, are conjoined together to represent a totality of oneness. Duality is a crime and he who divides reality into duality commits a grave sin. Likewise, Bulleh Shah, in one of his poetic verses, says, "It's the truth that Bulleh has gained, it's all in One contained." Some critics place him as a *vedantic monist* but monist nonetheless (Shackle, 2012).

The point of giving the examples of the above-mentioned Sufi poets is to prove two things here. The first is that since Sufi poets represented popular sentiments and wrote in popular language instead of national or official ones, their poetic themes were a description of how human beings around them saw reality and lived their lives. They represented the people. That is why people still go in numbers to their shrines. Second, Sufi poetry was not just poetry but an epistemological discourse. It is important to understand here that these poets were well-read scholars. Fiction or Poetry was not anything-but-knowledge, it was knowledge in its complete form. It was later that Sufi poetry was reduced to the status of just poetry in modern terms. The reason for that being, an introduction of colonial epistemology, or coloniality of epistemology, which reduced knowledge only to that which could be verified scientifically.

Coloniality of knowledge and its dualistic framing is being contested in contemporary academia. Rosi Braidotti, a famous posthuman feminist believes that a sustained effort of disengaging from the "dominant modes of subject formation" is required to challenge the dominant humanist way of perceiving things in subject-object duality (Braidotti, 2017, pp. 30-31). For her, this might require a radical change of behavior. An alternative way of viewing things. Beyond any set patterned epistemological direction. Edmund Husserl stressed this need long ago when he, explaining his new science of Phenomenology, proposed that subject-object duality should be rejected in favor of a concrete lived experience of returning to the things themselves (Cobb-Stevens, 1994). Returning to things themselves might be seen as an act of acknowledging the totality of experience by challenging the subject-object duality. Donna Haraway (2016, pp. 34-76) also views things this way when she suggests that Cthulucene is muddled and lacks any proper genealogy. She is also challenging the subject-object formation and wants to introduce a concept or a lived experience that could go beyond the ordinary perception of separating different realities. The central proposition of all these philosophies is based on a critique of delusional anthropocentrism. Think we must, Haraway would say, to get out of this dualistic mess. Or think we must, Braidotti would suggest, in exploring 'new ways of becoming together.'

Though this contestation against colonial epistemology from the Western academy is welcome, the point I want to stress here is that there is nothing new in what these philosophers are suggesting. What is new in Cthulucene or Phenomenology or Posthumanism? What is new in Gaia theory? Gaia theory argues the earth is a superorganism and human beings its elements, viewed as part of a larger teleological totality (Lovelock, 1972; Margulis & Lovelock, 1997). If we replace the word superorganism with the word mother, Gaia theory might reverberate the Indigenous way of viewing the

planet, taking humans as part of a whole, connected, and inseparable. Gaia theory must be a welcome addition to the scientific discourse, and I am not discussing its purely scientific-theoretical components which might only be visible to the “experts” of the scientific community. But from a layman’s perspective, it only offers things that have already been laid down in Indigenous and traditional knowledge for centuries. The academic world, it seems, is acknowledging the views and practices of people it has questioned quite condescendingly for the past few centuries.

Though colonial formation of knowledge was quite hegemonic in Punjab during colonial times, and was establishing itself as the new order, the Sufi poets of Punjab, rebelled against this order. They were anti-establishment. The establishment at that time was the British Empire. The kind of knowledge that the British Empire wanted to impart was challenged, and rejected altogether in their poetry since these poetries were said in local rather than national (Urdu, Persian) and colonial (English) languages. The means of their poetry was the language of the people depending on the locality. In Northern Punjab, Punjabi, while in Southern Punjab, Seraiki was utilized for Sufi poetry. There was no written text involved at the time, even though written compilations have been published and are available now. But at that time, Orality was the means of communicating knowledge.

Orality had to be changed if the colonizers were to dismantle the human relationship to nature. Lord Macaulay’s now-infamous minutes to the British Parliament called for a reform of the education system in India if the colonizers were to rule without resistance. The upper and privileged class of the Indian society were to be reformed through education. This strategy was devised to attack the traditional way of living, a tried and tested colonial formula (Deb, 2014). Macaulay’s minute presented in his report called for educating the colonized to “form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect” (Macaulay, 1835).

The results of introducing such an education system were obvious and predictable. A new class of brown people, “Indian in color but English in taste” had been created. The idea was to separate the people from their land, values, and indigenous ways of life. Colonial epistemology disrupted Indigenous knowledge, creating a capital-friendly and nature-exploitative relationship with the land. The new education system redefined the question “what is knowledge.” It created a boundary. Knowledge was now to be gained through schools and universities built by the British Empire. Locals were not to be seen as sources of knowledge. They were to be seen as poets full of wisdom at best. But poets, nonetheless. A whole new narrative was introduced, and history was revised. Traditions were scrapped and targeted viciously. New colonial disciplines of sciences and social sciences were introduced in colonial institutions carrying the banner of “knowledge”.

The history of postcolonial as well as settler societies is written, compiled, produced, and propagated by colonizers and settlers. In this history a fictional account of underdevelopment, barbarity, and collective ignorance, shaped by cultural and political biases of the colonizers are portrayed, and ingrained in the mind of the colonized as well (Alatas, 1977; Said, 1979; Spivak, 2003). In the case of the Indian subcontinent, resultantly, and expectantly, through educational institutions, history was revised. It can easily be argued that in a postcolonial context, since history as a discipline creates narratives that are fictions and presents them as historical truths, the study of Indigenous and Postcolonial societies through these settler narratives of history, is a study of fictional accounts only, presented under the garb of historical truths. The truths about such societies can only be found by digging into their literature. This literature is mostly present in terms of fiction. For example, poetry and stories of Indigenous people are not ordinary fictions but ones that disclose the social relationships, moral systems, human-nature relationships, family, and tribe systems. An obvious example of such fiction is Sufi poetry that I have discussed above. Fiction, or as in this case Sufi poetry, becomes an account of history filled with facts about

the working of Indigenous societies. History is just fiction, written through the colonizers eyes and their biased exaggerations, resulting in an inaccurate account of these societies. This is what happened when Macaulay reforms violently revised Indian history through colonizer's imagination.

Conclusion

I want to conclude by pointing out that academic critiques coming from Settler Colonial studies which are built on the critique of soft terms like *settler* and *settlement* are not harsh enough to expose the atrocities of the past few centuries (King, 2019, pp. 63-67). "Systems of power" especially colonialism, capitalism, industrialization, patriarchy, and extraction, are major factors causing environmental harms, and must be consistently called out (Whyte, 2021, p. 71). To counter this, we need harsher critiques that could expose the systems of power. These systems of power were built on human-nature divide and place-thought bifurcation, consequently, producing a transformation of cultural as well as biotic diversity into a homogenized whole resulting in a vicious global biocultural homogenization (Rozzi, 2018). This regimented standardization is dangerous because it is constructed on the destruction of ecological friendly philosophies built over centuries. Colonial epistemology is a threat to human civilization. Failing to recognize that there can be different interpretations of realities equally rational and true, has been the fundamental trait of this mindset. Place-thought harmony was one such interpretation of reality disrupting which has cost us severely in terms of culture, nature, life, and the environment.

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