The Depiction of Ecotourism in Burma in Amy Tan’s Saving Fish From Drowning

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Abstract

This research attempts to show the depiction of ecotourism in Burma. This study uses postcolonial ecocriticism approach. The writer divides the analysis into three subchapters; firstly, the writer examine the past life and present life of Karen tribe, the personal intentions and views of American tourists and the government regime as well to reveals the relation of three of them. Secondly, the writer discusses about the role of technologies to capitalized ecotourism in Burma as well as the Karen tribe. The last subchapter explores how ecotourism become a new industry in Burma and its impacts to the native also Burma’s environment. The writer uses Huggan and Tiffin’s theory as the main theory. To strengthen the analysis, the writer uses some books as the references. Finally, this study finds that ecotourism in Burma is a form of western neocolonialism as well as government.

Keywords: ecotourism, development, visual tourism, neocolonialism, capitalist

Introduction

Tourism is a new global phenomenon as more and more people want to spend their leisure time to visit new places aimed to either relieve boredom or look for new experiences. Tourism industry has significantly grown since the beginning of the 21st century and kept on developing until now. As stated by Huggan and Tiffin in Postcolonial Ecocriticism Literature, Animal, Environment, tourism is the most significant and rapid form of development (66). Since tourism provides many advantages, especially in terms of economics, it increases the national income. Hence, the current tourism development is preferred and encouraged to be continued.

The development of tourism industry is certainly supported by the sophisticated technology, especially digital technology. By means of the Internet, television, newspapers, magazines, and social media which display images of tourism, supported with pictures of a very natural and exotic environment, many people are then attracted to visit. The writer has several steps in the analysis process in order to refine the analysis result. First, the writer will analyze the relation between the tourists, natives and government, especially Burma’s military, and how their perspectives to each other and nature. From these different perspectives, the writer is able to examine the negotiation between the tourists, natives and Burma government. The analysis will be followed by the analysis on how ecotourism in Burma “is capitalized” through the digital technologies. The last analysis is the ecotourism industry in Burma as a new form of modern colonialism in terms of economics, even an ecological exploitation to developing countries. The writer terminates the study with the conclusion on ecotourism depiction in Burma.

In analyzing this research, the writer uses postcolonial ecocriticism theory. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin book become the main theory. At first, postcolonial studies are also used to minimize the environmental and social problems, that there is dominance and social gap between western countries to developing countries, likewise the issues of racism that is still yet to be eliminated. The current forms of new colonialism are the western ideologies that affect the cultural and environmental change in developing countries.

Huggan and Tiffin coined that “one of the central tasks of postcolonial ecocriticism as an emergent field has been to contest – also to provide viable alternatives to – western ideologies of development” (27).
Huggan and Tiffin also reinforce the non-western views on development, “radical Third-Worldist critiques that tend to see development as little more than a disguised form of neocolonialism, a vast technocratic apparatus designed primarily to serve the economic and political interests of the West” (27). Development is used to disguise western ideology in it. There is a political trick by the west which is also a new form of modern colonialism. The implementation is not directly but through the ideologies that are formed by the west.

One of the forms of tourism is ecotourism. Ecotourism is suggested to dismiss the ecological problems, in fact, it is not. Ryel and Grasse and also Fennell suggest ecotourism is “organised around a conservation ethic aimed at increasing public awareness of the environment, maximising economic benefits for local communities, fostering cultural sensitivity, minimising the negative impact of travel on the environment” (qtd. in Huggan and Tiffin 67). But, Dobson argue that ecotourism is an alternative tour for the rich to enjoy the nature (qtd. in Huggan and Tiffin 67). Somehow, tourism activities will give impacts to ecology as well as the native. According to Mowforth and Munt, western culture values will ignore the native values (qtd in Huggan and Tiffin 67). Western interests always override the natives’ interest. Tourism and ecotourism as well ought to be quite positive for natives if natives’ interests are precedence (qtd. in Huggan and Tiffin 68).

The relation between tourists, native and government

Karen people always view western is savior As stated by Edward Said that eastern need the role of western to help them (207). That is why Karen people adore western people and always put them special and honored. It is applied on their way to receive western people in their residence.

Eating is a good tradition for Karen people. According to Karen culture as mentioned in the book above, “Eating together is a way of expressing hospitality and creating bonds ”(25). Then entertain their guests is one way to express a sense of respect. “Please, we inviting you—eat, sir.” (268).

Karen people treat their honored guests traditionally according to their daily lifestyle by serving typical foods of their tribe with limited groceries and unlimited rainforest groceries (268), giving them a comfortable bed and a warm blanket giving in tree holes (295), and they also treat the sick tourists with traditional ingredients that is effective (313). As explained above that tourists love with something they consider as primitive, new and challenging that they have never experienced before. So, treat the tourists traditionally is the best. In this case, there are two different perspective. Karen people still use their native’s background and view which are called ecocentrism. They treat the tourists based on what the nature serves for human. They know how to use it properly without causing any damages to the environment. Different to the American tourists, they enjoy what native and nature serve for them. Because they must be prioritized, nature should follow human interests.

When Moff suffered digestive problems due to poor hygienic dishes and his luck after eating the berries Zanthoxylum that serves as digestive cleanser (101, 120). It is probably change his opinion, nature provides all that is needed by human. Although western people think that close to nature always looks like a dirty and unhygienic, but nature has medications that can be used for healing humans. It breaks western’s values that nature has provided for human and the duty of human is using nature. Human expected to not only utilize but also close to nature and preserve it.

As well as experienced by Rupert, Esme, Wyatt and Wendy are infected malaria. One of the elders Karen makes potions and gives them Artemisia annua herb that is used in anti-malaria (341). In developed countries anti-malaria drugs are still rare, but in the rain forests of Burma, nature has provided. In other words, if you are close to nature, then nature will give you goodnsses, such interrelationships that native need nature so they have to preserve nature as well.

Sanitation is also one of neocolonialism, it is only western justification to help native out of the sanitation problem. Dwight does not believe that lifetime can be achieved by the Burmese is over a hundred year, in the absence of sanitation. Meanwhile, many children who have disabilities from birth (118). As stated in Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin’s book, sanitation problems are often found in marginalized people and lower class society. In fact, these wastes are the western wastes (4). The western
build factories in native land, they use native’s resources and generate wastes in native land. So, it is nonsense if they come and help native out from sanitation problems.

Bennie have a desire to endorse the tourist economy. By purchasing items they want to pay even more than the price offered (268). So tourists can open up business opportunities for them. Through tourism, especially ecotourism, the tourists could endorse native’s economy as well. According to Wyatt experiences in guiding some ecotourism before, the tourists will pay more to get a chance to plant trees as an effort to decrease global warming (289). These are the western ways to promote kindness of their culture. Huggan and Tiffin also discusses about what western people did is a way to promote an ethnocentric view and negate the cultural clashes (67). Western’s generous, charitable and every positive manners are the camouflage of the ethnocentric view. Which is resulted to the degrading natives’ culture.

Second is the relation between Karen people and military. As told above, Karen people and military have a bad relation. Because the military assumes every Karen people is a rebel which is anti military regime (422). They will do a guerrilla war to overthrow the military regime.

Thus the military is very cruel to eradicate Karen people. Karen people are the main enemy of the military as well as Karen people also hate military regime. They prefer to commit suicide rather than be caught and tortured by the military (372).

As the story above, the construction of big oil pipe is also supported by the military regime. By military intervention, the capitalists can easily get rid of the native. As stated by Ken Saro-Wiwa that native suffered a double colonization, besides colonized by western, native also suffered domestic colonialism in which military regime (Huggan and Tiffin 38).

Different to Karen, the military’s treatment to the tourists is not bad as such treatment to Karen people. Military is welcomed to Harry and other tourists’ families to seek the missing tourist (341). It was done in front of the media to improve military’s image of notorious. In maintaining military’s sympathetic, Harry should aware to what he will say. He should tell the truth without any intention to critic military regime (322).

Finally, the American tourist’s interventions help Karen people to alleviate their problems with government. This novel accordance to the postcolonial critics views which claim that the western is savior for natives.

Other than as an alternative tourism, virtual tourism also useful to popularize tourism in Burma around the world. Hereinafter tourism becomes a part of the development, thus it opens up new forms of economic imperialism and ecological imperialism as a result of the development.

Through news, Harry documentary, and Roxanne’s amateur footage that contains Burma’s landscape and Karen lifestyle as well, it also raise the name of Karen tribe. Through this video, Karen’s lifestyle is looked very primitive. The audiences will know how Karen tribe establishes good relations with nature, mutually beneficial relationship. Nature gives what they need, meanwhile they preserve nature. As stated by Buell, ecocentrism is native’s perspective that nature is the most important, even the interests of all human beings are to be put aside for preserving nature.

This video starts with visiting cigar and paper mill, then heading to Karen’s dwelling which is leading by Black Spot. The tourists look so amaze with the natural scenery around them. This video also shows the suffering of Karen tribe, almost of them are permanent disability which caused by military abuses. Such as leg stump, eyes that sewn shut, losing of an arm or leg (399-402). As though this video would like to describe how suffering Karen tribe in their isolated place, so that Black Spot and his followers have to find Younger White Brother (or western people) to rescue them. Like stated by Edward Said, “saw the Orient as a locale requiring Western attention, reconstruction, even redemption. The Orient existed as a place isolated from the mainstream of European progress in the sciences, arts, and commerce. Thus whatever good or bad values were imputed to the Orient appeared to be functions of some highly specialized Western interest in the Orient” (207). Native is always depicted to require western, they have to win western attention so arises sympathy from western and let them solve Karen’s problems. Because they are promote the ethnocentric view, like stated by Huggan and Tiffin. Western tend to show their kindness and ability to help native.
Sister Roxanne had spoken with great heart about their suffering and used just the right words about the cruelty of the SLORC soldiers. She showed the tribe’s wounds, the maimed, the faces of good people. She spoke of their kindness. Their story was not on TV Myanmar but on Global News Network. His heart pounded. The whole world knew their story (420).

With technological sophistication and mass media, the video disseminated rapidly. “The journalist held up a bogus camcorder tape, the real contents having been copied onto the disc and sent to GNN headquarters from Bangkok via a high-speed digital link” (418). Because the video become a commodification for the news capitalist. It will be a highlight and make a fortune for them. Krug aso argues that virtual tourism bring up audiences’ comments about nature (249). Through the video, audiences will see the differences between western view and native view towards the nature. Because this video is original Karen’s culture and life side by side with nature.

Shortly after the tourists are found along Karen tribe, the name of Karen tribe become more familiar. Even some producers are keen to make a reality show for Karen people which will be an economy resource for the tribe as well as their popularity (434-435). Because of their resource and popularity force them to have some cultural changes like wearing modern clothes. “T-shirts from Bugger-Off bug spray, jeans from Ripped & Ready, and baseball caps from Global News Network” (439). Development and modernisation are followed by a new form of imperialism. Their name was popular and became rich, instead the producer utilize them as finances well by exposing their life.

As argued by Sen about freedom and market, native need both of them. The tourists not only want to provide freedom but also provide economic change for native. From the reality show, they generate their own money. However, capitalist get more benefit many times from selling natives’ culture. Through the reality show, native got popularity so that they can be free of military threat.

After a few weeks of their popularity eventually dims, they had to go back to the refugee camp on the border of Thailand and some of them died of malaria (439). Popularity, riches and their development are the ideas of western. They do not need it, and it just proved in vain. All forms of natives’ development only make things worse. According to De rivero, they are modernized, re-established, that no differences between western and eastern. In point of fact it is just a hoax, they had to be returned to its original state as a native, while the tourists on the contrary, and they still may exist. Some tourists appear in magazine articles (439). The arrival of western does not help them. They change the natives’ cultural values and their perspectives that do not conform to their culture.

**Ecotourism in burma**

Ideally, ecotourism is an alternative tourism to increasing global knowledges of the environment destruction, giving economic benefits for local communities, cultural tolerancy, and decreasing ecological pollution (qtd. in Huggan and Tiffin 67). It always uses positif purposes for native as well as environment. Unfortunately, ecotourism is only a form of neocolonialism from capitalists and western, and even just become a way for middle upper class to enjoy the nature.

The tourist visiting in factories and traditional markets raises trading activities among tourists and local communities there. The tourists are bargaining in the cigar factory (399), and purchasing souvenir in traditional markets, as said by Bennie, they will buy a lots only not to disappoint the natives (204). However, these forms of trading activities are simply a way for tourists to enjoy travelling with shopping. As stated in the previous chapter that western interests and cultural values always override eastern interests and values. For example when Roxanne purchasing a longyi, a traditional cloth worn by the people of Burma, both women and men but with different motives, but Roxanne choose fabric with patterns for men (154-156), she ignores the cultural values in that fabric. Those fabrics have a gender identity for Burmese, every motive is distinguished based on the gender. She purchases it only by her desire, not to show her gender identity as did all of Burmese. In this case the Western interest has overcome the Burmese culture values. Also Wendy, she bought a farmer hat. She utilizes it only cover herself from the sunlight (159-160). Behind those trading activities, it only shows that western interests are also overcoming the native interests and cultural values.
The practices of ecotourism also evoke disparagement to the natives’ culture. So ecotourism efforts to uphold cultural sensitivity is not implemented well. It could be seen in the comments of American tourists when they see fishermen who were fishing. Burmese catch the fish because they want to save them from drowning, but after it, the fish is dead (162). As stated by Said that American tourists see native is uncivilized. Through this case the tourists could underestimate the natives’ perspective which is think irrationally and uneducated. This gap makes tourists could degrade natives’ culture, they should be able to understand that western and eastern perspectives are completely different. And the ideal view of ecotourism is not aplied because of the western belief that they always educated than eastern, more superior and think rationally.

Village feasts are incorporated into the tour itinerary also become a commodification. As one of the travel itinerary of the American tourists in Burma

we’re going to a village that is holding a fair for the hundredth anniversary of one of its stupas, those dome-shaped shrines you’ve seen. There will be a big food market, plenty of games and competitions, gambling as well, though I warn you, no one wins. And the children from the local school are going to perform onstage. Each class has practiced for months. A special arrangement—I believe you call them skits in the States. Not to worry, it is quite all right to take photos. (215-216)

Many celebrations transformed into a festival that is commodified for the travelers. Actually it was the only traditional celebrations which eventually became one of the destinations as well. The tourists may come and document it.

American tourists are invited to close to the native. They have a schedule to visit local schools which is expected to give donation for schools (232-233). By donating funds for schools does not mean they come to reduce social inequalities in Burma, it is only an ethnocentric view. That American people think that their culture is the best, and their existence in Burma is needed by the natives. If natives study in formal school, it means they could remove the western idea that native is uncivilized.

The facilities which are provided for tourism were always adapted to the needs of western tourists. Floating island resort is one of the existing facilities in Burma which is highly dedicated for western travelers. It seen from the advantages that owned by the resort, the resort is adapting western management, and create comfort, space arrangement, scenery, and even services in accordance with the western style and interests (208-209). For example, the scenery that can be seen from the room was the view of the lake, one bungalow and others are connected with the teak walkway, and all of the equipments are made of rattan (209-210). In this case, the interest of western in natural thing make the sites are conjured up with natural style. In which the western interests are impacting to the environment. How many trees that should be cut off to fulfill the needs of the buildings and all of the resorts equipments, somehow this “natural places” or “imitate natural places” still provides the tourism wastes that can harm the environment. Although this resorts look like natural, but it existences still harm the environment. It is absolutely opposed to the ideal view of ecotourism that the ecotourism practices are useful to reduce the negative effects of travel on the environment. Because the values of ecocentrism do not appear in this sites, although it uses natural materials for furniture. The only purpose is service the western tourists as though living in nature but did not see the negative impacts to the nature.

In addition floating island resort hires foreigner to manage the resort, while the native just as a courier pick up (209). The practice of ecotourism in the third world is not fully give benefit to the local communities. The western people still remained at the top position, while the native is in the lower position. This is one of the camouflages of neocolonialism. Employment in the native’s land is taken by western people. Native worked as a laborer, they work for western capitalist. As stated by Britton in the previous chapter that tourism is neocolonialism in economic forms of under-development countries. Western capitalists come as if help a poor countries to welfare its people. So they open business, include in tourism field, with the aim of seeking their own advantages. In fact, western come to exploit the natural resources of Burma, while they do not provide worthy jobs for native. Not only natively, they also do not care about environmental damaged by the practice of ecotourism.
To attract more western tourists, many capitalists are competing in creating new tourism sites. There is so many small villages were changed to be Shangri-La (43). Reorganizing a village become Shangri-La requires a very large fund, which makes Shangri-La become expensive tourism sites. Dobson says that ecotourism is a western middle class luxury practices (qtd. in Huggan and Tiffin 67). Rich tourists come and spend their money, enjoy the nature, that is all. They are not come with a purpose to conserve the nature, like conservation movements.

Burma tourism is a neocolonialism practice that has a system to commodify the native. Natives are required to help the success of a campaign visit Myanmar. “It was their duty to help win over more tourists as part of the “Visit Myanmar” campaign to change foreign perception of their country” (233). Yet, they do not obtain the benefit from the increased tourism in Burma, but capitalists who get the benefits. Exactly, the increasing tourism is followed by the increasing amount of ecological damage which is resulted from tourism activities.

Conclusion
Karen tribe is depicted as a weak tribe who always try to find their “savior” to out from their isolation. While American tourists come with a wide range of capacities and ready to assist native. As an ethnic minority group in Burma, Karen tribe need western people (American tourists) to help them to alleviate their problems with government (military Junta). According to postcolonial theory that native is always inferior than western is superior. Their capacities must be needed by the native to solve their problems. Natives need western people’s capacities to re-build them.

Native is always be a victim of development. Western people come for all intents and purposes, but their arrival always give a bad impact on native as well as nature. Their ideology of development is not a benefit for native. Those developments create neocolonialism practices which is give disadvantages to the native.

Karen people is being capitalized, they have their own reality show and become popular. However, their reality show is commodified their culture and lifestyle become world spectacle. The real who get benefit is the capitalist, native only an object to get economical benefits. Through the reality show, natives’ culture and lifestyle are exposed, and it could impacting to their cultural changes. Native will not purely stand for their culture, eventually they will imitate western culture because of the frequent interaction between them.

Besides, Ecotourism is being capitalized as well. Ecotourism in Burma is a form of neocolonialism. Its practices are not impacting positively to the native and environment, instead give negative effects. Every activities of ecotourism is endangering the environmental preservation as well as the natives’ existency.

The practices of ecotourism only give benefits to the western as capitalists. And the ecotourism practices are opposite to the ecotourism idealistic view.

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