



Plantationocene and Environmental Crisis: Discussing Cultivation and Neo-Colonialism in the Global South

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Abstract

Postcolonial interpretation of violence inflicted on colonial subjects for crop production has shifted to a neocolonial interpretation because colonization now takes place in a disguised form of neo-ism. Such transfer of subject domination and power relation between subject and the master should be interpreted according to modern day disguised labor coercion. Here the transfer of inspection is thus from colonial exploitation for cultivation of crops to plantation culture. Plantationocene is then an epoch similar to anthropocene where the Global South is locked in a circle of environmental havoc following the notion of development as an idea as established by the Global North. Plantation technique requires harsh policies which has a historical tendency of labour coercion. Such coercions were categorical during colonial era however modern day labour coercion uses techniques of soft power and maneuver. The phenomenon of detrimental extractive processes is prevalent in the Global South countries where these economically weaker countries serve for the Global North countries. To discuss labour coercion and environmental degradation requires parallel discussion of the politics behind creating vulnerable environment for existence of indigenous people leading to quiet erasure of such minority communities, indigenous people being part of the minority communities.

Keywords: Global South, Environmental Crisis, Plantationocene, Post-colonialism, Neocolonialism

Any activity which is anthropogenic meaning activities carried on by humans for the sole purpose of human existence, interacts on a multispecies level causing primarily environmental degradation, plantation being one such anthropocentric activity. Bacteria are one such terraformers as Haraway (2015) points out in *Staying with the Trouble*. The problem with anthropocene lies in the fact that though seed dispersal of plants have existed as part of our planet's historic ecological evolution even before agriculture became a practice that changed our the way we live, the way Anthropocene, Plantationocene, or Capitalocene are interrelated today and its increasing complexity is alarming. What should concern us is asking "when do changes in degree become changes in kind" (Haraway, 2016, p.99) meaning how much change is sufficient to draw our attention to rectify these anthropogenic practices and how does it affect species assemblage and also other biotic and abiotic forces.

The collisions of the Columbian Exchange took place in a thousand different forms, but all had one ultimate result: making the world's ecosystems more and more alike. So widespread was this biological leveling that some scientists now say that Colón's voyages marked the beginning of a new biological era: the Homogenocene. (Mann as

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cited in Orion Magazine, 2011)

Trade today follows ideology governed by homogenocene meaning uniformly blending in multiple cultures into a homogenous culture for example Mindoro is an island in Philippines where the Mangyan, an indigenous tribe saw Chinese and Spanish invasion after which the natives were dispersed and squeezed in to the hills resulting to vanishing of the indigenous cultures, languages and habitat. Homogenizing people of diverse cultures, ethnicity or language is a tool that helps organizations in power to manipulate and control the people at margin such as indigenous or rural communities.

Postcolonial eco-criticism has defined its goal to expose and find alternative to the West's ideology of development. Development is an ambiguous term with multiple connotation varying from person to person and the west particularly uses its "technocratic apparatus" (Huggan and Tiffin, 2010, p.27) to design economies that serve the political interest of the west over the east. Development is therefore an illusionary notion or a myth propagated by the west as "historically produced discourse" (Escobar, 1995 as cited in Huggan and Tiffin, 2010). Such an idea of development is similar to what Edward Said criticizes in his work *Orientalism* that examines the west's preconceived notion of being the best and having the best ideology to be applied on all geographic location for betterment of respective economic conditions or as a matter of fact any developmental goals that is applicable. This phenomenon operates under the disguise of the West's use of concepts like progress and Enlightenment to be later applied on the third world or economically backwards countries forcing them to give in to the capitalistic model of production which without doubt propagates inequality and causes environmental wreckage parallel to adaption of western economic model. (Huggan and Tiffin 2010)

The market, Sen insists, is not just a vehicle of self-interest but an instrument of social justice; and development, similarly, isn't just about 'growth' per se, but about the various mechanisms that promote and protect the quality of human life. (Sen, 2000 as cited in Huggan and Tiffin 2010)

Plantation culture in the Global South doesn't promise social justice for plantation workers particularly because of the notorious low wages and inhumane working conditions. Current concerns about global extractive process have been packaged under a new term sustainable development which questionably takes us back to the question when does a change in certain degree change into the change of the kind. If sustainability comes along with development it is ironic because the idea it propagates is development with restriction enough that such a systematic phenomenon leads to economic development in any country seeking such developmental progression but not so much that it leads to environmental wreckage. But such advance determination of the extent to which development is permissible so as to avoid resources depletion, environmental crisis or endangering species assemblage cannot be done. The line between the degree and the kind is abstract and cannot be determined in advance thus opening up chances of disjoining the sustainable from the development.

As Anna Tsing defines enlightenment, it is a concept created by the white Christian man doubtfully related to any indigenous community who primarily isn't concerned about concepts like enlightenment or development which partly justifies that question of why large "landscape modification projects" (Tsing, 2019 as cited in Mitman, 2019) have been carried out without taking into consideration how such changes affects people living around it or as a

matter of fact any other species. Plantation therefore becomes a legacy of the colonizer which was forced upon by them on lands they had colonized earlier. This phenomenon has now adapted itself very carefully through disguised neo-colonization of the Global North over the Global South giving the Global North sufficient power to control the geopolitical relation between both states. Under the modernly changed circumstances of power abuse of the economically developed over the third world Global South, the Global North gives itself power to determine what is good for third world economies and how they shall develop themselves. In the process Global South becomes the factory of the Global North. However the environmental changes brought along with such development in Global South countries cannot be addressed under same logic used to solve environmental changes in the Global North (Ramachandra Guha, 1989 as cited in Rangarajan, 2018). It is important to understand that each geographic area divided and governed by their natural positioning on distinct latitudes brings different environmental concerns such as the countries positioned near the tropical zones cannot have similar environmental changes compared to the lands near temperate zones.

Donna Haraway draws attention to plantationocene as a new term that criticizes the ways in which agricultural production is done in a world dominated by capitalism. These new techniques of production involves labour coercion and use of detrimental pesticides and insecticides in absence of required regulation direly needed to be imposed by respective governments capacitating plantation farming particularly in the Global South. Plantations are prone to pest invasion because of their monoculture characteristics. She defines it as “an epidemic friendly way of rearranging species life in the world” (Haraway, 2019 as cited in Mitman, 2019) because changes brought about by clearing forests in order to pave way for plantations causes changes to weaker species in a multispecies world. It operates on the science of survival of the fittest where a group thriving by propagating capitalism dominates on the indigenous groups who are rendered voiceless.

In history we have seen implementation of Africans as slave having been brought from Africa for the sole purpose of working as slaves in plantations. Eventually indigenous tribes residing near plantations such as Amazon area during 1920s were incorporated as slaves. What is alarming is that plantation isn't an eco-friendly way of cultivation given the fact that it adopts monoculture and labour coercion. The mischievous sliding of colonialism into neo-colonialism in the name of development and enlightenment most often goes unnoticed.

Before our lives were simple, not rich, but enough. I can't feed my family. I have a baby. I must put food on the table every day. How do I do that when both of us [my husband and I] are not working. Every day I must figure out how to do this. (Bongkang, 2018 as cited in Human Rights Watch, 2018)

These people belong to the indigenous community in Indonesia where oil palm plantation has increased over the decade and as a result once self sufficient people like Bongkang now has to look for alternative mode of earning. Earlier these people could farm off their land which now has been taken away by the government for oil palm plantation. Capitalism has made simple living complex as is in case of indigenous tribes around forests where these people neither understands enlightenment nor wants it. Human Rights Watch has found that most households in Indonesia weren't properly rehabilitated and most often the forests and living areas are bulldozed without prior consultation. The treatment of indigenous communities varies from country to country however plantation culture in the global south is the biggest contributor of neo-colonization by the Global North in the Global South.

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The concept of plantationocene should be considered as an off-shoot of the term anthropocene. Anthropocene refers to an epoch which consists of all human interaction with earth's ecosystem and any geological phenomenon that has been undertaken as a result of human intervention. With industrial revolution came colonization and one characteristic feature of the process of colonization involved the empire state coming to new land destined to be colonized and in the process set up plantations where slaves from the native land were made to work in such plantations. The age of plantationocene coincides with capitalocene making plantation culture attention worthy for its concerning extractives process using labour coercive technique. Both Haraway and Tsing arrive at the centre of the meaning of the new term plantationocene which is relatively a new concept. To understand the meaning of the word we need to focus on the 'cene' in the word. Cene meaning epoch or era which comes up to mean a period of time being defined by its characteristic trait; for plantationocene the trait being the bad extractive process of natural resources that conclusively damages earth and all species living on this planet particularly the one living around such extractive zones. Plantation culture isn't new and definitely not unique to 21st century. Anna Tsing doesn't restrict her idea of the term solely to an era but is inclusive of all suitable conjecture to make the term define what it is. The question then lies at identifying the time when plantation became environmentally detrimental enough that scholars had to start criticizing the process.

Donna Haraway goes further to describe plantation as multispecies forced labor way of cultivation ranging from unequal contract to absolute slavery. Issues pertaining to plantationocene focuses on the intensity of change occurred by them. She coined the term to draw concerns regarding ecologically damaging extractive processes. Plantationocene seen through neo-colonialism exposes disguised labor coercion and environmental damage in the Global South. Plantation cultivation requires harsh policies which has a historical tendency of labour coercion. Such coercions were categorical during colonial era but 21st century labour coercion uses techniques of soft power. Plantation techniques have a pattern of systematic destruction of indigenous culture in Global South countries such as deaths of indigenous people during Amazon Rubber Boom.

Plantation and the idea of its absolute indispensability as has been propagated by the British Empire and consequently the Global North developed nations is a tragic irony of the notion of enlightenment which like the word development as explained earlier varies geographically. Indigenous communities in Global South are the affected groups under plantation industry. These groups of people belong to a different culture and cannot be confused with urban culture. Being people of the forest their everyday life is largely dependent on resources that they gather from forests. When forests are cleared their surrounding environment is detrimentally affected so much so that a healthy or simple living is no more possible.

Plantation being the brainchild of colonialism disperses knowledge and power in a way that gives the centre (Global North) more power and control over the marginalized that is Global South countries and workers of plantations in such countries. Governments and companies use ideas like profit and modernization as illusionary concepts to mould in workers for large scale cash crop farming. If knowledge is political and a tool to fortify social structures, then power that is used to coerce the marginalized using this knowledge is used by the power in the centre that oppresses plantation workers.

Plantation culture thrives on poverty and abundance of labour supply in the Global

South luring cheap labour service at minimum wage and although it creates jobs for large number of people it makes the plantation owners depend largely on the foreign markets where he exports his goods and provides jobs for labourers working in such plantations. They become vulnerable in hands of the Global North Market demands. Plantation agriculture damages the environment through its monoculture techniques. It requires clearing of forest spaces meaning displacement of indigenous people around the forest. When plantation disrupts microclimate around the area or depletes ground water level it affects the people living around it physically.

South America saw rubber cultivation in two phases during 1879-1912 and 1928-1945. Research shows a plantation started with fifty thousand Indians and was later left with only eight thousand workers. The second phase of rubber plantation in South America was started by Henry Ford, the founder of Ford motors which were soon destroyed by leaf blight. This initiated production shift of rubber in South-East Asia such as Vietnam. His main agenda was to produce rubber to meet America's growing automobile industry even if it required making indigenous people work in abysmal conditions. The living conditions of these indigenous groups working in such plantations didn't improve yet they had to work amidst malaria outbreak and other pathogens.

Rubber Plantation was introduced in Tripura in 1963. The government encouraged indigenous people to grow rubber in order to improve their socio-economic status. The rubber plantation culture is based on rational human choice and economic decisions which serves better incentives however it increases government dependency by compelling indigenous communities to abandon self sufficiency. From a plantationocene perspective Tripura's rubber plantation culture is alarming because it is practiced as monoculture making indigenous cultivators quit Jhum, slash-burning and shifting cultivation.

Tripura faces drought like situation during October to March. According to reports there has been an annual deficit of rainfall up to 23.3% leading to groundwater level depletion. Moreover usage of water to produce Ribbed Smoke Sheet mainly used to produce tires is bound to increase due to rise in average atmospheric temperature. Such rubber productions also lead to emission of CO₂, CH₄ and Sox starting from latex tapping to tire production. For example 144896 kiloliter of latex contains 89637 kiloliter of water making it a 62% content of water (Majumder, 2014 pp. 768-779). Truth is rubber plantations look like forests but aren't forests and is grown as monoculture. Rubber is a growing industry so the adverse effect of rubber plantation is only up for an increase. Monoculture of cash crop also affects surrounding biodiversity.

The Tripura Government introduced Rubber Plantation Scheme aiming to provide land for agricultural practices to the shifting cultivators and indigenous people. The beneficiaries started working as daily wage laborers in such rubber plantation where the government provides them with free seedlings and soft loans for the plantation work. They mortgage their lands to the Rubber Corporation until their loans are repaid. To produce latex from these plantations require six to seven years driving them to work as daily wage labourers before they can start paying for the loans and finally own the plantation. The problem in the long run that some scholars have identified is that the cultivators continue working as laborers failing to recognize themselves as plantation owners. A research conducted to test the satisfaction level of these indigenous people shifting from Jhum cultivation to Plantation culture showed that almost 92% of the respondents were unhappy with the change. These cultivators weren't happy to quit their cultural practices that are integrally associated with shifting cultivation. (Ghosh, 2019) Rubber Plantation in Tripura is

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marked with extensive labour absorption contributing to the overall state GDP. Recently newer payment methods have been emerging. Wages are being replaced by sharing of output similar to share cropping tradition. Although large numbers of labourers are employed it is characterized by informal working contracts and low wages.

Current banana production technique in Ecuador is similar to Banana Massacre caused by United Fruit Company in 1928, Columbia. Ecuador produces bananas under questionable circumstances particularly involving unfair treatment towards laborers and use of child laborers. Investigations have found presence of calixin and organophosphates in water samples around the area. Ethoprophos and chlorpyrifos have been found in the pesticides and insecticides used in banana trees. Ecuador also faces higher tariffs from European Union who is the largest importer of Bananas facing threat from its competitors such as Columbia leaving Ecuadorian markets at the disposal of the Global North (EU). Today's plantation trend in the Global South operates under neo-colonialism. India's rubber plantation schemes have comparatively improved socio-economic status of people in Tripura where as Ecuadorian banana plantations continue to exploit their plantation workers.

A healthy biodiversity is a contribution of shared living among all species. Palm oil is cultivated as monoculture leaving thousands of hectares of palm susceptible to disease therefore becoming easy prey to pests such as in case of South American leaf blight in the rubber plantations. Monoculture also causes faster exhaustion of soil nutrients, affects ground water level and surrounding biodiversity and disrupts healthy habitat around it. Because palm cultivation produces more oil than canola or sunflower its demand is on the rise. As a result deforestation is on the rise for creating land for oil palm cultivation. Any deforestation has adverse effects on microclimate around the region and on local habitat around such plantations. Increasing deforestation means forcing wildlife residing in those forests to squeeze in a smaller area contrary to how they had been living earlier before forests were cut down. Palm Oil plantation in Indonesia has rendered the Sumatran Orangutan critically endangered.

Orangutans are native to places in South-east Asia like Malaysia and Indonesia. They move from tree to tree avoiding the ground and love to live in solitude. Agricultural practices like plantation farming in Borneo where the orangutans are native has led to displacement as forests where these animals live have been cut down to meet rising demand of agricultural land for oil palm plantation. Although some orangutans are rehabilitated it disrupts their natural habitat (Husson et al. 2016 as cited in Parreñas, 2018). The International Union for Conservation of Nature assesses status of endangerment and extinction of all species and their 2016 report shows reason for current Orangutan endangerment. Destruction of habitat and hunting are the two primary reasons for decrease in number of Orangutan. Quantified data tells that orangutans are hunted down when they raid farm land, the most common raiding occurs at monoculture plantations. Orangutans can still coexist with such farming practices if alternative sufficient living space is given for remaining wild orangutans. These animals are important because of their seed dispersal function that helps in maintaining the health of the forests. This in turn helps in survival of other animals related to the particular ecosystem in which the orangutans live. However as more forest lands are cut down for the growing oil palm industry in Indonesia, orangutans have become endangered causing a wreck of the ecosystem in the area (Ancrenaz and Lackman-Ancrenaz, 2004 as cited in Parreñas, 2018)

While colonialism was associated with European countries particularly England, the

ideology of colonization still remains. Global North countries are economically developed related to imperialism, strategically leaving out Global South countries they have colonised in the past. This division testifies existence of colonialism in form of neo-colonialism. The Global North-South division makes the South a warehouse of the North with cognizable plantationocene trends in the South. These enterprises of power have multiple centres such as North versus South and South versus plantation workers. This leads to existence of multiple centres, rise of neo-colonialism, increase in exploitation of the plantation workers and degradation of the environment.

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Bio-note

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