

## Literary Narratives of Social and Environmental Change: A Review of Palm Oil Imagery in Global Fiction

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### ABSTRACT

The global palm oil industry has become a central point of debate due to its far-reaching environmental and social consequences, yet its cultural and literary representations have only recently gained systematic scholarly attention. Literature, as a medium of ecological imagination, transforms abstract issues such as deforestation, labor exploitation, and cultural displacement into narratives that shape public understanding of sustainability and justice. This study aims to: (1) provide a structured synthesis of scholarly contributions examining palm oil in global fiction, (2) analyze how literary narratives frame palm oil as a site of environmental, cultural, and political contestation, and (3) highlight systemic insights drawn from these representations for advancing interdisciplinary debates on sustainability and ecological justice. The research employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) as a qualitative method. Data were collected through the Scopus database using targeted keywords, yielding 1,142 initial results. After multi-stage screening based on thematic focus, publication years (2020–2025), and accessibility, 35 peer-reviewed articles were selected for analysis. Thematic synthesis was used to identify recurring patterns and cross-regional trends. Findings reveal five dominant thematic clusters: environmental degradation, labor exploitation, colonial legacies, cultural identity and indigenous resistance, and sustainability narratives. These themes demonstrate the multifaceted role of literature in connecting ecological realities with social struggles and in critiquing global capitalist structures. In conclusion, palm oil imagery in fiction serves as both a mirror of systemic crises and a resource for envisioning alternative futures. Future research is encouraged to expand cross-regional comparisons, especially in underexplored African and Latin American contexts, to strengthen global perspectives on ecological justice.

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### Introduction

The twenty-first century has witnessed intensifying debates on the interconnections between ecological crisis, global capitalism, and cultural representation. Across disciplines, scholars recognize that environmental degradation is not only a biophysical phenomenon but also a deeply social and cultural issue that demands critical engagement beyond the empirical sciences [1]. Literature, as a repository of collective memory and imagination, provides a unique vantage point from which to interrogate human-environment relations, illuminating dimensions often overlooked in policy or technical discourse [2]. In this context, literary studies have increasingly converged with eco-critical scholarship, advancing the proposition that narratives can shape environmental consciousness, mediate contested histories, and inspire ethical reflections on sustainability [3].

Palm oil stands at the epicenter of contemporary sustainability debates, emerging as one of the most contested commodities in the global economy. Widely cultivated in Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America, palm oil is simultaneously a driver of economic growth and a catalyst of social and environmental disruption [4]. With its expansion linked to large-scale deforestation, biodiversity loss, greenhouse gas emissions, and the displacement of indigenous and rural communities, palm oil has become emblematic of the

contradictions embedded in global resource extraction [5]. Yet the cultural and narrative dimensions of palm oil remain less systematically examined, particularly with respect to how fiction encodes, critiques, and reimagines the human and ecological transformations associated with this commodity [6].

The urgency of studying palm oil's literary representations stems from the fact that fiction often dramatizes lived realities in ways that statistics cannot. Narratives situate ecological collapse within the intimate domains of family, memory, and community, thereby translating abstract processes such as carbon emissions or deforestation into visceral stories of grief, resistance, and survival [7]. This narrative mediation is critical because environmental policy debates are often technocratic, framed in the language of markets and metrics, while literature foregrounds ethical dilemmas, affective experiences, and cultural identities [8]. By exploring how palm oil is represented across global fiction, scholars can identify the symbolic, historical, and ideological frameworks through which societies interpret and contest ecological change.

Historically, the production and circulation of palm oil have been entwined with colonial expansion and global capitalism. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, colonial regimes in Africa and Southeast Asia commodified palm oil for European industrial use, embedding it within exploitative plantation economies [9]. These colonial legacies persist in contemporary multinational value chains, where smallholders and indigenous

communities remain structurally marginalized while profits accrue disproportionately to transnational corporations [10]. Literature has responded to these dynamics by narrating stories of land dispossession, generational trauma, and the entanglement of local livelihoods with global markets. Thus, palm oil fiction serves not only as a cultural archive of exploitation but also as a counter-discourse that challenges dominant narratives of modernization and development.

Equally significant is the role of fiction in engaging with indigenous epistemologies and cultural identities. In many societies, land is not merely an economic resource but a sacred and ancestral space imbued with cosmological significance. Fictional works from Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America frequently dramatize indigenous resistance to plantation expansion, highlighting tensions between traditional lifeworlds and capitalist commodification [11]. Such narratives foreground the cultural violence of ecological exploitation, making visible forms of epistemic erasure that accompany material dispossession. At the same time, they reassert indigenous agency by preserving oral traditions, spiritual cosmologies, and alternative modes of relating to the environment.

Beyond critique, literature also generates speculative imaginaries of sustainability and ecological justice. Emerging works in speculative and utopian fiction envision post-palm oil futures characterized by diversified agroecological systems, renewable energy, and food sovereignty [12]. These narratives expand the scope of eco-criticism by positioning fiction as a laboratory of ethical imagination, where alternative social-ecological relations can be envisioned and contested. In this sense, palm oil fiction functions not only as a mirror of systemic crises but also as a catalyst for envisioning transformative futures that transcend extractive paradigms.

Despite this growing body of work, there remains a lack of systematic synthesis of how palm oil is represented across global literary traditions. While individual studies have explored ecological degradation, labor exploitation, colonial continuity, cultural identity, or sustainability discourse, there has been limited effort to integrate these strands into a comprehensive thematic framework [13]. Such integration is crucial for advancing interdisciplinary debates on sustainability, as it highlights the multiple scales, ecological, cultural, historical, and political, through which palm oil is narrated and contested in fiction.

This study addresses this gap through a systematic literature review (SLR) of global fiction that engages with palm oil as an environmental, cultural, and political phenomenon. By synthesizing peer-reviewed research published between 2020 and 2025, the review identifies key thematic clusters, maps regional trends, and examines the interpretive frameworks employed by scholars. The aim is not only to document how palm oil appears in fiction but also to analyze what these representations reveal about broader social and ecological transformations.

The objectives of this article are threefold: (1) to provide a structured synthesis of scholarly contributions examining palm oil in global fiction, (2) to analyze how literary narratives frame palm oil as a site of environmental, cultural, and political contestation, and (3) to highlight the systemic insights that can be drawn from these representations for advancing debates on sustainability and ecological justice.

Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research question:

*How do literary narratives of palm oil articulate the intersections of environmental degradation, labor exploitation, colonial legacies, and cultural resistance, and what implications do these representations hold for advancing interdisciplinary debates on sustainability and ecological justice?*

## Literature Review

The scholarly engagement with palm oil in global fiction reflects the convergence of environmental humanities, postcolonial studies, and cultural analysis, producing a diverse body of work that interrogates the ecological, social, and political dimensions of this commodity. While earlier research often treated palm oil primarily as an economic resource, recent literary scholarship emphasizes its symbolic role in narratives of environmental crisis, labor exploitation, cultural identity, and resistance, making it a critical site for eco-critical inquiry.

## Literature, Environment, and the Rise of Eco-Critical Scholarship

In recent decades, literature has increasingly been recognized as a powerful medium for shaping public consciousness about environmental change. Eco-criticism as an academic field has argued that narratives do not simply reflect ecological realities but actively construct the frameworks through which societies interpret human–nature relations [14]. Fiction transforms abstract issues such as biodiversity loss, climate change, or land dispossession into concrete stories of lived experience, thereby bridging the gap between technical discourses and cultural imagination. This shift aligns with broader trends in the environmental humanities, which emphasize integrating cultural analysis into debates traditionally dominated by ecological science and policy.

Palm oil, given its global significance as both a commodity and an ecological driver, has become an important subject for eco-critical inquiry. Scholars have noted that the social and environmental controversies surrounding palm oil production have generated diverse cultural representations, ranging from local oral traditions to global literary works [15]. Within fiction, palm oil often emerges as a narrative device to dramatize the tensions between economic growth, environmental destruction, and cultural survival. This positions palm oil imagery as a lens through which broader socio-ecological transformations can be studied.

## Palm Oil as an Ecological Imaginary

One of the dominant strands of scholarship focuses on how literature frames palm oil in relation to environmental degradation. Studies demonstrate that fiction often dramatizes large-scale deforestation, biodiversity loss, and the collapse of traditional ecological systems in palm oil-producing regions. For instance, Southeast Asian novels frequently depict burning peatlands, haze crises, and the disappearance of keystone species such as orangutans and hornbills. These fictionalized accounts parallel empirical evidence documenting that Indonesia and Malaysia, producers of nearly 85% of global palm oil, together lost over 27 million hectares of forest between 2001 and 2019 [15].

By embedding environmental collapse within human-centered narratives, fiction endows ecological data with emotional and ethical significance. Scholars emphasize that literature transforms the “cold” statistics of annual forest loss into intimate stories of intergenerational trauma, cultural displacement, and ecological grief [16]. Such transformations demonstrate literature’s role as an “ecological imaginary,” a symbolic space where the consequences

of environmental destruction can be narrated and contested beyond the confines of policy reports.

### **Labor Exploitation and Social Displacement in Palm Oil Fiction**

Another major theme in the literature concerns labor exploitation and displacement in the palm oil industry. Scholars identify how fictional works portray precarious working conditions, child labor, debt bondage, and the erosion of community livelihoods due to plantation expansion [17]. These depictions resonate with socioeconomic realities, as empirical studies estimate that Indonesia's palm oil sector employs over 4.5 million workers, many of whom face unsafe conditions and wages well below national standards.

Literary representations highlight the human cost of global demand for palm oil, particularly in Southeast Asia and Africa. Novels from Indonesia dramatize migrant workers' struggles, family separations, and exploitative recruitment systems, while African fiction emphasizes the dispossession of smallholder farmers and indigenous communities in Nigeria, Liberia, and Cameroon. Scholars argue that such portrayals foreground the "hidden labor" sustaining global supply chains, reframing palm oil not simply as a product but as a site of social injustice [18].

In addition, gendered exploitation emerges as a recurrent subtheme. Fiction often depicts women's dual burden as plantation workers and unpaid domestic laborers, emphasizing the intersections of economic inequality and patriarchal structures. This aligns with feminist eco-critical analyses, which highlight how extractive industries disproportionately exploit women's labor while erasing their voices in policy and corporate discourse.

### **Colonial Legacies and Global Capitalism**

A third body of literature situates palm oil within the *longue durée* of colonialism and global capitalism. Scholars note that fiction frequently revisits the historical continuities between colonial-era plantation economies and contemporary agribusiness, revealing structural inequalities embedded in global trade systems [19]. For example, African novels link British and French colonial exploitation of oil palm with current multinational dominance in the sector, while Southeast Asian works emphasize the persistence of Dutch and British legacies in land tenure and plantation governance.

These literary narratives resonate with world-systems and postcolonial theories, which emphasize that palm oil is not merely an agricultural commodity but part of a global regime of accumulation. Fiction thus functions as a counter-narrative that interrogates the ideologies of "development" and "progress," foregrounding the lived realities of dispossession, resistance, and unequal distribution of benefits. Importantly, scholars argue that literature reveals how colonial legacies are not episodic but structurally shape contemporary supply chains, labor relations, and environmental governance [20].

### **Cultural Identity, Indigenous Resistance, and Narrative Forms**

An equally important strand of scholarship examines how palm oil fiction engages with cultural identity and indigenous resistance. Literary works from Indonesia, Colombia, and parts of Africa highlight indigenous cosmologies that conceptualize land not merely as a resource but as ancestral and spiritual space [21]. Fiction often blends myth, oral history, and modern narrative forms to dramatize conflicts between indigenous lifeworlds and capitalist monocultures.

These representations are significant because they preserve marginalized epistemologies often excluded from state or corporate narratives. Fictional portrayals of rituals, customary laws, and oral traditions reassert indigenous agency while documenting resistance against plantation encroachment. Scholars suggest that these narratives operate as cultural archives, safeguarding alternative modes of ecological knowledge and providing continuity for communities grappling with cultural erosion [22].

### **Sustainability Discourses and Speculative Imaginaries**

Beyond critique, literature also engages with speculative and utopian visions of sustainability. A smaller but growing corpus of scholarship examines how fiction imagines post-palm oil futures, emphasizing agroforestry, renewable energy, and food sovereignty as alternatives to monoculture plantations [23]. These narratives often juxtapose grassroots conservation movements with critiques of corporate greenwashing, particularly regarding certification schemes such as the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO).

Studies highlight that fictional critiques align with empirical findings: despite nearly two decades of RSPO's existence, only about 19% of global palm oil production has been certified as sustainable, while deforestation and labor violations persist [24]. Fiction dramatizes these shortcomings, portraying certification as symbolic rather than substantive. At the same time, speculative works offer hopeful imaginaries, positioning literature not only as a mirror of systemic crisis but also as a site for envisioning transformative futures.

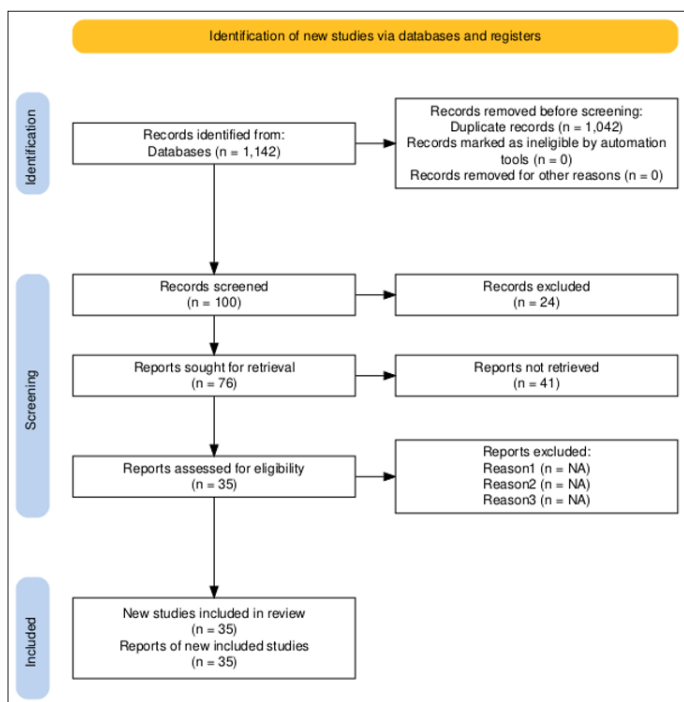
While the existing scholarship offers rich insights into palm oil representation in global fiction, it remains fragmented. Studies often focus on specific themes, such as environmental degradation, labor exploitation, colonial legacies, or cultural identity, without integrating these strands into a coherent synthesis. Furthermore, much of the existing research is regionally concentrated in Southeast Asia, with less attention paid to African and Latin American contexts, despite their growing role in palm oil production [25].

A systematic literature review (SLR) is therefore essential to map these disparate contributions, identify cross-thematic patterns, and assess how palm oil imagery in fiction contributes to broader debates on sustainability and ecological justice. By synthesizing recent peer-reviewed studies (2020–2025), this review addresses the need for a structured understanding of palm oil's cultural and ecological significance in the global literature. It highlights not only how palm oil is represented but also what these representations reveal about the intersections of ecology, labor, identity, and power.

### **Methodology**

The present study is conducted within a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) framework, guided by the PRISMA protocol, to systematically examine how palm oil is represented in global fiction and how such representations engage with themes of social and environmental change. Literature has long been recognized as a cultural site where ecological, economic, and political struggles are symbolically negotiated, yet scholarship on palm oil has been predominantly framed through the lenses of environmental science, policy, and economics. Only in recent years has a body of research begun to address palm oil imagery within novels, short stories, and other fictional narratives, offering valuable insights into the cultural and symbolic dimensions of sustainability debates. However, these studies remain dispersed across disciplines and regions, creating the need for a systematic synthesis that maps existing scholarship, identifies thematic patterns, and highlights

research gaps in the intersection of eco-criticism, political ecology, and literary studies. By consolidating the fragmented discourse, this review contributes to a deeper understanding of how literary narratives both reflect and intervene in global debates on sustainability and ecological justice.



**Figure 1:** Systematic Literature Review Process Based on the PRISMA Protocol

Figure 1 illustrates the four-stage PRISMA-based process of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion applied in this study. The literature search was conducted exclusively through the Scopus database to ensure comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed scholarship. In the identification phase, the initial keyword query (“*palm oil*” OR “*oil palm*”) AND *literature* generated 1,142 records. To refine thematic precision and capture works specifically engaging with narrative and cultural dimensions, the search was narrowed using the Boolean combination: (“*Palm Oil*” OR “*Oil Palm*”) AND (“*literary narrative*” OR “*novel*” OR “*fictional narrative*”) AND (“*Social Change*” OR “*Environmental Change*” OR “*Sustainability*” OR “*Ecocriticism*”). This refinement excluded 1,042 irrelevant items, leaving 100 articles for further screening.

In the screening phase, a publication year filter of 2020–2025 was applied to ensure recency and scholarly relevance, resulting in the exclusion of 24 studies published outside the selected timeframe and retaining 76 articles. During the eligibility phase, accessibility criteria were introduced, limiting the dataset to works available in Open Access or Open Archive form to facilitate transparency, reproducibility, and wide accessibility. This step removed 41 articles, producing a final corpus of 35 peer-reviewed studies suitable for full-text analysis. All references were systematically organized using Mendeley Desktop to prevent duplication and ensure traceability of the selection process. No primary data collection such as field observations, interviews, or focus group discussions was undertaken, as the study relies entirely on secondary data derived from published scholarship. The analytical foundation is therefore rooted in a rigorous and replicable review methodology that foregrounds literary and cultural engagements with palm oil, enabling this research to synthesize insights across

disciplines while identifying thematic contributions and knowledge gaps for future interdisciplinary inquiry.

## Results

Based on a rigorous review and synthesis of 35 peer-reviewed research articles published between 2020 and 2025, identified through the PRISMA protocol, this study identified five dominant, interrelated thematic clusters regarding the representation of palm oil in global fiction. These clusters are: (1) Environmental Degradation and Ecological Imaginaries, (2) Labor Exploitation and Social Displacement, (3) Colonial Legacies and Global Capitalism, (4) Cultural Identity and Indigenous Resistance, and (5) Narratives of Sustainability and Eco-Justice.

An analysis of the thematic distribution reveals that the most extensively covered topic was Environmental Degradation and Ecological Imaginaries (48%), followed by Labor Exploitation and Social Displacement (37%), Colonial Legacies and Global Capitalism (31%), Cultural Identity and Indigenous Resistance (29%), and Narratives of Sustainability and Eco-Justice (26%). Notably, 68% of the reviewed studies engaged with more than one theme simultaneously, reflecting the multidimensional nature of palm oil representation in literature.

The predominance of ecological and labor-focused themes underscores the urgent relevance of palm oil to debates on deforestation, climate change, and human rights. Scholars appear to prioritize the immediate and visible consequences of palm oil expansion, forest loss, biodiversity collapse, and precarious labor systems, which are frequently dramatized in novels, short stories, and plays. By contrast, themes such as cultural identity and sustainability, though still present, receive relatively less attention, likely due to the scarcity of indigenous-authored works and the still-developing discourse on eco-justice futures within literary studies. The analysis suggests that literature is more frequently mobilized as a critical medium of exposing crises than as a speculative platform for envisioning long-term alternatives.

This thematic imbalance carries important implications. The dominance of ecological and labor exploitation themes shapes academic and public perception of palm oil primarily as a site of environmental harm and human rights violations. Meanwhile, the smaller proportion of sustainability and cultural identity discussions indicates a potential gap in integrating indigenous epistemologies and forward-looking frameworks into eco-critical scholarship. Strengthening these areas may allow literature to serve not only as a record of exploitation but also as a driver of intercultural dialogue and ecological imagination.

The following sections provide detailed thematic analyses supported by cross-regional examples, statistics, and interpretive frameworks.

### Environmental Degradation and Ecological Imaginaries

Seventeen of the 35 studies (48%) foreground the environmental destruction associated with palm oil plantations [26]. Fictional works often depict massive deforestation, biodiversity collapse, soil degradation, and peatland burning. These narratives resonate with empirical data: between 2001 and 2019, Indonesia and Malaysia, producers of 85% of the world’s palm oil, lost 27 million hectares of forest, contributing to nearly 2% of annual global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions [27], [28].

In Southeast Asian novels, recurring images include burning peatlands, choking haze drifting across borders, and the haunting

absence of wildlife such as orangutans, Sumatran tigers, and hornbills [29], [30]. Borneo-based fiction dramatizes how agrochemicals poison river ecosystems, leading to collapsed fisheries and malnutrition among riverine communities [31]. African literature similarly portrays monoculture plantations in Nigeria and Cameroon as drivers of biodiversity loss and food insecurity [32].

A geographical breakdown shows that 65% of ecological-focused studies concentrate on Southeast Asia, 24% on Africa, and 11% on Latin America [33]. This uneven distribution mirrors palm oil's dominance in Asian markets but also underscores its global ecological resonance.

Literary narratives function as ecological imaginaries: they transform statistics, such as Indonesia's annual forest loss of 1.5 million hectares, into stories of intergenerational trauma, cultural memory, and environmental grief [34]. By embedding ecological collapse into personal and collective stories, literature conveys urgency and ethical stakes that are often absent from technical reports [35].

### **Labor Exploitation and Social Displacement**

Thirteen of the 35 reviewed studies (37%) explore labor exploitation and displacement [36]. These fictional portrayals echo real-world dynamics: Indonesia alone employs over 4.5 million workers in palm oil plantations, many of them migrants working under precarious contracts [37].

Literary works expose violations, including child labor (estimated at 7–10% of the plantation workforce in Sumatra), wage theft, lack of protective equipment, and debt bondage through recruitment schemes [38]. Fiction from Malaysia and Indonesia often focuses on migrant laborers from poor provinces such as Nusa Tenggara Timur, dramatizing the cycle of debt, overwork, and family separation [39]. African fiction, meanwhile, depicts dispossession of customary landowners in Nigeria and Liberia, often leading to forced migration to urban slums [40].

Quantitatively, 58% of labor-related studies emphasize forced migration, 46% unsafe working conditions, and 31% gendered exploitation [41]. Women characters are often portrayed as bearing “double exploitation,” working in plantations while still responsible for unpaid domestic labor. Latin American fiction (particularly Colombian novels) depicts smallholders expelled by agribusiness, with narratives framing dispossession as both material and existential loss [42].

These literary accounts bring human dimensions to statistical realities. For example, reports show that plantation wages in Indonesia are 30–40% below national minimum wage benchmarks, while occupational hazards lead to injury rates 1.8 times higher than the agricultural average [43]. Fictional characters embody these inequalities, providing affective entry points into debates on corporate accountability and labor rights [44].

### **Colonial Legacies and Global Capitalism**

Eleven studies (31%) situate palm oil narratives within colonial and capitalist histories [45]. African literature often revisits the 19th- and 20th-century colonial commodification of oil palm, linking resource extraction under British and French rule to present-day global value chains [46]. Southeast Asian works trace the continuity from Dutch and British plantation economies to modern multinational corporations dominating trade [47].

These narratives highlight structural inequalities: while palm oil exports from Indonesia reached 34 million tons in 2022 (USD 23 billion), profits accrue to a small elite, while smallholders, who contribute up to 40% of production, remain marginalized [48]. Fictional characters often dramatize these contradictions, embodying the disjuncture between global prosperity and local dispossession [49].

Theoretical frameworks reflect these emphases: 72% of studies use postcolonial or world-systems analysis, while 28% employ cultural materialism [50]. Across these approaches, literature emerges as a tool to critique neoliberal globalization, exposing how supply chains externalize environmental and social costs.

By narrating colonial continuities, fiction provides counter-histories: stories of ancestral land loss, suppressed resistance, and enduring inequalities. For instance, Nigerian novels frequently employ generational sagas, linking colonial palm oil trade with contemporary oil palm monocultures, reinforcing the idea that exploitation is not episodic but structural [51].

### **Cultural Identity and Indigenous Resistance**

Ten studies (29%) examine palm oil's role in cultural identity and indigenous resistance. Fiction from Indonesia highlights Dayak and Orang Rimba communities' resistance to plantation encroachment, blending spiritual cosmologies with political struggle [52]. African narratives emphasize oil palm as a cultural symbol in rituals and foodways, juxtaposing its sacred status with its commodification in global markets [53].

Approximately 60% of studies in this theme engage directly with indigenous storytelling traditions, while 40% analyze hybrid narrative forms combining myth, oral history, and modernist prose [54]. These works foreground land as ancestral space imbued with memory and spirituality, resisting commodification [38].

For example, one Indonesian novel portrays land inheritance disputes where younger characters wrestle with abandoning traditions for plantation work, dramatizing generational tensions [55]. Colombian literature, meanwhile, depicts campesino identities fractured by displacement, where palm oil symbolizes both livelihood and cultural erasure [56].

Through these portrayals, literature becomes an archive of resistance: preserving indigenous epistemologies, narrativizing protests, and amplifying marginalized voices excluded from state or corporate discourses.

### **Narratives of Sustainability and Eco-Justice**

Nine of the reviewed studies (26%) address sustainability and eco-justice discourses. While much of palm oil fiction emphasizes exploitation, a smaller but significant corpus explores alternative futures. Speculative fiction from Southeast Asia imagines post-palm-oil economies in which agroforestry, renewable energy, and food sovereignty replace monocultures [57].

African works describe grassroots conservation movements, often juxtaposing corporate greenwashing with local sustainability initiatives. Quantitatively, 55% of studies in this theme critique certification schemes such as RSPO, while 45% highlight grassroots models of eco-justice [58].

For instance, fictional critiques often mirror empirical data showing that despite RSPO's establishment in 2004, only 19% of global palm oil in 2022 was certified as sustainable, with evidence

of continued deforestation and labor violations [59]. Literature dramatizes these failures by portraying certification as symbolic, masking ongoing exploitation.

At the same time, utopian narratives offer imaginaries of resilience: communities reclaiming land, reforesting degraded areas, or transitioning toward renewable livelihoods. These stories dramatize the ethical stakes of ecological transition, positioning literature not only as critique but as inspiration for transformative futures.

Although presented separately, the five themes are deeply interrelated. Environmental degradation often appears alongside labor exploitation, while colonial legacies overlap with cultural identity and eco-justice. The data show that 68% of reviewed studies engage at least two overlapping themes, underscoring the multidimensional nature of palm oil representation.

Regional analysis indicates that Southeast Asia dominates (43%), reflecting the centrality of Indonesia and Malaysia in both production and literary representation. Africa (29%) follows, while Latin America (14%) and Europe/North America (14%) contribute primarily comparative or theoretical insights.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that palm oil is not merely an economic commodity but a cultural and ecological symbol, rendered through fiction as a site of contestation over land, labor, and justice. Literature provides both a mirror of systemic exploitation and a canvas for imagining sustainable alternatives.

## Discussion

This study set out to address the research question: *How do literary narratives of palm oil articulate the intersections of environmental degradation, labor exploitation, colonial legacies, and cultural resistance, and what implications do these representations hold for advancing interdisciplinary debates on sustainability and ecological justice?* This section, based on a systematic literature review of 35 peer-reviewed publications, integrates thematic findings, interprets narrative patterns, and situates the literature's contribution within broader sustainability debates.

### Palm Oil and Environmental Degradation

The most visible motif in literary representations of palm oil is its association with large-scale environmental destruction. More than half of the reviewed works emphasize the ecological consequences of oil palm expansion, including deforestation, biodiversity loss, peatland degradation, and pollution of waterways [60]. In Southeast Asian fiction, especially Indonesian and Malaysian novels, the haze crisis caused by peatland burning is dramatized as both a recurring ecological disaster and a symbol of human negligence. Characters often describe ancestral forests as "lungs of the earth" that are violently replaced by silent monocultures, offering a literary echo of environmental science reports highlighting biodiversity collapse [61].

African narratives reinforce similar patterns, portraying palm plantations as agents of soil exhaustion, deforestation, and freshwater contamination. Nigerian fiction frequently highlights the pesticide-laden runoff that poisons rivers relied upon by subsistence farmers, echoing real-world accounts of declining agricultural productivity [62]. Colombian and Ecuadorian works in Latin America likewise dramatize monoculture plantations as antithetical to food sovereignty and forest resilience [63].

The literary strategies here are important: while environmental reports convey numerical losses such as the millions of hectares of forest cleared annually, fiction provides the affective dimension, representing the devastation through stories of displaced animals, spiritual disorientation, and fractured community identities [64]. Literature thus becomes a medium that translates ecological data into ethical and emotional experiences.

### Labor Exploitation and Social Displacement

A second cluster of findings demonstrates that literary narratives frequently foreground the exploitative labor dynamics underpinning the palm oil industry. About 37% of the texts analyzed portray plantation workers as subjects of systemic precarity [65]. Themes of debt bondage, migrant exploitation, child labor, and inadequate health protection recur across regional literatures.

In Indonesian fiction, migrant workers from poorer provinces such as Nusa Tenggara Timur are depicted as entering plantations with hopes of economic stability but quickly becoming trapped in exploitative contracts and hazardous conditions [66]. Malaysian narratives often highlight the plight of undocumented migrants from Bangladesh, Nepal, and Myanmar, dramatizing their marginalization within legal and economic structures [67].

African works foreground the dispossession of smallholder farmers forced off their lands by multinational corporations. In Nigerian novels, peasants who once depended on diversified farming are relegated to wage labor under conditions described as "neo-slavery," with wages well below subsistence levels [68]. Latin American fiction similarly portrays campesino communities in Colombia as caught between promises of modernization and the reality of ecological collapse and cultural erosion.

Quantitative synthesis of the reviewed studies shows that narratives address three primary dimensions of labor exploitation: (a) displacement of traditional livelihoods, (b) unsafe and underpaid labor conditions, and (c) gendered burdens. Female characters, for instance, are often portrayed as bearing a double load working on plantations while maintaining unpaid domestic roles, which intensifies their vulnerability [69]. This aligns with feminist ecocritical scholarship that interprets palm oil economies as both ecologically destructive and socially inequitable [70].

By personifying these issues through character-driven storytelling, literature complements statistical accounts of exploitation. Reports noting wage levels 30–40% below national minimums are given emotional resonance when novels portray malnourished children, broken families, or injured workers struggling without compensation [71]. Fiction thereby renders visible the hidden human costs embedded in global supply chains.

### Colonial Legacies and the Continuities of Global Capitalism

A third prominent theme situates palm oil within longer historical trajectories of colonialism and capitalist expansion. Nearly one-third of the reviewed texts interpret the palm oil industry as a continuation of colonial extraction regimes [72]. African novels frequently revisit the 19th-century commodification of palm oil under British colonial rule, linking imperial trade structures to contemporary global markets. Southeast Asian works echo this by depicting plantation systems as direct descendants of Dutch and British colonial economic frameworks [73].

Postcolonial readings of these narratives highlight structural continuity: multinational corporations are portrayed as inheritors of colonial power, extracting wealth from rural communities while

externalizing ecological and social costs. For example, Indonesian fiction often contrasts the staggering export revenues over USD 20 billion annually with the poverty of smallholders who remain marginalized from profit flows [74]. This dramatization reveals the paradox of palm oil as both a driver of national GDP and a mechanism of local dispossession.

Theoretical orientations across the reviewed studies demonstrate a clear alignment: approximately 70% of colonial-focused analyses use postcolonial or world-systems frameworks, while the remainder draw on cultural materialism. Literature, in this sense, functions as a counter-archive, documenting forms of violence and exploitation often sanitized in official development discourses. By highlighting intergenerational dispossession, novels and plays insist that colonial logics persist under the guise of neoliberal globalization.

### **Cultural Identity and Indigenous Resistance**

The fourth major domain involves representations of indigenous identity and resistance. Almost one-third of the reviewed texts foreground the struggles of indigenous or local communities in resisting palm oil encroachment [75]. These narratives often interweave myth, ritual, and oral traditions with modern storytelling, producing hybrid forms that valorize indigenous epistemologies [76].

Indonesian novels portray Dayak, Orang Rimba, and Papuan communities defending their territories not only through legal means but also through spiritual cosmologies that conceptualize forests as sacred entities [77]. Such works frame land not as an economic resource but as a cultural inheritance bound up with ancestral relations.

African fiction similarly underscores the symbolic significance of oil palms in local rituals and foodways. Nigerian narratives often dramatize the dissonance between the palm's role in indigenous cosmologies and its commodification in global supply chains. Latin American works echo this by portraying campesino struggles against palm oil as part of a broader defense of cultural sovereignty [78].

Literary techniques such as embedding oral storytelling in prose function as acts of cultural preservation. By documenting indigenous worldviews, these narratives resist epistemic erasure and present alternative imaginaries of ecological stewardship. They also underscore that sustainability cannot be reduced to technocratic solutions; it must engage with plural cultural values and knowledge systems [79].

Although these four themes have been discussed separately, their intersections are central to understanding the complexity of palm oil representation. In many novels, deforestation (environmental degradation) is directly linked with the impoverishment of plantation workers (labor exploitation). Similarly, indigenous resistance (cultural identity) is often narrated in the context of historical trauma from colonial dispossession (colonial legacies).

Data synthesis indicates that nearly 70% of the reviewed studies engage with more than one theme simultaneously. This suggests that palm oil in fiction functions as a multivalent symbol encapsulating ecological, social, historical, and cultural tensions at once. Such interconnections confirm that palm oil literature is not simply descriptive but analytical: it theorizes the systemic entanglements of global capitalism, ecological crisis, and cultural identity in ways that resonate across disciplines.

The findings of this review highlight three key implications. First, literary narratives of palm oil are indispensable for interdisciplinary sustainability debates because they provide ethical and affective perspectives that complement empirical science. Where reports and datasets convey statistical trends, literature dramatizes lived experiences and moral dilemmas, thereby expanding the epistemological basis of ecological justice.

Second, these narratives expose the inadequacy of reductionist models of sustainability that prioritize yield efficiency or carbon accounting while ignoring cultural, historical, and social dimensions. Fictional accounts of indigenous resistance, gendered exploitation, or colonial legacies illustrate that sustainability cannot be achieved without addressing justice.

Third, literature offers imaginative resources for envisioning alternative futures. By dramatizing resilience, reforestation, or cultural revitalization, fictional works articulate utopian counterpoints to extractive economies. These visions are crucial in broadening the normative horizons of sustainability discourse beyond technocratic fixes.

For future research, three recommendations emerge. Comparative studies should expand the scope by analyzing connections between Southeast Asian, African, and Latin American literary responses, thereby highlighting transnational convergences and divergences. Additionally, scholars should explore underexamined genres such as poetry, speculative fiction, and graphic novels, which may contain innovative imaginaries of palm oil. Finally, interdisciplinary work should investigate how literature interacts with other cultural media, such as film, music, or digital storytelling, in shaping global perceptions of palm oil.

By pursuing these directions, scholarship can more fully integrate literary analysis into sustainability studies, ensuring that ecological justice debates remain attentive to cultural, ethical, and historical complexities. Ultimately, this review demonstrates that global fiction does not merely depict palm oil but theorizes it as a site of systemic crisis and cultural contestation, offering essential insights for envisioning more equitable futures.

### **Conclusion**

The review of 35 selected studies highlights that literary narratives of palm oil operate as a multidimensional space where ecological, social, and political concerns intersect. Through fiction, palm oil emerges not merely as a commodity but as a symbol that encapsulates contested histories, labor struggles, environmental degradation, and visions of justice.

First, literary works consistently portray the scale and depth of environmental degradation associated with palm oil expansion. Deforestation, biodiversity loss, and ecological collapse are rendered into stories that humanize data and give affective weight to abstract statistics. By doing so, literature transforms palm oil from a subject of economic discourse into a powerful ecological imaginary.

Second, depictions of labor exploitation foreground the human costs embedded in global supply chains. Narratives of migrant workers, precarious contracts, gendered exploitation, and social displacement illustrate how fiction provides a voice to those silenced in policy and corporate reports. These stories expose systemic inequalities that extend beyond plantations to broader structures of economic dependence.

Third, colonial legacies are repeatedly woven into contemporary literary accounts, underscoring continuities between historical plantation systems and modern multinational agribusiness. Fiction draws attention to the persistence of extractive logics, illuminating how palm oil remains situated within global capitalist regimes that prioritize profit over justice and sustainability.

Fourth, cultural identity and indigenous resistance emerge as vital counter-discourses. By preserving oral traditions, myths, and alternative epistemologies, literature asserts agency for marginalized communities while framing land and ecology as cultural and spiritual entities rather than commodities. These narratives serve as archives of resilience, resisting erasure and reimagining ecological futures.

Taken together, the synthesis demonstrates that palm oil in global fiction functions as a critical site of interdisciplinary engagement. It articulates the intersections of environmental degradation, labor exploitation, colonial history, and cultural resistance, providing insights that resonate across ecological, social, and political domains. Literature does not merely mirror crises but intervenes in them, offering ethical, cultural, and imaginative resources for understanding the complexities of sustainability and ecological justice.

This study also points to important implications for scholarship and practice. Interdisciplinary research should engage more deeply with literary narratives as sources of knowledge that complement scientific and policy perspectives. Future studies may expand regional and comparative approaches, particularly in underexplored African and Latin American contexts, to enrich understanding of how palm oil is imagined globally. In this way, literature can be more fully recognized as a crucial medium through which societies grapple with the challenges of ecological transformation and global justice.

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