

# Reimagining Nature and Identity: A Postcolonial Ecocritical Exploration of Rice in Four Asian Poetry

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**Abstract** This study explores the representation of food and crops in literature, focusing on the thematic importance of rice as a staple food in Asian countries. Rice cultivation in Asia has a long history that is intertwined with the legacy of Western colonialism, which disrupted traditional practices and exploited workers. Despite the disruptions caused by colonialism, rice remains an integral part of Asian culture, as reflected in myths, folklore, and legends. Recent studies in postcolonial ecocriticism have offered insights into the interaction between humans, nature, and the environment, taking into account the ecological crises caused by colonialism and its legacy. In this study, four rice-themed poems from Indonesia, Korea, and Vietnam are examined to explore rice's cultural and spiritual values in the context of current global challenges. The research data were collected from printed sources and online platforms using "poems about rice" as the keywords. The result shows that rice has great socio-cultural importance in Asia, where it is revered as a sacred symbol and cultural memory beyond its commercial worth imposed by Western colonizers. Each poet represents a different country in East and Southeast Asia, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the significance of rice in Asian literature.

**Keywords** Asian literature; postcolonial ecocriticism; representation of rice

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## Introduction

Representation of food and crops in literature has been a recurring theme for centuries. The importance of food in the continuation of human civilization cannot be understated, and its thematic significance can be seen in literature since ancient times. From the biblical episode of the Israelite exodus, sustained by *manna* from heaven to contemporary novels such as Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* (1992), Joanne Harris' *Chocolat* (1999), and Durian Sukegawa's *Sweet Bean Paste* (2013), food has been used as a literary motif as well as a symbol representing various societal and cultural issues (Coghlan; Piatti-Farnell and Brien). Literature, and humanities, in general, have always been concerned with social relations and with a larger web and connection, in which the act of eating food is intricately woven within a mode of production upon certain societal/cultural values. As Goldstein emphasized,

The broader attitudes about the political, social, and cultural issues surrounding the questions of eating, often alludes toward the mechanism of inclusion and exclusion. Literature's fascination with the conceptual and literal boundaries of

eating relations cannot be overstated. The boundaries may be drawn in a variety of ways - along lines of religion, class, race, sex, and gender, but also using myriad other demarcations that echo other boundaries in a given text. (47-48)

In summary, the representation of crops in literature is a complex and multifaceted topic, encompassing a wide range of dimensions such as cultural, environmental, societal, and economic. The significance of food and crops in literary works underlines their crucial role in human life and illustrates further insight into the aspect of human-nature coexistence and relationship.

Similarly, the thematic importance of rice as a staple food in Asian countries is profound. Asia produced more than 90 % of all grown rice worldwide (Sharma). Rice is seen as a geopolitical commodity in most Asian countries, with political stability directly tied to food security and the availability of rice at reasonable costs. The revitalization of the domestic rice sector and efforts to achieve food security through food self-sufficiency demonstrate the importance of rice for many countries in the region (Timmer 12-13). During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, food security risks have increased in Asia and the Pacific. Difficulties in the domestic and international food supply chains during the pandemic times had a great impact on the availability and accessibility of food including rice (Kim et al.). Asian countries can be proud because they have a dynamic rice farming system, resulted in different methods and innovations used in rice cultivation, such as System of Rice Intensification (SRI) and Seed Film Cultivation (SFC). Rice, unlike other types of crops which are not water resistant, is suitable for growing in wet environments throughout Asia, resulting in the tens of thousands of locally adapted rice varieties. Despite the recent disruptions in rice production and consumption, the high degree of dependence on rice cultivation distinguishes Asia from the rest of the world. This phenomenon is historically connected with this region's recent history of Western colonization and its legacy.

It is impossible to separate the history of Western colonialism from the history of rice cultivation in Asia. Population increase stimulated agricultural development throughout the colonial era, and rice production became an important commodity (Booth 61-63). In response, the European powers established plantations in Southeast Asia to meet the growing demand for rice. The Dutch established rice plantations in Java, Indonesia, while the British did the same in Burma (now Myanmar) and Malaysia. Western colonialism had a significant impact on rice cultivation, leading to the displacement of traditional practices, exploitation of labor, and loss of cultural heritage. These plantations relied heavily on forced labor,

and the workers, who were often indentured or enslaved, were subjected to grueling working conditions and suffered from exploitation and abuse. Moreover, the control of land by imperial powers, as Said (7) posits, transforms the traditional production of rice production based on subservience and sustainability in which farmers were forced to grow only cash crops such as tea, opium, and coffee instead of rice.

Even within the disruption caused by colonialism, rice remains as a crop with socio-cultural significance, treated with reverence by Asian society, beyond the monetary and economic values imposed by Western colonizers. More than just a staple food, rice is an essential and sacred symbol for people in the Asian region. In almost all Asian languages, separate terms describe each phase of cultivation and the type of rice harvested. Japanese language, for example, differentiated between *gohan* or *meshi* for cooked rice, while uncooked rice is called *kome/okome* and newly harvested rice as called *shinma* (Ohnuki-Tierney 6). In Burmese, *Htamin Sar* can be interpreted as either “to eat a meal” or “to eat rice,” similarly *an com* in Vietnamese is used in a similar way (Hiên et al.) There are countless other metaphors within Asian languages which interpolate the significance of rice in Asian culture. In contrast, the term “paddy” in English also refers to “rice,” including the process of cultivating and processing it from the paddy field to the grocery store, kitchen, and eventually dining table.

The socio-cultural importance of rice as an integral part of Asian people’s lives is evident in myths, folklore, legends, and other literary works. Various stories about rice in Indonesia are inseparable from the diversity of ethnicities and cultures. The fairy tale about rice in Java is often associated with Dewi Sri’s charity. But there is a narrative from Bali Island about Mr. Poleng, an old farmer who is willing to share his ration of rice for lunch with cattle and other farm animals. Lord Indra made Poleng a servant of heaven after witnessing his generosity (Zidni via McDonald 28-31). In the Philippines, there is also a story of Agmay, a little girl who assists her father in repaying all of his debts. Agmay planted and collected golden grains, specifically rice, unintentionally, which later became a source of family income (Sharma 4). Furthermore, the story of rice from Malaysia begins with the sacrifice of Kinomulok, the daughter of Tok, the tribal chief of the village of Kadazandusun, which was originally fertile but became arid because it was blocked by a rock that grew bigger and bigger every day. The brave woman stood in front of the rock and let her body be struck by lightning and shattered into pieces. Kinomulok’s blood turned into rice, her teeth turned into corn, and her flesh became cucumbers, each of which grew many times over. The rock no longer grows and is now known as Mount Kinabalu (Ng Kok Keong via McDonald 46-48). Rice is seen as a means

of satisfying both human physical requirements and a symbol of wisdom and good acts, all of which are important components of traditional Asian cultures in the three mythological illustrations above. As a result, authors from Asian roots frequently employ rice as a motif. However, it should also be noted that not all studies demonstrate the significance of rice in Asian civilization; some merely use rice to highlight the setting of a region, while others say that rice is only addressed briefly (Coroza; Eugenio; Laksmitarukmi).

Recently, eco-critical studies of rice stories in poetry, novels, and short stories with Asian backgrounds have begun to emerge (Sangkhaphanthanon; Ryan; Diaz; Payne et al.). Their studies align with the recent development of literary critical theory, postcolonial ecocriticism. Broadly speaking, postcolonial ecocriticism can be defined as an interdisciplinary field that explores the relationship between humans, nature and the environment as they are shaped by colonialism and its legacies (Indriyanto 124-25). It draws attention to the ways in which colonialism has disrupted the traditional relationship between humans and culture, and how this erasure of indigenous outlook has contributed to the ecological crises of the present. Through examination of the historical background and the ongoing neo-colonial exploitation on the environment and human society, postcolonial ecocriticism interpolates a more equitable and sustainable relationship between people and the natural world. Banerjee writes,

Postcolonial ecocriticism exposed the anthropocentrism, the human-centeredness of many of these depictions, and it went on to point the alternative ways of being in the world. In such corrective fashion, ecocriticism from the very beginning had global concern; If indeed the impending doom of planet earth was to be averted, political as well as global activism had to be global in scope. (Banerjee 195)

In line with the insights from postcolonial ecocriticism, this current study examines whether the cultural and spiritual values of rice have relevance and dynamics with the current global challenges, including the destruction of the natural and social environment. It will look at 4 (four) rice-themed poetry with cultural origins from four Asian countries: Indonesia, Korea (America), and Vietnam. Except for “Padi yang Tak Berputik” [Paddy with No Pistils], which is accessible in printed form published by *International Literary Magazine Homagi*, research data was acquired from pages on the internet by entering the keywords “poems about rice.” Each poet is from a diverse East and Southeast Asian country. The table of poems to look at is

presented below.

**Table 1. Poems for Analysis**

Title of Poem	Author	Source
Spoonful of Rice	Hi-Dong Chai	<a href="https://www.poetrysoup.com/poems_poets/best/120291/hi-dong_chai">https://www.poetrysoup.com/poems_poets/best/120291/hi-dong_chai</a>
The Poem I Can't Yet Name	Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai	<a href="https://poetryandplaces.com/2020/10/07/nguyen-phan-que-mai-the-poem-i-cant-yet-name/">https://poetryandplaces.com/2020/10/07/nguyen-phan-que-mai-the-poem-i-cant-yet-name/</a>
Padi Tumbuh Tanpa Suara	Eka Budianta	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PjsZjWpg5xM">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PjsZjWpg5xM</a>
Padi yang Tak Berputik	Ni Wayan Kristina	International Literary Magazine Homagi #8, July 2022, p. 42.

Within the framework of postcolonial ecocriticism, the analysis of the four poems employs a qualitative-interpretative method to delve into the intricate layers of meaning embedded within the texts. This approach allows for a comprehensive exploration of the poems' language, imagery, structure, and literal as well as metaphorical elements, all of which contribute to the construction of their postcolonial and ecocritical themes. Drawing on the insights of postcolonial ecocriticism, this study unravels the underlying power dynamics, historical implications, and cultural nuances that inform the poems. This involves examining the relationships between human and non-human entities, the exploration of environmental issues, and the interplay of identity, memory, and nostalgia in the postcolonial context.

Under the postcolonial ecocriticism paradigm, the historicity of Asian writers highlights the relevance of the historical context in which these writers emerged, as well as the influence of colonialism on their writings. Examining the authors' backgrounds, including their experiences of colonization, displacement, and encounters with environmental issues, enables a deeper interpretation of their works and reveals the interplay between power dynamics, cultural nuances, and environmental concerns in the Asian postcolonial context.

Hi-Dong Chai left his home country Seoul, Korea, at the age of 16 to study in the United States, where he earned his Ph.D. in electrical engineering and subsequently worked for IBM for over two decades. As a child in Seoul, Hi-Dong Chai saw the tragedies of World War II and the Korean War as a kid. He wrote a poem about his father, a Christian preacher who refused to abandon his beliefs. He was tortured, imprisoned, and eventually murdered. Hi-Dong Chai's brother, who had

joined the military to help defend the country, was also killed. Now in America, Hi-Dong Chai opted to spend the remainder of his life as a writer after retiring from San Jose State University as a professor in 2002. He wants to share his thoughts, emotions, and life experiences with the rest of the world. His 2013 book *Shattered by the Wars: But Sustained by Love* is about his family's plight during World War II under Japanese occupation and the Korean War. This acclaimed memoir won a number of awards, such as 2015 SPR contest in non-fiction.

Next, the writer of "The Poem I Can't Yet Name," Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai, was born in 1973 in a rural town in North Vietnam. Quế Mai moved to South Vietnam with her family when she was six years old. Having returned to Vietnam in 1997 after her study in Australia, she joined a number of international organizations, including the United Nations, to promote sustainable development in the country. She was fascinated by the long-term effects of war by spending a lot of time working with war veterans and victims. The poet, who finished her master's degree and pursued her Ph.D. studies, has won several awards, including the Capital's Literature & Arts Award and the Hà Ni Writers Association's Poetry of the Year 2010 Award. She was also designated one of the top modern Vietnamese poets by the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. Poetry and Places is one of the websites where the poetry under study may be found. As the name implies, this world poetry website shares the experience of exploring the earth through poetry, with the motto "Sharing our travel adventures and celebrating our planet...through poetry."<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, the International Literary Magazine Homagi has published Ni Wayan Kristina's poem, "Padi Tanpa Putik" [Paddy with No Pistils] (2022). The poet was born on February 1, 1991, in Pupuan, Bali, Indonesia, and has published several poems in internet media. She won the AIS (Asqa Imagination School) Poetry Writing Competition in 2021. Kristina was awarded the Indonesian COMPETER (Community Pena Terbang) Award the following year.

Another Indonesian poet Eka Budianta, who was born on February 1, 1956, has been widely published since he was in his early 20s. Along with co-founding the Pustaka Sastra Foundation, he published more than 40 volumes, ranging from collections of poetry to short stories, and supported the rise of emerging authors and poets. He received a Satupena Award for fiction in 2022 in recognition of his commitment to the literary community. On May 2, 2021, "Rice Grows Without a Voice" was read aloud for the first time at the Taman Siswa Webinar. Eka Budianta then performed this poem once more on August 18, 2022 at the Poetry Reading and Independence Speech event that Hati Pena TV had planned.

1 see "Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai, The Poem I Can't Yet Name" 1

### **Rice as Sanctity and Nostalgia: Eco poetic Reminiscence and Reflections**

Employing postcolonial ecocriticism, the exploration of symbols in poetry takes on a deeper significance, reflecting the interwoven of cultural memory, sanctity, and nostalgia. The four poets in question employ the symbol of rice in diverse ways, each interpreting it as a representation of its sacred nature. Rooted in Asian cultures, the whiteness of rice is imbued with profound symbolism, embodying the image of divinity and purity (Knecht 10). Moreover, symbolism of rice echoes the theme of nostalgia, rootedness within a sense of place disrupted by acts of ecological destruction.

### **Ecological Restoration: Rediscovering the Sacred in Postcolonial Landscapes**

Literary imagination of postcolonial writers deeply intertwined with the lived experiences of a place, offering an alternative epistemology of the land that recognizes the sanctity of nature, particularly rice in Asian cultures as a central tenet. Postcolonial ecocriticism reads texts through a politically engaged lens for their representation of ecology, past, present, and looking forward to the future (80). Through the exploration of poems such as “The Poem I Can’t Yet Name,” “Paddy with No Pistils,” and “Rice Grows Without a Voice,” the current study delves into the intricate relationship between spirituality, cultural heritage, and the sustenance provided by the land. The poets’ reflections highlight the diverse meanings attached to rice, encompassing love, sacrifice, tenacity, hard work, and compassion. By examining these narratives, we gain insight into the multifaceted dimensions of rice as a symbol and its significance in the restoration of postcolonial ecosystems. Moreover, these poems advocate for a nuanced exploration of environmental concerns within a postcolonial framework, emphasizing the importance of reclaiming indigenous knowledge systems and practices as integral components of ecological restoration efforts.

In “The Poem I Can’t Yet Name,” to begin with, rice is associated with sanctity. Through the narrative of the poet’s pilgrimage to her grandmother’s grave, rice assumes a central role as an offering, accompanied by incense sticks firmly planted in a bowl of rice. The rice-eating shown in the poem is a postcolonial gesture, echoing Goldstein’s point cited earlier about literature’s concern in the conceptual and practical boundaries of eating interactions (Goldstein 47). Indeed, Vietnamese culture attributes spiritual strength to rice, considering it an essential element in various celebrations that fosters emotional resilience in times of both joy and sorrow (Hiên et al.). The use of rice as a symbol in this context underscores the deep-rooted

connection between spirituality, cultural heritage, and the sustenance provided by the land. This line of argumentation echoes Alex and Deborah's opinion concerning how "the natural and cultural entity attains a sacred quality, anthropomorphized as protector of the agricultural land, people, and their beliefs and ethics towards ecology (425)."

Food production and consumption are intricately linked to humanity's spiritual nature. In "Paddy with No Pistils," the mournful song of rice attests to its metaphorical embodiment of life. Pollination is difficult due to the loss of female reproductive organs, notably the pistil, as a result of the destructive impact of a lengthy drought. The cultural value of rice farming is emphasized in this poem, which pays attention to the labor-intensive techniques and traditions connected with cultivating rice, the Balinese's crucial crop. The poem reveals how rice, symbolizing both nourishment and resilience, serves as a powerful metaphor that shapes how people perceive postcolonial landscapes.

In the poem "Rice Grows Without a Voice," the symbol of rice acquires sanctity by alluding to the inherent nobility of human nature. Budianta begins his three-stanza-poem with the lines "Rice grows silently/ Like your love for your country," and speaks about the pioneers of education in Indonesia whose friendship gave birth to the first national school called "Taman Siswa" [Students' Garden]: "Rice grows silently/ Such is eternal friendship/ Cipto Mangunkusumo - Douwes Dekker/ And Suwardi Suryaningrat/ Enhancing the spirit of Taman Siswa" (Budianta). The message here is that growing rice means growing people. The second stanza describes nowadays' noisy but pointless relationship: "I miss friendship in this century/A softly blazing fire/ Not on Facebook or Instagram" (Budianta). The bygone mutual friendship stands in sharp contrast to the banal, loud, and sometimes misleading ways of communication that are pervasive in modern culture. Rice becomes a symbolic anchor in this context, reflecting the everlasting ideals of stillness, honesty, and connection with nature. Here, rice is synonymous with spirit, in this case, the spirit shared by the early Indonesian educators and intellectuals in Budianta's, "Rice Grows Without a Voice." This poem depicts full, hefty rice bending as "a growth for the spirit of Taman Siswa" (Budianta, 2022). Rice represents the soul of those who strive quietly to set an example and inspire the country. Budianta's poem differs from the other three poems due to the usage of the rice metaphor.

Recognizing the sacredness of nature, particularly the significance of rice in Asian cultures as a central tenet, the literary imagination of postcolonial writers deeply intertwines with the lived experiences of a place. Through these four

poems, the diverse aspects of the rice symbol are vividly highlighted. While traditionally symbolizing the essence of life, rice also encompasses contextually specific interpretations, becoming a symbol of love, sacrifice, tenacity, hard work, and compassion. Reflecting the diverse experiences and cultural memories of those involved in cultivating and consuming this staple grain, the poets illuminate the transformative power of cultural memory in shaping one's understanding of the world. Moreover, they advocate for a nuanced exploration of postcolonial environmental concerns, inviting readers to reevaluate human-nature relationships within the framework of cultural diversity and ecological sustainability.

### **Resonating with the Land: Nostalgia and Cultural Memory**

The exploration of nostalgia in these four poems unveils the symbolic power of rice as a conduit for deep yearning and cultural memory. Each poem delves into a different aspect of nostalgia, drawing upon the lived experiences of war, family sacrifice, and the impact of environmental changes. Nostalgia has both a sweet and bitter face. In his study of letters sent by British troops to his family during World War I, Roper (441-42) found a number of functions of nostalgia. Nostalgia can give brief reassurance and help in escaping from routine, diverting unacceptable concerns, surviving, and living in solitude. In addition, nostalgia may be used to communicate with the loved ones. The four poems examined here all include aspects of nostalgia in varying degrees and depths.

The poet sees a spoonful of rice as a heartbreaking remembrance of a mother's sacrifice in "Spoonful of Rice," creating a sense of ancestral connection and familial devotion. Rice's importance goes beyond its culinary worth to serve as a testament of parental love and commitment. Hi-Dong Chai's "Spoonful of Rice" was first published on the PoetrySoup website in 2019 before being reprinted in a poetry anthology of the same name. PoetrySoup is an online repository of poetry of many styles and subjects from across the world. Aside from conveying the narrative of a woman who makes sacrifices for her children, "Spoonful of Rice" depicts the narrator's traumatic past as a result of war tearing his family apart. "This is a universal story of mothers' sacrifice for their children, whether material, emotional, or intellectual," the poet wrote. ([https://www.poetrysoup.com/poems\\_poets/best/120291/hi-dong\\_chai](https://www.poetrysoup.com/poems_poets/best/120291/hi-dong_chai)). The narrator describes poverty and food scarcity during the war:

Mother and I were left alone  
In an island as refugees

Without anyone supporting us (Hi-Dong Chai)

They are starving. When the narrator's mother arrived with some food, he ate barely three spoonsful of rice before discovering that his mother had not eaten. From the kitchen wall gap, he watched his mother scavenge the last few grains of rice and lick the spoon many times. He hurried away, full of guilt, wanting to perish in the water so his mother wouldn't have to feed him. He was discouraged as the narrative continues:

She has already lost  
 Many of her loved ones  
 Without me  
 She will not go on living (Hi-Dong Chai)

Similar to "Spoonful of Rice," hunger from war causes anguish in "The Poem I Can't Yet Name." The narrator lifted a bowl of rice as an homage while kneeling before the grave of a grandma she had never met. Many people died in the 1945 famine, and their graves were never discovered. The poet describes her father's grief as "eating bitter rice" since he could not discover where his mother had been buried for many years. The poet writes,

After sixty-four years, my father and I stood  
 in front of my grandmother's grave.  
 I heard my father call "Mum," for the first time;  
 the rice field behind his back trembled. (Qué Mai)

Like Hi-Dong Chai's poem, Qué Mai's *oeuvre* brings the reader to the bitter nostalgia of war. This type of elegiac writing style is related to the nostalgia conveyed by each author. This nostalgia reflects the lasting effects of colonialism and war on human interactions with the environment. The absence of formal structure allows for a fluid expression of complex emotions associated with memories of war.

Rice becomes a powerful metaphor for the poets, transporting them to bittersweet recollections of the past. The poems lament the loss of natural landscapes and disrupted relationships between humans and the environment, highlighting the entanglement of environmental degradation with colonial histories. Even within the disruption caused by war and destruction, the epistemological conception of place, or 'sense of place' (Indriyanto, "Reconciling Locality and Globalization through

Sense of Planet in Kiana Davenport's "the House of Many Gods" 5) is emphasized through vivid nostalgia echoing a distant memory of past situation. In the last line, rice fields represent both the physical landscape and the cultural practices associated with rice cultivation. The existence of rice field connects the sense of place and cultural memory to the everyday experiences and rituals of the community, yet it was trembling, echoing the traumatic experience of armed conflicts.

Both "Spoonful of Rice" and "The Poem I Can't Yet Name" above are written in free verse. They exhibit similarities to American contemporary poetry in terms of their use of short lines and a conversational tone. This connection can be traced back to the influence of French Symbolist poets on American writers like T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams, who popularized free verse after World War I. (Abrams and Harpham 129) While Hi-Dong Chai employs visual imagery (Mother scavenging leftover rice grains), Quế Mai focuses on auditory aspects, particularly through the grandmother's lullaby in her poetry. These techniques enhance the nostalgic tone present in both poems, enables the readers to experience *qualia* (what it is like) as if they were physically presents in that event (Weik von Mossner 79). Notably, Quế Mai's work highlights the significance of rice, which holds a central position in the Asian (Vietnamese) narrative. A recent study reveals that rice-related words and phrases in Vietnamese language intersect with various aspects of social, political, and economic life, underscoring its crucial role in shaping the nation's identity (Tham). This connection between American contemporary poetry and the poems of Hi-Dong Chai and Quế Mai highlights the cross-cultural influence of literary traditions. In contrast to Western worldviews, such connection emphasizes the symbolism of rice as a vehicle for telling personal stories, cultural memory, and broader societal ties in Vietnam.

Meanwhile, "Paddy with No Pistils" is the only pastoral elegy type of poetry explored in this study. The image of rice that thrives becomes nostalgic. As drought arrives, nature cries. The poet describes retreating water, sad birds, lonely cows, snails with empty tummies, leeches spitting blood, and so on. There is a setback here. There is no water for the rice to grow in. This paddy plant is limp in a land crowded with buildings. Imagery of loss is clear: "The snails are stumbling on an empty stomach,"; "Leeches vomit blood with rage/ Seeds planted in an inch of land/ ruins of luxury building construction"; and "The drops of water are gone/ unable to quench thirst" (Kristina). In the end, the rice with no pistils falls to the ground. The personification of rice as "throws its body" is reinforced by the two concluding lines "on dry land/ that never gets wet" (Kristina). "Paddy with No Pistils" thus serves as cultural memory that the poet seeks to recall. Rice is central in this poem. Rice and

other creations cannot live on that arid area. This poem, as an elegy, emphasizes a vital point: water, which is critically required for irrigating rice fields in Bali, can no longer be found.

Nostalgia is very evident in the last stanza of “Rice Grows Without a Voice.” The poet longs for the rice that grows in silence, as well as the companionship he saw among Indonesia’s education forefathers: “I miss rice growing in the absence of sound/ When words become weapons/ Caring is a pillar of brotherhood” (Budianta). Different from the three previous poems, rice functions here symbolically. Eka Budianta invites readers to reminisce about the beautiful friendship of the fathers of the nation who were concerned with education. They are like paddies that continue to enliven the soul while becoming fuller and more bowed. They are “a fire that burns silently” (Budianta). These paddies grow silently, not noisy like the generation that grew up with social media.

To conclude, in these four poems, the symbol of rice emerges as a compelling channel for conveying a deep nostalgia for the past. Rice becomes a physical link to ancestral customs and beloved memories as the poets examine their ethnic identities and the vast fabric of their ancestry. A spoonful of rice becomes an emotional recollection of a mother’s sacrificial love, bringing them to a time when they were warm and nourished. Pilgrimages to grandmother’s graves with rice as a ceremonial sacrifice create a sense of desire for ancestral links and the spiritual strength found in cultural rituals. The regret over rice without pistils evokes the longing for a period when nature’s harmony was unbroken. In the midst of fast societal changes and mundane communication, the rice symbol reappears as a beacon of authenticity, luring people back to a simpler, peaceful existence. Nostalgia runs through these poems, filling the rice symbol with a strong feeling of longing and a desire to regain cultural memory’s richness. By considering the socio-political and environmental conditions that shaped the perspectives and experiences of the Asian writers in question, this study allows for a nuanced exploration of their postcolonial and ecocritical themes.

## **Conclusion**

The importance of food and crops in literary works demonstrates their significant place in human life and provides insight into the aspect of human-nature coexistence. This study has shown that paddy or rice is identifiable in the four Asian poems, i.e., “Spoonful of Rice,” “The Poem I Can’t Yet Name,” “Paddy with No Pistils,” and “Rice Grows Without a Voice” through each poet’s background be they Asian or diasporic Asian writers writing outside their own country. They all take the

theme of rice because emotionally and culturally they are close to this plant-based food source.

This study also shows that female authors pay special attention to rice cultivation. If Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai's narrative is set in the past, when their ancestors battled to plant rice, Ni Wayan Kristina's story is set in the present, when nature is deteriorating and rice is becoming more difficult to cultivate. Meanwhile, the two male poets employ rice as a metaphor to bring up the subject of social-emotional degeneration. For Hi-Dong Chai, war has never brought any good. War leads to loss, poverty, hatred, and other forms of suffering. Eka Budianta longs for the nobility of human dignity that grows like rice when it is full, rather than the behavior of the internet users today, who are loud but pointless.

The four poets examine rice poems through the lens of postcolonial ecocriticism, highlighting the intersection of their transnational experiences and national identities. Ni Wayan Kristina and Eka Budianta incorporate rich Indonesian imagery into their poems, while Hi-Dong Chai explores the symbolism of rice rooted in his ancestral Korean culture. Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai draws inspiration from Vietnam's rich cultural heritage. Each poet's portrayal of rice unveils its profound cultural significance, underscoring its role in sanctity, heritage, and identity as postcolonial subjects. The diverse representations and contextual meanings of rice in Asian poetry showcase its enduring status as a cultural symbol, an invaluable source of inspiration. Evaluating Asian "rice" poetry provides insight into the varied features of rice as a symbol and its role in the restoration of postcolonial ecosystems. They highlight the various connotations of rice, which include persistence, sacrifice, and compassion. The poems examined show how rice, which represents both food and resilience, acts as a potent metaphor that influences people's perspective of postcolonial landscapes. Furthermore, the descriptions of rice in these four poems exemplify the authors' affirmations of Asian distinctiveness and identity. In engaging with the ecological and postcolonial dimensions of rice, these poets contribute to the discourse on postcolonial ecocriticism, challenging dominant Western-centric narratives and asserting their agency in the face of colonial legacies.

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