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Painting Queer Ecologies: Gender Fluidity and Environmental Aesthetics in Shani Mootoo's Select Fiction and Art

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Abstract

Shani Mootoo, an Indo-Caribbean Canadian novelist and visual artist, brings a painterly sensibility to both her fiction and artwork, shaping the spatial, environmental, and emotional landscapes of her narratives. This paper explores her novels *Cereus Blooms at Night* and *Moving Forward Sideways Like a Crab* alongside select paintings to examine how her visual imagination informs her literary depiction of gender fluidity and nature. In *Cereus Blooms at Night*, the untamed garden serves as a queer refuge, offering sanctuary beyond societal constraints. Meanwhile, *Moving Forward Sideways Like a Crab* reflects the fluidity of identity through shifting geographies between Toronto and Trinidad. Mootoo's prose, characterized by vivid imagery, sensory depth, and a painterly approach to colour, texture, and composition, echoes artistic techniques, positioning nature as an active force in the lives of queer and diasporic characters. By analysing the intersections of art and literature, this study highlights how Mootoo constructs queer ecologies where gender, space, and environment merge into transformative, affective landscapes.

Keywords: Queer Ecologies, Gender Fluidity, Environmental Aesthetics, Visual Art, Caribbean Literature.

Introduction

Shani Mootoo, an Indo-Caribbean Canadian novelist and visual artist, integrates painterly sensibilities into her literary works, shaping the spatial, environmental, and emotional landscapes of her fiction. This paper examines *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) and

Moving Forward Sideways Like a Crab (2014), alongside Mootoo's select paintings, to explore how her visual imagination informs her literary portrayal of gender fluidity and nature. Through a theoretical lens incorporating queer ecology, postcolonial ecocriticism, and gender studies, this study demonstrates how Mootoo

constructs queer ecologies, wherein gender, space, and environment converge in transformative landscapes.

Theoretical Framework: Understanding Queer Ecology and Gender Fluidity

Queer ecology, as theorized by Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, challenges heteronormative views of nature, emphasizing diversity and fluidity (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 5). This perspective aligns with Stacy Alaimo's trans-corporeality, which highlights the interconnectedness of human bodies and the environment, rejecting fixed, isolated identities in favor of dynamic, interdependent ones (Alaimo 2).

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, outlined in *Gender Trouble*, asserts that gender is not innate but continuously constructed through repeated social and cultural practices (Butler 34). In Mootoo's work, characters navigate environments that actively shape their identities, illustrating how queerness and ecology intersect in fluid, transformative ways.

The Garden and the Landscape as Queer Spaces

Mootoo employs nature as a space of transgression and resistance. In *Cereus Blooms at Night*, Mala Ramchandin's untamed garden functions as a queer refuge, symbolizing resilience and defiance. The cereus plant, blooming only at night, becomes a metaphor for hidden queer identities, thriving beyond the constraints of societal expectations (Casteel 21). The garden's chaotic yet nurturing presence allows Mala to withdraw from patriarchal violence while simultaneously embodying her survival.

In *Moving Forward Sideways Like a Crab*, Sydney's transition is mirrored in the shifting geographies between cold, rigid Toronto and Trinidad's warm, lush landscape. The crab, moving both sideways and forward, underscores the nonlinear progression of

gender identity, reflecting Sydney's journey of self-discovery (Korducki 87). Toronto's winter, described as "a test indeed to the mettle of anyone who arrives there from a tropical country" (Mootoo, *Moving Forward* 176), metaphorizes Sydney's struggle with displacement and trans identity.

Mootoo's painterly prose enhances these environmental themes. In *Cereus Blooms at Night*, the garden is described in "lush overgrowth swallowing the house whole, vines creeping through shattered windows" (Mootoo, *Cereus* 45), reinforcing nature as an active presence in identity formation. Similarly, in *Moving Forward Sideways Like a Crab*, Trinidad is rendered in vibrant, fluid strokes, reflecting Sydney's emotional landscape: "He spoke of the nuances of scents in the cold air ... snow crunching, sludge peeling off car tires" (Mootoo, *Moving Forward* 54). The contrast between landscapes highlights how geography plays an integral role in self-conception and the negotiation of identity.

Gender Fluidity and Environmental Aesthetics in Mootoo's Visual Art

Mootoo's visual art extends the ecological and gender themes of her literary works through deliberate formal strategies that challenge conventional artistic representation. Her paintings function as autonomous works that simultaneously illuminate the theoretical frameworks underlying her fiction. This analysis examines two significant works: *The Muddy Swamp is Where the Lotus Grows* (2011, acrylic on canvas, Surrey Art Gallery Association) and *Smoke Tree Leaf* (2017, acrylic, Oeno Gallery), demonstrating how Mootoo's visual practice articulates queer ecological concepts through material and symbolic means.

The Muddy Swamp is Where the Lotus Grows presents a compelling visual exploration of transformation that directly engages with Butler's understanding of gender as an ongoing performative process rather than a fixed identity (Butler 145). The painting depicts a lotus flower

emerging from dark, murky swamp waters, but Mootoo's treatment of this traditional symbol moves beyond conventional spiritual metaphors. Instead, the work embodies Alaimo's concept of "trans-corporeality," demonstrating how boundaries between what society deems pure and impure, between self and environment, dissolve into relationships of mutual influence and constitution (Alaimo 12). Rather than presenting the lotus as triumphantly separate from its muddy origins, Mootoo's composition positions the flower centrally while maintaining visual and conceptual connections to the swamp that nourishes it. This compositional choice refuses to privilege the lotus's supposed "purity" over the swamp's perceived corruption, instead suggesting their interdependence.

The serpentine form that winds through the composition – which Oleksijczuk analyzes as a recurring motif in Mootoo's work – functions as both potential threat and catalyst for transformation, embodying the complex relationship between queer identity and hostile social environments (Oleksijczuk 82). This snake-like presence suggests that danger and growth often coexist, reflecting the reality that queer subjects must navigate spaces that are simultaneously threatening and generative.

Mootoo's painting technique reinforces these conceptual themes through her use of layered brushwork that renders the swamp's surface as both opaque and permeable, solid and fluid. This technical approach mirrors the way Mala in *Cereus Blooms at Night* inhabits her garden refuge, where the boundaries between human consciousness and natural environment become increasingly porous and indeterminate. The lotus emerges not in spite of its muddy environment but through intimate relationship with it, directly challenging Western philosophical traditions that position nature and culture, purity and corruption, as fundamentally opposed categories.

Smoke Tree Leaf engages with questions of time and transformation through its focused attention to botanical decay and regeneration. The painting centers on a single leaf captured in a state of transition – neither fully alive nor completely dead – which serves as a visual representation of what Halberstam theorizes as "queer time," a temporal experience that resists heteronormative expectations of linear progression toward reproductive futurity (Halberstam 4). Mootoo's artistic technique deliberately alternates between precise botanical rendering and more abstract, gestural marks that suggest movement and dissolution. This approach reflects the non-linear temporality that characterizes Sydney's gender transition in *Moving Forward Sideways Like a Crab*, where identity development occurs through cycles of exploration and retreat rather than steady forward movement.

The leaf exists in what we might call perpetual becoming – a state of ongoing transformation that embodies the liminal temporality central to queer experience. This temporal liminality challenges conventional narratives of development that expect clear beginnings, middles, and endings.

The painting's deliberately flattened perspective disrupts traditional Renaissance spatial conventions that organize visual space according to hierarchical depth relationships. Instead, Mootoo creates what might be understood as "queer space" – a visual territory where conventional spatial hierarchies collapse into layered simultaneity. This formal strategy aligns with Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson's argument that queer ecology requires fundamentally "different ways of seeing and knowing nature" that challenge both heteronormative and anthropocentric assumptions about space and time (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 47). The leaf's indeterminate state visually echoes Sydney's lateral movement between Toronto and Trinidad, where identity formation occurs not through straightforward geographical

progression but through complex negotiations of spatial and temporal multiplicity.

Both paintings demonstrate Mootoo's deliberate deployment of earth-toned color palettes that resist the binary color coding traditionally associated with gender and sexuality. Her chromatic choices establish what this analysis terms "ecological chromatics" – color relationships that evoke natural processes of growth, decay, and regeneration while deliberately avoiding the pink/blue gender binaries that structure normative color symbolism in Western culture. This chromatic strategy reinforces Alaimo's trans-corporeal framework by positioning human identity as emerging from ongoing relationship with rather than opposition to natural processes (Alaimo 158). The colors themselves seem to emerge from the earth, suggesting that identity, like plant life, grows from environmental conditions rather than transcending them.

Mootoo's consistent use of layered painting techniques, where underlying colors remain visible through subsequent applications, creates what might be understood as visual palimpsests – surfaces that bear traces of multiple temporal moments simultaneously. This technical approach mirrors the temporal complexity of her literary narratives, where past experiences continue to influence present circumstances rather than being simply overcome or left behind. The layering technique suggests that identity formation, much like the painting process itself, involves accumulative processes where earlier experiences remain visible within present configurations of selfhood. This approach challenges linear developmental models, proposing instead what we might call "sedimentary identity" – identity formation that occurs through the gradual accumulation of experiences that remain simultaneously present rather than sequentially superseded.

Conclusion

This analysis demonstrates how Mootoo's interdisciplinary practice establishes formal and conceptual frameworks that challenge normative constructions of gender, sexuality, and environmental relations. Through her integration of visual and literary modes, Mootoo articulates what this study terms "queer ecological aesthetics" – representational strategies that position identity formation as fundamentally environmental process rather than autonomous self-construction. Her paintings and novels consistently refuse binary thinking, whether through the lotus emerging from the swamp or Sydney's lateral movement between geographical and gender positions.

The theoretical convergence of Butler's performativity, Alaimo's trans-corporeality, and Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson's queer ecology finds material expression in Mootoo's layered painting techniques and non-linear narrative structures. Both her visual and textual works demonstrate how queer identity emerges through sustained engagement with environmental conditions rather than transcendence of them.

Mootoo's contribution to contemporary Canadian cultural production lies not merely in representing queer or racialized experience, but in developing formal innovations that make visible the ecological dimensions of identity formation. Her work suggests that future scholarship in queer ecology and postcolonial ecocriticism might productively examine how artistic form itself functions as theoretical apparatus, generating new conceptual possibilities through material practice rather than simply illustrating existing theoretical frameworks.

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