

# EcoGothic Entanglements: Fungal Colonialism and Decaying Hegemonies in Silvia Moreno-Garcia's Mexican Gothic

Nevedha Liz Gloria K

Assistant Professor of English, Nazareth Margoschis College at Pillaiyanmanai  
Nazareth, Thoothukudi, Tamilnadu, India.

## ABSTRACT

The present paper claims that *Mexican Gothic* (2020) written by Silvia Moreno-Garcia uses the framework of EcoGothic in order to anatomize the interlinked histories of colonialism, racial capitalism, and patriarchy. Based on a theoretical synthesis of EcoGothic scholarship, postcolonial ecocriticism, and fungal horror, this paper analyzes the way in which the novel makes the critique of the material and ideological violence of colonial history. Through a close reading, the paper investigates three key elements: the decaying manor of High Place as a toxic postcolonial ecosystem; the sentient mycelial network, or "the gloom," as a literalization of the "environmental unconscious" that archives repressed histories of exploitation; and the Doyle family's eugenicist ideology as a manifestation of Simon C. Estok's concept of "ecophobia." The analysis shows that Moreno-Garcia plays with the classic tropes of Gothic by setting the horror against a not-supernatural backdrop of an ecology of monsters that was formed through the instrumentalization of the land, bodies viewed through the racial lens, and women. The paper concludes that through its ambiguous resolution, *Mexican Gothic* performs a "decolonising" of the Gothic genre itself, ultimately questioning whether the spores of colonial trauma can ever be fully purged from the landscapes they have contaminated.

## Keywords:

### 1. Introduction

In this paper, I advance the argument that *Mexican Gothic* (2020) by Silvia Moreno-Garcia is a brilliant use of an EcoGothic framework to dissect the long-standing histories of colonialism, racial capitalism, and patriarchy. Through the sentient, mycelial fungus that infests High Place and its inhabitants, the novel literalizes what critic Michael Niblett terms the "environmental unconscious," revealing how repressed histories of extractivism, eugenics, and gendered violence fester within the landscape itself, creating a postcolonial ecology of horror (Niblett 5). Moreno-Garcia is inverting the usual Gothic aspects not only to comment on social vices, but on their flesh/material and ecological causes, and whether or not the vile stink of colonial mentality itself can ever truly clean the land wretchedly infected by it.

In order to untangle these layers, this analysis uses a tripartite theoretical approach. First, it draws upon the field of the EcoGothic, which provides a critical lens for exploring the "problematic aspects" of human-nature relationships and the "Gothic ambience in the natural environments" they produce (Parker 2). Second, it integrates the insights of postcolonial ecocriticism, a field dedicated to examining how "socio-ecological relations are inextricably bound up with hierarchies of race, class and gender" and the enduring violence of imperialism (Niblett 13). Last, it deals with fungal horror theories, a subgenre that deploys the biology of mycology to foment modern fears of contagion, permeable subjectivity, and networked minds (Hurley 7; Gregersdotter 55). An analysis of High Place as a disintegrating colonial ecology, the awakening fungus as the actor of EcoGothic intertwining, and the ideological system of the Doyle family as the center of ecophobia and exploitation will be performed right after the establishment of this theoretical framework via formal literature review in this paper. It concludes by examining the novel's ambiguous resolution, considering its implications for de-colonial critique within the Gothic genre.

*Mexican Gothic*, opens with a cry of help that is also a diagnosis of a sick environment. Catalina Doyle writes a pleading letter to her cousin, Noem, who is a socialite in Mexico City, telling her that her new English husband is poisoning her, going into the rotten, isolated mansion at High Place. More unsettling than this accusation, however, is her description of the house itself, which she claims is "sick with rot, stinks of decay, brims with every single evil and cruel sentiment" (Moreno-Garcia 48). Here, the first picture sets the overall Gothic mood of the novel, as well as driving in the key metaphor of rot, which goes beyond the material corruption of the mansion to intellectual miasma of the people, who live there. It is not only a haunted place: it is ecological, historical and very political.

### 2. Theoretical Framework: Weaving The Ecogothic Lens

The odd power of the subversive is what makes *Mexican Gothic* a must-read and we should contextualize it initially with the critical dialogues brought into play with such an eloquence. The novel exists within the vectors of a number of theoretical categories, the most noticeable of them being the EcoGothic, postcolonial ecocriticism, and fungal horror. When combined, these lenses arise to a unified system of interpretation of this specific way Moreno-Garcia associates environmental decay with colonial ideology.

### **Defining the EcoGothic**

The EcoGothic is a fairly recent mode of critique that has gained significant prominence on its ability to eke out the darker, more troubling aspects of the human-environment relationship. Scholars Andrew Smith and William Hughes, in their foundational 2013 collection *Ecogothic*, boldly assert that it is not a genre but a "critical lens" or a "mode of deconstruction" (Parker and Poland 115; Smith and Hughes 3). Elizabeth Parker elaborates, describing it as a "flavoured mode" that can be applied to texts possessing an "undeniable sense of Gothic ambience in the natural environments that they portray" (35). This is crucial, since it confirmed that the EcoGothic lens can be safely applied to such a novel as *Mexican Gothic*, written with a purposeful mash-up of horror, the past and the use of social commentary. The aim of the EcoGothic is to move beyond the idealized, often Romantic, view of nature prevalent in early ecocriticism and instead to explore the "monstrous, sublime, spectral, and uncanny constructions of Nature" (Parker and Poland 117). It focuses on what Parker calls landscapes of "trial, trepidation, and terror," spaces where the environment is not a passive backdrop but an active, often malevolent, force (2).

### **Introducing Ecophobia**

At the heart of the EcoGothic sensibility lies the concept of "ecophobia," a term theorized by Simon C. Estok to describe the psychological and ideological roots of environmental destruction. Estok defines ecophobia as an "irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world," a condition that exists on a spectrum from outright contempt to passive indifference and "allows humanity to do bad things to the natural world" (Estok, *The Ecophobia Hypothesis* 11; Estok, "Terror and Ecophobia" 91). In the case of Estok this is not just a fear of ecological disaster but a primal distaste towards nature itself, a hostility that presents the environment as an enemy to be conquered (*The Ecophobia Hypothesis* 1).

The strongest point of the theory offered by Estok as being applied in reading the *Mexican Gothic* is the fact that he suggests that ecophobia cannot be viewed as a standalone prejudice. Rather, he argues that "ecophobia, racism, misogyny, homophobia, and speciesism are thoroughly interwoven with each other and must eventually be looked at together" ("*Reading Ecophobia*"). This theoretical step can give the decisive connection between the environmental exploitation of the Doyle family and their social pathologies. Their desire to tame the "unrestrained" Mexican wilderness is inseparable from their racist eugenics, their patriarchal subjugation of women, and their violent classism (Parker and Poland 118). Ecophobia of the Doyles is the philosophical motor of their colonial agenda. This unified knowledge displays a causal order: the ideology of ecophobia offers the philosophical rationale behind the material practice of colonial extraction which, in turn, generates the perversion of the conditions (monstrosities) that the EcoGothic mode is the most apt to depict.

### **Postcolonial Ecocriticism And The Environmental Unconscious**

Postcolonial ecocriticism outlines historically and materially how, whereas ecophobia accounted ideology as the why. As articulated by critics like Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, a central task of this field is to contest "western ideologies of development" and expose the "tension between ownership and belonging" that defines the colonial relationship to land (3, 85). The colonizers want to own and exploit the land and resources although it can never be part of their own. This is the focus of the Doyles who bring English earth in the fruitless pursuit to possess the Mexican landscape to which they are foreign (Moreno-Garcia 29).

Postcolonial ecocriticism also provides the concept of the "environmental unconscious," which Michael Niblett, drawing on Fredric Jameson, describes as the uncanny return of repressed histories of environmental violence (Niblett 7). In this view, the Gothic becomes a powerful mode for summoning the "revenants of past ecological disasters in order to explore the complex causality of environmental catastrophes" (Niblett 13). *Mexican Gothic* literalizes this concept through "the gloom," the sentient fungal network that serves as a psychic archive of the Doyles' crimes—from the exploitation of the silver mine to the murder of their workers and family members. The land itself remembers its own violation and the memory is a productive, ghostly force. Through the combination of these very essential strands, Moreno-Garcia rewrites the Gothic tradition, as exemplified by the table below.

**Table 1: A Comparative Framework of Gothic Modes in Mexican Gothic**

Feature/Trope	Traditional Gothic	Female Gothic	EcoGothic (as deployed in Mexican Gothic)
Primary Antagonist	Supernatural entity; tyrannical patriarch.	The patriarchal system; the dangerous, seductive man.	The entangled system of colonial-capitalism and its ecophobic ideology, manifested as a sentient, nonhuman fungus.
The Haunted House	A site of ancestral sin and supernatural events.	A domestic prison; a symbol of female confinement.	A decaying ecosystem; a site of colonial haunting and repressed environmental history.
The Heroine	A passive, imperiled damsel.	A victimized but resourceful heroine navigating patriarchal threats.	An active, anti-colonial feminist agent (Noemí) who confronts and deconstructs the source of the haunting.
Nature/Landscape	A sublime or picturesque backdrop.	Often absent or secondary to domestic interiors.	An active, agential, and monstrous force; a repository of trauma and a site of colonial violence.
Central Horror	Fear of the supernatural; loss of lineage.	Fear of sexual violence; loss of autonomy and identity in marriage.	Fear of contamination/assimilation; the horror of ecological and historical entanglement; the violence of ecophobia.

As the table demonstrates, Mexican Gothic is not simply a Gothic novel set in Mexico. It is a work that fundamentally redefines the genre's core components through a postcolonial and ecological lens. The horror emanates not from a ghost or a vampire, but from a system of exploitation where the land, the fungus, the house, and the ideology of the colonizer are inextricably and monstrously entangled.

**High Place: A Postcolonial Ecology of Decay**

High Place is the main EcoGothic agent of this novel, a place where physical and ideological corruption coincide. Moreno-Garcia does not merely set the estate as an ancient, ghastly mansion; she does not simply map the estate as the location of organic and slow decomposition but rather the estate is the location of a lively decay, a figure of the soon-to-be gone colonial system being reclaimed by the nature it attempted to control. This process of decay is not passive but an active de-composition, a force that breaks down the artificial colonial structure and reflects the novel's larger project of deconstructing the Gothic genre itself.

Since the very beginning, in the first experience of Noem, High Place is described to be involving rot. She perceives it as an "abandoned shell of a snail," a description that evokes both fragility and desolation (Moreno-Garcia 21; Zapata 11). The image suggests that the Doyles' colonial project is not just failing but is already a hollowed-out remnant, its grandeur long since consumed. Catalina's letter reinforces this, lamenting that the house "stinks of decay" (Moreno-Garcia 48). This is the decay of a "failed colonizing process" (Zapata 11), where the Doyles' attempt to impose a piece of England on the Mexican highlands has resulted in a festering wound. The very Englishness of the house is an unnatural imposition, a "little piece of England" built with imported European soil, an act that underscores its alien and unsustainable presence (Moreno-Garcia 29). The rot is hence resistance - the local ecology actively reoccupying and digesting the foreign organism in its presence.

In addition to being symbolic, this house is an unnatural organism, an unfriendly ecosystem of control. Its oppressive silence, its rigid rules, "We do things a certain way around here," Virgil's sister Florence insists (Moreno-Garcia 27), and its physical state are all manifestations of the Doyles' corrupting influence. The world is militarized. Noemí astutely observes the parallel between the physical and biological decay, noting that a book in the library is "ravaged by mould" just as her cousin Catalina is "ravaged by disease" (Moreno-Garcia 24, 38). This direct link establishes the house's fungal infestation as the source of the physical and psychological violation of its inhabitants. It is not only a haunted house but a pathogenic house.

This way, Moreno-Garcia disrupts the time-honored haunted house trope. The secrets and ghostly ghosts in High Place are only secondary horrors; the major one is ecological and ideological. The "ghosts" are revealed to be psychic echoes, memories preserved within the mycelial network of "the gloom" (Moreno-Garcia 213). The true threat is not a supernatural entity but the living, breathing fungus that is "in the walls" (213). This reframing aligns with a material ecocritical perspective, where the haunting is a symptom of a sick environment, a "toxic" ecology born from colonial

violence (Stuckey 132). The horror of High Place is that of a landscape which has been scarred and remembers having been scarred, and has grown monstrous in process.

### **Myco-Horror and the Colonial Unconscious: The Fungal Entanglements of the Gloom**

The brain of High Place, the source of the peculiarly mycological terror of contamination and entanglement and forgotten memory that fills the novel, is the animate fungus, its neural network, colonizing not only the social fabric but the literal body and mind of the novel, becoming metaphor and reality in turn. Moreno-Garcia is drawing on a nascent subgenre of fungal horror which draws upon the bizarre biologies of fungi to probe anxieties about leaky subjectivity and loss of agency of the individual (Hurley; Astrom and Gregersdotter). In Mexican Gothic, the fungus is the ultimate "ecoGothic monster," an animate entity that dissolves the boundaries between human and nonhuman, self and other, past and present (Parker 164).

The mechanism of this horror is "the gloom," which Francis Doyle explains is a vast mycelial network: "The fungus, it runs under the house... Like a giant spider's web. There we can store memories, thoughts, that become trapped just like those flies that accidentally get into a real web. We call that repository of our thoughts, of our memories, the gloom" (Moreno-Garcia 213). This network is the biological and psychic archive of the Doyle family's history, a living "environmental unconscious" that traps the characters in a shared cycle of violence (Niblett 7). The atrocity of the darkness is in its corruption of natural model of ecology. Mycelial networks in nature tend to become models of symbiosis and communication, exchanging nutrients and creating survival in imperfect unity (Sheldrake). Howard Doyle on the other hand has colonized this natural system and turned a model of relation into the tool of a total patriarchal control. The "mycorrhizal network controlled by Howard Doyle" is not symbiotic but parasitic and totalitarian ("Fungal Colonialism"). The fungus does not make things evil, instead, its horror relates to its weaponization in the name of an ecophobic, colonial agenda.

This weaponization appears in form of fear of pollution and absorption. To breathe the air of High Place is to inhale the fungal spores and risk being absorbed into the Doyles' hive mind. Noemí's horrifying nightmares are not merely psychological; they are incursions from the gloom, moments of profound violation where her mind is no longer her own. Virgil cruelly taunts her with this reality after a dream in which he assaults her: "'That was a dream,' she stammered. 'It doesn't mean it wasn't real'" (Moreno-Garcia 228). This forced intimacy and the dissolution of self align perfectly with fungal horror's thematic preoccupation with the "loss of a unified and stable human identity" (Hurley 23).

At the heart of this monstrous network lies the abject maternal body of Agnes, Howard's first wife and sister, whom he murdered and sacrificed to become the gloom's host. She is the nexus of the horror, her decaying corpse described as a "monstrous Virgin in a cathedral of mycelium," her body transformed into an ecological nightmare that feeds the family's parasitic immortality (Moreno-Garcia 282; Nai 5). Her unending suffering is the energy source for the Doyles' power, a grotesque perversion of motherhood where she gives not life, but a perpetual, undeath. Noemí's realization that "They buried her alive and she died, and the fungus sprouted from her body" reveals the foundational act of gendered violence upon which the Doyles' entire system is built (Moreno-Garcia 282). Agnes's eventual destruction by fire is thus not just an attack on the fungus but an act of mercy, a final absolution for her "soiled motherhood" and a severing of the patriarchal curse at its source ("Fungal Colonialism").

### **"Mulch for the Soil": Eugenics and Extractivism as EcoGothic Violence**

The gloom fungal horror is perpetuated by an extremely ecophobic ideology, embodied in the figure of the patriarch, Howard Doyle. His worldview perfectly embodies Simon Estok's theory of ecophobia, where a hatred of the natural world is inextricably linked to racism and misogyny ("Reading Ecophobia"). Howard's obsession with eugenics—his crude inquiries about "the intermingling of superior and inferior types" and his fixation on Noemí's "Indian heritage"—is the human-centric expression of his desire to purify and control all aspects of his environment (Moreno-Garcia 29, 89). This ideology provides the justification for the twin violences of extractivism and exploitation that define the Doyles' existence in Mexico.

The novel provides an effective exposure of this ecophobic logic in its animalization of bodies. Women are pushed to the biological role in life, as they are prized as containers where children are produced. "A woman's function is to preserve the family line," Howard declares, revealing his view of women as breeding stock whose purpose is to be "fruitful" (Moreno-Garcia 87). Catalina and Noemí are targeted for their ability to introduce new genetic material into the Doyles' decaying, inbred lineage, but only on the Doyles' terms. This constitutes a form of reproductive violence that is central to the colonial project, where the bodies of colonized women are seen as resources to be controlled and exploited for the continuation of the colonizer's bloodline (Zapata 12).

Women are considered to be incubators; so the local Mexican mine workers must be even worse: just disposable biomass. In one of the novel's most chilling passages, Francis reveals that Howard referred to the miners who died in his service as "mulch" for the soil (Moreno-Garcia 221). It is a nightmare metaphor that hits painfully to the point because it directly connects exploitation of racialized labor to the exploitation of the earth itself. The Doyles do just as brutally with the silver in the ground and the life of the workers all with the same ruthless harvesting rationale. This is the

"socio-ecological violence of extractivism" that postcolonial ecocritics identify, where the domination of nature and the domination of the racialized Other are not parallel processes but are one and the same (Niblett 6).

Moreno-Garcia also presents an epistemological horror where the language of science and modernity are incorporated so that barbarism can be concealed. Howard eugenics as being an object of scientific and logical approach to the world is opposed to the ineffective (but at the same time, successful, since it helps the people of the town), folk knowledge of a local curandera, Marta Duval, who gives people remedies that actually work (Moreno-Garcia 155). This juxtaposition reveals a conflict between the Doyles' imported, violent, and supposedly superior Western knowledge system and the holistic, community-based knowledge of the colonized. The novel is therefore critical of not only past colonialism but also its malignant survival in the ideas of progress and rationality, which potential can be used to legitimate the more atrocious manifestations of ecocidal and racist violence.

### 3. Conclusion

With her short novel *Mexican Gothic*, Silvia Moreno-Garcia has managed to combine the conventions of the Gothic horror novel with the interpretive tools of ecocriticism and postcolonial theory. The novel's EcoGothic framework, centered on the monstrous entanglement of the Doyle family, their decaying estate, and the sentient fungus that connects them, serves as a powerful allegory for the material and ideological legacies of colonialism. The horror of the High Place can be discussed as that of an inescapable history in which the very soil is tainted with the violence dealt to it and to racialized, gendered bodies, establishing a toxic ecology that may engulf anyone who sets foot in it.

The novel's fiery climax, in which Noemí sets Agnes's body ablaze and High Place is consumed by flames, appears as a moment of triumphant liberation, a purging of the colonial-fungal entity (Moreno-Garcia 290). However, this resolution is strangely ambiguous, not wanting an easy, clear-cut win. As critic Angie Zapata argues, the novel, for all its subversions, "still suffers from the limitations of the genre" it seeks to decompose. Francis, a Doyle by blood and a figure "complicit in the Doyle's colonial practices," survives (Zapata 12). His budding romance with Noemí, while presented as a tender alternative to the Doyles' violence, risks reinscribing the "Gothic marriage plot" that has historically defined the genre's patriarchal confines (Zapata 13). Moreover, Francis himself is afraid that the fungus and the ideology, it symbolizes, might remain in his body. Such an uncertainty implies that colonial trauma cannot be simply removed or burnt; its spores are still there, and they continue to haunt the survivors and promise to appear in some new form.

After all, the novel by Moreno-Garcia is the ultimate gesture of what Rebecca Duncan calls decolonising Gothic (Kala 152). By drawing on the conventions of the genre only to undermine it even as she goes along with it, she writes a horror story that is also a shrewd political commentary. It is not the ease with which the novel comes up with a resolution that makes it so powerful today, but how it seemingly bares its teeth asking that the process of decolonization is complicated and that the process itself continues to happen. The burning of High Place is not the oblivion of the olden times, it clears the floor. The very last, slightest hope that the world in which the characters live could be remade, could be kinder and sweeter, is planted in the ashes of the violent past as the sign to the immensely worthwhile strength of a human being needed to survive the entanglements of the world that are EcoGothic (Moreno-Garcia 301).

### Works Cited

1. Åström, Berit, and Katarina Gregersdotter. "CFP: Fungal Horror and Popular Culture." Call for Papers, Umeå University, 9 Oct. 2024, [call-for-papers.sas.upenn.edu/cfp/2025/04/10/fungal-horror-and-popular-culture](http://call-for-papers.sas.upenn.edu/cfp/2025/04/10/fungal-horror-and-popular-culture).
2. Estok, Simon C. *The Ecophobia Hypothesis*. Routledge, 2018.
3. ---. "Reading Ecophobia: A Manifesto." *Ecozon@: European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2010, pp. 77-80.
4. ---. "Terror and Ecophobia." *Frame*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2013, pp. 89-101.
5. "Fungal Colonialism in Silvia Moreno-Garcia's *Mexican Gothic*." *Gothic Nature Journal*, 29 Sept. 2022, [gothicnaturejournal.com/fungal-colonialism-in-silvia-moreno-garcias-mexican-gothic/](http://gothicnaturejournal.com/fungal-colonialism-in-silvia-moreno-garcias-mexican-gothic/).
6. Gregersdotter, Katarina, and Berit Åström. "CFP: Fungal Horror and Popular Culture." ResearchGate, Oct. 2024, [www.researchgate.net/publication/384760217\\_CFP\\_Fungal\\_Horror\\_and\\_Popular\\_Culture](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/384760217_CFP_Fungal_Horror_and_Popular_Culture).
7. Huggan, Graham, and Helen Tiffin. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. Routledge, 2010.
8. Hurley, Kelly. "The Abhuman." University of Minnesota Press, [upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/the-gothic-body](http://upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/the-gothic-body). Accessed 26 July 2024.
9. Kala, Anjana. "Decolonial Urban EcoGothic in Deepa Anappara's *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line*." *eTropic: Electronic Journal of Studies in the Tropics*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2023, pp. 149-67.
10. Moreno-Garcia, Silvia. *Mexican Gothic*. Del Rey, 2020.
11. Nai, Corrado. "Book review: *Mexican Gothic* (2020) by Silvia Moreno-Garcia." Medium, 6 May 2023, [medium.com/@corrado.nai/book-review-mexican-gothic-2020-by-silvia-moreno-garcia-5073482a84e8](https://medium.com/@corrado.nai/book-review-mexican-gothic-2020-by-silvia-moreno-garcia-5073482a84e8).
12. Niblett, Michael. "Ecogothic." ResearchGate, May 2020, [www.researchgate.net/publication/341557174\\_Ecogothic](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/341557174_Ecogothic).



13. Parker, Elizabeth. *The Forest and the EcoGothic: The Deep Dark Woods in the Popular Imagination*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.
14. Parker, Elizabeth, and Michelle Poland. "The EcoGothic: An Interview with Elizabeth Parker and Michelle Poland." *REDEN*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2022, pp. 114-29.
15. Sheldrake, Merlin. *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds & Shape Our Futures*. Random House, 2020.
16. Smith, Andrew, and William Hughes, editors. *Ecogothic*. Manchester UP, 2013.
17. Stuckey, Amanda. "The ground itself was a traitor!: Horrors of Deforestation in Leonora Sansay's *Secret History*." *Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, edited by Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils, Routledge, 2018, pp. 121-34.
18. Zapata, Angie. "'What Decays and What Stays': Understanding Gothic Violence and Colonialism in Silvia Moreno-Garcia's *Mexican Gothic*." *The Macksey Journal*, vol. 4, 2023, article 16.