SP Publications
International Journal Of English and Studies (IJOES)
An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Journal; **Impact Factor:**8.337(SJIF)
ISSN: 2581-8333|**Volume 8, Issue-11(November);2026**

Commodification, Capitalism and Ecological Violence in Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax:* An Anthropocentric Study

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Article Received: 05/10/2026
Article Accepted:07/11/2026
Published Online:08/11/2026
DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.11.39

Abstract:

The proposed study primarily focuses on anthropocentrism, capitalist pursuits, ecological appropriation, environmental threats, displacement of non-human species, commodification and their long- term consequences on our mother nature in Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax* (1971). The researcher focuses on the capitalist model of material advancement and human greed which Dr. Seuss has depicted through the character of Once-ler. His anthropocentric desire has utterly neglected ecocentrism. Once-ler's capitalist greed violates non-humans' harmony with nature. Appropriation of ecology and non-humans would be at keen focus for the argument. The character of Once-ler, who exploits the ecology to fulfil his material and capitalist quest for wealth while disregarding nature and non-human species inhabiting the indigenous land. Carolyn Merchant's edited work *Ecology: Key Concepts in Critical Theory* (2nd ed., 2008) has chapters contributed by different literary scholars, whose arguments have taken to interpret Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax* on various critical theoretical account. An ecocritical appraisal of nature strengthens arguments by exposing exploitation of natural resources and capitalist appropriation. The industrial ambition to take an ecological advantage has also critiqued. The proposed argument would be studied from an anthropocentric perspective. How Once-ler's anthropocentric conception of wealth and capital accumulation of natural resources for material production have represent similarity with Western ideology, this aspect has given minor focus.

Keywords: Commodification, Capitalism, Anthropocentrism, Ecocentrism, Non-humans, Ecology, Exploitation, Aftermath, Land.

Introduction:

Theodor Seuss Geisel popularly known as Dr. Seuss. He was famous for children's literature, mostly children's stories. Apart from this, he was a great illustrator. He has illustrated many of his own classic books on children's literature. Not only that, but he has produced many characters which are children's favourites. For example, The Grinch, Horton the Elephant, The Cat in the Hat and The Lorax. Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax* (1971) is a short

book with the illustrations made by himself. The genre of *The Lorax* can be considered as a fable; to be specific it can be taken as an Eco-Fable or an Environmental Fiction or a Cautionary Tale. *The Lorax* depicts the ecological appropriation and the aftermath. The potential environmental threats are alarming the contemporary modernity as a whole, which are mainly industry-driven and also driven by the material needs and high profit demands. Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax* (1971) is a fiction. Through unique narration and illustrations Dr. Seuss has depicted the importance of nature and how the violation of our ecology may lead to ecological crisis, environmental threats and the possible devasting phenomenon. *The Lorax* has written in rhyming verse. Dr. Seuss has used some of made-up words. His writing style has made considerable impact on children. In *The Lorax,* his use of made-up words creates an element of entertainment and at same time it also raises an ecological and an environmental concern. For example, Once-ler wanted his factory "biggering and biggering and biggering" (Seuss, *The Lorax*). He has used the made-up word "biggering" (Seuss) instead of "bigger". The repeated use of this made-up word shows an extreme greed of Once-ler. He wanted to be rich and richer; his greed has completely neglected the ecology. Anthropocentrism or human-centredness, where, the sole focus on humanity and every other aspect revolves around the humans and their material desires. The proposed study of Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax* would critique Once-ler's anthropocentric practices and its aftermath effects on ecology and nonhuman species. Jason Moore's *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (2015) is a popular work of the theory of capitalism. Moore argues that capitalism impose brutal alteration on planetary life, "…Capitalism does, of course, impose real and violent transformations on planetary life…" (Moore 23) Dr. Seuss's The Lorax is not different in that sense, the Once-ler's capital accumulations, commodification and industrial material productions has transformed ecocentric indigenous land into an infertile land with the displaced nonhuman species.

The Lorax is a cautionary tale telling the story of an environmental loss and human greed of material advancement. Once-ler, a greedy person who went to the beautiful natural region filled with an enormous indigenous tree, animals, birds, fishes. Once-ler wanted to do something big, he saw big "Truffula Trees" and got an idea, he has chopped down one tree and built little shop. Dr. Seuss has portrayed Once-ler who has possessed the ability to invent something mainly regarding material possessions. Once-ler has invented "Thneed", a product which has made from knitting a soft tuft of Truffula Trees. Lorax, a character who always speaks in favour of trees. Once-ler represents anthropocentrism or humanity, whereas, Lorax represents ecocentrism or nature. The character of Lorax can be seen as an ecological hope, who put his efforts to preserve nature. Eventually, Once-ler has chopped all the Truffula Trees; despite the frequent warnings from Lorax. Thus, leading to ecological loss and displacements of animals, birds and other non-human species.

The character of Lorax, he has originated from somewhere under the tree. Dr Seuss has depicted Lorax's entry with little magical effects that he has emerged from the chopped tree. "I am the Lorax. I speak for the trees." (Seuss, *The Lorax*) Lorax speaks for trees

because trees cannot speak by themselves. Postcolonial critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's instrumental essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) where, she argues that subaltern cannot speak as they are considered as subaltern. Trees cannot speak for themselves as humans do, or we can say, humans cannot understand the language of non-humans, therefore, the character of Lorax speaks for the tress. The Truffula Trees play a significant role in lives of animal, birds, fishes and the entire ecosystem of that indigenous ecological region depicted in *The Lorax*. The arrival of Once-ler has devasted the lives of non-humans. His material pursuits can be considered as a form of economic colonialism. Identity of his country is not mentioned. Therefore, we cannot label him as a Westerner. However, his capitalist material desire at the cost of nature presents similarity with the Western thought of wealth. In *The Lorax*, Once-ler has built his shop in the indigenous region:

In no time at all, I had built a small shop.
Then I chopped down a Truffula Tree with one Chop.
And with great skilful skill and with great speedy speed,
I took the soft tuft. And I knitted a Thneed! (Seuss, *The Lorax*)

Elleke in Boehmer *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* (2nd ed., 2005) argues that colonialism often manifested "…the exploitation or development of resources…" (Boehmer 2) this development is not a literal development but a pseudo development by colonial authority. The development which would benefit only colonisers. Appropriation of natural resources often leads to planetary crisis. Although, there is no direct reference of colonialism or imperialism in *The Lorax*, however, Once-ler's actions have truly represented him as a true coloniser. *The Lorax* presents a cautionary tale of peak humas greed with the character of Once-ler. While harming the ecosystem; he gave himself a false reassurance that he was causing no harm to anyone. He remarked, "… I chopped just one tree. I am doing no harm…" (Seuss, *The Lorax*) Once-ler's self-assurance that he was causing no harm to anyone at all; this has rigorously changed when he has invited his whole family to that indigenous ecological region for the sole purpose of capital expansion of the Thneed production. Once-ler has chopped Truffula Trees and from the tree's soft material he has made "Thneed", a knitted product. Once-ler's anthropocentric passion reflects when he has transformed his little shop into a factory. This scale-up represents the industrial ambition. Once-ler has built the factory in that indigenous land, chopping the Truffula Trees like anything:

And, in no time at all,
in the factory I built,
the whole Once-ler Family
was working full tilt.
We were all knitting Thneeds
just as busy as bees,
to the sound of the chopping of Truffula Tress. (Seuss, *The Lorax*)

Joel Kovel in his contribution of the chapter titled as "Global Capitalism and the End of Nature" in the book *Ecology: Key Concepts in Critical Theory* (2nd ed., 2008) edited by

Carolyn Merchant; Kovel focuses on the issue of global capitalism, the potential ecological threats and the relationship of both these aspects. Kovel presents his argument, "Although the essentials of the ecological crisis lie in qualitative relationships, its outcome will turn upon quantity…" (Kovel 104) according to him, if the reason for ecological crisis has any qualitative relations with any of its causes; then also, its consequence would indicate upon the quantity. In another words, we can interpret that the end-result of an ecological crisis would determine it in-terms of quantity. In *The Lorax*, Once-ler's desire for the rapid material production of the Thneed indicates his quantitative determination for the mass-scale of production. For this purpose, he has transformed his shop into a factory. Mass-scale production requires large number of workers; Once-ler's invitation to his family for his factory work fulfils this requirement. Initially, Once-ler has built his shop, chopped one tree and prepared the Thneed. Apparently, his capitalist material drive to become rich; this thought has taken over the ecological sustainment thinking.

Val Plumwood, popularly known as an ecofeminist. Plumwood's *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (2002) presents the ecological crisis and ecological struggles against West's rational worldview. She argues that human-centredness and rationality have been privileged over nature and emotionality. Therefore, Anthropocentric belief in which, "… commodifying and getting the most out of the radically reduced Other that is nature…" (Plumwood 238) commodification makes nature as Other and its essentialism neglected to the great degree. Plumwood's observation of nature has accurately seen in *The Lorax*, in which, Once-ler has commodifies the Truffula Trees of the natural ecological region, where, the harmony of nature and non-humans was in an organic form of relationship. Once-ler's commodification has reduced nature as Other. The entire non-humans of that land have been victimised and suffered the significant loss in-terms of shelter and food. Their displacement in search for shelter and food is ironically portrayed by Dr. Seuss through the illustrations in *The Lorax.*

Herbert Marcuse has contributed the chapter "Ecology and Revolution" in the book *Ecology: Key Concepts in Critical Theory* (2nd ed., 2008) edited by Carolyn Merchant. Marcuse argues the danger of excessive capital production which can lead to exhaustion of natural resources. He remarks, "…the demands of exploitation progressively reduce and exhaust resources: the more capitalist productivity increases, the more destructive it becomes…" (Marcuse 68) *The Lorax* stand firm in this case. Once-ler's capitalist drive for his Thneed business has constantly increased to the extent where his discontent with the slow chopping of the Truffula Trees has forced him to invent something which could increase his rapid expansion of chopping off the Truffula Trees for his Thneed production. Once-ler has invented sturdy axe:

So I invented my Super-Axe-Hacker
which whacked off four Truffula Trees at one smacker.
We were making Thneeds

four times as fast as before! (Seuss, *The Lorax*)

Marxist ecologists, a group of thinkers who assert that environmental degradation is a consequence of the capitalist ideology of endless desire for profit. Pramod K. Nayar presents Marxist ecologists view of nature, "Marxist ecologists argue that nature has become a *commodity* with capitalist production…" (Nayar 247) as per this argument; ecological land region depicted in *The Lorax* is a mere commodity for Oncer-ler. We can argue that the use of this land for capitalist production was influenced by Western ideology of rationality. Once-ler's actions were truly presents him as a true model of Western ideology. Nayar argues that Western thought of nature is related to exploitation and capital fulfilment of their need. Nayar points out that Western thought of nature where, "… nature is there to serve human needs…" (Nayar 246) Westerners do not see beyond their capitalist needs. Anthropocentrism is a thought of human-centredness where nature acts as Other. Ecocentrism or nature-centredness is outrighted by the anthropocentric conception.

Capitalist regime and conception of wealth these two aspects throughout *The Lorax* have been associated with Once-ler. His sole focus was on scale-up his Thneed business. Once-ler remarks, "… I went right on biggering…selling more Thneeds. / And I biggered my money, which everyone needs." (Seuss, *The Lorax*) he has neglected the voices of the marginalized entity i.e. non-humans. In *The Lorax*, Seuss has portrayed "Swomee-Swans", "Brown Bar-ba loots", "Humming-Fish" and "Truffula Trees" which represent nonhuman species and at large nature. They have become victims of Oncer-ler's authoritarian ecological exploitation. The aftermath of this ecological destruction was the barren and infertile land without trees and non-human species. The whole natural entities have suffered the terrible fate of displacement and loss in harmony with nature.

Brian Tokar argues that traditional knowledge is no longer remain in an organic form; commercialization has taken place beyond traditional knowledge. He has contributed the chapter, "Global Ecological Movements" in *Ecology: Key Concepts in Critical Theory* (2nd ed., 2008) edited by Carolyn Merchant. Tokar points out that, "…traditional knowledge is thus transformed into a source of commercial products to be sold worldwide at a substantial profit." (Tokar 112) contemporary modernity has neglected traditional knowledge. Ironically, traditional knowledge has transformed into a mere source of material possession for commercial production. Once-ler has also neglected indigenous ecology for the production of Thneed. He has continued his production of Thneeds which made from the exploitation of trees to be sold in order to become rich. He has not understood the importance of trees until the last Truffula Tree has been chopped out. When the realization of ecological devastation came to Once-ler, he exclaimed:

Now all that was left 'neath the bad smelling sky
was my big empty factory…
the Lorax…
and I. (Seuss, *The Lorax*)

To conclude, Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax* presents the cautionary tale of human intervention on the natural world. Ecological appropriation remains a primary concern in this research. The researcher has taken Carolyn Merchant's edited work *Ecology: Key Concepts in Critical Theory* (2nd ed., 2008) to strengthen the theoretical critical arguments in analysing Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax*. Ecocentrism has been challenged by Anthropocentrism. *The Lorax* also portrays the consequences of the ecological appropriation, land degradation, environmental threats and displacements of the nonhuman species and violation in their harmony with nature. These are the primary outcome of Once-ler's anthropocentric quest. The capitalist pursuits of Once-ler to become rich, his act of exploiting the Truffula Trees for the material capitalist advancement have been analysed. Lorax's representation of ecology, especially, his concern for trees and ecosystem was valuable in-terms of Ecocriticism. However, Lorax's voice has been suppressed by Once-ler, which metaphorically represents the treatment of marginalised by colonisers. Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax* presents commodification, capitalism, ecological appropriation and land degradation which have been studied from an anthropocentric perspective in the proposed study.

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