

Fragile Worlds: Pandemic Ecology in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Dream Count*

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Abstract

This study examines Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Dream Count through the lens of pandemic ecology, an extension of ecocriticism that interprets pandemics as ecological events arising from disrupted relationships between humans, nonhuman life and the environment. Drawing on postcolonial ecocritical frameworks, the paper argues that the COVID-19 pandemic in the novel functions not merely as a medical crisis but as an ecological rupture that exposes deep-seated inequalities, environmental degradation and the fragility of human systems. The analysis highlights how Adichie intertwines environmental decay, psychological introspection and socio-economic disparity through the experiences of her four protagonists. The narrative foregrounds themes such as spatial confinement, temporal disruption and interior ecology, revealing how lockdown transforms both external landscapes and internal emotional worlds. Through depictions of polluted environments, extractive economies and embodied ecological suffering, the novel illustrates the interconnectedness of environmental and human vulnerability. Ultimately, Dream Count redefines ecological discourse by demonstrating that pandemics, like climate crises, demand a rethinking of human relationships with nature, power structures and global interdependence.

Key words: Pandemic, COVID-19, Survival, Ecology, Climate

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Ecocriticism is generally understood as the study of how literature engages with the natural world. Although its roots can be traced back to classical texts, it emerged as a significant literary movement in the late twentieth century—particularly during the 1980s and 1990s—through the contributions of scholars and nature-writing advocates such as Cheryll Glotfelty, Harold Fromm, Michael P. Branch, Scott O'Grady, Glen Love and Lawrence Buell. These scholars sought to foreground the analysis of nature and environmental concerns in literary studies, an area that had previously received limited attention.

Thus, ecocriticism involves both the collection and critical examination of literary works that focus on nature and the environment. As Buell, Heise and Thornber suggest, the term 'ecocriticism' or 'environmental criticism' serves as an umbrella concept for environmentally oriented literary analysis. The field itself derives its name from William Rueckert's 1978 essay, "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism."

Glotfelty describes ecocriticism as an exploration of the connection between literature and the physical environment, emphasizing that it involves studying environmental concerns within literary contexts (xviii). Similarly, Marshall characterizes ecocriticism as a form of literary criticism shaped by ecological consciousness, indicating that it is grounded in the values promoted by the ecological movement (8). In the same vein, Cokinos explains that ecocriticism expands both the critical and pedagogical scope of literary studies to incorporate texts that address the nonhuman world and humanity's relationship with it (3).

Postcolonial ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary approach that brings together the concerns of postcolonial studies and ecocriticism to examine how environmental issues intersect with histories of colonialism and imperialism. It investigates how colonial exploitation reshaped landscapes, disrupted indigenous ecological knowledge and contributed to environmental degradation in formerly colonized regions. This perspective highlights that environmental crises cannot be understood in isolation from power, inequality and global economic systems, as many ecological problems in the Global South are rooted in colonial resource extraction and its continuing legacies.

At the same time, postcolonial ecocriticism foregrounds indigenous voices, local knowledge systems and alternative ways of relating to nature that challenge Western, anthropocentric frameworks. It emphasizes resistance to environmental injustice, including issues such as land dispossession, deforestation, pollution and climate vulnerability disproportionately affecting marginalized communities. By reading literary texts through this lens, scholars reveal how narratives from postcolonial contexts articulate ecological concerns while also addressing questions of identity, culture and survival in a world shaped by both environmental and political struggles.

Pandemic literature examines how humans experience outbreaks of disease, appearing in diverse forms across history and reflecting evolving societal understandings of contagion and crisis. This genre is marked by its focus on fear, endurance, isolation and the ethical dilemmas that arise during widespread illness. Spanning from early apocalyptic narratives to contemporary depictions of global pandemics, such works offer a lens through which to

understand how disease transforms not only the body but also social structures, moral values and psychological states.

The idea of pandemic ecology broadens traditional ecological perspectives by incorporating biological crises such as viral outbreaks. It understands pandemics as ecological events that arise from disruptions in the relationships between humans, animals and their environments, often intensified by processes like globalization and urbanization.

Within this framework, pandemics reveal deep interconnectedness, as diseases easily cross borders and underscore global interdependence. They also expose the vulnerability of human systems—social, economic and emotional—while highlighting inequalities, since marginalized communities are disproportionately affected. Furthermore, pandemic ecology points to a disruption of temporal experience, where linear notions of time give way to cycles of waiting, uncertainty and introspection.

The outbreak of COVID-19 marked a significant shift in contemporary literature, inspiring narratives that engage with themes of isolation, mortality and global interconnectedness. In *Dream Count*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie situates her story within this extraordinary crisis, interweaving the lives of four women as they confront both personal and societal disruptions. The novel is shaped by the emotional and existential upheavals brought about by the pandemic, prompting the characters to reflect deeply and reassess their lives.

This study employs the concept of pandemic ecology, an extension of traditional ecocriticism that considers pandemics as ecological events capable of unsettling human systems, exposing social inequalities and redefining the relationship between individuals and their environments. Unlike more visible ecological crises such as climate change, pandemics function in subtle yet pervasive ways, transforming not only physical realities but also psychological experiences.

Born on 15 September 1977, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a Nigerian novelist, short story writer and literary critic whose work spans multiple genres, including children's literature and poetry. Her debut novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, brought her international recognition, earning prestigious awards such as the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award. Her subsequent novels and short stories have also received wide acclaim, firmly establishing her as a leading voice in contemporary literature.

Beyond her literary achievements, Adichie is a prominent global speaker who has delivered influential talks, most notably her 2009 TED Talk, *The Danger of a Single Story*. Her works have been translated into more than thirty languages, reflecting her global impact. Known for her realistic portrayal of contemporary issues, she gives voice to oppressed and

marginalized communities through her writing. Her works frequently explore themes such as immigration, identity, race, gender, relationships, marriage, education and broader social concerns.

Set against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, *Dream Count* explores themes such as marriage, immigration, sisterhood, race, class and gender. The novel centres on the interconnected lives of four women: Chiamaka, a Nigerian writer living in America who experiences displacement and isolation as an immigrant; Zikora, her close friend, a successful lawyer grappling with betrayal and loneliness; Omelogor, Chiamaka's cousin, an independent and accomplished woman; and Kadiatou, Chiamaka's housekeeper, who strives to raise her daughter despite a life-altering traumatic event.

Through these characters, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie foregrounds the struggles of women constrained by patriarchal structures and societal expectations. In a review for the Associated Press, Helen Wieffering acknowledged *Dream Count*'s "vibrant energy" and said it "succeeds because every page is suffused with empathy and because Adichie's voice is as forthright and clarifying as ever".

The pandemic setting functions as a significant narrative framework, where lockdown is portrayed not as a dramatic occurrence but as a state of enforced stillness that intensifies awareness and interrupts routine distractions. Within this suspended moment, the four protagonists—Chiamaka, Zikora, Omelogor and Kadiatou—are driven to confront unresolved emotions and past experiences. Although Chiamaka frames the beginning and end of the narrative, the shifting viewpoints of all four women resist presenting lockdown as a uniform experience, instead revealing how introspection varies across differences in class, migration and personal security.

In *Dream Count*, these elements are evident in the characters' experiences of isolation, economic instability and emotional turmoil. The pandemic becomes an ecological force that reshapes both external environments and internal landscapes. The novel dismantles triumphalist Afropolitan narratives by exposing the affective toll of gendered migration, cultural translation and ecological abandonment.

From a postcolonial ecocritical lens, it can be argued that the novel showcases how ecological ruin, infrastructural decay and biopolitical neglect do not begin with COVID-19. In Adichie's narrative, the pandemic is not merely a medical crisis but an ecological rupture that disrupts everyday life. Chiamaka, a travel writer, finds herself immobilized by lockdown restrictions, symbolizing the collapse of global mobility.

The pandemic brings about profound shifts in everyday life, beginning with spatial confinement, as individuals are restricted to domestic spaces that become paradoxical sites of both safety and entrapment. This is accompanied by temporal stagnation, where the usual sense of structured time dissolves into repetitive and monotonous routines. At the same time, emotional experiences are intensified, with isolation deepening feelings of grief, anxiety and self-reflection. In this context, Chiamaka's inability to write during the pandemic symbolizes a wider ecological paralysis, where uncertainty and fear suppress creative and productive energies. She narrates, "I did not write because I could not write". (9)

One of the most significant aspects of pandemic ecology in *Dream Count* is the shift from external to internal environments. The lockdown forces characters to turn inward, creating what may be termed an interior ecology—a psychological landscape shaped by memory, desire and regret. Chiamaka's reflections on past relationships illustrate how the pandemic acts as a catalyst for introspection. Her 'dream count;—a re-evaluation of past lovers—becomes a metaphor for the human tendency to seek meaning in times of crisis.

Dream Count vividly reflects the principles of pandemic ecology by portraying environmental degradation as deeply intertwined with human disruption. Kadiatou explains,

They passed fields of sick- looking grain, young stalks already shriveling to straw. The stream had become a muddy pudding on whose surface a few dead fish floated round-eyed. Kadiatou stared in disbelief, turning from side to side. She felt as if she had been dropped inside a world shorn of its feathers. The air was soiled, the soil arid. To look at the mine itself on their way back was to shudder at a vast harsh expanse of disemboweled earth, gaping helplessly, stark and stripped of life. An urge seized her, to run to the motor park and return to her village where the grass still grew as grass should. (184)

The imagery of 'sick-looking grain' and a stream reduced to 'muddy pudding' with dead fish suggests a breakdown in ecological balance. From a pandemic-ecology perspective, such scenes symbolize how disturbed human–environment relationships—whether through extractive industries, pollution or crisis conditions—produce lifeless, contaminated landscapes. Just as pandemics emerge from ecological imbalance, this degraded environment mirrors a system pushed beyond its limits.

The description also emphasizes vulnerability and loss, key concerns of pandemic ecology. Kadiatou's sense of disbelief and her feeling of being 'dropped inside a world shorn of its feathers' evoke a profound estrangement from nature. The environment is no longer nurturing but hostile 'the air was soiled, the soil arid'. This parallels how pandemics expose

the fragility of both ecological and human systems, stripping away the illusion of stability. The ‘disemboweled earth’ further intensifies this idea, suggesting not only environmental damage but also a violent rupture in the relationship between humans and the natural world.

Kadiatou’s urge to return to her village, ‘where the grass still grew as grass should’ reflects a desire to reconnect with a more harmonious, sustainable environment. This contrast between the ruined landscape and the remembered natural order highlights the uneven distribution of ecological damage—often tied to class, labor and exploitation. In the broader context of pandemic ecology, such longing underscores the need to rethink human practices and restore healthier, more ethical relationships with the environment.

Kadiatou description of the mining town as ‘noise and dust’ reflects ecological disruption caused by extractive capitalism, a key concern of pandemic ecology. The relentless “hacking and digging and extracting” signals human intrusion into natural systems, similar to how pandemics emerge from disturbed ecological balances (184). The dust covering everything—animals, children and homes—suggests an environment overwhelmed by human activity, where the boundary between the natural and the artificial has collapsed. This mirrors pandemic ecology’s emphasis on how environmental degradation creates conditions for broader crises.

Adichie uses the image of the “mournful landscape of that mining town” to evoke an ecological space shaped by extraction, depletion and environmental degradation (190). From the perspective of pandemic ecology, this setting mirrors the broader crisis conditions intensified during a pandemic—where disrupted human–environment relations produce both physical and emotional exhaustion. The mining town, marked by dust and lifelessness, symbolizes a damaged ecosystem that parallels the psychological confinement and stagnation experienced during the pandemic. Being ‘freed’ from this landscape suggests not only a physical departure but also an escape from an oppressive ecological and emotional environment that limits well-being and agency.

Similarly, the recollection of “birthing her son ... in that hospital, in that mining town full of dust” highlights how intimate human experiences such as childbirth are deeply entangled with ecological conditions (231). Through a pandemic ecology lens, the dust-filled environment reflects vulnerability, exposure and the intrusion of ecological crisis into the most personal moments of life. The hospital, typically a site of care and safety, becomes embedded within a compromised environment, suggesting how systems meant to protect life are themselves affected by ecological degradation. This memory underscores how environmental

and biological precarity—central to pandemic ecology—shape not only public health but also personal histories, reinforcing the interconnectedness of body, place and crisis.

Kadiatou’s bodily reactions—rashes, coughing, itching and irritation—illustrate the embodiment of ecological crisis, a central idea in pandemic ecology. Just as viruses infiltrate the human body during pandemics, here environmental toxicity invades and destabilizes her physical being. Her suffering is not isolated but directly linked to her surroundings, showing how human health is inseparable from environmental conditions. The line about wanting “to reach in and scratch at the center of her soul” metaphorically deepens this, suggesting that ecological harm penetrates beyond the physical into psychological and existential discomfort (184).

Third, the imagery of ‘sick-looking grain’ and a polluted stream with ‘dead fish’ foregrounds ecosystem collapse and loss of biodiversity, paralleling pandemic ecology’s concern with systemic breakdown. The land itself appears diseased, reinforcing the idea that ecological imbalance affects all life forms. Just as pandemics expose the fragility of human systems, this environmental decay reveals the vulnerability of agricultural and aquatic systems, which are essential for survival.

This passage highlights inequality and uneven ecological burden, another key principle of pandemic ecology. Kadiatou, as a marginalized figure, is the one most exposed to these harsh conditions, reflecting how environmental and biological crises disproportionately affect vulnerable communities. The mining operation benefits unseen powers, while local people endure pollution and health risks. This aligns with pandemic ecology’s critique of how global systems of exploitation produce localized suffering, making certain bodies and environments more expendable than others.

The contrast between the “air-conditioned hospital on top of a hill” and the “relentless, marauding dust” underscores the unequal distribution of safe and unsafe environments (188). The hospital represents a controlled, protected ecological space, while the outside world signifies exposure to environmental and biological risks. When the mother is forced to leave this protected space, the transition back into a precarious environment result in tragedy. Pandemic ecology emphasizes how disruptions in environmental conditions—such as poor sanitation, dust and lack of medical infrastructure—can quickly turn into life-threatening crises, especially for vulnerable bodies like infants.

At the same time, the passage highlights the theme of inequality, a central concern of pandemic ecology. The inability to remain in the hospital reflects structural limitations—economic, social and infrastructural—that disproportionately affect marginalized individuals.

The baby's sudden illness and death reveal how fragile human life becomes when systems of care are inadequate or inaccessible. The rapid shift from temporary safety to irreversible loss also reflects the unpredictability and immediacy of ecological crises, where the boundaries between life and death collapse quickly. Thus, the passage demonstrates how environmental exposure, systemic inequality and limited access to healthcare converge to produce devastating outcomes, reinforcing the core principles of pandemic ecology.

The suburban landscape, once structured around human activity, becomes eerily still, allowing nonhuman life—symbolized by the herd of deer—to reclaim space. Their unusual boldness reflects a reversal of ecological hierarchies, where human absence enables nature to reassert itself in unsettling ways. Chiamaka's fear of the deer suggests not just a reaction to animals, but an anxiety about the breakdown of familiar boundaries between the human and nonhuman worlds. This aligns with pandemic ecology's emphasis on interconnectedness and ecological disturbance, where a biological crisis like COVID-19 reshapes both physical environments and human perceptions of them.

At the same time, the passage foregrounds the psychological and temporal disruptions central to pandemic ecology. The "formless days" and the sense of "time turning inward" reflect a collapse of linear temporality into repetitive, stagnant cycles, while Chiamaka's physical discomfort and inability to write signify a deeper ecological paralysis affecting both body and mind (9). Her isolation, fragmented routines and reliance on digital communication highlight the disintegration of social connections and the inadequacy of virtual substitutes. Thus, the passage reveals how the pandemic not only alters external environments but also internal states, producing a condition in which creative, emotional and social energies are suspended, reinforcing the ecological fragility of human life.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Dream Count* powerfully reimagines the COVID-19 pandemic as an ecological event that unsettles not only public health systems but also the intricate relationships between humans, environments and social structures. Through the lens of pandemic ecology, the novel reveals how biological crises emerge from and intensify existing ecological imbalances, including environmental degradation, extractive economies and global inequalities. The experiences of Chiamaka, Zikora, Omelogor and Kadiatou demonstrate that the pandemic is not a uniform phenomenon; rather, it is shaped by intersecting factors such as class, gender, migration and access to resources. Adichie's narrative thus challenges anthropocentric perspectives by foregrounding interconnectedness, showing that human vulnerability is inseparable from the health of ecological systems.

Furthermore, the novel deepens ecocritical discourse by introducing the idea of ‘interior ecology,’ where psychological states, memory and emotional resilience become integral to understanding ecological disruption. The enforced stillness of lockdown transforms both physical and mental landscapes, compelling characters to confront personal histories while navigating uncertainty and loss. By linking environmental decay with embodied suffering and socio-political marginalization, *Dream Count* underscores the uneven distribution of ecological and biological risks. Ultimately, Adichie calls for a reimagining of human–environment relationships grounded in ethical responsibility, sustainability and social justice, suggesting that meaningful recovery from pandemics requires not only medical solutions but also ecological awareness and structural transformation.

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