

Ecologies of Circulation: Coastal Power and Relational Worlds in Royyan Julian's *Tiang Garam* and Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Arus Balik*

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ABSTRACT

Coastal environments are often read as spaces or resources, obscuring circulations sustaining their livability. This study compares Royyan Julian's *Tiang Garam* [*Pillar of Salt*] and Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Arus Balik* [*The Turn of the Tide*] to examine how coastal worlds are sustained, captured, disrupted, and reopened. Using comparative qualitative literary analysis combining close reading, relational ecological textual analysis, and deductive-inductive thematic coding, 80 textual units were analyzed. Four patterns emerged: relational infrastructures, capture of circulation through access and route control, relational dispossession, and ambivalent repair. Findings show coastal power extends beyond extraction and territorial possession to governing connections among people, commodities, infrastructures, and more-than-human life. The study proposes *ecologies of circulation* for understanding coastal power, maintenance, and world-making.

INTRODUCTION

Literary works do not merely reflect reality but interpret and imaginatively reconstruct the relations through which people inhabit their worlds. Environmental literature therefore renders ecological change, human–nonhuman relations, livelihood, memory, and power culturally intelligible. Ecocritical and environmental-humanities scholarship has accordingly shifted from nature as a passive represented object toward material interdependence, more-than-human relations, and world-making (Descola, 2013; Tsing, 2015; Haraway, 2016; Escobar, 2018; Garrard, 2023). Recent studies extend these concerns across climate fiction, human–nature–spiritual relations, and more-than-human perspectives (Mączyńska, 2023; Nahdhiyah et al., 2023; Ribó, 2024; Ryan, 2024), while Indonesian literary-ecological scholarship has examined natural harmony, ecofeminist exploitation, ecological violence, and alternative literary world-construction (Maslikatin et al., 2025; Maslikatin et al., 2026; Saputra et al., 2025; Saputra, Prasetya, et al., 2026). Literature thus matters not only for depicting environmental problems but for revealing how ecological worlds are organized, contested, and sustained.

This article constitutes the second publication output of the broader research project *Rekonstruksi Epistemologi Relasional Berbasis Etnosains Using: Kritik atas Ideologi Ekologis Modern dalam Novel Indonesia Kontemporer*, which examines ten Indonesian novels organized into five ecological clusters. The first output examined two novels in the first cluster (Ayu Welirang's *Jejak Balak* and Ayu Utami's *Bilangan Fu*) and was published in the *International Journal of Contemporary Sciences* under the title “Making Landscapes Extractable: Epistemic Politics and Relational Ecologies in Ayu Welirang's *Jejak Balak* and Ayu Utami's *Bilangan Fu*” (Saputra, Indiarti, et al., 2026). The present article turns to the second cluster through Royyan Julian's *Tiang Garam* [*Pillar of Salt*] and Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Arus Balik* [*The Turn of the Tide*], shifting the analytical focus from landscape extractability to coastal circulation and relational world-making.

From this perspective, what sustains a coastal world when land, water, commodities, labor, vessels, memory, and authority remain in motion? Coastal life depends not merely on sea, shoreline, or resources but on relations enabling people, materials, organisms, knowledge, and livelihoods to move across land–sea interfaces. In Royyan Julian's *Tiang Garam*, salt fields, fishing boats, mangroves, birds, kinship, and ancestral landform an interdependent coastal world (Julian, 2023), whereas Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Arus Balik* expands this scale through Tuban's ships, ports, commodities, fishing settlements, shipyards, roads, and hinterland connections (Toer, 1995). Comparatively, the novels shift attention from degradation alone toward the relations through which coastal worlds remain connected and livable.

This relational perspective converges with oceanic and blue humanities, which treats seas and waters as material, mobile, political, and epistemic media. “Reading for water” foregrounds water's sensory, political, and agentive force (Hofmeyr et al., 2022), while blue humanities advances water-centered cultural and ecological inquiry (Mentz, 2024). Maritime-mobility studies emphasize im/mobility, routes, and postcolonial and multispecies relations (Ganser &

Lavery, 2023a), and wet ontologies challenge static terrestrial models through fluidity and continual reformation (Steinberg & Peters, 2015). Related scholarship encompasses Indian Ocean world-making, routes and roots, historical constructions of ocean space, planetary-water poetics, and colonial inheritances (Steinberg, 2001; DeLoughrey, 2007; Lavery, 2021; Mentz, 2023; Ferwerda, 2024; Hofmeyr et al., 2024; Kluwick, 2025). Hydrocolonial scholarship extends these concerns to freshwater systems (Puri, 2026), while Indonesian maritime-literary research foregrounds local knowledge and marine-resource use in archipelagic communities (Saputra et al., 2022). Together, these perspectives provide a basis for reading circulation as constitutive of coastal worlds (Ganser & Lavery, 2023a, 2023b).

Movement, however, is inseparable from power. Access theory distinguishes the ability to benefit from resources from formal property rights (Ribot & Peluso, 2003), while infrastructure studies examine the material networks through which people, commodities, ideas, finance, and authority circulate (Larkin, 2013) and how environmental systems themselves may become infrastructural (Carse, 2012). Mobility is differentiated through routes, rhythms, frictions, and regulation (Cresswell, 2010), maritime space through sovereignty and appropriation (Campling & Colás, 2018), and infrastructure through maintenance and repair (Graham & Thrift, 2007). Mobility-justice scholarship further stresses unequal capacities to move and their social consequences (Sheller, 2018, 2020). These approaches raise a central problem for literary environmental analysis: how circulation sustains coastal relations and how power enables, channels, monopolizes, interrupts, or restores them.

Existing studies clarify this gap. Research on *Tiang Garam* has addressed environmental exploitation and ecological awareness (Rahman & Cindi, 2025), as well as symbolic violence, agrarian capitalism, class domination, and resistance (Habiburrahman et al., 2026). Yet the novel specifies domination through control of circulation: Haji Badawi monopolizes salt brokerage, intimidation discourages alternative sales, the village head restricts outside buyers, depressed prices weaken salt farming, and abandoned fields enter shrimp-pond expansion (Julian, 2023). The conflict therefore concerns not only exploitation but also market access, land conversion, livelihood pathways, and intergenerational place.

Studies of *Arus Balik* have emphasized maritime history and political transformation (Kumaidi, 2017), coastal culture (Kumaidi, 2021), struggle and heroism (Badio et al., 2019), and spice-route port connectivity (Muslimin, 2022). Muslimin's account of ports as centers of shipping, trade, distribution, knowledge transfer, and social dynamics is especially relevant, but the present study asks how such connectivity becomes politically vulnerable. When Maluku-Tuban trade declines, the port quiets, warehouses empty, ships alter routes, shipyards stop, wages disappear, and instability spreads inland (Toer, 1995). Character-centered scholarship has also examined Wiranggaleng through the hero's-journey framework (Putri, 2019). Thus, the issue is not connectivity itself but the political conditions under which circulation is maintained, redirected, monopolized, or broken.

Previous scholarship has therefore illuminated environmental degradation and class conflict in *Tiang Garam* and maritime history, coastal culture, heroism, and connectivity in *Arus Balik*, but has not adequately explained how both novels construct coastal life through politically governed circulations whose capture, maintenance, disruption, and reopening reorganize ecological relations. The novels differ in scale (*Tiang Garam* foregrounds ancestral land, salt production, shrimp ponds, households, and village markets, whereas *Arus Balik* maps ports, fleets, sea routes, inter-island trade, infrastructures, and geopolitical authority) but their comparability lies in the shared problem of how movement sustains coastal worlds and becomes an object of power.

Accordingly, this study examines how *Tiang Garam* and *Arus Balik* construct coastal environments as relational worlds; how circulation and access are captured, redirected, maintained, or disrupted; and how ecological knowledge, relational dispossession, resistance, and repair emerge from these processes. It develops ecologies of circulation as a comparative perspective in which coastal power operates not only through territorial possession or resource extraction but through control over the relations and infrastructures that keep ecological worlds connected and livable. By placing Indonesian contemporary and historical fiction in dialogue with relational environmental humanities, oceanic studies, and theories of access and infrastructure, the study positions Indonesian literature within broader debates on coastal world-making, mobility, and ecological power.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Relational Ecologies and World-Making

Contemporary environmental humanities challenges the view of nature as a self-contained domain external to human society. Relational approaches instead understand ecological worlds as emerging through historically situated relations among human and nonhuman beings, material processes, practices, knowledge, and authority. Descola (2013) critiques the modern nature–culture divide, while Escobar (2018) conceptualizes relationality and world-making through radical interdependence. Haraway's (2016) *sympoiesis* emphasizes multispecies "making-with," and Tsing (2015) shows how livelihoods and ecological possibilities arise within contingent assemblages shaped by capitalist disturbance. Kohn (2013) extends more-than-human inquiry toward nonhuman semiosis, while Alaimo (2016) foregrounds material exposure and trans-corporeal entanglement. Political-ontology scholarship further cautions that some environmental conflicts involve divergent enactments of worlds rather than merely competing representations (Blaser, 2009, 2013).

In this study, relational ecology therefore means more than general interconnectedness. It examines how ecological entities acquire significance and agency through relations. In *Tiang Garam*, ancestral land connects burial, kinship, ritual obligation, vegetation, water, wind, animals, and future generations; the bidara trees are described as guardians of water, callers of wind, and homes for animals (Julian, 2023). Relationality thus functions as an analytical principle for understanding ecological worlds as simultaneously material, genealogical, ethical, and more-than-human.

Oceanic Humanities and Maritime Mobilities

This relational perspective is especially important for maritime environments. Blue and oceanic humanities challenge terrestrial models that treat the sea as empty space between fixed places. Mentz (2024) develops blue humanities as water-centered cultural and ecological inquiry, while Hofmeyr, Nuttall, and Lavery (2022) propose “reading for water” as attention to water’s materiality, movement, agency, and political histories. Hofmeyr’s (2022) hydrocolonialism shows ports and coastal waters as sites where law, empire, commodities, texts, and environmental forces intersect, while Ganser and Lavery (2023a) connect maritime studies with oceanic im/mobilities, postcolonial relations, and multispecies perspectives. Lavery (2021) shifts literary analysis from national territory toward transoceanic relations, and recent scholarship extends blue humanities toward planetary water, hydrocritical method, and colonial critique (Mentz, 2023; Ferwerda, 2024; Hofmeyr et al., 2024; Kluwick, 2025).

Steinberg and Peters’s (2015) “wet ontologies” similarly resist stable terrestrial spatial models by conceptualizing seas as dynamic material volumes shaped by movement and continual reformation. *Arus Balik* exemplifies this relational maritime world through seas, ships, ports, reefs, roads, commodities, labor, and political institutions. Tuban is produced through both favorable natural conditions and accumulated human intervention; deep water, coral formations, docks, roads, and centuries of labor (Toer, 1995). Its maritime environment is therefore better understood as a mobile socio-material world than as terrestrial political history merely relocated onto water.

Access, Infrastructure, Maintenance, and Circulatory Power

Relationality and mobility alone do not explain why circulation benefits some actors while excluding or dispossessing others. Ribot and Peluso (2003) define access as the effective ability to derive benefits from things rather than simply formal ownership. Their distinction between a “bundle of rights” and a broader “bundle of powers” directs attention to markets, institutions, knowledge, technology, capital, and coercion. This is crucial because both novels show that coastal power involves not only property but also control over markets, routes, prices, ships, ports, and mobility.

Infrastructure studies further clarify these mechanisms. Larkin (2013) conceptualizes infrastructures as networks through which people, commodities, ideas, finance, waste, and power circulate, while Carse (2012) shows that hydrological systems themselves may become infrastructure. Coastal circulation consequently depends on both built facilities and socio-natural conditions such as water depth, channels, currents, labor, vegetation, and maintenance. *Arus Balik* illustrates this when neglected waterways become shallow and large ships can no longer enter the interior (Toer, 1995).

Maintenance is therefore constitutive rather than secondary. Graham and Thrift (2007) show that infrastructures remain functional through often-invisible practices of repair, while Cresswell (2010) emphasizes that mobility is socially differentiated through route, rhythm, friction, speed, experience, and regulation.

Campling and Colás (2018) further connect maritime space with sovereignty and appropriation. Together, these perspectives shift analysis toward who can move what, through which routes and infrastructures, under whose authority, at what cost, and with what consequences. In *Tiang Garam*, Haji Badawi's power rests not simply on landownership but on controlling market access through monopoly, intimidation, and alliance with the village head, thereby depressing prices and contributing to livelihood shifts and land sales (Julian, 2023). Power thus operates through the selective organization of circulation.

Ecologies of Circulation: A Conceptual Synthesis

Drawing these perspectives together, this study develops ecologies of circulation as a comparative analytical concept. It refers to relational and politically contested configurations through which water, organisms, commodities, labor, vessels, knowledge, memory, and authority move (or are enabled to move) through material and institutional infrastructures requiring continual maintenance. The concept integrates four propositions: relational ecology explains how worlds are constituted through relations; oceanic humanities foregrounds water and mobility as material forces; access theory identifies unequal capacities to benefit from circulation; and infrastructure and maintenance studies show that flows depend on material arrangements, institutional work, and repair.

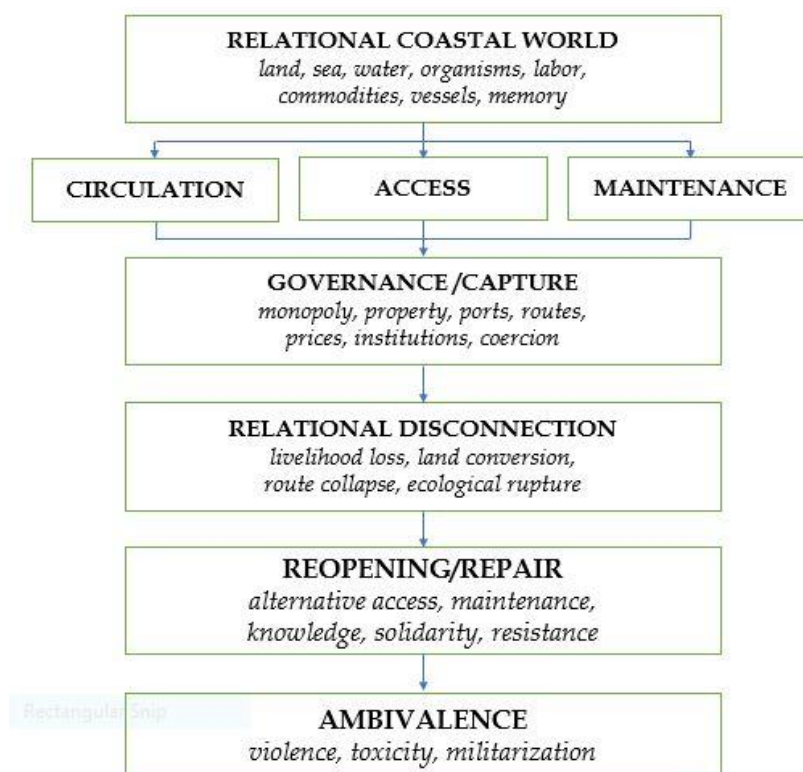


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Ecologies of Circulation

Circulation, however, is not inherently ecological, emancipatory, or just. The same systems that sustain livelihood and connectivity can also transmit monopoly, coercion, militarization, dispossession, and toxicity. Maritime routes may facilitate trade while enabling appropriation; market connections may

sustain producers while being monopolized; and resistance may reopen access while reproducing violence against human or nonhuman life. The analytical value of ecologies of circulation therefore lies not in celebrating movement but in tracing how relations are maintained, governed, captured, redirected, interrupted, and reopened, and with what unequal ecological and political consequences.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed comparative qualitative literary analysis combining close reading, relational ecological textual analysis, and deductive-inductive thematic coding. Close reading examined how description, dialogue, spatial organization, material processes, and conflict construct relations among coastal environments, livelihoods, infrastructures, nonhuman entities, and authority. Relational ecological textual analysis functioned as an operational procedure derived from the theoretical framework, tracing how land, water, organisms, commodities, labor, vessels, memory, and institutional power are connected, maintained, disrupted, or reorganized. Thematic coding identified patterned meanings across the corpus (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019), while coding and analytic memoing developed descriptive codes into analytically meaningful categories (Saldaña, 2021). Close reading also remained attentive to manifest textual form and description, informed by surface and descriptive reading (Best & Marcus, 2009; Love, 2010; Felski, 2015), while comparative thematic organization drew on applied thematic analysis and qualitative data interpretation (Guest et al., 2012; Miles et al., 2014).

The corpus comprised Royyan Julian's *Tiang Garam*, Pelangi Sastra, 2023 (Julian, 2023) and Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Arus Balik*, Hasta Mitra, 1995 (Toer, 1995). The novels were treated not as identical coastal formations but as contrasting yet comparable configurations: *Tiang Garam* foregrounds salt fields, ancestral land, shrimp ponds, village markets, and coastal livelihoods, whereas *Arus Balik* develops a broader maritime world of ports, ships, sea routes, trade, shipyards, and political authority. Units of analysis included significant passages, dialogue, ecological and spatial descriptions, labor and livelihood, property and access, maritime infrastructures, knowledge regimes, conflicts, and practices of resistance or repair.

Analysis proceeded iteratively through whole-text reading, page-by-page screening, preliminary coding, comparative categorization, and interpretive memoing. The process generated 80 analytically salient textual units, recorded with page number, passage, context, ecological entity, circulation type, actor or authority, access/control mechanism, relational consequence, knowledge regime, resistance/repair, comparative code, and analytical memo. Coding combined theoretically informed categories (relationality, circulation, access, infrastructure, and maintenance) with inductively emerging categories. Comparative recoding consolidated the data into four patterns: relational coastal infrastructures; capture and governance of circulation; relational dispossession; and knowledge, maintenance, and ambivalent repair. From the larger matrix, 24 flagship passages were selected as representative and contrastive evidence for

the Results section, while the remaining units served as supporting and checking evidence.

Analytical rigor was strengthened by retaining passages that qualified or contradicted emerging interpretations. Coding therefore did not assume that circulation, relationality, or resistance was inherently ecological or emancipatory. Kana's resistance in *Tiang Garam*, for example, challenges monopolistic control but later involves potassium cyanide being used in Haji Badawi's shrimp ponds, killing the shrimp (Julian, 2023). This passage was retained as counter-evidence because it shows that resistance can reproduce ecological violence. Accordingly, coding was treated as theory-testing and theory-refining rather than merely theory-confirming: *ecologies of circulation* was evaluated against supportive, qualifying, and contradictory textual evidence before organizing the comparative findings.

RESULTS

Relational Coastal Worlds and Infrastructures of Circulation

The first comparative pattern shows that both novels construct coastal environments as relational infrastructures of life rather than passive settings. Their ecological formations differ in scale, yet both depend on connections among environmental processes, labor, nonhuman life, material infrastructures, memory, and livelihood. In *Tiang Garam*, this world centers on salt fields, the sea, *taneyan* [an ancestral family compound], ancestral land, vegetation, and household reproduction; in *Arus Balik*, it expands into a transregional network of seas, ships, ports, roads, commodities, shipyards, hinterlands, and political institutions.

Tiang Garam establishes land-sea continuity through Kana's return to Kotasek, where the "aroma asin" ["salty scent"] of salt fields, offshore fishing lights, and mangroves connect terrestrial and marine spaces (Julian, 2023, p. 4). Ancestral land further links burial, kinship, descendants, vegetation, water, wind, animals, and ritual practice; the bidara trees are described as "penjaga air, pemanggil angin, rumah para binatang" ["guardians of water, callers of the wind, and homes for animals"] (Julian, 2023, p. 25). Labor reinforces this continuity as Ayat sustains the *taneyan* through salt-field work, connecting soil, climate, family organization, and generational reproduction (Julian, 2023, p. 37). The novel thus constructs a localized ecology organized through land-sea-labor-kinship-memory-more-than-human life.

Arus Balik develops a wider maritime formation. Tuban's ships, fishing settlements, naval facilities, and shipyards form one coastal system sustained by flows of goods and people (Toer, 1995, p. 31). The port is explicitly "made" through natural and human co-production: deep water, coral formations, harbor facilities, roads, and accumulated labor together create its viability (Toer, 1995, p. 32). Maritime circulation also transports "barang-barang baru, pikiran-pikiran baru, agama baru" ["new goods, new ideas, new religions"], showing that movement carries knowledge and cultural transformation as well as commodities (Toer, 1995, p. 36).

The novels therefore differ in scale but share a relational mechanism. *Tiang Garam* foregrounds intimate, intergenerational subsistence, whereas *Arus Balik*

emphasizes interregional maritime connectivity. In both, coastal worlds remain viable through maintained connections through which materials, labor, organisms, people, knowledge, and memory circulate. Coastal relationality is therefore fundamentally infrastructural.

Capturing Circulation: Monopoly, Access, and Maritime Power

The second pattern shows that coastal power operates not only through possession but by governing the routes and conditions of movement. Domination often narrows or redirects circulation rather than stopping it.

In *Tiang Garam*, Haji Badawi's expansion begins with consumer pressures and land sales generated by economic inequality (Julian, 2023, p. 82), but becomes structurally decisive through control of salt circulation. As Kotasek's sole middleman, Badawi receives virtually all local harvests, while Pukara intimidates competing sellers and village head Anwari discourages outside buyers through illegal levies (Julian, 2023, pp. 91-92). Farmers continue producing salt but lose meaningful control over where and under what terms it circulates. Low prices contribute to livelihood shifts and the eventual sale of neglected salt fields for shrimp-pond expansion (Julian, 2023, p. 92). Formal property then consolidates this unequal arrangement when Badawi invokes land certification against uncertified villagers' claims (Julian, 2023, p. 94). Coastal power thus develops through consumer pressure, land exchange, monopsony, intimidation, restricted access, depressed prices, livelihood shift, land conversion, and legal consolidation.

Arus Balik represents the same logic at a wider scale. Jepara's shipyards are interpreted as instruments for "menguasai laut" ["to command the sea"], demonstrating that maritime sovereignty depends on material capacity to build ships and control routes (Toer, 1995, p. 40). Portuguese strategy toward Banten and Sunda Kelapa similarly seeks to redirect pepper flows toward Europe while weakening rival ports and extending control over Java and Sumatra's waters (Toer, 1995, p. 743). The relation becomes explicit when "kekuasaan atas jalan laut" ["control over the sea routes"] is linked to spice-trade monopoly through war, violence, alliance, diplomacy, and maritime communication (Toer, 1995, p. 1002).

The comparison shows that circulatory power operates through selective channeling rather than simple immobilization. Salt continues to move, but increasingly through Badawi; commodities continue to circulate, but maritime powers seek to determine their routes and destinations. Coastal domination therefore works through control over the relational pathways that keep coastal economies and ecological worlds connected.

Relational Dispossession: Broken Land, Routes, and Livelihoods

The third pattern shows that dispossession exceeds property loss. It occurs when sustaining relations are severed, producing effects across ecological, social, economic, and mnemonic networks.

In *Tiang Garam*, family land converted into shrimp ponds becomes a site of hydrological, vegetal, genealogical, and affective disruption. Pond water seeps into the family cemetery, the burial ground contracts, and the bidara trees

planted by Kana's grandparents disappear after the land is sold to Badawi (Julian, 2023, pp. 12, 28). The loss therefore breaks relations among burial, ancestry, ritual, vegetation, water, and family continuity. This culminates when Kana describes the *taneyan* as the "arah dan sumbu hidupnya" ["the orientation and axis of her life"] and experiences its loss as "kehilangan pusat" ["lost her center"] (Julian, 2023, p. 188). Dispossession becomes an existential as well as economic dislocation.

Arus Balik represents a structurally comparable process through maritime decline. As Maluku-Tuban trade weakens, Tuban's port quiets, warehouses empty, and ships seek other routes (Toer, 1995, p. 347). Disorder then spreads "from the port to the city, from the city to the interior"; shipyards close, workers lose wages, and merchants relocate their vessels or redirect trade inland (Toer, 1995, p. 348); warehouses stand empty, boats remain unused, inhabitants leave, and land-sea circulation collapses together (Toer, 1995, p. 568). The process can be summarized as route disruption, port contraction, shipyard closure, wage loss, commercial relocation, urban and inland instability.

The two novels thus depict different forms of relational dispossession: *Tiang Garam* foregrounds land-ancestor disconnection, while *Arus Balik* foregrounds sea-port-livelihood disconnection. In both, loss propagates beyond its original site. Coastal dispossession is therefore best understood as the severing of relations through which coastal worlds remain materially viable, socially continuous, and inhabitable.

Reopening Relations: Knowledge, Maintenance, and Ambivalent Resistance

The fourth pattern shows that damaged coastal relations are not simply restored; they are maintained, reopened, or reconfigured, often ambivalently. In *Tiang Garam*, relational repair first appears through Lubet's combination of inherited agricultural knowledge and university-based technical knowledge (Julian, 2023, p. 104). It later develops into collective resistance against Badawi's monopoly. Farmers organize, support one another, and reopen market access by inviting outside buyers to trade "tanpa ancaman, tanpa pungutan liar" ["without threats or illegal levies"], while reclaiming the right to choose whom they sell to (Julian, 2023, pp. 181–183). Repair here means reopening circulation by pluralizing access.

Yet this process remains ethically compromised. Bibib's intimidation of Anwari reproduces coercive mechanisms even as it challenges monopoly (Julian, 2023, pp. 181–182). Kana's later use of potassium cyanide in Badawi's shrimp ponds, killing the shrimp, further shows that resistance may restore economic choice while generating ecological violence (Julian, 2023, p. 191).

Arus Balik locates the same problem within maritime infrastructure. Neglected canals, uncleared rivers, and shallow waterways demonstrate that circulation depends on continual labor and institutional maintenance (Toer, 1995, p. 17). When Portuguese ships withdraw, indigenous shipping and trade with Maluku revive, reconnecting ports, vessels, and coastal economies (Toer, 1995, p. 680). Yet restoration remains ambivalent: after Demak's conquest of Banten, the port reopens and livelihoods recover while adults are mobilized as soldiers,

blacksmiths are redirected to weapons production, and the port becomes a military base (Toer, 1995, p. 906).

Across both novels, repair is therefore best understood as contested relational reconfiguration rather than simple return. Hybrid knowledge, renewed market access, maintenance, and reopened routes can sustain livelihoods, yet they may coexist with coercion, ecological destruction, and militarization. Circulation should therefore not be normatively equated with ecological good; what matters is which relations are reopened, who controls them, how they are maintained, and what human and more-than-human consequences follow.

DISCUSSION

From Coastal Space to Ecologies of Circulation

The findings support a shift from viewing the coast as a bounded geographical zone toward understanding it as an ecology of circulation. This position aligns with environmental and oceanic humanities that reject nature as passive background and seas as empty surfaces. Descola (2013) critiques the modern nature–culture divide, while Escobar (2018), Haraway (2016), and Tsing (2015) conceptualize ecological worlds through interdependence, *making-with*, and contingent multispecies relations. Blue humanities further foregrounds water as material, mobile, political, and epistemic (Hofmeyr et al., 2022; Mentz, 2024), while hydrocolonialism, maritime mobilities, and “wet ontologies” show that ports and seas are structured through movement, regulation, power, and fluid materiality (Steinberg & Peters, 2015; Hofmeyr, 2022; Ganser & Lavery, 2023a). Coastal space is therefore better understood as a mobile relational formation.

The two novels extend this framework through different scales. In *Tiang Garam*, the ancestral *taneyan* connects burial, descendants, bidara trees, water, wind, animals, ritual, and livelihood (Julian, 2023, p. 25), making material, genealogical, religious, and more-than-human relations mutually constitutive. In *Arus Balik*, Tuban emerges through deep water, coral formations, docks, roads, shipping, trade, and accumulated labor (Toer, 1995, p. 32), while maritime circulation carries “barang-barang baru, pikiran-pikiran baru, agama baru” [“new goods, new ideas, new religions”] alongside commodities (Toer, 1995, p. 36). The port is therefore not a passive setting but a relational interface through which political, ecological, cultural, and commercial processes converge (Hofmeyr, 2022; Ganser & Lavery, 2023a).

Despite their different scales, both texts show that ecological worlds remain viable only while heterogeneous relations continue to connect. *Tiang Garam* emphasizes localized relations among *taneyan*, salt fields, vegetation, kinship, and livelihood, whereas *Arus Balik* constructs an archipelagic network of ports, ships, commodities, roads, labor, and authority. Their common implication is that coastal relationality is organized through circulation. Mobility is not merely displacement but depends on material conditions, routes, technologies, and im/mobilities (Ganser & Lavery, 2023a, 2023b). Salt production requires land, weather, labor, markets, and household continuity; maritime trade

requires navigable waters, vessels, ports, labor, commodities, and hinterland supply.

The concept of ecologies of circulation therefore integrates three dimensions: relational constitution, through which ecological worlds emerge from interdependence; material mobility, through which people, organisms, commodities, and knowledge connect dispersed sites; and infrastructural continuity, through which these relations remain reproducible. The decline of waterways in *Arus Balik* shows that circulation ceases when dredging, clearing, and institutional maintenance disappear (Toer, 1995, p. 17). Coastal worlds are thus relational but infrastructural, mobile but maintained, open but politically organized. This perspective shifts analysis from what the coast represents toward which relations sustain it and how those relations are materially and politically organized.

Power Beyond Extraction: Governing Access, Routes, and Maintenance

The findings also extend ecological power beyond extraction. Previous research showed that landscapes become extractable through epistemic and political processes that render them classifiable, ownable, and governable (Saputra, Indiarti, et al., 2026). The present study identifies a related mechanism: relational worlds can be governed by controlling how things move. Coastal power therefore concerns not only ownership or extraction but also access to markets, infrastructures, routes, prices, passages, and authority.

Ribot and Peluso's (2003) distinction between a "bundle of rights" and a broader "bundle of powers" clarifies this mechanism. In *Tiang Garam*, Badawi's dominance derives not merely from landownership but from monopolistic brokerage, intimidation, political alliance, and exclusion of outside buyers (Julian, 2023, pp. 91–92). Villagers may retain land or continue producing salt yet lose effective capacity to benefit from it. Formal possession and effective access therefore diverge. Badawi's power depends on selective channeling: salt must continue circulating, but increasingly through him. Land certificates later reinforce this arrangement without fully explaining it (Julian, 2023, p. 94).

Infrastructure and mobility studies extend this argument. Larkin (2013) treats infrastructure as networks enabling circulation, while Carse (2012) shows that hydrological systems may themselves become infrastructure. *Arus Balik* demonstrates this materially when silted and unmaintained waterways prevent large vessels from entering the interior (Toer, 1995, p. 17). Cresswell (2010) further shows that mobility becomes political through route, speed, friction, regulation, and accessibility. The key question is therefore whose mobility is enabled, restricted, redirected, or made costly.

At the maritime scale, this converges with Campling and Colás's (2018) analysis of oceanic sovereignty and appropriation. In *Arus Balik*, control of Banten and Sunda Kelapa is imagined as a means of redirecting pepper toward Europe and weakening rival ports (Toer, 1995, p. 743), while "kekuasaan atas jalan laut" ["control over the sea routes"] becomes inseparable from spice-trade monopoly achieved through war, alliance, diplomacy, and violence (Toer, 1995, p. 1002). The strategic object is therefore not merely the commodity but the **route-**

system governing its movement. This also resonates with Colás and Campling's (2023) emphasis on maritime temporalities, logistical rhythms, and political coordination.

Maintenance adds a final dimension. Graham and Thrift (2007) show that infrastructure persists through continuous repair; thus, maintaining ports, routes, waterways, and markets becomes a form of political capacity. Governing circulation means determining which connections receive the institutional and material work necessary to endure. The comparison therefore supports a broader proposition: coastal domination may operate less by stopping circulation than by selectively channeling it. Power lies in shaping the conditions of connectivity (who and what may circulate), through which routes, under whose authority, and toward whose benefit.

Relational Dispossession across Scales

The findings further suggest that dispossession should be understood not only as property loss but as the severance of relations through which ecological and social life is sustained. Harvey's (2003) concept of *accumulation by dispossession* foregrounds privatization and coercive appropriation, while Nixon's (2011) slow violence helps explain cumulative environmental and livelihood losses. The two novels show, however, that dispossession propagates beyond the asset initially transferred. This study therefore uses relational dispossession to describe how control over land, markets, ports, or routes disrupts wider networks through which worlds remain inhabitable.

This formulation accords with relational perspectives that understand worlds through interdependence (Tsing, 2015; Escobar, 2018). In *Tiang Garam*, conversion of ancestral land produces effects extending from property to graves, water, bidara trees, ancestry, ritual, and memory (Julian, 2023, pp. 12, 28). Kana's description of the *taneyan* as her "arah dan sumbu hidupnya" ["the orientation and axis of her life"] and its loss as "kehilangan pusat" ["lost her center"] demonstrates how dispossession travels through grave-tree-water-kinship-memory-land (Julian, 2023, p. 188). Relational-values scholarship helps explain this process because environmental value may reside in relationships rather than solely in discrete objects (Chan et al., 2016; Campbell & Gurney, 2024).

Arus Balik expands the same process to a macro-regional scale. When Maluku-Tuban trade declines, warehouses empty, ships redirect, shipyards close, workers lose wages, merchants relocate, and instability spreads inland (Toer, 1995, pp. 347-348); disrupted trade has become a wider sea route-port-shipyard-labor-market-hinterland disconnection (Toer, 1995, p. 568). Tsing's (2015) emphasis on precarious assemblages is relevant because the port's viability depends on continuing relations among ecological conditions, infrastructure, labor, and commodity movement.

The comparison therefore extends dispossession across scales. *Tiang Garam* concentrates relational loss in ancestry and dwelling, while *Arus Balik* distributes it through archipelagic infrastructures of routes, labor, and trade. Their comparability lies in the propagation of loss across relations. Relational dispossession thus asks not only what has been taken but which sustaining

relations have become impossible, weakened, or redirected. Its ecological consequences exceed the point where ownership or control initially changes.

Maintenance, Repair, and the Ambivalence of Relationality

If coastal worlds depend on circulation, they also depend on the continuing work required to sustain it. Graham and Thrift (2007) reposition maintenance and repair as constitutive processes of infrastructural life. In coastal settings, relations themselves require maintenance: waterways must remain navigable, ports operational, markets accessible, livelihoods reproducible, and ecological connections intact.

Arus Balik demonstrates this when neglected channels become shallow and rivers cease to support large vessels (Toer, 1995, p. 17). Circulation fails not because water disappears but because recurrent labor and institutional care are withdrawn. Conversely, after Portuguese ships withdraw, indigenous shipping and trade revive across northern Javanese ports (Toer, 1995, p. 680). Yet recovery is uneven: Jepara expands while Tuban loses shipbuilders and maritime expertise (Toer, 1995, p. 681). Reconnection at one node may therefore intensify displacement elsewhere.

The ambiguity becomes even clearer in Banten. Fathillah reopens the port and restores livelihoods while simultaneously recruiting soldiers and redirecting blacksmiths toward weapons production (Toer, 1995, p. 906). Repair and militarization become part of the same process. This complicates any romantic account of relationality. Mobility is politically differentiated (Cresswell, 2010), and entanglement itself does not guarantee ethical outcomes (Tsing, 2015; Haraway, 2016).

Tiang Garam presents a comparable tension. Collective action among salt farmers reopens market access and reduces dependence on Badawi (Julian, 2023, pp. 181–183), but this resistance also uses intimidation (Julian, 2023, pp. 181–182). Kana's later sabotage with potassium cyanide further shows that attachment to land and community can coexist with deliberate harm to nonhuman life (Julian, 2023, p. 191). Relational values may therefore matter deeply while remaining politically and ethically contested (Chan et al., 2016; Campbell & Gurney, 2024).

The central qualification is consequently clear: maintenance may preserve unequal relations; repair may reconnect coercive worlds; and circulation may sustain life while also carrying domination, militarization, or ecological harm. Repair should therefore be understood as politically and ethically contested reconfiguration, not as innocent restoration. In this sense, relationality is not equivalent to morality, circulation is not equivalent to justice, and repair is not equivalent to innocence. The analytical task of *ecologies of circulation* is therefore to ask what is maintained, what is reopened, by whom, through which means, and at whose ecological and political cost.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study shows that *Tiang Garam* and *Arus Balik*, despite their different scales and historical settings, construct coastal worlds through relations linking environments, livelihoods, mobility, memory, infrastructure, and human and more-than-human life. *Tiang Garam* foregrounds localized relations among salt

fields, ancestral land, kinship, and coastal livelihoods, whereas *Arus Balik* develops a broader maritime network of ports, ships, routes, commodities, labor, and hinterlands.

The comparison demonstrates that coastal power operates not only through territorial possession or resource extraction but through control over access, routes, infrastructures, prices, and circulation. Domination often works by selectively channeling movement rather than stopping it. Dispossession likewise exceeds property loss: it becomes relational disconnection, disrupting the networks that sustain ecological, social, economic, and mnemonic life.

The novels also complicate any assumption that circulation, relationality, or repair is inherently beneficial. Reopened markets and maritime routes may restore livelihoods while coexisting with coercion, violence, toxicity, or militarization. Repair is therefore a politically and ethically contested reconfiguration of relations.

These findings support the central proposition that coastal worlds remain livable through maintained relations of circulation, while power operates by governing, capturing, redirecting, or interrupting those relations. The concept of *ecologies of circulation* connects relational environmental humanities, oceanic studies, and infrastructure and mobility scholarship while positioning Indonesian fiction as a site for refining understandings of coastal power, dispossession, maintenance, and world-making. Future environmental literary studies should therefore examine not only degradation but also the mobilities, infrastructures, access relations, maintenance practices, and more-than-human connections through which ecological worlds are sustained or dismantled.

FURTHER STUDY

This study has several limitations that also suggest directions for further research. First, its two-novel corpus cannot represent the diversity of Indonesian coastal writing. Expanding the corpus across regions, languages, and ecological formations would test whether *ecologies of circulation* remains productive beyond the salt-field and port-maritime configurations examined here.

Second, the historical asymmetry between contemporary *Tiang Garam* and the sixteenth-century world reconstructed in *Arus Balik* limits direct temporal comparison. Future studies could employ more historically symmetrical corpora or examine how literary representations of circulation shift across colonial, postcolonial, and contemporary periods.

Third, the study analyzes textual worlds rather than empirically verified coastal conditions. Comparative work involving archives, policy documents, port histories, environmental reports, oral histories, or ethnography could clarify how literary configurations of circulation correspond with or critically rework documented coastal processes.

Finally, *ecologies of circulation* should be tested across river, island, port-city, migration, Southeast Asian archipelagic, and Global South oceanic literatures. Such work could engage planetary scale (Heise, 2008), routes and roots (DeLoughrey, 2007), water-centered humanities (Hofmeyr et al., 2022; Mentz, 2024), and maritime im/mobilities (Ganser & Lavery, 2023a) to determine

where, at what scales, and under what material and political conditions circulation shapes ecological world-making, dispossession, and repair.

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