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Defiant Nature: An Ecofeminist Reading of Selected Postcolonial Works by Women

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Dedication

For the women of Gaza

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Through the lengthy process of constructing this thesis—and I say *constructing* and not *writing*, for anyone who has undertaken such a work knows that it is the only fitting term—I have been fortunate to receive the support and faith of many people. I wish to acknowledge them here and to thank God for placing them in my path—or me in theirs.

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Abstract:

Ecofeminism examines the interconnections between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature, challenging the patriarchal dualisms and hierarchical structures that have historically legitimized both forms of domination. However, ecofeminist scholarship has faced criticism for its tendency, particularly in some of its earlier formulations, to privilege the experiences of white Western women while overlooking the diverse historical, cultural, and socioeconomic realities of women in the Global South. In response to these limitations, this thesis explores the intersection of ecofeminism and postcolonial literature through an analysis of three novels written by women: *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, *Nervous Conditions* by Tsitsi Dangarembga, and *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* by Nawal El Saadawi. Drawing on ecofeminist and postcolonial theoretical perspectives, the study examines how the selected works represent the interrelated structures of gender-based oppression, colonial and neocolonial power, and environmental exploitation. It also investigates how these narratives challenge dominant ideologies; expose the unequal distribution of power, and articulate possibilities for female agency, resistance, and empowerment. Through a qualitative approach grounded in close textual analysis and contextual interpretation, the thesis considers the specific cultural, historical, and political circumstances shaping each literary work. By bringing these texts into dialogue, the study highlights the diversity of postcolonial women's experiences and demonstrates the value of an inclusive, context-sensitive ecofeminist approach to literary criticism. Ultimately, it contributes to a broader understanding of how postcolonial women's literature interrogates the interconnected dynamics of gender, ecology, and power.

Key words: ecofeminism, postcolonialism, Arundhati Roy, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Nawal El Saadawi.

المخلص:

تتناول النسوية البيئية الترابط بين اضطهاد المرأة واستغلال الطبيعة، من خلال مساءلة الثنائيات الفكرية الأبوية والبنى الهرمية التي أسهمت تاريخياً في تبرير هذين الشكلين من الهيمنة. غير أن الدراسات النسوية البيئية تعرضت لانتقادات بسبب ميل بعض اتجاهاتها المبكرة إلى التركيز على تجارب النساء البيض في المجتمعات الغربية، مع إغفال التنوع التاريخي والثقافي والاجتماعي والاقتصادي لتجارب النساء في بلدان الجنوب العالمي. وانطلاقاً من هذه الإشكالية، تسعى هذه الأطروحة إلى دراسة التقاطعات بين النسوية البيئية والأدب ما بعد الاستعماري من خلال تحليل ثلاث روايات كتبتها نساء، وهي *The God of Small Things* : لأرونداتي روي، و *Nervous Conditions* لتسيتي دانغاريمبغا، و *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* لنوال السعداوي. واستناداً إلى مقاربات نظرية تجمع بين النسوية البيئية ودراسات ما بعد الاستعمار، تبحث الدراسة في كيفية تصوير هذه الأعمال للعلاقات المتشابكة بين الاضطهاد القائم على النوع الاجتماعي، وعلاقات الهيمنة الاستعمارية وما بعد الاستعمارية، واستغلال البيئة. كما تتناول الكيفية التي تتحدى بها هذه الروايات الأيديولوجيات السائدة، وتكشف عن التفاوت في توزيع السلطة، وتطرح إمكانيات الفاعلية النسائية والمقاومة والتحرر. وتعتمد الأطروحة منهجاً نوعياً قائماً على التحليل النصي الدقيق والتفسير السياقي، مع مراعاة الخصوصيات الثقافية والتاريخية والسياسية التي تشكل كل عمل أدبي. ومن خلال إقامة حوار نقدي بين هذه النصوص، تسلط الدراسة الضوء على تعدد تجارب النساء في السياقات ما بعد الاستعمارية، وتبرز أهمية تبني مقاربة نسوية بيئية شاملة تراعي الاختلافات والسياقات في النقد الأدبي. وتسهم هذه الدراسة، في نهاية المطاف، في تعميق فهم الكيفية التي يستكشف بها الأدب ما بعد الاستعماري المكتوب بأقلام نسائية الترابط بين النوع الاجتماعي والبيئة والسلطة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النسوية البيئية، ما بعد الاستعمار، أرونداتي روي، تسيتي دانغاريمبغا، نوال السعداوي.

Résumé:

L'écoféminisme examine les interconnexions entre l'oppression des femmes et l'exploitation de la nature, en remettant en question les dualismes patriarcaux et les structures hiérarchiques qui ont historiquement légitimé ces deux formes de domination. Les études écoféministes ont fait l'objet de critiques en raison de leur tendance, notamment dans certaines de leurs premières formulations, à privilégier les expériences des femmes blanches occidentales, au détriment de la diversité des réalités historiques, culturelles et socioéconomiques des femmes du Sud global. Cette thèse explore les intersections entre l'écoféminisme et la littérature postcoloniale à travers l'analyse de trois romans écrits par des femmes : *The God of Small Things* d'Arundhati Roy, *Nervous Conditions* de Tsitsi Dangarembga et *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* de Nawal El Saadawi. S'appuyant sur les approches théoriques écoféministes et postcoloniales, cette recherche examine la manière dont les œuvres étudiées représentent les liens entre l'oppression fondée sur le genre, les rapports de pouvoir coloniaux et néocoloniaux, et l'exploitation de l'environnement. Elle analyse la manière dont ces récits remettent en question les idéologies dominantes, mettent en lumière les inégalités de pouvoir et ouvrent des perspectives d'autonomie, de résistance et d'émancipation féminines. Cette étude, fondée sur une démarche qualitative reposant sur l'analyse textuelle et l'interprétation contextuelle, prend en considération les spécificités culturelles, historiques et politiques propres à chaque œuvre. En mettant ces textes en dialogue, elle souligne la diversité des expériences des femmes dans les contextes postcoloniaux et démontre la pertinence d'une approche écoféministe inclusive et attentive aux particularités contextuelles dans le domaine de la critique littéraire. En définitive, cette recherche contribue à une meilleure compréhension de la manière dont la littérature postcoloniale écrite par des femmes interroge les dynamiques interdépendantes du genre, de l'écologie et du pouvoir.

Mots-clés : Écoféminisme, postcolonialisme, Arundhati Roy, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Nawal El Saadawi.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“Where do you draw the line between one creature and another? Where does one organism stop and another begin? Is there even a boundary between you and the non-living world, or will the atoms of this page be a part of your body tomorrow?”¹

I. General Introduction

The relationship between women, nature, and systems of domination has long occupied a significant position in feminist thought, environmental criticism, and postcolonial studies. Across different historical, cultural, and geographical contexts, women and the natural environment have frequently been subjected to forms of exploitation justified through ideological constructions that associate femininity with passivity, irrationality, inferiority, and subordination. Although these forms of oppression are not identical, they often emerge from interconnected structures of power that regulate bodies, control resources, establish social hierarchies, and determine whose experiences and interests are considered valuable. Such connections become particularly significant in postcolonial contexts, where the legacies of colonial domination intersect with patriarchal traditions, capitalist development, cultural displacement, and environmental degradation. Examining these intersections requires a critical approach capable of addressing gender and ecological concerns without separating them from the historical and political circumstances in which they develop. Ecofeminism, considered alongside postcolonial feminist

¹ Evernden, Neil. "Beyond Ecology: Self, Place, and the Pathetic Fallacy" quoted from Timothy Clark's *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*.

criticism, provides a valuable theoretical framework for understanding these complex relationships and examining their literary representations.

Ecofeminism emerged as a critical perspective that investigates the conceptual and material connections between the oppression of women and the exploitation of the natural world. The term is commonly associated with the French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne, who introduced 'écologie-féminisme' in 1974 to highlight the relationship between ecological destruction and patriarchal structures. Since its emergence, ecofeminist thought has developed into a diverse field encompassing philosophy, environmental activism, literary criticism, political ecology, and feminist theory. Rather than constituting a single, unified doctrine, ecofeminism incorporates different approaches to understanding the ways in which gender, environmental injustice, economic exploitation, and social inequality intersect. Its central concern is not simply the representation of women alongside landscapes, animals, or other natural elements; it is also the examination of the ideological systems that make the domination of both women and nature appear legitimate, necessary, or inevitable.

A significant contribution to ecofeminist thought is the identification of hierarchical dualisms that have historically structured Western philosophical traditions. Val Plumwood, in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, examines the relationship between dualistic thinking and practices of domination. Oppositions such as man/woman, culture/nature, reason/emotion, and human/nonhuman frequently position one term as superior to the other, transforming difference into a justification for hierarchy. Within these conceptual structures, masculinity is often associated with rationality, autonomy, and authority, whereas femininity is linked to the body, emotionality, reproduction, and nature. The natural world, similarly, is frequently represented as passive matter available for human appropriation and control. Such associations contribute to systems in which

women and nature become objects of regulation, exploitation, and exclusion. Ecofeminist criticism challenges these hierarchies by questioning the assumptions upon which they rest and by exploring alternative relationships grounded in interdependence, responsibility, and respect for difference.

Nevertheless, ecofeminism must be approached critically to avoid reproducing the very assumptions it seeks to challenge. The association between women and nature does not necessarily produce liberation, nor does it imply that women possess an inherently closer relationship with the environment than men. Essentialist interpretations risk reducing women to their reproductive capacities or presenting them as naturally nurturing, passive, and environmentally conscious. Such representations can reinforce restrictive gender expectations instead of dismantling them. Consequently, an important strand of contemporary ecofeminist scholarship emphasizes the historical, cultural, economic, and political conditions through which women's relationships with the environment are constructed. Women's experiences of ecological change differ according to class, race, ethnicity, nationality, location, and access to resources. These differences are particularly important in postcolonial societies, where environmental conflicts cannot be understood independently of colonial histories, unequal development, and global economic relations.

The intersection between ecofeminism and postcolonial criticism is therefore essential to understanding the distinctive environmental and gendered experiences represented in literature emerging from formerly colonized societies. Postcolonialism examines the enduring consequences of colonialism, including racial hierarchies, cultural displacement, economic dependency, political inequality, and the persistence of colonial modes of knowledge and representation. Colonial domination was not confined to the occupation of territories or the imposition of political authority; it also involved the appropriation of land, the extraction of natural resources, the restructuring of

local economies, and the transformation of relationships between human communities and their environments. Colonial administrations frequently represented colonized territories as underdeveloped spaces requiring external management, while their inhabitants were portrayed as incapable of exercising legitimate authority over their own resources. These representations helped justify economic exploitation and the displacement of existing ecological and cultural practices.

Such histories also reveal the limitations of treating colonialism as an exclusively national or economic phenomenon. Colonial power operated through gendered assumptions concerning civilization, masculinity, femininity, sexuality, domesticity, and social order. Women in colonized societies often occupied positions shaped simultaneously by colonial authority and patriarchal structures within their own communities. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" raises fundamental questions about the conditions under which marginalized subjects can represent themselves within dominant systems of knowledge. Her work is particularly relevant to the study of women whose experiences are mediated through institutions, cultural expectations, and narratives that frequently deny them interpretive authority. Similarly, Chandra Talpade Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" challenges the construction of women from the Global South as a homogeneous, undifferentiated category. Mohanty demonstrates the importance of recognizing historical and cultural specificity rather than assuming that women share identical experiences of oppression.

These interventions are important for an ecofeminist reading of postcolonial literature because environmental degradation and gender inequality do not affect all communities in the same way. Access to land, water, food, housing, and other resources is shaped by unequal relations of power, while the consequences of ecological disruption are often distributed unevenly across social groups. Women may experience environmental change through their relationships with domestic

labour, agricultural production, reproductive responsibilities, and community survival. However, these experiences must be understood in relation to their specific socioeconomic circumstances rather than attributed to an assumed universal feminine identity. An intersectional perspective consequently enables ecofeminist criticism to examine how gender interacts with class, colonial history, economic dependency, and cultural expectations in determining vulnerability, agency, and resistance.

The importance of this intersection becomes particularly apparent when environmental exploitation is understood as a political and economic process rather than an isolated ecological problem. Vandana Shiva's *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* explores the relationship between patriarchal development models, ecological destruction, and women's knowledge and labor in the Global South. Although her approach has generated important debates within feminist scholarship, her work draws attention to the consequences of development practices that marginalize local communities and undermine established relationships with the natural environment. Taken together, such scholarship underscores the need to examine both ideological constructions and concrete economic arrangements. Environmental injustice cannot be adequately understood without considering who controls natural resources, who benefits from their exploitation, and who bears its social and ecological costs.

Literature provides an important space for investigating these questions because literary narratives represent the intimate relationships between individuals, communities, landscapes, and systems of authority. Through characterization, symbolism, narrative structure, imagery, and the representation of everyday experience, literary texts can expose the connections between patriarchal power and ecological exploitation that may remain obscured within dominant political or economic discourses. Landscapes in postcolonial literature are not merely decorative settings;

they can function as repositories of collective memory, markers of cultural identity, sources of livelihood, and sites of conflict. Rivers, forests, gardens, animals, soil, and urban environments may acquire significance through their relationships with characters' bodies, experiences, and struggles for autonomy. Their transformation or destruction can consequently illuminate broader histories of dispossession, social inequality, and cultural disruption.

An ecofeminist literary approach also enables an examination of the body as a site where social and environmental power converge. Women's bodies are frequently subjected to regulation through marriage, motherhood, sexuality, domestic expectations, and patriarchal definitions of respectability. Similarly, the natural environment is often treated as an object whose value is determined by its usefulness to dominant economic and political interests. Although these processes operate through different mechanisms, their comparison can reveal shared assumptions concerning ownership, control, productivity, and the legitimacy of domination. In literary narratives, bodily vulnerability may intersect with environmental vulnerability, while the struggle for personal autonomy may parallel resistance to the appropriation of land, resources, or collective histories. Such parallels must be established through close textual analysis rather than presumed in advance, since their meanings depend on the particular historical and cultural circumstances represented in each work.

Within this critical framework, the present study examines selected postcolonial works by women writers whose narratives engage with gendered oppression, cultural authority, social inequality, and changing relationships between human communities and their environments. The primary texts are Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, and Nawal El Saadawi's *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*. These works emerge from distinct literary, geographical, and political contexts, yet their juxtaposition creates an opportunity

to investigate how gender and power operate within societies shaped by colonial histories, patriarchal structures, and unequal processes of modernization. Rather than treating these texts as interchangeable expressions of a universal female experience, the study approaches their differences as essential to understanding the multiple forms that domination, vulnerability, and resistance can assume.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* explores the relationships between family authority, caste hierarchy, gender expectations, and the enduring legacies of colonial influence in Kerala, India. The novel's engagement with the natural world is closely connected to its representation of memory, social boundaries, and the consequences of transgressing established hierarchies. The river, the landscape, and the transformation of the surrounding environment participate in the narrative's exploration of historical change and social exclusion. These environmental dimensions acquire additional significance when considered alongside the regulation of women's lives and the punishment of relationships that violate caste and patriarchal conventions. An ecofeminist reading of the novel can therefore investigate how the control of bodies, the maintenance of social boundaries, and the transformation of the environment intersect within a broader structure of power. At the same time, attention to the novel's specific social and historical context prevents its ecological imagery from being reduced to a simple metaphor for female oppression.

Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* examines the gendered consequences of colonial education, racial inequality, patriarchal authority, and socioeconomic aspiration in colonial Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe. Through the experiences of its female characters, the novel interrogates the contradictions of education as a potential means of liberation that can also reproduce colonial values and established hierarchies. Its representation of domestic life, rural existence, educational

institutions, and social mobility provides opportunities to examine how women's identities are shaped by intersecting structures of gender, race, class, and colonial power. From an ecofeminist perspective, the relationship between women and their material surroundings can be considered alongside the social arrangements that determine their access to education, autonomy, and opportunity. Such an approach does not require the novel to be understood primarily as an environmental narrative; rather, it investigates how its representations of place, everyday life, and social transformation contribute to a broader understanding of the relationship between human vulnerability and systems of domination.

Nawal El Saadawi's *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* offers a distinct perspective through its engagement with patriarchal authority, oil wealth, political power, and the ideological structures governing women's lives. The relationship between petroleum, wealth, and domination provides a particularly significant context for examining the connections between economic systems and gendered subordination. Oil can be understood not only as a material resource but also as a source of political authority and a symbol of development organized around extraction, accumulation, and control. Within such a framework, the natural environment becomes inseparable from the economic structures that determine social relationships and distribute power. The novel's treatment of women's bodies, identities, memories, and possibilities for resistance can therefore be examined in relation to the broader political and material conditions of an oil-dependent society. Its engagement with the environment also invites consideration of the relationship between ecological resources, cultural memory, and the forms of authority sustained by extractive economies.

Reading these three works comparatively makes it possible to explore the different ways in which postcolonial women's writing represents the relationship between gender, nature, and power. Their distinct contexts resist any assumption that environmental exploitation or patriarchal

oppression takes a uniform form across postcolonial societies. Instead, the texts offer different configurations of authority and resistance, ranging from caste and familial hierarchies to colonial education and the political economy of oil. Their comparative examination can illuminate the ways in which local cultural practices, historical experiences, and economic structures shape women's relationships with their bodies and environments. It can also reveal the limitations of universalizing accounts of both feminism and ecological crisis, demonstrating the importance of attending to differences while identifying meaningful connections across literary and cultural contexts.

The significance of this study lies in its effort to bring ecofeminist and postcolonial perspectives into a sustained dialogue through close readings of these selected literary works. Although feminist criticism, postcolonial studies, and ecocriticism have developed substantial bodies of scholarship, their intersections continue to provide productive possibilities for examining how literary representations connect gendered experiences to environmental and material conditions. An integrated approach allows the study to move beyond readings that isolate women's oppression from the wider systems in which it occurs, while also avoiding the assumption that every representation of nature necessarily carries an ecofeminist meaning. By situating literary imagery and narrative strategies within their specific historical, cultural, and political contexts, the study seeks to establish how ecological concerns contribute to the representation of gendered power and how women's experiences can reveal the unequal structures underlying social and environmental relations.

Ultimately, *Defiant Nature: An Ecofeminist Reading of Selected Postcolonial Works by Women* approaches literature as a critical space in which the relationships between gender, environment, colonial history, and systems of domination can be interrogated. Its central premise is that the experiences of women and the condition of the natural environment, although distinct,

may be shaped by overlapping structures of power that privilege control, hierarchy, and exploitation. By examining *The God of Small Things*, *Nervous Conditions*, and *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, the study investigates how these structures are represented, contested, and sometimes reproduced within different postcolonial contexts. It also considers the possibilities of resistance articulated through memory, embodied experience, cultural knowledge, and challenges to established authority. Through this comparative ecofeminist perspective, the study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of postcolonial women's literature and its capacity to expose the interdependence of social justice, gender equality, and environmental concerns. Rather than treating women and nature as inherently united or assuming that their oppression is identical, it foregrounds the historical and political relationships through which their experiences become connected, opening a critical space for reconsidering the meanings of autonomy, justice, and resistance in postcolonial literary representation.

The primary purpose of this thesis is to explore the intersection of ecofeminism and literature written by women in the postcolonial context. It seeks to undertake an investigation of the nuanced ways in which women's experiences, particularly those in the global south, are depicted and read within the framework of ecological and feminist discourses. By focusing on the works of Arundhati Roy, Tsitsi Dangaremba, and Nawal El Saadawi, the research hopes to contribute to a more profound understanding of how postcolonial ecofeminism manifests in diverse cultural and geographical contexts. In analyzing the nexus of postcolonial ecofeminism, this thesis delves into these literary works to reveal their engagement with ecofeminist principles, addressing pressing concerns at the intersections of environment and gender. Through this exploration, it aims to establish the distinctive individuality of women's identities in the global south while

concurrently highlighting the interconnected nature of their shared experiences, particularly those marked by suffering, within the framework of oppression.

Against the backdrop of power dynamics shaped by colonial histories and ecological exploitation, this research scrutinizes how women are represented in postcolonial ecofeminist literature. It asks the questions: How does postcolonial ecofeminism challenge or expand traditional feminist and postcolonial perspectives? In what ways do the selected literary works by Roy, Dangarembga, and El Saadawi engage with ecofeminist principles and address environmental and gender-related concerns? How do power dynamics, particularly those related to colonial histories and ecological exploitation, influence the representation of women in postcolonial ecofeminist literature? To what extent do these narratives offer alternative visions for female empowerment and ecological sustainability in postcolonial settings? The formulation of these questions aims to guide a thorough study of the relationship between feminism, postcolonialism, and ecological concerns within the literature under analysis.

This research employs a qualitative methodology, drawing on close literary analysis and theoretical frameworks from ecofeminism and postcolonial studies. Textual interpretations are complemented by a contextual examination of historical, cultural, and environmental factors influencing the selected works. A key methodological tool, facilitating a nuanced understanding of the commonalities and divergences in the representation of themes across the chosen texts, is the use of the feminist, ecofeminist, and postcolonial theoretical background established in the first chapter. In the opening chapter, the research sets the stage by exploring the theoretical underpinnings at the intersection of feminism and postcolonialism. It begins by introducing the complexities of feminist thought, moving beyond binary perspectives and incorporating intersectionality. Furthermore, the chapter introduces the concept of postcolonial feminism,

highlighting its unique considerations within the broader feminist discourse. This leads up to a section dedicated to current debates in the field of ecofeminism, then eventually to the core theoretical nexus of this thesis: postcolonial ecofeminism. The chapter concludes with a literature review, positioning the thesis within existing scholarship that guides the subsequent analysis.

The ecofeminist reading of the novels begins in the second chapter with Roy's work *The God of Small Things*. The chapter initiates with an introduction to Roy as a defiant postcolonial ecofeminist, setting the stage for a thorough analysis of her contributions to literature and literary criticism. As the narrative explores the oppression of the small in postcolonial India, dissecting the symbolism and implications in various contexts, the analysis reads this under the scope of ecofeminism. Specifically, attention is given to the novel's engagement with the colonial history of India, the caste system, the repercussions of development, and the identity struggle of the characters. The chapter devotes a lengthy section to draw ecofeminist connections within the text, using the symbolism of 'pinned butterflies' to refer to the ecofeminist issues of Roy's female characters.

Moving to Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, the third chapter unfolds with an introduction to Dangarembga as a postcolonial ecofeminist author. The analysis begins with the tensions of navigating African identity amid colonial influences, particularly examining the juxtaposition of remembering Shona roots and assimilating Englishness. The chapter meticulously explores power dynamics through the lens of food and cultural diets, examining the dualism of meat consumption/vegetarianism as a parallel to the dichotomy of masculine/feminine, thus as an issue of ecofeminism. This paves the way for a study of food disorders—in this case anorexia—in the context of patriarchal and colonial oppression, in addition to a review of hunger as a burden of motherhood. Additionally, the chapter investigates the unequal division of labor, marriage, and

female sexuality within the postcolonial context. It culminates in an exploration of an African sisterhood, elucidating how ecology, education, and solidarity become pathways to female freedom.

In the fourth chapter, the focus shifts to the ecofeminist reading of El Saadawi's *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*. The chapter commences with an introduction to El Saadawi as a pivotal figure in Arab feminism and ecofeminism, as her work is the first to familiarize its audience with feminist struggles in a work of oil fiction written in Arabic. It investigates feminist narratives in petrofiction, unraveling the systematic subjugation of women within the patriarchal petrostate—a state where the oil industry rules, here likened to many nations of the Arab Gulf. The analysis further explores the interplay of oil—representative of the oil industry—as an oppressor of women. It then proceeds to read the symbolism of ancient Egyptian goddesses and nature's feminine essence in the novel within an ecofeminist lens. The chapter concludes with a discussion on empowerment amidst oil, emphasizing memory and solidarity as means of female resilience within the realm of petrocapiatalism.

The thesis concludes by synthesizing the key findings from the ecofeminist readings of Roy, Dangarembga, and El Saadawi. It reflects on the common themes and divergences identified across the texts, contributing to a broader understanding of postcolonial ecofeminism. Additionally, the conclusion discusses the implications of the research for future studies in ecofeminism and postcolonial literature. The significance of this thesis lies in its potential to contribute to the fields of ecofeminism and postcolonial literature by analyzing the selected works through the lens of postcolonial ecofeminism. It aims to expand existing theoretical frameworks within this intersection through identifying the variations and crossings of women's experiences in postcolonial settings. The study focuses on women from the global south, often marginalized in

mainstream discourse, by offering a more inclusive understanding of feminist discourse and environmental activism in the way in which these writers engage with ecofeminist principles. This, in turn, can guide future research endeavors in the exploration of ecofeminist themes in a broader array of postcolonial contexts.

As the literary works under study grapple with issues such as development, cultural identity, and environmental degradation, the thesis aims to shed light on the interconnectedness of these challenges. Understanding the consequences of these issues is crucial for developing strategies that are more effective for social and environmental justice beyond the academic realms of literature and literary criticism. This thesis seeks to contribute not only to academic scholarship but also to far-reaching conversations surrounding environmental sustainability, gender equality, and cultural representation. Through its comprehensive analysis, the research endeavors to offer a richer and more accurate view of postcolonial ecofeminism and its potential implications for both literary studies and real-world encounters.

II. Women at an Intersection: Theoretical Views

Of the women who fall under the countless categories of oppression, hardly any receive the due recognition that allows them to, first, acknowledge themselves—and thus be acknowledged—as an oppressed group, and, then, endeavor to break their shackles. For a large number of these women, oppression does not come in one form, and for that same reason, many of them struggle to appear on the facade of movements against oppression. Women, therefore, often find themselves at an intersection of sexism with one or multiple other forms of persecutions such as colonialism, racism, classism, and environmental injustice. With such vast classifications of oppression and their equally enormous theoretical adversaries, women who stand at the intersections become

obscured by matters of allegedly greater significance, and their issues become discarded—a fallacy that ecofeminism in general, and postcolonial ecofeminism in particular, strive to rectify, as will be demonstrated throughout this chapter.

1. **Beyond the Binary: Dualism, Intersectionality, and Feminism**

As an ideology deeply indoctrinated in western philosophy, dualism (or binary opposition)² is a repetitive pattern that exists in all forms of thought and implications of western culture, and more often than not, in a critically objectionable manner; it is the understanding of all issues in only two opposed categories instead of a continuous spectrum. Val Plumwood, a pioneer Australian ecofeminist, holds Plato responsible for the inception of dualism. In her book, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, she demonstrates how Plato's consideration of dualism as a system sets the mind as superior and the body necessarily as inferior, then associates the former with the masculine and the latter with the feminine, the natural, the reproductive, and the domestic—all which is involuntarily bound to serve (70-72). From that point onward, dualism became the core of all western ideology; dichotomies of mind/body, reason/emotion, male/female, white/black, master/slave, culture/nature, and many others provided the necessary rationale and vindication of all the debauchery of that ensued.

Freya Mathews, Australian environmental philosopher and professor, substantiates that “the hold of dualism on the Western imagination had proved resistant to argument and hence correction because it served a political purpose and was held in place by powerful political interests” (55). For the subjugation of groups claimed to be inferior to thrive, the thought process behind the oppression must be unmarred, natural, and often assisted by divine law, which has been the case

² The terms dualism and binary opposition are to be used interchangeably throughout the work.

for western schemes. Namely, patriarchy, colonialism, and environmental injustice all had to assume a natural appearance rather than be associated with cultural constructs (Frye 34). The connection of the binary within the roots of western ideology can be recognized in certain characteristics: backgrounding the other³ and denying dependency upon them by minimizing their role, hyperseparation or radical exclusion between the superior and the other where the two are made out to be drastically dissimilar, incorporation or relational definition of the other which can only be defined in terms of either what they lack in comparison with—or how they serve—the superior, and objectification or instrumentalism in that the other is reduced to an object or an instrument of use to forward the master's objectives—within which stereotyping and homogenization⁴ take place (Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* 48-55).

Although Mathews inaccurately accredits the west with the first emergence of science—thus discrediting earlier scientific endeavors in the east—in her attempt to explain the persistent presence of dualism in western thought, she does not err in the remainder of her hypothesis. Dualism has proven to be resiliently associated with *theoria*, thus, the history and consequences of western civilization (which is largely based on its own *theoria*) have been binary in nature: the discrimination it has instigated has always had a dualistic justification (Mathews 65-66). Because of the tremendous reach of dualist thinking, no domain is free from its shadow, and “it follows that, from an ecofeminist perspective, neither women nor the natural world may be emancipated unless thinking is freed from the distorting lens of dualism” (54). To achieve that, Mathews, with the example of ecofeminism, suggests putting theory into practice as a way to demolish dualism within theorizing itself as the latter abides by binary tradition—in other words, even attempting to counter

³ Other here is used in postcolonial and subaltern studies to refer to the second part of the dichotomy of self/other, here made synonymous with superior/inferior or master/slave.

⁴ All members of a category are considered similar and denied individuality and unique traits.

dualism is dualist and would still be insufficient unless it encounters other forms of practice—perhaps she refers to activism (54).

To comprehend the implications of binary opposition, American feminist Carol J. Adams, in her famous work *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, writes that meat, “a symbol and celebration of male dominance” (58), conceptually as well as literally, can only exist as a result of the exclusion of animals in a dichotomy of meat/animal; this, she refers to as the ‘absent referent’ without which the superior concept would not be but whose value is entirely erased (66-67). Amongst all the domains in which this discriminatory dualist drill is observed, literature is not acquitted; in her reading of ecofeminism and examination of Adams’ work, Josephine Donovan, American literary scholar, writes,

But much literature does not remain faithful to the absent referent and its story, its reality; rather literature—like other ideological discourses—twists, cuts, distorts, and reshapes the referent to fit the requirements of the signifier, whose identity itself is determined largely by its interrelation with other signifiers in the signifying text, its exchange value. Even literary texts thus reshape, obscure, and dominate the ‘literal,’ subduing it to the claims of the ‘figurative.’ (163)

Within literature or without it, it is this process of twisting and reshaping that we refer to as stereotyping where the distorted image becomes the identification of the referent. Quoting Mikhail Bakhtin, Donovan suggests “a non-monologic, antisystemic conception of truth;” she proposes

Bakhtin's rejection of 'theoretism'⁵ and its subordination with 'prosaics'⁶ as a way to attempt a reliable representation of the referent (174).

Dualism, therefore, through its numerous forms, has subjected many groups to oppression, all of which attempt an anti-dualist criticism that winds up dualist as per Mathews' clarification. Namely, theories of race, gender, ecology, and postcolonialism are defenses against one dualist system or other, yet they have all conformed to a certain binary opposition in order to do so: white/black, male/female, culture/nature, or colonizer/colonized. However, the binary nature of critical theories is not their only failing, or perhaps as a result of this particular failing, criticism has often been unsuccessful in considering a defense of individuals that neither belong to one category nor the other, but to two or more. As Judith Butler expresses it in her work "Gender Trouble", "the exasperated 'etc.' that so often occurs at the end of such lines" (182) refers to the ones left unheeded as each of these theories strove to protect a category but only regarded one side of it leaving the rest unheard. Can these grand narratives, then, be critiqued without the accidental conception of other grand narratives in an endless loop of attempting to represent a group and discarding a minority within it? Is not intersectionality the key to a retaliation without a dualist foundation?

Maria Lugones, Argentinian literary critic and feminist philosopher, writes that, by western standards, all individuals are gendered and raced, but not all are discriminated against on the basis of those—or other—categories. It is the people that gather within more than one form of oppression who pass unnoticed when criticisms of different—but irreversibly linked—categories are considered detached and are only perceived through the lens of intersectionality (17); she explains

⁵Linguistic systems that eliminate the individual and their context for the sake of general understanding.

⁶The examination of particular individual circumstances for a comprehension of depth rather than a generalization.

that without intersectionality, “‘women’ picks out white bourgeois women, ‘men’ picks out white bourgeois men, ‘black’ picks out black heterosexual men, and so on. It becomes logically clear then that the logic of categorical separation distorts what exists at the intersection, such as violence against women of color” (18), which is why intersectionality has resolute roots in both feminist thought and critical race theory. The term itself is credited to Kimberlé Crenshaw, American lawyer, professor, and civil rights advocate whose keen interest in the rights of black women has driven her to the conclusion that both critical race theory and feminist theory have unmistakably failed to recognize the issues of black women. To prove her point, Crenshaw, in a TED talk in 2016, questions her audience about police violence against black people in the United States. She instructs them to stand up while she lists names of victims, then to take a seat whenever they cannot identify a name. The number of people who remain standing dwindles as the list moves from men’s names to women’s, until no one is left standing, thus indeed displaying black women’s invisibility in both feminist and race issues.

There are three acknowledged approaches of intersectionality as indicated by American sociologist and political scientist Leslie McCall in her work “The Complexity of Intersectionality”. On the one end, *anticategorical intersectionality*, as its title reveals, completely rejects the categorization of individuals into fixed groups, and this approach, according to the writer, has been “the most successful in satisfying the demand for complexity”(McCall 1773). On the other end, *intercategorical intersectionality* conforms to the existing categories in order to be able to examine the social injustices resulting from categorization systems—in other words, dualist systems—and with which the author herself identifies (1773). Between anticategorical and intercategorical falls *intracategorical intersectionality*, which, while it challenges categorization and duality, also

recognizes the powerful existence of these categories within social life; its main focus is on the individual experience of the oppressed amongst their groups and categories (1773-1774).

Although intersectionality was thus introduced into the academic world, feminists have since embraced it and made use of it to highlight differences amongst women as feminism's most significant yet most disregarded issue (Kings 64). Before intersectionality made its implications on feminist philosophy, dualism vastly occupied the field. While liberal feminists of the first wave adhered to dualism as they "tacitly accepted the reason/nature, human/nature dualisms that underpinned liberalism; they merely tried to de-gender these categories" (Mathews 56), second wave feminists leaned towards gynocentric feminism⁷, which, while it granted women a milestone in independence and empowerment, still remained dualist in that it attempted to reverse the dichotomy of man/woman—not dismantle it—to birth a gynarchy in place of the patriarchy (57). This, in addition to the exceedingly biologically essentialist nature of gynocentric feminism, created a vast division within feminist criticism (and even within ecofeminism itself).

With the influence of French philosophers and deconstruction theory, most feminists moved towards a more anticategorical understanding of feminism. The beliefs of postmodern feminists shifted from defending women from a dualist system to questioning the dualist system itself, to remunerating its limitations, and to criticizing its dictations. Intersectionality is then introduced to extend the question to more than just gender, if gender is performative and simply dictated by a binary system⁸, are not all other categorizations? Intersectionality gave scholars the lens with which to view subjects of oppression as not only related but allied, and feminist interest

⁷ Defined by Freya Mathews as "the association of woman with embodiment (with fertility, procreation, eros, nurturance, and corporeality) and hence with nature (the terrain of life, purpose, creativity, vulnerability, of intelligence and sentience in a thousand guises, the exuberant and fecund matrix of our existence)" (56).

⁸ See "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" by Judith Butler.

began to pour into ecofeminism, as Mathews' words express it, "woman was, in a word, *nature* to man's *culture*. In transcending nature, man transcended—that is to say, raised himself above—woman, and thereby justified his domination of her" (57). Man, then, by aligning himself with reason and culture and opposing himself to emotion and nature, succeeded in going beyond the human, the raw and identifying with the abstract—leaving woman to grovel, produce, and serve.

Neither ecocritics nor feminists would have been able to make the observations nor draw the conclusions that ecofeminists, by merging the fields in an intersectional standpoint, have achieved. Val Plumwood as a woman amongst a majority of male contemporaries in ecocriticism began to investigate into dualism and anthropocentrism in feminist critique and found that, on the other side of matters, feminists were also investigating the same issues in the culture/nature and human/animal binaries (Mathews 55). It became clear to her, and to the feminists and ecocritics that were to launch and become the ecofeminist movement, that

if dualism was a paradigm that defined entities and attributes by hyper-separation, then relationality was the key to a new, emerging paradigm that would define entities and attributes in terms of their constitutive relations with one another, retaining difference and distinctness but construing these not in terms of exclusion, hierarchy, instrumentalism, backgrounding, incorporation, or homogenization, but rather in terms of continuity (Mathews 60).

The concept here labelled *relationality* is but another terming of intersectionality; accordingly, intersectionality has helped feminist critique redirect its focus towards categories that lie in the shadows.

Not only has intersectionality brought ecofeminism to life, but it has also saved it from vanishing into the background when academia lost interest in it. By merging ecofeminism with postcolonialism, a new light has shone on yet more shadowed areas of feminism, ecocriticism, and postcolonialism. It has ensured the transformation of feminism from an imprecise—often white-centered—critique of women’s oppression that often fell into the trap of stereotyping and homogenization into a vast, all-encompassing view of oppression. Intersectional feminism forwarded the awareness that “the ‘freedom’ of humanity is not only reliant on the freedom of nature and women, but it is also reliant on the achievement of liberation for all of those at intersecting points on along these fault lines” (Kings 71). This ardent “liberation for all” has inspired attempts at a more inclusive, less dualist feminism: postcolonial feminism—and to be discussed later on, postcolonial ecofeminism—remains the clearest case in point.

2. A Margin within the Margin: Postcolonial Feminism

Prior to leaping onto the contemplations surrounding ecofeminism in general and postcolonial ecofeminism in particular—which is, after all, the core of this work—an introductory opening into postcolonial feminism, be it brief, is indispensable. Postcolonial feminism arises as an outcome of the intersection of feminism and postcolonialism as the two fields can hardly be separated yet often fall into conflict. Postcolonial theory is assumed to disregard feminist issues to center its focus on others such as decolonization and liberation concerns—which are, indeed, issues of immense importance, but which are wrongly assumed to be detached from and should take precedence over the gender question. As Anne McClintock, Zimbabwean-South African feminist scholar, writes in, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, “in many nationalist or socialist countries, women's concerns are at best paid lip service, at worst greeted with hilarity. If women have come to do men's work, men have not come to share women's work.

Nowhere has feminism in its own right been allowed to be more than the maidservant to nationalism” (386).

Despite the accuracy of McClintock’s reference to feminism as a ‘maidservant’ of nationalism in the eyes of most postcolonial theorists, that fact does not entail that feminist theory is above suspicion when it comes to similar allegations. Western feminism overall has either largely ignored women’s concerns in the Global South or attempted to address them and wound up efficiently misrepresenting them. An example worthy of citing in the field of literature is the widely controversial⁹ classic *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, to which the pioneer Indian postcolonial literary critic Gayatri Spivak pointed in her essay “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” where she criticizes the demeaning representation¹⁰ of Bertha, Rochester’s Creole bride as an unhinged, hysterical woman in an allegedly feminist work. This misrepresentation has created the idea of the third world woman as one who is poverty-stricken, oblivious, traditional (in all the pejorative sense of the word), victimized, unable to make her own decisions, and “sexually constrained” by her society (Mohanty 337).

Spivak, in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* recounts the events of the *Sati* ritual at which widows in certain Indian regions sacrifice themselves at their spouse’s pyre, a ritual which was abolished by the British colonization in India in a colonial act of “white men saving brown women from brown men” without taking into consideration the fact that perhaps “the women actually wanted to die” (93). Spivak proceeds to explain that these hypocritical claims that the British colonizer used

⁹ Charlotte Brontë’s work has inspired an outrage regarding the misrepresentation of Bertha; one remarkable novel that was written as a criticism of *Jane Eyre* is the ingenious re-imagination of Bertha’s life in *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys.

¹⁰ The term representation is defined by Ella Shohat in “The Struggle over Representation: Casting, Coalitions, and the Politics of Identification” as “the semiotic principle that something is ‘standing for’ something else, or that some person or group is speaking on behalf of some other persons or groups” (166).

as justification of controlling the female population of India are still upheld by white feminism today (93). While the ritual itself is evidently not one to be supported, the dispute in this instance is in the fact that the perspective of these Indian women was never to be consulted—both white colonizers and white feminists assumed their self-appointed roles of defense and *spoke for* these women. In her work “Feminism in/and Postcolonialism”, Deepika Bahri, a scholar of postcolonial literature, bases a conclusion on a passage from Edward Said’s *Orientalism* concerning the idea of the (mis)representation of the Orient which she applies to women proving that producing a fabricated image of a group with no association with reality is not only possible but also often twisted to pass laws and authorize control over people’s lives (205).

Women of the Global South are subject to misrepresentation from within and without their nations—as, “between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third-world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization” (Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* 102). This is the motivation which led academics from the third world to produce intersectional postcolonial feminist scholarship. This disarray of representation only leaves women in postcolonial contexts out of the scope; they appear to have gotten the worst of both worlds: “the inferior status of gendering as women, without any of the privileges accompanying that status for white bourgeois women” (Lugones 28).

Postcolonial feminists have different focuses within the field itself; while some analyze cases of women of color within the global north, others deem the conditions of those in the Global South worthier of discussion. Other differences may arise within the scope of ‘color’ given the example

of Irish women as white women in a postcolonial context¹¹. Alternatively, some postcolonial feminists refuse any geographical divisions based on the belief that the actions (or the conditions) of a small group of women anywhere in the world might reverberate globally (Bahri 203). One noteworthy instance of perspectives in postcolonial feminism is Nawal El Saadawi, Egyptian writer and feminist, who, in the preface of her book *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women of the Arab World*, writes that the oppression of women attributed to those in the Arab world, in fact, occurs all over the world and is to be accredited to the capitalist system (i). While she refuses the separation of women's issues based on location and insists on it being a division of class and labor, she still endorses the idea that "it is Arab women alone who can formulate the theory, the ideas and the modes of struggle needed to liberate themselves from all oppression" (xvi). Although Spivak asserts similar arguments to El Saadawi's in her work, her conclusion regarding representation is to some extent different in that she considers that absolutely infallible representation cannot occur even if the subaltern speak for themselves, her solution is what she calls a *persistent critique*—a constant, continuous attempt at bettering representation (Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic* 63).

Feminism, before the interference of postcolonial feminism, had long eradicated the existence of what could perhaps be called feminism amongst women in indigenous societies before colonization. In her work "The Coloniality of Gender", Maria Lugones criticizes Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano's work on the coloniality of power condemning his unmoved reception and acceptance of the Eurocentric, patriarchal standards of gender. Quijano in this instance is understood as the ideal case in point of the postcolonial scholar who, while defending the oppressed

¹¹In his work "Postcolonialism: What's in a Name?", Aijaz Ahmad, Indian philosopher, discusses the tendency of using the term 'postcolonial' to describe "non-whites" without being condemned as racist, as the term is easily used to refer to previously colonized nations where the majority of people are colored, but uncomfortably avoided when the people are a white majority such as in Ireland.

man, leaves women outside the equation, enforcing the patriarchal notion that men are in control of the resources of sex, and women are the resources (19). Lugones demonstrates a continuum perception of gender in indigenous communities rather than a binary opposition; she bases her argument on the research of Paula Gunn Allen, a prominent Native American writer, activist, and literary critic, who held that Native American tribes were positively matriarchal, acknowledged the existence of intersexed individuals, and had no awareness of biologically based gender roles.

Before colonialism, societal roles in most Native American tribes were decided “on the basis of proclivity, inclination, and temperament. The Yuma had a tradition of gender designation based on dreams; a female who dreamed of weapons became a male for all practical purposes” (qtd. in Lugones 25). These tribes were gynocratic to the core—their belief that creation is feminine and the creator is female was deeply rooted within their culture until the arrival of white colonialism—who replaced the feminine divinity with the Christian (male) god thus disrupting and displacing the balance of power from female to male and easing the way of the establishment of its own systems (24). In another instance, Lugones cites the work of Nigerian gender scholar, Oyéronké Oyewùmí, who confirms that before English colonialism, Yoruba culture did not acknowledge gender as an asset in its power relations; the terms *obinrin* and *okunrin* (female and male) were simply anatomical categories—they neither indicated opposition nor hierarchy (22). It is to be understood, then, that what western feminism has been attempting to achieve for centuries had already been established in indigenous cultures before the choking grasp of white colonialism—what is sought today by postcolonial feminists is simply a return to one’s origins.

Through denouncing dualism, disrupting the binary system, forwarding intersectionality, and forcing postcolonial feminism out of the margin, feminist activists today are striving towards a globalized, attentive, and inclusive feminism. They pursue a feminism characterized with “the

possibility of a difference, yet, a difference or an otherness that will not go so far as to question the foundation of [the others'] beings and makings" (Minh-Ha 22). This—what white feminism has repeatedly miscarried—has almost been failed again by ecocriticism for being a male majority, then ecofeminism for being a white majority, until it was embraced by postcolonial ecofeminism. The emergence of postcolonial ecofeminism has therefore been the natural outcome of the misrepresentation of Third World women, of the interference of the Global North in the Global South, of the oppression of the marginalized in the postcolonial world, of escalating anthropocentrism on a global scale, and of environmental injustice altogether.

III. Women and Nature: Current Discussions

Opinions on what gathers women with nature are widely divergent, and not all of them are well-intentioned, which places ecofeminism in a thought-provoking—and often puzzling—position amongst theorists within and without the field. Ecofeminism has long been practiced before it found its way into theory as indigenous women of all cultures, in protecting their land, had carried out unlabeled ecofeminist acts. These, however, have long been set aside, or at best gone unnoticed, by white ecofeminism in its beginnings; while the philosophy itself came as a rebellion against the male-lead ecocriticism, it eventually failed to flourish because of its gynocentrism, its essentialism, and its inconsideration of indigenous women in postcolonial contexts. Nevertheless, it was not time for the end of ecofeminism, for authors and scholars of the global south had embraced the field under the slogan that “there is no social justice without environmental justice.” Ecofeminism has endured—and still endures—endless disputes that often threaten to disperse it but still have not managed to; today, it maintains its position as a wide-ranging field that rigorously defends all which falls at the disregarded intersections.

Contrary to common belief, ecofeminism did not start when the term was coined by the French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974; for, although the act of labeling gave the movement an enormous leap into the field of criticism as it allowed the unison of its scholars, ecofeminism had long been part of many previously misrepresented cultures. The first Chipko movement of 1730—later recreated in 1973—is one of the earliest known direct acts of ecofeminism that can be acknowledged as it dates back to the events in Rajasthan, India, where 363 people, most of which were women, sacrificed their lives to oppose the Maharaja's¹² orders to cut down the sacred Khejri trees. This movement was recounted by Vandana Shiva, the Indian environmental activist and scholar, in her first work, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*, marking a milestone in the breakthrough of ecofeminism and an opening for the genesis of postcolonial ecofeminism.

Despite the entangled relationships of association, derivation, and often opposition between ecofeminism and postcolonial ecofeminism, neither are complete theories by any means. It is as the American ecofeminist scholar Karen Warren describes it, “theories are like quilts” (*Ecofeminist Philosophy* 66), a metaphor she develops to describe the diversity and progressiveness of ecofeminism as a theory; she expresses the inclusive nature of the study saying that “adjustments to the quilt do not ruin the quilt or decrease its value, since it is part of the nature of quilting to welcome alterations” (67). She concludes her chapter on this metaphor by noting that quilting has always been a mostly feminine practice, embraced largely by women, leaving her female readers to question the nature of the statement as either an essentialist accusation against them or a responsibility handed to them. Whether ecofeminism is inherently essentialist or not is one of the

¹² Sanskrit for “Great King”: here refers to Abhai Singh, the Maharaja of Marwar between 1724 and 1749 during whose time the Khejarli massacre (or the Chipko movement) occurred.

most—but not exclusively—debated and severing arguments amongst ecofeminist scholars as there remain relentless disputable variables within the field.

However, before exploring the dilemmas of ecofeminism, an attempted definition of the theory must precede. The term ecofeminism, sometimes termed ecological feminism, in a straightforward understanding, refers to the intersection of ecocriticism with feminism, an integration that occurred as a result of the principle that “something is a feminist issue if an understanding of it helps one understand the oppression, subordination, or domination of women” (Warren 1). Ecofeminism is regarded as the field within which all frameworks of dualist oppression are questioned and corrected whether it applies to environmental injustice, speciesism, sexism, heterosexism, racism, ethnocentrism, colonialism, or classism. The principles of ecofeminism sprout from the belief that all oppression is connected; hence, all the oppressed are connected—that this is rooted within the androcentric¹³ dualist structure of the standards of life, mostly in western societies, and accordingly, feminists must vehemently oppose all forms of subjugation as it is agreed upon that all living organisms deserve unbiased justice.

Ynestra King, American ecofeminist scholar, in her speech for an ecofeminist conference in the 1980s, declares:

Ecofeminism is about connectedness and wholeness of theory and practice...We see the devastation of the earth and her beings by the corporate warriors and the threat of nuclear annihilation by the military warriors as feminist concerns. It is the same masculinist

¹³ The structure of society is based on the masculine point of view and constructed around male needs as the central priority of social life.

mentality which would deny us our right to our own bodies...and which depends on multiple systems of dominance and state power to have its own way (qtd. in Najera 7).

King displays impeccably the inclusive nature of ecofeminism: it is feminist to oppose environmental destruction because the system causing the decay of nature is the same one that brought about the persecution of women: an androcentric system of exploitation and marginalization—the victims of which she refers to as “the non-hegemonic ‘we’” (King 20).

Greta Gaard, American ecofeminist scholar, in her work “Strategies for a Cross-Cultural Ecofeminist Literary Criticism”, explains that ecofeminist literary criticism reaches beyond its scope as a theory into an activist movement; its literary practice cannot be divided from its activism¹⁴. She asserts that among its characteristics, ecofeminism studies the mutually-impactful relationships of humans with other species and with the environment, emphasizes the outcomes of the systems of oppression and hierarchy in society against all subjugated categories, and advocates for an eco-defence within all aspects of the human community towards an ecocentric mode of life rather than an anthropocentric one, which has become more necessary today than ever (47-48). The need for an ecofeminist criticism seems to rise simultaneously with the growth of science and technological endeavors according to Carolyn Merchant, the American ecofeminist and thinker, whose theory of *The Death of Nature* denotes that the social impact of the Scientific Revolution has been central in the change of the perception of Earth from a living organism to a machine, and, thus, to the formation of the reason/nature or machine/nature dualism. The emergence of the machine cut a vast gap between the industrial and the domestic as it allowed for both women and

¹⁴ Anna Bedford, in the afterword for *Literature and the Environment: Intersectional and International Voices*, “Ecofeminism through Literary Activism, Hybridity, Connections, and Caring” writes that one of the binary oppositions that ecofeminism seeks to destroy is the academia/lived experience one as she claims that grassroots activism cannot be separated from academic writing.

nature to be dubbed domestic, thus inferior to science, reason, machinery, and most notably, to man, who came to be in charge of all.

Of the links between women and nature, Karen Warren writes of eight relationships based on the infrastructures of human society and civilization. While *historical* connections are found embedded in the culture of patriarchy, *symbolic* connections can be traced within the religion, art, and literature of said culture where derogatory associations between nature—particularly land and animals—and women are made in terms of barrenness, fertility, wildness, tameness, virginity, domestication, savagery... etc. *Conceptual* connections, she explains, are essentially the dualism and binary nature of social constructions resulting in *epistemological* associations of dualism in western thought and philosophy. The existence of the four latter connections has given rise to the next as an *empirical* connection can be recognized in the recent attempts at data collection and analysis in order to prove the greater impact of environmental destruction on women's lives, especially when intersected with the categories of the colonized, the poor, and the children. Naturally, *ethical*, *theoretical*, and *political* connections came into actuality to respectively push forward an equal understanding of all living organisms outside of androcentrism, create new intersectional approaches and theories between feminism and ecology, and bring the abstract views into practicality in the form of ecofeminist political activism (*Ecological Feminist* xi-xvii).

In *The Death of Nature*, Merchant also states identical designations of the connections between nature and the oppression of women to Warren's historical, conceptual, and symbolic relationships. She, however, adds that in some cases, these connections were what prevented—or, at least, postponed—the Earth's destruction; she clarifies that “the image of the earth as a living organism and nurturing mother had served as a cultural constraint restricting the actions of human beings. One does not readily slay a mother [...]. As long as the earth was considered to be alive

and sensitive, it could be considered a breach of human ethical behavior to carry out destructive acts against it” (3). Val Plumwood, in contrast, argues that the association of nature and women with motherhood does not guarantee “unmixed respect”; instead, it allows for women to be diminished into the background of male achievements, either a relentlessly giving and never demanding mother or a demonic mother, nowhere in between (“Conversations with Gaia” 668). It is to be understood, thus, that the objectification and reductionism of women and nature on the basis of reproduction solely has made it easier to tyrannize over them in the name of the prosperity of the patriarchy and the androcentric mode of life, which is why essentialism—by definition, reducing a group of individuals to an *essence*, a set of characteristics that categorizes them and strips them of their individuality—has been a subject of sharp debate amongst ecofeminists. In the context of feminism, essentialism appears in three evident forms: the reduction of women’s experiences to fixed biological characteristics, the unification of the experiences of a whole category based on their gender, and universalism or the assumption that what is accurate for one setting must be so for another (Li 355).

For essentialism to come from someone within the context of oppression is, to many, a more abhorred offense than it is coming from someone outside it, for, as Salman Rushdie describes authenticity¹⁵, one considers essentialism “the respectable child of old-fashioned exoticism” (67). Thus, one of the ecofeminists receiving the strictest criticism on her essentialist views is the previously-mentioned Vandana Shiva, whose work in the field is predominantly grounded in Hinduism and the concept of Prakriti—Sanskrit for nature—which, in Indian philosophy, refers to the feminine facet of existence. The issue with Shiva’s work remains both in her failure to address

¹⁵ Attempting to pursue a “supposedly homogeneous and unbroken tradition” of literary writing and canon, according to Salman Rushdie.

the essentialism in the ideology she had embraced as grounds for her work and in her generalization of what is particular to practitioners of Hinduism and believers in Indian cosmology to a large variety of women with unique backgrounds in the Global South (Kings 75). Critics of essentialism in ecofeminism, similarly to critics of gynocentric feminism, believe that glorifying the feminine in the guise of female empowerment is in itself oppressive as it forwards a dualist philosophy and forces aspects of domesticity and caretaking on women—in other words, an involuntary deprivation of personal interest, intellect, or character.

Much essentialism manifests in a subdivision of ecofeminism known as motherhood environmentalism, which allots women, mothers in particular, with a superior awareness of environmental matters due to a closer connectedness with nature. While the movement is not, for the most part, mistaken in associating motherhood with the development of a superior ecological conscience, it lingers in reductionist ground by the recognition of women's integrity towards nature solely through the achievement of motherhood—a concept reminiscent of the Gaia symbolism that Plumwood alludes to in “Conversations with Gaia”, a symbolism whose intentions are ambiguous as one fails to distinguish whether it emancipates nature and women or objectifies them. Women, ecofeminists assure, ought not to be dismissed as “simply following a biological calling, when, in fact, they make a conscious choice to become political and ethical activists” (Gaarder 59). Though caring might be a feminine trait, it is to be found in all genders; thus, the interest women take in environmental matters is not one they are endowed with, it is one they cultivate upon reflection, empathy, and association of their own subjugation with that of all living organisms at the hands of the patriarchal culture.

Although the majority of feminists and ecofeminists disdain any essentialist connection of women with nature beyond the oppression and associations forced upon them (previously

introduced through Warren's words), some others view the matter in a different light. Gayatri Spivak, for instance, encourages the use of a *strategic essentialism*, one devoid of biological determinism but tolerant of the existence of some connections in order to analyze and appropriate them, or else, the scholar stands at an impossibility of building any field of study (as cited in Bahri 209). There lies the issue with essentialism, for to define, one must essentialize, and this identification with nature that women have had coerced onto them need not be wasted in vain. Recognition of human—including female—connectedness with nature might also be considered as a step towards the obliteration of dualism and the move from the binary to the spectrum. As the epitaph for this chapter probes, where does one end and the rest of creation begin? It is scientifically understood that only 1.5 percent to 7 percent of the collective human genetic code is distinctively human whilst the rest is all shared with other living organisms. Ronnie Zoe Hawkins, American ecofeminist, declares that “humans are neither hyperseparated from the rest of nature nor construed as genetically determined automatons” (172) thus closing the debate on essentialism.

It is at the hand of these internal debates that ecofeminism has fallen through shortly after its peak. For “fear of contamination” as Gaard calls it, ecofeminists began to disperse into many minor approaches including ecological feminism, feminist environmentalism, social ecofeminism, critical feminist eco-socialism, vegetarian ecofeminism, or gender and the environment (“Ecofeminism Revisited” 27)—all of which shared unchanged philosophies and moral codes but desperately battled against association with one another. Of the reasons that Gaard gives to these differences amongst the sub branches is the tension between ecofeminists, a predominantly first world, white, middle-class, vegan, and homosexual majority, and environmental justice activists, a predominantly third world, colored, working-class, omnivorous, and heterosexual majority (“New Directions” 648). In addition to the internal divisions, by the end of the Cold War, feminist

antimilitarism, which was of pronounced support to ecofeminism, dissolved, leaving ecofeminism to fall into a stupor.

Gaard, in “New Directions for Ecofeminism”, suggests multiple ways for the field to proceed towards its mission including intersectional readings of ecofeminism with postcolonialism, bioregionalism¹⁶, and sexuality studies¹⁷. For although ecofeminists are found in perpetual disparities often, their common disapproval of the fallacies of dualism and western hegemony and their acknowledged determination against the oppressions of the patriarchy have made the ecofeminist movement relentless. Gaard does not hesitate to display the ambitious, unrelenting nature of ecofeminism by declaring:

As the slogan goes, "I'll be post-feminist in the post-patriarchy"—and when sexism, heterosexism, transphobia, classism, racism, speciesism, ableism, ageism, and the global inequalities produced and exacerbated by industrial capitalism and the legacies of colonialism cease to be a problem, then feminism will have accomplished its goals and outlived its usefulness (“Ecofeminism Revisited” 43).

In this fashion, the ecofeminist justifies and legitimizes the firm resolve of feminism to intersect itself with every field in which oppression still resides.

It is an undeniable truth that “to be a feminist, one must also be an ecologist. [...] To be an ecologist, one must also be a feminist” (Murphy 48), but the interminable disputes and widening gulfs amongst critics do not advance the field any further. The world is in continuous demolition and turmoil, lists of environmental issues that will worsen in time are drawn every year and their

¹⁶ The concept of ‘home’ for a lot of women, servants, children, and animals has long been one of marginalization, isolation, forced labor, and imprisonment.

¹⁷ Sexuality studies could adopt a new view of animal sexuality: sexual violence and forced insemination of female animals in farms, for example.

results exceed the expectations of predictions, and humans stray further from their position in the ecological balance every day. When literature with an ecocentric view—in opposition to an anthropocentric one—attempts publication, it is desk-rejected under the pretext that “these stories have trees in them” (qtd. in Love 13). Ecofeminists have a responsibility—nay, a duty—to lay their differences aside and direct their undivided attention toward a more grounded, more applicable theoretical framework with roots that reach well into activism and truly set one foot in literature and the other on land as Glotfelty had anticipated (Glotfelty xix). Is postcolonial ecofeminism the answer then? Has this point of intersection emerged to stipulate a new set of objectives and place the foundation stone for an effective and comprehensive environmental criticism?

IV. Ecofeminism: A Postcolonial Issue

Ecofeminism was not first confessed to be a postcolonial issue; instead, like most subjects when it comes to postcolonialism, it required a considerable amount of published retort from scholars for it to be admitted to the field—and in its admittance, it saved ecofeminism from obsolescence and oblivion. Although it seems difficult to adapt ecocriticism to postcolonialism on the account of elements of unity and universalism that the former calls for and that the latter regards with contempt, an intersection with ecofeminism—rather than ecocriticism—was reasonably more coherent. The inclination of ecofeminism to be inclusive and to stand in the way of patriarchal oppression in all its forms and contexts certainly served to establish a bridge between ecofeminism and postcolonial feminism. From the other side of matters, postcolonial feminists have grown weary of western misrepresentation, local antifeminism, and disregard from their male counterparts—the latter being a burden they shared with ecofeminists. The inevitable intersection of the two fields proved highly productive as it laid the groundwork for postcolonial ecofeminism

and created the opportunity for women in the Global South to voice their reality, represent themselves, and fight for their own land.

1. Falling through the Crack: Women of the Global South

In her book, *Imperial Leather*, Anne McClintock alludes to an audacious, in all the negative connotations of the adjective, drawing by Jan van der Straet¹⁸ representing Amerigo Vespucci as he stands upright on the shores of America. Fully clothed and armored, and carrying an astrolabe, a flag, and a half-hidden sword, Vespucci stands to represent science, imperialism, and camouflaged murder. Facing him is an indigenous woman, naked, rising from an indolent stupor, and offering her hand—and, one is forced to assume, herself—to the imperialist explorer. The insolent allusions continue, for, in the background, two figures, most likely female figures, are seen to be feeding on a human leg. The entire drawing, while derogatory in endless ways, is an ideal illustration, a perfect argument for the case of postcolonial ecofeminism. The image of both women and nature—here viewed as land—in postcolonial context is reduced to one of a conversion from savagery to tameness, from barbarism to submissiveness owing to “the godlike arrival [that] is destined to inseminate [the indigenous woman and land] with the male seeds of civilization, fructify the wilderness and quell the riotous scenes of cannibalism in the background” (McClintock 26).

The representation of women in the Third World, the Global South, the postcolonial context, or whatever it may be referred to, has always been, at best, wholly indifferent and, at worst, purposefully distorted by the powers of colonialism—a practice as gendered as it is oppressive. A gruesome illustration of this practice by Patrick D. Murphy, American professor, describes the matter as “a two-pronged rape and domination of the earth and the women who live on it” (qtd. in

¹⁸ Also known as Johannes Stradanus, Flemish artist famous in Florence, Italy during the sixteenth century.

Warren, *Ecological Feminist* xiv). While this metaphor—dreadful as it is—is not entirely inaccurate, it has been renounced by Icelandic professor of theology and priest, Sigridur Gudmarsdottir, who, in an ecofeminist reading of John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, writes that “without an acute awareness of genuine suffering of particular bodies, raped, tortured and violated by particular oppressors in a particular time and place, the metaphor loses its referent and conveys neither justice for women nor nature” (211). The comparison is not only deeply integrated within the patriarchal ‘rape culture’ which normalizes acts of sexual violence by referring to them out of context—and often jestingly—and carrying insensitive graphic descriptions, it also stands to further essentialism by associating women with nature in symbolism. These attempts at representation, neither carried nor approved by women—and definitely not by women in the global south—only manage to lead the study astray.

Of androcentric oppression, an abundance of examples has been examined, but of Eurocentric views within ecocriticism, a closer look at scholarship revolving around postcolonial context written by white, male scholars will suffice. William Slaymaker, American—white—ecocritic, bases his work on Lawrence Buell’s established criteria on the definition of an ecocritical work to arrive at the conclusion that ecocritical/ecofeminist postcolonial literature is, in fact, not ecocritical, as he believes that “to some African critiques and writers [...], what ecocriticism offers is not another theory of liberation like Marxism. Rather, it appears as one more hegemonic discourse from the Metropolitan West” (qtd. in Pasi 49) then continues to assume that “the (siren?) call of the Green Wave resounding through much of the literary world has been answered weakly by black African writers and critics” (53). Slaymaker, perhaps unintentionally, but nevertheless concretely, represents the vast majority of critics with a Eurocentric background to whom the definition of

what is ecocritical or ecofeminist is a narrow perception that does not go beyond an understanding of the limited criteria established by yet another white, male critic with a colonial perception.

In another instance, Jeremy Gavron, English journalist and author, in *The Last Elephant: An African Quest*, accuses the Africans of “wip[ing] out their elephant populations: not merely to use the ivory to buy modern material goods, but also, it seems to me, to destroy their world's wildness and danger, to eradicate what many Africans regard as a primitive and shaming past” (xii). One wonders, has it not occurred to the writer that, perhaps, Africans hunted their own elephants because of the malicious seeds of capitalism and materialism left in the aftermath of colonialism, without whose ideals of development and modernity, Africans would have remained as harmonious with their elephants as ever? It seems, therefore, that writers from imperialist backgrounds neither have faith in a postcolonial ecological conscience nor do they find postcolonial ecocritical writing satisfactory to their standards; they do, however, believe in taking up the mantle to speak for the ‘unassuming’ third world. To answer Slaymaker’s concerns on the ecocritical-ity of postcolonial literature, it must be understood that postcolonial literature refuses to be the inferior to western literature in a binary of western/postcolonial or canon/imitation, so it does not set western literature—in this case ecocritical western literature—as an ideal to mimic. The recognized relationships that postcolonial and western ‘canon’ have are a repudiation of the canon, a revision of the canon, or a decanonizing of the canon (Marx 83-85). Thus, in producing their literature—not adequately ecocritical for Slaymaker—Africans (and third world writers in general) repudiate, revise, and decanonize works such as Gavron’s that are heavy with imperialist nostalgia¹⁹.

¹⁹An expression used by American anthropologist Renato Rosaldo in his book, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*, referring to the tendency of individuals from imperialist backgrounds to long for previous colonies in a supposedly innocent manner.

As we enter postcolonial ecofeminist ground, we must question if it can be molded to fit the criteria of western ecofeminism—or if it should. Given the example of globalization, which western ecofeminists understand as an imperialist, hegemonic practice, there is no clear agreement amongst women in the global south upon it. While some third world women—one cannot help but think of Vandana Shiva—unquestionably reject values of globalization, others—and, here, Gaard cites examples of middle class Chinese and Taiwanese women—perceive globalization as a deliverance from local patriarchal rules (“Strategies” 50). Built on her own experience in teaching classes of ecofeminism to Taiwanese graduate students, and through her astonishment at the enlightening new perspectives on ecofeminism emerging from their own culture, Gaard concludes that

any critique of cultural traditions and cultural narratives harming women and/or nature must be initiated and led by the women within the culture itself; ecofeminist literary critics will be little more than colonizers if we use this ecocriticism to legitimate criticizing other cultures solely in accord with our own standards for narrative form and content, gender equality and environmental health. Instead, what we can do is offer the tools of ecofeminist analysis to feminist literary critics of other cultures, and develop relationships with these cultural insiders so that we can work in solidarity (51).

Gaard, thus, holds that ecofeminism should not be adapted from western perspective to, in this case, Asian perspective, but that it requires a fundamental change in philosophy from Christian/western ideology to, for example, Buddhist philosophy (“New Directions” 652)—or whichever philosophy suits the context best rather than idolizing western views.

While women suffer from gender-based oppression in almost all societal contexts, though by various degrees, their relationship with nature and the social injustices imposed upon them due

to ecological imbalance are widely different from North to South. In addition to the example of Buddhist vegetarianism, an inspection of fishing and farming communities proves that women in such societies are not as bound to domestic pursuits as they are in other societies; they are, in fact, even more responsible for production than men (Jabeen 18-19). This production, however, is considered ‘invisible’ as it does not fit within economic records such as gross national product, so, because women produce more than sixty five percent of the world’s unpaid labor—which equals half the global gross domestic product—they make up as high a percentage as seventy percent of the poorest individuals in the world (cited in Pandey 348-350). It is no wonder, therefore, that it is women in the global south who endure the weight of environmental change the most while still being prevented from representing themselves—neither locally nor globally—in order to prevent further environmental damage; they are, instead, even more prone to receive blame for it²⁰. The accountability for this intolerable status that women of the global south have found themselves trapped in lies, first, in the patriarchal ways of their nations, and, second, in (neo)colonial powers within and without their nations.

Vandana Shiva maintains a radical position against the interference of western nations in the affairs of the third world in the name of development, philanthropy, or technological advancement. To her, development is a “continuation of the process of colonisation” that subjugates women and nature alike, and she assigns it her vocation to call for a “liberation from development” as earnestly as she would a “liberation from colonialism” (659). In their assumption that the western lifestyle is the epitome of a successful system, first world nations, after the independence of ex-colonies and the collapse of imperialism, have resorted to hegemonic capitalist

²⁰ Arguments of overpopulation lay the blame of the influence of the increasing number of human on the planet’s deterioration on women for reproducing.

practices such as development to slither into the affairs of third world nations under the guise of an alleged war on poverty. Poverty, however, is a culturally relative concept as Shiva clarifies: individuals who live on organic, self-grown, and self-made products in self-sufficient modes of life are regarded as dreadfully poor (663-664) by western capitalist standards of mass production, commercial markets, and consumer culture, for “‘production’ takes place only when mediated by technologies for commodity production, even when such technologies destroy life” (660). She, nevertheless, professes that domestic mismanagement is as culpable as foreign intrusions—the so-called elite have taken up the colonizer’s mantle and continued the process of colonization through economic development (659), an idea that Spivak, native of the same nation as Shiva, agrees with²¹.

The primary victims of the circumstances thus displayed are, naturally, women. The privatization of land ownership, the migration of the male population to cities in search for industrial work, the expansion of rivers to dams²², the overcutting of wood from forests, and numerous other forms of development stated by Shiva have radically altered the lives of women in rural India from a status of subsistence to a survival of families on meagre means. It is as Gustavo Esteva, Mexican activist and author, exasperatedly declares, “My people are tired of development, they just want to live” (qtd. in Shiva 665). Despite the supposed redistribution of wealth implanted in globalization and development theoretically, the fact remains that a lower class individual in the first world still earns more than an upper-middle class individual in the third world (cited in Pandey

²¹Gayatri Spivak believes that the independence of India from Britain was not a won revolutionary war but a negotiation established by the elite that knew nothing of India yet became its liberators and leaders—leaders of a semi-illiterate people to whom the state of India signified nothing, thus allowing the elite to exercise manipulation and move the same machine of colonialism (see “How the Heritage of Postcolonial Studies Thinks Colonialism Today” by Gayatri Spivak).

²²Instances of failed development plans include The Narmada Valley Dam Projects, what Arundhati Roy, Indian author, refers to as “India’s Greatest Planned Environmental Disaster” which was a project that built hundreds of dams all around India in an attempt to provide water and electricity and ended up causing great losses and damages for both land and people.

345). As some ecocritics²³ have suggested to merge postcolonial approaches within ecocriticism to study the ecological aftermath of colonization on both sides of the equation, postcolonial ecocritics and ecofeminists stood firmly against the notion that the first world and the third world suffer ecological calamities in the same fashion.

Alarmingly like in a dystopian setting, the president of the World Bank unabashedly declares, “shouldn’t the World Bank be encouraging more migration of the dirty industries to the Least Developed Countries?” (qtd. in Carrigan 92). It must be seen, then, that oppressors are not to be categorized in the same group as the oppressed when it comes to environmental destruction; First World leaders and World Bank presidents are not to be labelled victims of environmental change when they are the cause. Dana C. Mount, Canadian literary critic and professor, writes,

The West—or certain parts of it—faces the *same* risk, but its ability to react and to restore quality of life will be considerably different. Studies show that low-lying countries such as the Maldives, areas of Sri Lanka, and other island nations, will be the first and hardest hit by rising sea-levels. [...] Sen’s simple claim that “The direct penalties of a famine are borne only by the suffering public and not the ruling government. The rulers never die” (343) speaks to the insulating effect of sovereign rule for those holding political power. (17)

The ‘rulers’, in this context viewed as those with prominent political and economic influence, truly never die, as it has been lately observed, under the outrage of millions, multibillionaires Elon Musk and Jeffery Bezos engaged in a space race worth billions of dollars mid-pandemic while over seven billion people were dying of coronavirus because of either inadequate or unaffordable healthcare.

²³ See DeLoughrey and Handley’s *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*.

The oppression of the environment and third world populations had originated from the same root of colonization—the juncture of which is often referred to as biocolonialism²⁴—just as the oppression of women and the environment had originated from the same root of patriarchy. The domination of nature based on the belief of the inferiority of the latter in the binary culture/nature is rooted in the same justifications that colonizers made use of to rationalize the domination of indigenous peoples: civilized/savage is, to some extent, but a rendering of culture/nature. This connection has been plainly disregarded by western ecocriticism as it is even admitted amongst ecocritics that a return to nature as one's home is the key to environmental catastrophes without a thought for the colonized whose home is either occupied or misplaced (Mount 7). In some instances, the struggles of people in the global south are passed over even in favor for their animals by western ecocriticism—to whom wildlife conservation should occur even at the cost of human life. It is an unfortunate example that “these killings [of people by tigers] are never reported, never written about in the papers. And the reason is just that these people are too poor to matter. We all know it, but we choose not to see it. Isn't that a horror too—that we can feel the suffering of an animal, but not of human beings...” (qtd. in Buell et al. 427-428). Ecocriticism, hence, if it did not immediately recognize the urgent need of an intersection with postcolonialism, finds itself under the threat not only of irrelevance to the field of criticism but, more importantly, of the accusation of underlying imperialist intentions.

A step ahead of ecocriticism, not only has ecofeminism helped uncover the vices of western intrusion in the global south, it has also helped to retrieve ecofeminist acts lost in indigenous African, Asian, and Latin American cultures. It begins with the discovery that, in most indigenous

²⁴ An example worthy of mentioning when it comes to biocolonialism is the system adopted by the apartheid movement in South African to restrict the living quarters of black South Africans to certain regions in order to offer power over the land to white settlers—a method applied in almost all colonies and by almost all colonizers.

cultures, the terms ‘environment’ and ‘nature’ do not have separate significances, for environment as an anthropocentric concept surrounding humans simply does not exist (Carrigan 82). Instead, these cultures are found to be truly ecocentric in their grasp of the universe; rather than human-centered spirituality, most indigenous peoples understand themselves to be part of a greater scheme which originates and culminates in nature—either through reincarnation, a return to the elements, the presence of ancestors within nature, or other examples of indigenous devoutness to the natural world. This early ecological wisdom imbedded in native cultures of the global south is denoted as traditional ecological knowledge defined as “the knowledge, practice and belief concerning the relationship of living beings to one another and to the physical environment, which is held by peoples in relatively non-technological societies with a direct dependence upon local resources” (Sahfan 9).

However, within these same societies, the ecologically conscientious ethos is found more apparent in women than it is in men. In peasant, uneducated, female sections of third world societies, ecofeminism exists in profusion, a fact that Kenyan environmental activist, Wangari Mathaai, demonstrates thoroughly with her Green Belt Movement in which the primary participants in the planting of over fifty million trees were women of modest backgrounds. Mathaai confirms, “[women] are often the first to feel the effects of environmental damage as vital resources become scarce and even unusable. [...] When the environment is destroyed, plundered, or mismanaged, it is their quality of life, and that of their children and families, that is ultimately undermined” (qtd. in Pandey 348). It could be argued that the connection these women have with their trees is a purely material one, one where they value their being because of their usefulness to their survival, but it is not the case. The Maiti²⁵ movement is a ritual that has spread to thousands

²⁵ From ‘mait’, Garhwali for ‘mother’s home’.

of Indian villages where young girls plant and care for one particular tree from a very early age up until their marriage; as they quit their home, the tree becomes a symbol for their roots and their presence in their mother's village, and the parents become required to care for the tree as they would their daughter (Pandey 353).

It is with a remarkable defiance that postcolonial ecofeminists have begun to break their silence in resilient endeavors to reverberate the voice of Third World women. Through revising western ideology, decentering values of imperialist science, reviving indigenous cultures, and promoting the ecofeminist approach in postcolonial literature, authors and critics alike have embarked on the rough journey of rewriting the postcolonial, the oriental, the indigenous, and the Third World through the eyes of its natives. It is not an easy conflict that which they engage in to alter their representation from Jan van der Straet's reclining woman mesmerized by the shadow of an imperialist figure to the reality of the indigenous woman, natural, persevering, industrious, willful, and—whether illiterate or intellectual—free. From the hearts of India, Zimbabwe, and Egypt, three women take up their pens and conjure strength from their natural environment to bring to the world three works of doubtless—whether already revealed or not—ecofeminist value.

2. The Future of Ecofeminism: Postcolonial Ecofeminist Literature

In the dynamic expanse of postcolonial ecofeminist literature, this thesis ventures on an analysis of the outstanding contributions of three literary giants in the field: Arundhati Roy, Tsitsi Dangarembga, and Nawal El Saadawi. These authors, through their seminal works, *The God of Small Things*, *Nervous Conditions*, and *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* respectively, have created narratives that transcend conformist storytelling by introducing themes of ecofeminism within the postcolonial framework. Roy, a luminary in the genre, confronts the shadows of personal and political history in *The God of Small Things*, interweaving individual narratives and struggles with

larger socioenvironmental issues in India. Dangarembga, through *Nervous Conditions*, also explores power dynamics, gender roles, and cultural influences in her society of Rhodesia (currently Zimbabwe) under colonial rule, offering a manifesto for postcolonial ecofeminism. Similarly, Nawal El Saadawi, in her magnum opus *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, digs into the intersection of gender, postcolonialism, and the ecological challenges posed by petrocapiatalism in the Arab Gulf. The section introduces the distinctive contributions of each author, unraveling the thematic richness, narrative choices, and socioenvironmental frameworks embedded in each work. Through this exploration, this section seeks to position the literary works selected for this research as potent catalysts for the broad discussion of postcolonial ecofeminist literature.

In the evolving study of postcolonial ecofeminist literature, Roy's work stands as a foundational pillar and a formidable voice redefining the outlines of representation of the marginalized in the contemporary literary canon. Through her work, *The God of Small Things*, Roy writes a novel that deeply resonates with postcolonial ecofeminist nuances as it uniquely intertwines the personal and the political, the individual and the ecological. The author and activist's defiance is palpable not only in the themes she introduces but also in her narrative techniques as she unearths the complexities that define the lives of the oppressed. Her portrayal of characters like Ammu, Rahel, and Velutha reflects a profound understanding of the interconnectedness of the personal—the small—with the universal—the big. Her novel extends beyond the trauma of her characters to encapsulate the weight of colonial history, the impact of societal pressure and norms, and the ecological consequences of development on the global south.

The God of Small Things is a story is set in Kerala, India that, through the techniques of flashbacks and flash-forwards, merges between two timelines: 1969 and 1993. The central characters of the novel, Rahel and Estha, are twins born into the Ipe family, a family of Syrian

Christian descent and considerable wealth and status in their community. The plot unravels against the backdrop of a society grappling with the caste system, postcolonial tensions, and family secrets. At its heart, the story revolves around the ‘Love Laws’ as a social construct that dictates the societal expectations of love. The focus of the novel remains the complicated relationship within the Ipe family, particularly as Ammu, the twins’ mother, is considered the outcast of her family. Through the eyes and the memories of the twins, the novel explores the haunted past of the family following the tragic death of their English cousin, Sophie Mol. In addition to the personal struggles of the family, the novel reveals the consequences of British colonialism, functioning as a critique of postcolonial India and its identity crisis between traditional values and western influence. The novel proceeds to address the impact of western imported development on local communities and wildlife, notably through an analysis of the family’s pickle factory after Chacko, Ammu’s anglophile brother, overtakes the business.

Roy, in *The God of Small Things*, employs non-linearity in her storytelling, vivid—often nature related—imagery, and poetic repetitive prose to capture the lavish yet oppressive atmosphere of Kerala. As the characters navigate individual and shared traumas, the narrative explores themes of love, grief, societal pressure, and the history of colonialism. It serves as a compelling example of ecofeminist literature, as Roy skillfully writes a layered narrative of the oppression faced by women, intertwining their stories with the broader environmental injustice surrounding them. The Love Laws, a central theme in the novel, become a lens through which Roy examines the gender-based, ethnocentric, and racist injustices perpetuated by the societal norms of the society she explores in her work. The characters, caught in the web of these laws, mirror the struggles of the small—particularly women—in a patriarchal society where the love laws spare not even the natural environment from their exploitation.

Perhaps the reference that resonates most with ecofeminism in *The God of Small Things* is Roy's exploration of the toll of development on marginalized communities, a core tenet for postcolonial ecofeminist theory. The work exposes how the pursuit of development, often imposed by western powers on postcolonial nations as a new form of colonialism, deepens already existing inequalities. Roy's relentless critique of development projects—whether in her fiction or nonfiction—reflects a keen awareness of their impact on women and nature and a persistent endeavor to fight them. The metaphorical significance of pinned butterflies—to which a section of the following chapter is dedicated—becomes a symbol linking the degradation of the ecosystem to the subjugation of female characters under both colonialism and patriarchy. This dual symbolism, a narrative technique that Roy excels at, serves to reveal the pervasive nature of oppression, transcending individuals to reach victims at a much larger scale, namely the ecosystem.

As the narrative reaches its end, Roy's defiance extends to the very structure of her novel and the themes discussed within it. Her unapologetic approach to addressing taboo topics, such as the incestuous relationship between the twins, breaks free from any constraints of conventional writing. This defiance, rooted in the structure of *The God of Small Things*, contributes meritoriously to reshaping the future trajectory of postcolonial ecofeminist literature. In essence, Roy, through her remarkable novel, invites her readership to engage within the ongoing debates on the intersections of gender, postcolonialism, and environmental issues. Her work stands as a beacon in the evolving landscape of ecofeminism, urging future generations of writers and readers to continue unraveling the threads she has unapologetically woven. Roy's legacy lies not only in her narrative brilliance but also in her role as an activist and promoter of voicing the concerns of the voiceless in the postcolonial world.

Following the ecofeminist reading of *The God of Small Things*, this work proceeds to analyze another monumental postcolonial novel: *Nervous Conditions* by Tsitsi Dangarembga. Through her novel, Dangarembga offers an exploration of the complexities of colonial and postcolonial Africa, navigating the interactions of gender roles, power dynamics, cultural—both indigenous and imperial—influences, and environmental challenges. Her narrative prowess is evident as she tackles intricate and even taboo concepts of cultural and linguistic hybridity, eating disorders, and female sexuality. Dangarembga's captivating storytelling becomes a vehicle for dismantling imperialist ideologies and redefining the narrative of the indigenous woman as she repurposes the semiautobiographical bildungsroman genre of the western canon to write a powerful novel on decolonization. The plot of *Nervous Conditions* is set in the author's country Zimbabwe, postcolonial Rhodesia at the time, during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The novel unfolds as the protagonist, Tambudzai, nicknamed Tambu, recounts her coming-of-age journey and her struggle for education and independence in a society marked by colonialism and patriarchal norms.

The narrative begins with Tambu's confession of her lack of grief at her brother's death, an intimidating but nonetheless captivating opening line. It becomes clear that the protagonist's aspirations for education, which collide with traditional gender roles and societal expectations of women, only thrive after the death of her brother. The opportunities for education, initially offered to Nhamo, are shifted to his sister after his sudden death, opening a door for her to attend a mission school under the roof of her wealthy uncle Babamukuru. As she contends with the clash between her Shona traditions and the influence of her western education at the mission, Tambudzai struggles to retain her identity and joins her anglicized cousin Nyasha in her hybridity. Tambu's relationships with her family members, particularly with Nyasha, and her interactions with the missionaries and the white colonial presence begin to shape her understanding of herself and the world around her.

Through this identity struggle of Tambu's, the novel explores themes of cultural identity, gender dynamics, and the impact of colonialism on indigenous communities.

Food politics, connection with the environment, poverty and class struggles, the unequal division of labor, and the female fight for freedom in a postcolonial patriarchy are all intricately woven into the narrative. Tambu's journey becomes a metaphor for the broader societal changes occurring in postcolonial Africa, stressing the complications of navigating life in the postcolonial world between tradition and modernity. At the heart of *Nervous Conditions* lies the exploration of power dynamics, particularly in the realm of food politics. Dangarembga employs a dualistic lens, using the metaphor—but also the reality—of meat consumption and vegetarianism to unravel the tensions between tradition and colonially imposed values. This narrative choice becomes a powerful instrument in dissecting the unequal division of labor, where women bear the burdens of hunger and anorexia—through poverty and oppression respectively—while cooking the meat for men. Through Tambudzai's journey, Dangarembga unveils the struggles faced by women in navigating societal expectations and reclaiming agency over their bodies and lives in the postcolonial landscape.

Tambudzai, grappling with these extremities as an adolescent girl in an oppressive patriarchal society, emerges as a resilient and determined character. The novel culminates in her realization of the transformative potential of female solidarity, education, and ecological awareness, presenting a nuanced and powerful exploration of the interplay between gender, culture, and the environment in the postcolonial context. As she writes the relationships of Tambu with her mother, her cousin, and her aunts, Dangarembga forms an unprecedented representation of an African sisterhood where the shared support, education, and ecological wisdom emerge as tools for female liberation. In this narrative, *Nervous Conditions* goes beyond being merely a work of

fiction; it becomes a manifesto for postcolonial ecofeminism, offering a blueprint for dismantling oppressive structures and envisioning a future where women, regardless of literacy or intellect, can be free.

Dangarembga paints a nuanced picture of collective consciousness, illustrating how the fostering of connections among women becomes a powerful antidote to the restrictive forces imposed upon them in the patriarchy. As we delve into the future of ecofeminism, Dangarembga's contribution, in both thematic and stylistic terms, becomes a new canon for the more inclusive, more empowering postcolonial ecofeminist novel. Her work challenges her audience to reconsider traditional representations of women in postcolonial literature, urging a departure from imperialist shadows to the authentic voices of indigenous women representing their own unique experiences. Through her pen, Dangarembga not only critiques the colonial past but also shapes the postcolonial future of literature, inviting readers to reimagine a world where the natural, industrious, and willful spirit of women becomes the focal point of postcolonial discourse. In the setting of postcolonial ecofeminist literature, Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* remains as a testament to the defiant strength of storytelling and the potential for a more socially unprejudiced and ecologically sustainable future through literature.

In the vast realm of postcolonial ecofeminism, Nawal El Saadawi, in her novel *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, succeeds in bringing into the spotlight the largely ignored genre of oil fiction. El Saadawi, a renowned Egyptian feminist, psychiatrist, and prolific writer, presents a narrative that goes beyond the conventional portrayals of women in postcolonial literature as it introduces—or rather reminds—its audience of the existence of the petrostate. Her narrative disrupts the established silence in literature on the impact of the oil industry on the population of the global south, especially women. Through the lens of ecofeminism, El Saadawi writes of the manifold of

challenges faced by women in the postcolonial context, specifically within the patriarchal structures perpetuated by the oil industry. *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* stands as a testament to El Saadawi's commitment to challenging the systematic subjugation of women within the petrostate, as has been her activism throughout her life. The surrealist novel intertwines together the dream-like experiences of its nameless protagonist, presenting a nuanced reflection on memory, indigenous history, scholarly pursuits, and female solidarity and resilience in the face of the petrocapitalist patriarchy.

Love in the Kingdom of Oil narrates the journey of an unnamed protagonist, whose only identification is her career as an archeologist, to an island submerged in a lake of oil where the petrostate had established an oil company that controls everything on the island. The narrative revolves around her experiences in the oil-controlled state where oil, in its fluidity and shapelessness, is used by the author as a symbol of the pervasiveness of oppression. El Saadawi also introduces memory as a dynamic force, allowing the protagonist to traverse landscape of recollection as a form of resistance to her reality as a wife of oil. Strategically, the author incorporates local cultural symbolism, invoking ancient Egyptian goddesses and the recollections of a natural pre-oil era, constructing a collective ecofeminist identity that assists the female characters of her novel to challenge the constraints of the petrocapitalist society. This leads to themes of solidarity and worship of nature among the female characters, initially obscured by the women's apparent submission but later surfacing as a powerful undercurrent of resistance, affording a fundamentally ecofeminist aspect to the novel.

After the protagonist goes on leave—an event that rattles her society and reaches even His Majesty—she escapes from the blurry figures of her husband and her boss and ends up in the claws of yet another oppressive man that appears to take on the role of her second husband. Surveyed by

the man, trapped by the oil, and forced to carry oil jars to the company ruled by western hands, the woman leads a delirious existence on the island as the novel waves back and forth within her memories and her reality. Throughout her experience in the Kingdom of Oil, the protagonist undergoes a metamorphosis from a subdued individual to a symbol of collective empowerment. Her daring escape and symbolic stand against petrocapitalist patriarchy embody resilience, defiance, and a quest for self-determination, reflecting the broader aspirations of third world women facing ecological and gender-based challenges.

Throughout the novel, El Saadawi explores the complexities of women's experiences within the petrostate, proposing an unprecedented and profound critique of societal norms in oil-ridden lands from the perspective of a woman. Ensnared by petrocapitalism, the women in the novel represent the intersection of oppression that falls between the struggle for equality and environmental justice in the postcolonial context, as they are victims to both the ecological change caused by western petrocapitalism and the tyrannical forces of the patriarchy. In *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, El Saadawi's work becomes a rallying point for a paradigm shift in the representation of Arab women challenging not only the patriarchal structure perpetuated by their own culture but also the far-reaching intervention of a so-called democratic west with no more than petrocapitalist interests in the land. Amidst the oil-laden struggles, the novel stands as a powerful testament to the resilience and agency of these women, inviting readers to confront the intricate layers of oppression and envision a transformative path toward liberation and justice for Arab women earned by them for themselves.

In traversing the difficult scene of postcolonial ecofeminist literature through the lenses of Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, and El Saadawi's *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, this exploration culminates in a profound appreciation for the revolutionary

influence of postcolonial literature written by women. Each author, with defiance and narrative prowess, contributes to the reshaping of the postcolonial and the feminist within the framework of ecofeminism. In three groundbreaking works, Roy, Dangarembga, and El Saadawi defy conventional narratives, weaving intricate tales that resonate beyond the pages towards the realities of women in the global south suffering from dual—and often more than dual—oppression. Delving into postcolonial India, postcolonial Africa, and the oil colonized Arab Gulf, each author, in their distinctive narrative approaches, illuminates the interconnected struggles of women, challenging readers to contemplate the shared threads woven through their stories of defiance and empowerment. Collectively, the echoes of these literary voices resonate not only as beacons in the evolving landscape of ecofeminism, returning academic focus on the field, but also as overtures for wide-ranging conversations about the future of this all-encompassing intersection of women's studies within postcolonial discourse.

V. Literature Review

Among the vast expanse of scholarship done in the well-studied fields of ecofeminism and postcolonialism, many studies can be categorized as most relevant to the amalgamation of both fields forming a substantial framework for the literary criticism in this thesis. This literature review attempts to highlight the academic works of pivotal influence on the theoretical backbone of this research. It explores studies that forged connections between gender, colonialism, and the natural world through topics such as cultural attitudes towards women, the agency of subaltern women under colonial pressure, and gender bias within environmental injustice. From there, these foundational studies pave the way for a deeper understanding of the budding critical movement of postcolonial ecofeminism within literary studies. As the review progresses, it widens its lens to include global perspectives, examining ecofeminist responses to environmental injustice and

gender-based oppression in postcolonial nations. The literature review navigates a rich terrain of works that intersect with the themes of ecofeminism, postcolonialism, and environmental literature, offering a nuanced understanding of the intersections among these academic fields.

In *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, Timothy Clark offers a valuable guide through which to examine the intersection of literature and the environment, providing debates on the crisis of authority in scientific discourse, evolutionary theories of literature, the ethics of the nonhuman animal and vegetarianism, anthropomorphism, and the future of ecocriticism. In the work, a thorough definition of ecofeminism is provided along with a comprehensive overview of key themes in literature and the environment, underlining the interdisciplinary nature of ecocriticism. Similarly, Lawrence Buell's book *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* and his article "Literature and the Environment" written with Ursula K. Heise and Karen Thornber provide a historical angle and critical foundation for ecocriticism. In *The Environmental Imagination*, Buell explores enduring environmental themes in American nature writing using Thoreau's *Walden* as a guide. Through a reading of the latter, the notable critic establishes a new basis for reading nature writing, thus refining ecocritical theory. In "Literature and the Environment", the authors collaborate to provide a historical mapping of ecocriticism, tracing its movement within literature since the early 1990s. The work extends from critical analysis of existing environmental literature to introducing emerging contributions such as the field of critical animal studies.

In a similar vein, Cheryll Glotfelty's anthology, *The Ecocriticism Reader*, defines the development of ecological discourse, exploring the relationship between literature and the physical environment. It contains a comprehensive collection of key texts from diverse disciplines, including literary criticism, philosophy, and environmental studies that have shaped the discourse

on literature and the environment edited by Glotfelty. The anthology includes both foundational and contemporary works, making it an excellent resource for scholars interested in the evolution of ecocritical thought. Glen A. Love, one of the authors featured in the anthology, wrote another pivotal work in the field of ecocriticism, *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology, and the Environment*. The book argues for the incorporation of science and Darwinian ideas into ecocritical thinking, emphasizing the biological foundation of human life in cultural imagination. The book aspires to bridge the gap between the two cultures of science and humanities. It applies a biologically informed theoretical base to literary studies, examining the pastoral genre and works by canonical writers. Love's approach grounds environmental literature in evolutionary biology and provides a critical perspective on the relationship between nature and culture.

Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment edited by Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley was the first collection of works to merge between ecocritical and postcolonial studies through reading texts from previously colonized Asia and Africa. Each section of the book delves into specific literary and environmental contexts, addressing issues such as politics, survival, cultivation, lives of animals, deforestation, nature and tourism, and disaster in postcolonial settings like Sri Lanka and the Pacific. On other dimensions of ecocriticism, Patrick D. Murphy's collection of his essays, *Ecocritical Explorations in Literary and Cultural Studies*, explores the ecocritical movement within literary and cultural studies. The essays cover topics such as conceptual barriers, the boundaries of genres and their literary alternatives, and the transnational aspects of ecocritical theory. Murphy's work engages with diverse genres and issues, including nature in the contemporary American novel, environmental justice, and the intersections of science fiction and ecocriticism.

In Neil Lazarus's *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, the editor introduces readers to postcolonial studies, providing carefully selected insights into the various social and historical contexts of postcolonialism. The work explores topics of anti-colonialism, national liberation, hybridity, subaltern literature, and the institutionalization of postcolonial studies. The companion also delves into postcolonial literature's presence in the Western literary canon, poststructuralism, feminist perspectives, nationalism, and temporality within postcolonial critique. Among the essays published in the collection, Deepika Bahri's work, "Feminism in/and postcolonialism", emphasizes the often misunderstood status of subaltern women within the intersection of feminism and postcolonialism. Bahri, in her work, cautions against perpetuating cultural colonization through terms like 'third world woman' as it reveals the inextricable link between gender issues and postcolonial criticism. The article underlines the inseparable role of gender in colonial discourse, examining justifications for colonial projects based on the status of native women.

Correspondingly, Carolyn Merchant wrote "The Scientific Revolution and The Death of Nature" following her book *The Death of Nature* to challenge the hegemony of mechanistic science as progress and reassess the merits of the scientific revolution. Linking seventeenth-century science to the ecological crisis and the domination of nature, Merchant argues that women were devalued alongside the production of scientific knowledge. The paper highlights Francis Bacon's rhetoric as legitimizing the control of nature and stresses the impact of dualistic thinking on human—especially gender-based—relations and environmental degradation. In another foundational theoretical work, Freya Mathews's "The Dilemma of Dualism", from the *Routledge Handbook of Gender and Environment*, critically engages with the notion of dualism from western ideology, arguing that it is rooted in the activity of theorizing itself. The chapter explores counter-dualist

theories and emancipatory politics, emphasizing potential challenges in overcoming dualism. Mathews examines the theoretical perpetuation of dualism within ecofeminism and the importance of political analysis in addressing dualistic consciousness. The work contributes to broader debates about dualism within feminism, ecofeminism, and the project of the deconstruction of western thought.

Karen J. Warren's book, *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters*, motivates ecofeminism through empirical data, offering an overview of ecofeminist positions. The book quilts ecofeminist philosophy from a western perspective, examining its connections to environmental ethics, animal welfarism, and ecosystem ecology. Warren explores ecofeminist philosophy's engagement with social justice and spirituality, providing a comprehensive overview of its contributions to western philosophical thought. This was published following Val Plumwood's pioneering ecofeminist book, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, which examines the dualist concept of the master/subject and its shaping of western culture. Arguing that ruling elites have used their control over culture to maintain oppression, Plumwood explores the deep structures of mastery embedded in western intellectual frameworks. Her work studies the importance of understanding nature in relation to domination and colonization, providing a grounding for postcolonial ecofeminism. It critiques reductionist approaches, analyzes reason-nature dualism, and highlights the parallel between the instrumentalization of nature and the marginalization of women.

Greta Gaard's "Ecofeminism revisited: Rejecting Essentialism and Re-placing Species in a Material Feminist Environmentalism" is a paper written on hopes for the rebirth of ecofeminism as an academic field, acknowledging its critique as essentialist and its subsequent dismissal in the 1990s. The work explores the renaming of feminist approaches and the rediscovery of theoretical

perspectives developed by ecofeminists. Gaard argues that discarding ecofeminist knowledge resulted in the loss of valuable insights. The work underscores the importance of recuperating ecofeminist perspectives, providing foundations for current material feminist environmentalism and liberatory theories. In her other works, Gaard suggests an intersection with postcolonial discourse and literature for a more significant and encompassing approach to ecofeminism, namely in “Strategies for a Cross-Cultural Ecofeminist Literary Criticism” and “New Directions for Ecofeminism: Toward a More Feminist Ecocriticism”. Her departure from traditional western ecofeminism towards postcolonial ecofeminism is notable in her work as she seeks an unbiased form of the movement that is neither Eurocentric nor glorifies western philosophy.

Postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s *Can the Subaltern Speak?* is a pivotal essay that engages with issues of representation, power, and agency within postcolonial contexts. In the essay, Spivak critically examines the complexities of representing the experiences and voices of the subaltern, particularly women within the context of colonial and postcolonial societies. She addresses the challenges of speaking on behalf of subaltern groups, emphasizing the risk of further marginalization when their voices are co-opted or misinterpreted. Spivak urges the need for a nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in representing marginalized voices, offering insights into the challenges and ethical considerations involved in representing the voices of marginalized groups, especially women, within the broader postcolonial discourse. Within this postcolonial discourse, Vandana Shiva writes her book, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development*, a pioneering work that skillfully brings together fields of ecofeminism, environmentalism, postcolonialism, and development critique. The book delves into the intricate connections between the oppression of women and the destruction of the environment, particularly within the context of western development policies imposed on the third world. Her work extends

beyond critique to propose alternative, ecologically sustainable models that prioritize the well-being of both women and the environment, emphasizing the importance of biodiversity and indigenous knowledge.

By exploring the foundational works discussed in this review, it becomes evident that the intersection of the fields of ecofeminism and postcolonialism significantly contributes to the depth and breadth of literary criticism, providing a solid theoretical framework for the impending thesis. The review traces the evolution of ecofeminism, examining key texts that define its contours, challenge essentialist perspectives, and articulate a more inclusive and material ecofeminism—often through the lens of postcolonialism. Simultaneously, it explores postcolonial ecocriticism, giving emphasis to the importance of considering environmental issues within the broader context of colonial legacies and global perspectives. The works of ecofeminist scholars like Shiva, Plumwood, Warren, Merchant, and Gaard provide crucial insights into the complex relationships among gender, colonialism, and the natural world. Additionally, the review highlights key anthologies and critical works that bridge the gap between ecofeminism and postcolonialism, offering a nuanced understanding of the complexities inherent in these academic fields. Together, these foundational studies pave the way for a deeper exploration and an informed analysis of postcolonial ecofeminism within literary studies.

CHAPTER TWO: AN ECOFEMINIST READING OF ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

“A bee died in a coffin flower.”²⁶

Introduction

The God of Small Things, Arundhati Roy's masterwork, transcends the conventional boundaries of literature, serving as a compelling canvas for a multi-faceted exploration of postcolonial India through the lens of ecofeminism. This chapter embarks on a comprehensive journey, navigating the intricate intersections of gender, postcolonialism, and environmentalism within Roy's narrative. As both a celebrated novelist and an ardent activist, Roy emerges as a defiant postcolonial ecofeminist, fearlessly challenging established norms and unraveling the oppressive structures woven into the fabric of her storytelling. In the first section, we delve into Arundhati Roy's persona as a defiant postcolonial ecofeminist, understanding the foundations that shaped her worldview and influenced the crafting of *The God of Small Things*. Roy's role as both a novelist and an activist is integral to comprehending the depth of her engagement with postcolonialism and ecofeminism.

Through her work, Roy not only questions the legacies of British colonialism but also grapples with the influence of Christianity, capitalism, and the complexities of the Indian caste system. The narrative choices made by Roy, both within and beyond her novel, showcase a courageous confrontation with oppressive structures, fostering a unique space for dissent and dialogue. The subsequent sections unravel the layers of oppression faced by the characters in postcolonial India, with a particular focus on the “Small Things” that bear the weight of societal

²⁶ Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*. United Kingdom: Fourth Estate, 2009.

norms. The History House becomes a metaphorical stage where the struggles of untouchables, the allure of Anglophilia, and the lingering specter of the English Ghost converge. The narrative dissects the impact of development on the Small, portraying the commodification of resources and the toll on marginalized communities. Through nuanced storytelling, Roy paints a vivid picture of the historical complexities that shape the characters' destinies and perpetuate oppressive structures.

As the exploration continues, the chapter delves into the symbolism of pinned butterflies, unraveling the ecofeminist themes embedded in Roy's narrative. The metaphorical representation of butterflies as fragile yet beautiful creatures serves as a poignant commentary on the fate of female characters within the novel. This section seeks to unveil the interconnectedness between the degradation of the environment and the subjugation of women, highlighting Roy's ecofeminist lens and her critique of patriarchal systems that exploit both nature and women. In synthesizing these elements, this chapter aims to offer a nuanced and comprehensive ecofeminist reading of *The God of Small Things*. Through an exploration of Roy's background, narrative choices, and the ecofeminist themes within the novel, we navigate the intricate web of connections that bind together postcolonialism, feminism, and environmentalism. Roy's work emerges not only as a literary masterpiece but also as a powerful vehicle for challenging oppressive ideologies and fostering a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between gender, postcolonial dynamics, and the environment.

I. Arundhati Roy: A Defiant Postcolonial Ecofeminist

One of the fundamental characteristics of postcolonial ecofeminist literature and literary critique, which distinguishes it from its predecessors in criticism, is that it constantly attempts to extend its influence to yield concrete results via activism. In that respect, Arundhati Roy, Indian

novelist, essayist, screenwriter, and human rights and environmental activist is found to be an exemplary model. In authentic faithfulness to her theoretical views, Roy has enthusiastically engaged in—and has even been arrested²⁷ for—battles against forces that threatened the lives of marginalized people in India, in the defense of which she wrote her debut and Booker Prize winning novel, *The God of Small Things*.

Born in 1961 to mixed heritage, a Syrian Christian mother and a Bengali Hindu father, Arundhati Roy and her brother were raised in the town of Ayemenem in the Kerala state after their mother's divorce, similarly to the twin characters in *The God of Small Things*, Estha and Rahel. Roy's mother, Mary Roy, was never truly reintegrated in the conservative community of Ayemenem after her so-called 'disgrace' in having been divorced. However, that may have also been due to her legal fight against the Supreme Court to amend the inheritance laws in which daughters were only allowed a quarter of a son's inheritance—a fight that she won in 1986 but that alienated her significantly from the majority of her tradition-bound society. Arundhati Roy, following her mother's example, has repeatedly wound up in legal conflicts for offenses caused by both her 'corrupt' writing and her avid activism. For Roy, a writer and an activist are indistinguishable; in her work *Power Politics*, she questions, "Why am I called a 'writer-activist' and why—even when it's used approvingly, admiringly—does that term make me flinch?" (10). She declares, in a manner rather unhesitant, that it is an author's responsibility, as part of the intellectual elite, to express their concerns explicitly when necessary, that while vagueness and symbolism are desirable under some circumstances, they will simply not suffice in dire times; she

²⁷ During her protests against the construction of the dam projects in the Narmada valley in 2002, Arundhati Roy was arrested for 'contempt' and jailed for one day along with a fine of 2000 rupees.

continues, “I believe that such times are upon us. And I believe that in the coming years intellectuals and artists in India will be called upon to take sides” (11-12).

True to her ideals and proving her own point, Roy shows unswayable support for the oppressed; she remains as unambiguous in her position in *The God of Small Things* as she is in her nonfictional works. In *The Checkbook and the Cruise Missile: Conversations with Arundhati Roy*, answering her interviewer’s question regarding the objectivity and neutrality of the intellectual figure, she explains that her initiative is neither to remain impartial nor to obscure or simplify matters, but simply to ensure that all individuals, especially the non-intellectual, the commonplace, are aware of what occurs around them (Barsamian and Roy 120). In the same vein, Roy declares,

I don’t see a great difference between *The God of Small Things* and my nonfiction. In fact, I keep saying, fiction is the truest thing there ever was. [...] *The God of Small Things* is a book which connects the very smallest things to the very biggest. Whether it’s the dent that a baby spider makes on the surface of water in a pond or the quality of the moonlight on a river or how history and politics intrude into your life, your house, your bedroom, your bed, into the most intimate relationships between people—parents and children and siblings and so on. (10-11)

Taking on the role she proposes as essential for the writer, to connect small things with big, Roy fulfills her objective thoroughly in *The God of Small Things* as she draws otherwise unforeseeable links between characters considered the ‘smallest’, the ethnically oppressed and the socially outcast, along with their environments and rivers, and others as ‘big’ as governments and world banks. It is in this custom that she ensures that the powerful remain associated with—therefore, accountable for—their misdeeds against the powerless.

It is evident, thus, that a central element in Roy's writing is connectedness. This concept often manifests in her understanding of the connection between grand narratives and the ways in which they interweave; namely, and most importantly for this work, dualist ideologies such as patriarchy, colonialism, and social and environmental injustice. Although novels, especially realist novels—a category to which *The God of Small Things* arguably belongs—have been scrutinized by scholars before for their probable inability to focus on environmental issues owing to their anthropocentric nature, postcolonial writers have been proven to argue both social and environmental injustice immaculately and without losing sight of their intersectionality (Carrigan 83). In her renowned skill of weaving connections, Roy's narrative is ideally intersectional, and through it, she became one of the most notable postcolonial Indian writers²⁸ who have left a distinguished impression on the definition of postcolonial literature by categorizing ecocriticism as an inevitable part of postcolonialism.

As it was referred to in the previous chapter in John Marx's view of the relationship between western literature and postcolonial literature in regard of canonization²⁹, rather than rewriting or renouncing the western literary canon, writers from postcolonial backgrounds seem to have settled on redefining the canon. In the tradition of these authors, Roy appropriates the bildungsroman, a western genre, and shapes it to fit her purposes for *The God of Small Things* especially in terms of a fragmented timeframe. Such adjustments have not been made arbitrarily; the bildungsroman category was indeed befitting for nationalist literature pre-independence, for works such as the autobiographies of India's patriots, but post-independence literature could not fit within the same template. Late postcolonial literary works were marked by peaking disappointment and frustration

²⁸ Arundhati Roy is often named in addition to Salman Rushdie as India's most influential (and perhaps most controversial) writers.

²⁹ See "Postcolonial Literature and the Western Literary Canon" by John Marx.

towards the governing parties of the newly independent nations, on which high hopes were hung but which greatly resembled, and even shadowed, the defeated colonizers (4).

In such conditions, literature, being of a reflecting quality to the social atmosphere of its context, emerged in fragmented timelines and chaotic plots that would not be restrained within the confines of traditional genres. The circumstances of Roy's life have not ceased to influence her writing. This impact was vividly apparent in her alteration of the genre or her unique techniques, but also in the happenings of the novel as well. In parallel with her character Rahel, Roy was also a student of architecture in her undergraduate years, though her interest was noticeably leaning towards political activism as her thesis revolved around a housing plan for the poverty-stricken in urban regions (Tickell 13-14). In her own words, Roy confesses that her architectural studies were of inestimable value, not in reference to architecture itself, but to the skills that it taught her to project on her writing (14). In a related instance of interweaving between her life and her work, Roy's relentless activism against the dam project in the Narmada River is in part her attempt to save for others what she could not have saved for her people in her childhood: the Meenachal River (cited in Kunhi and Kunhi 2-3). This river of Kerala, the one that she idolizes in *The God of Small Things*, is the same river that she, like her characters, grew up with and gradually watched deteriorate from a mighty stream to a polluted pond.

The river is one of the landmarks in Roy's novel, as in her life, but it is far from being the only natural source of inspiration that long motivated her work. Speaking of her fondness for Kerala, she affectionately admits,

I think the kind of landscape that you grew up in, it lives in you. I don't think it's true of people who've grown up in cities so much, you may love a building but I

don't think you can love it in the way that you love tree or a river or the color of the earth—it's a different kind of love. I'm not a very well read person but I don't imagine that that kind of gut love for earth can be replaced by the open landscape. It's a much cleverer person who grows up in city, savvy and much smarter in many ways. If you spent your very early childhood catching fish and just learning to be quiet, the landscape just seeps into you. Even now I back go to Kerala and it makes me want to cry if something happens to that place. (qtd. in Ch'ien 198)

We learn from *The God of Small Things* that a lot did happen to Kerala indeed, that its nature and its people were subjected to all forms of exploitation, and that Roy, “a born talker and a born writer” in her mother's opinion, could not remain neutral (qtd. in Parmar 63). Although her nonfiction is unmistakable activism for the postcolonial ecofeminist cause—whether she refers to it under that terminology or not—her novel is more ambiguous (but not less vehement) in delivering its message. The following sections undertake a detailed analysis of *The God of Small Things* within the light of postcolonial ecofeminism in hope of dissipating the supposed uncertainty surrounding it.

II. Oppression of Small Things in Postcolonial India

In an accurately postcolonial ecofeminist style, Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a statement of protest against an abundance of forms of oppression. As she successfully evades the error often committed by ecofeminists in focusing only on what associates women with nature while overlooking the intersections in which all subjects of oppression interlink, Roy skillfully weaves the women, the children, the colonized, the poor, the untouchables, the animals, the insects, and the river all in one manifesto. To the purpose of this work, before devoting a section to the

women of *The God of Small Things*, the novel will be analyzed as a narrative discourse on postcolonial India in which both modernity and native cultural injustices intersect. For this, an understanding of the historical remnants of British colonialism and the newfound detriments of development in postcolonial India as portrayed in the novel is inevitable.

1. The History House: Untouchables, Anglophiles, and the English Ghost

According to the native Hindu myth of Purusha, the caste system originated when Purusha—the cosmic androgynous human from which all creation began—was sacrificed and the four castes of Indian society were formed from his body. It is believed that from the mouth came the Brahmins (the uppermost caste consisting of priests and men of religion), from the arms came the Kshatriyas (the aristocratic caste: the nobility and the warriors), from the thighs came the Vaishyas (the peasantry, a lower social caste including farmers and tradesmen), and from the feet came the Shudras (the servant caste, at the bottom of which the Paravans are found). A Paravan, or an untouchable, according to the caste system, is an individual residing at the lowermost part of the social hierarchy and bound to perform the labor that no other caste should *touch*: trash disposal, sewage cleaning, and removal of corpses and animal remains; hence their title and their untouchability. It is to this caste that Velutha and his family belong in *The God of Small Things* in contrast with the Ipe family they serve who are Vaishyas and whose ancestor, Reverend E. John Ipe, was a priest of the Syrian Christian church, the second wealthiest class after the Brahmins in Kerala.

The complex division of the Indian society does not cease with the caste system but continues to split further on a religious basis creating even more tension amongst the social groups. The appearance of Syrian Christianity, the dominant religion in the Kerala region—and in the

novel—in Kerala can be traced back to as early as 52 CE according to the church text *The Acts of St. Thomas* named after St. Thomas. This saint, who sowed Syrian Christianity in the region, had first been a slave of the king Gundaphorus³⁰, and, when commanded to build him a castle, donated the king's money to the poor and claimed to have built him one in heaven. This led to his imprisonment and, later on, to his liberation after the king's brother allegedly revisits from the dead to confirm the presence of the castle in heaven (Tickell 19). The first converts of Syrian Christianity were upper caste Brahmins who then embraced the religion and secured the caste system through it thus maintaining their status as top of the hierarchy. The church, to enforce its authority, threatened excommunication to any members who disobeyed its rules—including rules of endogamy³¹ and untouchability (20). It is tempting to believe that it is from this root that Roy writes recurrently of the Love Laws in *The God of Small Things*.

The Syrian Christian church of 52 CE is not the Syrian Christian church of today as it has undergone various attempts of reform and dismantling by forces of colonialism. With the coming of British colonialism to India, more attempts of conversion into the Anglican Church were made; especially through targeting the poor (inevitably the lower castes) by offering them food—hence, the offensive title they received as 'Rice Christians'. This included the untouchable Velutha's grandfather, Kelan, in *The God of Small Things*, who converted in an attempt to “escape the scourge of Untouchability” only to realize that he “had jumped from the frying pan into the fire” (Roy 74). In this aspect, British colonial powers enforced the caste system even further and caused a widening in the gap between social groups as these untouchable Christians were still segregated (they had separate churches) and even lost every right to government benefits after the independence because

³⁰ Indo-Parthian king of Arachosia, Kabul, and Gandhara (today's India, Afghanistan, and Pakistan) from approximately 19 to 45 CE.

³¹ According to the Cambridge dictionary, endogamy is marriage within the boundaries of caste.

their Christianity had made them casteless. This discrimination against caste and religion is outlawed in the Indian constitution today, but—not unlike gender-based discrimination—it does not go far in preventing its occurrence in real life.

Although younger generations of lower castes understandably challenged the concept of untouchability, the majority of older ones still adhered to it without questioning. Roy's main illustration of that in *The God of Small Things* is in the example of Velutha and his father. She writes,

Velutha's father, Vellya Paapen, however, was an Old-World Paravan. He had seen the Crawling Backwards Days and his gratitude to Mammachi and her family for all that they had done for him was as wide and deep as a river in spate. [...] Vellya Paapen feared for his younger son. He couldn't say what it was that frightened him. It was nothing that he had said. Or done. It was not *what* he said, but the *way* he said it. Not *what* he did, but the *way* he did it. Perhaps it was just a lack of hesitation. An unwarranted assurance. In the way he walked. The way he held his head. The quiet way he offered suggestions without being asked. Or the quiet way in which he disregarded suggestions without appearing to rebel. While these were qualities that were perfectly acceptable, perhaps even desirable, in Touchables, Vellya Paapen thought that in a Paravan they could (and would, and indeed, *should*) be construed as insolence. (76)

In the novel, Velutha is described as an amiable, confident, and intelligent young man whose only misfortune was his birth as a Paravan. While the story takes place in the late 1960s, well after

untouchability had been outlawed³², he is still viewed as a menace to himself and to society for having characteristics that would be praised in any other ‘touchable’ individual.

Although Velutha received a better treatment from the Ipe family than any other untouchable would, he was still reminded of the boundaries that his caste sets in implicit ways. Mammachi—Estha and Rahel’s grandmother, and Ammu’s mother—had made sure Velutha went to a school for untouchables that her father-in-law founded in his day, that his intelligence and genius for carpentry and mechanics did not go to waste. It was she who repeatedly lamented that “if only he hadn’t been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer” (Roy 75). As she hired him to work in her factory, Mammachi determined Velutha’s wages as less than a touchable’s but more than an untouchable’s though he is more skilled than any of her workers. She justified this by her belief that “he ought to be grateful that he was allowed on the factory premises at all, and allowed to touch things that Touchables touched” (77). It was ironic, in a way, that Velutha’s true tragedy befell him when he *touched* Ammu, when his own father realized that a love affair was growing between his untouchable son and the divorced daughter of Mammachi, and in his ‘Old-World Paravan’ dread, confessed all to Mammachi and “offered to kill his son with his own bare hands. To destroy what he had created” (78).

The Love Laws that Roy writes of serve perhaps as a synopsis to the events of *The God of Small Things*; her declaration that “The Love Laws lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much” (177) is recurrently mentioned throughout the novel at crucial occurrences, and, indeed, the gist of the work is essentially a demonstration of how the Love Laws unfurl and how consequences that are too often calamities follow their impact. One can distinguish it in all the

³² Discrimination on the basis of caste was prohibited by law in the Indian constitution since 1948.

characters, from Pappachi's unrecognized moth discovery, Mammachi's abuse by her husband, Baby Kochamma's unrequited love for Father Mulligan, Chacko's divorce from his English wife, Ammu's endless streak of abuse and oppression, Velutha's persecution and untouchability, Estha's sexual assault as a child, Rahel's fear of abandonment, to the twins' joined envy of Sophie Mol. The plot, if regarded from a certain angle, is simply an illustration of the butterfly effect³³ in which one *small*, relatively insignificant, event might end in a tragic scene—in this case, Pappachi's moth ending in the death of Sophie Mol.

During the days of British colonization, Pappachi, Mammachi's husband and the Ipe family patriarch, worked under the title of Imperial Entomologist, a title that brought him great pride for belonging to the British empire—and later on, great prejudice against his Indian fellows. After the independence, Pappachi happened to discover a moth that he declared to be unknown before, and he had high hopes of having it named after him only for it to be rejected by the Department of Entomology in Delhi as only a variation of an already discovered species. Pappachi's disappointment did not end here, for, more than a decade later and long after his retirement, someone else brought forward the same moth, and it was recognized as a new species (Roy 49). The bitterness that Pappachi felt led him to a certain disillusionment with all that is Indian and made an even stronger anglophile of him as he attributed his loss to the fact that it was the Indians and not the British that he was working for during his discovery (Grav 14). Pappachi grew into a tyrant in his family, constantly beating his daughter and his wife, all while cultivating a public image of generosity towards others, particularly if they were white when his behavior simply “stopped short of fawning on them” (Roy 180).

³³ The idea that the flap of a butterfly's wings has the ability to start a tornado.

Criticizing his anglophilia, Ammu describes her father as “an incurable British CCP, which was short for *chhi-chhi poach* and in Hindi meant shit-wiper” (51); and in explanation, or rather, a confession, Chacko (Ammu’s brother), declares that

Pappachi’s mind had been *brought into a state* which made him like the English. Chacko told the twins that though he hated to admit it, they were all Anglophiles. They were a *family* of Anglophiles. Pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history, and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away. (52)

The interesting emphasis on ‘*brought into*’ in the passage draws the reader’s attention to the use of the verb and tense. Not only is the sentence written in the past tense, rendering the subject without choice, as if Pappachi had no choice in the matter of his liking (or becoming similar to) the British—and most likely, he indeed did not—but it is also followed with ‘made him’ which assures his powerlessness in the situation. As the quotation shows, most of the members of the Ipe household are anglophiles of different degrees, and it is understood that Roy lays most of her blame on British colonialism for this, for the latter, during colonialism, had taken up the charge of creating citizens “Indian in blood, British in taste”³⁴, and it somewhat succeeded; in his defense, Pappachi is just as drawn to anglophilia as a moth is to a flame, just as mindlessly, and just as self-destructively.

³⁴ The words of Thomas Babington Macaulay, Secretary at War of Great Britain from 1839 to 1841 and Paymaster General of the United Kingdom from 1846 to 1848. He was also a historian who encouraged the use of the English language to replace local native languages in the colonies in order to cultivate a British culture all around the empire.

In an attempt to grasp how the notion of anglophilia has come about, one must first comprehend that the relationship between colonizer and colonized is that of both creation and destruction in that it constructs an entirely new identity for the colonized but only through erasing—or attempting to erase—the already existing indigenous identity (Tizzoni 45). Although *The God of Small Things* is set more than two decades after the independence, it is still littered with instances of the previously mentioned process of cultural dispossession. In preparation of the reception of their cousin Sophie Mol from England, Estha and Rahel were forced by their great aunt Baby Kochamma to speak only in English, and whenever they made the mistake of getting caught using Malayalam, she punished them by extracting a sum from their pocket money. This was not enough reprimand for her as she also “made them write lines—‘impositions’ she called them—*I will always speak in English, I will always speak in English*. A hundred times each” (Roy 36). Baby Kochamma’s tantalization of the twins was persistent, as she believed their education to be lacking, especially in English and in religion. In one passage of the novel, an Australian missionary friend of Baby Kochamma’s, known as Miss Mittens, is introduced to Estha and Rahel. Miss Mittens appears to underestimate the twins’ learning and offers them children’s books in English, which, at the age of seven years old, they consider an offense. They make a point of reading the book to her both forward and backward. The twins become especially irritated when they realize that while Miss Mittens came to teach them her language (which they already spoke), “she didn’t even know what Malayalam was. They told her it was the language everyone spoke in Kerala. She said she had been under the impression that it was called Keralese. Estha, who had by then taken an active dislike to Miss Mittens, told her that as far as he was concerned it was a Highly Stupid Impression” (Roy 60).

Estha and Rahel's traumatic childhood and oppressive household were filled with occurrences of the Love Laws. During their trip to retrieve Sophie Mol and her mother from the airport, the family makes a stop at a movie theater to watch *The Sound of Music* (during which Estha's sexual assault by the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man occurs); an activity that Chacko deems "an extended exercise in Anglophilia", but to which he drives the family himself (Roy 55). The description of the family in the movie is intriguing when juxtaposed with the Ipe family from the perspective of the children; their understanding was that, in the movie, "They all loved each other. They were clean, white children" (105). This, in fact, is an example of internalized racism in the children; their certainty in their inability to aspire love and affection resides in the fact that they are not 'clean white children'—a result of the constant comparisons with their white, English cousin, Sophie Mol.

In a heart wrenching passage, Roy writes the twins' thoughts and questions about whether the captain from *The Sound of Music* could love them like he does his children, she says,

Oh Captain von Trapp, Captain von Trapp, could you love the little fellow with the orange in the smelly auditorium? He's just held the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man's soo-soo in his hand, but could you love him still? And his twin sister? Tilting upwards with her fountain in a Love-in-Tokyo? Could you love her too?

Captain von Trapp had some questions of his own.

(a) *Are they clean white children?* No. (*But Sophie Mol is.*) [...]

"Then I'm sorry," Captain von Clapp-Trapp said. "It's out of the question. I cannot love them. I cannot be their Baba. Oh no." Captain von Clapp-Trapp couldn't. (Roy 105-106)

The twins believe themselves unlovable, stained by their traumas and their skin color. Later on, when Sophie Mol arrives, the comparisons between her and the children—especially Rahel—continue: “Littleangels were beach-coloured [...]. Littledemons were mudbrown” (179) and “One beach-coloured. One brown. One loved. One loved a little less.” (186). It is even explained by the twins to Kuttappen, Velutha’s paralyzed brother, that Sophie Mol could not possibly visit him in his family’s squalid cottage because, as they understood it, “if she gets dirty, she’ll die” (210).

Sophie Mol, whose tragic death in the river towards the end of *The God of Small Things* was the summit of what is referred to as ‘The Terror’ in the novel, is Chacko’s daughter from his English ex-wife, Margaret Kochamma. Margaret Kochamma’s marriage to Chacko was outrageous; while her mother attended her wedding disapprovingly, her father declined the invitation completely—it was, according to them, inappropriate for a white woman born and bred in England to marry an Indian, as they were deemed inferior and seen as “sly, dishonest people” (Roy 240). Their marriage, however, did not last long, which might be seen as yet another pillar in Chacko’s inferiority complex and anglophilia. Chacko returned to India and Margaret Kochamma remarried, and it was the death of her second husband that brought her and her daughter to India for the first time in hopes of remedying from a tragedy only to end up in an even greater one. Upon their arrival, Kochu Maria, the Ipe family’s cook, performs a gesture of affection in which she holds Sophie Mol’s hands in hers and smells them³⁵, causing Margaret Kochamma to remark on the gesture with fascination—be it in an ignorant manner and evocative of orientalism—as a result of which she receives a sharp retort from Ammu. Ammu’s pride, that of a woman intolerant of colonial insolence and anglophile attitudes, despite her lack of education, earns her the description of being “just that sort of animal” (180). The similitude that set Ammu to be compared with an

³⁵ The sniff-kiss: an old Indian custom showing affection and respect.

animal provokes much ecofeminist thought³⁶, and it would neither be the first nor the last time a woman is rendered similar to an animal or an object throughout the novel.

In protest to condescending conduct like that of Margaret Kochamma in the previous passage, Roy often writes cultural aspects in a stubbornly untranslatable style. More than once, Roy makes a point of using Malayalam without any hint as to the meaning of the words used, or she mentions a practice or a custom without any clarification—a technique she invokes to establish a balance to the power relations and to demonstrate that culture does not always require justification (Tickell 8). In a highly ironic tone, and in a description that appears to be a parody of orientalist insolence, Roy writes a scene on Kochu Maria, the aforementioned cook, and her reaction to Rahel narrating Neil Armstrong's moon landing to her. While she could deign to believe in the existence of Americans and even allow for a name as ridiculous as Neil Armstrong to be a real person's name, Kochu Maria, illiterate as she was, could not bring herself to believe in a moon landing to which the only proof was an ambiguous grey photograph (171). Roy's tongue-in-cheek passage is a powerful retort, for it is an unfortunate western routine to find the very existence—let alone the vast scope of cultural wealth—of eastern peoples to be extraordinary, and in her own way, the author ridicules this routine through what is perhaps her most nonsensical character.

The clash of the English and Indian cultures in *The God of Small Things* creates a fluidity or a hybridity in the identities of most characters, and it is even alluded to by Roy in her description of the twins as she concedes that they were “physically separate, but with joint identities” (2). Of all the characters in the novel, Baby Kochamma appears to have the most noticeable identity struggle. It manifests in her hateful and often-oppressive attitude towards those she considers her

inferiors. While she was christened Navomi Ipe, a purely Indian name, there is no explanation as to the change of her name to Baby Kochamma, but the combination of Malayalam and English in her name is intriguing when examined from the aspect at hand. ‘Kochamma’, which, if translated from Malayalam, conveys the meaning ‘young mother’—something she never was—in addition to ‘Baby’ does not much make sense for the character herself unless she is viewed in a satirical manner. The chaotic hybridity of Baby Kochamma’s identity is understandable due to the wildly differing backgrounds of her youth; she grew up in Kerala, as she was the daughter of the Rev. E. John Ipe (Pappachi’s sister), and was desperately in love with Father Mulligan, an Irish monk who visited her father regularly.

After joining a Roman Catholic convent in her attempt to gain the affections of the monk and failing, Baby was sent to the United States to study ornamental gardening at the University of Rochester. Upon her return, she was given leave to decorate her father’s garden within which she “raised a fierce, bitter garden” (*The God of Small Things* 26) full of ghoulish figures. While Baby Kochamma held on firmly to her local culture in some aspects, she also welcomed, or rather unpleasantly fawned over, anything related to western culture; it, however, must be mentioned that the only parts of Indian custom that Baby Kochamma preserved were those that served her own interests, particularly the caste system. When the affair between Ammu and Velutha was revealed, it was she, Baby Kochamma, who decided to accuse Velutha of charges of rape and kidnapping in order to protect the family’s reputation, and it was she who led to his severe beating and death. Before putting her plan to motion, Baby’s first step upon hearing the confession of Vellya Paapen was to fuel Mammachi’s anger by reminding her of Velutha’s caste. In *The God of Small Things*, it is narrated as “That was when she said: ‘*How could she stand the smell? Haven’t you noticed? They have a particular smell, these Paravans.*’ With that olfactory observation, that specific little

detail, the Terror unspooled” (257). Baby Kochamma’s stubborn faithfulness to the caste system, in addition to her piety and devoutness, both happen to conveniently maintain the powerful status of the Ipe family—and thus herself—which brings to light her actual motives for her commitments.

When Rahel returns to the household decades later, the garden, arguably a symbol of Baby Kochamma’s manipulative tactics, is abandoned because she has finally successfully gotten hold of all the Ipe family possessions and power, but Baby, at the height of her power, is disturbingly, almost grotesquely, childish. Roy describes,

Under the table she swung her tiny, manicured feet, like a small child on a high chair. They were puffy with edema, like little foot-shaped air cushions. [...] Her hair, dyed jetblack, was arranged across her scalp like unspooled thread. The dye had stained the skin on her forehead a pale gray, giving her a shadowy second hairline. Rahel noticed that she had started wearing makeup. Lipstick. Kohl. A sly touch of rouge. And because the house was locked and dark, and because she only believed in forty-watt bulbs, her lipstick mouth had shifted slightly off her real mouth. [...] She managed to look almost fragile. The dim, dining-room light had rubbed the wrinkles off her face, leaving it looking—in a strange, sunken way— younger. She was wearing a lot of jewelry. Rahel’s dead grandmother’s jewelry. All of it. Winking rings. Diamond earrings. Gold bangles and a beautifully crafted flat gold chain that she touched from time to time, reassuring herself that it was there and that it was hers. Like a young bride who couldn’t believe her good fortune. *She’s living her life backwards*, Rahel thought. (20-22)

Baby Kochamma's eccentricity in her dress is almost like an overenthusiastic child's whose excitement is uncontrollable over having a chance at an adult's makeup and accessories. When provided the chance, Baby applies enough makeup to appear caricatured and wears not some but all of Mammachi's jewelry, and this, along with her babyish figure and mannerisms, gives her a disturbingly childish air. Baby Kochamma's grotesqueness is understood to come from her consistent mimicry of whomever she considers superior and her persistent oppression of whoever she considers inferior. These attempts of assimilations are what renders her childish in the end, not unlike Pappachi with his childish drooping lower lip and a head out of proportion with his body (Comfort 12). As Roy seems to see it, persons who attempt to impersonate others at the cost of their own culture can only achieve so much—they become distorted caricatures, demonstrating neither themselves nor what they are trying to be.

To connect all matters big and small, as is her objective in writing, Arundhati Roy used a central concept to which everything is rooted in *The God of Small Things*: The History House and the English Ghost inhabiting it, mentioned repeatedly to place a visible reminder for her readers of who is to blame for all the tragedy. The idea of the History House in the novel begins when Chacko is in the midst of one of his lengthy lectures to the twins—this one in particular regarding anglophilia—and uses an allegory in which history is like a house with the ancestors whispering inside and to which they, as punished anglophiles, cannot enter. Estha and Rahel's imagination takes them to an abandoned house on the other side of the river, in which an Englishman known as Kari Saipu³⁷, referred to as “Ayemenem's own Kurtz” (52), lived before he took his own life, allegedly becoming a ghost. Kari Saipu's madness in *The God of Small Things*, not unlike Kurtz in *The Heart of Darkness*, rather than being ascribed to his connection with an oppressive colonial

³⁷ Translates to 'white man' from Malayalam.

force, is thought of as a result of his close brush with life in a colony and on friendly terms with natives (Comfort 8).

In a broader sense, the History House centers all the unfulfillable dreams of those who suffered colonization “because [their] minds have been invaded by a war. A war that [they] have won and lost. The very worst sort of war. A war that captures dreams and re-dreams them. A war that has made [them] adore [their] conquerors and despise [themselves]” (*The God of Small Things* 53). However, it also functions as a center in which all the individual—specifically tragic—experiences of the characters connect. As it is described by Roy, it was with Vellya Paapen’s strike, the one that sickled the English Ghost to the tree, that the Terror began. It was, indeed, in the History House that Ammu and Velutha had conducted their affair, it was in the History House that Estha and Rahel hid after Sophie Mol’s drowning, and it was in the History House that Velutha was beaten near to death in front of them. Roy insists that it all began because Vellya Paapen caught a whiff of the English Ghost’s cigar smoke. It becomes, then, obvious that the writer still accuses colonialism of causing calamities that strike decades after its departure, and she would not be wrong in her accusations because *The God of Small Things* itself is an illustration of “how traumas produce traumas, and how a single form of discrimination degenerates into a broader discriminating structure” (Tizzoni 50).

The History House, where the tragedies of an English Ghost, of untouchables, and of anglophiles—of all those dealt an unfair deal by the Love Laws—is hardly a place of abandon and misfortune by the end of the story. Everything about the house is privatized, renovated, and turned into a paradise under the name God’s Own Country, leaving “a History-shaped hole in the Universe” (*The God of Small Things* 307). The hotel, the tourists, and all the luxuries that came with them buried the history of oppression suffered by Roy’s ‘small’ characters. Just as she wrote

of Velutha's vilely unjust murder that while blood does not show on a black man, it still smells (310), she, in a triumphantly mocking tone, assures us that while they could build walls to conceal the slums, "there wasn't much they could do about the smell" (125). The characters of *The God of Small Things*, however, were not the only ones to pay the price of development with their misfortunes, for, with the rebranding of history—in the form of the History House—the concept of Small Things extended to include entities as vast as rivers as the next section discloses.

2. "More Rice, for the Price of a River"³⁸: The Weight of Development on the Small

Development is ultimately understood to be an indirect extension of colonization and hegemonic ideology by most third world thinkers—those of India in particular, namely Arundhati Roy. After publishing *The God of Small Things*, it appears that addressing the troubles caused by colonialism and its continuance in the form of development in fictional, allegorical terms was not sufficient for Roy to express her well-warranted exasperation. She proceeded to write her most renowned non-fictional piece, "The Greater Common Good", as a manifesto against development focusing predominantly on dam projects in India. Taking the raw, dreadful details of the Narmada dam projects as her case in point, Roy strengthens her view that there is no such concept as 'Development Aid', but only a rejected industry running out of business in the first world because of its highly destructive nature and taking root in the third world instead. Roy explains that India sits now at the very top of the list of dam-building nations in the world, and that this is no achievement to be proud of as most of its population still does not have access to safe drinking water—that being the presumed motive behind dam-building in the first place. She determines,

³⁸ See Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, page 124.

then, that the project is both an ecological disaster and a play of power politics in which safe drinking and farming water is the asset (“The Greater Common Good” 4).

Roy, in “The Greater Common Good”, faithfully reports the level of environmental injustice created by damming rivers in India beginning with the numbers of people suffering from displacement. In a swift calculation, and taking the lowermost probability, she counts thirty three million³⁹ Indians, at the very least, displaced from their homes solely due to dam projects—not counting those affected by other development projects (5). During her investigations for the article, Roy found that these millions of people with tribal backgrounds and no educational upbringing are offered financial reimbursement for their lands taken forcefully from them by the government, but only if they have the paperwork to prove ownership of the land in question. The horror of the situation lies in the fact that these tribal farmers neither had the necessary papers nor knew how to use the money handed to them if they did (6). The situation they were left in is a dire one; in a description of her encounter with a family whose life was demolished by the damming business, she recounts,

The man who was talking to me rocked his sick baby in his arms, clumps of flies gathered on its sleeping eyelids. Children collected around us, taking care not to burn their bare skin on the scorching tin walls of the shed they call a home. The man's mind was far away from the troubles of his sick baby. He was making me a list of the fruit he used to pick in the forest. He counted forty-eight kinds. He told me that he didn't think he or his children would ever be able to afford to eat any fruit

³⁹ To visualize the number, it might be helpful to consider that the number of Ukrainian refugees in the world today displaced due to the alleged Third World War amounts to six millions—barely reaching a fifth of the displaced victims of dam projects in India.

again. Not unless he stole it. I asked him what was wrong with his baby. He said it would be better for the baby to die than to have to live like this. I asked what the baby's mother thought about that. She didn't reply. She just stared. (20)

The miserable image that Roy paints of the people displaced from their serene, almost heavenly lives to lives in tin shanty houses on the edges of overwhelming cities they knew nothing about is unfortunately an accurate one.

For the entire length of the article, the author proceeds to provide factual evidence of the devastation caused by dam projects: farmers not allowed access to their rivers anymore, their crops sunk, their livestock left for dead, their peaceful protests ending in police beatings, harassment, arrests, and even murder. In *The God of Small Things*, it is not difficult to spot the damage of this dispossessed and displaced Indian, for Velutha's family are a befitting illustration. Velutha dwells with his father and his disabled brother in a shed where there are only four corners—meaning one room—that barely enclose the necessities of human survival: “one corner for cooking, one for clothes, one for bedding rolls, one for dying in” (*The God of Small Things* 206-207). People of Velutha's family's class and caste could not afford more than that in a postcolonial ‘development’ era; while during the events of the novel, the dam project has not yet touched the Meenachal river, it did at the end along with the transformation of the History House into a luxurious hotel under the name of God's Own Country. The reader is not granted a view into the future of this family in the last pages of the novel, but one can only assume that their destruction was already brought upon by their relations with the Ipe family—and long before that, with their ancestor's attempt to join Christianity to escape untouchability.

To Roy, there is an unbreakable link between the three Cs: Colonialism, Christianity, and Capitalism (including development) as they all remain relatedly accountable for the despair of families like Velutha's. Untouched by any remnants of globalization, Velutha and his family's life on one side of the river is symbolic of the wide gap between them and those on the other side of it (like the Ipe family) in terms of profit from the growing capitalism—not differently from the manner in which embracing the colonizer's religion affected their lives. The dispossessed Indian that Roy writes of in her work not only benefits nothing from his land (or is murdered on it in Velutha's case) but is also deprived of his sense of identity and belonging. While she insists on the family's hut being almost bare of any possessions, the presence of an almost caricature-like Jesus stands out, which is understood as the author's ironic stand on how the presence of Christianity in the lives of these individuals has only brought them misfortune (Chae 523). It is not fair to say that the 'small' in Roy's *The God of Small Things* remain untouched by development, for that would imply their safety from it; they are not unscathed, they are indeed touched by development because they suffer from it.

Displacement appears to be a recurrent theme in *The God of Small Things* as instances of diaspora and returns (and re-returns) are abundant in the novel. These are summarized by Tickell as beginning with Ammu's return to Ayemenem from her failed marriage, Rahel's migration to and return from the United States, Estha's re-return to his father after the tragedy, in addition to the metaphorical—fruitless—attempts of the twins to return to their unalterable past (5). The absence of the concept of home—in the sense of immovable roots—in the story invokes images of displacement as the characters, despite having been inhabitants of their land for generations, struggle to find a lasting connection with it after colonialism—and perhaps because of it. This is essentially symbolic of the uprooting influence of the aforementioned three: colonialism,

capitalism, and Christianity. Displacement is particularly relevant in ecocritical studies as it is often understood that the best route taken is a return to nature as a home, not considering the victims of colonized or displaced homes for whom said return is entirely impossible.

Roy demonstrates that the independence of a nation from under colonial power does not necessarily guarantee its freedom in the full sense of the word. In a rather implicit passage, she writes, ““India’s a Free Country,” Estha said. No one could argue with that. India was a Free Country. You could make salt. Row jam, if you wanted to. The Orangedrink Lemondrink Man could just walk in through the gauze doors. If he wanted to” (*The God of Small Things* 197-198). The Orangedrink Lemondrink Man, a pedophile rapist who assaulted Estha sexually thus setting forth the procession of traumatic events in the tragic childhood of the twins, is a representation of all that is monstrous and malicious. His walking in through the door as a consequence of India being a ‘Free Country’ is not placed randomly by the writer but is chosen specifically to signify the horrors that the supposed independence brought about—this, according to Roy, includes Marxism. Unexpectedly, the author’s qualms concerning capitalism do not steer her to consider communism exempt from having a role in the horrendous consequences of India’s sham independence. She describes both capitalism and communism as “edifices constructed by human intelligence, undone by human nature” (*Ordinary Person’s Guide to Empire* 44).

The coming of Marxism to Kerala, where *The God of Small Things* takes place, was the first of its kind in being uncharacteristically peaceful. In 1957, the state of Kerala voted a Marxist political party into power, thus becoming the first place in the world to appoint a communist government democratically. Roy, however, implicitly questions the ‘peacefulness’ of this new arrival by denying its legitimacy; in the novel, it is alluded that the sole reason the Marxist party

came into power is that there was neither a revolution nor a transition but simply a rebranding of political strategy. Roy writes,

Marxism was a simple substitute for Christianity. Replace God with Marx, Satan with the bourgeoisie, Heaven with a classless society, the Church with the Party, and the form and purpose of the journey remained similar. [...] The real secret was that communism crept into Kerala insidiously. As a reformist movement that never overtly questioned the traditional values of a caste-ridden, extremely traditional community. The Marxists worked from *within* the communal divides, never challenging them, never appearing not to. They offered a cocktail revolution. A heady mix of Eastern Marxism and orthodox Hinduism, spiked with a shot of democracy. (*The God of Small Things* 66-67)

Taking into account her reservations against Christianity, it becomes clear from the beginning that Roy does not favor Marxism. She, then, proceeds to reveal the stealth with which communism paved its way into Kerala's government—through opportunistic ways where no deep-rooted tradition is questioned no matter its inconsistency with the party's supposed principles (the most obvious example being the caste system). She finishes her description with the fact that “before the year was out, the Peaceful part of the Peaceful Transition came to an end” (67). Images of famine, police brutality, and peaceful student riots turned into bloodbaths invaded the scene, and the rule of communism in the state became stained with blood, leading to the coming of the Naxalites.

The Naxalites were a group of Marxist rebels, most often of lower caste and class, which raised a militant protest against the ruling Marxist party in Naxalbari, Bengal in the year 1967. The uprising received support from the Chinese government for having adopted the views of China's

communist leader, Mao Zedong, but it was still hastily—and bloodily—stifled by the government (Tickell 32). Being of peasant and untouchable majority, the Naxalites are of great significance to the message of *The God of Small Things*. The values from which the Naxalbari revolution sprouted stem from the same roots as Roy's environmental concerns: lower caste farmers who revolted after they were turned out from their land after the false promises of Indira Gandhi's state agricultural plan deceitfully named the 'Green Revolution' were exposed. The agricultural revolution pushed by this plan required too much of peasant farmers—the use of expensive fertilizers and new grains—that they were left more impoverished following the Green Revolution (34). This subject was later on explored by Vandana Shiva in her work, *Biopiracy: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge*, in which she explains how native farmers in the Global South are forced to grow specific grains with certain fertilizers without which they would not yield because they are genetically modified for this purpose. The same grains, though, were grown naturally and unproblematically before, thus revealing that the farmers are being coerced to depend on monopolizing western companies and crushed under the wheel of capitalism (34).

Roy's critique of capitalism and communism extends to their grotesque amalgamation in what is perhaps the most hypocritical of her characters from *The God of Small Things*: Chacko. An avid Marxist in theory and an egocentric capitalist in practice, Chacko is at best comical and at worst outrageous in his inconsistency of principle and contradiction of behavior, but he represents Roy's distrust in both systems impeccably. It is stressed in the novel that before the arrival of Chacko *from England*—as it is perhaps necessary to emphasize for allegorical reasons—the factory had been run by Mammachi⁴⁰ “like a large kitchen” (Roy 57) in which everything was managed

⁴⁰ Although there are many postcolonial ecofeminist nuances—regarding only women—to this passage, they will not be discussed as yet and will instead be reserved for the following section “Pinned Butterflies: Ecofeminism in *The*

on a smaller but most successful scale. Upon his arrival—here best understood as the arrival of capitalism through colonial forces (here synonymous with development)—Chacko overturns the business by involving himself in it almost forcefully. He begins investing in machinery and a larger staff and dismisses Mammachi as a sleeping partner thus appointing himself as the dominant partner; and, despite the spectacle of a prosperous business that he puts on, Chacko in fact eventually drives the factory to bankruptcy. In another intriguing passage, Roy mentions an issue of almost trivial proportions with ‘banana jam’, which, while having been in the family business for a while, became suddenly illegal for them to produce after the Food Production Organization could neither classify it as jam nor jelly. The event itself seems like a trifling at first, but the fact that the author thought it worthy of allusion raises the question of its figurative depth: the failure to categorize something onto one side of a binary viewpoint or another often leads to its extermination. Roy, after that anecdote, adds, “it seemed as though this difficulty that their family had with classification ran much deeper than the jam-jelly question” (30-31). Roy’s reasons for describing this chain of events seem to center on delivering a message concerning capitalism and its malicious fruits.

The replacement of the close-knit local staff with a larger number (leading to the loss of any interpersonal relationships between employee and employer) facilitates the process of an immoral exploitation⁴¹ of the workers—which is inevitable in a capitalist system. According to Susan Comfort, this becomes evident when Roy starts eliminating the individuality (and even the personhood) of the women working in the factory and substituting it with a passive description of

God of Small Things” in order to devote the focus of this section to a larger group of marginalized people (here referred to as ‘the small’).

⁴¹ This would even include instances of sexual harassment against female workers by Chacko himself to be addressed in the following section.

the labor performed by them, hinting at the fact that the mechanisms of a capitalist workplace cannot coexist with individual identities (6). She writes, “Chopping knives were put down,” “Pickled hands were washed,” “Escaped wisps of hair were recaptured,” and finishes off with “Blue-aproned, white capped, like a clot of smart blue and white flags” (171-172). It is, however, mostly intriguing that Roy, immediately after this paragraph, proceeds to cite the names of each and every one of the women working in the factory as if in rebellion, as an act of protest against capitalism. This dehumanization of the workforce, in addition to the bringing about of machinery to replace local (usually natural) resources, is the essence of western development projects in the Global South and their interference in the lives of native people, especially in agricultural matters.

Development disturbs places like Kerala the same way Chacko disturbed Mammachi’s business: a polish on the surface and a steep decline in truth. This is the notion prompted by the quotation in the title of this section; in her declaration against development, especially when it comes to damming rivers. Roy writes, “Downriver, a saltwater barrage had been built, in exchange for votes from the influential paddy-farmer lobby. The barrage regulated the inflow of saltwater from the backwaters that opened into the Arabian Sea. So now they had two harvests a year instead of one. More rice, for the price of a river” (*The God of Small Things* 124). The Meenachal River in *The God of Small Things* is a motif so intensely reviewed that it might even be considered as a character in the novel. Throughout the work, the river is perceived as a fierce god(dess), a protective mother, an uncontrollable monster, a point of connection, and even a line of difference, yet whatever difference those perceptions might enclose, there is an undeniable certainty that the river remains at the focal point of the novel. There is a complex web of legends surrounding the Meenachal river connecting it indefinitely with Hindu culture and religion and condemning its vulgarization as almost sinful as its water is understood to be holy. The river is known to have flown from a spilled

kamandalu⁴² that contained water from the seven holy rivers of India making it as significant as a Hindu god, or even more so for its vital existence in Ayemenem (Singh 46). For three months every year, Ayemenem is hit by the wet monsoon⁴³ and its river is flooded watering the surrounding rice fields, which make up two-thirds of the region's surface—thus the majority of its population's living is made on rice fields. In other words, the river Meenachal is crucial to the survival of the villagers of Ayemenem as both their food and water supplies rely fully on its existence—making it not only holy but also indisputably indispensable.

Besides being the meeting ground of nature and culture as rivers often are, the Meenachal proves to be the meeting ground of the Big and Small as well. In *The God of Small Things*, the river stands between the Ipe family manor and Velutha's family hut as its “geographic site [...] between the well-graded Ayemenem and the abandoned History House demonstrates a split between the Touchable side and the Untouchable” (Bessedik 39). While the river's vastness symbolizes the wide gap between them, living on its banks (and off its merits) still remains the one thing in common between them. In the novel, however, Roy explains that “you couldn't see the river from the window any more” (29) after Mammachi had updated the house by putting Ayemenem's first sliding doors in the verandah. It appears that this statement was added to emphasize that the Ipe family, due to their high social and financial status, had begun to lose sight of nature—literally in this case—and its worth. Ever in protest, Roy does not stop at that but, a paragraph later, declares that “though you couldn't see the river from the window any more, like a seashell always has a sea-sense, the Ayemenem house still had a river-sense” (30). Just because one cannot see it does not mean it is not there, and just because one chooses to disregard the weight

⁴² Sanskrit for water pot (often used for religious purposes).

⁴³ A period of seasonal wind that brings uninterrupted rain (from June to August in Ayemenem).

it has on one's life does not mean it does not have any; the river, like all of Roy's nature in *The God of Small Things*, always persists.

The river is, in many instances in the novel, compared to a god—perhaps a deceptive, vengeful goddess to be exact. In the chapter where Sophie Mol drowns in the river, before the tragic event occurs, the river is described as “dark and quiet. An absence rather than a presence, betraying no sign of how high and strong it really was” (291). Unlike the common quiet before the storm, the illusion of the river's tranquility continues as Sophie Mol drowns; Roy narrates, “There was no storm-music. [...] Just a quiet handing over ceremony. A boat spilling its cargo. A river accepting the offering. One small life. A brief sunbeam” (293). The diction that the author uses all throughout the novel to refer to the river is always one of attentive reverence. As a kind of foreshadowing in Roy's chaotic style, she writes the scene of the recovery of Sophie Mol's body from the river before she writes of the drowning, but even then, her perception of the river is that of a divine being. She affirms, “how wrong it is for a fisherman to believe that he knows his river well. *No one* knows the Meenachal. No one knows what it may snatch or yield. Or when. This is what makes fishermen pray” (259). Roy's river, like a god, is high and strong, it snatches and yields, it accepts offerings and prayers, and it is unknowable.

The reader is left to assume that Sophie Mol's death was an offering that the river accepts as compensation for what it has lost. Upon his return to Ayemenem as an adult, Estha remarks that the river smells like excrement and “pesticides bought with World Bank loans” (*The God of Small Things* 13), and that of the majority of fish that died, only a disfigured few were left. Roy, yet again, does not hesitate to blame development for the devastation of the Meenachal; she puts direct blame on the World Bank and on the postcolonial governments that trail after western systems, taking out loans from the World Bank to join the unnecessary western race towards development. In a similar

fashion, writing from Rahel's point of view as an adult, the author conceives a silent interaction between the young woman and the river, where the latter smiles "a ghastly skull's smile" from what she imagines is a hospital bed (124) as Rahel, as if meeting an elder after a long absence, notices that "It had shrunk. And she had grown" (124). In the paragraphs that follow, the descriptions of the river proceed, contrasting what it was with what it became, from an entity that commands veneration to a drained water surface with garbage bags and dead fish strewn across it, and the offerings it accepted changed from those worthy of a deity to a bounty of excrement and pesticides.

The river, dispossessed of its divinity and given a crude use in society, resembles another victim of development in *The God of Small Things*: the Kathakali⁴⁴ Man. In her heart wrenching fashion, Roy writes of the Kathakali Man:

To the Kathakali Man these stories are his children and his childhood. He has grown up within them. [...] He tells stories of the gods, but his yarn is spun from the ungodly, human heart. The Kathakali Man is the most beautiful of men. Because his body is his soul. His only instrument. [...] But these days he has become unviable. Unfeasible. Condemned goods. His children deride him. They long to be everything that he is not. He has watched them grow up to become clerks and bus conductors. Class IV nongazetted officers. With unions of their own. But he himself, left dangling somewhere between heaven and earth, cannot do what they do. He cannot slide down the aisles of buses, counting change and selling tickets. He cannot answer bells that summon him. He cannot stoop behind trays of tea and Marie biscuits. In

⁴⁴ A form of pantomime or dance in costume and masks in which a story based on Hindu literature is told.

despair, he turns to tourism. He enters the market. He hawks the only thing he owns. The stories that his body can tell. He becomes a Regional Flavor. In the Heart of Darkness they mock him with their lolling nakedness and their imported attention spans. He checks his rage and dances for them. He collects his fee. He gets drunk. Or smokes a joint. Good Kerala grass. It makes him laugh. Then he stops by the Ayemenem Temple, he and the others with him, and they dance to ask pardon of the gods. (229-231)

Thus Arundhati Roy tells her readers of the Kathakali Man, the most beautiful of men, the protector and narrator of history, who, in a fate similar to the divine river's, becomes a regional attraction—a price he pays to survive in a development-ridden culture where he does not belong.

The manner in which Roy writes about nature in *The God of Small Things* makes it difficult to categorize it as either powerful or powerless—or rather, a Big Thing or a Small Thing. In Roy's work, despite the fact that it is littered with development-related settings, nature is neither forgotten nor rendered defenseless, it is instead portrayed as a repressed entity preparing for a vengeful return (Mortensen 188). The opening pages of the novel are an endeavor to capture this vengeful return, conveying the way in which a rapid switch of power dynamics occurs when the monsoon hits Ayemenem in early June. "Boundaries [between nature and civilization] blur" (*The God of Small Things* 1) as descriptions of natural elements overtaking the manmade existence in the town ensue: moss covered walls, flooded roads, electric poles wrapped in vines, potholes filled with rainwater and fish (1). In a similarly interesting passage towards the end of the work, the Plymouth car that belonged to the Ipe family is forgotten on the side of the road, and every monsoon, nature reclaims it a bit further as more moss covers it (295). As if in clarification of why this had happened, Roy explains that a sparrow died after many unheard pleas in the backseat of the car, "like a joke", she

abruptly adds (296). While the sparrow could simply represent nature itself in this statement—and the repossession of the car as nature’s gradual retaliation—it is intriguing that this specific bird was used in this case as it is a known symbolism for the lower class.

At the summit of her belief in connectedness, Roy wrote *The God of Small Things* as a tangled web of connected elements, both in terms of plotlines and themes. Repeatedly, she uses her twin characters Estha and Rahel as a pattern for these connections as both their conflicts and their inseparability remind one of man and nature’s relationship (Chatur Sow Mondal and Lavanya 1143). In the beginning of the book, it is made clear that while Estha and Rahel are twins, there was no confusion in telling them apart, for they were easily distinguishable, physically; nevertheless, “the confusion lay in a deeper, more secret place” (2). Considering the twins as man and nature, the passage following this statement becomes more coherent. The author writes,

In those early amorphous years when memory had only just begun, when life was full of Beginnings and no Ends, and Everything was For Ever, Estha and Rahel thought of themselves together as Me, and separately individually, as We or Us. [...] Their lives have a size and a shape now. Estha has his and Rahel hers. Edges, Borders, Boundaries, Brinks and Limits have appeared like a team of trolls on their separate horizons. (2-3)

Reading this with an ecocritical insight, one cannot help but replace Estha and Rahel relationship with that of man with nature thus interpreting this as Roy’s reminiscence of a time when human civilization and nature did not have to be on conflicting ends—a time well before borders.

There is an instance in the novel where the twins are described as “so evenly matched” that whenever physical fights occurred between them, they would go on for a long time, and “things

that came in their way [...] were smashed or irreparably damaged” (62). Continuing with the same metaphor, it can be concluded that this ‘match’ between civilization and nature can only end in severe and irreversible destruction, and, most likely, on civilization’s side. Ultimately, it is of no great significance whether nature is powerful or powerless since there is only one outcome; its connection to civilization is one of direct causation—nature’s powerless collapse is man’s downfall, and its powerful wrath is still man’s downfall. Still, Roy often has a solution to offer, and in this case, it appears that her key is Velutha’s character. Velutha, in the novel, is the god of small things—that is unquestionable as the author refers to him as such frequently—the intriguing question is why Velutha? Although of a modest, poverty-stricken, and lower caste background, and despite the discrimination and oppression, Velutha manages to become the closest thing to a scientist. As a knowledgeable and educated man, perfectly capable of handling machinery, he has every opportunity to attempt control over nature as is the common way with men of science, but he does not, instead deepening his relationship with small things around him recognizing that he himself is one of them (Chae 524).

The scene that Roy paints of Velutha afore his and Ammu’s first romantic encounter is one of complete harmony with the river and the nature within it and surrounding it. As he lies floating in the river, Velutha is part of it, and it is part of him; of him Roy writes,

A log. A serene crocodile. Coconut trees bent into the river and watched him float by. Yellow bamboo wept. Small fish took coquettish liberties with him. Pecked him. [...] she saw that the world they stood in was his. That he belonged to it. That it belonged to him. The water. The mud. The trees. The fish. The stars. (333-334)

With complete surrender to the power of nature, and with no self-conceited ambition to control it, Velutha can float; he is at peace with the river so it carries him effortlessly, and its trees and fish compliment him. The image of the fish pecking Velutha reminds one of the intimacy between a whale and the dependent smaller fish surrounding it (Bessedik 43). Velutha, one is made to understand, stands as a sharp and noble contrast to other men that the writer speaks of, “men without curiosity. Without doubt. [...] They looked out at the world and never wondered how it worked, because they knew. *They* worked it. They were mechanics who serviced different parts of the same machine” (*The God of Small Things* 262). It is this, which makes him the god of small things.

Men without curiosity and without doubt, men who believe they control the world like an engine, are, in the eyes of every ecofeminist, including Arundhati Roy, the planet’s plague. Against these, Roy does not hesitate to display her scorn as she occasionally uses the narrator’s voice in *The God of Small Things* to pitch her own commentary on destructive human behavior. In a passage where Comrade Pillai⁴⁵ (who happens to be one of the men Roy was referring to in the previous quotation) first introduces young Estha and Rahel to the Kathakali, they watch a scene of him embodying a legend “searching for the beast that lives in him” (236) as Comrade Pillai describes it. Roy is not satisfied with that expression and she aims to correct it; she continues, “Searching for the *man* who lives in him was perhaps what he really meant, because certainly no beast has essayed the boundless, infinitely inventive art of human hatred. No beast can match its range and power” (236). Eerily, the author strives to reveal how cheerfully mankind commits atrocities against other living beings; in a merry kitchen, for example, “the disembowelling of lesser mammals” (127)

⁴⁵ Comrade K.N.M. Pillai is the political leader of the communist party in Ayemenem; he is also a neighbor and friend—though of questionable ambitions—of the Ipe family.

occurs as casually as if their lives were insignificant—Roy even uses the words ‘lesser mammals’ to remind humans that, though they believe in their complete superiority, even they remain mammals. This casual carnage does not stop at different species but it extends against other unfortunate humans too as is seen by the end of novel when the police unconcernedly beat Velutha to death for a crime he has not committed. Roy explains that they did not initially intend to wound him the way they did, they only did it unconsciously because “any implication that if nothing else, at least biologically he was a fellow creature—had been severed long ago” (309). When Roy wrongly chooses the word ‘twinkle’ to compare human civilization with the existence of the Earth Woman⁴⁶, she immediately corrects herself—‘twinkle’ is too optimistic a word to designate humankind (54).

These would not be the only instances that the writer promptly points an accusatory finger towards humans—nor the first instances they are warned that their debaucheries will rise against them; the cub hunter, fish killer, frog eater is recurrently cautioned that the cub “shall hunt thee!” (*The God of Small Things* 59). In a moment of proof that out of the mouths of babes comes the truth, Lenin, Comrade Pillai’s son, after struggling with reciting Shakespeare, suddenly, as if in epiphany, bursts with “*The evil that mendoo lives after them*”⁴⁷ which, Roy explains, is “remarkable, considering he was only six and didn’t understand a word of what he was saying” (275). Considerable ruin has been left in man’s wake following the growth of human civilization especially after the industrial revolution—ruin that was extended by force to countries of the Global

⁴⁶ The Earth Woman is a concept in *The God of Small Things* that helps recognize Arundhati Roy as an ecofeminist; it is discussed more thoroughly in the following section.

⁴⁷ The line is misspelled on purpose by Arundhati Roy to emphasize the child’s lack of knowledge of what he is reciting.

South—yet, the belief that there will be consequences is almost nonexistent, it is still dismissed as a speculation, a theory, but never an authentic threat.

Like Murlidharan, the naked lunatic, humans count their keys completely oblivious of what goes on around them—or perhaps not oblivious but in conscious denial. On Murlidharan, Roy writes,

He watched the trains come and go. He counted his keys. He watched governments rise and fall. He counted his keys. He watched cloudy children at car windows with yearning marshmallow noses. The homeless, the helpless, the sick, the small and lost, all filed past his window. Still he counted his keys. He was never sure which cupboard he might have to open, or when. He sat on the burning milestone with his matted hair and eyes like windows, and was glad to be able to look away sometimes. To have his keys to count and countercheck. Numbers would do. Numbness would be fine. (*The God of Small Things* 63)

Counting keys is a metaphor of the purely human obsession with the material. Humans, here represented by a madman, are always eager to deflect, to look away from their tangled messes, and often do so by counting keys. It might be necessary to note that when Roy describes Velutha's family hut, she makes certain to mention that "there were no keys or cupboards to lock" for the poor and the casteless have nothing to count (208). One cannot but recall T.S. Eliot's lines in *The Waste Land* (which carries substantial ecocritical interpretations)⁴⁸: "We think of the key, each in his prison/Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison" (413-414).

⁴⁸ See Hounaida Benmahidi's "Of Wastelands and Ecopoetics: An Ecocritical Reading of T. S. Eliot's Poetry"

In a similarly disturbing imagery, at the train station from which Estha was returned to his father after the tragedy, a man removes his artificial leg and from it come tumbling his personal effects along with his secrets, his love, his hope, his madness, his joy, and, Roy proceeds, “his real foot was bare” (301). Of the human tendency to glorify trivial possessions, to put all their hopes on material matters over more significant issues, Roy continuously pens, as she understands the gravity of the consequences following this tendency—socially, but also environmentally. She writes, “If there is a nuclear war, our foes will not be China or America or even each other. Our foe will be the earth herself. The very elements—sky, the air, the land, the wind and water—will all turn against us” (qtd. in Kunhi and Kunhi 5). As illustrations of the author’s belief in the latter, images of impending doom excessively fill the novel: insects burn themselves against a light bulb (9-10), morning heat carries the promise of catastrophe (305), and the elements, the sun, the trees, all turn into sand and dust⁴⁹ under which humans are buried (222). As unsettling as this version of reality might be for Roy’s readers, it is always contrasted with a better alternative under one condition: the dismantling of the Big.

In “The Greater Common Good”, Roy writes of a possibility of a future where the Small are finally put into perspective; she speculates,

Who knows, perhaps that's what the twenty-first century has in store for us. The dismantling of the Big. Big bombs, big dams, big ideologies, big contradictions, big countries, big wars, big heroes, big mistakes. Perhaps it will be the Century of the Small. Perhaps right now, this very minute, there's a small god up in heaven readying

⁴⁹ Imagery also highly reminiscent of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* in the line “I will show you fear in a handful of dust”.

herself for us. Could it be? Could it possibly be? It sounds finger-licking good to me. (3)

In a country in the Third World where the philosophies, the battles, and the development of the Big overshadow the struggles, the truths, the principles, and even the existence of the Small, in countries where “nothing mattered much. Nothing much mattered. And the less it mattered, the less it mattered” (Roy, *The God of Small Things* 19), a God of Small Things is urgently anticipated.

The God of Small Things was written for that purpose; it is a book of the voiceless but they do not remain voiceless in it. Contemplating Estha singing in the cinema, where the audience is the ‘Big Man’ and he is the ‘Little Man’, he is silenced over and over, but he breaks into song because he simply “couldn’t stop it” (100). Estha is punished for his song, and his elected muteness is his response, but not the author’s—she writes on, wherever the voiceless are dwarfed, she emphasizes. This section explored how successfully Arundhati Roy, in *The God of Small Things*, had protested and exposed oppression of all her Small characters in the ecofeminist tradition. In a truly effective web of connections, characters from children, to untouchables, to the poverty-stricken, to the colonized, extending to other living beings and to entities of necessity and reverence to indigenous cultures, Roy does not undervalue the subjects that fall under any intersection of subjugation. Under an ecofeminist scope, notions of colonialism, postcolonialism, identity, race, caste, class, development, and environment in *The God of Small Things* have been examined, thus setting the scene and paving the way for a profound analysis of women and nature in the novel.

III. Pinned Butterflies: Ecofeminism in *The God of Small Things*

The way Roy writes of the oppression of women in *The God of Small Things* is intensely interwoven with other forms of oppression under the question of power relations and history. Her

perspective in the novel indeed becomes all that postcolonial ecofeminism had hoped to find in literature: a voice for everyone crushed under the wheel of colonialism, globalization, development, capitalism, and patriarchy. The latter, patriarchy, is undeniably understood to be the groundwork of all tyrannical systems in the world today as it provided the original blueprint for dualist thinking—hence, the unbreakable connection between all intersections of the oppressed in postcolonial ecofeminist theory. Although Tickell refers to postcolonialism as the “most influential” angle of study in *The God of Small Things* (72), much change has occurred to literary criticism since the publication of his book in 2007 with the revival of ecofeminism (through postcolonial ecofeminism) making it the current most significant theory in the reading of the novel instead. After having developed an analysis of various oppressions in the previous section, this section singles out the core of postcolonial ecofeminist literary analysis: the relationship between women and nature and the subjugation of each and both in *The God of Small Things*.

According to a research done by the Thomson Reuters foundation, India is the most dangerous place in the world for a woman counting up to four reported cases of rape per hour (cited in Suleman and Mohamed 2). This is despite the conjoined efforts of Indian feminists, writers, and activists during and after the independence to shed some light on the deplorable persecution of women in India. Women’s rights movements in India stemmed first from motherhood feminism and nationalist feminism then transitioned into post-independence feminism rejecting the gendered notions of the previous movements and focusing on lower caste and lower class women; this manifold of philosophies puts feminism in India today on a spectrum of various movements rather than one unified message. Among these feminist writers and activists is Arundhati Roy, who, on this issue, writes that the prospect of her participation in movements other than feminist—Marxist for example—during her university years had seemed increasingly “silly” because men within that

same movement harassed her as a woman. She explains, “The only real conflict seemed to me to be between women and men” (qtd. in Tickell 89).

Similarly to most women in countries that suffered from colonialism, Indian women in the postcolonial era were at even worse situations than their ancestors despite their rights being decreed in the constitution because of the social ignorance—or denunciation—of these rights. As an illustration of this disconcerting condition, Tickell mentions the Nayar⁵⁰ women who, before colonization, lived in a community that follows a matrilineal⁵¹ system. This left both men and women at total liberty to choose their sexual partners (multiple partners throughout their lives in most cases) as the children resulting from these relations followed their mothers’ ancestry and no confusion of kinship could be claimed—allowing women an amount of personal and sexual freedom undreamt of by contemporary Indian women (38-39). As it has been discussed in the previous chapter, the position of women in indigenous cultures before the arrival of colonialism might not have been ideal. It was, nonetheless, less oppressive than notions of objectification and domestication left behind by western cultures. Ideas of female divinities, feminine creation, and the deification of nature as goddess were commonly accepted in Indian culture until the interference of Christianity. This brought forth an unquestionable necessity for feminism in the postcolonial era, so, as a major Indian postcolonial author, as a woman, and staying true to her belief in the centrality of feminism, Roy constructed a network of oppression in *The God of Small Things* at the heart of which a woman always stands.

⁵⁰ A Hindu caste native of Kerala belonging to the noble castes.

⁵¹ A kinship system where descent identification follows the mother instead of the father.

Of all the instances of oppression in *The God of Small Things*—and there are plenty—one particular moment stands out as the flawless recapitulation of the concept of double colonization⁵². While Tickell hints to the incident as an introduction to his analysis of Ammu’s situation (37), there is more to be said about the dispute that Ammu finds herself at the heart of when her husband’s boss (a white English man) strikes up a bargain with him in which she is the offering. Ammu’s husband, being an alcoholic, was facing termination from his job as an assistant to the manager of an English tea estate when his boss—a man notoriously known his affairs with Indian women on the plantation and his countless illegitimate children—offers him an alternative. He is offered the chance to go to a rehab until he can return to work while Ammu remains with the English man in his home to be taken care of (an insinuation of becoming his mistress). Ammu’s husband, to her horror and disgust, makes the proposition to her, and, perhaps not anticipating a refusal from her, starts to beat her repeatedly when she does so (*The God of Small Things* 42-43). Ammu is left with no option but to return to her home in Ayemenem where her own father refuses to believe her, “not because he thought well of her husband, but simply because he didn’t believe that an Englishman, any Englishman, would covet another man’s wife” (42). The most intriguing realization one can conclude from this passage is that it is almost a letter-perfect depiction of Spivak’s words on “white men saving brown women from brown men”⁵³ where the woman in question has no voice in the matter and is treated like property to pass along.

The objectification of women is not a matter of sole appearance in the novel, so, while some explicit scenes such as the above stand out, other implicit instances are just as significant. In one

⁵² A term coined by editors Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford in their book *A Double Colonization: Colonial and Post-colonial Women's Writing* referring to the predicament of women in colonial and postcolonial situations who find themselves dually oppressed on basis of both race and gender.

⁵³ Return to “Chapter One” for reading and citation of the passage.

example, Roy writes sarcastically of a police officer pointing his baton at Ammu's breasts as if choosing mangoes to buy while a sign behind him reads of the noble principles of the police (8). In other instances, Baby Kochamma is likened to a hill (62), to the family's car (65), to a mountain (95), and her breasts to melons (97-98), and this would not be the end of the writer's recurrent references to breasts—here the comparison of a woman's breasts to fruit is indicative of the reduction of women's bodies into mere vessels of reproduction. To demonstrate the social taboos around female anatomy, Roy writes two passages that—coincidentally or not—relate the repression of breasts, as perhaps the most obvious female bodily attribute, directly to Christianity. Narrating Rahel's history of expulsions from schools, Roy describes a phase where Rahel began intentionally to run into older girls at school, and, after being reported and questioned, reveals that the reason behind her actions was “to find out whether breasts hurt. In that Christian institution, breasts were not acknowledged. They weren't supposed to exist” (16). This refusal to even recognize the existence of breasts in extremist Christian settings is equated with the need to bind them into nonexistence. In her description of Mammachi, Roy lets slip another reference to this subject by explaining how she tied her bodice in an uncomfortably tight manner just to “flatten her *unchristian* breasts” (170). Female bodies in the novel, as viewed through the symbolism of breasts, are either oversexualized to the point of objectification or unacknowledged to the point of tabooization.

Society's obsession with controlling women's bodies is critiqued in *The God of Small Things* in tones of mixed despondency and cynicism (Comfort 10). An example that the latter critic gives is when Roy writes of the verandahs that open in halves (top and bottom) to conceal the lower parts of women opening them from outsiders (often salesmen); she ridicules the tradition by adding that they might as well “buy carpets, or bangles, with their breasts covered and their bottoms bare” (165). This caging of women's bodies is seen in female characters of all categories and age groups;

young girls, wives, mothers, and older women's bodies are all directly linked to virtue and chastity in the novel, be it for different reasons: a family's honor rests fully on a woman's reputation and on whatever the social norms define as her virtue. This is addressed directly in *The God of Small Things* through the unfairness of Mammachi's rage at Ammu, her daughter, for her affair with Velutha and for "defil[ing] generations of breeding" while endeavoring to even pay the multiple women her son sleeps with, excusing his behavior as simply "Men's Needs" (258). The concept of reputation for women in such environments is deeply destructive, for, in most cases, the certainty of their future prospects hang on their reputations—and those prospects, more often than not, were just marriage.

No marriage in *The God of Small Things* seems of any advantage for the woman involved in it. More than that, Roy goes on to describe the institution as something as horrifying as "the gallows" when she writes of Ammu lamenting the absurdity of embellishing herself for her wedding when it was as futile as "polishing firewood" (43-44). Ammu's suffering from domestic violence is regrettably no news to her either as the readers are informed of the cruel beatings that her own mother lives with under her father's roof. Pappachi, in fits of juvenile jealousy of Mammachi, of her growing business, of her violin skills, hits his wife mercilessly with a brass vase on a daily basis (47). When Chacko finally steps in to stop the abuse against his mother, Pappachi retorts to never speaking to her again while still making sure he appears to be the neglected victim of a working wife—by pretending to sew his own clothes in the verandah where he is sure to be seen by gossiping neighbors (48). Throughout these melancholic events, the mocking tone of Roy's style always returns with anecdotes that appear harmlessly insignificant, comical at best, but indeed add a lot of weight to the theme of her novel. In a description of Comrade Pillai's wife, a woman of undeniably great beauty, she adds on a note that while she respectfully refers to her husband

with ‘addeham’, which, when translated from Malayalam, becomes “that honorable fellow”, Comrade Pillai simply calls her ‘edi’, an extremely colloquial, even offensive term which at best translates to “Hey you!” (270). Marriage, in short, is quite the imprisonment for women in *The God of Small Things* as it appeared to be their only option other than remaining with their fathers—this Roy summarizes in a sentence: “choosing between her husband’s name and her father’s name didn’t give a woman much of a choice” (37).

Not only do these women suffer from objectification and possession by their husbands but also experience it through motherhood. Ironically, the glorification of motherhood is indeed the death of sexuality: while women’s sexualities are already perceived as taboo in most societies, after they become mothers, the concept becomes not just unmentionable but unthinkable. This, and many other components of a woman’s identity, are expected to be erased upon her bearing children, which is seen in Ammu in *The God of Small Things*. In a seemingly harmless moment where Ammu is cuddling her twins, Rahel, her daughter, leaves a kiss on the stretch marks on her belly, and the innocence of the kiss reminds Ammu of the lack of passionate desire in her life, and, suddenly frustrated, she pushes her children off. Roy writes, “Ammu grew tired of their proprietary handling of her. She wanted her body back. It was hers. She shrugged her children off the way a bitch shrugs off her pups when she’s had enough of them” (222)—noting the comparison of Ammu with a female dog. Ammu’s bitterness is understandable; for a young woman in her early thirties, she already reasoned that her “life had been lived” (38) because all she had was her marriage and her marriage failed. Ammu’s perspective was not always as narrow, but she was robbed of the opportunity of education when her father refused to send her to university—his reasoning being that college was a pointless expenditure to spend on a daughter (38).

The chance at an education, however, was given to some of the women in the Ipe family, those who were deemed disagreeable enough to be overlooked for—or even escape—an arranged marriage: Baby Kochamma and Rahel. On the one hand, Baby Kochamma was a stubborn girl in her youth, which, Roy explains, “was considered as bad as a physical deformity” (24) when it came to marriage (with an unfortunate complete disregard for the ableist undertone). Reverend Ipe, after his daughter obstinately defied him repeatedly, joining a Roman Catholic convent to impress Father Mulligan, finally surrendered to the fact that her reputation was unsalvageable, and “since she couldn’t have a husband there was no harm in her having an education” (26). Rahel, on the other hand, fled the fate of an arranged marriage because of emotional and financial neglect: in short, no one paid enough attention to Rahel to raise her ‘as a girl’ and no one was willing to pay her dowry, and, thus, she was free (17). Education, although appears to be the key out of society’s control and possession to these women, is not a completely infallible plan. Such is the example of Margaret Kochamma, Chacko’s English ex-wife, who, despite her education, her status, and even her divorce from Chacko, is still paraded by him, along with their daughter Sophie Mol, “like a pair of tennis trophies that he had recently won” (173). The loop of objectification in the novel is dreadfully never-ending, from humorous moments of overly complicated verandah gates to dreadful scenes of women abused by the patriarchs in their families, the message that Roy writes definitely hits its mark.

A return to a passage discussed in the previous section is inevitable to revise it in ecofeminist terms. While, previously in this chapter, Chacko’s intervention in Mammachi’s business was read as an allegory for development and a critique of capitalism, it must now be addressed for what it is in literal terms. Upon his return from England, Chacko simply appropriated his mother’s factory overnight and usurped her of her place as sole owner; he named himself partner

and “informed” her of her new status as his sleeping partner (*The God of Small Things* 57). Cynically, Roy notes that while Chacko always speaks of the subject as “my factory, my pineapples, my pickles” (57), “whenever anything serious happened in the factory, it was always to Mammachi and not to Chacko that the news was brought” (122). In short, in the partnership, the profits were Chacko’s share, and the worries were Mammachi’s. Chacko did not only overtake his mother’s assets when he made Paradise Pickles his factory but also his sister’s, for, although Ammu did as much work as him—if not more—he was the only proprietor by law because she legally could not inherit a share in it which shines the spotlight on the issue of inheritance (57). Apparently inspired by her own mother’s battle for the right to inherit as a Syrian Christian woman, Roy breaches the subject in her novel through Ammu’s lack of locus standi⁵⁴ and her inability to inherit what is rightfully hers but what belongs to her brother legally. In a mocking tone, Chacko torments his disinherited sister; he says, quite truthfully, “What’s yours is mine and what’s mine is also mine” (57).

In fact, it is not only in legal matters that Chacko manages to dispossess his sister, but, as the reader is bound to notice throughout the novel, in terms of the ‘Love Laws’ too. One of the main victims of the Love Laws⁵⁵ in *The God of Small Things* is Ammu whose mother establishes her preference of her son over her daughter early on and treats the pair accordingly for the rest of their lives. In one scene, where Mammachi is praising Chacko’s intelligence, Ammu’s bitterness overtakes her and she resentfully remarks, “All Indian mothers are obsessed with their sons and are therefore poor judges of their abilities” (56). The choice of wording in this sentence is interesting, for the reference to obsession is not an exaggeration in this case. Later on in the novel,

⁵⁴ The right to legal action in court.

⁵⁵ Concept previously analyzed in the chapter.

it is clarified that Mammachi indeed developed a peculiar—almost incestuous—attachment to her son, especially after his interference against his father’s abuse. Roy writes, “Mammachi packed her wifely luggage and committed it to Chacko’s care. From then onwards he became the repository of all her womanly feelings. Her Man. Her only Love” (168). The narrator then explains that Mammachi, in her glorification of her son, harbored hatred for any woman he showed interest in, specifically those he had feelings for, thus justifying her resentment towards Margaret Kochamma. His sexual relations, however, did not bother Mammachi as much—or at all, in fact—as long as the women involved in them understood the nature of the affairs: simply sexual; this she understood to be Man’s Needs, and she accepted the notion without quarrel or turmoil.

Mammachi, despite having been criticized thoroughly for her inherent sexism, was granted a fresh—and more merciful—analysis from the new approach that some critics took towards her character in *The God of Small Things*. As Chae views it, Mammachi’s favoritism of her son is not exactly a choice; she is, in fact, completely financially dependent on Chacko and must attend to his every whim for her own survival (526). Roy uses characters like Mammachi cleverly to portray the different variations of oppression that women experience to show their diverse and valid—though not always acceptable—responses to it. The example of a woman from each generation that the author creates is sufficient to understand that the only reaction a woman is met with in a patriarchal society is tyranny, regardless of her attitude and actions. Mammachi is submissive, she does not show resistance to any of the emotional and physical abuse that her husband inflicts on her, yet she faces oppression. Ammu is rebellious, she flees from her father’s tyranny and flees again from her husband’s, yet she faces oppression. Rahel is invisible, she does not require nor receive any care from her family, yet she faces oppression. With this, she skillfully rests her case on the need for representation in postcolonial feminism and ecofeminism, for, if oppression takes on a newfangled

nature from one woman to the other in the same cultural frame, how would resistance against it be similar in entirely different and vast cultures?

Throughout the novel, Chacko as a patriarchal figure is relatively tolerable; while he is overbearing, hypocritical, and conceited, he is not physically abusive towards the women in his family, and this puts him in a better light than his other counterparts in the story. This, however, changes abruptly when his daughter drowns to her death, and Ammu, Velutha, and the twins become the scapegoats. After Velutha's brutal murder, Chacko separates the twins by returning Estha to his father and then proceeds to order his sister out of the Ayemenem house; Rahel alone remains, but she goes practically unnoticed by her family for the rest of her childhood. Ammu lives in abysmal poverty for the last months of her life, always attempting to save money and bring her children back together under one roof; she is only allowed to see her daughter once more before she eventually succumbs to an illness that kills her in a barren lodging room at the age of thirty-one. The circumstances of Ammu's death are heartbreaking, but even more so is her burial—or lack thereof. Of Ammu's death, and from Rahel's perspective, Roy writes,

A platoon of ants carried a dead cockroach sedately through the door, demonstrating what should be done with corpses. The church refused to bury Ammu. On several counts. So Chacko hired a van to transport the body to the electric crematorium. He had her wrapped in a dirty bedsheet and laid out on a stretcher. Rahel thought she looked like a Roman Senator. *Et tu, Ammu!* she thought and smiled, remembering Estha. (162)

The strong imagery at the beginning of the passage is disturbing; a cockroach seems to deserve a better funeral than Ammu, for, while the ants carry it to its rest, she is wrapped in squalid cloth and

cremated to dispose of her corpse when no church would take it. Rahel's words 'Et tu, Ammu!' invoke her feelings of betrayal and abandonment; she is reminded of her mother telling her and Estha the story of Julius Caesar falling to his death at his best friend's hand. Ammu, who was adamant on teaching her children that "you can't trust anybody. Mother, father, brother, husband, bestfriend. Nobody" had indeed fallen to her demise at the hands of her own family (83).

In another scene earlier in the novel, the family car drives by a commotion caused by a dead elephant in the road—fallen wires had electrocuted the animal, and the accident caused much distress. The scene can be read both as one of Roy's ecocritical analyses on the ways in which human civilization harms wildlife, or as foreshadowing and comparison to Ammu's tragic cremation as Roy describes the disposal of the elephant's corpse as "not a matter to be treated lightly" unlike Ammu's case, one is left to assume (153). For her funeral to be compared with that of a cockroach and an elephant would not be the first instance in which Ammu is directly linked to her environment in *The God of Small Things*. In the story, Ammu, as the most suitable character for motherhood and Gaia imagery, is placed in comparison with the river as both fiercely protective and tenderly caring. Roy describes Ammu's fear for her children's safety as if they were a pair of frogs plunging towards moving trucks hand in hand (43). Because of her own traumatic experiences, Ammu had learnt to be alert at all times—except on the days described as the days on which she listened to her favorite songs on the radio. Of Ammu on these curiously liberating days, Roy writes,

On days like this there was something restless and untamed about her. As though she had temporarily set aside the morality of motherhood and divorcehood. Even her walk changed from a safe mother-walk to another wilder sort of walk. She wore flowers in her hair and carried magic secrets in her eyes. She spoke to no one. She

spent hours on the riverbank with her little plastic transistor shaped like a tangerine. She smoked cigarettes and had midnight swims. What was it that gave Ammu this Unsafe Edge? This air of unpredictability? It was what she had battling inside her. An unmixable mix. The infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber. [...] On the days that the radio played Ammu's songs, everyone was a little wary of her. They sensed somehow that she lived in the penumbral shadows between two worlds, just beyond the grasp of their power. That a woman that they had already damned, now had little left to lose, and could therefore be dangerous. So on the days that the radio played Ammu's songs, people avoided her, made little loops around her, because everybody agreed that it was best to just Let Her Be. (44-45)

A perfect image of the river's personification, Ammu's wild moments strip her of her docility and tenderness and replace them with menace and unpredictability. The people who sentenced Ammu to her position in life, to whom she owes her cursed status as a divorced mother in an environment prejudiced against divorced mothers, can only fear her when her temperament shifts.

This "unmixable mix" and the ensuing fear in its spectators are seen again in instances of the novel where descriptions of the river occur. In a lighthearted conversation with the twins, Kuttappen, Velutha's older brother, warns them of the dangers of the river; he explains to them that "this river of ours", while she pretends to be "a little old church-going ammooma⁵⁶" she is, in truth, "really a wild thing" (210). The wild nature of the river, similarly to that of Ammu, does not put the twins off her; close observation of the way in which the narrator describes Estha and Rahel's

⁵⁶ Malayalam for 'grandmother'

relationship with the river forces one to see the motherly connection they have with it. It is in the river—or perhaps with the river—that the twins learnt how to swim and how to fish, when to be silent and when to speak, when to listen and when to watch, when to wait and when to move (203). Their attachment to the river is apparent in the narrator’s observation that, in their sleep, “they dreamed of *their* river” (122): the river is theirs just as their mother is theirs, and their love for one rivals their love for the other. In many ways, Ammu and the river become interchangeable until, by the end of the novel, the line blurs and the description of her and Velutha’s sexual intercourse turns into a metaphor of river and sailor. Roy explicitly writes, “She was as wide and deep as a river in spate. He sailed on her waters” (336-337).

Related to the anthropomorphism of the river is the notion of the Earth Woman in *The God of Small Things*. Chacko, lecturing his niece and nephew about the beginnings of life, leads them to imagine the earth as a woman and minimizes the four thousand six hundred million years of existence into forty-six years, which he allots as the Earth Woman’s age. Chacko proceeds to explain to the twins that the entirety of human civilization barely makes up the last two hours of the Earth Woman’s life, rendering it a trivial, insignificant detail—and most likely a mishap—in existence. This, he explained, “Was an awe-inspiring and humbling thought, [...] and we, my dears, everything we are and ever will be are just a twinkle in her eye” (54). This is when Roy interrupts, at the end of the passage, to clarify that the implication that the word ‘twinkle’ left was too cheerful to befit the unworthy human civilization. The metaphor that Chacko forms is by no means an original one, for, as long as civilization has prevailed, the earth has been perceived as a woman, typically a mother. Roy’s concept of the Earth Woman concept appears to be a spin on the notion of Mother Earth, which, as has been explored by Val Plumwood⁵⁷, is more destructive to earth than

⁵⁷ See Chapter One.

it is protective. The claimed motherhood of the earth unfortunately fails to save her from brutal exploitation and deliberate, agonizing expiration. In a disturbing passage from Sophie Mol's funeral, Roy writes, "you can't hear screams through earth and stone" (7) reminding her readers that, perhaps, if the earth could scream, her shriek would be earsplitting.

Of beings that cannot scream, the smallest creatures in *The God of Small Things* ought to be mentioned. In moments of cynical gloom, Roy writes of insects that meet their fate through unlikely means such as the bee that falls to its death in a coffin flower during Sophie Mol's funeral; the flower, firmly the bee's foundation of life, becomes at best its resting place and at worst a cause for its death (5). Another similarly bizarre moment in the novel is that in which insects burn themselves on the verandah's light bulb by swarms (10). Still conveying a similar message is the instance of a butterfly hitting the windshield of the family car when, instead of them having driven into it, the author claims, "perhaps it drove into them" (154) loaning it the ability to commit suicide to evade its circumstances. Butterflies, in *The God of Small Things*, seem to meet fates as unfortunate as those of the female characters in the novel. As creatures of beauty and liberty, the symbolism that the butterflies carry is more explicit than is Roy's habit, and it is strengthened when a description of Pappachi's study reveals the disintegrated pinned butterflies as reminders of the female characters whose aspirations vanished at the hands of patriarchy (Mecwan 230). As the corpses of the butterflies decomposed and fell into piles of dust in their display glass, the pins that Pappachi—the fallen patriarch—stuck remain fixed as tokens of his inherited cruelty (Roy, *The God of Small Things* 155).

Later in the novel, an imbedded confirmation of the previous interpretation appears when Roy summons the image of the pinned butterflies again to write, "Broken butterflies with imploring eyes. A wicked king's wooden wives, languishing under an evil wooden spell. *Trapped*" (239).

The author completes the metaphor by directly likening the butterflies to women—wives, more significantly—trapped under the rule of an oppressive king, a sole patriarch, or the patriarchy itself. In such a system, women are forced to fade into the background. Roy expresses this feeling of being blotted out using Rahel's viewpoint, she writes, "Rahel looked around her and saw that she was in a Play. But she had only a small part. She was just the landscape. A flower perhaps. Or a tree" (172). It cannot be a mere coincidence that the terms the writer chooses to equate with Rahel are all related to nature, for, in a male dominant world, flowers, trees, and women, while being the essence of existence, are dismissed as insignificant. As if to disprove this supposed insignificance, Roy leaves a hint in the story to the value of a woman's legacy rather than a patriarch's in a male descendant's life. There is an instance where Estha struggles to reach a urinal in a bathroom—that, to him, represents his manhood—but only does so when he finds a couple of cans that might be his grandmother's Paradise Pickles cans. Roy writes that "his honor [was] redeemed by grandmother's cans", but it is never specified whether the cans were indeed hers or not, and for that, she is still vaguely behind the scenes (96). There is, nevertheless, in having chosen Estha for this passage, evidence of ostensible hope that Roy suspends on the future male generations.

There is an implied understanding in *The God of Small Things* that the main oppressive forces in the story are the Love Laws and Men's Needs. More or less, the Love Laws and Men's Needs are comprehensive of interconnected and overlapping motives that all serve Big Things while burdening Small Things. Towards the end of the novel, when the policemen viciously beat Velutha within an inch of his life in front of the twins, the narrator intervenes to explain that, while the twins were too young to understand it, this was the norm. In clarification that the matter was not personal but simply an act based on unrecognized fear, Roy writes that it stems from "civilization's fear of nature, men's fear of women, power's fear of powerlessness. Man's

subliminal urge to destroy what he could neither subdue nor deify. Men's Needs" (308-309). Oppression is, then, according to Roy, a consequence of a fear of inferiority to be attributed to Men's Needs—the meaning this expression carries is that of the existence of unchallenged male supremacy and the expenses that come with it, including, but not limited to, religious intolerance, social prejudices, colonial forces, and other sorts of incorrigible injustice. However, before Men's Needs, before the Marxists, the British, the Syrian Bishops, before even Christianity itself, Roy argues that "it really began in the days when the Love Laws were made. The Laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much" (33). The Love Laws, in *The God of Small Things*, categorize people; those deserving of love and those undeserving, based on factors of gender, race, class, and power. The Love Laws, on that definition, are indeed easily interchangeable with dualist rationale.

As is Roy's fashion, the novel ends on a rebellious—though quite problematic this time—note in an attempt to break the tyrannical rule of the Love Laws. She gives closure to the twins from the traumatic events of their childhood, who, after their long separation, meet again at the Ayemenem house. Estha and Rahel, as adults, find comfort in one another, and, it appears in one another's bodies as well as the scene devolves into an unmistakable description of sexual intercourse between the twins. Defiantly, Roy rationalizes the act by asking and answering her own question; she says, "But what was there to say? [...] Only that what they shared that night was not happiness, but hideous grief. Only that once again they broke the Love Laws." (328). This moment appears to be a sneer at unreasonable love laws set by arbitrary social customs and baseless assumptions—it sounds as if Roy is punishing the family that doomed Ammu and Velutha to their death for their love affair by brewing degeneration within their own blood.

It has been demonstrated throughout this chapter that *The God of Small Things* is a novel spun like a web of connections, full of moments of ironic wit and others of dejected attitude, with the sole objective of holding the guilty accountable. As this chapter has argued through a detailed postcolonial ecofeminist reading of the novel, Roy proves that dualist grand narratives are to be held responsible for the gender-based, postcolonial, ethnic, and environmental injustices committed throughout the plot. This chapter had discussed the British colonial history in India, the influence of systems such as Christianity and capitalism on social norms, the inner constructs of Indian caste systems, the postcolonial medals of anglophilia and corruption, the rise and consequences of development, and the gradual disruption of wildlife and nature. It has ultimately exposed instances of domestic abuse, female objectification, childhood trauma, tragic love affairs, and redemptive incestuous endeavors. Thus, in her own way, Roy attempts to reform the rules—or at least avenge those they were inflicted on—whilst still reminding her readers of the irony of a bee dying in a flower, perishing where it was supposed to thrive.

CHAPTER THREE: AN ECOFEMINIST READING OF TSITSI DAGAREMBGA'S *NERVOUS CONDITIONS*

“The river, the trees, the fruit and the fields. This was how it was in the beginning. This is how I remember it in my earliest memories, but it did not stay like that.”⁵⁸

Introduction

Tsitsi Dangarembga's magnum opus, *Nervous Conditions*, unfolds as a narrative interwoven with the threads of postcolonial Africa and the nuanced discourse of ecofeminism. In this chapter, we embark on a profound exploration of the novel's rich layers, unraveling the complex relationships between gender-based oppression, colonialism, cultural clash, and the environment. Dangarembga, a literary trailblazer, employs her unique voice rooted in the African experience to challenge Western conventions and engage in a multifaceted narrative that reshapes our understanding of societal norms. As we delve into this journey, it is imperative to comprehend Dangarembga's role as a storyteller shaping the discourse on African postcolonial ecofeminism. The author's narrative prowess positions her as a literary force, seamlessly blending the struggles of women within postcolonial societies with broader societal challenges. Before dissecting the ecofeminist tapestry within *Nervous Conditions*, we must appreciate Dangarembga's contribution as a visionary writer, whose work transcends conventional boundaries, ushering in a new era of literary exploration.

At the core of *Nervous Conditions* lies the tension between Shona heritage and the imposition of Englishness, symbolizing a poignant exploration of cultural identity. This chapter

⁵⁸ Dangarembga, Tsitsi. *Nervous Conditions*. Seal Press, 1989.

meticulously examines the characters' experiences of cultural clash, shedding light on the complexities of reconciling traditional values with the encroachment of colonial influences. The concept of a "Good African" is dissected, unraveling the struggle to maintain authenticity in the face of external pressures and setting the stage for a broader discussion on power dynamics and cultural resilience. The narrative's intricacies extend to the realm of food politics, where Dangarembga artfully weaves the politics of sustenance into the fabric of the story. This chapter probes the dualism of meat consumption and vegetarianism, unraveling their symbolic significance within the novel. Furthermore, it explores the ecofeminist motifs of hunger and anorexia, exposing the burdens imposed upon women in the realms of motherhood and womanhood. As we navigate the politics of food, we gain insights into societal expectations and their impact on female autonomy.

In the subsequent sections of this chapter, the analysis deepens to unravel the intricate notions of marriage, female sexuality, and the persistent and unjust division of labor. This exploratory inquiry lays bare the power dynamics that underlie these societal institutions, exposing the subtle yet pervasive forces that curtail female agency within the nuanced context of postcolonialism. Through a careful examination of these structures, we illuminate the oppressive mechanisms that constrain women, offering a critical lens on how colonial legacies continue to shape and restrict the lives of women in postcolonial societies. As we navigate the complexities of marriage, the nuanced exploration extends to encompass the realm of female sexuality, exposing the intricacies and challenges that women face in asserting their autonomy within a societal framework deeply entrenched in patriarchal norms. The unequal division of labor emerges as another focal point, shedding light on the entrenched disparities that persist in postcolonial settings, illustrating how gender roles are often perpetuated to the detriment of women.

The collective examinations presented in this chapter contribute significantly to a nuanced understanding of the myriad obstacles impeding women's agency and empowerment. The focal point of this exploration culminates in a discerning analysis of an African sisterhood, revealing the intertwined themes of ecology, education, and solidarity as potent agents for female liberation. Throughout the narrative, it becomes increasingly apparent that the cultivation of collective consciousness, coupled with a shared commitment to ecological stewardship and education, functions as a robust antidote to the constraining forces imposed upon women. In this light, *Nervous Conditions* emerges as the quintessential African postcolonial ecofeminist novel, actively engaging in a profound discourse that unravels the intricate interplay between gender dynamics, cultural influences, and the environmental backdrop against which these narratives unfold.

I. Tsitsi Dangarembga: Writing the African Postcolonial Ecofeminist Novel

Being the first Zimbabwean woman to publish a novel in English, Tsitsi Dangarembga wielded substantial influence on the characterization of the literature produced by her peers thereafter, thus rearranging—or rather improving—the image of African literature and perhaps constructing, for the first time, the groundwork for the African postcolonial ecofeminist novel. With an almost instinctive comprehension of the relationship between postcolonial literature and the so-called western 'canon', Dangarembga wrote her novel with a determination to repudiate, revise, and decanonize⁵⁹ western literature. While appropriating the formerly western bildungsroman as her genre of choice, the author revises it through introducing previously unexplored themes to it. Such themes include, most significantly, the struggles of gender inequality under the patriarchal system colonial Rhodesia (pre-independence Zimbabwe), and the issues of

⁵⁹ See "Postcolonial Literature and the Western Literary Canon" by John Marx.

anglophilia, remembrance of Shona culture, history, poverty, food politics, anorexia, female sexuality and rebellion, all threaded intricately with nature and the environment surrounding—and deeply rooted within the lives of—the women of the novel.

Speculations concerning the semi-autobiographical nature of *Nervous Conditions* are fulfilled with a peak into the life of the author. Dangarembga, born in colonial Rhodesia in 1959, was uprooted from her birth country as a two-year old and moved to England for four years while her parents finished their studies. Those years being the formative in a child's establishment of their identity, Dangarembga found herself at a loss in her own mother country (and lacking her own mother tongue) when she returned. This tearing of identity and later the attempted hybridity of both is well prevalent in *Nervous Conditions*, especially in the case of Nyasha whose childhood is remarkably similar to that of the author's. In Tambu's eventual insight into the racist mechanisms of colonialism within the walls of the Sacred Heart convent school, Dangarembga revisits her own revelations in the Marymount Mission convent school where she boarded in her youth similarly to her protagonist. For the transnational intellectual, as Biman Basu designates Tsitsi Dangarembga, "protagonists function as surrogates for writers" who, while coveting to express anticolonial attitudes in their work, are trapped within western tradition (7). Thus, to redeem—or even correct—the conformity to the western canon, Dangarembga appropriates the words spoken for (and not by) the oppressed to offer them a voice.

In quoting Jean Paul Sartre's famous words in his introduction to the Algerian postcolonial pioneer Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* in her novel's epigraph and as inspiration for its title, Dangarembga grants a lengthy, genuine, insightful, and true-to-life evaluation of "the condition of a native is a nervous condition." From the perspective of many critics, *Nervous Conditions* could serve as a feminist rereading of *The Wretched of the Earth* as it meets the latter's

shortcomings in regards of the toll of colonization on the mental health of women which Fanon appears to be “almost entirely silent” about (Vizzard). It is intriguing how Dangarembga, in her redirection of the spotlight towards women under the crushing force of colonization, almost completely refuses to acknowledge any other injustices of the war of colonization and only determinedly addresses women’s issues as related to their environment and social persecution instead. It follows that “if charity begins at home (and *Nervous Conditions* is about family charity), then so, perhaps, does war” (Rooney, “Inheritance and Independence” 135). Thus, it preaches that liberation from oppressive systems must first begin from the domestic space, within one’s own home. The implicit hostility that the novel carries perhaps takes its origin in the disillusionment that the author, along with a number of feminist activists in postcolonial Zimbabwe, suffered following the failure of the liberation movement to meet its objectives regarding gender equality after the independence. Having lived in the Zimbabwe that Dangarembga writes about and having been part of the same feminist groups as hers, the Kenyan author Carolyn Martin Shaw confirms the bitterness of Dangarembga’s disappointment with the postcolonial authority and society. She explains that while some laws were passed in favor of women’s emancipation, they were still largely rejected in the social life (8). She further affirms that “though increasing numbers of women broke away from the good daughter-loyal wife-sacrificing mother ideal to establish a different kind of sexual politics, they were certainly not heralded as cultural pioneers” (8). These marginalized women served as a warning to others considering their benefiting from newly granted—though incomplete—freedom, and thus keeping the patriarchal social order predominately in control.

After having been in the frontlines of the liberation movement along with men, women in postcolonial Zimbabwe had expected recognition and perhaps even a step forward from the restrictive triangle of good daughter-loyal wife-sacrificing mother that Shaw refers to. However,

this was not the case; while the men who fought for the revolution were rewarded with positions of power; women were expected to return to their motherly domestic duties without a token of recognition for their service stirring up dormant rebellion in women and creating friction between the nationalist movement and the feminist movement (Rooney, “Mothers of the Revolution” 60). From this arose the need for Zimbabwean women in particular—and African in general, for the outcomes of independence in most postcolonial nations in the continent were rather the same in this regard—to speak for themselves, and in the case of this novel, to write for themselves. African literature, encumbered as it was with mostly male writers, was undoubtedly inadequate in portraying the African woman. For their part, male writers remained within the boundaries of social conformity in their building of the female character: either condemned wives or outcast rebels (Riemenschneider 402). Amidst the stereotypical misconception and the evident shortcomings of Western white feminism, which, as Dangarembga asserts, “does not meet my experiences at a certain point, the issues of me as a black woman” (qtd. in Shaw 14), the author is compelled to depict her own struggles and those of African women.

Nervous Conditions holds a very influential position in the shaping of female African writing and the African novel in general. While acquainting the African reader with original notions—as she may well be the first African writer to allude to anorexia in her work (Uwakweh 81)—Dangarembga still succeeds to retain an antique quality to her novel. To borrow from Alice Walker’s testimonial on it, *Nervous Conditions* magnifies as it goes the voices of “the African sisters, mothers and cousins of antiquity [...] beginning to reassert themselves in these perilous times, and to speak”⁶⁰. In writing Tambudzai Sigauke’s story, Dangarembga rotates its events

⁶⁰ From Alice Walker’s testimonial on *Nervous Conditions* by Tsitsi Dangarembga found in the back cover of the Seal Press edition of 1989.

around femaleness as a universal mark of victimhood, and in arguing that all that is female is perceived as inferior to all that is male. Throughout, she paved the ecofeminist's path towards identifying the said-femaleness in her work outside the narrow comprehension of the concept as only related to women. It is not only literary works that rigidly fit the description of ecofeminism through direct address of environmental injustice that should be scrutinized through ecofeminist critique, for those are already glaringly recognizable as ecofeminist. It is works like *Nervous Conditions* which require such scrutiny to extricate their ecofeminist essence, an attempt which this study undertakes through exploration of how cultural identity, food politics, sexuality and reproduction, and land labor relate to postcolonial ecofeminism.

II. A Cultural Indigestion: The Good African between Remembering Shona Roots and Stomaching the Englishness

In a truly postcolonial ecofeminist tradition, Tsitsi Dangarembga begins her novel with an epigraph that positions her characters as victims—suffering from a nervous condition—of the dualist western colonial hierarchy of the civilized colonizer against the savage native. This binary, like every other in western essentialist perception, with its severe adherence to two extremities, eliminates the prospect of anything remaining uncategorized within the spectrum in-between. Such is the case of civilized/native (meaning uncivilized), white/black, superior/ inferior, and accordingly good/evil in which the characters of the novel find themselves in—along with the burdensome addition of the dualism of male/female in later sections of this chapter. Writing of this predisposition to sharply opposed extremes, Dangarembga creates Babamukuru in *Nervous Conditions* to embody the moral axis that upholds this dualism and Nyasha, his daughter, as the plethora of colors in between. She writes, “Through him, because of him, black would remain definitely sombre and white permanently clear, even in spite of Nyasha, whose strange disposition

hinted at shades and textures within the same color” (164). The insinuation of the somberness of black as opposed to the clarity of white is not metaphorical; it is, instead, a direct statement about the gravity of colorism and racism in the colonial context. Moreover, the passage does not come without warning for all who attempt to struggle against the dualistic system of belief. The warning comes in the form of an allusion to Nyasha’s ‘strange disposition’—a disposition that later on proves to be prey to a severe nervous condition that arises as a price for her rebellious and untamable nature.

Babamukuru, the patriarch of the Sigauke family, is characterized throughout the novel as a force of oppression that carries the will of colonization against all those weaker than him while hiding behind a mask of elite gentility. The existence of Babamukuru in the story upholds—and perhaps creates—several oppositions, namely men/women, civilization/nature, wealth/poverty, colonizer/colonized, and white/black; the latter of which even he, as an agent of colonialism, is still a victim. In his quest to maintain the colonial, capitalist, and patriarchal rule, and regardless of his educational background and academic degrees, Babamukuru is found to be unwavering in his imperialist convictions. He appears to be brainwashed into demeaning Shona religious and cultural beliefs, maintaining an image of belonging to genteel polite society, and displaying disdain for all which is not western; simply being “an obstacle towards the African decolonization process” (Mphiko 71). The patriarchal side of the Sigauke family, anglophiles by relation to their brother, cousin, and uncle Babamukuru, worship at his feet—quite literally as they drop to their knees in front of him every chance they get—and venerate his every step towards the Anglicization of the family. In what could be seen as “collaboration between British colonial patriarchy and indigenous

African patriarchy” (Mphiko 72), the men of the family (Jeremiah⁶¹, Takesure⁶², and Nhamo⁶³) pursue the same oppressive route as Babamukuru and are as complicit as him with the tyrannical system of British colonialism.

Babamukuru, though retaining a deceptive image of power and status, in truth has none. At the mission where he lives with his family and presides over the local school as headmaster, Babamukuru “was the only African living in a *white* house” which was a great source of pride to the family—most of whom lived squalid poverty (Dangarembga 63). While the house was indeed white in color, it is evidently not the only significance of its whiteness; it appears to serve as an altered version of Frantz Fanon’s image of black skins and white masks. Babamukuru, a black African, is disturbingly determined to seem as white as possible and to fit within his white environment, but the truth remains glaringly obvious: the impossibility of his blending in renders his anglophile attempts grotesque⁶⁴. This grotesqueness, evident best in his oppressive nature that lacks critical rationale, is unmistakably clear to his daughter Nyasha. Immediately after the preceding passage, Tambu, Babamukuru’s niece and the narrator of the story, corrects herself by adding that while they were all, in fact, proud of her uncle’s white house, Nyasha, who “had taken seriously the lessons about oppression and discrimination”, was not (63). Having been educated in the patterns of repression and assimilation, Nyasha was not impressed by her father’s position. The white house, she understood, did not come with any real authority or afford Babamukuru the ability to make a change in favor of his African brethren.

⁶¹ Babamukuru’s brother.

⁶² Babamukuru’s cousin.

⁶³ Babamukuru’s nephew.

⁶⁴ This is as the characters from *The God of Small Things* analyzed in the previous chapter, in particular, Pappachi, Chacko, and Baby Kochamma.

Momentarily after moving into her uncle's house for her education, Tambu also comes to a similar conclusion about him. Upon her arrival, she begins to observe his properties and is astonished at the amount of wealth he had accumulated beyond his family's imagination—and beyond their scrutiny as well. Tambu is suddenly reminded of her late brother Nhamo's descriptions of Babamukuru's eminent prosperity and position, and she admits,

Nhamo's chorus sang in my head and now it sounded ominous. Its phrases told me something I did not want to know, that my Babamukuru was not the person I had thought he was. He was wealthier than I had thought possible. He was educated beyond books. And he had done it alone. He had pushed up from under the weight of the white man with no strong relative to help him. How had he done it? Having done it, what had he become? A deep valley cracked open. There was no bridge; at the bottom, spiked crags as sharp as spears. I felt separated forever from my uncle.
(Dangarembga 64)

Tambu finds herself questioning all her knowledge of her much beloved and revered uncle, from his genteel generosity which begins to appear disproportionate in comparison with his wealth, to his grandiose character which starts to reveal itself as an inadequate replica of a white man's character.

Babamukuru is at a peculiar position hanging between power and powerlessness that his white superiors arranged meticulously for him. He is given authority at the mission and over his family through his financial and academic accomplishments, yet he still remains unequal to his white peers—despite doing their bidding—because of his blackness as is the example of the indifference of the white nuns at the Sacred Heart school to his status and their essentialist reduction

of him to just another black man (McWilliams 107). In simple terms, Dangarembga explains in the novel that “the authorities thought Babamukuru was a good African. And it was generally believed that good Africans bred good African children who also thought about nothing except serving their communities” (107). The definition of a good African that British authorities had set in the colony was one of boundless servitude and narrow intellect which, when combined, guarantee an ideal vessel for colonial rule to continue. Babamukuru, to his credit, might not have been of narrow intellect, for, in a description of him in the homestead—away from the scrutiny of white supervision and artificial refinement—the author writes that “he looked younger and more loveable than he ever did at the mission” (Dangarembga 123). One is left to assume that Babamukuru might have had the intellectual perceptiveness to understand the grave treachery of his position to his cultural and national identity but still chose to keep it, which is indeed more accusative than it is defensive.

The strength of Babamukuru’s influence on those surrounding him assured the inheritance of his anglophilia by the younger generation of males in the family, especially his son Chido and nephew Nhamo. Whereas Chido is less present in the story, Nhamo’s is highly significant in the examination of the association of his anglophilia with his treatment of his female relatives. When Nhamo, being the only male offspring of Jeremiah’s at the beginning of *Nervous Conditions*, went to live with Babamukuru in order to attend the mission school, he underwent a radical change in attitude towards his family at the homestead. At first, he began to generate excuses not to return to the home of his parents during his school breaks because “all [their] poverty began to offend him” (Dangarembga 7). Tambu, in narrating her brother’s story, recalls, “Before he went to the mission, we had been able to agree that although our squalor was brutal, it was uncompromisingly ours; [...] but then something that he saw at the mission turned his mind to thinking that our homestead no longer had any claim upon him” (7). The family at the homestead, though they lived in abysmal

poverty, were reconciled to their predicament as long as it was theirs to cope with and tolerated no intrusions—this, of course, was no longer the case when Nhamo assumed an anglophile attitude and imperial insolence towards his own home and family.

After some time at the mission, Nhamo completely ceased to use Shona, his mother tongue—pretended he had forgotten it—and conversed only in English, which cut a deeper gash between him and his sisters who, for their lack of education, neither spoke nor understood English. To his own mother, who desired his education but, more importantly, longed to communicate with him (Dangarembga 53), he only spoke in fragmented, heavily accented Shona; Tambu dejectedly adds, “but he did not speak to her very often any more. He talked most fluently with my father. They had long conversations in English” (52). The author’s narration of this passage unswervingly threads the subjugation that anglophilia creates with sexist persecution, thus highlighting the double oppression that women suffer from in places with patriarchal social order and under colonial systems. In such societies, lower class, uneducated, black women, perceived as inferior in all binary oppositions, face the gravest risks and, sadly, often bear the heaviest losses. While expelling all African-ness from their identities—thus marginalizing the women in their lives who are often unlikely to assume the same attitude—and only retaining Englishness, men like Babamukuru and Nhamo still would not release the African label but would strive to alter its meaning to befit their categorization: Babamukuru’s intolerance of any Shona rituals throughout the novel being the best case in point. Of this, Dangarembga writes, in the voice of Tambu, “he wanted to eat his chicken and have eggs as well” (43).

Of all the instances where Babamukuru shows disdain for the customs of his culture, one particular occurrence is singled out as perhaps his most patronizing moment: the Christian church wedding he coerces Tambu’s parents into after almost two decades since their marriage within

Shona tradition. When familial disputes, poverty, sickness, and even death strike the homestead where Jeremiah and his wife Ma'Shingayi reside, a family conference is held by Babamukuru to find a solution. Upon Jeremiah's suggestion of a cleansing ritual, a practice frequently embraced by the Shona people, involving a medium and a sacrificial ox to purify their lives of unyielding evils, Babamukuru is profoundly offended. Despite the earnest efforts of Jeremiah and Tete Gladys⁶⁵ to persuade him, Babamukuru vehemently refuses to listen. He instead declares that the family issues began with the fact that his brother's marriage is sinful because it was never performed at a church (Dangarembga 146-147). This is how the idea of the incongruous church wedding came about, much to Tambu's dismay who, while being convinced that "the further we left the old ways behind the closer we came to progress" (147), still found offense in Babamukuru's verdict. Dangarembga, in Tambu's disheartened voice, writes, "The whole performance was ridiculous. The whole business reduced my parents to the level of the stars of a comic show, the entertainers" (163). The statement is a powerful recapitulation of the grotesqueness that results from the absurd anglophile attempts of assimilation.

Tambudzai, though she had completely rejected the notion of her parents being shepherded into a church wedding, was still of Babamukuru's opinion on forsaking Shona rituals and retained that her repugnance of the idea was borne of her own wickedness. Upon bringing the subject to Nyasha's attention—Nyasha who had shown great interest in Shona ceremonies and great embarrassment at her ignorance of them—Tambu was surprised to receive a lecture from her cousin that concluded in one of the most significant quotations of the novel: "It's bad enough [...] when a country gets colonised, but when the people do as well! That's the end, really, that's the end" (Dangarembga 147). It is not a surprise that Tambu holds such pejorative views of her own culture

⁶⁵ Babamukuru's sister.

after the perpetual derogatory indoctrination that she undergoes along with all Africans in contact with white people. Most of this indoctrination was done through Christianity and at religious educational institutions; in the novel, Tambu explains that during her time at the mission, when she attended Sunday school on a weekly basis, the notion of the graveness of sin was diligently drilled into the children's minds. She says, "[We] were taught every time that sin absolutely had to be avoided. It had to be avoided because it was deadly. I could see it. It was definitely *black*, we were taught" (150). The definitive nature of the instruction left nothing to be discussed: sin was black, sin was deadly, and the deadliness of blackness was to be taught to children whose own skins were black.

The latter is by no means the sole incident in *Nervous Conditions* in which the educational system in colonial Rhodesia asserts the diminished way African children view themselves. In the beginning of the novel, Dangarembga informs the reader of the government's decision to declare seven years old as the suitable age for African children to begin their schooling—an implication that while most children began at the age of six, African children were intellectually slower and thus inferior to white children (13). This is further confirmed when the writer continues to explain that most children were much older than seven when they first attended school; she writes, "Perhaps other parents, believing we really were a retarded lot, thought it best to let their children's abilities mature a little before exposing them to the rigours of formal education" (13). The branding 'retarded lot', offensive as it is, was what most Africans thought of themselves under the influence of British hegemony. This reflects Edward Said's vision on education as a colonial technique that emphasizes how education was used as a means to shape perceptions, control narratives, and maintain colonial dominance over colonized societies, thereby reinforcing cultural hierarchies and perpetuating inequality.

This projection of lowered self-esteem can be noticed in the alteration of Tambu's attitude towards white people from the beginning of the story to its end. At the homestead, before having been exposed to the white way of life and residing in close contact with white people, Tambu expresses an aversion towards them; in narrating the incident where she attempted to sell maize to a white elderly couple to fund her education, she outright declares dislike—almost disgust—for the way their skin looked (Dangarembga 27). However, this impression does not last, for, later on in the novel, after having lived among 'the Whites', Tambu's opinion changes drastically; she recounts,

This took away most if not all of the repulsion towards white people that had started with the papery-skinned Doris and her sallow, brown-spotted husband. I used to feel very guilty about feeling that way. I used to feel guilty and unnatural for not being able to love the Whites as I ought. So it was good to see the healthy young missionaries and discover that some Whites were as beautiful as we were. After that it did not take long for me to learn that they were in fact more beautiful and then I was able to love them. (Dangarembga 104)

The change in the narrator's opinion of white people is apparent even in the structure of this passage. Gradually, Tambu begins first to accept, then to admire, then to revere the 'Whites' as her superiors which she understands as her duty—something she *ought* to do.

The society surrounding Dangarembga's protagonist is what adamantly drives her to reprimand herself for her lack of admiration for white people at the beginning. During the colonial days in Rhodesia, it was generally understood that missionaries were a godsend, that while other whites (expatriates) might have been in Africa for their own self-interests, white missionaries were

on a self-sacrificing, altruistic mission to bring salvation to the ‘darkness’ of Africa, and on that note, they were treated like “minor deities” (Dangarembga 103). Ironically, however, Tambu adds that while a clear distinction between missionaries and expatriates had been drawn for her, she still could not differentiate between the two except in title. She explains, “The distinction [...] does not stick in my mind since I have not observed it myself in my dealings with these people” (103); the missionaries were not, in fact, any better than expatriates as their graciousness only extended so far. Just as they had done with Babamukuru in his childhood, the missionaries offered opportunities to young African boys—for it was rare the prospects included girls—as long as the window was narrow, as long as they were ‘good Africans’ who settled with whatever they were given and did not probe further (106).

When the opportunity did present itself to girls for once, the nuns from the Sacred Heart School came to the mission in search of female candidates for their institution, and Tambudzai was chosen. Tambu’s joy was immeasurable that “people, *white* people for that matter, thought [her] background was interesting”: having attracted the attention of the nuns, especially for their being white, was a great achievement to the young impressionable Tambu (177). As much as she tried, however, she could not impress the nuns with the more developed side of her family (her uncle Babamukuru’s side) as they only seemed intrigued by her poverty-stricken origins at the homestead. This, of course, is a distinctively typical behavior of missionaries in Africa who used assurances of relieving starvation and destitution to entice people to embrace Christianity in lieu of their own spiritual or religious beliefs in what is merely a practice of colonialism in an altruistic disguise. When Tambu finds that she succeeded the selection process, her prospects suddenly become appealing. She thinks of the possibility of attending the convent school as “another step away from the flies, the smells, the fields and the rags; from stomachs which were seldom full,

from dirt and disease” (183). The objective of the nuns is then attained when Tambu, their subject, regards their interest in her as her family’s ticket out of misery, and she accepts. It is certain that she comprehends the enormity of her potential loss in that case, as when she finishes enumerating the benefits of attending the convent to herself. Tambu tenderly recalls the river in her homeland. While the position offered her a step away from desolation, it also removed her a step away from her home; to her previous statement, she adds despondently, “Also from Nyamarira that I loved. [...] I felt numb; then I felt better. The cost would balance. What I needed I would take with me, the rest I would discard” (183).

That Tambu would discard too much worried Nyasha enormously and pushed her to plead with her cousin to reject the Sacred Heart School’s invitation to join the convent. Sarcastically, though truthfully, Nyasha calls the entire affair an opportunity “to forget who you were, what you were and why you were that” (Dangarembga 178-179). Arguing with Tambu, she explains to her that the convent follows a process of assimilation where youth with potential are recruited to mold their intellect in accordance with Christian and colonial hegemony—all to avoid them thinking for themselves and coming to conclusions that could threaten the existence of the British Empire (179). Nevertheless, despite Nyasha’s sharp reasoning and her strong influence on her cousin, she fails to persuade her because while Nyasha could afford to entertain her obstinate idealism being the wealthy Babamukuru’s daughter, Tambudzai could not. This is one of the instances in *Nervous Conditions* where the presence of the class struggle between the two branches of the Sigauke family becomes unmistakably evident, but it is not the only one. Tambu’s thoughts, overwhelmed by the abrupt change in her circumstances when she first arrived at her uncle’s house, take an unexpectedly masochistic turn. Describing herself as ignorant and dirty, Tambu declares that she

“deserved to suffer” (65) for assuming she could be part of a household so far above her with a family that “never got wet or cold” (74).

This decidedly dense difference—rooted in unjust wealth division—between Tambu and her uncle’s family finds its way even into their linguistic interactions. Much like the language barrier that Nhamo’s education set between him and his family, Tambu, replacing him at the mission, found herself at a completely new linguistic situation with her Anglicized relatives. Right after her arrival, she suddenly starts to mix between Shona and English because she cannot decide which would impress her uncle more (Dangarembga 80). At another rather comical point in the novel, Tambu, on her first night at her uncle’s house, works herself into a state of ardent discontentment with her cousin Nyasha after she observes her casual rudeness to her parents, especially after Nyasha invites her to smoke cigarettes in secret, and takes offense in their stead. When Tambu joins her in their bedroom, Nyasha asks her to switch off the lights as she could not sleep with them on not knowing that the unfortunate Tambu was not accustomed to electricity and had no clue how to do that. In her indignation, Tambu stubbornly refuses to confess her ignorance and silently climbs into her bed upon which her cousin, realizing the truth, tells her to “stop being a peasant” and shows her how to do it (89). Tambu, with her limited knowledge of the English language during that time, was highly offended at having been called a peasant which she actually mistook for the word ‘pheasant’—it is left to the reader to contemplate on whether Tambu would have been more or less offended had she understood her cousin’s real connotation. Dangarembga, as any ecofeminist author would, writes this witty passage seemingly with the intention of intricately linking the obvious class struggle with the less obvious linguistic struggle that Tambu, a peasant by all definitions, finds herself suffering from in the midst of her relatively bourgeois relations.

The scorn that Tambu feels towards Nyasha at this point of the story had stemmed from earlier encounters when Babamukuru and his family first returned from England and went to visit at the homestead. Before their departure abroad, Tambu and her cousins, Nyasha and Chido, were on intimately friendly terms, which intensified her sense of loneliness and envy at not being as close to them as her brother Nhamo pretended to be after their return. Nyasha's lack of decorum, her beauty, her short dress that barely covered her thighs, and especially her forgotten Shona and English substitution of it all aggravated Tambu to no ends, and no friendly attempt from Nyasha seemed to soften her. Maiguru, Babamukuru's wife and Nyasha and Chido's mother, interjecting on Tambu's invitation to Nyasha to dance, explained that her children did not understand Shona anymore—though, in truth, they could to some extent—thus fixing a full barrier between her children and their coarse peasant cousins. It becomes clear that she does not allow them to participate in the dance because, like her husband, she demeans Shona rituals and considers them beneath her family's status (42-43). Tambu, shocked at her aunt's declaration, finds herself asking questions of a nature fitting for an identity crisis; she wonders, "Shona was our language. What did people mean when they forgot it?" (42). She longingly reminisces of their earlier, much simpler childhoods—before England came between her and her cousins and turned them into strangers—when fluent talk in Shona, wild fruits, and swims in Nyamarira were all that connected them to each other.

In many other ways subtly infused into the plot of *Nervous Conditions*, the relationship between Nyasha and Tambu—which later on strengthens into an unbreakable bond of friendship and sisterhood—still faces a cultural barrier in some of its aspects. When Nyasha was welcoming her cousin into her new home with them, she showed her affectionate hospitality to her in a uniquely culturally hybrid manner. Tambu describes the gesture, saying, "Nyasha was on me with

a big hug, which I understood, and a kiss on both cheeks, which I did not” (Dangarembga 66). Tambu understood the hug, which was part of Shona culture, but could not see the significance of the kisses on the cheeks, which is a distinctly European greeting that Nyasha must have picked up in her time in England. Tambu, a highly perceptive character, was aware of all the differences that her stay at the mission made in her life despite her inability to truly belong in her new environment. When Anna, the maid at Babamukuru’s household, drastically changes her attitude towards Tambu from a generally chatty and casual confidence into kneeling when addressing her and not looking her in the eyes, Tambu begins to understand that a simple “change of address” had been powerful enough to make her into someone not even talkative Anna could comfortably talk to (85). In order not to be too awestruck with her uncle’s standards of living, Tambu is often seen searching for the imperfections in her new home to remind herself that its illusory glamor was not worth losing her identity for—like her brother Nhamo had. She settles her question of whether this was heaven or not by finding dirt in the form of dust; dust, an accumulation of history, would not be fully removed from the extravagant British furniture. Though Babamukuru and Maiguru had gone to great extents to maintain the appearance of divine domestic bliss, the dust riled by the buses remained, serving as a metaphor of the colonial past that cannot be erased. Her relatives were as human—as African—as she was, and Tambu was satisfied (71).

For Tambu, Babamukuru and his family were closer to white people than they were to their African roots, which is precisely the image that Babamukuru and his wife had strove for. On her first time drinking tea with Maiguru at her house, Tambu is surprised to see a tea-strainer, a luxury she had never encountered before that Maiguru believes is indispensable; Tambu reminds herself to try tea again at home with its leaves to decide on the so-called indispensability of the sieve (Dangarembga 73). Tea drinking, although mistaken for a tradition brought to Zimbabwe by the

British, is, in truth, a pillar in the diets of many Rhodesian cultures (Andreucci); it is, however, drunk with its leaves in Shona tradition, which is not how Maiguru, following English custom, had done it. In a metaphorical sense, this scene could be seen as the removal of Africanness from the cultural identity of an Anglophile. Here, tea leaves, symbolizing the African heritage of Maiguru and her family, are confined within an English tea-strainer, suggesting an attempt to 'purify' the tea by separating it from its African roots (Wright 10). The purification is indeed unnecessary and is often just a ruse to accredit imperialism where it does not merit credit. After having attended a sermon at the church, Nyasha surprises the family at the dinner table with a rhetorical question as exasperating to them as it was truthful; she muses, "it was all very well to render unto Caesar what was his, but who was to say what was Caesar's? Caesar. Then everything would be his!" (Dangarembga 100). Nyasha's impeccable intellect and wit, a great source of irritation to her parents especially Babamukuru (perhaps because he failed to refute her sharp arguments), once again pinpointed the heart of the issue when it came to the injustice of not only colonization but all binaries of dialectics of power.

As white people in Africa had used force to take possession of what was not theirs to begin with, whatever kindness they demonstrated was not considered an act of generosity but a duty of redemption. Mr. Matimba, one of Tambu's teachers at the first school she attended at the homestead had driven her into the nearby town Umtali in order to sell her maize to white people. When the previously mentioned Doris sees young Tambu, she is—ironically enough—greatly indignant at seeing the child work and, assuming Mr. Matimba was her father and was forcing her to work, calls the act, of all terms, an act of slavery (Dangarembga 28). After hearing of Tambu's misfortune from Mr. Matimba's quite exaggerated account, Doris donates enough money to keep Tambu in school for years, and when some bystanders praised Doris's generosity, others, bitterly but

truthfully, murmured that “white people could afford to be, in fact ought to be, generous” (29). Tambu’s lack of funds for her schooling and her family’s poverty are consequences of the social hierarchy established by colonialism—a hierarchy that puts Doris, a white settler, above Tambu, a native of the land, in all aspects of life. Doris’s gesture is thus hardly a kind one; it is only rendering onto Caesar what is actually Caesar’s.

When the dreaded generosity of white people reached Tambu in the form of her acceptance at the Sacred Heart School, it was evident that she would not withstand the kindness offered to her without profound sacrifice. An almost immediate alienation came for Tambu from her friends at the mission when news of her being chosen by the convent spread. The same friends who had competed with her for the position scorned and shunned her for associating with what they called her ‘Whites’ and for presumably participating in white activities—sports such as basketball and tennis—instead of local ones such as netball (Dangarembga 187). Once on the premises of Sacred Heart, and although Tambu notes the presence of a netball court (192) almost as a promise of considerate inclusivity, no such inclusivity extends to reality; of her first glance at the entrance of the school, Tambu narrates, “Disappointment. I looked and looked and searched carefully through the crowd, but I could not find a single black face which did not belong to our party, except of course for the porters. The porters were carrying trunks, but none of them offered to carry mine” (194). The way in which the narrator adds ‘of course’ to her statement about the porters being black is evidence of humble jobs being, as a matter of fact, assigned only to black people, and their services reserved only for white people.

Added to the absence of integration is the segregation of the black girls into a room of their own chosen as far down the corridor from the rest of the girls as possible, and into which six—rather than the usual four—students were to be crammed (194). The nun who was showing the

family around was having trouble remembering which of the girls, Nyasha and Tambu, was the one attending the school, repeatedly asking “which one is it?” (194). The nun was committing the everlasting offense of assuming all people of the same race were indistinguishably similar, what is often referred to as the mark of the plural (McWilliams 106)—a claim often adopted by white people to justify the dehumanizing act of reducing an individual’s being to their color. On top of that, the nun was making a miserably failed attempt to pronounce the family name enunciating each syllable into what absurdly sounded like ‘Mr. See-ga-ookey’, an Anglicized version of the Sigauke family name (107). Mr. Sigauke, Babamukuru, in a rare moment of powerlessness in the novel, was as invisible as his daughter and niece to the white nun; his title, his career, and his status were insignificant. He was simply reduced to another black man, and all of his endeavors to exert some of his influence in Tambu’s favor, to improve her living conditions, were in vain (Dangarembga 194). If even the usually intimidating Babamukuru was victim to the school’s implicit racism, then, Tambu swiftly realizes, concepts of inclusion, integration, and equality were plainly out of question at the convent.

Having grown up witnessing Babamukuru’s constant state of never quite being his own master, Nyasha had developed a sharp consciousness of the indirect devices of colonialism. With that awareness, as is often the case, came a heavy dread of falling victim to those devices, and Nyasha was torn between an acquired English identity that came naturally to her and an African identity she painfully struggled to construct. Maiguru admits her dismay at her children having “picked up all these disrespectful ways in England” (Dangarembga 74). In a similar vein, Nyasha confesses to her cousin that she has no control over her Anglicized attitude, upsetting her parents. She expresses a desire that her parents had sent them back home before the Englishness settled in, before they were “stuck with hybrids for children” (76). Of both their children, Babamukuru and

Maiguru's disappointment landed harder on Nyasha than it did on Chido—most likely because of her gender—and they did not attempt to hide their embarrassment of her behavior when in company. Nyasha's ignorance when it came to Shona culture, from her awkwardly clumsy greetings of the elders, which she never quite got the handle of, to her tiny dresses and tight-fitted clothing, mortified Babamukuru, so he preferred to avoid her in public as much as possible and, in turn, so did she (99).

This pitiable relationship that Nyasha had with her father, in addition to her inability to fit in with her peers, burdened her mental health deeply. When Tambu arrived at the mission and started attending school there, it had been three years since Babamukuru returned to Rhodesia, and three years since Nyasha had started her schooling there, yet Tambu begins to notice that Nyasha still has no friends. Tambu narrates, "The girls did not like the way she spoke. They were still imitating her accent behind her back [...]. As it turned out, it was not Nyasha's accent they disliked, but Nyasha herself. 'She thinks she is white,' they used to sneer, and that was as bad as a curse" (94). Nyasha, paradoxically as she was the one being accused of masquerading whiteness, was the most rebellious of her peers against white colonialism, and her defiance came from her hybridity. Her obsessive reading of history, her political analyses of the African situation, and her interest in the question of South Africa's revolution (93), all on top of the oppressive weight of her father and the merciless discrimination of her society, eventually brought about her mental breakdown. In a hysterical episode that Nyasha suffers from at the end of the novel, she passionately tears her history books with her teeth, fervently repeating to Tambu that it is *their* history, *their* lies (201).

The pronoun 'they' that Nyasha raves about recurrently refers to the concern of the present study: the oppressors, the powerful, the Big, to talk in terms of Roy's narrative, that operate the dualist systems of domination, and in Nyasha's case, the colonizer. Her rage is rooted in one

coherent statement in the incoherent chaos of her breakdown where she ponders, “Do you see what they’ve done? They’ve taken us away. [...] All of us. They’ve deprived you of you, him of him, ourselves of each other. We’re groveling”, and in her despair she adds, “I won’t grovel. Oh no, I won’t” (Dangarembga 200). Nyasha’s ferocious digestion of history in her circumstances leads her to an unfathomable question of identity, and the same mouth that digested that colonial history violently vomits it—or in this case, shreds it. It is, therefore, pitiful that in all Nyasha’s endeavors to rid herself of Englishness and embrace Africanness, her identity is once more questioned at the end of *Nervous Conditions* when a psychiatrist refuses to look into her case because he claims that Africans did not suffer from her illness, that hers was a white illness (201). Speaking in an interview of her characters Nyasha and Tambu, and drawing from her personal experience, Dangarembga comments on Tambu’s ability to persist in her circumstances unlike Nyasha. She explains that Tambu “has [a] very solid background. [Unlike Nyasha who at an early age was uprooted from her culture, Tambu] knows exactly where she's come from. She may be leaving it, but it's there for her” (qtd. in Okonkwo 67).

Remembering, in *Nervous Conditions*, is employed as an act of tacit rebellion, and it manifests in both Tambudzai and her mother Ma’Shingayi. Tambu, who carries her grandmother’s stories and her mother’s forewarnings, is urged incessantly to remember throughout the novel—by her loved ones and by her own conscience. Younger Tambu, though uneducated, seems to understand the significance of remembering as, when attempting to protect her cousins from the Englishness that engulfed them, insists on inviting them to dance a traditional dance; she reasons that “things like that [...] would bring their speech back more quickly” (Dangarembga 42-43). It is atrocious to Tambu that someone could forget where they come from and watching her brother Nhamo and her cousins Nyasha and Chido lose their mother tongue was incomprehensible to her.

She did not understand why one would need to be told not to forget; upon leaving for the convent school, after many admonitions to remember, Tambu wonders to herself, “Don’t forget, don’t forget, don’t forget. Nyasha, my mother, my friends. Always the same message. But why? If I forget them, my cousin, my mother, my friends, I might as well forget myself. And that, of course, could not happen. So why was everybody so particular to urge me to remember?” (188). Tambu, trusting with utter naivety that it is impossible to forget, later on becomes herself the proof of its possibility when she begins to forget to answer her cousin’s desperate letters due to her absorption with her new situation at Sacred Heart (197).

Throughout the novel, both Tambu and Ma’Shingayi are observed to struggle with accepting Englishness in all of its forms. In one instance, Babamukuru gifts Ma’Shingayi a Dover stove, a heating stove widely used in British households, after the church wedding he had arranged for her—a wedding she was as adamant against as her daughter but against which she did not express herself. Ma’Shingayi, however, still preferred the use of her old hearth and would still choose it over the much more developed—but much more English—Dover stove. Ma’Shingayi’s comfort depended on her closeness to her culture, and, understanding the Dover stove as a symbol of Englishness, development, and western intervention, one could easily place her position in the matter (Okonkwo 66). Tambudzai, not unlike her mother, is found to hesitate under the overwhelming weight of Englishness that she becomes suddenly exposed to under her uncle’s roof. By detaching herself from the identities of her Anglicized relatives, keeping cautious of the English ways surrounding her, and, interestingly, slowly digesting small proportions of the British food presented to her (Okonkwo 67), while still insisting on consuming Shona meals, Tambu manages to stomach Englishness in small, harmless doses.

When Nyasha's breakdown occurs at the end of the novel, Tambu, who could not trace its reasons, reverently listened to her mother who explained that "the problem is the Englishness, so you just be careful!" (Dangarembga 203). Having been as careful as she was, Tambu still ends up doubting her presumed resistance,

Was I being careful enough? I wondered. For I was beginning to have a suspicion, no more than the seed of a suspicion, that I had been too eager to leave the homestead and embrace the 'Englishness' of the mission; and after that the more concentrated 'Englishness' of Sacred Heart. [...] I banished the suspicion, buried it in the depths of my subconscious, and happily went back to Sacred Heart. I was young then and able to banish things, but seeds do grow. (203)

Tambudzai, who was herself undergoing a process of brainwashing within her new environment, had failed to see the seeds of Englishness that had grown over—and eventually smothered—her cousin. Ma'Shingayi, however, untouched as she was by any culture other than her own, knew that the same Englishness that had seeped into her son and stirred the ancestors' wrath against him, was destroying Nyasha, and would, indeed, pursue Chido and Tambu. Ominously but resignedly, she would explain to Tambu that "you couldn't expect the ancestors to stomach so much Englishness" (203).

Examining the cultural clashes between colonizers and colonized individuals in *Nervous Conditions* uncovers the enduring consequences of racial discrimination, segregation, anglophilia, identity crises, hybridity, and class struggle. These aspects emphasize the necessity of approaching the novel through a postcolonial ecofeminist lens. As this section has demonstrated, the wide-ranging system of oppression in the story, beginning with the forms mentioned, requires a larger

scope of examination than the theories available—hence postcolonial ecofeminism as a suggested theory of a more inclusive reach. Pursuing one of ecofeminism’s most substantial instructions, this section has proved that Dangarembga writes against dualism by intricately introducing, in a malicious light, characters and entities that uphold binary oppositions of civilized/native, white/black, educated/uneducated, and wealthy/poor and, in a flattering light, characters that defy these oppositions. In addition to the latter, this work proceeds henceforth to analyze *Nervous Conditions* in alignment with the same postcolonial ecofeminist objectives finding root in culture and identity conflicts, food politics, cultivation of land, female workforce, sexual freedom and reproduction, and in femininity being the core of oppression as it is understood in postcolonial ecofeminist research.

III. Power Relations and the Politics of Food in *Nervous Conditions*

For postcolonial ecofeminism to emerge into existence, an intersection between postcolonialism and ecofeminism was indispensable but largely overlooked and often even rejected for fear of tumbling into essentialism. Essentialism, with its tendency to oversimplify and generalize complex identities, posed a significant concern, hindering the exploration of this theoretical space. This anxiety, rooted in the acknowledgment of the diverse and nuanced experiences within postcolonial and ecofeminist contexts, often led to the neglect of this vital intersection. This guardedness, though well-intentioned, was vastly misplaced and predisposed to lead ecofeminist critique even farther from the female body. It is, however, impossible to achieve absolute accuracy in feminist critique if the critic discards the notion of the female body—the main reason behind women’s oppression—for a more disembodied perception: the womb, the breasts, the skin, and the hair are the stimulus for feminist criticism and cannot be disregarded (Peracullo

29). Having affirmed the inevitability of the body in feminism and, necessarily, ecofeminism, the need to uphold the same in postcolonial criticism arises. For that, one must simply return to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* for its ever relevant connection to *Nervous Conditions*; in it, Fanon writes, "the relations of man with matter, with the world outside, and with history are in the colonial period simply relations with food" (308). As a novel largely influenced by Fanon's work in that specific book, *Nervous Conditions* vividly illustrates the connection between the characters' relationship with food and their power dynamics. In this hierarchy, food scarcity disproportionately affects women and children before men, while the consumption of meat signifies power and superiority, contrasting with vegetarianism associated with powerlessness and inferiority.

1. The Dualism of Meat Consumption and Vegetarianism in *Nervous Conditions*

In *Nervous Conditions*, Tsitsi Dangarembga evidently positions a dichotomy of meat consumption/vegetarianism in which vegetarianism is for the oppressed as she associates it with the native Shona diet consumed mainly by women and children as opposed to the meat-eating colonizers, patriarchs, and Anglophones. The relationship of vegetarianism with postcolonial ecofeminism, as is clarified in the first chapter of this work, revolves around the notion that plant-eating is a feminine routine regarded for its feebleness when faced with the masculine practice of meat-eating. Carol Adams, in *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, writes of the attempts of a nineteenth century English doctor called George Beard to use plant-based diets as a means to warrant the 'savageness' of the colonized natives as opposed to their beef-eating superiors (53-54). Justifying himself with Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, Beard explains that, in short, consumption of other animals sets the white Englishman above other races who share their plant diets with animals; he outright confesses that "savages who feed on poor food are poor savages, and intellectually far inferior to the beef-eaters" (qtd. in Adams 54). In *Nervous Conditions*, an environment where a

plant-eating, black, colonized race coexists—for lack of a better word—with a meat-eating, white, colonizing race, the circumstances of Beard’s racist deductions persist.

It can be observed in *Nervous Conditions* that the Shona diet is practically purely vegetarian and, at times, even vegan. Sustaining mostly on sadza⁶⁶ and vegetables, and reserving their animals for farm work, the Shona exclude meats and animal products almost entirely from their diet. The Sigauke family at the homestead milk their cows only during their natural⁶⁷ pregnancies, and, as their dung is imperative for the ecosystem of the farm (used as both fertilizer and construction material), they are too dependable to be slaughtered for meat (Rhu and Wright 276). In Shona culture, cows are exceedingly valuable—apparently as valuable as women for they are used as dowries to be exchanged for brides in a trade where “men employ both of them for their labor, homemaking, and reproductive capacities” (276). Slaughtering animals on the Sigauke farm happens only as a rare manifestation in events worthy of celebration—and more often than not, those events revolve around the reception of Babamukuru, the patriarch, to the family home (276). Dangarembga, in description of this occurrence, writes, “On the days that Babamukuru came to visit we killed a cock. Or rather, we killed a cock if there was one to spare” (8). It frequently fell to Tambu and her younger sister Netsai to slaughter the chicken on these occasions—a chore which Tambu confesses to abhor. With both a woman’s and a child’s compassion with the animal, Tambu painfully describes how the screeches of the bird and the sight and smell of blood sicken her (12),

⁶⁶ The Shona word for a thick porridge made of finely ground corn (mealies) traditional to people in west, east, and central Africa, famously known as the Igbo word for it ‘foo-foo’ due to its mention in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*.

⁶⁷ Industrialized farms force pregnancies on cows and separate them from their calves to keep milk production going all year round.

and her relief is immeasurable on an occasion where Nhamo does not come home and she no longer has to kill it (8).

In a thought-provoking manner, Dangarembga addresses the inequality of labor between genders on a farm in the same vein as Tambu's sensitive account of the killing of a chicken. She writes, "Next time, I thought naively, Nhamo will catch it himself. If he wants to eat chicken, he will catch it and kill it. I will pluck it and cook it. That seemed a fair division of labor" (Dangarembga 12). The butchery of the animal was originally a task designated to Nhamo who never deigned to complete it, and it came to Tambu instead, so while bitterly expressing her revulsion at having to kill the chicken, Tambu also expresses her revulsion at having to kill it instead of her brother. More insufferably, while slaughtering, cleaning, cooking, and serving the animals was considered a labor for women (and children), eating it was not. Upon Babamukuru's arrival home after years of residency in Britain, a feast out of proportion with the poverty of the homestead is readied in his honor, and, as a rarity, there was meat. As serving men first was the custom, one of Tambu's aunts, in her excitement over the patriarch's return, had served all the meat to the men; the women and children, eating in the kitchen, had to satisfy themselves with vegetables instead. Tambu, as if reassuring the reader of the ordinariness of the incident, says, "We, who rarely tasted meat, found no reason to complain" (42). This appears to be a familiar occurrence in the life of Tambu and the women of her family as they were all routinely treated as what Carol Adams calls 'second-class citizens' deserving only of 'second-class foods' such as fruits, vegetables, and grains (48).

When Tambudzai moves to her uncle's house later in the novel, one of the characteristics that broadened the material gap between her and her relatives was their vastly different diets. Having been seldom in the presence of meat and animal products, Tambu is, at first, overwhelmed

by “these relatives of [hers] who ate meat, and not only meat but meat and eggs for breakfast” (Dangarembga 91). Tambu struggles with the food served on her uncle’s table—English food that was aesthetically pleasing but that was neither filling nor tasteful. To save her the embarrassment, Tambu’s aunt Maiguru sympathizes with her on account of having suffered the same way on her first days in England and orders the traditional “sadza that nobody else [at the table] would eat” for her (82). In a confusion of chaotic dreams that night, Tambu sees “the colonization of her brother’s diet” (Rhu and Wright 279) as she fearfully witnesses Nhamo stuffing native mealies⁶⁸ covered in English gravy in his mouth. Nhamo, indeed, was already dead by that point in *Nervous Conditions*: an event that his mother blamed on Maiguru, specifically for the food she served him. In this regard, the recurrent phrase of ‘stomaching the Englishness’ returns with a renewed—and more literal—significance. Ma’Shingayi is certain that her son died from the Englishness he had stomached at the mission; his lightened skin, plumped body, Anglicized appetite, and vanished Shona were all signs of doom to his mother (Rhu and Wright 279).

It is evident in the passage where Ma’Shingayi receives the news of her son’s death that the majority of her blame rests on Maiguru instead of Babamukuru. When Maiguru attempts to comfort her, her rage is unleashed in a furious monologue, accusing Maiguru of bewitching her son, stealing his tongue, and killing him (Dangarembga 54), it is only after that that she adds “And you too, Babamukuru! Pthu! I spit at you! You and your education have killed my son” (54). To Ma’Shingayi, one’s roots are cut first through what they stomach before they are cut through what they read. It follows that Tambudzai, cautious and hesitant as she was, had managed to rein in the Englishness because of her placing of careful “small portions of it in [her] mouth” (82); the huge gulps that ruined Nhamo and Nyasha had “refused to go down [her] throat in large quantities” (82),

⁶⁸ Maize plant, or corn, is known as mealies in most parts of southern Africa.

and she alone remained intact. To claim that Tambu stomached small portions is not to claim that she did not stomach any at all. In fact, on her return to her parents' home after months of residing with Babamukuru at the mission, Tambu is caught thinking "Bread and margarine! I would have preferred egg and bacon!" (134). The slight alteration—still noticeable to her own mother—in Tambudzai further aggravates the tension between Ma'Shingayi and Maiguru, and in a flurry of passionate frustration, Ma'Shingayi remonstrates to Tambu,

Maiguru has turned you against me with her money and her white ways [...] If it is meat you want that I cannot provide for you, if you are so greedy you would betray your own mother for meat, then go to your Maiguru. She will give you meat. I will survive on vegetables as we all used to. And we have survived, so what more do you want? You have your life. Go to your Maiguru and eat sausage. (Dangarembga 140-141)

The reiterated inference to motherhood, while signifying Ma'Shingayi's bitter anguish over losing her children, is also loaded with implications of the connection with the 'mother' nature and the 'mother' tongue that greed for meat and for all it represents—power, whiteness, Englishness—has disrupted.

Endeavoring to preserve the Shona diet from Anglicized corruption, Dangarembga, though having written *Nervous Conditions* in the English language, goes to great lengths to avoid translating Shona terms for food. In addition to sadza and mealies, she leaves the names of vegetables, *covo* and *derere*, and fruits, *matamba*, *nhengeni* and *matunduru*, completely untranslated—native fruits which Tambu and her cousins had grown "too civilised" (120) to enjoy the way they had in their childhood (Rhu and Wright 275-276). Determined to write her culture along with her female protagonists into a victory of some sort, Dangarembga overturns the biased

balance of masculine meat consumption and feminine vegetarianism in an intriguing passage in *Nervous Conditions*. The author moves from serving no meat to the women of the Sigauke family—and in one case rancid meat so that it does not go to waste while the “patriarchy” consumes the refrigerated meat (Dangarembga 135-136)—to an unprecedented instance where the meat is reserved for a woman alone. A pivotal moment in the novel unfolds when Lucia, Ma’Shingayi’s sister, returns to the homestead, putting an end to her sister’s hunger strike⁶⁹. Bringing meat exclusively for Ma’Shingayi, Lucia explicitly instructs Jeremiah in front of everyone, emphasizing its reserved status (185). Thus, through troubling the dualism of meat consumption and vegetarianism that she had established at the beginning of *Nervous Conditions*, Dangarembga warrants a more sanguine tone for the paths of her female characters. However, as the author portrays the women in her novel as more in control of their diets and protective of their young, she also exposes them to the perils of unconventionality—specifically, hunger and anorexia.

2. Hunger and Anorexia: The Burdens of Motherhood and Womanhood

The unfair division between the sexes that Tambu laments at the beginning⁷⁰ of *Nervous Conditions* is a postcolonial ecofeminist issue par excellence, as it appears to haunt women in poverty-stricken, colonized, and oppressive patriarchies the most. This not only puts women under the obligation to provide more labor than men but also to afford more hunger as they participate in “deliberate self-deprivation, offering men [and children] the ‘best’ foods at the expense of their own nutritional needs” (Adams 49), and this results in one of the concepts to be discussed in this section: hunger. While hunger is a connection forced upon individuals with their bodies, anorexia,

⁶⁹ Ma’Shingayi suffers a breakdown when she learns of Tambudzai’s acceptance at Sacred Heart and begins to refuse food completely—it is never declared explicitly but Ma’Shingayi appears to be on a hunger strike in protest against Babamukuru (and Englishness) taking yet another child from her.

⁷⁰ Passage mentioned in the preceding section: see Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*, page 12.

in *Nervous Conditions*, becomes an endeavor to escape the boundaries of the body into a cerebral abstract realm. Just as childbearing and childbirth are often viewed by ecofeminists as the entrenched bonds of the female body with nature, rendering it—and femininity in general—inferior to the masculine body free to delve into intellectuality, so is the case with hunger in *Nervous Conditions* where the elected solution becomes anorexia. With hunger as the burden of motherhood and anorexia as the burden of womanhood, Dangarembga communicates women's nervous conditions and their endeavors at liberation through their connection with food and with their bodies.

In writing about hunger as the path of ecofeminist awakening for women (in the context of Filipino women), Peracullo defines hunger as “an embodied experience [that] exposes the human body as sexed and gendered; biological yet also social, political, and cultural; material yet metaphorical and symbolic; and a site of not only varied oppressions but also liberation. Hunger is therefore foremost a bodily experience but also symbolic or metaphorical” (26). While hunger is perhaps the most unignorable bodily sensation—second only to pain and sometimes equivalent to it—its ability to render a body ‘sexed and gendered’ makes it liable to symbolism against oppression, this being the case in *Nervous Conditions*, especially with the characters Ma’Shingayi and Nyasha. Peracullo argues, quite truthfully, that hunger strikes women more than it does men on account of their often being primary caretakers of their families—especially children (36). In colonial and postcolonial environments, where poverty and famine reign, women are most likely to forgo food in order to provide for their families thus making themselves more vulnerable to malnutrition than men. Hunger is a present issue in *Nervous Conditions* where famine had spread throughout Rhodesia due to the interference of the inexperienced British colonial government

which, with its lack of knowledge of the land, had caused a permanent struggle of chronic famine and hunger (Rhu and Wright 275).

In the novel, Ma'Shingayi is often witnessed struggling to feed her family in the destitute circumstances of the homestead. In one instance, Ma'Shingayi schemes to send her husband and son off to Tete's house for at least one day in order to lessen the demand on food they cannot provide, but Jeremiah demands provisions instead. Exclaiming that "these men don't think!" (Dangarembga 33), Ma'Shingayi wonders how the men in her family self-assuredly ask for the corn and sweet potatoes they did not plant and the chicken they cannot afford to slaughter. This passage further reinforces the concept that hunger is a heavier burden on women than it is on men; women appear to be the only ones aware of the dire conditions that their families suffer from while men require luxuries in an atmosphere of near starvation. This nonexistence of familiarity with food production—or lack thereof—is descended directly from the absolute absence of males in the environment of the kitchen and the forced residence of women in it. In *Nervous Conditions*, the disinterest of men in matters of the kitchen is represented adequately in Babamukuru's complete disregard of his—or rather, Maiguru's—kitchen in comparison with the rest of his house. While the house at the mission is, in Tambu's eyes, extravagantly decorated, the kitchen reflects poor maintenance as it lacks repairs in most of its facilities. Tambudzai explains that this disrepair has "more to do with means and *priorities* than taste" (69), and Babamukuru simply did not prioritize the comfort of the women in his family.

As positions of power are significantly imbedded in the architecture of any building, in a case of postcolonial ecofeminist critique, a building becomes what Okonkwo refers to as "a site of conflict" (56). The dilapidated kitchen and the over furnished living room in Babamukuru's house are far from being the only examples of such a case in *Nervous Conditions*, for there seems to be

an alarming number of instances when women practically reside in the kitchen all throughout the novel. One striking account of this is when the narrator is casually describing the sleeping arrangement at the homestead; she writes,

The bed and its mattress belonged to my father. My mother was supposed to sleep on the reed mat on the floor with her babies before they were old enough to join me in the kitchen, although she hardly ever did. Usually she fell asleep in the kitchen and could not be bothered to rouse herself to go up to the house. All the women in the family—Mother, Netsai and myself—preferred it this way (Dangarembga 62).

The disturbing air of familiarity with which Tambudzai describes the discrimination allotted to her mother, her sister, herself, and her entire sex is perhaps more distressing than the injustice itself. With complete resignation, the women of the Sigauke family have grown accustomed to their conditions; Ma'Shingayi fought neither for a place beside her husband rather than at the foot of his bed nor for a place outside the kitchen at all. She, in her exhaustion after her day's labor, simply slept on the floor of her kitchen along with her daughters simply awaiting the next day's labor. In the same resigned tone, Tambu adds after the latter description, "The other bedroom in the house was a spare" indicating that, indeed, the sleeping arrangement, just like Babamukuru's kitchen, was not an issue of space or of materialism but of established power relations (62).

The responsibility to feed one's family that the men neglect in *Nervous Conditions* falls on the shoulders of mothers and daughters; Tambudzai and Netsai, both barely of adolescent age, carry more weight in household affairs than their father. In a rather heartrending occurrence in the novel, Tambu discovers for the first time the delight of "planting things for merrier reasons than the chore of keeping breath in the body" (64) when she sees flowers in front of her uncle's house. Tambu,

whose main concern at the homestead was to keep herself and her family alive, had never moved beyond physiological needs⁷¹ for long enough to consider aestheticism, as this—in addition to her previously-mentioned surprise that food could indeed look interesting⁷²—demonstrates. What was different at Babamukuru’s house on this regard was not in others, for, though food was plentiful, women were still portioned second-class foods. Maiguru, visibly terrified of her husband’s unmatched tantrums, begins to fuss over him—as if to distract him—when he comes home and notices that the family had almost begun dinner without him. As he serves himself, Maiguru piously holds up Babamukuru’s plate for him, but still displeased, he directs his anger at Nyasha for her reading and eating habits. In an act of pure deliberate self-deprivation, Maiguru awaits her husband’s rage to subside and offers him a new dish, claiming that his “old meal was no longer fresh. She said she would eat it herself” (81) and repeats the procedure of holding his plate for him while he serves it. This time, however, Nyasha refuses to comply with the ritual and, to her family’s shock, skips the ceremony and serves herself.

The tension between Nyasha and Babamukuru in *Nervous Conditions* culminates in a food battle: he forces her to eat food, she forces herself to vomit it. Nyasha’s anorexia is symbolism for many things: for her rebellion against her father, for her inability to stomach Englishness and colonialism, for her struggle to experience her body when all other means of experiencing it are prohibited, for her endeavor to remain in a childlike shapeless body unbound by feminine features. Nyasha’s anorexia, in short, while a physiological phenomenon, is still an attempt at self-expression where social, political, and especially familial ties create a toxicity that calls for rebellion. Environments where “repressive family interactions and dysfunctional communication

⁷¹ See Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.

⁷² Return to *Nervous Conditions* by Tsitsi Dangarembga, page 82.

patterns” characterize the relationships between parents and children, eating disorders such as anorexia are inevitable (Mphiko 78). Anorexia is usually an illness common to white women due to their attempts to align with the thinness in western beauty standards; this is in contrast with African standards where fullness of the body is considered a pillar of beauty standards (Uwakweh 81). This made Nyasha’s case a unique one and would explain the reaction of the doctor that refused to treat her because he genuinely believed that Africans could not suffer from anorexia, that hers was a white—and thus copied—illness (Dangarembga 201). Nyasha’s duality of background, the clash of her two cultural foundations, had pushed her towards anorexia as a means both to reject the patriarchy of her culture by never growing out of her childlike form and to refuse to stomach any more of the plateful of Englishness her father would force on her.

Nyasha’s anorexia is associated with both her sexuality and her reading ever since the beginning of *Nervous Conditions* where Babamukuru is shown forcing her to eat for the first time right after forbidding her from reading the notorious novel *Lady Chatterly’s Lover* known for its carnal implications. In switching to reading to replace food, and in embracing her anorexia, Nyasha appears to be “mourning for a pre-oedipal body” (qtd. in Plasa 37) that her father did not cruelly disapprove of. Her tragic story reads as that of a woman who, facing the wrath of a social and familial patriarchy, collapses knowing she did not deserve it; Nyasha’s breakdown was the result of the conundrum abridged as “If I am to keep by father's love, I must not become a woman. If I do not become a woman, I will die” (Shaw 10). Nyasha, who “devoured English letters with a ferocious appetite” like her father, and unlike him, shredded them with her teeth and vomited them, is an emblem of female intellectuality, decolonization, and rebellion in *Nervous Conditions* (Dangarembga 36). Her attempts and failure to reach disembodiment through a bodily purge of

colonial and patriarchal ideologies fix her as the ideal intersection between ecofeminism and postcolonialism and a center of interest for this work.

IV. Between Production and Reproduction: Marriage, Female Sexuality, and the Unequal Division of Labor in Nervous Conditions

Tsitsi Dangarembga, when writing *Nervous Conditions*, positioned her female characters within a narrow classification of the ideal woman as a combination of a good daughter, a good wife, and a good mother. To fulfill their roles of faultless womanhood in relation with the men in their lives, these women become trapped in a loop of production in terms of manual labor and reproduction in terms of childbearing and contained sexualities. The section examines how women in the novel react to their entrapment in this cycle, providing material for ecofeminist criticism where the land, cultivated by women, produces, the women reproduce, and men control both.. This section of the third chapter explores how marriage, sexuality, and labor division impact Dangarembga's female characters in *Nervous Conditions*. The novel, as described by the protagonist Tambu, revolves around "my escape and Lucia's; about my mother's and Maiguru's entrapment; and about Nyasha's rebellion" (Dangarembga 1)—in essence, a story about women and their circumstances.

The households found in *Nervous Conditions* are built on purely patriarchal foundations where wives and daughters are completely under the control of husbands and fathers which is a family structure inherited from British culture as a result of colonialism. Arguing that a daughter's sexuality is a matter of no interest to her father originally in Shona culture, Shaw writes that Babamukuru's hounding surveillance over Nyasha's sexuality "is motivated by his need to protect and promote his position in the colonial system [...] where fathers and daughters live under the

same roof” (10). Throughout the novel, Babamukuru shows great contempt for his daughter, believing thoroughly that “there’s something wrong with her” (Dangarembga 84); he finds offense in her reading, her dresses, her companions, and in her entire behavior generally. When her aunt Ma’Shingayi jokingly makes a reference to her becoming a woman by pinching her breast, Babamukuru, struggling not to display “his inbred aversion to such biological detail”, declares his daughter unworthy of marriage as any husband who would take her would “soon be wanting [his cattle] back” (130-131). Proving that Babamukuru’s association of those choices with sexuality is random at best, Dangarembga assures the reader that Nyasha, despite her father’s belief, is not sexually active when she writes a scene of her wishing she had done something to deserve her father calling her a ‘whore’ (119).

Nyasha, in that passage, interestingly condenses the entire experience of the taboo of female sexuality in one sentence when she sardonically but quite truthfully declares, “Honestly, even on my wedding day they’ll be satisfied only if I promise not to enjoy it” (119). The lack of female sexual identity—and of sexual education in general—in *Nervous Conditions* leads to the sexualization of would-be mundane occurrences in the event of the absence of that tabooization. In a striking example of this unfortunate purity, Tambu, who had only ever known “sundry old rags” (Dangarembga 70), sees a tampon for the first time when Nyasha introduces it to her. She—upon noting that the drawings on the box were especially intriguing to her as she confesses they were not informed about reproductive systems in school—finds the tampon’s shape aggressively offensive and initially refuses to use it (96). Laughing at her cousin, Nyasha assures her that if such was the case, Tambu would be safer losing her virginity to a tampon “which wouldn’t gloat over its achievement, than a man, who would add [hers] to his hoard of hymens” (96). Nyasha’s bold declaration, coupled with her mother’s strong aversion to tampons, exposes the double standards

prevalent in the social order of *Nervous Conditions*. Men are allowed to collect hymens and boast about them but women are not allowed to use hygienic products that might infiltrate their virginity, nor even receive education about the roles that their bodies carry in reproduction. In another horrid confirmation of this lack of sexual education, Dangarembga writes that “menstruation was a shamefully unclean secret that should not be allowed to contaminate immaculate male ears by indiscreet reference to this type of dirt in their present” in the oblivious tone of a daughter—here Tambu—indoctrinated to be ashamed of her body (70).

Nyasha’s sexuality, as an archetype for a daughter’s sexuality in a patriarchal environment, is forcibly curbed by her father, a patriarch and a representative of the social order. Babamukuru’s possessiveness is an indication of his desire to contain her sexual identity and prevent its progress, which, according to him, could be traced in her reading of D. H. Lawrence, in her short dresses, in her walking with young men at the mission, and in her refusal to make herself small by kneeling to the Sigauke patriarchy (Shaw 11). Hypocritically, Babamukuru’s possessiveness of his daughter disappears when she crosses his lines as he immediately places culpability on Maiguru and, in an expression heavy with blame, transcends from claiming Nyasha as his possession to calling her “your daughter” in an accusatory attitude to his wife (Dangarembga 81). This is previously echoed in the case of Tambu’s parents where Jeremiah resorts to calling Tambu “this child of yours” whenever addressing her mother about her misgivings (24). Tambu’s sexuality, though not as prevalent an issue as her cousin Nyasha’s in *Nervous Conditions* because of Tambu’s mild temperament and tendency against rebellion, is just as controlled but in a subtler manner. Upon writing on her passion for dancing, Tambu describes the untamed movements of her dancing in her early childhood as amusing to her family; she adds, however,

As I had grown older and the music began to speak to me more clearly, my movements had grown stronger, more rhythmical and luxuriant; but people had not found it amusing anymore, so that in the end I realised that there were bad implications in the way I enjoyed the rhythm. My dancing compressed itself into rigid, tentative gestures. (Dangarembga 42)

Tambu, more acquiescent to social rules than her cousin, had not required more than disapproving glances to realign herself with what was decreed as correct. Despite it being an expressive means of communication to her, and despite her rooted connection to it, Tambu ‘compresses’ her dancing into a more appropriate, though stiff version.

The sexualization—hence the repression—of Tambu’s dancing, in addition to other alike instances, falls within what Shaw finds as the three binaries of sexuality in Dangarembga’s work: pleasure/sin, self-expression/dependence, individual right/cultural compulsion where the pursuit of sexual identity in any form stands opposed to the concept of a good daughter (8). Daughters, in *Nervous Conditions*, are, as Nyasha sees herself in her father’s eyes, “water to be poured wherever he wants” (Dangarembga 119). The shapeless obedience required of daughters to their fathers relies foremost on their renouncing of pleasure, self-expression, and individual rights in favor of cultural and social duty. This social duty, more often than not, revolves around a marriage of convenience to the family’s financial situation where “the daughters will bring cattle” (125). When Nyasha shows resistance against this unquestionable role, Babamukuru beats her within an inch of her life into what he hoped would be submission. In her most defiant yet perhaps most reckless moment in the novel, Nyasha stands up to her father when he calls her a ‘whore’ and, upon receiving merciless blows from him, hits him back (114-115). This direct rebellion of Nyasha almost leads to her death as Babamukuru’s fury and shock set him on a vindictive, violent rage as he swears—and actively

attempts—to kill her (115). Only Maiguru’s interference and pleas save Nyasha from an almost certain death at her father’s hand. When the origins of this familiar scene of honor killing are inspected, the reader finds that Babamukuru almost murdered his own daughter just because he had seen her talking to a boy outside past her curfew.

It appears that, in *Nervous Conditions*, female sexuality is repressed until it is to be offered into a marriage to be exchanged with materialistic and reproductive intentions. Marriage is not the sexual liberation it promises to be as women pass from daughters controlled by fathers into wives controlled by husbands, and just as Nyasha’s father beat her to remind her of her status, ideally, so would her husband. It seems that half of the Zimbabwean female population suffers from domestic abuse and does not know of its illegality; physical abuse is normalized and even approved of by social custom as “a corrective measure” that even law does not intervene with (Uwakweh 76-77). The normalization of this practice is evident in *Nervous Conditions* as Babamukuru is repeatedly seen to beat the women of his household to correct their behavior. Babamukuru, of whom Tambu has the highest expectations, believing him to be above bullying anybody turns out to be even more abusive than she could have imagined, but she condones this miscalculation of hers as a naivety of her own, “a rosy view of male nature” (Dangarembga 49-50). After Babamukuru’s outrage and attempt at Nyasha’s life, he still proceeds to punish her properly by whipping her fourteen times (118). Similarly, when Tambu disobeys him for the first time by refusing to attend the mockery that was her parents’ church wedding, Babamukuru delivers fifteen lashes with his own hand to discipline her (169).

Defiance from women in *Nervous Conditions* is always met with violence to curb it, a philosophy that Dangarembga concisely puts as “Why talk? [...] Just hit. That’s what *they* hear” when Nhamo and Tambu get into a fight and one of his friends encourages him to beat her (23).

They—women—are not treated any differently from cattle in such conditions where verbal communication is not even considered and brutal force swiftly replaces it. These scenes of brutalization seem closely related to female sexuality in the novel, as one reads of Tambu being hit by her brother until “blood runs down her thigh” and of Nyasha’s period starting right after her father beats her, nine days early (Mphiko 79-80). These occurrences of “a second castration”⁷³ are what Mphiko refers to as instances “when a woman must be violently forced to remember that she is just a woman” (80). Before this second castration came the first one of birth as a female of which Tambu speaks as follows,

Exclusion whispered that my existence was not necessary, making me no more than an unfortunate by-product of some inexorable natural process. Or else it mocked that the process had gone wrong and produced me instead of another Nhamo, another Chido, another Babamukuru-to-be. I often felt superfluous in those days, but there in the camaraderie of the cooking, it was comfortable to occupy the corner that that same natural process had carved out for me. (Dangarembga 39-40)

The social environment that Tambu has been formed into does not fail to convince her of the mistake of her birth as a female. In a patriarchy where the only correct way to exist is as a male, the females are left to atone for their existence by toiling in the kitchen—a penitentiary that becomes, as if by Stockholm syndrome, a comfort zone to them in their belief that they, by birthright, belong in it.

This allegedly inherent connection of femaleness with menial labor is recurrent in *Nervous Conditions*. In a description of the washing routine of the townspeople in the river, Dangarembga

⁷³ Expression used *Essays on African Writing* by Abdulrazak Gurnah.

writes of two different washing beds designated for men and women. Unsurprisingly, she describes the women's as a 'shallow' spot "sensibly architected for doing the laundry" as opposed to the men's side of "deeper, cooler, more interesting pools" (Dangarembga 3). The concept of gender roles where women carry the largest expense—and often the entirety—of workload is so deeply entrenched in the lives of the women of *Nervous Conditions* that it even infiltrates their washing routine and prevents them from a moment's rest without chores. It is just as common for women to be confined in kitchens to sleep where they are forced to inhale the carbon monoxide from the kitchen fire all night while the men, for lack of space, sleep on the back of a truck in the fresh air—an instance that Dangarembga prefers as a textbook definition of ecofeminist critique (133). Tambudzai describes the sleeping arrangement that the Sigauke family had conjured up when everyone was at the homestead for the holidays in which "all the unmarried women [being of the lowest rank in the social order] slept in the kitchen" as has been the case in all the mentioned instances, Tambu assures the reader of her quiet acquiescence of the situation (132). During the same holidays, when all the Sigauke relatives were gathered at the homestead, Tambu narrates the trouble of preparing food three times a day, doing the laundry, and fetching water from the river all for twenty-four people that had fallen to Maiguru and five teenage girls including Nyasha and herself (133). Resignedly, Tambu declares that "this kind of work was women's work" though she admits that its heaviness had rendered the holiday intolerable (133).

The inequality of the division of labor in *Nervous Conditions* lies in the fact that the female characters not only feed, wash, clean for their male counterparts, but they also work the land. At the start of the novel, Dangarembga depicts Tambu and Netsai plowing fields with their mother, who toils while carrying baby Rambanai⁷⁴ on her back. They also take on the traditionally male

⁷⁴ Tambu's youngest sibling at the beginning of *Nervous Conditions* later succeeded by another child.

responsibility of herding cattle, a task avoided by both Nhamo and Jeremiah, and they return home to prepare the evening meal (7-8). The men's collective refusal to participate in the necessary labor is evident throughout the novel, as they do not even undertake chores traditionally assigned for males. In one instance, Babamukuru stands watching Maiguru, Lucia who was pregnant, and the children of the family including Rambanai who was still a toddler carry provisions into the house without interfering once (129). Dangarembga, when describing the occasion, writes "all of us except Babamukuru and including Rambanai" as an opposition apparently to draw the reader's attention to the fact that the patriarch could not stoop to the manual labor that the women—and even a toddler—must participate in. The limited scope that a woman's life in *Nervous Conditions* is narrowed into guarantees her a term of perpetual servitude to men and prohibits her involvement in anything outside domestic labor. When Jeremiah notices Tambu's silent wish—for she did not dare to ask—to join him and Nhamo on their journey to meet Babamukuru upon his return from Britain, he reproaches her "unnatural inclinations" and reminds her that what is natural for her as a woman is to remain home and prepare for the arrival (33).

In a mocking statement about the ego of the men surrounding her, Dangarembga writes in the voice of Tambu, "I have met so many men who consider themselves responsible adults and therefore ought to know better" to which she adds that they were at least "sincere in [their] bigotry" (49). Tambu's sarcastic attitude originates from having been a daughter, niece, and sister to many men who have dictated the course of a woman's life without being truly responsible for her. From Babamukuru who dispenses of his wife's salary without crediting her, to Jeremiah who survives entirely on the manual labor of his wife and daughters, to Takesure who takes advantage of Lucia to live on the homestead and off the scraps of his relatives, and to Nhamo whose mere gender decrees him his mother and sisters' superior. Of this male tendency to do no work and take all

credit, Tambu talks of her failed attempt to convince Takesure to help her mend the roof of the kitchen where it was leaking which ended up with her and pregnant Lucia mending it themselves, (145). When Babamukuru accidentally praised Jeremiah and Takesure assuming they did the job, Jeremiah not only accepted the praise but he also forged a false narrative of the difficulties he and his cousin had faced while mending it; Tambu comments, “Lucia and I could not hide our smiles” though they may have been smiles of bitter resignation (145). Women who labor on a domestic level are either discredited or devalued, for their work remains unrecognized on a larger economic scale where the labor that sustains the necessities of individual human life is considered insignificant.

Though daughters, nieces, and sisters are required to perform domestic labor for their male kin, they remain relatively freer than wives bound by indissoluble, and often unsolicited marriages. Lucia, seen throughout *Nervous Conditions* as an outspoken, free woman, is the only character capable of standing up to Babamukuru’s injustice, a fearlessness she attributes to her being unmarried. Upon speaking against his severe punishment of Tambu for refusing to go to the wedding to Babamukuru’s face, Lucia reminds him, “maybe when you marry a woman, she is obliged to obey you. But some of us aren’t married, so we don’t know how to do it. That is why I have been able to tell you frankly what is in my heart” (Dangarembga 171). Lucia’s unmarried status seems to grant her an air of security that allows her to speak, as Babamukuru comments admiringly, “like a man herself” (171). Women like Lucia, however, are not thought of kindly by society, and they often pay the price of their relative independence with merciless social slander. While Lucia’s sexual freedom contributes to her being shunned by society, it is not the main reservation her social environment has against her. It appears, when Tambu describes her mother and aunt’s youth, that Ma’Shingayi had been forgiven her breach of sexual conduct when she

accidentally bears a child and is married off to Jeremiah. Lucia, however, is viewed differently from her sister regardless of having behaved in the same manner but neither bearing children nor choosing marriage. Tambu relates, “‘there is nothing of a woman there. She sleeps with anybody and everybody, but she hasn’t borne a single child yet. She’s been bewitched. More likely she’s a witch herself.’ Thus poor Lucia was indicted for both her barrenness and her witchery” (126). It becomes clear that the problem is not Lucia’s sexual activity per se, it is her lack of fulfilment of the only socially accepted roles for a woman: that of a wife and of a mother.

The relentless urge of a patriarchal society to contain women’s sexual identities is persistently pointed to in *Nervous Conditions*. Constantly attempting to trap Lucia in a position of marriage and childbearing, people had even accused her of bewitching her married sister, who had endured many miscarriages and infant deaths, and, as a solution, recommended her as “a second child-bearer” for Jeremiah (Dangarembga 51). The accusations against Lucia originate not from a place of sympathy for her sister but from a place of disapproval of her sterile state. In a social order where a woman’s sole established role is to provide a reproductive system, Lucia, for her chosen childlessness and her unashamed attitude towards her sexuality, has no place. Talking almost like a man in such circumstances would, Lucia admits to her desires unabashedly, “her body had appetites for which she was not ashamed [...]. ‘A woman has to live with something,’ she shrugged, matter-of-factly. ‘Even if it’s a cockroach. And cockroaches are better.’” (153). Lucia, referring to Takesure in particular and to men in general, shows no reverence or admiration for the gender as she confesses to her relations with men as a matter of casual habit. Proving that a woman’s sexuality is only pardonable when it results in reproduction, it is seen in the novel that when Lucia becomes pregnant, despite the fact that it is not clear who the father of her child is, she is suddenly—though not kindly—embraced into the family. A meeting is then held by the Sigauke patriarchy to decide

the fate of Lucia where she herself is uninvited, but she barges in and reclaims her position as a free woman. She physically humiliates Takesure, seizing him by the ears in front of the patriarchy, boldly declaring, “Whatever he can do for me, I can do better for myself” (144-145).

Accordingly, Lucia escapes the claws of an unwelcome marriage with either Takesure or Jeremiah as Babamukuru—who, it appears, stood in unadmitted awe of her—found her a job at the mission to provide for herself and an opportunity to pursue an education after the birth of her child. This escape is what Tambu refers to in the beginning of the novel when she claims that the novel is “about [her] escape and Lucia’s” (1). Tambu herself only narrowly makes her escape from marriage when Babamukuru began to refer to the matter repeatedly as she had grown more obviously into womanhood. When the chance of joining the convent school to pursue her education appears to Tambu, her uncle loses no time in presenting marriage as an opposing argument. Tambu writes bitterly, “Marriage. I had nothing against it in principle. In an abstract way I thought it was a very good idea. But it was irritating the way it always cropped up in one form or another, stretching its tentacles back to bind me before I had even begun to think about it seriously, threatening to disrupt my life before I could even call it my own” (180). When marriage started to grow as a hindrance to Tambu’s education, she begins to see it in a new light as an atrocious monstrosity with tentacles always reaching to snatch her life away from her. Even though Tambu adheres to society’s expectations with unwavering determination and silently accepts norms, understanding that “panties should not be hung to dry in the bathroom where everybody could see them”, she and the other women in her narrative fall victim to oppression (155). Recognizing this reality, Tambu acknowledges that a rebellious escape is unavoidable.

On the first page of *Nervous Conditions*, Dangarembga writes of a scene on a packed bus where bodily odors are overwhelming, and implicit as she is inclined to be, she includes an

opposition where “the women smelt of *unhealthy reproductive* odours [...] and the men gave off *strong aromas* of *productive* labour” (1). Whereas the women smell of sickening ‘odors’ indicating their reproductive abilities, the men have ‘aromas’ revealing the strength and nobility of physical labor. While the pejorative diction describing odors from women followed by approbatory diction for male odors appears antithetic as a stand-alone, when interpreted within the context of the novel, it reveals a tone of irony in a statement that Dangarembga proceeds to prove wrong throughout the text. In *Nervous Conditions*, women represent both the productive and the reproductive force of the Sigauke family though they remain discredited, scorned, and belittled by their male counterparts. With forced marriages and repressed sexual identities, Dangarembga’s female characters become self-contained instruments with no imagined hopes beyond servitude to the men in their lives. The loop of production and reproduction is lethal to any remains of character, but seeds of defiance are natural in an environment where women are connected with one another and with the land.

V. An African Sisterhood: Ecology, Education, and Solidarity as Means of Female Freedom in *Nervous Conditions*

The connections of the lives of the women of *Nervous Conditions* among themselves and their environment create intriguing patterns for the ecofeminist reader. In a situation where the women are bound to live within—and from—the roughness of the land, they turn to it for means of survival, to one another for means of comfort, and to education for means of escape. This section reveals the intricacy with which Tsitsi Dangarembga, in her novel, ties education to the land, the land to women, women to each other, women to the river, and all of these elements to the long hoped-for acquisition of autonomy for the female characters of the novel. While “the spirit of

sisterhood in African women” is represented unambiguously in Tambudzai and Nyasha’s relationship (Mphiko 76), it is also found covertly in the connections between other female characters. This can be traced from Maiguru, Ma’Shingayi, Lucia, to even Tambu’s grandmother whose limited presence in the novel does not allow for an in-depth view of her character but still reveals a stimulating reading of women revolting—in their own subtle or outspoken ways—against colonial, patriarchal, and environmental exploitation.

Perhaps one of the characters most befitting for a postcolonial ecofeminist reading in Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* is Tambudzai’s paternal grandmother. Though she had already passed away when the story begins, the memory of her grandmother is vividly present with Tambu as she thinks of her reverently often throughout the novel. The grandmother is remembered as a woman of firm connection with the land and its history as she had lived through the cleansing and displacement of her race by white colonizers. Tambu’s grandmother had planted in her a deeply rooted connection of history with land as she followed a strict routine of working her garden and only pausing now and then to relate her history to her granddaughter. Reminiscing about her bond with her grandmother, Tambu writes, “She gave me history lessons as well. History that could not be found in the textbooks [...]. Slowly, methodically, throughout the day the field would be cultivated, the episodes of my grandmother’s own portion of history strung together from beginning to end” (Dangarembga 17). The history of colonization, which could never be found in textbooks, was found in an elder woman’s structured narrative, almost in the tradition of the African Griot⁷⁵.

The grandmother’s garden plot, after her death, is inherited not by her son but by her daughter-in-law, Ma’Shingayi, who, in turn, hands it down to her daughter when Tambu decides

⁷⁵ An African storyteller following a tradition of oral history performed through music or poetry.

to plant and sell maize for her school fees. It is on this land, passed down from woman to woman, that Tambu is found directing her prayers for a successful crop to her grandmother. She writes, “How I mumbled adoring, reverent prayers to my grandmother in those early days of my market gardening. My grandmother, who had been an exorable cultivator of land, sower of seeds and reaper of rich harvests until, literally until, her very last moment” (17). The bond between Tambu and her grandmother had created for the girl a space in which the acquisition of her freedom through knowledge of her history and of her land was possible. This tie alters the impression of the relationship of women with their environment from one of submission and objectification to one of self-instruction and liberation. The connection between indigenous women and the land is not an innovative concept, as the environment constitutes a focal point in the lives of such women— isolated lives completely dependent on natural means of sustenance in which the land is part of the community rather than an object of use. Accordingly, to free herself from her father’s and her brother’s tyranny, Tambu turns first to her mother then, more successfully, to the land as if relying on an elder for support. Upon finding that her mother’s dejected resignation to the conditions of women was immovable as she encouraged Tambu to accept her circumstances and refrain from seeking better ones, Tambu decides that her mother “had been listening too devoutly to [her] father” (20) and turns to the land instead.

The environment, indeed, becomes an evidently reliable foundation of triumph when Tambu’s mealies successfully launch her education. Similarly, Ma’Shingayi effectively collects fees for her son’s education by selling maize and eggs, both products yielded naturally in her environment from land and animals. Ma’Shingayi, though stoic to her and her daughters’ circumstances, appeals to her environment to improve her son’s status—and perhaps her own through it. Jeremiah, however, is seen throughout the novel as completely detached from his

environment, a condition that deepens his poverty (Pasi 83). The detachment of men from nature in *Nervous Conditions* is a repeated occurrence as it is easily spotted in Nhamo's behavior as well as his father's. At the beginning of the novel, Tambu narrates her perplexity at her brother's dislike of his walk from the bus station to the homestead, for a road passing through fields in which nature was to be admired seemed to her a relief rather than an encumbrance (Dangarembga 2). Tambudzai, unlike Nhamo, is seen to venerate the natural environment surrounding her—at least at the beginning of *Nervous Conditions*. Even in her diction, the protagonist is seen to include natural scenes in her metaphors towards the beginning of the novel, but they eventually recede from her style. In her own words, Tambu admits, "Sophistication is acquired quickly. The vast rippling fields of maize and tobacco between Rusapi and Marandellas⁷⁶ no longer impressed me, nor did Gomore Mhanda⁷⁷, whose stony baldness had been so intriguing on the outward journey" (202).

The sophistication of which Tambu speaks is problematic as it refers to her pretentious upbringing at the mission. Her uncle's anglophilia had affected her natural priorities where, according to her indigenous upbringing, women are in first-hand contact with the earth and with its wildlife and vegetation, both benefiting from its riches and venerating its generosity. This connection ensures that when one is oppressed, so is the other, which is, indeed, the case with Tambu as both her femininity and her bond with nature are repressed in the capitalist patriarchal regime of Babamukuru's household. The women and girls of *Nervous Conditions* rely entirely on their environment for their survival from sustenance to shelter and protection as they eat from the produce of the land and hide from the blazing climate under the shadows of its trees (Pasi 78). They, in turn, are in complete harmony with their environment which they endeavor to respect

⁷⁶ Cities in Rhodesia, known in the Zimbabwe of today as Rusape and Marondera.

⁷⁷ Presumably a mountain range on the road to Umtali.

despite the challenges it poses for them. Admittedly, even “the sundry old rags which they washed and reused and washed again” for their menstruation were, in their recyclability, a more eco-friendly option than the sophisticated tampon (Dangarembga 70). This is also the case with the intriguing return to nature and to primitive—but decidedly improved—ways that Tambu and Nyasha undertake when they boycott the latrine at the homestead in favor of the bushes, just as they had done before the existence of the toilet (123). This gesture is easily interpreted as an act of rebellion against all that is colonial and capitalistic as even the term they use—boycotting—is evocative of revolutionary accomplishments.

The river in *Nervous Conditions*—just as it had been proved previously apropos of *The God of Small Things*—commands a significant presence in the novel, especially in the lives of the female characters. In addition to being the only source of water for the family at the homestead, the river represents a refuge for the women and girls from the overwhelming weight of their routine. In a demanding way of life where water has to be fetched from a river for every necessity, women become intimately acquainted with the river and find solace in their trips to it, for, as Tambu admits, “this was not such a chore” in comparison with their other obligations (Dangarembga 134). The trips to Nyamarira were a distraction from the chaos of the homestead (149), and Tambu justifies her sense of relief at her errands at the river by describing the pleasantness of the journey towards it with the abundance of fruit (mangoes, oranges, hute, peaches, guavas, and mulberries) offered by neighbors from their trees (134). When at the river itself, Tambu continues to explain, “Although the tasks themselves were tiring, the laundry and the drawing and carrying of water, we did not feel it too heavily, because we could bathe and sun ourselves on the rocks while we waited for the clothes to dry” (134). Cumbersome tasks begin to ease when Tambu finds herself on the banks of the beloved Nyamarira River surrounded by all that the nature of her homeland has to offer.

Tambudzai's affection for the river, like her reverence for the land, is that of a child towards a benevolent—and in the river's case, playful—elder. When it is decided that Tambu would leave the homestead to attend school at the mission, she considers what her new circumstances would be, and against malnourishment, squalor, and poverty on one side of the balance, Tambu weighs Nyamarira on the other. She laments, “Nor would there be trips to Nyamarira, Nyamarira which I loved to bathe in and watch cascade through the narrow outlet of the fall where we drew our water. Leaving this Nyamarira, my flowing, tumbling, musical playground, was difficult” (59). The mournful air with which Tambu retreats from her river is indicative of a great, almost motherly⁷⁸ bond with it formed in her early childhood. This is further affirmed when one recollects the protagonist's fond memories of swimming in the river's washing beds with the rest of the children and women. It appears that it is at this site that the first bonds of womanhood are formed for the female characters of *Nervous Conditions*. Dangarembga writes a passage where Lucia, after Ma'Shingayi's breakdown, turns up at the homestead to nurse her sister back to health, and her first instinct upon returning was to induce her sister to go to Nyamarira. This trip becomes what Tambu refers to as “very good medicine” when Ma'Shingayi is immediately revitalized and finally returns to her senses in the presence of the sunlight, Nyamarira's waters, and the conversation of other women (185).

The scene at Nyamarira offers what is perhaps the most significant example of female solidarity within nature in *Nervous Conditions* where a woman's plight recognized by other women becomes less difficult to confront. Another passage in which female solidarity coupled with rebellion, what Tambu calls a “sisterly solidarity [...] in the kitchen”, is represented in the novel when the women gathered in the kitchen of the homestead realize that the family patriarchy is

⁷⁸A reminder of Estha and Rahel's love for the river Meenachal as a mother.

deciding Lucia's fate behind closed doors and without her knowledge (Dangarembga 137). Ma'Shingayi, indignant at the accusations against her sister and enraged at her husband's conduct, is the first to voice her discontent to the other women who, having suffered different but equally frustrating forms of oppression at the hands of the Sigauke men, show enthusiastic agreement. Feeding on one another's anger, the women begin to plot a rebellious move against the patriarchy, but the heat of the moment is quickly extinguished when they turn to Maiguru for support and she declines it claiming no concern for the problem. In the voice of Tambu, Dangarembga writes,

What was needed in that kitchen was a combination of Maiguru's detachment and Lucia's direction. Everybody needed to broaden out a little, to stop and consider the alternatives, but the matter was too intimate. It stung saltily, too sharply and agonisingly the sensitive images that the women had of themselves, images that were really no more than reflections. But the women had been taught to recognize these reflections as self and it was frightening now to even begin to think that the very facts which set them apart as a group, as women, as a certain kind of person were only myths; frightening to acknowledge that generations of threat and assault and neglect had battered these myths into the extreme, dividing reality they faced, of the Maigurus or the Lucias. (Dangarembga 138)

The solidarity, then, soon dissolves after Maiguru's rejection to participate in it, and of this disappointing result, Tambu writes the preceding observation. She concludes that if women like Maiguru and Lucia would recognize their struggles, their aspirations, or in short, themselves in one another, their camaraderie would strengthen and so would their chances at liberation.

A woman left alone without the companionship and support of other women is left vulnerable; hence, Maiguru, in setting herself apart from the other women of her family because of her financial status and educational background, had, indeed, become prone to breakability. Even at the mission, Maiguru could not—or perhaps would not—befriend other women because of their lack of education, and as she defined herself based solely on her degrees and her status as Babamukuru’s wife, no other women showed interest in her and she remained alone (Dangarembga 97). Though she endeavored to maintain a pretense of utmost contentment with her situation, her daughter knew better, and in conversation with Tambu, Nyasha often expresses dread at her mother’s ‘trapped’ situation. Tambu recounts, “I could imagine many things worse than being Maiguru, did not have to imagine them because I had seen them. I told Nyasha so, and she agreed with me but said it was all relative and that it all boiled down to the same thing” (96). Nyasha, while aware that her mother’s material circumstances were substantially superior to most of the women of her society, still understood that her education and status had not guaranteed her respect from her husband, that she was, in truth, as oppressed as any of the others. In fact, throughout the novel, instead of being venerated for her education like her husband, Maiguru is ridiculed repeatedly by being likened to a fussing, chirping mother bird—in accordance with most of the vocabulary used to describe her—whose only concerns are those of a wife and mother (95-96).

The education of women in *Nervous Conditions* is considered at best a harmless indulgence and at worst a pointless squander, which is why women like Maiguru receive no recognition for their educational merits. It is only halfway throughout the novel that it is revealed that Maiguru has the same academic degrees as her husband. It becomes evident that, unlike what was assumed about her, the years she spent in England were not simply as a companion and caretaker to her husband, but as a student herself though only Babamukuru’s education is recognized (Dangarembga 101).

To Tambu, Maiguru confesses the truth, and when Tambu questions her about whether the government confiscates her salary, Maiguru, laughing bitterly, admits that “you could say that”, hinting that Babamukuru, not unlike a corrupt government to her, confiscates her salary instead (101). Maiguru, despite her bitterness, or in an effort to hide it, declares to Tambu her belief that her sacrifice was worth it, and the young girl, having been brought up to it, agrees with her aunt. She contemplates, “If it was necessary to efface yourself, as Maiguru did so well that you couldn’t be sure that she didn’t enjoy it, if it was necessary to efface yourself in order to preserve his [Babamukuru’s, man’s] sense of identity and value, then, I was sure, Maiguru had taken the correct decisions” (102). Thus Tambudzai, having been raised to efface herself for the benefit of the men in her life, reasons that Maiguru’s sacrifice was the correct choice.

Nyasha, on the other hand, was not as impressed by her mother’s choices as Tambu, for, to her understanding, Maiguru had sacrificed not only herself but also her daughter to the patriarchy she had devotedly served. Angrily, Nyasha would snap at her mother to “stop cooking” or to “learn how to drive”, to be as independent as her education should guarantee her to be (Dangarembga 102). Ironically, Maiguru retorts with her inability to buy a car further indicating that her husband, who owns two cars, not only takes her salary but also prevents her from driving the extra car that he had perhaps bought with her money. Nyasha, of whom Tambu admits a certain reverence and fear because of her representing “alternatives and possibilities”, was not prepared to accept sacrifice as part of her destiny (76). She had, indeed, suffered her breakdown as a result of her stubbornness against social conventionality; her words towards the end of the novel repeating “I’m not a good girl. I won’t be trapped” remain as proof of that willfulness (201). In a letter she wrote to Tambu when the latter was at Sacred Heart, Nyasha complains of her reality as a misfit among her classmates. She admits, “They think that I am a snob, that I think that I am superior to them

because I do not feel that I am inferior to men (if you can call the boys in my class men). And all because I beat the boys at maths!” (196). Entirely refusing to lower her self-esteem and intelligence in order to provide a space for men to claim superiority over her—a familiar act in all patriarchal societies—Nyasha succeeds in her endeavor but remains on the outskirts of social acceptance.

Even at her worst, Nyasha, for her difference from them, never receives proper support and solidarity from her female relatives. While Maiguru’s devotion to Babamukuru blinds her from objectively understanding his systematic repression of their daughter, Tambu’s indoctrination prevents her from acting in defense of her cousin even when she is aware of her struggle as she, despite her love for Nyasha, is repeatedly seen to pity her uncle for having such a daughter. This lack of support from the women around her, in addition to her inability to befriend the girls of her generation, is a major force against Nyasha’s rebellion and eventually leads to her incapacity to continue her fight alone. Unlike her surroundings, Nyasha is compassionate towards all the women in her community, even the servant Anna, whose rights as a worker she defends to Maiguru and whose kneeling habits she vehemently rejects (155) (79). When Maiguru’s unobtrusive obedience inevitably breaks as she explodes in anger to Babamukuru finally confessing to him that she is “tired of being nothing in a home [she is] working [herself] sick to support” and abruptly leaves him, Nyasha is her first and most enthusiastic ally (172). To Nyasha, Maiguru’s disappearance felt more like an act of solidarity than of desertion, for it was the first time that she witnessed a deed of rebellion against Babamukuru—that was not her own doing—and it had given her hope (174). Indeed, Nyasha even scorns her mother for returning to her husband in five days; observing the improvements she notices in her parents’ relationship, Nyasha mournfully regrets what her mother could have been had her circumstances been different (175).

The path for an escape from her father began to seem clearer to Nyasha when she had her mother's footsteps to follow proving thus that the emancipation of mother equals the emancipation of daughter. Although she was upset that her mother had run to her brother—yet another man—from Babamukuru, Nyasha admits that such a clean cut from patriarchal oppression is too hard to obtain. To Tambu, she contemplates, "It's everything, it's everywhere. So where do you break out to? You're just one person and it's everywhere" (174). Referring to the system that trapped her mother and that would trap her, Nyasha understood the futility of one woman's plight against its universality and supremacy. Though aware of the prospective pointlessness of her fight, and perhaps because of her fear of falling into her mother's passivity, Nyasha refuses to back down from or even postpone her rebellion at Tambu's suggestion, knowingly "burning herself out" but determined not to be trapped, not "to be anyone's underdog" (116-117). In *Nervous Conditions*, women with Nyasha's passion, who vehemently reject passivity and embrace fervor, are either considered a threat to repress or a challenge to conquer. In the novel, Nyasha and Lucia represent these categories adequately, as Babamukuru and the rest of the Sigauke patriarchy attempt to repress Nyasha for her insolence and Lucia for her wildness, though with different outcomes.

In *Nervous Conditions*, there is an evident similarity in the way in which Lucia and Nyasha are described. Lucia is often described as a "wild woman" whose possession would be like "possessing a thunderstorm to make it crackle and thunder and lightning at your command" (125). Similarly, Nyasha is described to have "stormy and turbulent" energy, never static and passive, always reaching for an emancipated future and ever refusing to settle (151). Both women, for their untamable nature, are likened to the natural phenomenon most associated with nature's wrath against humans taking advantage of it: the thunderstorm. However, while Nyasha suffers her tragic conclusion, Lucia is seen to achieve what is perhaps the most successful rebellion among the

women of the novel. Moving out from under Babamukuru's scrutiny, attending classes to begin a proper education, and maintaining a job to provide for herself and her son as a single mother, Lucia marks the first successful attempt of the women of the story at complete financial and social independence. It can be argued that Lucia's triumph is the product of her understanding of the need for female solidarity and connection, unlike Maiguru, whose degradation followed her lack of female bonds despite her education and elevated social status (Uwakweh 82). Lucia, throughout the novel, fearlessly stands up for her female relatives against even the most intimidating of the male characters, Babamukuru, and still she marches the farthest in her pursuit of freedom, proving that neither submission nor stoicism are likely to aid women in their search for autonomy.

The most suitable example of stoicism in the novel is Ma'Shingayi whose impoverished circumstances reduce her to a state of complete carelessness and lack of rebellious energy. Tambu, with a high regard for her mother's indifferent self-sacrifice, speaks admiringly of Ma'Shingayi when she writes, "I reprimanded myself [...] by thinking of my mother, who suffered from being female and poor and uneducated and black so stoically that I was ashamed of my weakness" (Dangarembga 89). Tambu, paradoxically, aspires to bear the burdens of femaleness, ignorance, poverty, and blackness as well as her mother rather than aspiring to combat the environment in which such burdens ferment. Advising her daughter, Ma'Shingayi urges her to understand as early as possible that "when there are sacrifices to be made, you are the one who has to make them" (16). Referring to the dual affliction of black women, with both womanhood and blackness weighing them down, Ma'Shingayi attempts to prepare her daughter to carry the difficulty of her being—as a black woman—with as indifferent an air as possible, abolishing any prospective notion of rebellion in Tambudzai. Nevertheless, despite her mother's exertions, Tambu naturally develops a

sense of revolt against the patriarchal figures in her life, especially her father and brother, when the question of her education is breached.

Tambudzai's willfulness when it came to her pursuit of education is perhaps what saved her from a life identical to her mother's. In the novel, she is perceived as stubborn and quick to offend in all that regards her schooling as she holds an interminable grudge against her brother Nhamo for attempting to sabotage her return to school—enough to declare, in the first sentence of the novel, that she was not sorry for his death (1). This quite reasonable resentment does not spare her father, for, after Jeremiah mocks Tambu's endeavors to return to school by questioning her, "Can you cook books and feed them to your husband? [...] Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables" (15), Tambu simply decides not to obey her father anymore. She sensibly clarifies that if there was no way to please her father, she would solely concentrate on pleasing herself, which is—beside her refusal to attend the wedding—perhaps Tambu's most rebellious moment in *Nervous Conditions* (33). Jeremiah's words, heavy with gender roles especially the inevitable link of working the land with women, indicate his—and the patriarchy's—belief that education is not meant for women "because in the end it will benefit strangers" (56). Since girls are married off often at a young age for their fathers to profit off their bride price, educating them appears to be a waste of resources as they would not live with their families long enough to aid them financially. By that logic, the priority of education is reserved for male children as was the case with Nhamo and Tambu; indeed, even after Nhamo's death, Tambu almost faces rejection for school fees once more after the birth of her new brother. Babamukuru, arguing against her accepting a place at Sacred Heart, reminds Tambu that the "money could be better used" if saved for the sake of her brother—who was in the cradle—when the time for his education comes as he is only male child in her family (180).

Having been conditioned to the beliefs of her family, the conviction that her education might be a bad omen is internalized within Tambudzai. On her first night at the mission, Tambu sleeps uneasily as she dreams of Nhamo scolding her for the step towards education that she was about to make. She writes, “I realised that my fountain pen was in fact a long smoking cigarette. Nhamo howled with vicious glee, telling me that I would come to a bad end, that I deserved it for deserting my husband, my children, my garden and my chickens. He spoke with such authority that I was ashamed of deserting this family that I did not have” (90). The sudden change of the pen that Tambu was holding in her dream into a cigarette—a symbol of moral corruption in women—signifies her internalized fear that education taints women, that, instead, she should be preparing to take care of a family and of farm animals as the societal decrees of gender roles stipulate. Tambu’s knowledge in her dream that her brother’s statement was not true, that she had no family, represents her understanding that the gender roles set by her society are arbitrary, but it still does not prevent her from experiencing the deep shame that comes with breaking them. Unexpectedly, it is through Maiguru that this stereotype of educated women is finally demolished.

After her return to her house, Maiguru successfully assumes a more powerful position in the household, and when asked her opinion concerning Tambu’s education, Maiguru surprises Babamukuru by offering an opinion—something she never attempts as he only ever asks her as a courtesy. Upon making a decision concerning Tambu’s involvement at the convent school, Babamukuru calls her to his living room in the presence of Maiguru to lecture her on the hindrances that would come of her joining Sacred Heart, among which he names the corruption of women through education. As is his habit, Babamukuru asks Maiguru if she has anything to add, and to his astonishment, Maiguru, for the first time, disputes his argument against Tambu’s education. She reasons,

When we went to South Africa, everybody was saying that we, the women, were loose. [...] People were prejudiced against educated women. Prejudiced. That's why they said we weren't decent. That was in the fifties. Now we are in the seventies. I am disappointed that people still believe the same things. After all this time and when we have seen nothing to say it is true. I don't know what people mean by a loose woman—sometimes she is someone who walks the streets, sometimes she is an educated woman, sometimes she is a successful man's daughter or she is simply beautiful. (Dangarembga 181)

The prejudice against women, as Maiguru proves, is completely unrelated to their occupations and deeds but simply exists no matter what and without any need for proof. Whether she is a prostitute or an intellectual, a woman will be called 'loose' if she does not fit the category socially constructed for her, even if her sin is simply a physical attractiveness she did not choose.

Maiguru's speech refutes every basis on which Babamukuru would have denied Tambu a chance for education, and, in the end, he consents to it. There is an intriguing ending to the latter passage as Babamukuru, stunned by his wife's arguments, almost unconsciously turns to ask Tambu for her opinion, something the portentous patriarch would never normally do. Dangarembga, by adding this seemingly irrelevant detail, reminds the reader that the change that one generation brings can open endless possibilities for the following generations. When Maiguru decides to pursue a rebellious path, regardless of its mildness, she provides an opportunity for Tambu to take a step towards a future she would not have had without the support of another, more experienced woman. *Nervous Conditions* is a story of women whose fates are interweaved with one another and which cannot be told separately. The legacy of the older generation of these women either builds or destroys the destiny of its descendants as the outcomes of their confrontations with

colonial, patriarchal, and environmental forces are inexorably suffered—or celebrated—by their daughters.

The lives of indigenous women in a colonial setting suffer a profound invasion within their natural environment as even the privacy of their washing beds in the river is breached. In the beginning of *Nervous Conditions*, Dangarembga recounts the consequences of the interference of the colonial administration in local affairs by describing the violation of the women's riverbeds by newly built district council houses and beer-halls. Reaching the new buildings required passing by the section of the river where the women of the village did their washing and bathing, forcing them to move from their spot further up the river (Dangarembga 4). The passage demonstrates accurately an image of displacement as one of the ways in which both women and their natural environment are affected by colonial—and in this case capitalist—presence, but it is not the only one. In the instance of Sacred Heart, too, this constant acquisition of native land and removal of the indigenous into limited parts of it is seen. The convent school, as an agent of Christianity and colonialism, takes up what Tambu refers to as “majestically spacious” grounds but only offers the natives of that land a cramped room in which its very few African students are supposed to fit in together (Okonkwo 60). The African students, in fact, are taken into schools like Sacred Heart only to further indoctrinate them as marionettes of the colonial system “like cattle fattened for slaughter” as Ma'Shingayi puts it (Dangarembga 184). The reference to the connection between nature and the oppressed—the simile of farm animals readied for slaughter—can be found again in the novel. Dangarembga writes of the good African, here referring to Babamukuru as a child, “They [the white colonizers] thought he was a good boy, cultivable, in the way the land is, to yield harvests that sustain the cultivator” (19).

Sustaining the cultivator but not themselves is what the victims of patriarchy, colonialism, and environmental injustice—of women, children, animals, and land—have to endure in order to survive in such a social order. Dangarembga accurately locates the common ground amongst the ideal targets of oppressors as femaleness, on which she writes,

The victimisation, I saw, was universal. It didn't depend on poverty, on lack of education or on tradition. It didn't depend on any of the things I had thought it depended on. Men took it everywhere with them. Even heroes like Babamukuru did it. And that was the problem. [...] But what I didn't like was the way all the conflicts came back to this question of femaleness. Femaleness as opposed and inferior to maleness. (Dangarembga 115-116).

Considering weakness to be associated with femaleness, all that is masculine dictates the equilibrium of social order rendering all that is feminine subject to its whims. Such is the case of the hegemonic dichotomies comprehensively discussed in this chapter.

This chapter has demonstrated the ways in which Tsitsi Dangarembga has connected issues of gender-based oppression, colonialism, racism, cultural clash, class conflict, to food politics, ecology, mental illness, political history, female sexuality, and rebellion. Her exploration of these themes in her award-winning novel *Nervous Conditions* is extensive and profound. This thesis, thus, discloses the value of *Nervous Conditions* as the ultimate African postcolonial ecofeminist novel by discussing the break it offers from western tradition through an exploration of a plethora of new-fangled themes. This chapter examined the clash between anglophilia and Shona culture among the characters of the novel. It raised questions about food politics within the dichotomy of meat consumption and vegetarianism, serving as mirrors for maleness and femaleness.

Additionally, it argued for hunger and anorexia as significant ecofeminist motifs. In addition to this, the chapter called for a reevaluation of the gendered division of labor as it relates to marriage and female sexuality and closed off with an optimistic reading of female solidarity and education as rebellious means for emancipation. Through an exhaustive reading and criticism of the novel, this work contends that *Nervous Conditions* is a postcolonial ecofeminist oeuvre par excellence as it explicitly discusses themes of the feminist struggle in relation with the environment under a colonial regime.

CHAPTER FOUR: AN ECOFEMINIST READING OF NAWAL EL SAADAWI'S LOVE IN THE KINGDOM OF OIL

“The land was changing as the oil changed. The oil was changing with the movement of the sun and the wind. Her breathing rose and fell according to the degree of hope or despair in her breast, and to the pulsing of blood from her heart to her arms, from her arms to her chisel, from her chisel to the ground, and from the ground to the oil, the wind and the sun.”⁷⁹

Introduction

In the exploration of Nawal El Saadawi's seminal work, *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, this chapter embarks on a comprehensive journey through the lens of postcolonial ecofeminism. Positioned within the broader framework of Arab Ecofeminism, the chapter delves into the intricate interplay of environmental issues, gender dynamics, and postcolonial narratives. The examination unfolds across multiple layers, with each section contributing to a nuanced understanding of the ecofeminist discourse within the context of petrocapiatalism. The introductory section lays the foundation by contextualizing Nawal El Saadawi's significance in shaping Arab Ecofeminism. As a pioneering figure, her literary contributions serve as a springboard for dissecting the intersections of gender, ecology, and postcolonialism within the petrostate. A critical lens is cast upon the broader landscape of postcolonial ecofeminism, setting the stage for a focused exploration of El Saadawi's work. Following this, the chapter meticulously unveils the systematic subjugation of women within the petrostate as portrayed in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*. Feminist narratives

⁷⁹ El Saadawi, Nawal. *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*. Saqi Bookshelf, 2019.

embedded in the novel are dissected, revealing the subtle and overt ways in which women are oppressed within the patriarchal and oil-driven societal structures. This section serves as a crucial precursor to the subsequent ecofeminist explorations within the narrative.

The chapter then navigates the intricate terrain of oil as an oppressor of women, unraveling the sacred symbolism of goddess imagery and the feminine essence of nature. These analyses delve into the symbolic representations used by El Saadawi, shedding light on how these elements function as both oppressive forces and sources of empowerment for the female characters. The exploration culminates in a discussion of memory, solidarity, and female resilience, emphasizing the transformative potential inherent in women's experiences within the petrocapitalist landscape. In the concluding segment, the chapter synthesizes these analyses, offering a profound exploration of ecofeminism within postcolonial literature. The protagonist's journey from submission to empowerment becomes emblematic of broader struggles against petrocapitalist patriarchy. By examining memory, solidarity, and female resilience, the chapter contributes to a nuanced understanding of the ecofeminist tapestry woven within *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*. Through this comprehensive exploration, the chapter engages with and expands upon the discourse surrounding women's struggles within the petrocapitalist paradigm, shedding light on the complex dimensions of their agency and resistance.

I. Nawal El Saadawi: Setting the Scene for Arab Ecofeminism

As her name was declared on a death list because of her antitheistic, antiauthoritarian writing, Nawal El Saadawi, responding to the threat, began to write yet another potentially perilous novel against one of the most dominant industries in the world: the oil industry. In *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, El Saadawi skillfully amalgamates her feminist convictions, environmental

consciousness, and reservations about capitalism, resulting in a remarkable example of postcolonial ecofeminist petrofiction, perhaps the first of its kind in Arab literature. During her resilient pursuit of unveiling the systems of subjugation against women, El Saadawi reports, “Deep down inside me was the feeling that oil was the hidden actor behind all this” (qtd. in Deckard 41). In her novel, indeed, oil is an unescapable agent of imperial, patriarchal capitalism that invades all spaces in what is perhaps best described as a dystopian petrostate situated in the Arab Gulf. The novel establishes a profound intersection between postcolonialism and ecofeminism, as it adeptly portrays the ongoing consequences of colonialism concealed within a neocolonial façade. It accomplishes this by meticulously exploring the plight of women and the natural world within the confines of a petrocapitalist patriarchy.

El Saadawi openly acknowledges that her writing in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* addresses the suffering experienced by individuals—especially women—in the Arab world and declares oil to be “the reason for [this] continuing colonial aggression” (qtd. in Mahzabeen 75). She firmly asserts that oil, manipulated by the neocolonial administrations of the Arab Gulf together with Western imperial monopolies, stands as the primary culprit behind the persistent colonial presence in the Arab world. The pervasive influence of oil in the contemporary way of life, especially within the context of the global south in which it is seen as a “colonial intruder” (Nandi 135), calls for its incorporation into literature, giving rise to the emergent subgenre of the postcolonial novel now recognized as petrofiction. The term petrofiction came into being when Amitav Ghosh wrote a review on Abdelrahman Munif’s *Cities of Salt* to highlight the defining distinctions that would characterize the potentially emerging genre of fiction revolving around the oil industry. In Ghosh’s assessment, the true beginning of the era of petrofiction dates back to the events of September 11th, 2001 when the profound global implications of oil could no longer be disregarded (Ghosh 20). In

order to claim a lack of literature in petrofiction, the challenge remains in the difficulty of ascertaining which works belong to the genre from those that do not. Graeme Macdonald's question, "Given that oil and its constituents are so ubiquitous in the material and organization of modern life, is not every modern novel to some extent an oil novel?" encapsulates the struggle (Macdonald, "Oil and World Literature" 7). This results in an extensive global array of literary works, spanning from El Saadawi's *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* to even Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, being recognized as petrofiction, making it simpler to categorize petrofiction as a subgenre of world literature (31).

The contentious history of the oil industry, with its appalling impact on both a human and environmental scale, is perhaps the best explanation for its limited presence in works of literature. This complication calls for the need to revisit postcolonial literature—especially Arab literature from the Gulf—with an ecofeminist perspective focused on petrofiction in order to reveal the penalties of petroimperialism in the global south. El Saadawi, in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, explicitly addresses those consequences from a petrofeminist⁸⁰ point of view in which she examines how the extraction, production, and consumption of oil impact gender dynamics, women's lives, and the environment. Confirming this further in "Women and the Poor", she writes that countries in the southern hemisphere undergo involuntary development dictated by international institutions, resulting in rising poverty in the global south due to wealth—specifically oil—being transferred to the global north (El Saadawi, *The Essential Nawal El Saadawi* 80). The neocolonial undertones of 'development' and the misleading concept of 'aid' that El Saadawi refers to are particularly relevant to ecofeminist critique, as they illuminate not only the perpetuation of

⁸⁰ Coined by Helen Kapstein in "Petrofeminism: Love in the Age of Oil"

power imbalances but also how women in the region often bear the brunt of these inequalities, both socially and environmentally.

Love in the Kingdom of Oil appears to function as a poignant critique not only addressing the petro-patriarchy prevalent in the Gulf but also questioning the underlying justifications for western petroimperialism in the Arab world often perpetuated through the lens of islamophobia. El Saadawi frequently faces accusations of catering to western readership because of her religious views and her political agenda. In her analysis of *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, Layla Hendor mistakenly assumes that the metaphors used by El Saadawi in the novel are exclusively Christian metaphors—overlooking the possibility that they might draw inspiration from both the Quran and the Bible, given the parallels present in both texts. Hendor forms her conclusion about El Saadawi “acknowledging her Western audience” based on this assumption, which might not accurately capture the full scope of influences and intentions at play (87). In an interview, El Saadawi firmly dismisses these accusations with a tone of finality, stating, “I do not write for the West. I write for people everywhere who believe in justice, freedom, love, equality, peace and creativity. But I do write in Arabic; therefore I write mainly for people in our countries” (El Saadawi, *The Essential Nawal El Saadawi* 335). El Saadawi emphasizes that her writing is not exclusive to Western readers but resonates with individuals worldwide who carry humanist values. While she writes in Arabic, her intention remains universal, inviting a global audience while staying rooted in her regional context, and reflecting the essence of postcolonial ecofeminism by transcending geographical boundaries while maintaining a connection to Arab culture.

The roots of petrocapiatalism trace back to the intervention of the British Empire, shaping the global economic landscape. The need for petroleum led Britain to engage in imperial expansion, and, during the start of World War I, Britain acquired a majority stake in the Anglo-Persian Oil

Company, ensuring a two-decade oil supply officially marking the beginning of Western involvement in the Middle East, fueled by oil-driven imperial actions (Dawson 29). American petrocapitalism, on the other hand, functions as a contemporary form of this petroimperialism, a reality often overlooked as academia “has not as yet produced any significant tradition of scholarship in American interventionism” (Vitalis qtd. in Nixon 33). This intervention's understated presence underscores the need for more comprehensive discussions within the environmental and ecofeminist movement, including the ecofeminist reading of novels such as *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*. Petro-interventionism in the novel is symbolized in the featuring of a malevolent corporate oil representative, presumably an American, collaborating with local elites to usher the area into petromodernity (Macdonald 31). In addition to its largely metaphorical content, *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* also exhibits a distinct surrealism, attributed to its politically charged narrative. The story's symbolism operates in an obscure manner as a response to the political climate that necessitates subtlety while also wielding transformative power by shedding light, though in an exaggerated manner, on the social and environmental impacts of the oil industry. The novel adopts the characteristics of critical irrealism, a mode of narration that, as defined by Lowy, characterizes a literary aesthetic that intentionally deviates from the conventional pursuit of “accurate representation of life as it really is,” yet remains critical of the underlying structures and dynamics of social reality (196). In this confluence of themes, *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* stands as a powerful exploration of the complex interplay between petrocapitalism, feminism, and environmental consciousness, inviting readers to delve into the intricate layers of its narrative and implications.

Nawal El Saadawi's *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* emerges as a potent critique of petrocapitalism, intricately weaving feminist convictions, environmental consciousness, and

reservations about capitalism. Positioned within the realm of postcolonial ecofeminist petrofiction, the narrative resonates beyond its pages, delving into the intricate web of modern society. In the backdrop of a dystopian petrostate, oil becomes an agent of imperial, patriarchal capitalism that permeates every facet of existence, especially in the lives of women. El Saadawi proficiently exposes the lingering colonial currents veiled within neocolonial constructs, shedding light on power imbalances and the gendered impacts on the region's women. Her narrative audaciously dissects the intersection of petroimperialism, feminism, and environmental consciousness, unearthing the profound repercussions of oil's presence in the Arab world. El Saadawi's writing, with its transcultural and universal appeal, encapsulates the essence of postcolonial ecofeminism—a fusion of global understanding and cultural rootedness. In a world grappling with the ramifications of petrocapi-talism, the novel stands as both a mirror reflecting our times and a catalyst for critical dialogue.

II. Feminist Narratives in Petrofiction: Unveiling the Systematic Subjugation of Women in the Petrostate of Nawal El Saadawi's *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*

Nawal El Saadawi's *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* is a compelling novel that dissects the intricate relationship between petrocapi-talism and patriarchy, exposing their joint exploitation of women's bodies and labor among other injustices. Within the scope of feminism in petrofiction, this section delves into the heart of El Saadawi's narrative, unraveling the complex tapestry of power dynamics, gender roles, and male-biased societal structures that underpin her work. Through the novel's narrative techniques and thematic elements, El Saadawi weaves together a thought-provoking exploration of how petrofiction interconnects with romance, sexuality, violence, and oppression, providing critical insights into the persistent subjugation of women in the petrostate. The central core of the novel in question is the rooted relationship between patriarchy and

petrocapitalism based on the common aim of the twain in profiting off of free labor at the expense of women. *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* uncovers the profound influence of petrocapitalism on the systematic oppression of women, setting the stage for the comprehensive analysis of this gripping narrative that this chapter undertakes. This section devotes its focus to the struggles of women under the patriarchal authority of His Majesty in the petrostate of *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* but provides only a preliminary exploration of the intricate relationship between oil and oppression, a topic further examined in-depth in the subsequent section.

The impact of the petro-industry on societal structures goes beyond economic and environmental concerns, reaching into the intimate realm of personal relationships of individuals in a petrostate. This broader influence implies that elements like “romance and pleasure are as much oil relations as are dirt, violence, and degradation” (Kapstein 61). This connection with romance and sexuality might provide a plausible interpretation of El Saadawi’s title of her novel, *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, suggesting that it is, at its core, a narrative of a woman’s romantic and sexual liberation. In Arab literature, a romance seldom concludes favorably for women, as it typically portrays them as victims of the male counterparts with whom they are in romantic—and especially sexual—relationships. The imagery of the hunted woman-nature and the hunter man-culture is found in abundance in Arab literature depicting power dynamics based on gender roles and societal norms (Elrefaei 127). This is referred to as the concept of ‘sallamat nafsaha’ literally translated into a woman surrendering herself to a male lover (Stephan 162). Exploring the hunter-hunted analogy in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* uncovers a recurring theme of the woman depicted

as a hunted animal⁸¹ since the entire plot of the novel centers on her going on leave and being pursued by the men who could not allow it.

Among these depictions in the novel, the portrayal that resonates most profoundly is the image of the woman being fattened like a lamb for slaughter. El Saadawi writes, “The size of [her] body increased, the amount of fat increased and the amount of movement decreased. On the night of the Festival, he would carry her on his back, as if she was a lamb, and place her on the scales, and with the price he received he would buy that new machine” (108). The transformation of the woman’s body in her living conditions with the man alludes to her dehumanization and the objectification of her body becoming a marketable commodity, likened to livestock. In the passage’s conclusion, it becomes evident that oil plays a pivotal role in this process as the man uses the obtained price of her sacrifice to invest in an oil-powered machine, a stark symbol of the woman's objectification at the hands of both the man and the oil industry. This alliance, according to El Saadawi, proves that men contribute to oppression by aligning with societal structures, including petrocapiatalism, thus hindering the efficiency of feminist activism in the Arab world (Stephan 169). She views this collaboration as the basis for the 'New World Order,' revealing it as a veiled version of the capitalist patriarchal system (El Saadawi, *The Essential Nawal El Saadawi* 84). *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* serves as a sobering reminder of the pervasive influence of petrocapiatalism, highlighting the intricate entanglement of personal relationships and economic systems, ultimately casting a shadow on even the most intimate aspects of human life.

The men in El Saadawi’s novel display an utter lack of acknowledgment of women as equal human beings with fundamental rights demonstrating systemic misogyny and denial of agency to

⁸¹ Due to the ecofeminist nature of these examples, they will be discussed in the following section “On Oil, Goddesses, and Women: Ecofeminist Explorations in Nawal El Saadawi’s *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*” devoted entirely to an ecofeminist analysis of the novel.

women in this petrostate. The woman in the novel directly states, “I am a human being like you, and I have rights”, to which the man retorts with “We have the rights of men only” (44). In the world depicted in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, the value of women is reduced to their fertility, a notion explicitly conveyed by El Saadawi when she states that “the woman is no more than a container” for embryos (67). When the protagonist tries to assert her identity as an archaeologist, her words are met with ridicule; the others dismiss her expertise and instead, inquire if she is pregnant. The author writes,

The word slapped her face like a blow. *Pregnant?* Could that be the reason for her detention here? She had been on strike against pregnancy from the moment her mother had died giving birth to her. She did not know what the point of pregnancy was. All women became pregnant. ‘Would the whole world be turned upside down if one woman ceased being pregnant?’ (84)

The protagonist's defiance against the societal expectation of motherhood and pregnancy represents a radical departure from the normative role imposed upon women in her society. Her questioning and rejection symbolize a feminist assertion of autonomy—a quality often absent among the women in the petrostate who exert pressure on one other to reproduce in an almost competitive atmosphere.

In the absence of successful pregnancies, the women resort to blaming each other, specifically accusing other wives of casting curses on them to prevent their pregnancies in the complex toxicity of polygamous marriages (93). Despite the possibility of men also being at fault, societal conditioning leads them to deflect blame away from the male counterparts; they claim, “What have men got to do with women becoming pregnant?” (144). The unjust shift of blame from men to women is a common theme in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* where women are repeatedly

held responsible for the misbehavior of men. At the beginning of the novel, the woman is described as “an ordinary woman who wouldn’t arouse in anybody a desire to rape her” implying a shift of blame from potential perpetrators to the victim, based on her perceived desirability (7). The statement reflects the victim-blaming culture prevalent in societies like the one in the novel—arguably the Arab world. In the same vein, there is an instance in the novel where the man slips and falls, and, despite the woman being at a distance, he immediately blames her. This highlights a pattern of deeply ingrained misogyny, where women are made to apologize for men's misfortunes regardless of the actual circumstances. The woman explains, “He believed in the following principle: ‘If misfortune struck him, it was because of a woman. If good came his way, it was because of himself’” (40). The man’s attitude reflects a broader societal issue where prejudice against women compels them to shoulder the blame for men's errors, real or imagined.

The persistent belief that “women are naturally wicked” regardless of their actions in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* promotes the societal grip over their freedom—particularly concerning their sexual autonomy (79). In a society where the belief that no sexual relationship can be conducted without the presence of Satan, the blame often falls on women for the summons of the devil with their attractiveness. This fixation on women’s sexuality in Arab and Islamic societies seems to stem from an urge to differentiate themselves in morality from the colonial influence and a desire to construct a distinctive cultural and moral identity unique to the region (Stephan 161). In Arabic culture, the term ‘fitna’ embodies the dual perception of women's sexuality as a captivating force with the potential to disrupt social order, reflecting the belief in women's powerful allure and its potential for chaos, hence reinforcing the limitations on their sexual freedom (162). However, it is not sufficient to attribute this attitude towards female sexuality to Islam alone, as evidenced by similar beliefs held by non-Muslim Arabs, proving that these restrictions are a result of the complex

interplay between cultural norms and religious influences (163). In the novel, where the society appears to mirror those in the Arab world, there is an inherent misguided belief that the ambitions of women are rooted within a consistent search for the phallus that, when unsatisfied, leads to perversion. This distorted view of women is proven by the psychiatrist in the beginning of *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* when he describes the woman as ‘abnormal’ for pursuing her archeological research instead of the allotted duties of a housewife—an instance he uses to illustrate his phallic-based logic (9).

In a passage in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, the details of the woman’s identity card are ascribed as follows, “name, sex, eye colour; profession: researcher in the archaeology department; of spotless reputation, married, no children” (18). The emphasis on the woman’s marital status and lack of children, in addition to the mention of her ‘spotless reputation’, reveals the scrutiny placed on women’s morality in prioritizing marriage and motherhood and overprizing reputation. Retained under this pressure of purity all her life, the protagonist of the novel is highly self-conscious about her body when she admits, “nakedness was frightening” (51). She proceeds to explain that both her husband and her boss thought of her as an emblem of purity until the latter began to search her for proof of treason, invading her physical privacy by touching “the forbidden regions” (51). The intrusive search implies that any deviation from the normative roles assigned for women inevitably results in an invasion of bodily autonomy and personal boundaries—an invasion considered justified even when it borders on harassment. Despite the intrusion being initiated by her boss, there is an implicit element of blame on the woman for losing her given title of purity after undergoing the search. It is as if by being accused of writing a pamphlet against His Majesty, thus participating in a political discourse—regardless of whether the accusation was true or not—the woman has marred her sexual reputation.

Within this context of controlled sexuality, the veil comes through as not just an icon of modesty but also a complex symbol of societal rule, defining the boundaries of acceptable femininity. In *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, where the worth and virtue of a woman are measured by her adherence to traditional customs, the protagonist faces harsh prejudice for not wearing the veil. After she arrives to the kingdom of oil, the woman attempts to introduce herself but is met with revulsion as another woman asks her, “Why don’t you veil your face? Have you no shame?” (19). There is an evident societal pressure on women to conceal their identity—better yet, erase it—through the cover of a veil in the novel. When the author describes the festivities of His Majesty’s birthday, she writes,

In the long queue the lady martyrs collapsed. And at the end of the feast there was the dilapidated bus that overturned with all those in it. Before the day had passed the mother would slaughter her children and then throw herself in the sea. But nobody wanted to commit an offence and everybody performed the rites. [...] The only thing that dispelled the joy was a woman’s bare face. (78)

The disturbing instances of female sacrifice and death in the passage illustrate the extreme despair and hopelessness experienced by women in the petrostate of the novel. Despite the tragic illustrations, the festivities continue, as the pressure for conformity is so strong that nobody dares to challenge the status quo. El Saadawi ends the paragraph with an intriguing sentence confirming that even within the horrors of slaughter and suicide, the worst possible scenario is an unveiled woman.

The only occurrence in which the veil provides a temporary respite for the woman in the novel is when it briefly conceals her from the constant surveillance of the oppressive regime in the narrative—almost identical to George Orwell’s Big Brother. El Saadawi writes that “it was a

woman's right to conceal her face completely without anybody pursuing her" when she describes the woman's struggle to reclaim a sense of privacy from the constant observation (75). The compulsion becomes a 'right' and the veil then takes on a dual role in the protagonist's life as it aids her to evade the unceasing scrutiny but still symbolizes her oppression (Hendow 93). El Saadawi's experiences of jail time and death lists have shaped her perspective on the concept of observation, surveillance, and the fear associated with hidden threats. Unlike a visible enemy with a known identity—what El Saadawi refers to as a uniform wearing, gun carrying, land occupying enemy—the nameless, unseen enemy creates a deep-seated feeling of paranoia and helplessness (92). This fear of the unseen enemy is reflected in her novel where the characters are constantly observed and controlled without knowing the identity of those watching them. Referencing the panopticon⁸² and Michel Foucault's theory that "visibility is a trap" raises the intriguing issue of women's sense of captivity in the petrostate of *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* (80-81).

In the novel, the oil consistently seeps through the cracks of the house where the woman is forcibly confined by the man, rendering her an object of observation for both patriarchy, embodied by the man, and petrocapiatalism, symbolized by the oil. In this confined space, marriage acts as an additional layer of societal control, intertwining the woman's fate further with patriarchal norms. During the interrogation, the policeman asks the woman's husband about the nature of their relationship, to which the husband replies with, "Legal of course. [...] A contract of work and marriage" (El Saadawi, *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* 81). The husband thus clarifies that their union is bound by a marital contract where the woman works for him within the framework of their marriage. This definition also extends to the woman's relationship with the second man she lives

⁸² A prison design by Jeremy Bentham where prisoners can be observed without knowing whether they are being watched, creating a sense of constant surveillance.

with in the novel, whose identity remains uncertain to her, but who treats her as a husband would—within the bounds of this characterization of marriage. Of the woman’s confusion about the man’s identity and his connection to her, El Saadawi writes,

‘Prepare the supper!’ The man’s voice pierced her ears. An imperative tone, completely natural when a man addresses his wife. An unpaid servant. Wasn’t he her husband? She didn’t know exactly when he had married her. Probably he had married her in her absence and the marriage contract had been prepared without her being present. The woman didn’t attend her marriage ceremony anyway, and all the formalities could be completed without her existence. (55)

The woman’s reflection on the nature of her marriage demonstrates a profound sense of desperate disempowerment and acute detachment from the situation. She appears to accept her position of unpaid servitude propelled by unjustified rage from her husband. Her lack of awareness about the specifics of her marriage—or whether she was married to the man at all—including her absence from her own marriage ceremony, emphasizes her status as a passive participant, devoid of any agency or choice.

El Saadawi provides a poignant commentary on the dehumanizing impact of gender norms in the institution of marriage, where women are often reduced to roles of servitude and are excluded from significant decisions of great concern to their own lives. The author openly criticizes the institution of marriage in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* when she refers to it as a piece of paper that must be signed because the man does not trust the woman (98). The formalization of the personal relationship through a legal document feels to the woman—thus to El Saadawi—like a breach of intimacy, “a rape of the spirit” (98). This phrase suggests a violation of the woman’s psyche, reflecting the heavy emotional toll of conforming to societal expectations, where gender-specific

arbitrary rules dehumanize women in marriages. The author confirms this interpretation by inserting a seemingly random sentence at the end of this passage that dictates, “Are you pissing standing up? That’s forbidden for women!” (98). This unexpected intrusion into the woman's privacy highlights the arbitrariness of the pervasive control over her even in the most intimate aspects of her life, reinforcing the narrative's portrayal of marriage as a site of profound inequality and loss of personal autonomy for women.

Deepening the disturbing power dynamics between the woman and the man in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, El Saadawi writes a passage that echoes the disturbing familiarity of a rape scene but takes a divergent turn. In a disturbing encounter, the man forcefully restrains the woman in what she assumes is an attempt to rape her, but it unfolds into a power play as he painstakingly forces her to kneel in front of him (72). The man’s actions are then portrayed as means of asserting dominance and instilling fear in the woman revealing the coercive nature of their relationship—a relationship centered around exerting control and manipulation rather than seeking mutual connection. El Saadawi writes her male characters in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* as incapable of love, and she denotes this in an interaction between the man and the woman that reads as follows, “‘Man is superior to woman, even in love.’ ‘Do you mean self-love?’” (115). The woman's retort, questioning if the superiority refers to self-love—in other words, narcissism—suggests a critique of male ego and self-centeredness. As the novel unfolds, it becomes increasingly evident that the self-appointed superiority is superficial as most of the labor, domestic and public, appears to be done by women. El Saadawi demonstrates this in a metaphorical depiction, illustrating women washing His Majesty’s statue in anticipation of his birthday, while men merely stand and salute (49). This proves that the demanding tasks traditionally appointed to women, such as cleaning and

maintenance, often go unnoticed or underappreciated, while men receive acknowledgment for more visible or public roles.

The women in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* undertake all labor in the domestic realm, and most of them, namely the protagonist, do it against their will. In fact, the man—for all his superiority—begins to prove incapable of performing the most basic tasks for himself such as preparing food and drink. Almost like a child, the man would throw tantrums over his hunger every couple of hours, the author describes, “the saucepan was on the stove, and the kitchen was only three paces away. She saw him sitting down shaking his knees and moving his feet in the air, cracking his toes. [...] Like a child, he could neither feed himself nor get himself something to drink” (31). The woman is expected to cater to his needs and oblige every whim of his, especially whenever she attempts to read as his jealousy of her attention being diverted to a book renders it impossible for her to pursue any knowledge, which is evidently his purpose. In contrast with his earlier demands, El Saadawi portrays the man asking for food yet again but in a much gentler tone revealing further his childlike vulnerability through hunger (57). The woman, in a fit of motherly compassion for his pitiable inability to feed himself, prepares food for him. It becomes clear that the role of the woman in her relationship with the man is to provide care and sustenance for her tyrant-dependent, with or against her will. Towards the end of the novel, El Saadawi reminds the reader once again that in the kingdom of oil, a woman’s worth is directly linked to her cooking skills. She writes, “Nor was she an excellent cook. She was a woman without value who tried to derive her value from the value of goddesses” (130) establishing that the woman’s endeavors to define her own value through her archeological work—the search for goddesses—is futile.

In the face of societal constraints and domestic obligations, the woman's persistent efforts to assert her identity and worth through intellectual pursuits become a defining theme in *Love in*

the Kingdom of Oil. In a pivotal moment in the novel, the woman boldly declares her intention to write her life story to the man, and his response comes as a laughter reverberating so deeply that even the jar of oil he is filling seems to join in (87). The mockery that the woman receives—for her desire for self-expression and intellectual pursuit—from both the man and the jar of oil is a glaringly stark reflection of the dismissal that the petrocaptalist patriarchy shows of women's ambitions. The interaction between them continues,

‘Are you seriously thinking of writing?’

‘Well, outside work hours revelation could fall.’

‘Revelation?’

‘Yes, revelation can sometimes fall on a cowherd or an oil caterpillar.’

‘This oil will get the better of any revelation even if it falls from heaven.’

‘Perhaps the outcome will be different if the revelation comes from the bowels of the earth.’

‘What do you mean, woman?’ (87)

The interpretation of the laughter of the oil as a metaphor for the indifference of the petrocaptalist system to women's creative endeavors is further confirmed through the conversation. The woman's brief optimism that inspiration could strike her is quickly extinguished by the man, who asserts that the omnipresent oil will subdue any potential revelation. The woman does not surrender to this realization easily; she remains steadfast in her belief that her connection with nature, with ‘the bowels of the earth,’ will yield a different result.

As the interaction comes to an end, the man's stinging question lingers, and the use of the term ‘woman’ as a derogatory remark only deepens her resentment, strengthening her resolve to challenge the confining limitations forced upon her. This would not be the only instance in *Love in*

the Kingdom of Oil where the word ‘woman’ is used as equivalent to an insult. In fact, at the beginning of the novel, when the protagonist arrives to the kingdom of oil, a man starts angrily calling out for her to stop and make herself known, repeatedly shouting at her “You, woman!” (19). The woman’s contempt for the “ugly word” is palpable as El Saadawi describes her revulsion for it stating that “the word ‘woman’ pierced her ears like a sliver of glass” (19). The deliberate—but quite ironic—choice of the author to refer to the protagonist as ‘the woman’ throughout the story carries significant symbolic weight. It serves to highlight not only the individual woman's struggle but also represents the broader dehumanization of all women. By not assigning her a specific name, the author emphasizes the universality of the woman's experiences and mirrors the essentialist societal tendency to reduce women to their gender, disregarding their individuality. This interconnected web of constraints, from the denial of literacy to the erasure of individual identities, illustrates the multifaceted nature of the oppression faced by women in this petrocaptalist patriarchy where even His Majesty is illiterate.

When accused of exaggerated accounts of women’s struggles in her work, claiming that women are needed in the workforce and are thus equal associates to men in economic terms, El Saadawi responded by explaining that despite their participation in the labor force—or perhaps because of it—women have not attained personal liberation (Stephan 176). It follows that capitalism, particularly petrocaptalism, is not a lesser evil compared to patriarchy but rather an equally devastating evil that functions in collaboration with patriarchy, reinforcing and perpetuating the oppression of women. In *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, the woman finds herself ensnared in a petrostate where women bear the brunt of labor, toiling involuntarily and without any compensation. The story exposes the hypocrisy of the men in power who exploit women's labor, as the abaya-clad women constitute the primary workforce in the oil industry, enduring the most

strenuous tasks without remuneration. Indeed, when wages in the form of oil drops are distributed to the workers of the oil industry in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, the men unapologetically appropriate the women's portion of the drops, receiving four themselves while only allowing the women two drops (28). When the woman, weary of the man's reminders of her indebtedness to him, dares to assert her right to acknowledgment for her work, the man retorts, "It's not right for a woman to work for money. [She should work] for a greater goal" (46). The man's retort implies that a woman's work should always be driven by altruism rather than financial ambitions—to work for society rather than for herself—reflecting the way women's attempts at asserting their rights to equal recognition and economic empowerment are viewed as a deviation from their ascribed domestic roles.

The man's endeavors to maintain control of the woman through emotional manipulation and religious rhetoric are evident in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*. When the woman insists on being compensated for her labor, the man attempts to placate her by asserting his role as her provider. However, when her dissatisfaction persists, he resorts to religious manipulation, deflecting her demands by justifying, "Your wage is due from God" (90). The woman's bewilderment at the sudden change of topic provides the man with an opportunity to deflect her inquiry about wages. By questioning her faith in God, he manipulates the situation, casting her as the antagonist in the argument, and his tactics prove effective as she, unable to pursue her original demand, surrenders (91). On his continuous streak of attempts to assert dominance over the woman, the man uses religion once again when he asks her, "Don't you know that God has ordered the woman to prostrate herself before her husband? Come on, prostrate yourself before me, woman!" (127). The coercive tone of the man and the humiliating demand he makes of her encourage defiance in the woman who reminds him that he prostrates himself in front of His Majesty despite the latter's

unjust rule. Her attempt, however, elicits no anger from the man as he, unlike her, unresistingly yields to the expected authority of His Majesty. The arrogance and sense of entitlement that the man sports are inspired from his belief in his superiority fortified by the religion in the novel. He firmly trusts that “instead of one wife, God will give [him] four”, a fact that fills him with pride to the point of elongating his neck to endless proportions, a sight terrifying to the woman (140). The woman's resistance against patriarchal oppression proves futile; every action she takes is labeled a vice, and “vice was [only] turned into virtue with a movement of a man's lips” (145).

In the shadow of His Majesty's unquestioned authority, the pervasive obedience and submission of the society in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* become apparent, profoundly influencing the woman's life and reinforcing the constraints placed upon her. In an intriguing passage in the novel, El Saadawi describes the way in which the people in the story mimic the actions of His Majesty without any understanding as to what they signify. She writes,

The voice of His Majesty mumbled over the loudspeaker. His words were indistinct, spoken in a strange accent, and nobody understood what he was saying. Their leader shook his head as a sign of pleasure and they all shook their heads. Then his head stopped shaking and their heads stopped shaking too. He jumped up from his seat, and they all jumped up too. He disappeared into the darkness of the night, and the men all disappeared behind him, and behind them went the women. (21)

The passage vividly depicts the sense of unquestioning obedience and conformity in the novel when it comes to His Majesty. The imagery of the synchronized actions portrays a collective submission, demonstrating that even when His Majesty walks into the dark his people follow him blindly—first the men, then the women. In another scene, the woman is suddenly struck down by a cane and forced to bow when His Majesty and the president of the oil company drive by in a tank

(35). His Majesty, emblematic of the authoritative patriarchal state, and the president of the oil company, symbolizing the petrostate, stand as revered figures representing the woman's oppression. The impact of their authority is accentuated by their arrival in a tank, reinforcing the imposing and oppressive nature of their dominance over her.

His Majesty's pervasive oppression, representing the epitome of patriarchal tyranny, casts a long shadow over the woman's life, stifling even her most basic pleasures. In a poignant occurrence in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, the woman dares to request a puff of the man's cigarette, only to be met with his perennial anger, as he declares, "Women do not smoke, by order of His Majesty" (58). This seemingly minor request encapsulates a deeper longing—a yearning for the freedom to indulge in the personal choices often arbitrarily denied by His Majesty and enforced by men. Beyond a mere desire for smoking, it signifies her thirst for freedom. She silently contemplates her place in a society where even her nurturing actions are met with unfulfilled yearnings in a profound contrast. This tyranny reaches further within the woman's life preventing her from developing personal relationships beyond the one with the authoritative men in her life. El Saadawi writes, "there is nothing that dirties the reputation of a woman as much as friends" (109)—a belief that appears constructed exclusively to leave women friendless and wholly dependent upon men. In addition to controlling and isolating women, the society of *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* further reaffirms its grip over women by ensuring their exclusion from political participation. The author makes it clear that "it is forbidden for women to engage in politics" and that, ideally, it is preferable if they can neither read nor write (110). The systemic denial of the woman's yearnings for personal freedom and genuine connections stands as a reminder of the profound societal limitations imposed upon her and exposes the depths of her isolation.

In a poignant portrayal of her daily survival, the woman in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* is seen repeatedly exchanging one form of captivity for another. Having sought a leave from her husband and boss at the beginning of the novel, only to find herself ensnared in the clutches of both her second husband and the oil company, the woman's escape proves illusory, as she confronts the same stifling captivity daily. El Saadawi writes, “She would leave the house for work each day as if she was leaving the grip of one person to fall into the grip of another. The ceiling was one and the same, like a vault. She pulled herself out of one vault to then come under another vault” (80). The metaphor of leaving one grip to fall into another emphasizes her perpetual entrapment, proving that any attempt at an escape from a capitalist patriarchy is both cyclical and futile. The imagery of the ceiling being compared to a vault can be related to the concept of the glass ceiling⁸³, further confirming that the double burden of a woman in a petrocapitalist patriarchy solidifies the already restrictive glass ceiling into a vault. Despite her efforts at an escape, she finds herself confined within different vaults, representing the persistent obstacles hindering—or rather preventing—her escape.

In her quest for liberation, the men that the woman in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* encounters become indistinguishable, blending into the form of one controlling figure. El Saadawi, in fact, using the techniques of analepsis and prolepsis⁸⁴ in the novel, melds the male characters, transforming them into a collective oppressive entity (Deckard 47-48). By shifting between past and present, the narrative blurs the distinctions among these male figures drawing on their shared tyrannical attitude towards the woman and emphasizing their unified roles as representative of

⁸³ A concept that refers to refers to invisible barriers that prevent women and other marginalized groups from advancing in their careers, often limiting their opportunities for higher positions and equal pay.

⁸⁴ *Analepsis*, also known as a flashback, is a literary device where the narrative shifts to a scene or event that occurred before the current timeline. *Prolepsis*, or foreshadowing, is a literary technique where the author provides hints, clues, or indications about future events in the story.

patriarchy authority. The constant interplay of analepsis and prolepsis in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* not only erases the boundaries between the male characters but also serves to highlight their collective impact on the protagonist. Defying a role stereotypically attributed to men, the woman in the novel is assigned multiple husbands, an unconventional situation that blurs the concept of possession. While being controlled by various men intensifies her repression, it simultaneously grants her an unusual freedom usually reserved for men (Hendow 85). While the woman's multiple husbands symbolize her entrapment within societal norms, their presence, if interpreted accordingly, might offer a more hopeful note to the novel's tone, providing the woman with an unconventional path towards her independence.

This complexity of the woman's relationships with the men in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* sets the stage for her resistance. Throughout the novel, the protagonist embarks on various attempts to escape, each endeavor—except for the first one, which could be deemed a success despite the fact that she ends up trapped by the second husband—ultimately ending in failure. These futile escapes often conclude in a reminder of the unyielding societal rule that states, “Women do not go on leave. If one does, then she does so in order to run some essential errand. Before going, she must obtain written permission either in her husband's hand or stamped by her boss at work. There is no precedent for a woman going and not returning” (El Saadawi, *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* 6). As the protagonist endeavors to set that precedent by leaving without permission or date of return, she becomes the first to attempt rebellion in the narrative, but towards the end of the novel, El Saadawi reasserts the previous statement. She repeats, “You could not leave the date of return unspecified. [...] However, the only leave the woman received was on the day of her funeral. How precarious was the distinction between leave and death” (107). This cyclical nature, where the woman's attempts at liberation are repeatedly stifled, ultimately highlights the novel's overarching

theme: the crushing weight of patriarchal and petrocapiatist systems. Despite her courageous attempts to break free from the confines imposed upon her, the narrative relentlessly pulls her back into her oppressive reality where the notions of ‘leave’ and ‘death’ are interchangeable.

El Saadawi's repeated sanction of the societal rule in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* serves as a harsh reminder of the woman's lack of autonomy, emphasizing the futility of her struggle against such deeply entrenched norms. One scene in the novel that resonates deeply with the previously explored passages is when the woman, on one of her attempts at escape, predictably fails because of the psychological toll of her situation as a hostage to the man she meets in the Kingdom of Oil. El Saadawi describes the woman as gradually sinking in the earth the more she struggles towards her freedom, only stopping when her yearning to comfort the man in his sadness overweighs her desire to escape (39). The woman, in a moment of rare emotional vulnerability displayed in the man's presence, utters a plea for freedom that falls on deaf ears as the man completely ignores her indignant entreaty (39). The soft earth trapping the woman's feet in the passage is evidently representative of the societal constraints and patriarchal norms that hinder her progress towards autonomy. The passage successfully encapsulates the woman's emotional turbulence, portraying her internal conflict and the daunting realization of her entwined fate with her oppressor, even through her own feelings of tenderness for him—despite his cruelty to her. When the woman is forced to carry the jar of oil in company with the other women, they advise her to continue to work to avoid the man's beatings—and, in fact, not even think about rebellion (82). They explain, “It is not necessary for disobedience to happen. It is sufficient for you to think about it. Sometimes the thought is more dangerous” (82). This conversation is an ideal illustration the inescapability of the environment in which the woman exists, emphasizing the psychological manipulation she endures even from the women surrounding her.

Love in the Kingdom of Oil stands as a touching testament to the entwined forces of patriarchy and petrocapitalism, encapsulated within the protagonist's harrowing journey. Through the intricate narrative techniques that El Saadawi uses, the male characters amalgamate into a collective oppressive presence, embodying the pervasive societal control that thwarts the protagonist's aspirations for her freedom. Her cyclic attempts at escape, borne of her disillusionment with societal constraints and emotional manipulation, emphasize the inescapable nature of her struggle against patriarchal and capitalist norms alike. The interchangeable concepts of 'leave' and 'death,' poignantly portrayed within the narrative, symbolize the relentless trap she confronts. The symbolism of multiple husbands adds layers of complexity, representing both her ensnarement within societal conventions and a potential unconventional pathway toward independence. The text illuminates the toll of the psychological warfare that the woman undergoes in the form of betrayal even from within her own gender as perpetuated by the patriarchal system. This analysis lays bare the novel's overarching theme—the oppressive weight of patriarchal and petrocapitalist systems, ensnaring the protagonist in an unbending cycle of subjugation. Significantly, these reflections pave the way for an ecofeminist lens, delving into the intricate connections between the oil industry, imagery of goddesses, metaphors of nature, and women, as explored in the subsequent section. Through this critical examination, the novel emerges as a powerful critique, urging readers to confront the complex layers of societal control that persistently oppress women in the petrostate.

III. On Oil, Goddesses, and Women: Ecofeminist Explorations in Nawal El Saadawi's *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*

Nawal El Saadawi's *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* intricately weaves together the oppressive forces of patriarchy and petrocapitalism against the quest for feminine liberation within the

confines of a rigid societal structure. In this section, titled “On Oil, Goddesses, and Women: Ecofeminist Explorations in Nawal El Saadawi’s *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*” we delve deep into the ecofeminist dimensions of the novel. This is achieved by illuminating the complex interplay of oil as an oppressor of women and exploring the symbolism embedded within goddess imagery, along with an analysis of the feminine essence of nature and its relation to oil throughout the novel. Through this ecofeminist lens, we explore the profound implications of the petrocaptalist patriarchy portrayed in El Saadawi’s narrative, unearthing the ways in which women’s lives are entangled with ecological and capitalist exploitation and symbolic goddess archetypes. The first subsection, “Illuminations on the Interplay of Oil as an Oppressor of Women,” critically examines the novel’s portrayal of the oil industry as a multifaceted oppressor, suppressing women—along with, but as the bottom of, the working class—and perpetuating their subjugation. In the second subsection, “Sacred Symbolism: Goddess Imagery and Nature’s Feminine Essence,” we unravel the layers of goddess symbolism and its interconnectedness with nature and oil, exploring how these motifs serve as a source of empowerment and resistance for the female protagonist. Through a meticulous analysis, this section seeks to unravel the intricate tapestry of ecofeminist themes embedded in El Saadawi’s narrative, shedding light on the symbiotic relationship between ecological exploitation, petrocaptalist patriarchal oppression, and the profound resilience of women in the face of these challenges.

1. Illuminations on the Interplay of Oil as an Oppressor of Women

In Nawal El Saadawi’s dystopian masterpiece *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, oil emerges as a central protagonist, its symbolism stretching far beyond economic boundaries. Within the intricate layers of this exploration, entitled “Illuminations on the Interplay of Oil as an Oppressor of Women,” we dissect the profound metaphorical significance that oil carries in the novel. This

analysis meticulously peels away the novel's surface to reveal the oil industry's nuanced grip, especially its subjugation of female characters, notably the nameless protagonist. Oil, in this narrative, embodies more than just economic value—it encapsulates both capitalist and patriarchal dominance, imposing rigid norms and curbing women's freedom within the petrocapitalist society of the novel. Delving deep, we uncover the multifaceted dimensions of oil, a tangible manifestation of power shaping the lives and choices of women, both within the narrative and throughout history. This investigation is not merely an unveiling of oppression; it is a profound examination of intersectionality among capitalism, patriarchal structures, and the exploitation of natural resources. Thus, the study unravels oil's intimidating influence, echoing El Saadawi's own confession that "In [her] novel, oil is the hero" (qtd. in Mahzabeen 69), confirming the omnipresent force of the element in the narrative. In navigating this complex interplay, we explore how women resist the multifaceted oppressions intertwined with the oil industry, offering valuable insights into power dynamics within petrocapitalist environments from an ecofeminist perspective.

In the history of petrofiction, oil began as a subtle presence in the backgrounds of narratives revolving around human lives, but, gradually, it emerged to assert its dominance in literary works such as *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*. Present in the title, and repeated over a hundred times in the novel, oil is everywhere in the narrative, whether in its physical form or in the grip it has over the characters—it appears that oil is, in fact, the core of the narrative. The relentless and rapid advance of the oil industry in reality, especially in the Arab Gulf, renders resistance seemingly impossible, emphasizing its overwhelming force and the chaotic nature of its influence, all of which are vividly portrayed by El Saadawi in the novel. The invisibility of oil is an issue of relativity: while it is argued that oil's presence often goes unnoticed due to processes like privatization and military control in core regions, oil can definitely be seen in extraction sites where it is blatantly visible

(Deckard 43). Despite attempts to conceal it, people living in these extraction sites are acutely aware of oil's pervasive presence proving that the perception of oil is experienced differently—and unfairly—across geographical and social landscapes. This perspective reframes petrocapitalism as more than just an economic system; it becomes an intricate ideological framework governing power relations. Within this framework, the distribution of benefits and consequences arising from the oil industry is profoundly unequal, creating stark disparities between the global north and south (Nandi 140).

Ecosickness, referring to the detrimental effects on the environment caused by the exploitation of natural resources—particularly oil—in colonized regions, is one of the consequences that the global south suffers from at the hands of petrocapitalism (Elrefaei 132). In “Petrofiction Revisited”, Amitav Ghosh reflects on a visit to Abadan, a town marred by the intrusion of oil installations along the picturesque Shatt al-Arab, where the once pristine riverbanks became cluttered with the industrial structures (19). In *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, parallels of this description abound with the vivid depiction of colossal oil pipes coursing through the village, saturating the land with the inky blackness of the liquid (El Saadawi 13). In fact, El Saadawi goes as far as to describe the entire oil company that occupies the region in the novel as “a black stain on an expanse that was even blacker. A piece of land rising into the sky like a chimney” (46). Within this evocative setting, the invisibility of oil becomes an unattainable feat, laying bare its undeniable presence and the attendant horrors that accompany such visibility. The emphasis on showcasing the extraction and visibility of oil in narratives like *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* challenges the predominantly first-world perspective that oil is almost abstract—only noticed for its usefulness (Hendow 86). With a new attitude towards oil, El Saadawi brings the smell, the sight, and even the taste of oil into the picture, revealing its weighty impact in the global south. Both the

woman's failure to veil herself and the shame associated with the visibility of oil—hence the visibility of its environmental impact—find common ground in the necessity of veiling subjects of oppression in the petrostate (89). Oil, despite its value, elicits feelings of danger and shame in its raw, unmasked state, mirroring the societal expectations on women to remain veiled and invisible.

Oil is often underestimated due to the consumerist narrative protecting it, which conceals the extensive influence of its presence as a finite resource without replacement deeply entrenched in modern life. Mid-twentieth century, when oil production began, the media portrayed it as ‘Mother’s little helper’, reducing household labor and contributing to various aspects of social reproduction (Deckard 45-46). However, these advertisements for oil were based on—and targeted to—the limited demographic of white and relatively rich families, thus excluding the reality of oil in the global south (46). The women of El Saadawi’s *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* stand in stark contrast to the previous ads, as the protagonist’s second husband in the petrostate appears to be complicit with the oil to coerce her into capitalist and domestic labor. The work that women like the protagonist of the novel do—predominantly unpaid labor—is indispensable to the continued existence of capitalism as it proceeds with the extraction and production of energy commodities such as oil. This is seen in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* where only the women carry the weighty jars of oil, thus representing the gendered labor associated with the oil industry. As the oil-powered typewriter appears, an envisioned machine in the novel supposed to be capable of replacing women in reproductive and caregiving roles, it completely disproves the theory of ‘Mother’s little helper’, instead revealing a machine that made it “possible for [the man] to do without the woman entirely” (El Saadawi 108).

The question of the machine is also a historical reality in the oil industry, where minimal staffing and heavy reliance on machinery prevent workers from effectively striking, ultimately

undermining the middle class and bolstering the power of capitalist monopolies (Dawson 30). This dynamic transforms the petrostate into an extraordinary and unfamiliar reality, driven by oil's extensive capacities, with advanced technology and machinery shaping a new paradigm (Macdonald 299). The intricate dance between technological advancements and societal structures unfolds further in the context of the oil industry, where machinery's dominance is juxtaposed with the suppression of women, positioning them as the cheapest labor source and reinforcing patriarchal dynamics within the petrostate. In the Kingdom, where “oil oozes patriarchy,” oil—as a symbol for the oil industry—undoubtedly sides with men at the expense of women (Hendow 82). El Saadawi, in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, parallels women with oil—thus to natural resources to emphasize men’s desire for dominance over both—when she writes the psychiatrist’s statement, “I think there is in her, as there is in other women, something resembling oil” (80). Despite this association, oil remains an active force in subjugating women, requiring them to bend over while carrying jars on their heads, symbolizing both a literal and symbolic imprisonment (Mahzabeen 70). Notably, the history of oil wealth in the Arab Gulf has gradually led to the unemployment of women and their economic dependency on men, who became more powerful with access to oil money (75). By reducing their presence in the labor force, the oil industry limits women’s political influence and reinforces gender disparities in oil-producing states.

In *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, the protagonist, who is an archeologist, finds no use for her academic skills as her abilities are redirected to the task of carrying oil jars instead of any intellectual pursuit. While the woman is instructed to carry the jars to the company on a daily basis, she is still so disconnected from the economic context she lives in that she wonders, “A mysterious word. The company. What is it? Who are the partners in this company? To whom do they sell the jars? How much do they pay for them each day? Does the man take a wage? From the day she had

come, she had received nothing. She had never held any money in her hands” (El Saadawi, *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* 45). Marginalized and ignorant to even the smallest detail concerning the mechanisms of petrocapiatalism, the woman, with her economic vulnerability, remains its ideal victim. In a passage where the protagonist reflects on the absence of women’s rights, she recounts seeing a dark layer of oil covering the pupils of the women carrying the jars, to which she adds, “and there was an order from His Majesty: ‘Any woman detained with paper and pen in her possession shall be prosecuted’” (51). While the role of oil in the oppression of women is symbolized in their oil-induced blindness, their liberty of intellectual pursuit is curbed by an order from His Majesty. By stifling women's intellectual agency, and preventing them from employing their academic skills, the petrocapiatalist regime reinforces their subjugation, maintaining a power dynamic where economic ignorance becomes integral to the exploitation of women.

The taxing physical and mental strain imposed on women by the oil industry is vividly portrayed in a scene from *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, where the woman, in a moment of revelation, decides to transfer the weight of the oil jar from her head to her back (47). As she realizes that even donkeys carry loads on their backs instead of their heads—a comparison that highlights the dehumanizing nature of the tasks assigned to women—the woman decides to try the same and is surprised by a thought that came to her as the cloudiness from the jar clears away. As she “realised why men refuse to carry things on their heads,” the woman finally experiences a moment of rebellion and self-liberation, remembering her abandoned intellectual and spiritual aspirations (47). The fact that the exploitative work of carrying heavy loads, often given to animals, is assigned to women in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, facilitates an ecofeminist reading of the work. This interconnected oppression emphasizes how patriarchal structures not only subjugate the natural world but also extend their tyranny to women, reflecting ecofeminism's concern for the

interdependence of gender and environmental justice. In multiple instances in the novel, the woman compares herself to an animal: to a bowed down camel, an extinct donkey, and a hunted mouse. This comparison culminates when the woman laments, “The tame ox could go on leave for a day, and the machine could stop working for a day, and nobody could accuse either of them of immorality. But unfortunately she was a woman, and she could not be innocent” (109). Women in the novel, reduced to mere tools of labor without the privilege of leave and “put in situations that an animal would not accept”, are dehumanized to the point that it becomes impossible to view them as morally innocent (147).

In the context of the novel's exploration of the impact of oil on the environment and the protagonist's perception, El Saadawi writes a passage⁸⁵ in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* that reflects the transformative nature of oil on both the physical landscape and the character's internal world. Noticing, “If the oil changed, everything around her changed,” the woman begins to comprehend the intricate dance of change that the oil weighs heavily on, impacting not only her life but every element surrounding her (48). The rhythmic description suggests a symbiotic relationship between the changing properties of oil and its intricate interconnectedness with the elements. The fluidity and variability of oil's forms mirror the protagonist's internal turmoil, symbolizing her sense of futility and lack of purpose in the face of the overwhelming force that is oil. The supremacy of oil seems to transcend even the power of the patriarchy in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* as El Saadawi writes a personification where oil invades the woman's body and penetrates every pore, suffocating her as she realizes, “oil is not a man whom you can get rid of” (100). The vivid imagery of oil creeping and advancing, despite the character's resistance, creates a sense of inevitability and helplessness towards its intrusive nature. The inescapable grip of oil—or the oil industry—becomes

⁸⁵ This is the same passage that serves as an epigraph to this chapter.

stronger than that of the patriarch, subsuming individuals within its pervasive influence and reshaping their lives in ways that transcend patriarchal power structures.

The notion that petrocapiatalism is so powerful that it is better to submit to it than rebel against it is prevalent in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*. As a colonial petrocapiatalist regime, the oil industry is understood to be “friendly towards us if we surrender to it,” reflecting a resignation to development, which carries the oil industry as an agent to colonialism (101). To further prove the oil company’s affiliation to colonialism, El Saadawi meticulously explains, “The company boss had a light skin and prattled on in a foreign language” as she describes him exchanging oil jars with His Majesty (89). The novel details the repercussions of this exchange through newspaper headlines, contrasting His Majesty’s benevolence with grim reports of casualties in oil wars, a tainted oil ministry, and heinous crimes against women and children (73-74). The headlines reveal a society in disarray, deeply affected by the power dynamics associated with the oil industry as the crimes against children and women appear to result from oppressive decrees dictated by the authoritarian petrostate. This disturbing blend of political, social, and moral chaos is written by the author in an abrupt shift from seemingly trivial headlines to grave atrocities to uphold the apathetic atmosphere of the novel where “The people. The nation. The masses [are] words that mean everything and nothing at the same time” (5). In weaving together these narrative threads, *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* not only exposes the cooperative relationship between petrocapiatalism and colonialism but also invites readers to confront the multifaceted consequences of surrendering to a system that, as depicted in the novel, blurs the lines between power and morality.

Love in the Kingdom of Oil carries a unique analysis of the relationship between love and oil as it intricately unspools the intimate aspects of life shaped by broader sociopolitical and economic forces, namely the oil industry—especially in the lives of women. In the novel, El

Saadawi wonders, as if to question the eligibility of her own title, “Could there be a relationship between love and oil?” (105). The uncompromising nature of petrocapitalism, however, ensures that there can be no balanced coexistence of love and oil as “the oil could not abandon its nature and side with the woman” and thus lends its unyielding power to the patriarchy to aid in her oppression (142). In fact, as women assert their right to fair wages within the oil company, a disconcerting conversation unfolds among the men who, instead of addressing the legitimacy of these demands, attribute the rise in prices to the perceived immorality of women (111). The men, then, propose the introduction of an oil-powered machine as a replacement for women’s labor, deeming it “God’s favour upon us,” thus using oil to strip women of their livelihoods, equate them with machinery, and frame their displacement as a divine order. By using women as scapegoats in all situations, including economic downturns, a persistent narrative emerges—one that seeks to exert control over women and undermine their roles as equal economic contributors, depicting them as burdens rather than valuable participants. This intertwining of patriarchal attitudes, economic exploitation, and a distorted sense of divine approval perpetuates gender inequality and justifies it through societal and religious lenses. Evidently, in the novel, the only form of love the woman seems liable to perform under the circumstances is sacrifice, where she is not only slaughtered but also has “to hide the traces of blood after the slaughter” (87).

As we conclude this section delving into the nuanced dynamics of oil as an oppressor of women in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, the symbolism carried by the weighty jars of oil takes on profound significance. These jars, laden with meaning, not only echo the feminization of labor in cultures across the Global South—especially in Petrostates—but also signify the gendered

hydropolitics⁸⁶ intricately woven into the fabric of the novel. As Deckard illuminates, the “Saudi alchemy”⁸⁷ of turning water into oil and vice versa finds resonance in the paltry ration of “oil drops” doled out by His Majesty in the novel, a sinister elixir that induces not only a physical thirst but also a metaphorical craving for political subservience (47). The hydrological crisis pervading the text, vividly portrayed through the woman's unquenchable thirst and the substitution of water with oil in various forms, is seen when she dreams of water and clean air after drinking the oil drops (El Saadawi, *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* 28). The metaphor for the broader environmental and sociopolitical impact of fossil capitalism urges the message that only a complete dismantling of the oil industry can hope to cease the prolonged war against both women and the planet. In the novel, the recurrent image of the lake, as deep as the sea filled with lifeless bodies, serves as a haunting reflection of the environmental toll exacted by the insatiable thirst for oil. As we draw the curtains on this exploration of the intricate dynamics of oil as a suppressor of women in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* with an understanding of oil's impact on nature as well, we set the stage for the connection between nature and the feminine in the following section.

2. Sacred Symbolism: Goddess Imagery and Nature's Feminine Essence

The celebration of the feminine connection with nature, akin to the ancient concept of Gaia as a portrayal for the Earth as a living system with a nurturing sense of motherhood, lays the

⁸⁶ Hydropolitics refers to the study of the political, social, and economic aspects of water resources and their management. It involves understanding how water influences and is influenced by political decisions, international relations, and societal dynamics.

⁸⁷ The term "Saudi alchemy" refers to a complex and often paradoxical process in Saudi Arabia where there is a simultaneous abundance of oil and scarcity of water. The phrase captures the relationship between the country's vast oil reserves and its limited water resources. It highlights the transformative nature of the Saudi economy, where oil is used not only as a source of wealth but also as a means to procure and manage water.

groundwork for this section. As this work navigates the realm of symbolism in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, it is crucial to critically examine how the celebration of this connection between nature and women, at times, can be wielded to subdue women's individual identities, revealing a nuanced interplay between reverence for nature's feminine essence and potential erasure of individuality. The profound connection between women and nature, celebrating their biological ties to the environment, is emphasized in the inseparable link forged by a woman's reproductive system, which allows her to partake in the experience of birthing and nurturing life alongside the broader living world (Collard and Contrucci 102). This perspective becomes a poignant entry point into the exploration of the feminine in both the metaphor of Mother Earth and of the imagery of goddesses in El Saadawi's *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*. This examination lays the groundwork for a nuanced understanding of how the intertwining of nature's feminine essence and women's roles may both empower and, paradoxically, oppress them within the novel's narrative.

Women, in Arabic and Islamic cultures, have an inconsistent representation, as they are either revered as symbols of love and sacrifice, particularly in their roles as mothers, or socially devalued, representing shame and vulnerability. It should be pointed out that women, in some cases, are referred to as *aura*—an Arabic term connoting private parts—that emphasizes the cultural fixation on the “hymen mystique” and female virginity, reflecting enduring perceptions and taboos centered on female sexuality (Stephan 165). El Saadawi succeeds in portraying this dichotomy in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* as she writes a passage of a woman breastfeeding her child publicly while clad in a fully covered abaya (El Saadawi, *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* 21). The visual contradiction of a wholly covered woman exposing her breast encapsulates the paradoxical nature of women's roles, forced to be covered at all times except when their bodies function in childbearing purposes, but still breastfeeding within the confines of a fully covered

garment—a situation enforced upon them through religious norms. On the subject of religion, the author composes a passage that illustrates the potential for a more inclusive approach to spirituality, challenging the constraints imposed by rigid cultural norms in the novel. She writes, “She was just as much a believer as the man, and more so. Her heart was big, bigger than his. It was large enough to embrace a faith bigger than his faith, a faith that also included the ancient gods—and the goddesses” (91). The woman’s faith extends beyond that of the man—who repeatedly preaches to her throughout the novel—as she claims to be capable of accepting something more than the belief dictated by His Majesty. Her acknowledgment of both ancient gods and goddesses implies the recognition of a belief that transcends monotheistic traditions towards a pantheist worldview.

Pantheism as a philosophical belief overlaps largely with ecofeminism as it posits the universe, including all of nature and existence, as deific where there is no distinct separation between the divine and the natural. Much like the narration in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, pantheism focuses on the interconnectedness of all things as an all-encompassing, immanent force of divinity as all the elements of nature are portrayed as living, vengeful powers. The wind, for example, is recurrently depicted as a formidable force, embodying nature’s anger as it snatches, bends, and howls at the characters. Only when the woman finally submits herself to its strength that the wind relents. The author describes, “Perhaps standing firm was not what was required. She abandoned herself to the wind, an attitude that her body was not used to at first. It appeared to be heavy. Then it became lighter. She closed her eyes in something resembling surrender” (17). Along with the wind, the lake—and water in general—in the novel is viewed with a reverence and fear befitting of a divine force. El Saadawi writes, “They sank together to the depths of the lake as if they were falling into the grip of a power that was greater than them, from which they could not

free themselves” (83). The lake, as a natural entity, symbolizes a force that is greater than humans, emphasizing the interdependence—and vulnerability—of human existence with the natural world.

In moments of fear from the unpredictable forces of nature, the women in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* find solace and refuge in the nurturing embrace of both mothers and goddesses. In a passage in the novel, the women are seen to gather in front of the sea for a dance ritual in order to pray, where one woman is described lifting “her eyes to heaven as if entreating the mother goddess” (37). Their prayer “Our Lady of Purity, Deliver us from the flood”, directed towards a female divinity and made in fear of a flood, is an ideal illustration of the case (37). The ritual is connected to a plea for protection that the women, in their interaction with nature, make by invoking feminine divinities, represented by the mother goddess or the Lady of Purity. El Saadawi further confirms this instinct to seek comfort from the maternal and the connection between fear and the attachment to the mother in another passage. She reiterates, “Fear of drowning filled people’s hearts. At the height of their fear, they became eagerly attached to the name ‘Mother’” (56). From an ecofeminist perspective, this phenomenon could be interpreted as reflective of a broader cultural and psychological association between femininity, maternity, and safety. The fear of drowning, which is a threat to life itself, triggers a collective reaching out for the comforting and protective symbol of motherhood.

In *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, El Saadawi introduces a myriad of feminine divinities, each serving as powerful symbols that encapsulate themes of hope, memory, and vengeance. In a moment of profound connection between the feminine and the cosmic, the protagonist gazes towards the stars and planets in search of “the mistress of them all, Venus” (15). Venus, traditionally associated with the goddess of love and beauty in classical mythology, begins to move as the woman watches her, eventually transforming into an animal along with the other stars. This

evokes a sense of unity between the celestial and the terrestrial as the divine feminine, represented by Venus, transcends earthly boundaries to connect with animal life forms in the presence of the woman, emphasizing the interconnected web of existence as established by ecofeminists. In the passage, the woman is reminded of her aunt's guidance on identifying the planets, an addition that displays the transmission of ecological knowledge through generations from woman to woman, symbolizing the link between women, goddesses, and natural wisdom. Repeatedly throughout the novel, the woman is seen constantly digging the ground with her chisel, searching the earth for goddesses as part of her archeological research. In one instance, one of the women carrying jars for the oil company notices the chisel in the protagonist's hand, and, to her horror, the protagonist explains that she uses it to search for Sekhmet in the ground (18). The mention of Sekhmet, an ancient Egyptian goddess connected with destruction and healing, embodying both nature's destructive and regenerative aspects, serves as a symbolic archetype for the divine feminine in Egyptian culture rather than Western culture.

The act of searching for goddesses in the bowels of the earth, recurrent in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, perhaps reflects a desire to unearth ancient, suppressed feminine wisdom embedded in the land. The woman's pursuit seemed to inspire terror and fury in all the characters of the novels, a response that suggests a deep-seated societal fear of feminine divinity. In fact, the presence of goddesses is so discreet in the novel that even the protagonist, despite her profession as an archaeologist, has only recently discovered their existence. El Saadawi writes of an instance where the woman is asked about her knowledge on goddesses by her boss; she narrates,

‘What do you know about Numu, the first goddess of the waters?’

‘Numu?’

‘And Inana, the goddess of nature and fertility?’

‘Inana?’

‘And Sekhmet, the goddess of death?’

She did not know that there were such things as goddesses. The prophets were all men, and there was not a woman among them. How then could there be female gods? Which are higher in rank, prophets or gods? As for the god of death, his name was Ezra’el not Sekhmet, and he was male not female. (30)

In the passage, the woman’s lack of knowledge about goddesses such as Numu, Inana, and Sekhmet is a reflection on the patriarchal and monotheistic framework that dominates the context of the novel. In fact, she associates the concept of prophets and gods exclusively with men, revealing a deep-rooted gender bias within her religious and cultural background. The goddesses, interlinked with elements of nature, seem to be systemically excluded from the local culture and history in order to enforce patriarchal narratives revolving around male domination.

El Saadawi, in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, recurrently writes of the absurd notion of statues of male gods with breasts—a peculiar concept that the patriarchal figures of the novel have conjured up to avoid attributing the statues to female goddesses, thus dismissing their existence. Of the woman’s boss, El Saadawi writes, “He believed that the male god could have a breast or two but he did not believe in the existence of goddesses, and if there ever happened to be one, she would be the wife of a god and not a goddess in her own right” (15). The boss reveals a stubbornly patriarchal mindset by refusing to acknowledge the possibility of female goddesses, perpetuating a hierarchal structure within divinities where the feminine holds a subordinate role still. Furthermore, the man’s reaction when the woman is caught reading from a book about goddesses,

accusing her of “blasphemy against the gods” (61), emphasizes the novel’s portrayal of the oppressive nature of denying the divine feminine. It appears that even the notion of exploring knowledge about goddesses is seen as a blasphemous act against the male gods as the characters persist in pretending the divine feminine is nonexistent. This oppressive atmosphere is a reflection of the broader societal reluctance to accept and acknowledge the spiritual and intellectual contributions of women. El Saadawi skillfully weaves these instances into the narrative, presenting a powerful critique of patriarchal structures that seek to suppress both women and their exploration of knowledge about nature.

In the same vein, the woman repeatedly faces similar discussions where female goddesses are either denied or devalued. Such instances include the lady Sphinx being perceived as the Sphinx’s wife after he had usurped her throne, removed the breasts from her statue, and added a beard (76). El Saadawi adds, “The lady Sphinx became the Sphinx, the soft smooth skin became hairy the flood invaded everything, agriculture died, and the river waters changed to a black liquid with a sharp taste like salt. The new god ordered that breasts be removed from statues and a penis be added” (77). The shift in the passage from the lady Sphinx to Sphinx appears to have caused great ecological degradation in the imagery of a flood invading everything as if to avenge the usurped ruler. The ecological imbalance that follows the forced removal of fertile feminine powers signifies the consequences of patriarchal control over both women and the environment—essentially represented in the turning of the river water into oil. This vengeful nature is also referred to earlier in the novel when the woman discovers a statue of the goddess Hathur⁸⁸ with her breasts intact—perhaps the only instance in the novel where the statue of a goddess has not been mutilated

⁸⁸ An ancient Egyptian goddess associated with music, dance, love, motherhood, and fertility. She was often depicted as a woman with the ears of a cow, wearing a headdress of horns and carrying a sun disk.

(55). However, as the woman reaches for the statue, a sea of oil floods her with the strength of what she thinks is Noah's flood, adding another layer of ecomythical analysis to the narrative. The flood—of biblical proportions—can be interpreted as a metaphor for the consequences of human actions on the natural world from famine, droughts, advancing deserts, to floods where water is replaced by oil.

To ensure to the connection of these goddesses with the women depicted in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, El Saadawi writes a scene where one of the women, gracefully balancing a jar on her head, seems to embody the essence of Hathur carrying a sun disk (46). In a second passage a few pages after, a woman is described carrying the planet earth on her head in the same manner of Hathur carrying the sun (50). The primal and earthy symbols attached to the passages hold an imagery that extends the connection between women and nature, accentuating their roles as bearers of life and sustainers of the natural order. These passages can be interpreted as a celebration of the feminine as intrinsically connected to nature, drawing parallels between women and goddesses who embody both nurturing and vengeful aspects. In a semi successful endeavor, towards the end of *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, the woman finally finds a statue depicting the goddess Hathur with one breast intact and another demolished by either oil or a man (106). The statue appears to have undergone some damage due to its circumstances underground in contact with oil, adding yet another environmental layer to the narrative. The damage becomes a metaphor for the environmental harm caused by human activities, particularly the impact of oil and pollution on the earth—and the feminine, as the damage has been caused mainly to the breast of the statue. The passage skillfully intertwines the degradation of a divine feminine figure with environmental destruction and patriarchal interventions and serves as a poignant commentary on the intersection of ecological and gender-based oppression.

The assertion that “the absence of goddesses in this place did not mean their absolute absence” that El Saadawi makes in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* hints that the historical suppression of the feminine in general cannot have entirely succeeded (118-119). In moments of utter hopelessness, the woman repeatedly reverted to either the memory of her aunt or the thoughts of goddesses such as the Lady of Purity. At a specific moment of desperation, wondering whether it is the end of the world, the woman sees the spirit of the Lady of Purity hovering over the moon (129). The watchful presence of this goddess is a comfort to the protagonist as she represents the stewardship of female divinity over the earth, especially with the choice of the moon—often associated with femininity and cycles. Many times throughout the novel, the woman finds herself submerged to the point of drowning by the oil or buried by the earth like the goddesses she is in constant search for. In a striking instance, the woman is seen digging through the earth in search for her own body, or even remains of her body, hoping to unearth a goddess along with it (116). The way the passage links the female body with the earth can be read through an ecofeminist lens to portray a recognition of the intrinsic connection between the female body and the natural world. The act of excavating her limbs or remains with her chisel is symbolic of the woman’s determination to restore a sense of completeness to her identity through her intellectual endeavors and connection with the divine feminine. It suggests a desire to connect not only with her individual self but also with femininity in the broader sense of the universe.

Towards the end of *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, the protagonist finally reaches a peak of desperation from her situation and utters a visceral cry for help—described as a slaughtered animal’s shriek—directed to the waves (120). To this, El Saadawi adds, “She could have lived like the other women, and then died, if it had not been for that chisel and those sunset sessions on the bridge when she was a child, and that light. Enough! Enough!” (120). The reflections of the woman

on her chisel and the impact of sunsets on her childhood suggest a profound association between her intellectual pursuit and her connection to the natural world in the shaping of her identity—an identity defiant to oppression. The woman’s inner turmoil always seems to be relieved with experiences that reconnect her with nature. In an instance when she surprised with a fresh breeze, she finds herself transported through her memory to “her childhood happiness”, particularly to recollections of sunset watching on the bridge (42). The protagonist’s desire for the simple joy and freedom derived from a connection with nature demonstrates her constant pursuit of unencumbered moments of vitality in harmony with an unpolluted environment. The reader is repeatedly reminded that the woman is “unable to forget her childhood [where] fields of crops stretched beside the river” instead of the oil-flooded desert island of her present (111).

Imbued with nostalgic fervor, the protagonist of *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* reminisces of cherished scenes from her childhood, captured by El Saadawi as moments of accord with the natural world. In a time where “the breath of animals mixed with the breath of the human population”, the woman remembers the hem of her aunt’s jallaba⁸⁹ splattered with mud instead of oil (112). The woman feverishly recollects, “In the evening she would not play with the children, for playing was only for boys. For her there was nothing to equal sitting on the bridge with her eyes fixed on the horizon, her heart pulsing vigorously and the lights shining in the sky overhead” (112). The almost utopian quality of the woman’s past life in comparison with the dystopian quality of her present is evident in the passage. It not only illuminates the protagonist's nostalgic connection to her childhood but also offers a profound exploration of gender roles and the transformative

⁸⁹ Both the jallaba and the abaya are traditional garments worn in certain regions, the jallaba is typically associated with men and is a loose-fitting robe, whereas the abaya is a full-length dress worn by women, emphasizing modesty and cultural expression. The fact that the protagonist’s aunt is wearing a jallaba in this context instead of an abaya might be eluding to her nonconforming habits.

power of nature in creating her identity. El Saadawi artfully captures the essence of a bygone era, an earthy existence where the intermingling breaths of animals and humans signify a harmonious coexistence with the natural world. The delineation of gender roles resurfaces as a theme in the passage, with the woman recalling the limitations imposed by societal expectations such as her exclusion from childhood play, reserved only for boys. However, the woman finds solace and empowerment in her unique form of rebellion—sitting on the bridge, gazing at the horizon, and reveling in the celestial lights. This act becomes a symbolic defiance of gendered expectations, a testament to the woman's inner strength and a reclaiming of agency in shaping her own narrative.

As a culmination of her connection with the earth, the woman undergoes a tumultuous experience of anchoring herself to the bottom of the earth as she endures what appears to be her emission like a cloud of smoke from a chimney (139). The choice of the chimney as a descriptor adds a layer of industrial connotation, inviting interpretations related to the impact of industries such as the oil industry on social structure, especially on the lives of women. Despite the turmoil depicted by the billowing smoke, the woman remains anchored to the earth, hinting at her resilient connection to the stabilizing force that is nature. The author solidifies the profound connection between the woman and nature when elucidating the source of her strength: “She pulled the depths of her inner mind from the caverns of the earth” (139). Thus, even in the face of violence and rape, as the woman endured a beating from the man, her resilience remained unbroken, upheld by the protective presence of the goddesses, of whom she names Sekhmet and Nefertiti⁹⁰ (143). In fact, the woman’s unwavering faith in the goddesses is so persistent that it evokes an intriguing reversal

⁹⁰ Nefertiti was a historical queen rather than a goddess. She was the Great Royal Wife of Akhenaten, an Egyptian pharaoh, and is renowned for her beauty and influence during the 14th century BCE. Nefertiti played a significant role in the religious and artistic changes initiated by her husband, and her name translates to “the beautiful one has come.” In the passage mentioned above, the woman invokes Nefertiti as a goddess, a reference that stems from a personal perception that elevates historical figures, especially notable queens or powerful women, to a divine status.

of Freud's concept of "penis envy"⁹¹. This is evident when she contemplates the man's chest, perceiving it akin to a god's statue whose breasts have been deliberately removed (136). The symbolism here reflects not an envy of masculinity but rather a reconstruction of the dichotomy of masculine/feminine where the feminine is for once superior.

A palpable apprehension of the woman's inner strength and her profound faith in the potency of goddesses permeates the narrative of *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*. When the woman applies for her job at the archeology department, the head of the department is reported to look at her "wide-eyed" declaring, "This department only accepts males" and revealing the entrenched gender-based oppression in the workplace (25). The abrupt fear that the boss reveals demonstrates not only his distress but also a broader unease with the idea of women actively participating in earth-centric activities, rendering them, through that connection, too powerful to oppress. When the head of the department justifies his decision, the conversation between them goes as follows:

'The work we do, I mean digging up the ground, is not suitable.'

'My aunt used to dig up the ground, and my mother also used to dig up the ground, and sow and...'

'Digs are something else... I mean searching for gods in the bowels of the earth.'

'The gods are in heaven, are they not?'

'But there are other gods. Haven't you read anything about archaeology?' (25).

⁹¹ Freud's theory of penis envy is a concept within his psychoanalytic framework, particularly during the phallic stage of psychosexual development. In this stage, occurring around ages 3 to 6, Freud proposed that girls might experience feelings of envy and inadequacy upon realizing they lack a penis. This phenomenon, termed "penis envy," is part of the broader Oedipus and Electra complexes, where children navigate unconscious desires and conflicts regarding their relationships with their parents.

The protagonist's reference to the women in her family having worked the land all their lives to feed their families—that invokes the ecofeminist theme—is promptly dismissed by her boss. He enforces the idea that women's work is only customary in domestic terms and that the academic realm remains exclusive for men and monopolized by them. His reasoning eventually betrays his apprehension of the woman's profound connection to the goddesses, a connection fortified through generations of mothers working the land, in addition to her intellectualism and passion.

The deep-seated anxiety that the patriarchs of *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* reveal in fear of women capable of defying them is prevalent in the novel. Much like her boss's endeavor to prevent her from reaching the goddesses, the woman's husband seemingly forbids her from forging connections with animals. When the woman sees a lizard crawling on the walls of the house, she begins to have affection for it and the lizard appears to return it as “a friendship was growing up between them” (26). Her affinity for non-human beings, symbolized in her sudden and unconditional affection for the lizard, is quickly interrupted by the man in a loud throat clearing and demand for dinner that sends the lizard into hiding. In this passage, the woman's engagement with her environment induces an apparent discomfort in the man and a reluctance to permit her autonomy in her interactions, whether with the natural world or with her research. Instead, the man proceeds to shout at her to prepare his dinner “in the tone of someone who had hired a woman to cook for him” while she stubbornly continues to write on her typewriter that she is a “Researcher into goddesses” (26). The juxtaposition of the husband's authoritative tone and the woman's defiance through her typed profession reflects an ongoing power struggle, where the woman seeks to define her identity beyond traditional domestic roles, embracing a more expansive connection with the divine and the natural.

In a stark passage from *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, the forcible rupture of the woman's connection with animals unfolds at the hands of man, revealing layers of patriarchal dominance, cruelty towards animals, and the objectification of women's bodies. In a graphic description, El Saadawi writes of the husband slaughtering an animal in front of the woman as the animal's eyes looked towards her, as if in a plea for help (33). The contrast of the animal's imploring gaze and the husband's demanding roar for the woman to cook it reveals an intricate dynamic where the woman finds herself both witness and unwilling participant in the violent act. When the woman refuses to cook the animal, exclaiming that she does not eat meat, the man responds with threatening to slaughter her next (33). The husband's violence does not stop with the menacing blade but extends to a violation of the woman's body as she prepares the meat for him. El Saadawi writes, "He was savouring the aroma of the meat, and rubbing up against her from behind. When the appetite for food was aroused in him, other appetites of his were aroused as well" (33). The predatory behavior of the man serves as a powerful example of the intertwining of the patriarchal tyranny over women and animals. Through this violent episode, the relationship between masculinity and meat consumption functions as an accurate reflection of broader food politics. The husband's insistence on slaughtering and consuming meat, coupled with the threat to the woman's life and the violation of her body when she refuses to cook it, accentuates traditional gender norms tied to the consumption of animal products. Meat consumption has historically been associated with notions of masculinity, contributing to a societal construct where men, driven by patriarchal influences, assert dominance over women and nature through the control and consumption of animals.

This commodification of animals and objectification of women's bodies reappears multiple times in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* where the woman repeatedly feels hunted like a mouse or

slaughtered like a chicken. This comparison ensures that meat eating remains a masculine activity as every time “an aroma of grilled meat might waft from the kitchen and the man would wake up. Appetite would awaken and perhaps love would as well” (131). This further elucidates the societal conditioning where meat symbolizes masculinity and male appetites as it becomes entwined with the arousal of sexual desires for them. In an act of defiance against this attitude, the woman is described in one passage observing a frog—that she associates with herself in its dance like a chicken with a cut throat, a description used to describe her earlier in the novel—jump towards a flame (122). Upon its fall in the flame, the frog emits a smell of grilled meat and the woman, driven by an instinctive desire, swiftly swallows the dead frog with no “time for pangs of conscience” (122). While the woman empathically compares herself to the creature, envying its demise as a means of rescue, she also consumes it as a means of rebellion against a society that associates the consumption of animals with masculinity, perpetuating a cycle where both women and animals become objects of exploitation. The man’s judgmental stare at the end of the passage and the woman’s fast attempt to wipe off any remains of the meal on her mouth “as if to conceal her *sin*” further confirm the societal scrutiny placed on women who deviate from prescribed gender roles, even in dietary choices (122).

In the perspective popularized by Marx, where labor is portrayed as “Monsieur le Capital” and nature as “Madame la Terre”, the content of this section can be summarized. The characterization of nature as the mother relegated to the reproductive realm echoes traditional gender roles, placing women and nature in a subordinate position in the production process (Mahzabeen 74). Women and nature’s roles, primarily focused on reproduction and the domestic sphere, are deemed non-productive in economic terms, and are thus devalued. This analysis aligns with the ecofeminist reading that this section has provided, highlighting the interconnected

oppression of women and nature within the patriarchal, petrocapiatlist structure of *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*. As the exploitation of women's reproductive capacities as free labor mirrors the exploitation of the earth's resources, the vengeance of the earth encompasses that of women. El Saadawi skillfully offers an escape route for her protagonist by channeling the forces of nature. She vividly describes images of the vengeful bull tossing the earth from one horn to another, evoking imagery reminiscent of the goddess Hathur, or of the waterfall collapsing the walls keeping the woman imprisoned with her husband (16) (128). As a return to mothers and goddesses paves the path for freedom for the woman, we see her wondering whether her mother was buried alive, and perhaps realizing it, finally finds purpose for her chisel (144). This section, having explored the intricate dynamics of oil as an oppressor of women, the profound symbolism within goddess imagery, and the intrinsic feminine essence of nature, sets the stage for a compelling narrative shift. It opens the door to a new exploration of how memory and female solidarity become guiding forces, propelling the women in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* on a transformative journey towards empowerment amidst the challenges posed by the oil industry.

IV. Empowerment Amidst Oil: Memory, Solidarity, and Female Resilience in the Realm of Petrocapitalism of Nawal El Saadawi's *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*

In Nawal El Saadawi's exploration of female empowerment amidst the challenges posed by petrocapiatlist in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, the narrative's refusal to grant absolute freedom to the protagonist prompts a nuanced reflection. Rather than succumbing to fatalism, the storyline echoes El Saadawi's own views on political resistance, emphasizing the resilience and potency of collective efforts over individual pursuits (Deckard 55). The woman in the narrative repeatedly—and to no avail—vocalizes her resistance through concrete demands for wages and acknowledgment of her labor, stressing a tangible but apparently unsuccessful quest for economic

justice. El Saadawi, however, strategically leaves the novel's conclusion open to interpretation, subtly suggesting the possibility of the protagonist remaining tethered to her initial circumstances as "a wife of oil" (Hendow 81). This deliberate ambiguity invites readers to ponder the implications of such a resolution and of El Saadawi's stance on the evolving oil-centric world and its intricate relationship with female emancipation where only the downfall of one could mean the rise of the other. Between memory and solidarity, the women depicted in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* may discover a route to resistance and empowerment. While this trajectory may not immediately liberate them from the clutches of the petrocapiatalist world, the enduring strength derived from collective memory and solidarity hints at a formidable journey of resilience.

Throughout the entirety of the novel, the prominence of memory becomes evident, with a notable characteristic being the absence of chronological constraints. The narrative unfolds in a non-time-bound manner, allowing memory to flow freely without being confined by the constraints of a specific timeframe. Oil, a powerful symbol within the novel, mirrors the nature of memory, sharing inherent characteristics of fluidity, shapelessness, and influence (Tiwari 2). The absence of a fixed narrative pattern enables voices from diverse settings to infiltrate the protagonist's consciousness, creating a perplexing multidimensional experience. The metaphorical thick particles, reminiscent of black wax in her ear, act as conduits for mental flights, providing the protagonist with the ability to traverse the landscape of memory unencumbered by time limits through the surreal nature of the novel. The memory of the pre-oil world is a persistent theme in most oil fiction where the characters find themselves in a continuous oscillation between the realms of pre-oil and post-oil existence, reminiscing in nostalgic reflections about their pasts as they navigate their oil-driven reality (Macdonald 300). In the context of ecofeminist analysis, authors often resort to myths of goddesses and images of nature to portray an empowered female figure

rebellious against traditional motherhood discourses while retaining the memory of her female ancestors to emphasize collective female resilience. In *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, the woman draws upon ancient Egyptian goddesses, the enduring memories of her aunt and mother, and recollections of a pre-oil era immersed in a natural environment to construct her identity. This interplay of cultural symbolism and personal history casts her as the archetype of the ecofeminist rebellious female protagonist challenging the constraints of a petrocapitalist society.

In contrast with the protagonist, the other women in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, while they reached an impenetrable solidarity of their own, exhibit an adamant submission to the prevailing system, inadvertently becoming complicit agents within it. The unique power of adaptation these women possess makes it inconceivable for them to break free from their oppressors and renders the woman, who attempts to rescue them, an immediate antagonist to them. The protagonist's refusal to conform to traditional gender norms, especially her refusal to wear the veil and carry the jars, puts her under the spotlight for the scrutiny of other women. Her insistence on proving to them "that she was not like them and that she could not live and die like an animal" stirs the anger of the women against her and turns her into a target (El Saadawi, *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* 69). The woman's determination to assert her individuality against other women reappears when she asks her veiled neighbor to uncover her face in order to see the world, claiming that "Even the ox tears the bandage off its eyes, and animals in cages kick" (71). The neighbor, completely immune to the woman's endeavors to open her eyes, dejectedly answers, "I used to kick a great deal until I became weary with kicking" and immediately changes to the topic to question the woman on whether her husband was beating her (71). The encounter concludes with the protagonist harboring a profound fear of the women uncovering her domestic abuse and categorizing her as merely another victim within their ranks. Desperate to conceal the reality of her ongoing abuse, she goes to great lengths

to dissociate herself from these women, steadfastly refusing to acknowledge her own reflection in their shared experiences.

In an ominous sequence that echoes the woman's recollections of her aunt, a scene unfolds where a woman stands chanting to the Lady of Purity amongst other women (38). However, as the men make their entrance, an eerie shift occurs—the women hastily conceal themselves under scarves, with one exception: the tall woman, reminiscent of the aunt in the woman's memories, defiantly remains uncovered. This act of nonconformity proves costly, as the men swiftly encircle her, escorting her towards a waiting van, where the women hear “One cry and then silence reigned” (38). The passage encapsulates the oppressive atmosphere imposed on women who resist the dominance of the petrocapitalist state by invoking feminine deities like the Lady of Purity, refusing to veil themselves, and attempting to unify the strength of all women. The protagonist, having witnessed this, still attempts to rouse the women to the hopelessness of their situation as El Saadawi writes,

Women will remain in their state until the Day of Resurrection. Isn't there anybody to resist the oil? Don't you ever think of solidarity? Think about the matter. Don't blame anybody apart from yourself if you are buried in this lake. The oil will dominate everything, and it will make its way to every place. What has happened? Why don't you speak?' (85)

The woman appears to make an urgent plea, imploring the women for resistance and solidarity against patriarchy and the oil. The passage signifies the entwined struggles of women and the environment within the oppressive framework of petrocapitalism as the oil nears its purpose in drowning them all—a catastrophe that nobody appears to protest. Despite her warning about the pervasive reach of the oil and her pleas for resistance against it, the seeming lack of response

suggests an inescapable apathy or resignation, depicting the jarring seclusion of a defiant woman's fight against the deeply ingrained structures of power.

Amidst the apparent resignation exhibited by the women in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, the novel's plot unfolds in a manner that invites contemplation on the true nature of their submission. The persistent question lingers as the woman contemplates, "Should she flee by herself or should she reveal her plan to them?" (52), offering a glimpse into the potential complexities that underlie their seemingly obedient exterior. Repeatedly throughout the narrative, the women are seen gathered to dance and pray in their ritual to the Lady of Purity, who appears to be a prophetess of healing that the woman describes as either the Virgin Mary or Lady Zaynab (29). In fact, the chants to the Lady of Purity were also chants "to the rising sun, or the wheat at harvest, or the waters of the Nile when they are in flood, or the moon when it becomes full" (123). As the woman's aunt would describe her, "The Lady of Purity is the mother of the universe. She is the mother of heaven and earth. She is the only one capable of healing her. She is the mother of all gods and prophets. She is the giver of life and health. She is the goddess of sickness and death" (124-125). The invocation of the Lady of Purity is not confined to a religious deity but extends to nature's elements, an expansion of reverence indicative of an ecofeminist connection. The Lady of Purity serves as a potent symbol embodying the interconnectedness between the divine, nature, and the feminine within the women's collective experience. In their oppressive environment, the women derive strength from this prophetess and from each other's presence in the ritual, emphasizing the transformative power that arises from their intrinsic relationship with nature and the resilience inherent in their collective femininity.

While their acts of defiance may not always be overt, the women in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* definitely exhibit moments of powerful rebellion against the constraints imposed by the

petrocapitalist society in which they reside. Harmonizing their chants in unison, the women are often described to engage in a ritual where they beat the earth while invoking prayers to the Lady of Purity, and, notably, they consistently appear without scarves during this ritual. In one of these instances, El Saadawi describes, “Around her the women were doing the same, uncovering their faces. Each of them held her black band in her hands and then shook it in the air a number of times, making a sound like the crack of the wind” (96). The women’s collective act of uncovering their faces becomes a symbol of liberation and defiance against the established order, especially as the shaking of their veils echoes the cracking of the wind, restoring their connection with the natural elements. It becomes evident that the women are not as submissive as they appear when, as they vigorously kick their feet against the ground, a picture of His Majesty seems to fall underneath them and is trampled under their feet (54). The protagonist reflects on the seemingly insurmountable challenges faced by these women, realizing that even if they were inclined to escape, the absence of a destination and the absence of a means to achieve solidarity stand as an unbreakable barrier. She contemplates, “Before, yes, before, I used frequently to use this word ‘solidarity’. But it is forbidden to utter this word, as if it is Satan or the goddess of death Sekhmet” (147). Drawing parallels between the concept of solidarity and powerful goddesses like Sekhmet implies a deliberate erasure of collective strength and unity, reinforcing the patriarchal and petrocapitalist structures that seek to maintain control by stifling any potential challenges to their authority.

In a poignant moment, the protagonist’s memory transports her to a scene where her aunt and the women of the community gather in prayer, raising chapped palms in a collective plea to the Lady of Purity (113). This powerful intersection of memory and solidarity unfolds as they seek divine protection for the girl, recognizing her exceptional genius. The whispered voices, akin to

the rustling wind, evoke a communal bond woven into the fabric of shared spirituality and support. The women seem to acknowledge the transformative potential of the girl's intelligence as a catalyst for women's emancipation. However, this recognition is tinged with an undercurrent of fear, a realization that her exceptional intellect may also make her vulnerable to potential harm. This highlights the evidence that memory serves as the sole beacon of hope for the survival and potential autonomy of these women. El Saadawi vividly portrays the crucial role of memory, in addition to the repeated calls to the woman to remember her mother, through the narrative of the daughter of the Lady Sphinx. In the tale, the daughter's remembrance of her usurped mother prompts her to remove the added beard from her statue, unveiling the truth that she was, indeed, a woman, a Lady Sphinx instead of the Sphinx (77-78). It is in instances such as this that El Saadawi recurrently employs the oil-like fluidity of memory through her novel as a tool for solace and resistance against the oppressive forces surrounding her protagonist.

In a remarkable passage from *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, the woman, assuming the fetal position, prompts herself onto a journey of recollections through the memory of her mother's face (72). Retracing the familiar path from home to school, adorned with a tree and a long river, the woman relives the vivid imagery of nature of her childhood and her customary spot on the bridge, awaiting the sunset lights. Within this sanctuary of her memories, she begins to invoke the names of celestial bodies and ancient goddesses as an ecofeminist act, symbolizing a connection to the natural world and the divine feminine, all prompted by the memory of her mother's face (73). By recalling the names of stars and goddesses, she not only taps into a shared heritage but also reinforces a sense of solidarity with the universe and the women who came before her. The use of memory, therefore, emerges as a potent form of resistance and empowerment, allowing the protagonist to navigate the complexities of her present reality within the context of her ecofeminist

lineage. In another instance, the protagonist submerges herself into the muddy black lake, to replicate her birth and perhaps hold on to the memory of her mother (63). As her ears fill with black mud, echoing voices from the bowels of the earth label her as a mad woman and an unbeliever, reinforcing the societal judgment of her non-conformity. The imagery intensifies as hands emerge to draw her out of the mud “As they had pulled her out of the womb” as she clings to the mud, mirroring the primal urge of clinging to her mother (63).

Love in the Kingdom of Oil is laden with fervent entreaties urging the woman to remember her mother, as if the essence of her existence and that of the women surrounding her hinges upon this recollection. Under the cover of the night, the woman is stealthily reading a book that contains commands from the mother goddess to her daughter to remember when she is stricken by the memory of her own mother (31). The commands of the mother goddess to “Bear her as she bore you” resonate in the woman’s ears, bringing forth memories of her mother from a time when she could only perceive her as a fetus in the womb (31). This clandestine act of reading while her husband sleeps becomes a rebellious ritual, a form of resistance against the patriarchal control represented by him. Reflecting a patriarchal directive to erase all the woman’s connection to her female being and lineage, the man clearly instructs her to forget them as he commands, “You must forget everything about your mother, your aunt, Hathur, Sekhmet and all women. Yes, all women, do you understand?” (94). The suppression of these connections to her cultural, familial, and divine roots can be interpreted as a strategy to weaken the woman’s sense of identity and solidarity with other women, thus maintaining the status quo of gender inequality within the narrative. Wondering why, on top of everything, women must lose their memories as well, the woman finds solace in knowing that “she had not forgotten the voice of her mother before she had been born” and in this remembrance alone, she discovers a triumphant defiance against the imposed erasure (100-101).

Channeling the strength of the women in solidarity and her memories of her female ancestors and deities, the protagonist of *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* finally resolves to take decisive action. In a pivotal turning point in the narrative, having made that decision, the woman finds herself in the position “to lead the women to the way of salvation” (129). The woman suddenly experiences a transformative realization and defiance against the oppressive fate of carrying jars of oil forever. A collective rejection of this fate appears to be made by the women, who shout “No, sister! It’s not our fate!” as the woman sees the first strands of light in the darkness of the novel (97). Of the violent fight that ensues between the woman and the man as a result of her sudden insight, El Saadawi writes,

He bent over her in a sort of fight. She threw him to the ground, even though she was worn out. He snatched the chisel from her hand, but she seized the jar by its two handles.

‘Force is only defeated by force.’

The earth revolved around her as she fought. In a flash he came on top of her. He was so filled with illusory pride of possession that the hairs of his head bristled. Sticking up like that, they appeared like the crest of a rooster. The battle could have turned into something resembling love if she had not snatched the chisel from his hand. She suddenly remembered that she bore the title ‘researcher’. (97)

Resolute in her conviction that her oppression can only be countered with force, the woman decides to reclaim both her chisel and her title as a researcher from the man through a physical fight. Borrowing strength from the earth, which seemingly revolves around her in solidarity as she fights, the woman resists succumbing to the man’s pride of possession, preventing their struggle from

morphing into something resembling love. In a powerful act of defiance, she forcefully retrieves her chisel from him, thus reestablishing her autonomy and reasserting her sense of identity.

In the concluding pages of *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, the woman finally embarks on a daring escape, breaking free from her captivity and the confines of the oil-dominated island. Despite her recurring contemplations about the easiness of returning to her shackles rather than fighting, the woman persists “day after day to hug hope to her bosom” (118). However, as a result of her determination to free them, “the women began to make off in the darkness. All she heard of them were distant whispers like the rustling of the wind” (113). At the very end of the novel, the investigator notes that women going on leave has become commonplace—a significant shift from the initial upheaval caused by the woman’s decision to take leave at the beginning of the story (150). The realization of the absence of wages to purchase travel tickets only dawns upon the women when they decide to undertake the journey of leaving, which prompts them to think, “then we must stop demanding [our wages] and take them with our own hands” (148). The narrative of *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, though it lengthily bends the women under the weighty burden of oil jars, keeps their necks straight and their heads turned upwards towards the end. The protagonist is described as having “a neck that you could not get a hold of in order to strangle it for instance. A neck that aroused your desire, in that you could not dominate it” (133). The protagonist’s neck becomes a symbol of her resistance to subjugation and her firm stand against the petrocaptalist patriarchy’s aggressive undertakings to bend her.

In the concluding moments of *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, the protagonist’s journey embodies a profound transformation marked by resilience, defiance, and a quest for self-determination. As she embarks on a search for her lost pride, the imagery of standing upright, no longer crawling on four legs, represents a reclaiming of agency and a rejection of traditional gender

roles (132). This transformation is further emphasized by her indifference to societal expectations, not conforming to the stereotypical roles expected from her, as she realizes “she was not a woman of the kitchen or the bed” (132). She finally resolves that “if she lived, she would live with her head held high. If she died, she would die kicking. She would not stop kicking until her last breath” (149). This defiance echoes in the imagery of her standing like a tree with “her roots [...] in the bowels of the earth”, with arms bent and twisted like twigs, portraying a connection to nature and an unwavering strength against external pressures (149). As the mention of her roots in the bowels of the earth and her leaves trembling in the wind aligns with an ecofeminist perspective, the passage suggests a symbiotic relationship between the woman and the natural world. Her death, standing firm like a tree, becomes a symbolic act of sacrifice for the rejuvenation of a world on the brink of demise under the weight of the oil industry.

Indeed, the women needed to lose blood. If not, the world would remain as it was, and everything would end in nothing. We must take the fresh blood of this woman and transfuse it into the world that is on the point of death.

The notion that the world needs the blood of this woman for its survival speaks to the transformative potential of female resilience and empowerment in the face of a deteriorating petrocapiatlist environment. The idea that “We must take the fresh blood of this woman and transfuse it into the world that is on the point of death” underscores the significance of women’s intervention and the potential for their actions to bring about positive change (149). In the last sentence of the novel, the protagonist’s ability to go on, to sleep and try again tomorrow, signifies a cycle of resilience and determination that transcends the immediate struggles, emphasizing the enduring spirit of empowerment amidst the challenges posed by petrocapiatlist (152). In essence, Nawal El Saadawi, through these poignant passages, presents a narrative of empowerment where

the woman becomes a symbol of resistance, challenging societal norms, and offering a lifeline for the rejuvenation of a world entangled in the clutches of petrocapitalism. This exploration of memory, solidarity, and female resilience underscores the transformative potential inherent in women's experiences, intertwining the personal with the ecological in a complex yet empowering tapestry.

In the culmination of Nawal El Saadawi's *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, a profound intersection of ecofeminist exploration unfolds, transcending the boundaries of the conventional narrative. This chapter delves into the intricacies of El Saadawi's narrative, framed within the broader context of Arab Ecofeminism. The analysis begins by setting the scene, exploring Nawal El Saadawi's role in shaping the discourse of Arab Ecofeminism. It then unveils the systematic subjugation of women within the petrostate, exposing the feminist narratives embedded in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*. The subsequent sections delve into the ecofeminist reading, shedding light on the oppressive nature of oil and unraveling the sacred symbolism intertwined with goddess imagery and nature's feminine essence. As the narrative unfolds, the interplay of memory, solidarity, and female resilience takes center stage, offering a multifaceted lens through which characters navigate the challenges of petrocapitalism in the postcolonial landscape. Through the strategic use of oil-like memory, unconfined by chronological constraints, and the invocation of ancient goddesses and symbols of motherhood, the author constructs a collective identity challenging the limitations imposed by petrocapitalism. Solidarity, initially obscured by apparent submission, surfaces as a potent undercurrent of resistance, culminating in the protagonist's metamorphosis into a symbol of defiance. In essence, this chapter serves as a comprehensive exploration of *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, unraveling its layers through an ecofeminist lens and contributing to the broader discourse on women's struggles within the petrocapitalist paradigm.

CONCLUSION

In navigating the intricate intersection of ecofeminist perspectives within postcolonial literature, this thesis has provided a deep analysis of three groundbreaking postcolonial works written by women: Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, and Nawal El Saadawi's *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*. The focal aim of this thesis has been to reveal the connectedness of women's experiences across the global south, to unveil the interdependent relationship between women and nature, and to highlight the postcolonial implications interwoven into the discussed ecofeminist narratives. This research first found its roots in a theoretical foundation that discussed dualism and intersectionality as a way of joining feminism with both postcolonialism and ecocriticism, thus resulting in the intersection of postcolonial ecofeminism. The introductory chapter has thus laid postcolonial ecofeminism as the groundwork for the subsequent analyses of the three novels, where intersectionality emerged as a guiding principle to acknowledge the multifaceted nature of women's identities and their experiences. Postcolonial ecofeminism, with its focus on the unique perspectives and experiences of women from the global south, provided an essential lens for interpreting the workings embedded in the selected literary works.

In the inaugural chapter of this thesis, an elaborate exploration of the field of ecofeminism unfolds, navigating through the profound connections between women, nature, and postcolonial literature. The chapter embarks on a comprehensive analysis of Karen Warren's eight relationships, delving into historical, symbolic, and conceptual links that bind women and nature in the context of patriarchal culture. Examining the works of scholars like Karen Warren, Val Plumwood, Gayatri Spivak, and Greta Gaard, the chapter scrutinizes essentialist debates within ecofeminism, questioning the implications of reducing women and nature to predetermined roles of production

and reproduction. The tensions between various ecofeminist sub-branches, such as motherhood environmentalism and vegetarian ecofeminism, are explored, revealing the complexities within the movement and hinting at the internal debates that have shaped the trajectory of ecofeminist studies. The chapter proceeds to discuss the challenges faced by ecofeminism in the aftermath of the Cold War and the subsequent dispersion into minor approaches, highlighting the need for cohesion and solidarity within the diverse ecofeminist community in order to re-attract attention to the field.

Continuing the journey, the first chapter establishes the groundwork for understanding ecofeminism as a dynamic field wrestling with internal conflicts and external criticisms. The examination of key figures like Vandana Shiva sheds light on the critique of essentialism within postcolonial ecofeminism, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging diverse perspectives on the theory, particularly from the global south. The chapter navigates through the challenges posed by globalization and differing interpretations of its impact, illustrating the necessity of contextual adaptation rather than imposition of western ideologies. The exploration of women's roles in traditional ecological knowledge within indigenous cultures adds a crucial layer to the ecofeminist discourse. The juxtaposition of Eurocentric views in ecocriticism and the struggles faced by women in the global south unveils the disparities and complexities inherent in the environmental and feminist dialogues. As the first chapter concludes, it paves the way for a deeper engagement with postcolonial ecofeminism, emphasizing the urgency of a nuanced and culturally sensitive approach to environmental criticism.

Building upon this theoretical foundation, the second chapter investigates, in a detailed exploration, the pages of *The God of Small Things*, untangling the complex web of postcolonial ecofeminist themes woven by Arundhati Roy. The analysis begins by a thorough exploration of the notion of 'Small Things', illustrating how it symbolizes the profound historical and societal

structures that shape the identities and struggles of the characters in the novel. The reading scrutinizes Roy's narrative choices, revealing the significance of her storytelling techniques in conveying a unified postcolonial ecofeminist message—a message that aligns with the activism she personally performs. The portrayal of characters, the use of symbolism, and the narrative structure of *The God of Small Things* collectively contribute to challenging the established norms—or Love Laws—of the social structure in the narrative and in postcolonial India. The chapter navigates through historical layers, unpacking the postcolonial legacy burdening oppressed characters like Ammu, Rahel, and Velutha that represent the Small Things of the novel.

In tandem with Roy's defiance against postcolonial legacies, the analysis sheds light on the environmental consequences of development and reveals it as a contemporary instrument of colonization. The examination of the toll of development on the marginalized communities in *The God of Small Things* illustrates how the quest for development often aggravates already-existing inequalities, influencing especially the lives of women and their environment. The symbolic significance in the section that follows, of Pappachi's pinned butterflies, emerges as a powerful metaphor, connection the degradation of the environment at the hands of patriarchal and colonial systems with the subjugation of female characters. This thesis succeeds in portraying the novel as a comprehensive analysis of the pervasive nature of oppression as a colonial, patriarchal, and environmental injustice that transcends individual experiences into a broader intersection. In essence, this chapter serves as a critical contribution to the ecofeminist discourse surrounding postcolonial literature, unpacking the layers of gender-based oppression, postcolonial dynamics, and environmental injustice within *The God of Small Things*. By contextualizing Roy's masterpiece within the larger net of ecofeminist postcolonial literature, this reading not only enriches the

understanding of the novel as a literary contribution but also positions it as a potent instrument for contemporary social commentary.

Extending the exploration of this thesis into Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, this analysis digs into the heart of an African narrative to extract its postcolonial ecofeminist themes. Dangarembga, striving as both an author and an activist to ensure the dispatch of her message, masterfully constructs a narrative that encapsulates the complexities of what she sees as a cultural indigestion—a forced coexistence of British colonial culture and indigenous Shona culture. Within this narrative, the 'Good African' grapples with the dual affliction of hybridity as he struggles to preserve his Shona roots while contending with the imposition of Englishness. Through the postcolonial ecofeminist lens focused on this novel, the complicated power dynamics within the work come to light, particularly manifesting in the realm of food politics. The metaphorical battleground of dualism from the first chapter is seen again in this novel between meat consumption and vegetarianism, where it becomes a vivid reflection of the tensions between entrenched traditions and externally imposed values.

Moreover, as Dangarembga continues to skillfully illuminate the oppressive nature of gender roles in the patriarchal colonial context of the novel, she sheds light on the unequal division of labor that leads to the hunger of women. Hunger and anorexia become poignant ecofeminist themes of the reading of *Nervous Conditions* as they prove to be burdens carried by women in the barren, colonized land and poverty-stricken economic class of the colonized. Hunger, forced on women through scarcity of produce, and anorexia, forced on them through the repression of their identities, become rites of passage to motherhood and woman, prompting an ecofeminist reading. As the female characters of the novel struggle between the options of production and reproduction, where within both they remain resources to be cultivated, they find solace and resistance against

the prevailing system in either solidarity or education—and, often, both. As we navigate the thematic landscape of the novel, it becomes evident that it stands as a formidable contribution to the ongoing dialogue on postcolonial ecofeminism. Dangarembga's work serves as a surgical instrument, dissecting the intricate connections between power relations, hybridity of culture, gender bias, and ecological discrimination within the distinctive context of postcolonial Africa. By unraveling these themes, *Nervous Conditions* not only enriches the perspectives of African literature but also offers a profound examination of the dynamics of gender and the environment in the postcolonial world.

Nawal El Saadawi's *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* introduced us to the world of Arab ecofeminism, where the systematic subjugation of women in the petrostate took the center stage. Through the lens of postcolonial ecofeminism, El Saadawi exposed the oppressive nature of the oil industry, particularly its impact on women, uncovering the ways in which the invisibility of oil has guaranteed it an uninterrupted tyrant regime on Arab women. The novel meticulously illustrated the interplay of oil as oppressor, perpetuating and enforcing the patriarchal structures that sought to bend and dominate women. El Saadawi intelligently reveals oil as a perpetrator and complicit agent of colonialism as the entire oil industry eventually appears to be a pact between western interventionism and Arab dictators represented by His Majesty. In writing about the complexities of El Saadawi's literary work, the ecofeminist lens not only unveils the harsh realities of women within the petrostate but also becomes a transformative tool for resistance and empowerment. This interplay transcends mere storytelling, offering a profound exploration of ecofeminism within the postcolonial context.

The novel's portrayal of oil as an oppressor intertwines with the symbolic imagery of goddesses and mothers as representatives of the inherent essence of nature's femininity. Through

the protagonist's journey, we witness not just a tale of individual defiance but a collective uprising against predetermined fates. The female characters of *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* derive strength to face their oppressors from the cosmic presence of their ancient goddesses in the natural environment surrounding them. In astonishingly ecofeminist descriptions, from bodies of water, winds, earth, and each other, the women of the novel extract faith in the power of nature to exact revenge for them. The ecofeminist narrative becomes a rallying point, emphasizing the significance of memory, solidarity, and female resilience in reshaping the trajectory of women's lives in the face of petrocapiatalism. As solidarity, memory, and female resilience become the driving forces behind the nameless protagonist's defiance, the narrative paints a vivid picture of women reclaiming agency, challenging societal norms, and offering a lifeline for the rejuvenation of a world ensnared by petrocapiatalism. This exploration stands as a testament to the enduring spirit of empowerment within the confines of a society contending with the burdens the oil industry, offering insights that resonate far beyond the confines of fiction and into the realm of sociopolitical realities of petrostates.

Reflections on this journey through the ecofeminist landscapes of postcolonial literature reveal common threads but unique perspectives. Each work, while distinct in its cultural and contextual nuances, weaves a narrative of women grappling with the complexities of identity, oppressive powers, and the environment. The interconnectedness of women and nature surfaces as a recurring motif in all the novels, emphasizing the symbiotic relationship between women and their environments that underpins ecofeminist thought. As the need to move beyond simplistic dualisms in feminist discourse had been established in the theoretical chapter, the thesis proceeded to prove the importance of intersectionality in understanding the nuanced nature of women's experiences. The postcolonial ecofeminist readings of *The God of Small Things*, *Nervous*

Conditions, and *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* display the imperative role of literature as a promoter for socio-environmental change as they compel us to confront the uncomfortable truths embedded in our social existence and environmental footprint. The transformative power of storytelling lies not only in its ability to reflect the complexities of women's lives but also in its potential to provoke critical thought, challenge established norms, and instigate tangible change.

The foundational chapter of this thesis has positioned these novels within the broader context of ecofeminism as a theoretical background that traces the evolution of this discourse over time. The three literary works bridge between theoretical frameworks and the lived realities of women as they portray the intellectual lineage of the field in depictions of a reality where it has tangible illustrations. This retrospective journey emphasizes the importance of acknowledging the roots of ecofeminism and recognizing the contributions of scholars who paved the way for a more comprehensive understanding of the interconnectedness of women and nature. As we delve deeper our understanding of ecofeminism, we recognize that it is not a theoretical abstraction but a lived reality for women globally. The diversity of experiences captured in these literary works dismantles the notion of a monolithic ecofeminism and, instead, suggests a nuanced comprehension of varied challenges faced by women in different geographical and cultural contexts—especially in the global south. It becomes imperative to rethink traditional feminist paradigms and to urge a more inclusive approach that takes in consideration the layered identities of women. This holistic theory is embodied in postcolonial ecofeminism, which, as depicted in the chosen literary works, remains not a monolithic entity but a mosaic of experiences, histories, and struggles.

As we expand our contemplation beyond the confines of academia, the postcolonial ecofeminist narratives induce us to reflect on our individual and collective roles in shaping a more equitable and sustainable world. They maintain a call for action for us to reassess our relationship

with the environment, challenge structures of oppression, and amplify the voices of those on the margins. The narratives presented in this thesis, while rooted in specific cultural contexts, resonate with one another and universally with women from diverse backgrounds as they evoke the indissoluble relationship between nature and women. As the ongoing discourse on women's empowerment through environmental justice broadens, works of literature such as *The God of small Things*, *Nervous Conditions*, and *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* evoke sympathy, inspire solidarity, and beckon us to become active participants in the enrichment of this discourse. From vast theoretical foundations to in-depth analyses of literary works, this work has aimed to shed light on the elaborate maneuvers in which the women's experiences intersect with nature beyond the simplistic dichotomies of dualism, along with the postcolonial implications inherent within them. As we conclude this thesis, the echoes of these narratives continue to reverberate, inspiring conversations, igniting activism, and fostering a world where the intertwined destinies of women and nature are cherished rather than exploited.

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