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Beyond the Binary: Postcolonial Ecofeminism in Indian Women's Writing in English

By

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
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Declaration

This thesis is submitted to the University of Warwick in support of my application for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. It has been composed by myself and has not been submitted in any previous application for any degree.

Beyond the Binary: Postcolonial Ecofeminism in Indian Women's Writing in English

Abstract

This thesis discusses the inter-relations between the theoretical field of postcolonial ecofeminism, women writing fiction in the Indian subcontinent, and to an extent, environmental activism. I argue that it is necessary to disrupt the culture/nature dualism that aligns women 'naturally' to nature. The disarticulation and disruption of the culture/nature dualism throws the space in-between as a grey area where multiple positions are possible for the women. Much of the ecofeminist theory and accounts of women-led activism do not allow for this ambivalent relationship to the environment. Women writing Indian fiction in English highlight this ambivalent relationship that women have with the environment, thus providing an important counterpoint to both theory and accounts of activism.

The overall thesis engages with three key theoretical frameworks—the representation of women and nature within postcolonial ecofeminist theories as well as accounts of activism; postcolonial fictions that engage with these issues of gender and environment; and a material feminist perspective to weave together the different threads to present an analysis and theory of the deeply interconnected and ambivalent concepts of representation of women, environment and space.

I will explore and discuss the ambivalent relationship that women have with the environment through the filter of women writing Indian fiction in English. The novels to be analysed in this study allow me to engage a range of critical perspectives—from early ecofeminism to urban ecofeminism: *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) by Kamala Markandya, *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) and *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) by Anita Desai, *A River Sutra* (1993) by Gita Mehta, *The God of Small Things* (1997) by Arundhati Roy, *The Madwoman of Jogare* (1998) by Sohaila Abdulali, *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* (2008) by Anuradha Roy and *Monkey-Man* (2010) by Usha K.R.

The novels analysed in this thesis allow me to explore a range of issues within postcolonial ecofeminism, while ensuring that postcolonial ecofeminism is not just confined to 'natural' or 'rural' landscapes alone. It is also important to disarticulate the non-urban/urban binary, and include the built environment—cities and other urban spaces and places—into the fold of ecofeminism. The novels themselves span a time from immediate post-independence to contemporary times, allowing me to engage with a range of postcolonial issues along with issues of gender and environment.

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Beyond the Binary: Postcolonial Ecofeminism in Indian Women's Writing in English

Introduction

Postcolonial ecofeminism is a relatively new concept emerging as a cogent theoretical field in recent years. The related field of ecofeminism has been dominated by a typically Euro-American point of view till date. Postcolonial ecocriticism, while taking into account writers and theorists from postcolonial countries, however, fails to touch upon issues of gender and the environment in sufficient depth. Both fields, postcolonial ecocriticism and ecofeminism, do not address the issue of postcolonial ecofeminism adequately, in that, they need to recognize “the “double-bind” of being female and being colonized” (Campbell, xi). A postcolonial ecofeminist perspective would involve the coming together of postcolonial ecocriticism and ecofeminism into one analytical focus, where it would be necessary to recognize that the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women are intimately bound up with notions of class, caste, race, colonialism and neo-colonialism.

This thesis is a study of the inter-relations between the theoretical field of postcolonial ecofeminism, environmental activism and women writing fiction in the Indian subcontinent. I argue that it is necessary to disrupt the culture/nature dualism that aligns women ‘naturally’ to nature. Disrupting the dualism would posit the women in an ambivalent relationship with nature and their immediate environment, whether rural or urban. Women then can be viewed not just simplistically and neatly aligned with nature or shown to be opposed to urban and technological development. They, in fact, straddle the grey area between the two binaries. Much of the ecofeminist theory and accounts of women-led activism do not allow such an ambivalence to emerge. Indian women writing fiction in English highlight this ambivalent relationship that women have with the environment, thus providing an

important counterpoint to both theory and accounts of activism. Through this, they also enable a re-imagining of women's spatial boundaries at the same time.

The novels to be analysed in this study allow me to engage a range of critical perspectives—from early ecofeminism to urban ecofeminism: *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) by Kamala Markandya, *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) and *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) by Anita Desai, *A River Sutra* (1993) by Gita Mehta, *The God of Small Things* (1997) by Arundhati Roy, *The Madwoman of Jogare* (1998) by Sohaila Abdulali, *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* (2008) by Anuradha Roy and *Monkey-Man* (2010) by Usha K.R.

The novels show a distinct progression of issues pertaining to postcolonial ecofeminism, from an impoverished village in Markandaya's novel to the developed and glitzy urbanized city of Bangalore in Usha K.R's novel. In highlighting the rhetoric of globalization, that the city presents equal opportunities for all, Usha K. R's novel presents an opportunity for critique in urban ecofeminism. Furthermore, this progression to the city illustrates that the theory of postcolonial ecofeminism is not fixed and isolated to natural or rural landscapes alone. Markandaya's novel, although set in a rural village in India, never mentions a specific time and place. This gives the writing a semblance of universality.

At this point, it is important to historicize the novels, give a brief social and political context in which they were written, and the pertinence of highlighting gender and environmental issues. The novels span a time-frame from the immediate post-independence era to one in which globalization is seen to be at its peak. Kamala Markandaya's novel, written in 1954, reflects issues and a style of writing particular of the immediate post-independence years. Typically classified as 'social realism', Markandaya writes in a sentimental language about the developmental challenges

India was facing post-independence, there being a political commitment to the land in the Gandhian discourse of its time. There is then a shift to the post-independence era characterized by a Nehruvian discourse emphasizing on industrial development, illustrated in Markandaya's novel by the emergence of the tannery in the village and its resultant effects on the people and the environment. Her novel, while initially presenting these as conflicting discourses, provides a resolution in the end by combining the best of the discourses together through the character of Rukmani.

Desai's novels span the decades of the 1960's and the 1970's. Jawaharlal Nehru had led India from post-partition to his death in 1964. Naturally, then, the nationalist vision was dominated by Nehru's economic and social policies till his death.¹ Nehru was the longest-serving prime minister of India, and in a bid to modernize and reform the Hindu law code, the Nehru government initially had passed certain reforms that ensured increasing legal rights for women and passed legislation against caste discrimination. Lal Bahadur Shastri was the prime minister for a short period of time after which, Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, became the prime minister in 1966, becoming the first female prime minister in India. Indira Gandhi was a close confidant of her father, Nehru, and was also a cabinet minister during Shastri's premiership and thus continued and accelerated Nehru's policies and ideas. The period of the 1960's through 1970's also saw two wars with Pakistan (first war in 1965, second war in 1971), and in 1975, a state of emergency was declared in India by Indira Gandhi. Although Desai would obliquely refer to these socio-political circumstances in her novels, usually positing homes in her novels as microcosms of the nation, Desai primarily focused on writing about issues pertaining to women in Indian society during that time. Desai has been typically derided by critics for positing

¹ See: Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (London; New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1997) 8-9.

‘suffocating psychological studies’ of her female characters, and being out-of-sync with reality since she predominantly has middle-class female characters in her novels.² Postcolonial scholars have dismissed her writings for not being political enough or not engaging sufficiently with postcolonial issues such as cultural identity and national history.³ Desai’s novels, however, provide an opportunity to re-think some of the postcolonial concerns espoused in the fiction of male writers.

Gita Mehta, Sohaila Abdulali and Arundhati Roy write their novels in the 1990’s, a seminal decade for India as the Indian economy started to liberalise in the year 1991.⁴ India became an economic powerhouse with foreign investments and multinational companies setting up bases in various Indian cities. This frenzied economic growth gave rise to a steady deterioration of the environment—land cleared for highways, water resources channelled to manufacturing soft-drinks, mining industries depleting precious resources. The 90’s incidentally also saw a projected water-shortage globally, but especially so in India and China. Mehta, Abdulali and Roy take up these issues, particularly their gendered aspects, in their novels. While Abdulali focuses on the primacy of the land, Mehta and Roy focus on social and political issues relating to water.

The years after the millennium—the year 2000 onwards—saw an exponential capitalistic development in the Indian subcontinent. Globalization became the buzzword for this era, and the immediate years from 2000 saw a rise in the ‘Call-Centre’ and ‘Business-Process-Outsourcing’ cultures. Youths taking up jobs in that

² See: Sharad Srivastava, “The ‘New Woman’ Proper”, *The New Woman in Indian English Fiction* (New Delhi, Creative Books, 1996) 48-50.

³ See: Ramesh K. Srivastava, *Perspectives on Anita Desai* (Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan Publishers, 1984) xxvi.

⁴ See: Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (London; New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1997) 29-35.

economic climate became affluent and they climbed the social and corporate ladders in a manner the generation before them could not even dream of. However, poverty also increased, and the distance between the rich and the poor widened. Anuradha Roy came out with her novel *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* in the year 2008, while Usha K.R.'s *Monkey-Man* published in 2010. Though the content of their novels has no direct bearing on the occurrences in the years they write (though K.R. does address the 'Call-Centre' culture and resultant affluence), the later part of the decade and its events do influence their writing. For example, in the fall-out of increasing capitalism, globalization and development, where despite the country's rapid economic growth, there has still been rampant discrimination against Dalits (untouchables), tribals, religious and ethnic minorities, women and children. The Human Rights Watch group states that despite development, the Indian state's failure to address basic pressing socioeconomic needs for vulnerable groups engenders grievances and gives rise to domestic terrorism and militant activity in the country.⁵

These women novelists have earned for themselves a name and a place of repute in the arena of writing in the English language. Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai fall into the category of canonical women writers from India (they are recognized in the category of women's writing along with other writers such as Ruth Jhabvala, Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sehgal, Shoba De and Gita Hariharan, among others), and Gita Mehta, Sohaila Abdulali and Arundhati Roy are established writers in their genres and fields.⁶ Mehta is known for writing *Karma Cola* (1979), *Raj* (1989), *Snakes and Ladders: Glimpses of Modern India* (1997) and *Eternal Ganesha* (2006) apart from *A River Sutra*, and after her migration to the United States, she has

⁵ See: *Human Rights Watch*, < <http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2010/country-chapters/India>>.

⁶ See: Varun Gulati and Maratt Mythili Anoop, "Introduction", *Contemporary Women's Writing in India* (London: Lexington Books, 2014) ix-xviii.

acquired the status of a diasporic writer. Abdulali has written a novel on the Wall Street culture in the United States, *Year of the Tiger* (2010), and is also known for her outspoken views against rape (she has been a rape survivor herself).⁷ Roy is most famous as an activist-writer and the winner of the 1997 Booker Prize for her novel *The God of Small Things*, and has been consistently writing about socio-economic and political issues, earning herself the moniker ‘India’s child of controversy’. Anuradha Roy is an upcoming writer with two other novels, *The Folded Earth* (2011) and *Sleeping on Jupiter* (2015), which made it to the long-list for the Booker Prize in 2015. Usha K.R is the author of a short story, “Sepia Tones”, written in 1995, followed by three other novels, *Sojourn* (1998), *The Chosen* (2003) and *A Girl and A River* (2007).⁸

The novels in this thesis have been chosen for highlighting issues and themes which are considered urgent and pertinent in the postcolonial and environmental context. Apart from foregrounding Indian women writers, the novels in question also “call for a carefully case-based, historically contextualised analysis of contemporary social and environmental problems” (Huggan, “Greening Postcolonialism”, 703). At the same time, the texts draw attention to issues of gender, caste, class, race and positing the writings as a site of resistance to prevalent attitudes and social practices that not only denigrate specific human individuals (both women and men) but also nonhuman entities.

⁷ For Sohaila Abdulali’s account of her story as a rape survivor, subsequent activism, and views on rape, see: Sohaila Abdulali, “After I wrote about my rape, again”, *The Guardian*, <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jul/14/rape-india>>.

⁸ Usha K.R’s short story, “Sepia Tones”, is available online at <<http://ushakr.wordpress.com/about/short-stories/sepia-tones/>>.

Why English?

One of the reasons why English-language novels have been chosen for this research is, firstly, to avoid the conceptual problems of translation (works translated to English from vernacular languages). Also, the English language has emerged as the dominant language of business, commerce and finance in the global markets. Especially with the advent of an increase in the publishing business in India (with major publishers such as Penguin, among others, setting up its offices in India), there has been a boom in English-language writing being published in India from the 1990's onwards. This also coincides with the era of economic liberalization in India post-1991, when economic reforms in the country helped to change much of the urban Indian landscape.

Tabish Khair writes that the English language is not transparent in nature: "it conditions our understanding and narration of events" (Khair, xi). This statement is especially relevant to India when we consider that the English language has been around in the subcontinent for approximately three centuries. During the British rule in India, English was not only the colonizer's language, but also the language of public administration and civil service, a dominant language of governance. It is thus a language that is imbued with cultural power and privilege, even today, despite the fact that India is one of the most linguistically diverse regions of the world.

Thomas Babington Macaulay's "Minute on Education 1835" was fundamental in establishing English as a hegemonic and homogeneous language of British governance, cultural privilege and education in India.⁹ His famous proclamation that

I have never found one [person] among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. The intrinsic superiority of the Western

⁹ See: Thomas Babington Macaulay, "Minute on Education 1835" <<http://www.mssu.edu/projectsouthasia/history/primarydocs/education/macaulay001.htm>>

literature is indeed fully admitted by those members of the committee who support the oriental plan of education... We must at present do our best to form a class...of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect. (Macaulay, 3-7)

Macaulay's proclamation set the precedent that major literary works by writers such as "Dostoevsky, Maupassant and Mann" are read in the English language in India (Orsni, 82). Furthermore, with the advent of communication technologies during British rule, for example, railways, post, and telegraph, English spread to even the remote corners of the subcontinent.

Despite Hindi being declared as the 'official' language post-independence in 1947, English was still retained as the language for official purposes, translation and communication between vernacular languages, as most of the non-Hindi speaking states in India protested the policy of having Hindi as the sole national language. Immediate post-Independence literature in English in India (1947 onwards) was mainly written in 'Standard' British English (though this is also true for Indian English literature in the 1930's). The writer first credited for experimenting with the English language is G.V Desani in his novel *All About H. Hatterr*, written in the year 1948. Salman Rushdie writes that "Hatterr's dazzling, puzzling, leaping prose is the first genuine effort to go beyond the Englishness of the English language" (*The New Yorker*, Web Source), where Desani's experimentation with the English language is seen as self-reflexive in nature. However, Desani's novel failed to garner the popularity that most novels written in English enjoyed from the 1980s.

There is a general consensus that it was Salman Rushdie's Booker-Prize winning novel, *Midnight's Children*, that increased the visibility of Indian fiction written in English from the 1980s onwards. While most of the immediate post-independence novels (and in the 1930's) dealt with pan-Indian concerns such as the

independence movement, the partition of India and Pakistan, the exploitation of women (Desai's novels) and the clash between tradition and modernity (especially in Markandaya's novel), Rushdie's novel challenged several assumptions concerning these pan-Indian issues. For example, in Meenakshi Mukherjee's words, Rushdie's novel "celebrated the plenitude of India...and had a very important role to play in the reversal of the 'centre-periphery' paradigm in English literary culture" (2609).¹⁰ It paved the way for other writers writing fiction in English to experiment with the English language used for literary purposes, as well as the issues and themes explored via the English language.

After the United States of America, India has the largest number of speakers of the English language.¹¹ Suman Gupta claims that it is the Indian middle-class youth, largely educated in a bilingual system—mainly Hindi and English—that has spurred "the use of a distinctively Indian idiom or of "homegrown English" [Hinglish]...[and is] a key reason for the success of Indian fiction in English" (Gupta, 50). Well into the post-independence period, the perception of English as a distinctly 'foreign' language, a language of the colonizers, has morphed into one that has Rushdie declaring (by the year 1997) that "English has become an Indian language" (*The New Yorker*, Web Source). Echoing a similar line of thought as Gupta's, Francesca Orsni writes that English has always been "the preferred language of the [Indian] urban middle-classes, and in the case of the elite, sometimes the only language" (82). The middle-class in India, then, seems to be a constant fixture in not only determining the popularity of Indian fiction written in English, but also in

¹⁰ Meenakshi Mukherjee also notes that Rushdie's novel is also, at the same time, beset with the anxiety about the fragility of the concept of India as inclusive and tolerant (plenitude of India). See: Meenakshi Mukherjee, "The Anxiety of Indianness: Our Novels in English", *Economic and Political Weekly* 28(48): 1993, 2607-2611.

¹¹ See: Rukmini Bhaya Nair, "Bringing English into the 21st century: A view from India", *International Journal of Language, Translation and Intercultural Communication* 1(1): 2012, 103-122.

determining the writers' biases. While having to be mindful of a target audience when writing in English (due to publishing demands and constraints), the authors also reflect a middle-class bias in their writings. For example, a middle-class consciousness in Markandaya's and Desai's novels discussed results in the obscuring of certain caste issues in their respective novels. Markandaya, while writing about the tannery and its environmental and sociological effects, steers clear of mentioning that it is usually the untouchables (Dalits) who traditionally work in tanneries (as cow/buffalo hides need to be tanned for making into leather). Similarly, Desai's novels predominantly deal with middle-class women and the ennui of domesticity that is enforced upon them, mainly to the exclusion of other caste factors.

It is important to recognize the place of English language in India (and also its specificity to the Indian context). Although the middle-classes today are bilingual—English and Hindi or any other vernacular language—it is important to note that English is only one of many spoken and written languages in India (Khair, xii). English is also not spoken uniformly across classes, and is in fact, “hardly spoken by working-class Indians and in rural India” (Khair, xii). Tabish Khair further notes that till today, English is still mired in debates of the dismissal of ‘authenticity’ of writing in English versus the celebration of English as a cosmopolitan, plural, and global language (Khair, xiii). These debates show that English-language writing in India cannot be read without reference to the framework of postcolonialism, where languages were mired, and still are mired, in debates of cultural ‘authenticity’ and nationalism.

English still occupies an ambivalent position in postcolonial novels. Photis and Yvonne Lysandrou state that in postcolonial literary works, the English language

sits in an ambiguous position.¹² On one hand, the choice of writing in English “assist[s] communities to register material development”, while on the other hand, “it just as certainly assists the process of dispossession that takes place co-extensively with and on the back of that [material] development” (Lysandrou and Lysandrou, 104). These statements reflect the on-going tensions that writers have to deal with when making a choice to write in English, where English is still seen to occupy a privileged position that excludes the majority of the population (in India). Majority of the writers in English have to then work out a strategy to negotiate these tensions and contesting claims of language and culture.

English-language writing, however, is here to stay. The post-liberalization period in India, 1991 onwards, was particularly instrumental in changing the ‘landscape’ of urban India. This period was also the time when many Indian English writers caught the attention not only of the ‘Western’ world, but became famous globally due to the publicity garnered when a literature-prize was won (for example, the Man-Booker Prize, Commonwealth Writers’ Prize).¹³ Also, with the position of English as a global language, there is an excessive market-driven demand that informs the trends in writing and publishing in English from India. If, as Rushdie has claimed, that English is an Indian language, it also goes to say that English has become the language of intellectual thought-process, a language that writers feel comfortable thinking in and therefore writing.¹⁴ Meenakshi Mukherjee states that, as a matter of

¹² See: Photis Lysandrou and Yvonne Lysandrou, “Progression and Dynamic Stasis: An Ambivalent Impact of English as Reflected in Postcolonial Writing”, *The Politics of English as a World Language: New Horizons in Postcolonial Cultural Studies* (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2003).

¹³ It is also important to note the debates and criticisms levelled at writers regarding their ‘celebrity’ status. See: Tabish Khair, “Redefining Indian Writing in English”, *Postliberalization Indian Novels in English* (London; New York: Anthem Press, 2013) xi-xiv.

¹⁴ See: Meenakshi Mukherjee, “The Anxiety of Indianness: Our Novels in English”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 28(48): 1993, 2607-2611.

fact, the “growing visibility of English as a language of literature in India seems to be an irreversible process” (2611). There will be more writers who will write in English because of the social dynamics within which they live, particularly in urban centres, driven by the forces of globalization and international fame.

English is now also the current dominant language of aspiration in India. With the advent of ‘homegrown Indian English’, known as ‘Hinglish’, used particularly in Indian pulp-fiction novels written/translated into English, there is an “irreverence built into the semantic code/structure of the current youth code” (Nair, 111). Thus, English has now taken on challenging forms in the global climate, forms which are new as well as acutely self-reflexive. These new forms reflect the changing attitudes towards English in a ‘New’ India, where an Americanization of English is taking place due to the rapid emergence of various forms of media, for example, television, social media platforms and pulp-fiction novels.

In the context of postcolonial and environmental concerns, coupled with gender, English language is useful as a tool of communication to address these concerns at a wider, global level. With English being established as the lingua franca of globalization, the use of it in the novels used in this thesis, as well as to address the concerns within these novels, enables wider accessibility as well as a legitimization of the environmental and gender concerns in a wider public imagination.

To sum up, I have chosen English-language texts from India because English-language writing from the subcontinent forms a substantive field of study, and for these elite, middle-class writers, English is a legitimate choice. Indian writing in English is distinguishing itself as a remarkable force in world literature. Sowon Park and Jernej Habjan state that

a prevalent way of thinking about world literature in the Western literary tradition was as the selection of masterpieces from around the world. This serviceable notion was,

however, shown to fall below its own theoretical requirement and to be clearly in need of revision, since the “world,” in practice, referred to the “First World,” and world literature had simply been another name for the classics from the five major European states—Britain, France, Germany, Spain, and Italy—and from Russia and the United States. (Park and Habjan, “Introduction”, Web Source)¹⁵

Park and Habjan further state that there is now an urgent need to “to acknowledge and validate occluded regions of the non-Western world as unique literary and historical spaces”, and that this inclusion has necessitated a “different framework for theorizing concepts such as language, nation and masterpieces” (Park and Habjan, “Introduction”, Web Source).¹⁶

Therefore, in the current climate, whether economic or socio-political, such English-language writing cannot be ignored. With an emerging middle-class in India, English has become a first choice of language and writing in English is becoming more and more visible. Since most of the English-language writers are from the urban, middle-class strata (all of the women writers discussed in this thesis are writing from a privileged, middle- to upper-middle class position), certain class-based issues become more visible in their writing, one of them being the environment. Globally, the notion of modern environmentalism, for example, that promoted by Greenpeace, among others, is mostly seen as a middle-class conception, and this is reflected in some of the women novelists writing about the environment.¹⁷ Such environmentalists and writers advocate the sustainable management of resources and stewardship of the environment through changes in individual behaviour and public

¹⁵ See: Sowon Park and Jernej Habjan,, “Introduction”, *World Literature* <<http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780190221911/obo-9780190221911-0025.xml>>.

¹⁶ See: Sowon Park and Jernej Habjan,, “Introduction”, *World Literature* <<http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780190221911/obo-9780190221911-0025.xml>>.

¹⁷ It is important to note that environmental movements the world over are diverse and contain a range of different scientific, social, political and grassroots movements. However, a certain notion of environmental imperialism can be forwarded by those in a privileged position (sometimes unwittingly) when advocating sustainability and policy-change.

policy. These writers, however, also obscure certain issues, for example, the caste issue which is not mentioned at all in Markandaya's and Desai's novels. Also, the issues that affect the lower-classes differ very much from the middle-class outlook on how sustainability should be achieved, or how policy-changes should be made, and this is poignantly illustrated in Abdulali's and Arundhati Roy's novels. Without the use of the English-language, such tensions and debates may not be adequately conveyed to the *global* readership/ audience.

The Postcolonial

One of the theoretical components addressed in this thesis is the concept of the postcolonial. It needs to be made clear what is meant by the 'postcolonial' at the outset of this thesis. Robert J. C. Young writes, very generally, that postcolonialism is "a body of writing that attempts to shift the dominant ways in which the relations between western and non-western people and their worlds are viewed" (2).¹⁸ In one sense then, this can be viewed temporally and chronologically, from the period of decolonization and countries gaining independence (although it is recognized that this is a problematic application of the term 'postcolonial').¹⁹ This is reflected in the chronological structure of the novels in this thesis, from the immediate post-independence era in India (Markandaya's novel in 1954) to the era of globalization post-millennium (the year 2000 onwards), and all the years in-between.

However, the concept of postcolonialism needs to be unpacked further. Scholars and theorists do not necessarily agree on one single definition of

¹⁸ See: Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, UK; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

¹⁹ For more on 'postcolonial' as a periodizing term, see: Julie Mullaney, *Postcolonial Literatures in Context* (London; New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010). See also: Deepika Bahri, "Once More With Feeling: What is Postcolonialism?", *ARIEL* 26(1): 1995, 51-64. Bahri states that the term 'postcolonial' also applies to the period following the Second World War, extending it to the definition of the 'postcolonial period' "as a framing device to characterize the second half of the twentieth century" (52).

postcolonialism, though one commonality between all the differing definitions is a central concern with cultural power.²⁰ It is an approach that encompasses more than just an ideological response to colonialist thought or simply being described as an approach/system that comes after the advent of colonialism. In literary and cultural studies, the term ‘postcolonial’ is usually taken to mean “the ramifications of colonialism from the point of first contact” (Mullaney, 5).²¹ Adapting Robert J.C Young’s definition to this thesis, that postcolonialism seeks to destabilize the social and political power relationships that sustain colonialism, and now neo-colonialism, there is thus an opening up of intellectual space for subaltern knowledges and voices to emerge, and a dismantling of binary systems and power relationships.

While, on the one hand, the term ‘postcolonial’ is used to signify endings, the ending of the period of colonization, on the other hand, it also suggests continuities. Global developments throughout the world that are thought to be the after-effects of colonial rule, are also encompassed within the term and meaning of ‘postcolonial’. For example, Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee, in his book *Postcolonial Environments*, states that

²⁰ See: Ella Shohat, “Notes on the ‘Post-Colonial’”, *Social Text* 31/32: 1992, 99-113; Francoise Lionnet, “*Logiques métisses: Cultural Appropriation and Postcolonial Representations*”, *Postcolonial Representations: Women, Literature, Identity* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1995) 1-21; John Thieme, “Introduction: parents, bastards and orphans”, *Postcolonial Con-texts: Writing Back to the Canon* (London; New York: Continuum, 2001) 1-14; Benita Parry, “Beginnings, affiliations, disavowals”, *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* (London; New York, Routledge, 2004) 3-12; Graham Huggan, “Introduction”, *Interdisciplinary Measures: Literature and the Future of Postcolonial Studies* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 1-20; Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, “Introduction”, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (London; New York: Routledge, 2010) 1-24; Elleke Boehmer and Rosinka Chaudhuri, “Introduction”, *The Indian Postcolonial: A Critical Reader* (London; New York: Routledge, 2011) 1-14; Geeta Ganapathy-Dore, “Postcolonialism, A Theoretical Overview”, *The Postcolonial Indian Novel in English* (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011) 1-20; Neil Lazarus, “‘Third Worldism’ and the Political Imaginary of Postcolonial Studies”, *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013) 324-339.

²¹ See: Julie Mullaney, *Postcolonial Literatures in Context* (London; New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010).

I take the postcolonial not as the sign of a clean historical break between the era of modern Euro-north American colonial domination and that of Asian, African, Latin American and Oceanic national self-determination; but rather as a historical condition of intensified and sustained exploitation of the majority of humans and non-humans of the former colonies by a cartel composed of their own and ‘core’ metropolitan European/north American elites. ...the ‘post’ in postcolonial marks not an end of colonialism, but an end of a particular *mode* of colonialism which then shifts its gears and evolves to another stage. (6, my emphasis)

For Mukherjee, the postcolonial includes the “globalized ruling classes” and “gigantic transnational corporations and the labyrinthine world of speculative financial transactions” (Mukherjee, 6), all of which are intimately and intricately tied up together in their interests and agendas. This neo-colonial condition under which many humans and non-humans live, characterizes much of the world today. The continuities from colonial rule then are extended to today, where there is an intensified exploitation of humans and non-humans in the name of globalization and development, where a term such as ‘globalization’ becomes ‘faceless’ in nature, thus allowing itself and the people in power who perpetuate it to not claim any responsibility conveniently. This definition of postcolonialism, as espoused by Mukherjee, is also used extensively in this thesis to show how humans and non-humans both are exploited under capitalist patriarchy, and how the women novelists posit resistance to such neo-colonial agendas.

Theoretical Framework(s)

This thesis engages with three key theoretical frameworks—the representation of women and nature within (postcolonial) ecofeminist theories as well as accounts of activism; postcolonial fictions that engage with these issues of gender and environment; and a material feminist point of view to weave together the different threads to present an analysis and theory of the deeply interconnected and ambivalent concepts of representation of women, environment and space.

Before explicating the theoretical fields of postcolonial ecocriticism and ecofeminism, it is important to go back to the roots of ecocriticism. As a critical approach, ecocriticism has been (to date) projected as a predominantly Western field of study. Rob Nixon writes in a *New York Times* article in the year 1995, titled “The Greening of the Humanities”, that there were “twenty-five writers and critics whose work was central to this environmental studies boom...[and] all twenty-five writers and critics were American” (Nixon, 233). Today, although the field of environmental studies and literature has developed further to include sub-sections such as ecofeminism and postcolonial ecocriticism, it is still perceived as an “offshoot of American studies” (Nixon, 234). Ecocriticism has also been a largely male-dominated field. These facts, however, elide two important points that are of central concern to me. Firstly, the historical trajectory that precedes the formal establishment of ecocriticism as a field of study in the Anglo-American academy, and secondly, the sustained critical and creative work of postcolonial writers and activists that has largely been lost or marginalised—ecocriticism has been a largely American-centric field in which postcolonial literary perspectives have made a rather belated entry.

Cheryl Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii). By the year 2004, Greg Garrard’s definition of ecocriticism goes a step further to define it as “the study of the relationship of the human and non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term ‘human’ itself” (5). Such a definition raises the question of what it means to be human and the ways in which we construct ourselves against nature which at times is complicit with colonialist and racist attitudes (Huggan and Tiffin, 6). In the (post)colonial context, the category of human as ‘not-animal’ has had catastrophic consequences for human beings as well, especially groups which

have been marginalized by dominant Western discourses and views, and who have been treated as ‘savages’ or ‘animals’.

Postcolonial ecocriticism focuses on the intersection of postcolonial and environmental issues. Many critics, particularly from the strain of deep ecology, have asserted that postcolonialism is inherently anthropocentric and ecological concerns are secondary to other discourses that have historically contributed to racial discrimination. Ecocriticism, on the other hand, has been criticized for ignoring such a history of colonialism thereby giving rise to ‘universal’ environmental and bioethical concerns. In discourses of purity concerning environment literature and criticism, women as the colonized, for example, have been “repeatedly naturalized as objects of heritage to be owned, preserved, or patronized rather than as subjects of their own land and legacies” (Nixon, 235). It is important then to bring together postcolonial and environmental issues so that continuing imperialist modes and colonialist attitudes of social and environmental dominance can be challenged (Huggan and Tiffin, 2).

If we were to look at some of the postcolonial countries such as those in Africa and South Asia, particularly India, we realize that these nations have a history of environmental activism and movements even before ecocriticism emerged as an academic discipline in the Western world.²² This is indicative of the fact that

²² In Nigeria, Ken Saro-Wiwa, an Ogoni writer and environmental activist was executed in the year 1995 while actively campaigning and fighting against the destruction of his native people’s farmland and fishing waters by oil conglomerates such as Shell and Chevron. The despotic Nigerian regime was intimately involved with the oil companies, thus creating a situation where the unquestionable and transnational power of multinational companies, combined with the internal government, results in a neo-colonialist enterprise. More recently, Wangari Mathai, a Kenyan environmental and political activist, became the first African woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize in the year 2004. She pioneered the Green Belt movement, planting trees native to the area, and was committed to fighting for many more environmental causes which impacted politics and community life directly. Both Mathai’s and Ken Saro-Wiwa’s writings and activism, however, do not find a place in the environmental literary canon. They are, however, slowly being incorporated into postcolonial ecocriticism, especially after the publication of Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin’s book *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*.

environmental consciousness in the postcolonial world in terms of activism precedes the formation of ecocriticism as a discipline. Examples of these instances will be discussed in the following section on women-led environmental activism and writing in India, which is my area of focus.

Women-led Environmental Activism and Writing in India

In India, the 1970s saw a powerful social and environmental movement led predominantly by women, known as the Chipko movement. This movement brought about the concept of tree-hugging to stop activities such as deforestation, lumbering and mining. The movement originated in the Garhwal region of Uttaranchal in Uttar Pradesh, India. The state's increasing commercialisation and underdevelopment of the Garhwal region was instrumental in the conceptualisation of this movement, where local women were affected by state-level decisions such as granting private contractors lumbering rights for the trees to manufacture sporting goods such as tennis rackets and cricket bats. Due to excessive deforestation, the year 1970 saw its most devastating flood and equally destructive landslides. The Chipko movement has gained iconic status and is now cited as a highly successful example of grassroots environmentalism in India. This movement is also noted for the way in which it mobilised women.

In the recent decades, other women who have become synonymous with heroic environmental causes and movements are Medha Patkar, Mahasweta Devi, Arundhati Roy and C.K Janu. Medha Patkar leads the Narmada Bachao Andolan, a social movement consisting of tribal people, adivasis, farmers, environmentalists and human rights activists against the Sardar Sarovar Dam being built across the Narmada river in Gujarat, India. Mahasweta Devi, both an activist as well as a well-known feminist writer, has dedicated much of her activism and literature to the cause of

betterment of tribal people and their environment in India. Arundhati Roy, best known as the Booker Prize winner of *The God of Small Things*, wields her passionate pen for causes ranging from the Narmada Bachao Andolan to nuclear testing in India. The latest woman to come under the spotlight for fighting for an environmental cause is C.K Janu, an adivasi woman occupying the Muthanga forests in North Kerala. This was to protest the breached agreement between the adivasis and the state government to provide 500 acres of land to each adivasi family. The figure of C.K Janu as an adivasi woman leading the cause has given the movement a dimension of subaltern identity politics in addition to social justice and ecological balance. Besides the aforementioned individual women, there are also other masses of women whose names are either unknown or they are unrecorded in history.



Figure 1: Women of the Chipko Movement hugging a tree.
Image taken from:
<http://indiatoday.intoday.in/education/story/sunderlal-bahuguna/1/566324.html>

The examples above illustrate the emergence of an ecocritical consciousness from realising how nature is being turned into a commodity for profit by the postcolonial state and multinational capital. It is a perspective which refrains from romanticizing nature in any of its aspects. For many women around the world, their day to day lives depend on the survival of the forests and land that sustain their daily activities. Their interest to conserve and preserve the environment around them stems from a daily effort to survive materially. This is in contrast to the romanticized notions of women being ‘naturally’ close to nature due to biological essentialism.

Many times, photographs/images of the Chipko Movement that are circulated, such as the one above, bring forth these romanticized notions through the celebratory images of women hugging trees, where there is a persistent return to the woman-as-nature coupling. It is important to note that the Chipko Movement was one among many where women came together to protest against natural resource conflicts. As mentioned earlier, such movements came about due to the daily struggle and material survival of the villagers. Rob Nixon and Ramachandra Guha term such movements as the ‘environmentalism of the poor’, where issues of social justice are inextricably linked to ecological sustainability and the need for human survival on a daily basis.²³

In light of such developments in India, it is then surprising that most of the ecocritical writings and activism (which explicitly foreground women) from this country have not been included in the environmental literary canon²⁴. Women writing postcolonial Indian fiction in English have generally not been accorded much attention in the ecocritical field. A case then needs to be built for why women writers are crucial to this project.

I will explore and discuss the ambivalent relationship that women have with the environment through the filter of Indian women writing fiction in English. Many Indian women novelists not only explore female subjectivity in order to establish an identity that is not imposed by a patriarchal society, but their work also retains currency for making social issues a key part of their novels. Indian women’s writing,

²³ See: Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Massachusetts; London: Harvard University Press, 2011); Ramachandra Guha, “The Past and Present of Indian Environmentalism”, *The Hindu* <<http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-past-present-of-indian-environmentalism/article4551665.ece>>.

²⁴ Recent developments in the theoretical field of postcolonial ecocriticism (Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee’s *Postcolonial Environments*; Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin’s *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*; Bonnie Roos and Alex Hunt’s *Postcolonial Green*, Elizabeth DeLoughrey’s and George B. Handley’s *Postcolonial Ecologies*) have included male writers from India such as Amitav Ghosh (*The Hungry Tide*), Indra Sinha (*Animal’s People*) and the only female writer from the Indian subcontinent to be included in these works is Arundhati Roy (*The God of Small Things*).

especially from the twentieth century onwards, is starting to be viewed as a powerful medium of modernism and feminism. Elleke Boehmer writes in relation to Indian women's writing as modernist and feminist that "their writing demanded a different complexity of response than did the writing of Western women or once-colonized men" (218) because Indian women's writing insisted on "the *diversity* and *layeredness* of women's experience" (Boehmer, 218, original emphasis). Indian women authors writing in English such as Kiran Desai and Arundhati Roy have earned international renown by winning prestigious awards such as the Booker Prize, and their presence in the English-speaking literary world cannot be ignored or sidelined. Boehmer also states that "postcolonial women writers from India...are equally concerned to bring fore the specific textures of their own existence. Both as women and postcolonial citizens they concentrate...on their own 'distinct actualities' [and] often this is a political commitment" (Boehmer, 219-220). One reason why Indian women writers are often overlooked is because of the perception of their seeming interest in the very specific and private worlds of the women they write about. Indian women authors in the present milieu have begun to voice their concerns on globalization in India, and its impact on gender and family relations as well as the environment understood in its broadest sense. Therefore, while their writings may seem very specific and private, they do make a strong statement of political commitment.

The ambivalent relationship that women have with the environment bring to the fore the existential and material crises of the women as well as of the environment in the texts to be discussed. The materiality of nature is also emphasized, where nature does not just passively exist in the background. There is a consensus in much contemporary ecocriticism that the environment consists of nature, landscapes and

spaces, and all of these are socially constructed to give it a meaning, and meanings are determined by power and discourses. Such a view, however, reinforces the anthropocentricity that most ecocritics and environmentalists strive to break away from. There is a conflict in viewing the environment as being dependent on human cognition and language, and the “existence of this world [as] largely independent of human social life” (Kidner, 342).

In the context of this study, while I agree on the composition of the environment to be nature, landscapes and spaces, the environment here also constitutes the postcolonial condition characterised by historical, geographical, socio-political, natural and cultural factors, and uneven development. A “mutual interpenetration” (Mukherjee, 19) of all these aspects is crucial to the understanding of the environment, while at the same time emphasizing that the environment is also “a multifaceted, diverse order whose patterns and possibilities extend well beyond our ability to understand them” (Kidner, 341), thus enabling an ambivalent positioning of both women and spaces.

With a modern global economy, one important factor to consider is the increasing privatization of the common resources of nature, such as water.²⁵ This privatization of the commons (water to manufacture soft-drinks, land for cash crops) typically leads to over-exploitation of the resources, as well as pollution and contamination of these natural resources. In several cases, local communities and people do not have access to water and land at all when private companies take over

²⁵ See: Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space* (London; New York: Verso, 1984); Fred P. Gale and Michael R M’Gonigle (eds), *Nature, Production. Power: Towards and Ecological Political Economy* (Cheltenham, UK; Northampton, USA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2000); Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life* (London; New York: Verso, 2015).

these commons. An example that is discussed in Chapter Three is of the Coca-Cola Company taking over the water resources of the local villages in Kerala.²⁶

This study then aims to include women writers from India into the global debate and research in the field of ecocriticism, particularly postcolonial ecocriticism and ecofeminism, and literature. By including Indian women writing postcolonial fiction in English, this study aims to explore and generate further theoretical possibilities, in this case, materialist postcolonial ecofeminism, and develop and explore more fruitful linkages between theory, activism and writing. The link between women-led environmental activism and writing will be explored further in detail in the chapters to come. In particular, writers such as Arundhati Roy are not only important as writers about the environment and other linked social issues, but they are also a prototype for modern women-led environmental activism. Through writing, these Indian women writers posit a new way of interacting with the environment and have brought forth a language with which to frame thoughts, discourse and actions that are specific and particular to the Indian context, while at the same time extending their concerns globally.

Lineages of Ecofeminism in Theory

Ecofeminism argues that there are important connections between the domination and oppression of women and domination and exploitation of nature by masculinist methods and attitudes. The term ecofeminism was coined by Francoise d'Eaubonne in 1974 in the book *Feminism or Death*, or *Le féminisme ou la mort* in French. The first strand of ecofeminism, which is still predominant in the current day and age, is cultural ecofeminism²⁷. Developed in the 1970s, cultural ecofeminism

²⁶ See also: Vandana Shiva, *Water Wars* (London: Pluto Press, 2002).

reclaims women-nature connections as “liberating and empowering expressions of women’s capabilities to care for nature” (Warren, Web Source). The women-nature connections that hold particular importance for cultural ecofeminists are related to celebrating pre-patriarchal practices, religious and spiritual, where such practices are then said to make “women’s ways of knowing and moral reasoning better suited to solving environmental problems” (Warren, Web Source). Childbirth and mothering are celebrated, where the role of the mother is paralleled to the notion of ‘mother earth’.

Cultural ecofeminism has its fair share of critics. Ynestra King, for example, says that cultural ecofeminism

[b]y itself ...does not provide the basis for a genuinely dialectical ecofeminist theory and practice, one that addresses history as well as mystery. For this reason, cultural/spiritual feminism...is not synonymous with ecofeminism in that creating a gynocentric culture and politics is a necessary but not sufficient condition for ecofeminism. (King, 117)

Such criticisms of cultural ecofeminism are based on the notion that this particular framework reinforces sex-role stereotyping. As such, it is seen as making “essentialist, universalist and ahistorical” (Warren, Web Source) claims about women and nature. Therefore, although cultural ecofeminism’s strength lies in that it is seen to be a deeply woman-identified and women-centric movement that celebrates distinctive characteristics about women, it is steeped in biological essentialism, and it also does not take into account that “men can also develop an ethic of caring for nature” (Merchant, *Radical Ecology*, no page). Furthermore, cultural ecofeminism

²⁷ Ecofeminism which has its roots in cultural feminism is also closely associated with the Gaia hypothesis developed by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis. The Gaia hypothesis states that “the Earth is an organic whole—Gaia—[and] is a total self-organizing and self-reproducing, organic, spatio-temporal and teleological system with the goal of maintaining itself. ...Man’s development of the technosphere is viewed as a threat to the survival of Gaia” (Braidotti et al, 152-153). The Gaia hypothesis has also been associated with the strain of deep ecology and has given rise to theories of interdependencies within the human (inorganic) and non-human (organic) world.

discounts the fact that women's lives and identities are "socially constructed, historically fashioned, and materially reinforced through the interplay of a diversity of race/ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, age, ability, marital status, and geographic factors" (Warren, Web Source). Women as a category are homogenized and their distinctive characteristics are romanticized.

Indian physicist and environmental activist Vandana Shiva's work comes closest to cultural ecofeminism in the Indian context. Shiva asserts that "[w]hile gender subordination and patriarchy are the oldest of oppressions, they have taken on new and more violent forms through the project of development" (Shiva, "Development, Ecology and Women", 82). She argues for the recovery of the feminine principle—*Prakriti*—to counter the destructive effects of the Western model of development, which she calls maldevelopment. She defines *Prakriti* as "the feminine principle as the basis for development which conserves and is ecological. Feminism as ecology, and ecology as the revival of *Prakriti*—the source of all life" (Shiva, "Development, Ecology and Women", 85). Shiva characterises maldevelopment as "a paradigm that sees all work that does not produce profits and capital as non- or unproductive work" (Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, 26). Shiva convincingly argues and shows that the Western model of development, or maldevelopment, has been violent for many people, especially women and local environments (Braidotti et al, 173), as the violence that arises from such a model "is rooted in the patriarchal assumptions of homogeneity, domination and centralisation that underlie dominant models of thought and development strategies" (Shiva, *Staying Alive*, 46).

Shiva's aforementioned critiques, although useful in critiquing certain paradigms of development and globalisation which question the inherent Western bias

in values and models of progress, however, do come across as reductive and anti-developmental in several instances. For example, she says that “[t]he visibility of dramatic breaks and rupture is posited as progress. Marginalised women are either dispensed with or colonised” (Shiva, *Staying Alive*, 45). While recognising that capitalism, progress and development are problematic issues up to an extent, it is not productive to use the development paradigm as a scapegoat for all of society’s ills or to dismiss it completely as Shiva does. As Meera Nanda convincingly argues,

[t]he total rejection of modernity by Shiva, Mies and most post-developmentalists represents a lament against this globalization of the capitalist mode of production and indicates their desire to hold on to the local narratives in some imagined authentic form. This kind of assertion of difference, however, is not very incompatible with the cultural logic of global capitalism, which can easily sell any such cultural difference as ethnic chic or cannibalize it in order to better market commodities. The celebrity status that Shiva has acquired in the West cannot be understood apart from the surge of multiculturalism in the West, which, as [Arif] Dirlik points out, serves the interests of transnationalized capital. In India itself, however, Shiva’s work has been received a lot more critically. (Nanda, 366-367)

Women are, in fact, much more ambivalently placed in relation to colonialism, development, nature and culture than Shiva allows, and as the following chapters demonstrate.

Furthermore, Shiva’s positioning of women in India with regards to questions of ecology and development also comes across as problematical, with a tendency to homogenise and essentialise the women. In explaining the feminine principle, she says that “[w]omen in India are an intimate part of nature, both in imagination and in practice” (Shiva, *Staying Alive*, 38) and that by virtue of this fact, they have a privileged access to the feminine and sustaining principle. To further cement her point, she claims that “Third World women, whose minds have not yet been dispossessed or colonised, are in a privileged position to make visible the invisible oppositional categories that they are the custodians of” (Shiva, *Staying Alive*, 46).

Such claims are problematic on multiple levels. Firstly, Shiva romanticizes the Third World Indian women in question here, completely obscuring the rural-urban divide between them as well as the conditions of poverty the rural women live in. The social division of labour according to the caste system plays a significant role, and any attempt to deal with the issues of women and nature without a focus on caste, as Shiva does, will not be of much relevance.²⁸ Such celebratory romanticization has the effect of invisibilising the wretchedness of the conditions of their lifestyles (itself a consumerist term) and the “work that gives Third World women their supposedly superior cooperative and ecological sensibilities” (Nanda, 369). Furthermore, Shiva’s overarching argument of the feminine principle *Prakriti* is steeped in Hindu Brahminical philosophy, thus putting forth a didactic one-dimensional religious framework opposing the mechanistic scientific viewpoint of the West. Her uncritical use of (Brahminical) Hindu imagery is likened by some critics to the ‘saffronising’ cultural nationalism in India where upper caste Hindu notions, symbols and metaphors are used to push for a nationalist agenda which can come across as fanatical in nature (Nalunnakkal, 3). Women from other (minority) religions in India (Muslim, Sikh, Christian, etc.) are not taken into account in Shiva’s predominantly Hindu paradigm of thought. Shiva’s rigid argument also does not accommodate the effects of the developmental paradigm and environmental degradation on different groups of men in different ways.

The seemingly ‘natural’ alliance of women in India with nature and the way they have negotiated environmental movements is better explained by Bina Agarwal and Ariel Salleh. Agarwal contends that women do suffer in gender specific ways

²⁸ For a more critical look at ecological issues from the vantage point of caste, incorporating Dalit and Adivasi women, see: Gabriele Dietrich, *Reflections on the Women’s Movement in India: Religion, Ecology and Development* (New Delhi: Horizon Indian Books, 1993); Aruna Ghandason, *Listen to the Women! Listen to the Earth!* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005).

from environmental destruction due to capitalist patriarchy but that their ‘natural’ relation to the environment is “not as Vandana Shiva would have us believe, but simply because [the women’s] position in society is such that they are most the most affected by environmental decline, and consequently most interested in resisting it” (quoted in Braidotti et. al, 173). Salleh cites that “on an international scale women, undertaking 65 per cent of the world’s work for 5 per cent of its pay, effectively are ‘the proletariat’” (Salleh, 6). With those statistics, she brings together historical materialism and ecosocialism, and stresses that “since the interest of *women as a global majority* lies in challenging existing productivist structures, women as an economic underclass are astonishingly well placed to bring about the social changes requisite for ecological revolution” (Salleh, 6, my emphasis). Salleh further asserts that “women are not ‘closer to nature’ than men in any ontological sense. Both women and men are ‘in/with/of nature’, but attaining the prize of masculine identity depends on *men distancing themselves* from that fact” (Salleh, 13, my emphasis). Agarwal’s and Salleh’s claims are important here because not only do they expose the falsity of the claim that women are ‘naturally’ aligned to nature and the environment, but their claims also refute the ‘authentic cultures’ that ecofeminists such as Shiva and those from the West bind the Third World women into. The upholding of Third World women as bearers of an ‘authentic culture’ gives rise to an idealized, celebratory and romanticized vision of poverty and Third World women as a homogeneous category without considering factors such as class, caste and various other traditional constituents. Chandra Talpade Mohanty warns against such a constructivist glorification and idealization of the Third World Woman, a view that Agarwal shares as well. Bina Agarwal states that it is difficult for rural women to enter the non-agricultural economy due to their high “domestic work burden, lower mobility [and]

lesser education” (“Are We Not peasants Too?”, 2), highlighting their daily conditions of struggle and poverty.

Socialist/Materialist Ecofeminism

The second distinct stream within ecofeminism is socialist/materialist ecofeminism. It is my contention that socialist/materialist ecofeminism brings together and defines the best of the material and spiritual aspects of ecofeminism. Thus, socialist/materialist ecofeminism shows how the connections between women and nature are embedded in social constructivism as well as biological predisposition. This particular framework also takes into account an analysis of capitalism and patriarchy (capitalist patriarchy) to explain the domination and oppression of women and nature. To avoid clumsy phrasing, I will use the term materialist ecofeminism below.

It is important to go back to the roots of historical materialism, since materialist (eco)feminism borrows several concepts from historical materialism to formulate a coherent theoretical base. Hence, a brief overview of historical materialism is needed before explicating why materialist feminism is important for postcolonial ecofeminism.

Historical materialism is central to Marxist thought, and it was first conceptualized by Karl Marx as the materialist conception of history. Historical materialism argues that in order for human beings to survive and continue existence from generation to generation, it is necessary to produce and reproduce the *material* requirements of life. Human beings collectively work on nature, and there is a division of labour in which people do different jobs, and some people live off the fruit of others’ labour by owning the means of production, for example, raw materials, land, other tools and technology. Therefore, there is a division of labour into social

classes based on property-ownership, and the system of class division is dependent on the mode of production. Thus, the way people organize a society is determined by the economic base and the relations that arise from its mode of production. In capitalism as a mode of production, the capitalist class privately owns the means of production, distribution and exchange, while the working class live by exchanging their labour for wages.²⁹

Materialist ecofeminism borrows the notion of historical materialism and sees environmental problems as “rooted in the rise of capitalist patriarchy and the ideology that the Earth and nature can be exploited for human progress through technology” (Merchant, “Ecofeminism and Feminist Theory”, 103). This proceeds on from the notion that it is men who are responsible for labour in the marketplace and women bear the responsibility of labour in the domestic sphere of the home. By virtue of the fact that the women’s main domain of labour has been stereotypically considered the home (although this is not universally true and women have been wage-earners), it is unpaid labour and therefore subordinate to men’s labour in the marketplace.³⁰ This is in direct contrast to the fact that a large percentage of the world’s work and labour (at home, farms, sweatshops, etc) is actually performed by women. In materialist ecofeminism, nature and human nature are viewed as being historically and socially

²⁹ See: Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977). See also: Z. Berbeshkiina, L. Yakovleva, D. Zerkin, *What is Historical Materialism?* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1985); Toril Moi and Janice Radway, *Materialist Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994); Lise Vogel, *Woman Questions: Essays for a Materialist Feminism* (London; New York: Routledge, 1995); Imre Szeman, “Marxist Criticism, Then and Now”, *Literary Materialisms* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 49-62; Leerom Medovoi, “The Biopolitical Unconscious: Toward an Eco-Marxist Literary Theory”, *Literary Materialisms* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 79-94; Rosemary Hennessy, “The Materiality of Discourse”, *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse* (London; New York: Routledge: 2013 [1993]) 37-66; Michele Barret, “Some Conceptual Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis”, *Women’s Oppression Today: The Marxist/Feminist Encounter* (London; New York: Verso, 2014 [1980]) 8-41; Christine Delphy, “A Materialist Feminism is Possible”, *Close to Home: A Materialist Analysis of Women’s Oppression* (London; New York: Verso, 2016 [1984]) 154-181.

³⁰ See: Mary Mellor, “Nature, (Re)Production and Power: A Materialist Ecofeminist Perspective”, *Nature, Production, Power: Towards an Ecological Political Economy* (Cheltenham, UK; Northampton, USA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2000) 105-120.

constructed, therefore connections and interactions between humans, nature, men and women “must be grounded in an understanding of *power* not only in the personal but also in the political sphere” (Merchant, “Ecofeminism and Feminist Theory”, 103, my emphasis). What this elucidates is that relationships between women and nature are steeped in social, material and political realities. Materialist ecofeminism thus goes a step further than cultural ecofeminism in bringing to prominence the areas of production and reproduction: in order for human beings to survive, the material conditions of life have to be continually produced and reproduced.

For Carolyn Merchant, one of the central questions in materialist ecofeminism is “what is at stake for women and for nature when production in traditional societies is disrupted by *colonial* and *capitalist* development?” (Merchant, *Radical Ecology*, no page, my emphasis). Here, the potential of materialist ecofeminism when combined with postcolonial issues comes to the fore to offer a more thorough critique of issues of domination, gender, class, race and so on. In the present situation, questions of neo-colonialism, development (specifically a First World model of development), and globalisation can be fruitfully invoked with the coming together of these two theoretical frameworks—materialist ecofeminism and postcolonial ecofeminism. At this point, I would like to revisit my argument that I had posited earlier on. I am arguing that women in the fiction written by Indian women writers have an ambivalent attitude towards nature. Their existential crises are highlighted through this ambivalent attitude, positing the women in the midst of/beyond both nature and culture, where each is thoroughly implicated in the other. Hence, women, nature, development and globalization are not straight-forward linear categories that either complement or contradict each other in totality. Globalization is then best seen as a *contradictory development* (a term that the materialist feminist critic Meera Nanda

uses as well) where it integrates women into the myriad spheres of global capitalism, and simultaneously loosens the grip of traditional patriarchy on the women. Therefore, a total rejection of globalization or modernity as called for by some ecofeminists is not a very compatible framework because globalization is not a unidimensional phenomenon. The concepts of development and globalization vis-à-vis nature and women need to be thoroughly examined and deconstructed by teasing out tensions between notions of ambivalence, spatiality (rural to urban spaces, private and public spaces, etc) and the spiritual and material aspects of ecofeminism.

Materialist Postcolonial Ecofeminism

It is important to explicate at this point what ‘materialist’ means in the context of this dissertation and what a materialist postcolonial ecofeminist framework constitutes of. The need for a materialist postcolonial ecofeminism arises due to the insufficiencies of ecocriticism and postcolonial ecocriticism in considering the issue of androcentrism. Postcolonial ecocriticism merges women with larger ecological issues such as (land) displacement and racism, erasing women’s distinct histories, identities and positions. Ecofeminism, on the other hand, while considering the issue of androcentrism at length, fails to consider postcolonial concerns, in particular issues of neo-colonialism, race, uneven development and globalization. I have suggested that materialist ecofeminism provides the most enabling framework to negotiate and critically examine issues of essentialism, social constructivism, capitalist patriarchy, women and nature. Hence, I will be using materialist ecofeminism along with postcolonial ecofeminism as the theoretical apparatus to dissect and analyse the texts in question in this thesis.

As mentioned in the previous section, materialist ecofeminism brings forth a dialectical conversation with aspects of production, reproduction and ecology, where

nonhuman nature is seen as “the material basis of all of life and that food, clothing, shelter and energy are essential to the maintenance of human life” (Merchant, *Radical Ecology*, no page), and the production and reproduction of immediate life is determined by historical factors. In traditional Marxist terms, this is known as historical materialism. Rosemary Hennessy and Chrys Ingraham state that

...feminists have continued to find in historical materialism a powerful theoretical and political resource. The tradition of feminist engagement with marxism emphasizes a perspective on social life that refuses to separate the materiality of meaning, identity, the body, state, or nation from the requisite division of labour that undergirds the scramble for profits in capitalism’s global system. (“Introduction”, 1)

Feminist critical engagement with historical materialism along with ecology, that is, materialist ecofeminism, then becomes important to challenge dominant modes of thinking that reinforce certain oppressions, exploitations, hierarchies and inequalities under capitalist patriarchy, development and globalization. Materialist ecofeminism considers capitalist and neocolonial policies for profit as the basis for inequalities between various countries as well as individuals. The key insight is that the connection between the domination and exploitation of nature and women is the global capitalist economy which is seen to be intrinsically anti-ecological (Kirk, 349). Undertaken with postcolonial concerns—race, class, caste, gender, neocolonialism, neoliberalism, power of the state, among others—a materialist postcolonial ecofeminism becomes important as a theoretical tool, one that brings together into one analytical focus concerns about gender, environment, postcolonialism, capitalism and material conditions.

However, stopping here is not enough. While historical materialism uses the term ‘materialism’ to make two separate points, one is emphasized more than the other. The first point ‘materialism’ makes is that matter is crucial in forming the condition for consciousness, that thought and consciousness arise from matter and not

the other way round. The second point ‘materialism’ makes is that economic processes form the material base of society upon which ideas, institutions, and the economy are derived from. In Marxist historical materialism, it is the second point which is emphasized more than the first.

As theories have developed over the decades, the other important facet of materialism that is not emphasized in Marxist historical materialism, has to be considered. If one looks at the dictionary definitions of materialism, one of them is:

the philosophical theory that regards matter and its motions as constituting the universe, and all phenomena, including those of mind, as due to material agencies.³¹ (Web Source)

Scholars such as Karen Barad, Stacy Alaimo, Elizabeth A. Wilson, Iris van der Tuin, Elizabeth Grosz, Rosi Braidotti, Jane Bennett, and more recently, Astrida Neimanis, have been most influential in forwarding such a conception of materialism. Often termed as ‘New Materialism’, this strain of materialistic conception of ecocriticism and ecofeminism emphasizes the refrain that ‘matter matters’.³² Serenella Iovino and Serpil Opperman write that such a materialist conception—that matter matters—is

[the] intermingling agencies and forces that persist and change over eons, producing new forms, bodies, and natures. It is through all these natures, agencies and bodies that “the world we inhabit”... is “alive”...the world’s material phenomena are knots in a vast network of agencies...Developing in bodily forms and in discursive formulations, and arising in coevolutionary landscapes of natures and signs, the stories of matter are everywhere: in the air we breathe, the food we eat, in the things and beings of this world, within and beyond the human realm. ...It is a material “mesh” of meanings, properties, and processes, in which human and nonhuman players are interlocked in networks that produce undeniable signifying forces.³³ (2)

³¹ Most of the dictionaries online give the same or similar definitions of materialism as the one stated here. See: < <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/materialism>>.

³² See: Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (eds), *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2010).

³³ See: Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (eds), *Material Ecocriticism* (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2014).

What is important to note here is that such a conceptualization of new materialism rejects the old notion of matter as inert, and in Diana Coole and Samantha Frost's words, as being 'mere' matter (Coole and Frost, 9). The world's phenomena are then interlocking systems that are active, dynamic and agentic.

This 'new material' turn in ecocriticism and ecofeminism encompasses subjects and fields such as the sciences, philosophy, quantum physics, feminist theory, sociology, among others. Such a turn is gradually becoming more and more important in literary and environmental studies because it views human and nonhuman life together, in totality, without binaries, dichotomies or dualisms that typify human thought processes. Agency is attributed to both humans and nonhumans, and this becomes important especially in the context of ecofeminism. Traditionally, in binary systems of thinking, nature (animate and inanimate matter included) and women have been considered passive, inert and as instruments to be used for man/mankind. Attributing agency, or rethinking nature as feminist space, as Stacy Alaimo does, means freeing up both nature and women from the baggage of traditional stereotypes that posit nature and women in an inferior position, as passive, static and inert.³⁴ Reality then "emerges as an intertwined flux of material and discursive forces" and as "a material-semiotic network of human and nonhuman agents incessantly generating the world's embodiments and events" (Iovino and Oppermann, 3). Binaries such as culture/nature are then thoroughly 'meshed' with each other. Donna Haraway uses the term 'naturecultures' to describe such a thorough intermingling of the culture/nature binary into each other. Such a disarticulation of

³⁴ See: Stacy Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 2000); Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment and the Material Self* (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010).

binaries that are particularly harmful to nature and women then presents alternative spaces and agencies that have empowering potentialities.

Materialist postcolonial ecofeminism thus takes into account both notions and conceptions of ‘materiality’ as explicated in the above paragraphs—socialist/materialist ecofeminism and ‘new materialisms’—along with postcolonial concerns especially pertinent to gender. Chapter Three on water in this dissertation particularly illustrates these conceptualizations within a materialist postcolonial ecofeminist framework.

While I have focused on South Asian writings, particularly Indian fiction by women writers, the relevance of such theories and of materialist postcolonial ecofeminism is not confined to South Asian texts alone. Patrick Chamoiseau’s *Texaco*, set in Martinique illustrates the global concerns of environmental justice that are foregrounded in a materialist conception of postcolonial ecofeminism. Nigerian author Flora Nwapa’s novel *Efuru* highlights the relation of the local Igbo community to the environment which has been appropriated by colonization, resulting in the local community’s alienation from the land and other natural resources. Marxist urban geographer Mike Davis’ book *Planet of Slums* also highlights issues of gender, urbanization and urban poverty with examples that span from a variety of geographical locations such as the Middle East, South America, Southeast Asia and South Asia. Certain Southeast Asian authors, for example, Lee Yew Leong, a Singaporean writer, and his short story “Honey, I’m off to be a Jellyfish Now!” illustrates concerns about boundaries between the human and the animal. My study of materialist postcolonial ecofeminism and women writing Indian fiction in English is but one aspect of the projects and studies undertaken by many other ecocritical scholars the world over. However, apart from Arundhati Roy, and perhaps

Mahashweta Devi, Indian female writers have not been mentioned or taken seriously in the field of postcolonial ecocriticism and ecofeminism.³⁵ Therefore, the emphasis on Indian women's writing along with postcolonial ecofeminism and materialism is crucial in this study.

Dualisms: A Common Ground in Ecofeminist Theory

The multiple definitions and viewpoints in ecofeminism have led the feminist and political philosopher Noel Sturgeon to claim that “the ecofeminism movement...is a fractured, contested, discontinuous entity that constitutes itself as a social movement” (Sturgeon, 3). The many definitions and diverse standpoints of ecofeminism are at the very core and heart of ecofeminist theory and need not necessarily be seen as providing negative contradictions to each other. At this point, it is important to address the common ground that binds these different positions and viewpoints in ecofeminist theory. According to Rosi Braidotti, all of the varying standpoints

derive from a critique of patriarchy and patriarchal epistemological frameworks. The male-centred (androcentric) ways of knowing, which account for the *antagonistic, dualistic and hierarchical* conceptions of self, society and cosmos, are perceived to be at the roots of oppression. *Most ecofeminists contrast dualisms, such as the subject/object split associated with patriarchal epistemologies, and the oppression of women and nature, with connectedness and mutualism perceived to be inherent in women's ways of knowing.* (Braidotti et al, 162, my emphasis)

The binding commonality of the various strands of ecofeminism is the notion of dualisms. As Serenella Iovino and Serpil Opperman posit, “[t]his natural-cultural plexus is the cypher of our world, and therefore the necessary terrain of every critical analysis” (5). The contestation of the culture/nature dualism is a major component of this thesis, allowing the ruptured space in-between to emerge as ambivalence. This

³⁵ At the time of writing this thesis, Dana C. Mount's article on Kamala Markandaya and ecofeminism had just been published. See: Dana C Mount, “Bend Like the Grass: Ecofeminism in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*.”, *Postcolonial Text* 2011, 6.3: 1-20.

allows women to be related to both nature and culture in more diverse and complex ways than the dualism normally allows. Such binaries tend to gloss over notions of class, caste, race, religion, rural and urban spatiality and neo-colonialism.

According to Nancy Hartsock, the structure of these dualisms then present a perspective of power, “a way of looking at the world characteristic of the dominant, white, male, Eurocentric ruling class, a way of dividing up the world that puts an omnipotent subject at the centre and constructs marginal Others as sets of negative qualities” (Hartsock, quoted in Plumwood, 44). This has important implications for not only gender or nature per se, but also groups of colonised and marginalised people. In such patriarchal thought, women are linked closer to nature and men are identified as being closer to culture. Nature and women are then seen as inferior to culture and men. Similarly, when the master/slave dualism is applied to coloniser/colonised, hierarchically the other in the dualism (nature, female, colonised) is constructed as inferior. The impact of such dualistic thinking, where hierarchies are set up between dominance and submission, is that “the inferiorised group...must *internalise* this inferiorisation in its identity and collude in this low valuation, honouring the values of the centre, which form the dominant social values” (Plumwood, 47, my emphasis). Therefore, the categories of culture, men, coloniser, claim for themselves reason, rationality and universal humanity, while on the other hand, nature, female, and colonised, inherit for themselves primitivism, emotionality and animality.

However, one important element in this construction that must not be overlooked is that the Other is *required* for the master (narrative). In other words, without the Other, there is no self, no master (narrative). The self's or the master's identity *depends* and is *defined materially* by the presence of the Other, without which

it will cease to exist. Therefore, such dualisms also reveal much about the dominant hierarchy—its *dependency* and its *falsity* for “this dependency is also hated and feared by the master, for it subtly challenges his dominance, and is denied in a variety of indirect and direct ways, with all the consequences of repression” (Plumwood, 49). What this means is that there must always be a submissive class below the dominant hierarchy to give selfhood to the master at the top, and the basic structure of domination must be maintained in sophisticated ways to ensure that such hierarchy *is not challenged* in any of its aspects. This leads to the birth of certain stereotypes such as generalisation of certain habits and living patterns of certain groups. For example, the colonised are usually portrayed as savages, animalistic, lacking in civilisation and are infantilised. This is then used as a justification for the dominant group to carry out the act of colonising. Similarly, the commodification and objectification of certain groups of people—of women, of marginalised tribal people and of nature itself—results from this enterprise.

Such dualisms are also linked to the Western philosophy of ontology and epistemology, where women are said to be ontological beings, “implicitly relegated to the realm of “being” ” (King, 115) because they are associated with, intuitively and organically, knowing the ways of nature and therefore considered the best candidates for earth care. This relegates the realm of epistemology to men who make and create knowledge and history. The production and creation of such knowledge and history, and their further divisions into niche subsets and areas, is “a tool of ideology” (Delphy, 60) that invisibilises creation of knowledge by women. It is therefore imperative that a materialist critique is undertaken along with postcolonial ecofeminism for “a social movement, the feminist movement, and for *knowledge*”

(Delphy, 64, original emphasis), because what is at stake here are intertwining webs of politics, economics and systems of knowledge and value.

According to Michael Zimmerman, it is “not only women but also men [who] have been distorted by the effects of patriarchies” (Zimmerman, quoted in Braidotti et al, 167). To expand this point further, Murray Bookchin also notes that both women and men alike “have been implicated in the epistemologies of rule and hierarchical constructions of social reality” (Braidotti et al, 158). What this means is that all of us—from children to adults—are constantly socialized in and through dualistic and hierarchical structures of thought and social practice. This, in turn, implies that not only do we need to accommodate dualism and essentialism in our lived reality as well as in theory, but also throw up the space in-between, that of ambivalence, for discussion and contestation. In the chapters to follow in this thesis, the notion of ambivalence will then be further explored through the works of the Indian female writers.

Ambivalence

In postcolonial theory, the concept of ambivalence can be traced back Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture*.³⁶ According to Bhabha, the idea of ambivalence in culture consists of opposing perceptions and dimensions. There exists a duality in the identity of the colonized other, a split or ambivalence that allows a hybrid of the colonized other’s own cultural identity and the colonizer’s cultural identity. Conversely, the colonial presence remains ambivalent too, where there is a split between the appearance of the colonial presence as original and authoritative, and its articulation as repetition and difference. In his paper “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse” (which is also found in his book *The Location of Culture*), Bhabha first mentions the concept of ambivalence in relation to colonial mimicry:

³⁶ See: Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, New York: 1994).

colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as *a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. ...a discursive process by which the excess or slippage produced by the ambivalence of mimicry (almost the same, *but not quite*) does not merely “rupture” the discourse, but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a “partial” presence. (126-127, original emphasis)

Ambivalence, then, destabilizes the absolute authority and unquestionable authenticity of the colonizer as well as the colonial text. Colonial ‘authoritative’ representations of race, sexuality, cultural differences and violence then no longer command an authority, where such representations then can be read as the production of hybridity. A split attitude towards the colonized leads to the production of mimicry that manifests more as a menace and rupture than a consolidation of the colonizer’s authority and authenticity. Bhabha borrows the term ‘ambivalence’ from psychoanalysis, where it is taken to mean a continual fluctuation between wanting one thing and wanting its opposite. It can also mean a simultaneous attraction towards and repulsion from a person, an object or an action.

Adapting Bhabha’s conception of ambivalence to this thesis, ambivalence here signifies the destabilization of knowledges and hierarchies sanctioned not only by colonial discourse, but also by capitalist patriarchy, where women’s voices, knowledge and ways of being are typically side-lined or silenced. Bhabha further writes that “[t]hinking—and *feeling*—through the medium of ambivalence is a kind of strange global necessity...” (“Notes”, 46, original emphasis), where both *thoughts* and *feelings* are important to work through ambivalence.³⁷

³⁷ See: Homi Bhabha, “Notes on Globalisation and Ambivalence”, *Cultural Politics in a Global Age: Uncertainty, Solidarity and Innovation* (Oxford, UK: Oneworld, 2007) 36-47.

From the point of view of the social sciences, Andrew J. Weigert states that ambivalence is a social reality, quoting S. Shapiro that “it is the human who is an ambivalent animal” (33).³⁸ For Weigert, social change is not possible without first working through ambivalence. He defines ambivalence as “the deep gray of contradictory feelings; of inconsistent knowledge; and of the indeterminateness of mutually exclusive decisions to act. Ambivalence refers to an emotional state when...I have mixed feelings about this action” (34). In sociological analyses, Robert K. Merton and E. Barber define core sociological ambivalence as “*conflicting normative expectations socially defined for a particular social role associated with a single social status*” (quoted in Weigert, 42, original emphasis), where a person is not able to conform to a norm and counter-norm in the same behaviour, at the same time.³⁹

In general, then, ambivalence as a concept captures the *messiness* of things, feelings, values, actions and ideas, as well as contradictory demands, in lived reality. Generally, ambivalence is taken to mean having mixed thoughts/feelings about something or having contradictory ideas about something or someone. In other words, it constitutes tensions of uncertainty, fluctuation, and the coexistence of both positive and negative thoughts, ideas and feelings in someone about something.

The rupturing of the culture/nature binary into ambivalence in the texts chosen in this thesis highlights the possibility of women occupying multiple positions. The culture/nature binary, traditionally conceived as a stable and unchanging dualism,

³⁸ See: Andrew J. Weigert, “Ambivalence as Social Reality”, *Mixed Emotions: Certain Steps Toward Understanding Ambivalence* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991) 33-58; S. Shapiro, “The Ambivalent Animal: Man in the Contemporary British and American Novel” *Centennial Review* 12: 1968, 1-22.

³⁹ See: Robert K. Merton and E. Barber, “Sociological Ambivalence”, *Sociological Theory, Values and Sociological Change* (New York: Free Press, 1963) 3-31. See also: Robert K. Merton, “Sociological Ambivalence”, *Sociological Ambivalence and Other Essays* (New York: The Free Press, 1976) 3-31.

does not allow different relationalities and complexities to emerge within and beyond the dualism. As such, within these binaries, women are either thought to be solely aligned to the nature-side of the binary, or they *distance* themselves from the ‘essentialism’ associated with nature and embrace the culture-side whole-heartedly. This is hardly the case, in reality or in fiction. Just as the world we live in is conceived as dynamic and intertwined by new materialisms, women are related to the culture/nature binary in various different ways that are dynamic, fluctuating, at times even inconclusive and irresolute. Hili Razinsky states that “one can manifest one’s ambivalence by performing a single act that expresses the opposed poles together” (6).⁴⁰ In so doing, Razinsky further states that such ambivalence is “not a mere momentary feeling or behaviour, but rather it...characterizes our medium- and long-term attitudes” (6). We see this ambivalence being manifested in the women in their stances towards the woman-nature equation in the novels discussed in this thesis.

The possibility that women might relate to culture/nature in both positive and negative ways *simultaneously*, that is, ambivalently, is not accounted for within the traditional conception of dualisms. This does not imply that such ambivalence is in any way unpleasant or undesirable, as also stated by Kenneth Weisbrode.⁴¹ As posited earlier, culture and nature are thoroughly constituted in each other, being ‘naturecultures’, and therefore the space that is ruptured between the binaries is constituted by both culture and nature as well. The degrees to which the women identify with the various constitutes, however, differs, and these varying degrees

⁴⁰ See: Hili Razinsky, *Ambivalence: A Philosophical Exploration* (London; New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017).

⁴¹ See: Kenneth Weisbrode, *On Ambivalence: The Problems and Pleasures of Having it Both Ways* (Massachusetts; London: MIT Press, 2012). For an in-depth account of ambivalence in philosophy, see: Hili Razinsky, *Ambivalence: A Philosophical Exploration* (London; New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016).

comprise the notion of ambivalence extrapolated in the texts discussed in this study. The texts then show the myriad ways this ambivalence in women is brought forth through problematizing the various dualisms and binaries: culture/nature, man/woman, human/animal, among others.

The Role of the Literary

What is the specific value of the novel as a literary form in helping to illuminate questions of ecology, and what is distinctive about the literary mode in elucidating issues of ambivalence and its role in disrupting the culture/nature binary? These two questions need to be addressed at this point in the thesis.

Richard Kerridge asserts that the literary movement and the global environmental crises are linked (Kerridge, 362).⁴² Kerridge quotes Scott Slovic that there is an urgent need to “appreciate the values-rich language of story and image” (Slovic, quoted in Kerridge, 363), especially with regards to environmental problems the world is experiencing today. Slovic further comments that literature and language “are crucially important in exploring, and even *shaping* our sense of personal values and in communicating these values” (Slovic, quoted in Bracke, 433, original emphasis).⁴³ These statements by Kerridge and Slovic illuminate questions about how our perception of the environment is culturally shaped, and how that perception is mediated through language and literature, that is, the novel as a literary form. (Heise, 511).⁴⁴

⁴² See: Richard Kerridge, “Ecocritical Approaches to Literary Form and Genre”, *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014) 361-376.

⁴³ See: Astrid Bracke, “The Contemporary English Novel and Its Challenges to Ecocriticism”, *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014) 423-439. See also: Scott Slovic, *Going Away to Think* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2008) 118.

⁴⁴ See: Ursula Heise, “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to Ecocriticism”, *PMLA* 121 (2): 2006, 503-516.

Furthermore, Peter Boxall writes in *The Value of the Novel* that the novel “both shapes the world and resists its demands” (12), therefore not only reflecting cultural values, but also resisting them.⁴⁵ Boxall further states that

[i]f the novel matters today, if it has a value, then it is because it has this unique ability to put the relationship between art and matter, between words and the world, into a kind of motion, to work at the disappearing threshold between the world that exists and that which does not, between the world that we already know and understand and that which we have not yet encountered. (13)

Boxall’s statement here clarifies the idea that while the novel allows us to inhabit cultural values and a world that already exists (and that we are comfortable existing in), the novel simultaneously allows us to imagine and make new worlds, where it is important to re-think and give expression to new “cultural possibilities, to decolonise the mind, to loosen then grip of the patriarchal, the heteronormative and the rational, in order to explore the non-normative, the transgressive, the dissident” (Boxall, 2).

The novels discussed in this thesis have been chosen for the same values as Boxall posits. Questions of ecology in these novels are brought forth precisely in questioning the normative cultural values as well as blurring boundaries between self and the external world, humanity and nature. Such absolutes are challenged by the women authors by employing alternatives such as hybridity, interdependency and a ‘mesh’ of exchange between the natural and human world, and to this I will add the concept of ambivalence that disrupts the clear boundaries between culture and nature, human and animal, man and woman. Ambivalence then becomes one of the tools that can be used to interrogate the dualisms and binaries that are rarely questioned when unconscious biases come into play.

⁴⁵ See: Peter Boxall, “Introduction”, *The Value of the Novel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 1-16.

What all the women writers and their novels have in common in this thesis is that environmental problems/ecology that cuts at the heart of gender necessitates a transformation of several of the “bedrock assumptions” (Kerridge, 367) on which our current world is premised and on which we lead our lives, assumptions such as responsibility, action and selfhood (human, nonhuman) as well as binaries, dichotomies and hierarchies, and the limits of each of these assumptions (Kerridge, 367).

Indian women’s writing in English in relation to postcolonial ecofeminism is then a significant contribution in that not only does this writing provide a counterpoint to theory and accounts of activism, such writing also challenges a simplistic and reductive attitude and reading of the environment. Furthermore, Indian women’s writing in English (within the novels discussed in this thesis and otherwise) has progressively forwarded the notion of postcolonial ecofeminism as the inclusion of both ‘natural’, rural and urban spaces and places. Therefore, an important point to note is that such writing also disarticulates the non-urban/urban binary to bring the built environment—cities and other urban landscapes—into the fold of postcolonial ecofeminism. With ambivalence as a key concept in teasing out the complexities of these representations and relationships with the environment, these novels by women writers have simultaneously drawn attention to issues such as gender, caste and class, positing these writing by Indian women as a site of resistance to hegemonic practices and attitudes that not only denigrate women in particular but also men and nonhuman entities.

This thesis, then, in discussing women authors along with themes such as land, animal, water, and the city, offers a new perspective on Indian women authors writing in English within a framework of postcolonial ecofeminism, while trying to further

the theoretical framework of postcolonial ecofeminism itself which is still developing. In forwarding a materialist conception of postcolonial ecofeminism, where ‘material’ means combining both approaches of socialist ecofeminism and ‘new materialism’ conceptualized by scholars such as Stacy Alaimo, Jane Bennet, Serpil Opperman and Serenella Iovino, I have tried to fill in the gaps left by ecofeminism presented as a solely gynocentric and woman-centric theory and movement.

Influential Works

This study has been greatly influenced by a number of scholars and their works in the ecocritical field.⁴⁶ The ‘old guard’ of ecofeminists—Val Plumwood, Ynestra King, Carolyn Merchant, Gwyn Kirk, Noel Sturgeon, Karen Warren, Mary Mellor, Janet Biehl, among others—formed the foundation of my work on ecofeminism. Mary Mellor, Carolyn Merchant and Ariel Salleh’s materialist take on ecofeminism formed the basis of my notions on materialist ecofeminism. Greta Gaard’s calls in several journal articles for taking ecofeminism a step further to include animals as well as a materialism that could account for not just women and animals, but an expanded notion of a more-than-human world, inspired the sections on Anita Desai’s novels as well as combining Gaard’s call with Carol J. Adams *The Sexual Politics of Meat*.

Greta Gaard, Simon C. Estok and Serpil Oppermann’s *International Perspectives in Feminist Ecocriticism*, and Mary Phillips and Nick Rumens’ *Contemporary Perspectives on Ecofeminism*, have given ecofeminism a push towards

⁴⁶ This list is by no means exhaustive. There are many other scholarly works that have influenced me as well as other scholars and other writings on ecocriticism and ecofeminism that are not mentioned here. For example, John Bellamy Foster’s work on Marxist ecology has been indispensable for some of the writings on socialist and materialist conceptions of ecology, ecocriticism and ecofeminism. The works that have influenced my work here is a quick overview of some of the scholarly writings that have been crucial to my research.

contemporaneity. These works have been crucial in underpinning a sense of why ecofeminism is not only still relevant, but in fact, much needed in today's world. Stacy Alaimo's *Undomesticated Ground* and *Bodily Natures*, Alaimo and Susan Hekman's *Material Feminisms*, have been particularly influential in my analyses of an expanded notion of materiality—from socialist/materialist ecofeminist concepts to 'new materialist' concepts—regarding the natural world and the human body, where both are seen as active political agents.

Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* has been a valuable resource in combining ecofeminism with postcolonial concerns.⁴⁷ Theirs is the pioneering work regarding postcolonialism in ecocriticism, along with Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. It is impossible to read Arundhati Roy's works without referencing Huggan, Tiffin and Nixon. More recently, Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee's *Postcolonial Environments* has laid the ground work for what constitutes the postcolonial environment in its totality, and has contributed to shaping the theoretical approach taken throughout the dissertation.

Chapters: Land, Animal, Water, City

The chapters in this thesis are arranged thematically to explore the pertinent issues related to women and nature. Divided into "Land", "Animal", "Water" and "City", the chapters show a distinct progression from early ecofeminism in the first chapter, to the incorporation of nonhuman animals in the second chapter, the expansion of materialist postcolonial ecofeminism to include 'new materialisms' (as espoused by Stacy Alaimo, Astrida Neimanis, Susan Hekman and Elizabeth Grosz, among others), in the third chapter, and finally the last chapter expands the territory of postcolonial ecofeminism into the built environment.

⁴⁷ See also: DeLoughrey, Elizabeth et al (eds). *Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities: Postcolonial Approaches*. New York; London: Routledge, 2015.

In the first chapter, “Land”, Kamala Markandaya’s *Nectar in a Sieve* is paired with Sohaila Abdulali’s *The Madwoman of Jogare* to touch on the primacy of land and soil, and urban development. This chapter explores the relationship of women with the land and the costs of development when agrarian communities are deprived of land that sustains them. The chapter argues that in both the novels, the female protagonists’ identity crises are resolved through the ambivalence of these women towards nature and spaces—rural and urban environment, human nature and social customs—all of which are indicative of the postcolonial environmental condition that the characters engage in to survive materially and triumph. Although both the novels have a gap of forty-four years between them, this gap is elapsed by the specific currency of the themes and issues that Markandaya raises in her novel—industrialization, development, displacement and land ownership. These issues are retained and resonated in Abdulali’s novel. Nature’s unpredictability and propensity to destroy is portrayed in these novels, thus disarticulating a romanticized view of nature/environment, especially in the rural countryside. Markandaya’s novel illustrates early ecofeminism’s concerns about women-centric identification with nature, while trying to accommodate more complex ways of relating to the land and environment.

In the second chapter, “Animal”, Anita Desai’s *Cry, the Peacock* and *Fire on the Mountain* are discussed to explore the connections between violence, nature, animals and women. This chapter argues that the ‘other’, in the form of women and animals, are centred in both the novels although both women and animals are seemingly removed and distanced from society. The woman becomes the mediator through which animals can be read. In turn, the identity politics and relationships between men and women are mediated through the figure of the animal. I show in this

chapter that the position of ambivalence is important when discussing the protagonists in both the stories. Within the culture/nature binary, these women belong neither to the cultural sphere nor the natural sphere. They straddle the binary in-between, thus showing their ambivalence to both the culture/nature constructs. There is no romantic or celebratory linking of the woman to nature or animals that puts them in inferiorized positions. Within this framework, the question of violence—towards both women and animals—is key. Not only is the culture/nature binary disarticulated, the human/animal binary is troubled too. Several critics have remarked on Desai's use of imagery and symbols involving the natural world and animals, but the interest in her novels has never been ecological. This chapter tries to incorporate Desai's writings into the larger corpus of ecofeminist writing, while realizing that Desai's works predate as well as anticipate much of the contemporary concerns in ecofeminism on the connections between women and animals. Desai's novels provide an opportunity to re-think some of the postcolonial issues espoused in the fiction of male writers through a gendered perspective.

Chapter Three, "Water", will look at Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and, briefly, her essay "The Greater Common Good". These texts examine the trope of the Narmada River, and the Meenachal River in Roy's novel, in relation to women, tribals and the notion of development. This chapter shows how women writers consciously subvert socio-political inequalities to imbue women with social agency through the figure of water. Women then are not portrayed simply as victims in patriarchal modes of thought. Both the authors consciously subvert and re-negotiate traditional political and economic understandings of power that have been historically reproduced. They allow for an alternative social agency to emerge through the relation of women and water,

more specifically through the *bodily registers* of women and water. Bodies and desire, through the figure of water, are then strongly politicized by both authors. Stacy Alaimo's figuration of 'transcorporeality' and Astrida Neimanis's figuration of 'bodies of water' form an important crux of the analysis of the two novels. This chapter incorporates an interdisciplinary approach, where scholarship from the social sciences, anthropology, hydrogeography, etc critically intersects, informs and complements that of literature, literary discourse and analysis.

The fourth chapter, "City", delves into Usha K.R.'s *Monkey-Man* and Anuradha Roy's *An Atlas of Impossible Longing*. This chapter explores issues of urban ecofeminism, along with uneven development, urban poverty, and environmental justice. I argue in this chapter that the city is shown by both authors to break down the culture/nature binary, while at the same time the city is portrayed as a double-edged sword. The women in the novels are shown to be related differently to the city, with some women as 'of the city' and the others as 'not of the city'—certain female characters long for the city as their sanity depends on being in the city, while other female characters find themselves lost in the city, and they long for places out of the built-up areas. Women in the city become a focal point in this chapter, highlighting that materialist postcolonial ecofeminism is not just static or confined to wilderness or rural landscapes. Traditionally, urban areas, cities and built-up environments are not considered as nature. Thus, the shift to the urban sphere disturbs the woman-nature link by breaking down the nature/non-nature binary at the same time.

While the common thread linking all the chapters is the disruption of the culture/nature dualism, each chapter, with its own argument, also contributes to a deeper understanding of how materialist postcolonial ecofeminism as a theoretical

tool can be developed. The thematic progression of the chapters from the land to the city shows the ways in which materialist postcolonial ecofeminism can also incorporate nonhuman others such as technological networks and machines. This is especially seen in the chapter on cities.

Conclusion

In summary, by using materialist postcolonial ecofeminism as an analytical framework and contributing rhetoric throughout this dissertation, I have argued that women's relationship to the environment is ambivalent. Ambivalence here is taken to mean the possibility that women might relate to culture/nature in both positive and negative ways *simultaneously*. This disputes the dualism of culture/nature, and yet straddles the grey area between the two binaries. Such a stance is particularly highlighted by women writing Indian fiction in English. A complex relationship exists between women and the environment, where aspects such as power, gender and caste discrimination and the larger sphere of politics and neo-colonialism have to be taken into account. Tracing the women-led lineage of environmental activism in India is an important exercise to incorporate into the analysis of the texts, especially when the writer doubles up as an activist, as seen in the figure of Arundhati Roy.

The disruption and transformation of the static dualism of culture/nature into a more dynamic, dialectical and inclusive relationship between the two sides of the binary is pivotal to gender inclusiveness in terms of women's material position as citizens and valuing women's (care) work which 'naturally' links women to caring for the earth. The culture/nature dualism, one amongst many such operational dualisms in theory as well as lived reality, does not recognize the female citizen as occupying multiple positions. Concepts of women and the land register anxiety over issues such as ownership (especially when majority of the women till the land), resources and

various meanings the land holds for women. Land also symbolises the rural and urban environmental divide experienced by women, and is thus also linked to the ideas of spaces, places, identities and power, all of which have to be examined in a gendered dimension. Urban spaces and the city involve myriad implications for women as urban inhabitants of the environment and their right to that environment and the city.

It has been important to trace the lineages of ecofeminism to contextualise the development of materialist postcolonial ecofeminism as a theoretical tool that is used to analyse the texts in this thesis. In combining the two strands of materialist ecofeminism—socialist/materialist ecofeminism and ‘new materialisms’—materialist postcolonial ecofeminism challenges the dominant modes of thinking that reinforce certain oppressions, exploitations, hierarchies and inequalities under capitalist patriarchy, development and globalization. This study is an intervention into a field in which women’s writing has not been taken seriously, and Indian women’s fiction resists and intervenes in dominant models of discourse and lived experience.

Chapter One

Land

Why is it that the dispossession and eviction of millions of women from land which they owned and worked is not seen as a feminist problem?—Arundhati Roy, “Capitalism: A Ghost Story” (Web Source).

Introduction

This chapter will analyse and discuss two novels: Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) and Sohaila Abdulali's *The Madwoman of Jogare* (1998). My analysis will show that in both the novels, the female protagonists' identity crises are resolved through the ambivalence of these women towards nature and spaces. This can be in the realm of the rural and urban environment, human nature and social customs, all of which are indicative of the postcolonial environmental condition that the characters engage in to survive materially and triumph. The ambivalence experienced by the women arises due to the rupture of the culture/nature binary, positing the women in-between the binary, where there is no 'natural' link of the women to nature. Their identity crisis constitutes of the decision whether to remain on or leave their land, and their decisions further illustrate their ambivalence since they refuse to be linked to the land in any essentialized manner. The crisis of identity of the women are mediated through the land—metaphorically and literally—in both novels.

The choice to pair these two novels together, in this chapter, is for two main reasons. Firstly, the land as a physical and geographical entity features predominantly in the lives of the women in the novels and the decisions they make regarding staying or leaving the land, or their land accepting or rejecting them. Secondly, both the novels deal with the tensions between the idyllic village life and the encroachment of industrialization on the land as well as its occupants. Markandaya and Abdulali, in dealing with these tensions, have successfully teased out and critically presented, through their female characters, other related social problems that are intertwined with

the issues of land ownership and the gendered dimensions of globalization and capitalism. Although both the novels have a gap of forty-four years between them, this gap is elapsed by the specific currency of the themes and issues that Markandaya raises in her novel. These issues are retained and resonated in Abdulali's novel.

Markandaya's novel, written in 1954, espouses a realistic writing style that shows the currency of the political issues and discourse of her time. Written not too long after India's independence from British rule, there is a political commitment to the land in the Gandhian discourse of its time. Day-to-day village life and its people are seen as authentic, and Markandaya presents such happenings in her novel in a detailed and ornate style. Her simple and lyrical language in the novel is a ruse for something darker, where although the village people are seen as authentic, she simultaneously highlights the reality to be found in the harsh actuality of the people's poverty in the village.

The jump to Abdulali's novel encompasses forty-four years in its wake. In those forty-four years, there is a change in the outlook of India's development. From a Gandhian discourse in the immediate post-independence years, there is then a shift to a Nehruvian discourse emphasizing on industrial development. The Gandhian discourse typically valorized non-violence (towards humans and nonhumans) and had a romanticized outlook on the village life and community, and the peasant:

...an assumption that the real India is in its over half a million villages; a focus on the poorest strata; a conviction that change must be nonviolent; a certain distrust of technology balanced by a concern for human relations...(Hopkins, 207)¹

In contrast, a Nehruvian discourse emphasized "state-planned economic growth, which in the then-prevailing circumstances, he found to be the only way for ending

¹ See: Nicholas S. Hopkins, "Gandhi and the Discourse of Rural Development in Independent India", *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 18: 1998, 205-236.

mass poverty and suffering in India” (Singh, 244).² By the 1990’s, economic liberalization was taking place in India, laying down the foundation for India as one of the fastest growing economies in the world. From a socialist past, India surged ahead with economic liberalization in 1991, with the goal of making India’s market economy more service-oriented and an economic climate friendly to foreign and private investments. However, the repercussions of such development included increased poverty, social inequality, and till date, it has not been an inclusive economic growth strategy. Economic inequality has deepened in India over the years, where consumption growth is generated among the wealthy and the poorest sections of the society remain entrenched in their poverty. Abdulali’s novel fleshes out these issues, where echoes of Markandaya’s novel still remain. Issues regarding who owns the land, who has access to it, who is included or excluded from the land, are issues that still retain currency from Markandaya’s to Abdulali’s novel.

Kamala Markandaya and *Nectar in a Sieve*

Nectar in a Sieve is the first novel written by Kamala Markandaya.³ She started writing novels just after India’s independence from the British rule in the year 1947. *Nectar in a Sieve*, influenced by this event, portrays some of the problems encountered by the Indian people as they dealt with the changing times. The socio-economic and political milieu of that era is characterized by poverty, hunger and starvation, especially due to communal and political disturbances in the aftermath of the partition of India and Pakistan. She presents the impact of industrialisation “from

² See: Kuldip Singh, “Nehru’s Model of Economic Growth and Globalisation of the Indian Economy”, *South Asian Survey* 19 (2): 2012, 243-253.

³ Kamala Markandaya, along with Nayantara Sahgal (*Prison and Chocolate Cake*, 1954) and Attia Hossain, were the only few female writers in a group of mid-century Indians (writers writing fiction in the immediate aftermath of India’s independence) writing in English, a group that included Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao, and Khushwant Singh. Despite her success, Markandaya remained an intensely private writer who revealed little about her personal influences even up until her death in the year 2004.

the points of view of the peasants, members of the lower middle-class in the city, the tribal and other common people. ...[and] the economic threat of starvation which forces people to accept working conditions which they otherwise would not accept” (Rao and Menon, 15). Markandaya then uses fiction as her vehicle and medium to communicate her vision of life during the uncertain political climate which forms the basis of the setting in *Nectar in a Sieve*.

Markandaya’s novels, including *Nectar in a Sieve*, are broadly termed by critics as being realist in genre. They aim to “create the impression of authenticity and objectivity in their portrayal of particular social environments” (Jackson, *Feminism and Indian Women’s Writing*, 148). The narrative techniques that Markandaya uses in her novels are geared towards exposing social injustice in India (Jackson, *Feminism and Indian Women’s Writing*, 148), thus the use of the more specific term ‘social realism’ by a number of critics to describe Markandaya’s novels. According to A.V Krishna Rao and Madhavi Menon, social realism is defined as the “awareness of the social forces that surround the individual, their power to influence lives of men and women for better or for worse—and the overall interaction of the individual and society” (125). Within this genre of social realism, Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve* is posited as an Indian peasant everywoman because Markandaya never mentions a specific time or place in the novel, which gives the story a semblance of universality.⁴ It is mainly through Rukmani’s story that Markandaya explores social concerns about “economic hardship in India and the impact of industrialisation [and of nature] on the lives of the rural peasantry” (Jackson, *Feminism and Indian Women’s Writing*, 149). Indira Ganesan remarks in the introduction to the novel that “[b]y giving voice to

⁴ Margaret P. Joseph does mention in her book (*Kamala Markandaya*. New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1980.) that Markandaya’s choice of nouns in the novel indicates that perhaps the setting could be anywhere in South India (Jackson, 149). However, the exact location (village, town), time and year is never alluded to in the novel.

Rukmani, Markandaya gives us a woman who affects us deeply through not only the burden of rural life, but also the burden of being a woman” (xii).

Rukmani’s story is presented in a linear chronological narrative, narrated in the first person by Rukmani herself as an elderly peasant woman, as she reminisces about her life so far. The novel starts with a nostalgic reminiscence in the first paragraph. By the fifth paragraph in the novel, the reader is taken back in time to her childhood and it is from then on that the narrative moves forward in a straight chronological order, ultimately ending at the point where it began.

Within this linear chronological narrative, the narrative of female self-discovery within the Indian context unfolds. According to Elizabeth Jackson, the female self-discovery narrative “tends to centre around a married woman, usually a mother, re-assessing her life and her relationships” (*Feminism and Contemporary Indian Women’s Writing*, 146). It is in this narrativisation of female self-discovery that the concept of identity, specifically the questions and crises of Rukmani’s identity, is brought to the fore. Jasbir Jain elucidates that identity or selfhood “has to work through the body” (quoted in Jackson, 146). In light of this quote, in *Nectar in a Sieve*, Rukmani’s early identity as child-bride, wife, a young woman and mother echoes cultural ecofeminism’s claims that her closeness with the land is intimately linked to her body and spirituality. However, Rukmani’s identity is mediated through *both* her labour and love of the land. Her interaction with the land integrates both production and reproduction, thereby giving it a materialist dimension. This is especially seen through the experience of an identity crisis when she is evicted from her land thus making her neither of the land nor of the city. Rukmani resolves this crisis of identity by ultimately refusing to be passively and fatalistically associated with the land, thereby refuting the claim that as a third-world peasant woman she is

best suited for the care of the land. This then problematizes her relationship with nature as she refuses to be associated with the land in any (biologically) essentialized manner, thereby disrupting the culture/nature binary. The resolution of her identity crisis is mediated through her interactions with the British doctor Kennington (or Kenny). It is also important to analyse the relationship of the other women in the novel with nature. Rukmani only presents one aspect of the broader woman-land-nature equation.

Gardening

Although the novel predates the emergence of (cultural) ecofeminism as an institutionalized theoretical field, several critics who have written about *Nectar in a Sieve* view Rukmani's connection with the land and nature through the prism of cultural ecofeminism. For example, Rukmani says that

[w]hen the sun shines on you and the fields are green and beautiful to the eye, and your husband sees beauty in you which no one has seen before, and you have a good store of grain laid away for hard times, a roof over you and a sweet stirring in your body, what more can a woman ask for? (Markandaya, 8)

This oft-quoted passage from the novel is seen to romanticize the relationship that Rukmani has with her land and to nature. The quote highlights that for a peasant woman, happiness consists of bare necessities at the elemental level made up largely of food, clothes, shelter and the idyllic beauty of the countryside (Srivastava, 8). Nature, the sun and the beauty of the green fields appear as Rukmani's source of well-being. Two other themes emerge from the quote above: the symbolism of grains/seeds and women's sexuality.

Grains and seeds represent the overriding symbol for life itself in *Nectar in a Sieve*. When Rukmani tends to her garden and plants pumpkin seeds, she marvels at the life concealed within each of the seeds she sows, thinking that

their growth to me was constant wonder—from the time the seed split and the first green shoots broke through, to the time when the young buds and fruit began to form. ...it seemed to me that...each of the dry, hard pellets I held in my palm had within it the very secret of life itself, curled tightly within, under leaf after protective leaf for safekeeping, fragile, vanishing with the first touch or sight. With each tender seedling that unfurled its small green leaf to my eager gaze, my excitement would rise and mount; winged, wondrous. (Markandaya, 13)

According to Beth Zeleny, “Markandaya implicitly connects woman and landscape through her recurring use of seed imagery. ...As giver and nurturer and endurer of life, woman participates in the cycle of life as seed, then seedling, which ultimately becomes part of the soil that supports future seed” (29). Here, the biological role of procreation (reproduction) is intimately linked to Rukmani, land and seeds. Procreation is seen to be a critical role for a woman in Rukmani’s society. A woman who fails to conceive early in her marriage may be renounced by her husband, as Ira is later on in the novel. Here, the claim that women are closer to nature rests on the premise of women bringing forth life from their bodies, undergoing the pleasures and pains of pregnancy, childbirth and nursing. In a social sense, childrearing and domestic caretaking have kept women close to the hearth and thus closer to nature. Cultural ecofeminists celebrate the relationship between women and nature by reviving ancient pre-patriarchal rituals centred on goddess worship, the moon and linking this to the female reproductive system.⁵

Rukmani’s work in her garden is closely associated with her coming-of-age, and thus linked to her awareness of sexuality. Rukmani finds that “[t]he sowing of the

⁵ For more on cultural ecofeminism, see: Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989); Judith Plant (ed), *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism* (Philadelphia; Santa Cruz: New Society Publishers, 1989); Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein (eds), *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990); Carolyn Merchant, *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World* (New York; London: Routledge, 1992); Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London; New York: Routledge, 1993); Karen J. Warren, “Feminist Theory: Ecofeminist and Cultural Feminist”. *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioural Sciences* <www.sciencedirect.com>. See also: “Introduction” in this thesis.

seed disciplines the body and the sprouting of the seed uplifts the spirit” (Markandaya, 102), linking her with the land through her body and labour. When the pumpkins started to form, Rukmani describes them as such:

fattening on soil and sun and water, swelled daily larger and larger and ripened to yellow and red, until at last they were ready to eat, and I cut one and took it in. When Nathan saw it he was full of admiration, and made much of this one fruit—he who was used to harvesting a field at a time.

“One would have thought you had never seen a pumpkin before” I said, though pleased with him and myself, keeping my eyes down.

“Not from our land”, said Nathan. “Therefore it is precious, and you, Ruku, are indeed a clever woman”.

I tried not to show my pride. I tried to be offhand. I put the pumpkin away. But *pleasure* was making my pulse beat; the blood, unbidden, came hot and surging to my face. (Markandaya, 10, my emphasis)

According to Dana C. Mount, Rukmani’s “first planting of pumpkins is a particularly moving process for her...[and] what is most striking is not the mere satisfaction or pride she feels, but the *pleasure* that the growth provokes in her” (3, original emphasis). Markandaya’s book is remarkable for its time precisely because of the frank overtones of sexuality attributed to Rukmani. Later on in the novel, after celebrating the Diwali festival, Rukmani recalls her “senses opening like a flower to [Nathan’s] urgency” (Markandaya, 57), a description of Rukmani’s sexual desire which echoes her earlier description of the seedling “that unfurled its small green leaf to [her] eager gaze, [and her] excitement would rise and mount; winged, wondrous” (Markandaya, 13). The text here uses nature as a metaphor to describe Rukmani’s sexual maturation as well as sexual desire. By overtly linking Rukmani’s body to the land, the text here hearkens back to cultural ecofeminism’s naturalization of woman’s pleasure and connectedness to the earth.

At this point, however, it becomes important to move away from the images of a romanticized and naturalized image of the third-world peasant woman reflected in

the character of Rukmani. Although Rukmani is initially projected to be unproblematically linked to the land, Markandaya subtly interweaves a larger socio-political critique that characterises the postcolonial environment within the few descriptive paragraphs discussed above. Beneath Markandaya's use of a simple and lyrical language, there is a layer of ambivalence that is registered in terms of the socio-political milieu and eventually her relationship to the land.

Rukmani reminisces that she was “young and fanciful” (Markandaya, 13) when she used to tend to her garden. Before that, when recounting her early days of marriage, she recalls that she preferred going to her husband “matured in mind as well as in body, not as a pained and awkward child as I did on that first night” (Markandaya, 4). It is revealed to the readers early on that Rukmani gets married to Nathan at the tender age of twelve. Markandaya, in alluding to these details, deftly interweaves a critique of child marriage and dowry into her narrative. Rukmani gets married to a landless and poor farmer because “four dowries is too much for a man to bear” (Markandaya, 4). Rukmani's father is no longer of consequence as a headman of the village. The power structure is now bequeathed to the collector, due to the centralization of the government, an indication that Rukmani and her village are caught between “the residual power of the ancient world and newly acquired world which has yet to achieve full shape” (Sinha, 64). A similar situation prevails when Rukmani's daughter, Ira, gets married at the age of fourteen and Rukmani and Nathan have to arrange for dowry to secure Ira's alliance. Markandaya's covert social critique of child marriage and the dowry system can be viewed through a critical lens intending to show how tradition combined with poverty oppresses women more than men (Jackson, 12).

Markandaya also raises the issue of literacy for girls in India in the uncertain political climate after independence through Rukmani. She was taught by her father to read and write, a practice that her mother strictly opposes: ““what use”, my mother said, “that a girl should be learned!”” (Markandaya, 12). She teaches her children in future to read and write as well, and says of Nathan that “it could not have been easy for him to see his wife more learned than he himself was, for Nathan could not even write his name; yet not once did he assert his rights and forbid me my pleasure, *as lesser men might have done*” (Markandaya, 13, my emphasis), indicating that an educated wife was generally frowned upon in a society that values women for giving birth to “lusty sons and [having] a husband to look after” (Markandaya, 12). The intentions of Markandaya’s critique become clear later on as the novel progresses when she shows that illiteracy makes people believe in superstitions, thus making them gullible and credulous, and therefore susceptible to exploitation.

However, despite Rukmani being a learned woman, she is not free from the prejudice against her girl-child. Her first reaction at the sight of her daughter is “I turned away and, despite myself, the tears came, tears of weakness and disappointment; for what woman wants a girl for her first-born?” (Markandaya, 15). This is more in line with the view of her husband. Rukmani’s daughter, and later on Rukmani’s sons, are intrinsically linked to the land. While Nathan had “wanted a son to continue his line and walk beside him on the land” (Markandaya, 16), his sons, capable and healthy, prove to be of little use. Rukmani’s sons Arjun and Thambi leave their paternal profession of tilling the land for better financial prospects and start working at the tannery and eventually they leave the country for good. Murugan leaves the land and goes to the city to work as a servant, and Raja is killed by the tannery officials when he is caught stealing a calf-skin. Their rationale for not tilling

the land is explained by Thambi to Nathan that “if it were your land, or mine, I would work with you gladly. But what profit to labour for another and get so little in return? Far better to turn away from such injustice” (Markandaya, 52). Markandaya carefully merges the land and sons together to show that both Rukmani and Nathan had hoped too much from them—too much from the land and too much from their sons—and both disappoint them bitterly. Nathan and Rukmani are still unable to lead a happy life even after they have begotten sons. Ironically, it is Ira, the daughter who begets disappointment at her birth, who comes to her parents and family’s aid. Irawaddy—the significance of her name is even more pronounced here as she is named after the river Irawaddy—becomes Rukmani’s sustenance when the family is starving, and again at the end of the novel when Rukmani is left husbandless and landless.

Hence, we see that although Rukmani alters the landscape through her gardening in beneficial ways and is positively linked to the land and her immediate environment, this romanticized view is given another materialist angle and shade of ambivalence. Through Rukmani, a critique of the social and cultural ‘landscape’ of the day is also offered to the readers. A feminist perspective is woven here into a larger critique of poverty and emasculation. A further dimension of this is taken up in the novel through Rukmani’s relationship with the tannery.

Tannery

The arrival of the tannery in Rukmani’s village marks a period of transition for her as well as the lives of many of the other villagers.⁶ It is a nod towards industrialisation and urbanisation. With the introduction of the tannery, “the novel also highlights the clash between the Gandhian and Nehruvian models of development that India has to choose from” (Chadha, 9), where India’s new prime

⁶ Markandaya never mentions in her novel whether Rukmini and her family are Dalits. Her silence about caste issues is significant since it is usually the Dalits/untouchables who work in the tannery. Also, her glossing over of caste issues also reflects her biases as a middle-class writer.

minister in the 1950's, Jawaharlal Nehru, strongly believed in economic planning. Gandhi's beliefs about a violent and repressive urbanised and industrialised society that destroyed human souls and the beauty of nature were slowly becoming outmoded.

Rukmani is shown throughout the novel to be strongly opposed to the construction of the tannery and everything that it stands for. In a sombre mood, Rukmani says that "[s]omehow I had always felt that the tannery would eventually be our undoing" (Markandaya, 131), and we see Rukmani's foreboding to be true to a certain extent.

The first immediate effect of the tannery is felt on the natural environment of the village. Rukmani describes that "the birds have forgotten to sing...[and ultimately the] birds came no more, for the tannery lay close" (Markandaya, 69), and that the "slow, calm beauty of [the] village [had wilted] in the blast from town" (Markandaya, 62). Here, it becomes easy to read Rukmani's sentimentalized laments against the destruction of nature in light of Vandana Shiva's pronouncements of maldevelopment. Shiva expresses a particularly negative and anti-developmental view of the application of scientific technology from the West (in this context, it is the building of the tannery in the rural village in India) and the resultant exploitation of nature and its processes. In advocating the concept of *Prakriti* (refer to "Introduction"), Shiva "sees the promise of ecological stewardship in the daily practices of women like Rukmani" (Mount, 5), and extends this to the potential of rural women in the Third World or the global South to act as caretakers of the land. Such a stance, apart from being essentialist in nature, also ignores the women's "connection to the sexual division of labour and the patriarchal ideologies that legitimize these relations" (Nanda, 379). Rukmani's work, in her garden, on the farm

and at home, is unpaid labour and “without independent rights of ownership of land, access to credit and new technologies, and equal, legally enforced wages for their labour, peasant women in the Third World face a bleak future” (Nanda, 378). Rural peasant women’s work, such as Rukmani’s, becomes economically and socially invisible when they are rendered one with nature. They are then considered as not making a valuable contribution to the state and economy.

Furthermore, a complete denial of modernisation and industrialisation (in the form of the tannery in the novel) ignores the enthusiastic and welcoming responses of some of the rural women, for example that of Kunthi, Janaki and Kali. These women’s responses stand in direct contrast to the notion of being one with nature and the land. Kunthi declares to Rukmani that she is not a “senseless peasant [woman and] there is no earth in [her] breeding” (Markandaya, 46). Kunthi is excited about the change in the form of “shops and tea stalls, and even a bioscope” (Markandaya, 29) that will come in the village with the tannery. Janaki welcomes the tannery as a source of employment for her sons “for the land could not take them all” (Markandaya, 29), such a response despite the fact that her husband’s shop has been forced to close down due to the high shop rent that they cannot afford to pay. Kali “had always been fond of an audience for her stories” (Markandaya, 29), and these three women, representative of the rural women in general who are eager to benefit from the changes that progress and modernization bring with them, “threw the past away with both hands that they might be readier to grasp the present” (Markandaya, 29). The responses of these women highlight the potential of development and capitalist tendency to have a productive transformation “which can lift the mass of labourers and peasants out of the morass of economic deprivation and *social degradation*” (Patnaik, 35, my emphasis) of hunger and poverty. Kali’s response later on in the

novel elucidates this point clearly. The setting up of the tannery brings with it officials from different races and classes, such as the Muslims. The class privilege of the Muslim women is seen in the “jewelled rings” (Markandaya, 48) they wear, “any of which could have fed the [peasants] for a year” (Markandaya, 48). Kali says of the Muslim women that “[i]t is an easy life, with no worry of the next meal and plenty always at hand. I would gladly wear a bourka and walk veiled for the rest of my life if *I, too, could be sure of such things.* (Markandaya, 48, my emphasis), indicating her yearning for security of food and to be free from the degradation of hunger. Rukmani and Kali’s exchange here about the Muslim women illuminates that no one should have to endure the brutalising effects of extreme poverty such that people are constantly worrying about not having enough to eat just to survive another day.

The second negative effect of the establishment of the tannery in the village that is felt by Rukmani is that the prices of goods in the local marketplace rise substantially, increasing the gaps between different classes of people—the landowners, moneylenders and the peasants. Moneylenders such as Biswas seize greater control of the trade of buying and selling vegetables and other goods from the peasants, and although Rukmani does eventually sell her goods to him instead of Old Granny, she gains little in return. As Rukmani points out, “we no longer had milk in the house...curds and butter were beyond our means except for rare occasions...[and] no sugar or dhal or ghee have we tasted since they came” (Markandaya, 23-28). The inflation of the bazaar prices exacerbates the condition of poverty and hunger for people such as Rukmani, and other related social evils start taking root. The tannery is linked to the commodification of women’s bodies as it gives rise to activities such as prostitution. Ira’s movements as a child have to be restricted, depriving her of the free space of the playground where the bazaar had been raised, and ultimately she resorts

to prostitution to feed her family and to save her brother Kuti from dying of starvation. Ira's decision to take up prostitution stems from the changes happening "under the impact of modernity and industrialism [where] she thinks the preservation of life more pious than the observations of so-called moral values which fail to feed her family" (Razia, Web source). Ira's motivation to do so is contrasted against Kunthi's, whose motivation to take up prostitution is based on selfish interests, thus highlighting the inculcation of individualism that comes along with the erosion of "the time honoured peasant-code...with no substitute" (Chadha, 17). However, the novel does complicate this by showing that both are essentially acts of defiance against prevailing socio-economic conditions combined with unfair existential conditions. The fact that both women even have to resort to prostitution just to ensure their own and their families' survival is shown by Markandaya to be something that ideally should be unacceptable. They should not need to resort to prostitution just to eke out a living so that no one goes hungry.

The tannery does, however, open up new opportunities for alternative employment and occupation. While Nathan and Rukmani do not find it honourable that their sons, Arjun and Thambi, are working in the tannery, the family income is augmented by their sons' income. Rukmani herself is forced to come to terms with the fact that

With their money we began once again to live well. In the granary, unused for so long, I stored away half a bag of rice, two measures of dhal and nearly a pound of chillies. Hitherto, almost all we grew had been sold to pay rent of the land; now we were enabled to keep some of our produce. (Markandaya, 53-54)

Similarly, Janaki's sons are employed in the tannery and she is shown to be faring much better than Rukmani as the novel progresses. Therefore, while it is shown in the

novel that industrialization is not without its evils, it still presents some form of upliftment of the rural poor.

Rukmani and Nathan are ultimately shown to be victims of two major forces, the landowners (or the *zamindari* system), and the vagaries of nature.⁷ Rukmani and Nathan are landless peasants, and with the establishment of the tannery, the landowner Sivaji sells the land that Rukmani and Nathan till, to the tannery owners. With economic development, most of the economic benefits went to the large landowners and the elite upper class, as seen in the figures of the landowner Sivaji and the moneylender Biswas in the novel. Rukmani, in a moving passage, tries to make sense of the loss of her land:

Tannery or not, the land might have been taken from us. It had never belonged to us, we had never prospered to the extent where we could buy, and Nathan, himself the son of a landless man, had inherited nothing. ... The hut with all its memories was to be taken from us, for it stood on land that belonged to another. And the land itself by which we lived. It is a cruel thing, I thought. They do not know what they do to us. (Markandaya, 132)

This quote registers Rukmani's subjectivity and consciousness—these are complex thoughts of a peasant woman. Rukmani's sophisticated thoughts come from her experience of the land and it is a pathos born of the land. Several critics have remarked that Rukmani's literacy is unusual for her time and for a woman in her position—a peasant woman who has such rich interiority and subjectivity.⁸

⁷ The Land Reform Act or Zamindari Abolition Act took place just after Indian independence. However, the most successful attempts at land reform happened in the states of West Bengal and Kerala (See: P. S. Appu, *Land Reforms in India* [New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1996]). Since Markandaya does not mention the specific place/setting of her novel, we do not know to what extent Rukmini and her family, or others in her village, were affected by these reforms. Markandaya makes it a point to show that despite these land reforms in place after independence, many peasants and farmers still suffered landlessness due to not owning the land they tilled in the first place.

⁸ See: A.V Krishna Rao and Madhavi Menon, *Kamala Markandaya: A Critical Study of Her Novels 1954-1982* (New Delhi: B.R Publishing Corporation, 1997); A. A. Sinha, *The Novels of Kamala Markandaya and Arun Joshi* (Jalandhar, Punjab: ABS Publications, 1998); Ramesh K. Srivastava, *The Novels of Kamala Markandaya: A Critical Study* (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 1998); Raghukul Tilak, *Kamala Markandaya: Nectar in a Sieve* (New Delhi: Rama Brothers, 2008).

Markandaya gives Rukmani enough depth and foresight to assure the readers that she is not ignorant. It is here that Rukmani's crisis of identity fully takes place when her land is taken away from her and she is forced to leave her home with Nathan. According to Nitya Rao, "land is a key element in the identities of indigenous people. Many of their struggles for recognition begin with land, which takes multiple meanings" (Rao, 5). The act of rejection that the land brings for Rukmani results in what Stephen Chan calls the "condition of abjection" (quoted in Graham, 97). Chan defines this condition of abjection as "psychosocial as well as physical displacement: the alienation—the *expulsion*, even—of individuals and families from what constitutes *home* for them. Often this idea of home bears a direct relation to 'the land'" (quoted in Graham, 97, original emphasis). For Rukmani, there is some chance of her retaining her identity while she had her land, encapsulated by the quote "while there was land there was hope" (Markandaya, 132). For rural peasant women such as Rukmani, the land offers the most opportunity for self-sufficiency although it does not absolutely guarantee it (Mount, 8). As Bina Agarwal elucidates, "[f]or many, [land] provides a sense of identity and rootedness. It is an asset that has a permanence that few other assets possess...their families alone could not guarantee them economic security. What they needed were fields of their own" (Agarwal, *SEEDS*, 2). This point by Agarwal retains its poignancy most when Rukmani becomes husbandless (Nathan dies in the city) and she has no form of food or economic security. The implication of this is that if women are in-charge of the means of production through owning the land, it represents the opportunity for self-determination which is intrinsically tied to one's notion of identity. For Rukmani now, in the condition of abjection through her

displacement/rejection from her land and home, there is no such hope. Such a situation finds its culmination in the figure of Old Granny, who dies penniless and a destitute on the streets in the village.

It is here then that the text is shown to strongly “resist the pastoral” (Mount, 6). The expulsion of Rukmani from the land, or the land rejecting her, and her resultant identity crisis brings her and the readers face-to-face with another reality, that “the calamities of the land belong to it alone, born of wind and rain and weather” (Markandaya, 132). The text exposes the destructive and dark capacity of nature itself, bringing to light the downsides of country life. The tannery, emblematic of development and capitalism, is not to be solely blamed for Rukmani’s crisis. Markandaya, as a writer, aestheticizes even the unpalatable storms and droughts to reveal the constructedness of nature in her novel, thus defying the idea that “the rural countryside is a place of refuge” (Mount, 7). The indifference of nature is shown when six men were killed by lightning due to a ravaging storm in the beginning of the novel and when Kuti dies due to starvation from a drought “with a bland indifference that mocked [Rukmani’s] loss” (Markandaya, 101). Such an exposition of nature, coupled with overlordism, politicizes the postcolonial environment to bring forth the material reality of living on the land: it makes starkly visible the hitherto invisibilized wretchedness of poverty and the working conditions of women like Rukmani—who have no food or land security, and *yet* are romantically linked to the land by appropriating their care-work. Therefore, while the environment “cannot be treated without attention to violence, warfare, government corruption, and transnational greed” (D. Murphy, quoted in Mount, 7), the woman-land-nature equation is nonetheless troubled and shown to be thrown into question when the land itself rejects Rukmani and nature is shown to be merciless and indifferent to her needs. It is

significant that after the storm and the drought, when everything is destroyed, the lasting image is that of the tannery: “the tannery stood, its bricks and cement had held it together despite the raging winds” (Markandaya, 41). Markandaya’s exhortation for development is seen here, in the bricks and cement that can withstand the natural calamities better than the peasants’ thatched huts and mud walls, and provide better lives for the peasants so that they can at least overcome some of the debasements they are subjected to in their daily lives.

Negotiating tradition and modernity: Rukmani and Dr. Kenny

Rukmani ultimately resolves her crisis of identity through negotiating the traditional and modern aspects of her life. This is seen through her interactions with the British doctor, Kenny. Several critics focus on Rukmani’s character as that of a typical Indian woman who is an upholder of tradition and values, and her ability to withstand so much suffering, earning her the title of “Mother of Sorrows” (Srivastava, 4). Rukmani also shows a keen dislike and mistrust of the rapid changes happening around her due to the onslaught of industrialisation and capitalism. However, her initial conservatism changes to negotiation through her conversations with Dr. Kenny, who represents “progressive enlightenment [and] the need for constructive programmes for rural reform and social service” (Chadha, 21). This is aptly encapsulated by Nathan’s philosophy to “[b]end like the grass, that you do not break” (Markandaya, 28).

When Rukmani is unable to bear sons—an indication of her infertility—she “placed even more faith in the charm [her] mother had given [her], wearing it constantly between [her] breasts” (Markandaya, 20). When her superstitions fail to yield any result—“nothing happened” (Markandaya, 20)—Rukmani seeks out Dr. Kenny for treatment of her infertility. She does the same for her daughter Ira.

Rukmani, however, does not tell her husband Nathan about her (and her daughter's) treatment from the British doctor. By concealing this bit of information from her husband, Rukmani is shown to "[exploit] gaps in the system; she is subverting what she understands to be the limiting patriarchal control over her life by taking charge of her body in accessing the medical services she needs to create the family she wants" (Mount, 13). Furthermore, it is also a way of undermining and standing up to Kenny's perception of her as an "ignorant fool" (Markandaya, 20).

However, Rukmani goes back to her superstitious ways of living and suffers calamity after calamity with passive endurance. During the drought, Rukmani "took a pumpkin and a few grains of rice to [her] Goddess, and [she] wept at her feet...but no rain came" (Markandaya, 73). When her son Raja dies at the hands of the tannery officials, she meekly says that she understands. When Kenny exhorts her to "demand—cry out for help—do something" (Markandaya, 43) and that "people will never learn" (Markandaya, 43), Rukmani does not understand and still does not learn. This refrain is repeated by her son Arjun when he and Thambi join the strike for higher wages at the tannery. Rukmani's nostalgia for the land does not let her understand that the "social structures of industrial production within which they function can be stifling and exploitative to the social structure of the agrarian production within which [Nathan and Rukmani] function" (Bhatnagar, *Kamala Markandaya: A Critical Spectrum*, 23). The younger generation resists this exploitation, but Rukmani still has to negotiate between the structures of blind tradition and Kenny's progressivism. When Ira starts earning money from prostitution and Kuti's health shows some improvement in the initial stages, Rukmani's path to negotiation starts. The realisation dawns on her that it was Ira's earnings that had been "responsible for the improvement in Kuti, not I, not my prayers" (Markandaya, 96).

Rukmani sharpens her social critique and starts becoming a more assertive person through her debate with Kenny about his personal life: “she grows from a dumbstruck child-wife terrified at putting herself in the hands of a foreigner, to the assertive woman whose native instincts and intelligence excite Kenny’s admiration” (Barbato, 11).

However, it is important to note here that Markandaya is not opposing tradition completely and neither is she showing the success of Western modernity to be superior. The negotiation does not happen in an unambiguous manner, for example, although Dr. Kenny manages to cure Ira’s infertility, it comes too late to restore Ira back to her husband and the child is born an albino.

The turning point for Rukmani comes when she is displaced from her land and leaves for the city with Nathan. Prior to the eviction, Kenny chastises Rukmani: “Do you never”, he said, “think of your future? While you still have your strength and can *plan*?” (Markandaya, 128, my emphasis). Rukmani replies that they are in God’s hands and she has no means to plan. However, Kenny’s advice about planning takes on a new resonance for Rukmani when the land itself rejects her and she has nowhere to go: “decide what we are to do for ourselves, *plan* as Kenny said for ourselves and our children. This present chaos is madness” (Markandaya, 131, my emphasis). Rukmani demonstrates her negotiation with modernity by implementing Kenny’s advice about planning in her city life. However, unbeknownst to Rukmani, this process of negotiation has already begun for her when she seeks out Kenny for treatment of her infertility, and she does so without telling Nathan. Rukmani approaches Kenny again for the treatment of her daughter, Ira’s, infertility without telling anyone in the family. She does not use the charms that her mother had given her, which failed to produce any result. Rukmani’s use of Kenny’s western medicine

for her and her daughter's treatments shows that she is already in the process of negotiating tradition and modernity in her life. This turns into a more concrete process when she implements Kenny's advice about planning while in the city.

The city initially disorients both Rukmani and Nathan. Rukmani feels sick and "dizzy" (Markandaya, 140) during her onward journey to the city, and once they reach the outskirts, they lose all sense of direction while trying to find Murugan's house. Once in the city, they are forced to compete with an exodus of rural immigrants who have moved to the city due to the changes from an agricultural to an industrial economy. Rukmani's final act of going back to her land is usually attributed to the alienation, moral degradation and uprootedness she feels in the city. However, it is my contention that the differences between village and city are blurred under the circumstances of industrialisation and modernisation. In the temple where Rukmani and Nathan seek shelter and food, we see the atmosphere there being similar to the one characterised in the village: one of hunger and fear. Rukmani has to ferociously compete with other homeless people for her share of food. Rukmani's belongings are stolen in the temple and she feels herself to be a victim of theft and deceit in God's house. However, a similar situation prevailed in the village when Nathan betrays her by having an extramarital affair with Kunthi (and having an offspring with her), and also when Kunthi steals rice from Rukmani's granary. If Rukmani feels no sense of kinship and community in the city, her own kin and community had also dispersed from the village, leaving her on her own. Therefore, just as the land (village) rejects Rukmani, the city also rejects her in a similar fashion. Rukmani's "condition of abjection" (Chan, quoted in Graham, 197) reaches its peak here where Rukmani is characterised as being, in James Graham's words, in a "country with land but no habitat" (Graham, 8). Although Graham states this in relation to South African fiction

in his book *Land and Nationalism in Fictions from Southern Africa*, his quote is nonetheless apt for Rukmani's situation and circumstances. Rukmani herself is aware of this reality: "we had left because we had nothing to live on, and if we went back it was only because there was nothing here either" (Markandaya, 175).

According to James Graham, "the rural peoples...are always already left behind in colonial modernity that speeds [them] into the future" (Graham, 34), and this also seems to be the initial critique Markandaya offers us of development and modernity. However, Rukmani's new-found ability to assess her experiences and to negotiate both the forces of tradition and modernity through the exercise of planning for the future, resists such a reading of the narrative. To earn money in order to survive on a daily basis in the city as well as to save, Rukmani's literacy comes in handy where she offers to write letters for people. Such a job, however, is riddled with gender biases and Rukmani does not fare too well in earning money by just writing letters. With the help of the street urchin Puli, who has leprosy, Rukmani and Nathan work in a quarry to break stones. The soul-killing toil in the quarry is highly dangerous and stressful because they have to be constantly alert for dynamite blasts. Nathan loses his hold completely when the strain proves too much for him, and he "progressively deteriorates in physical and mental strength...feels quite uprooted [and] can no longer survive" (Rao and Menon, 22). Rukmani proves to be stronger in spirit, and even after Nathan's pitiful death, Rukmani still plans to return back to her land, demonstrating her new-found resilience and asserting control over the conditions of her own life.

The way Markandaya represents Nathan's death through Rukmani is poetic and beautiful:

They laid my husband on the paved floor [of the temple] and I sank down beside him. ...I wiped him clean, took his head in my lap.

...Nathan's head kept twitching from side to side, he called to our sons and muttered words that I did not understand. The rays from the lantern fell on his wasted face, on the tight yellowed skin, on the lips split with fever, on his limbs which were like a child's. ...And so I laid my face on his and for a while his breath fell soft and light as a rose petal on my cheek, then he sighs as if in weariness and turned his face to me, and so his gentle spirit withdrew and the light went out in his eyes. (Markandaya, 184-185)

Markandaya's presentation of Nathan may be in a poetic form, but she also highlights his marginalised status. Nathan was injured and "lying by the side of the road where someone had carried him" (Markandaya, 182) to the temple. As a disenfranchised other in the city, no one bothers about him until someone takes pity on him and brings him to the temple. As a peasant farmer who does not know how to survive without his land and has no skills other than farming, he loses it completely in the city and dies disenfranchised. Markandaya highlights through Nathan and his death that, for a peasant, personal freedom is tied to a peasant's land and his rootedness in that land. She makes us question the righteousness of the economic system and unequal conditions that lead to such an abject surrender.

Rukmani's final act of adopting Puli is her way of keeping hope alive—she does not have land, and neither does she have her husband by her side anymore. Puli's adoption is also her way of reaching out to a wider community and establishing those connections that she nurtured back in her village once more. Her act acquires a larger significance because Rukmani adopts Puli with a *promise* (Barbato, 13) of curing his leprosy in the village hospital run by Kenny and her son Selvam. The very act of promising distils the actions of planning. Thus, when the novel starts with Rukmani reminiscing her life, the image is one which encapsulates both tradition and modernity: "In the distance [on the land]...a large building, spruce and white; not only has money built it but men's hopes and pity, as I know who have seen it grow brick by brick and year by year" (Markandaya, 3). The hospital—a symbol of

modernity—on the village land—a symbol of tradition. Puli's leprosy is cured in the building that is the epitome of tradition and modernity, and Rukmani's promise finds its fulfilment. Also, in the building of the hospital, we see the coming together of two cultures, the British (Dr. Kenny) and the Indian (Selvam) (Barbato, 13), and Markandaya seems to be pointing to the ability of the two cultures to successfully come together when they are able to incorporate the best of each other—the best of modernity and the best of tradition with all their complexities in between, where the marginalised and disenfranchised like the peasants have to be successfully co-opted into the process of economic restructuring.

Rukmani's resolution of her identity crisis comes in the wake of accepting the ambivalence towards nature and spaces—the rural village and the urban city, human nature and social customs—all of which are indicative of the postcolonial environmental condition that she engages in to survive materially and triumph. Her final act of returning to the land is testimony to the distillation and acceptance of this ambivalence in negotiating tradition and modernity: despite being rejected by both the land and the city, she still chooses to come back to the land which is starting to embody both aspects itself. Her return is then an *active* choice born of a complex process of reconciling her trust in the land, spirituality and the Gods, and man's ability to plan and assert control over his/her life. At this point, Rukmani refuses to be passively and fatalistically associated with the land, thereby refuting the claim that as a third-world peasant woman she is best suited for the care of the land, rupturing the culture/nature binary effectively. The novel, thus, resists a simplistic reading of a celebratory and romanticized return of the native who is one with the land. Also, it is worth noting that Rukmani's reliance on the land can and does cause untold suffering. Rukmani's poignant suffering does not redeem or nullify the tyranny of nature or

lessen its destructive effect in any way. The ambivalence of the land itself is registered in these sufferings, where the land as a basis of identity is also a platform for untold suffering, destructiveness and loss of identity.

Several critics have noted that Markandaya has a tendency to lapse the distance between the author and the narrator, and this can be seen in *Nectar in a Sieve* as well. Such a strategy allows Markandaya to present the peasant woman's point of view—Rukmani's point of view—directly, without someone speaking for her. Such a device also allows Markandaya to present the harsh realities of poverty, the relentless aspect of nature and land, and the resulting peasant's plight (both male and female) in her novel to make the reader aware that a peasant's life with its hardships are not to be romanticized. If Markandaya as an author is a product of her environment and culture during the immediate post-independence era in India, so is Rukmani, as a narrator, a woman and a peasant.

Sohaila Abdulali and *The Madwoman of Jogare*

Taking a leap of forty-four years, we now come to Sohaila Abdulali's novel, *The Madwoman of Jogare*, written in the year 1998. The period of the late nineties was characterized by rapid liberalization of the economy in India. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) formed the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) with other party members and became the first non-congress government, with Atal Bihari Vajpayee as the prime minister (Dunleavy, Diwakar, and Dunleavy, Web source). The main focus was on advocating a free-market economy, and the Pokhran Tests in 1998 marked an important milestone in India's attempt to join the nuclear countries of the world. India's move in testing their nuclear weapons resulted in several economic sanctions being imposed on them, especially by the United States of America. However, most of these sanctions were removed by the year 2001.

In light of this economic and political background, Sohaila Abdulali is one amongst several other women writers of that era, taking up issues such as development, the environment, the plight of women and tribals in India, a new form of imperialism by the United States, and neo-imperialism by the Indian elites. The concern for such issues echoes the ecofeminist claim that

[i]n the existing worldview the duality paradigm favoring the masculine qualities creates a society in which the male mode of aggression, violence and control becomes the dominant mode, generating the militaristic mindset, the nuclear mentality, the war culture. (D'Souza, 39)

Abdulali's book was shortlisted for the Crossword Book Award in 1998, and won praise by *The Sunday Times of India* that "one more writer joins the world of Amitav Ghosh, Gita Mehta and Vikram Chandra" (*Sohailink*, Web source). The other female writer who rose to fame during this period is Arundhati Roy, winning a Booker Prize for her novel *The God of Small Things*, which will be discussed in the later chapters of this thesis.

While Markandaya presents the impact of industrialization immediately after independence from the point of view of a landless peasant woman Rukmani, Abdulali presents the milieu of rapid development through Ifrat, a woman in a much more privileged class position than Rukmani. The increasing cosmopolitanism of that era in India is also represented by Ifrat, who is the child of a mixed-marriage between a Muslim man, Abu Shekpali, the father, and a Parsi woman, Farzana, the mother. Like Rukmani, Ifrat is initially shown to be intimately linked to the land through her body:

Ifrat spit some seeds, whistled and then pulled down her shorts and squatted on the hard ground. She scrabbled about in the dried mud for a suitable spot to pee and whistled back at the koel. ... 'I fertilize you with red, O karwanda bush!' she announced, and wondered as she walked away how many tampons she had buried in the valley over the years. (Abdulali, 1)

Ifrat's characterization here is similar to what Ynestra King posits as an "embodiment of the biological function, the image of nature" (King, 18), where women's bodily functions such as bodily excretions—urinating and menstruating—sanction the patriarchal premise that "women are believed to be closer to nature than men" (King, 18). Rukmani's link to the land is through her labour and the way she changes the landscape through her gardening; Ifrat, as an artist, is linked to the land through the work of her paintings. Ifrat muses that "maybe [she'll] do a painting...something dramatic about seeds, eggs, life's blood in the ground" (Abdulali, 2). The landscape of the valley features prominently in her paintings, for example, she explains to the Pruthis that "[s]cenery is just the backdrop for my work...living here, obviously scenery is important, as it forms the ethos of my subjects" (Abdulali, 25). Ifrat's paintings, and indeed the attitude of the Shekpali's towards nature, the landscape and the people of the valley in general, are at times paternalistic (Varma, "Developing Fictions", 217). The scenery in her paintings is just a backdrop, signaling a distance from the subjects that she paints. This is one example of Ifrat's elitism coming to the surface in and through her paintings. Furthermore, it is significant to note that the distance from the landscapes in her paintings alienates her from the land rather than embedding her within the land she paints. W.J.T Mitchell states that in painting a landscape, there is inevitably "the "reflective" and imaginary projection of moods into landscape [which] is read as the dreamwork of ideology" (7).⁹ When Ifrat paints the scenery with the landscape as the background, she is also imposing her ideologies and values onto the landscape she has painted. Thus, land/landscape ceases to be independent of human intentions and interpretations. The satisfaction and pleasure derived from the land and nature which characterizes Ifrat's "ruthless aestheticism"

⁹ See: W.J.T Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape". *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 4-34.

(Abdulali, 110; Varma, “Developing Fictions”, 221) and Abu and Farzana Shekpali’s love of the land, is more typical and aligned towards pleasure defined by leisure or recreational aspects of the First World/North American expression of environmentalism, as argued by William Cronon (Cronon, 78; Mount, 6). An added dimension of (environmental) imperialism becomes evident in the class-based environmentalism expressed by the cosmopolitan Shekpalis, and this expression of environmentalism is then very different from the one that Rukmani expresses in *Nectar in a Sieve*. Furthermore, Ifrat’s link to the land gets even more complicated by the fact that she has buried tampons in the valley over the years. While expressing love of the land on one hand, Ifrat is also polluting the land on the other.

However, just as Markandaya moves away from the idealized images of the peasant woman and nature, Abdulali in a similar vein brings forth a comparatively darker and skeptical reading of the land and landscape in a postcolonial environment, moving away from the leisure-based environmental aesthetics of Ifrat’s paintings which connect her to the land in various ways.

Despite having a gap of forty-four years between Markandaya’s and Abdulali’s novels, the issues of child marriage and dowry, literacy for girls and preference for sons have spanned across these years and have remained unchanged till today. Abdulali’s critique of the socio-political landscape of the late nineties with regards to these issues is highlighted in the figure of Sangeeta, daughter of the Shekpali’s domestic servant Ramesh. The cosmopolitan Ifrat and her lesbian best friend Rekha are juxtaposed with Sangeeta and her sister Lata. Sangeeta and Lata are uneducated teenage girls who are married off at a young age by their father. While both Ifrat and Rekha are shown to have a choice and agency in not getting married and having unconventional relationships, Sangeeta and Lata face a different reality

where “they really don’t have a choice about when and how” (Abdulali, 86) and “in the end, the man’s character determines their fate” (Abdulali, 104). Sangeeta becomes the epitome of this situation when she is tasked with the burden of bearing sons after her marriage. When Sangeeta miscarries for the second time, several realities unfold for the reader. Firstly, apart from women being treated as child-bearing machines, these tribal women also have to do hard manual work to support the family in terms of providing care-work and sustenance. Women, and the female children particularly, “very often...[have to] walk for miles to collect wood and water” (Mattheew, 128). Secondly, because they are married at a young age, the girls’ “systems can’t handle it” (Abdulali, 103). And finally, Ifrat sums it up by saying that “they are too young, they don’t get enough to eat, or enough of the right things anyway, and they don’t get taken care of properly when they are pregnant” (Abdulali, 103). Without the control of resources for production, many rural and native women mirror Sangeeta’s conditions. While Abdulali offers a scathing critique of this, we also see her pushing for an agenda for the literacy of girls. Similar to Markandaya, Abdulali shows the credulousness and gullibility of the rural natives without proper education when instead of taking Sangeeta to a proper doctor for her pregnancy pains, her in-laws took her to Bhagat who gave her “all sorts of powders and potions which didn’t do any good” (Abdulali, 103).

Ifrat’s initial identity crisis is couched in the question of her marriage when Tony proposes to her. She sees the realities of a woman in matrimony in the figure of Sangeeta, that “marriage had done that, reduced her to a moaning creature full of pain and despair” (Abdulali, 106), and Ifrat in response thinks that she would “rather be a bird alone than be married” (Abdulali, 106), remaining true to her cosmopolitan root(lessness). The thought of getting married evokes the image of “the half-finished

canvas in her studio” (Abdulali, 106), where it parallels the half-finished life she thinks matrimony would have in store for her. However, she experiences her identity crisis not from marriage but from the personal tragedy she goes through as a result of the development of the land and subsequently being internally displaced like the tribals.

The Age of the Maruti and ‘Modern’ Construction

In Markandaya’s novel, the tannery represents the period of industrialization after independence from British rule, and the source of Rukmani’s anxieties about displacement. In Abdulali’s novel, it is the white Maruti car owned by the Pruthis (and driven mostly by Arun Pruthi) that takes over the symbolism of the tannery. The white Maruti car is the “pervasive symbol of Indians who have newly arrived into money and power, and which the novel critiques as “this Maruti age” ” (Varma, “Developing Fictions”, 217). The Maruti comes into the Shekpalis driveway “crushing a fragile baby rain tree” (Abdulali, 22), putting in motion the first sign of foreboding for Ifrat, much in a similar manner that the tannery pulled down houses around the maidan (Markandaya, 25).

The Pruthis represent the new elites of Indian society, ones who have “left behind [their] dependence on austerity and state protection and [have] embraced an open India that is at ease with broader processes of globalization” (Fernandes, Web Source), in the wake of the policies of economic liberalization initiated in the 1990’s. Arun Pruthi and his father Satish Pruthi also own a construction company called Modern Construction, which like the tannery, has been in operation since India gained independence, and where the word-play on ‘Modern’ is not lost on the readers. The Pruthis intend to buy land in the valley (Abdulali, 40) to construct holiday resorts and a recreation centre so that the valley and the surrounding land and lakes are turned

into a “venture that many can enjoy” (Abdulali, 67). This is Arun Pruthi’s pet project and he rationalizes it for his father as such: “This is business...the world moves on, and the Shekpalis are wrong to think they can keep that place a wilderness forever. Bombay is expanding outwards and the demand for green places is strong” (Abdulali, 53). For him, the future lies in the profitability and the “commodification of these green places, their integration within national and global economic logic of development” (Varma, “Developing Fictions”, 218).

The commodification of land is further seen when Arun gets M.T. Gadgil, a government surveyor, to re-survey the land’s boundaries because “[t]here was one little patch of seven acres with a jagged boundary which was claimed by at least three different people” (Abdulali, 88). Here, Abdulali very cleverly juxtaposes two different forms of imperialistic powers upon the land and its people: British rule in the past and the new elites in the present. The British displaced the locals and claimed the land and its natural resources as their own when they “used local labour to do all the real work...[and] took all the credit” (Abdulali, 91) and “sought to tame the red earth...[with] their notebooks, their horses and their whiskey into the very heart of tribal India” (Abdulali, 92). The once-displaced tribals are now doubly displaced when the local elites, in the form of Arun Pruthi, once again come to “take away their land” (Abdulali, 93). Arun Pruthi understands “development in a purely accumulative sense” (Varma, “Developing Fictions”, 218) and as explained by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, “development, understood this way, is a classic example of the self-privileging discourse of *neocolonialism*, as put into practice by people and governments primarily interested in exploiting others in the name of the noble cause” (Huggan and Tiffin, 30, original emphasis). The connections between British rule and neo-colonialism (both intrinsically tied to capitalist production) are seen here, where

under present conditions of globalisation, uneven development seems to be the inevitable outcome.

The Maruti ultimately gives way to the image and powerful symbolism of the green bulldozer, which is gifted to Arun Pruthi by his father on his birthday: “Arun laughed as he sat at the controls of his toy. The bulldozer was truly a miracle; it could resculpt an ancient landscape within hours, minutes” (Abdulali, 126). According to Rashmi Varma, “[t]he megalomania of India’s capitalist class is captured well in Arun’s hysterical outburst upon receiving the bulldozer as a gift” (Varma, 219) and we see that India has come a long way from Markandaya’s “old feudal power nexus of landlords” (Varma, “Developing Fictions”, 219) to the “ruthless frenzy of capitalist accumulation by India’s new economic elites” (Varma, “Developing Fictions”, 219). It is under this form of development that the madwoman of Jogare starts assuming significance, and which will ultimately lead to Ifrat’s tragedy.

The madwoman of Jogare is characterised as unknowable, “[n]obody was sure exactly how old the madwoman was, or just what her story was” (Abdulali, 3). Ifrat finds that she is unable to out the mad woman on canvas (paint a picture) initially and reasons with herself that “[m]aybe the madwoman wasn’t knowable, and that was why it was so hard to paint her” (Abdulali, 13). Prior to the madwoman’s death, the forest guard, “representative of the forest department, India’s biggest landlord since the last century” (Abdulali, 184), denies the madwoman her right to collect dead wood and food from the forest. The madwoman then ultimately dies hungry, unknowable and silent, her “rictus of a mouth tightly pulled back” (Abdulali, 184). This unknowability and silence of the madwoman assumes a greater significance than mere mystery under the present developmental model characterised by the Pruthis, and one that the novel painstakingly indicts. The madwoman becomes representative

of the gendered dimensions of development and knowledge that are constantly rejected, denied and silenced. According to Corinne Kumar D'Souza,

[i]n its construction of knowledge of the world, this [development] paradigm left out the women; it has rendered the existence and experience of women mute and invisible. An androcentric perspective which, in its universal applicability, has “rendered” women not only unknown, but virtually unknowable. (D'Souza, 3)

In the figure of the madwoman then, what becomes visible, apart from her conditions of poverty, is the “genderization of science...development...[and] sexual economics” (D'Souza, 30). It also gives face to the hidden aspects of violence and intolerance that underlies modern progress. The death of the madwoman then paradoxically reveals this silence, her death showing how women continue to be denied their own voice (Graham, 106) in the dominant spheres of knowledge production and development.

It is here, in a climactic moment of Arun's hysterical frenzy, that Abu and Farzana Shekpali meet with an accident on the road that Arun had bulldozed at random in the forest, a “road to nowhere” (Abdulali, 127). Ifrat's parents are killed on the spot, and Ifrat in a state of bewilderment thinks that “that's not the plan!” (Abdulali, 171). Within a short period of time after their death, Arun and Satish Shekpali attempt to capitalize on the opportunity and suggest that Ifrat should sell her family land to the Pruthis. It is at this point that Ifrat starts experiencing her crisis of identity, similar to Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve*. Hearing this, Ifrat has an outburst:

“You thought I would sell it to you? To Arun?”. Ifrat was stunned. “My God, are you people never satisfied? You're tearing up the valley, you killed my parents, and now you want the land?”. (Abdulali, 181-182)

Here, as James Graham states in relation to South African fiction, for women such as Ifrat, we see that “the structures of neo-colonial authority and violence have blocked the processes, the possibility even, of mourning [her] losses” (Graham, 104). Ifrat's hitherto conservationist connection and link to the land, through the romantic and

essentialist tropes of the female body and a notion of superior environmentalism, is severed through her displacement when she decides to finally sell the land to the Pruthis and move to Bombay. At this point then, Ifrat's "connection to the land is that of disturbance. Something negative" (Graham, 109). Through Ifrat's displacement here, we see that the disturbance she goes through offers her both positive and negative opportunities to come to terms with her crisis. Through Ifrat then, the trauma and tragedy of the material landscape is exposed to the readers, where the threat of displacement of people is very real.

The idea of land (or environment and nature) as a benevolent and sustaining force is countered by its indifference to Ifrat's tragedy borne out of the accident: "[b]ut the land was the land; earth, elemental, *indifferent*" (Abdulali, 98, my emphasis). This parallels the notion of the indifferent land that mocked Rukmani's loss of her son Kuti in *Nectar in a Sieve* (Markandaya, 101), exposing not only the downsides of country living as discussed earlier, but also ruptures the mythical unity and pristine beauty of the landscape. James Goehring's essay "The Dark Side of Landscape" talks about the art historian John Barrel's study of English rustic landscape painting and its relevance to desert landscapes, and some of the ideas in his essay can be applied to both Abdulali's and Markandaya's novels. For example, the idea of the "dark side of landscape" (Goehring, 437) itself which exposes the harshness of nature as well as the new social order, and also how "the landscape, shaped by human ingenuity, in turn shapes the social and cultural world of its creators" (Goehring, 437). In relation to this then, it can be said to a large extent, that Ifrat's identity crisis stems from living *in-between* landscapes of *change*, social, cultural and economic. Ifrat's crisis of who she is and where she belongs, is then ultimately resolved through accepting this landscape of change.

The resolution of the crisis: TUCS, Savitri and change

An important step in the resolution of Ifrat's identity crisis and displacement is the recuperation of the notion of development. According to Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, "the battle is not against development...as intrinsically harmful process and activities, but rather against the often flagrant human and environmental abuses that continue to be practiced in [its] cause" (Huggan and Tiffin, 77). Therefore, in light of this quote, it does not become productive to read Abdulali's novel in an entirely anti-developmental stance, where it becomes crucial to move beyond "the simplistic equation of development with capitalism" (Huggan and Tiffin, 77) or to simply couch development and capitalism as scapegoats for all of society's ills.

Although both Markandaya's and Abdulali's novels are "enraged by the kind of developmentalism that merely panders to global-corporate interests" (Huggan and Tiffin, 77), both novelists, however, do *not* suggest that the destructive aspects of cultural and economic development, and globalization, can simply be bypassed (Huggan and Tiffin, 77). The question then is, as we recognize that processes of globalization and development are not unified or univocal, how can these processes be reorganized so that they can be directed towards new ends and possibilities (Kumar, xvii). One attempt at an answer to this question is provided by the Tribal Upliftment and Cultural Studies Centre, or TUCS, in Abdulali's novel.

TUCS is run by an Indian woman Veena Gore. The text points out that "one wonder[s] why she was so willing to leave her posh flat and successful lawyer husband in Bombay and live on the banks of the Kallai most of the time, beleaguered by both the endless problems of the Adivasis and the endless demands of the funding agencies" (Abdulali, 11). This echoes the question Rukmani asks Kenny in *Nectar in a Sieve* about building the hospital: "I do not know why people who have not seen us

and who know us not should do this for us” (Markandaya, 111). TUCS (and the hospital) is the product of a more sympathetic and grassroots-oriented developmentalism where people like Shobana keep her hope alive by teaching the tribal school children that “when you teach a child the word corruption, you’re teaching it about the whole world” (Abdulali, 36). This form of developmentalism, while acknowledging the negative aspects of First World development practices, still accepts development’s basic premise: “to address the persistence of poverty, environmental degradation and the violation of human freedom in the contemporary globalised world (Sen, quoted in Huggan and Tiffin, 29).

However, there are still problems to contend with in the form of developmentalism espoused by TUCS. For one, the politics of caste rooted in the traditional constituents of the area has to be dealt with. The character of Sushila embodies this to the tee when she thinks to herself that “[n]either Veena nor all the strictures of God and government could erase those invisible, invincible lines” (Abdulali, 29). The potential of the logic of globalization is brought forth here though, where caste politics and other traditional constituents integrate but also forge “*necessary* alliances with the national and local power elites (Varma, “Developing Fictions”, 220, original emphasis) and thus are challenged and eroded to an extent when they are absorbed by the processes of globalization.

The other problem that a body like TUCS has to contend with is funding. TUCS receives funding from international bodies such as The World Bank and Ford Foundation. The visual symbolism of this can be seen in some of the people employed in TUCS, for example Richard and Ann. Richard Prater III is a Britisher who has “gone native” (Abdulali, 4), indicating that the form of imperialism practiced by the British during their rule is now outmoded and giving way to a new form of

imperialism practiced by the United States of America in the form of transnational corporations and financial aids. Ann, an American graduate student on an internship in TUCS, stands for this especially when she keeps having a “ghastly feeling that somehow she had missed something essential in all her careful digging and sifting...Ann knew in her heart that she had failed to grasp some very essential truth in all her work” (Abdulali, 193-194). Ann’s failure to comprehend the way of the tribals and other Indians in general parallels the “inadequacy of discourses” (Huggan and Tiffin, 77) and the “top-down processes of social and environmental management” (Huggan and Tiffin, 77) practiced by institutions such as The World Bank and Ford Foundation, or the new imperialism of the United States. Having said that, in the words of Amitava Kumar, it cannot be denied that “[i]f we are to work toward another, alternative globalization, then our narratives must forge new connections and elaborate on these new coalitions and emergent subjectivities” (Kumar, xxiii). Therefore, a more cosmopolitan and globalized “network of development culture” (Varma, “Developing Fictions”, 219) is seen in the connections TUCS has with institutions such as The World Bank and Ford Foundation. In light of this then, for both TUCS in *The Madwoman of Jogare* and the hospital in *Nectar in a Sieve*, we see that instead of a reliance on ““national” urban elites”, there is a shift in favour of a more “sympathetic international community” (Varma, “Developing Fictions”, 220).

Savitri as the new madwoman of Jogare is then incorporated into the narrative of the move towards a new form of developmentalism which has the potential to recuperate the gendered dimension which has hitherto been left out. The death of the previous madwoman posits the (tribal) women collectively as victims rather than as women who can also effect change and contribute meaningfully to development.

Savitri, in the role of the new madwoman, rejects the institution of marriage, thus actively refusing to be another Sangeeta in the making.

Savitri is also indicative of the fact that the impossibly archaic customs of rural Indian life will always reside alongside the absurdly modern lifestyles of contemporary cosmopolitanism, as seen through Ifrat. The idiosyncrasies of both ways of life are brought to life and light in the valley. Abdulali reveals to the readers through Savitri that while most of the world moves towards mechanization and modernization, there are still some people who will always live by their instincts off the land. Alternatively, it also suggests that the tribals/natives will beat the odds and survive, no matter what the circumstances are. Their fortitude is linked to Rukmani and the peasant community in *Nectar in a Sieve*, where the will to survive triumphs all else. This is most aptly captured in the attitude of Savitri's brother, Gopal:

The blue smoke curled up into the sky. Let Labad Seth shout about his contract. Let Motha Kaka shout about dynamiting. Let Veena shout about making steady wages. Let the jungle guards shout about the trees. The rock was warm at his back and the river blue at his feet. Gopal melted black into the rock and fished, and smoked, and *didn't care*. (Abdulali, 167, my emphasis)

This attitude partly explains why Savitri's parents and the whole of Makadpada are not worried when her whereabouts are not known: "they seem rather calm about the whole thing [and]...completely sure that *everything will work out*" (Abdulali, 201, my emphasis).

It is here then, in the story of Savitri the new madwoman of Jogare, that Ifrat "felt a faint stirring of well-being, a...flicker of hope, the first since the bend in the road" (Abdulali, 206). Ifrat feels a sense of hope emerging when she learns that Savitri is going to continue the tradition of the dance of the madwoman and the madwoman's hut is not going to be empty anymore. The resolution of her identity crisis starts taking place in the recognition after this event that even if she sells the

land to the Pruthis and goes to Bombay, both the city and the land do not guarantee a refuge, a safe space, for her. Ifrat slowly starts understanding and accepting that the land is not an absolute, spiritually or politically (Graham, 103). Rather, the land and landscape constitute *differences* that are environmental and cultural in nature. This understanding, however, comes at a cost to Ifrat—she loses her parents in the tragic accident. The acceptance of the fact that environmental and cultural difference (and the difference in attitudes of the people towards environment and culture) exist in juxtaposition to each other, and that *is* what constitutes the landscape and her notion of belonging to the land, makes her realise that “the Pruthis of this world might win in the end, but before the war is over there is many an annoying little battle to be fought” (Abdulali, 163). In not giving up and ultimately coming to terms with change, Ifrat starts appreciating the meaning of a remark she made earlier in the novel to Richard: “the only people who really belong here are the Adivasis, but that doesn’t mean the rest of us are going to pack up and leave” (Abdulali, 129). Ifrat’s internal displacement on the land, like the Adivasis, finds its resolution in the recognition and acceptance of change. Her identity crisis is resolved through the ambivalent attitude she takes towards both the land and the notion of development in the end.

Ifrat finds that once she has taken the decision to remain in the valley, she is finally able to paint a picture of the madwoman: “Painting the madwoman; remember how I never could? How to paint her when she keeps *changing*? First it was the madwoman I grew up with, now it’s Savitri” (Abdulali, 211, my emphasis). Along with her identity crisis, Ifrat’s crisis as an artist also finds its solution once she comes to terms with the notion of belonging and that change is the only constant in the valley. The land and landscape then are not only in the background of Ifrat’s paintings. Ifrat’s ambivalence towards land and landscape becomes critical to her

identity formation. Not only that, when Ifrat starts thinking of her identity ecologically, that is, thinking identity through the axes of land, nature and lived experience, and all the complexities in-between constituting her ambivalence, that is when she is able to paint the madwoman.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* and Sohaila Abdulali's *The Madwoman of Jogare*, the female protagonists' identity crises are resolved through the ambivalence of these women towards nature and spaces—rural and urban environment, human nature and social customs. These are indicative of the postcolonial environmental conditions that the characters engage in to survive materially and triumph in their decisions. The crises of identity of the women are mediated through the land in both the novels, where the ambivalence of both women is shown through the deep ruptures between land and women. These women are then not linked in a straight-forward manner to the culture/nature binary.

Issues that have sutured both the novels together, despite the long gap of forty-four years, are: (1) women's seeming embeddedness in nature, (2) the violence of the postcolonial state and the new elites which displace the women from their homes and land, (3) the ways in which the text and the women ultimately resist being easily dichotomized to fit the culture/nature binary, and (4) the women's assertion of their individual decisions through the ambivalence they feel towards nature, land and the notion of development.

Questions of Third World women's labour and ownership of the land they till and work on have figured in both the novels. The tensions between the "ontological insistence to belong" (Huggan and Tiffin, 20) and land as a "disputed object of discursive management and material control" (Huggan and Tiffin, 21) are highlighted

in both the novels, seen through Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve* and the Adivasis and Ifrat in *The Madwoman of Jogare*. The question of birth-right to the land or being entitled to it through legal laws is at the heart of the matter in the novels. The novels also move away from the romanticized view of nature and land by throwing up the untenable conditions the women live and work in.

Linked to the above-mentioned issues of the land is the notion of development. While both novels start off with a seemingly anti-developmental attitude, they take a turn towards being broadly counter-developmental (Huggan and Tiffin, 20) or posit development ultimately as a contradictory process by the time each novel reaches its conclusion. It is also recognized by both the novels that under the present set of conditions, globalization cannot help but produce uneven development and some destructive elements of such a process sometimes cannot be simply done away with completely.

The exclusion and rejection of women from the land—seen through the two novels protagonists and the Adivasis—pushes them towards the city, where the city too presents no better alternative. The question of belonging for women, whether to the land (village) or the city, or both, or to none, highlights the connections to land and soil that constitute as being core to the material body in forming the identities of the women. However, it is important to note that far from depicting women as one with land, the two writers are depicting women's alienation from the land. Rukmani becomes one of the urban dispossessed in the city while Ifrat laments the “spit, shit, snot...the quintessential horrors of urban India” (Andulali, 99), where Bombay becomes characterized by all that is “rejected by the body” (Huggan and Tiffin, 62) in a literal sense. In both novels, there is a vindication that no matter what, life goes on despite suffering and hardships encountered along the way. Change is a constant in

both Markandaya and Abdulali's novels, and coming to terms with change enables the women to also come to terms with themselves.

Chapter Two

Animal

“The animals of the world exist for their own reasons. They were not made for humans any more than black people were made for white, or women created for men”—Alice Walker, (Web Source).

Introduction

This chapter looks at the link between women, animals and violence through the lens of materialist postcolonial ecofeminism. Not much attention has been paid to this topic under the rubric of ecofeminism, especially in tandem with postcolonial issues.¹ Anita Desai’s novels *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) and *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) provide an opportunity to re-think some of the postcolonial issues espoused in the fiction of male writers through a gendered perspective. Simultaneously, this allows considering of the specific processes that align women and animals into inferior and stereotyped positions. The notion of violence is key in exploring patriarchal oppressions of women and animals in both of Desai’s novels, where violence is understood as constitutive of patriarchy, caste, class, and oppression. A key argument that is furthered in this chapter is that the ‘other’ in the form of women and animals takes centre stage in both novels although women and animals are removed and distanced from society. The woman becomes the mediator through which animals can be read. In turn, the identity politics and relationships between men and women are mediated through the figure of the animal. The protagonists

¹ The research on animals and women specifically went on till the late 1990’s. After this period, there was a large gap in the scholarly work on animals in ecocriticism and ecofeminism as a whole. The research that did come out in the subsequent years focused mainly on animals in the wilderness, animal rights, zoos and captivity, companion species and how they played a role alongside humans, and theories focused on animals including deep ecology and affect theory. Although a lot of scholarly work has been churned out since then on animals in themselves and their roles in human lives, research on interconnections with women and a gendered analysis has since taken a back seat. It is my hope that this chapter will try to build on the existing research regarding women and animals, and expand on the postcolonial aspects with a critical gendered analysis. Most of the major critics who have intervened in the debates of feminist theory and critical animal studies have been discussed in this chapter, especially in the section on the background between women and animals.

occupy ambivalent positions in both stories since these women belong neither to the cultural nor the natural. They defy any romantic or celebratory categorizations of women within the natural sphere that includes nonhuman animals. The animal becomes a conduit through which this ambivalence arises for the women. In certain instances, for example Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* and Raka in *Fire on the Mountain*, the woman and animal become exchangeable, thus highlighting another aspect of the affinity between women and animals.

Cry, the Peacock was Desai's first novel to be published, and *Fire on the Mountain* was published fifteen years later. These two novels written by Anita Desai were chosen for analysis in this chapter as they both illustrate the continuity of Desai's concerns that spans most of her novels: a particular concern about the position of middle-class Indian women and the use of animals and nature in her novels. Both of Desai's novels under consideration in this chapter predate as well as anticipate much of the contemporary debates on the connections between women and animals in society.

Desai's novels span the era of the 1960's and 1970's in India. Tanima Banerjee comments that "Indian women, who fought as equals with men in the nationalist struggle, were not given that free public space [in the ensuing years]. They became homemakers, and were mainly meant to build a strong home to support their men who were to build the newly independent country" (Web Source).² Banerjee's comment is especially pertinent to the position of the middle-class women, described by Desai in her novels and otherwise, where the ennui of domesticity shackled many of the middle-class women in real life as well as in fiction written by women writers in the 1960's through the 1970's.

² See: Tanima Banerjee, "Here's How The Status Of Women Has Changed In India [Since 1950 Till Date]", *Youth Ki Awaaz.*, <<https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2012/03/heres-how-the-status-of-women-has-changed-in-india-since-1950-till-date/>>.

While the previous chapter discussed the relationship of women and land through a materialist postcolonial ecofeminist lens, this chapter will build on this theoretical framework through the analysis and discussion of the relation between women and animals. Desai's novels, as well as specific instances from Markandaya's and Abdulali's novels that were not touched upon in the previous chapter, will be primarily worked through the theoretical explorations of relationships between women and animals. The figure of the animal then opens up the space of ambivalence for the women in the novels.

Women and Animals: A Brief Outline

It is important to contextualize, very briefly, the debates and arguments surrounding women and animals historically and socio-politically. Patrick D. Murphy remarks that

the deconstructionist philosopher Jacques Derrida is correct when he claims that Western philosophy is based on the *opposition of nature and culture, since this opposition seems fundamental for a vast array of claims made about human uniqueness, in terms of spiritual essence, right to domination, and exploitative destiny...* This underlying principle of opposition masks and suppresses not simply the history of human origins but also ongoing human interrelationship with the rest of nature... (Murphy, 311, my emphasis)

Two important points arise from Murphy's quotation above. Firstly, we are brought face-to-face with the reference to Cartesian dualisms once again (refer to "Introduction"), where the culture/nature dualism goes back to the self/other dichotomy. Secondly, this reference goes back to the basic ecofeminist premise that this binaristic framework authorizes various forms of oppression because it puts in place a set of hierarchical oppositions. René Descartes, in his *Letters of 1646 and 1649*, claims that "the reason why animals do not speak as we do is...that they have no thoughts" (60). From this, he concludes that animals are "natural automata" (Descartes, 61), that is, they are mechanical and only have instinctual drives. Such

Cartesian thinking has had far-reaching impacts on the attribution of reason to men (culture, human) and instincts and emotions to women (nature, animal).

Even before Descartes, Aristotle in *The History of Animals* claimed that “[n]ature proceeds little by little from things lifeless to animal life” and that “[t]he life of animals, then, may be divided into two acts—procreation and feeding; for on these two acts all their interests and life concentrate” (6). From fourth century BC then, animals have been constantly denied the (cap)abilities for reason, “a proposition that has been recast over the centuries as denial of human kinship with animals and eventually transformed into a rigid hierarchical system known as the “Great Chain of Being”...with God at the top, humans below God, other animals below humans, and the rocky earth at the very bottom” (Kalof and Fitzgerald, “Introduction”). Such philosophical generalizations have been naturalized till date and thus allow certain oppressions and exploitation to take place—of animals, women and other marginalized groups of people. This is most clearly seen when “women’s bodies have been seen to intrude upon their rationality” (Adams and Donovan, 1) and thus women’s ‘animality’ is used to deny them the rights of public citizenship.

Margo DeMello states that “[g]ender studies and women’s studies...are interdisciplinary fields and, as such, are especially appropriate for human-animal studies [because] both highlight difference and focus on how difference is constructed and represented” (25). In other words, the differences among different groups are assumed to be essential in nature and culminate in the process of othering. These differences are then used as the basis for the domination and/or oppression of certain categories of people or animals.

While it is true that much of the recent cutting-edge theory regarding the connections between women and animals has come out of gender and women’s

studies, it is also true that much of ecofeminism previously “has failed to locate animals as central to any discussion of ethics involving women and nature. Some theorists...have taken this issue as their special concern, while others dismiss it entirely” (Gaard, 6). More recently, Greta Gaard in her 2011 article “Ecofeminism Revisited: Rejecting Essentialism and Re-Placing Species in a Material Feminist Environmentalism”, writes that “[i]nterest in human bodies was seen as suitably political” in the fields of mainstream feminism and ecofeminism but “interest in animal bodies and nature was not” (41). This statement is also true for literary texts and in this case of Indian women’s writing. So far, in the Indian literary scene, Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* (2007), Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* (2005) and most recently Nilanjana Roy’s *The Wildings* (2013) have come closest to exploring the intertwining connections between human-animal, and women-animal and animal-animal. The interest in Anita Desai’s writing has been thematic till date and not environmentalist in any sense. How Desai fits in this mold is in re-reading, re-interpreting and re-negotiating the women and animal connections that have been previously ignored in her writings.

The connection between sexism and speciesism has been well-documented by many ecofeminists. This stems from the belief and increasing research that supports the claim that all oppressions are interconnected. Therefore, the connections and oppressions of women and animals cannot be viewed in a vacuum, independent of other forms of “abuse, degradation, exploitation and commercialization” (Adams and Donovan, 3). According to Susanne Kappeler,

[w]hat we consider to be the speciesist paradigm has never been the simple binary opposition between “humans” and “animals”, but the complex interaction of speciesism, racism, sexism, classism, nationalism, etc, which crystallizes a narrow yet historically changing group of masters who give themselves the name “human”. The zoological (including the racist) continuum of classification blends

with the classist instrumentalization of those classified, with the sexist division thrown in as and when required. (334)

Kappeler's statement clarifies that sexism and speciesism have to be viewed together with racism, classism, and nationalism (in the form of the power of the state) and scientific discourses, all of which legitimize the exploitation of women and animals to a large extent.³ Such interconnections work at times by animalizing women (speciesism) and by feminizing animals (sexism), and sometimes some of the nonhuman animal terms can function as racial epithets. This also goes to show that "the relationship between speciesism and sexism is not unidirectional. Just as speciesism contributes to women's oppression, sexism contributes to the oppression of nonhuman animals" (Dunayer, 23).

Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin in *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* state that

Postcolonialism's major theoretical concerns: otherness, racism and miscegenation, language, translation,...voice and the problems of speaking of and for others—to name just a few—offer immediate entry points for a re-theorising of the place of animals in relation to human societies....[However], the metaphorisation and deployment of 'animal' as a derogatory term...make it difficult to even discuss animals without generating a profound unease, even a rancorous antagonism, in many postcolonial contexts today. (135)

One of the potential problems that this statement immediately illuminates is that of priority: in this context, should animals or women be given priority? It must be stressed that this chapter is not about privileging one group over the other, that women and animals here are not viewed as being either/or: it is not about *either* women *or* animals. This chapter is about exploring the interconnections between these two groups—women and animals—in a postcolonial female author's writing as well as rupturing the space between the binaries—of culture/nature, human (man)/animal (woman)—as an ambivalent position. It is important to do so because a failure to

³ I am mindful that there are other forms of oppression that fit within this framework, for example, homophobia, heterosexism, disability, etc. However, it is beyond the scope of this chapter and this thesis to cover these aspects fully to do them justice.

challenge these binary distinctions undermines a more complete understanding of the workings of oppression.

Thus, one important point to note here is that the connection between women and animals is “*not* to be understood as a ‘natural’ connection—one that suggests that women and animals are essentially similar—but rather a *constructed connection* that has been created by the patriarchy as a means of oppression” (Gruen, 61, my emphasis). The constructedness of this connection then exposes several things. Firstly, such constructs are “culturally and historically contingent; that is, depending on time and place, this border not only moves but the reasons for assigning animals and humans to each side of the border change as well” (DeMello, 33). Implicit in this is the notion of power and hegemony—who is in power and who gets to represent whom and in what way, where some humans themselves may be lumped together with animals. It is important to note here that, in the Indian context, both fiction and otherwise, caste issues assume pertinent significance in relation to categorizations where humans may be lumped together with animals. Historically, Dalits, or the untouchables, have been animalized or literally treated as animals, where not only Dalit women but Dalit men are also oppressed in significant ways. With regards to both caste and class, higher-caste women who are also upper-class may not be oppressed in the same ways as the Dalit women are. Similarly, regardless of caste and/or class, not all women are oppressed.

Secondly, “although there are parallels between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature [animals included], the woman-nature affinity is not a cross-cultural phenomenon” (Gaard, 9; Li, 272). Here, what is important to note is that despite the woman-nature affinity not being an over-arching framework, it *still* does not prevent many cultures and societies from engaging in various forms of

oppressions against women, animals and even children. There is *still* a tendency for patriarchal cultures to keep coming back to this dualism in some form or the other. Thirdly, such a construct also has to take note of the role of language, particularly the issue of anthropomorphism which has proven to be an extremely contentious one with regards to representing animals. DeMello states that

Animals are *like us*, but also *unlike us*. Because of this ambiguity, they are a perfect vehicle for expressing information about ourselves, to ourselves. ...we bestialize people...and humanize animals (that we anthropomorphize). And although we can use animals to highlight a person's good qualities (brave like a lion), we more commonly use animals negatively (cunning like a fox), especially to denigrate racial minorities. (287-288, original emphasis)

However, critics such as Marion Copeland and John Berger have spoken in the defense of anthropomorphism. For example, Copeland says that

Anthropomorphism now is seen by literary critics as a useful means of restoring individuality and power to the nonhuman in fiction with animal subjects...In fact, Paul Shepard has gone so far as to suggest that anthropomorphism in myth and story creates "the imaginary continuity between animals' lives and our own", thereby "reinforc[ing] a profound and enduring memory...Anthropomorphism", Shepard claims, "binds our continuity with the rest of the natural world", and is the genesis of "our desire to identify" with other animals (p.88).⁴ (91-92)

Similarly, Berger is of the opinion that "the much-maligned process of anthropomorphism is actually beneficial because it expresses the proximity between human and animal" (Kalof and Fitzgerald, 251; Berger, 255). It is also important to realise, however, that some of the claims that ecofeminists make against this position—that anthropomorphism is both anthropocentric and androcentric—also remain valid and true in certain instances.⁵ I suggest that Desai be posited within the

⁴ Copeland is aware that anthropomorphism is a "double-edged sword as capable of being used to denigrate as to reveal the true character of the nonhuman protagonist" (92). However, she maintains that because of these anxieties, it is a clear attestation of the human desire to know the animal directly.

⁵ For an in-depth account of and comments on the debate about anthropomorphism with regards to women and animals, see: Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (New York; London:

framework of recuperating anthropomorphism when reading her novels. Part of her strategy is to allow human readers to identify with the characters, their feelings as well as the interactions between women and animals in the novels where a certain necessary anthropomorphism, to use Copeland's term, is deployed by Desai in her writing. This is more explicit in *Cry, the Peacock* than it is in *Fire on the Mountain*.

Gaard (2011) suggests that one way of stopping the perpetuation and rupturing the culture/nature dualism is through advocating "a materialist base for ecofeminist analyses of human-human, human-animal, and human-nature oppressions" (40). The acknowledgement of material connections with the environment would argue for the agency of nature and for a material feminism that reconceptualizes nature in ways that account for what Karan Barad terms as 'intra-actions'. She defines 'intra-actions' as "phenomena that are material, discursive, human, more-than-human, corporeal, and technological" (Gaard, 42). Intra-action is used to replace 'interaction', in that, intra-action understands agency as not an inherent property of an individual or human to be exercised, but as a dynamism of forces (Barad, 141). Therefore, the ability to act (to have agency) emerges from within the relationship humans and nonhumans have with each other, and not outside of this relationship. In Desai's novels, we see women and animals have this relationship of intra-actions, where women and animals, and their ability to act/have agency is co-constitutive, emerging from relationships they have with each other. This chapter then, in re-reading Desai, and re-interpreting and re-negotiating the interconnections between women and animals in a postcolonial

Continuum, 1990); Greta Gaard, *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan, *Animals and Women* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 1995); Val Plumwood, "Androcentrism and Anthropocentrism: Parallels and Politics", *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature* (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997) 327-355; Marion W. Copeland, "Nonhuman Animals. Society and Animals", 1998, 6:1: 87-100; Lawrence Buell, "The Misery of Beasts and Humans", *Writing for an Endangered World* (Massachusetts; London, UK: Harvard University Press, 2001) 224-242; John Simons, "Anthropomorphism: The Non-Human as Human", *Animal Rights and the Politics of Literary Representation* (New York: Palgrave, 2002) 116-139; Simon C. Estok, "Theory from the Fringes", *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, 2007, 40:1: 61-78.

context, attempts to situate itself within these developing and ongoing debates about ecofeminism.

A Brief Note on Anita Desai

Much of the critical writings available on Anita Desai's fiction deride her as being a woman writer who posits "suffocating psychological studies" (Narayan and Mee, quoted in Dengel-Janic, 1) about her middle-class female protagonists. While criticizing her choice of upper-class based concerns which are deemed irrelevant for the lived reality of most Indian women, many critics have also dismissed her writings as devoid of a postcolonial perspective that most male writers engage with—issues of cultural identity, national history and politics to name a few. However, in this chapter, it is my contention that by engaging with the private sphere of 'women's psychology', the home and family, Desai's novels provide an opportunity to re-think some of the postcolonial concerns espoused in the fiction of male writers. In particular, the binary oppositions of culture/nature as well as public/private realms are explored and revised through the rupturing of the binary of the human (man)/animal (woman). The human/animal boundary is a 'postcolonial' topic precisely because, in the words of Huggan and Tiffin,

the western definition of humanity depended—and still depends—on the presence of the 'not-human': the uncivilized, the animal and animalistic. European justification for invasion and colonization proceeded from this basis, understanding non-European lands and the people and animals that inhabited them as 'spaces', 'unused, underused and empty'. The very ideology of colonization is thus one where anthropocentrism and Eurocentrism are inseparable. (5)

Hence, the human/animal boundary exists as a sort of institutionalized speciesism that still continues to be used to rationalize not only the exploitation of the animal, but also the human as animal (animalised human 'others') (Huggan and Tiffin, 5).

Desai's characters are creations that she has deliberately constructed to convey the feminist ideology behind her novels. For example, by employing the tropes of excessive interiority and psychological inwardness in her female characters from *Cry, the Peacock* and *Fire on the Mountain*, Desai is highlighting "the vulnerability of women who have not been socialized and educated to survive apart from the family" (Jackson, 21). Desai indicts such treatment of women in the familial sphere, which in itself proves to be problematic (in its own right), where paternal authority is exercised in several different ways. Desai's novels then, though mainly seen as fictional representations of women and the domestic sphere, also point to socio-political and historical realities in which such women are poignantly situated in reality. Familial relationships are seen as particularly enslaving to women. The fictional characters of Desai's texts and the novels serve to function as social critique intermediaries, especially considering the implications of enslaving familial relationships which posit the home as a place of suffocation and danger for the women. This representation then goes against the common traditional and/or conservative rhetoric that a woman's 'proper' place is the home because it is supposed to be a safety-net for women.

Cry, the Peacock

Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* (CTP) is a story about a sensitive young girl, Maya, who is obsessed with a childhood prophecy of disaster. An albino astrologer had predicted death to either her or her husband four years into their marriage. Believing that she is the one to die, she hovers on the brink of neurosis and insanity. However, in a moment of epiphany, an idea takes root in her mind that since the astrologer had predicted death to either of them, it may be Gautama, her husband, and not she whose life is threatened. She thus transfers her death wish to Gautama and thinks that since he is so detached and indifferent to her and life in general, it will not matter to him if

he dies. After this realisation dawns on her, she asks Gautama to accompany her to the roof of the house to enjoy the cool air and he does so while lost in his own thoughts. They walk towards the terraced end of the roof, and Maya looks enraptured at the pale glow of the rising moon. As Gautama moves in front of her, hiding the moon from her view, she, in a fit of frenzy, pushes him over the parapet. It remains in the end for Gautama's mother and sister to take away the now completely insane Maya from the scene of tragedy to the house of her father.

There is no actual or literal peacock in the story. The image of the peacock crying during the first monsoon rains is embedded in Maya's mind when she thinks that Gautama could actually be the one to die. The entire idea in her mind is framed by a refrain that repeats itself in the novel: "Pia pia I cry, mio mio I die" (*CTP*, 82), mimicking the cry of the peacocks during mating, where "cry" and "die" then assume critical significance when Maya thinks about killing Gautama. The image of the peacock, from being associated with positive connotations when Maya gets married to Gautama, then becomes a negative image progressively as Maya thinks about killing her husband Gautama.

Maya the Prey

The novel opens with the death of Maya's pet dog Toto. Toto's body "lay rotting in the sun" (*CTP*, 7) as Maya waited for her husband Gautama to come home and bury the dead body since the sweeper refused to do the deed. Maya subsequently moves the bed on which Toto's dead body is laid into the shade of the lime trees and "saw its eyes open and staring still, screamed and rushed to the garden tap to wash the vision from her eyes, continued to cry and ran, defeated, into the house" (*CTP*, 7). A number of issues regarding both animals and women are exposed with just the mundane actions and reactions of Maya to her pet dog's death.

The pet animal is a major topic of study in human-animal studies, including ecofeminism. A pet is generally defined as a companion animal, where the act of naming the pet “incorporates him or her into the human social world and allows us to use their name as a term of address and a term of reference” (DeMello, 149). Maya, in constantly referring to her dog by name in her thoughts and soliloquies, and with whom she has developed a close and rewarding relationship, confers upon him a distinct identity and personality. For example, when she alone ponders about the “loneliness of time, the impossible vastness of space...[and where she stood in it]” (*CTP*, 28), she arrives at the “definite truth that I did indeed have a place in it. Not only I, but my small dog, whose journey I followed with my mind” (*CTP*, 28). In giving Toto a distinct identity and a definite place in her life, she refuses to deny Toto’s material reality and history, of his body that she has known and seen rotting after death (her emphasis on Toto’s body, “small white Toto, small white corpse” (24), “the impact of his body as he flung himself upon me” (21), run throughout the novel). Toto’s identity is not effaced, and he does not become an “absent referent” (Adams, 66), where Toto’s distinct being and identity is not effaced.⁶ It is important to note that Maya and Gautama are a middle-class and upper-caste couple who can afford the luxury of owning/having pet animals, where the pet animal itself denotes a heterosexual, middle-class, nuclear family.

It can be argued at the same time that Maya, in speaking for the dog, may be speaking for herself and her plight. Clinton Sanders and Arnold Arluke, in their essay “Speaking for Dogs”, invoke the concept of constructing “dialogues with the self” (67) through the pet, and this is something that Maya does engage in. However, it is

⁶ In this chapter, I have used Carol J. Adams’ concept of the ‘absent referent’ from her seminal work *The Sexual Politics of Meat*. While vegetarianism constitutes a major component of her work in entirety, I have not used vegetarianism in this chapter. In the remaining chapter, I have consistently used only the concept of the ‘absent referent’.

important *not* to view this negatively as Desai uses this as a strategic device to contrast Maya's husband Gautama's reaction to the death of the dog. Gautama comes back from work late and

he did all that was to be done, quickly and quietly like a surgeon's knife at work. He telephoned the Public Works Department, he had them send their scavenging truck to take the corpse away... 'Yes, yes, the bed too,' he said. 'By all means, burn it too.' When the truck left, he came to her [Maya]... 'It is all over,' he said. 'Come and drink your tea, and stop crying. You mustn't cry'. (CTP, 8)

Gautama's reaction to the dog's death is the complete opposite of Maya's. In taking care of everything "like a surgeon's knife at work" (CTP, 8), Desai is implicitly invoking the scientific discourses and instruments (the knife) that distance humans, especially men, from animals. Gautama's actions here are purpose-driven and not communicative, therefore making him detached and unemotional. This is similar to the "unemotional and detached language of scientific reports" (Birke, 32), used by Desai here, to inform Gautama's actions. The effect of this then is that "caring and connectedness are stereotypically associated with femininity, and thus typically *devalued* in the pursuit of objectivity and detachment" (Kalof and Fitzgerald, 323; Birke, 323, my emphasis). This can be seen here when Gautama keeps telling Maya that she needs to stop crying and just have a cup of tea, ultimately "forgetting her, forgetting her woes altogether" (CTP, 9), and forgetting Toto. In espousing his philosophy of detachment that he often quotes from the *Gita*, both Maya and Toto then become absent referents for Gautama—Gautama forgets the dog and his name within a few days of his death and does not remember it even after Maya's prompts. To Gautama, a pet is replaceable, and he gets a cat for Maya as a replacement for Toto. Maya relates this to a comment made by Gautama in the early days of their marriage that she looks like a cat (CTP, 27). With that in mind, Maya tries to forge a relationship with the cat, but the cat "scorned to have [her] touch her secret dreams"

(*CTP*, 33). It is significant then that Maya does not name the cat. Maya's relationship with the feline then does not convey the same familiarity and intensity as her relationship with the dog, and towards the end of the novel, before pushing Gautama off the parapet, both she and the cat are almost indifferent to each other's presence. Through Gautama then, a middle-class, upper-caste heterosexual male (patriarch), we also see the specific middle-class oppression of animals in the private sphere of the home. Not only are pets in the home absent referents, they are also replaceable and their individual beings and identities are of no consequence.

DeMello states that "[t]he term 'pet', after all, was a fifteenth-century English term meaning 'spoiled child'. This word probably derived from the French term *petit*, or 'little', and grew to mean anything or anyone that was spoiled or indulged" (149). Maya, too, has been spoilt by her father's upbringing, where she describes her childhood as akin to a "toy princess in a toy world" (*CTP*, 78). Gautama gets exasperated by her sensitivities and indulgences and mocks her, saying sarcastically that "everyone must bring a present for little Maya—that is what her father taught her" (*CTP*, 98). Desai here is pointedly drawing attention to the ennui and emptiness of the middle-class woman who reacts in various ways to family-based and sanctioned codes of righteous feminine conduct. Anuradha Roy states that in Maya's case, her father's benevolent tyranny creates a situation where "[t]he powerlessness of women is...generated within the structures of the family, through apparently nurturing institutions and individuals" (quoted in Jackson, 35). Maya's father's attitude towards fatalism that he has taught her, that one must accept and everything will be alright, offers Maya no alternatives from the albino astrologer's prophecy of death. Feeling utterly lost and insecure by the hounding of the prophecy, Maya desperately thinks "Father! Brother! Husband! Who is my saviour?" (*CTP*, 84). She ultimately realizes

that her father, husband and brother are all extensions of each other and of male ways of thinking which are essentially alien to her nature: “‘The stagnant dregs of sentimentalism available only to the decadent’. Who had said that? Arjuna? Gautama? It could have been either” (CTP, 117). Maya tries not to ‘accept’ and rebel against fate and fatalistic thinking engendered by the men in her life, and in doing so she is deemed as a misfit, a neurotic (exclaimed repeatedly by Gautama), and eventually as insane. Maya is then a completely othered ‘pet’ here when she withdraws into her subjective world. An important point that crops up here is that the woman (Maya) and the animal (pet) become exchangeable. The affinity between the woman and animal resides in this exchangeability in the male mental model (espoused by Gautama) which is alien both to the woman and the animal.

The dualisms of culture/nature, rational (detachment)/emotional (attachment) and human/animal, are literalized/personified in the form of Gautama and Maya as a couple. In deriding Maya and not losing any opportunity to put her down, Gautama uses animal pejoratives in a negative sense for Maya:

You have done it once again, Maya. You go chattering *like a monkey*, and I am annoyed that I have been interrupted in my thinking. But, *being a creature of pure instinct*, you do, every now and then, stumble—purely by accident, I’m sure—upon the salient point of the problem. (CTP, 20, my emphasis)

The blatant categorization of Maya as a monkey and a creature of pure instinct slot her into an inferior position. In comparing Maya to an animal, two things simultaneously happen here. Firstly, the denotation of the animal by Gautama ‘removes’ him from animals, and in a larger picture, distances humans and animals from each other and reinforces the false dualisms in place. Secondly, through the binary divisions, the woman here is effectively ‘animalized’ and excluded from humankind. Joan Dunayer states that “[l]inguistically ousting women from

humankind has force because lack of membership in the human species condemns an individual, however thinking and feeling, to inferior status” (19). Similarly, the use of an animal in an image as a negative connotation reflects the belief that nonhuman species do not merit equal consideration, dignity and respect.

According to Dunayer, “[e]very negative image of another species helps keep that species oppressed” (17). Here, in light of the negative comparison between Maya and chattering monkeys, it is important to discuss the scene at the railway station where Maya gets distressed by the plight of caged monkeys being shipped off to America for scientific laboratory experiments. Maya

went towards them, looked at them through tears, watching them move, feverishly, desperately, in cages too small to contain their upright bodies. ...Long furred bodies swarming upon each other, till limbs and tails were twisted together, the elegant lines of their muscles contorted nightmarishly...And one that [she] saw was perfectly still and quiet, backed into a corner by the frantic bodies of its companions, and gazed out with eyes that had melted into liquid drops about to slide down its pinched, indrawn cheeks. Its brow was lined with foreboding and the suffering of a tragic calamity, and its hands, folded across its thin belly, waited to accept it. Then it spied on something on the platform beside it, and, with famine swiftness, shot out one arm and picked it up, brought it close to its face for inspection, and sniffed it. It was only a monkey-nut shell, empty. A small whimper broke from the animal as it dropped the shell, then was silent again, waiting. (*CTP*, 129-130)

Marian Scholtmeijer states that “[t]he injustices suffered by women—the suppression, silencing, and violence—are arguably an extension of the more easily identified abuse of animals” (232) and that “[o]ne way [of] ensuring that animals are not alone in their pain [is by] means of a posited kinship between victimized women and victimized animals, [where] women writers both reclaim the fact of women’s suffering and challenge the isolation of human from animal that permits aggression against animals in the first place” (235). Desai here attempts to show how Maya’s suffering and that of the monkeys is linked. Maya’s distress at the animals’ distress is apparent here, and

Desai does not necessarily privilege one over the other. Through her tears, when Maya tells Gautama that the monkeys are hungry and thirsty and they should not be in those cages, Gautama's reaction is to dismiss her cries as excessive female sentimentality just as her reactions to her dog Toto's death were dismissed by him. The validity of Maya's feelings and sentiments over the animals' suffering, which she identifies with, is completely estranged from Gautama that only a connection and concurrence with the animals (monkeys) can tell of and validate Maya's isolation here. In this sense then, Maya's sense of resignation at her fate, her feelings of sadness and isolation—"let me out! I want to live Gautama, I want to live!" (*CTP*, 131)—would have remained indescribable without the example of the monkeys here.

The focus on the corporeality and materiality of the monkey's bodies—"long furred bodies swarming upon each other, till limbs and tails were twisted together", "eyes that had melted into liquid drops about to slide down its pinched, indrawn cheeks" (*CTP*, 130), also a clear reference to animals subjected to cruel experiments in cosmetic industries—points to the reduction of these animals as mere body parts for exploitation in the name of scientific progress for humanity. Such exploitation is thoroughly rationalized and legitimized through scientific and hegemonic discourses by the state to secure general public acceptance, in this case seen through Gautama's reactions and even his mother's reaction, who recognizes that "something must be done immediately about it" (*CTP*, 130) but nonetheless remains distanced enough from the plight of the monkeys to let them be transported to Bombay for scientific experiments. As a woman who works with NGOs, Gautama's mother has the power to actually do something about the monkeys' plight, to translate her reaction into tangible action, but she refrains from going all the way, therefore not associating herself to the spheres of nature or animal in any way. Animals as such, then, are

treated as raw materials and manufactured commodities, and both the oppressions of humans and animals oppression have escalated with the rise of capitalism as an overarching economic system. The monkeys here are considered as a resource, a factor of production, and are thus tightly crowded into small cages with feeding and watering largely neglected to minimize operational costs so that some people in power (scientific companies, multi-national corporations, etc. hierarchically at the top) can benefit. In this analysis then, suffering is not accidental but a “logical outcome of a system that demands profit above all else. And this extends from the economic system into the political system” (DeMello, 274), as exemplified by Gautama, the main male voice of reason, politics and the public sphere in the novel.

Similar to this is the incident with the bear. As children, Maya and the gardener’s children watch a bear performing at her father’s house for their entertainment:

The bear balances on its tired feet, his snout up in the air, as though in prayer, and his unexpectedly small frail paws curled, like a sleeping child’s, over his once handsome chest ...The trainer, holding onto a string which is attached to a metal ring that passes through the bear’s nose, goes around with his filthy turban turned inside out, singing a song for pity and *baksheesh*. And all the while the bear stands there, his quivering, dew-touched snout lifted into the air which is scented with carnations and oranges—enjoying an interval of memory refreshed between the agony of the brawling asphalt streets...and he closes his eyes because he cannot bear to see the flat, flat lawn, the white, white house, the many, many people, when his heart is pounding with renewed passion for the wilderness of rain scented firs and the tangled undergrowth of the Himalayan mountains...(CTP, 75-76)

The bear as a performing animal is highlighted by Desai here, where such a performance is a “devised [way] of seeing and connecting with wild animals” (DeMello, 100). In general, the more wild and exotic an animal, the more pleasure most people get by watching them perform (DeMello, 101). The wild animal, such as the bear, is brought into a domestic space—Maya’s father’s house—to do humanlike

tricks, and such a use of the wild animal within the domestic sphere maintains the distance necessary to fit most people's idea of entertainment: "the bear balances on its tired feet, his snout up in the air, as though in prayer, and his unexpectedly small frail paws curled, like a sleeping child's, over his once handsome chest" (*CTP*, 75). However, such an interaction with the bear hardly provides him with any benefits. The bear is forced to perform in ways that are unnatural for him, for example standing on his hind legs and folding his paws and holding that balanced posture for a period of time. The trainer's power and control over the wild bear is demonstrated through his actions of "holding onto a string which is attached to a metal ring that passes through the bear's nose" (*CTP*, 75). The nose ring indicates potential physical violence towards the bear to train him to perform tricks. Even here, as in the scene with the monkeys, food deprivation is indicated as a form of control and emotional punishment for the animal. When Maya gazes into the eyes of the bear, she sees that "all pride and power have gone" from the bear, "leaving only an intent determination to remain tearless" (*CTP*, 76) and gauging his hunger, she runs inside her house to get two bananas for the bear. Maya again demonstrates a connection with the distress of the animal, and gets profoundly affected by it: "'I was sure', I explain to my father, when unable to sleep that night, 'that the bear doesn't get much out of [the trainer's] earnings. I'm *sure* he doesn't'" (*CTP*, 77, original emphasis).

The reaction of the trainer to Maya feeding his hungry bear reveals much:

the trainer's face grows clouded. Looking up at him, I see that he is furious, and am a little shaken in my pride at having made the Himalayan beast happy. ... 'You have given the beast food, missahib, and not to a poor human being. If he is hungry, do I not starve? If he dances for his living, do I not sweat? Alas for the ignorance of the blessed rich! They will not consider a man's hunger anymore'. (*CTP*, 77)

Firstly, it reveals a class-based oppression, where the “blessed rich” live in ignorance and abuse the trainer that he already has been paid his fair share and should not complain that he is hungry. The trainer, however, returns the abuse with equal vehemence, and in comparing his own human labour with the wild animal’s hunger and dancing, reveals the “ongoing confrontation between the wild and the tame” (Kalof and Fitzgerald, 193). In ‘taming’ the bear and getting him to be docile through the infliction of pain (nose ring) and hunger, it gives credence to Yi-Fu Tuan’s dictum that “domestication means domination” (143), and in extension an affirmation of the superiority of culture over nature, the disciplining of the ‘wild’ into being ‘tame’.

In both the long passages quoted from the monkey scene as well as the bear scene, we see Desai’s use of anthropomorphism here. She describes the whimpering and shrieking of the monkeys’ distress and hunger using human metaphors and feelings, and does likewise for the description of the bear’s yearning to be free and roam in the wild again through a child’s perspective (seen in the repetition of “flat, flat”, “white, white” and “many, many”). Maya’s vision as a child sees the bear standing in a mournful attitude with infinite sorrow etched on his face due to the loss of freedom of living a life in the mountains. As pointed out earlier, anthropomorphism is a necessary device that Desai uses to illuminate and to give meaning to Maya’s connection with the animals as well as highlight the animals in themselves. However, that does not mean that Desai’s use of anthropomorphism is also androcentric and anthropocentric. While it is true that the words used to describe the distress of the animals are also used to describe human feelings, it “does not mean that we somehow own them” (DeMello, 358). Eileen Christ postulates that in using anthropomorphism, animals are represented in the language of the ‘lifeworld’, a world inhabited by actors “whose lives are filled with action and meaning” (DeMello, 358). She states that “[i]n

rendering action meaningful and authored, animals emerge as subjects. In turn, the portrayal of animals as subjects allows the existence of [their] mental life to supervene with forcefulness and credibility” (Christ, quoted in DeMello, 358). Thus, Desai’s use of anthropomorphism in the narrative act of conjoining the protagonist Maya and the animal victims such as the monkeys and the bear is a positive step in highlighting not only the woman’s suffering in a patriarchal system but also affirming the importance of animal suffering. Such a strategy also exposes how “power over another being is demonstrably firm and perversely delicious when it is exercised for no particular purpose and when submission to it goes against the victim’s own strong desires and nature” (Tuan, 148), as seen by the caged monkeys and the performing bear, and even Maya who lives subjugated by her father and brother first, and Gautama later on. At the same time, Maya’s need for an outlet for her gestures of affection (which are blatantly rejected by Gautama) is provided by the animals whose distress she feels deeply for and, in some sense reflects her own distress as well.

Maya’s traumatic childhood event of the performing bear and the nightmares of discombobulated bear and human body parts in a grotesque dance routine thereafter come as a flashback immediately after another (traumatic) event that Maya faces as an adult: a cabaret dance routine. The cabaret dance that Maya witnesses with Gautama and his friends proves to be a frightening experience for her. It brings her face-to-face with the exploitation of the cabaret dancers, which then triggers off her memory of the bear dance and the exploitation of the animal she sees as a child. The cabaret dance routine is depicted at length by Desai in the novel, and the juxtaposition of the exploitation of the women and the bear distills the workings of Maya’s subconscious mind into concrete reality—her own oppression, the cabaret dancers’ oppression and the bear’s oppression all bound together by the same forces of oppression (patriarchy,

class, caste, gender) as well as the prophecy of death told to her by the albino astrologer. Desai uses descriptive animal phrases such as “wild catcalls”, “the howls of preying wolves hunting in packs, in the darkening jungles”, and “little animal cries of voluptuous invitation, as cats do when they mate” (*CTP*, 73-74) throughout the entire scene of the cabaret, the many references to sexual exploitation of the women. Using such language also points to the objectification of both women and animals, where “each spangle was a price tag, each price tag proclaimed the price of their breasts, their rumps, their legs. The spangles were bright, the prices were low” (*CTP*, 74), such objectification of body parts as part of the process by which women and animals have been reduced to “isolated and productive *consuming* units” (Berger, 256, my emphasis). Here, it is helpful to consider Carol Adams’ analysis of the objectification of women’s bodies and how it is linked to objectification of animals: “[w]hat is “the sexual politics of meat”? It is an attitude and action that *animalizes women* and *sexualizes and feminizes animals*” (4, my emphasis). Her analysis of sexual violence and exploitation of both women and animals elucidates the reactions of the (male) audience watching the cabaret, for example the Sikh who shouts “Jolly good!” (*CTP*, 72) at the sight of a gyrating woman and “the fat man at the neighbouring table sobbing ‘Beautiful! B-beautiful b-bitch!’” (*CTP*, 74):

The process of viewing another as consumable, as *something*, is usually invisible to us. Its invisibility occurs because it corresponds to the view of the dominant culture. The process is also invisible to us because the end product of the process—the object of consumption—is available everywhere. ...Through the sexual politics of meat, consuming images such as these provide a way for our culture to talk openly about and joke about the objectification of women without having to acknowledge that this is what they are doing. ...It makes the degradation of women appear playful and harmless. ...The sexual politics of meat traps everyone—“him”, “you”, and the animals who are supposed to be consumed. (Adams, 15-17)

In highlighting the exploitation, degradation and objectification of the cabaret women, animals do not become absent referents in the language used by Desai here because this episode is immediately followed by the memory of the performance of the bear that Maya sees as a child. The effect of such a move is that this serves to bring up the connections between such exploitation and objectification between women and animals and different structures of oppressions. Furthermore, readers can detect a discomfort of class in the cabaret episode as well. There is an intrusion of women of a different class—the cabaret dancers are of a poor working class background (in the party). Desai highlights how people/women of a lower class are that much more easily animalized. Maya intuitively makes these connections, and for her then, the life of a wild animal, epitomized by the bear, becomes an ideal she wants to strive towards. Such an ideal is characterised by John Berger as a feeling surrounding a repressed desire that is internalised (Berger, 257). Maya's desire here is to live immersed in the world of attachments that is derided by patriarchal logic, to live fully and freely.

Here, it is important to go back to my argument on the link between women, animals and violence. The cabaret dancers highlight this link aptly by being sexualized and animalized through linguistic violence, patriarchal attitudes as well as class oppression where these women are ostracized by the society and thus removed and distanced from that very 'genteel' society. Desai, however, centralizes them as 'other' in her novel by devoting a significant section describing the attitudes towards these dancers, especially from the male audience and Maya's intuitive fear and disgust which connects the various oppressions and violence to her own self. Desai thus illustrates their animalization, sexual exploitation and oppression in great detail, shedding light on the specific processes that align women and animals into inferior and stereotyped positions.

Carol Adams' and Josephine Donovan's feminist theorizing about the sexual politics of meat and the exploitation and objectification of women and animal bodies is also applicable to Markandaya's novel. In *Nectar in a Sieve*, the significance of the tannery lies in its direct and literal consumption of animals. Not only do the birds avoid the village for the tannery was situated there, the tannery actually transforms animals into leather for various consumer goods. Here, capitalist logic works in conjunction with the speciesist nature of this industry that profits from the (dead) bodies of non-human animals. Alongside this, Rukmani also objects to the curtailment of freedom of her daughter Ira's carefree movements. With the presence of the tannery and its workers, Ira as a child is no longer able to follow her brothers wherever they went, highlighting once again the connections between the subordination of women and animals often in terms of violence and physical harm. It is important to note that Markandaya never mentions in her novel the specific caste and class positions of her characters. Rukmini's sons work in the tannery and she is unhappy about it, and this may go back to Hindu beliefs that dead animals are polluting (although the fact that her sons work in the tannery suggest that they are of the lower caste/untouchables). The tannery as such goes against ingrained upper-caste Hindu beliefs of not only dead animals as polluting but also the consumption of meat as unclean.

Maya the Predator

Maya, like Rukmani, tries to assimilate herself in the larger community ethic of care towards animals and others. Rukmani, although homeless and destitute, still takes pleasure to feed and enjoy watching goats munching on leaves near the temple in the city. Maya, too, longs to share with Gautama the joy and pleasure she feels when she sees a "goat nuzzle, secretly, a basket of sliced melons in the bazaar" (*CTP*,

90). Maya, so far, seems to reinforce all the traits attributed to her on the other side of the binary slash—nature, emotional and animal. However, she re-appropriates this ‘otherness’ attributed to her and overturns the victim-and-victimizer images in several instances. Where initially she is aligned to the image of a trapped prey, Desai re-appropriates her into the imagery of predation instead.

The first sign of a predatory sensibility taking root in Maya’s mind is when she reflects on her own opinion of her friend Leila’s husband who is incapacitated due to tuberculosis. She thinks of her friend’s husband as “an animal, a ferocious and wild beast that had allowed itself to become a house pet for its own reasons, and he accepted the food and drink [Leila] earned for him” (*CTP*, 53). Maya’s potential for participating in the oppression of others who are less fortunate than her is seen in this remark. Carol Adams is extremely critical of such sensibilities reflected in women’s writing. She says that “feminist theorists take us to the intersection of the oppression of women and oppression of animals and then do an immediate about-face...and so reflecting a patriarchal structure” (90). Adams’ comment here is helpful in making sense of Maya’s attitude towards Leila’s husband. Maya is shown to have the potential to be complicit in perpetuating the very oppression she suffers and wants to escape from. Here, a class-based and speciesist-based oppression are at work where the incapacitated lower middle-class husband is given an inferior status by Maya through the linguistic fusing of negative animal pejoratives. Her discourse here fails to integrate the literal oppression of animals as well—animals that she supposedly feels akin to, such as her pet dog Toto, at times her pet cat, the monkeys at the railway station and the performing bear. She starts occupying an ambivalent position here, where her complicit condescending attitude towards Leila’s husband does not slot her

into the romanticized position of the caring, nurturing woman automatically linked to the natural.

Maya is also not as passive as she is deemed to be by critics writing on Desai's novels. In several instances, she challenges Gautama's inflexible logic and tries to put forth her own views about the issues that concern her deeply. For example, when Gautama callously dismisses the idea of burial rights for Maya's beloved pet dog Toto as attachment and sentimentalism which, according to him is not espoused by the *Gita*, Maya attempts to stand her ground: "But how can you tell which facts matter?... I mean, how can you dictate?" (*CTP*, 19). Maya craves not just emotional involvement and attachment with the world around her but she also wants to be respected by Gautama for her thoughts and feelings, values and perspective which are so different from his. She makes one last attempt at confronting Gautama towards the end of the novel, "begging him once more to answer, to come and meet [her] half-way in [her] own world, not merely demand of [her], brusquely, to join him in his" (*CTP*, 164). Gautama's constant refusal to acknowledge the validity of Maya's feelings and perspective results in the intensifying of her inner life and thus rebelling against Gautama's cold way of thinking and living life.

The images of peacocks, and reptiles and rodents such as lizards and rats start to assume a major significance for Maya. Claude Levi-Strauss in "The Totemic Illusion" says that "natural species are chosen not because they are "good to eat" but because they are "good to think" (268). Strauss argues that totemic animals have a "perceptible reality" that intensifies the "embodiment of ideas" (268), and through this, humans have a special way of thinking about animals. Strauss's idea iterates a positive aspect of a human-animal relationship. To a certain extent, Strauss's idea that animals are "good to think" is useful in clarifying how Maya thinks about peacocks,

and ultimately how she inverts the idea so that it takes on a negative aspect instead. The frenzied dance of the peacocks is a central image in the novel. On the one hand, peacocks do assume a totemic value in the novel. For Maya (and even for the readers) the peacocks are “good to think” as they indicate a human merger with animals through myth and fantasy. Boria Sax in “Animals as Tradition” applies Strauss’s idea towards having a respectful relationship with animals through symbolism, stories and myth. This is seen in the way Maya first thinks about the peacocks being wise and their “hundred eyes upon their tails have seen the truth of life and death, and know them to be one” (*CTP*, 83). She starts identifying herself with the peacocks: “I heard their cry and echoed it. I felt their thirst as they gazed at the rain-clouds, their passion as they hunted for their mates” (*CTP*, 83).

However, the image of the peacocks start assuming a more morbid significance for Maya as the novel progresses and she is unable to escape the prophecy of death. The image of the frenzied dance of the peacocks who fight before they mate, “pia, pia, they cry. Lover lover. Mio mio—I die I die” (*CTP*, 83), is saturated with both Maya’s longing for love and the premonition of early death. She starts viewing her marriage to Gautama as a struggle—like the peacocks when they fight, mate and die—which will ultimately lead to the death of one of them. The idea that then distills in her mind from the peacocks is that of murder: “Hate was a new emotion to me...And what made gods reach out and touch it with their cold fingers, as they considered the prospect of a murder? Murder.” (*CTP*, 91). Maya justifies her thoughts and actions by feeling superior to Gautama in her world of interiority, thinking that since Gautama is detached from her and the world around him, it is not she who must die, but him. Peacocks that were supposed to be ‘good to think’ and

have a positive relational image ultimately take on a morbid image and lead to a violent idea embodied in Maya.

As Maya succumbs to living more and more in her subjective world, several disturbing images of slimy, crawling creatures such as rats, snakes, lizards (iguanas) figure one after another, and all of them are associated with the albino astrologer and the prophecy that he makes. For example, the image of rats nursing their young, at first glance, seems to obliquely indicate Maya's agony over her own childlessness:

Rats will suckle their young most tenderly. I know this, as now I lived quite near one, with seven young ones nestling between her legs. ...And the rats with their young, suckling them, *then lashing their tails, spreading plague.* (CTP, 107, my emphasis)

The tender image gives way to one of disease where rats spread plague. Intertwined with this image is that of "snakes that coil themselves...with forked tongues that lash and lash again at the heart of innocence" (CTP, 107). The repetition of the word "lash" indicates a violent gesture and there is no coherence to Maya's thoughts here. All of these images reach a crescendo that reveal Maya's deep-seated preoccupation with death:

But what of the dangers? Ah, they'll not tell you of them. Of the lizards, the lizards that come upon you, stalking you silently, upon clawed toes, slipping their clublike tongues in and out, in and out with an audible hiss and a death's rattle, slowly moving up, closing in on you, taking their time, knowing they have hypnotized you with their circular eyes...
Albinos. Bleached into albinos by the desert sun, these lizards. But the rat, too, is an albino...
Ah, here it comes, the lizard. Here it comes to mount you, saliva falling in lines of white from its mouth, its belly dragging on the ground, then dragging on you. (CTP, 107-108)

The inner world of her imagination is no longer inhabited by human beings or recollections of her father and his garden, but rather it is now inhabited by rats, snakes and lizards. These animals in her subconscious capture the predatory sensibility in

Maya, where after this episode, she is so shocked at the unpleasantness of the slimy creatures in her mind that she detests any animal that comes near her, even her pet cat, for a moment. Maya's kinship with one set of animals is disrupted here: that with her pets. However, she veers towards identifying with animals that she associates with disease and death, and ultimately connects them to the albino astrologer. After this, Maya decides that even for the fulfillment of the albino astrologer's prophecy, her own death is not necessary, that it might be Gautama's death instead. It becomes interesting to note Maya's reversal of roles here where she starts identifying herself with the erstwhile enemy. The images quoted above from her subconscious are then functional in the sense that they warn the reader of the potential violence and destruction that the seemingly fragile Maya is capable of. The rats, snakes and lizards also reflect how Maya subconsciously reverts to the Aristotelian classification of both Gautama and the albino astrologer with creatures considered of lesser worth and at the bottom of the great chain of being.

Maya's final act of killing Gautama, pushing him off the roof when he comes between her and the moon, is her ultimate way of rebelling against him and what he generally represents—detachment, the male sphere of reason and public politics—and all of these are dictated on Gautama's terms. He is detached from Maya and life in general, and cements his position by quoting from the Gita that it is necessary to remain detached and not get overly emotional. Through this logic, he is associated with the reason side of the reason/emotion binary, and since the public sphere is touted to be the male sphere, he represents the sphere of public politics in the novel. Although Maya ironically achieves some semblance of the 'detached temperament' that Gautama always espoused to her through convincing herself of the need to do away with him completely, Desai here does not offer any utopian solution to Maya's

predicaments. The ending of the novel suggests that Maya commits suicide, and narratively speaking Maya has to die because she is perceived to be too much of an 'other' to the social norm. Desai, however, does not resort to this move in her novel *Fire on the Mountain*. While Maya is not offered any alternative but death, which results in her nihilistic 'liberation', this is reversed in the character of Raka in *Fire on the Mountain*. Maya, however, in no way is romantically aligned by Desai to either side of the binary slash in culture/nature. Maya's connection with animals and nature is both positive and negative, creative and destructive, and at best, she seems to straddle the space in-between the slash in complex ways.

Narrative Strategy in *Cry, the Peacock* in Centering the 'Other'

Desai's novel *Cry, the Peacock*, is generally a plotless novel. Desai makes it very clear in her novel that Maya's limitation of space—she is restricted to Gautama's home or her father's home—reinforces a state of 'uneventfulness' in Maya's existence within her domestic space. The plotlessness then, in turn, reinforces and highlights the restriction of domestic existence for Maya. Desai then uses characterization as her main device to move the story forward, hence the heavy emphasis on what Maya thinks, feels and does. Through this, Maya is the main focalizer, but she is also an active agent in telling her own story for most parts of the novel.

Maya is also the narrator in the novel (except for the last part), and it makes clear where Desai's own sympathies lie. Karen Warren argues that, from an ecofeminist perspective, first-person narratives "give voice to a felt sensitivity often lacking in traditional ethical discourse, namely, a sensitivity to conceiving of oneself as fundamentally 'in relationship with' others" (quoted in Vance, 176). Applied to Maya's first-person narration in *Cry, the Peacock*, we see that, Maya is in a complex

and ambivalent relationship with the more-than-human world, and that connection is not even considered a possibility by her husband Gautama or the other men in her life. This narrative technique, however, can nowhere be said to be an objective method of reporting events in the novel. Maya as the narrator is unreliable. This technique, apart from giving a disjointed and fragmented perception of reality, is important in ultimately questioning whether Gautama, logical, unsentimental and detached, is really the wise one or is it Maya, sensitive, emotional and craving a connection with Gautama as well as the more-than-human world.

Images and symbols feature prominently and powerfully in her novel, especially zoological images and tropes from the natural world. Apart from foregrounding the 'other' in the novel, these images are, at one level, used to express feelings and perceptions of the characters since her novel here mainly deals with the interior self. The psychic and emotional state of the protagonist Maya is often reflected in her response to animals, to the landscape and to other incidents in the natural world. Maya's helplessness and acute longing for freedom is repeatedly expressed in terms of the images of caged birds, caged monkeys or the wild bear that is deprived of its freedom. The dust storm that takes place just prior to the incident where Maya pushes Gautama off the roof is cathartic for her because it is a means by which she externalizes her emotional unrest: "it gave me a sensation of flying, of being lifted off the earth and into the sunset, released from bondage, released from fate, from death and dreariness and unwanted dreams" (*CTP*, 157-158). Maya's loneliness and desire to reach out to Gautama is powerfully conveyed through the image of the night sky. Gautama's final act of tipping Maya over the edge when he interposes himself between her and the moon also happens in the backdrop of the night sky, where the moon itself is an archetypal symbol of female imagination and

madness (lunacy). Desai's use of such zoological imagery especially, and symbols, becomes what Berger calls the "universal use of animal-signs for charting the experience of the world" (254). The subjective experiences of Maya are then made concrete to the reader through these images from the natural world.

Fire on the Mountain

Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* (FOTM) centres on Nanda Kaul, a great-grandmother, who supposedly retreats to a former British hill station, Kasauli, in order to spend her old age in peace and isolation in her house called Carignano. Her quiet life in Carignano is interrupted by her great-granddaughter Raka, who is being sent to her to recover from an illness. It is revealed at the end of the novel that Nanda Kaul's husband had had a life-long affair with a mathematics teacher, Miss David, and Nanda is forced to go into exile rather than choosing it on her own. She comes to terms with this reality in her life when she hears that her old friend Ila Das has been raped and murdered. At the same time, Raka sets the forest on fire.

Nanda Kaul and Ila Das

The following sections in this chapter will show that Desai, in *Fire on the Mountain*, crystallizes the link between women, animals and violence. If *Cry, the Peacock* subtly hints at violence initially before it is realized in the end—" [Maya] winced at [Gautama's] violence", Gautama "flung the towel to the floor where it made a soft, damp plop like a limp dead bird thrown down" (49)—*Fire on the Mountain* presents its readers with outright abuse and physical violence meted out to its female characters as well as animals in the flesh.

The image of the hen assumes a prominent significance throughout the novel, especially related to direct physical abuse and violence. We are told through Ram Lal, the cook, that the hens that live at Carignano "were said to be the descendants of Miss

Jane Shrewsbury's original poultry and certainly looked antique, hardy" (12). Ram Lal turns the hens into his victims of violence "while he started flinging chopped vegetable heads at them, each one accompanied by a word of filthy abuse" (12) and then again when "he flung his filthy market-bag at [a bony hen] in rage" (39). Ram Lal's violent attitude towards the hens crystallizes two things which merit attention: the deep-seated link between violence, animals and women, and, the connection of farm animals (hens) and women which has not been given sufficient attention in literary works.

The link between violence, animals and women has already been discussed in some detail with regards to the novel *Cry, the Peacock*. In *Fire on the Mountain*, we see this taken one step further. Such a violence is first hinted at through Nanda Kaul. When the telephone rings at Carignano, Nanda reluctantly answers the phone to discover it is her friend Ila Das calling her. While talking to Ila, Nanda

stared out the window at a large hen scratching under the hydrangea. ...Nanda Kaul turned her head this way and that in an effort to escape. She watched the white hen drag out a worm inch by resisting inch from the ground till it snapped in two. She felt like the worm herself, she winced at its mutilation. (20-21)

The narrative slowly reveals why she identifies herself to a mutilated worm and is forced to live under circumstances of exile and utter desolate isolation. The novel reveals the proverbial double standards that allow Nanda Kaul's husband to keep both a wife and mistress, while doing just enough so that Nanda Kaul does not speak up against this injustice. It is also an indictment against the remnants of a colonial past and a Victorian ideology that prepared women like Nanda Kaul and Ila Das for a "status-enhancing role in the house with a piano... [and] not the kind of skills that would qualify her to take up outside employment" (Wickramagamage, quoted in

Jackson, 39).⁷ This then constitutes a critique of the fashionable upbringing characteristic of the neo-elites after India's independence which particularly left women incapable of facing changing political realities and dealing with real problems. Elizabeth Jackson states in *Feminism and Contemporary Indian Women's Writing* that, for women such as Ila Das and Nanda Kaul, who are part of the colonised native elites, there is a "desire to emulate bourgeois British cultural norms" (38) where daughters and wives were expected to assume a status-enhancing role. For women, this predicament was peculiar to the middle-class, and such expectations of women continued in the neo-elites even after India gained independence. This emphasis on image and status prevented middle-class women such as Nanda and Ila from confronting/rebelling against their oppression (Jackson, *Feminism and Contemporary Indian Women's Writing*, 39). Nanda's confinement to domesticity is implicitly interconnected to this violence meted out to her and she therefore explicitly rejects her obligations as a mother, grandmother and great-grandmother. Hence, she does not delight in the sight of hoopoes feeding their babies and associates the call of the cuckoo with the demands and constraints of domesticity and it is also why she feels preyed upon by the domestic hen.

Linked to the above is the question of domesticity, farm animals and women. Where attention has been paid to domesticated companion animals such as pets, seen in *Cry, the Peacock*, this is not the case for domesticated farm animals, and Desai's novel here opens up the issue. Nanda Kaul's sphere of domesticity and her explicit rejection of it has its roots in the notion of domesticated farm animals that are kept for a specific purpose and where humans control their breeding. This is seen in the

⁷ See: Elizabeth Jackson, *Feminism and Contemporary Indian Women's Writing* (London; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) 38-41. See also: Carmen Wickramagamage, "Private Women/Public Men?: Reading Politics into Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*", *Journal of the South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies* 38: 1994, 19-45.

continuation of the lineage of Miss Jane Shrewsbury's hens. Ram Lal's violence towards the hens not only points to the growing consensus that "there is a strong causal connection, known as "the link", between violence toward animals and violence toward people" (DeMello, 245), but it also highlights the literal suffering farm animals such as hens have to go through in industrial factory farm production. Carol Adams writes that in institutional factory-farming, it is usually female animals such as hens and cows that are used for the output of 'feminized' protein such as eggs and milk, a clear example of the exploitation of the reproductive system of the female farm animal. The female bodies of animals then are not only exploited but go through a literal and material suffering due to the close confinement of such animals that has necessitated a number of procedures to be performed on the livestock. Hens, for example, go through the process of debeaking—"amputating, without anesthesia, the front of the chicken's beak" (DeMello, 93)—where they are intensively confined in battery cages. A particularized connection also exists between hens and women in terms of linguistic metaphors used to describe female body parts: thigh, breast, leg, etc., when referring to women and the meat/body parts of the chicken/hen to be consumed as meat. Karen Davis writes that animals like hens are conventionally associated with "images of things that are "unnatural, tame, and confined" (196), and it is precisely in this connection of the unnatural, tame and confined that Nanda Kaul is located in and resists. Also, Desai once again does not make the woman or the hen an absent referent, where the comparison does not elide the woman or the animal.

At this point, it is important to bring in Ila Das and the brutal violence that is meted out to her. Ila Das depicts the plight of a woman caught between the contradictory discourses of British imperialism and Hindu patriarchy. Like Nanda, Ila Das recognizes and articulates the perils of their upbringing: "We thought we were

being equipped with the very best—French lessons, piano lessons, English governesses—my, all that to find it left us helpless, positively *handicapped*” (*FOTM*, 127, original emphasis). While having been brought up to emulate bourgeois British cultural norms, she is at the same time subject to Hindu inheritance laws where her brothers are the sole inheritors of the family property, leaving her, her sister and her mother penniless. She is unable to support herself adequately due to her genteel upbringing. Being forced to work as a social worker in the village, Ila suffers not only from material deprivation but also because she is perceived as a total misfit and an oddity where she is pushed aside, jeered at and bears taunts from almost anyone she comes across.

Ila is aware of the village men’s hostilities towards her, particularly Preet Singh:

Now I’ve run into all this trouble over trying to stop child marriage...they’re planning to marry their little girl, who is only just seven, to an old man in the next village because he owns a quarter of an acre of land and two goats. He’s a widower and has six children but, for a bit of land and two goats, they’re willing to sacrifice their little girl. Nanda, can you believe it? I’ve argued and argued with her mother, and I even tackled the father, Preet Singh, in the potato fields the other day. But he’s a sullen lout, I could see I wasn’t making any headway with him. (*FOTM*, 129-130)

Desai prefigures the rape and attack on Ila at least three times using the “parallel trajectories of the common oppressions of women and animals, the problems of metaphor and the absent referent” (Adams, 73) as well as the link between violence to animals and violence towards women. Firstly, it is prefigured when Nanda Kaul throws away a ripe apricot and “[i]mmmediately, a bright hoopoe, seeing its flight and flash, struck down at it and tore at its bright flesh, then flew off with a lump in its beak” (*FOTM*, 4). Here, the problem of metaphor and the absent referent is brought forth in considering the incident of the male violence where the use of a stand-in

image of a hoopoe and an apricot “alternates between a positive figurative activity and a negative activity of occlusion, negation, and omission in which the literal fate of the animal [and woman] is elided” (Adams, 73). Secondly, Ila Das’s rape is prefigured in the violence of schoolboys firstly towards a chipmunk, and later on towards Ila Das herself. In the first instance, the schoolboy “would stop now to pick up a flat stone, now to shy it at a chipmunk...then slide down on his bottom into the ditch and search for a golden beetle” (*FOTM*, 5). In the second instance, the schoolboys swung about Ila Das

like *langurs*, ...They hooted at her little grey top-knot that wobbled on top of her head...at everything, in short, that was Ila Das. Whooping and hooting, munching and mooing, they ran to the right and left of her, suddenly stopping, suddenly swerving to bump her small, brittle person, to send her crocheted and motheaten shoulder bag flying or her umbrella spinning...’Lace-y and tart-y’ bawled another whose weapon was a marble as large as a horse chestnut. (*FOTM*, 108)

Ila Das becomes a victim of both physical and linguistic violence here (lacey and tarty), and although Ram Lal does come around to help Ila, he also contributes to this violence by scorning her as an “old animal that has been made to run before the hounds. Carefully turning his head, he spat into the raspberry bushes” (*FOTM*, 109). In the third instance, we come back to the image of the hen and the more specifically crucial comparison between women and farm animals. The hen here is caught in a dust storm: “A white hen was lifted into the air and tossed past the window in a frantic, fluttery arc, its squawks snatched out of its beak and shattered like glass” (*FOTM*, 52-53). Ila’s primary distinguishing characteristic is also shown to be her hideous shrill and screeching voice, like the squawks of the hen, which is brutally silenced when she is strangled while being raped: “the last gasp rattled inside her, choked and rattled and was still” (*FOTM*, 143). K. J Phillips writes about Ila Das that

“just as she is directly compared to a shot crow (102), she is [also then] *implicitly present in the squawking hen*” (7, my emphasis).

The horrific spectacle of male violence against Ila—being raped and murdered—shows Preet Singh resorting to “a uniquely gendered revenge...to regain his superiority over her as a man in a culture governed by an ideology of female subordination” (Wickramagamage, quoted in Jackson, 40). At the literal level, the rape suggests that sexual violence has its own ‘terrible logic’ (Jackson, 71), meted out as a punishment for a woman such as Ila Das who dares to interfere with men’s transactions of female sexuality (Jackson, 71; Ramanathan, 28). At the narrative level, the rape has been viewed by critics metaphorically and symbolically to expose the futility of life that Nanda Kaul leads, and this rape ultimately forces her to face the reality spun in a web of lies (of fantastical stories) for herself and for her great-granddaughter Raka, ultimately leading to Nanda’s death as well. It is deeply ironic that Ila Das’s rape is mercilessly carried out in the darkness of the fields that are supposed to sustain life, bringing forth the darker shades of nature as well as the grim realities of life that women such as Ila Das face.

Like Maya, Nanda is also shown to be complicit in perpetuating the oppression that she finds herself subjected to on the basis of gender and also of those who are not of the same class as her. She does not hesitate to insult the postman by calling him “[a] bullock man, an oafish ox” (*FOTM*, 3), and that his “ideal was the donkey and he lived like one” (*FOTM*, 11). In using animal metaphors derogatorily to insult a man of a lower class than hers, Nanda Kaul engages in an act where “[t]he ethic of human domination remove[s] animals from the sphere of animal concern [and simultaneously] legitimize[s] the ill-treatment of those humans who [are] in a supposedly animal condition” (Adams, 69). Such an act assumes a greater

significance in a postcolonial context where the act of grouping certain people together with certain animals places them and the animals in an inferior hierarchized position and thus by extension justifies their exploitation. Nanda uses a similar tactic in distancing Raka from herself and makes her dislike of the great-grandchild known by constantly referring to her as “one of those dark crickets that leap up in fright but do not sing, or a mosquito” (*FOTM*, 39), likening Raka to insects and creatures she considers repulsive. Nanda Kaul is also shown to be partly complicit in Ila’s tragic fate by not reaching out to her and extending the care towards her friend emotionally and financially. Nanda, then, though shown to be longing to “merge with the pine trees...to be a tree, no more no less” (*FOTM*, 4), and exulting in the barrenness of the landscape and the more-than-human nature around her, refuses to be linked to the natural sphere out of a romanticized ideal of care and nurturance. If at all, Nanda brings to the fore the enslaving aspects of such care and nurturance, where she finally admits in the end that “[her] children were all alien to her nature. She neither understood them nor loved them” (*FOTM*, 145). Desai uses Nanda Kaul’s character to debunk the grand myth of the ‘sacrificial and self-denying mother’, a figure which is romanticized to no end and has a powerful hold on the public imagination of the Indian psyche (Jackson, 100).⁸

Raka

It is important to note that in both the novels, *Cry, the Peacock* and *Fire on the Mountain*, Desai does not stop and foreground the conclusion that marginalized and

⁸ For more on motherhood in Anita Desai’s fiction, see: Geetha Ramanathan, “Sexual Violence/Textual Violence”, 1993, *Modern Fiction Studies* 39.1: 17-35; Geetanjali Singh Chanda, “Mapping Motherhood”, *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*, 2002, 73-83; Elizabeth Jackson, “Motherhood and Other Work”, *Feminism and Contemporary Indian Women’s Writing* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010) 84-110; Ashley Batts, *The Fiction of Anita Desai: An Exploration of Indian Motherhood* (University of Tennessee Honours Thesis Project, 2011); Ellen Dengel-Janic, *Home Fiction* (Germany: Konigshausen & Neumann, 2011).

'othered' women are necessarily victims of gender-related violence, that is, not having a choice but to constitute acts of fatality in her novels. Through Raka, the text introduces a different form of female existence and even agency from Maya, Nanda and Ila.

As mentioned earlier, Raka is described by Nanda Kaul to be an "utter misnomer", where her name means the moon, but the child only bore "her resemblance to an insect" (*FOTM*, 39). The zoological images ascribed to Raka are not static—they change as Nanda's feelings for Raka change and as Raka's own character goes through a subtle change. From being described as akin to crickets, mosquitoes and lizards, the images slowly change to that of a rabbit and a fish (*FOTM*, 47, 95). Nonetheless, Raka is still likened to a wild thing and her gestures are depicted as being animalistic. She forages for food in the forest, "drop[s] on all fours [to come] scrambling up the hill" (*FOTM*, 73), and doubles over to lick the scratches and wounds on her arms and legs like an animal (*FOTM*, 50). It is this very nature of being wild and animalistic that makes Raka evasive and she opts for the unruly, wild and untamed landscape of Kasauli instead of the "safe, cozy, civilized world in which Raka had no part and to which she owed no attachment" (*FOTM*, 91). At this point, Raka rejects the socio-cultural domain and the text seems to suggest that it is impossible to contain her as she actively frees herself from all close ties and boundaries that shackled Nanda at some point.

Like Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, Raka too gets distressed at the distress of the animals around her or at the violence meted out to them. When Ram Lal picks up a stone to hurl at a pair of mother-baby langurs who searched the apricot trees for ripe fruit, Raka begs Ram Lal to "leave her, leave her" (*FOTM*, 78). Similarly, when the hoopoes "sat disconsolately in the apricot tree, looking baffled and distressed"

(*FOTM*, 66) because they could not feed their chicks with the presence of humans around them, Raka bursts out at Nanda Kaul, “[i]f we don’t go away, they won’t be able to feed their babies” (*FOTM*, 66). She is not able to bear the sight of “a boy saunter past with a gun over his shoulder and a pheasant dangling from his hand” (*FOTM*, 63). Through such incidences, Desai rejoins the issue of intertwined oppressions of animals and women and that it is instructive to consider incidents of male violence. Two scenes from the novel, the Pasteur Institute and the Kasauli Club scene, find in them the culmination of such male violence apart from the rape at the end of the novel.

For Nanda Kaul, the Pasteur Institute “flung writhing snakes of smoke into the sky” (*FOTM*, 73) spoiling the view. When Raka first sees the Pasteur Institute, she describes it as “enormous concrete walls of what looked like a factory, for sharp chimneys thrust out cushions and scarves of smoke...Chutes emerging from its back wall seemed built to disgorge factory waste into the ravine” (*FOTM*, 42). Apart from condemning the air pollution that is caused by the works inside the institute, through Raka’s perspective, Desai also describes the actual garbage dispensed in the ravine and surrounding villages: “Shoals of rusted tins, bundles of stained newspaper, peels, rags and bones, all snuggling in grooves, hollows, cracks, and sometimes spilling” (*FOTM*, 41). Desai seems to be pointing towards a call for environmental and social justice by exposing the act of dumping as an issue of environmental racism here. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin write that “[e]nvironmental racism is perhaps best understood as a sociological phenomenon, exemplified in the environmentally discriminatory treatment of socially marginalised or economically disadvantaged peoples” (4). Here, the site of the native villages has become a prime target for the disposal of wastes from the institute, leading to the unjust living conditions of the

native people who live there and are more affected by environmental pollution and degradation than others. This criticism then extends into the larger conceptual connection between social and environmental justice where rights of nonhuman animals, forests and rivers are inseparable from people and human rights.

When Raka inquires about the institute from Ram Lal, he tells her that

[t]hat is the Pasteur Institute. It is where doctors make serum for injections. When a man is bitten by a mad dog, he is taken there for injections—fourteen in the stomach. ...Once a whole village was rounded up and taken there—a dog had gone mad and bitten everyone in the village. The dog had to be killed. Its head was cut off and sent to the institute. The doctors cut them open and look into them. They have rabbits and guinea pigs there, too, many animals. They use them for tests. ...Oh, they are always boiling serum there—boiling, boiling. They make serum for the whole country. (*FOTM*, 44)

Desai seems to be suggesting a direct reference to the Pasteur Institute in Paris, France, where two women who were instrumental in the anti-vivisection protests in the years 1903-1907, saw hundreds of animals dying in agony.⁹ The passage above also calls to mind the killing of a rabid dog by Abu Shekpali in Sohaila Abdulali's *The Madwoman of Jogare*. Abdulali, in a veiled critique, presents the imperialistic and paternalistic attitude of Abu Shekpali over the environment, including nonhuman animals. The circumstantial realities of the dog(s) is ignored by him to highlight the inflated moral condition of his family: "And this is the spot, yes, where Motha Kaka, who is never afraid of anything and can cure snakebite with magic, ran towards the mad dog when everyone else ran away and he killed it after saying a magic mantra although everyone knows ordinary people can't kill mad dogs without going mad themselves" (Abdulali, 33). Desai refrains from aestheticizing animal suffering and pain in the passage quoted above—an issue many writers have been accused of. She pointedly brings the dogs' suffering to the fore through Ram Lal's description of

⁹ For more discussion on the anti-vivisection riots, see: Carol Lansbury, *The old Brown Dog* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

events to Raka: the dogs' heads are cut off and sent to the institute. The doctors cut them open and look into them. Later on, again in a conversation with Raka on churails (witches), Ram Lal tells her that the churails "feast on the corpses the institute doctors throw down after they have cut up the mad dogs and boiled their brains" (*FOTM*, 77), highlighting the indignities of animal death through the violation of the animals' bodily integrity which necessarily denies the subjecthood of the animal, and all of this constituted in the discourse of commercial scientific experiments and vivisection. Raka understands this when she "smelt serum boiling, smelt chlorofoam and spirit, smelt the smell of dogs' brains boiled in vats, of guinea pigs' guts, of rabbits secreting fear in cages packed with coiled snakes, watched by doctors in white" (*FOTM*, 49). In a particular reference to dogs (also the subject for the anti-vivisection riots in the year 1907, called "The Brown Dog Riots"), it also illustrates the "obligatory, constitutive, protean relationship between dogs and humans in technoscience" (Kalof and Fitzgerald, 305) where the figure of the companion species (seen lovingly in Toto and Maya's relationship in *Cry, the Peacock*) and its relationship with humans is thrown into question.

At the same time, the Pasteur Institute is undeniably linked to Raka. Nanda Kaul, with regards to the hold the Pasteur Institute has on the child, thinks "[w]hat did Raka see in it? Why did it fascinate the child?" (*FOTM*, 73). Almost as if in an answer, Raka admits that "[t]he scene of devastation and failure somehow drew her, inspired her. ...It was the ravaged, destroyed and barren spaces in Kasauli that drew her" (*FOTM*, 90-91). Not only the Pasteur Institute but also the burnt house on the hill whose owner was burnt alive when she tried to rescue her cat from the fire. Raka's feelings and position of ambivalence manifest themselves here, where on the one hand she makes the uninviting landscape her home by rejecting the socio-political

sphere altogether. On the other hand, she revels in the *destructive* aspects of this nature and landscape, and by the end of the novel, she will reject the natural sphere with equal vehemence as well.

This change in Raka seals itself completely after she witnesses the party at the Kasauli club. In a direct parallel to the violence inflicted on the animals in the Pasteur Institute, and also a parallel to the cabaret Maya sees in *Cry, the Peacock*, the spectacle of violence enacted in the costume party dances in the club horrifies Raka:

...Raka saw the skull and crossbones in white upon his chest. He had a scythe tucked under his arm and it glinted and shot off bolts of lights when he raised it and chopped off the woman's bucket head. Under her disheveled hair her pink throat opened wide and she laughed in bubbles of blood. ...

Then the row of bottoms parted to let through a figure in a brown robe that came stalking up to Raka as though it saw her there behind the curtain. Yet it could not see for it had no head, only a shawl dipped in blood dripping about its neck. It held its head tucked underneath its arm, grinning like a pot, with too many teeth. (*FOTM*, 71)

What Raka sees here is a ritualized celebration of male violence which is also in the guise of male sexuality. This violence of the dances in the club bring Raka face-to-face with, and literally visualize for her, the traumatic memory she has of the violence she and her mother, Tara, suffered at the hands of her father. The figure with the scythe, chopping off the woman's head, the blood dripping from the neck, crystallize for Raka the father

...beating at her mother with hammers and fists of abuse—harsh, filthy abuse that made Raka cower under her bedclothes and wet the mattress in fright, feeling the stream of urine warm and weakening between her legs like a stream of blood, and her mother lay down on the floor and shut her eyes and wept. Under her feet, in the dark, Raka felt the flat, wet jelly of her mother's being squelching and quivering, so that she didn't know where to put her feet and wept as she tried to get free of it. (*FOTM*, 71-72)

This violence is key to understanding why Raka seeks out scenes of ugliness and devastation, and why she feels safer with animals in the wild landscape and rejects the

‘civilised’ world, feeling that unhappiness is the only reality in her life. It is also important at this point to bring in the history of Carignano, rendered by the postman, which is ridden with murders and violent deaths.¹⁰ Geetha Ramanathan posits that the violence against Raka’s mother Tara and the violent history of the house inform each other where “the seething violence of the women of Carignano is a reading of Tara’s position, for Tara herself is completely silenced” (27). The text’s strategies here then work in such a way that by exposing the violence, Tara’s silence is ruptured. This also brings to mind how silence works as a connecting thread between women and animals where traditionally both women and animals have been silenced by viewing them as objects—for consumption, for violence—and not as subjects capable of articulating their own unique positions and voice.

When Nanda Kaul tries to make sense of Raka’s attitude and tries to reach out to her (signaling her own yearning to end her isolation and to connect with her great-grandchild), Raka “ignored her so calmly, so totally that it made Nanda Kaul breathless...wondering at the total rejection, so natural, instinctive and effortless” (*FOTM*, 47). Raka’s total rejection and utter unknowability here is an act that renders her almost an animal herself and can be read in the light of Marian Scholtmeijer’s analysis of Clarice Lispector’s story “The Buffalo”. Scholtmeijer writes that “the animal’s negation of identification is as harsh ...as in Lispector’s. As in “The Buffalo”, too, the animal’s silent rebuff casts the person back upon his or her own devices, more fully conscious than before the encounter of personal existential aloneness” (244). Similarly, Raka shuns all identification with Nanda, Ila and her own parents. Her total rejection and rebuff of Nanda Kaul forces Nanda to fall back to her

¹⁰ In rendering the history of the house Carignano, Desai also refers to colonial relations and their racist ideology. She frames the issues of exile and dislocation through postcolonial issues that comprise of this colonialist supremacy and ideology, first of the British inhabitants and then through the Indian inhabitants.

own devices of spinning webs of fictional lies (of families, houses filled with exotic animals and far-off travels) which ultimately also fail in ‘capturing’ and captivating Raka. It illustrates the literal indomitability of animal otherness seen in and through Raka. Nanda’s own existential aloneness comes to the fore when she is forced to face these lies and the reality of her existence as a sham without the possibility of any identification with Raka, and the death of Ila Das, at the same time.

Collectively, the atrocities that the women suffer in the novel, including Raka herself, find their culmination in Raka who sets the forest on fire in the end. While the fire is evidently her revenge against the adult world, Raka also symbolically destroys the local space which resulted in the violence, failure and death of females (British and Indian) before her. In the first instance of the forest fire in Kasauli, Raka does wonder about the “cries of animals and birds burning in that fire” but then later only hears the “crepitation of silence” (*FOTM*, 75). In the destructive agency, the collective silence is finally articulated through her when she whispers that “look, Nani, I have set the forest on fire” (*FOTM*, 145). At this point, she is situated neither in the socio-cultural sphere nor in the natural sphere. Raka ruptures and totally rejects the binaries of culture/nature, world/home, human/animal, male/female. Raka becomes the perpetrator of destruction in the final act where she pledges no allegiance to either the human or the animal world, thus manifesting her ambivalent position within and beyond various binaries.

Narrative Strategy in *Fire on the Mountain* in Centering the ‘Other’

Unlike *Cry, the Peacock*, *Fire on the Mountain* is not told from a first-person point of view. Controlled by an omniscient narrator, the first part of the novel gives voice to Nanda Kaul, in the second part the voice is divided between Raka and Nanda Kaul, and in the third part, the voice is shared between Nanda Kaul and Ila Das. The

effect of such a strategy is to lend an ideological and political weight to the experiences of violence experienced by the different characters, human and animal. For example, in the Kasauli club scene, although Raka's perceptions are subjective, "it was lunacy rampant [and] she thought [her head] would crack in two" (*FOTM*, 69), the immediate shift to a third-person narration after this reveals the facticity of abuse, violence and the dangers the women (and animals) have been subjected to: "Somewhere behind them, behind it all, was her father, home from a party..." (*FOTM*, 71). Therefore, similar to *Cry, the Peacock* then, the subjectivity is given a validity that seems to imply a skeptical view of 'objective' reality which is common in a patriarchal mode of story-telling and has been extensively critiqued by feminist writers.¹¹

Desai once again makes an associative use of landscape and zoological images to evoke the feelings of characters. However, this does not undermine the animals themselves. For example, the use of contrasting responses of Nanda Kaul and Raka to the cuckoo birds delineates their respective states of mind. For Nanda, the cuckoo calls are "domestic tones" (*FOTM*, 36) that call out to her to resume her domestic duties of caring and nurturance. For Raka, the cuckoos "were not the dutiful domestic birds that called Nanda Kaul to attention at Carignano. They were the demented birds that raved and beckoned Raka..." (*FOTM*, 90). However, the birds also symbolize an intuitive connection with the two characters as well. Raka translates the "cuck-oo – cuck-oo [of] the wild, mad birds from nowhere" (*FOTM*, 91) into an intimate connection and identification with herself that is reflected in the burnt house caretaker's words, "The crazy one, he muttered, the crazy one from Carignano" (*FOTM*, 91). Also, some of the juxtapositions of animal images with the

¹¹ This is the difference between objective and subjective reality (subjective reality as explored in Desai's novels), This is not to say I am talking about the mode of realism, or positing realism as patriarchal.

human world serve to highlight the base nature of man (humans), seen clearly when Raka feels that there was “something more alarming about [these newly hairy young men] than in the wails of the jackals or the sudden rattles of the nightjars in the darkness” (*FOTM*, 68). In these instances, Desai’s use of animals in her novels serves to destabilize the concept of humanity itself.

Conclusion

Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, and Raka, Nanda and Ila in *Fire on the Mountain*, are all middle-class women (Desai does not mention what caste they belong to in the novels). This class position, though privileged, still does not prevent these women from being oppressed in different ways, though this is clearly not the same as what a lower-class and lower-caste woman would go through. This is supported by Elizabeth Jackson in her book *Feminism and Contemporary Indian Women’s Writing* when she says that “Anita Desai’s middle-class protagonists are shown to suffer the emptiness and ennui of family-bound lives, unlike their poorer counterparts whose sufferings do not include domestic confinement” (5).

Desai shows that these women, especially Maya and Nanda, can be complicit in other’s oppressions (Maya calling her friend Leila’s husband derogatory animal names; Nanda calling the postman an oaf and bull, and her contempt for her friend Ila) while being oppressed themselves. Their privileged class and linguistic positions allow this duality to emerge: despite being middle-class and English-educated, they are still oppressed by societal norms that dictate what a woman and a mother should be, and despite being acutely aware of this oppression, they still do not hesitate to linguistically oppress others. Their class and linguistic positions then bring out their ambivalence towards nature (animals are included in nature), in that, these women refuse to be simplistically situated within the culture/nature binary. These women,

while being in a privileged position culturally, liken themselves to other nonhuman animals' suffering and relating it to their own suffering, while still being able to oppress others who are in a lower class and linguistic position than them. Thus, from the point of view of sociological ambivalence (refer to "Introduction", 41-42), these middle-class women in Desai's novels are not able to conform to a societal norm and counter-norm in the same behaviour, at the same time.

Maya in *Cry, the Peacock*, and Nanda, Ila and Raka in *Fire on the Mountain* do not fit into the ideal home space typically defined by dominant gender discourses on the home and family. They are removed and distanced from society, and as such are characterized as 'others' and yet are centred in the novels by Desai. This chapter has explored the connections between these women and animals in Desai's novels without the aim of privileging one over the other. It is important to note that Desai does not offer any utopian solutions to her characters' predicaments. The fact that Desai's novels resist any utopian solutions is indicative of her decentering strategy that challenges masculine/male ways of thinking (Jackson, 174). Desai then removes the typical expectation of rationality, cerebral thinking and excessive action to counter the romanticized and idealized association of women to the 'natural' side of the culture/nature binary. Indeed, as Elizabeth Jackson posits, "the feminist criticism implicit in the narratives of Desai...is arguably stronger, precisely because it suggests that there are no such 'easy' solutions to the complex problems posed by patriarchal ideologies" (174). The novels then show and offer critical insights into the processes that align women and animals into inferior and stereotyped positions and, in certain instances, the ways in which these are resisted by the women.

By re-reading and re-interpreting the novels to unsettle the binaries of culture/nature and human/animal through the fictional representations of women, the

women's ambivalent position emerges in the novels through the animal. The animal then opens up the space of ambivalence for the women, just as, in certain instances, the woman and animal become exchangeable. This is especially seen through Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* and Raka in *Fire on the Mountain*. Maya as an extremely 'othered' pet illustrates this exchangeability while Raka's indomitability and utter unknowability as both woman and as animal highlight this affinity between woman and animal. The women's ambivalence shows conflicting normative expectations that render the binaries unstable, thus disrupting discursive stereotypes as well as providing a potential to alter socio-normative inscriptions. The women's search for an outlet culminates in a fusion of both the dichotomies of creation and destruction in the end. These simultaneous contradictory positions of creation and destruction bring forth the ambivalence of these women, constituting tensions of uncertainty, fluctuation, and the coexistence of both positive and negative thoughts, ideas and feelings towards animals as well as other humans. For example, Raka, while associating herself with the wild, untamed landscape and the animals around her, sets that very landscape and animals in that landscape on fire.

The notion of violence has been key in exploring patriarchal oppressions of both women and animals. Linked to this is also the idea that for characters such as Maya, Nanda and Raka, the private sphere of the home has not been the primary space for socialization because its association with various types of violence ruptures the notion of supposed safety of the home where women are confined. Women's and animals' suffering due to this violence is then inextricably linked and Desai forces us to pay attention to both wrongs against women and wrongs against animals. This also goes to show that both the oppression of women and the oppression of animals are linked and do not operate in a vacuum. Also, in several instances the animal 'other' is

centred and given importance in its own right in Desai's novels apart from the women.

This chapter has shown how Desai centres the 'other' in the form of women and animals in both the novels although both women and animals are removed and distanced from society. Both of Desai's novels under consideration in this chapter predate as well as anticipate much of the contemporary debates on the connections between women and animals in society.

Chapter Three

Water

It cannot be denied that water is integral to both earthly history and to epochal events in the interface between the 'seen' and the 'unseen' that we call religion and myth. More so than fire, water is the universal 'sakshi', sacred witness in human rituals of birth, marriage and death, consecration, blessing and healing across cultures"—Renuka Narayan, "The River Has Spoken", OutlookIndia.com.

Introduction

This chapter shows how issues regarding water and women are examined in the South Asian literary and social context, and how women writers consciously subvert socio-political inequalities to imbue women with social agency through the figure of water. Women then are not portrayed simply as victims in patriarchal modes of thought. In the context of this chapter, agency means the ability of individual subjects to willingly speak or act in resistance against capitalist patriarchal social prejudices and subjugation.

The literary framework of materialist postcolonial ecofeminism will be used to analyze Gita Mehta's novel *A River Sutra* (1993) and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997). This chapter argues that both the authors consciously subvert and re-negotiate traditional political and economic, historically reproduced, understandings of power. They allow for an alternative social agency to emerge through the relation of women and water, more specifically through the *bodily registers* of women and water. Bodies and desire, through the figure of water, are then emphatically politicized by the two authors.

By consciously subverting and re-negotiating traditional political and economic understandings of power rooted in structural inequalities, both men and women are depicted to be connected to nature and water in different ways. This offsets the woman-nature link stereotypically prevalent in binaristic modes of thinking,

placing the care-work for the environment as an additional burden on the figure of the Third World woman. Linking male characters to water and nature in important ways, Mehta and Roy do not remove or distance women from nature. Rather, they insert men into this equation to trouble the binaries. Women's ambivalence is then highlighted by being embedded in culture *and* nature, or rejecting the natural sphere altogether.

The Narmada River and the Meenachal River that figure in Mehta and Roy's novels respectively show that water too, physically and metaphorically, carries social agency along with its cultural symbolic meaning. Both authors portray the rivers in their novels as characters that create places of alternative possibilities and agencies. This is important because nature in the form of water, and women, are then not figured as passive and essentialist but imbued with agency, and thus both nature (water) and women emerge as actors. Many of the ideas, emotions and experiences of the characters are distilled through water. Water then informs corporeal and embodied experiences which are crucial sites of resistance in the two novels. Water also acts as the material entity to bring the human and nonhuman (environment) together in an interconnected space in both novels. Having said that, it is important to note that Mehta and Roy do not romanticize water, women or those who make transcorporeal connections with the more-than-human world.

Both novels are written during the decade of the 1990s. As mentioned in the earlier chapters, the 90's saw prolific economic liberalization and growth. The fact that both Mehta and Roy chose to write about water in the 90's is significant as several data studies and newspaper reports during that era carried warnings of water

shortages in the world's most populous countries, i.e. India and China.¹ The reasons given for these water shortages included increasing populations in the Third World along with wasteful irrigation practices, as well as climate change causing extreme wet weather in certain parts of the world and droughts in others. India, in general, continues to have a water crisis. Most of the planned water resources in India are experiencing a strain due to the rising population. The rural areas and populations get left out in governmental/private planning. There has been an over-privatization of water resources. The rapid economic growth in India has led to government solutions being stretched and, at times, ineffective. Despite vast improvements to drinking water, many water sources still remain polluted, leading to water-related health problems claiming many lives when not treated in time.

The remainder of the chapter will give a general overview of the politics of water and gender, exploring and discussing these strands, first in Gita Mehta's novel and then in Arundhati Roy's novel, through a postcolonial ecofeminist framework, focusing on the relationship of women to the materiality of water.² An economic, political, social and religious background, especially in contextualizing water and rivers in the Indian context, is needed before a literary analysis of the novels can be undertaken.

¹ See: Rudy Abramson, "Report Predicts Worldwide Water Shortages in 1990s", *Los Angeles Times*, <http://articles.latimes.com/print/1989-12-10/news/mn-471_1_irrigation-water>; "U.S Faces Acute Water Shortage In 90's, Government Expert Says", *The New York Times*, <<http://www.nytimes.com/1990/11/23/us/us-faces-acute-water-shortage-in-90-s-government-expert-says>>; "Chronic Water Shortages Predicted For 90's", *Deseret News*, <<http://www.deseretnews.com/article/76381/CHRONIC-WATER-SHORTAGES-PREDICTED-FOR-90-S>>.

² In this chapter, materiality is expanded to include Stacy Alaimo's 'material feminism' that emerges primarily from corporeal feminism, environmental feminism and certain aspects of science studies. Thus, concepts from traditional materialist feminism which emerge from Socialist or Marxist feminism, for example, class, caste, race, labour, coloniality and postcoloniality, are combined with Alaimo's 'material feminisms' to include the importance of corporeality with regards to the environment and nonhuman others. This is not to say that some form of biological essentialism is being forwarded here. Rather, in situating materiality to include both traditional and Alaimo's notions, *all* bodies—human and nonhuman, male and female—are attended to and given importance in their own right.

The Politics of Gender and Water

Ever since the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were laid out by the United Nations (now expanded upon to become Sustainable Development Goals-SDGs) in the year 2000, water has assumed a central place in the debates that surround topics such as globalization and development of the earth's common resources. A common resource such as water becomes inseparable from issues of neocolonialism, discourses of neoliberalism, privatization, and gender. Women have most commonly been defined as essential users and providers of water in the domestic sphere as well as subsistence farming. Much of the burden of water collection in rural areas falls on young women (unmarried daughters, young daughters-in-law). Global gender inequalities associated with water negatively affect and impact women, especially through policies of corporate privatization of water. Hence, women, especially so in the developing world, are disproportionately affected by the lack of access to safe and clean water.

Tina Wallace and Anne Coles state that “[d]eepening understanding of the ways in which gender shapes who has control of water, who gets access, the different needs and positions of women and men, and the issue of rights, is crucial for development” (1). Women have been commonly defined as essential providers and users of water, a role assigned to them because they have often been regarded as the ‘natural’ guardians who care for the environment. They are mostly associated with domestic uses of water—cooking, cleaning, washing, care-taking (when a family member is taken ill, water use and consumption goes up significantly). Women, thus, have been known to have what McDevitt-Pugh terms as “women’s water wisdom” (119), where women

in many parts of the world have been exercising tremendous ingenuity for centuries on water production for domestic and livelihood use. Large numbers

of women in the developing world have been responsible for producing usable water where and when families, local communities, households, and even national economies require it. (McDevitt-Pugh, 119)

Most water policies, and indeed wider mainstream political and economic structures, however, do not take into account women's water management, distribution, and even production of water seriously. This then leads to "the individualizing assumptions of neoliberal water policies to the detriment of women and other marginalized groups" (O'Reilly et. al, 382). This inequality at policy-level is further emphasized where productive uses of water are concerned, for example, irrigation. Although many women till the land for agricultural purposes, especially when the men in the family migrate to urban centres in search for work, women own less than 2 percent of the world's private land (Ghosh, 444). Such a lack of access to land is one major reason for women's inequitable and limited access to water, which is also a major reason for the poverty of households headed by females.³

Such poverty, combined with unscrupulous privatization of water by multinational corporations, leads to an increasingly fragile physical and natural environment, and puts women at the forefront of risks associated with water scarcity. Not only are they at risk when the surrounding areas flood or have landslides due to water mining (legally or illegally), women are put at risk bodily too. Poor rural women from peasant and tribal communities have to walk longer distances to fetch clean, uncontaminated water in such instances. This carries multiple risks for women who are pregnant and physically strain themselves. Women, in addition to poor nutritional intake, may be prone to spinal deformities and injuries when carrying heavy pots or buckets of water on their heads as well as in their hands. There are

³ In such a situation then, according to Mara Tignino, "women make up 70 percent of the world's population living in poverty" (524). See: Mara Tignino, "Water, Women and International Law", *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 9 (4): 2007, 524-526.

accounts of women who get raped or mauled by wild animals when forced to fetch water at unsafe distances in unsafe environments.

Certain social customs and norms may dictate what is ‘proper’, for example, a ‘proper’ place for a woman to be in or a woman to be clothed in a certain manner that is deemed ‘respectable’ and ‘proper’ for that place (O’Reilly et. al, 383; Sultana, 432). This may restrict their mobility and visibility in public spaces, thus forcing them to forego access to safe water at longer walking distances and ultimately being forced to fetch unsafe, contaminated drinking water for the whole family that is more easily available. In such instances, women then become exposed to contaminated water and are vulnerable to water-borne diseases, and this has several negative social repercussions for them—inability to get married, abuse, social ostracism and lack of medical attention. Furthermore, as Karen Bower states

Women perform all the labour associated with water collection at *the expense of education, cultural, and political involvement, and rest and recreation*. It also limits their time for activities such as growing and preparing food and income-generating work...[and] their marginalized position in the monetary economy makes them suffer disproportionately when a price is put on water, for example, through water privatization. (466-467, my emphasis)

Since the burden of water collection generally falls on younger women in several South Asian societies, many of them forego educational and/or economic opportunities upon reaching puberty due to the lack of privacy available for sanitation needs or due to the lack of infrastructure for the purposes of sanitation itself. Women then are materially and bodily affected by the lack of access to safe and clean water, and that too disproportionately, and especially so in the developing world.

Thus far, global gender inequalities associated with water alert us to how women are negatively impacted and affected, especially through policies of corporate privatization of water. While this is extremely important to recognize and realize, we should beware of not perpetuating a stereotypical view of women as victims. A focus

on “the role of women’s knowledge, initiative, and agency in securing access to what the United Nations has declared not only a human right, but also the precondition to all our human rights” (Bouwer, 467), is necessary. Wallace and Coles state that “[w]omen are often involved not only in the consumption and use of water, but also in its production. ...Failure to recognize women’s active roles often results in misunderstanding of their needs and interests, and their further disempowerment” (17). Women then are also able to actively contribute to and become agents of change. Farhana Sultana, for example, expands this idea in the context of a Bangladeshi society where “inter-generational tensions between daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law [over water access] shows its versatility when pointing to the *potentially empowering opportunities* that younger women find when they negotiate permission to fetch safe household water from farther places” (quoted in O’Reilly, 383, my emphasis).⁴

Vandana Shiva in *Water Wars* cites several examples of successful grassroots activism undertaken by women who succeeded in stopping governments and companies from privatizing water. One example of such a successful grassroots movement involved the closure of the Coca-Cola manufacturing plant in Plachimada, in the Palakkad district of Kerala, India. Massive amounts of water were being drawn from natural water sources in the village for production purposes in the plant. The villagers depended on these sources of water for their daily livelihood. By the year 2003, several women protesters had gathered to protest the depletion of their water sources. Further controversy was created when an Indian photographer, Sharad Haksar, “created a billboard from a photo of water jugs lined up at a pump in front of a Coca-Cola billboard. This picture served as a commentary on the water shortages in

⁴ See: Kathleen O’Reilly et. al, “Introduction: Global Perspectives on Gender-Water Geographies” *Gender, Place and Culture* 16 (4): 2009, 381-385.

India, drawing attention to the 500, 000-1.5 million litres of water a day used by Coke to manufacture soft drinks in the bottling plant” (Opel, 504).⁵ The women who were fighting the Coca-Cola plant and

[t]he protests by villagers from Plachimada, in the southern state of Kerala have shown the strength of community-led activities, even against this global multi-national company. Through round-the-clock vigils outside the factory gates, they have managed to ‘temporarily’ shut down Coca-Cola’s local bottling plant. As of early 2007, the factory had remained closed for a number of years and a combination of community action and legal redress was aimed at permanent closure. (*The Rights to Water and Sanitation*, Web source)⁶

For Shiva, water scarcity, often deliberately created (man-made disaster to facilitate profits for a multinational company, in this case Coca-Cola), leads to corporate profits because “companies like Coca-Cola are fully aware that water is the real thirst quencher and are jumping into the bottled water business” (Shiva, 99).

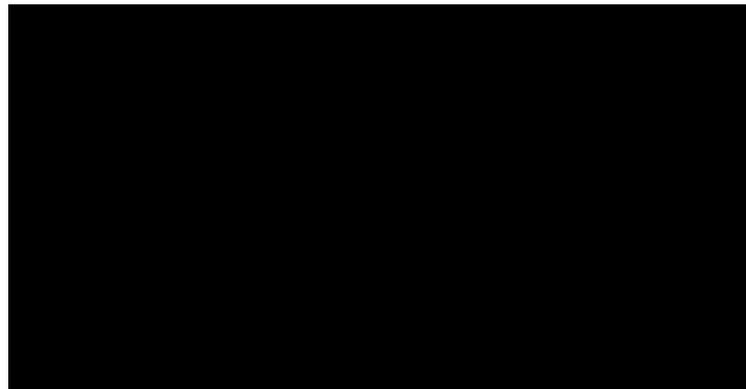


Figure 2: Sharad Haksar’s Coca-Cola billboard.

Image taken from:

<http://www.slideshare.net/nethanp/unethical-business-by-cocacola>

However, such a view also tends to obscure several complexities and complications that arise from other traditional and local factors, for example that of caste, class and even intra-gender oppression, thus essentializing women to have an inherent connection to water, and generalizing that all women suffer equally. Furthermore,

⁵ See: Andy Opel, “From Water Crisis to Water Culture: Dr. Vandana Shiva an interview by Andy Opel”, *Cultural Studies* 22 (3): 2008, 498-509.

⁶ See: *The Rights to Water and Sanitation*, < <http://www.righttowater.info/>>.

such views also imply stasis, not taking into account that gender issues change over time and especially so with the introduction of new technologies, although this tends to favour men more strategically. This leads to the resurrection of hierarchies with regards to questions of water access, water management and policies instead of a focus on the integration of various forms of women's agency carved out painstakingly while being immersed in the traditional constituents of a local area. Therefore, various scholars such as Ahlers and Zwarteveen (2009), Farhana Sultana (2007; 2009), Coles and Wallace (2005), and O'Reilly et. al (2009), posit that it should *not* be *uncritically argued* that women should just be simplistically included in the "devolution, decentralization and marketization processes" (O'Reilly, 384) but rather such arguments should be critically interrogated.

In light of this then, a better approach towards women and water is advocated by Farhana Sultana. Sultana argues that instead of a focus solely on the lack of access to water quantities, supply and gender politics, what needs greater emphasis is how "the very materialities of water/nature itself can influence both the constructions of gender and of resource struggles" (Sultana, 428).⁷ Greater attention needs to be paid to questions of gendered and embodied subjectivities that are in themselves fluid—uneven, unstable and shifting—and simultaneously produced and negotiated through material water bodies. Such materialities, and gendered and embodied subjectivities, are linked to broader issues of sexual division of labour, gendered spaces and places, social practices and discourses, and all of these have to be critically assessed vis-à-vis water.

Therefore, an important consideration to have is that spaces, places and especially water are infused with meaning (social, cultural and religious), and both

⁷ See: Farhana Sultana, "Fluid Lives: Subjectivities, Gender and Water in Rural Bangladesh", *Gender, Place and Culture* 16 (4): 2009, 427-444.

water and human beings are in turn subject to human practices of meaning-making. For example, in certain Hindu societal rituals, the various strands of water, caste and gender combine to determine notions of purity and pollution. In relation to this, Deepa Joshi and Ben Fawcett write that “water both is polluted by the touch of the impure and purifies those who are so polluted...[thus resulting in] particular constraints faced by Dalits and women” (39). Human bodies are assigned “temporary impurity...in the act and process of producing bodily secretions or associating with these materials are polluting” (Joshi and Fawcett, 40). Hence, women become polluting when they are experiencing menstruation or during the process of childbirth, regardless of their caste, and this affects their access to water. This is important to bear in mind especially when dealing with issues of caste, where Dalits or untouchables are not allowed to use water or have access to water that is solely the domain of the higher-castes. Drop4Drop, a non-governmental organization that works with India and Africa to provide safe drinking water to communities that are denied this basic right, states that “[t]he principles of untouchability and the dynamic between purity and pollution dictate what Dalits are allowed to do. There are countless restrictions on life as a Dalit, such as where they can live, sit and visit, who they can and cannot give water to” (Web Source).⁸ The issue of water and untouchability gets even more complicated when the untouchable in question is a woman who may be pregnant, menstruating or who may be a widow (land access and inheritance is skewed in favour of men, which then affects access to water sources).

Water in India in the 1990s

“Drought is no longer a natural disaster. It is a direct consequence of human activity. The resulting human suffering is enormous and growing” (Korten, *Living*

⁸ See: Drop4Drop, <<http://drop4drop.org/india-caste-system-water/>>.

Economies Forum, Web Source).⁹ This quote by David Korten in “Drought: India’s 1990’s Crisis” sheds light on the water problems India has been facing even before the decade of the 90’s till today, and the fact that human activities have exacerbated water shortages in the subcontinent. In a similar vein, D.A. Mooley writes that “India experienced 18 droughts during 1871-1990, of which 10 were severe and 5 were phenomenal” (597).¹⁰ With an increasing population growth and an increasing demand for water, consumption that is spurred by globalization, water tables were falling and many water resources were shrinking and drying up, and coupled with natural factors such as monsoon rains being delayed, droughts became an increasing occurrence in various parts of the Indian subcontinent.¹¹ This has a disproportionate effect on women compared to men, and International Development Enterprises (India) states that “[a]cross India as a whole it is estimated that women spend 150 million work days every year fetching and carrying [water], equivalent to a national loss of income of INR 10 billion/ 160 million USD” (Web Source).¹² We see the gendered aspects of such water politics through this disproportionate effect that water-collection puts on women, where not only is this labour unaccounted for, but socially and *bodily*, women bear the unequal burden of fetching water, ensuring that their families have enough for consumption as well as for care-taking needs (refer to page 152-153).

⁹ See: David Korten, “Drought: India’s 1990’s Crisis”, *Living Economies Forum*, <<http://davidkorten.org/06stephen/>>.

¹⁰ See: D. A. Mooley, “Origin, incidence and impact of droughts over India and remedial measures for their mitigation”, *Sadhana* 19(4): 1994, 597-608.

¹¹ The Bengal famine of 1943 was a major famine that occurred during British rule in India. Historians have frequently characterized this famine as ‘man-made’, in that, war-time colonial policies first created, then exacerbated, the crisis. Lack of access to clean water sources for irrigation as well as consumption contributed to this crisis, as did water shortage during the dry season, creating drought-like conditions.

¹² See: International Development Enterprise (India), “Water—India Facts”, <<http://www.ide-india.org/content/water-india-facts/>>.

Women then are materially and bodily affected by the lack of access to safe and clean water, and that too disproportionately compared to their male counter-parts.

This can also be seen in the latest water crisis India has been experiencing since the year 2015 till today. Southern Indian states particularly suffered acute water shortages in the last three years (2015-2018) so much so that water tankers had to be deployed so that people could have access to drinking water.¹³ Such water shortages not only resulted in an increase in farmer suicides, but also in a phenomenon known as ‘water wives’. This is a phenomenon where some Indian men marry multiple wives in order to beat drought and have either access to drinking water if the wives in question have their own source of water (land owned where there is a well or a tap), or the multiple wives provide extra man-power to fetch water.¹⁴ This phenomenon is mainly taking place in the villages of Maharashtra in India, particularly the village of Denganmal. Ashee Sharma, in a news article, writes that

[t]he term Water Wives is used to depict an extreme manifestation of patriarchy and coupled with poverty, the impact it has on the lives of women. ...Water Wives is a symbol and a symptom of a larger problem of women’s subjugation, which exists everywhere—in our

¹³ See: Asit K. Biswas, “India is facing its worst water crisis in generations”, *Quartz India*, <<https://qz.com/931878/india-is-facing-its-worst-water-crisis-in-generations/>>; Saptarshi Dutta, “76 Million Don’t Have Safe Drinking Water: India’s Looming Water Crisis”, *NDTV News*, <<http://www.swachhindia.ndtv.com/76-million-dont-have-safe-drinking-water-indias-looming-water-crisis/>>; Jaideep Hardikar, “The Ticking Time Bomb: India’s Water Crisis About to blow Up in Our Face”, *News 18*, <<https://www.news18.com/news/opinion-the-ticking-time-bomb-indias-water-crisis-about-to-blow-up-in-our-face/>>; A.A.K, “Why India has a water crisis”, *The Economist*, <<https://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2016/05/economist-explains-11>>; The Editorial Board, “India’s Water Crisis”, *The New York Times*, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/04/opinion/indias-water-crisis.html>>; “World Water day 2017: What is it and Why is it Important for India?”, <<https://www.mapsofindia.com/my-india/india/world-water-day-2017-indias-wake-up/>>; Nirmala Ganapathy, “Drought grips southern India, set to worsen in summer”, *The Straits Times*, <<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south-asia/drought-grips-southern-india-set-to-worsen/>>.

¹⁴ See: Mallika Kapur, “Some Indian men are marrying multiple wives to help beat drought”, *CNN*, <<https://www.edition.cnn.com/2015/07/16/asia/india-water-wives/index.html>>; Ashee Sharma, “ActionAid India tells the story of India’s Water Wives”, *Afaqs! News*, <http://www.afaqs.com/news/story/46460_actionAid-india-tells-the-story-of-indias-water-wives/>; Danish Siddiqui, “Drought-hit Indian Village looks to ‘Water Wives’ to quench thirst”, *Reuters*, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/india-waterwives-widerimage/drought-hit-indian-village/>>.

homes, workplaces, and all around the world, wherever women are unpaid and unrecognized for their work. (*Afaqs! News*, Web Source)

This is one of the many ways in which gender inequality related to water is manifested in everyday lives because polygamy is illegal in India (unless the family in question is Muslim).

Furthermore, water pollution is a serious problem in India, where “almost 70 per cent of its surface water resources and a growing percentage of its groundwater reserves are contaminated by biological, toxic, organic and inorganic pollutants” (Murty and Kumar, 285).¹⁵ Such contaminated water also contributes to water scarcity as its availability becomes limited for both the ecosystem as well as human consumption. Saptarshi Dutta writes that “[r]ampant pollution, dumping of sewage waste and abuse of the rivers has led to large sections of important rivers like Ganga and Yamuna becoming unfit for use” (Web Source).¹⁶ Development scientists in India agree that it is not that India is not rich in water (re)sources, but that lack of sensitization to water conservation ethics as well as industrial pollution of water resources create conditions for water scarcity. In addition to this, there is a lack of proper infrastructure for water storage (especially harvesting rainfall) to ensure safe water access across the Indian subcontinent. This lack of infrastructure impacts women in rural areas more adversely than men (as stated in the section before on water and gender politics). Such water pollution is alluded to in both Mehta’s and Roy’s novels.

¹⁵ See: M.N Murty and Surender Kumar, “Water Pollution in India: An Economic Appraisal”, India Infrastructure Report 2011, <<https://www.idfc.com/pdf/report/2011/Chp-19-Water-Pollution-in-India-An-Economic-Appraisal.pdf>>.

¹⁶ See: Saptarshi Dutta, “76 Million Don’t Have Safe Drinking Water: India’s Looming Water Crisis”, *NDTV News*, <<http://www.swachhindia.ndtv.com/76-million-dont-have-safe-drinking-water-indias-looming-water-crisis/>>.

The decade of the 90's also saw economic growth and liberalization. Following a series of development initiatives, dam-building was still picking up pace in the 1990's. The Narmada Valley Development Project was given clearance by the Indian government in 1987 without an environmental review.¹⁷ It has been slated as India's biggest dam building scheme, and involves the building of 3,200 small, medium and large dams in the Narmada valley for electricity and water for irrigation purposes. The first dam to be completed in the valley was the Bargi Dam in the year 1990, and displaced an estimated 114, 000 local people living along the river's banks.¹⁸ This number was 44, 000 more than the official estimation of the government, and the land submerged for the dam was three times more than the official figures projected by the developers. There was no proper rehabilitation policy available and as a result, many of the displaced people were left destitute and landless. If the project goes ahead, it will involve the forcible displacement of more people than any other dam-building project in the world. It would also involve massive environmental destruction due to ecological imbalances caused by the dam-building in the riverine system.

The biggest controversy to date has been the Sardar Sarovar Dam along the Narmada River. Of the 30 major dams planned on the Narmada River, the Sardar Sarovar Dam is the largest to be built, and also the most fiercely opposed. The protests, spearheaded by the NBA (Narmada Bachao Andolan, 'Save the Narmada' Movement), posit that the project will displace more than 200,000 people apart from

¹⁷ This project was first envisaged in the 1940s by India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. The dams were part of Nehru's vision for development and to compete with the western industrial nations just after gaining independence from British rule (he is famous for his quote "dams are the temples of modern India"). The project began much earlier but did not get official clearance in the later years due to legal and logistical problems.

¹⁸ Figures taken from *Independent* news, available at <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/arundhati-roy-furious-at-dam-decision-634956.html>>

damaging the fragile ecology of the region. NBA activists, headed by Medha Patkar, say that the dams will submerge forest farmland, disrupt downstream fisheries and possibly inundate land along the canals, salinate them, and increase the prospect of insect-borne diseases. However, proponents of the dam state that the project will supply water to an approximate 30 million people and irrigate crops to feed another 20 million people. The year 1993 saw a major victory for the anti-dam activists when the World Bank withdrew its funding of the Narmada project, citing human and environmental concerns. The construction of the dam is slated to be fully completed by the year 2025.

Many of the local people affected were Dalits and tribals, who are some of the poorest in Indian society.¹⁹ Furthermore, droughts, in the 1990's and over the years till today, have ensured that certain tracts of the Narmada River have fallen silent, especially in Bharuch, Gujarat, "thanks to a mindless political decision that has prompted authorities to quietly empty upstream dams into the Sardar Sarovar Project at a time when the rains were below normal" (Hardikar, Web Source). Government authorities then post armed guards at the dams to prevent desperate farmers from stealing water since the river dries up and there is an acute water shortage for irrigation and other farming activities ("India's Water Crisis", *The New York Times*) as well as for household consumption. The Narmada River forms an important backdrop in Gita Mehta's Arundhati Roy's non-fiction writing, and we see these issues addressed in both Mehta's and Roy's novels as well as Roy's non-fiction essay "The Greater Common Good".

In summary, crises such as droughts and the resulting water-scarcity can be man-made disasters as well as natural, most often a combination of the two. This is

¹⁹ This is covered in more detail in the section on the Narmada River and Arundhati Roy in this chapter.

clearly seen in the dam-building on the Narmada River. Water shortages exacerbate social problems such as farmer suicides, and also create new problems such as the phenomenon of ‘water wives’. More often than not, these disasters and problems have a disproportionate effect on women because the burden of fetching water and other care-work falls on women more than men. Such politics of water and gender are further illustrated in Mehta’s and Roy’s novels respectively. Mehta and Roy bring out the issues affecting the lower-classes, and how their outlook differs very much from the middle-class outlook on how water sustainability should be achieved.

Water and Women in Literature and the Arts

Much of the writings on hydraulic civilizations of South Asia (including the conquest/control for access to water) are represented as ungendered, focusing only on the male gender culturally, socially and politically. In relation to such a representation of water histories, Sara Ahmed and Margreet Zwarteveen state that it is “all the more striking since water in much of South Asia has always had deeply gendered associations and connotations in culture and religion” (8). T. Tvedt and T. Oestigaard in *The World of Water* write that water can be read as a text as water is used to express meaning (xviii). They further elaborate that

[t]he pervasive role of water in society as a structuring principle stresses how and why water is such an efficacious metaphor and symbol when people describe and communicate the world they live in to themselves and to the outer world. ...The use of water metaphors is a more sensitive, visual and forceful way of arguing than the use of other metaphors [and as such] the conceptualization of water is often emphasized and elaborated extensively in literature, art and film. (xviii)

The essential place of water in the life of women as accounted in the previous section then leads to the prominent and recurrent role of water and its relation to women as metaphor and symbol in literature and the arts.

Water has generally held centrality as an object of worship and veneration (in several cultures and religions around the world). It has become a central metaphor for poets and writers, especially water anthropomorphized as female and/or feminine. Such representations are cultural expressions that underlie women's recovery of water as a fundamental human right (Kattau, 132) and illustrate the culture/nature dualism that underlies the approaches to water as an economic resource. In literature, women writers either tend to celebrate the woman-water connection or find subversive strategies to undermine the culture/nature dualism that translates into damaging stereotypes of power over nature and therefore power over women. Furthermore, scholars such as Zdenka Kalnicka (2010), T. Tvedt and T. Oestigaard (2006) talk about water's ambiguity, where water is used as a "framework for interpreting, grasping and explicating ambiguity within [a particular] culture and society" (Tvedt and Oestigaard, xviii). Water then is both culture and nature, since the interwoven aspects of social interaction and other social, economic and political aspects cannot be neatly separated from water in/as nature and its meanings. This is important to note as one of the main arguments in this thesis is that it is crucial to overcome the culture/nature dualism in traditional analyses which aligns women and nature to stereotyped and inferior positions that tend to be romanticized.

John Gregory Brown writes that "[w]ater is, of course, mutable and sublime, sustaining and destructive, and throughout literature water serves as a representation not only of birth but of death, not merely of placidity but of violence" (Web source).²⁰ Connotations of both creation and destruction are present in Brown's statement. Specifically, in relation to women and water in literature, Colleen Kattau further explicates that there are two archetypes that figure prominently and repetitively: (1)

²⁰ See: John Gregory Brown, "Literature and Water", <<http://witcombe.sbc.edu/water/literature.html>>.

the water-related “wild-woman archetype”, which links concepts of sexuality and fertility to women and water, exemplifying the untamed and fecund aspects of both women and nature that are perceived as a threat to the hegemonic patriarchal worldview, (2) and the “great mother or goddess” that links the maternal to water, and in extension portraying the womb as preserving life, or conversely, as a dark and engulfing space (143-145).²¹ Both these archetypes and the related connotations portray creation (life) and destruction (death) as two sides of the same coin. For many women writers, water becomes a way of expressing political points. In *A River Sutra*, Mehta establishes these woman-water links in her novel but at the same time uses these links to empower her female characters and gives them an alternative form of agency.

A Brief Note on Gita Mehta’s *A River Sutra*

Gita Mehta’s *A River Sutra* is set around the banks of the Narmada River in central India. The novel is told from the perspective of an un-named retired bureaucrat who interacts with a variety of travelers and residents of the area, and the various stories are relayed to the reader through a series of vignettes. The Narmada River forms the ‘sutra’, that is, it forms the link between the different stories and the narrator fulfills the role of a ‘sutradhaar’, someone who knits the different stories in the novel together. Several critics have commented that the use of the narrator as a ‘sutradhar’ calls to mind the oral traditions of the Indian epics. The structure of the stories told is non-linear, and the stories explore themes of love and desire. However, until recently, not much scholarly attention has been paid to the ecological aspects of the novel, and how they relate to gender, in particular women and water.

²¹ See: Colleen Kattau, “Women, Water, and the Reclamation of the Feminine”, *Water and Women in Past, Present and Future* (USA: Wagadu and Xlibris, 2007) 132-151.

Mehta's simple and accessible language complements the profound themes and concerns of her novel. The simplicity belies the complexities she couches in the vignettes as well as through the narrator. Rahul Jacobs, in his review of the novel, aptly states that "Mehta uses parables, myths and even hymns, to weave a book of unusual wisdom, one that gently questions our tendency to quarantine ourselves from the exhilaration and disappointment of attachment" (Web Source).²² Though espousing wisdom through an easy and accessible style, Mehta in no way gets didactic when it comes to expounding the complexities of life in her various stories, nor does she romanticize them in any way.

As mentioned earlier, the decade of the 90's was one that saw economic liberalization in India. However, it was also a decade that saw strife and communal riots. In December 1992, India was besieged with Hindu-Muslim communal riots due to the destruction of Babri Masjid, one of the largest mosques in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Hindu extremists destroyed the mosque after a political rally went out of control at the site, and this subsequently triggered riots all over India.

Keeping this politico-religious background in mind, Gita Mehta, in her novel, espouses what several critics have termed a 'secular-humanist' view of India (Bande, 121).²³ This is most clearly seen in the narrator's (Hindu) and the mullah Tariq Mia's (Muslim) relationship in the novel, and later on, when the courtesan recounts the past glory of her town Shahbag ruled by a Muslim who integrated the different religious communities in the town. All this happens on the banks of the Narmada River which then assumes that very secular-humanist characteristic that Mehta imbues the novel with.

²² See: Rahul Jacobs, "Down the Stream of Stories: *A River Sutra*", *Los Angeles Times*, 1993, <http://articles.latimes.com/1993-07-11/books/bk-11907_1_river-sutra>.

²³ See: Usha Bande, *Gita Mehta: Writing Home/Creating Homeland* (New Delhi: Rawat Publishers, 2008) 121-152.

The Narmada River in *A River Sutra*

Rivers in India (and in many other places in the world) are typically associated with religion and are considered sacred. Metaphorically and symbolically, they are associated with drought and plenty, life and death, and rituals to do with purification—flowing water is said to remove any pollution or impurity associated with childbirth, death, and the corporeal body (Feldhaus, 4; Joshi and Fawcett, 39-40).²⁴ In the Hindu tradition, the purificatory power of water is also emphasized in the ability of the river to cleanse a human being of sins, past and present. In Mehta's novel, the Narmada River is accrued with such powers and the stories woven around its banks centre on the river water's purificatory, cleansing and calming properties.

Rivers and their waters are often presented as feminine and personified as goddesses, and the Narmada River is no different. There are many fables, stories and accounts of how the Narmada River originated, and these accounts are almost always associated with the Hindu god Shiva. Most traditional religious texts that are written on the various rivers in India are replete with "cosmo-sexual imagery...that indicates that the relationship between Shiva and the rivers has a sexual element to it" (Feldhaus, 26). For the Hindus, the Narmada River is one of the seven holy rivers in India. The sacred importance of the Narmada River is testified by the fact that Hindus perform a holy pilgrimage of a 'parikrama' or circumambulation of the river.²⁵ In present times, the Narmada River has also assumed important ecological significance. Nowhere is it more aptly shown than in the activism and writings of Arundhati Roy

²⁴ See especially: Deepa Joshi and Ben Fawcett, "The Role of Water in an Unequal Social Order in India", *Gender, Water and Development* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2005) 39-56.

²⁵ The Narmada Parikrama, as it is called, is considered to be a meritorious act that a pilgrim can undertake, regardless of gender, caste and class (however, women who are menstruating are usually told to avoid this pilgrimage). Many sages and pilgrims walk on foot along the river, to the source at Amarkantak hills in Madhya Pradesh and back along the opposite bank of the river. This is also explicated time and again in Mehta's novel by the various characters.

regarding the construction of dams on the Narmada and the subsequent displacement of tribal people in that area (see Arundhati Roy's essay "The Greater Common Good", 1999).

Illustrated below is a pictorial representation of the Narmada River as a goddess, followed by a description of the Narmada and the mythological account of how it originated in Mehta's novel:

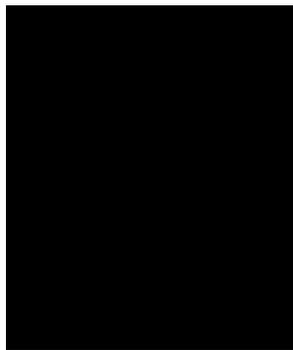


Figure 3: Narmada River as a goddess.

Image taken from:
<http://ecoheritage.cprecc.org>

The river is among [the] holiest pilgrimage sites, worshipped as the daughter of the god Shiva. ...It is said that Shiva, Creator and Destroyer of Worlds, was in an ascetic trance so strenuous that rivulets of perspiration began flowing from his body down the hills. The stream took on the form of a woman—the most dangerous of her kind: a beautiful virgin innocently tempting even the ascetics...Shiva named her Narmada, the Delightful One, blessing her with the words "You shall be forever holy, forever inexhaustible". Then he gave her in marriage to the Ocean, Lord of Rivers, most lustrous of all her suitors. (Mehta, 8-9)²⁶

It is important to note that the Narmada is described here as dangerous, invoking the wild-woman archetype where not only is the river and its water seen as dangerous, the *river as woman* is seen as dangerous too because she is portrayed as a temptress, and thus as an opponent for male ascetics. The overt sexuality makes her an 'other' and a threatening figure because as a river and woman combined, she represents the very things that an ascetic renounces: sexuality, fecundity, continuous flow (of life—through the woman's reproductive capacity and the life-giving power of water, and

²⁶ Anne Felhaus, in her book *Water and Womanhood*, states that "[t]heoretically, rivers that flow into the ocean have the ocean as their husband" (54), as seen in the quotation above. See: Anne Feldhaus, *Water and Womanhood: Religious Meanings of Rivers in Maharashtra* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

the ecology present in the river waters) and beauty. In fact, in the above extract, the figure associated with the greatest of ascetics, lord Shiva, and his austerity and penance are defeated by the supposedly feminine realm of emotion, passion and imagination. His material body takes on the significance traditionally accorded to females—biological bodily functions (a trance so strenuous, perspiration, flowing). Such a description is already a deviation from a typical austere, objective, unpassionate and distanced ascetic. In a subtle overturning of the masculine aspects that are typically privileged in the world of ascetics, Mehta highlights and gives eminence to the more feminine aspects of the world of imagination and intuition.

The following sections will analyze Mehta's *A River Sutra* and show that the stories and the novel as a whole affirm the feminine and female agency even though the larger frame narrative of the novel is narrated by a male character. On the surface, it seems Mehta elucidates a deeply patriarchal worldview to the readers because the characters, including the narrator, espouse a male viewpoint of the themes in the novel. However, this surface text is problematized by a deeper subtext that emerges in these stories to not only rupture the culture/nature binary, but also to disarticulate the romanticized and essentialist connection that mistakenly categorizes women as uniquely ecological—this limits women to a notion of biological essentialism and the notion of womanhood to be necessarily caring and compassionate. In effect, these perceptions do not free women from the negative cultural baggage that such a stereotype carries. The possibility of agency and empowerment is then thwarted by rooting women's 'natural' characteristics in biological determinism.

While the Narmada River forms a backdrop in the 'The Monk's Story' and 'The Teacher's Story', it starts assuming a deeper significance in the other four stories that follow, binding the women, landscape and water together to strongly affirm

female agency and resistance, although this is not necessarily romanticized as life-affirming. The analysis is divided into the following sections: (1) Water and Materiality (2) Water, Desire and Sexuality, and (3) Water and Transcorporeality. The figure of water will be used to think about women's agency and women's ambivalence emerging out of the culture/nature binary that unproblematically aligns them to the natural sphere.

Water and Materiality

Karen Bakkar defines water's materiality as "the role that [water's] biophysical and ecological characteristics play in shaping human perceptions, discursive constructions, and responses to water" (617).²⁷ We see the perceptions, discursive constructions and responses being played out in the Vano tribal women in Mehta's novel. These tribal women live in the forests on the banks of the Narmada River, close to where the bureaucrat-narrator stays while managing the guesthouse. He meets them on his way home after meeting the village mullah Tariq Mia:

Loud laughter pierced the morning silence as I walked through the jungle back to the bungalow. The Vano village women were collecting fuel by the sides of the mud path. Through the undergrowth I could see their slender brown arms reaching for dry branches fallen on the mud. (Mehta, 92)

Mehta, through the waters of the Narmada River, evokes certain assumptions about nature and the tribal women. The river "connects individual bodies to the collective body politic" (Bakkar, 619), and here we see the tribal women in a collective connection with both the human and nonhuman world. They depend materially on the river and the surrounding forest for water, wood for fuel, and their hard labour is evidenced by their "slender brown arms" (Mehta, 92). The tribal women's ambivalence comes forth here, in that, while they are linked to nature and water (the

²⁷ See: Karen Bakkar, "Water: Political, Biopolitical, Material", *Social Studies of Science*, 2012, 42.4: 616-623.

natural sphere), they are linked *materially* without any notions of biological essentialism. Their connection with water and nature, and their uses of water and nature, is in very pragmatic ways, yet these tribal women are denied rights to the very environment they depend on to survive materially. These women do not have any legal rights to the water, the land they live on or the forests they forage in. Water then, being material, also becomes political, as questions of ownership, access, use and inequality are also tied up with it. This also calls to mind struggles for (environmental) justice linked to the rights for women, tribals and dalits. These women's ambivalence then is itself rooted in material inequality, and the river here is a literal material lifeline for the daily survival of the tribals, portrayed in Mehta's novel.

Water, Desire and Sexuality

This 'water as a material entity' strand continues throughout the novel and merges with the themes of desire and sexuality. When the bureaucrat-narrator encounters the tribal women, the theme of desire emerges. Desire here is featured as a form of material agency as stated by Stacy Alaimo.²⁸ It is here that we see a complex mix of water, women and desire merging to form an alternative agency for both the executive, Nitin Bose, and the tribal woman who seduces him, Rima. Nitin Bose assumes that Rima has captured his soul in two-halves of a coconut, following a tribal superstition under a lunar eclipse, and that this has caused him to go mad.

The bodies of the tribal Vano women and the body of the Narmada river intertwine together to form the body of desire. This is seen through the ways in which women's bodies and water are constantly either likened to each other or substituted for each other in invoking Kama, the God of Love:

²⁸ See: Stacy Alaimo, "Transcorporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature", *Material Feminisms* (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008) 237-264.

... saris sliding from their shoulders, baring their waists and the curve of their full breasts to my view as they stacked bundles of wood... Their provocative laughter followed me down the gentle incline of the path.

“Kama must be sharpening his arrows...Take care the Sahib does not lure us into seduction.”

There was indeed a mood of longing in the jungle. ...The call of the koil bird, that strange imitation of a woman’s cry at the moment of sexual fulfillment, hung suspended in the air, and I felt mythology might at any moment become reality. (Mehta, 92-93)

From the excerpt above, the bureaucrat-narrator then goes on to ruminate further:

The teasing of the women had left me restless. Behind me I could hear the rushing of the waterfalls... I watched the water sparkling and disappearing, sparkling and disappearing, like the anklets encircling a woman’s foot, and thought of the Ascetic watching the dancing woman formed by the rivulets from his own penance. [Even the Gods] had warned the Ascetic that he too must feel Desire for without Desire the play of the worlds would cease. (Mehta, 96-97)

What fascinates the bureaucrat-narrator here is not just the Narmada River itself but the river personified as *female* and its ability to invoke desire. We see water (river) and woman as twinned together here, and it is a twinning that emphasizes the Narmada’s moving, flowing waters as opposed to ecologically damaged water. This twinning is also in direct contrast to the capitalist commodification of nature shown by Mehta through the Jain monk Ashok’s father, a diamond merchant, who “was unmoved by the conditions under which the diamonds were mined, or the distressing poverty of the miners...wealth had excised [his] emotions, freeing him to examine people as if they were abstractions” (Mehta, 25). Mehta’s overt linkage of woman and water overturns capitalist patriarchy’s agenda that seeks not only a distance from both women and nature (water), but also mastery over them, as shown by Ashok’s father.

The bureaucrat-narrator first encounters Nitin Bose in jail. Nitin identifies himself as the tribal woman Rima and sings about collyrium and vermilion, imploring the bureaucrat-narrator to read his diary and help him find a “shrine to a goddess in these jungles” (Mehta, 105) to cure his madness. What is noteworthy here

is Nitin Bose's dissonance in *thinking* that he is female while having the outwardly characteristics of being male: "distinction of a young man...an air of authority to his carriage, and his well-cut cotton suit still flattered his body" (Mehta, 103). Everyone around Nitin Bose appears to be uneasy due to this distance in his thinking of himself as female in contrast to his outwardly appearance as male. Mehta here subtly challenges traditional gender boundaries and roles by making a biological male embody stereotypically female characteristics such as passion and enchantment (madness).

Nitin Bose's madness is not a literal possession of his body by the woman Rima. Mr. Chagla, the bureaucrat-narrator's assistant, explains patiently:

It is not a woman who has taken possession of Mr. Bose's soul, sir. How can such a thing ever happen? ...Sir. Really, sir. The goddess is just the principle of life. She is every illusion that is inspiring love. That is why she is greater than all the gods combined. ...she is what a mother is feeling for a child. A man for a woman, A starving man for food. Human beings for God. And Mr. Bose did not show her respect so he is being punished. (Mehta, 142)

Nitin Bose's madness is actually a punishment for ignoring desire, and hence ignoring the feminine principle of the affirmation of life. Mr. Chagla's words make it clear that love, personified by Rima and the tribal goddess, is a primal energy that is not to be taken lightly. It has its place in the larger scheme of things and that "without desire, there is no life. Everything will stand still. Become emptiness. In fact,...be dead" (Mehta, 142). Here, the Narmada River, the tribal goddess and her various shrines on the river's banks, and Rima, are all treated as and consistently linked to the essence of life, and the river and its waters become a literal anchor for Nitin Bose's sanity.

Bodies and desire here are figured by Mehta as strongly political (Roy will use the same tactic in her novel later) and bear an in-depth relation to water. Particular

attention needs to be paid to the figure of Rima, a local tribal woman, who comes to Nitin Bose only at night and he is unable to stay awake to see her clearly:

I did not know whether I had fashioned her from the night and my own hunger. ...Knowing the urgency of my desire, I could not understand my inability to stay awake. ... I never saw her by daylight, and if I had I would not have recognized her. At some point in our lovemaking she had revealed her name was Rima... (Mehta, 125-126)

Dr. Mitra, an accomplished psychiatrist who works with the tribals in Vano, clearly has a handle on Nitin Bose's predicament when he says that "[t]he young man has imagined his sickness. Let him imagine his cure" (Mehta, 108). Nitin Bose conjures up Rima in his mind, and she is not only a personification of desire, but her body is also an absolute negation of a life without desire and affect. Rima as a body of desire is also a body of water as Nitin Bose's only cure is to "worship the goddess at any shrine that overlooks the Narmada River. Only that river has been given the power to cure him" (Mehta, 137). Chitra Sankaran states that the Narmada can be seen as "offering women a figure of identification outside the law by depicting nature as a force that resists mastery [where] Mehta's Narmada river and its surrounding land becomes a place to cast off constricting domestic values...and serves as a place of possibility" (442).²⁹ Rima as a body of desire that is sexual and unorthodox parallels the river as a body of water since the Narmada River is created by Mehta as sexual and unorthodox as well. Desire and water here are then featured as renewal and connection, affect and reinvention, as Nitin Bose needs to be exposed to both the woman's body and the water body to regain his zest and desire for life. Rima, as a tribal woman who is so closely associated with the river's waters, once again brings out the continuous strand of water's materiality, and the role the river plays in the daily survival of the tribals.

²⁹ See: Chitra Sankaran, "Women, Rivers and Serpents: The Primordial Link in Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*", *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 2012, 47.3: 429-446.

The material and political strand of water, bodies and desire converge and form an apex when a former courtesan, now an elderly woman, wanders to the bureaucrat-narrator's guesthouse looking for her kidnapped daughter. A local bandit, Rahul Singh, has kidnapped her daughter, believing she was his lover in a past life. The courtesan's daughter ultimately reciprocates his love and becomes pregnant with his child, but Rahul Singh is killed in a police encounter. The police are searching for the elderly woman's daughter while she plots revenge against Rahul Singh's killers. The daughter seeks out the mother, tells her all that has happened and her attempts at revenge are thwarted when the bureaucrat finds her arsenal of weapons. She then commits suicide by jumping into the Narmada's fast flowing waters.

The courtesan reminisces that fifty years ago, the Muslim ruler of their town Shahbag "honoured the river's holiness" (Mehta, 163). We see here the co-mingling of two different religions, Hindu beliefs and Islam, at the bank of the Narmada River and its waters. It is a testament to Gita Mehta's vision of a secular-humanistic approach towards all life, human and nonhuman, and among the various doctrines that are explicated in the novel. Not only has the tradition of secularism evolved on its banks, the Narmada River comes across as the most constant and enduring female figure, with a history, identity and a sustained cultural repertoire of stories, myths and legends. The Narmada is personified as "a kind of 'everywoman', being virgin, seductress, bride, courtesan (a dancing girl), and mother...all rolled into one" (Sankaran, 435). This connotation of 'everywoman' becomes significant when the courtesan's daughter commits suicide in its waters, where the daughter becomes another aspect and an extension of the Narmada River herself.

A multidimensional view of the river and its waters is presented here through the courtesan's memories. Prior to industrial and capitalist development taking place

in Shahbag, there were “fields of flowers growing on [the] river bank and beyond” (Mehta, 162) and the pristine state of the waters parallels to how the women were treated at that time. Women’s mobility was not restricted, and they could be found along the river bank enjoying leisure activities such as walking in the garden, boating and taking in the fresh river air. With capitalist development making inroads fifty years later, the industrialized Shahbag is described by the courtesan as thus:

how Shahbag has changed in my lifetime. Where there used to be gardens now we have factories. Our gracious buildings have been torn down to be replaced by concrete boxes named after politicians. The woods that once ringed the city have been cut down for the shanty-towns of labor colonies. ...we must keep the windows closed because of the smell from the open gutter. The city is owned by men who believe every human being has a price, and a full purse is power. ...we are only women to them, our true function to heave on a mattress and be recompensed by some tawdry necklace flashing its vulgarity on a crushed pillow. (Mehta, 167-168)

We see here that industrial development is accompanied by capitalist patriarchy which metes out violence to both nature and women and these oppressions and violence are interlinked. In the courtesan’s description above, we see the exploitation of both nature and women. The pollution of the river waters is suggested from the foul smells coming from gutters. Women no longer have free access to open spaces surrounding the river, suggesting a public/private dichotomy, where the public sphere is dominated by “men who believe every human being has a price” (Mehta, 167), and the mobility of women is now restricted. As nature is exploited for industrial purposes and the river waters get polluted, a similar decline in the treatment of women is depicted. Women are now just viewed and treated as sexual conquests and

transactions, plundered in similar fashion to the woods that have been plundered to make way for shanty-towns.³⁰

While a relevant point is being made about the effects of maldevelopment, to borrow a term from Vandana Shiva (see “Introduction”), on both nature and women, the courtesan’s narrative nonetheless frames both nature and women as passive victims of capitalist development and patriarchy. Her narrative echoes cultural ecofeminism’s claims that there is an essential link between women and nature (of which water is a part) which should be celebrated. We come back to the idea of mistaken categorizations, where the courtesan’s narrative romanticizes such a connection between women and nature, thus providing an essentialist connection that *mistakenly categorizes* women as uniquely ecological. This then limits women to a notion of biological essentialism and the notion of womanhood to be *necessarily* caring, nurturing and compassionate. In effect, these perceptions do not free women and nature from the negative cultural baggage that such a stereotype carries. The possibility of agency and empowerment is thwarted by rooting women’s ‘natural’ characteristics in biological determinism.

The courtesan’s daughter and her narrative challenge such a view of women as passive victims and provides agency to and for women, for water, over water and over their lives. The daughter grows up in an era of capitalist development, and has no romantic view of a bygone era where women and nature were either held in a higher regard or treated better. Although trained in the traditional arts that were the hallmark of courtesans during her mother’s time, the mother has protected her daughter from

³⁰ It is important to note that the courtesan’s narrative (and the subsequent analysis of her narrative), at first glance, seems couched in a romantic past glory and passive victimisation. However, Mehta’s narrative strategy does not allow such a reading to persist because immediately after this, we have the courtesan’s daughter’s narrative that counters her mother’s romanticisation of a past she never inherited. Therefore, Mehta’s seeming romantic glory of a city that had ‘fallen’ to the ‘perils’ of capitalism is complicated by the juxtaposition of the daughter’s story immediately after the mother’s nostalgic flashback.

the sexual advances of men. Invoking the patriarchal binaristic framework of the virgin-whore, Mehta upturns these binaristic stereotypes and modes of thought: the courtesan's daughter is a pure virgin, accomplished in sixty-four arts and philosophies that men are eager to learn from courtesans, and when kidnapped by Rahul Singh, she uses these sixty-four arts to survive in the middle of the forest flanked by the Narmada River.

The daughter's suicide in the Narmada River highlights two things in the novel: her agency in living/ending life on her own terms, and that of global water pollution and poisoning. Although the suicide accords her a metaphorical and metaphysical agency, it is still a violent end, and this violence illuminates the violence against water. Her body here becomes a weapon in resisting patriarchal notions and diktats against women viewed in the virgin-whore binary. She tells the bureaucrat that "I am Rahul Singh's woman. It will not be long before the police find out, and some ambitious policeman accuses me of assisting in my husband's crimes. Can you imagine my fate then? Locked in a cell? A girl known to be a courtesan and a bandit's wife?" (Mehta, 187). In deploying her body to commit suicide and merging with the waters of the Narmada River, the narrative does in part imply that the woman *becomes* the river, and this carries with it life-giving connotations. The suicide, however, simultaneously pollutes and poisons the water with material, corporeal flesh that makes the water unsuitable for drinking and harboring water-borne diseases. This throws light onto the unequal plight women face when collecting water from natural water sources, where the flowing water enters global currents of ecology. The river, a site and means of her resistance, is also poisoned by such suicides but its continuous flow carries down the stories of such women that would otherwise remain unheard and silent.

It is important to note here that Mehta makes a crucial maneuver in addressing gender inequality relating to water and nature in general. Through Rahul Singh, Mehta shows how even men can have an ethic of care towards nature and water, thus overturning and falsifying the ‘natural’ woman-nature link stereotypically portrays women as naturally being able to care and nurture. Rahul Singh’s refuge is the forest and he knows it and the waters surrounding it intimately. Not only does the forest provide the care and sustenance he needs to live and survive, he in turn is able to imbibe those very qualities of care and nurturance which he then displays towards the courtesan’s daughter. When he kidnaps her and she taunts him to keep surviving the capture, he “[watched] her as if trying to prove there was a greater art than all [her] arts, the ability to love someone as he loved [her]...” (Mehta, 184). Through Rahul Singh’s ardent passion for the courtesan’s daughter, Mehta underscores that human emotions are important in not only understanding the matters of the heart and life itself, but also in relating to others and the environment, including water. Hence, Mehta cleverly overturns the culture/nature binary and its attendant modes of thinking that typify a structural capitalist patriarchal mindset that proves destructive to women, water and the environment.

Water and Transcorporeality

The materiality of the Narmada’s waters also act as an *integrator* of individual beings and bodies, both human and nonhuman. This integration and intercorporeality, between water and human and nonhuman bodies, shows how these bodies “are all caught up in one another’s currents...[and therefore] as bodies of water, we are always, at some level, *implicated*” (Neimanis, 38, original emphasis).³¹ This is seen

³¹ See: Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2017) 27-64.

through the Naga Baba and the child he rescues from a brothel, Uma, who later becomes a river minstrel.

Mehta adopts the tactic of embedding the male with the natural elements and environment to pertinently offset the woman-nature link. When performing his meditations and harsh penances, we see the Naga Baba at one with his surrounding natural environment. He lives in the midst of jungles and forests, constructing shelters out of leaf structures, wood and grass to live in during the monsoon seasons. His intimate knowledge of the forests and jungles extends to knowing which roots and berries can be foraged to be eaten, “which plants could suppress thirst and hunger, or which yogic exercises slowed down the metabolism so a man could endure the extremes of heat and cold” (Mehta, 238). When he brings Uma with him to live in the forest, he teaches her to “[look out] for water snakes, learning where they swam the water was pure enough to drink” (Mehta, 248). He smears ash from burnt cow dung on his body and “when he rubbed the mixture on [Uma’s] arms she found mosquitoes never bit her” (Mehta, 249), the burnt dung being an antiseptic as well as insulation against the harsh weather elements.

Furthermore, the Naga Baba’s act of smearing ash from cremation grounds is described as follows:

With the water still dripping from his body, he sat beside a funeral pyre where a body had just been cremated. The smell of smoldering wood and the acrid aroma of burnt flesh was still strong in the summer night as he took handfuls of the charred wood from the pyre and crumbled it between his fingers, throwing out fragments of bone and flesh before rubbing the ash over his hair and body in the ascetic’s bath that would increase the power of his meditations. (Mehta, 241)

Here, the Naga Baba’s austerity—in meditating, performing penance and his general lifestyle as lord Shiva’s disciple and a mendicant—is contrasted with his ease of comfort with his, and other’s, bodily abjections (even the cow dung)—the

combination of *bone, flesh and ash* that he smears on *his own body*. Mehta's alignment of the *male body* with nature here is thus not only significant but also radical.

The Naga Baba's renaming of the child as Uma from Chand bestows upon her a new identity to move forward with. The Naga Baba also sees the Narmada River as the goddess or great mother that will reclaim motherhood for Uma who was sold to a brothel-owner for a pittance. The explicit linking of the goddess pantheon to the Narmada River (for example, the Vano tribal folk goddess that Nitin Bose has to worship), as well as the Narmada as goddess herself, cements the relationship that Naga Baba bestows upon Uma by naming her as a manifestation of a goddess (Uma), and the river. The Narmada as everywoman is also then a mother goddess. As the Naga Baba explains to Uma: "The Narmada claims all girls as hers. Tonight you become a daughter of the Narmada" (Mehta, 254). The Naga Baba then submerges her into the Narmada's waters as a symbolic ritual of giving her to the Narmada as a daughter. Uma's literal submergence into the waters of the Narmada calls to mind what Astrida Neimanis terms as a 'body of water'. Neimanis describes that the figuration of the body of water

is posthumanist and material, both real and aspirational. Most importantly, she is responsively attuned to other watery bodies—both human and more-than-human—within global flows of political, social, cultural, economic and colonial planetary power. (23)³²

For Neimanis, being a body of water means partaking in an ecology where humans and other bodies of water (animal, vegetable, mineral) are already implicated as lively agents in one another's well-being (24). She further explicates that "attention to the material capacities, or the specific logics, of water can inspire us to reimagine how we emerge as subjects" (29). Neimanis calls these water-specific logics as hydrologics,

³² See: Astrida Neimanis, "Feminist Subjectivity, Watered", *Feminist Review* 103: 2013, 23-41.

and schematizes them as such: “gestation, dissolution, communication, differentiation, archive, unknowability” (30). Of these, two that pertain significantly to Uma are the hydrologics of communication and archive.

Through Uma, the hydrologic of communication is illustrated when Uma, in becoming a body of water, not only engages with the specific matter of water (the waters of the Narmada River), she also becomes a “material *medium of communication* [where] the flow and flush of waters sustain our bodies but also connect them to other bodies, the lifeworld and our environment” (Neimanis, 31, original emphasis).³³ Uma not only connects with Naga Baba who is also figured as a male body of water, but also connects with the history of the waters of the Narmada, or what Professor V.V. Shanker in the novel calls the river’s immortality: “the Narmada River has never changed its course. What we are seeing today is the same river that was seen by the people who lived here a hundred thousand years ago. ...This river is an unbroken record of the human race” (Mehta, 264-268). The material communication of and through water then creates “the conditions for repositories of memory, or archives” (Neimanis, 31), illustrating the hydrologic of archive. Indeed, the odes to the river that Uma sings as a river minstrel when she has grown up highlight this archival historicity of water (“You [the Narmada] were present at the Creation, by Shiva’s command you [the Narmada] alone will remain at the Destruction”, 277) and of the connection to other bodies of water such as “turtles, dolphins, herons, fish, crocodiles, bards and ascetics” (Mehta, 279) that converge in/on the river.³⁴

³³ Astrida Neimanis, “Feminist Subjectivity, Watered”, *Feminist Review* 103: 2013, 23-41.

³⁴ Regarding the hydrologic of archival and history of water, Neimanis writes that “[t]he water that temporarily composes and sustains any body brings with it a history that is at least 3.9 billion years old and will continue far beyond the span of any body’s lifetime” (31). See: Astrida Neimanis, “Feminist Subjectivity, Watered”, *Feminist Review* 103: 2013, 23-41.

Uma's and Naga Baba's materiality as bodies of water is also resonant of what Stacy Alaimo calls a transcorporeal materiality:

the time-space where human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from "nature" or "environment"...[the] literal contact zone between human corporeality and more-than-human nature. Imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the corporeal substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from the environment. ... "human" and "environment" can by no means be considered as separate. (Alaimo, 238-239)³⁵

Both Uma's and Naga Baba's bodies open out into the more-than-human world, and this gives way to a reconceptualization of "bodies and natures in ways that recognize their actions" (Alaimo, 244-245). In other words, bodies and nature are redefined and are no longer passive and essentialist, but are historical actors and reconfigured to have agency. If nature itself is redefined to have agency, then it no longer becomes a repository of passivity and essentialism to give rise to binaries such as culture/nature, reason/emotion and discipline/passion. Bodies, especially female bodies, then become free of the cultural baggage associated with such binaries. We see this in the conflation of not only Uma and the Narmada River, but also of the Narmada as woman ("From Shiva's penance you became water, from water you became a woman", 273) and in Naga Baba's male body that is not separated from nature or the waters of the river.

As elaborated in the earlier sections, the Narmada River as water and woman is consistently linked to the feminine and essence of life, and the river as everywoman opens itself up to other bodies, both human and more-than-human. Uma, in singing her odes to the river, describes the plenitude the waters offer to both flora and fauna:

Woodland heavy with wild jasmine

³⁵ Stacy Alaimo, "Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature", *Material Feminisms* (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008) 237-264.

Embrace you with their fragrance.
Hearing your approach
Young plantain trees
Burst into sudden blossom.
...
Leaping antelopes
Chart your course,
Birds throng the sacred trees
Shading your village squares.
Rose apples darken your water.
Wild mangoes fall into your coiling current
Like flowers in a maiden's hair. (Mehta, 275-276)

Not only does the river become another aspect of the women in the stories, the river and women both illustrate the transcorporeality that Alaimo talks about in opening up and becoming the contact zone between human and nature. Both the river and women here enact a subjectivity that, Neimanis states, “can counter what the ‘phallogocentric regime’ has ‘declared off-limits’ and ‘does not want us to become’” (Neimanis, quoting Braidotti, 38).³⁶ In other words, as elaborated in the section on Nitin Bose and Rima, the river as/and woman are figured as unorthodox and sexual where constricting domestic values can be cast off. They are therefore depicted as resisting mastery.

It is only towards the very end of the novel that the bureaucrat-narrator reflects on all the narratives and gradually admits that “Tariq Mia’s observation that [the people he had encountered] were like *water flowing* through lives to teach us something. Perhaps the old mullah was right. Perhaps destiny had brought [him] to the banks of the Narmada to understand the world” (Mehta, 268-269, my emphasis). It is ironic that the narrator who claims to be a ‘vanaprasti’ and has given up the world then learns about the immediacy of life from the different stories, proving that it is even harder to live in the world with its complexities than it is to give it up. This shows Mehta’s affirmation of the importance of the feminine that the text eludes at

³⁶ Astrida Neimanis, “Feminist Subjectivity, Watered”, *Feminist Review* 103: 2013, 23-41.

first glance. Mehta does not romanticize nature, the feminine or her female characters in any way. The agency imbued to them is both positive and negative, creative and destructive, illustrating their ambivalence of straddling the culture/nature binary, and even going beyond the binary. Similar to Anita Desai, Mehta does not offer the narrator, or any of her other characters, any utopian solution/ending to their problems. The Narmada River as woman becomes a character in the novel, creating a place for alternative possibilities and agencies. Thus nature as the river and women both are not passive and essentialist but imbued with agency and therefore emerge as active actors.

The Narmada River and Arundhati Roy

Coming out of the world of Gita Mehta's novel, the Narmada River assumes a different kind of significance and agency with Arundhati Roy. After winning the Booker Prize for her novel *The God of Small Things*, Roy used her celebrity status to join and boost the environmental activism of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), which translates to 'Save the Narmada Movement'.³⁷

Supporting the NBA and their anti-dam protests, Arundhati Roy as an activist became a major figure of controversy too. Along with Medha Patkar, she visited the Narmada valley and met the indigenous tribals that would be affected by the dam construction on the river. She protested against the paltry compensation schemes that were being offered to the tribals and Dalits in place of their land, farms, homes and

³⁷ There are several accounts of the NBA movement and the Narmada-dam controversy available online. The website <<http://www.narmada.org>>, entirely run by a group of volunteers, covers the controversy as well as the damage caused by the ill-conceived development schemes of the Indian government regarding the 'oustees' of the project. The harmful environmental effects caused by the various dams built along the river, and the major point of contention, the Sardar Sarovar Dam, that has been the crux of legal disputes between the government, NBA and several other protestors and activists, are all carefully documented in various news articles and academic essays. For example, see: Jane Chapman, "India's Narmada Dams Controversy", *Journal of International Communication*, 2007, 13.1: 71-85; Judith Whitehead, "Submerged and Submerging Voices: Hegemony and the Decline of the Narmada Bachao Andolan in Gujarat, 1998-2001", *Critical Asian Studies*, 2007, 39.3: 339-421; Rob Nixon, "Unimagined Communities: Developmental Refugees, Megadams and Monumental Modernity", *New Formations*, 2010, 69: 62-80; Tabassum Ruhi Khan, "'Dam' the Irony for *The Greater Common Good*: A Critical Cultural Analysis of the Narmada Dam Debate", *International Journal of communication* 6: 2012, 194-213.

villages. As a result, Roy was issued a contempt-of-court notice and was jailed for one day along with a fine. Her jail-sentence made international headlines, giving the NBA and their protests an international awareness and coverage.

As an activist-writer, Roy penned the hugely popular as well as condemned essay “The Greater Common Good” in the year 1999, two years after winning the Booker Prize for her novel. The essay is a scathing commentary against state and corporate interests spurring the dam-building on the Narmada River. Many critics posit this essay as a coda of sorts for reading her novel, despite the fact that it was written two years after the novel. She famously writes in the essay:

Big Dams are to a Nation's "Development" what Nuclear Bombs are to its Military Arsenal. They are both weapons of mass destruction. They're both weapons Governments use to control their own people. Both Twentieth Century emblems that mark a point in time when human intelligence has outstripped its own instinct for survival. They're both malignant indications of civilisation turning upon itself. They represent the severing of the link, not just the link—the *understanding*—between human beings and the planet they live on. They scramble the intelligence that connects eggs to hens, milk to cows, food to forests, water to rivers, air to life and the earth to human existence. (Roy, Web source, original emphasis)³⁸

Roy’s activist writing, such the passage quoted above, is heavily criticized by public officials, intellectuals and the environmental historian Ramachandra Guha. They characterize her writing as unnecessarily hyperbolic and verbose such that the lay person cannot adequately understand her point.³⁹ To these accusations, Roy counters

³⁸ See: Arundhati Roy, “The Greater Common Good”, 1999, <<http://www.narmada.oeg/gcg.html>>.

³⁹ For an in-depth account of Arundhati Roy’s writing style and (uneven) form of her fiction and non-fiction, see: Chitra Sankaran, “Ethics, Aesthetics and the Globalized Other in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*”, *Global Fissures: Postcolonial Fusions* (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2006) 103-120; Elisha Cohn, “Radical Aesthetics: Arundhati Roy’s Ecology of Style”, *ARIEL*, 2009, 40.2: 161-181; Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee, *Postcolonial Environments* (New York; London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee, “Arundhati Roy: Environment and Uneven Form”, *Postcolonial Green: Environmental Politics and World Narratives* (Charlottesville; London: University of Virginia Press, 2010) 17-31.

that her writing is intentional in its hysterical and passionate tone to jolt the complacency of the readers.

Despite the worthiness of her essay, critics have accused Arundhati Roy for hijacking the NBA movement and using her celebrity status to her advantage. The point of contention lies in the fact that “even as the inhabitants of the valley staged a brave resistance for over two decades, Roy’s celebrity status ensured that her voice was heard more clearly than were their anguished pleas” (Khan, 195).⁴⁰ However credible this might be, it cannot be ignored that Roy gave a valuable *language* with which to talk and write about the effects of the dam construction on the river. Rob Nixon succinctly puts it: “Roy, for all her contentiousness within India, became an indispensable translator for international audiences of the wider implications of the Narmada Valley struggle for the environmental justice movement” (68). Roy exposes the ‘iron triangle’ of the dam industry—the nexus of politicians, dam-builders and bureaucrats—the human and ecological costs of dam-building (flooding of valleys and villages of tribals, erasing their literal culture that is dependent on the floodplains, and the flooding of the literal ecosystem in place), all couched in the language of *violence* within a neo-liberal state bound tightly in the circuits of globalization.

Her representation of the Narmada River in the essay then assumes importance in this context of placing “dam-building in the domain of *violence*” (Nixon, 69, my emphasis). In contrast to the language of violence used to outline the humongous costs and damages (human and nonhuman) of dam-building on the Narmada, Roy’s representation of the Narmada River in the essay is extremely evocative. Roy portrays a deep sense of *personal* connection to rivers. Her treatment of the landscape of the Narmada valley, its people and the river is in a deep connection and being with her

⁴⁰ See: Tabassum Ruhi Khan, ““Dam” the Irony for *The Greater Common Good*: A Critical Cultural Analysis of the Narmada Dam Debate”, *International Journal of Communication* 6: 2012, 194-213.

own self rather than just viewing them as distant *objects* of analysis or data to be recorded. Her description of the life forms, human and nonhuman, inhabiting the Narmada River are infused with a stylistic evocative lyricism, and are described in minute detail. This technique is what Rob Nixon terms as “outsized sentiments” (77).⁴¹

For example, these ‘outsized sentiments’ are clearly seen when Roy writes:

Suddenly they [the tribals and Dalits] can’t trust their river anymore. It’s like a loved one who has developed symptoms of psychosis. Anyone who has loved a river can tell you that the loss of a river is a terrible, aching thing. But I’ll be rapped on the knuckles if I continue in this vein. When we’re discussing the Greater Common Good there’s no place for sentiment. (Roy, Web source)⁴²

Here, Roy’s personalised appeal to the readers is evident. The river is a “loved one” and the loss of that river leaves behind a terrible ache in her *own body*, revealing precisely that very deep connection to the Narmada River that she feels and writes about. The evocative language she uses in the passage above shows that for Roy, resistance is not only about facts and domination but also about ‘sentiment’, that is, emotions. Both the Narmada and Roy’s own body are posited as materially interconnected and therefore also intercorporeal. Roy’s body and the Narmada as a water body, interconnected and intercorporeal, then become what Neimanis terms as “bodies indebted to other bodies” (43), where we become implicated in and connected to other watery bodies.⁴³

Mehta and Roy bring their different depictions of the Narmada River together in a salient point they make about the river’s history. The river’s ‘immortality’ that is described in Mehta’s novel finds emphatic affirmation in Roy’s essay as well: the

⁴¹ See: Rob Nixon, “Unimagined Communities: Developmental Refugees, Megadams and Monumental Modernity”, *New Formations* 69: 2010, 62-80.

⁴² See: Arundhati Roy, “The Greater Common Good”, 1999, <<http://www.narmada.org/gcg.html>>.

⁴³ See: Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2017) 27-64.

Narmada valley as “the only valley in India, according to archaeologists, that contains an uninterrupted record of human occupation from the Old Stone Age” (Roy, Web source). Roy used her celebrity status to further the cause of the NBA and bring international focus and support to the Narmada issue, raising pertinent points in her essay: environmental damage, displacement of tribals and Dalits, the power of the state, development and privatization, neoliberal policies controlled by the neo-elite, and postcolonial violence of the river’s waters and the indigenous people living along the river. These issues, and indeed her writing style—for example, the deployment of the metaphors of “Big”, “Small”, and “God” in the essay—reflect and parallel that from her novel *The God of Small Things*. While the Narmada River does not feature in her novel, the Meenachal River assumes larger-than-life significance and forms the backdrop of the novel, and takes on the issues that Roy puts forth about the Narmada.

The Meenachal River

The Meenachal River (sometimes spelled as Meenachil) flows through Kottayam and ends in the Vembanad Lake in Kumarakom, Kerala. As with the Narmada, the Meenachal has religious connotations and is the river-form of Goddess Meenakshi. It is therefore considered a holy river. The Meenachal is a major river in Kerala and several towns and cities flourish along its banks. Not only do people depend on this river for drinking water, they also depend on it for commercial activities. However, akin to the Narmada, the Meenachal is also facing environmental problems, albeit on a different scale. Rapid urbanization along its banks has been causing water pollution due to the disposal of urban and domestic waste into the river. There is depletion of the water table due to illegal sand mining used for the construction industry. Excessive deforestation, construction of check dams and salt-water barrages along the river (referenced in Roy’s novel) have caused the destruction

of marine life. There is an acute shortage of water during the summer due to these issues, affecting thousands of people and wild life who depend on the river.

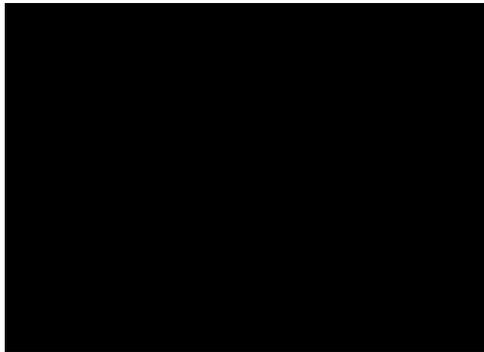


Figure 4: Meenachal River, Kerala.
Image taken from:
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meenachil>

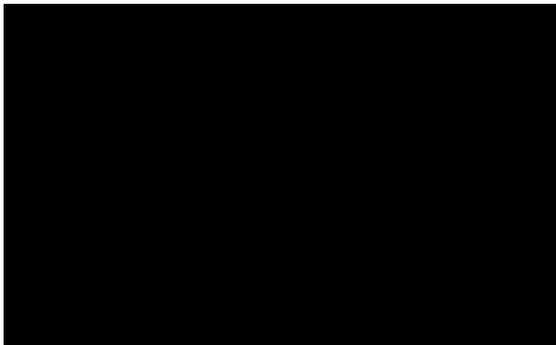


Figure 5: Palai town on the banks of the
Meenachal River, Kerala.
Image taken from:
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meenachil>

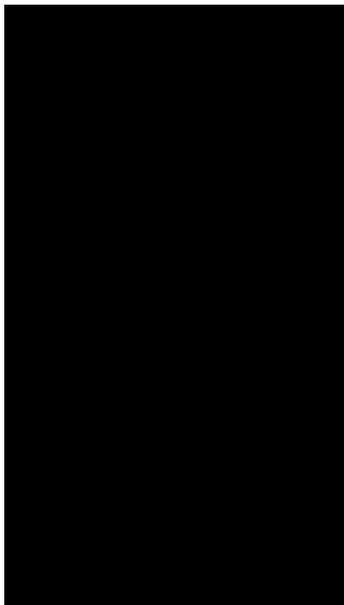


Figure 6: Pictorial representation of the Meenachal as Goddess
Meenakshi.

Image taken from:
<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/398709373235499016>

The God of Small Things

Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* (*TGOST*) is about the childhood experiences of fraternal twins, Estha and Rahel, whose lives are destroyed by societally-sanctioned "Love Laws" (*TGOST*, 33). The book explores how big and small things affect people's lives, and the tragic turn lives invariably take because of the consequences of these big and small things. It is set in the fictional town of Ayemenem (actual town called Ayamanam exists in the Kottayam district in Kerala), and the narrative swings back and forth between the years 1969, when the twins are seven years old, and 1993, when they are adults. The Meenachal River flows through the heart of Ayemenem and the narrative, and is the site of major occurrences in the novel.

The state and corporate interests that are heavily criticized by Roy in her essay "The Greater Common Good" are brought together with local and community concerns in her novel. These issues are juxtaposed with the political climate of 1969 and 1993, where the 1960's revolutionary communist movement in Kerala is replaced with transnational capital in the 1990's. These 'Big' forces converge together to bring about a doomed inter-caste love affair, the accidental drowning of a child, an untouchable's murder, the separation of the twins from each other and from their mother, and a local community that is ridden with ecological destruction when it is turned into an international tourist destination with five-star hotels and boat-rides in the Kerala backwaters.

'Big' Things and 'Big' Lives

The central trauma of the novel comprises the untouchable Velutha's death after it is discovered that he and Ammu Ipe, a divorcee from a higher caste and class, are having an affair. Ammu's children, Estha and Rahel, are forced to corroborate in

their grandmother Mammachi's and grand-aunt Baby Kochamma's false police report of Velutha kidnapping them and raping Ammu. Velutha is then falsely implicated for kidnapping, rape, and the murder of Estha and Rahel's cousin Sophie Mol, who actually drowns in the Meenachal River by accident. This trauma becomes the converging point of all the 'Big' things and lives that Roy has traced and critiqued throughout the novel: gender, caste, politics, history, globalization, empire and the nation-state.

Roy is scathingly critical of the double-standards of society in Ayemenem regarding gender. Mammachi and Baby Kochamma represent the epitome of hypocritical attitudes against women, and this is further complicated by the fact that both are women themselves, illustrating gender complicity in endorsing patriarchal codes when they are viciously internalised. It is precisely because of their gender—women—and their own powerlessness that they staunchly champion patriarchal attitudes, since both are dependent on Chacko, Ammu's brother, for protection and familial upkeep.

Of all the other female characters in the novel, and especially in stark contrast to Mammachi and Baby Kochamma, it is in Aleyooty Ammachi that one finds a modicum of resistance against a patriarchal vision within the Ipe family.⁴⁴ At one point in the text, Rahel sees the Meenachal River through Aleyooty Ammachi's ear lobes. Rahel comes back to the Ayemenem house as an adult and looks at the oil portraits of her great-grandparents Aleyooty Ammachi and Reverend Ipe that hung in the verandah of the Ayemenem house. She observes that although Reverend Ipe

⁴⁴ Roy is further critical of the hypocrisy and double-standards regarding gender, and shows this through familial inheritance rights that are skewed towards the male. Roy highlights this through Ammu and Chacko's differential rights on their pickle and jam factory. Furthermore, Mammachi is shown to be forgiving and tolerant of Chacko's sexual needs but derides her daughter Ammu for having the same needs and having an affair with an untouchable.

“smiled his confident-ancestor smile out across the road instead of the river” (*TGOST*, 30), Aleyooty Ammachi

looked more hesitant. As though she would have liked to turn around but couldn't. Perhaps it wasn't that easy for her to abandon the river. With her eyes she looked in the direction that her husband looked. With her heart she looked away. ...Through the holes in her ears you could see the hot river and the dark trees that bent into it. And the fishermen in their boats. And the fish. (*TGOST*, 30)

The Meenachal River here functions as the avenue to bring forth Aleyooty Ammachi's resistance although she is no longer alive. Reverend Ipe's linear vision and sight is shown as insufficient and opaque as opposed to Aleyooty Ammachi's holes in the ears which reveal sights that are hidden and deemed unimportant by her husband. Aleyooty Ammachi reveals important sights without her literal eyes seeing or giving away anything: the river and its waters, the river people and the river flora and fauna. Through Aleyooty Ammachi's ears (the holes made by her heavy kunukku earrings), the agency of the river and its people is revealed, an intermeshed world of humans and nonhumans. This is made all the more poignant because Mammachi has had the back verandah closed so that the Meenachal River cannot be seen from it or through the windows in the verandah. Despite this, the house is still described by Rahel as having a “river-sense” (*TGOST*, 30).

Linked to Roy's critique of patriarchy and gender issues in Keralite society is her critique of caste issues, explicitly shown through the figure of Velutha. Alex Tickell writes that “[a]s a *paravan*, Velutha in *The God of Small Things* belongs to this stigmatized ‘untouchable’ group [on the margins of the caste system], and it is this fact that makes his affair with Ammu—and their mutual erotic ‘touching’—such a transgressive act” (23, original emphasis).⁴⁵ However, Roy also presents Velutha, his father Vellya Paapen and his brother, Kuttapen, as people of the land and the river.

⁴⁵ See: Alex Tickell, *Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things* (London; New York: Routledge, 2007).

Here, the environment and the river are brought into dialogue with Roy's description of Velutha's home:

On the edge of the clearing, with its back to the river, a low hut with walls of orange laterite plastered with mud and a thatched roof nestled close to the ground...The low walls of the hut were the same colour as the earth they stood on, and seemed to have germinated from a house-seed planted in the ground. (*TGOST*, 195-196)

Velutha's house is almost as if it springs out of the earth itself and is an integral part of it, expressing sensitivity to the natural world. Divya Anand describes the entanglement of the environment with untouchable settlements like Velutha's "the tenuous relation of the environment and the exploited figures in contemporary creative and critical literature" (95).⁴⁶ Dalit or untouchable communities are predominantly exploited within structures of capitalism and development: although Velutha is educated and runs the machinery of Paradise Pickles and Preserves, he is paid lesser than the upper-caste workers. He is also not allowed inside the Ayemenem House due to his social status as an untouchable. The Meenachal River here assumes significance as a border between the 'touchable' and untouchable worlds. Closer inland lies the 'touchable' world with its repressive forces, and at the banks of the river lies the untouchable world earthed as the 'other' to the 'touchable' world. Velutha, Vellya Paapen and Kuttapen are then portrayed by Roy as the antithesis to the culture and civilization of the status quo and the 'touchable' world of the Ipe family. However, it is important to remember that Roy does not romanticize Velutha's or his family's closeness to the water/environment: Velutha and his family live on the banks of the river because they do *not* have a choice as they are socially marginalized to the extreme.

⁴⁶ See: Divya Anand, "Inhabiting the Space of Literature: An Ecocritical Study of Arundhato Roy's *The God of Small Things* and O. V Vijayan's *The Legends of Khasak*", *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment* 12 (2): 2005, 95-108.

As much as the river divides these two worlds, the ‘touchable’ and the ‘untouchable’, it also connects them in its very waters. Through the act of crossing the river, these two worlds merge in the figures of Ammu and Velutha. Ammu, a ‘touchable’ Syrian-Christian, is a divorcee from an intercommunal marriage. Ostracized in her family due to these reasons, she is also described by Roy as having an “Unsafe Edge...The infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber...[that] eventually led her to love by night the man her children loved by day” (*TGOST*, 44). Ammu’s ‘unsafe edge’ is the threat posed to the status quo, endorsed vigorously by the Ipe family, that as a *mother* Ammu desires another man, challenging sexual prohibitions of the society that would traditionally separate motherhood and eroticism (Tickell, 33). Raging against this social order where she is radically ‘othered’, she crosses into and across the river with Velutha. The world she enters in the river’s waters is described by Roy as being Velutha’s and on his terms:

As he rose from the dark river and walked up the stone steps, 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. He moved so easily through it. (*TGOST*, 333-334)

Here, agency is re-distributed by Roy not only to an untouchable Velutha, but also to the nonhuman world, including the river’s waters and life within it, including both Ammu and Velutha within the waters as well. Mirja Lobnik writes that Velutha turns “into a member, rather than owner, of a more-than-human world” (129) and this presents to the readers a compelling instance of the human body—Velutha’s untouchable human body—in entanglement with the material environment and water, where neither is posited as hierarchically superior but rather as complementary parts of one another. Roy seems to present a possible common ground between Ammu, Velutha, the river and the environment, and their collective subalternity—water from

the Meenachal River then functions as a social leveller, breaking down entrenched caste hierarchies as well as the culture/nature binary.

The Meenachal River assumes particular significance with regards to the History House in Roy's novel. Estha and Rahel's childhood History House has been converted to a five-star hotel, 'Heritage' Hotel, for the tourism industry. The booming tourism industry of the 1990's turns rural Ayemenem into "the size of a little town" (*TGOST*, 128). The accompanying environmental degradation and pollution of the Meenachal is described through an adult Rahel's eyes as such:

The History House...could no longer be approached from the river. ...The hotel guests were ferried across the backwaters, straight from Cochin. They arrived by speedboat, opening up a V of foam on the water, leaving behind a rainbow film of gasoline. The view from the hotel was beautiful, but here too the water was thick and toxic. *No Swimming* signs had been put up in stylish calligraphy. They had built a tall wall to screen off the slum and prevent it from encroaching on Kari Saipu's estate. There wasn't much they could do about the smell. (*TGOST*, 125)

Roy exposes two things simultaneously here: the pollution of the river as well as uneven development. The river waters have turned toxic due to over-farming when a salt-water barrage is built on it, resulting in the "silver slant of a dead fish", and it was "choked with a succulent weed", ferrying "fetid garbage to the sea" (*TGOST*, 124). Industrial pollution of the river is hinted at with the "thick white scum in its wake" and that "clean mothers washed clothes and pots in unadulterated factory effluents" (*TGOST*, 125). Alongside this, the tourism industry has spurred uneven development evident in the slums that have cropped up on the banks of the river where the hotel is located: "On the other side of the river, the steep mud banks changed abruptly into low mud walls of shanty hutments. Children hung their bottoms over the edge and defecated directly onto the...exposed river bed" (*TGOST*, 125). Roy's depiction of both pollution of the river's waters and the uneven development that has taken place

suggests the perpetuation of the uneven relationship between postcolonial India and the western world (Britain and United States of America now) that has been going on from colonial times till today. This juxtaposition not only highlights the History House's inescapable past—India's colonial history and the grounds of the house turned into a rubber plantation estate for profits—it also exposes how the local population is exploited through capitalist development projects like the tourism industry.⁴⁷ In effect, such development schemes are shown by Roy to continue the cycle of the colonial predecessors, where not only is nature policed and disciplined but the locals' livelihood is also degraded and they are mired in poverty.

The History House assumes significance on yet another level, where it provides an important critique of revisionary narratives of the past. This house is also the site of the novel's central events, the drowning of Sophie Mol and the brutal beating of Velutha, that form Estha and Rahel's central site of trauma well into adulthood. The house is where both political interests and personal desires converge and is then transformed years later into 'Heritage' Hotel by the tourism industry. The hotel owners create "Toy Histories for rich tourists to play in" and dole out "truncated kathakali performances" (*TGOST*, 126-127) for the tourists' short attention spans. As Joanne Lipson Freed states in her essay, Roy's narrative makes it clear that "these accounts of [toy] history are appealing precisely because they efface the tourists' complicity in colonialism and class and caste oppression, much as the hotel itself seeks to conceal the poverty that surrounds it and the dangerous pollution of the river

⁴⁷ History (usually presented by Roy in the novel with a capital H) is shown by Roy "as a dominating, oppressive force that saturates virtually all social and cultural space, including familial, intimate and affective relationships" (Needham, 372). India's colonial and postcolonial history is not only presented in the History House, but it is also evoked by Roy within the Ipe family, whom Chacko describes as anglophiles. Also notable is the Ipe family's particular affection for the English language, if only to set themselves apart from the lower castes and lower class. See: Anuradha Dingwaney Needham, "'The Small Voice of History' in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*", *Interventions* 7 (3): 2005, 369-391.

that borders it, unappealing facts for which its patrons also share some responsibility” (234). The present-day hotel and its activities are layered over with another account, that of Rahel’s abandoned wristwatch with the time ten-to-two painted on it, subtly emphasizing the importance of personal events in the histories of individuals that are routinely effaced by dominant ‘official’ modes of histories used to maintain the state’s hegemony. The Meenachal River then not only becomes the agent that exposes the eco-social and eco-political issues problematized by Roy, but the waters also expose and rewrite histories that are considered unpalatable in the larger scheme of development couched in the nation’s interests. The waters’ crossing over to the History House/’Heritage’ Hotel evokes colonial and postcolonial history and their collective violence, and in the present day the river is positioned as a repository for marginalized histories as well.⁴⁸

Roy’s critique of globalization is woven into her critiques of gender, caste, politics, colonial and postcolonial history, ‘big’ issues that affect the individual characters in her novel in a ‘big’ way. Roy is not critical of globalization per se, but of the development practices and mindset that spring from globalization that enforce Vandana Shiva’s notion of maldevelopment as well as perpetuate social and economic inequalities. This is poignantly enunciated by Roy in her novel as ‘[f]eelings of contempt born of inchoate, unacknowledged fear—civilisation’s fear of nature, men’s fear of women, power’s fear of powerlessness” (*TGOST*, 308): in other words, hierarchies and binaries that legitimize the exploitation of nature and women by patriarchal structures of oppression, and of the oppressed by the more powerful

⁴⁸ Apart from colonial history, Roy is also keenly aware and critical of a pre-colonial past that affects her characters in the novel, especially the socially-sanctioned “Love Laws” (33). While tracing the colonial history of India, she is simultaneously critical of India’s Vedic and Hindu history that form the basis of social traditions. Therefore, Roy is not only concerned about highlighting the violence of the colonial past but also of localized pre-colonial history that informs the coda of ‘proper’ socialization in India generally.

oppressors. In response to this, Youngsuk Chae writes that “[g]lobal capitalism’s predatory economic domination is based on unequal power relations between developed and developing countries, and the inequality of power on local and global levels which causes the “othered” countries and subjugated peoples to be objects of exploitation in the name of development” (520).⁴⁹ We see these exploitations and inequalities illustrated between: (1) genders, men and women, but especially within women due to internalisation of patriarchal and caste diktats, (2) castes, the ‘touchables’ versus the untouchables, (3) politics, where Marxist and communist ideals are used to further personal interests, (4) the state, where the law and police collude with gender, caste and political discrimination to ensure the power of the hegemonic status quo, and (5) history, where colonial history’s cycle of violence is perpetuated in neo-colonial times through the state and neo-elites.⁵⁰ Within all these inequalities, Roy prominently locates the environment—Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee states that “[for Roy] any serious political and cultural consideration is thus always already environmental” (18)—and expands her critique of globalization.⁵¹ She exposes the ‘iron triangle’—the nexus of politicians, dam-builders and bureaucrats—not only in her essay “The Greater Common Good” but also in her novel where the “banks of the river ...smelled of shit, and pesticides bought with World Bank loans” (*TGOST*, 13). Here, the complicity between local (the state, politicians) and global powers (World Bank, dam-building companies) is brought to the fore along with the harmful environmental effects: dead fish, and the surviving ones “suffered from fin-

⁴⁹ See: Youngsuk Chae, “Postcolonial Ecofeminism in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*”, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 51(5): 2015, 419-530.

⁵⁰ This list of inequalities refers mainly to that narrated in the novel, but in extension, Roy’s critique implies that these inequalities extend more broadly within India.

⁵¹ See: Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee, “Arundhati Roy: Environment and Uneven Form”, *Postcolonial Green: Environmental Politics and World Narratives* (Charlottesville; London: University of Virginia Press, 2010) 17-31.

rot and had broken out in boils” (*TGOST*, 13). Furthermore, the rationale of capitalist development that has caused millions to be displaced and dispossessed is questioned by Roy through the “Gulf-money houses built by nurses, masons, wire-benders, and bank clerks who worked hard and *unhappily* in faraway places” (*TGOST*, 13, my emphasis).

While acknowledging the potential levelling effects of globalization—for example in the figures of Baby Kochamma (higher class) and Kochu Maria (lower class) through a “television-enforced democracy” (*TGOST*, 88) where they are “locked together in a noisy Television silence” (*TGOST*, 28)—Roy nonetheless points out that its negative effects outweigh its benefits. The brand of globalization that filters through American television programmes via satellite into the Ayemenem house is vicariously consumed by Baby Kochamma and Kochu Maria. Roy presents satellite television and the “dizzying array of programmes, transmitted around the clock by powerful satellites put into orbit by European rockets and American space shuttles” (Steger, 4) as a high point of globalization where such technologies become available and affordable for the lower class as well. However, she critiques such modes of globalization as leading to cultural imperialism, especially enforced by the United States of America. The façade of the repetitive television commercials and American soap operas that Baby Kochamma and Kochu Maria are addicted to in their old age is shown to be impersonal and faceless, promoting consumerism for profits, and glossing over crucial cultural differences and social inequalities. The end result then is a seeming homogenization of culture and the imposition of uniform standards that gloss over important differences and the dehumanizing of social relations (Steger, 73). In showing Baby Kochamma embracing the material world in her old age, thus living her life backwards, Roy seems to echo the criticisms of American political

theorist Benjamin Barber who argues that adult consumers are routinely infantilized through “dumbed down advertising” (Steger, 73) to sustain the global capitalist industry.⁵²

The Agency of ‘Small’ Things and ‘Small’ Lives

In a famous interview with David Barsamian (*Progressive* e-magazine), Arundhati Roy states that her novel

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. (Web Source)⁵³

This quote succinctly captures the hegemonic ideology that ‘big’ things—gender, caste, politics, history, globalization and the state—matter more in the general public imagination than the ‘small’ things. With regards to these ‘big’ and ‘small’ things, Alex Tickell writes that “Roy’s constant privileging of the small refuses the conventional ordering of politics in its public or national guises and replaces it with a radical *equivalence* in which a sense of community, personal relationships, and an individual’s imaginative response to his/her surroundings become as momentous as paying taxes and supporting particular parties” (12, original emphasis). Thus, Roy’s relating the ‘big’ and ‘small’ together becomes politically significant in that it shows the effects of ‘big’ things leaking into ‘small’ things and lives, for example, private lives and spaces, the individual and their body, giving rise to material, embodied experiences that cannot be ignored. This is emphasized in Roy’s novel through the interdependence of what she terms as ‘small scurrying lives’ in the human world as well as the natural environment. Unsurprisingly, these ‘small scurrying lives’ are also

⁵² See: Manfred B. Steger, *Globalization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁵³ See: David Barsamian, “Interview with Arundhati Roy”, *Progressive* e-magazine, <<http://progressive.org/magazine/interview-arundhati-roy/>>.

the most marginalized: Estha and Rahel, Ammu and Velutha, and the creatures of the nonhuman world. However, the ‘small scurrying lives’ are also the ones that pose important questions that resist the dominance of the ‘big’, hence illustrating the agency of the ‘small’, no matter how limited it may seem initially.

Estha and Rahel are the marginalized and ‘othered’ twins who provide an alternate point of view to the established social conventions in the novel. Alex Tickell writes of Estha and Rahel’s hybridity:

Roy emphasizes the ironies of [the] slippage between categories in the figures of Pappachi’s grandchildren, Estha and Rahel, who are, like Pappachi’s moth, examples of a kind of biological anomaly. They are dizygotic (two-egg) twins, and therefore represent, in the words of the eighteenth-century French naturalist Buffon, “mixed objects which it is impossible to categorize and which necessarily upset the project of a general system”. (78)⁵⁴

The twins are juxtaposed to nature through Pappachi’s moth. In this parallel, “[t]he threat of what happens to the unclassifiable” (Tickell, 78) is highlighted when they defy binaries and boundaries and exercise their agency in their child-like thinking. Classification in Roy’s novel is not only associated with science but also with power, exemplified in the authoritarian, violent and oppressive figure of Pappachi. When Pappachi tries to categorize and contain the moth according to this paradigm of authority, violence and oppression, the moth, just like the twins, resists such rigid classification. The twins and the moth both highlight “nature’s tendency to evade or slip across the boundaries” (Tickell, 78), where such boundaries are restrictive and simplistic. The twins, furthermore, highlight an even more profound slippage, where being conceived from two-eggs, they subvert the classic Cartesian dichotomy of Self/Other (from which the culture/nature binary is ultimately derived) (Tickell, 78): “[Estha] and Rahel thought of themselves together as Me, and separately,

⁵⁴ See: Alex Tickell, “The God of Small Things: Arundhati Roy’s Postcolonial Cosmopolitanism”, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 38: 2003, 73-89.

individually, as We or Us” (*TGOST*, 2; Tickell, 78-79). Estha and Rahel’s subjectivity merges into one whole despite one being male and the other female. Later on, as adults, the imposition of “Edges, Borders, Boundaries, Brinks and Limits” (*TGOST*, 3) on their lives highlight the high cost that society exacts when one does not conform and be ‘classifiable’, boundaries which they will transgress yet again.

Estha and Rahel, already once linked to nature via Pappachi’s moth, are further entwined with the natural world through the Meenachal River, where the river also represents the transgression of boundaries. In the aftermath of almost any traumatic event, both Estha and Rahel are shown longing for the river. For example, when Estha is molested by the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man, he “longed for the river. Because water always helps” (*TGOST*, 113).⁵⁵ Later on, when he and Rahel are sleeping in the Hotel Sea Queen bedroom, “they dreamed of their river” (*TGOST*, 122). The river is also described intimately as their friend:

The first third of the river was their friend. Before the Really Deep began. They knew the slippery stone steps (thirteen) before the slimy mud began. They knew the afternoon weed that flowed inwards from the backwaters of Komarakom. They knew the smaller fish. The flat, foolish pallathi, the silver paral, the wily, whiskered koori, the sometimes karimeen. ...Here they studied silence...and learned the bright language of dragonflies.

...But the middle of a respectable river, or the Other Side, was no place for children to Linger, Loll or Learn Things. Estha and Rahel accorded the second third and third third of the Meenachal the deference it deserved. (*TGOST*, 203-204)

Estha and Rahel illustrate a material connection and embeddedness with the Meenachal River, its waters and biotic community (the pallathi, paral, koori and

⁵⁵ In several scholarly works on Arundhati Roy, Estha’s molestation episode has been critically understudied. It not only forms the foundation of his trauma that expands when he becomes complicit in falsely implicating Velutha for rape and murder, it is also indicative of how class is exploited as an excuse for committing such a reprehensible act. The Orangedrink Lemondrink Man blithely excuses away his act of molestation and Estha’s resulting trauma by saying that Estha is a “lucky rich boy, with porketmunny and a grandmother’s factory to inherit” (*TGOST*, 105). Estha never inherits the family wealth or the factory, and even if he had, it still would not have muted his trauma in any way.

karimeen). This connection is similar to Mehta's river minstrel, being at once transcorporeal and illustrating a shared relation with other watery beings and bodies such as the local fish in the river, and with each other. Estha and Rahel's transcorporeality here ensures that they are aware of the river's specific materialities which can sustain life or even destroy it. This is shown in how they first identify the river as their friend but at the same time give it the deference and respect, acknowledging it as part of a larger sphere of the natural world and thus being unpredictable. This unpredictability of the river is illustrated in two instances: firstly, when Velutha's brother Kuttappen tells the twins that "[t]his river of ours—she isn't always what she pretends to be...[she's really a] wild thing. I can hear her at night—rushing past in the moonlight, always in a hurry. You must be careful of her" (*TGOST*, 210-211), and secondly, when the fisherman finds Sophie Mol's drowned corpse in the river and thinks "how wrong it is for a fisherman to believe that he knows his river well. *No one* knows the Meenachal" (*TGOST*, 259, original emphasis). Despite this unpredictability, the twins give the river an embodied identity (a friend) and challenge dominant ways of knowing by illustrating radically inclusive politics in their material connection with the river. Roy does not romanticize water or the relationship of humans with water. While showing important material connections, Roy also acknowledges the destructive aspects of water by showing the Meenachal's unpredictability, where "an excess of water can threaten the integrity of living bodies" (Chen et. al, 11).

Years later, when Rahel returns as an adult to Ayemenem, the Meenachal River "greeted her with a ghastly skull's smile, with holes where teeth had been, and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed. It had shrunk" (*TGOST*, 124). Here, Roy's call to protect the integrity of rivers and their biotic community, humans and nonhumans

alike, is apparent. Through Rahel's view of the river, she highlights the inseparability of social justice and political power. Alongside this, another parallel becomes apparent: the river's "ghastly skull's smile" is a direct parallel to Estha's silence lurking in his own skull. Both the river and Estha witness the deterioration of their spirits, the river through extensive pollution and Estha through his trauma of being molested, being made to falsely testify against Velutha, and being separated from Rahel and his mother. The "succulent weed, whose furred brown roots waved like thin tentacles underwater" (*TGOST*, 124) echoes the octopus that lives inside Estha's skull, an embodied form of his collective trauma and the resulting silence. Estha's corporeal sensibility then is obliquely informed by the Meenachal's polluted waters despite staying away from it for several years.

Estha's silence is also contrasted with Baby Kochamma's response to it. Whereas Estha "had acquired the ability to blend into the background of wherever he was [and] occupied very little space in the world" (*TGOST*, 10), Baby Kochamma, when confronted with Estha's silence and refusal to acknowledge her, exulted with "the air of a game warden pointing out an animal in the grass" (*TGOST*, 90). Mirja Lobnik states that Baby Kochamma, in her behaviour towards Estha, "not only betrays her condescension towards someone considered part of the animal world but also suggests a particular relationship to this world, one that positions herself as elevated above nonhuman nature" (130). This attitude is also seen in her relationship with her garden in the Ayemenem house. Pappachi sends Baby Kochamma to the University of Rochester to pursue a diploma in Ornamental Gardening. When she returns to Ayemenem, Baby Kochamma "raised a fierce bitter garden that people came all the way from Kottayam to see. ...Like a lion-tamer she tamed twisting vines and nurtured bristling cacti. She limited bonsai plants and pampered rare orchids. She

waged war on the weather. She tried to grow edelweiss and Chinese guava” (*TGOST*, 26-27). Here, we see Baby Kochamma exercising a form of negative agency in “waging war on the weather” and trying to tame natural elements to conform to her ways of growing the garden. Baby Kochamma here is not aligned to the natural sphere at all. Instead, she wholly ascribes to the cultural patriarchal view of nature being passive and existing to be tamed for instrumental purposes. Lobnik characterizes Baby Kochamma’s horticultural ambition as “aesthetic, scientific and social forms of violence...to transform a perceived wilderness into a meticulously designed landscape” (117). Roy here illustrates one aspect of the logic that permits violence against the nonhuman world as well as the dispossessed: “human nature’s pursuit of ascendancy” (*TGOST*, 293). Baby Kochamma, in trying to illustrate the triumph of her will against the natural elements, gets further estranged from the land. Her techniques do not nurture, as evidenced by the language used by Roy to describe her methods of gardening. Just as Baby Kochamma derives pleasure in policing the women and children in the Ipe family, she derives pleasure policing her garden which cannot be left to its own natural devices. Aarthi Vadde links Baby Kochamma’s gardening to the colonial enterprise:

Although a native of Ayemenem, she presides over her garden like an imperial horticulturalist remaking an imagined wilderness into a global natural order of, among others, Chinese, Japanese, Swiss and Indian plant species. ...Her gardening strategies suggest the indigenization of colonialism’s epistemologies, complicating the notion that Indian subjectivities can be separated from European ones even in the aftermath of national independence. (Vadde, 531)⁵⁶

This is a key area of critique that runs through most of Roy’s non-fictional works as well. The co-option of the Indian elite into the neo-colonial and neo-liberal enterprise

⁵⁶ This can also be seen as a critique of the commercial monocultural production of eucalyptus trees, indigo, rubber and cotton that displaced the subsistence farming of staple foods such as grains, millet and rice during the British rule in India. Increased periods of drought and food scarcity were reported during the practice of monoculture than in the seasonal cultivation of staple foods that farmers lived on. Furthermore, it is worthwhile noting that the colonial empire was also often represented as a garden.

ensures that the logic of ascendancy gains traction and thus harms the environment and further exacerbates the inequalities between the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’. Thus, whether relating to the natural world or the human world, Baby Kochamma is shown to be thoroughly exploitative. She is not shown as being ‘closer to nature’ in any romanticized sense. Her agency here is destructive and negative, even in her old age.

In contrast to Baby Kochamma’s negative agency and Estha’s octopus’s inky tranquilizing effects (*TGOST*, 12) that numb him from the traumas of his past, is the overgrown, hyperactive and unruly garden in the Ayemenem House that Estha and Rahel encounter as adults. Rahel sees that “the wild overgrown garden was full of the whisper and scurry of small lives” (*TGOST*, 1). Roy further describes the garden that

[l]eft to its own devices, ...had grown knotted and wild, like a circus whose animals had forgotten their tricks. The weed that people call communist patcha (because it flourished in Kerala like communism) smothered the more exotic plants. Only the vines kept growing, like toe-nails on a corpse. They reached through the nostrils of the pink plaster gnomes and blossomed in their hollow heads... (*TGOST*, 27)

Sara Upstone writes that the dirt and decay of the garden and the Ayemenem House is Roy’s “acknowledgement of the true and subversive function of the [garden and] the house, a space of abjection that “disturbs identity, systems, order,” so that marginality offers previously denied potential” (74). In light of this quote, it is important to read the overgrown and unruly garden as a sign of resistance rather than as a sign of decay and stasis. It ultimately proliferates with life whereas Baby Kochamma had sought to blot out that very life by trying to tame and discipline the natural order of things. The subversive function of the garden becomes even more apparent when Rahel sees all manners of creatures *thriving* amongst the wild overgrown, abandoned garden: “In the undergrowth a rat snake rubbed itself against a glistening stone. Hopeful yellow bullfrogs cruised the scummy pond for mates. A drenched mongoose flashed across

the leaf-strewn driveway” (*TGOST*, 2). Here, small marginal lives take centre-stage and signal the shift away from Baby Kochamma’s colonial ideals.

Similarly, Roy pays minute, individual, attention to the “hurrying, scurrying boatworld (*TGOST*, 202) that Estha and Rahel discover underneath an old abandoned wooden boat by the Meenachal River:

White termites on their way to work.
White ladybirds on their way home.
White beetles burrowing away from light.
White grasshoppers with whitewood violins.
...A white wasp. Dead.
A brittlewhite snakeskin, preserved in darkness, crumbled in the sun.
(*TGOST*, 202)

Roy’s emphasis here on the ‘small’, small lives of animals and insects that Estha and Rahel, themselves marginalized, discover, echoes what she has said in an interview: “The god of small things...whether it’s the way the children see things or whether it’s the insect life in the book, or the fish or the stars—there is a not accepting of what we think of as adult boundaries. This small activity that goes on is the under life of the book. All sorts of boundaries are transgressed upon” (quoted in Upstone, 71). Furthermore, the wild garden in the Ayemenem House and the ‘boatworld’ are portrayed by Roy as spaces of socialization where an ecological collectivity is enabled through the forging of bonds between humans and nonhumans. The conceptions of agency, along with justice, and the transgressions (Vadde, 530) that Estha and Rahel exhibit as children and, later on as adults, cannot be understood without the role of nonhuman actors and of intuitive environmental literacy that they display throughout the novel.

Roy, in fact, makes a gesture towards global ecological currents and the grand scale of ecological evolution in her novel through the ‘boatworld’ spider:

A white boat-spider floated up with the river in the boat, struggled briefly and drowned. Her white egg sac ruptured prematurely, and a

hundred baby spiders (too light to drown, too small to swim), stippled the smooth surface of the green water, before being swept out to sea. To Madagascar, to start a new phylum of Malayali Swimming Spiders. (*TGOST*, 204)

The fact that it is Estha and Rahel's river games in the Meenachal in Kerala that lead to the spawning of the new Malayali spiders in Madagascar "demonstrates the global ecological ripples of a seemingly local and trivial human endeavour" (Vadde, 535), illustrating the intricate interdependency of the human with nonhumans in complex ways. Through this spider, Roy also highlights the inefficacy of binary thought systems and dichotomies that 'big' things and lives subscribe to. Pappachi's rigid taxonomic, categorical thought and Baby Kochamma's endeavours of disciplining nature are shown as severely incapacitating thought-systems when juxtaposed to seemingly incongruent binaries in words such as "boatspider", "boatlives", "boatworld", "boatflowers" and "boatfruit" (*TGOST*, 202). These incongruent binaries are related to the twins, who despite being conceived from "two-egg[s]", were really "Siamese twins, physically separate, but with joint identities" (*TGOST*, 2), where their joint identities intuitively promote the various interdependencies in the incongruous binaries.

The Meenachal River is not only characterized as Estha and Rahel's friend but is also a literal boundary which several characters cross. On one hand, the river gives life as a friend, and on the other hand, it gives death, poignantly illustrated in the drowning of Estha and Rahel's cousin, Sophie Mol. The drowning is described as a "quiet handing over ceremony...A river accepting the offering" (*TGOST*, 293). Sophie Mol's death is the price Ammu and Velutha pay for their love affair. It is significant that when Sophie Mol drowns, the twins are crossing the river because Ammu's affair with Velutha has been discovered and in a fit of rage, she blames the twins for her problems. The river then is a physical and metaphorical boundary, and

all the characters that break societal rules cross the river's limits onto the other side where the History House is. This space on the other side of the river is characterized by Roy as being an inclusive and interconnected space. For example, when Ammu and Velutha consummate their affair, they link their fates to that of a spider that lived in the History House on the bank of the river—'small' lives likening the outcome of their affair to another 'small' life. The inclusivity of this space, as well as of Ammu and Velutha in connecting intimately with the spider, acts in opposition to and as resistance against the hegemonic caste-sanctioned law and order on the other side of the river, even though the resistance is limited (both Ammu and Velutha eventually die).

Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee states in *Postcolonial Environments* that confined spaces such as the cell that Velutha dies in or the hotel room that Ammu breathes her last “define the nodal spaces at which the natural and the cultural continuities of environment become visible”, and that for Roy “political and economic forces—colonial, postcolonial and neo-colonial—...shape this environment” (98). In light of this statement, it then becomes possible to read the confined spaces that Ammu and Velutha die in as spaces of (environmental) injustice. Both die emotionally and physically broken and in states of economic destitution, where their bodies also become the ‘environments’ that have been risked and killed due to physical and/or societal harms (Stein, 2), and these bodies and spaces are greatly affected by issues of gender and sexuality, class and caste.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ The policemen, when beating Velutha in the History House, call him “AC-DC” (*TGOST*, 311), a slang for a bisexual (literally meaning “alternating current/direct current”), when they see red nail polish on his finger-nails. As readers, we know that Velutha prioritized the twins and their desires, even in death, by letting them apply the nail polish on his nails, but the policemen misconstrue this as an indication of his sexuality and use it as a pretext to abuse him further: “One of them flicked at his penis with a stick. ‘Come on, show us your special secret. Show us how big it gets when you blow it up.’ Then he lifted his boot (with millipedes curled into its sole) and brought it down with a soft thud.” (*TGOST*, 311)

This is not to say that both Ammu and Velutha hold no power or agency—they do, however momentary and limited it may be. In Ammu and Velutha’s affair, the politics of touch, that is, the act of touching, holds immense power and agency, and also the fact that Roy chooses to end the novel on the word “tomorrow” (*TGOST*, 340).⁵⁸ Agreeing with Tickell’s statement that, the fact that characters such as Mammachi and Baby Kochamma “are obsessed with untouchability...transforms ‘the simple question of touching into a power-issue, but also into a highly dangerous and sensual obsession: even the most casual “touch” is oversaturated with symbolic meaning”’ (quoting Baneth-Nouailhetas, 87), Ammu and Velutha’s erotic transgression at the end then is extremely political and full of agency because it threatens to marginalize, and undermine, the mainstream hegemonic status quo.⁵⁹ Just like the Meenachal’s waters, Ammu and Velutha’s bodies become watery and fluid, acting as solvents to increase the permeability of the borders of ‘touchability’ and ‘untouchability’. Ammu’s body becomes porous and subject to infiltration when Velutha’s “untouchable tongue touched the innermost parts of her” (*TGOST*, 337). Velutha’s body becomes a literal solvent as it merges with the river’s waters to

⁵⁸ Much has been written about Aijaz Ahmad’s and Brinda Bose’s polemical essays about Roy, where Ahmad derides Roy’s position at the end of the novel that the idea of the erotic is not political enough. Ahmad’s position comes across as a bit too simplistic and couched precisely in the binaries of public/private politics that are reductive. Both Ammu and Velutha have actually posed political resistance in the public sphere as well: Velutha is a card-carrying member of the Marxist political party and even construed to be a Naxalite. Ammu, when told of the possibility that Rahel had seen him in a communist march, hopes that it had been Velutha and that he shared her overt anger against society’s biases and injustices. Ammu is quick to answer back to any rebukes by Chacko, Baby Kochamma and Mammachi, leaving them to wonder where she had learnt her effrontery from since she was not as educated as Chacko. Hence, Ahmad’s criticisms of both Roy and politics of eroticism in her novel are limited and fall within the traps of dualisms that this dissertation is arguing against. See: Aijaz Ahmad, “Reading Arundhati Roy *Politically*”, *Frontline*, 1997, 103-108; Brinda Bose, “In Desire and in Death: Eroticism as Politics in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*”, *ARIEL* 29 (2): 1998, 59-71.

⁵⁹ See: Emilienne Baneth-Nouailhetas, *The God of Small Things: Arundhati Roy* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2002) 100-102. Also, Roy is intentionally deliberate in disrupting the chronological order of her narration at the end, where she ends the novel in the middle of her narrative events. She purposely employs this strategy to undermine the deterministic forces of society and history that she indicts in her novel, thus making a bid for agency and an optimistic hope for a better future in the word “tomorrow”.

permeate boundaries between himself and Ammu as they cross the river for thirteen nights to consummate their affair. Both their 'leaky' bodies become the strongest threat as sexual intercourse "results in both the intermingling of natural bodily fluids and the hybridization of children and caste [seen in Estha and Rahel]" (Froula, 42). It is because of this threat that Inspector Thomas taps Ammu's breasts with his baton as a premeditated gesture to insult and to return her to her 'place' in the larger scheme of things.

Ammu and Velutha's material bodies (later, Estha and Rahel's too) then become threatening in a similar way the Meenachal's waters are threatening: both bodies and water obscure and cross boundaries that the Keralite society prizes above all else in the novel. As bodies are made up of almost seventy percent water, "[b]odily fluids attest to the permeability of the body" and "[b]ody fluids flow, they seep, they infiltrate; their control is a matter of vigilance, never guaranteed" (Grosz, 193-194; Longhurst, 30). Bodily and watery borders are then shown to be always vulnerable and open to renegotiation, rupture and resistance. Since bodily and watery borders are vulnerable and permeable, they are then also able to connect with other watery bodies, both human and nonhuman. Both bodies and the river are shown in a state of transition where "boundaries blur" (*TGOST*, 1) and both bodies and water act as the most potent liminal metaphors as well as natural barriers that are porous, destabilizing any notion of fixed and stable boundaries. It is this treat of fluidity, of permeable and porous borders and *bodies*, which provokes such an "unmanageable" outrage from Mammachi:

Mammachi's rage...was redirected into a cold contempt for her daughter and what she had done. She thought of her naked, coupling in the mud with a man who was nothing but a filthy *coolie*. ...*Like animals*, Mammachi thought and nearly vomited. ...Her tolerance of 'Men's Needs' as far as her son was concerned, became the fuel for her unmanageable fury at her daughter. *She had defiled generations of*

breeding [my emphasis]...and brought the family to its knees. For generations to come, *for ever* now... (TGOST, 254-258, original emphasis)

Mammachi's fury at Ammu for "[defiling] generations of breeding" shows the traditional Keralite (and by extension, Indian) society's fixation with unmoving borders, boundaries and classification through patriarchal discourse that espouses "preservation of values and privilege through *lineage*" (Tickell, 87, my emphasis). The state of being fluid, as well as bodily fluids, are typically seen as a liminal and borderline state that disrupt the solidity of objects and things (Longhurst, 31). Therefore, bodily boundaries that are watery, fluid and permeable, and bodily fluids when intermingled, are a threat if crossed, transcended and mixed.⁶⁰

This is also seen in Estha and Rahel's sibling incest, which Roy positions just before the episode where Ammu and Velutha consummate their affair. When Estha comes back to Ayemenem as an adult, he is repeatedly shown drenched in rain or that it is raining outside the Ayemenem House while Estha and Rahel are inside or they meet. Rain—a liquid phase state of water and part of the natural water cycle—is shown as renewal, facilitating a renewed connection between the twins that was severed twenty-three years ago due to circumstances outside their control. Cecilia Chen, Janine Macleod and Astrida Neimanis state that "tangible forms of water—gentle rain, immovable ice, crashing wave—mingle their qualities with our ideas of generosity, emotional paralysis, or overwhelming power, even as they accumulate new connotations on their transit through paragraphs"(10). This statement is relevant

⁶⁰ Robyn Longhurst states in *Bodies: Exploring fluid Boundaries*: "Fluids are implicitly associated with femininity, maternity, pregnancy, menstruation and the body. *Fluids are subordinated to that which is concrete and solid*. In turn, solidity and rationality become linked [and] all borderline states, functions, and positions as dangers, sites of possible pollution and contamination" (31, my emphasis; Grosz, 195). See: Robyn Longhurst, *Bodies: Exploring fluid Boundaries* (London; New York: Routledge, 2001) 9-32; Elizabeth Grosz, "Sexed Bodies", *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994) 187-210.

here to Estha and Rahel's emotional trauma, the "emotional paralysis" that gets mingled with the constant motif of rain in the novel:

Twenty-three years later, Rahel, dark woman in a yellow T-shirt, turns to Estha in the dark.
"Esthapappychachen Kuttappen Peter Mon", she says.
She whispers.
She moves her mouth.
Their beautiful mother's mouth.
Estha, sitting very straight, waiting to be arrested, takes his fingers to it. To touch the words it makes. To keep the whisper. His fingers followed the shape of it. The touch of teeth. His hand is held and kissed.
Pressed against the coldness of a cheek, wet with shattered rain.
(*TGOST*, 327)

Rain as connection and renewal, and that material matter which brings out the twins' trauma, shows what Chen, Macleod and Neimanis describe as water's creative-connective capacity.⁶¹ Estha and Rahel not only share their "hideous grief" (*TGOST*, 328) but also attempt to recuperate from that grief and connect to each other through the common (bodily) waters they share with each other and the natural water cycle that recycles all water through rain: "In some sense, we all emerge from and return to waters. ... Water is a matter of relation and connection. Waters literally flow between and within bodies, across space and through time, in a planetary system that challenges pretensions to discrete individuality" (Chen et. al, 12). Estha is so traumatized that he cannot communicate with words, and Rahel's trauma manifests in her emotional emptiness, hence their bodies, and shared waters, then express their grief and trauma at being separated from each other, from their mother Ammu, and being an accessory in Velutha's murder.

The ending of the novel, after juxtaposing the two love scenes, ends on the word "Tomorrow" (*TGOST*, 340). It is a deliberately ambivalent ending, where

⁶¹ See: Cecilia Chen, Janine Macleod and Astrida Neimanis, *Thinking With Water* (Montreal and Kingston; London; Ithaca: McGill-Queens University Press, 2013) 12.

despite knowing the actual outcome of ‘tomorrow’—that Ammu and Velutha die and the twins are traumatised for the rest of their lives—there is still a note of hope for a future that is not as bleak or tragic as what is meted out to the characters. In keeping with her ecocritical stance, Roy offers the ultimate hope in the figure of the History House spider by the river, ‘Chappu Thamburan’. The spider, initially covered with various bits of garbage, sheds his old ‘clothes’ to acquire a new covering. Just like the spider discards his old covering, the “outmoded world-view” and “antiquated philosophy” (*TGOST*, 339-340) of ‘Love Laws’ that are sanctioned by society and history can also be discarded slowly. As Roy points out, “gradually” (*TGOST*, 339), it will take time for such a future to emerge like the ‘new’ spider, but eventually things will progress for a better future, a better tomorrow.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown the centrality of water to postcolonial environments, ecofeminism and gender. By arguing that the two authors, Gita Mehta and Arundhati Roy, present an alternative social agency in their novels through the bodily registers of women and water, water, bodies, and desire are shown to be strongly politicized. Traditional political and economic understandings of power that are rooted in structural patriarchal inequalities are consciously subverted by the two authors. The result of such a move is that both men and women are shown to be linked to nature and water in different ways, off-setting the stereotypical association of women with nature. However, agency is figured as both positive and negative by both authors, and this highlights women’s ambivalence regarding the culture/nature binary.

The materiality of water is highlighted constantly by both the authors. Mehta shows the materiality of water through the Narmada River in her novel. The Narmada River is not only the thread that runs through the book and the various stories, but it is

also presented as a literal lifeline for the tribal communities living along the banks of the river. This is also reflected in Arundhati Roy's essay "The Greater Common Good", where the Narmada River is linked to Roy's own self and body in material ways, and the tribals of the Narmada Valley depend on it for material survival as well. Water then connects individuals, human and nonhuman, politically, socially and materially. Both novels capture the role of water as an integrator of various lives and beings, as well as being a geographical and spiritual anchor—for Estha and Rahel in times of trouble in Roy's novel, and for Ammu and Velutha who find an anchor in the river for their socially-unacceptable love affair. The Meenachal River in Roy's novel shows how it decentres agency away from human beings alone, and includes within itself various agencies of various beings—human, nonhuman, 'touchable' and 'untouchable'. The river also serves as a metaphor for the recognition of previously marginalised voices and histories.

For women writers then, water becomes a way to express political points in their narratives, especially related to gender, and in this context, the environment. Water plays an important role in the narratives of Mehta and Roy as a literal body and metaphorical language, where many of the experiences, ideas and emotions of the characters are distilled through water, both literal and symbolically. Mehta and Roy repeatedly show, through the Narmada and Meenachal rivers, how the natural world keeps pushing against the 'cultural' side of the culture/nature boundary, where it cannot simply be contained or confined in binaries or 'constructed' gardens, thus creeping into so-called 'civilized' cultural spaces—also seen in Velutha, who as an essential 'other' and part of nature, attempts to enter the realm of culture by loving Ammu and crossing literal and unspoken boundaries into the History House. It is

important to note that Mehta and Roy do not romanticize nature, water, women or those who make transcorporeal connections with the more-than-human world.

Chapter Four City

“For those who are lost, there will always be cities that feel like home”—Simon Van Booy, Everything Beautiful Began After.

“...it’s home isn’t it? It may be a hovel, but if it’s your home then you can’t stop longing for it”—Anuradha Roy, An Atlas of Impossible Longing

Introduction

With a focus on urban postcolonial ecofeminism, this chapter will analyse two novels, Anuradha Roy’s *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* (2008) (henceforth referred to as *AAIL*) and Usha K. R’s *Monkey-Man* (2010).¹ In this chapter, I will show that the city is simultaneously portrayed as a double-edged sword, where the women are shown to be related differently to the city, with some women as ‘of the city’ and others as ‘not of the city’. Certain female characters long for the city as their own sanity depends on being *in* the city, however, other female characters find themselves lost in the city and they long for places, spaces, and homes out of the built-up urban areas.

Both Anuradha Roy and Usha K.R refrain from romanticizing the city and its allures while simultaneously portraying that the woman-nature link does not hold as several women in the novels are inseparable from their urban surroundings and concrete landscapes. The urban environment in the cities is also replete with its own problems such as urban poverty, slums and nature’s use for capitalistic purposes.

The city or urban landscape has typically not been considered in the remit of ecofeminism. Women and/in the city become a focal point in this chapter, highlighting that materialist postcolonial ecofeminism in all its strains is not static or

¹ It is important to note that this chapter is not on the urbanization processes of cities or how cities are made. Rather, this chapter’s focus is on how the inter-relations between gender and the (urban) environment play out in cities, with a theoretical focus on building materialist postcolonial ecofeminism in relation to cities and the urban environment.

just confined to natural landscapes, rural places and wilderness. Catherine Villaneuva Gardner states that “[w]e should understand “environment” to cover not just the wilderness or national parks, but our homes, our communities, and their interactions” (201).² Indeed, as Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee emphasizes, the environment is not just the ‘natural’ but also consists of “[the] network of politics, culture, ecology, physical space, and non-human matter that we should understand as ‘environment’” (13). The ‘natural’ and the ‘cultural’ always seep into each other to form particular environments and also the text’s engagement with these environments. The shift to the urban sphere falsifies the woman-nature link and brings forth the notion that women *are not* ‘naturally’ associated with nature. The romanticized link of the Third-World women to nature especially is shown as a construct when the culture/nature binary is disarticulated, where the conditions of poverty and hard labour on a daily basis are revealed to be the women’s need for survival, and especially so when the city as non-wilderness/ non-‘nature’ is inserted into the equation. This is not a romanticized notion to be associated with nature in essentialist ways such that it obscures the hardship and drudgery that many of the women live with.

Cities, Natures and Women: A Brief Outline

Materialist postcolonial ecofeminism has yet to fully venture into the urban-scapes of everyday life. So far, the notion/perception of ecocriticism and ecofeminism is that it is used to analyse and explicate the rural landscape or wilderness. Linda Vance, a prominent American ecofeminist, states that, in the American imagination, “[t]he problem lies in the premise that wilderness equals nature...[such that] the inferiority of all other expressions of nature will be reinforced” (61). Urban environments and cities generally have not been thought of as nature, or as Linda

² See: Catherine Villaneuva Gardner, “An Ecofeminist Perspective on the Urban Environment”, *The Nature of Cities: Ecocriticism and Urban Environments* (Tucson, USA: The University of Arizona Press, 1999) 191-212.

Vance says, “[i]n the nature-culture dualism...they are not-good-nature” (62). Nascent research into urban ecocriticism has been done by Michael Bennet and David B. Teague (1999) in their book *The Nature of Cities: Ecocriticism and Urban Environments*. In the section titled “Ecofeminism and the City” of the book, there is a very brief foray into urban ecofeminism with two chapters devoted to ecofeminism and the urban environment. Catherine Villaneuva Gardner’s essay in the book suggests that if ecofeminism can be redefined to be a “social and moral strategy offering an alternative to a deep-ecological environmental ethic” (Bennet and Teague, 7), then it can offer a more respectful and inclusive perspective to social injustices regarding the urban environment. Laura Sullivan’s essay in the book talks about the ways in which western, middle-class, urban, white women are co-opted into a rhetoric of beauty that renders Third World ‘nature’ as a repository for capitalist exploitation, and invisibilises the indigenous women and their struggles with poverty.

Although there is a vast body of literature on cities and/in literature, classic writings on cities from scholars such as David Harvey and Henri Lefebvre leave out certain important points about the (urban) environment in relation to *gender*. Doreen Massey has criticized David Harvey’s writings precisely on the premise that “women, for instance, do not figure in the development of [his] argument, and neither does the possibility of feminist readings of the issues” (40), in spatial relations constituted within capital accumulation.³ Although Henri Lefebvre does not talk about the specific relationship between women, cities and nature/environment, his ideas about “bodily and experiential difference” became salient points for “feminist and anti-racist urban struggles” (Varma, 6). Kevin McNamara’s book *The City in Literature* (2014) includes a comprehensive list of chapters from the medieval city to urban utopias and

³ See: Doreen Massey, “Flexible Sexism”, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 9: 1991, 31-57.

dystopias, to postmodern and postcolonial cities and urban inequalities that include the LGBT community. However, a glaring absence of environmental issues and gender is once again prevalent in his collection of essays about the city in literature.⁴

In recent years, under the category of ‘Environmental Humanities’, more scholars are realizing the importance of writing about nature and the environment in cities and urban centres. One recent work is Jon Christensen and Ursula K. Heise’s essay “Biocities: Urban ecology and the cultural imagination” in *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities* (2017). This essay traces the American cultural imagination of nature in the city over the years and the theories used to analyse nature in cities from different fields and disciplines. Christensen and Heise state that ultimately, “science fiction and speculative non-fiction [provide] more complicated versions of how these histories and theories and cultural imaginings might play out” (457). Erik Swyngedouw (2015) states that we have entered a period termed as the Anthropocene (following on from the Holocene) where urbanization does not only manifest in geography, but also in the “socio-spatial process that shapes the intimate and accelerating fusion of social and physical transformations and metabolisms that gave the Anthropocene its name” (609).⁵ Swyngedouw iterates that what is important in this capitulation is that capitalism in urban cities gives rise to “particular forms of capitalist urbanization...that weld together things, natures and peoples, but do so in socially, ecologically, and geographically articulated, but *uneven*, manners” (609, my emphasis). The question that becomes important in this

⁴ McNamara does state in his introductory chapter to the book that the anthology would have benefitted from a chapter on women and the city, where women writers counter the hegemonic male perspective in representing the literary city. However, no such chapter was included in the book and therefore there is no female perspective or female writer included, much less the environment.

⁵ See: Erik Swyngedouw, “Urbanization and Environmental Futures: Politicizing Urban Political Ecologies”, *The Routledge Handbook of Political Ecology* (London; New York: Routledge, 2015) 609-619.

scenario is of the urbanization of nature in the flows of urban capital. Maria Kaika and Swyngedouw define the urbanization of nature as “the process through which all manner of natures are socially mobilized, economically incorporated (commodified), and physically metabolized/transformed in order to support the urbanization process” (*Eurozine*, Web Source).⁶

Maria Kaika’s *City of Flows: Modernity, Nature and the City* (2005) takes an in-depth look at the urbanization of natures that Swyngedouw mentions. Kaika starts off by stating that what seems to be a compartmentalized and conceptually separate world of the home, city and nature is, in fact, “a messy socio-spatial continuum”(4). For Kaika, modernity and urbanization were aimed at disciplining and controlling nature through “technology, human labour, and capital investment” (5). The modernization of cities was contingent upon having complex networks of “natural elements, social power relations and capital investment cycles” that remain “fetishized or visually severed” (5) so that a semblance of autonomy appears to function within cities and homes.⁷ It is these relations of production and material flows of nature into the urban that not only ‘urbanize’ nature, but also assert the unbreakable linkages between nature, city and home. Kaika therefore claims that nature and city are hybrids: they “are not separate entities or autonomous “space envelopes”, but hybrids. Neither purely human-made nor purely natural” (5). The production of cities and the production of nature are then shown to be part of the same process of “urbanization of nature” (7) along with the production of space. The main

⁶ See: Maria Kaika and Erik Swyngedouw, “Radical Urban Political-Ecological Imaginaries”, *Eurozine*, <<http://www.eurozine.com/radical-urban-political-ecological-imaginaries/>>.

⁷ For the concept of fetishization of the city and urban nature, see: Maria Kaika, “The Phantasmagoria of the Modernist Dream”, *City of Flows: Modernity, Nature and the City* (New York; London: Routledge, 2005) 27-50; Maria Kaika and Erik Swyngedouw, “Fetishizing the Modern City: The Phantasmagoria of Urban Technological Networks”, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 24 (1): 2000, 120-138.

idea is that the city is both produced (built) as well as natural. Kaika's configuration of the city as a hybrid becomes an important concept to consider in Roy's and K.R's novels.

Both nature and the city subscribe to notions of good and evil. Kaika elucidates this dual scripting of nature and cities as follows:

This double coding of both nature and the city as, on the one hand ecologically and morally superior and on the other hand barbaric and uncivilized, has prompted (and still prompts) many debates as well as conflicting spatial and social practices. (14)

The culture/nature dualism translates into a schizophrenic attitude of good and evil towards both nature and the city (where the 'culture' in the dualism stands for the city). Nature, in this dualism, is conceived as morally and ecologically superior to urbanized cities, but it is at the same time viewed as 'uncivilized', wild and dangerous. The city is also viewed similarly: on the one hand, it stands for man's ultimate victory over nature (nature is tamed and disciplined for use in urban spaces, or built over in urban spaces), while on the other hand, it is shown as polluted and in desperate need for untouched, 'pristine' nature to restore the human spirit that has waned in the urban spaces. The material implications of this dualistic thought-process is that, in terms of planning capitalist cities, there is an invariable social segregation where the lower classes or the working class population are relegated to spaces that are polluted, toxic waste dumps or environmentally unclean (this has given rise to activism such as the environmental justice movements). This dualistic conceptualization, however, is important for analyses of postcolonial texts that show the inter-linkages between nature, city and gender, where "landscapes of power" (Kaika, 21) are an outcome of neo-imperial and neoliberal policies/agendas of states and nations.

However, the focus on *gender* and environment in urban settings/cities has not been explored in greater depth after the initial research in this area. This gap is even more pronounced regarding the links between postcolonial cities, gender and the environment. In McNamara's book, Caroline Herbert's essay "Postcolonial Cities" provides an important entry-point into the issue of urban spaces and postcoloniality. Her statement that "[p]ostcolonial literary studies has been relatively slow to recognize the significance of urban space to configurations of colonial power and to negotiations of postcolonial subjectivity and citizenship" (200) highlights my concern of bringing gender, environment, urban space/the city and material postcolonial ecofeminism into one analytical focus, albeit the fact that Herbert leaves out the gender and environment component from her essay.

Earlier works on the postcolonial city include Sara Upstone's *Spatial Politics in the Postcolonial Novel* (2009), and Sara Upstone and Andrew Teverson's *Postcolonial Spaces: The Politics of Place in Contemporary Culture* (2011). Upstone's *Spatial Politics* envisages "an alternative concept of spatial politics: one that is rooted not solely in a politics of the nation, but instead reflects the diverse spaces that construct the postcolonial experience" (1) through the reading of various postcolonial literary texts. Upstone emphatically asserts that through the renegotiation of space, constructions of identity in postcolonial spaces and places are renegotiated as well: "the right to space must be seen as key to the very real, often violent, material effects of colonization. For the colonial gaze that forms a territory does not only this, it also creates an identity for the colonised" (5). Unlike McNamara and Herbert, Upstone includes various female writers in her analyses, such as Arundhati Roy and Tsitsi Dangarembga, providing a counter-hegemonic female perspective on postcolonial spaces and cities. Upstone states that in postcolonial literary studies,

cities have generally been accorded the status of “the often-undermined smaller-than-national spatial location[s]” (23). In her chapter “The Ambiguous Utopia: Postcolonial Cities”, Upstone further elaborates that the city “may also be seen to offer its own specific geopolitics” (85) apart from the nation state and its tensions. She mentions in passing the colonial project of taming nature to construct the postcolonial cities of the present:

the city consists of layers that may be stripped away to reveal an often violent and power-laden past. ...the natural environment was overlaid as ‘the grids were laid over irregular terrain...as if what could not be harnessed to this mechanical, tyrannical geometry did not exist’. (Upstone, quoting Richard Sennet, 91)

Upstone, however, does not take the nature/environmental analysis further in her chapter and book. Specifically, she does not make any connections between gender, city and the environment, despite the inclusion of female postcolonial writers in her book.

In Upstone and Teverson’s *Postcolonial Spaces: The Politics of Place in Contemporary Culture*, there is a wider consideration of various interactions of spaces with, for example, the city, the body and gender. Elizabeth Jackson’s chapter in the book, titled “Gender and Space in Postcolonial Fiction: South Asian Novelists Re-imagining Women’s Spatial Boundaries”, explores the connections between domestic settings and spaces, colonial ideologies and how women in private spaces resist these colonial ideologies. Caroline Herbert’s “Owning the City: Screening Postcolonial Bombay in Milan Luthria’s *Taxi 9 2 11*” engages with issues of urban inequality, globalization, as well as the “connection between ‘lived’ and ‘imagined’ geographies” (Upstone and Teverson, 12). Again, while being extremely useful for analyses in postcolonial texts where gender, private and public spaces, and cities are explored, the

specific connections between gender and environment in cities and urban spaces are left out.

In a similar category lies Rashmi Varma's *The Postcolonial City and its Subjects: London, Nairobi, Bombay* (2012). This book is immensely helpful for conceptualizing the postcolonial city as a *hybrid*, a term that Kaika uses and I strongly agree with, and extending that hybridity further to include conjuncture:

...the postcolonial city as a *conjunctural* space that produces a critical combination of historical events, material bodies, structural forces and representational economies which propels new constellations of domination and resistance, centres and peripheries, and the formation of new political subjects. (1, original emphasis)

Where McNamara and several other writers failed to include women writers and their perspectives, Varma succeeds in foregrounding women's narratives about the city and their place within it, or as Varma puts it, the "simultaneous reconfiguration and subversion of women's "proper" place in the city, and of their proper work, as central to thinking and theorizing postcolonial feminist citizenship" (2). The hegemonic masculine perspectives of the city are disarticulated by including "women's and colonized people's relationship to...the city" (2). Varma engages three key frameworks in her book to unravel the postcolonial city and postcolonial feminist citizenship within it: "the city within postcolonial theory and culture", "postcolonial fiction as constituting a new world literary space" and "postcolonial feminist citizenship as a universal political project" to challenge the all-pervasive neo-liberal productions and articulations of "public spaces and rights" (1). She uses the figure of 'unhomely women' to unpack the concept of postcolonial feminist citizenship in her conceptualization of the postcolonial city.⁸

⁸ Varma's concept of 'unhomely women' is derived from Frantz Fanon's essay "Algeria Unveiled", where the veiled woman becomes a political subject when she discards the veil for anti-colonial resistance, but adopts it again for nationalistic purposes. This duality of the woman engages with the "geographical specificity of the Manichean city, with which the veil shares many effects on the body

John Thieme's *Postcolonial Literary Geographies: Out of Place* (2016) almost seems like a natural progression of Varma's work in *The Postcolonial City*, where postcolonial ecologies are foregrounded in his book. Thieme states that since post-Enlightenment, there has been a tendency to think about place and space as "static and unchanging" (1). He argues against this conception using postcolonial writing that illustrates that space is "heterogeneous and malleable" (2). He further argues that identity politics, in all its senses, in postcolonial writing challenges the notions of place and space as stable entities. According to Thieme, space becomes place "as it is endowed with different kinds of value by the various characters that people [a text]" (11). Human perceptions of space tend to override static physical geography so that the different meanings endowed turn it into a place which, again, has different meanings for different characters and people. Thieme's chapter "Borrowing the Earth: Postcolonial Ecologies" looks at the various "representations of the environmental consequences of colonization, globalization and tourism" (102) in texts that consider Native Canadian communities as well as novels from Africa and India. In taking into consideration the environment, Thieme expands the idea of the "mobile, contested nature of place" (102) by focusing on the forced displacement of native peoples and their subsequent marginalization in mainstream society.

Bringing it All Together

It is my aim that by combining urban ecofeminism with postcolonial city spaces, a fruitful theoretical paradigm of a materialist approach to urban postcolonial ecofeminism can take place. Several writers and scholars have provided helpful concepts to work with. For example, Kaika's formulation of the city as hybrid—neither man-made nor natural—is a useful concept to integrate with Varma's

and the subjectivity of women" (22). From this, the figure of the "unhomely women" refutes certain gender ideologies that necessarily inscribe the 'proper' place for women to be at home (in the sphere of domesticity).

gendered outlook on ‘proper’ places for women in cities that are conceptualized as conjunctural. This, in turn, can be combined with Thieme’s notion of challenging the idea that environments—ecologically and politically—and spaces are stable entities. Furthermore, Upstone’s assertion that differential constructions of identity are contingent upon the renegotiation of space is of particular importance as well, especially in the context of gender, environments and city-spaces. In integrating these discussions and analyses together, it is pertinent to overcome the binary division of society and nature—the culture/nature dualism—that posits the burden of environmental conservation and care-taking onto women, that too Third World women. Additionally, the non-nature/nature dualism, derived from the primary culture/nature binary, posits urban environments in an inferior position to ‘natural’ environments, a notion that needs to be disarticulated in contemporary times.

What all this effectively does is that it dismantles the notion entrenched in the various dualisms that women are ‘naturally’ connected to wilderness or rural nature. The postcolonial environment and city, and its inter-relations with gender, show that several women characters in the novels consider the city as home. Uprooting from the city results in madness for Kananbala in *An Atlas of Impossible Longing*, and in others, a desire to flee the monotonous town and village life, typically considered the ‘natural’ environment. However, the interactions with the city and its environment(s) are complex, therefore there are yet other female characters who flee from the city, but not necessarily because they long to be in ‘natural’ or rural surroundings.

Neera Chandoke’s article “The Post-Colonial City” (1991) in *Economic and Political Weekly* asserts that in any study of urban place and space, “politics, culture and *gender consciousness* are to be treated as active elements” (2872, my emphasis). Regarding gender, it is important to note that historically, women have been largely

excluded from the city's agenda and the development process. Writing an article on women's rights to the city, Manmeet Sahni claims that "this lack of political agency is impeding the goals of making cities safe and inclusive" (Sahni, Web Source).⁹ Cities and urban-scapes have increasingly been the sites of violence for women in the recent years, especially physical and sexual violence.¹⁰ This violence needs to be seen within an overarching framework of capitalist patriarchy that exudes the same attitude towards the environment as well—instrumentalist attitudes that tame and discipline women's sexuality as well as nature that is perceived to be wild and dangerous (refer to Chapter Two). Also, the public/private dichotomy comes into play here, where a city's public spaces in certain countries remain largely inaccessible to women (refer to Chapter Three). With the urban landscape changing rapidly and constantly, the fear of being in public spaces is not limited to just the developing/Third World countries. Countries such as the United States of America and France are also facing this issue. It is important, once again, to transcend such dichotomies as lack of access to certain spaces in the city hampers the ability of women to access essential everyday services and materials, for example water, food and healthcare services.

Ana Falu made a poignant point at the U.N Habitat Conference 2016 held in Ecuador: "the first territory is our body...we have to eliminate violence [to the female body] in order to access the right to the city" (quoted in Sahni, Web Source). This is an idea that Thieme touches upon briefly in his book as well. As Jenny Ryan in "Women, Modernity and the City" puts it, the urban experience of the city has to be

⁹ See: Manmeet Sahni, "Whose City is it Anyway? Reclaiming Women's 'Right to the City'", 2016, <<http://www.telesurtv.net/english/analysis/Whose-City-is-it-Anyway-Reclaiming-Women's-Right-to-the-City-20161028-0021.html>>.

¹⁰ Protests against female violence in cities have become more prominent in the last few years, especially after the rape of 23 year old Jyoti Singh in a private bus in the city of New Delhi in the year 2012. Her case made international headlines, followed by Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, protesting against the gang-rape of a 16 year old teenager that was mocked on twitter. Several protestors around the world in cities took to the streets for a period of time whenever the crime of rape was committed in their home-towns.

gender-differentiated through “space, place and time” (36), and to all these aspects I would add the (postcolonial) environment in its broadest sense as explicated by Mukherjee, Kaika and Swyngedouw. All of these aspects have to be carefully considered within an interpenetration of class and caste, and how these factors are implicated in different social relations within structures of capitalist patriarchy. It is also important to note that place (within cities) needs to be engaged as ‘produced’ nature, in Swyngedouw’s terms, that is essential for everyday human existence.

The Postcolonial City in India

Globalization and economic liberalization has led to the rapid growth of certain cities in India, for example Bangalore. These cities are “capital-intensive, export-driven and oriented towards the information-technology and service sectors” (Bates and Mio, 1).¹¹ Furthermore, the growth of these cities has seen an exponential increase in “a new elite of young, educated workers with money to spend and an outlook on life that is often a complex conflation of vibrantly modern ideas and conservative tradition” (Bates and Mio, 1). However, at the same time, cities have also attracted an unskilled labour force migrating from villages and towns to the cities in search of better job prospects, better pay, and a better quality of life in general. These cities become a site of aspiration for the lower-classes, and while we see these issues addressed in Usha K.R’s novel in relation to the city of Bangalore, it is important to keep in mind that Calcutta had a growth trajectory that was markedly different than that of Bangalore.

Though Calcutta was the colonial capital under British rule until 1911 before New Delhi, post-independence Calcutta (the official name until the year 2001, now

¹¹ See: Crispin Bates and Minoru Mio, *Cities in South Asia* (London; New York: Routledge, 2015).

known as Kolkata) has had a communist government.¹² From the years 1977 to 2011, Calcutta has been governed by the Communist Party of India (CPM), during which Calcutta was seen as the key base for Indian communism.¹³ Calcutta experienced economic stagnation for a period of time due to communist policies in place which encouraged trade-unions to frequently conduct strikes that were backed by left-wing government parties.¹⁴ Calcutta thus experienced a steady economic decline following Indian independence. It was from the 1990's onwards, with the opening up of the Indian economy and instituting pro-market reforms, that Calcutta experienced rapid economic growth, and since the year 2000, has seen many investments to develop the IT infrastructure and its tertiary services industry.¹⁵

Such urban growth in cities such as Calcutta and Bangalore has also meant the socio-political dominance of the middle- and upper-classes “to an extent that is vastly disproportionate to their numbers” (Bates and Mio, 2).¹⁶ Alongside this, the physical landscape and geography of the city also changes with a changing population dynamic living in the cities. For example, Calcutta and Bangalore face severe traffic congestion problems, but at the same time there is an improved network of telecommunications. The rural-urban migration also sees with it differing/competing ideas of how to live, which may be different from the locals already rooted in the respective areas in the

¹² Calcutta became the headquarters of the East India Company by the year 1773. See: John Hutnyk, *The Rumour of Calcutta* (London: Zed Books, 1996) vii.

¹³ See: Peter Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2002) 198-206.

¹⁴ See: Chandrika Singh, *Communist and Socialist Movement in India: A Critical Account* (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1987) 154-160. See also: Ananya Roy, *City Requiem, Calcutta* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) 1-9.

¹⁵ See: Krishna Dutta, *Calcutta: A Cultural and Literary History* (Oxford, UK: Signal Books, 2003) 185. Ananya Roy describes this economic growth in the city as “a communism for the new millennium, a communism as comfortable with global capital as with the sons of the soil” (10). See: Ananya Roy, *City Requiem, Calcutta* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) 1-12. See also: Tanya Dutta, “Rising Kolkata’s Winners and Losers”. *BBC News*. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/crossing_continents/4830762.stm>.

¹⁶ See: Crispin Bates and Minoru Mio, *Cities in South Asia* (London; New York: Routledge, 2015).

cities, and this may cause tensions and problems that were hitherto unforeseen, for example, street violence. Crispin Bates and Minoru Mio state that with the lower-classes and working-classes occupying a significant position in the cities, there has also emerged the new ideal of ‘subaltern citizenship’, where the working-classes seek to empower themselves through the legal aid of NGOs and other charitable organizations (4).¹⁷ We see these aspects that Bates and Mio mention in both Roy’s and K.R’s novels, and especially so in *Monkey-Man* where K.R portrays the lower- and working-classes rising above their poverty-ridden circumstances to find a better life in Bangalore.

Calcutta in this chapter is discussed within its colonial legacy and at a time when it was the colonial capital during India’s British rule. It is then juxtaposed alongside the millennium city of Bangalore to illustrate the continuities of certain colonial processes (as well as colonial violence) into postcolonial times, or what Ananya Roy calls the “violences that persist beneath the veneer of gentlemanly Calcutta” (12).¹⁸ As mentioned earlier, CPM rule in Calcutta is of crucial consideration, which means that Calcutta followed a different trajectory of globalization than that of Bangalore.¹⁹ In the remaining chapter, I will first analyze and discuss Anuradha Roy’s novel, *An Atlas of Impossible Longing (AAIL)*, followed by Usha K.R’s *Monkey-Man*.

¹⁷ See: Crispin Bates and Minoru Mio, *Cities in South Asia* (London; New York: Routledge, 2015).

¹⁸ See: Ananya Roy, *City Requiem, Calcutta* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) 12.

¹⁹ The histories of the cities of Calcutta and Bangalore are given in more depth in their respective sections in this chapter. Calcutta is discussed within the analysis of Anuradha Roy’s *An Atlas of Impossible Longing*, and Bangalore is discussed within Usha K.R’s *Monkey-Man*.

An Atlas of Impossible Longing

Anuradha Roy's first novel, *An Atlas of Impossible Longing (AAIL)*, is set during India's colonial rule by the British and is split into three sections. The first section, "The Drowned House", tells the plight of Kananbala and her gradual descent into madness as she feels isolated and neglected from her husband Amulya, as well as from her home in the mining town of Songarh. She strikes an unlikely friendship with her half-English neighbour, Larissa Barnum, while being confined in her room in the upper level of the house, and colludes in the conspiracy of the murder of Larissa's husband, Digby Barnum. Larissa is having an extramarital affair which is discovered by Digby, and in the ensuing tussle, Larissa stabs Digby with a Kukri knife and kills him. The second section, "The Ruined Fort", is about Kananbala's youngest son Nirmal, who becomes a widower when his wife Shanti dies during childbirth, and Meera, Nirmal's distant cousin, who is a widow. The two secretly nurture feelings for each other, but due to the prevailing social climate, are unable to get married. Roy sensitively depicts the plight of widows and critiques some of the gender-biased practices still prevalent in certain sections of Indian society today. The third section, "The Water's Edge", is told from the perspective of Mukunda, an orphan taken in by Nirmal, and before that by Amulya (Nirmal's father). Mukunda is ostracized by the rest of the family members due to the uncertainty of his caste and lineage, except for Nirmal's daughter Bakul, who is very close to Mukunda. This section depicts Mukunda's search for a home to anchor his rootlessness in the city of Calcutta. In the end, he goes back to Bakul and her maternal home in the town of Manoharpur, and the two carve out a future for themselves together. Roy makes a political statement in this section that indicts cultural and social beliefs about caste and religion during the partition of India and Pakistan.

Most of the action in this novel is set either in the mining town of Songarh or the colonial city of Calcutta. Songarh, as a mining town, is an in-between space, that is, a space straddled between a village and a city. This recalls Kaika's notion of hybridity: Songarh is a hybrid space, not totally natural, and not totally produced (man-made), and therefore it cannot be rejected as a completely rural space/rural wilderness altogether. Mining towns in the colonial era were typically towns that were bases for engineers, for example from Britain, alongside the native Indians (Amulya residing alongside Digby Barnum who is a manager of one of the mines in Songarh). Steel plants were also set up in such towns, alongside shops that would cater for foreign products—seen in Kananbala hoarding tins of butter cookies from Britain. Mining towns such as Songarh then, along with being hybrid in-between spaces, were also, to an extent, cosmopolitan in nature due to the social demographics of such towns. Roy's Songarh, despite being a mining-town, still retains a narrow attitude in terms of a stifling nature of the local landscape and community.

In Roy's novel, the city of Calcutta assumes particular significance. It is not only the colonial capital in the novel's setting, Calcutta is also the centre of the Bengali renaissance taking place during the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. As such, it was a centre in colonial India where modern ideas were gaining credence, especially regarding social reform to do with the uplifting of women's position through better education and the abolishment of practices such as sati, the dowry system, and allowing widow remarriage. Through colonial education, the urban middle/upper-classes in Calcutta (the *bhadralok*) made a concerted effort to introduce educational reforms for women that modernized women while simultaneously entrenching them in 'acceptable' modes of 'traditions' and 'domesticity' that suited the emerging nationalisms for the removal of colonial

powers.²⁰ The city of Calcutta then becomes important in the ways the gendered longing for a big city is brought out in contrast to the claustrophobia of small-town Songarh.

Madness

In this section, the gendered longing for the big city is explored and how the uprooting from cities results in ‘madness’ for the women, Kananbala and Larissa Barnum, who are seen as subjects who long for this link to the city of Calcutta. Amulya and Digby, the women’s respective spouses, attempt to ‘naturalize’ them within the rural landscape of Songarh. Upon resistance, both women are invariably declared mad. Kananbala resorts to excessive garrulity, but no one hears her, and is ultimately confined to a bedroom by her husband. Larissa is paralleled to the madwoman par excellence, the figure of Bertha Mason, as being a woman of mixed-blood raises suspicions in Digby’s mind of her lineage, inheritance and sexuality.

Kananbala dislikes the small mining town of Songarh. She feels resentment towards her husband who did not consult her before moving to Songarh from the city of Calcutta. While Amulya “felt a connection with Songarh” (*AAIL*, 12), he was aware (but complacent enough not to do anything about it) that “for his wife it was a different story” (*AAIL*, 16). For Kananbala, the city of Calcutta is associated with notions of home and belonging, the din of the city comforting her as opposed to the silence of Songarh that oppresses her:

In Calcutta, in her rambling family home crowded with siblings and aunts and uncles, there was always the possibility for a chat, the comforting sounds of nearby laughter, gossip, clanging utensils, squabbling sisters-in-law, *the tong-tong of rickshaw bells, the further-away din of the bazaar, the cries of the vendors, the afternoon*

²⁰ See: Inderpal Grewal, *Home and Harem* (London: Leicester University Press, 1996), 52-56. See also: Partha Chatterjee, “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question”, *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* (New Brunswick; New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 233-253; Partha Chatterjee, “The Nation and its Women”, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 116-134.

murmurs of a decrepit goldsmith who visited them with boxes of new trinkets and a tiny silver balance to weigh them on. (AAIL, 16-17, my emphasis)

The colonial city of Calcutta becomes a space and environment that is produced out of the “edgy claims of peoples, places and timescales” (Gibson, 244): the squabbling family members, the bazaars and vendors, and the home.²¹ All of this assumes significance for Kananbala, consolidating her identity as a woman of the city. Her transition from Calcutta to Songarh is simultaneously a transition to insanity.

Kananbala’s emotional and mental state is what Shoshanna Felman describes as “a ‘female psychology’ conditioned by an oppressive and patriarchal male culture” (117). The oppressiveness of Songarh and the resentment towards Amulya is internalized by Kananbala. She is derided at every point when she expresses her desires to Amulya. For example, when she complains that she is never allowed to go to Calcutta on her own, Amulya chides her: “can you find your way *anywhere?* ...you’d be a lost little girl on the road of any big city, what with your Shyambazaar at the other end of Howrah Station” (AAIL, 30, original emphasis). This is deeply ironic on Amulya’s part, considering that before marriage, his wife was *of* the city, and even after marriage, they were living close to Shyambazaar that Kananbala is so fond of. Amulya’s paternalistic attitude is typical of the English-educated male elites (upper-class and upper-caste) of the time who saw themselves as educated and thus modern, and assumed they knew best regarding women’s concerns.²² Kananbala’s madness that seems so literal to her husband, sons and daughters-in-law, is actually the avenue that her resentment and frustration takes to voice itself, and this is seen and understood by Kananbala’s Anglo-Indian neighbor, Larissa Barnum. Felman theorises this as “the acting out of the devalued female role or the total or partial rejection of

²¹ See: Ross Gibson, “Review of *Edge of Empire: Postcolonialism and the City*”, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 1997, 15: 239-252.

²² See: Inderpal Grewal, *Home and Harem* (London: Leicester University Press, 1996), 146-148.

one's sex-role stereotype" (118). However, it is also important to note that madness here is not romanticized or idealized by the author. It is not the means of political protest for Kananbala. Rather, what Roy seems to be showing is how madness here is the "impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest or self-affirmation" (Felman, 118). For Kananbala, this impasse is intricately tied up with the local ecologies of urban belonging that are severed when she comes to Songarh. Although Songarh is an in-between space between a village and a city, Kananbala nonetheless feels stifled in Songarh as opposed to the city. The city of Calcutta takes on the significance of a modern space where it is also seen as a space for self-affirmation particularly for Kananbala.

Larissa Barnum intuitively understands (without meeting Kananbala) that Kananbala's so-called 'madness' emerges in response to certain stimuli, for example when she is nervous or emotionally upset, or when communicating with Amulya. If Kananbala feels oppressed in Songarh and by Amulya's aloofness, Larissa Barnum suffers a similar fate at the hands of her English husband Digby Barnum: "What must the servants think, their mistress waving at the local mad woman? There was something in all those things people said about mixed blood. The longer he was married, the more he felt sure of this" (*AAIL*, 55). It is this behavior towards Larissa that leads her to kill Digby when he discovers her extra-marital affair, and Kananbala colludes in the murder to protect Larissa from being arrested by the police.

Larissa, too, feels out of place in Songarh because she has been transplanted there from Calcutta when her husband becomes the manager of the coal and mica mines in Songarh. For Larissa, Calcutta holds a nostalgic significance—her dances and tea parties in the city were the main highlights of her social life as a colonial master's wife:

I was always dancing the night away in Calcutta, and going to the cinema in my sea-green gown, the men in their bow ties and the champagne afterwards, my feet not touching the ground for dancing, always the prettiest girl at the ball, the men waiting for Larissa to dance with. (AAIL, 146)

The city of Calcutta is seen as a modern space for women where freedom was possible. The state of Larissa's house in Songarh parallels her mental and emotional state in being distanced from the city she longs for:

The two-storeyed house had once been yellow, but in the eleven years since Mr Barnum's death, it had not been painted and was now scabby with black mould. The wooden gate had sections missing that had not been replaced...From cracks and crevices in the walls, sturdy little peepal trees had begun to send out leaf and stalk. It was only a matter of time before the trees cracked open the house and brought it down. (AAIL, 97)

In her distraught state, Larissa pretends to have elaborate tea parties and 'surprise' birthday parties to which she invites Bakul and Mukunda, and several other imaginary guests. When her butler leaves her, she is still shown to ring the bell and call out for him.

Both Kananbala and Larissa Barnum are radically othered here, where both women's states culminate in madness because of being separated from the local ecologies of their city. The city holds homely and affective features for the women that translate into notions of belonging in the city. Kananbala and Larissa's belonging to the city is also a reflection of an upper-middle-class discourse where the city is represented as a liberational space.²³ They reject the wilderness of Songarh, despite Songarh being an in-between space. The wilderness—the jungle/forests in which mining takes place, and the ruined fort—it oppresses them, suffocates them and distances them from the landscape. Kananbala and Larissa defy romanticized notions of the colonial/colonised/Third World woman being linked to nature. The

²³ See: Shompa Lahiri, "At home in the city, at home in the world: cosmopolitanism and urban belonging in Kolkata", *Contemporary South Asia*, 2010, 18.2: 192-197.

culture/nature binary is disrupted here and what emerges is an ambivalence experienced by both women after the estrangement from their city. They live in Songarh but in states of fragmentation and disintegration similar to Larissa Barnum's house, where the 'wild' nature creeps into the closed-off spaces insidiously. Kananbala's ending culminates in an indifferent death, and her confinement in an upper-level room till her dying day parallels the Victorian madwoman in the attic of *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, theorized by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar.²⁴

Kananbala and Larissa's departure from the city of Calcutta challenges traditional notions of femininity linked to nature and the culture/nature binary where these binaries are inherently not stable. Susanne Gruss states that for some women in fiction who declare their "belonging to the cityscape and its freedoms...the conventions of the classical pastoral, which posits 'a natural world, a green world, to which sophisticated dwellers of court or city withdraw in search of the lessons of simplicity that only nature can teach', are therefore quite effectively turned upside down" (332).²⁵ We see Amulya as seeking out the "lessons of simplicity that only nature can teach" in Songarh: "why then the self-imposed exile from a great metropolis into the wilderness? Was there anything in the world Calcutta did not offer a man like him?" (*AAIL*, 13). For Kananbala and Larissa, however, Songarh is neither a pastoral utopia nor do the women desire the nature around them. For these two former city-dwellers, the attraction of nature and a rural habitat is limited. While they were able to roam freely the bazaars and streets in Calcutta, in Songarh their mobility

²⁴ See: Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1979) 3-44, 336-371.

²⁵ See: Susanne Gruss, "Sex and the City?: Ecofeminism and the Urban Experience in Angela Carter, Anne Enright and Bernardine Evaristo", *Local Natures, Global Responsibilities: Ecocritical Perspectives on the New English Literatures* (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2010) 321-336.

is restricted amidst the natural ruralness of the mining town—Kananbala is ‘caged’ in her home due to her ‘madness’, and Larissa is reduced to sneaking out of her home in secret to pursue a clandestine affair with her lover. Kananbala and Larissa then experience an environmentally induced madness that is inseparable from local ecologies of their city, Calcutta, as well as Songarh.

A link between the country and the city is developed in the novel through the urbanization of nature, when the coal and mica that is mined is transported to colonial industrial cities like Calcutta and Bombay for production. Calcutta needs hinterlands like Songarh for its development: this is an uneven development where the profit made from the hinterlands is used in the development of the cities. The country and city are then linked through production, consumption and supply chains. Songarh and Calcutta then are not only linked through the memories and aspirations of the characters, but they are also linked in a material relationship of landscapes of uneven development between the city and the hinterland. In a sense, Kananbala and Larissa’s mental deterioration can also be seen as a parallel to the degradation of the local environment through mining for colonial profits. Ashley E. Reis succinctly puts it:

...the concurrent breakdown of environmental and human mental health...positions the state of one’s homeplace and environmental surroundings as fundamental to human well-being and suggests more broadly that the effects of environmental degradation on the human are more extensive than we have traditionally imagined. (712)²⁶

Reis’s statement is applicable here for Kananbala and Larissa whose psychological decline happens in tandem with the growth of coal and mica mining by exploiting natural resources. The environmental and human degradation is explicated by Roy in the novel when a mining disaster happens:

²⁶ See: Ashley E. Reis, “The Wounds of Dispossession: Displacement and Environmentally Induced Mental Illness in Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*”, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 2016, 23(4): 711-729.

...in 1935, one of the coal mines a few miles away caved in. Forty-eight miners were trapped under the ground for five days...There was a scandal. It was thought that since the labourers in the mines were poor Indians and the managers of the mines were expatriate British people who came and went, safety had not been a priority. (*AAIL*, 99)

Roy intertwines environmental issues with important postcolonial paradigms such as race, class, gender as well as British colonial rule and their subsequent exploitation of the local landscape and people. Kananbala and Larissa's ambivalence is aptly illustrated here as, on the one hand their madness is due to the displacement from the local ecologies of the city of Calcutta, on the other, their mental decline can also be read as the outcome of "the alienation of the individual from his/her 'natural' environment through growing tendencies towards commodification" (Volkmann et. al, xv).²⁷ Through these women in the novel, a gendered interconnectedness of place is put forth, whether it is the city or the rural town.

In the figure of Meera, the widow Nirmal employs to look after his daughter Bakul, we also see the yearning to escape the isolating confines of Songarh. She desires to go to a big city to seek employment opportunities so that she is financially independent and is able to live on her own. Although Meera feels a kinship with the stray dogs she feeds at the Songarh ruins, she also "daydreamt about escape" (*AAIL*, 97) from the social confines of widowhood and the spatial confines of Songarh: "She could not, *could not*, continue living in Songarh. She must leave. Anywhere would be better than here...she would look for a job in a big city, anything but this nightmare" (*AAIL*, 166, original emphasis). Meera, to a certain extent, seeks in the city of Calcutta what cannot be obtained in small-town Songarh: a semblance of anonymity

²⁷ See: Laurenz Volkmann, Nancy Grimm, Ines Detmers and Katrin Thomson, "Local Natures, Global Responsibilities: An Introduction", *Local Natures, Global Responsibilities: Ecocritical Perspectives on the New English Literatures* (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2010) xi-xvii.

and the opportunity for economic mobility.²⁸ As a widow who is extremely marginalized in the Indian society during colonial times, Meera's departure to a city to look for employment opportunities shows that the culture/nature dualism and its related dichotomies are turned upside down and disrupted. The kinship to the landscape of Songarh and the dogs she feeds is not enough to sustain her sanity or her identity. The pull of the city and its larger pool of opportunities for a widow to lead a comparably less socially-constrained life is a beacon that Meera cannot ignore. The source of such an understanding of the city comes from ideologies being propagated at that time that Calcutta is a city of progress. This is especially relevant to a widow like Meera when Calcutta began debating on issues of widow remarriage. Lefebvre characterizes the urban city as a space of ambivalence that is "full of opportunity, playfulness and liberating potential, while being entwined with spaces of oppression, exclusion and marginalization (quoted in Heynen et.al, 9). For Meera, it is the pull of the spaces of opportunity and emancipation that makes her depart for the city. Thus, for Meera, what emerges is ambivalence towards both spheres of culture and nature through her disposition towards both the rural town and the city.

Rootlessness (In and Out of Cities)

This section will explore the significance of uneven spaces and places in Roy's novel in countering the allure/pull of the city, where the characters who venture to the city find themselves rootless. We see this in the figures of Mukunda's wife, Malini, who leaves him as she is unable to set up roots in the city of Calcutta. Also, Bakul, who initially wants to leave Songarh to go to Bombay, ultimately finds her roots in her mother Shanti's house in the town of Manoharpur. These women long for places that are outside of the urban built-up area but not because there is an over-

²⁸ See: Christopher G. Boone and Ali Modarres, "Urban Morphology and the Shaping of an Urban Ideal", *City and Environment* (New Delhi: Temple University Press, 2006) 1-37.

arching, essentialised women-nature coupling here. Rather, these women seek out places and spaces outside of the city for material and emotional reasons.

Malini gets married to Mukunda and comes to the house Mukunda 'inherits' from Suleiman Chacha who has to vacate it along with his wife because of the racial riots induced by the partition of India and Pakistan prior to 1947. Due to a financial dispute, Mukunda illegally sells that house and moves to a slum located on the fringes of Calcutta. Heynen, Kaika and Swungedouw write that "[t]o the extent that cities are produced through socio-ecological processes, attention has to be paid to the political processes through which particular socio-environmental urban conditions are made and remade" (2). In light of this statement, it is important to consider "the deeply uneven power relations through which contemporary...cities become produced" (Heynen, et. al, 3). Through urban political ecology, these power relations are recognized as comprising "urban environments [that] are controlled, manipulated and serve the interests of the elite at the expense of marginalized populations" (Heynen et. al, 6). This creates uneven socio-ecological environments in the city due to differential power geometries that shape control and access to different environmental and socio-political resources. The slums at the fringes of urban cities, in this case in Calcutta, are part of this uneven socio-ecological process. The first slum tenement that Mukunda and Malini shift to is next to Shyambazaar in Calcutta. Malini, who is used to open spaces and a more 'natural' environment from her village, is extremely uncomfortable living in the slum:

It was a slummy area. Open drains, shared bathrooms which were dirty. We had to stand in a queue for the lavatory each morning. ...There were about eleven tenant families. ...oil fumes smoked up our room if we opened our single window.

Then one morning [Malini] went into the lavatory and found that the child who had been before her had left a pile of mustard-coloured turds on the floor. [Malini] had squelched them. "On the floor," she

screamed. “What kind of children do people bring up that leave shit on the floor!” (AAIL, 251)

In the extract above, Malini is shown to be completely out-of-place in the slum. As Lefebvre has noted as well, colonial capitalist restructuring of a city, such as Calcutta, shows how the “antinomies of capitalist urbanization processes and socio-environmental injustices” (Heynen et. al, 2) are linked. In a colonial city such as Calcutta, ‘nature’ takes the form of socially produced commodities constituted through multiple socio-ecological processes that *invisibilise* structures of domination and exploitation. The slum is a result of such processes which reveals a landscape of uneven development, power and access. Malini and her family are marginalized inhabitants of a city that materially and culturally privileges the powerful few, such as the vicious landlord and builder Aangti Babu.

Malini, Mukunda and their son then shift to another slum tenement near an area called Kidderpore. This slum

was on a busy street slashed in different directions by tramlines. All evening and all day we could hear the clanging of trambells and the honks of buses below. ...We would fall into tired sleep at last and woke to the sound of crows cawing and the trams clanging up and down once more. (AAIL, 252)

The development of infrastructure of various kinds—here, transport—combined with landscapes of uneven development—the slums—shows the “crises tendencies inherent to neo-liberal forms of capitalist development” (Heynen et. al, 11). Such socio-environmental transformations ultimately produce conditions of empowerment, for the powerful few, and disempowerment, for the marginalized such as Malini and Mukunda.

Malini leaves Mukunda and the slums to go back to her village. She leaves the city because “she was full of suppressed rage” (AAIL, 257) at having to cope with the life in the slums that she was not used to. As her father, Barababu, puts it:

“What do you expect?”, he said, heated. “My daughter finds out she has to live in penury because you are supporting another family, and you keep pictures of strange women in your cupboard, and then you expect her to come back? Which self-respecting woman would?” (AAIL, 269)

Malini’s return here is not prompted by a longing for ‘natural’ rural-ness that her village has to offer. Her return back to her village is prompted by her financial and marital troubles that are implicitly interwoven with the marginalized landscape that she has to live in within the city. As Mukunda’s wife, Malini bears the brunt of the negative urban socio-environmental changes leading to spatially differentiated and uneven landscapes of power, which also includes skewed gender relations.

For Bakul, Songarh represents a static place that is unremarkable and uneventful. For her, the only escape from Songarh’s stagnation and inert spatiality is through a prospective marriage proposal from Bombay. She describes her suffocation as such: “sometimes, living in Songarh with no change—such loneliness, such boredom, and no hope for release—sometimes I’d think anything would be better, even marrying a stranger. He looked pleasant enough and he lived in Bombay” (AAIL, 300). Bakul, however, does not go to Bombay nor does she marry. She instead goes to her mother Shanti’s house, which is by a river in a town called Manoharpur. The first floor of the house is submerged in water due to the river changing its course over the decades. After Shanti’s death while giving birth to Bakul, the house is all that is left for Bakul as the connection to her mother. Yi-Fu Tuan’s concept of topophilia is relevant here for extrapolating Bakul’s connection to her maternal home. According to Tuan, topophilia is the “sentimental attachment that people have to places. Topophilia is visual pleasure and sensual delight as well as the fondness for a place because it is familiar, because it is home and incarnates the past because it invokes

pride of ownership and creation” (Tuan, 247; quoted in George, 22).²⁹ For Bakul, inheriting the house after her grandfather’s death bestows ownership of both the house and the past associated with the house related to her mother. That past is the sole link for Bakul to her mother. Rosemary Marangoly George, in *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction*, states that “[t]here is no “natural” link between a place and a people: instead there are links that are forged or forgotten on both material and spiritual levels” (17). Her statement is relevant to why Bakul chooses to stay in her maternal home rather than go to the city of Bombay. It is not a yearning for ‘nature’ or rural spaces that is the attraction for Bakul in Manoharpur. Rather, her decision is based on a material and spiritual significance the house in Manoharpur holds for her as a last link and connection to her mother and her memories.

For Malini and Bakul then, the notion of home is unrelated to any essentialised link or association to ‘natural’ spaces and places. They leave the city in favour of smaller towns and the homes in them, but in no way is that related to a woman-nature link. Rather, these homes—Malini’s in her home-town before marriage, and Bakul’s in Manoharpur—hold a material significance for each woman. For Malini, her home is a respite from the brunt of the financial and marital troubles that she bears in an unequal landscape in the city. For Bakul, her mother’s home in Manoharpur is the last of her ties to her maternal family and her mother’s past.

In the colonial context, the exploitative relations and dynamics of colonial capitalism (here, also extractive capitalism in relation to mining) paralleled, and ultimately, also led to socio-ecologically uneven conditions in the urban spaces. The city of Calcutta in Roy’s novel is represented along such lines where the infrastructure

²⁹ See: Rosemary Marangoly George, *The Politics of Home* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1996). See also: Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perceptions, Attitudes and Values* (West Sussex; New York: University of Columbia Press, 1974).

being built for colonial profits “permitted the incessant and accelerating movement of all manners of natures into, through and out of the city, creating the metabolic vehicles (like pipes, ducts, cables, canals, (rail)roads, etc)” (Heynen et. al, 10) that created, and still create, uneven landscapes of power. Land and water pollution is seen with the commodification and accelerating privatization of the commons:

...the river below, dark as buffalo skin in the night, the lights it reflected struggling to wink on its scum-slicked surface. It was not water any more, but greasy, stinking, rotting sludge. (*AAIL*, 281)

Within the socio-ecological (colonial) capitalist system of the city, such polluted landscapes and/or waterscapes constitute the “uneven distribution of both environmental benefits and damages to economically/politically marginalized people” (Heynen et. al, 9). The numerous slums sprouting around the city are testament to the location of marginalized people, such as Malini and Mukunda, in and within places that harbour environmental damages, illustrating deeply unjust socio-environmental conditions that affect the marginalized and disenfranchised.

Therefore, although on one hand, women such as Kananbala, Larissa and Meera yearn for the city and feel rootless by not being *in* the city, on the other hand, uneven and unjust landscapes of power, development and inequality create conditions of rootlessness *in* the city for women such as Malini and Bakul. In parallel, the conditions of exclusion in the small-towns such as Songarh include caste, class and marital status. Mukunda is excluded on the basis of an unknown caste lineage in Amulya’s home as well as in places of worship, such as the temple and its priest taking offence to Mukunda’s presence in the temple. In terms of class-based exclusion, Digby Barnum refuses to socialize and associate with Amulya and his family, using pejorative terms for them since he was the manager of the mines in Songarh. Meera is excluded from Songarh on the basis of being a widow. She is seen

as no better than a 'maid' or 'baby-sitter' for Bakul, and although Nirmal nurtures feelings for Meera, both are unable to get married due to fear of being socially ostracized and excluded from the family.

Without romanticizing the attraction and allure of the city, Roy posits the women in ambivalent positions with regards to the culture/nature binaries. Roy's women are not 'naturally' linked to nature or the rural environment in any way. Kananbala, Larissa and Meera come close to rejecting the natural sphere. Malini and Bakul return to rural spaces and places with abundant rural nature, but not because they are romantically linked to the natural sphere. Rather, their material and emotional conditions contribute to their return to their respective towns.

Usha K. R's *Monkey-Man*

Usha K. R's novel *Monkey-Man* is situated in the city of Bangalore at the start of the new millennium, the year 2000. Bangalore, commonly described as the 'Silicon Valley of India', becomes the hub of the country's IT industry from what was known as a 'Pensioner's Paradise', a laid back city with gardens and parks. Through the city of Bangalore, Usha K. R shows the changing urban Indian landscape as capitalist development takes place in the city. These socio-environmental changes are distilled through the lives of the different characters in the novel. K. R shows how the changes affect each of the characters in turn, and their ability to cope with the changes.

Usha K. R's allusion to the figure of the monkey-man parallels the episode in the year 2000 in the city of New Delhi, where people from various parts of the city, and later the whole Indian subcontinent, reported seeing a creature that seemed to be half-monkey and half-man, striking terror into the hearts of everyone it encountered. K. R uses this figure as a mythic image and metaphor to evoke the dramatic, fast-paced and irreversible transformation of the city. The theme of paranoia is woven

throughout the novel, where the monkey-man symbolizes the fear of the unknown. The characters who encounter the monkey man are left feeling disorientated, mimicking the feeling the changes in the city bring out in the characters inhabiting it. These characters are then invited by a radio jockey, Bali Brums, to talk about their experiences on his radio show 'Voices from Heaven'.

Usha K. R tells in an interview on what prompted her to use the monkey-man as a symbol and metaphor for the paranoia encountered while dealing with massive, overwhelming changes in the city and in the lives of various people:

One of the marvels of fiction is that it seems to suggest very plausible connections between things that are logically very remote...As I was thinking about the lives of my characters in this 'exponentially growing' world, and how little control they seemed to have over the changes that were creeping up on them, I wondered over the possibility of a completely random element that takes over our lives and destinies and forces them to a logical end...whether cities have their own destinies, whether sudden and uncontrolled growth can spin off a miasma, a spectral presence, and in which case what would it be. (quoted in Iyer, Web source)³⁰

Despite the novel being titled *Monkey-Man*, the episodes of encountering the monkey-man do not take centre-stage in the novel. Rather, Usha K. R focuses on the grotesque changes and the uncertain ways the characters grapple with those changes thrown at them. The monkey-man then remains just as Usha K. R has suggested: a fictional device through which the changes and the resulting feelings and actions are precipitated.

The following sections will focus on how the city of Bangalore changes from an 'old economy' of a 'garden city' and 'pensioner's paradise' to a 'new economy' in the year 2000, earning the moniker 'Silicon Valley of India'. The sense of the city as 'old Bangalore' and women's relation to it is contrasted with 'new Bangalore'

³⁰ See: Sandhana Iyer, "The Summing Up: *Monkey-Man* and Interview with Usha K. R", <<http://sandyi.blogspot.sg/2010/04/monkey-man.html>>.

reshaping gender in the city. These themes are explored through the characters Lily, Neela Mary Gopalrao, Alka Gupta and Pushpa Rani, exploring how the rapidly changing socio-environmental landscape of Bangalore either presents unending opportunities or rejects the women who cannot cope with the burgeoning changes. The city is once again represented as a double-edged sword. Alka Gupta and Pushpa Rani embrace the city and its socio-environmental changes, “unburdened by the past, by caste and community, who grasp at the opportunities that the new age has provided and want to live life on their own terms” (K. R, quoted in Iyer, Web Source). Lily and Neela are the rejects of the city, who represent the ‘old economy’, caught in a time warp and completely out of sync with the city’s new dimension. The paranoia exhibited by Lily and Neela inverts the madness experienced by the characters in Roy’s novel: if in Roy’s novel the women go mad because they are separated from the city, in K. R’s novel, the paranoia experienced is because the city is proving to be too much for Lily and Neela.

From ‘Garden City’ to ‘Silicon Valley of India’: The City of Bangalore

Bangalore was founded in 1537 by Kempe Gowda, a military chief who owed allegiance to the Vijaynagar Empire.³¹ It was then known as ‘Bengaluru’, a name which has been adopted for the city again today. Bangalore is now the capital of the state of Karnataka in India. Post-independence Bangalore witnessed an increase in the migration of a number of people and groups into the city, and the demographic composition of Bangalore is now extremely diverse.³² Before becoming the ‘Silicon

³¹ See: Smriti Srinivas, *Landscapes of Urban Memory: The Sacred and the Civic in India’s High-Tech City* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001) 1-3. See also: Harini Nagendra, *Nature in the City: Bengaluru in the Past, Present and Future* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016) 17, 26-37.

³² Smriti Srinivas states that “Bangalore’s location in the central part of south India between four linguistic regions is a contributing factor to this...diversity, and multi-lingualism is extremely common in the city” (5). See also: Harini Nagendra, *Nature in the City: Bengaluru in the Past, Present and Future* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016) 8-16.

Valley of India', Bangalore was known as the 'garden city', and later, as K. R. mentions, 'pensioner's paradise'. During the colonial era, under British rule, gardens flourished in the city.³³ For example, Smriti Srinivas says of Lalbagh garden in Bangalore that "[a]lthough in Haider Ali's time Lalbagh had covered an area of about sixteen hectares, by the end of the nineteenth century it stood at forty hectares" (44). Cubbon Park, named after Sir Mark Cubbon, became a place of leisure for the residents during the colonial era as well as afterwards, and is a famous garden in Bangalore now.³⁴ After India gained independence from the British, Bangalore's expansion and development accelerated rapidly. Bangalore pursued what Harini Nagendra calls the "European ideals of town planning" (58), creating what came to be known as the 'garden city'. With further expansion, surrounding villages also became subsumed within the city, creating "hybrid identities of the village and the city" (Nagendra, 58), where it became common to see retirees taking walks in neighbourhood parks, hence becoming the 'pensioner's paradise'. Bangalore, during this period, was touted to have clean air (less air pollution from development initiatives), and was generally known to be a laid-back city. Later on, from the 1980s onwards, Bangalore saw a boom in the electronics industry, which laid the foundation for the present growth of the information technology industry in Bangalore (Nagendra, 56).

E. Dawson Varughese, quoting J. Nair from *The Promise of the Metropolis: Bangalore's Twentieth Century*, states that "the city of Bangalore has, over the past

³³ Harini Nagendra writes that initiatives for 'greening' Bangalore were not limited to the British alone. Older notions of nature as sacred and a part of the landscape was an important part of the lives of residents, and successive rulers, Muslim and the British, added to the nature and cultivation of gardens in the city. See: Harini Nagendra, *Nature in the City: Bengaluru in the Past, Present and Future* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016) 43-45.

³⁴ Smriti Srinivas further postulates that gardens played an important role in communities concerning everyday ritual processes. See: Smriti Srinivas, *Landscapes of Urban Memory* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001) 47-53.

forty years, been swiftly remapped as a territory for accumulation of economic power on an unprecedented scale” (Varughese, 30; Nair, 345). The transformation of Bangalore from a ‘Pensioner’s Paradise’ to the ‘Silicon valley of India’ as stated by Nair recalls Kaika’s hybrid cities: Bangalore city as exemplified by “the metabolic and social transformation of nature through human labour” (Kaika, 27), creating a hybrid of the natural and the cultural. Indeed, Usha K. R describes Bangalore’s exponential growth into a capitalist city as such:

Shrinivas Moorty didn’t know which phrase he disliked more—his father’s nostalgic cliché, ‘Pensioner’s Paradise’, which suggested a cityful of toothless ex-public servants taking the balmy evening air together as they traded notes on their respective ailments, or the currently aspirational ‘Silicon Valley’...In the four hundred years since its founding, the city had forgotten its mud fort origins and far outgrown the four tower outposts which its founder had built to mark the limits of its healthy growth. (13)

Bangalore as described above by K. R can be theorized by using Kaika’s notion of the city as a material entity, where the city “exists in a state of perpetual state of transformation and change” (27). The city is thus depicted as always growing and changing, within a circulatory conduit of material relations, making the city neither purely ‘natural’ nor purely ‘non-natural’. Over time, the city’s production processes as such become normalized within modernity, and the modern city is then characterized as a hybrid.

In the novel, K. R details the capitalist explosion of Bangalore steadily, first as a city that has crossed the mark of five million people, “expanding eight-fold from a mere sixty-six square kilometres to five hundred and thirty one” (31), and second as a metropolitan and cosmopolitan city that has its own “clever patois, slipping between Kannada and English easily, with Hindi thrown in from time to time, as this was a metropolitan city with a growingly mixed population” (33). Usha K. R’s metropolitan, cosmopolitan Bangalore boasts of mobile phones, jobs in call centres and Business

Processing Outsource centres (BPOs), shiny shopping malls and a millennial culture of bars, pubs and gourmet cafes. Here, Swyngedouw's notion of 'cyborg cities' aptly captures Bangalore as an aspirational capitalist city and an IT hub in the new millennium. According to Swyngedouw, the cyborg city is

a metabolic circulatory process that materializes as an implosion of socio-natural relations, a process which is organized through socially articulated networks and conduits whose origin, movement, and position is articulated through complex political, social, economic and cultural relations. These relations are invariably infused with myriad relations of power that saturate material, symbolic and imaginary (or imagined) practices. (35)³⁵

Here, the urbanization of nature ensures that nature enters "squarely into the sphere of money and cultural capital and its associated power relations, and redraws socio-natural power relations in important new ways" (Swyngedouw, 36). A cyborg city then combines nature and society (culture) to form a political socio-ecological landscape: "a hybrid, an urban cyborg that combines the powers of nature with those of class, gender, and ethnic relations" (Swyngedouw, 37).

Bangalore's transformation into a cyborg city as depicted by K. R through the urbanization of nature also recalls Lefebvre's notion of 'second nature' where "[n]ature, destroyed as such, has already had to be reconstructed at another level, the level of "second nature" i.e the town and the urban....It gives way to produced space, to the urban" (quoted in Heynen et. al, 5). Swyngedouw characterizes Lefebvre's 'second nature' defining urban environments as "necessarily socially produced and thus paves the way to understand the complex mix of political, economic and social processes that shape and reshape urban landscapes" (Heynen et. al, 5). It is these multiple and complex socio-ecological processes in Bangalore, rapidly being characterized as a cyborg city, that either create unending opportunities for characters

³⁵ See: Erik Swyngedouw, "Metabolic Urbanization: The Making of Cyborg Cities", *In The Nature of Cities: Urban Political Ecology and the Politics of Urban Metabolism* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006) 21-40.

such as Pushpa Rani and Alka Gupta, or the city is unable to embrace the 'old economy' characters such as Neela and Lily.

'Old Economy'

The 'old economy' here refers to the notion that a government job implied security in terms of financial aspects. Sometimes, a government job also entitled the employee a house and a car, but this is more so for the middle-classes. In more concrete terms, a government job meant that a steady and stable job ensuring long-term employment with its attendant benefits (house, car) thrown in. In Usha K. R's novel, the character par excellence that embodies this 'old economy' mindset is Shrinivas Moorthy, the main protagonist. However, it is Moorthy's wife, Lily, and Neela Mary Gopalrao, an employee at a government institute, the Centre for Socio-Economic Studies (CSES) that bring out the crippling effects of the 'old economy', unable to transition along with the deluge of changes in the city.

Lily is a housewife and shown to be the complete opposite of her husband Shrinivas Moorthy. If Shrinivas is a man who has grown up with Marxist ideals but who is completely out of sync with the new world order in the new millennium, Lily is a woman who has and wants nothing to do with the outside world. Lily's domestic life is carefully structured to exclude everything transpiring outside of it. Lily's structured domesticity is at the expense of excluding outside 'others'. Kaika states that the act of exclusion—excluding the outside world and 'others'—is an act of creating the space of an isolated and private home. This act of exclusion and creation of space "contributes to the conceptual construction of nature and the home as distinct and autonomous "space envelopes", as Lefebvre put it" (Kaika, 61). Thus, Lily's act of

excluding (and wanting to do nothing with) the socio-natural processes of the outside world creates a distance between her and the socio-natural world outside, including the social inequalities resulting from uneven socio-natural processes, such as the slum on Ammanagudi Street that she lives in.

Lily's encounter with the monkey-man is the most dramatic of all—she is 'attacked' by him in the balcony of her house, her arm scratched and bleeding, and her cat's litter of kittens mauled by the monkey-man. If, according to Usha K. R, the monkey-man represents "the projection of man's innermost fears and desires" (Chakrabarti, Web Source), then Lily's encounter with the monkey-man is testament of her failing and sterile marriage to Shrinivas, her childlessness, and her affair with her cousin Balu.³⁶ Her paranoia also highlights her total disconnect from the city and its socio-natural processes. When Shrinivas dies after having a heart-attack during an interview with radio jockey Bali Brums, Lily moves back with her parents and her cousins, once again ensconcing herself in her domesticity and wanting nothing to do with the 'other' outside world. Although she excludes the socio-natural processes of the outside world, Lily's domesticity is nonetheless predicated upon

[the] material connection[s] to the very elements and processes which are excluded ideologically. The "other" in the form of natural processes or social relations of production is simultaneously inside yet outside, domestic yet unfamiliar, homely yet unhomely. (Kaika, 65)

The "visual exclusion of production networks, of metabolized nature and of social power relations" (Kaika, 65) inside the domestic sphere are factors that contribute to Lily's feeling of comfort, safety and familiarity inside her home. Lily is then in an ambiguous position where, though she resides in the city with all its processes, ideologies, production and power relations, she is yet not 'of the city'. Lily is then

³⁶ Sujata Chakrabarti quotes Usha K. R in her article "Usha K. R Traces Changes in Society". See: Sujata Chakrabarti, "Usha K. R Traces Changes in Society", 2010, *DNA Newspaper*. <<http://www.dnaindia.com/lifestyle/report-usha-kr-traces-the-change-in-society-1402285>>.

posited in an ambivalent relationship to the culture/nature binary, where she is neither inside nor outside, neither of the city nor of the natural sphere. The culture/nature binary becomes porous here, where socio-natural processes ensure the interaction between the two binaries not only in creating the city-space but also the domestic realm of Lily's abode.

Another character, Neela Mary Gopalrao, is a stock representative of the 'old economy'. Working at the government institute CSES, she is a secretary to a prominent economist, and has a thirty-year tenure at the institute:

As soon as Neela had finished her graduation in commerce, she had enrolled in a secretarial course, and then sought a *safe* job. Is it a *government job*, her mother asked when she was applying to the newly created Centre for Socio-economic Studies. Yes, she replied. Once I'm confirmed *they can't throw me out for the next thirty years*. (K. R, 26, my emphasis)

For Neela, this government job implies security literally till her retirement. Having struggled to reach this point in her job, she rules with an iron-fist over her fiefdom of peons and administrators, treating them and her research colleagues very shabbily.

Neela senses the changes happening around her with the advent of globalization and privatization, but she does not have the appropriate skills and the technical know-how to deal with them. For example, Neela views her colleague Alka Gupta, a research associate, with total incomprehension: "Try as she might, she could not understand the logic of Alka's life, how she could be who she was....To Neela, Alka Gupta represented arcane and frightening possibilities; she could only react by needling her" (K. R, 26-27). To cope with the changes around her, Neela can only fall back on guile and petty games towards her colleagues, delaying their cheques and re-employment contracts. Stuck in a city whose changes she cannot handle, Neela is unable to be productive in any sense, worried that globalization has made her skills obsolete. For Neela, the changing city of Bangalore then takes on the "populist

conception of the city as a dark brooding place” (K. R, quoted in Dua, Web Source), and Neela’s encounter with the monkey-man echoes her paranoia of being unable to meet up to the challenges the evolving millennial city throws at her.³⁷

Neela’s life is structured along rigid hierarchies that she follows unflinchingly. Two incidences illustrate her tendency to hierarchize and compartmentalize people according to the social status Neela thinks they deserve: the bus that goes to work and her five-point system to categorize people that in turn dictates how she will behave with them. Neela starts taking the bus to work along with other people who work at the government institute. She feels relieved to be in the bus

for within it, *order was restored*. As per its unwritten rules, she sat in the first seat while the library girls made their jerking, lurching way down the aisle, banging against the seat handles, to the back of the bus *which was their designated place*. No one ever had to spell it out, but everyone knew who sat where, *who had the right to first seating* and who would stand when the bus was full. (K. R, 20, my emphasis)

Additionally, when Neela is confronted with the unending possibilities that Alka Gupta represents to her, she brings out her five-point devised system to categorize people to comprehend them:

To cope with the vagaries of such encounters [as Alka Gupta’s], with the flow of people of uncertain status through the Centre, Neela had devised her own tool of assessment. She instinctively measured every person she met on a five point scale. Ignoring/Disregarding/Being mean to this person would/may: 1) be bad for my career and well being; 2) cause problems in the short run; 3) not matter either way; 4) uplift my spirits momentarily; 5) add spice to my life. (K. R, 27)

Neela’s need to hierarchize people according to their station in life translates to her disdain for the slum she has to cross on Ammanagudi street on her way to work. Despite living in the same area, “Neela hated walking through the slum. It was not just the slush that wet the edges of her sari...[it was the] unavoidable mass of

³⁷ Rohan Dua interviews Usha K. R and quotes her in his article “Book Talk: Bangalore author Usha K. R. looks beyond IT”. See: Rohan Dua, ““Book Talk: Bangalore author Usha K. R. looks beyond IT”, 2010. <<http://in.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-51218820100901>>.

humanity that pressed upon her, so close, so early in the morning, that she could not stand.” (K. R, 19). Neela’s hatred for the slums and its inhabitants, human and nonhuman, is akin to what Sywngedouw and Kaika term as the discomfort experienced by an individual when confronted with uneven socio-ecological conditions and socio-ecologically dystopian geographies of suburban informal wastelands (*Eurozine*, Web Source). Neela’s tendency to hierarchize and divide people into ‘comprehensible’ categories and her disdain for walking through the slum highlight the issue of class positions as well as urban segregation. Examples of this are the gentrified neighbourhoods of Ammanagudi street where the poor (slums) exist alongside a landscape of privilege and wealth. The wealthy neighbourhoods, with their partitions and barriers designed to keep at bay the impoverished people, exist in close proximity to the impoverished slum areas. Neela’s perceived upper-class station in life and categorizing Sukhiya Ram from the slum and others like him as “Class Four staff” (K. R, 19) shows her disconnect from a changing city that is throwing up unevenness constituted in globalization and privatization, but at the same time is eroding her strictly dichotomized world view through characters such as Alka Gupta who do not fit within any such binary. Neela is thus unable to comprehend her own city and its complexities, and while trying to fit in a certain category, she alienates other humans, nonhumans and her local ecologies. Akin to Lily, she is in the city, yet not ‘of the city’ as its complexities prove too much for her.

Of the City- ‘New’ Economy

The ‘new’ economy is characterized by the explosion of globalization and several multinational corporations setting up base in Bangalore, resulting in the boom of IT infrastructure and services in the city. The ‘new’ economy also represents the emerging new millennial generation with new ideas about career and life—as opposed

to a safe, comfortable and secure long-term government job. Characters such as Alka Gupta and Pushpa Rani see this metamorphosis of the city as an opportunity to welcome with open arms and break free from the poverty-ridden circumstances of their lives. It is important to note though, that these opportunities are neither uniformly welcomed, as seen through Lily and Neela, nor uniformly accessible, as seen through the slum-dwellers on Ammanagudi street. Having said that, the city and its new opportunities provide a socio-ecological landscape of hope for the lower-class to rise above their stations in life and live their lives on their own terms: Bangalore “is not an unremittingly dark place. It is a place of hope, of opportunity for some people. ...even as some people find it difficult to cope with change, the younger lot, who are free of the baggage of the past, can grow here unfettered” (K. R, quoted in Dua, Web Source).³⁸

Alka Gupta is a research associate working in CSES under another professor, Antonia Larson. Migrating to Bangalore for her research, she lives in a rented flat with two other women. As Neela surmised, Alka is an enigma she cannot understand because of the very fact that Alka belongs entirely to the new millennial generation with ideas that differ widely and reshape gender in the city:

...a girl younger than [Neela] was by several years, who had lived in places Neela could not identify on the map, studied in colleges and worked in offices that were just big names to Neela. ...Alka would fumble with embarrassment and elaborate courtesy when giving instructions to the sweeper, whom Neela addressed with instinctive authority, yet she hesitated not a bit to slip into first-name familiarity with Dr Subramanyam and various other visitors, whom Neela addressed as ‘sir’. ...She was known to have slept the night on her capacious desk; Dr Subramanyam had asked her to use the sofa in his office if she ever needed it. Her father was in the diplomatic corps and was stationed at Washington D.C., her mother she rarely mentioned. (K. R, 26-27)

³⁸ See: Rohan Dua, “Book Talk: Bangalore Usha K. R. looks beyond IT”, 2010. <<http://in.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-51218820100901>>.

Alka is a true eco-cosmopolitan, to use Ursula Heise's term, of her generation. While being rooted locally to do research on "the rural interiors, travelling by red-board mofussil buses, as part of the field work for her projects" (K. R, 27), she is at the same time comfortably globally mobile (she has also migrated to Bangalore for her research). Alka's global mobility while researching localized rural interiors recalls Ursula Heise's statement that "an entire planet becomes graspable as one's own local backyard" (Heise, 4). Alka does not fit into any circumscribed category, hierarchy, binary or dichotomy, and this is precisely what Neela finds discomfiting about her. Alka's ease at being in the world and in the city speaks of her ability to straddle the global and the local with equal gumption. She fully accepts the opportunities that the city of Bangalore presents to her, placing her on equal footing with her contemporaries and colleagues, and this is something that Neela resents. It is significant then that Alka is perhaps the only (female) character in the novel who does *not* encounter the monkey-man.

Here, Aihwa Ong's concept of flexible citizenship is also applicable to Alka within the structures of global capitalism in Bangalore. Ong defines flexible citizenship as "the cultural logics of capitalist accumulation, travel, and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions" (6). Alka is a 'flexible citizen' on the global world stage where her allegiance is not to a single nation-state, or even a single city, but rather to global opportunities presented to her for economic reasons or otherwise. Her family, particularly her father's job as a diplomat, is influential in Alka's mobility and flexibility in repositioning her relationship with the city of Bangalore as well as the nation-state (India). This recalls Ong's claim that flexible citizenship is produced within "particular structures of meaning about family, gender, nationality, class

mobility and social power” (6). Alka is a ‘flexible’ citizen both physically as well as mentally: not only is she an upwardly-mobile globe-trotter but she also tries to level her privileged social position with others, for example the sweeper in CSES, who is of a lower social position than her. With others who are equally as privileged as her, for example Dr. Subramanyam, she addresses them on a first-name basis, refusing to show deference to any bureaucratic hierarchy. Alka thus breaks down various hierarchies in her ‘flexibility’ and as a flexible citizen, displaying the ability for thriving within circuits of global capitalism/globalization. Alka is wholly aligned to the cultural sphere and falls within structures and spaces that provide opportunity and hope to her.

The character of Pushpa Rani and her story seems like a classic rags-to-riches saga, complete with an ailing father, and Pushpa as the sole earning member of the family. Pushpa lives at the outer margins of Bangalore, an area called Sundarapalya, “closer to the city, its last outpost, refuge of those who could no longer afford to stay in the city but did not want to leave it” (K. R, 86). To finance her father’s healthcare bills and the daily running of her household, Pushpa first takes up a job at a crockery factory in Sundarapalya, and later as a temporary typist under Neela in CSES. Pushpa’s aspirations to rise above her social station in life are intertwined with the city of Bangalore itself and the hopes the city provides to thousands of aspirants such as herself: “she set her face resolutely towards Bangalore, whose lights were fast approaching Sundarapalya” (K. R, 90). The city indeed fulfilled Pushpa’s aspirations for she landed a job at a call centre in Bangalore. With a fat salary package, “[w]ithin six months of being confirmed in her job [she] shifted her family out of Sundarapalya...and into Ammanagudi Street” right into “the crowded heart of the city” (K. R, 90-91). Her job opened up new worlds and horizons for her: “in an accent

free of the influence of her mother tongue, she knew that she was straddling the world, reaching across oceans and continents to another person in a place she recognized only as a pink splotch on a map, to help him, to make a difference in his life” (K. R, 91).

Far from finding her irregular working hours as an inconvenience and a discomfort, she preferred working the night shifts and saw the sunrise from her office window as a sign of good luck. Pushpa Rani’s effortless merging with her job and the city is what Matthew Gandy calls the “‘endo-colonization’ of the human body itself so that we no longer talk of the body in the city but of the ‘city in the body’” (32). Gandy uses Paul Virilio’s concept of ‘endo-colonization’ as the “colonization of the body by new technologies [by the state or military]...that marks the critical ‘third wave’ of modernity following the earlier revolutions in transportation and communications technologies” (Gandy, 32). Pushpa’s ease with the new technologies introduced to her in the call centre, the headphones and computers, software and hardware that she uses bodily, and the bodily effects such usage has on her, for example, backaches, headaches and poor sitting postures for which she has to learn yoga, highlight not only the bodily colonization of technology but also the technologically-advanced city merging with her body. Pushpa becomes an example of the “contemporary networked urban citizen as ‘a spatially extended cyborg’” (Gandy, 32) who remains anchored to her immediate surroundings and environment while reaching out to new worlds when talking to her clients.

The image of the cyborg was first put forth by Donna Haraway. She views the culture/nature binary as false, where destabilizing this dualism would free up both nature and women from various oppressions and essentialisms, thus posting them as active, historical actors with agency (refer to Chapter Three and Stacy Alaimo’s

notion of transcorporeality). Haraway states that “we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism—in short, cyborgs” (Haraway, 7; Melosi, 9), thus defining the cyborg as a coupling between organism and machine. The cyborg, in Haraway’s conception, is not overtly gendered, thus further breaking down the binary of male (culture)/female (nature). If Pushpa is figured as a ‘spatially extended cyborg’ while being an urban citizen, she is then breaking down several binaries simultaneously: “Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves. ...It means both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships, spaces, stories” (Haraway, 67-68; quoted in Alaimo, 147). The undermining of systems of domination and oppression occurs when such binaries, dualisms and hierarchies are broken down.

Indeed, when Antonia Larson, Alka Gupta and Neela have a chance encounter with Pushpa at the local temple near Ammanagudi Street, they see a transformed Pushpa in front of them: “[i]t was Pushpa Rani and it wasn’t” (K. R., 69). Pushpa has bodily transformed herself, in terms of dressing up in modern outfits such as a low-slung pair of jeans, a fitting T-shirt and slim handbag, to fit in with the city’s modern, global (out)look. The blurring of boundaries between the body and the city, as in Pushpa’s case, emphasizes the inclusion of “objects, forms, structures and *non-human elements*” (Gandy, 33, my emphasis) that have otherwise been traditionally excluded in the conception of cities. Under a posthumanist conception, such inclusions indicate a more integrated system of cities and individuals rather than an exclusionary system of hierarchies and binaries. As aptly termed by Antonia Larson and Alka Gupta, Pushpa becomes the “New Woman” in the “New Economy” (K. R., 74) where the breakdown of certain binaries creates spaces of ‘transgression’:

...for Neela, [Antonia, Alka and Pushpa's] greatest transgression lay in their insistence on behaving in *human* terms, their utter disregard for the niceties of what was due to whom, and their refusal to understand and respect their appointed place; their behavior reeked of insubordination. It was dangerous too for they challenged her authority in a way so subtle that she could not name it and hence could not take appropriate retaliatory measures. (K. R, 70, original emphasis)

Bangalore, as a highly commercialized city, becomes a place where non-Cartesian spaces are created to not only challenge authority in a subtle manner, but also to include nonhuman others, nonhuman machines and networks, to create a city that envisages hopeful possibilities and better futures for a myriad of aspirants similar to Pushpa Rani (and even the peon Sukhiya Ram in CSES) who have risen above their disadvantaged economic class. However, Pushpa's encounter with the monkey-man in the shape of the death-god Yama, distills paranoias about the fast-growing city, and how long the economic-prosperity bubble will last before bursting:

Pushpa Rani...is a character whose real-life counter-parts are so recently evolved from the primordial slime of India's social inequalities that her feet are still a little webbed, a little unknowable. None of us has enough data about what lies in the future of all the Pushpa Ranis rising up from the slums and shanty towns of Indian cities. (*marginalien* blog, Web source)³⁹

As Pushpa herself surmises, “[w]as it so easy then to turn the tide, to cheat destiny, to get the better of fate? The thought made her so fearful that she clung more fiercely, with deeper desperation and faith, to her symbols and omens, afraid that her luck would turn” (K. R, 91). Gandy states that there is a lack of conceptual vocabulary to describe “the unknown, the unknowable and what is yet to come” (40) in the contemporary cyborg city. Pushpa's encounter with the monkey-man, and her omens and symbols, are then a visual representation of what cannot be articulated by her in terms of her unknowable future (and the future of others like her).

³⁹ See: Marginal Lotus, “A Monkey-Puzzle Story”, *Marginalien* Blog, 2010, <<http://marginalien.blogspot.sg/2010/08/monkey-puzzle-story.html>>.

Against the tendencies to write the urban environment into a predominantly declensionist narrative, Usha K. R presents the contemporary urban city with a modicum of hope and potential to uplift the downtrodden, and especially so in relation to women.⁴⁰ While presenting the city as a double-edged sword that includes members such as Alka and Pushpa but excludes others such as Lily and Neela (and the various other ‘have-nots’), K. R also breaks down the culture/nature binary pertaining to both the city and women. While the city is shown to be a hybrid of culture and nature, both seeping into each other in equal measure, the culture/nature binary with regards to women is disrupted to bring forth ambivalence for Neela and Lily, and inseparability from the cultural realms of/within the city for Alka and Pushpa.

Conclusion

Martin V. Melosi writes that “cities are not simply the product of human agency, but are dependent on geography and geology, climate, and a whole range of nonhuman actions, occurrences, events, and conditions” (15). In other words, cities need to be conceptualized as hybrids between culture and nature, between society and environment. Such hybridity then leads to the encompassing of environment in the city as not only the ‘natural’ environment but also the built environment—homes, communities, machines, uneven development, humans and nonhumans. The city’s hybridity in itself then breaks down the culture/nature binary.

The relationship between women, city and the urban environment in the first instance is shown through Roy’s *An Atlas of Impossible Longing*. Roy shows how the uprooting from the cities results in ‘madness’ through characters such as Kananbala and Larissa Barnum. Kananbala and Larissa show hints of lunacy when they are

⁴⁰ See: Martin V. Melosi, “Humans, Cities and Nature: How Do Cities Fit in the Material World?”, *Journal of Urban History* 36 (1): 2010, 3-21.

physically separated from the socio-natural ecologies of the city of Calcutta. However, this madness can also be read in tandem with the destruction of the local environment in the mining town of Songarh. Capitalist production and development during colonial rule in Calcutta show the exploitation of the local rural natures when the forests are destroyed for coal and mica mining, and the profits expropriated are for the colonialists along with postcolonial profiteers, but not the locals/natives. Roy also shows that women's relationship to the city is complex. The theme of rootlessness in a big city is explored through characters such as Malini and Bakul. These women have a very different relationship towards cities compared to Kananbala, Larissa and Meera. Malini is never able to set up roots in Calcutta because of her disenfranchised position as an economically disadvantaged citizen in the socio-natural spatiality of the slums. The slums further show that uneven development further entrenches the disempowered position of some of the women living in the slums. Bakul forsakes her dreams of going to Bombay for setting up roots in her mother's house that she has inherited after the deaths of both her mother and grandfather. The house not only is her final link to her mother, but also to the ownership to her mother's past. Hence, due to material and emotional conditions, Malini and Bakul leave the city to set up roots and homes in small towns. In both situations, women in the city and women leaving the city, the woman-nature link is disarticulated, showing women's ambivalence to both city spaces (culture) and natural spaces (nature). The city's uneven environment is shown through the allures and pull of the city for characters such as Kananbala, Larissa and Meera, as well as through the urban poverty in the slums, thereby highlighting the city as a double-edged sword.

In the second instance, women's relationship to the city and its built environment is shown through Usha K. R's novel *Monkey-Man*. The city of

Bangalore is portrayed by K.R as a cosmopolitan metropolis that is changing everyday due to forces of globalization and privatization. The capital accumulation and wealth transforming Bangalore runs alongside the slums and their squalor. As Alastair Niven states, it is not all about slums and disappointment, “[t]his is the flashy new India, living alongside the old, but almost impervious to it” (604).⁴¹ The new India with its new changes is unable to absorb people like Shrinivas Moorty, his wife Lily, and Neela, as they are caught in a time-warp and are unable to accommodate the new changes the city brings. While living in the city, they then become *not* ‘of the city’. On the other hand, women like Alka Gupta and Pushpa Rani see the new changes in the city as opportunities to better their lives. While Alka is already an eco-cosmopolitan global citizen, Pushpa uses the opportunities globalization provides to uplift herself and her family out of poverty. From living in a peripheral town, Pushpa ultimately moves into the heart of Bangalore while working as a supervisor in a call centre. Alka and Pushpa are women ‘of the city’ who have immensely benefitted from the capitalistic development that globalization brings about.

The urban environment in the two novels is theorized as a socio-ecological political landscape which includes social relations and power relations, where the urban landscape constitutes the material transformation of nature. Cities are then “a process of urbanization of nature” (Swyngedouw and Kaika 2003, 567), where the social and environmental are always combined together and seep into each other. Both Calcutta in Roy’s novel and Bangalore in K. R’s novel are presented as “cityscape[s] [that are] a palimpsest of densely layered bodily, local, national, and global—but geographically depressingly uneven—socioecological processes”

⁴¹ See: Alastair Niven, “India and Its Cities through the Eyes of Its Writers”, *The Palgrave Handbook of Literature and the City* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) 604.

(Swyngedouw and Kaika 2003, 568).⁴² Thus, material and symbolic things combine to produce uneven, heterogeneous, and sometimes conflicting, socio-environmental spaces and places that intertwine the social, political, natural, rural and city together. The uneven, disenfranchised landscapes are seen through the slums in the two novels, juxtaposed against colonial/capitalist development.

Anuradha Roy and Usha K.R do not romanticize the cities and their environments in any way, nor do they present a hopelessly bleak outlook on cities. In a parallel to Lefebvre's notion that the city is "something akin to a vast variegated whirlpool replete with all the ambivalence of a space full of opportunity, playfulness, and liberating potential, while being entwined with spaces of oppression, exclusion, and marginalization" (Swyngedouw and Kaika 2003, 570), Roy and K.R do present the cities as spaces of emancipation, hope and freedom while recognizing the urban poverty and disempowered social groups and the corresponding disempowered places/spaces.

⁴² See: Erik Swyngedouw and Maria Kaika, "The Environment of the City...or the Urbanization of Nature", *A Companion to the City* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2003) 567-580.

Conclusion

Going Beyond the Binary

This chapter of the thesis will give an overall conclusion, summarizing the key points of the thesis, and will touch on some of the limitations of the current work. A brief outline will be given for some suggestions on future work that can be pursued. Although ecofeminism, in its various strains, is gaining traction in theory as well as in practice (activism), there are areas which still remain unexplored and need to be expanded upon.

This thesis has shown the inter-relations between postcolonial ecofeminism, women writing Indian fiction in English, and to some extent, women-led environmental activism. The thesis has argued that it is necessary to disrupt the culture/nature dualism that aligns women ‘naturally’ to nature. Disrupting this dualism allows women to be placed ambivalently in relation to their immediate environment, natural or otherwise. The ambivalence shows that it is not possible to align women neatly to just one category in the dualism. The disarticulation and disruption of the culture/nature dualism throws the space in-between as a grey area where multiple positions are possible for the women. Much of the ecofeminist theory and accounts of women-led activism do not allow for this ambivalent relationship to the environment. Women writing Indian fiction in English highlight this ambivalent relationship that women have with the environment, thus providing an important counterpoint to both theory and accounts of activism.

The novels analysed in this thesis have allowed me to explore a range of issues within postcolonial ecofeminism, while ensuring that postcolonial ecofeminism is not just confined to ‘natural’ or ‘rural’ landscapes alone. In today’s times, it is important to disarticulate the non-urban/urban binary as well, and include the built environment—cities and other urban spaces and places—into the fold of

ecofeminism. The novels themselves span a time from immediate post-independence to contemporary times, therefore allowing me to engage with a range of postcolonial issues along with issues of gender and environment.

By engaging with the three primary frameworks in this thesis—the representation of women and nature within postcolonial ecofeminist theories, postcolonial fictions that engage with the environment, and a materialist feminist point of view to weave together these threads—a deeply interconnected representation of women, environment and space has emerged in the analyses of the novels. With ambivalence as a key concept in teasing out the complexities of these representations and relationships with the environment, the texts have simultaneously drawn attention to issues such as gender, caste and class, positing these writings by Indian women as a site of resistance to hegemonic practices and attitudes that not only denigrate women in particular but also men and nonhuman entities.

The research that has been done in this thesis spans thematic issues such as land, animals, water and cities, that also form the thematic basis of the chapters in this study. While outlining the basic concepts of ecofeminism in the introductory chapter, the rest of the chapters have explored in greater detail and depth the inter-relationships between women and land, animals, water and cities. The over-arching theme and issue that has emerged in the analyses of the novels regarding these broad themes is that the women authors of these novels resist a simplistic and reductive attitude towards the environment, as well as a reading of the environment.

Though ecofeminism as a theoretical approach has been around for some time, its potential has largely been seen as unfulfilled. This thesis then, in discussing these authors and the themes of land, animal, water and city, has offered a new perspective on Indian women authors writing in English within a framework of postcolonial

ecofeminism, while trying to further the theoretical framework of ecofeminism, and especially postcolonial ecofeminism itself which is still developing. In forwarding a materialist concept of postcolonial ecofeminism, I have tried to fill in the gaps left by ecofeminism forwarded as a solely gynocentric and woman-centric theory and movement.

Dualisms such as culture/nature are operational in both theory and lived reality. There is a tendency to keep coming back to the overarching stereotype (in reality, in dominant patriarchal thought-processes, in media and popular culture, as well as in literature) forwarded by this dualism that there is a woman-nature link that exists ‘naturally’, almost automatically, and that women are therefore in a better position to take care of the environment. This places an additional burden of care work on the women who are already situated in structures of unpaid labour at the domestic front, and this is especially so in Third World countries. These women have to till the land (especially when there are female-headed households where the males go to cities to look for work opportunities), along with taking care of their family members at home.

Disarticulating and rupturing the dualism of culture/nature is important not only to expose structures of hierarchy and oppression, but also to ensure that women are allowed to occupy multiple positions beyond this dualism. As shown in the novels, while some women are indeed in an ambivalent position regarding the dualism, others refuse to be associated with nature (of any form) in positive ways—for example, the character of Raka in Desai’s *Fire on the Mountain*. Not only is the culture/nature dualism shown to be false, the connotations it holds for women and men both are shown to be false too. Hence, men too can relate to nature in positive ways and extend an ethic of care without needing to distance themselves from

'nature' to attain the prize of masculinity. Similarly, women do not need to remove themselves from nature completely to transcend the notions of biological essentialism associated with the culture/nature dualism. Ultimately, complementarities work better than oppositional dualisms and dichotomies where both men and women can be freed from the cultural baggage the culture/nature dualism carries.

While many scholars have already touched upon the problematics of the culture/nature dualism within fields of ecocriticism, ecofeminism as well as postcolonial ecocriticism, there has been a notable absence of women writers from South Asia in these on-going debates. My thesis, in its research and analysis, has contributed to bridging this gap by including women writers from India writing fiction in English. It is especially important to pay attention to these women writers in today's milieu because of the exacerbation of materially based socio-political systems of oppression in the age of globalization. Women writers, such as those mentioned in this thesis, bring to the fore gender-based concerns along with postcolonial issues in their writing, thus making a strong statement of political commitment regarding the environment and related issues through their works, especially so in the countries that they are posited.

The focus required to do the research and analysis on the themes of the thesis necessarily imposes some limitations. My focus has been on analyzing South Asian women writers, in particular, Indian women writing fiction in English. One limitation of this is that other South Asian women writing fiction in English (or for that matter in the various regional and vernacular languages) could not be taken into account in this thesis. Women writers from Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, for example, have been writing about similar concerns in their own respective contexts. Related to this, the other limitation of my thesis is that since the focus is on fiction, the thesis could not

accommodate non-fiction writing (with the exception of Arundhati Roy's non-fictional essay "The Greater Common Good") on the environment by women writers and activists in South Asia. In today's world, there are also many more up-coming issues regarding gender, environment and postcolonial concerns. For example, violence and conflict within and between nation states has intensified in the last two decades. Political violence that is stemming from religious conflict, and conflicts over material resources, such as oil and mineral wealth, destroys environments and local systems and ecologies while creating a complex network of issues cutting at the heart of gender. One example that explores such a nexus of gender, environment and political violence is Sri Lankan writer Jean Arasanayagam's *All is Burning*, a collection of stories with the 'Liberation of the Tamil Tigers Elam' (LTTE) forming the backdrop to the stories. This is an area in postcolonial ecofeminism which has immense potential to be developed into further research as postdoctoral work.

Thus far, within postcolonial literature (and specifically in relation to literary works from South Asia), theoretical works that deal with political and religious violence are limited to: Nivedita Majumdar's *The Other Side of Terror* (2009), Alex Tickell's *Terrorism, Insurgency and Indian-English Literature 1830-1947* (2012), Elleke Boehmer's and Stephen Morton's *Terror and the Postcolonial* (2015), Basuli Deb's *Transnational Feminist Perspectives on Terror in Literature and Culture* (2015), Pavan Kumar Malreddy's *Orientalism, Terrorism, Indigenism: South Asian Readings in Postcolonialism* (2015), Daniel O' Gorman's *Fictions of the War on Terror: Difference and the Transnational 9/11 Novel* (2015), Meenakshi Bharat's *Troubled Testimonies: Terrorism and the English Novel in India* (2016), and more recently, Maryam Khalid's *Gender, Orientalism and the 'War on Terror'* (2017).

Within this corpus of work, while there is an effort to incorporate gender within the overarching umbrella of political and religious violence (particularly pertaining to the South Asian region and its novels), the environment, in its broadest sense, and the role it plays, is not taken into account. The nexus of gender, environment and political/religious violence is not straightforward in nature. Rather, it is complex with many ambivalent issues at the heart of this triangle. Many stereotypical binaries do not work in categorizing and recognizing such themes and issues in postcolonial ecofeminism along with violence that is political and religious in nature. There is an urgent need for new ways of exploring these issues, along with the representation of nature and women, where the environment may also not be seen as 'natural': gender and environment are also political constructions.

In addition, another angle such materialist postcolonial ecofeminist research can take is from the perspective of world-literature and world-ecology, as elaborated by Jason W. Moore in *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (2015). Moore's work has been very influential in putting forth the concept of the modern capitalist world-system as world-ecology, and scholars such as Michael Niblett and Sharae Deckard are broadening this theoretical concept to include world-literature into this field, where world-literature is understood as the literature of the capitalist world-system. Many postcolonial literatures are co-opted into this fold and analysed to highlight the ruptures in content, form, language and aesthetics of a novel that registers the unevenness of capitalism and world-ecology. The drive of the modern capitalist system and globalization to extract raw materials from the 'peripheries' (the remote zones and countries that are resource-rich) ensures a radical transformation not only of the environment but also of human beings within that environment. Such an unequal exchange prompts differential gender relations as well.

The refugee crisis that we are experiencing today is, in part, a result of such unequal resource extraction and production, where the production of nature under capital increasingly gets determined by vectors of the market, giving rise to environmentally-displaced refugees. The Syrian civil war is a prime example of this, resulting in the issue of environmentally-displaced refugees. The war has not only caused widespread economic and social destruction, leading to the refugee crisis, it has also contributed to environmental destruction, causing a severe water shortage in the country. This led to severe droughts in the years 2007 to 2010, contributing to the other socio-political stressors that led to the refugee crisis.¹ Farmers' livelihoods were destroyed, and this contributed to the social uprising in the country. Along with global warming, the social unrest in Syria has exacerbated drought conditions in the country, thus adding further to all the other stressors.

The possible use of the theoretical framework of postcolonial ecofeminism, world-ecology and world-literature can be used to tease out questions pertaining to the environment, gender and political/religious violence. Examples of novels for such a possible future research can include: *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) by Kiran Desai, *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* (2006) by Anita Rau Badami, *Cracking India* (1988) by Bapsi Sidhwa, *Home Fire* (2017) by Kamila Shamsie, *All is Burning* (1995) by Jean Arasanayagam, *Mosquito* (2007) by Roma Tearne, *The Golden Age* (2007) by Tahmima Anam, *Shame* (1993) by Taslima Nasreen, *The Pearl that Broke its Shell* (2014) by Nadia Hashimi, and *A House Without Windows* (2016) by Nadia Hashimi. This list, of course, is not exhaustive, and other writers from other countries can be included.²

¹ See: Lorenzo Brenna, "Syria, the environmental crisis behind the war", 2015, <<http://www.lifegate.com/people/news/syria-the-environmental-crisis-behind-the-civil-war>>.

² These books are arranged from authors of these countries respectively: India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan.

There are many fruitful ways in which other future suggestions for postcolonial ecofeminism can be put forth. Within the field of ecocriticism itself, various new and upcoming collaborations with other academics have taken place in fields that can be combined productively with ecocriticism. One recent example is the combining of the fields of ecocriticism and geocriticism. Geocriticism, broadly, is the study of the incorporation of geographic space within literary theory and literary studies: “space, place, mapping and literature...[where] space is of the utmost social importance” (Tally Jr. and Battista, 1-2). Bertrand Westphal first came up with this concept in his book *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*. Robert T. Tally Jr. and Christine M. Battista’s *Ecocriticism and Geocriticism: Overlapping Territories in Environmental and Spatial Literary Studies* (2016) is an instance of the two fields, ecocriticism and geocriticism, combining together and creating new theoretical possibilities. Geocriticism has also been combined with postcolonial literary studies, for example, in Sten Pultz Moslund’s *Literature’s Sensuous Geographies: Postcolonial Matters of Place* (2015). In Tally Jr. and Battista’s collection of essays on ecocriticism and geocriticism, there has been an initial foray with combining ecofeminist concerns with geocriticism in Silvia Schultermandl’s essay “Nature and the Oppressed Female Body in Nora Okja Keller’s Ecofeminist Aesthetics”. There is potential here for further research in combining postcolonial ecofeminism and geocriticism together to not only understand the importance of place and space in environmental literary studies, but also how it connects with postcolonial and ecofeminist concerns simultaneously.

Another area which is fast gaining credence is ecofeminism and affect theory. Chaia Heller’s *Ecology of Everyday Life: Rethinking the Desire for Nature* (1999) is the first book of its kind to connect feminism, ecology and affect theory. While much

of the scholarly work on affect theory has focused on animals, not much has been done in relation to women in particular, or alongside postcolonial concerns. Although Tonya K. Davidson, Ondine Park and Ron Shields's *Ecologies of Affect: Placing Nostalgia, Desire and Hope* (2011) focuses on affect theory and urban ecology, in particular to do with cityscapes, it does not mention gender. Hence, one potential area of research for postcolonial ecofeminism is to combine affect theory alongside feminist ecological concerns and postcolonial concerns. This can also be combined with queer and LGBT studies on ecofeminism, such as Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erikson's *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (2010).

Climate change is another issue that needs attention. Global warming on a planetary scale has contributed to 'freak weather' patterns due to warmer temperatures and an increase in the levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Human activities such as deforestation and burning of fossil fuels to produce energy for electricity, among others, contribute to the increase in greenhouse gases and global warming. This has caused (sometimes extreme) detrimental effects on ecosystems and humans. For example, there have been documented effects on the Great Barrier Reef in Australia that has been experiencing coral bleaching (leading to corals dying) due to warmer ocean currents, and arctic ice that has been melting, causing habitat loss for polar bears as well as starvation. More recently, Hawaii has banned the use of particular sunscreen lotions that contain harmful chemicals that contribute to coral bleaching and the overall destruction of the reefs.

Canadian author and activist Naomi Klein's work is important in these aspects (environmental refugees and climate change), and especially so within the context of postcolonial ecofeminism. In particular, she is noted for her material analysis of the current neo-liberal market economics and corporate globalization in her book *This*

Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate (2014), where she argues that climate change is not about just about carbon, but about capitalism. She combines her analyses with other issues such as racism and inequality.³ Klein's work needs to be incorporated within both ecofeminist and postcolonial contexts so that the intersection of climate justice issues with gender can be brought out.

In summary then, this thesis has been a study of inter-relations between the theoretical field of postcolonial ecofeminism, women writing Indian fiction in the Indian subcontinent and environmental activism. I have shown in this thesis the importance of breaking down the culture/nature binary to disarticulate the seemingly 'natural' woman-nature coupling. Disrupting the dualism posits the women in an ambivalent relationship with the environment, whether rural or urban. While straddling the grey area between the two binaries, women are shown to be in a complex relationship, along with occupying multiple positions, with the environment. I have explored women's ambivalent relationship with the environment through the filter of women writing Indian fiction in English. The simplistic binaries and automaticities associating women–nature have been effectively disarticulated.

On a concluding note, Linda Hogan, a prominent Native American ecofeminist, states that “[w]e have to believe in words. They are what we have to transform thinking and envision a greater narrative for ourselves” (xvi).⁴ Hogan means to say that women's works, literary, activist, or otherwise, are important because they set examples for what can and may be done with language and activism, and to change outmoded ways of thinking, and hence the need for new writing and

³ See Naomi Klein's interview: Oliver Milman, “Naomi Klein on Climate Change”, *The Guardian*, 2015, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/aug/27/naomi-klein-on-climate-change-i-thought-it-best-to-write-about-my-own-raw-terror>>.

⁴ See: Linda Hogan, “Earthing History: International Perspectives in Feminist Ecocriticism”, *International Perspectives in Feminist Ecocriticism* (London; New York: Routledge, 2013) xv-xvii.

thought. I end this thesis with Hogan's words and thoughts because it is my hope that this thesis and the future research potential postcolonial ecofeminism holds can achieve the pathways Hogan envisioned in new writing and thinking to a better future for all lives, human and nonhuman.

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