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Postcolonial Ecofeminism

The Ecological Crisis and Its Intersections with
Colonialism and Women's Oppression in Vandana Shiva,
Arundhati Roy, and Amitav Ghosh

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Abstract

Ecofeminism emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as the result of the intersection of two critical perspectives, namely ecology and feminism. Therefore, it simultaneously serves as an environmental critique of feminism and as a feminist critique of environmentalism. The term was coined to designate a new social theory and a critical and political stance that challenges scientific views, gender relations, social institutions and the dominant economic doctrines, or, in other words, mankind's role in the ecosphere, by asserting that all forms of oppression are connected and that structures of oppression must be addressed in their totality. The aim of this thesis is to analyze ecofeminism as a form of literary criticism and its relationship with postcolonialism. In order to do so, it will start by providing a general overview of the ecofeminist movement, focusing particularly on its theoretical origins, its history and importance and role as a literary approach. Thereafter, this work will focus on the links between the current ecological crisis, colonialism and the oppression of women through a close reading and analysis of Vandana Shiva's acclaimed book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. Finally, it will provide an ecofeminist postcolonial reading of two renowned and awarded novels by contemporary Indian-born authors, namely Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*. The latter will be analysed with a particular view at investigating whether it is possible to approach a literary text by a male author from an ecofeminist perspective.

Introduction

The current ongoing ecological crisis poses a challenge for international governments, scientists, as well as for intellectuals worldwide. Over the past decades, several writers and artists have questioned their role with regards to climate change, environmental degradation and the catastrophic weather events mankind is presently witnessing, in a shared view that sees these issues as urging and compelling as ever and, paradoxically, contemporary forms of artistic and literary expression as inadequate to deal with them. Ecofeminism, that is, the intersection between ecocriticism and feminism, represents one of the most remarkable among the intellectual, philosophical and literary efforts to address social injustice, focusing in particular on those perpetrated against women and the environment. This thesis will attempt at providing an in-depth analysis of ecofeminism as a form of literary criticism, especially as far as its connections with postcolonial theory are concerned.

The first chapter provides a general introduction on ecofeminism as a movement, starting from outlining the birth of the term and its definition as given by Ynestra King. Then, it moves on to explore the theoretical origins of the movement, in particular its drawing the conceptual basis from ecology and feminism, which leads to an unedited critical approach that discloses the cultural framework and transcultural associations in the devaluation and subjugation of women and nature. The following section offers an historical outline of the ecofeminist movement as a whole, with reference to the emergence of women-led activist and grassroots projects concerned with environmental issues, such as the well-known Green belt Movement initiated in 1977 in Kenya by Wangari Maathai and the Chipko Movement that interested the Indian country. Finally, the chapter closes by addressing ecofeminism specifically as a form of literary criticism that aims at highlighting the male-centered structures of thought that have led to the cultural dichotomous opposition between nature and culture.

Having thus provided the general framework of the scope of analysis of this dissertation, the second chapter will shift the focus specifically on the ecofeminist discourse in postcolonial India. In order to do so, it will provide a critical reading of Vandana Shiva's distinguished book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*, which represents the renowned scholar and environmental activist's attempt at disclosing the deep connections between women and their environment, and the catastrophic effects that the developmental paradigm imposed by the West on former colonies such as India is causing on the biosphere and on the people who depend on it for their survival. In particular, Shiva acknowledges the Scientific Revolution produced by the Enlightenment as the beginning of a cultural shift, which has resulted in a drastic change in the way in which humans conceive their role within the ecosphere. Then, the chapter focuses on the author's advocacy for the recovery of the feminine principle, a cultural construct drawn directly from the ancestral Indian cosmology, which sees nature as a feminine, positive, creative force, as opposed to the "demothering" nature brought forward by the Western, reductionist science. In the last two sections, the chapter closely follows Shiva's analysis of specific environmental and resources management concerning today's postcolonial Indian rural communities, giving particular emphasis on the plight of women.

With the third chapter, the focus of this thesis moves to the literary context, in particular as far as English Indian literature is concerned. More specifically, this chapter will attempt at an ecofeminist reading of Arundhati Roy's debut novel, *The God of Small Things*, an acclaimed work of fiction through which the author investigates the superimpositions of indigenous and Western power structures at work in postcolonial Indian society, and how these are challenged and transgressed. To do so, it will discuss the various forms of oppression that are to be found in the narrative, giving particular attention to their connections with colonial legacy, patriarchal domination and environmental exploitation, by applying critical concepts drawn from postcolonial theory, such as hybridity, trauma and the construction of one's identity in former colonies, as well as from ecocriticism and ecofeminism, as far as the position and self-assertion of women and the characters' connections with the surrounding environment are concerned.

Finally, this thesis will investigate Amitav Ghosh's environmental concern, by offering a critical reading of his renowned novel *The Hungry Tide*. In particular, the final chapter will analyze the importance of the Sundarbans as the setting for the novel, and how this particular environment positions itself within the characters' story, as well as how, due to its unique ecological features, it paves the way for discussing postcolonial concepts such as transculturation. Thereafter, on the basis of what theorized by Ghosh himself in other works of non-fiction, attention will be given to the role that the author envisions for literature and writers with regards to climate change and the current ecological crisis, exemplified in the novel by one of the main characters, Kanai. To conclude, the last section will deal with the feminine qualities attributed by Ghosh to the environment of the Sundarbans, and subsequently will analyze the main female protagonists, as well as the fisherman Fokir as the possible embodiment of the feminine principle, in order to put forward the possibility to address even a male-authored book from an ecofeminist perspective.

1.

Ecofeminism: an overview

Ecofeminism emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as the result of the intersection of two critical perspectives, namely ecology and feminism. It therefore simultaneously serves simultaneously as an environmental critique of feminism and as a feminist critique of environmentalism. The term was introduced by Françoise D'Eaubonne, a renowned and influential French feminist writer, in her book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort (Feminism or Death)*, published in 1974, to designate a new social theory and critical and political stance that challenges scientific views, gender relations, social institutions and the dominant economic doctrines, that is, more broadly, human beings' role and position in the ecosphere¹. Ynestra King (1989) has famously defined ecofeminism as “a global movement that is founded on common interests yet celebrates diversity and opposes all forms of domination and violence”². Ecofeminist trajectories are varied, and, as a matter of fact, over the past decades, the movement has originated a liberatory political and social construction aiming at the public recognition and consequent fight against the denigration of nature and women, as well as it has come to represent a critical science which maintains upon the critique of the existing society and the suggestion of different directions for restructuring human society in harmony with the natural environment³. Broadly speaking, ecofeminism asserts that all forms of oppression are connected, and that structures of oppression must be addressed in their totality, and more specifically, that the oppression of the natural world as well as that of women are intrinsically related and must be examined together in order to confront them fully, for both represent socially constructed oppressions formed out of the power dynamics of the patriarchal system.

¹ Stephanie Lahar (1991). Ecofeminist Theory and Grassroots Politics. *Hypatia*, 6.1., Ecological Feminism.

² Ynestra King. (1989). Healing the wounds: feminism, ecology and nature/culture dualism. In: Alison M. Jaggar and Susan R. Bordo (eds.) (1991). *Gender/body/knowledge: Feminist reconstructions of being and knowing*. New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press. Cited in: Stephanie Lahar (1991). Ecofeminist Theory and Grassroots Politics. *Hypatia*, 6.1., Ecological Feminism.

³ Donald A. McAndrew (1996). Ecofeminism and the teaching of Literacy. *College Composition and Communication*, 47.3.

As a result, the analysis of the patriarchal system as the cause which has led to the destructive tendencies that threaten life on earth represents the starting point for many ecofeminists' work and reflection. As Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies point out in their joint book *Ecofeminism*, patriarchy was built and maintains itself through the colonization of women, of foreign people and their lands and of nature, and, as a consequence, this world system seems to bear to a significant extent the responsibility of women's oppression and environmental exploitation⁴. Moreover, patriarchy and modern civilization are based on a cosmology and anthropology that structurally dichotomizes reality by hierarchically opposing two parts to each other, the one always considered superior to the other. If the ecofeminist approach involves the analysis of the human exploitation of the nonhuman as well as other interwoven and interdependent forms of oppression such as sexism and racism, conceptual dichotomies that structure the dominant contemporary culture are considered as key elements maintaining such conditions. In other words, ecofeminism claims that patriarchal structures justify their dominance through dualistic hierarchical oppositions, such as heaven/earth, mind/body, male/female, human/animal, spirit/matter, culture/nature, white/non-white. Established social, economic and cultural systems have then continued and still continue to manifest their abusive powers by reinforcing assumptions of these binaries, which sometimes comes to include the use of religious and scientific constructs in order to support them. According to many critics, these dichotomies are also naturally followed by a consequent sense of psychological division and a state of existential isolation, resulting in humanity's loss of contact with their intimate values and alienation from their natural surroundings⁵. Ecofeminism posits that all dualisms and binary oppositional forms must be dismantled, for as long as any of the dualisms exist as an integral component of societal structuring and justification, they will all continue to serve as starting points to justify patriarchy.

⁴ Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva (1993). *Ecofeminism*. Halifax, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publications.

⁵Stephanie Lahar (1991). Ecofeminist Theory and Grassroots Politics. *Hypatia*, 6.1., Ecological Feminism.

1.1 *Theoretical origins*

First of all, ecofeminism draws its theoretical and conceptual basis from ecology, especially as far as the belief of the interdependence of all forms of life in the ecosphere is concerned, and, secondly, from feminism, in particular from the analysis of the domination of women and its connection with racism and classism. Despite this shared foundation, however, ecofeminist theorists trace different lines of development for the movement. For example, while some acknowledge a critical analysis of the capitalist technological and industrial culture as crucial to both ecology and feminism, others recognize feminist and earth-centered spiritualism as a fundamental source for a value system for ecofeminism, whereby interconnection translates into compassion, that is, the ability to sympathize for human and nonhuman others. As a result of this multiplicity of idea, tracing the historical lineage and fundamental principles of ecofeminism can represent a difficult task.

Nevertheless, the starting point in the early formulations of ecofeminist theory was the analysis of the transcultural associations and devaluation of women and nature, which appear particularly clear in the explicit and measurable interaction between women's oppression and environmental exploitation in most developing countries today. Significantly enough, Vandana Shiva has shown through her investigations how in India, as in many other parts of the world, gender inequalities have been exacerbated through the impoverishment caused by environmental degradation⁶. Therefore, one of the primary issues debated in ecofeminist theory are the causes of domination and oppression of women and nature and their interrelatedness. According to most, the origins of the patriarchal pattern of subordination and dominion can be found in the invasion of Indo-European societies, which, according to historical evidence, in the Neolithic era were matrilineal and matrifocal, by nomadic tribes from Eurasia about 4500 B.C., which not only did invade the area physically, but also influenced the indigenous communities with ideas concerning welfare and male dominance through the imposition of the warrior cult and a patriarchal social cult, and the transposition of

⁶ Vandana Shiva (1988). *Staying Alive: women, ecology and development*. London: Zed. Cited in: Stephanie (1991). Ecofeminist Theory and Grassroots Politics. *Hypatia*, 6.1., Ecological Feminism.

the sense of sacrality from nature and the female into a distant and transcendent divine entity in the sky⁷.

Narrowing down this historical investigation, one can trace the roots of the patriarchal structures of thought in the Enlightenment and in the following European project of so-called modernity or progress. As a matter of fact, since Hobbes and his philosophical production, society has been conceptualized as an assembly of social atoms, activated by agonistic interests. This has translated on the one hand into an economic paradigm which sees self-interest as the impulse of all economic activity, and, on the other, into the perception of natural evolution and social dynamics as impelled by a constant struggle of the stronger against the weaker, in a state of constant warfare. This idea has been thoroughly expanded by Carolyn Merchant in her book *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*⁸, which is considered to be one of the most influential works of feminist scholarship ever written, as well as still relevant today, due to its ability to connect sexism and other forms of modern domination and oppression with a historical framework⁹. Merchant's unprecedented analysis highlights the historical processes whereby women's reproductive prerogatives have throughout centuries become themselves object of scientific enquiry, and have therefore undergone, together with nature, a process of objectification. In other words, what the author suggests is that the domination of women and the domination of nature are essentially related and originate from the same system of thought. Merchant acknowledges particularly the Scientific Revolution as momentous in this sense, however, her work also focuses extensively on religious culture, suggesting that the reductionist models of both Western theologies and many Western scientific ideologies foster a world that is no longer sacred, but rather mechanistic. This separation and disconnection of the spiritual from the material lies at the basis of the Western cultural mechanistic approach to both nature and women. While organic thinking and interdependence shaped life throughout the Middle Ages, the "fathers" of the Scientific Revolution determine to dominate nature. Moreover, she argues

⁷ Charlene Spretnak, (1993). Critical and Constructive Contributions of Ecofeminism. *The Bucknell Review*, 37.2.

⁸ Carolyn Merchant (1980). *The Death of Nature. Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*. New York: HarperOne.

⁹ Charis Thompson (2006). Back to Nature? Resurrecting Ecofeminism after Poststructuralist and Third-Wave Feminisms. *Isis*, 97.3.

that, from a linguistic point of view, the parallelism and relatedness between the vocabulary used to connote nature and women as unruly are obvious.

Due to the vast scope of analysis that characterizes this critical, political and theoretical movement, and also due to its interaction with various and numerous disciplines, ecofeminism emerges as fluid and in constant transformation. However, most scholars, in an attempt to circumscribe its grounding features and fundamental aims, acknowledge several major claims on which the movement seems to lie upon. First of all, ecofeminists argue that the exploitation of nature and of women arise from the chauvinist and patriarchal drive for dominance that sees both nature and nurturant women as commodities: since patriarchy is modeled on the logic of male domination, neither nature nor women will be liberated without an explicit confrontation with the structures of male domination. Ecofeminists encourage the general public to see beyond this patriarchal hierarchy. Secondly, according to ecofeminists, the reason for the connection of ecology and feminism lies in the objectification of nature and women. What follows is a general one-eyed vision that splits the subjective and transcendent from the objective and immanent, mind from body, nature from culture, value from fact, leaving autonomous individuals observe and make rational decisions about a world that has become “other” to themselves, resulting in our diminished ability to care for our community and the natural world. Ecofeminists advocate the need to replace this dichotomous separations with interrelatedness. Another point that runs through ecofeminist literature is that Western science and technology are not gendered neutral, but tools of patriarchal dominance instead¹⁰. As a matter of fact, both perpetrate a view of the natural world as something to be mastered or even conquered. Furthermore, ecofeminists recognize the suppression of the feminine as truly an all pervasive human universal, and therefore argue that only a revaluing that restores the feminine to a balanced place with the masculine can supply humans with the wholeness of personhood necessary to end the exploitation of nature and other peoples. They consequently point out the need for a restoration of the spiritual dimension of life. As a natural consequence of all these considerations, ecofeminism as an activist political ideology appears to be doubtlessly grounded on the idea that patriarchal institutions and ideologies in our culture -

¹⁰ Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva (1993). *Ecofeminism*. Halifax, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publications.

what has been defined as the masculinist mainstream, or, as Janis Birkeland puts it, the “manstream” - must be challenged¹¹.

1.2 *A short history of the movement*

Despite the fact that women’s participation in environmental movements dates back to the late nineteenth century, ecofeminism as a movement was born in the 1970s, and its birth was marked by a generalized crisis of modernity. As a matter of fact, if, on the one hand, the scientific and technological progresses were providing humanity with undeniable benefits, on the other hand, many feminists started noticing that modernity was also resulting in a weakening of women’s social role and importance and in the lack of equal relations. Among other factors, some historical events of the decade turned out to be particularly favourable for the raising of the movement, for example the declaration of the International Women’s Year in 1975 and the Women’s Pentagon Actions in November 1980 and 1981. The latter are especially regarded as the largest and most significant actions to have taken place in the history of the movement. Organized by some participants of the “Women and Life on Earth: Ecofeminism in the 1980s” conference, these nonviolent actions saw a group of women surrounding the Pentagon and issuing a Unity Statement, which advocated for economic, social and reproductive rights, and for the end to human and environmental exploitation¹². Such events contributed to emphasize the failures of the Western model of development, which was putting in a state of great vulnerability the developing as well as Third World countries, affecting in particular poor women and their subordinate condition¹³. Women’s efforts in the protection and conservation of the natural environment also depended on a general renewed consciousness about the environmental crisis and new developments in the environmental movement also from the literary quarter, especially through the work of influential authors, whose works are considered as examples of nature writing.

¹¹ Janis Birkeland(2010). *Ecofeminism: Linking Theory with Practice*. Greta Gaard (2010). *Ecofeminism*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. Cited in: Donald A. McAndrew (1996). *Ecofeminism and the teaching of Literacy*. *College Composition and Communication*, 47.3.

¹² Stephanie Lahar (1991). *Ecofeminist Theory and Grassroots Politics*. *Hypatia*, 6.1., Ecological Feminism.

¹³ Josefina Vivar-Arenas. (2015). *Claiming the Nature. An Approach to the Ecofeminists Perspectives*. *Ra Ximhai*, 11.2, pp.81-92.

The 1970s saw throughout the world the birth and emergence of different women led movements concerned with environmental issues. Among the most famous and renowned, the Chipko movement was born in 1973 in northern India to protect forests from deforestation, while the Kenyan environmental, political and feminist activist Wangari Maathai initiated in 1977 the Green Belt Movement, a rural tree planting project which is still ongoing today¹⁴. After the emergence of these early movements, in the 1980s and 1990s the broader feminist movement began to intersect with other social justice movements, and therefore to explore how women's oppression was linked to other forms of oppression through gender, race, class, species, national identity and ecology. In the 1980s, ecofeminism became a significant presence as a world movement, and in some cases it came to represent the organizing principle that lied behind decentralized movements in the international left. By the mid-1980s, moreover, vegetarian ecofeminism started developing and appearing in writing, as another manifestation of the sympathy for non-human entities promoted by the counterculture movements of the 1970s. In the same decade, some considered ecofeminism as essentialist and therefore acknowledged it to represent the third wave of feminism, or, in other words, the successor to the first wave, which had led to a general enfranchisement of women, and the second wave, which raised thoughts about women's sexuality and exposed pay inequities. On the contrary, what has retrospectively been categorized as the third wave of feminism produced strong critiques of ecofeminism, and, notwithstanding the movement's ability to address and debate about important issue such as science, capitalism and warfare, by the early 1990s it had been relegated to a marginal position in the feminist movement. As a matter of fact, post structuralism and third-wave feminism argued that ecofeminism equated women with nature, thus restricting women into a single category and creating a dangerous dichotomy¹⁵.

Overall, throughout the past decades ecofeminism has drawn from and contributed to initiatives such as the peace movement, the direct action movement and the Green Party politics, with which it shares goals including the construction of more equitable and peaceful social relations, as well as of more sustainable and less exploitative economic and

¹⁴ Wangari Maathai, (2003). *The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience*. New York: Lantern Books.

¹⁵ Charis Thompson (2006). Back to Nature? Resurrecting Ecofeminism after Poststructuralist and Third-Wave Feminisms. *Isis*, 97.3.

development models. Ecofeminism is also characterized by a spirit of resistance to the injustices of the institutionalized power structures and attempts to implement all these ideas and ideals through the open, widespread and inclusive debate among its theoretician and activists.

1.3 *Ecofeminism as literary criticism*

In order to address ecofeminism as a form of literary criticism, it is fundamental to start by trying to define and circumscribe feminism criticism and ecocriticism, of which ecofeminism represents an intersection. The essence and scope of feminism literary criticism is still debated and, therefore, very difficult to define. The term is used in some cases to refer to any piece of literary criticism written by a woman, regardless of the subject matter of the text taken under analysis. According to others, feminist criticism involves criticism written by a woman from a specifically feminine perspective, with regards to texts that can be indiscriminately have been written by a male or female author¹⁶. Other scholars broaden the term, making it inclusive enough to refer to any piece of literary criticism written by either a man or a woman which is informed by a feminist perspective. The difficulty in providing a univocal definition extends to the attempt to identify the methods and ultimate objectives of feminist criticism. As a matter of fact, most scholars nowadays agree in recognizing a plurality of approaches, sometimes even in contradiction to one another. This pluralism seems to represent a natural consequence of the multiple ideologies that permeate the women's movement as a whole¹⁷.

Similarly, ecocriticism is characterized by pluralism and multiplicity of manifestations. Cheryll Glotfelty in 1996 provided the most widespread and agreed definition of the term, which reads:

¹⁶ Annette Kolodny (1975). Some Notes on Defining a 'Feminist Literary Criticism'. *Critical Inquiry*, 2.1. Cited in: Douglas A. Vakoch (2012). *Feminist Ecocriticism. Environment, Women and Literature*. Lexington Books.

¹⁷ Douglas A. Vakoch. (2012). *Feminist Ecocriticism. Environment, Women and Literature*. Lexington Books.

Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment, Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspectives, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies¹⁸.

Some scholars add to this definition the idea that ecocriticism stands as the result of the convergence and confluence of a variety of practices and, as a consequence, of approaches . Despite the methodological or theoretical stances that lie behind and set in motion each approach, all ecocritics share the commitment to keep environmental issue at the core of their literary analysis and critique. More specifically, the common premise that stands at the basis of any piece of ecocriticism is that human culture is inextricably connected to the physical world through a bilateral relations that sees the two poles mutually affecting each other. Thus, as a theoretical discourse, it represents the negotiation between the human and the nonhuman, while as critical approach it juggles literature and the land.

It is exactly the openness and fluidity of both feminism and ecocriticism that has allowed the formation of a new field of research and criticism, namely feminist ecocriticism, or, more famously, ecofeminism, a hybrid discipline that has been defined as a politically engaged discourse that analyzes the conceptual connections between the manipulation and oppression of the human and the non-human. In the years that immediately followed Françoise D'Eaubonne's coining of the term, few literary critics adopted this variegated and complex perspective. As a matter of fact, while related ideas were being discussed in other areas of the humanities, in literature departments the connections between nature and women were largely ignored during the 1970s and 1980s¹⁹. Only in the following decade did literary critics begin to explore and analyze in depth the analogies between woman and nature and the historical, cultural, symbolical, linguistic, representative and social connections between the domination of women and that of nature. According to contemporary ecofeminists, the aim of the interaction between feminism and ecocriticism must be that of highlighting the male-centered structures of thought and the androcentric logic that has constructed throughout the centuries a widespread dichotomous opposition between nature and culture, whereby culture is given a

¹⁸ Cheryll Glotfelty(1996). Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis. In: Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (1996). *The ecocriticism reader: landmarks in literary ecology*. Athens, Georgia: the University of Georgia Press.

¹⁹ Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy, (1998). Cited in Vakoch, D. A. (2012). *Feminist Ecocriticism. Environment, Women and Literature*. Lexington Books.

higher value, thus justifying the human domination over nature. Ecocriticism and feminism seem to be particularly suitable to combine their efforts in this sense, for both are essentially critical of domination: ecofeminism therefore represents a coproductive critical view that denounces the oppression of women and non-human nature and addresses this issue with theory and practice. In other words, ecofeminism is a variegated form of critical thought, in some cases aligning with deep ecology, in other cases supporting emancipatory principles which diverge from deep ecology. As such, ecofeminism cannot be said to be related to either feminism or ecocriticism in a consistent or univocal way.

Nevertheless, the multiplicity of positions, approaches, assumptions and directions which characterizes ecofeminist literary criticism does not seem to damage or threaten its productiveness or effectiveness as a critical method. As a matter of fact, if one takes into consideration the already existing feminist and gender studies in literature as models, it is possible to recognize the major goals of the ecofeminist reading of literary text. First of all, ecofeminist literary critics aim at the identification of ecofeminist stances and perspectives in literature in general, with a special regard to nature writing. Secondly, they try to adopt themselves to an ecofeminist point of view when reading texts, especially those written by women. Finally, all ecofeminist literary criticism seems to be pervaded by the objective of recuperating both nature writing, which has been categorized as a secondary literary genre, in order to reevaluate and include it in the general canon, as well as voices that were thought to be apolitical and neutral in order to disclose their ecofeminist value²⁰.

According to what discussed above, it stands out to reason that the potential of ecofeminism lies in its capability to maintain the crucial balance between critical and creative directions. As a matter of fact, if, on the one hand, ecofeminism appears to be highly critical of most current social, political, cultural and economic tendencies and doctrines, thus operating as a deconstructive force that supports expressions of resistance to the dominant patriarchal paradigm, on the other hand it also represents a social philosophy that aims at the reform and reconstruction of a more equal and less exploitative society. Hence, in this day and age, ecofeminism faces the task of maintaining and to a certain extent recovering social activism and participation through both its intersection with marginalized political actions and literary

²⁰ Naomi Guttman. (2002). Ecofeminism in Literary Studies. In: John Parham (2002). *The Environmental Tradition in English Literature*.

criticism as means of cultural reform. The fulfillment of this challenge depends on theorists and activists, who, through their work, activity and divulgation of the ecofeminist set of values, can influence the general public as a whole to achieve concrete political and social change.

2.

Ecofeminist discourse in Vandana Shiva: the feminine principle and maldevelopment in postcolonial India

*This we know: the earth does not belong to man,
man belongs to the earth.
All things are connected like the blood that unites us all.
Man did not weave the web of life,
he is merely a strand in it.
Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.*

Excerpt from Chief Seattle's letter to the American President, 1852

Ecofeminist discourse has had the merit of formally highlighting some important conceptual links between the symbolic cultural construction of women and nature and the ways of approaching and acting upon them, as well as the commonalities between the environmental and feminist movements, particularly as far as their shared attempt to envision a more egalitarian and peaceful future society is concerned. However, some scholars have recently started arguing that ecofeminism has partially failed as a revolutionary movement insofar as it has underlined and disclosed exclusively the ideological side of the connection between the domination of nature and that of women, not taking into account the actual material aspect of the issue. More specifically, the ecofeminist argument has posited and confronted women as a unitary and undifferentiated reality, hence overlooking the differences based on gender, class and ethnicity. In this sense, ecofeminism has proven to be characterised by an essentialist

inclination, as if it were based on a notion of a single and unchangeable female essence²¹. Such tendency, however, neglects the evidence that concepts such as gender, culture, nature are actually socially and historically constructed and vary across time and space. In other words, it appears that most of the ecofeminist argument has been formulated in reference to an ideal feminine model, that is, the white, Western woman²². Nevertheless, as the 1980s unfolded, the movement saw a shift from the “centre” to the “margins”, and voices from “the periphery” of the world started to be heard and taken into consideration²³. This brought the examination of women’s relationship with the natural world to a level other than ideology, and to a concrete analysis of how the material realities which women of different classes live through might affect their connection with and way of relating to the environment, that is, to a substantial shift in concerns.

Shiva’s work on India should be read in this context, and it represents one of the most prominent example of a piece of literature by a politically oriented natural scientist working on issues concerning global sustainability. As a matter of fact, the author takes the reader further than Western ecofeminists in analyzing the connections between women and their environment and the effects that developmental processes are having on the biosphere and on the people who depend on it for their survival. Like other renowned ecofeminist scholars, such as Carolyn Merchant, she sees the current violent and destructive attitude towards nature and women as based on the same patriarchal ideology, and, therefore, as strictly related to the dominant model of development. Unlike her Western fellow scholars, however, she also characterizes the capitalist developmental paradigm as a colonial imposition, therefore adding with her investigation a different perspective to the ecofeminist argument and debate. What is more, she also aims at exposing the fact that violence against women and nature are not only

²¹ According to Allison Stone (2004), essentialism “philosophically [...] is the belief that things have essential properties, properties that are necessary to those things being what they are. Recontextualised within feminism, essentialism becomes the view that there are properties essential to women, in that any woman must necessarily have those properties to be a woman at all. So defined, essentialism entails a closely related view, universalism: that there are some properties shared by, or common to, all women – since without those properties they could not be women in the first place. Essential properties, then, are also universal. ‘Essentialism’ as generally debated in feminist circles embraces this composite view: that there are properties essential to women and which all women (therefore) share.” Essentialism has generated a vast debate and created division within the feminist movement, with feminist scholars and thinkers taking their stance in favour of or against the essentialist argument.

²² Bina Agarwal (1992). The Gender and Environment Debate: Lessons from India. *Feminist Studies*, 18.1.

²³ Ariel Salleh (1991). Reviewed Work(s): *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* by Vandana Shiva Review. *Hypatia*, 6.1, Ecological Feminism, pp. 206-214

ideologically, but also materially related, for the destruction of nature corresponds to the destruction of women's resources and ways of "staying alive". Shiva constructs her argument by directly drawing from her personal experience and activity as a physicist, philosopher, ecofeminist, writer and science policy advocate, and, especially, from her personal involvement in the Chipko movement during the 1970s. Her field of research and scope of action and intervention range from agriculture and food security to biodiversity, ecology and gender, from intellectual efforts and academic research to grassroots campaigns and governmental advising²⁴. Her informative and practical work, therefore, has represented and continues to represent a fundamental and invaluable contribution in the broader ecological and environmental discourse, especially as far as its interweaving with postcolonialism in the Third World are concerned. Overall, her activity has been essential in disclosing the problematic and violent logic underlying especially the global food system, and her approach to these issues is characterized by her drawing from Gandhi's political methodology and legacy and advocating a nonviolent transformation to face the violent dominant paradigm. In her most distinguished book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*, Shiva expresses her concerns for ecological stability in her native India through an in-depth analysis of how the alluring appearance of prosperity promoted by Western, patriarchal, capitalist modern science is, in fact, generating the alienation of humanity from the environment and causing an ecological devastation, and how this affects especially women in rural areas. The text uses all her intimate practical knowledge of the subject, and cleverly weaves its way through geology, mythology, economics, plant physiology, in order to support a basic thesis that the imposition and adoption of the Western model of development in India, which was supposed to be a postcolonial project, has actually carried forward a new, different phase and process of colonization. As the author herself states, her work represents "an attempt to articulate how rural Indian women, who are still embedded in nature, experience and perceive ecological destruction and its causes, and how they have conceived and initiated processes to arrest the destruction of nature and begin its regeneration".²⁵

²⁴ Antonia Navarro-Tejero, (2006). Placing Women and Ecology at the Heart of Modern Development Discourse: Vandana Shiva Interviewed by Antonia Navarro-Tejero. *Atenea*, 26.1, pp. 9-16.

²⁵ All the subsequent quotations are taken from this edition: Shiva, V. (ed. 2016). *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. Berkley, California: North Atlantic Books. P. xxxi

2.1 *The West after the Scientific Revolution: cultural shifts, technological progress, colonization and its aftermath*

Shiva's analysis begins by acknowledging the Scientific Revolution as the historical process which led Western culture and structures of thought to be based on the Cartesian dichotomization between man and nature. This resulted in a significant change in how humans conceive their role and place as a species in the universe and the ecosphere. The Enlightenment, in particular, and the consequent idea of progress it gave rise to, was centered on the sacredness of two categories: modern scientific knowledge and economic development. Shiva extensively argues that it is precisely that sort of dualistic thinking that has placed the planet in the current ecological crises, and by doing so she rephrases the concern that to a certain extent professor Lynn White Jr. had already expressed at the end of the 1960s in a pioneering article, namely the belief that scientific knowledge corresponds, in simple terms, to the technological power over nature²⁶. In his text, White retraces the roots of the current ecological crisis by identifying the Baconian revolution that originated in the mid nineteenth century - thus, he claims, quite recently in human history - as the turning point which erased the previous distinction between science and technology, and, consequently, generated a drastic change in man's approach to the natural environment. More specifically, he argues that such crisis has paradoxically emerged from the spreading of democratic culture and society: if prior to the Scientific Revolution science was "aristocratic, speculative and intellectual in intent" as opposed to "lower-class, empirical and action-oriented" technology, the fusion between these two realms during the nineteenth century generated an understanding of scientific knowledge as a means of human power and unlimited control over natural resources. The acceptance of this inherently and specifically occidental cultural paradigm and mindset as the normal pattern of action represents, in White's view, the greatest event in human history since the invention of agriculture. Similarly, Shiva's critical analysis as a scientist highlights how, following the Scientific Revolution, the pursuit of progress began to destroy life without any assessment of how much biodiversity was disappearing. In other words, she sees the conservation of life in all its diversity as having been sacrificed to progress, with the sanctity of life replaced by the imperatives of science and development. Only recently has a new awareness begun to grow that is questioning the universality of

²⁶ Lynn White Jr. (1967). The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crises. *Science, New Series*, 155.3767.

science and development as categories of progress, and highlighting their being special projects of Western patriarchy instead.

In a clear reference to Carolyn Merchant's most acclaimed work, Shiva names the current process of ecological devastation as a whole "the death of nature". With the destruction of entire ecosystems, forests, water and land humankind is losing its life-supporting systems, and this book clearly represents the author's effort to reveal how the dominant development model, as long as it is one that threatens life itself, appears to be intrinsically wrong. Development is seen by Shiva as a project of Western patriarchy. It represents, in her words, a postcolonial project, that is, the imposition of a paradigm of progress whereby the entire world has to remake itself in order to conform to the model of the colonial modern West, without having to undergo the subjugation and exploitation that colonialism involved. The underlying assumption for such project was that the Western lifestyle and development, which allegedly corresponds to an improved well-being for all, was possible for the entire humanity. In other words, the economic doctrine that emerged within the specific industrialization and capitalist paradigm which colonization was based on, was supported and encouraged as universal and applicable to the almost opposing context of the newly independent Third World countries, whose society was based on the principle of the satisfaction of all basic needs for everyone instead. Nevertheless, even once the colonial experience was over, the industrialized, capitalist West needed the permanent occupation of the former colonies and the destruction of the local economies. In her analysis of how the process of colonization is still affecting Third World countries even after the end of colonialism, Shiva is actually recapitulating an argument that has been exposed many times by intellectuals from various quarters. For instance, the Marxist philosopher and economist Rosa Luxemburg showed through her book *The Accumulation of Capital* how colonialism represents a constant necessary condition for capitalist growth²⁷. According to her, development has been reduced as a mere continuation of the process of colonization. As a consequence, just as colonised peoples struggled for liberation from colonialism, from the formal end of colonialism until the present they have been struggling for the liberation from development as the main cause of natural and human exploitation, poverty and dispossession. More recently, the Indian writer Amitav Ghosh has addressed in his latest work of non fiction the issue of climate change and

²⁷ Rosa Luxemburg (1913). *The Accumulation of Capital*. Cited in: Vandana Shiva, V. (ed. 2016). *Staying Alive*. P.1

the ecological crisis in Asia, with particular regards to India, by looking at it “through the prism of empire”, in the attempt to disclose how Western imperial control over Asia has played a double and ambivalent role as far as the unfolding of the current climate crisis is concerned²⁸. As a matter of fact, he extensively argues that, on the one hand, the emerging fossil-fuel economy needed in its early stages the colonies - from which the Western was withdrawing the necessary resources - to be prevented from imitating the same model as its *sine qua non* condition, and that happened through imperial rule, which seems to have delayed the onset of the ecological crisis by retarding the economic expansion of Asia and Africa. On the other hand, the empire and its disparities have incisively shaped a contemporary world marked by profound differential of power between nations, which are strictly connected to carbon economy and the consequent environmental crisis. This means that, despite the painfully achieved process of decolonization, the imperatives of political and military dominance over former colonies are still leading the way global natural resources are managed, in a political structure that sees the maintenance of the status quo and non-intervention as crucial in order to protect major vested interests.

Shiva takes the analysis of the colonial implications in the contemporary Western paradigm of development to a deeper level by providing actual data and describing subsistence and social structure of real communities in rural India. In particular, she stresses the difference between poverty as subsistence from misery as deprivation: what is culturally perceived poverty from a Western point of view does not necessarily correspond to real material poverty. As a matter of fact, subsistence economies which satisfy basic needs through self-provisioning are not deprived, yet the Western patriarchal ideology sees them as poor because they do not consume commodities produced for and distributed through the global market economy, a system based on productivity, historically and politically constructed by the colonial experience. Traditional economies are not advanced in the matter of non-vital needs satisfaction, but as far as satisfaction of basic and vital needs is concerned: societies based on such economic structure have been significantly defined by the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins as “the original affluent societies”, to indicate that hunter-gatherer and Western societies present a different conception of affluence, and that hunter-gatherers do not suffer from deprivation, but instead

²⁸ Amitav Ghosh (2016). *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. P. 87

live in a society in which "all the people's wants are easily satisfied"²⁹. According to Shiva, the paradox and crisis of development arises precisely from the mistaken cultural identification of poverty with material and technological poverty. On the other hand, while Western development promises a constant increasing of goods and wealth, it is causing, in fact, the degradation and exhaustion of natural resources, such as water, soil and biodiversity, which is leading to the steadfast impoverishment of entire communities surviving on the basis of nature's and women's survival economy. Thus, she advocates the overcoming and transformation of these foundations, through the redefinition of growth and productivity as categories linked to the production, not the destruction, of life.

Another striking point in Shiva's argument is her defining development as maldevelopment, that is, a development bereft of the feminine, the conservation and the ecological principle. By and large, maldevelopment is based on the neglect of nature's work in renewing herself and in women's work in producing sustenance in Third World communities, so much so that it becomes a new source of gender inequality, with modernization hence associated with the introduction of new forms of dominance and subjugation. Whereas under conditions of subsistence female and male domains are separate but still based on diversity and not inequality, maldevelopment challenges equality and superimposes the ideologically constructed and reductionist categories of the Western technological man as a uniform measure of the worth of classes, cultures and genders, as well as Western male-oriented concepts of women, non-Western peoples and nature. This way, maldevelopment represents the violation of the integrity of organic, interconnected and interdependent systems, that sets in motion a process of exploitation, inequality, injustice and violence. What is currently defined as development, Shiva argues, represents in fact maldevelopment, for it accentuates the male domination over nature and women, which are turned into and treated as passive "others". Maldevelopment corresponds to what is generally called "economic growth", which is measured by the Gross National Product (GNP) parameter, which, despite being effective in measuring some costs as benefits, fails to measure hidden costs such as the new burdens created by ecological devastation.

²⁹ Marshall Sahlins (1974). *The Original Affluent Society* (abridged), ch.5, pp79-98. In: Solway, J. (ed.) (2006). *The Politics of Egalitarianism: Theory and Practice*. New York: Berghahn Books.

2.2 *Pakriti and the recovery of the feminine principle*

Women in India are intimately linked with nature and its processes. Drawing from the very Indian cosmology and mythology, Shiva introduces the notion of *Pakriti*, the feminine principle and life force. In the Indian tradition, the world is produced and renewed by the dialectical tension between two opposites - creation and destruction, cohesion and disintegration - which is depicted as the first appearance of the primordial, dynamic energy, *Shakti*, the substance of everything, pervading everything. Nature (*Pakriti*), both inanimate and animate, represents the manifestation of *Shakti*, the feminine principle of the cosmos, which in conjunction with *Purusha*, the masculine principle, creates the world. The identification of nature with *Pakriti* signals its being an essentially active, powerful, productive force in the creation, renewal and sustenance of all life. Moreover, *Pakriti* represents, even in the most patriarchal streams of Indian philosophy, a popular, highly evolved philosophical category in the Indian cosmology through which women in the rural areas of the country relate to nature. It is worshipped as *Aditi*, the primordial vastness and power, the inexhaustible, the source of abundance, and all the forms of life are the children of the Mother of Nature. *Pakriti's* desire to become many represents the creative impulse through which the diversity, dynamism and interrelatedness of living forms in nature is created. This cosmology that sees nature as the creative expression of the feminine principle establishes a living and nurturing relationship between man and the natural environment which differs evidently and dramatically from the Western patriarchal notion of man as separate from and dominating over nature. As a matter of fact, in the Indian cosmology there is no division between man and nature or man and woman, for ontologically person and nature are duality in unity, and every form of life bears the sign of the dialectical unity and the diversity within the feminine, unifying principle. Nature is integral and inviolable, and as *Pakriti* it sustains life as whole, while as a concept it organizes daily life, by sanctioning the connectedness and interrelationship of all beings, including man, the continuity between the human and natural and the sanctity of life, in clear contrast with the Cartesian concept of the natural world as a resource to be exploited to the benefit and advantage of humankind. This becomes all the more interesting if one considers that, as a general tendency, the current ecological movements in the West seem to be counteracting and exposing this dominant paradigm, and the symbolism of the protective and creative Terra Mater, the concept of Gaia, the earth goddess, which have been shared across time and space, is being recovered,

counteracting and exposing the dominant paradigm that originated during the Scientific Revolution and saw the separation between man and nature and the conceptual shift from Mater to “matter” have been seen as essential for scientific and technological advancement and development.

At any rate, Vandana Shiva’s main concern remains that of highlighting through her work how the violation of nature is linked to that of women, especially in the Third World, where women reproduce not only biologically, but also through their social role in providing sustenance. As she argues, whenever ecological societies organized on the feminine principle, that is, all societies of forest-dwellers and peasants whose life is based on the principle of sustainability, have been disrupted or colonized, their male inhabitants have either been forced to migrate or started to engage themselves in life-destroying activities, while women generally preserve a privileged relationship with nature through their role as providers of sustenance, water and food. This organic process of growth, which sees women and the environment working in partnership, has been defined by Maria Mies as the “production of life”³⁰. With Adam Smith and his economic doctrine, male labour became the fund which originally supplies it with all the necessities and conveniences of life, consequently introducing a duality between nature and man, while making invisible the wealth produced by women. This devaluation of nature’s and women’s productivity, Shiva claims, has led to the ecological crises and to sexism and gender inequality, which overlooks that:

Every woman in every house in every village of rural India works invisibly to provide the stuff of life to nature and people. It is this invisible work that is linked to nature and needs, which conserves nature through maintaining ecological cycles, and conserves human life through satisfying the basic needs of food, nutrition and water. It is this essential work that is destroyed and dispensed by maldevelopment: the maintenance of ecological cycles has no place in a political economy of commodity and cash flows. (45)

Thus, the shift induced by the focus on the feminine principle would lead to the recognition of the capitalist patriarchal model development as a culture of destruction. Two implications seem to emerge from this: first, that the current dominant paradigm of development is essentially a process of maldevelopment, that is, a source of violence to women and nature across the ecosphere, and secondly, that the crises that have been caused that the model of

³⁰ Maria Mies (1986). *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*. London: Zed Books. Cited in Vandana Shiva, (ed. 2016). *Staying Alive*. P. 44

maldevelopment cannot be solved within the same paradigm, for their solution lies in ancient and renewed life-maintaining categories of thought, perception and action. In other words, Third World women, whose minds have not been colonized or dispossessed of their privileged understanding of and relationship with nature, are central not only as victims of the ongoing environmental degradation, but also as leaders in creating new intellectual ecological paradigms and making the new oppositional categories visible.

The recovery of the feminine principle involves the challenging and overcoming of the patriarchal gender-based ideology that has been constructed over centuries, and which is associated with the creation of woman as the “other”, in an asymmetrical relation whereby femininity is ideologically and culturally constructed as anything which is not masculine and must legitimately be subjected to domination. Overall, there seem to have been two main responses to this process of asymmetry and domination: the first one is represented by Simone de Beauvoir’s ideas as expressed in her well-known book *The Second Sex*, based on the acceptance of masculine and feminine as biologically established categories, and the patriarchal categorization of the status of women as the second sex - passive, weak and unproductive - as similarly determined³¹. Therefore, de Beauvoir imagines women’s liberation as the “masculinization” of the female, in a world where the masculine is accepted as a superior pole, which allows women to assume masculine values: according to her, the emancipation of the second sex is possible only through its modeling on the first, and women’s freedom corresponds to their gaining freedom from biology. On the other hand, the myth of feminine passivity and masculine creativity has been analyzed by the more recent feminist scholarship, in the attempt to show how sexism has represented the underlying ideology of the work that has been considered as unbiased and gender-neutral scientific divulgation. Moreover, feminist scholars such as Evelyn Reed and Maria Mies have focused in particular on the traditional categorization of “woman-the-gatherer” and “man-the-hunter”, arguing that the relationship between men and nature was inevitably destructive, predatory and violent, and highlighting how humanity has survived because man-the-hunter’s productivity and activity represented only a small part of sustenance. Yet, they claim, patriarchal ideology has chosen to adopt violent domination as its structural component by proposing the man-the-hunter as the model of human evolution and the exemplary of human

³¹ Simone De Beauvoir (1972). *The Second Sex*. London: Penguin Books. Cited in: Vandana Shiva (ed. 2016). *Staying Alive*. P. 50

productivity, while he is, in fact, basically a parasite that establishes a relationship with nature based on one-sided appropriation, destruction, exploitation and dominance. Another possible scenario, according to Shiva, is that of overcoming gender division and ideology through a process of liberation that is trans-gender, that is, based on an ideology whereby the feminine principle is not embodied solely in women, but is a shared principle regulating both women's and men's activity and relationship with nature. Thus, there is no clear distinction between the masculine and the feminine, between human and nature, and though distinct, they remain inseparable in dialectical unity, as two aspects of a single being. Following Gandhi's idea that freedom is indivisible, for not only all the oppressed ones, but also the oppressor is caught in the web of oppression, the recovery of the feminine principle appears as a response to multiple forms of domination and devaluation, not just that of women, and, in this sense, it is based on inclusiveness. It implies seeing nature as a living organism and women as productive and active, as well as a relocation of action aiming at the creation of life-enhancing, not life-reducing and life-threatening, societies.

Modern science and development, seen from the perspective of Third World women, are historically and ideologically of Western male origins, the latest and most brutal manifestations of patriarchal ideology and science, together with the Industrial Revolution based on capitalism, that is, the quintessential patriarchal mode of economic development. The European Scientific Revolution transformed nature from *terra mater* into a machine and source of raw material, therefore removing all human ethical and cognitive constraints to its exploitation and violation. As a matter of fact, the synergy between industrialization and modern science made the exploitation of natural resources not only acceptable and justifiable, but also desirable, and the man's new pattern of domination and control over nature reflected in the male way of relating to women. Women have therefore raised as victims of the patriarchal model of development against it in order to protect nature and preserve their and all humankind's survival and sustenance. This is particularly true for Third World countries and India, where women have represented the forefront of ecological struggles to conserve the ecosphere, its ecosystems and its resources, especially by challenging the Western equation that sees nature as a source of profits and opposing to it nature as *Pakriti*, the living force that supports and allows life. Women have, in other words, been creating a feminist ideology that transcends gender and is inclusive, as well as it challenges the patriarchal paradigm's claim to universality with diversity, the dominant concept of power as violence with nonviolence as

power, simultaneously fighting for the liberation of nature and against their own marginalization.

What Shiva advocates throughout her book is the recovery of the feminine principle as an intellectual and political challenge to maldevelopment, that is, the patriarchal project of domination, destruction, violence, subjugation, dispossession and dispensability of women and nature. If maldevelopment is intellectually based on reductionist categories of scientific thought and action, which have justified as “scientific” each project that has fragmented nature and displaced women from productive work, the feminine principle represents an oppositional category of non-violent ways of conceiving the world and of acting in it to sustain all life by maintaining the interconnectedness and diversity of nature, thus allowing the ecological transition from violence to nonviolence, or, in other words, from destruction, anti-life processes and fragmentation to creativity, life-giving processes and holism. Modern science itself, then, appears as inherently violent. Only recently has feminist scholarship begun to claim that the dominant scientific system did not emerge as a liberating force for humanity as a whole, but, rather, as a masculine and patriarchal project produced by a specific group, namely white, middle class males, which led as an inevitable consequence to the subjugation and oppression of both women and nature. The very Baconian method produced through the formulation of the experimental method an ideological dichotomy between mind and matter, rational and emotional, as well as an association of masculine and scientific with the domination over nature, women and the non-West. As Carolyn Merchant argues, with the Scientific Revolution human cultural and scientific paradigm saw a shift from the older science, represented as female, to a new science heralded by men³². In other words, due to this momentous revolution, nature was ideally transformed from a living and nurturing mother, which represented a moral constraint to its exploitation, to dead, inert, passive and manipulable matter to exploit to the benefit of the capitalist imperatives. Patriarchal science represented, to some extent, a political need emerged out of the industrial capitalism, and, as a male venture, science served as justification for the subjugation of women and legitimized their being subordinated to male authority. The recovery of the feminine principle through the combination of ecology and feminism can, thus, play a pivotal in restructuring and

³² Carolyn Merchant (1980). *The Death of Nature. Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*. New York: HarperOne.

transforming both intellectually and politically maldevelopment into development in order to ensure a vital planetary future.

2.3 Reductionist science and the “demothering” of nature

According to Shiva, hence, the roots of the current ecological and environmental crisis lie in the Western patriarchal and capitalist model of development, which is based on a scientific method that she defines as “reductionist” and she acknowledges as intrinsically violent and destructive. By providing a general factual outline of such paradigm, she underlines how the “demothering” of nature through science and the association of the new paradigm of knowledge with power did not only represent, historically, a source of female subjugation, but also accounted for the oppression of non-Western, non-European peoples. As a matter of fact the famous scientist and Governor of the New England Company Robert Boyle is reported to have openly admitted the rise of the mechanical philosophy to represent an instrument of power over the indigenous populations inhabiting America, and declared his intention to erase what he considered ridiculous notions about nature, arguing that their veneration of the natural world had prevented men from their rightful domination over the inferior creatures of God. Paradoxically, the new ecological that is currently emerging from different quarters is reevaluating the beliefs and knowledge of indigenous populations and native Americans as an essential source of learning how to regain a renewed lifestyle in harmony with nature and its cycles. However, as Shiva mentions in her book, contemporary ecologist and feminist movements that offer alternatives to the reductionist scientific model are not the first attempts to introduce a nature-oriented counter tendency, for many alternatives to the chauvinist, gendered and mechanistic project of science emerged already during the Scientific Revolution itself, as, for example, the Paracelsians.

From a political perspective, the masculine reductionist project of science was the project that mirrored the politics of class and was committed to middle class values, such as capitalism, mercantile economy and the State, with reductionist science becoming a determining factor and major agent of economic and political change in the centuries to follow through the dichotomizing of genders and classes, and the alienation of man from their natural environment. For centuries, the paradigm that emerged from the Scientific Revolution has ruled as the only possible, unbiased method, transforming a particular and circumscribed

tradition into an acknowledgedly universal and superior model to be superimposed to all class, genders, cultures. As argued by Lynn White Jr., modern technology and science are, as a matter of fact, inherently occidental, since, in addition to having resulted from the Scientific Revolution of the sixteenth century, they represent one of the most significant outcomes of the victory of Christianity over paganism³³. Unlike other forms of worship, the Christian religion is characterized by a marked anthropocentric tendency, a crucial aspect in this cultural and ideological shift as a whole: if in the antiquity every living being had its *genius loci*, by destroying pagan animism Christendom allowed and justified the exploitation of nature in a mood of indifference for the feelings and sufferings of natural objects and beings. This has resulted in the distortion of the history of both the Western and non-Western world, and has kept reductionist science inaccessible to criticism, despite its being gender and class-based, hidden behind a supposed objectivism, neutrality and intellectual progress.

During the last decades, however, this cultural “myth” is being steadily challenged by feminist scholarship and the histories of science in non-Western cultures, which are highlighting the destruction of both women’s and indigenous women caused by reductionism. European witch-hunts were the first example of a process that largely aimed at delegitimizing and destroying the expertise of women, and a deeper and more violent process of exclusion of women’s knowledge and expertise as well as that of tribal and peasant cultures is now taking place in the name of development. It is precisely for this reason that Shiva refers to the epistemological tradition of the Scientific Revolution, because, in her words:

[...] it reduced the capacity of humans to know nature both by excluding other knowers and other ways of knowing, and it reduced the capacity of nature to creatively regenerate and renew itself by manipulating it as inert and fragmented matter.” (22)

Thus, she argues, reductionist science proceeds by reducing complex ecosystems into single components, and each component to a single function, allowing the manipulation of the ecosystem with a view at maximizing the single-function exploitation, which places reductionism among the major causes of the current growing environmental crisis. Reductionist science has displaced non-reductionist models of knowing, and dispossessed women and indigenous population of their knowledge and privileged relationship with nature thanks to the political support of this ideology, which plays a fundamental role in the Western

³³ Lynn White Jr. (1967). The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crises. *Science, New Series*, 155.3767.

capitalist economic affairs. It has also proved to be able to destroy in the time span of few decades what local people and women had conserved through history. It is in the destruction of these forms of knowledge and ecologies that lies, according to Shiva, the violence of reductionism, which results in forms of violence against women, nature and knowledge.

Reductionist science has also established a sharp separation between facts and values, whereby facts are socially constructed categories which have the cultural marking of the western bourgeois, patriarchal system. As already shown by Carolyn Merchant, until the sixteenth century and the advent of the Scientific Revolution the West was culturally pervaded by an organically oriented mentality in which female principles played a pivotal role, whereas, as the Western culture became increasingly mechanized, other traditions of knowledge, as well as the female earth and virgin spirit were eliminated and subjugated. If the nurturing earth image served as a moral constraint to the types of man actions considered as socially and morally acceptable with regards to the Earth, the new images of mastery and dominion functioned as justification for the exploitation and denudation of the natural world. In her observation of the Third World, Shiva notices how these two contrasting perceptions of the world, with reductionism opposing the ecological view, are a contemporary and everyday reality, whereby the work of Western reductionist scientists and experts interferes and penetrates in a world where the relationships between all the different elements of the ecosystem are still strongly and intimately felt by a population attached to traditional knowledge. Thus:

The domination of the South by the North, of women by men, of nature by westernized man are now being identified as being rooted in the domination inherent to the world-view created by western man over the last three centuries through which he could subjugate or exclude the rest of humanity on grounds of humanity. (30)

Many have argued, in defense of modern science, that it is not science itself but the political misuse and unethical application of it that has lead and is still leading to violence, however, Shiva points out, this argument seems unreasonable in these days and ages, when science and technology have become cognitively inseparable and have been incorporated into the scientific-military-industrial complex of capitalist patriarchy. At a time when a quarter of the world's population is threatened by starvation due to erosion of soil, water and genetic diversity of living resource, chasing the mirage of the unending growth becomes almost

genocidal, and the intellectual recovery of the feminine principle seems to be essential to create new conditions for women and non-Western cultures to become principal actors in establishing a democracy of all life as countervailing forces to the culture of dispensability that reductionism creates.

2.4 The plight of women in rural India and the Chipko Movement

As all ecofeminist scholars, Shiva sees ecological sustainability as clearly and inextricably linked to social justice, and the dismissal of women's thousand-year-old expertise as one of the major contributors to both ecological breakdown and rural impoverishment. Her account sapiently ties together the analysis of class, race, speciesism and race, and addresses the violence on women that has followed the failure of the green revolution led by men³⁴. Her main concern seems to show how within the current paradigm of development and natural resources management women are doubly devalued: first, because the destruction of nature devalues their work which cooperates with natural processes, and in the second place because the maldevelopment paradigm devaluates the kind of work which satisfies needs and ensures sustenance, to which follows that a growth in maldevelopment corresponds to less life-supporting systems. When viewed from the point of view of nature's productivity and growth, and women's production of sustenance, the categories of productivity and growth which have been seen as universal appear, in fact, restricted patriarchal categories, which are found to be ecologically destructive and a source of gender inequality, for the heavy ecological costs associated with economic growth are mostly borne by women. Shiva's stance in this sense is made clear from an effective use of vocabulary, which is one expressing the alienation, commodification and homogenization caused by the impact of industrial practices, in an analysis that investigates the the role and plight of women in rural India by examining the current management, in contrast to the traditional one, of specific resources: forests, food and water.

³⁴ Arile Salleh (1991). Reviewed Work(s): *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* by Vandana Shiva Review. *Hypatia*, 6.1, Ecological Feminism, pp. 206-214

2.4.1 *Women, the forest and the Chipko Movement*

The forest has always been central to the Indian civilization, which has been distinctive in locating its source of regeneration, material and intellectual, in the forest rather than in the city. Forests have traditionally been worshipped as *Aranyani*, the Goddess of the Forest, the primary source of life and fertility, and the *aranya samskriti* (forest culture), which did not represent a condition of backwardness and primitiveness, but, in fact, one of conscious choice, with its diversity, harmony and self-sustainability, was viewed as a desirable model for societal and civilizational evolution and organization. As a matter of fact, human evolution was measured not in terms of man's capacity to subdue the sacred nature, but, on the contrary, in terms of his ability to merge with its rhythms intellectually, spiritually and emotionally. Hence, it may be argued that the forest has always served as the principle nurturing an ecological civilization, or, in other words, a society based on a fundamental harmony with nature. For the tribes of central India, the forest is the context and condition of survival, and all religions and cultures of the South Asian region are rooted in the forest, not through fear and ignorance but, rather, through ecological insight and sensitivity, for, as Myers argues, in the humid tropical areas of the globe, forests represent a primary source of intimate relation between man and nature, which stands in sharp contrast with the perception of the forest in the temperate zones, where they are seen as dangerous places³⁵. Simply put, Indian peoples have traditionally recognized the essential role played by the forest as an ecosystem as far as human survival is concerned.

Although it has been argued that scientific forestry and management of forest resources began with the British colonization, Shiva confutes such idea, which in her opinion can be considered as acceptable only if Western patriarchal science is acknowledge as the dominant and corroborated scientific paradigm. Evidence, however, shows that a scientific knowledge of the plant kingdom, though not based on the same pillars as Western science, existed already in ancient Indian traditions, as it is testified, for instance, by the presence of a specific vocabulary of the forest in ancient texts, whose content also shows how the forest was perceived from a multi-functional perspective with a focus on diversity of form and function. This common knowledge used to be passed on from generation to generation, through the

³⁵ Norman Myers (1984). *The primary Source*. New York: W.W. Norton. Cited in: Vandana Shiva (ed. 2016). *Staying Alive*. P. 57

direct participation of the members of a forest community in all the sustainable processes of the ecosystem, and women played a central role.

When it comes to forestry and forest culture in India, one must always bear in mind how British colonialism affected the landscape and the management of natural resource. As a matter of fact, Shiva emphasizes how, in the early stages of the colonizing process, the British first colonized Indian forests, and reduced them to mere source of timber and wood by ignoring the local knowledge, displacing local rights and local needs and replacing women's subsistence economy with commercial economy. Therefore, the author argues, although local people have always been considered as responsible for deforestation, it was, in fact, the commercial demands of the colonizers to result in large-scale forest destruction. Moreover, colonial forestry did not replace the traditional forestry by virtue of a superior knowledge, but, rather, through military power, and it was only after a century of forest overexploitation by the British for commercial interests that attempts were made to limit the destruction, in particular with the 1865 first Indian Forest Act, passed by the Supreme Legislative Council, which authorized the government to declare forests and wastelands as reserved lands, thus marking the beginning of what is known as the "scientific management" of forests. Commercial, "scientific" forestry, based on reductionist Western scientific knowledge, has had a huge ecological impact and generated poverty at all socioeconomic levels for those populations whose wealth and livelihood depended on the forest and its resources, by causing the progressive reduction of ecological diversity and natural resources and by ignoring the complex web of relationships between people, their environment and all beings. If for those population the forest represented an ecosystem, for the colonizers it represented only a stock of wood and a source of money. The destruction of forests harshly affects women, for it is their work that conserves and protects the natural cycle and environment in forestry and agriculture. Women consider forests as living beings providing food, water, resources, and maintaining their diversity is critical to their use of the ecosystem.

When addressing forestry, Shiva inevitably draws from her personal experience as a member of the Chipko movement, a grassroots voluntary organization that used to undertake non-violent struggle against the removal of trees and other ecologically and environmentally dangerous practices. As reported by Christopher Hrynkow, Shiva credits her encounter and experience with the members of this movement as crucial in teaching her "the value and worth of nature's economy" as well as fundamental for her research on the negative effects of

the Green Revolution in Punjab³⁶. The Chipko movement in India preceded by centuries the first Western women's ecological movements of the 1970s, and although it is referred to as a feminine organization, it is only some of its male representatives that have gained public recognition and visibility, while women's contributions and efforts are generally remained invisible and ignored. This has taken place in spite of the fact that the history of Chipko is the history of the visions and actions of exceptionally courageous women, and that the movement has been fueled by women's ecological awareness and political strength. This movement articulates through a variety of events and actor, however, overall, it represents a process of resurgence of woman power and concern in the Garhwal Himalaya, and, among others, one of the most significant catalyzers which made the resistance possible has been Mira Behn, one of Gandhi's closest disciples. The movement has, in short, fought against the exploitation of forests for commercial purposes and tried to protect the feminine forestry activity, which conserved the ethics of sharing, producing and maintaining life, in order to countervail the masculinist market and morality.

Nowadays, Shiva points out, India is characterized by two utterly opposed approaches to the forest, which are mirrored in as many paradigms of forestry: the life enhancing paradigm is based on the feminine principle, and creates a sustainable, self-supporting, renewable forest system, whereby the maintenance of the condition for its renewability represents the main objective; the second, life-destroying paradigm, on the other hand, emerges from factory and the market, and has the maximization of profits as its main objective. The first is eradicated in India's ancient forest culture, and it has been renovated by initiatives such as the Chipko movement, which became explicitly an ecological and feminist movement in 1977. The main thrust of conservation struggles like Chipko is that forests and trees are life-supporting systems, and should be protected and regenerated for their biospheric functions. On the contrary, the Western patriarchal and reductionist paradigm sees forests as a commercially valued source of wood and raw materials, and therefore it sets into motion a process which converts afforestation into deforestation and desertification, justifying it all with the catchy slogan "Money grows on trees". Despite being presented as schemes for local forestry development, afforestation programmes actually act against the feminist principle, since they destroy the forest as a diverse and self-sustaining ecosystem and also its commons, which

³⁶ Cristopher Hrynkow (2017). Situating Earth Democracy: Vandana Shiva on Agroecology, Contemporary Politics and Resilience. *Political Studies Review*, 1.12.

ought to be shared by a number of social groups, which are left instead almost deprived of rights, access and entitlements.

2.4.2 *Women and the food chain*

Shiva's investigation goes on to an in-depth analysis of the role of women within the food chain. She starts by reasserting the importance that both nature and women have as food providers in natural farming, that is, again, a food system that operates in harmony and partnership with nature and based on the feminine principle that sees trees, animals and crops as intimately related. Women's contribution in the food chain has been exemplified by their self-reproducing and sustainable work in agriculture and farming, as opposed to the new patriarchal paradigm based on the production and use of hazardous agri-chemicals, which provoke a disruption of nature's ecological cycles. In other words, agriculture and the food chain have seen, too, a masculinist shift that considers farming as a mere source of profit, resulting not only in ecological destruction, but also in economic deprivation:

The fact that larger numbers of poor in the Third World are victims of hunger and famine today is intimately related to a patriarchal model of progress which sees sales and profits as indicators of well-being and thus destroys the real well-being of people.
(94)

Women, Shiva underlines, were the world's original food producers, and continue to be central in food production in Third World countries. However, women's contribution in this field, as in many others, has been obscured in the scientific and anthropological literature, mostly produced by male authors. Hence, current feminist scholarship is concentrating its efforts in digging up the historical importance of woman-the-gatherer in the development, survival and perpetration of human societies. As it has happened with women's traditional forestry and management of hydrological resources, the adhesion to the Western reductionist and capitalist paradigm of agriculture, which promised to increase food productivity and availability for everyone, has, in fact, dispossessed women of their social role, underestimated their knowledge and work, and deepened gender inequality in the Third World.

The myth of self-sufficiency promoted by the Western Green Revolution in India has, since its beginning and throughout its development, in fact, proven to be a mere fallacy. This has happened mainly on two levels: on the one hand, it has caused the dispossession of the poorer

sections of rural society in the name of the appearance of production surpluses at a broader level, which, however, do collide in actual facts with the lack of purchasing power created by the Green Revolution strategy. Hence, Shiva, as a scientist, advocates a new, post-Green Revolution era that corresponds to the recovery and revival of the feminine principle in order to protect genetic diversity, self-renewability and self-sufficiency in food production, and moreover, with a view at retransferring the control of seeds and crops from the hands of corporate giants back into the hands of local women and peasants.

According to the author, the application of masculinist reductionist science and technology to Indian agriculture, which has been promoted as “the greatest biological revolution of all time”, may in fact result into the most significant process working against the biology of nature and women, whereby the result of the supposed revolution will be evaluated solely on the basis of profitability. The ultimate outcome of this model will inevitably be the gradual erasure of diversity and sustainability in nature and of basic human needs and rights, as well as a growing genetic erosion. In more concrete terms, the Green Revolution is now causing the death and erosion of Indian soils, historically among the most fertile of the world, and a spreading desertification crisis, which are mainly due to the introduction of large scale monocultures and high water demand coinciding with low water conservation. Shiva points out that the actual problem with the Green Revolution and the new food system is its being based on the reductionist scientific paradigm, which, as already argued and expanded by Carolyn Merchant, operates by analysis each single component in of complex systems in isolation, and by consequently trying to provide the most effective solution to each particular issue, therefore overlooking the whole picture³⁷. In other words, the Green Revolution, by working under the assumption that nature is inefficient, has hazardously damaged its productivity. More specifically, in order to increase the amount of food produced under the myth of infinite growth, it has in fact made the very production of food a threat to life.

³⁷ Carolyn Merchant (1980). *The Death of Nature. Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*. New York: HarperOne.

2.4.3 Women and the hydrological resources

Shiva's analysis eventually moves to focus on water scarcity, an issue which has been of pivotal importance in the 1980s as far as the struggles for survival in the Indian subcontinent are concerned. Drought and desertification are evident and inherent consequences of reductionist knowledge and the maldevelopment process, which violates the cycles of life in rivers, soil, mountains, causing the drying up of rivers, groundwater and consequent drinking water shortages that are endangering entire villages and provoking violence in towns and cities.

The issue of water crisis acquires a particular importance in the context of India. As a matter of fact, Indian civilization is traditionally a riparian one, and the ancient temples have traditionally been dedicated to rivers, perceived and used in total integration of their surrounding environment and their relationship with rainfall, mountains, forests, land and sea, and all the elements involved in the water cycle have always been considered and treated as sacred. However, modern India has seen the progressive replacement of those ancient temples dedicated to natural resources and goddesses with dams - the modern temples dedicated to industrialism and patriarchal capitalism. If the indigenous system of water storage and distribution worked in harmony with the natural cycles, Western paradigms of water management have deprived rivers of their sacrality by alienating hydrological resources from natural processes and promoting their use as a source of profit and revenue, which has eliminated all the moral constraints from the overuse and abuse of water. Nevertheless, what was presented and promoted as a profitable and efficient paradigm at the beginning of the Indian independence, has in fact proven to be, according to Shiva, the main cause of increasing desertification and famine. In order to achieve uniformity in water use, and assuming that nature is deficient and people use inefficiently natural resources, the reductionist paradigm has introduced the intensive irrigation model, which, however, does not take into consideration the existence of natural ecozones, a concept that has traditionally represented the foundation for diverse cultures and economies since the dawn of civilization, and whose diversity is destroyed by this model, consequently disrupting the water cycle. Hence, desertification is now spreading everywhere due to the impact of non-sustainable agricultural water use, which, by promising abundance, is in fact generating an increasing water scarcity and transforming a renewable resource into a non-renewable one by way of misuse and over-exploitation. This also has a heavy impact on women and their role in rural

societies. As a matter of fact, nature's and women's cooperative work in water conservation has been ignored by reductionist, patriarchal water management. Women's work in traditional agriculture represented an example of perfect partnership with nature, which increased water availability for human use and survival without disrupting the hydrological cycle, has been generally ignored and has been replaced by the partnership between masculinist science and technology with industry and chemicals.

Overall, Shiva proposes that at this juncture in history it is fundamental to envision and implement less violent and exploitative ways of living on the Earth, and she expresses the need for a profound transformation towards a reality of integral connectivity and interrelatedness, whereby humanity can step back from treating food, natural resources and living beings - including women - as commodities, in order to start considering all the inanimate and animate inhabitants of the ecosphere as members of a larger web of connections and interdependence and, thus, moving towards more sustainable practices in all aspects of the socio-political life on this planet³⁸. Through an effective and thought-provoking argumentation, she shows how the Enlightenment gave rise to categories of gender inequalities, and how these are presently being challenged throughout the world as the project of a narrow group of Western, technocratic men. After identifying modern Western scientific thought as reductionist, therefore inherently violent and destructive to nature as a producer and to women as knowers, Shiva discloses how this reductionist view is mirrored in the current dominant economic categories, which assume that only paid labour produces value, and ignore man's dependence on the natural world. What stands out to reason from her text and research is that, instead of a sustainable reproduction of wealth, the global economic system led by capitalism has started to focus on instant wealth creation through speculation at the cost of the future of the planet, and of the poor. Hence, the global economic system appears as paradoxical because, while pursuing a mythical construction of capital and wealth, it is able to threaten and destroy instantly through this game of speculation the real economies of entire countries. Since modern Western project of progress is based on the sacrifice of nature, women and the Third World, it has proved to be non-sustainable and inequitable. This way, the author deconstructs the myth of the "rational" man, son of the Enlightenment, who is

³⁸ Cristopher Hrynkow (2017). Situating Earth Democracy: Vandana Shiva on Agroecology, Contemporary Politics and Resilience. *Political Studies Review*, 1.12.

shown to be for his part exposed to a number of irrationalities that threaten the survival of human kind. Recovering the feminine principle thus appears as the only possible way to move forward, and, in Shiva's words:

Unless the world is restructured ecologically at the level of world-views and life-styles, peace and justice will continue to be violated and ultimately the very survival of humanity will be threatened. (37)

Through this work, Vandana Shiva brings invaluable additions to the ecofeminist epistemology and discourse, namely an analysis of the extent to which the global economy of the allegedly advanced world is dependent on the resources and labour of the other "under developed" Two Thirds World, how this global system represents a legacy of colonialism and the way it affects Third World women and their underestimated, age-old expertise³⁹.

³⁹Ariel Salleh (1991). Reviewed Work(s): *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* by Vandana Shiva Review. *Hypatia*, 6.1, Ecological Feminism, pp. 206-214.

3.

The weight of the small things: colonial legacy, women's assertion and environmental degradation in Arundhati Roy

*To love. To be loved. To never forget your own insignificance.
To never get used to the unspeakable violence
and the vulgar disparity of life around you.
To seek joy in the saddest places.
To pursue beauty to its lair.
To never simplify what is complicated or complicate what is simple.
To respect strength, never power.
Above all, to watch. To try and understand.
To never look away. And never, never to forget.*

Arundhati Roy, *The Cost of Living* (1999)

Arundhati Roy's debut novel *The God of Small Things* generated controversy and encountered mixed critical opinion almost from the moment of its publication in 1997⁴⁰. Awarded with the Booker Prize in the same year, the book does not only reveal the author's revolutionary ideas and iconoclastic attitude, but also her profound sense of social justice. As a matter of fact, through her narrative Roy seem to be standing up for all of those who are seen and treated as subalterns in an Indian society that she depicts as strongly patriarchal, caste-ridden and tradition-bound⁴¹. Set in the Southern Indian State of Kerala and chronologically divided between the late 1960s and the early 1990s, the plot revolves around the ill-fated vicissitudes involving the Syrian-Christian Ipe family. Much of the narrative is presented retrospectively from the perspective of the twinned-child protagonists, Estha and Rahel, and the most significant events are revealed gradually as the twins meet in their thirties in 1992, twenty-three years after the tragic events of 1969. This complex double time scheme allows for an insightful, in some cases obsessive and even cathartic recollection of the family tragedies, and

⁴⁰ Alex Tickell (2007). *Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things*. New York: Routledge. Print.

⁴¹ Jamuna Rani(2014). Mode of Assertion Adopted by the Woman Protagonist in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. *New Academia: An International Journal of English Language, Literature and Literary Theory*, 3.3.

it is through the close juxtaposition and blending of past and present that Roy expresses her other main concern, that is, the delayed effect of the past painful, damaging and dreadful events on Estha and Rahel, their traumatized return to the family home in the town of Ayemenem and their - incestuous - reconnection in adulthood. The novel resists categorization, for it draws together elements of the fairy tale, psychological drama, pastoral lyric, tragedy and political fable⁴². Among many other elements, what emerges from the narrative is Roy's marked interest in the continuities between childhood and adulthood, which has led some critics to identify an underlying *Bildungsroman*⁴³ pattern in the novel, while others have argued that, on the contrary, the constant resonance of Estha and Rahel's past in their lives as adults, and their troublesome return to the family home in Ayemenem seems to suspend and even reverse the conventional and traditional structure of the genre, characterised by a progressive movement. For this reason, some have suggested that this third-person narrative may be defined as an "anti-*Bildungsroman*", in which the main protagonist do not undergo a proper process of personal growth and development⁴⁴. As it will be further discussed in a later section of the chapter, due to its close formal connection to biography and memoir, the *Bildungsroman* has often been used by postcolonial writers as a means of connecting the political with the individual, in a narrative structure that allegorizes the struggle for independence and the growth of the newly independent nation in the personal progress of a central protagonist, which may serve as a satisfactory explanation for the presence of such pattern in Roy's novel.

In addition to representing Roy's worldwide debut as a writer of fiction, *The God of Small Things* also marked the inauguration and launch of her career of activism and resistance against local and global inequities in India, and it is possible to trace a number of strong continuities between this novel and the author's subsequent works of prose. As noted by many scholars, Roy's political awareness and social sensitivity can be already detected in her own life and personal story, as for instance in her mother's experience as an uncompromising

⁴² Alex Tickell (2007). *Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things*.

⁴³ According to Alex Tickell (2007), the term *Bildungsroman* refers to "a type of novel, usually narrated in the first person, in which the central character's growth from childhood to maturity and their developing self-awareness provide the main framework of the narrative." It is a narrative genre that deals with the formative years of the main character, focusing in particular on their psychological development and moral education.

⁴⁴ Alice Traux (1997). *A Silver Thimble in Her Fist*, New York Times, 25 May 1997. Cited in Tickell, p. 3

feminist and social activist.⁴⁵ In this particular novel, Roy focuses in depth on the plight and social barriers that burden Indian women as well as lower class people and racial subalterns, exemplified in the narrative by the Dalits - the untouchables -, facing global capitalism and neoimperialism that act disguised as the broader and allegedly positive phenomenon of globalization. Moreover, Roy sees resistance against gender oppression as strictly connected to resistance against caste, class oppression and anti-colonial thought and action. Therefore, she presents alternative modes of resistant rebellion through the examination of the marital and inter-gender relations of Ammu, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and Rahel. The acts of transgression of these characters, be they openly subversive or more simply outside the limited boundaries of the institution of marriage as practiced in postcolonial India and the “Love Laws [...] The laws that lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much.”⁴⁶ and that predate Western colonialism, generate in the reader an interrogation of the basic values and structures of postcolonial Indian society. In this way, Roy, besides disclosing the faults of her society, points a possible way for the Indian women to resist local as well as global inequities.

Through her novel, Roy portrays a rural world which, while retaining some universal qualities, is at the same time uniquely Keralite, and she manages to show it to the reader in its complexity and contradictions: it is a world populated by Syrian-Christians, who, however, stick and adhere to the prejudices and practices of orthodox Hinduism and the rules of the caste system, and where male characters, such as the tragic-comic Chacko, enjoy the privileges accorded by a gender-oriented culture and society, whereas female characters, like Ammu, make desperate efforts to free themselves from the fetters and restrictions of religious and social orthodoxy, but they are defeated at every turn, or as maternal figures in a supposedly matriarchal society are in actual facts victims of the patriarchal order which they live immersed in and which they to a certain extent silently support, for they do not possess the necessary mental energy to overcome their destiny, and consequently they succumb to it by being passive aggressively destructive. It is precisely the essential inadequacies and weaknesses of the characters inhabiting the world of Ayemenem that creates the hateful web

⁴⁵ Tickell, Alex (2007). *Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things*.

⁴⁶ All the subsequent quotations are taken from this edition: Arundhati Roy (1998). *The God of Small Things*. London: Flamingo. P. 33

that draws both its protagonists and any outsider to their destruction, in a world where people quote from the Bible and invoke its moral precepts while in fact acting deviously. Roy effectively manages to create a continuous suspension of disbelief that leads the reader to immerse themselves into a reality that appeals gender consciousness, class biases and politically controlled sensibilities, through a flowing and captivating prose that powerfully addresses the serious themes that underlie the narrative, that is, the destructive effects of patriarchy, the integral corruption of the political system, and the emptiness of the values of a seriously flawed social structure. Moreover, the novel lends itself to an ecocritical reading and approach, for all the author's concerns are always expressed and investigated in connection with the environment, in a narrative pattern that establishes a clear and visually powerful parallel between the characters, their stories, their growth, and postcolonial India as a whole and the natural world.

In other words, with *The God of Small Things*, Roy investigates and provides a clear understanding of the superimposition of indigenous and Western power structures that are at work in Indian society. She explores the multiple ways in which man-made boundaries and hierarchies influence and condition the lives of the characters as well as the meaningful ways in which power structures are transgressed and challenged, which allows her to emphasize the destructive consequences of major power structures, for each of them seems to exact a sacrificial victim in the novel. The aim of this chapter is to analyse the various forms of oppression that characterize the narrative and affect its characters. More specifically, particular attention will be given to the way in which oppression represents from time to time an expression of colonial legacy, patriarchal domination and environmental exploitation, in the attempt to provide a postcolonial as well as feminist and ecocritical reading of the novel.

3.1 *Hybridity, trauma and self-assertion: the aftermath of colonialism.*

Before moving to an analysis of all the postcolonial implications that characterize Roy's novel, it seems necessary and useful to provide some background information about the British colonial empire in India and postcolonial theory as a critical approach to literary text - a relatively recent academic strand of research which focuses on the cultural legacy of colonialism and imperialism, as well as on the human consequences of the control and exploitation of colonized people and their lands.

To begin with, one must bear in mind that colonialism and imperialism represented widespread and long-lasting historical and political processes, and, as a matter of fact, more than three-quarters of the people living in the world today have had their lives shaped by such experiences. Literature offers undoubtedly one of the most important and privileged ways of expression of the new perceptions that emerged in the colonies and their population, and which continue to develop and influence their inhabitants even after the end of colonialism, conventionally identified with 1947, the year in which India finally achieved independence. It is especially in writing and through other arts that the day-to-day realities experienced by colonized peoples have been most powerfully encoded, to the point of becoming profoundly influential and achieving a kind of universality. According to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, the term postcolonial is used "to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. This is because there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression."⁴⁷ Ashcroft and his fellow scholars, moreover, acknowledge that, regardless of distinctive and regional characteristics, it is possible to identify a common element that all postcolonial literary texts share, namely, their having emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and having asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, as well as by emphasizing their differences from the imperial centre⁴⁸.

⁴⁷ Bill Ashcroft, Graham Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (1989). *The Empire Writes Back*. Theory and practice in post-colonial literatures. London, New York: Routledge. P. 2

⁴⁸ Bill Ashcroft, Graham Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (1989). *The Empire Writes Back*. Theory and practice in post-colonial literatures. London, New York: Routledge.

India has had a peculiar relationship with the Empire, which continues to cause cultural, linguistic and social repercussions to the present day. The British Raj was established in India by Queen Victoria in 1858 and Britain remained the dominant power structure until Indian Independence in 1947, also managing to dominate the country from a linguistic and cultural point of view, with policies that saw a marked infiltration of British culture and literature into the Indian context⁴⁹. Thus, India has a long tradition of absorbing, incorporating, translating and adapting British culture, which is doubtlessly due to the British occupation of its territories, for Great Britain, like all Western countries, justified colonialism as a “civilizing mission”: in 1871, Joseph-Ernest Renan, in his work *La Réforme intellectuelle et morale*, presented colonialism as an “extension of civilization”, which ideologically excused the self-ascribed racial and cultural superiority of the Western over the non-Western world. Shortly after the annexation of India, the secretary to the Board of control Thomas Babington Macaulay emphasized the need to create a class of people “Indian in blood, but British in taste” in order to reinforce the British power over the colony. Needless to say, language represented an excellent instrument of control over the colonized, and, consequently, his famous Minute on Education (1835) institutionalized the study of English and proclaimed the introduction of European ideas and culture through the medium of English as the only sensible educational policy for India⁵⁰. It can be argued that the study of English and the growth of the Empire proceeded hand in hand from one single ideological tendency, whereby the development of the Empire was seen as intrinsically connected to the development of the study of the English language. This had repercussions at the level of simple utility and, more significantly, at the unconscious level: it caused the naturalizing of constructed values, which established “savagery”, “native”, “primitive” as their antithesis and as the object of a reforming impulse. Language became the medium through which the hierarchical structure of power was perpetuated, and the effective system that established conceptions of truth, order and reality. Furthermore, the replacement of the indigenous languages with English seems to bring as a natural consequence a condition of alienation, which represent a crucial element developed in much postcolonial literature, whereby a concern with place and displacement seems to often correspond to the characters’ crisis of identity, generally set into motion by

⁴⁹ Kamlesh Mohan(2002). The Colonial Ethnography: Imperial Pursuit of Knowledge for Hegemony in British India (Late 19th to Early 20th Century). *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 63, pp. 827-836.

⁵⁰ Bill Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin(1995). *The post-colonial studies reader*. Chap. 75. London, New York: Routledge.

cultural denigration.⁵¹In a similar way, literature was made central to the cultural enterprise of the Empire, leading the colonized to immerse themselves in the imported culture, denying their origins in an attempt to become “more English than English”. In most postcolonial nations (including the West Indies and India) the nexus of power involving literature, language and a dominant British culture has strongly resisted attempts to dismantle it, which testified to which extent the former colonial political control has resulted in a cultural hegemony that resists the flowing of time.

According to most scholars, in order to address and understand the damages that colonization and the empire have had on India it is essential to investigate the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized and, more specifically, its evolution through the pre-independence, independence and finally post-independence generations. The underlying idea is that much of the identity of colonized subjects is generated by the colonizer, in a process that has been defined by Memmi as “the mythical construction of the colonized”. In other words, the colonizer imposes a precise identity upon the colonized, which represents one of the most crucial part of colonization, for it results in the colonized individual’s partial adherence to colonization. Thus, the bond between colonizer and colonized is simultaneously destructive and creative, it destroys and recreates both identities: if, on the one hand, the colonizer must accept his role, the colonized must accept their condition of subjugation and inferiority. Furthermore, Memmi adds, the colonized must identify with the colonizer at some point, a stage which he considers as the final act of the colonized preceding revolt. Roy’s main characters, the members of the Ipe family, reside in Kerala, which represents an interesting and significant choice of geographical setting, for Kerala has a rich and complex history of colonization, and, as a matter of fact, the Ipe family identifies with Christianity, most likely as the result of Portugal’s previous colonial and missionary efforts in the region. Despite their Christian practices, however, they still maintain some Hindu tradition as well, for example the adherence to and perpetuation of the caste system, even if, as Christians, they should be casteless. Roy describes the psychological effects of this conglomeration of East and West as “having to sweep away your footprints without a broom. Or worse, not being allowed to leave footprints at all” (71). Therefore, the synthesis of identity corresponds in fact to a loss of identity. The colonized’s acceptance of colonization is reflected through several

⁵¹ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (1989). *The Empire Writes Back. Theory and practice in post-colonial literatures*. London, New York: Routledge.

character in *The God of Small Things*, in a double time scheme that includes three generations of characters who are representative of each of the phases of Indian independence, by incorporating voices of a pre-independence, an independence and a post-independence generation. Roy's novel presents a multigenerational approach to describe the effects of the British Empire, thus constructing a narrative structure that exposes the psychological effects of colonialism on her characters and their reaction to Western colonizers, which questions their identity as colonized subalterns⁵².

Another crucial element in postcolonial literary theory is the definition of the other as the object of colonization: the other is inevitable and essential to the defining of the subject identity, both that of the subordinate, marginalized and exploited other, or, on the other hand, that of the representatives of the imperial power, in whose gaze the subordinate identity is constructed and exists. As pointed out by Edward Said in his renowned essay *Orientalism* (1978), "[...] the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience."⁵³ Many elements in the novel allow for an interpretation of the text through the concept of the other, as for instance the multitude of interrelation of the characters, the space they inhabit, their habits and their personal development throughout the novel. Roy presents to the reader the county of Kerala in 1969, more than twenty years after the Indian independence, yet many details suggest a world that is still heavily burdened with postcolonial hegemony and the colonial aftermath: the ongoing dominance of the British culture elbows its way through the characters' use of language and ideas, as well as with issues connected with race and culture. As Chacko tells the two-egged twins Estha and Rahel, the malady of the Ipe family is their Anglophilia:

Chacko told the twins that though he hated to admit it, they were all Anglophiles. They were a *family* of Anglophiles. Pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history, and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away. He explained to them that history was like an old house at night. With all the lamps lit. And ancestors whispering inside. (52)

⁵² Cassandra Galantine (2015). Colonized or Self-Colonizer: A Generational Journey Through Independence in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 7.2.

⁵³ Edward W. Said (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Random House. Cited in Ashcroft, Bill, Griffiths, Gareth and Tiffin, Helen (1995). *The post-colonial studies reader*. Chap. 12.

It is as if colonialism never really ended, but just changed its shape, and the cultural hegemony of the West stands out in the family's fascination with everything that is connected with Britain and the West, both in the Ayemenem of the 1970s, seen through the eyes of children, and later in the 1990s after Rahel's return from America. Roy's novels relies on a historical and social background that clearly implicates the process of the othering as something unavoidable, be it through Anglophilia in a postcolonial world, Hinduism and its three-thousands-year-old tradition, or through the egalitarian ideology and constructs of Marxism and Christianity⁵⁴.

As previously anticipated, another formal element which must be taken into consideration when reading Roy's novel from a postcolonial perspective is its connections with the *Bildungsroman*, a narrative structure that has often been used by postcolonial writers as a means of connecting the political with the individual. The 1920s and 1930s saw the quick spreading and growing popularity of the memoirs of India's nationalist leaders, Mohandas K. Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, fulfilled a similar function and seemed, in Nehru's words, to show how during the struggle against the British their prosaic existence assumed a universal and epic value. For many postcolonial writers and artists, however, the epic experience of national independence was followed by a growing disillusionment with the unfulfilled promises of the newly independent nation-state. Thus, in contemporary Indian literature we are more likely to encounter ironic or satirical reworkings of the established conventions of the genre as a national allegory. Postcolonial authors have also used the *Bildungsroman* pattern to explore the problems of retaining roots and preserving a sense of cultural belonging in the aftermath of colonial rule. In *The God of Small Things*, these issues are investigated in the unconventional bond between the twins, who are "physically separate, but with joint identities" (2), and, thus, seem to embody the dislocated or split cultural identity of the colonized. In common with other postcolonial novelists, Roy seems to stress the idea that the understanding of the sense of the colonized identity - just as her own - demands an awareness of the continuing, damaging effects of colonial rule, for, as she asserts:

⁵⁴ Slavica Troskot, (2011). The Resistant and Resilient Web of O/others in Arundhaty Roy's Novel *The God of Small Things*. (Post)modernism and the Other, 2.

Fifty years after independence, India is struggling with the legacy of colonialism, still flinching from the cultural insult [and . . .] we're still caught up in the business of "disproving" the white world's definition of us.⁵⁵

This issue is most evident in her careful, penetrating and sensitive use of language, and, as a matter of fact, she seems to be challenging the linguistic inheritance of British colonialism in various ways. For instance, the dense patterns of quotation and literary reference that she waves through the novel not only do reveal the intermixture and cross-fertilizations of contemporary south-Asian culture, but also disclose and release hidden or disturbing aspects of India's colonial past. The intertextuality of Roy's novel, for example the link to Conrad in the History House and the large set of references to British and American authors and movies serve to highlight Roy's own articulation of the Indian voices left outside of this cultural basin and to emphasize how damaging this exclusion remains, especially for the twins, who often quote English and American canonic texts to narrate or revere to their own experience. This intertextuality does sometimes also correspond to the set-into-being of traumatic events, as it happens when the twins are taken to the cinema to watch *The Sound of Music*, an event particularly disturbing for Estha, who in that occasion is victim of a sexual abuse from the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man. Moreover, the novel's peculiar two-way time scheme, allows the author to address the drawbacks and negative impacts of the colonial period, as well as to show her awareness of the shadows of an older precolonial history. In this sense, the novel also tackles the enduring effects of India's ancient Vedic and Hindu history and traditions, while at the same time revealing the perversions and degradation of its fully industrialized, globally integrated present.⁵⁶

As far as the doubled-time scheme is concerned, Elizabeth Outka has provided an interesting postcolonial reading of the novel which ties this narrative structure to trauma. In her essay, Outka introduces the concept of "temporal hybridity", whereby the term "hybridity" is intentionally borrowed from postcolonial theory, to refer to a way of looking at cultural meetings not as simple binaries, but as encounters governed by multiplicity and ambivalence to produce hybridization. For Roy's characters, the two interwoven narrative threads are not,

⁵⁵ Arundhati Roy (2001). *Power Politics*, p.13. Brooklyn: South End Press. Cited in Alex Tickell (2007). *Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things*.

⁵⁶ AlexTickell (2007). *Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things*. New York: Routledge.

as a matter of fact, binary and unrelated, but a hybrid where different times become simultaneous, multiple, ambiguous, and through which the author is able to investigate the harmful effects of caste prejudice, sexism, and commercial and political colonizations. According to Susan Stanford Friedman, hybridity can be read either as a sign of oppression, as in the case when one culture forces another to assimilate, or as a sign of progression, where fixed dichotomies are disrupted and new forms emerge⁵⁷. On a temporal level, the novel depicts these contradictions, exploring hybridity both on the level of individual characters and on the level of collective forms of drama. One of the most noticeable aftereffects of traumatic experiences is a disordering of time, when past events threaten to take over the present, returning repeatedly to haunt the current moment in the form of flashbacks, hallucinations or dreams. Hence, trauma reorders time itself, and Roy's temporal hybridity outlines trauma's enduring damage. The novel's most traumatized characters - Ammu and the twins - carefully portray temporal hybridity produced by specific overwhelming and tragic events, in a mixture of amnesia and flashback, frozen time and relentless return. The exploration of such hybridity seems, overall, to expand to the entire community, especially in the depiction of the lingering effects of colonial rule as well as in the local patterns of discrimination based on caste and gender. In particular, colonialism's extensive damage to community relations - in addition to a numerous variety of individual traumas - creates on several levels a sense of temporal disorder in the community. The colonial encounter itself can be considered as the superimposition of different threads of time, for it implies a modern colonizer confronting the inhabitants of a supposedly primitive past, and the postcolonial period appears as painfully and traumatically marked by this attitude, as well as haunted by the sense of a past time, and a past community, that have been erased by the colonial encounter. During a conversation with the twinned children, Chacko significantly implies that, even after independence, India remains caught in the colonizers's narrative, forced to dream foreign dreams and to play unchosen parts:

⁵⁷ Susan Stanford Friedman (1998). *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP. Cited in Outka, Elizabeth (2011). Trauma and Temporal Hybridity in Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things". *Contemporary Literature*, 52.1. P. 23

“We’re Prisoners of War” Chacko said. “Our dreams have been doctored. We belong nowhere. We sail unanchored on troubled seas. We may never be allowed ashore. Our sorrows will never be sad enough. Our joys never happy enough. Our dreams never big enough. Our lives never important enough. To matter.” (53)

In other words, history has been disordered and leaves not a clear sense of connection to the past but an unanchored sense of living simultaneously in different timelines. Chacko speaks of “History”, “Conquerors” and war, and by using such generic terms he seems to be addressing a universal issue rather than specifically the British colonization of India. This Oxford graduate appears as caught in what Dipesh Chakrabarty has described as a historical discourse that assumes Europe to be the referent for the world, and while, on the one hand, refuting this assumption, on the other, he reinforces his belief that the British still determine the course of history. When he notes how colonial rule has swept away their footsteps and locked them out of the metaphorical house of history, he in fact echoes Velutha’s actual exclusion from the main house. These subtle links suggest how traumas produce traumas, and how a single form of discrimination degenerates into a broader discriminating structure.

In order to fully address how the colonial experience and its aftermath influences and impacts the protagonists of *The God of Small Things*, it seems important to analyze some of the main character’s individual attitude towards the former colonizers, especially as far as the construction of their linguistic, cultural and behavioural identity is concerned. One of the most striking example of a colonized struggling to come to terms with his Indian origins is undoubtedly provided by Pappachi, the grandfather of the family, and thus a representative of the pre-independence generation. He entertains a peculiar relationship with the British Empire and rule, having himself worked as an imperial entomologist. Ammu describes him as “an incurable CCP, which was short for *chi-chi poach* and in Hindi meant shit-whiper. Chacko said that the correct word for people like Pappachi was *Anglophile*.” (51). During his career, he discovers a new species of moth, however, a British scientist is awarded for the same discovery after Pappachi’s retirement, and for his undefeated loyalty and admiration for the British colonizers he seems to represent a prime example of what Memmi describes as the “Situations of the Colonized”, an expression he uses to point out that “as long as [the colonized] tolerates colonization, the only possible alternatives for the colonized are

assimilation or petrification”⁵⁸. It is precisely this frustrating psychological response to colonization that challenges and disrupts Pappachi’s identity, leading him to physically and emotionally abuse his wife and daughter. Another member of the pre-independence generation, Baby Kochamma seems unable, throughout the whole novel, to reconcile both British and Indian identities, despite her self-righteous nature. Despite being a Christian - with a past as a Roman Catholic novice - she strongly supports the caste system and the social hierarchy and discrimination it establishes. Overall, she seems to embody more than the colonized individual that passively accepts colonization, because she completely embraces it, as testified by her frequent and unabashed displaying of Western tendencies. Her affinity to American and British television, for instance, are significant example of Memmi’s theorization of the colonized willingly adopting the culture of the colonizer. She conveniently maintains the cultural and economic benefits of being a Brahman Hindu and a Syrian Christian, and her incessant struggle to keep her family’s social position is the result, as Roy puts it, of “ancient, age-old fear. The fear of being dispossessed.” (70). The male exponent of the independence generation, Chacko, for his part, enjoys the privileges of his British colonized identity and English proficiency by moving to England to study at Oxford University, where he meets and marries an Englishwoman, Margaret. The woman, for her part, has English working-class origins, which, at the time of colonial expansion, meant being no less exploited than colonized peoples. However, her father does not approve her marriage with an Indian man, despite his being a member of the upper class in this country, for “he disliked Indians, he thought of them as sly, dishonest people” (240), which testifies how prejudices that had been deeply-rooted in the Western culture by the colonial enterprise and the consequent construction of the Orient were not easily dismantled. After the loss of his daughter Sophie and of the factory, Chacko moves to Canada where he, symbolically, runs an unsuccessful antiques business. Canada represents in the minds of many a kind of psychological escape from trauma and the last peaceful place within the Anglo-Saxon world, in addition to being itself an interesting country from a postcolonial perspective, since it is characterized by a double cultural marginalization, in its attempts to follow in the first wave the British and, in the recent times, the American cultural hegemony. Thus, through the novel’s development Chacko’s *Building* seems to reach a regression rather than a process of

⁵⁸ Cassandra Galantine (2015). Colonized or Self-Colonizer: A Generational Journey Through Independence in E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 7.2.

personal growth and development: eventually, he has lost his authenticity, and he does not belong anywhere anymore. On the contrary, his tough-minded and brave sister Ammu displays signs of resisting any form of hierarchy and colonization. She is characterized by a resentful attitude, which, if seen from a psychological perspective, clearly represents a manifestation of what Veena Shukla defines as a binary opposition of exploiter/exploited at work ⁵⁹. Her mode of social resistance is described in the novel as her “Unsafe Edge”, and her “air of unpredictability”, elements of personality that cause her constant struggle against “an unmixable mix. The infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber.” (44). Though Ammu’s resistance comes initially in from her having return to the family house as a “divorced daughter from an inter community love marriage”, her initial fight against her own individual marginalization seems to expand throughout the novel to assume the shape of a broader resistance and struggle against the social hierarchies that were firmly instituted by her former colonizers and perpetuated by the previous generation of her family, in a strenuous resistance that becomes an attempt to redefine her family’s Indian identity. The climax of her rebellious attitude reaches its peak in her affair with Velutha, which represents a complete transgression of both caste and colonizer’s laws. Finally, the protagonist two-egged twins, Estha and Rahel, the representative characters of the post-independence generation, present uncertain identities and uncertainty about to whom and where they belong, which directly and metaphorically illustrates the tragic and multi-generational effects and aftereffects of colonization on the identity of the colonized. Since their early childhood, they are forced to read short versions of English and American canonic literary texts, and are severely punished if they make linguistic mistakes in their oral or written assignments. They seem to be in a way retraining their mother’s process of self-assertion and rebellion, and to be taking it to its extreme consequences: their final, incestuous reconciliation in adulthood, as a matter of fact, does not only represent an act of personal transgression, but the passing of Ammu’s breaking of religious and caste rules, for they break a universally accepted taboo that prescribes the coupling between siblings as irremediably immoral. This abandonment of the “Love Laws” and societal taboos demonstrates an overall generational movement towards freedom from the persisting psychological effects of colonialism. Thus, in her novel, Roy subtly depicts the stereotyped ways in which Indians are

⁵⁹ Cassandra Galantine (2015). Colonized or Self-Colonizer: A Generational Journey Through Independence in E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 7.2.

perceived by their former colonizers, and shows that the typical stereotypes of India, which were conceived and spread in Western countries as a strategy of control and domination, are still deeply inculcated in the British world. Even if the main action of *The God of Small Things* is set more than twenty years after Indian independence, the author portrays Indian societies as still bearing the vestiges of colonialism, and the readers are made to realize that there are still deep-rooted modes of consciousness that endangers a feeling of inferiority and the drive to imitate the former colonizer. The tragic events around which the whole plot revolves, and which causes the character's traumatic regressive movement towards personal collapse, Sophie Mol's death, can be thus read from a postcolonial perspective as the ultimate failure of the colonial project.

3.2 The ambivalence of self-assertion: complicity and resistance in Roy's patriarchal Kerala

Political independence of the former colonies did not correspond to social equality in the new countries, and, as a matter of fact, a process of subordination continued to take place in some aspects and to burden specific social and ethnic groups. As Ania Loomba puts it: "The newly independent nation-state makes available the fruits of liberation only selectively and unevenly: the dismantling of colonial rule did not automatically bring about changes for the better in the status of women, the working class or peasantry in most colonized countries." Colonialism, she adds, does not necessarily represent a subjugating force coming from outside a country or a population, but it can also manifest itself within the colonized peoples as a consequence of the oppression they suffer ⁶⁰. Indian society, in particular, is traditionally strongly patriarchal and the relationship between the sexes seems in a way to mirror the fixed and rigid hierarchical social structure. From its part, the current feminist discourse remains characterized by concerns about identity formation, which assumes a particular importance and connotation when it comes to address the even more problematic identity of postcolonial women. The coupling of the term "postcolonial" with the term "woman", however, seem to have led too often and almost inevitably to simplicities that underlie unthinking celebrations

⁶⁰ Ania Loomba (2000). *Colonialism / Postcolonialism*. London, New York: Routledge, 2000. Cited in: Troskot, Slavica. (2011). The Resistant and Resilient Web of O/others in Arundhaty Roy's Novel *The God of Small Things*. *(Post)modernism and the Other*, 2.

of oppression, whereby the racially female voice has been elevated into a metaphor for “the good”⁶¹. Nevertheless, if, on the one hand, Western feminist discourse and political practice is neither singular nor homogenous in its goals, interests or analyses, on the other many have argued that it is possible to trace a coherence of effects resulting from feminist investigation, which seems to testify that much of the feminist discourse works under the implicit assumption of “the West” as the primary referent in theory and practice, thus overlooking differences and other forms of oppression or marginalization that women may suffer based not only on gender but also on ethnicity. For this reason, feminist scholars coming from former colonies as well as those who willingly assume a postcolonial perspective in their work, see the relationship between “Woman” - a cultural and ideological composite Other constructed through varied representational discourses - and “women” - real and material subjects of their collective histories - as one of the central questions the practice of feminist scholarship seeks to address. An analysis of “sexual difference” in the form of a cross-culturally singular, monolithic notion of patriarchy or male dominance leads to the construction of what Mohanty defines as the “third World Difference”, namely the stable, ahistorical element that apparently accounts for the oppression of most, if not all the women in Third World countries. It is precisely in the production of this “Third World Difference” that Western feminism appropriates the fundamental complexities and conflicts which characterize the lives of women of different classes, religions, cultures, races and castes in these countries, hence setting into motion a process of homogenization and systematization of the oppression of women in the Third World. The current challenge of Western feminist scholarship, Mohanty adds, is that of situating itself and examining its role in a global, complex, varied, multicultural economic and political framework, otherwise it would be ignoring the complicated interconnections between first and Third World economies and the profound effect of this on the lives of women in these countries.⁶²

Among the women writers of Indian fiction written in English, Arundhati Roy has earned a distinct and noticeable space for her unprecedented and significant attention towards the plight of women and social injustice. Through a sensitive portrayal and understanding of

⁶¹ Suleri, Sara (1992). *Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition*. *Critical Inquiry*, 18.4.: Cited in: Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (1995). *The post-colonial studies reader*. Chap. 48.

⁶² Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984). *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*. *Boundary*, 12.1. Cited in: Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (1995). *The post-colonial studies reader*. Chap. 45.

intrinsic human nature, in *The God of Small Things*, Roy deconstructs stereotypical constructs about women, conveying to the reader the message that women can play an equal part with men, only on condition that they succeed to gain a distinct voice of their own and learn to transcend the traditional barriers of their silence. Indian society, as effectively outlined by this skillful author, appears to accuse women of immoral conduct when there is even a slight deviation from the accepted norms of behaviour, therefore condoning any abuse towards female subjects. Roy powerfully attacks such age-old attitudes and constructs, and seems to have written the novel with a clear-cut objective of dismantling the old fabric of the male chauvinistic Indian society and rebuilding it in favour of the oppressed and exploited sections of the society, particularly women. In order to clearly understand how the author addresses women oppression and marginalization, it seems useful to analyze the forms of patriarchal and colonial subjugation the most relevant female characters suffer and to which extent they act as either supporters or challengers of their gender-based societal and cultural constructs.

Ammu is undoubtedly the most important female character in *The God of Small Things*. A middle class bourgeois woman, she is a divorcee and the mother of two twinned children, Eshta and Rahel. Throughout the novel she puts up a brave fight against the age-old norms of the androcentric society she has to confront with, and, despite encountering a tragic death at the end, she emerges as a stubborn and strong-willed woman, capable of asserting herself. In all the roles that she assumes as a woman she reveals her pioneer feminist inclination and consciousness, because she is never a passive and patient sufferer, ready to accept the ill-treatments and indignities her family, her husband and the society as a whole put her through, but, in turn, she struggles to find some means of overcome her traumatic condition. She is a powerful and brave spirit which apparently cannot be subdued by the forces of tradition, casteism, religion, and community. This may serve as a sufficient reason to explain why some scholars have defined her as a woman of great grit, and her rebellious attempts at self-assertion and realization represent, in actual fact, an attempt at repossessing, renaming, reknowing the world, which, however, appears to be doomed from the very beginning, because the nature of the society she has to seek refuge in after her divorce does not provide her with any adequate model for the understanding and redefining of herself⁶³. During her life, Ammu is burdened by various kinds of oppression and abuse: as a child, she suffers acts

⁶³ Golam Gaus Al-Quaderi and Muhammad Islam (2011). *Complicity and Resistance: Women in Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things*.

of physical violence from her strongly patriarchal and chauvinistic father who, in addition to beat his wife and daughter, makes a lot of discrimination between his son and daughter, depriving Ammu of the opportunity to pursue higher education because of his misconception that higher education depraves a woman, while he sends Chacko to Oxford University. What implicitly emerges from the text is Roy's intransigent condemnation of this kind of gender discrimination and marginalization as a form of gross injustice. Ammu feels sympathy for her mother, who is constantly the victim of her father's rage, however, she lacks a strong emotional connection to Mammachi, because in her view she embodies the prototypical example of a woman attached to tradition and to the dictates of a strongly patriarchal society. Despite the discriminatory attitude of her parents and her limited access to formal education, Ammu grows up as an autonomous individual who exercises her right to choose for herself, and inter-community marriage is her first mode of assertion against the male hegemony of her father and a way to escape his tyranny. Hence, like a rebel, she fights against and tries to demolish patriarchal structure, in a gender-based society where the yardsticks of moral judgements are stricter for women than for men, as testified by the loving indulgence with which Chacko's sexual affairs with the factory women are tolerated in contrast to the marginalization Ammu suffers from her own family as a divorcee mother:

She [Baby Kochamma] subscribed wholeheartedly to the commonly held view that a married daughter had no position in her parents' home. As for a *divorced* daughter - according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all. (45)

Even death does not end the humiliation that Ammu suffers, for she is denied the decent burial that every Christian deserves, becoming, as Brinda Bose puts it, almost a political statement as the ultimate punishment for her transgressions⁶⁴. It can be argued that, therefore, after having had her personality locked up her entire life, she eventually dies exiled. However, before succumbing to her ill fate, she becomes through all her brave and desperate attempts of self-realization a symbolic and exemplary personification of all subalterns, especially women who challenge power structures of the social order, refusing to be subalterns and raising their voices against local and global inequalities. Through this unforgettable character, Roy

⁶⁴ Brinda Bose (1998). In *Desire and in Death: Eroticism as Politics in Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things*. *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 29.2. Cited in Tickell, Alex (2007). *Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things*.

suggests that women will only be able to emancipate themselves if they challenge the patriarchal norms through an articulation of their feelings and emotions without feigning the feminine virtues in order to meet social and cultural expectations.

Another important and remarkable female character is Mammachi, Ammu and Chacko's mother. The attitude she maintains towards patriarchal forms of oppression is particularly ambivalent, for if, on the one hand, she herself is victim of his husband's psychological and physical abuses, on the other she silently endures Pappachi's violence as if it were in the natural order of things for a wife to be beaten by her husband sometimes, thus accepting the chauvinist ideology and to a certain extent assimilating herself many of the features of an Indian patriarch, despite being herself a victim of oppression and especially with regards to her daughter Ammu. On the contrary, Mammachi's patriarchal behaviour does not help her in asserting her authority towards Chacko, who, in the end, reclaims his role as the family's patriarch and replaces her as the director of Paradise Pickle & Preserves, the pickle factory, symbol of the capitalist enterprise, she had laboriously created and carried on on her own, without any support from Pappachi:

Though Mammachi had conical corneas and was already practically blind, Pappachi would not help her with the pickle-making because he did not consider pickle-making a suitable job for a highranking ex-Government official. (47)

In India, even today, the iniquities of caste, class and patriarchal oppressions feed and depend on each other, and Mammachi seems to assimilate such mentality, especially when it comes to her attitude towards her children: although both Ammu and Chacko are divorcees, Mammachi does not resist her tyrannical and manipulative son, and she indulgently condones his "Men's Needs", as Chacko's sexual encounters with "pretty women who worked in the factory" (65), while she cannot accept nor forgive the mutually consensual relation between Ammu and Velutha, partially because of her caste and class bias, and her reporting Velutha to the authorities plays a crucial part in his murder in the hands of the police, a colonial institution. Mammachi, however, is not totally complicit in social injustice, as testified by the dominating role that she chooses for herself, which seems in a way to falsify the idea that women should only obey orders. As a postcolonial Indian woman she is driven by the pulls of precolonial generation, therefore, she is also the representative of a longing for freedom and equality, generated both by India's encounter with the West and by a neocolonial present which connects the local inequalities of caste, class and gender with the global ones deriving from an

unequal and broadly unjust economic and political order. Despite her ambivalent attitude towards patriarchy, however, the reader tends to sympathize for this character due to the depredation, oppression and abuse she has to go through and that she bears resiliently. Overall, she is marginalized on the basis of class and gender, but, as a descendant of upper class Brahmins, she is not a victim of caste prejudice. In this novel, then, Arundhati Roy addresses women's oppression and subordination by presenting it not as a stable, unproblematic condition, but, rather, by presenting different degrees of rebellion against and collusion with the dominant ideology, she shows the dialectic relationship and mutual dependence that exists between the subjugating forces and the subaltern's attitude towards their oppressors, which may range from total resignation to rebellious revolt⁶⁵.

At a first reading, Baby Kochamma, the daughter of Reverend Ipe, might appear as a disagreeable and conformist character, especially because she concurs to repressive actions to the detriment of Ammu. Nevertheless, her intransigent behaviour towards her niece stands in sharp contrast to other of her actions, which prove her ambivalent form of resistance against patriarchy and other indigenous repressive and oppressive social structures still intact in the post-colonial India of the novel. Although Baby Kochamma does not emblemize any kind of rebellion against social order nor does she overtly believe in the rights of women as well as subalterns, for she is clearly more focused on the pursue of her own self-interest than in the common interest of women, her love for Father Mulling does lead her life to subversive changes. For instance, despite her verbal and actual conformity she transgresses the borders of religion, community and caste, because her love-driven conversion to Roman Catholicism implies a rejection of her own history. Moreover, in a Syrian Christian community which did not allow celibacy for women, her life-long admiration and unfulfilled, unconditioned love for Father Mulligan represents a breaking of the Love Laws that date back to precolonial times and prescribed marriage as the only possible life path for women. Thus, her action do make her a kind of agent of change in the novel, even though she succumbs to the dictates of an extremely sexist, casteist and prejudicial society in the name of decency and family honour, refusing to play a role of active resistance against local and global inequities. In other words, if, on the one hand, the first generation of women in the Ipe family gives extreme importance to patriarchal social norms, on the other, if one investigates beneath the surface and consider

⁶⁵ Golam Gaus Al-Quaderi, and Muhammad Islam (2011). *Complicity and Resistance: Women in Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things*.

their actions, it emerges that even woman characters like Mammachi and Baby Kochamma put up a kind of resistance against the iniquitous socio-political and economic order in postcolonial India.

Finally, Rahel, Estha's twin sister, is subjected to social marginalization on numerous and different levels: first of all, because she is female, to which one must add the stigma of mixed parentage attached both to her and to her brother as two-egged children born within an interreligious and intercommunity marriage - their father being a Bengali Hindu and their mother a Keralite Syrian Christian. After Estha is "returned" to their father and Ammu's death, Rahel shows a rebellious spirit, for she refuses to be co-opted by the school as well as by her relatives and by society as a whole. Being marginalized because of her religion, gender, class and age, she embodies the perfect example of the subaltern, and her acts of non-conformity can be considered as acts of resistance and self-assertion through which she wants to bring about some kind of change for herself. Undoubtedly, her most relevant and noticeable act of transgression is the incestuous reconciliation with her brother, Estha, when they reunite again after twenty in the family house in Ayemenem. If read from the perspective of the feminist motto "the individual is also political", this taboo-breaking act not only does represent a strong attempt at personal self-assertion, but also a deeply political stance that challenges indigenous local inequalities in postcolonial India. In conclusion, these four women, Ammu, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and Rahel, all interrogate, to varied degrees, precolonial indigenous norms, customs, laws, values and structures connected with patriarchy, class, caste and capitalist economic structures, as well as the ancient "Love laws". As Rahel points out retrospectively when she returns to Ayemenem in her thirties:

Looking back now, to Rahel it seemed as though this difficulty that their family had with classification ran much deeper than the jam-jelly question.

Perhaps Ammu, Estha and she were the worst transgressors. But it wasn't just them. It was the others too. They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much. The laws that make grandmothers grandmothers, uncles uncles, mothers mothers, cousins cousins, jam jam, and jelly jelly. (32,33)

3.3 An ecocritical perspective: the environmental degradation as a mirror for personal downfall

The central concern of ecocriticism is the analysis of the connections between literature and environment, based on the assumption that nature and culture are intimately connected and interrelated. As pointed out by Glotfelty and Fromm, the first law of ecology states that “everything is connected to everything else”, and, given Roy’s marked interest for these connections and the understanding of the links between human beings and the planet, which she she investigates extensively in her works of prose, it is unsurprising that *The God of Small Things* has allowed scholars for ecocritical readings ⁶⁶. As a matter of fact, Roy utilizes various techniques to signal the profound connection between characters and the natural environment they are immersed in: through the effective and striking juxtaposition of the narrative of the Ipe family’s tragic story and powerful images of the changing nature that surrounds them, the author manages to establish a powerful, symbolic and almost visual correspondence between the characters’ gradual, but inexorable, personal downfall and environmental degradation. As it will be further discussed later on in this section, this pervasive element may be argued to be linked both with the ecofeminist and the postcolonial implications of the novel.

Roy’s approach to nature in the novel seems to blur the dialectical pairs prescribed by the Cartesian dualism that has generated the Western ideological nature/culture dichotomy. The symbiotic relationship between nature and its human inhabitants gathers strength as it is emphasized by the author through a high-powered use of metaphor and metonymy, which discloses the principles of kinship underlying the ecosphere. Another strategy is to apostrophize nature and even the Earth at various instances with a view to communicate pathos to the readers and dismantle traditional and long-established dichotomies. Moreover, the novel underscores ecofeminist concerns, as the parallel between the social marginalization and oppression of some characters and natural deterioration seems to play a central role especially as for the subjugation of women. Ecofeminism, as a theory, works under the assumption that there is a strict connection between patriarchy and the current ecological crisis, and, as practice, it is necessarily anti-hierarchical, for it prescribes that life on Earth is

⁶⁶ Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (eds) (1996). *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press. Tickell, Alex (2007). *Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things*. P. 97.

the result of an interconnected web, not a hierarchy, of all non-living and living beings. Thus, ecofeminist theory emphasizes the importance of interrelationships between humans and the natural environment, and is now viewed in a larger perspective as a movement working against the interconnected oppressions of gender, race, class, and nature. The survival instinct of female characters against patriarchy and their struggle for self-assertion is outlined in the novel's language of ecology, which emblemizes Roy's attempt at erasing the human/nature dichotomy. This intention is eloquently shown by the river, which, in addition to represent a significant physical element surrounding the family house in Ayemenem, also stands as a microcosmos for the entire ecosystem and, from a narrative point of view, as a metaphor for Ammu. Although the word "river" is of neuter gender in the English language, the Indian traditionally riparian civilization has always attributed with feminine qualities to it: rivers, as pointed out by Vandana Shiva, were fundamental to the development of society as sources of fertility, sustenance and creativity ⁶⁷. Viewed from this perspective, then, the pervasive and constant association between Ammu, the wronged woman, and the river, does not seem accidental. The narrative presents a structure whereby the progressive disillusion and growing despair of the woman corresponds a consequent change in the river, as, for instance, when Rahel encounters the river after twenty-three years, and it apparently reminds her of how her mother succumbed under the dictates and inequalities of patriarchal society, as well as it mirrors the family's unsurpassed tragedy:

You couldn't see the river from the window anymore. [...] Though you couldn't see the river from the house anymore, like a seashell always has a sea-sense, the Ayemenem house still had a river-sense. (29,30)

The metaphor of the river extends to Ammu's love relationships, as for example when the narrator asserts that "To Ammu, her twins seemed like a pair of small bewildered frogs engrossed in each other's company" (43), which represents an interesting parallel, for just as frogs have semipermeable skin that provides them with special adapting and survival strategy to deal with dry habitats, the twins are characterized by a resilient spirit and forcedly adapt to live without Ammu, their river ⁶⁸. Estha and Rahel, therefore, are themselves engaged in a

⁶⁷ Vandana Shiva (ed. 2016). *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books.

⁶⁸ Rukhaya Kunhi and Zeenath Mahomed Kunhi (2017). An Ecocritical Perspective of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*.

relationship of deep connection with the river, as shown by the changed way in which Rahel perceives the river after her return from America:

Years later, when Rahel returned to the river, it greeted her with a ghastly skull's smile, with holes where teeth had been, and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed.

Both things had happened.

It had shrunk. And she had grown. (124)

During the three-day period in which the twins return to Ayemenem in 1992, the same natural environment that in the late 1960s was associated for Ammu and them with transgression, passion and desire, is shown as having become a source of filth and corruption, a dirty, polluted, poisoned landscape of death ⁶⁹. It seems also noteworthy that Estha, immediately after his abuse from the Orangedrink man at the cinema, instinctively longs for the river, which he therefore perceives as a source of maternal protection. Finally, the Ammu/river connection also works as a powerful image during Ammu and Velutha's sexual union, and the author depicts it as follows: "She was as wide and deep as a river in spate. He sailed on her waters" (337). Here, nature is presented as a pleasure-giver as well as a nurturer, though this represents Velutha and Ammu's ultimate act of transgression: they unite as man and woman on the river, overlooking and violating all man-made rules of caste and class. When addressing the river metaphor in the novel, one must also bear in mind that in other renowned works of prose, such in her 2002 essay *The Greater Common Good*, Roy foregrounds the harm caused and the ecological dangers generated by big dams on the river, a political project that represents one of the many examples of colonial legacy, and a concern that clearly testifies Vandana Shiva's influence on the author's activism ⁷⁰.

As already mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis, Carolyn Merchant in her pioneering work of ecofeminism, *The Death of Nature*, exposes how in the culture and mindset of the societies that preceded the Scientific revolution "The image of the earth as a living organism and nurturing mother had served as a cultural constraint restricting the actions of human beings" and "As long as the earth was considered to be alive and sensitive, it could be

⁶⁹ John Lutz (2009). Commodity Fetishism, Patriarchal Repression, and Psychic Deprivation in Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things". *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, 42.3.

⁷⁰ Alex Tickell (2007). *Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things*. New York: Routledge.

considered a breach of human ethical behaviour to carry out destructive acts against it”⁷¹. It seems, then, remarkable to notice how this previously commonly held view of nature is retraced by Chacko in a conversation with Estha and Rahel:

Then, to give Estha and Rahel a sense of Historical Perspective (though Perspective was something which, in the weeks to follow, Chacko himself would sorely lack), he told them about the Earth Woman. [...] It had taken the whole of the Earth Woman’s life for the earth to become what it was. For the oceans to part. For the mountains to rise. [...] “The whole of human civilization as we know it,” Chacko told the twins, “began only two hours ago in the Earth Woman’s life. As long as it takes us to drive from Ayemenem to Cochin.”

It was an awe-inspiring and humbling thought, Chacko said (Humbling was a nice word, Rahel thought. Humbling along without a care in the world), that the whole of contemporary history the World Wars, the War of Dreams, the Man on the Moon, science, literature, philosophy, the pursuit of knowledge-was no more than a blink of the Earth Woman’s eye. (53,54).

Therefore, the chauvinist Chacko gives voice to a thousand-year old idea of nature as an inherently feminine principle of interconnectedness and reciprocity among all livings and non-living beings. As some critics have argued, however, the fact that he refers to an objective and impersonal Earth Woman, as opposed to Mother Earth, seems to a certain extent to deprive nature of its humane, nurturing and motherly qualities, which falls within the patriarchal mentality he holds as a male character in postcolonial India⁷².

The depiction of a progressively and increasingly polluted and deteriorated environment also lies within Roy’s intention to disclose the drawbacks of the former colonial control over the Indian territory. As a matter of fact, rather than presenting India as undergoing a process of rapid, beneficial progress because of the growing availability of salable items for consumption coming from the West, and, in particular, from America, the narrative clearly seems to suggest that the country’s embracing of the commodity culture and consumerist ethic are, on the contrary, responsible for an ongoing process of environmental degradation and ecological crisis, which brings with it as a natural consequence a marked social fragmentation. For this reason, Roy conveniently makes use of a narrative structure that represents the Ipe family’s

⁷¹ Carolyn Merchant, Carolyn (1980). *The Death of Nature. Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*. New York: HarperOne. P. 227.

⁷² Rukhaya Kunhi and Zeenath Mahomed Kunhi (2017). An Ecocritical Perspective of Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*.

history as interlocked with the broader historical events transforming India. Furthermore, The scenes of progressive environmental degradation, along with the penetration of India by the effects of global capitalism, find consistently points of reference in the characters' psychological trauma, especially that inflicted upon Rahel and Estha, whose personal tragedy frequently resonates in the detailed descriptions of postcolonial India. Overall, what emerges from the author powerful and evocative portray of the country, both in the 1960s and in the 1990s, is a kind of apparent democracy designed to facilitate the further exploitation of human beings and nature, while failing to meet people's actual psychological and biological needs. More than once, the novel provides the reader with negative images of the commodification of Indian history and culture, as, for example, in the airport scene, in which the process of commodification that transforms everything in the natural environment into a profit for the tourism industry finds correspondence in the description of the cement kangaroos. Their pouches, rather than being safe and protecting environments nurturing offsprings, are filled with garbage, which establishes a striking negative womb imagery to suggest the extent to which capitalism fails to nurture and protect human beings. Thus, Roy seems to be consciously pointing out how, ironically as well as tragically, in a landscape saturated with an abundance of superfluous objects for consumption, fundamental human needs go unmet. The fate of both the river - which, on Estha and Rahel's return "was no more than a swollen drain" (124) - and the family house leads the reader to acknowledge the social fragmentation and environmental degradation that have resulted from the commodification of India's cultural heritage and natural resources ⁷³.

The God of Small Things undoubtedly represents a powerful and thought-provoking literary exploration of numerous issues and controversies affecting postcolonial India on a cultural, political, social and material level. As this chapter has attempted to show, the novel's colonial, feminist and environmental implications seem to lie among the most significant expressions of Roy's concerns, for it is by exposing the darkest side of Indian contemporary society that the author discloses the various forms of physical and psychological deprivation resulting from the intersection of multiple structures of social, economic and cultural domination. If there is no final redemption for her characters, and although the novel provides no indication or suggestion of a possible historical agency that might succeed in bringing about

⁷³ John Lutz (2009). Commodity Fetishism, Patriarchal Repression, and Psychic Deprivation in Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things". *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, 42.3.

revolutionary changes, the last word of the narrative - “tomorrow” - seems to condensate all of Roy’s optimism for the future, despite the bleak and tragic fate the members of the Ipe family have to suffer.

4.

Ecofeminism in male-authored literary production: Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

*[...] Nothing escapes the maw of the tides;
everything is ground to fine stilt, becomes something else.
It was as if the whole tide country were speaking
in the voice of the Poet:
“life is lived in transformation”.*

Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* (2004)

Amitav Ghosh's 2004 renowned work of Postmodernist fiction, *The Hungry Tide*, seems to a certain extent to represent his forerunning attempt to fulfill the literary gap that he extensively investigates in his later work of non-fiction *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), namely the inability of contemporary novel and literary forms as a whole to deal with the current and urging issues related to climate change and the ecological crisis, which, in his view, represents the broad imaginative and cultural failure of our age. This novel, awarded with the Hutch Crossword Book Award in the very year of its first publication, does, as a matter of fact, testify his great talent in outlining specific landscape and contouring their histories, which conveys to readers a strong sense of place, in order to expose his environmental concerns through the medium of a pleasant and flowing narrative, thus making important and, quite often, overlooked issues accessible and understandable for the general public.

The story is set in his region of origin, the Sundarbans, a mangrove and tidal area at the border between India and Bangladesh, a vast and intermittently submerged archipelago where the freshwater of the river Ganges encounters the seawaters of the Gulf of Bengal. This specific geographical location allows the author to explore the encounter of different cultural attitudes, that is, the Western patriarchal dichotomous knowledge and relationship to nature and the local, traditional, spiritual, folkloric, thousand-year-old and non-scientific expertise

that sees human beings as strictly connected to their surrounding environment and its fauna and flora. In addition to his personal attachment to the Sundarbans, in a 2005 interview Ghosh himself explains his choosing this area as the subject matter for his novel, consequently positioning it as a response to the dominant visual practices that have led to a lack of information about his homeland:

Part of the idea behind *The Hungry Tide* was to shine light on this area that is little known within India. But even within Bengal, the Sundarbans is really a kind of area of darkness. People don't think of it, they don't write about it, they don't look at it. This is such a strange thing. For the ordinary tourist, the Sundarbans doesn't offer much. You will never see the tigers; there is no wildlife to be seen. [...] But, at the same time, it is a place of incredible beauty and presence. To appreciate it, tourists would have to be there for quite a long time—for three or four days at least—because the beauty of it reveals itself very slowly.⁷⁴

More specifically, by choosing as the setting of the novel the Sundarbans, a region that sees ferocious animals such as tigers and crocodiles living alongside human population, Ghosh establishes one of the main themes of the book, that is, the interrelatedness between human and non-human. Interestingly enough, the plot structure seems in a way to mirror and emphasize this concern, for, as a matter of fact, similarly to Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Ghosh's novel features a double time scheme, or, rather, two parallel narratives: the first one is by the omniscient narrator that relates most of the events, while the other corresponds to a notebook by Nirmal, in which the retired teacher and activist relates the 1979 eviction of refugee settlers from the island of Morichjhapi, which is privately read by his nephew Kunai, a translator in his forties. This narrative structure does not only allow the reader to progressively reconstruct the entire story of both the characters and the region, but also provides the text with an engaging structure in which the fate of humans and nature are constantly intertwined. There are, however, other narratives enfolded by the novel - part fact, part fiction, and drawn from actual history as well as from the Indian folklore and mythology - such as the story of identification and aquatic history of the Orcaella, the cetaceans that the

⁷⁴ "The Chronicle Interview: The Hungry Tide." Interview with Hasan Ferdous and Horst Rutsch. *UN Chronicle* 4 (2005): 48–52. Print. Cited in: Laura A. White (2013) *Novel Vision: Seeing the Sundarbans through Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide. ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 20.3, pp. 513–531. P. 513

female protagonist Piya is doing research on, or, among others, the visionary ambition of Sir Daniel Hamilton, a Scottish man that had envisioned the utopian possibility to set an ideal community in the Sundarbans. These stories go along with those, individual and joint, of the novel's protagonists, Kanai, Nilima, Piya, Fokir, Moyna and Tutul, and other secondary characters. Thus, in a generally overlooked and even obliterated land by writers and, consequently, the Western public, the extreme weather events that Ghosh depicts - the flood tide and the huge tidal waves caused by cyclones, which also mark the novel's climax - offer to the reader a sense of the sedimentation of human history, as well as the layers of traditional knowledge, experience and memory that constitute an overall strong sense of place.

It may be argued, then, that the natural environments plays a pivotal role in the novel, to the point that characters seem to be less central for the author, for they often appear more as aspects of the place they occupy, as well as focalizers that actually serve to show the reader the landscape. Undoubtedly, the novel is not so much about the characters' getting increasingly acquainted with each other, however, their presence is essential for the progression of the narrative, because each of them, with their own individual process of self-development, offers to Ghosh the opportunity to explore a particular issue, as it will be further discussed later on in the chapter. Overall, the main aim of the novel seems to remain that of disclosing past and present mistakes as far as the human relationship with the environment is concerned, be they administrative or political, and by offering a sense of place and history, the author apparently advocates for new, alternative and less-exploitative ways of relating with nature. For this reason, the text lends himself to an ecocritical reading, and, more specifically, it is possible to adopt even an ecofeminist approach towards some of the constitutive elements and characters of the narrative. Thus, the aim of this chapter is to analyze Ghosh's peculiar and innovative way of dealing with the current ecological crisis through the medium of a flowing, remarkable and well-informed literary narrative form. In order to do so, it will focus in particular on his depiction of the Sundarbans region and its ecological, cultural and postcolonial implications, as well as to his implied suggestion of literature and writer's responsibility towards contemporary environmental issues, and, finally, to the author's exploration of the human-nature relationship within the West-East encounter.

4.1 *The Sundarbans: ecology, transculturation and hybridity*

As stated by the author himself, the choice of the Sundarbans as the setting for the novel is not casual, nor can it be reduced to Ghosh's personal attachment with his region of origin: his purpose, is, rather, that of responding to the detached, touristic vision that Western people have towards the area. His skillful writing undoubtedly succeeds in achieving this objective, especially through evocative and detailed descriptions which provide the readers with a clear sense of place as well as with the feeling of being themselves physically immersed in this tidal and mangrove environment. However, this is not the only element which has attracted the attention of postcolonial ecocritics since the publication of the book: there is also a strong concern with ways of knowing that permeates the narrative and that has led many critics to explore the intersections between local and global forms of knowledge. These islands, therefore, represent more than a fictional backdrop, since they are, in fact, the space onto which Ghosh is able to project his environmental sensitivity and activism.

Few years after the publication of *The Hungry Tide*, the author published an essay in which he explores and discusses issues concerning development and environmental conservation, with a particular focus on the Sundarbans tigers and history of the political forms of power and dominion that over the centuries have influenced and contributed to shape the relationship between the human inhabitants and the non-human ecosphere in the region. What emerges from this text is a powerful idea that already underlies the novel under consideration, that is, that colonial dominion, by silencing local histories, has led to the homogenization of the human approach towards nature, causing environmental damage, which, according to Ghosh, presently requires humanity to rethink and reposition themselves in relation to the non-human world, in order to restore the human presence within the environment whereby man plays a part as partner rather than a predator⁷⁵. The silencing power that the West has had on the Orient through centuries of colonization is, symbolically, also represented in the novel by the difficulties the main protagonists have in changing communications with each other, which establishes a communicative scheme whereby the indigenous Fokir represents the corner stone: he is, as a matter of fact, a character subjected to a double form of linguistic marginalization, for Piya, who is the representative of the colonial West, cannot talk to him

⁷⁵ Laura A. White (2013). Novel Vision: Seeing the Sunderbans through Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*. *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 20.3, pp. 513–531.

through verbal language with him, while Kanai, who acts as a translating intermediary between the two - thus, symbolically, as the point of convergence between East and West - is superior to Fokir by virtue of class, education and caste. Due to his condition of subaltern, the fisherman's verbal contribution is reduced to gestures or cries, or, more often, he is totally silenced, which perfectly reflects and emphasizes Ghosh's argument that the Orient's voice and history has generally been ignored by the West. Furthermore, just as the Sundarbans represent an inaccessible environment for Westerners, the reader cannot have a direct access to Fokir's words, which are instead reported in Piya and Kanai's conversations and commentary on him, thus establishing a distance between the two parts.

All of this may serve as a sufficient explanation to the fact that the plot is absolutely inextricable and inseparable from the history, shape, form and texture of the landscape it is set in. According to Pramod K. Nayar, this accounts for what he defines as the "postcolonial uncanny", namely the sense of simultaneous home and homelessness that emerges in the Sundarbans, a region that is between land and water, and an ecosystem which is both land and water. The islands, their vegetation, and the rivers that divide them hide dangers and threats, while creating optical illusions and providing no clarity of sight, which seems to suggest, from Ghosh's part, that the human colonization of the archipelago is the consequence of a mirage whereby man thinks that he can control any land⁷⁶. This concept is refrained and expanded by Ghosh in his above mentioned work of non-fiction, *The Great Derangement*, where he himself introduces the term "uncanny" in reference to climate change and the unprecedented, catastrophic weather events it is currently causing: the changes that are interesting the ecosphere, he argues, are not surprising and unexpected because they are unknown, but they are, rather, characterized by a strong uncanniness that lies precisely in the fact that they generate moments of recognition whereby human beings have to acknowledge something that they have long ignored - the presence and proximity of non-human interlocutors. In historical terms, this mistaken Enlightenment idea that mankind can control and subjugate the whole natural world and its elements has seen its major manifestation in the colonial vision of the world: one of the most noticeable example of this lies the fact that, while throughout history human settlements emerged quite far from the water edge, even those of the societies that made their livelihood from the sea, for it existed a general

⁷⁶ Pramod K. Nayar (2010). The Postcolonial Uncanny; The Politics of Dispossession in Amitav Ghosh's "The Hungry Tide". *College Literature*, 37.4, pp. 88-119.

acceptance that some safety measure had to be taken against the unpredictability of the waters, it was not until the seventieth century, with the colonial expansion, that cities began to be founded on seafronts for commercial reasons⁷⁷. In the novel, this concept is transposed in the figures of Englishmen that during the colonial period sought to domesticate different Indian areas regardless of the adverse weather or environmental conditions. The most striking example of this is provided by Kanai in his retelling to Piya the story of the city of Canning and its port as his uncle Nirmal had told him when he was a child. The episode clearly testifies the Western indifference towards natural threats and constraints: regardless of the warnings put forward by the cyclone expert Mr. Paddington about the dangers of the location, the port is built as planned:

[...] Paddington-shaheb drafted dozens of letters; he wrote to planners and surveyors and warned of the dangers; he told them it was crazy to build a town so deep in the tide country. The mangroves were Bengal's defense against the bay, he said -they served as a barrier against nature's fury, absorbing the initial onslaught of cyclonic winds, waves and tidal surges. [...] if the port was built at this location, he said, it would not last more than fifteen years. [...] Of course, no one paid attention⁷⁸

From a visual point of view, the Sundarbans also establishes a powerful metaphor that underlies the whole narrative and that introduces an important concept in postcolonial theory, namely transculturation. This tidal region at the border of India and Bangladesh sees, as a matter of fact, the encounter of sea and river currents in its countless channels, which creates an ecosystem where biological diversity proliferates and thrives. It is as if the entire ecosystem functioned as a matrix for the meeting and mutual exchange and influence between different cultures, establishing an analogy between the environmental phenomenon of confluent waters and the social phenomenon of confluent cultures: just like rivers flow into the sea to create these peculiar ecological conditions, foreign cultures flow into the local culture to create an original cultural system. It is especially the remarkable and unique water composition that favours a highly heterogenous environment and a great variety of life forms, and the geographical configuration of the region underlies the spatial, cultural and narrative

⁷⁷ Amitav Ghosh (2016). *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

⁷⁸ All the subsequent quotations are taken from this edition: Amitav Ghosh (2005). *The Hungry Tide*. London: HarperCollins. P. 268

systems of the novel. The conflagration of water currents seems to extend to representation of the cultural identity of the Sundarbans, especially as far as the encounter between the West and the East is concerned, for to comparison between the ecology of the Sundarbans and that of the Old Continent allows for the juxtaposition of two different cultural system, therefore facilitating the readers' understanding of the region. Another rhetorical device used by Ghosh to insist on the idea of confluence is the reference to the linguistic variety that characterizes the Sundarbans, where languages stand as metonyms for cultures:

the mudbanks of the tide country are shaped not only by rivers of silt, but also by rivers of language: Bengali, English, Arabic, Hindi, Arakanese and who knows what else? Flowing into one another they create a proliferation of small worlds that hang suspended in the flow. (247)

As shown by this passage, the connection between languages and rivers lies in their common power to shape the environment. As a matter of fact, if the meeting of cultures creates the conditions for the “proliferation of small worlds”, the encounter between rivers brings about the proliferation of aquatic forms of life and environments. What emerges from this pervasive analogy is the idea that cultural and ecological phenomena are both characterized by a strong creative power, which represents the foundation of transculturation: when cultures meet, like rivers, they do not merge to result in a new homogenous culture, but rather flow into one another, creating a space where diversity and difference can prosper. Being inextricably linked to the materiality of ecological phenomena, transculturation cannot represent a static process, and the novel conveniently and consistently recounts and investigates through the characters' narrations how the tide country has been continuously been influenced and given shape by the encounter with foreigners - the other-, as exemplified by the utopian society envisioned by the Scottish Lord Sir Daniel Hamilton and by Nilima's Trust. Furthermore, the meeting of local and foreign characters in the text clearly shows how transculturation does not only affect communities and societies, but also individual human beings. As a matter of fact, Piya's and Kanai's cultural values progressively transform throughout the narrative, so much so that at the end of the novel it is possible to recognize a radical epistemological shift in their cultural system of value⁷⁹.

⁷⁹ Arnaud Barras (2015). The Ecosystem as Matrix for Transculturation in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*. In: Brill, Leiden (2015). *Transculturation and Aesthetics : Ambivalence, Power, and Literature*.

Ghosh's *Sundarbans* seems to represent a remarkable exemplification of a multicultural society, where destitute and impoverished people from various origins are joined and live together without any substantial boundary between cultures. Thus, the tide country stands out as a place for the dispossessed, or, in other words, a place where a group of subaltern individuals form a community that has not codified any distinction based on race, caste or gender. Again, it seems appropriate to apply to *The Hungry Tide* the postcolonial concept of hybridity, as already done with regards to Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* in the previous chapter, that is, a way of approaching cultural meetings as processes ruled by multiplicity rather than as simple binaries. Moreover, the term might be argued to be connected with transculturation, for it refers to the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization. In this text, Ghosh conceptualizes multiculturalism by reflecting it in a hybridity that is indivisibly connected and bound to the natural environment: the author's *Sundarbans* represents a diasporic resettlement where the ecosystem has been allowed to thrive in its diversity and wilderness, and where human beings have restored and re-established the empathetic relationship with the environment and its non-human inhabitants which, as maintained by ecocriticism and ecofeminism, all mankind should attempt at recovering ⁸⁰.

4.2 *Literature for the environment: the role of intellectuals in the age of ecological crisis*

Throughout his writing career, both in his works of fiction and non-fiction, Ghosh has displayed a particular interest in the possible role that fictional literature can play in the current ecological crisis, and in *The Great Derangement* he investigates extensively the responsibility that burdens contemporary writers and the challenges climate change poses for them, addressing why modern literature has, in his view, failed to deal with such issues:

That climate change casts a much smaller shadow within the landscape of literary fiction than it does even in the public arena is not hard to establish. To see that this is so, we need only a glance through the pages of a few highly regarded literary journals and book reviews [...] When the subject of climate change occurs in these

⁸⁰ Richa (2013). Ecotheology and the Notion of Multiculturalism in *The Hungry Tide* and *Sea of Poppies*. In: Singh, Prabhat K. (ed.) (2013), *The Indian English Novel of the New Millennium*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

publications, it is almost always in relation to nonfiction; novels and short stories are very rarely to be glimpsed within this horizon. Indeed, it could even be said that fiction that deals with climate change is almost by definition not of the kind that is taken seriously by serious literary journals [...]⁸¹

What the author acknowledges is, thus, a broad imaginative and cultural failure that lies at the basis of the climate crisis and the uncanny weather events it generates. In other words, the ecological crisis seems to correspond to a crisis of culture and, thus, of imagination. In particular, Ghosh points out the incapability of Western modern narrative forms to cope with climate change adequately, for, if modern literature, which finds its privileged way of expression through the genre of the novel, represents the triumph of the everyday and the individual, its realism has paradoxically called out the ecological and geological changes of nature humankind is presently witnessing. By focusing on ordinary and mild nature, it as if literature had lost its capability of dealing with extraordinary and catastrophic natural events and occluded human ability to talk about them. On the contrary, Ghosh argues, ancient sagas and myths were more suitable than modern novel to talk about extraordinary nature: it is not, as a matter of fact, the literary form that matches with ideas, but, rather, the genre changes our way of perceiving reality, and by focusing on the individual modern literature has overlooked the totality the world that surrounds human characters. Having recognized the failure of modern literary forms to include collective catastrophe, it is therefore essential to find new, hybrids forms of expression to address this urgent issues, since, according to the author, men and women of letters and, more generally, artists can play an essential role in divulging, popularizing and making the current ecological crisis understandable for the general public⁸².

In his essay *Wild Fictions*, the author provides his personal explanations for his decision to deliver his critique of paradigms of development and environmental conservation through the form of the novel: fiction, he argues, is the first necessary step to raise awareness and enable responsible decisions, and it also represents the adequate space where to reimagine human presence in the natural world. Ghosh does not advocate a single narrative, but, rather, new imaginings of nature, as varied as nature itself, for in his view fiction creates a space where

⁸¹ Amitav Ghosh (2016). *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. P. 7

⁸² Amitav Ghosh (2016). *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

new visions can thrive⁸³. The novel, thus, due to its ability to include cultural diversity, can represent an efficient response to the current economic drive that is leading humanity towards a global homogeneity, and to discuss environmental justice, a concept that sees the quality of human life as strictly dependent on the sustainability and ecological conservation of local environments. As argued by several critics, *The Hungry Tide* doubtlessly engages with the urging question of how individuals as intellectuals, writers and readers should position themselves in relation to environmental and geopolitical inequalities, especially as far as countries and lands that are geographically and culturally distant are concerned. Ghosh seems persuaded that foreign cosmopolitans, represented in the novel by Piya and Kanai - respectively from the urban first world and the urban Third World - can actually play a constructive role with regards to environmental issues. Kanai, the cosmopolitan coming from New Delhi, a highly-educated, polyglot translator, seems to play a specific function in text, namely that of exploring the role of the intellectual in a challenging, sometimes extreme and ever-changing ecological system. As a matter of fact, he plays a crucial part as for the other characters' mutual understanding, because during Piya's expedition he serves as the translator that allows the communication between her and Fokir. Furthermore, Kanai occupies a vital and strategic position within the narrative, since, by acting as an intermediary between the characters, he becomes the focalizer through which the Western reader accesses the Sundarbans and its inhabitants: significantly enough, though, despite his being an Indian man with Indian origins, he maintains the detached perspective of an outsider towards the tide country, which provides the text with an interesting and peculiar multifaceted depiction of this specific multicultural and environmentally unique region. At the beginning of the novel, the purpose of Kanai's journey to his aunt's house in Lusibari is that of retrieving and reading a notebook that his dead uncle Nirmal has left for him. From a structural point of view, his going through the pages of Nirmal's diary assigns to the novel two temporal lines as well as a double narrative scheme, whereby the story of the protagonists intertwines with that of the settlers' repression on the island of Morichijapi. On the one hand, this story provides an example of the colonized individual's attitude towards Western literature, for Nirmal quotes extensively from the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, thus showing literature's powerful ability to express universal human feelings. On the other, it functions as a cautionary tale,

⁸³ Amitav Ghosh (2008). *Wild Fictions. Outlook*. Cited in Laura A. White (2013) *Novel Vision: Seeing the Sunderbans through Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide. ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 20.3, pp. 513–531.

since it represents a criticism of a homogenous, global and utterly historically uninformed model of environmental conservation that ignores the colonial legacy of spoliation and the subsequent postcolonial paradigms of progress that have favoured the preservation of wilderness and nonhuman species with touristic appeal to the detriment of local populations⁸⁴.

At the of the novel, in turn, Kanai decides to reorganize the translation company he has founded in New Delhi in order to be able to slow down and spend some periods in Kolkata, the closest city to the Sundarbans, where he will dedicate himself to the re-writing of his uncle's notebook and the story of Morichijapi. If one considers the author's wider agenda of environmental activism, it appears therefore clear that Ghosh is projecting onto this character his idea of the role of intellectuals, artists and specifically writers towards climate change and the environmental crisis, namely that of finding a suitable and adequate form through which telling a story that, despite its burning urgency, has remained and still remained largely untold, mainly with a view at raising awareness among the global population. As argued by White, the closing scene can also be considered as a starting point in the narrative, for, instead of providing a final solution and resolving all the questions raised throughout the text, it challenges the reader to resist their urge for closure and remain conversant with an ongoing process, which is not only the characters' story, but also the current ecological issues. In other words, the ending represents to an extent the starting point of Piya's and Kanai's shift in perspective, which, implicitly, the author urges and advocates also for his readers. However, if the novel fails to provide a resolution for environmental and social dilemmas, it creates the conditions whereby action and intervention toward environmental and social justice seem possible⁸⁵. Overall, the novel explores and presents a way of approaching the Sundarbans, its ecology, its peculiar climatic conditions and its human and non-human inhabitants that overcomes the colonial and postcolonial visions of the empty, virgin land to subjugate and exploit in order to meet the needs of the global capitalist model of economy. Moreover, it demonstrates that creative imagination can represent a powerful tool for the decolonization of the dominant Western structures of thought.

⁸⁴ Patrick D. Murphy (2013). Community Resilience and the Cosmopolitan Role in the Environmental Challenge - Response Novels of Ghosh, Grace, and Sinha. *Comparative Literature Studies*, 50.1, Special Issue: *Sustaining Ecocriticism: Comparative Perspectives*, pp. 148-168.

⁸⁵ Laura A. White (2013) Novel Vision: Seeing the Sunderbans through Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*. *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 20.3, pp. 513-531

4.3 *Nature, female characters and the feminine principle*

Since it stands out to reason that a strong environmental concern characterizes Ghosh's writing career as a whole, and that, as already argued, *The Hungry Tide* in particular lends itself to ecocriticism, one may wonder whether it is possible to apply also an ecofeminist reading to a male-authored novel. In order to investigate this issue, it seems appropriate to start from the very constitutive theoretical and conceptual elements of the ecofeminist movements, which come from ecology and establish, first and foremost, the belief that all forms of life in the ecosphere - human and non-human - are inextricably interdependent and interconnected. As far as this first point is concerned, the novel certainly endows the human/nature relationship with some spiritual qualities, with the natural environment serving almost as a fictional character that is intimately linked with its human inhabitants in a relationship of respectful reciprocity. However, all the human characters, even if grouped as men and women separately, do not appear to have a shared approach and attitude towards the natural world of the Sundarbans, but, rather, they are individually engaged in a personal relationship with nature, which is determined by the material reality they are immersed in and that is beyond their control. For instance, for the human inhabitants of the tide country hunger and catastrophe represent common and frequent circumstances, and Ghosh seems to imply that these plagues are the result of external, intruding forces that directly derive from patriarchal ideology, in the form of wrong policies of environmental conservation and development based on the assumption that the efficient Western paradigm of natural resources management can be blindly applied to the former colonies and their lands ⁸⁶.

The spiritual quality of the relationship between nature and humankind is also embodied in and testified by the tiger-goddess of the jungle, Bon Bibi, a female tutelary presence that protects humans from the attacks of tigers in the forest⁸⁷. Thus, the nature of the Sundarbans is clearly characterized by female qualities, as already established by the very name of the fictional place where Kanai's aunt live, that is Lusibari, an island named after Lucy Hamilton, a woman "for the far end of Europe" (40). Furthermore, at the very beginning on the novel, Kanai, on the train that is taking him to Canning, reads a sheet on which his uncle Nirmal has

⁸⁶ Neelam Jabeen (2016). *Women and the Environment in the Global South: Toward a Postcolonial Ecofeminism*. PhD: North Dakota State University.

⁸⁷ Laura A. White (2013) Novel Vision: Seeing the Sunderbans through Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*. *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 20.3, pp. 513–531.

recounted the mythical legend that sees the creation of the Sundarbans archipelago as the result of the goddess Ganga descending from heavens. Thus, the religious beliefs of the tide country attribute to the natural world female qualities, very much similarly to the Western culture that preceded the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution. This also accounts for the almost symbiotic relationship that the inhabitants of this region entertain with their islands, their waters and their forests, a relationship that, as a matter of fact, the Western Piya and the city-dweller Kanai manage to understand only to a certain extent. As first theorized by Carolyn Merchant and then expanded by the subsequent ecofeminist scholarship, an organic cultural and intellectual paradigm that sees nature as characterized by a female essence, or even as a nurturing mother, and the environment as a web of interconnectedness between all beings represents the fundamental precondition for a non-exploitative use of natural resources and a respectful approach towards the natural world⁸⁸. If, as argued within the ecofeminist debate, in the West such structures of thought were swiped away the patriarchal science and culture that emerged during the Enlightenment period, generating the dichotomy that sees mankind as sharply distinct from their environment, this shift seems not to have taken place in the Sundarbans portrayed by Ghosh.

Although these closeness and reciprocity with nature does concern all the human inhabitants of the tide country, and not exclusively women, it is, however, possible to highlight a privileged connection with the environment, especially as for two of the main female characters, Kanai's aunt Nilima and the cetologist Piya. For her part, Nilima Bose, who in the narrator's words "believed herself to be a revolutionary" (80), embodies a perfect example of a strong-willed and emancipated woman who is responsible for important cultural and social transformations in her community. At her arrival on the fictional island of Lusibari as a young newly-wedded woman, she acknowledges the miserable and painful condition of the women, most of which are young-aged widows of the poorest population, therefore she decides to create a Women's Union, later turned into a Trust:

⁸⁸ Carolyn Merchant (1980). *The Death of Nature. Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*. New York: HarperOne. Print.

It was true that here, on the margins of the Hindu world, widows were not condemned to lifelong bereavement: they were free to remarry if they could. But in a place where men of marriageable age were few, this meant little. Here, Nilima learnt, even more than on the mainland, widowhood often meant a lifetime of dependence and years of abuse and exploitation. [...] It did not matter what they were; what mattered was that they should not remain what they were. (81)

In the space of two decades, thanks to the activity of the trust, she is able to provide the community with a hospital, offices, workshops and a guest-house, undertakings that have a strongly positive influence on the social and transcultural life of Lusibari, for, by offering women with the opportunity to get an education she helps them to be able to provide for their family and escape the previous condition of poverty⁸⁹. Her character seems almost drawn and inspired from the real most prominent representatives of the ecofeminist movement, for her activity on the island resembles on many levels that of renowned activists who thanks to their endeavors have transformed the life of entire communities, such as for example Wangari Mathai's Green Belt Movement, the tree-planting and environmental conservation project in Kenya that has empowered the women of the local rural communities in addition to reintegrating and transmitting positive practices of environmental conservation.

The most remarkable and significant among female characters is, doubtlessly, Piyali Roy, an Indian born cetologist from America that returns to her parents and family's country to do research on the rare Irawaddi dolphin. Her position in the narrative is therefore very controversial: as a member of the Indian diaspora, she is and outsider in the USA, which she considers her homeland, but, at the same time, despite being born and having spent her early childhood in India, she also feels an outsider in the Sundarbans because she cannot speak any Bengali or Hindi. As a matter of principle, being she the only character coming from a Western country, the reader should as a natural consequence adopt her perspective towards the tide country and its customs, yet, she is in fact simultaneously the representative of the Western, colonizing world and part of the India culture. Hence, as already pointed out as far as the female characters of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* are concerned, in this case as well the reading of the female identity and process of self-development and self-assertion appears as inextricably connected to colonial legacy as well as to postcolonial theory

⁸⁹ Arnaud Barras (2015). The Ecosystem as Matrix for Transculturation in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*. In: Brill, Leiden (2015). *Transculturation and Aesthetics : Ambivalence, Power, and Literature*.

and criticism. Piya does, as a matter of fact, undergo many changes throughout the narrative, all of which are made possible both by the unique ecological conditions of the Sundarbans and by the encounter with a different culture. Symbolically, her journey of self-discovery and personal growth seems to correspond and parallel her search for the Irawaddy dolphin, adding to the narrative some elements of the Bildungsroman, which serves the same textual function as in Roy's novel and in many postcolonial works of fiction, namely that of linking the political and a nation's struggle for independence with the protagonist's personal progress. In addition, Piya's *Buildung* presents a circular structure: if upon her arrival in India she considers herself an American, at the end of the novel she decides to stay in Lusibari and calls the island her home, and this momentous change in her sensitivity takes place precisely during a research expedition, when the personal connection she feels towards the surrounding environment and the interconnectedness between the natural elements and the living beings finally lead her, in a moment of epiphany, to realize her true vocation⁹⁰ :

Now, as she sat in the boat, thinking about these connections and interrelations, Piya had to close her eyes, so dazzling was the universe of possibilities that opened in her mind. There was so much to do, so many queries to answer, so many leads to follow [...] Whatever came of it in the end, it was a certainty that it was not going to create an upheaval in science. But at the same time, who would have thought that it would be so intensely satisfying to have your future resolved, to now what you were going to be doing next year and the year after that until who knew when? [...] It would be enough; as an alibi for life, it would do; she would not need to apologize for how she had spent her time on this earth. (125,125,127)

This passage represents a turning point in the narrative, because from this moment of recognition onwards Piya will engage in an even deeper and more intimate relationship with the environment, which will no longer be based exclusively on her scientific expertise and knowledge about the natural world as a marine biologist and cetologist, but also on her renewed sensitivity. It is especially on the island of Garjontola, a privileged place where dolphins can communicate with human beings in trustful harmony, that she seems to be able to find her emotional and intellectual fulfilment: the island represents her own paradise, the space where she can pursue her activity⁹¹:

⁹⁰ Lalita Jagtiani Naumann (2008). *The Other Woman in The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh. *L'autre*.

⁹¹ Evelyne Hanquart-Turner (2018). *The Search for Paradise - Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide*. In: Ramsey-Kurz, Helga (2011). *Projections of Paradise : Ideal Elsewheres in Postcolonial Migrant Literature*. New York: Editions Rodopi.

Piya was awestruck. Did there exist any more remarkable instance of symbiosis between human beings and a population of wild animals? She could not think of one. There was truly no limit, it seemed, to the cetacean gift for springing surprises. (169)

The access to the paradisiac Garjantola is provided to Piya by Fokir, who represents her antipodal character in the narrative: if the educated American cetologist is the representative of Western culture, values, knowledge and scientific progress, the impoverished and illiterate fisherman is the spokesman of the non-scientifically proven, ancestral knowledge that the inhabitants of the tide country have treasured and passed over generations. Their encounter and their subsequent falling in love and cooperating in the research subverts on different levels the colonizer-colonized relationship, which would be expected to represent one of superiority and domination. As a matter of fact, from the very first moment, Piya maintains a respectful attitude towards Fokir, and she considers his knowledge of and familiarity with the Sundarbans archipelago and its waters as invaluable. Their mutually respectful relation, moreover, cannot be based on language, since the woman can speak only English and he speaks only Bengali, thus they are forced to explore a new method of communication, which finds its expression in gestures of kindness and respect, and separated as they are by the barrier of language their mutual understanding is flawless:

It was not just that he had thought to create a space for her; it was as if he had chosen include her in some simple, practiced family ritual, found a way to let her know that despite the inescapable muteness of their exchanges, she was a person to him and not, as it were, a representative of a species, a faceless, tongueless foreigner. But where had this recognition come from? He had probably never met anyone like her before, any more than she had ever met anyone like him. (71)

Garjantola represents also Fokir's paradise, for he knows better than anyone else the island's geography, flora, fauna and ancient past, and, by disclosing his knowledge to Piya, he silently expresses his love for her. Moreover, Garjantola is the place Fokir goes to in order to evade from his wife's expectations and societal restriction, thus it represents the space whereby he

can feel and be completely himself⁹². Hence, it appears clear that their relationship and growing affection are strictly connected to the surrounding environment, and their perfect, intense and close understanding is only possible within it. In other words, it is the ecosystem of the Sundarbans that bonds the two of them, overshadowing the marked differences in class, origin, language, culture and education that divide them and that in any other part of the world would represent obstacles to their connection. The interrelatedness between their human feelings and the environment reaches its climax in the scene of the tidal wave, when Fokir uses his own body as a shield to protect Piya, thus sacrificing his own life to save her:

She tried to break free from his grasp, tried to pull him around so that for once, she could be the one who was sheltering him. But his body was unyielding and she could not break free from it, especially now that it had the wind's weight behind it. Their bodies were so close, so finely merged, that she could feel the impact of everything hitting him, she could sense the blows raining down on his back. She could feel the bones of his cheeks as if they had been superimposed on her own; it was as if the storm had given them what life could not; it had fused them together and made them one. (390)

It is, therefore, the unique environment of the Sundarbans that brings them together and occasions their falling in love, and an extremely dangerous weather event and their desperate fighting for survival that ultimately merges their bodies before dividing them for good.

Regardless of the fact that the reader is not allowed a direct access to Fokir's personality, because, due to his inability to speak English, his words are always conveyed on the page through Kanai's translation and mediation, and given that he appears in any case to be a quiet person, this character plays a central role in the novel's plot, especially as well as the understanding of the Sundarbans and their culture is concerned, and, moreover, it may be argued that he provokes general feelings of empathy, sympathy and appreciation. This may be attributed to his profound connection with the surrounding environment, which allows him to be perceived as a positive, peaceful presence within the ecosystem of the tide country, and one that lives in respectful harmony with it. Seen from this perspective, it seems allegedly appropriate to suggest an ecofeminist reading of this character, which, considering his gender, provides with an even more interesting line of investigation of the novel's numerous and

⁹² Evelyne Handquart-Turner (2018). The Search for Paradise - Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*. In: Ramsey-Kurz, Helga (2011). *Projections of Paradise : Ideal Elsewheres in Postcolonial Migrant Literature*. New York: Editions Rodopi.

varied levels of ecological concern. In order to do so, it is useful to bear in mind one of the key concepts theorized by Vandana Shiva in her already discussed *Staying Alive*, namely the recovery of the so-called feminine principle. In the Indian cosmology, Shiva reminds the Western reader, nature represents the manifestation of *Shakti*, the feminine principle of the cosmos, that together with *Purusha*, the masculine principle, creates the world, in a process of constant destruction, creation and renewal. There is, therefore, no distinction between man and nature nor between man and woman, because the perception of nature as a feminine principle leads to a nurturing relationship between human and non-human, and every person lives in unity with the natural world regardless of their gender. One of the most impacting and destroying elements of colonial legacy is, according to Shiva, the imposition, in order to meet the needs of capitalist economy and system of production, of a paradigm of development that is deprived of the feminine principle and, as a consequence, overlooks nature's work in renewing itself and the ability of the inhabitants of small Third World communities to provide sustenance and satisfy all people's biological and vital needs, causing the destruction of entire self-sufficient environments and ecozones⁹³. Fokir, a fisherman, appears to be precisely the narrative embodiment of a traditional, non-capitalist economy, as well as of a traditional kind of knowledge based on the respectful conservation of his land's ecology.

Overall, it seems that through the depiction of the relationship between Piya and Fokir, Ghosh is not only representing the encounter between the West and the East, but also by and large enfolding the relationship between human and non-human, disclosing wrong policies of environmental conservation that appear to be the result of the colonial dominion over the Indian country. This happens on a narrative level more through the cetologist and the fisherman's cooperation in the research about the Irrawaddy dolphin, a process whereby the highly-educated Piya recognizes the invaluable help that Fokir's traditional form of knowledge can provide to her work:

“She [Moyna] wants to know why a highly educated scientist like you needs the help of her husband - someone who doesn't even know how to read and write.”

[...] “Could you please tell Moyna,” Piya said to Kanai, “that her husband knows the river very well. His knowledge can be of help to a scientist like myself.” (211, 212)

⁹³ Vandana Shiva (ed. 2016). *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. Berkley, California: North Atlantic Books.

At the end of the novel, Piya, after surviving the tidal wave thanks to Fokir's sacrifice, decides to stay in Lusibari and pursue her scientific project in the archipelago thanks to his ancestral knowledge of the Sundarbans, which she intends to transpose into modern technology⁹⁴:

“See, this is connected to the satellites of the Global Positioning System. on the day of the storm, it was in my pocket. It was the only piece of equipment that survived.” At the touch of a button the screen flickered on. Piya showed a key to access the memory. “All these routes that Fokir showed me are stored here. [...] That one map represents decades of work and volumes of knowledge. It's going to be the foundation of my own project. That's why I think it should be named after him.” (398)

Thus, the novel seems to be suggesting a often neglected, positive and constructive synthesis between the Western and the Eastern paradigms of knowledge, which overcomes the historically subjugating and imposing attitude that the West has maintained and still maintains towards former colonies and the Third World, that is, the force introduction of Western knowledge, culture and model of economic development and resources management. By extension, Ghosh seems to be proposing a new possible outcome of the encounter between the East and the West, whereby they do not represent opposite and irreconcilable poles but, rather, two distinct realities that through cooperation can achieve unedited and unprecedented models and paradigms to restore humanity's respectful relationship with the environment, in order to prevent the threats of current patriarchal capitalism and pursue a more egalitarian, democratic and evenly-developed society.

⁹⁴ Evelyne Hanquart-Turner (2018). *The Search for Paradise - Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide*. In: Ramsey-Kurz, Helga (2011). *Projections of Paradise : Ideal Elsewheres in Postcolonial Migrant Literature*. New York: Editions Rodopi.

Conclusion

The aim of the present thesis was to analyze ecofeminism and to investigate its role and implications within postcolonial contexts, or, more specifically, postcolonial and contemporary India. The first chapter has broadly outlined ecofeminism as a movement, in order to provide the theoretical instruments to understand the arguments put forward in the following chapters. Vandana Shiva's work of non-fiction has provided the subsequent work with an invaluable and essential backdrop for the understanding and critical reading of the two selected novels in the light of the issues she raises. More specifically, her book has served to disclose the drawbacks of colonial legacy, especially as far as the imposition of the Western capitalist model of development is concerned, and to highlight the significant impact it has had on the environment and how it has affected local communities, particularly women. The analysis of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* has, finally, brought the discussion on a literary level, thus allowing me to investigate how two Indian-born authors writing in English have succeeded in expressing their personal concerns and activism through flowing, compelling and engaging prose.

As an English literature student with a strong interest for climate change and environmental issues, I wanted to use this final work to explore an adequate way to merge my literary studies with these preoccupations, and researching on ecofeminism has undoubtedly allowed me to do so, as well as it has led me to a deeper understanding of the role that man and women of letters can play with regards to the ongoing, destructive and threatening processes that are currently interesting our ecosphere. In all likelihood, literature per se cannot lead to any pragmatic change, however, as this work of research has attempted to show, the texts under analysis are remarkable demonstrations of the fact that one does not need to be a scientist in order to give their contributions in the ecological debate, for anyone can decide to do their best to be part of solution.

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