

**FEMALE CORPOREALITY, ABJECTION AND THE GROTESQUE
AT THE INTERSECTION OF THE GOTHIC AND ECOCRITICISM
IN CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S FICTION**

by
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ABSTRACT

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Keywords: contemporary women's fiction, ecogothic, grotesque body, abjection, metamorphosis

This dissertation aims to study contemporary women's fiction and cinema in terms of its representation of the grotesque and abject female body entangled with more-than-human nature, which subverts the patriarchal coding of female corporeality and sexuality as repressed, excess, and non-agential. Drawing primarily from Kristeva's theory of abjection and Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque body, I establish an ecogothic, material ecofeminist, and queer ecological framework to investigate the complex interplay between nature, gender, and intersectional structures of oppression. I base my analysis on Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*, Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*, Latife Tekin's *Zamansız*, Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, and Julia Ducournau's *Raw* as examples in which the grotesque and abject female body, marked by race, class, and gender, becomes a site of resistance against the interlinked oppression of women and nature. By foregrounding the intersections of gender and nature through an ecogothic lens, I focus on the theme of the metamorphosing female body to expose how sense of abjection and grotesqueness, a category of the patriarchal register attributed to any female body that does not conform to norms, are defined through ideas of what counts as natural. I posit that these texts seize the subversive and transgressive potential of the abject female body, in its grotesque materiality, to engage in a 'carnavalesque uncrowning,' redefining what counts as woman and what counts as human from a non-anthropocentric perspective.

ÖZET

ÇAĞDAŞ KADIN EDEBİYATINDA GOTİK VE EKOELEŞTİRİ KESİŞİMİNDE KADIN BEDENİ, İĞRENÇLİK VE GROTESK

GİZEM DAMLA ÇAKMAK

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Anahtar Kelimeler: çağdaş kadın edebiyatı, ekogotik, grotesk beden, iğrençlik, metamorfoz

Bu çalışma, çağdaş kadın edebiyatı ve sinemasında insandan ibaret olmayan dünyalarla iç içe geçmiş abject ve grotesk kadın bedeni temsillerini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu temsiller, kadın cinselliği ve kadın bedenini aşırı, bastırılmış ve eyleycilikten yoksun kurgulayan ataerkil sisteme karşı çıkararak yıkmayı hedeflemektedir. Kuramsal çerçevesini Kristeva'nın iğrenme (abjection) kuramı ve Bahtin'in grotesk beden imgesi üzerine kuran bu çalışma, doğa, toplumsal cinsiyet ve kişisel baskı sistemleri arasındaki etkileşimi incelemek için ekogotik, maddeci feminist ve queer ekoeleştirel bir çerçeve önermektedir. Bu çalışma, Anita Desai'nin *Fire on the Mountain*'ı, Larissa Lai'nin *Salt Fish Girl*'ü, Latife Tekin'in *Zamansız*'ı, Han Kang'ın *The Vegetarian*'ı ve Julia Ducournau'nun *Raw*'unu, ırkın, sınıfın ve cinsiyetin işaretini taşıyan abject ve grotesk kadın bedenini doğa ve kadınlar üzerindeki eril tahakküme karşı bir direniş alanı olarak sunan eserler olarak ele almaktadır. Toplumsal cinsiyete ve doğal olana ilişkin yarguların kesiştiği noktaları öne çıkararak başkalaşım geçiren kadın bedenini ekogotik bir mercekle incelemektedir. Patriyarkal düzenin norm dışında konumlanan kadın bedeni ile ilişkilendirdiği grotesk kavramı ve iğrenme hissinin neyin doğal kabul edildiğine ilişkin fikirler üzerinden nasıl tanımlandığını incelemektedir. İncelenen metinlerin, sınırları ihlal eden ve hiyerarşiyi alaşağı eden grotesk bir oluş biçimi sunan abject kadın bedeninin insanlığı ve kadınlığı insan-merkezci olmayan bir perspektiften yeniden tanımlamaya olanak sunan karnavalesk bir başkaldırışı temsil ettiğini savunmaktadır.

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For my mom and nonhuman family

To the loving memory of my mom, Nevin Güçlü.

May your memory live on in the free-spirited koi fish that swims against the current, embodying the resilience you so beautifully exemplified.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Against the backdrop of anthropogenic environmental degradation, the first decade of the 21st century has seen a flourishing interest in the darker aspects of our relationship to nonhuman ecologies. The age of the Anthropocene has forced many to think about cultural production in the wake of the ecological crisis and reflect on ways cultural texts figure in our mode of engagement with the natural world. It is at these precarious times that the ecogothic, which Smith and Hughes define as the exploration of “the gothic through theories of ecocriticism,” has emerged as a timely lens to analyze literary representations of nonhuman nature within a gothic setting that combines dark, foreboding, gloomy atmospheres and grotesque characters and events (2013, 1). The ecogothic invites us to move beyond the environmental imagination that inspired the writings of the Transcendentalists within the tradition of American and British nature writing who viewed nature as pastoral, unspoiled, and in harmony with humans. It impels us to embark on a “journey beyond the benign shores of Walden Pond” (Keetley and Sivils 2017, 16) to explore the unsettling sides of our relationship with the physical world outside us from a non-anthropocentric point of view.

The ecogothic is extensively but incoherently used as a genre title, literary mode, theoretical framework, and approach. In their 2013 edited collection *Ecogothic*, Smith and Hughes treat ecogothic as a theoretical framework with which to look at the relationship between humans and the nonhuman world in gothic fiction. Simon Estok’s thought-provoking essay “Theorising in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia” highlights the importance of theorizing the ecogothic through ecophobia, which he defines as ‘an irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world’ (2009, 208). Tom J. Hillard (2009) builds upon Estok’s argument and asserts that gothic fiction is ideally suited for examining the darker sides of nature writing. Hillard posits gothic writing, marked by its thematic preoccupation with dread and fear, as a ‘useful lens’ to interrogate our anxieties about nature. David Del Principe discusses, from a non-anthropocentric position, how the body in the

gothic literature functions as a site where species identity is contested, done, and undone. He employs an ecogothic approach to re-envision the role that the natural world and the nonhuman play in constructing what counts as monstrous (2014). Keetley and Sivils, on the other hand, define it as a ubiquitous literary mode that stands at the intersection of gothic and environmental writing (Keetley and Sivils 2017, 1). For them, adopting a gothic ecocritical lens allows the analysis of gothic tropes in texts which, while not written in the gothic mode per se, quite often use the gothic to examine humans' relationship with all that is nonhuman. In her book, *The Forest and the Ecogothic*, Elizabeth Parker examines the anthropocentric and symbolic construction of forests as places of fear and embodiments of otherness by discussing key Western texts of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries Parker (2020). Parker claims that her position is much more in line with that proposed by Keetley and Sivils and posits the eco-gothic as a theoretical lens and tool rather than treating it as a strictly defined genre.

Though ecogothic is a relatively new subfield of ecocriticism, traces of the ecological can be found in Romantic gothic fiction of the 19th century, the two most prominent of which are Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). Authors from the Romantic period sought to undo and muddle the difference between humans as creators of knowledge, constructors of culture, and masters of nature and the nonhuman as that which is constructed, molded, and managed by humans (Morton 2016, 145-46). Although feminist, queer, and trans scholarship has offered various readings of Shelley's *Frankenstein* through a gender and sexuality lens, there has not been much work devoted to an ecological reading of the novel until very recently. Some of these readings focus on the queerness of the narrative itself, foregrounding Victor Frankenstein as a parental figure and highlighting the queerness of his techniques for creating life as the eponymous scientist produces a body through stitching dismembered parts of different corpses and then creates a female companion for him the same way that he creates him (Heggestad 2023). Some others shift focus to the sexual panic and anxiety triggered by the transsexual body that is monsterized and seen as unnatural and transgressive, as Frankenstein's creation is, violating the boundaries of fixed gender identities (Stryker 1994). This anxiety, Stryker states, is handled by relegating transsexuals to a less-than-human status.

Ecocritical readings, on the other hand, make us rethink humans' ontological and epistemological position as opposed to nonhuman life forms. They challenge and question the notion of nature as conceived by humans. In his ecocritical reading of the novel, Timothy Morton underscores the potential of Shelley's work to break down the nature/culture binary that positions the natural world as inferior to the

human as Frankenstein's creation muddies the differences between the natural and the unnatural (Morton 2016). His monstrous progeny is natural because it does not belong to culture and is imbricated with the materiality of nature. It is stitched from pieces taken from corpses in morgues and animal carcasses in slaughterhouses. In this sense, Frankenstein's creation, though "a product of medical science" and "a technological construction (Stryker 1994, 238), is made of flesh and organic matter. He is not a cyborg or robot. He is something of nature, a part of nature. Yet he is unnatural in that his existence resists the association of the natural with both non-human and non-monstrous. His bodily presence in terms of embodied corporeality undermines the notion of nature as a malleable blank slate awaiting cultural inscription. He is a human-like creature but not quite human. The creature's body is composed of a pile of corpses that are being reanimated by electric shocks. Against the will of his creator, he walks out of the door to find a place he can call home, striving to isolate himself from both Victor Frankenstein and society. He acts autonomously and is not a slave to his creator's will. He rejects carnivorous sacrifice (of the nonhuman), constructed as central to the constitution of human subjectivity in flesh-eating societies (Derrida 1992), and chooses to be a vegetarian. He survives on berries, acorns, and roots for days. He is not a cannibal, either. He does not kill animals to glut his appetite, which stands out as an anomaly in the context of monstrosity from an anthropocentric perspective, considering the portrayal of monsters as flesh-eating, evil, and hideous creatures in fairy tales and myths (Hansen 2019). In the eyes of the creature, his monstrosity does not come from his diet but from his appearance, a deformed body made of dismembered corpses. Inspired by such eco-critical examinations of important gothic texts such as Frankenstein, this study will consider in Chapter 2 how the gothic engages with ecological themes in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* and Julia Ducournau's *Raw* to investigate the relationship between meat-eating, patriarchy, and the anthropocentric positioning and privileging of the human over nature in ontological value.

Like Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* abounds in references to inter-species relationships between human and nonhuman life forms, where eating habits serve as delineators and arbiters of species boundaries. In his article "(M)eating Dracula: Food and Death in Stoker's Novel," David Del Principe undertakes a zoo-centric discussion of the Count, depicted as a human/vampire/animal hybrid, and his vampirism, focusing particularly on his resistance to consuming animal meat (2014). Del Principe highlights how flesh consumption plays a crucial role in establishing species borders enforced by carnivorism and constructing the very notion of monstrosity. Judith Halberstam is another scholar who takes up the figure of the monstrous in the novel and puts it into discussion with vampirism. Focusing

on the body of Dracula, Halberstam (1993) shows how the trope of monstrosity in the gothic fiction of the 19th century entangles conceptions of nature and issues of species borders with fears related to race, class, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. In a similar vein, Başak Ağin, in her gothic ecocritical reading of Dracula, argues that the novel constructs the idea of nature through ecophobic spatial and conceptual binaries and discusses whether the Count can be seen as a posthuman figure representing queer nature (Dönmez 2015). Based on such non-anthropocentric and ‘queering’ approaches to species identity, the discussion of Anita Desai’s *Fire on the Mountain* in Chapter 3 focuses on vampirism as a key gothic trope. It sets its gaze on the Hindu mythological figure of the female ghost-vampire in the novel known as churail while examining the estrangement between species that results in the creation of abject figures, animals as objects of science that are born only to die and save humanity from death. The second part of this chapter analyzes vampirism in relation to racial and class inequalities and colonial attitudes toward female sexuality. It reads vampirism as a feminist critique of the colonial obsession with civility and purity and colonial environmental exploitation, discussing the possibility of subverting patriarchal definitions of female sexuality as contagious. It shows how Desai uses vampirism to illustrate the overlap between ecophobic justifications for human maltreatment of nature and the colonial justification of racism and the patriarchal urge to control women’s bodies.

The principal aim of this thesis is to bring the ecogothic into dialogue with feminist and queer ecological critiques of anthropocentric and heteronormative conceptions of nature to explore the interplay between sexual and environmental politics in contemporary women’s fiction and cinema. The primary literary texts selected for close reading are Anita Desai’s *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl* (2002), Latife Tekin’s *Zamansız* (2022), and Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian* (2015). The cinematic text under consideration is the French director Julia Ducournau’s vegetarian horror film *Raw*, aka *Grave* (2016). This research is interdisciplinary in approach, involved in the terrain where literary criticism, psychoanalysis, gothic ecocriticism, and feminist and queer studies meet. It uses close reading to evaluate and interpret the selected texts and highlights gender as a category of analysis (Scott 1986). The textual analysis is arranged around four key themes: the ecogothic, the grotesque female body, abjection, and metamorphosis.

In this study, I posit that the texts under consideration are not written in the gothic mode per se but quite often make use of the gothic principally as a means to call into question humanity’s attempts to control the environment and the resulting fear of a menacing nature. As such, these texts allow us to trace historical patterns persisting across social and ecological transformations by exploring intersections of

social inequalities along the lines of class, race, gender, sexuality, indigeneity, and the exploitation of nature. For this reason, I explore gothic themes and tropes in these texts that are ripe with environmental imagery. Though a discussion of female authorship is out of the scope of this study, the fact that women have created these texts takes particular relevance when considering their subversive potential to generate modes of becoming that have not been regulated by a phallogentric and anthropocentric economy (Bainbridge 2008; Showalter 1977).

This thesis thus attempts a gothic ecocritical reading of these texts through the lens of gender. It interrogates how and whether such motifs as monstrosity, flesh-eating, cannibalism, and vampirism activate ecophobia to relate the ontological and social configurations of what is natural and what is human to female oppression, as well as the exploitation and destruction of nature. It addresses how nature is represented through the authors' gaze. It examines the role such representation plays in the sense of abjection experienced by the female characters and the perception of physical and mental grotesqueness that they display. In particular, it attends to the question of whether these grotesque modes of representing the female body and psyche can enable forms of becoming with the nonhuman world amidst ecological pressures and whether this can have an empowering effect in feminist terms.

While Han's *The Vegetarian* tells the story of a married young woman who decides to turn vegetarian after having blood-soaked nightmares about eating meat, the film *Raw* is a coming-of-age story about a young woman raised as a vegetarian who begins to discover her sexuality and her cannibalistic urges while studying at a veterinary college.

Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* engages gothic ecocriticism with feminist postcolonial approaches to examine how colonial appropriation and re-organization of the landscape have shaped gender and racial dynamics in colonial and post-independence India. Desai's eco-gothic reading of Indian colonial history shows important links between ecophobia, racism, and patriarchy. Similarly, in *Salt Fish Girl*, Lai illustrates how legacies of colonialism continue to inform prevailing gender inequalities and the capitalist exploitation of migrant labor in contemporary Canada by narrating the story of an immortal shape-shifting female Chinese goddess. The novel makes clear the link between the eco-gothic depictions of nature and the materiality of the female body. It narrates a dystopian scenario in which those expelled from the sanitized, corporate-controlled cities dwell in the contaminated Unregulated Zone. A group of female factory workers called the Sonias, cyborgs cloned from cat, fish, and human DNA, start a new life in this contaminated landscape. They produce only female offspring via parthenogenesis by consuming a mutated species of durian fruit growing

in this toxic environment that enhances fertility. The resulting births are described as monstrous in the novel. Their landscape is profoundly liminal, exposing the Sonias to poverty and ecological danger and allowing them to survive and flourish. It both threatens and creates life. An ecogothic reading of this novel makes us aware of the porosity between the materiality of the landscape and that of the abjected female body. It reveals that such excesses, as in the example of ‘monstrous’ babies born out of parthenogenesis, are products of the interaction between the physical environment and humans.

Tekin’s *Zamansız* is a love story between a man and a woman who get into a car accident, fall off a cliff into a lake, and metamorphose into a weasel and an electric eel. *Zamansız* is an example of ecological storytelling that shifts the focus from human existence as separate from nature to the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman bodies. As a story about inter-species intimacy, desire, and mourning, it strives to witness humanity from a nonhuman standpoint. It reverses human-centered conceptions of time and place by demonstrating the various ways nature talks, expanding our conception of what language involves beyond the anthropocentric horizon. Tekin’s unique narrative style, poetic prose, blurs the boundaries between human and nonhuman and oscillates between the semiotic, as defined by Kristeva, and the symbolic. The eruption of the poetic into the narrative allows an exploration of gender in relation to Kristeva’s notion of semiotic chora, which she associates with the maternal body and pre-verbal bodily rhythms and desires. It opens a space for resisting and subverting rigid patriarchal norms.

There are many features that these texts share, but they are differentiated from each other by the historical, social, and cultural contexts of text production. What links them in the first place is that they were produced in the context of the posthuman turn of the late 1990s by female authors who, in their own ways, align ecocritical issues with feminist and queer theoretical thought. Their narratives invoke post-anthropocentric possibilities for engaging with more-than-human worlds by decentering the Enlightenment conception of the human as the measure of all things. Representations of the female body in these works share essential characteristics with the abject and the grotesque and have significant queer and ecological resonance. They all feature female protagonists. Women, in their specificities of class, culture, race, and sexuality, are key to the plots that are set in different historical and socio-economic contexts. All the female characters undergo metamorphosis, in some cases finished and, in others not, their bodies inhabiting the more-than-human.

While *The Vegetarian* is a story of metamorphosis from a human to a plant as the protagonist Yeong-hye desires to shed her human skin to become a tree, the film

Raw centers upon the narrative motif of reverse metamorphosis that is illustrated by the transition of a young vegetarian woman into a cannibal, human flesh eater. *Salt Fish Girl* portrays metamorphosis as a never-ending process of becoming in which difference is experienced, and the body's borders are continuously negotiated through corporeal contact in more-than-human worlds. In *Fire on the Mountain*, the transformation from human to vampire is motivated by the vengeance of the oppressed female upon its male oppressors. In *Zamansız*, the transformation from a human into a state of animality is triggered by the touch of water. Metamorphosis becomes a tool for transgression and subversion of patriarchal power in all five texts. The metamorphosing female body exists in a state of limbo, evoking both horror and fascination, as it disrupts the boundaries between the inside/outside and the self/other. This body is a site of abjection that breaks down the distinction between one body and another and escapes the limits of the human body. It triggers ecophobic fears of a descent into nature, which is inextricably intertwined with patriarchal representations and fears coding the feminine as monstrous. This body, in constant flux, depicts a grotesque materiality that is "open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing" (Russo 1995, 8).

Metamorphosis is essentially corporeal in all texts, connecting bodies to other bodies. All texts focus on the materiality of the metamorphosing female body, which I analyze within the framework of Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque body, defined as "a body in the act of becoming" (1984, 317). This body lingers on borders and becomes entangled with other materialities and the world. I hypothesize that such literary depictions of the female body fading into corporeal ambiguity represent grotesque modes of being that challenge and dismantle heteronormative notions of femininity and sexuality through their entanglements with the nonhuman world.

A preliminary literature review shows that much of the earlier work on the grotesque focused on the definition and origins of the notion as perceived through a human-centered lens. Etymologically, it is derived from the Italian word 'grotto,' meaning cave, followed by the suffix -esque, indicating style and resemblance. Geoffrey Harpham (1976) defines the grotesque as a slippery aesthetic category, noting its changing perception across time and space, and points to the difficulty of defining the term. He traces its history to an excavation in Nero's Domus Aurea in fifteenth-century Rome during the Renaissance and its literary embodiment to the Enlightenment. He demonstrates the association between the grotesque of the Renaissance and the unnatural and uncanny, a product of the artists' imagination combining the fantastic with depictions of realistic details of the human body in their works. As such, the grotesque as a category inherently contains ambiguities and contradictions, blurring the boundaries between human and animal, as well as

natural and monstrous, by fusing forms that are traditionally regarded as separate (Harpham 1976, 464).

As this thesis aims to gender the grotesque body, which Bakhtin does not explicitly do, although his work may be read as presenting the interpretative possibility that this body is female, it is important to understand what characteristics, from his point of view, imbue a body with grotesque qualities. Bakhtin bases his discussion of the grotesque on a re-reading of the sixteenth-century novel *Gargantua and Pantagruel* written by François Rabelais and defines it in relation to the concept of the carnival. Anarchy, transgression of borders and limits, ambivalence, lack of clear boundaries, excess, exaggeration, and materiality of the body constitute the central attributes of the Bakhtinian grotesque (Bakhtin 1984, 317-18). Bakhtin argues that the spirit of the popular festive carnival described by Rabelais marks the temporary suspension of hierarchy and the established order, allowing the celebration of “a body in the act of becoming” (Bakhtin 1984, 317) and debasement of the official culture and of all that is sacred.

In examining the different forms femininity comes in, it is this celebration of excess, unruliness, madness, and entanglement with other bodies and the outside world that I propose to discuss as characteristics of the grotesque body, playing a role in articulating queer and feminist ecological concerns in the selected texts. Close readings suggest that the way these female characters experience their bodies and sexuality does not imply a rejection of womanhood or humanness itself but rather unfolds an interstitial way of becoming in the world – one that blurs boundaries and explores ever-changing relationships between the human and nonhuman, highlighting their permeability and resistance. The figure of the female grotesque frustrates normative expectations regarding bodily morphology, reproduction, and desire and unsettles established cognitive and epistemological categories. It is queer in that the female characters, with their non-heteronormative sexualities and gender identities, are perceived and stigmatized as freaks and monstrous figures straying on the margins of society, as is the case with queer communities. These grotesque bodies are also embedded in an ecological relationality of being in the world where “the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world” (Alaimo 2010, 2).

The notion of the grotesque female body in a state of metamorphosis and its connection to the ecogothic can also be framed with recourse to the notion of abjection as defined by Julia Kristeva (1982). Kristeva defines the abject as that which “disturbs identity, system, order” and that which “does not respect borders, positions, rules” (4). The formation of the self requires the radical exclusion of the abject, of that which “the subject finds loathsome” (Creed 1993, 3). The abject constitutes

a demarcation line between the human and the nonhuman. In *The Vegetarian*, the female protagonist, Yeong-hye, desires to gradually metamorphose into a tree. She is neither human nor animal or plant. From Yeong-hye's perspective, in a radical reversal of what goes on in the 'normal' subject constitution, the abject element that must be excluded is the human. It is the protagonist's willingness to give up her humanness to become a plant that causes her to become abject in the eyes of society since this wish signifies a border crossing. Her humanness estranges her from her corporeality and her 'natural' being. Drawing on this and other examples in the texts under consideration, this research employs the concept of abjection to ask what constitutes the abject in normative and alternative configurations and experiences of femininity. It delineates how the female protagonists experience and attempt to take control of their fluid, grotesque, and abjected bodies, how they embrace and/or redefine abjection itself, and in what ways these processes differ from and oppose the ways in which womanhood is experienced in phallogentric and anthropocentric cultures.

The corporeal experiences of the female protagonists in their respective worlds are closely surveilled and controlled, as their bodies are deemed unruly. In some cases, they embrace the nonhuman abject and otherize the human. An intimate relationship exists between the female grotesque and the abject as both evoke attraction and repulsion. The grotesque and the abject have been culturally construed as aberrant in their corporeal alterity, unnaturalness, and moral decadence and have existed as referents defining and reproducing notions of social, cultural, bodily, and sexual normality. As Butler states, the consolidation of the human as a subject with a sovereign mind housed in a self-contained body requires "the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet "subjects," but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject" (Butler 1993, 3). It is not possible to think of the categories of the human body, sexuality, and gender both in their materiality and as social constructs without constructing the nonhuman as that which needs to be expunged from the self (Seymour 2013). This domain of abject beings includes animals and other nonhuman life forms, such as the cyborg female factory workers and genetically engineered Janitors in *Salt Fish Girl*, the female ghosts with red eyes and backward-turned feet in *Fire on the Mountain*, the female college student with cannibalistic urges in *Raw*, the human couple joining the ranks of the animal kingdom through metamorphosis in a car accident in *Zamansız*, and the female flesh-eater turning vegetarian and eventually desiring to become a tree in *The Vegetarian*.

Abjection, as defined by Kristeva, is central to constructing a border between 'maternal/material/non-identity' and 'paternal/symbolic/identity.' In her influen-

tial book *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva (1982) posits the abject as a human reaction that erupts in response to the risk that meaning will dissolve when the boundaries separating the subject from the object blur and even disappear. She locates abjection at a point before entry into the symbolic register in Lacanian terminology. The abject marks the moment when the infantile body is separated from the maternal body and when we attempt to separate ourselves from nonhuman animals. In this sense, Kristeva looks at abjection as a process whereby a corporeally bounded and psychically unified human being is separated from the nonhuman and constituted as a subject in the symbolic order (Creed 1993, 8). The abject navigates the territory of the liminal, threatening to split the self as its constitutive Other by undoing the clarity of corporeal boundaries. In this sense, it occupies neither the subject nor the object position.

This thesis examines through an ecogothic perspective how the abject, the grotesque, and the monstrous traverse the metamorphosing material bodies and the psyches of the female characters in the selected texts. Questioning womanhood through an ecogothic lens reveals how normative, essentialized gender distinctions map onto human-nonhuman hierarchies and how exploring the entanglements of the human with the nonhuman goes together with the redefinitions and revaluations of feminine bodies and modes of being. It hypothesizes that the female characters, in their imperfect, incomplete, and in some cases hybrid materiality, engage in acts of what Bakhtin calls ‘carnavalesque (grotesque) uncrowning’ that trouble stable identities and question what counts as woman and what counts as human from a non-anthropocentric position.

There are, of course, significant differences among the historical and socio-cultural contexts of the analyzed texts. The cinematic text *Raw* is exclusively Western. It is an example of European (French) body-horror cinema, directed by French filmmaker Julia Ducournau. Larissa Lai, the author of *Salt Fish Girl*, is a US-born academic and novelist of Chinese descent. Anita Desai, the author of *Fire on the Mountain*, is an Indian novelist who writes in English. *The Vegetarian* and *Zamansız* were written by South Korean novelist Han Kang and Turkish novelist Latife Tekin, respectively. As explained above with specific examples, the rationale behind selecting both Anglophone and non-Anglophone texts is that they illuminate the varying implications of the socio-historical context for how we construct our relationship to nonhuman nature in the cultural imagination.

2. THE POLITICS OF FLESH: ABJECT REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMALE DESIRE IN HAN KANG'S *THE VEGETARIAN* AND JULIA DUCOURNAU'S *RAW*

2.1 A Body in Decay: Vegetarianism and the Crisis of Masculinity in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

This chapter examines the motif of metamorphosis in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* by focusing on the protagonist Yeong-hye's uncanny but incomplete transformation into a tree and her subsequent plunge into abjection. It proposes to read Kristeva's notion of the abject from a non-anthropocentric lens that decenters and deprivileges the human as the site of agency and subjectivity. Yeong-hye's altered body, which is in a constant state of decay, becomes a protest against human beings' domination and exploitation of nature, first through her renunciation of meat and later through her refusal to eat and speak. Yeong-hye's metamorphosis blurs the lines between human, animal, and plant, creating a sense of abjection and eliciting revulsion from those around her, as she desires to abandon her human form for that of a plant. Through a Bakhtinian lens, her emaciated body has grotesque qualities as it is transgressive, excessive, and defiant. Yeong-hye desires to tear the human skin off and become plant-like. She wants "flowers to bloom from her crotch" and dreams about "sprout[ing] roots" (Han 2015, 148). This somewhat erotic corporeal aspiration, coupled with her refusal to eat meat and her self-imposed starvation, can be read as an act of defiance against rationality and civilization itself, violating the terms of the founding civilizational contract that posits the communal eating of nonhuman flesh as a ritual protection against cannibalism and non-civilized existence in general. Yeong-hye's physical deterioration in the state of metamorphosis is a precursor to her gradual withdrawal from language (the capacity to speak being the exclusive privilege of the agential human subject) and human connections, and her corporeal and mental detachment from her identity as a human.

On the other hand, Yeong-hye's attunement to nonhuman nature and life through her vegetarianism does not simply amount to reiterating the traditional Western patriarchal association between the female and nature, as such association feminizes nature and naturalizes the feminine, constructing the masculine selfhood through the othering of the feminine as the antithesis of civilization and rationality. Her vegetarianism and her markedly sexual desire for a plant-like existence can also be read as a form of taking over control of her own body. Her withdrawal from language can be seen as a stubborn refusal to speak with the terms of patriarchal culture. Against this background, this section discusses whether her lack of voice in the most general sense can be regarded as a form of resistance or whether it intensifies patriarchal oppression and violence. In discussing this, it rejects the dualism between silence and speech that equates voice with agency and silence with loss of power and oppression (Parpart 2009). Instead, it argues that silence and speech are socially constructed, negotiated, and contested (Fivush 2010), taking on different meanings in different gendered and cultural contexts that shape violence against women. Seen in this way, silence can be both liberating and confining.

Yeong-hye's body becomes a battleground where relations of power and resistance are played out. Her corporeal existence has a visceral and erotic connection with nature. This intertwining of the erotic and the natural provides a fertile ground for an ecogothic examination of her body as activating ecophobia and "erotophobia" which Greta Gaard defines as "a fear of eroticism" (2010, 650). The fear of the erotic normalizes and legitimizes heteronormative sexuality over other forms of sexuality (Gaard 1997), constructing the male as the rational mind, unitary, and autonomous being, and the female as the irrational body controlled by desire and emotions (Plumwood 1993). This portrayal of the female body is associated with nature, emphasizing its unruliness and the impossibility of taming it. Thus, femininity emerges as a less-than-human, inferior status in need of cultural inscription to become discursively legible and controllable. My ecogothic reading of this novel considers how Han presents vegetal alterity and discusses whether such alterity (the merger of woman and plant) serves as a source of female empowerment, or conversely, a tool of patriarchal oppression. Such reading raises critical questions about the voice, silence, and agency triad. Through an ecogothic lens, I attend to the conceptualization of nature in the text and question the role such conceptualization plays in depicting the protagonist's body as grotesque. I also examine how abjection works through Yeong-hye, who tries to "shuck off the human" (Han 2015, 179).

Han Kang's three-part novel *The Vegetarian*, first published in South Korea in 2007 and translated into English by Deborah Smith in 2015, tells the story of an unhappily married, middle-aged woman named Yeong-hye in contemporary South Korea who

decides to turn vegetarian after having recurring, blood-soaked nightmares about meat eating. Her refusal to eat meat turns into a desire to become a tree, which leads her to gradually move away from her traditional patriarchal family and the world in general. The novel's first chapter, "The Vegetarian," is narrated by Yeong-hye's ex-husband, Mr. Cheong, a patriarchal man with no affection and empathy for his wife. In the novel's opening pages, he describes Yeong-hye as "completely unremarkable in every way" (Han 2015, 3). He views her as a submissive and subordinate woman on whom he inflicts verbal and physical violence. The second chapter, "Mongolian Mark," focuses on Yeong-hye's video artist brother-in-law, whose name is not revealed to readers. This unnamed character has fantasies of having sex with Yeong-hye, which later in the novel becomes a reality. Yeong-hye's involvement as a model in his art project fosters her identification with the vegetal world (Lai 2023, 1). The last chapter, "Flaming Trees," is narrated from the perspective of Yeong-hye's elder sister In-hye. This section offers a glimpse into the period when In-hye occasionally visits her sister, who has been committed to a psychiatric facility, struggling with anorexia nervosa and schizophrenia, and abandoned by her husband and family.

Yeong-hye remains largely voiceless throughout the novel, except when she gives brief answers to questions from Mr. Cheong and other family members, or when she vividly describes her haunting nightmares. In the first chapter, Mr. Cheong's first-person narration is interrupted by the incorporation of paragraphs, typeset in italics, that steer readers into the world of Yeong-hye's dreams and memories. These dreams are what pushes Yeong-hye to stop eating meat. She starts to lose weight and does not engage in any meaningful communication with those around her. As the novel unfolds, she progressively loses her voice through her gradual but incomplete transformation into a plant.

Her desire to become a tree represents a renunciation of human speech and signifies a temporary suspension of the hierarchies within the patriarchal Symbolic order, to use Lacan's term (1982). This abstinence from speech paves the way for the debasement of all that is constructed as natural, proper, and morally acceptable in an androcentric culture. This "as yet unfinished [vegetal] metamorphosis" reinscribes Yeong-hye's body into the potentiality of another world where the human body, in a grotesque gesture, is degraded to the material level (Bakhtin 1984, 24). This body, in the process of becoming and transforming, descends to the Earth, conceives a new form, and is reborn as a plant. In this sense, this degradation, an essential principle of Bakhtinian grotesque realism, does not only destroy but also regenerates. Death is not always in unequivocal opposition to life. As the passage below illustrates, "degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth" (Bakhtin 1984, 21).

“Look, sister, I’m doing a handstand; leaves are growing out of my body, roots are sprouting out of my hands. . . they delve down into the earth. Endlessly, endlessly. . . yes, I spread my legs because I wanted flowers to bloom from my crotch; I spread them wide. . .” (Han 2015, 79).

I propose to view this body as a post-anthropocentric body, willing to shed its human skin to come to life as a plant, inseparable from nonhuman nature in its materiality. This fusion of plant and woman creates a space for ambivalence to redefine human subjectivity in non-anthropocentric and non-androcentric terms. This hybrid body epitomized in the image of Yeong-hye standing upside down on her hands symbolizes a connection with the cosmic world beyond the human to which she tenaciously desires to assimilate herself. The soil Yeong-hye plants herself in and the taking in of sunlight by spreading her legs wide open become her way of enacting a trans-corporeal connection to the vegetal world. This ‘trans-corporeal’ entanglement (Alaimo 2010) highlights the material connections between the human and nonhuman and exemplifies the Bakhtinian grotesque body, open, becoming, dying, and re-birthing, inseparable from environmental matter.

For Bakhtin, there is an association between the upper body stratum and the classical body image, understood as closed, completed, and separated from the rest of the world. This image is in stark contrast with the grotesque body that he links to the lower bodily parts, “the genital organs, the belly and the buttocks,” which grow beyond their own limits in a state of constant renewal and becoming (Bakhtin 1984, 21). Although Bakhtin does not use a gender lens to theorize the grotesque body, maternal breasts and the pregnant belly – as in the Kerch terracotta figurines of laughing senile hags – are those parts that swell and protrude from the body. These parts, in their transgression and excess, present the interpretative possibility that this grotesque body is female (Dentith 2005, 81).

Bakhtin considers Earth “as an element that devours, swallows up (the grave, the womb) and at the same time an element of birth, of renascence (the maternal breasts)” (Bakhtin 1984, 21). As a maternal source of sustenance, the breast symbolizes the openness of the grotesque body in its role as both gestator and nourisher of life, aligning with Bakhtin’s celebration of growth and fertility. Breasts connect the grotesque body to the Earth’s life cycles by bridging the inside and the outside world through the act of breastfeeding.

“Can only trust my breasts now. I like my breasts, nothing can be *killed* by them [emphasis added]. Hand, foot, tongue, gaze, all weapons from which nothing is safe. But not my breasts. With my round breasts, I’m okay. Still okay.” (Han 2015, 33).

In the passage above, Yeong-hye contrasts her breasts with other body parts that she perceives as weapons. While she finds a sense of safety and trust in her breasts, associating them with non-violence, she views other body parts, such as her hand, foot, tongue, and gaze, as having the potential to be weaponized and inflict harm. By emphasizing their non-violent nature, she reclaims her breasts from the male gaze, which depicts them as markers of female sexuality and objects of sexual desire. She thus counters the destructive tendencies of patriarchal violence. There are moments in the text that expose the violence inherent in these body parts, which can be read as representations of patriarchal violence against both nonhuman animals and women. When Yeong-hye was nine years old, the dog of the village *Whitey* bit her in the leg. Her father, a patriarchal veteran, decides to punish the dog for what it did. Yeong-hye describes how she watched the dog suffering and dying at the hands of her father as follows:

“...Once it has gone five laps, the dog is frothing at the mouth. Blood drips from its throat, which is being choked with the rope. Constantly groaning through its damaged throat, the dog is dragged along the ground. At six laps, the dog vomits blackish-red blood, trickling from its mouth and open throat. As blood and froth mix together, I stand stiffly upright and stare at those two glittering eyes. Seven laps, and while waiting for the dog to come into view, Father looks behind and sees that it is in fact dangling limply from the motorcycle. I look at the dog’s four juddering legs, its raised eyelids, the blood and water in its dead eyes.

That evening there was a feast at our house. All the middle-aged men from the market alleyways came, everyone my father considered worth knowing. The saying goes that for a wound caused by a dog bite to heal you have to eat that same dog, and I did scoop up a mouthful for myself. No, in fact I ate an entire bowlful with rice. The smell of burnt flesh, which the perilla seeds couldn’t wholly mask, pricked my nose.” (Han 2015, 42).

Yeong-hye’s father is not only father, but Father with a capital F. To use Lacan’s terminology, he is more than a parental figure, a literal father. This Father represents the signifier within the symbolic order, which enables its functioning. As Grosz explains, this “symbolic father is the (ideal) embodiment of paternal authority, the locus from which patriarchal law and language come” (Grosz 1990, 72). The father takes up the role of the Symbolic Father at the nuclear family level as the representative of law and order. He is the one who makes sure that the child internalizes and submits to social customs, norms, and culturally viable principles (Grosz 1990, 68). In the passage above, the bodily parts that Yeong-hye perceives as weapons, I

argue, are those of her father, who is the real-life incarnation of Lacan's Symbolic Father regulating social order. He uses his hands to tie "the dog to the tree and scorch it with a lamp" (Han 2015, 41). He then makes the dog run along behind the motorcycle, which he considers "a milder punishment" compared to flogging (41). The *tongue* in the first passage signifies the power of language to oppress and dominate. In the eyes of others, language acquires authority from his social status as the authority figure in the family. He inflicts wounds caused by the tongue on his daughter. He instigates violence by charging his words with the emotion of anger and inflicts psychological violence by threatening and forcing her to eat meat against her will: "Don't you understand what your father's telling you? If he tells you to eat, you eat!" (Han 2015, 38). He cannot control his daughter's choices and her body. The physical and psychological violence he inflicts on Yeong-hye emanates from ecophobic anxieties about the loss of control. His violence feeds on patriarchal fears of the feminine Other, cast as unruly and in need of taming. Such a representation of the feminine demands that he controls what he fears by resorting to violence if necessary.

2.1.1 Han's Ecogothic Representation of Nature

As mentioned in section 2.1, the politics of ecophobia and the politics of sexism and misogyny are intertwined. In *The Vegetarian*, Han activates ecophobia, the fear of the natural world, to interrogate and problematize the association of men with meat, power, and agency and women with vegetables, passivity, and submission (Del Principe 2014, 30). The novel is infused with various elements of the ecogothic, which Estok (2019) suggests are intertwined with interlocking intersectional structures of oppression. Changes in Yeong-hye's body due to insomnia, self-starvation, and her decaying mental state fill male family members with loathing. It triggers anxieties about control, anxieties that might be characterized as ecophobic.

At a housewarming party at In-hye's new apartment, Yeong-hye's father, a patriarchal ex-military man who served as a veteran in Vietnam, strikes her in the face and force-feeds her meat. He tells his son Yeong-ho and Mr. Cheong to hold her still, then jams a piece of pork in her mouth. She spits out the meat. Yeong-hye growls and moans like an animal in protest of her father's treatment. She does not speak. As her brother-in-law describes it: "An animal cry of distress bursts from her lips" (40). She grabs a fruit knife, cuts her wrist, and then becomes hospitalized. In terms of abjection, Yeong-hye steps out of the symbolic realm, reverts to a state preceding language where there are no clear distinctions between 'I' and others, human and

animal, inside and outside.

Her father is not the only one trying to force meat into her mouth. Yeong-hye's mother "pick[s] up some sweet and sour pork with her chopsticks and thrusts it right up in front of Yeong-hye's mouth, saying: "Here. Come on, hurry up and eat'... 'Open your mouth right now. You don't like it? Well, try this instead, then" (Han 2015, 37). Her refusal of food offered by her parents, a refusal to incorporate it, inscribes her morphing body within an economy of abjection. Through a Kristevan lens, Elizabeth Grosz defines such oral disgust as "the most archaic form of abjection." As she explains further:

"Where a 'spoonful for mummy and a spoonful for daddy' signify their love for the child, the child's spitting out and choking on food is a refusal of their demands, that is, that eating represents the child's reciprocal love of the parent. In refusing the (m)other's food, the child is rejecting the mother at the same time as expelling itself" (Grosz 2012, 90).

This visceral reaction of spitting out and vomiting is a projection of her desire to cleanse her body of meat, a haunting reminder of the abject, of the nonhuman animal that was once alive, making her sick. I suggest that this retching is both a consequence of her veganorexia and a reaction to her own capacity to reproduce and partake in violence by omission (having a meat-based diet) or by being directly violent (crushing a bird in her grip until life leaves its body and sinking her teeth into its flesh at the hospital). In this context, vomiting becomes an act of expelling the human self to rebirth as a plant and to live a life free of violence. As Kristeva puts it, "I abject myself within the same motion through which I claim to establish myself" (1982, 3).

Another instance of Yeong-hye's corporeality leading to anxiety is the loss of patriarchal control over the female body. Her physical transformation and choices provoke discomfort and fear by challenging societal norms of propriety. While dining in a restaurant with her husband's boss, two directors, and their wives, Yeong-hye faces the others' contemptuous gaze due to her not wearing a bra and her vegetarianism as a dietary choice. Staring at Yeong-hye's breasts for a while, the executive director's wife sarcastically asks: "A balanced diet goes hand in hand with a balanced mind, don't you think?" (23). Dinner guests pathologize her self-imposed starvation and silence as unnatural and a mental disorder. When asked why she became a vegetarian, Yeong-hye says she "had a dream" (23). At this point of the conversation, Mr. Cheong feels compelled to make a rational explanation and tells them that his wife, acting on the advice of a dietician, gave up meat to relieve the symptoms of

gastroenteritis. While others nod their heads in affirmation, the executive director's wife begins to talk about how she finds vegetarianism improper:

“I'm glad I've still never sat down with a proper vegetarian. I'd hate to share a meal with someone who considers eating meat repulsive, just because that's how they themselves personally feel... Imagine you were snatching up a wriggling baby octopus with your chopsticks and chomping it to death —and the woman across from you glared like you were some kind of animal. That must be how it feels to sit down and eat with a vegetarian!” (Han 2015, 24).

In the passage above, Han links Yeong-hye's deviation from or rejection of rules of social propriety in South Korean society to the social construction of meat eating as natural and proper (Beeston 2020, 685). Through her refusal to consume animal products and wear a bra, Yeong-hye defies patriarchal societal norms that normalize meat eating, which is associated with “male-identified strength” and virility (Adams 2019, 137). Flesh-eating societies posit meat consumption as vital to cultivating a healthy psyche and a precondition to acquiring a rational subject position. It is instructive to consider Adam's analysis of the association of alimentary practices with femininity and masculinity. She argues that the traditional Western patriarchal culture associates the female with vegetable consumption and relegates women, in their avoidance of meat eating, to the status of less-than-human while equating the male with the human (2010). In this line of logic, meat consumption is constructed as a key part and parcel of what it means to be human in patriarchal discourse and practice.

At several points in the novel, readers are given access to Yeong-hye's dreams, which lead her to throw all meat and dairy products in the refrigerator. In one of those dreams, Yeong-Hye has a vision of escaping from the city (representing culture) into dark woods. She finds herself wandering in the dark woods where there are “no people” but only trees with “sharp-pointed leaves” (Han 2015, 12). She feels “lost,” “frightened” and “cold.” At that moment, the sight of “a red barn-like building” catches her attention, and she goes in. The scene she encounters there horrifies her: “a long bamboo stick strung with great blood-red gashes of meat, blood still dripping down” (12). She tries to push past, but dead animal flesh does not grant her passage; “there is no end to it” and “no exit” (12). Her skin absorbs the blood that covers her mouth and clothes. Dead, raw flesh, as if it were alive, blocks Yeong-hye's path to the outside.

Looking at her bloody hands and the blood dripping from her mouth, she discovers the animal in herself, the abject other that is “familiar and yet not” (Kristeva 1982,

12). After realizing that she ate that mass of raw meat, Yeong-hye experiences a psychological displacement from her corporeality: “My face, the look in my eyes. . . my face, undoubtedly, but never seen before. Or no, not mine, but so familiar. . . nothing makes sense. Familiar and yet not...that vivid, strange, horribly uncanny feeling” (12). This face, she remarks, “is different every time. . . There are times when it’s all bloody. . . and times when it looks like the face of a rotting corpse” (Han 2015, 115). Whether it is an animal’s or a human’s face is ambiguous. Yeong-hye thinks she will not dream about those faces again if she stops eating meat, but they return to her. That is when she realizes that they are not exterior to her body but “rise up from inside her stomach” (Han 2015, 115). She leaves the dark woods behind and sees families singing songs, laughing, “barbecuing meat,” and “picnicking” with their children among green trees “thick with leaves, springtime’s green light” (12). In sharp contrast to the darkness, chaos, and savagery in the dark woods, this picnicking site emerges as an open and safe recreational space, a product of civilization, where meat is “cooked to be palatable for people” (Adams 2010, 56).

By drawing attention to the binary of civility and barbarity in relation to alimentary practices, Han reveals the disguised connection between the killing of an animal, which once was a living being, and meat as a finished product (in this example, cooked meat). Such disconnection, what Carol Adams refers to as the “absent referent,” hides the violence inherent in acts of meat consumption and has significant parallels with the domination and sexual objectification of women in patriarchal cultures, viewing them as pieces of meat “butchered, fragmented, or consumable” (Adams 2010, 13).

2.1.2 A Body in Limbo: Becoming Arboreal

Abjection plays a central role in the formation of epistemological awareness related to what to include and what to exclude from the category of the human. Yeong-hye, in her non-normative dietary choice, threatens the stability of the human subject, which positions nonhuman animals as food. Her vegetarianism signifies a border crossing and presents the possibility of the descent of the human into the nonhuman. As her brother-in-law remarks, “whether human, animal or plant, she could not be called a ‘person’, but then she wasn’t exactly some feral creature either - more like a mysterious being with qualities of both” (Han 2015, 88). Though Yeong-hye adamantly wishes to merge with the vegetal, she cannot complete her transformation.

Han demonstrates Yeong-hye’s liminal existence between human, animal, and plant

as also manifested in her urge to kill in dreams by putting her hands “around someone’s throat, throttling them, grabbing the swinging ends of their long hair, sticking (her) finger into their slippery eyeballs.” The same fingers could also “squeeze that brightness out of next door’s cat” (Han 2015, 32). Although Han presents Yeong-hye as a human being under metamorphosis, there is constant reference to the duality within the self: “I become a different person, a different person rises up inside me, devours me...” (32). It is hard to tell whether Yeong-hye is the prey or predator, human or nonhuman. The abject bodies represented by nonhuman animals return and “rise up from the pit of her stomach”: “Animal eyes gleaming wild, presence of blood, unearthed skull, again those eyes” (33). In one of her dreams, she checks if her fingernails are soft, and her teeth are gentle as if trying to prove to herself that she is not the perpetrator of violence against animals. On another occasion, she devours a bird in the yard after being hospitalized for cutting her wrist. She sits there undressed and exposes herself to sunlight under the appalled gaze of strangers while tightly holding a small, bleeding bird in her palm and with “her lips stained with blood” (52). The novel presents this moment as the last time she ate meat. The moment she bites the bird, Yeong-hye begins to “stray on the territories of animal,” haunted by the animal Other that she wants to expel from the self (Kristeva 1982, 12). Mr. Cheong finds his wife naked in the sun, seemingly unconscious of what she did, and describes it in his own words as follows:

“I prized open her clenched right hand. A bird, which had been crushed in her grip, tumbled to the bench. It was a small white-eye bird, with feathers missing here and there. Below tooth-marks which looked to have been caused by a predator’s bite, vivid red bloodstains were spreading.” (52)

This quotation demonstrates the thinning line between humanity and animality and highlights Yeong-hye’s connection to nature’s primal forces. Her nudity, “leaving her gaunt collarbones, emaciated breasts and brown nipples completely exposed” (51), symbolizes both her breaking free from societal constraints and the vulnerability and fragility that she shares with the bird. The bird marked “by a predator’s bite” co-locates Yeong-hye within the domain of animality, as she is the predator, the creator of violence, and the bird is the prey. The toothmarks and bloodstains on the dead bird’s body reinforce the imagery of consumption and predation, something Yeong-hye rejects through her abstinence from meat, yet these violent acts still intrude upon her reality. She is also a victim of physical and emotional violence in that her father slaps her to force pork into her mouth during the family dinner, leading her to switch from human speech to a more primitive, animalistic language (Bae 2024). Once she comes to realize that her repeated and desperate attempts

at communication through human speech – “I won’t eat it”, “I’m sorry, Father, but I just can’t eat it” (Han 2015, 38) – fail, she physically hurts herself to escape the patriarchal violence plaguing her (Sands 2024). These two scenes underscore the impossibility of escaping cycles of violence both in society and in nature. The act of crushing and biting the bird can be seen as reflecting an in-between stage between human existence and arboreal existence, marked by the resurfacing of the urge to kill and eat animal flesh on her way to shed her human skin gradually. Her predatory behavior shows that her desire to metamorphose into a plant is laden with contradictions and ambiguities. Yeong-hye slowly strips away the qualities that make her human and act more animal-like. She uses “her fingers instead of a fork” (Han 2015, 76), makes moaning sounds and howls like an animal illegible to those around her, gets rid of her clothes that are “concrete material covers of the human body” (Lehmann 2023, 766) and “bare[s] her breasts to the sun” (138) “like some kind of mutant animal that had evolved to be able to photosynthesize” (83).

During one of her sister’s visits to the psychiatric ward, Yeong-hye tells her, “. . . My insides have all atrophied. . . I’m not an animal any more. . . I don’t need to eat, not now. I can live without it. All I need is sunlight” (153). Towards the end of the novel, Yeong-hye vomits blood and has convulsions in her stomach. There is a grotesque exaggeration in this scene. The symptoms produced by starvation are increased to such an extent that she is nothing but skin and bones below thirty kilos, and hair starts to grow on her cheeks. She begins not to have her periods, and her breasts lose their roundness and are flattened. To In-hye, who tries to convince her to eat so that she will not have to be tube fed, her sister appears as a grotesque being “looking like a freakish overgrown child, devoid of any secondary sexual characteristics,” with “burst veins on both hands, the soles of both feet, even her elbows” (Han 2015, 151). To become a plant, Yeong-hye refuses to consume any kind of food except drinking water. She eats less and less and “gets thinner day by the day,” “her cheekbones becoming indecently prominent” (15), and her breasts resembling “a pair of small bumps beneath her sharply protruding collarbones” (31). Yeong-hye’s grotesque body disrupts binary distinctions between child/adult, female/male, and human/nonhuman. This body is the embodiment of death in human disguise who does not eat, does not speak, has withdrawn from the outer world, and thereby is in a state of abjection, confronting our bodily existence as humans.

During her days in hospital, Yeong-hye’s memories evoke in her guilt and leave her breathless when she thinks about the lump, “stuck in her solar plexus, as she remarks:

“Yells and howls, threaded together layer upon layer, are enmeshed to form that lump. Because of meat. I ate too much meat. The lives of the animals I ate have all lodged there. Blood and flesh, all those butchered bodies are scattered in every nook and cranny, and though the physical remnants were excreted, their lives still stick stubbornly to my insides... Nobody can help me. Nobody can save me. Nobody can make me breathe.”(Han 2015, 49).

Through a Kristevan lens, feces, containing remnants of animals slaughtered and cooked for their meat, is an abject bodily matter emanating from the orifices of Yeong-hye's body, which can neither be incorporated into the self nor completely thrown out, objectified. Schilder explains the abject nature of bodily fluids as he remarks: “whatever originates or emanates out of our body will remain a part of the body-image. The voice, the breath, the odor, the feces, menstrual blood, urine, semen, are still parts of the body-image even when separated in space from the body” (1978, 213). Following this logic, the animal remnants from her body are tied to her body image. In this sense, the animal within threatens her sense of self as a vegetarian, and as a woman desiring to metamorphose into a tree.

The grip of her desire to rid her body of meat takes hold over Yeong-hye as her previous consumption of meat, enabled by the violence done to animals and materialized in the remnants in her stomach, shatters her being from within. It disrupts her stability to such an extent that she cannot expel it. This is what the abject does.

Yeong-hye's abject body not only disrupts the boundary between human and non-human but also subverts patriarchal codes of descent and allows for the development of alternative and transgressive form of female sexuality. Yeong-hye perceives her bodily existence primarily as a plant that is distanced from human corporeality and animality. She seeks to remove all traces of meat from her body and, wants “flowers to bloom from her crotch,” desires to “sprout roots,” and “dive down into the earth” (Han 2015, 148). In envisioning such bodily entanglement between the human and the plant, Han constructs an alternative female subjectivity that is liberated from the hegemony of heteronormative reproduction, “seeking to grow plants instead of children.” This “body in the act of becoming” (Bakhtin 1984, 317) aspires to merge with the vegetal, progressively moving away from the dominant notions of the idealized feminine body posited as reproductive and domestic (Beeston 2020, 689).

This erotic corporeality of the female body is implicated in her sexual arousal by the sight of flowers painted on her brother-in-law's body. In his studio, where he films

her, Yeong-hye sees his front body covered with red flowers and “strokes the flowers on his chest” (113). Their bodies merge into one and create a new body as “his red flower closes and opens repeatedly above her Mongolian mark, his penis slipping in and out of her like a huge pistil” (113). In-hye recalls their “writhing movements” that “made it seem as though they were trying to shuck off the human” (Han 2015, 179). This depiction of sexual union offers a grotesque view of the body because it disrupts our sensory perceptions regarding where one body ends and another begins. A new body that of a nonhuman (plant) is formed through the union of two human bodies in the act of sex itself. In casting such a union as a possibility, Han frustrates normative expectations regarding what constitutes desire and sexuality. In this sense, *The Vegetarian* shifts the focus from the human body as a privileged locus of sexuality to a broader definition of sexual desire, as flowers painted on a body are invested with a capacity to stimulate sexual arousal in another body that they relate to.

Although Yeong-hye’s erotic engagement with the nonhuman exemplifies the subversion of heteronormative sexuality, it intertwines with her experience of epistemic and physical patriarchal violence. Her refusal to eat meat and her sexual arousal by plants are inextricably linked through their shared transgression of normative boundaries of a patriarchal world. Her erotic aspiration for communion with the vegetal world transforms plants into objects of desire, illustrating a radical reimagining of desire and bodily pleasure. Her corporeal resistance, coupled with this redefinition of erotic pleasure, fuels patriarchal fears of disorderly, unruly women that are also associated with nature. As such, it intensifies the oppression she faces but also creates a space for liberation and empowerment, with her taking control over her body and sexuality.

2.1.3 Return to Object Nature: A Source of Female Empowerment or Oppression?

Although her refusal to eat meat can be interpreted as an act of female defiance, it exacerbates patriarchal violence due to her defiance of male authority. As I will demonstrate below, when the patriarchal violence becomes unbearable, Yeong-hye uses self-starvation, self-harm, and silence as coping mechanisms to re-establish a sense of self-control and to reclaim control over her body.

Does return to nature provide a refuge from the patriarchal oppression and carnivorous violence that permeate androcentric and anthropocentric culture? Does it have a liberatory potential for women who are trapped in patriarchal confinement, or

does it reproduce patriarchal violence against women and nature? As suggested by Beeston (2020), Yeong-hye's gradual retreat into silence and her refusal to consume meat in defiance of traditional gender roles and carnism can work both ways: to resist the cultural inscription of women as subordinate compliant, submissive, and silent by the phallic order and to reproduce, even exacerbate, patriarchal domination and violence.

As mentioned, Yeong-hye's father tries to force-feed her pork, although she tells him she does not eat meat. To make her pain go away, she cuts her wrists with a knife and then becomes hospitalized. Her mother visits Yeong-hye in the hospital and tells Mr. Cheong to feed her daughter black goat meat she cooked by adding herbal medicine to suppress the smell. After drinking a sip from the cup filled with the "black liquid," she realizes there is meat in it and throws up in the hospital room (47). Han portrays Yeong-hye's mother as an accomplice of patriarchy through her silence in the face of the abuses she suffered at the hands of her husband and father and through her participation in force-feeding. On a phone call, Mr. Cheong tells Yeong-hye's mother that her daughter has started living on vegetables and that she has imposed her vegetarianism on him. She becomes frustrated and advises Mr. Cheong not to "follow this diet." She remonstrates about Yeong-hye's defiance, which she thinks disgraces her son-in-law (27). Mr. Cheong also calls In-hye, who is equally shocked by what she hears over the phone and apologizes to her brother-in-law. After learning about the change in Yeong-hye's eating habits, her mother and sister try to convince her to eat meat again. As Yeong-hye's father discovers her vegetarianism, he taunts her for defying the 'natural order of things.'

Another example of the patriarchal violence Yeong-hye faces is the repeated marital rape by her husband. This sexual violence illustrates the analogy between dismembered animal bodies as sources of food and the portrayal of the female body as butchered, ready for consumption (Adams 2010). One night, Mr. Cheong comes home drunk and rapes Yeong-hye. Even though she puts up "strong resistance" against him and "spits out vulgar curses," he "inserts" himself "successfully" after three attempts (Han 2015, 30). His use of the word 'successful' to describe this act of sexual violence against Yeong-hye occurs within a "metaphoric system of patriarchal language"(Adams 2010, 67). This language evokes sexual consumption and acknowledges Mr. Cheong as a virile, full, and meat-eater subject with agency while constructing Yeong-hye's body as a passive object – a piece of meat – to be brutally consumed against her will.

Another incident of sexual violence and attempted rape is when her brother-in-law films Yeong-hye and his friend J's naked bodies covered in painted-on flowers in

a rented studio. He regards Yeong-hye's body, before becoming an object of the male gaze, "as nothing more than an object of pity, albeit a faintly inscrutable one" (Han 2015, 69). However, he begins to sexualize it as he voyeuristically observes her after hearing about the Mongolian mark on her buttocks. He recalls the moment when he carries Yeong-hye on his back down the stairs after she cuts her wrists and imagines himself "pulling down her trousers just enough to reveal the blue brand of the Mongolian mark" and masturbates (Han 2015, 65). After he finishes filming them, Yeong-hye starts to giggle. When asked why she laughs, she answers: "I'm all wet" (Han 2015, 106). Yeong-hye is sexually aroused by the sight of the plants covering his body, but he takes it as a sign of her consent to have sex with him; her brother-in-law walks over to her and tries to take her jeans off. Although Yeong-hye denies him consent by saying 'No' and thrusts him away, it does not discourage him from pushing her against the wall and pressing his lips against hers, but she again shoves him away. After asking his ex-partner, who is an artist, to paint flowers on his body, he rushes back to Yeong-hye's studio flat and hastily unbuttons his shirt and trousers while "sucking her lips and nose," thrusts himself into her "already soaking wet vagina" and "releases a jet of semen with a gasp of pain," neither asking for nor being verbally given consent (Han 2015, 112).

In the face of such epistemic and physical violence, Yeong-hye struggles to assert her agency and embrace her arboreal identity through silence, abstaining from meat, and self-harm. One possible reading of Yeong-hye's withdrawal from language is that she breaks female silence, which is imposed upon women in South Korean androcentric culture, through her taciturnity. Her attempt to transform into a tree manifests itself in the form of bodily decay due to eating disorders, self-imposed starvation, weight loss, and, in later parts of the novel, a complete withdrawal from language.

"Whatever it was, there had been no warmth in it. Whatever the words were, they hadn't been words of comfort, words that would help her pick herself up. Instead, they (words) were merciless, and the trees that had spoken them were a frighteningly chill form of life... They'd just stood there, stubborn and solemn, yet alive as animals, bearing up the weight of their own massive bodies" (169).

As the quotation shows, the incomprehensibility of the language spoken by trees, as shown in the quotation above, is something that Yeong-hye shares with them. As she steps out of the domain of human language, Yeong-hye starts to reside in liminality, confusing anthropocentric binary distinctions between animate/inanimate, human/nonhuman, living/dead and sentient/insentient. Yeong-hye gets lost on one of those days when 'non-serious patients' are allowed to take unaccompanied walks. One of the nurses finds her deep in the woods, sitting soaked, motionless in the rain

“as if she was one of the glistening trees” (Han 2015, 125). Yeong-hye is alive but seems not to be. She is blended in with the trees, which humans deem both dead and alive. Like plants, she is not readily discernible to the human eye.

In-hye enters a tunnel on her way to the psychiatric hospital. She notices a speckled moth beating its wings against the wall and observes it. “On the pitch-black tunnel ceiling, the moth stays put, as though conscious of being observed” [emphasis added] (Han 2015, 130). I argue that Han reverses the anthropocentric gaze that elevates the sentient human subject over the backgrounded, dismissed, insentient nonhuman, posited as an object in the subject’s eyes, by attributing conscious thought and intention to the moth which decides to ‘stay put’ to avert the possible threat and harm to itself by In-hye. In the hospital yard, she turns her gaze towards the zelkova tree, which she thinks is four hundred years old.

In a similar vein as in the previous example, Han represents the zelkova tree as a thinking, perceptive, and sentient being, to borrow from Parker (2020, 71), demonstrating both physical movement by ‘spreading its countless branches’ and ‘letting the sunlight scintillating its leaves’ on sunny days, just as Yeong-hye would expose her breasts to the sun from behind the closed ward’s window, and consciousness by choosing to ‘keep its thoughts unspoken’ on gloomy, rainy days (Han 2015, 135). Similarly, In-hye accompanies her in the ambulance when Yeong-hye is transferred to the main hospital. She describes the trees on the roadside as ‘blazing, green fire undulating like the rippling flanks of a massive animal, wild and savage’ (Han 2015, 183). In-hye attributes sentience to the woods. This trope of sentient, articulate, moving, thinking tree collapses human/nature dualism and disrupts the way we think about what it means to be alive for humans and nonhumans (Parker 2020, 76).

As Keetley (2016) explains in her analysis of plant horror, the silence and inscrutability of trees make them uncanny and liminal in that they communicate with In-hye by spreading their branches without explicitly articulating their intentions. Similarly, Yeong-hye’s silence creates an ecogothic sensibility by positioning her as a liminal figure whose withdrawal from human communication mirrors the non-verbal existence of the plant world. Her silence makes her ‘alive like us, yet not alive like us’ (Parker 2020, 75). The similarity between the way trees and Yeong-hye communicate emphasizes the uncanny connection between her silence and the unsettling, ambiguous qualities associated with the natural world.

Through an ecogothic lens, it raises anxieties about the possible loss of the ability to speak, constituted as the exclusive privilege of the human subject, acquired through language and conscious thought. Speech separates non-humans from the human,

which leads to the silencing of nature in our culture (Manes 1992). Although there is no textual confirmation of her physical transformation into a tree, her corporeal being in the world threatens to split the self by undoing the clarity of corporeal boundaries. She is cast out as an abject figure whose ontological liminality provokes a categorical and epistemological crisis among her closest social circle. She becomes a threat to the established identity system and, hence, a disposable target of gendered violence.

To Yeong-hye, her refusal to speak is liberating for silence becomes her voice (Glenn 2004), her way of finding her voice as opposed to reclaiming modes of speech governed by patriarchal and anthropocentric structures. Her silence involves a radical shedding of the human by stepping out of language. It can be seen not as a lack of agency but rather a reaction to the profound marginalization of women and their reduction to a state of silence in male-dominated societies.

Apart from being subjected to sexual, domestic family violence and discriminated against for her dietary choice, epistemic violence is inflicted upon Yeong-hye that marks her silencing by her husband and family members who attempt to eliminate and dismiss the knowledge she acquires through her violent dreams (Tai 2021). The dream space she enters in her sleep, which determines how Yeong-hye functions in the present life in search of new truths, can be analyzed through Bakhtin's conceptualization of dialogism (Bakhtin 1981) that places dialogue at the center of his theory of meaning. Drawing on a distinction between dialogic and monologic tendencies in a literary text, he elaborates on the dialogic nature of discourse, which inherently accommodates multiple voices and is, therefore, by definition, polyphonic. Every utterance engages in a dialogic relationship with others, echoing and inhabiting the voice of the other, just as existing and emerging texts within a genre answer to each other (Pearce 2006). Bakhtin's concept of the multiplicity of social voices manifests on an individual level within Yeong-hye through the dialogic interaction between her dreams and her real-life choices. This interaction creates space for her silenced, marginalized voice to be heard above the monologic, hegemonic, patriarchal voice.

2.2 The Feast of Transgressive Metamorphosis: Cannibalism as a Rite of Passage and Female Desire in *Raw*

In Han's *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye's act of biting into the white-eyed, small bird's flesh marks her abject relationship to meat eating and the inherent violence within it. Although her rejection to eat nonhuman animal meat can be seen as a refusal

to partake in the carnivorous and patriarchal violence that dominates her world, the violent imagery of clenching the bird in her palm and biting it complicates this narrative. The act highlights the inescapability of violence, even in her aspiration to become arboreal. Ducournau's *Raw* (2016), which centers on the metamorphosis of the female protagonist in the opposite direction from a vegetarian to a cannibal, also acknowledges violence as an inescapable feature of the human condition. Whereas Yeong-hye's metamorphosis is driven by a desire to leave the bounds of the human species, Justine's transformation into a cannibal involves ritualistic cannibalism as a rite of passage into womanhood and a means to sexual discovery. *Raw* tells the coming-of-age story of a young woman, Justine (Garance Marillier), who discovers her identity and cannibalistic sexual desires while studying at a veterinary college. The narrative marks a transition from abstaining from animal flesh to consuming human flesh. Justine, raised by her parents as a vegetarian from birth, is forced by senior students to partake in violent hazing rituals, leading to intense physical and emotional humiliation. This marks the moment when, for the first time, she eats raw animal meat and gradually gives into her cannibalism.

This sub-section turns to *Raw*, which offers a unique perspective on the metamorphosing female body and ecophobic discourses that are deeply embedded in the imagery of cannibalism. Ecophobia, Estok claims, organizes the way we think about food and plays a significant role in defining the boundaries of species identity by attributing an instrumental anthropocentric value to animals as edible meat (2018). Justine's cannibalism in *Raw* reverses this ecophobic stance, which presupposes the ontological priority of the human over the nonhuman, by rendering human flesh fit for human consumption. The film offers a different perspective on how the female body navigates violence and desire. Unlike Yeong-hye who retreats into the arboreal realm to escape the patriarchal violence, which paradoxically culminates in self-harm as an attempt to regain control over her body, Justine's transformation into a cannibal reveals her body's 'monstrous' potential and marks her descent into abjection by transgressing the cannibalism taboo. She navigates her taboo sexual impulses, both cannibalistic and incestuous, through her immersion in the violence of consuming human flesh.

Based on a close reading of the film, this sub-section explores the relationship between acts of animal meat consumption and the patriarchal domination and suppression of female sexuality in carnivorous societies. It traces the psychological and physical changes in the lead female character, specifically focusing on how she perceives and connects with her body and sexuality. In doing so, it explores the potential of the film as a medium for engaging with the generative possibilities of abjection, positively reconstituting the sexual and gendered marginality of the fe-

male body by transforming it into a site of sexual self-discovery. It suggests that the representation of the vegetarian in the film as a “cannibalistic carnivore” (Packham 2019) blurs the boundaries between the human and nonhuman and fills the protagonist, the spectator, and even her sister, who has similar cannibalistic tendencies, with loathing and disgust because it signals the return of the abject, the bestial within the human, that was cast away.

Ducournau’s narrative, I posit, turns to the protagonist’s body as a site of non-heterosexual, non-reproductive, and non-anthropocentric female sexuality to show that the human subject is not always created through the ‘carnivorous sacrifice’ of the nonhuman. It also subverts ‘the heterosexual matrix,’ in Butler’s terms (1993), through Ducournau’s portrayal of cannibalism as a means of sexual pleasure derived from the consumption of another human being’s flesh. Ducournau presents a picture of body image understood through its capacity to devour, which creates a space for exploring a queer conception of sexuality using a Bakhtinian lens. Such an approach calls for a critique of the subordination of sexuality to a moral, heteronormative imperative intent on marking queer bodies as threatening, unnatural, and other.

The setting for the film is a veterinary college that is a highly disciplined, controlled, and hierarchical environment organized by patriarchy and heteronormativity. The first-year students, referred to as rookies, are advised by their elders, who call themselves the ‘great ones,’ to obey them. Bodies of nonhuman animals, both dead and alive, are subjected to invasive, intrusive medical examinations and surgical operations in the name of scientific study as part of the process of group formation through rituals (Delanoë-Brun and Beugnet 2021). The rituals serve to maintain heteronormative masculine norms and practices. Those who refuse to go through them are seen as traitors.

The rituals consist of multiple layers, each involving varying degrees of violence and abuse. Seniors gather all first-year students in the college yard to announce the start of initiation rites, marking their passage from juniority to seniority. The seniors march in perfect formation and sing a march, posturing as soldiers as if they were in a hyper-masculinized military context. During the first ritual, Justine is forced to eat raw rabbit kidney and is drenched in animal blood along with her peers. She tells the senior student that all her family members, including her, are vegetarians and asks her sister Alexia to confirm it. Alexia immediately denies it and eats a raw kidney to set an example for Justine. She then forces another one between Justine’s lips against her will, which leads her to develop a full-body rash. After eating the kidney, she develops an insatiable craving for meat. On the night of this hazing ritual, Justine rolls in bed in her dormitory room from side to side,

unable to sleep, constantly scratching scaly red bumps all over her legs, arms, and belly. The itch, I posit, symbolizes the return of the repressed, the cannibalistic urge that runs in the women of the family, which has been kept under control through submission to a higher moral order that is a refusal to eat meat as a conscious choice on ethical grounds rather than basing it on a consideration of health (Adams 2010; Frey 1983). The itching does not stop until her craving is satiated. Justine's recently developed carnivorous desires become so strong that she steals a hamburger patty from the college cafeteria. Unable to control her appetite, she eats a shawarma with her roommate, Adrien, at a truck stop. She is met with appalled looks from Adrien as she shoves in the meat as if she has not eaten for days. When she returns to her room on the college campus, she wakes up, opens the refrigerator at night, and starts eating raw chicken. Justine violently chews on the meat and burns with carnivorous desire.

A lorry driver approaches Adrien and Justine at the truck stop and begins conversing with them. After discovering that they study at the vet school, he mentions that he had to bring his sick pig to the college for treatment. Adrien asks why he has a pig in the back of his truck, and the driver replies, "We [lorry drivers] all do. To swap our boozier blood. Pigs are almost like humans. Have you not learned that yet? Genetically, or something" (Ducournau 2016, 35:32). The drivers use pigs to swap out their alcohol- and drug-infused blood with that of pigs, helping them avoid getting caught by the police for driving under the influence. Through the lens of abjection, pigs, in their animality and their association with filth, are construed as the abject Other that needs to be cast away by the human subject. Yet, ironically, these abject beings, from a non-anthropocentric approach, have been corporeally incorporated into that same human subject through xenotransfusion and as food. As Kristeva states: "Food becomes abject only if it is a border between two distinct entities or territories. A boundary between nature and culture, between the human and the nonhuman" (1982, 75).

This dialogue demonstrates how the limits of the skin, posited by the heteronormative and anthropocentric ontologies as the ultimate frontier of the human body, have been transgressed from within. Here, it is instructive to consider Haraway's analysis of the co-evolution of human and nonhuman life forms in *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003), where she questions the solidity of human identity and the skin as the outer boundary of the human body. She underscores the ever-changing nature of the body, which is constantly in flux, evolving through technological augmentation (the figure of cyborg) and biological interactions with other species, both of which are shaped by and shape culture. Haraway's work emphasizes the relationality of existence, highlighting the constitution, co-constitution, and the mutual shaping of

entities in relating. This blurs the lines between categories such as nature/culture and object/subject. As she states, “Through their reaching into each other, through their “prehensions” or graspings, beings constitute each other and themselves. Beings do not preexist their relatings. “Prehensions” have consequences. The world is a knot in motion. . . There are no pre-constituted subjects and objects, and no single sources, unitary actors, or final ends” (2003, 6).

This also resonates with Karen Barad’s notion of posthumanist performativity, which takes, as its basic premise, the entanglement of matter and meaning (2012). Barad, combining a diffractive reading of quantum physics, feminist science studies, and Butler’s theorization of performativity, questions the conceptions of causality, agency, and subjectivity predicated upon Cartesian dualisms. She highlights the inseparability of being and knowing, challenging the anthropocentric view that positions materiality as merely an effect of human agency. Instead, she proposes the notion of intra-action as pivotal to understanding the workings of performativity in nature. Similar to Haraway’s disruption of clear-cut boundaries between technological and organic, as well as between human and nonhuman, through the figures of the cyborg and companion species, Barad’s notion of agential realism, based on an ontological indeterminacy, replaces the concept of inter-action, which assumes ontologically separable, pre-established bodies or entities that then engage with each other, with the idea of intra-action. Barad’s agential realism contests the anthropocentric view of agency and redefines it as distributed across human and nonhuman entities. She conceptualizes agency as a dynamic process in which phenomena she describes as “dynamic topological reconfigurings/entanglements/relationalities/(re)articulations of the world” do not exist as separate entities but engage in an ongoing process of formation, continuously redefining and reconstituting themselves (2007, 141). Barad’s promotion of relational ontology and Haraway’s emphasis on the porosity of the human body, which is entangled with technologies and nonhuman species, have profound ecological implications for how humans position themselves in relation to their environment. Both scholars challenge the notion of a solid, complete body with impenetrable and fixed boundaries, separate from nature.

The conversation between the driver, Adrien, and Justine exemplifies this entanglement of human and nonhuman bodies mentioned earlier. The mixing of genetic materials from humans and pigs through blood transfusion blurs the boundaries between them as separate bodies, making it difficult to discern where the human starts and where the animal begins. Pigs are among the species with high biological and anatomical similarity to humans, a fact the driver also acknowledges. They are considered ideal organ donors for humans. The already blurred boundary due to genetic similarity between the species is further complicated and blurred by blood

swapping. The viewer is not informed whether more than one pig is brought to the slaughterhouse in trucks. If that pig the driver refers to is slaughtered to be consumed by humans, eating it would symbolize devouring one's fellows, turning the eater into a cannibal figure. The abject, aligned with the animal, now becomes a part of the self, within which a hybrid of human and nonhuman resides. This cannibal figure, inhabiting a space between nature and culture and performing a role to keep the two realms apart, embodies the transgression of social norms and signals the "gothicization of transcorporeality" (Fitzpatrick 2022, 19). I read blood swapping to represent the gothic trans-corporeal enmeshment of the human with the pig, borrowing from Alaimo (2010). This act reintegrates the figure of the cannibal into human social life, challenging the very exclusion upon which civilization is founded. The blood exchange between the pig and the driver also gives us a foundation on which to question the basic human-centered assumptions upon which Kristeva's theory of abjection is based.

As Merrall Llewelyn Price puts it: "The cannibalistic woman is the Bakhtinian grotesque body par excellence" (Price 2003, 24). From a Bakhtinian perspective, the grotesque body, which is always already becoming, manifests in the act of eating, allowing it to interact with the outer world and transgress the limits of the embodied self (Bakhtin 1984, 281). In this process, the eater blurs the boundaries between itself and the world by incorporating what the world offers into its body, devouring and eating triumphantly without being eaten. The eater transgresses her own limits and sustains, even enriches, its corporeal integrity at the expense of the eaten. In doing so, it loses the ambivalence that the Bakhtinian concept of the medieval grotesque associates with the cosmic commingling of the individual and the world. However, the grotesqueness manifests in the ambivalence of the act of cannibalistic eating itself, which is motivated by both desire and aggression, blurring the boundaries separating one's self from what one eats. The act of incorporation is ambivalent because it both relies on and troubles binary divides regarding what is inside and outside the body, as the eaten object, initially external to the eater's body, becomes a part of it (Kilgour 1990, 4). This absolute opposition, which is founded on a nostalgic longing for a state of presumed 'unity and oneness' where all that is alien and external is totally subsumed, seeks to remove any traces of difference and emphasizes sameness (Kilgour 1990, 5). The law "you are what you eat" obscures identity and makes it impossible to say for certain who's who" (Kilgour 1990, 6-7).

In Bakhtinian terms, the open mouth is one of those body parts that serves as an initial contact point with the world outside the individual through which the lover devours the beloved through the exchange of saliva in kissing, and the eater eats the food, whether human matter or otherwise, through "biting, rending and chewing"

(Bakhtin 1984, 281). In this sense, the orality of eating links in with the orality of kissing, but at an intense level, the boundary between the erotic and aggressive aspects of incorporation blurs, making it challenging to discern when the yearning for gratification transforms into a craving for consumption (Kilgour 1990, 8).

In one scene, Justine's sister Alexia accidentally cuts off a finger with scissors while giving Justine a Brazilian wax, causing her to faint. Justine calls the emergency services, who advise her to use ice to keep the finger cold so it could be sewn back on. While waiting for their arrival, she finds the severed finger on the floor, holds it, and watches the blood drip from the finger into her palm. After a moment of hesitation, she starts to lick it (See Figure 1). When she puts the finger in her mouth, she gets overrun by excitement, impulse, and hunger. She takes small bites of tendons and muscles from where the cut occurred. This is how the film reveals that Justine is a cannibal. Justine's cannibalistic desires take on an incestuous character, which implies an excessive proximity that both cannibalism and incest taboos as markers of civilization work to avert. Eating her sister's flesh is a grave transgression because it takes the form of a doubly incestuous transgression — “one member of the family devouring another” (Arens (1979) as cited in Price (2003, 24-25)).

Figure 1: Justine savoring Alexia's severed finger



Justine, now unable to resist her previously unknown hunger for human flesh, discovers shortly after being discharged from the hospital that her sister Alexia shares the same cannibalistic urges. Alexia then offers to teach her how to obtain human flesh. Alexia takes Justine to the side of the road just like an animal, teaching their

young how to hunt and procure food to survive. They hide in ambush just like animal predators waiting for their prey, but with the difference that Alexia is after her own kind, hunting for human flesh. Unable to stop her, Justine watches Alexia jump in front of a passing car, causing it to veer off the road. Seeing her sister lying on the road, Justine gets worried and panicked. After checking on Alexia, Justine walks over to the car with an anxious expression. She sees two men inside: one in the driver's seat, with his forehead resting on the steering wheel and blood streaming from his head, and the other in the passenger seat, covered in blood but still breathing. Ducournau uses a close-up of the blood-covered man's Adam's apple, focusing on his shallow breathing while the car horn blares incessantly in the background as the driver's head slumps onto it after he passes out. Justine walks away from the car; meanwhile, Alexia, depicted in a calm posture, passes by and opens the car door. "Don't! What are you doing? Stop. Why are you opening the door?" Justine yells at her sister and looks away (Ducournau 2016, 52:59). The camera captures a deep focus on Justine's uneasy look, her breath coming in heavy pants, while the landscape behind her is blurred.

The shot is filled with diegetic sound – the loud, incessant honking of the car horn that creates a sense of uneasiness in the spectator and reflects the discomfort and horror Justine experiences. She struggles with the idea of eating a wounded fellow human and transgressing the cannibalism taboo. Alexia leans into the car and then turns to Justine, saying, "He won't make it," as if seeking her sister's approval to eat his flesh. Meanwhile, the blurriness in the background gradually fades, and Alexia, with her mouth covered in blood, fixes her gaze on Justine (Ducournau 2016, 53:28). They stare at each other and stay silent for a while. Then Alexia reaches into the car and takes a bite from his brain. In this shot, the camera stays focused on Alexia as Ducournau displays a graphic image of her in the act of eating one man's brain exposed through an open wound in his skull. By using a close-up shot of his Adam's apple and the gulping movement in his throat, Ducournau suggests that her transgression is not only a deviation from the moral code, dictating human beings not to eat their fellows but also a descent into animality. Eating him uncooked forces the spectator to confront the source of the food, the human, without allowing them to disconnect from it. What makes her transgression even more loathsome and horrific is her consumption of raw human flesh. As Carol Adams explains, "[w]ithout cooking, meat would not be palatable... [C]ooking masks the horrors of a corpse and makes meat eating psychologically and aesthetically acceptable" (2010, 155). Humans become consumable commodities that are eaten raw. While that bite divests her of her humanity and symbolizes her descent into the realm of the animal, "it invariably and ironically also functions to reaffirm it, since membership in the

human species is a prerequisite for the eater of human flesh to be considered a cannibal” (Price 2003, 88).

Justine runs to her in rage, forces Alexia to spit the bite out, and pushes her to the ground. Justine’s reaction leaves Alexia feeling unappreciated, leading her to respond with frustration: “I did this for you, idiot! You need to learn, right? (2016, 53:51). This scene reveals that it is not Alexia’s first time acting on her cannibalistic impulses. It is not the first time she slides into abjection as she, a member of the human species, blurs the distinction between the flesh of a nonhuman animal and the flesh of a human one, both of which are butchered and dismembered for consumption. This scene foregrounds ecogothic fears of the return of the animal whose abjection is necessary, from an anthropocentric gaze, for the self to emerge. In this respect, Docournau activates ecophobia to challenge and problematize the logic of carnivorous sacrifice as central to the constitution of subjectivity (Derrida 1992) by portraying the vegetarian female protagonists as ‘cannibalistic carnivores’ (Packham 2019, 91).

Justine’s cannibal appetite, I argue, can be read through Judith Butler’s theory of gender melancholia, which builds on Freud’s theory of melancholy, particularly in relation to the incorporation and subsumption of homosexuality within normative heterosexuality. In his 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud states that the experience of the loss of a beloved one leads to a process whereby the ego identifies with the desired and loved other, incorporating it into its very structure in order not to lose it and harbor it within the self (Freud 1964). He elaborates on what differentiates mourning from melancholia in terms of how an individual manages the pain of loss. In mourning, the ego becomes inhibited and restricted while absorbing itself in the grief process. However, in the aftermath, it does not cling to the lost love object but instead frees itself and preserves its integrity. According to Freud, melancholia becomes pathological, manifesting as withdrawal from the outer world, ego depletion, inhibition, and profound depression, limiting and debasing of the self. The individual cannot work through grief and severs bonds with the lost other. Rather than losing the loved one, the ego manages and overcomes its pain through imitation and replication of the other’s qualities and characteristics, an absorption of the other into the self. This, Freud argues, creates a dichotomy between that part of the ego, which seeks to protect its integrity by letting go of the love object, and that which torments and blames itself for having willed to abandon it. As he explains, “the ego wants to incorporate this object into itself, and, in accordance with the oral or cannibalistic phase of libidinal development in which it is, it wants to do so by *devouring* it” [emphasis added] (Freud 1964, 249-50). Such an understanding foregrounds ambivalence, whether constitutional or arising from lived experience,

as a predisposing factor to melancholia, which can intensify or trigger the already-present feelings of abandonment, disappointment, insult, and loss. The internalized other is both desired and disdained, loved and hated, which is key to the formation of the ego.

The replacement of libidinal investment in a love-object by the ego's identification with the lost other in the state of melancholia, Judith Butler claims, not only plays a vital role in the formation of its character but also pertains to 'the acquisition of gender identity' (2006, 79). Butler builds on Freud's definition of melancholy as the phantasmatic incorporation and preservation of the lost love-object in and as the ego (Butler 1997, 132). In her gendered reading of melancholia, Butler proposes that a melancholic identification with the lost object-cathexis is pivotal to the process of the ego's assumption of a gendered character. For her, the positions of masculine and feminine within the heterosexual matrix are accomplished through prohibition and repudiation of homosexual attachment and desire, resulting in their loss. The melancholic ego installs the prohibited and barred object as part of itself and preserves it as what Butler calls "repudiated identification." It buries this ungrievable loss in inaccessible regions of the psyche. This identification, Butler claims, "contains within it both the prohibition and the desire, and so embodies the ungrieved loss of the homosexual cathexis" (1997, 136). The normative prohibition on homosexuality culminates in the experience of homosexual desire through loss, which Butler explains as follows:

"... This is a preemptive loss, a mourning for un-lived possibilities. If this love is from the start out of the question, then it cannot happen, and if it does, it certainly did not. If it does, it happens only under the official sign of its prohibition and disavowal" (1997, 139).

Though Butler's reading of melancholia focuses on the formation of gender through melancholic identification, it provides valuable insights to address Justine's sense of loss and grief by analyzing the scene where she bites her wrist while making out to her roommate Adrien, who identifies as gay (See Figure 2). In this scene, driven by her newfound cannibalistic desires and hunger, Justine tries to make her way on top of Adrien and sinks her teeth into his bicep hard. Having the upper hand in this fight for dominance, Adrien manages to push her away. Seemingly unable to resist her craving for human flesh, Justine instead bites her wrist and moans in pleasure derived from the release of unsatiated desire. This aligns closely with the depiction of sexual intercourse as an act of consumption, where two bodies become one in a less permanent and less ambiguous way, yet without the disintegration of individual corporeal boundaries (Kilgour 1990, 7).

Figure 2: Justine biting her wrist



Justine becomes who she is both as a woman and a vegetarian through being subject to a double prohibition. First, she abjects the mother, the woman she cannot be and cannot love as an object of desire. Second, she represses her cannibalistic desires. The prohibition on cannibalism operates throughout a primarily carnivorous and civilized existence, which allows the communal eating of nonhuman animal flesh but forecloses the eating of one's fellow humans. Cannibalism represents an inheritance that she receives from her mother, an inheritance she is taught to reject but which is nonetheless incorporated and phantasmatically preserved in her ego. In line with Butler's framing of melancholy, I posit that Justine grieves the cannibal version of herself that is denied to her because of her vegetarian upbringing, which regulates her eating behaviors and sexual pleasure intertwined with these cannibalistic urges. In this context, cannibalism can be thought of as a "preemptive loss" that is disavowed and negated as a possibility, which in turn leads to the establishment of the 'I' predicated upon that disavowed possibility. As her cannibalism is a maternal inheritance, its rejection implies that Justine cannot grieve the loss of a connection to her mother.

Abraham and Torok's notion of introjection, which they derive from Sándor Ferenczi (1909), and Torok's conception of cryptic mourning, can further illuminate this scene. Abraham and Torok draw a distinction between introjection and incorporation in their analysis. Introjection means 'casting inside' and refers to a gradual process of the enlargement of the ego through the assimilation and absorption of the love-object into itself, "the constantly renewed process of self-creating-

self” (1994, 100). Second, Abraham and Torok associate incorporation with fantasy, which asserts itself in response to the failure of introjection, the refusal to mourn and acknowledge a loss so as not to have to deal with it. As they state, “the fantasy of incorporation merely stimulates profound psychic transformation through magic... So in order not to have to “swallow” a loss, we fantasize swallowing (or having swallowed) that which has been lost...” (1994, 126). Incorporation retains that which is foreign within the self as foreign (Kuzma 2019, 180) and thus halts the process by which the ego broadens and enriches itself by including libidinally charged objects. Introjection, on the other hand, designates the inclusion of the drives and fantasies of desires occasioned by the object in the ego, achieved through the removal of repression. It is in relation to this failure to fully acknowledge the loss that Abraham and Torok propose the notion of the crypt, which refers to the erection of “a secret tomb inside the subject” occasioned by “inexpressible mourning” (1994, 130). The crypt is where a love-object that has not been grieved is buried alive as a full-fledged person. This process is marked by the transformation of the lost love-object into an “intrapsychic secret” buried within the self (1994, 131). One possible reading might be that as Justine cannot fully acknowledge or mourn the loss of her inheritance that is denied to her, she builds a “secret tomb” within the ego and buries the cannibal ‘I’, the very possibility of which is negated and disavowed, behaving as if no loss or repudiation had occurred.

When the sister’s parents hear about Alexia’s hospitalization mentioned earlier, they immediately come to the hospital, where Alexia tells them that her dog, Quicky, ate her finger. The father tells Justine that they will have to put Quicky down to prevent him from doing it again: “An animal that has tasted human flesh isn’t safe. If he likes it, he’ll bite again” (Ducournau 2016, 49:55). Here, the animal Justine’s father is referring to could be understood as either human or nonhuman. Pointing to Quicky as the perpetrator of the act could be seen as a justification for Alexia’s insatiable yet suppressed desire from a Kristevan perspective. This desire, the antithesis of civilized life, is projected onto the dog, conceived as the nonhuman other, thus allowing her to keep this family secret and incestuous desire buried in the crypt. The imposition of a vegetarian diet on Justine and Alexia by their mother can be seen as a way of keeping something dreadful – meat, a reminder of the cannibal within the self – at bay, preventing it from rising to consciousness. This symbolizes the incorporation of the maternal body, temporally relegated by Kristeva to the semiotic chora, by the subject-as-yet-to-come into being yet undifferentiated from the abjected mother, threatening to dissolve the self radically (West 2007, 236). Kristeva says, “I give up cannibalism because abjection (of the mother) leads me toward respect for the body of the other, my fellow man, my brother” (1982,

79). For Kristeva, both separation from the maternal body, which is crucial for individuation, and from the animal, which is critical to becoming a member of the human species, are based on prohibitions and prescriptions regarding eating (Oliver 1993). In her schema, this process of subject formation and entry into the Symbolic requires an abstinence from cannibalistic urges. She proposes that the fear of the fecundity of the maternal body not only renders her body repulsive and inedible but also deems all other bodies repugnant and inedible (Oliver 1993). The very existence of cannibal sisters both acknowledges and challenges Kristeva's theory of abjection and Butler's theory of gender melancholia. They abject their mother in the process of becoming a human being on an individual level. Still, they internalize her attributes and incorporate her cannibalistic urges into the very structure of the self to harbor her within. They metaphorically devour their mother and become one with that abject archaic figure which strengthens, rather than dissolves, their sense of self and enables them to discover who they are as individuals.

In conclusion, Justine confronts her repressed desires and renegotiates societal taboos through her metamorphosis into a cannibal. Her cannibalistic urges, which she inherits from her mother, become a path towards her sexual awakening and self-discovery. By turning human flesh into edible meat, Justine's cannibalism blurs the lines between the predator and the prey, the human and the nonhuman as well, revealing the role flesh consumption plays in shaping species identity. The violent and grotesque imagery of eating raw flesh highlights the ecophobic tension between the humanity's pursuit of dominion over the natural world and its need to tame its own impulses. Justine's craving for human flesh becomes a monstrous reflection of the exploitative and hierarchical relationship between humans (the eater) and the natural world (the eaten). Her journey leads to her confrontation with the abject through her cannibalistic inheritance, which serves as a thread that ties her not only to her mother but also to the repressed and darker aspects of her sexual desires. Through her metamorphosis, she reclaims the maternal inheritance that she was taught to reject. This reclaiming of the abjected maternal can be read as enabling her to unlock the Crypt, to use Torok and Abraham's terminology (1994), and restore communication with her desires that are buried deep in the unconscious and denied expression.

3. HUMAN AND NONHUMAN ENTANGLEMENTS IN LARISSA LAI'S *SALT FISH GIRL* AND ANITA DESAI'S *FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN*

3.1 Posthuman Metamorphosis, Memory and Contagion

Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* is set in post-independence India and tells the story of Nanda Kaul, who decides to retreat to Kasauli - a hill station south of Shimla established during the British colonial rule from 1858 to 1947 - to isolate herself from the outer world and live as a recluse in nature. The only company she has in this place is the old servant and cook, Ram Lal. "Everything she [Nanda Kaul] wanted was here, at Carignano, in Kasauli. Here, on the ridge of the mountain, in this quiet house... She wanted no one and nothing else. Whatever else came, or happened here, would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction" (Desai 1977, 3). The narrative suggests that Nanda Kaul left her flamboyant life in Punjab where, while surrounded by servants and ayahs as the widow of an Anglicized Vice-Chancellor, she was intensely burdened with domestic duties and familial obligations. This self-isolation that she had so longed and prepared for is disrupted by a letter sent by her daughter Asha stating that her great-granddaughter, Raka, is coming to spend the summer in Kasauli.

Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* (2002), on the other hand, is set in a futuristic dystopian society and tells the story of an immortal Chinese goddess of genesis, Nu Wa, with the ability to morph into life forms, human and nonhuman alike. The story is narrated in alternating voices: Nu Wa, who reincarnates as a "bawling black-haired baby girl" in late 1800's China, and Miranda Ching, a later reincarnation of Nu Wa living in a futuristic dystopian society in Canadian Pacific Northwest (2002, 48). The stories of Nu Wa and Miranda develop and merge as the novel progresses. Miranda's mother, Aimee, conceives her at the age of sixty-three after consuming a mutated durian fruit, which enables women to reproduce without male insemination.

Towards the end of the novel, Miranda also eats one of those genetically modified durian fruits and gives birth to a “black-haired and bawling... little baby girl” (269) in a hot spring in the mountains.

This chapter focuses on the theme of bodily metamorphosis in relation to the abject and grotesque female body to demonstrate how racial, gender, and natural alterity have become associated with contagion in the colonial mindset. It examines how the crisis of contagion is played out on the female body and sexuality, which are construed as abject, monstrous, and ferocious in the colonial imaginary. It analyzes how metamorphosis takes effect and shapes female protagonists’ sense of self and others within the context of abjection. Furthermore, it aims to show how Desai and Lai activate the ecophobic imagination to illustrate this imperial attitude toward native animals and peoples, which is triggered by a sense of vulnerability to threats posed by gendered and racial otherness. It investigates the role of ecophobic ideas about nature and the natural as contagious and menacing in shaping raced, sexed, and classed female bodies in the colonial narrative.

In *Fire on the Mountain*, I focus on the Hindu mythical figure of the female ghost-vampire, the *churail*, as an embodiment of the abject female body, endowed with grotesque features and undergoing metamorphosis to seek revenge on the men who have abused, oppressed, and exploited her. I aim to demonstrate the connection between the discriminatory treatment and oppression of socially marginalized Indian women, who are believed to rise from the dead as *churails*, by masculine colonial power, and of nonhuman animals used in colonial laboratory experiments. I argue that Desai uses a language of haunting to recount past traumas, revise our sense of what the colonization process entails, and redefine it in non-anthropocentric terms by including the nonhuman world as targets of violence and subjugation. Her eco-gothic reading of Indian colonialism reveals how histories of ecophobia and gendered oppression are interwoven.

On the other hand, Lai posits metamorphosis as a trans-corporeal movement across bodies, times, and places within more-than-human worlds (Alaimo 2010). This movement serves as a response to homogenizing tendencies of colonial domination and a critique of the marginalized positioning of queer populations within the heterosexual colonial and neocolonial imaginary. In Lai’s text, I focus on human-fish hybrid factory workers - the Sonias - and technologically augmented cyborg cleaners - the Janitors - as depictions of abject posthuman female bodies in cross-species metamorphosis. In Lai’s fictive world, metamorphosis through shape-shifting acquires an ecologically relevant quality. The novel intertwines human and nonhuman beings in a tangle of relationships that challenge Eurocentric and androcentric tran-

scandalism, which positions the heterosexual white male as the measure of all things and separate from nature. The shape-shifting goddess Nu Wa invests the life forms she morphs into with mobility, making them communicators of histories of colonial violence and agents of queer “contagious” desires. By critically engaging with humans’ relationship to the more-than-human worlds and foregrounding smell as the site of same sex desire, Lai questions reigning anthropo- and andro-centric paradigms, allowing us to engage with ways nonhuman agency intervenes “in the world’s becoming” (Barad 2003, 803).

3.2 Smelly, Anti-colonial Metamorphosis in the “Mesh”

Salt Fish Girl opens with a Chinese origin myth that accounts for the creation of human beings by the goddess Nu Wa, also known as Nügua in Chinese mythology. Depicted with a human head and torso and sometimes a dragon or snake tail, Nu Wa narrates the myth from her own perspective. She describes how, as a celestial being, she created life on Earth on the bank of the Yellow River. She makes clay figures out of mud in her snakelike image, seeking to relieve her solitude with the company of human beings. “As soon as [she] gave it a mouth and eyes, it too began to laugh at [her]” (Lai 2002, 3). When confronted with the contemptuous gaze and arrogance of her creations, the Genesis mother, in a fury, splits their tails in two, dumps them into the river, and starts making clay figures from scratch until she falls asleep out of sheer exhaustion. Upon waking, she finds that “[t]he things,” as Nu Wa calls them, have survived her wrath. To get her creations to treat her better, Nu Wa teaches them agriculture and fishing. They, in turn, build temples for her, become her devotees, and offer meat sacrifices such as pork and chicken. Unable to bear watching her creations fade and dim with age, Nu Wa endows them with the ability to procreate by making “strong ones into women and weak ones into men” to continue their lineage (2002, 5). Moved by a desire to experience their pleasure and passion, she gives up her divinity to live a life in human flesh. She dives deep into a cave in the green lake, sees a giant green fish with “eyes older than the world,” and asks to be transformed into a human being (2002, 8). Swallowing the pearl that the green fish says will grant her immortality, her painful metamorphosis begins.

In her human form, the Chinese goddess falls into a water tank in a nearby town close to the lake. She begins to shrink in size until she becomes undetectable by the eye. Although the specific life form she transforms into is not mentioned, textual hints suggest that the human-snake hybrid goddess morphs into a bacterium con-

taminating the water. One of her young female devotees, who prays for children, drinks a cup of “unboiled river water” from the cistern and swallows her (48). Lodging herself in her creation’s womb, Nu Wa induces parthenogenesis and is reborn as a “bawling black-haired baby girl” (48) in late 1800’s China. She incarnates as a lesbian woman and falls in love at fifteen with the daughter of a salt-fish merchant, known as the Salt Fish Girl. The body of the Salt Fish Girl stinks “of that putrid but enticing smell. . .” (48).

As a result of her affection for the Salt Fish Girl, Nu Wa chooses to enter into spinsterhood. Since being a spinster is not an option for the Salt Fish Girl, whose father forces her to conform to patriarchal customs, they flee their village and end up in Canton, a trading city in South China. Meanwhile, the Salt Fish Girl’s father is wrongfully sentenced to death for allegedly murdering Nu Wa. In Canton, Nu Wa meets a mysterious woman named Edwina, alias the “bird-woman,” who takes her to the city of Hope on the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness. There, Nu Wa is arrested by coast guard officers for illegal immigration and drug smuggling. She is locked up for five years in a women-only prison. Nu Wa, still youthful, returns to China after spending fifty years on the island. She reveals to her brother that she has been alive all along and that the Salt Fish Girl’s father did not kill her. To avoid scandal, her brother adopts her as his daughter. He then pressures her to marry the son of the Salt Fish Girl’s uncle to preserve the family’s wealth, which had been transferred from the salt fish vendor’s family to theirs after they falsely accused the Salt Fish Girl’s father of murder. Consequently, she marries him.

Nu Wa’s brother mocks and humiliates Nu Wa’s husband by asking him if he has “any more fish swimming around in [his] stagnant ponds?” (Lai 2002, 180). Still in love with the Salt Fish Girl, Nu Wa refuses to engage in sexual relations or have children with her husband. Her husband, to avoid scandal, instructs her to find another man to father a child. Accused of adultery, Nu Wa is ordered to be drowned in the river, encased in a pig basket to prevent her escape. The story of Nu Wa’s human incarnation ends as she merges with the seed of the durian tree, which is eventually eaten by Aimee. Afterward, Aimee gives birth to Miranda, Nu Wa’s lesbian incarnation in futuristic Pacific Northwest society:

“There was a tree growing beside the water. . . It was a durian tree in full flower. . . I made myself small as a worm, crawled through the tiny aperture of a barely opened bud, and coiled myself round and round its small black heart. . . Slowly, a shell grew over me, leather-hard and spiky on the outside, but on the inside smooth, veined and sticky moist. Around me seeds grew thick, and over them a dense yellow-white flesh. . . She knew I was coming. . . Though I held the heart of the fruit, the fruit held me. Its strange acids worked at my flesh in a way

that discomfited me. I found a small hole in the seed. I scaled down further and crawled inside. *I became the seed and the seed became me. Whatever grows from it will be mine* [emphasis added]" (Lai 2002, 208-9).

In this metamorphosis scene, Nu Wa recognizes Aimee as her mother and Stewart as her father and identifies with Miranda. Miranda also identifies with Nu Wa through fistulas, one behind each ear, which she thinks "served the function of memory, recalling a time when we [humans] were more closely related to fish, a time when the body glistened with scales and turned in the dark, muscled easily through water" (Lai 2002, 108). By weaving links between past, present, and future, Lai creates a narrative of circular metamorphosis to show the entanglement of human and more-than-human life forms and subverts the linear logic of heterosexual procreation. In her fictive world, bodies materialize through constant corporeal interaction, either directly or indirectly. Disparate corporeal existences do not blend imperceptibly and form a hybrid creation such that the demarcation lines cannot be defined clearly. They become what and who they are in the process of relating. This echoes Timothy Morton's concept of "the mesh," which refers to the interconnectedness of all life forms, sentient and insentient beings. Based on his reading of Darwin's theory of evolution, Morton claims that there is no absolute center in the mesh from which control over peripheries or edges is exercised. It is hard to tell where one life form ends and another begins, "Nothing exists all by itself, and so nothing is fully "itself"" (Morton 2010, 15). Life forms are porous and liquid, constantly leaking across different temporalities and spatialities. They merge, overlap, and clash with others, retaining traces of corporeal encounters and witnessing memories of other bodies they inhabit. Lai skillfully interweaves an ecogothic perspective with this grotesque mode of being, underscoring the ecological connectedness of life forms. "Instances of humans consumed in one way or another by nature are common to ecogothic narratives" (Keetley and Sivils 2017, 9). The text normalizes the literal melding of Nu Wa with the durian tree while challenging heteronormative ideas of what counts as natural in a queer context. I propose that what Nu Wa experiences is not terror caused by the ecophobic anxieties of becoming absorbed by the nonhuman, but rather a sense of mutual becoming and a transgressive sexual intimacy marked by a desire to know the other. As Patricia MacCormack points out:

"Becoming shares with seduction the entering into an alliance with an entity by which we are seduced because it is other, because it is strange and not us. Seduction is not a desire to know or assimilate the other, it wants the other to change us and us to change the quality of the other to create a unique hybrid beyond any sexual narrative. Seduction is a sexual technique of queer becomings" (2009, 115).

The second part of the novel is narrated by Miranda Ching, a further reincarnation of Nu Wa, who lives in a sanitized, mega-corporate-controlled city called Serendipity in the 2040s and 2060s. Miranda's cabaret singer mother, Aimee, conceives her at the age of sixty-three after consuming a mutated durian fruit with parthenogenetic qualities. On the day Miranda is born, Aimee smells a pungent scent that wafts through the air like "the reek of cat pee tinged with the smell of hot peppers that have not been dried and are on the verge of going off" (Lai 2002, 13). She immediately recognizes this "familiar," "intriguing" and "illicit" smell as durian, which her family smuggled into the country before it was divided into two geographical zones. Her husband, Stewart, confronts her about the risks of getting durian from the Unregulated Zone, where the citizens of walled cities are barred from entering. Yet, she "want[s] it anyway" (Lai 2002, 14).

Stewart sees the fruit as a "wild thing" that is unsafe. To him, the environment in which durian grows and the fruit itself represent fear. Despite his fear of being caught and his perception of the plant as wild and strange, he brings one to Aimee. Mesmerized by the sight of it, Aimee starts making love to Stewart as the durian stink becomes "a source of sensuality" (Lai 2002, 21), and she gets pregnant with Miranda who has the same smell as durian. In this scene, the fruit becomes a thing that resists categorization. While it is depicted as motionless and inscrutable, Lai endows it with mobility. It "tumbles between them [Aimee and Stewart]" with hunger, "its green spikes biting greedily into their flesh," "its pepper-pissy juices mixing with their [scents], and the blood of the injuries it inflict[s] with its green teeth" (15). As such, the durian is portrayed as a monstrous and anthropomorphic figure as if it desires to feed on human flesh and blood, underscoring Stewart's ecophobic fear of dangers that take root in the Unregulated Zone. The act of copulation itself evokes the posthumanist concept of the imbrication of nature and humans. Durian, with its green spikes, can be understood to have a sexual desire, giving love bites to Aimee and Stewart, sinking its spikes into their skin, and making them bleed. It causes them to incorporate an "absolute alterity" within themselves, which the durian embodies (Keetley 2016). The unruly, untameable fruit transgresses borders meant to confine it and actively partakes in the act of sex. It defies and dissolves the boundaries that draw the contours of the human body and differentiates it, through an anthropocentric lens, from the natural world. Lai complicates Miranda's origin story and undoes the hegemony of heteronormative human procreation by assigning sexual agency to durian. She leaves the reader with these unanswered questions: Is Miranda's birth the result of a heterosexual and reproductive romance between her parents? Is she a human-plant hybrid? Was it durian that got Aimee, who "was a good eight years past menopause," pregnant? (15).

Miranda's body produces a foul hot pepper and cat pee odour that "get[s] into everything," "not only infuse[s] the external fabric of [the] house [but] seep[s] into the skin of all family members" (Lai 2002, 16-7). This liquid-like nature of the smell exposes the porosity of the body and situates it as a corporeal entity that leaks. As Patricia MacCormack states in her discussion of queer becomings, "[f]luids and fluidity resist the spatial and temporal nature of existence," which can be seen as a form of becoming in the world that the queer celebrates (2009, 115). Smell has the potential to transform and change the other in the encounter, but without an imperative to assimilate and master. As such, it unfolds a queer becoming that defies the conditions of corporeal existence embodied by the white, male, unified human and defined in spatio-temporal terms. When Miranda begins school, her smell, combined with her origins as "the only Asian child in her class" (23), causes other students to recoil from her and give her derogatory nicknames related to her smell, including "Cat Box," "Kitty Litter," and "Pissy Pussy" (21). Her alterity, based on race and odour, cannot be kept at bay; it sneaks through and creeps into the narrowest cracks and crevices, causing her to experience social abjection.

She is pushed to exist on the fringes of the school's social life, standing on the playground's edge watching others play games. However, after their expulsion from Serendipity, she feels much more comfortable working at the grocery store where her family sells durian in the Unregulated Zone. Her smell blends with that of durians and the larger environment. However, she finds the thought of eating it disgusting and identifies it with the sensation of repulsion as it reminds her of her abjection. The smell does not exist outside her but oozes from within, emanating from her pores. The fruit itself is not the other that needs to be expelled, as it becomes her after Nu Wa crawls into its seed to be consumed by Miranda's mother. From an anthropocentric point of view, this signifies a border crossing and a fall into the abject state where Miranda becomes the nonhuman other. She cannot abject her smell without abjecting herself.

While Aimee finds Miranda's pungent smell "quite delightful" (15), Stewart sees it as a pathological condition that requires treatment. Stewart's stance reflects the colonial use of olfactory stereotypes to repress the colonized indigenous populations through deodorization, which served the function of creating an understanding of commons in colonized landscapes as "empty and uniform," "ready to receive settler culture's atmospheric embellishments and externalities" (Hsu 2020, 155). Miranda's durian-scented body functions as a racial marker that links with other signs and meanings – e.g., the smell of durian – which, from an orientalist point of view, are associated with the primitive and barbaric, in need of civilizing. In line with Hsu's discussion of smell as a colonial weapon of repression, I argue that the colonial

mindset, represented by the capitalist corporations, constructs Miranda's body as abject that is marked by the smell of durian, an exotic fruit native to Southeast Asia. Miranda's body embodies sensuality, relationality, and porosity, which sharply contrasts with the Enlightenment conception of body and materiality, defined by autonomy, independence, willpower, and rationality. Smell in Lai's fictive world ceases to be a marker of ethno-racial alterity and expresses a lesbian desire (Lai 2008; Liu 2009). By cultivating olfactory encounters as a tool to connect with the collective memories and environmental knowledge of indigenous people, Lai subverts the ocularcentrism and heteronormativity of Western culture.

Lai transforms smell into a powerful tool to illustrate the inseparability of speciesism, racism, and sexism in the colonial exploitation of indigenous peoples' labor and the land, a concept Val Plumwood refers to as "hegemonic centrism" (2001). The capitalist mega corporations, known as the Big Six, radically modify the ecology of the futuristic society in which Miranda and her family live. While citizens of walled cities eat uniform, standardized food that is "always vibrant bright and regular in shape," such as Saturna apples large enough to feed four people, the food that grows in the contaminated Unregulated Zone - like the ones offered to Stewart by an Asian man in virtual reality environment as a cure to Miranda's smell - are "strange, twisted and misshapen (Lai 2002, 31). The Big Six also clones female factory workers using genetic engineering technologies and mixing genes from different organisms. Two types of identical clones - Sonias and Miyakos - are produced in a controlled laboratory environment under Nextcorp's, another capitalist corporation, 'Diverse Genome Project.' Dr. Rudy Flowers, a famous doctor from Painted Horse, is the mind behind this cloning project. "Miyakos have cat genes. [Dr. Flowers] [s]ent them to all the factories to work for Pallas. All except two. One for a wife and one for a daughter" (252). The daughter in this quote is Miranda's lover Evie Xin, one of the identical fish-human hybrids produced by Dr. Flowers and a further reincarnation of the Salt Fish Girl whose "smell of salt fish was unmistakable" (161).

Miranda's father writes a letter to Dr. Flowers listing the symptoms she has been experiencing: a foul odour that stinks like durian, a skin condition he describes as psoriasis as Miranda sheds silver and translucent fish scales, two small fistulas above her ear, which is hereditarily passed from her mother Aimee who also had one beside her left ear. In his letter, Stewart also mentions the rumors about a disease that is linked to dreaming, which is being spread through the consumption of genetically modified foods produced by corporations. Miranda has dreams that make her recall memories from the past, leaking into her consciousness as if they were her own. Although she has doubts as to whether she has caught the disease or she had been born with it, her dreams, as pointed out by Yazıcıoğlu and Mackey (2021), serve

the function of evoking a pre-human past endowed with mythical qualities, tracing human evolution back to nonhuman. This past is marked by the entanglement of the human and nonhuman in unpredictable and infinite ways. Miranda's dreams connect her to Nu Wa as her hybrid ancestor, the goddess of human creation: "[T]he first little slips of the past returned, memories of a muddy river and of a body wide as a road and just as thick arcing through the cool dark and burning with a messy, generative fury" (Lai 2002, 186).

The sufferers of this "dreaming disease" commit suicide by drowning. However, Miranda is at ease with her dreams, which do not compel her to walk into the ocean but instead provide her with comfort. The disease that has no cure spreads through barefoot contact with the earth or the sand, "[n]ot everywhere but in certain areas close to where they've grown GE potatoes" (Lai 2002, 164). Dr. Flowers and his clone wife, Dr. Seto, theorize that it emerged due to the contamination of the land, which "might be the product of mass industrial genetic alteration practices" (Lai 2002, 102). The only way for the afflicted to relieve themselves of the pain caused by remembering every detail of the suffering inflicted by previous generations is to lay in a tub or, when the pain becomes unbearable, to walk into the ocean. This resonates with the Aboriginal concept of dream, which blurs the boundaries between consciousness and the unconscious, as well as between visceral and illusory experience. As Warry points out (1998, 14), for the Aborigines, the dream world offers a glimpse into reality, such as when hunters dream of animals and are shown where to find their prey. Dreams are where the wall between the physical and the spiritual world comes down and thins to film for they are understood to be entry points to the world of spirits. To showcase the permeability of two realms, Warry gives the example of the youth of Aboriginal communities who say they are driven to commit suicide due to hearing the voices of their beloved lost ones who reach out to them in the dream state.

Based on a close reading of two female characters, Miranda and Evie, as embodiments of more-than-human subjects, I argue that dreams not only act as portals to unearth and recount past traumas but also offer glimpses into alternate world makings, where the closet no longer governs same-sex desire and biotechnologically facilitated cross-pollination enables reproduction outside the heterosexual matrix.

The Sonias find a way to get rid of their tracking device and escape from Pallas shoe factory compounds to start a new life in the Unregulated Zone. This escape is not only a physical relocation, but also represents a break from and an alternative to mega corporations' capitalist logic of overaccumulation, extraction, and exploitation of the land and people. A queer posthumanist reading of Lai's text evokes

the figure of the collective, as illustrated by the Sonias, which challenges the Enlightenment conception of the human self as alienated from nature and superior to animate and inanimate life forms. Instead, life in the Unregulated Zone presents an alternative mode of embodiment that values the sense of belonging to a community, relationality, and accountability over individuality and singularity. As a queer cyborg collective, the Sonias, I posit, embody this ethos by extending the boundaries of the self through the encoding of cat and fish DNA in their genetic material. They blur the distinction between human and nonhuman and subvert human-centered approaches, which elevate the human above other life forms.

All-powerful capitalist corporations use bioengineering as a means to restore fertility in females, who are unable to conceive a child, through the introduction of human genes into fruits. Underlying this is the anthropocentric idea that humans can act on and manipulate nature through the mediation of technologically assisted reproductive technologies, which in turn act as instruments of patriarchal control over the female body. This exhibit of humans' meddling with nature comes with unforeseen consequences, as Sonia 14 points out:

"[O]f course the pollen blew every which way and could not be contained. And fertilized the fruit of trees bred for other purposes—trees bred to withstand cold climates, trees bred to produce fruit that would strengthen the blood. Perhaps some natural mutations were also involved." (Lai 2002, 58).

The Sonias discover that the durian tree is one of those trees whose fruit "could make women pregnant without any need for insemination" (Lai 2002, 258). In the contaminated zone where the Sonias live, durian forms due to cross-pollination that occurs naturally in the wild. They consume fertility-enhancing durians, which give them the ability to give birth to female clones created in their image. They cultivate cabbages and radishes to "support and strengthen the fetuses" (258). Dr. Flowers describes the resulting births as monstrous. He tells Evie that "the fertility those durians provided was neither natural nor controllable. It was too dangerous" (256). From an ecogothic perspective, the passage above illustrates nature's indifference to human intervention and highlights the dread faced by Dr. Flowers, "the God-Man," to use MacCormack's words (2009, 114). He seeks to extend his existence as producer of offspring through genetic manipulation of nonhuman nature, but he is confronted by the limits of his control over Sonias' bodies and the environment.

Working at Dr. Flowers' lab, Miranda listens to patients telling her the content of their dreams. She meets a woman who smells like radishes and has fairy-tale-like dreams about "young women rescued from tall towers" and "stolen fruits" (Lai

2002, 102). To Miranda, there is something quite familiar about these tales that subconsciously echoes or anticipates times when she will join the “free society of their own kind” that Evie and other Sonias built from scratch (256). I propose that this woman’s dream illustrates the text’s revision of the German fairy tale *Rapunzel* through a subversion of the stereotypical damsel in distress trope, the female waiting passively to be rescued by the heroic, acting male.

In the original version of the tale written by the Brothers Grimm in 1812, a heterosexual couple longs for but cannot conceive a child. One day, believing the Lord granted her request, the woman gets pregnant. She begins to crave rampion growing in a sorceress’ garden that could be viewed from their window, a garden around which a high wall was built. Unable to resist a pregnant woman’s cravings, the husband steals the herb from the garden in the darkness of the night to prevent his wife from falling ill, just like Miranda’s father gets one from the forbidden Unregulated Zone. After being caught by the witch stealing, he is forced to make a deal with her to give the child away in return for getting his wife as much as rampion he wants. When the child is born, the sorceress takes her away and names her Rapunzel after the herb. When Rapunzel reaches puberty and emerges as a beautiful young woman with long golden hair, the sorceress traps her in a tall tower where the only way in and out is through a tiny window. Whenever the witch wishes to go to the top of the tower, Rapunzel unbraids her hair and dangles it out the window for her to climb up. The softness in her voice while singing attracts a young prince who rides through the forest toward the tower where she is held captive. In Lai’s novel, I argue, “tall towers” stand for “grey compounds” in which “thousands, or even hundreds of thousands of women [the Sonias] in the world who looked like her [Evie]... were locked up” (Lai 2002, 216).

Metamorphosis is how the past leaks into the present. Following this logic, we are meant to understand the Sonias as further incarnations of female factory workers from 20th-century China. In the novel, harsh working conditions at the factories lead to the spread of mass hysteria among female workers who begin “howling and throwing themselves against the walls in sheer frustration with the dreariness of their toil and the damage it was exacting from their once young bodies” (123). A woman of Malaysian origin, a body marked by race and ethnicity, works at the same factory as the Salt Fish Girl for almost three years. She experiences hysterical outbursts, loses it due to “the tedious repetitiveness of the work” and begins “screaming and tearing at her hair” (122). Although they have no other choice but to work for the very people who oppress them to make a bare living, the Sonias, from the future, launch a rebellion against their capitalist oppressors represented by genetic engineers employed by mega-corporations to produce clones to work at the factories (Huang

2016).

As mentioned before, the Salt Fish Girl and Nu Wa decide to leave their past life behind and flee to the city of Canton, where the Salt Fish Girl kills a drunk man in a Western suit who attempts to rape her. A factory foreman sees her running away from the dead body and blackmails her into working on an assembly line to piece together the parts of wind-up toys in the early 1900s. As Nu Wa observes: “[S]he sat in the dim light, bleary-eyed” (118), “straining through a magnifying glass to attach tin torsos, wings, arms, beaks, legs, guns and bicycles to their spring and wind-ups with precise mechanical accuracy” (120). In one of the grey and “dilapidated” buildings unfit for human habitation in the factory district, there is a factory specializing in paper products where the Salt Fish Girl works. In the quotation below, mediated by Nu Wa’s gaze as narrator, Lai exposes the precarious working conditions that capitalists, making huge profits from their labor, impose on female workers who are paid poverty wages. In the quotation below, mediated by Nu Wa’s gaze as narrator, Lai exposes the precarious working conditions that capitalists, making huge profits from their labor, impose on female workers who are paid poverty wages. She offers her critique of how capitalism exacerbates socioeconomic inequalities and systematically discriminates against ethnic minorities and migrants, with women being negatively and disproportionately affected:

“The next alley dealt in paper products —lanterns, stationery, brightly dyed cutouts of opera masks, palace ladies, luscious flowers and exotic animals. Older women stamped bright dyes onto the paper. Younger women, their eyes still sharp, worked with tiny scissors under the low light, snipping away at the paper so that each figurine emerged in lacy detail beneath their hands. I did not linger long enough to notice their eyes growing dimmer, or notice the older women, nearly blind, wasting away in the dark corners of the factory mixing the colours and wheezing in reaction to the bright, powdery, dry chemical form of the dyes” (Lai 2002, 118).

These female factory workers from early 20th century China, one of whom was the Salt Fish Girl, bear a remarkable resemblance to the Sonias and Janitors both in their ethnic origins and in the way they have been ‘made’ to be used as cheap labor to increase capitalist profits and wealth accumulation. These workers in the passage above work under harsh conditions, putting their mental and physical health at risk, for they have been exposed to toxins and chemicals for “pitiful” wages, “barely enough to buy dinner for the evening,” in labor-intensive jobs (Lai 2002, 119). They are “racialized and gendered workers” (Huang 2016, 126) from the socio-economic margins of society,” dressed in identical tan-colored uniforms with military-style

pockets” (119). They are just like the female Janitors with their “dark bodies in blue uniforms,” mopping the school floors, and the Sonias with “brown eyes and black hair. . .” whose racialized bodies are their uniforms (160).

One of the unverified origin stories that spread among the Sonias is that they are derived from “a woman called Ai, a Chinese woman who married a Japanese man and was interned in the Rockies during the Second World War.” The woman’s body, along with her husband’s, were sold to science” after their death (160). The Sonias’ genes are “point zero three percent *Cyprinus carpio* – freshwater carp” (158). According to this origin story, Miranda’s lover Evie defines her kind as “a patented new fucking life form” whose number stand at a hundred thousand (Lai 2002, 158). Evie refers to the other female clones created by Dr. Flowers as her sisters (159).

These clones are the source of cheap labor, working in factories to produce consumer goods such as Pallas sneakers. Just like factory workers are surveilled by factory foreman and, as in the case of the Salt Fish Girl who had been forced into precarious work under the threat of being reported to the police, the Sonias are strictly monitored by a metal device, which Evie sarcastically calls “Guardian Angel” that is placed under their skin to “monitor [their] body temperatures, note the presence of disease, help rescuers find [them] if [they] get lost. . .” or, Miranda adds, “if [they] escape” (Lai 2002, 159). They are “cybernetic organism[s], hybrid[s] of machine and organism” spliced with human and carp DNA (1991, 149). In the walled sanitized cities, they are dehumanized and seen as less than human as Evie, in a conversation with Miranda, describes herself as a “closet Catholic” for “[o]nly those defined as persons” have the freedom to practice the religion of their choice (156). Evie tells Miranda she is “an early model”, “not designed for wits or willpower” (158). But in defiance of the hierarchical order of life imposed by the capitalist corporations which commodify and objectify their bodies as disposable and replaceable, as they own the exclusive right to produce worker clones, she rips her Guardian Angel from beneath her skin and becomes a fugitive on the run to fight against gendered, racialized and anthropocentric violence imposed on her kind. She joins other escapees, a bunch of Sonias, who are rumored to live together in a secret house making plans to sabotage Pallas.

Similarly, the transparency of the composite at the back of the Janitors signifies the urge of the conquering male gaze from nowhere, to quote Haraway (1991), to surveil female bodies that are inscribed as abject and unruly in need of taming and control. Miranda’s friend from school Ian is first to mention that the Janitors, illegal female cleaners, are the primary carriers of dreaming epidemic called the “Contagion”. They are technologically enhanced biological bodies whose internal organs

have been rearranged by Dr. Flowers. A transparent silicone composite functions as a skin replacing flesh and muscles on their backs which exposes internal organs to the voyeuristic gaze of others. Their hybrid cyborg bodies are amalgams of mechanic and organic parts which are no longer human, yet have human skin as the outer border of the body and internal human organs. This resonates with Haraway's cyborg figuration that posits bodies as technologically mediated objects of knowledge that do not preexist social relations they engage in but that materialize in the process of relating (1991). Lai's text, evoking the figure of the female cyborg clones, can be read as a work of queer posthumanism embracing its liminal position that refuses categorization. Janitors occupy a liminal position between human and machine as they are in between opposing states of life and death. They speak a language Miranda would not understand. It is not clear whether they can speak human language at all. Lai opens up a space of textual possibility that what they say or voices they make are transcribed onto the silicone composite placed at their back for they wear uniforms "with strange curling text ... printed in large white letters across their backs" (Lai 2002, 75). This unrecognizable language may, on the other hand, be linked to their racial and class identities based on the unrecognizable language they speak and their occupation as cleaners with dark bodies which has put them in a marginalized and oppressed position. What Dr. Flowers do resonates with Shelley's Victor Frankenstein by virtue of him playing the role of God. Even Evie sees herself as the progeny of the doctor and refers to him as father as Dr. Frankenstein's progeny, his monstrous creation calls him father. From Miranda's perspective, their organs had been arranged like "stones in a formal garden, mimicking the asymmetrical aesthetics of nature, but with human intention" (Lai 2002, 77).

3.3 *Churails*: A Descent into Wilderness

Churails are an extreme form of abjection as they are reminders of death, dwelling in the land of spirits and roaming the ravine of the Pasteur Institute amongst the carcasses of animals that were used in experiments in research centers and bacteriological laboratories established in early 20th century colonial India. It is believed that women who have been sexually and physically persecuted by male family members, whose earthly, carnal desires have not been fulfilled or who die during pregnancy, childbirth, in menstruation or confinement rise from the dead as churails. In different parts of India, they are also known as chudel or chudail. Churails are animated corpses, and thus occupy a liminal position between the living and the

dead.

Churails share some common features both with Kali, the goddess of death and destruction but also of life and creation in Hindu mythology, and with Indian animals used in experiments. The accounts from the medieval period locates Kali on the margins of Hindu society (Kinsley 1998) just like churails are believed to come from a lower caste in India, known as the Chûhra or “sweeper caste” (Crooke 1896, 1:454). They are placed at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy and are exposed to occupation-based discrimination by upper classes. People of this cast work as manual scavengers, dispose of, collect waste, and clear drains. What they do to make a living has been associated with filth and pollution (Ahmad and Shah 2022). Kali is also associated with low-caste people and most of her devotees come from this stratum of society, criminals and thieves. Ancient Sanskrit architectural treatise dating back to the 6th and 8th centuries states that Kali’s shrines are built outside the confines of the so-called civilization, close both to cremation grounds where she lives and to dwellings of the outcastes (Kinsley 1998, 70). There are different interpretations as to what Kali’s disheveled hair represents. Kali with her wild and loose hair revels in her non-conformity to social norms imposed upon Indian women, which culturally produces and centers bound hair as a site of social control along the lines of purity and pollution. Kinsley argues that customs prevent menstruating Indian women from binding their hair as they are considered impure and polluted (1998, 84). He adds that it is very likely, though not textually confirmed, Kali can be understood as menstruating since she is the epitome of the subversion of the gendered social order, which associates menstruating women with impurity. It is common practice in India to isolate menstruating women within the household and not to allow them to do household chores and domestic work as they are considered impure until they go through purification rituals that involve bathing and change of garments (Crooke 1896, 454). This leads to a view of Indian women as contaminated and contagious, impurifying the things they touch and those who touch her, and who thus need to be kept at bay during their period. It is those women who die in a state of impurity while menstruating are believed to return as churails.

Kali is depicted as completely naked. She wears a garland of severed human heads and a girdle of severed arms. Her red tongue lolls out of her mouth covered with blood. The Hindu folklore tends to emphasize churails’ bodies as grotesque in their physical appearance with their saggy breasts, black tongues, coarse lips, disheveled hair, and fingers that look like the claws of an animal (Bane 2017, 47). Kali is portrayed as bearing vampire-like features since she drinks the blood of her victims and enemies, and does a victory dance in the battlefield. Kali is described as having a grotesque appearance with four arms, a dreadful face and a dark complexion, sharp

fangs and disheveled long, black hair just like churails. In Hindu mythological accounts, churails are depicted as vengeful and bloodthirsty vengeful vampiric ghosts, rising from the dead to drain the blood of and kill the male family members who subject them to sexual and physical violence and ill-treats them. They have the ability to shapeshift just like Chinese goddess of genesis Nu Wa in *Salt Fish Girl* but with the difference that they reincarnate as vampiric female ghosts lurking in the disguise of mostly an alluring woman to haunt their male torturers and take their revenge. A churail seduces young men into their death by convincing them to pass the night in her company and eat the food of the underworld. If they accept the offer, the churail keeps these good-looking men until she drains the life out of them before sending them back into the real world (Crooke 1896, 1:455). As they sit together by the hamam on a June evening, Ram Lal describes to Raka how churails look like:

“They always live amongst the dead. They live off their flesh. They feast on the corpses the Institute doctors throw down after they have cut up the mad dogs and boiled their brains... Dressed in black so they can’t be seen in the dark. Only their red eyes glow like coals. And their feet are turned backwards” (Desai 1977, 77).

The cremation grounds and battlefields, where she is accompanied by female jackals, goblins and snakes, and surrounded by bones, are her haunts. Churails might transform into a dakini and join the goddess Kali as her host of associates (Melton 2011, 372). Just as Kali is surrounded by jackals as her consorts, a human-nonhuman kinship between churails and jackals develops. The bodily incorporation of the non-human, whose bodies are used in scientific experiments both in life and death, by jackals and churails, dismantles the distinction between the dead and the living. Churails are depicted as nocturnal flesh eaters which dwell in the forests, burial and cremation grounds, swamps, deserted places, crossroads and ruins (Enthoven 1990; Khanna and Bhairav 2023), and they devour their own flesh in case they cannot find one to feed on (Enthoven 1990, 196). Jackals are also nocturnal creatures and carrion eaters. These female ghosts in Desai’s novel also dwell in a cremation ground which I propose is represented by the gorge of the ravine of the Pasteur Institute. This is not a burial site of the dead but a dump yard where the ashes and bones of scientifically objectified and tortured guinea pigs, rabbits and dogs are emptied. These dead animals threaten reprisals for their objectification as other nonhuman life forms in the novel - jackals - consume their dead bodies as food, and then go mad, bite humans and infect them with rabies. They become human substances, flesh of human flesh, after their infected dead bodies eaten by jackals transmit the disease to humans and/or after churails upgrade them (objectified animals) to the

status of undead, if not quite living, when they devour their bones.

As mentioned above, male oppression and patriarchal domination is something that Indian women share with nonhuman animals. To prevent Indian women, particularly those dying during pregnancy, to rise from the grave and haunt their families as churails, brutal rituals that include bodily mutilation and dismemberment are performed. In some parts of India, these women's dead bodies are buried lying on their back with their eyes stitched shut, covered with chili powder, and gouged out to block their sight. Last but not least, thorns are pressed into the soles of their feet and their ankles broken so as to prevent them from walking (Khanna and Bhairav 2023). Just as the mutilation of dead Indian women's bodies, rabbits, monkeys, and guinea pigs on which the laboratory experiments were conducted to develop a potent anti-rabies vaccine were subjected to unspeakable cruelty and torment both in life and in death. Rabies is usually thought to be transmitted to humans through bites of infected pariah dogs. Chakrabarti discusses the brutal killing of stray dogs, classified as disease reservoirs, by beating and stoning them to death to alleviate public panic caused by the possible exposure to rabies-infected animals (Chakrabarti 2010a, 130-31). The number of rabbits that were bred in the Institute for use in the production of vaccines was recorded as six thousand per year (Chakrabarti 2010a, 125). Rabbits and monkeys were put in cages with wire gauze walls to aid the attendants in holding them still. The attendants were clothed in leather suits and wore cricket gloves in order to prevent them from harm by animals in the process of inoculation. Animals were deliberately inoculated with cerebrospinal fluid taken from a mad dog, jackal or human, and those which showed symptoms of rabies either had been killed or died in the process.¹ The all-knowing narrator in the second part of the novel exposes the scientific endeavors of British Raj to prevent the spread of the virus, which express ecophobic anxieties about controlling or, rather, taming the natural environment (Estok 2009).

“[Raka] shaded her eyes to look up at the Pasteur Institute chimneys piercing the white sky, lashed about with black whips of smoke’ and ’sniffed the air and smelt cinders, smelt serum boiling, smelt chloroform and spirit, smelt the smell of dogs’ brains boiled in vats of guinea pigs’ guts, of rabbits secreting fear in cages packed with coiled snakes, watched by doctors in white” [emphasis added] (Desai 1977, 49).

In the British colonial mindset, nonhuman alterity was linked primarily to contagion. Commercial practices of the British Raj in India led to a massive environ-

¹Source: Edinburgh University Library, Special Collections Department, E. 3, Papers and correspondence of John Cunningham, 1880–1968, reference code: GB 0237 Gen. 2004, 15 boxes, Special Collections, Edinburgh University Library, Edinburgh.

mental degradation and the loss of biodiversity in the hill station landscape. British settlement in the highlands came with deforestation. With the expansion of residential areas for British settlers and growing size of the population, there had been an increasing demand on the part of the British expatriates for fuel and construction material for houses and railways which were procured from timber and wood in the early 1800s (Kennedy 1996, 53). Deforestation was driven not only by the expansion of timber trade and developmental pressures, but also by the colonial belief that the indigenous vegetations and animals of Indian highlands served as a hotbed of disease. This in turn justified on the part of the colonizers to preemptively eradicate the native flora and fauna and subject them to ecocide before they threaten the well-being of the British civilization in the colony. The natural environment of highlands is characterized as a “site of monstrous fecundity,” the excess of which needs to be removed, or else sinisterly spread diseases (Deckard 2019, 174).

This monstrous and untamable fecundity is associated with Indian female sexuality. British women were seen as “European male’s only salvation from the contagions of the tropics” (Murthy 2009, 222). Unaccompanied Indian women in public were labeled ‘vagrant’ in 18th and 19th century British discourse. Just as pariahs, they were constructed in the imperial imagination as posing a threat to the virility, purity and sanity of the British race, and thus threatening the success of the colonial mission through contamination through interracial sexual acts and their worship of female goddesses such as Kali. This was also accompanied by the construction of Indian men as effeminate, and of the larger nation as well, that was key to asserting white supremacy (Stoler 2002). This happened during the 1840s which were characterized by the influx of British women travelling to India to serve as sexual and social partners for British soldiers with the explicit purpose of preventing them from courting or entering into a marital union with ‘dark’ Indian women (Murthy 2009, 222). However, throughout the 19th century, there was a progression in the imperial discourse, or rather a metamorphosis, from the effeminate subject position to a truly masculine one.

“Suddenly it was all over. It was 1947. Maiden ladies were not thought to be safe here any more. Quickly, quickly, before the fateful declaration of independence, they were packed onto the last boats and shipped back to England - virginity intact, honour saved, natives kept at bay” (Desai 1977, 9).

As the passage below demonstrates, a sexual moral panic emerged around the hypersexuality of Indian men who were perceived by the British as a threat to the racial purity of white people as reflected in the sexual purity of British women. It

is suffice to say that, viewed from the imperial perspective, not only Indian women but also the black (Indian) colonial subject represented a professed threat of sexual aggression and penetration to the masculinity of British men and the purity of British women. They had been allegedly accused of rape and mutilation of European women's bodies and their murder, and this sexual threat was referred as the 'Black Peril' (Stoler 2002, 58). Now, by drawing on the Hindu mythical figure of the churail, the next section turns to an analysis of Indian femininity that had been associated with monstrous and contagious configuration of the nonhuman alterity in the colonial mindset, against which the British attempted to define and silhouette itself.

3.4 A Portal of Disruption: The Ravine of the Pasteur Institute

The Pasteur Institute at Kasauli plays a central role as an ecogothic landscape in Desai's novel. It serves not only as a metaphor for death and renewal, but also for material destruction wrought on Indian landscape by the colonizers. Narrated from the perspective of Nanda Kaul's cook Ram Lal, Desai casts the ravine of the Institute as a gothic locale and a haunted place where various nonhuman life forms coexist and haunt the world of the living. The day she arrives at Kasauli, Nanda Kaul's great grand-daughter Raka as an adventurous soul fueled by a love for exploration, immediately starts exploring Nanda Kaul's house and the hill station landscape. She sees "enormous concrete walls of what looked like a factory" surrounded by and rising above "servants' quarters, tin sheds and cook-houses" (Desai 1977, 41-42). When she questions the cook Ram Lal about what she thinks as a factory, he tells her that what she saw was the Pasteur Institute. For Raka, the Institute looks like "a square dragon, boxed, bricked and stoked" (Desai 1977, 42). Its "sharp chimneys thrust out cushions and scarves of smoke" and "[c]hutes emerging from its back wall seemed built to disgorge *factory waste* into the ravine [emphasis added](42). Ram Lal warns Raka not to go there and tells her [i]t's a bad and [unsafe] place" where "they empty the bones and ashes of dead animals down [there]" (Desai 1977, 44).

The ravine is haunted by ghosts of people who have died after being bitten by mad dogs and snakes. The ravine is also the haunt of jackals which go there mostly at night, as Ram Lal tells Raka, to "chew the bones," "go mad and bite the village dogs" (44). Churails, described as ghosts of unpurified mothers in Hindu mythology, wander there at night and make "sudden sounds, like shots" while "cracking bones" of animals, which the white doctors of the Institute dumped after they experimented

on them. From an ecogothic perspective, the novel portrays the recluse in the ravine as a heap of rubbish where “[t]here were splotches of blood, there were yellow stains oozing through paper, there were bones and the mealy ashes of bones. Tins of Tulip ham and Kissan jam. Broken china, burnt kettles, rubber tyres and bent wheels” (1977, 48). It becomes a symbol and place of contamination that has been accumulating for some time where the colonial past leaks, or rather oozes, into the present and the spirit world leaks into the physical world. Desai uses polysyndetic listing where the clause “there were” is overused and repeated very often to direct attention to the colonial legacy of violence against animals as objects of scientific experiments. The physical remnants of the suffering endured by animals, their bones and ashes, become mealy for jackals, which roam through the ruins of the past in the gorge and feast on them. It is through the act of eating that the colonial violence and trauma seeps into the narrative and haunts the present as the fear of contamination by the Other, especially pariah dogs - persists and materializes in the act of biting by the nonhuman of the human. After the first sentence, Desai shifts to asyndetic listing of items where she does not use conjunctions at all, joins the words with commas instead or links them with fewer repeated conjunctions such as “Tins of Tulip ham and Kissan Jam.” We lose the end and the distinction between words. In the absence of linking words, the language reflects a certain kind of aggressivity that manifests in the behavior of jackals motivated by an anti-colonial rage. They go mad after feasting on the bones of rabies-infected animals. They then bite other dogs, which go mad and transmit the virus.

In this passage, the novel also hints at how the British authorities created particular stereotypes linking Indian women’s sexuality and bodies to diseases that are in turn connected to certain localities and natural landscapes such as plains. Indian women’s bodies had been construed and marginalized as demonic, exotic and savage, mirroring the national body of India which was deemed as unruly by the British imperialists. The masculine social anxiety fixated on this body, which was constructed as unclean and contagious, thus conjuring up the fear of miscegenation. Indian women had been rendered abject in their spatiality and corporeality. This abject female body was portrayed as masculinized in imperial discourse as capable of seducing men with its hyper-sexuality and *contaminating* the British body.

In an anti-colonial reversal of the anthropocentric civilizing mission of the British, the narrative transforms the Institute, originally built as a research laboratory to prevent the spread of diseases such as rabies that come from nature and are commonly associated with the tropical climate in India, into the exact place where contagion spreads to the “civilized world” they created. The novel activates ecophobic anxieties of the fall from culture into nature to interrogate how the colonial

administration constructed the nonhuman world as an infectious menace which represents the troubled mind and body that need to be contained and controlled. This ecogothic reading of the novel aims to show how such construction of nature serves as one way to set boundaries between the British colonizers and the Indian colonized. Serenella Iovino, as cited by Estok, states that an anthropocentric position considers madness – a quality of the abject – as the inclusion of the nonhuman within the corporeally and psychologically bounded human self (2018, 121). I propose that those bitten by rabies-infected jackals from the ravine go mad and navigate the world free from a human-made and colonial truth structures attempting to silence and objectify both Indian population and indigenous nonhuman life forms. This creates an ambiguous zone of inclusion and exclusion in which a tamed, civilized cultural space, promoting the ontological superiority of the human and centralizing it as the norm, incorporates within itself an unruly zone of wilderness, defined by its imbrication with the unpredictable materiality of the natural world. They, the mad, are displaced from the boundaries of civilization, marginalized and imagined as less-than-human. They see and experience the world differently, unclouded by any norm-driven values, judgments and expectations (Bakhtin 1984, 39). It is them now, from within the civilization, who complicate the ontological and epistemological boundaries of human identity as the corporeal embodiment of the failure of civilization to live up to its ideals of reason, civility, sanity and restraint.

In the second part of the novel, Ram Lal “recalling better days, spent in service of richer, better homes” and “still speaking out of proper and ordered world in the distance to which he had once belonged, suggests her to visit the Kasauli club to play with other (British) children there in the evening (Desai 1977, 51-52). There is the scene of masquerade ball held during the summer season party in the Kasauli club where Raka voyeuristically watches men and women who are dressed as animals and wear costumes reminding her of death (Concilio 2000, 78): “[a] women with a bucket on her head” opening “her pink throat” wide open and “laughing in bubbles of blood“, “a brown animal [with] eyes glaring like two black marbles with white snakes coiled inside them” and a “headless brown robe [with] its head tucked underneath its arm” (Desai 1977, 69-71). The sight of these figures reminds Raka of her mother’s suffering at the hands of her abusive father when he “[beat] her mother with hammers and fists of abuse” after coming home drunk from a party and left her mother lying on the floor “squelching and quivering” like a “wet jelly” (72).

This scene of domestic violence and abuse is narrated from the third person point of view. Raka becomes a silent spectator, a helpless observer “cower[ing] under her bed clothes and wet[ting] the mattress in fright” (71) just like her mother Tara is silenced in the face of male violence. This third-person narrator in the novel does not

hand her voice to Tara. She does not make an appearance in the novel. Her voice is repressed. The strategies the text uses deconstructs the binary opposition between silence and violence as Desai resists a simple equation of silence with resistance or the loss of female, in this case Tara's, agency. When exposed to physical violence, Tara lays on the floor, powerless, her eyes shut and weeping. She cannot put up a fight although "she trie[s] to get free of it. On the other hand, her silence cannot be read solely as a sign of victimization. Previous female owners of Nanda Kaul's house Carignano and churails, metamorphosing into "one swoop, black-bat females to avenge themselves" (77) and tearing through the night, break Tara's violence and tells her story and express her rage through random violent outbursts and attacks. The presence or threat of death is most evident in the story of the pastor of Kasauli whose wife attempted to murder him several times but failed:

"When she had her back turned he would pour out the tea she had brewed for him into a pot of geraniums beside his chair and silently watch them droop and die. He woke to see her the second before she plunged the kitchen knife into him and learnt to sleep with one eye open till he went blind..." (7)

"Her mother was crying. Then it was a jackal crying" (72). Shocked by she witnessed and trying to get away from the club in a hurrt, Raka hears the jackal's crying from within the ravine and her mind comes back to the present. For a moment, the distinction between her mother and the jackal disappears. She makes a move to go down the ravine where the jackal cries as if she wants to reach out to his mother emerging from her position, back at that time when her father exposed her to violence, as a mute observer but she cannot and goes back to the silence of her room confused and frightened. As, I propose, the ravine is a place where the wall between the spirit world and the living weakens and sometimes dissolves and where domestic violence Raka's mother suffered from her husband in the past seeps into the fabric of life in Kasauli and materializes in the form of the jackal's tears dwelling there.

In the second section of the novel, Nanda Kaul makes frequent references to the nonhuman world including crickets, black mosquitoes to define Raka and sees her as a being of nature. Going on long excursions around Kasauli and disappearing for hours, Raka is a restless child and, though having a pale complexion, is full of energy. "[She], in her great grandmother's words, was a recluse by nature, by instinct, as Raka wanted only one thing - to be left alone and pursue her own secret life amongst the rocks and pines of Kasauli" (Desai 1977, 57). In her room at Carignano, she is represented as bearing animal-like features. She is resembled to a "newly caged,

newly tamed wild one” as if contained within walls against her will and ripped off from nature. She “slid[e]s from wall to wall on silent, investigating pads [of an animal]” (Desai 1977, 41). To quench her thirst, she “lick[s] a windowpane to cool her tongue-tip” and “[clings] to the rail of [the veranda] and slid[s] along it” just like a lizard (Desai 1977, 42). In terms of what and how she chooses to eat, she never rises from the tea-table with her stomach full. In the evenings, she “forages for food” on the hills in nature, searching for “a bush with ripe berries... or a bunch of sour oasis leaves to chew” (55), stains “the pockets of her dress... with raspberry juice during her excursions around Kasauli (47) and “come[s] out into the wet grass early in the mornings to eat apricots before breakfast” (65). Although there is no passage or textual verification in the novel clearly suggesting that Raka follows a meat-free diet, it seems likely that we are meant to understand Raka as vegetarian. Ram Lal murmurs to Raka about how different the Kasauli club was back in “the old days... when the Angrez Sahibs and Memsahibs had dances, but the army is something like them. They also have the band come from the cantonment for the evening, and drink whisky and dance” (Desai 1977, 66). The club was established in 1880 as the Kasauli Reading and Assembly Rooms by civilians and service personnel and renamed as the Kasauli Club in 1898 as its management was taken over by those serving in the army of the British Raj in India and civil servants who reside in the Kasauli cantonment. It was an exclusive space for the socialization of the British in Kasauli where the British held dinner dances and tea parties and enjoyed sports activities playing tennis in an elite social set up. The Indians were barred from entering the club.² Ram Lal explains this difference between old days and present days with a reference to alimentary practices: “They used to roast whole sheep over a spit... Whole sheep...[N]ow it is nothing like that” (Desai 1977, 66-67). Desai, from a postcolonial perspective, offers a critique of the construction of the colonizer as masculine through meat-eating and the colonized as feminine.

Raka sees the world from the eyes of a nonhuman. She is at ease when she is exploring the barren landscape of Kasauli. To her great grandmother, Raka is “an intruder, an outsider, a mosquito flown up from the plains to tease and worry” disturbing her tranquil and lonely life in Kasauli (Desai 1977, 40). By resembling Raka to a mosquito from the plains which British Indian medical discourse targeted and aimed to exterminate as carriers of the tropical disease of malaria, Desai employs the ecogothic mode to draw attention to the process of racial and spatial othering of both Indian people and indigenous landscape and to critique British colonial discourse positing them as carriers of disease and contamination. Raka is represented as having a pale complexion and “looking like a ghost“. Nanda Kaul’s daughter Asha

²<https://www.tribuneindia.com/2005/20050529/spectrum/main3.htm>

tells her mother that Raka is still in the process of recovering from typhoid, and that she and everyone thinks she would be better off by “go[ing] to the hills to recuperate” (Desai 1977, 15). The implication in this passage is that there is a colonization of the mind at work here on the part of Asha as the daughter of an Anglicized Indian bourgeoisie. This passage illustrates the internalization of the colonial mentality as Asha’s mind seems to have been possessed by English ways of thinking and acting particularly with regard to the policy of residential segregation introduced by the colonial administration. Here the novel hints at the hill stations’ role in the legitimation of British authority, and their function as instruments of social, cultural, and racial segregation between the British population and the Indian population they governed.

There was a medical tradition going back to the 18th century which established a link between the hot climate of the tropics and susceptibility to diseases creating an ideal environment for the production and spread of germs and viruses (Chakrabarti 2012, 4). The physical separation between the colonizer and the colonized amplified patterns of racial residential segregation with hill stations becoming ‘home’ for the British and plains for Indians. Towards the end of the 18th century, ideas of physical filth, lack of hygiene, diseases and germs started to take on a moral character that associated the tropical regions and their populations with moral miasmas and backwardness, socially and culturally lagging behind Europeans (Chakrabarti 2012, 25). As sparsely populated mountain areas, hill stations are located at a higher altitude with cooler temperatures. They were originally built as cantonments in the early 19th century, and served as residential quarters for “military representatives of British colonial power in India” between eighteenth and twentieth centuries (King 1976, 97). They, later on, were used for recreational and therapeutic purposes by both civilian Europeans and local elites of colonial India. In the colonial mindset, hill stations were designed to be seasonal sites where the British expatriate population could take part in recreational activities, socialize with those with whom they shared cultural values and had similar social status, and where the ill and unhealthy could recuperate from the searing heat of what were perceived to be disease-ridden, densely populated plains of India. Spatially, they were designed to evoke memories of home.³ Just like hill stations were spatially designed to keep the ‘primitive’ and ‘degenerate’ Indian population at bay which had been construed as the cultural

³As Kennedy explains: “Both the morphological patterns of the hill stations and the social practices of their British inhabitants furthered this nostalgic intent. In their physical configurations, hill stations had far more affinities with the quaint villages of a romanticized England than with the stark cantonments of a regimented India. Rather than transpose the grid patterns of civil and military stations on the plains to these mountain settings, the British embraced the sinuous contours of the rugged landscape and constructed their cottages along the crests of ridges and around the shores of lakes without apparent premeditation or planning. They hedged the stations’ meandering avenues and footpaths with trees and flowers indigenous to their homeland and cultivated English fruit orchards and vegetable gardens in their backyards” (1996, 3).

other that needs to be managed by their so-called civilized, white, and progressive superiors, the Institute represents the anthropocentric colonial imaginary that turned the nonhuman body into a scientific object and a site of colonizing power (Chakrabarti 2010*a,b*).

In conclusion, *Fire on the Mountain* subverts the association of the monstrous with the female body by portraying the figure of the churail as a symbol of resistance against patriarchal and colonial oppression. In the novel, they are represented as abject figures haunting the ravine and disrupting the dichotomies between life and death, purity and pollution, and human and animal. By reimagining churails as emblems of feminist and ecological resistance, Desai exposes the entanglement between colonial exploitation, ecological degradation, and patriarchal control. She portrays the ravine of the Pasteur Institute as an ecogothic landscape, filled with the spectral presence of churails and jackals, that stands as a site of haunting and resistance. The ravine itself becomes a symbol of decay and contamination, an emblem of colonial violence, where the imagery of environmental degradation and animal experimentation reflects the broader violence inflicted upon both the Indian population and nonhuman animals under colonial rule. It is also portrayed as a metaphorical space where past traumas and colonial injustices continue to haunt and demand reckoning. This reckoning is not only with historical injustices but also with the ethical implications of the colonial engagement with the landscape and the natural world. This haunted, liminal space disrupts the colonial narrative of civilizing nature and shows how efforts to tame the untameable are thwarted by the subversive, spectral forces of the abject and the unruly. Through the metamorphosis of the oppressed women into churails, Desai demonstrates how these acts of control by the colonial authorities are inherently unstable and open to resistance.

Desai blurs the line between the victim and the avenger by portraying this vampiric female ghost as a figure of abjection, highlighting how the oppressed can reclaim agency and power, even in death. This spectral resistance echoes the ecophobic anxieties of the British colonizers whose attempts to tame and control nature falter in the face of the abject and the unruly. Desai gives voice to the silenced and the marginalized by reclaiming the figure of the churail and turning abjection into positive signification, a site of subversion. Churails exist outside the societal norms of purity and address subjects like domestic abuse and patriarchal oppression, highlighting the silence and pervasive violence experienced by Indian women from all social strata. Their grotesque bodies subvert heteronormative and colonial norms surrounding female sexuality and purity. By foregrounding the spectral and the monstrous feminine, Desai critiques the ecological and social devastations caused by colonial extractive practices and the processes marginalizing the indigenous pop-

ulation. She offers an alternative form of relationality, one that acknowledges the interconnectedness of all life forms and the agency of the nonhuman.

4. THE SEMIOTIC DANCE OF METAMORPHOSIS AND GRIEF IN LATİFE TEKİN'S *ZAMANSIZ*

*"We have a specific politics of location as bodies of water, but as watery,
we also disrupt our own sense of embodied self."*

Astrida Neimanis (2010, 49)

*Zamansız*⁴ (*Timeless*) is a work of fiction by Latife Tekin that was published in 2022 and written during the pandemic. During those strange times, both humans and forces of nature went through metamorphoses. There was a swapping of roles as human beings were being caged within the confines of four walls due to Covid curfews and restrictions and silenced, while nonhuman animals and nature began to talk. *Zamansız*, as many of Tekin's previously published fictional works, is written in poetic prose and explores the themes of death, love and mourning. It employs vivid natural imagery to present the complexity, sensuality and emotionality of nonhuman life and to engender in readers a concern for the environment, particularly in the context of increasing capitalist extraction of land's natural resources, regardless of the locale and biodiversity, as part of mining ventures in Northwestern Turkey after 2015. It starts with the love story of an electric eel (Yılanbalığı) and a weasel (Gelincik), which are "animals of the same water source" (Tekin 2022, 31). The novel later reveals that they were metamorphosed from a man and a woman who drifted out of the car into a lake after a car crash: "[I]t appears that we have transformed after flying out of the window and plunging into the water; I have become a sharp-eared, obsessive Weasel and you a dreamy Eel longing for distant bays" (15). There are two other parallel stories that are entangled with one another – that of the Woman in the White Dress (Beyaz Elbiseli Kadın) and her lover Benini, and that of the relationship between a mother, a daughter, and a son.

⁴During the writing of this thesis, Tekin's novel *Zamansız* was not officially translated into English; therefore, all quotations from the novel are translated from Turkish to English by the researcher of this study.

In *Zamansız*, Tekin gives the narrating voice to Gelincik and Yılanbalığı and imbues them with agency to create their own story rather than advancing a narrative that is centered on memories, emotions, and other affective experiences of the human couple before they morphed into animals. In the novel, nonhuman narration functions to call into question humanity's ethical position regarding humanity's relationship with the natural environment. In Gelincik's dream, Yılanbalığı says to her: "I am an underwater creature, I only have a hum, no voice" (Tekin 2022, 64). The weasel and the eel are a part of the lake ecosystem, which I associate with the semiotic chora. The voices and experiences of humans and nonhumans intermingle and coalesce into each other. The novel invites the reader to imagine time from a nonhuman perspective, enabling us to feel the insubstantiality of human experience and acknowledge the presence of those which preceded the advent of humanity, as Yılanbalığı remarks: "I am as old as sleep ah" (19). By evoking nonhuman time, Tekin moves away from anthropocentric modes of being and knowing towards thinking about time and existence on a geological scale. She attributes considerable agency to both inanimate and nonhuman living beings. Black-beaked and black-legged herons descend from the mountain for a ceremonial gathering in the land of birds (25); Delikli Island sinks in and out of the water as if to catch its breath (25); insects pierce through the soil to breath fresh air, the hunger of birds and frogs melts into a shriek in the air – "Rogg rogg rogg! Frii-iii-er-fri-iii-fri!"(45); a moss hedgehog and a red fox desire to make love to the weasel to lose themselves in the ecstasy of lust and pleasure to forget for a while the loss of their significant others; a jaybird advises Gelincik to chew cypress resin to forget the eel (66). Tekin unearths the histories and lives of nonhumans with access to knowledge and wisdom lost to humans, untapped and unknown. The symbolic and anthropocentric aspect of language proves inadequate to express the inexpressible and the unknowable that emerge in the semioticized space of the lake and the marshland that surpasses the limits of human temporality and spatiality.

After arguing with her lover on the coast of the lake where Gelincik and Yılanbalığı live, the Woman in the White Dress throws into the water a blue bag full of memories of love: two rings in a pink box, photographs, letters and small notebooks. Gelincik believes that the only way to make sense of where they came from and how they ended up in the lake is to tell their own story. While she insists on controlling and narrating the unknown and making the unfamiliar familiar, Yılanbalığı becomes obsessed with the blue bag and is filled with an uncontrollable excitement and curiosity to discover what is inside the bag and eagerly embraces the unknown (Abanoz 2024). Despite Gelincik's persistent objections, Yılanbalığı feels that it would risk opening Pandora's box to "discover the soul of the lake, to understand

why [they] happen to be here in the middle of these mountains, a chance to learn about [themselves], transformed into animals⁵” (Tekin 2022, 35).

4.1 Metamorphosis in *Chora*: Mourning the Ecological Crisis

In an interview, Tekin said that she reads the word “interspecies” as becoming-animal (Oral 2022). The theme of metamorphosis illustrates how becoming animal operates in Tekin’s universe and reflects on the indistinct boundary between human and animal. I propose that the novel evokes cannibalistic imagery to portray metamorphosis as a form of consumption. The human self is being metaphorically consumed by nature to be reborn as a nonhuman animal to bear witness to the ecological destruction wrought by mass consumerism and capital expansion. It understands cannibalism as a means of coping with the loss, trauma, and continuing transformation on a planetary level that breaks away from prevailing anthropocentric understandings of grief. Due to the impossibility of achieving closure when it comes to ecological grief as we mourn a dying planet and grieve for the past losses as well as those that are yet to come, we encounter human characters whose corporeal forms are undone by the touch of nature, metamorphosing into nonhuman bodies to experience the grief arising from environmental loss through their situated knowledge and temporality. As suggested by Gündoğan İbrişim, the novel expands the narrative of loss and mourning, which are commonly associated with human experience and sensibility, to include the cosmos, meaning the universe or the earth” (2022, 44). Tekin promotes the idea that mourning is not a privilege of human bodies and argues against a human-centered mode of responding to loss, opening up a space for the idea of nonhuman forms of grieving.

Gelincik keeps journals to work through its grief when Yılanbalığı abandons it. On the second day of mourning, Gelincik, fearing that Yılanbalığı went after the Woman in the White Dress, goes to Seaside Restaurant (Sahil Lokantası) to check whether she is still there. If it can find her, it can reunite with its lover. Hiding behind the hibiscus flower, it listens to the conversation between the woman and the waiter. It is appalled upon hearing that she does not recall throwing her blue bag into the lake or falling off the chair and passing out. In the initial pages of the novel, the Woman in the White Dress appears as a woman tormented by jealousy at seeing her lover Benini with a young woman. She experiences a nervous breakdown and starts

⁵“...gölün ruhunu keşfetmek için bir fırsat oluştu sanki, ne arıyoruz bu dağların ortasında suyun içinde, hayvana dönüşmüş kendimi ve seni öğrenmek için bir şans.”

yelling at both of them. Benini and the young woman drag her into the car, but she gets out with a sense of urgency and throws her bag down into the lake while deliriously repeating time and time again: “*They have cut down the eucalyptus trees, they have cut down the eucalyptus trees! I’m thirsty, give me water*”⁶ (26). Tekin presents nature as a compass, guiding us to navigate our path in this more-than-human world: “If it is not us driving the car confused by the road with cut-down trees into the clouds, then who are those being scattered by the light reflected from the lake to the sky?”⁷ (Tekin 2022, 13).

After this incident, Benini abandons her. In this scene, the grief arising from the loss of a loved one, not by death but by separation, entwines with that of environmental loss, which is in turn exacerbated by feelings of guilt arising from human complicity in and responsibility for ecological decline and violence, as explained by Stef Craps (2023, 73). Just like the Woman in the White Dress does not recall the events leading to her separation from Benini, Gelincik does not recall the night when Yılanbalığı disappeared into the depths of the lake and left Gelincik in despair. Gelincik in her mourning journals, writes, “The woman’s sorrow is so similar to mine that I started feeling close to her; it is impossible not to be shaken by it”⁸ (51).

On her sixth day of mourning, Gelincik finds the blue bag it was searching for and discovers that it “had a hidden compartment at the bottom” where she had “stuffed transparent plastic bags labeled with lake names”⁹ (58). The novel reveals that the Woman in the White Dress is a filmmaker-writer who lists the landscapes she thinks would be the ideal place to shoot Benini’s film. The word “Zamansız” is engraved on the rings in the pink box that Gelincik discovers, and it is also the title of Benini’s film (62). Gelincik communicates with Yılanbalığı via letters and suggests a connection between Benini and Yılanbalığı: “Did you know, my love, that the fishers in the lake call the eel Benini because its skin is spotted?”¹⁰ (65). In its desperate search to find Yılanbalığı, Gelincik walks in fear of forgetting it. A young red fox appears before Gelincik and tells it that “they [hunters] trapped and shot his mate” and “as he ran towards her, he stepped on the trap and got caught by his foot, hanging from an oak branch, his tail and head twisted, moaning in pain, Ihhida ihha hiiii hii, viv

⁶ “*Okalıptüsleri kesmişler, okalıptüsleri kesmişler! Susadım su verin bana.*”

⁷ “Ağaçları kesilmiş yolun şaşırtdığı arabayı bulutlara süren biz değilsek, gölden göğe yansıyan ışıkla savrulanlar kim öyleyse.”

⁸ “[K]adının üzüntüsü üzüntüme öyle benziyor ki yakınlık duymaya başladım ona, sarsılmamak elde değil.”

⁹ Gelincik writes in its journal: “..mavi çantanın alt kısmında gizli bir bölme varmış, inanmayacaksın ama üstünde göl adları yazan şeffaf naylon keseler tikiştirmiş kadın oraya.”

¹⁰ “Gölde avlanan balıkçılar yılanbalığına derisi benekli diye Benini diyormuş, biliyor muydun bunu sevgilim?”

viv viv”¹¹ (Tekin 2022, 68). In this scene, we are meant to understand that the hunters engage in what is called trophy hunting, killing wild animals for sport and displaying them as trophies. The female fox’s hunting can be considered within the context of the commercial usage of foxes driven by an unsustainable capitalist appetite. The female fox may be trapped and killed to make a fur coat regardless of the cost to nonhuman lives. This resonates with David Huebert’s concept of “ecological cannibalism,” which positions human beings as cannibals whose unsustainable practices, unsatiated hunger, and desire for consumption lead to the degradation of the ecosystem, the planetary body of which we are part. As he explains: “. . . [H]umans are ecological cannibals insofar as they excessively devour their own planetary body. Excess is crucial here, as is the word “devour. . . Simply consuming the planet is not ecological cannibalism unless that consumption is excessive.” (2017, 68-68).

“How strange! Both of us grew up by the lake! Enjoying the pleasantness of this thought, I climbed up the height of the marble mountains and reached the Marble Plain where your childhood passed. . .

Layer upon layer of broken white mountains from their peaks to their foothills.

Mountains sliced lengthwise and crosswise, left unfinished.

Marble cadaver terraces, quarry steps, collapsed rubble cavities.

The land of marble bushes, marble flowers, marble trees, marble goats, marble birds.

*Kırç mee! Tak tak mee!*¹²

In this passage, Tekin deals with capitalism allegorically via ecological cannibalism, where capitalism is conflated with cannibalism. We see a looting and plundering of nature, an underlying environmental violence that pervades the novel. The mutilation of mountains and cutting of trees become a form of self-mutilation and self-cannibalization since humans, as agents and co-habitants of ecosystems, deplete their sources of oxygen, which is vital to sustain life. In this passage, the narrator is the Woman in the White Dress. She reveals that Benini’s father, who was working at a marble mine, died after being crushed by a block of marble. This is an instance of human beings devoured by their own creation. Nature, but one altered by human

¹¹“Seni unutmaya korkusuyla yürürken genç bir kızıl tilki çıktı karşıma, dişisini tuzağa düşürüp vurmuşlar, ona doğru koşarken düzeneğe basıp ayağından yakalanmış, meşe ağacının dalına asılı kalmış öyle, kuyruğu kafası ters dönmüş, acı içinde inliyor, İhhida ihha hiiii hii, viv viv viv”

¹²“İkimizin de göl kıyısında büyümüş olmamız ne tuhaf! Bunun hoşluğunu düşünerek mermer dağların yüksekliğine çıkıp çocukluğunun geçtiği Mermer Ovası’na ulaştım. Doruklarından eteklerine kat kat kırık beyaz dağlar. Enine boyuna dilim dilim doğranıp yarım bırakılmış dağlar. Mermer kadavra terasları, sayalama setleri, şev göçmesine uğramış yıkıntı oyukları. Mermer çalılar, mermer çiçeklerin, mermer ağaçların ülkesi, mermer keçilerin, mermer kuşların.”

constructions, becomes a menacing threat that is central to the ecogothic. The novel activates ecophobia by demonstrating the tangible ways in which human bodies are enmeshed with the natural environment through breathing. Just as humans and culture have been silenced during the pandemic, Benini's father, crushed under the deadly weight of a marble block, gasps for breath until he is silenced by death. The death of nonhuman nature becomes the physical death of humans and renders extinct the idea of the human as separate from nature. In this scene, the marble symbolizes the petrification and silencing of the natural world, the gradual draining of life's force from otherwise animate beings – goats, birds, trees, flowers, and bushes – and their freezing in time that renders them neither alive nor dead. Marble is a type of rock that is commonly used in the construction of tombs, monuments and statues and is thus associated with death. It also stands out for its resilience and durability, making it a symbol of timelessness. The transformation of living organisms into durable but lifeless marble versions stand in sharp contrast with the constant dynamism and change in the environment. It reflects an ecophobic environmental ethics as humanity dissolves the absolute difference between nature and culture through a destructive and mournful reduction of diversity in the ecosystem into sameness, taking on the appearance of lifeless marble statues within the same motion through which it claims to establish itself by the writing of culture onto nature. These marble statues function as memorials that activate memories of human induced environmental loss and as a metaphor for the capitalist devouring of the earth that creates an image of an unsettling environment. In its attentiveness to the enmeshment of human and nonhuman lives, the novel promotes an understanding that human action in the natural environment will not be without consequences and will affect human lives in every aspect.

4.2 Grotesque Embodiment in Timeless Waters

Tekin depicts the novel's characters in watery landscapes that connect human bodies with other more-than-human bodies. They are entangled with their environment, which shapes their experiences of loss, love, and desire. As Astrida Neimanis suggests, water gestates life and facilitates the very bodies of the eel and the weasel into being. It connects them while simultaneously changing and differentiating them in the process of becoming (2017, 95). The touch of water triggers the characters' transformation from human into a state of animality, though the change is never fully complete. There is an ambiguity surrounding their transformation. Water symbolizes fluidity, transformation, relationality, and the permeability of the body's

boundaries. Neimanis's concept of watery subjectivities imagines embodiment as watery, seeing water as not something out there in nature but as constitutive of selfhood and corporeality, linking us to other life forms and bodies, including but not limited to human bodies (2017). With its emphasis on constitutive permeability, vulnerability, fluidity, and relationality, watery bodies challenge individualist, anthropocentric, and phallogocentric ways of being and knowing in the world, subverting the masculinist logic of self-sufficiency, autonomy, and finality.

These bodies gestated by water have a distinctive grotesque character as they uncannily merge with the natural world, blurring the socially constructed boundary between human and animal. The bodies of Yılanbalığı and Gelincik are grotesque in that their corporeality signifies the ambiguous transformation of the human into a nonhuman animal. This metamorphosis exemplifies what Bakhtin defines as the "double body," which suggests that we need to divest from the idea of bodies as autonomous, complete, and sealed off from other bodies. Bakhtin's double body is a gestative body that rewrites the boundaries between life and death. Death becomes an operator of difference, a transition to other modes of being as it is conceived as a generative moment allowing for the rebirth of another body. This body is entangled with the materiality of the cosmos that "can merge with various natural phenomena, with mountains, rivers, seas, islands, and continents" (Bakhtin 1984, 318). Woman in the White Dress and Benini become one with water when another watery body, the lake, swallows them up. They are stripped of their individuality and no longer belong "to the private, egotistic "economic man," but to the collective ancestral body of all the people" (Bakhtin 1984, 19). Bakhtin's concept of the double body places human corporeality in the universal cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

Although it is not explicitly stated which human character morphed into which animal, there are strong textual hints suggesting that the Woman in the White Dress transformed into the weasel, while her lover Benini became the eel. The weasel dreams about the eel, which "with a burst of light slip[s] from the hand of a young Japanese woman and twist[s] in the air, transform[s] into a human"¹³ (Tekin 2022, 81). Similarly, the eel once had a dream in which it transformed into a fish that had taken on a human form, "a male fish that electrocutes itself" (38). When asked why she chose an eel and a weasel as the nonhuman characters in her story, Tekin mentions how eels have fascinated minds, including Freud and Aristotle, since ancient times, which are, along with weasels, among endangered species. She also acknowledges ambiguity surrounding the male eel which appears only during the breeding season (Yilmayan 2023). While Tekin aims to promote

¹³"(...) Rüyamda ışıklı bir fırlayışla genç bir Japon kadının elinden kayıp havada bükülerek insana dönüşüyordum Balığım."

a non-binary and non-anthropocentric understanding of subjectivity, she seems to embed metamorphosed nonhuman bodies within the heterosexual matrix, to use Butler's term (2006), that renders them culturally intelligible through the expression of binary sexual difference, Gelincik being female and Yılanbalığı male.

The puzzling question of eel reproduction left Aristotle pondering in the 4th century and led him to speculate that eels grew from mud as neither they come from copulation nor lay eggs or mate. Determined to crack this mystery, Freud dissected over 400 eels in search of testicles in Trieste, which then belonged to the Austria-Hungarian empire. Still, he failed to locate their sexual organs (Svensson 2020). It was later discovered that eels are sea critters in constant metamorphosis, which grow sexual organs only when they need them, namely, to breed. They are born in the Sargasso Sea, a liminal body of water in the northwest Atlantic, surrounded by four ocean currents with indeterminate boundaries. As Patrik Svensson remarks: "Its metamorphoses are not just superficial adaptations to new life conditions. They're existential. An eel becomes what it needs to be when the time is right" (2020, 66). It goes through four stages of metamorphosis. The (European) eel starts its life in the Sargasso Sea as a transparent, flat larva. It then transforms into a glass eel when it reaches European coasts, adapting to the climatic conditions of a landlocked, fresh-water existence. There, the glass eel turns into a yellow eel, and its body begins to take on serpentine features and grows more muscular. At the final stage of its life cycle, it starts its journey back to the Sargasso Sea, its place of birth, and morphs into a silver eel while traveling a fairly long distance to reproduce and die after fertilizing its eggs. It undergoes a drastic transformation, with its fins growing in size and eyes growing larger to have a better vision in the deep sea while developing reproductive organs and fasts during its journey, with its body full of roe and milt before mating (Svensson 2020, 12-13). The eel is neither a fish nor a snake; thus, its existence resists the taxonomic structuring of nonhuman bodies. It can slither on land just like a snake through moist grassland. It has scales and gills like a fish, which is nevertheless challenging to catch by the eye, but has fins growing larger during the breeding season in the fourth and final stage of its metamorphosis. Its body is oily and covered with slime, which allows it to crawl out from every orifice in the dark. The slime is endowed with the capacity to stain and smear. The slime engulfs that with which it comes into contact and leaves residues on the skin. It symbolizes sticky contamination, clinging to the skin and hard to wash off, thus transgressing the boundaries of the self's clean and proper body. As a slime-covered sea critter, the eel becomes a symbol of ultimate alterity, unknowability, and ambiguity. With its high level of adaptability to changing aquatic conditions and its ability to metamorphose, I propose to read the eel as a shapeshifter that displays gender-bending

qualities that deny categorization and thus is central to representations of abjection.

4.3 Waters of Sorrow: Lake as *Chora* and the Longing Body

Zamansız embraces the fluidity of corporeal existence, time, and space, blurring the line between reality and fantasy and between the past and the present. After their metamorphoses into animals, the lake and the surrounding marsh turn into a natural living environment for the eel and the weasel, where they make love to each other, and go through mourning and loss. In the marsh, time is not linear and flows in rhythm with the cycle of nature. Such a concept of time offers an alternative to anthropocentric temporality and spatiality in which nonhuman lives do not progress like human lives and follow their own temporal logic.

I propose to analyze the lake and its surrounding marshland as a proto-linguistic space, echoing Kristeva's reading of *chora*, where the life of the nonhuman characters is conceived and out of which bodily impulses and drives arise. Although the primary focus of Kristeva's analysis centers on the human regarding the dialectical dialogue between the semiotic and the symbolic as foundational to the constitution of subjectivity, this chapter extends her term *chora*, introduced in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984), beyond anthropocentric premises to suggest that thought, sentience, and meaning-making is not the exclusive privilege of humans and appear in organic nature as well. The lake, as a watery body, represents the breaking down of boundaries and both the destruction and rebirth of identities. It represents the subject in constant renewal and becoming in the signifying process. I argue that the pulsional, desiring bodies of nonhuman characters in the novel operate in this semiotic space whose corporeality challenge patriarchal and anthropocentric structures of meaning. It is where the unruly and disorderly elements of bodily existence manifest themselves.

Kristeva makes a distinction between the symbolic and the semiotic in terms of meaning-making as the symbolic operates "through the use of logical terms" and the semiotic through the "emotive" "flow of words" that unfold in a stream of consciousness-like way (McAfee 2004, 16). While "the symbolic is a mode of signifying in which speaking beings attempt to express meaning with as little ambiguity as possible, expressions found in music, dance, and poetry exemplify the semiotic," originating in the unconscious (McAfee 2004, 16). The *chora*, which Kristeva borrows from Plato, comes from the Greek word translated as space and womb. It is the regulator of drives and the site of semiotic processes, which she associates with

“basic pulsions” that are “predominantly anal and oral, and as simultaneously dichotomous (life/death, expulsion/introjection) and heterogeneous” (Moi 1986, 12). The chora is the pre-linguistic space of the maternal body, which is marked by an “uncertain and indeterminate articulation from a disposition that already depends on representation” (Kristeva 1984, 25). “[It] precedes and underlies figuration and thus specularization, and is analogous only to vocal or kinetic rhythm” (Kristeva 1984, 26). It is a pre-spatial and a pre-temporal realm associated with the musical, the poetic, and the rhythmic “but restrained by a single guarantee: syntax” (Kristeva 1984, 97). It represents non-identity and designates the unrepresentable and unnamable in the symbolic realm. The bodily drives, never fully repressed within the realm of signification, erupts subversively and transgressively with the potential to disrupt the social order, posing a threat to its stability.

The symbolic order is where, Lacan (1982) argues, the child acquires its subject status upon entry into language and, through signification, forms an identity and subjectivity based on sexual difference. Like Lacan, Kristeva posits the mirror stage as the first step in the infant’s detachment from semiotic motility, which she defines as the capacity for spontaneous movement. In the mirror stage, the infant seeks to capture a unified image in a mirror, thinking that what is reflected back is an ideal and complete ‘I’ toward which it should strive despite its unattainability. To see itself as unified, it needs to put a distance between itself and the mirror, but it cannot be due to a discharge of libidinal energy. The threat of castration in the Oedipal phase marks the second step in the splitting of the child from the maternal body, marked by alterity and negation. Such separation reduces the mother to a place of alterity and renders her abject. For Kristeva, completing these two stages prepares the child to enter the symbolic order. It hence enables it to assume a speaking subject position, which requires the suppression of the chora. This pre-verbal space then “can be perceived only as “pulsional pressure” on symbolic language: as contradiction, meaninglessness, disruption, silence, and absence” (Moi 1986, 13). Although the semiotic is distinguished from the symbolic, Kristeva states that the eruption of chaotic, rhythmic bodily energy is what makes meaning possible in the symbolic mode of signification. She emphasizes the dialectical relationship between the two in the constitution of the subject within “the same signifying process” (Kristeva 1984, 24) in which language becomes an outlet for the discharge of bodily and libidinal energy that forms the subject’s relation to its corporeality and other bodies (McAfee 2004, 14).

This chapter proposes that the *chora*, which Kristeva defines as the repository of instinctual bodily affects, drives, and impulses preceding the separation from the mother and hence signification, can be applied to Tekin’s narrative style in terms of

its emphasis on poetic language. Tekin poetic prose disrupts the symbolic, marked by orderly and coherent communication, where meaning is conveyed by the use of “the normal rules of syntax and semantics” (McAfee 2004, 24). Tekin’s text manifests a semiotic dimension. The love language between Gelincik and Yılanbalığı and the mother’s narration of her relationship with her son, written in bold, abound in semiotic elements as they bring the speaking body back into language. The semiotic manifests through a syntactic reversal of the regular order of the words.

The pre-Oedipal union between the mother and the infant manifests itself in the novel through the act of suckling milk from the mother’s breast, instances where pain and pleasure intermingle. In this pre-verbal space, inside and out and pain and pleasure are not differentiated from each other, as Kristeva remarks: “In that anteriority to language, the outside is elaborated by means of a projection from within, of which the only experience we have is one of pleasure and pain. An outside in the image of the inside, made of pleasure and pain. The non-distinctiveness of inside and outside would thus be unnamable, a border passable in both directions by pleasure and pain” (Kristeva 1982, 61).

“... Ah my son and with the painful smile of my daughter piercing into my eyes I feared nothing in this world as much as I feared her gaze dripping onto my cheek when you wanted to try French kiss with me I was very sleepy my darling so sleepy the wet image of the dream remained the pink image of sought-after child’s tongue bursting with heart palpitations on my palate my son your minty scent sealed in my palate flows into my throat”¹⁴ (Tekin 2022, 17).

“The milk that you let trickle from the corner of your mouth with a smile -my fresh milk flowing from my breast to your mouth my darling drips down to my stomach from my armpit—creating an unbearably cool path, a thin, slightly breezy path turning into wind between my legs as you suckle me. That warm, sticky shiver on my breast reminds me of the hot and cold ocean currents twisting from the south to the north, from the west to the east of the world...”¹⁵

“With your devilish gaze that knows how to overturn everything don’t laugh at me like that close your eyes and sleep quickly feeling and seeing how you could be deadly when you were a little boy dependent on my

¹⁴“... kızımın gözlerimin içine dalan acı gülüşüyle hiçbir şeyden ürkmeydim onun yanağıma damlayan bakışlarından ürktüğüm kadar dünyada sen benimle Fransız öpücüğünü denemek istediğinde çok uykuluydum uykuluydum bitaneceğim rüya tadında ıslak imgesi kalmış aranan çocuk dilinin damağımda kalp çarpıntısıyla fişkıran pembe imgesi oğlum genzime akan nane kokusundan mührün var damağımda”

¹⁵“Dudağımmın kenarından gülerek akıttığım süt -mememden ağzına yürüyen tazecik sütüm bitaneceğim-koltukaltıma süzülüp karnıma damlıyor dayanılmaz serinlikte bir sızıyla yol oluyor bacaklarımın arasına doğru incecik hafif esintili bir yol rüzgâra dönüyor hava sen emdikçe beni o ılık yapışkan ürpertisi yok mu göğsümün bana dünyanın güneyinden kuzeyine batısından doğusuna kıvrancırasına bükülen sıcak soğuk okyanus akıntılarını anımsatıyor...”

milk shakes me. . . slowly suck don't hurt my breast be careful the milk you quickly sip and swallow overflows from your mouth and foams you like this don't you your toes curl with pleasure as your knife-mouthed rascal as your legs contract and relax my mouth becomes salty inside me and my soul tickles and moistens"¹⁶ (Tekin 2022, 17).

Narrated by the mother, these passages partake of the semiotic mode as there is no punctuation between words and independent sentences are not separated by conjunction or punctuation. The boy's separation from the archaic, pre-Oedipal mother is not fully achieved. The relationship between the mother and the boy is marked by a sensuous connection and sensory experiences, yet it is also fraught with tensions, as will be explained further below. There is no subject and object position in the semioticized space. The child, oriented to the maternal body, can be seen as a gestural performer in this pre-verbal space, marked by the absence of the linguistic sign, which connects with the maternal through stimuli. In the passages, the mother seems to gain personal rewards by simply gazing at her baby while he is sucking milk from her breasts. She articulates a desire for their skin to become one, acknowledging the sensual nature of breastfeeding, which evokes an arousing response in the mother, who seems to experience a genital sensation. Their bodies are inextricably linked, and the boundaries between the mother and the infant are blurred. A sense of merging and fluidity is articulated through the commingling of bodies in breastfeeding. The milk that the infant sucks from the breast takes a meandering path through the maternal body. The breezy path of cooling milk trickles down from his mouth and turns into wind between her legs. The boundaries separating inside from outside are ambiguous, and milk leaking from the child's mouth distorts the body's corporeal boundaries.

As the mother's narration progresses, the son becomes more and more incessant and insistent on feeding from the mother, causing her to experience a searing pain in her nipples and breasts. Kristeva sees the infant's abjection of the mother as a prerequisite for achieving subjecthood, but now it is the mother who wants to abject her son to disconnect from him, striving for individuation and separation.

"I aged with the pain of milk leaking from the cuts you made on my nipples my cooling skin my distant body like mint candy burning my mouth. . ." ¹⁷ (Tekin 2022, 17).

¹⁶"Her şeyi alt üst etmeyi bilen şeytani bakışınla gülme yüzüme öyle kapa gözlerini uyu çabuk sütüme muhtaç bir oğlancıkken nasıl öldürücü olabildiğini hissedip görmek sarsıyor beni kalbim çarpıyor duyumsayıp düşündükçe bunu nefesimin dalga dalga uçuşunu kızımın gizlemekte zorlanıyorum zehir gibi korkuyorum aramızda esen rüzgârı kız kardeşin fark edecek diye yavaş em acıtma mememi dikkatli ol çabuk çabuk yudumlayarak yuttuğun süt ağzından taşıp köpükleniyor bu hoşuna gidiyor değil mi ayak parmakların bükülüveriyor zevkten seni bıçak damaklı çapkın bacakların kasılıp gevşedikçe ağzım tuzlanıyor benim de ruhumun içi gıcıklandı sulanıyor. . ."

¹⁷"Meme uçlarımda dişlerinin kestiği süt sızısıyla yaşlandım bir anda soğuyan tenim benim uzak bedenim

“When will your anger subside my son stop undoing the buttons of my chest don’t do this the strings of my body are breaking I’m tired of seeing your arms flail in the air like playing with a shadow and your fingers curling one by one as if in desperate plea it saddens me when you collapse onto me sobbing my shoulders whimper I don’t know how to explain this everything else disappears in the clouds that make me forget everything but springs at the peak of my breasts have dried up don’t rub against me like that move away a bit will you choked with anger grab my stomach and then kiss me all day.”¹⁸

“Don’t run your tongue over my mouth and face my ivy the waters inside me rise as if my breasts are about to leak into my chest cavity don’t lift my skirt, don’t do this my legs are cold don’t dig your nails into my neck my veins are thinning as if they’re about to snap my breath is strained don’t press your tear-soaked cheeks against mine don’t bump your head against my forehead don’t do it don’t stir up the dust of my heart my son... Off hof hof hof go play by yourself play right there look I’m suffocating I’m burning up”¹⁹ (77).

In the passages above, there is a palpable sexual tension, tinged with oral aggression, between her and the boy. In his 1905 essay *Three Essays on Sexuality*, Freud establishes an association between oral stimuli, sucking the mother’s breast, and sexual gratification in the oral phase in which there is not yet a differentiation between the ingestion of food and sexuality (1994). At this stage, a sexual focus is placed on the milk that comes from the breast and, thus, on the maternal body. Freud argues that lips are particularly sensitive to sexual stimulation as the mouth becomes the primary source of the infant’s interaction with the mother. This pleasurable sucking has cannibalistic undertones since the infant wants to incorporate the mother into itself by suction, teething, and biting. As Melanie Klein argues, the child, though dependent upon the mother for survival, exhibits “oral-sadistic impulses” towards the breast (1984, 5). It is important to mention that Kristeva links the semiotic to pre-Oedipal processes, anal and oral drives such as breast-sucking, which are both associated with and regulated by the maternal body, controlling what goes in and what comes out of the infant’s body. To her, this “maternal regulation prefigures

nane şekeri gibi ağız yakıcı oğlum ah...”

¹⁸“Ne zaman yatışacak öfken oğlum bırak çözme göğsümün düğmelerini yapma gövdemin telleri kopuyor yoruldum bir gölgeyle oynar gibi kollarımın boşluğa savrulmasından yalvarırcasına açılan ellerinin parmak parmak büküldüğünü görmek üzüyor beni hıçkırarak üstüme kapandığında omuzlarım sızlıyor nasıl anlat-acağımı bilemiyorum bunu silinip kayboldu senden başka her şeyi unutturan göğsümün dağ başı pınarları kurudu sürtünme öyle çekil biraz sinirden boğularak karnımı avuçlayıp sonra bütün gün öpecek misin beni”

¹⁹“Ağzımda yüzümde dolaştırma dilini sarmaşığım göğsüm göğsümün boşluğuna akıp damlayacakmış gibi sular kabarıyor içimde kaldırma eteğimi yapma bacaklarım üşüyor batırma tırnaklarımı boynuma damarlarım inceliyor kopacakmış gibi nefesim zorlanıyor Off hof hof hof git oyna kendi kendine şuracıta oyna tıkandım bak ateş basıyor”

paternal prohibition” (Oliver 1991, 46). The bodily drives represent the “subject-in-process” as they exemplify the operation of the logic of signification and prohibition at the semiotic level (Oliver 1991, 19).

The sexual tension and ferocity between the mother and the son are present in the love making scenes between Gelincik and Yılanbalığı. The metamorphoses of the Woman in the White Dress and Benini mark the transition from nonhuman to human and takes us back to the lake’s semioticized space, preceding human temporality and spatiality. Just as the bodies of the narrating mother and the son are inextricably interlinked, the bodily boundaries of the eel and the weasel are made and unmade in relating to each other and the environment they are a part of. They are ambiguous, fluid bodies that are constituted by both natural processes and the exchange of bodily fluids like blood. Nature appears as a force that both decays and regenerates. As Yılanbalığı observes, “[b]lood, water and wind deform Gelincik’s shape day by day”²⁰ (Tekin 2022, 27). Electricity traversing through the eel’s body “struck[s] [the weasel] along [her] thin right and left meridians, from the level of [her] ears to the soft pink skin under [her] toes, at a thousand points,”²¹ causing her to bleed in searing agony. Gelincik desires to “lull [Yılanbalığı] to sleep by sinking [her] teeth into [his] neck and mouth”²² (15).

As carnivores and adept predators, weasels are known for their bloodlust, bearing vampire-like features. They are instinctual carnivores triggered by the movement of their prey, and their attention is driven by auditory and visual cues in their environment, just like the infant is invested with semiotic motility characterized by “gestural and vocal play” (Kristeva 1984, 26). In the semioticized space of the lake, it is Yılanbalığı that provides an orientation for Gelincik’s anal drives. In the quoted passages, the boy craves breast milk and is full of movement, though regulated and, in some cases, rejected by the mother. His arms flail in the air; his fingers and toes curl. He digs his nails into his mother’s neck just like Gelincik desires to penetrate her tooth into the orifice of Yılanbalığı’s neck. Gelincik takes pleasure in thinking they are creatures of the same water body (Tekin 2022, 31). Likewise, the mother and her son become one with a sense of intimacy and embodied closeness: “Whenever and in whichever season you sleep in my arms, we both vibrate within the same circle, as if we found life in the same water source. Our breaths blend harmoniously the

²⁰“... günden güne kanla suyla rüzgarla bozuluyor biçimin...”

²¹“Kulaklarımın hizasından ayak parmaklarımın alt pembe derisine kadar sağ ve sol ince meridyenlerim boyunca çarpıldım bin noktadan, inleyerek kanamaya başladım...”

²²“Saplayıp dişimi boynundan ağzından uyutacağım seni.”

length of your eyelashes to mine the mist of your gaze to the mist of mine”²³(33). Both the mother and Gelincik want to be blended with, respectively, the son and Yılanbalığı in such completeness. Although this semiotic space is a space of oneness and unity with the other, it is also a space of rupture, “a positing of identity or difference” which Kristeva calls the “thetic break.” She explains this as follows:

“WE SHALL distinguish the semiotic (drives and their articulations) from the realm of signification, which is always that of a proposition or judgment, in other words, a realm of positions. This positionality, which Husserlian phenomenology orchestrates through the concepts of doxa. position, and thesis, is structured as a break in the signifying process, establishing the identification of the subject and its object as preconditions of propositionality. We shall call this break, which produces the positing of signification, a thetic phase” (Kristeva 1984, 43).

Kristeva posits the thetic as that which makes signification and language possible. The enunciations of a child who discharges energy through gestures and the use of sounds are not yet expressed in fully formed sentences. At the same time, it can separate an object from a subject and differentiate itself from its surroundings (McAfee 2004, 20). The enunciations attribute to the object a “semiotic fragment,” making it a signifier. The child learns that it can use language to refer to things outside of it. This semiotic attribution, for Kristeva, “represents the nucleus of judgment or proposition” (Kristeva 1984, 43). In this sense, the thetic break marks the tension between the semiotic and the symbolic which enables the child’s initiation into language and subjectivity by separating itself from the mother and her body to emerge as a distinct individual within society regulated by the Law of the Father. The child going through the thetic phase abjects the mother, representing a movement from undifferentiated oneness, materialized in the act of breastfeeding, to a state of unity within the heterogeneity of the chora. It does not only mourn for the lost other, mother, and breast, but also the lost self. In this sense, chora becomes a space of rupture.

In Tekin’s poetic prose, the rupture and dissolution of unity in the semiotic realm manifest through the loss of the love object. The pre-verbal loss of the mother and Gelincik’s experience of abandonment by Yılanbalığı come to represent each other. This incommunicable loss both resists and transforms signification. The anguish of losing Yılanbalığı tears through the very essence of Gelincik, as the following quotation shows. Gelincik cannot accept her loss. Although her words have a

²³“..sen ne vakit hangi mevsimde koynumda kucagımda uyusan aynı çember içinde titreşiyoruz biz ikimiz hep aynı su kaynağında hayat bulmuşuz gibi ahenkle birbirine karışıyor aldığımız nefesler kirpiklerinin uzunluğu kirpiklerime bakışımın buğusu bakışımın buğusuna...”

clearly demarcated meaning, they are fueled by a semiotic dimension. Her semiotic articulations unsettle and destabilize the symbolic.

“(...) I fear that I will forget you because I can’t bear missing you.

Don’t look at the water when night falls
Don’t look at the water when night falls
Don’t look at the water when night falls
Don’t look at the water when night falls
Don’t look at the water when night falls
Don’t look at the water when night falls

Don’t look at the water when the sun shines
Don’t look at the water when the sun shines

When herons wing and fly to the mountains, and cranes twist and dive into the sky, don’t look at the water, don’t look at the water (...)”²⁴(Tekin 2022, 72-73).

In conclusion, in the fluid and heterogeneous space of chora, which I argue is the lake, the characters become immersed in bodily desires, negotiate their subjectivities, erotic lives, and experiences of loss through nonhuman metamorphosis. Their immersion in the semiotic brings the speaking body back into language. It allows them to access a form of subversive power that is not dependent on patriarchal and anthropocentric validation. The lake becomes a site of constant flux, which dissolves the boundaries between the self and the other. It offers an interstitial space in which new forms of becoming and relationality can emerge. The characters who inhabit this liminal space not only destabilize fixed sexual and gender identities, but also subverts the anthropocentric thinking by substituting it with an ecological attitude that is attuned to the nonhuman world. Through this engagement with Kristeva’s chora, Tekin’s text opens up a space for transcending the limitations that are imposed by both patriarchal and anthropocentric frameworks and reimagining subjectivity and temporality through an ecological lens, grounded in the confluence of human and nonhuman agency.

²⁴“(...) Özlemeye dayanamayıp unutacağım seni diye korkmaya başladım.

Suya bakma gece çökünce
Suya bakma gece çökünce
Suya bakma gece çökünce
Suya bakma gece çökünce
Suya bakma gece çökünce
Suya bakma gece çökünce

Suya bakma güneş parlarken
Suya bakma güneş parlarken“

5. CONCLUSION

The Anthropocene is the current geological epoch in which humanity, as a major geological force, has fundamentally and decisively altered earth ecosystems. Although this geological periodization has been widely debated among scholars from different disciplines and paradigms, it stimulated research into how humans interact and engage with the nonhuman ecologies surrounding them. This global ecological crisis has aroused substantial repercussions in the field of literature and art as well. Although they are not a new concern for literature, environmental issues have become increasingly prominent in contemporary fiction since the 1980s in the context of the posthuman turn in humanities and social sciences.

In this study, I aim to understand how ideas of what counts as natural and what counts as human are bound up with gender and sexuality by exploring representations of the abject and grotesque female body in contemporary women's fiction and cinema. I have developed an ecogothic and a material eco-feminist framework for exploring the intersections of nature and gender in relation to other social structures of oppression. I examine the intersection of the gothic with ecocriticism through a gender lens and chart its complex interplay with social inequalities along the lines of race, class, and indigeneity. Throughout this study, gender remains integral to the trope of transgression embodied by the metamorphosing female body that is constituted through its material entanglements with non-human matter, crossing the boundaries and displaying the instability of corporeal boundaries, as the abject and the grotesque often do. This metamorphosing body enmeshed with the more-than-human world is figured as a gendered body, often feminine, that defies categorization and control and challenges androcentric and anthropocentric superiority.

Representations of the female body as the abject and grotesque, a body in a state of unfinished becoming, fit well within the realm of the ecogothic as they embody idea of the 'Other' representing chaos and transgression, the opposite of control and order. An ecogothic framework has been particularly useful in examining the gendered nature of transgressive embodiment that, I argue, engage with revaluations

and changing definitions of femininity and of the 'natural. "The ecogothic inevitably intersects with ecophobia" (Keetley and Sivils 2018, 3), which Simon Estok defines as "an irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world" (2009, 208). This study takes as its core this definition of ecophobia, which conflates fear that is born out of the natural world's agency with hatred. Ecophobia feeds on humans' fear of the natural world which embodies the idea of the 'Other' representing chaos, the opposite of order and control. Fear demands control and the creation of boundaries separating us from the 'other.' In this study, I argue that civilizational ecophobic anxieties not only emerge from the fear of losing control of nature and landscapes, but extend beyond the nonhuman and towards 'othered' human bodies. By tracing the moments of ecophobia in the selected texts, I demonstrate the connections between representations of the female body as abject, monstrous, and grotesque and the ecogothic depictions of nature. We have seen how the selected texts reappropriated and subverted traditional associations between femininity and nature as anthropocentric fears of monstrous nature are projected onto the patriarchal imagining of women's bodies as unruly and uncontrollable. The female protagonists transgress borders across species and partake in an open-ended process of becoming and flux. This image of leaky and liminal female body draws on traditional female-nature associations as the trope of transgression that manifests in the motifs of the cannibal, vampiric, cyborg, and monstrous women engages with patriarchal attempts to challenge non-conforming behavior and reinstate control. I posit that this leaky, porous, and relationally constituted female body can be read as a site of resistance, an ambiguous space of becoming where the feminized configuration of nature in the male imagination as controlled, tamed and manipulated is on the brink of shattering and rioting.

Metamorphosis becomes a tool for trans-corporeal embodiment (Alaimo, 2010), suggesting a permeability and fluidity across individual bodies that materialize in the process of relating. It is an act of resistance to patriarchal forms of domination, a subversive tool with transformative potential, enabling the possibility of the re-making of the self. It reverses a masculinist devaluation of passivity associated with both women and nature. In the process of female protagonists' becoming through metamorphosis, environmental matter no longer figures as a blank slate passively awaiting cultural inscription but is recognized as agential "reconfiguring the very boundaries of the human" (Alaimo 2010, 154). The metamorphosing female bodies in the selected texts inhabit a state of corporeal ambiguity. Their bodies are simultaneously one and more than one, depicting the commingling between humans and nonhumans as bodies within bodies, selves within selves. This hybridity in terms of the materiality of the body, an unfinished body degrading to the material

level, aligns with, as Bakhtin states, “[o]ne of the fundamental tendencies of the grotesque image of the body [that] is to show two bodies in one: the one giving birth and dying, the other conceived, generated, and born. . .” (1984, 26). Bakhtin describes this body as ambivalent as it represents “pregnant death, a death that gives birth” (Bakhtin 1984, 25). Bakhtin’s pre-occupation with the materiality of the human body, whose corporeality is marked by liminality and transgression, is something that it shares with Kristeva’s abject, which “does not respect borders, positions, and rules” (1982, 4), threatening the subject with the possibility of dissolution. Liminality, which is defined as an intermediate state or phase, implies a threshold and a borderline state. It is characterized by ambiguity and openness to change, carrying the potential for transformation that materializes in the female protagonists’ metamorphosis.

Their metamorphosed, bodily existence reflects their alienation from patriarchal and heteronormative societal norms and expectations from women and their connection to chaotic and uncontrollable aspects of nature. Their leaky corporeal boundaries embody and incorporate otherness that refuses normative bodily categorizations. Their entanglement with the materiality of nature extends their distance from humanity proper towards a space of chaos beyond human power and control. I posit that these female bodies that are enmeshed with the natural world are sites of abjection. Their grotesque mode of being is intertwined with ecophobic depictions of nature in the male imagination driven by the urge to control. This positioning is consonant with the bestialization of the female body, throwing it into a space of unpredictable and terrifying nature.

In this dissertation, I engage with the generative potential of abjection and grotesqueness that define feminist corporeality and sexuality in feminist and queer terms. The female authors of texts under consideration reappropriate the abject that has had a negative connotation and associated with the female body as passive and receptive, and female sexuality as excessive and unruly. This patriarchal positioning of women’s bodies and sexuality is articulated through ecophobic discourses. I argue that the texts are populated by women who embrace their abjection through their becoming with the nonhuman other (Haraway 2003) as a means of exercising agency over their bodies and sexuality, even at the risk of reinforcing patriarchal power structures that limit and constrain such agency.

This study’s importance is twofold. First, it offers a non-anthropocentric framework for understanding the processes of subject formation and womanhood by challenging traditional feminist critiques of psychoanalysis that often center around anthropocentric notions of identity and selfhood. It becomes a source from which future

research can draw to delve deeper into non-anthropocentric theories of subjectivity through a gender lens. Second, it contributes to the field of ecogothic criticism by tracing the paralleled constructions of the landscapes of bodies and settings. It adds a new layer to the research on the ecogothic by providing insight into the complex interplay between the shifting cultural anxieties and fear surrounding the nonconformist body, often cast as monstrous and abject in particularly gendered ways when seen through the lens of a heteronormative, patriarchal matrix, and our ecophobic reactions to the natural world.

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