Subalternizing and Reclaiming Ecocentric Environmental Discourses in Zimbabwean Literature: (Re)reading Doris Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing* and Chenjerai Hove’s *Ancestors*

Introduction

Much of the criticism of Zimbabwean literature has skirted the ecological question. Critical exegeses of the literature have focused on such aspects as gender, colonialism, and post-coloniality. However, in the context of the current global “environmental crisis” it is essential to “recover” the discourse on the natural environment in Zimbabwean literature.

Discourses on the relationship between humans and the environment have always mediated human consciousness in one way or the other, centering on people as part of nature or as masters of the same, what Soper calls the “Human-Nature paradox” (49). The paradox plays on human, particularly Western anxieties and ambivalences concerning relationships with the animal world and nature in general. The setting of Doris Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing* (1950) and Chenjerai Hove’s *Ancestors* (1996) in colonial Zimbabwe means that they, in one way or another, engage with the environmental ideologies of the
(Western) colonizers and the (African) colonized. Therefore, an analysis of these two texts, necessarily, has to rely on a triangulation of some of the most recent environmental philosophies, namely, deep ecology, social ecology, and ecofeminism.

Deep ecology locates current environmental problems in the dominant Western philosophical outlook, which envisages humans as destined to dominate nature and control it. This thinking is traceable to the biblical story of creation in which humans are destined to control nature. In fact, as Edward Said puts it, “everything about human history is rooted in the earth” (5) since over time human beings have struggled and competed over geography and territory, conceptualizing the environment as space that needs to be turned into place (5). Human civilization developed on this foundation, and particularly in the West, was conceived from a Social Darwinian perspective as progressing from lower forms to higher forms, as shown by the four stages of human social development in Adam Smith’s seminal text *The Wealth of Nations* (qtd. in Bowden 127). In this Western thinking, nature is conceived as existing to serve human designs and becomes objectified in the process. This human-centered or anthropocentric worldview also led to the development of “a mechanistic Cartesian metaphysics which sees nature as a dead, inert machine, insensitive to abuse and exploitation by humans” (Eckersley 45–46). In this can be said to lie the roots of the domination and exploitation of the natural environment that is at the center of the current global environmental crisis. So, deep ecology tries to promote an alternative ecocentric worldview to replace the current anthropocentric one that privileges humans over the environment, making it an appropriate tool for the analysis of the above texts, which also proffer alternatives to anthropocentrism.

Social ecology is associated with the work of Murray Bookchin. It represents a movement away from deep ecology’s focus on philosophical causes to explain the current global environmental crisis. It locates the causes of the same in human relations of domination: “The very notion of domination of nature by man [gender specific] stems from the very real domination of human by human” (Bookchin qtd in DesJardins 240). Social ecology as an environmental philosophy is particularly pertinent as a tool of analysis of Lessing’s and Hove’s texts, which are largely set in a colonial context where the teleology of domination of one human being by another is the main defining characteristic of human existence.

Ecofeminism is related to social ecology in its location of the causes of human domination of nature in human relations of domination of one human being by another. Its main point of departure is the adoption of a gendered prism in its analysis of this dialectic. It sees relations
of domination and hierarchical social systems as patriarchal and phal-locentric, creating significant “others” such as women and non-human nature who are at the receiving end in this dialectic. So, the narrative of the domination of space and nature by humans is a patriarchal and masculine one. Consequently, “ecofeminism argues that the struggle for ecological survival is intrinsically linked with the project of women’s liberation” (Wall 178). Ecofeminism’s gender prism as an analytical tool for Lessing’s and Hove’s novels is all the more pertinent in a colonial set up where relations of domination are gendered. In fact, because humans are gendered, ideologies of masculinity and femininity mediate human relations of dominator and dominated with the former associated with masculinity and the latter with femininity (Mutekwa “Gendered beings, gendered discourses”). This means that nature, because of its domination by humans, becomes feminized and, hence, the link that feminists make between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women.

Anthropocentric Triumphalism: The Othering and Feminization of Nature in The Grass Is Singing and Ancestors

The common trope that unites Lessing’s The Grass is Singing and Hove’s Ancestors is the suppression of subaltern narratives by dominant ones. As the narrator in Ancestors points out: “the stories that we hear, the victors are the only story-tellers” (Hove 21). Set in colonial Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) with its racially premised hierarchies, the domination dialectic is much more accentuated. So, in the texts, the subaltern discourse is fighting to be heard or centered.

Doris Lessing’s text, The Grass is Singing, focuses mainly on the white colonialists during the early to mid-days of colonialism, that is, the 1930s to the 1940s. Lessing herself was one of the left-leaning white liberals who supported the idea of a multiracial society in Rhodesia, something that did not endear her to the racialists who were for the perpetuation of white supremacy. The novel, therefore, is a critique of colonial racism based on Enlightenment binary notions of civilized and uncivilized, and a Social Darwinian conceptualization of human societies. It is a socio-psycho realist novel that has as its basis a newspaper article about the murder of a white colonial woman by her native black servant. The narrative proceeds using tropes that show a white civilization that views itself as under siege from the palpable, “dark,” and “savage” forces of Africa, of which the natives and nature feature prominently. They endeavor to protect themselves from these forces by cultivating an esprit de corps and a sexual politics that center upon the protection of the body of the white woman from the black
man’s supposed hypersexual potency. To create a sense of being at home, the colonizers also try to create the colony in the image of the metropolis, for example, through a replication of metropolitan architecture and nomenclature.

The narrative, its omniscience and Lessing’s liberalism notwithstanding gives a voice and an identity to the whites while denying the same to the blacks who, together with the natural environment, are constructed as the threatening Other against which white civilization is ranged. The text is a victim of its time as the narrator is unable to get into the psyche of her black characters and explore them in the same way as the white characters because “one never had contact with the natives, except in the master-servant relationship. One never knew them in their lives, as human beings” (Lessing 21). The black characters are, therefore, presented in broad strokes as archetypes, in line with the preconceived white racial stereotypes of blacks.

Colonialism, a product of the human struggle over geography and the control of the environment, is by its very nature a hegemonic discourse in so far as it is premised on the domination of the indigenous people by the colonizers. Through a gendered prism, such as that of ecofeminism, this domination translates into a masculinization of the colonizers and feminization of the colonized and non-human nature. Colonialism is, thus, a patriarchal and masculine narrative that silences other narratives, in this context the feminine, that of nature, and that of the natives. Colonial society is highly hierarchical, and in line with Bookchin’s social ecology philosophy, these hierarchies “provide the psychological and material conditions, the motivation and the means, for exploiting and dominating nature” (DesJardins 244).

Consequently, in Lessing’s text, the colonizers’ domination extends to include not only the indigenous people but also the colonized space and nature in general. In fact, the colonial enterprise is premised on the need to dominate and exploit nature when one considers that colonies were mainly a source of raw materials for the metropolis. The domination of the indigenous people by the colonialists, as Hove’s Ancestors shows, is mainly the result of their having a different world view that allowed them to develop a different relationship with their environment. Colonial attitudes toward the natural environment are also mediated by colonial metaphors and myths of Africa as a “dark continent” where the image of Africa is that of a hostile wilderness waiting to be opened up, penetrated, and tamed by Western technology. These myths are also gendered in that they construct the continent of Africa as feminine if one considers the words “open up” and “penetrate” that mediated and informed colonial intrusion into Africa. The construction of Africa as a “dark continent” means that African
nature is othered at two levels, namely, that of nature in general, and secondly, in its construction as the savage and threatening Other. This implies that it can only be controlled and dominated through brute force. The feminization is also seen in the white novels of Empire, notably Haggard’s *She*, in which the African space is constructed as feminine, while the “savage” construction is manifest in Conrad’s novel, *Heart of Darkness*.

The feminization of the colonized African people and the natural environment means that they exist to be mercilessly exploited for the benefit of the colonizers who, in Lessing’s text, are personified by Charlie Slatter, the archetypal colonialist and fortune hunter. His consciousness is mediated and informed by a teleology of domination, as well as colonial myths about Africa, and this is shown by how he treats his land and the native people. His doctrine of the sjambok, a weapon for the control and domination of the supposedly brutish and savage Other, that he considers indispensable for the attainment of his goals, summarizes how he relates to Africans and nature. His ecological philosophy is in tandem with the dominant Western world view and so it is quintessentially anthropocentric and instrumentalist. An anthropocentric environmental perspective is human-centered, and sees the natural environment as a “storehouse of resources” at the disposal of, in the service of, or as an instrument of humans and human designs (Eckersley 26). This instrumentalism is the result of a “self-hood conceived as that of the individual who stands apart from an alien other and denies his own relation to and dependency on this other” (Plumwood *Feminism* 142). This is how Slatter sees himself vis-à-vis the natural environment. The profit motive, ruthlessness, and individualism at the core of Slatter’s consciousness are a reflection of the dominant Western worldview critiqued in the ecophilosophy of deep ecology as being at the center of the current environmental crisis.

Slatter’s farming methods are so exploitative that they amount to a “rape” of Africa, in line with the feminization of the continent and nature in general (Mutekwa “Gendered beings, gendered discourses”). This rape of the Other is the quintessence of brute domination and instrumentalism, confirming Bookchin’s social ecology thesis of the connection between social domination and the domination of nature by humans. In tandem with the ideologies of empire, the colony, for Slatter, is a source of easy riches. His disregard for the environment is mocked by the narrative voice in the text that compares his farming methods to the shifting cultivation practised by the black Africans. In this broad stroke, the text is sweepingly dismissive of indigenous methods of land use and, by extension, their environmental conservation methods. This further confirms that the text is in a prison of its time.
where the racialism of the colony makes it impossible for whites to fully understand the lives of the colonized Africans. Slatter's profligacy and exhaustion of his farm leads him to covet the well-conserved if not prosperous farm of his white neighbor Dick Turner who represents the alternative ecocentric, deep ecological environmental philosophy, but is largely unsuccessful as a farmer. This shows that issues of environmental control and depletion have always been at the center of human conflict, hence, the connection some scholars (para. in Bowden) make between human civilization and war. In fact, Slatter epitomizes Adam Smith's fourth and highest stage of human social development which, as paraphrased by Brett Bowden, is “of civilised ... commercial society; an efficient and effective exploitation of nature and all the fruits she has to offer” (127). In this paradigm of human civilization, Turner is not using his land efficiently and should be displaced.

So, in this text, environmentally exploitative discourses are represented by the “big man” (Slatter), whereas the environmentally friendly ones are represented by the “small man” (Turner). That human beings’ control and domination of the environment is illusory is, however, shown by the severely degraded state of Slatter’s farm, the quintessence of an environmental dystopia. Exhausted, his land refuses to give more, and this is nature’s way of getting back at Slatter. As Gary Snyder, in a personification of nature, puts it: “Revolutionary consciousness is to be found/Among the most ruthlessly exploited classes/Animals, trees, water, air, grasses” (“Revolution in the Revolution in the Revolution” 39). Snyder’s comment personifies nature and subverts the dominant anthropocentric view that sees nature as an object.

Furthermore, considering that the farm is private property, Slatter’s attitude is surprising and makes a mockery of Garrett Hardin’s “tragedy of the commons” which relates to the exploitation and overuse of commonly held resources (1244). The colony, in fact, appears like the “commons” if Slatter’s attitude is anything to go by. This is so because human economic success and power have been entangled in environmental exploitation, so the “tragedy of the commons” is just a symptom rather than the underlying cause. For the colonizers in the text, there is also an absence of a sense of belonging and responsibility, and so a pillage mentality dominates Slatter’s consciousness.

The effect of the Slatter-kind of attitude to nature is mirrored in Hove’s text, Ancestors. Unlike Lessing’s, this text focuses on the colonized, the Other, rather than on the colonizers. The text is about the recovery of an ancestral past in which there are subaltern discourses that need to be centered, which are the environment and women. The two are conflated in the sense that both are denied a voice by dominant masculine discourses. This places Ancestors in the ecofeminist
tradition that sees connections between women’s oppression and exploitation by men and the domination and exploitation of the environment by humans. As ecofeminist philosopher, Elizabeth Warren, puts it, it “is the position that there are important connections—historical, experiential, symbolic, theoretical—between the domination of women and the domination of nature, an understanding of which is crucial to both feminism and environmental ethics” (126). In fact, Ancestors explicitly situates the dominant worldview into a patriarchal, phallocentric cosmology, and metaphysics: “Only the stories of the men, our fathers were told” (Hove 12). This patriarchal monologic narrative silences other narratives such as those concerning women and the natural environment, and so Ancestors is a recovery of these.

Ancestors reflects on the colonial relations of domination, just like The Grass is Singing. The colonized in the text view their dominators as models to emulate, and it is in their imbibing of the dominant Western worldview of the colonizers that they start to have a disharmonious relationship with their environment. This is missed in Lessing’s text, which sweepingly dismisses indigenous farming methods as both primitive and environmentally unfriendly. In Ancestors, the father of Mucha, the main male character and narrator, abandons and begins to disdain his ancestors’ traditional, eco-friendly agro methods and to adopt what he sees as the progressive views of the colonizers. This is a consequence of imbibing colonial Manichean binaries of Western civilization that Othered African knowledge systems. He unwittingly follows the colonial, anthropocentric environmental philosophy and becomes the embodiment of a compound patriarchal narrative, encompassing his traditional ancestral narrative and that of the colonialists. In this sense, one sees collusion between the two patriarchies in the service of their common interests as far as the domination and control of nature and women is concerned.

Ancestors illustrates the problems of conceiving Bookchin’s social ecology in terms of the relationship between human social relations of domination and the domination of the natural environment. The text shows that, in traditional African societies, represented by that of Mucha’s ancestors, the domination of women exists side by side with a harmonious, non-dominating relationship between the people and their environment. This problematizes the relationship between social domination and the domination of nature as noted by critics of social ecology (DesJardins 247–48). Ancestors shows that the domination of nature goes beyond mere relations of social domination or the control of space. In the case of the colonizers, it is necessary to turn to the Western dominant worldview that is rooted in Enlightenment subjectivity that is quintessentially masculine and dualistic, and positioned
man as the center of the universe, replacing God and nature. It is in this Enlightenment-premised masculine and dualistic cosmology that the human domination of nature, at least in the context of the text, is located, as is shown by the colonized subjects in *Ancestors*, who only begin to dominate and exploit their environment after imbibing the ideologies of the colonizers. Dualization, in the words of Plumwood, is “more than a simple hierarchical relationship—it is the devaluation and inferiorisation of the Other” (*Feminism* 47). In this way, the Other, the colonized, and nonhuman nature are objectified to be used and exploited for the One's benefit.

Mucha's father in *Ancestors*, on imbibing the colonial dominant worldview, loses his intentionalist/ecocentric attitude to nature and adopts an anthropocentric, instrumentalist one. “Intentionalism” is that attitude which “allows an ethical response encompassing respect for, and mutuality with others,” in this case, the natural environment (Plumwood, *Feminism* 138). His new consciousness is now mediated and driven by egoism and the profit motive. It alienates him from those around him as he loses his humanity just as Slatter does in *The Grass is Singing*. He begins to see the world through a Manichean dualist-tinted lens that consigns primitiveness to traditional knowledge systems and modernity and progressiveness to the Western and so becomes complicit in his Othering by the colonialists, who validate him by awarding him a Master Farmer certificate.

His complicity with colonial discourses puts him at the disposal of the colonialists, and he becomes a useful cog in the colonial machinery designed to maintain the system and its racially premised hierarchies. He is made one of those small-scale black commercial farmers, a class created as a buffer between the wealthy large-scale white commercial farmers and the impoverished black peasant farmers who had been consigned to marginal areas as a result of iniquitous colonial land policies. He, like the white farmers, benefits from the dispossession of fellow blacks, here represented by chief Gotami and his people, who are dispossessed of their land to make way for small-scale black commercial farmers who include Mucha's father. This dispossession epitomizes the triumph of the colonialist, masculinist dominant narrative and its accompanying exploitative, instrumentalist environmental philosophy. It resonates with the trajectory of Western civilization, as the Gotami people who have had a nonexploitative relationship with the environment are over-powered and displaced by the colonizers whose civilization and success is largely based on environmental exploitation. Their “crime” is their reluctance or inability to efficiently exploit the environment, and so in the logic of Western civilization they, like Turner in the *Grass is Singing*, must be replaced.
The name “Gotami,” in the Shona language, means the “humble one,” and, as a representative of a traditional environmentally friendly philosophy, casts him as subaltern to colonial hegemonic discourses. The Gotami community is one that is characterized by minimal social domination as shown by the peaceful methods they use to defend themselves from hostile ethnic groups in the precolonial era, and against the white colonialists who grab their land. The harmonious relationship that the Gotami people have with their natural environment somewhat validates the claims of social ecology about the relationship between human and social domination and the domination of nature. Here the absence or minimizing of social domination within the community is paralleled by a biocentric, or environment-friendly, environmental philosophy.

However, as Ngugi wa Thiong’o observes, “[I]mperialist pretences to free the African from superstition, ignorance and awe of nature often resulted in deepening his ignorance, increasing his superstitions and multiplying his awe of the new whip-and-gun-wielding master” (67). Evidence of this is the uncritical adoption of colonial farming methods and notions of progress and development premised on ruthless environmental exploitation. This is the tragedy of Mucha’s father. His adoption of colonial environmental sensibilities also has the effects of problematizing what is referred to above as “the tragedy of the commons.” In this context, this happens when indigenous methods of control, represented by chief Gotami, break down as a result of colonialism, and men like Mucha’s father and their newly-acquired anthropocentricism have a free rein. The coup de grace is when Mucha, the son, completely distances himself from his father’s dream of exclusively pursuing the profit motive. This represents a subversion of the colonial, masculine-dominant narrative that mediates the exploitation of the natural environment, and it foregrounds the possible recovery of an intentionalist, ecocentric one.

Ecocentric Intervention: Recovering Intentionalist Environmental Discourses in *The Grass Is Singing* and *Ancestors*

Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing* attempts to recover an ecocentric environmental philosophy that in the novel is made subaltern by the anthropocentric. Set against the hegemonic anthropocentric discourse represented by Slatter, Dick Turner epitomizes the alternative, ecocentric discourse which represents the alternative worldview privileged by the philosophy of deep ecology as the panacea to the environmental crisis. Although Turner is one of the white colonizers and also benefits
from the privileges accruing to whiteness in Empire, such as being positioned at the top of the racial hierarchy, his worldview is not in tandem with that of colonial civilization. This marks him out as one who does not conform to the tenets of white domination and is therefore a weak link in the chain of white hegemony over the blacks. So, the text portrays him as a site and fault line on, and along which, the silenced discourses of nature and the colonized blacks can use to find expression and subvert the dominant, racially mediated discourses of Empire. Colonial civilization survives on conquest and brutal domination and exploitation of the natives and nature, as Slatter epitomizes. Success is judged by material success, which is valorized as the greatest “good” in the utilitarian-premised colonial discourses. The destruction of nature and the inhuman treatment of blacks, the inferiorized Others, are non-issues in the colonial moral and ethical universe as long as they are pursuant to this greatest “good” for the colonizers.

Judged on the basis of the above yardsticks, Turner is a sorry failure, as materially he is only marginally better than the impoverished blacks. He is thus Othered by the colonial, hegemonic masculinities of empire as represented by Slatter, and he becomes vulnerable to their predation just as the blacks are (Mutekwa “Gendered beings, gendered discourses”). It is therefore no surprise that Slatter covertly covets Dick’s farm that has not been as over-exploited as his own. Turner’s vulnerability also exposes him to those forces that the colonials are confronted with, namely the natives and hostile nature.

Unlike in ecofeminist metaphysics where women and nature are conflated as victims of hegemonic patriarchal discourses, the blacks and nature in the colonial racial universe are conflated in The Grass is Singing. This implies that the liberation of the blacks is inseparable from that of nature. This shows that there are shared commonalities between and amongst systems of domination, in this case patriarchy and racism that need to be fully grasped in order to successfully deal with racial, gender, and environmental exploitation. As colonial hierarchies are racially mediated, white and black women are positioned differently. Colonial racial hierarchies consign femininity to the dominated, in this case the blacks (both men and women), and masculinity to the dominators, who are the whites in this situation (Mutekwa “Gendered beings, gendered discourses”). Ecofeminist postulations, where only the domination of women is related to that of nature, thus appear blind to this racial dialectic in human relations of domination where femininity is not the preserve of biological women (nor masculinity the preserve of biological men), as relations of domination are permeated by gender ideologies. Colonial racial hierarchies “masculinize” the white woman, and so, in the text, she is not conflated with nature.
In Lessing’s novel, Dick’s wife Mary Turner does not have a close relationship with nature unlike her husband, but like many a colonialist, as Anthony Chennells argues in his study of the Rhodesian settler novel, finds the African veldt a hostile and threatening presence. This fear is closely related to the metaphor and myth of Africa as a “Dark Continent” created by the early European explorers and missionaries (Jarosz 106). In the myth, nature, together with the natives, is one of the palpable savage forces of the dark continent that Western civilization is set against. In fact, the role played by this hostile nature in the tragedy of the Turners is by no means minor. While Mary cannot control the natural environment, she, because of her “masculinization” in the colonial racial universe, endeavors to subdue and control one of these dark and savage forces in the form of her black houseboys.

Thus Mary’s problems and finally her tragedy are in part a result of her inability to forge a new identity and relate to nature. Unlike Dick, home for Mary, like many a colonialist in the text, is England, and this privileging of roots shows the failure to carve a new identity that would enable her to relate to the African environment. This failure to fashion a new hybrid identity (as underlined by the colonialists’ neurotic fear of “going native” in the text) means that colonizers are destined for failure in their mission of controlling African nature and the natives.

The disharmony in the Turners marriage is in large part a consequence of their diametrically opposed environmental sensibilities. Mary is, in many ways, like Slatter and views the farm “as a machine for making money,” showing that she subscribes to the dominant anthropocentric worldview as opposed to Dick’s ecocentric one (Lessing 151). Also, unlike Mary, Dick does not envisage England as his home. If anything, he is scandalized by the way the colonialists are trying to model the colony into another England, for example, through architecture. Dick is like the typical postcolonial migrant whose main defining characteristic is hybridity. This tendency, however, is symptomatic of “going native” in the colonial imaginary and strikes at the heart of white supremacy as it undermines the constructed racial hierarchies between blacks and whites. This process of “going native” represents a “feminization” of Dick in colonial hierarchies, and so he begins to lose control of his world and that lays the ground for his defeat by a hostile nature and by Moses, the black houseboy.

In colonial imaginaries as shown in this text, the threat of a hostile nature is conflated with the sexual threat of the colonized natives and so both need to be subdued and controlled, hence, they are made subaltern. Colonial myths of Africa as the dark continent were also permeated by myths of the hyper-sexual potency of blacks, and so colonial
sexual politics regarding blacks and whites are central in mediating relations between the races. The white woman is at the center as she is constructed as the marker of the boundary between the races and so is closely guarded by white men to protect her from the supposed hyper-sexuality of the black man (Mutekwa “Gendered beings, gendered discourses”). In the colonial racial hierarchies, the white woman is located at the boundary where the masculinity of the colonizer starts and the femininity of the colonized ends, as she has literally exchanged places with the black man who has been relegated to the feminine realm (hence, his association with nature), while she has been elevated to the masculine one (hence, her dissociation from nature). The boundary between the two is therefore one that the colonialists need to carefully guard as it is permeable and one on which colonial hierarchies could be readily subverted.

In the Turners’ household, the threat of the natural environment is conflated with that of Moses, the last houseboy. The authorial voice denies Moses a voice and he fights to have one in the Turner household, and as he succeeds, so does the potency of the environment to triumph over the colonialists. The constructed boundary between Mary and Moses begins to collapse and dissolve, and this is accompanied by Mary’s epiphanic realization that the natural environment was getting the upper hand over her and Dick: “the bush was conquering the farm” (245). At the end, the subalternized nature and the natives triumph over Mary and Dick, hence, the title of the novel, The Grass is Singing. The jitteriness of the whites, their garrison mentality, the socially constructed racial boundaries, and the ceaseless vigilance show that their conquest is tenuous.

Dick Turner’s failure and Slatter’s material success suggest that colonialism can only succeed in the masculine, hegemonic mode, because it is premised on brute domination and all the colonial machinery and state apparatus are fashioned to function in this way. Outside of this, the colonialist is exposed and has no viable machinery and apparatus to succeed, as Turner’s predicament aptly shows. Dick’s failure is not the quintessential failure of ecocentricism, but rather evidence of the absence of the appropriate cultural, epistemological, and political or administrative software and tools, in Western civilization that are fashioned to make an environmentally friendly approach a possibility.

However, the triumph of Dick’s ecocentric environmental philosophy is in the manner in which his farm remains preserved, unlike that of Slatter, hence the latter’s envy and machinations to dispossess him. The moving scene when Slatter forces Dick to give up his farm serves to underline his ruthlessness and, symbolically, the (temporary) triumph of anthropocentric, instrumentalist environmental sensibilities.
(Lessing 222). However, from an ethical perspective, Slatter’s virtual robbing of Dick underlines the victory of Dick’s particular environmental ideology and mocks Slatter who is forced to steal from one of his kind. Dick’s ecocentrism is, in fact, an intervention in the dominant anthropocentricism represented by Slatter. It has a limited chance of success as long as the dominant masculine worldview, the driving force behind Western notions of progress and development, remains the same. This worldview, premised on domination, control, and exploitation, sets up a conflict between humans and nature, manifested in environmental problems like the current ones, with nature likely to get the upper hand at the end, as it does in Slatter, and Mary and Dick’s case. Nature’s repercussions, as in this case, unfortunately, do not discriminate between those who abuse the environment (like Slatter) and those who do not (like Turner), just as current environmental problems affect those responsible for them and those who are not.

Hove’s *Ancestors* attempts to bring ecocentric and intentionalist environmental discourses to the center through a foregrounding of eco-friendly, Afro-centric environmental discourses. Hove is a second-generation Zimbabwean writer whose main preoccupation is the plight of the weak and marginalized, here represented by women and the environment (Veit-Wild). The text represents an attempt to recover an African ancestral past in which Hove foregrounds two subaltern discourses: those of women and those of the natural environment. These are conflated in the text, casting it in the ecofeminist tradition that calls attention to an inseparable link between the exploitation of the environment and the oppression of women. The women and nature in the text areothered by patriarchal discourses, and the dominant social narratives, both the indigenous and colonial, are patriarchal. Hove uses the indigenous metaphor and trope of spirit possession in the form of the avenging spirit to recover these discourses. This trope of the ancestors, who intervene in the lives and affairs of the living, strikes right at the heart of Enlightenment rationality and subjectivity that underpin the dominant colonial patriarchal narrative. It shows the existence of other realities and subjectivities beside, and over and above, the human. In the text, the main character is the spirit of Miriro, a woman who during her lifetime was deaf and dumb, symbols of the silencing of women in patriarchal discourses (Mutekwa “The Avenging Spirit”). She is now an avenging spirit who has returned to seek the righting of her subalternity during her lifetime.

In fact, the ancestral voice of Miriro is the main narrating presence in the text, possessing an omniscience that enables the other narratives to be known by Mucha, Miriro’s medium. Miriro’s voice mainly concerns itself with the narration of the discourses of the suppressed, in
this case, women and nature. As a spiritual presence, Miriro’s narrative is surrealistic, enabling it, for example, to transcend the barriers of space and time and subvert the laws of nature. Through surrealism, the narrative is able to give a voice to nature and bring it on par with humans, subverting those modernist discourses that objectify nature. Miriro’s narrative, however, interlocks with that of Mucha, which operates at the level of realism.

Miriro’s spirit uses a male medium, Mucha, to articulate the interconnected discourses of women and the natural environment. The narrative proceeds by juxtaposing and interlinking the two discourses, employing images, tropes, and metaphors that link women and nature, resonating with the ethos of ecofeminism, particularly the cultural feminist strand which sees a historical link between women and nature. In furthering its goals, the narrative also seeks recourse to oral narrative, particularly folktales. In folktales animals take the place of humans and help expose human folly and pettiness, *inter alia*, helping to subvert humans’ perceived superiority to animals and nature in general. In addition to these, the narrative employs allegories and anecdotes that help further its message relating, in particular, to the relation between humans and nature. Proverbs, metaphors, and other figures of speech serve the same purpose. Orature is the medium to which Mucha, a representative of the African patriarchy, can best relate. The poetic language of the narrative also fits in with that of most oral narratives such as folktales, epics, and others; this is a quality that was traditionally part of the mnemonic devices of a preliterate society. In the text, it also functions, apart from giving the narrative a musical quality, as a mnemonic device for Mucha, to whom Miriro narrates her story.

The narrative of *Ancestors* is mediated by one of the major tenets of deep ecology, namely biocentric equality, which is “the recognition that all organisms and beings are equally members of an integrated whole and, therefore, have equal intrinsic worth” (DesJardins 227). The close and symbiotic relationship between people and their environment is highlighted through the recurrent images that relate people, especially women, to nature. For example, Miriro, the dumb and deaf female ancestor, mourns her predicament thus: “They went their way, leaving me alone, a dry leaf, a lone bird with a broken wing which no one calls their own” (Hove 13). Miriro’s lamentation here is a reference to an absence of an “ethics of care” in the patriarchal narrative, also shown by her Othering as a disabled child (DesJardins 252). This ethics of care emanates from women’s traditional nurturing and life-giving roles associated with motherhood. Central to this female narrative is an ethics of love, responsibility, and care that represents the missing link in the individualist, monologic patriarchal narrative,
resulting in the latter being a destructive force as evidenced by environmental damage. Because of its violent orientation, the patriarchal narrative goes together with a reactive approach to environmental conservation often referred to as “shallow ecology” that ecology which tries to minimize the effects of environmental degradation such as pollution. In the final analysis, the patriarchal narrative is self-destructive, unsustainable, and life-denying as shown by the state of the environment today. The ethics of the feminine narrative enable a proactive approach to environmental protection. Miriro addresses the patriarchy in order that they accept this alternative narrative so as to create a unitary, dialogic, narrative—“our story”—that would better serve the interests of both women and men, and the environment (Hove 12).

This means that the feminine narrative should no longer exist in a subordinate relationship to, and separate from, the patriarchal one whose binary focus has feminized nature all the more to subdue and exploit it. This lifts Ancestors from being a narrative anchored on cultural ecofeminism, which merely sees connections between the domination of women and the domination of nature and aims to “remedy ecological and other problems through the creation of an alternative ‘women’s culture’” (Plumwood, “Feminism” 10), to one that represents the perpetuation of a duality that has been the basis for the oppression of women and nature and that does not subvert the dominant masculine worldview. Ancestors, through its subversion of the dualisms of man–woman and human–nature narratives that underpin social hierarchies, operates more in line with the tenets of what has been called “third wave” ecofeminism represented by the environmental philosophers Elizabeth Warren and Val Plumwood. This “third wave” ecofeminism is opposed to Enlightenment dualizations and hierarchizations and so “challenges both feminists and environmentalists alike to uncover the patterns of domination common to the oppression of women and nature, . . . [and] also begin[s] exploring alternative and non-dualistic ways of thinking about both human and non-human nature” (DesJardins 256). This is what Ancestors tries to do as it identifies the patriarchal narrative as the source of the domination of both women and nature and seeks to create a combined, dialogic narrative of both men and women to replace the story of the fathers. However, it does not attempt to create a unitary monologic metanarrative that forecloses others. In fact, the use of surrealist techniques in the narration is a subversion of realist meta-narratives that foreground only one possible reality; surrealism opens up the space for the existence of other realities, even outside the unitary masculine and feminine narrative that it tries to promote. Thus “third wave” ecofeminism subverts not only the patriarchal meta-narrative that sees only
its reality as the only possible one, but also a possible ecofeminist meta-narrative like that of the cultural feminists that, like the patriarchal one, potentially forecloses others.

Through the religio-environmental sensibilities of the people of Gotami, Othered by the colonialists as a mark of backwardness, Ancestors fractures and subverts the rationalist, Enlightenment-informed Western biocentric ethics that are centered on human subjectivity. The narrative promotes an Afro-centric, ubuntu biocentric ethics that is evident when the narrator Mucha and his family migrate to a new area as a result of colonial land policies. In this new land of chief Gotami, an earth-cum-cosmic, religio-environmental biocentric ethics reigns supreme. Gotami’s land is portrayed as an ecotopia, “a community that seeks harmony with rather than dominance over nature” (DesJardins 231).

The coming in of the black small-scale farmers, however, is a subversion of this as their environmental sensibilities are quintessentially instrumentalist; though they are forced, to some extent, to kowtow to the indigenous environmental mores in the new land. But at best, their perspectives embrace what has been referred to as “shallow” (as opposed to “deep”) ecological sensibilities that are reactive rather than proactive in promoting environmental conservation and resource preservation and in which domination and exploitation continue to mediate the relationship between humans and nature. This “shallow” ecology, is, however, not valorized in the text as it is still human-centered, and so, at Mucha’s father’s death, he is mocked, in surrealist fashion, by what appears a vengeful nature: “The dusty soils of Gotami’s lands came to his nose and said: We have come. Eat us, the power of your dream, eat us before we eat you” (Hove 59). This triumph of nature is similar to that in Lessing’s The Grass is Singing. It is a part of the two authors’ strategies of recovering ecocentric environmental narratives. This suggests that anthropocentrism sets up a conflict with nature in which humans lose in the end. This resonates with the avenging spirit trope which the text employs to center marginalized discourses. Just as suppressed, wronged ancestors can return seeking retribution on the wrong doers, so also is the abused environment capable of getting its own back on humans.

So, the text attempts to recover traditional, eco-friendly environmental discourses by centering ecofeminism and what can be termed ubuntu/unhu³ environmental philosophy as alternatives to the dominant Western ideology premised on domination and dualism. Ubuntu philosophy is not premised on binarisms and, as in the case of the people of Gotami, enables the existence of a worldview not premised on humanity’s mastery of nature. Ubuntu cosmology is holistic, as it integrates the social, the economic, the religious, and the
environmental. In essence, *ubuntu* as an environmental philosophy fits under the rubric of what has been referred to as “deep ecology,” as it negates, and is an alternative to, the dominant ideology through which humanity’s domination and exploitation of nature is mediated. So, *ubuntu* and ecofeminism have some shared commonalities and the two complement each other in furthering a deep ecological perspective. *Ubuntu*, though a non-dualist and an eco-friendly philosophy, is still a narrative of the fathers and so needs tampering with the feminine narrative with its ethics for it to be fully ecocentric, resulting in a quintessentially deep ecological philosophy that the text perceives as the answer to rampant environmental destruction.

In the *ubuntu* environmental philosophy in the text, humanity also tries to influence nature in a positive way, as shown by the practice of rain-making through prayers to the ancestors whose powers are believed to be omnipotent (Hove 132). In this way, subjectivity is not only the preserve of humans but also of the ancestors and nature, leaving humans and nature with no clear ontological distinction. So, the *ubuntu* biocentric environmental philosophy subverts those rationalist Western biocentric ethics that are secularist and do not include other realities exemplified by supernatural forces. These tend to foreclose other perspectives such as those of chief Gotami’s people in *Ancestors*. In *ubuntu*, the influence of spiritual and supernatural forces is part of humans’ lived experiences and they are entangled in its biocentric ethics. Instead of one subjectivity, *ubuntu* recognizes others which interlock with the human, for example, the realm of the spiritual from which the avenging spirit trope, through which the narrative is mediated, is drawn from.

Like the avenging spirit, in the case of the women characters who come to avenge their wrong doers, the text also shows that the environment is capable of getting its own back on humanity for the abuse perpetrated on it. In *Ancestors*, anthropomorphic climate change and its accompanying effects come to haunt the community (Hove 145). Here nature’s vengeance is similar to that of the avenging spirit that affects not only the wrong-doer but also his/her extended family. Nature’s repercussions do not affect only the actual perpetrators of environmental damage but all members of the human family, necessitating co-operation by all in dealing with the environmental crisis.

**Conclusion**

Environmental discourses permeate Lessing and Hove’s literary texts, which focus on race and gender, respectively, and frame them. Both texts critique the dominant anthropocentric environmental
philosophy based on Enlightenment and patriarchal worldviews and try to recover ecocentric ones, essential in the case of Zimbabwe, which, like many parts of the globe, is experiencing environmental problems. The triumph of anthropocentrism is subverted by the destruction of the environment and associated repercussions and is shown to be unsustainable. Ecocentrism, in the context of this dominant worldview, appears difficult to realize as shown by the failure of Dick Turner in The Grass is Singing and the dispossession of the Gotami people in Ancestors. This reflects the current global scenario in which the so-called developed countries largely owe their success and dominance to superior environmental exploitation when compared with developing nations. It is also possible, therefore, because of the above, for developing countries to regard issues of environmental conservation, particularly if coming from the developed countries, as ruses to prevent developing countries from attaining the same levels of development and so keep them shackled in poverty. Developed countries, for fear of losing their dominance and/or hegemony, may also pay lip service to environmental conservation in the highly competitive globalizing world. Clearly, a paradigm shift is needed. This includes a transformation of the dominant, masculine worldview that mediates human–human relations and human–nature relations. This would involve a shift from reactive to proactive approaches to environmental protection and conservation. Chew shows that environmental destruction and degradation have been linked with the decline of human civilization throughout history, showing that humanity disregards the environment at its own peril (184–227).

Notes

1. For more on this, see Hammon and and Jablow (1970).
2. In Zimbabwean Shona cosmology, avenging spirits are spirits of the wronged dead ancestors which return to haunt and torment the perpetrators seeking restitution for the wrongs done them during their lifetime. For more on this, see Bourdillon (2000).
3. Ubuntu is a Zulu/Xhosa word. In the Zimbabwean majority Shona language, it is called unhu. For more on Zimbabwean ubuntu/unhu, see Samkange and Samkange (1980).

Works Cited


