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Nurturing in a Broken World: Maternal Ecofeminist Resilience in the Face of Environmental Trauma in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* and Sherri L. Smith's *Orleans*

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Dedication

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Abstract

In the context of escalated environmental crises, literature provides a nuanced lens to explore how marginalized communities respond to ecological devastation and its psychological aftermath. This study investigates how Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* and Sherri L. Smith's *Orleans* portray motherhood as a form of Ecofeminist resilience in settings of profound environmental and social collapse. Through an Ecofeminist lens, the study examines the intersection between women, nature, and patriarchy while incorporating Patricia Hill Collin's Black feminist framework to center black women's experiences. It also employs Glenn Albrecht's concept of solastalgia to analyze the emotional turmoil of the protagonists. Moreover, it provides an in-depth comparative method grounded in close reading and thematic analysis of motherhood and resilience. The research critiques the role of ecological and social degradation in creating struggle-filled environments for marginalized communities. It also sheds light on the different survival mechanisms black women employ to navigate these fraught environments. Ultimately, the study contributes to Ecofeminist literary criticism as well as ecological discourse, offering relevant insights into the complex interplay of gender, race, and environmental trauma in contemporary African American literature.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Motherhood, Maternal Resilience, Race, Gender, Class, Environmental Trauma, Dystopian Fiction, *Salvage the Bone, Orleans*.

Résumé

Dans le contexte d'une escalade des crises environnementales, la littérature offre une perspective nuancée pour explorer la façon dont les communautés marginalisées réagissent à la dévastation écologique et à ses conséquences psychologiques. Cette étude examine comment *Salvage the Bones* de Jesmyn Ward et *Orléans* de Sherri L. Smith dépeignent la maternité comme une forme de résilience écoféministe dans des contextes d'effondrement environnemental et social. En adoptant une optique écoféministe, l'analyse examine l'intersection entre les femmes, la nature et le patriarcat, tout en incorporant le cadre du féminisme noir de Patricia Hill Collins pour centrer les expériences des femmes noires. Elle utilise également le concept de "solastalgie" de Glenn Albrecht pour examiner les perturbations émotionnelles des protagonistes. Par ailleurs, la méthodologie repose sur une approche comparative, fondée sur une lecture attentive et une analyse thématique de la maternité et de la résilience. La recherche critique le rôle de la dégradation écologique et sociale dans la création d'environnements de lutte pour les communautés marginalisées, tout en mettant en lumière les mécanismes de survie déployés par les femmes noires pour naviguer dans ces environnements hostiles. Enfin, l'étude contribue à la critique littéraire écoféministe et au discours écologique en offrant des perspectives pertinentes sur l'interaction complexe entre genre, race et trauma environnemental dans la littérature afro-américaine contemporaine.

Mots-clés : Écoféminisme, Maternité, Résilience Maternelle, Race, Genre, Classe, Traumatisme Environnemental, Fiction Dystopique, *Salvage the Bones*, *Orléans.*

الملخص

في سياق الأزمات البيئية المتصاعدة، يوفر الأدب عدسة تحليلية دقيقة لاستكشاف كيفية استجابة المجتمعات المهمشة للدمار البيئي وتداعياته النفسية. تبحث هذه الدراسة في كيفية تصوير رواية "إنقاذ العظام" لجيسمين وارد ورواية "أورليانز" لشيري ل. سميث للأمومة كشكل من أشكال الصمود الإيكولوجي النسوي في سياق الانهيار البيئي والاجتماعي. من خلال نهج النسوية البيئية، تحلل الدراسة التقاطعات بين النساء والطبيعة والنظام الأبوي، مع دمج إطار عمل باتريشيا هيل كولينز للنسوية السوداء لتركيز تجارب النساء السوداوات. كما أنها توظف مفهوم "السولاستالجيا" (الاغتراب البيئي) لغلين ألبريشت لفحص الاضطرابات العاطفية لدى الشخصيات النسائية الرئيسية. علاوة على ذلك، تعتمد المنهجية على مقارنة نقدية متعمقة ترتكز على القراءة المتأنية والتحليل الموضوعي للأمومة والصمود. ينتقد البحث دور التدهور البيئي والاجتماعي في خلق بيئات معيشية قاسية للمجتمعات المهمشة. كما يسلط الضوء على آليات البقاء المختلفة التي تستخدمها النساء السوداوات لمواجهة هذه الظروف الصعبة. في نهاية المطاف تساهم الدراسة في توسيع آفاق النقد الأدبي الإيكولوجي النسوي وكذلك الخطاب البيئي، عبر الكشف عن التفاعلات الجدلية بين الجنس والعرق والصدمة البيئية في الأدب الأميركي- الأفريقي المعاصر.

كلمات مفتاحية: النسوية الإيكولوجية، الأمومة، صمود الأمهات العرق، الجنس، الطبقة الاجتماعية، الصدمة البيئية، الخيال البائس (الديستوبي)،رواية إنقاذ العظام، رواية أورليانز.

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General Introduction

Motherhood is both a deeply personal experience and a social construct that is laced with ambivalence and mystery. The act of giving birth or mothering in itself is ambiguous and is approached and defined differently by several women. In literary contexts, motherhood often occupies a prominent space of representation and critical exploration. Shared experiences and thoughts on motherhood give way to a variety of texts to be constructed, which sheds light on its other aspects as well. Motherhood is profoundly influenced by intersecting narratives of race, class, and gender, which affect how it is perceived and understood. Elaine T. Hansen for instance, reflects on the diverse experiences of motherhood, stating that: "what is said by and about mothers—full time mothers, surrogate mothers, teenage mothers… mothers who live in poverty… is increasingly complicated and divisive" (1).

In the contemporary context of climate change, motherhood takes on an unconventional, multilayered and vexing prevalence. It becomes tethered in a narrative rooted in ruination and instability and goes beyond nurturance and care. When motherhood intersects with environmental issues, it finds its theoretical foundation in Ecofeminism. This theory combines feminism and ecology, and it links the oppression of women and subjugation of nature under patriarchal structures. These structures not only dominate female bodies, but also exploit nature, treating both as inferior and as sources that need to be controlled and silenced. In this context, ecofeminism provides a nuanced lens for examining the portrayals of motherhood in environmental crises, specifically how these maternal figures respond to said crises, and how they overcome trauma that comes with it. Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* and Sherri L. Smith's *Orleans* are poignant texts that explore these dynamics through delineating their female

characters in contexts that reject traditional maternal roles, positioning them instead as emblems of resilience that are crucial to their survival.

The central argument of this dissertation highlights the intrinsic connection between black women and the nature they are part of. It reveals how both are dominated, jeopardized, and pushed to the margins by patriarchal and systemic institutions, and how race, class, and gender intersect under environmental degradation. It also underscores how "black motherhood" rejects these institutions and withstands the emotional toll of environmental trauma. The analysis, thus, focuses on the female protagonists in *Salvage the Bones* and *Orleans*, by examining how these characters live under different circumstances and embark on journeys dictated by inexorable environmental unrest and patriarchal oppression. It further explores how these forces threaten their agency and how both protagonists adopt unconventional maternal roles to overcome these threats.

Although understudied, previous scholarships have been written on Sherri L. Smith's *Orleans*. In the journal article titled "The Female Leader: The Neo Slave Narrative and Twenty First Century Young Adult Afrofuturism," Melanie Marotta examines the journey of Fen De La Guerre in a post-apocalyptic world as a neo-slave mother. Fen's experience reflects broader tensions between empowerment and the burdens of imposed motherhood. By placing herself in the role of mother, Fen ensures the survival of the next generation through her sacrifice. While the main focus is on empowerment through sacrifice, the analysis does not sufficiently address how motherhood operates as a form of resistance to the environmental destruction that surrounds Fen. The analysis does not focus on the ways through which Fen's maternal actions function as a source of strength and healing during ecological collapse.

Furthermore, in "Decolonizing the YA North: Environmental Injustice in Sherri L. Smith's Orleans", M.J. Coleman examines the portrayals of environmental injustices in *Orleans* and argues that the narrative reflects broader themes of colonialism, systemic, and gendered inequality which affects marginalized communities. The thesis in general calls for a re-evaluation and decolonization of environmental narratives in YA fiction. Although Colman addresses colonialism and systemic inequalities, he does not explore how Fen's maternal role helped her navigate a world infused with ecological collapse and trauma. The intersection of motherhood and nature is not given focus, which could provide a nuanced understanding of how maternal roles act as sites of resilience in YA fiction.

Moreover, in *Ecosocial Harm, Grief and Communal Empowerment in Sherri L Smith's Orleans*, Marijama Mikié discusses the depiction of environmental destruction in a post-apocalyptic narrative, and how Fen's grief and loss, combined with environmental racism, compel her to employ protective roles. Mikié's expansion on grief narrative and emotional toll of environmental collapse is enriching, however, no examination is given on how Fen is driven by her maternal role to navigate and endure the deteriorating landscape, and to ensure the safety and survival of Baby Girl.

When it comes to Ward's *Salvage the Bones*, a considerable body of literature has been devoted to the analysis of the novel. On the one hand, Erika L. Gotfredson's "Is This What Motherhood Is? Ambivalent Representations in Black Women's Novels" evaluates how motherhood in *Salvage the Bones* is utilized as a tool to express black women's burdens and to uncover the various models of systemic racism. It suggests how systemic oppression complicates Esch's ability to fulfill her role as a mother. However, despite her impoverished circumstances, she finds empowerment in her emerging motherhood. Gotfredson's focuses on ambivalent

"Black motherhood" representations but does not expand on "black motherhood" as source of resilience and protection, and as a source of emotional healing in the context of environmental trauma.

On the other hand, Renee Vincent's "Weathering the Storm: Black Maternal Mortality, Resistance, and Power in Richard Wright's "Down by The Riverside," Zora Neale Hurston's "Their Eyes Were Watching God," and Jesmyn Ward's "Salvage the Bones"" explores natural disaster narrative in black southern literature and the socio-historical oppression. It suggests that Ward centers Black female agency to enact a sense of communal hope against disaster oppression. There is, however, a lack of focus on how Esch grapples with her emerging identity and how she incorporates her asserted motherhood to face environmental distress.

Furthermore, in "Finding Identity through Survival: The Impact of the Hurricanes in Zora Neale Hurston Their Eyes Were Watching God Jesmyn Ward's Salvage the Bones," Crystal F. Giles demonstrates how Hurricane Katrina enables motherless characters like Esch to emerge as a stronger version of themselves despite facing systemic and racial oppression. While the article explores survival and personal growth, minimal focus is dedicated to the emotional strength of maternal identity in the face environmental trauma.

Much of these previous studies lend their focus to racial and systemic narratives, with much attention directed to how these protagonists ensure communal continuity. However, they portray motherhood as a burden, a symbol of oppression and sacrifice. Although some of these studies examine communal empowerment through maternal roles, there is a gap in the specific ways Esch and Fen find strength from their maternal roles in the face of environmental trauma. The role of motherhood as a beacon of resilience in the face of ecological distress as well as patriarchy is largely absent.

More in-depth examination reveals a gap in terms of ecofeminist reading which could deepen the analysis of nature, gender, and maternal roles during environmental crises. Exploring the intrinsic relationship between women and nature could be done within an Ecofeminist lens in order to provide profound perspectives on how "Black mothers" emerge from environmental harm as well as fight patriarchal and systemic inequities by reclaiming a narrative built on maternal resilience, healing, and survival.

Furthermore, a comparative gap exists in these previous scholarships. *Salvage the Bones* and *Orleans* have not been analyzed simultaneously in the context of maternal resilience in the face of environmental trauma. Both novels share black teenage protagonists, elements of environmental collapse, systemic oppression, and motherhood. A comparative analysis is crucial for a deeper comprehension of how different forms of "black motherhood" are approached in a post-apocalyptic narrative of *Orleans*, and in a realistic narrative of *Salvage the Bones*.

This research is grounded in the Ecofeminist framework, drawing particularly on the works of Vandana Shiva, Val Plumwood, and Ynestra King to provide critical tools for analyzing the intersections of gender, structural oppression, and environmental degradation. Additional foundational work—such as Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* is used to examine the notion of motherhood. This framework is further expanded by drawing on the work of Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought*, to provide much needed insights about "black motherhood" specifically. Moreover, the philosopher Albrecht Glenn's concept of Solastalgia is incorporated to offer a fresh interpretive lens for the characters' internalized emotions and responses regarding environmental collapse.

A comparative analysis of both novels is applied in order to provide in-depth insights into the similarities and differences in how they portray the themes of motherhood and resilience,

allowing for a deeper understanding on how maternal Ecofeminism manifests across literary texts. By using close reading as a central analytical method, both novels are examined through specific scenes, character arcs, and symbols that depict characterization of maternal figures and descriptions of environmental trauma while paying particular attention to the different strategies of resistance and survival employed by the protagonists.

The research seeks to highlight the relevance of climate fiction by demonstrating the ways *Salvage the Bones* and *Orleans* portray and critique the disproportionate burdens placed upon black women, including social and environmental crises. It also aims to demonstrate how these burdens shape maternal journeys, highlighting the ways they can manifest emotionally. Another objective lies in examining how survival and resilience—performed by the protagonists—can be tethered to connections with nature.

This study poses the following questions: How do *Salvage the Bones* and *Orleans* grapple with and portray different identities of motherhood, and how do they navigate patriarchal and ecological degradation? In what ways does motherhood function as a site of resilience against environmental collapse?

In this research, we argue that *Salvage the Bones* and *Orleans* portray varied models of motherhood. *Salvage the Bones*' Esch depicts a biologically-rooted maternal identity, whereas *Orleans*' Fen exhibits another form rooted in surrogate kinship. Both protagonists navigate patriarchal and ecological degradation through different perspectives shaped by their respective settings and experiences. We also argue that both of these protagonists challenge conventional ways of resilience by claiming agency, rendering nature an ally rather than an adversary, and implementing strategies that challenge hierarchical structures of oppression.

This dissertation makes a meaningful contribution to Ecofeminist literary studies by providing a nuanced understanding of how motherhood functions as a site of resilience in the face of oppressive systems and environments. By giving voice to marginalized voices of black women, this study pushes beyond Eurocentric contexts and sheds light on the intersectionality of environmental crises, gender, and race. Moreover, by bridging literary interpretation with ecological critique, this research offers, as an outcome, valuable insights into both literary scholarship and broader socio-environmental discussions in a time where environmental deterioration and global issues persist.

The research thus, is divided into three chapters. Each chapter will build upon the preceding one to provide a cohesive analysis: The first chapter, entitled "A theoretical Framework," sets up the theoretical foundation of the research. It begins by introducing ecofeminism, tracing its origins, key figures and its critique of patriarchal systems that exploit both women and nature. Additionally, it contextualizes maternal resilience within Ecofeminist contexts drawing on the relationship between women and nature. Lastly, this chapter establishes the meaning of environmental trauma, linking ecological degradation to race, gender, and class disparities.

The second chapter: "Motherhood, Oppression, and Environmental Trauma in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* and Sherri L. Smith's *Orleans*" delves into the analytical process of this research. This chapter focuses on how *Salvage the Bones* and *Orleans* portray various maternal identities through Esch and Fen, highlighting their biological and nonbiological bonds with their babies, respectively. It also highlights the interaction between ecological degradation and oppressive systems. Subsequently, it examines the way their journeys, decisions, and

emotional responses as well as their motherhood, are shaped by mapping environmental trauma onto both narratives.

The final chapter titled “Overcoming Environmental Collapse and Systemic Oppression,” brings into focus the ways in which *Salvage the Bones* and *Orleans* challenge conventional narratives of resilience. It analyses the various ways employed by the protagonists of each novel to face the challenges imposed upon them by patriarchal and systemic oppression. Consequently, it emphasizes the relationship between nature and women.

Chapter One:

A Theoretical Framework

Introduction

This chapter provides a conceptual and theoretical framework that forms the base of this research. It will explore the theory of ecofeminism and its origins, while focusing on the interconnection of women and nature's oppression. Central to this research is the critique of patriarchy, mainly Val Plumwood's hierarchical dualism that is crucial to identify the root cause of women's domination and nature's exploitation. It will also incorporate Glenn Albrecht's concept of solastalgia to examine the emotional toll of environmental degradation. Lastly, it will provide insights on maternal resilience and ecofeminist approaches to environmental trauma, and include overviews on literary genres specific to the research.

1. Ecofeminism and Literature

1.1 Ecofeminism: Definition, Origins and Key Figures

Defining Ecofeminism cannot be narrowed down to one simple definition as it contains a multitude of varying perspectives and approaches from diverse theorists. Susan A Mann for starters defines ecofeminism as "the diverse range of women's efforts to save the earth, as well as to the transformation in feminist thought that have resulted in new conceptualization of the relationship between women and nature" (1). Karen Warren describes it as an ecofeminist philosophical quilt that is made up of various 'patches' and generated by quilters in specific social, historical and materialistic contexts (qtd. in Cuomo 3). Ecofeminism, thereby, is a multifaceted theory that intersects the theories of feminism, environmentalism, and activism to examine the interconnectedness of the tyranny of patriarchy that oppresses women and exploits nature.

Moreover, feminism, as a theory, is informed by ecology; the scientific study and analysis of interaction among organisms and their environment, and the two terms, ecofeminism and ecological feminism are used interchangeably. This link ultimately led ecofeminism to become a useful tool for investigating women's oppression and ecological crises, and ecofeminists oftentimes turn to ecology to support their claims; particularly claims about the importance of feminism to environmentalism. Ecology, thus, is a feminist issue and through combining ecology with feminism, ecofeminism attempts to unite the demands of the women's movement with the ecological movement in order to bring forth a world and a world view that is not based on socioeconomic and conceptual structures of domination. Many ecological feminists have claimed that what is needed is a feminism that is ecological in order to approach environmental issues (Cheney and Warren 197).

The concept of ecofeminism was first introduced between 1970s and 1980s particularly during the protests against nuclear technologies and weapons. The movement covered a number of growing issues such as deforestation, animal rights, toxic waste, and reproductive rights. The French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne first used the term in her landmark book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (*Feminism or Death)* to emphasize the urgent need for women to lead an ecological revolution. Using the slogan 'feminism or death,' she argued that the phallic order poses a dual threat to both humanity and nature through overpopulation, by exploiting women's reproductive power, and through overproduction by exploiting natural resources (Glazebrook 12).

For d'Eaubonne in *Feminism or Death*, both capitalism and socialism undoubtedly contribute to ecological disasters, and this is why she emphasizes the need for a "collective provision" (xxiii) of the means of production that radically differs from socialism of her time. *Feminism or Death* was evidently a warning to the ecological consequences of patriarchy.

D'Eaubonne asserted furthermore that the stakes of feminist struggles were not about equality but about life or death—for humans and the planet, and thus, she argued that patriarchy's control over women's bodies and the natural world leads to their mutual destruction, and that feminism and environmentalism must bring forth a brand-new world view.

D'Eaubonne saw ecofeminism as a "new humanism" to put feminine goals in an egalitarian authority. She stated that "a society in the feminine would not mean power in the hands of women but no power at all," and the goal, as she asserts, was to rebuild the planet around a completely new model where feminism and environmentalism come forth to not just dismantle male power, but to overthrow the entire system of power. Only the feminine, as she insinuated "which is concerned with all levels of society and nature" can accomplish the ecological revolution. (xi, xxviii).

While d'Eaubonne laid the foundation for ecofeminism, ecofeminists drew insights and expanded on her ideas, developing distinct ecofeminist perspectives. In 1979, ecofeminism was a major theme at a conference that was held in the United States. The conference titled "Women and Life on Earth: A Conference on Ecofeminism" explored themes related to the connections between feminism, militarization, and environmentalism. Major early ecofeminists were brought together in this conference namely, Susan Griffin, Ynestra king, and Charlene Spretnak. Another notable conference was held in 1987 in the United States titled "Ecofeminist Perspectives: Culture, Nature, and Theory." It explored the spiritual and academic nuances of ecofeminism and linked the oppression of women and nature to other forms of oppression such as racism (Power 12). The ecofeminist movement was profoundly shaped by the valuable contributions of several key figures namely: Val Plumwood, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Mary Daly, Carolyn Merchant, Greta Gaard, Vandana Shiva, Susan griffin, and Karen Warren.

Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* was the very first contemporary work to address ecofeminism. Later, Karen Warren and Australian philosopher Val Plumwood underlined the eco in ecofeminism and applied feminist philosophy to analyze the human-nature relationship and in doing so, they highlighted a broader theory of oppression and liberation (Cuomo 1). In the essay titled *Feminism and Ecology: Making Connections* Warren argued that feminists must pay attention to environmental issues and ecological mutually beneficial ties, and that environmentalists must recognize and address the connections of ecological degradation, sexism and different forms of oppression (Cuomo 1-2).

Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature* delves into the intersection of racism, speciesism, colonialism, capitalism and the historically "specific-nature model that situated twin domination of women and nature in Europe" (Power 13) Susan Griffin's book titled *Women and Nature* examines the deep connections between women, nature, animals, and people of color, emphasizing how they have been marginalized and seen as separate and inferior (13), whereas Greta Gaard's *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* includes several essays which delve into the mutual oppression of women and nonhuman animals in patriarchal societies (qtd. in Hobgood 14). In addition, Ynestra king's *Social Ecofeminism*, and *Reweaving the World* by Diamond and Orenstein are influential works that emphasized the importance of ecofeminism. Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva also expanded on the emergence of ecofeminism and co-authored "*Ecofeminism*" where they discuss the interconnectedness of patriarchy, colonialism and environmental degradation. Ecofeminism is also engaged in the critique of racism and colonialism. Ruether's *Women Healing Earth* offers insights into Asian, African and Latin American ecofeminism (Gaard "Ecofeminism Revisited" 29-30).

1.2 Ecofeminist Critique of Patriarchy

Patriarchy, as defined by Maria Mies in *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a world Scale: Women in the International Division of Labor,* is a historically specific and systemic structure of male dominance that emerged through processes of "robbery, warfare, and conquest," rather than a universal or timeless condition. While the term literally means "rule of fathers," Mies expands it to encompass the broader control and "rule of husbands, of male bosses, of ruling men in most societal institutions," constituting what she terms. the "men's league" or "men's house" (37-38). She also emphasizes that patriarchy is not a pre-capitalist relic, but a dynamic system intrinsically linked to capitalism, forming a unified "capitalist-patriarchy" where male-female relationships that thrive on male dominance sustain capital accumulation as "capitalism cannot function without patriarchy" (38).

Ecofeminism critiques this patriarchal system by exposing how "oppressive conceptual frameworks" rooted in patriarchy naturalizes the exploitation of women, marginalized communities, and nature. In her seminal work *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters,* Warren identifies oppressive conceptual frameworks as systems that "maintain, explain, and 'justify' relationships of unjustified domination and subordination" (46). These frameworks exhibit five key features. Starting with "Value-Hierarchical Thinking" or "Up-Down" thinking, which refers to assigning superiority to "Ups" (e.g., men, white-skinned people, culture) over "Downs" (e.g., women, people of color, nature), framing inequality as natural and legitimate (46). Secondly, "Oppositional Value Dualisms" which refers to binary oppositions like rationality/emotions, and male/ female, privileging one term over the other. Therefore. "According to these value dualisms, it is better to be male, white, or rational, than female, black, or emotional" (46). Another feature is "Power-Over" and it is about exercising

control of “Ups” over “Downs” such as “parents over their young children,” “judges over defendants” or “rapists” over “victims” (46). Additionally, to that is the characteristic of “privilege” that refers to the systemic advantages for those who qualify “Ups” (e.g., access to education) while tokenizing “Downs” to suppress their potential resistance. The fifth and the most significant feature is the “Logic of Domination”, and it is the belief that “superiority justifies subordination,” often justified through traits like rationality (47).

Warren clarifies that value-hierarchical thinking and value-dualisms themselves are not inherently oppressive. “Taxonomies” or parental guidance can be benign. Oppression arises when the logic of domination weaponizes these hierarchies to “falsely justify” the privilege of “Ups” to maintain the unjustified “domination-subordination” relationship. It is where the “logic of domination” takes place (48).

Val Plumwood expands on this by critiquing dualisms as logic of colonization, where the master’s identity depends on the “hyperseparation” and inferiority of the “Other” (49). For example, the reason/nature dualism positions rationality (masculine) in opposition to nature (feminized). It also constructs “males, humans” as “primary model” (space) whereas “women, nature” as the “subordinate” inferior side in order to justify domination (32). This “radical exclusion” erases shared qualities between “Ups” and “Downs,” perpetuating systems like slavery, where “the slave makes the master a master”. Dualisms such as “civilized/primitive,” “human/nature,” “male/ female” naturalize oppression and domination by constructing white men as the “center” and indigenous peoples and women as lower orders of being and “the periphery which makes the center” (49).

Ecofeminists also critique the objectification that this system perpetuates. Ariel Salleh argues how patriarchy reduces women to exploitable objects through the Madonna/Whore

dichotomy, dividing femininity into idealized nurturers “Mother Madonna” and sexualized “damned Whore”. For instance, Tasmanian mining companies maintained brothels near plants, exploiting women’s bodies to manage worker morale, a “win/win model of diversification” for profit with “Woman as resource” (78). Mies expands this critique by locating male violence including rape, domestic abuse, and sexual harassment not as “deviant” acts but as systemic tools of capitalist-patriarchy to “keep women in their place”. This violence coexists with the state’s “rule of right,” exposing the hypocrisy of modern patriarchy’s alleged progress (27).

Carol J. Adams in her book *The Sexual Politics of Meat* extends this notion to human-animal relations, emphasizing how patriarchal “objectification” does not only degrade women but also animals, reducing both to consumable resources (73). Lisa Kemmerer further highlights this focus on the interconnections between the domination of women and the domination of nature, arguing that both stem from the same logic of devaluation (14-15). For instance, in 2014, a partnership between Women’s Earth Alliance (WEA) and the Native Youth Sexual Health Network (NYSHN) published a report on Indigenous communities and their intense experience with this dual exploitation. Colonial states sanction environmental violence, such as “drilling, mining, and fracking” on Indigenous lands while neglecting the well-being of Indigenous women, who suffer from health issues like “toxins” in their “breast milk,” as well as from sexual violence or even murder (58). This intertwined subjugation underscores the deep connection between women and nature. As Amanda Lickers explains in the report, “If you destroy the women, you destroy the nations, and then you get access to the land” (qtd. in WEA 4).

1.3. Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: An Overview

Ecofeminist literary criticism is a growing field of knowledge that applies elements and principles from ecofeminism to highlight relationships and differences between human and

nonhuman life, and to observe how they are presented in the corpus of contemporary women's writings. In general, it strives to explore, dismantle, and challenge patriarchal devaluation of both women and nature through utilizing literature.

In their introduction to *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism*, Greta Gaard and Patrick Murphy state that ecofeminism was initially discussed exclusively in an academic environment, particularly in philosophy and women's studies and on the edge of environmental studies. Recently however, as ecofeminism continued to expand and deepen its roots in ecological discussions, other departments began to discuss ecofeminism, namely criminology, political science, cultural studies and most importantly English departments in terms of women's and environmental literatures. By the 1990s, ecofeminism started to be incorporated in literary studies. Gaard and Murphy wrote that many critics are starting to develop the insights of ecofeminism; a component of literary criticism, and they also are discovering a wide range of environmental literature being written by women as ecofeminist philosophy and criticism is being developed (5).

Gaard and Murphy further argue that environmental writing has been ignored, just like women's writing has been historically marginalized. Ecofeminist analysis, therefore, produces an explanation for this phenomenon in literary analysis, and a philosophical orientation for developing ecofeminist literary theory in order to direct new criticism (6). This criticism can be done by critiquing the traditional canon, precisely the male tradition of nature writing in American literature and exploring and promoting environmental literature by women.

When it comes to reading through an ecofeminist lens, it is not limited to performing a "litmus test" to see if the text contains ecofeminist content, because as Gaard and Murphy maintain, it would be "arrogant" and "anachronistic". Instead, it is concerned with uncovering

previously unnoticed or foregrounded elements in a text, if the ecofeminist perspective can tell critics anything new about the text in terms of traditional elements of style, structure, metaphor, narrative, form and content, and the capability of this perspective to improve explorations of connections and differences between the characters in the text, or more specifically between animal and human, culture and nature—between human differences in terms of race, class, and gender—as well as the effect of these connections and differences on our relationship with nature (7).

As Murphy highlights, Ecofeminism has come to criticism as a result of the influence and continuation of activism. For this reason, recovering works by women underlining ecological sensibilities and ecofeminist themes is given an important value in women's studies (45). Thereby, just like feminist theory and criticism, ecofeminist literary criticism is a crucial component of literary studies as it brings to light nonhuman characters alongside humans.

1.4. African American Literature and Dystopian Fiction

I. African American Literature

African American literature is a rich corpus written by African Americans which echoes the historical, cultural, and political experiences of their fellow African Americans. Rooted in slave narratives and emerging from Harlem Renaissance to contemporary literature, African Americans have constructed rich and dynamic literary forms, which have become an important and unique aspect of American literature and culture (Abarry 379). By definition, Kenneth Warren writes that "African American literature was a post emancipation phenomenon that gained its coherence in the social world defined by Jim Crow segregation" (qtd. in Zafar 128).

What sets African American apart from other literary traditions is the constant documentation of the struggles that African Americans have endured with race and racism; this

is evident in works written by Toni Morrison, W.E.B. Du Bois, Alice Walker, Jesmyn Ward and Sherri L. Smith as they weave storylines that tackle these ongoing issues. Ever since the 18th century, African American writers have utilized forms ranging from orature, the written word, and song, to jazz, and film in their literature as medium to demonstrate the versatile African American expression (Jarrett 1).

This literature is emphasized by strong sense of community and collective memory, where shared struggles and resilience are voiced in the writing; it also celebrates the profound African heritage and cultural identity which helps challenge prevailing stereotypes. Today more than ever, African American authors are very much in the mainstream of American literature. Works by African American writers, are not merely accessible but also taken seriously by American critics and scholars (Currie 6).

II. Dystopian Literature

Dystopian fiction has emerged as a paradigmatic expression of the Western imagination in the twentieth century (Booker "African Literature" 58). African American writers such as Octavia Butler, Nola Hopkinson, and Sherri L. Smith engage with and utilize dystopian fiction to transcend the boundaries of reality in order to contextualize issues and imagine diverse futures in their most pessimistic form, and to also heighten readers' awareness by shifting real systemic inequities into unfamiliar contexts (Gartner 1).

Functioning as the opposite of utopia, the word dystopia is derived from Greek, "dus" and "topos" which means a bad and diseased place. Dystopian literature thus stands as a critique of existing social conditions or political systems through critical examinations of utopian thought that conditions and systems are based, or through the imaginative extensions into different realities that could expose their flaws and contradictions (Booker 3).

From its emergence in the 19th century, dystopian literature has grown to become an inclusive genre that merges different traditions and forms together. It also ties together thematically close genres and accommodates the different historical phases of the genre of dystopia, dystopian narratives of apocalypse, post-apocalypse, and climate fiction as well (Isomma et al. xi). Furthermore, Science and technology in dystopia are also used to produce fears or morally dubious, sometimes destructive consequences, whereas ecological catastrophes typical of climate fiction and post-apocalypse are usually caused by human technology (xv).

2. Maternal Resilience in an Ecofeminist Context

2.1 The Intersection of Women, Nature, and Maternal Roles

For centuries and across various cultures and nations, women have been inherently tied to the natural world due to their roles as nurturers, caregivers and most importantly as mothers. This connection is undoubtedly apparent in cultural narratives that represent nature in feminine notions, often referring to it as Mother Earth or Mother Nature. Such personification underlines the aspects of life giving and nurturing the earth, symbolizing the qualities of a mother. In Greek mythology, deities, such as Gaia who is considered the personification of earth and nature, and the ancestral mother of all life and Artemis goddess of the hunt and wilderness, are often associated with the natural environment while embodying nurturing and caretaking roles, which would reflect the connection between the feminine and nature. Simone de Beauvoir states in *The Second Sex*:

> The adolescent girl will devote a special love to nature: still more than the adolescent boy, she worships it. Unconquered, inhuman, Nature subsumes most clearly the totality of what exists. The adolescent girl has not yet acquired for her use any portion of the

> universal: hence it is her kingdom as a whole; when she takes possession of it, she also proudly takes possession of herself (362).

The intersection of women, nature and maternal roles has led ecofeminists to hold divergent views on the nature of this connection while building their activism around one common goal; survival of the natural world and ending women's oppression. The first view, known as cultural/spiritual Ecofeminism encourages the link between women and nature, putting them on one side of the equation in order to break down patriarchal ways of domination, and since both share a subordinate and instrumental relationship to men, both are subjects of male domination and both are gendered feminine as one of the means of that control.

However, due to women's association with nature, they acquire a unique responsibility to the health and survival of nature (Longnecker 1). Thus, both women and nature must also be allies to resist domination (Ruether "ecofeminism" 33). For them, women carry a capacity for sympathy and nurturance that renders them uniquely tied to nature, as they are viewed to be in sync with the natural world, operating in union with it, whereas men engage in a hierarchical relationship with nature where they try to dominate it. Thus cultural/spiritual ecofeminists argue that women's ethics are closer to nature than man's. In other terms, they consider feminine values crucial and necessary for survival against patriarchy (Salman and Nuzhat, 853).

Furthermore, the intimate connection that women and nature share is the backdrop of their ultimate liberation. For instance, their bodies are in tune with moon cycles and sea tides (Ruether "Ecofeminism" 38) and according to Adirenne Rich's *Of Woman Born*, the moon is considered the first object of nature worship, which the menstrual cycle corresponds to (107). In pre-patriarchal civilizations, women and nature were often regarded as interconnected. Similar to how the child emerges from his mother's womb, vegetation also emerges from the earth womb

(107). Interestingly, the words for mother and mud—or clay that man is built from—and the matter that composes the earth, are tightly close in many languages, such as mutter (German), madre (Italian/Spanish), mater (Latin), materia (Latin), moeder (Dutch) (108). Additionally, women's biology such as menstruation, pregnancy, lactation, their roles as nurturers, and being the ones whom the seed of life grows- draws them nearer to nature. The capacity of women as Swanson underlines in "A Feminist Ethic that Binds Us to Mother Earth" to give birth and to be a mother maintains the circle of life, and it aligns with Mother Earth (86).

In contrast, the second position called social/materialist ecofeminism -which diverges from orthodox Marxism by bringing forms of oppression under capitalism- opposes and critiques the cultural/spiritual position. Social ecofeminists argue that tying women to nature gives way to direct authority, justifies their treatment as objects, and ultimately permits their exploitation. Carlassare in "Socialist and Cultural Ecofeminism" maintains that they argue that systems of domination—such as capitalism, patriarchy, and imperialism—are ecologically destructive, and they consider social ecofeminism as the only viable basis for ecofeminism (91-2).

Social ecofeminism, therefore, aims to sever and deconstruct the link between nature and women as an attempt to liberate them from stereotypes —especially biological ones— that have been used to justify their exploitation (Power 9). More in depth, social ecofeminists view the connection between women and nature as an extension of patriarchal cultural construction and aim to separate both men and women from the rest of nature (Ruether "ecofeminism" 37). That rather than change in spirituality, consciousness or culture, social ecofeminism offers critiques of patriarchal capitalism, and advocates material and institutional change for an ecological transformation of society (93).

Additionally, in the article titled “Loving Your Mother: On the Women Nature Relation” Roach critiques the well-known environmental slogan “Love Your Mother” and its implications on the women-nature relationship. She explains that this metaphor is problematic and for both women and nature, as it reinforces the expectation that mothers must serve as caretakers (48). Many ecofeminists, therefore, have raised the alarm on the dangers of associating women with nature, advocating for an ecofeminist ethic that serves environmental justice, promoting gender equality and calling for responsibility towards nature without exploitation.

Despite their differences on whether to embrace this connection as a form of empowerment and sacred responsibility, or to critique the association and link it as a form of justified oppression and exploitation, both positions are considerably allies of the same cause, agents and stewards of women and nature’s liberation and independence.

2.2 Motherhood as a Symbol of Nurture, Resistance, and Survival

Motherhood has oftentimes carried meanings that transcend the biological act of bearing children. Historically, the role of the mother has been foundational to family and community structures. In traditional societies, the mother’s ability to nurture was often seen as both a natural instinct and a divine sacred gift. However, as modernity reshaped gender roles and family structures, motherhood began to be scrutinized through a critical lens. Feminist scholars argued that while the nurturing role was revered and respected, it also risked confining women to a limited sphere of influence, reinforcing gendered hierarchies and domestic subordination. The transformation of motherhood into a symbol of resistance emerged from these critiques. Rather than merely conforming to prescribed roles, many women began to reclaim and redefine motherhood as a site of empowerment. They argued that mothering itself could be a form of political resistance and a way of affirming life against forces of domination and violence.

Central to the symbolism of motherhood is the concept of nurture. Nurture, in this context, extends beyond biological reproduction to encompass a broader capacity to care, heal, and sustain life. The nurturing aspect of motherhood encompasses emotional support, the transmission of cultural knowledge, and the creation of safe havens within families and communities. This expansive view of nurture challenges the reductive notion that equates motherhood solely with self-sacrifice or passivity. Instead, it frames maternal care as an active, creative force that shapes identities and builds communities.

Motherhood, in ecofeminism, is deeply connected to ecological stewardship, reflecting the interdependence of women's caregiving and environmental health. Mohawk midwife Katsi Cook asserts that "women are the first environment," emphasizing how the "waters of the Earth and the waters of our bodies are the same" (qtd. in WEA 4). This embodied connection positions maternal roles as acts of nurturing that sustain both communities and ecosystems. Indigenous teachings, such as the Seneca concept of "iewirokwas" meaning "she's pulling the baby out of the Earth," depict childbirth as a sacred alignment with natural cycles, emphasizing the relationship between mothers and nature (4).

Affinity ecofeminists, drawing on cosmological and biological frameworks, also argue that women's connection to nature is embodied in maternal practices. Vandana Shiva, for instance, invokes the concept of "Prakriti"—a universal feminine principle in Indian cosmology—to frame women as inherently aligned with ecological balance: "nature is Prakriti, a living and creative process, the feminine principle from which all life arises" (xviii). This perspective is echoed in Davis Elizabeth's assertion that women's instinct is to "tend, to nurture, to encourage healthy growth, and to preserve ecological balance," positioning motherhood as a sacred duty rooted in biological and cultural affinity (335–336).

Materialist ecofeminists, however, shift focus from symbolic affinity to the material realities of gendered care labor. Motherhood and nurturing, in this view, are reconceived as embodied work—tasks like childcare, hygiene, health maintenance, and emotional support—that sustains life yet remain systematically devalued under patriarchal systems. Carolyn Merchant critiques how patriarchal science rationalizes this exploitation by framing nature as a "female to be tortured," a metaphor that justifies both environmental destruction and the subjugation of women's caregiving labor (518). Thus, materialists emphasize that the ecological crisis is inseparable from the devaluation of "women's work," arguing that sustainability requires recognizing care as intrinsic to all forms of production (Biesecker and Hofmeister 1707).

Ultimately, ecofeminism reclaims motherhood as a radical act of nurture that challenges exploitative systems. Ynestra King synthesizes these perspectives, arguing that women's socially constructed connection to nature offers a "vantage point" for dismantling dualisms and building societies that creates a "different kind of culture and politics" (qtd. in Plant 23). Whether through cosmological affinity or material labor, motherhood emerges not as a passive biological function but as a dynamic symbol of care, one that sustains life and resists the patriarchal logic of domination.

Motherhood becomes a site of resistance when women reclaim autonomy over their bodies and territories. Amanda Lickers explains that colonial violence targets Indigenous women because "by carrying our clans, [we] are the ones that hold that land for the next generation.…If you destroy the women, you destroy the nations, and then you get access to the land" (qtd. in 4). Motherhood also functions as a site of political resistance, where maternal bodies and labor challenge intersecting systems of patriarchy, racism, and environmental exploitation.

For instance, when it comes to reclaiming bodily autonomy, foundational works such as Patricia Hill Collins' book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* comes into focus. Collins, in this book, discusses motherhood within black feminist contexts. She emphasizes how maternal roles can act as sites of resistance and empowerment in racially marginalized communities, explaining the importance mothers have in ensuring survival across generations. Vandana Shiva highlights this survivalist ethos in *Staying Alive*, arguing that women's subsistence work, often dismissed as "non-productive" by capitalist standards, sustains life and "provides the very basis of survival and well-being" (148).

Resistance also emerges in the shape of movements like Standing Rock, where a small group of Indigenous mothers led resistance against the Dakota Access Pipeline that threatened their land and water, framing this ecological protection of Mother Earth as an act of maternal care for their future offspring and generations "We know what's going on, and we know what belongs to us, and we know what we have to keep for our children and our grandchildren." (Estes 27). From the tree-planting mothers of Kenya to the pipeline-blocking matriarchs of Standing Rock, women are redefining motherhood as a radical commitment to life in all its forms, using it to protect and promote the right to having a better future for their children.

3. Environmental Trauma

3.1 Understanding Environmental Trauma: From Theory to Lived Experience

Environmental trauma, often referred to as ecological trauma, is an emerging concept in psychological and environmental studies that examines the complex psychological and emotional distress caused by environmental degradation and climate change. As environmental crises became more frequent in recent decades, scholars began to focus on the psychological and emotional effects of these calamities, ranging from biodiversity loss and deforestation to natural

disasters brought on by climate change. While trauma is conventionally defined as an event or series of events that overwhelm an individual's ability to cope, environmental trauma expands this understanding by incorporating both direct and indirect exposure to ecological devastation.

The study of environmental trauma draws from traditional trauma theories while adapting them to the unique challenges of ecological distress. Lenore C. Terr categorizes trauma into two types: Type one trauma, which results from a sudden catastrophic event, and Type two trauma, which develops from prolonged exposure to distressing conditions (10-20). This framework has been applied to ecological trauma to differentiate between acute environmental disasters, such as hurricanes and wildfires, and the chronic stress of gradual environmental decline. As Panu Pihkala explains, "Many kinds of events and consequences may be approached by using trauma theories" to analyze environmental trauma, and while the terminology remains fluid, the concept broadly includes both primary and secondary trauma responses to ecological crises ("Bearing Witness" 5).

One key challenge in defining environmental trauma is its intersection with "anxiety," "worry," and "fear" (Pihkala, "Eco-Anxiety and Ecological Grief" 2). Scholars have introduced terms such as "climate trauma," "ecological grief" (Cunsolo and Ellis 275–281), or "solastalgia" to describe the psychological impact of witnessing environmental destruction. Glenn Albrecht defines "solastalgia" as "the pain or sickness caused by the loss or lack of solace and the sense of isolation connected to the present state of one's home and territory" (Albrecht 45). His foundational work is inspired by a few scholars such as Aldo Leopold, Elyn Mitchel, and David Rapport. Moreover, this term describes the emotional distress or psychological pain experienced when one's home environment undergoes negative changes, resulting in a loss of solace, identity, and a sense of belonging. Unlike nostalgia, which longs for a past place or time, solastalgia

arises from the present-day degradation of a loved environment, causing feelings of dislocation and homesickness even while still at "home" (Albrecht 45).

Solastlagia goes beyond reminiscing about a golden past or seeking another place to call home, it is however, the "lived experience" of the loss of the present that manifests in a feeling of desolation; of being dominated by forces that disrupt the potential for solace. Any context where place identity is threatened by pervasive change can cause solastalgia. Those who suffer from solastalgia might even actively seek to create new things or engage in collective action that gives way to solace (Albrecht 45). This environmental philosophy intersects with trauma theory to enrich the understanding of how distress over environmental degradation is not merely a metaphorical extension of traditional trauma, but rather a more complex psychological and social reality.

Environmental trauma manifests through both direct and indirect experiences of ecological loss. Primary trauma occurs when individuals experience environmental destruction firsthand, such as losing a home to wildfire. The growing frequency and intensity of natural disasters have contributed to a rise in climate-related post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) cases. Whereas, secondary trauma, also known as "vicarious psychological trauma," arises from indirect exposure to environmental destruction (Doherty and Clayton 266). This type of trauma is particularly prevalent among environmental researchers, activists, and journalists, who frequently engage with distressing ecological realities (Pihkala "Bearing Witness" 8).

According to John Fraser et al., "Constant contact with evidence of environmental degradation as part of one's daily work and awareness of the challenges facing the environment… may lead to acute stress experiences that may potentially be severe enough to be diagnosed as acute stress disorder" (qtd.in Pihkala "Bearing Witness" 9). These findings

highlight the profound emotional toll that constant engagement with environmental crises can have on individuals, leading to burnout, anxiety, and depressive symptoms.

Some scholars have expanded the concept of environmental trauma to challenge anthropocentric assumptions about trauma theory. Posthumanist approaches emphasize the interconnectedness of human and non-human life, asserting that ecological trauma should be understood as a "multispecies experience that is psychological as well as biological" (Wright 74). This view suggests that trauma is not limited to human psychological responses but extends to the broader web of life affected by environmental destruction. In this framework, ecological trauma is seen as a breakdown of the relationships between humans, nature, and the ecosystems that sustain them. Scholar Zhiwa Woodbury argues in her article "Climate Trauma & Recovery" that climate trauma is not merely an individual experience but a cultural phenomenon that requires collective healing (1-5).

The definition of environmental trauma continues to evolve as scholars keep integrating insights from other fields such environmental humanities, psychology, and ecology. Despite the lack of a commonly used definition, existing research highlights that environmental trauma encompasses a wide range of stress reactions to ecological degradation and collapse. Whether directly or indirectly experienced, environmental trauma is a reflection of the psychological and emotional toll that the climate crisis has had and continues to have on communities. Therefore, as the environmental crisis deepens, more research is needed to enhance trauma-informed approaches to ecological and climate change adaptation. By acknowledging the impact and importance of environmental distress, societies can move towards more efficient and sustainable solutions to these challenges.

3.2 Representation of Environmental Injustices in Marginalized Communities

In the realm of environmental injustice, marginalized communities, which are in general predominately comprised of women, people of color, and low-income individuals, are the most vulnerable to environmental crises. These communities bear the burden of ecological degradation, industrial neglect, and facing little to no access to natural resources or governmental aid. When it comes to environmental injustices they manifest in significant economic and social disparities, arising from unfair policies and practices towards marginalized societies known as environmental racism.

The term environmental racism is defined by Robert Bullard as “any policy, practice, or directive that differently affects or disadvantages [whether intended or unintended] individuals, groups, or communities based on race or color” (23). It also extends to include the transmission of hazardous waste, unsafe technologies, and pesticides, targeting predominately poor and marginalized regions. When it comes to environmental movements, colonization is blurred out, but it is the reason behind the link of racism and classism to a system of domination. Environmental legislation and policy often exclude marginalized communities which would lead to further oppression and injustices (Karon 6).

Moreover, hazardous waste, toxins and pollutants are one of the most prominent manifestations of environmental injustices, where black neighborhoods—with the most low-income and marginalized individuals—become the dumping ground for harmful hazardous industrial facilities, resulting in elevated health risks. Furthermore, environmental injustice extends beyond health risks to include low incomes, low property values in the area, decreased education and low economic developments all of which are allocated in southern United States where it is mostly inhabited by African Americans (Bullard 25).

Regions like South Louisiana's "Cancer Alley" stretching along the Mississippi river to New Orleans and Alabama's "blackbelt" are notorious for being hazardous waste landfills filled, trapping residents in environmentally challenging and economically oppressive communities, and resulting in high cancer rates. "Cadillac of dumps," another hazardous landfill located in Alabama, is mostly made up of African Americans living in danger to all sorts of illnesses and environmental injustices (25).

It is safe to address a pattern that showcases how these marginalized individuals are victims of systemic inequities which results in their oppression. Thus, the intersection of race, gender and class is seen to highly influence the likelihood of exposure to environmental threats as well as healthcare accessibility, thereby perpetuating environmental racism. Black women have also been part of environmental injustices that affects them and their children as well, usually discovering that their communities have been built on contaminated grounds or finding sources of pollution affecting their neighborhoods (Kirk "Ecofeminism" 10). Adding on, they also frequently experience the lion's share of climate change effects, such as water scarcity, food shortage, and displacement (Ayodele et al. 80). Moreover, black women also work in toxic workplaces, resulting in their exposure to toxic chemicals (14) which would consequently lead to increased rates of environmental illnesses. Understanding the risks associated with environmental racism is crucial to grasping the full scale of dangers of environmental injustices.

3.3 Ecofeminist Activism in Relation to Environmental Trauma

The ecofeminist paradigm provides diverse perspectives and valuable insights regarding the interconnectedness of race, gender, class, and environmental issues. Through confronting multifaceted oppressions such as racism, sexism, classism and most importantly environmental injustices, ecofeminism brings forth a holistic approach to create a more sustainable and a better

ecological life, aiming towards resilience against environmental challenges. Presumably, ecofeminists proclaim that traditional patriarchal approaches to environmental care are usually exploitive and value economic growth. Therefore, they promote an ecofeminist ethic that is inclusive and prioritizes the value of nature along with gender equity, in order to relieve environmental trauma.

Accordingly, Plumwood criticizes the manifestation of patriarchy, where woman/nature and race are placed under its domination. She underlines that "The master culture must now make its long-overdue homecoming to the earth. This is no longer simply a matter of justice, but now also a matter of survival (qtd. in Swanson 86). The way forward—in order to confront environmental trauma and collapse—according to her is to discard the reinforced dualisms and aim for a "third way" where men and women are equal parts of nature and culture (86). She argues for an anti-dualistic ecological feminism called Critical Ecofeminism. The premise of this philosophy lies in that both women and nature have a sense of control and ownership over their existence, and are not considered an inferior side at the expense of a superior side which is man and culture. Thus, the feminine is used to realize women's full potential by completely embracing it rather than rejecting it, which could serve for a better future and would avert an ecological crisis (86).

Furthermore, ecofeminists are oftentimes seen in action in the form of activism and movements. A prime example would be the grassroots movement, which are localized community-driven initiatives often advocating for social and/or political change for instance the Chipko movement of 1973in India. Many other movements took place throughout the world such as the Narmada Bachao Andolan, the save Silent Valley, and the Appiko movement all became revered examples that highlight women's leading efforts against environmental degradation and

capitalism in order to safeguard nature and aim for solutions that are planetary safe and sustainable.

Ecofeminists work through promoting an environmental movement that prioritizes reversing damage inflicted and left by patriarchal view of lands used for instrumental and economic usage, by preserving natural life and resources, limiting the effects of climate change, and attempting to return the land to its 'natural' state (Karion 1). Additionally, ecofeminism highlights how resource extraction and industrial pollution affect regions inhabited by people of color, worsening economic hardships and health inequities. Glenn Albrecht highlights that the attempt to relieve solastlagia can be done in a negative or positive way. The alternative positive response, as he asserts "is through personal and community involvement in the protection, restoration and rehabilitation of their home/place/bioregion/country and the nurturing of an andemic sense of place in both individuals and communities" (54).

Consequently, these activists assert the importance of simultaneously addressing social and environmental concerns, which is achieved via community based work that reaffirms the importance of including women in the process. In these crucial instances, women are found at the forefront of their communities, they are the ones who find effective and sustainable solutions to alleviate the impacts of climate crisis and to help their communities navigate through it while insuring themselves and their families' wellbeing (Dagnon).

Confronting environmental degradation and trauma lies in recognizing and advocating for Indigenous women's ecological knowledge which is embedded in sustainable practices and a deep understanding of ecosystems. As Vandana Shiva suggests that diversity is the principle of women's work and knowledge and it is why they have been excluded by patriarchy, and that "the survival and sustainability of livelihoods is ultimately connected to the conservation and

sustainable use of biological resources in all their diversity" (212). Lastly, in their introduction to *Reweaving the World*, Diamond and Orenstein note that ecofeminist politics does not stop at the phase of dismantling the androcentric and anthropocentric biases of western civilization. Ecofeminism strives to reweave new narratives that acknowledge and appreciate the biological and cultural diversity which is responsible for sustaining all life (xi).

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the relevance of ecofeminism in examining the connection between women nature and patriarchal oppression. This chapter has also framed how environmental collapse is the result of patriarchal systems and is the epitome to women and nature's exploitation. Furthermore, this conceptual framework has given focus to the emerging issue of environmental trauma, particularly and its proportionate effect on individuals. These frameworks are significant for interpreting the conversion of ecological trauma and gendered oppression, forming the foundation for the literary analysis that follows.

Chapter Two:

Motherhood, Oppression, and Environmental Trauma in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* and Sherri L. Smith's *Orleans*

Introduction

Building upon the aforementioned theoretical foundation, this analytical chapter will examine how each novel—Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*, and Sherri L. Smith's *Orleans*—portrays maternal identity, drawing on the connection of patriarchal oppression and ecological degradation in shaping motherhood. Additionally, the chapter will shed light on the emotional state the protagonists experience within settings of profound environmental collapse.

1. Nurturing Amid Approaching Disaster

1.1. Esch's Maternal Becoming

Salvage the Bones stands as a journey of self-discovery that Esch Batiste, a fifteen-year-old African American girl, embarks on in the twelve days preceding Hurricane Katrina where survival is not guaranteed. Facing an unexpected pregnancy, the challenges of adolescence, and poverty, the story chronicles the everyday life of Esch along with her three brothers Randall, Skeetah, and Junior as they attempt to navigate their own personal hardships with the looming threat of the storm. In this novel, Ward effectively sculpts the essence of family ties, the role of nature, love, trauma, and most importantly the will to survive embedded within the family and the black community of the fictional town Bois Sauvage in the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

The novel opens with the family dog China giving birth amidst the Batistes' preparations for the storm. As the siblings gather around her in the shed, they witness the complicated birth of a litter of puppies where one comes out stillborn while the rest survive. On one hand, Esch describes China's birthing process as fighting—something she was born to do (Ward 6); and on

the other hand, she is reminded of her mother, recalling the day she gave birth to their youngest brother before passing away. Junior's birth is depicted as a flower, a symbol of rebirth amidst a tragic death.

> What China is doing is nothing like what Mama did when she had my youngest brother, Junior. Mama gave birth in the house she bore all of us in… Daddy said that Randall and Skeetah and me came fast… so when it was time for Junior, she thought she could do the same. It didn't work that way. Mama squatted, screamed toward the end. Junior came out purple and blue as a hydrangea: Mama's last flower (6).

Coincidently, after the arrival of the puppies, Esch figures out that something is wrong with her body, only to be confronted by the shocking reality of her pregnancy. Adrienne Rich, in *Of Women Born*, insinuates that if motherhood occurs without autonomy or choice, it can lead to a feeling of having lost control (264). This revelation profoundly unravels Esch's world as it occurs at an opportune timing, which leaves her completely detached from the impending motherhood that awaits her.

As the days go by, Esch exudes calmness despite the big news she had learned. She continues her daily life as usual while struggling to understand the significance of her pregnancy, treating it like an abstract concept rather than a life-altering event. This is due to the harsh socio-economic conditions she is raised in, being a poor black teenage girl in southern United States amidst approaching disaster: "Every time I dozed, the truth that I was pregnant was there like a bully to kick me awake" (Ward 37).

Having no one to go to with her problems, the pregnancy becomes a source of alienation; she is partially aware of yet chooses to deny it, so she hides it from those around her and represses it even from herself, "I don't want him to know. But I can't tell him, because I can't

say it. I haven't said it to myself yet, out loud" (79). What Esch is experiencing is exemplified in Patricia Hill-Collins' *Black Feminist Thought*. She emphasizes the complexity of motherhood, and the challenges faced within the African American community, stating that some women regard motherhood as a really burdensome condition responsible for hindering their creativity, exploiting their labor, and turning them into partners in their own oppression (193).

Evidently, Ward pushes the narrative and renders Esch's body as a battleground that stunts her abilities in participating in activities with her brothers. The pregnancy becomes an obstacle that she at one instance wishes to reach inside of her and pull out the wet seed that is her baby (Ward 109). This repression is also manifested in the way she dresses. She often wears oversized men's clothes and covers up any vulnerability that could draw attention to her and the sickness. "If I throw up again, somebody would ask me what my problem is. And I don't want to have to speak the lie, to be convincing, to have them looking at me and asking" (47).

Esch's reluctance to accept her new identity reflects the societal pressures inflicted upon impoverished young black mothers. It is also a considerable form of protection from familial and societal judgment, as well as a way of escaping confrontation with the maternal responsibilities endowed upon her fifteen year old body. According to Elaine Bell Kaplan, in *Not Our Kind of Girl*, the experiences of Black teenage mothers require a deeper analysis because they struggle with the adolescent process while becoming mothers and attempting to make sense of their lives at the same time (9). Evidently, the unwanted pregnancy situates Esch in a state of in-betweenness; she is neither child nor an adult but something in the middle, and thereby, she is left to grapple between both worlds.

Collins also contends that "Black motherhood" can often call for significant personal costs. For Black women, as Collins argues, several dimensions of motherhood promoted by

traditional family ideals and by Black community expectations are essentially problematic. She asserts that managing unexpected pregnancies can be profoundly oppressive (195). Ultimately, Esch's unplanned pregnancy depicts these struggles and sheds light on maternity issues that black teenage girls face.

As the novel progresses and Katrina approaches, Esch's understanding of motherhood signals a slow, almost reluctant confrontation with her reality. Ward employs intertexual references from mythology, namely the allegory of Medea and Jason to show the reader how Esch copes with the pregnancy. The story is introduced as a summer reading homework that Esch was given, and she spends her days immersed in the book, where her fascination and identification with the mythical character allows her to make sense of her reality. The myth of Medea—a cunning sorceress and one of the most notoriously violent figures in Greek mythology—is about her concocting a terrible revenge against Jason by killing their two children.

Witnessing this complex act of vengeance—which is induced through poetic language—Esch is left to contemplate the paradoxical and volatile nature of motherhood that ward had constructed, and to recognize that maternity is not always delicate, but it can be a destructive force. She undoubtedly sees herself in this character because she has no maternal model to base her experiences on. By identifying with the sorceress and her drastic actions, Esch aligns her own experience of unrequited love with Manny as well, "I am still reading about Medea… When Medea falls in love with Jason, it grabs me by the throat" (Ward 38).

Ward also juxtaposes Medea's story with China and her litter of puppies; both representing the paradoxical nature of motherhood. "China is bloody mouthed and bright-eyed like Medea. If she could speak, this is what I would ask her: Is this what motherhood is?" (116).

Upon observing China, it significantly alters Esch's views on motherhood. In Ecofeminism, this parallel serves as a prime example of the special connection between women and the natural world. Maria Mies states that women's interaction with nature and with their own nature is a reciprocal process (43). Esch despite being a passive observer of China; she is in awe of the ferocious dog that embodies strength and maternal viciousness, calling her a weary goddess and a "mother so many times over."

However, China's maternity in this case is violent which contrasts with Esch's perception of motherhood that she learned from watching her late mother. Esch remembers her delicate, gentle, and nurturing mother, whereas China is fierce because she is wired to fight. Esch describes how she does "not lay down like a new mother. She does not suckle. She licks the big red puppy and then forgets him" (Ward 20), but hovers around her puppies in a primal way, and kills one puppy weakened by parvovirus to ensure the safety of the rest in a process of natural selection. By blurring the boundaries between animal and human, Ward's narrative challenges traditional notions of maternity, and simultaneously critiques societal neglect of "Black motherhood".

Gradually, Esch begins to notice her impending motherhood, a slow acknowledgment and confrontation with the fact that her body is changing in ways she is not familiar with. "I sit up as straight as I can. There it is. It is not a watermelon curve. It is not that large... The closest I can get to it is a honeydew curve; it is long and slight" (80). Even shrouded in silence and secrecy, her body is beginning to tell her secret. In a scene where she accompanies Skeetah on one of his endeavors, she finds it difficult to keep up with his speed like she usually does. The weight of the baby combined with the sweat from the scorching heat slows her down. This does not escape Skeetah's attention as he articulates the unspoken reality, "You ran slow yesterday…

Maybe you're gaining weight" (79). Caught in the middle of an impending catastrophe, Esch's journey towards understanding what it means to carry and embrace life inside her womb has just begun.

1.2. Fen the "Othermother"

Within the borders of an isolated Gulf Coast ravaged by environmental disasters, a unique form of motherhood emerges, a form that is different from any other traditional maternal bonds: Fen De La Guerre, a girl of sixteen years of age—who takes it upon herself to become the mother of an orphaned newborn infant—redefines motherhood as a form of ecological stewardship through instinctive acts of nurture, care, and protection. This bond embodies the essence of Ecofeminist thought—a marginalized woman's labor to sustain a life in a world that strives to commodify both her body and nature.

In her dystopian novel *Orleans*, Sherri L. Smith presents Fen as a maternal force that transcends biological kinship. She parallels what Patricia Hill Collins frames as the "othermother"—a notion that prevails in many African American communities:

> But African and African-American communities have also recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible. As a result, othermothers-women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities-traditionally have been central to the institution of Black motherhood (Troester qtd.in 178).

This notion is illustrated when fen reveals that she has been reading "baby development" books that she purchased for Lydia and was willing to help the mother whenever needed: "I'd have been Lydia's nanny when she needed, bottle-feeding the baby when we in powwow or

whatever. Long as Lydia needed me, I'd do what I could" (Smith 50). Collins points out that "othermothers" often intervene when biological mothers are unable to fulfill caregiving roles:

> Othermothers can be key not only in supporting children but also in helping bloodmothers who, for whatever reason, lack the preparation or desire for motherhood… children born into extreme poverty or to alcoholic or drug-addicted mothers, or children who for other reasons cannot remain with their bloodmothers have all been supported by othermothers (180).

And since the newborn Baby Girl cannot remain with her "bloodmather" who passed away. Fen takes the role of the "othermother" as she assumes a substitute maternal role for her tribe's chieftain.

Unlike conventional portrayals of motherhood, which is predominantly anchored in biological reproduction, Fen's maternal role is established through an amalgamation of deliberate choice, circumstance, and instinct. Her actions demonstrate a deep understanding of the vulnerabilities that marginalized individuals face in a collapsed environment. One of the most significant instances of this occurred early on in the novel when Baby Girl was first born. After her mother's death, Fen immediately took off her "shirt to make a sling to carry" Baby Girl even though her "skin be covered in goose bumps" (38), illustrating how much she is willing to do for the sake of this infant even at the expense of her own well-being and comfort. This early interaction is crucial because it establishes the premise of motherhood: the decision to care and protect is rooted in the inherent recognition of another's vulnerability, which, according to affinity ecofeminists, is intrinsically interwoven within women's nature.

This act of chosen motherhood is intricately linked to the broader thematic concerns of *Orleans*. As the environment crumbles around her, Fen creates a refuge where safety and

nurturance reside, establishing a sanctuary amid chaos—a protective bond that is central to ecofeminist mothering. The whole plot revolves around how to transport Baby Girl across the wall, a place where she can survive the ongoing environmental collapse devastating the region's inhabitants. Fen states, "Lydia say she want Baby Girl to have a better life… Ain't no such thing as a better life in Orleans. Not really. Only chance this baby got is in the Outer States. So, I got to get her there" (49). Driven by the immediate need to ensure this plan comes to fruition, Fen navigates a landscape defined by disease and violence. Her protective bond is evident in her constant vigilance, feeding, hiding, and strategizing her moves to keep Baby Girl safe.

In one pivotal scene, after getting caught and dragged to a "blood farm" (88), Fen clings to Baby Girl when blood hunters try to separate her from the infant. The hunters wanted her blood, treating her body as a mere resource. It was either blood willingly given, or blood forcefully taken, and Fen could not bear the thought of Baby Girl being drained like cattle, leading to her body instinctively acting as a shield as she "be holding her too tight" (90). This scene coupled with her declaration of ownership over the infant, "She mine, now" (187), is not about possession but rather about protection. By claiming Baby Girl as her own child, Fen shields her from tribal exploitation and asserts her role as the baby's guardian and protector.

Fen's ultimate act of protection manifests when she expresses her willingness to give up her life for the baby, she states: "The City takes. Well, if She want me, She can have me. Maybe then She leave Enola alone" (204). Enola, the name that was finally given to Baby Girl after a long journey, mirrors Fen's own emotional journey of bonding with the child, a bond that grew stronger to the point of sacrificing herself. That statement can be seen as a foreshadowing of the climactic escape through the militarized wall. As Fen distracts soldiers, her body becomes a decoy to ensure Baby Girl's passage to safety. The text reads:

> Behind him, Fen stood silhouetted against the searchlights, rain spattering the water around her. Her arms were raised, her face turned up…For an instant, she looked at him. The moment hung in the air, Fen's mouth curving into a smile, seeing Daniel and the baby almost [to the wall][…] A shot rang out. The bundle fell from her hands (217).

This sorrowful moment of selfless action emphasizes how "mothers demonstrate varying combinations of behaviors devoted to ensuring their daughters' survival-such as… helping their daughters go further than mothers themselves were allowed to go (qtd. in Collins 184). Through her sacrifice, Fen achieved the goal of ensuring that her baby went further than she herself could, by crossing beyond the wall.

Fen's motherly protective instincts are always present, yet in moments of clash, she finds herself trembling under the weight of her responsibility. the responsibility imposed on her to affirm the value of life in a world that negates it. This is a world where blood hunting becomes a norm, practiced by certain tribe members in order to survive, their logic being justified "first by necessity, then by a self-determined sense of right" (Smith 193). Smith illustrates the agitation of Fen by positioning her in blood-chilling situations. In those moments of vulnerability, her struggles reveal the hidden paradoxical nature of motherhood. In fear of encountering blood hounds while feeding Baby Girl, Fen says in a moment of panic: "I could make it on my own. I wouldn't be so stupid if I didn't have this baby" (93). Her trembling hands and near- paralyzing fear: "so scared I almost pee myself" (93), expose the emotional toll that accompanies the responsibility of maternity and the complexity of one's survival. This notion is further reinforced in one clear passage where Fen, feeling the utmost terror from the hounds, unconsciously considers sacrificing Baby Girl for her own survival:

> Last time I ran, I didn't get eaten. But that 'cause they been too busy eating someone else. I look down at Baby Girl, snuggled up against me. I want to run so bad, but she so tiny. Too tiny to hold the dogs off me for long. Then I close my eyes and feel hot all over, I'm so ashamed (Smith 86).

The shame and regret that plague her mind afterwards crystallizes the emotional turmoil regarding motherhood under duress, capturing motherhood's conflicting nature. These admissions are crucial for understanding Fen's character because they humanize her in an otherwise inhuman setting. Her heavy burden of sustaining life during the most difficult circumstances echoes that of nature, for both "nature and women" are "producers of life" (Shiva 91). Motherhood, thus, is paradoxical in nature, it is a site where nurture and struggle both exist simultaneously in a world ravaged and exacerbated by environmental trauma, systemic and patriarchal oppression.

2. In a World Where Decay Persists

2.1. Mapping Environmental Trauma in Esch's Narrative

Generally, post-Katrina texts split into two categories, "texts that focus on testimony and deal with processing the storm and its traumatic and cultural effects, and texts that center on the identity politics activated and complicated by Katrina" (Jellenik and Marotte. in "Creaturely" 247). Evidently, the central dilemma of *Salvage the Bones* is the omnipresent threat of Hurricane Katrina, stretching its sharp claws over the gulf of Mississippi. Ward uses the storm's devastation to highlight the continued injustices on marginalized communities, and the environmental trauma it left on them.

The narrative of the novel articulates a profound connection between body, land and trauma which aligns with structures that allow the exploitation of the physical land and of

women without accountability. According to Plumwood in *Feminism and The Mastery of Nature*, dualism creates a radical separation of the highly valued side that is males and humans—which are configured as alien and different in nature—from the lower, inferior side that is women and nature. Thus, the dominant side is regarded as primary whereas the inferior side is defined in relation to it, leading to its subjugation (32). Expanding on this, Shiva in *Ecofeminism* argues that the ecological crisis is embedded in the white man's belief that human beings stand apart from and above nature, and that they do not belong to the democracy of nature's life (323).

Ward constructs an unflinching narrative that exposes the disproportionate injustices faced by her characters, one that serves as a representation of black lives—particularly Black women—in the rural South. In an interview with the Paris Review, Ward explained the primary strategy called "Narrative Ruthlessness" that she employs to portray the social and environmental vulnerabilities experienced by the fictional town Bois Sauvage. She states: "I had to be more honest about the realities of the community I was writing about… I needed narrative ruthlessness. I couldn't dull the edges and fall in love with my characters and spare them. Life does not spare us" (qtd. in Bares 21). This style which rejects sentimentality is evoked through placing Esch in the threat of an approaching environmental disaster while enduring an unwanted pregnancy.

The Batistes have lived for generations in a clearing called the Pit—an area prone to waste dumping and flooding. The familial residence passed down through generations has withstood continuous assaults by hurricanes and forces of nature. The most recent hurricane they have experienced is called Elaine, and it had occurred when Esch's mother was still alive and also pregnant with Junior. The night before Katrina makes landfall, Esch returns back to that memory.

> The first hurricane that I remember happened when I was nine, and of the two or three we got every year, it was the worst I've ever been in. Mama let me kneel next to the chair she'd dragged next to the window. Even then our boards were mismatched, and there were gaps we could peer out of, track the progress of the storm in the dark (Ward 191).

Although a brief account of what she had previously experienced in her childhood, but it is important enough to understand the toll these recurring hurricanes had on her psychology. One can note through the narrative that Esch has not confronted her trauma yet—or more specifically—she had resorted to psychic numbing as a maladaptive behavior (pihkala "Ecoanxiety, Tragedy" 8) and this is apparent in her unexpected calmness despite learning about Katrina's progress in the Gulf. When it comes to her silent response, it aligns with type two trauma, which is usually experienced through repeated exposure to acute external events (Terr 15); in this case, hurricanes. This type of trauma results in repression and dissociation from the event, a coping mechanism that Esch employs in order to safeguard her psyche. In fact, she is no stranger to disarray because her world is defined by chaos and instability, and the very environment she lives in is painted by Ward as barren and constantly degraded. When Katrina makes its arrival known through a shriek similar to a train, her repression is shattered because her trauma is being repeated again: "The wind… sighs and says, *Hello*. I lay here in the dark… and do not answer" (Ward 193).

As the anxiety of the storm intensifies, whispers from TV and snatches of radio chatter scatter through the novel like omens and echoes of the anticipated arrival of the hurricane, which gives it a haunting nature of a predator stalking its prey. Consequently, Esch's life becomes more tangled and complicated with the knowledge of her pregnancy and the deteriorating landscape of

her rural Mississippi home. By placing Esch in the middle of a ruthless and exploited environment, Ward intensifies her trauma.

Furthermore, the oppressive heat and drought mirror her internal struggles and emphasize how external hardships create severe distressing experiences. In the novel, Bois Sauvage is not merely a setting; the human and non-human life it carries are but one living injured character, and its vulnerability to the storm symbolizes Esch's own precarious existence. Arguably, changing climate forces people with less economic resources, most likely minorities—to become more vulnerable, and they experience stronger effects because of their inability to afford technologies that could manage the economic and medical effects of climate change (Clayton and Doherty 271). In addition, Richard Crownshaw points out how the state's neglect in part had evidently failed to safeguard coastal regions of New Orleans and the gulf coast that are prone to hurricanes. Its inhabitants who are predominantly African Americans became victims to environmental devastation and especially trauma (128). Individuals like Esch—who are black, poor, unwed and pregnant—are more prone to face these overwhelming consequences.

Nature in Ward's narrative becomes a paradox; it is life-giving but destructive, much like the female body. The recurring motif of water that Ward employs is depicted as a destructive force ready to dismantle lives. The reader can sense Esch's developing solastalgia—a concept introduced by Glenn Albrecht to highlight the distress caused by ecological devestation—because of the hurricane, especially after learning of its development into a category 5 developed. The possibility of their home facing the immediate assault of Katrina becomes a distressing reality for her (Albrecht 45), and she articulates this melancholia—mainly to herself—through using mythology. She states that in ancient Greece, water means death (Ward 191), and "Medea's journey took her to the water, which was the highway of the ancient world,

were death was as close as the waves" (141). Corresponding to this mythological metaphor, Esch's journey also places her at the mercy of nature. Upon hearing the wind's loud siren, Esch hugs her knees to her chest and admits to Skeetah that she is scared; the trauma here is articulated out-loud for the first time.

When Katrina makes landfall on the eleventh day, chaos unfolds and stress ensues, water enters through the cracks of their home and makes its way to them. The storm is extremely powerful that Ward gives it a voice of its own. Esch visualizes it surrounding them like a hungry snake and hallucinates it speaking to her: "the storm screams, *I have been waiting for you*" (203). The fragile foundation of their house is not able to withstand the power of the storm, and it starts to collapse. The family's last option is to climb onto the roof of the grandparents' house. Her solastalgia is delivered upon seeing the destruction, or more specifically the physical desolation (Albrecht 45) of what she has come to know as home.

During this climatic scene, Skeetah urges Esch to come with him to break into the roof window of their grandparents' house, but when their dad holds her back, Skeetah announces her pregnancy: "Skeetah points. Daddy's face shuts, and he pushes… Daddy saw it… before he pushed me… Daddy saw the curve of a waist, the telltale push of a stomach outward. Daddy saw fruit" (206). In a moment of exposure, the hurricane lifts the veil off her and forces her to confront her reality. The hurricane in Ward's narrative does not only destroy the physical but also the emotional barrier that Esch worked carefully to conceal. Furthermore, Ward escalates Esch's anxiety and powerlessness to a palpable degree by throwing her in Katrina's hands. She imagines a conversation between her and Katrina while she struggles to stay afloat. When Esch asks "*who will deliver me*?' the hurricane hisses in response, dwindling her psyche even more: "it shushes me through the water, with a voice muffled and deep" (207).

2.2. Esch: Binding Powers of Patriarchy and Systemic Neglect

In *Salvage the Bones,* Ward situates Esch in a world where her agency is systematically exploited, challenged, and denied. Her entire existence as a black girl in the American South is deeply rooted in a patriarchal environment that dictates her personal experience and imposes rigid gender. Growing up in the Pit, her early life mirrors that of her brothers as she engages in the same activities with them, which effectively blurs traditional gender lines: "Where my brothers go I follow" (Ward 50). However, as she matures, societal norms increasingly impose limitations on her femininity, compelling her to take on complex roles. Following her mother's death, during Junior's birth, Esch is thrust into a maternal role at a young age. "Daddy fed him until he figured out me and Randall could do it" (82).

With most responsibilities falling on Esch, Ward pushes her into becoming a surrogate mother to her brother through nursing, feeding, and mothering him. The maternal responsibility, however, extends beyond caretaking to supporting and being an emotional anchor for her brothers, particularly for Skeetah whom she follows in his endeavors. Arguably, her assumption of adult responsibilities emphasizes broader systemic failures; failures of the state and of her emotionally absent father who is unable to attend to her needs.

Outside the borders of her male-dominated household, Esch's existence is further shaken by gender expectations; particularly through her encounters with Manny and their complicated relationship which further obscures the comprehension of her womanhood. Because she lacks experience in sentimental affairs, Esch only knows love from reading about it in mythology: "I imagine this is the way Medea felt about Jason when she fell in love… I felt it strongly that I cannot imagine how Manny does not feel it too" (56). Because of this, Manny is able to trick Esch into submitting to him. Whenever he wants instant gratification, she welcomes him fully

because she believes he chose her, and it was his way of loving her. Regarding him as the sun, Esch offers emotional and physical intimacy which is evident in the poetic and emotional language she uses. However, he gives nothing back, instead he effectively sidelines Esch, failing to acknowledge her or see her as his equal: “This is love, and it hurts. Manny never looks at me” (85).

To further understand this dualistic relationship, Ynestra King argues that women and nature in patriarchy are the original “other,” they are something different from men, and their hatred is intimately connected and mutually reinforcing. “Immanence” that women symbolize, calls the man back and reminds him of his link to nature that he wants to forget, thus he must forget and achieve manhood and “transcendence” as Beauvoir terms it. However, it cannot be total, as it results in ambivalence and dependency of self (man, culture) on the other. This latter then, develops a love-hate fetishization of women’s bodies which manifests in regarding them as objects to be controlled, humiliated and raped (qtd. in Plant 20-21).

Manny effectively embodies a gender-based power hierarchy; he controls Esch’s body and denies her agency in every encounter they share. His actions are embedded in patriarchal norms that paint women as passive and disposable. For Simone de Beauvoir, man usually views himself as “the Absolute” because he believes that woman is inferior, and thus, he tries to separate the feminine from the masculine in order to maintain his position of power (xxii, xxx, 161). When Esch learns about her pregnancy, she is certain that it is Manny’s child but chooses to remain silent, fearing his rejection. His emotional unavailability and indifferent treatment add to her struggle, reinforcing her feelings of inferiority. Esch, as per De Beauvoir’s words, also participates in her own oppression by remaining silent and avoiding confrontation with the

masculine other (43). This combination allows patriarchy to reduce women to mere bodies and reproductive machines, while exempting men from responsibility.

In one of their encounters, Esch in an act of defiance attempts to force him into looking at her face rather than her body—to see her as a girl—to see her secret, "he is seeing me…All I ever wanted. He knows" (Ward 130). However, upon noticing her stomach he pulls away and reacts to it with repulsion and disgust, expressing it through masculine violence: "he is throwing me up and off of him. I hit the door behind me, the rough cat tongue face of his is gone, and I grip steel, air, nothing" (130). In the words of Joseph Campbell, "The fear of woman and the mystery of her motherhood have been for the male no less impressive imprinting forces than the fears and mysteries of the world of nature itself" (qtd. in Rich 103)

After this devastating encounter, Esch is left heartbroken. Just as she manages to make him see her, he rejects both her and their baby. Being rejected by Manny is a great setback for her experience as Collins highlights that rejection by Whites is one thing—rejection by Black men is entirely another (177). When she finally builds the courage to confront him, he blatantly denies and they indulge in an argument, "I'm pregnant. He stops in profile. His nose is like a knife. And? It's yours. What? Yours. Manny shakes his head. The knife cuts … I ain't got nothing here, he says… looks at me head-on for the second time ever. Nothing" (Ward 179). In Shirley Hartley findings, teenage fathers express negative attitudes towards the teenage mother because they feel insecure about fatherhood. She uses the term "pseudoadulthood" to highlight that the adolescents may feel so threatened by the growing responsibility that they resort to constructing derogatory stereotypes about the unwed mothers (qtd. in Kaplan 92).

By the same token, Ward parallels Esch's experience of constrained agency with that of China. The family prized dog is a victim of exploitation and oppression. Lori Gruen puts in

Ecofeminism: Women, Nature, and Animals, that in a patriarchal society woman and animal are categorized to serve the same symbolic function. They are used to sustain human male dominance in theoretical discourse through constructing them as dominated, submissive and "other" and their role is to serve/be served up (qtd. in Gaard 61). For King as well, in Western industrial civilization, nature became an object to be dominated and to serve the needs of men who reduce her to "natural resources" (qtd. in Plant 20). China's body then is commoditized and used for both economic gain and symbolic value as a fighter, yet it is greatly valuable for Skeetah. One can understand that her relationship with her owner is paradoxical: while he exploits her reproductive abilities to sell her puppies for profit, he also shows compassion and remains deeply possessive and overprotective of her.

Additionally, Ward employs the pit to serve as a potent reminder of systemic and racial oppression, evoking a long history of discrimination and environmental neglect. The land owned by Esch's grandfather used to be exploited by white men for clay extraction, and the soil had been excavated to the point of scarring the land—a motif Ward employs to mirror the injured black bodies in the South. "Papa Joseph let them take all the dirt they wanted until the digging had created a cliff over a dry lake in the backyard… so he stopped selling earth for money" (Ward 17). Moreover, the Batistes have always lived in inadequate conditions in the Pit; the dark heart of Bois Sauvage which is a symbolic representation of the poor systemically marginalized South as opposed to the white part of town; the pale arteries.

When Esch observes the dense forest around her, she realizes that small animals do not flee and chose to hide in their homes instead. Ward utilizes the similarity in response as a metaphor for the Batistes themselves, who choose to stay and border the house. They are reduced to a small and helpless state due to their impoverishment. Ward's narrative can be seen as a

testimony to the injustices lived by black people, and she pushes it further on the day before the storm hits when they receive an automated call from the state government. This call gives them neither instructions nor any information. A warning is all the help they receive.

> I cannot remember exactly what it says, but I remember it in general. *Mandatory evacuation. Hurricane making landfall tomorrow. If you choose to stay in your home and have not evacuated by this time, we are not responsible. You have been warned. And these could be the consequences of your actions*. There is a list. And I do not know if he say this, but this what it feels like: you can die (191).

Esch's response highlights how lack of support and alienation caused by political powerlessness contributes to solastalgia (Albrecht 52). In the wake of Katrina, a deeper and more systematic failure was revealed — namely, the state's abandonment of a safety net for the poor, sick, and homeless (Clark 342). The continuous assault on the Gulf of Mississippi through environmental injustices and exploitation stands as an indication of a broader systemic failure to safeguard these communities from the unpredictability of nature. Those who remained in the South during the storm, as Michael E Dyson states, were labeled stupid and stubborn; however, they simply did not have enough resources to escape destruction (qtd. in Clark 343). One can conclude that the Batistes are paralyzed by systemic neglect and such portrayals serve to increase racist and classist images that would further marginalize black people.

2.3. Orleans' Wounded Soil and Soul

In this dystopian novel, Smith draws attention to the weight of traversing the once familiar but now irrevocably altered land of New Orleans. Orleans, the necrotic landscape where "rivers" are more "than land" (Smith 32), provides an ideal setting to explore the ways in which emotional and psychological torment manifest itself in the face of environmental degradation. To

fully grasp the depth of Fen's emotional turmoil, her responses will be examined through the lens of Albrecht's concept of "solastalgia."

As the Gulf Coast—now the quarantined Delta—has been ravaged by hurricanes, deadly fever, and societal breakdown; the environmental collapse becomes omnipresent: "There be houses under here, silt and mud on top. Acting like a natural levee for us but used to be somebody's home. Now it be they crypt" (Smith 151). The imagery itself reflects a place suffering from profound degradation, and the city becomes what Aldo Leopold terms "sick landscape" (qtd. in Albrecht 42).

Central to solastalgia are the feelings of loss of belonging, and of solace. These feelings become a form of a traumatic mourning for a loved home. Mirroring, in this case, the home of Fen, which is no longer a place of refuge, but rather a lethal wasteland marked by environmental degradation. While Fen watches her home succumb to ruination, her distress leads to "an attack" on her "sense of place, in the erosion of the sense of belonging (identity)" (Albrecht 45), as a result from the constant threat from ecological disasters.

Fen's memories of pre-disaster Orleans—its music, community, and historical landmarks—reveal the deep yearning she feels for her forever-lost home. Each time she scavenges through the city, she can't help but muse about the way things once were: "We be near the Market, where the old levee used to be, across from St. Louis Cathedral. What once been a green hill now be a beach dune made of debris" (Smith 19). Fen's unrelenting engagement with the memories of her past further highlights her mourning for a lost home. Her environment, once a site of solace and identity, now a source of threat and alienation. Smith employs different flashbacks of her protagonist to illustrate her psychological disorientation: "I be at the cottage again, hidden in the woods. Lovely, dark and deep, like that poem Daddy used to read. I got a

vine in my hands, and I be skipping it the way Mama say they used to skip rope" (85). The stark contrast between what once was and what is today induces a profound sense of loss and isolation asserting what Albrecht defines as the "homesickness one gets when one is still at 'home'" (45).

Solastalgia does not only exist within ecological context, the social environment is also a part of one's home or sense of place. Therefore, the collapse of social structures exacerbated by patriarchal oppression can also lead to "solastagic" distress. Albrecht argues that emotional anguish resulting from solastalgia can manifest "psychosomatically" meaning that distress is articulated "through body language" (53). The "blood farm" scene in *Orleans* illustrates how this social collapse intensifies Fen's solastalgia and how this particular distress leads to psychosomatic reactions. After being caught and dragged to this farm by the blood hunters as previously mentioned, Fen surveys the scene of the place that unfolds like a macabre tableau, searing the grim atmosphere of itself into memory. "The camp look like Hell. All Saint's Day be starting early at the blood farm" (Smith 95). As she witnesses the suffering at this farm, a realization dawned upon her.

Every passing moment in this tense atmosphere is a reminder of the threat that is looming over her like a deadly cloud. The hunter who dragged her there, an embodiment of male dominance, struck her violently the moment she screamed in terror. She states, "We be screeching like owls. The hunter haul off and slap me across the face. I stop screaming then, but tears be coming as much from pain as from fear" (97). Her intense emotional distress causes her to react physically in the form of crying and screaming. The hunter's dehumanizing reduction of Fen to a mere "bitch pouring milk" (97) strips her of her identity, severing her connection to the solace she once had in her community, further triggering her solastalgia.

This particular feeling of distress should be taken into consideration throughout the whole analysis of the protagonist's experiences, as it is all-consuming and inevitably damaging. Therefore, her emotional state concerning environmental degradation has a significant role in shaping her maternal journey.

3. Motherhood and Environmental Oppression

3.1. Environmental Crises and Systemic Oppression as Obstacles to Motherhood

Motherhood in *Salvage the Bones* and *Orleans* is depicted as a condition strained by environmental crises, systemic neglect, and oppression. Esch's pregnancy unfolds in the shadow of hurricane Katrina and the barren landscape of Bois Sauvage, which is marked by environmental degradation, poverty, and oppression. Her trajectory of life thus develops in a collapsing home surrounded by the decaying scenery of the Pit. On the one hand, the family's financial situation is dire and inadequate. They are let down by the state and left to survive off a disability check their father receives after getting into an accident. Because they cannot afford basic needs, most of the house's furniture is salvaged from their grandparents' home. Additionally, cheap canned goods and instant ramen are the only kinds of food they stack up and eat to stifle their hunger. Sometimes they scavenge for eggs because they lack basic nutritious food and even capture wildlife to feed themselves. With her unplanned pregnancy, Esch is not able to nurture her body and the baby growing inside of her. "I eat, and nothing touches my stomach, nothing tells me it is full with food, with something more than food" (Ward 97).

On the other hand, the Pit serves as an unsafe environment for Esch, as it attests to how marginalized communities are often assigned to environmentally and systemically neglected areas. Living up to its name, it traps her not only physically but also socially—it is a zone of neglect where they burn garbage, and their father has turned it into a junkyard.

The instability of the environment, combined with the reoccurring storms threatening the Mississippi Gulf, means that the community—and by extension Esch—lives in a constant state of paranoia and uncertainty. “We ain’t had one come straight for us in years, time enough to forget… how many cans of sardines and potted meat we should stock, how many jugs of water to fill” (9). Ultimately, it prevents her from emotionally processing her impending motherhood, and stifles the slow, natural progress crucial for a healthy maternal experience. As she puts all her focus and energy into taking care of her siblings and preparing the house, Esch’s pregnancy thus becomes an extension of the land—unprotected and reduced to nothing.

Similar *to Salvage the Bones*, the deadly Delta fever and the frequent storms in *Orleans* serve as more than just backdrops: central to ecofeminist theory–which asserts that systematic injustice and ecological collapse are intertwined–this environmental degradation acts as an elaborate force that disrupt economies, destabilize communities, and render marginalized groups more vulnerable. The outbreak of the Delta fever triggered a cascade of institutional neglect.

The government enacted a “Quarantine” of the South, completely abandoning the Gulf Coast region under the guise of “inalienable rights of the majority” (Smith 14). For mothers, this act of government withdrawal led to a scarcity of resources critical to motherhood such as baby formulas, medicine, and safe shelters. Fen’s use of moss and leaves as an alternative to diapers highlights the desperate needs of marginalized caregivers in a world that devalues life itself. The government’s betrayal also resulted in reshaping the very fabric of communal life and local society, leading to the formation of blood tribes. These tribe divisions, while intended to control the disease, ended up immortalizing racial and gender-based oppression, deepening social fragmentations, and creating a world where one introduces oneself by stating his blood type, thus the “blood type” becomes “identity in the Delta” (98).

Since every individual is forced to join a tribe with a similar blood type of his own, a chasm between kin was created. This intrusion upon the already delicate realm of motherhood made it impossible for mothers with a different blood type than their children to not be separated, as tribes would accept only babies, fearing they would not know "what kind of egg they got—chicken or snake" (2), when the infants were older than six. Therefore, this obstacle strips mothers of their maternal identity as they are forced to relinquish the right to mother their own children. Thus, motherhood in conditions like that of Esch's pregnancy or Fen's maternity is rendered almost impossible.

3.2. The Impact of Environmental Oppression on Maternal Choices

Ward's *Salvage the Bones* and Smith's *Orleans* emphasize the ways in which environmental disasters are intertwined with systemic oppression, both of which have a significant impact on the maternal choices of Esch and Fen. Coming from an impoverished family and an environmentally degraded region, Esch's maternal choices are limited. Her inability to access reproductive health services highlights broader environmental injustices imposed on black women. At one point in the novel, she considers aborting the baby and weighs a few methods of abortion she had heard from girls at school; however, she ultimately finds no practical solution.

> I could find something big enough and hard enough to jump on: Daddy's dump truck hood, Daddy's tractor... We have bleach in the laundry room. Only thing I wouldn't be able to find is the birth control pills; I've never had a prescription, wouldn't be able to have the money to get them if I did, don't have any girlfriends to ask for some (Ward 93).

Deep in despair, her thoughts and considerations are not personal; they are the product of environmental and especially socio-economic injustices that force her to resort to such extreme

methods. Additionally, societal neglect and patriarchy deepen her conflicted emotions surrounding the pregnancy. Her contemplation of abortion arises from patriarchal pressures imposed particularly on Black women, and eventually she has no choice but to hide her pregnancy from her family knowing that it would not be celebrated, "When no one wants what's inside of you" (92). This passage implies how black women's unplanned pregnancies are often considered burdensome.

Ward's narrative highlights how environmental oppression can hold an advantage on maternal choices made by black women. When Esch refers to her baby as a "wet seed," she symbolically merges the amniotic fluid of pregnancy with the floodwaters of the relentless hurricane. The baby's potential for growth is overshadowed by the uncontrollable and inevitable environmental destruction approaching the heart of Bois Sauvage. Thus, Esch's reproductive autonomy is undermined, and her choices are dictated by environmental and systemic injustices imposed upon her.

In *Orleans,* where environmental oppression is also marked by ecological degradation, institutional neglect, and systemic violence, maternal choices transform into paradoxical actions such as love and sacrifice. Much like Esch, Fen's role as the "othermother" to Baby Girl Enola, illustrates how oppressive systems force mothers to consider harmful decisions that harm both their emotional and physical well-being. However, for Fen, decisions where attachment becomes inseparable from relinquishment, and protection becomes devoted to parting, would always have her in shackles. The quarantined Delta region that forced Fen to relinquish Baby Girl reflects the ways this oppression constrains maternal choices. Fen's inner turmoil gets triggered when she observes Daniel holding the child: "He say we and it hit me that Enola don't belong to me no

more. She ain't looking up at me… I want to hold her again, but then I might not let her go" (153).

This moment in particular captures Fen's painful awareness that Baby Girl cannot stay with her. Environmental pressure and the subsequent tribal wars make it impossible for Fen to find a safe haven for her baby. Her love for Baby Girl, illustrated by her clinginess to her, even when the odds are against her, building her dream upon a hope, albeit a small one, that the scientist Daniel could truly find a cure for the fever, and that Baby Girl "wouldn't have to leave" her (154); further emphasizes the harrowing truth behind the oppression's impact on her choice. Fen realizes at the end that giving up her motherly position is the cost of rescuing Baby Girl. Her inability to act due to her Delta Fever infection indicates that separation is inevitable in her case. Both Esch and Fen's maternal decisions are enforced by injustice.

Conclusion

By examining the intersection of patriarchal oppression and environmental trauma in *Salvage the Bones* and *Orleans,* this chapter has underlined how maternal identity is approached and shaped within the context of systemic neglect and environmental collapse. Esch and Fen's journeys highlighted how motherhood emerges as a paradoxical force one that reflects the entangled relationship between the female body and nature, while coping with environmental distress. The novels have highlighted the broader struggles of black women as they attempt to reclaim selfhood and agency in their unforgiving circumstances.

Chapter Three:

Overcoming Environmental Trauma and Systemic Oppression

Introduction

Drawing from the distinct maternal experiences introduced in Chapter Two, this chapter will shift the focus to maternal resistance in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* and Sherri L. Smith's *Orleans*. It will mainly explore how Esch and Fen defy systemic oppression, and how their defiance is tethered in nature. By interrogating the differences between the two protagonists, the analysis will highlight the societal expectations they challenge and the survival strategies they employ. Building on Chapter One's Ecofeminist foundation, this chapter aims to demonstrate how Ward and Smith reimagine motherhood as a site of strength and resistance in a world where patriarchal systems, ecological decay, and racial oppression intersect.

1. Maternal Resilience in a Fractured Community

1.1. Esch's Fight: Recognizing Maternal Strength in the Shadow of Patriarchy

Esch's journey towards embracing her maternity is molded into shape when Skeetah affirms her worth, and in doing so, he supports a changing process she is already undergoing. His unwavering devotion and attentiveness towards China transform her from being his pet to becoming his devoted child, allowing Esch to recognize her maternal agency, and to embrace her motherhood. Skeetah's interactions with Esch contrast sharply with her relationship with Manny, who objectifies her existence or dismisses it. Skeetah treats Esch as his equal and she senses it from the way he comes to her whenever he needs her, to standing up to her against Manny. Because of China, he grows to value life and deems it sacred, and when he tells Esch that everything deserves to live and everything deserves a chance, she starts to view her motherhood in a different light.

In the scene where Skeetah preps China for the upcoming dog fight, Manny belittles her abilities and suggests that giving birth and nursing has weakened China: “But you know China ain’t as boss as she used to be… Any dog who gives birth like that is less strong after. Even if you don’t think it. Take a lot out of an animal to nurse and nurture like that. Price of being female. Finally, Manny glances at me. It slides over me like I’m glass” (Ward 87). This derogatory remark may have been directed towards China, but it is meant for Esch to diminish her female agency. Manny’s view is the product of patriarchy, as per Lori Gruen in *Ecofeminism: Women, Nature, and Animals*. She maintains in account of a human social evolution, that woman’s body is seen as smaller, weaker, and reproductive, which hinders her from participating in the hunt, pushes her into the non-culture arena, and renders her inferior from not participating. Her reproductive capacity and life-bearing activities contrast the death-bringing activities that underscore culture; the human social evolution thus, creates the subservient status of both woman and animals (qtd. in Gaard 62).

Carol Adams expands on this using the term “Absent Referent” in *The Sexual Politics of Meat* where she emphasizes the notion of meat that functions as an absent referent (67). She further explains that “animals have become absent referents, whose fate is transmuted into a metaphor for someone else’s existence… the absent referent can be anything whose original meaning is undercut as it is absorbed into a different hierarchy of meaning.” She states that both women and animal overlap as absent referents, and the death experience of animals demonstrates the lived experience of women where patriarchal values become institutionalized (67).

Unlike Manny, Skeetah recognizes that femininity and motherhood are a source of power, and he offers a powerful statement that claims Esch’s worth and dismantles this patriarchal view: “You serious? That’s when they come into they strength. They got something

to protect. He glances at me, too, but I feel it even after he looks away… To give life—Skeetah bends down to China… is to know what's worth fighting for. And what's love" (Ward 87).

Through observing this exchange, Esch actively reinterprets Skeetah's perspective through her lens, and turns it into a pedestal that pushes her into identifying with her growing identity. She transforms from being haunted by phantoms of shame and reluctance, to recognizing that motherhood, although challenging, can be a source of empowerment. Evidently, Collins confirms:

> Motherhood can serve as a site where black women express and learn the power of self-definition, the importance of valuing and respecting ourselves and the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and a belief in black women's empowerment… Others see motherhood as providing a base for self-actualization, status in the black community and a catalyst for social activism (193)

China then goes on to defy Manny's remarks in a brutal match with Kilo the father of her puppies. In this scene, Ward lays bare a volatile description laced with vivid and violent details which does not only mirror the intensity of nature in Bois Sauvage, it also highlights the brutality of motherhood itself, China fights her opponent despite being a new mother, and when she loses a part of herself, it is not a loss but a tribute to her fierceness, "he bows his head like a puppy to drink. But he doesn't drink. He bites. He swallows her breast… Her breast is bloody, torn. The nipple, missing." (Ward 153-54). Through this scene, Ward's narrative turns away from the patriarchal notion that reproduction weakens the female body and proves that there is undeniable strength in the act of nurturing and mothering. Nevertheless, China's fight and her bodily sacrifice, defies patriarchy by asserting that care and combat can coexist; that motherhood is not synonymous with weakness but rather with protective violence.

Arguably, “Black motherhood” allows black women to resist negative evaluations of “black motherhood” through rearticulating black women’s inherited power from their everyday experience of motherhood (Morrison qtd. in O’Reilly 3). By the end of the novel, Esch envisions a bond with China that is different from her brothers; a bond based on recognition, nurturance, and shared struggle that challenges expectations through empowering motherhood. Esch is positive and certain that China will return and recognize her as a sister too; knowing she has kept watch and has fought, China will know that Esch is now a mother (Ward 227).

1.2. Fen’s Maternal Fight against Racial and Gender-Based Oppression

As cruelty, despair and savagery dominate the Delta, Fen de la Guerre emerges as a symbol of resilience in a post-apocalyptic urban setting. She finds herself constantly fighting against a deadly world where systemic oppression manifests as environmental injustice, subjugation, and the erasure of marginalized voices. Her physical defiance against systemic violence materializes during many scenes in the novel. For instance, Fen’s encounter with O-Neg tribe—a group surviving in the ruins of a quarantined New Orleans—is charged with tension. Surrounded by “lithe” armed warriors from all sides, she stands unafraid, arms raised in the ritualistic self-introduction: “My name is Fen de la Guerre. I am an O-Positive. I come for counsel. This child is Enola. She is an O-Positive, too. Her daddy be one of you” (Smith 209).

After the encounter, a confrontation between Davis and Fen unfolds in the O-Neg camp. As the leader of the O-Neg tribe, Davis embodies patriarchal and authoritarian power structures that systematically marginalize and silence women. He humiliates Fen, rendering her inferior to him: “Child, don’t speak to me as if we are equals. You were nothing but Lydia’s pet. I do not hear you” (Smith 212). His language emphasizes not only his authority but also the gendered silencing of Fen’s agency. He demands a “blood payment” (187-189) due to a conflict that

erupted during a prior “Powwow” (24)—a potential peace negotiation between the O-Negs and the O-Positives. He weaponizes the tradition of blood debts to legitimize his claim over Baby Girl to settle the debt: “Lydia owes us a blood price. Give me the child and it’ll be paid” (212). This demand highlights how systemic oppression operates by subordinating marginalized people, particularly women and their offspring, as a form of restoration. Although Davis frames his claim to the infant as a matter of tribal justice, his intent aligns with that of the “blood farm” hunters, all of whom view Baby Girl as a commodity. “Like hell,” Fen snaps: “You gonna sell her to blood hunters? Exchange her for weapons?” (212).

Fen’s unwillingness to relinquish Baby Girl subsequently led to a scene steeped in violence. She asserts: “You want blood? It gotta come from you or me, but not her” (213). After making Davis accept her blood as a payment instead of Baby Girl’s, she engages in a ceremonial knife fight. A performance of power meant to humiliate her while reinforcing Davis’s patriarchal dominance. The man’s state: adorned in “feathers and beads,” wielding a “ceremonial blade” (214), and wearing his hair in way that gives “him the look of a lion” (209), emphasizes his position as a tribe leader. The camp’s collective cry “O-Negs roar in triumph”(215) when he presses the weapon against her throat depicts the normalization of brutality within these marginalized communities. After a series of knife strikes, Fen disrupts the spectacle by slashing him, exposing the fragility of his authority. The duel then becomes about defying the patriarchal oppression as much as it is about fighting for her child’s life. Emphasizing how protective maternal instincts act as site of strength against patriarchy.

Another transformative point in Fen’s life that highlights her resilience is her petrifying experience under Mama Gentille’s care. What happened to Fen during that period exposes the exploitation of young girls in a patriarchal world devastated by environmental degradation.

Smith introduces Mama Gentille's household as a sanctuary for the orphaned children of Orleans. Nevertheless, she constructs Mama Gentille as a deceptive maternal figure whose betrayal underscores how patriarchal systems can be perpetuated and enforced by women complicit in the exploitation of other women and children. Smith initially describes this character as a maternal figure who "take care of all the little kids" (Smith 71). Mama Gentille offers Fen a new chance at safety after the loss of her parents.

However, this was all but a ploy, a scheme orchestrated meticulously by Mama Gentille to put Fen's guard down. The illusion of this sanctuary crumbles when Fen is first singled out by a man "in the black hat," a shadowy figure who always seems to be frequenting the household. Following this encounter, Mama Gentille starts grooming Fen for this man, coercing her into wearing a long white dress, and threatening her into obedience. Fen's body becomes a literal commodity as the man extracts her blood which is described as "rubies in the firelight" (77). The violation escalates when he sexually assaults her, his "hot flesh" piercing her body instead of the needle. In this household, Fen is reduced to nothing more than a sexual servant and a blood bank.

The fire of her rebellion is ignited in an act of self-mutilation: she burns her smooth arms "near to the bone" rendering them "scarred thick for good" (78). By destroying this asset of exploitation, she reclaims agency over her own flesh and bodily autonomy, defying patriarchal objectification. Her scars are not merely physical wounds; they are engravings of resilience and fight. This experience left a deep mark on Fen both literally and figuratively. Her rebellion culminates during her encounter with Mama Gentille, after almost 7 years since the incident. Fen's refusal to let Baby Girl have the same fate, forces her to fight against the shackles of the oppressive system that once controlled her. "She ain't gonna die here. Ain't gonna be one of Mama's babies, sold for blood and sex and magic, any more than I am" (91). She declares before

fleeing with Baby Girl in her arms, despite her struggle to remain conscious under Mama Gentille's spell.

Fen's confrontations with Davis and Mama Gentille cannot be isolated from the larger system of structural violence and ecological racism that governs the post-apocalyptic Delta. It all started in 2005 with Hurricanes Katrina and Rita that "break pieces off the land like eating cake". Then Isaiah hit, followed by Lorenzo, Olga, Laura, Paloma, and finally, Jesus in 2019. However, after this series of catastrophic events, other mental and physical health issues came, taking New Orleans by another storm. "Then came the Fever. And the Quarantine" (Smith 12). In the aftermath of the quarantine declaration, a wall has been built to further isolate the Delta region. The quarantine wall holds an important symbolic role in the novel. Smith uses it to symbolize the U.S. government's abandonment of Orleans. Resulting in systemic neglect and environmental desolation of poor black communities living in this region. The rusty steel, and the "vines eating at the wall like acid" (243), mirror the erosion of institutional care. The quarantine imposed on the Gulf Coast by the government exemplifies what Rob Nixon terms "slow violence": invisible violence of delayed destruction that spreads over time and space, an "attritional violence" that happens slowly and is usually not considered violence at all (13).

The wall in this context represents both physical and ideological barriers leading to the slow, cumulative harm of the Delta region. Since the wall isn't merely a physical structure, it acts as a systemic tool that neglects and marginalizes communities over time, enabling the erosion of infrastructure, healthcare, and basic human needs. Therefore, the wall represents a symbol of "slow violence." However, its structural visibility challenges Nixon's focus on "invisibility." Thus, Smith's work reconfigures slow violence as not always hidden, but rather as a possible spectacle of abandonment for the poor.

Orleans' environmental collapse—flooded streets, rotting buildings, and illnesses—is not natural but engineered. Upon reading the Declaration of Quarantine:

> For the safety of the population at large, we deem it advisable to seal off all storm-affected areas of the Gulf Coast region. No citizens or personnel will be allowed to cross the border without blood testing for Delta Fever. This is an epidemic of proportions we have not witnessed since the Spanish Influenza of 1918. The Quarantine will be reevaluated as the disease runs its course and we make progress toward treatment and a cure. Until then, all borders will be sealed (Smith 13).

One might assume at a first glance that the government was truly determined to find a solution for the fever, however, Smith's passages throughout the novel imply otherwise. In one crucial scene, at the Institute of Post-Separation Studies in Orleans. Daniel—a scientist from the Outer States—discovers the real objective of the institution, which he had believed was trying to find a cure. Fen clarifies: "They ain't working on a cure here, Daniel. Orleans just a lab to them. We ain't people, we rats" (158). With her assertion that the studies were about the tribes instead of a possible cure, Fen distorts the illusion of governmental care. With the quarantine, targeting regions with mostly African American populations alongside "immigrants who came here for job rebuilding since the Government been promising work" for them (Smith 132). It is possible to conclude that this separation is racially motivated.

Ultimately, since women are subjected to numerous forms of oppressions, "black women are the victims of what is termed 'triple oppression'—racial oppression, class oppression and gender oppression" (Lockett qtd in. Erwing 20). Fen's sacrifice must be contextualized within the systemic neglect that defines Orleans. The wall, surrounded by soldiers, reinforces the existential segregation between the white community (Outer States' residents) and the African

Americans (Orleans' survivors). The military's indifference to Fen's existence reflects the view of black bodies as threats to be neutralized, rather than lives to be preserved.

Thus, her sacrifice transcends mere tragedy. It becomes a rebuttal to "slow violence" itself, and to the racial oppression that structured her very struggles. Fen's death, though violent, resists erasure by ensuring Baby Girl's survival—a future beyond the wall. For as she uses Daniel to ensure her baby's life outside this sinister land, she shapes the trajectory of future generations of black women, a trajectory in which they live on par with their white counterparts. Ultimately, she sows seeds of hope in the ruins of a broken world—reconfiguring the possibilities of "black motherhood", and in doing so, paving the way for a better future.

2. Through Storms and Within Trees

2.1. A Beacon of Resilience: Esch's Maternal Role and Nature's Rhythms

On the night of the hurricane and as the storm beats its limbs upon their fragile roof, Esch revives her mother's absence through her memories and recalls how she would gather them close to her in a maternal embrace that offered protection. Noting how she had talked back to Elaine over the storm and she pulled them in the midst of it to keep them safe (Ward 193). It is not merely a recollection but a representation of motherly protectiveness, that despite the destructive power of the hurricane, it is confronted by her mother. The determined act of talking back to the storm—from a female to another female—reflects a profound sense of resilience, and suggests that if given the power, their mother would have commanded the very entity itself in order to shield her children. A brewing desire grows within Esch to reclaim her mother's empowering legacy; an urge that propels her to weigh the possibility of having the same resilience and nurturance her mother had. It is no longer about her own survival, but about protecting her child and surviving for it.

> The secret that is no longer a secret in my body: will I keep it safe? If I could speak to this storm, spell it harmless like Medea, would this baby, the size of my fingernail, my pinkie fingernail, maybe, hear? Would speaking make it remember me once it is born, make it know me? Would it look at me with Manny's face… Would it reach out with its fingers, pink, and grasp? (193).

Esch's thoughts are etched to her baby, wherein she visualizes it through mythology as "a black Athena, who reaches for me. Who gives me that name as it is mine: Mama" (193). By calling it a "black Athena," Esch is altering the stereotype that often paints "black motherhood" as vulnerable and burdensome. While Athena is evoked meaningfully, Ward enriches Esch's vision of motherhood and subverts it from its common implications. Athena is a virgin goddess, born without a mother, which might seem ironic or paradoxical in the context of Esch's biological pregnancy, but it symbolizes her child as the embodiment of resilience and intelligence—qualities Athena represents. The child in return would call her "Mama" and thus grant her the maternal strength she needs to survive.

This is further strengthened when Skeetah tells her she resembles their late mother in appearance. It deeply moves Esch and allows her to see that care, nurturance, and resilience did not wither away with their mother, but it continued through her. This scene marks a personal metamorphosis that redefines Esch's identity, and her body emerges as a beacon of resilience that is capable of sustaining life in her unforgiving circumstances. As Collins asserts regarding motherhood: "Despite the obstacles and costs, it remains a symbol of hope for even the poorest Black women" (198).

Furthermore, it is worth noting that Esch's journey is intrinsically linked to the natural world surrounding her. For instance, as the storm intensifies, China starts barking and moving

around frantically, as if sensing catastrophe before it strikes. Just as they observe her anxious behavior, a tree falls on their roof and leaves a gaping hole in their father's room—allowing the hurricane to slither through, "Skeetah reaches out to grab her, to stop her from curling and running and there is a loud, deafening boom. When it comes, China leaps from Skeetah's bed and rushes to the door as if she would rip the wood to splinters with her teeth" (Ward 197). Though Skeetah tries to apprehend her, only Esch understands that China's instinctual responses to danger were right and that "she knew… About the tree" (197-98). Her actions are driven by an inherent natural desire to safeguard her environment—in this case, the house where her puppies live. Ultimately, Esch starts to understand the signals and warnings of nature and how crucial they are to her own survival. The innate desire to be connected to living things is an innate desire to overcome solastalgia by finding a connection with life processes on this earth (Wilson qtd. in Albrecht 55).

At the climax of the novel and as the hurricane unleashes its furry, the family huddles in the living room and awaits the storm to be over; completely unaware that water is seeping through the cracks of the floor and is ready to flood the house. In a moment of panic, Esch thinks she is having a miscarriage, and she expresses it in fragmented and urgent language "*Why are my shorts wet? Is it gone? Am I bleeding? Shouldn't I be cramping*?" (199). Fear of losing control over her reproductive destiny settles in Esch, this baby growing inside of her is a living testament to the injustices she has lived, and a testimony against Manny's rejection and denial. It is, after all, the reason she is adamant on surviving the storm.

Suddenly, Katrina finds its way to them and turns the Pit into a lake, Esch and her family flee to the roof and barely escape to their grandparents' house before water swallows them. As previously mentioned, Esch's pregnancy is revealed to the whole family in this stressful scene

which is ironic because she has spent the entirety of the novel concealing it. As mentioned before, her father reacts by pushing her into the water where she almost drowns. His reaction is both a culmination of anger at Esch and at his failings, and a shock due to revelation in the midst of a disaster. As she falls, it results in losing both the puppies and China that squirms out of Skeetah's embrace and jumps right after them. The relentless water carries her away, almost as if Katrina has come to reclaim and return her back to nature. China's loss in this case symbolizes the passing of maternal legacy from her to Esch.

In the immediate aftermath of the hurricane, the family seeks refuge in Big Henry's house, a friend of theirs—which is surprisingly spared the damage of the hurricane—in there, Esch and her father engage in a conversation for the first time in the novel.

> What Skeetah said. Is it true? … I nod… I shouldn't have pushed you, he says… I am quiet, feel every inhale and exhale like an explosion… Daddy breathes and stops. I am blinking quickly, a feeling like boiled water splashed over my chest, soaking up my face. I'm sorry, Daddy says. I want to say, Yes. Or I know. Or I'm sorry, too. But I squeak, small as a mouse in the room (216-17).

Surprisingly, her father's visible remorse humanizes him, and it signifies a shift from his usual uncaring and detached demeanor; it also shows in a way the strain environmental and systemic circumstances can place on familial bonds. Furthermore, the way through which Ward portrays Katrina's power is telling. The hurricane not only possesses the power to uproot the literal ground, but it has the ability to cleanse, purify and forge connections that are lost. This is evident in her father's response: "seeing him folding in on himself, soft where he had been hard, the rigid line of him broken… when we can, we need to find out…Make sure everything's okay. I nod. So nothing will go wrong" (217). Interestingly, this subsequent worry highlights how the

shock of the storm has prompted him to reconsider his abandoned duties as a father before it is too late, whereas his desire to ensure the wellbeing of both Esch and her baby stems from the trauma of losing his wife during childbirth, and clearly, he does not want it to happen with Esch.

Although Katrina has wreaked absolute havoc over the Gulf of Mississippi, Ward juxtaposes it as a destructive yet maternal archetype that prompts Esch's own maternal transformation and forces her to confront her trauma. Esch in part does not demonize Katrina or blame it but calls it mother. Because of the hurricane, she also emerges from the destruction carrying life within her. Rich emphasizes that out of a woman's body she created man and woman, and continuing existence. She was the source of vegetation, fruition and fertility therefore she spiritualized into a divine being (100). Notably, Esch embodies survival and renewal through her pregnancy, and is determined to pass down the story of Katrina and continue the legacy of her late mother, because Katrina's legacy is also her own; a story of both loss and regeneration

> Tell the story of Katrina, the mother that swept into the gulf and slaughtered. Her chariot was a storm so great and black the Greeks would say it was harnessed to dragons. She was the murderous mother who cut us to the bone but left us alive, left us naked and bewildered as wrinkled newborn babies… Katrina is the mother we will remember until the next mother with large, merciless hands, committed to blood, comes (Ward 224).

2.2. Reconnecting with Nature as an act of Defiance

Like other ecofeminists, Susan Griffin stresses the importance of acknowledging our relationship with nature. She states: "We are afraid to remember what we, in our bodies and in our feelings, still know, but what, in our fragmented, civilized consciousness, we have been

persuaded to forget." She reveals that like the rivers we want to control or the trees we ruin, we are nature (qtd.in Ewing 13).

Fen's journey, like the storms reshaping New Orleans—rendering it "a necropolis, a city of the dead" (Smith 80) where "The New in New Orleans had been dropped after the second chain of storms" (56)—resonates with this particular ethos of Griffin. Her relationship with nature is foreshadowed during one of the earliest scenes of the novel. A scene Where Fen's mentor goes into labor during an ambush but dies in the process after delivering the infant. Leaving Fen with the lifeless corpse of her chieftain and caretaker. Using bricks made of clay cut "from the edge of the stream" (54), Fen proceeds to seal the deceased mother inside a tree, symbolizing the interconnection between women and nature. This symbolism further resonates with many mythological and folkloric tales, particularly those of Greek and Slavic traditions. Akin to a Greek Dryad (who inhabits trees and assumes the appearance of a charming woman) and its Slavic counterpart, the Mavka—both of whom have an existence tied to the trees they are destined to protect—Lydia is symbolically transformed into a guardian of the natural world, and her ritualistic burial becomes an act of ecological restoration. One that embodies the "positive" attempt to alleviate solastalgia (Albrecht 54).

Even though the marking on her grave "One Female O Positive" (Smith 54) reduces Lydia to nothing more than her blood type—a critique of the social collapse of the society she lives in, manifested through the tribal divisions that treat humans as nothing more than a blood vessel, consequently commodifying women and mothers in the process. The burial itself that merged Lydia with the tree symbolizes resistance against the environmental degradation caused by systemic neglect and exploitation; it alludes to repairing the severed bond between humanity and nature. For, just as the Dryad withers away if her tree withers, humanity too perishes when

disconnected from ecological stewardship. Therefore, in this context, the Dryad's fate portrays a poetic symbolism that illuminates the interconnectedness of nature's ecosystems, and the consequences of disrupting those connections.

This symbolic merging of woman and tree is also reminiscent of the 20th-century environmental movement in India. According to Shiva, "in the mountain regions of the Himalaya, the women of Garhwal started to protect their forests from commercial exploitation even at the cost of their lives, by starting the famous Chipko movement, embracing the living trees as their protectors" (113). As stated in the Britannica Encyclopedia, Chipko is a Hindi word that means "to hug or to cling to." By hugging the trees to prevent corporate deforestation, these women powerfully declared that trees are not just economic assets but vital resources to the continuity of life itself. Thus, with Fen's burial of Lydia inside a tree, Smith reimagines resilience through interconnecting with nature, advocating that women's dignity cannot be severed from that of the nature itself.

Fen's reconnection with nature is most vividly illustrated when she enters a "glade" in the swamp, marking a stark shift in the novel's narration tone. Prior to this scene, Fen's voice is urgent and is driven by the constant pressure of survival in a landscape shaped by decay and collapse. Her thoughts are restless; her body, taut, "I be tired of running and hiding, tired of just trying to survive" (Smith 231). Yet as she steps into the heart of the wetland, the prose transforms into a poetic meditation. Smith's narration becomes therefore saturated with sensory details, immersing the reader in Fen's internal shift:

> Then I walk into the swamp and the trees be so tall, it like a cathedral from a photograph, high arches, cool and deep and green. The water be warmer than it look. It feel good to the touch, so I step in, lower and lower, ignoring the moss and the green scum on the

> surface. I drag my hands behind me and I start to feel so light …WATER LILIES AND SWAMP FLOWERS WRAP around me…watching the sun through the trees. It beautiful, the mist lifting like the veil of a nun, trees dappled in shadow and light even as the sky grow cloudy. Peaceful. The most peace I ever found in Orleans (232- 35).

This hymn-like description portrays baptism, a symbol of resurrection and rebirth. The swamp glade, described as a "cathedral" with "high arches," becomes a sacred place where Fen takes refuge. Just as Fen shields Baby Girl from the hunters' violence, the swamp shields her from the world's brutality. Fen's baptism is framed as both a surrender and a defiance. She lets herself get carried down the stream, completely succumbing to the flow of the swamp. However, in this tender moment of reuniting with nature, she finds herself defying patriarchy's commodification of her body and critiquing the blood-tribe system, not allowing anyone or anything but nature to get hold of her, asserting that her body is not a resource to exploit, but rather, a living entity entwined with mother earth. Mirroring the paradoxical state of Fen, the land around her is deteriorating, what was once a site of her childhood where her "Mama had a hammock tied between these two trees on sunny days in the middle of summer" (231), has now been claimed by the marsh, its pumps rusted, and its walls burnt. Yet this deterioration is not a sign of decay but that of resilience. The swamp is "so alive," its "gators and foxes" (231) thrive despite— or because of— human absence, and "Orleans is healing herself" (202).

Ecofeminism asserts that both nature and women are devalued through patriarchal dualisms—human/nature, man/woman—that position them as inferior or subordinate. In Orleans, the reconnection between women and nature forms a powerful alliance, enabling both to resist and survive against patriarchal oppression and ecological destruction. Thus, Fen's baptism, which parallels her earlier ritual of burying Lydia in a tree, signifies the power and defiance

resulting from merging with the ecosystem, the ecosystem that neither the institutional neglect nor the blood tribes have been able to destroy. This idea resonates with Vandana Shiva's assertion that "women and nature are intimately related, and their domination and liberation similarly linked" (93), reinforcing the notion that the survival and empowerment of both are interconnected within the ecofeminist framework.

3. Not This Earth's Quiet Daughter

3.1. Challenging Expectations through Motherhood

For *Salvage the Bones*, Esch has stumbled through motherhood because of a one-sided relationship with Manny. Ward crafts a maternal journey for her that resists idealization because it is surrounded by many obstacles ranging from poverty to patriarchal and systemic oppression. Similar to Fen, her journey deviates from the norm that motherhood is usually planned, ideal and stable and it emerges as the product of survival and resilience that defies all odds. Andrea O'Reilly argues that resistant mothering, whether articulated against white supremacy or patriarchal motherhood, challenges the dominant discourse of motherhood that renders mothering as just private and emotional. She further elaborates that African American motherhood allows mothers "to develop a belief in their own empowerment [while] providing a base for self- actualization" (118).

Esch challenges gender expectations by confronting the figure that represents patriarchy itself: Manny. When Manny denies the paternity of his child in an antagonizing manner, Esch in a moment of blinding rage uses violence in order to resist his harsh patriarchy and objectification,

> "I am on him like China… I am slapping him, over and over, my hands a flurry, a black blur…I loved you! I hit his Adam's apple with the V where my thumb and pointer finger

cross. He chokes. I loved you! This is Medea wielding the knife. This is Medea cutting… leave pink scratches that turn red, fill with blood" (180).

In this powerful scene, Esch's act of resisting Manny challenges societal and patriarchal notions that regard motherhood as a weakness and a setback. Ward alludes to China and Medea, characters with whom Esch implicitly identifies, and she combines the savage fierce nature of China and the brutal strength of Medea to rupture the internalized male dominance and the inferiority she has endured throughout the novel. Her intense reaction mirrors China and Kilo's fight. Ward in this essence subverts the dominant dualistic narrative that Plumwood emphasizes in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, of categorizing "feminine" traits (the emotional, passionate primitive, natural, irrational, female) as inferior to masculine and rational traits (19-43). This outburst stands as reclamation of her objectified body, and through this passage Esch shows that wildness is a rational response to the relentless oppression imposed by patriarchy upon black women.

Esch's insistence on life manifests through claiming her identity as a mother and surviving the storm, showing that motherhood is not a submission, but is rather a firm standpoint against patriarchal and systemic oppression. Katrina may have swallowed homes, trees, and even China, but it ultimately tipped the balances with her uncontained and uncontrollable strength, and has cleared her sight to see things she was in denial of, "Many learned who I was and disowned me, where Skeetah fought for me… and suddenly there is a great split between now and then," (Ward 221).

Esch in this way breaks from a past characterized by patriarchal and systemic injustice; she steps away from a reality that narrows down her existence to a mere object and moves towards a future written by her own terms and conditions.

Much like Esch, Fen's motherhood was neither planned nor stable. Both characters are thrust into maternal roles shaped by survival rather than premeditated choice. Fen assumes guardianship of her dead chieftain's infant in a similarly damaged world. Unlike the conventional ideal of biologically grounded motherhood, Fen's guardianship is shaped by unforeseen circumstances and non-biological kinship. Her relationship with the infant gets continuously stronger with each chapter. Fen's statement that was once "Lydia's baby" (Smith 91), during the initial chapters, changed into "my Baby Girl" (236) by the latest lines. This emotional transformation—illustrated by reclaiming Baby Girl as her own— joined with Fen's declaration of motherhood: "I look down at Baby Girl dozing in my arms and wonder if being a baby mama making me soft" (188), affirms the profound bond she has with the child. Thus, she challenges reductive definitions of family and asserts that kinship transcends blood ties.

Fen's most radical act of challenging expectations occurs during a confrontation with Father John in the Super Saver Chapel. This patriarchal figure who utilizes his religious image and good reputation to exploit Fen's trust, straps Baby Girl to an altar, seeking to extract her "pure" blood to cleanse himself of the Delta Fever's scars—a delusional purification ritual where he sings "I've been forgiven," and "this child will cleanse me" (238). After demolishing the pretense of his righteousness, Fen, uses violence while in a state that appears almost animalistic, "clothes streaming with mud, leaves twisted in her hair like a madwoman" (Smith 239). Her appearance mirrors the chaotic intensity of her defiance and rage as she tackles the priest to the ground. However, Fen takes a more fatal turn as she escalates her defiance to lethal extremes—staking the priest to the heart with his own sharp instruments.

By killing Father John, Fen also dismantles the stereotypes that paint mothers as gentle and meek. And as she rejects this passive role assigned to women in patriarchal societies, she

contests the narrative of female vulnerability and maternal weakness. Fen's fearless attitude leads her to go even further by burning the chapel and leaving the priest's body to the flames. With this radical act, she enacts a symbolic cleansing, transforming the site of trauma into one of fierce liberation.

3.2. Differences in Survival Strategies and Responses to Environmental Crises

Survival in *Salvage the Bones* extends beyond mere physical endurance; it goes beyond to a reclaiming of identity and agency. Survival is the force pulling Esch to resist environmental and systemic injustices and realize her potential as a mother. For starters, the Batistes' familiarity and generational knowledge about the reoccurring hurricanes of the Mississippi Gulf strengthens their preparedness as they attempt to proof their house from destruction. From boarding up the windows, filling up the bathtub to stockpiling food, these are all measures common to the Batiste's and to other families in Bois Sauvage as well. They are also echoes of solastalgia expressed in their desire to sustain their only source of safety and solace (Albrecht 45). Although these methods are not effective in the face of Katrina, they provide them with enough time to escape and lower their risk of drowning and potential death.

The nature of the Pit also plays a crucial role in their survival. Esch listens attentively to signals and cues from nature and does not take them for granted. The increasing rush of the wind and the changing temperature as well as the movement of animals do not go unnoticed by her; they help her mold a response crucial to her survival. Furthermore, during their escape through the roof, a beacon of hope glimmers when Skeetah discovers that their grandparents' house is situated on an unnoticed hill. This discovery provides them with a safe refuge before the hurricane completely swallows them. Mother Lizbeth's property—which their mother had

inherited—stands as a reminder of these deceased female figures and becomes a lifeline during the storm. Even after death, traces of motherhood remain alive and continue to resist and protect.

Furthermore, kinship and sibling bond are central to Esch's survival. With the death of their mother and an absent father, they work as one to ensure their safety and wellbeing. When Esch almost drowns, it is Skeetah who dives right in and saves her from Katrina's claws. His vigilance and protectiveness towards his sister contrasts once again with Manny's. This action thus offers an alternative model of masculinity that rejects dominance and control, and it emphasizes the significance of sibling connection and cooperation in times of crises.

After the water dries and the skies clear up, Big Henry drives Esch, Randall, and Junior to the upper part of town where they are shocked to see the obliteration Katrina had inflicted. The destruction instills in them a poignant solastalgia, the land clearing, the sky becoming vast, and building demolition causes them profound distress. However, despite the wreckage, they stumble across what used to be the liquor store and they salvage a few bottles to take home.

Esch for instance, collects glass shards and stones, intending on showing them to Skeetah to take his mind off of losing china. In this way, she transforms her traumatic experience into a survival narrative by salvaging physical fragments and assigning meaning to them. It is also a way of lifting the distress of Katrina by creating solace and comfort from the remnants of disaster. This act of storytelling that is similar to her mother's Hurricane Camille tale, it is not just a strategy of processing the destruction, but it helps facilitating healing and preserves her experiences for future reflection. By following in the footsteps of her late mother and how she endured till her last moments, Esch finds a thread of hope and survival.

When it comes to *Orleans*, Smith repeatedly puts Fen in life-threatening situations from tribal ambushes to literal hunting hounds, and even weapon battles. She always seems ready to

fight and survive. Similar to Esch, whose survival relies on generational knowledge of hurricanes, Fen's survival strategy is shaped by her father's teachings on tactical awareness: "Look around you, Fen, know your situation. Then identify your assets. Anything that can help you escape" (Smith 91). Her internal monologue reveals a calculated, pragmatic mindset, where methodical decision-making becomes essential to survival. For instance, the escape plan that she formulates to flee the blood farm and save her baby conceptualizes this approach:

> The first rule of escape: Assess your situation. We in a room; but a room within a room…They walked us through the main building when they brought us in here…The second rule of escape: Assess your assets. I got two legs and two arms that work... They took the chains off when they threw us in here. I got a half-empty bottle of baby formula…Then a cough come from the other side of the room and I remember I got one other thing. I got the leper… and I think maybe I can use him like a weapon (92).

Fen's practice of assessment echoes that of what Sara Ruddick terms "maternal thinking." In her book Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace, Ruddick claims that the act of mothering demands cognitive engagement; "out of this need for thought-fullness, a distinctive discipline emerges" (24). She explains:

> I speak about a mother's thought —the intellectual capacities she develops, the judgements she makes, the metaphysical attitudes she assumes, the values she affirms. Like a scientist writing up her experiment, a critic poring over a text, or a historian assessing documents, a mother caring for her children engages in a discipline. She asks certain questions-those relevant to her aims-rather than others (42).

Just like the scientist, Fen constantly analyses the situations around her methodically to adapt her strategies. She weighs danger, evaluates threats, and prioritizes actions to provide

protection for herself and for those she cares for. This mirrors Ruddick's claim that maternal work is not passive caregiving, but rather an active "discipline" that requires constant critical thinking.

Fen's second strategy is also rooted in something equally powerful: hope, specifically the hope to secure a safer future for her child. Fen's longing for this future fuels her determination to survive whatever Orleans throws her way from social and ecological challenges. It becomes a compass, guiding her through the ravaged lands and hostile territories. In a rare moment of vulnerability, she muses to Daniel about the child's potential to experience a world beyond the walls of Orleans. When Daniel describes a Big Mac, she states: "Maybe Baby Girl be having her first Big Mac for me one day" (127), as she gazes upon the baby nestled tenderly within her embrace. Although both of Esch and Fen derive strength from familiar bonds, Fen's embodiment of the "othermother" archetype that was explained in the aforementioned chapter, emerges as a survival strategy.

As she takes the role of Baby Girl's caretaker, she develops nurturing as a site of power, for Black feminists attribute the creation of new paradigms of social transformation to this particular practice of other mothering (James qtd. in O'Reilly 24), rendering black motherhood a political action. "Guardians of the generations" is the term used to describe Black mothers and grandmothers. Throughout history, Black mothers have been tasked with educating, raising social and political consciousness, and providing their children and the youngsters in their communities with unconditional love, care, socialization, and values, state Bernard and Bernard (qtd. in O'Reilly 25). So, with Fen being an "othermother," she eventually becomes a force that keeps social activism alive in marginalized communities. Thus, her role in itself acts as tool to resist systemic oppression, and to ensure the survival of future generations.

Conclusion

Ward and Smith forge a profound and complex narrative that amplifies the immense maternal strength embodied in Esch and Fen. This chapter has explored the role of maternal identity and relationship with nature as banners of resistance against the dehumanizing attempts carried out by patriarchal and systemic oppression. Esch's journey is lived under the inexorable nature of Hurricane Katrina and characterized by the lack of traditional support systems; this had compelled her to seek out unconventional ways to understand her motherhood as a source of strength. Fen's care and sacrifice for Baby Girl coupled with her resilience and maternal fierceness enable her to navigate a brutal, post-apocalyptic world where survival is never assured. The novels reimagine motherhood as a dynamic and an unapologetic force of nature, wherein Esch and Fen's resilience is portrayed with active tactics of defiance rather than passive endurance.

General Conclusion

This dissertation has aimed to examine the way *Salvage the Bones* by Jesmyn Ward and *Orleans* by Sherri L. Smith redefine maternal identities as a vital force of ecofeminist resilience in the face of environmental trauma and patriarchal oppression. By providing a close reading through Ecofeminist context, this research invites readers to consider the myriad ways in which maternal bonds can be formed and sustained, even when their traditional journeys have been disrupted by external forces. The research has also shed light on the way in which these novels challenge conventional narratives of resilience by redefining it through eco-maternal resistance.

Additionally, the research has implemented an environmentally philosophical concept of solastalgia, which assists in the process of grounding the emotional burden resulting from environmental degradation. The aim of incorporating this concept is to validate the lived experiences of environmental trauma, particularly in marginalized communities. Consequently, it raises awareness about environmental injustices enforced by systems designed to marginalize and erase.

By conducting a comparative analysis of *Salvage the Bones* and *Orleans*, the research has advocated for the inclusion of more voices from women in marginalized, climate-vulnerable communities. The comparison has also provided broader insights about maternal identities beyond biological bonds, bridging the differences between both and celebrating the intrinsic value of nurturing shared among women.

Moreover, the research has provided insights on the profound relationship between nature and mothers, offering a transformative perspective to understand the intersection of caregiving, agency, and ecological kinship. By situating nature as an active ally rather than a passive setting,

the research has highlighted the need for ecological stewardship in order to ensure survival and foster resilience within hostile environments.

The research's limitations arise in the form of time and source restrictions. The research also depends on in-depth textual analysis—which is subjective—and even though each interpretation is supported by evidence, different readers may interpret the same texts in different ways. Other future research could expand on this study by incorporating empirical data of firsthand experiences from women facing environmental challenges to ground literary analysis in lived experiences.

Ultimately, in a world intent on silencing voices from the margin, literature forges a portal through which these voices are amplified, allowing us to glance into the world of wounded communities and scarred landscapes. Ward and Smith construct narratives in which their protagonists do not merely survive, but actively resist, rebuild, and reimagine their realities. Their narratives reject the violent logic of exploitation and frames nature as a living entity. And in doing so, they invite us to reflect on this haunting quote: "You ask me to plough the ground: shall I take a knife and tear my mother's bosom?" (Smohalla qtd. In Shiva 60).

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