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Ecofeminist Resistance, Patriarchy, and Ethical Justice in Olga Tokarczuk's *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*

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ABSTRACT

Ecofeminism, as a critical and ethical framework, examines the interconnected oppression of women, nature, and non-human life within patriarchal and capitalist systems. Olga Tokarczuk's *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*(2009; trans. 2018) offers a compelling literary space to explore ecofeminist resistance through its unconventional protagonist, Janina Duszejko—an aging, marginalized woman who challenges institutional authority, patriarchal violence, and anthropocentric morality. This paper undertakes an ecofeminist reading of Tokarczuk's novel by situating it within key ecofeminist theories articulated by thinkers such as Françoise d'Eaubonne, Carolyn Merchant, Vandana Shiva, Karen J. Warren, Val Plumwood, and Greta Gaard. It argues that Janina's outsiderhood—shaped by her gender, age, ethical worldview, and ecological consciousness—functions as a radical critique of patriarchal dominance over women, animals, and nature. The study examines how patriarchal institutions such as the law, religion, hunting culture, and land ownership perpetuate ecological violence and silence dissenting female voices. Janina's empathy toward animals, her rejection of hunting, and her belief in cosmic justice challenge human exceptionalism and foreground an ethics of care rooted in interconnectedness. Tokarczuk's narrative destabilizes conventional

binaries—human/animal, reason/emotion, law/justice—by privileging alternative epistemologies such as astrology and moral intuition, which are often dismissed as irrational within patriarchal discourse. The novel also interrogates ageism and the erasure of older women, presenting Janina as a feminist figure who resists invisibility and asserts moral agency. By reading *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* through an ecofeminist lens, this paper demonstrates how Tokarczuk critiques the violent logic of patriarchy while envisioning an alternative ethical order grounded in ecological balance, compassion, and justice beyond human-centered legal systems. The novel ultimately emerges as a powerful literary articulation of ecofeminist resistance, urging a reimagining of justice that includes women, animals, and the natural world.

Ecofeminism is a philosophical, political, and ethical movement that exposes the structural links between the domination of women and the exploitation of nature. Coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne in *Le Féminismeou la Mort*(1974), the term highlights how patriarchal systems of power rely on hierarchical thinking that legitimizes control over both women and the natural world. D'Eaubonne argues that ecological crises cannot be resolved without dismantling patriarchal models of domination, asserting that "there can be no liberation for women and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental relationships are based on domination" (32). Since its inception, ecofeminism has evolved into an intersectional framework that addresses gender, class, race, species, and colonialism as interconnected axes of oppression.

Literature has emerged as a powerful site for ecofeminist critique, offering imaginative spaces to challenge dominant narratives of progress, rationality, and human supremacy. Olga Tokarczuk's *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*occupies a significant position within this tradition. Set in a remote Polish village, the novel centers on Janina Duszejko, an elderly woman who opposes hunting, empathizes deeply with animals, and questions institutional authority. Her marginalization—due to her age, gender, and unconventional beliefs—mirrors the silencing of ecofeminist voices within patriarchal societies.

This paper argues that Janina's outsider status enables a radical ecofeminist critique of patriarchy, anthropocentrism, and institutionalized violence. By examining her resistance to hunting culture, legal

indifference, religious sanctioning of animal cruelty, and capitalist land ownership, the study foregrounds Tokarczuk's ethical vision of justice that transcends human-centered law

Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature* (1980) provides a crucial historical foundation for ecofeminist thought. Merchant traces how the Scientific Revolution transformed nature from a living organism into a machine, thereby legitimizing its exploitation alongside the marginalization of women. She observes that this mechanistic worldview sanctioned domination, replacing reciprocal relationships with extractive practices (193). Merchant's call for a "partnership ethic" between humans and nature resonates strongly with Tokarczuk's narrative, where Janina envisions coexistence rather than control.

Similarly, Karen J. Warren emphasizes that ecofeminism exposes "the logic of domination" that underpins both sexism and environmental degradation (27). This logic constructs hierarchical binaries—man/woman, human/animal, culture/nature—where the first term is privileged over the second. Tokarczuk's novel systematically destabilizes these binaries by granting moral agency to animals and epistemic authority to a marginalized woman.

Vandana Shiva extends ecofeminist critique to capitalist exploitation, arguing that patriarchal systems commodify both women and nature in the name of development. Hunting, in this context, becomes a symbolic enactment of masculine domination. Janina's rejection of hunting as "killing for fun" (*Drive Your Plow* 78) aligns with Shiva's critique of violence normalized by patriarchal culture.

Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature* (1980) offers one of the most influential historical foundations for ecofeminist thought by tracing how Western modernity reconfigured humanity's relationship with the natural world. Merchant demonstrates that prior to the Scientific Revolution, nature was largely understood through an organic worldview, imagined as a living, nurturing entity with which humans shared reciprocal bonds. However, with the rise of mechanistic science in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, nature was reconceptualised as inert matter—a machine to be mastered, dissected, and controlled. This epistemic shift, Merchant argues, legitimised extractive practices and sanctioned widespread environmental exploitation, while simultaneously reinforcing the subordination of women, who were culturally associated with nature, fertility, and embodiment. As she notes, the mechanistic worldview "sanctioned the domination of both women and nature" by replacing ethical reciprocity with control and profit-driven rationality (193). This historical insight is crucial to understanding how ecological destruction and gender oppression emerged not as parallel phenomena but as mutually reinforcing processes.

Merchant's critique does not remain confined to historical diagnosis; it also gestures towards an ethical alternative. Her call for a "partnership ethic" urges a reimagining of human relationships with the natural world based on cooperation, care, and mutual respect rather than domination. Such an ethic challenges the Enlightenment legacy of mastery and instead promotes ecological responsibility grounded in interdependence. This vision resonates powerfully with Olga Tokarczuk's *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, where Janina Duszejko consistently rejects the idea of nature as a resource to be exploited. Janina's worldview privileges coexistence over control, empathy over ownership, and moral accountability over institutional authority. Her refusal to accept hunting as a legitimate cultural practice echoes Merchant's critique of mechanistic rationality, revealing how modern societies continue to reproduce violent relationships with the natural world under the guise of tradition, law, or progress.

Building upon Merchant's historical framework, Karen J. Warren further refines ecofeminist critique by identifying what she terms the "logic of domination"—a conceptual structure that justifies oppression through hierarchical binaries (27). According to Warren, patriarchal culture organises reality through oppositional pairs such as man/woman, human/animal, culture/nature, reason/emotion, where the first term is valued and the second devalued. These binaries are not neutral distinctions but ideological tools that normalise inequality and render domination morally acceptable. Tokarczuk's novel systematically destabilises this logic by unsettling each of these hierarchies. Animals are granted moral presence, emotions, and agency, while human institutions appear ethically hollow and indifferent. Similarly, epistemic authority is transferred from male-dominated systems of law, science, and religion to a marginalised woman whose knowledge is grounded in care, observation, and intuition.

Vandana Shiva extends ecofeminist critique into the realm of capitalist development, arguing that patriarchal economic systems commodify both women and nature in the name of growth and progress. In Shiva's analysis, violence against ecosystems is inseparable from the exploitation of vulnerable bodies, particularly those of women and indigenous communities. Within this framework, hunting emerges as a symbolic enactment of masculine domination—a practice that transforms living beings into trophies, entertainment, or proof of power. Janina's condemnation of hunting as "killing for fun" (*Drive Your Plow* 78) directly aligns with Shiva's critique of patriarchal violence normalised through cultural rituals. Her resistance exposes hunting not as a benign tradition but as an ethical failure rooted in entitlement and anthropocentrism.

Janina's marginalisation operates across multiple axes: she is an older woman, unmarried, childless, physically frail, and openly critical of male authority. In the conservative rural setting of the novel, these

attributes render her invisible, suspect, or irrational. Her observation that "No one listens to old women" (*Drive Your Plow* 87) encapsulates the intersection of ageism and sexism that structures her exclusion. Simone de Beauvoir's insight that women are socially devalued once they no longer fulfil patriarchal ideals of beauty, sexuality, or reproductive usefulness is particularly relevant here (*The Second Sex* 271). Tokarczuk foregrounds this erasure to critique a society that measures women's worth through utility rather than ethical agency.

Crucially, Tokarczuk does not portray Janina's outsider status as a deficiency; instead, it becomes the source of her moral clarity. By positioning Janina as the ethical centre of the narrative, the novel reclaims marginality as resistance. Her refusal to conform to prescribed gender roles, her distrust of institutional authority, and her commitment to animal life challenge dominant power structures that depend on silence and compliance. As Ewa Kraskowska observes, women who adopt alternative epistemologies are frequently dismissed as irrational not because their knowledge lacks coherence, but because it threatens hegemonic systems of meaning (78). Janina's belief in astrology exemplifies this challenge. While ridiculed by others, astrology functions in the novel as a counter-epistemology that resists Enlightenment rationalism and affirms interconnectedness, cyclicality, and moral order beyond human law.

Through Janina Duszejko, Tokarczuk thus enacts an ecofeminist critique that brings together historical consciousness, ethical resistance, and feminist epistemology. Janina's character embodies a sustained refusal of domination—over women, animals, and the natural world—by rejecting the hierarchical logic that privileges human authority, masculine power, and institutional control. Instead of accepting the normative structures that regulate her rural community, Janina articulates an alternative moral vision grounded in care, attentiveness, and ecological responsibility. Her ethics are not abstract or theoretical; they are lived through everyday acts of resistance, empathy toward animals, and her unwavering insistence on justice beyond legality.

The novel exposes with sharp clarity how social and legal institutions reinforce ecological and gender injustice by prioritising human authority over ethical responsibility. Janina's repeated attempts to draw attention to the systematic killing and abuse of animals are consistently dismissed by the police, who refuse to recognise animal suffering as morally significant. The officer's remark, "We're dealing with a murder investigation, not a couple of dead animals" (*Drive Your Plow* 129), exemplifies the anthropocentric logic that underpins modern legal systems. Such responses reflect what Greta Gaard identifies as institutional complicity in sustaining patriarchal exploitation, where state structures align

themselves with dominant power interests while silencing feminist and ecological concerns (67). By refusing to treat animal death as meaningful, the law reproduces a hierarchy that devalues non-human life and marginalises those—often women—who speak on its behalf.

Religion, too, emerges as a powerful ideological force that legitimises domination and naturalises violence. Father Rustle's theological defence of hunting relies on a rigid hierarchical worldview in which animals are positioned as inferior beings created solely to serve human needs. His assertion that animals occupy a "lower rank" in divine order (*Drive Your Plow* 175) reveals how religious authority can be mobilised to justify ecological harm and silence ethical dissent. Tokarczuk's portrayal of Father Rustle does not reject spirituality outright; rather, it critiques patriarchal interpretations of religion that sanctify domination and deny moral consideration to non-human life. Janina's quiet defiance of such doctrine exposes the ethical limitations of belief systems that prioritise obedience over compassion.

Similarly, Duke, the local landowner, represents the intersection of patriarchy and capitalism, viewing land not as a living ecosystem but as private property to be owned, controlled, and exploited. His declaration—"The land is mine" (*Drive Your Plow* 122)—echoes the logic of ownership that Carolyn Merchant critiques in *The Death of Nature*, where nature is transformed into a commodity through masculine notions of mastery and possession (112). Duke's worldview exemplifies how capitalist patriarchy reduces both land and life to resources, erasing relationships of care and responsibility. In contrast, Janina's approach to land and animals emphasises coexistence, stewardship, and moral accountability, exposing the ethical impoverishment of ownership-based relationships with nature.

Janina's belief in cosmic justice further destabilises anthropocentric legal frameworks by proposing a moral order that exceeds human institutions. Her interpretation of the hunters' deaths as nature's retribution—"It was the animals who took revenge" (*Drive Your Plow* 121)—introduces a radically non-human-centred vision of justice. While this perspective is ethically unsettling and morally ambiguous, it foregrounds accountability in a world where legal systems repeatedly fail to address ecological violence. Eliza Rose's description of Janina's stance as an "anarchic ethics" aptly captures her refusal to recognise the legitimacy of institutions complicit in harm (111). Janina does not seek chaos; rather, she exposes the violence embedded within supposedly orderly systems of law and governance.

Importantly, Tokarczuk does not glorify violence or present Janina's vigilantism as a simple moral solution. Instead, the novel invites readers to confront uncomfortable questions about justice, responsibility, and the limits of law. Janina's actions emerge from frustration with systems that protect perpetrators—hunters, landowners, officials—while dismissing ethical protest as madness or hysteria.

Her vigilantism thus functions as a critique of patriarchal justice systems that prioritise authority over ethics and legality over compassion. The novel insists that when institutions refuse to acknowledge ecological harm, moral resistance inevitably takes unconventional and troubling forms.

Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead ultimately emerges as a powerful ecofeminist text that challenges patriarchal domination, human exceptionalism, and institutional violence. Through Janina Duszejko, Tokarczuk reclaims the marginalised figure of the ageing woman as a profound ethical agent capable of articulating an alternative vision of justice rooted in care, interconnectedness, and ecological balance. Janina's age, gender, and outsider status—far from disqualifying her—enable her to see what dominant structures refuse to acknowledge.

By dismantling hierarchical binaries and foregrounding non-human life, the novel aligns closely with ecofeminist calls for systemic transformation. It urges readers to rethink justice not as a human-centred legal construct, but as an inclusive ethical framework that recognises the intrinsic value of women, animals, and the natural world. In doing so, Tokarczuk offers not a utopian resolution, but a deeply unsettling and necessary challenge to the moral foundations of modern society.

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