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Women Don't Speak, the Land Remembers: Gender and Ecological Loss in *The Orchard Keeper*

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Abstract

The Orchard Keeper, published in 1965 by Cormac McCarthy, is frequently interpreted as a regional bildungsroman or as a story about Appalachian outlawry. It provides an interesting yet under-researched intersection of gendered silence, ecological decline, and environmental injustice. The paper posits that the landscape of the novel, especially the contaminated spray-pit, the rotting orchard and the militarised government tank, serve as archival places which recalls what its human community, and especially its women, are incapable of or unwilling to say. There are female figures such as Mildred Rattner, whose agency is limited and whose voices are silenced, a reflection of the exploitation of the land by industrial incursion and underground economies. The research explores how the logic of patriarchy and extractivism intersect, making women as well as nature inactive, expendable landscapes, through the prism of an ecofeminist approach based on the works of Karen Warren and Val Plumwood. Land becomes symbolic: soil, water and trees testify to buried trauma, unmentioned grief and systemic neglect. McCarthy looks to the modern issues in environmental justice, particularly, the morality of memory, the politics of disposability, and the displacement of silenced bodies, both human and nonhuman. The paper concludes that

The Orchard Keeper is not just a Southern Gothic artefact but a prophetic reflection on the fact that gendered oppression and ecological violence are inseparable.

Keywords: gendered silence, ecological memory, patriarchy, ecological loss, toxic landscapes, female erasure, slow violence, interconnected oppressions, nonhuman narration.

Introduction

The Orchard Keeper is a novel that is frequently placed among Southern Gothic or regionalist textual traditions, yet, and perhaps most importantly, it provides an interesting location upon which ecofeminist research may be founded. The novel is set in the rugged terrain of rural Tennessee in the period between the World Wars. It follows the intertwining lives of the orphaned boy John Wesley Rattner, the bootlegger Marion Sylder and the old man Arthur Ownby, who is reclusive and lives a life of quiet violence. What is particularly lacking in the discourse on the novel is the long-term analysis of the ways gendered silence and ecological degradation interact. This paper contends that in *The Orchard Keeper*, the silence of women, whether of narration, marginalisation, or erasure of symbols, is likened to the gradual erosion of the natural world; the land itself becomes the repository of unspeakable trauma, of that which human speech, particularly female voice, is unable to express.

The portrayal of women by McCarthy is quite pathetic. The mother of John Wesley, Mildred Rattner, is represented solely by fragmented memory and household habits, her mourning is privatised and her power is restrained (McCarthy 42-43). Other female characters, the unnamed wife of Sylder, Mrs. Tipton, are moved to the background, limited to practical utterances or to outbursts of emotion lacking narrative control. This obliteration reflects the so-called “logic of domination,” in which the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature can be traced back to the same logic of hierarchical thinking that places reason above emotion, culture above nature and male above female (Warren 22). This logic can be seen in McCarthy's *Red Branch*, not merely in the dynamics between the characters, but also in the physical shift to the industrial, the dead orchard, and the government tank that is built on Red Mountain. All of these indicate an advancing industrial order that re-places the ecological balance and communal memory.

More importantly, the landscape takes a mnemonic role where human testimony is weak. The wasted orchard and the polluted pit are not simple manifestations of an absent-mindedness they are conscious of. Western dualisms, as Val Plumwood argues, divide mind and body, human and nature, making the nonhuman world dumb and lifeless (Plumwood 45). However, McCarthy breaks this dualism: the land speaks in its scars. Whenever children discover a dead body in the spray-pit, it is the soil and not any adult who testifies to concealed violence (McCarthy 78-79). This is in line with the idea proposed by Rob Nixon of the concept of a slow violence that is incremental, invisible violence that is caused to marginalised bodies and to the environment over time (Nixon 2). “Slow violence” is accumulated in Red Branch through water that is contaminated, vacant huts, and women who have been muted, and are merely some of the victims of the system that values neither persons nor the location.

Therefore, this research question is the following: How does McCarthy treat women in nature? How does the landscape act as a witness or memory-keeper? And what ecological loss are gendered reflections of dispossession? Through questioning *The Orchard Keeper* with an ecofeminist approach, we find the way in which *The Orchard Keeper* predicts modern issues in environmental justice, in which voice, visibility, and care meet in the fight against systemic erasure.

Discussion

Absent Voices: The Erasure and Marginalisation of Women

In Cormac McCarthy's *The Orchard Keeper*, women are not actors, but ghost images who are seen briefly or recalled in pieces or subjugated to a functional role in a male-dominated world. The fact that they are virtually absent in the centre of the narrative is not accidental but structural in nature, and it shows a community where gendered exclusion takes place collaboratively with ecological dispossession. The three female characters: Mildred Rattner, the nameless wife of Sylder, and Mrs. Tipton are the perfect example of this erasure since none of them are shown in depth but rather only in their relationships with men or as housewives.

The most heartrending instance of such marginalisation is the mother of the boy, John Wesley, Mildred Rattner. She does not even speak in the novel; she is mediated totally by the

memory or the observation of others. When she comes on stage, physically, it is in domesticity-drudgery scenes: “pinching from loaf to loaf across the bread rack” or tending to a smokehouse (McCarthy 32). The signs of misery imprint her body; she feels "gaunt," with sunken eyes, but her sorrow at the loss of her husband is privatised, heterosocial separation. Even her moral declamations (“When them as wallers in sin thinks they’s gettin by with it, that’s when He strikes em”) are uttered in isolation, unheard by those who perpetuate the violence she condemns (McCarthy 32). The agency is cancelled out; her agency is an instrument of loss, not of moral or ecological existence on the Red Branch.

Sylder has a wife, but in a little domestic scene, she is silent as well. She only appears after Sylder had gone through a violent run-in and is looking after him as he bleeds and whispers, “Damn you,” a phrase that captures frustration without authority (McCarthy 195). His bruises are bathed by her hand, her hand bringing his clothes, nurturing, but reactive, never of plot or place. Importantly, she is not referred to by name, which further promotes her as the extension of Sylder instead of a person. Her role is representative of the so-called subsistence perspective, as Maria Mies calls women's reproductive and care labour: this type of work supports the social life. Still, it is economically and narratively invisible (Mies 116). Red Branch male existence is based on such labour, which does not allow access to decision-making, land, and discussion.

Mrs. Tipton is even more ephemeral, as she is only mentioned as a wife to June Tipton at a time of need. She gives the wet boy and wounded Sylder coffee and dry clothes, but she does so as a sign of hospitality and not independence (McCarthy 178-79). She possesses nothing, owns no resources, and has no opinion concerning the deterioration of the environment that is happening to her, the poisoned creek, the dead orchard, the government tank towering over the mountain, like the rest. None of the women of the novel possesses land, plants trees and challenges industrial encroachment. Their silence is not an individual one but a systematic one that is reminiscent of what Adrienne Rich terms the “re-vision” of patriarchal narrative: women are not written, they become passive observers of the male action (Rich 18).

This annihilation does not only end on the characters but also on the very structure of the novel. The scenery, orchards, creeks, and spray-pits are viewed solely through the eyes of the man: the stewardship of Arthur Ownby, the bootlegging paths of Sylder, the trapping of John Wesley. This ecological imagination does not include women. Their non-presence does

not merely suggest literary omission; it demonstrates a world perception where nature and femininity are actually places of exploitation, rather than a conversation. According to Mies, "the systems of capitalism and patriarchy make women invisible, inactive and non-political labour" (Mies 45), a phenomenon that is reflected in the Tennessee hollow of McCarthy, where women are the ones who make things work but are deprived of voice, visibility, and volition.

Therefore, the women of *The Orchard Keeper* are haunting not due to their lack of substance, but due to the unwillingness of the story to offer them substance. Their mute reflection is the degradation of the land: both are not subjects, but mute land to be used.

The Land as Archive: Nature's Mnemonic Function

In *The Orchard Keeper* by Cormac McCarthy, the landscape is not only an object in the background, but it functions as a living reminiscence, trauma, and moral history. The orchard, creek, spray-pit and Red Mountain act as mute witnesses to human violence, neglect and erasure as witnesses to precisely where the human voice has failed. As societies are unwilling to speak or even cannot speak the truth about death, exploitation or complicity, the land takes the role of the person to remember. The soil, water, and trees become nonhuman narrators, and their materiality is filled with the residue of the unspoken past. This ecological mnemonic action coincides with the idea about "trans-corporeality" of Stacy Alaimo, according to which, "human being is continually entangled in the material world and that bodily boundaries are permeable allowing substances, toxins and memories to pass through human and nonhuman bodies" (Alaimo 2). The earth does not forget; land archives in McCarthy, Tennessee hollow.

There is no more chilling performance of this archival part than in the spray-pit, a concrete tank previously employed in mixing insecticide, but now in use as a secret grave. When two children fall into the pit and peep through the green face wrought and coming out of the clear, rotting water with the eyeless socket and green fleshless grin, they run away in horror, with no time to process it. (McCarthy 108). The deceased, who came to be Kenneth Rattner, the father of John Wesley, stays underwater over the years, and nobody recognises it or acknowledges its existence. The pit turns into a place of mass negation: nobody takes the body away, no investigation is initiated, and life is moving on as though nothing has been taking place. Yet the land holds fast. The thick green furred top of stagnant water, the "sour...

odour, like bad milk," and the moss clinging to the concrete walls all testify to the decay festering beneath the surface (108). The pit is silent; the very fact of its existence demands memory. Toxic environments, as Alaimo argues, exist "materialise social injustices," making visible what dominant narratives suppress (Alaimo 27). The spray takes the form of the silent complicity of the community.

Similarly, the ruined orchard serves as a palimpsest of generational loss. Once productive "fruit had come so thick and no one to pick it that at night the overborne branches cracking sounded in the valley like distant storms raging the orchard now lies in desolation, baked under a sky of pitiless blue" (McCarthy 65, 3). The reference to rotting fruit left to the ground not only brings one to the image of economic deprivation but also a more essential failure of care, stewardship, and continuity. The rot of the orchard is a reflection of the weakening of the family and social ties: Mildred Rattner mourns alone, Arthur Ownby is a hermit, and Marion Sylder works beyond the law. This entropy gets recorded in the land. Its red dust, "like powder from a brick kiln and cracked clay in endless micro cataclysm reflect a world where coherence has collapsed" (3). Even though it reflects the paradox of abandonment, the orchard is a reminder of the abundance, even when it is abandoned, as an ecological memory that continues to exist outside human will.

The old man, Arthur Ownby, the guard of the spray-pit, the tender of his bit of mountain, represents another epistemology which is based on close, embodied knowledge of place. He is walking the forest with a hickory pole "hewed... octagonal and graced the upper half with hex-carvings nosed moons, stars, fish of strange and pleistocene aspect, suggesting a cosmology woven into the landscape itself" (115). He is familiar not with the seasonal cycles, animal footprints, and spots of concealed springs, but with the experience of relationship. This is in stark contrast to the infiltration of the state tank, a fenced-in and anonymous building with red markings placed on red mountain with no explanation or consultation. The tank is a symbol of institutional blindness: it enforces order in ignorance and control in unconcern. When later Ownby shoots holes into the tank using spent cartridges of the shot hollowed out, he does a ritual of resistance where he claims that the land cannot be turned into a state utility (194). His action is no vandalism but re-taking: a statement that the meaning of the mountain is bigger than bureaucratic naming.

This conflict between the embodied ecological knowledge and institutional abstraction exposes the nature of memory as a site of contention. The state views the

mountain as an infrastructure place; Ownby as an archive of living. McCarthy goes on the same side as the latter. The novel indicates that the truth is not found in the written documentation, but in the tangible remnants within the ground and water, which are due to the diligence of Ownby and to the persistence of the land itself. We have to learn to, as Donna Haraway encourages us to "make kin rather than make empire to forge relationships of reciprocity with the more-than-human world" (Haraway 58). In *The Orchard Keeper*, the land is family: it cries, recalls, and holds to its feet. In the event of the failure of human institutions, such as the sheriff's office, the church and the family, all the creek, the orchard and the pit assume the role of witnessing.

Even the flora and fauna of this mountain are involved in this mnemonic ecology. The dying hound of the family, Scout, detects the dead body in the pit before the human beings accept it (109). Possums, owls and buzzards creep in and out of the story as ghostly spectators, their presence reinforcing the boundaries of human perception. The natural world is governed by another temporality, one that tolerates decay, seasonal re-emerging and long-repressed truths. The trapping of muskrats by John Wesley makes him part of an ancestral subsistence, although he even has his own traps caught up in the violence of the land: seized by officers seeking to find out what is happening with bootlegging, they represent the policing and violation of ecological intimacy. However, the creek lives, and the water of the creek brings silt, blood, and memory to the downstream.

Finally, McCarthy introduces the land as not scenery as a passive object but as an ethical actor. It is not judgmental, it is not forgetful. The odour of the spray-pit, the sterility of the orchard, the silent vigilance of the mountain, all this is testimony. In a society where women are oppressed, men become violent, and institutions are indifferent, the earth is the sole valid narrator. As Alaimo writes, "the environment is not 'out there' but is intertwined with the human body and social practices" (Alaimo 10). In Red Branch, conscience is lacking in the people because they do not have one.

The Orchard Keeper, therefore, foresees the current environmental justice issues by making land the location of historical resolution. The novel urges the view that ecological degradation and social amnesia are co-constitutive and necessitate the acknowledgement of the stories that are written in soil, water and bones to be healed. The land remembers. Whether man will ever know how to read it is the question.

Parallel Oppressions: Linking Gendered and Ecological Violence

The Orchard Keeper creates a world where domination is not the exception but the organising principle, which works at once on human bodies, especially on female ones, as well as on the natural world. The novel never expressed it explicitly as a political critique. Still, through its imagery, the interaction between its characters, and ecological destruction, a deep fit between gendered oppression and environmental oppression can be seen. Hunting, bootlegging, dumping, and shooting are not just survival or rebellion; they are manifestations of a widespread logic of mastery where land and femininity become territories to be conquered, devoured or dumped. This group ideology of a common sense that ecofeminist philosopher Karen J. Warren calls the "logic of domination posits that the same conceptual framework that grounds and justifies the domination of nature also grounds and justifies the domination of women" (Warren 43). The logic of this situation can be traced in the Red branch as parallel violence, the silencing of women and the poisoning of creeks, the erasure of female agency and the deforestation of hillsides, the vulnerability of domestic animals and the disposability of feminine life.

Look at the factory incursions that are etched in the scenery. The government tank in Red Mountain comes without consultation, explanation, or consideration of the local knowledge through a fenced structure, which is anonymous with red warning signs (McCarthy 194). It is a representation of state power that imposes itself on communal space, transforming the mountain as a lived, narrated space into a bureaucratic location. Similarly, the Green Fly Inn functions as a node of moral and ecological decay: its waste pit overflows with refuse, its patrons engage in illicit trade, and its very name evokes contamination ("green fly" suggesting rot and infestation). The whiskey trade, which forms the main occupation of Sylder, also involves the land in the workings of digging and wasting away; the stills concealed in gullies damage the streams with chemical effluents, and the hauling of whiskey leaves the paths in the woods scratched. Not neutral economic activities but ecological forms of violence based on instrumentalism, the perception of nature as a resource and not a relation. Such instrumentalism as Greta Gaard notes is "inextricably linked to patriarchal values that position women, like nature, as passive, inert, and available for male use" (Gaard 57).

This is instrumental logic when applied to the treatment of women. Women characters never have the freedom to decide what to do with their bodies, voice and space. Mildred

Rattner is just a prisoner of the house; her lamentation lives inside her, her voice is never heard in the conversation (McCarthy 32). Sylder's wife appears briefly to tend his wounds, uttering only "Damn you" before receding into silence, a reactive cry, not a constitutive act (195). No woman is a land-owner, a tree-planter, or even an inquisitor of the encroachment of industry. Their marginalisation is not incidental but systemic, reflecting what Gaard identifies as the "interlocking systems of oppression" that bind sexism, classism, and ecological destruction (Gaard 60). Poverty in Red Branch brings out such a dynamic: as women work to make ends meet, their efforts go unacknowledged, as is the case with soil that feeds crops but gets trampled on.

This dominance in duality is shown even by apparently harmless contact with nature. Hunting, as an example, is not represented as a means of subsistence, but as a challenge. John Wesley does not hunt muskrats according to the need to do it, but as a way of initiation into a masculine economy of capture and control (McCarthy 89-90). Arthur Ownby is more sensitive to land, but he nonetheless uses dominion shooting crows, traps and finally shoots into a government tank as a measure of defending territory (194). His opposition, however noble, is nevertheless put in a paradigm of ownership: the mountain is his to defend. This is a reflection of men who, in the novel, assert dominance over the lives of women: Sylder, his wife, Kenneth Rattner, his wife (even after her death), the sheriff, his community, and the moral order of the community. The common denominator is control, whether it is control over terrain or control over the body.

The most frightening demonstration of such parallel vulnerability, perhaps, is the death of the cat. Early in the novel, an owl attacks a housecat, leaving it "half eaten... entrails strung along the fence like garlands" (McCarthy 22). It is grotesque lyricism to depict the helplessness of the cat to face a predatory power it could have never imagined or counterattack. This scene reverberates further than its horror at the moment: the cat, the domesticated, needy, and silent creature, is used as a metaphor of the feminine in a world of eating. Similar to Mildred, it is in a liminal zone between the wild and the fully secured and suffers the consequences. Its bloody conclusion highlights the fragility of any vulnerable body within a structure that values power, aggression and dominance.

McCarthy avoids explicit condemnation; his criticism lies between the lines of juxtaposition. The dead body in the spray-pit is lying next to empty bottles of whiskey. The government tank dominates over the cabin of Ownby, who carves stars in his walking stick. The garden is rotting as men wrangle over land. These images are piled up to reveal a world perspective where domination is normalised on registers. As Warren argues, "oppressions are interconnected not just empirically but conceptually," meaning that challenging one requires confronting the underlying logic that sustains them all (Warren 50). Although steeped in Southern Gothic fatalism, this reasoning, though, finds oblique reproach in *The Orchard Keeper*, which reveals its effects: poisoned water, muffled women, dead cats and broken lineages.

The novel prefigures, in this regard, ecofeminist demands of intersectional justice in the contemporary era. Gaard insists that "environmental issues cannot be separated from issues of gender, race, and class" (Gaard 62), and McCarthy's Tennessee hollow embodies this entanglement. The land is hurt as it is perceived to be expendable, and women are hurt as they are perceived to be secondary. Both are victims of one long-standing ideology that mistakes power and control and considers care as a sign of weakness. In turning neither masculinity nor wilderness into a romantic image, McCarthy shows what the price of such a worldview is: a world where memory is drowning in poisonous pits, voices are disappearing to the wind, particularly those of women.

Resistance Through Stewardship: Quiet Acts of Care

Despite the fact that women in *The Orchard Keeper* are not given much narrative centrality, they continue to have power through minor but consistent gestures of caring that are a form of veiled revolt against the logic of domination that fills Red Branch. These gestures, preserving food, maintaining domestic order, and mourning in silence, are not grand political statements but forms of what Ariel Salleh terms "embodied materialism": a mode of knowing and acting rooted in reproductive labour that sustains life even amid ecological and social decay (Salleh 23). Even though there is no explicit feminist criticism in McCarthy, these feminine-infused practices demonstrate a long-standing ethics of care that defies the ethos of extraction and violence that dominate the novel.

One of such actions is the work of Mildred Rattner in the smokehouse. Though she appears only briefly, her labour is precise and purposeful: "she pinched from loaf to loaf

across the bread rack" and oversees the curing of meat in the smokehouse, a space of preservation in a world marked by rot and abandonment (McCarthy 32). This subsistence work, while embedded in domestic confinement, embodies what Vandana Shiva calls "seed sovereignty": the assertion of autonomy through nurturing life-sustaining practices outside capitalist or state control (Shiva 56). The smokehouse by Mildred is not just a storage shed where food is placed to avoid spoiling, but it is also one of the places where memories are preserved, as much as it is the place where food is preserved. It is still too soon and unexpressed that she mourns the death of Kenneth, but the fact that she is still labouring is an expression of resistance against chaos.

In addition to the individual deeds, McCarthy suggests offstage female networks, which become the sources of communality. Women are shown at the general store, in church pews, or sitting on porches, characters who swap news, resources and maintain social solidarity by informal means. While never named or developed, their collective presence echoes the "Stitch-and-Bitch" circles Barbara Kingsolver depicts in novels like Animal Dreams, where women's talk becomes a form of cultural preservation and mutual support (Kingsolver 112). In *The Orchard Keeper*, these networks are ghostly, but the implied presence of these networks indicates that care is moving even where it is not being told. These women do not even challenge the sheriff or destroy the government tank, yet they preserve the houses, feed children, and preserve rituals that bind the community to continuity. Above all, this ecological sensitivity of John Wesley Rattner can be interpreted as a legacy of this repressed maternal morality. John Wesley is not as thoughtless as Sylder, who uses the land to make money, or the authorities, who develop infrastructure without knowing it; he picks his traps but also tracks animal tracks, hears the birds call, and follows the seasonal cycles (McCarthy 89-90). He is not at war with nature in a master-slave relationship but rather in a relationship of reciprocity, an ethic that has more to do with care than domination. This sensibility, since he has had little experience with male mentors (his father has died, Sylder is transient, Ownby is reclusive), could have been ingrained in him at an early age by the silent attentions of Mildred. As Salleh argues, "reproductive labour transmits values of nurturance and interdependence across generations," even when those values are marginalised in dominant discourse (Salleh 41). It is a displaced manifestation of a feminine ethic that survives despite being repressed, as is the reverence of the land by John Wesley.

These acts of care do not overturn patriarchy or halt deforestation, but they constitute what Shiva describes as "living economies", spaces where life is valued over profit, connection over control (Shiva 72). Such scenes are not accidental in a novel, which is full of violence and loss; they are resistant ones because they reject the logic that makes both the women and nature disposable. A smokehouse, the pew in the church, the careful steps of the boy over the creek, these are places where there is still a second way of seeing the world.

Conclusion

The Orchard Keeper shows that ecological degradation and gendered erasure are not similar processes but identical violences which constitute one another. Only women such as Mildred Rattner can become spectral, as they are only remembered by men or even their usefulness in the household, as the land becomes poisoned by industrial intrusion and black market economies turn into the only storehouse of unspoken trauma. However, within this silence, the novel finds a silent ethics of care: there is the smokehouse, the pew in church, the boy paying attention to the creek. Drawing on ecofeminist frameworks, this analysis shows how McCarthy's early work critiques the "logic of domination" that exploits both nature and femininity, even as it gestures toward alternative modes of relation embodied, gynocentric, and ecologically attuned. No character itself appears to stand against systemic violence, but the land itself serves as witness, archive and moral compass. By doing this, *The Orchard Keeper* preempts the current environmental justice issues, stating that remembrance, care, and accountability are to be based on the very soil from which we have lost the knowledge of reading.

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