

رواية النحل للروائية لالين بول: قراءة نسوية بيئية

Laline Paull's *The Bees*: An Ecofeminist Reading

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الكلمات المفتاحية: لالين بول، رواية النحل، النسوية البيئية، الطبيعة، الرأسمالية، النظم الشمولية، الأنظمة اللاهوتية، الامومة.

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المخلص

تسعى الفلسفة النسوية البيئية إلى بناء مجتمعات تتسم بالمساواة والتكامل وتحافظ على استدامة الكوكب وسكانه. يتطلب هذا الهدف الجليل جهودًا متنوعة لخلق وعي شامل وتدابير عملية، تتمثل في سنّ القوانين والنشاط العام. وللأدب دورٌ هام في نشر الوعي النسوي البيئي. تعد رواية "النحل" للكاتبة لالين بول روايةً راقيةً تحمل العديد من الممارسات النسوية البيئية. بطلّة رواية "النحل"، فلورا ٧١٧، هي نحلة سوداء تنتمي إلى طبقة العاملين في مجال الصرف الصحي ضمن نظام هرمي شمولي لاهوتي صارم. ومع ذلك، استطاعت إنقاذ خليتها في أوقات الكوارث وضمان استمراريتها. تفترض الورقة وجود مواضيع نسوية بيئية في المستويين التمثيلي والسرد للرواية. لذا، ستُطبق الورقة منظورًا نسويًا بيئيًا لدراسة الرواية لتفكيك طبقات معانيها.

Abstract

Ecofeminist philosophy endeavours to create egalitarian and holistic societies that maintain the sustainability of the planet and its inhabitants. That prodigious objective requires various efforts to create a comprehensive awareness and actions represented by instituting laws and public activism. Literature has an important role in publicizing ecofeminist awareness. Laline Paull's *The Bees* is a sophisticated novel that holds many ecofeminist praxis. The heroine in *The Bees*, Flora 717, is a black bee who belongs to the sanitation class in a strict hierarchical, totalitarian, and theological system. However, she could save her beehive in times of calamity and ensure its continuity. The paper hypothesizes the presence of ecofeminist themes in the representative and narrative levels of the novel. Thus, the paper shall apply ecofeminist lenses to investigate the novel to dismantle the layers of meanings of the novel.



1.1. Introduction:

Ecofeminist philosophy endeavours to create egalitarian and holistic societies that maintain the sustainability of the planet and its inhabitants. That prodigious objective requires various efforts to create a comprehensive awareness and actions represented by instituting laws and public activism. Literature has an important role in publicizing ecofeminist awareness. Laline Paull's *The Bees* is a sophisticated novel in which the heroine Flora 717, is a bee who belongs to the sanitation class in a strict hierarchical, totalitarian, and theological system. However, she could save her beehive in times of calamity and ensure its continuity. Flora 717, along with the beehive members, insects, birds, animals, and a few humans, are the main characters of the novel.

1.2. The Discussion

The novel can be viewed as an allegory because it explores the lives of beehive members, with the protagonist being a distinguished bee. However, Paull only uses real scientific facts about bees in the main structure of the novel. The author states: "I returned to the real biology of the hive as my spine, and that gives the narrative a lot of strength" (Gani, 2015, p. 6). That feature enables the novel "to avoid the cutesy trappings that sometimes characterize novels featuring nonhuman characters. A surprisingly compelling tale" (Paulson, 2015, p. 22). The novel also has a realistic level because of the scientific facts and the realistic environment. These facts add an eco-pedagogical perspective to the text that concerns the environmental education the novel has added to public awareness.

The allegorical level of the novel displays the subjection of woman and nature by a totalitarian matriarchal regime inside the beehive as well as the impact of climate change and capitalism on the beehive's destiny. Le Guin (2018) states in her book *Dreams Must Explain Themselves: The Selected Non-Fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin*: "Nobody has ever heard an animal truly speak human language, yet in every literature in the world they speak human language. It is so universal a convention that we hardly notice it" (230). Moreover, Shami Chakrabati, chair of judges for Bailey's Women's Prize for Fiction 2015, appropriately remarks that Paull's novel is "so real. This could be like an *Animal Farm* of twenty first century. What a great way to critique society, power, and hierarchy" (Thomas, 2015, p. 555). The realistic level of the novel displays the interactive impact of climate change, pollution, and capitalism on the bees as insects.

The two levels of the novel are very much intermingled throughout the lenses of ecofeminism that criticizes the subjection of women and nature, "because both feminism and environmentalism are fundamentally



critical of domination, each one can find in the other one resources for expanding its attentions and energizing its methods, ultimately to join hands in a co-productive ecofeminism" (Otto, 2012, p. 13).

However, the author imbues the novel's characters with characteristics of human beings: "Thus a plot which purely deals with bees and their affairs and biological facts inside and outside the hexagonal chambers are well anthropomorphized in every nooks and corners" (Thomas, 2015, p. 555), which facilitates an allegorical reading of the text.

Many aspects of the novel are compared to classical literary works that it is "described in some quarters as *Animal Farm* meets *The Handmaid's Tale*". The novel is also compared to Richard Adams' *Watership Down*. The author admits that she is influenced by writers such as Margaret Atwood, George Eliot, Tom Wolfe, Aldous Huxley, Elizabeth Smart, Chaucer, Geraldine Brooks, Cormac McCarthy, and others (Paull, 2015). However, this paper aims at examining many themes in *The Bees* from an ecofeminist point of view, such as classism, nature, racism, motherhood, climate change, pollution, and capitalism, as well as women's persecution in states ruled by theocratic and totalitarian regimes.

1.3. Totalitarianism in *The Bees*

While ecofeminism aims at establishing egalitarian communities, totalitarian and theological regimes represent the worst systems that persecute human beings and encumber their emancipation and development. The novel, on the one hand, displays a typical totalitarian theological regime and shows how persecuted entities can subvert that system on the other hand. The novel also alludes to the idea that totalitarian regimes comprise the seeds of their own subversion. Laline Paull's text appears to be very relevant in light of the rise of white supremacy in the UK and the United States of America, in spite of the great promise of democracy with egalitarian societies. The Indian-British author must have a keen observant eye on the manifestations of racism and classism in her multicultural society.

Moreover, the system she describes in her novel alludes very much to the serfdom¹ that lasted to the mid of the 19th century in some parts of

¹ The condition of a tenant farmer bound to a hereditary plot of land and to the will of a landlord : the state or fact of being a serf. Despite obvious personal repugnance for *serfdom*, she enhanced the powers of nobles to demand more labor from their ill-treated and unorganized serfs. Carol S. Leonard. Servitude stretched from *serfdom* in Russia to the sugar plantations of the Caribbean to the indigenous slave systems in Africa that supplied both the Arabian and Atlantic trades. Adam Hochschild. (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/serfdom>).



Europe and the caste² system in India. That system classifies people into castes, in which the lowest is called the "cast away," or "Dalit," or "untouchables," who were enslaved in the past. However, in contemporary times, and despite the amendments to the constitution in India, this class has suffered various forms of persecution, such as arbitrary arrest and arbitrary detention. The Dalit has no right to gain an education. They are obliged to work in degrading and hard jobs like sanitation. Women of the Dalits suffer a high rate of rape and murder without the right to claim their rights. The basis on which the caste system is built is religious. The Hindus believe that each class in society is made up of part of the god except the Dalits.

According to Carl Friedrich and Raymond Aron, who set the criteria of the totalitarian system, it is safe to say that the beehive system of the novel encompasses most of these criteria. The first is that the system has a single party that monitors the state apparatus. The second is that a president with a special charisma should run the party. The third is that the system is characterized by autocracy, i.e., a system that gives one party the monopoly power of political activity. The fourth is that the system imposes an ideology on all its members. A dominating totalitarian party with a special ideology is also characterized by the monopoly of mass communication and the means of persuasion represented in all mass media such as radio, television, the press, etc. The fifth is that the system has central management of the economy.

The phrase "*Accept, Obey, and Serve*," reverberates in the Beehive whenever an order is announced. If any bee from any class disobey the system then it would be charged with "Blasphemy" by the "The Law of Treason!" and be subjected to the Kindness-execution. The beehive has one party that governs the colony, represented by the Queen and its sages. The Queen manages the beehive members by many means. The first is via the intoxicating potions of love she emits to govern her people who worship her and call her "Holy Mother": "Flora was one of the many who stood transfixed by the blissful sense of being loved —until the divine surge began to ebb away". The Queen's most important duty is to lay eggs, and that mission strictly belongs to her: "*Only the Queen May breed*"

² **caste**, any of the ranked, hereditary, endogamous social groups, often linked with occupation, that together [constitute](#) traditional societies in [South Asia](#), particularly among [Hindus](#) in [India](#). Although sometimes used to designate similar groups in other societies, the "caste system" is uniquely developed in Hindu societies. Madan, T.N.. "caste". Encyclopedia Britannica, 14 Feb. 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/caste-social-differentiation>. Accessed 20 August 2022.



(Paull, 2014, p. 36). If any bee lays eggs, the Fertility Police destroys them at once. The Fertility Police also destroy any bee that does not fulfil its duties. The most important duty of the fertility police is to destroy any deformed larva, ailing bee, or bee who disobeys the queen and her Sages. Thus, the police fertility is the system's second and most powerful means.

The Sages' class are female bees who have identical, beautiful, and elegant forms. They are called priestesses because they truly govern and arrange the life in the beehive: "The Melissae, invincible kin of Queens!" They have powerful surveillance over all the bees in the colony by using their antennas, as they adopt theirs to any bee's antenna and an immediate chemical transition of information transforms to the Sage. Thus, they would discover any revolutionary thoughts and eliminate the convicted bee immediately. Thus, the power of surveillance is the third pedestal of governing the colony. The Sages also performed chants and rituals that ensured beehive obedience and discipline. The rituals of the sages, along with the Beehive mind that transforms the orders to the bees via air and the comb of the ground, constitute the media, the fourth force used by the system. Furthermore, the Queen and her party—the sages—have free access to the treasury of the hive and can gain ample amounts of honey and pollen bread, unlike other members of the hive, especially the sanitation workers, who are forced to be thrifty. One of the mottos of the system is "*Discord is sin, Greed is sin*" which is imposed on other classes and most severely on the sanitation workers. Moreover, only the Sages have access to the queen's library.

In order to exert strong control on its members, the beehive system divides its community into classes. Thus, it would guarantee that society would never gain integration and revolt against the system's standers. Nevertheless, totalitarian systems erase the individual personalities of their members. According to the Italian fascist philosopher, Giovanni Gentile (1875- 1944), because there are no borders or places in which the state has no right to interfere, and that the totalitarian state is the embodiment of the moral spirit of the people, it imposes the dissolution of the individual into the general structure of the state and its political movements (Masahil, 2015, p. 11).

Flora's 717 belongs to the sanitation class, the lowest one in the colony. They are innately supposed to be unable to speak, subservient and not smart. Besides, they have a specific shape and smell. Their role in the beehive is undermined. When Flora 717 hatched, the police fertility decided to kill her because of her big size and black colour: "*Deformity is evil. Deformity is not permitted*" (Paull, 2014, p. 4) and they add: "'Sister Sage. This one is obscenely ugly.' 'And excessively large—' 'It would appear so. Thank you, officers, you may go.' Sister Sage waited for them to leave.



She smiled at Flora" (Paull, 2014, p. 5). The beehive authorities perpetuate the beehive system by applying rigid barriers and rules, which prevent any evolution in the beehive. Sister Sage decided to keep her alive to apply experiments on her because Flora can speak and because the colony suffers from a shortage of members: "A sanitation worker who speaks. Most notable" (Paull, 2014, p. 5).

Flora understands that being different is dangerous. Therefore, she tries to block her antenna so that the priests cannot read her mind: "At her silence, Sister Sage relaxed. "Good. Knowledge only causes pain to your kin." (Paull, 2014, p. 10). Flora's ugliness is placed in contrast to the splendid description of the queen and the priestesses. Sister Sage brings Flora to the nursery. There she discovers that Flora 717 can flow (lactate) royal jelly, but Sister Sage conceals that fact. In the nursery, the police fertility discovers that a bee has laid an egg. The sages executed the suspected bee in an act called Kindness. One of Arendt's well-known writings, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), explains the idea of totalitarianism by focusing on its traits, effects, and outcomes. Totalitarianism is a political tyranny that exerts great effort to dominate and has an insatiable thirst for power. It imposes its ideological principles and regulations on people in order to increase its dominance. Totalitarianism relies on widespread approval and support as it broadcasts ideological propaganda through the media. It also tames rebellious people who fiercely oppose the system or criticize it without being challenged and condemned by other members of society (Hajo, 2017, p. 1128).

Working on her experiment, Sister Sage orders Flora to kill the deformed child instead of the police. Flora resists the order and refuses to kill the child. Because of torture and fear, her tongue twisted in her mouth and she lost her ability to speak. However, the sages suspect the potential capacity of Flora; therefore, they brainwash her mind so that she will never remember her abilities:

"Provided she is docile," said another. "To have a rebel in that kin—and one who could have learned of feeding—" "That will never happen." Sister Sage knelt down beside Flora and looked up at her fellow priestesses. "More than one of us should do this, to be sure." "Of course," said another. "Dirt and fear will be her only guides." Three more priestesses knelt by Flora's head, so there were two at each antenna. Then they all touched their own antennae to hers. The sensation was very strange. As the chemicals jolted into her brain her body shook, but she did not feel pain, only waves of numbness, stronger and stronger until her consciousness shrank to calm and blackness (Paull, 2014, pp. 37–38).



According to Carlos Sluzki (2018), totalitarian regimes affect and confuse the critical thinking capacities of individuals as well as the masses. The heavy imposition of propaganda as well as the little access to knowledge hinder the individual from making a sound judgment. The individual sometimes fails to recognize or acknowledge the atrocities of the regime. In times of famine, the beehive mind gives orders to the bees to attack the drones and kill them. Though they used to adore the males, they now obey the system. The system soothes the bees after the carnage and they forget the incident. The system simply changes history, which is also a common trait of totalitarian systems. Sluzki explains how persecution subjugates the individual's mind and hider his ability to internalize but the vision of the system. He explains that those who were forced to live under a repressive regime and were only exposed to the official discourse — which, among many other externalisations, omissions, and distortions, maligned the victims of the "final solution" — simply avoided learning the things they didn't want to know, whether out of conscious or unconscious choice. Under the aegis of totalitarian governments, human beings are capable of unspeakable mental atrocities (Sluzki, 2018, pp. 12–13).

Thus, Flora was forced to work in sanitation like her kin. She internalizes her role subserviently. However, in time of distress Flora defends the beehive when she helps to kill a wasp and a rat as they attack the colony. Those valorous acts give her the privilege to see the Queen because she is able to apprehend the alarm of invasion the system has transmitted via the comb net of the beehive. The queen is the god-like figure and mother of the beehive whose voice intoxicates and controls the beehive members and keeps them steady and systematic. The queen gives Flora the privilege of reading in her library. That experience is the first step toward gaining agency. While the Sages question Flora's abilities, that she has no innate test for flower, Lily 500—an old forager- believes in her. Lily 500 represents the social reformer in the novel when she tells Flora, "I read flowers, not scriptures. But I know our hive is in grievous need of food and that you have wings and courage and brain" (Paull, 2014, p. 90). Lily 500 does not follow the beehive standers because she has another reading of the world depends on her own experience. Despite her loyalty and serves, she presented to the beehive, the system sacrifices her for the enemy's as it usually does with other lowest classes in the colony. That reflects the hypocrisy of the totalitarian system. It also reflects the system's ability to manipulate religion as they promise those bees with a better life after death, "*From Death comes Life Eternal*. Holy Mother, take me back" (Paull, 2024, p. 36). However, Lilly can transform all her knowledge to Flora 717, before her execution.



Moreover, the capability of the system to manipulate the religious scriptures to serve its ends is suggested when Flora 717 discovers that she can make wax as any other bee of other classes. The system prevented sanitation bees from making wax claiming that it's a sacred mission: "*A flora may not make wax, for she is unclean; nor propolis, for she is clumsy; nor ever may she forage, for she has no taste; but only may she serve her hive by cleaning, and all may command her labors*" (Paull, 2014, p. 114). Like the Dalits in the caste system the sanitation workers are literally "untouchables". As such, the system would perpetuate classism on religious basis. However, Sister Cyclamen, the chief bee who is responsible for making wax, dismantles that rule when she informs Flora that all the children of the Holy Queen are holy too. The author does not defy religion but displays how the system can distort religion to establish the system's interests. Thus, the monolithic voice of the system is subverted that there are other stories to be listened to other than that of the system.

Manipulating religion for the cause of the system is displayed in many literary works that discuss totalitarian regimes such as *Animal Farms*. When we examine both the past and the present, we see that religious ideals have sometimes been misused by political opponents. Despite this, it is often believed that monarchical and theocratic administrations use and manipulate religion. Contrary to this assertion, it is sometimes seen in secular regimes, such as the Bolsheviks. Occasionally those in authority have used religion, and sometimes those struggling for power have utilized religion. The Tsar regime's use of religion against political opponents who were preparing for a major revolution in 1917 and the Stalin regime's use of religion against the people more than two decades later are examples of this truth (Şahin, 2021, p. 633).

The same idea is suggested when the bee members discover that neither their class is innately decided nor there is what is called "Divine Right" that gives the Sages class the right to rule. The class of the bee is decided by the system according to the amount of food the larva receives after hatching. The more the larva receives food the more its class is elevated. Besides, they know that every bee can lay eggs. Thus, the system knowingly decided the class of its members and sets the rule by which its continuation is guaranteed. The priestess secretly maintains the process in the Nursery. As the Teasels -the nurse's class- uncover the truth a revolution instigates in the colony; however, the fertility police face it ruthlessly:

And five days makes a princess—Flow is the great secret!" she screamed as the police surrounded her. "Any female could—" The police unleashed their rage on her body and the smell of her blood filled the air. An officer held up a wet red mass on her claw. "The



traitor made more eggs.” She ate them. “And was rich in Flow.” Before the bees could scream, the priestesses drove their scent hard through the crowd, so that their brains were seized and the sound of terror died within them. The comb jerked beneath their feet. (Paull, 2014, p. 305)

However, sister sage agrees to elevate Flora's position only because the colony needs every hand to survive. Because of the pesticides, climate change, and technology, many bees lost their way back to the beehive and die. During her hectic and dedicated endeavour to collect food, the author displays the impact of pesticides on the ecosystem.

She grew frustrated at dropping packages down through the leaves, but only when she decided to fly down to retrieve one did she see the horror beneath them. The earth was littered with bodies. Covered in black ants, a bloated mouse stared up with white eyes. Dead sparrows lay between the plant stalks, their beaks open and their tiny tongues dried gray. Between them were dead bees, countless numbers of them, and wasps and flies, their bodies speckled with the pale gray film that had condemned those foragers in her own hive. (Paull, 2014, p. 115)

The Bees displays how predatory animals and insects such as rats, wasps and spiders usually attack the beehive. Thus, the capitalists' biotechnological promise of welfare, productivity, and fixing climate crisis has turned into a nightmare. Vandana Shiva elaborates on this issue and she condemns what she calls the "destructive Anthropocene of human arrogance and hubris." (Shiva, 2016, p. xix). She explains: on the other hand, they will not solve the existing issues but rather create new ones. We have already seen this with genetic engineering: it was supposed to increase food production but has failed to increase crop yields; it was supposed to reduce chemical use but has increased the use of pesticides and herbicides; it was supposed to control weeds and pests but instead it has created superweeds and superpests (Shiva, 2016, p. xix).

Furthermore, the queen's sickness and her inability to lay healthy eggs echo the impact of pollution on human fertility rates. Crises of fertility increase despite the so called scientific and technological development. However, the totalitarian regime of the beehive annihilates any bee, which lay eggs except the queen. Thus, productivity becomes the privilege of the upper class in the Hive. In the real world this is what "governments, intergovernmental agencies, and power elites" of modern Patriarchy do to the second and third world countries. They consider peoples of those countries "the weak.... 'surplus' population" who are "putting an



unnecessary burden on the planet's resources" (Shiva, 2016, p. 86). Therefore, they impose unfair population control programmes on those countries. Shiva (2016) explains that to prevent overpopulation and save the planet from destruction, population control programmes ruthlessly assault women's bodies. Where industrial pollution poses a danger to women's fertility, women's interests are pitted against those of their offspring. The eco-crisis can only be managed to the benefit of those who have power and privilege, hence a strategy of divide and rule seems to be necessary (p. 87).

Shiva (2016) adds that the countries of the first world consume the resources of the planet far more than poor and developing countries. Thus, the assumption that decreasing the population of poor countries would save the planet's resources is not true. Shiva states, "In global terms, the impact of a drastic decrease of population in the poorest areas of Asia, Africa and Latin America would be immeasurably smaller than a decrease of only five per cent in the ten richest countries at present consumption levels" (p. 87). The same idea the novel alludes to when presenting the upper class as consumers. Other classes in the colony exert much effort to maintain the productivity of the colony and they consume less food. Moreover, they system victimized them for the sake of its interests.

However, the rigidity of the system starts to disintegrate the moment the Sages delay the appointment of Flora's execution. Keeping the deformed bee alive sets the first step toward the subversion of the Western duality "survival of the fittest" which in turn holds the hieratical system. Spencer's phrase 'survival of the fittest' is the developed materialistic 'scientific' copy of "the idealistic philosophical discourse" (Mies, 2014, p. 180) of the culture/nature duality:

In this process Darwin's theory of evolution played a decisive role, particularly in the form of Social Darwinism developed by Spencer, which posited that 'survival of the fittest' was the selective mechanism by which 'superior' societies evolved from lower ones. The backwardness of the peoples in the colonies was now attributed to their being on a lower stage in the evolutionary process. At the pinnacle were the Anglo-Saxons or the Nordic race (Mies, 2014, p. 180).

The marginalized group in the colony-the sanitation workers-eventually goes through a process of evolution, which improves their capabilities to the point where they are able to assume leadership roles in the new colony. There are signs that may be gleaned from the progression that sanitation employees have encountered. The first one refers to Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and the concept that natural processes might



give rise to new forms of life and new ways of evolving. The second has a symbolic and sociological importance in the sense that societies progress if the hegemonic persecution of the system is lessened, which results in a modicum of freedom being made available to the people. During the Queen's Dream, which was the colony's winter sleep, the sanitation workers' antennas were left uncovered, and there was no surveillance that monitored the employees' thoughts. As a direct result of this, they are capable of comprehending Flora's messages. They are aware of her pregnancy and the potential risks she faces; as a result, they disguise the odor of her egg with their own unique odour in order to protect her:

“Go,” Flora whispered. “Those who would spare themselves, find another task and do not return. I will finish the work and go in your place.” The sanitation workers bobbed their strange curtsy to her, then ran to receive the sacrament. Flora watched them go, stunned at their knowledge. It must have happened during the Queen’s Dream, when all antennae were opened. That was why they had shielded her with their kin-scent. (Paull, 2014, p. 225)

1.4. Ethics of Care in *The Bees*

The psychological studies of Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan constantly reveal that men and women are different in their sense of self and the other. While women display a sense of an 'interconnected' self, men generally show "a sense of self as separate" (as cited in Gaard, 2011, p. 2). Chodorow's and Gilligan's assumptions are rightly indicated in *The Bees*. Flora is very much interconnected to her beehive. She flights for many hours looking for fields not contaminated with pesticides. She fights for the safety of her hive. She flies for distant places to bring nectar to her colony. She can overcome the intoxicated effect of the queen's voice, and the bee hive-mind to save her larva. She shows solidarity with other bees. Moreover, in the time of winter and scarcity of food the queen gives order to kill all the drones because they consume food and do not do any work. Those drones are usually worshiped by other bees who fed them, clean them: "*A male— A male arrives—* “Worship to His Maleness!” cried several feminine voices as a carved piece of wax fell out, followed by screams of delight as through the hole came the large, plumed head of a brand-new drone" (Paull, 2014, p. 8). The bees obey the queen and kill the drones. Nevertheless, Flora does not kill them. When she finds the drone Sir Linden hiding himself, she does not kill him. She feeds him and saves him to the end of winter. Flora's acts challenges the system, because her interconnected self "makes moral decisions on the basis of an ethic of



responsibilities or care... that is, men tend to focus on rights, whereas women tend to focus on responsibilities" (Gaard, 2011, p. 2). The system of the bee hive though matriarchal yet it shows rigidity and violence justified by the high interest of the hive.

"Yes!" Sister Sage said to them all. "Even foragers may be measured, for no sister is exempt from the Holy Law. Eggs blight in the nursery—which means she who curses this hive still runs free, and seeks to pass her evil spawn as the pure issue of Holy Mother." A frightening tone entered her voice. "What is our highest law?" "Only the Queen may breed." (Paull, 2014, p. 191)

According to Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan, the patriarchal system cannot display interconnectedness. The decision-making of the patriarchal system is based on rights, i.e., interests, which are the fundamental cause of environmental calamities. According to Gaard (2011), it is the inability to acknowledge the interconnectedness of all beings that generates violence. It is the "disconnected sense of self is most assuredly at the root of the current ecological crisis (not to mention being the root cause of all oppression, which is based on difference)" (p. 2).

When comparing the female main character in *The Bees* to early ecofeminist novels such as Margarete Atwood's *Surfacing* 1972, one would notice that Flora 717 can develop agency, while Atwood's heroine cannot especially in her early novels. Monica Seger (2016) remarks that the female character in Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, has no agency. Her actual retreat to nature makes her out of the cultural domain (p. 243). According Maureen Devine, this establishes the idea that the patriarchy is "responsible for both the destruction of nature and women" (as cited in Seger, 2016, p. 243). Yet with the passing of time, this idea grows weak because it estranges woman from being active in the cultural domain and suggests her need to be educated and restrained by men. According to Stacy Alaimo (2010), "defining woman as something mired in nature pushes women outside the domain of human subjectivity, rationality, and agency" (p. 2). Contemporary ecofeminism considers integrating nature, culture, and women. They link sexism, racism, and other forms of oppression and the dehumanisation of nature and other forms of life. This implies that we should finally accept women as members of a society and end the denial of women's agency that has persisted in our culture for so long without putting women or the environment down or ignoring culture (Seger, 2016, p. 243).

Paull's Flora 717 does not estrange herself out of the cultural domain. She is unlike Atwood's Offred, in *The Handmaid Tales* 1986, whose supreme achievement is to retreat to nature and save her baby away from the patriarchy. Offred's survival with her baby has symbolic significance.



Like a rare plant, she could overcome all circumstances to preserve its species. Unlike Offred, Flora 717 has agency that she does not retreat from her culture. She actively re-establishes her own culture based on new vision. She fights the system for the good of her race and guarantees the continuity of her race when her daughter becomes the queen.

The Bees juxtaposes environment with civilization, in contrast to master narratives that encourage natural retreat and present nature as a safe place to dwell. They work together and coexist. According to Marilyn M. Copper, stories of retreating into pristine nature are often based on a mechanical viewpoint in which nature is perceived as apart from human civilization and as something that must be explored or preserved by a domineering, submissive subject (as cited in Kostkowska, 2013, p. 2). The story of interconnectedness examines the likelihood of coexistence between nature and civilization. By viewing the world as "an intrinsically dynamic, interconnected web of relations in which there are no absolute discrete entities and no absolute dividing lines between the living and the non-living, the animate and the inanimate, or the human and the non-human," Robyn Eckersley promotes a more fruitful ecocritical practice (as cited in Cudworth, 2005, p. 126).

Moreover, the novel demonstrates magnificent pastoral landscapes bees forage to gain nectar and pollen. Paull mentions many species of trees, flowers and insects on the tongue of Flora 717 while she was foraging to bring nectar to the beehive. As such, she creates a pastoral landscape like that of Rachel Carson's *The Silent Spring* (1962). According to Greg Garrard eco-critical themes are very likely to be examined in texts with pastoral issues: "With its roots in the classical period, pastoral has shown itself to be infinitely malleable for differing political ends, and potentially harmful in its tensions and evasions. However, its long history and cultural ubiquity mean that the pastoral trope must and will remain a key concern for ecocritics" (Garrard, 2004, p. 33). Moreover, the dystopian scene of the mass death of insects and animals and the shortage of bees also allude to Carson's book. Thus, the novel stresses the idea of solidarity and a common destiny among the living beings on the planet.

The novel's conclusion makes a strong suggestion on the above-mentioned concept. Even though Flora's dying scene is aesthetic, it also conveys the idea of the natural cycle and the connection between women and the natural world. Flora passes away peacefully while admiring the flowers she loves and watching the bees as they rejoice over their brand-new colony. Her body will rot and become a part of the nutrients the flowers absorb and turn into nectar on which bees eat: "Flora could no longer move, but she smelled speedwell, and bluebells, and cyclamen, and felt the cool, smooth leaves of aconite holding her body. She wrapped



herself in the rich perfume of the forest floor and watched until the last bee flew into the tree. Then she rested" (Paull, 2014, p. 341).

The Canadian critic and novelist Margaret Atwood describes *The Bees* via twitter as "[A] gripping Cinderella/Arthurian tale with lush Keatsian adjectives."³ (Atwood, 2014). Thus, she acknowledges the rich and ornamented language of the novel as well as the potential subversive subject of a heroic Cinderella figure.

The author, Laline Paull uses a highly poetic language that is rich with botanical vocabulary by which she successfully creates an orchard-like atmosphere suits the actual lives of bees "the lyrical prose holds the attention, for this is a novel that delights in language, savouring words with the same relish with which Flora rolls honey on her tongue" (Sethi, 2014). Paull brings together the horror of the rigid system that governs the beehive with the beauty of language, which evokes the readers' senses:

Flora got to her feet, flashes of flowers and petals and fragrance filling her senses. The sky was wide open. But before she could unlatch her wings, the second police bee had landed beside her. "Number and kin." Her voice was ugly and abrasive and Flora could see Lily's blood still wet on her jaws. If she flew now they would knock her out of the air. She bowed her antennae subserviently. "Flora 717. Sanitation." "Then get there." (Paull, 2014, p. 104)

The literary allusion Atwood suggests when comparing Flora to Cinderella and King Arthur opens a gate to revisiting these stories, especially the fairy tale of Cinderella, from an ecofeminist perspective. Like Flora, Cinderella is an eco-friendly character. Both of them are diligent, patient, and show care towards their community and environment. Cinderella is acquainted with nonhuman entities such as rats, cats, dogs, and plants. She is connected to her environment. When she needs help, a godmother magically collaborates to create a carriage—a cultural apparatus made of nonhuman entities—by which Cinderella goes to the ball in the prince's castle. However, when the magic timer expired, the carriage disintegrated into its natural components, causing no harm to the environment. In the German version, the ecofeminist motif is more evident. Cinderella plants a hazel bush, a gift from her father, at the grave of her mother. The plant grows tall and beautiful and becomes a shelter for birds. When Cinderella distresses the bird, magically, helps her. It also gives her

<https://www.bookdepository.com/Bees-Laline-Paull/9780007557745>³



the gown and shoes she needs for the party. Thus, nature becomes an ally to the girl who used to be good to it. The girl plants a tree that is watered by her tears and gets nutrition from the body of her mother, signifying the symbiotic nature of the relationship between human beings and nature.

However, the spiritual connection between human beings and trees is very interesting, especially in Celtic folklore and literature. While the hazel tree in the Germanic version of Cinderella signifies "divine wisdom and inspiration" (MacLeod, 2006, p. 107), the hollow beech tree that Flora and the swarm settle in signifies "the Queen of Mother of the Wood" according to Celtic folklore. Most importantly, beech trees symbolize knowledge and education. It is reported that the first book was made from thin sheets of beech wood that were tied together. The beech tree has a serpentine root structure, which may have inspired the idea that a knowledgeable snake may impart wisdom to those who seek it. John Matthews, and Will Worthington (2001) state in their book, *The Spirit of Nature Oracle: Ancient Wisdom from the Green Man and the Celtic Ogam Tree*, that the beech tree signifies many meanings. Death and endings are one meaning of beech's dual meanings, while the realization of new possibilities is another. Beech advises you to take the risk of stepping over the threshold into the unknown so that you might get the gift of experience and so seek revelation and grow in wisdom (p. 77).

Many things make the symbolic significance of the beech relevant. Most important is the death of the old colony and the birth of a new one. Besides the importance of valor action to cross the threshold of fear of the totalitarian system into an egalitarian and healthy community nurtured by interconnectedness, love, and knowledge. It is the knowledge Flora has gained in the Queen's library that leads her to find the beech tree. She deciphers the symbolic codes of the stories she has read.

It was true. Flora's antennae surged with memories. The tree in the forest. The Queen's Library. *The last panel, the comet from the cradle*. Not a star in the sky, but a swarm from the hive—the hive was the cradle, and the swarm its only true child, which she must nurse to safety... the destination. *The hollow tree. The forest*. (Paull, 2014, p. 340)

Examining Flora's character, the reader would find that Flora has agency while Cinderella has not. Flora does not wait for a savior to come and make her destiny. Like King Arthur, Flora develops moral code and work for the good of her people. Besides her innate physical and mental capabilities, two main elements elevate Flora from a sanitation worker into a leader and mother of new Queen. The first is the knowledge she acquired from the library, from Lilly 500 and from her own experience during foraging.



However, the agency Flora has gained is not only related to knowledge, but to motherhood.

1.5. Motherhood in *The Bees*

In the novel, being a mother is not shown as a burden. Pregnancy and motherhood are presented as an antidote to the oppression of the status quo. Flora's devotion to her larva allows her to break out from the system's dictated narrative. Unfortunately, for Flora, she was unable to keep her two eggs safe from the fertility patrol. She is devastated by the loss of her first two eggs and is driven to action by a desire to save her third one from the same fate. Motherhood is depicted positively as something that may bring about both emotional and physical renewal. Flora's love for her offspring is stronger than the signals of the beehive's dominance or the Queen's affection. When the fertility police eliminate nurse Clover, Flora's tongue twisted in her mouth because of terror. Later, her sense of motherhood liberates her tongue. It frees her mind of the Sages' brainwashing that had her acting and feeling subservient:

She settled herself to feed her child in her arms. As he nestled against her and opened his little mouth, her cheeks tingled as the Flow rose from its secret source and soothed her like Devotion. The child ate until he was sated, then curled in his mother's arms and slept, his particular fragrance rising from his little body. A missing worker was only ever presumed dead, never sought out, so Flora made herself comfortable and gave herself the luxury of falling asleep holding her child. (Paull, 2014, p. 299)

As a mother, she is more in touch with her physicality and more willing to fight for the privilege of bearing children, even if this privilege belongs solely to the queen. She is able to grow in moral agency as a result of this. Flora, on several times, acts in opposition to the established order. For example, she shelters Lord Lindon, a drone, with her wings the entire winter while they are in hibernation, despite the system's instructions to murder all the drones for economic reasons. The Sages have also reportedly ordered Flora to give away sanitation bees to the spiders on another occasion. She disobeys instructions and tells the bees the truth, urging them to flee for their own safety. Despite their appreciation to Flora, the sanitation workers go gladly to their deaths. The sanitation workers are portrayed as sacrificial lambs of the system, who are pacified by the queen's love and the promise of an eternal paradise.

Flora worries that her kid may be sickened by the nasty or poisoned nectar of pollen she picks from flowers for sustenance. The lecturers and ecofeminist campaigners both make passing references to the concept that



becoming a mother might increase one's concern for the environment. Right away, mother would start watching what she drinks and eats more closely. In her paper "The Birth of an Eco-Mom: Cancer, Feminism, and the Environment," Professor Heidi Hutner 2011, discusses her own experiences as a mother and cancer survivor, as well as the loss of her parents to cancer. She fears losing her own child to cancer as well. She asserts that her environmental consciousness rose due to concern for her child's future and maternal love. She states that her eco-feminist awakening coincides with the merging of her cancer and motherhood experiences. She was paralysed with fear when she found out that she was pregnant because of her anxiety about her own and her family's history with cancer. She starts to think of the measures to take to safeguard her unborn child. She eventually came to believe that toxic pollution was to blame for her cancer and that it threatened and violated the future of her daughter and all children. Years passed as she went from being an orphan with cancer to a mother with cancer to an environmental scholar, writer, teacher, and activist. Locations in her story range from the human body to the home, the classroom, the great outdoors, and popular culture. All of these different streams of thought and practise eventually merge into what she calls "ecological, feminist, and mothering awareness" (p. 38).

The theme of disease, toxics, radiation and their effect on the fertility of women and society is suggested in the novel. The queen's sickness and her ailing eggs eventually cause the destruction of the colony. The system executes the queen to save the colony from being infected. Corruption of the womb of the queen leads to the disintegration of the beehive, which parallels Hunter's saying; "*A mother's womb is the earth's womb*" (Paull, 2014, p. 46). Even though the eco-mom represented by Flora saves the colony by giving birth to a healthy strong princess who becomes a queen and leads her community to a safe hive.

1.6. Narrative Strategies and the Ecofeminist Motif in *The Bees*

Regarding the narratology of the novel, the reader moves now and then from the representational and allegorical levels of the novel to the realistic representative level in which the bees are mere insects humming around in an environment governed by the presence of capitalist culture. In the prologue of the novel, the whole tone of the novel is set. It suggests an impending danger of climate change and technology that crawls slowly towards humankind and nature. The writer cleverly connects the destiny of humankind, and other creatures with the climate change that has become a fact whose influences are easily observed. Throughout a conversation among the owner of the beehive and his daughter and a woman who wants



to purchase the beehive, the novel demonstrates that summer is becoming shorter, it rains heavily almost every day, and the majority of people are oblivious. They, especially the younger generations, spent most of their leisure time on the cyber net:

“So’s my father. He calls them his girls.” The man looked up at the low gray sky. “Is that more rain? What happened to summer?” The woman glanced up from her phone. “I know! I’ve forgotten what blue sky looks like. Must be hard with the kids out of school.” “They barely notice. They’re always online.” (Paull, 2014, p. 1)

The owner of the beehive, who used to call the bees "my girls," decides not to sell it for the time being. Then, in the subsequent chapters of the novel, the narration concerns the evolution of a bee, Flora 717. Nonetheless, the novel now and then refers to the world of human beings, creating a parallel space to that of the beehive story. In myriad scenes, the reader notices, for instance, the scene of an ecocide in which millions of tiny insects, birds, and gnawers are dead because of pesticides and herbicides. Then Flora's agony that her device of recognizing her beehive location-GPS-is off because of the magnetic fields of the cellular towers. In another scene, the presence of plastic, the smell of garbage, and the worthless nectar of sterile flowers that grow in a cultural environment are highlighted.

In the town there was very little to be had; the gardens were nearly empty of friendly flowers, though many provocatively dressed foreign ones stood bold and bright, flaunting their sterile sexes. The foxgloves and the snapdragons, whose particular tricks of access Flora had delighted in perfecting, were long gone, the echium had fallen, but there were still some fuchsia, whose hanging bells required skill to plunder. Flora took all she could find, but it was paltry. She was about to leave the gardens and their reeking black waste bins buzzing with flies when she smelled a thistle in bloom. (Paull, 2014, p. 196)

Accordingly, an environmental consciousness is created, because the reader would notice the effect of the presence of each space on the other: "the human and nonhuman dramas in this fiction reflect the mutual phenomenological interrelation because they are presented as interdependent and analogous" (Kostkowska, 2013, p. 3). Moreover, the abovementioned scenes bring the reader to the reality he/she is living in, because they are highly referential and provocative. Nonetheless, the author's plan of describing the two worlds as parallel, yet interconnected continues and develops to the end of the novel.



In the epilogue, the family of the owner comes to the beehive to tell the bees that their owner is dead, an English tradition known as "Telling the Bees". This tradition is Celtic. However, it is also followed in many countries in Europe and the United States of America. This tradition is deeply rooted in the English and European heritage. Some resources claim that it is derived from Greek in the ancient Aegean age. In that age, people believed that bees had the capacity to intersect the two worlds of the living and the dead (Kite, 1889).

In Britain, a tradition of "Telling the Bees" was observed for many years. According to tradition, the bees residing in family bee hives "had to be treated as members of the household; in particular, they must be told about deaths, births, and marriages in the family."⁸ If these courtesies were not made the bees would either swarm to another hive elsewhere or die. (Varner, 2007, p. 186).

Moreover, that tradition developed across the ages to take its place in the Christian communities, as people believe that bees pray to God and their activities are related to special Christian occasions such as Christmas. Interestingly, the pagan belief has melted into an Abrahamic religion, which represents patriarchy, that is to say, culture. Thus, culture and nature coexist: "In a letter within *The Gentleman's Magazine* of 1811, it was said that in Yorkshire, following the changing of the calendar, bees would hum to signal the correct Christmas Eve and the imminent anniversary of the birth of the saviour" (Cherrell, 2021). That notion of the coexistence of nature and culture intensifies when the bees left their diseased colony and the beekeeper died at the same time. In some parts of Britain, the colony is watched should the bees were "easily moved, they were happy and had accepted their new home. Should the bees leave, it was a sign that they had been called to their master" (Cherrell, 2021). However, that incident has a sinister symbolic significance that death of nature or absence of nature indicates death of humanity.

The idea of nature and culture coexistence is scattered in many scenes in the novel, which leads to subverting the culture/nature Western duality. Away from reading the novel as an allegory, the author gives much space in the narration to non-human elements that function as tools to create a space of environmental consciousness. The scene of Flora 717 foraging in an urban space demonstrates the omnipresence of capitalism and science. Nature, Flora, cannot obtain adequate nutrition in that environment. Suddenly, the scene shifts to a wild plant that cracks the asphalt and grows tall and fragrant in the midst of a polluted and stinky environment: "The thistle was so strong it had forced its way through the asphalt, then the dark space between the bins, straining its sharp purple



crown up to the light. At Flora's approach it pushed its scent harder, and the touch of her feet made its prickly petals shiver in gratitude." (Paull, 2014, p. 196)

The picture has a symbolic meaning: asphalt is a key tool of capitalism because it is a big part of city infrastructure. The presence of the wild plant symbolizes nature's endurance and resistance, as well as its ability to evolve and impose itself in a dominantly cultural space. Moreover, that presence is beneficial and good. After all, Flora 717 gains a good amount of nutritive nectar from the wild thistle. Thus, the notion of a culture/nature duality is subverted. While western dualism usually portrays nature as "Radically discontinues with the self", nature could prove its continuity and interconnected selves through entities like the bee and the wild flower: "She was about to leave the gardens and their reeking black waste bins buzzing with flies when she smelled a thistle in bloom." According to Val Plumwood 2002, western dualism establishes disconnected spheres between all forms of dualities. She states:

A major aim of dualistic construction is polarisation, to maximise distance or separation between the dualised spheres and to prevent their being seen as continuous or contiguous. Separation may be established by denying or minimising overlap qualities and activities, and by the erection of rigid barriers to prevent contact. (p. 49)

However, nature can prove its continuity in the novel when the plant transforms its organic, non-genetically modified nectar for the bees. Moreover, the process of creating a wild plant in an urban environment suggests the presence of a seed that could, literally and metaphorically, subvert the thick crust of the cultural capitalist domain, thus proving its continuity and resistance. Furthermore, the scene of the interaction between the bees and the flowers is dramatic. The narration treats the nonhumans as autonomous subjects that have their own spaces, which are no less important than those of humans. Likewise, in the scene where the family of the beekeeper tells the bees that he is dead, the reader will notice that the space that separates the nonhuman from the human is blurred.

Kostkowska comments on similar narration, stating that the border between the human and the "environment" is frequently blurry in these writings, serving as a criticism of the idea of "environment" per se. Flakes of human skin physically mingled with the remains of other natural species to make dust, which is only one illustration of how alienated people look from each other and the natural "others" in Ali Smith's books. In these stories, nature is often shown as unique and dynamic, making sudden and dramatic interventions that shake up human systems and highlight the



nonhuman world's lively realism and tenacious tenacity. To serve the ecological "cause," the nonhuman presence does not have to prevail in a text; rather, it is frequently more noticeable when appearing momentarily, strongly establishing itself within the human environment. (Kostkowska, 2013, p. 3)

To continue with the author's investments in symbols and images, the novel suggests the annihilating effect of capitalism by portraying its products as monstrous and frightening entities via the eyes of Flora. Thus, the classic perspective is reversed; from the viewpoint of nature, culture is criticized. Flora, while foraging, described the harvesting machines as "sublime monsters" that could recklessly make their way into the fields, hurling anything in their path the mercilessly away: "Before Flora knew it a beauty of dragonflies was upon them, mesmerizing and terrible in their iridescent armor. Moving with astonishing speed and agility, the sublime monsters cut through the field, taking bees out of the air—and then they were gone, high and distant before any could cry alarm" (Paull, 2014, p. 196).

The scene illustrates capitalism's cultural hegemony over nature, and women, because it alludes to agricultural mass production that necessitates deforestation, which in turn results in the erosion of soil, corruption of human and non-human ecosystems (Giri, 2019, p. 228). Vandana Shiva illustrates the dangerous impact of multinational companies on nature and indigenous people especially women who are responsible to secure food and water to their homes. Flora, as a female character or as an insect, is like those women whose daily activities become hard because their environment is corrupted:

Deforestation, as well as replacement of mixed forests with eucalyptus or Chir pine groves, has degraded not only the environment, but also the condition of these women. They often need to spend the entire day gathering fuel and fodder, not only an exhausting task in itself, but one that makes cooking and the care of children more difficult. In addition, as the mixed forests are destroyed, springs and streams dry up and the women must go further for water. In short, the degradation of the forest environment means more work and suffering for the rural village women (as cited in Taylor, 2005, p. 775).

Dwelling on the same strategy of employing symbols, the author suggests the hazardous effect and artificiality of the technology when Flora examines a cellular transmission tower thinking that it is a real tree. In the real world, the artificial trees—the cellular towers—are used for aesthetic reasons and to avoid a community uproar because people suspect the



unsafe impact of cellular radiation: "In an era of conspiracy theories about 5G technology, Varnelis said that camouflaging transmission towers as trees may be a precautionary measure" (Miller, 2021). However, its impacts on nature, represented by the bees, are displayed in the novel. The image of the artificial tree alludes to the artificial products of capitalism. The image is placed in contrast to the beech tree, which represents a utopian home for the surviving bees. The presence of the artificial tree suggests the displacement of a natural one whose space is occupied in the interest of capitalism:

One was larger than the rest and its dark green branches barely moved. It was some sort of massive conifer, its leaves stiff and gleaming, its trunk covered in a strangely uniform-colored brown bark. Some of its branches appeared to be made completely of metal, and a dismal emanation transmitted from its core, like a prayer mumbled backward. It had no smell and its energy was neither living nor dead. (Paull, 2014, p. 161)

According to Flora's point of view, the simulacra of the tree is arduous and sad, and the prayers that it spreads are "mumbled backward." This indicates that the promise that capitalism makes of development and prosperity is both false and retrograde. The camouflaged cellular towers best represent capitalist hegemony because they are expanding massively everywhere to ensure the continuity of communication. In other words, to ensure the stability of the profits of capitalism that result from advertisements. It also guarantees the system's hegemony over the individual because the cellular phones enable surveillance. Moreover, the data of the individual becomes a commodity in exchange for the free internet services presented on the web. The result is what is called "surveillance capitalism," according to Shoshana Zuboff in her article "Big Other: Surveillance Capitalism and the Prospects of an Information Civilization." She also says, "With the new logic of accumulation that is surveillance capitalism, a fourth fictional commodity emerges as a dominant characteristic of market dynamics in the 21st century" (Zuboff, 2015, p. 85).

1.7. Conclusion

To sum up, the novel condemns totalitarian systems. To subvert the system, the novel suggests many things. The first is free education and critical thinking through questioning every piece of information and examining its validity in the real world. The second is the interconnectedness among human beings, regardless of their race, gender, and class. The novel celebrates motherhood and presents it as a means of



liberation. The novel promotes women's rights to use their bodies and not be submissive to the system's objectives. The novel celebrates the beauty of nature via splendid description and poetic language; however, nature is not presented as a passive receiver of actions. The novel alludes to the agency nature has via images and symbols, especially the images of trees and flowers. The novel alludes to the negative impact of capitalism on man and nature. The novel shows how capitalism objectivizes them and promotes consumerism.

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