

Commodified bodies and instrumentalized ecology: A new materialist ecofeminist reading of *The Good Earth*

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Abstract: This research offers new materialist ecofeminist reading of Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth*. It posits that compassion and importance are conditional upon capitalism and patriarchal objectives, wherein women and earth are considered of any value only when they fulfil economic, reproductive and utilitarian needs. Although existing literature highlights ecocritical concerns, it often neglects the intertwined oppression of women and the environment within patriarchal structures. This study combines ecofeminist perspectives with the new materialist approach to examine how the novel, *The Good Earth* portrays human and non-human entities, highlighting a diffused agency that challenges patriarchal dominance. It contributes to a broader discourse on sustainability, gender justice, and socio-ecological equity. This study offers to researchers, activists, and educators, a critical perspective to understand how literature poses and critiques the intertwined oppression of women and nature within patriarchal systems.

Keywords: ecofeminism, new materialism, ecology, patriarchal capitalism, agency

Introduction

With the rise of environmental concerns and the ongoing debate on gender inequalities, literature has emerged as an influential platform, portraying the ways through which women and nature are exploited by the patriarchal and capitalist systems. Within this framework, women and nature are getting affected in multiple forms of exploitation and marginalisation. The search aims to study such a form of exploitation portrayed in Pearl S. Buck's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Good Earth* ([1931] 2012).

This novel presents a clear picture of the Chinese rural life through the portrayal of a poor Chinese farmer, Wang Lung and his wife O-

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Lan. It portrays land, labor and gender roles within patriarchal-capitalist framework. It is centred on the issues of poverty, struggle to survive and farming. O-Lan, who labor tirelessly throughout the story without complains, can be compared to the land, fertile, and powerful, and ultimately exhausted in serving his family (Cao 2019).

With this novel, Pearl Buck (illustrates man and nature relationship, a recurrent theme across her work. It is the first book of the author's *House of Earth* trilogy followed by *Sons* (1932), and *A House Divided* (1935). Other novels, *The Mother* (1934), *Pavilion of Women* (1946), and *Peony* (1948) show Buck's thematic continuities align closely with ecofeminist philosophy, which emphasizes the analogues forms of control and commodification experienced by women and the environment (Phillips 2020, 157-160). New materialism extends this perspective by refusing the conventional human and non-human dichotomy (Fo and Alldred 2019, 1). It highlights the agency of matter, such as soil and bodies as active contributors to the formation of life.

By reading Buck's *The Good Earth* through this interconnected framework, the present study examines how value is constructed around productivity; care is conditional; and systems of domination obscure the mutual interdependence between humans and the material world. Ultimately, the novel functions as a tale of endurance, wherein land and women are considered only in the times of necessity and overlooked in the times of prosperity.

Background

Recent years, marked by the growing ecological concerns such as climate change, deforestation, rising water levels, and resource depletion, clearly indicate that our planet is under serious threat (Liu et al. 2025). This ecological catastrophe is not a standalone phenomenon; rather it is deeply connected with existing systems of social inequalities, such as patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism, affecting both, the ecosystem and marginalised communities, particularly women.

For instance, In South Asia, despite women's significant contributions to agricultural labor in collaborative production systems, their productivity is consistently devalued and limited due to deep-rooted gender-based inequalities (Islam et al. 2024). Though collaborating on the same work, men and women adopt distinct gender specific roles influenced by socio-cultural conventions. Across culture and histories, women's bodies have been treated much like the land,

sources of labor, fertility, and reproduction, valued for their productivity and often disregarded when no longer usable.

Exploration of intersection between gender and ecological discourse has evolved from several viewpoints, particularly within ecofeminist and postcolonial environmental studies. Val Plumwood, Vandana Shiva, and Greta Gaard have argued on the patriarchal and capital system perpetuating gendered inequality and ecological destruction (Hulluru and Sebastian 2025). Their works have been used as a foundation to examine texts in which the suffering of women is interconnected with degradation of the environment.

Bathwal (2025) contributes to the discourse of ecofeminism since it places the ecological problem in the environment of rural Indian women. It shows with a clear demonstration of the symbolic and masterfully exploitative nature of land and female bodies in the institutions of patriarchal and economic oppression, but, however, much of the modern ontological standpoints are omitted by the studies, they are referenced metaphorically or in representations only.

Seiji's (1975) 'Nostalgia for Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth*' offers a valuable interpretation of western reception of the novel by Buck and how it influenced the perception of the Chinese rural life. It goes a long way in helping understand how literary stories may produce and reproduce cultural imaginaries. The article focuses on the socio-historical approach, neglecting the ecological and gendered dimension in the novel.

Moreover, Gamble et al. (2019) in 'What is new materialism' provide a theoretical base to understanding the phenomenon of new materialist ideas. Despite providing the theoretical groundwork to philosophical study, the article fails to apply these theoretical findings to the literary study, which leaves it lacking in understanding the way the new materialist concepts work within narrative frameworks, characters, or themes within fiction.

MacGregor (2020) contends that material practices have constantly been crucial to ecofeminist philosophy and cautions against the obliteration of fundamental feminist contributions. Although the study presents significant political and theoretical issues, it mostly resides within domain of environmental sociology and activism. Consequently, it does not examine how literature may facilitate or represent these material behaviours.

Thus, existing literature provides substantial insights that cover ecofeminist interpretations, materialist reinterpretations, and cultural

criticism. Nonetheless, most studies regard ecofeminism and new materialism as separated rather than synthesizing them into a unified analytical framework. These studies explore symbolic representation, gendered embodiment, or material agency independently. The interplay of gendered experiences, ecological influences, and non-human agency in the co-production of meaning and resistance remains insufficiently examined.

Theoretical framework

Ecofeminism arose in the late 20th century as a critical response to environmental degradation and gender inequality. (Nhanenge 2011) Francoise d'Eaubonne introduced the term in 1974, in her work *Le Féminisme ou la mort*. With Vandana Shiva, Val Plumwood, and Carolyn Merchant, the western philosophy's content has developed by favoring a set of binary oppositions, man/woman, reason/emotion, mind/body, culture/nature that have legitimized hierarchical social and ecological frameworks (Khalil and Abdelsabour 2018). These hierarchies have not only legitimized the oppression of women but also endorsed the domination of nature.

Ecofeminism asserts that these forms of oppression are not incidental but profoundly interconnected (Nhanenge 2011). It posits that every endeavour to rectify ecological problems must concurrently tackle gender inequality, and vice versa. This theory advocates for 'co-operation' over 'control', 'connection' over 'separation', and 'mutual gain' over 'hierarchical supremacy'. Power must be reconsidered as not an instrument of force or subjugation and hierarchy, but as relational force based on harmony and interdependence. This change of societal mentality is essential because it redefines how value is given to the women and also to nature, and how they have historically been marginalised and exploited.

With the growing global warming and the persistence of gender injustice, this reconceptualization is more and more urgent. Ecofeminism is therefore an indispensable framework where these related crises can be studied together as a whole instead of individual problems. Ecofeminism places environmental degradation and patriarchal oppression in a single due analytical context and thus, discovering the mutual roots and pushing towards extensive, inclusive solutions, it focused on justice, sustainability and collective good (Nhanenge 2011).

Historical connections

The systematic commodification and exploitation of nature are depicted by the historical oppression of women, who were excluded in the rights to property, political representation, and economic control (Lvova 2013). This kind of parallel can be observed in the examples of the Chipko movement in 1970s, when the women in rural India staged a movement to protect the forests against commercialisation, and it forms obvious that the exploitation of nature and marginalisation of women are the products of the same very structure of domination (Sharma 2025).

This interconnected history demonstrates that the marginalisation of women and environmental degradation are continually associated, forming the basis for the ecofeminist claim that both types of oppression stem from the same patriarchal viewpoint.

Symbolic connections

Women and nature are often represented through similar imagery in religion, literature, and common discourse. Terms such as ‘mother earth’, ‘virgin land’, ‘fertile soil’, and ‘barren woman’, figuratively associate female bodies with landscapes, implying that both are subject to domination, control and exploitation for growth.

Political connections

The political engagement of women, such as anti-nuclear demonstrations and organizing of seed-saving initiatives, exemplifies their dual dedication to social justice and ecological preservation. Mahor (2016, 18) emphasizes that these forms of activism demonstrate how women frequently find themselves at the intersection of environmental conservation and human rights advocacy.

For example, in a recent study, titled, ‘A feminist community-based participatory action research approach to advance climate justice’, researchers have used a feminist-informed community based participatory action research (f-CBPAR) framework to demonstrate how gendered, racialized, and class based power structures generate environmental injustice in a rural community of California (Cannon 2025). The study argues that feminist community participation exposes systemic disparities, such as the excessive environmental burdens to marginalised women, and assist in building community-based resistance toward climate justice. Furthermore, The Green Belt movement, established in Kenya in 1977, is a prominent worldwide

instance of women leading environmental advocacy (Kinoti 2022, 40-44). They integrate tree planting, women's economic empowerment and land rights, and also community based ecological governance. These initiatives underscore how women's contribution in environmental activism demands alternative models based on community autonomy, ecological sustenance and participatory governance.

Theoretical connections

The theoretical importance of ecofeminism is its ability to synthesize various critiques such as feminism, postcolonialism, environmental justice and modern materialism. These interdisciplinary relationships allow more detailed study of systemic oppression and have holistic alternatives.

Ecofeminism criticizes ideological and cultural systems, the new materialism goes further by focusing on the material world and its agency, activity and influence on human experience. New materialism does not only concentrate on the human relations with nature but on things like the body, landscape, objects, construct reality. Theorists like Karen Barad, Jane Bennett and Rosi Braidotti argue that matter is neither passive nor inactive, but instead active and related (Diener 2020).

New materialism is the result of an aversion to ideational conceptions of the world, especially those that see nature as background or metaphor. According to the new materialism, the material and symbolic world are closely linked and non-human agents like land, weather, and even the pull of the gravity should be taken into consideration.

Relating new materialism to ecofeminism offers a more detailed approach to power understatement, which is identity and resistance. Since ecofeminism argues against hierarchical and exploitative ideologies, new materialism focuses on the material circumstances and pressures that support such systems. As a whole, they offer a comprehensive approach to the interpretation of the participation of both human and non-human animals in the systems of control and even engagement in the process of resistance and rejuvenation.

Ecofeminism should be integrated with the new materialism at a time when social and ecological crisis need innovative thinking. Such a two-lens makes easier comprehensive interpretations. It helps us to transcend the symbolic interpretation of the natural world and gender,

as well as to appreciate the powerful role of environment and matter in making up narrative and meaning. Additionally, it acknowledges the intersection of ideology and physical realities in perpetuating oppression or facilitates resistance. In this way, the study aims to enhance the expanding of discourse that challenges hierarchical perspectives and advocates for a more relational, egalitarian comprehensive of human and non-human interconnections.

Discussion

Commodification of female body and ecofeminist materiality

In *The Good Earth*, O-Lan's character illustrates the material-discursive interconnection of women and nature within patriarchal capitalism. She is not only metaphorically connected to the land, her body, like the soil, is also cultivated, relied upon, and ultimately abandoned. Her labor, both agricultural and reproductive, is essential to Wang Lung's prosperity, yet her individuality remains suppressed. This reflects the commodification of nature and female bodies through analogous principle of instrumentalization. Her commodification begins before she even enters Wang Lung's family, as she is characterized by the House of Hwang in objectifying terms:

'Take her and use her well, she is a good slave, although somewhat slow and stupid, and had I not wished to acquire merit at the temple for my future existence by bringing more life in to the world. I should have kept her, for she is good enough for the kitchen.' (Buck 2012, 19)

Here, O-Lan is not given an agency; she is strictly a collection of utilitarian values, which can be reflected in the argument by Vandana Shiva (2014) who argues that development as a masculinist idea of extracting resources is an idea that sees land and women as a resource to produce but does not acknowledge them as partners in survival. Her pain and physical degradation are made to be normal and invisible. O-Lan's silence is not structural only but individual as well, it is a construct that eliminates the voice of the ones who give life. According to Plumwood (2002), this tendency is called backgrounding where women and nature, which are the important contributors are lost in the view of normalities.

The substitution of O-Lan by Lotus, a prostitute, highlights the way capitalist patriarchy judges people mostly by their looks and output. O-Lan embodies the spirit of resistance, and the characters of Lotus are sexualized femininity, commodified femininity, an embodiment of an

image of beauty. This distinction depicts how the femininity is disrupted and instrumentalized, the progression of land in terms of fertility or economic output.

It is sociably better to have the ugly woman, than the hundredth beauty. (Buck 2012, 11) The economy of utility is gendered and this is displayed in the above given line. The death of O-Lan and his sickness is the result of the material drain. Like overexploited soil, she is completely exhausted. The fact that she internalized the logic of patriarchy by agreeing to sell her daughter and yet she was sold herself is an example of the ecofeminist oppression mechanism, which does not only work forever but also serves as a system of assimilation.

The collapse of ethical and ecological bonds

The sons of Wang Lung represent a significant divergence from the values that once tied his family to the land. Unlike his father, whose relationship with the land, though ownership based, he still involved direct contact and dependence. His grandchildren are raised in wealth and urban environment, completely disengaged from manual labor and the concept of subsistence. For them, land is not more sacred, living or reciprocal. Their ideology is grounded in instrumental values, entities, encompassing land and individuals; it has significance solely to the extent that they fulfil personal ambition.

This detachment is not merely social or cultural, but ontological. From a new materialism ecofeminist standpoint, the son's perspectives illustrate a loss of relational ontology, that human and non-human existences are mutually constitutive. The land no longer occupies a role in their ethical or emotional framework. Their desire to sell the land signifies more than greed; it indicates a failure to acknowledge that matter possess agency, significance, and the capacity for life making. They acquire world affluence but lack ecological awareness, thus disconnecting themselves from the cycles that formerly sustained their ancestors.

'I am no longer young and it is not necessary for me to work anymore with my hands since I have men on my land and my sons and peace in my house.'
(Ibid, 232)

The above line spoken by Wang Lung represents the beginning of ethical relaxation. Although throughout the novel, Wang Lung remains rooted in the land, this particular example signifies a circumstantial shift in his ethical involvement, his peace and prosperity now permit

him to disengage physically, suggesting that ethics may change with the economic comfort. The moral connection to the land weakens as material conditions is improved, paving the way for further ethical erosion in the next generation.

‘This field we will sell and this one, and we will divide the money between us evenly. Your share I will borrow at good interest, for now with the railroad straight through I can ship rice to the sea and I . . .’ (Ibid, 292)

Furthermore, the above spoken by sons of Wang Lung, highlights the commodification of the land. It underscores the total instrumentalization of nature. The land is no longer a living legacy but an asset to be converted into cash. The son’s reasoning is stepped in capitalist rationality, assessing value solely based on return and profit. The mention of ‘railroad’, a symbol of industrial modernity, suggests the onset of a masculinist, extractive rationale that disrupts emotional and spiritual associations with the land. The role of land as co-actor is erased; it becomes a passive and silent asset.

Their values are shaped by the city, education and the pursuit of appearance and autonomy. In this context, tradition becomes burdensome and the land becomes dispensable. They signify the spread of patriarchy, capitalist modernity that demonstrate lack of affection towards nature or sustainability. The land has lost its status of a co-actor but become silent, an inert entity. This method is not merely a generational one, but also an ideological one. Cultural importance of land becomes a form of trade leading to collapse of relational fabric of both human and non-human life. This story can therefore be described as a tragedy since the land which was a bonding factor amongst the families is now left by those who were supposed to be the heirs.

Treatment of nature

The land is symbolically used as a backdrop, as well as it is a dynamic force, which is an inseparable part of human life, identity, and integrity. The dependability of Wang Lung on the land shows that it is valuable; however, his approach to the land is often dominated by an attitude of conquer as opposed to one of appreciation. His connection to the land is based on property and consumption, and this will be anthropocentric based on the ideas of dualism as holds by Val Plumwood (2002) that considers nature as dependent and instrumental.

However, the story as such contradicts this perception. The land is unyielding, it cultivates, responds, denies and punishes. The famine erases the distinction between human and non-human by making people eat the very stuff that has been supporting them all this time, showing the agency of matter and its power over human fate. Moreover, in novel, Wang Lung's reliance on land is imperative though his association lies in property as opposed to mutual gain. He takes out of the earth without acknowledging it as a living partner, which is similar to dualist domination that Val Plumwood (2002) presents where nature is considered non-equivalent and instrumental.

'It is the breaking-up of a family--when they start to sell the land, he said brokenly.' ... 'Out of the land we came and into it we shall go--and, if you will keep thy land, no one can rob thee of land.' (Buck 2012, 292)

These were the lines which symbolized the strong bond between man and the earth. In this case the earth is not only depicted as a passive background but as a living object that is tightly connected with the existence, and existence of the society and its wellbeing. The land, much like the feminine body is presented as a place of permanence, nourishment and strength, which needs to be taken care of and pondered upon.

The new materialist lens states that the land is not a passive matter but dynamic matter, an active part of the creation of life. It responds, sustains, and punishes. It deconstructs the illusory distinction between human and non-human, reminding readers that matter, like soil, has influence over human destiny. When Wang Lung is showing positive response and care towards the land, humility and balance are present; but when he acquires wealth and becomes detached to it, moral decay ensues. The land, in this work, is not simply a setting but a co-actor and a moral agent. This relationality is fundamental to the new materialist ecofeminism, which posits that non-human matter is not passive but intra-active, affecting and being affected within relational ontologies.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates a pattern of instrumental value woven in *The Good Earth*, wherein appreciation is based not in inherent worth but in usefulness and productivity. Although Wang Lung demonstrates reverence for the land, his admiration is contingent. Land is valued because it nourishes his family, and enhances his fortune. Likewise, O-

Lan's importance is only recognized in terms of her labor, and reproduction. The moment either loses their capacity to serve, their significance fades. O-Lan and the land are both important to Wang Lung's survival and success, yet their contributions are normalised and forgotten. They are remembered during the times of hardship and overlooked during the times of affluence.

An ecofeminist perspective elucidates the common mechanism of commodification, demonstrating how patriarchal systems reduce both the feminine and the environment to mere resources that are exploited, owned and replaced. New materialism extends this argument by dismissing the subject-object dichotomy. It posits that bodies, soil, seasons, and other matters are not passive or inert; rather they are active and co-constitutive forces in the world.

Ultimately, *The Good Earth* serves as a literary example, critiquing extractive principles. It highlights the cost of dismissing reciprocity; when land and women are considered important only for their usefulness, both become the domains of exhaustion. This research advocates for revaluation of value, care, and agency, with an appeal for egalitarian, relational and sustainable framework that emphasizes interdependence rather than dominance.

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