



## Tracing Verticality: A Critical Study of *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*

Anum Ilyas<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

#### Article History:

##### Received:

September 29, 2023

##### Accepted:

December 26, 2023

#### Funding:

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

This paper investigates the (de)construction of binaries vis-à-vis the verticality of women in domestic and epistemic domains in Nayomi Munawera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*. In doing so, the study employs Greeta Gaard's concept of naturalization of women and feminization of nature which refer to the process of using binaries as a means to ensure that women remain on a horizontal position in the vertically moving structure of power. Being in a horizontal position, both women and nature are not powerful. Through this theoretical lens, this study explores the reasons of horizontality by investigating the patriarchal thoughts of society that categorize women as aquatic, domestic and wild animals through the use of animalistic language to show their restricted movement. The animalization reflects the subjugation of women in the hands of *capitalist man*. The study also focuses on feminization of nature which is feminized because of its caring and reproductive attributes. These shared attributes allow patriarchal ideologies to dominate women and nature through oppressive strategies. The discussion on animalization and naturalization underscores the constraints imposed on women and their mobility within sociocultural context. Furthermore, this paper takes into consideration the traumatic experiences, sufferings and exploitation of rape victims and highlights how female characters break the societal sanctions, and resurface in order to move vertically while deconstructing the binaries of male-female, Sinhala-Tamil, and human-nonhuman. The deconstruction of binaries creates an inclusive society without discrimination of the oppressed and the privileged. It also highlights that we need to treat all living creatures equally with compassion. I use Catherine Belsey's method of textual analysis in order to analyze the selected text.

**Keywords:** binaries, nature, patriarchy, ecofeminism, women, exploitation

<sup>1</sup> Lecturer at Department of Social Sciences, Iqra University, Islamabad



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 International License \(CC BY-NC 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

## I

The main title of my research paper provides the essence of my argument and the selected text provides plenty of space to trace vertical mobility of women in different spheres of life. Sylvia Plath initially used the idea of verticality in one of her poems, "I am Vertical", and the relevance of title may be explicated by briefly looking at Plath's argument. Though she expresses her death wish in the first line "But I would rather be horizontal", her poetic expression that "I am not a tree with my root in the soil" (Plath, 1981, p. 162) shows that she is not grounded and lacks power. Horizontality is akin to death and shows passivity like land while verticality denotes power structure within society. This research paper first discusses horizontality where women are naturalized/animalized and then focuses on the upward mobility of women in different institutes when binaries are deconstructed. I also want to elucidate that chosen title does not depend on postmodern rhizomatic concept of horizontality espoused by Deleuze and Guattari. The subtitle of my project states that I intend to make critical reading of Munaweera's text. For making a critical reading of the text, I relied on Greeta Gaard's eco-feminist theory for analyzing the naturalized and animalized position of women in different institutes that underpins binaries as main cause of almost all emerging issues. Women's marginalized position is equated with horizontality and my research states that humans need to dismantle the binaries of male/female, human/non-human, and Tamil-Sinhala for the health of this planet and it will also help women move vertically upward.

This study investigates the ecofeminist concerns of Nayomi Munaweera in her novel *An Island of Thousand Mirror*. Employing Greeta Gaard's lens, I attempt to examine how ecofeminist issues figure in my selected text. The common thread that runs across the selected work is the treatment of women and nature in the backdrop of Sri Lankan civil war. The main argument of the study is that women and nature are subjected to oppression in almost similar modes. Investigating the reasons of their subordinate positions, I explore the possible solution to these problem for "sav[ing] the earth" (Gaard, 1993, p. 5). I argue that women and nature seem to be equally exploited at the hands of capitalist man with his baggage of bias in terms of class, race, and gender. One of the main concerns in ecofeminism is to dismantle the existing binaries and liberate women and nature from the clutches of capitalist patriarchal strangleholds. The men-women binaries, I argue, are man-made and there is a dire need to deconstruct these binaries for the vertical mobility of women.

Using the research method of textual analysis, I examine the treatment of women as land and trace their exploitation. Munaweera raises the issues of marriage and literacy in Sri Lanka through her characters. While figuring out the treatment of women in different institutions, I scrutinize construction and deconstruction of binaries in the text. The reading of the selected text explores the animalization of women and feminization of nature that has created binaries

which result into war. Therefore, there is a dire need for women to dismantle those binaries to move vertically. Furthermore, I have also teased out the trauma of patriarchy's victims.

I have divided into four sections: the first section briefly introduces my project while the second one discusses in detail the theoretical framework. The third section presents the detailed analysis of the selected novel and the last section concludes this research.

## II

Greeta Gaard has contributed to the theory of ecofeminism by writing *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals and Nature*. Her article, "Living Interconnections with Animals and Nature" provides me the theoretical support for my project and helps explore the novel under investigation. In this essay, Gaard claims that the western thought has "devalued whatever is associated with women," while it has simultaneously "elevat[ed] in value those things which are associated with men" (1993, p. 5). Ecofeminists believe that the ideology that sanctions the oppression of race, gender and class is the same ideology which gives approval of the oppression of nature. Along the same lines, humans consider themselves superior to nature, they want to dominate it for their own betterment.

This paper also focuses on the feminization of nature because of its caring and reproductive attributes. These shared attributes allow patriarchal ideologies to dominate women and nature through oppressive strategies. The animalization of women underscores the constraints imposed on women and their mobility in different institutes. While animalizing women and feminizing nature, we put both of them in a worthless inferior position. Being in an inferior position, they are vulnerable to exploitation. Gaard asserts that "naturalizing or animalizing women has served as justification for the domination of women, animals, and the earth" (1993, p.5). I focus on Gaard's concepts to trace feminization of nature and animalization of women that has justified the oppression of both of them. From my position of a researcher, I see that all these biases result in the exploitation and distortion of natural landscape.

Furthermore, environmental degradation results in poor quality of life. In a polluted environment, the basic necessities of life are impure and, at times, unavailable. They start depleting and, consequently, humans suffer. As Gaard states: "another connection between feminism, animal liberation, and environmentalism has been made by documenting the effects of environmental pollution and degradation on the lives of women and animals" (1993, p. 5). All these problems seem to reinforce the system of oppression. Then, Gaard moves forward to explain that the poor quality of life for women, people in the third world, and the environment "demonstrates that sexism, racism, classism, and naturism are mutually strengthening the system of oppression" (1993, p. 5).

The ultimate aim of ecofeminism seems to be the idea that all humans are equal regardless of their gender, race or class, therefore, dismantling the facade of these dichotomies help liberate women and nature from the shackles of oppression. Gaard's suggestion regarding these issues is that "no attempt to liberate women (or any other oppressed group) will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature" (1993, p. 1). The common thread that runs throughout Gaard's theory is that women and nature should be liberated simultaneously for the progress of this world. It seems impossible to liberate only women while ignoring nature. Being inclusivist, Gaard makes ecofeminism a multifaceted approach by including animals, nature and women and most importantly she does not exclude men. Gaard concludes her essay that "this theory is dedicated to create a sustainable way of life for all inhabitants on earth," (1993, p. 10) however, men should also play their part in order to protect this world from ecological crisis. She further adds: "for if one thing is certain, it is that women alone cannot "save the earth"-we need the efforts of men as well" (Gaard, 1993, P. 5). Humans are powerful, therefore, they can save the earth "the earth is depending on us" (Gaard, 1993, p. 304). To Gaard, the only way out of these lurking problems is to get men and women working as humans to protect this land from exploitation. This project deploys Greta Gaard's concepts to explore the ecofeminist concerns of Munaweera in the selected text.

As I embark on ecofeminist study of Sri Lankan fiction, the textual analysis stands out as the most suitable research method for my project. While scrutinizing the selected text, I have taken the interpretive approach to analyze the text and make sense of its meanings. While interpreting the selected text, textual analysis has empowered me to do a subjective reading. Of my selected text. Catherine Belsey notes in her article "*Textual Analysis as a Research Method*" that the researcher cannot interpret something without knowledge from elsewhere and this knowledge comes from secondary sources, and she explains the reason that "the first impulse of many researchers, confronted by an unfamiliar text, is to look up what others have said about it on the internet, in the library, and in bibliographies provided for the purpose" (Griffin & Belsey, 2005, p. 157). Textual analysis does not exclude history; therefore, I have tried to examine the selected novel in historical context also, like the effects of civil war on the people of Sri Lanka.

### III

In order to carry out the analysis, I have chosen *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* to see how Sri Lankan writer talks about the exploitation of women and the destruction of landscapes. The selected text brims with vivid details where women are within certain confines and they don't have access to privileged positions within patriarchal society. There is a deep relationship between hierarchy and subordination. The basic idea this research paper explores women characters' efforts for verticality which, I argue, might not be possible unless we

look at their marginal roles through their animalization when it is treated together with feminization of nature. I discuss these two ideas together in this section. The animalization of women shows their horizontal position and creates a dichotomy between men and women as well as between humans and non-humans. Gaard divides humans in two groups: the privileged, and oppressed and she believes that sexism, racism, and classism mutually strengthen the system of oppression. The aim of ecofeminism is to dismantle the hierarchy of patriarchy in order to liberate women from the oppressed group of society so they could progress in various aspects of life. Being a South Asian writer, Munaweera has shown a sharp interest in Sri Lankan culture, by addressing gender-based inequalities with astonishing clarity of mind. I discuss how women are animalized and naturalized that underscores the constraints imposed on women and their mobility within sociocultural context. While doing a deconstruction of binaries, I critically evaluate the verticality of women in domestic and epistemic domains.

Greta Gaard lays out the modes of animalization of women by discussing the domination philosophy and she explores how anything associated with women is devalued, and how their horizontality is ensured by a capitalist patriarchal system. From an androcentric point of view, these categories dehumanize women and open them up to exploitation. As animals are considered inferior to humans, reducing women to animal positions through metaphors and similes (in the novel) is like giving them a vulnerable position. Getting out of this vulnerability sets them off to negotiating verticality. Thus, this paper sets out to investigate more than just pictorial presentations of these images but to discover the treatment of women in Munaweera's hand. This is a sort of discrimination and it needs to be addressed in critical terms. In her novel, Munaweera tries to encapsulate the patriarchal thoughts of society by describing women in animalistic terms or the imagery of birds.

The imagery of birds in her text throws the theme of ecofeminism into sharp relief. Comparison with birds is a derogatory construction for women and, in some cases, birds are pets too. In this novel, Munaweera effects dance moves in her description as water is pouring and rushing over the skin and she presents the movement of arms like a bird fluttering in the air. This fluttering in the air may be interpreted as a call of all caged up women, crying for freedom. In *A Doll's House*, Ibsen also gives certain bird names to Nora that is love on the surface but, actually, he dehumanizes her (1985, p. 65). While feeding her children with rice and fried fish, Munaweera presents Beatrice as a "bird" and her children as "chicks" and she is like "a bird feeding its chicks" (2012, p. 9). Munaweera Placing women on par with nature generates a regular concern for critical attention in the novel. They share a common bond with nature, caring and nurturing, eventually, vulnerable to exploitation. The animals also possess the same quality as they feed and take care of their offspring. This shows that the only duty of women is to bring up children and nurse them. As Rodriguez also holds much of the same stance that the bird' metaphors focus on "the senses of small size, youth,

domesticity and entertainment” (2009, p. 86). This is how Beatrice is domesticized. Being small in size, like a bird, she does not do anything great rather than feeding and nursing her children. However, she is imprisoned by patriarchy.

The birds are source of food and eating of meat is related to sexuality. Munaweera’s comparing women with birds, however, seems to present them as sexual objects. She describes Miss Rajasingham’s saree that has “thin gold border in the shape of swirling peacocks,” (2012, p. 141) rather seductive, and her husband comes to see her in the school. The seductiveness of attire reinforces my argument that women are sexual objects and, that is why they are presented as birds. Catherine Belsey’s statement in *Textual Analysis as Research Method* explains that knowledge from elsewhere helps in the interpretation of the text, and the following secondary sources strengthen my claim. Margaret N. Barasa, and Isaac Nilson Opande in their article titled “The Use of Animal Metaphors in the Representation of Women in Bukusu and Gusii Proverbs in Kenya” write that the chicken nourishes our body and the small size bird signals towards edibility. Being small, women “must serve the men in all capacities; including serving as meat (the term meat has sexual innuendoes)” (2017, p.96). Being nothing more than an object of desire, women are, therefore, depicted as birds devoid of any presence similar to Margaret Atwood’s handmaids in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. They are compelled to serve as producers for commanders.

In *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*, Nayomi Munaweera’s characters proffer an insight into the nature of men as hunter. They hunt those animals that are inferior to them and this is how they satiate their appetite of supremacy in the world. Fishing has been the profession of men from the beginning of time. In the novel, Nishan has a soft corner for Radhini who is “jerked upward like a fish plucked out of water by a cormorant’s skewering beak” (Munaweera 2012, p. 25). This treatment like fish not only showcases Nishan’s emotional affinity with Radhini but also highlights her vulnerability to exploitation as prey. Being fragile, she is unable to defend herself against Sinhalas who consider her Tamil. Steve Harvey in *Act like a Lady Think like a Man* also discusses the innate nature of men as hunters and he states that “[m]en are, by nature, hunters and women have been put in the position of being the prey” (2009, p. 70). This association between women and nature reinforces Greeta Gaard’s argument and perpetuates their horizontality in different contexts.

Munaweera illustrates that women are too sensitive to survive the harsh weather and they may wither away. Ananda assumes that summers “will be hot enough to turn [his nieces] into dried fish,” (2012, p. 97) and that is quite derogatory. Saraswathi, the second narrator of the novel, also considers herself a fish and hears the curiosity in voices “like open fish mouths just under the surface of the water” (Munaweera, 2012, p. 156). However, the arrival of hunters gives fish a fright under the water. Saraswathi further considers herself a parched fish being

“stranded in the paddy fields after a storm. I drink and drink, but always, my throat is dry” (2012, p. 156). Drinking water does not quench her thirst and her parched throat highlights the sufferings of women. Munaweera writes that “[w]hen she falls asleep, it is in exhaustion, like losing a wrestling match or drowning” (2012, p. 44). The one who loses the match is not a man, but a woman. At one point in the novel, she demonstrates that the fishermen wrestle with the turtles and, in the same way, patriarchs wrestle with women in different domains of life.

The civil war has contaminated the sea water and, consequently, seafood is no longer safe for consumption. Greeta Gaard emphasizes that environmental degradation results in poor quality of life and Munaweera’s characters suffer because of water pollution. The water is germ-infested because of dead bodies being dumped there that “whoever eats lagoon fish gets sick and vomits for days” (2012, p. 137). Beatrice Muriel buys Thora, an expensive fish, and her family eats with great festivity, but there are people who eat dried fish. Munaweera writes that these fish have become completely extinct. Many aquatic animals suffer terribly because of water pollution.

The author gives powerful position to men while talking about the soldiers seducing the young girls. Visaka, being obsessed in love, thinks about Ravan all the time and envisions that “would he bite with those perfectly white, slightly wolfish teeth?” (Munaweera, 2012, p. 40). At another point in the novel, she makes an attempt to map out women’s vengeance by subverting power relationship. For example, being ferocious, Visaka, even in her dream, tears her rival’s belly and exposes her entire circulatory system “like the veins of a leaf, surging with green envy, bright yellow rancor” (2012, p. 45). The molestation of circulatory system is compared with the structure of leaf; however, it proves that like men, women may also exploit women. When women become exploiters of other women, it simultaneously announces their moves in verticality circles. The transformation in Saraswathi’s character is hard to overlook. She articulates that “I am fearless. I am free. Now, I am the predator” (Munaweera, 2012, p. 185). Her acts make her a predator from a prey when she kills soldiers ruthlessly. Saraswathi envisions that her duties heal the wounds of her family that are inflicted by her being spoiled, and she feels that her struggles have made her parents proud “from now on, they will see me as I am, a Tiger with teeth and claws” (2012, p. 192). This may be considered vertical mobility on the part of Saraswathi, though it contains disastrous outcome.

Investigating gendered metaphors, this article examines how comparison of women to cats, dogs and cows perpetuates stereotypical perception of society and how they are carefully examined as sexual object at a domestic level. While scrutinizing a girl for marriage, her physical beauty is taken into consideration and women are being rejected, based on the reason that “her eyes are perhaps bigger than usual, her face a little more feline” (Munaweera, 2012, p. 54). Alice’s

son resents cats as they always congregate wherever he goes. Cats are like a mother “and [he] pushes them gently away with a pointed toe, an impatient foot” (2012, p. 64). When he joins the army, the cats mourn at his departure openly “raising their whiskered faces to the sky and yowling outside the opening of his hut, refusing to eat even the fisherman’s best tidbits for weeks” (2012, p. 65). The mourning of cats may be compared with Alice’s mourning for her son in the opening of the novel. This brings women and cats at the same pedestal. Munaweera writes that “[l]ater we lie like replete kittens on our mothers’ bellies” (2012, p. 59). The kittens are not powerful, they need the warmth of their mothers’ lap.

The image of a dog shows loyalty and dependence but its interpretation varies from culture to culture. Saraswathi is being gang raped, and this incident devalues her in her own eyes and she considers herself a “Tiger Bitch” (Munaweera, 2012, p. 152), a word that is related to promiscuity. Rodriguez also discusses that in some cultures the word bitch shows ugliness and promiscuity and, even in South Asian culture, bitch has negative connotation. Mala is represented as a pet and women think of her “like a puppy dog” (2012, p. 75), as she is always after her husband. Similarly, Yasodhara’s mother calls her daughters doggies and asks them to come and kiss her “with your dirty little dog breath, your filthy little doggie teeth” (2012, p. 113). This image illustrates women as filthy and dirty. A mother uses such disparaging language for her daughter to perpetuate patriarchal thinking. In the light of Greeta Gaard’s concept of animalization, Munaweera animalizes Parvati’s mother that she “mak[es] a noise like a wounded dog” (2012, p. 143) over the death of her daughter. Her portrayal as a dog symbolizes her as an uncivilized being. In Catherine Belsey’s point of view, interpretations vary from culture to culture, as discussed earlier in detail, the symbol of a dog underestimates women. Munaweera puts women in a place where they are controlled. These stereotypical images also restrict women to the boundaries of their houses and also limit their opportunities.

In the novel, attention has also been paid to the treatment of powerless humans as insects. Grandmother keeps check and balance on her grandchildren and “pins [Shiva] like an insect” (Munaweera, 2012, p. 62). Pinning him like an insect confirms that he is not powerful. Similarly, insects are not authoritative, therefore human forces smash them mercilessly. The Tamil and women are powerless and, therefore, marginalized and treated like insects. At another point in the novel, “[t]he girls are giggling at this grown man struggling like an upturned insect” (2012, p. 183). It seems to me that whoever is in a vulnerable position is animalized. Here women are powerful and want to kill the soldier, therefore, the warrior begs for his life. He is being compared to an insect. It seems the play of power. Whoever is powerful subordinates the other, but largely women are animalized as birds, insects, wild, domestic, and aquatic animals in Munaweera’s work, and this animalization mirrors the subjugation of women in the hands of patriarchy.

Fish constitutes a vital dietary component of Sri Lankan cuisine and the comparison of women with marine animals demonstrates that women are to be consumed. Munaweera's attention to Sri Lankan food culture at great length highlights her pivotal interest in indigeneity. In the novel, wherever the word food is mentioned, it is used with mother. Either she looks for food or she cooks food. The narrator of this novel writes that her mother and Shiva's breastfed them. Mothers breast-feed their children and Mother Earth also feeds the children of the earth, human beings. This is how nature is feminized and women are naturalized.

Women and animals exist as separate entities without sharing any natural connection. Gaard and Guri write in their essay "Dismantling Oppression" that the connection between women and animals is not natural. It is "a constructed connection that has been created by patriarchy as a means of oppression" (1993, p. 61). We should deconstruct the binaries in terms of their treatment. They should be accorded compassion and reverence while reevaluating our cognitive paradigm. This strategy may liberate women and nature. Anthropomorphic treatment of animals presents challenges and complexities. The preservation of animals is crucial in order to maintain ecological equilibrium and the killing of animals for recreational activities should be banned. J. M. Coetzee rightly observes, "As for animals, by all means let us be kind to them. But let us not lose perspective. We are all different order of creation from animals. Not higher, necessarily, just different" (Coetzee, 2000, p. 74). If we started treating animals like human that would present challenges due to differences in their instincts and behavior. It seems important to prioritize animals right.

As the novel opens, Munaweera makes an attempt to inform the reader about the values of fresh meat in South Asian countries, especially Sri Lanka. The fishermen's struggle to keep the flesh of octopus fresh in order to attract the customers' attention highlights the modern men's dilemma to find women who are in their early twenties. Like fishermen, mothers express unwillingness to attach the stigma of staleness with their daughters and desire to marry them off at an early age. The fear of growing old and bitter always simmers in women's hearts. Keeping in mind "indigenous patriarchal structure," (Spivak in Spivak, 2013, p 42), Yasodhara's mother wants her to marry young. The apprehensions of a mother plant the seeds of many complexes in the minds of their daughters; therefore, they do whatever society expects from them. Munaweera succinctly puts that there are "obvious reasons" (18) for Alice being unmarried. First of all, she is humped and secondly, she has an illegitimate child. That is why she is stale. This example is enough to explain my stance that no one intends to buy stale meat. Women possibly have a subordinate role in society and Munaweera presents how society treats them differently from men. It seems that some of them are "wedded to patriarchal thinking" (hook, 2010, p. 2). However, despite Sunethra being a teacher, she is cognizant of this patriarchal fact that girls should focus on domestic responsibilities. Similarly, Beatrice also bears some grudges against her daughter Mala, who is black by birth. Sylvia Sunethra herself got married when

she was only 15 and, after the death of her husband, she prepares Visaka for the marriage market by making her “familiar with the intricacies of the Colombo marriage market,” (Munaweera, 2012, p. 31) and her statement “Amma won’t be here to take care of you forever” (2012, p. 35) reinforces the idea that unmarried women need protection. This also shows the apprehensions of mother about the settlement and prosperity of their daughters.

Greta Gaard emphasizes the animalization of women and that essence permeates in the comparative study of the wrestling of fishermen with sharks and the physical molestation of Tamil girl, Saraswathi. Women in the novel are abducted by soldiers who manifest power over them. It demonstrates that rape is not only about physical obliteration, but power. The physical molestation reduces them to an object. The fishermen, being powerful, exert power on sharks and turtles. The fishermen are ruthless with the flesh of sharks; likewise, the soldiers are with that of women. Women are not considered as living beings but an object to satiate soldiers’ carnal desires. Munaweera unravels the sufferings of turtles that “bleed slowly, drip salt tears from the corners of their ancient eyes” (8). This bleeding of turtles symbolizes the loss of innocence of Saraswathi in the ramshackled house, away from her home. She is completely broken and tears flood out of her deep eyes. Patriarchy is, perhaps, rooted in rape. This incident has changed the personality of Saraswathi to a great extent. Birte Heidemann, in his article “The Symbolic Survival of the “living dead”: Narrating the LTTE Female Fighter in Post-War Sri Lankan Women’s Writing,” uncovers the experiences of war in two novels: Nayomi Munaweera’s *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* and Niromi de Soya’s *Tamil Tigress*. While reviewing Munaweera’s work, he compares the picture of opening and closing chapters of Saraswathi’s story and explores the causes that tend to make women suicide bombers. The opening atmosphere is quite serene and peaceful, according to Heidemann: this peaceful imagery echoes silence and, as the story progresses, it changes into “deserted, almost deadly, place, one that is littered with bodies—both dead and alive—of the living dead” (Heidemann, 2017, p. 12). He focuses on the transformation of Saraswathi’s character who relinquishes her high aspirations of becoming a teacher.

Nayomi Munaweera’s capability of keeping an eye open to the sufferings of rape victims and environmental distortion makes it possible to perceive as to what extent patriarchy is involved in the exploitation of both. The incident of rape “precludes the possibility of marriage within [Saraswathi’s] context” (Jayasuriya, 2010, 200). In this patriarchal society, the husband has to showcase the virginity of his wife that “he has married a good girl, an unspoiled girl,” and for this reason, he examines the sheets carefully “to find the splotch of blood that indicates her honor” (Munaweera, 2012, p. 57). The society, being complicit with rapists, gives undue attention to the concept of female chastity that makes the survival of the survivor of sexual violence difficult. As Yasmin Tambiah writes in her article titled “Sexuality and Women’s Rights in Armed Conflict in Sri Lanka” that “a sexually compromised woman or girl foregoes the chance of marrying” (2004, p. 80).

Munaweera's use of word "unspoiled" focuses on the chastity of women. Saraswathi's concept of this word is quite innocent; and initially, she wonders at the word "spoiled," but, later on, she realizes what it means to be spoiled when she herself experiences it. The glance at Parvati's dead body makes Saraswathi think that "they must have a different girl, a stranger" (2012, p. 144). Later on, being "ravaged by the street dogs," she fails to identify her image in the mirror. Her long serpentine like hair now looks like "oily curtains" (2012, p. 157). The dark shadows beneath her eyes and "the dark blossoming marks on [her] wrists and neck" (158) make her horrified. The use of the word "break" makes her an object: "a toy" (2012, p. 45). From the stand point of Catherine Belsey, cultural knowledge plays an important role in the interpretation of sufferings of these victims of patriarchy who undergo traumatic experiences.

While talking about the damaging effects of Sinhala soldiers' conduct, Munaweera brings readers' attention to the issues of environmental destruction in the periphery of war. Catherine Belsey states that cultural criticism does not exclude history, therefore I discuss Sri Lankan civil war between two ethnic groups. The Sinhala soldiers "set fires on front lawns, threw in furniture and children over the wailing of mothers (Munaweera, 2012, p. 83). The burning of bodies smitten the area with stench, all places reek of an unbearable odor, unpleasant for human senses. Moreover, the Sinhala damage the properties of citizens, burn the cars, "looted textile factories from which bolts of cloth lick the sky like dragons' tongues, towers of garbage, bodies blackened beyond recognition, orphans, torn women, and destroyed men" (2012, p. 91). The soldiers ignite houses and drag out the older ones. The atrocities of Sinhala people displace Tamils and they abandon their property over there. Munaweera captures the hideous nature of the situation in this statement: "Arteries, streams, and then rivers of Tamils flow out of the city. Behind them they leave: looted, soot-blackened houses, the unburied or unburned bodies of loved ones, ancestral wealth, lost children, Belonging and Nationalism" (2012, p. 91). These lines are self-explanatory and do not demand an extended analysis. War demolishes the land and human beings suffer. War, as presented in novel, is a responsive entity that may engulf multitude in a single attempt while highlighting the perilous nature of conflict. The conflict engulfs the societies, and it encourages us to contemplate the implications of these issues for the betterment of women and nature.

The women characters in Munaweera's world, being mothers, take care of family and they also excel in professional fields. While moving vertical, they break binaries. Being a teacher, Sylvia Sunethra is quite vigilant and studious and her students' remark that "she has two eyes in the back of her head" (Munaweera, 2012, p. 14) complements her professional competence. She is multitasking and her duties are not confined only to teaching and rearing her children up. She has perfected this art to handle the difficulties of life. The judge sells the land "in order to fund his house-building obsession, he has emptied all the accounts, sold

all the lands” (2012, p. 33). This selling of land is, perhaps, directly linked with looming cauldron of troubles for the family. Women have close association with nature and land, therefore, it may be assumed that by selling the land, Judge sells out all the pending happiness from Sylvia Sunethra’s life. The judge, husband of Sylvia Sunethra, rips and uproots his garden a few days after this incident “the mutilated branches send forth vines” and “[b]irds return once again to build nests in the outstretched arms of the trees” (2012, p. 16). This showcases that it is hard to suppress women, and like these plants, they show upward movement in different spheres of life. They are empowered when they are vertical.

Tackling hard circumstances highlights women’s power to handle difficulties in life. After the death of her husband, unlike other woman of Colombo, Sylvia Sunethra grows very strong, even the other women endorse her strength: “If it was me, I would just die” (Munaweera, 2012, p. 33). However, the death of the Judge leaves the family in great turbulence and the mocking attitude of relatives teaches Sylvia Sunethra some remarkable lessons of life: “she will carry with her into adulthood and whisper into the ears of her children” (2012, p. 34). Similarly, women implant different ideas in the minds of new generations. Munaweera destabilizes the binaries by elevating Sylvia Sunethra’s status, and it is in sync with Greeta Gaard’s theorizing. Though these incidents incredibly perturb the serenity of Sunethra’s life, she still solves these overwhelming problems dexterously. She dismisses the servants and tutors of her children, sells all her dowry in the black market, and she rents the upper portion of her house to Shivalangam, a Tamil.

There is, however, a dire need to talk about the intellectual growth of women. Within the layers of the novel, Munaweera ruminates over this idea of vertical mobility of women. Women are marginalized in education and the pivotal focus of the family is to marry off their daughters. This contrasts sharply with men’s approach to education across the borders who, unlike women, study medicine and engineering. Sunethra has been taught patriarchal thinking through her society, therefore she treats both her children differently. Bell hook’s “Understanding Patriarchy” explicates the same idea that “[o]ur sense of gender roles was learned from our parents, from the ways we saw them behave” (hook, 2010, p. 1). The “jewel in Sylvia Sunethra’s crown” (Munaweera, 2012, p. 31), Ananda, studies medicine in England. Similarly, “Beatrice Muriel dreams of the day her son will enter university” (2012, p. 14). That is how women characters display their growing verticality in their approach to life.

Mala’s trajectory from disenfranchisement to verticality is part of what women do in Munaweera’s text. The birth of Mala, a black girl in Sinhala’s family shows the marginalized status of women. The people of her own community treat her differently, even the women criticize her “scrawny” figure and dark complexion. The family considers her “the boy’s twin and shadow, remains as stubbornly dark as at birth” (Munaweera, 2012, p. 21). Val Pulmwood, in *Feminism*

*and the Mastery of Nature*, claims that women are imprisoned in their traditional roles of mothers and they are invisible creature in all domains of life (1993, p. 41-69). Mala is not allowed to go out all alone and stays with her mother at home while men go wandering. This is a patriarchal rhetoric that women should be confined within four walls, and they should not participate in a productive way. Munaweera treats Mala as a “dreamy doctor,” (21) and her brother a “scholarly boy” (21)). This stereotypical generalization figures forth women fit for domestic chores only.

Mala’s vertical movement emancipates her thoughts regarding educational field and the marital institution. There is immense transformation in Mala, and “a different Mala awakens” (Munaweera, 2012, p. 21) with a different world view of the world. She comes out of the patriarchal walls and plays cricket with boys and climbs trees nimbly. When Mala gains admission in university, her family undermines her success, but “[i]n her happiness, she blooms like a forest orchid” (2012, p. 49). She transcends the traditional binaries specified for women, “to marry whatever smelly uncle was chosen for them” (2012, p.76). Contrary to this idea, she marries the man of her own choice. Mala’s decision of adopting a Tamil girl highlights Gaard’s focus to liberate women from the oppression of racism and sexism. Being insecure in the hands of her father, Poona’s mother throws her at Mala’s gate just to save this little girl from her brutal father. While scrubbing the child, Mala discovers “bruises and lacerations everywhere” (2012, p. 68) and she accepts the girl. However, “[e]very fortnight, her father comes to spew filth in Tamil” (2012, p. 68). The voice of the father causes this little child to be scared, she hides under the table. This “malnourished, dirty little thing” (p. 68) shows “epistemic transformation” and comes out of a “static culture” (Spivak, 2013, p. 41, 42). Mala swells with pride at the immense achievements of her adopted girl as a university professor. Women’s vertical movement within education is a threat to their traditional roles as Malathi de Alwis takes into account these potential threats. She writes that “[t]he education of women, their employment outside the home, their agitation for political rights, their assumption of political office, etc., have been perceived as potential threats to women’s “traditional” roles and status within Ceylonese society at various moments in Ceylonese history” (De Alwis, 2002, p. 675). Mala recalls the time people considered her decision of adopting a Tamil child a madness. They assumed that “she would murder [her] in bed. But now they come with proposals for [her] girl” (Munaweera 204). Mala’s emancipating thoughts make Poona’s vertical movement possible. In doing so, she deconstructs the existing binaries of sexism that is what Gaard expects for the betterment of this planet.

Munaweera seems to be incorporating the idea of deconstruction of binaries and suggests that these binaries are perhaps a social construct to perpetuate differences and legitimize the control of one over the other. Munaweera’s characters of third generation transcend binaries to come out of traditional patriarchal interests. Visaka’s falling in love with a Tamil boy, Ravan,

dismantles the binaries of Tamil-Sinhala. Ravan destabilizes binaries while proposing Visaka by referring to her aunt who married a Sinhala and “[t]here’ll be an uproar for some time, and then they’ll forget” (Munaweera, 2012, p. 43). This reinforces the idea that love between Sinhala and Tamil is there for ages, despite being quite distinct from one another. For instance, Munaweera writes: “who believe that they are descended from the lovemaking between an exiled Indian princess and a large jungle cat,” (6). In the prologue of her novel, there is a vivid description of lovemaking between two opposite ethnic groups, Sinhala and Tamil, and that is materialized at the end of novel. Munaweera’s characters intermingle with foreigners, the introduction of a burgher girl, Nishan’s love in the novel manifests that these categorizations are a social construct. This proves that beyond Tamil and Sinhala, we are humans. At the end of novel, Yasodhara marries a Tamil boy and Munaweera wonders at the child “who is both American and Sri Lankan, but beyond this, also Tamil and Sinhala” (233). My reading of the selected text shows that binaries are the root cause of certain problems; therefore, there is a dire need to dismantle them to move vertically.

#### IV

*Island of a Thousand Mirrors* by Nayomi Munaweera illustrates the horizontal and vertical positionality of women through the invocation of ecofeminist theory. The ecofeminist approach inspires me to search the embedded sufferings, the root causes and, eventually, the consequences of these problems in the lives of all humans, especially women. This guides me in seeing who is responsible for such hideous activities and how we may overcome them. The women characters in this novel are exploited like animals and nature. Different wounds are inflicted on the bodies of those vulnerable creature by putting them in the position of animals. The purpose of animalizing women and feminizing nature is to show that both of them possess the same qualities and they are vulnerable to exploitation. The marginalization and maltreatment of women indicate their horizontal position. The epistemic and social verticality of women also signifies the destruction of traditional binaries and upward movement of women that empowers them. The victims of rape retaliate by exploding bombs that highlights their wrath and anger against the violence on their bodies. The explosion of bomb may also be interpreted as verticality. It may be concluded that it is unjustified to put blame on the shoulders of any single group like Tamil/Sinhala and Male/female. To end environmental crisis, we have to acknowledge the existing culture of binaries that is the root cause of all problems. These groups are equally involved in this process of environmental destruction. Therefore, all groups, irrespective of these racial, gender or religious identities may work for environmental protection which would also help women advance vertically in different spheres of life.

## References

- Atwood, M. (1996). *The handmaid's tale*. Vintage.
- Barasa, M. N. N., & Opande, I. N. (2017). The use of animal metaphors in the representation of women in Bukusu and Gusii proverbs in Kenya. *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 10(2), 82–112.
- Belsey, C. (2005). Textual analysis as a research method. In G. Griffin (Ed.), *Research methods for English studies* (pp. 157–174). EUP.
- Coetzee, J. M. (2000). *Disgrace*. Vintage.
- De Alwis, M. (2002). The changing role of women in Sri Lankan society. *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, 69(3), 675–691. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2002.0036>
- Gaard, G. (1993). Living Interconnections between women animals and nature. In G. Gaard (Ed.) *Ecofeminism: Women, animals, nature* (pp. 1–14). Temple University Press.
- Guri, L. (1993). Dismantling oppression: An analysis of connection between women and animals. In G. Gaard (Ed.), *Ecofeminism: Women, animals, nature* (pp. 60–90). Temple University Press.
- Harvey, S. (2009). *Act like a lady, think like a man*. Harper.
- Heidemann, B. (2017). The symbolic survival of the “Living Dead”: Narrating the LTTE female fighter in post-war Sri Lankan women’s writing. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 54(3), 384–398. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989417723414>
- Hook, B. (2010). Understanding patriarchy. *Louisville Anarchist Federation*, 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.53347/rid-88104>
- Ibsen, H. (1985). *A doll's house*. Dover Publications.
- Jayasuriya, M. (2016). Terror, trauma, transitions: Representing violence in Sri Lankan literature. *Indialogs*, 3, 195–209. <https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/indialogs.48>.
- Munaweera, N. (2012). *Island of a thousand mirrors: A novel*. St. Martin’s Press.
- Plath, S. (1981). I am vertical. In T. Hughes (Ed.), *The Collected Poems*, Harper & Row.
- Plumwood, V. (1993). *Feminism and mastery of nature*. London: Routledge.
- Rodriguez, I. L. (2009). Of women, bitches, chickens and vixens: Animal metaphors for women in English and Spanish. *Culture, Language and Representation*. VII, 77–100.

- Spivak, G. C. (2013). The burden of English. In G. C. Spivak. (Ed.), *An aesthetic education in the era of globalization*. (pp. 35–57) Harvard University Press.
- Tambiah, Y. (2004). Sexuality and women's rights in armed conflict in Sri Lanka. *Reproductive Health Matters*, 12(23), 78–87. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0968-8080\(04](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0968-8080(04)