

From Soil to Asphalt: Ecofeminist Displacement and Identity in *Silver Sister*

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Abstract

Lillian Ng's *Silver Sister* offers a corrosive exploration of how environmental degradation and forced displacement fracture personal and national identity through an ecofeminist lens. This paper examines how the protagonist's interdependent relationship with the land, initially a source of cultural rootedness, is systematically dismantled by industrialization and rapid development, reflecting the dual oppression of women and nature under patriarchal and neo-colonial systems. Drawing on ecofeminist theorists such as Vandana Shiva and Val Plumwood, this study argues that Ng's novel critiques nationalist narratives that prioritize economic progress over ecological and human well-being, rendering marginalized communities, particularly women, expendable and ignored. As the protagonist migrates from rural to urban spaces and to different countries, her identity succumbs alongside the torn landscapes, embodying Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence," where environmental and cultural losses gather up invisibly yet destructively. The paper further analyzes how Ng's portrayal of displacement challenges monolithic notions of national identity. Forced to adapt to alien urban environments, the protagonist's struggle represents the broader disconnect between state-imposed nationalism and the lived realities of displaced peoples such as Silver who struggles with language and landscape changes which make her feel even more alienated. Her acts of resilience and survival through all these difficulties become subtle acts of ecofeminist resistance, reclaiming agency through connecting with the natural world. These moments expose the contradictions of postcolonial nationalism, which often replicates colonial patterns of ecological exploitation while silencing women's voices.

Critically engaging with postcolonial ecofeminism, this study reveals how *Silver Sister* destabilizes dominant discourses of development. By centering the protagonist's embodied connection to the land, Ng underscores the intersections of gender, ecology, and displacement, urging a redefinition of belonging that transcends borders and embraces ecological interdependence. The paper concludes that Ng's work not only highlights the gendered costs of environmental destruction but also imagines alternative, inclusive forms of identity rooted in sustainability and collective memory, a vital intervention in contemporary debates about nationalism and environmental justice.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, displacement, national identity, slow violence, Lillian Ng, *Silver Sister*, environmental degradation.

INTRODUCTION

Ecofeminism, nationalism, and displacement are interwoven themes that resonate deeply in Lillian Ng's

Silver Sister, offering a poignant critique of how slow environmental degradation due to capitalism and war, gendered exploitation, and forced migrations shape identity and belonging. Ecofeminism, as a theoretical framework, highlights the interconnectedness of the oppression women and nature face, exposing how patriarchal and capitalist systems exploit either in the name of development and progress. Nationalism, often framed as a unifying force, is revealed in the novel as a sanitised ideology that prioritizes economic growth over the well-being of people and the planet, erasing marginalized voices in the process. Displacement, both physical and emotional, becomes a central experience for the protagonist, whose migrations are driven by civil wars and industrialization, fracturing her sense of self and connection to her homeland as the landscape changes and deconstructs her memories of China.

Set against the backdrop of China's rapid path of modernization after recovering from the destructive nature of war torn zones, *Silver Sister* tells the story of a woman whose life is inextricably tied to the land. As familiar places are cleared and changed, rivers polluted, and communities uprooted, her link with the natural world, a source of cultural and personal identity, is broken. Her journey mirrors the broader problems of women and ecosystems under nationalist agendas that commodify both. Through her story, Ng interrogates the human and environmental costs of progress as it changes entire landscapes challenging the memories of millions whose notion of recognising change as essential places in their memories cease to exist, also a challenge for readers to rethink nationalism not as a rigid, exclusionary ideology, but as a sustainable, inclusive connection between people and the planet as well as their own identity.

This paper explores how *Silver Sister* uses an ecofeminist lens to critique nationalism, revealing the interconnected struggles of women and the environment in the face of displacement and environmental degradation. By analyzing the protagonist's relationship with the land, her forced migrations along with how complicated that makes her journey of belongingness due to changes in her living space and the erosion of her national identity, the novel ultimately asks for a more compassionate and sustainable vision of belonging.

Methodology

Close Literary Analysis: A detailed reading of the novel will be conducted, particular attention will be given to how gender, ethnicity, and class shape characters' interactions with nationalist frameworks. Giving us an in-depth analysis of how identity is shaped through unique diasporic experiences through an eco feminist lens.

Ecofeminism and the Land-Woman Connection

Ecofeminism provides a powerful lens for understanding the protagonist's relationship with the land in Lillian Ng's *Silver Sister*. Vandana Shiva's concept of "ecological imperialism" and Val Plumwood's critique of nature-culture dualism offer frameworks to analyze how the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women are intermeshed together. Shiva defines ecological imperialism as the domination of both land and marginalized communities, particularly women, by colonial and capitalist systems that treat nature as a resource to be extracted rather than a life-sustaining force to be respected. She writes, "The violence against nature and women is embedded in the very mode of perceiving both as 'resources' to be exploited" (Shiva, 42). Similarly, Plumwood critiques the Western philosophical tradition that separates humans from nature, creating a hierarchy that justifies the domination of both women and the environment. She argues for an equal worldview that recognizes interdependence, stating, "The dualistic vision of nature and culture as separate realms must be replaced by an understanding of their mutual

embeddedness” (Plumwood, 45). Ah-pah or Silver showcases how women were looked down upon in her country, beaten and bullied, considered subordinate to men yet forced to serve them and be controlled by them as they degrade them and treat them like commodities Silver’s own sisters are sold off to brothels and to families for a few pieces of silver coins, their existence was defined by men and for men just like how nature was looked at.

In *Silver Sister*, the protagonist’s bond with the land stands for these ecofeminist principles. The land is not merely a setting but a vital part of her identity, memory, and survival. From her young age, she is one with the natural world, shown through vivid descriptions of her daily interactions with nature. For example, Ah-Pah is depicted tending to crops, drawing water from streams, and finding solace in the rhythms of the seasons when she could. These moments reflect a deep, reciprocal relationship where she cares for the land, in turn, sustains her. One poignant scene describes her “the government was too drastic. In demolishing houses of character built in pre-war style and erecting new ones they have...removed its colour and atmosphere,” (Ng, 102) a metaphor that underscores her intimate bond with the land and its role as a source of identification and memory that helps in forming your understanding of your home.

However, this bond is shattered by the forces of ecological imperialism. As war and then later, industrialization encroaches on her village, the land undergoes dramatic changes: forests are cleared, rivers are polluted, and the soil is overused of its lifeblood, the entire landscape of her home changes till she can no longer recognise or associate herself with it, “The family of Wong Lao and Wong Ma belonged to the past, which I only knew because I lived in it...they were all ghosts now, perhaps they came to haunt this hut at night, their birth place, their birthright.” (Ng, 233). The protagonist bears witness to these inevitable changes with a sense of helplessness and grief. In one passage, she reminisces “We splashed in the cool, clear water, so clean that the bottom was visible” (Ng, 7) and how it was soon overflowing due to the flood then drying with the drought with “corpses bobbed in the stream” (Ng, 18) a stark symbol of the environmental degradation result of wars and in later examples due to rapid development as fields were ruined and starvation ensued. Shiva’s concept of ecological imperialism helps us understand this as a form of systemic violence; not only against the environment but also against the women whose lives are meshed with it (Shiva, 56). The protagonist’s displacement is not just physical but also emotional, as she mourns the loss of a world that once defined her.

Plumwood’s critique of nature-culture dualism further illuminates the protagonist’s suffering. The industrialization of her homeland reflects a worldview that separates humans from nature, treating the land as a resource to be exploited rather than a partner in an equal exchange. This dualism is present in the way the Silver’s community is uprooted to make way for factories and infrastructure, with little care for the ecological or human cost no matter what place she moves to. Plumwood’s assertion that “the domination of nature and the domination of women are structurally linked” (Plumwood, 72) echoes deeply in the novel, as the protagonist’s struggles reflect the broader exploitation of both women and the environment under nationalist and capitalist agendas which are unsupportive of women, the regime of China offers no help towards elderly overworked women who are barely surviving in the harsh and starving conditions of China with its failing system which promised abundance in production and technological prowess. Similarly in Singapore and Hong Kong as well women are limited to certain roles and jobs which they cannot transgress or they get punished cruelly.

The protagonist’s journey becomes a powerful proof to the resilience of both women and the environment. Despite the destruction around her, she finds ways to adapt and survive, drawing strength from her memories of the land and her connection to it. In one moving scene, she finally settles in her own home

in her old age and remembers her lasting struggles and memories that define who she is, this acts as a symbolic act of resistance that reclaims her bond with her land wherever she had lived for however many years. This act echoes Shiva's call for "a recovery of the feminine principle as a source of regeneration and healing" (Shiva, 89), suggesting that the protagonist's relationship with the land holds the potential for renewal, even in the face of systemic exploitation.

Through the protagonist's story, Ng illustrates the devastating consequences of ecological imperialism and the urgent need to deconstruct the hierarchies that separate humans from the natural world. Her journey is not just a personal struggle but a broader critique of the systems that devalue both women and nature. By applying Shiva's and Plumwood's frameworks, we see how *Silver Sister* challenges the dualistic thinking that underpins environmental degradation and gendered oppression, vouching for a perspective rooted in interdependence and reciprocity.

Nationalism and the Erosion of Identity.

Nationalism and its conception is questioned in this novel by Ng through the protagonist's life events, the novel critiques how nationalism is defined and decided by the people in power, exploiting both women and nature, erasing individual and cultural identities consequently. Drawing on the insights of scholars like Rob Nixon and postcolonial feminists such as Gayatri Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, we will look upon how Silver's sense of belonging is shattered into pieces by the forces of nationalism, environmental degradation, and forced migration.

Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" provides a useful framework for understanding the piecemeal destruction of the protagonist's identity. Nixon defines slow violence as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space" (Nixon, 2). In *Silver Sister*, this slow violence reveals itself in the gradual erosion of the protagonist's homeland in the name of national growth. Silver is impotent in the face of these changes, as the land that once defined her identity is forced into starvation. One poignant passage describes her standing "For the people of old Singapore, a specific tradition was sacrificed in the name of progress" (Ng, 224) a sharp example of the environmental and cultural losses brought by industrialisation which specifically focused on the betterment of only the rich and privileged with the lives of the poor people ignored and uncared for.

Many of Silver's friends and acquaintances face financial loss and lose their homes with the government remaining unmoved, all in the name of progress and development.

The protagonist's displacement is both external and internal, as her connection to the land and her sense of self is sundered. Gayatri Spivak's critique of how marginalized voices are silenced in nationalist narratives resounds here. Spivak famously asks, "Can the subaltern speak?" (Can the Subaltern Speak?), elucidating how women and other marginalized groups are often voiceless in the stories of national identity formation. In *Silver Sister*, Ah-pah's experience is similarly marginalized; her loss and displacement are unimportant in the grand narrative of China's modernisation along with the other places she moves to. Her mourning over the landscape changing is rendered invisible, as nationalist rhetoric upholds progress and development, "The Government seemed eager to acquire a new and modern image by wiping out its slums, re-housing all Singaporeans in new high-rise blocks, and relocating the bazaars and street markets in new supermarkets and department stores, despite protests by the owners and criticism from the tourists." (Ng, 223).

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's work on the intersection of gender, capitalism, and nationalism further sheds a light on the protagonist's contentions. Mohanty argues that nationalist projects often rely on the

exploitation of women's labor and the commodification of nature, treating both as expendable resources. In the novel, this misuse is evident in the way the protagonist and her community are plucked again and again to make way for factories and infrastructure. Her migrations, forced by war, environmental degradation hidden by grand development of certain areas and industrialization, reverberate the conflicting gendered elements of surviving under nationalist capitalism. Constant migrations fray her sense of belonging as it becomes more and more shattered, sandwiched between nostalgia for the traditions she left behind and the cruel realities of a modernizing world that dismisses her way of living as irrelevant as she loses identification with the places she had lived in for decades. The government only looks at the broader picture with the rest discarded affecting their sense of identity and connection with the land.

The ghettoisation of marginalised communities was common and Silver or Ah-Pah witnessed how almost every metropolitan city had a "Chinatown", their culture and people limited to thrive in a confined area. This strain between tradition and modernity is recurring in Silver's journey, her identity is shaped by her culture and customs followed loyally through all her life, yet she is forced to discard it due to the modern society for being obsolete and full of hearsay from a young age her Chinese identity is deeply reliant in the customs and rhythms of rural life. She finds meaning in her daily chores as it is all she knows and her exchanges with nature: washing clothes, drawing water, and participating in communal festivals. These traditions are not mere practices but a way of life that connects her to her ancestors and her community. However, as war impinges onto the village, these traditions crumble, replaced by destruction and later by impersonal demands of a market-driven economy due to industrialisation. One powerful scene depicts her standing "The pond where the carp would jump for their food was partially filled in for planting wheat." (Ng, 235), a metaphor for how modernization overshadows and displaces traditional ways of life and takes with it their peace too.

The protagonist's migrations also highlight the fragility of national identity in the face of displacement. As she is forced to move from place to place, she is constantly reminded that she is an outsider, she does not have her family or a place she belongs to or owns. In a scene, she remarks on how "My home was just a shell, filled in by other people from another time, another kind of smell prevailed; of earth, manure and antiseptic." (Ng, 234). This sense of rootlessness underscores the human cost of nationalist progress and the consequences of war, as individuals are uprooted and their identities fragmented in the pursuit of economic growth. Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence is particularly relevant here, as the protagonist's loss of identity is not a single, grand event but a steady process of disintegration, a lifetime of small losses that nationalist rhetoric cannot pacify (Nixon, 45). She can no longer call China her home because her home has been erased making her memories empty, she can no longer recognise the landscape or connect to their sense of nationalism and belonging because she's not a resident.

Silver's adaptability and resilience is brilliant as she survives and works herself to her bones all her life even in the face of such harsh changes and she also redefines national identity for herself because she sees herself as a part of every place she resides in, imbuing the culture and way of their life into her own identity, she is an amalgamation of all the places she had migrated to and ultimately when she becomes a citizen of Australia though she is considered as an outsider she views the nation as her own and feels pride at its progress. It is due to her connection with the nation as compared to her past homeland China which she now feels no link to, only nostalgia and memory exist as reminders of China. She builds her own national identity and understanding of herself through her displacements. This also parallels how nature triumphs over changes as well coming victorious in the face of destruction.

Result

This paper successfully demonstrates how the connection between land and women remains persistent even with destruction caused by rapid industrialisation and development leading to distorted identity whether self or national. Through Silver's journey we see how Lillian Ng depicts the facets of a migrant's life and how landscape changes cause further alienation in foreign soil as the refugee loses any sense of identification yet they retain their own sense of identity and nationalism which keeps them connected. Focusing on the feminine experience and how they are doubly marginalised, treated as material objects, exploited and neglected much like the land exploited by men as well.

It is a victorious end for Silver as she makes a home for herself and feels pride in being a citizen of Australia even after all the struggles in her life, she gains her own house, work and identity as she situates herself in her "home" finally. Reclaiming the land and herself.

Discussion

Ng's *Silver Sister* powerfully illustrates how environmental destruction and forced migration fracture identity through an ecofeminist lens. The protagonist's visceral connection to the land, broken by industrialization in the name of development, reflects Plumwood's nature-culture dualism critique. Her displacement personifies Nixon's "slow violence," where ecological and cultural erosion take place insidiously. Yet Ng subverts this narrative with subtle shows of resistance: refusing to learn English, traditions and rituals preserved even in exile and mockery. These acts help in taking back agency through ecological kinship, challenging nationalist progress, narratives that justify the sacrifice of both women and nature. The novel ultimately proposes identity rooted not in borders, but in sustainable exchange; a revolutionary redefining of belonging in the Anthropocene.

Conclusion

In a world dealing with environmental crises and mass displacement, *Silver Sister* is a poignant work. It challenges readers to rethink the systems that govern our lives and to envision a future where progress does not come at the expense of people or nature. By centering a marginalised female character in the narrative, Ng shows us the multitude of struggles women face. Through its intense storyline and ecofeminist critique, the novel offers a powerful move for action: to honor the enduring nature of those who survive and to build a world where both women and nature can thrive.

The novel also highlights the complicated identity of a migrant and how it is defined by their varied experiences which cannot be confined by a limiting definitions of nationalism and national identity which cause erasure of anyone's identity which does not fit into their conforming understanding of nationality, Silver cannot reconcile with China's cruel way of life and finds comfort in her final place of residence, Australia, which she sees as her home finally.

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