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From Marsh Girl to Published Author: An Ecofeminist Reading of Delia Owens's *Where the Crawdads Sing*

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I declare that this is a totally original piece of work; all secondary sources have been correctly cited. I also understand that plagiarism is an unacceptable practise which will lead to the automatic failing of this assignment.

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Abstract

Where the Crawdads Sing by Delia Owens (2018) is a novel set in the fictional coastal town of Barkley Cove in the mid-20th century that alternates between the narration of the story of Catherine "Kya" Danielle Clark, a young white girl abandoned by her family who learns to fend for herself making use of her surroundings, and the telling of the discovery of a well-known local man found dead beneath the old fire tower, which is eventually blamed on the protagonist. Although it is a contemporary book that has not yet been thoroughly analysed academically, this novel has great potential for applying ecofeminist theory due to the intimate relation of the writing with the setting of the story.

I aim to prove how the discrimination suffered by Kya is based on the link with nature she develops throughout her life. In this dissertation, I will argue the social prejudice of the protagonist's lifestyle in the novel is indicative of a traditional mindset overly present in the Western world of categorically regarding women and "nature" as inferior and alienated from men and "culture", which is interconnected with social class issues and fear of the "other". Therefore, this thesis will include an analysis of the presence of the natural world in the narrative and the presentation of ecological messages that evoke an ecofeminist reading. Lastly, it will examine the recurrent social discrimination and abuse committed against the main character and their association to the interrelation of the oppression of women and nature.

Keywords: *Where the Crawdads Sing;* Delia Owens; marsh; social discrimination; nature writing; ecofeminism

0. Introduction

0.1. Context and objectives

In August 2018, retired zoologist and conservationist Delia Owens published her debut novel, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, a coming-of-age story with a mystery plot set in the marshlands of North Carolina, USA, in the 1950-1960s (summary of the storyline in the Annex). In September of the same year, actress Reese Witherspoon's choice to include it in her book club spiked its popularity, and it has, since then, become a bestseller with more than 15 million copies sold worldwide. The diffusion of this fictional work through social media allowed me to discover it, becoming immediately intrigued since it was generally distinguished as beautifully written and with a strong presence of nature.

However, it is worth mentioning that there has been some controversy as Owens and her former husband were suspected of being involved in the murder of a suspected poacher in Zambia in 1995. In view that the novel is based on a girl, later a woman, accused of murder, some parallelisms could be established between the author and the protagonist. Additionally, the novel has received some backlash due to its portrayal of people of colour, under claims of infantilisation and stereotyping of the characters Mabel and Jumpin', the only representatives of African American people in this fictional text.

In the last few years, there has been a resurgence of books that could be categorised as nature writing, defined in Encyclopedia.com as non-fiction and fiction literature concerning nature and the human relationship to it. This trend could be due to the rise of climate change activism and a need to escape from a secluded life in the city through literature, the latter of which was one of my motivations for reading Delia Owens's novel.

The fact that the natural world influenced every aspect of this fictional work, from the story to the writing, led me to analyse it more thoroughly. After research of the studies conducted so far, it was perceived that despite its popularity, there have barely been any academic analyses, probably due to its publication five years ago. In this context, I saw a need to contribute due to its great potential as an object of study by applying feminist ecocriticism.

Ecofeminism as a field, which includes both political activism and intellectual critique (Buckingham 845), was previously unknown to me. Even so, once introduced to its ideology, it has proved a suitable and helpful approach to the analysis of WCS[1]. This is evidenced by the ecofeminist emphasis on the interconnectedness of humans with the natural world, embodied in this text by the main character, Kya, who manifests a profound connection to her surroundings. Another relation between the two can be established in the linkage of ecofeminist theory between the domination of women and the degradation of the environment, which can likewise be located in the storyline with the treatment towards the protagonist, indicating the existence of a mentality that leads to the oppression of both nature and women.

This dissertation aims to apply ecofeminist theory to this novel to demonstrate the presence of many ecological reminders in the writing of WCS that correlate to ecofeminist thinking. In addition, the examination of the discrimination against the protagonist by the inhabitants of the town of Barkley Cove seeks to prove the inferior status associated with nature, which is accentuated by her gender. Finally, this study will focus on the character Chase Andrews in order to show the dominant attitude towards Kya and the marsh, representative of Western thinking and behaviour regarding women and the natural world.

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[1] Henceforth, this abbreviation will be used to reference *Where the Crawdads Sing*.

0.2. Theoretical Framework

WCS by Delia Owens (2018) is a contemporary novel which has become increasingly popular in the last few years, but of which there is no extensive academic research. Most of the existing studies focus on the fact that the author adopts the genre of nature writing to emphasise and promote environmental concerns, and they examine the special connection of the protagonist with her surroundings discernible in the text (Kimura, Salisbury). However, there is no known study on the portrayal of the discrimination against Kya and its interrelation with ecofeminist theory. In this dissertation, I will follow an ecofeminist approach by examining the inevitable link between the novel's writing and the environment, along with analysing the oppression suffered by the main character. The purpose of this thesis is to defend the value of Owens's novel as a great exponent of ecofeminist theory due to the narrative style and the issues that permeate and influence the plot. Overall, adopting such an approach to literary criticism will be an opportunity to step away from hierarchical thinking, rejecting the categorisation of nature and certain human groups as inferior, alienated, or "other".

The concern over the mistreatment and exploitation of nature by human beings is a topic widely spread across the world, especially relevant in recent times as the effects of climate change become more visible in our everyday lives. Given this anxiety, ecocriticism, the "study of the relation between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmental praxis" (Coupe 4-5), has been particularly influential since the 1980s. According to this scholar, its strongest advocates are feminist and gender critics, who consider that social status is determined by the idea of place (Coupe 165). The conflation of gender issues and the environment is carried out by ecofeminists, who, in all their diversity, believe that the historical domination of women and the natural world are inherently related and work for a "great cultural revaluation of

the status of women, the feminine and the natural" (Plumwood 7). Generally, ecofeminism explores the interrelation of nature and human beings, more specifically women, and it assesses the "historical connection in western culture [which] has influenced the construction of feminine identity and […] of both masculine and human identity" (Plumwood 7).

The start of ecofeminism can be established in 1974 with *Le Feminisme ou la Mort?* by Françoise d'Eaubonne, in which the author introduces the term. In her work, this feminist indicates a parallelism between the oppression of nature and women, making patriarchy responsible for ecological disaster and women's low status in society (Buckingham 45). Another early text that became pivotal for the emergence of the movement is Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* (1978), which exposes "the historical and cross-cultural persecution of women as legitimized by the various male-dominated institutions of religion, culture, and medical science" (Gaard 28). In this fashion, ecofeminism arose from joining feminist research with social justice and environmental health activism (Gaard 28) through foundational texts such as Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature* (1980), which sets the Enlightenment as the time when scientific and economic rationalism led to the domination of women and exploitation of nature (Lauwers 2), and Susan Griffin's *Woman and Nature* (1987), where language is regarded as the pillar of the patriarchal system (Lauwers 2). Alongside these influential texts, the anthologies *Reclaim the Earth* by Léonie Caldecott and Stephanie Leland (1983), *Healing the Wounds* by Judith Plant (1989), and *Reweaving the World* by Irene Diamond and Gloria Orenstein (1990), contributed to the shaping of ecofeminism through their "critiques of racism, speciesism and colonialism" (Gaard 30).

Although from its outset, ecofeminism was characterised by a transdisciplinarity between several fields, the direction that became more prominent in the 1970s and 1980s

was “cultural ecofeminism” or “essentialist ecofeminism” (Buckingham 46), even though it afterwards went out of fashion due to being considered too essentialist and scarcely inclusive of non-white women. This approach intended to empower the association commonly established between woman and nature - until then negatively viewed - to reverse “women’s historical subordination by a patriarchal society” (Buckingham 46). This branch of ecofeminism claimed female human beings were gifted in their empathy, caretaking abilities, and special connection to nature, and, accordingly, they were considered the best-suited advocators of the environment. Nevertheless, they were only part of the field, as other ecofeminists derived from liberal, social Marxist, anarchist, and social feminisms (Gaard 32), evidenced by the works of Greta Gaard, Carolyn Merchant, and Noel Sturgeon.

Thenceforth in the 1990s, the term ecofeminism would be used as a critical theory with application to various fields (Lauwers 4), as diverse theories “continued to refine and ground their analyses, developing economic, material, international, and intersectional perspectives.” (Gaard 32). Ecofeminist thinking explored numerous areas, for instance the relationship between nature and gender inequalities in postcolonial countries (Vandana Shiva), queer theory (Greta Gaard), and environmental justice (Susan Buckingham, Karen Warren). According to Buckingham, this diversification is a sign of increased attention to the intersectionality of gender with other aspects of identity such as ethnicity, culture, class, age, parenthood, dis/ability and sexuality (xxi). In conclusion, diversity appears to be one of the main characteristics of ecofeminism, seeking to reach and join feminist and environmental thought and activism.

The last decade of the century was characterised by many ecofeminists’ progression from investigating the relations between objects of oppression, i.e. women and nature, to focusing on the structure of oppression itself, which had impacted humans’ relationship

with the natural world in Western culture (Gaard 32). One of the most important representatives of this point of view is Val Plumwood's work *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993), which analyses human thought in the West to discern its inherent dualism. According to this ecofeminist, the definition of dualism is the following:

> Dualism is a relation of separation and domination inscribed and naturalised in culture and characterised by radical exclusion, distancing and opposition between orders constructed as systematically higher and lower, as inferior and superior, as ruler and ruled, which treats the division as part of the natures of beings construed not merely as different but as belonging to radically different orders or kinds, and hence not open to change. (Plumwood 47-48)

Her approach is based on exposing the "master model" (Plumwood 23), the framework of assumptions and system of binaries pervasive in Western thought that, in her view, account for the treatment of nature, women, and other human groups as opposed, separate, "other", to men and reason, and thus, inferior, dominated and alienated. Furthermore, Rosi Braidotti establishes our era as belonging to posthumanism and believes that the human is a category that has always been interrelated to power and privilege. Consequently, this feminist supports a redefinition of humanity that includes multiplicity: sexualised and racialised others. Similarly, Donna Haraway, another of the most influential figures of ecofeminism, denounces and rejects the dualistic nature of divisions and boundaries such as male/female, human/animal, and technical/natural (Buckingham 11), adopting a posthumanist approach in the rejection of the traditional hierarchy that positions the human above the non-human. Concisely, many ecofeminists would consider dualistic and hierarchical thinking to be the root cause for the exclusion and domination of the natural world and detrimental to certain human beings, particularly women.

Regards the responses to the field, the most radical approaches to ecofeminism received numerous criticisms in the last decade of the millennium, to the extent that the entire discipline would be negatively perceived. Academically, the disapproval was

directed either at the conflation of sex and gender and the homogenization of women's experiences or at presenting nature as a relevant aspect to consider in feminism (Gaard 35). While this is the case, Margot Lauwers states in her historical review of ecofeminism that the transdisciplinarity of the movement was the origin of the negative critiques of the discipline from its emergence. This researcher and activist attaches ecofeminist criticism not with the theory's illegitimacy or insignificance (Lauwers 2) but with the fact that "the variety of ecofeminism's approaches and applications represented a problem for traditional modes of thinking" (Lauwers 3). This new perspective on the negative regard of ecofeminism explains the systematic rejection of the term and the concept of interrelating women and nature ever since the critiques aforementioned emerged, as many ecofeminists distanced themselves from its cultural variant and its characteristic essentialism and yet they would still be rejected.

As a result of such negative critiques, ecofeminism became generalised under claims of essentialism or essentialist spiritualism, forming what Greta Gaard calls the "anti-ecofeminist backlash" (36). This criticism seriously impacted how ecofeminist thinking would be regarded, being often overlooked or undermined in the feminist and environmental fields until the mid-teens of the new century (Gaard 31, 42). In an attempt to counteract this, the work of ecofeminists has been renamed on many occasions to avoid being targeted as essentialists and gain more acceptance, with terms such as "ecological feminism" (Karen Warren, Val Plumwood), "feminist environmentalism" (Bina Agarwal, Joni Seager), and "gender and the environment" (Susan Buckingham). Nevertheless, ecofeminism has not achieved the prominence it had in its initial stage, even though many of the issues raised by ecofeminists have continued to be researched and are becoming increasingly influential, especially in Latin America and South Asia, chiefly because of

the increasing concern over climate change and new discussions about sexuality and gender (Buckingham xxi).

Ecofeminism's connection to literature was instigated with the literary analyses of Annette Kolodny and Susan Griffin in the 1970s and 1980s (Lauwers 9), becoming officially initiated as a discipline with Patrick D. Murphy and Greta Gaard's co-edited work *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy* (1998). This anthology defends the convergence of literary criticism and ecofeminism by merging activist and literary theory, arguing for variety as a benefit and not a drawback of ecofeminism. According to Lauwers (9), this new use would allow for a resurgence of the positive regard towards the whole movement in the twenty-first century, as it eludes essentialist claims (Lauwers 9), and, due to the possibilities of literature, it makes the questions debated by ecofeminism more understandable, "less problematic to our critical minds" (Lauwers 9) and can be used for the application of the theory into practice (Lauwers 10). Following this argumentation, ecofeminist literary criticism would be the answer to how to make ecofeminism resurge after its devaluation.

Regarding the novel this dissertation deals with, Marianne Kimura (2019) reviews Owens's fictional work and declares it an ecological allegory, mainly involving the protagonist. In her article, Kimura explores the intimate connection of Kya and Tate with nature, considering them instances of a "healthy" relationship with nature, in contrast to Chase Andrews, who exemplifies an exploitative vision towards the environment. This study of the novel emphasizes the author's critical attitude towards capitalist society, advocating for better treatment of nature.

More recently, Annika Salisbury (2023) conducted an ecocritical reading of the novel through three different lenses: postcolonial ecocriticism, ecofeminism, and climate change criticism. The major conclusions of this analysis were first, that both nature and

Kya are othered but progressively given a voice; second, that the text ascribes agency and not passivity to Kya and the natural world; and third, that the novel conveys an underlying ecological message to the readers, stressing the importance of respecting the environment. This M.A. dissertation allows a varied approach to the text when examining the protagonist and the relationship with her surroundings, which the critic argues is aimed to appeal to the readers' ecological consciousness (Salisbury 53).

Both studies on the novel examine the text's portrayal of the deep connection between Kya and the natural world and note the author's ecological message with optimistic undertones for the future. However, while Kimura does not include the terms ecocriticism or ecofeminism in her article, Salisbury defines her reading as belonging to both. The latter dedicates a section of her dissertation to the ecofeminist defence of both women's and nature's agency, as well as proves that the interconnectedness between them is a helpful tool for both Kya and the Marsh. Similarly, Kimura centres her approach on how the nature writing in the novel invites the interrelation of the main character and her surroundings and the reciprocal protection they perform throughout the story, thus adhering to the ecofeminist view of the interconnectedness of human beings with nature. However, Kimura includes a comparison between the attitudes of Chase and Tate towards the marsh, whereas Salisbury focuses solely on Kya. In short, although both studies could be considered to ascribe to ecofeminism's reinforcement of the interconnection between human beings and their environment, Kimura analyses the ecological allegory formed by the author in the text, whereas Salisbury adopts additional ecocritical views and stresses the ecofeminist claim on the need for women's voices to contribute to environmental theory and practice.

After reviewing the research conducted to date, numerous aspects of this fictional work and its relation to ecofeminist issues are yet to be studied to contribute to the existing

readings. Examining the narrative's description of the discrimination committed against Kya and other human groups that are closely related to nature can provide an insight into the attitude of most inhabitants of Barkley Cove, who exemplify the influence of the Western mentality based on dualisms (nature/culture, men/women, human/non-human, etc.), i.e. by the structure of oppression that ecofeminists fight to dismantle. Related to this, analysing how the text relates the setting of the story with social class has yet to be studied, but it is relevant to this discussion, as the characters more associated with the environment are those that are regarded as inferior and othered, with an emphasis on Kya as the main character in the storyline. With this perspective in mind, this dissertation will consist of an ecofeminist reading of WCS that avoids essentialism by perceiving Kya's connection with the marsh not caused by her gender but by her condition as a human being. Then again, analysing an instance of popular fiction with a girl/woman as the main character can help view ecofeminism positively, bringing to the surface the importance of issues such as hierarchical mentality, the connection of setting with social class, and speciesism: "prejudice or discrimination based on species", assuming the superiority of human beings (definition of the Merriam-Webster Dictionary).

In conclusion, ecofeminist theory has, in all its diversity, continually given value to women's connection with the natural world and used it to reinforce their agency in societies governed by Western thought, which has historically treated both women and nature as inferior, so they have been subjugated to reason, men, and culture. Ecofeminist literary criticism seeks to take advantage of literary analysis to explore concerns of the movement about the conditions of women and the environment in this society. Concerning Delia Owens's fictional novel, the little academic research undergone until the present moment focuses on the protagonist's connection with her surroundings and the consequent benefits for both Kya and the marsh in the story. In parallel to such

analyses, this dissertation aims at showing nature's pervasiveness in the text as an ecological reminder of the inevitable connection of humans with the natural world. Additionally, this thesis will adopt a deeper ecofeminist perspective and examine the text's portrayal of the discrimination and abuse suffered by the main protagonist and its relation to her condition as a woman and human being with a physical and emotional attachment to her surroundings, linking place and social class. Accordingly, I believe this study will contribute to the existing literature on Delia Owens's work of fiction and will encourage the analysis of many other unresearched subject matters, for instance, the treatment of people of colour in Barkley Cove or Tate's evolution as a character. Finally, this dissertation will hopefully participate in reaffirming the current value and relevance of ecofeminism as a critical approach to literature and, by extension, to the world.

1. The Natural World as Subject Matter in *Where the Crawdads Sing*

1.1. The Prologue: Introduction to the Marsh and the Swamp

> Marsh is not swamp. Marsh is a space of light, where grass grows in water, and water flows into the sky. Slow-moving creeks wander, carrying the orb of the sun with them to the sea, and long-legged birds lift with unexpected grace – as though not built to fly – against the roar of a thousand snow geese.
> Then within the marsh, here and there, true swamp crawls into low-lying bogs, hidden in clammy forests. Swamp water is still and dark, having swallowed the light in its muddy throat. Even night crawlers are diurnal in this lair. There are sounds, of course, but compared to the marsh, the swamp is quiet because decomposition is cellular work. Life decays and reeks and returns to the rotted duff; a poignant wallow of death begetting life.
> On the morning of October 30, 1969, the body of Chase Andrews lay in the swamp, which would have absorbed it silently, routinely. Hiding it for good. A swamp knows all about death, and doesn't necessarily define it as tragedy, certainly not a sin. But this morning two boys from the village rode their bikes out to the old fire tower and, from the third switchback, spotted his denim jacket.
> (Owens 3).

Delia Owens starts the novel with a prologue that describes the setting of the murder scene of Chase Andrews, which could be considered quite usual in a fictional work, especially

if it involves an unsolved crime. However, this opening chapter is distinctive as it adopts a narrative voice that almost seems to be in communication and representation of the marshlands. Therefore, this fragment is an early indication of the importance of the natural world in the text and the story of the protagonist, Kya. In my view, it indicates the intention of the writer to convey an ecological message to the readers in an attempt to challenge the categorisation of nature as the "other" who is simple, passive, and alienated from humans, managing to destabilise the traditionally considered superior nature of human beings.

A third-person omniscient narrator is used to introduce the reader to information about the natural world the story will be set in, not focusing on the people involved in it and instead choosing to stress the peculiarities of the setting. The author dedicates the first paragraph to the characteristics of the marsh, such as the "grass [that] grows in water", its "slow-moving creeks", and its fauna. Afterwards, the second paragraph is focused on the swamp, the setting of "decomposition", a quiet activity that hides the transformation from death to life. Only after do we locate the first human references, with "the body of Chase Andrews", the presence of "two boys from the village", and the first human-made objects: the boys' "bikes" and the "fire tower". Even then, nature's perspective of death is expressed: "a swamp knows all about death, and doesn't necessarily define it as tragedy, certainly not a sin". This structural decision stresses the voice of the natural world in the novel: the marsh and the swamp are established as beings that need to be approached and considered to be able to understand the story to its fullest. This approach that insists on the non-human "challenges the complacent culturalism which renders other species, as well as fauna and flora, subordinate to the human capacity for signification" (Coupe 4). In this context, this fragment can be considered an attempt by the author to challenge and subvert the assumption that human characters in literature

are superior and more important to consider than the setting, in addition to defying the belief in human superiority as a species (speciesism). By allowing space for the natural world to communicate through this narrative voice, this text aligns itself with the ecocritical rejection of a hierarchical categorisation of nature.

In these descriptions of the setting, the swamp and the marsh are differentiated as separate phenomena of nature, clearly stated from the first sentence, “Marsh is not swamp”, emphasising their individuality and, so, the diversity of the natural world. The marsh is portrayed as “a space of light”, which is afterwards compared with the swamp water that “has swallowed the light in its muddy throat” and is consequently “still and dark”. Contrasted to the vivid activity of the marsh, with the long-legged birds that fly from the waters “against the roar of a thousand snow-geese”, the swamp has subtler sounds; it seems paralysed and yet hides the process of decomposition, a different kind of life. This differentiation between ecosystems emphasises nature’s diversity by focusing on numerous aspects of the marshlands and, by extension, of the natural world, attaching value to this multiplicity that is not typically acknowledged (Plumwood 54). Similarly, it can be suggested that the narrative correlates with “ecology’s emphasis on the creativity of organic life and the need for biodiversity” (Coupe 7). In conclusion, through the depiction of the particularities of the marshlands in North Carolina, the prologue can be seen to ascribe to ecologists’ message of rejecting the simplicity of nature and stressing the value of its complexities.

Another essential point in this passage is the direct association of nature with agency, both within the story, hence in literature, and within the world, as it can be seen that every aspect of the natural world is performing some action, contributing to life and death. The first paragraph refers to the grass of the marsh growing in the water, which “flows into the sky”. In the sea, the long-legged birds are depicted lifting and the geese

roaring. In the second paragraph, the swamp involves the transformation from death to life. Lastly, the swamp is portrayed as "absorbing" the body of Chase Andrews, though it is interrupted by the boys who encounter it before the process is finished. As can be observed, the natural world is not regarded as a submissive entity; it is an active being with an agency in this story and life, as the marshlands perform many actions, including hiding the evidence of a murder. This could be interpreted as a proclamation of the active role of nature, an example of how it influences the workings of life and death, even if quietly as the swamp. As a result, this extract defies the "mechanistic stance expressed in the treatment of nature as lifeless, homogenous and passive and in the negation of nature as agent" (Plumwood 118), claimed to be highly invasive of the human sphere (Plumwood 118). In view of this, the prologue reinstates the agency of the marshlands by emphasising its movements and actions, which affect every aspect of this narrative world.

In addition, every characteristic of this setting is connected, which can be seen as related to the ecofeminist rejection of the non-human/human, nature/human or nature/culture dualisms. This is perceivable in how the marsh grass is linked to the water, which is, in turn, associated with the sky, the sun, the sea, and the present fauna. Then, the swamp is tied to the bogs and the "clammy forests", its "night crawlers", as well as to the human body of Chase. These repeated connections the text generates emphasise the relationships found between the multiple elements of the natural world, including human beings, as Chase's body is interrelated with the activity of the marsh, which was absorbing it "silently, routinely". For this reason, in this extract, there is no presence of the nature/culture binary entrenched in Western thought (Plumwood 11) since the human body is included in the marsh, hence the natural world. That being the case, I argue that the dualistic thinking that has alienated nature from human identity (Plumwood 71) is being negated in this fragment by interrelating every component of the setting, refusing

its validity as it does not describe the reality of this context or, as many ecofeminists would claim, of the world.

1.2. Owens's Ecological Messages

1.2.1. The Final Chapter

The messages the prologue presents are developed throughout the novel. Specifically, the ecofeminist message of the interconnectedness between the human and the non-human world can be appreciated in the final chapter, with the declaration that "Kya had been of this land and of this water; now they would take her back. Keep her secrets deep." (Owens 368). With this statement, the narrator establishes a link between the two fragments: this land and water are hiding her secrets of the murder, which is observed happening in the prologue by the swamp as well, hiding the clues of the murder and attempting to swallow Chase's body in its waters. This extract stresses the close relationship of Kya with her surroundings, connecting this character with the marsh and the swamp, which are described in the prologue. It can be regarded as a collaborative relationship since the protagonist has managed to keep a part of the marsh wild (Owens 366) while the marsh has hidden the truth of Chase's murder and provided her with resources in order to survive throughout her life. In this way, the novel offers a "model[s] of human identity and human relationships with nonhuman nature that can disrupt and challenge dominant ideologies" (Armbruster 202), which would be the separation of the human world from their setting. Briefly, this character can be interpreted as the representation of the possible relationship based on collaboration that humans could have with the natural world if we overcome the nature/human dualism of Western mentality and do not reject our surroundings in the construction of our identity.

1.2.2. A Poem by Amanda Hamilton

> "Sunsets are never simple. / Twilight is refracted and reflected / But never true. / Eventide is a disguise / Covering tracks, / Covering lies.
> "We don't care / That dusk deceives. / We see brilliant colors, / And never learn / The sun has dropped / Beneath the earth / By the time we see the burn.
> "Sunsets are in disguise, / Covering truths, covering lies.
> "A.H."
> (Owens 249)

The matters of simplicity, agency and voice of the natural world are reinforced in this poem by Amanda Hamilton, who is often mentioned in the text as she is the protagonist's favourite poet and, as it turns out, is Kya herself. First, the statements "[s]unsets are never simple", "Twilight is refracted and reflected", the "dusk deceives" reinstate the complexities of the natural world and the need to understand them, hence negating the homogenisation of nature characteristic of Western dualistic thinking (Plumwood 69). Likewise, according to this poet, humans generally seem not to pay attention due to a lack of consideration for nature's voice, "We don't care", and instead, we focus on the superficial aspect of the dusk, its "brilliant colors", which results in ignorance: we "never learn". Nevertheless, even if sunsets are overlooked, they exhibit agency, "[c]overing truths, covering lies", relating truth and secrecy to the intervention of the marshlands just as in the prologue, it was linked to life and death. I propose this can be extrapolated to the natural world, a message of the poet and, by extension, of the author of the novel, to reinforce the importance of considering its peculiarities. Therefore, we can establish a connection between these two passages in their intention to communicate these issues to the readers, emphasising the power of literature to convey ecological messages and, specifically, of this fictional text, to highlight the value of nature as an active complex being in the world.

1.2.3. *A Sand County Almanac* by Aldo Leopold

The two fragments analysed so far are two instances of the many hints the author makes throughout her fictional text to reiterate the ecological messages already introduced in the prologue. To illustrate it further, it is noteworthy to consider the references to Aldo Leopold's influential work *A Sand County Almanac* and the relationship with Owens's novel. It does not seem coincidental that the first text that Kya manages to read is this one, a non-fiction book originally published in 1949 with observations on the wilderness in Wisconsin and essays on America's relationship with the land. According to the protagonist, Aldo Leopold taught her to appreciate the natural world even more than she had done until that moment and offered her "[t]ruths everyone should know, yet somehow, […] seemed to lie in secret like the seeds" (Owens 113). In my view, this message expressed by Kya of our ignorance is another appeal for the readers to learn about their surroundings, which is emphasised by her publishing several books on the marsh, spreading her expertise around the world similarly to Leopold. The author presents this "real-life knowledge" (Owens 113) as equal or superior to the one we learn at school and, consequently, is necessary for human beings to acquire. As expressed, the insertion of a published work centred on the natural world reminds the readers of the necessity of acknowledging the environment as worthy of human attention, just as Kya has been interested in the marsh all her life.

Another relation that can be established between the two texts is their negative outlook on science and development, which parallels Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva's belief in these as the causes for the domination of nature and women in the West. The second reference to Leopold's text in the novel is introduced by Kya when the narrative informs the readers that developers have been coming to the area meaning to dry the marsh, after which one can find the comment that "[a]pparently, they had not read Aldo Leopold's

book" (Owens 218). One of the premises of the latter is that "We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us." (Leopold, xxii), which is exemplified by Chase's consideration of the marsh as "a thing to be used, to boat and fish, or drain for farming" (Owens 176) in the same way that, according to Tate, most people regard it as wasteland to be drained and developed (Owens 122). There is in both texts a denunciation of the exploitation of nature due to the Western world mentality based on science and development, accentuated by the Industrial Revolution (Shiva xiv). This focus on progress has caused human beings to view the natural world as submissive and belonging to us. In this context, the tendency has been for humans to use nature to our advantage instead of respecting and introducing it to our culture, as Leopold suggests (xxii). To sum up, I argue the author intentionally chooses Aldo Leopold's novel to stress the negative consequences of the human focus on development that has led to the oppression of nature in Western culture.

2. The Interrelation between the Discrimination against Kya and the Marsh

The language used by the inhabitants of Barkley Cove portrays their vision of the protagonist as someone primitive, uncivilised, and almost non-human, which is predetermined inferior and thus, leads to discrimination against her. This can be seen on multiple occasions, for instance, when Johnny Lane calls Kya "little beggar-hen" (Owens 52), as well as when some boys reach her shack: "Show us yo' teeth! Show us yo' swamp grass!" (Owens 91). In both examples, the towners use natural terminology to abuse her verbally, relating the protagonist to a non-human animal, traditionally considered inferior to the human species. This theme is repeated throughout the novel as a means to denigrate her, which can be observed in the constant allusions to Kya as marsh/swamp trash (Owens

18, 46, 52, 318), as well as in the mockery performed by two girls of similar age to the main character: “Where ya been, marsh hen? Where’s yo’ hat, swamp rat?” (Owens 30). Additionally, this last sentence reveals how the absence of a hat in Kya's clothes on her first day at school to these girls is perceived as a marker of a lack of civilisation, and as such, she is an object of ridicule. This last point is also alluded to by the boys already mentioned, who were “hollering with relief that they had survived […] the Wolf Child, the girl who couldn’t spell dog” (91). As proved then, it can be seen that the inhabitants of Barkley Cove take advantage of natural and animal terminology to oppress Kya, which signals their view of the character as belonging to the natural world and not civilisation.

This abusive behaviour towards the protagonist can be explained due to her connection with her surroundings in a society which positions civilisation over nature and, as a result, oppresses human beings closely related to it along with the non-human. Even though the marsh has always been considered a “wasteland bog” (Owens 8), Kya chooses to stay and live there even after she is abandoned by her family, first because of her poor circumstances and afterwards due to her love for her surroundings. According to Gaard, the Western intellectual tradition has consisted of elevating what is associated with men, reason, humans, culture, and the mind, whereas devaluing women, emotion, animals, nature, and the body (5), establishing a hierarchy between the superior culture and the inferior nature. In this way, Kya’s setting automatically places her in low social status, as the town inhabitants seem to expand their disregard for the land to a disliking of the humans who live there. Plumwood interprets this categorisation as a consequence of the nature/reason dualism, in which, because of its separating and excluding nature, the concept of reason “provides the unifying and defining contrast for the concept of nature” (Plumwood 3). Therefore, the human groups connected to the natural sphere are considered uncivilised, more primitive, and contrasted to reason. In that view, as the main

character is cast as nature on account of living in the marsh and constantly interacting with it, she is inevitably excluded from reason and categorised as inferior to their traditionally civilised lifestyle. Overall, the discrimination against Kya correlates with hierarchical thinking and the historical exclusion of nature from reason and culture in the West, which has relegated the main character to a lower social status in this society.

The Western mindset of opposing and excluding nature from reason leads the inhabitants of Barkley Cove to generate a set of prejudices and a preconception of the protagonist. This can be proved by Chase's amazement over the fact that "the girl who couldn't spell dog, knew the Latin names of shells, where they occurred – and why" (Owens 160). Even Tate's father, Scupper, acknowledges he "was taken aback by her scientific and artistic prowess" (Owens 328). As can be seen, the novel hints at the overarching thought in town that Kya is separated from reason, so these characters are shocked by the fact that she possesses and produces what can be considered rational knowledge and thinking, having managed to become a published author using her expertise on the marshlands. This mentality seems to parallel the historical association of women with nature and emotions, in contrast to men with culture or reason (Plumwood 11). Correspondingly, Kya's gender classification as a woman emphasises her separation from culture, and it generates a preconception that incapacitates the people in town to value her without being influenced by her gender and her connection to the marsh. This prejudice is made evident by the police officers Joe and Ed, who relate Kya's interest in the natural world and mad behaviour, as they remark: "Looks like she's a bit off her rocker" (Owens 244) and "Almost a like a shrine in here. Half a' me's impressed, the other half's got the heebie-jeebies." (Owens 245). This link between the protagonist and madness reveals a reluctance to change their preconception, which had assessed Kya as a primitive and non-rational human. In conclusion, the prejudice that most town residents

harbour against Kya can be explained by the historical categorisation of women and nature as contrasted to reason in Western thinking.

Consequently, due to the mentioned categorisation of the natural world, Kya is also excluded from the community at Barkley Cove. The novel manages to communicate this alienation through the body language that the town dwellers repeatedly display around her, for instance, when Sam and Patti Love "halted abruptly, said nothing, and sidestepped around her – making a wider berth than necessary." (Owens 187), setting a clear distance between them. A desire to avoid an interaction can likewise be perceived in the shop owner Johnny Lane who, as soon as he saw her, sent her away (Owens 52), in a similar fashion to the wife of the Methodist preacher who told Kya to "get away" (Owens 65) and prevented her daughter from touching her. This behaviour can be explained by the connections between Kya and her surroundings. Given that she is viewed within the category of nature, "a field of multiple exclusion and control, not only of non-humans, but of various groups of humans and aspects of human life which are cast as nature" (Plumwood 4), the main character is thus, marginalised throughout her life. In general, the instances provided demonstrate an inclination for the town inhabitants to alienate Kya, which can be explained by their viewpoint based on the linkage of the protagonist with the marsh that sets her apart from their community, "part of a sharply separate, even alien lower realm" (Plumwood 4).

This general tendency indicates the categorisation of Kya and the marsh dwellers as the "other", in this way homogenising them. According to Donna Haraway, there has been a tradition in Western science and politics of the "reproduction of the self from the reflections of the other" (Haraway 7). In these terms, it can be interpreted that the town inhabitants regard themselves as the "self" and the people that live in the marsh, including Kya, as the "other". This is evidenced in the insistence on referring to the main character

as “the Marsh Girl” and using that label when alluding to her throughout the novel except for Tate, Jumpin’, and Mabel. Similarly, the people who settled in the marsh due to a lack of resources (Owens 8) are not known in any other way than as “marsh people” (Owens 219, 234). There is no acknowledgement of individuality within this human group, which can be observed in Patti Love’s comment concerning Kya: “I don’t know her name. Or even if she has one” (Owens 172). This reluctance to appreciate their diversity can be related to Plumwood’s theory of the master residing at the centre, to whom “differences among those of lesser status at the periphery are of little interest or importance, and might undermine comfortable stereotypes of superiority” (Plumwood 54). For that reason, the town residents homogenise the people who live in the marsh in order to keep their sense of superiority and distance from them in a self/other dualism.

Connected to this, the distance the inhabitants of Barkley Cove establish from the marsh people implies a desire to perpetuate humans’ separation from the natural world. It can be observed that there is no attempt to approach Kya or the marsh dwellers throughout the novel, which the police officers of Barkley Cove divulge: “they didn’t even try to keep track of the marsh people” (Owens 234). This inclination to alienate the latter group relates to the desire of the community to seek “the western human ideal which maximises difference and distance from the animal, the primitive and the natural” (Plumwood 26). Seeing that Kya and the marsh dwellers are more closely related to the natural world, challenging that separation, the towners aim to extricate themselves from their lives to keep their sense of superiority, as the “dignity of humanity, like that of masculinity, is maintained by contrast with an excluded inferiorised class” (Plumwood 26), which in this case would be the people who live in the marsh. In conclusion, most inhabitants of Barkley Cove alienate those people more attached to their surroundings,

ignoring their similarities as human beings in an attempt to reject a human identity that includes nature.

3. Chase Andrews: Perpetrator of the Oppression against Women and Nature

Chase Andrews is characterised in the novel with a patronising attitude towards Kya, which reveals his feeling of superiority and that can be associated with the view that the knowledge he learned at school is more valuable than that which Kya acquires about the marshlands. Remarks such as “I know everything” (Owens 190) and “All ya need to know is when and where the fish bite, and I can tell ya that” (Owens 177) exhibit the character’s competitiveness, a desire to be established as the superior one in the relationship. On top of that, it conveys his conviction that he is more intelligent than she is, which, in my view, stems from having followed the traditional institutionalised education in town. This education system did not include studying the complexities of their surroundings, and thus, Chase disregards the value of Kya’s expertise in the marsh. In addition, the last quotation implies the assumption that an interest in the natural world is solely based on its usefulness to the human world. This attitude resonates with Plumwood’s argument about the mechanistic worldview of Western culture that regards nature in purely instrumental terms (24), relating to the needs of the master rationality (Plumwood 194), i.e. human beings. Such a vision of nature can be argued to be the reason that Chase does not value Kya’s knowledge, as it goes beyond this instrumentalist perspective, examining the marsh to understand its workings and complexities out of disinterested curiosity.

Similarly, Chase seems to "instrumentalise" the protagonist, showing a sense of ownership that can be extrapolated to his attitude towards the natural world. Chase’s purpose concerning Kya can be perceived in his changing behaviour during their first

sexual encounter, as once he had her permission "an urgency gripped him and he seemed to bypass her needs and push his way" (Owens 194). Another instance of this is how, even though Kya stopped seeing him immediately after she discovered his engagement with Pearl, Chase endeavours to abuse her sexually one year later, employing physical force to negate Kya any agency. In this way, this character uses the protagonist as a means to the end of having sexual intercourse that once granted, does not accept opposition. This can be considered an example of how "the instrumentalisation of nature and that of women run closely parallel" (Plumwood 21). Furthermore, in the abovementioned abusive interaction, there is frequent use of personal pronouns: calling her "My Marsh Girl" (Owens 263), "my lynx" (Owens 264), and declaring "Like it or not, you're mine" (Owens 265), extracts that showcase his sense of ownership over her. It can be observed that this character uses terminology to refer to Kya that has to do with the natural world, following the general pattern of the inhabitants of the town in their treatment towards her. As a result, it can be interpreted that Chase's naturalisation of the main character corresponds to how "feminizing nature and naturalizing or animalizing women have served as justification for the domination of women, animals, and the earth" in Western culture (Gaard 5). I suggest that by constantly relating Kya to her surroundings, Chase attempts to justify his actions. Overall, the oppression of nature and women are intertwined in this novel through the representation of a character with a possessive and mechanistic attitude towards women and the natural world.

Chase's behaviour aligns him with a masculinity that has systematically perpetuated the domination of women and nature. Analogously to his treatment of the marsh, this character shows a desire to control Kya. For instance, in their first meeting, he attempted to get intimate with her without considering her wishes; it was "a taking, not a sharing or giving" (Owens 161). As can be seen, from the start of their relationship,

Chase is already portrayed as dominating, which is reinforced on many occasions, as when this persona told the protagonist he would "take care of everything" (Owens 190), as well as "I know how shy you are, how ya don't ever do stuff in town. I know you'd be miserable" (Owens 193); "Believe me, you ain't missin' a thing." (Owens 194), assuming he knows what is best for her. His dominating attitude towards nature can be appreciated in the comment that "he scoffed at [Kya's] soft touch, cruising at slow speeds, drifting silently past deer (Owens 176), which, in my opinion, indirectly communicates a sense of domination, ownership, and carelessness regarding the natural world. This kind of alpha, dominant masculinity Chase manifests has traditionally been "valued above all other ways in which men can behave" (Buckingham 5-6). This can be seen in the town's high regard for this character, voiced by the sheriff who believed Chase "only hung out with the so-called Barkley elite. Not trash" (Owens 140). Consequently, he constructs his identity through assertiveness and domineering masculinity, greatly valued in their community, which impacts the attitude he presents before Kya and the marsh.

4. Conclusions

This thesis has aimed to analyse this novel through an ecofeminist approach, with the intention to prove the validity of applying such a theory to literary works. Although the field is not mentioned at any point in the text, the messages the narration repeatedly spreads evoke several ecofeminists' arguments. First, the setting of this story is pervasive in the novel to the extent that it is impossible not to consider it in its analysis. Therefore, it provides space and voice to the inferiorised nature as it does to the marginalised protagonist. Furthermore, the multiple instances in which the narrator and Kya offer descriptions of the complexities and workings of the marshlands negate the validity of

the homogenisation and passivity of nature as a mentality. Furthermore, it can be observed that there is an intention to challenge the separation of the natural world from human identity, as the main character constructs her sense of self around the marsh. In this way, the dualistic thinking characteristic of Western culture is negated.

An examination of the discrimination Kya suffers throughout her life has proved to be the result of her link with the marsh, considered a wasteland by most inhabitants of Barkley Cove. This can be extended to represent the historical inferiorisation of the natural world in Western culture. On top of that, the prejudice against her seems to be further emphasised by her gender as women have traditionally been associated with emotions and the natural world and contrasted to reason and culture, which the story's location in the 1950-1960s can better elucidate. Notwithstanding, the protagonist surpasses the expectations set on her as the "Marsh Girl", turning her deep connection with the marshlands to advantage with the publication of many books on her surroundings, becoming a published author. Lastly, the abusive behaviour the character Chase Andrews presents, focused on satisfying his needs and disregarding the complexities of the marsh, embodies a competitive and dominating masculinity that has historically instrumentalised nature and oppressed women in the West. Because of these reasons, the oppression of both nature and women that ecofeminists seek to interrelate is inevitably linked in the context of this story.

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Annex

The storyline of WCS centres on the development of Catherine Danielle Clark, Kya, since she is six years old when her mother, a victim of domestic violence, abandons the family home, and soon after, her four brothers and sisters also leave to escape their father's abusive treatment towards them. When she is ten, her father disappears too, so this character is left at her own devices, without any resources. These years, the protagonist learns to fend for herself using her knowledge of the marsh, isolated from the community in town, Barkley Cove, who label her "the Marsh Girl", except for Tate Walker, who teaches her how to read when she is a teenager. As a result of his encouragement, Kya learns how to write and documents her observations of the marsh. Afterwards, she sends her notes and drawings of her surroundings to an editor, which leads to the publication of multiple books on the biodiversity of the marsh, becoming "the Marsh Expert" (Owens 341). At nineteen years old, the protagonist has a one-year romantic relationship with Chase Andrews, a local and highly reputed man discovered dead in the swamp by the fire tower in 1969. Subsequently, Kya becomes the prime suspect in the investigation of his death and is eventually tried for murder, even though she is declared non-guilty due to a lack of evidence proving her direct implication. Despite this verdict, the protagonist spends the rest of her life without going to town again, living with Tate in her shack and

continuing to record and publish her knowledge on the marsh until her death, the moment in which it is revealed both to Tate and the readers that she had murdered Chase to prevent potential abuse against her.