

**القهر عبر الاجيال : قراءة نسوية بيئية مابعد  
استعمارية لتمثيلات الجدات والامهات والاطفال في  
رواية المعبر القديم لنموالي سيربل**

**Oppression Across Generations: A  
Postcolonial Ecofeminist Reading of  
Grandmothers, Mothers, and Children in  
Namwali Serpell's The Old Drift**

سجى يحيى صالح

Saja Yahya Salih

جامعة سامراء | قسم اللغة الانكليزية

University of Samarra / Department of English Language

E-mail: [mailto:EDUHM250200@stu.uosamarra.edu.iq](mailto:mailto:EDUHM250200@stu.uosamarra.edu.iq)

07731246840

ا. م. د. عفاف حافظ شاكر

Afaf Hafedh Shakir Darraji

جامعة سامراء | قسم اللغة الانكليزية

University of Samarra / Department of English Language

E-mail: [afaf.h19@uosamarra.edu.iq](mailto:afaf.h19@uosamarra.edu.iq)

الكلمات المفتاحية: النسوية البيئية ما بعد الاستعمارية، القمع، الأجيال، المرأة، الطبيعة،

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## الملخص

يتناول هذا البحث تمثيلات القمع عبر الأجيال في رواية ناموالي سيربيل "الانجراف القديم" (2019)، من منظور نسوي بيئي ما بعد الاستعمار. وهي تركز على فكرة أن الرواية لا تقدم اضطهاد المرأة واستغلال الطبيعة كمسارين منفصلين، بل كشكلين مترابطين من الهيمنة يستمران عبر الأجيال في أشكال اجتماعية وسياسية ومادية متغيرة. يتبنى البحث منهجًا تحليليًا نصيًا، ويتخذ من النسوية البيئية ما بعد الاستعمارية الإطار النظري الرئيسي لقراءة العلاقة بين تهميش المرأة، واستنزاف الموارد، والسيطرة على الجسد، وتحويل التقدم العلمي والتكنولوجي إلى أدوات جديدة للهيمنة. يركز التحليل على الأجيال الثلاثة في الرواية: الجدات والأمهات والأطفال، من أجل إظهار كيف تنتقل أدوات القمع من الإقصاء القانوني والاجتماعي إلى السيطرة على الأسرة، والاستغلال الطبي، والعمل السام، وتكنولوجيا الرقابة، والتدهور البيئي. ويسلط البحث الضوء أيضًا على دور جوقة البعوض كصوت سردي غير بشري يكشف عن هشاشة المطالبة البشرية بالسيطرة، ويكشف عن حدود الدولة والتنمية والعلم والتكنولوجيا. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن الرواية لا تمثل مرحلة ما بعد الاستعمار باعتبارها قطعة كاملة مع الماضي الاستعماري، بل باعتبارها مرحلة يتم فيها إعادة إنتاج منطق الهيمنة من خلال وسائل جديدة. وهكذا تكشف الرواية أن اضطهاد المرأة واستغلال الطبيعة يظلان مترابطين هيكلًا عبر الأجيال، وأن هذا الترابط يشكل أحد المحاور الأساسية في بناء المعنى السردى والنقدي في النص. الكلمات المفتاحية: النسوية البيئية ما بعد الاستعمارية، القمع، الأجيال، المرأة، الطبيعة، الانجراف القديم، جوقة البعوض.

## Abstract

This research examines representations of transgenerational oppression in Namwali Serpell's novel *The Old Drift* (2019), from a postcolonial environmental feminist perspective. It is based on the idea that the novel does not present the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature as two separate paths, but rather as two interconnected forms of domination that persist across generations in changing social, political, and material forms. The research adopts a textual analytical approach, and takes Postcolonial Ecofeminism as the main theoretical framework for reading the relationship between the marginalization of women, the depletion of resources, control over the body, and the transformation of

scientific and technological progress into new tools of domination. The analysis focuses on the three generations in the novel: Grandmothers, Mothers, and Children, in order to show how the tools of oppression move from legal and social exclusion to family control, medical exploitation, toxic labor, censorship technology, and environmental degradation. The research also highlights the role of Mosquito Chorus as a non-human narrative voice that exposes the fragility of the human claim to control, and reveals the limits of the state, development, science, and technology. The study concludes that the novel represents postcolonialism not as a complete break with the colonial past, but rather as a phase in which the logic of domination is reproduced through new means. Thus, the novel reveals that the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature remain structurally interconnected across generations, and that this interconnectedness constitutes one of the fundamental axes in constructing the narrative and critical meaning in the text.

### 1. Introduction

Postcolonial ecofeminism assume considerable importance in literary studies. Feminist, ecological and postcolonial the perspective interrogates the intertwined forms of exploitation and oppression of colonialism, patriarchy and capitalism. Mies and Shiva, *Ecofeminism* (1993: 22). As they argue, oppression of women and the exploitation of nature are structurally linked within systems of domination. And in doing so, the literary text becomes a site that shows how power extends domination from the land and natural resources to the body, labor, social relations and everyday life.

Within this context, Karen J. Warren argues in *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters* (2000: 67), the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature are

inextricably tied: they are two sides of the same coin of domination. This lens is particularly useful in reading Namwali Serpell's *The Old Drift* (2019), which spans generations and links history, environment, power, the body, and technology within a single narrative frame. Rather than offering a full stop for oppression in the form of postcolonialism, this novel posits that postcolonialism is yet another chapter where domination occurs in new forms after independence.

In *The Old Drift* (2019), these changing forms of domination appear from generation to generation. In the grandmothers' generation, oppression takes the form of law, incomplete citizenship, social exclusion. In the mothers' generation, it appears as family pressure, dangerous labor, medical exploitation, the colonization of the female body. In the children's generation it comes anew, e-waste, control, censorship, environmental destruction. The cycle of the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature continues, albeit in different forms.

Past critics of Serpell's *The Old Drift* (2019) have largely focused on history, narrative construction, and art. This study departs from those concerns, and considers ecofeminist aspects of generational oppression in the British colony of Nyasaland, and how forms of oppression mutate across generations but remain seated in the same matrix of power. The study further explores how the oppression of women and nature are interlinked, since Nature is also subjugated in the service of exploiting Woman, and Woman, in turn, is used in the subjugating of Nature, set against a backdrop of colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism. I aim to fill a gap in the criticism by demonstrating how Serpell parallels the oppression of women and nature across the grandmother's, mother's, and children's generations.

Using this context, this study answers the question; how does Namwali Serpell's *The Old Drift* (2019) show the concurrent oppression

of women and nature across the generations in the postcolonial period? The study aims to demonstrate that the novel presents postcolonialism as no clear rupture with the past, but as being the stage in which hegemony assumes novel social, environmental, political and technological forms. In exploring this idea the study will foreground textual analysis as its primary method, and postcolonial ecofeminism as its basic theoretical framework. To make the case transparent, we will walk through the three generations of the novel grandmothers, mothers, and children—as well as the Mosquito Chorus, a nonhuman voice that widens the reach of oppression beyond human boundaries.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

I approach the text through Postcolonial Ecofeminism, which is the most capable theoretical framework for reading the complicity of women and the environment in *The Old Drift*. This approach does not treat women and nature as two separate categories to which the colonial logic is applied, but, instead, views both women and nature as both subjected to a single structure of control shaped through colonialism and carried into post-coloniality through different iterations. From this point of view, *The Old Drift*, demonstrates that control is not found exclusively in the land, territory, or resources, but extends to bodies, work, social relations, and daily life to the extent that women and nature are integrated and equally found within one logic of exploitation and management (Mies & Shiva, 1993: 167).

Warren describes how “[o]ppression occurs not merely because two parties are different, but when the difference serves to justify placing one in a subordinate position with regard to the other and to treat it as natural for the other to use and control the subordinate one” (Warren 2000: 188). In other words, according to Warren, oppression occurs through a

logic of domination that makes domination natural and justifiable with respect to intellectual and cultural systems.

Our study furthers Val Plumwood's argument, and in particular her undertaking of Western dualisms: man/woman, culture/nature, mind/body...etc. She portrays the way in which those dualities not only explain the difference, but also rank it, putting the first into a combination of reason, culture, power, while pushing the second into the position of body, nature and submission. Here therefore the notion of instrumentalism becomes especially salient, because it shows how women and nature become means for stronger ends and not selves with their own value and limits (1993).

#### **4.1. Grandmothers**

In the grandmothers' generation, suffering is not one thing: even across Agnes, Sibilla, and Matha, it takes various forms. Agnes's suffering indicates that colonial racial ideology continues to produce intimate life even when it remains unarticulated, extends itself after independence in more subtle ways: the taboo created by colonial ideas of race governs Agnes's relationship with Ronald, while after independence she still holds to white social space—a universe of legally sanctioned change where privilege is not transformed to responsibility. Sibilla's suffering belongs to the late colonial moment: she is Italian, yes, but within the imperial world is oppressed, socially, for her bodily difference and low class. Her naked shame is evidence of a body rendered strange, and shameful, by an imperial world, while her movement to Kariba foregrounds the life that links her to the colonial dam project, where, in ejection and violence, the projective empire demonstrated control over land and, by extension, over the people who lived there. Matha experiences colonial suffering and postcolonial suffering. When she is a child in the colonial period, her education is denied on account of being girl, her mother cuts her hair so that she can enter



school as a boy, and the mother is imprisoned when Matha is still very young. In the early postcolonial period, Matha experiences abandonment, pregnancy outside of marriage, poverty, social isolation, the declining state of her body, and losing her daughter. Thus, in the grandmothers' generation we find different but linked instances of oppression: the circulation of colonial domination into postcolonial continuities.

At the level of particular encounters of citizenship, Agnes's experience shows us that you do not enter the new national sphere as a full citizen. Rather, acceptance into this new realm is dependent on inherited legal and social criteria, as she says: "hadn't had the chance to vote for Kaunda. Only married women could vote, and the law had only just been changed to allow Africans to practice at all" (Serpell, 2019, p. 126). Political activity is distributed not as a matter of equal civil rights, but as a matter of inducing the state to recognize a specific social status like marriage. In this sense a woman steps into the public, not on the basis of her direct right as a citizen, but by the grace of legal recognition.

This scene can be analyzed through James C. Scott's notion of state legibility as presented in his *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (1998). In it, Scott describes the modern state's tendency to rearrange society into categories where society becomes easier to see, classify, and control. Seen this way, the act of recognizing a woman here is not predicated on her being an entire human being, but rather on whether or not she reads legally as an individual the state recognizes; citizenship, then, becomes more about administrative conditions than about a commitment to equality (Scott, 1998: 66).

The novel does not stop where legal exclusion ends, but shows how women who create an alternative source of legitimacy outside the state are exposed to violence. This violence is rendered through the spectral-historical presence (rather than the literal presence) of Alice Lenshina in



the novel. She does not return as a living person who becomes active in the plot, but she remains as history, and as a sign of alternative female authority. The novel introduces her as the leader of an independent religious movement, the followers of whom refused state and to pay tax: “A woman named Alice Lenshina had started a religious culture. Her followers, thousands of them, had built their own settlements and refused to pay taxes” (Serpell, 2019, p. 145). That a woman appears as an outside leader, signifies to us not just the religious but in fact a threat to the very monopoly of legitimacy and obedience the state lays claim to. Historically, as David M. Gordon (2008: 90) tells us, the 1964 UNIP-Lumpa conflict ends in some million people dead, as followers of Lenshina are massacred (rather, forced dispersal occurs until malfunctioning of limb becomes), at least 1,000 people die, and Lenshina herself surrenders on 11 August 1964 in exchange for a guarantee of her personal safety. Many Lumpa followers are rounded up and kept in camps (Gordon, 2008: 90). Her being then adds an important postcolonial and gendered understanding of the grandmothers at play here, which is that the end to one sort of domination by way of national independence, leads to a violent attempt to repress the existence of another purportedly competing mode of authority. In this way, the episode corroborates my argument that postcolonial oppression entails control of women’s leadership, public authority, and community formation as much as exclusion via laws.

This meaning deepens still further when the chorus votes in about this incident: “Oh Alice Lenshina! Our own Joan of Arc! So many dead at the birth of this nation and all from a single, stray byte!” (Serpell, 2019 : 145). Not only does it have a satirical bite, this phrase, it draws attention to the fact that nation-building has been associated since its inception with violence, with exclusion and instability, not just liberation. More importantly, it constitutes an example of nonhuman agency, because the

voice speaking here is not a human personality but the voice or voices of a nonhuman collective watching, remembering, and commenting on events. It is through this nonhuman voice that the novel attempts to give us an historical awareness of the postcolonial, because it turns out that the violence associated with independence cannot be delivered in the dance performed on the boundary of the new state in official nationalist narratives. Instead, the event is reread from a point of view that exposes the limitations of power and the inadequacy of the nation as complete or innocent beginning. In this way, nature is not a silent witness; it is an active (and sometimes hostile) bearer of historical memory that reveals the paradoxes of the postcolonial moment.

This scene can be read through Achille Mbembe's necropolitics. The latter contends that sovereignty does not simply govern life, regulating difference, but also entails the right to protect or let it die, to expose certain to violence, exclusion, and death. In the former, if a group led by a woman is registered as a threat to the state's monopoly over legitimacy, the violence that follows is no longer a temporary aberration, instead it has the chance to reorganize the public sphere itself according to the logic of the state (Mbembe, 2003: 55).

Another of the African grandmothers in *The Old Drift*, Matha, also shows that national or revolutionary discourse is not necessarily more just toward women, either. Her exclusion from the space project because of her pregnancy reveals that the female body is not a natural part of life but rather a problem that interrupts the public project and damages the image of progress. "Matha Mwamba is launching nowhere. She is above take-off weight!... We could not face our sponsors with a pregnant girl!" (Serpell, 2019: 188). In this way, the novel suggests that even movements that claim to represent national ambition continue to marginalize women when their bodies do not fit the designated roles assigned to them. Her experience



shows that national or revolutionary discourse is no more just towards women. This becomes evident when she is excluded from the space project because of her pregnancy: “Matha Mwamba is launching nowhere. She is above take-off weight!... We could not face our sponsors with a pregnant girl!” (Serpell, 2019: 188). This scene shows the female body not as a natural aspect of life that needs to be accounted for in terms of society but as a blight that interferes with the public project and sullies the public image of progress. The novel reveals that even those movements that explicitly lay claim to national ambition continue to exclude women from the picture when their bodies fail to conform to the expectation prescribed by male discourse of seriousness and public representation. Women are excluded from the future not because they are helpless but precisely because their bodies do not meet the expectations of male discourse.

This exclusion makes sense in light of Michel Foucault’s notion of the process of normalization in his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977) which documents how modern power does not depend solely on outright prohibition, but on setting an “ideal” standard of desirability and then measuring bodies against it. The pregnant woman ceases to be the model, not because of some essential failing, but because the state can decide which bodies are allowed to circulate and which must thus be erased or hidden. The novel is correct in that oppression is permitted to operate through measures and standards that are therefore presumed to be mechanical and technical, but that in fact have a ‘gender’ specific weight.

It becomes progressively more apparent when the novel demonstrates that Matha faces not just the power of the public project, but the power of family, custom, and space: the countryside is “designated” as the place for Matha to give birth; the decree itself comes at a family council; and her sadness becomes an object of social regulation when she



wanders weeping in the street. It is said in the novel, “Matha's public, personal brief seen odd, rude even. Women stared and clucked. Men avoided her path. Schoolboys lauded at her” (Serpell 2019: 202-203). In this sentence lies the revelation that not simply her body, but her very sadness, the mode of its appearance, and the place it occupies, is regulated by society. Women are allowed to show pain as long as it is confined within the accepted form, but when sadness becomes visible, individual and public, it turns into a violation of the social order.

In this generation of grandmothers, we discover that independence does not bring freedom instead, but rather reconfigures subjugation within the national state. Here the law circumscribes citizenship, women leaders meet state violence, women's ambition up against exclusion, personal sorrow still connected to social regulation. All of this the novel shows leaves women still exposed to social diminishment after independence, and the architecture of domination does not dissolve but persists through new institutions and quieter but no less ferocious forms of power (Serpell, 2019: 204).

#### **4.2. Mothers**

In the mother's generation, *The Old Drift* shows that oppression does not disappear after independence, but rather moves from the level of law and state to a level closer to everyday life, such as family, work, medicine, and the body. In this generation, dominance does not always appear in the form of direct formal authority, but rather operates from within private relationships, economic conditions, and medical discourses, such that women become more vulnerable to exploitation within what appear on the surface to be ordinary or familiar spaces. In this sense, this generation reveals that postcolonialism does not abolish control, but rather makes it more intertwined with every day and living (Serpell, 2019: 205).



This form of oppression begins with Sylvia's abduction from her mother, Matha, in a scene that shows how the family itself can become a tool of oppression rather than a space of protection. Sylvia, Matha's daughter, is not taken at random. The novel suggests that Matha neglects her, while Nkuka persuades Grace that the child must be saved from Matha's abuse. At the same time, Nkuka depends on Mr. Mwape for housing, money, and social comfort, which makes the child useful within this fragile domestic arrangement. The novel describes the act when Grace carries out the plan: "Someone gently took her arm, raised her to her feet, and led her stumbling out... Aunty Grace dragged Sylvia... then up the outdoor steps... holding Sylvia in a chokehold" (Serpell, 2019: 220). In this way, the abduction does not appear as a passing incident, but as a form of family violence in which the child is treated as transferable and reusable within adult calculations of need, dependence, and survival.

This scene can be understood through Deniz Kandiyoti's concept of patriarchal bargaining in her article *Bargaining with Patriarchy* (1988). Kandiyoti explains that women do not act in a free space within patriarchy. Instead, they try to secure protection and stability by negotiating within unequal conditions created by male authority. From this perspective, Sylvia's abduction appears not only as an act of violence, but also as part of a patriarchal arrangement in which the child becomes a means of solving another woman's problem. In this way, the scene shows that care, recognition, and support remain shaped by unequal power within the family and society.

Moreover, in the mothers' generation, oppression takes a new postcolonial form when women's bodies become objects of medical knowledge and scientific use. This appears in Lee Banda, the son of Agnes, whose relationship with Sylvia is shaped not by equality, but by access to marginalized female bodies. The novel states: "her salon was clearly a front

for a brothel. These were precisely the women who might have the genetic mutation he sought. As he courted her, he took samples from her and her girls, and sent them off to be tested.” (Serpell, 2019: 226). This passage shows that Sylvia is not approached as an equal partner, but as a means of reaching other vulnerable women. In this way, the novel reveals that, in the postcolonial period, oppression extends from social control to scientific control, as female bodies become available for examination, use, and exploitation.

This sort of control could be read through the lens of Mies and Shiva’s critique of reductionist science, in that this form of knowledge does not conceive of the body as a complete self, but as something to be rendered measurable, calculable, and available to the laboratory. So it doesn’t really matter how fragile and broken their lives are, it is only a matter of how much could be harvested from their bodies for the benefit of a scientific, medical project. The novel makes clear that what science divorced of justice and moral accountability reproduces, is the same power system of domination, but inscribed in the guise of progress and treatment (Mies & Shiva, 2014: 77).

It’s not only medicine here, the implication being that women’s very work, too, is a slow poison. “The whole place reeked of burning electrical, frictional, chemical,” Serpell writes of Sylvia’s salon (259). Not just a workplace, but a hell where women have to earn their living in an atmosphere that eats them alive.

This damage can be articulated through Rob Nixon’s formulation of slow violence, since the harm here does not come as a shock or disaster, but accumulates slowly in the current of daily life until it becomes part of life. Constant exposure to toxins, work in dangerous conditions, lack of alternative economic opportunities makes the violence surface-free, but



deep and long in its effect on the body and on the capacity to continue (Nixon, 2011: 78).

Isabella, the daughter of Sibilla, the Italian grandmother, embodies another form of oppression in the mothers' generations in which the female body within the family becomes a direct economic resource. After the mother makes sure that her daughters inherit the long-hair genes from her own mother, Sibilla, she exploits these daughters by building a business around this inheritance, opening a company that sells the daughters' hair. The novel describes this process like this: "She made for them a regulated route to rein them in – and made them profitable. She named the family business Lovely Luxe Locks Ltd." (Serpell, 2019: 318). We can see that the girls are no longer treated as growing selves but as subjects of control and profit. What was once an inherited trait of the girl's body is now a thing that can be managed and exploited. Domination has transferred from outside the family, to inside: motherhood has become part of the logic of control and investment.

The danger of this path finds a counterpart in the novel's fictional dialogue describing hair as an inexhaustible resource, "It's just hair. An infinite resource" (Serpell, 2019, 321). So too, reading Emma Tarlo's book, *Entanglement: The Secret Lives of Hair* (2016), is useful here, a consideration that shows how that commodity, once released from the body, travels in networks of market, exchange, and profit. From that perspective, hair is not something that remains part of identity, of a body's economy: it is a something to be collected, packaged, sold, traded. And hence the female body itself enters an economy of extraction and benefit. The novel also adds a wider dimension this generation through the Mosquito Chorus' non-human take on love and motherhood: "These we feed to our parents in need and this you become our wet nurses... To stay is to spoil; to settle, to stagnate; to protect, to become an ouroboros"

(Serpell, 2019: 343). This moment signals that care is not always presented as generous. Rather, the novel holds that closeness, protection, and attachment may in turn become forms of burden, control, and self-destruction. And so the Mosquito Chorus becomes not a figural voice but a critical voice that reminds the reader how even intimate relations can share logic with an oppressive order.

In that sense, mothers' generation shows that oppression in the novel is less direct-seeming but deeper in its effects, that family can harm, that knowledge can become a means of exploitation, that work can harm the body, that motherhood can be reformed by profit and control. And through all of this the novel demonstrates that women in this generation live in a multiplied structure of domination which turns body, use, care, home into parts of the continuation of exploitation across generations (Serpell, 2019:222).

### 4.3. Children

In Children's Generation, *The Old Drift* indicates that while colonization's impact on the present has moved from a legal and familial basis to one based upon more recent means (such as technology, electronic waste, medical practices, censorship and environmental challenges), it continues to affect this generation through similar forms of experience but in an ever-evolving state. This shows us that rather than simply reproducing former patterns of domination through harm to previous generations, the damage that is done by the past appears in a variety of new forms, each of which reproduces the same logic of subjugation as its predecessors. This also suggests that within this new generation, all elements of the environment (including the body), technology and power are interconnected within a common framework of control (by Serpell et al., 2019).



In the way that Jacob was raised by his mother Sylvia who was raised by her grandmother Matha indicates that this same generation of children will have a corrupt world in which to live with technological and electronic products that are no longer usable and have become 'e – waste' (Serpell, 2019: 462-463). The author's use of the term 'e-waste' suggests "This means that the countries you live in around the world today are now receiving what other more powerful country's waste product." Therefore, Africa is not being portrayed as a place where people create new things or become independent instead it has been made a legitimate consumer or recipient of other countries' waste products. Thus, Jacob has not become the child of a technically autonomous future but instead has been relegated as a child of the remains of inequitable world order whose remnants were discarded in the margins to now be forced to create a life there. Therefore, it seems that post-colonial environmental management is no longer undertaken through direct occupation but instead by being technically disposed of (i.e., their resources).

The article by Costanza Mondo titled "Post Nature and Ecocritical Epic in Namwali Serpell's *The Old Drift* (2024)" offers valuable insights into how technology is not presented in *The Old Drift* as a neutral marker of advancement; instead, it is associated with environmental pollution and degradation of natural-vs-artificial distinctions, as created by the use of technology. The technological waste depicted in the novel therefore not only serves as a background element within the novel but also demonstrates that the logic behind the continued domination of a particular group over another persists with regard to the continued existence of global south as an area subject to environmental destruction due to technology, which ultimately imposes dependency upon those in the global south instead of creating freedom.



When looking back at Agnes' memories in the novel, the relationship between her current relationship with the environment and how that link extends to colonisation (i.e., by using the example of Kariba Dam) is made apparent when she tells Joseph, "Kariba Dam has been damned (i.e., 'cursed') since it was first built; thousands of people were displaced whilst building that dam" (Serpell, 2019: 543–544). This quote indicates that the type of environmental violence depicted in the novel did not originate as a separate occurrence in the post-colonial period but is rather a continuation of a previous history that impacted the reconfiguration of the river and earth (i.e., changes were made to the environment so that it could support the forces of capital and control). Thus, environmental realities now being experienced by children carry the memories of a history of prior exploitation. The message from the novel is that environmental oppression was not created in the present; rather, it may change form and continue through time. By utilising Val Plumwood's notion of Instrumentalism (1993), as expressed in her writing around Feminism and Nature, we see that domination doesn't just classify others as 'inferior', but instead transforms them so that they can be used to fulfill the 'needs' of those in power. This is depicted clearly throughout this novel, where both nature and humans are treated as tools that can be used and redirected to serve us. Under this view, we see that dams, waste, resources and even human bodies are simply viewed as tools for our use, where their value is only measured based on how useful they are to us, as opposed for example, on the basis of justice, recognition and/or balance.

Oppression is also reflected in medical knowledge. After Joseph's father dies, he finds he can't find out if the women in the medical files are real people or if they are just numbers: "The logs were dated, but they had a code that only he could figure out the key to when he listed the names: Chileshe K., Loveness J., Sylvia M. – as he typed on his computer in the

dining room when Granny came in ... Dr. Lionel Banda had a whole circle of sick people as a result of his work" (Serpell, 2019: 234). This quote indicates how medical knowledge in the text is used to take away women's identity, reduce them to just a number or test subject, and make their bodies, their illnesses, and their experiences a commodity for scientific purposes. In *Ecofeminism* (2014), Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva critique how non-reductionist science has created a separation between body and context by measuring bodies independently of their context. This viewpoint allows the scientific community to create a larger power structure by treating marginalized women as unworthy of being treated as humans deserving of respect or safety.

#### **4.4. The Mosquito Chorus and the Nonhuman Critique of Power**

The Mosquito Chorus is one the most recognizable narrative devices in *The Old Drift*. Like other techniques used by Serpell, it adds much more than simply a minor voice. It is a powerful mechanism for articulating the vulnerability of human authority and its lack of legitimacy as an authoritative source of control. In this way, the novel provides a means for nonhuman forms of existence to give us their view of and participate in the assessment and criticism of historical, political, and environmental realities in both direct and indirect ways, and also provide means for linking all three types of reality (Serpell, 2019: 235). So not only does the use of mosquitoes shift the perspective of the narrative, but it fundamentally alters how readers come to understand what power is. What humans perceive as a valid means of progress and support for the capacities of the state and its systems of operation appears to mosquitoes to be simply a web of disconnection and violence, through which one organism penetrates another, and from entires to diseases, and from beings left with their own limitations (Serpell, 2019:236).



The significance of this voice is demonstrated by its ability to connect the political event that created an environmental element with the event itself when that same event is framed within the metaphor of the mosquito chorus creating a meaning beyond simply being politically motivated violence, but as both a way of invading and gradually doing harm to the environment. As Serpell describes the political event and how Alice Lenshina is tied to the deaths of many people in this new nation, he states: "Oh Alice Lenshina! Our very own Joan of Arc! So many dead at the birth of this nation and all because of one small fly!" (Serpell, 2019: 145). The chorus not only serves as a witness to history but also sets the stage for understanding violence as something that enters quietly, spreads through small means, and leaves behind lasting impacts.

Svetlana Stefanova's 2022 article, "The Insect Metaphor: Intrusion, Parasitism, and Transformation in Namwali Serpell's *The Old Drift*," explains how the role of mosquitoes as insects in revealing these three concepts (e.g. intrusion, parasitism, and transformation) is made clearer. While they serve as positional representations of disease, insects are also used as metaphors that help to articulate what is meant by trespass, parasitism, and transformation within both human and political relations. Using this rationale, insects (e.g. mosquitoes) demonstrate the means through which quiet penetration of power occurs, how harm can accumulate over time, and that power can be wielded by taking advantage of weaknesses, rather than solely relying upon the application of force.

## 5. Conclusion

The research undertaken in this study found that *The Old Drift* reflects a transgenerational pattern of oppression that exists as an ongoing structure, changing forms but remaining fundamentally the same throughout. As such, the text clarifies how post-colonial hegemony does not simply cease; instead, it is re-affirmed and reproduced throughout all



aspects of life, whether that be law, family, medicine or technology and the environment. Overall, evidence presented in the analysis demonstrated: the generation of grandmothers is reflective of legal and social exclusion; the mother's generation has been subject to oppression through the body, labour and domestic relationships; while the children's generation present most contemporary manifestations of oppression through electronic waste, exploitation of human life for medical reasons, technological censorship, and environmental degradation. The study also indicated that the oppression of women and the exploitation of the environment are not strictly independent issues, rather they are complicit as they form part of the same underlying system of domination rooted within control and degradation. This is why the Postcolonial Ecofeminism perspective on reading the novel is so important. It illustrates how these connections happen over time. Furthermore, *Mosquito Chorus* expands upon this view by dismantling anthropocentrism and demonstrating the delicate nature of and limits to humans' power. The end result of this book confirms that oppression in postcolonialism is not simply a remnant of history, but instead a continuous entity that exists both in society and the environment as they evolve together.

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