

**“The Question of Land and Woman:
Alan Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country* from an
Ecofeminist Perspective”**

Sayed Mohammed Youssef, PhD

A Staff Member at the Department of English Language and Literature,
College of Languages and Translation, Al-Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud
Islamic University, Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Abstract

Alan Paton’s maiden novel, and still his *magnum opus*, *Cry, the Beloved Country* has often been interpreted as a post-colonial literary document that records the segregational discrimination of the 1940s, which was later institutionalised as the ill-reputed apartheid a few months following the publication of the novel. Indeed, such readings are true. However, they do not take into consideration the feminist considerations and ecological implications permeated in the novel. The examples that show the political, social and economic exploitation of women along with the degradation of land are numerous. This article is an ecofeminist reading of Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country*: It aims to elucidate that both white and black women do not have much leverage within the colonialist and patriarchal society in which they live. The weak and minor position given to women here goes hand in hand with the degradation of African land. To the dismay of many, more particularly feminists, almost all the female characters depicted in the novel are stigmatised as helpless, naïve or immorally decadent. Even the good ones of them stereotypically play second fiddle under *pater familias* and endure the monotonous chores of mothering and domesticity. As for land in pre-apartheid context, it is not any far better off than woman as it has been degraded and eroded by man-induced factors such as inappropriate agricultural

practises, overcultivation, overgrazing and gold mining. Furthermore, poverty-stricken tenants have deserted their land for urban regions in search of better life.

Key Words:

Degradation, ecofeminism, land, patriarchy, woman

"قضية الأرض والمرأة: دراسة لرواية "ابك أيها الوطن الحبيب" للروائي
"آلان باتون" من منظور نظرية النسوية الإيكولوجية"

د. سيد محمد يوسف

عضو هيئة تدريس بقسم اللغة الانجليزية وآدابها
كلية اللغات والترجمة - جامعة الإمام محمد بن سعود الإسلامية
الرياض - المملكة العربية السعودية

الملخص:

غالباً ما يتم تحليل رواية "ابك أيها الوطن الحبيب" من منظور نظرية "ما بعد الاستعمار"، لكن مثل هذه القراءات النقدية لا تأخذ في الاعتبار القضايا البيئية والاعتبارات النسوية في النص، فالتحليل النقدي المتأني للرواية يظهر الأمثلة التي تعكس امتهان المرأة والبيئة الطبيعية معاً. وهذا هو محور اهتمام نظرية النسوية الإيكولوجية. ودوماً ما تظهر المرأة بالعاجزة والضعيفة والسادجة أو سيئة السمعة. حتي الشخصيات النسائية حسنة السمعة تبدو ضعيفة مقابل الرجل، ودوماً ما يلعبن أدوار نمطية كرعاية الأسرة ويتحملن المهام الرتيبة كالأومومة والقيام بالأعمال المنزلية. حتى تطلعات وأحلام المرأة تتحقق عن طريق الرجل. والرجال وحدهم دون النساء هم من يرسمون خريطة طريق نحو مستقبل بلا عنف ولا عنصرية. أما فيما يتعلق بالأرض، فهي ليست أفضل حالاً؛ فقد تدهورت وتآكلت بسبب عوامل عدة من صنع الرجل مثل: الرعي الجائر والإفراط في الزراعة

وعمليات التعدين المختلفة وغيرها مما أضعف من إنتاجيتها وأدى إلى فقدان التربة الصالحة للزراعة قوتها، وبالتالي موت النبات والحيوان وهجرة الانسان.

كلمات مفتاحية:

أمتهان، النسوية الإيكولوجية، الأرض، المجتمع الذكوري، المرأة.

1. Ecofeminist Activism- A Conceptual Framework:

Alan Stewart Paton (1903-1988) is a fervent social and political activist who spent his life defending the rights of the poor, downtrodden and oppressed South African natives against the injustices and atrocities practised against them in their white-dominated country. His maiden novel, and still his *magnum opus*, *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948) has often been interpreted from a post-colonial perspective. It is primarily looked upon by many critics and readership as well as a politicised novel against the segregational discrimination, which was later institutionalised as the ill-reputed apartheid a few months following the publication of the novel. However, a thorough critical reading of the text shows that it can be analysed from an ecofeminist perspective as it is filled with a great number of examples of the degradation of land and the bias and prejudice against woman, both white and black.

However, before going any further, it is necessary right here to begin with a theoretical framework about the main term, i.e., ecofeminism. As a concept, ecofeminist activism is simply a movement that emerged as early as the mid-1970s alongside second-wave feminism. It basically asserts a close correlation between the degradation of nature and the subordination and oppression of woman. In essence, the question of land and woman is its main concern. In his book *Beginning Theory*, Peter Barry asserts that the term

'ecofeminism' first arose in the mid-1970s and apparently lay dormant in the critical vocabulary until America's Cheryl Glotfelty of University of Nevada, Reno, revived it in 1989. It is Glotfelty who co-edited with Harold Fromm a key collection of helpful and definitive essays titled *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (University of Georgia Press, 1996) (249). This way, states Barry, "American ecocriticism was already a burgeoning academic movement by the early 1990s, beginning to establish its infrastructure of designated journals and official corporate body" (248).

Ecofeminism is an activist and academic movement that is the amalgamation of many other movements that seek to halt all forms of degradation and oppression practised by traditional patriarchal thinking or any other unfair force that triggers distinction of any sort. This distinction is embedded more specifically in the western tradition of thought, and is much apparent in the value dualisms of *male/female, culture/nature, sex/gender, reason/emotion, human/nonhuman* and the like. Such disjuncts are unfortunately seen as oppositional rather than complementary, and exclusive rather than inclusive. Of such disjuncts are male/female and culture/nature, which place higher value on one disjunct rather than the other. The system of dualisms, especially when it comes to the relationship between men and women, culture and nature, is stigmatised as inaccurate since it simply discards women outside culture. Andrea Campbell states,

The problem with the critique is that it is very limiting in its explanation of Western ideologies. While it is correct to argue that Western discourse describes women as closer to nature, the use of the culture/nature dualism means women would have to fall outside of culture. Obviously this is inaccurate as

women live and participate substantially in the realm of culture. There is no room for negotiation between culture and nature when placed in opposition to one another. It is the same for the human/nonhuman dualism, which would mean human possesses no animal characteristics and women would possess no human characteristics. (*New Directions* x)

In her book *Feminist Thought*, Rosemarie Tong argues that ecofeminism is basically premised on the argument that oppression of any sort has to come to an abrupt end and that freedom for all should be a unanimous slogan by all activists:

Ecofeminism’s basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature. Ecofeminism calls for an end to all oppressions, arguing that no attempt to liberate women (or any other oppressed group) will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature.(1)

Afterwards, Tong goes further to quote contemporary American philosopher Karen J. Warren of Macalester College in Minnesota, who warns deeply of the danger of what she denounces as the hierarchal and dualistic thinking of patriarchy already cited above. To quote her own words,

Patriarchy’s hierarchical, dualistic, and oppressive mode of thinking has harmed both women and nature, in Warren’s opinion. Indeed, because women have been “naturalized” and nature has been “feminized,” it is difficult to know where the oppression of one ends and the other begins. Warren emphasized women are “naturalized” when they are described in animal terms

such as “cows, foxes, chicks, serpents, bitches, beavers, old bats, pussycats, cats, birdbrains, hare-brains.” Similarly, nature is “feminized” when “she” is raped, mastered, conquered, controlled, penetrated, subdued, and mined by men, or when “she” is venerated or even worshipped as the grandest mother of all. If man is the lord of nature, if he has been given dominion over it, then he has control not only over nature but also over nature’s human analogue, woman. Whatever man may do to nature, he may also do to woman. (238)

2. Discussion:

2.1. Degradation of (African) Land:

In his “Note on the 1987 Edition” of *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Alan Paton states that “One of the most important characters in the book was the land of South Africa itself” (7). This statement is quite right and is indeed asserted by the very title given to the book. In essence, the novel is first and foremost the story of a land degraded and deserted by its tenants. As early as the very opening chapter, the novel makes numerous references to the land, especially the Natal province of eastern South Africa. As the book progresses, the narrator speaks of other locations such as the metropolitan city of Johannesburg and many other urban cities. Hence, from start to finish *Cry, the Beloved Country* deals with the South African society and its relationship with the land. The story is located in two different, though adjacent, locales. It opens with the quasi-religious description of the beauty of the fertile and lush land of the Britons and Afrikaners, which is described as paradise-like:

There is a lovely road that runs from Ixopo into the hills. These hills are grass-covered and rolling, and

they are lovely beyond any singing of it. The road climbs seven miles into them, to Carisbrooke, and from there, if there is no mist, you look down on one of the fairest valleys of Africa. About you there is grass and bracken and you may hear the forlorn crying of the titihoya...and beyond and behind the river, great hill after great hill...The grass is rich and matted, you cannot see the soil. It holds the rain and mist, and they seep into the ground, feeding the streams and kloofs. It is well-tended, and not too many cattle feed upon it; not too many fires burn it, laying bare and the soil. Stand unshod upon it, for the ground is *holy*, being even as it came from the Creator. Keep it, guard it, care for it, for it keeps men, guards men, cares for men. Destroy it and man is destroyed. (33)

However, at the bottom of this idyllic setting stands the barren and desolate Ndotsheni region of the African inhabitants, which is depicted exactly as an eyesore. Paton writes,

But the rich green hills break down. They fall to the valley below, and falling, change their nature. For they grow red and bare; they cannot hold the rain and mist, and the streams are dry in the kloofs. Too many cattle feed upon the grass, and too many fires have burned it. Stand shod upon it, for it is coarse and sharp, and the stones cut under the feet. It is not kept, or guarded, or cared for, it no longer keeps men, guards men, cares for men. The titihoya does not cry here anymore. (33-34)

As stated above in the aforementioned two quotations, the sterility and barrenness of the natives' land, if it is in any way meaningful to claim that the poor African people have

possession of any land under white colonisation and hegemony of the 1940s, to the juxtaposition of the fertility and richness of the grass-covered hills of the whites is significant and does reinforce the harsh reality of the situation in South Africa at that epoch. Likewise, it shows the detrimental impact of the segregation policy pursued by the whites against the blacks. The hills are described as marvellously gorgeous whose outstanding beauty is represented through the matted grass, which makes it possible for one to take off one's shoes and move barefoot. The place holds both the rain and mist, and is well-tended by all people, men and women, old and young, who regard it as 'holy'. Singing birds, especially the titihoya and lots of other birds, are always heard singing everywhere- things that make of this setting paradise-like with the thorough sense of the word.

Nonetheless, the case is entirely different when it comes to the land where the poor natives live, which is represented here through the valley at the bottom of the lush hills. Unlike the unbelievably green hills, the valley is barren, with no sufficient water. It fails to feed the destitute people or their cattle living on it. Furthermore, it is rocky, which makes it really difficult for one to move barefoot. Consequently, the desolateness of the setting has driven young people to flee to the urban regions, most specifically the metropolitan city of Johannesburg for better life. Also, such a place does not attract the singing titihoya, whose sound is not heard there. Like the barren land on which they are marooned, the elderly blacks are portrayed as if they were sickly and helpless children, who are unable to fend for themselves. This way, Chiwengo may not be mistaken when she asserts that the description of the land inhabited by both the blacks and whites reinforces the racial and hierarchal nature of society in the 1940s:

These contrasting spaces, at the beginning of the novel, metaphorically represent a racially hierarchized society. The setting reinforces the image of Africans as children who are incapable of providing for their minimum needs and who lack the intelligence to understand the working of nature. The green colour of the hills also reinforces the idea of growth, wealth, and abundance whereas the red colour of the valley conveys a sense of death and violence. (*Understanding Cry, the Beloved Country* 3)

Once again, the greenness of the hills juxtaposed to the redness of the valley reveals much about the bloody clashes and suggests "the know-how and the hegemony of the Western world and the ignorance and inferiority of the African community" (Chiwengo 3). Many a time, the narrator speaks of the redness of the natives' land: "For they grow red and bare" (Paton 33), and "the great red hills stand desolate, and the earth has torn away like flesh"(34). It is not merely the earth that is torn up right here; rather, it is also the nation itself—something that foreshadows the bloody conflict between the blacks and whites.

The sharp contrasts already cited between the two types of landscape also emphasises in symbolic terms the anger of the blacks' land against the discrimination practised against them and its determination to be barren and uncooperative with farmers. Other factors have helped make the land unproductive and trigger its desertification such as the blacks' degradation of their land through overgrazing and overfarming, which lessen the land's productivity day after day. Overcultivation causes arable soil to lose its vigour and, therefore, prompts the exhaustion, if not death, of plants. And this is the case of the natives' land: It has lost its nutrients and

vegetation. It has metaphorically become “sick, almost beyond healing” (45), as the narrator claims.

Degradation of land is also well delineated in *Cry, the Beloved Country* through gold mining, which is one of the major factors that result in desert-like conditions, erosion and contamination of soil. South Africa is one of the countries which is rich in many important metals, especially gold. The mines of South Africa are indeed owned by the whites, both Britons and Afrikaans. Even the underprivileged natives are seen ripping up their land in search of gold. The poor natives work in the mines for meagre wages to extract gold. On his way to Johannesburg to retrieve his family members, Reverend Kumalo, one of the two protagonists of the novel and an aging Zulu Anglican pastor, sees many mines and asks about the process involved in mining, and a native miner tells him that Europeans use dynamites to explode the hard rocks out on their endless search for gold. Similarly, *Cry, the Beloved Country* shows the importance of the mines in South Africa of the 1940s. The crime committed by Absalom Kumalo of killing a white man, Arthur Jarvis by name, is the centre of the plot. It stuns the whole society and makes headlines in the press as violence arises, and bloody skirmishes between whites and blacks go viral from one province to another. However, young Kumalo’s hideous crime goes into sudden oblivion once the gold mines are discovered in the Orange Free State. Chiwengo comments,

The mines are so central to South Africa’s livelihood and economy that the trial of Reverend Kumalo’s son, Absalom, who has killed James Jarvis’s son, Arthur, is all but forgotten when gold is discovered in Odendaalsrust, in the Orange Free State. There is much excitement but also contention within the European community. Clashes ensue between rich

and poor, shareholders and nonshareholders, since the mines, the mainstays of the country’s economy, enable farmers to be productive, ensure employment, determine wages, and increase urbanisation. (121-122)

As mentioned above, the land has been degraded, if not let down, by both blacks and whites. Young men desert the land to old men, women, widows and children to tend. Even educated people leave it for better opportunities in the urban regions:

It was a problem almost beyond solution. Some people said there must be more education, but a boy with education did not want to work on the farms, and went off to the towns to look for more congenial occupation. The work was done by old men and women...For if they got more land, and treated it as they treated what they had already, country would turn into a desert. (Paton 163).

The net result is that land adamantly turns its back on those tenants who desert it. As the narrator states in the very opening paragraphs of the opening chapter, “Keep it, guard it, care for it, for it keeps men, guards men, cares for men. Destroy it and man is destroyed” (33). It is no wonder that the characters who leave their land for the urban cities are much plighted as if the curse of land, which they have left behind, pursue them: For example, Gertrude, who leaves for Johannesburg to look for her husband who works in the mines there, is lost and, in time, turns into a woman of moral laxity; Absalom Kumalo, who leaves for Johannesburg to look for his aunt, leads life of delinquency and is finally arrested and executed by the authorities for murdering a white man; and John Kumalo, though his situation is somewhat different from both Gertrude and Absalom, turns into a crooked and corrupt

politician who is only attracted to the labyrinths of politics to achieve personal interests. This way, in losing their connection to land, Gertrude, Absalom, John Kumalo along with many others lose themselves. With the loss of connection to land, both order and stability are also destroyed.

2.2. Marginalisation of Women-Both White and Black:

With regard to the position of women in South Africa in pre-apartheid context, *Cry, the Beloved Country* documents the inferior and subservient role given to women and the injustices they actually experience, whether they are white or black. Nevertheless, unlike their white counterparts, black female characters suffer from dual injustice as they fall helpless victims to the clutches of both racial discrimination and patriarchy. As early as the very opening chapter, the novel delineates how black men and women together bitterly suffer from the segregational discrimination practised by their white counterparts. The book is replete with a great number of examples illustrating this very specific point. To cite just a few, as cited beforehand, the racial segregation quite prevalent in the society is firmly established between the whites and blacks through the narrator's description of the idyllic setting of the whites, which has already been described as *paradise-like*, in sharp contrast with the barren and eroded valley of Ndotsheni region of the African inhabitants, which is stigmatised as a desolate and *waste land*. Similarly, the metropolis Johannesburg is seen divided into separate places for the natives and other ones for Europeans. In Johannesburg's filthiest ghettos, where millions of black South Africans live, Reverend Stephen Kumalo finds his family members.

Likewise, the migration of country black folk, both males and females, to the urban regions is ascribed to the bad

economic and social conditions along with the disintegration of traditional tribal system. To ensure that the natives will not turn against them or do anything that will embitter their existence, Europeans, whether Britons or Afrikaners, have dismantled the traditional tribe. This way, the natives of South Africans, they claim, cannot be united. Reverend Kumalo's excursion into Johannesburg is basically "a quest for family unification"(Chiwengo's 14) as he seeks out to reunite the members of the once one single entity. Segregational discrimination is also obviously manifested on the train to Johannesburg. Though the train has no Europeans since they all "have their cars, and hardly travel by train any more"(Paton 43), there are carriages specially designated for them. As a Zulu, Reverend Kumalo climbs one of the carriages for the Africans, which is replete with black passengers who are dressed in European uniforms. Later on, Reverend Msimangu grumbles that even in trams, there are certain places for Europeans and other places for Africans, who are often harassed by young whites-something he takes for a harbinger of doom: "They run trams for the centre of the city, and part is for Europeans and part for us. But we are often thrown off the trams by young hooligans. And our hooligans are ready for trouble too" (59).

Chiwengo summarises the subservient role given to women, both white and black, in the novel. It is worthwhile quoting her own words,

Women in Alan Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country*, whether white or black, do not hold a seminal position in their society. From the onset, Mrs Kumalo is associated with food and service; the white women also occupy solely domestic spaces. Most of what is heard about Mrs James Jarvis, even when she attends her son’s funeral, is learned indirectly; the reader is

given insight into her sorrow, but she never articulates it herself. Reverend Kumalo's wife has also lost a son, but she, apart from expressing her public humiliation, never expresses her thoughts. How could she have done so? (175).

To a great degree, this statement is true. The first woman to be mentioned in the novel is Mrs Kumalo, the black wife of Reverend Kumalo. Throughout the handful chapters in which she makes her appearance, the author refers to her as merely "Mrs Kumalo" as her first name is not given. Though she is an African woman, who is traditionally not associated with her husband's name, her maiden name is not given and is associated with the family name of her husband. Like many black wives, Mrs Kumalo endures the monotonous tasks of mothering and domesticity patiently. The narrator describes her as a typical black wife who is simply obedient and acquiescent to her husband as well as supportive of both husband and family. Her husband consults her about the letter he has just received from Johannesburg and asks her to fetch him their savings to use them for his journey. Once she grumbles wearily about the money that is planned to go to their only son's education, her husband sharply and harshly silences her by reminding her that "When people go to Johannesburg, they do not come back...They go to Johannesburg, and there they are lost, and no one hears of them at all...They go to Johannesburg, and there they are lost, and no one hears of them at all" (Paton 39). Such words are enough to silence her. This way, the narrator is not mistaken when he aptly describes her a forbearing and even-tempered woman who accepts things calmly: "Then she sat down at his table, and put her head on it, and was silent, with the patient suffering of black women, with the suffering of oxen, the suffering of any that are mute" (40). Towards the end of the

novel, her husband comes back from his nightmarish journey accompanied with both Absalom’s mistress and Gertrude’s son, and the now bereaved Mrs Kumalo kindly and generously welcomes her guests. She is ostentatiously overjoyed once Absalom’s girlfriend calls her mother.

Thorny topics like prostitution, pregnancy out of wedlock and liquor trade are also represented in the novel through female characters, more particularly Gertrude and Absalom’s promiscuous girlfriend. Gertrude is the younger sister of Reverend Kumalo, who has left the province of Natal for the metropolis in search of her husband who works in the gold mines there. Failing to find him there, she is attracted to the underworld of prostitution and bootlegging. The reader first hears of her when Reverend Msimangu, a priest in Johannesburg, sends a letter to Reverend Kumalo asking him to come hastily to the metropolis to take care of his sister, whom he aptly describes as critically ‘sick’. Reverend Kumalo thinks erroneously that Gertrude is physically sick and naively asks if she is very sick. He is told that “she is very sick. But it is not that kind of sickness. It is another, a worse kind of sickness” (Paton 53). To Reverend Kumalo’s dismay, his little sister has turned into a prostitute and bootlegger in Johannesburg. As Reverend Msimangu puts it, she is one of “These women [who] sleep with any man for price. A man has been killed at her place. They gamble and drink and stab. She has been in prison, more than once” (53).

As a corollary to her morally decadent behaviour, everything about Gertrude is described by the narrator as cold and almost dead. When Reverend Kumalo first meets her in one of the filthiest slums of Johannesburg, she stretches her hand to him, which is described as “cold and wet, there is no life in it” (59). She is simply spiritually dead since she leads a

meaningless and absurd life in a sinister environment. Her elder brother tells her angrily, "You have shamed us, he says in a low voice, not wishing to make it known to the world. A liquor seller, a prostitute, with a child and you do not know where he is? Your brother a priest. How could you do this to us" (61). Advised by Reverend Msimangu, Reverend Kumalo, though much ashamed of his sister, decides to talk to her in order to save at least her little child: "Perhaps if you cannot save the mother, you can save the child" (54). On her part, Gertrude promises to go back to Ndotsheni with her son and, consequently, sells her possessions and moves to a room at the boarding house of Mrs. Lithebe in preparation for the trip. However, in no time Gertrude, yearning for the life of moral looseness, runs away after she abandons her son with her brother. Though startled by his younger sister's action, Reverend Kumalo courageously forgets all about her, simply because he is sure enough that she is utterly ruined from within and that it is too late to bring her back to the fold again.

Absalom's girlfriend is also another female character who shares some certain characteristics with Gertrude. She has been described as a woman of sexual promiscuity who has had a number of sexual partners. Throughout the novel, she is not given a name; she is only referred to as Absalom's girlfriend or mistress. However, the condition of this young girl seems much different from that of Gertrude. Whereas Gertrude has had a good family in Ndotsheni that cares for her, represented here through her elder brother Reverend Kumalo, Absalom's girlfriend belongs to a dysfunctional family. This makes Absalom's girlfriend a victim of a broken family: her mother is a degenerate drunk and her stepfather abuses her. This is the reason why Reverend Kumalo sympathises with her once he first meets with her. Another thing that differentiates Absalom's girlfriend from Gertrude is the former's keen and

sincere determination to change her life utterly once the opportunity is given. Once Reverend Kumalo offers her to go with him to the rural region of Ndotsheni to give birth to her expected son and to start a new and pure life there, she is overjoyed and surprisingly catches at the opportunity given to her. The idea that Reverend Kumalo calls her daughter throws her into ecstasy. She is overjoyed to call him father-in-law and to be called daughter. Back in Ndotsheni, she is so happy to have a caring family like the Kumalos. In the case of Gertrude, she has been a woman of flighty nature who prefers life of moral looseness to life of morality and stability. This is why she runs away, leaving her only son to her elder brother.

Likewise, the author speaks of the difference between Absalom’s girlfriend and Gertrude through the way they laugh. Laughter has been used symbolically here to reflect their morally loose lifestyle and, therefore, their morally corrupt nature. The first time Reverend Kumalo visits his sister, he hears laughter at the door- a sort of laughter that is described as terrifying rather than reassuring. The narrator comments, “There is laughter in the house, the kind of laughter of which one is afraid. Perhaps because one is afraid already, perhaps because it is in truth bad laughter” (59). When the pastor talks angrily to his sister about her moral laxity which has brought much shame to the whole family and to him as a priest, he detects something of moral degeneration in her voice, something akin to the laughter he has already heard in the house before he is asked to come in. Also, many a time conservative Mrs Lithebe of the mission house complains of Gertrude’s imprudent giggling. Indeed, it is not laughter that annoys Mrs Lithebe or Reverend Kumalo right here; it is the carelessness or imprudence embedded in that sort of laughter that does exasperate them. On her part, Gertrude does

not change her way of laughter much to the displeasure of Mrs Lithebe and elder brother. The idea that Gertrude is not willing to change her careless laughter foreshadows that she is not willing to change her immoral lifestyle or that she is fully content with this sort of loose life.

On the other hand, Absalom's girlfriend, who is keen enough to change her immoral lifestyle, stops her careless laughter once she hears Mrs Lithebe chastising her for that. From that time on, there is no careless laughter at the mission house. The narrator asserts, "So there was no more of the careless laughter, and the girl was quiet and obedient. And Gertrude saw that she was a child, and left her alone and was indifferent and amused after her own fashion" (153). As is obvious from this quotation, the submissive and obedient nature of Absalom's girlfriend comes to the fore right here. She is seen earnest enough to mend her way of life which has been damaged by promiscuity.

Another native woman who deserts Ndotsheni for Johannesburg, but this time to serve a white family, is a girl named Sibeko's daughter. Like many female characters in the novel, she is nameless and is only referred to as the daughter of Sibeko. Though her part in the novel is too short, it is somewhat important in this context. In passing, the narrator describes her as one of those natives who have set off for the metropolis to seek better life and have not turned up again. Shortly after his arrival to Johannesburg, Reverend Kumalo asks after her as he is recommended by her father to look for her during his trip. To the pastor's shock and surprise as well, the white lady of Sibeko's daughter sharply tells him that the girl has been dismissed out of the house after the police have arrested her on a charge of bootlegging.

One of the social ills quite prevalent in the black community of pre-apartheid context is the broken home,

which has led many women astray. It is through Absalom’s girlfriend that Paton speaks of the broken tribe and its subsequent ramifications. Despite its savagery and superstition, the old tribal system is a moral system that protects its members from moral delinquency. This system has been represented through the village of Ndotsheni, where people like Reverend Kumalo live. It is no wonder all those who turn their back on the values and norms of their rural community are morally lost. Chief of such are Gertrude, Absalom Kumalo and John Kumalo. Paton wants to assert that the number of criminals, prostitutes and drunkards in Johannesburg has been in the increase due to the demolition of the old tribal system. This very specific point is represented in the novel through the character of Arthur Jarvis, who can be described as the author’s mouthpiece in *Cry, the Beloved Country*. He is described as a white activist who defends the rights of the natives against the hegemony of the colonialist whites.

In one of his political essays written to defend the natives, Arthur Jarvis, laments the destruction of the old tribal system and holds the whites, including himself, responsible for its deterioration. He is of the view that the native crime, or the crime committed by the natives against the Europeans in South Africa, is mostly one of the inevitable consequences of detribalisation or deterioration of the old tribal system:

The old tribal system, for its violence and savagery, for all its superstition and witchcraft, a moral system. Our natives today produce criminals and prostitutes and drunkards, not because it is their nature to do so, but because their simple system of order and tradition and convention has been destroyed. It was destroyed by the impact of our own civilization. Our civilization

has therefore an inescapable duty to set up another system of order and tradition and convention. (179)

Arthur's philosophy is well expressed in his last words, which he has written a few moments before he is abruptly murdered by Absalom Kumalo during a robbery. In this unpublished essay, he goes so far to present his panacea for South Africa's bloody ethnic clashes, which he restricts to religion, more specifically Christianity. He is so sad and sorry for what he denounces as the Europeans' misuse and intentional misunderstanding of Christian values about equality and justice, especially when non-whites are involved. Ironically enough, Arthur is murdered by Absalom Kumalo, one of those very specific natives whom he defends.

As cited earlier, good women in *Cry, the Beloved Country*, such as Mrs Kumalo, are depicted as stereotypically subservient and cooperative, almost enduring the boring tasks of mothering and domesticity patiently and imperturbably. Mrs Lithebe, the black landlady of the boarding house where Reverend Stephen Kumalo and his family stay in Johannesburg, is no exception. She is simply given a domestic space to play in the novel. The narrator describes her as a kind and generous Christian woman who likes to help others as she believes that helping others, especially those in distress like Reverend Kumalo, is her duty. The reader first hears of her through Reverend Msimangu, who aptly describes her as a good Christian woman: "I have a place for you to sleep, my friend, in the house of an old woman, a Mrs. Lithebe, who is a good member of our church" (51). Mrs Lithebe's kind-heartedness and generosity is elucidated obviously when she accepts both Gertrude and Absalom's mistress to reside in her boarding house. Not only does Mrs Lithebe accept the two women in her house, but she befriends them and tries to do her best to alleviate their suffering. Many a time, she is heard

talking and singing with Gertrude while performing daily tasks.

On different occasions, conservative Mrs Lithebe is heard clashing with Gertrude over the latter’s careless behaviour. This clash is normal and is expected as each of them belongs to a different category of women: the former, though subservient and cooperative, is mindful enough of the restraints of the male-dominated society in which she lives; whereas the latter is described as revolting against such society with its regulation, which she negatively sees as restrictions. Gertrude’s repellent behaviour has been illustrated through her negligence of the principles of her patriarchal society and environment as well that incriminate such a flippant behaviour, especially if it comes from a woman. Also, Gertrude’s indifference to Mrs Lithebe’s frequent exhortations to stop her careless laughter exposes her revolting, if not repulsive, character. Patriarchies tend to reject and ostracise such women like Gertrude, typically stigmatising them as debauched and morally decadent. This is the very reason why Gertrude feels herself out of place in the boarding house of Mrs Lithebe. To the dissatisfaction and displeasure of Gertrude, Mrs Lithebe has been much frank about her concerns about Gertrude’s irresponsible ways that she disapproves of her behaviour, which she discerns as carefree and disrespectful. Gertrude’s escape and her desertion of her son and brother does attest that the moral concerns of Mrs Lithebe are absolutely right. On the other hand, the harmony between Mrs Lithebe and Absalom’s mistress reveals that they somewhat share the same character features, especially submission and obedience which are expected of women in any patriarchal society. On different occasions, Absalom’s girlfriend is described by the narrator as literally

obedient and acquiescent-privileges that win her the favour of both Mrs Lithebe and Reverend Kumalo.

White women in *Cry, the Beloved Country* are not far better off than their black counterparts, too, since they solely occupy spaces that are stereotypically limited in scope to domesticity and mothering. Also, they are given secondary roles to play in the novel whose two protagonists and main characters are all males. The reader hears about Mrs James Jarvis, the bereaved wife of James Jarvis, more specifically after the murder of her sole son, Arthur. However, most of what is heard about this character is indirectly articulated by her husband. Like any white or even black women in her society, her possessions are controlled by her husband. Such is the law of the 1940s in South Africa. Women's possessions are controlled and conducted by their husbands:

White women [of the time] had no alternative, under Dutch law, to common-property marriages, so they and their possessions were controlled by their spouses. Years later, thanks to some legislative amendments, they were able to control their property, but these required an exception. (Chiwengo 176).

Another point to be stressed about the portrayal of female characters is that in addition to their marginalisation in the novel, their actions and aspirations come true through men. Chiwengo asserts, "The actions of both white and black women are also materialised through men; it is James Jarvis who puts into action his spouse's aspirations for Ndotsheni, and it is Reverend Kumalo who must save Gertrude, although she is of another mind" (176). To a great degree, this statement is true. For example, it is Reverend Kumalo who turns Absalom's promiscuous girlfriend into a dignified woman. It is also he who adopts Gertrude's son after

Gertrude’s disappearance, thereby saving him from potential moral and social delinquency.

Conclusion:

A thorough critical reading of Alan Paton’s most famous novel *Cry, the Beloved Country* elucidates that it is permeated with a number of examples of the degradation of both women and land. And this is the focus of the present article which is an ecofeminist reading of the text. The marginalisation of women, both white and black, goes hand in hand with the erosion and destruction of African land. All the female characters in *Cry, the Beloved Country* do not hold a seminal position in their community. Rather, they are stereotypically stigmatised as helpless, naïve or immorally decadent. Furthermore, they are marginalised in a text whose protagonists and most important characters are all male characters. Both white and black women here are depicted either good or bad. The good ones of them, such as Mrs Kumalo, Mrs Lithebe and Mrs James Jarvis, are all *married* women who solely occupy spaces that are stereotypically limited in scope to the monotonous chores of domesticity and mothering. Likewise, women’s actions and aspirations come true through men. For example, it is Reverend Kumalo who turns a promiscuous girl like Absalom’s mistress into a dignified woman. Similarly, it is men alone, represented here through Reverend Kumalo and James Jarvis, who map out the future brilliant hope for the politically and socially disintegrated country. With regard to land, it is not far better off than women: It has been degraded and eroded by such causes as overgrazing and overfarming, which lessen its productivity. Overcultivation causes arable soil to lose its vigour and, therefore, triggers the exhaustion and death of plants. Also, both white and black people are seen ripping up

their land in search of gold. To the detriment of land, dynamites are used in the mines to explode the hard rocks out. Furthermore, land is deserted by its tenants who set off for the metropolis and other urban cities in search of better job opportunities.

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