

Beyond the Human and the Patriarchal: Ecofeminism and Animal Ethics in Olga Tokarczuk's *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*

Muskan Ahmed

Postgraduate Scholar, Department of English Literature, Lingaya's University, Faridabad, Haryana, India

Email: muskanahmedpsychophile@gmail.com, Orcid ID: 0009-0008-8064-9606

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Abstract— This paper examines the ways Olga Tokarczuk's novel, *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, synthesizes feminist and environmental thought to mount a coordinated critique of species hierarchies and patriarchal structures. Narrated through the singular perspective of Janina Duszejko—an elderly woman who advocates for animals and imagines their demand for justice—the novel compels a re-evaluation of moral responsibility beyond the human. Drawing on Donna Haraway's concept of "companion species," Cary Wolfe's critique of speciesism, and ecofeminist insights from Vandana Shiva and Carolyn Merchant, this study argues that Tokarczuk constructs an ethical counter-narrative grounded in care, interdependence, and gender-aware epistemology. The novel's persistent attention to hunting, animal suffering, and environmental degradation exposes how anthropocentric and androcentric worldviews mutually reinforce systems of domination. Janina's position as an aging woman and social outsider becomes a site of epistemological resistance, where empathy and relationality contest detached, patriarchal rationality. Through an ecofeminist and multispecies critical lens, this article contends that Tokarczuk imagines a form of justice rooted in mutual respect rather than control. Ultimately, it situates *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* within the expanding fields of feminist ecocriticism and animal studies, demonstrating how narrative fiction can articulate the new ethical frameworks urgently needed in an age of ecological crisis.

Keywords— *Olga Tokarczuk, Ecofeminism, Posthumanism, Animal Ethics, Speciesism, Anthropocentrism, Patriarchy, Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Olga Tokarczuk's *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* (2009, English translation 2018) masterfully blends crime fiction with profound philosophical inquiry. The narrative follows Janina Duszejko, a retired engineer and teacher living in a remote Polish village, whose profound respect for animals and unconventional beliefs—including astrology and the poetry of William Blake—place her in direct conflict with her community's powerful men. When local hunters and authorities begin to die under mysterious circumstances, Janina posits that the animals are enacting retribution. Dismissed as a madwoman, her perspective challenges the reader to reconsider the foundations of justice, empathy, and community.

More than a conventional mystery, Tokarczuk's novel employs irony, symbolism, and a transgressive narrative voice to critique systems of domination over nature, animals, and marginalized humans. This paper argues that *Drive Your Plow* offers a potent ecofeminist and posthumanist critique, dismantling the dualistic hierarchies that elevate (male) humans above women, animals, and the environment. Janina Duszejko embodies a form of resistance that echoes Donna Haraway's call to "make kin" across species and Vandana Shiva's vision of making peace with the Earth.

Through an analysis framed by the work of theorists including Haraway, Cary Wolfe, Shiva, and Carolyn Merchant, this study will demonstrate how Tokarczuk's novel 1) exposes the interconnected logic of patriarchy and anthropocentrism; 2) champions embodied, situated knowledge over detached rationality; and 3) uses literary form to explore the radical, even violent,

implications of a truly multispecies ethics. The novel's resonance extends beyond the page, as evidenced by its adoption as a symbol in real-world environmental protests in Poland. At a time of climate collapse and mass extinction, Tokarczuk's work provokes a crucial ethical reckoning with our responsibilities to the more-than-human world.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW: SITUATING THE NOVEL IN CRITICAL DISCOURSE

Since its publication and particularly after Tokarczuk's 2018 Nobel Prize, *Drive Your Plow* has garnered significant scholarly attention intersecting literary, ecological, and feminist studies. Early reviews highlighted its genre-blending audacity and moral urgency. Hannah Weber labelled it a "thought-provoking" eco-fiction and "ecological thriller" whose rebellious protagonist has become an icon for activists, noting that Janina's name appeared on protest signs during the defense of Poland's Białowieża Forest.

Academic scholarship has deepened this analysis. Ellen Mortensen's (2021) ecofeminist reading, "The Fury's Revenge," frames Janina's vengeance through the mythic figure of the Furies, interpreting her actions as a form of "wild justice" against patriarchal and ecological violences. Danijela Petković and Dušica Ljubinković (2022) examine the clash between Janina's animal ethics and localist ideologies that defend hunting as tradition, arguing the novel critiques a parochialism that masks cruelty. Comparative work, such as Nima Fakhshafaie's (2024) study pairing Janina with J.M. Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello, locates Tokarczuk within a global literary tradition that uses fictional protagonists to stage rigorous debates on animal rights, challenging the supremacy of reason over compassion.

In Polish literary studies, Małgorzata Poks (2023) identifies a consistent ethical thread in Tokarczuk's oeuvre, highlighting her focus on "nonhuman animals suffering without choice" and her creation of "heterotopian alternatives" to anthropocentric norms. Poks emphasizes Tokarczuk's posthumanist impulse to recognize the animal as a significant "Other."

This existing scholarship effectively establishes the novel's thematic concerns with gender, ecology, and ethics. However, a synthesized analysis that meticulously applies the core tenets of ecofeminist and posthumanist theory—specifically the integrated frameworks of Haraway, Wolfe, Shiva, and Merchant—to the novel's narrative mechanics and philosophical provocations remains a fertile avenue. This article aims to fill that gap, providing a consolidated theoretical reading that elucidates how Tokarczuk's formal choices (e.g., unreliable narration, irony, symbolism) serve to dismantle the "human" as a category built upon the subjugation of women and animals.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: WEAVING ECOFEMINISM, POSTHUMANISM, AND ANIMAL ETHICS

The analysis of Tokarczuk's novel is grounded in the interconnected theoretical frameworks of ecofeminism, posthumanism, and the critique of speciesism. Together, they provide a lens to examine the novel's deconstruction of what Val Plumwood termed the "backgrounding" of nature and the feminine within the dominant Western worldview.

Ecofeminism posits a historical and conceptual link between the domination of women and the exploitation of nature, both rooted in a patriarchal logic of dualistic hierarchy (mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, human/animal). Carolyn Merchant, in *The Death of Nature* (1980), historicizes this shift, arguing that the Scientific Revolution reconceptualized nature from a living, nurturing mother to a mechanistic resource, enabling unchecked exploitation—a shift paralleled by the persecution of women healers and midwives. Vandana Shiva extends this critique to colonialism and global capitalism, demonstrating how the "rape of the Earth" and the subjugation of women are mutually reinforcing processes. For Shiva, ecofeminism represents a liberatory project to move beyond this "maldevelopment" toward an "Earth Democracy."

Posthumanism, particularly as articulated by Cary Wolfe, critically interrogates the philosophical underpinnings of human exceptionalism. Wolfe argues that humanism, even in its progressive forms, often remains anthropocentric, co-opting the other into a human-defined schema. True posthumanism requires a fundamental rethinking of subjectivity, community, and ethics beyond the human species. This aligns with Donna Haraway's work on "companion species," which deconstructs the boundaries between human and animal, emphasizing entanglement and co-constitution. Haraway insists that the categories of species, race, and gender are inextricably linked, writing that the figure of the animal has been crucial to the oppressive logic of colonialism and racism.

Speciesism, a term popularized by Peter Singer, denotes the unjustified privileging of human interests over those of other sentient beings. Feminist philosopher Carol J. Adams, in *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990), explicitly connects speciesism and sexism, arguing that both depend on the reduction of living subjects to consumable objects (animals to meat, women to

bodies). Her concept of the “absent referent” describes the linguistic and cultural process that hides the lived reality of the animal, a process analogous to the objectification of women.

These frameworks converge on a key point: the autonomous, rational (male) human subject of the Enlightenment is constituted through the exclusion and domination of its others—women, animals, nature. Tokarczuk’s novel dramatizes this convergence. Janina’s marginalization as an “irrational” woman is directly tied to her empathy for animals; both her gender and her ethical stance place her outside the community of “rational men.” The novel thus becomes a laboratory for testing a posthuman, ecofeminist ethic, asking what justice and community might look like when the circle of moral consideration is radically expanded.

IV. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS: UNRAVELING PATRIARCHY AND ANTHROPOCENTRISM

Tokarczuk’s critique is enacted through intricate character construction, symbolic networks, and a deliberately unsettling narrative voice.

Janina Duszejko: The “Mad” Truth-Teller. Janina is the archetypal ecofeminist outsider. Her identities—aging woman, vegetarian, astrologer, animal advocate—place her in opposition to the village’s patriarchal, Catholic, hunting-centric norms. Her worldview, dismissed as madness, constitutes a profound epistemological challenge. She operates from what Haraway calls “situated knowledge,” grounded in embodied experience, care, and alternative systems like astrology, which the novel treats not as superstition but as a rival cosmology to the instrumental rationality of the hunters.

Janina’s language itself is insurgent. She capitalizes key words (“Animals,” “Creatures,” “Ailments”), elevating them to proper-noun status, and assigns people reductive, animalistic nicknames (“Big Foot,” “Black Coat”). This linguistic practice inverts the societal order: she personalizes the animal world and de-personalizes the human oppressors. Her deep, grieving anger—over her murdered dogs, the slaughtered deer—is framed not as hysteria but as a justified, clarifying force. As she states, “Anger makes the mind clear and sharp... Anger is definitely the root of all wisdom.” This aligns with contemporary feminist reclamations of female anger as a legitimate political response to systemic injustice.

The Patriarchal-Anthropocentric Order. The village power structure is a microcosm of interlocking dominations. The men—Big Foot (the poacher), the Commandant (police), the Priest (Father Rustle)—represent institutional authority (state, church) and cultural tradition. Their bond is cemented through hunting, a ritualized performance of human dominance over nature, explicitly blessed by the Church in the grotesque St. Hubert’s Day mass. Here, Tokarczuk makes a bold ethical link: Janina mentally compares the hunters’ gathering to a concentration camp tower, invoking the Holocaust to shock the reader into seeing speciesism as a logic of ultimate exclusion and violence. The Priest’s sermon, which glorifies man’s God-given dominion, exemplifies what Merchant identified as the marriage of mechanistic science and patriarchal religion to sanction exploitation.

Narrative Irony and Multispecies Justice. The novel’s brilliant central irony is that the “detective” (Janina, who seeks the cause of the deaths) is also the perpetrator (she kills the hunters). This structure forces a profound moral reckoning. Initially, the narrative cultivates the tantalizing possibility that nature itself is revolting—that the animals are executing cosmic justice. This fantasy represents a deep-seated ecofeminist desire for a rebalancing. The revelation that Janina is the agent does not deflate this desire but complicates it. Her violence is presented not as random madness, but as targeted, poetic retribution: Big Foot chokes on a deer bone; a fur farm operator is found in an animal trap. She becomes the human instrument of the justice she believes the animals deserve, blurring the line between human and animal agency and posing an unbearable ethical question: if the legal system is complicit in violence, is extra-legal vengeance ever justified?

Symbolic Networks. The novel is rich with ecofeminist symbolism.

- **Animals & Bones:** Deer, foxes, dogs, and insects are not mere plot devices but narrative presences whose suffering matters. Bones, referenced in the Blake-derived title, are the great equalizer, the material remainder that links all mortal creatures and humbles human pretensions to transcendence.
- **William Blake:** The chapter epigraphs from Blake, a visionary poet hostile to industrial reductionism, provide a spiritual and philosophical framework. Blake’s protest against “mind-forg’d manacles” mirrors Janina’s rebellion against the manacles of anthropocentric law and patriarchal reason.

- **Astrology and the Elements:** Janina's astrology represents an alternative, holistic epistemology that connects human fate to cosmic patterns, challenging the disconnected, hierarchical worldview of her opponents.

V. DISCUSSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR LITERATURE AND ETHICS

Drive Your Plow transcends its genre to become a significant work of philosophical fiction with broad implications.

Reimagining Genre and Justice. The novel subverts the detective genre, where a rational agent typically restores a disrupted social order. Here, the detective is the disruptor, and the “order” she attacks is revealed as fundamentally unjust. The novel thus becomes a tragedy of “civil disobedience,” exploring the extreme costs of conscience in a corrupted system. It resonates with real-world tensions within animal and environmental activism, where legal channels often fail.

Modeling a Posthuman Ethic. Janina embodies the struggle to live a posthuman ethic. Her identity is relational, defined by her care for her dog-friends and her solidarity with wild creatures. Her final escape into the forest borderland symbolizes a refusal to remain within the confines of the human community as it is currently constituted. She attempts to practice what Haraway advocates: “making kin” across species boundaries, forging a precarious, affective community based on mutual vulnerability rather than domination.

Confronting the Anthropocene. The novel is a literary response to the Anthropocene. It localizes the planetary crises of extinction and climate change in the specific, brutal practices of hunting, poaching, and ecological disregard. Janina’s “ecological grief” and rage are presented as the only sane responses to pervasive, normalized cruelty. The novel argues that a change in consciousness—a recognition of our entanglement with the more-than-human world—is the necessary precursor to any political change.

The Limits and Power of Narrative. Tokarczuk offers no easy solace. The systemic order absorbs the shocks of Janina’s violence with a cover-up, and she must flee. The revolution is incomplete, personal, and costly. Yet, the novel’s power lies in this very ambiguity. It does not preach but inhabits a radical perspective so fully that it destabilizes the reader’s own assumptions. By making Janina compelling, ironic, and morally complex, Tokarczuk ensures that her ecofeminist, posthumanist challenge cannot be easily dismissed. The novel itself becomes a form of activism, a “bell that rings to call attention,” expanding the reader’s circle of empathy and moral concern.

VI. CONCLUSION

Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead is a formidable literary achievement that uses the tools of fiction to conduct a radical ethical thought experiment. Through Janina Duszejko, Tokarczuk dramatizes the inseparable links between the oppression of women and the exploitation of animals, both stemming from a patriarchal, anthropocentric worldview that privileges control, rationality, and hierarchy over care, interdependence, and kinship.

By applying an integrated ecofeminist and posthumanist lens, this analysis has shown how the novel’s narrative strategies—its unreliable narrator, its ironic inversion of the crime genre, its rich symbolism—are essential to its philosophical project. Janina is not a flawless heroine but a compelling embodiment of the crises and contradictions that arise when one takes the claims of the marginalized—both human and non-human—seriously. Her story is a tragic, furious, and darkly comic demand for a justice that transcends the human sphere.

In an era defined by ecological collapse, Tokarczuk’s novel is more than literature; it is a crucial intervention. It challenges us to “drive our plow” over the ossified bones of outdated paradigms, to break the ground for a new ethics. It asks us to imagine, with Janina, a community that includes all Creatures, and to recognize that our freedom is bound up with theirs. The novel’s enduring power lies in its ability to make that demand not as an abstract theory, but as a visceral, unsettling, and unforgettable story.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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