



# Subjugation of Women and Environment in the Windup Girl by Paolo Bacigalupi: An Ecofeminist Analysis

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## Open Access

Manuscript ID:

BIJ-2025-J-065

Subject: English

Received : 18.06.2025

Accepted : 23.06.2025

Published : 28.07.2025

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## Abstract

*Ecofeminism is an interdisciplinary movement that amalgamates radical feminism and ecological principles. It serves as a key framework for comprehending the intertwined oppression of women and nature which posits that patriarchy has dominated both ecology and women for decades. The narrative unfolds in a future Thailand ravaged by environmental collapse and corporate control. The plot centers on Emiko, a genetically produced "windup girl," who is regarded as a commodity, illustrating the overarching theme of commodification of the New Human/women in the novel. By analysing the character of Emiko and the critical condition of Environment in the novel, this paper will analyse The Windup Girl as a powerful critique of the capitalist ideology and the patriarchal dogmatic structure that intertwines the exploitation of women and the degradation of the environment. The dystopian setting in the fiction mirrors the real-world issues of environmental destruction and gender inequality. By examining the plot, characters and setting through an ecofeminist lens, the paper will demonstrate The Windup Girl as a powerful metaphor of patriarchy and environment crisis.*

**Keywords:** ecofeminism, commodification, marginalisation, gender, dystopian

## Introduction

Ecofeminism, as a critical lens, has emerged as a powerful framework for examining the inextricable links between the exploitation of the natural environment and the oppression of women. Ecofeminist analysis explores the connections between women and nature in culture, religion, literature and iconography, and addresses the parallels between the oppression of nature and the oppression of women (Zein 1). This intersectional perspective acknowledges that androcentric dominance and control structures are the core cause of subjugation of women and the subjugation of the environment. Modern dystopian writing delves into the intricacies and expressions of these interdependencies, even though most ecocritics like Cheryll Glotfelty, Greg

Garrard have long recognised that people and environment are not separate. Apart from the effect that humans have on the nature, dystopian literature often shows a similar cause-and-effect relationship between patriarchy and women. The impacts of human activity on the natural environment are undeniable, and this cause-and-effect relationship between is mirrored in dystopic fiction in another relationship as well: the connection between the patriarchy and women. Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* provides a dystopian setting of a world where these historical legacies are amplified, creating a society in which both women and the environment are severely compromised. It exemplifies these two-way exchanges, which shed light on the complexities of the system that upholds women's and the



environment's oppression at the core of ecofeminism is the idea of a "dominator culture" that seeks to control and exploit both nature and women (Grotzke 1). This culture often casts nature as feminine, weak, and in need of domination by a masculine, rational force.

The relevance of ecofeminism has become more apparent in this age of rapidly changing climate, extensive environmental degradation, and ongoing gender-based disparities. Ecofeminist scholars and critics have brought attention to the structural causes of the subordination of women and the environment by drawing parallels between the two. Among the many victims of the androcentric, capitalist-driven paradigm of "development"-which, according to environmentalist Vandana Shiva, had disproportionate effects on women-was the depletion of natural resources and the exclusion of indigenous populations. Carolyn Merchant has highlighted the ways in which the scientific revolution and the development of a mechanical worldview have aided in the dehumanisation of women and the nature. This historical legacy continues to shape global power dynamics and environmental degradation. The "calorie companies" that control the food supply mirrors the neocolonial practice of monopolizing trade and exploiting local economies. Just as colonisers extracted wealth from colonized lands, these western corporations like AgriGen, PurCal extracts resources and profit from poor countries like India, Burma, Thailand, leaving the country and its people impoverished.

The Windup Girl is set in a future Thailand which is now suffering because of the consequences of ecological collapse and corporate exploitation. Climate change in the city has caused sea levels to rise, making it necessary to build 'dikes and levees' (Bacigalupi 121) to prevent Bangkok from being drowned. Further, the exhaustion of energy resources has left the remaining civilization ruined. The characters in the novel struggle to survive in a world ravaged by climate change and corporate greed which highlights the interconnectedness of human and ecological well-being. Bacigalupi's dystopian Thailand is a landscape marked by resource depletion, pollution, and the looming threat of climate change.

"The dry season never ends. Will the monsoon even come this year? Will it save them or drown them? There are gamblers who bet on nothing else, changing the odds on the monsoon daily. But with the climate so much altered, even the Environment Ministry's own modelling computers are unsure of the monsoon from year to year"(Bacigalupi 239).

Emiko is a genetically modified windup who was developed in Japan as helping assistance, she was abandoned by her Japanese master in Thailand. In Thailand Emiko is deprived of access to essential resources due to her status as a member of a marginalized female minority lacking power. She faces food shortage, health risks, and economic hardship in Thailand. Emiko, embodies the gender and class oppression. As a product of biotechnology, she is treated as a commodity, her body subjected to the desires and control of men. This socioeconomic disadvantage renders her vulnerable to the environmental factors as well. Both women and the environment are marginalized and are treated expendable, their voices are silenced which clearly exposes the historical objectification and commodification of women in colonial societies, where they are often reduced to property or reproductive vessels. Emiko's character and her feelings shows how the novel's handling of the windup girl exemplifies the ecofeminist critique of the economic exploitation of women and the environment. Emiko is a powerful symbol of the interplay between environmental degradation and the subjugation of women.

"Emiko faces these environmental hazards because "women and children who do the daily work...bear the burden of environmental degradation as a result of heavier workloads, inferior nutrition, or direct pollution, and thus predominantly suffer from health problems." (Grotzke 12)

The intersection between environmental exploitation and gender inequality is a central theme in ecofeminism. Patriarchy, according to ecofeminism, is based on the dominance and debasement of the feminine, whether it be female bodies or a feminised "Mother Earth." This perspective emerged from the intersection of feminism and environmentalism. Human and non-human feminine subjection are fundamental to this



dynamic, as is the commercialisation and control of female bodies, which ecofeminist researchers have maintained for a long time are interdependent. One common theme in dystopian societies portrayed in science fiction is the objectification of gynoids, who are often reduced to the role of mere resources to be controlled and devoured by the powerful power structures in the stories. This relationship, however, is not exclusive to the fictitious world. Technologists are understandably worried that female-presenting androids may be subjected to objectification and abuse in the age of advanced robotics and artificial intelligence. Concerns that these technologies, which are already pervasive in our society, may further normalise the sexism and patriarchy that have long oppressed women are well-founded.

When conventional wisdom divides environmental and gender concerns, ecofeminist philosophy provides a necessary rebuttal. Because ecofeminism acknowledges the interconnectedness of these battles, it offers a comprehensive framework for dealing with the complicated problems our planet is experiencing. By looking at the world through an intersectional lens, we can see how oppressive systems interact with one another and how the emancipation of women and the planet are interdependent causes. In addition, ecofeminism has served as an inspiration for other collective actions and grassroots movements, such as the Chipko movement in India and the Standing Rock demonstrations in the US. These movements have shown how effective it is to put women's voices and leadership in the struggle for gender equality and environmental justice at the centre, especially when they come from disadvantaged backgrounds. (Heldman) The ideas put out by ecofeminism are more important than ever before in light of the growing number of environmental catastrophes and the persistence of gender-based injustices. A more equal, just, and sustainable society can be achieved through ecofeminism's revolutionary goal of shedding light on the patriarchal systems that support the exploitation of women and the environment. Ecofeminist theory and practice can be a crucial framework for addressing the pressing issues of our day and for creating a future in which human well-being and environmental sustainability are inseparable.

Similar to how the natural world is exploited in the text, Emiko also is enslaved by the greedy ambitions of the western corporations as well as the common people. At the very beginning of the book, Emiko is presented as something devoid of humanity, degraded to the level of a commodity to be owned and managed. Emiko was sold in Thailand to Raleigh, a pub owner, after being disowned by her Japanese diplomat owner. With this framing in place, Emiko is immediately reduced to a commodity, her autonomy and individuality swallowed up by the economic processes that gave rise to her. She is coerced into engaging in sexual activity by Raleigh, the owner of the Ploenchit in Bangkok. Emiko is just a commodity to him, a "windup girl" to be shown off and utilised to appease his clients. The novel's protagonist, Anderson Lake, aids in dehumanising Emiko by viewing her as nothing more than a tool to be used for collection information about the secret seed bank of Thailand. He views her as an instrument, a conduit for knowledge, and a means to amass authority. One way of looking at Emiko's dehumanisation and oppression from an ecofeminist point of view is as a symbol of how capitalist ideologies abuse feminine forms of expression that are not limited to humans. The natural world, like Emiko, has been dehumanised and turned into a commodity that can be owned and controlled and its limitless resources are being used for profit.

Emiko is consistently objectified and dehumanized by the male-dominated societies in which they exist. This objectification takes on various forms, reflecting the multifaceted ways in which women, and particularly those perceived as "artificial" or "unnatural," are often stripped of their autonomy and reduced to mere commodities.

"[E]veryone is laughing at how Emiko 's body twitches and jerks now that she is in a panic, coughing the liquid from her lungs. She is nothing but a silly marionette creature now, all stutter-stop motion – herky-jerky heechy-keechy – with no trace of the stylized grace that her mistress Mizumi-sensei trained into her when she was a girl in the crèche. There is no elegance or care to her movements now; the telltales of her DNA are violently present for all to see and mock" (Bacigalupi 37).



Her body is subjected to a constant process of objectification and dehumanization at the hands of male counterparts. This objectification is in various forms, from sexual exploitation and physical violation to the reduction of their personhood to mere commodities to be traded, studied, and manipulated. These instances serve as a powerful commentary on the systemic nature of gender-based oppression, and the ways in which women, even those of artificial origin, are often denied the basic rights and freedoms afforded to their male counterparts. Through the compelling and at times harrowing experiences of Emiko these works of speculative fiction offer a critical lens through which to examine the real-world challenges faced by marginalized individuals and groups. By highlighting the ways in which power, technology, and gender intersect to perpetuate systems of oppression, these narratives encourage readers and viewers to confront the harsh realities of discrimination, exploitation, and the denial of fundamental human rights.

Emiko serves as a powerful call to action, urging us to challenge the status quo and work towards a more equitable and just society – one where all individuals, regardless of their origins or perceived differences, are afforded the dignity, autonomy, and respect they deserve. The marginalization experienced by Emiko is further compounded by the gendered nature of their oppression. As women, she is not only denied the basic rights and freedoms afforded to their male counterparts, but are also subjected to specific forms of exploitation and abuse. Emiko's forced entry into the sex trade, for example, highlights the unique challenges faced by women in a society that views them as commodities to be consumed and discarded. The character of Emiko serves as a powerful symbol of the ecofeminist struggle against the systemic devaluation of the feminine, whether human or non-human. Through her eyes, readers are confronted with the harsh realities of commodification, objectification, and the dehumanizing consequences of a social order that privileges profit over the inherent worth and dignity of all living beings. In doing so, *The Windup Girl* offers a compelling cautionary tale, urging us to fundamentally reimagine our relationship with emerging technologies and the natural world in a

manner that embraces empathy, respect, and the flourishing of all.

One of the most striking parallels is the way both Emiko and the natural environment are reduced to the status of mere commodities to be possessed, controlled, and exploited for profit. Just as Emiko is described as a wind-up girl, a construct of the Company, and sold in Thailand the natural world is similarly framed as a resource to be extracted and commercialized. This commodification is exemplified by the “calorie companies” that dominate the novel's economy, as they seek to control the world's dwindling food supplies. As the narrator observes, the calorie companies are the new gods, the new powers that rule the world emphasizing how these corporations have reduced the very sustenance of life to a tradable commodity. Emiko's own reflections highlight the parallels between her dehumanization and the degradation of nature. As she laments, she is as much a part of the ruin of the world as anyone drawing a direct connection between her subjugated status and the broader environmental devastation that permeates the novel's setting. “This sense of shared victimhood is further reinforced when Emiko observes the plight of the rare and endangered species that have been pushed to the brink of extinction.” (Simon C. Estok) As she watches the cheshires - a breed of genetically-engineered cats - she reflects, they are like her, wind-ups, creations of the company underscoring the common threads of commodification and control that bind her to the natural world.

In addition, the novel's depiction of the “calorie companies” and their exploitative practices towards both Emiko and the environment mirrors the ecofeminist critique of capitalism's inherent indifference to the natural and feminine. In the same way that Emiko is stripped of her autonomy and personhood, the natural world is stripped of its intrinsic value and reduced to a resource to be extracted and profited from. The novel invites readers to consider the broader implications of a social order that prioritises profit over the wellbeing of both human and non-human life. In the end, the similarities between the commodification of Emiko and the exploitation of nature in *The Windup Girl* serve as a powerful allegory for the interconnected



struggles against patriarchal, capitalist oppression. The degradation of the environment and Emiko's subjugation are inseparable, symbolising a shared experience of dehumanisation and the stripping away of inherent worth and dignity.

### Conclusion

By analysing these texts through an ecofeminist lens, we can see how the patriarchal worldview relies on the dominance of the feminine, whether in female bodies or the feminised "Mother Earth." By drawing attention to these intersections, we can begin to address environmental justice and gender equity from a more comprehensive and inclusive perspective, acknowledging the inseparable connection between the emancipation of women and the liberation of the planet. The intersections of gender, power, and technology are central to the narratives in *The Windup Girl*. Emiko serves as potent symbols of the dehumanizing effects of these intersections, as they are denied their full agency and personhood by the male-dominated structures that seek to exploit and subjugate them. Her struggles to assert their own identities and secure their basic rights and freedoms mirror the real-world experiences of marginalized individuals and groups who must fight against systemic oppression and discrimination. In *The Windup Girl*, Emiko's journey is further complicated by the novel's exploration of the impact of climate change and the global biotech industry on the lives of those living in a future Bangkok. (Gioli) Her status as a "New Person" reflects the broader societal anxieties and prejudices surrounding genetic engineering and the blurring of the lines between the natural and the artificial. Emiko's treatment at the hands of the male characters, who view her as a threat to their perceived dominance and control, resonates with the real-world fears and biases that often emerge in response to technological advancements that challenge traditional social and gender hierarchies. Ultimately, the parallels between the systemic oppression of gynoids in science fiction and the real-world exploitation of the feminine, both human and environmental, underscore the urgent need for a more holistic and emancipatory approach to technology, one that is grounded in the principles

of ecofeminism and its vision of a more just, sustainable, and equitable future. The intersection of ecofeminism and science fiction dystopias provides a powerful lens through which to examine the systemic marginalization of both women and the natural environment under the oppressive forces of capitalist ideologies.

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