Proceedings of ICEIPI 2025 Symposium: Understanding Religious Identity in Educational Contexts
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.ND24834

Ecological Political Analysis of The Golden Notebook from the Perspective of Ecological Feminism

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Abstract. Doris Lessing, a Nobel Prize laureate in literature, in her representative work The Golden Notebook, unveils the political, psychological, and creative struggles faced by mid-20th-century intellectual women through the protagonist Anna Wulf's black, red, yellow, blue, and ultimately golden notebooks. In the novel, the retreat of the African primal jungle not only reflects humanity's exploitation and plunder of natural resources but also implicitly critiques the ecological violence of colonialism. Meanwhile, the metaphors of menstruation and land exhaustion also suggest the dual disciplining of women and nature by the patriarchal society. Thus, this paper approaches the subject from the perspective of ecofeminism, analyzing the diverse interactions between women and men, humans and nature, and women and nature in the novel, revealing how patriarchal society and the capitalist system impose dual oppression on nature and women through binary ecological discourses. Furthermore, in the context of contemporary globalization, this paper aims to provide critical insights and theoretical references for addressing ecological crises and gender issues.

Keywords: Doris Lessing, The Golden Notebook, Ecofeminism, Ecological Politics, Binary Oppositions

1. Introduction

Doris Lessing stands as one of the most groundbreaking female writers in twentieth-century British literary history. Renowned for her diverse writing styles and narrative techniques, her works span across realism, psychoanalysis, and science fiction allegory. In 2007, she was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature[1]. Lessing's childhood in Africa profoundly shaped her worldview and thematic concerns; the racial tensions and natural landscapes of the colonies nurtured her acute social insight. In her representative novel The Golden Notebook, the protagonist, writer Anna Wulf, documents her experiences across four color-coded notebooks—black, red, yellow, and blue—through which she recounts memories of colonial Africa, her political disillusionment, fictional creations, and psychoanalytic reflections. Ultimately, she assembles a coherent self in the fragmented and chaotic black notebook. Through its fractured narrative structure, the novel reflects the psychological crisis faced by intellectual women in the Cold War era. Anna teeters on the edge of collapse amid the disillusionment with communism, maternal anxiety, and creative exhaustion. Yet the notebooks themselves become instruments of resistance against the patriarchal discipline and

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DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.ND24834

ideological constraints imposed by society. Focusing on women's struggle for autonomy, Lessing reveals the intricate interconnections between female freedom, gender relations, and sociopolitical conditions. The novel's depiction of the retreat of Africa's primal forests and the exploitation of ecological resources under colonial rule further exposes the ecological violence inherent in colonialism.

At present, scholarly research on The Golden Notebook primarily adopts feminist, psychoanalytic, and postmodernist perspectives. Existing studies tend to focus on issues of female identity or postmodern narrative structures[2-8]. While some research has addressed the dilemmas faced by women and their forms of resistance, the novel's implicit ecological-political dimension and its symbiotic relationship with gender oppression remain underexplored. In fact, the narrative portrays extensive exploitation of land, the objectification of the female body, and the interweaving of reproduction with ecological catastrophe. Therefore, this paper undertakes a further analysis of the novel from an ecofeminist perspective.

Ecofeminism emerged in the late 1970s, first articulated by French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in her two seminal works of the decade: Le Féminisme ou la Mort (Feminism or Death, 1974) and Écologie Féminisme: Révolution ou Mutation (Ecofeminism: Revolution or Mutation, 1978). By the 1990s, the concept of "gender justice/social justice" had become the theoretical core of ecofeminist discourse[9]. In Reclaim the Earth: Women Speak Out for Life on Earth (1983), edited by Leonie Caldecott and Stephanie Leland, the social, political, and economic oppression experienced by both women and nature is analyzed in depth. Contemporary Western ecofeminism often emphasizes the unique connections between women and nature through the lenses of race, culture, and spiritual traditions. Scholars such as Patrick D. Murphy and Vandana Shiva, adopting the perspective of environmental justice, have explored how race, class, and culture contribute to the marginalization and alienation of women, thereby revealing the complex interplay between ecological and gender politics[10]. In China, ecofeminist studies have largely drawn on the principles of ecological essentialism, focusing on the cultural and gender dimensions of the ecological crisis[11]. At the same time, Chinese scholars have not only highlighted the political and cultural attributes of ecofeminism but also critically examined the deeper relationships among women, ecology, political economy, and social ethics under the multifaceted processes of modernization. They have consciously sought to uncover and present the local connections between women and environmental issues.

Ecofeminist theory, on the one hand, emphasizes the identification between women and nature, positing that "the human assault on nature is equivalent to the male assault on the female body." On the other hand, it offers a critique of the Western modern scientific worldview, thereby providing a theoretical foundation for feminist interpretations of The Golden Notebook. Re-examining this canonical text through the lens of ecofeminism not only reveals the patriarchal suppression of female subjectivity and the capitalist exploitation of nature, but also offers a literary illustration of anthropocentrism, patriarchy, and ecological degradation. Such a perspective holds significant value for understanding ecological crises and gender issues in the context of contemporary globalization.

2. The spiritual purgatory of women: patriarchal oppression of women

Patriarchal society is a product of gender inequality. In social, familial, and marital contexts, men secure dominance by controlling leadership roles, while women gradually lose their subjectivity and social recognition, becoming marginalized entities devoid of value.

Patriarchal structures systematically discipline women in both the public and private spheres. Men assume leadership roles within the family, while domestic labor is implicitly regarded as the

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woman's "natural duty." Women are expected to sacrifice their individuality and time to fulfill the roles of wife and mother. As one narrator describes the "housewife syndrome" as an occupational hazard, she notes: "Now it has erupted within me. The physical tension in my body signifies that the inner peace has long abandoned me as if some switch has been flipped on"[12]. Society's assumption that family care is exclusively a woman's responsibility not only reduces women's bodies and emotions to instruments in the prolonged performance of unpaid labor, forced to operate according to patriarchal rhythms but also gradually erodes women's subjective value through continuous toil.

Patriarchal structures exert influence within the workplace as well. When women step outside the home to engage in social and professional work, they cannot escape their subordinate status relative to men[13]. Although Anna actively dedicates herself to her literary creations in an effort to realize her value as a female writer, she repeatedly encounters frustration and helplessness. On one hand, oppression and discrimination against women by men are pervasive in the workplace. For example, The War Front was renamed Desperate Love, and the script editor "began discussing how to make the story appear 'less negative' in the eyes of the 'sponsor'—for instance, the female protagonist cannot have an affair"[12]. While Anna's identity as a writer grants her some degree of discourse power, she still must contend with patriarchal regulation of female narratives: women's expression is required to conform to male-imposed moral frameworks, and the roles portrayed by female authors must even align with the male gaze's ideal of purity.

From a Marxist feminist perspective, the oppression of women is not only manifested in the control of female labor but also on ideological and cultural levels[14]. Some normal physiological phenomena are socially constructed as "impure" or "taboos that need to be concealed," forcing women to bear additional psychological burdens. Regarding menstruation, an integral part of a woman's daily life, Anna is compelled to "go to the bathroom to ensure there is no odor on her"[12], and she reflects on her feelings of "disgust and aversion to the faint, suspicious, and exclusively menstrual stench. It is a smell that even I find strange, as though it originates from an external source rather than from my own body"[12]. Anna perceives the odor of menstrual blood as "coming from the outside," revealing that, under societal discipline, she has internalized the discrimination against normal female physiological processes and has begun to loathe her own bodily functions. This psychological burden continually drains Anna's energy, making her preoccupied with the concern of "whether there is any odor," thus preventing her from focusing on other matters. The taboo surrounding menstruation has a long historical continuity. Across the world, women suffer during their menstrual periods due to religious and cultural norms. Beyond the physical pain, menstruation taboos also reinforce women's socially inferior status, exacerbating gender inequality in society[15]. Menstrual taboos position women as moral custodians of the private domain. In the public sphere, they are at a disadvantage in terms of moral authority. This gender-based double standard in morality, in turn, reinforces women's position as marginalized. Patriarchal societies force women to conceal physiological phenomena, creating menstrual taboos as a microcosm of how power structures are maintained through the control of female bodies[14]. This logic, on the one hand, exposes the operational dynamics of gender oppression, i.e., by stigmatizing natural physiological processes, generating bodily anxiety, and weakening female power. On the other hand, it subtly forces women to internalize self-loathing.

Despite the multiple forms of oppression that Anna faces from her family, society, and ideology, she does not compromise under the discipline of patriarchal society. Anna chooses not to conform to the male-dominated social order but instead strives to assert her identity on equal terms with men, to shine in her own right[16]. The emergence of self-awareness and untamed thoughts coalesce into

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written words, and her notebook becomes a weapon of resistance against patriarchal oppression. When Anna becomes frustrated by the burden of housework, she does not silently internalize this emotion. “Accompanied by a useless but evidently unavoidable sense of tension, the switch of resentment inside me was also flipped on. What did I resent? Injustice. I resented having to waste so much of my time on trivial matters, and this feeling was directed at Michael”[12]. The labor of domestic work does not numb Anna into becoming a voiceless “object” in the patriarchal narrative. While her resentment seems to be aimed at Michael, it is, in fact, a broader condemnation of the injustice of the entire patriarchal system. She clearly recognizes that oppression stems from societal structures, not individuals. Regarding workplace oppression, Anna is acutely aware of this subtle inequality. When the editor suggests modifying the novel’s character, she counters the suggestion and “remains steadfast.” The editor’s request to change the novel seems like a mere suggestion, but it subtly implies a bias—the female character must conform to a male aesthetic. Anna’s strong discomfort upon returning home indicates that the oppression she experiences in both the workplace and society has exceeded her psychological tolerance, and this disgust is an instinctual response to long-term subjugation. As for the more covert ideological oppression, although Anna is deeply affected by it, she constantly engages in self-reflection and awareness. Upon realizing her own aversion to menstruation and the male authors’ discrimination against female physiological phenomena, she writes: “I realized that, fundamentally, this is not a literary issue”[12]. “This instinctive sense of shame and constraint is dishonest”[12]. Male authors’ perception of women’s natural bodily functions as “unsightly” is not a matter of literary aesthetics, but rather the result of the patriarchal society’s long-standing demonization of the female body. Women’s sense of shame is not innate but a conditioned reflex trained by patriarchal society. When Anna refuses to feel shame about her physiological condition, it becomes an act of defiance against the cultural oppression of patriarchal society. The figure of Anna subverts the norms of patriarchal society, criticizing the passive, repressed, and obedient roles imposed on women through gender socialization[17]. Through her writing, she deconstructs the shame labels imposed on the female body, transitioning from self-censorship to self-acceptance. This transformation not only reflects the continuous awakening of female subjectivity but also substantively challenges the patriarchal control over the definition and regulation of the female body.

In society, family, and marriage, patriarchal oppression permeates every dimension of women’s lives—discrimination and double standards in the workplace, unpaid domestic labor in marriage regarded as an inevitable responsibility, and the disciplinary control over women’s bodies within societal ideologies. These various forms of oppression have a profound impact on the space available for women’s survival and development. However, women such as Anna are unwilling to be mere housewives dependent on their husbands. Molly, as a divorced single mother, refuses to be an “appendage” of her ex-husband and actively engages in political activities. They reject the binding of their self-worth to traditional gender roles and exhibit the awakening of subjectivity. Anna’s four notebooks are not only a denunciation of the mental breakdown caused by patriarchal oppression, but also a powerful weapon. They form a resistance to the patriarchal society’s attempts to instill the image of the “perfect woman” through fragmented cognitive reflections.

3. The silent strangulation of nature: human domination and encroachment on nature

Since the Industrial Revolution, technological innovations have greatly advanced material civilization and further reinforced anthropocentrism. However, driven by the profit motives of capital, unchecked resource extraction has led to large-scale ecological degradation, including

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.ND24834

deforestation, industrial expansion, and environmental pollution, ultimately deepening the contradiction between humanity and nature.

In the novel, humanity's plundering of the natural environment is depicted with unchecked violence. When Anna recalls the scene she saw from the steps of the Mashobi Inn in the black notebook, she writes: "On the eucalyptus side, a freight train pulled into the platform, and as it stopped, the locomotive hissed, releasing white steam"[12]. In the process of modernization on the African continent, modern transportation has become integrated into local life. However, behind industrialization lies the continuous human encroachment on nature. The railway, as a symbol of industrial civilization, represents humanity's invasion of nature, while the "white steam" is a manifestation of industrial emissions. The harsh "hissing" sound of the train contrasts sharply with the quiet of nature, revealing the violent intrusion of human technological progress and societal development into the ecological realm.

In the novel, the extensive depictions of Africa's natural landscape reflect how, in the process of modernization, humanity either inadvertently or intentionally overlooks the destruction it inflicts upon nature. Yet, the natural world, like women, is also a victim of anthropocentrism. "There is a similarity between the exploitation of women by men and the domination of animals by humans"[18]. The destruction of life by humans in the novel is similarly portrayed as inhumane and barbaric, with the violence inflicted by male characters on living creatures particularly highlighting deeply ingrained anthropocentric and patriarchal ideologies. Anna records in the black notebook the abuse of a pigeon on a London sidewalk: "A man kicked it, and the pigeon was sent flying into the air"[12]. The casual disposal of life by the man reflects his disregard for the animal's existence, while the pigeon's dying process concretizes human violence. Urban infrastructure becomes a tool for human slaughter, and living beings are reduced from subjects to mere objects that can be disposed of at will. Ironically, the dove, a symbol of "peace," becomes both the material for pigeon pie and a toy for men to trample upon in the novel. Paul discusses the pigeon's meat as being better when it is still in the tree, reducing the value of the creature to mere food. He later dismisses the idea of saving it, stating, "So what? They're just like your butterfly, destined to be destroyed," attempting to rationalize the crime of killing by claiming it as a natural law. The dismissive tone of "So what?" reveals the patriarchal discourse's double negation: it denies both the emotional connection between women and nature and the inherent value of natural beings.

The dual oppression of women and nature in a patriarchal society results in immense trauma for both. Lawrence Buell, one of the prominent figures in contemporary ecological criticism, argues that the significance of ecofeminism lies in "the critique of the patriarchal representation of nature as female, and the advocacy for a 'care ethics' that opposes the exploitation or utilization of nature"[19]. When humanity, as the subject, objectifies nature and continuously expands its "living space," the underlying logic often carries the value judgment that civilization's progress must inevitably be accompanied by nature's retreat. In the novel, the continuous expansion of human influence on the natural environment, the reckless extraction of resources, and the patriarchal society's endless exploitation of female value share a similar logic of "othering," reducing both nature and women to mere resources for exploitation. In the black notebook, the scene of Peter's farewell to his lover is striking: "They spent their last night together, nestled in each other's arms, in a brothel by the sewage river on this small town's outskirts." Here, the "sewage river" is not only a geographical marker but also a symbol of ecological violence in the process of industrialization, hinting at human production activities' pollution of natural waterways. The choice of a "brothel" as the setting juxtaposes ecological exploitation and gender oppression. Both the nature devastated by industrialization and the objectified female body become victims of patriarchy.

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The ecosystem is an organic whole, and "humankind must restrain itself, or it will destroy the Earth." If humans continue to damage the natural environment, it will lead to various ecological imbalances, including the depletion of rivers and desertification of land. This is the consequence of "an anthropocentric approach in the relationship between humans and nature, which emphasizes and exaggerates human subjectivity" [20]. These ecological crises are also a form of nature's silent resistance—quiet, yet violent. When Anna and Paul's group describe the air while hunting pigeons, they write: "The sensation of the heatwave that day: damp, unforgettable, and yet also terrifying." The "damp" air not only brings physical discomfort but signals ecological imbalance. While the male characters perceive the abnormal weather as a mere random occurrence, the female characters, with their sharp sensibility, detect the silent scream of nature. Nature is "terrifying"—if humanity continues to ignore the laws of nature, it will ultimately face nature's revenge. The gender perception differences constructed in the novel subtly hint at the core issue of ecofeminism: the oppressed natural world under patriarchy and the disciplined female body together form a trauma body under the violence of civilization. Nature has never been an appendage of human society; its "silence" is not due to its lack of power, but because of human disregard for nature's resistance.

The binary opposition in rationalism devalues both nature and women as subordinate objects, constructing a logic in which humans, in order to satisfy their own needs, can freely dominate and control nature without considering its intrinsic value[21]. The novel's extensive depiction of African landscapes emphasizes the destruction of local natural environments caused by the civilizing process of colonization. The large-scale construction of inns and railways serves as evidence of humanity's continuous expansion into the natural world, during which nature suffers significant oppression. This logic mirrors the exploitation of women by men in a patriarchal society—both nature and women are reduced to objects. The natural environment is simplified to a mere provider of resources, while women are objectified as tools for reproduction and labor. However, the mechanism of oppression itself contains the seed of resistance. Just as women in a patriarchal society awaken their "subjectivity" to resist the oppression they face from family, profession, and society, nature too issues a warning to humanity through abnormal climate patterns. The relentless ecological destruction will eventually lead to nature's retaliation. Within the framework of rationalist dualism, the shared source of oppression experienced by both women and nature enables them to form a natural alliance. This connection, as part of a broader life community, becomes a critical force in deconstructing anthropocentrism and the structures of patriarchal oppression.

4. Double marginalization: the ecological connection between women and nature

"The connection between women and nature has a long history, and this alliance has persistently endured through culture, language, and history"[21]. Throughout different periods of human societal development, the circumstances of women and nature share striking similarities. Under the violence of patriarchy, both women and nature are othered, reduced to disciplined objects. Ecological feminism asserts that both women and nature occupy positions of domination, subjugation, and devaluation, and it considers this to be the most fundamental and critical form of oppression in human society[21]. Therefore, under patriarchal violence, women are increasingly naturalized to dissolve their subjectivity, while nature is continuously feminized to romanticize acts of exploitation. Through the reconstruction of the symbiotic relationship between women and nature, the novel links women's daily lives to nature, imbuing nature with feminine characteristics, thereby re-establishing the possibility for a dialogue of subjectivity between the two. In doing so, it deconstructs the double othering of both women and nature within a patriarchal society.

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A large number of "naturalized" female character representations reveal the marginalization of women within societal structures. In their connection with nature, women endure oppression similar to that which nature suffers. This concept of nature extends beyond traditional natural landscapes to include the biological entities that are also linked to women. In the introduction of Mrs. Latimer, it is described that "She was never without her dog, a very handsome setter, whose fur matched the color of her hair, and whose eyes mirrored her own, full of pitiable longing, tearful and full of desire"[12]. "She looked up with her broken face, her hands clutching her red hair, tears falling down her face. Her dog whimpered quietly beside her, resting its head on her lap, its fluffy red tail apologetically sweeping the ground back and forth"[12]. Mrs. Latimer's husband, who had a drinking problem and a temper, often verbally abused her when intoxicated, leaving her to "cry pitifully, sighing in despair," and live alongside her pet dog. The analogy between Mrs. Latimer and her pet dog reflects the similarity between women and nature, and it also suggests that her social status is akin to that of a tamed pet—passive and dependent. Her constant companionship with her dog further exemplifies the traits of women being close to nature, with animals becoming a means for women to seek solace from their helpless, painful marital lives. When Ella walks with Paul across a grassy field, the bright sunlight and the scent of nature give her a sense of freedom. "She wandered through the grass for a while, touching the blades and inhaling the scent of the grass, letting the sunlight fall on her face"[12]. However, when she returns to Paul, "The look of waiting on his face destroyed the sense of ease that the small, sunny patch of freedom had given her"[12]. When Ella enjoys the sunlight in the grass alone, through bodily perceptions like touching the grass and breathing in the fresh air, she momentarily escapes from societal discipline. The natural environment here is not just the physical landscape; it represents a space of temporary independence, free from the male gaze. However, Paul's "look of waiting" effortlessly destroys this brief sense of freedom. With his controlling gaze, the male presence becomes a latent threat to the woman's autonomy, even without words. Both women and nature are reduced to mere suppliers of resources, and their subjectivity is gradually eroded within the male subconscious of objectification. The imagery in Anna's dream further sharply highlights the similar wounds borne by both women and nature under patriarchal oppression. "She then saw an image: a dry well, like a wound on the earth, filled with dust"[12]. This dream, with its images of the dry well and dust, exposes the shared trauma of women and nature. Both women and nature are akin to one another: the earth, as the mother of all life, and women, as the mother of humanity. The "dry well," as a wound on the earth, corresponds to the destructive damage caused by human exploitative development. Similarly, women within societal structures endure similar bodily exploitation. Unpaid domestic labor and reproductive responsibilities continually extract women's life value, leaving them emotionally drained, like the gradually drying well. But just as the dust accumulates at the bottom of the well, the suppressed trauma of women and the wounds of the natural ecosystem are often overlooked in patriarchal societies.

Women are the meticulous caretakers of nature, and nature is a refuge for women; they comfort and depend on each other[22]. The portrayal of nature as "feminized" reflects how women seek solace and relief in their interactions with nature. Anna, for example, alleviates her tense emotions by tending to plants, and the six potted climbing plants serve as a temporary escape from her daily life. "Watching the bubbles rise as they sink into the water. The plant leaves bubbled under the water, and the dark soil emitted a damp, growing scent. I felt much better"[12]. When Anna feels irritable due to her menstrual cycle and work stress, the plants help her relax. The "bubbles rising upward" symbolize Anna's attempt to break free from the constraints of patriarchal society. When women connect with nature, it ceases to be an abstract, static concept and becomes a healing force

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that can be sensed through smell and touch. The soil, constantly nurturing life, mirrors the nurturing qualities of women who give birth to humanity. The soil has a serene yet boundless vitality, its roots growing steadily within the earth, just as a woman's emotions and creativity are revived in her interaction with nature. Anna frequently calms herself by touching the potted plants on her windowsill. "In the past, when I touched the plant leaves, I often felt a closeness to the roots that were growing beneath the soil, the green leaves that were breathing"[12]. From sight to touch, Anna's connection with nature intensifies. The plant roots symbolize the subconscious and creative potential of women that is repressed by society. Through touching the plants, women gradually awaken their hidden selves, which have long been suppressed by societal discipline.

Under the hegemony constructed by patriarchy, both women and nature are doubly marginalized, enduring the violence of having their life value alienated into mere resources. Though fragile, they are not merely passive victims of oppression; instead, they have developed unique strategies of resistance—namely, the alliance between women and nature. Through bodily senses, women engage with nature, seeking comfort and liberation in their interactions with the natural world. This biotic community represents a return to the origins of life, and through this symbiotic relationship, it forms a critique and deconstruction of anthropocentrism.

5. Conclusion

Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook profoundly reveals the dual oppression of female subjectivity and the natural ecology of patriarchy and capitalism through the five notebooks of the protagonist, Anna Woolf. Utilizing a binary opposition discourse, the novel treats both women and nature as "worthless" resources, with both continuously subjected to oppression and exploitation, leading to the gradual dissolution of their subjectivity. Within the patriarchal framework, women are disciplined as the "other" within the family and society, and their labor values, bodily experiences, and mental freedoms are systematically deconstructed. Anna's experiences of unpaid domestic labor, workplace discrimination, and menstrual shame not only expose the disciplining of women's bodies by gender power but also mirror the exploitation of women through the alienation of their value and ideological control under capitalism. Simultaneously, the novel highlights the exploitation of natural resources during industrialization, metaphors of land desertification, and the violence perpetrated by men on animals, collectively revealing the ecological violence imposed on nature by both anthropocentrism and patriarchy. Under the binary opposition logic, both women and nature are reduced to dominated objects, their traumas bearing striking similarities, which leads to a mutual solace and dependence between the two. This connection between women and nature becomes a refuge for women to momentarily escape the pain of reality. Ecofeminism not only deepens the interpretation of the text but also provides an explanation for the methods and processes by which patriarchy and capitalism exert dual oppression on both women and nature.

This paper, through an analysis of the ecological politics in The Golden Notebook, offers critical insights into the ecological crisis and gender inequality within the context of contemporary globalization. In today's era, addressing ecological issues should not be confined to technological governance improvements alone; it is essential to dismantle the anthropocentric and patriarchal cognitive frameworks that conspire together and to re-establish the status of women and nature as subjects.

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