

# Unearthing Ecofeminist Voice in Jessica Zafra's "*Portents*": Language in Nature-Culture Relationship Construction

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## Abstract

Using the ecofeminist lens, the study examines the short story "*Portents*" by Jessiza Zafra and determines how the nature-culture relationship within the Philippine literary context was reconstructed. Through close reading and textual analysis, the study attempted to address a critical gap in ecofeminist discourse by situating the analysis in a non-Western setting, unraveling the narrative's ecological and societal implications. The findings highlight the narrative techniques, such as stream-of-consciousness, symbolic imagery, and dark humor, that bridge the protagonist's struggles with environmental and social issues, which the author employed. The metaphor of pregnancy in the short story, which represents creation and destruction, is central to the study. It underscores the interconnectedness of gender and nature. It also critiques the patriarchal systems and humanity's exploitative behavior toward the environment, through the use of an apocalyptic setting of war and ecological collapse to allegorize the instability of natural and cultural systems. Moreover, it discusses how the story challenges traditional binaries such as nature versus culture and gender versus agency, supporting the idea that humans and nature are deeply intertwined. Through this lens, Zafra reframes narratives surrounding motherhood, ecology, and human relationships, showcasing resistance and resilience in both women and the natural world. Lastly, the study presents a transformative critique of societal norms, advocating for a reimagined perspective of ecology and cultural interdependence.

**Keywords:** ecofeminism, Portents, reconstruction, nature-culture relationship, gender narratives

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction

The intersection of gender and ecological issues, explored through the lens of ecofeminism, has grown into a vital area of academic inquiry over the last few decades. Ecofeminism, coined in the mid-1970s, critiques the parallel domination of women and nature and advocates for the reconstruction of relationships between human beings and the environment. Central to this discourse is the integration of feminist and ecocritical perspectives to examine how literary texts reflect, challenge, and reimagine these intertwined oppressions (Murphy, 2022). However, as scholars such as Cook (2021) and Wiyatmi et al. (2020) point out, ecofeminist literary criticism often faces marginalization within broader ecocritical and feminist paradigms. This study aims to contribute to this evolving discourse by unearthing ecofeminist voices within "*Portents*" by Jessica Zafra, focusing on how language functions in reconstructing nature-culture relationships. The study builds on foundational literature in ecofeminism, which addresses the shared histories of oppression faced by women and nature, while also highlighting the gaps in this field. As cited by Warren (2020) and Carfore (2021), scholars such as Estok and Plumwood emphasize the conceptual links between gender and ecological domination, critiquing the instrumental roles historically assigned to both. Similarly, Wiyatmi et al. (2020) demonstrate the need for integrating ecofeminist perspectives into literary criticism, particularly in educational contexts, where such frameworks remain underexplored. These insights inform the present analysis, which examines Zafra's work to uncover how her narratives address the themes of ecological degradation and gendered subjugation, contributing to a broader understanding of ecofeminist discourse in literature. This study also acknowledges the contributions of Indian and global ecofeminist scholarship, which has expanded the theoretical underpinnings of ecofeminism to include diverse perspectives. As Arun and Subbiah (2020) and Sharnappa (2016) suggest, works by authors such as Mahasweta Devi and Kamala Markandaya bring culturally specific insights into ecofeminist discourse, reflecting localized struggles against extractivism and environmental degradation. By situating Zafra's "*Portents*" within this broader ecofeminist tradition, this study not only seeks to critique the oppressive structures she portrays but also to explore her literary contributions to the ecofeminist movement, particularly in the Philippine context. Through a critical engagement with the author's narratives, this research aims to underscore the role of literature as a medium for fostering ecological awareness and advancing feminist ideals. By reconstructing the nature-culture relationship through Zafra's work, the study contributes to the ongoing efforts to address the gaps in ecofeminist literary criticism and promote an emancipatory vision of environmental and gender justice.

### 1.2 Significance of the Study

While existing ecofeminist studies have explored themes in literature from Western and postcolonial contexts, there is a noticeable lack of focus on Philippine literature. This puts into perspective not only the need for representation of Philippine literature in ecofeminist lenses but, more importantly, how ecofeminism is integrated into Filipino society. This short story is part of a decades-long timeline of Philippine literary texts that talk about the societal issues of womanhood, motherhood, and nature. This study, when followed by other similar studies on literary texts centered on the same issues, allows for a better perspective on the changes in the implicatures, narratives, and coping mechanisms towards these usually sensitive topics over the course of time; thus, it could develop into a longitudinal, possibly developmental, approach in understanding the theory and the subject.

Furthermore, the role of language in reshaping the nature-culture relationship within an ecofeminist framework remains underexplored. This gap underscores the need to contextualize ecofeminism within Philippine literature, examining how this particular masterpiece navigates and reconstructs the relationship between nature and culture through its unique linguistic and narrative strategies.

### 1.3 Research Questions

To unearth this ecofeminist voice and understand how language is used to reconstruct the nature-culture relationship in one of Jessica Zafra's short stories, "*Portents*", the study sought to answer the following research questions:

- (1) How does the selected short story represent the interconnectedness of gender and nature through ecofeminist perspectives?
- (2) What linguistic techniques are employed in the short story to reframe the relationship between humans and the natural world?
- (3) How does the selected short story redefine cultural narratives about nature and gender through literary expression?

### 1.4 Theoretical Foundations

This study is anchored to the proposed theory by Val Plumwood (1986), the ecofeminist theory. The ecofeminist theory critiques Western ideologies contributing to the ecological crisis, encompassing issues like climate change, species extinction, and pollution. It involves understanding, addressing, and creating alternatives to the oppression of women. Nature, often synonymous with "the environment" in this context, qualifies as a feminist issue because understanding environmental challenges can reveal how women's oppression is interconnected with the unjustified exploitation of nature.

For instance, research indicates that women, particularly poor, rural women in less developed countries who head households, face disproportionate impacts from environmental issues like deforestation, water pollution, and exposure to toxins. This connection highlights how women's lives and societal status impact environmental problems (Warren, 2020). Such findings underscore why these environmental challenges are eco and feminist concerns, leading some to adopt "nature is a feminist issue" as a guiding concept in ecofeminist philosophy (Carfore, 2021).

Having established this, it is important noting that this study may not be straightforward, as ecofeminism as a theory may cover spiritual, social, materialist, and intersectional aspects, giving fluidity in interpreting the text but possibly subjective. While researcher bias was reduced with multiple readings and runs of interpretation among the researchers, their cultural backgrounds and personal beliefs remain different and, thus, may still reflect in the discussion. Finally, despite the thorough investigation and analysis, the researchers do not claim generalizability of the findings since only one text was used as a source.

## 2. Literature Review

The study of ecofeminism and its intersections with literature has garnered significant scholarly attention over the years, evolving in its theoretical frameworks and applications. Literature and studies related to the ecofeminist voice in literary works, focusing on the language and nature-culture relationship reconstruction, were reviewed.

### 2.1 Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism, as a critical framework, has been extensively explored across theoretical and literary domains. Murphy (2022), in *The Routledge Handbook of Ecofeminism and Literature*, provides a comprehensive examination of the intersection between gender and environmental issues. This handbook discusses key concepts such as activism, intersectionality, and material ecocriticism, offering innovative methods to analyze literature through an ecofeminist lens. Presenting in this handbook the diverse perspectives across languages and genres underscores the global relevance of ecofeminist literary criticism and its potential to shape emancipatory literary theories.

In the context of education, Wiyatmi et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of integrating ecofeminist perspectives into academic curricula, particularly in Indonesian universities. Their study highlights the minimal adoption of ecofeminism in formal education regardless of its growing significance in literary criticism. To address this gap, the researchers propose a structured model for teaching ecofeminist literary criticism, complete with lesson plans and content materials. It is focused on improving the application of ecofeminist theories in the analysis of literary works, especially novels.

Several studies illustrate the application of ecofeminist theory to specific literary texts. For instance, Arun and Subbiah (2020) analyze Mahasweta Devi's short story *Witch from Bitter Soil*, exploring themes of extractivism and the exploitation of marginalized communities. Their analysis highlights the ecological consciousness in Devi's narrative. It advocates for the harmony of human life with nature. It also

enriches ecofeminist discourse by addressing the intersection of ecological degradation and socio-economic oppression. Similarly, Sharnappa (2016) focuses on Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) to investigate the convergence of feminist and ecological concerns within the Indian context. This study provides insights into the evolution of ecofeminist theory in Indian English literature, emphasizing the interconnectedness of gender and environmental issues.

At a broader theoretical level, Gaard (2010) critiques the marginalization of feminist and ecofeminist perspectives in foundational ecocritical texts, such as Buell's *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005) and Garrard's *Ecocriticism* (2004). Gaard calls for a more inclusive approach that integrates feminist insights into ecocritical discussions; it proposes new directions for ecofeminist scholars to correct historical omissions and expand the scope of ecofeminist criticism.

Meanwhile, Plumwood (1986) provides a foundational critique of ecofeminism, addressing the conceptual links between the domination of women and nature. Her study identifies significant parallels between the treatment of women and the environment. It also points out theoretical gaps and misrepresentations within ecofeminist discourse.

## 2.2 Ecofeminism in Philippine Literature

Recent ecofeminist studies highlight the connection between nature, culture, and gender through diverse cultural lenses. Research by Molino (2024) explored how the Filipino concept of "ate" (eldest sister) connects women's roles as both family caregivers and environmental advocates. Additionally, Calabias (2023) analyzed Marjorie Evasco's poem *Elemental*, examining relationships between human and nonhuman elements through the indigenous feminine principle of *ba'i*, establishing a unique Philippine ecofeminist viewpoint.

The cultural conceptualization of nature in Filipino folklore was the focus of Puguon (2023), who revealed nature's multifaceted roles as friend, mystery, and teacher. Ecofeminism's early works explored ecological themes and literary expression. Arbilo (2018) studied Philippine short stories (1991-2007), examining how literary elements revealed human-nature relationships. Similarly, Septiaji et al. (2019) analyzed Indonesian short stories, highlighting women's roles in addressing environmental and social issues.

Early ecofeminist studies examined ecological themes and literary expression across Southeast Asia. Arbilo (2018) studied Philippine short stories (1991-2007) to understand human-nature relationships through literary elements. Similarly, Septiaji et al. (2019) analyzed Indonesian short stories, highlighting women's roles in addressing environmental and societal challenges.

Peracullo's 2015 study explored hunger as a physical connection between humans and nature, framing Philippine ecofeminist practices around shared vulnerabilities. These studies showcase how ecofeminism in literature transforms our understanding of nature-culture relationships, with works like Zafra's "Portents" further expanding this discourse.

## 3. Method

The methodology outlines the procedures and techniques used by the researcher in conducting the study, including the design, data collection, and analysis method.

### 3.1 Research Design

The researchers employed a descriptive qualitative design to explore the ecofeminist voice in the text, particularly focusing on how language is used to construct the nature-culture relationship. This design is appropriate as it allows for a detailed, context-based analysis of textual elements without relying on rigid theoretical frameworks or numerical data. Descriptive qualitative research emphasizes presenting a comprehensive summary of an experience or phenomenon in everyday terms, making it suitable for literary analysis that seeks to uncover underlying meanings within a text. Through close reading and textual analysis, the researchers closely examined literary devices, tone, and imagery to understand how these linguistic elements contribute to the portrayal of ecofeminist ideas. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) note, qualitative research is particularly valuable for interpreting how individuals or texts construct meaning within specific social and cultural contexts. Since ecofeminism foregrounds the role of language in shaping perceptions of gender and the environment, a descriptive qualitative approach not only aligns with the philosophical underpinnings of the study but also provides the interpretive depth needed to analyze the symbolic and ideological functions of Zafra's narrative.

### 3.2 Inclusion Criteria

The following criteria are considered by the researchers in choosing the short story to undergo the close reading and textual analysis: (1) the short story must have an ecology content (2) the short story must feature a female protagonist; (3) the short story must be authored by a writer with extensive experience in literary writing; (4) the short story must emphasize gender perspectives in their work; and; (5) the short story must explore moral themes that reflect human relationships.

### 3.3 Data Collection Procedure

The researchers initiated the data gathering procedure by obtaining a copy of the text. Next is the exploration of the text's context by looking into biographical details about the author and examining the historical and cultural background of the literary work. When the context was established, the researcher engaged in close reading analysis through rereading and annotating the text. Words, phrases, and passages were marked, with recurring motifs, linguistic elements, and symbolic imagery highlighted as they began to surface. The analysis deepened as attention shifted to the finer elements of the text's language. The researcher also analyzed the sentence structures, word choices, and narrative techniques in depth, uncovering the layers of the author's craftsmanship. Finally, with the collected annotations and observations, the researcher synthesized the findings. Emerging themes were interwoven, patterns were connected, and

cohesive arguments were constructed, culminating in the ecofeminist interpretation of the text.

### 3.4 Data Analysis Procedure

The researchers adopted a qualitative approach using close reading and textual analysis to examine the short story through an ecofeminist lens. Close reading enabled a detailed exploration of the literary elements such as narrative structure, diction, and stylistic choices to uncover how these components collectively convey meaning (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2023). This method allowed the researchers to interpret the subtle ways in which language reflects and constructs the relationship between nature and culture, revealing the author's intent and thematic depth. Complementing this, textual analysis provided a structured framework to critically assess the linguistic and symbolic dimensions of the text. The analysis unfolded in four stages: (1) the Descriptive Stage involved summarizing the text and identifying its context, authorial perspective, and intended audience; (2) the Analytical Stage focused on detecting recurring themes, patterns, and key terms to interpret ecofeminist motifs; (3) the Interpretive Stage examined the implicit messages, symbolism, and linguistic nuances to uncover deeper meanings; and (4) the Evaluative Stage assessed the text's coherence, persuasiveness, and overall impact (Khan, 2023). These methods facilitated a comprehensive understanding of how language operates within the literary work to articulate ecofeminist concerns and construct the nature-culture dynamic.

## 4. Results and Discussions

### 4.1 Interconnectedness of Gender and Nature through the Ecofeminist Perspective

Ecofeminism often highlights patriarchy and how its structures are said to exploit both women and nature. In this story, Zafra explores the reflected interconnectedness of gender and nature, particularly with women's domination and environmental degradation. The text uses the protagonist's pregnancy as a central metaphor, exploring themes of creation, destruction, and agency amidst personal and global crises.

#### 4.1.1 Female Body as a Site of Conflict

The protagonist's pregnancy symbolizes a tension between creation and destruction. The fetus, being a *"creature ripping out of [her] stomach,"* connects her internal struggles with broader themes of violence and destruction in nature. This is portrayed when the *"Visions of blood and umbilical cords and feeding bottles whirled before my eyes like malevolent frisbees"* was described. The imagery reflects a lack of control over her body, paralleling how nature is often subjected to exploitation and abuse by external forces. The line *"She put the fetus in a jar of formalin... kept it in the drawer where her wedding dress lay yellowing among mothballs and dead flowers"* further strengthens this. These descriptions evoke both the physicality of reproduction and the haunting aftermath of human intervention, akin to how nature's exploitation leaves scars.

Ecofeminist studies have long underscored the symbolic and material link between women's bodies and the Earth (Bernad, 2024). Recent studies suggest that the effects of climate change on communities are influenced by gender dynamics (Sharma & Barot, 2022). Beyond ecological exploitation, the female body has also functioned as a strategic site of conflict. Speake (2012) documents how wartime sexual violence operates not only as an assault on individual women but also as a means of targeting communities and asserting dominance.

This is reinforced by Modie-Moroka et al. (2024), who highlight the continuity of gender-based violence across both war and peacetime, reflecting patriarchal structures that objectify women's bodies as repositories of male honor and property. Such insights situate the protagonist's embodied violence within a broader global pattern of systemic gender oppression.

#### 4.1.2 War and Environmental Devastation as Parallels to Female Oppression, Uncontrollable Forces

The constant references to war, chemical weapons, and environmental destruction mirror the protagonist's internal turmoil. Images in the lines *"He predicted earthquakes signaling the end of the world, and we had that big one last month. Then he said a leader from the Middle East would launch a world war. I thought it would be Khadaffi, but no, it's Saddam Hussein"* and *"May use poison gas, Iraq warns. Next to it is a picture of a dead Kurdish woman clutching the body of her dead child"*, connect the oppression of women (as victims of war) to the destruction of nature (through weapons of mass destruction). The poison gas newspaper headline and the image of a dead Kurdish mother clutching her child juxtapose global violence with her fears about motherhood. This suggests that the patriarchal and destructive systems driving war are also the ones that marginalize women's autonomy.

In this light, the chaos dramatized by the text is seen not as an isolated phenomenon but as a mutually reinforcing structure of violence. The protagonist's turmoil thus becomes emblematic of broader global crises, situating the female body as a contested site where political, ecological, and patriarchal struggles intersect. This parallel between the societal treatment of women and the natural or built environment devastations has shown up in research more often recently, emphasizing their shared vulnerabilities and intersecting challenges. A good literary sample is Merchant's *"The Death of Nature"* (1980). It established links between patriarchal exploitation of women and nature. This was later critiqued by Arora-Jonsson (2014) for patriarchal culture and framed by Csevá (2021) on how violence against women (VAW) and against the Earth (VAE) are intersecting global crises. Conflict studies also echo these dynamics. Ćorić (2014) and Fairbanks (2010) show women's bodies as metaphors for violated land. Gogoi (2022) highlights their agency in South Asian conflict narratives. Modie-Moroka et al. (2024) extend this by connecting patriarchal violence to both gender and environmental insecurity, underscoring the entanglement of personal and geopolitical trauma.

Additionally, literature has always shaped people's perceptions of nature and our connection to it (Huguen, 2023). Thus, nature—along

with its diversity, duality, and unpredictability—is a force to reckon with. Take Moreno et al. (2020) as an example. They examined nature's dual role as both a creator and a destroyer, highlighting its influence on the world, living beings, and itself. By analyzing selected British and American Romantic poems, the study categorizes nature's destructive facets, emphasizing its impact on humanity, other life forms, and nature itself, both in physical and transcendental terms. From a Romantic viewpoint, the research identifies three primary classifications: God as the creator and destroyer of nature, humans as minor yet essential contributors to life's renewal, and nature as both a creative force and a self-destructive entity. The same team also examined Kang (2021) who saw nature in her study as one of the most intricate and multifaceted literary elements in English. It can describe the essence or character of something and also represent the physical world, making it a term rich in meaning and widely used. As a versatile concept, nature often features prominently in literature, requiring careful analysis to understand how it is portrayed. A notable example is found in William Wordsworth's celebrated poems published in 1807. In *"I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,"* Wordsworth uses vivid and picturesque language to present nature as a vital and guiding force, emphasizing its profound influence on human life and its role in shaping daily experiences. In the short story, "earthquake" is often used to describe nature as an uncontrollable force.

#### 4.1.3 Patriarchal Control and Agency

Lawrence, one of the potential fathers, has a patriarchal and consumerist mindset. He reduces relationships to ownership and calculation. His "control freak" nature contrasts with the protagonist's chaotic, uncontrolled experience of pregnancy and societal judgment. The lines *"All his books were stamped 'Private Library of Lawrence R. Alvarado.'"* and *"He hated it whenever I did that. Lawrence had a very definite concept of 'mine'"* prove this.

This reflects ecofeminist critiques of how patriarchal systems prioritize control and dominance over organic processes, such as reproduction or ecosystems. Lawrence's possessiveness symbolizes the broader tendency of patriarchal systems to impose control over women and nature. Patriarchal dominance recurs across English literature (Ayala & Murga, 2016). It reflects and critiques the rigid gender roles and expectations that perpetuate stereotypes and inequalities. Here, women are often portrayed as caregivers and subordinates, while men assume roles as decision-makers and breadwinners. This reinforces unequal power dynamics and proves how patriarchal dominance is an ingrained societal structure and cultural norm (Hiwarkhedka & Sharma, 2024).

#### 4.1.4 Reclamation of Agency

In the story, the frequent references to earthquakes, natural disasters, and apocalyptic portents emphasize both the unpredictable and uncontrollable power of nature and the protagonist's pregnancy. This alignment resonates with ecofeminist perspectives that frame nature and women as resisting patriarchal control (Merchant, 1980; Shiva, 1989), underscoring the futility of reducing organic processes to systems of exploitation. These are presented in the lines:

*"It's exactly as Nostradamus said," Pocholo said. "He predicted earthquakes signaling the end of the world, and we had that big one last month. Then he said a leader from the Middle East would launch a world war. I thought it would be Khadafi but no, it's Saddam Hussein."*

*"There's going to be a big earthquake at 2:30," he said... 'It's a prank,' I said. 'I'm not leaving.'"*

*"That's crazy," I said. "You can't predict exactly when an earthquake will happen."*

*"It was on the radio," Pocholo repeated, as if media coverage were an infallible confirmation of 6 truth."*

*"2:30. Powerful earthquake, intensity nine."*

*"Well, I'm not leaving," I declared. "I'm not going to fall for an idiotic prank."*

*"This building could collapse!" he screeched. "Like the Hyatt Terraces!"*

*"You can't predict an earthquake exactly."*

The narrative also foregrounds the repression of female agency. Broude and Garrard (2020) show how women artists challenged the passive roles assigned to women, embedding subversive agency in their art despite cultural resistance. Similarly, public figures such as Marie de' Medici and Marie-Antoinette faced symbolic erasure when attempts at self-representation threatened patriarchal norms. As Wilson (2022) and Swan (2021) note, female subjectivity has long been marginalized, whether through misattribution, censorship, or outright condemnation, reflecting persistent unease with and struggle to regain women's self-assertion. The protagonist's internal reflection, such as *"This child would be mine, really truly mine, which couldn't be said of a lot of things"* and *"Maybe I'll turn out to be a genius who will invent something beneficial to mankind"* marks that: an attempt to reclaim control, creating a mental ledger of possibilities that reframes pregnancy as a site of empowerment rather than loss.

This act mirrors ecofeminist calls to revalue women and nature beyond patriarchal utility (Arora-Jonsson, 2014; Csevá, 2021). In this light, the protagonist's struggle is not only personal but emblematic of broader structures that bind women's autonomy to systemic domination. By situating pregnancy amidst ecological catastrophe and societal upheaval, the story dramatizes the entanglement of gender, environment, and power. Like ecofeminist critiques, it exposes how patriarchal systems exploit both women and nature while also gesturing toward resilience and reclamation.

#### 4.2 Linguistic Techniques to Reframe the Relationship between Humans and the Natural World

Literature distinguishes itself from other art forms through its distinctive reliance on language. Fowler points out that literature is conveyed "in and through" language, underscoring the significant role language plays in literary creation (Candria, 2019). For writers, language becomes a tool for expressing creativity and communicating ideas, while readers derive both aesthetic enjoyment and interpretive understanding by engaging with the text (Fowler, 2019). Unlike everyday communication, the language of literature is marked by its departure from conventional linguistic norms. This deliberate and artistic manipulation of language lies at the heart of what gives literature its unique character and value (Simpson & Hall, 2022).

##### 4.2.1 Stream-of-Consciousness Narrative

Zafra employs a stream-of-consciousness narrative style that uses linguistic techniques to refract the human experience against a backdrop of societal, environmental, and existential crises to provide an unfiltered view into the protagonist's mind, blending personal reflections with societal commentary. These are presented in these lines:

*"Visions of blood and umbilical cords and feeding bottles whirled before my eyes like malevolent frisbees. He started speaking to me in urgent tones, as if he were revealing important secrets, and there was a crazy glint in his eyes. I understood nothing. He was speaking either in dialect or in gibberish, I couldn't tell, I looked on stupidly. People stared, expecting perhaps that he would produce a cleaver and hack me to death. The man went on with his weird recitation; why he chose me I had no idea, maybe he could see past the designer clothes into my dark and grimy soul."*

Stream of consciousness seeks to authentically depict a character's thought process, an interior monologue that reflects the non-linear way our minds operate (Noor et al., 2024). This style often incorporates free association, repeated phrases, sensory impressions, and unconventional punctuation or syntax, all of which offer insights into a character's psychological state and perspective and create an immersive take on a character's mental flow, almost as if you're observing their mind directly (Delf, 2021). This approach captures emotional and psychological authenticity, illustrating how the mind shifts from one thought to another. This is exactly what the vivid imagery reveals. The protagonist's chaotic mental state has seamlessly connected her dread with the violent imagery of war ("blood"), emphasizing a shared vulnerability between individual and collective crises. The story intertwines the protagonist's personal turmoil, unexpected pregnancy, and complex relationships with broader global anxieties, reframing the relationship between humans and the natural world as one of entanglement, vulnerability, and interdependence.

##### 4.2.2 Juxtaposition of Personal and Global Crises

The narrative constantly shifts between the protagonist's personal dilemma and apocalyptic scenarios, creating parallels between human fragility and the volatile natural and sociopolitical world. This excerpt is a perfect example: *"The newspaper was lying next to the platter of toast; I read the headline about two hundred times. 'May use poison gas, Iraq warns.' Next to it is a picture of a dead Kurdish woman clutching the body of her dead child. Mother. Child."*

The protagonist's fears about motherhood go side-by-side with the horror of war, framing her individual experience as part of a larger human struggle. This literary technique has been common these days. A good example is Eslit & Villanueva's (2024) exploration of resiliency and survival in pandemic-themed novels. It reveals a complex interplay of factors that contribute to the onset of pandemics, with the infected rat emerging as a recurrent and symbolic agent, particularly in stories about the Bubonic Plague. The rat is seen not only as a literal disease carrier but also as a metaphor for the unpredictability of pandemics, the fragility of human societies, and the interconnections between nature and civilization. This symbolic presence underscores the broader theme that pandemics are not isolated events but intertwined with personal crises as well.

##### 4.2.3 Symbolism and Allegory

In the short story, symbols and allegories are easy to spot. Several of these elements, such as the *street crazy* and *his cryptic message*, serve as allegorical warnings about humanity's hubris and neglect of the natural world.

*"...a filthy man with long, matted hair. A tattered bag was slung across his bare chest, upon which his ribs protruded like spikes. A thick layer of soot covered his emaciated body—he looked like a walking pile of ashes. He started speaking to me in urgent tones."*

Symbolism refers to the concept that objects or elements represent something beyond their literal meaning. Essentially, it can carry any meaning you assign to it. In this way, it can symbolize everything or nothing at all, since its meaning is not fixed or universal. Without a consistent, defined meaning, it lacks an inherent value as a symbol for a single concept (Elbom, 2020). From the extracted text, the man's unintelligible speech symbolizes humanity's failure to comprehend or act on warnings from the natural world.

Meanwhile, the man's soot-covered appearance likens him to an embodiment of environmental decay. Thus, the use of this image is allegorical. Allegory uses symbols to express a deeper meaning, often moral or political, carried by the form—whether a word, image, or narrative—by which it is presented (Bude, 2020).

##### 4.2.4 Dark Humor and Irony

In the short story, dark humor underscores the absurdity of human attempts to maintain normalcy in the face of chaos, reframing human's relationship with nature as both adversarial and symbiotic. This is highlighted in Lawrence's line, which goes, *"By next year the official*

*exchange rate could be 28 pesos to the dollar. That's a conservative projection... Inflation will go through the roof," he added, almost with relish."*

Lawrence's casual tone about impending economic collapse reflects human detachment and denial, mirroring the protagonist's detachment from her pregnancy. Dark humor often is a coping mechanism in high-stress environments, allowing individuals to distance themselves emotionally from difficult or traumatic situations (Taylor, 2021). In the text, the jokes, although seemingly morbid, are not intended to offend but rather to help Lawrence process and manage the emotions he is experiencing (Napp, 2023).

#### 4.2.5 Intertextual References and Allusions

Zafra integrates cultural and religious references to situate the story within a larger existential framework, linking personal struggles to humanity's cyclical fears of catastrophe.

*"A man on a horse. Riding across the sky. A hundred schoolchildren saw it. According to my aunt it looked like the statue of St. Martin that stands in their church."*

*"St. Martin on a horse?" I said. "Maybe it was St. George or Joan of Arc. I don't think St. Martin rode a horse."*

*"No, stupid," he said. "You're thinking of St. Martin de Porres. We're elating about St. Martin of Tours. And you know what? My aunt says they saw the same vision just before World War II. Then the Japanese arrived." He ran his fingers through his artfully moussed and tousled hair. "Oh my God, what if it's really the end. I mean, I don't even have a kid yet."*

The mention of St. Martin riding across the sky as a portent draws from apocalyptic imagery, echoing humanity's historical tendency to interpret natural or unexplained phenomena as signs of impending doom. This is an allusion, a brief yet intentional reference in a literary work to a person, place, event, or another piece of literature. Allusions are crucial for writers, as they help place their work within the broader cultural and literary context (Schwartz, 2021).

Meanwhile, the invoked various Catholic saints are intertextual references. This referencing to another text, like a song lyric or a movie quote, highlights relations and concepts between bodies of various, seemingly unrelated texts. By using intertexts, their meanings become linked to each other. Literary intertextuality functions similarly, but it typically involves references that are more focused on literary works (Hogan, 2023).

In "*Portents*," Zafra employs these linguistic techniques to present the human-nature relationship as inherently fraught yet inseparable. The protagonist's pregnancy becomes a metaphor for the paradox of creation and destruction, reflecting the natural world's cycles of renewal and devastation. The street crazy's message and the apocalyptic imagery further suggest that humanity is both a product and a disruptor of the natural order. By juxtaposing personal and global crises, the story reframes humans not as dominators of the natural world but as deeply enmeshed within its vulnerabilities and unpredictabilities. This invites one to reconsider humanity's role, not as separate from the natural world but as an integral, albeit destructive, part of it. The linguistic techniques underscore this interconnectedness, portraying individual experiences as reflective of broader ecological and sociopolitical truths.

#### 4.3 Redefinition of Cultural Narratives on Nature and Gender through Literary Expressions

Like any other literary texts, "*Portents*" embodies societal issues, becoming a hive for cultural narratives. Most of these are long known; some are even cliché. But bold and unapologetic texts like this, especially in the craft of a skilled storyteller, could challenge these common perspectives. Ecofeminism enables questioning these old binaries and seeing things from a different angle. Those that follow demonstrate this deconstruction of ideologies, attempt to reshape public knowledge, and create new cultural imaginaries. They are contrary to the previously presented results that show aspects of the story's usual tropes and symbiotic connectedness.

##### 4.3.1 Nature as a Backdrop of Impending Disaster

Nature primarily appears as a backdrop of impending disaster in the text, embodying chaos and uncertainty. Earthquakes, war, and environmental disruptions are symbolic of a world out of balance, mirroring the protagonist's internal turmoil.

Some of the apocalyptic imagery in the short story:

*"May use poison gas, Iraq warns."*

*"The earth opening up to swallow you."*

These lines highlight how nature becomes weaponized through human intervention, symbolizing humanity's destructive tendencies. The world depicted here is one where the natural order has been perverted. Instead, modern anxieties about the environment, war, and survival are seen.

The "impending doom" redefines how nature is commonly viewed as nurturing, cyclical, and eternal. It is something that balances life. Instead, nature was framed as uncontrollable, volatile, and fragile, a subverted view from the usual that the protagonist's internal struggles similarly project. Here, earthquakes, war, and environmental disruptions are not just merely literal; they are metaphors for a world spiralling out of control. The images of "*poison gas*" and the earth "*opening up to swallow you*" invoke fear and destruction. This presents nature as possible to be weaponized. These references highlight humanity's destructive tendencies and how human actions have perverted the natural order. This perception shift speaks to modern anxieties surrounding climate change, geopolitical instability, and the uncertainty of survival in a rapidly deteriorating world.

#### 4.3.2 Pregnancy as a Redefined Metaphor for Nature's Creation Process

The protagonist's pregnancy parallels the uncontrollable forces of nature. Her fear of the "*creature ripping out of her stomach*" (a nod to *Alien*) and visions of "*blood and umbilical cords*" suggest that even creating life could feel monstrous in a world teetering on collapse. Motherhood, often harmonious and life-giving, is presented as grotesque and alienating. This idea clearly contrasts with already established images.

The protagonist's humorous musings about her cravings, highlighted explicitly by saying, "*I thought, if I ate a lot of anchovies, would my child have scaly skin, or look like a fish?*", provide a sharp contrast to the apocalyptic imagery that surrounds her. This lighthearted reflection taps into traditional cultural myths, such as the Filipino belief in "paglililihi," the idea that a mother's cravings or desires during pregnancy will affect her child's appearance or behavior. By highlighting this interplay between nature, culture, and superstition, the story critiques how such myths attempt to impose order on the otherwise uncontrollable forces of nature. The protagonist's skepticism and the power of these folk beliefs reveal the tension between cultural narratives of control and the chaotic unpredictability of life itself.

In essence, the story challenges traditional views of nature as nurturing and gendered processes of creation. Through apocalyptic imagery, it underscores nature's fragility and volatility, while simultaneously exposing how cultural narratives and myths shape our understanding of gender, identity, and the natural world. The story transforms pregnancy into a metaphor for both creation and destruction, suggesting that gendered roles and natural processes are intertwined with the chaos of a destabilized world. This humorous reflection underscores the absurdity of cultural myths while acknowledging their pervasive influence on individual perceptions of natural processes.

### 5. Conclusion

The short story "*Portents*" by Jessica Zafra demonstrates how literature can highlight and redefine the connections between gender, nature, and culture from an ecofeminist lens. Its plot and language speak heavily to its questions about patriarchy and environmental abuse by humankind. These are achieved while also building connections between human experience and the natural world. The story underscores the vulnerable entanglement of human and natural systems, as seen in the turbulent pregnancy and the apocalyptic imagery.

Zafra's effective use of narrative techniques, including grotesque imagery, dark humor, allegorical expressions, and intertextual references, invites readers to reflect on humanity's complicity in environmental degradation and the marginalization of women. In the same way, it also recognizes the potential for agency and resilience within these oppressive frameworks. Unlike thematic analyses that only trace parallels between women and nature, this paper highlights the linguistic techniques employed in the story, such as the stream-of-consciousness narrative, symbolic elements, and ironic juxtapositions.

These techniques now effectively highlight the entanglement of personal and global crises. Furthermore, it serves as an active site where the nature-culture relationship is reconstructed. At the same time, it also blurs the boundaries between the individual and the collective, the natural and the cultural; the story thus can challenge traditional binaries and invites a reimagining of humanity's role as deeply embedded within and dependent on the natural world.

Finally, it redefines cultural narratives about nature and gender by disrupting idealized notions of motherhood and nature as nurturing forces. Instead, it portrays them as unpredictable, powerful, and resistant to control, echoing ecofeminist perspectives. The story emphasizes that in a world marked by systemic exploitation, both women and the environment can catapult resistance and transformation, offering a potent critique of the status quo and a call for renewed respect and agency for both.

The scope of the study is limited to begin with due to its reliance on a single text and the interpretive subjectivity inherent in close reading. Yet, it still demonstrates how Philippine literature both participates in and reshapes the global ecofeminist discourse. Thus, future work of a similar nature is highly encouraged. This study could help the momentum of discussions by being a springboard for in-depth literary criticism. This may also expand by integrating reader-response perspectives or drawing on indigenous ecological knowledge. A simple but profound move could also be a comparison of multiple texts.

In conclusion, this paper underscores the value of Philippine literature in advancing ecofeminist studies. Running parallel to it is how it invites further, broader explorations that situate local voices within global debates on gender, culture, and ecology. Jessica Zafra's "*Portents*" is now not merely a reflection of contemporary anxieties about gender and the environment. Through its literary expressions, it evolved as a powerful literature that reimagines important themes with complexity and depth. Through its layered narrative, the story challenges readers to rethink their relationship with nature, gender, and the cultural constructs that shape them.

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### Authors' contributions

**Jaycel Anne B. Panday** served as the lead author, primary editor, and head of communications, overseeing the drafting and revision of the manuscript. **Dr. Jonathan V. Gochuico** (corresponding author 2) guided the study design and revisions. **Mark Louie D. Reyes** (corresponding author 3) was responsible for the literature review. **Wincel M. Atienza** (corresponding author 4) led data collection and analysis. **Gil M. Mallen, Jr.** (corresponding author 5) managed data handling, contributed to the conception and interpretation of data analysis, and developed the research conclusions. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.



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