

Embodiment, Relational Ontology, and Ecological Coexistence in *Always Coming Home*

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59136/lv.2026.27.1.7>

Abstract

This study uses an ecofeminist perspective to analyze Always Coming Home by Ursula Kroeber Le Guin. The focus of the study is to examine how gender-based oppression, non-human species-based oppression, and ecological exploitation are all connected together with each other as part of the oppressive hierarchical structure of the Condor Society. The research will investigate how Le Guin's writing challenges patriarchy and its societal constructs of women and nature as less than, expendable categories that exist outside of structures of power and recognition. This paper also includes close textual analysis to explore the devaluing of women, marginalizing of non-humans, and ecological impacts of industrial modernism presented throughout the novel. A particular emphasis is placed on examining the militarized and exploitive world view of the Condor society, and how it supports itself through domination, exclusion, and strict social hierarchies. On the other hand, the Kesh society is analyzed as an alternative ecological model where humans live in coexistence with one another and with their environment based on reciprocal relationships and dependence on one another. Additionally, the paper examines how Le Guin reveals the devastating effects that industrial civilization has on both human life and ecological life to illustrate the connection between environmental degradation and social inequalities. Overall, by analyzing hierarchy, ecological ethics and domination systems throughout the novel, this research demonstrates that Le Guin presents alternative ways for people to live which contest anthropocentric and patriarchal forms of thinking about being alive and present with multiple forms of life and material realities.

Keywords: Materialist Ecofeminism; Embodiment; Relational Ontology; Ecological Coexistence

Ecological Embodiment and Materialist Ecofeminism

Contemporary environmental issues have brought into sharper focus the complex, interconnected systems of patriarchy, capitalism, modernization, and ecological degradation. Literary works are increasingly examined as sites through which hierarchical systems shape relationships among people, non-people, and the environment (Buell 700). William Rueckert

Article History: Full Article Received on 1st June, 2026. Peer Review completed on 19th August 2026, Article Accepted on 25 Aug. 2026. First published: Sep. 2026. **Copyright** vests with Author. **Licensing:** Distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

defines literature as “stored energy” to develop ecological awareness and to facilitate social transformation (Rueckert 108). Ecofeminists study the ideological connections between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature (d’Eaubonne 2) and demonstrate how patriarchal societies utilize a “logic of domination” to justify the subordination of both women and the earth (Warren 2). Val Plumwood critiques the hierarchical dualisms that define women, nature, and non-human beings as inferior and exploitable (Plumwood 443).

Materialist ecofeminism emphasizes the embodied dimensions of ecology and social power (Gaard 35). Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva argue that capitalist patriarchy utilizes identical mechanisms of exploitation against women, colonized peoples and natural resources through systems predicated on accumulation and extraction (Mies and Shiva 282). Trans-corporeality is a theory developed by Stacy Alaimo that describes the porous interconnectedness between ecological systems and human bodies (Alaimo 238); Serenella Iovino’s material ecocriticism views matter as an active producer of ecological meanings (Iovino 3). These theories collectively critique anthropocentric and patriarchal models of domination through highlighting ecological reciprocity, embodiment, and dependence. The relevance of this theoretical framework is evident in Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Always Coming Home* (1985), particularly in its portrayal of the Kesh and Condor societies. The novel critiques industrial modernity, anthropocentrism, and exploitative societal structures while imagining alternative forms of ecological coexistence and interdependence. Stone Telling’s experiences in the Condor society demonstrate the patriarchal anxieties regarding female embodiment, particularly as menstruation is viewed as impure and contaminating. On the other hand, the Kesh worldview is based on ecological reciprocity, coexistence, and relational interdependence, a view that corresponds with Donna Haraway’s “becoming-with” through networks of mutual dependence rather than domination (Haraway 54).

There exists considerable research regarding *Always Coming Home* from ecofeminist, ecocritical, utopian, and environmental perspectives. Medlicott views the work as an ecofeminist utopia (Medlicott); Veistola explores its rejection of the nature-culture dichotomy (Veistola); Garlick and King analyze the novel’s depiction of place, toponophilia, and post-Anthropocene survival (Garlick and King). Although these studies have significantly contributed to understanding Le Guin’s ecological imagination, there remains scope for further exploration of how *Always Coming Home* engages with questions of embodiment, labor, ecological reciprocity, and patriarchal domination from a materialist ecofeminist perspective. This study examines how the novel presents alternative models of ecological coexistence while also drawing attention to the material processes through which patriarchy, anthropocentrism, and exploitation are sustained.

Materialist Ecofeminist Analysis

Critiques of Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Always Coming Home* have thoroughly addressed the ecological, anthropological, and utopian aspects of the work. While scholarship on *Always Coming Home* has extensively explored its ecological, anthropological, and utopian dimensions, comparatively limited attention has been devoted to examining how the novel connects embodiment, labor, ecological relations, and patriarchal domination through a materialist ecofeminist framework. Many ecofeminist readings have productively highlighted Le Guin’s environmental ethics and models of ecological coexistence; however, the novel also invites consideration of the material and epistemological processes through which patriarchal cultures organize identity, labor, corporeality, and ecological existence. By foregrounding these interconnected dynamics, this study contributes to ongoing discussions of Le Guin’s ecological thought from a materialist ecofeminist perspective. Through a materialist ecofeminist lens,

Always Coming Home makes clear that systems of domination do not operate solely through apparent political authority, but instead through classifying mechanisms that create hierarchical distinctions between purity/contamination, reason/embodiment, civilization/nature. Le Guin therefore represents ecological being as relational, materially situated, physically located, and inherently antagonistic to the binary constructs that underlie patriarchal authority. Rather than depicting ecology merely as environmental harmony, the novel foregrounds the material interconnections through which social power, gendered oppression, and ecological exploitation reinforce one another. Through this connection of embodiment, ecology, and institutionalized power, Le Guin discloses the unstable foundation of patriarchal systems based on exclusive forms of identity and hierarchical conceptions of difference. The critique of patriarchy is most evident in Stone Telling's fractured identity as a product of Kesh-Condor ancestry that consistently places her outside stable social categories. She is referred to as "Hwikmas," which means "half-house" or "half-person" (Le Guin 9); this term does not describe hybridity as neutral, but as socially deficient. Stone Telling's admission that she "understood this in my own way, badly" (Le Guin 9) reveals how such exclusion becomes internalized long before she understands its social origins. The category of "half" functions ideologically, regulating inclusion through classification based on purity. Stone Telling's existence disrupts dichotomies such as self/other, civilized/primitive, pure/impure, and insider/outsider. The unease generated by her identity demonstrates that patriarchal authority relies on fixed boundaries since ambiguity threatens classificatory systems. Le Guin therefore critiques not only interpersonal prejudice but the epistemological base of domination itself. Her hybrid identity corresponds with Donna Haraway's idea of "making kin", relational models of coexisting predicated upon interdependence and ecological entanglements (Haraway 54). Her estrangement arises from living in a society structured through oppositional thinking that can accommodate neither fluidity, ambiguity, nor relational difference. Stone Telling's fluid identity thus indicates that patriarchal systems retain their dominance by establishing and enforcing borders while eliminating modes of existence that refuse categorization.

Le Guin intensifies this critique by showing how patriarchal cultures convert difference into inferiority. Stone Telling's mixed ancestry places her outside accepted categories of belonging, exposing the arbitrariness of classifications based on purity and exclusion. Her existence reveals the instability of hierarchical systems founded on fixed identities. The critique extends into Stone Telling's extensive relationship with the Earth, in which ecological interconnectedness is inextricably tied to embodiment, memory, and ancestral continuities. The narrator describes the earth as "the mother of my mothers" (Le Guin 19) transforming landscape from a passive setting into a living source of ancestry and communal continuity. The phrase is significant because it situates identity within ecological relationships rather than within exclusive systems of lineage and social classification. At a moment when dominant social structures render her a "half-person," the land offers an alternative form of belonging that is not dependent upon purity or exclusion.

Each time Stone Telling experiences disorientation or uncertainty, she retreats from patriarchal organizations toward rivers, mountains, and non-human entities, indicating that ecological relationships present types of belonging inaccessible within hierarchical social frameworks. The ecological awareness demonstrated by Stone Telling illustrates that subjectivity is environmentally embedded rather than separated from material realities. Le Guin dismantles ideologies promoting human exceptionalism and reconstructs identities through networks of ecological reciprocity, embodiment, and material entanglements. The novel's ecological philosophy also contests capitalist/patriarchal beliefs that nature serves primarily as a source of extraction/domination. Unlike industrial societies based on

accumulation/control, the Kesh worldview defines ecological coexistence through reciprocity/sustainability/mutuality. Rivers/forests/animals/landscapes are not seen as passive objects open for exploitation but as members in relational webs of coexistence. This relational worldview is reflected in Stone Telling's description of the earth as "the mother of my mothers" (Le Guin 19), a phrase that transforms the natural world from a resource into an ancestral presence. Rather than positioning land as property to be controlled or extracted, the expression establishes ecological relationships as the basis of memory, identity, and communal continuity. The Kesh, therefore, understand their existence as emerging from reciprocal connections with the more-than-human world rather than from mastery over it. These views resonate with materialist ecofeminist critiques of capitalist modernity, which argue that patriarchal capitalism simultaneously exploits ecological systems and embodied labor (Mies and Shiva 282; Salleh 195).

Exploitation of nature, women, and minoritized groups occurs through identical systems that transform relational coexistence into hierarchical control. Through the Kesh worldview, the novel imagines an alternative ecological ethic that eschews human mastery over nature. The distinction between ecological coexistence and institutional dominance becomes more evident through Le Guin's portrayal of the Condor society, through the material organization of labor, education, and intellectual power. The narrative describes "the girls and women" as being taught only "the skills of the household", and women had "no role in the intellectual activities of the Dayao" (Le Guin 200). The exclusion of women from intellectual life is particularly significant because knowledge itself functions as a source of authority. By restricting women to domestic labor while reserving education and governance for men, the Condor naturalizes gender hierarchy and reproduces patriarchal power across generations. Rather than describing patriarchy solely as interpersonal misogyny, Le Guin shows how patriarchal authority makes historically produced inequalities appear natural. Although women support the social structure, reproductive and domestic labor, their contributions remain structurally invisible, symbolically devalued. Masculinity is linked to reason, governance, and transcendence; and femininity is limited to use-value, embodiment, and service. In this way, the institutionally established division between men and women mirrors Maria Mies' idea of "housewifization" of labor, in which women's labor is treated as inherently available to others while remaining economically unrecognized (Mies and Shiva 282). Ariel Salleh likewise argues that capitalist patriarchy exploits embodied reproductive labor while rendering the ecological conditions necessary for social existence invisible (Salleh 199). The novel illustrates that patriarchal authority is sustained not only through interpersonal domination but also through institutional mechanisms that regulate labor, embodiment, and intellectual authority. Le Guin expands on this critique by associating women, animals, and strangers with pollution and contamination through symbolism. The text designates "foreigners," "women," and "animals" as "unclean... dirt people" (Le Guin 200) and thus establishes a hierarchy that makes elite masculinity synonymous with civilization, purity, and authority while reducing all ecological and feminine existence to polluting and inferior. By placing women, animals, and foreigners within the same category of impurity, the Condor does not merely identify social differences but transforms them into markers of moral and cultural inferiority. The language of "dirt" is particularly significant because it presents exclusion as a necessary act of purification, thereby legitimizing domination as a means of preserving social order. By grouping together women, animals, and strangers as contaminated, Le Guin illustrates how patriarchal authority constructs differences into ontological inferiorities. The novel thus suggests that systems of domination depend upon representing bodily and ecological materiality as a threat to social order. Such symbolic degradation reflects broader anthropocentric assumptions that assign value according to proximity to masculine authority and rationality. Bodies associated with

materiality, vulnerability, and ecological interconnectedness are marginalized because they challenge the fantasies of human superiority.

This fear of embodiment is most explicitly illustrated through Le Guin's portrayal of menstruation. When Stone Telling first menstruates, her doctor reacts in horror, treating it as if she were suffering from some kind of "dreadful disease" (LeGuin 344). A natural form of bodily activity, menstruation is therefore represented as proof of disorder, impurity, and contamination. The doctor's reaction is significant because it medicalizes and pathologizes a routine aspect of female embodiment, transforming a life-sustaining biological process into a source of anxiety and social stigma. By framing menstruation as illness rather than as a natural function, the Condor reveals their discomfort with bodily processes that resist control and transcendence. According to Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, this episode illustrates how patriarchal societies fear certain forms of material embodiment that disrupt bodily boundaries and symbolic systems of purity (Kristeva 4). Stone Telling's menstruating body creates threats to the stability of hierarchical structures founded on bodily control and separation. Stone Telling's body threatens patriarchal society by destroying the myth of purity upon which patriarchal systems rely. Le Guin consequently critiques not merely attitudes toward women but broader patriarchal anxieties surrounding corporeality, ecological interconnectedness, and material existence. Le Guin further illustrates how patriarchal societies regulate bodies through shame/surveillance/exclusion. While female corporeality is associated with pollution because it represents a reminder to patriarchal systems that humans have a physical dependency on ecological/biological processes. Menstrual cycles/reproduction/aging/vulnerability disrupt fantasies of transcendence/rational autonomy that patriarchal authority strives to represent. The fear of Stone Telling's body represents a larger cultural anxiety about interconnectedness with matter. By emphasizing bodily permeability and ecological entanglement, Le Guin dismantles rigid divisions between body and environment, between human and non-human, and between self and other (Alaimo 238). The novel redefines embodiment not as weakness/pollution but as evidence of humanity's engagement with physically connected ecosystems. In direct opposition to the violent exclusivity practiced by the Condor society, Le Guin envisions the Kesh community as an alternative ecological philosophy grounded in reciprocity/participation/coexistence. While many scholars interpret the Kesh as an ecological utopia, the novel's deeper significance lies in its redefinition of ontology through interdependent forms of existence. The Kesh eliminate hierarchical distinctions between human and nonhuman life by using kinship terminology to describe ecological relationships within networks of reciprocal belonging. For example, the community identifies an olive tree as "grandmother" and a sheep as "sister" (Le Guin 424), thereby challenging anthropocentric assumptions that place humanity above nature. By extending kinship terminology to plants and animals, the Kesh blur the distinction between human and non-human life. The terms "grandmother" and "sister" are particularly significant because they transform ecological relationships into obligations of care, reciprocity, and mutual responsibility rather than relations of ownership or utility. Such language is not merely symbolic representation of ecological reverence; rather, it represents a relational ontology instead of a hierarchical one.

Identity within the Kesh emerges through participation in networks of ecological interdependence rather than through domination over subordinate others. This relational ontology resonates with Timothy Morton's concept of ecological interconnectedness, in which beings exist within webs of coexistence rather than isolated individualism (Morton 48). Donna Haraway's theory of interspecies kinship similarly emphasizes relational forms of belonging and coexistence (Haraway 54). Through the Kesh worldview, Le Guin reconceptualizes ecological existence not as human domination over nature but as mutually dependent coexistence built on material

reciprocity/reciprocal belonging and collective identity. Ultimately, the Kesh provide a representation of a reciprocal societal system that provides an alternative moral paradigm to one of capitalist exploitation, patriarchy, and environmental destruction (Gaard 28). Through her depiction of the Kesh worldview, Ursula K. Le Guin presents an alternative ecological community based on dependency, humility, and non-hierarchical coexistence. As portrayed in *Always Coming Home*, the Kesh is a social system that counters both patriarchal and dualistic patterns of organization. The narrator states, “homosexual marriage was recognized and homosexual spouses not distinguished” (Le Guin 426), indicating a community in which relations occur free from marginalization or hierarchical classification. The absence of distinction is particularly significant because it removes the social mechanisms through which difference is transformed into inequality. Rather than organizing society through categories of normality and deviation, the Kesh recognize diverse forms of kinship as equally legitimate expressions of communal life.

The lack of words similar to “bachelor” or “spinster” indicates that identity has not been defined within strict gendered expectations or exclusionary marital standards. By refusing labels that stigmatize unmarried individuals, the Kesh challenge the tendency of patriarchal cultures to regulate identity through socially prescribed roles and classifications. From a materialist ecofeminist perspective, the Kesh disrupt the patriarchal propensity to socially organize through domination, binary thought, and exclusion. Val Plumwood posits that dualistic structures create differences in relation to an inferior and alien sphere (Plumwood 445). In comparison, the Kesh also portray an alternate model of ecology in which reading/writing are seen as part of “the human social being” (Le Guin 494). Instead of literacy being controlled/monopolized by those who have power/knowledge, literacy is communally practiced, thereby rendering knowledge a collective activity rather than an instrument of authority and exclusion. The phrase “the human social being” is significant because it presents literacy as a shared social practice rather than a marker of status or privilege. Knowledge, therefore, becomes a means of strengthening communal relationships rather than reinforcing hierarchy. Through this social structure, Le Guin critiques patriarchal systems that use restricted access to knowledge to concentrate power, while simultaneously depicting an ecofeminist community based on inclusion and reciprocity. This relational worldview is similarly represented in the Kesh understanding of existence as being based on “relationship and interdependence” (Le Guin 94). The emphasis on interdependence challenges assumptions of autonomy and self-sufficiency that often underpin hierarchical systems of authority. Instead, identity is understood as emerging through connections with human and non-human others. The symbolic connection among language, stones, mountains, and memory illustrates how meaning arises through ongoing continuities with the material world rather than through its separation (Hinchliffe 217). Different from patriarchal societies that assert their authority through hierarchy, exclusion, and mastery over nature, the Kesh understanding of language demonstrates an awareness of the natural world that is relational and coexistence. This perspective is congruent with Val Plumwood’s analysis of Western duality, which divides culture/reason from nature in order to justify domination/hierarchy (Plumwood 443). Le Guin’s rejection of hierarchical notions of superiority is further demonstrated in the Kesh conception of existence as having fundamental interconnectedness like a “forest” (Le Guin 152). The metaphor is particularly important because a forest consists of diverse forms of life that coexist through mutual dependence rather than through centralized control. This ecological image challenges anthropocentric and patriarchal systems that assign value through exclusion, domination, and binary opposition. Karen Warren posits that exploitative conceptual frameworks function through “value-hierarchical thinking” and the “logic of domination”, wherein perceived superiority is used to rationalize subordinating others (Warren 2). On the contrary, the Kesh worldview deconstructs such ideas through imagining existence as a relational/interdependent/

ecological balance. Through this alternative philosophy, Le Guin creates an ecofeminist vision based not on domination/mastery but on mutual coexistence/shared ecological belonging. The novel consequently imagines ecological life beyond patriarchal hierarchy and anthropocentric domination, offering reciprocity and interdependence as the basis for a sustainable social order.

Conclusion

Always Coming Home critiques patriarchal, anthropocentric, and industrial systems that maintain power through hierarchy, exclusion, and control. Through the contrast between the exploitative Condor society and the ecologically connected Kesh community, Ursula K. Le Guin demonstrates how oppressive systems rely on divisions between human and nonhuman life, culture and nature, and masculine authority and female embodiment. From a materialist ecofeminist perspective, the novel suggests that ecological destruction, bodily regulation, labor exploitation, and social inequality are interconnected processes rooted in capitalist and patriarchal structures of domination. While the Condor society is structured through militarism, hierarchy, and exploitation, the Kesh embody reciprocity, shared knowledge, and ecological interdependence. Their close relationship with the land and non-hierarchical social organization presents an alternative ecological ethic grounded in coexistence rather than domination. More significantly, Le Guin does not merely imagine a better society; she redefines the conditions through which identity, community, and ecological belonging become possible. By locating human existence within networks of material interdependence, the novel challenges assumptions of autonomy, mastery, and human exceptionalism that underpin both patriarchal and capitalist systems. The significance of *Always Coming Home*, therefore, lies in its vision of ecological coexistence as a mode of social and ethical transformation, suggesting that sustainable futures depend not upon control, accumulation, and exclusion but upon reciprocity, relationality, and collective responsibility.

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