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IPEK ONMUS ORCID: 0000-0002-9917-0733
ILGIM VERYERI ALACA ORCID: 0000-0002-7512-1507
Koç University

Ecofantasy and Rural Industrialization: An Ecocritical Reading of Two Stories from Türkiye and China

Abstract: This paper provides readings of two different narratives of rural industrialization and its effects on human–nature and human–nonhuman interactions through the lens of ecocritical studies, namely Latife Tekin's *The Children of the Goldenmeadow Valley* and Xiu Xinyu's *The Stars We Raised*. These texts can be characterized as ecofantasy – a subgenre of speculative fiction that incorporates fantastical elements inspired by the natural world. This study examines the role of ecofantastical elements in these narratives, such as the talking plants in *The Children of Golden-Meadow Valley* and the sentient 'stars' in *The Stars We Raised*. It explores how these two texts engage with topics such as ecological consciousness and environmental justice, employing a set of three questions designed by the renowned ecofeminist scholar Greta Gaard for the studies of environmental children's literature.

Keywords: ecofantasy, ecofiction, ecofeminism, industrialization, human–nonhuman engagement

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents an ecocritical study of two texts, drawing a comparative analysis of their treatment of industrial development and its impact on human–nature and human–nonhuman relationships in rural settings. One of these texts is a children's novel by a famous Turkish author known for her literary explorations of ecofeminist themes, while the other one is a speculative coming-of-age story written by a young Chinese author. We believe that the study of these texts is both timely and distinctive, given their origins in two relatively underrepresented regions within the field of children's literature studies, particularly when compared to the dominance of works originally written in English. These texts were selected for their thematic resonance with one another in addressing industrial development in rural settings, despite their different countries of origin. They present narratives that draw on local sensibilities while at the same time

addressing global ecological concerns, particularly those entangled with environmental degradation, pollution, and climate change at large. According to Suzanne Van der Beek and Sonali Kulkarni (2022), in order to have a more global perspective on environmental issues, it is critical to understand such narratives with their connections to the ecological and climate crises in different geographic regions. Ultimately, this global perspective, if attained, could serve as an invaluable asset for building bridges, sharing knowhow, and collaborating in real-life situations. As such, these two texts present a window into two different regions that hint at differing problems and resolutions, albeit fantastical, for the reader to consider. The special cases introduced can be pondered as hypothetical scenarios that might inspire readers from different parts of the world to rethink their relationship to their immediate natural surroundings. For instance, although Tekin's narrative is embellished with a fantastical style, it also concerns itself with mines and rapid industrial development in rural areas, which is a present concern in Turkey and actively discussed. In that manner, this book grounds itself in current challenges about mining, nature preservation, and pollution. Global awareness is a topic of ever-growing concern, and narratives from different parts of the world can reveal connections and foster communication in order to facilitate interconnectedness.

Both texts show characteristics of ecofantasy, an ecocritical subgenre of speculative fiction in which the fantastical framework is driven by nature-inspired elements. This fantasy standpoint makes it easier to delve into issues of a particular gravity that, if presented in realist fiction, might assume a more demanding literary voice. Fantasy serves as a method of alienation, creating a distance between readers and the narrative. This distance may help the author to introduce serious topics in a less didactic manner. This type of alienation through a fantastical framework allows readers to come into contact with an idea, only to stand at a distance from it and evaluate this experience afterwards. Alienation and distancing strategies can also be utilized in texts to bring a temporal change of environment in the narrative and give a glimpse of an imaginary situation. Van der Beek and Kulkarni address potential negative consequences of temporal or geographical alienation and the distancing strategies used in environmental narratives, such as climate-change stories set in a distant future or focused only on locations such as the Arctic or Africa (2022: 37–38). They argue that such narratives might unintentionally alienate readers. The perceived temporal or geographical distance between the reader and the story can cause problems that are concrete and pressing to seem abstract and distant. However, we argue that alienation and distancing strategies can also be utilized in creating more approachable and engaging environmental stories for children and young adults. Both of the texts that we are working with here are set in realistic rural environments, in the authors' respective countries, and in the contemporary era, avoiding the unintentional alienation highlighted by

Van der Beek and Kulkarni. These texts instead establish a different layer of alienation through their fantastical framework. We argue that this type of distancing can be an effective strategy in helping readers to engage with environmental issues in a less didactic manner. Taking a non-didactic approach in ecological storytelling can be a strategic choice. This might allow readers freedom to explore and evaluate their own position in relation to environmental issues, without feeling coerced to follow a certain path. Such a subjective approach facilitates a ground for contemplation and critical thinking where readers are allowed to reassess their relationship with the environment and recognize their own degree of agency.

This paper will examine these two texts in juxtaposition to highlight the range of different attitudes toward industrial development in rural areas. There is a rich scholarly tradition that studies the dichotomies human–nature and nature–technology in literature. Through the lens of speculative fiction, these classic dichotomies are reinterpreted with even further clarity, as speculative fiction operates by making the figurative literal (Todorov 1970: 76–77), thereby enhancing our understanding of these symbolic oppositions. In narratives centering around human–nature conflict, the protagonists often find themselves in a struggle against the forces of nature. Traditionally, these forces are portrayed as paradoxical: simultaneously feared and yet respected; unpredictable yet ceaseless; destructive yet reproductive. They are seen as mysterious, awesome, and simply beyond human understanding. However, with the advent of the Enlightenment, nature was reframed as an impediment to civilization and a civilized world: a domain to be conquered with the help of science. This shift in perspective prompted Enlightenment scholars to reassess the defining characteristics of human civilization and its stance towards nature. Within this new framework, it was logic, science, and technology that were designated as human civilization's chief achievements, and these stood in contrast to nature which was often depicted as unpredictable and uncontrollable. In literary studies, this is still, perhaps anachronistically, discussed as the "man vs. nature" conflict. It is through this repositioning of humanity that the epic myth of *man* as the rational animal is created, and his scientific maturity marks his triumphant departure from the precarious nest of *mother nature*. Any violent acts he commits to oppress and conquer her are justified in the name of advancing human civilization through technological development and industrial growth. The gendered nature of this discourse is not accidental; gender stereotypes are rather deeply embedded in "man vs. nature" narratives, and the systems of oppression that they describe for dominating nature parallel the systems of exploitation imposed upon women, people of color, and other marginalized groups (Warren 2000: 1–2). One of ecofeminism's concerns is to untangle and analyze these gender-coded dynamics. Ecofeminist thinkers and authors criticize and reject the justification for exploitation of nature and non-human

entities in the name of humanity. In her 1986 thought piece *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, author Ursula Le Guin expresses her exasperation with the narratives (whether of history or fiction) that glorify violence toward or in response to nature, saying that: "[…] if that's what it took [to be human], to make a weapon and kill with it, then evidently, I was either extremely defective as a human being, or not human at all" (Le Guin, 1986: para. 11). In the texts selected for this paper, each author engages with these themes from their own unique perspectives. The following sections will provide ecocritical readings of these texts while also bringing out their distinctive features.

GOLD OR MEADOW: CONFLICTING INTERESTS OF "MAN" AND NATURE

The first book that this paper examines is a children's book titled *Altınçayır Vadisi'nin Çocukları* (trans. *The Children of the Goldenmeadow Valley*) written by the contemporary Turkish author Latife Tekin and published in 2020 in Turkish.[1] It is the first children's book written by this author, and in 2020 it was included on the International Youth Library's White Ravens list for international children's and youth literature. Tekin is a pioneer of ecocritical writing in Turkey. Environmental issues, especially the way they intersect with social problems and injustices, have always been at the core of her writing, including her previous novels written for adults. In an article that analyses Tekin's 2018 novel *Manves City*, which talks about tragic events that take place in a fictional post-industrial city, Ozlem Akyol describes Tekin's writing as 'ecosocial' (Akyol, 2021). Ecosocialism combines socialist and green concerns under the umbrella of ecocritical studies and aims to turn a critical lens toward environmental issues that disproportionately impact impoverished areas and underprivileged populations. In a newspaper interview, Tekin has expressed her interest in exploring the intersecting of social injustices and environmental problems, saying, "I had first turned to nature, to things humans deem as the 'other'… Yet, as I heard the cries of the underprivileged and the impoverished, it has become my calling to write these novels [that bring these two issues together]" (Tuna, 2018).

Tekin's interest in these topics is rooted in her own upbringing and childhood experiences. Tekin was born in 1957 in rural Turkey to a family of modest means and seven children. When she was nine years old, her family migrated to Istanbul in search of better economic opportunities. Tekin grew up experiencing firsthand the rural–urban divide and the myriad of problems that rural-to-urban migrants face (Kas, 2019:66). In the 1970s and 1980s, Turkey

[1] At the time of writing, this novel has not yet been translated into English. All translations of quotations from this work, including its title, were made by the authors of this article.

went through a politically turbulent time period, with violent conflicts between right-wing and left-wing groups. Tekin laments that most Turkish authors of her generation, who spent their formative years engrossed in these political struggles, largely overlooked environmental and ecological issues (Tekin, 2014 qtd. in Ergin, 2020: 53). In a 2020 study on ecocriticism in Turkey, Meliz Ergin[2] suggests that by combining "a political reading of ecological problems with an ecological reading of social problems," Tekin delivers a literary style and narrative that is different from other politically motivated authors of her generation (2020: 53–54). Tekin also believes that younger generations of readers are more receptive to topics related to the environment, compared to her own generation (Tekin, 2011 qtd. in Ergin, 2020: 53), revealing a potential source of motivation for her decision to write a children's book which addresses these critical issues.

The Children of Goldenmeadow Valley, just like Tekin's books for adults, explores difficult themes such as industrialization, pollution, rural poverty, rural depopulation, and resistance against capitalist exploitation. *The Children of Goldenmeadow Valley* is a magical yet mundane story of a small rural town with gold reserves. In this story, the inhabitants of Goldenmeadow Valley are left worried and divided as the town's mines reopen under new ownership after a long and relatively peaceful hiatus of fifteen years. Despite navigating these heavy themes, Tekin skillfully avoids a didactic tone. Tekin's literary style is whimsical and lighthearted, which strikes a balance with her subject matter. Through her creative use of figurative language and unexpected euphemisms, she alleviates the harshness of unpleasant concepts or events. For example, when a villager gets diagnosed with cancer, it is referred to as a "bad illness," (Tekin, 2020: 64) and when talking about the impacts of the pollution caused by the mine, Tekin writes: "[… as for the trees] the poison took away their breath […]" (Tekin, 2020: 77). Tekin's deliberate use of innovative language that is based on an ecological framework, exemplified by expressions such as these, brings an ecopoetic dimension to her writing, while leaving it still accessible to a young audience.

The Children of Goldenmeadow Valley is not only a story about the industrial development of a small town, it is also about its mythology, local tales, superstitions, as well as its imaginative flora. The town's local plants play an important role in the book, as the protagonist learns from her grandmother that the medicinal herbs that grow in Goldenmeadow Valley's woods can empower children to treat any illnesses their mothers have; and that those who pass under the trees on which the very last drops of rain have fallen can have their wishes granted.

The Children of Goldenmeadow Valley also contains certain allegorical aspects. These aspects can be observed in the friend groups formed by the

[2] See Meliz Ergin's book *Ecocriticsm and Turkey* (2024) from Bloomsbury Publications for further information on this topic.

children of the village based on shared interests or ambitions: such as the Dreamers (of which the protagonist, Asinaz, is the last remaining member), the Gold Rushers, the Bird-Watchers, the Scientists, and the newly-emerging Leaders. The nicknames given to villagers also reinforce the allegorical tone, such as 'Realtor Bali the Trickster' ('Emlakçı Alavere Bali', in the original), who tries to convince the villagers to sell their land to the mining company, his son 'Selim the Busybody' (Kımılcık Selim), known for swindling others, and 'Nabitcar the Gold Trader', a historical character who founded the first gold mine in the village. All three of these characters are talked about in a negative vein, especially in terms of their affiliation with the mining company, and they can be considered the antagonists of the story. However, Tekin does not dehumanize them. For instance, despite his flaws, Selim the Busybody is hinted to be a caring father, and when he gets diagnosed with a tumor, the children of the village are sincerely upset about this predicament. This nuanced approach allows the narrative to avoid the pitfalls of one-dimensional characters despite its allegorical framework.

The same principle also applies to characters who are generally seen in a positive light. Throughout the narrative, we get to explore their shortcomings as well. For example, Sultanay Dudu, who is the grandmother of the main character, is portrayed as a wise old woman archetype, serving as both a mentor and spiritual guide to Asinaz. She teaches Asinaz about the medicinal uses of local plants and important weather events of Goldenmeadow Valley, and she also tells Asinaz stories about the village's history. One passage illustrates Sultanay Dudu's intimate relationship with the village and nature: "Those who couldn't listen to the thunder of the waterfall, would not be able to enter the [secret] gardens. There wasn't anyone left in Goldenmeadow but Sultanay Dudu who could listen to and decipher the language of the falling water" (Tekin, 2020: 44). However, the villagers' opinions on Sultanay Dudu are divided. A portion of the villagers look up to her, showing respect for her knowledge and skills. They go to her for fortunetelling, and she also plays an important role in organizing and leading the protests against the mining company. Other villagers, however, associate Sultanay Dudu's knowledge of herbal medicine and fortunetelling skills with witchcraft and try to undermine her credibility. It is worth noting that those who disapprove of Sultanay Dudu and spread rumors about her are also those who cooperate with the mining company, such as Realtor Bali the Trickster. This is another direct manifestation of the underlying ecofeminist framework of *The Children of the Goldenmeadow Valley*, as women such as Sultanay Dudu are portrayed as having a more close-knit relationship with nature and taking the initiative to protect it. In contrast, male characters such as Realtor Bali are stereotypically depicted as financially motivated and greedy at the expense of the well-being of nature and their village. Realtor Bali slurs Sultanay Dudu as "the witch with the motorcycle" (Tekin, 2020: 62). From

this innovative name-calling, we can get a glimpse of the world built by Tekin. On the one hand, it is a fantasy land with witches, magical talking plants, and time travel. It is rumored that there are mysterious crypts under Sultanay Dudu's house, that she possesses supernatural powers, and that she meets up with her female pirate acquaintance every day in the caverns by the sea. But as the audience, we are never sure what to make of these rumors and stories because, on the other hand, the world of Goldenmeadow Valley is also a very mundane one. Sultanay Dudu is called "the witch with the motorcycle" simply because she is unable to travel to and from her house on foot due to her old age, and her so-called supernatural powers could merely be traditional practices or rituals that she inherited from her matriarchal ancestors. Her primary concern appears to be to protect her village from further exploitation by capitalist corporations. The fantasy aspects of the story are in a constant clash with the mundane and call the reader to question how much of what they are reading is just an exaggerated and childlike retelling of common life events, and how much of it is actually fantasy built into the world of Goldenmeadow Valley.

The storyline about the 'Karaboğular', petrified humanlike creatures in the forest, also blurs the line between reality and fantasy. These creatures, whose presence is accompanied by the sound of the cracking of a whip, are rumored to be the spirits of former laborers who were forced to dig for gold in the mines by a cruel king of the past. However, when Asinaz sees the face of one of these petrified creatures, it reminds her of her father. We find out that Asinaz's father used to work in the mines until an accident that caused him to lose his legs and resulted in the cessation of mining activities in the village fifteen years ago. Although this accident is not explicitly narrated in the book, we understand that it was a very traumatic event that took a financial as well as a psychological toll on the family. Asinaz's mother, employed at a nearby holiday resort as a service-industry worker, is described as someone who sleeps a lot, is often melancholic and moody, and is evidently "having a hard time carrying the weight of the past" (Tekin, 2020: 22), possibly as a post-traumatic reaction to this accident.

The Children of the Goldenmeadow Valley, similar to Tekin's other novels, shows characteristics of magical realism and draws inspiration from oral traditions, such as folktales, legends, and mythology (Kas, 2019:66). *The Children of the Goldenmeadow Valley* can also be defined as a work of ecofantasy. Ecofantasy pays special attention to the codependency of humans and nature (Goga, 2018: 58). Brawley (2014) discusses two major functions of fantasy writing. Firstly, fantasy mimics or recreates the feeling of "awe" that readers experience from religious texts and practices, and secondly, it urges the readers to reconsider their perception of and their relation to the natural world (2014: 5–6). He argues that fantasy offers the readers secular narratives that they can enjoy in a similar way religious people may enjoy spiritual texts (2014: 9). In

The Children of the Goldenmeadow Valley, nature comes closest in replacing this definition of the divine. However, nature is not all-powerful; it is not immune to harm and destruction, yet it possesses the power to rejuvenate. This is exemplified when Sultanay Dudu interprets the arrival of the Blue Crow as an auspicious sign: "'The Black Forest will be green again; the breath of a new life has been drawn into the pines,' she said" (Tekin 2020: 67).

Having narrowly escaped a thorough defeat by industrialization fifteen years ago, Tekin's Goldenmeadow Valley still resists *domestication* by the mining corporation. However, it is less guarded towards Asinaz. Goldenmeadow Valley's plants talk to her for the first time after aiding her in saving her grandmother and let her give them names (Tekin 2020:86). From the eyes of its post-industrial readers, Goldenmeadow Valley is full of mysteries, unpredictability, unknown dangers, as well as adventures. It is also a place of nostalgia and childhood.

FARMING STARS IN A POST-INDUSTRIAL WORLD

The second work that we discuss is a short story titled *The Stars We Raised*, written by the Chinese author Xiu Xinyu. Xiu is a young author in her late twenties who lives in Beijing, China, and she mainly writes speculative and science fiction. She wrote *The Stars We Raised* in 2017 in Chinese. It was translated into English by Judy Yi Zhou in 2021 and published as part of the Chinese speculative-fiction anthology *The Way Spring Arrives*. This anthology exclusively consists of the works of female and non-binary Chinese authors of speculative fiction. It is important to note that the anthology in which Xiu's work appears is not a collection devoted specifically to children's or young-adult literature. However, *The Stars We Raised* speaks strongly to experiences of childhood and growing up. This has inspired us to consider it in a cross-cultural dialogue with Tekin's *The Children of the Goldenmeadow Valley*. Both texts essentially tell the story of a rural village undergoing industrial development, yet following drastically different paths.

The Stars We Raised is a coming-of-age story that poses interesting questions about human–nonhuman relationships within a capitalist framework. Just like the Goldenmeadow Valley, *The Stars We Raised* also takes place in a rural setting undergoing certain changes due to industrial development. According to the speculative narrative of the story, this village becomes one of a few dozen places in the world where a strange phenomenon occurs: unidentified objects that people refer to as 'stars' descend from the sky. These are rock-like objects, and they seem to organically grow in size over time. They emit fluorescent light, but as they grow, their light starts to dim, and they start to float in the air. It is these features that gain them the name 'stars'. Not much is discovered about these objects, beyond the fact that they do not pose any immediate threat to

people and that they can be ground up into 'stardust' to be used as a construction material. As this material is moderately sturdier than regular construction materials, it makes the stars an asset for the villagers, but not enough of an asset to relieve them of their financial problems. What these objects are, why they appeared, and where they come from remain unknown throughout the story. "If these stars had a message, no one knew what it was," comments the unnamed narrator (Xiu, 2022: para. 11). This attitude shows parallels with the attitude of industrial and capitalist societies towards nature and natural resources. They are simply controlled, possessed, and turned into profit without being understood. In the village where *The Stars We Raised* is set, the villagers develop a custom of having children "care" for the stars during their infancy stage, even though the stars do not require any kind of special care:

> […] We would wipe the baby stars with melted snow, hoping the pristine water would wash away the dullness and make them shine more brightly. Some […] under the belief that their baby stars could learn to understand simple commands, would cup them in their palms, hold them up like offerings, and talk to them every day. (Xiu, 2022: para. 4)

When the stars reach an optimum size, their parents then take them back and sell them to factories:

> No matter what we did or did not do, however, the stars always grew up. They became larger and lighter, and by the following spring, […] would turn an opaque grayish brown. That was when our parents would try to get us to grind them into dust and sell them. (Xiu, 2022: para. 5)

Through this practice which largely parallels livestock farming, *The Stars We Raised* tells the story of how the children of the village cope with the situation. As early as elementary school, the children become involved in this process by acting as caretakers or trainers of the stars, only to have them taken away by their parents each year. Some of the children, especially one called Jiang Yang, feel conflicted at this situation and refuse to let their stars go. However, for their parents, the stars are an important source of extra income, and thus the children must make compromises. By the time the children reach middle school, their gamified interest in the stars turns into apathy:

> No city kids had ever bothered to try raising stars. They had all sorts of toys, like transformers, dolls, and stuffed animals. City people had thought of stars as strange objects with a mysterious composition and unknown origins, so it would be best to keep the children as far away from the stuff as possible. (Xiu, 2022: para. 57)

This excerpt describes the change in the narrator's attitude towards the stars as she grows up and starts to navigate her place and status in society, especially

in relation to urban dwellers. It is hinted that the children of the village slowly start to become aware and self-conscious of their rural upbringing. As children grow up to be adults, many of them leave the village for better education or employment opportunities in big cities. The village also undergoes changes, as the harvest of the stars becomes regulated by the government to keep their population under control, similar to measures applied to wildlife hunting and fishing:

> […] and the village had even developed an elaborate set of star-mining standards. The mountains were now blocked off all year, except in winter, when the government paid the village to hire a bunch of locals to collect grown-up stars all at once. For young people who came back once a year [during the Chinese New Year holiday], it was a good seasonal job for extra cash. (Xiu, 2022: para. 84)

These regulations put further distance between humans and the non-human stars, and transform star-harvesting into merely a new underpaid job opportunity for villagers. In this narrative, what could have been an extraordinary event – a possibly extraterrestrial entity, and one capable of building emotional bonds with humans, descending to Earth – is rendered mundane by the priorities of capitalist society. Initially, children take notice of the remarkable nature of this event, but as they grow older, their priorities shift, and they even begin to doubt whether their bonds with the stars were not merely a part of their childish fantasies. In Tekin's novel, the changing priorities of children as they grow up are expressed by the groups they belong to: the Gold Rushers and the Scientists gain popularity, a new group called the Leaders appears, and Asinaz's group, the Dreamers, is reduced to a single member. Asinaz's best friend, who moved to the big city with her family, leaves Asinaz's persistent letters unanswered, emphasizing the symbolic distance and divide between the urban and the rural. This change is mirrored in Xiu's *The Stars We Raised* when the "dreamer" of this story, Jiang Yang, finally ends up grinding the star that he raised as a child into stardust.

THREE QUESTIONS ON ECOCRITICISM

Fiction has the potential to stimulate readers emotionally and intellectually in order to create a response to ongoing global issues. When it comes to ecocritical narratives, it can be argued that the desired responses would be an increased interest in nature-related issues, as well as prompting individuals to reevaluate their status as humans in relation to the nonhuman world. Małecki (2012), among others, highlights the substantial work that is needed in order to tackle this challenge, suggesting that fiction alone cannot be sufficient to take all the necessary actions, even though it can stir up substantial debate and encourage the readers to support this cause. Gaard proposes three questions to

evaluate the capacity of ecocritical children's literature in creating these desired responses (2008: 15; 2009: 327). Each of these three questions corresponds to one of the three steps in the 'logic of domination' as defined by ecofeminist studies: alienation, hierarchy, and domination (Gaard, 2008: 12). The 'logic of domination' and its three steps play an important role in the normalization and justification of violence against marginalized groups and, within the context of ecofeminism, against nature and non-human entities.

The first question is: "How does the text address the ontological question, 'Who am I?' Is the human self-identity constructed in relation or opposition to nature, animals, and diverse human cultures/identities?" (Gaard, 2008:15). According to Gaard, in order to dismantle the myth of a separate self and alienation,[3] which is the first step of the 'logic of domination', narratives can showcase interdependence between humans and the non-human world, challenging the assumptions of human superiority and independence (Gaard, 2009: 327). In *The Children of the Goldenmeadow Valley*, characters such as Sultanay Dudu are in a codependent relationship with nature and they do not distinguish themselves as separate entities from it. However, characters such as Realtor Bali alienate themselves from nature, elevate the benefits they can obtain over its well-being, and dominate it, following the three steps in the 'logic of domination'. *The Stars We Raised* illustrates the level of detachment through humanity's disinterest in finding out the actual nature or the origin of the stars. The villagers and government are only interested in benefiting from the stars financially. Even though children initially connect with the stars on a personal and passionate level, as they grow up, they learn to adopt a more "pragmatic" attitude and internalize the mainstream attitude towards the stars and other nonhuman beings. They distance and alienate themselves from them, elevate themselves and their economic interests to a different level, refusing to believe that the stars may be sentient, and lastly, dominate them by collecting and selling them. Both texts engage in a critical examination of how the myth of the separate self is constructed in order to financially benefit from non-human entities.

The second question is: "How does the narrative define the ecojustice problem? Does the narrative conclusion offer an appropriate strategy for responding to the problem posed in the story, rejecting hierarchy in favor of community and participatory democracy?" (Gaard, 2008: 16). Gaard explains that the 'logic of domination' necessitates a hierarchical structure that prioritizes the advancement of human civilization over the well-being of nature. Narratives

[3] Alienation, in this context, should be distinguished from the distancing strategies discussed earlier in this paper. In the former case, alienation is employed to temporarily distance readers from harsh realities, providing them a safe space to reflect on these difficult issues in an approachable manner. In the latter, the act of alienation specifically targets non-human entities, marking them as separate from and inferior to humans.

can counteract these rigid value judgements by depicting diverse communities without hierarchical structures (Gaard, 2009: 327). This theme is vividly explored in *The Children of the Goldenmeadow Valley,* where the main dispute among the villagers stems from their differing priorities and the hierarchies that these priorities imply. *The Stars We Raised* explores the same concept in a somewhat more pessimistic manner through Jiang Yang's futile efforts to resist the mainstream hierarchical structure by refusing to grind the star he raised into dust. Neither of the texts studied in this paper directly calls for action, but they clearly convey a message that criticizes the damaging actions of hierarchical capitalist institutions. As mentioned in the introduction, narratives that opt for a non-didactic approach may provide readers room to engage with these themes on their own terms, encouraging their critical thinking and independent contemplation.

The third question complements the previous ones, this time inquiring about the extent of agency attributed to nature in ecocritical texts: "What kind of agency does the text recognize in nature? Is nature an object to be saved by the heroic child actor? Is nature a damsel in distress, an all-sacrificing mother, or does nature have its own subjectivity and agency?" (Gaard, 2008: 18). This question aims to dismantle the final step of the 'logic of domination' which is the physical and spiritual domination of nature by stripping it of its agency and subjectivity. In both texts studied here, nature plays a more passive role with little agency over its fate. In *The Children of the Goldenmeadow Valley,* it can be argued that the self-renewal of the Black Forest, despite its devastation at the hands of the mining company, is a testimony to its resilience and its intrinsic will to persist. In *The Stars We Raised,* it is expressed that the stars hardly need human care in order to go through their life cycle; they persevere regardless of human intervention. These non-human entities demonstrate the capacity to not only exist and survive but also to flourish on their own. Yet, the impact that human civilization has on them can be severely devastating. However, their attitude towards humans is marked by compassion and benevolence. This is vividly illustrated in the sentient talking plants' interaction with Asinaz in *The Children of the Goldenmeadow Valley*, when they come to Asinaz and her grandmother's aid in their time of need, symbolizing their agency and intrinsic goodwill. Thus, the entanglement of humans and nature is made visible, and their coexistence is vividly portrayed. The two ecofantasy narratives that we evaluated can also be reminders of our own estrangement from the natural world around us, which may be summarized as follows:

> […] we have become estranged, othered, from the planet and from our bodies, the ghosts of our past we hold within exposes us. But we are tied together by a genealogy, a history of our bodies entangled on this landscape with others. Noticing attunes us to worlds otherwise unrecognised and reconfiguring our sensing of bodies forces us into a new recognition of our histories. (Malone et al. 2020: 110–111)

In that manner, the two selected narratives can serve as aide-mémoires for revisiting the various ways in which human–nature entanglements and relational positionings can be built. A closer look at these texts reveals the ever-changing scenarios we can envision or critically engage with, in fiction and the real world, with the aim of exploring those blurred boundaries.

CONCLUSION

This paper has provided in-depth readings of two ecofantastical narratives that center around rural industrialization and discussed them through an ecocritical lens. The cross-cultural dialogue between these environmental texts helped us peruse a more nuanced picture of a rural village undergoing industrial development. Through a study of these narratives, we explored the impact that rural industrial development has on human–nature and human–nonhuman relationships and delved into the ways in which these texts critically engage with topics such as ecological consciousness and environmental justice. The final part of this paper analyzed these two texts using a framework of three questions designed by ecofeminist scholar Greta Gaard, with an aim to evaluate the potential social impact of ecocritical narratives. These questions seek to understand ecocritical narratives through the lens of the 'logic of domination' formulated by ecofeminist studies. These questions reveal strategies taken by authors Tekin and Xiu to make visible and dismantle the prevalent 'logic of domination' mindset that justifies human civilization's exploitation of the nonhuman world. We argue that these narratives foster a critical engagement with environmental issues, facilitating a bridge between reality and fantasy, prompting a dual sense of alienation from what we know and what is foreign to us concomitantly. They enable us to imagine the ecological transformations that rural areas are going through or can go through in the near future, encouraging a degree of awareness and contemplation through an ecocritical lens.

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