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Beyond the Inhuman Stone: Reclaiming Gender in an Ecofeminist Reading of Maha Khan Phillips's The Curse of Mohenjodaro

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Abstract

Ecofeminism holds a significant place in contemporary literary criticism because it exposes the intertwined logics of gendered and ecological domination. Speculative fiction has emerged as a particularly fertile site for exploring these entanglements. It allows authors to literalise the metaphorical link between women's bodies and the natural world in plots of extraction, inheritance and violence. In Pakistani literature, however, criticism has tended to privilege consciousness-centred models of resistance over material and generational ones. This paper offers, to my knowledge, the first sustained ecofeminist reading of Maha Khan Phillips's The Curse of Mohenjodaro (2016), a novel that moves between ancient Meluhha and present-day Pakistan. Existing scholarship has read its central relic, the Bloodstone, through new materialist and geocritical frameworks as an instance of stone's inherent agency, overlooking its explicitly gendered and hereditary character. Drawing on Val Plumwood's account of dualistic domination, Karen Warren's logic of domination and Vandana Shiva's concept of Prakriti, this paper argues that the novel's central conflict concerns the appropriation of a maternal inheritance passed down through generations of women. The analysis traces how the women contest, reinterpret and reclaim this inheritance. At the novel's turning point, Jaya's curse undermines the redemptive woman–nature symbolism that ecofeminist criticism has sometimes been too quick to celebrate. The novel later reframes the Bloodstone as a morally neutral inheritance whose meaning depends on the intent of those who wield it. Nadia ultimately reclaims the Stone in an act of resistance that remains only partially redemptive. The novel thus offers a multigenerational, partially resolved model of ecofeminist resistance that departs from the more consciousness-centred models found elsewhere in Pakistani Anglophone speculative fiction.

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Introduction

Maha Khan Phillips is a Pakistani novelist whose fiction draws on thriller and speculative conventions to explore the cultural and historical terrain of South Asia. *The Curse of Mohenjodaro* (2016) exemplifies this approach. A fast-paced conspiracy narrative, it also undertakes historical and mythological reconstruction, imagining gender, caste and religious authority in the ancient Indus Valley city it names Meluhha. The novel interweaves this ancient narrative with a present-day plot involving cult ideology and inherited trauma. What makes the novel particularly valuable to ecofeminist criticism is its refusal to confine this speculative world to the distant past. The structure of domination that the novel depicts in Meluhha resurfaces four thousand years later in updated, superficially secular language. The fantasy element thus exposes a pattern of appropriation that might be less visible in a realist narrative set entirely in the present. I first approached this novel expecting a relatively straightforward instance of woman–nature symbolism, with a goddess, a sacred stone and a

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persecuted priestess. I found a text considerably more sceptical of its own mythic framework than I had expected. It depicts the goddess's failure to protect the vulnerable as pointedly as it depicts the priesthood's corruption. I argue that this scepticism makes the novel a productive subject for ecofeminist criticism in its own right.

Objectives

1. To examine how *The Curse of Mohenjodaro* constructs the Bloodstone's power as an explicitly gendered inheritance and how this reading addresses an omission in existing new materialist scholarship on the novel.
2. To trace Iaf's coercive control over Jaya and the threat it poses to her daughter Aal, drawing on Plumwood's and Warren's ecofeminist frameworks and Sultan's triangulated model of women, Others and nature.
3. To analyse Jaya's curse against Shakari following the murder of Al-Mien as the novel's central act of demystification, through which the text holds the maternal principle associated with nature to account for the violence enacted in its name.
4. To trace the novel's subsequent demystification of the Bloodstone as material technology and compare its resolution through Nadia's direct, violent action with more voice-centred and testimony-based models of resistance in Pakistani Anglophone speculative fiction.

Research Questions

1. How does the novel construct the Bloodstone as a specifically gendered inheritance, and what does this construction reveal about existing new materialist readings that approach the Stone's agency independently of gender?
2. How do Iaf's control over Jaya and the threat to her daughter Aal illustrate Plumwood's and Warren's accounts of dualistic domination and its underlying logic? How does Al-Mien's death show that the same logic of disposability also operates through disability and clan status?
3. What does Jaya's curse against Shakari achieve that a straightforward affirmation of goddess symbolism could not? How does the curse prepare for the novel's subsequent treatment of the Bloodstone as material technology?
4. What do Aal's demystification of the Bloodstone and Nadia's eventual violent reclamation of it suggest about how women can resist domination in Pakistani Anglophone speculative fiction?

Significance

This is the first ecofeminist reading of *The Curse of Mohenjodaro*. Existing scholarship on the novel has drawn on Karen Barad's account of material agency and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's argument that stone is ‘never truly inert’ to read the Bloodstone's power as an expression of matter's inherent agency, independent of gender. This reading overlooks the novel's explicit treatment of the Bloodstone as a maternal inheritance. Described as ‘the heart of Shakari’, the Stone passes through the blood of daughters rather than sons. Jabeen's emphasis on the material relationship between women and nature brings this detail into focus and recasts the novel's central conflict as a multigenerational struggle over gendered inheritance. The study also asks whether ecofeminist theory developed primarily in Western philosophical and South Asian agrarian contexts retains its explanatory force when applied to speculative and mythic-historical fiction. By deliberately defamiliarising the present, these genres pose interpretive demands distinct from those of realist fiction.

Delimitation

This study focuses on a single primary text, *The Curse of Mohenjodaro*. The concluding discussion briefly considers other Pakistani Anglophone speculative fiction to situate the novel's distinctive model of resistance. The theoretical framework draws primarily on Plumwood, Warren, Shiva, Jabeen and Sultan. The study engages with existing new materialist scholarship on the novel to establish the interpretive gap it addresses. Its discussion of new materialism and its treatment of the novel's extensive cast and subplots are limited to material that bears directly on the central argument.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive design grounded in close textual analysis. It follows Catherine Belsey's (2013) account of textual analysis as a research method attentive to a text's plural and often contradictory meanings. This design suits a novel that sustains two competing accounts of its central object, presenting it as both a sacred maternal relic and a morally neutral technology without formally reconciling the two accounts. It also allows for close examination of how Jaya breaks with the mythic framework that has organised the ancient narrative up to that point.

Theoretical Foundation

This study's theoretical framework rests on Val Plumwood's (1993) account of dualistic domination. Plumwood identifies five interlocking features through which a dominant culture constitutes itself by excluding and subordinating an other. These features are hyperseparation, homogenisation, denial or backgrounding, incorporation and instrumentalism. Karen Warren's (1990, 2000) logic of domination explains how a descriptive claim about difference becomes a normative claim of entitlement to control. Vandana Shiva's (1988) concept of Prakriti understands nature and the feminine as an active, self-generating principle with its own agency. Neelam Jabeen (2020) insists that the South Asian woman–nature correspondence be understood as materially embodied. Faiz Sultan's (2021) triangulated model situates women, socially disposable 'Others' and nature within the same conceptual framework, while distinguishing the forms of subordination each experiences. The study also engages directly with new materialist scholarship on stone and matter, principally Karen Barad's (2007) account of agential realism and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's (2015) argument for an ecology of the inhuman. It considers what an ecofeminist framework attentive to gender adds to a materialist reading of the same object.

Method: Close Reading of Mythic and Material Registers

The primary method is close textual analysis of passages that establish the Bloodstone's origin myth and its transmission through female bloodlines. The analysis also examines Iaf's coercive control over Jaya, Al-Mien's death and Jaya's subsequent curse against Shakari. It then considers how the novel demystifies the Bloodstone in the ancient timeline and how the struggle over it ends in the contemporary timeline. The selected passages bring the mythic vocabulary of gift, blessing and inheritance into tension with the material vocabulary of coercion, extraction and bodily cost. They also show how Jaya, Aal and Nadia come to question or overturn the myth's claims to redemptive authority.

Procedure

The analysis proceeds in four stages corresponding to the research questions. First, it examines the Bloodstone's gendered and hereditary character in light of existing new materialist scholarship that treats the Stone's agency independently of gender. Second, it applies Plumwood's and Warren's frameworks to Iaf's domination of Jaya and uses Sultan's triangulated model to examine how a related

logic of disposability operates in the treatment of Al-Mien. Third, it examines Jaya's curse against Shakari as the novel's central challenge to its own mythic framework. Fourth, it traces the demystification of the Bloodstone and the novel's resolution through Nadia's direct action, situating that resolution alongside more voice-centred models of resistance in Pakistani Anglophone speculative fiction.

Rationale for Method

Close reading, combined with an ecofeminist framework drawing on several theorists, is appropriate to this study because the novel develops its central ideological and theological tensions through the language its characters use. At different points in the narrative, they describe the Bloodstone in terms of gift, heart, blessing, curse, technology and intent. Attending to this shifting vocabulary grounds the study's ecofeminist interpretation in textual evidence and brings into focus the details that a broader thematic reading could overlook.

The Bloodstone as Gendered Inheritance

The novel establishes the Bloodstone's origin as a maternal gift. Iaf recites the city's founding myth during the ritual Naming ceremony, which structures several early chapters in the ancient timeline. The Goddess's gift to the mortal woman Meluhha fuses bodily sacrifice with maternal generosity: 'Shakari took out a piece of her own heart. She gave her the Bloodstone' (Phillips, 2016, p. 40). From the Bloodstone's first appearance, the origin story ties its power to a specifically feminine and maternal act. A goddess gives part of her own body to a mortal woman. The maternal character of this transfer gives the Stone's agency a specificity that broader new materialist readings of the novel's stone imagery can overlook.

Elsewhere in the text, the explanation given to Jaya for the Goddess-Blessed caste's exclusive authority establishes that the ability to read the Bloodstone is hereditary. It depends on bloodline rather than spiritual merit or training: 'Their own daughters are born in the way of Shakari — it is in their blood. Why do you think they are the only ones who can read the Bloodstone' (Phillips, 2016, p. 35). Read through Shiva's (1988) concept of Prakriti, the ability to read the Stone is a material capacity inherited through the female line. Within the novel's logic, this inheritance exemplifies the embodied correspondence that Jabeen (2020) argues ecofeminist criticism of South Asian fiction must take seriously. Reading it solely as a symbolic association between women and nature would obscure the concrete role that inheritance plays in the novel.

The novel makes the exclusionary dimension of this inheritance explicit. An elite defender of the existing order dismisses those outside the ruling lineage as they begin to organise and demand political standing: 'they do not have our blood in their veins... They will never read the Bloodstone. And yet here they are, demanding rights' (Phillips, 2016, p. 169). Read through Sultan's (2021) triangulated model of women, 'Others' and nature, the passage identifies a third subordinated group alongside the novel's central gendered division. People outside the ruling lineage are excluded from sacred authority. Their exclusion is structurally related to, though distinct from, the gendered subordination that Goddess-Blessed women experience within their own privileged caste. The phrase 'our blood' asserts both religious legitimacy and caste-based purity, showing how the novel's treatment of the Bloodstone binds sacred authority to hereditary descent.

Domination Across Generations: Iaf, Jaya, and the Death of Al-Mien

Iaf's authority over Jaya is physically coercive. Jaya has had to 'endure his touch, his pain. His control' (Phillips, 2016, p. 188). The reference to touch and pain distinguishes Iaf's control from the forms of domination exercised through the Handbook and broadcast rhetoric in Bina Shah's

Before She Sleeps, as discussed in my companion analysis. The same passage shows that Iaf also monitors who can read the Stone: he 'grew increasingly disappointed, as no one else had proved to be able to read the Bloodstone. Jaya had lied to him, time and time again, to protect those who the Stone had shown her had abilities' (Phillips, 2016, p. 188). At this stage in the narrative, Jaya resists covertly. Under near-total coercive control, she conceals what she knows to protect others with the same ability.

The priesthood's claim extends to Jaya's daughter, Aal: 'A daughter who Iaf would one day turn to — to read the Bloodstone. A daughter she had to protect' (Phillips, 2016, p. 189). In Warren's (1990, 2000) terms, the passage shows how the priesthood turns its claim on Jaya's gift into a future claim on her child. The priesthood locates value in the bloodline itself and takes that value to justify its entitlement to control successive generations of women regardless of their consent. This claim turns a maternal relationship into another site of institutional extraction. The economic stakes become explicit when the novel reveals that 'Iaf was making her read the Bloodstone almost daily, so that he could acquire more gold from the merchants' (Phillips, 2016, p. 313). Iaf thus extracts labour and profit from what the origin myth presents as a freely given sacred gift. The gap between symbolic reverence and material exploitation is precisely what Jabeen's (2020) framework asks the critic to identify.

The logic of disposability extends beyond the gendered treatment of Jaya and Aal. The killing of the Unclanned boy Al-Mien offers the novel's most direct illustration of Sultan's (2021) triangulated model. Al-Mien, whom the narrative describes as disabled and stateless, is murdered before Jaya's eyes. Bas, the man responsible, dismisses the killing in terms that show how little value the city's hierarchy places on Al-Mien's life: 'Leave him, Lady. He was mad. An Unclanned cripple. He should have been killed at birth, instead of being a burden on others. Unclanned filth. We have enough of them on our streets, taking what's rightfully ours' (Phillips, 2016, p. 339). Bas's justification exemplifies Warren's (1990) logic of domination. He takes Al-Mien's disability and his status as Unclanned and stateless to justify his claim that Al-Mien should have been killed at birth. He recasts Al-Mien's survival as an illegitimate 'burden' on those he deems entitled to the city's resources. For Jaya, witnessing a killing justified through disability and clan status precipitates the theological rupture examined in the following section.

Jaya's Curse: The Collapse of Redemptive Symbolism

I argue that Jaya's curse against Shakari, delivered immediately after Al-Mien's death, is the novel's most consequential passage for ecofeminist criticism. Existing scholarship has yet to give the scene sustained attention. Its force depends on the escalation of Jaya's language across successive utterances. After crawling to Al-Mien's dying body, Jaya puts 'her hand over her mouth' and remembers a series of earlier cruelties: 'Nene's baby, crying, desperate to suckle, but left outside tied to the pipal tree to shrivel up and die, the time laf had blackened both Lal's eyes, the mother who left her child at the Temple and starved to death on the walk home' (Phillips, 2016, p. 339). Al-Mien's death brings these memories of institutional violence together. The curse that follows is a reckoning with the pattern of cruelty that the Temple has enabled.

Jaya's curse proceeds in three stages. She first curses Bas directly: '"I curse you, Bas," she shouted at the retreating figure. "I curse you and your family. Don't you walk away from me, you cur. I curse you, do you understand?"' (Phillips, 2016, p. 340). She then extends the curse to Iaf and the institution he represents: '"I curse you, laf. Do you hear me? I curse you and all those who support you"' (Phillips, 2016, p. 340). In the final stage, she turns her fury against the goddess herself. She speaks in a whisper, a shift in register that makes this final utterance the most private

and arguably the most sincere of the three: '"And most of all I curse her," she whispered. "I curse the Goddess Shakari. I curse her and all of her family. I invoke the One Horned God. May he bring her untold suffering as she has brought me"' (Phillips, 2016, p. 340).

The escalating sequence echoes the novel's wider examination of how domination operates at several levels. Jaya's grief carries her from the immediate agent of violence to the institution that authorised it and, finally, to the sacred principle that lent the institution legitimacy. The shift from shouting to whispering suggests that cursing Shakari is a more serious transgression than cursing Bas or Iaf. Even in her distress, Jaya cannot voice the final curse at full volume, yet she utters it. Most importantly, Jaya names Shakari as an agent of suffering. To ask why the goddess failed to intervene would allow Jaya to question the limits of Shakari's benevolence while still assuming she meant well. By calling on a rival deity to inflict on Shakari the suffering that Jaya attributes to her, Jaya accuses the goddess of complicity.

Read through Jabeen's (2020) postcolonial ecofeminist framework, the curse holds redemptive symbolism linking women to nature or the goddess to account for the material violence enacted in its name. The reactions of those present convey the gravity of Jaya's words. Aal, who holds her mother's arm throughout, is left 'gasping and crying'. Bas watches from a distance, 'smiling', aware that Jaya 'had gone too far'. The danger becomes concrete when the Temple guard arrests Jaya at the end of the scene (Phillips, 2016, p. 340). Her punishment shows the material cost of breaking with Shakari. As in *Before She Sleeps*, discussed in my companion analysis, the act of naming domination brings ideological clarity while leaving the person who speaks subject to that same power.

Jaya's curse changes how we read the novel's initial opposition between Shakari and Iaf's Temple. Shakari initially appears as an immanent, generative goddess associated with nature, while the Temple exercises institutional power through extraction. Before the curse, Jaya locates the sacred in experiences of the natural world: 'the warmth of the sun... a strong wind... the ripening of fruit' (Phillips, 2016, p. 30). In doing so, she implicitly rejects the priesthood's claim to exclusive authority over access to the divine. Read in isolation, this passage might support a reading informed by Plumwood in which the feminine principle associated with nature offers a redemptive alternative to institutional corruption. Jaya's curse complicates that reading. At the narrative's most emotionally charged moment, the character whose perspective anchors much of the ancient timeline implicates Shakari in the violence carried out in her name. By giving voice to this accusation, the novel itself makes the ethical demand that Jabeen's framework makes of the critic.

Demystification and Reclamation: From Myth to Technology to Action

Jaya's curse begins a process of demystification that continues later in the novel, when her daughter Aal rules over the city's ruins after the Temple's collapse. Aal comes to understand the object she has inherited in a new way: 'she now knew how the Bloodstone worked. She knew it was not a soothsaying piece of the Goddess's heart. Instead it was technology... It was intent' (Phillips, 2016, p. 432). Aal's discovery responds to the concerns raised by Sultan (2021) and Jabeen (2020) about the uncritical romanticisation of woman–nature symbolism. Recognising the Bloodstone as technology leads Aal to act with caution. She moves to seal the Temple's remains and mark them as dangerous, treating the technology as a hazard regardless of who might wield it. Demystification thus gives Aal a way to identify and contain a danger. Across two generations, Jaya names the goddess as complicit in the Temple's violence, and Aal reclassifies the goddess's 'gift' as morally neutral technology. Each woman challenges a different aspect of the Bloodstone's sacred status.

The tension between symbolic reverence and material danger persists in the novel's contemporary timeline, where the struggle over the Bloodstone resurfaces in the language and structures of a modern cult. Nadia negotiates directly with her father, Sohail, over control of the Stone and invokes his stated preference for her half-sister: 'Let me use the Stone, instead of Layla. Save her. You love her, you said yourself she was your true heir' (Phillips, 2016, p. 399). By naming Layla his 'true heir', Sohail repeats the hereditary logic that governs the ancient timeline. He assigns value and entitlement through blood and his choice of heir, irrespective of either daughter's wishes or consent. His rhetoric of legacy and inheritance thus serves the same purpose as Iaf's claim on Jaya's bloodline.

The novel resolves the immediate struggle through direct action, distinguishing its model of resistance from the more consciousness-centred models found elsewhere in the genre. Nadia shoots and kills Sohail, ending his exploitation of the Stone. The narrator adds that she 'had had the presence of mind to step over his inert body and pick up the Bloodstone' (Phillips, 2016, p. 440). Her physical reclamation of the Bloodstone is as significant as the violence that precedes it. The struggle over the Stone has exposed three generations of women to coercion and exploitation. Nadia, its contemporary inheritor, takes possession on her own terms. This act completes the novel's progression from mythic gift to theological curse, material demystification and physical possession.

Comparative Implications: A Different Model of Resistance

My companion analysis of Bina Shah's *Before She Sleeps* argues that resistance in that novel takes shape primarily through voice. Sabine achieves increasing clarity about the state's reproductive policies, culminating in her declaration that the women of Green City 'do not consent' to the state's reproductive 'conspiracy'. Her testimony gives her the authority to diagnose and articulate their predicament, while material conditions for her and the other women remain unchanged. *The Curse of Mohenjodaro* offers a different resolution, even though both novels could be read in terms of 'critical utopian' incompletion. Across three generations, Jaya's theological accusation gives way to Aal's reclassification of the Stone and then to Nadia's direct physical action. Even this limited comparison shows a range of responses to patriarchal and ecological domination in Pakistani Anglophone speculative fiction, from sustained, unresolved testimony to decisive, violent reclamation.

Nadia achieves a more materially decisive outcome than Sabine, but the novel qualifies that achievement. The corporate backers, cult infrastructure and public fascination with the 'Ancients' ideology that Sohail exploited are largely untouched by his death. Nadia's violence ends his exploitation of the Bloodstone while leaving the mythic and material conditions that enabled both Iaf and Sohail largely in place. This limit on what individual resistance can achieve is consistent with a critical tendency in ecofeminist readings of speculative fiction to consider which structures survive an apparent victory.

Conclusion

This study has argued that the maternal inheritance at the heart of *The Curse of Mohenjodaro* is materially significant within the novel's own logic. Existing new materialist scholarship emphasises matter's inherent agency independently of gender. Reading the Bloodstone as an explicitly maternal inheritance brings into view a gendered logic of domination that persists across the novel's four-thousand-year span, as well as the forms of resistance that develop in response. Jaya endures coercion and surveillance and ultimately curses the goddess she once trusted. Aal recognises the Stone as technology and treats it as a hazard, and Nadia resolves the immediate

struggle through direct, violent action. The resistance escalates across the three generations, and the resolution remains partial. Jaya's curse against Shakari is the novel's most consequential moment for ecofeminist criticism. It subjects the symbolism of nature as a redemptive maternal force to scrutiny in light of the material violence the narrative depicts in its name. That violence includes reproductive coercion, economic extraction and the institutional treatment of the Unclanned Al-Mien as disposable.

Drawing on Plumwood's and Warren's accounts of domination, Shiva's and Jabeen's work and Sultan's triangulated model, this study has traced a pattern of gendered appropriation, theological rupture and multigenerational resistance that an ungendered materialist reading of the Bloodstone only partly registers. More broadly, the analysis suggests that ecofeminist criticism of speculative fiction can attend to how seemingly non-human objects such as stones, relics and technologies exercise material agency while also carrying explicit gendered meanings. Frameworks developed to theorise material agency in the abstract can overlook the cultural and gendered language through which a text gives that agency meaning. Read alongside my companion analysis of *Before She Sleeps*, *The Curse of Mohenjodaro* suggests that Pakistani Anglophone speculative fiction represents resistance to patriarchal and ecological domination in several forms, from Sabine's sustained testimony through Jaya's theological rupture to Nadia's decisive violence. Further comparative research could trace this range across a wider body of fiction.

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