

Against the Machine: An Ecofeminist Reading of E.M. Forster's *The Machine Stops*

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Abstract: E.M. Forster's 1909 short story *The Machine Stops* is a text that has traditionally been read as a dystopian tale about the dangers of mechanization and the alienation of modern life. This paper aims to revisit it through the principles expressed by ecofeminist theory during the late twentieth century, with particular attention to the frameworks of Val Plumwood, Karen J. Warren, and Vandana Shiva. The analysis argues that Forster's text anticipates many of the concerns later articulated by ecofeminism, such as the risks of the overuse of technology, the subjugation of nature, and the fragility of closed, hierarchical systems. The short story focuses on humanity's estrangement from both the natural world and the physical body. This is embodied in the contrast between the two main characters: Vashti, who represents full complicity with the Machine's values, and her son Kuno, who seeks to recover a direct relationship with the natural world. Forster envisions a society that denigrates physical contact, erases the cycles of birth and death, and renders food, air, and energy sources invisible, thereby creating the illusion of autonomy from nature. This alienation, while promising comfort and rational order, results in existential sterility and ecological vulnerability. The eventual collapse of the Machine exposes the fragility of a system that denies all ties with the natural world. In contrast, Kuno's resistance and his rediscovery of the surface world point toward a renewal of embodied existence, echoing ecofeminist calls for reconnection with nature. This analysis reconsiders the Machine not merely as a symbol for the dangers of technological dependency, but as a figure for the logic of domination – the hierarchical reasoning that legitimizes the exploitation of both nature and women – that ecofeminism identifies as simultaneously ecological and patriarchal. The collapse of the Machine at the end of the story highlights the ecofeminist suggestions for a renewed relationship with the natural world and respect for ecological limits that technological systems cannot indefinitely suppress.

Key words: alienation, ecological collapse, ecofeminism, E.M. Forster, technological dependency

Introduction

Traditional critical interpretations of “The Machine Stops” (1909) have positioned this short story as an early critique of technological totalitarianism, with references to anxieties about mechanization and modernist alienation. The story’s origins lie in E.M. Forster’s intellectual disagreement with H.G. Wells’ techno-utopian vision. Forster’s biographer notes that “The Machine Stops” was conceived as a “reaction against one of the earlier heavens of H.G. Wells” (Furbank 1978, 121), especially his *A Modern Utopia* (1905), which envisioned a rationally organized World State governed by technocratic elites. Seamus Flaherty’s recent scholarship demonstrates that Forster found Wells’ centralized system to be an “abomination” – a mechanized totalitarian hierarchy that prioritized efficiency over human connection and subordinated individual autonomy to collective order (Flaherty 2020, 444). Yet, more than a century later, the text resonates with environmental and feminist thought, a path that has been insufficiently explored. While it is not an explicitly ecofeminist text, its themes of technological dependency, human alienation from nature, and the decline of people’s physical bodies allow us to read it through an ecofeminist lens. This paper offers an outline of the ecofeminist theoretical framework and then applies it to Forster’s text in order to lay out the alienation from nature and the body as central to the author’s dystopia, and finally considers how the collapse of the Machine gestures toward ecofeminist visions of renewal.

The Machine Stops imagines a world in which the human race has retreated underground, where each individual is entirely dependent on a vast self-sufficient technological infrastructure, known as the Machine, which provides sustenance, communication, and intellectual stimulation for its inhabitants. The story centres on Vashti, who embodies complete devotion to the Machine’s values, and her son Kuno, who begins to question the underground civilisation and yearns for direct experience with the natural world. The story imagines people living in individual self-contained pods, which they call “cells”, isolated from one another and avoiding direct physical contact; at the same time, direct experience and unmediated knowledge are replaced by abstract forms of connection, facilitated by the omnipotent Machine. Direct contact with nature is completely

rejected, while travel is discouraged as futile and eventually forbidden because “the habit was vulgar and perhaps faintly improper: it was unproductive of ideas, and had no connection with the habits that really mattered” (Forster 2021, 48). When the Machine begins to fail and civilization collapses, the reader is shown the fragility of a society that has ceded its agency to technology. Only those who have already sought the “outside” – the Earth itself – glimpse the possibility of survival.

Despite its enduring relevance, *The Machine Stops* has received comparatively limited critical attention relative to other canonical texts of the anti-utopian tradition, such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). The novella was situated primarily within the tradition of technological anxiety and mechanization critique. This scholarly neglect shifted dramatically during the Covid lockdowns of 2020-2021, when Forster's prescient vision of isolation and technological mediation suddenly acquired contemporary relevance. Fordoński's (2025) comprehensive bibliography documents a marked surge in scholarship on *The Machine Stops* from 2020 onward, reflecting the story's newfound resonance with pandemic experiences. Francesca Pierini, for example, examines how the story's depiction of screen-mediated communication and enforced physical separation eerily anticipated pandemic-era online education, arguing that Forster identifies the “imponderable bloom”, i.e., the ineffable quality of embodied human presence, that digital interfaces cannot replicate (Pierini 2020, 285-289). Building on this technological critique, Emine Şentürk analyses the underground dwellers' relationship to the Machine through Günther Anders' concept of “Promethean shame”, or the human sense of inadequacy before one's own technological creations, demonstrating how Forster's characters internalize their inferiority to the machine's capabilities (Şentürk 2023, 167). This scholarly interest has been accompanied by media coverage, with *The Conversation* and the BBC highlighting the story's relevance to pandemic lockdown experiences. However, even within this recent wave of scholarship, sustained ecofeminist readings of the text remain scarce.

Earlier scholarship examined the novella's participation in what Krishan Kumar identifies as the modern anti-utopian tradition's response to industrialism. Since “industrialism had remained bound to the interests of the dominant social groups” (Kumar 1987, 232), ecological thought impacted Western societies in the sense that it “has always tended towards utopia, though not necessarily in the formal sense” (Kumar 1987, 415). More recent readings have explored the story's

prescience in relation to digital culture, networked surveillance; as Pettman observes, Forster's text anticipates the dangers of "midwifing our nascent electronic nervous system" (Pettman 2021, 11). However, despite this growing body of scholarship, a comprehensive ecofeminist analysis of *The Machine Stops* specifically – one that would situate the text's interrogation of technological totalitarianism within the broader framework of patriarchal domination over both women and nature – remains absent, and this paper aims to address that critical lacuna.

Ecofeminism: Theoretical Framework

According to Greta Gaard's definition, ecofeminism is a framework that recognizes the interconnected and reinforcing oppression of both the natural world and human communities, stemming from a patriarchal culture that emphasizes separation and domination (Gaard 1993, 1-2). At its core lies the recognition that patriarchal and capitalist systems construct dualisms – man/woman, culture/nature, reason/emotion, mind/body – that devalue the second term and legitimize its exploitation. Karen J. Warren (2000, 24) further develops this theoretical position by identifying the "logic of domination", a structure of hierarchical reasoning that not only posits an upper and a lower tier, but also provides the moral justification for the subordination of the "lower" term. For Warren, the conceptual connection between the domination of women and the domination of nature is simultaneously empirical and philosophical, requiring a sustained ethical response (Warren 2000, 15). Warren's exposition takes a specific argumentative form: first, a value-hierarchical dualism is established in which one term is positioned as superior to another; second, the author argues that such superiority confers the right to dominate; and third, the domination of one term by the other is thereby moralized and legitimized (Warren 2000, 46-47). Most importantly, Warren argues that this logic is not descriptive but normative, because rather than reflecting hierarchies, it constructs them. Consequently, any feminist theory that fails to address the domination of nature remains conceptually incomplete, since the same logical structure subordinates women and nature simultaneously. Warren calls this a "boundary condition" for ecofeminist philosophy, i.e., a necessary criterion that distinguishes ecofeminism from liberal feminist positions that leave the human/nature hierarchy unexamined (Warren 2000, 66).

Val Plumwood further refines the analysis of dualisms promoted by Western thought – such as human/nature and male/female – which produce not only

ecological destruction but also gendered, racialized, and class-based forms of oppression. The author identifies five interlinked logical features through which dualistic hierarchies are constructed and maintained: backgrounding, whereby the contribution of the subordinated term to life is rendered invisible or denied; radical exclusion, which exaggerates differences between the poles; incorporation, which defines the subordinated term exclusively in relation to the dominant; instrumentalism, which reduces the dominated to a means for the dominant's ends; and homogenization, which treats the dominated as an undifferentiated and interchangeable mass. Taken together, these five features constitute what Plumwood calls the "master identity," a mode of subjectivity that constructs its freedom precisely through the denial of its dependence on what it dominates (Plumwood 1993, 48-60). All five of these terms, as will be demonstrated below, are inscribed in the Machine's relation to both the natural world and the bodies of the human inhabitants of the world it controls. Similarly, Carolyn Merchant's foundational study *The Death of Nature* (1980) traces how early modern science and capitalism produced a mechanistic worldview in which nature was reconceived as inert matter to be dominated and exploited. Vandana Shiva (1988) later argued that this mechanization of life was inseparable from the marginalization of women, who were associated with the natural and the bodily.

It is equally important to acknowledge that ecofeminism is not a monolithic discourse. By the mid-1980s, certain strands of ecofeminism – particularly those associated with spiritual and cultural ecofeminism – were criticized for essentializing the woman-nature connection, inadvertently risking expanding the very dualisms the framework sought to dismantle. Christine Cuomo argues that hypothesising women as having consistent features across all manner of diversity plays into patriarchal logic. Instead, she proposed a rigorous, non-essentialist ecological feminism grounded in an ethic that emphasized dynamic, relational identities rather than fixed categories. According to her, "much of the history of Western philosophy" was modelled by "a lack of attention to the diversity of women's experiences" (Cuomo 1998, 117).

Forster's *The Machine Stops* resonates with these feminist concerns, as the Machine functions as both metaphor and apparatus of the mechanistic worldview: it is the concrete manifestation of Merchant's world-machine (1989, 20), a totalizing system that replaces organic interdependence with technology. For instance, when Vashti recoils at the prospect of leaving her cell, Forster writes that she "shrank back into the room, and the wall closed up again" (Forster 2021,

22), literalising the sealed, womb-like enclosure that mediates all contact with the world beyond. This architectural metaphor (the cell as protective membrane) embodies Merchant's mechanistic worldview made concrete.

Stacy Alaimo's concept of "trans-corporeality," developed in *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (2010), is another theoretical concept that can be applied to an ecofeminist reading of Forster's text. Alaimo argues that the human body is not a bounded, autonomous entity but one that comprises continuous flows of matter that cross the threshold between self and environment as "the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world" (Alaimo 2010, 2). Trans-corporeality thus reframes bodily porosity (the organism's susceptibility to environmental toxins, climates, and ecological systems) not as vulnerability to be overcome through technological mediation but as an ontological condition that demands acknowledgement. This concept is directly applicable to Forster's dystopia: the sealed architecture of the underground cells enacts a systematic denial of the body's constitutive permeability. By mechanically processing air and food, eliminating all unmediated sensory contact with the natural world, and substituting technological mediation for ecological embeddedness, the Machine performs a radical fantasy of bodily autonomy. Alaimo's framework reveals that it is precisely the illusion of self-sufficient, machine-serviced, bounded-body that renders the civilization fragile. Trans-corporeality cannot ultimately be suppressed, and when the Machine's systems fail, the bodies that have been sealed off from their ecological conditions of existence prove incapable of survival.

The Machine and the Logic of Domination

The Machine in Forster's story enforces a radical separation between humanity and the natural world. The story describes the surface of the Earth as being abandoned, hostile, and unnecessary, since all needs are met underground through the provision of the almighty Machine. As Vashti insists, there is no life left on the surface of earth and that is why it has been abandoned. This denial exemplifies what Plumwood calls the "backgrounding" of nature, i.e., the erasure of the ecological foundations that sustain life, replaced by an illusion of autonomy.

The logic of control and abstraction is enacted by the omniscient Machine since all knowledge is mediated exclusively through its communication system. People communicate through screens, exchanging ideas and lecturing on various

topics they have never directly experienced themselves. Travel is discouraged, and eventually forbidden, as unnecessary and subversive. Some dwellers of this underground world have even started to worship the Machine as an infallible authority, echoing Merchant's account of how the mechanistic worldview supplanted organic models of nature with mechanized, hierarchical ones (Merchant 1980, 193). In this regard, the reflection articulated by Kuno shortly before the tragic conclusion of the story is particularly relevant, warranting extensive quotation:

Cannot you see . . . that it is we that are dying, and that down here the only thing that really lives is the Machine? We created the Machine, to do our will, but we cannot make it do our will now. It has robbed us of the sense of space and of the sense of touch, it has blurred every human relation and narrowed down love to a carnal act, it has paralysed our bodies and our wills, and now it compels us to worship it. The Machine develops – but not on our lies. The Machine proceeds – but not to our goal. We only exist as the blood corpuscles that course through its arteries, and if it could work without us, it would let us die. (Forster 2021, 42– 43)

Forster's story is set in a world where humans are no longer in contact with the surface of the Earth, thus illustrating a complete severance from the natural world, a central concern to ecofeminism. The all-encompassing and controlling Machine exploits and dominates the environment, and although people are under the impression that the Machine takes care of them by providing the human population with everything necessary for a comfortable lifestyle, it actually oppresses and controls them. Because they receive everything they need with just a push of a button, the inhabitants of the underground world have become sluggish, detached from their bodies, losing self-reliance and the ability to interact physically with the world. As a result, they are unable to grasp the importance of the essential role of nature in sustaining life.

Kuno longs for the physical world and starts yearning for a return to a more authentic and natural connection with the Earth. When he returns from a visit to the outside world, he tells his mother that he “felt that those hills had called with incalculable force to men in the past, and that men had loved them. Now they sleep – perhaps for ever. They commune with humanity in dreams” (Forster 2021, 42). The fact that Vashti, his mother, is detached from any maternal intuition and

completely lacks an emotional bond with her son, stands as a metaphor for the decline of the feminine principle – life, nurturing, interconnectedness – which is sacrificed for the sake of a sterile and artificial-coded technological system.

A note of interpretative caution must be mentioned here. It is Kuno, a man, who seeks and achieves reconnection with the natural world, while Vashti, a woman, embodies complicity with the Machine's logic of domination. This configuration does not straightforwardly align women with nature in the manner of the more essentialist strands of cultural ecofeminism. Kuno's transgression is best understood not as the expression of a masculine identification with nature but as an act of resistance to the logic of domination itself. His reconnection with the surface, embodied in his actions of climbing the hills, breathing unfiltered air, experiencing the weight and texture of the earth, constitutes a practical refusal of Plumwood's five modes of dualistic reasoning, enacted at the level of the body. Vashti, conversely, has fully internalized the Machine's hierarchical values, demonstrating that complicity with systems of domination is not genetically or essentially determined but is the product of ideological formation. This dimension of Forster's text in fact strengthens its ecofeminist relevance, illustrating Plumwood's argument that the "master identity" is a socially constructed position available, in principle, to any subject who identifies with the dominant term of the dualism (Plumwood 1993, 57).

When the Machine finally collapses in a huge explosion that wipes out all of the underground inhabitants, its perpetual hum stops to make way for "the silence that is the voice of the earth and of the generations who have gone" (Forster 2021, 60). This can be interpreted as a return to nature. In order to regain its primordial connection with the Earth, humanity must die first. Kuno's final act, which stands as a metaphor for his life in death, is that of kissing his mother for the first and last time: "I am dying – but we touch, we talk, not through the Machine . . . We have come back to our own. We die, but we have recaptured life" (Forster 2021, 62).

The structure of the Machine mirrors patriarchal domination, not only in its hierarchy, but especially in the suppression of dissent. When Kuno starts speaking about the outside world and his intention to visit it, his mother treats his words as heresy: "She knew that he was fated. If he did not die today he would die tomorrow. There was not room for such a person in the world. And with her pity disgust mingled. She was ashamed at having borne such a son. . . The very hair that disfigured his lip showed that he was reverting to some savage type. On atavism the Machine can have no mercy" (Forster 2021, 39).

Kuno's desire for a direct, physical, embodied experience with nature on the surface of the Earth is marginalized and dismissed as irrational. The philosophy promoted in the underground world is that experiences gained through direct engagement with the natural environment are useless because they lead to "first-hand ideas" which, in fact, do not exist. The most important are not those ideas produced as a result of physical impressions, but the ones that are "second-hand" and thus "removed from that disturbing element – direct observation" (Forster 2021, 49). Additionally, since "terrestrial facts must be ignored" (Forster 2021, 50), everything related to nature must also be ignored. Thus, in humanity's desire for comfort "it had over-reached itself. It had exploited the riches of nature too. Quietly and complacently, it was sinking into decadence, and progress had come to mean the progress of the Machine" (Forster 2021, 52).

Yet, when Kuno clandestinely travels outside and gets the chance to experience the stars, the air, the hills, he connects with nature; this triggers a revelation, which he shares with his mother. Her response is blunt and in accordance with the dictates of the Machine: "I dislike the stars" to which Kuno remains resolute and replies "I want to see these stars again. They are curious stars" (Forster 2021, 16). Forster contrasts Vashti's sterile intellectualism with Kuno's longing for a connection to the Earth. After walking on the hills outside, Kuno restores a sense of continuity with ecological and historical life beyond the Machine: "I felt that those hills had called with incalculable force to men in the past, and that men had loved them. Now they sleep – perhaps for ever. They commune with humanity in dreams. Happy the man, happy the woman, who awakes the hills of Wessex. For though they sleep, they will never die" (Forster 2021, 42). This invocation of Wessex evokes Thomas Hardy's literary geography, a rural England that Hardy documented as vanishing under industrialisation, lending Kuno's vision an elegiac quality that resonates with Hardy's own concerns about the loss of traditional life. This moment resonates with ecofeminist calls to revalue embodied experience. Although the underground civilisation appears to be autonomous, in reality it depends on the Earth's resources; thus, the idea of self-sufficiency becomes an illusion.

Alienation from Nature and the Degradation of the Human Body

Central to Forster's dystopia is the alienation from both the natural world and the physical, sensorial dimension of existence, which, in the case of the underground world, leads to a degradation not only of people's emotions, but also of

their material bodies. This alienation is not incidental but constitutive of the Machine's oppressive logic. To understand Forster's vision through an ecofeminist framework, it is crucial to trace how the text portrays this alienation and how it exposes the costs of denying a connection with nature.

In *The Machine Stops*, physical touch is considered distasteful; for Forster's characters, physical contact becomes a site of discomfort and even revulsion. Vashti, who is the epitome of the values promoted by the underground world dominated by the Machine, repeatedly shudders at the idea of physical proximity to other bodies. When her son Kuno asks her to visit him in person, she protests: "But I can see you!", "What more do you want?" (Forster 2021, 15). In her logic, which is modelled according to the ideological norm of the Machine culture, the mediated image suffices; the presence of bodies is unnecessary and even burdensome. Bodies are immobilised in isolated cells, their functions outsourced to mechanical devices. This resonates with Merchant's analysis of mechanistic science, which reconceives the body as a machine and nature as inert matter (Merchant 1980, 189).

Bodies are passive, immobile, serviced by mechanical arms. At the beginning of the story, Vashti is described as a "swaddled lump of flesh", a woman "with a face as white as a fungus" (Forster 2021, 13). She barely moves from her armchair and has everything delivered to her cell by the robotic arms of the Machine. Vashti recoils from the very idea of leaving her cell at her son's request to see him in person. The Machine displaces the body's functions with technological substitutes, mirroring the ecofeminist criticism of the idea of mechanization as a means of rendering the organic obsolete.

Forster's description of Vashti's face as "white as a fungus" requires closer analysis as it is an indication of the Machine's deeper logic. The fungal simile is not incidental as fungi subsist by breaking down and absorbing organic matter, thriving in conditions of darkness and decomposition. Forster thus figures Vashti not merely as bodily diminished but as a creature adapted to a system that feeds upon the dissolution of organic life rather than sustaining it. Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality is illuminating here; Vashti's body, sealed within its cell and serviced by mechanical arms, is a body systematically obstructed from the material flows that constitute living organisms. The pallor of her face, drained of colour by the absence of sunlight, wind, and outdoor air, materializes at the level of individual physiology the cost of that hinderance.

Physical exercise is abhorred because "it was a demerit to be muscular" (Forster 2021, 34). To take matters even further, the dwellers of the underground

world perform a reversed Spartan ritual, in which babies are checked upon their birth, and “all who promised undue strength were destroyed” because “it would have been no true kindness to let an athlete live” since “he would have never been happy in that state of life which the Machine had called him. He would have yearned for trees to climb, rivers to bathe in, meadows and hills against which he might measure his body.” Thus, the schism from nature is total because “man must be adapted to his surroundings” (Forster 2021, 34). When Kuno realizes that by breaking all ties with the surface of the Earth humanity has lost itself, he becomes determined to recover at least part of it. He starts doing physical exercises that make him stronger and ultimately allow him to reach the surface, or what he calls the “outside” world. By reconnecting with nature for a brief moment, Kuno understands that people have also lost the measure of themselves. In other words, they had lost the self-awareness of their own value: “Man is the measure” for his “feet are the measure for distance, his hands are the measure for ownership, his body is the measure for all that is lovable and desirable and strong” (Forster 2021, 35).

Forster's partial deployment of Protagoras' maxim, “Man is the measure of all things”, is significant here. The original Protagorean formulation is radically anthropocentric and relativist, placing human perception at the centre of all value and truth. Protagoras' maxim positions humanity as the arbiter of reality itself, with individual human perception determining what exists and what has value. Yet in Forster's context, Kuno reclaims the maxim not to assert human dominion over nature but to restore embodied, sensory knowledge of the world – feet as measure of distance, hands as measure of ownership, the body as measure of what is lovable. This represents an inversion: where Protagoras' maxim places abstract human consciousness at the centre of epistemology, Forster relocates “measure” in the material, sensory body engaged in direct encounter with the physical world. Kuno's vision is thus anti-anthropocentric in its implications as it insists that meaningful measurement emerges not from human sovereignty over nature but from immersion within it. In this reading, Forster transforms potentially dominating anthropocentrism into an embodied ecology of knowledge, anticipating an ecofeminist principle which suggests that genuine understanding comes not from abstracting ourselves from nature, but from recognizing that our physical existence depends on and connects us to the Earth.

The estrangement from nature is absolute. The Earth's surface is described as barren, hostile, and unnecessary or, in Vashti's words, as “only dust and

mud, no advantage" (Forster 2021, 18), reinforcing the narrative promoted by the Machine that life is possible only within its controlled environment. For her, the Machine provides everything, but this also means that everything is controlled by the Machine: meals arrive mechanically, without origin or context; air is purified and circulated through hidden systems; users do not see the sources of their sustenance and in fact, they deny that sources exist outside the Machine. Nature, therefore, becomes redundant. When the Machine fails, this illusion disintegrates, and the dependence on invisible systems reveals itself. It is not dependence on nature, but the Machine's promise of autonomy, that becomes radical vulnerability.

The idea that the food supply is invisible deserves closer attention as an ecofeminist concern in its own right. In Forster's underground world, food arrives pre-processed and standardized, with no discernible origin, no labour of cultivation, no seasonal variation, and no connection to soil, water, or the bodies of other organisms. As Forster writes, "there were buttons and switches everywhere – buttons to call for food, for music, for clothing" (Forster 2021, 18); food appeared at the press of a button as "the Machine. . . feeds us and clothes us and houses us. . . the Machine is omnipotent, eternal; blessed is the Machine" (Forster 2021, 51). This represents what Shiva identifies as the systematic erasure of ecological and subsistence knowledge, a process she terms "mal-development"; this mode of development renders productive ecological knowledge invisible in order to keep its subjects dependent on centralized technological provision (Shiva 1988, 6). In Forster's novella, the underground inhabitants have not only lost knowledge of how food is produced; they have lost the very capacity to recognize this loss as a loss. When the Machine begins to fail and food deliveries become erratic, the population reveals itself as entirely incapable of responding since they lack not only practical skills but the very conceptual frameworks that would allow them to understand what sustenance requires. This is Plumwood's "backgrounding" literalized: the ecological foundations of life have been so thoroughly rendered invisible that their sudden reappearance, in the form of scarcity, can only be experienced as catastrophe.

The alienation from nature and the degradation of the physical body are not simply a cultural oddity in Forster's dystopian world; it is the source of its downfall as they reveal the fragility of the Machine's closed system. Ecofeminism argues that attempting to dominate nature will ultimately undermine humanity, as ecological interdependence cannot be erased especially since "nature's

life" becomes a "*precondition* [original emphasis] for human survival" while the "integrity of inter-connectedness in nature" becomes a "*precondition for life*" (Shiva 1988, 45). Forster dramatizes this principle in the breakdown of the Machine: once the relation to nature is denied, collapse becomes inevitable. When its systems falter, humanity has no resilience. The collapse of the Machine plunges civilization into chaos, leading readers to think about the revenge of nature. Lights fail, air grows unbreathable, food is no longer delivered, and communication ceases. As a result, the collapse exposes the illusion of self-sufficiency and the violence of abstraction. The Machine, like Merchant's mechanistic worldview, is revealed to be finite, fragile, and dependent on the very ecological processes it sought to displace. Furthermore, it could be argued that Forster's novella anticipates Shiva's principle that, as long as nature and the Earth remain inert, the very conditions of human survival become endangered. Humanity can survive only by promoting "living cultures" which "are based on the dignity of and respect of all life, human and nonhuman", "cultures which do not promote life-destroying lifestyles or consumption and production patterns, or the overuse and exploitation of resources" (Shiva 2006, 11). In other words, the more humanity denies Earth, the more fragile its survival becomes. At the same time, Shiva mentions the necessity of an Earth Democracy whose principles are based on the ideas that "we are members of the earth family, our deepest identity is our earth identity, and our highest duty is to protect all life on earth" (Shiva 2006, 97).

From an ecofeminist perspective, this collapse is not merely apocalyptic but revelatory. It illustrates an existential crisis, as human life loses its meaning without a connection to nature. Vashti and her peers devote themselves to interminable lectures on topics varying from Australian music to the French Revolution and the sea, things that no inhabitant of the underground civilisation has directly experienced. These are hollow performances, disconnected from reality. The Machine's promise of comfort yields only sterility. The text dramatizes the consequences of alienation while opening the possibility of renewal. In the final scene, Kuno tells Vashti that humanity has learnt its lesson and that even though the machine stops, humanity survives because there are still people who have rediscovered and embraced the outside world, patiently waiting for the era of the Machine to come to an end. The Earth, once denied, reasserts itself as the ultimate ground of life.

The ambiguity of Forster's ending deserves further attention from an ecofeminist perspective. The "Homeless" (the people who have survived on the surface of the Earth) are evoked by Kuno in his final speech but are never directly

represented in the narrative. The reader receives no description of their communities, their practices, or the relation they have with the natural world. This representational silence is significant. Thus, Forster appears to point toward ecological renewal without being able – or perhaps willing – to narrate it from within the discursive framework the Machine has established. This parallels a change that ecofeminist theorists have themselves identified related to the difficulty of articulating positive visions of ecological interdependence within and against conceptual vocabularies saturated by the logic of domination. As Warren argues, ecofeminist ethics is not merely critique but construction, requiring new narratives of care, trust, and kinship capable of grounding alternative relations with the natural world (Warren 2000, 110). That Forster’s text gestures towards, but does not develop, this alternative may itself be read as symptomatic of the limits that the logic of domination places on what can be imagined, a limitation that lends the story its peculiarly melancholic, yet cautionary character.

Conclusion

While E.M. Forster’s *The Machine Stops* predates the formalization of ecofeminism, the story allows for an ecofeminist interpretation since the collapse of humanity is generated by the disconnection from nature as a result of technological dependency and the oppression of the natural world. The systemic marginalization of nature is closely connected with the appreciation of technology and the suppression of emotion and physical contact. The story’s conclusion, where the Machine collapses and the remaining humans realize the importance of connection to the natural world, can be seen as an ecofeminist call for a more holistic, life-reaffirming system that integrates rather than exploits.

As Pettman points out, E.M. Forster’s text, even though published more than one hundred years ago, anticipates and describes in its dystopian scenario our own world and warns us of the dangers generated by technology overuse. As we ponder whether a symbiotic relationship between our real lives and the online ones is dangerous or beneficial, we “may indeed still be at the beginning of the story that Forster recounts” and that the real nightmarish scenario would be that the “Machine has not stopped at all, but is only just beginning to really hum” (Pettman 2021, 12).

Ecofeminism emphasizes renewal through reconnection and interdependence with nature. Forster’s text, though grim and apocalyptic in its depiction of the dissolution of civilization, indicates the possibility of what Shiva calls an

"earth democracy," a politics grounded in sustainability and respect for nature. The survivors will not be those who cling to the abstraction but those who seek to reconnect with the Earth.

By rejecting embodied existence, the Machine culture attempts to transcend what it perceives as the vulnerability of dependence on nature. Yet Forster reveals the cost of this fantasy: bodies atrophy and the richness of the emotions derived from physical proximity is all lost. Read through an ecofeminist lens, *The Machine Stops* becomes an intentional but cautionary tale about what happens when technology outgrows its purpose and begins to govern life rather than serve it. It reminds us that the Earth exists beyond abstraction and that humanity needs to turn again to the outside – the ground of life itself.

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