

# Ecological Decay and Feminist Resistance in Drylands

M. A. POORNIMA PRIYA DHARSHINI<sup>1\*</sup>, DR. SWARNALATHA JOSEPH<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1\*</sup>Research Scholar, (Reg No 18221174012006), Pg & Research Department of English, Rani Anna Government College for Women, Tirunelveli-627008, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abhishekapatti, Tirunelveli-627012, Tamil Nadu, India

<sup>2</sup>Principal & Head, (Retd) Department of English, Government Arts and Science College, Mettupalayam-641104, Tamil Nadu, India

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

This article examines Thea Astley's novel *Drylands* through an ecofeminist lens, highlighting the intersection of environmental degradation and patriarchal oppression. The narrative portrays a drought-stricken rural town in Queensland where the scarcity of water mirrors the emotional and social deprivation experienced by its female inhabitants. Astley's fragmented storytelling emphasizes the struggles, resilience, and subtle acts of defiance of women who challenge societal and domestic constraints. Through textual analysis and critical commentary, this study argues that *Drylands* not only critiques the moral and ecological decay of the town but also celebrates women's resistance and agency, revealing the inseparable link between ecological health and gender justice.

**Keywords:** Drylands, Ecofeminism, Environmental Degradation, Feminist Resistance, Patriarchy

## Introduction

Thea Astley's Miles Franklin Award-winning novel *Drylands* (1999) presents a powerful exploration of dualistic water imaginaries and the consequences of environmental depletion. Set in a fictional rural Queensland town named Drylands, the narrative portrays a community economically, psychologically, and morally devastated by drought. As the town dries up, its inhabitants gradually abandon it in search of emotional renewal and economic opportunities in coastal or water-abundant regions. The central character, Janet Deakin, who lives in a flat above her failing convenience store, begins writing "a book for the world's last reader," reflecting the cultural and intellectual collapse surrounding her. The structure of the novel is non-linear and fragmented, composed of six interwoven stories that emerge from Janet's imagination. These stories revolve around diverse individuals—a writing instructor, an Indigenous laborer, two women trapped in domestic roles, a farmer, and an accountant—each struggling with isolation, despair, or disillusionment. Their lives intersect only through their shared experience of living in a dying landscape during an unrelenting drought.

*Drylands* has often been read as a critique of Australia at the turn of the millennium, confronting social issues such as racism, sexism, and the erosion of communal values. The bleak environmental setting parallels the moral and cultural disintegration of the town, suggesting that the nation continues to grapple with the legacies of colonial exploitation and ecological neglect. Written in the context of prolonged droughts that devastated Queensland and much of Australia during the 1990s, the novel symbolizes the fragility of both the land and the communities that depend on it. The harsh landscape serves as more than just a backdrop; it becomes an active force that shapes human behavior and social structures. At the heart of the novel is a profound interrogation of the relationship between water, power, and identity. Rather than presenting nature as passive or subordinate to human control, *Drylands* restores agency to the environment, revealing how water scarcity transforms economic systems, social relationships, and cultural narratives. The novel challenges simplistic binaries between humans and nature, suggesting that the fate of society is inseparable from the ecological systems that sustain it.

The drought-ravaged town symbolizes the degradation of natural resources and the moral and emotional desolation of its inhabitants. Women in this narrative are central to the exploration of resilience, agency, and defiance in the face of patriarchal and environmental constraints.

### Female Resistance and Emotional Fragmentation

From the very beginning of *Drylands*, the narrative takes the reader through a series of fragmented scenes focusing on different characters who are united by their sense of isolation, emotional pain, alienation, and their desperate attempts to escape the overwhelming pressures of their lives. The story places emphasis on individuals who are misfits in society—those who do not conform, who feel displaced, and who suffer silently under oppressive social, cultural, and familial circumstances. The complexity of the novel lies not only in its innovative narrative style and unconventional sentence structure, but also in its fragmented storytelling. The characters do not follow a linear journey; instead, their stories appear disjointed, reflecting the psychological fragmentation of people living in a world that is collapsing both environmentally and morally. “From its beginning, the novel shuffles us through a series of scenes that focus on different characters but all with something in common: their marginalization, their unhappiness, loneliness, frustration, and their compulsion to escape both literally and emotionally”. This quote reinforces the theme of fragmented narratives reflecting psychological and social isolation. It shows that the structure of the novel itself mirrors the emotional dislocation of the characters, particularly women, highlighting the interplay between personal alienation and environmental desolation.

However, when viewed through an ecofeminist perspective, the connections between these fragmented stories become clear. The degradation of the environment mirrors the deterioration of human relationships—especially those involving women. As the land withers, so does the emotional life of the characters, particularly women who are silenced, burdened, and oppressed. Yet, where there is oppression, resistance emerges. The women in *Drylands* are not passive victims; they attempt to reclaim autonomy, identity, and dignity despite constant setbacks. Though their efforts are often met with hostility or violence, their resistance—no matter how small—becomes significant.

In one powerful episode, a woman named Evie arrives from the city to the drought-ridden town of Drylands. She discovers that a large portion of the population is illiterate, with men dominating public spaces and culture crumbling around them. Despite this bleak environment, four women—Win, Paddy, Lannie, and Ro—seek learning and spiritual nourishment. Evie begins teaching them music, literature, and the arts, creating a space where they can momentarily escape the burdens of domestic labor. For these women, attending the class was not merely an educational activity; it was a silent rebellion, an assertion of their inner lives and their desire for intellectual freedom.

During the sessions, these women experienced a rare sense of joy and empowerment. They shared emotional connections, strengthened their bonds, and began to realize their own worth beyond their roles as wives, workers, and caretakers. Evie encouraged them to explore their individuality, to imagine possibilities beyond the repetitive and laborious routines imposed upon them. However, their moment of liberation was abruptly interrupted when two men—husbands of Win and Ro—arrived filled with anger and hostility. They dragged their wives away, using physical violence to reassert control and punish their pursuit of self-expression.

This horrifying act reveals the brutal force of patriarchal dominance in Drylands. Yet, it also highlights the significance of even the smallest acts of resistance. These women, through their desire for learning and self-development, were challenging the very structures that confined them. Though suppressed externally, the spark of agency and awareness had already been ignited within them.

### Drought, Movement, and Rural Inequality in *Drylands*

Australia is the driest inhabited continent, a place where periods of low rainfall lasting up to a decade or more are commonplace. The Bureau of Meteorology defines ‘drought’ as ‘a prolonged, abnormally dry period when the amount of available water is insufficient to meet our normal use’ (Federation Drought). The word “drought” evokes images of barren fields, dying stock, and water holes and reservoirs drying to cracked mud. Shrivelled hopes, failed crops, and often economic ruin are its trademarks.

Drought is a prominent feature of the Australian scene. It is also part and parcel of life in Australia, particularly in the marginal areas away from the better-watered coasts and ranges. Of all the climatic phenomena to afflict Australia, drought is probably the most economically costly: major droughts such as that of 1982/83 can have a major impact on the national economy. Moreover, apart from crop failure and stock losses, droughts set the scene for other disastrous phenomena, such as fires, dust-storms, and general land degradation (Federation Drought). Astley experienced Australia's most severe drought periods since the beginning of European settlement. The 1958-1968 and 1982-83 droughts were possibly the most intense with respect to the area affected by severe rainfall deficiencies. Based on research, Australia is prone to drought because of its geography. The continent sits more or less astride the latitudes of the subtropical high-pressure belt, an area of sinking, dry, stable air, and usually clear skies. Astley's portrayal of *Drylands* emphasizes drought as both an ecological and social crisis, shaping every aspect of life in the town. The environment itself appears hostile, as “dust blew through the town like a slow disease,” creating a landscape where hope evaporates alongside water. The town's decline is presented as inevitable, with its residents feeling “out-manoeuvred by weather” and pushed toward coastal cities in search of relief. Many characters view migration not as a choice but as the only remaining path to survival; as the novel notes, “the road out of Drylands seemed the only promise left.” Janet Deakin's struggle to write reflects the broader paralysis caused by drought. Her self-imposed task of creating “a book for the world's last reader” becomes an act of quiet rebellion, a way to resist the cultural erasure taking hold of the town. For her, writing is a form of witnessing, because “she wrote because someone had to

remember,” even as the environment works relentlessly to erase everything. This struggle symbolizes the broader difficulty of preserving identity and expression in a place where “words dried up as quickly as the water.” The social fabric of *Drylands* is further strained by gendered inequalities intensified by environmental pressures. Women in the town often find themselves overworked, overlooked, and emotionally depleted, living “like a long drought—silent, cracked, unyielding.” Their experiences reflect how patriarchal systems become more rigid in times of crisis, limiting women’s agency and amplifying domestic burdens. The desire for knowledge or self-expression is treated as subversive, reinforcing the town’s refusal to change.

Astley also highlights the cultural divide in how Australians relate to the land. In the scene where Benny drinks from the creek while Paddy recoils, the narrative notes that “the water was sweet. Only they were afraid of it,” exposing a settler-colonial fear of the uncultivated environment. This moment underscores the deep tension between ecological knowledge and inherited settler anxieties—what Benny understands intuitively is exactly what Paddy has been taught to distrust.

## Conclusion

Thea Astley’s *Drylands* reveals the deep interconnectedness between ecological deterioration, social inequality, and gendered oppression. Drought is not depicted simply as an environmental hardship but as a force that reshapes every aspect of human life—weakening community bonds, heightening patriarchal control, and magnifying emotional isolation. Women in *Drylands*, already burdened by domestic expectations and silenced by cultural norms, experience this crisis with greater severity. Their small acts of resistance—whether through education, creativity, or solidarity—become powerful responses to both environmental scarcity and societal suppression. Janet Deakin’s writing, in particular, emerges as a quiet but significant form of defiance, ensuring that the experiences of *Drylands* are neither erased nor ignored.

At the same time, the novel situates the town within broader national and global structures that shape environmental vulnerability. The repeated migration of characters toward coastal regions reflects the growing dependence on water-rich urban spaces and highlights the failure of Australia’s long-standing belief that the inland could be “redeemed” through irrigation and development. Astley exposes how rural communities—especially those already marginalized by gender, class, or race—become the most affected by global economic pressures, water mismanagement, and the expanding export economy of the 1990s. Through these portrayals, *Drylands* becomes a critique of the colonial and economic assumptions that have long governed Australia’s relationship with its land and water.

Despite the bleakness of this portrayal, *Drylands* affirms that resilience and renewal remain possible through acts of witnessing, memory, and communal care. By foregrounding voices often excluded from national narratives—women, Indigenous characters, the poor, and the uprooted—Astley challenges dominant understandings of drought, development, and identity. The novel insists that ecological restoration cannot be separated from social and gender justice. In allowing fragmented stories to coexist without closure, *Drylands* acknowledges the ongoing nature of environmental crisis while also recognizing the quiet strengths that survive within it. Ultimately, even in a landscape marked by dust and desolation, Astley suggests that the seeds of resistance and hope continue to endure.

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