

## Eco-theatre as Green Solutions: Some Insights and Observations on *Sila*

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### Abstract

The escalating global climate crisis has catalyzed extensive interdisciplinary discourse, reinforcing the urgent necessity for civil society to safeguard collapsing ecological systems. While policy interventions and scientific innovations have shifted toward proactive action, the transition from viewing Nature as an exploitable resource to a site of preservation requires a profound cultural and psychological shift. This paper argues that the arts and humanities, specifically theatre, through its eco-practice, have the potential to foster a collective and urgent eco-sensibility, as theatre envisions the lived experiences of ecological destruction, given its art form allows for a mimesis like no other form can emulate.

Through a detailed exposition of Chantal Bilodeau's play *Sila*, the study examines the intersection of ecosophical dramaturgy and "eco-realism"—a framework expressed creatively and performed materially to prioritize the synchronism of all the sentient beings. Deviating from traditional contentions that humanist drama is inherently anti-ecological, this research suggests that humanist and ecological concerns exist in inevitable congruence. By dismantling the Nature vs. Culture binary, the paper reveals how modern drama serves as a vital medium for experiencing the interconnectedness of a fractured global ecosystem.

### Introduction

The recent upsurge from a few decades, of global confabulations on climate, round-table negotiations among nations, discourses in forms of protest and disquisition in/among a number of establishments; have set a few records straight, that there is an urgent and critical need for all members of civil society to take steps towards safeguarding and preserving the collapse of ecological systems, and the vestiges of the lost environment.

There also had been an upturn in policy implementation globally for sustainable goals, the action networks, community leaders and educators have made interventions from top-down. There had been well founded sciences, techno innovations, operational management, and social policies, it all had indeed moved towards proactive actions, but as it took centuries of treating Nature as a resource, a reservoir of abundance that mankind exploited, it may take, again years of consistent and rigorous efforts to reverse the damage done to the extent that Nature now reverts with anger by depleting every resource that had once come handy to humans. The ecological problem thus no more remains a matter of glass chamber discussions, rather, it becomes "a matter of culture and psyche

formation as it is of watershed management and air quality protection” (Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 10). While liberal arts and literature, including poetry, arts, drama and theatre practices may not transform the planet in a day, but storytelling arts, and humanities essentially envision and create lived experiences of how and when ecological destruction prevails, ecophobia takes over, and a fractured climate is experienced through human communities collectively, perceived through deep sensibilities individually, then humankind can experience the troubles of other organisms and of themselves before all is lost. In this direction then, Chantal Bilodeau’s *Sila* emerges as an important work to remind that theatre as an art form, can intervene by actually bringing the audience to experience what scientific papers can not enact or weave in stories. The play *Sila* then moves from ecosophical theatre to eco-realist one, a term which must entail a common ecological supersystem of various sentient beings existing together in cognizance of one another, as a model ecosystem of synchronism and coequality.

Una Chaudhuri writes, “ecological victory will require a transvaluation so profound as to be nearly unimaginable at present. And in this the arts and humanities - including the theater - must play a role” (25). This paper through the detailed exposition of Chantal Bilodeau’s play *Sila*, reveals how theatre stands at the crossroads of eco-realism, and ecosophical dramaturgy, and moves towards a greater awareness or hyper acute eco-sensibility where climate crisis does not just serve a template of crafting the dramatic plot, rather it includes and takes into account all stakeholders, living, non-life, and some of the traces the anti-dichotomous, and congruous elements among the humanist and ecological traditions from the English dramaturgy till the modern dramatic tradition. Bilodeau is a climate change playwright and translator whose work moves outside the textual domain of writing to that of real causes, and for the reason have been taken realistically; not hanging on the last tattered threads of plays written by dead white men. Deviating from Uma Chaudhuri’s contention that humanist emergence of drama was anti-ecological; the paper rather suggests that humanist and ecological concerns have existed simultaneously, in congruence with the anti-dichotomy of Nature vs Culture as binary, the two as locked in an inevitable duality and metaphorical pairs and not as hostile contradiction to each other.

### **Methodology and Review**

As the premises to establish its own synthesis and antithesis of the argumentation, the paper employs a discourse analysis of the text as a methodology to explore the historicity of eco-theatre, using the broader ideas of Una Chaudhuri, an American scholar in the studies of ecocriticism and theatre studies, who initiated her own ideas upon the belief that ‘the ecological crisis is a crisis of values’ (25). Despite drawing heavily from Chaudhuri “There Must Be a Lot of Fish in That Lake: Toward an Ecological Theater”, the paper deviates from her contention that theater’s humanist emergence and origins makes it “anti-ecological”. It rather suggests, as through canonical dramatist’s substantiations, that ecology and the humanist concerns had co-existed simultaneously, in the fast evolving troubled “human” species which solved its own quagmires of existence in the new world first, not treating Nature as hostile but often a sidelined state of treatment. In congruence with the anti-dichotomy of Nature vs Culture, the two that is the man and the Nature rather emerge as the inevitable dual of each other; almost as metaphorical pairs and not as hostile contradiction.

## Discussion

As Timothy Morton reveals, “People still habitually assume that life non-life boundary is tight and thin, in dogged opposition to contemporary science. . . (276). Nothing explains Morton’s statement better than Bilodeau’s *Sila*, which entails all characters involved as at the receiving end of climate crisis and disaster that try to escape the harshness that Nature lashes onto all beings. Historically, ecosophy, a term borrowed from Arne Naess and later developed by Félix Guattari, have rejected humans as to be the top of creation of the most sagacious among the other organisms and perhaps catering to the “eco-ego” in the man to consider themselves to be the optimum of the food chain. This eco-ego, i.e. to be ecologically the most superior and thus the ego, somehow marginalizes other organisms and nature element to its service, thereby rejecting the co-existence principle as the dominant one. In other words, man often poses himself as ‘the invincible’ against the Nature, trying to tame it, colonize it and subjugate given any means or method possible. Even in case when ecology is threatened by the onslaught of civilization, it posits itself as a quintessential eco-loss, and not the loss of man, as the mourning of the loss is regarding that of the environment or the ecology. Bilodeau’s story justifies this fallacious claim by demonstrating how deeply intertwined all the lives are. *Sila* by the French-Canadian playwright Chantal Bilodeau, reveals the complex interplay of the climate crisis, cultural communities’ interaction primarily humans with the environment as well as the non-life/other lives of the ecological spectrum.

In a detailed exposition of tracing the evolution and sentiment of anti-ecology in theatre and dramatic writing from Renaissance till the post-modern times, Chaudhuri demonstrates Naturalism designates nature on its peripheries:

by defining human existence as a seamless social web, naturalism was unwittingly acting out 19th-century humanism’s historical hostility to ecological realities. Though its thematics kept in touch with nature through images of cherry orchards, wild ducks, and polluted baths, the ideological discourse of realism thrust the nonhuman world into the shadows, from which it emerged in the ghost-like form of strangely menacing-yet inanimate-objects. The junk-strewn, garbage-choked stages of Pinter, Mamet, Shepard, and others, reveal naturalism’s anxiety-long concealed-about the widening gap between the human and the nonhuman. (24)

Here Uma Chaudhuri is right to point out that “along with other discourses born out of the age of industrialization, the 19<sup>th</sup> century humanism located its shaky foundations initially on the growing gap between the social and the natural world, constructing a fragile edifice that could sustain itself only at the cost of actively ignoring the claims of non-human” (23). I would go to the extent of saying that the cause of this increasing alienation between human and Nature is definitive a drive of eco-ego, the human tragedy in totality had risen because of its consistent, recurring push of Nature upon the margins, other than which was everything which was non-human. The birth of tragedy, in stories and the in the innumerable plots, in the lives of planetary inhabitants, with humanists as the centre of every act of human adventure, has been practiced due to the augmented emphasis on seeking harmony, order or structure in the systems around us and that this diversion to the Dionysus, a suspension of the self, rather egoist self of the human, in celebration of the collective, the chaotic, all contributed to the prudence and sagacity

of the Greeks. Nietzsche calls it the distinction as the Apollonian and Dionysian. It is this forgotten state of Dionysus, which celebrates satyrs, sylphs, nymphs, animals as anthropomorphic characters, and a host of all other creatures along the bio-diversity which led to the idea of Una Chaudhuri of the “historical hostility to the ecological realities” (24) or humanism since its inception to be “anti-ecological” (24). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Naturalism as a movement essentially tried to contribute to the preordained and fated calls as one of upsetting the world order, disasters, ill-omens, fatalistic interplay of events, outlandish shifts and violations. Thus, naturalism as a movement does come as a forewarning, a consequential nemesis to the hero, but as an “otherized” outsider, a force which only when arrives bring about transitions, amendments to the providence, a convenience on nature to be incumbent upon its coming or exit as an external source of plot. It is this lack of intrinsicality of Nature, of its rejection as a fundamental, essential, inherent part of human life, that the modern drama largely suffered from. This universalized humans as the elemental, pervasive or even omnipotent and dictatorial dominance as the human-centered. But just as ecological problems be not sort by one or two performances of the eco-canon, similarly it is essentially reductionist to assume and package ecology in any one metaphor. Ecology rather is in itself a metaphor of a counterpoised existence of shared resources of bio-diversity and planetary resources, harmoniously equilibrizing every sentient being. But as Chaudhuri declares, “like any cultural theorisation today, that of a possible ecological theatre will take place in the shadow of the approaching millennium” (23).

Naturalism as against realism pursue its subject thematics with issues of natural disaster, man-made arrangements severing the ecological set-up of a lot of biosphere, but all existing either on margins, on the peripheries or treating them as a subject as radically different or other or pervasively absent. The need of the hour is the eco-realist theatre, that being the urgent ecological issue at the centre-stage forming the core and centre, a return to anthropomorphic stage, where biodiversity is ascribed human qualities, plastics, clocks, trees and lakes become characters, plot pivot upon the imagined psyches of tropical cyclones, heatwaves, derelicts, parched ponds, habitats such as grasslands, forests, wildlife, mangroves dominate the dramatic narratives, decentralizing human live stories, contributing to a citadel of an alternative canon of eco-realism. The aim is to dismantle the hostility and dispassionate distancing of nature, in order to avoid the trap of anthropomorphism, perhaps as an answer to the Anthropocentrism, the essential universalization of nature as a perennial phenomena in the backdrop.

Among other ways, one way is also to bring an intensification of nature objects, bio-diverse organisms as a unified theatrical practice, so as to create the aesthetics of eco-realist drama constituent of the broader goals of eco-canon or the ecological theatre. Another tendency follows a methodical dismantling of the often conflictual binaries of Nature vs Man, a philosophical systematization that treat them as dyadic, considering of a direct interaction between the pain, Nature vs culture, and as antagonistic or adversarial rather dialogic, in causality, with one cease to exist others is damaged and vice-versa, create a depending of delicate balance.

The play *Sila* proceeds unlike typical modern plays, in the words of Bilodeau’s words, in a cubist, post-modern kitsch, how multiple languages, multiple characters’ lives are intertwined, underlining the central principle of the play, which mama bear says, “All life is a breath. From the original breath, that gave us the miracle of creation to the world itself, *Sila* wraps all around us” (43, *Sila*). Interestingly, the viewpoint in the play comes from not only

human character, but mama bear who is an anthropomorphic voice and agency to state the truths what scientific papers and years of research have stated, but could not effectively leap out in people's memory through popular culture and other means. Visceral and corporeal bodies, when perform as enactments or the mimetic realities of pain, loss, grief, mourning, melancholy etc. fuels art through emotions. Bilodeau also establishes the complex intersections of race, class, age-old communities, economies, and even languages as crucial markers of climate change and decline, not just entailing the capitalists' hunger as the sole responsible factor for the same. Bilodeau's plays have been performed across different countries including Alaska, United States, Canada, Finland and Sweden, with *Sila* particularly, have been discussed as a moot point in conferences, a significant one "Warming Arctic: Development, Stewardship and Science at Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Boston's Tufts University. *Sila* theatrical production have transpired people to action: in Alaska the locals have written to the legislators of the State and region about the growing apprehensions and fears of extinguishing communities such as Inuit in Arctic, reinforcing Art's ability for prompt action, swift ideological shifts, breaking away the glass-chamber ceiling of many-a-comforting societies, who are perhaps highly disconnected from local communities in distant-off regions, Inuit community of the Arctic in this case. Bilodeau intends to write the eight cycle plays of various Arctic regions and States: from United States to Iceland, Greenland, Canada, Finland, Russia, Sweden and Norway, encompassing the environmental changes taking place in these region in the light of the local and national politics involved regarding the policy apparatuses in these regions. This 109-110 paged, colloquially written play, entails two Arctics: one is the Arctic of the Southerners and the other, Arctic of Inuit community of Canada. The underlying contrast between the Inuit and Southerners derives the sharp distinction between the raw warmth of nature, the fiercely active ecology of the Inuit, the ice-capped mountains, trails of no land, but only snow, while the Southerners metaphorically enact human's of its mystical coldness towards nature, the aridity of feeling towards protecting the Arctic of its rare resources progeny of wildlife hardly concerned of, ready to consumed, slashed or even butchered at the service of human utilization. The use of Inuktitut language, phrases and myths, the belief in Nanurjul, the spirit of polar bear as a star in the Ocean constellation, Nuliajuk, the Inuit goddess of the ocean and the underworld, whose encounter with the scientist Jean forges the primarily inter linkages between the connecting lives of all the characters, then Jean being wrapped by Nuliajuk with her strands of hair around her waist as the sea-animals arrest him to attack, all these little actions are knitted together to announce the spirit of *Sila*, a philosophy in the Inuit circuit of religion to be the source of life, everything that exists environmentally and cosmically in alignment to the creatures and the substance of the souls. The play ends with Jean's partial madness due to the mysteries of the dark blue ocean, the cocoon of Nuliajuk who engulfs him with her tresses, daughter bear who drowns while mama bear tries to save her and Veronica's son's teen suicide due to loneliness. As the ideological imprint of the play, *Sila* reinforces it presence of life-force that breath in every sentient being, who demands and yearns for an equal share inhabiting the Arctic, as if the earth equally belongs to each one of them, as much as it belongs to the humans. When Jean returns to his consciousness, he understands Nuliajuk's pain like Tulugaq and insists to comb Veronica hair, as if to release her of her pains of bereavements entangling Nuliajuk's own grief of betrayal from humans. The entangled destinies of Veronica, her son, mama bear, Jean, the lost baby, Nuliajuk's sadness is intertwined to suggest to the symbolic disentanglement that the trapped souls of

the dead humans and animals feel the wrath of the goddess. The play reinforces the erroneous notion of human to antagonize nature, to view its competitors or a rival even as stark nemesis, the delusional de-valuation of nature as some force to be won over. *Sila* thus emerges as an eco-aesthetic attempt to bring about the collective ethos and subjectivities in order to regularize and situate issues of climate and ecology derangement in the Arctic regions or otherwise, where indigenous knowledges have preserved the ecological balances between nature, humans, and other lives non-human, as an important pool of resource of information and protection.

As Chaudhuri writes, “the problem with these plays is that they try to exist within a theater aesthetic and ideology (namely, again, 19th-century humanism) that is, as I shall argue below, programmatically anti- ecological. One solution to this problem is to join ecological concerns with the protocols of “site-specific” theater, creating works that directly engage the actual ecological problems of particular environments” (23). It is this ‘site-specific’ climate conflict of and around the Arctic regions and States that Bilodeau addresses and resolves in *Sila*, an play undertaking bold initiatives in the direction of bringing climate activism to the people’s hearts.

Arons and May with regard to the ecological theatre say that ecological theatre aims to “shock us into recognition of the inescapable inter-dependencies and shares contingencies with the non-human actors of the world” (45). The need for a continuous, and rigorous storming of ideas for eco-dramaturgy, ecological theatrical and theoretical practices, as the rise of eco-theatre writing and its praxis and performance cuts through the traditional arts, conventions, demands are ecological survey of the past Literature so as to see the emerging 21<sup>st</sup> century as the optimum production of the ecologically aware dramaturgy with a keen interest in the hyper-acute ecosensibility. Some of these plays are Steve Water’s *The Contingency Plan*, Richard Bean’s *The Heretic* ; Stephen Emmott and Katie Mitchell’s *Ten Billion*, Caryl Churchill’s *Escaped Alone*, Stephen Carleton’s *The Turquoise Elephant*, Gordon Dahlquist’s *Tomorrow Come Today* any many more written in and around 2008-2018. Given this mental and sense acuity. Chantal Bilodeau’s writing *Sila* captures the new-age ecosophy that embraces not just a world of humans, but of Arctic snow, icebergs, seagull and polar bear, scientists, sea-goddesses, climate activists, local communities in an attempt to insert all stakeholders involved in order to bring in the dialectics and debate around what is left of the earth which now can not be built in a few years. Concurrently, it is also crucial for powerful, high stakes organization to intervene, advocate, collaborate and act as patrons for the increasing support to art forms and practices as allied to scientific date and discoveries, sometimes as cognate or other times as medial and primary formats for actively registering the perils of changing climate, altering environments, as in the case of *Sila*, which was produced in collaboration with The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) with CST for the “public understanding of science through theatre”(220).

Nature has been used as some kind of resource-machine, a magic well for profitability, rather as a eco-treasury of a superior force of abundance associating the natural progression in nature’s expansion which ultimately strengthens the cultural systems of humans. This, vis-a-vis reinforces the formulation of Anne Naess’s concept of ‘Deep and Shallow’ ecologies, where if and when the tenets of deep ecological roots is accepted as a wider practice and norm among the masses, as theatre can by-an-large influence the citizens who hold the spirit and backbone of a country; watching clocks, trees and plastics as character, as one among them, it can reorient ways to invoke

nature. The ecosophy (Naess, 4) when brought to the quotidian, the circadian rhythms of the state of affairs of our cosmos utilizing a unified framework for ecosophical systems (Naess, 4).

### Conclusion

Chantal Bilodeau writings, born out of an authentic and genuine artistic devotion to the cause of climate degeneracy based on research projects. Megan Sandberg-Zakian, the director of the production to Chantal Bilodeau's play *Sila*, writes of a significant implication of all eco-dramas and of particularly *Sila* he was told by the scientist community to warn the audience of, a) “. . . we cant get back what we've lost. Its gone, and b) we must adapt to the unavoidable results of climate change”.

She further writes, “if one thing has become clear from a century of ecological thought and effort, it is that the earth cannot now be saved by half-measures, by tinkering and puttering and fiddling around with rules and regulations and practices and customs; whether we like it or not, the ecological crisis is a crisis of values. Ecological victory will require a transvaluation so profound as to be nearly unimaginable at present. And in this the arts and humanities-including the theater- must play a role” (25).

In other words, art when used to embody the disturbing shifts of ecologies can become a powerful instrument to bring about transformations inside out and resist the opposition that go against such transmutations. Most of the observation and postulates formulated in the article are rather pure reasoning and intellectual contemplation but not disconnected from the praxis or future practicability, plausible only when intrinsically espoused. By bringing them to the normative paradigms of conscious practice, it can, much like *Sila* is imagined, be worked as circuits of active sources of eco-sensibility.

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