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Ecocriticism and Eco feminism in Plínio Cabral's *Umbra*: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract Plínio Cabral's *Umbra* presents a complex interplay between nature, culture, and gender, making it a fertile ground for ecocritical and ecofeminist analysis. This study explores how the novel constructs environmental concerns and gender dynamics, highlighting the intersections between ecological degradation and patriarchal oppression. Through the lens of ecocriticism, the research examines the representation of nature as both a living entity and a contested space, reflecting broader anxieties about environmental crises. Simultaneously, an ecofeminist perspective reveals how the novel critiques the marginalization of women and nature, drawing parallels between their subjugation. By analyzing the narrative's structure, symbolism, and thematic concerns, this paper sheds light on *Umbra*'s contribution to contemporary environmental and feminist discourse. Ultimately, the study argues that Cabral's novel offers a critical reflection on human responsibility toward the environment while challenging traditional gender hierarchies.

Keywords *Umbra*; Plinio Cabral; Ecofeminism; Ecocriticism; Distopia

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Introduction

The concept of dystopia has captivated readers and scholars alike for decades, evolving into one of the most prominent subgenres of science fiction. Emerging as a counterpoint to utopian narratives, dystopias depict imagined worlds where societal structures, political systems, and technological advancements have spiraled into oppressive or chaotic realities. The enduring appeal of this subgenre lies in its ability to explore humanity's darkest fears, challenge social norms, and provide cautionary tales that resonate with contemporary audiences.

Although it is far from being unanimous among literary critics, we define dystopia as a speculative narrative that envisions a future in which technological development and progress are exalted as essential for harmony between humans and their environment but ultimately serve as tools of control. Rulers manipulate discourse to uphold an apparently perfect system in which the population is conditioned to accept the present without questioning the past and to see the future as an inescapable repetition of the present. Advanced technology often plays a central role in sustaining oppression, reinforcing surveillance, and limiting individual autonomy. Thus, dystopia exposes the dangers of oppression disguised as order, revealing a world where freedom and critical thought are suppressed in the name of stability and progress.

At its core, dystopian literature serves as a mirror reflecting society's anxieties and shortcomings. From the mechanized horrors of industrialization to the ethical dilemmas posed by artificial intelligence, these narratives delve into the consequences of humanity's relentless pursuit of progress. As a subgenre of science fiction, dystopias often leverage speculative elements to construct plausible, albeit unsettling, visions of the future. Classic works like George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* critique authoritarian regimes and unchecked technological growth, while Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* examines themes of gender oppression and religious extremism. More recently, dystopias aimed at younger audiences, such as Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*, have brought the subgenre to new generations, addressing pressing issues like social inequality and environmental degradation.

Dystopia's versatility is a key factor in its widespread appeal. As a subgenre, it blends seamlessly with broader science fiction elements while incorporating themes from speculative fiction and social criticism.

By situating their stories in worlds that feel both familiar and alien, authors compel readers to confront uncomfortable truths about the present and envision potential futures.

This subgenre is inherently interdisciplinary, drawing from environmental science, political theory, sociology, and philosophy to construct speculative worlds that reflect contemporary ecological crises. By integrating insights from **Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, Environmental Humanities, and Science and Technology Studies**, dystopian narratives offer pertinent critiques of climate change, resource depletion, and the consequences of unchecked technological advancement. These stories often incorporate scientific realism—such as the impacts of rising sea levels, genetic engineering, or ecological collapse—while also engaging with ethical and sociopolitical dimensions, including environmental justice and the role of corporate and governmental power in shaping ecological policies.

Through this intersection of disciplines, dystopias serve as warnings about potential futures encouraging critical dialogue on sustainable alternatives. In this context, the objective of this study is to analyze the Brazilian dystopia *Umbra* from the perspective of **Ecocriticism and Ecofeminism**, exploring how the novel engages with environmental degradation, gendered oppression, and power structures in a speculative setting.

1. Ecocriticism, and Ecofeminism: Intersections and Critical Perspectives

As said before, Dystopian literature has long been a space for critical reflection on the relationship between humanity and the environment, making it a fertile ground for discussions within Ecocriticism and Ecofeminism. These theoretical approaches provide essential tools for understanding how dystopian narratives critique environmental degradation, the exploitation of natural resources, and the sociopolitical structures that contribute to ecological collapse.

Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary approach that examines the relationship between literature and the environment, analyzing how texts portray nature, ecological crises, and humanity's role in environmental change. It emerged in the late 20th century as a response to growing ecological concerns and seeks to understand how cultural narratives shape environmental perceptions and attitudes. Scholars in this field explore themes such as climate change, resource exploitation, and the Anthropocene in literary works, revealing the ideological frameworks that influence human interaction with nature (Kerridge 1998; 2020; Afonso Murad 2021; Mendes 2020; Stephanie Dror 2014; Garrard 2014)

Ecofeminism, on the other hand, is a theoretical perspective that connects environmental issues with feminist critique, arguing that the exploitation of nature is deeply linked to patriarchal structures. Rooted in both ecological and feminist thought, ecofeminism challenges dualistic thinking (nature/culture, male/female, reason/emotion) and highlights how the subjugation of women and the environment often stems from the same systems of oppression. Ecofeminists analyze how literature and cultural narratives reinforce or resist these structures, particularly in

dystopian fiction, where environmental destruction and gender-based oppression frequently intersect (Alicia Puleo, 2011; Gras, 2023; Godoy, 2021; Navarro Martínez, 2024; Candido et al, 2022)

Dystopian narratives often depict societies where environmental catastrophe has reshaped human civilization, leading to authoritarian control, social hierarchies, and new forms of oppression. These speculative worlds serve as cautionary tales that critique the unchecked expansion of technology, capitalism, and political power at the expense of ecological balance. Novels such as *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood and *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler exemplify the close ties between dystopian fiction and ecofeminist concerns, showing how environmental crises disproportionately affect marginalized groups, particularly women.

Moreover, dystopian literature frequently explores themes central to ecocriticism, such as resource scarcity, climate collapse, and the commodification of nature. Works like *Oryx and Crake*, by Atwood and *The Road*, by Cormac McCarthy depict worlds where human intervention has led to irreversible ecological damage, raising questions about sustainability, ethics, and humanity's responsibility toward the environment.

By engaging with dystopian literature through the lenses of Ecocriticism and Ecofeminism, scholars and readers can better understand how these narratives reflect contemporary anxieties about environmental destruction and social inequality. As climate crises and ecological degradation continue to shape global discourse, dystopian fiction remains a powerful medium for imagining alternative futures—both cautionary and hopeful.

2. Analyzing Plínio Cabral's *Umbra*

Plínio Cabral's *Umbra* is a portrait of a devastated world. Its plot takes the reader to the future as a projection of present-day reality. The flowers, the clean water, the rivers, the fresh air are all disappearing.

Little by little pollution is poisoning the planet and its wildlife, making man an irrational being unable to stop the consequences of his own action.

From the very beginning of the novel, it is possible to identify issues related to colonialism in Brazil and Latin America. For example, the factory gated ports remind us both of the way in which slaves were enclosed in the *senzalas* (slave quarters) after six in the evening and the original colonial settlements in which a city worked as a fort whose gates were closed at 9pm every night.

Another important allusion to this time is the way people die: "*some suffocate by pollution; others kill themselves or go mad*". This is exactly what happened to the original natives: many died of illness caused by the colonizer and many chose to commit suicide rather than submit to the horrors of colonization.

Another important fact that bears witness to the continuing impact of colonial history on Brazil during the seventies is the way Cabral represents most characters: nameless, homeless, submissive, dependent and hopeless, unable to take decisions by them own. Given that a 'name' is central to the individual's sense of identity, Cabral denounces the lack of identity in *Umbra's* characters. Expressions like 'the young boy', 'the old man', 'forerunner' replace the name of the characters as if they do not have a real name.

Also important is the idea of homelessness present in the novel. This is clearly illustrated by a frequent movement of people looking for a better place to live. Paradoxically, there is no other place where they could settle and build a better future; In fact, Cabral reflects on the lack of perspective for Brazilian society during the seventies, the characters behave as if they already known the future - "*they meet to discuss about the history of the future*" - which is not possible literally since the word '*history*' is usually related to something that happened in the past. This attitude can support the idea that *Umbra* is strongly related to issues of colonization which is not just to do with Brazil's past but also with its current and potentially future political and economic status.

Given the fact that this novel was published in 1977 it is pertinent to highlight that its publication coincided with some important ecological movements that arose in Brazil during the seventies. Another important issue to stress is the particular significance of the environment for Brazilian national identity which is associated to the myth of *grandeza*, or national greatness. This myth goes back to images of Brazil's wealth and beauty, its forest and fertile land.

In 1971 the agronomist José Lutzenberger founded the first ecological association in Brazil and Latin America - The Gaúcha Association of Protection to the Natural Environment (*Associação Gaúcha de Proteção Meio Ambiente Natural - AGAPAN*). It was located in Rio Grande do Sul state where Plínio Cabral was born. Among other important actions of AGAPAN one can mention: the fauna and flora defense, combating the industrial and vehicular pollution, combating the indiscriminate use of insecticides, fungicides and herbicides, fighting against water pollution caused by industries and against the destruction of natural landscapes.

From 1971 to 1974 these actions were severely repressed by the military regime; any attempt to raise awareness of these ecological problems could be taken as an insult to the governmental authority since ecological activists pointed the government as the main responsible for the destruction of nature. Its countless enterprises did not take into account the preservation of the environment. During the sixties and seventies, with the growth of industrial

production, toxic wastes used in agriculture were thrown into rivers, dangerously compromising the water resources. Uncontrolled gases expelled by industries and motor vehicles were the principal cause of the increase in respiratory illness.

According to the sociologist Eduardo Viola in his work *MeioAmbiente, Desenvolvimento e Cidadania [Environment, Development and Citizenship]* (2005), the height of absurdity, when it comes to ecological issues, was when Brazilian president Medici put an advertisement in international newspapers and magazines inviting first world companies to move to Brazil where they would not face any expenses due to anti-pollution legislation.

As a journalist, lawyer and member of the government, Plínio Cabral occupied important posts in cultural and politic fields, among them it is worth mentioning his performance as Chief Secretary of the State of Rio Grande do Sul. From this post it was possible for him to see and discuss the problems of environmental devastation during the military regime. Although his position as a member of the government did not allow him to join the AGAPAN, his writings reveal his deep consciousness about ecological issues.

For Ginway (2004), Cabral is among the first to popularize environmental themes and contest the cultural myths of Brazilian sensuality and of the lush and fertile land (p.33). As a writer, he has been critical of modern society and its relationship to the natural environment. His use of metaphor and allegories can be understood as a necessary response to censorship.

Thus, he used dystopian fiction as a way of denouncing and satirizing modern society. By utilizing an imaginary futuristic world, his dystopia effectively focuses on political themes and satirizes tendencies present in contemporary society.

According to Ginway (2004), Plínio Cabral's *Umbra* is the first Brazilian dystopia to focus exclusively on ecological disaster. Given the fact that the novel was published during the military regime when the government wanted technological advancement at any cost, and censorship did not allow any opposing views, it is no surprise that the author used allegoric discourse as his most important instrument in order to protest against the depletion of Brazil's natural resources. The idea that everything could be replaced by technology is strongly stressed by Cabral from the first chapter:

Nada era importante: cada um fazia o que era necessário fazer, desde tempos imemoriais. E ninguém se importava com o resto. A fábrica fornecia tudo: roupa sintética, alimento concentrado, figuras visuais e reuniões onde se debatia a história do futuro [Nothing was important: each man did what he had to do since time imemorial. Nobody worried about the rest. The factory provided everything: clothes, food, visual pictures and meetings to discuss about the history of the future] (p.10).

Little by little the natural environment is replaced by an artificial one and not only the environment, but also people's values. With the expression "*nothing is important*" the reader can see how nature is put aside; there is no need to cultivate or preserve the natural environment since technology provides whatever is necessary. However, at the same time that man is shown as intellectual, scientific and superior to nature, he seems to be an irrational being, enslaving himself. This attitude can be associated to the invading colonizers who despised the indigenous people's harmonious relationship with the natural world. Drawing on Merchant's ideas, Shiva defines Western science as based on an epistemology of male domination over women and nature.

This epistemology abstracts the male knower in a transcendent space outside of nature and reduces nature itself to dead matter pushed and pulled by mechanical forces. Thus, the *homo scientificus* given supremacy over nature, denying the symbiosis between humanity and the natural world. From this perspective, the modern scientist is a man who creates nature as well as himself, through his own intellectual power. Echoing Merchant's argument, Cabral seems to advocate the idea that man and nature are in constant symbiosis. Reflecting this argument at the end of most legends, the hero joins with a natural element: sand or water, as can be seen by the second legend:

Um dia, por fim, chegou à beira de um rio. Era calmo e silencioso. Aric, então, deixou-se ficar ali. Já não podia mais caminhar. Não tinha forças. Abraçou-se ao rio e chorou misturando-se com a água e nela tornou-se. E assim, correndo com o Rio, continuou a nadar. Até o fim do mundo [One day he got to the river's sedge. It was calm and silence. Aric, then, stopped and stayed there. He could not walk anymore. He was weak. He hugged the river and cried, his tears mixed with the water and Aric and the river became only one. Aric ran with the river and swam to the end of the world] (p.33).

Here, the dynamic interaction of man (hero) and nature emphasizes the fact that the non-human world, animals, plants, celestial bodies are not simply under human control. They also have their own purpose, their own relation to God, as expressed by Ruether (2005: 68). Unlike non-human world, modern man has lost contact with nature; instead of being a part of it he has alienated himself from it and therefore abuses it. Allusions to important biblical ideas are also an important strategy used by Cabral in order to reinforce the idea that nature has its own vitality and it is strongly related to God. In the ninth legend, the hero Daric dies to save nature in the same way that Jesus Christ dies to save humanity:

Depois ergueram o lenho e o corpo a ele preso, e olharam: Daric de braços abertos, a cabeça sobre o peito...Os homens, então, sentiram medo. A terra parecia tremer. Chegara a noite, embora fosse dia. O céu estava ficando violeta e roxa. Em breve estaria negro... Correram todos, desesperados, gritando. A noite, porém, descia sobre eles, furiosa, escura, mais negra ainda, medonha.... [After that they lifted his body fixed on a wood cross and looked: his arms were opened, his head was bent over the chest... The men, then, felt fear. The earth seemed to shake. It got dark though it was day. The sky became purple. Soon it would be black...Everybody ran desperate and shouting. The night, though, was coming furious, dark, terrifying] (p.67).

In this passage it is possible to find important aspects of the patriarchal paradigm with its hierarchical structure and methodology of thought which is closely linked to the Judeo-Christian ideas of man's innate superiority over nature. These ideas are discussed by the historian of science Lynn Townsend White in her article *The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis* published in 1967.

White suggests that an alternative worldview was necessary, and this alternative must be religious. She also believes that science and technology were so tainted with orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature that no solution to our ecologic crisis can be expected from them alone¹.

According to Gebara (2005: 111) Patriarchal epistemology bases itself on eternal unchangeable 'truths' that are the presuppositions for knowing what truly is. In the Platonic-Aristotelian epistemology that shaped Catholic Christianity, this means eternal ideas that exist *a priori*. Catholicism added to this the hierarchy of revelation over reason. Revealed ideas come directly from God and thus are unchangeable and unquestionable, compared to ideas derived from reason. This religious way of seeing reality shows, somehow, Cabral's ambivalent discourse; as is a practicing catholic, he transfers, unconsciously or not, his beliefs to his texts.

Gebara criticizes this kind of discourse, because according to her, experiences are the most important subject for any discourse, they cannot be translated into thought finally and definitively. They are always in context, in a particular network of relationships. This interdependence and contextuality includes not only other humans but the nonhuman world, ultimately the whole body of the cosmos in which we are embedded in our particular location. Theological ideas are not exempt from this embodied, contextual questioning. Gebara goes on to state that changing the patriarchal paradigm for an ecofeminist one starts with epistemology, with transforming the way one thinks. Such an effort to dismantle patriarchal epistemology for ecofeminist thinking includes the nature of the human person.

In *Umbra*, patriarchal epistemology is also reproduced in the hero who seems to be a disembodied self that is presumed to exist prior to all relationships. From this perspective the ideal self is autonomous, has extricated itself from all dependencies on others and stands outside and independent of relationships as a 'free subject'. Interestingly *Umbra's* hero always reincarnates with other names and without any family ties or 'network of relationships', as if he existed by himself. In an ecofeminist understanding of the human person, such autonomy is a delusion based on denial of the others on whom one depends. This attitude is also expressed in the end of the novel when the nameless boy decides to leave alone searching for a better place to live. Ironically, he is supposed to be a hero but he fails to understand the necessary reconceptualization that is needed. Whilst the novel is strongly critical of environmentally destructive policies, it reproduces individualistic and transcendent ideas that are, according to ecofeminism, incompatible with environmental awareness.

Whilst Cabral's hero can successfully incarnate in other bodies, the opposite happens with nature. The promise of planting more and better plants has never been kept (p.43). The idea that technology is able to renew nature is dismissed. Here, one can make a link to Merchant's criticism of human attempts to civilize nature. From this perspective, science and technology are restoring human dominion and thus transforming primitive, disorderly nature into civilization.

Influenced by Merchants' ideas, Ruether (2005:121) states that, this task of civilizing nature is the white man's burden². This reference seems to be ironic. The white Western male is subduing the whole world, first Europe and then the colonized areas of the Americas, Asia, and Africa and elevating them to a higher order. And by "areas" one can include all individuals living within them: indigenous people, women, black people and slaves, among others.

Merchant goes on to state that this system of patriarchy or elite male domination is further developed in Western colonialism and modern scientific technology and economics. These patterns of domination lead to the impoverishment of most humans and the natural world and rapidly produce a crisis that threatens survival on earth. Cabral illustrates this same feeling of devastation by male domination in modern society; because of the effects of pollution, men lose their natural habitat and have to survive in inhuman conditions:

Naquele tempo quase não falavam. Não havia o que dizer. Deixavam-se ficar ali, protegendo-se do frio ou do calor, olhando o horizonte, cavando a terra, sem esperança. De quando em quando alguém aparecia com raízes velhas, sem

¹ Science, vol.155 (March 10, 1967), 1203-7. Reprinted in *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature and Environment*, Roger S. Gottlieb, ed (New York: Routledge, 1996), 184-93.

² This expression was probably taken from a poem by Rudyard Kipling which is addressing the entrance of the United States into the club of colonizing countries.

água, esfarelando-se como a própria terra. Mastigavam os pedaços, depois cuspiam sangue, a boca seca, lábios cortados. Assim era a vida. E de tanto sofrimento, um dia perguntaram: por quê viver? [That time, men hardly ever spoke. There was nothing to say. They used to stay there, protected from the cold or the heat, looking at the horizon, digging the earth without hope. Sometimes some people found old roots, without water, dissolving in the earth. They chewed pieces of roots and then, spit blood, with dry mouths and chopped lips. That way was life. The suffering was so much that one day they asked: Why do we live?] (p.82)

From the perspectives of **Ecocriticism** and **Ecofeminism**, this passage from *Umbra* by Plínio Cabral presents a **bleak dystopian vision** where human life and nature are equally devastated. The landscape is barren, devoid of vitality, mirroring the **desperation and physical deterioration of the people**. The description of **dry, crumbling roots** and **cracked lips bleeding** suggests an **environmental collapse** that has left both the land and its inhabitants in a state of extreme suffering.

As its core this passage critiques **human disconnection from nature and the consequences of ecological exploitation**. The scene presents a world where **natural resources have been exhausted**, leaving people in a state of hopelessness. The act of **digging the earth without hope** symbolizes a **futile attempt to extract life from a dying world**. This aligns with **eco-apocalyptic narratives** that warn of the **irreversibility of environmental destruction** when societies exploit nature without sustainable practices.

Ecofeminism, which connects the domination of nature with the oppression of marginalized groups, would read this passage as a critique of patriarchal and capitalist systems that have drained both the earth and human bodies. The suffering described—hunger, dehydration, and physical decay—echoes historical patterns of exploitation where women, indigenous peoples, and the poor bear the brunt of environmental crises. The absence of speech in the passage (“quasenãofalavam”) suggests a loss of agency, reinforcing the silencing of both nature and marginalized communities under oppressive systems.

The passage ultimately paints a dystopian world where humans and nature have been reduced to mere remnants of their former selves. It serves as a warning about the consequences of unchecked exploitation and environmental neglect, themes central to both Ecocriticism and Ecofeminism. The final existential question- “porquêviver?”-reflects not just physical despair, but also the loss of meaning in a world where both nature and humanity have been stripped of their vitality.

Final Considerations

Plínio Cabral's *Umbra* presents a dystopian vision deeply intertwined with ecological and environmental concerns, making it a compelling subject for analysis through **Ecocriticism** and **Ecofeminism**. The novel portrays a world devastated by environmental collapse, where nature has been irreversibly damaged, and human existence is reduced to suffering and despair. This bleak scenario underscores the consequences of unchecked exploitation of natural resources, reflecting **ecocritical concerns about the degradation of the environment and the illusion that technology can restore what has been lost**. The barren landscape and the characters' struggle for survival serve as a warning about the limits of human control over nature, emphasizing the unsustainability of modern industrial and colonialist paradigms.

From an **ecofeminist perspective**, *Umbra* also illustrates how environmental destruction is intertwined with the oppression of marginalized groups. Drawing from theorists such as Carolyn Merchant and Rosemary Radford Ruether, the novel can be read as a critique of **patriarchal and capitalist systems that exploit both the land and vulnerable populations**. In this dystopian setting, nature is no longer a source of sustenance, mirroring the silencing and suffering of those who have historically been dominated—women, indigenous peoples, and the poor. The novel thus aligns with **ecofeminist arguments that the same logic of control and exploitation that governs nature also subjugates human bodies**, particularly those outside the structures of power.

Umbra serves as a **literary cautionary tale**, reinforcing the urgent need for **rethinking humanity's relationship with the environment**. Through its dystopian imagery, it challenges the **myth of infinite progress and human supremacy**, urging reflection on sustainable practices and social justice. In doing so, it echoes the warnings of both Ecocriticism and Ecofeminism, positioning environmental destruction not just as an ecological crisis but as a fundamental ethical and political issue.

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