

Patriarchal Supremacy in the Postcolonial City: Gendered Politics of Urban Space in Lauren Beukes's *Zoo City*

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Abstract

This article examines Lauren Beukes's Zoo City through the lens of postcolonial urban ecology, arguing that the novel identifies patriarchal supremacy as a structuring force in the production of urban marginality. Although Zoo City initially appears to envision an ethical reconfiguration of human-animal relations through enforced symbiosis, the narrative ultimately demonstrates how animalization operates as a mechanism of surveillance, discipline, and control within a male-dominated postcolonial metropolis. Drawing on ecofeminist theory and urban environmental criticism, the article contends that the novel constructs Zoo City as both ecologically deteriorated and socially stratified, where women and nonhuman creatures are simultaneously marginalized, stigmatized, and subjected to systemic exploitation. The spatial containment of "animalled" bodies echoes colonial regimes of segregation that classified and regulated populations marked as deviant, thereby recasting the city as a terrain of environmental injustice and biopolitical governance. Through Zinzi December's navigation of this precarious landscape, the text reveals how patriarchal authority converges with economic instability, ecological decay, and gendered violence to reproduce entrenched hierarchies of power. Rather than affirming hybridity or interspecies relationality as emancipatory, Zoo City interrogates the moral constraints of anthropocentric urban paradigms that privilege masculinist rationality while rendering feminized and nonhuman lives expendable. By embedding gendered domination within the material, spatial, and ecological conditions of the postcolonial city, this study advances critical conversations in environmental justice, urban ecological thought, and the politics shaping human-nonhuman entanglements.

Keywords: Postcolonial urban ecology, Ecofeminism, Patriarchal supremacy, Animalization, Environmental justice, Lauren Beukes, *Zoo City*

Introduction

Postcolonial cities are not merely sites of rapid development or multicultural coexistence; they are historically sedimented ecological formations in which colonial

planning, racial capitalism, and gendered hierarchies remain materially inscribed. Recent work in postcolonial ecocriticism and urban environmental studies has demonstrated how colonial spatial regimes and extractive economies continue to structure uneven infrastructures, producing landscapes of environmental injustice that disproportionately burden racialized and economically precarious populations (Garrard, 2011; Nixon, 2011). Recent scholars have expanded this discourse, highlighting how urban narratives in the Global South dramatize these inequities by entwining social and ecological marginality (Fiasconi, 2021; Judith, 2024). Yet comparatively less attention has been given to how patriarchal supremacy operates through these urban ecologies to naturalize gendered precarity within the postcolonial metropolis. This article addresses that gap by reading Lauren Beukes's *Zoo City* as a critical meditation on the gendered politics of postcolonial urban space. I argue that the novel represents Johannesburg not as a neutral setting but as an active regulatory environment in which ecological degradation, spatial segregation, and biopolitical surveillance converge to sustain patriarchal control. Through its depiction of Hillbrow as a decaying enclave that confines "animalled" bodies, *Zoo City* exposes how environmental marginalization and gendered domination become mutually constitutive within the material infrastructures of the contemporary postcolonial city.

In this regard, contemporary literature that engages with urban ecologies offers critical insight into these dynamics, revealing how domination is embedded not only in ideology but also in the material organization of space and the regulation of bodies. Lauren Beukes's *Zoo City* (2010) exemplifies this intersection by presenting Johannesburg as a postcolonial urban space in which ecological, social, and gendered hierarchies are intricately entwined. Such works align with emerging postcolonial and urban environmental criticism that foregrounds the uneven ecologies of Global South cities (Li, 2025; Benedetti & Haaland, 2024). Specifically, Beukes's novel is a work of speculative fiction that captures a complex African scenario complicated by human–nonhuman divisions. As the story is set in an African patriarchal society, identity is presented as fragile and ephemeral.

The novel portrays the coupling of women and animals and their societal relationships. Narrated by the protagonist Zinzi December, the story reflects contemporary socio-political structures in Africa while narrating Zinzi's personal struggle as an "aposymbiot" with emotional dependence and a telepathic relationship with a specific animal, Sloth. The novel emphasizes psychic trauma associated with the phenomenon known as shadow-self absorption, commonly referred to as the "Undertow." As the novel depicts, "Aposymbiot individuals, psychologists cannot ignore the continuing religious stigmatization of Aposymbiots within society and within the therapeutic community itself" (Beukes, 2010, p. 91).

Although the novel does not offer a direct depiction of reality, it constructs a material and virtual world that integrates digital technologies such as the internet, email, and mobile communication alongside the presence of animals, thereby providing an innovative representation of the broader social environment. Throughout the narrative, characters often lack a fully human identity, maintaining both physical and emotional connections with animals. This interconnection between humans and animals reflects the conditions of African American ghetto spaces and exposes the legacies of white supremacist ideology, which historically marginalizes women and nature as a means of control. In the text, animals and the natural world increasingly function as the other, while women are simultaneously externalized and objectified, positioned as both subjects of knowledge and instruments of exploitation. The novel thus illustrates how patriarchal authority suppresses women in a manner that parallels societal domination over animals. In *Zoo City*, characters like Zinzi December and other convicted criminals are psychically “animalled,” each bonded to an animal familiar as punishment for their transgressions. They are physically bonded to an animal familiar and forcibly expelled from normative urban spaces into the blighted area of Zoo City. While this human–animal symbiosis initially appears to destabilize anthropocentric hierarchies, Beukes’s narrative reveals that animalization functions as a mechanism of social and patriarchal control. Women are disproportionately affected; their animalled status serves as a visible marker of moral failure, legitimizing spatial confinement, economic exploitation, and social marginalization. Accordingly, the urban environment in *Zoo City* operates as both a physical and ideological system that materializes patriarchal authority. By linking environmental degradation, social exclusion, and gendered violence, Beukes positions Zoo City as both a metaphorical and material site where oppression is enacted and normalized (Beukes, 2010).

From an ecofeminist perspective, the novel foregrounds the interconnected subjugation of women and nonhuman animals. Ecofeminists argue that the domination of women and nature is structurally linked and rooted in hierarchical dualisms privileging masculine rationality over bodily vulnerability and emotionality (Gaard, 2011, pp. 4–5; Warren, 2000, p. 16). *Zoo City* renders this dynamic visible by portraying animalled subjects as legally stigmatized, socially monitored, and spatially confined within Johannesburg’s urban order. The animal familiar does not simply signify past wrongdoing; it operates as a permanent public marker of guilt that makes the body instantly legible to systems of judgment and control. Zinzi repeatedly reflects on how the sloth on her back identifies her before she speaks, announcing her criminal history to strangers and exposing her to suspicion and hostility (Beukes, 2010, p. 33). Her presence in public space is therefore shaped by hyper visibility. Shop owners watch her carefully, employers hesitate to

trust her, and passersby interpret her animal as evidence of moral failure. This constant scrutiny limits her access to formal employment and pushes her toward informal and unstable labor, including letter writing scams and investigative work that place her at further risk. Animalization thus functions as a structural condition that narrows economic opportunity and reinforces marginal status.

The spatial organization of Hillbrow intensifies this exclusion. The neighborhood is depicted as overcrowded, decaying, and neglected by state infrastructure, with broken buildings, unreliable utilities, and visible poverty. Animalled individuals are concentrated in this environment, suggesting that the city manages deviant bodies through spatial containment. This concentration echoes earlier regimes of segregation in South African urban history, where marginalized populations were confined to deteriorating districts under the logic of order and control. In this setting, environmental degradation becomes inseparable from social regulation. Zinzi's daily movement through polluted streets and unsafe housing conditions underscores how ecological decline and social stigma operate together.

Gender further deepens this vulnerability. Zinzi must navigate interactions with male figures who dismiss, exploit, or threaten her, revealing how patriarchal authority intersects with biopolitical labeling. Her economic survival depends on maneuvering within male dominated networks that treat her as expendable. The sloth, frequently described as heavy and physically restrictive, symbolizes not only companionship but also the burden of institutional judgment that constrains her mobility and autonomy. Rather than offering a vision of liberatory interspecies intimacy, the enforced bond exposes how systems of surveillance, economic precarity, and gendered power converge. Through Zinzi's embodied experience, the novel demonstrates that animalization is an imposed ethical and spatial condition that sustains patriarchal and ecological injustice within the postcolonial city.

Moreover, the novel engages with postcolonial urban theory by illustrating how cities reproduce historical inequalities through multiple intersecting mechanisms. First, spatial segregation is vividly depicted in the hidden Zoo City, where marginalized individuals are physically and socially isolated from the broader urban environment, highlighting the systemic exclusion of disadvantaged populations (Beukes, 2010, p. 12). In addition, economic precarity compounds this marginalization, as exemplified by Zinzi, who must rely on informal labor to survive, thereby reflecting persistent economic disadvantages faced by socially and structurally excluded urban residents (Beukes, 2010, p. 34). Furthermore, environmental neglect is presented as a critical dimension of inequality, with the polluted and decaying conditions of Zoo City revealing the uneven distribution of urban resources and municipal care (Beukes, 2010, p. 15).

Together, these elements demonstrate how Beukes's depiction of Johannesburg foregrounds the entanglement of social, economic, and environmental disparities in postcolonial urban spaces. In the novel, environmental injustice reflects what Nixon (2011) describes as "slow violence," a gradual, often invisible harm embedded in institutional structures where marginalized women and animals occupy hazardous spaces created by neglect yet are held responsible for their own marginalization (p. 2). Beukes thereby emphasizes that cities are not neutral environments but sites where domination, exclusion, and ecological harm intersect. By focusing on Zoo City, the novel critiques wider socio-environmental systems, showing how patriarchal and postcolonial legacies shape everyday life (Beukes, 2010, pp. 51–55).

The narrative illustrates how postcolonial Johannesburg functions as an ecological system structured by domination, in which women and animals are simultaneously othered and rendered disposable. Through Zinzi December's experiences, Beukes highlights the convergence of patriarchal ideology with spatial marginalization, environmental neglect, and economic vulnerability, challenging human-centered urban ethics and prompting reflection on justice, care, and relationality in postcolonial urban spaces. By situating the oppression of women and animals within the material and symbolic organization of the city, *Zoo City* advances ecofeminist and postcolonial critiques of urban space. More specifically, the novel foregrounds relational vulnerability, highlighting the ethical responsibility humans have toward both nonhuman species and marginalized populations. Ultimately, Beukes reconceptualizes the postcolonial city as an ecological system whose moral and ethical frameworks are inseparable from social and environmental justice, inviting readers to interrogate anthropocentric and patriarchal assumptions embedded in contemporary urban life (Beukes, 2010; Gaard, 2011; Nixon, 2011; Warren, 2000).

Ecofeminism, Othering, and Patriarchal Dualisms

Ecofeminist theory provides a particularly incisive lens for interpreting the symbolic economy that structures Zoo City, as it foregrounds the interdependence of gendered domination and ecological exploitation. Specifically, ecofeminists argue that the historical subjugation of women and the exploitation of nature emerge from the same patriarchal logic, one that is sustained through hierarchical dualisms such as human/animal, culture/nature, reason/emotion, and male/female (Gaard, 2011; Warren, 2000). Contemporary ecofeminist and posthuman theory further emphasize that dismantling these binaries requires attending to relational entanglements that challenge autonomy and mastery (Vakoch, 2026; Fetherston, 2025). These binaries function not only as abstract concepts but also as material frameworks that reinforce power, linking masculinity, reason, and control with cultural dominance, while simultaneously devaluing women and the nonhuman world.

Within this structure, those associated with nature, including women, animals, and colonized peoples, are made vulnerable to regulation, exploitation, and exclusion.

In *Zoo City*, animals are not companions chosen through care, ethical reflection, or personal affinity; they are instead imposed upon individuals by an external moral and juridical authority as a form of punishment. Zinzi December, for example, must carry a sloth on her back, a physical marker of her past wrongdoing that defines how others perceive and treat her. This enforced intimacy enacts what Plumwood (1993, pp. 48–50) describes as the logic of “backgrounding,” where the labor, needs, and suffering of subordinated beings are rendered invisible even as dominant systems depend upon their contributions. This critique resonates with recent scholarship on how postcolonial fiction negotiates human–nonhuman enmeshment to unsettle normative hierarchies (Fetherston, 2025). In the novel, animalled individuals are socially stigmatized and confined to marginalized urban spaces, yet their skills, supernatural abilities, and daily labor remain essential to the functioning of

Johannesburg’s informal economy. Zinzi’s investigative work, for instance, relies upon her unique capacity to track missing persons and solve crimes, but her contribution is recognized only instrumentally, never ethically or socially. Animalled women are doubly burdened: the novel repeatedly depicts them as morally suspect, socially expendable, and exposed to both environmental hazards and patriarchal control. By portraying these punitive attachments and their consequences, *Zoo City* dramatizes how gendered and racialized bodies are objectified, exploited, and animalized in ways that sustain broader social, economic, and ecological hierarchies.

In addition, Zinzi December’s sloth familiar operates as a persistent and unavoidable sign of guilt, transforming her body into a site of public exposure and moral inscription. As Zinzi observes, Sloth curls around her “like my own personal scarlet letter” (Beukes, 2010, p. 33), a metaphor that explicitly invokes the gendered history of bodily punishment and sexualized shame. This image evokes patriarchal traditions in which women’s transgressions are addressed not merely through temporary punishment but through lasting mechanisms of visibility, stigma, surveillance, and spatial control, which extend across social contexts. Therefore, the animal familiar functions as a biopolitical tool, ensuring that guilt is both internalized and constantly visible, thereby rendering female culpability enduring and unavoidable. In this way, *Zoo City* reveals how patriarchal power operates by collapsing moral judgment into corporeal form. Accordingly, the animalled woman’s body becomes a living archive of transgression, a reminder that female deviance is never fully forgiven but must remain legible within the public sphere.

Furthermore, this process aligns with Foucault's understanding of biopolitics, in which power is exercised not solely through laws or institutions but through the regulation and inscription of bodies themselves. However, Beukes extends this critique by demonstrating how such biopolitical control is simultaneously gendered and ecological, targeting bodies that are already positioned as closer to nature and therefore more easily rendered disposable. By linking women to animals in a relationship characterized by coercion rather than care, *Zoo City* challenges idealized views of human–animal intimacy and reveals the violence inherent in enforced relationships under patriarchal systems. Consequently, the novel argues that ethical connections cannot arise from domination, even when presented as moral guidance or social regulation. In this context, the animal familiar functions as a persistent reminder of how patriarchal urban governance perpetuates itself through the visible marking of women's bodies, the exploitation of nonhuman life, and the normalization of social and ecological vulnerability in postcolonial settings.

Zoo City as Postcolonial Urban Ecology

In *Zoo City*, Johannesburg functions not merely as a backdrop but as an active agent within systems of social and moral exclusion. The city is sharply demarcated along lines of privilege and deprivation, with sanitized urban zones of relative affluence sharply juxtaposed against the deteriorating slums occupied by the animalled. These slums, collectively referred to as Zoo City, operate as a form of containment, spatially and socially marginalizing individuals deemed morally or socially deviant. Importantly, such urban segmentation resonates with historical and ongoing practices of colonial and postcolonial urban planning, which sought to regulate and segregate populations under the dual logics of sanitary management and moral oversight (Nixon, 2011). Accordingly, the physical and symbolic architecture of the city reproduces hierarchies of power, with the urban environment itself complicit in sustaining gendered, racialized, and moralized exclusions.

Moreover, urban ecocriticism destabilizes the traditional assumption that ecological inquiry is confined to wilderness or rural landscapes, emphasizing that environmental degradation is inseparable from social, political, and economic structures (Buell, 2005). Beukes's representation of Johannesburg exemplifies this insight, illustrating how poverty, infrastructural neglect, crime, and gendered violence converge in urban spaces to produce what might be termed "urban ecological injustice." Specifically, Zoo City is characterized by pollution, overcrowding, and infrastructural decay, conditions that mirror the marginalization and dehumanization of its inhabitants, particularly women and the animalled. In this sense, the environmental conditions of the slums are not incidental but constitute a material manifestation of social hierarchies, demonstrating that ecological degradation and social inequity are mutually reinforcing phenomena.

Within this urban matrix, women's mobility and agency are rigorously circumscribed. For instance, Zinzi December negotiates a city in which her body is policed through both formal and informal mechanisms, encompassing gang violence, economic precarity, moral surveillance, and supernatural regulation via her animal familiar. Thus, her marginality is simultaneously spatial, economic, and ontological, revealing the embeddedness of patriarchal power within the very organization of postcolonial urban space. Importantly, the city's architecture, social codes, and systems of governance converge to ensure that women, particularly those deemed transgressive, remain visible as objects of moral scrutiny and materially constrained. This illustrates the inextricable linkage between ecological injustice, urban governance, and gendered oppression, showing how social and environmental hierarchies intersect to shape everyday life in postcolonial urban spaces.

Animalization, Gender, and Moral Surveillance

Animalization in *Zoo City* operates as a strategy of patriarchal control. Historically, women have been likened to animals to justify their exclusion from political and ethical consideration (Donovan, 1990). In this context, Beukes literalizes this metaphor by binding women to animals, collapsing symbolic degradation into physical reality through the subjugation of women alongside the subjugation of animals in the novel. Consequently, animals increasingly appear as the "Other" of human culture. Moreover, animalled women are simultaneously externalized and objectified, functioning as both objects of knowledge and objects of exploitation. Beukes creates a vivid, sun-bleached Johannesburg inhabited by hustlers, addicts, prostitutes, criminals, street dwellers, pop bands, music moguls, and animals.

Importantly, the animals belong to those affected by a ghostly force called the Undertow, which appears to exact a form of moral judgment by sending an animal familiar to bond with the transgressor for life. Through this mechanism, Beukes explores a variety of animals, including crocodiles, sparrows, mongooses, rabbits, and Zinzi's sloth. As a result, the animalled convicts, or "zoos," live in constant fear of the Undertow, an inexplicable and deadly blackness that consumes them once their animals die, forcing them into the slums of Zoo City, a lawless urban ghetto (Beukes, 2010).

According to the ecofeminist Josephine Donovan, women and animals can be subjugated by patriarchal society to reinforce male dominance, as both are rendered vulnerable to control and exploitation. Donovan explains:

"The anomalous and the powerless include women and animals, both of whose subjectivities and realities are erased or converted into manipulable objects—the

material of subjugation at the mercy of the rationalist manipulator, whose self-worth is established by the fact that he thus subdues his environment. Everything—even the human individual, not to speak of the animal—is converted into the repeatable, replaceable process, into a mere example for the conceptual models of the system” (Donovan, 1990, p. 179).

In a similar vein, in *Zoo City*, women criminals are mysteriously “animalled” following any act of violence. Consequently, the animalled, or “zoos,” experience ongoing social and moral surveillance. Their animals serve as constant evidence of criminal transgression, reinforcing marginalization and exclusion. Despite the pain and suffering they endure, the animalled are forced to live together. According to the novel, the transgressors are referred to as “aposymbiots” and are relegated to slums in Zoo City. Beukes clarifies:

“‘Animalled’ or ‘zoos’ and shadow-self absorption as ‘Hell’s Undertow’ or ‘The Black Judgement’ perpetuate this stigmatisation and very often fail to see the very real trauma that aposymbiots experience as a result of lifelong anticipation of shadow-self-absorption” (Beukes, 2010, p. 91).

Moreover, *Zoo City* narrates the story of Zinzi December, who is animalled and aposymbiotic, and whose relationship with her animal familiar demonstrates her marginalization from society. She lives primarily for herself and her familiar, as both are objected by social norms. Zinzi has committed a past transgression. She has killed someone and her animal, in part, serves as a mark of sin. In contrast, some humans adopt real animals for aposymbiots who cannot choose their own companions, yet life can remain difficult if the animal is perceived as weak or cowardly. As the Butterfly prisoner in the novel explains:

“There is an order to things, too. Don’t matter what you did, you got a bad-ass animal in here, you’re a bad-ass too. And it don’t matter how many people you killed, you got a Chipmunk or a Squirrel, you’re gonna be a bitch. Way it is” (Beukes, 2010, p. 51).

In this framework, Zinzi December is an aposymbiot whose animal is a sloth named Sloth, and her mashavi talent is tracking lost objects. *Zoo City*, set in Johannesburg, South Africa, is a science fiction narrative in which criminals are magically linked with the spirit of animals as punishment. Zinzi, known as a “Zoo girl,” lives in a rundown city ironically named Elysium Heights, situated in the poor, ghettoized area of Zoo City. Consequently, she cannot distance herself from her crime while marked by Sloth. Zoos are visible, ex-offenders living freely, and as such, they are a source of societal fear and convenient scapegoats. They are subjugated by society and compelled to perform roles allocated by a

patriarchal African social system. Beukes emphasizes that the women in *Zoo* are considered “animal” because they are all criminals, including murderers, rapists, and addicts, a societal labeling that reinforces ecofeminist claims about systemic subjugation (Donovan, 1990). Furthermore, Donovan observes:

“The dominance over nature, women, and animals inherent in this scientific epistemology, which requires that the anomalous other be forced into ordered forms, may be rooted in the Western male maturation process that requires men to establish their autonomous identity against the maternal/feminine” (p. 179).

In this novel Zinzi is both physically and psychologically linked to her animal familiar due to an error in judgment that results in her brother’s death. This speculative human–nonhuman coupling requires the protagonist to engage her sympathetic imagination, fostering a heightened sense of responsibility and hospitality toward her nonhuman companion. Similarly, Greta Gaard (2011) argues, “The common condition that unites humans with animals is sensibility, the capacity to feel pain and experience pleasure” (p. 172). In *Zoo City*, Zinzi and Sloth are united through this shared sensibility, allowing her to perceive Sloth’s irritation:

“Sloth doesn’t respond, but I can feel his irritation in the way he shifts his weight, thumping against my back. In retaliation, I blow the smoke out the side of my mouth into his disapproving furry face. He sneezes violently” (Beukes, 2010, pp. 10–11).

From an ecofeminist perspective, women possess a special connection to the environment through daily interactions, yet this bond is frequently overlooked. In *Zoo City*, Zinzi is a criminal mystically saddled with an animal companion as penance for her crime. She and Sloth are bound until death, and her status as a zoo has removed her from a life of relative privilege, relegating her to the squalor of *Zoo City*. The only advantage of being animalled is her mashavi ability, which allows her to find lost objects. Similarly, Donovan (1990) observes:

“Since all who work on behalf of the interests of animals are ...familiar with the tired charge of being ‘irrational,’ ‘sentimental,’ ‘emotional,’ or worse, we can give the lie to these accusations only by making a concerted effort not to indulge our emotions or parade our sentiments” (p. 169).

Zinzi is a charismatic heroine who employs her abilities to help locate lost belongings. Her drug addiction indirectly caused her brother’s death, and she is consequently burdened with Sloth as both a scarlet letter and a magical talent. Their bond is physical, telepathic, and emotional, as she acknowledges, “Crack cravings have nothing on being away from your animal” (Beukes, 2010, p. 72).

Since the animalled are unable to move far from the mark of their crimes, their lives remain constrained. Zinzi is a flawed but compelling protagonist, demonstrating the consequences of moral error in a society structured by patriarchal and capitalist norms. Beukes presents a world in which animal companions coexist with humans, endowed with mashavi talents, while simultaneously portraying the structural inequities of post-apartheid South Africa, including systemic poverty, homelessness, sex trafficking, drug abuse, and the impact of AIDS. In this environment, animals, like women, are frequently depicted as passive agents and objects, highlighting their subjugation within patriarchal and social hierarchies. The novel emphasizes that the concerns surrounding the animalled or “zoos” extend beyond criminality; they reflect a societal suspicion that these individuals are no longer fully human. As Gaard (2015) observes, “The split in society between ‘personal feelings’ and ‘economic production’ was integrated with the sexual division of labour. Women were identified with emotional life, men with the struggle for existence” (p. 175). This observation illuminates the ethical framework within which Zinzi navigates her world: while male characters such as Odi, Huron, and Nasty exploit animals as a means of economic gain, Zinzi is unable to commodify Sloth due to her emotional bond, demonstrating her moral and affective engagement with nonhuman life. Her empathy is further illustrated when she witnesses Odi and Nasty mistreating a healed porcupine, underscoring her recognition of the intrinsic value of animal life.

The novel further highlights how the animalled are denied full citizenship and constrained to precarious labor, often leveraging their mashavi abilities for survival. Zinzi’s talent, for example, is commodified and controlled by male-dominated criminal networks, exemplifying the convergence of patriarchal and capitalist interests in exploiting feminized bodies and ecological resources (Gaard, 2015). Nonhuman animals themselves are also subject to systemic harm. Beukes repeatedly depicts acts of cruelty toward animals, revealing that violence against women and nonhuman life emerges from the same ethical and structural failures. In doing so, the novel challenges anthropocentric narratives that treat animal suffering as merely metaphorical, emphasizing its material and moral significance.

Becoming-Animal and Ethical Relationality

Despite its bleak portrayal of domination, *Zoo City* offers an alternative ethical vision through interspecies relationality. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) concept of “becoming-animal,” the novel suggests that human–animal entanglement can destabilize hierarchical identities. Zinzi’s bond with Sloth, while imposed, gradually fosters empathy, responsibility, and ethical awareness.

Unlike patriarchal models of autonomy that privilege independence and control, Zinzi's subjectivity is relational. Her survival depends upon attentiveness to Sloth's vulnerability, challenging the logic of mastery that defines both colonial and patriarchal power. This relational ethics aligns with ecofeminist calls for care-based moral frameworks that recognize interdependence rather than domination (Plumwood, 2002).

Zinzi's final decision to assist others, even at personal cost, signals a rejection of patriarchal individualism. Her journey suggests that ethical agency emerges not from moral purity but from responsibility toward human and nonhuman others.

Urban Marginality, Patriarchy, and Interconnected Oppression

Lauren Beukes's *Zoo City* presents Johannesburg not simply as a setting but as a complex postcolonial city where historical, social, and ecological inequalities intersect. The city's infrastructure, governance, and spatial arrangements actively create marginalization, especially for the animalled, individuals who are forcibly bound to animals as punishment for moral wrongdoing. Although this animalization might initially seem like a form of human and animal cooperation, the novel shows that it functions as a tool of social control, reinforcing patriarchal power and sustaining social hierarchies (Beukes, 2010, p. 33).

The protagonist, Zinzi December, demonstrates how women are disproportionately affected by these intersecting systems of control. Her attachment to her sloth familiar, Sloth, transforms her body into a public marker of moral failure. Zinzi herself describes her familiar as curling around her "like my own personal scarlet letter" (Beukes, 2010, p. 33), symbolically inscribing guilt onto her physical being. This bodily inscription functions as a visible site of surveillance and societal judgment, reflecting historical practices wherein women's bodies were regulated to enforce moral and social norms. Beukes emphasizes that such regulation is not merely figurative; the urban environment itself, including the physical geography of Zoo City, actively enforces confinement and exclusion. Zinzi's home, the crowded, neglected housing of Zoo City, mirrors the structural neglect and moral condemnation imposed on its residents, suggesting that spatial marginalization is inseparable from social and ecological oppression (Nixon, 2011, p. 19).

From an ecofeminist perspective, Beukes highlights the connection between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nonhuman animals. Ecofeminist scholars argue that hierarchical divisions, such as male versus female, human versus nonhuman, and reason versus emotion, justify domination by presenting masculinity and rationality as superior while devaluing women and nature (Warren, 2000, p. 16; Gaard, 2011, pp. 4–5). In *Zoo City*, this hierarchy is evident in the punitive system that bonds individuals to animals, which disciplines and objectifies women in ways that echo the historical animalization of

racialized and gendered subjects. Zinzi's relationship with Sloth exemplifies this dynamic: the animal both accompanies her and limits her, physically and symbolically marking her as a deviant. She reflects on her restricted mobility, noting, "I can't run, can't hide, can't escape the eyes that watch my every step" (Beukes, 2010, p. 47). Through this, Beukes shows that animalization operates both as a form of moral punishment and as a method of spatial and social control, making female transgression highly visible.

In addition, Johannesburg itself is depicted as a materially and socially degraded environment that reflects and reinforces patriarchal authority. Zoo City, situated on the city's margins, is characterized by overcrowding, pollution, and structural neglect, functioning as a literal and figurative space of exclusion (Beukes, 2010, pp. 55–60). This setting exemplifies Buell's (2005) argument that urban ecology must account for the social and environmental dimensions of cities, illustrating how ecological degradation is inseparable from systemic inequality. Zinzi's journey through the city emphasizes that spatial and environmental marginality are entwined: she traverses streets riddled with garbage, abandoned buildings, and violent encounters, underscoring the persistent threat posed to marginalized bodies. As she navigates these spaces, she reflects: "Every alleyway smell of someone else's ruin, every shadow threatens a repeat of my own" (Beukes, 2010, p. 59), emphasizing that her marginalization is both embodied and environmental.

Furthermore, the novel engages with postcolonial urban theory by highlighting the historical and socio-political underpinnings of spatial segregation. Zoo City mirrors colonial urban planning practices that segregated populations based on perceived moral or social inferiority (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). By confining the animalled to decaying zones, Beukes illustrates how contemporary cities inherit colonial hierarchies of power, wherein social and spatial exclusion reinforces systemic inequality. Zinzi's experience reflects not only gendered oppression but also economic precarity, as she must navigate informal economies and exploitative labor while simultaneously managing the moral and social implications of her animalled status (Beukes, 2010, p. 72).

The intersection of mythology, power, and social control further complicates the novel's critique. The Shona concept of *mashavi* or spirit-animals situates supernatural abilities within culturally specific knowledge systems. However, Beukes demonstrates that these abilities are appropriated by patriarchal urban governance, serving to regulate and exploit both women and nonhuman animals (Beukes, 2010, p. 101; Bhatta, 2014, p. 34). Zinzi's magical abilities, tied to her sloth, provide no liberation; instead, they increase her visibility as a moral deviant, making her subject to further social and economic marginalization. This illustrates that power and mythology, when mediated through patriarchal institutions, reinforce rather than disrupt structural hierarchies.

Chronologically, the novel traces Zinzi's navigation of these overlapping systems, beginning with her immediate experiences of stigma and confinement and progressing to her engagement with broader socio-ecological networks within Zoo City. She encounters criminal gangs, predatory clients, and urban infrastructure that functions as both physical and symbolic constraint. Each encounter reveals the cumulative impact of ecological degradation, economic exploitation, and gendered oppression. Zinzi's reflections on her own limitations and societal judgment highlight the persistent interplay of bodily, spatial, and moral discipline: "The city presses in from all sides, and my familiar is both my burden and my witness" (Beukes, 2010, p. 92). This demonstrates how Beukes uses the protagonist's lived experience to articulate the ethical and material dimensions of urban oppression.

Ultimately, *Zoo City* offers a sustained critique of patriarchal supremacy within postcolonial urban ecologies. The novel foregrounds the interconnected vulnerability of women and nonhuman animals, illustrating how social, spatial, and ecological marginalization reinforce one another. By situating these processes within the material and symbolic organization of Johannesburg, Beukes challenges anthropocentric and patriarchal frameworks, emphasizing the ethical responsibility humans have toward both nonhuman species and socially marginalized populations. The forced interdependence of Zinzi and Sloth exemplifies how relationality is framed within systems of domination rather than choice, revealing the structural entanglement of morality, ecology, and urban governance (Beukes, 2010, pp. 45–100).

To sum up, Beukes's *Zoo City* demonstrates how urban space, ecological conditions, and patriarchal authority intersect to regulate and marginalize certain bodies. Through Zinzi's experience and her enforced bond with Sloth, the novel reveals that oppression operates not only through individual moral judgments but also through the social, economic, and spatial infrastructures of the city. This perspective reflects a growing scholarly consensus that literature can illuminate layered and intersecting urban injustices in postcolonial contexts (Fiasconi, 2021; Judith, 2024). By situating these narrative moments within ecofeminist and postcolonial frameworks, it becomes clear that *Zoo City* critiques the systemic mechanisms that perpetuate gendered and ecological subjugation, highlighting the ethical and material consequences of social hierarchy in postcolonial urban life. **Ethics, Relationality, and Structural Oppression in Postcolonial Structure**

In *Zoo City*, Lauren Beukes presents Johannesburg as more than a mere setting; the city emerges as a complex postcolonial ecological system in which social, spatial, and environmental hierarchies intersect to produce marginalization and oppression. Through the lens of ecofeminist and postcolonial urban theory, this article has demonstrated that the

novel foregrounds the interconnected subjugation of women and nonhuman animals, showing how patriarchal supremacy is materially and symbolically enacted within the urban landscape. Zinzi December's bond with her sloth familiar exemplifies the visibility and vulnerability imposed upon women, highlighting how moral transgression, economic precarity, and ecological degradation converge to reinforce systemic exclusion.

The analysis reveals that *Zoo City* is not a neutral or fantastical environment, but a deliberate reflection of postcolonial urban inequalities, wherein spatial segregation, environmental neglect, and social surveillance operate as mechanisms of patriarchal control. By situating women and animals at the intersection of these oppressive systems, Beukes critiques hierarchical dualisms; male/female, human/nonhuman, rational/irrational; that underpin both historical colonial practices and contemporary urban governance. The novel's depiction of enforced interdependence and visible guilt illustrates that relationality in the city is framed not by freedom or mutuality but by structures of domination and moral regulation.

Furthermore, the narrative engages with culturally specific mythologies, such as the Shona concept of *mashavi*, demonstrating that even spiritual and supernatural knowledge is co-opted to reinforce systemic control. Beukes's representation of Johannesburg, with its polluted streets, overcrowded slums, and invisible social violence, underscores that ecological degradation is inseparable from social injustice. Environmental harm, gendered oppression, and economic marginalization are intertwined, revealing how postcolonial urban ecologies perpetuate vulnerability and othering.

Ultimately, this study argues that *Zoo City* operates as a critical intervention in contemporary literature, offering a sustained critique of patriarchal and anthropocentric frameworks in postcolonial urban spaces. The novel exposes the ethical and political stakes of urban living, urging readers to reconsider the interdependence between humans, nonhuman animals, and the urban environment. By highlighting relational vulnerability, material inequality, and structural violence, Beukes's narrative advances both ecofeminist and postcolonial critiques, emphasizing that social and environmental justice cannot be separated from one another. In doing so, the novel challenges conventional human-centered urban ethics, foregrounding the necessity of care, responsibility, and equitable relationality within postcolonial cities. In conclusion, Beukes's *Zoo City* illustrates that urban marginality is simultaneously ecological, social, and gendered, and that patriarchal supremacy is reinforced through spatial, economic, and moral mechanisms. By analyzing the novel through ecofeminist and postcolonial urban frameworks, this article demonstrates how literature can illuminate the ethical complexities of human–nonhuman interdependence,

urban environmental justice, and systemic oppression, offering critical insights for scholarship at the intersection of literature, ecology, and gender studies.

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