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REIMAGINING HOME: LITERARY ENCOUNTERS WITH DEEP ECOLOGICAL THOUGHT

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Abstract: This paper brings together Ursula K. Le Guin’s novel *Always Coming Home* and Biljana Crvenkovska’s novel *Куќа наг Брановиџе* (*House Above the Waves*) by reading the Macedonian text in relation to Arne Næss’s theory of deep ecology and in the broader context of Le Guin’s ecological poetics. These novels represent different literary traditions, cultures, and histories, but articulate ideas of “dwelling”: not as just shelter, but as a way of living with the natural world. Whereas Le Guin has long been discussed in feminist and ecocritical circles, Crvenkovska’s work, published recently, has so far received limited critical attention beyond local cultural commentary. This paper examines *House Above the Waves* through the lens of deep ecology, showing how its stripped-down style reflects on the value of nature and the shifting boundaries between body, self, and environment. Considering the novel in relation to Le Guin’s work allows us to see how deep ecological ideas emerge across distinct literary traditions—whether in communal ritual or in solitary endurance. Both stories offer meaningful ways to rethink how we live as part of a more-than-human world.

Keywords: *deep ecology; dwelling; ecological self; biocentric ethics; anti-consumerism; transnational literature.*

Introduction

In a world grappling with ecological crisis, literature often becomes a space to reimagine how humans might live differently on the earth. The word ecology, from the Greek *oikos*, “house” or “dwelling”, offers a starting point for the two works, which separated by geography, language, and time, come together around a shared idea of home that’s deeply connected to nature. Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Always Coming Home* (1986) and *The House Above the Waves* (2020) by the Macedonian author Biljana Crvenkovska present that living in a place is not simply a physical location, but also a way of existing in the world, encompassing the spiritual and ecological.

The texts align with Arne Næss's deep ecology, which emphasizes mutual bonds between every being and thing, an attitude of respect toward nature and all else, as well as turning away from human-centered thinking. Le Guin envisions an ecotopian society where living in a community shapes every part of life. Crvenkovska uses another approach, deploying the house and the sea as symbols of memory, where the emphasis is on the close connection between a person and their surroundings. However, their works show how the idea of "home" functions as more than metaphor: it becomes a foundation for ecological consciousness. In what follows, Le Guin's ecological poetics serves as a guiding framework for approaching *House Above the Waves*. This does not assume direct influence, but proposes a working hypothesis: that the deep ecological sensibilities articulated in *Always Coming Home* can illuminate the ecological intuition and narrative economy of Crvenkovska's novel. The extent to which this lens proves productive is explored throughout the analysis.

Næss articulates deep ecology in *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle* (1989), emphasizing the intrinsic value of nonhuman life and the idea that humans are only one strand in a wider web of existence. His key principles—cultivating an "ecological self," recognising biocentric equality, valuing diversity and symbiosis, critiquing consumerism, and favouring local and decentralised living—provide a framework for reimagining human life in relation to the more-than-human world. We apply these tenets to show how Le Guin's ecological worldview provides a lens for reading Crvenkovska's novel, allowing similarities, differences, and distinct articulations of deep ecological principles to emerge. [All translations from *House Above the Waves* from Macedonian are our own unless otherwise indicated]

Reception Contexts and Deep Ecology

Ursula K. Le Guin's *Always Coming Home* (*ACH*) has been the object of various critical interest from ecocritical, utopian, feminist to mythopoeic criticism; however, its potential resonance with Arne Næss's deep ecology has not been explicitly explored in scholarship. Earlier reviews overviewed the novel in several ways: Selinger (1988) plots it in an "art of living" in which fractured ethnographic form is shows the communal identity and ecological morality of the Kesh; Wytenbroek (1987) defines it as a political, pacifistic, and anarchistic utopia; and Heldreth (1989) determines it in terms of cultural tale and myth, and emphasizes cultural "patterns" of the Kesh as mythic forms which correct communal identity. Khanna (1990) concentrates on the feminist utopian character of the novel. Collectively, these interpretations highlight the difficulty of categorizing *ACH*.

More recent scholarship places *Always Coming Home* within a distinctly ecofeminist and ecophilic tradition, offering a productive framework for the aims of this study. Otto (2012) approaches Le Guin's work within the broader canon of feminist science fiction and argues that the novel imagines a form of gender justice grounded in reciprocity and communal care. Her emphasis on the political and ethical stakes of feminist utopias highlights how the Kesh world resists domination

through practices of sharing, relationality, and embodied cooperation—elements that resonate with ecofeminist critiques of hierarchy. Byrne (2021) situates *Always Coming Home* in Le Guin's long evolution toward ecophilia, showing how earlier Hainish novels gradually build toward the Valley's ethos of interdependence, nonhuman kinship, and ecological humility. His argument that Le Guin develops a sustained "practice of attention" to land and species helps clarify the deep ecological sensibility of the Kesh, for whom dwelling is inseparable from multispecies coexistence. Medlicott (2022) expands this perspective by reading the text as an ecofeminist utopia in which ritual, craft, and polyphonic narration function as forms of ecological governance. Her analysis foregrounds how Le Guin structures community through responsive, non-hierarchical relationships that distribute agency across human and nonhuman actors alike.

Taken together, Otto, Byrne, and Medlicott emphasize the novel's commitment to relational ethics, embodied ecological practice, and nonhuman presence—concerns that directly overlap with key principles of deep ecology and ecofeminism. These insights are useful for approaching Crvenkovska's *House Above the Waves*, though with a significant shift in narrative mode. Where Le Guin imagines ecological consciousness through communal ritual, shared labour, and interdependence among everything living and non-living, Crvenkovska locates ecological awareness in solitude, bodily precarity, and the stark immediacy of elemental forces. While the Macedonian novel does not construct a feminist utopia in Otto's sense, nor a fully articulated ecophilic society as described by Byrne, Medlicott's attention to embodied care and distributed agency offers a valuable lens for reading how *House Above the Waves* configures the self in relation to sea, wind, and rock. In this way, recent ecofeminist readings of Le Guin help illuminate both the resonances and the divergences in how the two texts imagine dwelling, survival, and the more-than-human world.

On the other hand, the reception of Biljana Crvenkovska's *House Above the Waves* (further referred to as *HAW*) has been narrow in scope and concentrated largely in Macedonian journalism and not in formal academic publications—a situation that is not unexpected for a novel that has been in circulation for only five years. A review in *Окно* summarizes the novel as "a prose meditation in which the human remains alone with silence, with the sea, and with their own shadow" (2016). *Нова Македонија* (2016) refers to the novel's ecological theme and observes that "this is a book in which nature is not a backdrop but a character; the waves, silence and wind have more presence than humans". *Вечер* (2017) cites Crvenkovska in interview summarizing her aesthetic design: "Silence is the voice of this book; the human is only the one who hears". This paper aims to continue that conversation by exploring how these elements intersect with ecocritical concerns.

This study approaches Le Guin's ecological vision as a framework through which Crvenkovska's novel can be read, showing how both texts—through very different cultural and narrative forms—use "home" as a site of ecological consciousness and contribute to broader conversations in environmental literature.

Always Coming Home: Intrinsic Value

Næss's principle of intrinsic value comes to life in Le Guin's *ACH* as cultural orientation. In Le Guin's work, this principle is embodied through cultural practice. The author imagines a community where life revolves around treating the land, animals, and plants like kin, not just as things to use. The ecological self, in Næss's philosophy, is a self that identifies with all living beings and inanimate things, landscapes. In Le Guin's narrative, this identity is cultivated through ritual and language in the Valley. In the Kesh community, "what one made, or gained, or owned, in the Valley, belonged to one; but one belonged to one's House, and House, and town, and people. Wealth consisted not in things but in an act: the act of giving" (1986, p. 112). This vision fits Næss's notion of the ecological self, where identity expands beyond the individual to encompass community, place, and environment. The self is not autonomous or dominating, but porous, woven into natural cycles (Næss, 1989, pp. 3, 11, 85, 164). As Næss (1989) explains, "We discover that parts of nature are parts of ourselves. We cannot exist separate from them" (p. 10), and self-realization requires "the development of a deep identification of individuals with all life forms" (p. 85).

In the novel this is vividly depicted when the narrator describes naming and greeting everything living and non-living, she encounters on her walk:

So, I went on. Everything that came to me I spoke to by name or by saying heya, the trees, fir and digger piné and buckeye and redwood and manzanita and madrone and oak, the birds, blue jay and bushtit and woodpecker and phoebe and hawk, the leaves of chamise and scrub oak and poison oak and flowering thorn, the grasses, a deer's skull, a rabbit's droppings, the wind blowing from the sea. (1986, p. 20)

Le Guin frames the world of the Kesh in seasonal works and festivals, deeply connected to the land, sun and moon, winds; which defines their intrinsic connection to place. The Stone Telling narrative presents a striking contrast, where the protagonist recalls her estrangement from the land and community during her years living with her father among the Condor people—a hierarchical, technologically dominant society. When she returns to the Valley, she yearns for still winter mornings, for the feel of working with her hands, and for the scent of the earth in cold air. She longs not only for peace, but a way to reconnect with a deeper, more natural sense of self—something that's been lost through control and disconnection from the earth in the Condor society.

All Life Matters

The Kesh don't just see the self as closely intertwined with place; their everyday actions also show a deep respect for the equal worth of all living beings. In Næss's terms (1989), every life form possesses intrinsic moral value. For the Kesh, it's an assumption woven into daily ritual of the people of the Valley. Animals are hunted with respect, and "the deaths of animals must be included in any account of Valley funerary practices. Domestic animals killed for food were addressed before or during the act of killing by any member of the Blood Lodge" (1986, p. 90). Taking life is never treated lightly but honored as a solemn exchange

within a shared community of being.

The people in the Valley use the same ethic in their relationship to the land. They tend their environment with care, using ecological farming and working in mutual relationship with the natural world. Songs and stories often praise particular plants like oaks, manzanita, corn; animals like moths, butterflies, quails, a lizard or a woodpecker; inanimate objects such a bucket, a hill, or the Blue rock—not as metaphors but as relations. This aligns with the argument that biodiversity is not valuable only for resilience, but also for meaning: “The conceptual bridge from Self-realisation to a positive evaluation of diversity, complexity, and symbiosis,” Næss writes (1989, p. 200). In Le Guin’s world, biodiversity isn’t just a concept—it’s something felt and lived. The Kesh show this through the way they name everything around them—houses, soil, birds, insects—with a level of detail that reveals how deeply they’re rooted in their environment.

Just as striking is the way this biocentric outlook shapes their social world—diversity is understood not only in biological terms, but as a cultural value too. Life in the Valley includes disagreements, tensions, and diverse ways of living—but all held within a framework that embraces plurality over uniformity. Families come in many forms—pair bonds, communal households, even visiting partnerships, and homes are shaped by the needs of their surroundings. Daily life centers around hearths where work, ritual, and kinship are woven together, all without a central authority prescribing a single way to live. Even the advanced knowledge from the City of Mind exists alongside Kesh traditions without asserting control, showing that different ways of living—at different paces—can thrive together. This kind of cultural pluralism reflects the biocentric ethic central to deep ecology.

Beyond Consumerism, Toward Place

For the Kesh, diversity is linked with simplicity. The Kesh’s humble homes made of natural material, their rituals, and tools represent a society that resists any material excess. Næss’s (1989) critique of consumerism rests on the recognition that high levels of material consumption do not translate into a higher quality of life, and the Kesh embody this principle. Their technology remains simple—looms, solar ovens, composting systems—always for communal use. Their objects are made to last, repaired when they break, or let go of in ceremony. They even use broken bowls for drinking, according to their ideas that objects carry meaning not through perfection, but through their continuous use:

Even if the bowl is broken (and the bowl is broken), from the clay and the making and the firing and the pattern, even if the pattern is incomplete (and the pattern is incomplete), let the mind draw its energy. (1986, p. 53)

Even the form of *ACH* reflects this ethic with the fragmented text, involving various forms and genres, being slow and meditative. It reflects a kind of “low-impact” storytelling that parallels the Kesh’s ecological footprint. When Næss (1989) declares, “Simple in means, rich in ends” (p. 18), he contrasts consumerist dependency with the freedom that comes from reducing material needs. Simplicity, for him, saves time and energy, but also creates awareness for deeper forms of satisfaction.

The focus on locality is also central. The Valley isn't only a mere scenery in the novel, but a character in its own right, named and mapped with care—literally sketched in drawings of villages, lodges, and landscapes that Le Guin weaves into the text. The Kesh measure time in terms of natural phenomena: the rains, the blossoming of plants, the migrations of animals. In contrast to the Condor people, who live in a technologically dominant and male-authority oriented society, the Kesh embrace relinquishment of power in all parts of life, from ecological, to family and social life. There is not a single authority that governs life in the Valley as decisions come out of agreement of the Valley's inhabitants. As Næss and Sessions (1984, pp. 97–98) note, decentralization fosters responsibility and ecological awareness. For the Kesh, this isn't a theory—it is the texture of daily life.

ACH embodies the principles of deep ecology in visionary form. It imagines a post-industrial society that manages to resist primitivism as it practices a low-technology reliance, awareness of nature and its cycles, but also ethical co-living of its inhabitants. Nature here is neither idealized nor commodified; it is home—a space of relationship, and reverence.

The House Above the Waves: Apocalyptic Loneliness

Crvenkovska's novel is composed like a mosaic: short lyrical scenes, fragments, and short meditations composed like field notes and scraps of memory. The world on the island is characterized by wind, sea, rock, and scant shelter—the house above the waves. The setting of the novel is a reminder of an absent society where life lingers in small objects and daily habits of Bela and her dog. For Bela life is simple where tools are craft-made and survival means mending, picking vegetables from the garden and foraging, but often just being outside and watching the weather. The book is full of genres—prologue, epistolary “audio” messages, documentary notes, lyric poems, and an epilogue which evades one hero or static viewpoint, as the narration shifts between Bela, Lukijan, Al Aral, and the Rememberers.

The prologue presents Al Aral of the Pomnachi (Rememberers), an other-terrestrial observer whose perspective frames the narrative as memory and aftermath. The early transmissions from Bela and Lukijan establish a world on the brink, after which the story shifts to Bela's life on the island, where fever and solitude blur reality. Later sections return to the Rememberers' communal consciousness, recounting the lead-up to the planet's destruction and offering poems that mourn what was lost. The ending suggests Bela endures, linking her survival to both lineage and the cosmic arrival of the Rememberers, binding the individual, the planet, and the wider universe.

Set on an isolated island in an atmosphere that borders on the apocalyptic, the novel posits a single character brokering life among winds, tides, and birds in a world where human society has receded or collapsed. With such reduction of life to fundamentals, Crvenkovska finds a space of narration where the human identity might be re-imagined in continuity with the non-human. The novel has no didactic ecological agenda but in imagery and rhythms resonates with the key

intuitions of deep ecology.

One of the great features of *HAW* is the necessity to insist on the sea and natural forces as objects in their own right. The second part of the novel meditates not so much on human doing, Bela's isolation on the island, but on the relentless movement of the waves and on the massive stillness of the air: "The clouds hang heavier than yesterday. The wind erases all before it. Darkness discovers us, wherever we may be" (2020, p. 32). The storm is not an enemy to be defeated but an agency that defines the scope of existence. For Næss (1989), it is an assertion of the in-itself value of nature. This experience of intrinsic value is closely related to the novel's exploration of the "ecological self." At moments, the categories between narrator and environment are permeable, "In her head, images began to form: the dark, threatening sea-sky, the jostling of the winds, the flash, the lament, the pain" (2020, p. 79). The weather is not a backdrop here. It breaks into thought and emotion. The "jostling of the winds" is in the same sentence as longings and pain, so mind and weather belong together. That makes the self-porous—open to space. Næss's concept of self-realization is reliant precisely on such expansion of identity—when the "I" is no longer distinct from but in the sphere of natural relations. To be on the island is to recognize one's very awareness shaped by the storm and the sea and the stillness.

The imagery of roots repeats this entwining of natural and human life. "Your roots are there, in the rock where only what it allows can thrive," (2020, p. 35) Bela's grandfather informs her. The root image fused with rock points to an identity that can't be separated from its place—one that owes its existence on the specific quirks of soil and stone. Næss emphasizes that the ecological self should stay rooted—not detached from the Earth, but understood through our deep connection to place and relationships. (1989, pp. 39, 175). Crvenkovska presents this in the geological and not social form of belonging: Bela's life is connected to the duration of rock.

House Above the Waves: Biocentric Principles

The narrative also widens its vision to encompass the diversity of life itself. At the very heart of deep ecology is the idea that human beings are neither ontologically nor ethically above other life. Every organism great and small has the same inalienable right to exist and to flourish (Næss, 1989, p. 166). *HAW* accomplishes this sensitiveness in the balanced way it portrays natural presences. Walking through the forest, Bela reports the world to an eye-opening awareness whose sphere includes mushrooms and birds and her dog Max in a chain of equal value: "Max and I went out into the forest. We ran and hunted and gathered mushrooms... listened to the birds, which seemed to be more and more with each passing day" (2020, p. 47). The mushroom-gathering is no less significant than listening to birds sing, and the animal companionship of Max is neither downplayed nor emphasized but naturally woven into the environment. This is a literary form of biocentric equality. Through seeing how the birds seem to become more numerous each passing day, she bears an awareness that their thrival is an occasion worth celebrating in itself.

The novel stresses the concept of diversity and symbiosis, and presents variety as richness.

He looked and saw all the barely visible, the small, the large, and the immense creatures in the seas and oceans. And the other creatures on dry land—large, small, barely visible, immense... And the ones in the fresh waters, in the atmosphere and in the earth's interior. Entirely other from those once dwelling on this planet but just as flawed and beautiful. (2020, p. 147)

The passage brings together life in all realms—sea, land, freshwater, air, and across all scales, from “barely visible” to “immense.” We can detect ideas of symbiosis by the way we can view them gathered into one living community. The text offers habitats side by side, which implies a kind of exchange and co-dependence among various kinds and species, but also cycles that link the ocean to the shore, and the air to the soil.

Simplicity and the Solitude of Survival

The novel's apocalyptic setting also emphasizes what it means to live simply after the collapse of consumerist society. As a sole survivor on a desert island, Bela's existence rests on the mindful using of life's most basic resources, and objects that endure and show resilience. In *HAW*, the theme emerges through the practical necessities to survive on an island. Material needs and possessions are reduced to the bare essentials: the house, heat from solar panels, vegetables from the garden, mushrooms from the forest. What remains is appreciated by its ability to withstand storms, or value is determined by the need for survival, not by increasing ownership. “The clear, pure water from the underground springs ... was divided—part for use, part for storage in special containers” (2020, p. 74). The distribution of spring water into portions to be consumed and stored depicts a lifestyle of minimum means of survival. Similarly, the long-lasting solar panels defy the consumeristic principle of replacement. Here value is found in durability and living in sync with nature. The isolation of the protagonist has the tone of an aftermath as if the narrator is one of the very last human witnesses in a world in which civilization has been brought to an end. “Yet, from the viewpoint of the island and its dwellers—Bela, the cat Max, and the birds of the forest—being severed from the rest of the world was not a burden but a blessing” (2020, p. 73). The scene has great resonance with Næss's maxim of decentralization: there are no world systems, no centralized powers or markets; solely self-reliance on elemental conditions.

Bela's apocalyptic solitude also reveals the novel's ecological imagination. Even in the absence of society, she continues to find meaning through her connection with nonhuman beings. The sea, the storm, the birds, the rock become interlocutors when human voices have diminished. What Næss (1989) characterized as an extension of the self into ecological identity becomes, in Crvenkovska's imagination, the only possible form of identity left. This is a vision with foreboding connotations. It suggests that ecological wisdom will arrive not through gradual reform but through disaster, when catastrophe convinces humans

of what is always true: our survival is at the mercy of forces we cannot change. But in defining a hero attuned to living in accordance with tide and wind and not against them, the author shares in Næss's vision of simplicity as freedom and not deprivation.

When read in the context of Le Guin's ecological poetics, *HAW* reveals both resonances and striking divergences across rhetorical, stylistic, thematic, ideological, and metapoetical levels. Like *Always Coming Home*, *The House Above the Waves* foregrounds a distinctly feminine mode of ecological perception—rooted in embodiment, care, and relational sensitivity to the more-than-human world. This resonance does not position the two works as symmetrical counterparts, but rather shows how Crvenkovska's solitary, post-apocalyptic heroine echoes and refracts the ecofeminist currents that Le Guin develops through communal female experience. While *ACH* constructs ecological consciousness through communal ritual, collective memory, and reciprocal relations between humans and the more-than-human world, Crvenkovska's novel stages ecological awareness in solitude, through elemental exposure, bodily precarity, and the stark absence of communal forms. Thematically, both texts reject anthropocentrism and consumerism, yet Crvenkovska's approach is more minimalist and post-apocalyptic, collapsing social structures to their barest remnants. Stylistically, her fragmentary prose and lyrical monologues echo Le Guin's ethnographic hybridity, but redirect it toward interiority rather than community. Ideologically and politically, Le Guin imagines an egalitarian ecological society, whereas Crvenkovska presents a world where ecological ethics emerge in the aftermath of collapse rather than through sustained cultural practice. On a metapoetical level, the two works share an interest in dwelling as a form of ecological belonging, yet they articulate this through radically different narrative architectures.

These insights allow us to return to the hypothesis that underlies this reading: to what extent does Le Guin's ecological poetics offer a productive lens through which Crvenkovska's novel can be understood? While *House Above the Waves* does not signal direct dialogue with *Always Coming Home*, and may not consciously inhabit Le Guin's tradition, the ecological vocabulary articulated in Le Guin's work nonetheless proves illuminating. Her notions of intrinsic value, dwelling, and biocentric ethics make visible the deep ecological intuition at work in Crvenkovska's stark, solitary world. In this sense, the hypothesis holds not because the two novels share origins or intentions, but because Le Guin's earlier text provides a conceptual scaffolding that clarifies the ecological tensions, sensitivities, and ethical undercurrents in *HAW*. The method works precisely by acknowledging difference: by allowing Le Guin's communal, ritual-based ecology to sharpen our understanding of Crvenkovska's minimalist, post-apocalyptic one. This framing sets the stage for the concluding reflections that follow.

Conclusion

Reading *House Above the Waves* through the lens of *Always Coming Home* at first feels like listening to two very different voices. Yet those voices still resonate, offering distinct but equally compelling landscapes of ecological

imagination. The world in *House Above the Waves* is desolate and solitary, where nature does not console or instruct—it simply exists, immense and indifferent, though never as an enemy. That stark exposure generates something crucial for the protagonist, and perhaps for readers too: an unsettling clarity about what it means to live within, rather than above, the world.

Le Guin's *Always Coming Home*, by contrast, imagines a society that not only survives in nature but lives in sustained harmony with it. Her vision is not naïvely utopian—conflict and complexity remain close to the Kesh—but it shows a world where deep ecological values function as everyday habits, rituals, and shared assumptions. Her people do not merely revere the earth; they inhabit it, with it, and as part of it.

Both works ultimately confront modernity's arrogance while offering paths beyond it: through endurance, recalibration, and reimagined forms of dwelling. What stands out is how powerfully they echo Arne Næss's claim that ecological wisdom is not a doctrine but a mode of being. Living in tune with nature emerges in silence, in song, in ritual, and in a careful refusal to take more than one needs. In this sense, approaching a Macedonian novel through an American one widens the lens of ecological reading and shows that deep ecology is not bound to a single cultural imagination—it can take root wherever people choose to listen to wind, tide, and the world beyond themselves.

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