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Ambika Raja
English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad

RETURN TO HOMELAND: SEARCH FOR IDENTITY THROUGH ECOLOGICAL MEMORY IN ROMESH GUNESEKERA'S *HEAVEN'S EDGE*

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Any discussion surrounding colonization and decolonization as well as global and local entanglements would be incomplete without referring to the theories of Edward Said. By suggesting that the notion of the Orient has been constructed by the West to justify colonization, Said has drawn attention to how geography and colonization are closely intertwined. Further, by pointing out that "these experiences [of colonization] enable complicated memories" (Said 181) for both the native inhabitants and the colonizers, Said has justified the "remarkable emergence" (182) of Anglophone writers who have attempted to retrace and re-excavate their past from a postcolonial point of view. A significant aspect of this recollection, exemplified by works of writers such as Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie, Michael Ondaatje, and Shyam Selvadurai, involves remembering the environment of their native land and charting the transformation it underwent due to these global interventions. This also includes elucidating the tensions that have arisen following the application of global practices in local environments and the experience of the colonised nations' identity loss. In an attempt similar to that made by the writers mentioned hitherto, Sri Lankan author Romesh Gunesekera in his noted work *Heaven's Edge* reminisces about the ecology of a country that is at war with unnamed powerful forces and emphasizes what these memories mean to a glocal protagonist who is caught between two worlds. According to Said, the

presence "overlapping memories" (182) for both the colonized and colonizers is an inevitable part of the colonial experience and the "unending cultural struggle over territory" (182). *Heaven's Edge* highlights the multiple and confounding identities the characters have to navigate and how these memories, specifically the ecological memories, enable them to regain or preserve their identities.

Published in 2000 to initiate discussion on the sense of homelessness and exile that groups of indigenous people have felt due to colonialism and its aftermath the *Heaven's Edge* provides a significant groundwork for the understanding of the slowly emerging interdisciplinary field of ecological memory. Set at the intersection of ecocriticism and memory studies, research on environmental memory highlighted in *Heaven's Edge* is still in its early stage. Nevertheless, theorists have attempted to define and redefine the terms by building on the existing research in the fields of ecocriticism and memory studies. To begin with, memory is the "means by which we draw on our past experiences in order to use this information in the present" (Sternberg 258). Memories urge a person to recollect past events and experiences associated with a place, space, or people. As argued by Afzal "this process is an extension of understanding through rethinking or one might say reflecting upon the past to ameliorate the present. Memory encourages one to remember ancestors and their contribution in making one who s/he is" (86). Offering deep insights into collective, autobiographical, and historical memory, Maurice Halbwachs' *On Collective Memory* can be regarded as the seminal work that has laid the foundation for the study of memory. Building on Halbwachs' ideas of dreams, memory images, and localization of memory, subsequent practitioners have surpassed the limitations of the previous theories to include "transnational, transcultural, or global perspective" (Craps et al. 500) into the spectrum of memory studies. Pointing to the advent of a new phase in memory studies, wherein we have "start[ed]to think ecologically (rather than merely socially)" Craps emphasizes that the ideas have been "prompted by our growing

consciousness of the Anthropocene" (500). In other words, environmental memory urges one to assess and evaluate memories associated with nature, its beings, landform, and the ecosystem. It is the process of recollecting vital interactions between human beings and the physical environment.

The objective of this paper is to explore the memories of the environment of their homeland the characters in the novel have and how these ecological memories enable the glocal protagonist to find and accept his identity. In my attempt to understand the representation of ecological memory in *Heaven's Edge* and in tackling the question of the global and the local, I also approach the literary work from a postcolonial perspective, as the novel is essentially a postcolonial text that discusses the impact of colonization and decolonization in Sri Lanka. Additionally, the novel rigorously engages with identity crisis and the concept of belonging, which continue to be some of the essential elements of postcolonial literary works. While postcolonial studies and memory studies have several overlapping concerns, as Michael Rothberg points out, even the most influential monographs of postcolonial studies have "no mention of memory" (359). Likewise, both the founding texts and many more recent assessments of memory studies have also largely avoided the issues of colonialism and its legacies. My research paper is an attempt to fill this gap in research by studying and analyzing a South Asian literary work through the lenses of postcolonial studies and ecological memory. Through a close reading of the novel and application of key concepts and ideas related to postcolonial studies and ecological memory, I argue that for postcolonial subjects, ecological memories can serve as a pathway for finding their identities and gaining a sense of belonging.

In Romesh Gunesekera's *Heaven's Edge* the central characters are rocked by the memories of the land and environment while struggling to keep alive the ecological aspirations of their ancestors. The characters here are subjects of both colonial and postcolonial experiences. Set in an unnamed island nation that has been ravaged by war with unnamed forces, analogous to the author's

homeland Sri Lanka, the novel can be viewed as a response to the Civil War that lasted for over two decades in Sri Lanka. Though the war erupted in the era following colonial rule, the roots of the Civil War can be traced back to the colonial period. Akash Kapur writes that "Sri Lanka was once the jewel of the subcontinent, a rich island with an educated and sophisticated population, a place where various ethnic groups coexisted harmoniously". However, during the colonial period, while the Sinhalese community of Sri Lanka distanced themselves from the British, the minority Tamil community grabbed numerous opportunities for economic advancements and availed themselves of colonial education (Ganguly 79). These differences, coupled with the postcolonial policies, led to a rift between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities in the country which eventually resulted in the ethnic war. Akin to the writings of renowned authors such as Michael Ondaatje, Shyam Selvadurai and Nihal De Silva Gunesekera's *Heaven's Edge* tries to explicate the struggle of the postcolonial, especially the struggle to understand one's identity, and break away from the subjugating dogmatic ideologies (Ramsamy 64). Unlike his earlier and most acclaimed work *Reef*, wherein the author presents the protagonist's flight from a spoiled paradise (Sri Lanka) to a secure and progressive nation – England (Ranasinha 30), thereby showcasing an "accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness" (Said 6), *Heavens' Edge* displays the return of the protagonist, Marc, who is a diasporic subject, from London to his native land and his eventual acceptance of the island and its culture. The protagonist is essentially caught between the two experiences of growing up in an imperial nation and moving to a colonized country in search for his identity. This quest gets fulfilled through the ecological memories and environmental entanglements the protagonist has upon reaching his native land, which eventually helps him understand his identity.

Romesh Gunesekera's *Heaven's Edge* has both the colonial period as well as the postcolonial war as its backdrop and traces the confused identities of three generations troubled by the outcomes of colonialism through the characters of

Eldon, Lee, and Marc. Eldon, the grandfather, leaves the island during his youth in the colonial period and settles in England, while Lee, his son, and Marc, his grandson and the protagonist of the story, grow up in England, and leave it in search of their identity for the island during the ethnic war period. Through these characters and through Uva, Marc's lover on the island, *Heaven's Edge* discusses the search for self-identity through the nuanced aspects of ecological memory in a postcolonial context. Even within these characters, the environmental memory adopts multiple shapes and forms, beginning with the narrative technique wherein the entire story is recounted from Marc's memory. By switching between the recollections of Marc's childhood and the memories of the war-torn nation, Gunesekera adds several layers to the ecological memories presented in the novel. Lawrence Buell, in his "Uses and Abuses of Environmental Memory," classifies environmental memory into four categories at which they operate: *biogeological memory*, which deals with human life and its evolutions since the beginning of time; *personal memory*, which focuses on an individual's relation with a place; *collective memory*, which theorizes memory at the level of a social group, and *national memory*, which examines the narratives of a nation (1). Going a step further, Rosanne Kennedy introduces the concept of "multidirectional eco memory, which link[s] human and nonhuman animals and their histories of harm, suffering, and vulnerability in an expanded multispecies frame of remembrance. It could facilitate new visions of justice that hold humans responsible and accountable for our actions towards nonhuman species" (268). The plea here is to not merely reminisce about the past associations with nature, but also to introspect and understand how these interactions affect the biotic and abiotic components of the environment. An analysis of any postcolonial literary text from the perspective of eco-memory would imply the espousal of such a multifaceted approach that necessitates an understanding of what these memories mean for nations that have been ravaged by imperialism.

In *Heaven's Edge*, the interplay of these personal, collective as well multidirectional eco-memories dominates the pages as the characters can be often found indulging in recollection of their own past experiences and exchanging tales of their community's associations with the physical environment. Here, for a character such as Marc, Lee, and Eldon, who are citizens of a globalized world rather than a local world, these personal and collective ecological memories serve as pathways for connecting with their traditions and thus regaining their identities.

After landing on the "pearl of an island" (Gunesekera 7), Marc, who is neither a tourist nor a native, but a man in search of his father and himself, realizes that the place is starkly different from the version he created in his mind while listening to the stories and memories of Eldon. Here, memory operates at two levels: Eldon's memory of his homeland and Marc's memory of his grandfather talking constantly about his native place. Halbwachs notes that elderly people have a tendency to repeatedly talk about the experiences and events of their past: "These men and women are tired of action and hence turn away from the present so that they are in a most favorable position to evoke events of the past as they really appeared" (47). The most crucial of Eldon's memories of the land is his trip from London to the island along with his family, during which they visit a range of ecologically rich areas, including the wildlife reserves, the cool tea-hills, and the coconut plantations, while searching for his ancestral home that had a "sand garden with lanterns and bougainvillea. Hundreds of butterflies. And a breadfruit tree" (Gunesekera 8). For Eldon, the journey is evidently one of his "fondest" (8) memories as he keeps narrating it to his grandson quite often. An inevitable element of postcolonial as well as memory studies is the presence of nostalgia in literary works that fall under these categories. Nostalgia has not just a continuing interest but a special resonance for those who are entangled by the long histories of colonialisation and decolonisation (Walder 12). Nostalgia in postcolonial writings often involves recollection of fond memories of a home or homeland and an

aspiration for restoration of the past, as exemplified through works including *Lost World of the Kalahari* (1958) by Laurens van der Post, *Midnight's Children* (1981) by Salman Rushdie, or *Lose Your Mother* (2007) by Saidiya Hartman. Walder notes that while it is possible to recall and reflect upon the past as an individual or a group without being affected by nostalgia, it is often difficult to disentangle nostalgic feelings from the operations of memory (4). This can be observed in the case of Eldon, whose recollection of his days amidst the breath-taking environment of island nation is interspersed with the feeling of nostalgia which urges him to return to his homeland. Nonetheless, the disappearance of his ancestral home due to the war affects him to such an extent that he never returns to the island again, indicating how the destruction of a memorable environment from the past can rupture one's entire association with the place or land. Eldon, for whom his native land is a significant part of his identity, is thus forced to forgo his previous connections and return to his global landscape. The ecological interactions and memories associated with it make Eldon realize that he has to cut his ties with the island and embrace the new world he has pushed himself into.

Having grown up between fig trees and the congested spaces of London, Marc's visit to the island can be viewed as a voyage to find his own identity and his own roots through the ecological memories of his forefathers. These memories, rooted in the beauty of the island's environment, have created certain expectations for Marc. However, his attempts to recreate the images conjured by Eldon's tale prove futile as the land is not as vibrant and green as he had expected it to be (Gunesekera 9). Wondering at the drabness of the place, the pile of rubbles instead of any vegetation, and the lack of any sign of life, Marc doubts whether it is the "same island Eldon had talked about" (10). The realization that endless wars have wreaked havoc on the island occurs to him only after communicating with the natives, especially Uva (27). There are several instances in the novel wherein Marc, during his interactions with the physical environment of the island, gets emotionally transported to his younger

days. The memories of his days in London keep reverting to his mind every time he comes across a new place or an intriguing landscape. The blanched flowers soaking in the sun and thin leaves hanging from the trees that he comes across while exploring the region immediately remind Marc of the "ancient chronicles" (11) his grandfather used to interest him in when he was young. Furthermore, when he sees the emerald doves during his initial encounter with Uva, he right away recollects the name of the species as he had previously read about them in his "boyhood bird books" (13). For Marc, the birds that Uva keeps freeing into the wild are a reminder of the spring flowers and herons by the riverside that he had witnessed during his early youth. At this juncture, Marc is caught in a liminal space; he is unable to completely indulge in the ecological beauty of the new landscape as the environmental memories of his home in England force his mind to switch between the two places. Though he has come to the island in search of his identity, every local ecological aspect transports him back to the globalized world he is a part of. Identity, which is essentially an ambivalent and nuanced notion, is key for understanding personal experiences in a world of constant change. According to Stuart Hall, identity emerges as a kind of unsettled space or an unresolved question in that space, between a number of intersecting discourses (Hall 10). In a postcolonial context, for diasporic subjects such as Marc, remembering not just his home but even the homeland has opened up the scope for multiple forms of identity within and beyond the nation-state (Walder 20). To elaborate, the colonized subject here dwells in a liminal space between his non-colonial identity in England and his newly found colonial identity which he realizes upon returning to his homeland. However, such identification is never simply a movement from one identity to another, it is a constant process of engagement, contestation and appropriation (Ashcroft et al 106), as exemplified through the case of Marc who is caught between his local and global experiences and thereby keeps shifting between his multiple identities.

It is worth noting that, for Marc, the memories associated with London and their environments are simultaneously connected to the life lessons Eldon had taught him during their expeditions in nature. While trying to adapt to his life as a newcomer on the remote island, Marc gets taken back to the examples from natural world Eldon had shown him to teach about dealing with life and its hurdles. Poking at the rich brown soil under the tall tropical trees in his Palm House, Eldon had demonstrated to Marc that one needed to grow and adapt to survive in the changing world (Gunesekera 204). Looking at his orange shoe-flower bush, Eldon had added that while many deemed hibiscus as a flower of idleness, he believed that "they prove you can change the world" (205). These words of wisdom taught through examples from nature prove to be highly beneficial for Marc who keeps harking back to them in times of crisis, which again indicates the liminal space he is caught in.

Though he spent very little time with his father and knew about him chiefly through Eldon's stories, it is hardly surprising that Marc spends a great number of hours pondering over the memories associated with Lee upon reaching the place of his death, the battle-scarred island. Predominant of these memories is the episode when the family learns that Lee passed away in a plane crash. While recollecting the order of events, Marc clearly remembers what the day looked like and how vibrant the garden along the Thames was, being a sharp antithesis to the incidents that were to follow:

> The sun was bright, but the sky hazy and the roar of jet planes coming in on to land seemed louder for their invisibility…Blackbirds were chi-chi-ing incessantly and the maroon roses on the straggly branches, too high up the neighbour's wall for my grandfather to reach, blossomed where the sun had warmed the buds into heavy blooms with ball grown pleats and voluminous petals… The garden was a riot of colour. (87)

Rather than remembering how he had felt when he learnt about his father's demise, Marc's memories of the day are strongly associated with the beautiful garden outside his London home and the heavy, sinking feeling within the house. The yellow Laburnum tree, the dandelion, the roses that he watered, the cabbage seedlings, and the ants in the garden are firmly imprinted in his mind

as opposed to the hazy images he has of his life after the death of his parents (90). The only other strong memory associated with his father that has been immortalized in Marc's mind is that of the video Lee had made while in the island country. The shots of the fresh yellow leaves and "birds trill[ing] between them in a pulsating tapestry of song" (151) as well as the wooden peacock chariot representing an amalgamation of history and mythology could be regarded as Marc's first insight into the culture and ecology of the landscape. In both instances, Marc's memory of Lee is strongly intertwined with the immediate physical environment surrounding him and his father. These instances suggest that for Marc, the local and global experiences are enmeshed in one another. He associates the memory of his father's death on the island with the flora and fauna he interacted with back at his home in England. He also connects the culture and ecology of the island with the memory of the untimely demise of his father. These interconnected eco-memories are precisely the catalysts for Marc's visit to the island in search of his identity.

In his discussions on the reconstruction of the past, Halbwachs juxtaposes the process of recollecting with the act of re-reading a book (46). Pointing out that while revisiting a book people try to remember how they had felt, the emotions they had undergone and their mental state when having read the book the first time, Halbwachs suggests that the present experience of reading the book would be vastly different from the former one. Each time a person re-reads a book, they feel as if they were going through an altered version of the work (46). Likewise, when Marc recollects the sequence of events that had occurred during Lee's death, though he has a clear memory of the situation and the setting, the sensations he undergoes are different from the ones he had felt earlier. The altered landscape, the unprecedented storm on the island, and the calm following it play a vital role in moulding Marc's current emotions. He now begins to imagine his father and grandfather standing against the same landscape, finally finding a place where they might all be "together again" (Gunesekera 90). The ecologically rich jungle surrounding him also reminds

him of illustrations he had seen in Eldon's boyhood book: images of sandpipers, green-shanks, golden-plovers, fish eagles, and brahminy kites (91). The images and the usage of the phrase *together again* are crucial as they suggest a sense of belonging Marc is beginning to feel on the island he has moved to. He can now envision living on the island and slowly embraces his identity as a native of the land. Several key postcolonial literary works (*The Mimic Man* by V S Naipaul, 1967; *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith, 2000; *Hummingbird* by James George, 2003) have extensively dealt with the theme of belonging where the authors have shed light on the feeling of rootlessness postcolonial subjects have experienced immediately after gaining independence. The subjects as well as their descendants, who either continue to reside in the colonized nation or leave their homelands during the colonization process often grapple with the "phantom of colonization" (Chiriyankandath 36) that looms over the post-colonial globe, indicating that they are neither able to have a sense of belonging in their colonized nation nor find it in the countries they move to. In *Heaven's Edge*, Gunesekera highlights this struggle through Eldon, Lee and Marc. While Eldon completely ends his ties with his native land and slowly finds a feeling of belonging in a European world, Lee and Marc find it difficult to have a sense of belonging while residing in England. As Marc says: "Both my father and grandfather had been quick to escape their formative traps. Eldon by coming to England from this apparent pearl of an island, and Lee, fifty years later, leaving England, his birthplace" (Gunesekera 6). It is only after their return to their homeland that both Lee and Marc find their identity and rootedness in the island nation. This is made possible through the ecology of the native land and the memories that they lead to, as exemplified through the previous examples.

A significant aspect of memory studies is the understanding and exploration of the déjà vu phenomenon. In contrast to general memory responses, déjà vu can be defined as a "strong impression of familiarity in absence of explicit recollection" (Strongman 214), an experience Marc undergoes upon reaching the military retreat in Farindola. The images of the gently sloping lands, the

vale, the calm water, and the higher ground of hills covered in the jungle give him a sense of familiarity though he doubts if he has seen them before: "Somehow, the pastel colours of the grass, the reflective water, the balance of the sky, cloud and soft sweeping hillsides each in its own way seemed connected to a faint glimmer inside my head" (Gunesekera 130). Additionally, the colours, the shapes, the climate, and the temperature that greet him when he walks down the trail behind empty retreat give him a feeling that he has arrived in a place he has been before. In subtle ways, the déjà vu created by the view of the picturesque land in Farindola provides Marc with a sense of belonging, which eventually urges him to settle down in the country. From this juncture onward, Marc, who was earlier caught in the liminal space, slowly starts to understand that though he is a part of the globalized world, his identity is connected with this island.

As the narrative progresses, Marc's memories connected with the land and his ancestors get interspersed with the ecological memories associated with his partner Uva, who is a native inhabitant of the island. After her mysterious disappearance, Marc attempts to keep alive the memories related to her by frequenting a waterhole that reminds him of Uva's duckweed pond where he had first met her. By looking for ash doves and green imperial pigeons near the shrinking waterhole, Marc develops a sense of hope in him, a strong belief that he would soon reunite with his lover. "I wanted to believe they would reappear" (Gunesekera 50), he says, adding "re-adorned, singing for a greener world, as she must" (50). In an effort to pay tribute to her and create the ecologically rich *ashram* that Uva had worked towards, he frantically endeavours to modify the unoccupied house he inhabits into a microcosm of her ambitious ideas. The exercise serves the dual purpose of retaining Uva's memories through the creation of an environment she had longed for as well as signalling his presence if she visited the place at some point. Beginning with a birdhouse akin to the one his lover had maintained followed by a garden like

the one he had in his London home, Marc steadily progresses in his venture to turn the isolated land into a sanctuary of flora and fauna:

> I wanted space and order, light and colour. I wanted the place teeming with a hundred different types of birds, of bees, of squirrels. I wanted them all to come, drawn by a lodestone of passion and the heady, overpowering scent of a garden in the middle of a jungle; to bring Uva with them, and if she could not come here, I wanted the garden to become her. (193)

Being obsessed with planting, replanting, and transplanting, everyday Marc tries to add a new element to his budding haven, thus creating a dreamland Uva had envisioned. The place eventually becomes a memorial for his family and Uva alike. In the backdrop of the war on the island, the essential aspect of ecological memory is that it is not about creating a discourse on what one community does to the other, but rather about strengthening the societies to deal with similar battles in the future (Clark 697). Marc's effort to create a pristine garden in memory of Uva can thus also be regarded as a form of resilience to deal with the imminent attempts of the enemies to destroy the ecology of the land. Throughout these events, Marc tries to retain his newfound identity and fight against the higher and intrusive powers by creating the haven in memory of his lover.

It can be safely stated that Marc has drawn inspiration for the venture from Uva's own efforts to develop a similar "ashram" for birds (Gunesekera 21) in memory of her mother. While for Marc, the ecology of the landscape is linked to the memory of his father and grandfather, for Uva, it is a way of associating and re-connecting with her deceased parents. The absence of what environmental psychologist Peter Kahn, Jr. terms as *environmental generational amnesia* (Kahn 106-114) in Uva, is precisely what helps her to reconstruct the eco-rich habitat envisaged by her mother. Environmental generational amnesia occurs when each generation accepts the environment they are born into as the norm, despite its levels of pollution, toxicity, and contamination (106). Though born in a country shattered by war, Uva's experiences with nature have been moulded by her parents' relentless efforts to build an ever-growing sanctuary. Thus, for

her, a diverse and vibrant nature is the norm, instead of a war-torn environment. Uva is also a part of the globalized world; although she has lived on the island throughout her life, she has interacted and engaged with numerous people from diverse backgrounds. Therefore, to ensure that her identity remains intact and, to keep the memory and spirit of her parents alive and carry on their "vision in secret" (Gunesekera 36) Uva tries to construct a farm filled with "clumps of bamboo and banana, tall avocado trees, shrubs full of berries and lantana growing everywhere" (35), after their death. While her farm does get destroyed by the military, upon reuniting with Marc in his newly made retreat, Uva develops a sense of belonging, as if she were in her "mother's home again" (227). Though Marc's presence plays a huge role in putting Uva at ease, this warm and homely sensation has primarily been stirred by the presence of a bountiful garden and a dynamic jungle around her that revert her to the memories of her family. For both its inhabitants, the retreat develops a web of eco memories connected to one another and their ancestors. It offers a shelter in which they can sustain themselves like "scavengers" (227) and provides them with a sense of belonging that they had never experienced before.

In the seminal work *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literature and the Environment*, Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George Handley express the need to enhance ecocritical discourses through postcolonial literature and suggest that the literary works of the former colonies act as powerful tools in revaluing the role of humanities in addressing global environmental issues (9). As demonstrated throughout this paper, Gunesekera's *Heaven's Edge* undoubtedly falls under this category of powerful fictions that are capable of generating newer narratives on identities and ecological memories. The characters of Marc, Lee, Eldo, and even Uva suggest that even though one might have multiple identities in a globalized world, it is possible to stay in touch with our roots through memories, and specifically ecological memories.

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Abstract

Situated at the confluence of ecocriticism and memory studies, the interdisciplinary field of environmental memory is slowly garnering attention, especially in researches pertaining to postcolonialism. While previous studies in environmental humanities focused primarily on the physical impacts of ecological transformation caused by global interventions on local communities, recent research sheds light on how these disasters shape the memories of individuals and groups with respect to their surrounding environments.

This research paper aims to explore eco memory as represented in the novel *Heaven's Edge* by award winning Sri Lankan author Romesh Gunesekera. Located in an unnamed island recalling Sri Lanka, ravaged by war due to certain unnamed forces, the novel highlights the ecological memories of a glocal protagonist who is in search for his identity. The paper attempts to understand how the novelist represents the nuances of ecological memory in his work and how this helps the characters in gaining or retaining their identities. By analyzing how the central characters navigate their memories and identities, the paper delineates the global and local interactions that pan out in the novel. Additionally, I argue that for those who have been displaced by colonial and postcolonial wars, ecological memories act as a pathway to reconnect with their homelands and thus regain or understand their identities.