

Ecofeminism in Selected Novels by Barbara Kingsolver, NoViolet Bulawayo, and Anita Nair: A Comparative Study

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ABSTRACT

This is an attempt to trace the history of ecofeminism in Western, African, and Indian contexts. A comparative study is conducted between *Flight Behavior* by Barbara Kingsolver, *We Need New Names* by NoViolet Bulawayo, and *Eating Wasps* by Anita Nair. It theoretically demonstrates how the selected works can portray the notions of ecofeminism in Appalachia, Zimbabwe, and Kerala. The research revolves around parallelism and interconnection between women and nature as well as the situation of women in patriarchal societies and how their lives are affected tremendously by ecological devastation in different contexts. For instance, in India, nature is perceived as a mirror of women's lives. The effects of chauvinistic attitudes and tribal traditions on Indian women are also traced.

Keywords:

Ecofeminism, Appalachia, Zimbabwe, Kerala, parallelism/women and nature

1-Introduction

From an ecofeminist lens, this article spells out the interwoven relationship between women and nature. The analysis shows the experience of oppression meted out to women and nature in patriarchal societies. The analysis relies on two major pillars. The first deals with the interconnection and parallelism between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature, whereas the second illustrates the major features of oppression and subordination of women and

nature. In light of these premises, an ecofeminist analysis of the works of Barbara Kingsolver, NoViolet Bulawayo, and Anita Nair will be explored. Three novels are dissected to highlight similarities and dissimilarities in the socio-cultural contexts under discussion. A lot of ecofeminist issues will be tackled in the works of three ecofeminist authors with different nationalities.

2. Experimental

To attain the objectives of the study, environmentally-related questions coupled with feminist issues are raised to explicate the interrelation between women and nature. The critical and analytical method will be used to introduce ecofeminism and to study the oppression of women in connection with the oppression of nature since ecofeminism apparently makes up the deficiencies of ecology. In his conflict with nature man pays no heed to women's exploitation and subordination. The aim is to highlight the justifications for considering the environment as a feminist concern and trace the interrelationship between women and nature. The role of NoViolet Bulawayo, Barbara Kingsolver, and Anita Nair in integrating environmental with feminist issues, their contributions and the interconnection between women and nature will be outlined.

3. Literature Review:

Karen Warren and Nisvan Erkal assert that inability to consider women's contribution to and interaction with the environment is called a patriarchal conceptual trap (7). Warren and Erkal add that women face taboos and customs that hinder their interaction with the environment. As such women suffer from the deprivation of their right to inherit economic trees, although women are considered the primary users of forest commodities. The patriarchal powers have ignored the social reality of women's important contribution to agriculture and forest production. Ecofeminists claim that logging trees, and forests causes deforestation, drought, desertification, shortage of food production, poverty, toxic wastes. They attribute all environmental issues to the oppression of women. Along the same lines, water supply and technology are the salient focus of the ecofeminists. It has been estimated that 85% of all environmental problems and diseases in countries occur due to the inadequacy of sanitation and water pollution. Children and women die out of unclean sanitation systems, and water-related diseases (Warren and Erkal 7).

According to Greta Gaard, "ecofeminism's basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppression on account of race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature" (1). Furthermore, ecofeminism demonstrates that all these forms of oppression are categorized under the patriarchal framework, and it is an ideology in which the self /other distinction is based upon a sense of self that is entirely separate (2). Hierarchy is the root cause of oppression because it is a result of the self/other opposition. Pollution and environmental destruction are the channels of communication between women and nature due to their effect on the female body. To illustrate, pesticides, toxic lands, pollutants, chemical waste, and radiation can affect the female reproductive system. These chemicals are often tested on laboratory animals to clinch the level of toxicity. This practice, together with the costly environmental developments of factories, clarify the link between environmental destruction and the oppression of animals (5).

Theoretical Framework:

History of Ecofeminism in Different Contexts:

Male bias against women and nature is the main reason for the interconnection between women and nature. Yildiz Merve Ozturk states:

Ecofeminism is an interdisciplinary critical theory which claims that environmental and women's issues are interconnected because of the objectification of women and nature in a male-dominant society. In line with this theory, the system forms a male-centered hierarchy and dualities, creating inequality in society and providing superiority for men (706).

Ecofeminists incorporate the elimination of this bias against women and nature. They call for preserving nature from male exploitation, derogation and destruction. They suggest that man must see himself as an ecological being to attain a balanced ecosystem that values nature. An ecological insight is imperative for feminists, and the feminist perspective is indispensable for any environmental approach.

Val Plumwood confirms that the problem of nature has become vastly interwoven with gender. Ecofeminism is meant for both activists and theorists. Its main objective is to illustrate the links between women's oppression and nature. "The western mapping of a gender hierarchy onto the nature/culture distinction has been a major culprit in the destruction of the biosphere." (Bratley and Krueger 476) Plumwood predicts the occurrence of ecological crisis. Coming up with this conclusion, she relies on two major elements, i.e. dualism and rationalism. For her, dualism is one of the basics of the relationship between humans and nature; she elucidates that Western culture has treated the human/nature relation as a relation of dualism (2). On the other hand, Plumwood demonstrates that drawing an analogy between women and nature does not mean that such a connection is merely positive. The comparison between women and nature and the subjugation of both to patriarchal power is a double burden. The correlation between women and nature should in turn give women an extra justification to fight patriarchal dominion that oppresses, and devalues nature, women, and nonhumans in general.

For Plumwood, "the Western model of human/nature relations has the properties of dualism and requires anti-dualist remedies" (41). Dualism depends on the exclusion of the "subordinated other" (41). This relation of domination/subordination shapes the logical structure of patriarchy. That structure gives rise to the creation of the "self" and "the other". Plumwood states, "by no means of dualism, the colonized are appropriated, incorporated, into the selfhood and culture of the master, which forms their identity" (41). The relationship between human beings and nature in the West has certain features which correspond to this logical structure, whereby the identity of the master is defined through the exclusion of women and nature, which lies at the heart of Western culture. Dualism includes nature and woman, as well as all the subordinated orders which are treated as inferior and are subjected to a "denied dependency" (42). Many key elements in the dualistic structure of Western culture are interlocking set of opposites. The following are illustrative examples:

Culture	/	Nature
Reason	/	Nature
Male	/	Female
Master	/	Slave

Rationality	/	Animality
Reason/		Emotion
Subject	/	Object
Self	/	Other

The dichotomy between these entities is called dualism. Dualism is ingrained in the nexus between dominance and division; dualism primarily constructs a difference between the two entities. It forms a superior/inferior, or higher/lower relationship. As far as Plumwood is concerned, backgrounding is a primary feature of dualism; it "is a complex feature which results from the irresolvable conflicts [in which] the relationship of domination [is] created for the master ... to make use of the other" (48). Dualism is based on the idea of providing a background to the dominant force. The idea of backgrounding depends on the exploitation of the "others" and the denial of their contributions. Backgrounding is one of the factors that lead primarily to the subordination of women and nature (49). Rationalism associates males with certain characteristics such as reason and power, and affiliates women with emotions and reproduction. This traditional connection between women and nature has been condemned by ecofeminists because women and nature are always described as uncontrolled animals, whereas men are consistently placed in a superior position.

Ariel Salleh contends that woman is considered the "reserved object of masculine desire" (20). Salleh calls for the subversion of the Eurocentric view which places men over women and nature. Salleh acknowledges the "other labor" produced by women since their work and their productive energies are always neglected and minimized by the dominant patriarchal culture, social, and economic system. Salleh asserts that the experience of women must be the epicenter of politics, indeed a prerequisite for building "ecological consequences"(20). Many ecologists claim that their principles are based on caring and connectedness, but they fail to illustrate women's underrated inputs, and experiences. Salleh voices dissatisfaction at women's undertaking the bulk of tasks all over the world with minimal or no wages, and therefore she turns out to be "the proletariat" (21). Salleh argues that the presence of women as a global majority brings out social changes essential for ecological revolution.

Moreover, Ruether excoriates the harmful binaries launched by patriarchal power to place women and nature in an inferior position. She condemns the false narrative which implies that women supposedly should be the cooks, cleaners, caretakers, and weavers because this assumption creates a schism between “men's power culture and women's inferior nature” (Hawkins 22). Ruether criticizes the inferiority of both women and nature caused by this unfair binary division. Ecofeminists dwell on the interconnection between the domination of women and nature. They condemn the system of oppression which tightens the subordination of nature. They tend to expose the interconnection between all forms and structures of oppression; therefore, all of them must be addressed dramatically. In her book, *New Woman/New Earth*, Ruether states that women will never solve their problems and liberate themselves without the eradication of the patriarchal constructs of the societies in which they live.

In the Appalachian context, ecofeminism constitutes the intersection between all the systems of human domination. Hawkins stresses that Appalachian culture is a key area in environmental issues due to the outrage over mining activities that exploit land and women. Capitalist business owners devalued the Appalachian land. For instance coal companies exploited Appalachian landscape, oppressed women, and children in mining, and logging activities. Besides, ecofeminism deals with a range of environmental issues such as climate change, biodiversity, abuse of animals, and the effect of all these environmental issues on the lives of women (Engelhardt 18).

In Africa, ecofeminists call for the preservation of ecology and the natural environment with an emphasis on the feminist element with a view to including gender equality. Ecofeminists seek to highlight this complex web of oppression and eradicate all prejudicial practices and oppressive social hierarchies which stem from female natural and racial “otherings.” “...nature-culture, female-male, and racial conflicts resonate and interlock throughout Africa's history” (Ewing 1). The examination of the importance of gender in the history of South Africa has acquired priority and the history of African women has already grabbed significant ecofeminist attention. In addition, ecofeminism focuses on how African authors mingle racial discrimination, environment, gender issues, and historical settings in their works of art (1).

According to Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, in Africa, ecofeminism addresses social concerns ranging from economic development, sexual abuse, political as well as health issues. Ecofeminists castigate the lack of health facilities, food, education, and shelter which in

turn affect the lives of women and children. Ecofeminism underscores the role of women and their epistemological expertise which preserve the environment. There is a strong connection between the widespread epidemics, the decay of the environment, and the breakdown of society (100). In Africa, women are regarded as caregivers and nurturers, if not mere male owned chattels. The interconnection between women and nature is sacrificed in the name of technological progress. Women and children are the most vulnerable victims of ecological devastation. The ultimate ecological devastation including soils and food crops resulted from the so-called dirt-cleansing revolution (Glotfelty and Fromm 4).

On the other hand, technology maintains racial discrimination through the exploitation of the working class and considering their races socially inferior. Due to their inferiority, this race is obliged to do work that destroys nature, and this in turn maintains the cycle of oppression. Their participation in mining makes them more dependent on it for having shelter, food, and their necessities. Their masters instruct them to perform these menial activities; otherwise they will be replaced by others who can perform their tasks more efficiently. Through this menace, Africans and people of color remain threatened and trapped by their white masters and they cannot even protect their environment, their cultures, and their families (Ewing 21).

In her book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*, Vandana Shiva elucidates that the Indian culture and civilization acquire their regeneration from unity with the rivers, trees, and lakes. In Indian culture, the gods and goddesses worship nature, but human greed eats it out (20). Nature is ill-used, and the feminine principle is excluded from creativity. If anything, it is a passive resource of benefit. This notion eventually led to the subordination and marginalization of women. Even women's innate knowledge of nature was marginalized. Shiva is deemed to be the most prominent advocate of ecofeminism. She condemns the prevalence of technology and modern science at the expense of originality and creativity. Progress and technological advancement represent a Western, colonial, and patriarchal project, which perpetuates violence against nature and women. In India, "Prakriti" means material nature or the living process, and the feminine principle stands for the *raison d'être* of life (Kramarae and Spender 250).

On the other hand, Gabriel Dietrich elaborates upon caste factors, social hierarchies, patriarchy, tribal structures, violence, chauvinistic culture, and subordination being contributing factors to the oppression of women and nature in India. Dietrich condemns Shiva's view of third-

world women being in the lap of nature. She thinks that “Prakriti” is the representative of Indian philosophy. However, Dietrich demonstrates that feminine principle is expressed in “Hindu terms” which are popular in the North of India. For Dietrich the feminine principle is implied for Muslims, Christians, Dalits, Sikhs, tribals, and other minorities in India (qtd in Rao 130).

Furthermore, Meera Nanda in her article condemns Shiva's portrayal of modern science as masculine and western. Shiva ascribes the deterioration of nature and the oppression of women to the colonial history of the country and the western model of technological development. Shiva ignores the existing chauvinism of power, class, caste, and culture that precede colonialism (32). To illustrate, in Indian patrilineal societies, property relations play a significant role in the relationship between women and the environment. Women do not have the right to own land. Conservative traditions do not allow women to inherit or even possess land in India (32). Nanda asserts that caste, class, tribal traditions, and other factors that may affect the status of women in India's patriarchal society should also be taken into consideration.

According to Zein and Setiawan, “ecofeminist analysis explores the connection between women and nature in culture” (1). India is well known for its cultural heritage, a major factor that leads to the oppression and victimization of women and nature. Patriarchy in India is shaped by race, caste family, urban, rural division, and environmental factors. The traditional practices of Indian culture have oppressed women and nature. Indian woman has encountered subordination, alienation, violence, rape, forced marriage, restricted mobilization, and patriarchal tribal laws. Ratna Dwi Astuti and Nurdien Harry Kistanti indicate that patriarchal restrictions, socio-cultural norms, and chauvinistic attitudes have been the major causes of women's subordination and oppression. Gender stereotypes restrict women's access to health services and expose them to sexual threats such as abortion, violence, unplanned pregnancy, and sexual exploitation (430).

The Selected Novels from an Ecofeminist Perspective:

From an ecofeminist point of view, this paper delves into the inextricable relationship between women and nature. The analysis manifests the experience of oppression sustained by women and nature in patriarchal societies.

In *Flight Behavior*, Barbara Kingsolver vividly depicts the environmental devastation in Southern Appalachia. The novel is a reaction against capitalist, patriarchally gendered practices that cause the devastation of nature and women. In addition, Kingsolver interweaves ecological

and feminist issues during the era of scientific revolution in her novel to highlight parallelism between women and nature, and how they are interconnected. She expands on the negative impact of global warming on women and the environment. Kingsolver elucidates how technological development may give rise to the destruction of nature, which in turn adversely affects the lives of women. The novelist draws an analogy between the chauvinistic exploitation of nature and the patriarchal oppression of women.

According to Sabah Atallah, Dellarobia's link to nature was clear in her view of the butterflies which reminded her of her latter child's soul, "a monarch is the soul of a baby that's died" (Kingsolver 359). Dellarobia's painful experience of abortion and the death of her children is equivalent to the monarch's destruction of the butterflies. Her fear of losing her child is the main reason for her early marriage and subordination because she cannot abort her baby after her rape. The interconnection between Dellarobia and nature is evident in this incident of the monarch's destruction of the butterflies which is parallel to the destruction of Dellarobia's habitat. Dellarobia's prefabricated house has been destroyed after the onslaught of flooding and tsunamis. "Above the lake of the world, flanked by white mountains, they flew out to a new earth" (Kingsolver 433). Dellarobia is agitated by Hester's misuse of land. She realizes that this process will bear negative consequences and may destroy the ecosystem. Tree logging will upset the stability of the ecosystem. It will also lead to deforestation, hence the destruction of her own home. The migration of the butterflies to begin a new life is equated with the displacement of Dellarobia and her family once flooding destroyed her home. That new earth resembles Dellarobia's new beautiful life.

In *Eating Wasps*, Anita Nair interprets the correlation between women and nature from another ecofeminist perspective. She narrates the oppressive circumstances each of the protagonists undergoes by using River Nila to show the inextricable nexus between women and nature in patriarchal societies. The protagonists are associated with nature. Even after their death, they still embrace nature. In addition, Nair espouses Meera Nanda's ecofeminist notions. She claims that western technological development may not be the only reason for the oppression of women and exploitation of nature. Many traditions and socio-cultural practices enrooted in the Indian society contribute to the suppression of women and abuse of nature.

Similarly, in India, according to Gomatam Mohana Charyulu, "the traditional practices of the people reveal that Prakruti (nature) and Parvati (woman) are not two different entities" (934).

In *Eating Wasps*, Anita Nair portrays how Urvashi feels that nature is her salvation from her unhappy life with her husband. She said "everything was in full bloom ... green and lush. She felt a rush of relief ... I feel like I've escaped into a secret garden" (Nair 12). Urvashi feels that nature is her comfort Zone in which she can escape from her unstable marriage (V.K. 1266).

Moreover, River Nila is the junction that ties together the stories of all the oppressed women in the novel. In part 2, the events occur nearby the river. Part 2 starts with the presence of Urvashi in front of the river. This scene highlights the irrevocable bond binding women and nature. In part 2, the river reflects Urvashi's feelings of despair and disappointment. She said: "I wish I could define who I am. I wish I could say that what I do makes a difference in the world, in some way" (44). Description of the river reflects Urvashi's feeling of subordination. In chapter 3, "the water in the river dried to an absurd and embarrassing trickle" (68). The river reflects Urvashi's depression and sadness. Nair begins the chapter with a vivid description of the river to reflect Urvashi's forlornness.

The river is an indication of Najma's deep sadness after the incident of acid attack "the thought of Najma squeezed her with a deep sadness" (69). In the wake of that incident, Najma suffers psychologically; she hates looking in the mirror. She flinches if a man comes near her. She loses her courage to meet people. In a soliloquy, the interconnection between woman and nature is developed further when Najma is chatting with nature about her experience of oppression: "when the worst that can happen to anyone has happened to me already, what more sorrows will you cast my way" (55). Najma was talking silently with the birds to complain about how painful her experience was. She divulges her secrets to nature because she always feels that she is connected to the surrounding nature around her.

On the flip side, Sreelakshmi's interconnection with nature is crystal clear from her desire to regain power from nature; she said: "a writer whose words sawed their way through the conventional once, I had withstood the sting of wasps" (4). She felt that the source of power is derived from her presence in the midst of nature, and getting inspired by the bees. In addition, she felt that she could fulfill her dreams through the bees' honey and nectar; she said: "I found a way to fulfill my desires on my own. So it was with the honey" (17). Sreelakshmi considers honey her source of inspiration to achieve all her future dreams. The river also constituted another source of power which pushes her to have a career and to be an independent woman.

Conversely, from an African perspective, NoViolet Bulawayo explores the parallelism between the exploitation of Zimbabwean natural resources and the oppression of women in patriarchal societies. An ecofeminist author, Bulawayo illustrates that ecofeminism embraces wider notions than ecological issues such as the exploitation of black females, and black children in hard labor, racism, discrimination, inequality, lack of adequate resources, and suitable housing, widespread epidemics, abject poverty, hazardous working conditions, sexual, psychological and physical violence. NoViolet Bulawayo touches on other environmental issues in *We Need New Names* such as pollution, deforestation, mining, and nuclear wastes which would eventually wreak havoc to the life of African women.

Like Kingsolver and Nair, Bulawayo reveals the strong interconnection between the sabotage of the environment and the subordination of black women in *We Need New Names* (Yusmarani 63). Bulawayo expatiates on the nexus between women and nature in a different way. She dwells on the interconnection between the degradation of nature in Zimbabwe and women's deprivation of their means of survival as well as the role trees play in saving African women from starvation. The mal-development conducted by patriarchal Zimbabwean authorities has damaged the country's natural resources. In chapter I "Hitting Budapest", NoViolet Bulawayo shows how African females and children suffer from poverty due to the dearth of natural resources. The ten-year-old Darling narrates how miserably hand-tied poverty-stricken women are especially after Operation Murambatsvina under Mugabe's rule.

The interconnection between woman and nature was well crystallized in the degradation of the Zimbabwean natural resources along with the displacement of Darling who blames all the leaders for implementing the process of mal-development in Paradise because they ruined women, nature, and children. She said: "I feel disappointed ... angry at our leaders for making it all happen, for ruining everything ... what they have done to our country. All the suffering..." (Bulawayo 287). The clean-up campaign known as Operation Restore Order destroyed thousands of houses; a campaign conducted under Mugabe's rule. It led to the displacement of at least 700,000 residents and seriously affected around 2.4 million people. Darling feels that her life has been shattered because nature in her country has deteriorated after attempts were made on technological experimentation. Subsequently, her family was displaced to the Shantytown of Paradise to live in the slums.

4. Conclusion:

To recapitulate, ecofeminism is a branch of feminism that utterly manifests the subordination of women and the abuse of nature as intersected entities. This interface between nature and women- as if they were two sides of the same coin- is well documented in the novels of Barbara Kingsolver, NoViolet Bulawayo, and Anita Nair. An ecofeminist reading of these novels proves that the experiences of unbearable oppression and subjugation imposed on women and nature are inseparable from their daily toil. Beside the plight of women in different countries and over different ages, ecofeminism covers many ecological issues. The comparative study is meant to pinpoint the interlinkages between environmental issues and feminist notions in general and in the three countries cited in particular.

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