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The Roots of Ecofeminism in Terry Tempest Williams “Refuge”

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ABSTRACT

There are strong ties that relate women to nature as women have been well known for their struggle not only for their rights, but also to protect and save the environment. Ecofeminism aims to liberate both assuming that they are the material basis of life. The study here, focuses on this relationship while examining the oppression practiced by men on both women and nature. Through the roots of ecofeminism Terry Tempest Williams explores in *Refuge* an Unnatural History of Family and Place the injustice of men and how she along with other female companions have stood against it. The study also explains how ecofeminists argue to eliminate the patriarchal structure to resist such domination practiced by men.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, feminist and ecological movements, nature, Terry Williams.

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Nature has always been related to mankind and affected by their behavior as men have always been putting it in danger, pushing humanity towards disaster. The bond that exists between women and the environment is a united one. Women have been known internationally to be at the forefront of starting environmental movements in defense of nature as a whole. The connection is termed as ecofeminism. The latter is defined merely as a branch of feminism that examines the relationship between women and nature (Merchant, 1980). It is a movement that shows the link between the degradation and exploitation of nature besides the oppression of women by men.

Ecofeminism, which is a movement towards the breaking of traditional patriarchal structures was given for the first time in 1974 by French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne. It is the latest development of feminist theory which includes different schools, still adheres to a basic theory that “tries to reveal the relation and origin between natural domination and gender domination” (Ling 2014). Ruther sums up the goals of the movements in her book, *New Woman/New Earth*, arguing that the feminist movement and the environment movement cannot accomplish anything substantial as both are in a society which believes in the domination of men. She calls for a radical transformation of socioeconomic relationships and to reshape the industrial society (1975). In a broader sense ecological movement should connect with regional and global women liberation movements to maintain women’s rights and resolve environmental crisis.

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Hence, female nature writers are not only well known in scholarly circles, but are considered important because they present radically different perspectives on the environment than their male contemporaries. For many female authors the sense of place is an important aspect of their writing as it is part of their daily life. One of the well-known writers who has a strong sense of nature is Terry Tempest Williams born in 1955. She is a conservationist and activist American author who is strongly influenced by the landscape of her hometown, Utah. Her works as their titles suggest concentrate on the individual's relationship to culture and nature. We see how the lack of intimacy with the natural world has led to lack of intimacy among humans in *An Unspoken Hunger: Stories from the Field* (1995), Williams reminds us in *Red: Passion and Patience in the Desert*, (2002) that the preservation of wildness is not only a political process, but also a spiritual one. She meditates on how both nature and humans connect in her book *Finding Beauty in a Broken World*, (2009) giving a hopeful narrative that what is broken can be constructed.

In *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, (1992) which is the focus of this study, Williams transforms tragedy into a document of spiritual growth. She learns to cope not only with the damage of her favorite spot since childhood, The Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, as the result of The Great Salt Lake River flood, but also with the diagnose of her mother with cancer. During such time of difficulty, she takes refuge in nature. Yet, when she learns that her mother and six other female members of her family have faced cancer because of nuclear tests, she decides to take a moral stand. By facing such challenges, Williams goes through a journey of spiritual change and a mature understanding of the strong ties between nature and women.

This study highlights on the close ties between nature and women and the unjust both face by men as presented in Terry Williams "Refuge." The researcher uses mainly feminist theory, that examines the relationship between women and nature, to investigate how and why both are manipulated by men. In doing so, some ecofeminist schools will be referred to during the analysis of this work. Cultural ecofeminism states that both women and nature are suppressed by the patriarchal system. This system must be reevaluated by developing new female culture and constructing the female spirit and so overcoming the patriarchal system. The school of social ecofeminism views patriarchy as only a partial form of social hierarchy emphasizing the power of economic and political roots on societies. The study gives a critical appraisal to the ecofeminist argument that subjugation of nature is akin to the repression of women. It also hopes to trigger future studies that cover other selections of literary significance that reflects ecofeminism.

Through ecofeminism, Terry Tempest Williams argues in *Refuge*, that men are by nature physical, while women are emotional and so the earth can only be saved by women. Williams conveys this in her emotional narrative weaved in her novel which talks about her personal life and then links it with her civil disobedience against nuclear power plants. She writes, "women couldn't bear it any longer. They were mothers. They had suffered labor pains but always under the promise of birth. The red-hot pains beneath the desert promised death only, as each bomb became a stillborn. A contract had been made and broken between human beings and the land. A new contract was being drawn by the women, who understood the fate of the earth as their own" (288). Williams describes how women seek unity with the land instead of seeing it as a tool to be conquered. "Our attachment to the land was our attachment to each other" (15).

While men who cultivated the land have arguably failed to maintain its sacredness, women who share her characteristics explains Terry Williams can encourage the universal community to reestablish their relationship with it which she resembles in her book to, "a contract." (288). Williams connects the suffering on earth with that of men through a series of events that she and some women in her family have suffered from. Her rage is against men who seek to dominate women in every conceivable way. Terry is a Mormon woman, who rejects the patriarchal forms of behavior imposed by the elders in the society. In her book, she explains that the Mormon General Authority thoughts and ideas have been critical of her for not having children of her own. Here, the ecofeminist in Terry takes strength to confirm that earth is more sacred than any other human institution which dictates women's actions on earth and so she takes earth as a companion in her struggle to establish a fair society.

Apart from studying the relationship, ecofeminism also sees a link between the destruction of the natural world and the subjugation and subordination women are facing from their male counterparts. Therefore, ecofeminism explores ways which various types of domination are regarded

as morally unjust (Li, 2007). In *Refuge*, Terry examines the connection between men, women, and nature as men are perceived to be controlling, active, and dominate over the land while women learn from nature and protect it from destruction. The ideologies are the fundamental problem and the reason for the oppression that women and nature undergo in patriarchal societies. She illustrates that all men dominate the land actively, with the aim of searching for individual gain from the environment or controlling it. "Many men have forgotten what they are connected to. Subjugation of women and nature may be a loss of intimacy within themselves" (10).

That women are central to the coexistence of man on earth is the hypothesis put forward by Terry Williams. Just as nature needs to be protected so do women for the sustainable future of the world. When she suggests a new radical way of looking at women's bodies to procreate, what she suggests is to do away with the idea of man as the master whom women must answer to. For they have been viewed as rational agents as they are given economic and educational opportunities which enable them to realize their potential and opens up their minds to be creative (Merchant 189). Women, on the other hand, have been viewed as irrational agents and biological reproducers which have prevented them from carrying out male occupations (Li, 2007). Throughout ages and in different societies, men have dominated in the matter of decisions on fertility and procreation through the instrumentalities of culture and socioeconomic structures. As a result, the massive growth in the population and exhausting natural resources are to be blamed on patriarchy.

There is an interesting connection that Williams writes about in her book which portrays the Great Salt Lake in Utah as a female who is manipulated by men for political, religious and military causes. The similarities that she depicts are out of the concept of intimacy. According to her, "Men define intimacy through their bodies. It is physical. They define intimacy with the land in a similar way" (10). On the other hand, she compares women who can provide both in the family and society to the 'Bird Refuge' through witnessing how they adapt when their homes are flooded. "The Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, devastated by the flood, now begins to heal... as I am trying to reconstruct my life" (3). Similarly, the interest of women in caring for nature is not a gender-related mechanism. Traditionally, women have been responsible for maintaining domestic things and caring for the vulnerable people. These conditions awaken their desire to defend nature and living things.

Williams' link of the woman's body to the earth shows her endurance of femininity. Historically, women have been seen to relate closer to nature because of their social roles, physiology, and psychology. Physiologically, the nature of women body and what it goes through besides domestic activities have kept married women in their homes and out of their jobs. On the other hand, the natural physiology of their male counterparts enables them to be free to carry out activities related to political and public businesses. Psychologically, women are more concerned with personal interests as compared to men who are objective and coherent and are viewed with a better capacity of thinking (Merchant, 1990). As she builds up her argument, Williams turns feminism into a political idea and links it with environmentalism. She identifies men as the principal enemy of both movements as men have always used culture to dominate both. "Earth is not well, and neither are we," she tells her grandmother. She further states that "the health of the planet" and the health of the women is the same thing (263). William describes how her father and brothers dominated the land through violence. They killed rabbits and took whatever they chose without looking at the consequences (14). Her forceful approach of describing men as the sole culprit has greatly helped the cause of ecofeminism movement. In her book, she writes about the attitude of the Gun Club members. She calls them beltbuckled men who are hell bent on killing owls just because they holler all over the place (12). According to Greta Gaard and Patrick D Murphy, the approach that William adopts makes men look, "as out of sync with nature in the same way that the men from the Gun Clubs are" (160).

Furthermore, women activists complain that technologies which are produced by men have nuclear effects such as radiation, hazardous wastes, and household substances on the reproductive organs of women and the ecosystem (Li, 2007). Bombs and nuclear wastes cause effects such as congenital disabilities, miscarriages, and cancers mostly leukemia. Pesticides which are being sprayed on plants affect both women and children who live close to them. An example is the atomic testing that was done in Nevada in 1951. Utah women suffered because they had to endure medical procedures, operations and illnesses due to the irresponsible and self-centered decisions made by male politicians during that time (Williams, 283). In *Refuge*, Terry fights against the existing economic models which do

not as much consider the opinion of ordinary people let alone women. She views the oppression of women and nature as interlinked because both are exploited by men. She brings out the story of many people who suffer silently on account of haphazard inequitable nuclear power development. And so, Williams declared herself as part of the "Clan of One-Breasted Women" as she had two biopsies of breast cancer and her family members had mastectomies as they were exposed to radiation from the atomic testing in Utah (281).

The public attention that is received by women's rights groups and the environment protection movements is the result of the prominence given to ecofeminism. The ideology combines the theme of men exploiting earth as well as women. Both of whom are in a way responsible for procreation and the sustenance of life, where the very existence of humans stands endangered due to rising global temperatures. Ecofeminism seeks answers to the reasons behind the current impasse where, the main source of life, both nature and women are targeted by men and their own benefits. In finding answers, Terry links personal narrative with happenings on the Nevada Test site where the desert is being held hostage to meet the military demands. She goes out on the protest march, gets arrested to convey the relationship each of us has with external happenings. Here, Terry's echoes Henry Thoreau words as he says, "all men recognize the right of revolution; the right to refuse allegiance to, and to resist, the government, when its tyranny or its efficiency are great and unendurable" (1983). Hence, through the roots of ecofeminism Terry Williams attempts to bring into open the voice of the self. The self whether it is women's own problems or the depletion of natural resources that is arguably the only medium which now needs to resist the attempt made by the traditional man who is playing the role of destroyer.

The envisioned history of the world where the individual is at the center of the human existence only empowers men. The systematic attempt to build a chauvinist society based on traditional ideologies need to be revised. People who protest are rare and their rarity becomes the reason to associate them with the fauna and flora, which equally are rare and endangered. Hence, the ecofeminism critique is an attempt at self-preservation not only of the human species in general, but also of modifying the political agenda which has remained mutually antagonistic to the rights of women and earth. It is an attempt to build female identified consciousness and reaffirmation of women's capacities (Baker, 1995). This refocusing according to Terry is desirable since women are the nearest to earth. She takes this argument further to state that each of the human species is given a certain well-defined role within the scheme of life. Men are given the task of maintaining culture, while women are given the task of helping the forces of nature. Hence, emphasizing both the biological and cultural diversity of life while seeking to unite two strands to build a balanced correlation for a sustainable earth. In other words, Terry refuses to acknowledge male superiority and argues the superiority of community. Her concept of ecofeminism is different from those who exploit male-female differences as she seeks to bring in a compromise by nurturing good in men to create a harmony within the community.

Apart from reconstructing the existing social and economic structures which exploit and dominate, ecofeminism sets an agenda for the Renaissance of the ideological orientation of mankind. Susan Baker, mentions six positive points and calls them reaffirmations which will reshape gender and nature. In this context, the first reaffirmation, valuing, wants men to admit that both earth and women are essential to existence. Nurturing, the second point, emphasizes that women have life giving capacities and their bodies have natural biological rhythm, hence they need to be protected. The third reaffirmation, weaving, wants mankind to accept interconnectedness of women and nature in terms of mutual coexistence. The disappearance of one is the disappearance of both. Mythologizing, the fourth point states that there are various instances in a non-patriarchal society where the ideology of ecofeminism has existed since long. What is called by modern man ecofeminism has been referred to by ancient wisdom as man in nature. Fifth, celebrating the spirit of women needs to be revived through its association with nature. Finally, there is the need for language reconstruction by modernizing its discourse which does not give women just. They must be brought nearer to all forms of nature and living beings. (1995).

The next course of action which is proposed by Terry Williams and others is to correct the political anomalies. They strongly believe that the norm of programs and policies are unjust, for they are destroying the self, nature and communities. "The Clan of One Breasted Women," as Terry calls her

family in her epilogue seeks to build the public opinion towards what can be called, political activism veering towards subversion (281). Hence, she launches the act of political mobilization to stop the nuclear testing at the Nevada site in order to make the world a better place for herself and others. In her book, activism packs women off to some place in the desert as a punishment. However, the determined band of Terry's women do not get disheartened. They smell the aroma of the locally grown plan and feel revived as they are, "soul-centered and strong women, who recognized the sweet smell of sage as fuel for ... spirits" (290). These are new age women who like Williams', one breasted woman, are not there out of their choosing, but to save the community. Having crossed the line, they are determined to put up the fight, which they consider their duty. William prods them to continue their struggle as their task is to "reclaim the desert for the sake of their children and for the sake of the land" (287).

Ecofeminism does pose several questions about the way it seeks to address the imbalance perpetuated by men. While Terry and her compatriots in the movements seek justice and equity for themselves and nature, their solution for commencing a violent conflict by simply making themselves soul representative on earth has come under criticism. It seems there exists no respect for men in the way men have failed to respect women (Cheney, 1987). So, it becomes just the case of inverting the pyramid as some opponents put it. Also, to unite both is to do away with the diversity of nature and to create homogeneity, which is precisely what ecofeminism claims to have destroyed the sanctity of earth and denied justice to women.

In this context, ecofeminism is an unsteady movement. Its members need to address the issue of competing claims of different identities instead of homogenizing women and earth. The joining of two different movements, feminist and ecological, may help to strengthen the cause of both, however the homogenization may create micro divisions in the future. Earth and women as the same sounds good to hear, but to lay claim in the whole of the same remains a debatable question. Hence, ecofeminism has to move beyond the issue of identities as earth is neither a male nor female and its existence is tied to the fate of both women and men. Both like any other part in nature are endangered. Murphy argues that part of the reason for the unification of nature and women lies at the door of the environmental movement which has failed to address, "gender oppression and socio-gender differences" (1995). According to Warren and others, ecofeminism needs to reinvent itself and overcome the dualism as the center of the developing critique of the existing framework of the world. Still, she acknowledges the ability of ecofeminism in helping women to assert themselves out of the patriarchal forms (1994).

Women and nature have been exploited beyond imagination by men is conclusively proved by various critiques. Although some policies have developed some changes in favor of both, still there are some real obstacles that prevent structural changes to social systems to ensure that women and nature welfare are a priority to decision makers. However, ecofeminism activists continue to fight for their rights. As a matter of fact, ecofeminism is the first serious attempt that has succeeded in bringing their pain on the high table of politics and suggested that any more dithering may lead to rebellion and subversion against the established, well entrenched patriarchal rulers who always looked at the issue the other way.

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