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AN ECOFEMINIST APPROACH TO ADRIENNE RICH'S POEM, *THE TREES*

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Abstract

Ecofeminism celebrates the profound bond between women and nature. It recognizes that the subjugation of women and the exploitation of the environment are inextricably linked, and advocates for a world in which both would be treated with respect. *The Trees* by Adrienne Rich is a compelling and evocative poem that reflects the ecofeminist sentiments. The research begins by delving into the core concepts and theories of ecofeminism, highlighting the shared experiences of oppression by both women and nature and calls for their liberation. Employing an ecofeminist lens, this research paper investigates how Rich has utilized her creative power to unravel the intricate relationship between the marginalization of women and the degradation of the environment. Through close reading of the poem, the research explores the images and metaphors utilized in the poem that convey the parallels between the constraints experienced by both women and nature. The research seeks to shed light on the act of escaping to nature, breaking all the boundaries and limitations of patriarchy.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Ecocriticism, Trees, Exploitation, Environment, Liberation, Nature, Escape, feminism.

Introduction

Since time immemorial, nature and human beings have shared an intimate relationship and nature will continue to be the man's source of physical and psychological needs. As dwellers in the sphere of nature, man being a more intelligent creature, perpetually devoting an enormous amount of energy and time to transforming nature to meet the domestic and industrial requirements which have disturbed the natural symphony over the decades. Historically, man has always strived to dominate nature and consequently, the techno-modern objective of mastering the environment for

extracting maximum resources has led to serious environmental threats like pollution, global warming, depletion of the ozone layer, climate change, melting glaciers etc. 'The nostalgic view of an unspoiled nature' demands a call for a universal awareness of the danger brought on nature by human activities. Over the previous decades, scholars, researchers, academicians and thinkers began to focus on understanding and demonstrating the instinctive relationship between man and nature.

The depiction of man's relationship with nature in literary texts has been recorded since the

times of the *Vedas* and the Bible. 'Ecocriticism' is a theory coined by William Reuckert in 1978 that tries to investigate "the ground upon which the two communities - the human, the natural - can coexist, cooperate and flourish in biosphere"^[1] with an earth-centered approach to literary text. On the other hand, ecofeminism is an activist and academic theory that according to Marry Mellor, the author of *Feminism & Ecology* is "a movement that sees a connection between exploitation and degradation of the natural world and subordination or oppression of women."^[2] Ecofeminism is a term coined by French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974) has been hailed as the third wave of feminism. It claims that women are "closer to nature" than men and encourages respect for both women and nature. Ecofeminism is a philosophical movement that acknowledges the connection between nature and women and their exploitation in the patriarchal society. It emphasizes that women and nature must unite together to achieve liberty and power.

Published in the poetry collection *Necessities of Life* (1966), *The Trees* by Adrienne Cecile Rich is a metaphorical poem that compares the trees to women. As an ardent feminist, Rich marvels at expressing the women's desire for liberty illustrating powerful images of nature in the poem. Rich, "one of the most widely read and influential poets of the second half of 20th century"^[3], has enriched the English Literature with her contribution of more than a dozen volumes of poetry. Her notable works include *A Change of World* (1951), *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law* (1963), *Leaflets* (1969), *The Will to Change* (1971), *Diving to Wreck* (1973), *A Wide Patience Has Taken Me This Far* (1982) and numerous poems. Adrienne Rich explores an intellectually stimulating and emotionally intense writing process. For her, poetry fortifies our relationship with the cosmos as she says, "Poetry is above all a concentration of the power of language, which is the power of our ultimate relationship to everything in the universe...."^[4] Her poetry deals with the perspective of a woman searching for an independent identity.

Literature Review

A lot of researchers, thinkers and literary critics have conducted critical studies on ecofeminism. They have dealt with various perspectives of ecofeminism and the guiding factors for development of this theory. However, an ecofeminist study of Rich's poetry has not been extensively explored. The present research focuses on theoretical understanding of ecofeminism and attempts to analyze *The Trees*, a poem by Adrienne Rich with an ecofeminist lens.

In *The Death of Nature* (1980), Carolyn Merchant traces how the rise of industrial revolution and capitalism has ravaged the nature for more and more advantage, leading to the emergence of the ecofeminist movement. She agrees that women and nature have an age old association – "an affiliation that has persisted through culture, language, and history."^[5] Carolyn Merchant writes that "the image of nature that became important in the early modern period was that of a disorderly and chaotic realm to be subdued and controlled ..." that "wild uncontrollable nature was associated with the female".^[6] She points out the classical notion of women's relationship with nature as woman lives in harmony with plants and animals. Further she writes about women's struggle to free themselves from the cultural and economic constraints that have kept them subordinate to men in American society.

In *The Nature of identity: Ecofeminism, Women's Poetry, and Reclaiming Power Through the Recognition of Parallel Oppressions* (2017), Jessica Dailey explores how poetry can become a mode of healing for today's feminist activists. The theory puts a large focus on the way in which capitalism and consumerism feed into the oppression of women and the destruction of the environment. She also points out the similarities between the treatment of women and nature. She recognizes nature "as a place for escape from patriarchal forces into the feminine community".^[7]

In *Discovering Feminine Power through Nature in Adrienne Rich's Poetry: an Ecofeminist Account* (2019), Leah K. Pisaruck discusses Rich's attempt to transform the patriarchal ideology of female domination and liberate both - women and

the natural world in order to encourage “a more inclusive, holistic, and loving view of our world”.^[8] Rich finds nature as a source of power and strength for her and often employs beautiful metaphors and imagery of nature to aid her in the process of discovering her inherent identity.

In *Adrienne Rich: Images of Marriage and Motherhood* (1986), Candace Michelle Haskell addresses the two main themes of the poem, *The Tree* - a woman writing letters and a number of trees in her living room symbolizing her inner self. Through this poem Rich evokes the women’s craving for freedom of being outside.^[9]

Discussion

A highly noted feminist poet Adrienne Rich, in her long writing career of more than fifty years, has dedicated her pen to express her ideas and feelings about womanhood and female roles. As a “revolutionist and revisionist”, she talks about the struggle of women to achieve social change at every level. Women and nature have been often depicted as chaotic, irrational and in need of control while man has been often characterized as rational, ordered and capable of taming nature as well as women. This arrangement of great power to men allows for the exploitation of women. Ecofeminism was born out of recognition of the parallels between the way women have been historically treated and the degradation of the environment. Women are often seen as advocates and voices of nature who speak out about the ecology with an empathic approach. Rich’s *The Tree* is a skillfully crafted poem that reflects the desires of women and plants isolated at home. Significantly, the poem seems to be an artistic outcome of woman’s yearning to escape from society where she often loses her identity and sense of self to the world where she can live according to her inner promptings. Through the extensive use of metaphor, Rich tries to describe the woman’s journey of transforming from a constrained self to a liberated self.

The Trees is an introspective reflection of the poet as an artist and woman. The poem conveys a symbolic meaning, the trees serve as an extended metaphor for the women. *The Trees* begins with the lines “The trees inside are moving out into the

forest”.^[10] The poet gives us a glimpse of the empty forest “no bird could sit / no insect hide”^[11] which makes the reader concerned about grave environmental issues like deforestation. The curiosity gets intensified as the poet says; the forest has been empty all these nights and will be full of trees by the morning. The stanza provides us with an unrealistic manifestation of trees, as a reader knows it well that the trees are immovable and hence, it prompts the reader to explore deeper meaning. The trees refer to the women who are ready to move beyond the boundaries of gender to get rid of the social limitations of patriarchal society.

Rich successfully intertwines the ecological concern and concern for women at the heart of the poem. With the interference of the industrialization in the 20th century, the shift of attitude towards nature can be significantly noticed. The green rulers of forest have been reduced to mere home décor. Man’s attempt to destroy forest for his industrial requirement and creating a false impression of nature in their house has confined the trees. Symbolically, women are also confined to their homes. In many cultures of society, the role of women is believed to be restricted to the domestic sphere only. The forest “will be full of trees by morning”^[11] can be interpreted as the movement of these women to associate them with the mainstream of the world.

Historically, women have faced various forms of discrimination that excluded them from various spheres of their lives and limited their personal and professional growth. However, their struggle for liberation has been an arduous journey filled with challenges. Adrienne symbolically records the long and continuous struggle of women for freedom as:

All night the roots work
to disengage themselves from the cracks
in the veranda floor.

The poet describes the struggle of plants to liberate themselves. The roots of the plants struggle silently for the whole night to move from the cracks of the veranda floor. The leaves exert pressure on the window glass so that they can break it and escape. Further, the poet throws light on the ‘small twigs’,

and 'long-cramped bough' that also participate in the liberation movement. Rich portrays the slow movement of the trees moving from home "like newly discharged patients/ half-dazed, moving/ to the clinic doors."^[12] These lines are not merely kinetic images of nature; Rich ingeniously conveys the profound meaning imbued with the theme of women's struggle for freedom in the poem. Here, the 'roots' might symbolize the foundational strength or the courage that women possess to stand against all challenges. The 'veranda floor' stands for the women's confinement within the domestic sphere in the patriarchal society and 'disengage themselves from cracks' indicates their break free from societal constraints. The 'leaves' and 'twigs' reflect the tenderness and weakness of the women. Even after women's complex and long struggle for liberation from the Suffrage Movement in the 19th century to contemporary times, the sense of fatigue could barely stop them rather; they are making desperate movement for a change that appears like "newly discharged patient half dazed moving to clinic doors."^[13]

Adrienne Rich has played a significant role in contributing to the feminist movement through her literary works. The poet herself appears in the poem. She is sitting inside the room writing letters and the door of her room opens to 'the veranda'. The 'inside' probably refers to the confinement and the open door alludes to the optimistic approach to women's liberation. In a literary context, 'house', 'home', or 'room' often symbolizes a place of safety, comfort, and refuge but here it is an oxymoron as it refers to the confinement of women in a patriarchal mindset. Further, the poet creatively embellishes the poem with the serene ambience of the night:

The night is fresh, the whole moon shines
in a sky still open
the smell of leaves and lichen
still reaches like a voice into the rooms.

Ecofeminism advocates that women can strengthen themselves through a deep connection with nature. The external environment also seems to endorse the movement. The images of 'whole moon' and 'sky still open' promise success in achieving the

freedom for women as well as unravaged environment for the mankind. 'The smell of leaves lichen still reaches like a voice into rooms' seems like an invite to the poet to join the movement. Lady Bird Johnson, an environmentalist has rightly said, "The environment, after all, is where we meet, where we all have a mutual interest. It is one thing that all of us share. It is not only a mirror of ourselves, but a focusing lens on what we can become."^[13] Adrienne Rich encourages us to look beyond the surface and engage with nature as a source of inspiration, guiding us to self-discovery and transformation.

In the last stanza of the poem, the poet is deeply pondering over the women issues as her 'head is full of whispers' and she believes it would be silent by the next day. 'Whispers tomorrow will be silent' symbolizes the success of the movement will be achieved soon and it would herald a social change. The poet facilitates the movement with the following lines of her poem:

The glass is breaking.
the trees are stumbling forward
into the night. Winds rushes to meet them.
The moon is broken like mirror,
its pieces flash now in the crown
of the tallest oak.

Conclusion

Adrienne Rich' *The Trees* illustrates the women journey from a constrained identity to a liberated self through the extensive use of images and metaphors. The poem propels the reader to go for multiple readings to reach at the core idea of the poem. *The Trees* captures the spirit of ecofeminism, emphasizing the interconnectedness of women and natural world. The nature has been feminized according to the ecofeminist view; it celebrates the women escaping to the heart of nature in order to get rid of the social constrains in the patriarchal society. It touches the theme of embracing harmonious relationship with nature encouraging women to identify nature as source of power and strength in order to emancipate their true selves. *The Trees* serves as a reminder that women's

empowerment is intricately tied to the wellbeing of the natural world.

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