

Women and Nature: Image and Imaginary Hybridization in Shakespeare's Sonnets

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Abstract

Women and nature are in ecofeminism, a conceptual hybridization foregrounded in nature as well as in culture. It transcends the nature-culture dualism as the capitalist brings the two in related exploitation following gender discrimination and environmental negligence. Shakespeare's works are largely read and designated to romanticism and romantic literature. However, the interpretation of the literature is inexhaustible. Thus, his sonnets No. 18 and 104 are beautiful songs of admiration composed of a metaphoric complexity of woman and nature. Unlike most pastoral, these poems open up with a striking connection between the woman and the natural seasons. This paper focuses on the nexus that joins women and nature as a process that yields literary aesthetics using Judith Plant's ecofeminism and women's environmental relationship. This is a re-evaluation of Shakespeare's Sonnets. The paper aims to engage the poems beyond mere romanticism thus, it interrogates the ecofeminist links as nuances of eco-gender negligence which is again, unruly exploited in patriarchal capitalism. This is, however, implicated in some danger of extinction including human and other life forms in the age of Anthropocene. Plant's socialist ecofeminist approach establishes women and nature as two inseparable beings strongly related in suffering but also in beauty. The figurative impacts within the poems show how women and nature are quite related in beauty and vulnerability. The entwinement is a demonstration of ultimate literary pleasure resulting from an imaginary portrait of a lady, whose beauty transcends to metaphysical. This is a positive stereotype of women and nature, which is the promise of ecofeminism.

Introduction

Metaphorically, women have long been associated with nature rhetorics like mother earth and beautiful nature are expressions of the relationship between women and nature. Over time, women have suffered suppression under patriarchy and sexism. It is to this effect that feminism, both radical and liberal had fought fervently. At the present, man in his insatiable desire for

materialism, extends his domination to the entire universe including the unseen and voiceless nature beings. Thus, the a need for ecological studies. The exploitation of the natural environment by man calls for serious attention since the earth is the live support of the entire universe. Feminists view environmental exploitation as feminist exploitation. The two variables (women and nature) are closely identified as sufferers of

masculinity. Both can be termed inseparable in their suffering from man's endless desire for wealth and development. This insatiability cannot be left to continue since the world through some philosophical theories like Marxism, Postcolonialism and Feminism seeks liberation and equality in order to attain egalitarianism. This article contributes to further insights into literature and literary criticism. It extends the boundaries of Shakespearean literariness by engaging his poems in contemporary but humanistic issues such as discussed in the subsequent subheadings. On this note, nature, however, is subsequently discussed as a literary signifier to whose, essence, the woman is theoretically connected as demonstrated in the selected poems.

Women and Nature: A Literary Objectivity

In literary criticism, the word feminism is not novel and ecocriticism has absorbed it as well. At the developmental stage of feminism, Elaine Showalter gave some three models of identifying feminism: the images of the women stage, the women's literary tradition stage, and the theoretical stage. Focusing on the third stage of feminism, this argument is drawn from a wide range of theories to raise a fundamental question about the symbolic construction of women within a literary discourse. The theoretical stage, however, is a continuum, ever-evolving and shifting boundaries since theory grows indefinitely to carry the inexhaustible nature of literary criticism (Lois Tyson, 2006). The third stage

therefore includes the environment and how it relates to women in beauty and exploitation.

Generally, these models allow feminism a good space of suggestiveness and endlessness. As a result, feminism is armed with knowledge sharing and knowledge transition. There is Postcolonial feminism, Psychofeminism, Poststructural feminism, Marxist feminism, etc, which may be different in approach, but not in objective. All facets of the feminist approach in literature are geared toward giving women a new and more positive representation. This may be achieved by criticising the old sexist stereotype or by appreciating an existing positive one.

Before ecological studies, feminism was a robust area of specialization which is dominated by gender oppression and sexist narratives about patriarchy and the unruly exploitation of women across the world (Adichie, 2015; De Beauvoir, 2010; El Saadawi, 1980; Woolf, 2010). Upon gender deconstruction and sexist stereotypes, feminism continues to expand its theoretical tentacles and today, nature is an established component of feminist criticism. In *The Ecocritical Reader: Land Mark in Literary Ecology*, Cheryll Glotfelty traces her theorization of ecocriticism to... Showalter's feminist models of investigation arrived at the following questions: how is nature portrayed in literature? How would nature-oriented nonfictions of the olden days get recuperated into literature? And finally, the theoretical stage; in which ecological discourses are drawn from numerous

theories, such as feminist literary theory. This also left ecocriticism suggestive and open-ended, thus, the interdisciplinary nature of ecocriticism. He went further with what he calls “Analogous work in ecocriticism which includes examining the symbolic construction of species.”(xxiv). This model of ecocriticism investigates the human/nature relationship in literary texts. Such critique questions the dualism inherent in human thought; the separation of meaning from matter, mind from body, men from women, and that which wrenches humanity from nature. Further studies in this model reveal and appreciate a correlation of any of these existing dualisms. According to Glotfelty; “a related endeavour is being carried out under the hybrid label “ecofeminism”(xxix). This is a hybrid of sorts: A hybrid of nature and feminine representations in literature.

Ecofeminism was first coined and used by a French feminist Frencios d’Eaubonne as a connection between Ecology and Women (Merchant, Carolyn...and Judith Plant 1999). This in the most radical sense of it, is targeted at the representation of three variables; men, women, and nature relationship. According to Judith Plant in her essay titled: “Women and Nature,” ecofeminism is described as that which gives men and women common ground. Though, women may have been associated with nature, both men and women dwell in the same environment. This is why both sexes have to come together in the struggle against the death of nature. Women have a voice through feminism but nature can only

react and cause disaster for humankind. Like feminism and ecocriticism, ecofeminist literary theory also applies different models of investigation. Val Plumwood writes in her text: *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* that;

“One essential feature of all ecological feminist positions is that they give positive value to a connection of women and nature which was previously in the West, given negative cultural value and this was the main ground of women’s devaluation and oppression”(8).

Kammer Mirian takes a look at some selected plays by Shakespeare and investigates the material and ideological implications of Shakespeare’s invocation of nature and womanhood in all their discursive and non-discursive forms. Her discovery is a subversion of the old assumption that nature often identified with womanhood is regarded as passive and exploitable (36). Mirian further pleads that ecofeminism must “first advance a material, non-metaphorical understanding of nature as an affective, dynamic, independent agent with the ability to signify, rather than as inert, static matter”(1-2).

It is the projection of this positive value to the identities of women and nature that qualifies ecofeminism as a theoretical framework in this essay. This is what Plumwood refers to as the social type of ecofeminist analysis: It is in this type of ecofeminism that the feminization of nature and the naturalization of women becomes a process of ideological manifestations. This is inherent in Shakespeare’s sonnets as nature alone shoulders the

responsibility to qualify the woman and her beauty.

Hybridity and Hybridization in Shakespeare's Sonnets

According to Blood D.C et al, hybridization is the production of hybrids while hybrid is "an offspring of parents of different strains, varieties, or species." (109). going by Blood's definition, hybridization is simply a process of getting two different variables together to get one of a higher value. Two pure breeds must come to a cross-breed in order to get a hybrid. Linguistic hybridization is a process of getting a word from elements of different linguistic origins. This may be as a result of language contact. Hybridization may sound alien in literary studies but the interdisciplinary nature of ecofeminism allows such terminologies as deep ecology, green wave, environmentalism, organism, degradation, etc, in current literary discourse. Hybridization in this context is simply a metaphoric weaving in which the beauty of a woman is perceived through some natural seasons.

To end the theoretical framework, let us take a look at how ecofeminism as a literary theory becomes according to Lagoism and Henryism a foreign body that infects Shakespeare (15). Following the Henryists, the study of women and nature as hybridization in Shakespeare's sonnets appears to be an inoculation that makes Shakespearian studies healthier.

We aim to examine the representations of women and nature as

a literary cross-breed in which, one might be the manifestation of the other. This is achieved in Shakespearian sonnets through the use of some elements of imagery like simile and metaphor since women are directly or indirectly compared to natural seasons.

"A popular contemporary green version attributes to women a range of different but related virtues, those of empathy, nurturance, cooperativeness, and connectedness to others and nature" (Plumwood 9). And when a beautiful woman is endowed with virtue, hers becomes an extraordinary beauty of sought. For Sarah Stickney Ellis inquires: "What man is there in existence, who would not rather his wife should be free from selfishness, than be able to read Virgil without the use of a dictionary" (1585). If the answer is none, it follows that the hybrid of the interrelatedness of women and nature in this metaphoric process is ultimate beauty. Ellis' feminist demand is foregrounded as women do not only share commonality with men but also with nature. Ellis writes from a point of view, in which the best education for the women of England during the Victorian period was according to her, the full knowledge of selflessness and cooperation with others. And that these virtues would have been worth more than the understanding of Vigil even without the use dictionary. Therefore, a selfless and cooperative woman would have been not just the ideal but the most beautiful. Beauty in literary parlance is called aesthetics. Shakespeare achieves the highest level of literary aesthetics especially in his sonnet sequence as presented below.

In *Sonnet No. 18* for instance, Shakespeare finds the beauty of the lady quite incomparable. It seems a wonder that only nature bears the burden of an unequal comparison. The persona begins with a tone filled with awe as he wonders;

“Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?/ Thou art more lovely and more temperate:” (1-2)

Though nature is adored for its beauty and generosity, these lines indicate that the lady is more lovely and more temperate than nature. Most people adore nature but not everybody likes women. The lines portray nature as quite admirable but cannot be compared to the virtues of the lady. Note that ‘summer’s day’ of course is always beautiful. But “more lovely and more temperate” are quite suggestive of virtue than visual beauty. Metaphorically, ‘summer’s day’ may have been allowed some virtue, but cannot be compared to those of the lady. Nature judged by man, sometimes practices extremism. Such is the case concerning weather in the following lines

Rough winds do shake the
darling buds of May,
And summer’s lease hath all too
short a date:
Sometime too hot the eye of
heaven shines,
And often is his golden
complexion dimm’d;
And every fair from fair
sometime declines, (3-7)

If harsh winds blow off the flower in May, and summer is always shorter than desired, and occasionally, the sun is too hot and the sky often loses of [his]

golden look, then, all fairness about the seasons sometimes disappears inconsiderately, then the poet has passed his opinion about nature. This justifies man’s opinion about nature earlier mentioned.

This paper looks beyond the positive or negative stereotype given to any of these two variables, especially by their male counterparts; it goes further to explore the poetic essence of these imageries. Nature is portrayed as rough, short, hot, cloudy, unfair, and finally inconsiderate but: “By chance, or nature’s changing course, untrimm’d” (Line 8), appears that man shows little or no interest in his understanding of the affairs of nature than to simply exploit it. The phrase; “by chance” shows that the principles governing the affairs of nature are vague to mankind. Nature here is likened to a woman, whose course is no man’s business. Nevertheless, there is a complexity in which the notable comparative modes are present. The lady is depicted to be more virtuous than nature through the reasons already expatiated as the voice leads readers on a comparative mode that remains open to further interrogation. From the second line that reads thus: “Thou art more lovely and more temperate” one could vividly come to terms with probably, some exaggerated reality.

Within the last few lines, the poem brings the two variables (women and nature) together in a non-detachable movement of metaphoric expressions. Here, the element of comparison has changed and one manifests the other.

But thy eternal summer shall not
fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair
thou ow'st;
Nor shall death brag thou
wander'st in his shade,(9-11)

The lady's beauty is now the metaphoric summer which shall neither fade nor lose its fairness. This summer surely, is another land of 'Eldorado.' This is the result of hybridization. A poetic hybrid of thought; where a lady's beauty is metaphorically represented as summer which shall never fade, nor lose fairness, nor die as we can see. This leaves the reader with pleasure perceived from the imagery of a perfect woman, who also surpasses death. This is the literary aesthetic in discourse.

A look at *Sonnet No. 104* equally reveals a series of ecofeminist representations that capture the gaze as A. N. Akwanya would put it. The persona calls the lady 'fair friend' who he says, does not age, for as she was when first he saw her, so remains her beauty. He goes on and emphasises the time past since he saw her first, thus:

...Three winters' cold
Have from the forest shook three
summers' pride;
Three beauteous springs of
yellow autumn turn'd
In process of the seasons have I
seen,
Three April perfumes in three hot
Junes burn'd, (3-7)

Imageries of natural seasons like winter, summer, and autumn, are all present and signify the time lapsed and the lady's beauty remains unfading. An attempt should be made to appreciate

(her) on whom Shakespeare lavishes his great wit of imaginative wealth. More admirable is the fact that she is not qualified in any other than natural season. Shakespeare in these sonnets brings women and nature into a close association with each other; which ecological feminists can look at as an appraisal and an answer to most ecofeminist questions. Giving that positive stereotype of women and nature in literary works will help heal the wounds already caused as people will read and get influenced by their knowledge. Literature has it in its nature to entertain and create awareness. Ecofeminism in this discourse tries to draw our attention to the wonder, made of the lady and the natural season in the sonnets. And that is creating awareness.

Based on this, Angela Schumann makes a case for women and nature in her essay: "But as a Form in Wax": An Ecofeminist Reading of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*". She states that the linked domination of women and nature by men is a misunderstanding and underestimation of the two identities by men. For this reason, she writes to subvert the perceived canonical assumption that Merchant according to Angela had dated back to the Early Modern Age (46): the assumptions that women and nature are inferior and subject to male domination. But since nature possesses such qualities as "forest shaking cold winter, proud summer, beautiful spring, yellow autumn, April with perfume and hot June" what then has nature's suppressor who claims to have dominion over it?

The last line of the second quatrain takes us to the climax of the integration process, thus: "Since first I saw you fresh, which yet are green;" (8). The lady is addressed as being fresh when first he saw her and remains green at present. Green symbolises life and freshness is to be ageless. Different aspects of nature come best as it is fresh for instance, fresh water, fresh air, fresh fruit, and fresh leaves. The lady was fresh when they met years ago and still looks green as he meets her again. The woman is described as an excellent signifier of nature: 'fresh and green'. This means a life-sustaining being, in connection with nature is life-giving and sustaining. These words equally demonstrate the best and richest condition and performance of most natural phenomena as earlier said. It is at the point when eyes cannot help but run after, in admiration.

Shakespeare's portrait of the lady is turbulence in the imagination of the readers. This beautiful lady so grossly qualified has a myriad of descriptions as the subsequent lines read:

Ah, yet doth beauty, like a dial-hand,
Steal from his figure, and no space perceived:
So your sweet hue, which methinks still doth stand,
Hath motion, and mine eye may be deceived,-(9-12)

The beauty that was as fresh as green now looks like a clock's hand which seems to move tirelessly without covering any ground (9-10). The beauty sets in motion as well and thus confuses the eyes of the persona (12). This is an evidence of a gaze in captivity. When

the gaze is being captured, it may eventually get lost in admiration and begin to see in double or more. Such an admirer can claim to be deceived as we see in the last line above. The word motion may be viewed in many perspectives of which double reflection is one of them. The persona as we are made to believe, expresses his admiration of the lady who captivated his interest, and his gaze upon her leads to some ambiguity of thoughts.

The enshrinement comes to an end in the following line:/ Ere you were borne was beauty's summer dead/ (line 14). Summer in most of the world comes towards the end of the natural season. It marks the concluding part of the year with its hottest weather that dries up every moisture (fresh and green) left by the previous seasons. Shakespeare's beautiful lady as we can see from this line was borne when beauty's seasonal end (summer) was already dead. Her beauty knows no end and it does not fade. It is evergreen and fresh. This lady is immortal as well. Where shall one find a woman encapsulated in every natural hue?

Conclusion

In an attempt to answer the question above, a review of Plant's ecofeminist assumption which can be interpreted as a social branch of the theory becomes necessary. She maintains that women and nature, indeed humans and nature need a new image of themselves as they mend their relations with each other and with the earth. This new image will surely reflect what we are learning through the study of ecology, what we are coming to understand through

feminism, and the experience in our daily encounters with the natural environment (2). This is the ultimate quest for ecofeminist literary theory. The search for a new image of the woman has given birth to many topics in feminist literary discourse like “New Face of Eve”, “The New Woman “and “Women in the 21st Century”, etc. Within the ecological studies, we also see things like; “Regreening the Other”, “Healing the Wound”, etc. All these are geared towards achieving a new and positive stereotypical image of women and nature. This will help revive our dyeing earth and reposition the women as both are co-sufferers of male domination and exploitation.

These two are undoubtedly depicted in the poems under analysis in such positivism that one account cannot bring it to exhaustion. The metaphoric impulse created in the poems cannot be unravelled taking women or nature as a separate entity but only as an organic unit. This wholeness is important as it helps to reveal the inseparability of women from nature in beauty and temperate as well as in strength and weakness. They are cross-breeds that yield for the men both in prejudice and in appreciation. The latter is what we have seen as it gives rise to an ultimate beauty.

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