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AN ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF *CAPTAIN OF THE SLEEPERS* BY MAYRA MONTERO

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ABSTRACT

Captain of the sleepers (CS) by Mayra Montero is a tale about Andres yasin and his family. The island inhabited by the natives is later occupied by the navy, who cause innumerable troubles to the islanders in the name of military exercise. Accompanying the main plot is the story line of Estela's affair with a man which disturbs the mind of her son, Andres immensely as it leads him to meet J.T.Bunker after fifty years to know the truth of the affair. This paper brings to the forefront the complex problems of expropriation, the devastation done to the ecology, including the turbulences the human inhabitants of the island faces. And focus vividly on the degradation of the natural resources in the Vieques Island by the Marines, in the name of military exercises.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Anthropocentrism, Pacifist Feminism and Environmental degradation.

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Captain of the sleepers has been published in 2002 and translated, then published in U.S. in the year 2005. It is story which revolves around Andres Yasin and his family members in the Island of Vieques during the nationalist movement in Puerto Rico in 1950's, and later in the year 2000 when the boy is portrayed as an adult, who goes to meet the captain to know the mysterious around his mother's life and death because of the affairs. The chapters keep on alternating between the past and the present. In his sixty two years oldness Andres Yasin comes to the island called St. Croix. This particular island and the hotel where he stays act as a medium in retrieving his memory about the incident that has happened in this island, and the island of Vieques inhabited by his family, in his childhood days. The novel shifts to the past. In doing so, he narrates each and every scene that revives back in his mind in full form - his past life in Vieques Island with his mother Estela, father Frank and J.T.Bunker - friend of Frank also known as captain are recollected.

This paper will pry the novel from ecocritical stance by taking into account various ideas of ecocriticism that will enhance and support the view point of how the resources of nature are depreciated by some of the human being in the name of development and growth of modern technology. Basically war is not good for the mankind and Nature. Perhaps, the wars fought in the modern ages are absolutely destructive; unlike the ancient times, when there has been no pollution affecting the atmosphere. In *Captain of the sleepers*, the island and its ecology end up in utter destruction because of the navy's anthropocentric vision.

Men exploit the environment of the island, unbothered of the consequences. As William Rueckert remarks that "In ecology, man's tragic flaw is his anthropocentric (as opposed to biocentric) vision, and his compulsion to conquer, humanize, domesticate, violate, and exploit every natural thing"(113).

In the opening scene of the novel the very first sentence starts as, "I'm in the last place on earth I'd like to be" (CS 1). This statement comes from Andres who refers to the final stage of his life as he is sixty-two, and almost in his voyage towards second childishness. Symbolically, this line may infer at the final stage in which our planet is placed being worn out by the exploitation of its natural resources. The natural balance is traumatized on this earth by human beings in the name of modernization, industrialization and development of technology scientifically. Rueckert says that "where there is no ecological vision, the people will perish"(114), likewise, the novel portrays the island which perishes ultimately along with its people because of the ecological depletion.

There is, moreover, a possibility for drawing symbolical comparison between the age old Captain and the earth. The Captain is very old just like the earth and he suffers from the disease called cancer; almost like the earth which is now cankered by the pollution created by the humans, and needs treatment for its disease of environmental depletion. In the same manner as the earth, the old man is visible with his dry bones pointing out in this body without any life and almost to death, "That's the word to describe his face, which has been distorted in the worst possible way: A lizard's eyes in violet- coloured sockets, devastated ears like those of a leper, sunken cheeks tinged with gray" (CS 6). The age old Captain's appearance can be juxtaposed with the earth in which one can know the lives of both human and the earth being distorted to the most possible level by modernity. The captain says that, "it's begun to grow dark" (CS 7). Literarily it refers to the upcoming of night in the novel but symbolically it may articulate about the world which is beginning to grow darker by the pollution surmounted on it by the inhabitants.

For Andres, a sense of belonging and integration is shared towards the place in which he has spent his vacation. He feels comfortable and accepts to visit the Captain after many years. One of the reasons being that, they plan to visit in an island hotel, to which he has acquaintance from his childhood days, "Only here do I have the courage to face what he's going to tell me. Courage and the kind of foreboding that lets you throw everything overboard" (CS 5). The island and the hotel provide him a kind of solace and courage to face the hard realities in life, for he shares a sense of belonging towards the land. The description of the island called Martineau is idyllic with a strip of beach in front of the hotel accompanied by a hill behind the house, and the small hollow with the dry woods.

Christmas Eve of 1949 has been the last festive season that Andres and his family commemorated together. After this Christmas, everything succumbed to change in this island. The serene beauty of the island has been spoiled by the seditions entry of the navy. The Navy people expropriated the lands from the natives by deceiving them. The inhabitants after losing their lands and livestock to the navy are forced to vacate their land. As they need a job to live their life, the people have gone to the nearby island like St.Croix to make their living. The natives devoid of their ownership towards their own mother land are made to slog in other's land for earning their daily beard. They have lived like excommunicated souls in their own land that uncovers the heinous attitude of the navy towards the people of the island.

The navy sets up camps in the Monte Santo district for the disposed people as a consolation for taking away their land and they has promised to provide them money, canned food, corn meal, as well as charcoal to cook their food. In the beginning, the deliveries to the disposed people have been punctual every week, but after few months have passed, the delivery of the goods has become less frequent and the dispatch slowly vanished. The disposed has been left to feed by them. Already devoid of their land and livestock, now additionally the navy washed off their hands from the responsibility of looking after the disposed. These people without any resources have suffered untold miseries in the camps.

Occasionally many died, owing to the difficulties and the pollution which infected the natives living in the camps, "Although women died occasionally, the once who'd just given birth died like flies" (CS 23). The clothing which has been donated to the disposed is by far the best cloths they ever have worn. Hence, the

pathetic and helpless situations of the owners of the land being exploited by the navy are revealed intensively. Pacifist feminist draws connections between a militarized culture filled with nuclear weapons and women violence as this militarism poses great threat to the planet because of their deathly weapons. Pacifist feminist's ideology of voicing against militarism becomes a central issue for many ecofeminists. Because of this militarization, women folks suffer untold miseries. Women are spoiled by the army people to celebrate their victory and women as refugees are made to look for contributions made by others.

In January 1950, many soldiers began to advance into the island, "and there are Marines everywhere....Crowding into the café's, laughing with guffaws that sounded like howls" (CS 25). These lines talk about the mannerism of the marines. Due to their arrival in huge numbers the streets of Isabel Segunda has become precarious for the inhabitants to walk through it. At one instance, Braulia warns Andres that the streets are no longer safe for a small boy like him who is just eleven years old. The marines known for their immoral etiquette indulges in drinking, merry making and flirting with girls. Braulia once complains that taking advantage of the situation the salesman also tries to bring in contraband girls to earn money through them. The whole island lost its morality and the values. There are chances offered even for the righteous person to indulge in wrong practices.

At times, these marines have gone to the extent of killing the girls in a brutish manner by seducing them. Matilde's daughter, Santa has been one such prey to the hunger of the malicious marines. Santa died because of the cruelty surmounted on her by the higher officials of the navy. The police have favoured the navy by closing the case silently. They put the blame on a disposed man who has been half crazy already. As a result the crazy man has committed suicide that concludes the problem and the injustice done to the girl.

These atrocities of the marines could not be questioned by anyone in the island because of their authoritativeness, "They ripped off her nipples with her teeth. They scalped her, they did that while they are dragging her along on the ground. She was still alive (CS 77)". These lines portray the beastly malevolent behaviour of the marines on the women folks. Ynestra King says that the military culture, "...is connected with rape, genocide, and imperialism; with saturation and homelessness; the poisoning of the environment and the fearful lives of the world's peoples- especially those of women (*Radical Environmentalism* 77). This is very much evident through the incidents that happen in the Vieques Island after the setting in of the marines. Feminist antimilitarist movement deals with fight against all these embellishments done to woman. Age of nuclear weapons does not serve any good than threat to woman and nature on a larger scale. The destruction done by the nuclear weapons can never be received back on both nature and women for which the Vieques Island and the female characters of the novel serve as a perfect example.

Nature is not made for merciless exploitation by these modern soldiers of war. It is a sacred institution, which should be treated with respect and justice. This Novel, by telling about the exploitation committed on nature, emphasize on the preservation of ecological world. Disturbances of this peace in the former will eventually result in uproar of the latter. As the pollution caused to the environment of the island finally has its effect on the islanders who suffer from various problem of diseases; contamination of water; and befouling air to breath. Destruction of the natural resources, ecological damages to the island and homogenization of the landscape are the greatest fallacy on the part of Navy. Misuse of the land and water bodies in the island is the root cause for all the turmoil suffered by the islanders. Like, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" quotes of "water, water everywhere not a drop to drink" (Coleridge), in the forthcoming future ages this phrase will eventually be used by mankind as a by-word if the current scenario of depleting water resources remains unchecked.

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