



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE, LITERATURE  
AND TRANSLATION STUDIES (IJELR)

A QUARTERLY, INDEXED, REFEREED AND PEER REVIEWED OPEN ACCESS  
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

<http://www.ijelr.in>



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 3. Issue.4.,2016 (Oct.-Dec. )

ISSN

INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

ECOFEMINISM IN HEMINGWAY'S SHORT FICTION

Dr. G. SRILATHA

Reader in English

P.B. Siddhartha College of Arts & Science, VIJAYAWADA, A.P, INDIA



ABSTRACT

Ecocriticism emerged as a study of the relationship between literature and the natural environment. It is concerned with nature writing and ecological themes. Ecological concerns have been the subject of literature for a long time. The first law of Ecology is that everything is connected to everything else. Ecofeminism is a branch of ecocriticism and emphasizes the interdependence of all life. The aim of ecofeminism is not the same as liberal feminism. Ecofeminist do not seek equality with men but aim for liberation of women as women. It is a movement that draws the connection between the domination of nature and exploitation of women. It is noted that women were the first to protest against environment destruction. They address issues on deforestation, animal rights, etc.

**KEY WORDS:** Ecofeminism, ecofeminist, patriarchy, destruction, oppression, insensitivity.

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INTRODUCTION

Ecofeminism is a term coined in 1974 by the French Feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne. It is a philosophy and movement born from the union of feminist and ecological thinkers. D'Eaubonne's description focuses on the similarities or interconnectedness of the way women and nature are treated in paternalistic societies. This idea of a parallel between the treatment of women and treatment of nature is one of the hallmarks of ecofeminism. Ecofeminism emphasizes the interconnectedness of all life.

Ecofeminism is rooted equally in environmentalism and women's liberation – two powerful movements that flowered in the 1970's. Combining the feminist and ecological perspectives, ecofeminism makes the women/nature connections: the domination, exploitation, and fear of both women and nature are characteristic of patriarchal thinking. Ecofeminism argues that there is a parallel between women and nature that comes from their shared history of oppression by a patriarchal society. Ecofeminists claim to be part of a distinct social movement. They feel that men dominate women and humans dominate nature. Naturally, then women and the environmentalist should be united in their struggle.

Ecofeminist activism grew during the 1980's and 1990's among women from the anti-nuclear and environmental movements. Mary Mellor says they draw "connections between exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women" (*Ecofeminism and Environmental ethics*)

1999). The primary aim of ecofeminism is that it does not seek equality with men as such, but aim for liberation of women as women.

According to ecofeminists, nature is a feminist issue. Ecofeminist philosophy extends familiar feminist critiques of social isms of domination (eg., sexism, racism) to nature. Dr. Vandana Shiva complements the idea of interconnectedness of women and nature. As a philosopher, eco-feminist and environmental activist, she is one of the original tree huggers from the 1970's. She won the prestigious Sydney Peace Prize 2010 for her commitment to environmental justice. She says "Ecofeminists have described a number of connections between the oppressions of women and of nature that are significant to understanding why the environment is a feminist issue, and conversely, why feminist issues can be addressed in terms of environmental concerns" (*Ecofeminism* 1993: 13).

#### **BODY**

In this paper, an attempt is made to study the ecofeminist aspects of Hemingway's stories. The stories considered exhibit feminist, ecological as well as ecofeminist features. Violence, physical, emotional or psychological, inflicted on women and nature, is discussed here, and ecofeminist insights are applied to the analysis of the stories. All these stories portray man-woman relationship against the backdrop of nature either in its pristine condition or denuded and despoiled by the greedy human. *Cat in the Rain*, *The End of Something* and *Hills Like White Elephant* are chosen for the study.

*Cat in the Rain*, presents a clearer link between apathy to nature and human character. The story presents an American couple on vacation, staying in an Italian hotel. Through the window one could see a war memorial beyond which could be seen a public garden with big palm trees and green colored benches. And beyond that is the sea. The man, George, is dying on the bed, propped up, with a couple of pillows at the foot of the bed; he is reading a book. Throughout the story, he is presented as being in the same posture, dying in bed, and reading. He does not know or care about the atmosphere outside or the rain that is falling.

The wife, in contrast, is seen to be more closely connected to nature. She is standing at the window, looking out and watching the scenery. That is how she comes to see a cat that is huddled under a table, keeping itself from getting wet. Her wish to save the cat is both instinctual and psychological; her heart goes out to the poor cat instinctively. The wife is able to empathize with the helpless creature easily, because she is no better. In psychological terms, she is frustrated; her situation as a childless wife of an insensitive man like George is no fun. She asks him to go out and rescue the poor cat. He merely grunts and says, "I'll do it", but does not bestir himself; he continues with his reading. When for a moment she loses sight of the cat, the wife laments, "I wanted it so much, I don't know why. I wanted it so much. I wanted that poor kitty. It wasn't any fun to be a poor kitty out in the rain" (138).

Feeling sorry for the cat, and for herself, she goes and sits in front of the mirror. She is disgusted with her short hair "I get tired of looking like a boy". But George had insisted that she have her hair short, because he liked it "the way it is" (138). Cutting the hair short may be a cultural practice, but it is contrary to nature. So, in contrast to what is found in the earlier story, the situation is reversed here the man who is apathetic to nature is insensitive while the wife who shows a concern for nature and other creatures is seen to be more sensitive.

For all the company the reading husband gives her she is lonely. Her desire to save the cat and to tend it is evidently born out of her sense of loneliness. She is found saying, "Anyway, I want a cat. I want a cat now. If I can't have long hair or any fun, I can have a cat" (138). She is seeking to fill the gap caused by the inattentive husband. His insistence on her having short hair is none other than an attempt to dominate his wife, the same attitude he seems to have against nature or non human beings. Insensitivity and domineering go together in him. The woman is eager to find solace in her relation with nature and with a non human creature like the cat. When the emotional needs of a person remain unfulfilled, the person seeks fulfillment through linking with other people, creatures or other things. And, in the cat, the wife sees a being as abandoned as her. Hence she shows her sympathy for the cat. She is emotionally unfulfilled as her statement shows.

I want to eat at a table with my own silver and I want candles. And I want it to be spring and I want to brush my hair out in front of a mirror and I want a kitty and I want some new clothes (138).

But George in his insensitive condition fails to notice his wife's needs. He silences her with, "Oh, shut up and get something to read" as if all problems would be solved thereby. The wife wishes to connect with the cat and with the environment outside. The window is the channel and the medium that links the human and the non-human world. Ana Romia, a critic, has something interesting to say in this context in her article "The Symbolism of the Cat under the Rain":

This story relates how a defenceless cat is struggling to keep dry during the pouring rain, and how the American woman wants to go outside. The cat is gone. After this event, the woman realizes that she is missing so much more than just the cat (web 15 May 2008).

Towards the end of the story, the hotel maid retrieves the cat for the woman. Her wish is fulfilled by a maid, and not by her husband.

"The sense of self as separate is more common in men, while an interconnected sense of self is more common in women" (*Ecofeminism* 1993: 9) says Greta Gaard, the ecofeminist critic. This idea is clearly illustrated in this story in which the woman shows ecological concern and associates herself with nature, while her husband is engrossed in the self-centered activity of reading a book.

The next story *The End of Something* demonstrates the extinction of the town, Hortons Bay. Returning to Hortons Bay after a period of ten years, he is struck by the amount of destruction that had overtaken the town. Simultaneously, he feels that his feelings for his lover Marjorie are no longer as strong as earlier.

In the old days Hortons Bay was a lumbering town. No one who lived in it was out of sound of the big saws in the mill by the lake. Then one year there were no more logs to make lumber. The lumber schooners came into the bay and were loaded with the cut of the mill that stood stacked in the yard. All the piles of lumber were carried away (96).

This passage summarizes the tragic tale of a dying town, a town that had flourished while there were enough trees to be despoiled and pulled down to feed the logging industry, and which is abandoned by the rapacious men for the simple reason that there are no more trees left to be pulled down. So the greedy populace shifted to a greener place which they could destroy. They took away all their machinery, leaving behind everything that had no value for them, and causing an irreparable damage to nature. Hortons Bay is now left with "one-story bunk houses, the company store, the mill offices, and the big mill itself stood deserted in the acres of sawdust that covered the swampy meadow by the shore of the bay" (96).

Nick and Marjorie, the lovers, see the sad sight of the disappearing town, all caused by man in the name of civilization. Apparently, Marjorie too, like the town, is experiencing the destructive effects of the rapacity of man: her lover had taken her virginity and now does not find any interest in her. The long passage describing the demise of the logging town serves as a parallel to the breakup of the romantic relationship between the protagonist and his lover. Val Plumwood, the ecofeminist critic, makes a pertinent comment on this parallel: "each woman has her own relationship with nature and that there are reasons why one cannot brush aside the whole issue of a woman-nature connection and that it has to remain central to feminism. Both have been mutually inferiorised" (21).

Probably, the ruined landscape had affected Nick psychologically, and perhaps he is sensitive to the damage of the landscape. But clearly, his sensitivity does not extend to the point where he would relent over the deteriorating relationship with Marjorie, and might endeavor to repair it. It is anti-climactic as well as ironic that his feelings for her should be in terms of vagueness of his emotions. After their supper

They sat on the blanket without touching each other and watched the moon rise.

You don't have to talk silly, Marjorie said. What's really the matter?

I don't know.

Of course you know.

No, I don't.

Go on and say it.

Nick looked on at the moon, coming up over the hills.

It isn't fun anymore.

He was afraid to look at Marjorie. Then he looked at her. She sat there with her back toward him. He looked at her back. It isn't fun anymore. Not any of it (99).

It is possible that the term "something" in the title is meant to indicate the non-specificity and therefore vagueness in the feelings of the protagonist. Even as the logging community had no use for a treeless town, Nick too finds no fun in having an emotional relationship with the woman who is no longer fresh. Insensitive to her feelings, he simply puts her aside. Moonlight, a satisfying dinner and the presence of his beloved by his side do not stir him up: on the contrary he feels as if "everything was gone to hell" inside of him. Marjorie takes this rejection passively and rows away from him on the waters, leaving him to his own thoughts and feelings. Bill, Nick's friend, out of touch with the feelings of others, is shocked at what had happened between Nick and Marjorie, but cannot understand how Marjorie could walk away without any protest.

According to biographer Carlos Baker, Hemingway was particularly disheartened by the change he witnessed in Spain's Irati River region from one year to the next:

All winter and spring the loggers had been working in the beach and pine forests and it was locally rumored that the fishing had been ruined. Ernest could not believe it .....But they soon found that the land lady was right. The dark stream bed of the Irati was filled with loggers' trash.....In four days of trying they did not take a single fish. "Fish killed, pools destroyed, dams broken down," said Ernest. "made me feel sick" (1969: 149).

Thus the story reflects the ecological concerns of Hemingway. Throughout the story Hemingway uses the imagery of an irreparably damaged environment. He appears more ecofeminist in his sympathies than his readers. Thus the reader notices that the oppression of Marjorie by Nick runs parallel to the ruined Hortons Bay.

This story yet again illustrates the insensitivity of man to a woman's ability to connect with the world outside her. Marjorie had believed in their love and had hoped to marry Nick and go to Italy. But the sight of the destroyed forest scope around Hortons Bay had perhaps given her a forewarning of how her own life would be no better than the "acres of dust" she saw all around. The damage done to the ecology, sad enough for conventional critics, rouses the anger of the ecofeminists. Such environmental damage is considered as no less than violence. In Karren Warren's words,

Feminist can begin to develop analyses of violence and non-violence which show the connections among kinds of violence: violence against the self (eg. Suicide); violence against others (eg. Spousal and child abuse, rape); violence against the earth (eg. "rape of the land"); perhaps even global, systemic, economic violence (eg. Poverty). This would involve showing ways in which patriarchy underlies all such kinds of violence and itself breeds violence (1996: 194).

The ecological and geographical destruction is seen in terms of economic and moral destruction, affecting not only nature but human nature, as much as the character of the humans.

The parallel between woman and nature is fairly open in this story. But in the next story it is more veiled. *Hills Like White Elephant* presents the disparity between man and woman with regard to having children. If motherhood for a woman is sweet and fulfilling, for the man it is a burden: he is unwilling to take on the responsibility, particularly when he is not yet ready to take on the burden of a wife. So he wants his lover to abort her pregnancy. And if she wants to retain his love, she must agree to his demands and sacrifice her motherhood. As it often happens, the vulnerable woman becomes the victim of male domination. It is a case of a woman being oppressed by the male.

This story too opens with a vivid description of the fertile hills on one side and the dry and drab railway station on the other side, where there is no shade:

The hills across the valley of the Ebro were long and white. On this side there was no shade and no trees and the station was between two lines of rails in the sun. Close against the side of the station

there was the warm shadow of the building and a curtain, made of strings of bamboo beads, hung across the open door into the bar, to take out flies (219).

On the one side is nature in its plentitude, and on the other side is what man has made in the name of civilization, the drab shelterless station. The phrases, "no shade", "no trees" etc. only emphasize and focus on man's destructive tendency. On this side are found the young man and his lover, waiting for the train that would take them to Madrid where the woman would have to abort the child she is carrying. The woman is being denied an opportunity to have a child: it is a denial of motherhood, a natural blessing for a woman, like Mother Nature. Man destroys nature and denudes space to build his railways; man seeks to destroy the woman's womb so that he can sojourn through life without burden. When man cuts down trees for his greed, nature is passive and silent. In the same way, the protagonist of the story expects his lover to be silent and acquiescent, and get rid of the pregnancy, because he does not wish to burden himself with responsibility.

The setting of the story is the railway station, which is treeless and shadeless on that hot summer day. The lovers sit outside the bar, and talk over their problem. It is about abortion: the girl is pregnant, and the young man wants her to get rid of the child. Unwilling for the drastic step of abortion, the girl is yet forced to agree to it, because the young man is insistent and domineering.

There is no action, only exchange of words between the lovers. Ironically, they sit facing the hills lush and green. The girl looks at the hills that reflect her condition and her natural desire for motherhood. The utterances and movements are archestrated in such a manner as to reveal her feelings of identity with the hills, prompting her to initially decide as to what to do about the child she is carrying, and also what direction she would wish to take, to make her life most rewarding.

The location they are placed in, the railway station, stands for sterility, denudation, the result of man's rapacity and greed. From where they are sitting, the young woman can look across and see the green hills standing for fertility and fruitfulness. Hemingway very deftly uses the implied significances of the location to bring out the innate characteristics of the man and the woman, and their deeper wishes. The woman, in her natural condition is cheered by the mountains: "They look like white elephants" she says, using a beautiful simile, reflecting the natural as well as wild condition of the situation, in contrast to the manmade condition of the station. Elephant may be wild and a part of nature, but "white" elephant is not. It is perhaps a "cultural construct" and hints at an ambiguity in the woman's attitude. But it indicates an imaginative streak in the female protagonist which is absent in the male one. He looks puzzled at the comparison because he cannot see the association between the swelling belly of the pregnant woman and the mound-like hills.

At the end, the woman makes the decision to destroy the baby, in spite of her initial desire to keep it. This is because she is more interested in keeping her lover than her baby. (In this regard she differs from Marjorie of the earlier story). The bitterness she must have experienced while making the decision comes through, in her outburst: "Would you please please please please please please please stop talking?" (222).

The name of the young woman, Jig, suggests a dance and music for the dance, and may have been used by Hemingway to imply that for the male protagonist, she is but a source of entertainment, an interlude, and not anything more lasting. Apparently, Hemingway's "negative" experience with his own mother had colored the character's resistance to have a family.

The above analysis of the story clearly illustrates the "iceberg theory" of Hemingway. The description of the hills suggests the young woman's desire for children and family. And, while the word "abortion" is not used in the entire story, many hints of sterility direct the reader straight to that conclusion.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The analysis of the stories from an ecofeminist point of view, shows that the society being presented in these stories is patriarchal, and man oriented and that man in his greed and through insensitivity has dominated both nature and woman, resulting in destruction of the former and demoralization of the latter. Both nature and woman suffer damage and destruction at his hand. Whether he is a husband, a lover or offspring, still man is a man; exploitative, negligent and insensitive. The feelings of a woman, which move fully

in tune with nature, are not considered. Her needs and wishes are not noticed. Her motherhood is not respected, and her being a mother is not honored. Woman is either disregarded, suppressed or dishonoured. The damage done to nature is displayed through felling of trees, destruction of the landscape, and hunting and killing of animals for pleasure and pride.

To conclude, woman and nature are not too different from one another. They are co sufferers at the hands of man. Ecofeminists believe in the close connection between woman and nature. They believe that when nature is protected, women will be protected and respected too. Both nature and women go through the experience of mothering, and they nourish their off spring. In other words both of them are sensitive to the needs of those they created. Val Plumwood says that there are reasons why one cannot brush aside the whole issue of a woman-nature nexus and that it has to remain central to feminism because both have suffered at the hands of man, the common enemy, and both have been degraded to an inferior status.

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