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AN ECOFEMINIST READING OF MATERNITY IN ALICE HOFFMAN'S
"THE MARRIAGE OF OPPOSITES"

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to explore Alice Hoffman's *The Marriage of Opposites* through ecofeminist lenses to investigate the connections between women and nature. The aim is to find an affinity of the male domination over nature and his domination over women. This paper reveals that the injustice against women and nature is alike as they are both depicted throughout the story in turmoil. The writer deliberately and metaphorically makes an affinity between women's features and the elements of nature. "She is a force. Like a hurricane." (The Marriage of Opposites.46) Motherhood and relation with nature are the most obvious issue in this novel by Hoffman. For the purpose of illustration, she shows the true emotion of mothers through their children and also the suffering and pain that caused by male society. The females attempt to release themselves from the restraints of the social and political rules to have the life they expect. One of the crucial problems we face today is the decadence of the nature and its social consequences on human life. The term ecofeminism suggests the connection between ecology and feminism. Like environment, female body is like a source of colonization and commercialization. This study explores the attempt mothers make in order to restore the bond with the nature and to preserve it. Through this function as the only liberation act, they can redeem their right to live in the world of masculine domination.

Key words: Ecofeminism, Alice Hoffman, Maternity, The Marriage of Opposites

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Alice Hoffman's *The Marriage of Opposites*, written in 2015, is a historical fiction about one of history's most captivating "invisible women": Rachel, Rachel's mother, a respected member of J Jews refugee community escaped from the European Inquisition; she has never forgiven her daughter for refusing to live by the rules. The concentration is on the issue of maternity with domination of men over women. Women in this island have tried to overcome the social constraints. Rachel's most important moral feature is the love for her children, both those she gives birth to and those she inherited. She always faces the social and political rules of her faith so she has dream to leave St. Thomas. Because she is the only child of the family and she is a woman so Rachel's husband inherited her father's property. This is the manner of law that women have no rights for property. After the death of her husband, the government doesn't allow her to take control over the business

so she has to wait for her husband's young cousin to become the executor of his uncle's will. Thus the fate of the business is on Frederic's hand. The females don't have right to possess the natural life. In this novel, Hoffman depicts how patriarchy exerts control over the female with social rules and religion and colonizes women's body and mind. The readers notice that men maltreat the women so that they wouldn't have control over their own lives. There are a lot of images of nature and different aspects of natural environment in Hoffman's novel.

The images of the island draw the readers' ecocritical attention. There are frequent references to plants, birds, smells, sea and beach. Rachel gives some descriptions about the nature of the island "In our world there had been pirates with more than a dozen wives, parrots who could speak four languages, shells which opened to reveal pearls, birds as tall as men... turtles that come to lay their eggs on the beach." (The Marriage of Opposites.5) The turtles at the beach in the twilight are signs of nature where they make themselves metaphorically similar to turtles. She also says, when they stand on the turtle's mission they don't care about them, as if they are turtle girls. Nature in this fiction is the island of St. Thomas. Rachel's grandparents' apple tree refers to the nature and its importance. The tree in this island functions as their heritage. The female characters as protagonists deal with particular social problems. Women characters are victims of male domination and oppression in this novel. Women attempt to create a space for themselves, to look for liberty, response, understand, and also to achieve social and gender equality. Subjugation of women in a male dominant society is the theme that she has taken up for her writing. Under the influence of male domination, exploitation of women's body and nature is inevitable. Like environment, female body is like as a source of colonization and commercialization.

Motherhood

In many cultures a blessing and expected result of being a woman is motherhood. Cultural norms force the girls to believe that their mind and body are created to reproduce. In general, motherly qualities come to all female beings naturally. The physical and mental connections of the body of pregnant woman, maternity and self twist together firmly. Various studies have laid emphasis on the relationship among motherhood, body and self. Language is as a medium to interpret the experience. Lynn M. Stearney uses the ideal of motherhood in the environmental movement to portray the relationship between the Earth and inhabitants. This Theory provides further explanations:

The maternal archetype functions persuasively within the context of ecofeminism through its ability to (1) construct an analogy between women's role in biological reproduction and the cycles of nature as a premise of women's greater attunement to the environment: and (2) reinforce the socially created contract that it is women who have the requisite psychological characteristics to "mother" biologically, emotionally and environmentally. (151-152)

Lynn Stearney claims that ecofeminism burdens women to have "an appropriate maternal attitude" that we must take care for nature. She states firmly that "Environmental responsibility" is gender-neutral. Women are identified or symbolically associated with nature, as opposed to men, who are identified with culture. Thus, it is always culture's plan to include and to exceed nature, if woman is a part of nature, then culture finds it natural to treat her less important, not to be oppressed.

Theoretical Framework

And I must think, do all I can,
That there was pleasure there.
If this belief from heaven be sent,
If such be Nature's holy plan,
Have I not reason to lament
What man has made of man? (Lines Written in Early Spring).

One of the problems that we face today is the destroying and exploitation of the earth and environment and its influence on human life. As the lines above by Wordsworth, he believes if it is God's will that all enjoy and if

the nature's plan and scheme is love and union, will I have right to complain about the misery that human cause for others?

Karen J. Warren is an ecofeminist philosopher claiming "There are important connections between the unjustified dominations of women, people, children, and the poor and the unjustified dominations of nature." (1) Warren mentions two unfair dominated groups. "human Others" like women, people of different color, children, and the poor and "earth Others" like animals, forests, the land. Based on ecofeminists, "nature" is among those who have been dominated and exploited. "Nature is a feminist issue" may be called the motto of ecofeminism. Ecofeminists emphasize women in their debates of interrelated system of unfair domination. It means a concentration on women discloses main features of interrelated systems of human domination. First, among white people, it is women who suffer a lot than men. Second, often female- gender roles cover environmental issue that male-gender do not. Third, some of the western ideologies that emphasize the idea and domination of "nature" are male-gender inequitable in ways that are separate from other kinds of inequity. There are at least eight sorts of connections between feminism and the environment that ecological feminists have identified them.

1. "Historical and casual." One type of connection between feminism and the environment is chiefly historical. Historical information are used about twin dominations of women and nature, so it is called casual.
2. "Conceptual." The conceptual basis of twin dominations of women and nature is dualism which is more oppositional than complementary, more exclusive than inclusive. The organized dualism includes reason/emotion, mind/body, culture/nature, human/nature and man/woman. They discuss whatever is connected with emotion, body, nature and woman are inferior to those that connected with reason, mind, culture, human and men. The part of feminism and environmental ethics is to show and get rid of these dualism.
3. "Empirical and experiential." Many ecofeminists have documented empirical evidence joining feminism and the environment. Some of them aim health and risk factors that made by low-level radiation, toxics, pesticides and other pollutants. They argue that hunting, meat eating, factory farming are fastened to patriarchal concepts. Some ecofeminist philosophers point out experiential connections which respect and celebrate important cultural and spiritual relationship of women and native people to the earth. These connections are main features to the creation of liberating, life-affirming, post-patriarchal and earth-based spirituality or theology.
4. "Epistemological." All connections that mentioned before have driven the need for different feminist environmental epistemologies. These epistemologies question the ideas of reason, knowledge and rationality.
5. "Symbolic." Many ecofeminist philosophers investigate symbolic association of women and nature in literature, religion, art and theology. Nature is often described female and sexual terms: Nature is raped, conquered, mined. Language naturalized woman and feminized nature. It reflects the domination and inferiority of both women and nature.
6. "Ethical." Many feminist philosopher relate women and nature ethically. Their goal is to develop "Theories and practices concerning humans and the natural environment which are not male-biased and which provide a guide to action in the prefeminist present." (Ecological Feminist Philosophies, 6)
7. "Theoretical." Because of space and audience, the argument of "Theoretical connections" is limited to the field of environmental ethics. Environmental ethics reflect the positions in modern normative philosophical ethics. The ecofeminist philosophers identify the connections between the indefensible behavior of woman and of nature. They try to develop ethics that are not male-biased.
8. "Political." Françoise d'Eaubonne introduced the term "ecofeminisme" in 1974 to take attention to women's potential for taking about an ecological revolution. These range from the subject of health regarding women and environment, to technology, science, anti-males, peace, and anti-nuclear activism.

The historical and empirical connections propose that social scientific information on nature and women, related to the theoretical promises in many areas of philosophy. In ethics, the information on nature and women increases topics of anthropocentric and androcentric bias. In epistemology, the information “indigenous technical knowledge” increases topics about women’s “epistemic privilege” about farming. In metaphysics, the information of “women-nature connections” increases topics about the idea of nature and the nature/cultural dichotomy. In political philosophy, the information about the inferiority of women’s life raises issues about political theories and theorizing.

Analysis

A) Rachel as a stepmother

Rachel as the main character in Alice Hoffman’s *The Marriage of Opposites* is a kind of rebellious girl. At the age of twenty, her father makes her to get married to a man who is more than double her age and has three children. Rachel’s father wants to enhance their power in business because he believes strength is a necessity on this island. So she becomes a mother of a newborn daughter and two little boys. When she gets married she says:

In truth, I wasn’t worried that something was wrong with the children. Rather I feared that I might not be able to experience the emotion a mother should possess, due to my own fraught relationship with my mother. I knew from fairy tales about the evil deeds stepmothers might do, how black their hearts might turn. I had no idea what reaction I might have to another woman’s children, especially the daughter who had caused her death. (16)

This excerpt manifests how a mother feels toward her children. She is worried about being a good mother with true feelings. She scared that may she doesn’t have good behavior toward the children like her relationship with her own mother. At the first day when she sees Mr. Petit’s children she experiences strong emotion toward them. The truth is that she loves the feel of their hands in hers, the weight and the heat, even when they go off to play she feels an emptiness in her heart. Rachel writes stories that she hears from the women in this island like a hundred butterflies arise from a single tree all at once to form a second yellow moon, a fish with the face of a horse who comes cantering in to the city, the fish that flies around the world for love. All of them refer to the pure nature and animals. She also heard from her father that they must live like fish, unattached to any land. Whenever there is water, they can survive. Some fish can stay in the mud for months or years, and when at last there is a high tide, they can swim away. She, honestly tells the children that they have only one mother in this world but at the same time she behaves them so kindly like her mother’s caring attitude toward her cousin.

B) Rachel as a mother

During six years after her marriage she adds three children to Esther. Issac Esther died when he was only fifty and Rachel was only twenty-nine and after his death, she gives birth to her fourth child. Rachel really loves her children both those she gives birth to and those that she inherited. Now, she becomes a widow with six children and one still to come. After months Issac’s cousin, Frederic Pizarro arrives to claim his property. Frederic and Rachel fall in love with each other but in the tradition of their society, it is against their morals and laws. She gives birth to her child in spite of widespread scandals. They name their son Joseph Felix. Their son’s name isn’t written in to the Book of Life because they are unmarried. Three years later their second child, Moses Alfred opens his eyes in to the world. Then they have their third son, Jacobo Camille. This isn’t an easy birth. After two weeks when he doesn’t gain any weight, she and Jistine go to the mountains and cross the monkeys to reach the herb man’s hut. He gives a bottle of brown liquid made of soursop and powdered herbs. This can make the baby sleep well. Rachel passes this difficult and dangerous way only for the safe of her child. In social roles, woman’s body and its functions are at a lower position than the man’s. This different functions give women a different psychic culture like her social roles and psychological nature closer to nature.

When her fourth son with Frederic is born Rachel names him Aaron Gustave. Now she has eleven children, she considers her step children her own. She is still worried about Felix, the one that was in her womb when she went to Reverend’s house and begged him to allow them to get married officially. It takes

about seven years that the elders of their congregation agree that their marriage is legal and write their union in their book. Jacobo is somehow like his mother. He doesn't like to work in the store like his siblings, so Rachel decides to send him to France for continuing his educations in Paris. He has special talent in painting and gradually becomes a famous artist. Jacobo falls in love with their young maid. Despite her mother's disagreement with his decision, he gets married with that young maid. They have two children when Rachel sees Jacobo's son and daughter, she feels love for her grandchildren so she forgives them. It shows again that the emotions of motherhood can come over all other feeling like anger or extreme dislike. As Sherry B. Ortner mentions there is something intrinsic among different kinds of males. Thus, biological determinists would discuss that it makes them domineering sex naturally and something is lacking in females. Naturally, women are not secondary but in general pretty satisfied with their roles because it gives enough time to them to protect their children and to increase maternal pleasures. These opportunities are the most satisfying experiences of life.

Madame Sara Monsanto Pomie'

A) As a mother

Rachel's mother is a force that few people dare to go up against. Her anger is terrifying. Rachel never scared of her mother unlike others. The relationship between Rachel and her mother is not so close. She always leaves her window open at night despite her mother's warnings. She describes that the island at night is pitch dark, the air is heavy and fragrant, perfect for dreaming. She also says people tremble when it rains, but she longs for cold weather. Whenever Rachel gathers the fruit that falls on to the patio, her mother says "These apples were meant for your father." Then Rachel go away from her mother and the tree. Her mother completely disagrees with Rachel's education. One morning when Rachel is in her father's library and studying, Madame Pomie goes to the library with a hired man to wash the windows, she sees Rachel that deeply concentrates on the books with untidy hair and doesn't do her chores. They quarrel with each other and from then on, Madame Pomie act as if Rachel doesn't exist. Rachel says about her feeling toward her mother:

I no longer cared if my mother disliked me. I didn't understand that when I closed myself to her, I took a part of her bitterness inside me. It was green and unforgiving, and as it grew it made me more like her. It gave me my strength, but it gave me my weakness as well. (4)

Rachel thinks that her mother hates her, but she also confesses that when she is near her mother she feels different emotions of strength, love and weakness. The day she speaks back to her mother, she tells Rachel with all the power of the case "I hope you have the child that causes you the misery you have caused me." (4) After some years Rachel's husband dies and she has to leave her house to pay the debt, even in that time Rachel doesn't want to live in her mother's house.

B) Madame Pomie as a stepmother

One night when Rachel was only a child Madame Halevy came to their house and gave Madame Pomie a new born baby. They tell Rachel that he is her cousin and his parents drowned in the sea. In fact, the boy's mother is Mrs. Halevy's daughter, Rebecca, and her father is an African sailor. When the time of birth comes, Rebecca goes to the woods, to the pure nature and gives birth to her baby then she leaves him under a tree. In truth she uses the forest as the shelter for her son and as the appropriate place to hide her own fault. Mrs. Halevy's maid saves the baby and gives him to Mrs. Halevy. Rebecca leaves St. Thomas next morning without any regret. So Madame Halevy and the maid consider what the best is for the child and decide he should go to a family where he would be loved. Madame Halevy gives the child to her friend because Madame Pomie had lost a baby son at birth. Madame Pomie doesn't care that the baby's father is an African man. She raises the boy that comes from the middle of the forest, left alone under the shade of a tree. She was upset before and mourned a lot and when she sees the baby, her mourning lifted. She acts him like his true son. Later when Aaron falls in love with Jestine, she does not let them marry because everyone thinks that Aaron is one of their faith and no one knows about his real identity.

Jestine

She is Adelle's daughter and an intimate friend of Rachel during all her life. Jestine falls in love with Rachel's cousin, Aaron, but they are not allowed to get married because they are not from the same faith. Rachel's mother urges Aaron to go to France to prevent their marriage. When Aaron leaves St. Thomas for France, Jestine has his child in her womb. She gives birth to her child and names her daughter, Lyddie. Jestine like her mother, Adelle is so calm and kind. When Lyddie becomes five years old, they lose Adelle. After she passed away Aaron comes back to the Island with his French wife, Elise. Jestine goes to Pomie's house to see Aaron but instead she faces Lyddie. Elise sees Lyddie who holds her mother's hand. She seems so cute and well-mannered. For a young girl, the personal identification with mother, is created in early infancy, she learns female role identity from her mother because mother is present and immediate when the daughter is learning role identity to be a woman. Particularly, in maternity she has the same personal identification. Elise is not able to have babies. At the time she sees Lyddie, she thinks she can have her as her own daughter. Jestine as a mother, feels fear inside herself. Although Aaron loves Jestine, he does not do anything about it. The morning when they want to leave the island they say goodbye to Pomie's family and go to the docks. Elise is so delighted and it makes Rachel confused. She runs after them to the docks. She sees Lyddie between Aaron and Elise. The sailors who had been hired to steal Lyddie are not from this island and don't care about their people. Rachel says:

Jestine might never have been discovered, but I knew the secret places in the hills. I ran until I heard a woman crying. It was up by the caves, where ruined women often went to end their lives when they had nothing left, near the gardens of the pirate wives. The sailors who'd stolen Lyddie had left Jestine tied to a jacaranda tree. (46)

As Rachel says above the place that the sailors tie Jestine to the tree is near the cave in the mountain, in a pure nature. This is the place where women go to end their lives, they come to this part of the nature to commit suicide. Infact they abuse nature to do this cruelty to a mother, to seprate a daughter from her mother. The domination of males over women and nature is obvious in this part of the novel. Rachel unties Jestine but unfortunately the rowboat has left. The laws give Aaron the right to have his own daughter. The people can hear Jestine's crying for miles. Again it shows the cruelty of political rules on women. Twenty four years later, Jacobo goes to Paris for education, he finds Rachel's daughter and tells her about her real mother. Lyddie doesn't know anything about the reality of her life, her true mother. Jacobo reveals everything to her. She writes sixty letters for Jestine and asks Jacobo to give her mother all these letters in St. Thomas. Seven years later Jacobo goes back to Paris again, but this time Rachel, Frederec and Jestine go after him to Paris. Finally Jestine achieves her ambition and meets her daughter after thirty-two years.

Adelle

She is African and Pomie's family cook. Adelle lives with her only daughter, Jestine in the cottage that is set on stilts. No one knows who her father is. Some people believe that Jestine's father is one of their congregation. She is the best cook on the island and so kind with Jestine and Rachel. Adelle always tells stories about the werewolves that are members of the old Danish families who own slaves. Their transformation is God's punishment for their wrongdoings and they often wear gloves and scarves. Adelle tells them if they see such a thing they should run. At nights when the bats are in the sky, the wind blows from Africa and the waves roar, three of them go outside together, no one knows where they are. Rachel admits she does not afraid of roaming half wolves, but of the inescapable lonliness of their homeland. Once Rachel tells his father she prefers Adelle to be her mother. In this island those of mixed blood who has white fathers are given their freedom. Jestine always says that her mother is enough and does not need more. Rachel loves Adelle so much. She says:

I took pride in Adelle's estimation of me, and I tried to live up to her high opinion... I wished I were the person Adelle thought I was, but I was afraid of my power. I suppose I was too young, and row emotion frightened me... Adelle told me women of every faith have power. (10)

It shows that she has deep feeling toward Adelle and it is important for her how Adelle thinks about her. Adelle is famous for having the gift of sight. She predicts Rachel's life in the future, about her children, her true love. Adelle is more sympathetic for her than her own mother.

Conclusion

There is no liberation and no solution for women and ecological crises in a society which fundamental model of relationship is domination. Ecofeminist philosophers criticize dualism and patriarchy to create harmony between nature and human beings, males and females. They attack the oppression and domination of culture over nature and men over women to eliminate the injustices against women and nature. While men focus on strength in technology and business, women are hopeful to achieve equality wholly and reciprocal advantage by getting closer to nature that has healing power on women. Abuse of nature and women are the critical issue and must be resolved to have better and salubrious society.

All women are not mentally and physically equipped to handle motherhood. Women are closer to nature, and maternity is a natural outcome in woman's life. In Alice Hoffman's *The Marriage of Opposites*, the women or mothers experience the pure feeling of maternity. Even those who do not give birth to children, like Rachel, Madame Pomie and Elise, they treat them as their own true children. So the feeling, the emotion of maternity is more important than just being a mother. In this novel, mothers devote themselves to their children. This intense devotion comes out of love like nature that cares about the human. In return, they receive oppression, cruelty, inequity just like mothers. Although giving birth and motherhood define the identity of woman, the oppression and domination of women and nature is undeniable. There is no liberation for women and nature under the pressure of male society.

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