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ON ECOFEMINISM IN J.M. COETZEE'S *SUMMERTIME*

WANG MIAOMIAO¹, MA QINGLING²

¹Associate Professor, ²Student

^{1,2}North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China

²Email:594482137@qq.com

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ABSTRACT

South African writer J.M. Coetzee is the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003. His semi-autobiographical novel *Summertime*, published in 2009, is the last one of his autobiography trilogy. Scholars focused on the study of the postcolonial themes in this novel. And the rich ecological writing elements also deserve our attention. This paper, based on the text analysis, explores the human's oppression on nature based on anthropocentrism, the dual domination of men over nature and women, and the relationship between female and nature from the perspective of eco-feminism, while also exploring how the oppressed nature and women revolt against the oppression. This paper concludes with the finding of the identity between gender oppression and ecological crisis. Only when men and women are on an equal footing and humans are willing to respect nature can a harmonious relationship be built among men, women and nature.

Keywords: Coetzee, Ecofeminism, Patriarchy, *Summertime*

1 Introduction

John Maxwell Coetzee(1940-) is considered as a prominent postcolonial literature writer in South Africa and beyond the world. He obtained worldwide attention since he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003. His work *Summertime* was published in 2009 which is an influencing novel reflecting the ecological situation in South Africa. Scholars tended to study this novel from the perspective of postcolonialism, such as cultural identity. So far, there are few researches on this novel, especially from the perspective of eco-feminism. And this novel is abound of eco-feminist elements which deserve our more attention.

The emergence of ecofeminism theory is firstly related to the environmental problems and ecological crisis in modern time. It is regarded as the third wave of the feminist movement. Ecofeminism is the intersection between feminism and ecology, first defined and officially named as such by the French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Feminism ou La Mort* in 1974. What this approach criticizes is the western dualism that distinguishes human from nature, men from women. It opposes logocentrism and modern technical rationality and considers that anthropocentrism in the relationship between human and nature and the androcentrism in gender relation have internal consistency. Barbara Bennett suggests that there are two major concepts of this approach: "first, ecofeminists believe in the interconnectedness of all things: what

happens in one life, will eventually affect all others; second, a society based on cooperation and balance rather than dominance and hierarchy is necessary for continued survival on this planet(Bennett 63-64).” As ecofeminist Karen J. Warren put it, one of the core themes of ecofeminism is that there exists an important link between the dominance of women and the dominance of nature. Women and nature are in the same situation in certain aspects. To put it clearly, women and nature are all dominated and oppressed by patriarchy. In addition, the duality in a patriarchal society is fundamental, such as the duality between human and nature, male and female, reason and emotion. Ecofeminism advocates the principle of equality of all things and there is no difference and hierarchy in all things. The main purpose of ecofeminism is to liberate nature and women from men’s oppression and domination.

This paper explores the relationship between human and nature, including the human’s destruction of nature and women’s isolation from nature, and discloses the unharmonious relationship between men and women from the perspective of eco-feminism, while also analyzes how the oppressed nature and women revolt against the oppression. The paper also explores what is the ideal relationship among men, women and nature, which provides referential significance for today’s ecological situation. Only when men and women treat each other based on love and gender quality and humans are willing to respect nature can a society be more harmonious.

2 The Relationship between Human and Nature

During the colonial period in South Africa, the white colonizers occupy the colony and cause damage to the local environment in their so-called “civilizing” colonial activities. They view themselves as the dominator of nature and make the most of it as resources. This anthropocentrism mentality also becomes the physiological foundation of male supremacy over women.

2.1 Human’s Destruction to Nature through Colonial Wars

The colonial aggression of the western colonizers does great harm to the natural environment of South Africa. In *Summertime*, the town of Melville is in decline after invasion by colonizers. It was sparsely populated, devastated and full of decay. The institutions in this town transplanted from “civilized” country such as bank were transformed into the welding plant later. The town of Melville became an “exhausted hamlet (Coetzee 109)”. The house to be bought by John Coetzee is badly painted and “in a sorry state”, “in front of the house, in a bedraggled rockery, a couple of aloes struggle to stay alive (Coetzee 109).” In the past, when the Coetzee family met at Christmas, the children “roamed the veld as free as wild animals (Coetzee 108).” Nowadays, on the contrary, the hometown has become barren and been plagued by drought. This originally beautiful and rich oasis has turned to be a desolate place, and the vitality of the town has gone. The eco-harmonious images of people living in peace with nature when Coetzee was a kid are now in sharp contrast to the bleak environment after the invasion of the empire. The ruin of Merville town reveals that the natural environment of the countryside which was originally peaceful has been ravaged by the colonial wars, resulting in natural ecological crisis.

Land is the first to be destroyed by the colonial activities. On the one hand, land is no longer home to the aborigines and becomes the object of colonizers’ occupation. It is the intruder’s occupation of the land that declares the start of the colonial history. Edward W. Said points out that imperialism in essence is an act of geographical violence. On the other hand, in the process of colonial expansion, the colonizers often regarded themselves as disseminators of advanced civilization and mode of production without consideration of local natural laws.

For one thing, the early settlers occupy indigenous land and drove the aborigines to the periphery areas. They distribute the most of land to the white people for them to set up the large farmhouse in which the black do some slavery work for the farmhouse owner. In the process of distribution of land, large quantity of black people were driven to the marginal areas. This caused a number of serious consequences including large population, excessive animal husbandry, water loss and soil erosion, as well as excessive deforestation.

For another thing, the introduction of modern agricultural tools contaminates the local original ecology. During the period of western colonization, the inhabitants use the agricultural tools introduced from colonial country in their agricultural production practices. But those inapplicable tools pollute the land and destroy local ecological environment. "The dam used to be filled by a wind-pump, but during the boom years Michiel installed a diesel-driven pump and left the old wind-pump to rust, because that was what everyone was doing(Coetzee 95)."

Human beings' blind conquest of nature under the pretext of "civilizing" eventually led to the nature's revenge to them. Today, the land degradation in South Africa is a serious problem, and land is the victim of colonial expansion.

2.2 Women's Isolation from Nature: Carol

After the racial segregation system Apartheid was abrogated in the 1990s in South Africa, the social status of the white people began to decline. For a long period they lost in the exploration of self-identity. They are alienative of nature and are losing their original nature in personality. The protagonist John Coetzee's cousin Carol is one of them.

Carol has so long been obsessed in industrial materialism that she has estranged herself from nature. After getting used to the high-living life in the city, she never recalled the good memory in her childhood in the farmhouse with pleasant natural scenery. She lived in the luxurious house and used advanced material goods, of which she felt so proud. She tended to like practical things more than the natural things. And she even can not bear John's behavior of sitting with his chin on his hands and contemplating the sunset. It is ridiculous for her to image a picture of one sitting alone while contemplating the natural phenomenon. "She snorts with laughter." She can not find the sense of belonging in the nature.

Not only keeping away from natural world, Carol also lost her original nature and her personality has been transformed after growing up under the worsening social environment. She lost her real self in pursuing the identity of being a real western people. "Carol has broken completely from her roots. She bears no resemblance to the country girl, she once used to be. She looks German with her bronzed skin and coiffeured blond hair and emphatic eyeliner(Coetzee 101)." The most obvious is that she became a mean woman from a kind and gentle girl. As a descendant of the early white settler, Carol felt ashamed of speaking the language of Afrikaans, the dialect of white people of South Africa. So she felt envy of her cousin John's received English education experience since he was a kid. For this reason she always showed an hostile attitude to John. For example, she sniffed about Coetzee's choice of abstaining from eating meat of animals. "'Aren't you having mutton, John?' calls out from the other end of the table in a tone of sweet concern(Coetzee 93)." Here Carol is giving her intentional attention with satire. The second shift in her personality is that she has grown more and more hardhearted even since she married and began to move in her husband's circle. She always presented an air of arrogance and acrimony before her country relatives. She even made a judgment that John's wish to buy a house at Merweville is just "a scheme to get rid of his father(Coetzee 128)", and he looked after his father in Cape Town just for need of his money. Here is also a manifestation of Carol's money-centered mentality. In her opinion, every action of every people in the society is greedy for getting money.

Based on above mentioned, it can be found that Carol lost her real self day by day in her obsessed in pursuit of materialized life. Being away from nature finally results in her alienation in interpersonal relation and confusion of self-identity.

3 The Relationship between Men and Women

Women and nature are both in subordinate position under patriarchy. Men take it for granted that women should be submissive to them both physically and psychologically in the patriarchal society. Instead of being persistently suppressed by male authority, more and more women choose to revolt against their domination by pursuing their own female identity.

3.1 Men's Domination over Women in the Patriarchal Society

Gerda Lerner defines patriarchy "the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and extension of male dominance over women in society and everything in nature in general(Lerner 239)."

In a patriarchal society, women have a lower status than men and are not respected by them. In such a society, women are just appendages of men and tools of sexual enjoyment, without their own independent personalities and appropriate social status. Women in such an environment could only be victims of male authority and can not get real happiness. Still Take Carol as an example. she is married to a German husband Klaus. When the impulse of their so-called love faded, it becomes a naked fact that they are using each other and each takes what she or he needs in such a love affair. "He...regaling them in his baby-Africaans, of which he is not in the slightest ashamed..." Margot, Carol's cousin, doubts that in the privacy of their home, Klaus will open his heart to Carol. "She doubts that Klaus has much of a heart to show(102)." Klaus showing no respect for Carol's kinsfolk can be a witness of their insincere love.

Women's inferior status in a patriarchal society is not only demonstrated by men's occupation of women's body, but also by men's oppression over women in psychology. Under patriarchal culture, women are believed to be original, uncivilized and irrational like nature, therefore, they are expected to behave to be submissive and subordinate to men. In *Summertime*, men's bullying of women manifests on two different levels, physically and psychologically. For instance, in cocktail party, men tried to seduce beautiful women to take notice of them. Some women fell prey to men's emotional inducement step by step but ended by being dumped by them. Once they got women's body and enjoyed sexual pleasure, "the man stopped calling you(Coetzee 26)." What's more, in a husband's business circle, the value of a wife lies in her beauty. Through wife's beauty, a man can gain friendly cooperation with other business partners. They use wife as a bargaining chip and then have "bad temper in the confines of the home(Coetzee 26)." Men show no respect for their wives and control them like their possessions and appendages. Women are not expected to own autonomy in their own social life. "They wanted the wives of other men to succumb to their advances but they wanted their own wives to remain chaste—chaste and alluring(Coetzee 27)." Men take it for granted that women as wives should be subject to their husbands both physically and psychologically. It is obvious here that both women and nature are in the position of being ruled and oppressed. In this way, the similitude between women and nature comes into exist.

On the other hand, men in the patriarchal society also show contempt for women in spirit, equating women with irrational animals. In *Summertime*, Julia was irritated by her husband Mark's lies about his business journey, but Mark just responded to her anger by saying "for god's sake just say the word, instead of stalking around the house like a tiger with indigestion(50)." Instead of feeling apologized, he lost patience and compared his wife to a tiger, restless with anxiety. "Animal categorizations and the use of derogatory animal metaphors have been and are characteristic of human language, often in association with racism and sexism(Huggan and Tiffin 152)." This kind of language of comparing women as animals is not alone in the novel. A woman in a patriarchal family is compared to a frightened mouse. "While their father thundered and roared and made them quake in their boots, their mother tiptoed around like a mouse(Coetzee 116)." This comparison demonstrates women's weakness like that of small animals. "After the midday meal, the whole house would freeze into silence: Grandpa was having his nap. Even at that age she was surprised to see how fear of the old man could make grown people creep about like mice(Coetzee 106)." Both women and children are oppressed by male supremacy and are leading a life with fear. Additionally, in Mark's mentality, women have no rational thinking or valuable ideas at all. He said, when men "are busy elsewhere deciding the future of the world, women are just sitting and kvetching about the weather(50)". He assumed that women could not discuss more interesting or meaningful topics except for boring complaints.

Another victim of patriarchy is Julia's mother. As a member of older conservatives, she was deeply influenced by the patriarchal culture, and became a typical woman slaved by man's authority unconsciously. "She came from a generation when a daughter was still married form the father's home straight into the

husband's, or the father-in-law's(Coetzee 63)." She has obeyed narrow moral norms all her life and was ashamed of expressing own desires as an individual woman, and led a closed life without vitality or joy. Julia said if her mother heard what she called her having an affair with other man as "great" and "sweet", "it would shock her(Coetzee 44)." She also had a conviction that women ought to be docile and keep silent, and condemned Julia who excelled at arguing for her violation of her old-fashioned norm. "A girl should not argue like that, a girl learn to be more soft(Coetzee 63)." Sometimes she also admired Julia's personality traits—open, active, passionate—but she had no courage and impulse to follow her heart after long period of oppression of patriarchy.

3.2 Women's Resistance to Male Authority: Julia

Julia is a typical deviant woman with awakening self-consciousness, and dared to be rebellious of androcentrism. Her personality traits undoubtedly pose a great challenge to patriarchy. First of all, she is an assertive woman who are never shy of expressing her opinions. When she was a student at school, she excelled at arguing with "a tongue like a knife." "At school everyone used to be nervous around me, even my teachers(Coetzee 63)." She was so confident and strong in expressing her opinions that her classmates and teacher have to take notice of her. In her love affair with men, she is also the determiner of relation development. Whether or not a love relationship should end is up to her other than man. She can make decisions independently instead of watching men's reaction. For example, when she got betrayal by her husband, she did not shed tears or feel wronged or behave hysterically. "I did not cry— the thought of crying did not so much as cross my mind—but on the contrary, choking with vengefulness(Coetzee 29)." Her reaction to husband's betrayal is different for other women in the patriarchal society. What's more, she can keep rational even when she was in a romantic and passionate love affair, which also makes her distinctive with other ordinary women. "What I was determined to avoid was emotional entanglement. A passing fling was one thing, an affair of the heart quite another...I was not about to lose my heart to a man about whom I knew next to nothing(38)." In addition, compared with those wives at workplace, she is frank and fearless to uphold woman's sexual desire as an individual. When they were coveted by their colleagues, they were excited but behaved like prudes. "Wives were excited too: I would not have had to be blind not to see that(26)." Julia felt disgusted with their hypocrisy. The females represented by Julia see that their mothers in traditional marriage suppress themselves and submit to the male. In sexual relationship, the female is just the tool for the male's sex desire. Julia's attitude towards sex can be considered as the most rebellious to the traditional female virtue. Since men in the patriarchal society consider chastity is one of the greatest virtues of the female. To sum up, Julia's personality is a thorough fighting against androcentrism.

Women's resistance to male supremacy is also demonstrated in women's pursuit of self-realization, reconstruction of self-identity and deciding their fate by themselves. After graduation from university, Julia gave up the job opportunity and chose to serve husband and daughter at home. Later her marriage ended with her husband's marital infidelity. In the past two decades, she was living for her daughter and was intellectually dormant. Her pursuit of self-identity starts with her daughter's growing up and leaving home. She went out of the family to accept further education in university. "Then I went back to college. This was in Montreal. I started from scratch with basic science, followed by medical studies, followed by training as a therapist. A long road(Coetzee 57)." After strenuous efforts she has grown t be a professional woman and soon obtained her own space in the society.

In a nutshell, in spite of the domination by patriarchy, women are making efforts to construct their self-identity. They are not passive but an active participant in the society. By reconstructing women's identity Coetzee succeeds in deconstructing those patriarchal norms that discriminate women and degrade them to the background. In this way Coetzee attempts to encourage women from the margin to the center.

4 The Ideal Relationship among Men, Women and Nature from the Ecofeminist Perspective

In the post-apartheid age in South Africa, although the traditional colonial wars happen no longer, human's alienation with nature still persist. And even in modern society, men's domination over women in this patriarchal society still cause great damage to women and children. Therefore, Coetzee demonstrates the ideal

relationship among men, women and nature in the novel. He claims that nature, men and women should have harmonious relationships.

4.1 The Harmonious Human Relation With Nature

With the coming of industrialization, human living environment in South Africa is worsening because of human destruction of nature, such as drought, desertification, which are nature's revolts against human. Therefore, it is of great significance to strike a balance between human and nature. It is necessary for human to rethink the relationship between human and nature.

In *Summertime*, there are a lot of details describing the beauty of nature which also represent human and nature living in harmony. Coetzee portrays a harmonious scene from a man's eyes. "This sky, this peace, the vast silence enclosing them—I feel blessed, one of a lucky few(Coetzee 132).” Margot and John walked along the dam in the morning and was intoxicated by beautiful scenery, with "white geese floating peacefully in the shallow waters(Coetzee 129).” Here the white goose symbolize all kinds of species in nature. They were floating in the water freely and peacefully without being disturbed by human beings which reflects the harmonious relationship between human and nature. "If anything has held them together over the years, it is that. This landscape, it has taken over her heart(Coetzee 129)..” Plumwood claims that "Bothe men and women can stand with nature and work for breaking down the dualistic construction of culture...because both of them are part if nature and culture(Plumwood 36).” She also thinks both men and women have the obligations to bond together to fight against confrontations between mankind and nature.

4.2 Women's Intimacy with Nature

In women's eyes, they always can find the beauty of nature whatever their situation, bad or good. From ecological standpoint, it is proposed that nature represents a place in which people can find mental comfort and it is a remedy for curing inner trauma. Adriana, a refugee from Brazil, came to South Africa to earn a living. She lost her emotional dependence after her husband was disastrously killed on his night shift as a security staff. It is arduous period for her and her two daughters to make a living in South Africa. In order to survive in this country, she suffers much pain and leads a torturous life. At times, when she is alone and therefore has to face herself, she can feel her own loneliness, agony and despair. But she draws the energy and recovers passion for life from nature. "In the mornings, when Joana was at work and Maria Regina was at school and the sun shone its rays into that little flat of ours...I would sometimes stand in the sunlight by the open window listening to the birds and feeling the warmth on my face and my breast; and at times like that I would long to be a woman again(Coetzee 195).” This demonstrates the healing power of nature and nature's mental comfort to women.

Ecofeminism holds that women are naturally connected with nature and can live in harmony with nature. In *Summertime*, Adriana, a refugee from Brazil, struggles to survive in South Africa, where she feels lonely and depressed after her husband is beheaded. But nature can awaken her inner strength and emotion. In the mornings, when Joana was at work and Maria Regina was at school, "the sun shone its rays into that little flat of ours...I would sometimes stand in the sunlight by the open window listening to the birds and feeling the warmth on my face and my breast; and at times like that I would long t be a woman again(Coetzee 195).” Isolated and helpless, Adriana has no support in South Africa and only seeks strength in the vastness and warmth of nature. The warmth of the sun and the behead birds awakened her inner feelings and gave her the courage to embrace herself. She enjoyed the freedom nature gave her. Through his characters, Coetzee expresses the consoling function of nature to the human mind and considers the healing power of nature to human's soul.

In Coetzee's works, there is a special connection between women and animals. Women are more likely to show empathy for animals. Margot is stranded overnight in the wilderness with her cousin Coetzee. The next day on the morning when Margot wakes up, she saw an antelope before her outside her car. The close contact with animals calls up Margot's love for small adorable animals. The antelope left leisurely after feeling safe in Margot's eyes. "More than anything she wants to embrace it, to pour out upon its brow this

sudden love; but before she can take a first step the little one has whirled about and raced off with drumming hooves. A hundred yards away it halts, turns, inspects her again, then trots at less urgent pace across the flats and into a dry river bed (Coetzee 121).” Here, the antelope symbolizes species in nature. It is wandering in the wilderness without being disturbed by human beings which symbolizes the harmonious relationship between human and nonhuman animals. This ecological picture of women and animals coexisting peacefully and integrating together forms a sharp contrast with the indiscriminate slaughter of animals by human beings.

4.3 Harmony between Men and Women

Harmonious harmony between men and women is mainly manifested in the ideal marriage between Margot and her husband Lukas. Her marriage with Lukas turns to be full of happiness and peace. “She and Lukas have what she would call a happy marriage(Coetzee 102).”

Lukas tries his best to protect and take care of his wife. “Lukas gives himself over to her with all his heart, and in return she gives her all of herself(Coetzee 134).” Most importantly, Lukas is the representative of the new male. He does not control Margot, and he loves Margot genuinely and sincerely. They provide emotional supports and care to each other when they are living in hard situation. For Lukas, love is simple and wholehearted. They are open to each other, which is distinct from her cousin Carol’s marriage. While supported and cared by her husband, Margot also shows admiration for her husband for his liberal and generous heart. “Through him she has learned to have a liberal heart too(Coetzee 142).” They both grow to be a better person in their marriage. “Through his love her husband brings out what is best in her: even now, sitting here drinking tea, watching him at play, she can feel her body warming to him(Coetzee 134).”

Margot and Lukas’s combination constructs the most harmonious marriage relationship between men and women. They are enjoying harmonious relationship based on love and equal equality.

5 Conclusion

This paper exposes the oppression of patriarchy to nature and women in *Summertime* from the perspective of ecofeminism, and argues that there is an underlying connection between human’s destruction to nature and male’s domination to female under patriarchy. Although nature and women are in the position of the Other, nature always revenges against human’s destructive actions in one way or another while women also increasingly begin to make efforts to fight against men’s supremacy. But this kind of relationship among men, women and nature is unhealthy and unhelpful for human’s living. In such case, it is necessary to look for solutions to get out of ecological dilemma. Humans can return to nature, keep close relation with nature so that they can appreciate the beauty of nature and find psychological dependence and spiritual comfort in the nature. As for the white people’s identity crisis in new South Africa, the local government should continue own natural culture so as to people in this country, whatever their race and gender, can have a belonging sense.

In our post-modern society, the ecological environment is worsening from natural world to interpersonal relation in human world. More attention should be paid to the ecological protection. Therefore, it is still more significant for people to rethink the ideal relationship among humans, nature, men and women. Only when men and women are on an equal footing and humans are willing to respect nature can our society be more harmonious.

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