

Resistance for Existence: An Ecofeminist Reading of Sarah Orne Jewett's *A White Heron*

Indu A S

Assistant professor, Department of English
Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham University
Amritapuri Campus, Kollam, Kerala, India
ias2287@gmail.com

Abstract: *Ecofeminism which developed in the 1970s in the United States refers to an ecologically centered discipline that critiques the dominant male practices and discourses relating to nature. It is a movement that questions or rejects previously held patriarchal paradigms and holds the belief that the oppression of women by men is intimately linked to the destruction of the environment. Sarah Orne Jewett's A White Heron portrays earth as a provider and sustainer of life and observes women's potential to solve the ecological issues by living in communion with earth. This paper attempts to analyze the close association between women and nature from the perspective of ecofeminism, the awakening of female consciousness in a patriarchal society where female becomes the preserver of nature. The work presents the conflict of nature with civilization by showing the relationship of the protagonist, a female who preserves nature, with a foreigner who is associated with the dangers of civilization. It is through this relationship we can identify the clearly defined, repressive gender roles, feminizing the concept of submissiveness while masculinizing attitudes of dominance over nature and competence in dealing with the challenges that nature present.*

Keywords: *ecofeminism, paradigm, gender role,*

Ecofeminism or ecological feminism which developed in the 1970s is an interdisciplinary movement that favours a new perspective on issues crucial to environment. It tends to question the previously held patriarchal paradigms and holds the view that the domination of women by men is intimately linked to the destruction of the environment by masculine power. Ecofeminists argue that traditional male-centered approaches including exploitation of and supremacy over women are reverberated in patriarchal practices and discourses related to nature.

The first person who used the word ecofeminist is Francoise d' Eaubonne in 1974. She used it to call upon women to lead an ecological revolution to save the environment. Women who bring together feminist and ecological concerns in both formal and informal movements and do not necessarily identify themselves explicitly are generally referred to as 'ecofeminists' (Mellor, *Feminism & Ecology* 4). *Ecofeminist* theory analyzes the bond and the strong parallelism that exist between women and nature for many centuries. We can see certain claims on the basis of this analysis:-

1. The oppression of women and the oppression of nature are closely related.
2. Both women and nature are devalued and exploited to serve the needs of men.
3. There is some connection between women and nature that men either do not possess or cannot experience like giving and nurturing life.
4. A feminist perspective is needed for solving ecological issues.

Ecofeminists opine that there is a great analogy between male domination and the subjugation of women in society and the exploitation of environment by masculine power. Women are perceived as merging with nature and as being a part of it. Similarly nature is perceived as female, as a virgin resource to be exploited or utilized by masculine strength. Nature is feminized because it is seen to possess the same qualities that women do. Women were considered as being pious, virtuous, kind, gentle, graceful, beautiful; the qualities that could easily be attributed to nature as well. Therefore nature was seen as the embodiment of all the characteristics that women are assumed to possess and there are ample and frequent allusions to this in literature irrespective of language or region.

Sarah Orne Jewett's *A White Heron* conveys the power of male domination and women's resistance against the degradation of nature. The protagonist Sylvia loves living in the rural farmland where she

can enjoy the beauty of nature to her heart's content. She chances upon an encounter with a man who is hunting a white heron. Her decision to protect nature and the white heron from being assaulted and exploited shows that women and nature can help each other in resisting male dominance and both can be liberated together from the male-centered society.

A White Heron begins by showing Sylvia's harmonious living with the nature around her. She becomes quickly and naturally attached to the flora and fauna of the woodlands. Sylvia recounts how she and her old cow were going away from the western light and "on striking deep into the dark woods" (Jewett 1), how their feet were familiar with the path and it did not matter whether their eyes could see it or not. Nature is shown as treating the girl with harmony as she is a "valued companion".

The perception that women and nature are dominated and exploited by men is apparent in Jewett's *A White Heron*. The young hunter is keen to elicit information from Sylvia's knowledge of the treasures and secrets of nature which he intends to make use of for the purpose of hunting a white heron. He aims to include this rare bird in his collection of birds. He reveals his plans to Sylvia and tells her about the birds he has caught and says proudly that "they're stuffed and preserved, dozens and dozens of them" (Jewett 10). He sees birds as mere test subjects of an ornithologist --objects to be studied for the purpose of devising more effective ways of exploiting nature. Sylvia cannot follow the young man's logic; nor is she able to appreciate his intentions. She is at a loss to understand why birds should be killed and stuffed. She is pained at the prospect of her dear birds getting killed. She is averse to the idea of killing birds and animals be it for sport, study, prestige or whatever it may be whereas he seems to derive great pleasure or satisfaction from it. The male attitude of conquering and domineering nature is alien to her. She would rather befriend it and live in harmony with it. The white heron was elusive; they both longed to spot it. The girl "grieved because she longed-for white heron was elusive, but she did not lead the guest, she only followed and there was no such thing as speaking first" (Jewett 13).

Ecofeminism propounds that both women and nature will be liberated together from their subordinate status if they help each other. This theory gets an apparent illustration in *A White Heron* when Sylvia takes a firm decision to protect nature. Sylvia's knowledge about the secrets of nature and her courage to undertake explorative trips into the woods are seen by the hunter as exploitable for serving his purpose. She recognizes that both she and the white heron are targets of exploitation by the young man. She realizes the pain and exhaustion of being subordinated by the hunter. She does not want the bird to be hurt and so remains silent about the bird's whereabouts. Although the young man tries to use his charm and money to fascinate her, Sylvia is more impressed by the white heron which is described as "came flying through the golden air" (Jewett 21). Being fascinated by the glory of nature and realizing the need to protect the heron, she resists her temptation towards the charm of the hunter and the money he offered to help her poor family. The rare heron raises the man's desire to add one more priced possession to his collection of stuffed birds which are nothing but trophies of his 'triumph' over nature and its inhabitants. But the little girl's calm determination to protect the bird makes him give up his attempts. Sylvia, with an innate awareness, identifies herself with the nature to which she and the heron belong. At some level of her feminine being she feels that betraying the bird to the ornithologist would amount to the betrayal of the woods to the aggression of urbanized man.

Sylvia is attracted by the gallantry of the young man but her dream of love is really a naïve fantasy of a young girl and is not grounded on a realistic appraisal of the man's intentions. At the same time, she continues to feel close to nature and does not betray the white heron, even though she knows where the bird's nest is. The narrator reports,

"The murmur of the pine's green branches is in her ears, she remembers how the white heron came flying through the golden air and how they watched the sea and the morning together, and Sylvia cannot speak; she cannot tell the heron's secret and give its life away". (Jewett 21)

Through her silence about the bird's whereabouts, she protects the bird and also keeps herself from being fully exploited by the ornithologist. At the end of the story, the narrator calls Sylvia "lonely", indicating that she is heart-broken over disappointing the ornithologist.

A White Heron glorifies nature by representing the flora and fauna as having a deep-rooted relationship with humans apart from human approach towards it. Jewett illustrates this idea by using

the contrast of a young girl to that of a higher-class hunter. The significance of having communion with nature and the human foolishness of assuming that nature exists merely for man's sake get a clear exemplification here. She establishes that nature is pure, generous and kind, man is an outsider to nature and something to be afraid of. Sylvia's first meeting with the hunter, illustrates this point,

“Suddenly this little woods-girl is horror-stricken to hear a clear whistle not very far away. Not a bird's-whistle, which would have a sort of friendliness, but a boy's whistle, determined and somewhat aggressive” (Jewett 5).

This quote implies Jewett's idea that nature is safe, something that can provide comfort whereas man appears to be truculent, aggressive and arrogant. Sylvia has a set of values different from that of the young man, definitely superior, resulting from her living with nature.

Sylvia's unique relationship with nature is demonstrated as “There ain't a foot o' ground she doesn't know her way over, and the wild creatures count her one o' themselves” (Jewett 9). She is accepted by nature as one of its own. Sylvia goes through a time of transition and experience to become her true self, in recognizing what gives her joy, attaining the maturity of a female, and being faithful to her own self. She finds it within herself to push aside all the pressures and opts to follow the dictates of her heart. Sylvia wants to protect the natural world and its values, serenity, and animals against the onslaught of the industrial outsiders. She sees some of herself in the heron, the rare bird far from its original home, and it is because of this feeling of kinship that she cannot disclose the heron's location to the appealing young man. Sylvia finds the treasures she would lose by sticking to her decision negligible compared to the treasures of nature. The experience of the dawn bonds Sylvia with the heron and provides her with the strength to stay loyal to her true love, the woods.

A White Heron supports Emerson's view that nature and humanity complement each another. As Elizabeth Mayor comments, most fundamentally, ecofeminism is the belief that “we cannot end the exploitation of nature without ending human oppression and vice versa”. The ecofeminist goal is the adoption of a new attitude towards nature, one that realizes the interconnectedness of humans and nature instead of treating nature as a resource for filling human needs.

Our earth is often referred to as mother earth because the earth fosters all living things on it just as a mother nurtures her children. As far as the earth is concerned there is no discrimination between animals and plants or between humans and non-humans; the earth provides for them all in equal measure. Rivers, mountains etc. which sustain large ecosystems are also assigned feminine names and revered as goddesses and angels. Nature is like a mother to all living things giving them food and shelter. Every living thing draws its sustenance from nature and nature sees to it that everything gets its share of everything thereby maintaining an ecological balance and harmony most needed for the survival of all species. Living in harmony with nature is the essence of existence. Females of all species are, by nature, aware of this and they have to rely largely on nature for their existence as well as the existence of their offspring. Since the well being of the offspring is their prime concern they abide by nature and live in harmony with it. This gender characteristic assumes an exalted level in the human female bestowing them with feminine traits which are capable of subliming to aesthetic, cultural and spiritual levels. Even tomboys like Sylvia have it in them. Note the narrator saying “it seemed as if she never had been alive at all before she came to live at the farm” (Jewett 3) indicating that she came to her elements only when transplanted to nature. Man, on the other hand, has no such concerns and by his brawn he attempts to challenge the order of nature more for the satisfaction of the ego rather than any compelling needs little realizing that mother nature will have the last laugh. He hunts and kills animals for sport, climbs mountains to assert his supremacy, blocks water-flows and tries to harness the forces of nature in various ways to make them work for him. Man's interest is in exploiting nature whereas woman's interest is in loving it. She seeks harmony; he seeks conflict. Both Sylvia and the young man are after the white heron—she to see it, to admire it, to love it and to cherish it; he to hunt it, to kill it, to possess it and add it as a trophy to his prized collection of stuffed birds. Civilization has come to mean urbanization which, in turn, calls for industrialization which can be had only at the cost of environment. Men are after the glitter of city life while women prefer a peaceful, serene rural environment. Sylvia is actually a child of the town but she chooses to live in the farmland because it is there that she feels at home. This conflict of interests gives room for conflict between the sexes on a physical, mental, emotional and social level leading to the oppression

of women in a male dominated society. Consequently women have to be perpetually on their guard to ensure their essence and existence. The fact that nature also faces threats from man makes woman connect to nature instinctively. Being not equal to man physically woman has to devise other means of fighting oppression. Resistance is her way out and she draws the required strength from courage, patience and determination which are her forte. The young man is largely built and physically strong, his gun inspires fear, his gallantry attractive, his charm irresistible and the money he offers is tempting. Yet Sylvia quietly resists his appeals with determination. She chooses silence rather than speech, poverty rather than money, loneliness rather than love, peace rather than violence, loyalty to nature rather than to a man and prefers nature to the 'great world'. This is how a woman puts up resistance with determination. In this male dominated patriarchal society woman lives perpetually facing threats which assume physical, emotional and social dimensions and her existence depends on sustained resistance on her part. For her resistance is existence. And resistance to gender oppression and environmental exploitation are related; the liberation of one must necessarily include the liberation of the other. This is the ecofeminist reading of resistance for existence and it will have its impact on the social, cultural and spiritual aspects of human life.

REFERENCES

- [1] Atkinson, Michael. "The Necessary Extravagance of Sarah Orne Jewett: Voices of Authority in a *White Heron*." *Studies in Short Fiction* 19.1(1982): Print.
- [2] Brenzo, Richard. "Free Heron or Dead Sparrow: Sylvia's Choice in Sarah Orne Jewett's *A White Heron*." *Colby Library Quarterly* 14 (1978): 36-41. Web 6 July 2014.
- [3] Church, Joseph. "Romantic Flight in Jewett's *A White Heron*." *Studies in American Fiction* 30.1 (2002): 21-44. Web 12 July 2014.
- [4] Diamond, Irene, and Gloria Orenstein. eds. *reweaving the world: the emergence of ecofeminism*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990. HQ1233.R46. Print.
- [5] Jewett, Sarah Orne. *A White Heron and Other Stories*. New York, 1886. *Google Book Search*. Web. 22 June 2014.
- [6] Kelchner, Heidi. "Unstable Narrative Voice in Sarah Orne Jewett's *A White Heron*." *Colby Quarterly* 28.2 (1992): 85-92. Web 14 May.2015.
- [7] Mayer '94, Elizabeth, "The Power and the Promise of Ecofeminism, Reconsidered" (1994). *Honors Projects*. Paper4.Web.12May2015.<http://digitalcommons.iwuedu/phil_honproj/4>
- [8] Mellor, Mary. Capitalism Nature Socialism. "Eco-feminism and eco-socialism: Dilemmas of essentialism and materialism". Volume 3, Issue 2, 1992. pp 43-62
- [9] "<<http://www.enotes.com/topics/ecofeminism-and-nineteenth-century-literature>>."
- [10] <[http://www.etweb.fju.edu.tw/elite/advanced_reading/06/A White Heron.ppt](http://www.etweb.fju.edu.tw/elite/advanced_reading/06/A%20White%20Heron.ppt)>

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY



Indu.A.S is currently working as Assistant Professor of English at Amrita Viswa Vidyapeetham University, Amritapuri Campus, Quilon, Kerala. She took her Bachelors and Masters Degree in English language and Literature from the University of Kerala. Her areas of interest are ecofeminism and gender studies.