

Negotiating Coleridge's Poems from an Ecofeminist Perspective: A Select Study

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Abstract

Among the various ecosophies providing a variety of analytical standpoints, influencing and propelling the ecocritical discourse in different directions, ecofeminism is a key ecosophy that seeks to engage a comprehensive inquiry into the values guiding human interaction with the environment. At the core level, ecofeminism may be defined as a philosophy that represents a union of feminist thinking with radical ecological thinking. Ecofeminists like Rosemary Ruether in *New Women and New Earth* (1975) and Karen Warren in *Ecological Feminism* (ed) 1994 argue that in such societies where the primary model of relationships is one of domination, liberation for women as well as ecological resolution will remain a distant dream. Ecofeminism thus identifies the androcentric dualism of man/woman as the source of anti-ecological beliefs and practices. Eco feminists all across the world argue that the goal of these two movements are mutually reinforcing as they involve the development of world views and practices that are not based on male biased models of domination. As opposed to patriarchal notions of domination, eco feminists espouse the "ethics of care", a philosophy promulgated by Karen Warren in *Ecofeminist Philosophy* (2000) that refer to the practices of care associated with 'mothers, nursing and friendship' based on sensitivity and moral inclination as opposed to patriarchy involving violence and oppression. In the backdrop of the above discussion, the present paper aims for an ecofeminist reading of three selected poems of the Romantic poet, S T Coleridge namely, "Christabel", "Frost at Midnight" and "The Ballad of the Dark Ladie : A Fragment". The aforementioned poems will argue for a rethinking and realignment of gender roles that impose patriarchal hegemony on the marginalized sections of society that include women and the environment. The methodology will be analytical in nature and primary and secondary sources will be consulted.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, Feminism, Ethics, Care, Patriarchy, Gender.

Ecofeminism, also referred to as ecological feminism is an important ecosophy of the Ecocritical Discourse that seeks to unearth the connections between women and nature and analyse the treatment meted out to both in patriarchal societies. As a philosophy it is grounded in the basic feminist tenets of equality between genders seeking to assert non-patriarchal or nonlinear structures. While seeking to maintain these notions of equality between genders ecofeminism is committed to protection of the environment and is grounded on the awareness of the associations made between women and nature. Practitioners of the ecofeminist philosophy assert the need for an alternative world view that values the earth and all the living creatures as sacred while also recognizing humanity's dependency on the natural world. In the present times, needless to say, given the precarious condition of the planet the ecocritical discourse is assuming a position of utmost importance. The ecocritical discourse termed as ecocriticism may be defined as the application of ecological concepts to the study of literature in relation to the ecosystem. The various ways in which literature treat the subject of nature and problematizes landscape and environment with special emphasis on season, climate, weather, region and a healthy continuation of biotic and abiotic elements is examined within the broad area of the ecocritical discourse. Moreover, it highlights a holistic approach to texts that examines the perceived relationship between man, nature, ecology and environment. In the backdrop of the postcolonial scenario together with the other paradigms such as race, gender, class and identity as represented in literary texts, the study of the ecology or environment has gained much prominence. Ecocriticism maintains that literature may be approached in a way that examines man as part of the ecosystem and explores the ways in which we imagine and portray the relationship between mankind and the environment in all areas of cultural production. At the same time, Ecocriticism seeks to give a voice to the ecological rights of nature so that a balanced ecosystem is maintained (Choudhury 1).

Among the various ecosophies providing a variety of analytical standpoints influencing and propelling the ecocritical discourse in different directions, ecofeminism is a key ecosophy that seeks to engage a comprehensive inquiry into the values guiding human interaction with the environment. The term 'ecofeminism' was first coined by Francoise d'Eaubonne (Merchant Earthcare 5) who drew an analogy between the male driven urbanized society that has reduced the earth's fertility and over breeding that has resulted in the ever increasing population and exploitation of women (qtd in Gates 17). Ecofeminist Rosemary Ruether in *New Women, New Earth* (1975) argues that in such a society where the primary model of relationships is one of domination there can be neither liberation for women nor ecological resolution. The demands of the women's movement need to be united with the ecological movement in order to recreate a society that is equal (204).

Ecofeminist philosopher Karen Warren takes a similar stance when she contends that Ecofeminism involves the recognition that both Feminism and the ecological movement share a common "logic of domination" (Warren 1994:9) an underlying 'master model' while ecofeminist Davion observes women have come to be associated with nature, the material, the emotional, and the particular, while men have been associated with culture, the non-material, the rational and the abstract' because of this "master model" (Davion 1994: 4). Critic Val Plumwood states that merely differentiating men from women, humans from nature and reason from emotion does not itself constitute problematic anthropocentrism or androcentricism. It is the underlying model of mastery shared by these forms that is important. She advocates a recognition of both similarity and difference in the human-nature continuum. "We need to understand and affirm both otherness and our community in the earth" (Plumwood 1993: 137). She does not argue for a rejection of either science or reason, but rather a qualification of the philosophies that would polarize reason and nature in opposition. It is possible, according to her, to distinguish reason and emotion, man and woman, human and animal, but without the obsessiveness of the mainstream philosophical tradition thereby helping to undermine that mastery model that legitimates anthropocentrism and androcentrism (qtd in Garrard 28).

The above theories as propounded by the various Ecofeminists make it clear that they are all unanimous in their opinion that the dominion of women and dominion of nature are fundamentally connected and this understanding is crucial to feminism, environmentalism and environmental philosophy (Garrard 26). Ever since the publication of Jonathan Bate's seminal works, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991) and *The Song of the Earth* (2000) critics and scholars have started recognizing the contribution of the Romantic poets towards the modern concept of ecology and environmental discourse. With his illustrious contemporary William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge too holds a unique position as a poet with a strong environmental consciousness. Like Wordsworth, Coleridge too was not a mere on-looker of nature's picturesque beauty and instead adopts the persona of a speaker whose voice is largely conditioned by "the local and personal history of the place he inhabits" (McKusick, Green Writing 28-29) His works consistently express a deep and abiding interest in the Earth as a dwelling place for all living things and in such a perspective one may locate the origins of ecological thinking and a "holistic conception of the earth as a household, a dwelling place for an interdependent biological community" (McKusick, Green Writing 29). Such a perspective negates the claim of mankind's superiority over other life – both biotic and abiotic which contribute to a sound ecosystem. Viewed from this perspective, Coleridge undoubtedly foreshadows the modern concept of ecology and environmental discourse (Choudhury 164).

It is possible to negotiate Coleridge's works from the standpoint of the various theories of the Ecocritical discourse such as Deep Ecology, Bioregionalism, Romantic Ecology, Ecotones and Ecofeminism. The present paper seeks to analyse the Ecofeminist perspective from a reading of three of his poems, namely "Christabel", "The Ballad of the Dark Ladie" and "Frost at Midnight." The paper is analytical in nature and primary and secondary sources have been consulted.

The poem "Christabel" offers an ecofeminist reading in terms of the violence faced by the maiden named Christabel from an intensely patriarchal society and an analogy may be drawn with a similar kind of oppression faced by the earth. "Christabel" is an incomplete gothic ballad written by Coleridge in two parts - in 1797 and 1800 respectively. The poem seeks to explore the oppressive patriarchal forces as represented by Sir Leoline and Geraldine on one hand and the feminized earth as symbolized by Christabel on the other. In her work, "A Girlish Nature: Ecofeminism in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Christabel" writer Kristin E Kawecki asserts that in the long history of feminine figures, Christabel may be seen as one who experiences exploitation similar to the earth (Kawecki 1). This is in direct opposition to the "Ethics of Care" as espoused by Karren Warren in Ecofeminist Philosophy (2000). The "Ethics of Care" involves the idea of "mothers, nursing and friendship" sensitivity and moral inclination in direct contrast to patriarchy which is based on violence and oppression (quoted in Kawecki 7).

The poem deals with the adventures of Christabel and her encounter with an evil sorceress named Geraldine whom she meets in the darkness of the woods where she is seen praying and seeking spiritual solace. Taking advantage of the innocent Christabel, Geraldine gains access to the inner chambers of Christabel's castle and casts an evil spell on her. Though Christabel finds out about the deception she is unable to reveal it to her father Sir Leoline because of the magical powers of Geraldine. Ultimately, she discloses the truth about Geraldine to her father but he rejects her entreaties and instead offers the hand of friendship to Geraldine and her so-called family. The narrative ends abruptly before the truth of Geraldine can be revealed.

Several examples from the text make it clear that Christabel may be viewed as a representative of the natural world. The analogy is drawn very clearly when it is seen that she is very much at ease with the natural world, she goes out to the woods to pray at midnight rejecting the inner confines of her room or the castle chapel. "She kneels beneath the huge oak tree" (Coleridge I lines 37), and the oak tree is symbolic of the Celts' belief in natural deities who provide "the essence of assuredness, love and care for her offspring" (The Goddess Tree, qtd in Kawecki 3). She is compared to a flower, as beautiful and lovely, "so

fair", "so innocent, so mild", a gentle and sweet maid. At the same time reference to her face as "fair/ not pale/and both blue eyes more bright than clear" (II lines 277-8) signifies her beauty as a charming maiden. The reference to the spring season in which the poem is set is also a signifier to the natural world- like the spring season that is associated with growth and fertility, Christabel is also a maiden on the brink of fertility. This association of Christabel with the spring season is indicative of the risks that both the virgin maiden and the virgin earth are subjected to. Both may be seen as commodities, valuable for their utility and at risk to be exploited by the masculine and dominant forces of society. In this context, Kate Soper in her work, "Naturalised Woman and Feminized Nature" (2000) opines that both woman and nature may be seen as spatial territory, as the land or earth, which is tamed and tilled in agriculture (qtd in Kawecki 2). In the poem a similar parallel is discernible when Christabel is instantly betrothed to a knight the moment, she attains reproductive capacity by her father thus transforming her to a valuable commodity. Her initiation into the culturally dictated realm of womanhood is analogous with her subjugation for the sake of utility and this links her to the earth, exploited and oppressed to satisfy the unlimited needs of mankind. Other examples in the text point to the oppressive and stifling nature of her father's castle. The castle is described as "ironed within and without" (I lines 122), it is a place where not a single moonbeam enters (I lines 170). Her position may be compared to the showpiece in her father's castle of a "twofold silver chain fastened to an angel's feet" (I lines 177-78). She too is shackled by the chains of patriarchy (Choudhury 183)

Geraldine may be identified as the alter ego of Christabel who without the proper guidance of her mother projects into creation the fellow maiden Geraldine as a result of her neurosis regarding her sexual maturity (Kawecki 3). As the evil Geraldine casts her spell on Christabel she not only replaces her mother or guardian spirit but also removes her from the natural and ordains her into sexual maturity. Geraldine here assumes the role of the corrupter and Christabel is initiated not only to physical corruption but also psychological corruption as she begins to absorb this view of the feminine as commodity herself (Kawecki 3). In contrast to the characters of Geraldine and Sir Leoline, one may discern in the character of Barcy the bard an alternate model of care and concern upholding the "Ethics of Care". He is the only one who suspects the real identity of Geraldine while recalling a prophetic dream the earlier night of a serpent strangling a dove. In the response of Sir Leoline that he will "crush the snake" and ensure the safety of his daughter one may further locate the link of patriarchy and furtherance of militarism which is opposed to the "preservation and care for life and the living" (qtd in Kawecki). Barcy's resolve to live with nature and protect the innocent, "To wander through the forest bare/lest aught unholy loiter there" (lines 563-64) makes him a

model of care and protection. Thus, viewed from an ecofeminist perspective this narrative may be read as a tale of oppression common to both the earth and women illustrating Vance's statement that women and nature are seen as "the known and shaped objects while the knowers and shapers are the men" (133). Ecofeminists suggest that the domination of both goes hand-in-hand and unless such inequalities are removed the dream of ecological restoration as well as women's liberation will remain a distant dream.

The second poem taken for discussion is "The Ballad of the Dark Ladie: A Fragment" (written in 1797) and as the title of the poem suggests, the narrative revolves around the tale of a dark lady who represents a colonized group. As a form of critical discourse ecofeminism is grounded upon the representation of colonized groups which include nature/environment, women, the poor, the natives, and the dark and coloured people to name a few. Viewed from the standpoint of ecofeminism the two women characters, the dark ladie and her mother represent the orient and they experience colonial hegemony at the hands of the white lords. It is to be remembered that during the Romantic age, the British Colonial powers were at their zenith and this age was marked by remarkable expansion of colonies all across the globe. The predicament of the mother introduced at some unspecified moment in the past of British Culture is not even narrated, her tale is taken for granted (Sadiq 13). Her story may be equated in terms of exploitation of the virgin colonies that Britain was hegemonising at that period of time. She represents the spoils of annexation, a commodity that comes along with annexation of the lands in the far east.

It is the daughter, the dark ladie who stands up against this kind of hegemony voicing her protest in forceful terms. That the lady represents the natural world is made amply clear when the poet identifies her as a part of the natural world- she sits beneath the tree right in the green moss where the brook flows- she is happy and at ease with the sloping rays of the sun as she has lingered the whole day there. Her tears as she awaits the arrival of her betrothed are seen as one with the waters of the brook (Sadiq 8). When the knight arrives she implores for his protection and shelter as she recounts to him the unkind and rude words of her friends, this protection is important to her because of her precarious social position- a doubly marginalized one in terms of gender as well as race. The knight responds to her pleas with love and care as he promises to gift her the fairest of his sire's castle to her. However, his plans of moving her there in the darkness of the night speak of elopement and clandestine joy which she is unwilling to accept. He symbolizes masculine hegemony and shows no interest in a legitimate marriage probably because of her race. In response to this offer she expresses her desire to be led from her "mother's door" (lines 50) in the "eye of noon" (lines 49) in a proper marriage ceremony. The poem ends by the poet describing the charm of her

Oriental beauty of "jet black hair in pearly braids" (lines 58 Sadiq 7-8) This assertion of her dark beauty and in her rejection of a clandestine affair and her refusal to be appropriated as a mere mistress is a reflection of her spirit of resistance. Unlike her mother who has silently accepted her fate, she voices her protest and refuses to be seen simply as a trophy of the Orient and demands her own social position. This spirit of resistance is a reminder of the dichotomy and cultural encounters of the East and the West. From the ecofeminist perspective the poem points to the damage inflicted on the natural world represented by the two women, by the hegemonizers who exercised their colonial rule over the virgin lands they were conquering all over the globe.

The above discussion vindicates the fact that Coleridge in the manner of a true ecologist makes a plea to abolish all kinds of oppression and exploitative policies while asserting the need for equanimity. Undoubtedly the poet stands tall as a dominant ecofeminist voice by advocating practices that are free from patriarchal, male based models of domination. The poems "Christabel" and "The Ballad of the Dark Ladie: A Fragment" throw insight into the harm and violence that is innate to patriarchal bodies of oppression. In contrast to such violence and patriarchy Coleridge advocates the need for equality and this is clearly vindicated in the ecofeminist language of nurture and care as observed in the poem, "Frost at Midnight". In his seminal work, *The Song of the Earth*, Bate opines that the most radical aspect of the poem, "Frost at Midnight" by Coleridge is the poet's portrayal of himself in the maternal posture of watching over a sleeping baby (Bate, *The Song* 112). The poem begins with the image of frost creeping through the night and as the entire world sleeps the poet is at peace with his infant baby close to him in his cradle. In this serene and quiet atmosphere the poet goes on to contemplate baby Hartley's future. This change of image from the stereotypical masculine father to that of the maternal role is significant (Choudhury 188). Such a realignment of gender roles paves the way for a caring and nurturing relationship with the world as opposed to an exploitative relationship. One cannot miss the poet's call for a rethinking of our bonds with each other as well as with the environment.

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