

# Tracing Affinities between the ‘Nature-Nurture’ Continuum: An Ecofeminist Reading of L.M. Montgomery’s *Anne of Green Gables*

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## **Abstract :**

The colour green has been known for its allusion with the earth and its fecund ways of sustenance. LM Montgomery’s *Anne of Green Gables* centres on the eponymous protagonist’s journey from an orphanage to the lush green precincts of Avonlea, where she is met with her beloved house of Green Gables. Forming a part of the children’s literature, Montgomery’s novel deals with the coming of age of the protagonist through her association with the world of nature as a source of imaginary pleasure and indirect nurture. The ‘green gabled house’ situated amidst the scenic beauty of a nature untarnished by the effects of development, at the expense of ruining the environment, became an abode of hope for her. Anne, a wild, talkative but, kind-natured little orphan has a way with observing the world around her. She fell in love at once with the natural beauty that Avonlea provided and even though her beginnings in Marilla and Matthew’s green gabled home was not very great, she loved her new room inside their home. It was this space within the house and the outer natural expanse that enabled her to survive and sustain a childhood which not only replenished her soul but also made her turn into a compassionate young girl towards the end of the novel.

The present paper is an attempt at reading the patterns of nature overlapping and at most times being one with that of the idea of nurture. The argument in this paper seeks to study whether the experience gathered by the protagonist through her association with nature has indirectly nurtured her persona into a confident young lady and also underlining the possibilities of observing the relationship between woman and nature in its intrinsic totality. Further, the protagonist’s experience in the care of nature as a feminine force facilitates her

to overcome most of the hurdles and that is why nature will be viewed as concrete and nurture as an abstract entity in building up the argument. This paper will also lean towards the theoretical frameworks of ecofeminism, phenomenology and space in building up the argument through a narrative focus on the protagonist and her experiences through nature and from her conversations with the characters within the novel.

**Keywords:** *phenomenology, ecofeminism, ecology, space, nature, nurture*

### Methodology:

As the discussion below aims to understand the protagonist, Anne Shirley's deep love for nature and its apparent contributions in nurturing her person into a confident woman in the novel *Anne of Green Gables*; in this context, the paper takes recourse to the ideas presented in the theories relating to phenomenology, ecological feminism or ecofeminism and spatial theory. The first book which is taken up for research on the idea of the phenomenon or the value of experience is Edmund Husserl's *The Idea of Phenomenology* (1990) wherein Husserl enumerates on the concept of the immediacy of experience as a conscious effort on the part of the observer without any presuppositions or unexamined preconceptions whatsoever. The second book, which is referred to while analysing this paper, is Val Plumwood's *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993) in which Plumwood illustrates the notion of Ecofeminism in relation to other feminist theories and their apparent connections. The third book taken up for the study is *Ecofeminism* by Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva which is a collection of powerful essays commenting on the effects of Ecofeminism as a movement, its beginnings and how its connotations have changed with time making it a much more dominant concern for human beings of the present era. The fourth book which will be looked into for this paper is, Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space: The Classical Look at How We Experience Intimate Places* (1958) wherein Bachelard throws light upon the phenomenological interrogation into meaning of spaces which preoccupy poetry, intimate spaces such as a drawer, a house, a night dresser and spaces of wide expansion like the vistas and woods. Therefore, the methods employed in the present paper will be analytical and qualitative in nature.

### Discussion:

“It's been my experience that you can nearly always enjoy things if you make up your mind firmly that you will.”

— Anne Shirley, *Anne of Green Gables*

Nature and women have always been linked in their aspects of nurture giving. While it is in nature that all things living, grow and dwell; in the same manner a women's role as a

bearer of life within her and a nurturer who helps in the growth of the family or the people she is surrounded by is genuinely manifest. Although there are many contentions about the idea that women and environment or nature are linked by their mutual aspects of nurture, nevertheless, women's role as nurturers or caregivers is itself a common trait that most women accomplish be it by societal pressure or innately. In L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*, one witnesses the thread of the nature-nurture continuum through the characters of Marilla and Matthew Cuthbert, Anne Shirley and the centrality that Nature itself posits in the text. It was in the desire of the Cuthbert siblings to adopt a 'boy' in order that they are helped by his presence in their farming and other chores, which led them to look for a prospective child to adopt from an orphanage. However, the universe had a different plan in store for them as Matthew Cuthbert ended up meeting the awkward and talkative red haired girl, Anne Shirley, who was waiting for him eagerly on the train station. Matthew was surprised to know that the orphanage he contacted for a boy had sent him a girl instead. This event was further intensified by his conversations with the station officer who gave a very brief but clear description about the nature of Anne Shirley. Matthew, who wished his sister Marilla were around to solve the situation actually ended up liking Anne, after listening to her, as it was she, who spoke first and eased the moment. Even though Matthew planned inside his mind to take her home and let Marilla do the talking and explain the error that led them to bring Anne, nevertheless, on the way to the green gabled home, he could make out from the words uttered by Anne that she was someone who observed nature and exercised her imaginations very passionately. This fact itself made her very interesting and also gives away the experiential values that this little orphaned girl wilfully nurtured from nature.

Being an orphan, Anne could never acquire the attention and love that a child should rightfully get from the parents and staying in an orphanage didn't help much as she had to share her space with many others like herself. Therefore, not much acquisition of individual love and nourish were possible for Anne. This however did not deter her from experiencing happiness as from the novel it can be made out that she did strive to teach herself through her imaginative and minute observational skills. She regarded nature to be her tutor and nurturer and this idea is exemplified in the following lines uttered by Anne in Chapter 37 upon the death of Matthew:

I am sure we should not shut our hearts against the healing influences that nature offers us. But I understand your feeling. I think we all experience the same thing. We resent the thought that anything can please us when someone we love is no longer here to share the pleasure with us, and we almost feel as if we were unfaithful to our sorrow when we find our interest in life returning to us. (Montgomery 451)

This in turn, brings one to the theory of phenomenology as propounded by the German Philosopher, Edmund Husserl, wherein he expresses phenomenology to be an approach which aims to describe how the world must appear to the naive observer devoid of all presuppositions and culturally imposed expectations. In simple terms however, phenomenology deals with describing basic human experience or phenomena which is a word derived from Greek, meaning ‘appearance’. Phenomenology proceeds through the concept of ‘bracketing’ which involves a willing suspension of belief. Anne, after having arrived at Avonlea had to face a lot of criticism, the first being her excessive need to assert her inner thoughts verbally, her red hair and freckles and lastly, her personality as a whole. Mrs. Rachel Lynde’s character is one with whom Anne had a conflict after moving in to Avonlea and Marilla later had to make her apologise to Mrs. Lynde. Mrs. Lynde is the town busybody who came to Marilla’s home in order to inspect how she has been bringing the newly adopted Anne up. As she disapproves of an old spinster like Marilla in bringing up a child, she confronts Anne with the following words: “She is terribly skinny and homely, Marilla... And hair as red as carrots!” (Montgomery 97) causing Anne to burst out in anger, stomping her feet and calling her fat, clumsy and devoid of imagination. Anne, here, displays a raw and uncouth behaviour which can be aligned with nature’s inherent rawness. Without thinking about the implications that society would denounce upon her, Anne chose to be her natural self and spoke her heart out thereby challenging existing expectations from society. She however, realises her fault and apologises to Mrs. Lynde which in turn depicts her desire to be generous and kind.

Anne would rather love and wholeheartedly devote and listen to nature than some mere human expectations and this again shows her apparent subversive attitude towards the dictates of society. The novels concern is primarily related with the development of the eleven year old Anne from prepubescent child to a young adult, outlining her development with regards to her academic as well as moral and domestic education into womanhood. Most of the times it is observed that Nature is her instructor and at other times when Anne tells Marilla about what her teacher Miss Stacy imparts to the girls at school, one can only trace the difference that Nature and Human expectations exhibit. In the care and warmth of Nature, Anne observes and practices culture without having any physical conversation with it. Her connection with nature is more emotional and experiential, having to do mostly with her personal and mental space. When she tells Marilla what Miss Stacy teaches to the girls: “that they couldn’t be too careful what habits they formed and what ideals they developed in their teens, because by the time they were twenty their characters would be developed” (Montgomery 363) highlights the expectations that society has for young girls as a whole.

This expectation can be defined as a restricted and controlled pace of living life without forgetting to maintain their calm and reserve, always obedient to the calls of society to be a perfect woman. This is suffocating for Anne as she struggles to control her pace of thoughts, actions and words, but thankfully she finds solace in tolerant characters like Matthew and Miss Josephine Barry. Both of these characters appear inaccessible to Anne at first but, once they opened their hearts and ears to her, she could realise that some people take time to open up and that appearance is not always the criteria for judging a person. This leads her to confide to Marilla about her experience in understanding human beings and their dispositions:

“Miss Barry was a kindred spirit, after all... You wouldn’t think so to look at her, but she is. You don’t find it right out at first, as in Matthew’s case, but after a while you come to see it. Kindred spirits are not so scarce as I used to think. It’s splendid to find out there are so many of them in the world.” (Montgomery 241)

Anne’s quick way of judging people has been cured by her encounters and conversations with people and this has enabled her gradual growth into a confident and wise young lady. This became possible for her because she was conscious and willing to value her own experience in the human world. The value that phenomenon or experience had on a person and through their conscious efforts to understand and emulate these notions into their living pattern is exemplified in the following lines from Husserl’s *The Idea of Phenomenology*:

In all of its manifestations, knowledge is a mental experience; knowledge belongs to a knowing subject. The known subject stands over against it... in perception, the perceived object is supposed to be immediately given. There stands the thing before my eyes. I see it; I grasp it. But the perception is nothing more than an experience that belongs to me, the perceiving subject. Likewise, memory and expectations are subjective experiences, along with all the acts of thoughts built upon them, on the basis of which we mediate posit real existence and determine any truth about such existence. (Husserl 17)

Another instance of Anne’s conscious efforts in understanding the world of nature around her through her extended imagination is again an indicator of the experiential values she has for her perceptual knowledge of things she views: “I read in a book once that a rose by any other name would smell as sweet, but I’ve never been able to believe it. I don’t believe a rose would be as nice if it was called a thistle or a skunk cabbage” (59). This is an allusion to William Shakespeare’s play “Romeo and Juliet” wherein in Act II, Scene II Juliet speaks these lines on the balcony and Romeo happens to overhear them. In the context of

*Anne of Green Gables* however, it shows Anne's knowledge and intelligence which further showcases her wealth of experience which is also extended to the world of books that provide more scope for imagination.

Ecofeminism in this novel seeps in with the treatment that society in the form of Mrs. Rachel Lynde, and the other characters offer to Anne. It is a view essential to the theory of Ecofeminism that women and nature are related and this is demonstrated by the traditionally feminine values of reciprocity, nurturing and cooperation, which exists in both nature and women. The ecofeminists further highlight the similarities that are inherent in the subordination of women and the degradation of the environment. As Vandana Shiva states in her essay "Women's Indigenous Knowledge and Biodiversity Conservation":

The construction of women as the "second sex" is linked to the same inability to cope with difference as is the development paradigm that leads to the displacement and extinction of diversity in the biological world. The patriarchal worldview sees man as the measure of all value, with no space for diversity, only for hierarchy. Woman, being different is treated as unequal and inferior. Nature's diversity is seen as not intrinsically valuable in itself... The marginalisation of women and the destruction of biodiversity go hand in hand. (Shiva 229)

Vandana Shiva tries to talk about the links between women and nature and the conservation of biodiversity in general. She tries to point out how women have been closely associated with agricultural practices which are sustainable and therefore, do not destroy the balance in nature. Marilla's occupation with nature is also significant in the text as she and her brother, both worked closely with nature. They were both farmers who worked hard to look after the animals and the greenery that were a part of their territory. Marilla was a strict disciplinarian as she liked to keep her house spotless clean and also never dealt with any nonsensical arguments laid down by others. She was especially critical of Anne's hyperactive personality that never stopped talking and imagining and it was only because Matthew convinced her to keep Anne that she agreed. Marilla believed that men and women were very different from each other and therefore overlapping of their roles in life was a sheer impossibility. According to her, boys and men do farm chores; girls and women cook, clean the home, sew and entertain and this is one of the reasons why the Cuthbert siblings wanted to adopt a boy. Marilla says: "No. We want a boy to help Matthew on the farm. A girl will be of no use to us." (Montgomery 39). Marilla's Victorian ideals were strong when she felt and expected all these things to be normal. It showcases her utilitarian zeal and her inherent need to civilise Anne by stopping her from imagining as she tells Anne in the beginning: "You'd better get dressed and come downstairs and never mind your imaginings." (Montgomery

49). However, Marilla's point of view is seen to change with the progress of the novel as Mrs. Lynde's advice to Marilla about how to punish Anne were rejected which in turn shows Marilla's willingness to challenge mainstream parenting practices. Marilla's transformation into a caring and nurturing mother for Anne enables her to experience motherhood in its purest sense although she was a spinster. Later on in the novel, Marilla becomes compassionate towards Anne as she realises her love for Anne and also expresses distress in sending her to Queens. This transformation of Marilla is important because along with Anne she also experienced growth and a change in attitude towards accepted practices and norms in society.

On the contrary, Anne projects an innate and natural maternal instinct as she is very capable of taking care of children. Anne learns through her experiences in society to choose the correct path of embracing womanhood without being hampered by society's pressures on her thoughts. She in fact, challenges society from the day she steps into Avonlea by questioning and exercising her own opinions as the following lines suggests:

"Why must people kneel down to pray? If I really wanted to pray I'll tell you what I'd do. I'd go out into a great big field all alone or in the deep, deep woods and I'd look up into the sky - up - up - up - into that lovely blue sky that looks as if there was no end to its blueness. And then I'd just feel a prayer." (Montgomery 76)

An important scene pertaining to ecology in the novel needs discussion as it depicts how nature is ruthlessly destroyed by the cutting down of Idlewild, Mr. William Bell's little stretch of land having trees which happened to be the quiet meeting place for Anne and her friends. Montgomery here probably tries to show how young girls with their colourful imagination are fascinated by the concept of woods and how the destruction of the woods lead to their eventual doom and emotional breakage:

Anne and Diana had spent most of their playtime that summer on and about the pond. Idlewild was a thing of the past, Mr. Bell having ruthlessly cut down the little circle of trees in his back pasture in the spring. Anne had among the stumps and wept, not without an eye to romance of it; but she was speedily consoled for... big girls of thirteen, going on fourteen, were too old for such childish amusements as playhouses, and there were more fascinating sports to be found about the pond. (Montgomery 335).

These lines occur in the chapter titled "An Unfortunately Lily Maid" wherein the segment of the cutting down of trees, the destruction of woodlands, suggests the deep ecological concern that Montgomery tries to introduce through her young narrator Anne. This incident

of Anne's weeping over the cutting down of the Idlewild trees and the sullen pulling down of her from the wooden post in the pond by Gilbert is a parallel visualisation of Montgomery's apparent and uneasy showcasing of the relationship between virginal girls and ruthless chopping down of the natural world all around. Another aspect which is suggested by these instances is the deep respect that Anne has towards nature and this reflection of her deep love and reverence for nature instigates one to notice how such respect leads to protecting and caring of the environment.

Nature plays an important role in the world that Anne occupied and is treated just like another character in the novel. It is this supposition that makes the assumption proper that Nature can be regarded as a concrete force that Anne worships and cherishes. Anne's connection with nature is such that she acknowledges that connection with the landscapes she sees and is satisfied with everything that the natural world has to offer. Encircled by the exquisite yet simple beauty of Prince Edward Island; *Anne of Green Gables* combines light and freedom, warmth and adventure. A deeper reading of the narrative suggests a prominent and a continuous interaction between Anne and the natural world surrounding her. This can again be justified by the fact that she was an orphan who lacked the loving warmth and protection of a mother and therefore, her deep love for nature further indicates that she regarded Nature to be her mother and a concrete force that helped her survive better. That she constantly tries to imagine Nature as her saviour and caregiver is highlighted at the very beginning when she expresses her opinion in the following lines that if Matthew had not arrived:

I had made up my mind that if you didn't come for me tonight I'd go down the track to that big wild cherry-tree at the bend, and climb up into it to stay at all night. I wouldn't be a bit afraid, and it would be lovely to sleep in a wild Cherry-tree all white with bloom in the moonshine. (Montgomery 18)

Val Plumwood throws light on how Ecofeminism is different from other feminisms in its insistence on "by making an account of the connection to nature central." (39) Plumwood in her book *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* tries to address issues relating to the idea of comparing women and nature. In the very first chapter of this book titled, "Feminism and Ecofeminism", Plumwood asserts that the connection between women and nature is an ancient one and that this particular idea made many feminists believe to be regressive and insulting. She further enunciates the view of women being pictured as earth mothers, as passive, reproductive animals; making the feminists understand it in terms of being an instrument of oppression and patriarchal dominance. However, she opposes this traditional view of the feminists by stating that the approach of women-nature connectedness is essential and logical

and that it must remain a central issue for feminism to discuss over:

The connection still constitutes the dynamic behind much of the treatment of both women and nature in contemporary society... it is perilous for feminism to ignore the issue because it has an important bearing on the model of humanity into which women will be fitted and within which they will claim equality... this analysis forms the basis for a critical ecological feminism in which women consciously position themselves *with* nature... the inferiorisation of human qualities and aspects of life associated with the necessity, nature and women— of nature-as-body, nature-as-passion or emotion, of nature as the pre-symbolic, of nature-as-primitive, of nature-as-animal and of nature as the feminine— continues to operate to the disadvantage of women, nature and the quality of human life. (Plumwood 21)

Plumwood, here, tries to explain the concept of backgrounding or denial of women and nature. This concept of backgrounding according to Plumwood involves a denial of dependence on biospheric processes, and a view that human beings are outside nature, which is in turn treated as a limitless provider of resources without needs of its own. The parallel that runs with the backgrounding of women and nature can be explained with the fact that women are systematically backgrounded and instrumentalised as housewives, as nurses and secretaries, as colleagues and workmates, without any scope of acknowledgement by the patriarchal society. A mother's role in nurturing a child and also her family's needs is never recognised; instead a mother is defined in terms of her relation to her husband and child. Likewise, Nature and its abundance are exploited by the dominance of human beings without any heed to exhausting its resources. Just like in the case of women, Nature is backgrounded and defined in terms of the human beings who regard themselves to be 'the environment'. This anthropogenic attitude of the human beings is what is divulged critically by Ecofeminists.

One element in the novel that needs especial mention is Anne's constant prayers to look pretty. The young Anne would prioritise her prayers with words like "Please let me stay at Green Gables; and please let me be good-looking when I grow up." (78). While her friend Diana tries to convince her that she is "the smartest girl in school" and that it is better than being good looking, Anne nevertheless, responds firmly, "No, it isn't... I'd rather be pretty than clever." (163); this is a worldview which has been centralised by the popular culture that she is aware of. Being beautiful or good looking is one of the traits that the society valued in Anne's world for a woman. Rather than her intellectual abilities, it was the way a woman dressed and behaved that mattered, making things complicated for girls like

Anne to thrive. Her hair colour being red is a part of her identity but, during Victorian times, red hair was synonymous with 'ugly' and no matter how intelligent a woman is if her hair is red she is still considered different. Her experience of this aspect of recognition owing to her red coloured hair makes her competitive and longing for hair which is brown and acceptable in turn transforming her into someone who values what the society opines about them. Thus, her intelligence is back grounded because of her hair colour and she herself is giving fuel to this scope of criticism. However, there was one point in the novel, where she dyes her hair 'green' in order to show her protest against society and immediately afterwards she expresses deep regret for doing so. This act of hers again questions her earlier conviction of being a proper subversive persona, but her regret afterwards throws light on her inherent desire to remain unaffected once again by the norms laid down by society. Her choosing the colour 'green' for her hair also needs scrutiny as this is one colour that she has the most access to viewing, her new home is green gabled and her surroundings are mostly green and it offers a space for her to bloom with freedom. The significance of the colour 'green' is also relevant because Nature is mostly understood from its greenish hues of plenty, a space which can be considered an alternative for the suffocating patriarchal one.

In chapter 5 titled "Anne's History"; it is revealed that Anne's biological mother Bertha Shirley's death excludes her from having a mother/daughter dialogue in the narrative. Since, her mother did not "live long enough for Anne to remember calling her 'mother', therefore, her story remains unspeakable and unspoken. But, upon reaching Green Gable home she found a new hope of belonging and both Matthew and Marilla became her mother figures. This new home also symbolically became her mother, as Anne constantly mentions her love for her new room and home. They present to her a source of care and comfort which she lacked during her eleven years of stay in the orphanage. Therefore, the space she occupied in the Green Gabled home and the green and lush landscapes of Avonlea enabled to nurture her. Another thing worth mentioning is her way of giving imaginary names to things she sees in nature. For instance, "the lake of shining water" for Barry's Pond which was located on the way to Green Gables and Anne gave it her own imaginary name. She calls the apple scented geraniums on the window sill of Green Gables "Bonny", the cherry tree outside her window, "Snow Queen and all these naming shows how personally affected she is with the natural settings around her. This again brings one to Gaston Bachelard's theory of Space wherein he talks about the significance that interior domestic spaces and their components like the various rooms and types of furniture have on the subjective consciousness of the observer. For Bachelard, the house is the quintessential phenomenological object which enables the culmination of the personal experiences to reach its height. He views the house

to be a sort of initial universe, enumerating that "all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home" (Bachelard 5). He further proceeds to examine the home as a manifestation of the soul through the poetic image and literary images found in poetry.

In conclusion, the discussion above tries to trace the significance that the environment and space of the Green Gabled home hold for Anne's education. It can be said that Anne's journey from the orphanage to Avonlea provided her a scope to embrace experience and thoughtfulness in brighter hues. Her imaginative abilities coupled with her deep reverence for nature and all things beautiful, complimented her growth into a wonderful young lady. It is also perceived in the discussion that the theories of Phenomenology, Ecofeminism and Space gets merged in the line of thoughts pertaining to the nature-nurture continuum in *Anne of Green Gables* as it can be seen that Anne's experience in the world of nature enabled her to acquire the skills needed to become a woman, complete with the abilities of nurturing and also understanding the ways of the human world. Nurture as a concept is seen to be interlinked with that of the concept of nature as they both run parallel to Anne's wholesome development. Nurture is more abstract as it takes place more symbolically within Anne's mental faculties and Nature is concretised by its physical presence and overpowering influence on Anne's observation. The notion of denying acknowledgement to women and nature is also touched upon in the discussion above which showcases similarities of treatment meted out to both nature and women. Marilla's choice to become a 'mother' despite her spinsterhood speaks wonders for the change that she embraces by the end of the novel and it is through her and Anne's deep connection with nature that the relationship between nature and women is established to be intrinsic. Thus, through the story of Anne, the urge to humanity for being more compassionate and understanding of the forces and needs of nature is underlined.

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