

ECHOES OF NATURE, WHISPERS OF FEMININE

An Ecofeminist Reading of Margaret Fuller's Poetry

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Abstract

This research paper highlights the ecofeminist themes in the poetry of Margaret Fuller. Ecofeminism shows the connection between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature. It further reflects the nature of patriarchal society. It demands women's empowerment over exploitation, as women are more empathetic to nature, which will lead to environmental protection movements, preserving nature as well. The poems, like *A Maiden Sat Beneath a Tree*, *Meditations*, and *Highlands*, explore the themes of women's subjugation by patriarchal figures, ecogothism, spiritual ecology, and female autonomy. Ecocriticism incorporates the aspects of exploitation as well as empowerment, making it a holistic social approach. Margaret Fuller's poetry embodies all these themes and makes the study significant enough. The relationship between women and nature is sheer in the political, social, emotional, and economic dimensions. The subjugation takes place widely, which joins these two aspects of feminism and ecology together. This paper shows that the subdued character of patriarchy tried to control both nature and women by asserting its power. Women and nature are counted as subservient to patriarchal power, and this assertion leads to the exploitation of both. This paper emphasizes the deep relationship between nature and women through the poetry of Margaret Fuller and highlights that Margaret Fuller is a true ecofeminist whose work is still significant in the contemporary world.

Key words: Ecofeminism, oppression, exploitation, subjugation, and patriarchal power.

Introduction

Decades before the word 'ecofeminism' existed, Margaret Fuller was writing poems where women and landscapes suffer the same silencing and show the same rage. Sarah Margaret Fuller, a 19th-century feminist author and an activist in the transcendentalism movement, was definitely ahead of her time. Her poetry incorporates the themes of feminism and nature as well, though she is highly famous for her feminist text "Women in the Nineteenth Century," but her poems hold an equally great significance. She very well describes the natural world and the shared agony among women and nature, which makes her poetry worthy to be studied under the eco-feminist lens. Ecofeminism is a new theory in the literature domain that is interdisciplinary in nature as it clubs up literature and ecology together. Theories that are studied in literature are apparently "theories" popularized in the name of literary theories; their application to some literary texts provides literary support to them in order to exhibit themselves as "literary theories." The study basically provides the literary aspect to the interdisciplinary theory—ecofeminism. Fuller's works are mostly studied separately as 'feminist works' or in association with the transcendentalism movement, which talks about getting back to your roots (nature). This study amalgamates the two distinct theories together to actually provide a great depth to the study of Fuller's poems. As her poems "naturally" have both the traits of nature and feminism.

"The violence against nature and women is rooted in the same worldview." – Shiva, 1988, 'Staying Alive.'

An eminent ecofeminist, Vandana Shiva, focuses on the postcolonial Ecofeminism. She shows the connection between women and nature through shared pain, making it significant in ecofeminist study.

‘A Maiden Sat Beneath a Tree,’ a poem by Margaret Fuller, has a strong transcendental vision to it. The poem delves into self-reliance and talks about the deep connection between women and nature; it also includes the “male gaze,” which disrupts the harmony shared between women and nature and hence establishes a strong bond between both.

“Meditations” by Fuller articulates “spiritual ecology” and highlights how nature evokes the light of spirituality within the hearts of humans, especially women, who are naturally empathetic to nature and deeply share a pure bond. In the arms of nature, women get the ultimate “liberation” she always sought from society, which is male-dominant.

“Highlands” talks about a deeper connection between women and nature; the description of the ‘Hudson River’ establishes an Eco-gothic space and illuminates the bold picture of nature, aligning with women's rage, which together forms an audacious bond.

“Ecofeminist literary criticism examines how the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women are interconnected in literature through parallel narratives of domination, silence, and enclosure.”
(Gaard, Greta, and Patrick D. Murphy, *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy*, 1998.)

Fuller’s “A Maiden Sat Beneath a Tree” argues about the exploitation of women and how the harmonious bond between women and nature is disrupted by patriarchy, which only sees women as someone subservient to men and also views nature as a commodity to be used.

‘Male gaze’ in “Maiden Sat Beneath a Tree” aligns with Karen Warren's idea of “logic of domination.”

“It is a structure of argumentation that justifies subordination by reference to a supposed natural inferiority; it is this same logic that sanctions the domination of nature and women.”

(Warren, Karen J. *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters*, 2000, p. 46.)

In “Highlands,” Fuller personified the natural landscape, especially the ‘Hudson River’ and its raging form. The image parallels the audacious look of a woman who seeks power from nature.

“The American landscape was feminized from the beginning, a virgin land whose promise and peril were described in explicitly sexual terms, inviting both reverence and rape.”

(Kolodny, Annette. *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and History in American Life and Letters*, 1975, p. 7)

Kolodyn ‘gendered the landscape,’ providing a solid backdrop for Fuller’s ‘Highlands,’ as she too personified the river and associated the bold Hudson River with feminine rage.

Background

Ecofeminism is the theory that connects nature and gender together. The term was coined by French writer and feminist Franois d’Eaubonne in the year 1974. In her book, titled “Le Fminisme ou la Mort (Feminism or Death) where she showed the connection between subjugation of women and the exploitation of nature, both are results of patriarchy.

D’Eaubonne frames the concept through the ultimatum of the book’s title—“Feminism or Death,” arguing that if women do not take control of the ecological struggle, the patriarchal system will lead to the “extermination of nature” and the “systemic destruction” of all life-sustaining resources. She additionally speaks about interlinked oppression. She describes women and nature as the two most exploited and enslaved resources.

Ecofeminism emerged from Eco criticism which talks about the condition of nature, its sceneries and the oppression of it. Though considered distinct fields, both share similar origin. Ecofeminism states the relationship between women and nature, also the patriarchal dynamics which exploits both.

In the contemporary world, there's a whole labyrinth of ecofeminism with different outlooks like liberal ecofeminism, spiritual ecofeminism, cultural ecofeminism, and social/socialist ecofeminism.

Margaret Fuller

Margaret Fuller pioneered Feminism in America and was also associated with the Social , literary and philosophical movement Transcendentalism. The movement aimed to connect to nature, the movement was in reaction to Industrial revolution and materialism which degraded the natural landscape. Fuller's works of feminism and her association with the Transcendentalism movement make her an important figure of ecofeminism, as her works are based on the ecofeminist framework even before the term came into existence.

Literature Review

Ecofeminism emerged as a theory in the late 20th century; it connects nature and Feminism together and establishes the relationship between them based on the origin of their exploitation which is patriarchal power structure. Margaret Fuller pioneered Feminism in America and wrote her seminal essay "Women in the Nineteenth century". She was also associated with a philosophical movement ,Transcendentalism ,which aimed to connect with nature and emphasized self- reliance. Many such theories developed over time in the field of Ecofeminism.

Vandana Shiva and Carolyn Merchant studied nature and the condition of women conjointly and found patriarchal power as the cause of their subjugation. Shiva emphasized postcolonial and indigenous women's role in the spiritual world, while Merchant presented a temporal context where nature and women both remain subservient to patriarchal autonomy.

Karen J. Warren is best known for articulating the "logic of domination," arguing that the same conceptual framework used to justify the oppression of women is also used to justify the exploitation of the natural world. She exhibits a bond between nature and women on the basis of shared agony.

While theory has consistently been developed by various eco-feminists, its application to the works of Margaret Fuller is meager, and this research focuses on the application of eco-feminist theories to the poems of Margaret Fuller, as her association with transcendentalism and feminism provides solid support to the research. Some of her obscure poems got very little attention; however, these poems hold a great potential to justify all the eco-feminist theories developed so far. Fuller being a transcendental activist and a feminist pioneer, her engagement with non-human nature, bodily connection to landscape, or the "invisible labor" of ecological care has not been fully explored through any ecocritical framework. Most scholarship on Sarah Margaret Fuller focuses heavily on her transcendentalist feminism, gender equality rules, and literary examples of women in the 19th century. Her connection to ecofeminism is often passed over for political or social critique. This research focuses on the poetry of Thoreau through an ecofeminist lens.

Theoretical Framework

The framework applied in this research is ecofeminism; the study incorporates the works of Sarah Margaret Fuller by applying an ecofeminist lens. Fuller, being an activist in transcendentalism and a pioneer of feminism, has written many poems with the essence of both aspects, but mostly her works are either studied through a feminist lens or an ecocritical lens. This very study focuses on the amalgamation of both, as her obscure poems explore the themes of nature with the support of feminism, making it peculiar to be studied through an eco-feminist lens.

Highlands, A Maiden Sat Beneath a Tree, and Meditations are a few poems that are analyzed in this paper to develop and enrich the study of ecofeminism. Fuller's prose is highlighted often, while her poems remain obscure; however, her poems are a rich treasure to be explored to add upon new knowledge to it. The eco-feminist view helps to highlight titular themes of Fuller's poetry as she personified nature as a bold individual, aligning with the audacious nature of women. Fuller also focused on the shared agony among both nature and

women and how patriarchy played a huge role in exploiting both. Fuller's poems also provide an eco-gothic vision as she describes nature as an untamed epitome of ultimate power.

Analysis of A Maiden Sat Beneath a Tree

Nature-women connection:-

The very title of the poem provides a linkage between nature and women: "A Maiden Sat Beneath a Tree." It signifies the shared harmony between nature and women female in her vulnerable state seeking the companionship of nature. Eco feminism emphasizes on this very topic where nature is gender as female and hands is justified by the universal title mother nature in the poem as well for the tranquillity the maiden in the embrace of mother nature by sitting under a tree the poem link the maiden to nature for instance stars and forest emphasize is her connection with or and highlights there shirt emotional and intellectual one more ability

"Her eyes upon the stars did glance" (Fuller, 1833)

Here, the eyes of the maiden created a sharp strike with stars. It reflects Maiden's connection to Cosmos. Ecofeminism's core idea is the shared harmony between women and nature; Fuller's poem highlights the very connection and emphasizes the strong bond between the two. The application of ecofeminist lenses reflects the unshaken association between women and nature.

"The ecological crisis is rooted in the mistaken notion of the human being as separate from and superior to the rest of nature".(Shiva, 1988)

The exploitation of nature is one of the aspects of ecofeminism; it originates from the ecological hierarchy maintained by humans. Humans are born with fully developed brains, but they use them to subjugate nature itself. The "superiority complex" lying in human minds is the cause of exploitation of both women and nature. Be it men in the case of patriarchy or humans in the case of natural exploitation, they are conditioned with brutal and cruel minds.

"The sacred stars looked sadly down". (Fuller, 1833)

Poem dramatizes the lamentation of Cosmos over the maiden.

This line personifies nature and emphasizes the compassion held by it. Compassion is a titular trait of both woman and nature. A woman is known for her compassion as she plays the role of a "mother," and the role of mother is always entitled with empathy. "Mother Nature" serves the same character as we get the ultimate tranquility in nature, be it abiotic or biotic; ,both the resources are provided by nature.

Nature and woman as provider :-

"The care needed to bear and nurture children and the households in which they develop provided the basis of an 'ethic of care' seen as necessary for the prevention of widespread environmental destruction." — Ecofeminism—An Overview (Source: ScienceDirect), pointing to the nurturing role as a protective act.

The women as providers and nature are often associated with their traditional roles of being nurturers and subsistence providers, which are exploited by capitalist society and patriarchy; both are seen as the resources to be used and consumed.

This linkage between the two exhibits the ecocritical union. Also, the shared agony makes women sentimental regarding nature.

Environmental movements like the “Chipko movement” of 1973 were primarily led by women; however, the contribution is often overlooked and marginalized. The movement was led by a group of rural women from the village of Mandal in the Indian state of Uttarakhand.

“Women in India, as nurturers and providers, have been at the forefront of ecological struggle”.(Shiva, 1988)

Such examples showcase the association between women and nature and how much empathy women hold towards nature and how frequently women and nature are marginalized by the male-dominated society.

“The parting moon appeared to frown” (Fuller, 1833)

Here the moon is personified , which is a cosmic element, looking daggers at the Maiden (Gunhilda). The lines highlight the disapproval judgement done by the cosmic element over the maiden over her wrong choice. As nature provides the power of self-reliance and Gunhilda, instead of having faith in nature herself chooses the momentary pleasure which added to her abandonment. This shows the deep connection between women and nature as nature responds to the overwhelming moments of women and hence provides a safe place to be.

Disruption of harmony:-

The poem features a hunter as well, who serves the role of a patriarchal figure disrupting the harmony between maiden and nature.

“A hunter with his bow so bright had caught her glance.” (Fuller, 1833)

This represents patriarchal intrusion into feminine-natural space exploiting vulnerability.

The arrival of Hunter breaks the pure bond, the shared anguish between nature and maiden, and this is evident in real life as well, where man wants woman to revolve around him and never encounter her own self, consequently discarding her “individuation.” The maiden was part of her individual self, snagged by the hunter (a patriarchal figure) and also the maiden's bond with herself.

“The violence against nature and women is built into the very mode of perceiving nature and women as dead, inert, and passive.”(Shiva, 1988)

Male gaze

The hunter’s gaze objectifies the maiden, breaking her harmony with nature.

There is a famous concept of 'male gaze', which was coined by Laura Mulvey, a famous British film theorist, in her essay“Visual pleasure and Narrative Cinema”(1975). The ‘male gaze’ outlines a way of representing ‘women’ which Authorize male and lessen women. It caters the power to Men, however diminishes the power of women.

“And a glance so bold and bright”.

The poem is a critique of the male gaze, consequently the patriarchal gaze, which has subdued women over the years. Man asserts his rights over woman, which gives rise to social evils like ‘marital rape,’ ‘harassment,’ and restricted autonomy of women. Such evils of patriarchy are validated by the society, which is ruled by men. Women are expected to carry on the traditional women's roles of a wife and mother; they’re treated as the unpaid labourers of just nature, which has been seen as a commodity to be utilized. This prioritizes men in every aspect of life over women. This unchecked autonomy of males results in violence, gender inequality, and sexual assault.

“Had lit his eye with amorous fire”. (Fuller , 1833)

This reflects the patriarchal power dynamics where women are objectified and results in the evils done to women, be it in a form of physical or emotional.

Women’s self-discovery and resistance:

“If loneliness thou canst not bear-
Cannot the dragon’s venom dare-”

Gunhilda ventures into the state of self-realization where she questions herself that if she can’t beat the loneliness of life, then how would she go through the hardships of it? The poem evidences the “self-discovery.” Maiden moves towards self-awareness and empowerment, echoing ecofeminist themes. The realization of self leads Gunhilda to encounter the reality of life where she needs to be on her own rather than seeking any outward help, as she sought before from the hunter. The hunter only provided her fleeting affection and then

abandoned her, which made her realize the reality of this patriarchal society, which uses women for momentary pleasure and leaves them afterward. In such a harsh world, a woman must be aware of her individuality. The poem “rejects the external validation,” one of the main attributes of “Transcendentalism,” hence making the poem influenced by the philosophical movement that asserts self-reliance.

Embracing solitude- It becomes one of the main themes of the poem where Gunhilda reclaim her power and authority by rejecting the assertion of patriarchal power dynamics. Hedonism ,practiced by men ,here Hunter is well detected by the maiden and she retrieves her autonomy which was lost initially. She gets to know that life is a solitary journey and she is the only sailor of her life’s boat. No man can ever provide the eternal love and care which she sought as she’s the ‘provider’.

Analysis of “Meditations”

Spiritual Ecology—Spiritual ecology is a broad and diverse domain; it doesn’t have one proponent but a number of proponents. Leslie E. Sponsel, a professor of anthropology at the University of Hawaii, defined Spiritual Ecology in his book “Spiritual Ecology: A Quite Revolution” , he states Spiritual Ecology as a quiet revolution which emphasizes on the connection between soul and nature.

“First, we have to step out of our dream of separation, the insularity with which we have imprisoned ourselves, and acknowledge that we are a part of a multidimensional living spiritual being we call the world. The world is much more than just the physical world we perceive through the senses, just as we are much more than just our own physical bodies. We need a shared harmony among all to work efficiently. The devas understand the patterns of climate change better than we do because they are the forces behind the weather and the winds. Just as plant devas know the healing powers of plants (and taught the shamans and healers their knowledge), so are there more powerful devas that know and guide the patterns of evolution of the whole planet.”

— Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee, *Spiritual Ecology: The Cry of the Earth*, 2013.

Spiritual Ecology joins spiritual awareness and ecology together and establishes a strong bond which caters the souls of humans through perceived admiration towards nature. It treats nature and humans equally.

This very theory connects spirituality, environment, and humanism (especially feminism); it clubs up self-actualization and nature, providing nature a spiritual direction, and takes the environment into the dimension of spirituality. Fuller’s poem, like “Meditations,” best fits in the theory. She focuses on the interconnection between human spirit and nature and how the natural world helps in the growth of our core. The poem dramatizes nature as something that promotes “individuation” rather than something to be used, hence making it best align with the theory.

“Today for the first time I felt the Deity/prayer on hearing thunder.”(Margaret Fuller, *Meditations*, 1833)

The lines highlight the association of spiritual power and nature as the speaker states that the natural forces like ‘thunder’ push her towards God, ‘Deity’; hence, the poem emphasizes the spiritual connection with the natural world. Furthermore, the speaker articulates the outward beauty by giving the description of clouds, mountains, forests, and birds and how her “sense” feels wholesome after getting drenched in this natural beauty.

The speaker listens to the “eternal echoes” from clouds and how the voice touches the “centre.” She wants to get submerged in the natural world by leaving the human world as her “senses” resonate with the natural beauty.

“Father, I cannot be a spirit of power. May I be active as a spirit of love.” (Fuller, 1833)

The poem serves as the journey from “romantic pride” to “transcendental rendering”; it dramatizes devotion, not just submission.

Eco gothic perspective

“Highlands” by Margaret Fuller was written in 1844 near the Hudson River and surrounding mountains.

Ecogothic theory reveals the dark side of ‘progress’ and ‘technological development’.

Margaret Fuller’s description of the “sullen grey” of the Hudson reveals a “pessimistic vision” and acts as a critique of the destruction of the natural world.

During the 17th century, nature was merely treated as a “commodity.” John Locke suggested that humans must treat the land as their private property. Hence, they held an instrumentalist perspective of nature.

Eco-gothic theory talks about the bleakness of the human mind towards nature and how nature can show the repercussions of continuous exploitation of it. The “Highlands” shows the “stern” and “bold” view of nature rather than the serene one that states nature as, sometimes, unyielding, or let’s say diabolic.

“Yet, not the less, I Hudson!” (Fuller)

States that through the picture of it, it was sullen then too; she found it calm and proud. Fuller saw Hudson not merely as a river but as an “emblem of that power/of high resolve.”

She depicts the Hudson River as so powerful that “even rocks have bowed.”

“Thou wouldst not deign thy course to turn aside/And seek some smiling valley’s welcome warm.” (Fuller)

She depicts the Hudson River as something that does not choose an easy way, as Fuller states through “smiling valleys,” but something that chooses a more robust way “through the heart of mountains.”

“Through the mountain’s very heart, thy pride / Has been thy channel and thy banks to form.” (Fuller)

Here, Margaret Fuller personifies nature, especially the ‘Hudson River,’ which resonates with an ‘audacious woman’ who seeks liberation in the lap of nature, who’s fearless and seeks power from nature, hence justifying the deep-rooted connection between women and nature. She rejects patriarchal norms; she’s bold and beautiful like the Hudson River (nature), but outward beauty is not all she has, as she’s highly undaunting within. She doesn’t choose an easy way; instead, she walks on a path full of hurdles and challenges (traditional female roles) and stands out stronger than before.

Conclusion

Reading A Maiden Sat Beneath a Tree, Highlands, and Meditations by Sarah Margaret Fuller together reveals that nature imagery is not a mere romantic escapism but an early ecofeminist critique. She aligns “nature stress” and “female psychology,” which share a beautiful bond and are subjugated by patriarchal society. It’s not just the empathy of women towards nature but also the shared “trauma” that establishes the bond. The gendered natural landscape in the poetry of Fuller provides the base for the research; the feminine energy of nature is something that adds to the ecocritical knowledge. Across all three poems, ‘natural imagery’ not merely acts as a backdrop but as an interlocutor. In A Maiden Sat Beneath a Tree, it acts as an ally to the maiden, who first laments in the arms of nature and then seeks liberation in it. Meditations opens the spiritual connection between women and nature and shows how nature evokes the spiritual awakening in the hearts of humans. Highlands showcases a gothic image of nature and presents the destruction of nature as a Gothic. Instead of serene imagery of nature, it articulates the haunted image parallels with the audacious woman and exhibits female by framing environmental protection as a radical. The study positions Margaret Fuller as a proto-ecofeminist voice whose poetry included nature and women's relations. The exploitation of nature and subjugation of women, even in the contemporary world, make the study significant enough to be read. This study limits itself to poetry and does not feature prose by Fuller, as scholarship on prose is crowded, making it less significant for further research. The poetry by Margaret Fuller is a domain apparently remaining obscure, making it best suited for the research. Her other poems incorporate the psychological effects that are open for study; those include “ecological stress” as well. Such work would expand the scholarship on Margaret Fuller.

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