

Re-reading Red Oleanders and The Handmaid's Tale: An Eco-Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

Feminism is an ideology which seeks not only to understand world but to change it to the advantage of women while Ecofeminism is a socio-political movement where there is an existence of considerable common ground between environmentalism and feminism with some current linking feminism and deep ecology. Tagore's play Red Oleanders may be re-read from an Ecofeminist perspective for in the play both Nature and Nandini, the heroine prominently mirror to each other and under the backdrop of the city of the demon-king and the dominant malign power politics her fight for restoring the agrarian social structure is brought into focus. Considered from Ecofeminist perspective Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale where women and nature, the benevolent life sustaining forces under the cosmos are identified with each other, gives us an idea of what the future will be if the threat and damage to ecological balance continue at the present alarming rate.

Keywords: Feminism, Ecofeminism, Nature, Patriarchy, Ecological Balance.

Ecofeminism also called 'Ecological feminism' is a branch of feminism that examines the connections between women and nature. ("Ecofeminism", *Britannica*) This concept basically can be divided into two words namely 'eco' and 'feminism'. The term eco is related to 'Nature' or 'Environment' whereas the term 'feminism' is related to 'Woman'. Eco-feminism puts forward the idea that nature and women are significantly related to each other in terms of the similarities that they display.

The term 'feminism' has its origin from the Latin word 'femina' meaning 'woman' and it refers to the advocacy of women's rights, status and power at par with men on the grounds of

‘equality of sexes’ and relates to the belief that women should have the same social, economic and political rights as men. It is, in other words, “the belief in the importance of gender equality, invalidating the idea of gender hierarchy as a socially constructed concept”. (Cott 4-5) Simone de Beauvoir writes, “the first time we see a woman take up her pen in defense of her sex” (de Beauvoir 105) was Christine de Pizan, who wrote *Epître au Dieu d’Amour* (Epistle to the God of Love) in the fifteenth century and thereafter it developed in three waves – first, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, second in the 1960’s and 70’s and third from 1990’s to the present.

Ecology is an interdisciplinary field that includes Biology and Earth Science. The word ‘ecology’ (‘okologie’) was coined in 1866 by the German scientist Ernst Haeckel. There are many practical applications of ecology in conversation biology, wetland management, natural resource management, city planning and human social interaction.

Ecofeminism is an activist and academic movement that sees critical connections between the domination of nature and the exploitation of women. (“Ecofeminism” *Wloe*) The term ‘eco feminism’, first used by French feminist Francoise d’Eaubonne in 1974, was hailed as the third wave of feminism. Eco feminism, as Karen Warren notes, is an umbrella term for a wide variety of approaches and although the categorization of eco feminism is a contested point, what holds these disparate positions together is the claim that, “there are important connections between the domination of women and the domination of nature.”(Warren 103) In the words of Mary Mellor “It takes from the green movement a concern about the impact of human activities on the non-human world and from feminism the view of humanity as gendered in ways that subordinate, exploit and oppress women.”(Mellor 1) To these notions, while eco feminism adds both a commitment to the environment and an awareness of the associations made between women and nature, ecofeminists examine the effect of gender categories in order to demonstrate the ways in which social norms exert unjust dominance over women and nature. (“Ecofeminism”, *Britannica*)

A central tenet in ecofeminism states that male ownership of land has led to a dominator culture (patriarchy) in which animals and land are valued only as economic resources. (“Ecofeminism”, *Green Politics*) Ecofeminism opposes the patriarchal monopolization over women and nature. Even the very creation myth highlights the patriarchal stance, where man was given the power to dominate and subdue women and nature, for his benefit. Ecofeminists point that wherever nature is exploited, women are also seen to be degraded and vice versa. Thus, according to Greta Gaard ecofeminism’s basic premise is that the ideology which authorises oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality and physical abilities is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature. In male dominated

society of the modern west, exploitation of the earth and of women's body go hand in hand. (Gaard 1-12) Vandana Shiva, in the same vein, makes it clear that one of the missions of ecofeminism is to redefine how societies look at productivity and activity of both women and nature who have mistakenly been deemed passive, allowing for them both to be ill-used. ("Ecofeminism", *Green Politics*) In a broad sense Ecofeminism, thus, seeks to do away with all kinds of oppressions and hold the belief that no attempt to liberate women will be successful without a similar attempt to liberate nature from the onslaught of modern technology and colonialists. (Das 66)

Thus, the modern Eco feminist Movement was born out of the ways in which feminism and environmentalism are combined to promote respect for women and the natural world. These were again motivated by the notion that a long historical precedent of associating women with nature had led to the oppression of both. They noted that women and nature were often depicted as chaotic, irrational, and in need of control, while men were frequently characterized as rational, ordered, and thus capable of directing the use and development of woman and nature. Accordingly, he justifies his patriarchal stance by pointing out that women and nature are savages who need education and proper supervision. Thus, it has become a kind of colonizer/colonized relationship between them. Eco feminists also contend that this arrangement results in a hierarchical structure that grants power to men and allows for the exploitation of women and nature.

Early Ecofeminism, thus, determined that solving the predicament of either constituency would require undoing the social status of both and rightly the primary works on ecofeminism consisted largely of first documenting historical connections between women and the environment and then looking for ways to sever those connections. One founder of Ecofeminism, theologian Rosemary Ruether, insisted that all women must acknowledge and work to end the domination of nature if they were to work toward their own liberation. As Rosemary wrote in 1975 in her book, *New Woman / New Earth* :

Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationship continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of this [modern industrial] society. (204)

Tagore's play *Raktakarabi* translated as *Red Oleanders* was written towards the end of 1923 with the title *Yakshapuri* or *The City of Yaksha* (the demon-king). Tagore further revised the manuscript and retitled it as *Nandini* after the name of the female protagonist of

the story. In the final version published in “Pravashi” in 1924 the title was further revised to *Raktakarabi* (*Red Oleanders*). “The shift in emphasis, it can be noticed, is from the city (Yakshapuri) through a character (Nandini) to a flower (*Raktakarabi*) and makes *Raktakarabi* essentially a symbolic drama”. (Ray 185)

The story of the play runs like this : The kingdom of Yakshapuri flourished on gold mining and forced labour . Its king lives behind locked steel doors, veiled in mystery, awe and terror. Into this ‘brave new world’ comes a young and willful girl, Nandini , ‘the bearer of the message of reality , the savior through death’ who fears no one and upsets the whole order, not only making the workers rebellious but luring the King himself out of the hiding. When he sees what his henchmen have made of his people , he himself leads the revolt against his own generals ---- but not before Nandini’s beloved companion, a brave and carefree youth, Ranjan, who refuses to be conscripted, is killed.

During Tagore’s tour to the west in 1916-17 and in 1920-21 all of his lectures were compiled in the books like *Personality* and *Creative Unity* where a new Tagorian outlook on the womanhood is expressed. It is here for the first time Tagore alluded to a kind of ‘woman-force’ which is very essential to save the civilization from the clutch of destruction. Tagore states:

True womanliness is regarded in our country as the saintliness of love. It is not merely praised there, but literally worshipped, and she who is gifted with it is called Devi, as one revealing in herself woman, the Divine...Thus the Eastern woman, who is deeply aware in her heart of the sacredness of her mission, is a constant education to man.(*The English Writings* 554)

Interestingly, this concept of ideal eastern woman is concretized through Nandini, a young and wilful girl, who fears no one and whose beauty charms everyone, upsets the patriarchal and male-dominated order of the kingdom of Yakshapuri wailing under the rule of the king, living behind locked steel doors, literally and symbolically implying the iron-curtain. She not only made the workers rebellious but lured the king himself out of his hiding. In the words of Tagore himself, “Nandini, the heroine of the play, has definite features of an individual person...Nandini is a real woman who knows that wealth and power are *maya*, and that the highest expression of life is in love...”. (Tagore 283-5) Nandini is like a lightning that contains the potential thunder: “I have brought the thunder, I shall strike the golden citadel”. (Tagore, vol.6.681). Thus, in the drama Rabindranath not only represents the role of woman in bringing about liberation for the toiling mass, but simultaneously makes their representative Nandini equal in all respects except physical strength with her male counterpart, the demon-king of the gold-mines.

As Kripalani perceives *Red Oleanders* raises the more fundamental issue of the free spirit of life through Nandini, the feminist voice of the play “set against the more terrible machine of a highly organised and mechanical society which turns men into robots, reducing names to numbers”(Kripalani 181) chiefly by way of depicting the character of the King who is an abstraction that represents the in-thing of the Western civilization – ‘a terrible reality’, ‘a titanic power with an endless curiosity to analyse and know, but without sympathy to understand, with numberless arms to coerce and acquire, but no serenity of soul to realize and enjoy’. (Tagore 283-5)

The play thus may be re-read from an eco-feminist perspective for here in the play Tagore has portrayed a woman at the centre who manifests the spirit of defiance against the dictates of this powerful killer and is presented, in his own words, as the embodiment of the benevolent aspects of Nature. Tagore remarks : “The entire play is an elaborate portrait of Nandini, a woman. She represents the joy of life, the simple beauty and pristine purity of Nature” (Preface) Because of the fact that consumerism, an effect of industrialization has robbed man of his soul, the environment has been plundered ruthlessly and an organised passion of greed is stalking abroad in the name of European civilisation, Nandini as the mouthpiece of the playwright warns us : “Man’s basic needs are limited. Physical appetite has a limit. But there is no end to Man’s desire”. (662)

In the play there is an unconscious attempt on the part of the writer to create an emphatic relationship between the wounded self of Nandini and the plundered nature. Nandini wants to fight against this greed of human beings along with the help of Ranjan, her love. But still keeping tune with the Wordsworthian dictum –“Nature never did betray....” Nandini finds solace in the lap of nature, the benevolent earth, becomes part of the landscape. As Nandini represents the innocence and opulence of Nature, the call of Paus, the harvesting season is a call of Nature in her pristine purity and limitless bounty. Accordingly she remarks: “The Earth gives away her treasures happily through Nature. But when man in his pride and arrogance exploits Nature by doing violence to her a curse falls on him”. (656).

Red Oleanders, as an Ecofeminist text, however, in my considered view addresses itself to such fundamental human issues as cruelty and violence, both of which are associated with power. In a very disquieting piece of reflection, the heroine identifies herself with the nature so that her tragedy and that of the nature mirror to each other, reflect each other. What men do to women, they do to Nature as well. However, by the end of the play we find that the king has been moved by the spirit of Nandini and there is a clear hint that ultimately the order will be restored and human values will triumph. It is at this point interesting to note that Nandini in this play bears certain resemblance to the unnamed narrator of Atwood’s novel

Surfacing who refuses to be victim and decides to give birth to the child in her womb. She tells: “I can not know yet: it’s too early. But I assume it: if I die it dies, if I starve it starves with me. It might be first one, the first true human, it must be born, allowed”.(*Surfacing* 206)

With protagonist’s determination to give birth to the child, Atwood has hinted that germination will take place and the implication is crystal clear – that’s both women and nature will be protected provided they defend themselves against the onslaught of men over them. Seen from an Ecofeminist perspective *Red Oleanders* too “lays bare the damage done to Nature on account of man’s insatiable thirst for power and greed and “ends on a note of hope for the restoration of ecological balance and consequently possible redemption of man”. (Ray 190)

Like *Surfacing* Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* deals with questions, problems and predicaments which have a universal rather than culture – specific validity. With no Canadian setting the landscape of the novel is not geographical or cultural, but interior . While giving a shocking treatment to the theme of sex, procreation and love, “ this novel takes on the character of grim prophetic vision of a future world where male chauvinism would have once and for all, destroyed the finest chords of wifehood, motherhood and womanhood.”(qtd. in Tandon & Chandra viii) Thus, *The Handmaid’s Tale* moves through the interior landscape of the protagonist rather than traversing the geophysical or cultural background.

In *The Handmaid’s Tale* , the patriarchal capitalist production technology, using power and violence, alienates women like Offred and other handmaids from their body living forms from their basic environment. Here, Offred, the narrator, questions the excessive use of reproductive technologies which in the guise of assisting a woman, rob her of the ability to tense her bodily rhythms. In *The Handmaid’s Tale* , in the academic discussions regarding Gilead, Prof. Pieixoto comments that this could be traced back to the widespread use of birth control of various kinds including abortion practiced in the modern west ! He says :

Still births, miscarriages and genetic deformities were widespread and on the increase and mistrend has been linked to various nuclear plant accidents, shutdowns and incidents of sabotage that characterized the period as well as to leakages from chemical and biological warfare (‘ Historical Notes’ 311-24)

Here the Professor’s voice embodies the vision of the novelist who is considerably concerned with the consequences of these hazards suffered by women in the 21st century.

In the totalitarian regime of Gilead the handmaids are rendered powerless, passive and mute and are subdued to their anatomical destinies. In this novel, Atwood depicts how patriarchy

with its state controlled religion has exerted a total colonization of woman's mind and body. The handmaids have become the complete property of the state and are utilized as a rational resource. If they fail to produce a child within the three chances given to them, they will be declared as unwomen and exiled to the colonies, where they clean toxic waste and act as slave labourers. Very often the offspring born are deformed ones, due to the ecological degeneration of the times. The effect is reflected in the animal world also, for the news says that the coastal areas are being "nested". Fishes have become extinct like whales.

It is the fear for herself and for her lover and child that keeps Offred passive in the beginning. But her emotions and validity are not to be suppressed for long after the ceremonial fertilization, she aches for Luke, her lover. Her developing awareness of herself as a victimized woman kindles in her the desire to subvert the pervasive canons of Gilead. Her secret affair with Nick and with the underground Network, meant for reassuming women and conducting sabotage, are the results of that. Eventually, she is saved from Gilead by Nick, though we are not sure whether this freedom is everlasting or not.

In the Gileadean patriarchy, a woman is denied the right to possess, or have control over her body. Her body is segmented and her value is determined on the basis of her reproductive capability. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood suggests that the society of today where choices are too many may lead to a totalitarian future that prohibits choice. Indeed, in *Surfacing* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood has depicted the menial issue of environmental degradation brought in by the technocratic society and how it has affected the life of women on this planet. Preservation of biodiversity is a must for continuation of human life on earth. It is in this context, that ecofeminism gains ground as a radical movement and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a strong vindication of this movement world over.

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