

# Ecofeminine Consciousness in Sarah Orne Jewett's "A White Heron"

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**Abstract-** *The dominating human practices and discourses regarding nature were questioned in 1970s in the USA with the emergence of eco feminism that talks of affinity between female and ecology. It is an academic form of the movement targeting to critique the exploitation of nature by human beings as of the women by men. This paper aims at analyzing close relation between women and nature in Sarah Orne Jewett's "A White Heron" from eco-feminist perspective. The project is based on the conflict between culture and the nature in the story represented by a male and the females respectively. The discussion will reassert the repressive and submissive; or destructive and protective gender roles over the nature.*

**Key words-** *Eco feminism; repressive; submissive; gender role; harmony affinity; conflict*

Eco feminism as an interdisciplinary strategy to deal with the important environmental issues came in to formal recognition in 1970s. Its main concern is to disagree with the previous patriarchal concept in terms of behaving with nature. It is formulated on the logic that the masculine type of exploitation of nature by human beings echoes the patriarchal domination of women. Eco-feminism as such was started in early 1970s namely by a woman activist Francois d' Eubone to make the women aware towards the nature and to save it. The shared features of women and the nature made this movement as eco feminist movement. Mary Meller says "the women who bring together feminist and ecological concern in both formal and informal movements are generally referred to as eco feminist". According to her those who raise the voice for the preservation of nature and who have similar features of fragility, delicacy, purity and have been dominated are eco feminist. This, as a critical discourse, stands on certain assumptions: Nature and Women are very similar in terms of helplessness, exploitation and both are supposed to fulfill the human needs, giving and nurturing life. It means that just like the male domination and exploitation of women there is the exploitation of nature by human beings in a masculine way. Its main idea is the naturalization of women and feminization of nature. All their characters are supposedly interconnected.

We can contextualize this condition in Sara Orne Jewett's "A White Heron", which depicts the innocent nature of women and exploiting tendency of a male ornithologist. It also tells that there is a close tie between women and nature by showing Sylvia for the bird and against the hunter. The victimization of femaleness starts from the protagonist Sylvia herself along with her migration from the city to the village. She had left the "crowded manufacturing city" to escape the misconduct of

a bad boy and to live a country life. Here, the behavior of that boy is the example of male domination on the women and her preference to country life is her tie with feminineness of the country.

Her name, Sylvia resounds Latin word 'Sylvy' which means 'wood' or 'forest', so, domination of her can be interpreted as the domination of nature and vice-versa. The word, 'city' itself sounds masculine, opposite to the feminine nature of Sylvia's village. Her unique relationship with nature is demonstrated as: "There ain't a foot o'ground she doesn't know her way over and the wild creatures sound her o'themselves" (Jewett9). She is accepted by nature as her own part and the nature as her part. She loves living in the ruler farmland where she can enjoy the beauty of nature to her heart's content. In the story, only female characters including the cow are in the harmony with nature, except the hunter who is the representative of masculine power to exploit the world of female nature.

The bird 'white heron' also suggests some female qualities since the word 'white' signifies innocence or peace like that of female or nature. Her intimacy with nature is defined by Catriona Sandilands as ". . . who is clearly more at ease with her tree and animal companions than she is with people"(Sandilands 58). Sylvia's eco friendliness is more valuable than any human being. She feels more comfortable to be the part of nature and the animals. In living with the nature and village, she seems to have forgotten earlier discomforts of living in urban part in the early childhood. It shows her eco feminine affinity to the nature.

"A White Heron" starts with her harmonious living with the nature around: "A little girl was driving home her now, a plodding, dilatory, provoking creature in her behavior but a valued companion for all that" (Jewett,

151). The common belief of eco feminists that there is the close link between female and the nature is supported by these beginning lines of the story. Whatever the provoking nature the cow has it is the most preferable companion for Sylvia as a part of the innocent nature. As soon as she comes with the nature, she becomes quickly and naturally attached with the flora and fauna of the jungle. Her account of going away from the western light with cow and their familiarity with the path of the striking deep dark woods tell about her great pleasure in the company of natural environment.

The masculine purpose of exploiting and dominating nature and women can be seen in the young hunter's efforts to elicit information from Sylvia by persuading her but his failure in this regard is the example of the close friendship of Sylvia and the nature. The hunter offers her much needed money and she is strongly attracted to his urban sophistication up to the point of climbing a pine tree to find the nest but she undergoes a type of epiphany experience there. When she sees a distant ocean spots heron, the wild, light slender bird that floats and wavers, she is more attracted by these rather than the monetary offer of the hunter. At this point Sandilands comments: "and prepares to tell the collector where to find him. But as she faces the man, she struck dumb, after her epiphany, she can't tell her heron's secret and give its life away" (59). Sylvia doesn't value money now because she has been enlightened with the flora and fauna of the natural landscape from the top of the pine tree. Her rejection to inform to the hunter about the nest is a type of her resistance against masculine exploitation of nature and women. Her confidence not to tell him anything is the outcome of her eco friendly consciousness towards the nature and the white heron.

The hunter sees the bird only as an object of satisfying his needs as an ornithologist- an object of study to exploit the nature further effectively but Sylvia doesn't follow his logic nor does she like that idea of killing and catching the birds. She is against the idea of killing birds and animals for whatever propose whereas the hunter seems to derive pleasure or satisfaction from killing and catching of the birds. Here, Jewett seems to say that the western genomic discourses of science are the major causes of ecological destruction and the rural traditional beliefs are more egalitarian towards the animal beings. The story is a controversy between the consumerist urban thought and ethical inclusive rural logic about the animals. These two logics are represented by the hunter (ornithologist) and Sylvia respectively. An American critic Donovar notes: "Sylvia, a nonliterate rural child resists the dominating intrusions of scientific discourse, which would colorize her natural environment, erasing it as a subject, objectifying it for exploitative purpose" (81). In this statement of Donvar we can derive women's connection to nature and masculine colonial purpose. The statement sounds as a resistance shown by Sylvia against the hunter and in favor of her feminine companion i.e. nature.

Against the patriarchal reason and industry, Sylvia is much nearer to nature as she has some ecological wisdom.

In "A white Heron", we see that the women are comparatively independent in nature as feminism pleads for it in the urban places. She attempts to show the women independent in relation to nature. The characters, Sylvia, her grandmother and even Molly seem happy and free in the company of natural surrounding and setting. The absence of male members in Sylvia's family also may suggest Jewett's disagreement with the obligatory idea of marriage and childbearing by women as she had opposed this in her own life. In the story, too, she may be meaning her characters enjoy their lives in the union with nature. Sylvia and her grandmother have survived their own in the country with the sense of freeing existence. As Margret Roman writes:

Women characters were unburdened by biological constraints, constrains that would tie them to men and to consequent gender expectations/exploitations, these women characters, removed from the domination of men . . . could achieve a secure, intimate and freeing existence. (146)

Indeed they are not obliged to any social expectations of patriarchy. Sylvia feels horror-stricken to hear a clear 'unnatural' whistle of the hunter from very near. It is not a bird-whistle, which would have a sort of friendliness. Sylvia leaves the cow there and steps aside into the bush. It is because she feels safety and closeness to the bush rather than with the representative of patriarchal exploitation, the hunter.

Even in the company of human being (hunter) she feels insecure and alone on the way home from jungle. For her, a male human being with gun is a double threat to her which disturbs her free playing with the nature: "She didn't dare boldly at the tall young man, who carried a gun over his shoulder, but again she came out of her bush and again followed the cow, while he walks along sides" (5). Here, the 'bush' and the 'cow' represent her living preferences. She likes to live in the pure innocent wilderness of the bush and she likes to live in the company of the animal. The cow is the innocent creatures of the nature itself. Moreover, she shares some biological and cultural sentiments with the protagonist, Sylvia. So the idea of eco feminist consciousness can be substantiated from this event of the story. Jewett's female characters are seen very near to the nature.

Like in "A White Heron", her story, Country of the Pointed Firs also shows its character, Mrs. Todd as a boundary-creature, on the line between nature and human society. She lives alone in her "Little Garden" filled with herbs of numerous uses. She visits over the landscape care freely. The garden becomes her green companion and ecological condition of it enables her with independence. Mrs. Todd's sense of relaxation and strength is rooted in the little garden which is the nature itself. For Sylvia, the male conquering and domineering presence of the hunter is alien whereas befriending the nature is akin to her where she can live in harmony with it.

One of the major logics of eco feminism is the possibility of getting liberated from the interference of human beings. But it relates this possibility with collaboration of women beings. Since they both are in subordinated position they both need freedom which is possible if they help each other. "A White Heron" illustrates this proposition in the most practical manner when Sylvia undergoes a sort of epiphanic realization about the importance of the white heron. She decides not to give any information about the bird to the hunter. In an indirect way, she comes to realize that along with the heron she herself may be the target of the hunter and she decides to evade him. She realizes the pain and exhaustion of being subordinated by the hunter.

After climbing on the top of the tree, her realization is reversed which is also the climax of the story. Getting fascinated by the natural beauty, she is overwhelmed and doesn't want the bird to be hurt. So, she remains silent about the bird's whereabouts. Her fascination to the beauty of the bird overweighs the monetary and physical attraction of the hunter. She describes the bird as "came flying through the golden air" (Jeewett 21). The silent determination of Sylvia to protect the bird makes the hunter to give up his attempt. At this point, Sylvia gets assimilated with the microcosm of the nature by gaining innate awareness from within. She identifies with the nature to which they both belong. Her betrayal to the hunter can be taken as honesty to the nature and her unity to protect each other and even to liberate from masculine domination.

In the story, we also can see the Emerson's idea of nature and humanity. He says that they both are complimentary of each other. In this regard, a critic Elizabeth Mayor says: "we cannot end the exploitation of nature without ending human oppression and vice versa". This is the common belief and goal of the eco feminism which aims at nurturing eco friendly attitudes in the people towards nature. Instead of treating nature as a source of desire fulfillment they should realize the interconnectedness of nature and women/human beings.

Except Sylvia, feminine affinity to nature can be seen in another character, Mrs. Tilly, too. Her belief seems that nature is the best and suitable place for the women to live. It is suggested from her calling her granddaughter, Sylvia from town to the village. Her close relationship with nature can be proved from Annabel Rodda's *Women and Environment*:

Most of women's work deals with nature such as nurturing, cooking and farming. Mrs. Tilly's chores deal with nature, too. She graciously describes her work that she has her own can from which she can gain milk anytime she wants. She also has husks and features that she raises all by herself. She also knows that there is a good pasturing for geese just below here towards the mash. (164)

Rodda means to say that Tilly feels glory in possessing her typical farmer identity. The cow, pasture, husks, geese and their company is after all the company of nature. She has the sense of pride to live with the natural beauty of the

village. She has understood the nature and its innocent presence there.

Not only has the intimacy of women to nature but also nature seems very willing and friendly to them. In "White Heron", the cow, personified as Mooly, is an example of eco friendly consciousness. She doesn't get annoyed in spite of Salvia's annoying treatment sometimes. She has become the best playmate of Sylvia to give her every pleasure possible. We can interpret the cow as the representative of the nature which has a friendly manner to deal with the human beings. Since Sylvia and Mooly have similar gender characteristics, their tie of friendship gets closer in the story. For example, when the couple hides and seek on the way home, "The old cow was not inclined to wonder further, she even turned in the right direction for once as they left the pasture, and stepped along the road at good pace" (161). The cow is conscious of the right time to return home. It looks as if she is attentive enough not to make Mrs. Tilly worry about them. So the feminine relation goes hand in hand in the story.

The shared features of a mother earth are some remarkable logics to derive eco feminist consciousness into being. Like a mother performs motherly duties and responsibilities, the earth mother also nurtures all the creatures of the earth indiscriminately. In the story, the reference to the natural things river cow, hill, jungle, etc. are generally attributed to feminine. And Sylvia's relation with them elicits the theme of female intimacy and plight. The essence of existence lies in harmonious relation with the nature, specially, all the women beings, by their nature, are comparatively aware and friendly to the nature which is essential for their own sake, for the sake of their offspring and for all humanity. But men are less worried and friendly to the nature. They have turned irresponsible to the protection of Mother Nature. To fulfill their ego they challenge the order of the nature. The phallic hubris with the men is the major problem for the ecology of the earth.

In the anthropocentric society nature is facing perpetual threats from human being as women are exploited by the males. The issues of gender oppression and environmental exploitation are interrelated and the recovery from problems demands collaborative efforts/cooperation between women and nature, which can only fight with the oppressive treatment of patriarchal mindset as in "A White Heron."

## Works Cited

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