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Ecofeminist Ties in Maya Angelou and Mary Oliver's Selected Poems

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There is a famous saying which goes as “Do as you would be done by”. If read deeply, we can realize that this sentence is replete with meaning and entirely related to the issues that have long clouded our sense of due judgments, leading some of us to feel superior to others and make others suffer. The very term “superiority” serves as the backbone of humiliating attitudes towards the minority group, i.e. Women, black nation, and non-human animals and serves as the dartboard against which the pointed darts of Eco feminism and Feminism tend to land in an effort to dismantle the male-biased tendencies and their disparaging views with regards to women and Nature. In line with the above-mentioned points, some selected poems of Maya Angelou, as the emblem of black woman’s struggle against oppression, and Mary Oliver will be discussed in this paper to reach the point that in a suppressive situation, as in the case of Angelou in particular and Oliver in general, writing Nature poetry could help the voices of such victims of male-centered societies be heard all around the globe.

Debates over gender and women’s position in the world on one side and man’s biased treatment of Nature on the other side paved the way for manifestation of such issues through Eco feminism around the 1970s. Since the advent of Eco feminism we have witnessed “major policy shifts in the fields of gender (in)equality and environmental sustainability” (Buckingham 1). In most cases the beliefs in Man’s rationality and reason have been the primary cause for maltreatment of Nature at the hands of Man. Views related to the “classical Greek humanism, the Judeo-Christian notion of creation as a “Great Chain of Being,” and the Cartesian mind/body dualism” all cast light on Man’s supremacy as the crux of their argument (Bazregarzadeh 17-18). Furthermore, Plum wood traces the “human/nature relation as a dualism” to the “west’s treatment of nature which underlie the environmental crisis” today and argues that “the logic of dualism yields a common conceptual framework which structures otherwise different categories of oppression” (2-3).

While postmodernism rose in reaction to modernism to include “a complex of anti-modernist strategies” (Bertens 3), it also separated the reader, the writer and the text. This gap, as a result, brought about Man’s getting farther from natural surroundings. In contrast to postmodernism’s tendency toward “self-reflexive investigation of the nature, the limits, and the possibilities of the discourse of art” (Hutcheon 22), Ecocriticism focuses on the afore-mentioned separation to bridge this gap and thereby create an inner link between Man and Nature. As Sue Ellen Campbell states in “The Land and Language of Desire” (1989), the break between human being and Nature originates from the incapability of “culture” to “teach us that we are plain citizens of the earth,” because when “we live apart from the natural world and deny our intimacy with it,” we end up in the loss of “the sense of unity [with Nature]” (qtd. in Glotfelty 133). That’s why in *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), Lawrence Buell poses the following question, “Must literature always lead us away from the physical

world, never back to it?” (qtd. in A. Campbell 15). What these critics try to bring forth is the notion of “biocentrism” that S. Campbell defines as, “the conviction that humans are neither better nor worse than other creatures . . . but simply equal to everything else in the natural world” (qtd. in Glotfelty 128).

Taking S. Campbell’s remark into consideration and extending it further to the principles of Ecofeminism, the main objective of this short study stands out. Though this study could be conducted using other critical approaches, the researcher has chosen Ecofeminism mainly because it “has evolved from various fields of feminist inquiry and activism” and its “basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature” (Gaard 1). Gaard’s highlighting such concepts as race, gender, class, etc. justify the interconnection between women and Nature as the targets of tyranny.

As Sturgeon claims, Ecofeminism is “a movement that makes connections between environmentalists and feminisms” (qtd. in Shehab 2) in the hope of pulling apart the “domination of women and domination of nature” (Prathibha V. 13). Examined in this manner we then can approve of Warren’s concentrating on the slogan of Ecofeminism as “Nature is a feminist issue” regarding the fact that in this critical approach “there are important connections between the unjustified dominations of women, people of color, children and the poor and the unjustified dominating of nature” (1).

Warren’s reference to “people of color” above opens our eyes to the sense of humiliation felt by those who were viewed as inferiors in societies where “sexism, racism, militarism, colonialism, and the destruction of ecological systems” were the core elements of oppressive systems “ (Kirk 2). In case of black women the oppression has always been twofold: because they were not white and they were not men. And this is true about Maya Angelou who was both a woman and black. Being black made her suffer double time the white women in the American white society of the time whose leaders looked down on African-American people and made them go through harsh, unjust treatments. Were it not with the help of writing, especially poetry, figures such as Angelou and Oliver could not put up with those mistreatments. Thus, the main issue that puzzles our minds here is their drawing on Nature and natural scenes quite often in their poems. According to Crawford, “Their nature poems about gender, however, include more than celebrations of womanhood; there are pivotal poems that critique the imagined naturalness of gender” (127).

As a multi-layered figure Maya Angelou (1928-2014) was known for her work in different fields including, poetry, novel, drama, filmmaking, history, dance, etc.; but part of her fame originates from her being known as the civil rights activist and “the most widely recognized poet in contemporary U.S. culture” (Burr 54). Her poems serve as windows to the American male-dominated societies where black women were tyrannized by their oppressors. As such, many believe that her poems are autobiographical sketches in that they deal with her experiences as an African-American woman. As Suhadiet. al. asserts:

She exposes the description of African-American women cultural status under white-centered society; they are frequently prevented from being fully accepted by mainstream culture. Her women are in-between of hegemonic culture or keeping their mother culture. They were forced to separate from their mother culture and identify with the new culture. As a result, their cultural identity was threatened, distorted, and brought to the inferior position. (155)

Being a black woman made Angelou and her counterparts be treated as objects who were needed, as Aquinas believes “to preserve the species or to provide food and drink”(qtd. in Plum wood 19). This deteriorating view of the role of women rendered them as mere tools to satisfy the needs of others and

be doomed to live soulless lives. In “Woman Work” we see Angelou’s resorting to natural elements to find solace in Nature when she proclaims:

Fall gently, snowflakes
Cover me with white
Cold icy kisses and
Let me rest tonight. Sun, rain, curving sky
Mountain, oceans, leaf and stone
Star shine, moon glow
You’re all that I can call my own. (23-29)

Sunshine, rain, moon, snow, etc. are seen as palliatives throughout this poem. Her drawing our attention to women’s responsibilities in the very poem, which can be summarized as taking care of the house chores and children, is an evidence for Gruen’s declaring, “The role of women and animals in postindustrial society is to serve/be served up; women and animals are the used” (qtd. in Gaard 61). Nevertheless, women do not surrender and make every effort to counter men’s mastery. Fighting for her cause in “On Working White Liberals” Angelou says:

I don’t ask the Foreign Legion
Or anyone to win my freedom
Or to fight my battle better than I can,
Though there’s one thing that I cry for
I believe enough to die for
That is every man’s responsibility to man. (1-6)

Angelou makes it clear here that freedom is the primary goal she is striving to achieve.

Similarly, Mary Oliver’s deep interaction with Nature is of equal importance here. Being a prolific writer and the Pulitzer Prize winner, in most of her poems we see “the earthly delight” that “constitutes her vision of happiness and holiness” (“Mary Oliver” 2793). In the title essay in *Winter Hours*, Oliver claims that she “could not be a poet without the natural world” (78). To manifest her celebration of Nature, she writes:

I believe in the soul—in mine, and yours, and the blue-jay’s, and the pilot whale’s. I believe each goldfinch flying away over the course ragweed has a soul, and the ragweed too, plant by plant, and the tiny stones in the earth below, and the grains of earth as well. Not romantically do I believe this, nor poetically, nor emotionally, nor metaphorically except as all reality is metaphor, but steadily, lumpishly, and absolutely. (84)

In her poem “Some Questions You Might Ask,” Oliver highlights the word soul to confirm that there is no difference between human soul and non-human soul. She then asks, “Why should I have it and not the anteater?” Correspondingly, in “Sleeping in the Forest” Oliver likens the earth to the images of a caring mother when she says:

I thought the earth
remembered me, she
took me back so tenderly, arranging

her dark skirts, her pockets
full of lichens and seeds. I slept
as never before... (1-6)

These images take us back to Gaia as “an inhuman force we cannot change but to which we must adjust for our survival” (Pepper 115). No matter we are male or female, “All humans need to reintegrate ourselves into the rhythms of Gaia, into the earth life process, in order to reconstruct a harmonious way of life with one another on earth” (Ruether 291). To reach that end Oliver summons us in “Morning Poem “to realize that:

there is still
somewhere deep within you
a beast shouting that the earth
is exactly what it wanted—?
.....
whether or not
you have ever dared to be happy,
whether or not
you have ever dared to pray. (25-8, 33-6)

For Oliver, “the natural world casts a spell of amazement over poet and reader” (“Mary Oliver” 2793). Her taking interest in earth validates Shiva’s personification of it as “the womb of life in nature and society,” (98) to which all of us return.

Unity with Nature and returning to earth can heal the wounds inflicted on the colonized people, knowing that “The cumulative displacement caused by colonialism, development and the global marketplace has made homelessness a cultural characteristic of the late twentieth century”. Progress and development, the major aims of colonization, have, therefore, ended in “the uprooting of the people and cultures” (98). Maybe Angelou had it right when she longed for death in “The Lesson,” where she said:

...The years
And cold defeat live deep in
Lines along my face.
They dull my eyes, yet
I keep on dying,
Because I love to live. (8-13)

If death is not a reunion with Nature and natural elements, then longing for it is the furthest thing from her mind. It is, thus, through the act of decomposition that Angelou can get reunited with the natural rhythms of life and come to life again. This, in fact, echoes J. Bate’s comment, “humanity only survives in *nature*. Human survival and the survival of nature is therefore co-ordinate with one another” (*Romantic Ecology* 34). Consequently, it is the “Memory of the old tombs” (“The Lesson” 5) that renews Angelou’s tie with her dear ones and grants her emancipation believing that “Nature plays

the role of a healing agent and soothes the bleak tragedy of the dead through the notion of spiritual redemption” (Bazregarzadeh 41).

Signs of oppression and harsh experiments are traumatic issues that stand in the oppressed women’s memories so long. Their taking refuge in Nature can be described as, “Women’s concerns about the environment derive from their experiences of particular problems experienced in private” (Sandilands xii). In her poem “Still I Rise,” Angelou puts forward the following lines:

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I’ll rise.

.....
Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I’ll rise. (1-4, 9-12)

Her references to the natural images throughout this poem reinforce her interrelation with Nature one way or another and stress “ecofeminist spiritualities” that “is a tool for surviving and overcoming patriarchy” (Glazebrook 19). In a similar setting, Oliver calls forth our attention to the act of killing and eating a fish in “The Fish” in order to reveal:

...Now the sea
is in me: I am the fish, the fish,
glitters in me; we are
risen, tangled together, certain to fall
back to the sea. Out of pain,
and pain, and more pain
we feed this feverish plot, we are nourished
by the mystery. (13-20)

Women’s affinity with Nature, one may say, is a path to a life of liberty, which is why Sandilands claims, “Women would find, or perhaps create, their true identity in spaces carefully separated from the distorting influences of patriarchy” (10) and to Oliver that space is truly the open bosom of Nature. To reach that end, “Oliver builds her stanzas so they interlock, one into another, and the reader is pulled through a series of perceptions into the poet’s insight” (“Mary Oliver” 2793).

Valera’s defining the “core of ecofeminist philosophy” as an effort to “make explicit the affinity between Women and Nature, between the feminine and the natural universe, “once more correlates with the fact that “The first point of similarity between Women and Nature inarguably the concept of maternity: both are mothers” (qtd. in Vakocho & Mickey 12). Being a mother is not related to the skin color; a mother is as sacrificial as the earth is. In her poem, “For Harriet Tubman & Fredrick Douglass,” Angelou reflects on her death as a generous deed:

I lie down in my grave
and watch my children
grow
Proud blooms
above the weeds of death
.....

Their seeds must fall
and press beneath
this earth,
and find me where
I wait. My only need to
fertilize their birth. (1-5, 19-24)

While Angelou's bond with Nature is achievable through death in this poem, Oliver reaches this sense after drinking some water at the pond in "At Backwater Pond," when she states:

I dip my cupped hands. I drink
a long time. It tastes
like stone, leaves, fire. It falls cold
into my body, waking the bones. I hear them
deep inside me, whispering
oh what is that beautiful thing
that just happened? (3-9)

Oliver's speakers in her poems, as Yaros avers, "do not experience difficulty in blending with nature, (in fact express a need for nature), which emulates Oliver's own ability to easily commune with nature" ("Nature and the Self").

Though there may exist some opposing views about Ecofeminism that relate it to "gynocentric essentialism" (Plumwood 8), which has as its main principle the notion that "women have special powers and capacities of nurturance,..., which are unsharable by men" (8), by unlocking the messages inherent in the poems of Angelou and Oliver we realize that they intend to lead us to a quest for "an ecologically sound, non-exploitative, just, non-patriarchal, self-sustaining society" (Mies 297). These issues are brought forth in Angelou's "Phenomenal Woman," when she wants the male oppressors to love her for herself:

I say,
.....
'Cause I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,

That's me. (51, 56-9)

Another case in point is Oliver's addressing the leaves in "Aunt Leaf":

Dear aunt, I'd call into the leaves,
and she'd rise up, like an old log in a pool,
and whisper in a language only the two of us knew
the word that meant follow,

.....

or she'd hang in the milky moonlight
burning like a medallion,
this bone dream,
this friend I had to have,
this old woman made out of leaves. (5-9, 27-31)

As such, we can see her "quest for transforming the world and the self," made possible through the opening of "the secret life of the world ... to human apprehension" ("Mary Oliver" 2793).

What absorbs our attention in the afore-discussed poems more than any other thing, in conclusion, is the point that all the natural elements in the chosen poems of Angelou and Oliver act as facilitators between human being and Nature to serve the task of "ecological criticism," that Pinkney summarizes as "a call to *responsibility*" (qtd. in Wu 413) on the part of all humans and non-humans as members of an intricate ecosystem. In the same manner, their poems are good examples of ecopoetry which relies on "an ecological and biocentric perspective recognizing the interdependent nature of the world; a deep humility with regard to our relationships with human and nonhuman nature" (Bryson 18). Accordingly, their poems can stand against the "Oppression and repression" that "are sustained by individuals and institutions that are also most often sexist and heterosexist, racist and classist, as well as exploitative of the natural world" (Gaard 93) by teaching us how to team up with Nature in a one-to-one relationship so as to gain ground in this interdependent tie.

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