

Ecofeminist Perspectives in the Poetry of Mary Oliver (١٩٣٥-٢٠١٩) and Margaret Atwood (١٩٣٩-): A Comparative Study

Shaymaa Gamal Ahmed^(*)

Abstract

This study attempts to show how the connection between the oppression of women and the destruction of nature in patriarchal social system is portrayed in the poetry of Mary Oliver and Margaret Atwood. It focuses on three main principles of the theory of ecofeminism. Within the course of the study, some of Oliver's and Atwood's poems are analyzed. Also, there is a comparison between their points of view. Despite their different points of view, ecofeminists work together to end the ecological crisis and to achieve social justice .

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Mary Oliver, Margaret Atwood, Ecological Crisis, Social Justice, Self-exploration, Hierarchal Dualities.

Introduction

Ecofeminism is a movement that reflects a relationship between the destruction of nature and oppression of women in patriarchal societies. It combines

^(*) مدرس مساعد بقسم اللغة الانجليزية – كلية الآداب جامعة الوادي الجديد.

مجلة كلية الآداب بالوادي الجديد - مجلة علمية محكمة

ecological concerns with feminist ones, regarding both as resulting from male domination of society. Also, it values the harmony between women and nature. Its essential purpose is to eliminate the ideology of patriarchal society in which men dominate both women and nature. Also, it aims at eliminating dualistic hierarchies of male/female, culture/nature, reason/emotion, white/black and human/non-human.

The present study attempts to show how Mary Oliver and Margaret Atwood view the relationship between the domination of women and the over-exploitation of nature in male-dominated society. Although the viewpoints of the ecofeminist thinkers are varied, they all agree that the patriarchal system has viewed nature as a feminized resource to be exploited. Ecofeminists believe that the connection between women and nature doesn't belittle women at all. Instead, this connection can be a source of empowerment for women if it is employed in a positive way. Hence, ecofeminists want to reform the negative cultural view of the connection of women and nature which has led to their oppression. This connection is mainly based on their ability of reproduction. Ecofeminists consider this ability of reproduction a source of

empowerment for both women and nature as they are sources of life.

Also, ecofeminism aims at eliminating dualistic hierarchies of male/female, culture/nature, reason/emotion, white/black and human/non-human. Since patriarchal culture is based on these dualities, it values the rational qualities rather than the emotional qualities which are considered passive, weak and female. Similarly, nature is considered wild, chaotic and therefore a resource to be controlled. Thus, ecofeminism resists the hierarchal structure found in patriarchal societies and values the harmony between all members of the ecosystem.

At its outset, this study sheds light on ecofeminism, its basic concerns, development, and leading figures. Also, it examines Mary Oliver's and Margaret Atwood's lives and literary careers showing the major influences on their work and views. In addition, it sheds light on the role of both women poets in transforming the miserable conditions of woman and nature in patriarchal societies.

Ecofeminism: An Overview

The term "ecofeminism" combines the women's movement with the environmental movement. The term

was introduced by Francoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort* [Feminism or Death] published in ١٩٧٤ (Lorentzen ١). Ecofeminist thinkers emphasize the connection of women and nature. Also, they investigate the oppression of women and the overexploitation of nature in patriarchal societies

Noël Sturgeon in his book *Ecofeminist Nature* defines ecofeminism as “a movement that makes connections between environmentalisms and feminisms” (qtd. in Campbell vii). Also, in her essay “Women, Water, Energy: An Ecofeminist Approach,” Greta Gaard suggests that ecofeminism is “more than a theory about feminism and environmentalism, or women and nature..., [it] approaches the problems of environmental degradation and social injustice from the premise that how we treat nature and how we treat each other are inseparably linked” (٢١).

There are two common strands of ecofeminism; ‘the spiritual’ and ‘the political’. The spiritual strand values women’s social and natural experience which allows them to realize and appreciate their connection to the non-human world. This spirituality is “centered on goddess worship, the moon, animals, and the female reproductive system” (Merchant ١٩١). Spretnak asserts that environmental concerns like deforestation and pollution have gone

unnoticed and unrecognized since “a powerful industrial giant like us lives on *top* of nature . . . free to do with it what we will” (٤). She suggests that this damage can be reformed only through an “ecological wisdom” in which humans recognize the hierarchical structure of patriarchy.

Critics of ecofeminist spirituality argue that women should direct their efforts to the political activism to improve their bad condition. Thus, the political strand of ecofeminism takes a much more activist role. Environmental activists are those people who engage in the most difficult ecological activities. These activities include participating in events organized by ecological groups, demanding an improvement of government policies regarding the environment, participating in protests against current environmental conditions, and helping to financially support ecological groups.

Dualism is one of the most important issues which has been discussed by ecofeminists. They claim that patriarchal structures justify their dominance through dualistic hierarchies such as mind/body, male/female, human/non-human, spirit/matter, culture/nature, and white/black. Oppressive systems are based on these divisions. In her introduction to *Ecofeminism: Women,*

Culture, Nature, Warren asserts, “What makes ecofeminism distinct is its insistence that non-human nature and naturism (i.e., the unjustified domination of nature) are feminist issues. Ecofeminist philosophy extends familiar feminist critiques of socialisms of domination to nature” (٤). Thus, ecofeminism replaces hierarchical dualities with relationships based on diversity and difference.

Also, ecofeminism is associated with animal rights movement. Carol Adams has examined the connections between treatment of non-human animals, and the exploitation of women. Her study, *The Sexual Politics of Meat* focuses on this field. She suggests that “The process of viewing another as consumable, as *something*, is usually invisible to us. Its invisibility occurs because it corresponds to the view of the dominant culture” (١٥). To conclude, ecofeminism asserts that all forms of oppression are connected and that structures of oppression must be examined and reformed. Oppression of the natural world and of women by patriarchal systems must be examined together.

Mary Oliver (١٩٣٥-٢٠١٩): Life and Literary Career

Mary Oliver is one of the most popular ecofeminist poets. She was born in ١٩٣٥ in Maple Heights, Ohio. She began writing poems when she was a teenager. In an interview, she indicates how she was interested in poetry saying, “what captivated me was reading the poems myself and realizing that there was a world without material substance which was nevertheless as alive as any other—the world of the imagination—into which one could go, and stay” (Olander ١).

She is highly noted for her appreciation of the natural world. In her poetry, she often expresses her desire to be one with nature. A private person by nature, Mary Oliver has given very few interviews over the years. Instead, she prefers to let her work speak for itself. However, she is both a creative and productive writer. She is known for her vivid and powerful depictions of nature. Some consider her to be a regionalist as the source of inspiration for many of her poems is her life in both Ohio and New England (“About Mary Oliver”).

Mary Oliver writes ecopoetry that focuses primarily on the human’s relationship with nature from a religious perspective. J. Scott Bryson, in his book *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction*, defines ecopoetry as “a subset of

nature poetry that, while adhering to certain conventions of romanticism, also advances beyond that tradition and takes on distinctly contemporary problems and issues” (٥). Thus, ecopoetry is a form of poetry that deals with the human’s relationship with nature.

Susan Salter Reynolds, in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, noticed that Oliver’s earliest poems are almost always about nature, but rarely examine the self and are never personal. But, Reynolds noted that in her later works, “this self-consciousness is a rich and graceful addition” (qtd. in Dear ٣٤٦). Thus, in her later poems, Oliver asks questions about the nature of the self and examines how the connection with nature helps human beings to identify their relationship with God and consequently to achieve self-discovery.

Oliver believes that art is an expression of our freedom and our desire to know. So, she intends that most of her poems “have a spiritual purpose.” She says, “I want the poem to ask something and, at its best moments, I want the question to remain unanswered. I want it to be clear that answering the question is the reader’s part in an implicit author-reader pact” (*Winter Hours* ٢٤). Most of her poems result from her close communication with nature. For her, art is the only way through which we can live more than one

life. Oliver spent most of her life in Provincetown, the inspiration for much of her work and died in ٢٠١٩.

Margaret Atwood (١٩٣٩-): Life and Literary Career

A highly noted ecofeminist, Margaret Eleanor Atwood is a Canadian poet, novelist, literary critic, essayist, and environmental activist. She was born on November ١٨, ١٩٣٩ in Ottawa, Ontario. She is a winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award and Prince of Asturias Award for Literature. Also, she has won the Booker Prize once and the Governor General's Award twice. In ٢٠٠١ she was joined to Canada's Walk of Fame. She is also a founder of the Writers' Trust of Canada, a literary organization that seeks to encourage Canada's writing community.

The internationally-known author has written award-winning poetry, short-stories and novels. Her works have been translated into different languages. Her works tend to focus on woman characters, the social constructions, and her strong desire to earn identity for women in Canada. With the development of environmentalism in the late ٢٠th century, many critics focus on the deep ecological implications reflected in her works ("Margaret Atwood: Author, Literary Critic, Poet"). So, she is a writer who is much concerned with the threatened environment.

Atwood has greatly contributed to many genres of literature which makes her the most productive writer of her time in Canada. The work of her father as a prominent entomological researcher had a strong effect on her career. She discovered her interest in nature at a very early as her father was always doing his research in the woods of Ontario and Quebec where the family mostly spent the summer. Another influence on Atwood's literary career was the work of the Romantic poet William Blake whose influence is evident in Atwood's first collection of poetry, *Double Persephone*. The poems in this collection highlight the conflict between nature and the ways adopted by mankind to dominate it. *The Circle Game* (١٩٦٦), for which Atwood received the prestigious Governor General award in ١٩٦٧, placed her in a good position in the world of literature and developed the theme of contrast between man and nature. In general, conflict is the main theme of most of Atwood's poetry. Through using metaphoric language in most of the poems in this collection, Atwood indicates that the rules set by humans in dealing with nature have to be changed (Mannani ١).

Thus, Atwood is a prolific writer who has written several novels, short stories and books of poetry. Her work presents variable themes such as Canadian national

identity, relations between Canada and the United States, the Canadian wilderness, environmental issues, human issues, and feminist issues, a prominent theme throughout her career. Her essential objective is to challenge the male-dominated way of thinking. For her, the Canadian literature is an expression of the Canadian identity. Thus, her main goal was to “write the Great Canadian Novel” (qtd. in Potts ٤). She claims that there is a Canadian Literature which is mainly concerned with victims and their ability to survive in bad conditions. Then, she has associated this theme with the victimization of woman and nature in patriarchal society.

Nature and Exploring the Self

Nature is usually believed to be a source of inspiration for any literary work. Artists have used natural elements as symbols to express their thoughts and feelings. Glenn Hughes comments, “An artwork, thus, is not an *explanation* of anything. It is an *exploration* of a way of seeing, or of hearing, or of shaping one’s living, expressed in the prereflective, concrete language of symbols” (٤١). People have always turned to nature to express their human experience. For example, the seasonal changes reflect the stages of our life: we are born and grow as flowers do in spring, and we grow old and become weak as leaves do in

the fall. Also, weather is often related to human feelings. For example, we associate the sunshine with joy and bad weather with sorrow.

Oliver often emphasizes the connection between nature and herself (as a woman). She believes that this connection comes from a strong belief that everything in nature has a soul and is alive. She believes that nature is an equal partner of humans. She writes:

I believe in the soul – in mine, and yours and the blue
jays, and the
pilot whales. I believe each goldfish flying away over
the coarse
ragweed has a soul, and the ragweed too, plant by
plant, and the
grains of earth as well. Not romantically do I believe
this, nor
poetically, nor emotionally, nor metaphorically ...but
steadily,
lumpishly, absolutely. (*Winter Hours* ١٠٧-٨)

In “Some Questions You Might Ask,” she asks questions about the soul and its nature: “Is the soul solid, like iron? / ...Who has it, and who doesn’t?” (*House of Light* ١). She thinks that there is no difference between a human soul or any other creature, plant, or inanimate thing that lives on earth, “Why should I have it, and not the

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anteater?" She assures that all beings have souls whether camels, trees, stones, roses...etc. "Sleeping in the Forest" presents the same idea: I slept as never before, a stone on the river bed, nothing between me and the white fire of the stars but my thoughts, and they floated light as moths among the branches of the perfect trees. (*New and Selected Poems* ١٨١)

In her poem "Work," Oliver identifies herself as a "woman sixty years old and of no special courage/who is engaged in a little conversation with God" (*The Leaf and the Cloud* ٩) through her adherence to "stare at the world". She believes that humans can be renewed through their connection with nature. It is through nature that she turns to be something better. In her poem, "Sleeping in the Forest," she says that she "rose and fell, as if in water" till she turns "into something better" (*New and Selected poems* ١٨١). This process is similar to the religious idea of baptism in Christianity. Also, in "In Blackwater Woods," she says that the river's "other side / is salvation" (*New and Selected poems* ١٧٨). In "Flare," nature is the place where everyone gets comfort and release from pain and grief. The beauty of nature can change grief into joy. She also finds comfort in "Such Singing in the Wild Branches:"

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Are there trees near you,
And does your own soul need comforting?
Quick, then – open the door and fly on your
Heavy feet; ... (New and Selected poems ١٠٥)

Keegan comments that “In poem after poem, Oliver’s purpose is to call us into the presence of the sacred in the raw otherness of nature in which she is not afraid to lose herself” (١٤٩). Thus, Oliver’s contemplation of the natural world gets her much closer to God and helps her get an honest insight of her own self. She often observes every aspect of nature and appreciates it. Also, she believes that humans are naturally connected to the world and that we all, humans and non-humans, are interdependent. So, the only way for humans to find their own real selves is to regain their relationship with the natural world.

Margaret Atwood has always been interested in the environment and she wants to protect it through her poetry. However, her poems don’t deal only with environmental issues. She often uses natural landscapes in her poems to express her own views of the world in general. She writes:

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Poems which contain descriptions of landscapes and natural objects are often dismissed as being mere Nature poetry. But Nature poetry is seldom just about Nature; it is usually about the poet's *attitude* towards the external natural universe. That is, landscapes in poems are often interior landscapes; they are maps of a state of mind. (*Survival* ٤٩)

"This is a Photograph of Me" is the first poem of Atwood's book, *The Circle Game* (١٩٦٦). She begins a journey of self-discovery by looking at the external nature. In fact, nature acts as a source of inspiration to her thinking and imagination. This poem portrays a photograph with the setting of wilderness with "a small frame house" and "lake" (١٧). The beautiful natural setting seems to be contrary to the human tragedy it hides. Atwood uses the subject "I" to show the presence of the speaker in the photograph. She describes the picture of the speaker as "drowned" in the "lake" motivating the reader to "look long enough" to see her.

The photograph doesn't reveal the speaker's identity. The hidden identity is shown from the beginning of the poem where the speaker describes the photograph as "smeared" with "blurred lines" and "grey flecks." This refers to the distortion of the female by the patriarchal

civilization. Hence, the speaker compares the situation of the photograph to her own situation, to her own self (Abbasi and Omid ٩١). Atwood was always concerned with the position of women as material commodities that are often exploited and neglected. That is why the photograph hides the speaker's identity. The woman can't identify her real self as a result of submission and frustration. A search of the self requires much effort from the female because male's unreal observations of her confuse her and makes her unable to find her real self.

Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* indicates woman's confusion about her role and identity as she attempts to adapt to her environment. In this book, Atwood presents a female victim who follows her husband from Europe to the Canadian environment. For Atwood, Mrs. Moodie represents the Canadian woman's struggle to adapt and survive. Mrs. Moodie could easily lose her identity as a victim not only of her husband's wrong expectations but also of her environment. Instead, she recognizes her own suffering and attempts to find a new identity. For Hönnighausen, Atwood portrays Susanna Moodie's transition from confusion about her past European self towards recognition of her traditional roles and her possible new self (١٠٤).

Mrs. Moodie begins to adapt when she realizes that she must leave her civilized past life and adapt to the wilderness. Her association with the male world of reason and logic must be exchanged for the female world of emotions and nature in order for her to survive. In “Further Arrivals,” Mrs. Moodie says that she needs “wolf’s eyes to see / the truth” (*The Journals* ١٣), which means that she has to return to nature in order to understand “the truth” about her identity.

In her poem “Book of Ancestors,” Atwood urges the woman to “open yourself like this and become whole” (*You Are Happy* ٩٦). Most of her poems indicate women’s attempt to discover the “inner world of self” and to break out of the man’s world in order to become independent (Grace ٢). Any search for self requires choosing between the world of males and the world of females. The images in “Her Song” distinguish between these two worlds:

Love, you must choose
Between two immortalities:
One of earth lake trees
Feathers of a nameless bird
The other of a world of glass,
Hard marble, carven word. (*Double Persephone* ٣٣)

Thus, Atwood insists that there are two separate worlds: the world of men and the world of women. For her, men can explore their own selves only through connecting to the natural world of women and leaving their material world of reason and logic. Also, women can't find their true selves within the world of men. Their suitable place is in nature. If men cannot connect to nature, separation between the two worlds becomes inevitable.

The Domination of Women as Connected to The Exploitation of Nature:

In ecofeminism, the connection of women and nature is strongly associated with patriarchal oppression. Plumwood states that some feminists reject the idea of unity of women and nature, asserting that connecting nature with femininity is always "regressive and insulting" (٢٠). According to Plumwood, feminists "view the traditional connection between women and nature as no more than an instrument of oppression, a relic of patriarchy," and insist that the focus must be shifted away from this connection towards women's rights (٢٠-٢١).

Oliver deals with every element of the natural world as if it has a soul - as if there are no barriers between her and nature. Also, she often feels that this is the essential

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source of her power, which contradicts the feminist argument that women's connection with nature can only be a means of patriarchal oppression. She believes that there is no difference between her human soul and the souls of all other creatures. She uses her connection with nature in a positive way and redefines it as something very empowering - even spiritual and sacred. Also, she doesn't only write poems about the beauty of nature, but also she writes about the violence of nature. This is empowering to women as it encourages them to realize their inner strength and to defend their rights as well as nature.

In "White Flowers," Oliver describes her experience in the fields as if it were a real event that took place. She presents two possibilities for what really happened to her: Either "my body went diving down/ under the sugary vines/ in some sleep-sharpened affinity" or "that green energy/ rose like a wave/ and curled over me, claiming me." One thing she certainly knows is that

Never in my life
had I felt so plush,
or so slippery,
or so resplendently empty. (*New and Selected Poems*
٥٨)

مجلة كلية الآداب بالوادي الجديد- مجلة علمية محكمة

This is the empowering ecofeminist concept which Plumwood advocates. The poet's connection with nature causes her to completely explore her true self. In this poem, as well as in "Sleeping in the Forest," "The Sea," and "White Night," Oliver attempts to understand the world by getting outside herself into nature, which in turn gets her to a place inside herself that is completely true (Wood ^).

Oliver usually feminizes nature as a caring mother. The image of Mother Nature who spread her passion over growing beings prevails in her poetry. Her poems often question patriarchal structures, which destroy nature and severely harm the human kind. She argues that women as well as nature are sacred because of their ability of giving birth and caring for other beings. Poems like "Honey at the Table" and "Honey Tree" support the ecofeminist view that we need to understand the position of women and nature in society. "Honey at the Table" challenges the patriarchal system which destroys nature by describing the process of getting honey from the honey pot on the table to the treetop, to the wilderness:

It fills you with the soft
essence of vanished flowers, it becomes
a trickle sharp as a hair that you follow

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from the honey pot over the table
and out of the door and over the ground
. deep in the forest you
shuffle up some tree, you rip the bark. (*American
primitive* ٥٧)

For Oliver, the destruction of the comb in the process of getting honey is symbolic of the domination of women and nature in the world of males: “You float into and swallow the dripping combs, / bits of the tree, crushed bees... a taste / composed of everything lost.”

Margaret Atwood is convinced that both woman and nature are victims of the male domination. Women, being more closely associated with nature in traditional roles, are expected to be emotional and sensitive but not intelligent and ambitious. Men, on the other hand, are characterized by reason and logic. Society allows the male powers to control and manipulate nature and the female world. To demonstrate the woman’s struggle against these roles, the poet portrays female counterparts, especially animals and children. In her poem, “The Animals in That Country,” Atwood portrays how animals are carelessly killed. Human beings don’t even notice their existence:

In this country the animals

have the faces of
animals.

Their eyes
flash once in car headlights
and are gone.

Their deaths are not elegant. (*The Animals in That Country* ٣)

In “The Surveyors,” Atwood’s speaker describes the destruction left by men, marking and cutting trees. The red paint which indicates cutting trees contrasts with the surrounding forest:

we saw too how these vivid
signals, painted assertions
were as we looked surrounded, changed
by the gradual pressure of endless
green on the eyes. (*The Animals in That Country* ٤)

While observing this exploitation of nature, the speaker’s confusion makes her see only the green colour of the forest and can’t see the red marks of the cut trees. Thus, she is unaware of the destruction caused by men and consequently can’t do anything to defend nature.

“Songs of the Transformed” shows male’s ways of exploiting and controlling the female. These poems also examine the woman’s increasing anger at the male’s actions which destroy her. These poems refer to the misunderstanding of male-female relationship caused by myths and traditional roles which lead to frustration and submission instead of change and growth. In these poems, the male changes the female into shapes he wants. For example, in “Pig Song,” the male changes the female into a “grey pink vegetable with slug / eyes” which cannot see or think and because “if [he] feed[s] [her] garbage, [she] will sing a song of garbage” (*You Are Happy* ٣٠). Atwood reveals the woman’s desire to escape the male’s power. Like the hunted fox in “Song of the Fox,” the woman complains about the “dear man with the accurate Mafia / eyes” (٤٠) who always observes and judges her.

In her collection of poetry *Power Politics*, Atwood focuses on the oppression of women by men, as well as on the entrapment of woman within social restrictions. For example, she expresses her interest in women and their suffering in her poem, “You Fit into Me.” This poem is divided into two parts with completely different images: “The first two lines of Atwood’s poem refer to a domestic, feminine image: sewing. The image that follows is more

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masculine: fishing. It is also graphically violent, suggesting death and destruction” (Macpherson ١٠٥-٦). In other words, the woman is occupied with traditional household tasks which are done in a peaceful way. But, the man usually fulfills his goal in a painful and violent way. This poem describes the relationship between man and woman. The woman is aware of the aggression and accepts it. It seems like she is imprisoned in man’s world and there is no way to change this. She says:

You fit into me
Like a hook into an eye
A fish hook
An open eye. (*Selected Poems* ١٤١)

Thus, Mary Oliver believes that both woman and nature are sacred. Women are closer to nature than men as they realize the spiritual side of nature and appreciate it. In her poems, she often portrays woman and nature as sources of life for all living beings. So, they are not supposed to be controlled and exploited by men. Also, Margaret Atwood views woman and nature as victims to male domination. Men consider them as only sources of consumption. So, they assign for themselves the right to dominate and exploit them. For her, women will never find their true identity in male-dominated society. She asserts that in male-

dominated society, women are so confused that they are unable to realize the reality of their submission. So, the only solution for their situation is that they live in a separate world.

Conclusion

As this study has shown, the basic principles of ecofeminism are reflected in the poetry of Mary Oliver and Margaret Atwood. This theory is mainly based on the belief that there is a connection between the subordination of women and the degradation of nature in patriarchal system. It represents a blend of environmentalism and feminism. Ecofeminists insisted on examining the historical connections between women and the environment. They noted that women and nature were often depicted as chaotic and irrational while men were characterized as rational, ordered, and thus capable of controlling women and nature. They also asserted that this ideology resulted in a hierarchical structure that allows men to exploit women and nature. Thus, ecofeminists determined that the solution of this crisis lies in changing the social status of both.

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مجلة كلية الآداب بالوادي الجديد- مجلة علمية محكمة

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