



# Towards Implementing Ecofeminism in the different departments of English

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**Abstract**— *This article revolves around the possibility of implementing ecofeminism as a pedagogical device and perspective on teaching ecofeminist literature in the Tunisian departments of English. Ecofeminist courses maybe taught mainly after an English literature student has already become familiar with feminist, postcolonial and ecocritical theories. Such courses may be a synthesis review and an expansion of the literature due to the interdisciplinary quality of the theory of ecofeminism. Margaret Atwood’s Surfacing may be considered as the best exemplary novel that lands itself to an ecofeminist reading. Hence, students may dig into ecofeminist ethos through an analytical eye on it.*

**Keywords**— *ecofeminism, synthesis, interdisciplinary, Margaret Atwood’s Surfacing.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary environmental situation illuminates the cultural aspect of reason/ nature binarism and the importance of eradicating Western dualisms. The Utopian conception of the land feminist thinkers have is that it is a place where women enjoy direct contact with the natural world, free from technological barriers and modern abysses. This symbiosis leaves room for coexistence between the different species ruled by ‘mutual dependency’ and acknowledgment of difference. Thus, the Other is perceived as neither the antithesis nor the extension of the self. Notably, the environmentalist movement has been fed by a belief in the symbiosis between humanity and nature. Many writers have emphasized the natural beauty that existed before the environmental postcolonial crisis. They used to stress the colorfulness, abundance, and spell of nature.

Ecocriticism fosters the image of nature as a powerful entity. The focus on the anatomy of nature responds to dualist notions of ‘incorporation’ and dominance. There is a mutual influence between nature and culture without losing the particularity of each category. Hence, strengthening the principle of reciprocity between the two seemingly separate concepts breaks the illusion of purity in nature and class, race, and gender.

Socially, culturally and economically shaped, these four categories form “a myth of mutual constructionism: of physical environment (both natural and human-built) shaping in some measure the cultures that in some measure continually refashion it” (Buell, *Writing 6*).

Ecofeminism also appeared to shift the angle of vision from which the relationships between nature and culture and between women and men can be explored. It is a term coined by Françoise d’Eaubonne and dates back to 1974. Plumwood has labeled it as the “third wave or stage of women’s movement” (*Le Feminisme 39*). While the first wave is that of the nineteenth-century women’s movement, the second is the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

While feminism concentrates on the study of gender, ecocriticism examines literature from a nature-based perspective. Feminist ecocriticism, however, relates the study of nature to that of gender in literary productions. Ecofeminism brings to the fore two seemingly different notions: gender and ecology. It forges the link between the dominance of men and the environmental crisis while diving into the depth of the structures of mastery, dualism and colonialism. It aims at drawing “a synthesis of environmental and social concerns” (Garrard, *Ecocriticism 3*).

What makes Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* exemplary in relation to ecofeminism is its immersion into notions of gender, identity, and ecology. Atwood frees her novel from the rational and the expected. She presents a flexible and fuzzy narrative content that challenges the reader to come to grips with the different layers of meanings mainly with the deviation from temporal linearity. The act of reading *Surfacing* resembles the narrator's act of diving. It is about reflecting on what the book implies and on what remains uncovered. Same as the narrator's access to meanings in life needs a sinking into adventure, into the unknown and the imaginary, the reader's access to meanings also requires a certain degree of imagination while acknowledging symbols and metaphors as the main axes of the book.

The narrator's seven-day journey back to her birthplace invites the reader to analyze from an innovative perspective the different elements of this multi-leveled voyage incorporating time, space, and gender. The imbrication between the author, her novel, and the context in which the latter was written also sets the background for the reader to approach the setting, characters and events. Moreover, Atwood portrays in her books what she termed four "basic victim positions":

to deny the fact that you are a victim; to acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but to explain this as an act of fate, the dictates of Biology, the necessity decreed by History, or Economics, or the unconscious, or any other large general power or idea; To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim but to refuse to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable; to be a creative non-victim. (Atwood, *Survival* 19)

Overcoming victimization needs that the victim understands her situation. It is about reflection on the 'biological, historical, economic or psychological' background that sets the victim as a victim. The body is oppressed by rape as in *Surfacing* and by repeated pregnancy as in *The Edible Woman*. The intention, therefore, is to avoid the negative connotations attributed to the female body and to show that the latter could turn into a site of resistance. The result is that 'the victim' can find a way to escape the position of the victim through 'creative' thinking. This idea generates the ability not to give up on hegemonic beliefs while diving in the realm of imagination and possibility.

Atwood's *Surfacing* demonstrates an ecological awareness that is visible in her transgression of old perceptions of the world as a monolithic entity. In revisiting the wilderness, revising the cultural representation of animals, and celebrating communion

with nature, Atwood aims at wording an environment that recognizes and protects all human and nonhuman beings; especially, fragile entities.

## II. THE WILDERNESS: FROM A "MASCULINE SUBLIME<sup>1</sup>" TO A FEMININE REALM OF ENUNCIATION

The reexploration of wilderness as an inevitable part of nature espouses a more inclusive approach to the human condition in general. For deep ecologists, ecological problems result from the monolithic character attributed to everything in the world. Only then a belief in plurality can solve them. In this respect, Edward Burke, an Irish political theorist, tried to revolutionize the aesthetic of the 'sublime' and 'the beautiful.' He points out that unlike the beautiful which causes mere feelings of pleasure, "the passion caused by the great and sublime in nature ... is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of Horror" (*A Philosophical* 53). Schama conceives that Burke's ideas countermand the philosophy of the 'Enlightenment' as he establishes himself as 'the priest of obscurity'.

## III. BEYOND MALE GAZE: THE ANALOGY BETWEEN WOMEN AND ANIMALS

The ecological study of the relationship between human beings and animals needs a philosophical and cultural understanding. It is to review the philosophical aspect of animal rights and their cultural representation in literary production. As Singer advocates, it is undeniable that transcending the "insuperable line" between human beings and animals stiffens the morality of liberation (8). Advocating the utilitarian "principle of equality", he draws a link between cruelty against animals and slavery. Discrimination against women or blacks, in this way, parallels discrimination against animals as they are both made on grounds of physiological differences. He believes that the capacity for suffering has to be a more distinguishing category than the faculty of 'reason' and 'discourse.' He then invites a moral consideration to the pain inflicted on both animals and people: "If a being suffers there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration" (9). Singer intends to break the dualistic relationship between human beings and animals by claiming that the suffering of a human being should not count for humanity more than the suffering of an animal. Every action, therefore, needs to be

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<sup>1</sup> This expression is taken From page 64 of Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism*.

judged on basis of whether it brings happiness or pain to the different creatures on earth before thinking of the progress or regression it can cause.

#### IV. DUALISM: ITS ENDS AND LIMITATIONS

The feminist attack of defining women in relation to nature did not loom from anything. Women were traditionally excluded from humanity on the grounds that they are guided by emotion. This argument aims to foster their image as mere sexual and reproductive objects. Even when they try to conquer the different fields of life, they are always put in the background, as Plumwood asserts, “women are ‘the environment’ – they provide the environment and conditions against which male ‘achievement’ takes place, but what they do is not itself accounted as achievement” (*Feminism* 22).

Taking as a background women’s closeness to the realm of nature, many theorists collude in denigrating them to a low status. Swift, for example, argues that he “cannot conceive of [women] to be human creatures, but a sort of species hardly a degree about a monkey” (Qt in Morgan 191). Aquinas, in the same vein, assumes that “a necessary object, woman, [...] is needed to preserve the species or to provide food and drink” (Qt in Morgan 183). These examples and others that cannot see women outside the sphere of the domestic make women’s identification with nature seem like a blemish for a woman yearning for a better status in the world of discovery and creativity.

Hence, Ecofeminists try to bespeak the positive part in women’s alliance with nature. Instead of being a tool of oppression of women and an instrument of consolidation of patriarchy, this alliance could make a turning point in the low status of both women and nature. Consequently, ecofeminists dive into the problem of how to confirm women’s connectedness to nature without excluding them from the fabric of culture and reason. Their route to resolution is to deconstruct the dualistic and hierarchical relationship between culture and nature in such a way that stresses both men’s and women’s belonging to both categories. In this sense, returning women their human essence and moving them to the foreground denies the backgrounding of nature. Then, it becomes possible to think of women as human beings enjoying a direct and fluid relationship with nature and empowering it.

#### V. FEMINIST INTERSECTIONS WITH ECOCRITICISM AND POSTCOLONIALISM

A woman is a tree of life;  
the heavens know her grace.  
In her is found an essence that  
eclipses time and space.  
She reaches heavenward, her fingers  
branching toward the sun  
and winds her roots through rocks and dirt  
to bless the work she’s done...  
to feed and anchor tender shoots  
by her good seed begun.

-Susan Noyes Anderson, “The Mother Tree”

This section sets out to reach a working definition of the major theoretical framework, using ecocriticism as an umbrella term, and ecofeminism and postcolonial ecofeminism as its derivational and interdisciplinary approaches. Warren, for example, advocates that within a society built on “a logic of domination,” there could be no remedy for an ecological crisis (Warren, *Ecological* 29). In other words, a revision of social relations is needed to allow a revision of the relation of man towards nature. A key element can be to “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 society” (Ruether 204). Literature can be the medium through which the relationship between the human condition and nature can be revised. It interprets the way human being can have a stand against environmental damage. Modern humanities agree that language is a conduit for the transition towards a more ecologically balanced society. A deviation from the norms of the Western male narrative can be seen as a prerequisite to eradicate narrative domination that extends to the domination of women, domination of nature, racism, classism; etc.

Plumwood introduces a list of binary oppositions in which she presents nature/ culture at its heart. Though people, in this dualism, belong to the realm of culture, the rational human being is conceived as exclusively male. Women, through their association with emotion and connection to childbirth, are treated as ‘other,’ as closer to nature. Building on this dualistic thought, male manipulation of both women and nature is justified in Western rationalism, embodied in Plato and Descartes. Plumwood underlines the way philosopher René Descartes, for example, advanced arguments to erase any corporeal presence in the domain of reason:

[He came to] reinterpret the notion of “thinking” in such a way that those mental activities which involve the body, such as sense perception, and which appear to bridge the mind/body and human/animal division, become instead, via their

reinterpretation in terms of ‘consciousness’, purely mental operations. (*Feminism* 115)

Descartes gave additional emphasis to the gap between mind/body and human/nonhuman beings, denying the latter both reason and feeling. He perceived nonhuman beings as not just different but inferior. The different forms of oppression, distinguishing between dualized categories, share the same “model of master ... [that] is based upon alienated differentiation and denied dependency” (Garrard 25). This model implies hierarchy not difference and creates “hyperseparation” (Plumwood, *Feminism* 47). Plumwood, therefore, criticizes this reason/nature dualism and confers upon it a gendered perspective.

Even though ‘reason’ has been used to justify men’s oppression of women, animals, and nature, Plumwood does not stand against it but rather against the philosophies that set it in opposition to other categories. She assumes that it is high time for rationalist androcentric<sup>2</sup> narrative to leave room for “multicentric pluralism” (Kostkowska 1). Plumwood wants to show that difference can be constructive “without the neurotic obsessiveness of the mainstream philosophical tradition ... [and] its idealization by androcentric philosophy” (Garrard 26). She stresses the idea that “we need to understand and affirm both otherness and community in the earth” (*Feminism* 137). Hence, the key solution is “diversity” as Ynestra King argues:

A healthy, balanced ecosystem, including human and nonhuman inhabitants, must maintain diversity. Ecologically, environmental simplification is as significant a problem as environmental pollution. Biological simplification, i.e., the wiping out of whole species, corresponds to reducing human diversity into faceless workers, or to the homogenization of taste and culture through mass consumer markets. Social life and natural life are literally simplified to the inorganic for the convenience of market society. Therefore, we need a decentralized global movement that is founded on common interests yet celebrates diversity and opposes all forms of domination and violence. Potentially, ecofeminism is such a movement. (“The Ecology” 20)

This spotlighting on both biological and cultural diversity comes to respond to the indeterminacy around the monolithic condition of human life. Ecofeminism is the outcry of women and nature. The meeting up of ecological

and feminist issues, within this new social and political theory, questions old hierarchical paradigms and imposes more egalitarian models. With the second wave of feminism and the consolidation of the green movement, ecofeminism succeeds to mature into a strong approach centering around the idea that there is an important connection between the subordination of women and the degradation of the natural world.

Plumwood points out that “the concept of oppression as a network of multiple, interlocking forms of domination raises a number of new methodological dilemmas and requires a number of adjustments for liberation movements” (Qt in Merchant, *Ecology* 230). He views that the solution is to think about each form of oppression as encompassing all other forms in such a way that each movement can be beneficial for many other movements. For example, the gender strife for equality can incorporate an advocacy of environmental justice and animal rights and vice versa. However, the success of such interweaving between militant movements can be reached only if “a degree of distinctness and differentiation” is acknowledged in spite of the cooperative insight they bear (231). In other words, the continuity that can exist between militant movements should not reduce women, nature, and animals into one category. The identity of each category needs to be preserved and though different, they can still forge a strong bond against the forces of exclusion.

Ecofeminists embrace spirituality as a source of empowerment in their struggle for re-inscribing women within the male-exclusionary cosmos. This movement gives rise to what is known as ‘spiritual ecofeminism.’ The latter combines “a celebration of women’s biological role (mothering, nurturing) with a celebration of women’s bodies and sexuality” (Mellor, “The Politics” 3). Spiritual ecofeminists, therefore, try to break the old degrading perceptions of women’s bodily experience involving menstrual blood and childbirth as a degrading condition.

Furthermore, ecofeminism was mainly conducted by two groups: affinity and socialist ecofeminists. Affinity ecofeminists assert that women and nature have a common identity. It is to see that women are related to the natural world through their bodies. Through the process of raising children and introducing them to society, women form the “bridge between nature and culture” (Bookchin 75). Consequently, the role of the woman lies in saving the natural world from man’s cruelty through her “reproductive system which enables her to share the experience of bringing forth and nourishing life with the rest of the living world” (102). The way the woman cares for and feeds her child is mirrored in nature providing man with whatever he needs for survival. As Andree Collard

<sup>2</sup> Androcentrism is a system of beliefs and practices that favors men over women (Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (glossary)).

points out: “[T]he identity and destiny of woman and nature are merged” (137). This idea countermands the long striving of feminism to deny that biology is a “destiny” (De Beauvoir 40).

Importantly, feminists have long fought against the acceptance of the feminine attribute as grounded in biological sex. They have attempted to prove that gender is a limiting social and cultural construct. Radical ecofeminists appear to mirror the way the notion of femininity is restrained by patriarchy. This radical group aims to show that albeit a positive valorization of femininity in terms of its affinity with nature, this does not undermine the fact that gender divisions are built and grown in patriarchal societies.

Radical ecofeminists’ critical philosophy is questioned. For example, Davion, who is an ecofeminist advocator, objects to radical ecofeminist thought and argues that “a truly feminist perspective cannot embrace either the feminine or the masculine uncritically, [but] requires a critique of gender roles, and this critique must include masculinity and femininity” (*Is Ecofeminism* 9). In other words, the patriarchal construction of femininity, which feminists and radical ecofeminists think is the main ground for gender divisions, is conceived of by ecofeminists as rather a crucial turning point. In the same line of thought, Judith Butler explores the different considerations of the body as implying “mortality, vulnerability, [and] agency” (*Undoing* 21). She claims that “the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others but also to touch and to violence” (ibid). Therefore, she draws on the cruciality of “the struggle to rework the norms by which bodies are experienced” (28).

Ecofeminists aim to expropriate the value-laden assumptions in-built in the patriarchal discourse. In other words, femininity needs to be studied in a way that incorporates the feminine and the masculine to tackle the issue of gender in a substantial manner. For example, tracing back the patriarchal discourse about gender roles to feminine biology naturalizes male superiority and foregrounds women as mere reproducers of humanity. It is important then to rethink the relationship between women and nature. The idea that women are closer to nature is the same starting point for the patriarchal construction of gender but the results can be reversive. Two possible results can come from the understanding of the relationship between women and nature. The first result is female subordination while the second result is an open liberation that favors both women and nature. Ecological feminism discards the idea that human beings and mainly men stand outside nature. Merchant has emphasized reciprocity and complicity while favoring an ethical

imbrication of human and non-human categories (*Earthcare* 56).

Ecofeminists, such as Warren and Plumwood confer upon ecofeminism a social and philosophical dimension “that countermands the irrationalism and essentialism of radical ecofeminism” (Garrard 27). They want to avoid the confusion posed by affinity ecofeminists and explain the connection of women to nature by a common experience of exploitation under capitalist, patriarchal or social misuse of power. King, also, sees that western industrial civilization thrived at the expense of nature. Because women are closer to nature in this anti-nature culture, King believes that this provides women with the privilege to rise against the impoverishment of nature. Women, accordingly, incarnate all other forms of domination. Therefore, the challenge “extends beyond sex to social domination of sex, race, class, and nature [which] are mutually reinforcing” (King, “Feminism” 120).

King advocates a positive connection of women and nature that can promote “a non-destructive connectedness between humanity (man) and the natural world” (Mellor 8). The personal rage of the woman is expressive of the grievance of many subordinate categories. Such rage can “celebrat[e] diversity and oppos[e] all forms of domination and violence” (119-120). This idea invites a community of categories that are entrapped with inferiority to defeat victimization. An invitation that comes at a “moment where women recognize [themselves] as agents of history- -yes even unique agents- -and knowingly bridge the classic dualism between spirit and matter, art and politics, reason and intuition. This is the potentiality of a rational re-enchantment. This is the project of ecofeminism” (King, “Feminism” 120-121). Breaking this dualism is, using Merchant’s words, “revolutionizing economic structures in a direction [that] equalize[s] female and male work options and reform a capitalist system that creates profits at the expense of nature and working people” (*The Death* 42). According to her, socialist ecofeminists explain environmental problems by “the rise of capitalist patriarchy and the ideology that the Earth and nature can be exploited for human progress through technology” (“Feminism” 294).

Moreover, ecofeminism has laid its seeds in the South. The Indian ecofeminist Vandana Shiva, for example, has been a strong advocator of the movement. She has tried to pose “the foundations for the recovery of the feminine principle in nature and society and through it the recovery of the earth as sustainer and provider” (*Staying* 224). Her beliefs drive her to organize several campaigns against ‘maldevelopment’ that is ecologically

destructive. This disordered development is mainly resulting from a loss of diversity that she defines as 'monoculture'.

Shiva sums up maldevelopment in her perception that "the paradox and crisis of development arises from the mistaken identification of culturally perceived poverty with real material poverty, and the mistaken identification of the growth of commodity production as better satisfaction of needs" (13). What one can infer from Shiva's statement is that cultural impoverishment can even be more dangerous for mankind than material poverty and that although people indulge in consuming more commodities, they are unhappy. It is because the process of production is male-dominated and ecologically devaluing. It is "a development bereft of the feminine, the conservation, the ecological principle" (4). What is rather needed is a kind of development that acknowledges cooperation between men and women, nature and culture, tradition and modernity. Only then "[can] nature maintain the production of renewable resources" (9) and can the technologies developed show a better understanding of traditional peoples' needs and knowledge. Shiva argues, in this respect, that "[r]ural women, peasants, tribals who live in, and derive sustenance from nature, have a systematic and deep knowledge of nature's processes of reproducing wealth" (219). This idea intends to recuperate this wealth of knowledge which has been the price of the Western 'monoculture of the mind'.

An important aspect of ecofeminism is the belief that human existence depends on the natural world. This belief breeds what is known as ecocentrism. Robyn Eckersley defines the latter as "an ecologically informed philosophy of internal relatedness, according to which all organisms are not simply interrelated with their environment but also constituted by those very environmental interrelationships" (*Environmentalism* 49). To put it differently, human beings cannot stand outside their environment as they affect and are affected by a web of relationships that shape and are shaped by their existence

Although ecofeminists may differ in their approach to the connection of women and nature, they meet in their critique of the patriarchal systematization of Western society. They share the view that the pattern of hierarchical divisions threatens to a large extent the natural world as well as the feminine world. The binary oppositions that set culture against nature, mind against body, scientific knowledge against traditional and indigenous knowledge, reason against feeling are the main ground for social divisions and mainly for the supremacy of men over women.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The relationship between human beings and the non-human world is a theme of constant change. This is because it is tantamount to the complementarities between nature and culture. Also, the fact that the world is rapidly changing due to technological development puts the existence of human beings and other ecosystems at stake. The ecofeminist belief is built on the cruciality of the human reconsideration of the hostile relationship between human beings and nature and creates the conceptual framework for merging ecological and feminist issues. The above facts justify the importance of ecofeminism as a synthesizing and revolutionizing field of study in the different departments of English literature.

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