

Nature, Women, Rebellion

-- On Portia Coughlan from the Perspective of Eco-feminism

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Abstract

Portia Coughlan depicts the mental anguish and identity dilemmas of the heroine Portia in a male-dominated social environment. This study tries to analyze men's possessions of nature and women, the close relationship between women and nature, and Portia's rebellion against patriarchal society respectively from the perspective of Eco-feminism, exploring the social situation of women as "the Other" in the contemporary society.

Keywords

Portia Coughlan; Eco-feminism; The Other; Rebellion.

1. Introduction

Marina Carr (1964-) is one of the most prominent female playwrights of contemporary Ireland. Since 1994, Carr has been setting her plays in the Irish Midlands, the area where she was born and raised. Her works contained many elements from native Irish folklore and ancient Greek tragedy, which were particularly reflected in her trilogy of tragedies -- *The Mai*, *Portia Coughlan*, and *By the Bog of Cats...* *Portia Coughlan* is the second work in her tragic trilogy. The play depicts the struggles of the heroine Portia in a male-dominated social environment who chooses suicide as a fierce measure to rebel against the oppression of patriarchy when she realizes she cannot change the plight of herself.

2. Theoretical Basis

In 1974, the term "eco-feminism" was originally introduced by French feminist researcher Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort*.

Eco-feminism aimed to analyze how various forms of oppression, including sexism, heteronormativity, racism, colonialism, ableism, and speciesism intersected and contributed to violence and injustice. Ecofeminist critics have reached a basic consensus that there is an important link between human possession of nature and male indifference to women, and that understanding the former necessarily contributes to understanding the latter, and vice versa. Therefore, eco-feminism extends the scope of research to examine the relationship between all types of oppression and domination. Eco-feminism is now attracting renewed attention as the impact of human activity on the world. Eco-feminist theory helps current people to create healthier relationships, emphasizing the need to pay attention to actual situations.

3. Nature and Women as "The Other" in Patriarchal Society

Eco-feminists aggressively opposed hierarchies, challenged conventional dichotomies, and provided a fresh perspective on how humans interact with the natural world. The trend of being "the Other" is a frequent occurrence in the patriarchal society, which is a harm to women and environment. Therefore, this part explores how nature and women are devalued to "the Other" in a patriarchal society.

In the patriarchal society, men regarded local wildlife, plants, and terrain as their own property. Portia's father Sly was dedicated to land exploitation and management, who exploited the Belmont Valley and considered it as his own property. In order to improve his social status and wealth, Sly spent a lot of time and energy on developing land resources and built a twenty acre of bog Belmont Farm. Sly's possession and control of nature were not based on respect and appreciation for nature, but on his own personal interests and social status. He regarded nature as merely a resource and tool that could be utilized, and as long as he could control nature, he could gain more benefits and power.

Other men also expressed indifference to nature. When Portia expressed her surprise at the incredible journey of the salmon to her lover, Fintan who did not show his interest in the natural wonders but rather claimed that his only interest was in how to flirt with Portia, showing that men simply care about what serves their own interest, and the nature and women are only tools to satisfy those objectives.

Othring of women is a phenomenon where women are seen as an alien or different group, which leads to their subjugation and often deprivation of opportunities to choose freely and develop their potential.

As "the Other" in the patriarchal society, women did not have the right to pursue freedom. Men always viewed women as commodities, which could be exchanged in order to acquire higher social status and further their own interests. When Portia was young, her father forced her to give up the opportunity to go to the college and to marry Raphael. Because Raphael was one of the richest men in the county, who was able to provide Sly with more beneficial help in his career. Portia appeared to live a superior material life most women desired, yet her heart was growing more and more empty because she had no right to choose the life she wanted.

Women's psychological needs were often overlooked by men. Okolocha claimed that men operating under the patriarchal societies tended to view women as vulnerable group, while themselves saw the power to dominate them. This attitude often led to failure to take interest in women's psychological needs, viewing women as appendices to them (Okolocha, 2017). Portia's father Sly believed he had provided Portia with all of things traditional women needed. On Portia's birthday, he concluded that no gift needed to be prepared for Portia. Sly believed that the Portia should feel satisfied with the affluent material life, which reflected that men always ignored the psychological needs of women.

Above all, women have no right to pursue freedom, control their happiness and their emotional needs were often ignored. Their social status as "the Other" has led women to become subservient to men, becoming "angels in the house" to serve them and their families. For men, women are mere tools to acquire more possessions and increase their status.

4. The Interaction between Nature and Portia

Nature and women have a multitude of similarities that have been acknowledged by eco-feminists. The similarities between the two have been recognized as nurturing and life-sustaining. Due to the inseparable connection between nature and women, there are still many other similarities between them.

In the play, Portia lived between the limited, suffocating house and the open, mysterious nature. Portia and Belmont Valley shared many similarities: both were difficult to be understood and both did not want external interference to disturb them. The Belmont Valley was a remote vale surrounded by many mountains, and Portia had never left the valley that implied her inner world, like the Belmont Valley, was closed. Portia rarely revealed her inner world. For instance, Portia's best friend Stacia eventually realized that she "didn't know Portia at all" (Carr, 1996: 224); her husband Raphael considered Portia as an abnormal woman; even her mother Marianne criticized her: "If I didn't know you for me own daughter, I'd swear ya were some evil

goblin perched up there glowerin' at me"(Carr, 1996: 245). Meanwhile, the beauty of the Belmont Valley was equally little known. When Portia's friend Stacia suggested Portia should leave the valley to have a relaxation, Portia refused and said: "Don't think I'd survive a night away from the Belmont Valley" (Carr, 1996: 203). But her friends could not appreciate the beauty of Belmont Valley deeply, and she also could not understand Portia's love for the Valley. Additionally, both Portia and nature were mysteriously unpredictable. The unpredictability of nature was a testament to its vast complexity and ever-changing dynamics. And the unpredictability of Portia's personality like a mystery nature: sometimes she was as soft as water, but other times she could be as untamed and unpredictable as a storm. For instance, one morning, Portia calmly asked her husband Raphael if he wanted to have dinner that night, but a few seconds later, Portia flew into a rage when Raphael asked her to take care of the children. Like nature, Portia's ever-changing emotions were also elusive and hard to read.

Water was an important medium to help Portia to find solace. In this play, the mother's womb and the river are symbolically related: "Times I close me eyes and I feel a rush of water around me and above we hear the thumpin' of me mother's heart, ... and the water swells around our ears" (Carr, 1996: 250). She believed that water held emotional significance: it represented her mother's heartbeat and love, while it also symbolized forgiveness and acceptance. By feeling the rush of water around her and hearing the thumping of her mother's heart, Portia may have experienced a sense of warmth and security, which implied that water was a symbol of motherhood where she could find a sense of existence and belonging.

Moreover, Portia spent all her days remembering her brother. She thought that her beloved brother Gabriel's ghost existed in nature and she could hear Gabriel calling to her from the hills, creatures, and rivers: "His name is in the mouths of the starlin's that swoops over Belmont hill, the cows bellow for him from the barn on frosty winter nights. The very river tells me that once he was here and now he's gone" (Carr, 1996: 209). It was the close connection between nature and Portia that enabled her to perceive the existence of all things in nature, making her feel that Gabriel had never left her, but existed in nature to accompany her. This spiritual comfort was also the driving force that kept Portia alive.

The beauty and tranquility of the natural world provided Portia with comfort and healing and Portia also invested her emotions in nature. Woman and nature were not only just intimately connected, but also had interactions and reciprocal engagement.

5. The Rebellion of Portia with the Support of Nature

Portia totally subverted the stereotypical image of Irish females as "the Other" in the society. Marina Carr connected the power of nature with the feminine, reflecting the process of the Irish women from silence to resistance in order to find their identity. This part will describe how Portia went through the process of finding her self-identification.

Nature endowed Portia with the power to seek self-identification. When Portia felt discouraged with life, it was the nature that soothed her soul. She believed that immersing herself in nature was the best way to relax. She only wanted to know if the waters of Belmont River flowed calmly or fiercely, if the salmon migrated to the ocean, or if the herons returned and so on. In addition, the story of the witch being saved by the River God deeply touched her. She felt that she was just like that witch, a woman who did not conform to traditional societal norms and only nature accepted and embraced her. It was nature that made Portia gradually realized that she had her own value, and nature had become one of Portia's sources of inspiration and strength to find self-identification.

Portia sought self-identification in the constant pursuit of freedom and opposition to patriarchy. Portia's mother Marianne was a woman who always conformed to the social expectations. She was always subservient to her husband Sly. Marianne felt the pain of her husband's family, but

she lacked the courage to fight back. As a result, Marianne ended up completely losing herself in the male-dominated society. Marianne was a housewife and wanted Portia to be her-- a woman who succumbed to a patriarchal society. But from Portia's perspective, her mother was a weak woman who lacked independence and the spirit of defiance. And Portia suggested that "I've always wanted to like ya, Mother, but I never could" (Carr, 1996: 244).

Portia sought self-identification in exploring her value of existence. There was a close bond between Portia and her dead brother Gabriel. People could not tell them apart, not even their mothers. Sometimes they could not even tell themselves apart either. In a way, Gabriel represented not just Portia's twin brother, but one aspect of Portia. Therefore, after the death of Gabriel, Portia suggested, "sometimes I think only half of me is left, the worst half" (Carr, 1996: 206). Portia saw herself as a shadow of Gabriel and she increasingly became confused about her self-identification. At a dance party, Portia discussed this issue with Maggie's husband Senchil.

Portia Would ya say I'm one of the shadow ones?

Senchil No-- but even if ya were, you'd still be necessary, a necessary backdrop for the giants who walks this world and mayhap the next(Carr, 1996: 243).

Portia's escapism and obsession with the past hindered her to explore self-identification. However, Senchil considered Portia as an independent individual and he prompted her to overcome her own fantasies and accept reality, which was a necessary condition for Portia to ultimately accept herself.

Portia eventually pursued self-identification by ending her life. When Portia found that the plight of women could not be changed, she ended her life by jumping into the same spot where Gabriel had committed suicide. Her suicide was the culmination of her struggle to find meaning and identity in her life, which was the ultimate expression of her despair and hopelessness, expressing her hatred of patriarchy and her unwavering belief in the courageous pursuit of self-identification.

6. Conclusion

In the patriarchal society, both women and nature were oppressed by men. As "the Other", women's spiritual needs were always neglected, and their value was depreciated. Meanwhile, men continued to exploit natural resources for their own benefit. Men considered both women and nature as mere tools for them to acquire fortune and increase their reputation.

In Portia Coughlan, the heroine did not conform to the social expectation, with the inspiration of nature, who sought to liberate from the male of oppression. The stereotypical Irish view of women as the "angels in the house" was challenged by Portia's disobedient actions.

Although the playwright was unable to offer a constructive and effective solution for contemporary Irish women as "the Other" in society, the heroine's spirit of fighting injustice and struggling to change the dilemma in the patriarchal society made a significant contribution to the social equality of contemporary women.

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