

Ecofeminism in Victorian Female Literature

-- Taking Jane Eyre as an Example

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Abstract. Ecofeminism was formally proposed in the 1970s and widely applied to sociology, religion, and political science, and plenty of other disciplines. Indeed, some visionary female writers applied ecofeminism theory to literary writing as early as the Victorian period, with the awakening of female thought. Jane Eyre, a classic work of the period, explores the connection between nature and female consciousness and reveals the tragedy of men mutilating and oppressing women and nature in the 19th century. The novel depicts men's dominance and oppression of nature and women in a way that subverts binary opposition, expressing the author's desire to liberate nature and women, awaken women's self-consciousness, and build an equal and harmonious society.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Victorian era, Jane Eyre, Patriarchal outlook.

1. Introduction

Ecofeminism is a combination of the women's movement, the peace movement, and the ecological movement. The term was originally developed by French writer Francoise d'Eaubonne in 1974 to demonstrate the possibility that women could make a substantial contribution to the ecological revolution [1]. Beginning with a critique of the modern Western worldview's hierarchical dualism and logic of domination, ecofeminism contended that Western men who hold a worldview of man-centeredness, analytic philosophy, and mechanism will be doubly oppressive to nature and women [2]. The basic thesis of ecofeminism is that nature and women are inextricably linked by a male-dominated mentality, and they are viewed as the other that can be transformed and destroyed arbitrarily, subjecting them to the same oppression [3]. This is why Francoise d'Eaubonne believes the movement to end discrimination against women and nature must be recognized and carried out contemporaneously [4].

1.1 Ecofeminism's Origins and Evolution

It is commonly believed that ecofeminism originated in the 1970s, when the feminist movement was in full swing, and as time passed, the study of ecofeminism expanded to include politics, religion, philosophy, and sociology. For example, Rosemary Ruether's book *New women / New Earth*, published in 1975 and in 1978, Susan Griffin's book, *Women and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*, became a pioneering work in the academic enterprise of ecofeminism and advocated for a new discipline that bridged women and nature and connected women to ecological and global issues. Leonie Caldecott and Stephanie Leland's 1983 collection of essays, *Saving the Earth*, Petra Kelly's 1984 autobiography, *Fighting for Hope*, Charlene Spretnak's *Green Politics, The Spiritual Dimension of Green Politics*, and Ynestra King's essays enable women to attempt to integrate and connect female individual, ecology, and politics. Then, the debate among sociology, ecology and feminism, was initiated by Vandana Shiva's 1994 book, *Close to Home: Women Reconnect Ecology, Health and Development Worldwide*. The history of ecofeminism has also been thoroughly examined, with a focus on the 1970s, when the term "ecofeminism" was first used in the book *Le féminisme ou la mort* [5]. During the same period, several magazines and newspapers about feminism and ecofeminism were published in the Western world, and ecofeminism began to emerge. Ecofeminism grew rapidly in the mid-1980s and 1990s, and the theory was gradually applied to political science and sociology. In the 21st century, the theory of ecofeminism matured as the five schools of ecofeminism emerged. However, some of the ideas of ecofeminism can be found in the books of some forward-looking

female writers as early as the first wave of feminist movement from the mid-19th to the early 20th century. According to the logic of human cognitive development, the emergence of feminism should first be manifested in the perceptual cognition of literary works [6]. Furthermore, ecofeminism research should not be limited to obscure feminist philosophical works or the study of politics, religion, sociology, and other fields associated with feminism, but should also include literary criticism. Using the famous 19th century British Victorian novel *Jane Eyre* as an example, this paper will apply ecofeminism to literary analysis and evaluate the early ecofeminist ideas in literary works [7].

1.2 Embryonic Ecofeminism in the Victorian Era

Women's literature began to emerge during this time period. Firstly, influenced by the British bourgeois revolution and the industrial revolution, some perspicacious individuals stepped forward to fight for the legal rights of female and feminists in Britain advocated for women to be economically independent and free to pursue their own careers. Because of the impact of these ideas, the consciousness of independence of British women gradually began to awaken. Secondly, the industrial revolution altered people's lifestyle, and because the rapid development of the industrial revolution required a large amount of labor, women gradually emerged in factories and society. At the same time, the unprecedented wealth created by capitalist mode of production threw middle-class women into a life of leisure and a large number of books and journals for women showed up in society. In the 19th century, women had been the main producers and consumers of fiction. However, because women were still oppressed in life and in spirit, women subliminally desired to change this situation and realize their true selves in fiction. For the first time, women's literature grew rapidly as a result of these factors. Writing novels was easier and safer for women to express their ideas than walking the streets to participate in political movements for women's liberation, and novels were also a medium that could conveniently preserve and spread their ideas. As a result, numerous excellent works of women's literature, such as *Pride and Prejudice*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*, and others, emerged during this time period.

1.3 An Excellent Feminist Work in the Victorian Period

"The novel for women is a novel in which women write about women's problems," said Virginia Woolf, a famous British women's writer. *Jane Eyre* perfectly fits this feminist criterion, as it is both a women's novel in which women write about women's issues and an expression of women's consciousness [8]. As a result, it is one of the most successful feminist novels of the Victorian era. The novel is about an English woman who is orphaned at a young age and who, through various trials and tribulations, pursues freedom and dignity, asserts herself, and eventually achieves happiness. The novel depicts a woman who defies oppression and fights for freedom and equality. As a consequence, the academic conception of women's thoughts in the novel has focused on the image of the main characters, Jane's female consciousness, and the love relationship between Jane and Rochester. The academic community, conversely, overlooks the author's description of the potential relationship between nature and Jane, as well as the author's condemnation of the destruction of the environment suffering from industrial revolution, and these views coincide with the views of ecofeminism. Although Charlotte Bronte did not present a complete theory of ecofeminism, she saw the relationship between women and nature with an epoch-making vision that enriched the connotation of feminism at the time and provided a new direction for modern literature research. Thus, this targeted paper will apply the relationship between women and nature in *Jane Eyre* to develop the novel's ecofeminist conception [9].

2. Woman Is One With Nature in Jane Eyre

Ecofeminism believes that women have a natural connection with nature, and that women have a natural affinity with nature, and in the novel nature is an extension of Jane's psychological activities.

Jane was bullied by her aunt and cousin when she lived in Gateshead. At that time, her feeling was the same as the cold winter, which was bleak and depressing. In Lowood School, with the end of winter and the arrival of spring, Jane felt a great pleasure that she never felt before "that a great pleasure, an enjoyment which the horizon only bounded". After Jane left Thornfield, she walked into the heath where everything was quiet and she enjoyed the natural breeze and became calm enough to rethink her next steps. Nature serves as the manifestation for her subconscious activities, and Jane's psychological changes correspond to the changes of nature. Moreover, ecofeminism holds that nature is the nurturing mother of all things, and Jane grows up under the care of mother nature, which provides her with the initial motivation to pursue female self-awareness.

3. Nature and women are both subjected to male oppression at the same time

The ecofeminism views men as enemies of nature. They believe that men treat the world as a hunting ground and marginalize women, children and nature. That is well exemplified by Jane's miserable experience in the patriarchal society in her childhood and the destruction of nature during the male-dominated industrial revolution. Jane was an orphan who was placed in foster care at her aunt's house, where she was constantly bullied by her cousin, to the point where "every nerve she had feared him, and every morsel of flesh in her bones shrank" when he came near. Her aunt was also biased against her, regardless of her son's behavior. Jane was bullied and oppressed by her cousin, and she was also verbally and physically abused by her aunt. Jane compared her cousin to "Roman emperors." Jane's cousin and aunt represented the patriarchal society that oppressed her [10]. In fact, not only was Jane oppressed in the patriarchal society, but nature also suffered from the oppression of the patriarchal society, as the novel described the natural environment: "Afar, it offered a pale blank of mist and cloud; near a scene of wet lawn and storm-beat shrub, with ceaseless rain sweeping away wildly before a long and lamentable blast." At the time, the "pale blank of mist" was the most visible manifestation of the environmental damage caused by the industrial revolution. The massive burning of coal generated by the invention of the steam engine polluted the atmosphere significantly. Jane and the natural environment survived the oppression of the patriarchal society. They wanted to resist, but could not do anything. After Jane left Thornfield, she moved to Whitcross [11]. At the time, the industrial revolution had reached the English countryside, and the majority of the people in the village worked in sand-turning factories and sewing yards, and factories only hired male workers. The male-dominated industrial revolution destroyed the village's natural environment, while men deprived women's right to work. The scene in Whitcross symbolized the oppression of women and nature by men and expressed author's criticism of patriarchy.

4. The Emancipation of Women and Nature

In the novel, nature connects with Jane's inner heart, empowering her to discover herself and challenge patriarchal society. Jane grew up gradually at Lowood School, where she met her best friend Helen and her teacher Miss Temple; however, after Miss Temple's departure, when Jane was teaching at the school, she frequently looked out the window and pondered the natural environment, as if nature was calling to her. She saw the blue peaks in the distance and wished she could cross them and go further. She desired to leave the school's big cage and travel to the world beyond the walls in search of a new self, a new world. She applied for a governess position in Mr [12]. Rochester's household on her own and fell in love with him. But she already had a more complete sense of self and equality at the time, and what she wanted to pursue was an equality marriage. After learning that Rochester already had a wife, Jane was determined to leave. In her hazy sleep that night, Jane Eyre saw a scene from her childhood: in the red room of Gateshead House, she saw the light of the moon about to break through the clouds and shine on the clouds, and it whispered in Jane's heart, "My daughter, flee temptation." The moon, a common natural object, appears to be guiding Jane Eyre, pointing her in the right direction. And later, when confronted with St. John's marriage proposal, Jane

clearly understood that what he needed was only a missionary helper, not a wife, and she resolutely refused John, at which time nature responded to Jane's heart, and the author wrote: "The glen and sky spun round: the hills heaved! It was as if I had received a divine summons." Nature, in its own way, objected to John's proposal and supported Jane with its own strength, steering Jane in the direction of her own self-discovery and liberation [13].

Furthermore, ecofeminism believes that we can only change the patriarchal worldview, which has become a stereotypical human mindset, by uniting all oppressed and exploited ecological groups: black people exploited by white people, third world people exploited by the first world, other species dominated by humans, and female cultural systems oppressed by male culture, etc. Rochester married with Bertha Mason and then he took a large portion of Mason's dowry for himself, and he fabricated the excuse of hereditary insanity to imprison Mason, after that, Mason had completely lost personal freedom and personal property, and finally, this so-called "madwoman" burned down the Thornfield and also burned down male society's supremacy and inviolability. Rochester was no longer on top [14]; he was on the same level as poor Jane. Based on this, Jane returned to him with her uncle's inheritance, and at this point Jane achieved not only material independence, but also spiritual independence. Women were no longer regarded as the second sex in society, but as spiritual partners on an equal footing with men, as the author's demand was finally met. The era of male dominance over women had passed, replaced by respect and care in the form of equal treatment. Conflict and confrontation were replaced by benign dialogue and communication. These fully reflected the author's grand ideal of opposing patriarchy, pursuing women's liberation, demanding women's self-awareness, and constructing a harmonious and equal society for both sexes.

5. Conclusion

Jane Eyre is regarded as one of the most outstanding novels of the 19th century in England. Charlotte Brontë promoted the idea of equality between men and women to her contemporaries by depicting the noble character of the heroine. This novel challenged male power and patriarchal society, and it broke down the binary oppression [15]. At the same time, as early as the Victorian period, this novel paid close attention to women and nature. Although the author did not present a complete ecofeminist ideological system, she did see the relationship between women and nature in a patriarchal society, as well as the harmonious coexistence of men, women, and nature, which is the embodiment of ecofeminism [16]. On the other hand, with the rapid development of technology, the environment is seriously polluted today, and gender equality has not yet been fully realized. Thus, ecofeminist ideology in Jane Eyre advocates that by liberating women and saving nature, we can pursue and achieve true equality between men and women, as well as realize the harmonious coexistence of humans and nature, which is still worthy of our consideration and study.

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