Healing Wounds in Partnership: An Eco-Feminist Study of Langley's "The Mourning Parade"

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Abstract

Patriarchy, colonialism, or any other dogma in which there is the subjugation of one group by another powerful group is strikingly similar to man's domination/exploitation of nature. Nature's ruthless domination by humankind has led to the present ecological disaster. The power be it economic or political rests in the hands of men. These men in power have been denying climate change or if they are accepting it, they are very slow in reacting. Men have plundered the earth and all its natural resources, considering it to be their birthright. They have a claim on the world that has been tailor-made for them and on all the inhabitants including the women and the animals. Patriarchy, fed by religious scriptures, eggs them on by telling them that the women have been created to please them, to serve them. The same applies to animals. These wounds inflicted by patriarchy can only be healed by women through the movement of Ecofeminism. This healing in partnership is the premise of this research article. It studies how two tortured and wounded souls help in healing each other in Langley's The Mourning Parade.

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Women have always been linked with nature and earth. The link between women and earth is also evident in the oppression of both at the hands of men. Through this social link, the theory of Ecofeminism has arisen. Ecofeminism focuses on the interconnection and codependence of all creation and creatures by caring for the earth as well as other suppressed groups. A few theorists of ecofeminism take this link further and claim women have a deeper and more profound connection with nature than men do that is why women can lead and direct the movement of healing nature and themselves in the process(Thompson, 2017). Despite the criticisms, ecofeminism has the ability to pave the way for healing and propagating a culture of sustainability. After the beginning of colonization and mechanization which started in the 17th century, Western societies have contributed a lot to today's ecological crisis. Under the guise of culture and progress, the exploitation of nature and people is legitimized by white European males especially after colonization and the scientific revolution. According to white western males, nature represents uncivilized and primitive life. For western societies, the culture of man represents civilization, progress, and advanced life. Anything, according to a white male, is acceptable for the progress of their society and nature is only an instrument to use for their ideals. For the white man who came to America, the lifestyle of the Natives was very different as it was close to nature, therefore considered primitive and uncultured. The Native Americans considered both women and nature as sacred. The Eurocentric definition of culture and civilization led to the exploitation of nature as man's right. It resulted in the deterioration of our environment.

Ecofeminism is but a new term coined for what is usually termed as ancient pagan wisdom. Ynestra King in the pioneer conference on Ecofeminism at Amherst in 1980 wrote:

Ecofeminism is about contentedness and wholeness of theory and practice. It asserts the special strength and integrity of every living thing... It is the masculine mentality which would deny us our rights to our own bodies and our own sexuality, and which depends on multiple systems of dominance and state power to have its way (Mies, 2018).

Ecofeminism identifies the parallels between the exploitation of nature and that of women. These parallels are studied in the patriarchal context. Ecofeminist theorists become aware of this connection between patriarchal exploitation and violence against women and nature, every time they stood up against environmental destruction and the looming threat of an atomic war leading to annihilation. Ecofeminists defy patriarchy and show loyalty to future human generations, this planet earth, and to life itself. They have a profound understanding of this phenomenon because of their nature and because of their female experience and existence.

1. Literature Review:

To understand the necessity and power of ecofeminism as a movement, the dualistic nature/makeup of the modern world needs to be understood. This dualistic structure claims that man and woman are separate, so is their nature and culture. Dualistic thinking is the basic construct of the western thought process. It leads to the domination of women by their male counterparts and similarly the supremacy of man over nature. The suppression of women and the exploitation of nature are connected because historically women and nature have been linked together. Plato in *Timaeus* states the concept that the soul on leaving the body reaches ultimate enlightenment on transcending the earth and reaches the helms of heaven. A woman according to Plato is incapable of undergoing this enlightening process. He goes on to claim that a man who is unable to transcend returns to this earth either as a woman or a beast, thus linking both woman and the beast together and placing a man on a higher status in comparison. Woman and nature both incapable of achieving enlightenment

thus left on the earth, whereas the enlightened man ascends heaven. There is a deep social link between women and nature as Ruether states in *Sexism and God Talk*

"We cannot criticize the hierarchy of male over female without ultimately criticizing the hierarchy of humans over nature" (Ruether, 1983).

The evidence of this connection between women and nature are the various phases that are used for describing the looting and plundering such as rape of the Earth. Thus validating the dominance of nature as it is a part of the material sphere of existence inferior to the spiritual realms, the former created for the sole purpose of servitude of man. The domination of women is justified through the same logic.

Furthermore, throughout history, religious doctrines have stressed the connection between women and nature with a particular focus on creation. In the pagan religions, the universe was poured out from the womb of a goddess. The ancient Greeks revered the goddess Gaia the controller of the earth. Hinduism celebrates the mother earth and holds it sacred. In Christian doctrine, wisdom is described as a creative force, which was brought forth before creation as a female equivalent of God.

In addition to these religious links, women as givers of life, as child bearers, as active members of the process of creation and producers of organic substance are more closely tied to nature than men. As women give birth that naturally ties them with nature. Historically also women have been designated with the tasks of giving birth and of gatherers or homemakers

Just as there is a link between the oppression of women and nature similarly there is a link between the female emancipation movement and the movement to restore the Earth to its original state. For the destruction and exploitation of the earth to end the suppression, oppression, and exploitation of all the marginalized communities must also end.

Humans depend on nature for their survival. There is a link between humans and nature, whatever humans do, influences and impacts nature, and similarly, every natural phenomenon affects humans. As mankind has not as of yet been able to find another planet other than earth to inhabit, they rely completely on the earth for their survival. Ruether in her book *Sexism and God Talk* talks brilliantly about this relationship.

"The plant can happily carry out its process of photosynthesis without human beings, but we cannot exist without the photosynthesis of plants" (Ruether, 1983).

Ecofeminist theorists truly appreciate their dependence on nature and hold it in high esteem bordering on reverence. They realize that the entire ecological system is altered due to the extinction of a single species. This is in contrast to the religious doctrines and the Western patriarchal philosophies which celebrate the idea of humanity's uniqueness. The proponents of ecofeminism believe that women must play their part in the healing of the wounds inflicted on nature by humanity because of this independence humans have.

Climate change and the destruction of the natural habitat of the earth mostly affect the marginalized groups of the society particularly the women and the children. The force that rose to control the geopolitics Geo economy for a significant period was the west which followed a patriarchal hierarchy and a capitalist economic system. Thus the resulting society ended up destroying the natural world. However, the society responsible for the destruction of the natural world will be least affected by the devastation it caused. The consequences of these destructive steps taken by man will be felt the most by the weakest links of the chain, the most vulnerable individuals in the world. This catastrophe befalls on the dying women and children in Syria, or the starving children in Madagascar suffering from a prolonged drought, or on the native people whose water sources are polluted by the passing oil pipelines. Most of the affected population/groups mentioned above belong to the third world or developing countries and can rightly be called the marginalized populace of the world.

This is because these countries lack the infrastructure, the legislation and the resources to prevent, stop, slow down, or reverse the damage that's been caused to nature.

The Capitalist upper class AKA the West has the resources and the power to either delay or completely avoid the devastating consequences of the destructive war they have waged against nature, at least for the time being. As McAndrew stated:

"...the destruction of the environment and the oppression of women are easy to do because nature and women have been objectified as "others" (McAndrew, 1996).

Ecofeminists claim that theirs is a social movement with three visions, these three visions are distinctive and have differences but they come together under the banner of ecofeminism. These are the "spiritual vision", "the feminist vision" and "the environmental vision". All these visions are accumulated under the SAGA which propagates that the devaluation of women and nature is linked. It is said that men exploit, and hegemonize women and nature for their gains. They do so because they are empowered by the norms of patriarchy and also the power of capitalism. It acknowledges that the Earth and all its inhabitants are endangered and on the verge of a serious crisis. All of this needs to change; A new consciousness should be created where all inhabitants of the Earth live together equally and harmoniously

"Ecofeminism opposes mechanical, reductionist, and separated dualistic thinking way encourages related, the multidimensional and integrated thinking way" (Ling, 2014).

This integrated and collective thinking allows women and nature to work together in partnership. The partnership view of relation means that the relevance between nature and people is emphasized to avoid a direct clash between man and nature. The multidimensional view offers, propagates, and revives collective organism tradition and avoids/sidesteps the dominance relationship. It encourages the relationship between individual and nature and treats it dialectically. It opposes the individual-centered world view. This interrelatedness locates humans/women in a situation of responsibility towards others, being responsible for them, caring for them while maintaining our connections

Ecofeminism unlike patriarchy believes in sharing power with and not asserting power over "the other". It is a power that comes as a result of the collaboration of members of a society, community, or social group. Patriarchy is dualistic and hierarchal, whereas ecofeminism is non-dualistic and non-hierarchal. The world according to ecofeminists is egalitarian. The hierarchies are social constructs that are destructive for the world. Ecofeminists dream of a society that would have its basis on the complete involvement of both men and women in the preservation and maintenance of all the ecosystems.

2. Data Analysis:

The examples of nature as a theme of a literary work have been a regular phenomenon. However, the present-day environmental crisis has resulted in works of literature that reflect the harrowing scene of a world at the brink of destruction. As a result of the social movements organized against the destruction of the natural environment, awareness of environmental issues created and it did not take long for ecocriticism to cause a niche for itself in the literary world and the world of academia.

Ecofeminism is a byproduct of the third wave of feminism as it propagates deconstruction of the existing constructs. It rejects all kinds of existing dogma and –isms. Ecofeminism preaches and practices diversity. The base of the theory as discussed earlier is that the domination of nature and the domination of women are linked. It works on the premise that in Western thought nature is inferior to mankind, however, the term mankind is not all-inclusive as it excludes, women, people of color, people belonging to the lower economic

class, in fact almost everyone that is not white, or male or belong to the upper class. Like nature, women are also a large group that is dominated by men. Men see women and nature as things to dominate because both have been assigned with passive attributes.

The stereotypical association of nature and women validates the western male's dualistic, manipulating, and dominating view of the world. This essentialist view allows men to continue assigning, attributing the caregiving, and life-sustaining, serving roles to women. As a result of this role assigning, women become solely responsible for the act of mothering.

The only solution to this essentialist problem, as agreed upon by all the ecofeminist theorists is the idea of partnership. White men do not consider women or nature as their partners. Ecofeminists suggest that action has to be taken in partnership with the current environmental crisis. The methods adopted should be non-hierarchal.

Ecofeminist writing is a comparatively new approach. Ecocritical/ ecofeminist issues have been seen in the works of American fiction writers. It mostly deals with the destructive attitude of patriarchal societies on nature and how this phenomenon is reflected in the domination of women. The appearance of ecofeminist thinking in literature is a reaction to the patriarchal dominant literacy canons. Ecofeminist criticism of the system has a deconstructive and critical approach towards the traditional literature as is discussed by Patrick Murphy

In order to have a woman's nature writing, there must be a breaking of genre conventions established by men and accepted by women, working within patriarchal structures. Such efforts have always been imperiled by the dominant culture's variegated ideological stratagems for silencing women's voices, or straining them through male normative discourses to conflate and deny differences. Today, this imperilment takes the form of codifying a patriarchal definition of nature writing. But unlike previous pivotal movements women, today have the benefit of an increasingly sophisticated conception of dialogical methods of discourse and critique and a voice from within the realm of natural philosophy itself, ecofeminism (Murphy, 1995).

Most of the novels written by female American writers are either dystopian or belong to the genre of science fiction as these allow the writers to portray the horrific consequences of the impending ecological disasters if the human race continues on the destructive path it is currently following. The majority of the ecofeminist novelists have chosen utopia or dystopia, ignoring the realist tradition, predicting doomsday. Dawn Reno Langley's *The Mourning Parade* differs from the existing works of fiction in this regard.

Dawn Reno Langley is an author, editor, arts advocate, theatre critic, professor of creative writing, and a home designer. She is an award-winning author with more than 30 books, dozens of theatre reviews, and several articles poems, and short stories to her credit. She is a nationally acclaimed expert of Native American and African American arts. Dr. Langley is a Fulbright scholar with extensive experience in developing college programs, specializing in fine arts. She has spoken on TEDx and has been working to create awareness for the safe treatment of elephants and other animals.

The author propagates the philosophy of taking responsibility for this earth. This is the reason her work has a lot of environmental aspects to it. She claims that this aspect of her writing is due to a lot of traveling which provided her with vast exposure to the world and its inhabitants, animals, and humans alike. Through her work, she wants to bring the attention of the common man and the fraternity of science towards the different species both plants and animals that are on the verge of extinction. This process of extinction is not like the extinction of the dinosaurs who were wiped off of the face of the earth by the ice age. This destruction and endangering of species is the result of the ignorant, irresponsible, and indifferent attitude of the mighty mankind. Dawn Reno Langley has four novels to her credit,

these include *The Mourning Parade* (2017), *Listening to the Sun* (2016), *Silver Dolphin* (2016), and *All That Glitters* (2016). As a novelist, she employs the skills she acquired as a journalist and conducts extensive research. Each story she writes centers on a social dilemma. She claims that she never writes a story about which she has no passion.

Grief the task of healing, the process of bereavement, and the seemingly invisible link between humans and animals are at the center of Langley's beautifully crafted novel *The Mourning Parade*. The protagonist Dr. Natalie DeAngelo volunteers for services at a Thai elephant sanctuary to numb the pain of losing her sons. She keeps a mum about the tragedy in her past, trying to avoid triggers that might set on her PTSD. She tries to find solace in the company of the tortured, abused, and battered elephants of the sanctuary. By trying to dull their pain she hopes to find peace in the process. She makes an effort to escape her pain by helping endangered animals. The sanctuary like the real world is full of challenges. She finds an adversary in Dr. Peter Hatcher who bears a grudge against her for negatively examining his dissertation a long time ago. The other challenge is in the form of the psychologically and physically traumatized elephant Sophie. The elephant is a kindred soul who would be put to sleep if Dr. DeAngelo is unsuccessful in rehabilitating her.

Unlike most of the novels written with ecological themes, *The Mourning Parade* portrays a world that is fighting back. As mentioned earlier most of the novels paint a dystopian world, where the earth has already succumbed to the wounds inflicted by humanity or represents a world that is trying to breathe once again. The Ecofeminist approach talks of a world that celebrates diversity, harmony, co-existence, interdependence, and self-sustainability. We see The Lotus Sanctuary as an example of such a world. Where humans live in harmony with the animals and utilize the resources that mother nature has to offer together. The animals that are the elephants and the stray dogs have been mistreated in the past, they are battered and abused but they have found solace and a home in this sanctuary. They are treated as equals. It is a place committed

"... to give some of the broken, blind and dispirited elephants a chance to live the rest of their lives with comfort and dignity they deserved" (Langley, 2017, p. 28).

The elephants and the dogs are treated physically by giving them much-needed medicine to cure their infections. They are also provided with an atmosphere where they can heal mentally and let go of the memories of the abuse humans have made them suffer. There are several elephants in the sanctuary and all of them are examples of "... how human greed destroyed magnificent animals... What happened to most animals was largely the result of human vanity..."(Langley, 2017, p. 28). The elephant Sophie feels threatened by the presence of humans around her; the extent of human cruelty becomes evident when we see it from Sophie's point of view "... She smells the men. Their anger. Their distress. And something else. Something threatening. Cruel."(Langley, 2017, p. 36). Sophie leaves no doubt in the minds of the readers that "the men. The men cause the pain." (Langley, 2017, p. 37). The sanctuary allows the elephants to live as they should live, they roam around freely, play in the river, splash mud, eat food that they like for most of the day, and not made to chores that elephants are not meant to do;

"...They are not meant to pirouette on their hind legs... their backs are not strong enough to withstand more than one hundred pounds... and elephants do not paint" (Langley, 2017, p. 45).

Another important aspect of the sanctuary is its ability to sustain itself and the animals. There are rice paddies, a banana plantation, and an enormous vegetable field that fulfill the dietary needs of humans and animals alike. Dr. DeAngelo's first impressions of the sanctuary tell the reader a lot about the place. There are small details like "... a small, carefully kept garden of yellow and orange marigolds and sunflowers..." (Langley, 2017, p. 24). These flowers tell the reader of a place that has been home for someone. They speak for the need "... to care for this place and its mission. The flowers spoke of a full heart." (Langley, 2017, p. 24).

Ecofeminist theorists, as mentioned in the literature review, believe in destroying the existing hierarchies for the world to achieve harmony and for nature to fulfill its potential. Patriarchy is on a rampage in the Lotus sanctuary as it is in the rest of the world in the form of Dr. Peter Hatcher. The targets are the same as in the real world women and nature to be more specific Dr. DeAngelo and Sophie. Hatcher's attitude towards Natalie and Sophie signify the relationship of patriarchy with women and nature. There is a strong urge to dominate, to conquer, to subdue. He tells Natalie right from the beginning that "You take marching orders from me. Things are done my way." (Langley, 2017, p. 42). Hatcher has a condescending attitude towards Natalie; he hates the fact that he has to share his crown of being the savior with a woman and tries to put her down a peg or two every time they interact. He chided her that she should have "...studied a bit more before coming here..." (Langley, 2017, p. 65). He accuses her of coming to the sanctuary and stepping in "... without the appropriate experience..." (Langley, 2017, p. 63). Hatcher's reaction to Natalie's PTSD is calling her "that crazy elephant." (Langley, 2017, p. 39). He believes that is the elephant is not submitting to the orders of the mahouts and is not responding to the antibiotics it is quite logical to "put her down... she's a danger to everyone here, as well as herself." (Langley, 2017, p. 41). The cold reason, the flawed logic of a man who believes that when a woman acts up she needs to be punished and if the punishment doesn't work should be eliminated or ostracized. The typical patriarchal claim of seeing the bigger picture and ignoring the tiny details like an emotionally or psychologically unstable woman or animal that needs help. Hatcher displays logic over emotion when despite acknowledging that Sophie's PTSD needs a lot of attention and time to cure he says "... We can't lose any more animals because of her. She is endangering everyone's safety..." (Langley, 2017, p. 65). He had already given up on Sophie and "was quite certain she's not going to be rehabilitated" (Langley, 2017, p.

Peter Hatcher when threatened has a major meltdown, his insecurity and jealousy become obvious for everyone to see. He calls Sophie's treatment regime to be "... some hare-brained scheme for special training that brings the sanctuary to a standstill to do her bidding..." (Langley, 2017, p. 256). He insults Natalie undermining the success of her research paper by stereotyping her as a "... dyed-in-the-wool movie star" (Langley, 2017, p. 256). His insecurity leads to a loss of control, and he tries to physically hurt Natalie.

The domination of patriarchy is broken in this novel right from the beginning when Natalie vows to stick to her guns and declares "She'd never been a quitter. She wasn't about to start now." (Langley, 2017, p. 43). The abuse suffered by the elephants makes her angry, makes her stomach churn, enrages her but she forces herself to "control it. Make it work for something good". She moves in with full zeal to try and cure Sophie with whom Natalie identifies on several levels, an echo of her observation that "animals and humans who work together often shared some of the same traits." (Langley, 2017, p. 79).

The deconstruction of patriarchal hierarchies is crucial according to the ecofeminist theorists for the world to have a chance at survival. This deconstruction is carried out in partnership. The partnership of "the others", that is the women and nature. The two others help each other in the process of healing and provide each other support to admonish the suppressing forces of patriarchy. This phenomenon is evident in *The Mourning Parade*.

Dr. Natalie DeAngelo who is a vet by profession has lost her two sons in a school shooting. She is grieving for them and is unable to come to terms with the loss as she puts it "How the hell do you move on when both of your kids are gone, and you are still here;" (Langley, 2017, p. 3). The pain of this loss is continuous "Nothing stopped the pain." (Langley, 2017, p. 3). She tries to block out the memories of the horrific incident. She tries to stop herself from thinking about her son as the thoughts act as triggers the onset of her PTSD. She feels guilty for living, breathing, surviving. Everything in her house that was once her happy place reminds her of the little things her sons have said or done, torturing her. She feels as if she is like a fish in a bowl, where everyone is looking at her and her emotions are on display. Natalie is broken and she is not able to voice her pain. At every step, she wants to run away

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from the place where her world came crumbling down. Andrew Gordon's presentation about the abused elephants and their rehabilitation struck a chord in her heart. Dr. DeAngelo has gone through the trauma of losing her children at the hands of the cruelty of mankind. She feels empathy for the elephants "so thin that their skin hung from their bones." (Langley, 2017, p. 15). She can understand the agony an elephant went through while she was trained as a circus performer to stand on her hind legs for such a long time that her "legs were twisted awkwardly, deformed." (Langley, 2017, p. 15). Just like her soul deformed with gaping holes in it. The pictures of the rehabilitated elephants give her a ray of hope and she seizes the chance by being consciously aware of it. Her stint at the sanctuary was "a last-ditch effort to cure the paralyzing stress that often left her feeling it would have been if she'd been one of the victims". Just like her, the sanctuary is Sophie's only and last chance. Sophie has been rescued by Andrew Gordon from a logger who kept her shackled causing a leg wound that is almost septic now reaching her bone. She is an antisocial elephant who doesn't mix up with other elephants. Sophie birthed several calves but they were all taken away from her. Just like Natalie, she has lost her children causing her trauma. Natalie and Sophie are suffering from PTSD. The rage and the lack of control make them bond faster. Sophie's voice in the novel explains the beginning of a panic attack that is triggered by the pain in her leg which she describes as

... It's the pain that has taken her breath. Her leg burns as if she's stepped into a giant fire ant mound, as if thousands of biting creatures have crawled under her skin, snapping and burning at every inch of her leg. She tears at it with her short tusks, doesn't care that she's ripping the skin. She wants the pain gone. All of it. Now... the pain gives her no respite. (Langley, 2017, p. 37)

Reminding the readers of Natalie's declaration "Nothing stopped the pain." (Langley, 2017, p. 13).

Natalie suffered through night terrors. She wakes up from them gasping for air and almost always she's unable to remember the dream because "...the reality to which she awoke was worse..." (Langley, 2017, p. 67). There seems to be no respite for both Natalie and Sophie. They feel "...exhausted, haunted by the ghostliness of it all..." (Langley, 2017, p. 67). It's her pain and her inability to cope with it that brings her to Sophie's closure in the middle of the night. The two kindred souls meet and there is a "peacefulness that fills the void between them" (Langley, 2017, p. 71).

The woman and the elephant thus start the process of healing each other meanwhile fixing the world as Natalie claims "we were having a conversation about how to fix the world's problems... Sophie has some wonderful ideas." (Langley, 2017, p. 73). Siriporn the mahout is talking about both Sophie and Natalie when he says "she needs freedom. Kindness. She needs a friend. Elephant always needs a friend." (Langley, 2017, p. 83).

Their relationship is the solution to their problems in a microcosm. Natalie's decision to fight for Sophie is her decision to fight for herself she vows "I'm not giving up on her until she gives up on herself." (Langley, 2017, p. 89). Natalie's treatment of Sophie reminds the readers that no matter how dire the situation is, getting together to solve the problem is always successful. Unlike the male mahouts and Dr. Hatcher Natalie uses protected contact to try and heal Sophie. A technique that is used for patients of schizophrenia illustrating that animals like humans have the same fears undergo the same kind of anxiety, they share one soul. She tries and understands Sophie's dilemma and is successful only because she is undergoing the same, after all, "How could one blame Sophie for her actions when human beings were at fault," (Langley, 2017, p. 127). The two help each other heal and the pain that never stopped is removed "Sophie's tender touch was soft- took away the pain- made Natalie believe it was temporary." (Langley, 2017, p. 141).

Sophie and Natalie "... arch into one another drawing support..." (Langley, 2017, p. 151) not understanding each other's languages but "...understand the emotions...grief...sadness and

despair. Heartbreak..." (Langley, 2017, p. 151). They identify each other's yearning "to care, to protect" (Langley, 2017, p. 152). The elephant reciprocates the woman's care by looping "her trunk over the woman's shoulders" (Langley, 2017, p. 153). As Gordon says "the best way to treat broken animals is with broken animals" (Langley, 2017, p. 339).

3. Conclusion

Through the hegemonization of both women and earth and all marginalized group, the theory of ecofeminism developed. This theory emphasizes the interdependence of all life. It also demands justice and equal rights for all those living at the margin. Women with this tool of ecofeminism in their hand can bring about changes in thoughts as well as behaviors, changes that can heal the earth and bring justice to mankind and all the inhabitants of the natural world.

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