

Narrating the Resilience: An Ecofeminist Reading of *The Four Winds*

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Abstract

The focal point of ecofeminism is the intrinsic link between the patriarchal oppression of women and other disempowered categories, and the degradation of nature and environment. Women and nature have been subjugated and suppressed since time immemorial under male dominance, which is thought to be “natural” by the society. The harm done to the individuality and identity of women by the hegemonic dominance exercised by patriarchy has reflected in the irrevocable damage done to the environment as well. The *Four Winds* by noted American writer Kristin Hannah, is focalised around the ecological destruction and socio-economic condition of the Dust Bowl era of the 1930s, which had resulted in a loss of security and stability, converting thousands into “ecological refugees.” In contrast to masculine domination and exploitation, women’s approach to nature is generally one of care and nurturing. The present paper examines how Elsa faces the adversities triggered by atmospheric conditions well as those caused by patriarchal domination. It shows how women are disproportionately vulnerable when there are environmental issues disrupting normal life leading to poor socioeconomic conditions.

Keywords: Ecocriticism; Ecofeminism; Ecological refugees; Oppression; Patriarchal domination.

Introduction

As a discipline closely interconnected with human beings and nature, ecocriticism critiques the way environment is constructed and represented in literature. The manifestation of environment in the text is the primary concern of the ecocritic, as it reflects the approach of the human being to the physical world that surrounds and protects him. The larger objective of ecology, a term originated from Greek roots “oikos” and “logos,”

meaning home and study respectively, is to maintain a holistic approach to living organisms in relation to their context. In the introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Cheryll Glotfelty explains the concept:

What . . . is ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies. (xviii)

In ecocritical studies, there is a paradigm shift from the anthropocentric to the biocentric. William Rueckert, in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism," defines the concept as the "application of ecology and ecological concepts to study of literature because ecology has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world"

(5).The existence of man depends on the conservation of nature and the maintenance of ecological balance.

Ecofeminism concentrates on the protection of women and nature alike, and foregrounds the intrinsic link between the patriarchal oppression of women as well as other disenfranchised categories, and environmental degradation. Throughout the ages, men have considered it their duty to extract "the best" out of women and nature alike, and have been proud of their skill in taming women as well as the wild land. As Chris Cumo contends:

Ecofeminism was originally associated with the view that women and nature are connected in morally significant ways because both are identified with femininity (or traits labelled "feminine"). This femininity, associated with characteristics ranging from fecundity to vulnerability to wildness, was seen as a source of ecological and social flourishing that is violently degraded in patriarchal cultures. (7)

The term ecofeminism was coined by the French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne synthesising the radical approaches in ecology and feminism. Karen J. Warren, in her work *Ecofeminist*

Philosophy, states: "The basic starting point of ecofeminist philosophy is that the dominations of women, and nonhuman nature are intercon-

nected, are wrong, and ought to be eliminated” (155). Ecofeminism envisages an end to all kinds of oppressions and believes that this should be addressed simultaneously. There exists an interconnectedness between woman’s self and nature, contrary to that of men. Greta Gaard considers this interlinking as the theoretical base of ecofeminism itself: “Its theoretical base is a sense of self most commonly expressed by women and various other non-dominant groups – a self that is interconnected with all life” (1). Hence women’s efforts are considered crucial in bringing about global changes in connection with the environment. Karen J. Warren’s concept of “the quilt of ecological feminism” acknowledges the wide range of methodologies and social, historical contexts going into it (66).

One of the bestselling American authors of the century, Kristin Hannah is widely acclaimed for her fictional oeuvre including *The Nightingale*, *The Great Alone*, *Winter Garden* and so on. Set in the Great Dust Bowl Era, one of the worst ecological disasters of the American continent, *The Four Winds*, published in 2021, explores the life and hardships of the people during the time when the entire country was shaken by The Great Depression. The Great Plains was utterly destroyed due to the dust storms and the drought that lasted for many years, forcing many to leave their land in search of jobs to support their family. The novel offers a staggering portrayal of the harsh realities of life during an era where economic collapse and environmental disaster converged to make existence difficult. The novel depicts how the drought and burning winds convert the protagonist Elsa Martinelli into a warrior fighting against restrictive forces. A woman denied love by her own family, Elsa enters into a fleeting relationship with Rafe Martinelli and is forced to marry him, as she becomes pregnant with his child. The transformation of Elsa from a weak, fragile and insecure girl into a woman of true merit and mettle is what Hannah depicts in the novel. Hannah says: “I am devoted to putting women in the forefront of historical stories. To telling women’s stories” (Egan). The strength, endurance and resilience of the human spirit are embodied in Elsa Martinelli. The present paper examines how Elsa faces the adversities precipitated by climatic changes as well as those caused by patriarchal domination. It shows how women are disproportionately vulnerable when there are environmental issues disrupting normal life leading to poor socioeconomic conditions.

The novel portrays the transition that hit the land of the Great Plains from

1921 to 1934; how the land had been “a gold mine of wheat and corn”

and the farmers were happy, proud and rich because of steady rain and good crop. The years of drought, dust, poverty and hardships ravage the land, making it almost lifeless. The farm had been “reconfigured by wind and drought, sculpted into a land of tumbleweeds and starving mesquite” (Hannah 61). The Great Plains was ruined and the entire biosphere suffered; the animals in the farm starved to death and every now and then a bird would drop dead from the sky. The novel gives the reader the realisation at many points that men’s insensitivity and aggressive acquisitiveness, the desire to earn more by cultivating more land catalysed the ecological disaster that they were encountering. Elsa is aware of the harm done: “The image of tractors rolling over the ground twenty-four hours a day, plowing the earth, churning up more and more fields. A horde of mechanical insects chewing up the ground” (Hannah 67). Ignorance regarding ecological balance had prompted the authorities to use various measures to attract the forefathers of the present generation to the vast blue-green buffalo grass to cultivate more and get a high yield.

Elsa’s identity evolves in connection with the land and she identifies her calibre after she reached the Martinelli’s home. Born in a family that imposed enforced solitude upon her due to an illness she had survived in childhood, Elsa was lonely and friendless, with only novels to provide her company with. Patriarchal to the core, the family, including her mother, suppressed her dreams of pursuing her studies or wearing a fashionable outfit. She was despised as a woman with no talent at all. A spinster neglected by everybody at the age of twenty-five, Elsa’s life changes when she meets Rafe Martinelli. A new Elsa evolves, an Elsa who works inside the house as well as out in the farm, an Elsa who loves the land and identifies with it: “She spent hours in the garden kneeling in the dirt, watching seeds she planted sprout and push up from the earth and turn green, and each one felt like a new beginning. A promise for the future” (Hannah 54). A sense of belonging, with the promise of a better future emerged in her. Elsa perceives the land as the cradle for her children: “... here her child would flourish, would run and play and learn the stories told by the ground and the grapes and the wheat” (Hannah 54). The nurturing attitude that women share with nature generates an unexpected strength in her mind. Later, when she decides to leave for California with her children Lorena and Anthony, as Anthony develops dust pneumonia, she becomes a fierce fighter. It is for the safety and future of her children’s life that she does everything, which further gets extended towards the entire humanity. That eventually makes her fight against all injustices and exploitations in the workplace until getting shot dead during a strike.

Environmental disasters affect various people in entirely diverse ways. Of these, women are disproportionately affected because they are one of the most vulnerable groups in the hegemonic power structure. As Karen J. Warren observes, "women are the primary sufferers of environmental degradation" (6). Jane Dewey, the friend Elsa gets in San Joaquin valley, becomes pregnant in the middle of these hardships, loses the baby and succumbs to typhoid later. Men being absent in the household, having relocated in search of jobs, women have to shoulder the responsibilities of providing for the family and taking care of the situation. Patriarchy has constructed the myth of men being autonomous, independent and powerful. But Elsa proves to be the real powerful, autonomous person whereas her husband Rafe turns out to be a coward; he flees from home in the middle of the night, leaving her, their children and his parents behind. He is a man of dreams, telling stories of faraway lands, trying to evade reality, whereas Elsa is rooted to the land, a tough and sturdy soul. She could not afford to support the illusive dreams of Rafe to escape time and place. Elsa was working all the time, constantly worried about saving food, not dirtying clothes and not wasting water. The caring labour undertaken by women like Elsa is in the interest of the family as well as the environment, which, further acts as a capital for the future generation. Loreda and Anthony survive the years of drought because of the struggle, fight and determination of Elsa alone. The exodus to California, the life in the unhygienic campground in San Joaquin valley and the work in the cotton fields are all situations which proved Elsa's true spirit and mettle.

The inherent devaluation that exists in patriarchal societies related to everything that women does is exposed in the novel. The practice of elevating and glorifying men's activities is criticised by the author in the Prologue of the novel itself: "A man's got to fight out here to make a living, they'd say to each other." Women, the effort that they put and the work that they do are often taken for granted. They are often treated as the "invisible minority," who need not be taken seriously, who are just a silent part of the system. In this regard, Petra

Kelly observes: "Invisibility of women is a familiar pattern of male dominance" (117). When the workers are on a strike on the Welty's farm, this invisibility becomes plainer and more prominent as they adopt an androcentric approach: "Get to work, man," Welty yelled. As if there were only men here" (Hannah 418). Elsa is irritated at the injustice in treating women as if they are insignificant: "It was always about the men. They seem to think it meant nothing to cook and clean and bear children and tend gardens. But we women of the Great Plains worked from sunup to sundown, too, toiled

on wheat farms until we were as dry and baked as the land we loved" (Hannah 431). Most of the female characters like Elsa, Rose and Jean are women who toil with the menfolk on the land and struggle hard to make both ends meet. Their resourcefulness to find new leaves or roots that can be eaten, to make dresses from flour sacks, to make soap that can be sold in the shop and so on prevents the family from moving into dire poverty.

Environmental justice means the fair distribution of environmental benefits and burden, justice not towards human communities alone, but towards other species, ecosystems, landscapes, and environment as a whole. The dominant power relations existing in society that facilitate all kinds of oppressions and exploitations are opposed by ecofeminists. As Janice Birkeland comments: "Ecofeminism contributes the necessary insight into the link between the abuse of power on personal and political levels that underlies human oppression and environmental exploitation" (16). Elsa becomes a true exponent of the idea by resorting even to force in getting medicine for Jane in hospital, in fighting for fair wages in Welty's farm, and demanding fair treatment for herself and her children at the school. Whenever there are hardships, suffering and miseries, women are at the receiving end. Rafe leaves Elsa and his family, and the frustration, anger and disillusionment of Loreda are aimed at Elsa: "She was mad at the world, and somehow that meant she was mad at her mom most of all" (Hannah 82).

In the face of all the hardships and miseries, the camaraderie that develops between women is a survival technique as well as an empowering force. The sisterhood that strengthens, appreciates and motivates each other on this tough journey helps to balance the onslaught of ecological hardships and patriarchal oppressions. Elsa and her mother-in-law Rose, though not much vocal in their relationship, have silently spun a sturdy and powerful bond of love between each other. It is Rose who is the first to appreciate Elsa's potential: "You have the heart of a lion. Don't believe anyone who tells you different" (Hannah 136). She also shares the faith in the bond between human beings and land. After reaching California, Elsa gets a similar companion in Jane who tells her how beautiful she is, the first person in her life to say so. Rafe has never appreciated her beauty or strength, but these women have. The spiritual bond between women gets extended to Loreda and her grandmother also: "She can see when the sadness rises in me; some days she gives me space with my grief, some days she takes my hand. I don't know how, but she always knows which I need" (Hannah 446). The legacy of her mother and grandmother flows through her in the form of the bond that she develops with nature.

The Dust Bowl era has seen millions of people becoming “ecological refugees” who leave their land and houses, either taken over by banks or given up as they have lost all hope. The people abandon the land they hold dear, after confronting series after series of mishaps including the death of their beloved babies. Elsa herself, uncompromisingly firm on not leaving her land, reluctantly takes the decision when her son’s life is in danger. The propaganda about the job opportunities in California stood before the people as an encouraging promise: “California. Land of milk and honey, they say. Don’t need honey, just work” (Hannah 72). People undertaking this tiresome journey of a thousand miles was not a rare sight because many could not afford for gas. But the promises prove to be futile and they were forced to live in inhuman conditions. Thousands of haggard and ragged people lived in cardboard boxes or broken down cars or shacks made up of cans and sheet metal. Moreover, they are treated as “the Other” by the natives of the place. They are ridiculed as “Okies” and thought to be thieves and even morally depraved people, unprincipled delinquents who have come to snatch the work and life of the natives. They are denied entry in their houses, fields, schools, hospitals and so on, the residents maintaining a physical distance from them as if they were untouchables.

Life is a web and human life is only a strand in it. Ecospirituality talks about the sacredness of nature. Elsa finds solace in the company of nature, in being together with the land, talking to the aster plant and considering the cows as siblings. The difficult times that each living being has been passing through have brought them in close proximity with each other, including spiders, insects and centipedes. The bond between animals and humans is expressed more strongly in women, as seen in Elsa worrying over the cows and the horses in the same way as she did over her children. She wants her children also to grow and develop in the spiritual connection with land: “I love this land. I love this family. This is home. I want you to grow up here, knowing that this is your place, your future” (Hannah 151). She aims at living in harmony with nature, maintaining a symbiotic coexistence with all living beings.

Elsa’s philosophy of life is that life is tough and hence one has to be tougher not to be destroyed by it. She is the epitome of willpower and resilience: “As always she stood ramrod stiff. She had perfected an unyielding, unforgiving stance: shoulders back, spine straight, chin up” (Hannah 80). Confidence and belief in herself exuded from her personality. Loreda realises the true mettle of her mother and grandmother, though a little late: “Mom and grandma were warrior women. Nothing stopped them

when they'd made up their minds" (Hannah 151). This never yielding spirit makes Elsa take her son to the hospital in a wheelbarrow when he collapses due to fever, as they have no horse to pull the wagon. She is not a woman who entertains false hopes in truly alarming situations, and so gets ready to leave for California because Antony's lungs have almost been filled with dust. The little aster plant, "defiantly green against all the brown," epitomises the indomitable spirit of Elsa, a symbol that directs and leads the children to safety through all dangers. Even though she could not see it, Loreda becomes the first Martinelli to go to college, as she always wished. Even through all these miseries, Elsa had taken particular care to see to it that their education did not suffer at all. She used to tell them: "You're a Martinelli, and you're as good as anyone in California" (Hannah 241). The aster survives all the drought and dust storms and extreme winter and has flourished in the garden, after all the hardships were over and the land regained its fertility. Elsa's visionary approach to life, dedication shown to protect her children, readiness to fight against the injustices shown towards her fellow beings and spiritual connection with the land become instrumental in the survival of her family.

Conclusion

In short, the novel traces the life of a group of people affected by one of the worst ecological disasters in the world. Elsa gets shaped by her experiences and emerges as a warrior fighting against all the obstacles and impediments on her way. Like the nature that rejuvenates everything and nurtures life in The Great Plains after the Dust Bowl era, her care and concern protect the people around her. In contrast to masculine domination and exploitation, women's approach to nature is generally one of care and nurturing. Elsa navigates her family like a true captain through all the hardships of the worst ecological disaster that the country has witnessed. She is motivated to act on her own as a mother and nurturer, gradually emerging as a leader in the altered environment. The novel proclaims the philosophy of interconnectedness and interdependence by highlighting the profound consequences of human actions. The greed of human beings leads to the overuse and exploitation of ecological resources, which, in turn, undermine the delicate balance of ecological relationships, causing threat to their own lives. The injured nature and the dysfunctional society can be retrieved and made functional only through providing caring labour which can be made possible by women at the most. The novel regenerates the hopes for a genuinely ecological community that would sustain the environment and protect life on earth.

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