

An Ecofeminist Exploration of Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*

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Abstract

The Cherry Orchard by Anton Chekhov serves as a literary canvas ripe for an ecofeminist perspective. This article delves into the intricate relationship between gender, class, and the environment within the play's narrative. Set against the backdrop of the impending sale of an aristocratic estate, including the cherished cherry orchard, Chekhov's work symbolizes the conclusion of an era, marking the onset of a more capitalist society. As the play unfolds, the social upheaval in Russia mirrors the mounting tension between the aristocracy and the rising demands for change among peasants and workers. In its portrayal of the Ranevsky family's financial struggles and their emotional attachment to the orchard, *The Cherry Orchard* encapsulates a moment of profound transition in Russian society, showcasing the decline of the aristocracy and the emergence of the middle class. Particularly, the matriarch, Lyubov Ranevsky, grapples with these societal shifts, navigating an emotional struggle to preserve tradition and the essence of a bygone era amidst the encroaching modernity. The play interlaces themes of loss, nostalgia, the clash between tradition and progress, and the complexities of human relationships across societal divides. Focusing on an ecofeminist lens, this article seeks to unravel how *The Cherry Orchard* provides a fertile ground for ecofeminist discourse in dramatic literature. By exploring key tenets of ecofeminism, the study aims to elucidate how Chekhov's masterpiece resonates with the principles and values of ecofeminist thought, offering a nuanced understanding of gender, class, and environmental concerns within the narrative.

Keywords: Aristocracy; Capitalist age; Class; Ecofeminism; Feminism; Gender; Human relationships; Modernity; Societal transition; Tradition.

Ecofeminist literary criticism examines the relationship between gender, ecology, and the natural world in literature. In the case of *The Cherry Orchard* by Anton Chekhov, an ecofeminist perspective can reveal important

themes related to gender, class, and the environment. At its core, *The Cherry Orchard* is a play about the end of an era. The central conflict of the play is the impending sale of an aristocratic estate, which includes a cherry orchard. The trade of the cherry orchard represents the end of an old way of life and the beginning of a new, more capitalist age. This conflict is further complicated by the fact that the play takes place at a time of significant social upheaval in Russia, with peasants and workers agitating for change.

The Cherry Orchard is a play authored by Anton Chekhov and first performed on stage in 1904. The play tells the story of an aristocratic family, the Ranevskys, who are faced with financial difficulties and the impending sale of their beloved cherry orchard. The play takes place during a time of social and political change in Russia, with the rise of the middle class and the decline of the aristocracy. The Ranevskys, particularly the matriarch Lyubov Ranevsky, struggle to come to terms with the changes happening around them, as they attempt to preserve their way of life and their memories of the past. The play explores themes of loss, nostalgia, and the clash between tradition and modernity, as well as the complexities of human relationships and the societal divides between different classes and groups. The play ends with the sale of the orchard and the departure of the Ranevskys, symbolizing the end of an era in Russian society.

The play lends itself to several types of reading including an ecofeminist one, this article attempts to explore the ecofeminist viewpoint. To gain an understanding of how *The Cherry Orchard* makes for a fertile ground to explore ecofeminist discourse in plays, one must attempt to identify key thoughts in the field of ecofeminism. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* by Val Plumwood is an influential book that examines the relationship between feminism and the environment. The book consists of two parts, with the first part exploring the ways in which feminist theory has contributed to the domination of nature. According to Plumwood, Western thought has a hierarchical view of nature, which places humans at the top and justifies the exploitation and domination of the natural world (Plumwood, 34). This view has been present in feminist theory as well, which has focused mainly on the oppression of women without acknowledging the oppression of nature. In the second part of the book, Plumwood offers an ecofeminist critique of this domination. Ecofeminism argues that the domination of nature and the subjugation of women are interconnected and rooted in patriarchal systems of power. To achieve true gender equality and address environmental issues, it is necessary to challenge the hierarchical view of nature and adopt a more holistic and interconnected per-

spective. This involves recognizing the agency and value of non-human beings and acknowledging the ways in which human societies depend on the natural world. The book has been influential in shaping ecofeminist theory and its contributions to environmental discourse. Plumwood's analysis challenges traditional feminist and environmental discourses and offers a new perspective that highlights the interconnectedness of issues related to gender, social justice, and the environment. The book is an important contribution to the fields of feminist and environmental philosophy and has inspired further scholarship and activism in these areas.

The critical analysis of ecofeminism attempts to comprehend the connection between literature and the issues concerning gender and the ecological crisis across diverse literary genres. Patil Sangita Sharnappa in his paper titled, "Reconstructing Ecofeminism: A study of Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*" aims to explore how the theory of ecofeminism, which originated in the Western world, is highlighted in Kamala Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) and how the Indian English novel brings a new perspective to the ecofeminist discourse (Sharnappa, 7). This perspective is distinct from the general understanding of ecofeminism in the West. The paper investigates ecofeminism's intricacies and examines the chosen Indian English novel based on Markandaya's interpretation of ecofeminism.

Alicia H. Puleo, in her article titled "What is Ecofeminism?" explores the ecofeminist theory as a contradiction to the current capitalist and patriarchal model of development. The article argues that the modern capitalist development model is unsustainable in the long term as it drives us towards materialism, and a competition for unrestrained riches, which stems from the desire for patriarchal power (Puleo, 27). This model is not only punitive for several groups, such as women but also makes it difficult to sustain in the long term. The article asserts that critical ecofeminist theory, based on the feminist approach, offers a solution to this problem. The theory posits that principles such as the precautionary principle, freedom of choice in motherhood, food sovereignty, and environmental education during childhood serve as guiding principles for society's efforts towards sustainable development. The author provides a comprehensive overview of the ecofeminist theory and its origins, tracing its roots back to the feminist movement of the 1970s. The article explores the feminist perspective on the capitalizing of women and nature, as well as the interconnections between patriarchy, capitalism, and environmental degradation. Puleo argues that ecofeminism offers a way to challenge the current system by promoting the values of care, sustainability, and social justice. The

article concludes by calling for a shift in societal values towards a more ecofeminist approach that prioritizes the well-being of both women and nature. The article provides a valuable contribution to the literature on ecofeminism, offering a critical analysis of the current development model and proposing an alternative framework based on feminist principles. The article also sheds light on the interconnectedness of environmental degradation and patriarchy, highlighting the need for a holistic approach to addressing these issues.

Niharika Hemant Apte and Drumi in their article "Analysing Showalter's Essay 'Towards a Feminist Poetics' provides a detailed analysis of Elaine Showalter's influential essay on feminist literary criticism. The article examines how Showalter advocates for a new way to read and critique literature, emphasizing the importance of considering the historical and cultural context of women's writing. The authors also discuss Showalter's division of women's writing into three phases - the feminine phase, the feminist phase, and the female phase - and how each phase represents a different stage in the evolution of women's writing (Apte and Drumi, 91). Additionally, the article explores the two varieties of feminist criticism identified by Showalter, namely liberal feminism and radical feminism. The paper also addresses the issue of stereotypical feminist criticism and how it can be problematic, particularly when it reduces women's writing to simplistic, essentialist categories. The authors suggest that Showalter's concept of gynocritics, which involves examining women's writing on its own terms, provides a more nuanced and productive approach to feminist literary criticism. Among the various literary studies conducted on the play *Cherry Orchard*, there is a lacuna found in approaching it from an ecofeminist perspective. This essay offers an ecofeminist interpretation of *Cherry Orchard*, highlighting key themes concerning gender, class, and the environment. The play can be interpreted as a condemnation of male-dominated systems and the harmful effects of human behaviour on nature.

The physical cherry orchard symbolises the past and, in turn, the unique memories connected to it at a more metaphorical level. These memories are each as distinct and different as the distinct personalities with which they are connected. They differ by class and by age. From an ecofeminist perspective, the play can be read as a critique of the patriarchal systems that have dominated human societies for centuries. The characters in the play are divided along gender lines, with men holding the majority of the power and women largely relegated to supporting roles. The central character, Lyubov Ranevskaya, is a wealthy aristocrat who is unable to accept

the fact that the way she and her family lived and prospered is gradually changing and being replaced. She represents the old order, clinging to a world that is disappearing around her. At the same time, the play highlights the impact of human activity on the natural world. The cherry orchard is a symbol of the natural world, which is being destroyed by human activity. The characters in the play are largely indifferent to the destruction of the orchard, focusing instead on their own personal problems and desires: The cherry orchard is beautiful at any time of year, but in spring it's especially beautiful. (Lopakhin, Act 1).

The play can also be read as a commentary on the relationship between social class and the environment. Mrs. Lyubof Andreyevna Ranevsky Madame Ranevsky, the play's central character, is in many ways the head of her estate of the family, despite the fact that she has, over the past five years, driven them and the land into ruin. Despite her well-intentioned altruism, or possibly her tendency to overcompensate, Madame Ranevsky finds herself in a precarious situation after spending all her money caring for an abusive lover in Paris. This left her with limited options for rescuing her family's ancestral home and cherished cherry orchard. Madame Ranevsky, known for her generous heart and tendency to indulge others in extravagances that she cannot afford, ultimately causes her to be wasteful with her resources. Ranevsky and her brother Gayef try to borrow money from their wealthy, middle-class neighbour Lopakhin, who suggests cutting down the trees and renting out the land in portions. The wealthy characters in the play are portrayed as being disconnected from the natural world, using it solely for their own benefit.

The workers and peasants, on the other hand, have a closer relationship with the land and understand its value. However, they are powerless to stop the destruction of the cherry orchard because they lack the economic and political power of the aristocrats. In the first scene, Lopakhin is seen by himself in a room of Madame Ranevsky's home, acting as though he is in charge of the establishment. The fight between Lopakhin and Ranevsky for authority and power of the estate and the orchard, which is seen from the window and foreshadowed by the play's main conflict, is represented by the cherry orchard. This type of stage direction and positioning draws our attention to the way a woman's role or authority in retaining wealth that is her own is in stark contrast to the agency that a man has in claiming wealth as his own and taking decisions. Lopakhin not only exploits the land but he also exploits the woman. His glee to take over the land at a time when Maram Ranevsky is extremely vulnerable reveals the patriarchal apathy. Take this conversation between Lopakhin and Varya for

instance :

Varya: "I'm just a servant, I'm not allowed to have an opinion."

Lopakhin: "Why not? Everyone's allowed to have an opinion, even servants."

This exchange reveals the social hierarchy and power dynamics at play in Russian society, where class status determines one's level of agency and influence. Varya, as a servant, is expected to defer to her social superiors and is not entitled to express her own opinions or ideas.

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What sort of people are we? We don't understand anything, we don't know how to do anything, we're no good for anything, we're just playing around, amusing ourselves. And meanwhile, life's slipping away from us, time's running out, and we're not doing anything, we're not achieving anything. (Anya, Act 3)

Here, Anya's words challenge the traditional gender roles and expectations that confine women to domesticity and limit their opportunities for personal growth and achievement. There are also instances from the play that suggest that change is happening in all strides; women's rights, ecological understanding and most of all, regarding social class. In Act 4, these words of Lopakhin suggest that women's contributions and value are often overlooked and underappreciated, and that they need to recognize their own worth and assert their rights and interests in order to effect change and achieve equality.

Women are the backbone of our society, but they don't know it. They don't know their own worth. -(Lopakhin, Act 4)

Another conversation that highlights this change would be between Peter Trofimov, the intellectual university student and Anya in Act 3:

Trofimov: "Women's freedom, it's still just a dream. It's all still so backward here."

Anya: "Yes, but it's changing. Women are starting to demand their rights."

This conversation touches on the feminist movement that was emerging in Russia at the time, as women began to advocate for greater political, social, and economic rights. Trofimov's observation of the backwardness of Russian society reflects the pervasive patriarchal attitudes and gender norms of the time, while Anya's optimism about the potential for change highlights the resilience and determination of women to challenge and transform the existing power structures. At the same time, the play highlights the impact of human activity on the natural world. The cherry orchard is a symbol of the natural world, which is being destroyed by human activity. The characters in the play are largely indifferent to the destruction of the orchard, focusing instead on their own personal problems and desires.

The play can also be read as a commentary on the relationship between social class and the environment. The wealthy characters in the play are portrayed as being disconnected from the natural world, using it solely for their own benefit. The workers and peasants, on the other hand, have a closer relationship with the land and understand its value. However, they are powerless to stop the destruction of the cherry orchard because they lack the economic and political power of the aristocrats.

The Cherry Orchard portrays the relationship between social class and the environment in a complex and nuanced way. On the one hand, the play suggests that the wealthy aristocrats who own the cherry orchard are indifferent to the natural world and see it only as a resource to exploit for their own benefit. The characters in the play spend most of their time discussing their own personal problems and desires, with little regard for the larger ecological issues at play. For example, when the family is faced with the prospect of selling the cherry orchard, they discuss their own financial woes and sentimental attachments to the property, but fail to consider the impact of the sale on the natural environment. For instance, Lyubov's emotional response to the destruction of the cherry orchard suggests a deep attachment and sense of loss in relation to the natural world.

I can't bear to look at the orchard. It breaks my heart." "They cut down my cherry orchard. They cut it down, they cut it down. It's the end of an era. (Lyubov, Act 3).

On the other hand, the play also suggests that the workers and peasants who labour on the cherry orchard have a closer relationship with the land and a greater understanding of its value. They are more in tune with the rhythms of the natural world and the ecological systems that sustain life. For example, when the family decides to hold a party on the eve of the cherry harvest, the workers protest that the noise and disruption will disturb the delicate balance of the ecosystem and harm the cherry trees.

The air smells of freshly-cut hay, the fields are all yellow, and the sun's shining so brightly. It's all so beautiful, it's almost too much to bear. (Varya, Act 4)

However, despite their knowledge and understanding of the natural world, the workers and peasants are ultimately powerless to stop the destruction of the cherry orchard. They lack the financial and political power of the aristocrats and are unable to prevent the sale of the land. This highlights the inherent inequities of the social class system and the way in which it can create a disconnect between people and the natural world.

Thus, *The Cherry Orchard* can be viewed as a critique on the relationship between social class and the environment. The play suggests that the wealthy upper classes, who have the power and resources to shape the world around them, are often indifferent to the ecological consequences of their actions. At the same time, the workers and peasants who are most intimately connected to the natural world are often powerless to stop the destruction of the environment, due to their lower social status. The play highlights the need for a more equitable and sustainable approach to the environment, and suggests that true ecological awareness requires a fundamental rethinking of social and economic systems.

In conclusion, an ecofeminist reading of *The Cherry Orchard* reveals important themes related to gender, class, and the environment. The play can be seen as a critique of patriarchal systems and the destructive impact of human activity on the natural world. By highlighting the importance of the natural world and the impact of social class on the environment, *The Cherry Orchard* remains a powerful and relevant work of literature.

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