

“To Live in this World”: An Eco-feminist Study of the Poetry of Mary Oliver

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Abstract: Maxine Kumin wrote in the “Women’s Review of Books,” that Mary Oliver is an “indefatigable guide to the natural world.” Her verses produce a relieving effect and concentrate on the calm aspects of nature, assiduous Hummingbirds, hunting owls. The present study is an exploration of the relationship between the humankind and the world of nature in the poems of Mary Oliver from an eco-feminist point of view. Ecological feminism or eco-feminism is a term first coined by the French writer Françoise Eaubonne in her book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort* (1974) to denote women’s inherent ability for bringing an ecological revolution to ascertain the survival of human being on earth. It started its journey as a movement in the twentieth century against environmental destruction, suppression and oppression of women. From the origin of the earth, man tries to desert the fertile earth and turns her into a barren land. To free women and nature from the clutches of male dominated society, many nineteenth century women wrote about the local landscape that is often an integral part of their daily life. The close examination of the bountiful objects of nature, plants and animals have established them as a liberating force. Mary Oliver took multifarious forms of nature to expose her clear and poignant observations regarding environment. She also sees earth as an upholder of human life and relationships. Nature and humanity is strongly emphasized through her poems to show a deep alliance between them. The reason I choose the poems of Mary Oliver is because they encourage us to think passionately about the kinship of humans with nature and the immense idea a person can gain in understanding one’s life in a meaningful way.

Keywords: Eco-feminism, environment, multifarious forms of nature, kinship

Introduction

Ecofeminism, in general, is a broad term that highlights the intersections between feminism and environmentalism. It was ascertained as a combined view of feminists and ecologists that the cruel exercise of power on women is directly connected to the victimization of the natural environment in patriarchal societies. The very term “Ecofeminism” is used to recount the multiform of women’s attempts to save the earth and the transformations of feminism in the West that have resulted from the new view of women and nature. (Diamond & Orenstein 1990: ix). Greta Gaard (2001:157) argues that “more than a theory about feminism and environmentalism or women and nature, as the name might imply, ecofeminism approaches and problems of environment degradation and social injustice from the premise that how we treat nature and how we treat each other are inseparably linked.” Karen Warren (1997) in her introduction to *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature* argues that “What makes ecofeminism distinct is its insistence that the nonhuman nature and naturism (i.e. the unjustified domination of nature) are feminist issues. Ecofeminist philosophy extends familiar feminism critiques of socialisms of domination to nature (p.4)”. Louise Thomason (2000) in her work “Women, Nature and Poetic Dwelling: “Ecofeminism and the Poetries of Phillis Webb and Judith Wright”, employs ecofeminism as a sensible means of analyzing Literature. She considers it as a lens with a view to highlighting the degradation and exploitation of the natural environment in relation to the domination of women in the natural world. She puts stress on the power of ecofeminism in the context of Literature for bridging a harmonious relations of human and nonhuman entities in constituting the universe.

Greta Gaard in an interview with Patrick D. Murphy states that the persuasive power of poetry can be utilized as a strong data to the development of an ecofeminist movement. She expresses the view that we have witnessed how music (“We shall overcome”) and literature (Uncle Tom’s Cabin) inspired many social movements in history. Similarly “poetry” as a piece of literature can be counted as the vital source of ecofeminism.

Mary Oliver (1935) a contemporary American poet uses day to day language and concepts to make

her poems an easy approach to a large range of people. By the use of her overwhelming words, the poet takes her readers on a journey where he or she can ponder over life's toughest questions. Her intense curiosity and magnetic charm toward nature are also visualized again and again by the readers. For Ostriker, Mary Oliver is among the few American poets who can "describe and transmit ecstasy, while retaining a practical awareness of the world as one of the predators and prey." Unlike Dickinson, Bishop and Plath, the personas of Mary Oliver do not go for a massive investigation of nature or look for death as a means of satisfying answer. Rather the personas enjoy nature for the charm it presents and thus she has been able to bridge a strong association with nature.

Thematic Analysis

Mary Oliver observes the beauty of nature with a grand festivity hoping to unveil the humble and commonplace matters behind the veil. In her classic poem 'Work'(2000), Mary Oliver ascertains herself as a woman of sixty years having no distinct courage. She is engaged herself in 'a little conversation with God' with a view to 'stare at the world'. This staring at the world is a glorious act for her. Later in the last stanzas she focuses on the core characteristics of her poetry as post romantic, eco-feminist and enunciates an enlightened mystical spirituality by encompassing the natural world. Oliver announces publicly that she will sing for the mystery of the number 3, 'the spirit of Luke' and for 'the ghost of Shelley'. At the same time we see her singing for 'the salt and the pepper in their little towers/on the clean table.

Mary Oliver's inspiration is gathered from her surroundings. Her celebration of the sacred things of nature reveals her understanding of the holiness of incarnation more vividly than any other living poets of the present world. Oliver's announcement to loose herself into the natural world may sound strange to the readers. But this merging with nature is not death for Oliver rather this is to declare the transformation of the poet. In order to solidify my observations about Oliver's eco-feminist essence through which she shows her intimate bondage with natural world, I want to focus on some of her magnificent poems.

Birds enact as a powerful symbol in her poems, typical figures of transcendence as shown in the poems of Keats, Shelley and Andrew Marvell. The birds dominate in her poems not only as a pictorial device but also as a flesh and blood creatures. The poem entitled "Field Near Linden, Alabama," portrays an unnerving, uncanny experience about a vulture that announces the very presence of death and decay. After noticing their "huge and shifty, /in their leather wings," Oliver pronounces that we, the human beings are connected to our bodies with the spirit and spirit cannot escape smoothly from matter. Our flesh rots and serves as food for other creatures. All creatures and ourselves are meat as well as vessels of the divine.

She universalizes the above mentioned theme in her another poem named, "Vultures,"(American Primitive,1983). Here the interceder is not an incorporeal body but the creatures who appear to be large, dark and lazy butterflies and Oliver observes their function indispensable as "... they "eat" death and thus ".....make of it the miracle:/resurrection...."(8-9). Oliver addresses these birds "ministers" as they convey us a very important fact of human life, i.e. mortality. In the poem's last lines, Oliver becomes aware of the truth that death is requisite to stimulate the mighty wings of the vultures as they perform an enormous task by defeating death and transmuting it into life. She desires to voice the idea that death and life are indivisible and they complement to each other.

Many predatory birds like hawks, crows and vultures dominate in Oliver's poems. Apart from this, one bird unfeignedly predominates in her work, it is the owl. Like the other carnivorous birds of Oliver's poems, owls are also noted for their tremendous powers of scrutiny. Owl, symbolizing

Athena is associated in many cultures with the world of the spirits of the elders. And thus it is not unexpected that Owls would appear in her poems. Most often the birds appear in her poems when she wants to meditate on death or tempts to define death not as an end but as an essential passage that unveils the connection between nature and the divine.

In her collections of poems “Owls and Other Fantasies”(2003),Mary Oliver used vivid diction to convey her thoughts on owls that represent the harsher side of nature, reveal its primitive beauty and uncompassionate hunger. Addressing them as the pure wild hunters the poet is in awe of the owl, “The screech owl I can imagine on my wrist, also the delicate saw-whet that flies like a big soft moth down by Great pond. And I can imagine sitting quietly before that luminous wanderer the snowy owl, and learning, from the white gleam of its feathers, something about the arctic.” She feels a close attachment with such a dangerous but magnificent creature of the night. Its tireless hunting abilities orchestrating a work of art every time before her and she speculates the beauty of Athena’s owl of wisdom and Merlin’s companion realizing the fact that the scream of the owl is the “sheer rollicking glory” of the death-bringer.”What she observes at the same time is the magnificent beauty of the “poppies,” “lupines” and “roses” that bring happiness in life. The flowers tell the story of merriment and owl narrates the story of terror. What the poet wants to demonstrate is that both the objects of nature (owl and flower) are needed for the complete balance of the universe.

The poet’s purpose for declaring the greatness of the bird has nicely been portrayed in the poem “The Hummingbird.” The bird’s skill in collecting the best nectar is highly appreciated by the poet. The poet wants to suggest us that we, the human beings should shoulder the same amount of strenuous effort like the bird to survive in this world. The brilliance of the bird has moved the poet so intensely that she wants to be like the bird. But the “knives of ambition” is compelling the poet to go back to her “desk” and “pages” and she utters her earnest feelings by saying,

“But I still stand under the trees, happy and desolate,
Wanting for myself such a satisfying coat
And brilliant work.”

Mary Oliver’s meditation on the futility of achieving immortality has nicely been expressed in the poem “Lonely, White Fields.”The poet learns from the owl’s inexorable nightly hunt that eternity as an escape from death is a delusion. The owls hunt reminds her about the delicate existence of all life and how death feeds into life, life and death are indivisible.

“Alligator Poem” showcases a splendid scene that portrays the insights of nature, animal and human being. The poem offers a stimulating discussion on how a person can lead a life of fulfillment without anguish. The pictorial description of wildlife pronounces the very essence of life, i.e. the inevitability of death and loss. She says that a man struggles in his life to possess a life of happiness but he should be aware of the ephemeral pleasure of life.

The poet is contemplating on the unforeseen death of a snake in the poem “The Black Snake.” The dead snake triggers the idea to the poet’s mind about the “terrible weight” of one’s imminent death. While removing the dead snake from the road, she notices the beauty of the snake. Thus the beauty of the snake reminds the poet of the precipitancy of death, “Death that is how it happens.” The saddening thought is immediately replaced by a happier thought. The poet says ours is a worthy life and we want to live a life which is not overshadowed by the fear of death. We hope to celebrate life the way it appears before us not thinking how we shall die. Crossing the road by the snake represents the desire to survive in life and the sudden death focuses the inability of the snake and the human race to avoid death.

Mary Oliver’s profound faith on mother earth has clearly been manifested in the poem “Sleeping in

the Forest". Her calm and peaceful acceptance of natural elements have been displayed vividly through the wonderful use of personifications and images.

"I thought the earth remembered me,
she took me back so tenderly,
arranging her dark skirts, her pockets
full of lichens and seeds."

The visual imagery of forest, river, birds, insects and the white fire signify her "being one with nature". The setting of wilderness and the soft utterance of the poet bring her more close to caring mother, nature. The celebration of nature in this poem also discloses the fact that we all have come from the earth and will go back to her.

We are amazed to discover "A woman knelt there, washing something/in the white bowl" in her excellent poem, "Singapore." But soon the speaker's gazing with great interest allows the readers to view how wonderfully she colours the situation by appreciating the movement and work of the woman. The readers find the working woman is described with the details of nature. The poet's inner musing inform us that she desires to watch the beauty in the woman's credence of her own life. Literary scholar Diane S. Bonds opines that the technique seen in the poem "Singapore" displays the characteristics in "...many of Oliver's poems suggest an educative- to be more precise, a self-educative-process which has resulted in the speaker's ability to move fluidly between individual consciousness and identification with nature." The unsightliness and pleasingness of the situation has been made transparent to us when we hear the poet says,

"And I want to rise up from the crust and the slop
And fly down to the river."

The poet's ultimate vision of life is that ours is an intricate life that offers good and bad. Therefore, a harmonious mingling of the human being and nature' association can constitute a livable world for us.

The inquisitive poet asks a series of questions about the creator of the world and the creations like swan, black bear and grasshopper in the poem "The Summer Day." The poet notices an immense power in the smaller natural objects. The poet says one can recognize the beauty and the tranquility of the world when he or she pays attention to the tiny details of their surroundings. Our life is short, but we can make it richer and fuller when we shall be able to mingle with nature and thus our life will become more precious. This vision of life has clearly been announced by the poet in the wonderful poem.

Mary Oliver states that her life-saving suet is her enthusiastic devotion for life and craving for knowledge. As the poet goes on, the readers feel the cold all the way down to the bones in her wonderful poem, "Cold Poem." She states that sometimes she feels her life is in perpetual darkness in the winter months.

"Cold now.
Close to the edge. Almost
unbearable."

So what keeps the poet to move in life? It is the "suet that shows her the way of life. The word "suet" has more than a literal meaning in the poem. It is the fat cell of some of the animals. It charms us the way she has connected to her life giving passion with the "suet" of the animals. After that we are amazed to notice the expression "summer with its luminous fruit." Summer is a warm

and fertile season that represents the cheerful moments of life. We cherish the sweet memories of fruits and blossoms of summer. These fresh memories of summer help the poet to forget the harsh days of winter and provide her hope for the coming life.

To lead a vibrant life like the colourful poppies is one of the recurrent themes in many of Oliver’s poems. In “Poppies” she depicts the exquisite beauty of the flower, poppy. At the same time, she reminds us that the “indigos of darkness” will surely overwhelm us and “loss is the great lesson”. By saying so, she intends to deliver the message to us that death is inevitable. In the face of death, the poet sees “an invitation” to “light” and a powerful feeling empowers her to voice the ultimate truth of life. Knowing that death will embrace us even we can live a spirited life like the poppies, we can enjoy each day without being remorseful and anxious. Thus the flowing together with nature offers a celestial experience for Oliver.

Mary Oliver wishes to be a leaf among the leaves and a friend in the poem “Aunt Leaf.” Together they want to fly like birds and leaving “the duty town” they desire to go to the marvelous haven, nature. She also wants to transform herself to a fox, a fish, a snake or an ancient woman created by leaves. Her longings to be one with nature invite the readers to be present among the sacred forms of nature. It is truly amazing to watch that all through the poem she expresses her willingness to become an integral part of nature.

The most stunning and wonderful poem “Wild Geese” conveys that nature’s reward is priceless. She rewards us with an open heart regardless we are good or bad. Hence, we should not blame ourselves for our personal failures because nature is going to shower her reward equally on us. The poet says that society binds us with numerous rules and regulations. Therefore, we do not dare to express our love openly. Mary Oliver suggests that we should not suppress our love for anyone rather express it with a childlike simplicity so that some rules of the society cannot drive us apart. People want to build up society by destroying and controlling nature. This very human nature has confined ourselves into our domain. As a result we fail to meditate on the immensely beautiful objects of nature. Sometimes we become worried about achieving our personal benefits. In this respect the poet opines, if we look at outside and view the enormous and bigger world of nature, we shall feel small. The worries and anxieties that we experience daily will soon vanish away. Thus nature provides us solace. In other words, “Wild Geese” suggests that human beings should live a life of happiness and fulfillment as nature is present to offer gorgeous prizes to us.

Conclusion

Val Plumwood in her philosophical book “Feminism and the Mastery of Nature” opines that to form an ideal relation between humans and nature requires a kind of speaking with and listening to nature. (138-39). Mary Oliver’s brilliant portrayals of natural world echoes the voice of a female speaker’s engagement with nature. Almost all of her poems regardless it is about birds, animals or flowers exhibit unbreakable relation to the rest of the world. Sometimes we see her entering into the natural world and becoming one with it. Her taking the persona of the elements of nature enables the readers to fancy a world of uninterrupted connection with the natural world. To Oliver, understanding the distinctive features of the world is to celebrating the magnanimous demeanor of natural world. To conclude, I would like to quote from the poem “To live in this World,” by Mary Oliver that demonstrates her intimate bondage with nature and respect for death which are essential characteristics of the theory of Ecofeminism.

“you must be able

to do three things:

to love what is mortal;

you hold it
 against your bones knowing
 your own life depends on it;
 and, when the time comes to let it go,
 to let it go.

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