

An Eco-feministic Perspective in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*

S. Joy Isabella

Asst. Professor

Division of English

Kumaraguru College of Technology

Coimbatore

joyisabella.scidkct.ac.in

Abstract

Margaret Atwood is one of the most prominent writers on the present day Canadian literary scene. Her tenth novel 'The Blind Assassin' had won the Booker prize award in the new millennium. It is strewn with nature and symbolically associated with women in several circumstances. This paper focuses on Eco-feminism under three important theoretical approaches. Viz. Empirical, Conceptual or Cultural and Epistemological. It is found that women characters in the novel have rich experience of nature than men since sufferings lead to gain more knowledge about nature.

Introduction

Lois Ann Lorentzen and Heather Eaton define Ecofeminism as "critical connection between the domination of nature and the exploitation of women" (1). Kate Soper comments "Despite the pervasive resistance of feminism to any naturalization of gender relations, there is an overall affinity and convergence of feminist and ecological political claims" (121).

Lois Ann Lorentzen and Heather Eaton in *Ecofeminism: An Overview* highlights, "there are three connections seem central to ecofeminist theory – the empirical, the conceptual and/or cultural/symbolic, and the epistemological" (1).

Brief summary

Norval Chase and his wife Liliana have two daughters namely Iris and Laura. Liliana loved Laura more than Iris. The death of Liliana when Iris was 9 years old made her to take up the responsibilities which include taking care of Laura. The novel is introduced with the tragic incident, the death of Laura Chase. She killed herself

An Eco-feministic Perspective in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* - January - March - 2013

when she drives a car over an embankment. When Norval Chase lost his business, due to economic depression of World War I, he has decided to hand over the factory to Richard Griffen. Norval decides that at the age of 18 Iris should marry Richard whose age is 35 in order to save his prestige. Richard's sister Ms. Winifred Prior also accepted the proposal. Hence Richard Married Iris.

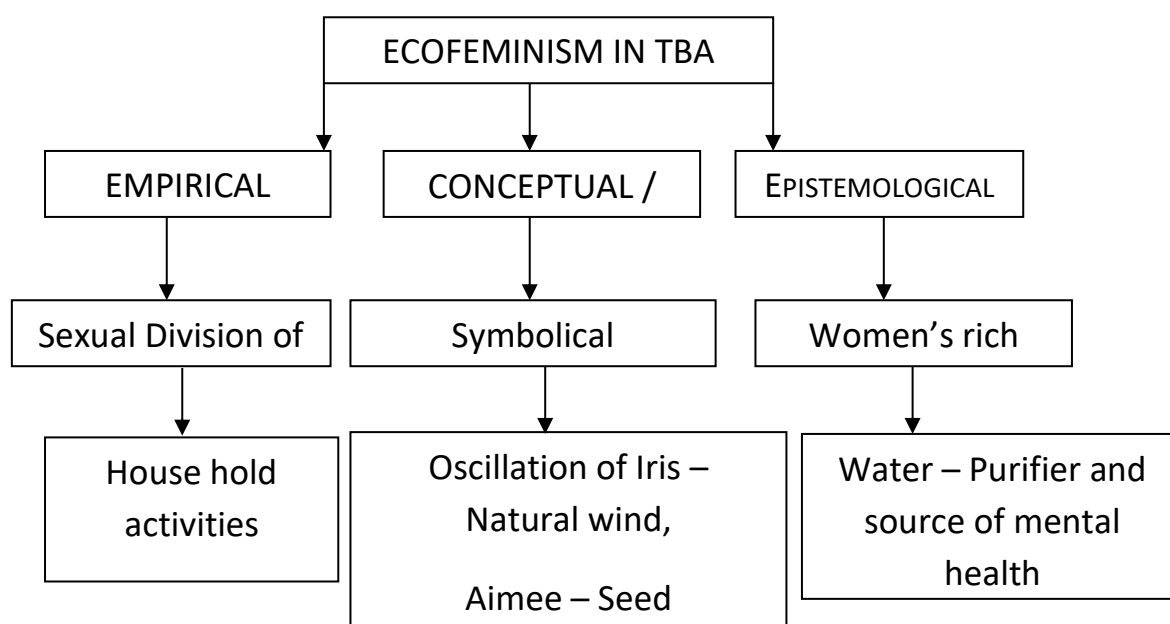
In this paper, Eco-feminism in *TBA* is analyzed critically with reference to the relation between environment and feminism as portrayed in figure 1.

The three different eco-feministic theories are,

- Empirical
- Conceptual / Cultural
- Epistemological

The empirical concept deals with the environmental problems, which affect women. It also includes a sexual division of labor found in most societies. Looking after the household duties is considered the work of women. The second theory, traces the connection between women and nature conceptually, culturally or symbolically. Epistemological theory admits that women have more knowledge about earth systems than men, because of environmental problems. It makes women better qualified as experts on such conditions.

Figure 1 Ecofeminism in *TBA*



An Eco-feministic Perspective in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* - January - March - 2013

Empirical theory

All the women characters in the novel stay at home, most of the time to manage their household activities. Adelia, the grandmother of Iris is a daughter of a prosperous father, who had earned his fortunes in the rail road industry. After the decline of the family fortune, Adelia is married to Benjamin. She acts as a manager to maintain the finance. Reenie says Adelia has married money and she is expected to refine it like oil. She holds parties as a mark of social status. Liliana plays the role of a helper to the Chase family. When her husband, Norval goes to the battle field, she takes up the responsibility of managing the button factory. Liliana helps children in need and represses her inner feelings.

Winifred has the ability to handle and arrange all household and business activities of Richard. "It was she who arranges things for Richard, she told me- social events, cocktail parties and dinners and so forth" (*TBA* 232). She boasts of her ability to run the chores for men.

The button factory is closed after the crisis and Iris's marriage to Richard saves their family factory. She becomes an object of exchange for establishing the button factory. According to Christine Yi-Hsin Hsieh, "Marriage is an act of trade for Iris" (2). She follows the act of her grandmother. She also makes sure that Laura does not move across the household and plays the role of a guardian to protect her. She is "tired of keeping an eye on Laura... tired of being held accountable for her lapses, her failure to comply" (*TBA* 173). After the honeymoon trip, Iris is confined to her home. She says, "In theory I could go wherever I liked, in practice there were invisible barriers" (*TBA* 320). She stays in her home like an upper class woman with money. It is found that all the women characters play the social role in maintaining the house hold and family business. But the men are free of chores because women are made to take up the responsibility. Women are put in an inferior position or unconsciously subordinate themselves to men. They are willing to succumb to the power of men. It is found that problems like lack of family fortune and war affect their equality and hence they are placed under empirical concept.

An Eco-feministic Perspective in Margaret Atwood's
The Blind Assassin - January - March - 2013
 Conceptual / Cultural Theory

The lovers Iris and Alex enjoy the gardens filled with trees and flowers. The leaves of the apple tree rustle. They enjoy the breeze coming through from the water. "The wind must have changed" (*TBA* 15). Iris is compared to the natural wind, who is fluctuating between Richard and Alex. They buy apples and oranges and a lot of plant seeds with them. Aimee, the daughter of Iris is like a seed, sown by Alex. But the affair between Iris and Alex leads to an unlawful productivity.

Hot breeze denotes the passion and love is like a golden cloud. "The hot breeze stirs the leaves, light falls through, there's pollen all around her, a golden cloud" (*TBA* 22). The lovers meet under the chestnut tree. They are lying like the "ripple of a stream" (*TBA* 33). The leafy branches, thin vines with purple flowers and the blue sky in splinters, all eco- attributes add beauty to their relationship.

Garden stands as a motif for marriage. "The garden has nothing in it but dead leaves and brittle stalks and a few diehard chrysanthemums. The sun is losing attitude... Sometimes there's wind, blowing through the leafless branches" (*TBA* 280). "Dead leaves" and "Diehard chrysanthemums" refer to lack of love of Iris and Richard. The leafless branches symbolically reflect that there is no offspring for them. Romance is defined in terms of nature. "It is looking in at yourself, through a window clouded with dew" (*TBA* 319). The romantic feeling is dominated by nature. After a long time, Iris visits her house at Avilion with Walter and she finds that the rock garden still existed, but it is much neglected. Iris feels that she is also neglected.

Laura is down on the dock, "trailing one arm in the water, gazing into the river as if she'd drop something and was looking for it down at the bottom. The bottom was too dark though. You couldn't see much" (*TBA* 478). Laura is not only gazing into the river, she gazes at her future, loss of chastity and lack of love. The wilderness of the Canadian landscape dominates the life of Laura.

In the sub novel, the land which is encircled by rock and mountains and ice, "then forest tangled with wind fall, a matted pelt of it, deadwood rotting under moss" (*TBA* 500). Laura loses her faith in future; she talks to Iris as if she is the elder one. She also brings in the context of crossing Niagara Falls. "If you were a blind folded tight rope walker crossing Niagara Falls on a high wire, what would you pay more

An Eco-feministic Perspective in Margaret Atwood's

The Blind Assassin - January - March - 2013

attention to – the crowds on the far shore, or your own feet?" (TBA 519). Problems faced by Laura are as big as Niagara Falls.

Niagara Falls is a symbol of life and death. People who have courage to cross the falls without paying attention to the onlookers will be able to cross the course of life. One who is afraid of the outside world will lack courage and dignity. Indirectly Laura advises Iris to have courage to face reality.

It is raining and "the rain of early April and the blue Scilla are beginning to flower, the daffodils have their snouts above ground, the self-seeded forget-me-nots are creeping up getting ready to hog the light" (TBA 577). Flowers like scilla and daffodils refer to women who are struggling hard to get the light. Iris looks at the vegetative cycle and life cycle and says "plants have no memories...they can't remember how many times they've done all these before" (TBA 577). It is found out that nature is not burdened with memories, but women are taxed with past memories. Towards the end of the novel, Iris goes to Avilion. The grounds are derelict, the gardens overgrow and desiccated plants still in their pots. "The pond of the stone nymph was choked with dead grass and weeds. The nymph herself was still standing, though missing some figures" (TBA 616). Iris is compared to a nymph who has lost her daughter, Aimee and granddaughter, Sabrina. Loss of relationship is compared to dead grass. Even though the nymph misses some fingers, it is standing. She wants to revive the past glory of the family by indicating the dead grass and weeds. She wants to give emphasis not to the family prestige but to love and human relationship. At the age of eighty three, she longs for the arrival of Sabrina.

Holes are scooped in the ground as if bombs are dropped there. The streets are gravel and mud. "Lawns of bare earth appeared with spindly saplings planted on them: weeping birches were popular" (TBA 619). The toppled trees indicate the lack of self-identity and self-assertiveness in Iris. Trees are cut down as if bombs have been dropped. Bomb, the destructive force refers to the fruitless marital relationships of Richard and Iris. "Saplings planted" refers to the hope in the mind of Iris, regarding the arrival of Sabrina.

Dualism of nature and culture is found in the epilogue. "Happiness is compared to a garden walled with glass" (TBA 632). When Iris suffers from

An Eco-feministic Perspective in Margaret Atwood's

The Blind Assassin - January - March - 2013

suppression, she symbolically refers to nature. At the end of the novel, Iris experiences the warm spring rain, she sees something "blue that glimmers down there at the end of the garden, the phosphorescence of snow in the shadow. In the flower beds the shoots jostle upwards, rayon-shaped, purple, aqua, and red. The scent of moist dirt and fresh growth washes in over me, watery, slippery, within an acid taste to it like bark of a tree." (TBA 635)

Iris is an old woman and lives alone in "a fossilized cottage, with hair like burning spider webs and a weedy garden" (TBA 637). The theme of isolation, loneliness, domination by environment, etc., may be overcome by Sabrina after hearing the story from Iris.

Women characters especially younger ones enjoy an intimate relationship with nature. They feel close affinity with nature. Houses are represented negatively and are restricting women's movement and forcing her into a prescribed domestic role. But nature is liberating and gives her sufficient space to move and allows her to chart her own future course.

Epistemological theory

Iris's concern for weather and nature shows her interest in environment. It is also found out that the women have rich experience of nature than men. The emotion, fear and illness of Iris are realistically portrayed. She says, "I looked sick, my skin leached of blood, like meat soaked in water. Was it fear, or true illness?" (TBA 46). The psychological status of Iris is depicted through the natural resource, water. The mind health overpowers the characteristics of good health.

Conclusion

Nature depicts the theme of isolation for Laura Chase and Iris Chase. They feel that they are placed in an encircled island and they are waiting for the rescue. Women are put in an inferior position or unconsciously subordinate themselves to men. Women in the novel suffer more than men and it makes them to gain more knowledge about nature and environment. Due to snowfall, women and children suffer a lot and the sufferings of men are not found in the novel. Therefore, it is found that women are affected by environmental problems and they get privileged position to gain ecological concern.

An Eco-feministic Perspective in Margaret Atwood's
The Blind Assassin - January - March - 2013

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