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ALLIANCE AND PARALLELS BETWEEN SHAW'S FEMALE CHARACTERS AND NATURE IN THE PLAYS PYGMALION AND ST. JOAN: AN ECOFEMINIST ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Although ecofeminism as a movement started around 1970s much after Shaw's death, his plays depict how foresighted he was with regard to the association that existed between nature and women that started this movement. His plays are mostly scene in the light of reformation of society at which they are aimed but they also abound in instances that reflect the undeniable association and dependence, women and nature share with each other. This aspect of his writings has been largely overlooked. This paper is written with the aim to explore and unearth this association in two of Shaw's plays Pygmalion and St.Joan. The paper indicates how Shaw's plays provide an insight to the objectives of Eco-feminism and its off-shoots like vegetarian ecofeminism. It also performs interpretation of these texts in ecofeminist light and relates the first few decades of twentieth century English writings to ecofeminist movement.

Keywords. Ecofeminism, Vegetarian Ecofeminism, G.B.Shaw, Pygmalion, St.Joan .

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Eco-feminism is a term that combines in itself two disciplines that are relevant in the contemporary times, namely, ecology and feminist studies. Ecology is a term that is understood as a scientific analysis and study of interactions among organisms and their environment. As a discipline, ecology addresses the full scale of life, from tiny bacteria to processes that span the entire planet, the various physiological processes, cycles and interaction that go on continuously in various ecosystems to maintain the balance among much cherished life-forms on earth. Feminist studies however are the study of ideologies that share a common goal to define, establish, and achieve equal political, economic and cultural, personal and social rights for women.

In the light of above definitions of these two disciplines, the question arises that what is it that unites these two disciplines with their different goals in the form of ecofeminism. It is the marginalisation of the interests of women and nature alike by the patriarchal and industrial society that sees both the women and nature as a source for exploitation and oppression. Ecofeminism as a movement, thus, voices the common wants and needs of women and nature against their shared oppression at the hands of men.

The hunting and food gathering theory in anthropology state that the evolution of human beings divided the role of food and water gatherer to women while the role of hunting the game was given to men. Women thus have historically held the

role of primary food, fuel and water gatherer for their families and communities. Vandana Shiva, a leading exponent of ecofeminism, also recognizes the same when she says that women in subsistence economies who produce "wealth in partnership with nature, have been experts in their own right of holistic and ecological knowledge of nature's processes". Because of all these, they have also had a major interest in trying to prevent or undo the effects of deforestation, desertification and water pollution and as such are associated with nature as its preserver. Any major change in environment affects women directly. For instance, construction of dam on a river creates the issues relating to household consumption of water for women who have to fetch water directly from the river. Thus, any adverse effect on nature has great impact in the lives of women as both are closely related.

Throughout history nature is portrayed as feminine and women are often thought of as closer to nature while men are the founders and closer ones to culture. The menstrual cycle, which is linked to lunar cycles, is also seen as evidence of women's closeness to the body and natural rhythms. Women's physiological connection with birth and child care has partly led to this close association with nature. These connections are illustrated through traditionally "female" values such as reciprocity, nurturing and cooperation, which are present both among women and in nature. This association between women and nature is clear in the poem *Three Years She Grew* by William Wordsworth:

Nature said, 'A lovelier flower
On earth was never sown;
This child I to myself will take;
She shall be mine, and I will make
A lady of my own.'

However, Women and nature are also united through their shared history of oppression by a patriarchal society. This undeniable association between women and nature gave rise to ecofeminism, a movement that can be seen as one stemming out in reaction to androcentricism and anthropocentrism. Ecofeminism describes movements and philosophies that link feminism with ecology. The term is believed to be coined by

the French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974). (Merchant, 184)

Ecological feminism, or ecofeminism, is an interdisciplinary movement that calls for a new way of thinking about nature, politics, and spirituality. Ecofeminist theory has particular and significant connections between women and nature. Ecofeminism interprets the repression of women and their exploitation in terms of the repression and exploitation of the environment. Ecofeminists argue that traditional androcentric approaches involving exploitation of and supremacy over women are echoed in patriarchal norms and discourse with respect to the environment.

Though ecofeminism was coined as a term in the 1970s, women became active participants in the environmental movements, mainly preservation and conservation much earlier to this. In late 19th century, women worked in efforts to protect wildlife, food, air and water. Susan A. Mann considers the roles women played in these activisms to be the starter for ecofeminism in later centuries. After 1970s, the feminists that took interests in these movements explored how oppressions were linked through 'gender, race, class and ecology, as well as species and ideas of nationhood.' The ecofeminist movement developed through texts, such as *Women and Nature* (Susan Griffin 1978), *The Death of Nature* (Carolyn Merchant 1980) and *Gyn/Ecology* (Mary Daly 1978). However, in the 1990s the advancing theories in ecofeminism began to be seen as essentialist. Through analysis done by post structural and third wave feminists it was argued that ecofeminism equated women with nature.

In 1993, an essay entitled "*Ecofeminism: Toward Global Justice and Planetary Health*" authored by Greta Gaard and Lori Gruen outlined what they call the "ecofeminist framework." The essay provides data and statistics along with laying out the theoretical aspects of the ecofeminist critique. The framework described is intended to establish ways of viewing and understanding our current global situations so that we are better able to understand how we arrived at this point and what may be done to better the situation. "The four sides of the frame are: the mechanistic materialist model

of the universe that resulted from the scientific revolution and the subsequent reduction of all things into mere resources to be optimized, dead inert matter to be used, the rise of patriarchal religions and their establishment of gender hierarchies along with their denial of immanent divinity, self and other dualisms and the inherent power and domination ethic it entails, and capitalism and its intrinsic need for the exploitation, destruction and instrumentalization of animals, earth and people for the sole purpose of creating wealth.”

Feminists before this period were focussed on deemphasizing the differences between men and women, but ecofeminists started a study of particularly female ways of “being and thinking about nature”. Thinkers in various fields, from science to anthropology, sociology, history, and politics began to question and analyse traditional attitudes toward the environment from a feminist perspective. The primary aims of ecofeminism, thus, are not the same as those associated with liberal feminism. Ecofeminists do not seek equality with men but aim for liberation of women as women. Central to their liberation is the recognition of the value of the activities traditionally associated with women like childbirth, nurturing and the whole domestic arena.

In the 1990s, a field of study called ecocriticism—an earth-centered approach to literary studies. Ecocriticism studies the relationship between literature and the physical environment, asking how nature is represented in literary works. Wikipedia defines ecocriticism as

“the study of literature and the environment from an interdisciplinary point of view, where literature scholars analyze texts that illustrate environmental concerns and examine the various ways literature treats the subject of nature.”

While ecofeminist literary criticism is similarly concerned with the depiction of nature, it emphasizes how traditional representations often see the land as innocent, female, and ripe for exploitation. The Ecofeminist literary criticism explores a text in the light of following elements to aid the investigation:

- The coercion undergone by both women and nature.
- Unravelling the association and cooperation between women and nature
- Depiction and comparison of women and nature.
- An ecological vision encompassed in feminist analysis that may indicate or propose a potential solution to ecological damage.
- A feminist analysis of natural processes or happenings to suggest a potential solution to the problem of oppression of women.

For most female writers, concern with the environment is not tied to a romantic longing for the openness of the rugged landscape or the withdrawal from society which is a common theme in men's nature writing. Rather, the earth is seen as sustaining human life and relationships, and the fragile boundary between nature and humanity is emphasized. Critics who study these women's writings have been particularly interested to show how the “gendered” female landscape is given more complex expression in works by women. They also show how female writing about the environment weaves together concerns about ordinary life and explores questions of community, gender, domination, and exploitation.

However, where Shaw's plays are concerned they were written by a male dramatist which makes some of the new generation feminists dismiss his work from the purview of feminist analysis. But one not forget that although Shaw was a male dramatists his role had been pivotal in making the New Woman characters acceptable on stage as well as society. His insight and presentation of female point of view may be biased by his over emphasis on his life-force theory but there can be no denial that other than that he had presented the female point of view boldly and objectively as the women themselves had wanted in his times. Thus, he was definitely a champion figure when it comes to liberating the much oppressed Victorian woman. As such, perhaps no aspect of women suffrage and psyche escaped his notice and treatment in his plays; and so is the case with the unique bond women and nature share among themselves.

Most of his plays have urban settings; still they do not fail to highlight the bond between women and nature in an important light. The degree of proximity he believed that women shared with nature would not have been something lesser than a direct, unadulterated contact as it is evident from Act III of *Pygmalion* where Prof. Higgins tells his mother that one of the safer subjects on which Eliza can talk without giving herself away is weather.

"Higgins: She's to keep to two subjects: the weather and everybody's health."

Weather being directly related to a place's natural conditions was a safer subject because it brought other women closer on a subject of shared interest that couldn't be affected by individual biases. However, Shaw didn't fail to show how a conversation that should have been based on scenic observation of nature turned into a speech filled with the intrusion of scientific information under the influence of Prof. Higgins's training who in this play emerges as the oppressor when seen in the feminist light after coming in contact with whom Eliza lost what was natural and innate in her. With the refinement of her language, naturalness left her speech.

Mrs. Higgins: Will it rain, do you think?

Liza: The shallow depression in the west of these islands is likely to move slowly in the easterly direction. There are no indications of any great change in the barometrical situation.

She talked like a battery operated doll repeating what has been recorded earlier. So deep is his influence on her that all she seemed to be concerned about was the correctness of her pronunciation and grammar of her speech.

Freddy: Ha! Ha! how awfully funny!

Liza: What is wrong with that, young man? I bet I got it right.

Further, how a change in the natural condition directly affects the life of women is presented in Mrs. Eynsford Hill's concern about influenza.

Mrs. Eynsford Hill. I'm sure I hope it won't turn cold. There's so much influenza about. It runs right through our whole family regularly every spring.

Even spring which is otherwise a season for rejoicing becomes one of concern to the ladies due to the change in weather. How closely nature and the life of home-makers is related can be clearly understood from here.

We can clearly find the association between man and culture and woman and nature in the respective settings of Prof. Higgins's and Mrs. Higgins's room. In act II, the play introduces the Wimpole Street laboratory of Prof. Higgins. This room faces the street and is well equipped with all the furniture depicting the cultural taste of his times along with various apparatuses and devices that help Prof. Higgins in his scientific study of language. This room shows the progression of culture and cutting off with the natural surroundings as evident from the presence of only portraits on the walls.

"It is a room on the first floor, looking on the street, and was meant for the drawing room.....a flat writing-table, on which are a phonograph, a laryngoscope, a row of tiny organ pipes with a bellows.....on the walls, engravings; mostly Piranesi and mezzotint portraits. No paintings."

In contrast to this is the drawing room of Mrs. Higgins at Chelsea Embankment which has its windows facing the river and the balcony decked with flower pots. Although, Mrs. Higgins does not remain untouched by the influence of culture as reflected in her taste of furniture and paintings, nature has not lost its touch upon her as the sole landscape on her wall finds a special mention in the description.

"Her drawing room, in a flat on Chelsea Embankment has three windows looking on the river....The windows are open giving open access to a balcony with flowers in pots....A few oil-paintings from the Grosvenor gallery thirty years ago (the Burne Jones, not the Whistler side of them) are on the walls. The only landscape is a Cecil Lawson on the scale of a Rubens."

"A blinding flash of lightning followed instantly by a rattling peal of thunder" introduces the Galatea of Shaw's *Pygmalion*, Eliza Doolittle. Thus the connection of the female protagonist with the physical nature is immediately established as soon

as she is introduced in the play. Soon after we find her regretting the loss of her flowers by Freddy which though was due to economic reasons showed empathy for the flowers spoiled in mud. Shaw's dramatic technique is not only limited to the purpose of connecting the flower girl with flowers but also draws a parallel between the condition of the flower girl and her flowers- both being beautiful enough yet smeared with mud and dirt with the effect that they appear to be spoiled in the eyes of bystanders. This mud and dirt are the result of the pollution man has driven into the world of nature. As such, man again takes the role of oppressor against both woman and nature through his industrial advancement by polluting the nature as well as through the feminisation of poor.

The flower girl [picking up her scattered flowers and replacing them in the basket]:
Theres menners f' yer! Tā-oo banches o
voylets trod into the mad.

[She sits down on the plinth of the column, sorting her flowers, on the lady's right. She is not at all a romantic figure. She is perhaps eighteen, perhaps twenty, hardly older. She wears a little sailor hat of black straw that has long been exposed to the dust and soot of London....]

This image of the flower girl with her flower basket recurs in almost all acts of the play and this basket becomes the symbol of Eliza's connection to the nature where she is free from the oppression of Higgins and her father as she mentions in act V:

Liza. Oh! If I only could go back to my flower basket! I should be independent of both you and father and all the world! Why did you take my independence from me? Why did I give it up? I'm a slave now, for all my fine clothes.

In this wailing of Eliza it can be clearly seen how the aristocratic culture forced on her by Higgins cut off her connection with nature to which she now finds difficult to return. There is a parallel drawn here indicating the modification of physical environment which is not always renewable and sustainable and totally undesired for. Man's domination over nature

and women make them a slave to their circumstances.

Interestingly, Eliza's conduct at the Ambassador's garden party has been compared by Shaw to a sleepwalker in the desert.

"She is so content on her ordeal that she walks like a somnambulist in a desert instead of a debutante in a fashionable crowd."

Eliza has been introduced in the play as a flower girl who comes to Higgins to learn perfect English speech that would make her eligible for the job of a lady in the florist's shop. But when she actually perfects the art of correct pronunciation in English language her surroundings became devoid of flowers. The desert symbolised a sense of complete isolation and alienation from her present world where she is taken as a princess as well as her former world at Drury lane. The image of sleepwalking in desert is in keeping with the aimlessness and the question of future belongingness that Eliza faced in the next act, act IV:

Liza: Whats to become of me? Whats to become of me.....I sold flowers. I didnt sell myself. Now youve made a lady of me I'm not fit to sell anything else. I wish youd left me where you found me.

Due to her transformation at the hands of Higgins she cannot revert back to her previous low class self but she has no means to keep up her lifestyle as a lady. Thus, her situation and the damage done to her natural self becomes irreversible. She thus becomes a permanent victim to the demands of middle class society. Her transformation from a blooming flower to a desolate and barren state finds its parallel in the world of nature also where the exploitation of the fertile land by men renders it barren. She becomes that beautiful mirage herself that she seems to be following in the desert- an illusive pursuit of better prospect. However, on reaching the destination, she finds herself craving with thirst more severely than before.

Eco-feminism also lies in the core of the play *St. Joan*, the theme of which is a farm girl's resolution to free her motherland from the oppression of English men. In Scene IV, she explains

her motive, inspiration and her resolute purpose as under:

Joan: My father told my brothers to drown me if I would not stay to mind his Sheep while France was bleeding to death: France might perish if only our lambs were safe. I thought France would have friends at the court of the king of France; and I find only wolves fighting for pieces of her poor torn body.

A simple farm girl despite opposition from her family sensed the oppression her motherland is undergoing and decided to fight for her (France's) freedom singlehandedly because she was able to empathize with her land in a way that no men including the king did. And thus, nature helped her in the ways in which she (nature) never helped the fighting folks of her land.

Though Joan's faith, courage and determination are central to the play, the cooperation nature extended in her miracles is unquestionable. An alliance between nature and woman is evident right from the first scene of the play where we find hens and cows refusing to provide for the squire who refused to give assistance to Joan in her enterprise. It's like nature and female protagonist forming a sisterhood based on non cooperation against men.

Robert: No: not oh sir, oh sir, but no sir, no sir. My three Barbary hens and the black are the best layers in Champagne. And you come and tell me that there are no eggs! Who stole them? Tell me that, before I kick you out through the castle gate for a liar and a seller of my goods to thieves. The milk was short yesterday, too; do not forget that.

Steward [desperate]: I know, sir. I know only too well. There is no milk: there are no eggs: tomorrow there will be nothing.

Robert: Nothing! You will steal the lot: eh?

Steward: No, sir: nobody will steal anything. But there is a spell on us: we are bewitched.

Robert: That story is not good enough for me. Robert de Baudricourt burns witches and

hangs thieves. Go. Bring me four dozen eggs and two gallons of milk here in this room before noon, or Heaven have mercy on your bones! I will teach you to make a fool of me. [He resumes his seat with an air of finality]

Steward: Sir: I tell you there are no eggs. There will be none-not if you were to kill me for that-as long as the Maid is at the door.

Here the application of ecofeminism to animal rights that has been established as vegetarian ecofeminism can be seen. Vegetarian ecofeminism combines sympathy with the analysis of culture and politics to refine a system of ethics and action. The demand of such an amount of eggs and milk within few hours by Robert de Baudricourt shows how man relentlessly exploits the flora and fauna in nature without any consideration for the latter's capacity, health and life. How men establish their undeniable and authoritative control on means of production as well as reproduction is evident in these lines. (Gaard, 23)

However, how these animals supported Joan in her endeavour by withholding their productivity and reproduction clearly shows the bond of mutual alliance and reliance that exists between nature and woman; which they released only when Robert agreed to assist her towards the end of scene I.

Robert [to Joan]: Have what you please.....

Steward: Sir, Sir-

Robert: What now?

Steward: The hens are laying like mad, sir. Five dozen eggs!

The idea that only the female species, the feminine aspect of nature can produce, provide for and sustain life is given in the very opening lines with a pun on eggs showing a parallel between nature and women.

Robert: Blasphemy. You tell me there are no eggs; and you blame your maker for it.

Steward: Sir: what can I do? I cannot lay eggs.

Thus, the importance of females in the world of nature for a balanced and healthy sustenance is indicated.

Another miracle performed by Joan was in the lap of nature beside the river Loire in Scene III. At Orleans, Dunois, exasperated from the strong east wind is desperately urging the west wind to come to their assistance by composing verses on it. Even the kingfisher which is often considered as a good omen for the change of wind and to whom Dunois requests, "Blue bird, blue bird, since I am friend to thee, change thou wind for me", couldn't help him.

The west wind assists Joan in moving a step closer to her canonization by letting its course change only upon the arrival of Joan.

[Joan, in splendid armour, rushes in a blinding rage. The wind drops; and the pennon flaps idly down the lance;]

Realization of this miracle came to them right when Joan was about to go to church and pray for the west wind, which ultimately forced Dunois to seek Joan's leadership.

The page: No: the wind, the wind, the wind [pointing to the pennon]: that is what made me sneeze.

Dunois [looking at the pennon]: The wind has changed. [He crosses himself]. God has spoken. [kneeling and handing his baton to Joan.] You command the king's army. I am your soldier.

The page [looking down the river]: The boats have put off. They are ripping upstream like anything.

Throughout the play nature's assistance is extended to Joan. The alliance that Joan receives from nature finds its roots in her empathy with nature. She can feel what the natural setting tries to convey her. To the much asked question on her insights and orders from God, she finally speaks in Scene IV which testifies her direct contact with the world of nature.

Charles: Oh, your Voices, your voices. Why don't the voices come to me? I am king, not you.

Joan: They do come to you; but you do not hear them. You have not sat in the field in the evening listening for them. When angelus rings you cross yourself and have done with it; but if you prayed from your heart, and listened to the thrilling of the

bells in the air after they stop ringing, you would hear the voices as well as I do.

In return what Joan supplies is her love for nature which becomes evident to us at several occasions like her childlike enthusiasm and excitement at the thought of seeing a kingfisher in Scene III. So great is her love for nature that she decides to embrace death under the open sky than living a life in man-made prisons away from the lap of nature as she tells in the Scene VI.

Joan: You think that life is nothing but not being stone dead. It is not the bread and water I

fear: I can live on bread: when have I asked for more? It is no hardship to drink water if the water be clean. Bread has no sorrow for me, and water no affliction. But to shut me from the light of the sky and the sight of the fields and flowers; to chain my feet so that I can never ride with soldiers nor climb the hills..... I could do without my warhorse; I could drag about in a skirt; I could let the banners and the trumpets and the knights and soldiers pass me and leave me behind as they leave the other women, if only I could still hear the wind in the trees, the larks in the sunshine, the young lambs crying through the healthy frost, and the blessed church bells that send my angel voices floating to me on the wind.

But without these things I cannot live;

It is to be noted all the aspects of nature that Joan lists down show nature at its innocent, unadulterated beauty and form. Here the criticism done by the radical feminists seems to be true that in the comparison of women with elements in nature, writers are often driven toward what is meek and positive. Eco-feminism firmly correlates the social status of women with the social status of nature, rather than the view that women and nature both have masculine as well as feminine qualities. As such those aspects of nature that are symbolic of aggression are mostly deemphasized in relation to women. This kind of depiction can be more frequently found in the male writings as is the case here. We are not giving any parallel in nature to the way Joan won the war for her countrymen. In

Pygmalion too, a parallel in nature can't be found to the aggression Eliza showed while conveying her annoyance at Higgins's indifference. The nature and women are both shown to be sisters in relation to the oppression they receive but the retaliation aspect is deemphasized.

But the fact that in both the plays the opening scenes juxtaposes the world of nature and the world created by men cannot be without some purpose: in *Pygmalion* people are found to be taking shelter under the human construction, i.e. portico of St. Paul's church against the nature's rain; in *St. Joan* "the fine spring morning on the river Meuse" is juxtaposed against the castle of Vaucouleurs. The purpose of the playwright here might have been to relate an urban setting to the broader context of all spread nature. Both the heroines are being shown as coming from the world of nature (Eliza rushed in from rain and Joan from her farm) into the shelter of man-made urban setting (Eliza in the portico of St. Paul's Church and Joan to the castle) only to crave for freedom and the desire to escape back to where they came from: Eliza to her flower basket and Joan to her meadows. Nature thus signifies a sense of ultimate freedom to these female protagonists where they would be free from the oppressions of men. And this is where eco-feminist movement joins hands with liberal feminism when women achieve or seek to achieve their freedom in the nature and in the causes related to nature.

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