



RESEARCH PAPER

Environment and Women in Kurt Vonnegut's 'Happy Birthday Wanda Juny': A Feminist Eco-critical Analysis

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PAPER INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Received: October 18, 2021</p> <p>Accepted: December 29, 2021</p> <p>Online: December 31, 2021</p> <p>Keywords: Feminist - Ecocriticism Eco- Feminism, Eco-Criticism Ecology, Environment, Exploitation,</p> <p>*Corresponding Author: drmuhammadasi f@gcuf.edu.pk</p>	<p>This study focuses on how both women and environment are exploited by patriarchy. Ecofeminism critiques masculine dominance highlighting its role in creating and perpetuating gender discrimination, social inequity and environmental degradation. Environmental crises affect women more than men because of their already precarious existence and subaltern position. There is affinity between women and nature as both are victims of climate change and other environmental hazards. Cheryl Glotfelty introduced interdisciplinary approach to the study of literature and environment. Literary ecology as an emerging discipline explores the intriguing relationship between environment and literature. Ecofeminism draws on feminist critique of gender inequality showing how gender categories inscribed in power structure exploit both women and nature. Francoise d'Eaubonne coined the term ecofeminism to critique the prevalent exploitation of both women and environment. Ecofeminism asserts that exploitation of women and degradation of the environment are the direct result of male dominance and capitalism. Ecofeminism argues for redressing the plight of women and protection of environment. Feminist Eco-Critical Analysis weds both feminist and environment concerns for common cause of mutual amelioration. Vonnegut's play 'Happy Birthday Wanda June' was written at a time when the movements for the right of women and protection of environment were gaining momentum. The play shows how toxic masculinity rooted in power and capitalism exploits both women and environment. This Feminist Eco-critical analysis foregrounds both women and nature and establishes that both need to be cared and protected against exploitation.</p>

Introduction

Kurt Vonnegut's 'Happy Birthday Wanda Juny' raises concern for both women and nature, critiquing patriarchal and capitalist structures that exploit both women and nature.

Men with immense power at their disposal are bent upon depriving women of their fundamental rights by usurping women spaces and destroying nature through war mongering. Concern for women rights has grown from strength to strength over the decades reflecting itself in different waves of feminism and third world feminism. Same is the case for the rights of nature where rising fears of climate change have forced humanity to take care of nature for the sake of posterity. Intersectional approach that has created Feminist ecocriticism takes a holistic approach to solving the problems faced by humanity by focusing both women and nature at the same time. The world has taken a dramatic shift when it comes to the environmental challenges and threats posed to the earth. With each passing day, awareness and consciousness about the severity of the threat posed by the impending climate disaster is being felt and efforts are being made at individual and collective level to tackle this issue. Green Literature, environmental Literature, animal studies and eco feminism are some of the literary movements initiated to highlight the issues of environmental crisis, and sensitize the readers about the seriousness of this issue. The concept of eco- criticism was unknown until the start of the twentieth century when William Rueckert used it for the very first time in his writing "Literature and Ecology". It is the study of relationship between the literature and the environment, be it flora or fauna.

Cheryl Glotfelty known as the father of Eco-criticism in the USA, has defined Eco-Criticism in the following words:

"Eco-Criticism is the study of relationship between the literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examine the language and literature from a gender conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of text, eco-criticism takes an earth centered approach to literary studies. (Glotfelty, 1996,p. xviii).

Eco-Criticism has given ways to multiple other theories; eco-feminism is one of them. It is a by- product of eco-criticism. Both Eco-criticism and eco-feminism are closely linked and dependent on each other. Marland (2013) says that ecocriticism has created 'earth-centered' approaches to cultural criticism that "reframe theories drawn from a range of disciplines including ecology, philosophy, sociology and biology". (Marland, 2013, p. 850) Françoise d'Eaubonne (19974) regards ecofeminism as study of the oppression and domination of women one hand, and nature on the other. She holds western patriarchal and colonial practices as directly responsible for the oppression and exploitation of the women and nature. "We must first put forward the principle that the abolition of patriarchy

and the establishment of the relationship with the environment that is finally balanced are not only fundamentally linked, but also can only occur in a post-revolutionary and self-managing society". (d'Eaubonne, 1999, p.181)

Eco-feminism is a branch of feminism which analyses the connection between the women and the nature. This movement considers patriarchy as the real problem. Charlene Spretnak (1999) contends that the real problem is 'androcentrism (male-centeredness) and not anthropocentrism (human-centeredness). Patriarchal society, in which the male definition of reality is normative and in which fear of women and nature set the stage for biocide, must be named as the problem." (Sandilands,1999, p.327).

Ecofeminism also focuses on harsh impact of environment on women. Climate change and environmental degradation that have been wrought by patriarchy and capitalism have grave impact on women. "Much of the eco-feminism literature refers to 'embodiment' - or how women's bodies are particularly vulnerable to environmental pollution" (Buckingham, 2004, p.152)

Feminism as literary movement is criticized for privileging white women. History of feminist thought is basically about the white women's history. The 'wave' theories of feminism are predominantly Euro-American white feminist theories. They ignore the third world women. Moreover, these wave theories also ignore ecological feminism. "A problem with this "wave" narrative of feminisms is that it offers no place for ecological feminisms, an erasure that is still evident in the majority of introductory Women's Studies, Gender Studies, and Queer Studies textbooks." (Gaard, 2010, p.657)

Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2007) tried to address the crucial issues of modern life in his fictive world. He was worried about death and destruction in a world in which both science and religion had failed to salvage humanity. His main objective was to wake the world to its ailments. The play 'Happy Birthday Wanda Juny' was written in 1971 when the importance to preserve the nature was gaining momentum. Vonnegut wrote extensively about the ethos of twenty first century. He was concerned about the Environmental challenges that was humanity was facing and he was worried that no serious efforts have been made to address challenges posed by dilapidating ecology. Vonnegut has used nature as a major motif in his number of writings; Happy Birthday Wanda June is one of them. Vonnegut's focus is on the issues of the power wars which are the by-product of capitalism. These wars are being fought at the expense of nature and the humanity. Projection of such thoughts are visible in the play, Happy Birthday Wanda June as Ronald Ratan has become addicted to war, and he feels fired when he sees no

war coming. Killing others be it human beings or animals have become a routine game for him. He pays little regard for other's feelings, needs, and emotions. This play is a story of men who enjoy killing and those who don't. The play does not project only the negative and the pessimistic approach but also erases the difference between good and bad. The play is a story of a man, Harold Ryan, who loves killing, he has returned from the Amazon forests after spending seven years. In his absence his wife and the only son had moved on in their lives as they didn't have any contact with Harold Ryan, and they presumed him dead. When he returns he gets upset to see that his wife had affair with two men and his only son has been raised in an unmanly manner. The play carries a number of dialogues which express its link with the nature; it contains symbols of forests, deserts, countries, places, war zones and some other imagery which depicts the role of nature in man's life and personality. Harold's wife Penelope is treated the same way as the nature is treated. She has been over looked, ignored, exploited and oppressed. She has been ignored by his husband, who did not care for him for the past seven years and did not bother to contact him or fulfill her needs. Now she is uncertain between her two boyfriends; the doctor and the vacuum cleaner, when Harold comes, he reinstates his right on her and gets hurt due to her changed behavior. He is a man thus his behavior is justified and Penelope's decision to move on in his life is not justified because she is a woman. This justifies what the ecofeminism tries to establish: "Ecofeminism is a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women." (Mellor, 2000, p.117)

Analysis

Feminist Ecocriticism focuses on the relationship between women and nature. Both literary criticism and literary theory are employed to re-examine the role of environment in shaping the fate of the protagonists in various genres of literature. Ecofeminism sees women as victim of environment as well. Ecofeminists explore the binaries male/female and nature/culture to deconstruct the power imbalance that plague society and impact women negatively. By highlighting the plight of women trapped in vicious cycles of poverty and hunger, ecofeminists seek to ameliorate the plight of women.

The two female characters in 'Happy Birthday Wanda June' Penelope and Wanda June, both are victim of exploitation, suppression and oppression at the hands of men. Penelope has lived a lonely life as his husband remained away from her, fighting in wars and hunting in Amazon forest. He never contacted his wife and did not bother to care about what she might be go through in his absence. This shows zero regard for her, her needs and

her wants. When her husband comes back from war after hiatus of seven years, he was enraged and surprised to see his wife in relationship with men who are opposite to his nature. He did not expect his wife to be such disobedient and rebellious in his absence. Same way, human beings treat nature, they exploit it, manipulate it, misuse it and still want more and more from nature. They pay zero regard and consideration for its protection, preservation and growth. It is quite evident in the annals of history that human beings have always used nature for their vested interest and did little to preserve and protect it. As a reaction to man's exploitation of nature, the mother planet has started waging war against human beings in shape of climatic shifts and unexpected weathers, killing millions through famines and disease and displacing thousands of people. The male character of the play, Harold Rayan is an exploiter who has become addicted to bloodshed and warfare and becomes depressed when he sees no war in which he can fight. He has zero sympathy and kindness, as killing and torturing have become his habit and a thing of daily routine. He treats his wife as equal to those animals he killed and hunted for the sake of fun. He exploits the vulnerability of women the same way as humankind exploits the vulnerability of Mother Earth

“What is acted out on the female body parallels the larger practices of domination, fragmentation, and conquest against the earth body, which is being polluted, strip-mined, deforested, and cut up into parcels of private property.”

(Caputi,1989,p.448)

The male character of the novel, Colonel Looseleaf Harper, an aviation officer feels guilty and remorse for dropping atomic bomb on Nagasaki which resulted in massive and unprecedented killings, causing a huge loss to nature as well. It was not only a disaster for the mankind but also for the animals and nature. It created such dangerous radiations that children born in that areas were born with congenital abnormalities. There is a difference between Harold and Colonel Looseleaf as Harold is proud of his exploitative nature but Colonel is not. Colonel is in deep agony and feels regret at his past action of dropping atomic bomb on Nagasaki. Both of them have harmed the nature through their actions. Both of them have caused unparalleled loss to the earth and nature. This is what men do to women as well; they play with their emotions, feelings and body; and women in return get nothing except deceit and manipulation. Penelope waited for her husband Harold Rayan for seven years only to find that he did not care for her at all. He kept himself busy in killing animals, human beings and destroying nature. The whole play, *Happy Birthday Wanda June* by Kurt Vonnegut is full of images and symbols taken from nature to define the very nature of the

men and women in it. Excessive use of images from nature show that nature plays an important role in defining the nature and temperament of human beings. Opening scene of act one describes the background of the set in which we can clearly see the walls which are decorated with the trophies won from the wars and hunting. That clearly shows the characters' keen interest in killing and warfare.

“The lights come up on the living room of a rich man's Apartment, which is densely furnished with trophies of hunts and wars.” (Vonnegut, 1971, 1.1)

At the start of the play background music and the noise is also made up of animals' voices and the light has been compared with the glittering eyes of the animals. This technique of cinematography builds closely interconnected relation of the play with the animals and the nature.

“SILENCE. Pitch blackness. Animal eyes begin to glow in the darkness. Sounds of the jungle climax in animals fighting.” (Vonnegut, 1971, 1.1)

As the play proceeds and characters of the play introduce themselves, the protagonist of the play, Harold Rayan introduces himself as a war monger and animal killer who enjoys killing as a sport.

‘I am Harold Ryan, her husband. I have killed perhaps two hundred men in wars of various sorts--as a professional soldier. I have killed thousands of other Animals as well--for sport’. (Vonnegut, 1971,1.1)

There is another important character of the play, Colonel Looseleaf Harper who is introduced by Penelope, wife of Harold Rayan, in the following words:

“Colonel Harper, retired now, dropped an atom bomb on Nagasaki during the Second World War, killing seventy-four thousand people in a flash.” (Vonnegut, 1971, 77)

This act of a single man played unimaginable havoc with the earth as it devastated burnt and destroyed everything which came its way. According to an estimate, a single atomic bomb which was dropped on Nagasaki killed millions in just a flash of time and millions died in next few days. The aftermath of this attack was felt for decades as children

with severe disabilities and deformities were born. Buildings were razed to the ground. Human flesh melted and moved like waves. People became living corpses. Penelope's husband loved killing and enjoyed warfare. His craze for killing was not restricted to animals only; he also enjoyed killing human beings. He had a cruel nature; he was a man without sympathy, empathy and compassion. He remained away from his home, from his wife, from his son for seven years and still expected her to be loyal and committed to him. He had same feelings for nature as he had for his wife. He had no regard for both of them. He believed as if both were for his amusement and pleasure. He was insensitive towards both his wife and nature. When his wife introduced her boyfriends to him he felt betrayed as he expected only allegiance and obedience from her.

"My husband, who kills so much, has been missing for eight years. He disappeared in a light plane over the Amazon Rain Forest, where he hoped to find diamonds as big as cantaloupes. His pilot was Colonel Looseleaf Harper, who dropped the bomb on Nagasaki." (Vonnegut, 1971,1.1)

There are other characters of the play, which are utterly opposite to Harold Rayan. They are Paul, Shuttle and Dr. Woodly. They are kind and sympathetic towards others. They feel disgust when they see walls of Penelope's home decorated with dead animal bodies.

"It's jungle rot! This room is making everybody sick! This is your family doctor speaking now. (Unrolling the poster) Here--I brought you something else to hang on your wall, for the sake Of variety." (Vonnegut, 1971,1.1)

Penelope is so sick of her husband's nature and temperament that she decides to bring her son a different environment. Paul, her son, is a kind hearted boy with a kind nature. His father is surprised to see him when he returns after seven years. Paul was only four years old when he went away. After returning home and seeing his only son as a man of effeminate nature, Harold feels disappointed. In contrast to her callous husband, Penelope is a good hearted woman; she hates killing, hunting, bloodshed and warfare. That is the reason she is inclined towards other men who are unlike his husband. She is not fond of war; she seems to be a nature lover and an environmentalist.

"War is not healthy for children and other living things." (Vonnegut, 1971,1.1)

The power game among individual, societies and states has wreaked unimaginable damage to the earth and all the living beings in it. The power hungry people have devised

such weapons and technologies as can destroy the living beings in seconds. Civil wars, guerrilla wars, religious wars, cold war and colonial wars have generated an existential crisis for all the human beings on it including the nature, ecology and the environment. Woody is sick of this war for power "This is the planet that's in ghastly trouble now and all our brothers and sisters thereon" (Vonnegut, 1971, 2 .1)

Superpowers keep themselves ready for war. They spend billions of dollars on war preparedness. Lethal war machines can eliminate human beings from earth in seconds. Race for global hegemony has endangered the whole globe. Russian, American, Chinese have always remained at the top of the list to expand their military zones and economic zones at the expense of nature, ecology and environment. They are responsible for immeasurable release of carbon dioxide and other lethal gasses which are major contributors to climate disaster. In cold war from 1945-1990, Russian and American started an endless competition for weapon production which is still going on at a very dangerous speed. Woody's words in the play aptly describe this catastrophic scenario.

"Chinese maniac, Russian maniac, American maniac and French manic and British maniac have turned this lovely, moist, nourishing blue-green ball into a doomsday devise. Let radar set and a computer mistake a hawk or a meteor for a missile, and that's the end of mankind". (Vonnegut, 1971, 2.1)

Violence, bloodshed, torture, murders have become so common in today's world that people don't feel astonished, worried or disgusted by such news. People like Harold Rayan have become addicted to killing and when they get to know that there are no more wars, they feel depressed that now there won't be anyone to torture, kill and murder. Human history is history of bloodshed. There have been many people who took advantage of the wars and killed hundreds and thousands of people for unjust causes. Penelope is a humanitarian and she hates those who kill others or destroy the nature for their selfish interest. Such people do not hesitate to inflict harm on others to please and satisfy their pernicious nature and insatiable instincts.

"Oh! Oh Oh! There people murdered in the last weeks! And police won't even go in there anymore." (Vonnegut, 1971, 2 .1)

The very nature of the mother earth and the women resemble each other in lot of ways. Both of them are sensitive, supportive, gentle, kind, helping, cooperative, modest, devoted and helpful and both of them love to serve others; but men treat both of them with rigidity, violence, suppression, oppression. Men expect complete submission from both nature and women. As Harold remains away from his wife and son for seven years and does not expect disloyalty and disobedience from her. When he returns, he feels disgusted and ditched on seeing his wife in love with men who are of opposite nature to Harold. The men Penelope is in love with are nature loving and kind, and they hate killing, violence and bloodshed which Harold is fond of. Looleaf says about Penelope that

“One thing, anyway _ _ _ at least Penelope did not throw all your crap. I bet Alice threw out all my crap after I’d been gone a week.” (Vonnegut, 1971, 1, 3)

The play “Happy Birthday Wanda June” is the story of a girl Wanda June who died before celebrating her birthday. Her birthday cake was ready at the bakery but it was not picked as she was killed before that and that cake was picked for Harold’s birthday. In scene four of the act one, she speaks from heaven and she tells that how happy she is with other people there. People around her were also killed on earth and they are living a happy and contented life being away from the tyrant, cruel and barbaric people of the earth. Wanda was hit by an ice-cream truck whose driver was drunk but she does not complain about him she says that she is happy that he hit her because she is in love with this place no where she is after death.

“I am really happy here. It is so much fun, I am glad the driver was drunk. If he had not been, I might have not got to heaven for years and years and years... everybody up here is happy..... the animals and the dead soldiers and the people who went to the electric chair and everything. They are all glad for whatever sent them here.” (Vonnegut, 1971, 1, 3)

Life on earth has become unbearable due to the political wrangling and war games on the one hand and ill-planned industrial and technical growth on the other. Unexpected climatic shift has created a great many problems for the earth, creating ecological disaster. Today’s world is facing massive environmental shifts due to the scientific development with zero consideration for the protection of earth. Ever increasing and ever expanding growth and testing of military weapons of lethal nature have caused a huge increase in environmental pollution be it air or water. Besides, space race has generated dangerous gases like carbon Dioxide, carbon monoxide and other environmentally hazardous gases

like chlorofluorocarbons. Climate change and environmental pollution are the direct causes of increased temperature, melting of ice belt, unexpected floods, rains and rising sea levels. More than half of species of animals, birds and marine animals have gone extinct due to the destruction of their natural habitat. These are the reasons that people living in heaven after death are extremely happy to be away from earth and the cruel people living on it. They are in a happy state and wish to be there forever. Wanda June tells about a number of other people living there in heaven, some of them were killed in wars, some of them died in accidents and some of them died a natural death. None of them is sad about their death and they call their death a lucky incident and they are thankful to those who killed them as their death sent them there in heaven where they have nothing to worry about and nothing to be afraid of, all they have to do is to eat, play and have fun.

Beast of Yugoslavia, Major Siegfried Von Konigswald is also among the people living with Wanda June in the serene and happy realm of heaven. He was a soldier who fought several wars in which he killed hundreds and thousands of people. He himself was killed by Harold Rayan in a very brutal way. Even he feels happy after death. He feels thankful to Harold for killing him and letting him taste the life after death. He also explains joys of life after death.

“When I got up on the day I died, I said, “What a beautiful day this is. What a beautiful part of the world.” The whole planet was beautiful.” (Vonnegut, 1971, 1, 7)

Nature is feminized and women share close affinity with nature; they have similar characteristics and habits in a number of ways; as the nature of both of them is same and equal; both are responsible for production, services, loyalty, and paying without any return. History shows that nature has always served men and it has always fed the whole humanity despite the fact that men have returned their mother nature in the worst possible way. Exploitative policies of human being and ill-planned technological and industrial growth have severely damaged the very core of the nature; still nature has not changed its habit of delivering and serving. Same goes for the women who never put aside their loyalty towards their relations and keep their allegiance to them. Penelope is a woman with kind heart, she kept waiting for her husband for seven years. She was uncertain whether her husband was dead or alive. Harold did not expect any disloyalty from her. This is the very nature of men they do not expect any reaction from the nature and the women as they have fixed ideas that women are born to be loyal and honest and they cannot dodge or ditch. When Harold did not return for a long time, Penelope developed relation with two men, a

doctor and a vacuum cleaner. When he returns and sees his wife having affairs with effeminate men he feels astonished and surprised. Harold's only son Paul has also grown in a womanish nature and Harold is deeply disappointed and is grieved to see his son having a womanish, weak, meek and humble nature. Penelope becomes confused upon return of Harold and reconsiders her plan of second marriage but she cannot let her son live an insecure life with a step-father that's why she changes her mind and reverses her decision. She gives up her idea of marrying another man in the best interest and safety of her only son.

“Penelope appears in the doorway. She has decided during an almost sleepless night that she owes to Paul and her own self-respect to explore the possibility of beginning her life with Harold anew. She is terrified of him. She hopes that if she can keep calm and open, her fears will diminish. Perhaps she can love him again.”
(Vonnegut, 1971, 2, 7)

Happy Birthday Wanda June can be called a mouth piece of the subjugated women and nature. This play is replete with the symbols and themes that show that women are exploited and abused the same way as nature is. The main character of the play Harold Rayan is accepted by his estranged wife after many years of his absence. Same way, nature accepts human beings no matter whatever ruins they brought to it; whatever havoc they wreaked on it. Women are quick to forget and forgive so is the nature. Both of them go parallel and side by side when it comes to their shared attributes and destinies. Eco-criticism and eco-feminism have been ignored for long until the women started waging for their rights along with the rights of the Mother Nature. Now eco-criticism and its study in the context of eco-feminism has secured a full fledge position as a separate and distinct genre of literary theory. Eco-critical feminism is now contributing towards the global acceptance and recognition of both nature's and women's right. Consequently, more and more literature is being produced to claim the women's equality and the need for the protection and preservation of nature. It is as a result of these campaigns and movements that the rights of both women and nature are being valued. Their rights which are being accepted and delivered now after ages and centuries were the very fundamental rights of women and the nature. Women cannot hope for a better world unless they fight for themselves; and nature cannot protect itself unless it is protected against patriarchal multinational capitalist war mongering patriarchy by women

“Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination.” (Ruether 1992, p.234)

Conclusion

To sum up the discussion, Intersectionality between eco-criticism and eco-feminism allows for drawing on the strengths of both the theories and developing a more comprehensive framework for understanding the plight of both women and nature. Feminist ecocriticism, an intersectional analysis of nature and gender, offers theoretical framework for critiquing patriarchal and capitalist systems that control both women and nature, and do not allow bringing about social justice needed to ameliorate the plight of women and solve the environmental crises in the present era.

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