

An Ecofeminist Reading of Alfred, Lord Tennyson's Selected Major Poems

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Abstract

Much has been written about the reality of women in the Victorian poetry, focusing on the many circumstances that result in their misery and despair, but, more recently, there are so scarce studies that tackle the portrait of women in the Victorian poetry from an ecofeminist perspective. Ecofeminism can be defined as an activist movement that highlights the relation between women and nature. Thus, it shed light on such issues as the relation between women and nature so as to identify that relation from environmental perspectives. This paper aims at identifying the image of women and nature from male viewpoint in the Victorian era. It also aims at elucidating the concept of ecofeminism in selected major poems of one of the pillars of the early Victorian poets, Alfred, Lord Tennyson. It deals with the relation between nature and women to reveal their true reality at that era and find whether their main dreary sources of sorrow are related to environmental concerns or not. One of the noteworthy conclusions is that Tennyson has been appreciated as a true Victorian voice because he takes up the relation between a woman's crises in the Victorian society and the many environmental factors from which those crises were resulted. He had succeeded to convey an actual image of the Victorian era throughout his poetry. In this works, a woman's life is viewed as detached from her milieu because of the conflict between science and religion on one hand, and drastic change of the Victorian England from rural to urban on the other.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, nature, human, non-human, gender, class, oppression and Woman in Tennyson's poetry

Introduction

Ecofeminism has been defined in different ways over the years: even the date of the movement's inception is up for debate. While authors and activists started to use the term "ecofeminism" in the early 1970's, women were taking notice of the parallels between the treatment of their sex and the treatment of animals as early as 1892. In the introductory essay for their anthology on the movement, "Ecofeminism: Feminist Intersections with Other Animals & The Earth", Carol J. Adams and Lori Gruen note that Edith Ward points out the similarities between the treatment of women and animals in her critique of Henry Salt's book *Animal Rights* in 1892. Despite the fact that there was not a vocabulary for the parallel oppressions occurring between women and nature, feminist theorists and animals rights activists have been alluding to it since long before the 1970's. Consequently, this means that many philosophers and writers have been using the presumed lower status of women, nature and animals as the basis for their ideas and research for many years. In other words, Ecofeminism combines ecological and feminist perspectives by focusing on not only showing but also redressing the subjugation of women and nature as summarized by Greta Gaard in the following words:

Eco- feminists have described a number of connections between the oppressions of women and nature that are significant to why feminist issues can be addressed in

terms of environmental concerns. For example, the way in which women and nature have been conceptualized historically in the Western intellectual tradition has resulted in devaluing whatever is associated with women, emotion, animals, nature, and the body while simultaneously elevating simultaneously elevating alue those things associated with men, reason, humans, culture and the mind. One task of Eco-feminists has been to expose these dualisms and the ways in which feminizing nature and naturalizing or animalizing women has served as justification for the domination of women, animals and the earth”(an Ecofeminist reading of marge piercy’s woman on the edge of time,2019:3)

Eco-feminism aims at exposing the association between women and nature as the feminine in male viewpoint. This work illustrates the relationship between nature and woman in Victorian era through popular literary works written by male author that still have many missing gaps to fill and areas of analysis to tackle. This paper is divided into two chapters. The first chapter is about Lord Alfred Tennyson, his life, the view of the Victorian women in his poetry and the impact of nature on women. The second section tackles the definition of feminism in brief, Tennyson's attitude towards nature and human life in the Victorian era and an ecofeminist reading of selected of his major poems.

Literature Review

This work gives critical appraisal of the ecofeminism arguments that the subjugation of the nature is akin to and stem from, the subjugation of women. For many years prior to colonization, native women believed that oppression of women did not exist. Women used to serve as political, spiritual and military leaders (Warren, 1997: 21). Like women, violence of the eco system was unheard of because it only served the needs of the people. The main priority was to achieve balance of things. An example of how women ruled as spiritual, political and military leader is that of Queen Nzinga of Angola, in Africa. According to Burness (1977: 226-227), “she was a prime example of courage, determination and love for her people. She was the queen of present Angola of the Kaunda people and lived throughout the Atlantic Slave Trade”. When colonization occurred, it meant domination of women and nature. Colonizers had to first subjugate women in order to dismantle the whole society. This system was important to bring women down to submit to male authority (Warren, 1997: 22). Nevertheless, Buckingham (2004) explains the topic on gender has become widely embedded at an international level. According to United Nation Women (2016), with response to climate change, the rise on water levels and destruction on the environment, women are mostly affected around the world. They further state that during pregnancy their health is at risk. However, their voices are the least heard in environmental planning and have less access to land and productive resources. For many years, structures put in place fail to recognize that women play a crucial role in ensuring that the fragile ecosystem is protected and that resources can be managed in an efficient and sustainable way. Nevertheless, women’s contribution is often taken for granted and undervalued. Ecofeminism, also referred to as ecological feminism, is a diverse movement because it represents different strands within feminism. According to Shepherd (2015), there are three different strands to look at namely liberal, radical and socialist Eco feminists. She further explains that liberal ecofeminism is those who challenge law and regulation that concerns women and the environment. Radical ecofeminism focus more on the patriarchal foundations for current environment degradation. Lastly, social ecofeminism states that they also recognize the patriarchal foundations bringing illness to the environment. However, they also focus on economic inequalities caused by the patriarchal system and the exploitation of both the environment

and women (Shepherd, 2015: 64). It is then highly important to note that ecofeminism focuses on the relationship between women and nature that are connected to the domination of nature and of women. They also bring emphasis on the role of women in solving ecological problems. When it comes to the topic of ecofeminism, there are different perspectives that argue about the legacies of it. Historically, women have been most of the time excluded from the public sphere through institutions created against them. Their relationship to nature and culture has been constructed in such a way that women are subordinate to men (Shepherd, 2015:65). Because of their closeness to nature, they were automatically excluded from participating in politics, economics or any kind of social participation. Another argument going against women is that they have essential characteristics and therefore, puts them in a marginalized category because they act in a certain way that will constrain development (Shepherd, 2015: 65). This review of ecofeminism has shown the most controversial issue because systems created disregards other identities that define women such as culture, age and sex. This also assumes that all men differ from women in terms of caring for nature. These sets of ideas that women ought to be subordinate to men has entrenched and misinformed many within environmental policies across the world .

Section One: Tennyson and the Victorian Scene.

Alfred Lord Tennyson was born on August 6, 1809, at Somersby, Lincolnshire, fourth of twelve children of George and Elizabeth Tennyson. The poet's grandfather had trespassed tradition by making his younger son, Charles, his inheritor, and arranging for the poet's father to enter the ministry. The contrast of his own family's relatively straitened circumstances to the great wealth of his aunt Elizabeth Russell and impoverished and led him to worry about money all his life. He also had a lifelong fear of mental illness, for several men in his family had a mild form of epilepsy, which was then thought a shameful disease. His father and brother Arthur made their cases worse by excessive drinking. His brother Edward had to be in a mental institution after 1833, and he himself spent a few weeks under doctor's care in 1843. The success of his 1842 poems made Tennyson a popular poet, and in 1845 he received a civil list[government] pension of \$200 a year, which helped relieve his financial difficulties; the success of "The Princess" and "In Memoriam" and his appointment in 1850 as a Laureate finally established him as the most popular poet of the Victorian Era. Long lived like most of his family, Alfred lord Tennyson died on October 6, 1892 at the age of 83. He is considered as a Victorian poet due to his actual ideas of his society which are conveyed by his poetry. Main basis on which Tennyson claims to be called as a Victorian poet are:

Firstly, his opposition to democracy:

During the Victorian age, Victorian Troy Aristocracy ruled England. As such, Democracy was opposed and mocked at. Tennyson also looks down upon the masses as is apparent from the following lines in his notable poem entitled "Locksley Hall": "*slowly comes a hungry people As a lion creeping higher. / Glares at on that nods and Winks behind a slowly dying fire.*" Victorians were supporters of maintaining status and bringing in gradual changes. Like Victorians, he hates violent and abrupt revolutions. Instead, he believes in slow evolution. *Secondly*, he respects law and order. The Victorians were fed up with the excesses of the romantics. So they wished for Law and order. Tennyson opines that in the nature there is law everywhere. He writes In Memoriam "*I curse not nature, no nor death/ For nothing is that errs from law*".

He pays great regard to law and opines that the law is the will of the Go: "*God is law, say the wise / O soul and let us rejoice.*" Like Victorians, Tennyson puts emphasis on

self-restraint. He thinks that self-reverence, self-knowledge and self-control are means to attain sovereign power. Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control. *Fourthly*, male superiority over female: Like Victorians he holds that man is superior to female. He differentiates between the duties of men and women and chalks out the working field for women. He says:

*Man for the field and woman for the heart
Man for the sword and for the needle she,
Man with the head and woman with the heart
Man to command to woman to obey.
Fifthly*, love and marriage.

Like the Victorians, he opines that the highest aim of a woman is marriage, discharge of household duties and the environment of married love. He presents Victorian ideal in his poetry as under " "Love for the maiden crowned with marriage / He condemns love outside marriage."

Sixthly, didactic purpose. Like the Victorian he believes in the moral function of literature. In his poems he tries to give moral lessons to his readers. In *Ulysses* he says:

Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are,
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Tennyson represents every nook or corner of contemporary English people's life, history, ideals, traditions and thinking. Hence he is quite appropriately called the representative of his age.

Tennyson's View of Woman in the Early Victorian Era:

Some creeds regarding the characteristics of women and their role in society marked the Victorian Era. In this era, the ideal woman was to be virtuous and free of any sexual assailment. Their first job in society was to be a housewife. While men were dominated, women were exactly isolated. The men were active participants in social life, women were not to participate in any kind of social life because of their beliefs that woman would pollute their pure virtue. This idea of the ideal Victorian woman was widely witnessed in different literary works of the Victorian period. One of Victorian poets who dealt with this issue is Alfred Tennyson. Tennyson conceived of his role as a poet and the function of poetry to focus on the two matters that seem to be at the Centre of the Victorian poetry debate: whether poetry should address social and political concerns or remain 'pure' and whether the poet should participate in society or withdraw from it. So, Tennyson consecrated all works to deal with social issues. Therefore, he dealt with the main important major of Victorian era which is the role of women. Tennyson had great feelings for women and the ways in which their lives were controlled. I think that Tennyson's poems, "The Lady of Shalott" and "Mariana" represent Tennyson's view of woman and her role in society. Thus, Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" gives an honest account of the division that exists between men and women in terms of their jobs during the Victorian

Age. In this poem, he employs both the outward and inward space to illustrate the idea of an isolated woman. The poem includes such vivid and powerful representations of fallen women during the era that influenced a movement of absorbed artists who thrived upon the idea of a sheltered woman. "The Lady of Shalott" concentrates on the idea of the restrained woman in the Victorian Age. Although the title of the poem alludes to the fact that it will center upon the woman character, Tennyson places emphasis on the natural surroundings of the poem. Additionally, he focuses his attention on the exterior and interior environment of the woman rather than the lady herself. Similarly, in "Mariana", he depicts her as if she were the typical fallen Victorian woman whose source of power appears more of a femme fatale who is not able to exhibit skills of the domestic nature. The flower pots that now contain black moss symbolize her role as the fallen Victorian woman. The sheds that have broken and now appear strange are a reflection of Mariana's unconventional behavior that has challenged the ideal Victorian view of womanhood. Tennyson consistently utilizes dark imagery in the poem to illustrate the level of Marianna's transgressions. She is not able to "... look on the sweet heaven" so as to illustrate that she is neither angelic nor virginal. Mariana's relationship with the setting and the landscape connects to her position as a fallen Victorian woman.

The Relationship between woman and Nature in Tennyson's poems:

Tennyson is a major poet of the Victorian age who also studied nature in detail and accuracy of observation. Even although Tennyson handles nature in his poems, but he does not deal with nature as a main element of his poetry as Wordsworth and Keats do. Wordsworth explores the meaning of spiritual in nature while treating Keats of nature is purely sensual but Tennyson has drawn and bandaged the naturaleza-fotos with the conscious pictorial care of the artist. Tennyson creates with Coleridge to interpret the mood of nature according to our mood, and that nature is happy or not. On the nature of the Romantic Movement is regarded as a phenomenon that one could turn to guidance, spiritual sustenance and mental restoration. Tennyson's beliefs often inspire him to portray and develop a human being in terms of natural phenomena. For example, in "Lotus eaters" indolence of the sailor is made with reference to the pause of the streams, persistent sun, precipitation of the languid air, etc. Tennyson's preoccupation with nature in his poetry and its employment as a projector of mood and symbolism, the interrelation of landscape with depth of feeling and narrative or even simple picturesqueness make him a the unique of spokesman of the true reality of women during his time. He is considered the best exemplar of the nineteenth century. T. S. Eliot acclaimed his poetic greatness because of his "abundance, variety, and complete competence" (qtd.in symbol and mood in Tennyson's nature poetry, 1971:5). Tennyson employs the voice of nature poignantly, bleakly, beautifully, in portrayal as natural as his inspiration. His most frequent symbols are "landscape, particularly when several levels sharply different can be seen rivers, usually with cataracts; stars yellow colors and rose; cheerful bells; rust; songbirds; the restless sea and sterile rock, (qtd. In symbol and mood in Tennyson's nature poetry, 1971:6). All used for their general impact, to reinforce or suggest a mood, to foretell a situation. The impact of stratified landscape, "from plain to cliff to sky," (quoted in symbol and mood in Tennyson's nature poetry, 1971:6) is apparent as Tennyson strives poetically to denote perfection in lofty Camelot, symbol of purity; misfortune and despair are the companions of twilight gloom, the misty sunset of an ebbing day. These, the gloom and nightfall, accentuate the tragic mood of Enoch Arden's homecoming and Mariana's grief for her faithless lover, as does the rugged landscape of Arthur's last journey over cliffs and crag to his death symbolizes the downfall of the Round Table, in sharp contrast

with his dream of the perfection of the island valley of Avilion "Where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow."

Section Two: Eco-Feminism in a Nutshell.

The term "ecofeminism" combines ecology with a feminist concern for the presentation of women and nature in literary texts. Ecofeminism critics shed light on the relation between woman and nature. They have to search for and analyze the previously mentioned associations. They may also investigate the oppression of women and the overexploitation of nature, a premise which derived from patriarchy. Noël Sturgeon in his book entitled *Ecofeminist Nature* defines Ecofeminism as "a movement that makes connections between environmentalists and feminisms"(Qtd. In An Ecofeminist study of selected poems by Mary Oliver, 2010:2). Furthermore, Greta Gaard suggests, "more than a theory about feminism and environmentalism, or women and nature... [It] approaches the problems of environmental degradation and social injustice from that how we treat nature and how we treat each other are inseparably linked."(Qtd. In An Ecofeminist study of selected poems by Mary Oliver, 2010:2). Similarly, to assert that oppression in any form is directly or indirectly linked to the dualistic hierarchies present in the patriarchal mindset. To justify their dominance and superiority, dominant patriarchal systems continue to widen the gap between binaries (mind/body, male/female, heaven/earth, human/animal, spirit/matter, culture/nature and white/non-white) by creating religious as well as scientific bogeys. Ecofeminists regard women as an integral part of the web of life, and in no way out of it Karen Warren writes in her book *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, and Nature*:

What makes ecofeminism distinct is its insistence, that nonhuman nature and naturism (i.e., the unjustified domination of nature) are feminists' issues. Ecofeminist philosophy extends familiar feminist critiques of socialisms of domination to Nature. (Qtd in *Eco-feminism in the Selected Novels of Margaret Atwood* 2012:32)

Moreover, Ecofeminism is not something new to the world. It is an old wisdom, which unfortunately got trampled under the dominance of patriarchy. If we explore in times we'll find close affinity between nature and women in all ancient civilizations. It was only after the emergence of patriarchy around 5,000 years ago, the western ideology of considering women and nature inferior to men came into being. Patriarchy gave rise to 'dualism' a belief which divided the whole world into conflicting pairs of concepts: mind/body, spirit/matter, male/female, culture/nature etc. All these concepts are alienated from each other and entangled into complex relationships. Kate Millet argues in *Sexual Politics*:

Patriarchy has God on its side. One of its most effective agents of control is the powerfully expeditious character of its doctrines as to the nature and origin of the female and the attribution to her alone of the dangers and evils it imputes to sexuality. The Greek example is interesting here: when it wishes to extol sexuality, it celebrates fertility through the phallus; when it wishes to denigrate sexuality, it cites Pandora.

. . .The Pandora myth is one of two important Western archetypes which condemn the female through her sexuality and explain her position as her well-deserved

punishment for the primal sin under whose unfortunate consequences the race yet labors. (Qtd.in Eco-feminism in the Selected Novels of Margaret Atwood 2012:36)

Tennyson's Attitude towards Nature and Human Life.

As it is known, Tennyson is a true representative of his age, who voices the various feelings, sentiments, ideals and trends as well as social and moral concerns of his age. He cherishes the values and ideals Victorianism, but also protests against those who are wrongful to people. Tennyson's poetry contains the most faithful reflection of the life, thoughts and beliefs of the Victorian age. His poetry can be seen in his treatment of and approach to nature. Like Shelley, he presents the various aspects of Nature with a scientific accuracy and precision of detail. Influenced by the evolutionary theory, he discards the traditional idea of a benevolent and motherly Nature, and brings out her fiercer aspects as well. He also finds Nature 'red in tooth and claw', and shows the cruelty perpetrated in the form of the struggle for existence. His scientific temper blunts his sensitiveness to the soothing charms of nature. Tennyson handles such themes as love, sex and marriage. He favors the typical Victorian virtues of domesticity, prudery and respectability. He delivers the Victorian ideal of the separate of duty assigned to man and woman.

Like his age, Tennyson did not favor a blind indulgence in sexual passion; nor could he conceive of sexual relationship outside marriage. He derides merely passionate love between man and woman, and preferred domestic love. The ideal of conjugal love is presented by him in the poem "The Miller's Daughter". "In Idylls of the King", he points out the ruin brought about illicit love-affair such as that between Lancelot and Guinevere. This is a typically Victorian attitude which did not permit any laxity in sexual morals. Tennyson seeks to bring about a compromise between a total inhibition in sexual matters favored by the Victorians, and the licentiousness favored by earlier ages, by allowing love and sex within the bounds of married life. In matters of love, Tennyson laid emphasis on spiritual love as opposed to mere physical love, and on love between the husband and wife as opposed to the illicit sexual gratification by unmarried couples. He voices the typical Victorian feeling about sexual morality when he condemns sexuality and advocates the suppression of animal desires, as in the following lines from "In Memoriam":

*Arise and fly
The feeling Faun, the sensual feast;
Move upward, working out the beast,
And let the ape and tiger die.*

"In Idylls of King", Tennyson has alluded at the harmfulness of sensual love for society. The illicit and sensual love-affair between Lancelot and Guinevere causes the breaking off of the Round-Table, which is symbolic of the disintegration of a whole society because of people's indulgence in sensuality.

The Ecocritical Implications in Tennyson's Poetry.

As indicated previously, one of the characteristic features of Tennyson's poetry is his concern with social issues. His poetry is filled with the voice of nature. So, nature is employed as an image of something is found in his society. It means that the image of nature is used significantly by Tennyson for the sake of making a reflection vista of what is surrounding him. In "Mariana", "the Lady of Shallot" and "Fatima", Tennyson explores the suffering of the Victorian women. "In Mariana", he portrays an isolated woman from

the world, with no relationships in life. "Mariana" was a poem that, as Tennyson himself puts it, "arose to the music of Shakespeare's words" – the words Tennyson quotes as the poem's epigraph. Or, to be more precise, misquotes: for where Shakespeare, in *Measure for Measure*, has the 'dejected Mariana' described as residing at the moated grange, Tennyson places Mariana in the moated grange, underscoring her sense of confinement and isolation. In this poem, Tennyson depicts the farmhouse as a setting for isolation. In "Mariana", Tennyson explores the term of ecofeminism obviously. As in these lines:

*With blackest moss the flower-plots
Were thickly crusted, one and all:
The rusted nails fell from the knots
That held the pear to the gable-wall.*

In these lines, Tennyson makes a connected point between women's state and nature in order to show the oppression of women in Victorian era. "Mariana" is presented as a 'dejected lady' who has long lamented the desertion of her lover in a "moated grange", the 'Moated grange' is employed as a present. Tennyson uses the image of 'flower-plots' to compare the dismal state of women. He compares the setting of "Mariana" to 'plots' to say that this place is not good for life. Moreover, he depicts it as a 'gable-wall' which is about to fail to refer to its despair. Similarly, in "The Lady of Shalott", he, then, gives an impressive image about the despair and suffering of women in the Victorian period:

*Willows whiten, aspens quiver
Little breezes dusk and shiver
Thro' the wave that runs for ever
By the island in the river
Flowing down to Camelot.
Four grey walls, and four grey towers
Overlook a space of flowers,
And the silent isle imbowers.*

Here, the imagery is of nature, freedom, and movement. This is contrasted with the inflexible, colorless walls and towers of Camelot in line 15. The flowers in the next line are not described by their colors or even by their motion in the breeze, but are "overlooked" by the grey walls, as if they are held prisoner. This tone of severity in the middle of nature's healthy activity prepares the reader for the introduction to *Lady of Shalott* in the eighteenth line. Moreover, Tennyson gives a unique example about the oppression of Victorian era when he associated the image of mirror as a direct translation to the world with the believing of the lady that the mirror will be a direct translation of the world to show her despair when the mirror is broken.

*And sometimes through the mirror blue
The knights come riding two and two:
She hath no loyal knight and true,
The Lady of Shalott.*

As suggested above, Tennyson gives a unique example about the oppression of Victorian era when he associated the change of colour. The colour change occurs at the

same moment as the suggestion of love and partnership and the simultaneous assertion that the lady has no knight of her own and therefore no place within these issues. There is an absence of love, loyalty and truth in her life, and because of this her view of the world is coloured by the mirror's melancholy blue. Hence, the mirror becomes 'crystal.'

*From the bank and from the river
He flashed into the crystal mirror
'Tirra lira', by the river.*

“Crystal” has many multi-faceted levels of interpretation and here can be taken to represent a multiplicity and intensity of attitude. Ricks writes that this passage shows a 're-reflection' which is overwhelming to the point that it serves to cancel out the Lady of Shalott's previously calm life of reflection. He also points out the 'river/river' rhyme in this passage as 'the only time in the poem, a word rhymes with itself - a perfect reflection'. This perfection within the verse is used ironically to describe the Lady's reflected life, a life which creates an imperfect reality, and a mode of perception which is ultimately unsustainable.

Conclusion

To conclude, Tennyson's feminine poems clarify that he is a true Victorian poet because he draws the reader's attention to woman's reality. Apparently, he adheres to the fundament of ecofeminism in his portrayal of the Victorian woman in his major poems as during an era that witnessed the callous moral, spiritual and faith crises known as the Victorian dilemma. Tennyson had succeeded to convey an actual image of the Victorian era throughout his poetry. Through his early major poems, that women's' life is highly relegated to be miserable and full of despair as their role was restricted and lost.

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