

# The Concurrence of Women and Nature in Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*: A Cultural Ecofeminist Reading<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The oppression of women, as the subordinate second sex, and the exploitation of the environment have been the focus of most ecofeminist studies. In this study, the authors will discuss the patriarchal injustice suppressing women and the environment in an 18<sup>th</sup>-century literary text, Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1719). Through the prism of cultural ecofeminism, this article makes an effort to illustrate the formation and also interrelatedness of two main long-held cultural dichotomies: the sexist-oriented privilege of male over female and the anthropocentric privilege of human over nonhuman in the microcosmic literary scope of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century English literature. From this regard, the feminist-oriented ecological issues will be discussed according to Val Plumwood's distinction of cultural ecofeminism. Within this theoretical framework,

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we try to demonstrate how the elements of a patriarchal system shape all feminine subjectivities. The present article also shows how Nature herself, as an objection to the patriarchal culture, acts as the major supporter of women throughout *The Rape of the Lock*.

**Keywords:** *The Rape of the Lock*, Cultural ecofeminism, Women, Nature, Patriarchy, The 18<sup>th</sup>-Century English Literature

## Introduction

As today, the cultural constructions of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which are palpably reflected in the literature of the era, were the main cause for the subordination of feminine subjects at that time. The patriarchal society encouraged the view of continuing exploitation of both marginalized entities, including women and nature. *The Rape of the Lock* (1719), Alexander Pope's masterpiece, can serve as a good example of this issue. Although this poem has been written in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it is the favorable work that embodies the notions of cultural ecofeminism. It shows both the place of women in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century society and the status of natural forces. This mock epic illustrates how Nature voluntarily and metaphorically helps the female protagonist to regain her lost position throughout the patriarchal society. In other words, women and nature have a common understanding in this text.

Although *The Rape of the Lock* and its main female character with her challenges in the patriarchal society have been the main issue for several feminist critics and researchers, it is an ecofeminist perspective of the text which can properly throw light on the roots of suppression imposed on the feminine subject and the way she is backed by some other feminine agents from nature.

Emerging in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ecofeminism is an attempt that defines the ideological and dialogic exposure of women and nature to subordination. Ecofeminism appeared beside the rise of the second wave of feminism, that is, radical feminism. Central to this ecological feminism is a simultaneous focus on both gender inequalities and the mistreatment of the environment. Since its rise in the mid-1970s, different branches of this movement have risen, but two schools among them have been very active and controversial: nature ecofeminism and cultural ecofeminism.

Nature ecofeminism, for its consideration of the biological and behavioral similarities between women and nature, is close to radical feminism. Nature ecofeminists hold that due to their physical features like reproduction, nurturing, and caregiving, women are aligned with nature. The metaphorical image of nature, in literature, identifies women with the paradigmatic sources of intimacy and the articulation of moral interactions. Given these similarities, aspects like body, reproduction, lactation, and emotionality reinforce their communion. The crucial point here is that the green mindset encompasses the widespread interactions of ecological practices within the dialogic discourse of feminism. Nature accepts the feminine role/gender because she shares the same features as those a woman can possess; therefore, they are employed as supplementary

agents by male hegemony. That is to say, the woman-oriented ecology re-examines the unjust domination of men over women and nature. To put it another way, nature ecofeminists struggle against the inferiority and subjugation of both agents through deconstructing the patriarchal hegemony.

While nature ecofeminists insist on biological bonds between women and nature and state that if both women and nature have experienced patriarchal injustice, it is because of their natural similarities, cultural ecofeminists have very different reasoning for the subordination of these minority groups. They believe that the apparent similarities between women and nature are just the products of the cultural constructions of the patriarchal discourse. According to the cultural ecofeminist philosophy, the male-dominated society equates nature and women in order to erode both. In other words, the male mentality creates an inactive *other* by giving similar attributes to women and nature.

Between nature ecofeminism and cultural ecofeminism, the latter can definitely shed more light on the discussion and the ecofeminist analysis of *The Rape of the Lock*. What one deals with in the text is not the biological similarities between Belinda and sylphs which put them under male domination and mistreatment. The roots for this sort of patriarchal subjugation lie in the patriarchal system itself which needs to be modified and rectified.

## Literature Review

The present article aims at a cultural ecofeminist analysis of Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the lock*. It is remarkable that most of the studies which have been, so far, conducted on this poem have taken feminist approaches and have handled the position and challenges of women. For instance, "Belinda's Weapons of Femininity in Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*" by Sarika Rao (2010) is a satire on Belinda's femininity. She is regarded as a powerful woman only when she uses her consumables as a weapon. To enter the love battle, she must preserve her beauty as the affected and metaphoric weapon.

Within the same framework, in "Woman and the Empire in Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock: A Reading*", Umme Salma (2011) draws a comparison between Belinda and the British Empire, where both become objects of desire. In this article, the author has discussed the notions of imperialism, patriarchy, and colonialism.

Moreover, Cassandra Westfall (1998) in "The Negative Images of Women in Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*," has focused on the negative outlooks toward the women in Pope's text. Westfall believes that this poem pokes fun at womanliness rituals among aristocratic families where it merely serves the cynical stereotypes of women. She concludes that Pope had an unjust perspective on the feminine entities of his era because there is no progress in the coquettish behavior of the female protagonist throughout the poem.

Recently, Glenn Storey (2017), in his article "Belinda, Thalestris, Clarissa... Queen Anne? Failures of Female Agency in the Rape of the Lock," has explained

the influential and individual characteristics of the female objects in Pope's mock-epic poem. The author of the above article states that English women must have perceived their feminine qualities in order not to be reproached by the hegemonic masculine discourse of the late 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

We can claim that the issues of women and nature together, their interrelatedness, and the analysis of the cultural structures causing these two dominated sides in *The Rape of the Lock* have not been investigated in any forms of academic research. There is just one article, conducted by Bill Phillips Mockford (2004) which, within an ecofeminist framework and a nearly close milieu, has illuminated the feminine similarities and also the patriarchal subjugation of women and the environment. Bill Phillips Mockford, in his article "The Rape of Mother Earth in Seventeenth-Century English Poetry: An Ecofeminist Interpretation," discusses the condition of women and the earth in the poetry of John Donne, John Milton, Aphra Behn, and Margaret Cavendish. The author, in this paper, shows how women and lands are downgraded by lovers, colonists, and theologians during the 17<sup>th</sup> century in England. Almost similar in the theoretical framework (since the present article adds a cultural dimension to the ecofeminist study) but different in the case study, this research tries to bring up the cultural causes for the patriarchal definitions and treatments imposed on women and nature in *The Rape of the Lock*.

## The Theoretical Framework: Cultural Ecofeminism

To clarify cultural ecofeminism, one needs to explain first what ecofeminism is since cultural ecofeminism has arisen out of and after ecofeminism. Ecofeminism emerged during the 1970s and entailed raising consciousness toward women and nature. As a movement, the term was first introduced by the French feminist, Francoise d'Eaubonne, referring to the women who have to preserve the planet (Sandilands, 1999, p. 6). Established as a distinct "value system", it "offers a *political analysis* that explores the links between androcentrism and environmental destruction" (Birkeland, 1993, p. 18). Val Plumwood, as the main contributor to cultural ecofeminism, introduces the gist of ecofeminism as always being "engaged with four forms of exploitation encompassed in race, class, gender, and nature" (Plumwood, 1993, p. 1).

Ecofeminism has very wide principles. Greta Gaard, the well-known ecofeminist, has once "vividly portrayed ecofeminism as a lake, from which the complexity of the sources and branches of ecological feminist theory can be seen" (Ling, 2014, p. 68). In this landscape, cultural ecofeminism is one of the recognized branches in feminine ecological studies. Val Plumwood perceives the woman-nature connection as the cultural ecofeminism (1992, p. 10). Domination over women and nature and the critique of 'patriarchy' are the cornerstones of cultural ecofeminist critics.

The hegemonic "Manstream" culture (Birkeland, 1993, p. 15) has established gender roles. Val Plumwood is true when she states that, among different forms of patriarchal domination, "gender is at least a major part of the prob-

lem” with which all other forms of domination are associated (Plumwood, 1993, p. 7). Her explanation on the interrelatedness of female consciousness with nature and other forms of domination is meaningful:

If we are women, we have as a group interest in escaping our ancient domination. We women also have an interest, which we share with all other living creatures and among them with men, in a sound and healthy planet, in sound, healthy and balanced ecosystems and in a sustainable and satisfying way of living on the earth. (Plumwood, 1993, p. 7)

The anti-sexist thinking and environmental ethics actually increase respect for the interdependence of women and nature. Both agents have been under the severe oppression of men for a long time. One of the main attributes which have been given to these oppressed subjects by the patriarchal discourse is that both are depicted as chaotic and irrational. Patriarchal consciousness believes that both need to be under control. The hierarchical system bestows power to men and permits them to exploit and exert inequality on female and environmental subjects; nevertheless, “the oppression of nature becomes part of women’s experience; the experience of oppression” (Sandilands, 1999, p. 69).

The way all dominated subjectivities (women, nature, the black, and the lower class) are defined and constructed by social and cultural principles becomes the main point for cultural ecofeminists. They believe that “the subservient positions of nature and women lies [sic] in the molding of natural temperament and identity of the female by social culture, which itself is on behalf of male” (Ling, 2014, p. 68). Accordingly, such “inferiorization” (Plumwood, 1993, p. 2) is constructed by dualistic patriarchal discourse. In the same manner that women have been treated, the planet is treated, too. Environmental forces, like women, are observed “as objects of man’s use, possession, and pleasure” (Bowerbank, 2005, p. 3). Metaphorically, masculine exploitation has raped the virginity of lands and mastered the wilderness of the yielding nature.

Cultural ecofeminism attempts in “the promotion of equality, nonviolence, cultural diversity, and participatory, noncompetitive, and nonhierarchical forms of organization and decision making” (Birkeland, 1993, p. 20). Accordingly, to shatter the structures of the patriarchal mentality and cease the threats to nature and women, cultural ecofeminist values are regarded as a practice at curtailing the inequalities of men and women within the web of nature.

Plumwood’s reasoning of the issue is helpful where she declares: “Because ‘nature’ has been a very broad and shifting category and has encompassed many different sorts of colonization, an adequate account of the domination of nature must draw widely on accounts of other forms of oppression...” (Plumwood, 1993, p. 1). Likewise, to institutionalize the ecological sensibilities in correspondence with the equal status of womanhood, ecofeminist tenets are major policy shifts in patriarchal practices. As a protest to the socially institutionalized disciplines, cultural ecofeminism is concerned with women and nature as

the products of the cultural constructions. Indeed, the position of women and the place of the environment are re-valued through this paradigm.

## Discussion

### Women's Status in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century

In a patriarchal society, women experience discrimination. The sexist culture resonates to the long-established conventional significance of women's passivity. Historically, Western society has been male-centered. The unequal status between men and women gives way to the superiority of men and the inferiority of women. Therefore, men receive authority and power. Women have been projected as servile and the gratifying tools of sexuality (Hazarika, 2012, p. 354). In her book, *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir mentions that "all the negative characteristics of humanity as men perceive them are projected onto women" (quoted in Cameron, 1992, p. 84).

The social conventions of the 18<sup>th</sup> century viewed women very differently. It was the superiority of men and the ownership of their women that originated from an unequal bias. The society had raised and favored the notion of one dominant sex for a long time. Women were dependent on their men after marriage.

Beauty and economic consolidation were the most important factors for a woman during the 18<sup>th</sup> century for marriage. In Britain, women received a subordinate position. Presumably, for receiving social attention, women did not only have to seem beautiful but they also had to occupy a well social and economic position. Moreover, the desirable woman was a person with more emotional and keener senses. The social construction of the day banned women from struggling for their autonomy and individuality. Rather, they were expected to practice politeness. Bridget Hill defines the ideal woman with "modesty, restraint, passivity, compliance, submission and most important of all chastity" (Hill, 1984, p. 17). The social belief considered a feminine agent as virtuous when she could be in control according to the limitations. Women had to preserve their innocence according to the sexual moral values. In contrast, the masculine ideal attributed man with "reason, authority, and resolve" (Tosh, 1999, p. 47).

In *The Rape of the Lock*, Belinda (representing Miss Fermor) is depicted as a young, single, beautiful, and sacred woman. Her sacredness is emphasized in the poem because she is protected by sylphs, the Guardian Spirits of the virgins. Sylphs are the alternative to paradise gods in Greek mythology. As if Belinda is inspired by the sylphs to protect herself, "Hear and believe! thy own Importance know, /Nor bound thy narrow Views to things below" (Pope, 2004, p. 3). Belinda is invited to join her friends at Hampton Court Palace. She would enter a meeting where most of the participants are men. Actually, the meeting is a symbolic banquet of pride and ostentation. Through the battle of vanity, young Barons try to compete for gaining the attention of the beautiful young ladies, "where wigs With Wigs, with Sword-knots Sword-knot strive" (p. 6).

The aristocratic family plays a very important role in *The Rape of the Lock*. Mostly, the rituals of womanhood are focused in the poem. Pope shows that the value of a woman in such a society is very demeaning and base. The women, in particular, Belinda, are marginalized. They become the object of laughter for men. Belinda is invited to the feast in order to be mocked and her worth is belittled. The poet depicts 'patriarchy.' Furthermore, male superiority is celebrated.

Female appearance gains significance in aristocratic families. While female self-worth loses its place, beauty becomes the most concerning issue. Beauty is considered a virtue by itself. Her physical characteristics magnify Belinda's virtuosity, "If to her share some Female Errors fall, look on her face, / and you'll forget 'em all" (p. 8). Intellectuality and usefulness of women are dismissed. Instead, the male-dominated society merely praised the charm and coquetry of a woman. In such a society, women were expected to show these kinds of behaviors. If they did not, they were regarded outcast. The sylphs, who protect Belinda for her beauty and chastity, punish the man who threatens her virtues (pp. 11-12).

Belinda's lifestyle is a force to her social status. Her priorities are different from those of other women from lower stratifications. The happiness of a courtly woman is torn down due to the rape of her lock. Metaphorically, Belinda is victimized by a male subject. She blames herself because of ignoring the warnings. When her lock is raped, she tries to internalize her inferior status and cries in pain, "Oh hadst thou, cruel! Been content to seize/ Hairs less in sight, or any hairs but these! [sic]" (p. 30). Being defamed publically and privately, her hair brings about humiliation to Belinda. She becomes the victim of a male-centered trick; moreover, she loses her beauty and chastity, symbolically, among her kin. In this way, Belinda is doubly victimized.

Pope, himself, lived in a masculine-oriented society. His characterization of Belinda is antipathetic. No feminine development is seen in the poem. The only ones who value Belinda are the sylphs, although they fail in their protection. The only (alternative) amorous scene in the poem refers to the coquettish woman and the man who is blind to love affairs. The lover changes into a rapist.

Women remain in their secondary position. The male-centered society cannot expect a woman to outwit men. When Belinda wins the card game and surpasses all other men in the male-dominated condition, masculine mentality conspires in punishing her. The uproaring flames of her pride are put out through a male trick of raping her lock of hair. A woman must not be equal to a man, "And she who scorns a Man, must die a Maid; / What then remains but well our Pow'r to use; / And keep good Humor still whatever we lose?" (p. 32).

The male-centered society is not restricted in thought and action. The Baron is not shameful for his misdeed while Belinda feels humiliated. Belinda's hair symbolizes all women's chastity. As if it is a property in all women that victimizes them according to the unequal discrimination of sexes. Men's violation over women becomes naturalized because Belinda is already warned to take care of herself in the first canto, "Warned by sylph, O Pious maid, beware! /

This to dislocate is all thy guardian can: Beware of all, but most beware of Man!" (p. 6). Thus, the victimization of women is internalized. Furthermore, Pope focuses on the secondary status of women in society by depicting their weaknesses. Pope shows the intellectuality of men versus the beauty of women. The decorum of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century privileges a beautiful woman of the day. This fact also shows that the beauty of a woman is futile. He composes, "Now suspends his golden Scales in Air, / Weights the Men's Wits against the lady's Hair; / The doubtful Beam long nods from side to side; / At length the wits mount up, the Hairs subside" (p. 34).

*The Rape of the Lock* is a poem of male centripetal orientation. Male-dominated mores create a secondary status for women. In the male-centered society, women were treated scornfully. This poem depicts women very naively. They feel enraged over the very trivial issues. Mostly, the negative characterization of women generalizes the inferiority of a feminine persona. Belinda, the most beautiful woman, of high social status, who is protected by spiritual agents, is considered as marginal and "prude" (p. 32) in a male-dominated society.

### Natural Entities in the Poem

The relationship between literature and natural phenomena is dialogic. Ecocritical studies aim at synthesizing nature and literary discourses. The literary concept of nature/human relationships are standpoints in ecocriticism. The presence of natural elements in Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* is undeniable. Ecological structures are very significant in this poem. Deep nature implications create bonds with people of the poem. The presence of ecological facades signifies the coexistence of human and non-human.

*The Rape of the Lock* transmits ecological thinking. In other words, the use and descriptions of the natural landscapes and natural phenomena construct a conceptual foundation for the examination of interconnections between literature and the environment. Environmental thinking raises human consciousness. Thereby, *The Rape of the Lock* finds an eco-literary significance.

Pope depicts the beauty of nature in his poem. In order to understand nature, Pope textualizes his own ecological and intellectual perception. Consequently, this poem is considered a green one. The reflection of nature in this text happens in two ways: First, Pope shows that an ontological truth regulates nature (Parham, 2010, p. 115). Second, it is through the depiction of natural elements that this poetry finds the cultural eco-feministic worth.

The common grounds between truth and beauty create a balance in *The Rape of the Lock*. Pope discusses the ontological truth which exists in nature. The magnificent beauty of nature discloses the hidden ontological truth. According to John Parham (2010), to understand both beauty and truth, the human mind must be invigorated by "phenomenological moment" (p. 115). To apprehend the language of nature, one must get along with the vital beauty of



natural phenomena in order to recognize the truth. The depiction of sylphs in the poem supports the notions of beauty and truth. In other words, they are the invoking muses who try to make Belinda understand the upcoming truth. The sylphs, dwelling in the air, become the personal guardian of Belinda. Thus, natural powers come to voluntarily protect a human on the earth. Nature lavishes the generosity to a young beautiful fellow in order to make her conscious of her future, "Belinda still her downy Pillow Prest, / Her Guardian Sylph prolong'd the balmy rest. / 'Twas He had summon'd [sic] to her silent Bed, / The morning-dream that hover'd ov'r her Head" (Pope, 2004, p. 2). Moreover, Belinda is a human being, who is considered as part of nature. Her existence is accompanied by the non-existent entities. The sylphs were women's spirits who lived one day on the earth. After death, "Thence, by a soft Transition, we repair/ From earthly vehicles to these of Airs" (p.3). Successively, "the unnumber'd Spirits" (p. 3) are humans who once existed on the earth.

The physical world is textualized in *The Rape of the Lock*. The ecocritical reader perceives the representations of natural phenomena. In Pope's poem, it is the language of nature which is heard. The intertextuality of nature and literature is the articulation of the ecocritical construction of nature. Nature is verbally re-conceptualized and romanticized. By re-conceptualization of nature, Diana Fuss claims that nature herself becomes the active speaking subject (Fuss, 1989, p. 6). When Belinda prepares herself for the banquet, it is as if all nature is in tune with her, "The Sun-beam trembling on the floating Trembling on the floating Tydes, /While melting Musick steads upon the sky And soften'd Sounds along the water die. / smooth flow the Waves, the Zephyrs gentle play, / Belinda smil'd, and all the World was gay" (p. 10).

Inside the ecosystem of nature "transaction" happens between the natural circles. Dewey and Bentley focus on the interconnection of the universal organism (Weaver, 1985, 301). Transaction of energy is the function of ecological practices. Moreover, Weaver claims that "meaning is determined through transactions of various sorts" (p. 304). The interrelatedness of the ecological system is clear in Canto V of *The Rape of the Lock*. When Baron succeeds in cutting Belinda's lock, she insists on the return of her hair. The literary aptness of Pope avers that her lock has gone to the heavenly spheres and changed into a star. Then, the people of the earth gaze at and admire it. Accordingly, nothing in nature is diminished. Belinda's lock of hair has become eternal. As a result, the literary concept of ecology contextualizes ecological considerations.

There is an emergence of elemental eco-poetics within the ecocritical framework. The ecoweb is made of four natural elements of earth, air, water, and fire. In ecocritical studies, nature herself is considered as a text. Therefore, Pope's eco-poem reflects the interplay of the four ecological elements. *The Rape of the Lock* is an eco-link between these elements and the language of literature. In Canto I, four elements of particular Spirits are introduced. They are gnomes, sylphs, salamanders, and nymphs who mirror the four natural elements of earth, air, fire, and water. The elemental perspective is shown as Pope's poetic evolution in the first Canto:

"The Spirits of fiery Termagants in Flame/ Mount up, and take a *Salamander's* name, / soft yielding Minds to water glide away, And sip, with *Nymphs*, their elemental Tea. / The graver Prude sinks downward to a *Gnome*, / In search of Mischief still on Earth to roam. The light coquettes in *Sylphs* aloft repair, And sport and flutter in the fields of Air" (p. 4)

*The Rape of the lock* is the reflection of the natural world. This poem is earth-centered. Nature plays a very major role in this poem. As a result, it is in harmony with nature.

## Conclusion

Ecofeminism concerns the oppression of both women and the environment. Ecofeminist thinkers struggle to decrease the misuse and exploitation of both women and nature. Feminists and environmentalists mingle their ideas to support the position of both agents. The researchers in this study attempted to raise the concerns of the cultural ecofeminists within *The Rape of the Lock*.

This study was an attempt, first, to show how the marginalization of women took place and was demonstrated in an 18<sup>th</sup>-century literary text of England. The social conventions of the era accepted the superiority of men and rejected the autonomy of women. In a society where its women were merely chosen according to their beauty and economic status, they, unintentionally, became the victim of the masculine system. The authors of the present article believe that Alexander Pope also applied his own patriarchal mindset in this poem. His depiction of an aristocratic woman's suffering is solely a nebular witticism to support the secondary position of women. Figuratively, the disquietude is not only the rape of the lock but it also refers to the rape of a woman's feelings, sensibilities, and chastity. Second, the authors demonstrated how the poem was structured within the cultural ecofeminist framework. Although ecofeminism has emerged as the result of the environmental crisis and the destructive behavior of human beings against nature, it is inevitable that *The Rape of the Lock* is a manifestation of the metaphoric consciousness of nature. It is nature that overcomes the oppression of women. Accordingly, natural forces subvert the imposed tyranny on the female objects through ontological truth, ecosystematic transactions, and the ecoweb of four natural elements of earth, air, water, and fire.

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