



A New Reading of Eco-feminism in Two Modern American Fictions

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This study aims at highlighting three main features of eco-feminism; Spiritual eco-feminism, Power-over concept, Bioregionalism, then giving an examples from the eco-modern American fiction ,such as Rae Meadow's I Will Send Rain (2016) and Alexis M. Smith's Marrow Island (2016). In addition, the study investigates how these features can affect the context of events and the characters' fate, emphasizing that the main features of eco-feminism theory can drive the characters' actions in such type of fiction. This study argues that in spite of the environmental difficulties and the bad circumstances that faces characters, they show a high perseverance, hope, and responsibility in the light of the main features of eco-feminism. The study raises some questions in order to clarify the main argument: First, does the ruined land lead to "ruined women" ? Second, are men responsible for women's and nature's abuse? Third, does the marital status of the female characters affect their ways of countering the eco-disasters and achieving their hope and perseverance? The study adopts a descriptive, analytical and critical approach to describe and analyze some features of eco-feminism-as a critical theory- in the two selected eco-literature examples.

Keywords: Eco-feminism, Spiritual eco-feminism, the concept of Power- over, Bioregionalism

In no other ages in the history of humanity did the world witness this great emphasis on eco-system as much as it does in these days. Ecology has become an important question in human beings' life due to its great effects on their everyday activities. Eco-criticism is the gate through which literature has the ability to discuss and analyze the ecological crisis depending on the intellectual literary perspective.

Most studies on eco-feminism focus on ecology as the mother literary theory of green literature. This study emphasizes that the main principles of eco-feminism theory are the main drive for the characters' actions in the two selected eco-fiction examples Rae Meadow's *I Will Send Rain* and Alexis M. Smith's *Marrow Island*. The study will emphasize the main female characters in the two novels including Annie and Birdie in *I Will Send Rain* and Lucie and Katie in *Marrow Island*. The three principles to be emphasized include Spiritual eco-feminism, Power-over concept and Bioregionalism: First, Spiritual eco-feminism refers to the association between ecology and religion from a feminist point of view. Second, the concept of Power-over refers to the oppression and domination made by males over all subordinate groups including (women, people of color, children, the poor, nature, animals, land, water, air, etc.). Third, Bioregionalism is related to a political, cultural, and ecological system or set of views based on naturally defined areas called bioregions that are similar to ecoregions.

Ecofeminism rejects the domination in the reductionist paradigm and its reformist environmentalism where the environmental crisis is solved by the externalization of its costs (onto developing countries), In this regard, ecofeminism is part of the concept "radical ecology" which discusses the patriarchal paradigm in which nature and women are inferior to males. In this context, Vandana Shiva has a major contribution in the international eco-feminist movement that discusses the eco-feminist concerns in both poor and developed countries.

In her article "Empowering Women" (2004), Shiva argues that a more sustainable and productive approach to agriculture can be achieved through reinstating the system of farming in India which completely depends on women (3). In addition, she refuses to advocate the prevalent "patriarchal logic of exclusion," asserting that a woman-focused system would change the current system in an extremely positive manner. She argues that the ecology of earth is threatened by the daily life, and that repairing the ecological system is women's responsibility (171).

Ecology refers to the set of practices which deal with the relationship between any complex system and its surrounding or environment. The term involves many categories, such as eco-criticism biodiversity, distribution, biomass, and populations of organisms. Ecocriticism is a literary term which was first used by

William Rueckert in (1978); the term emerged as a reaction to the activities of environmentalism during the 1980s and 1990s. It includes all the literary works which adopt ecological and environmental concepts. Ecology has many important sub-classes, such as “eco-feminism,” a term that highlights the relation between feminism and ecology, especially in the capitalist societies. It emerged in the 1970s and 80s to introduce many forms of feminist, environmental theories that intersect with each other.

Eco-feminism is related to a general movement called feminism. There are three waves of feminism. The first wave (early of 20th century) calls for women rights and is faraway from any ecological concerns. The second wave of feminism (1960s-1980) creates a comprehensive concept of eco-feminism as a female-nature relationship. Moreover, it deals with the connection between women and earth as subordinate to male’s power, oppression, and misuse. The third wave of feminism (post1980) is associated to eco-feminism as it reflects the movement’s response to ecological crises and gender concerns. In this regard, Mohit Ray argues that eco-feminism represents the relation between the domination of males and the oppression of women as a mirror of the oppression and domination of males over nature. As a major concern of eco-feminism, nature and biota, along with women experience the oppression that is based on the power of patriarchal system, controlled by males. (Ray, 2000, p.42).

This study argues that in spite of the different cultural, psychological, and environmental circumstances that the heroines in the two selected eco-literature examples suffer from, they show the same perseverance, hope, and responsibility in the light of the three selected principles of eco-feminism. Though they are the same, we can notice some minor differences between the heroines because of some social and cultural differences between their characters. For example, in terms of ecological awareness, in *I will Send Rain*, Annie and Birdie’s eco-feminist trend is based on their survival instinct, whereas in *Marrow Island*, Lucie and Katie’s ecological awareness represents the acquired knowledge of a modern knowledgeable educated woman. Moreover, in terms of power, it is necessary to assert that males are responsible for women’s and "nature’s suffering" as they deal with both as their subordinates whom they oppress and misuse. It is clear that in *I Will Send Rain*, Annie and Birdie’s exploitation depends on their simple immature excellent experiences, while in *Marrow Island*, Lucie and Katie are misused intellectually by the dominant power of the colony. In addition, in terms of spirituality, it is obvious that Annie and Birdie’s religion is Christianity, but Lucie is an atheist, she doesn’t believe in God. These minor differences affect their behavior and cause some challenges to them. For instance, in *Marrow Island* the protagonist's reaction is unpredictable, but in *I Will Send Rain* the reactions of the protagonist, as a result of her belief and simplicity,

are predictable. As a consequence of their perseverance, the female characters show a strong determination and willingness to get their goals in spite of all the difficulties and challenges they face.

According to the eco-feminist perspective, eco-fiction novels serve as ecological as well as feminist novels, and the two genres complement each other since the natural disasters of the eco-system is one of the reasons that leads to the female protagonists' resistance, perseverance, hope, and responsibility. The aim is to show how the worst conditions inflicted upon the eco-system create strong women. Indeed, an eco-feminist reading of the two novels illustrate the interconnectedness between the struggle of women and the difficulties of nature.

The reason for choosing this topic is the importance of the theory of eco-feminism as a valuable source and ground to identify the relation between women and nature to understand why feminist issues can be addressed in terms of environmental concerns. The reason for choosing the theory of eco-feminism as the major theory through which the two novels are discussed is the richness of this theory which involves many interesting ideas including green utopia, deforestation and desertification, and disasters' effect on human beings.

By adopting the eco-feminist approach in reading the two examples, the researcher aims at introducing a better understanding of how the two novels discuss such ecological problems. Whereas, the reasons for choosing the two selected novels, in particular, constitute the interrelation between the female characters in both novels, especially the similarities in their reactions to the ecological concerns. In addition, the two novels portray two different bioregional characteristics of two different female characters; however, the two female characters show the same amount of perseverance, hope, and responsibility, though in different ways.

Among many literary works that tackle eco-feminism, like the Gastonia novels, these two texts in particular seem to be more relevant, especially in the way that their main characters react to eco-disasters and their willingness to encounter eco-struggles. However, such characteristics do not exist in most eco-feminist novels, their major characters fail in dealing with ecological problems because of the lack of perseverance which might help them to overcome the obstacles that they face. Furthermore, the two selected novels reflect males' negative and limited awareness of ecological issues.

Rae Meadows' *I Will Send Rain* takes place in 1934 in the Bell farm in Mulehead, Oklahoma. It discusses Annie's suffering as a reaction to the disaster of dust storms that hit the area and cause the death of her son "Fred" who suffers from pneumonitis. The storms of the Dust Bowl attack everything. Annie and her daughter Birdie cannot escape from the dust and drought. They live a very hard life. Not only the main

female character suffers from the ecological disaster, but also all her family. As a result of the ecological disaster, Annie's lover Jack leaves Mulehead, and her daughter's lover Cy Mack leaves too, leaving her fifteen-year old daughter Birdie pregnant. Her husband ,Samuel, is obsessed by the visions of the flood, so he decides to build his own Noah's Ark. Annie never loses hope and refuses to leave her family in spite of her beloved son's death.

Rae Meadows' *I Will Send Rain* has a clear connection between the human being and the eco-system and how each one of them affects the other negatively. Moreover, the female protagonists of the novel can be highlighted through eco-feminist analysis because of their resistance against all eco-disasters, as in the case of Annie who does her best for the sake of her family, serving all their needs under extremely difficult circumstances of drought and dust. Thus, *I Will Send Rain* highlights the notion of eco-feminist fiction as it focuses on three major eco-feminist features as the major drive of female characters' behaviors.

As for Smith's *Marrow Island*, the novel goes back and forth in a unique style of narration to relate the past environmental disaster to the present suffering of Lucie and her friend Katie. The novel takes place in Marrow Island, Orwell Island, and Washington, from 2014 to 2016 with a hint to the twenty-year old earthquake disaster. Lucie left her island after an ecological disaster, the earthquake which destroyed the local refinery and consequently ruined the island's environment, and destroyed her own life too. However, she never loses hope to find her father's body. She wants to live in the island and fix up her childhood cabin. Her friend Katie lives with a mysterious group called Marrow Colony—that want to minister to the Earth by it's strange system depending on a green fertile permanent nature.

In *Marrow Island*, there is a strong correlation between the human and the eco system and how they affect each other negatively. Moreover, eco-feminist analysis can raise the female characters because of their resistance and perseverance to face many ecological difficulties in spite of the strong reservation about the colony's eco-system secret. So, Lucie tries so hard to help the colony members to be more aware about their misuse of nature.

While one can read the two selected novels from different points of view, this study asserts that both novels can be best read and analyzed through the eco-feminist perspective, especially when it deals with the particular features mentioned above. An eco-feminist reading will help the reader to better understand the female characters' reactions. Consequently, it tests, defines, and analyzes the main eco-feminist features in these novels by investigating how these features can negatively or positively affect the characters' reactions to reflect the crisis of ecological disaster societies. In other words, eco-feminism is an interdisciplinary theory that emphasizes the link between the abuse of power and its effect on the personal, social and

economic aspects of people's lives. It underlies the human oppression and environmental exploitation experienced by the female characters and demonstrated in their surroundings.

Most critics agree that Eco-criticism can be defined as the study of literary works from an environmental point of view by investigating how these works deal with the theme of nature. The present study adopts this definition in an attempt to discuss and analyze the two selected novels in terms of three major eco-feminist features; namely, the concept of power-over, Bioregionalism, and eco-spiritual feminism.

Cheryll Glotfelty (1996) defines eco-criticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (p. xviii). Lawrence Buell (1995), on the other hand, defines "ecocriticism" as "[a] study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis" (p. 430). In this regard, Simon Estok remarks that:

Eco-criticism has distinguished itself, debates not with standing, firstly by the ethical stand it takes, its commitment to the natural world as an important thing rather than simply as an object of thematic study, and, secondly, by its commitment to making connections. (2001, p. 16-17)

In this regard, a newly used literary genre has appeared to involve ecology and fiction; that is eco-fiction. Eco-fiction is a nature-oriented fiction in which the ecological disasters affect the protagonist's life in a dramatic way. In other words, the protagonist's suffering comes as a result of nature's suffering. Moreover, it is a man versus nature relationship and how man affects and abuses nature and vice versa. In the light of this relationship, the recent study explores how this relationship destroy both man and nature due to man's impact on nature and nature's impact on man in the two selected novels.

Eco-feminism tries to find the link between the life of women and ecological matters. It is a theory linking nature to women. This theory pays attention to women writers, female characters and their interaction with nature. It tries to answer questions like: How female characters interact with nature, and how female characters are affected by environmental degradation. In adopting eco-feminism, critics work to examine the female characters' connection with the environment in the literary works. In her introduction to *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*, the editor Karen Warren asserts: "What makes eco-feminism distinct is its insistence that nonhuman nature and naturism (i.e., the unjustified domination of nature) are feminist issues. Eco-feminist philosophy extends familiar feminist critiques of social isms of domination to nature" (1997, p. 4).

Eco-feminism looks deeply at works written by women using gender as its basic dimension. It analyzes literary works through "the interconnection of forms of oppression" between gender, race, class,

sexuality and the exploitation of nature (Gaard and Murphy, 1998, p. 3). Noel Sturgeon defines eco-feminism in his book *Ecofeminist Nature* as "a movement that makes connections between environmentalisms and feminisms; more precisely, it articulates the theory that ideologies that authorize injustices based on gender, race and class are related to the ideologies that sanction the exploitation and degradation of the environment" (2016, p.23).

As a matter of fact, eco-feminism appeared for the first time in Françoise d'Eaubonne's book *Le Féminisme Ou La Mort* (1974) translated (Feminism or Death). She states that humanity is suffering from two problems: the first problem is overpopulation, and the second problem is the destruction of nature. These two problems are due to patriarchy. Men's control of women's bodies resulted in overpopulation, and men's control over nature resulted in the destruction of natural resources (1974, p.66).

The notion of freedom can be shaped in terms of similarities between women and nature as both of them are oppressed by males in a modern industrial society which destroys both of them. Freedom in feminism depends on reducing male-domination. Whereas, in the two novels of this study, the concept of freedom is associated with liberating both women and nature from male's power and oppression.

Recently, there has been a long list of different definitions and approaches to eco-feminism, including: eco-feminist art, eco-feminist theory, social justice and political philosophy, religion, contemporary feminism and poetry. In this regard, Charlene Spretnak -an American author whose major concerns are culture, feminism, and ecology- lists three features that categorize any eco-feminist literary works: first, through the study of political theory as well as history; second, through the belief and study of nature as a spiritual element; third, through environmentalism (1990, p.10). Accordingly, the present study will adopt the last two principles as they are the major source of all eco-feminist concerns, whether they are political, cultural, or psychological.

In spite of the long list of essays, books, and studies which focus on eco-feminism as a theory and philosophy, there are few studies which focus on eco-feminist features and principles in eco-fiction. Moreover, few studies focused on the relation between ecological crises and their impact on females. Consequently, the present study aims at highlighting the relation between ecological crises and their effects on female characters in the two selected novels.

What is "Spiritual Eco-feminism"?

Amongst many features of eco-feminism, spiritual ecofeminism is regarded as one of the most influential features of the mother movement that is clearly highlighted in the two selected novels. Spiritual eco-feminism mainly emphasizes that "earth is alive" (Starhawk, 1990, p.73). Additionally, it is a secular

term that aims at protecting the earth in the light of ecological concerns rather than religious ones. Karl Marx argues that “the physical and spiritual life of man is tied up with nature is another way of saying that nature is linked with itself, for man is part of nature.” (2000, p. 63) In spite of being a non-religious concept, some Judeo-Christian Spiritual-eco-feminists believe that God imparted humans the dominion and control over earth (Starhawk, 1990, p. 73).

In terms of spiritual eco-feminism, Abrahamic religions, namely Judaism, and Christianity assert the subjugation of earth to human beings. In the same manner, some religions emphasize the subjugation of women to men. Accordingly, in terms of eco-spirituality, both females and nature are subjected to males. This subjugation is linked to male’s abuse of nature. In addition, all the above-mentioned religions assert that human beings are created for two major purposes: to make nature better, and to worship God.

Starhawk, the prominent Spiritual Eco-feminist, argues that the three most important concepts of earth-based spiritualities are: first, the immanence of the goddess in the living world; second, the interconnection of mind, body, and nature; third, the compassionate life-style (1990, p.261-263). Spiritual eco-feminism is also concerned with ancient traditions, such as the worship of Gaia, (Mother Earth) and the goddess of nature and spirituality (Lovelock, 1972, p. 223)

Gaia hypothesis is an eco-feminist principle that asserts that all universal elements, whether they are organic or inorganic, interact with each other through a synergistic and self-regulating, complex system (Lovelock 1972, p. 16-18). This system’s major function is to maintain life on the planet in terms of ecological concerns.

Recently the term, “Gaya” has developed from being a “mythological figure” into a broad term that includes ecological concerns including “the biosphere”, the evolution of organisms, global warming, salinity of seawater, and atmospheric oxygen levels (Cook, 2013, p. 47). All these concerns aim at the habitability of the earth. The Gaia hypothesis is mainly a teleological philosophy (Turney, 2003, p. 772), as it argues that each element in nature does something in order to achieve survival. In this regard Starhawk states:

When we understand that the Earth itself embodies spirit and that the cosmos is alive, then we also understand that everything is interconnected. Just as in our bodies: what happens to a finger affects what happens to a toe. The brain doesn’t work without a heart. (1990, p.73)

Here, human beings and nature are completely interconnected as the human body is a minor representation of the huge surrounding nature.

In *I Will Send Rain*, spiritual eco-feminism clearly appears between the folks and the preacher about their relation to God and through Birdie's speech about God. Additionally, it appears in the clergy men manners towards nature and the hunting game. Moreover, it can be highlighted through Annie's husband who is obsessed by the visions of the flood, so he decides to build his own Noah's Ark. In *Marrow Island*, spiritual eco-feminism appears in the strange religion adopted in the colony, highlighting that eco-spirituality does not belong to a certain religion. In addition, this feature can be highlighted through the particular religious ritual that is used in funeral by the colonists. Moreover, both novels assert how the Gaya hypothesis connects human beings to nature by the concept of humans' origin as earth is the source of everything, it represents the final destination of humans' dead bodies.

What is “The Concept of Power-over?”

The concept of power-over or power system is a distinct hierarchy which includes subordinates who are weaker and usually oppressed. Patriarchal systems refuse women's rights. Traditional Christianity does not admit women as a part of the power structure. Likewise, colonialism “Power-over” defines any animate element as a subject to another in terms of superiority and inferiority (Dahl, 1957, p. 3). As a system of domination, in power-over, superiors try to make the greatest benefits of their subordinates regardless of the consequences.

The concept of “Power-over system” has many forms which vary according to the way by which the “superior” exerts his/her power-over what is “inferior.” For example, in feminism, the concept is concerned with males' dominance that results in female's oppression (Flammang, 1983, p.178). In colonialism, the concept is exerted over colonized people or areas for political or economic purposes. In colonialism, colonizers force the colonized to follow their religion, economic system, and medical practices. In ecology, humans misuse and force nature for commercial benefits, that's why human beings carry out a kind of “power-over” nature. In this way, ecology, feminism, and colonialism share the concept in different ways.

The concept of "Power-over" represents a form of oppression made by a “superior” against “an inferior” or “a subordinate.” Thus, it is necessary to discuss the term anti-oppression as a result of “power-over,” especially in terms of eco-feminist features. Françoise d'Eaubonne emphasizes that eco-feminism is strongly associated with oppression and domination of all subordinate groups or element, including human beings, such as females, lower social classes or non-humans, such as nature (animals, land, water, air, etc.) (1974, p.34).

In *I Will Send Rain*, the concept of power-over which appears in Annie's attitude towards the poaching reflects the eco-feminist sense of responsibility towards nature. In this regard, Birdie deplors the

brutal way of slaughtering the rabbits, where male characters are primarily responsible for holding these bloody festivals which are described in the novel as “blood bath.” In *Marrow Island* the concept of Power-over appears through Lucie’s suffering and her struggle for the sake of nature, freedom, and finding truth.

The best words to describe man versus nature relationship in terms of inversed power, are those that are mentioned in Newton’s first law in physics when he emphasizes that “For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.” Consequently, as a reaction to human beings’ action (power) against (nature), nature also expresses its power through what is known as “Nature Wrath.”

In terms of power, nature expresses its own power in the two novels through the earthquake disaster in *Marrow Island* and storms of the dust bowl attack everything in *I will Send Rain*. Thus, in terms of eco-feminism, “Nature Wrath” which result in a “ruined land” makes the female characters stronger and empowers them with more perseverance.

What is “Bioregionalism”?

Bioregionalism is a term which involves political, cultural, and ecological implications that coordinate in an ecological system in a specific area which holds certain physical, cultural, and environmental features (Pena, 1998, p.28). It emphasizes that any environmental element including plants, wild life, geography, climate, etc. - is heavily influenced by humans. In this context, Ryan Moothart argues “[a]s such, those ways to thrive in their totality—be they economic, cultural, spiritual, or political—will be distinctive in some capacity as being a product of their bioregional environment (Moothart, 2017, par.6).

Bioregionalism adopts a homogeneous economy which depends on “consumer culture” (Evanoff, 2010, p. 143). Additionally, the management of the “bioregion” mainly focuses on ecological concerns through matching the political boundaries and ecological boundaries (Davidson, 2007, p. 313). In this regard, the features of bioregionalism management involve: first, consumer culture; second, use of local materials; third, cultivation of local plant; forth, organic foods; fifth, sustainability in harmony with the bioregion.

Bioregionalism as a general term requires a full understanding of Bioregional “awareness.” “Bioregional awareness” means that humans, as the dominant element of nature, should learn who their neighbors are and how to deal with them. In terms of cultural bioregionalism, George Stanley (2003) argues:

The place where the writers live, the natural environment and the human communities—village, town and city-particularly as they have been subjected to heedless and accelerated change by the changing priorities of economic exploitation, have been more than just a background refracted in the

personal concerns of their poems; they have been the subject of the poems as lived experience. In a sense there is no background in the north. All is figure, all is ground. (qtd. in “Si Transken, “Ecofeminist Community building and the politics of valuing otherness” 2).

Thus, bioregion represents the writer’s cultural, economic, and ecological background and its relation to his personal concerns, which eventually reflect his literary productions.

The notion of Bioregionalism, as a key notion in eco-criticism theory clearly appears in *I Will Send Rain* through the tough and difficult natural circumstances and their effects on the folks’ life style and their babies' health. Also, this notion clearly appears in *Marrow Island* through the green colony which adopts the notion of green utopia holding its own natural characteristics, rules and even religious beliefs. The bioregion in *I Will Send Rain* is a simple rural area which is full of superstition and simple minds, whereas the bioregion in *Marrow Island* seems like a futuristic area which depends on the modernity and absurdity of the modern and postmodern man. This study emphasizes the importance of eco-feminist literary theory and its association with eco-fiction as the source of green literature. Some studies like- John Stadler’s *Eco-fiction* (1971), Neerja Arun and Rakesh Saraswat's *Ecology and Literature: Global Perspective* (2009) and Hubert Zapf's *Literature as Cultural Ecology: Sustainable Texts* (2016)- discuss eco-feminism theory as a general term. However, few studies highlight and analyze specific features of eco-feminism, namely man-women-nature relationship and the effect of these features on female characters according to an environmentalist point of view. Some of these studies include Douglas A. Vakoch’s *Feminist Eco-criticism: Environment, Women, and Literature* (2012) and R R Ruether’s *Gaia & God: An Ecofeminist Theology Of Earth Healing* (1992). Consequently, the present study discusses and highlights the main principles of eco- feminism theory in the two selected texts. In this regard, the characters, the themes, and symbols of these novels will be discussed in terms of the selected principles of eco- feminism.

Unlike the previous studies which deal with eco-criticism or feminism as individual theories, the present study joins them together and presents the main features of eco-feminist fiction in the two selected novels. Moreover, it investigates the three features mentioned earlier, highlighting their effects on the context of events and the characters' fate. As far as the researcher knows, no one has discussed these features together as the main focus of eco-feminist approach of any literary work.

Also, unlike most previous studies which assert that a “ruined land” leads to a “ruined woman” – and depicts women as a weak creation that is easy to be destroyed and oppressed, the two selected novels show that a “ruined land” can lead to a stronger woman who fights, not only for the existence of herself, but also for the existence of humanity as a whole.

As a final point, Rae Meadows and Alix M. Smith reflect through their novels a deep concern for history, culture, nature and a woman's experience of these aspects. The complexity of their work challenges traditional representations and the stereotyping of oppressed women. They effectively demonstrate how time and place come together in compelling ways to show how literature encompasses nonhuman as well as human contexts, as well as discussing natural issues in a cultural context. Thus, the two selected novels reflect females' reactions against ecological crises, whether such reactions are negative or positive. They reelect the strong association between females and nature as victims of males' behaviors against them.

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