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Communion with Nature: An Ecocritical Approach to Mary Oliver's Poetry

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Abstract

Literary studies in the present age are constantly in flux wherein new outlooks toward literature have emerged rapidly to keep up with contemporary pressures. One of the biggest concerns of the last few decades is the global environmental crisis. Humans, nature and literature have had a deep relationship for ages. Nature's influence on Man and Man's influence on nature can be observed closely in literature throughout history. Today, these unprecedented changes in the environment caused by human voracity and egotism are affecting individuals, societies and nations. Under these circumstances, there arose a new theory of literature called ecocriticism that analyses "nature writing" and "nature-oriented literature". Broadly speaking, ecocriticism investigates the relationship between literature, Man and nature. Keeping up with these revisions, another branch of ecocriticism emerged called ecofeminism. An intervention of feminist criticism and ecocriticism, this literary theory explores the inseparable relationship between women and nature and proclaims that the exploitation of women is similar to the exploitation of nature. This paper aims to analyse Mary Oliver's selected poetry like *The Journey*, *Sleeping in the Forest* and a few others through the ecocritical and ecofeminist lens. Mary Oliver has been called an "indefatigable guide to the natural world," by Maxine Kumin in the *Women's Review of Books*, "particularly to its lesser-known aspects." Nature plays a vital role in almost all of Oliver's poetry. Her poems use various elements of nature to explore the inner self. This thesis attempts to prove that her works, unlike the works of romantic writers (mainly Wordsworthian), undo the dichotomous pair of nature/self, but instead, they focus on the communion of nature and self.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, Nature Poetry, Nature/Self

"Instructions for living a life.

Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it."

— Mary Oliver, *Sometimes*

Humans and Nature have always had a harmonious relationship since the dawn of time. The interconnection between Humans and Nature, not merely with the pleasant aspects of nature like plants or animals, but the entirety of the physical realm has created a deep bond between them. The human and the non-human components of the physical environment are interdependent and mutually intertwined. This authentic union with nature has inspired writers across countless generations and has led to the creation of a canon of literature called “nature writing” or “nature-oriented literature”.

Ecology is a branch of science that deals with the deep-rooted and interrelated connection between living organisms and the physical environment around them. Suresh Fredrick in *Contemporary Contemplation on Ecoliterature* says that "The modern ecological consciousness has a feeling that the balance between human and the natural world must be maintained. A perfect ecology is one in which plants, animals, birds and human beings live in such harmony that none dominates or destroys the other". What Fredrick is rightfully trying to say is that any disturbance in one relationship will indubitably lead to a disturbance in the other.

The last few decades have already witnessed these unprecedented changes in the environment caused by human voracity and egotism affecting individuals, societies and nations. Therefore, the most ignored, yet the most pressing concern of the 20th century is the global environmental crisis. Literature, always the favourite mode of introspecting various contemporary issues could not have escaped this theme too. These concerns about ecology and human beings' relationship with nature gave rise to a new literary theory: ecocriticism.

ECOCRITICISM

What is Ecocriticism? Simply put, Ecocriticism is the study of Literature and the physical environment i.e., humans and non-human elements. It takes an earth-centred approach to literature. The term ecocriticism was first coined by William Rueckert in his critical writing "*Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*" in 1978. According to him, it means a criticism of the environment as represented in literature. According to Rueckert, ecocriticism applies ecology or ecological principles to the study of literature. Lawrence Buell, 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's praxis. It is distinguished from conventional nature study by its commitment to the natural and non-human

world.” Accordingly, eco-critics analyze nature writing or nature-oriented literature and investigate the relationship between man, nature and literature.

ECOFEMINISM

Another branch of ecocriticism has emerged called ecofeminism. An intervention of feminist criticism and ecocriticism, this literary theory explores the inseparable relationship between women and nature. It combines ecology with a feminist concern for the presentation of women and nature in literary texts. Noël Sturgeon in his book *Ecofeminist Nature* defines Ecofeminism as "a movement that makes connections between environmentalism and feminism". The literary theory also investigates the relationship between the exploitation of nature and the exploitation of women. About ecofeminism, Greta Gaard writes that "more than a theory about feminism and environmentalism, or women and nature, [it] approaches the problems of environmental degradation and social injustice from the that how we treat nature and how we treat each other are inseparably linked."

MARY OLIVER

Mary Oliver (1935-2019) was a renowned American poet whose work was celebrated for its deep connection with nature and its ability to capture the essence of the natural world. Born in Maple Heights, Ohio, Oliver's early life was marked by a difficult upbringing and a love for the outdoors. Her passion for nature and writing began at an early age, and she found solace in exploring the woods and fields near her home. Influenced by both Whitman and Thoreau, she is known for her clear and poignant observance of the natural world.

Oliver's poetry is characterized by its simplicity, clarity, and profound observations of the natural world. Her verses often revolve around themes of love, wonder, solitude, and the interconnectedness of all living beings. Throughout her literary career, Oliver published numerous poetry collections, each one receiving critical acclaim. Some of her most notable works include "American Primitive," "Dream Work," "House of Light," and "New and Selected Poems." Many of her poems are grounded in her experiences and interactions with animals, plants, and the landscapes she explored.

In her writing, Mary Oliver invites the readers to slow down, pay attention, and savour the beauty of the natural world. Her language is often evocative and illuminating, making her poems accessible to a wide range of audiences. Her works continue to inspire environmentalists, writers, and those seeking a deeper connection with the natural world. Mary

Oliver's contemplations in her works resonated with readers worldwide, earning her numerous awards and a devoted following. In 2007, The New York Times described her as "far and away, this country's best-selling poet."

MARY OLIVER'S NOTION OF NATURE

Her creativity was stirred by nature, and Oliver, an avid walker, often pursued inspiration on foot. She believes that "everything in nature has a soul and is alive" and claims,

"All things are mactable and replaceable. Not at this moment, but soon enough, we are lambs and we are leaves, and we are stars, and the shining, mysterious pond water itself" (Oliver, 2000)

She binds with Nature through deep contemplation, made possible via the help of imagination, and putting those moments of deep interaction with Nature into words in her eco poetry. For Oliver and the speakers in her poems, this unbreakable relation and connection is her own way to seek salvation, redemption, and a way to God. She says in *Upstream*,

"For me the door to the woods is the door to the temple."

She raises spiritual, philosophical, and religious questions which are answered through nature. She finds the self only strengthened through an immersion with nature. Attuning herself to the rhythm of the natural world, she uses it as her means to understand the world and to cope with it. Oliver's poetry beautifully weaves nature into a tapestry of interconnectedness and dissolves "into the totality of nature" losing her self-boundaries and "all outward form" (Graham, 1994). Mary Oliver's preoccupation is with nature, and judges every single creation of nature with value. In her poetry, she urges us to step into the perspectives of turtles, geese, birds, insects, and other creatures of nature and to merge with forests and oceans through our imagination. The speakers in her poems consistently shed their individual identity, a construct of dominant ideology, immersing themselves in a harmonious, interconnected world of vibrant ecosystems.

Oliver brings forth a new kind of Romanticism. As Janet McNew states, "most male Romantic nature poetry is about achieving an identity that transcends nature" which is not all the case in Oliver's poetry as she brings the focus back to nature in her writings. Though she was inspired by the Romantics like Wordsworth and Keats, her poetry does not come under Romanticism. Oliver's acute observation of Nature leads to the suspension of the motif of egocentrism. Mary Oliver adeptly reconciles apparent opposites, achieving the ecocritical objective of redefining the relationship between nature and self. Oliver's eco-poetry embraces the premise of

Ecocriticism as it broadens the “notion of ‘the world’ to include all the ecosphere”. She does away with the existing rift between man and Nature and the alienating attitude that accompanies the rift.

NATURE AND SELF IN OLIVER’S POETRY

In her eco poetry, Mary Oliver endeavours to restore the lost harmony between nature and humanity. She presents a vision of interconnectedness between Humans and other elements of the ecosystem. Unlike the prominent Romantics, who though sought unity with nature, still focused on the ‘human experience’ of it all, Mary Oliver's eco-poetry disregards the traditional dichotomous pair of Nature vs Self prominent in most nature writings. Marianna Rosa in *Bridging Opposites: An Ecocritical Approach to Mary Oliver’s Poetry* says about Oliver that, “In her contemplation, Mary Oliver disarms these apparent opposites by viewing them not as mutually exclusive and limiting, but as permeable and interconnected. In her poetry, she wants to attain a certain kind of unity with nature, always accessible by means of the senses, which are doors to communion with the ‘natural other’. There is in Oliver no fear at the prospect of dissolving individual consciousness and this is probably so because she conceives of the movement between self and nature as fluid.”

In her poem, “*Sleeping in the Forest*” from *New and Selected Poems (2023)* Oliver celebrates the idea of her unification with nature. She becomes ‘a stone on the riverbed’ and integrates with nature as she returns back to the earth.

I slept
as never before, a stone
on the riverbed, nothing
between me and the white fire of the stars
but my thoughts, and they floated
light as moths among the branches
of the perfect trees.

She exhibits a willingness to "merge" with nature purely for the delight of the encounter. She dissolves in the natural elements around her and becomes the best version of herself in the lap of nature.

By morning
I had vanished at least a dozen times

into something better.

Embracing her identity as a part of creation, she finds joy in the inherent connection that unites her with all living entities, providing contentment, serenity, and a sense of fulfilment. Oliver unites with nature in her eco-poetry through various sensuous acts. In her poem *The Fish*, she uses the act of “eating” the fish to merge with the sea and become the fish herself. Through these physical acts of catching and eating the Fish, Oliver interacts with nature and therefore becomes one with it.

I opened his body and separated
the flesh from the bones
and ate him. Now the sea
is in me: I am the fish, the fish
glitters in me; we are
risen, tangled together, certain to fall
back to the sea...

In her poem, “*White Night*” from *American Primitive*, Oliver floats all night in the shallow ponds and expresses her longing to depart from her consciousness and dissolve in nature.

I want to lose myself
on the black
and silky currents,
yawning,
gathering
the tall lilies
of sleep.

In her poem, “*When Death Comes*”, she advocates the use of the metaphor of being both the bride and bridegroom symbolizing her deep connection and engagement with the world, emphasizing her profound communion with the beauty and amazement that surround her.

When it's over, I want to say all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

Greg Garrard says that the Romantic poet William Wordsworth is “on the whole, far more interested in the relationship of non-human nature to human mind than he is in nature in and for itself”. This is not true for Mary Oliver as she tries to decenter the human experience in nature and just focuses on worshipping nature as something divine with its beauty and its cruelty. Thus, through her eco poetry, it can easily be proclaimed that Mary Oliver undoes this dichotomous pair of Nature/Self.

NATURE AND WOMAN IN OLIVER'S POETRY

Parallel to the dichotomous pair of nature and self, we encounter another contrasting pair, that of women and men. Throughout the annals of history, women have been invariably linked to nature, oftentimes depicted as passive beings, while men, asserting their dominance, have sought to conquer both nature and women. In this context, feminist critics, including Margaret Homans, have ardently argued that a "feminine tradition" within visionary poetry must disengage from the harmful myths perpetuating the association between women and nature.

However, Mary Oliver embraces the multifaceted nature of existence and portrays both the active and the passive aspects of nature. Her association with nature assumes a nuanced and empowering dimension, no longer ensnaring women in the web of submission. Oliver refrains from reducing women to mere symbols of passive nature, recognizing the indomitable spirit that courses through them.

In "Wild Geese," she invites the reader to connect with nature and find solace in the wild landscape. The poem emphasizes the idea of finding one's own voice and path, which can be interpreted as empowering women to embrace their unique identities and break free from societal constraints.

You do not have to be good.
 You do not have to walk on your knees
 for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
 You only have to let the soft animal of your body
 love what it loves

In "Sleeping in the Forest," Oliver explores the concept of unity between women and nature. She feminizes nature as a caring mother while the speaker in the poem finds a sense of belonging and safety while lying down in the forest, suggesting a harmonious relationship between women and the natural world.

I want to flow out
 Across the mother
 Of all waters

She reclaims the association with nature, reclaiming its power and bestowing upon women the majesty of nature's complexity. Thus, In Janet McNew's words, what Oliver does in her poetry is not so much "To defy patriarchal boundaries as to ignore their defining powers"

CONCLUSION

Mary Oliver's poetry weaves a vision that transcends conventional boundaries and extends beyond rigid dual oppositions. Her verses take apart the restrictive notion of the opposing dichotomies of nature vs self and, nature and woman vs man. Rather than choosing one end of the spectrum within the dichotomy, she sees the movement from one pole to another as permeable. Her reverence for the great outdoors has led her verses to be an ode to unity—a celebration of the interconnectedness between the human experience and the vast expanse of nature's wonders. Fearlessly, she melds herself with the natural world, becoming an inseparable part of it, and in doing so, she unveils her emotions and ideas as seamlessly woven into the fabric of nature. She believes that every element of nature has a soul and uses her diverse poetic voice to merge with those elements of nature, not by forgoing her own consciousness but by embracing the earth and its realm as a part of her. It is through her direct sensual experiences with the non-human world that she attains true Communion with Nature.

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