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Possessing Nature: An ecofeminist study of Eugene O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms*

Abstract

*Humans have enjoyed the place of central stage and the only speaking subject in American fiction. American fiction seems very much replete with debates surrounding American dream, racism and other social and political issues. Ecology is present in passive backdrop in American fiction. However, nineteenth century saw a shift in thematic concerns of American fiction. Ecology appeared as one of the emerging concerns for American writers. Eugene O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms* brought attention to nature in the realms of theatre. This paper attempts to discuss the nature of ecology in the play. It explores how O'Neill presents nature in this play and what sort of agency he grants to nature and physical environment. This paper further analyses how far O'Neil considers the communication between humans and nature significant. This paper analyzes O'Neil's play using the theoretical framework of ecofeminism. The concept of ecofeminism was first introduced by a French feminist named Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974. It emphasizes that Men's desire to possess nature like their desire to possess women objectifies nature and de In present age when world is confronted with emerging environmental crisis, this study becomes very significant. Its high time to address the issues regarding the treatment of nature and environment in literary discourse. The main focus of this research is to see the representation of nature similar to the representation of women with theoretical strains of ecofeminism and its relation to the human world.*

Key Words: Nature, woman, human beings, ecofeminism.

For a millennium, human beings have been the center of the universe and the non-human elements have been manipulated and used for their benefit only which have caused irreversible damage to environment. Now, the world is encapsulated in various environmental crisis like water crisis, air pollution, depletion of ozone layer, global warming, and excretion of poisonous gasses in the air making it toxic for human beings which in turn is causing multiple lungs issues etc. The human beings are now confronted by many health problems due to the damage that they have done to the environment. Today, the world is trying to tackle the environmental crisis and the presence of nature can be felt in literary realms too. Considering the current environmental emergency, this study deals with treatment of nature in Eugene O'Neill's play (who was an American playwright and Nobel laureate in Literature) *Desire under the Elms* to explore how environment and non-human elements shape human behaviors.

Man is continually mindful of the impact of nature as the air he inhales, the water he drinks, the Food he eats, and the progression of vitality and data. Furthermore, a significant number of his difficulties are a reaction to the regular procedures and changes in the climate, Cosmic energy radiation which have been intensified to a fatal level, and storms and hurricane that rage around the earth. These natural disasters we suffer today are also a result of our mishandlings and transgressions of nature. To put it plainly, we are associated with nature by blood ties and we can't live outside nature. During their transitory takeoffs from Earth spacemen take with them a touch of the biosphere. No place does nature influence humankind in the very same manner. Its impact fluctuates. Contingent upon where individuals happen to be on the world's surface, it allots them fluctuating amounts of light, warmth, water, precipitation, vegetation. Mankind's history offers many number of instances of how natural conditions and the help of our planet have advanced or impeded human improvement.

During the end of eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, ecological writing has emerged as a whole new genre because it has now become inexorable to separate human from his physical environment and non-human elements surrounding him. There is an interdependent relationship between humanity and nature. Considering the environmental crisis around the globe, it has now become a genre that is being widely read around the globe. Christopher Cokinis defines ecology as "the critical and pedagogical broadening of literary studies to include texts that deal with the nonhuman world and our relationship to it" (Cokinis 3). Amidst the current global

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environmental crisis, nature needs more attention now than ever before. Thomas K. Dean explains ecology as “a response to the need for humanistic understanding of our relationships with the natural world in an age of environmental destruction” (Dean 5).

Michel Foucault in his essay demonstrates that social power operates through a regime of privileged speakers, having historical embodiments as Priests, Kings, authors, intellectuals and celebrities (Foucault). Their words are taken more seriously as compared to the unprivileged class of society that includes women, children and prisoners. The above mentioned socially powerful speakers are in constant communication with each other and are intelligible to one another. Socially privileged class as said by Foucault is in constant communication with each other and protect their own rights, while on the other hand unprivileged class is not perceivable by others and is unable to protect itself from destruction. Ecology, environment and nature is that unprivileged class in our society as mentioned by Foucault.

Emmanouil Aretoulakis in his article theorizes ecology as “post humanist ecology”. He argues that posthumanism does not suggest “suppose end” of humans or a movement which replaces human beings. It does not recommend to exclude humans but it emphasizes the need to redefine human being. It is not merely associated with the issue of defining human or “what it means to be human, but also of the relationship between humans and their non-human other, thus exhibiting a tendency to think beyond humanism” (Aretoulakis 71). He further states that post humanism attempts to subdue the central presence of human beings to bring attention to all the non-human aspects, “yet it remains firm in its belief in the possibility of a globalized ecological symbiosis of humans and nonhumans; in our case humanity and the environment” (Aretoulakis 85-86).

For the longest time, the recurring themes of American fiction have been the American dream, coming of age, disillusionment, war, rebellion, isolation, technology, oppression and racism. Scott Russell Sanders in his article points out that there is something evidently missing in American fiction: “Much contemporary fiction seems to me barren because it draws such tiny, cautious circles, in part because it pretends that nothing lies beyond its timid boundaries” (Sanders 649). He asserts that human being gets the central treatment in such fiction: “Such fiction treats some “little human morality play” as the whole of reality, and never turns outward to acknowledge the wilderness raging around” (Sanders 649). What he believes is missing in American fiction is nature and presence of any non-human entity. Mostly, nature has acted as a backdrop of the central human characters: “In the great works of American Literature, the human world is set against the overarching background of nature” (649). He believes that fiction which limits itself to the indoors and refuses to look beyond the human experience is false and unreasonable.

Christopher Manes in his article also gives similar arguments: “For half a millennium, “Man” has been the center of conversation in the West” (Manes 26). He regards human beings as the only speaking subject in literature: “Nature is silent in our culture (and in literate societies generally) in the sense that the status of being a speaking subject is jealously regarded as an exclusively human prerogative” (Manes 15). The silent nature of ecology in modern societies is a consequence of human occupying the central stage in the play of life, anything else is pushed to margins. This human centric approach is named as anthropocentrism, which claims that human occupies central stage in affairs of the world and everything else is working for the betterment of humans. This anthropocentric view has been the reason of present state of nature and ecology in our society. Binaries of Nature and Culture came into being as a result of human centric approach with culture occupying a far superior place than nature. Anthropocentrism paves way for the exploitation and objectification of nature. Second wave of industrial revolution during the early years of 20th century may be said as the beginning of what we may call as a disastrous period for nonhuman elements of nature. Contamination of water reserves, depletion of ozone layer, excretion of poisonous gases in air, increase in air pollution level and global warming were the issues that came as a result of massive scale industrialization. But the main issue was the silent nature of authorities on one of the most significant issue that surrounds humans.

Until the latter quarter of 20th century no major effort was done in the field. So when Manes in his essay, “Nature and silence” says that nature is silent in our society does not mean that nature is unable to speak or does not have any language. Like humans nature had language of its own. Nature has been communicating to us for a very long time and Mircea Eliade in her study of Shamanism elaborates about nature being inspirited and having the spirit of its own, not just the living organisms even the inert entities like water, clouds, stones and soil. What Manes meant about silence of nature is humans inability to comprehend the language that is not human. Manes in his article “Nature and Silence” explained the characteristics of animistic societies and the role of nature and ecology in

animistic cultures for the society. Martin Heidegger in his essay "An Introduction to Metaphysics" elaborates on the qualities of language. According to him, all language both reveals and conceals. However our particular idiom, a pastiche Hermeneutics and renaissance humanism with its faith in reason, intellect and progress has created immense realm of silences, a world of 'not saids' which include a part of society which is silenced and that includes nature, women and minorities.

Hans Peter Duerr believes that humans do not exploit the nature that speaks to them, his statement seems very much correct in present scenario as we look around our selves. It may also be taken in this way that humans do not destroy anything in which they trace qualities similar to their own. In patriarchal societies alterity is not respected that is the reason of exploitation of women and minority rights, and above all in this context of nature and ecology, it is a way ahead where humans do not find any similarity. Thus, exploitation and destruction of nature finds suitable claim in this sense. For nature and ecology to be preserved by humans there needs to be a way where humans find the similarities in nature and for that the anthropocentric attitude of our society needs to be changed. Many critics of ecology proposed their ideas relating the nature of change that is desirable in current scenario to counter the exploitation of nature through humans.

Aldo Leopold in his book *A Sand Country Almanac* presents one solution in the form of "land ethics" to counter the issue. According to him certain questions based on human ethics and ,orality needs to be asked to humans of their role in present world. The fact that we live on and of the earth places under certain moral and ethical responsibilities that needs to be fulfilled. On the other hand post humanist critics asks for a complete separation of nature and humans if the ecology is to be preserved. According to them the slight presence of human in wilderness pollutes it and compromises it purity. As they believe that wilderness is nature in its true sense and independence of nature is what is desired. Independence of nature is compromised by even the slightest element of human gaze because in that way they consume the nature. According to them any possibility of a mutual relationship is not possible as it would lead to objectification of nature from humans. What they want is post humanist treatment of ecology which separates the two and removes any human trace from nature. giving it its real state of wilderness. The fictional human character has excluded the non-human and natural world, leaving it behind without any voice and subject. Nonetheless, human being is not indestructible. He suggests that "the time has come for our culture to politely change the subject" (Manes 26). He also recommends that we should find other ways to appreciate humans instead of objectifying non-human world: "We need to find new ways to talk about human freedom, worth, and purpose, without eclipsing, depreciating, and objectifying the nonhuman world" (Manes 24).

However, Nineteenth century saw the "change of the subject" which Christopher Manes mentioned in his essay. Nature has a central place in nineteenth-century literary consciousness. The second half of nineteenth century is considered as the age of ecology and birth of naturalism. On recent American writing, Sanders comments that now writers "seek to understand our life as continuous with the life of nature; they project "the little human morality play" against the wilderness raging around" (Sanders 657).

Una Chaudhuri in her article points out that humanistic origin of the theater makes it "anti-ecological" (Chaudhuri 28). Theater artists who attempt to work on ecological concerns are also hindered by traditional theater which describes drama "as a conflict between and about human beings" (May 28). May claims that ecocriticism is similar to other literary criticism and addresses inequality like other literary theories in representation of nature: "Ecocriticism, like feminism, post-colonial or multi-cultural theory, addresses injustices felt in the body—the body of experience, of community, of land" (May 86). Looking at ecology from a meaningful perspective instead of metaphorical terms, "gives rise to new ways of looking and reading (ecocriticism) as well as creating (ecodrama/performance)" (May 86). According to him, literature and ecology is inseparable because "Stories are written in the land and in human and other bodies. Like air, water, food and shelter, some stories sustain life; like toxic waste, some stories kill" (May 86).

There have been various researchers who have studied the play from various perspectives, psychoanalytic being the most common. However, this study aims to explore the treatment of nature and how humans interact with each other because of the non-human elements present in the play. One's physical environment plays a crucial role in shaping ones gestures and behaviour. In the play, the physical environment of the farm leads to conflicts within the characters and with other characters.

Robert Baker-White in his book explores the natural perspectives of O'Neill's plays. He views O'Neil as a writer who persistently engages with natural reality while constructing his fictional world. As he states, his plays

deal with “concern for the place of nature in human affairs, and the place of human in nature” (White 2). He finds the bond of characters and Earth very strong in *Desire under the Elms*: “The play presents characters with intense connections to specific pieces of earth and the gravity of those relationships rivals and even eclipses the personal and social complexities more usually cited as the foundations of drama” (White 2).

There are various studies which discuss elms trees as a metaphor in the play. The interpretation of nature only as a symbol or metaphor ignores the naturalistic implications of the play. Una Chaudhuri in her article describes the implications of ecological metaphor: “ecology as metaphor is so integral a feature of the aesthetic of modern realist-humanist drama that, paradoxically, its implications for a possible ecological theater are easy to miss. It's very ubiquity renders it invisible” (Chaudhuri 24). Sanders in his article quotes Bobbie Ann Mason who also believes that nature helps playwrights to give metaphors to depict conflicts of characters.

Rafid Sami Majeed in his article explores symbolism of Earth in the play. He does an ecocritical analysis of the play. He studies the relationship between “literature and physical environment” (Rafid 20). He explains that nature shapes behaviour of characters. Every character in some way is affected by the natural elements surrounding him. Nature does not merely act as a background landscape of the thematical concerns and character's environment but rather as a crucial force which leads the plot of the play. Characters and their natural environment is a significant theme in the play.

In the light of existing research, this study is distinctive and significant in a way that it thoroughly deals with treatment of nature in the play. It explores various major aspects of ecology in the play. This study addresses two research questions. Firstly, how and what sort of agency O'Neill grants to natural elements in the play i.e. the ecofeminist approach Secondly, how characters and plot are affected by and respond to the natural elements surrounding them i.e. reducing nature to merely a piece of land or property.

This research analyzes the novel by applying the theoretical framework of ecofeminism. The term 'ecofeminism' was first coined in 1974 by a French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne. It originated from what had previously been two different social movements: the environmental movement and the women's movement. This theory centers upon the idea that current environmental crisis is a consequence of the ways in which we perceive and associate with each other and the natural world around us. Barbara T. Gates in her article defines it as “the linking of the devaluation of women and the earth” (Gates 8). She further explains this linkage by saying that men are responsible for the overpopulation in the world and overpopulation is the biggest threat to humanity right now.

Overpopulation is demolishing both humanity and the earth, for the earth is treated with the same disregard as are women. Urbanized, innovative society, which is male- driven, has diminished the world's fertility while overbreeding, too male-driven, has expanded the population. Women must act to spare themselves and the earth all the while. The two needs are intimately connected (Gates 9). d'Eaubonne also explains the similar argument through the act of reproduction in women and nature. Everyone realizes that today the two most prompt dangers to survival are overpopulation and the demolition of our resources; only few people understand the total responsibility of the male System, to the extent that it is male (and not capitalist or communist) in these two perils; yet much less despite everything have discovered that each one of the two dangers is the result of one of the two equal disclosures which gave men their control more than fifty centuries back: their capacity to plant the seed in the earth as in women, and their cooperation in the demonstration of propagation (d'Eaubonne). This part which is most quoted one from d'Eaubonne' work directly links women and nature through the phenomenon of reproduction. Man being responsible for reproduction in woman and plantation of seeds exploit nature similarly in the way they exploit women.

Ecofeminists state that that the exploitation of women and the exploitation of nature are essentially connected. In ecofeminist writing, ecofeminism is usually depicted as a belief that environmentalism and feminism are naturally associated. Another definition recommends that subjugation and discrimination dependent on gender, race and class are directly identified with the misuse and devastation of the nature.

This section analyzes the play with the help of theoretical strains taken from ecofeminism. In this play, nature goes side by side with human morality play. Nature plays a significant role, it is not just a background setting in the play rather it contributes to the development of the plot. It is present in the title, the setting and is also entirely responsible for how characters behave and act in the play. *Desire under the Elms* takes its title from nature as well. The title literally and metaphorically means the desire of the possession of farm which lies under the elm trees by male characters of the play. In Abbie's scenario, she cannot directly own the farm but through her son. The fact that

only male character can own the farm is also ecofeminist approach. In patriarchal society, it's the men who owns and posses women. In case of nature, it is also men who can own the farm.

The whole play takes place around the Cabot Farmhouse in New England. The natural setting of farm is as integral to plot as any character of the play is. The behaviors and actions of all the characters take place in the farm which is the focal point of the plot of the play. In the play, there is a widower Ephraim Cabot the elderly person who is the owner of Cabot Farmhouse. He is deeply in love with his farm not because he loves nature but rather he loves to be the owner of a piece of land. Not only the father is greedy, his family which is comprised of three sons shows similar greed towards the farm: Eben, the youngest, Simon and Peter. Eben's mother was the proprietor of a huge piece of the farm, and he feels that it is his lawful right to be the sole beneficiary of the form and believes that his mother passed away because she had to work hard day and night on the farm. He steals some cash from his father to give it to his brothers Simon and Peter to purchase their share in the farm. Simeon and Peter utilize the cash to go to California in search for gold. The greed and selfishness control these individuals' lives and dominates their emotions. Eben's stepmother Abbie also wants to own the farm while engaging in extramarital relations with him. She had a child by Eben yet she could persuade his husband that this child is his own to make sure that she gets the farm for herself and for her kid. However, she kills the child expecting that it would ruin her relationship with Eben whom she loved. Being an executioner, She was given to the sheriff by Eben because she killed his child. Later, when Eben realizes that he also loves her he admits that he was also responsible for the murder of his son.

O'Neill describes farm not as a natural element but something which the characters want to possess and as a piece of land and property. Here, the treatment of nature is similar to the treatment of women in literature. In patriarchal societies, man wants to posses the woman and in this way they objectify woman as an object instead of a being. In their struggle of possession of the farm, Cabot and his family objectify the farm, completely refusing to consider nature as an entity of wilderness. Farm represents materialism and wealth. Here, the theory of ecofeminism can be applied. Eugene O'Neill treats nature in a similar way woman has been treated in literary works. Susan Baker in her article on Ecofeminism quotes Plato. She believes that because of his philosophy, Western thought has deciphered the world through a lot of dualisms: man/nature; mind/body; male/female. Combined with this was the belief that man was better than nature and the psyche better than the body. As indicated by ecofeminism, women fitted conveniently into this image: their capacity of reproduction was considered to make them both controlled by their biology and closer to the natural world and they were viewed as inferior compared to men (Baker). Like women, man consider nature inferior and control it the way they want to. In this way, they exploit natural environment. Ecofeminists argue that all living things are eventually connected, as the survival of each relies on the other. They believe that the environmental crisis emerged as an outcome of our failure to 'perceive our significant association with all the living creatures' (Baker).

The stage direction of the play begins with description of the physical environment: "The action of the entire play takes place in, and immediately outside of, the Cabot farmhouse in New England" (O'Neill 1). Elm trees are also very significant in the play. Their presence on the stage is very powerful. O'Neill begins his stage directions by describing the two elm trees that hung on both sides of the house:

Two enormous elms are on each side of the house. They bend their trailing branches down over the roof. They appear to protect and at the same time subdue. There is a sinister maternity in their aspect, a crushing, jealous absorption. They have developed from their intimate contact with the life of man in the house an appalling humaneness. They brood oppressively over the house. They are like exhausted women resting their sagging breasts and hands and hair on its roof, and when it rains their tears trickle down monotonously and rot on the shingles (O'Neill 2).

O'Neill describes the elms as exhausted women which reinforces the close connection of women and nature. Elms are described as sinister maternity which refers to the ghostly presence of Eben's dead mother in the house. Though, she is dead but she is still present in Eben's thought because he believes he has a legal share in the farm because of his mother. The fact that both women and nature are responsible for the process of reproduction closely links them together. Earth has always been identified as a mother figure for its inhabitants. Earth has been symbolized in literature as a mother's womb for its inhabitants.

Simon and Peter work hard in the farm so that they may have their share in it because of the effort they put into it. Eben believes that the farm belongs to him since his mother died of the overburden of the hard work she did for the farm. Their father thinks that he is the sole owner of the farm because it's his property. Abbie Putnam, third

wife of Cabot marries him solely because she sees it as an opportunity to own the piece of a land i.e. the farm. Being a woman she cannot own the farm herself. Knowing that her husband can not impregnate her, she bore a son by Eben so that he becomes the owner of the property of her husband. The play even ends on the desire for the farm. Even the sheriff at the end says: "It's a jim-dandy farm, no deny in. Wish I owned it!" (O'Neill 74). The last line sums up the ecofeminist approach of the playwright which is the possession of nature for materialistic purposes. The struggle of the possession of the farm is similar to man's possession of a woman. In patriarchal societies, man does not view woman as a being, he sees her as someone who he possesses and have him under his control. In turn, he makes woman an object for his pleasure and ownership. The similar objectification can be seen in the character's desperate battle for the farm which in turn objectifies and reduces the farm to merely a piece of property, making Eugene O'Neill's treatment Eco feministic in the play.

When Cabot asks Eben that he would have come to the party to find a girl to marry he asks him that he may get a share in the farm by getting married. Characters are absolutely aware of each other's desire of the farm. Eben tells him ironically that he already has earned his share in the farm. Cabot then mocks him that he can't even own a stone because the farm would be owned by his newborn son after his death which is actually not his son but Eben's: "Yewr farm! God A'mighty! If ye wa'n't a born donkey ye'd know ye'll never own stick nor stone on it, especially now arter him bein' born. It's his'n, I tell ye--his'n arter I die--but I'll live a hundred jest t' fool ye all--an' he'll be growed then--yewr age a'most!" (O'Neill 59).

The only reason Abbie marries an old man like Cabot is to own the farm after his death. She tells Cabot that she wants to conceive a son by him so that he would own his property and land after his death. But later, she falls in love with her stepson:

Cabot: She did. An' I says, I'll blow his brains t' the top o' them elums--an' she says no, that hain't sense, who'll ye git t' help ye on the farm in his place-- an' then she says yew'n me ought t' have a son--I know we kin, she says--an' I says, if we do, ye kin have anythin' I've got ye've a mind t'. An' she says, I wants Eben cut off so's this farm'll be mine when ye die! (with terrible gloating) An' that's what's happened, hain't it? An' the farm's her'n! An' the dust o' the road-- that's your'n! Ha! Now who's hawin'? (O'Neill 59).

In scene one of part three, Cabot feels that something unpleasant is happening around. He can see it in the elms as well which shows that nature can also feel the obnoxious things that happen in its surroundings. Whenever he feels heavy, he goes to the barren or farm to find an escape in nature: "Ye kin feel it droppin' off the elums, climbin' up the roof, sneakin' down the chimney, pokin' in the corners! They's no peace in houses, they's no rest livin' with folks. Somethin's always livin' with ye. (with a deep sigh) I'll go t' the barn an' rest a spell" (O'Neill 57).

Eben believes that his father married his mother (who had a share in the farm) to steal the farm and burdened her with so much work that she died working in the farm. Claiming that it was his mother's farm gives him the right to claim it as his own farm: "EBEN--This was her hum. This was her farm. ABBIE--This is my hum! This is my farm! EBEN--He married her t' steal 'em. She was soft an' easy. He couldn't 'preciate her. ABBIE--He can't 'preciate me! EBEN--He murdered her with his hardness. ABBIE--He's murderin' me!" (O'Neill 46). All the members of the Cabot family believes themselves to be the sole owner of the farm.

Hence, this study has engaged itself with Eugene O'Neill's ecofeminist treatment of nature in the play. O'Neil has given the same agency that has been given to woman in literary realms. It has further explored how nature directs behaviors of characters in the play. Through the constant battle and desperate desire of ownership of farm in materialistic terms, nature is objectified losing its essence as wilderness.

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