

NATURE AS HEALER: AN ECO-FEMINIST STUDY OF *THE NETTLE SPINNER* BY WENDY WUYTS

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ABSTRACT

*This study shows an analysis that how Wendy Wuyts' short story *The Nettle Spinner* brings together literary characters, themes of nature, healing, female resistance and myth within an eco-feminist framework. It tells the story of a young woman, through her work with nettles, who grows stronger, confident and regains her closeness to the land. The research looks at how Wuyts makes nature more than a background, showing it as something alive, healing and strengthening, especially affecting the main character. Using eco-feminism as the main idea, the story studies the literature through a qualitative reading of work by Vandana Shiva, Karen Warren and Françoise d'Eaubonne. This scholarship helps us understand that women and nature share many forms of oppression, why ecology matters ethically and how to challenge traditional gender hierarchies. The author shows that *The Nettle Spinner* rejects control over women and nature by capitalists and men and suggests that to resist and heal; we should renew our bond with the land. By emphasizing the value of traditional ecological learning, community teaching and personal strength, Wuyts gives her book an important place in current eco-feminist literature. This research shows that storytelling can influence beliefs about nature and femininity, pushing for a greater focus on sustainable, respectful and connected ways of life.*

Keywords: *Nature, Healer, Eco-feminism, oppression, resistance*

INTRODUCTION

The movement of ecofeminism identifies relations between female oppression and natural oppression through masculine-centered patriarchal societal activities. During the original concept of ecofeminism Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Feminism or Death* (1974) specifically details the central position of feminism for both environmental and gender issues. The concept developed beyond its initial sense as a definition pertaining to women and the environment alone. During the late twentieth century researchers recognized Ecofeminism as a collective activism that advocates for women together with environmental protection and marginalized social groups which encompass queer communities. Ecofeminism contains three central branches that serve to explain how women connect to nature. The Cultural/Spiritual Eco-feminist movement believes women share a specific and singular relationship with nature through which they form a bond with "Mother Earth" and present their views about nature's feminine character. Traditional knowledge about nature defense and woman respect should be followed in the modern world according to this argument. (krishna, 2014) For clarity, eco-feminism, in the words of Sarah Regan (2020) in her essay, "*What Is Ecofeminism? Understanding the Intersection of Gender and the Environment*" is "an ideology and movement that sees climate change, gender equality, and social injustice more broadly as intrinsically related issues, all tied to masculine dominance in society"

Human survival depends on nature which provides essential environments for wellness along with physical health development. Modern people who live in developed nations interact with nature at significantly lesser levels than earlier periods of history. Unfortunate outcomes stem from infrastructure growth and social development that isolates people from nature so they disconnect more from their environment leading to increased natural devastation and excessive

harmful human use of nature (Soga & Gaston, 2016). Multiple disciplines have documented evidence which demonstrates that human beings need to establish better connections with nature as this relationship results in worsening dysfunction and disease. A complex network exists between these professions along with their studies about natural environment-related positive effects.

As an environmental intellectual and writer Wendy Wuyts presently focuses her work on eco-consciousness with feminist lookouts while using folktale storytelling components. She crafts poetic influences between nature conservation and sustainability with gender readings and fabulous storytelling that classifies her as an active writer in developing eco-feminist literature (Wuyts, 2023). Wuyts discovers throughout her stories how women practice domination and environmental deprivation through indistinguishable male dominated systems. She highlights how women, like nature, are often exploited, controlled, and marginalized in patriarchal societies. She also portrays nature as a site of enablement, where women regain their intervention through ecological knowledge, healing practices, and traditional wisdom. Wuyts often reinterprets traditional folk tales to shed light on contemporary ecological and feminist concerns (Merchant, 1980; Shiva, 1989).

The Nettle Spinner takes its basis from a Belgian folktale which enables Wuyts to weave a substantial narrative about erosion and natural intelligence alongside feminist rebellion. The story presents an eco-feminist interpretation of ancient myth through the story of a young woman who spins nettles from their original meaning of problems into a representation of empowerment. The retold fairy tale features both environmental recognition and feminist elements alongside develops strong bonds that strengthen her survival instincts and result in transformative abilities of personal autonomy (Wuyts, 2023). The text reveals how women together with nature experience patriarchal and capitalist suppression by presenting ecological landscapes and herbal knowledge in detail through *The Nettle Spinner*. Wuyts introduces an innovative story which showing natural elements in their destructive and healing aspects. Through nature the protagonist breaks away from traditional victimization narratives about women because it demonstrates how nature enables people to heal through resistance against oppression. The story transforms into an important discourse about folklore and environmental justice and female empowerment that adds vital value to eco-feminist literature.

Statement of the Problem

This study is based on the idea that women were oppressed and silent because of their gender and identity and how male dominance plays a cruel role in women's lives and struggles. Keeping in consideration *The Nettle Spinner*, the Eco-feminist approach is well suited to analyze suffering of major female character in the story and the role of nature as a healer. This study explores an undeniable relationship of women and nature in *The Nettle Spinner* through an Eco-feminism theory.

Research Objectives

- To examine nature as a healer in *The Nettle Spinner* using an eco- feminist view point
- To explore the confrontation of conventional depiction of women and nature in *The Nettle Spinner*

Research Questions

1. How does *The Nettle Spinner* portray nature as a healer with in an eco-feminist context?
2. How does *The Nettle Spinner*, confront the conventional depiction of women and nature?

Significance of the Study

The main aim of the work is to deepen our understanding of the urgent need for an environmentally friendly society. This research attempts an Eco-feminism reading of *The Nettle Spinner* to demonstrate Wendy's Eco-feminist consciousness and to examine the profound literary significance of the story. The eco-feminist study of the story aids in understanding Wendy's Eco-Feminist awareness and give insight into the importance of environmental and human equilibrium. The work highlights the way women are treated and oppressed because of their identity and gender. It reflects a man-centered culture and dominance. This study highlights a patriarchal society where a woman has a strong relationship with nature. The theoretical study of this research benefits all those oppressed women who want to be empowered in a male-centered society.

Delimitation of the Study

The main objective of this analysis focuses on *The Nettle Spinner* through its literary examination using eco-feminist theoretical perspectives. The research only evaluates *The Nettle Spinner* in its literary context and excludes multiple comparisons between folk tale adaptations and environmental literary works. The research explores *The Nettle Spinner* through literary analysis yet fails to perform an extensive anthropological investigation of Belgian folklore traditions. This research has limited scope because few academic studies and secondary sources can be found regarding *The Nettle Spinner* even though the story is new in the literary world.

LITERATURE REVIWE

Nature plays a very important role in a woman's developing status and her life in this patriarchal world. When she is physically and psychologically disturbed by men, she finds nature as well cruel and harsh on them. Trollope (2001) believes that in different research, As a result of some societal pressures, women are known to have mental health illnesses and problems. Moreover, their health is suppressed. Here, cultural significance is occasionally misconstrued, which needs to be recognized because it appears to be a disorder that is in culture. Although researchers have written about these challenges, action should be taken to improve women's health. According to Jamal Singh (2014), under socially created patriarchy, customs, and cultural ideology, women have always been held down. Her position changes depending on the setting and the circumstances.

According to Katiyar (2020), eco-feminism in English literature shows the relationship between nature (environment) and literature. It has been referred to in the literary world by a variety of other terms, including eco-poetics, green studies, nature writing, green philosophy, eco-ethics, and eco-philosophy, among many others. Several related subfields of the study of natural history exist, such as Eco-criticism, also referred to as Eco-feminism, Eco-sophy, Eco-spirituality, and Eco-linguistics. In recent years, literary criticism has seen an increase in the prominence of eco-feminism. It investigates how the natural world and its creatures are reflected in literature. Further, Malhotra (2000) indicated that Eco-feminism provides "the fundamental conceptual foundation, but it is not the only one from which this approach is built, and it loosely defines movements and ideas that integrate feminism with ecological." (Malhotra, 2000 p. 45). This has advanced from numerous disciplines of studies, including social anarchism, labor movements, environmental movements, and movements for women's health and equality in the workplace. Its basic tenet is that the same principles that allow for the oppression of people based on sexual orientation, class, race, gender, and physical abilities also allow for the subjugation of nature.

Vandana Shiva describes in her book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* that “Forests have always been central to Indian civilization. They have been worshipped as Aranyani, the Goddess of the Forest, the primary source of life and fertility, and the forest as a community has been viewed as a model for societal and civilizational evolution. The diversity, harmony and self-sustaining nature of the forest formed the organizational principles guiding Indian civilization; the Aranya Samskriti (roughly translatable as 'the culture of the forest' or 'forest culture') was not a condition of primitiveness, but one of conscious choice.” (Shiva, 1988) Mary Daly, who is a radical lesbian feminist, in her much critically acclaimed book *Gyn/ecology* analyzes the concept of femininity, its origin and roots. She explains, with the help of theology, that how notions of virtuous womanhood have arrived and perpetuated which forms the basis of patriarchy.

Under ecofeminism's view women possess natural understanding of nature which they love together with their inherent opposition to male domination of women and nature oppression within patriarchal structures. The advocacy of Ecofeminism supports opposition because liberation for women and liberation exists naturally as one unified cause. The main philosophical emphasis of eco-feminism follows three principles: it opposes mechanism natural view, highlights decentralized systems and works to advance ethical values based on love, care and justice for the pursuit of natural harmony. Sustainable development requires absolute respect for nature's dominant position since it enables equal conversations to take place between men and nature. (Ameen, 2019-2021)

Ecofeminism provides us new ways to resolve ecological catastrophes and free women from subjugation. Previously studies about laws excluded female perspectives but with ecofeminism this changed as the combination of social gender studies and legal examination led to rejecting gender-based legal systems. Through ecofeminism researchers can unify the battles of both natural liberation and female liberation through a unique analytical approach. The theory finds an ecological crisis solution through its analysis of mechanistic nature understanding and patriarchal culture while re-establishing female and natural worth and creating social-ecological systems which promote human-nature harmonious coexistence. Every knowledge project fights for its recognition in scientific domains through admitted or unacknowledged ethical and political grounds according to Haraway. Our dialogue with the world will benefit from the supportive relationship between ecosystem ecology and ecofeminism which act as complementary objects (Zhang, 2021).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research here uses qualitative methods based on reading and interpreting texts that apply eco-feminist literary criticism. The main purpose of this research is to assess the portrayal of nature as a healing force in the story by employing ecofeminism. Because *The Nettle Spinner* grew out of folklore, environmentalism and feminism, it is best to examine this work by closely studying the language, symbols, plot and the development of its characters. The study centers on examining important passages, mainly those that focus on the character's dealings with the environment, changes due to nature's influence and changing types of women's stories told outside society. These concepts are studied using ideas proposed by Vandana Shiva, Françoise d'Eaubonne and Karen Warren, whose theories speak of linked forms of oppression, environmental care and resistance arising from experience and community training. The research includes looking at recurring themes in literature such as nettles, spinning, herbal medicine and silence. All these themes are discussed in relation to ecofeminism, folklore renewal and

environmental literature as a whole. The short story of Wendy Wuyts, *The Nettle Spinner* is used as the major source and other journal articles are used as secondary sources.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Eco-feminist theory is the backbone of this study, as it makes clear how nature's domination is closely tied to women being oppressed. By using the work of Françoise d'Eaubonne, Vandana Shiva and Karen Warren the framework looks at how *The Nettle Spinner* sees nature supporting and empowering both women and their communities. Here, *The Nettle Spinner* is considered an arena for resisting the current system, since rediscovering our bonds with the Earth helps women heal and gain strength.

Vandana Shiva points out in *Staying Alive* (1988) that modern capitalism not only ignores nature, but also does not care about women's rights. She believes that sustaining the environment relies on respecting both native and female ways of knowing. She argues that modern industry and the scientific focus on little details undervalues traditional knowledge about nature held by women in many countries. Shiva, V. (1989). According to *The Nettle Spinner*, women gathered in an academy where they focused on spinning, healing and heeding the wisdom of nature. Nettles, frequently seen as weeds, are symbols of regeneration which supports Shiva's point that every plant and living thing has worth in traditional knowledge systems.

Karen Warren introduces an organized framework for ecofeminism using the concept of the "logic of domination" to show how dualistic views (for example, man/woman, culture /nature) support the overpowering of women and nature. She brings forth an alternative idea: giving importance to caring relationships, how a person is situated and relational interaction. Warren, K. J. (2000). *Eco-feminist philosophy: A western perspective on what it is and why it matters*. *The Nettle Spinner* depicts this ethos with the bonds between the women and the nettles. Women give precedence to the plants, interacting respectfully and not taking over. It overturns binary structures and main focus on creating sympathy through relationships. This theme appears in the story as the main character supports nature and holds a caretaker role in the environment. Applying a feminist and environmental perspective to old tales can allow for new stories that were originally about quiet females and people being more important than nature. Here, Wuyts reinvents the story to give the suffering maiden new meaning, showing her as powerful, ecologically wise and helpful in fighting evil.

The eco-feminist approach highlights that Wendy Wuyts teaches readers to challenge forms of oppression and presents a view of people and nature coexisting in peace. In addition, eco-feminism takes its name from the joining of environment and feminist beliefs, both in theory and in practice. Françoise d'Eaubonne, a French author, introduced the word in her novel titled *Le Féminisme ou La Mort* (1974). He emphasizes that the patriarchal capitalist system helps to dominate women and the environment. The call is for women, known for their reproductive and ecological roles, to lead a major change towards a better future for all. d'Eaubonne, F. (1974). *Le féminisme ou la mort*. Éditions P. Horay. Instead of being passive in the story, the women show they are important contributors to the environment. Nettles' ability to regenerate and the communal activities by women celebrate reclaiming traditions that support life. Silent Spring stresses that women ought to start an environmental movement to save our planet. These approaches to eco-feminism are linked to pollution and the mistreatment of women. It is believed by eco-feminists that all forms of oppression across the planet originate from the patriarchal system.

ANALYSIS

To discover useful information, make decisions and help achieve goals, data analysis involves checking, cleaning, transforming and studying data. With statistics, researchers and professionals can detect patterns, relationships and trends in data, leading them to make informed conclusions. To offer insights for research, business, healthcare or social science, data analysis mixes different methods, interactive tools and appropriate knowledge to extract data's true worth and helps plan future actions.

Wuyts' *The Nettle Spinner*, goes into depth about eco-feminist ideas, especially the positive ways nature can help and heal people. Reading the text carefully, we find that the environment influences the struggles of the main characters and groups to identify with themselves hold strong to their resilience and fight for nature's protection. At the beginning of the story, nature reflects that the protagonist is both weak and oppressed. Still, when she encounters the elements near her, especially nettles, nature comes alive and refreshes her. "*Such a secluded place must surely weary you?*" "*I've grown accustomed to it, my lord, and find solace here*" (p. 233). The lord wanted to know if being alone and out of sight could lead to feeling exhausted and tired. Renelde replies that being alone has become familiar to her and she likes it. The word "solace" shows that the isolation and silence are meant to help her, offering her support and possibly covering up her grief from earlier troubles.

From Wuyts's perspective, Renelde and the other spinners care about and guard knowledge and wisdom about herbs and nature gathered through instinct and practice. This fits with eco-feminist beliefs that celebrate traditional, nature-based ways of knowing that are usually set aside by patriarchal society. "*These women were believed to communicate with nature, understanding the essence of each plant and its purpose*" (p.235). It means looking at women from old cultures who were spiritual guides, healing herbalists, or medicine buddies, since they were thought to connect with the natural world effortlessly. These women were in harmony with nature and talented at using and understanding the natural features and uses of plants, even while mixing science and wisdom.

This is in keeping with the eco-feminist way of respecting plants and rejecting harmful, industry-led exploitation of nature. People cooperate with nature instead of taking advantage of it and they treat it with respect. Nettle spinning is an important part of the story and is treated with great respect. In some cases, nature becomes a cradle of reconciliation and perseverance. "*The father, the count breathed his last, finding peace*" (p.232) .It advocates that people who contributed to former tribulations can also find a way to heal with nature, substantiating that nature's healing is meant for all people and not just the oppressed.

"*In her dreams, as I was foretold, the spirit of the nettles appeared, elucidating the mysteries she sought to unravel*" (p.235) .This section tells about how the Renelde had a dream where a 'spirit of the nettles' appeared, guiding and informing her. She knew this would happen because of a prophecy she received. The term elucidating explains exactly what is not clear or unclear. Choices may concern making things with magic or taking steps to lift a curse.

The story points out that eco-feminist resistance looks different from the loud forms—it is mainly saving the land with love, knowledge and patience and in return nature also teaches with the experiences of life. Spinning the nettles can be a hard task but what it produces a soft material same as nature teaches the lessons to face the hardships. "*The nettles, once processed, yielded a thread that was simultaneously soft, sturdy, and ethereal*" (p.235) .In this process, nettles (a plant with sharp needles) are made into a special kind of thread by a lot of hard labor.

Even though the nettles are so rough, they are used to make materials that are soft and delicate. This shows that spinning is often thought of as magical, because it can make troubles look better and give them value.

Nature acts with intensity and is not just included for ornamentation in *The Nettle Spinner*. It guides women to healing, teaches life lessons and contributes to building their agency. This story imagines a way to heal our world through combining nature, spirituality and a respect for natural cycle. "*Resume your spinning, love,*" Guilbert urged. "*It's our sole hope. He's bound by his own word*" (p.236) Here protagonist's companion Guilbert, urged her to carry on spinning. The author suggests that the only thing that will help them survive or lift a curse is the successful completion of the task. This phrase shows that the outcome depends on the completion of a promise or required action because the character must stick to what they have agreed.

"*No sooner were the nettles plucked from the earth than they seemed to rejuvenate, regenerating with an uncanny speed. Easily these resilient plants even sprouted on the well-trodden grounds of Renelde's cottage...*" (p.237) This scene shows how the environment and the female character can heal after suffering. Though pain and difficulty have always accompanied these nettles, here they speak of hope and regrowth, just as the protagonist keeps getting stronger.

"*As her needle made the final stitch, imbued with the essence of nettles, sealing the destiny intertwined*" (238). The spinning now serves as a ritual that helps with healing and builds strength. Today, nettles mean something special and are directly tied to fate and healing, helping people, families and nature recover. Wuyts uses the traditional folk tale to highlight female gatherings and learning that is connected with nature. This idea is further explained in the following lines.

"*Joining forces with the countess, they established a unique academy... not just taught the art of spinning but also guided to attune themselves to whispers of nettles and the desire of their hearts*" (238-239). It demonstrates ecofeminism's desire to build new communities by sharing respect, care and mutual help with nature. At the academy, young women build connections and trust which gives them the power to grow and recover.

"*And because of these young girls and the nettles, I tell you, Ghent became a rich place*" (p.239.) This is a closing or reflective statement, from a narrator suggesting that the efforts of the young girls (like the protagonist) and their labor with the nettles led to great prosperity for the city of Ghent. It implies a myth or legend behind the economic success of the town—crediting bravery, endurance, and magic.

For many eco-feminist authors, plants represent both religious and political ideas in addition to their natural form. In this tale, a nettle shifts from something that brings pain to something that helps heal and bring out ideas. The plants having the ability to come back after being harvested, means the plants and women share hardiness and strong determination. It demonstrates Shiva's view that biodiversity found at home and passed on by women is essential for living sustainably and rescuing nature.

Nettle fiber spinning is shown as a symbolic and transfigures process. We see sewing referred to as a job that helps the women but also heals the community. Eco-feminist ethics are clearly seen in this ritual, since it gives new value to traditionally feminine jobs and turns away from industries that focus on high production. Handcraft is combined with an awareness of the environment. It connects to Warren's approach to ethics which favors safe and connected practices that build long-lasting communication between humans and the rest of the natural world. The women interact with the nettles, notice their cycles and do their work in step with the

nettles. Using respectful language, this approach opposes models that prioritize human extraction of resources. It breaks down the nature/culture divide by making women more like helpers of nature, not those who control it.

The group forming the spinning academy demonstrates how knowledge can be transmitted and support. The group serves as an example of recovery between eco-social systems. The book explores healing for both people and the place they live in, demonstrating how systems in society and nature work together. That's why leaders in the movement showed a preference for ways of living in harmony with nature that are not controlled by large organizations or steered solely by women. By choosing a plant connected to suffering and changing it into a healing remedy, the work turns ideas of danger into strength. Even though nettles are said to sting, they turn into lifesaving tissue through feminine management. The theory means that being seen as smaller as or less valued than others can be changed into power when considering the world from an equal and related position. When the narrative finishes, Ghent is wealthy because of what the girls and the nettles accomplished. That means a rich culture is created through ecological and feminist awareness, not simply progress in industry. Ethics, indeed, depend on the community and its experience, as Warren believes.

By using the Nettle Spinner, the book models eco-feminist healing in a strong way. The novel accomplishes this by highlighting nettles, promoting female strength and drawing on environmental beliefs which are part of the movement's core principles. It makes nature a healing source and puts feminine knowledge at the heart of turning things around environmentally and socially. It becomes clear from this study that ecofeminism is practiced, narrated and enacted by both Wuyts and the women she describes, interacting with plants and place throughout her story.

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