

ECOFEMINISM IN ACTION IN ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND

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Abstract:

There is a rising concern amongst the people worldwide at the rapid rate at which our environment is going downhill. Man has exploited Mother Nature up to the hilt and is only now beginning to see the grey areas of his activities. Ecofeminism is a branch of feminism that correlates the exploitation of the environment to the exploitation of women, and aims at finding a solution on common grounds. Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (27 January 1832 – 14 January 1898), also known by his pen name Lewis Carroll was an English writer noted for his fictional writing for children. Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland follows the story of a young girl named Alice as she descends into a magical world where human rules and laws do not hold. In this strange land Alice struggles to find an identity for herself as she slowly takes in the way of nature around her. This paper is an attempt to read Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland from an ecofeminist point of view.

Keywords: Environment, Feminism, Ecofeminism, Identity, Nature.

Ecofeminism, also known as ecological feminism, is a movement, which came into being in the period between the 1970s and the 1980s. The term Ecofeminism was first coined by the French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974), which literally translates in English to Feminism or Death.

Much like women, nature too has been exploited and degraded for cheap labour and higher monetary benefits. Ecofeminism is a movement which correlates this condition and status of both women and nature and aims at finding a common solution. It gained momentum alongside the second wave of feminism and gradually the movement spread across the world. According to Peter Barry, this movement "...was a renewal of an old tradition of thought..." (*Beginning Theory* 116).

Ecofeminism is based on the basic principles of feminism, which overrules any distinction between the sexes and opts for peaceful co-existence. The practitioners of Ecofeminism also focus on the protection of our environment and a life of perfect harmony resulting from nature and humans living side by side. Keeping in mind the relation between women and nature, and the mistreatment meted out in the name of patriarchy towards both, ecofeminists advocate a holistic approach to both the issues.

During the late 1980s ecofeminists found themselves facing a divide due to the differences in their opinions. Thus Ecofeminism was divided into two different branches: Radical Ecofeminism and Cultural Ecofeminism. Radical ecofeminists hold the view that it is the patriarchal domination of the society that degrades both women and society. Therefore, they seek to put an end to patriarchy for the well being of both women and society. Cultural ecofeminists, on the other hand, believe that women by nature tend to be closer to Mother Nature. They, thus, encourage the association of women with nature and advocate for the protection and upliftment of both women and nature.

Nature has been seen as a personification of a loving woman and a nurturing mother since time immemorial. The fruits of Mother Nature are bountiful and she bears us all lovingly, exactly like a mother does to her child. This practice of endowing nature with the characteristics of a woman can be seen in various cultures across the world. Mother Nature is a Greco – Roman embodiment of nature and her child – bearing and nurturing characteristics. Apart from ancient Greece and Rome, nature has been viewed as having feminine attributes among the indigenous people of the Americas and Southeast Asia. It is from this practice that the basic tenets of Ecofeminism arise.

Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (27 January 1832 – 14 January 1898) is a British writer who is best known for his fiction for children. But it was through his pen name the world familiarised themselves with him and his works – Lewis Carroll. Lewis Carroll has created a unique place for himself in the history of English literature through his vivid and quirky imagination. His works abound in strange landscapes and stranger characters. In Lewis's world the basic laws of nature do not hold, much to the delight of the little children his stories were meant for. But beyond all the light – hearted banter that his works provide, one cannot ignore the deeper meanings that his works convey.

Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is a story of a young girl who falls into a rabbit hole and finds herself entangled in bizarre adventures. Though terribly confused at first, Alice soon learns to take in her stride the unnatural event of things around her without assigning any hidden meaning to them. Abundant in nature, the wonderland that Alice falls into pushes her to question the world around her and also try to find her true identity.

Even though more than one hundred and fifty years have passed since the publication of this iconic novel, the story continues to remain relevant to this day. The abundance of word play within the novel also serves to indicate the ever – changing and complex form of nature. The anthropomorphism in the novel can be seen as a reminder that all animals in nature too are emotional beings and their existence is very crucial to the survival of both Mother Nature and human beings.

Throughout the course of the novel, Alice grows from taking the ways of nature for granted and often imposing her own will on the animals, to accepting the course of Mother Nature. As Alice falls into the wonderland she immediately goes on to assert her authority over the other animals, but soon realizes that all animals too are intelligent creatures, much in contrast to what she had been taught in her school.

One can notice the obvious growth of Alice as the novel progresses. Once in wonderland, she terrorizes the animals with the talk of her predatory cat and spreads panic around. Alice's cat Dinah can be seen as the representation of Man, ever greedy and destructive. But Alice soon learns more and grows as an ecofeminist as the story unfolds along the pages of the novel. From going in search of her identity among nature to realizing that the ways of Mother Nature cannot be altered with, Alice finally find meaning and contentment in nature.

One lazy day as Alice is sitting with her sister on the riverbank, she happens to see a rabbit in a waistcoat with a pocket watch rushing past by. This strange event would seem terribly outlandish to anyone. But it is not so to Alice. In fact, Alice would later wonder at how a rabbit rushing past in a waistcoat had all seemed very natural to her first, "... it all seemed quite natural" (*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass* 5), when it should not have.

This is the first introduction of Alice as an ecofeminist, who as a female is more intimate with nature. She does not question the quirky ways of nature, instead accepts Mother Earth for what she is. But her curiosity does get the better of her and she follows the rabbit into its hole. As she falls into the hole she is tossed into a land where nature takes it own course and like a true ecofeminist she does not question it and she learns to find her way amidst it.

Once inside the rabbit hole, she finds herself in a room, unable to find her way out. There are doors but she is trapped inside the cramped space due to her size which does not allow her to go out. She longs to go out and goes so far as to drink and eat unidentified things in a bid to let herself out of the suffocating room.

Alice opened the door and found that it led into a small passage, not much larger than a rat-hole: she knelt down and looked along the passage into the loveliest garden you ever saw. How she longed to get out of that dark hall, and wander about among those beds of bright flowers and those cool fountains.... (*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass* 8)

Throughout the centuries, women have been subjected to repression of many kinds sanctioned by various illogical rules and regulations imposed in the name of culture and tradition. Patriarchy has forced women behind walls, slowly suffocating them into oblivion. This similar sentiment can be seen in Alice as she longs to go out into the world and explore.

Ecofeminists too share the same view, as they advocate women to find peace and harmony through and in nature. Just like Alice who looks through the door and on finding the garden outside wants to make good her escape through one means or the other, ecofeminists too talk about women learning how to be resilient and yet loving like Mother Nature. Nature has its own course and bends to no man's rules. Man quickly learns the high price one has to pay if one tampers with the way of Mother Nature. This is the resilient spirit of Mother Nature that ecofeminists try to encapsulate.

Alice soon finds herself face-to-face with a caterpillar sitting on a mushroom and smoking a hookah. After a series of adventures, Alice realises that she no longer knows her real identity. She then approaches the caterpillar with a view to learning about her identity and wants to know if the caterpillar will be of any help to her in resolving the identity crisis. The caterpillar is all help to her albeit answering her questions in a confusing manner.

'Who are you?' said the caterpillar.

This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, 'I – hardly know, sir, just at present – at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.'

'What do you mean by that?' said the Caterpillar sternly. 'Explain yourself!'

'I can't explain myself, I'm afraid, sir,' said Alice, 'because I'm not myself, you see.' (*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass* 31)

Alice longs to find her true self, as she feels that she has not been allowed to be herself at all. The events that take place around her confuse her and she feels that she has been manipulated into being someone she is not. So she goes into the realm of nature to find her true self, and is eventually directed to do so. Even though Alice is hesitant at first, she finally decides to trust the caterpillar – a part of nature, and takes its advice.

One of the principal doctrines of feminism states that it is the lack of identity that makes women around the world fall prey to the evils of patriarchy. When one finally figures out one's identity, it becomes much easier to chart out one's life and find peace and happiness. Throughout the ages, women have been refused an identity, with the idea of suppressing them in the name of patriarchy.

Ecofeminists hold that it is through the association of women with nature that they can find their true identity. Nature too has been exploited for the benefit of man. Patriarchal dominion over both women and nature has led to destruction and chaos. But Mother Nature nevertheless reigns supreme and refuses to bend to any man's whims and fancies. Man has learnt a long time ago not to mess with the forces of nature, for the consequences are dire and far-reaching.

Much like Alice who is looking for answers in nature, ecofeminists uphold the idea that the answer to the various problems that women face around the world can be found in Mother Nature. Mother Nature can be unyielding in her ways and yet can be a loving and nurturing mother to all living beings. It is thus through her ways that the victims of patriarchy can once again learn to find their identity, happiness and eventually their way in life.

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