

## Exploration of Ecofeminism in Three Representative Nineteenth Century American Women Novelists

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### **ABSTRACT:**

This paper is a detailed analysis of the role of ecofeminist literature in the nineteenth century American literature. Ecofeminism is a practical political movement addressing a broad range of urgent social and political problems, from pollution, health, and species extinction to economic development, militarism, racism, and sexual violence. It is an ecologically centered discipline that critiques the dominant male practices and discourses relating to nature. While ecofeminist literary critics examine literature from all cultures and throughout history to explore female perspectives on nature, nineteenth-century English and American literature is seen as a particularly rich area of study. Margaret Fuller's *Summer on the Lakes* (1843) chronicles the travels of Fuller and her companions as they visit Niagara Falls, the Great Lakes, Chicago, and the Wisconsin Territory. Susan Fenimore Cooper's *Rural Hours*, (1850) she describes an ideal rural society based on her experiences during her excursions in the local countryside. Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), for example, is set in the fictional town of Dunnett Landing on the coast of Maine, and the action of the novel revolves around the town and surrounding islands. Taken together the works of these three writers provide unequalled representation of women's efforts on both sides of the pond to challenge the social constraints that blocked their self-realization, and to speak for nature. Their masterpieces exhibit their efforts to interpret the nature of nature and their own identities. They show a splendid chronology that places these women's work in the context of the long nineteenth century.

**Key Words:** Ecofeminism, Nature, Environmental Ethics, Female Exploitation, Gender Politics, Domesticity, Local Landscapes.

Eco-feminism is the latest development in environmental ethics and is a feminist and ecological combination of Marxism. It is an interdisciplinary movement that calls for a new way of thinking about nature, politics, and spirituality. Ecofeminist theory questions or rejects previously held patriarchal paradigms and holds that the domination of women by men is intimately linked to the destruction of the environment. Eco-feminists embarked on a study of particularly female ways of being and thinking about nature throughout history. While ecofeminist literary criticism is similarly concerned with the depiction of nature, it emphasizes how traditional representations often see the land as innocent, female, and ripe for exploitation. Ecofeminists have various commitments to liberal, cultural, socialist, indigenous, and postmodern feminist theories. Ecofeminism is an ecologically centered discipline that critiques the dominant male practices and discourses relating to nature.

Throughout the Victorian era, an interest in botany and horticulture flourished and seduced the masses into producing what can be referred to as a language of flowers. Beverly Seaton says, “Amidst the numerous publications on floral symbolism, there was a genuinely intense interest for the profound truths that nature offered. Flowers were adopted as tools for emotional expression, which were heavily associated with love, family and of nineteenth century Victorian life.”

This paper underscores the synthetic vision of nineteenth-century women writers, who are often more likely to regard nature in the context of gender politics or struggles for social improvement than as a separate political or cultural concern. The number of published women authors was greater in the nineteenth century than in any preceding century. Women's access to higher education increased exponentially during the century, providing them with skills that they could use to develop their art. The growth of market economies, cities, and life expectancies changed how women in Europe and the United States were expected to conform to new societal pressures, and made many women more conscious of their imposed social, legal, and political inequality. Finally, the many social reform movements led by nineteenth-century women, such as religious revivalism, abolitionism, temperance, and suffrage, gave women writers a context, an audience, and a forum in which they could express their views.

Toward the end of the century, nineteenth-century women writers expanded their subject matter, moving beyond highlighting the lives and hardships suffered by women locked in domestic prisons. Instead, they increasingly expressed their individualism and demanded more equal partnerships in marriage, public life, law, and politics—with men. For many nineteenth-century women, the sense of place was an important aspect of their writing and many wrote about the local landscape that was often an integral part of their daily life.

This paper surveys the heritage of three best representative female nature writers through their masterpieces -- *Summer on the Lakes (1843)* by Margaret Fuller, *Rural Hours (1850)* by Susan Fenimore Cooper, *The Country of the Pointed Firs (1896)* by Sarah Orne Jewett -- of nineteenth century. The paper highlights these women naturalists who have located specifically gendered meaning in their work. It sees them less as key individuals as engaged in a communal tradition, sometimes integrating their interests in nature with broad-based gender-role expectations to departing from those expectations in a kind of quiet revolt against the dominant culture.

Margaret Fuller was clearly considered by many nineteenth-century women as the sine qua non of the woman's rights movement. Fuller, in fact, explicitly distinguishes a woman's gender from her nature at a time when the two were fast becoming synonymous for women: hence in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* she contends that "what woman needs is not as a woman to act or rule, but as a nature to grow, as an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely and unimpeded." Here, the freedom and lack of impediments she believes to be guaranteed to any soul are conferred upon women precisely by identifying her as soul versus the traditional identification of women with (or as) body. Fuller's treatise, then, provides women with a potential means of escape from their confinement in woman's sphere, in a "woman's place" where and when that confinement is based on the penalty of biology.

In 1843 Margaret Fuller, a well-established figure in the Transcendental circle of Emerson and Thoreau, traveled by train, steamboat, carriage, and on foot to make a roughly circular tour of the Great Lakes. "*Summer on the Lakes*, was Margaret Fuller's first original book-length work, the product of her journey through what was then considered the far western frontier in mid-nineteenth-century America. . . . Throughout her *Summer on the Lakes*, Margaret Fuller describes the Western landscape vividly, in images often reminiscent of nineteenth-century

landscape paintings such as those of the Hudson River School and Luminist painters. Throughout *Summer on the Lakes*, Fuller experiences a series of epiphanies, in which she merges with nature and comes to see-in the metaphysical as well as physical sense- nature and its design. Fuller's ideal landscape is one in which humankind and nature almost merge, where there is a sense of communion between them. If the landscape is also a metaphor for the nation, then Fuller reveals that it is through communion and harmony with the natural world, not conquest, that America can create a new Eden in the West. At the same time, Fuller critiques the masculine view of nature which demands the domination of nature, not peaceful co-existence. In her descriptions of the landscape, as she merges with nature, Fuller acts as an example of the ideal she hopes her fellow Americans will achieve as they build the West.

For many women, life on the frontier meant further drudgery and hard work doing domestic chores, and consequently they had a different sense of the possibilities of the landscape than did their husbands and sons. Other women travelers noted in their writings that despite the promise of untouched landscapes, women's domestic captivity prevented them from enjoying what the land had to offer. This is one of the themes of Margaret Fuller's *Summer on the Lakes*. This portfolio of sketches, poems, stories, anecdotes, dialogues, reflections, and accounts of a leisurely journey to the Great Lakes is, at once, an external and an internal travelogue. Drawing on historical sources, contemporary travel books, and her own firsthand experience of life in prairie land, Fuller used the opportunity of visiting the frontier to meditate on the state of her own life and of life in America--both as they were and as she hoped they might become."Fuller gets directly to the essential spirit of the new land ," notes Babette Inglehart of Chicago State University.

Susan Fenimore Cooper's *Rural Hours* based on her explorations around her father's home (which she never left) in Otsego, New York and her wide reading of natural history. She "properly" disclaims scientific knowledge and focuses on nature as her home and the study of one's natural environment to educate children and nurture moral character. This image "conjoining women's roles as domesticator and the American landscape's new image as home" (not wilderness) set a model for many American women. She disliked the Latinate system of names and used nature as a "springboard for religious meditation and moral instruction." She liked a mixture of wild and tame plants, advocating the native growth but seeing nature as a

place of democratic harmony, yet she lamented the losses that she saw, especially in the forests. She anthropomorphized the birds she loved, appreciating domestic arrangements of all animals and finding models there for the "proper female virtues of modesty, constancy, and sisterhood."

Sarah Orne Jewett was at the peak of her literary career with her incomparable novel, *The Country of Pointed Firs*. (1896). Literary critic Willa Cather stated that it would be "ranked along with the *Scarlet Letter* and *Huckleberry Finn* as three American books that have the possibility of a long, long life because no others confront time and change so serenely" ([Lindemann par 50.](#)) *The Country of the Pointed Firs* is set in the fictional town of Dunnett Landing on the coast of Maine, and the action of the novel revolves around the town and surrounding islands. The story is of a young woman writer who spends a summer in the small town, where she falls in with a group of women who weave a web of stories about the place and its people. Jewett also portrays this circle of women as a manifestation of nature that seems to arise from the rugged landscape. Jewett lionizes the importance and necessity of female relationships in society. Her most praised creation of such a relationship was in *The Country of Pointed Firs*--Mrs. Todd, a woman in her sixties who serves as the local herbalist, offers herbal remedies to help heal the physical and emotional ailments of the local community. Jewett chose to write about spinster or widows, for they are the ones who concentrate with single-mindedness on maintaining and celebrating the bonds of the community.

Sarah Orne Jewett reflects the mocking of women's spheres in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. The men come to nature for plunder, not refuge. From Jewett's perspective, women are a more peaceful and spiritual sex, and their involvements in society are important in keeping the town in balance with itself. "Jewett was at the heart of a vibrant, urban community of women writers, artists, and scholars in Boston; creating her fiction in a unique period when 19th-century middle-class feminism was firmly embedded in the mainstream culture of New England." Says Harper.

Nineteenth-century nature writing by women took various forms, but one theme that is seen in most of these works is the importance of the link between human beings and their natural surroundings. For most female writers, concern with the environment is not tied to a romantic longing for the openness of the rugged landscape or the withdrawal from society, which are

common themes in men's nature writing. Rather, the earth is seen as the sustainer of human life and relationships, and the fragile boundary between nature and humanity is emphasized. Critics who study these women's writings have been particularly interested to show how the "gendered" female landscape that is central to nineteenth-century male writing about the environment is given more complex expression in works by women. They also show how female writing about the environment weaves together concerns about ordinary life and explores questions of community, gender, domination, and exploitation.

Ecological feminists, or eco-feminists, identify disturbing connections between the domination of women and the domination of nature, and they argue that these associations explain the violent attitudes toward both nature and women pervading Western culture. The Indian context imparts an added significance to the meaning of ecofeminism. In Indian Philosophy Women symbolize **Prakriti** means **Nature** as She creates and nurtures the creation to bloom. She also signifies as **Sakti** means **the power that drives the system**. Ecofeminists hope to change society; their concern is for the future; their goal is a new mode of interaction between humans and nature." For this precise reason, knowing our history through literature is crucial!

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