



J.G. BALLARD'S *THE DROWNED WORLD* AS AN ECO-FEMINIST TEXT

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Abstract:

*This article analyses J.G. Ballard's work of climate fiction, *The Drowned World* from a social eco-feminist perspective and its purpose is to expose the relationship between patriarchal capitalism and the oppression of women and nature through the only female character; Beatrice. Through Beatrice, it is revealed how and in what ways, the oppression of women and natural areas are interconnected. Ecofeminism is employed in this article because prevalent parallelisms exist between the condition of women and the state of the natural environment. Additionally, similar connections prevail between ecofeminism and environmental preservation/security. In specific, the study focuses on the setting, (global ecological disaster-flood) the characters and the relationships between them within the context of the novel's plot.*

Keywords: *Ecofeminism, Holism, Biblical, Environmental Issues, Oppression, etc.*

As a theory, ecofeminism was formulated in the mid-1970s by Françoise Eaubonne and it was mainly specified as the combination of ecology and the women's movement. As a sub-branch of feminism, eco-feminists shared the belief that feminism alone ignored many other issues and was not comprehensive enough to meet the needs of its supporters (Bennett, 63). Ecofeminism is an extensive thought which: "touches on subjects as diverse as nature-based religion; animal rights; women's rights; environmental worries about water, land, and air pollution; wildlife conservation; and the oppression of Third World countries and peoples by the United States and other industrialized nations" (Bennett, 63). Thus, it can be asserted that ecofeminism is holistic in nature and encompasses a great variety of social concerns ranging from environmental issues to animal rights, protection of nature and minority rights.

Ecofeminism consists of two distinct characteristics: holism and the annihilation of hierarchy (2005, 64). Holism is described as the doctrine which affirms that all living beings on this planet are related to and cannot be disconnected from one another. In addition, hierarchy is regarded as the main cause of conflicts and human oppression. Hierarchy is associated with patriarchy which is considered the primary responsible for all types of conflict and struggle among human beings. Despite the fact that pre-history and mythology are shaped by matriarchal culture; "patriarchy challenges and replaces everything which powerful women handle" (Ekmekçi, 210). Therefore, it is believed that the annihilation of hierarchy and patriarchy is bound to create a better and peaceful world. Ecofeminists argue that: "valuing one kind of life over another will keep the hierarchy firmly entrenched, leaving traditionally defined "male" qualities-physical power, mechanistic ability, analytical and linear thinking-to be affirmed over "female" qualities-empathy, sensuality, emotion" (Bennett, 64).

In short, it is obvious that a ground-breaking, revolutionary change of spirit is imperative in order to provide the application of ecofeminism whose priority forms the eradication of hierarchy. Instead of being a simple theory, ecofeminism comes forward as a complex philosophical notion that engages literary texts as a tool to articulate and transmit its concepts and messages to the public. Eco-

feminist texts appear in a great many genres among which are science fiction, fantastic fiction and autobiographical writing. Eco-feminist writing challenges conformist forms of fiction by deconstructing hierarchical focal points and reciprocal relations.

In Ballard's *The Drowned World*, the protagonist, Dr. Robert Kerans is assisted by Dr. Alan Bodkin, Colonel Riggs and his pilot Lieutenant Hardman. The novel's main antagonist is an intriguing character named Strange man and lastly there is also a woman who goes by the name of Beatrice Dahl. Beatrice has the unique quality of being not only the only woman left in the drowned city of London, but also the only woman character in the entire novel. In the early pages, Beatrice is mentioned as she: "Lay back on one of the deck chairs, her long oiled body gleaming in the shadows like a sleeping python. The pink-tipped fingers of one hand rested lightly on an ice-filled glass on a table beside her, while the other hand turned slowly through the pages of a magazine" (Ballard, 25).

She is depicted as a relaxed, careless person who tries to live life to the fullest despite the catastrophic setting. Beatrice insists on her joyful and individualistic lifestyle which she is determined to carry on no matter what happens. Ballard entrusts some negative characteristics on her by naming her a traitorous and unreliable woman who is after deceiving men (Clement, 61). Ballard compares her to a "sleeping python" which enforces the negative connotation attributed by the author. Beatrice is directly blamed for being a snake-like character and portrayed in an openly sexist manner. As the Earth experiences a reversion to the Triassic stage, those who are left alive also go through a process where they ascribe new roles to one another. Ballard makes several implications to the creation myth of Adam and Eve. While Kerans assumes the role of Adam, Beatrice becomes his Eve: "The birth of a child had become a comparative rarity, and only one marriage in ten yielded any offspring. As Kerans sometimes reminded himself, the genealogical tree of mankind was systematically pruning itself, apparently moving backwards in time, and a point might ultimately be reached where a second Adam and Eve found themselves alone in a new Eden" (Ballard, 23).

The notion of going back in time creates a mysterious atmosphere while at the same time establishing an allusion to the early stages of our Earth and humankind. In this apocalyptic setting, children are no longer or very rarely born which causes a drastic decline in the human population. The Biblical references to Eden and Adam and Eve, reflect Kerans' inner dreams of becoming the last man alive on Earth to fulfill the sacred mission of providing humanity's continuance. Robert Kerans' ambition in claiming such a mission is not because he wants to save the human race, but rather owing to the fact that he is after becoming a hero in a time of Global disaster and complete destruction (Clement, 61).

Therefore, it can be stated that Kerans acts out of pure personal interest rather than the common good. Beatrice, on the other hand is a monotonous and dull woman that everyone is eager to possess. She is generally tedious, disoriented, obedient and reckless but nevertheless seductive in physical terms. As it is the case with most of the characters in *The Drowned World*, Beatrice exhibits signs of an inconsistent mental condition. At the beginning of the story, Kerans wants to join an expedition of scientists on a journey to Greenland but gets dissuaded from leaving when: "Beatrice looked away for a moment. Oh, nothing. I've just had one or two peculiar nightmares recently. Robert, seriously—if I decide to stay on here, would you? You could share this apartment. Kerans grinned. Trying to tempt me, Bea?" (Ballard, 28)

Ballard's word choice to describe the conversation between these two characters is worth noting. Kerans assumes the role of an artificial father figure but also puts Beatrice in a weak and subordinate position, as if she is in desperate need of help and assistance. Kerans flatters Beatrice by reminding her of the fact that she is not only the only woman left but also the only beautiful woman left alive in London. Ballard's references to Adam and Eve continue in a rather ironic fashion. Kerans' attitude towards Beatrice is condescending and dishonoring at large. Beatrice's only worth and meaning is her physical appearance and female sexuality. She is being treated in an overtly sexist manner but does not exactly seem to be bothered by this. Her degradation and intimidation as a human starts right from the early pages: "Beatrice pulled off her sunglasses, and then tightened the loose back-strap of her bikini under her arms. Her eyes glinted quietly. All right, you two, get on with it. I'm not a strip show" (Ballard, 25).

In these lines, Beatrice is treated as a sexual commodity rather than a human being and to our surprise she neither responds emotionally, nor shows any sign of anger to this kind of treatment. She seems to take this kind of sexist behavior for granted. Another scholar of ecofeminism affirms that

“the boundary conditions specify that an eco-feminist ethic must be anti-sexist, anti-racist, anti-classist, anti-naturist, and opposed to any ‘ism’ that presupposes or advances a logic of domination” (Warren, 2000: 99). The same scholar also contends that “the basic starting point of eco-feminist philosophy is that the dominations of women, other human others, and nonhuman nature are interconnected, are wrong, and ought to be eliminated” (Warren, 155). Warren thus strongly advocates that the dominance and subordination of women and nature are consistent with one another. Another scholar, Yan Liu maintains that in the patriarchal system: “nature is regarded as the object of conquest and utilization, as well as a tool for servicing person. And slavery and destruction of nature will inevitably lead to the imbalance of the whole ecosystem” (Liu, 216). Ballard’s narrative is identical to Liu’s description as nature is regarded and treated as a mere object, a commodity to possess and exploit.

In conclusion, both Beatrice and nature share the same fate in *The Drowned World*. Both have been oppressed, abused and exploited by the same belligerent which is the patriarchal capitalist system. Along with the collapse of this system, capitalism and patriarchy have been annihilated and a new world order finally emerges from the ruins of the old one. In this new world order, both women and nature can now enjoy their beloved liberty. In the subtext of *The Drowned World*, Ballard criticizes anthropogenic climate change which is ultimately caused by human industrial activities. By displaying the oppression of women together with the destruction of nature’s ecological balance, Ballard not only attracts attention to the oppressive state of patriarchal capitalism, but also conveys to his readers the urgent need to adopt an eco-centric mentality that will lead to the emancipation of all subjugated living beings. With a fictional, global catastrophe, the author successfully demonstrates that the domination of women and nature are interrelated and for one to become free, the other needs to be liberated as well. As a result, the author carries out an eco-feminist message to his readers in *The Drowned World* and while he does not directly propose a concrete solution, it can be inferred that Ballard envisages an eco-centric alternative to the hegemonic system of patriarchal capitalism he deems responsible for all before mentioned forms of oppression.

References

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