

An Interpretation of E.M.Forster's Novels from the Perspective of Ecofeminism

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Abstract: This paper probes into the view that how men, women and nature interact with each other in E.M.Forster's novels from the perspective of ecofeminism. It analyzes the oppression of women and subjugation of nature in the patriarchal ideology in Forster's works and summarizes the best to get rid of this phenomenon is by their mutual efforts, women and nature can eventually earn respect from men and establish a harmonious relationship among men, women and nature.

Keywords: Ecofeminism; Men; Women; Nature; Relationship

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1 Introduction

As one of the most influential writers in the 20th century, Edward Morgan Forster (1879-1970) has published six novels in his whole life, and three of them have been made into movies. E.M.Forster's status in literature has been highly praised, such as an eminent literary critic Bradbury once claimed that "Forster has served as an embodiment of the virtues he writes about; he has shown us their function and their destiny; he has left, for other writers and other men, a workable inheritance"^[1]

Critics mainly comment on E. M. Forster's novels from the perspectives of marriage, post-colonialism, cultural conflicts, symbolism and writing techniques. However, few scholars apply ecofeminism to interpret his classic novels. At present, more and more people begin to focus on the female problem and ecological

crisis. As a result, ecofeminism has become a heated topic for discussion. Most of Forster's novels were concerned about the interconnections between the male and the female and between human beings and nature, but few scholars and critics paid attention to this perspective. Thus this paper will analyze E. M. Forster's major works from the perspective of ecofeminism in order to explore the natural and intimate relationships between women and nature and male's control of women and nature in the patriarchal society.

2 Definition of Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism first originated from feminism, which referred to the female movement emphasizing on the equal right of women and the protection of the nature. More and more scholars and experts paid attention to the increasingly serious environmental problems, it has become a theory in ideological field. The term ecofeminism initially appeared in a French feminist named Francoise d'Eaubonne's book *Le Feminism ou la Mort* in 1974. In her book, she discussed women's potential to launch an environmental protection movement which would lead to new type of interconnections between the male and the female as well as between men and nature. Another feminist called Janis Birkeland described ecofeminism as "the logical conclusion" of feminism, which "theorizes the interactions among self, societies and nature"^[2] That is to say, ecofeminism focused on the perfect integration of feminism and ecology.

In Forster's novels, there were a large number of descriptions on the interconnections between men and women and between man and nature, especially in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905), *A Room with a View* (1908), *Howards End* (1910) and *A Passage to*

India (1924). Through these descriptions, Forster hoped to realize the mutual understanding between men and women and the harmonious interconnection between human being and nature. That coincides with the essence of ecofeminism.

3 Women's Interconnection with Nature in Forster's Works

As we all know, there was a sharp contrast in the society in the past. Men played an important role in various jobs and had to support the family, while women merely stayed at home to take care of the children, do the housework and cater to the husband, therefore they formed a considerate and patient personality, this personality cultivated women with special abilities to appreciate nature and to interact with nature. In return, while staying with nature, women could get safety and comfort from nature. In addition, women could let their mind and body in a healthy state and accumulate strength to rebel against the patriarchal society.

3.1 Women's Love for Nature

In *Howards End*, the two protagonists Margaret and Helen Schlegel, who were considerate, philanthropic and intelligent young women making acquaintances with a family called Wilcox by accident. Later on, Margaret and Mrs. Wilcox established close friendship with each other. In her will, Mrs. Wilcox decided to pass her house *Howards End* to her new friend Margaret. Because in Mrs. Wilcox's eyes, the country mansion *Howards End* was a symbol of nature. She loved it very much and whenever she was in low spirit, she could get consolation there. She cared about it and cherished it. Before her death, she found Margaret had the same interest that cherished the country house and loved nature. Because her husband or her son just regarded the country house *Howards End* as a commodity, they inherited it and might sell it or destroy it for other purpose. Although Margaret and Mrs. Wilcox got married after Mrs. Wilcox's death, the Wilcox family refused to give this mansion to Margaret. But as the story developed, to our surprise, Helen's husband was killed by Mrs. Wilcox's son, as a remedy, the mansion *Howards End* was given to Helen's son.

By analyzing the plot, it is evident to see that Forster hoped that the nature should not be destroyed by others and should be taken good care of by its masters. Through Margaret's and Mrs. Wilcox's depictions, we got to know the gorgeous country mansion *Howards*

End which symbolized nature. They appreciated it and cherished it in their unique way. Both of them were spokesmen of eco-feminism, for they clearly announced that women were willing to have a close interaction with nature, are delighted to take the responsibility to protect the natural environment.

3.2 Nature as Shelter for Women

Ecofeminists maintained that women are the close friends of nature. In *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, the protagonist Lilia was eager to get in touch with nature and would like to stay with nature. In Britain, she always disliked the dull and miserable life there because she had to stay at home under the inspection of her mother-in-law and could not have a chance to touch nature, she endeavored to run away from that kind of lifestyle, while in Italy, when she first arrived in Monteriano, she sensed the free, vital and energetic environment there at once and fell in love with Gino. After her remarriage, Lilia disliked the indoor life, she always wanted to take a walk outside because in the open air she would forget her agony and she could find comfort from nature when she felt blue. In her opinion, the nature outside was her paradise that was full of liberty and relaxation. It seemed to her that nature could prevent her from harm and create a sanctuary for her.

4 The Male Oppression on Women and Nature in Forster's Works

Ecofeminism claimed that all kinds of domination over women and nature should come to an end, and insisted that everybody in this universe should be equal and have the same right. Under the patriarchal system, men engaged in all kinds of business and mastered the universe, gradually subjugated women and controlled nature.

4.1 The Male Oppression on Women

In *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, Forster depicted the oppression on women in male dominated society. The heroine Lilia was dominated by male both in Britain and in Italy in her whole life. When Lilia's ex-husband passed away, her mother-in-law and brother-in-law continued to inspect and dominate her. She expressed her suffering in the family like this "For twelve years you've trained me and tortured me, and I'll stand it no more. Charles died I was still to run in strings for the honor of your beastly family, and I was to be cooped up at *Sawston* and learn to keep house, and all my chances spoilt of marrying again^[3]" In order to avoid

the oppression of patriarchal society, Lilia bravely left for Italy from Britain and got married with Gino. After her marriage, she realized Gino was similar to her ex-husband and was also a typical spokesman of patriarchal system. Gino did not allow Lilia to take a walk by herself, wistfully refused Lilia's suggestion of holding a tea-party, persuaded Lilia to join the Roman Catholic Church, and considered Lilia as a tool for reproducing descendants. He forced Lilia to follow the Italian patriarchal conventions, it made Lilia feel suffocated and lonelier. Lilia was eager to run away from Italy when she was pregnant, but the letter for help posted to her faithful friend Mr. Kingcroft were stolen by Gino. In the end, she became seriously ill under the patriarchal oppression and died in an alien country.

4.2 The Male Oppression on Nature

Karl Marx maintained that men frequently transformed nature to meet their requirements after they led a life in a big, indifferent and industrial city. Therefore the bond between man and nature alienated step by step. In Forster's *Howards End*, it was evident to find this phenomenon.

Men's destroy of nature could be seen in Mr. Wilcox and his son's attitudes towards the country house *Howards End* which was a beautiful mansion in Mrs. Wilcox's eyes surrounded by trees and meadows. Although they have lived in *Howards End* for decades, they never showed their affection for the natural beauty of it, but usually criticized its "Endless drawbacks". With the improvement of industrialization, cars and automobile became a common tool for transportation in modern society. The upper-class regarded it as a symbol of social status. However, the arrival of the modern transportation tool also caused a problem that was where to park the car. Charles and his father had a good idea to change Mrs. Wilcox's favourite paddock near the wych-elm into a garage. Their behavior implied that men were only interested in what profits nature could afford them, they did not care about the harmful effects on nature. What's more, whenever Charles drove on the unpaved rural road, he usually complained that the dirty roads should be tarred and insisted that the delicate flowers and trees should be eradicated and never thought of the air pollution caused by cars to the nature.

5 Harmonious State among Men, Women and Nature

5.1 Conciliation between Women and Men

As we all know, where there is oppression, there is rebellion. Facing the patriarchal oppression and prejudice, women could rebel against them courageously in their own way to gain the harmony and conciliation between men and women.

In *A Passage to India*, both Mrs. Moore and Adela all took measures to fight against the patriarchal oppression. After the trip to the Marabar caves, the traditional British lady Mrs. Moore realized the hypocrisy of the male dominated society and claimed that his son Ronny just viewed his fiancée Adela as a machine to defend men's dignity. "She has started the machinery; it will work to its end"^[4] She courageously pointed out the true purpose of the marriage and persuaded Adela not to be dominated by the British patriarchal society. With her help, Adela canceled the engagement and went back to Britain, started her own career and depended on herself. It was because of the Marabar caves' echoes that awakened her self-consciousness, encouraged her to get rid of the patriarchal restraint and became an independent lady.

Meanwhile, after the Marabar caves journey Adela followed her heart and took back the accusation of Dr. Aziz and committed that was because of the echoes that made her form an illusion that Dr. Aziz raped her and recognized the innocence of Dr. Aziz. By describing this event, Forster intended to create a chance to let male and female reconcile with each other and reach a harmonious state.

In another novel *A Room with a View*, we can easily find the evidence of conciliation between men and women, when Lucy and her sister Charlotte first arrived at the Italian hotel and complained the room given to them could not enjoy the beautiful scenery as promised, just then, two gentlemen Mr. Emerson and his son George willingly changed their room with a view to them. By doing this, we could see the male made concessions to the female and showed their respect to women.

5.2 Conciliation between Men and Nature

The idea of conciliation with nature occurred in *Howards End* when Mr. Wilcox was asked to go to the

police station, when Charles asked him whether to take a car or not. He said “I think I’ll walk^[5]” This indicated that Mr. Wilcox wanted to change his lifestyle and enjoyed nature by having his feet on earth. When he knew his son would be put in prison, he was defeated and let his ex-wife’s will come true to pass Howards End to Margaret. Because of his illness, Mr. Wilcox had to live in Howards End for a few months, but he was happier this time. Because he eventually found that natural Howards End was a spiritual home instead of a commodity. He finally understood his ex-wife hobby and recognized the true value of this house.

6 Conclusion

Through the interpretation of the ecofeminist consciousness embodied in Forster’s novel, we can

clearly draw a conclusion that Forster had a deep concern about the oppression of women and focused on the subjugation of nature in the patriarchal society. Through his works, he also wanted to express his wish to establish a harmonious relationship among men, women and nature.

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