



## An Eco-feminist Interpretation of Howards End

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**Abstract:** This paper attempts to analyze the eco-feminist consciousness embodied in Howards End from three aspects: women's intimacy with nature, women's and nature's plight in the patriarchal society and the construction of harmonious relationships between women and men, man and nature. It is evident to find that Forster has a deep concern about the conditions of women and nature in the patriarchal society and expressed his view on mutual understanding and respect in order to get of the domination of men on women and nature in Howards End.

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### 1 Introduction

E. M. Forster (1879--1970) is an outstanding English novelist, essayist and literary critic in the 20th century. He is good at applying various writing techniques in his writing, especially using symbolism in his novels. Therefore, his works are well received both domestically and overseas. One eminent literary critic, Butler once said "Forster is one of the greatest living master of the novel."

Forster was born in the latter part of the Victorian age and the beginning of Edwardian age, industrialization prevailed in the society at that time. Therefore throughout his life, Forster desired for a peaceful life, in his novels he expressed concern about man's domination over both women and nature and he hoped that men, women and nature could establish a harmonious relationship among them.

His dream just coincides with the doctrines of eco-feminism.

### 2 Definition of Eco-feminism

The term "eco-feminism" is put forward by the French feminist Francoise d'Eaubonnen in her *Le Feminisme ou la mort* (1974). Ecofeminism is regarded as the integration of feminism and ecology. It emphasizes that there is a close connection between the suppression of women and the control over nature. By studying the key reason that caused this kind of interconnection, eco-feminists claimed that the patriarchal world view was the root source. In the patriarchal society, women and nature are considered inferior to men, they must under the domination and help of men, which leads to the marginalized positions of both women and nature.

Because women and nature are in the same boat as "the other" in a patriarchal society, eco-feminists advocate that the emancipation of women should be related to the liberation of nature. Eco-feminists hoped that women and nature can make joint efforts, only in this way can they get rid of the oppression, discrimination, inequality and so on. Eventually they can realize their dream of building a harmonious relationship between men and women, as well as between human beings and nature.

### 3 Women's Love of Nature in Howards End

In ecofeminists' eyes, there exists a close relationship between women and nature. They depend on each other. As a mother of the children, women also take good care of nature and love nature, in return, whenever women are in trouble or in low spirit, they think nature is a refuge for them and they can get strength and comfort from nature. In Howards End,

E. M. Forster vividly described the close connection between women and nature. He depicted three representatives Ruth, Helen and Margaret who loved nature very much. They all shared the same interest that they all showed their affections for the country house -----Howards End.

The hostess of Howards End preferred to stay in the country house because in that house she could appreciate nature and felt relaxed and enjoyed the trees, flowers and moon which were all symbols of nature. Before her death, she made a will to pass her house to a friend Margaret who cherished the country house instead of letting her family members to inherit it. In Ruth's opinion, if her family member succeeded the country house, they would sell it for money and they didn't regard it as nature and they didn't cherish it.

Unfortunately, after Ruth's death, her greedy family members disagreed with her will of passing the country house to a complete stranger--Margaret and they tore it up and possessed it for other purpose. The author didn't want this tragedy to happen. He designed the remarriage of Ruth's husband, the fiancée was the ideal owner of Howards End, Margaret.

Another protagonist who loved nature is Helen. At the beginning part of the novel, Helen wrote a letter to her sister Margaret, in which she gave a brief introduction to the country house--- Howards End, she explicitly described the trees, flowers and animals there. From her description, a gorgeous and vibrant scene appeared in the readers' minds, which was quite different from Ruth's husband, Henry's depiction. Therefore, through these three major characters' detailed account of the country house and its surroundings, E. M. Forster showed us the intimacy between women and nature and women's love of nature.

#### **4 Both Women and Nature as Victims in the Patriarchal Society**

E. M. Forster not only paid attention to the intimacy of women with nature, but also sympathized with to the same destiny of women and nature in the patriarchal society. From the male character's perspective, they considered the female and nature as the possessions and accessories of men. They belonged to the subordinated and marginal social status. They were inferior to men and must be under

the domination of the male.

The typical victim of patriarchalism is the character Ruth, she had a miserable life. She got married with Henry who was a very selfish, mean and inconsiderate person. Ruth devoted her whole life to cater to her husband and her children. As a result, her husband and her children took it for granted that it's her responsibility to take care of the family and sacrifice for them. On a wedding ceremony, Henry's mistress named Jacky encountered him by accident, he didn't feel guilty for what he had done in the past and he just regarded it as normal for young people who are "cut off from the decent society and family ties". In his opinion, because at that time he worked abroad and felt lonely, to have a mistress was very reasonable. He didn't realize his disloyalty and betrayal would hurt his wife or he didn't care about his wife's feeling.

Although Ruth loved the rural life very much, she disliked the noisy and crowded city and she preferred to live in countryside Howards End. However, Henry was indifferent to her feelings, disagreed with her and was reluctant to live the countryside. In Henry's opinion, the female were "the other" and they had no choices but just follow the rules of their husband. When Ruth was ill, "he had promised to take her down into Hertfordshire, but meanwhile arranged with a nursing-home instead" . Ruth dare not rebel against her husband's decision, therefore she became sick and even worse. In the end, she died of disappointment and sorrow.

Nature also has the same fate as women. E.M. Forster showed his deep concern for nature. In Howards End Chapter X, from Ruth and Margaret's description while they were going Christmas shopping, they saw the heavy fog in the air as if "they passed through a clot of grey". It was obviously caused by the human being. For one thing, men attached great importance to the development of industry, for another, it would give rise to serious environmental pollution, which not only destroyed the natural environment but also was harmful for our health.

With the development of living standard, people began to use vehicles for transportation. The cars not only cause noise pollution but also the emissions would cause air pollution. Human beings are in a hurry to build a car park to park their cars. In Howards End Henry didn't discuss with Ruth and

changed Ruth's beloved paddock into a garage arbitrarily, "the paddock that she loved more dearly than the garden itself is converted into a garage for the Wilcoxes". In his opinion, the natural resources were meaningless and he didn't cherish the sacred natural country house Howards End, only the objects that could bring profits and benefits for him were significant to him. Whenever he went to Howards End, he would drive his car, in Chapter III E. M. Forster depicted the scene that Henry's car broke the tranquility of the countryside. While his father was driving, Charles saw "the cloud of dust" raised by him. The fresh air was polluted by his car's emissions and the flowers and grass were run over by his car.

## 5 The Eventual Harmonious Relationship

As we all know, where there is oppression, there is rebellion. In the patriarchal society, women and nature were under the domination of men, they did not have freedom and equal rights. In eco-feminists' view, in order to get rid of domination exerted by men and the liberation of nature, women and nature must unite together. Only in this way can they eventually construct a harmonious relationship between men and women, men and nature.

The spokesman of the rebellion is the timid Ruth. In the past, she was as meek as a lamb, she did everything according to her husband Henry's order. But before her death, she made a sensational decision that was passing the country house Howard Ends which she cherished very much to a friend who just met for several times. Because she regarded the house Howard Ends as her spiritual paradise, but her husband and children underestimated the value of that house, if she died, they would sell it for money and she would lose the invisible bond with nature. She met Margaret by chance and gradually she found that Margaret was the ideal successor of that house, because they had the common interests that they both loved nature. Without getting the permission from her husband, she made a will to let Margaret inherit that house. At that time it was rare to pass your heritage to a non-relative. When Ruth's husband Henry knew the will, he tried his best not to admit the will and smashed it. Finally the author arranged the remarriage of Henry and Margaret, so Margaret became the new hostess of the country house Howard Ends which symbolized nature, after marriage they lived in the

country house, indicated that men, women and nature reached a harmonious state.

Another representative of rebellion was Margaret and Helen whose revolt was much stronger. They were well-educated and knowledgeable intellectuals. They did not submit to the domination of the male. They struggled for their independence and desired for the equal rights for women. They had strong self-consciousness. They went to the theatre to appreciate music concert. They held public meetings to discuss about politics and current affairs as men. Not only the female attended the discussion but also the male joined the meeting which symbolized men recognized the equal political rights of the female as the male.

When Helen and Paul fell in love, Paul was afraid to tell the others because Helen was not born in a prosperous family and could not help him if they got married. When Helen realized the timid and hypocritical personality of Paul, she said goodbye to Paul at once. She did not want to marry this kind of hypocritical person. At the end of the novel, before Helen was giving birth to a child, her sister Margaret wanted to do her a favor to live with her, at first Margaret's husband Henry disagreed because Helen's baby was illegitimate and he was afraid that it would discredit his family. With the development of the plot, Henry's son Charles killed Helen's lover by accident and was put into prison, the hypocritical and arrogant realized what he had done in the past was wrong, in order to make a compensation, he passed his wife's beloved house Howards End to Helen's future child and fulfilled his wife Ruth's will which was to find an ideal person who cared about nature and could take good care of her spiritual paradise. The happy ending of the novel indicated that the male made some concessions in order to construct a harmonious society in which everyone is equal and understands each other.

## 6 Conclusion

Ecofeminists hold the view that all living creatures on the earth are equal, if they understand and respect each other, they could live in a harmonious state. E. M. Forster's view is similar to ecofeminists' opinion, he is aware of the male's domination and oppression of women and nature, therefore he demonstrates in his works Howards End to call on the public to realize the seriousness of the problem, through the depictions

of the relationship among the male characters, the female characters and nature, the readers can easily find that the female show their affection and respect to nature and in return, nature endows women with energy and comfort. Eventually they unite with each other and make efforts to rebel against the autocratic men. That is the solution put forward by E. M. Forster to solve the problem, which coincides with ecofeminists' theory.

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