

Original Paper

An Interpretation of Natural Images in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* from the Perspective of Ecofeminism

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Abstract

*Ecofeminism introduced in 1974 by Françoise d'Eaubonne links ecological and gender-equality issues together. It exposes an intimate connection between women and nature, and addresses the parallels between the patriarchal logic of male power over female and humans' domination over nature. This new approach in literary-criticism takes anthropocentrism and androcentrism as the roots of human-nature and male-female dualism respectively. Moreover, "Shakespeare Plus", a new researching trend in Shakespeare criticism, involves three important topics of "the Domestic" "Subject-Object" and "Knowledge-Making" that ecofeminism concerns in re-examining Shakespeare's works. This paper focuses on many natural images in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* directly or indirectly related to humans especially female characters to reveal how anthropocentrism and androcentrism affect mankind-nature and male-female relationships and interpret ecofeminist thoughts revealed in them from the subjects of "the Domestic" "Subject-Object Relations" and "Knowledge-Making". The findings, for one thing, show that affected by androcentrism and anthropocentrism humans think male-female and human-nature relationships dualistically without understanding the world in a comprehensive, equal and diversified way; for another, humans, nonhuman natural objects and other things not known or predictable yet, are interrelated. Therefore, only tolerance and equality are given to this plural world, can harmony be realized in human-nature and male-female relations.*

Keywords

Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night's Dream, ecofeminism, natural images

1. Introduction

As environmental and gender-equality issues draw more and more attention from literary critics worldwide, a new approach of literary criticism named ecofeminism comes into being. In 1974,

Françoise d'Eaubonne, a French feminist and environmentalist, first introduced this concept in her book *Le Feminisme ou la mort*. Ecofeminism exposes an intimate connection between nature and women based on their similarity in fertility, and addresses the parallels between humans' exploitation of nature and men's oppression of women. It reveals anthropocentrism and androcentrism as the roots of dualism in human-nature and male-female relations respectively, and advocates to reconstruct a world where all human and nonhuman natural objects coexist in harmony and equity. Moreover, Shakespeare criticism starts its new trend in researches from the perspective of "Shakespeare and Theory" in 21st century, namely "Shakespeare Plus", including Shakespeare. Three subjects of "the Domestic" "Subject-Object Relations" and "Knowledge-Making" which ecofeminism concerns are of great significance in re-examining Shakespeare's works.

A Midsummer Night's Dream is one of the four great comedies of the world's well-known dramatist William Shakespeare, expressing the personality liberation and humanistic thoughts of pursuing freedom and love in 17th century in England. In the play, Shakespeare depicts lots of natural images related to humans. From ecofeminist point of view, this paper attempts to analyze natural images which are directly or indirectly linked to humans, particularly women in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, to explore how anthropocentrism and androcentrism influence the mankind-nature and male-female relationships respectively and also interpret ecofeminist thoughts revealed in them from the three topics of "the Domestic" "Subject-Object Relations" and "Knowledge-Making". This paper advocates to establish an equal, healthy, non-dualistic, non-anthropocentric and non-masculine world.

2. Literature Review

This part will introduce the comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the literary review on it as well as literary criticism of ecofeminism.

2.1 Introduction to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

2.1.1 Brief Content to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

The comedy of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* set in Athens consists of several funny and dramatic stories which revolve around the royal wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta. Before the wedding, four Athenian teenagers Hermia, Lysander, Helena and Demetrius have love conflicts which are finally resolved by spirits' mischief in the magical forest at night. At the same night, Bottom, who is one of amateur actors rehearsing the play for wedding celebration in woods, and the fairy queen Titania, who has a contradiction with the king Oberon, both get involved in the tricks played by Oberon's servant Bottom. When morning comes, all conflicts disappear and everything is back on track and in harmony. This comedy's content includes plenty of natural images related to women. Therefore, this paper will try to find out the direct or indirect relations between natural images and humans especially female characters in this play to interpret ecofeminist thoughts. These images include nonhuman natural objects or phenomena such as plants, animals, celestial bodies, etc.

2.1.2 Previous Studies on Natural Images in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Both at Home and Abroad

Foreign scholars focus on the study of natural images such as trees, animals, gardens and weather in Shakespeare's works in early time and some representatives includes Beasley's *Shakespeare's Garden* (1864), Spurgeon's *Shakespeare's Imagery* (1935) and Clemen's *The Development Shakespeare's Imagery* (1977); Beasley introduces images of plants in 26 dramas of Shakespeare by means of dictionary entries; Spurgeon provides a detailed discussion of the various types of imagery and their functions in Shakespeare's plays; Clemen discusses the development of imagery from a chronological perspective. (qtd. in Xie & Wu, p. 32) These previous fundamental studies have significance for future studies of Shakespearean natural imagery.

Domestically, many scholars pay attention to natural imagery in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and do research on it to express concepts. Some of them focus on images of nature to examine Western-Chinese culture behind them, such as Xie and Wu (2022), Chen (2006), and Xie and Yuan (2022). Xie and Wu (2022) discuss the Western-Chinese culture differences behind the rhetorical devices of animal imagery in this play and *the Peony Pavilion*; Chen (2006) compares transformations of natural scene imago in dramas of Tangxianzu and Shakespeare, including *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, so as to find the natural resonance and cultural bifurcation expressed by natural scene imagoes; Xie and Yuan (2022) analyze the similarities and differences of plant metaphors in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *the Peony Pavilion* to find how culture experience influences the cognition of plants in two dramas.

Besides, some researchers study the archetype of natural images based on Frye's Prototype Archetype and concern the dualism of the nonhuman natural world and social reality to praise the green forest and call for individual emancipation like Huang (2009) and Liao (2016). Huang (2009) analyzes the original myth archetype of the forest to show the opposing relation between ideal green world and feudal society, yearning for a return to primitive nature, humanity and freedom; Liao (2016) describes the human-centered society and the symbolic pure forest in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and other plays of Shakespeare to reveal humans' desire for a Utopian world and encourage their pursuit of a better future.

The previous researches reflect cultural factors and the ambivalent relation of secular society and nature concealed in natural imagery in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. As ecofeminism develops in the late 20th century, some scholars turn their attention to the connection of human-nature conflicts and male-female contradiction revealed in through natural images in Shakespeare's plays. However, just Hao (2013) analyzes the female figures and natural images in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* from ecofeminist point of view, whose study takes the forest as a whole object in the analysis to oppose dualism in human-nonhuman world and men-women relationship and advocate gender equity and ecological harmony. However, this study doesn't present enough specific natural images as examples to further interpret the ecofeminist ideas.

To sum up, this paper will fill the blank and examine the natural images related to female characters in

more details to explore anthropocentrism and androcentrism as well as ecological thoughts behind them.

3. Introduction to Ecofeminism

As environmental and feminist movements developed, human-ecology relationship and gender equity draw more and more attention worldwide, let alone in literary criticism. The concept of “ecofeminism” was first introduced in Françoise d’Eaubonne’s book called *Le Feminisme ou la mort* in 1974. According to ecofeminism, women have an intimate and inherent connection with nature because they are similar in fertility and both oppressed by male-dominated human society. Therefore, it provides a new approach for literary critics to interpret how human-nature imbalance is related to gender inequality and how to examine and handle the issues of men’s oppression over women and human’s exploitation of environment in literary works.

As the 21st century has arrived, Shakespeare criticism starts its new trend in researches from the perspective of “Shakespeare and Theory”, namely “Shakespeare Plus”, including Shakespeare and Ecofeminism theory (Zhang, 3). In the book of *Shakespeare and Ecofeminism Theory* co-written by Rebecca Laroche and Jennifer Munroe, it points that “the Domestic” “Subject-Object Relations” and “Knowledge-Making” as three of main topics ecofeminism concerns are meaningful in re-examining Shakespeare’s works (Ibdi. 10).

“The Domestic” reflects the issue of unjustified domination of women by and unfair domination of nature by human. In male-dominated culture, men limit women’s life field within the household to construct female identity and functions in the society. According to ecofeminism, humans build boundaries to part from nonhuman natural objects, which indicates anthropocentrism and fosters androcentrism. These limitations and boundaries show dualisms because the men-centered society doesn’t consider women and nature as equal members in a whole community to coexist with. Therefore, it is the male-dominated world that leads to the two forms of dualism that ecofeminists strive to destabilize (Ibdi. 10).

“Subject-Object Relations”, with trans-corporeality as one of its key terminologies, is also the concern of ecofeminism. Ecofeminism emphasizes a whole community where humans are just one part of it and coexist with other nonhuman or unknown parts. Therefore, the subject and object are not opposing but symbiotic. Any efforts to exclude others, build boundaries and protect territory embody the concepts of anthropocentrism and androcentrism (Ibdi. 10).

“Knowledge-Making” is also a problem that ecofeminism concerns. Ecofeminists focus on how to identify the knowledge and how to obtain it. Additionally, in ecofeminism it was thought that subject and object are not binary but interlinked and coexisted. In Shakespeare’s works, sometimes supernatural power works and challenges the traditional natural world so that humans need to realize that there’s something they cannot control or fully understand (Ibdi. 11).

Because these key issues mentioned above are interlinked, in the following ecofeminist discussion

there are no clear boundaries among them. This paper will focus on the human-nature, male-female and female-nature relationships revealed in natural images to interpret ecofeminist concepts from the female-related natural images in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* from the three topics of “the Domestic” “Subject-Object Relations” and “Knowledge-Making”.

4. An Analysis of Natural Images from the Perspective of Ecofeminism

This part will make an analysis of natural images related to human-beings especially female figures in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to explore how anthropocentrism affects the mankind-nature relationship and how androcentrism affects the male-female relationship, and interpret ecofeminist thoughts revealed in them from the three topics of “the Domestic” “Subject-Object Relations” and “Knowledge-Making”.

4.1 “The Domestic” Concept

Ecofeminists believe that male construct limits of social identity and personality of female through “domestication” of women and humans build boundaries for understanding and evaluating nature’s positions and functions from anthropocentrism point of view. All these limits or boundaries are built based on inequality and dualism.

In Scene 1 Act 1, Theseus tells Hermia that “But earthier happy is the rose distilled; Than that, which withering on the virgin thorns; Grows, lives, and dies in single blessedness.” He compares married women to “distilled rose”, indicating that in male-dominated society women should be deflowered just as roses should be picked and distilled by human beings. It shows that women’s happiness, value of life and destiny are being a wife, which is defined by men. Likewise, humans consider nature as their terrain. Only being out of natural growth and manipulated by human, can roses have values in human-centered society.

In Act 3 Scene 1, when amateur actors are rehearsing the play, they are worried that if the lion will frighten the ladies and discuss how to reduce this possible frightened feeling. However, they only think about female groups and ignore male audiences’ reaction towards the so-called fierce beast. That’s because in patriarchal culture women as men’s property are dependent in social relation and fragile in personality while men should protect women in their domination just as humans safeguard their terrain when confronting dangers.

In the Act 2 Scene 2, Lysander says that “Who will not change a raven for a dove?” Here the black raven refers to Hermia and the white dove refers to Helena. Except the meaning that Hermia’s skin color is darker than that of Helena in this metaphor, this sentence indicates that men prefer dove-like girls as lovers. From “the Domestic” point of view, humans have different attitudes towards various nonhuman natural objects and build different relations with them. Compared with ravens, doves are docile, so humans prefer the latter and tend to keep away from the former. Likewise, men are likely to choose girls they can easily control, which is conducive to maintain patriarchal culture.

In Act 3 Scene 2, Demetrius describes the lips of Helena with “O how ripe in show; Thy lips, those

kissing cherries, tempting grow”. This metaphor shows both Helena’s attractiveness and a man’s strong desire of possessing a woman. Humans cultivate plants in spring and pick fruits in autumn. Similarly, girls are brought up with men’s financial support and when getting mature they will marry to and be possessed by other men in patriarchal society.

In a word, what the examples of natural images mentioned above show is that patriarchy regulates girls’ traits like obedience and cowardice and their life values like getting married rather than treat female with respect and equality. Meanwhile, humans take advantages of nature for granted by considering it as terrain in anthropocentrism, like picking roses and tasting ripe fruits. Therefore, only overturning the male-dominated can redress the imbalance of male-female and human-nature relations.

4.2 Subject-Object Relations

Ecofeminists think that like “men and women” and “human-ecology” relations don’t belong to “Subject-Object Relations”, nor being in a binary opposition or an either-or situation. On the one hand, men and women can transformable and nature and humans are interacting; on the other hand, there are still unknown and unpredictable things, or in other words, the world is multilateral. Thus, a tolerant and equal attitude should be taken towards this diverse world. Moreover, in a world constituted by humans and nonhuman thing, only when the world’s components are no longer opposing, can harmony be achieved.

Demetrius has promised his love to Helena before, but later he pursues Hermia, which makes Helena crazy and sorrowful. Knowing that it’s impossible for Demetrius to change his mind and all her insistent efforts are useless, she says in Act 2 Scene 1 that “The dove pursues the griffin; the mild hind; Makes speed to catch the tiger-bootless speed, when cowardice pursues and valor flies”, making comparisons of herself to docile animals and Demetrius to ferocious animals. For one thing, influenced by men-centered society, Helena admits women’s passive and unequal position in male-female relationship; for another, it seems that the secular and natural world consists of the weak and the strong, showing the dualism rather than diversity, imbalance rather than equality.

In the play-in-play plot, Flute as male is assigned to play the female character Thisbe; Snug as human play the role of lion; There’s also a person presenting the wall. In this scene, human and nature, animate and inanimate things, as well as men and women have flowing, interchangeable and integrated relationships which embrace tolerance and deny dualism. Seeking human and nonhuman natural world as an entire mutual symbiosis is just what ecofeminism advocates.

In addition, on account of the magical power of the “love-in-idleness” flower, the fairy queen Titania falls in love with a donkey. On the one hand, this across-species love symbolizes harmonious relationships among different creatures; on the other hand, it challenges the traditional marriage concept in patriarchal culture because a woman can choose any creature that she blindly loves rather than the person chosen by her father. Moreover, except love between men and women or within same species, there are still various forms of love existing in the diverse world which need acceptance and tolerance rather than rejection and exclusion.

In Act 2 Scene 1, there are natural images in chaos in Titania's argument against Oberon. Titania also points out that "And this same progeny of evils comes; From our debate, from our dissension". This part can be explained, in other words, that it is the male-female disharmony or dualism that causes disasters in nature, showing that all things connect with and affects each other in the whole world. Only establishing a harmonious male-female relation will the natural world not have disasters.

To sum up, all constituent parts in the multilateral world, such as human and nonhuman natural objects, female and male, and other unknown things are not opposing and should be respected.

4.3 "Knowledge-Making" Concept

Ecofeminism challenges the traditional way of identifying and obtaining knowledge which is based on reason and logic and disapproval of the dualist way of thinking. For instance, the supernatural power appeared in Shakespeare's works proves that there's something not yet known or fully understood by humans, thus dualist thoughts are incomplete in the process of cognition or reflection.

The flower "love-in-idleness" has the magic function to make one falls in love with the first person one meets. In Act 3 Scene 2, Hermia describes how Lysander loved her before with "The sun was not so true unto the day; As he to me." She has absolute certainty of Lysander's firm love to her. When she wakes up and couldn't find Lysander, she blames Demetrius by saying that "It cannot be but thou hast murdered him". Actually, it is the magical flower that drives Lysander to chase another girl. She compares Lysander to sun and herself to day on earth, showing female's dependence on male because when there's no sun, there's no day. In 17th century in Europe, heliocentric theory was widely accepted. This metaphor puts men in the center and indicates the imbalanced love relation between male and female. Moreover, Hermia blames on Demetrius because she, as a human, doesn't realize that there could be supernatural power changing her lover's mind.

In the play-in-play plot in Act 5 Scene 1, when Pyramus thinks Thisbe is killed by lion, he says "O wherefore, Nature, didn't thou lions frame?" Humans categorize lions into fierce animals just like they categorize docile animals in examples mentioned above, and consider the relationship between humans and animals as an either-or thing, which means either humans tame docile animals or they keep away with ferocious ones. It is the dualist logic based on the incompatible contradiction between humans and lions that makes him believe that there's no other possibility but lions causing her death and makes him finally miss his lover.

In a word, the dualist way of thinking limits humans' understanding and cognition of the world. Humans should admit that something yet unknown or unpredictable possibility may happen and influence themselves and that all things in the world have inner link and coexist. In this way, a more harmonious community can be achieved.

5. Conclusion

From three main topics of "the Domestic" "Subject-Object Relations" and "Knowledge-Making" that ecofeminism concerns, this paper analyzes the representative examples of natural images directly or

indirectly related to especially female characters in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. For one thing, some natural images mentioned above shows that androcentrism and anthropocentrism makes humans take dualist attitude towards or use dualist way of thinking male-female and human-nature relationships so that they couldn't understand the world in a comprehensive, equal and diversified way; For another, other examples in the play shows that all things in the world, including humans, nonhuman natural things and other things not known or predictable yet, are interrelated and interact with each other. Therefore, only tolerance and equality are given to this plural world, can harmony be realized in between humans and nature as well as male and female, and the world be healthy, non-dualistic, non-anthropocentric and non-masculine.

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