

**RESEARCH PAPER**

Gender-Inclusivity in Nature Preservation by Renouncing the Dualisms: An Ecofeminist Reading of Delia Owens' *Where the Crawdads Sing*

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ABSTRACT

The given study aims to conduct an ecofeminist investigation of Owens' *Where the Crawdads Sing*, employing Val Plumwood's theory of critical ecofeminism that embraces a gender-inclusive approach toward nature's conservation. The study utilizes qualitative approach to highlight ecofeminist elements in the given novel. Focusing on the said novel, the research states that Delia Owens' *Where the Crawdads Sing* discourages anthropocentric, dualistic thinking by underscoring the damages of deeming nature passive, and inferior to reason, capitalist development, and men's society. Owens, through her protagonist, Kya, showcases women's intimate bonds with the environment and its sentience, repudiating the master-slave relationship between the human community and nature's wilderness. Owens, in addition, stresses men's role in saving the environment from degradation, offering a critical ecofeminist approach toward nature preservation. The given study concludes that anthropocentric traditional notions of master-slave are redundant and problematic. To ensure the mutual survival of life on the planet, the study recommends that anthropocentrism must be replaced with an all-encompassing environmental consciousness.

Keywords: Environment Degradation, Ecofeminism, Gender, Nature, Women, Where The Crawdads Sing

Introduction

Nature is a shared asset of mankind, an inevitable source of life and sustainability for all living entities. Both men and women are equal stakeholders in environmental conservation efforts. Against the unprecedented degradation of the biosphere, the entire human race faces the threat of an "environmental apocalypse" culminating in the annihilation of the home planet (Buell, 1995). Women hold a unique position by sharing an intimate bond with nature, defined by the common elements of resilience, strength, and nurturing. Throughout history, women have shared the powers of creation and regeneration with nature, along with the innate abilities of adaptation and perseverance. Both nature and femininity exhibit a will of defiance in the face of suppressive powers, be it patriarchy or degradation of the environment. In this regard, Delia Owens' debut novel, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, offers a captivating tale of the partnership between nature and women in the struggle for survival. The author, who is a retired zoologist, dissects the societal marginalization of women and Mother Nature, throwing light upon the themes of ecofeminism in the novel. At the same time, Owens embraces men's participation in the efforts of "ecosophy", a term coined by Naess (1990), which emphasizes the interconnectedness of humans and nature. Owens underscores the importance of men's role in saving the environment from the oppressive nexus of patriarchy and capitalism, chanting omens of doomsday.

The novel revolves around the life of a "marsh girl", Catherine Danielle Clark referred to mostly as Kya, who "was bonded to her planet and its life in a way few people

are. Rooted solid in this earth. Born of this mother” (Owens, 2018, p. 292). Kya taps into the power of nature as a source of shelter when threatened by the agents of patriarchy and ambitious profit-mongers of the town. Owens equates Kya’s character with a firefly, a creature of astonishing intellect exemplifying female predation. The communion of nature and woman in the novel portrays the destructive as well as nurturing sides of the two forces, echoing their interconnectedness and interdependence. The novel portrays the symbiotic relationship between environment and femininity by showcasing their mutual concern against annihilation, as the overwhelming dominance of patriarchy and capitalism endangers their existence. The novel makes readers wonder who rescued the other partner in the battle for survival and toil to thrive against sheer oppression. One can only wonder if the marsh came to Kya’s rescue or if it was Kya who saved the natural surroundings from an ultimate extermination. Nonetheless, the protagonist’s understanding of the flora and fauna of her surroundings echoes the themes of the timeless connection between the environment and women in the novel. At the same time, through the character of Tate, Owens provides an androgynous and gender-inclusive approach toward saving nature, showcasing that both men and women must partner together to ensure the survival of the environment and humanity. Owens highlights that environmental preservation is not confined to solely women’s interests, rather men must become a part of the mission to save nature and humanity from the lurking disaster of ecological decay.

The given study explores the intricate relationship between women and nature through the shared miseries of abuse, exploitation, subjugation, and brutality in Delia Owens’ novel *Where the Crawdads Sing*. Like women, the environment has borne the brunt of man’s heedless actions and unwarranted use of power. Kya’s character in this regard imitates nature’s strength when faced with a dire situation. As Owens states, “It is not a morality, but simple math. Among themselves, doves fight as often as hawks” (Owens, 2018, p. 8). Owens seems to portray the revengeful side of women as well as the environment. Furthermore, the research will explore the impact of the marsh on Kya’s character and the role of nature as an inspiration for life-changing decisions made by the protagonist as the novel develops. The study will highlight the mutual interdependence of the environment and Kya since the two act as a lifeline for each other, challenging the anthropocentric dualistic notions of mankind’s superiority over nature. Delving into this interdependent relationship between the protagonist and nature, the study will explore the many ways in which the two agents ensured each other’s survival and endured patriarchal-capitalist forces of oppression. In addition, the study will explore the novel’s androgynous perspective toward environmental preservation, highlighting the importance of men’s inclusion to save the planet from degradation. The novel raises pertinent questions regarding the conservation of the environment and saving humankind from altogether annihilation. Owens advocates a gender-inclusive campaign of nature preservation, making men partners with women against the environmental abuse and eventual degradation of the biosphere. The study addresses two fundamental questions. How does the said novel destroy the dualistic perspective that deems mankind superior to nature? In addition, the study explores the novel’s take on how men can partner with women in saving the planet from extermination.

Delia Owens’ debut work, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, was first published in 2018 in the United States. Since then, more than 10 million copies of the novel have been sold (Holmburg, 2022). In 2022, the giant streaming platform Netflix adapted the novel into a film. The title of the novel exhibits an interesting ecological insight from Owens’ childhood memories. Although crawdads do not sing, according to Gustaman et al. (2021), young Owens’ mother used to encourage her to experience nature’s wilderness and to hear the unheard melodies of nature, such as the singing of the crawdads. Owens borrowed the term from her mother in this crime thriller, which revolves around the life of a woman named Kya, who lives alone in a secluded marsh, away from the busy life of the town. Kya’s intimate relationship with the marsh nurtures her, earning her the title of the “marsh girl” by the

residents of the town. The townspeople of Barkley Cove see Kya and the marsh as aberrant and strange, disconnected from the outer world. Kya and the uninhabited marsh are seen as primitive agents that must be tamed according to the modern way of life. When the prejudiced townspeople accuse Kya of killing a man from the city, she seeks power from her unexplainable relation to the marsh and its animals. Kya's life is shaped by her environment. Likewise, the marsh sustains through Kya, who defies all odds to save the marsh from destruction at the hands of the village's profit mongers. In addition, Owens projects Tate, Kya's partner as an ally in her endeavors to save the marsh, thus reiterating her androgynous approach toward environmental protection. Overall, the novel provides an interesting insight into the intricate connection between humanity and the natural world, each imperative for the other's survival.

The novel *Where the Crawdads Sing* carries the themes of ecofeminism, portraying women and the environment as victims of oppression. At the same time, men like Tate and Tom play a crucial role in the marsh girl's heroic endeavors against the patriarchal and profit-driven people of Berkley Cove, suggesting that it is not women's job alone to save the planet. Instead, men too are equal partners in the movement of ecofeminism, which aims to build an environment-oriented discourse that can ultimately help save the planet.

Literature Review

Ecofeminism argues that nature and women have both been oppressed by patriarchal ideologies. In this regard, different studies have been conducted exploring the relation between environmental degradation and women's subjugation. Many scholars have found an irrefutable connection between violence against women and the inconsiderate assault of nature at the hands of men. These ecofeminists trace the history of environmental degradation to inhumane patriarchal practices and capitalist ideologies. In this regard, both women and the environment have been studied as entities on the periphery, deemed inferior to men and development, respectively.

Oppression against an entity is led by the notions of perceiving it as "the other" that is inferior in status and an object to be subjugated. Nature and women are, unfortunately, the targets of such oppressive ideologies. Val Plumwood (2002), in her essay *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* suggests that women have traditionally been included in the sphere of nature and considered inferior to men. For instance, Plumwood provides an example of women's status equated with animals and nature, deemed suitable only for the domestic sphere of life. In Plumwood's words, "Feminine 'closeness to nature' has hardly been a compliment". The status of inferiority has resultantly become a tool of oppression common against both women and nature. In this equation, nature and women are considered opposite to reason and culture, thus making them partners in misery. However, Plumwood suggests that excluding men from the nature-humanity equation is unjustified since man's survival is as much at stake as women's amidst environmental degradation. Plumwood instead suggests discouraging dualistic notions of nature against men and not indulging in uncritical anthropocentric debates. Instead, environmental conservation must be the goal of all humanity, both men and women, by dismantling the dualisms of hierarchical nature.

Vandana Shiva (1988) in *Staying Alive* highlights the impacts of environmental imperialism on the status of nature and marginalized women. Shiva equates development with the assault of patriarchy and capitalism asserting that man's mastery over nature has been led by patterns of domination over women. In this process of mastery and domination, women were excluded from the developmental gains, violating their integrity and posing serious threats to their survival. In Shiva's words, "Patriarchal categories which understand destruction as 'production' and regeneration of life as passivity have generated a crisis of survival. Passivity, as an assumed category of nature and of women, denies the activity of nature and life". Shiva further asserts that the gains of capitalism that patriarchy refers to as "development" are a "maldevelopment". Maldevelopment, in her opinion, sustains on dualist

perspectives, violating the harmony between nature and humankind. In other words, Shiva refutes claims of mankind ushering into an age of prosperity and growth as the environmental assault keeps worsening. To address this maldevelopment, Shiva proposes the concept of “earth democracy,” which is not only human-centered but environmentally oriented. Shiva, in her popular book *Earth Democracy*, advocates the rights of marginalized communities engulfed by corporate globalization, usurping their land and wreaking havoc upon the planet’s natural resources.

Rationality and reason are the vanguards of the movement of capitalism and growth. The same elements are the driving force of patriarchal ideologies that subjugate women in the name of logic. Karren J. Warren (1989) in her work *The Power and Promise of Ecological Feminism*, opines that environmental degradation must be viewed through a gendered lens since sole reliance on reason is the main force of oppression of both nature and women. Warren suggests that environmental degradation is conducted in the name of rationality, growth, and development. Emotions have been pushed to the back seat while logic has taken over the dominant position. The justification of environmental degradation has origins in the practice of misogyny and gendered oppression, thus making a natural alliance between women and nature in their effort to survive.

The ecofeminist lens sees masculinity in opposition to both femininity and environmental preservation. In this respect, Robin Hedenqvist offers a man’s point of view in the ecofeminist debate that traces relations between nature and women. Hedenqvist (2020), in the research work *Exploring Ecological Masculinities Praxes: A Qualitative Study of Global Northern Men Who Have Participated in Pro-Feminist and Pro-Environmental Reflective Groups*, reiterates that traditional masculinity views the subject of environmental degradation as irrational and feminine. The research states, “Masculinity is defined in opposition to femininity, and studies have shown that men resist pro-environmental behaviors, such as recycling and eating less meat, just because they are viewed as feminine” (Hedenqvist 13). In Hedenqvist’s opinion, to appear masculine, men behave indifferently toward the environment, unwilling to project empathy toward nature, just as they are reluctant to accept women as equal partners. In other words, the preservation of the environment is an emotional ideology, thus, closer to feminine ideals of empathy and non-discrimination.

The term ecofeminism goes beyond the common grounds of oppression against women and nature. Gurpreet Kaur (2012), in her work *An Exegesis of Postcolonial Ecofeminism in Contemporary Literature*, states that the assault on the environment must be comprehended beyond the perspective of dualism. Kaur opines that Western capitalist domination is the most brutal force in causing environmental havoc, along with making the lives of women miserable in previously colonized countries. Kaur reiterates that Western hegemony, coupled with capitalist ideology and patriarchal norms, is the driving force of environmental degradation. In the process, women from colonized countries are the direct victims of environmental assault, patriarchal societal norms, and environmental degradation. These women have not only been the worst victims of ecological degradation, but they have also been left behind in the process of development. Kaur urges ecofeminists to go beyond a dualist comprehension of ecological assault by conducting an interdisciplinary analysis of the issue at stake. For this purpose, factors such as Western domination, unbridled capitalist ideologies, and economic-environmental assault on colonized nations must be the primary concerns.

Delia Owens’ novel *Where the Crawdads Sing* is a classic example of a capitalist-patriarchal assault on women and nature, powered by the anthropocentric view of life, which gives human superiority over all other living entities. The given study explores such dualistic notions by employing concepts of various ecofeminist scholars, investigating how Owens raises ecological consciousness through her fictional work, *Where the Crawdads Sing*.

Where the Crawdads Sing by Delia Owens has been a part of academic studies that have explored the novel from various dimensions. Various studies have been conducted analyzing the violence against women along with themes of rape and mental assault. Along with that, different studies have explored the feminist and ecological aspects of the novel. Given are some of the studies that explored different aspects of the novel under discussion.

Violence against women is a dominant concern in the crime mystery novel, *Where the Crawdads Sing*. Holmborg (2022) uses the given quote from the novel as the subject of the study: "She'd learn over and over from Pa: these men had to have the last punch". The research suggests that Owens' novel throws light upon subjects of rape and physical assault, portraying the power structures in patriarchal societies. The study builds the argument against the backdrop of Kya's troubled childhood as she suffers physical violence at the hands of her father. Holmborg (2022) employs the Foucauldian interpretation of power to explore rape culture and violence against women. The researcher further opines that the novel can be used to teach and discover the actions and behaviors of rape perpetrators in the classroom to educate young minds regarding sexual assault against women.

The eco-centric values in Delia Owens' *Where the Crawdads Sing* address the issue of environmental degradation. According to Holmstedt (2021), the novel emphasizes the power of fiction in instating change in a manner that scientific facts are unable to do. The novel's popularity is a classic example of addressing the issue of climate change by raising awareness to influence readers' perspectives. The integration of climate issues in fiction writing not only signifies the interconnectedness of science and literature, but the novel's potential to reach a large audience also signifies the promotion of eco-centric values in public discourse. Holmstedt (2021) opines that the novel *Where the Crawdads Sing* has the potential to raise environmental consciousness with a greater possibility of bringing significant change to the cause.

Delia Owens' novel *Where the Crawdads Sing* underscores the sense of urgency in matters of environmental degradation. According to Salisbury (2023), the novel resonates with contemporary environmental issues, voicing concerns to address the cause. Salisbury (2023) studies the novel from three different eco-critical lenses, including postcolonial ecocriticism, ecofeminism, and climate change criticism. The research opines that the themes of interconnectedness in the novel showcase the importance of fostering care for the natural world and preserving the non-human world. Kya's strong affiliation with the marshland conveys the message of hope and survival for the degrading planet.

Theoretical Framework

The term ecofeminism traces the complex relationship between women and nature. Plumwood (1986) argues, "The structures of patriarchal consciousness that destroy the harmony of nature are expressed symbolically and socially in the repression of women" (Plumwood 122). The term ecofeminism is interested in understanding the "inferiorisation of the female and the non-human sphere through the identification of the female sphere with nature and the body" (Plumwood 123). Ecofeminism traces the historical origins of oppression in the roots of male-dominated socioeconomic structures. According to Shiva (1988), the violence against women is akin to the violence against the environment, both led by patriarchal institutions of society. Where women have historically been the victims of oppression by men, the environment has similarly been abused by the patriarchal forces of capitalism and industrialization. Man has been ruthless toward the other gender as well as the environment. Shiva (1988) states that the "brutal expression" of patriarchal forces has led the environment and the whole human species to the verge of extinction. In addition, with scientific developments and rapid industrialization, new horizons of subjugation by patriarchal ideologies have emerged, making nature a victim along with women. Shiva (1988) further states that man's domination over nature is closely related to his mastery over women, meanwhile excluding both of them as equal "partners" in science and

development. In other words, the ecological destruction and women's subjugation are rooted in the same ideologies of oppression and unchecked exercise of power by patriarchal powers. According to Mies (2007), violence and material oppression against women became the basis of the growth model, which ultimately became the corollary of environmental degradation. Thus, ecofeminism views the subjugation of women and the environment as the effects of patriarchal oppression by social institutions.

The given research employs Val Plumwood's concepts from her seminal work, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, to study Delia Owens' novel *Where the Crawdads Sing*. Plumwood (2002) traces the connection between nature and femininity, arguing that feminist schools of thought must go beyond drawing mere analogies between the oppression of patriarchy and capitalism. Plumwood criticizes the "mastery model" that equates women with attributes of nurturing, recreation, and life. Rather, Plumwood urges feminists to reject the dualistic characterization of men and women. In an interesting rebuttal to liberal and radical feminist perspectives, Plumwood reiterates the importance of raising above more human and less human attributes. Men are not alienated from nature based on the so-called attributes of reason or rationality. Plumwood instead underscores an androgynous approach towards environmental preservation with both men and women on board for the cause. The androgynous environmental protection is visible in Delia Owens' *Where the Crawdads Sing*, where Tate aids Kya in the preservation of the marsh.

Material and Methods

This given study employs a qualitative, interpretive approach to analyze ecofeminist themes in Delia Owens' *Where the Crawdads Sing* (2018), using Val Plumwood's *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993) as a theoretical foundation. The research utilizes Delia Owens' novel *Where the Crawdads Sing* as its primary source, drawing on the text to highlight ecofeminist elements within the book. In addition, the research uses Val Plumwood's ideas projected in her work *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* as another primary work to study the broad niche of ecofeminism in relation to the said novel. Furthermore, the research uses relevant research articles and books as secondary sources to supplement the gradual development of arguments.

To ensure rigor, the study triangulates theory, textual evidence, and scholarly dialogue, while acknowledging limitations in scope, i-e, the study is a literary interpretation only. Ultimately, this methodology examines how *Where the Crawdads Sing* embodies ecofeminist critiques of mastery, offering a narrative of resilience against anthropocentric and patriarchal violence.

Results and Discussion

Ecofeminist Analysis of *Where the Crawdads Sing*

In the intricate nexus of existence, nature, like humans, pulsates with a vibrant beating heart. The grand web of life on planet Earth is a manifestation of the codependent life cycles of different species. The survival of the human species is dependent upon the ceaseless sprawling of ecosystems, which is a testament to a shared existence. In this regard, Delia Owens' *Where the Crawdads Sing* acknowledges the profound truth that in interconnected ecosystems, there is no hierarchical importance of one life or species over another. Owens dispels the delusions that human beings are superior to Mother Nature, revealing a shared kinship, harmony, and mutual respect in the symphony of existence. Plumwood (2002) in her work *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, similarly rejects the dualistic views of nature versus humans, reiterating that one cannot exist without the other. Against the backdrop of ecofeminism, Plumwood argues that the liberal feminists' view of dissociating women from the ecosystem or radical feminists' argument to associate her with nature is naïve and parochial. Rather, the debate must transcend the boundaries of human

versus nature since both belong to the same interconnected web of life. In Plumwood's words, "But both men and women must challenge the dualist conception of human identity and develop an alternative culture which fully recognizes human identity as continuous with, not alien from, nature" (Plumwood 36). Such an alternative conception of human identity is portrayed in the said novel where Tate partners with Kya and adopts a life in the marsh.

Challenging the Dualistic Notions in the Sphere of Existence

Dualism refers to an anthropocentric system of creating binaries that operate on the concepts of self and the other. Ecofeminism criticizes the traditional notion that puts humans at the center while pushing nature and non-human creatures at the periphery. Vandana Shiva (1988) refers to this dualistic notion as "eco-apartheid" (apartheid means separateness in Afrikaans). According to Plumwood (1986), "In dualism, the more highly valued side (males, humans) is construed as alien to and of a different nature or order of being from the 'lower', inferiorised side (women, nature) and each is treated as lacking in qualities which make possible overlap, kinship, or continuity". Plumwood reiterates that the question must not be to reject or adopt dualistic assertions of women's association with nature; rather it is the dualism that must be repudiated altogether. That is to say, women and nature must not be considered as aberrations and in opposition to the dominant side of men or humans. The effect of such a practice in Plumwood's words, is the "naturalization of domination" of man/human/reason in comparison to the supposed anomalies perceived to be women and nature. It is the destruction of dualistic conceptions that the emancipation of women as well as nature lies. In other words, nature is not an aberration nor is it "the other". In comparison to culture, nature must not be placed on the peripheral pole. This "critical ecofeminism" does not place nature and women, or even culture and men, as opposite entities. Both nature and culture, like men and women, are a part of the ecosystem with no hierarchy and notions of superiority. Owens projects similar ideas in the said novel by portraying nature as a dynamic and sustaining entity.

Delia Owens, in *Where the Crawdads Sing* projects the marsh as a living and breathing creature. The prologue of the novel challenges dualistic notions of existence, where the marsh is not rendered as a mere stagnant landscape. Instead, it is portrayed as a living, mysterious, and sentient creature that harnesses life. It acts as a character itself, playing a significant role in the development of the novel's plot. The prologue of the novel states,

"Marsh is not a swamp. A marsh is a space of light, where grass grows in water, and water flows into the sky. Slow-moving creeks wander, carrying the orb of the sun with them to the sea, and the long-legged birds lift with unexpected grace- as though built to fly- against the roar of a thousand snow geese" (Owens, 2018, p. 3)

The rejection of binaries holds the essence of ecofeminist thoughts in the said novel. According to Bonastre (2003), in the novel *Where the Crawdads Sing*, social discrimination against Kya and perceiving the marsh to be alienated from modern culture and society becomes the source of oppression against the protagonist and the environment. Moreover, Owens rejects the system of binaries governed by the notions of self and other. Plumwood (1986) reiterates that the rejection of such dualistic notions of the hierarchy of the human world to the non-human world (nature) is the essence of ecofeminism. The hierarchical pattern of the human-nonhuman world and the dualisms of nature and culture are renounced by the novel's ecofeminist portrayal through Kya's sense of attachment to the marsh. In other words, the marsh holds an equal right to existence as does the town, and the lives of the non-human beings in the marsh are as important as those of the human world outside.

The marsh in the said novel plays the role of a major character, shaping the plot and Kya's life. In Marsh acts in complicity with Kya when she is accused of murdering Chase Andrews. It can be argued that the marsh acts as Kya's partner, aiding her in the battle for survival against the deleterious people of the city. As stated in the novel, "The marsh did not confine them [marsh dwellers] but defined them and, like any sacred ground, kept their secrets deep" (Owens, 2018, p. 7). The partnership between the marsh and Kya is evident even in the prologue when the marsh appears to be acting in collusion with the protagonist to hide Chase Andrews's body. The collusion is evident when the narrator states, "The body of Chase Andrews lay in the swamp, which would have absorbed it silently, routinely. Hiding it for good. A swamp knows all about death, and doesn't necessarily define it as tragedy, certainly not a sin." It can be inferred from the given characteristics that the marsh is alive and sentient. It is not a deadened place of shelter for Kya and the other creatures; rather it cradles its inhabitants and protects them against outsiders. In Kya's case, it appears that the marsh knows that one of its inhabitants is threatened by the alien forces, thus colluding with Kya to rescue her life. Kya's romance with the marsh is echoed in feminist utopias exclaimed by Plumwood, which further reiterate the multilayered ecofeminist aspects in the novel. Plumwood defines such a "feminist utopia" as "This is a land where there is no hierarchy, among humans or between humans and animals...where the power of technology and military and economic force does not rule the earth, or at least that part of it controlled by women" (Plumwood, 1986, p. 7). The feminist utopia in the said novel signifies an ecofeminist view of a community that denounces a dualistic view of life, making nature an equal partner in survival.

The dualistic tendencies are rejected in the novel; however, discrimination against nature and Kya elucidate a dominant theme of the novel. Kya, who has spent her life away from the main city in an uninhabited marsh surrounded by wild animals and plants, is considered an aberration in society. For instance, people from the city keep referring to Kya as "Marsh trash". Kya is often referred to as "marsh girl" throughout the novel; however, labeling a young child "marsh trash" highlights an extreme, dualistic, and impaired viewpoint among the people of the town. The hierarchy and the aloofness between the marsh dwellers, which mostly include fugitives and outlaws, is reflected when the narrator exclaims,

"The marsh dwellers bootlegged their laws- not like those burned onto stone tablets... but deeper ones, stamped in their genes. Ancient and natural, like those hatched from hawks and doves. When cornered, desperate, or isolated, man reverts to those instincts that aim straight at survival. It is not morality but simple math. Among themselves, doves fight as often as hawks" (Owens, 2018, 8)

The dwellers of the marsh, such as Kya, inherit genes of survival from the marsh. When threatened by outside forces of prejudice and oppression, the marsh alongside its inhabitants, retaliates in full force. As the plot untangles, dualism fades away with the gradual elimination of the master-slave relation between nature and humans.

Plumwood advocates rejecting a prejudiced perspective against nature as she states, "We do not have to accept a choice between treating 'nature' as our slave or treating it as our master". Rather, the ecofeminist school urges us to consider nature as a partner at equal footing. Such harmony and kinship are reflected in Kya's decision to stay in the marsh after being abandoned by her parents as she tells herself, "The marsh is all the family I got." Moreover, to avoid her father's beating, young Kya finds solace in the marsh. "She lived in the woods and water, then padded into the house to sleep in her bed on the porch as close to the marsh as she could" (Owens 13). In the years that follow, Kya stays in the marsh and refuses to leave despite coercive efforts by the people of the town, especially Chase Andrews. The marsh indeed caters to Kya like a family, ensuring her survival against formidable challenges.

Repudiating the “Mastery Model” in the Novel

Nature-women partnership is viewed through different lenses by various feminist versions. The communion is lauded by radical feminists who see women as a natural partner of the environment against the patriarchal-capitalist nexus. Radical feminists endorse women as nurturing in nature, associating femininity with recreation and life. On the other hand, liberal feminists reject femininity as a relic of birth and life. Instead, liberal feminists adopt reason and rationality as faculties that women must excel at par with men, repudiating the image of women as “earth mothers”. However, Plumwood (2002) considers the debate to be naïve and an unintentional acquiescence to the mastery model, thereby accepting that man and culture hold the superior position in comparison to woman and nature. In other words, Plumwood argues that the “uncritical equality” of the mastery model that champions women as strong and rational like men, or the uncritical endorsement that women and nature have indeed been oppressed by patriarchal models, puts men out of the equation. Conversely, Plumwood offers an alternative approach of critical ecofeminism that does not ostracize man from the nature-human zone of affection. According to Plumwood, “In this alternative, women are not seen as purely part of nature any more than men are; both men and women are part of both nature and culture. Both men and women can stand with nature”. This alternative approach is employed by Owens in the novel *Where the Crawdads Sing* through Tate’s character, who becomes Kya’s aid in saving the marsh.

Kya’s partner, Tate, symbolizes the importance of men’s role in saving nature from degradation and assault. Although Kya’s bond with the marsh is unmatched, Tate too develops a close and intimate relationship with nature. The partnership between Kya and Tate and their shared bond with nature is reflected when Kya tells Tate, “We are married. Like the geese” (Owens, 2018, p. 289). Tate’s symbolic marriage with Kya represents his metaphorical marriage with the marsh since Kya shares a deep affection for her surroundings. It can be argued that Owens develops an androgynous approach toward nature preservation as Tate’s character adopts the marsh and spends his life among the wild creatures. Kya and Tate’s assimilation with nature is alluded to in the novel several times as Owens metaphorically refers to them as creatures of the wild. For instance, Owens states, “He moved into the shack with her the next day, packing and unpacking within a single tide. As sand creatures do” (Owens, 2018, 289). Owens rejects what Plumwood refers to as the traditional Western ideology of dualism that deems men unworthy of developing affection and concern for nature. Owens states, “Tate’s devotion eventually convinced her that human love is more than the bizarre mating competitions of the marsh creatures” (p. 292). Owens rejects the dualism characterized by Plumwood exclaiming, “It seemed to combine a romantic conception of both women and nature, the idea that women have special powers and capacities of nurturance, empathy and ‘closeness to nature’, which are unsharable by men and which justify their special treatment, which of course nearly always turns out to be the inferior treatment” (Plumwood, 1986, p. 8). This repudiation of dualistic perspectives that operate on the mastery model of men’s dominance showcases critical ecofeminist colors in the novel, which advocate partnership with men to preserve nature.

Tate, like the marsh, is Kya’s confidant regarding Chase Andrew’s murder. Initially, Kya colludes with her marsh to fight back against Chase Andrews, who has cornered her, threatening her survival in the marsh. Decades later, however, Tate discovers Kya’s heroic courage and the unspeakable spirit to fight back. Tate knows “Nature had nurtured, tutored, and protected her when no one else could” and therefore, joins the marsh to protect Kya’s secret even after she has died of old age. Upon discovering that it was Kya who killed Chase Andrews, Tate throws Andrews’ necklace, the last piece of evidence, into the sea. The narrator beautifully narrates, “Kya had been of this land and this water, now they would take her back. Keep her secrets deep... And then the gulls came. Seeing him there, they spiraled above his head. Calling. Calling” (1986, p. 296). In other words, Tate, like Kya, develops ecological consciousness by harboring an intense attachment to the marsh and its

inhabitants. By embracing Tate's ecological consciousness, Owens acknowledges the "critical ecofeminist" school that does not deem men unable to develop a strong emotional relationship with nature.

Conclusion

To conclude, Delia Owens' powerful narrative in *Where the Crawdads Sing* stands upon two fundamental pivots of Plumwood's critical ecofeminism. First, humans are not superior to nature, thereby declaring the master-slave relationship between humans and the environment as null and void. Secondly, men are as capable of developing emotional intimacy with nature as women are, and, therefore, nature preservation must be an androgynous and non-gendered project. Through Kya and Tate's characters, Owens questions traditional ecofeminism's assertion that women alone enjoy a heartfelt relationship with nature, proclaiming man's dissociation from the environment and the planet Earth. Owens underscores that women share relics of life and birth with nature; however, such attributes do not invalidate men's reliance upon the environment, nor do they absolve them from sharing responsibilities of nature preservation. The survival of humanity is conditional upon nature's longevity and prosperity. Human society's annihilation will be the inevitable outcome of the lurking threat of ecological degradation, putting mankind at risk of extermination. Nature's survival is as important as humanity's existence. Either humanity survives with a thriving environment or exterminates alongside it; any other alternative is non-existent. Owens, in her beautiful tale *Where the Crawdads Sing* stresses the tenets of critical ecofeminism, which embrace men's ecological consciousness against traditional anthropocentric views. Moreover, Owens stresses the renunciation of dualistic views that put men and reason against women and nature, respectively. Instead, as Plumwood argues, man is not aloof to his environment, nor should he be.

Recommendations

This study's findings suggest several avenues for future research and application. First, environmental degradation is an immediate threat, one that demands urgency in action. To this end, literary works such as Owens' *Where the Crawdads Sing* offer a practical way of resolving the issue. To this end, the given research offers an approach informed by gender harmony, based on the principles of nature preservation. The given study suggests that environment protection and preservation is a collective job of the entire humanity, and therefore, both women and men must transcend beyond traditional dualities. Second, educators can integrate the text into environmental humanities curricula to explore themes of ecological justice, encouraging students to critique anthropocentrism in literature. Third, the research strongly emphasizes that against the formidable challenge of environmental degradation, it is pertinent to break dualisms that consider non-human entities inferior to human beings. Ultimately, this study underscores the novel's potential to provide awareness regarding gendered environmental violence and the need to ensure inclusive nature-preservation efforts.

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