

Nature's Aesthetics in Dalene Matthee's *Dream Forest*: An Ecofeminist Outlook

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Abstract

This article examines the realities of the coexistence between humanity and the natural environment. It explores what an ecofeminist outlook might entail by discussing the beauties embedded in nature's elements by employing Dalene Matthee's *Dream Forest*. The aim is to examine nature's aesthetics in *Dream Forest* from an ecofeminist outlook. The study applies the ecofeminist theory for its analysis. A theory that sees a close connection between nature and the woman and argues that the depletion of nature amounts to the oppression of the woman. Using the content research method, the article analysed the novel to unveil the similarities between humanity and nature elements. The study established that everything nature spells beauty, that nature is alive- it has a voice, can feel, hear and is therapeutic. The paper concludes that humanity owes it a duty to respect, preserve and protect nature and nature elements for the benefit of future generations.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Nature, Ecofeminism, Preservation, Women

Introduction

According to Kathryn Miles, more than four decades have passed since the French feminist Francoise d'Eaubonne coined ecofeminism. This was on the occasion of the publication of the book *Le Feminism Ou LA mort* in 1974 (1). From then on, ecofeminist values, principles, practices, tenets and orientations have been explained, described, questioned and criticized. In light of the above, studies have shown how environmental problems such as pollution of air and water, land degradation, deforestation, and the extinction of animal and vegetal species all tend to affect the peace of humanity. These circumstances by no means are fueled by the uncaring attitude of humanity toward the natural environment, jettisoning the conservation and preservation of nature and ultimately destroying it. As a theory and a movement, ecofeminism maintains a healthy, beautiful and conducive environment for all life forms. This is because its campaign shows consideration for humans, plants and animals. The movement advocates for a relationship between nature and humanity that will showcase nature's aesthetics. Writers in the field of literature have given a significant place in their works to the natural environment. The works of fiction are used as tools to bring to the fore the beauty that lies in nature, they are also used to impress on humanity to necessarily conserve and preserve nature for future generations. As an interdisciplinary field, ecofeminism is interested among others in interrogating the complex relationship between humans and non-humans. The aim is to make readers conscious of their environment and to compel an earth-centered angle to literary studies.

Etymologically, the term 'ecofeminism' derives from two different words 'ecology' and 'feminism'. While ecology is the term that relates to plants and animals as well as their environment, feminism is a women's movement that campaigns for equity of the right between males and females in society. In this paper, ecofeminism is discussed as the study of ecology and how women relate to it. It also implies the campaign by women over the right of the natural environment to ensure its beauty. The objective of this paper is to view and explain ecofeminism as the move by women as well as their contribution to unearth the beauty of nature and nature elements, as exemplified in Dalene Matthee's *Dream Forest*. The next section dwells on the theoretical framework adopted for this research.

Theoretical Framework

Ecofeminism is the apt theory that gives a clear understanding of the discussion in this study because it emphasises that both women and nature must be respected. Therefore, such a tenet of the theory validates the theory's choice as a theoretical base for this study. Historically, Ecofeminism was born out of the strong desire to eradicate all forms of social injustices, including those against women and nature. According to Kathryn Miles, the French feminist Francoise d'Eaubonne coined the word when she argued that there are particular and significant connections between woman and nature (2016.) To this, Karen Warren adds that ecofeminism relates the oppression and domination of all subordinate groups (women, children, the poor) to the oppression and domination of nature (animal land, water, air, etc.). All these groups have been subjected to oppression, domination, exploitation, and colonization by patriarchal societies that emphasise and value men. (1997). Ecofeminism expanded over time, and strands such as nature-culture, social constructionist ecofeminism, and spiritual ecofeminism were born. Some notable proponents of ecofeminism around the globe include Caroline Merchant, Karen Warren, Vandana Shiva, Katheryn Miles, Salleh Ariel, etc. The following section is a discussion on a review of related literature.

Review of Related Literature

Though published in 2006, Matthee's *Dream Forest* has hardly enjoyed reviews in articles and other scholarly works; however, several online scholars have reviewed the novel. They highlight various themes for their discussions. In her review titled, 'Beautiful and Magical', reviewers such as Sue narrates the plot while expressing her excitement about the storyline and how magical the forest is presented in the novel. On her part, Linda Hendry does a character analysis of the novel while depicting it as portraying the protagonist, Karoliena Kapp, as a heroine that people misunderstand in her attempts to do good. Another reviewer is Andrea Nucholenas, who compares *Dream Forest* to Matthee's other novels. He states that in her description of the Knysna forest, the setting of all her novels, she romantically brings her readers close to nature by making them perceive the trees and hear the birds close to them. Essentially, Nucholenas reviews the novel from an ecocritical perspective. In a Journal article titled "Wild Volksmoeder in the Forest: An analysis of the Human-non-human relationship in Dalene Matthee's *Dream Forest*", Delia Rabie discusses the relationship between human and non-human from an ecocritical angle. According to the

reviewer, the novel suggests a connection between the sexist and class treatment of the protagonist Karoliena and the deforestation of the Knysna Forest. In his article titled “Identity, place and “the Gaze” in *The Woodlanders*” by Thomas Hardy and *Dream Forest* by Dalene Matthee, Pat Louw focuses on the theme of identity. He pays attention to the identity of the people in the novel as constructed about the forest. He argues that the people live, work and suffer in the forest, all of which inform their identity. Like Andrea Nucholenas and Delia Rabie, Louw also employs the ecocriticism theory in his review of the novel. While the foregoing reviewers read *Dream Forest* from a diver’s angle, the preoccupation of this article is to examine nature’s aesthetics from an ecofeminist perspective, paying attention to and directing its argument on how nature is giving due attention in the novel. The following section looks at the synopsis and discusses the theme of nature’s aesthetics in Matthee’s *Dream Forest*.

Synopsis: *Dream Forest* is a forest novel. It tells the story of the intimate relationship between an initiated forest woman and the heart of the forest and how it becomes an obstacle in her experience with the man she loves. Karoliena Kapp, the protagonist, is an only child of an unsympathetic mother who has had three men. A streak of lightning had killed her father while she was young, causing her to access the forest as her primordial mother. Karoliena is beautiful and is soon spotted by Johannes, the child of a woodcutter who frees himself from the stranglehold of poverty in the forest and makes Karoliena his wife. The union between the two does not enjoy the traditional togetherness of a husband and wife, as Karoliena’s heart remained with the forest till the end.

Analysis of Nature Aesthetics in Matthee’s *Dream Forest*

This section discusses the realities associated with the connection between humanity and the natural environment, which is a given. Such realities, however, do not present without complexities. The idea of bringing to the fore a necessary connection between humanity and nature is one of the principles that the theory of ecofeminism campaigns strongly for, which this article through *Dream Forest* foregrounds. Further, the idea of nature’s aesthetic is examined and discussed about the connection between nature and humanity, especially the woman.

In the novel, the world of the forest and the village in Knysna are juxtaposed, each representing a different order of existence. The forest makes a mystical existence possible, the kind of ecstasy Karoliena looks for, while life in the village is dedicated to the self-directed search for money.

Karoliena is in love with Johannes; however, she uses the first opportunity to run away from Johannes straight back to the forest because she knows something is wrong the very first day after their wedding ceremony. She made the wrong choice, leaving the forest. She exchanged her precious freedom for a cage and returned to the forest.

Employing the character of Karoliena Kaap and using content analysis, this article showcases the beauty of everything in nature, which is scarcely visible to ordinary eyes. Through the actions of Karoliena, Matthee depicts that women have inherited a global environmental reality that they must necessarily alter. In *Dream Forest*, the Knysna forest is the setting in which Karoliena's connection and activities of showing pride in the elements of nature are situated; her character and role contribute to the conservation of the beauty of nature. One of the ways she displays regard for nature is that, like an ecofeminist, she does not see a distinction between human and non-human nature; she appreciates the fact that they are alive, can feel, have a voice, and can speak. This is affirmed in the narrative when she speaks to the trees using statements such as "tree ..., I wish I could go and stay somewhere deep in the forest until I can see the light again, it's so dark around me" (150). She speaks to the tree because she believes it is alive and can hear. In affirming that the tree is alive are the following words by Old Man Botha: "The tree blows out his breath when he falls, just like a human. The spirit is his breath" (151).

There is an uncommon and unpopular attachment between Karoliena and nature elements. The elements are at home with her, coming to her without fear, as displayed in the narrative: "Tree, she said look, there's a little bird sitting on my hand ... then it hopped boldly on to her other hand" (133). In affirming that there is a great similarity between humans and nature, the narrative states that there are "signs of life in the sleeping forest. All those creatures that slept by day woke up and quietly went about their lives" (133) ... "which meant that the trees had woken up too" (138). The idea that nature possesses the ability to speak is also visible in the narrative, "...and when he hisses like a snake, he's telling the elephants that you're close" (49). By this, the author is sending out the idea that nature elements have their ways of communicating even when humans might not understand. Karoliena's close connection with elements of nature propels her to deeply appreciate their beauty. She is heard for instance speaking in praise of the ambience and freshness of nature elements in the following words: "the whole swamp was covered with the most beautiful red lines; so beautiful that it was unreal" ... "if this really was the elephants' garden, they had chosen the

most amazing place to hide it” (160). Also, she beautifies nature by personifying them, such attributes abound in the novel. The forest for instance “was in utter chaos and seemed exhausted from the turmoil” and “... her father told her the forest was resting” (162), also, “the forest was actually in pain because of the draught” (252). All the foregoing statements show how human features are attributed to nature, which stems from the belief that they are also alive. On another accession, the narrative attributes eyes and legs to the tree in the following statement; “A stink-wood tree, with eyes that could see from deep inside. A tree that started walking slowly along the footpath into Kom’s bush” (168).

The narrative advances its description in such a way that an astute reader is equipped with a wholesome picture of nature elements as no different from humans. An addition to the description is the fact that nature has a voice and can make sounds, though to be heard only by people like Karoliena who has according to the ecofeminist Karen Warren, been transformed by simply connecting with nature (187). Such is depicted in the narrative as the reader observes that Karoliena “listened to the sound of the forest” (179), “... River says we may cross”, and “can a river speak?” “Yes. You must always ask his permission; you can’t just go through” (150). Because Karoliena connects well with nature, she attains “transformation” which according to Warren is, “trying to come to an understanding of what it might mean to respond to something in the nonhuman environment as a member of one’s moral community” (187). One can understand this to mean that, an understanding and connection with the natural environment translates one to a level of viewing nature with a different eye. All of the foregoing signifies that Karoliena possesses qualities that demonstrate the theme of nature’s aesthetics. Another human attribute that nature elements possess as depicted in the novel is the ability to hear. Karoliena is found speaking freely and extensively to trees, forests and birds. In talking to the tree for instance, the reader can hear her say, “tree, it will be best for me if I can find a safe place somewhere in the forest to hide forever, become a tree. At least I will then live in peace until I die” (191). The people around Karoliena are confused and inquired who she is talking to. They are confused because they do not understand the language of the forest and the “forest-words” (192). Karoliena even speaks to the wind, appealing to it on behalf of the tree, and she says “please wind ... wind please” (162). The reason other people in Knysna are confused at Karoliena is because as depicted in the narrative “the outside world does not understand the world of the forest” (172).

The voice of nature can also be heard loud and clear by Karoliena. The scenario is depicted when Karoliena and Abel had to wait for the river to speak and permit them to cross over, Abel is heard saying: “River says we may cross” ... “Yes, you must always ask his permission, you can’t just go through (150). This is an indication that nature has a voice and speaks. Such is a show of respect and consideration for the place of nature in the affairs of humans. The purpose of this presentation is to provoke man to positive thinking regarding nature as well as the zeal to preserve it. Similarly, is the fact that birds can sing as observed in the narrative: “when she woke up the birds were singing” (258). The bird also spoke to Karoliena, at the stream, A brown canary called loudly; “who are you-who are you”? (267). Because of her deep and extraordinary understanding of the world of the forest and nature, and in appreciating nature for its beauty and mystery, Karoliena is inspired and has a strong desire to have a taste of what nature elements feel. According to the narrative, “she wanted to take herself away from the outside world and walk deep into the forest ...” (168), this is because of the notion that there is freedom and protection in being an element of nature thus: “... nothing can touch her, she was free, she was a tree with a new spirit, a human-tree” (168). In a bid to emphasize the reality of the freedom enjoyed by nature, the narrative reveals that “As she walks further into the world of the forest, a peace grew slowly inside her. The frogs did not stop their calling when she approached. The other trees looked in awe at the tree with feet ...” (168). In other words, elements of nature are not frightened at the presence of another, only the tree is surprised at another tree with feet, and “she felt as if she was wearing the most beautiful dress” (169). Karoliena testifies to Master Fourcade that “it’s different from being a human being”. She finds freedom and comfort amid trees and in the forest, she wants to talk to, relate with and have a deep company with them for instance, “the only thing she wanted to do was get to her tree and tell him that she was feeling strangely uneasy ...” (172). Also “she wanted to stay in the forest world a little longer” (173). For reasons such as the intense desire to stay connected to nature, and more, Karoliena is seen to believe more in nature than in humans and so while in dialogue with Johannes, she relates that “in the forest I am real, with you, I am a lie” (203).

Karoliena’s deep connection with nature makes her feel real with nature, she can confide in and tell the tree about her worries. The reader can hear her in the following words: “tree I don’t know what kind of person I am. I feel as if I am being rejected everywhere. I walk through the village; people stare at me... I keep on walking, telling myself they don’t know about tree-spirits; I get on

the train strangers stare at me ...” (224). Although people do not understand Karoliena’s relationship with the forest, she still finds peace with everything in nature. The novel narrates for instance that “... The peace of the forest enveloped her with every breath she took, washing away her worry about the woodcutter and old man Bother’s pension. She wishes she could fall asleep right under the tree and just let the stillness of the forest sink into her body”. (228). Besides finding peace, Karoliena also achieves her dream of knowing what it feels like to be a tree thus; “when she had made herself the body of a stink-wood tree, she knew what it was to be a tree” (260). She also wanted to be an elephant and according to the novel, “she was even prepared to exchange her greatest wish for it ... Forest please take me and make me an elephant” (265), she says.

In addition to achieving her dream, Karoliena finds freedom in deep association with nature. The narrative reveals that “... her fears left her, she felt as if she had been cleansed and set free ... as she walked through the forest in elephant feet, happiness spread through her” (266). Karoliena’s eyes are no longer ordinary there is something special that comes with her new status which comes with her association with nature, she can see that “there was a spirit in every tree, ... even if she could not physically see them. ... it was a magic forest, a dream forest where life was a dream, even if you were awake” (267). In other words, there are deep-seated mysteries that exist in the heart of one who is transformed through association with nature as depicted in the character of Karoliena. At this point, it may be safe, therefore, to say that nature has all of the answers and solutions that humanity seeks. Ecofeminists who have a deep association with nature, understand and can feel what nature feels, they can also speak to and hear the voice of nature. Karoliena is in praise and appreciation of the elements of nature. Her attitude depicts love, protection and preservation of the natural environment. The words, for instance, are in praise of nature thus: “the forest chestnuts ... is a very beautiful tree, large, providing lots of shades and flowers ... Wonderful pink flowers that attract the most beautiful butterflies” (196). She revealed this to the council while advising on the most suitable forest tree for beautifying the village. She sees beauty in moths and her expression, she states: “Moths, as beautiful as that? ... Four wings on a bright orange body, the two bottom wings a light orange; the top wings, huge and light orange” (230). Karoliena also believes in nature’s soothing power as depicted in the narrative. “She took the footpath to visit the tree in the hope it would make her feel better. She let the stone-chat sit on her shoulder, fly around her head ...” (205). More depiction of such is seen in the following expression “Nothing made her feel better until she rested her head against the tree’s old body of coarse bark and whispered her

fears to him, I am scared and confused, please help me. I don't know which way to turn" (206). Because of such feelings about nature, Karoliena keeps longing for the forest even after she grudgingly leaves and returns to her husband, Johannes "At night she longed for the forest" (307), and the reason is simply that nature is also in acceptance of Karoliena thus, "when she got up and started walking, the bird stayed with her, around her, on her head, on her shoulder, almost all the way back to the station" (147).

Conclusion: This study specifically explored the diver's areas showcasing nature's beauty. The study also showcases Karoliena Kapp and her strange and uncommon relationship with the elements of nature. The relationship is described as uncommon because Karoliena's outlook in the novel is not what obtains in a human-nature relationship. Karoliena is closely attached to nature in such a manner that she desires to behave, feel and do like nature, and to achieve this, she decides to dress up like a tree. Even when she married her love, Johannes, her heart and soul were still with nature; essentially, she could not detach herself from nature. Matthee employs personification to serve the purpose of giving deeper meaning to the narrative. Personification adds vividness to the expression of the theme for an in-depth understanding of the message, as humans always look at the world from a human perspective only. Matthee uses Karoliena to let humanity understand that it is nearly impossible to be detached from nature. For this reason, humanity must necessarily see nature with Karoliena's type of eyes and resolve to respect, protect, and conserve nature for future generations.

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