

Analysing Eco-Feminism And Sisterhood In Katherine Center's *The Lost Husband*

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Abstract:

This article analyses a contemporary American novel by Katherine Center. This research tries to analyze the concepts of sisterhood and ecofeminism through this novel. The protagonist finds solace in nature as well as her aunt. Gradually one can see the progression of the female protagonist to a self-dependent woman.

Key words: feminism, sisterhood, eco- feminism, second wave feminism.

The Lost Husband by Katherine Sherar Pannill Center, a contemporary American fiction writer, is about a woman, who finds a new life after her husband's death. The protagonist, Libby, also gets refuge in another woman, Aunt Jean, who helps her to survive. This dissertation attempts to analyse the novel in an eco-feministic view and also discusses the theme of sisterhood. With the publication of *Feminism or Death* by French feminist Françoise d' Eaubonne in 1974, the term of "Eco feminism" or "ecological" was introduced and had later widened as a separate school of thought. It is a branch of feminism that examines the connections between women and nature and is also gaining momentum in contemporary literature.

The theme of sisterhood can also be seen in this novel. As Sally J. Scholz has suggested "sisterhood is a notion of unity among all women, i.e., that all women are sisters. Sisterhood is found on shared experiences of oppression. Women share a bond or seek to connect with other women because they relate the difficulty of their experiences of being subordinated, victimized, excluded and oppressed." (75)

Though Center's novels mainly focus on women's fiction, which is an umbrella term for women-centered books that focus on women's life experiences, here the protagonist Libby in, *The Lost Husband*, gets close to nature by farming and

eventually becomes a farmer. The story showcases the bond created between Libby and nature. The novel also highlights, the theme of sisterhood when Libby and the supporting female character, Aunt Jean, share their insecurities.

Feminism and its Different Aspects

Feminism is a term that emerged long after women started questioning their inferior status and demanding an improvement in their social position. It is a call for liberation of women from every oppression and gender-based discriminations. The movement also aims to provide freedom and self-promotion for deprived women who were denied opportunities and equality with men. This phenomenon of the twentieth century put the awareness that patriarchal society with its structure is indifferent to women's freedom and their discrimination is culturally constructed. Society always tried to keep them subjugated in order to establish the patriarchal power and authority. Therefore, feminism as a movement was started for establishing equal opportunities for women in education and employment.

According to Sally J. Scholz, feminism is a critical project. It looks at all aspects of life to identify those elements that might be oppressive and also suggests alternatives. A feminist reading, as a critical project, would look especially at what is being said about women, what social roles are they expected to take, what are their liberties or privileges in relation to men, and similar sorts of inquiries. Feminists see the world through a different lens and what they see usually requires a response. Feminism, in other words, follows the critical project with action to bring about a social change. It might mean a movement for social change or it might mean a concern for all forms of oppression.

Feminism definitely has a critical edge to it and there is an end or goal for which it strives. To understand feminism's goals, here is the trajectory of its growth classified in waves. The first wave feminism spans from seventeenth to early twentieth century. The main issues of the first wave of feminism were the abolition of slavery and women's rights. Although not exclusively, first wave feminism was concerned with gaining equal rights for women, particularly the rights to suffrage (right to vote). In the United States of America, women got voting rights in 1920 and in Britain it was in 1928. It took until 1944 for France to grant women full suffrage and 1971 for Switzerland. First wave feminism, also focused on women gaining status as human beings with full civil, intellectual, social, economic and legal rights. Mary Wollstonecraft an eighteenth century feminist writer argued for full humanity of women and their moral personhood. Through her work *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, she tried to expound the equality of the sexes. She also argued that women must act courageously to become fully human and to attain the same status as men.

By the late 1960's, spurred by civil rights activism of the 50's, feminist activity burgeoned in new directions as a "next generation" of activism that dealt with anti-discrimination policies and equal privileges and called it the "second wave." The second wave tried to address all aspects of women's oppressed experience and extended women's bodily experience in culture and society as an analysis of oppression. This creates a new understanding of the body, morality, subjectivity and

identity of females. When protests again centred around women's inequality—although this time not only in terms of women's lack of equal political rights, but in areas of family, sexuality and work—second wave feminism also sought solidarity among all women in the experience of oppression.

The third wave is generally understood to begin in the 1990's. Third wave feminism refers to several strains of feminist activity and study, whose exact boundaries in the history of feminism are a subject of debate. The third wave theories and practices employ a number of mainstream and alternative cultural techniques to challenge dominant ways of thinking and introduce new elements into personal and cultural consciousness. The third wave, accordingly, offered women-centred political theories rather than modifying the traditional masculine ones.

During the second wave, Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) called for solidarity which comes in many forms and one model is "sisterhood." This form includes the idea and experience of female bonding, self-affirmation and identity discovered in a woman-centred vision and definition of womanhood. Sisterhood is based on a clear awareness that all women, irrespective of class, race or nation have a common problem. The term "sisterhood" is an important part of contemporary feminism (Scholz, 268). According to Scholz, "Sisterhood is an ocean of unity among all women, that is, that all women are sisters. Sisterhood is found on shared experiences of oppression. Women might bond over shared anxieties, sufferings and trials". Similarly, Bell Hooks (Gloria Watkins) argues, the vision of sisterhood evoked by women's liberationists was based on the idea of common oppression (29). There are a number of strengths to grounding sisterhood in shared experiences of oppression. First, it helps to name a problem. For example, sexual harassment was not identified as a problem until women started sharing their experiences in the work force. Likewise, domestic violence, date rape and gender discrimination all gained prominence once the experiences moved out of the private lives of individual women and were recognized as social problems. Another strength of the sisterhood approach is that as women share their experiences of violence or oppression, they may also gain a feminist consciousness (Scholz, 75). There is also the personal benefit that comes from sharing one's story and realizing that one is not alone in the experiences of violence or oppression. In other words, sisterhood implies a moral and epistemological bond between women, regardless of whether individual women actually know one another. It should mean that sisters aid their sisters in need (Scholz, 76). Women have to move beyond being victims in order to identify the many strengths that women have and act on those strengths for the good of all (Scholz, 77).

In addition to the above mentioned concept of sisterhood, Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* says that liberation for women is very complex achievement and many political movements seek to build solidarity among participants. Scholz refers to Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and suggests that, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (69) Rajeev Yadav states "eco-feminism is one such movement after the 1970's which observes 'power politics' in respect of social, political, economic, cultural and psychological mentality in the exploitation of women and nature." He further explains eco-feminism as a movement that sees a connection between the

exploitation/degradation of the natural world and the subordination/oppression of women (116).

Although the term "eco-feminism" was introduced by French writer Francoise d' Eaubonne in her book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort* (1974), the concept gained popularity in the 1990's with the third wave feminism offering women-centred political theories rather than modifying the traditional masculine ones. Yadav states that eco-feminists do not seek equality with men as such, but aim for the liberation of women as women. Hence, he says, that eco-feminists concentrate on condemning two things basically: one, the creation of a relationship between woman and nature in their oppression and exploitation in society; and the other, representation of woman and nature in all ideological traditions especially in literature as subordinated and secondary to their male counterpart in the hierarchy. Eco-feminism has made a particularly useful analysis of power relations, and rejects any form of hierarchy even represented in literature, myth and traditions (116).

Moreover, central to eco-feminists aim for the liberation of women as women is the recognition of the value of activities traditionally associated with women—childbirth, nurturing and the whole domestic arena (Yadav, 118). But, eco-feminists argue that though there is a deep connection between women and nature, it is socially created. Vandana Shiva makes it clear that one of the missions of eco-feminism is to redefine how societies look at productivity and activity of both women and nature who have mistakenly been deemed passive, allowing both of them to be ill-used. Eco-feminists are of the opinion that the idea of associating weaker features with women and nature should be re-valued because firstly, this is a result of socialization and secondly, with the age of mechanization the personality and role of both of these have been changed (Yadav, 124).

Examining Eco-Feminism in *The Lost Husband*
Touring the farm, I got the feeling Jean had told O'Connor to start with the most basic of basics about farm life. When we walked past the barn, he said, "This is the barn." When the goats gathered around us, he said, "These are the goats. (49).

Here, Libby, the protagonist is gets introduced to nature by James O'Connor (the farm help) when Jean (Libby's aunt) asks her to tour the farm. She is introduced to the basics of farm life as she is very new to farming. Here, the role of farming resembles to the role of nature in her life. Though many eco-feminists argue that nature is compared to the lives of women as passive. Here, farming is an activity that closely links Libby to nature and later becomes her livelihood. She eventually becomes an independent, strong woman and is actually benefiting from nature. At first, she was very new to this productive source (nature). In other words, she was new to another woman (nature) itself. When she starts knowing nature her life turns a new leaf.

Now it was three years later. Three impossible years later. And I was doing okay. I had, in fact, somehow managed to carry on, like they say you're supposed to. But that's not quite right. I hadn't so much carried on as been carried. All I'd really

done was remain in the current of living world—something that was less of a choice than a lack of choice and let it pull me along . (11).

Libby's life in the beginning of the novel was dull and monotonous. She was caught in a web of responsibilities as that of a wife and of a mother. Her husband, Danny met with a brutal accident which led to his death. After her husband's death she had to suffer a lot in terms of debt, mother's interference and lack of income. Even her education did not benefit her.

The turning point of Libby's life takes place when her aunt Jean, sends her a letter inviting Libby to Aunt Jean's place. She grabs the opportunity and immediately leaves to aunt Jean's house at Atwater. The new environment at Atwater brings about a metamorphosis to Libby's life. Libby gets introduced to farming and that helps her to discover an interest in it. As relationships develop between Libby and the farm and Libby with her new environment, the theme of interrelatedness gradually evolves. Through this novel it is clarified that each living thing is dependent on the existence of other creatures in a complex web.

The story of Libby as an independent woman who transforms herself from a city dweller to a farmer is made clear when she says, I looked around the first day and saw charm and more charm: the candles everywhere, the cabinet full of board games, the laundry line out back with white sheets blowing in the wind. I was so charmed, in fact, that I did not notice things that were missing. Things like a clothes dryer. A dishwasher. A cordless phone. A microwave. (34-35)

This can be noted as her return to nature. At first she is amazed when she comes to know that her aunt doesn't use any of the electronic gadgets except for a radio. She finds it difficult to believe the actual facts. But, gradually the novel also makes it clear that Libby loves her new life without electronic devices, which used to make her life easy and comfortable. She finds herself enjoying the new life as a farmer. Even her children started liking their new environment and schooling.

After her husband's death, she struggled for three long years alone. During the first year, she stayed at their own house along with her children and when she had to leave the house due to debt, she left for her mother's place where she struggled even more. Her mother did not support her and asked her to get married and leave the house. Out of the bloom, she receives Aunt Jean's letter and without hesitating or even having a second thought she left her mother's house. Jean welcomes Libby whole heartedly. By embracing the natural surroundings of the farm and experimenting with the new business, despite finding it difficult in the beginning, Libby makes her presence known in that new place. She creates a bond with nature and develops a unique sense of love towards the goats.

In this novel *The Lost Husband*, Center beautifully describes the house of Jean as very environment friendly. This is clearly understood when she says, It looked like a plump little English cottage-like something from a magical forest. It

had exposed crossbeams, rounded dormer windows, planter boxes with flowers, and plants all around it in full bloom. The whole thing was lopsided, almost like a life-sized ginger bread house (28- 29).

Libby's children, Abby and Tank also were very much loving the farm at Atwater as they started to forget about television and video games. This shows that the love for nature slowly crept in not only in Libby's heart, but also in the minds of her children.

The author also introduces another character called Sunshine. Sunshine is a pseudonym of the actress, Amber Mc Allen. She was a world famous actress who was fed up with her celebrity identity. She changed her appearance and was now living a peaceful life at aunt Jean's farm. O'Connor used to help Jean in the farm chores, but after he left for the farm due to some personal crisis, Aunt Jean asked Sunshine to help Libby with the farm chores. The author describes Libby's feelings on seeing Sunshine and says, "I was ecstatic to see Sunshine arrive... She was the Amelia Bedelia of the farm help...." (149).

Towards the middle of the novel, it is seen that Libby had started doing all the farm work by herself. She is now familiar with the goat names. She could run the milking machines on her own and could find the circuit breaker when the power got overloaded. She loved her life as a farmer and she was familiar with all kinds of work in the farm.

Not only is Libby a good farmer, she is an efficient marketer as well. Along with Aunt Jean she sold the farm products such as cheese, with a brand name "Lucky Lady Farm". The name itself gives away an eco-feministic outlook. In this era when women get empowered, nature is not left behind. Here, nature gets uplifted i.e., women get help from a woman (nature) itself.

Even when Libby's education doesn't help her to make a livelihood in the city and when she is left alone in the middle of this busy world, she finds refuge in the rustic life at farm. When she bonds with nature, she identifies herself as an independent, strong woman and is also to take care of her children in a better and eco-friendly way.

The novel characterises Libby as a representative of the whole female community who are generally considered to be the "second sex." Eco feminists like Vandana Shiva says women and nature are both identified as victims of exploitation. As women, who are considered to be the "other" in a male-dominated society, abused sexually and are not given their basic human rights, so is the exploitation of nature. Nature also gets degraded. Humans destroy nature for their own selfish needs. Women's choices and bodies are often controlled by patriarchal viewpoints, but in this novel most of the female characters maintain an ecological balance with nature and this enables them to come out as strong and independent women.

Katherine Center also demonstrates the positive phase of eco-feminism. She beautifully portrays her protagonist Libby getting supported by nature. The protagonist finds solace when she starts a relationship with nature. She also evolves into an independent woman and she raises her children without anybody's help. She finds herself free to live her own life without being weighed down under the bondage of responsibilities. In an optimistic point of view, Libby and nature together get rescued, uplifted and rejuvenated. In eco-feministic perspective this novel reflects many interconnections between women and nature. The author also shows that with nature's support a woman finds her identity.

Sisterhood in *The Lost Husband*

Unlike your mother, I'm getting old. I've got arthritis in my hands, and I can't milk my goats like I used to. And there are a million other farm chores I just can't milk my goats like I used to. And there are a million other farm chores I just can't get done. I need a helper, if you're interested. I can offer you room and board and a small salary, and I'd be happy to look after your kids. (19)

Aunt Jean's phone call to Libby indicates that she is welcoming Libby to experience farm life. Actually, the invitation is to experience the experiences that Jean had. Jean wants Libby to escape from her rude mother Marsha, who wants Libby to get married and leave her house. During the sibling's younger days Marsha had created problems for Jean, which is clearly evident in her invitation letter to Libby that says,

It occurs to me that you and your two children have been living with your mother for—dear Lord!—two whole years, and I'm writing to see if you'd like to be rescued. I run a little farm in Atwater, and as I get older, I find it's harder to get my chores done. Do you need a place to stay? If you'd be willing to help on the farm, I can pay you a little and offer room and board. (15)

According to Sally J. Scholz, in her book *Feminism*, says that, "Sisterhood is found on shared experiences of oppression. Women might bond over shared anxieties, sufferings and trials."(74) Here, Jean and Libby have experienced the same kind of ill-treatment from their sister and mother, Marsha. In order to rescue Libby from the clutches of her mother, Jean invites Libby to Atwater and offers her a salaried job along with accommodation and child care.

While living and working in the farm, Libby along with Sunshine visit an old haunted house near Aunt Jean's farm. Libby gets a photo and describes it as, It was my first chance to really look at the photo. Here were these people again: mother and father and baby. They were on the steps of the haunted house. The mother had the baby on her lap, and both she and the father were gazing down with that love-smacked expression parents get. It was clear the moment before they expected the shutter to click, and they hadn't yet looked up to smile. (214)

When Libby asks Jean about the photo, she says that it was Frank (Jean's boyfriend), Jean and Libby in the photograph. Jean explains that Marsha, her sister

was considered to be the good, studious child and her parents sent her to college. But within a month, she eloped with a man just when she was seventeen. A year later, Marsha returned home with a baby girl (Libby). Both of them were welcomed, but again within a month Marsha cheated her parents and sister and left home, leaving baby Libby behind. Libby from then on was taken care of Jean and her boyfriend Frank. But some time later Marsha returned home to take Libby under her responsibility and the court was in favour of Marsha. However, Marsha never took proper care of Libby or gave the baby girl the love and attention she deserved, she used to leave the baby behind and go to parties. Therefore, knowing this history, Jean could easily understand Libby's mental tensions and fears when she stayed with her mother Marsha. The sense of sisterhood sprouts in Aunt Jean which enabled her to help Libby.

Meanwhile, Aunt Jean unveils Sunshine's story to Libby and says that she was a famous actress, Amber McAllen, who did not like her fame. Sunshine was financially broke because all her investments as an actress were stolen by her mother's boyfriend. So she decided to quit from acting and name and changed her appearance. "Also, of course, we talked about the goats. Whose lives turned out to be almost as compelling as our own—to Sunshine at least". (150)

From these lines it is evident that the lives of the goats were compared to the lives of Libby and Sunshine, but mostly with sunshine whose lives were miserable and pathetic earlier. The goats were named after famous personalities such as Laura Ingalls Wilder, Ella Fitzgerald, Mother Teresa, Ethel Merman, Oprah Winfrey etc., Wilder was a writer as well as a farmer. She, along with her husband learnt to cultivate wheat as their sole crop. Also, they diversified their farm with poultry, a dairy farm and a large apple orchard. Ella Fitzgerald was a professional jazz singer, often referred to as the first lady of song, queen of jazz and Lady Ella. She was a quite ardent supporter of many charities and non-profit organizations including the American Heart Association and City of Hope Medical Center. In 1993, she established the Ella Fitzgerald Charitable Foundation. Mother Teresa was a social worker, who had to undergo a lot of hardships in her life and struggled hard to help the poor people. She considered poverty, diseases and the other hardships as her own and worked for the betterment of it. Ethel Merman was an American actress and a singer. She had been called the "the undisputed First Lady of the musical comedy stage. Oprah Winfrey is a media proprietor, talk show host, actress, producer and philanthropist. Several assessments regard her as the most influential woman in the world. She was molested in her early childhood and was conceived at the age of fourteen. Her son died at a very early age. She suffered a lot during her childhood. She was raised by a single mother.

These personalities show that they had to face a lot of hardships in their lives. It is quite interesting to note that Jean named her goats after these women. It is possible that Jean may have had some similar experiences as that of these personalities. Even though the goats are separated from their natural habitat, Jean's concern and love for nature makes her farm a natural home for the goats and they continue with their productive roles. The idea of sisterhood i.e., females bonding over

shared experiences, is clearly evident.

As nature suffers human being's aversion had Aunt Jean also suffered some kind of aversion from her parents. This is clear when Jean says: Your mother was always the good girl. I was sneaking out, and your mother was home, studying. I was a constant disappointment to my parents, especially after I dropped out of college and started shacking up with Frank. (220).

In this novel, nature gets preserved by women who make a livelihood from it. So there is a sense of sisterhood in it. That is, nature and women bond over shared experiences of oppressions and sufferings but have overcome the negatives by strengthening each other to become self sufficient and independent.

Similarly, in this novel, Center describes how Libby slowly becomes unmaterialistic once she starts living at Atwater i.e., when she says: I was so charmed, in fact, that I did not notice the things that were missing. Things like clothes dryer. A dishwasher. A cordless phone. A microwave. Things I was so used to—that were such a given—that long after I knew weren't there, I'd still continue to look for them. (34-35)

Libby developed this kind of attitude was developed once she realised how rejuvenating nature is. Her life can be compared to that of nature. Her life was totally broken and distorted after her husband Danny's death and when she and her children stayed at Marsha's house. As soon she got Aunt Jean's invitation, she came forward to look after the farm chores. At first she found it difficult to work in the farm, but gradually she started loving it and was soon doing all the chores on her own. The idea of sisterhood is clearly observed here when this act of Libby shows that while she takes a leap to rescue herself and her children from difficulties she in turn rescues Aunt Jean and her farm.

O'Connor plays an important role in this novel. He has helped Aunt Jean in her farm chores from his childhood and Jean introduces O'Connor to Libby as her (Jean's) farm manager. On her request, he whole heartedly helps Libby in creating a bond with nature. His knowledge in the chores at the farm and in nature creates his love towards nature, which is established in the minds of the readers. He is seen as a helping hand to Aunt Jean and she acknowledges his work tremendously. His work at the farm shows his interest in preserving nature, thereby eco- feminist characteristics.

Center in her work, demonstrates the theme sisterhood very well. Each of her characters in the novel are interconnected. It can be seen that she relates each of her characters to sisterhood by sharing experiences of independence and achievement thus creating positive aspects in the minds of the readers. Through this novel it is also evident that sisterhood can be generated in the minds of every individual without gender disparity as in the case of O'Connor and he works with rest of the women characters for the upliftment of nature and individuals betterment. He is also seen as a helping hand throughout the novel, which enables the reader to view the novel in a

positive

aspect.

The novel *The Lost Husband* by Katherine Center depicts the two aspects of feminism namely: eco-feminism and the theme of sisterhood. Every character of the novel are interrelated. Eco-feminism is applied to the characters with a positive outlook. The protagonist Libby coming towards nature with the help of her aunt is the most inspiring one. Even though, this novel reads like a women empowering text, it can also be viewed in certain other feministic aspects. The aspect of eco-feminism is beautifully portrayed throughout the novel.

This novel proves to be an eco-feministic one, as the protagonist Libby finds her identity and individually through nature. She eventually becomes a farmer and introduces some business strategies. Libby's life in the beginning of the novel was very monotonous. And her mother Marsha was an uncaring woman. After coming to Aunt Jean's house she discovers herself by working in unison with nature. She is strengthened with the help of Aunt Jean. Not only does Libby benefit from working at the farm, but Amber McAllen, aka Sunshine also chooses to work at the farm, after she quits from her famous and toiling career as an actress and finds peace of when she becomes a farm help. Aunt Jean is seen to love nature so much that she too takes up the productive role of nature. She helps Libby, Sunshine and O'Connor with their lives. The theme of sisterhood is applied.

The main aim of this dissertation is to portray the idea that eco-feminism and sisterhood is not all about women and nature empathizing with each other instead eco-feminism in this novel is all about using nature to strengthen one self. Thereby, evolving into independent strong characters.

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