

"The Barren Wife and the Fruitful Land": Agricultural Metaphors of Infertility in Early Modern and Modern Literature

Ms Pavithra A¹

Research Scholar

Department of English

Karpagam Academy of Higher Education.

Coimbatore- 641021.

Pavithravignesh436@gmail.com

Dr. S. Selvalakshmi²

Professor and Head

Department of English

Karpagam Academy of Higher Education.

Coimbatore- 641021.

Abstract

English literature has long figured infertility through agricultural imagery, in which the female body becomes soil, the child a harvest, and childlessness a blighted field. This article traces that metaphor from early modern drama and poetry to twentieth-century modernist and dystopian fiction. Using Lakoff and Johnson's conceptual metaphor theory, it argues that Shakespeare's *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and the procreation sonnets naturalise the equation of female worth with fertility. T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* marks a turning point: by tracing the land's sterility to the Fisher King's wound, it displaces blame onto male failure, yet it still reads cultural decay through women's reproductive lives. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* completes the critique by literalising the metaphor, exposing the violence latent in treating the body as a state resource. Together, these texts show infertility's figurative language being questioned and finally dismantled.

Keywords: Infertility, Metaphor, Barrenness, Broken body, Agricultural imagery.

Introduction

When Lear calls on Nature to "convey sterility" into Goneril's womb (*King Lear* 1.4), he does more than curse a daughter. He assumes that a woman's body is ground that can be made to fail, and that its failure is a fitting punishment. That assumption runs deep in English writing. The womb is a field, the child a harvest, and childlessness blight on the land. Such figures can pass for plain description, yet as Lakoff and Johnson argue, metaphors shape how we understand and act on experience (5). Susan Sontag made a related claim about illness, insisting that the healthiest way of being ill is the one most resistant to metaphoric thinking (3).

When barrenness is imagined as a quality of soil, a social judgment is made to look like a fact of nature, and responsibility settles on the woman's body. The question is whether literary texts merely repeat this figure or expose it. Shakespeare's Sonnet 3 casts procreation as husbandry, with a womb that "Disdains the tillage of thy husbandry" (lines 5-6). *Macbeth* shifts the figure toward dynasty in *Macbeth's* lament over his "barren sceptre" (3.1). T. S.

Eliot's *The Waste Land* opens with a landscape "breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land" (lines 1-2) and builds its vision of cultural exhaustion on the Fisher King myth drawn from Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* makes the figure literal, in a state that values women as fertile ground.

Existing scholarship supplies important context but not an answer. Fissell shows that early modern ideas about conception, pregnancy and childbirth were also ways of talking about gender relations and power. Jensen traces how reproductive metaphors evolved from the seventeenth century into the early twentieth and how they cast women as at fault for childlessness, while Oren-Magidor shows that early modern attitudes to infertility, shaped by religion, medicine and gender, affected men as well as women. Critics of Shakespeare have examined the maternal and reproductive body on the early modern stage (Laoutaris; Potter), and Bracken has analysed how metaphors reduce women to reproductive potential in *The Handmaid's Tale*. These studies are valuable, but each is bound to a single period, discipline or text. Only few studies have followed the soil metaphor across Shakespeare, Eliot and Atwood as one figure who's meaning changes over time.

This paper argues that these texts mark a movement from naturalising the metaphor to questioning it. Shakespeare binds female worth to fertility. Eliot partly displaces blame onto male damage through the Fisher King, yet the poem still reads cultural decay through women's reproductive lives. Atwood dismantles the figure by showing what happens when it becomes policy. Using conceptual metaphor theory, the article examines the early modern consolidation of the soil metaphor, then Eliot's ambivalent inversion, and finally Atwood's critique, showing how literary form can restore the suffering subject that the figure erases.

Theoretical Framework

This article interprets the soil metaphor within the framework of conceptual metaphor theory, where metaphor means "understanding one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff and Johnson 5). In the soil metaphor, the source domain is agricultural production, while the target is reproduction, which is systematically mapped as follows: womb equals soil, seed equals semen or child, conception equals planting, harvest equals birth, barrenness equals infertility or blight. The metaphor brings the logic of the source domain into the target domain and brings some elements of a concept into focus and makes other elements go out of focus (Lakoff and Johnson 10-13). The soil metaphor puts emphasis on the womb as the locus of failure and downplays male infertility, sickness, poverty, and randomness. The figure has a long history. Imagery from agriculture for the female body is found in classical literature (duBois), and in early modern England, it was modified, so that as Fissell argues, the discourse on conception and childbirth became the discourse on gender relations and power. Jensen further points out that the reproductive metaphors overlap, and the meaning of each is historically determined, which is why I consider the soil metaphor as one among many.

To examine how literary texts react to this figure, this paper isolate three processes which are used here as conceptual tools. Naturalization renders the mapping transparent, such that barrenness is presented as a phenomenon of nature, rather than as a social judgment. Inversion retains the mapping but shifts its blame, such that the sterility is attributed to the

male body. Literalization makes the source domain a reality, such that a woman is literally rendered into ground and the brutality of the figure becomes apparent. They are tendencies, rather than rigid stages, and a single text can carry out several of them at once. Sontag's argument concerning how metaphorical meanings imposed on a suffering subject are unrelated to his condition (3) provides an ethical context: not only how the figure functions, but who is harmed by it. The approach is close reading of significant passages within their historical contexts, using Shakespeare as a representative example of early modern naturalization, Eliot as a modernist inversion and Atwood as literalization. This choice is intended to be deliberately narrow. The issue of infertility in the early modern period was recognized to affect men and women equally (Oren-Magidor).

Naturalising the Metaphor: Shakespeare

The procreation sonnets of Shakespeare make use of the soil metaphor in its strongest form, since the metaphor is taken for granted as common sense. In sonnet 3, for instance, Shakespeare addresses the young man and wonders about "where is she so fair who's unear'd womb or Disdains the tillage of thy husbandry?" (Sonnet 3, lines 5-6). The term "unear'd" is an alternative to "ploughed," and what the sonnet implies is that any woman would take it as an honour to be cultivated by him. Here, a woman's womb is likened to the ground which awaits labour, and the man is likened to the husbandman. The interesting thing about this metaphor is the fact that the fault lies in the man's refusal to produce a child, and it is regarded as waste of resources.

King Lear takes the same metaphor and turns it against Goneril. He talks to Nature as the goddess of fertility and asks her to "convey sterility" into Goneril's womb and to "Dry up in her the organs of increase" (1.4). In this case, barrenness is no longer a bad luck; it is a punishment, an act of revocation of the divine gift of fertility given to a woman to cherish and to keep safe. It becomes possible because of the use of the metaphor, which makes it look like the decree of nature. It is evident where the function of the metaphor consists in: the social condemnation of the daughter's behaviour is portrayed as a law of nature. The cruelty of the passage and the audience's shock in response to it reveal the ethical price of the figure, but the play does not deconstruct the metaphor; on the contrary, it takes advantage of it.

The complications in *Macbeth* are important to the argument that follows. *Macbeth* laments that the witches' prediction led to his getting "a fruitless crown" and "a barren sceptre," to be taken away because none of his sons will inherit (3.1). The concept of sterility is applied to a male sovereign, in the sense that it is a kind of power which has no offspring. The worry is of dynastic nature, and it reveals the use of language of sterility in relation to men in addition to women, consistent with the conclusion made by Oren-Magidor about men and women being equally affected by infertility. On the other hand, Lady Macbeth prays for her spirits to "unsex" her and give her milk gall (1.5), considering her reproductive body the obstacle to the perpetration of violence. The reproductive and demonic aspects of the play are examined in one of Laoutaris' chapters, while Potter describes how the dramatists coded the women's biology on stage to make it easily understandable by the audience. The play thus demonstrates how the metaphor can be extended to the male power, in anticipation of its application to a male in Eliot.

These writings, however, do not merely recycle an old literary trope. Rather, they reveal a culture where, as argued by Fissell, discourse on conception and childbirth was also a discourse on gender and power, and where the metaphor of the soil was available to express

desires, punishments, and fears of politics. Common to all of these writings is naturalization: in each case, the analogy between land and womb seems so obvious that a social arrangement is assumed to be a matter of nature. What Shakespeare provides us with is not a criticism but the most complete expression of this figure.

Inverting the Metaphor: Eliot

The Waste Land initially seems that the poem dislodges the soil metaphor by changing the origin of the disease. As Eliot himself admitted, the idea and much of the imagery in his poem was inspired by Jessie Weston's study of the legend of the Grail (Eliot, notes; Weston). In the legend, the infertility of the land is caused by a wound of the Fisher King. It is not the feminine body that fails, but rather the masculine one that becomes the origin of infertility of the earth. The agricultural language is preserved with a land "breeding or Lilacs out of the dead land" (lines 1-2). However, the object of the figure is changed: when the speaker in the final section is sitting fishing with "the arid plain behind me" and asking himself if he could "set my lands in order" (lines 424-25), it is a man who becomes responsible for the fertility of the soil. Gilbert and Gubar maintain that the Great War's "no man's land" became a metaphor for a crisis of masculinity in numerous modern works of literature including Eliot's poem (*Sexchanges*).

The displacement is, however, partial. When the poem presents the action of reproduction itself, the damage occurs in the women. In the pub scene in "A Game of Chess" (lines 139-72), a speaker describes the sterility of Lil, who puts the blame on "them pills I took, to bring it off" (line 159). The speaker lays the guilt on Lil, not on her husband Albert, who is back from the war. The mythological explanation makes the source of sterility a man, yet in the scenes where the action of reproduction takes place, the exhaustion lies within women's bodies. In this way, the soil metaphor has been displaced from the plane of legend to the plane of scene. It has been observed by critics that the women in Eliot's poem are presented as hysterical or frail, and the attitude towards them is patriarchal (Kouachi), and Gilbert and Gubar suggest that resistance to women becoming writers was not only the theme but the impetus of modernism (*War of the Words*).

This is the reason why Eliot makes an appropriate transition point in this analysis. He understands that the trope of barren land can be used in criticism of the man ruling over it, which allows him to abandon the traditional association between barrenness and women. However, he keeps using the gendered body as the locus of cultural deterioration, so that the feminine body remains the site at which decline can be seen. And even Tiresias, an androgynous seer referred to by Eliot in his notes as the connecting figure of the poem, cannot change this. He represents both genders, but what he sees is a sexual encounter which void feeling comes from the woman. Therefore, Eliot's contribution is ambivalent: he challenges the source of the blight while retaining the tendency of finding it in the body. However, the trope of barrenness does not leave *The Waste Land* unharmed; however, it does not destroy the poem either. The task that still needs to be done is showing the price of the trope paid by its subjects, and that is where I resort to Atwood.

Literalising the Metaphor: Atwood

In Atwood's novel, the soil metaphor operates according to the logic of state. In Gilead, fertile women are allocated to the households of dominant men for procreation among women whose spouses cannot reproduce, and the system supports the policy by referring to Rachel, Bilhah and Jacob's biblical story (Atwood 88). The Handmaids are stripped of all

identity except for their ability to conceive children as stated in the following quote: "the two-legged wombs, which exist to breed". Following Bracken, it can be said that this novel turns bio medically metaphoric women's bodies that produce babies into literally reproductive machines through allocating fertile women as national resources that can be nationalized and distributed as means of public health and crisis control. The agricultural metaphor of this article can be analyzed in the same manner.

Wood's most cutting remark is on the question of culpability. According to the law, Atwood states, there are no sterile men, only fertile and barren women (Atwood 61). Here is how Lakoff and Johnson refer to this kind of "hiding" (10-13). However, the plot contradicts the law. "The Commander's physician implies that quite a few of the powerful men in Gilead are sterile and incapable of producing offspring" (Atwood 61), and the very structure of the Commander's family indicates that he is to blame, since his Wife organizes another conception with somebody else for him. Hence, Atwood proves the ideology of barren ground to be nothing but an illusion in her novel.

The reason for this shift from description to criticism possible is the element of form. In Offred's first person narrative, which is incomplete and reconstructed through memory, there is provided interiority to a figure that the metaphor denies: she remembers, desires, and judges, and by telling her story she does not remain soil alone. The "Historical Notes" at the end of the novel then present a discussion of a symposium of academics, which treat her narrative as evidence with detached humour (Atwood 299). This frame alerts us that even critics can make the suffering individual into matter, and this alert pertains to this article as well. Thus Atwood achieves what is outlined in this paper. Shakespeare has naturalized the figure, Eliot has inverted it, and Atwood has literalized it so that its violence is evident.

Conclusion

This article has shown how one conceptual metaphor, that of the woman as land and reproduction as agriculture, has changed its function through four centuries. In Shakespeare, the metaphor is naturalized. The "unear'd womb" of Sonnet 3 and the curse Lear pronounces on Goneril show the woman as the product of her own soil, and the mapping is taken for granted as common sense and not as an argument. In *The Waste Land*, the metaphor is reversed. By linking the infertility of the land with the wound of the Fisher King, Eliot transfers the cause of barrenness from the female body to the male one, and the failing land is used as a sign of the culture's spiritual exhaustion. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the metaphor is literalized, thus revealing itself as such. The republic of Gilead cultivates and harvests women as the ground, and the expression "two-legged wombs," used by the narrator (Atwood, 136), uncovers what the older metaphor had always concealed.

In reading Lakoff and Johnson, it appears that the metaphor calls attention to certain aspects of its target and ignores others. The soil metaphor pays attention to fertility and produce but fails to pay attention to consent, work, and the female experience of being infertile. "Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*" is a critique as the text brings to light what the metaphor ignores. One must state the limitations of the article. It is a selective examination of only three writers and the three phases discussed above are only labels and do not mean that literary history proceeds in a linear fashion. Other lines of research could examine the pattern in other literary forms as well as postcolonial and non-western literatures in which land has a very different meaning.

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