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An Ecofeminist Reading of Aeschylus' *The Eumenides*: Visions and Revisions

Abstract

**Dina Mohamed Abd
Elsalam**

Associate Professor of
English, Faculty of Arts,
Alexandria University

According to ecofeminist criticism, patriarchy tends to provide a context for the subjugation of women and nature alike, hence the term "ecofeminism" which clearly demonstrates that both ecology and feminism are closely intertwined in this discipline. It is the aim of this paper to give an ecofeminist reading of the Classical play *The Eumenides* which was written by Aeschylus in fifth-century B.C. Athens at a time when patriarchy had taken over and silenced the former power of the matriarchs. The new Athenian polis urbanized the old rituals of the earlier rural cults, and male priests now presided over those rites. Set in those times, the play tries to consolidate male rule over the polis, but the tension lurking underneath is quite evident. The paper will shed light on the conflict between matriarchy and patriarchy, the eventual triumph of the latter, and the consequences of that on the environment through an ecofeminist reading of the play. Ecofeminism, however, is not a homogenous critical school. The essentialism of the early period of ecofeminism was soon to accumulate many detractors from within the ecofeminist discipline. Accordingly, the paper will reexamine the play once more from an anti-essentialist ecofeminist perspective, hence showing one of the many diversities within this critical school.

Keywords: *The Eumenides*, ecofeminism, patriarchy, essentialism, constructionism, Aeschylus



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قراءة لمسرحية اليومنيديات لإسخيلوس من منظور النسوية البيئية: رؤى ومراجعات

مستخلص الدراسة

دينا محمد عبد السلام
أستاذ الأدب الإنجليزي المساعد، قسم
اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية الآداب، جامعة
الإسكندرية

يرى النقد النسوي البيئي (النقد النسوي الإيكولوجي) أن النظام الأبوي يؤدي لإخضاع المرأة والطبيعة معا، ومن هنا اشتق مصطلح "النسوية البيئية"، حيث يدمج هذا المنهج النقدي في رؤيته بين كلا من المرأة والطبيعة. ويهدف هذا البحث لتقديم قراءة من منظور نسوي بيئي للمسرحية الكلاسيكية اليومنيديات والتي كتبها إسخيلوس في أثينا في القرن الخامس قبل الميلاد وهو العصر الذي شهد فرض هيمنة النظام الأبوي، وتراجع النظام الأمومي، كما تم في تلك الفترة تحويل الطقوس الدينية المنتمية للعبادات القروية لطقوس خاصة بمدينة أثينا يقوم بها كهنة ذكور وليس إناث كما في السابق. تحاول المسرحية التكريس لذلك الفكر الذكوري ولكن آثار الصراع المستتر بين الأبوية والأمومية تظهر بوضوح في المسرحية. من خلال منظور النقد النسوي البيئي سيلقي البحث الضوء على ذلك الصراع القائم في المسرحية والذي انتهى بانتصار النظام الأبوي كما سيلقى الضوء على الآثار المترتبة على ذلك فيما يخص البيئة. ومن اللافت أن المنهج النسوي البيئي ليس منهجاً متجانساً، حيث إن الجوهرية التي تميزت بها بدايات هذا المنهج النقدي قد استقطبت العديد من المنتقدين، وعليه فسيقوم البحث بإعادة قراءة المسرحية مرة أخرى ولكن من منظور النقد البيئي الغير جوهرية، ليظهر أحد الاختلافات الكثيرة التي يعج بها هذا المذهب النقدي.

الكلمات الرئيسية: اليومنيديات، النسوية البيئية، الأبوية، الجوهرية، البنائية، إسخيلوس

By: Dina Abd Elsalam

An Ecofeminist Reading of Aeschylus' *The Eumenides*: Visions and Revisions

Ecofeminism: An Overview

Ecocriticism aims at exploring the relationship between humans and nature as presented in literary texts, focusing on humans' maltreatment of nature and their constant destruction of it. Ecofeminism, however, goes a step further by focusing on the interconnectedness between the ill fate of women and nature. It is a theoretical framework which seeks to explore the relationship between both women oppression and environmental destruction, since both are the outcomes of patriarchal thought and practices, which aim at controlling means of production, and women as well; the "backgrounding and instrumentalisation of nature and that of women run closely parallel" (Plumwood, 1993, p.21). The environment suffers from pollution, deforestation, climate change, global warming, and ozone layer depletion just as women have always suffered from exploitation, degradation and relegation to the margins. For example, in most societies, women shoulder all the household chores because of "the sexual division of labor" which "considers family sustenance to be women's work" (Eaton & Lorentzen, 2003, p.2). The term "ecofeminism" itself clearly shows how both the ecological and feminist dimensions are intertwined in this critical theory.

Ecological feminism started in the 1970s "as a political movement" (Warren, 2000, p.21). It is political in the sense that ecofeminism "seeks to transform" the world (Beltrán, 2017, p.101) and undertakes to effect change concerning the destruction of nature and the maltreatment of women. French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne was the first to coin the term "ecofeminism" in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974) "to call attention to women's potential to bring about an ecological revolution" (Warren, 2000, p.21). Women were now asked to reassume their original role and protect nature, raising awareness of ecological

problems and redressing the wrongs done by patriarchy; “[b]ased in matricide, the death of all nature, and the utter exploitation of women, Western culture has now run itself into the ground, and there is no other way but to return to the Mother who gives us life” (Sjöö, 1991, p.xviii). In order to effect change, and fight back oppression, domination and exploitation, ecofeminism relied on “focusing on the critique of patriarchy and the overexploitation of nature and their impacts on society” (Beltrán, 2017, p.101). The reason being of course that patriarchy usurped the natural rights of women and nature alike, it was constructed “on the broken backs and confiscated rights and subjectivity of both women and the natural world” (Bitney, 2012, p.204). The fervor of this political movement was immediately realized by the academy and embraced “into the discourse of philosophy, religious studies, political science, economics, sociology, and literary studies” (Murphy, 2022, p.1).

Essentialist Ecofeminism

Essentialist ecofeminism proposes that patriarchal thought is based on hierarchical binary opposites which “permeate western culture” and run “through its entire conceptual system” (Plumwood, 1993, p.42). These dyads are essentialist in nature, since each category is different from the other based on its exclusive intrinsic characteristics; “essentialists hold that things behave as they do, not because they are forced or constrained by God, or even by the laws of nature, but, rather, because of the intrinsic causal powers, capacities and propensities of their basic constituents and how they are arranged” (Ellis, 2002, p.1). Thus, male is intrinsically different from female because of the pure and fixed characteristics of the physical and psychological makeup of each.

These binary opposites, which include but are not limited to male/female, human/animal, mind/body, civilized/primitive, reason/emotion, heterosexual/homosexual, self/other, maintain the superiority of the former over the latter: “the first principle is primary, dominant, and preferable and the second principle is secondary, subservient, and inferior”

(Nortjé-Meyer, 2022, p.2). As such, these dualisms serve as a pretext for the use and abuse of the second principle and “reflect the major forms of oppression in western culture” (Plumwood, 1993, p.43).

The main claim of ecofeminism is that women’s liberation is dovetailed with the liberation of the environment from patriarchy, as environmental destruction is “inscribed in and by the dualisms and ‘otherings’ of Western patriarchal myths, theologies, philosophies, sciences, and agendas of greed, conquest, and colonization” (Bitney, 2012, p.209).

According to Ioanna Sahinidou, this hierarchial division between dyads can be traced back to the time of Plato, when:

[M]ale domination, class hierarchy, and inferiorization of nature were parts of the social order, showing the primal division of reality into soul over body. Ruling-class males, at the top of the hierarchy, mirrored the world of eternal ideas, with gods sharing in the animating principle of the cosmic soul. (2019, p.142)

The argument is that Plato’s introduction of the division between soul and body, and setting the soul as superior to the body, initiated these Western hierarchical dualisms. In the same vein, Nancy Hartsock argues that hierarchical patriarchal thought “puts an omnipotent subject at the center and constructs marginal Others as sets of negative qualities” (1990, p.161). The other, in this case, comes to bear all of the regressive, backward and inferior qualities. Ynestra King argues that women and nature, in this sense, are the original “others”, and this leads to their objectification and subordination (1989, p. 21). That is why she finds it necessary to combine both ecology with feminism: “[w]ithout a thorough feminist analysis of social domination that reveals the interconnected roots of misogyny and hatred of nature, ecology remains incomplete” (King, 1989, p. 24). According to her, both women and nature are interconnected, and nature cannot be saved without feminism: “feminism and ecology need each other” for the “hatred of women and the hatred of nature are intimately connected and mutually reinforcing”

(King, 1989, p. 18). Her words stress the common fate of women and nature, since both have suffered from othering and abuse at the hands of patriarchy.

The connection between women and nature is not just a matter of common fate, but it is a link based on common qualities and affinities, and is best expressed in the term "mother earth", which highlights the similarity between women and nature as regards their reproductive and replenishing qualities, for both give birth, nurture their offspring and maintain life:

[S]he like nature, is the beauty of the green earth, the life-giving waters, the consuming fire, the radiant moon, and the fiery sun. She is Star Goddess and Spiderwoman; she weaves the luminous web that creates the universe. As earth, the great planetary Spirit-Being, She germinates life within Her dark womb. (Sjöö, 1991, p.xviii)

But the establishment of patriarchy disrupted this ecological balance and brought about destruction by "the selfish and despotic patriarchs, male brotherhoods, who hate organic life" (Sjöö, 1991, p.xix).

Prior to patriarchy and in prehistoric times, matriarchy pervaded; women were in total power; they were goddesses, priestesses and tribe leaders. They were seen as life originators, for they were the ones who gave birth, then nourished their offspring, hence their power and influence. Their power was exercised both within the family and in the larger societal context. The mother was "the head of the family, taking this position in community or state government as well" (Stone, 1976, p.32). Priestesses, the symbol of female authority, presided over the rituals of the old agrarian cults which were meant to preserve the fertility of the land. In those times, the role of the male in reproduction was unknown:

[I]n the most ancient human societies, people probably did not yet possess the conscious understanding of the relationship of sex to reproduction. Thus the concepts of paternity and fatherhood would not yet have been understood. Though probably

accompanied by various mythical explanations, babies were simply born from women. (Stone, 1976, p.11)

Matriarchy went hand in hand with matrilineality which meant that title, property and land were inherited through the mother, not the father and accordingly meant that all males (sons, husbands and brothers) were to inherit on account of “their relationship to the woman who [was] the legal owner” (Stone, 1976, p.32). The inheritance would then “be kept through the female line, going from mother to daughter, rather than from father to son, as is the custom” (Stone, 1976, p.11).

Thus, essentialist ecofeminism stresses the historical interconnectedness of women and nature based on similar intrinsic qualities which they both share. These qualities are related to their procreative and nurturing capacities. The hatred and misogyny both women and nature suffer from are directed at them by a dualist hierarchical system maintained by patriarchy. It is in this context that ecofeminism emerges as a necessary critical and political movement capable of honing in on the causes of this systematic destruction, with the ultimate aim of redressing the harm done to both women and nature.

The following will be an attempt at an essentialist ecofeminist reading of *The Eumenides* by Aeschylus, a play which clearly dramatizes the clash between matriarchy and patriarchy. Though patriarchy had established itself firmly at the time Aeschylus wrote the play, matriarchal influences were still circulating in Classical Greek culture, and had not been totally obliterated. In writing this play, Aeschylus aimed at containing remaining matriarchal traces which threatened the rule of patriarchy.

Mythical Background of *The Eumenides*

In antiquity, it was commonplace for dramatists to draw on mythology and reuse the stories of the gods as raw material for their literary works. In fact, they would often play around with those myths to resolve pressing socio-political tensions. Aeschylus was one such

dramatist. In *The Oresteia*, he chose a myth steeped in blood and revenge, and tried to resolve it to present to the Athenian spectators some sort of reconciliation for urgent tensions.

The Oresteia was based on the myth of the house of Atreus, which reeked of revenge and vendettas. Briefly, the myth dates back to Tantalus, a mortal who was a favourite of the gods, but whose *hubris* drove him to outsmart them; he killed his son Pelops and, in a divine banquet, offered him to the gods as animal flesh. Thus, he was to receive eternal punishment by the gods for *hubris* could not go unpunished. Pelops was recreated by the gods and became king and had two sons: Atreus and Thyestes. Sadly, his sons were to repeat their grandfather's sin, for when Atreus learned that his brother Thyestes had lured his wife, he killed the two sons of the latter and offered them to him as animal flesh. Aegisthus, the youngest son of Thyestes, escaped that tragedy, but he was later to avenge the murder of his brothers by killing Agamemnon, Atreus' son. Orestes was then to kill both Aegisthus and his mother Clytemnestra, as she had conspired with Aegisthus to kill her husband Agamemnon.

The Oresteian trilogy of Aeschylus (*Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, and *The Eumenides*) uses this myth, which is steeped in blood, as its backbone. It begins in *medias res*; the first play, *Agamemnon*, tackles the return of Agamemnon from the Trojan war and his murder at the hands of his wife Clytemnestra who is aided by her lover Aegisthus. Among the grudges which she holds against him are his return with a booty girl, his fight over a slave girl before leaving to Troy, and above all his sacrifice of their daughter Iphigenia before setting sail to Troy. Hurt and offended by his ill doings, she decides to retaliate. But her deed is "a blow against all patriarchal authority; Clytemnestra's act constitutes the most outrageous rebellion against the masculine authority of husband and king" (Millet, 2000, p.112). The second play, *The Libation Bearers*, tackles the murder of Clytemnestra at the hands of her own son Orestes, who is ordained by Apollo to avenge the death of his father and claim his usurped throne. *The Eumenides*, the last play of the trilogy and the focus of this paper, is purely the invention of

Aeschylus, and as such presents a fictional addition to the myth. In this play, Aeschylus depicts Orestes' ordeal through an imagined strife between Apollo, who represents the new Olympian patriarchal divine order, and the Furies, the ancient goddesses of the earth, to resolve the tension between old and new ways of life and to consolidate the new patriarchal order of the Olympians. The play starts with Orestes seeking Athena's shrine in Athens, upon Apollo's ordination, for he is being hunted down by the Furies, who are outraged by his matricide. As goddesses of the earth, the Furies are horrified by his defilement of matriarchy. Athena decides to set a court of law to settle the dispute, but when the vote is tied, she casts her lot with Orestes to acquit him.

An Essentialist Ecofeminist Reading of *The Eumenides*

The conflict presented in this play is between the Furies, who represent the older deities, and Athena and Apollo, who represent the newer deities. It is a conflict between the earth-bound female deities and the celestial Olympian gods. The belief system of each is different. In *The Eumenides*, the Furies hunt Orestes down because he committed matricide. Generally, what enrages them are crimes that violate blood ties, the basis for matriarchy. They uphold the primacy of mother earth and defend it against encroaching patriarchal beliefs which violate older ties with nature. In the trial itself, the Furies clearly condemn Orestes for killing his own mother: "How could she breed you in her body, murderer? Disclaim your mother's blood? She gave you life" (Aeschylus, 1977, p.258). As per their words, the mother delivers life through her womb. Her bloodline is far more important than that of the father. By contrast, Apollo, the mouthpiece of the Olympian Zeus, ordained Orestes to kill his mother, and is now defending him, because she killed her husband. He puts no great value on her life or role: "The woman you call the mother of the child/ Is not the parent, just a nurse to the seed,/ The new-sown seed that grows and swells insides her./ The man is the source of life-the one who mounts" (Aeschylus, 1977, p.260). He views the role of the male as superior to that of the female or

rather offers “a politicized version of biology” (Millet, 2000, p.113); man becomes the “source of life” (Aeschylus, 1977, p.260) and the seed is now more important than the womb. His words set the basis for patriarchal thought and brush aside nature. With the advent of patriarchy, Classical Greek culture was to move away from nature and value urbanity. This is best pronounced in the way Greek ceremonies related to the fertility of the land came to be handled. They were urbanized and carried within the confines of temples by male priests instead of being carried out in rural areas by matriarchs. The rites which celebrated rebirth, fertility and reproduction lost touch with nature and “the seasonal blood-renewal of crops and herds” (Sjöö & Mor, 1991, p.236). Apollo takes his argument a step further. He uses the example of Athena to show that the womb can be totally dismissed, for the male can beget children on his own, as was the case with Zeus, who gave birth to Athena from his head: “[c]hild sprung full-blown from Olympian Zeus,/ Never bred in the darkness of the womb” (Aeschylus, 1977, p.261). According to the myth, Zeus impregnated Metis, the Goddess of prudence, counsel and craftiness. While the two were playing one day, Metis turned into a fly. Zeus swallowed her instantly, and put an end to their story, but Metis continued to inspire him with wisdom from inside. Thus, Zeus now acquired female wisdom and added it to the male domain. One day, Zeus suffered from a splitting headache. Hephaestus, the goldsmith of the gods, was called upon to split open Zeus’ head, allowing Athena to emerge fully grown and fully armoured. Athena’s birth from a male parent belittles the role played by the female in the reproductive process, hence shaking the foundations of matriarchy. The womb that delivers and the land that yields crops are no longer important, for the male can take over and perform the whole process on his own. This is the argument that the Olympian Apollo sets forth in the trial scene; the “father can father forth without a mother” (Aeschylus, 1977, p.261).

The play emerges as political drama rooted in Aeschylus’ vision of the socio-political development of fifth-century Athens; the goddess Athena summons a court of law, the first of

its kind in European history, hence setting forth a new legal model, and replacing the old ways of blood and revenge. The tribunal held at the Areopagus emerges as “the earliest surviving instance of a trial scene in western drama” (Murnaghan, 2002, 190). According to Aeschylus, it presents the enforcement of law and order; “the mature polis becomes the means by which the Law is satisfied without producing chaos, since public justice supersedes private vengeance; and the claims of authority are reconciled with the instincts of humanity” (Kitto, 1991, p.77). The creation of the court scene in the play is also an innovative technique used by Aeschylus to project the conflicting views of both sides. In so doing, Aeschylus “was also drawing on the inherent affinity between drama and the trial” (Murnaghan, 2002, 190) for both rely on theatricality and spectacle.

Both the Furies and Orestes, aided by Apollo, plead their cases, the judges cast their lots, but the vote is tied. When it is Athena’s turn to render the final judgment, she votes for Orestes, saying:

I will cast my lot for you.

No mother gave me birth.

I honour the male, in all things but marriage.

Yes, with all my heart I am my Father’s child.

I cannot see more store by the woman’s death-
she killed her husband, guardian of their house.

Even if the vote is equal, Orestes wins. (Aeschylus, 1977, pg. 264)

Athena, the goddess of wisdom and war, is biased right from the start. As per her words, she emerged from the head of Zeus, and was born by no mother. Her words reveal that she favours patriarchy over matriarchy, and thus finds Clytemnestra guilty of killing the “guardian” (Aeschylus, 1977, pg. 264) of the house. Through her speech and actions, the goddess of wisdom is establishing a new patriarchal regime which holds the supremacy of the male over

the female, and which claims to replace blood, revenge and chaos, with civic order and the supremacy of law. But it remains a claim for she manipulates the course of law at the end of the trial, and acquits Orestes because of her clear biases.

After the acquittal of Orestes, the Furies, infuriated, reel around Athena, threatening to poison the soil, for they, after all, are the old matriarchal goddesses who hold power over the fecundity of the land, and can make the land go barren and sterile: "I loose my poison over the soil, aieeee! —/ Poison to match my grief comes pouring out my heart,/ Cursing the land to burn it sterile" (Aeschylus, 1977, pg.266). Athena cleverly decides to abate the Furies. First, she reassures them that they will still retain their rightful place: "By all my rights I promise you your seat/ In the depths of earth, yours by all rights" (p.267). That is their legitimate territory and domain; they have always dominated it and are to continue doing so. But she also offers them to become loyal subjects of the newly-established polis, hence resolving all tensions. Athena, the goddess of wisdom, finds it unwise to evoke the wrath of those older matriarchal deities. They are not to be left out or expelled from the newly-found patriarchal system but are to be incorporated into the new Athenian fabric, provided they cast their older selves and become subservient followers. Strangely, they accept and mellow, or this is what Aeschylus depicts for it is all his fabrication. Towards the end of the play, they are seen dancing around Athena to celebrate their newly-acquired status. In compensation, they are endowed with the new title the "Eumenides", meaning the kindly ones, instead of the intimidating title the "Furies".

The vision of Aeschylus, "the eldest and most conservative of the Greek tragedians" (Millet, 2000, p.112), for peace, order and stability entailed crushing the earlier matriarchal deities, the ones who were close to nature, and giving supremacy to the patriarchal Olympian pantheon headed by Zeus, king of the gods: "[t]hus was the gestalt of the new patriarchy expressed by Greek male poets and dramatists" (Sjöö & Mor, 1991, p.236). Literature was used

as a tool to promote the ideology of the time, and brainwash the spectators, and Aeschylus was the poet of the polis par excellence: “[i]n Aeschylus’ dramatization of the myth one is permitted to see patriarchy confront matriarchy, confound it through the knowledge of paternity, and come off triumphant. Until Ibsen’s Nora slammed the door announcing the sexual revolution, this triumph went nearly uncontested” (Millet, 2000, p.115). To achieve this, those matriarchal deities were depicted as ugly, disgusting, mad and hysterical throughout *The Eumenides*. On seeing the Furies, at the beginning of the play, Apollo bluntly expresses his disgust:

They disgust me,
These grey, ancient children never touched
By god, man or beast –the eternal virgins.
Born for destruction only, the dark pit,
They range the bowels of Earth, the world of death,
Loathed by men and the gods who hold Olympus. (Aeschylus, 1977, pg.234)

The play does not depict the two sides objectively for the Furies are depicted as filthy, ugly, dark, irrational and chaotic, whereas the Olympians are depicted as rational, orderly and civilized. The old, wild, and flowing forces of nature are cast in an unfavourable light and are no longer tolerated. In this play, there is clear bias against the earth-bound matriarchal deities, along with their nature-oriented set of beliefs. They are regarded as archaic, hence unfit for the modern Athenian society. The dichotomy between nature and civilization is crystallized in this play, and the association of nature with the female is quite evident.

The above reading of the play from an ecofeminist perspective showed how patriarchy provided a context for the subjugation of women and nature. Women along with rural life were brushed aside in favour of the new urban model, embraced by the Olympians. In order to achieve that end, Aeschylus innovatively devised the trial scene, to introduce both sides of the

debate, but he wittingly crushed the matriarchal side, through the biased Athena, who was his mouthpiece in the play.

Different Currents within Ecofeminism

Though ecofeminism is clearly founded on the link between the subjugation of women and nature, as mentioned above, there are different directions within this discipline. In fact, ecofeminism cannot be pinned down to one path, for it is quite varied, if not controversial at times. In her book, *Ecological Politics: Ecofeminists and the Greens*, Greta Gaard asks the following questions about the nature of ecofeminism:

Did it mean women were somehow "closer" to nature-and if so, what were the implications for men? Did it mean women and nature had experienced similar treatment under patriarchal systems? Or did it mean women who were active in both feminist and environmental movements now had a name for their dual involvements?

Through the dialogue among ecofeminists addressing each of these questions, the several branches of ecofeminist thought developed. (1998, p.12)

Her words clearly show that there is no agreement among ecofeminists, for it means different things to each group. In the same vein, Karen Warren explains that the reason for the disagreement among ecofeminists is that there are different kinds of feminisms: "[s]ince ecofeminism grows out of and reflects different and distinct feminisms (e.g., liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, radical feminism, socialist feminism), ecofeminist positions are as diverse as the feminisms from which they gain their strength and meaning" (2000, p.21). Thus, it is the existence of different feminisms that basically creates this diversity within the field of ecofeminism, which uses feminism as its springboard and combines it with the political vocation of saving nature.

One main controversy within the field of ecofeminism would be the one created by critics who support binary opposites versus those who tend towards deconstructing binary

opposites; between those who see that there are essentialist differences between male and female, and those who tend towards gender fluidity, or believe that essentialism can be used against women. Carolyn Merchant highlights the problem:

Is not the conflation of woman and nature a form of essentialism? Are not women admitting that by virtue of their own reproductive biology they are in fact closer to nature than men and that indeed their social role is that of caretaker? Such actions seem to cement existing forms of oppression against both women and nature, rather than liberating either. (1989, p.xvi)

Merchant believes that this connection between women and nature will deter the liberation of women, as it will confine them to the traditional stereotypical roles conferred on them by virtue of their female bodies. What she is attacking here is essentialist ecofeminism, “which associates being a woman to nature and thus concludes that the defence of nature is inherent to women’s gender identity” (Beltrán, 2017, p.108). According to the detractors of essentialist ecofeminism, the interconnectedness between the female body and nature ultimately means that by virtue of their nature, women, like nature, are only cut out for childbirth, childrearing, cooking and the like. Confining women to the biological functions of pregnancy, birth and lactation, by stressing their contiguity to mother earth which yields crops from its womb, will only imprison them, rather than emancipate them.

Similarly Catriona Sandilands believes that it is because of the sharp identity divides and the “reliance on the language of identity that its political project is currently limited” (1999, p.xvii). What ecofeminism should do, according to Sandilands, is to depart from this male/female identity trap, which clearly defines the role of each, and move on to “a post-identitarian, critical democratic project” (p.xviii).

In the same vein, Gretchen Legler finds that the solid constructs of female, mother, nature, versus male, father, urbanity tend to maintain “hierarchical ways of thinking that justify

the oppression of various ‘other’ in patriarchal culture by ranking them ‘closer to nature’ or by declaring their practices ‘natural’ or ‘unnatural’” (1997, p.228). Legler finds that sticking to this gender dyad ultimately fortifies hierarchical thinking where male is set above female. According to anti-essentialist ecofeminists, ecofeminism should work outside the framework of those social constructs which serve patriarchal power relations and hinder progress.

Diana Fuss explains that constructionism or anti-essentialism “insists that essence is itself a historical construction” and the result of “complicated discursive practices” (1989, 2). That is why constructionist ecofeminists seek to uncover the “intricate and interlacing processes which work together to produce all seemingly "natural" or "given" objects” (Fuss, 1989, 2).

***The Eumenides* from an Anti-essentialist Ecofeminist Perspective**

If *The Eumenides* is to be reexamined in light of the arguments of anti-essentialist ecofeminism, it will appear in a different light. For instance, though the goddess Athena is a female, her identity is rather fluid and does not conform to the stereotypical gendered image of a female. First, she is a female but does not sympathise with women, nor does she side with them. She holds the supremacy of men owing to the fact that she was motherless, and sprang from the head of her father Zeus, king of the gods. Secondly, she is the patron goddess of the urbanized polis Athens, not rural and agrarian territories. She again violates the typical idea of female connectedness to nature, for her domain is the city. Thirdly, not only is she far removed from earthly attributes, but she also refuses to marry and beget children and is adamant on remaining single: “I honour the male, in all things but marriage” (Aeschylus, 1977, 264). This is another violation of the stereotypical roles associated with the female sex, which are marriage, pregnancy, childbirth and lactation. In refusing to get married, she is ultimately refusing all of those gender-related roles. In fact, rather than the traditional image of a mother, she is the goddess of warfare. Born in full armour, she instantly becomes the goddess of wisdom

and war. In the play we see her “armed for combat with her aegis and her spear’ (Aeschylus, 1977, p.248). Like Ares, the god of war, she too is the goddess of warfare, which is another male domain. Betty lies draws an interesting comparison between both Athena and Ares, which shows that she stood on a par with the male god Ares in that tough field, if not outshone him:

As the goddess of war, she could perform mighty deeds of battle; at least twice she defeated the war god Ares. Yet war gave her no pleasure. She preferred peace, and would rather settle disputes by wise judgment than by fighting. In this, she was most unlike the wild Ares, who loved battle for its own sake, and was never happier than when he was slaughtering enemies or destroying cities. It was probably Athena's superior intelligence and strategy in battle that made her stronger than the war god with his mindless fury. (1999, p.47)

Though equally skilled in war like her male counterpart, if not even better, she was also wiser resorting to peace when possible and preferring it over needless bloodshed. So she combined both male warfare skills with female prudence, hence producing a different post-identitarian amalgam. What we see here is a female partaking of the male identity, and adding female attributes to it.

Athena challenges essentialist representations: neither does she act like a woman, nor is she connected to nature. Her identity does not fit into the stereotypical divides of the male/female dyad, or into the gender limitations imposed by patriarchal power. Rather than identifying with her gender, she upsets all expectations and offers a different mixture of both male and female attributes. Thus, the fluidity of her identity defies essentialist ecofeminist readings of the text. Her case can be taken as proof that “neither ‘woman’ nor ‘nature’ is stable, that each is preceded and crosscut by a long chain of contingent representational fictions, and that these fictions are the target of necessary deconstruction” (Sandilands, 1997, 33). From a deconstructionist perspective, Sandilands argues that gender is a fictional representation of how

each sex is supposed to act. This fictional representation should be dismantled or deconstructed since it is a fallacy fabricated by power. Athena does not subscribe to the gendered representation of her sex. Her fluid identity defies the solid definitions imposed by dualist thought. According to anti-essentialist ecofeminism, the problem with essentialist ecofeminism is that someone like Athena would not fit because “[w]omen were given a set of characteristics, consequently dismissing transgender women, non-binary people assigned female at birth, lesbians and non-heterosexual women, women who have no desire to reproduce, and other women who do not fall under the mainstream definition of a woman” (Ourkiya, 2023, 312). Her qualities, actions and behavior do not fit into the typical essentialist image of a woman and her masculinized womanhood stands as proof that there are no sharp dividing lines between opposites. Instead of the fixed and stable identities of essentialist philosophy, she emerges as an admixture of both manhood and womanhood: an androgynous self.

Another instance of gender fluidity is the mythic birth of Athena from Zeus, which Apollo uses to defeat the Furies. By usurping childbearing and childbirth, which were previously considered purely female attributes, and thrusting them upon the king of gods, women were to be stripped of their essentially characteristic endowments. The myth is a tactical manoeuvre that allows for “the transition from female dominance to male dominance by overt male usurpation of her procreative function, the basic source of her mystery and power” (Zeitlin, 1984, p.179). This is not the only instance where childbirth is taken over by the male figure. At the beginning of the play, Orestes, covered with his mother’s blood and holding the sword with which he killed her, seeks refuge at Apollo’s shrine at Delphi where he is “ritually reborn at the *omphalos* of Delphi, the female symbol at the- center of a place whose name means womb” (Zeitlin, 1984, p.176) to be purged of his guilt and to allow for his transition into adulthood. Thus, he is delivered from a shrine that has been adopted by Apollo, and has become a male rather than a female domain. One of the recurrent mythemes of initiation rites

is that “the first birth from a female uterus is to be superseded by a second birth, this time from the male” (Zeitlin, 1984, p.176) to allow for initiation into the world of manhood. By usurping the womb from the mother figure, the dividing lines between male and female are deconstructed, since a purely essentialist female function is conferred upon the male counterpart.

Conclusion

In conclusion, ecofeminism started out as a theoretical and political movement which called for reforming the conditions of both women and the environment, since both were considered victims of patriarchal practices. The bond between both nature and women was seen to be based on their similar reproductive and nurturing qualities. For centuries, patriarchy and capitalism systematically overexploited nature causing the world to suffer from severe environmental issues and making it in need of immediate intervention to sustain life on the planet. Similarly, patriarchy pushed women to the margins, while consistently exploiting their bodies and labour. It was high time to denounce the exploitative practices of the patriarchal capitalist system which dominated, abused and destroyed the life of nature and women alike. Though ecofeminism sprang out of the desire to redress the wrongs inflicted on both women and nature, it eventually branched out and came to include different positions and currents. The reason being that since its inception, ecofeminism has been both a political endeavour and a theoretical movement, which has been continually evolving, and this is what accounts for the heterogeneous positions and currents which circulate within the ecofeminist space. Within this space, feminists, activists, philosophers, theoreticians are developing different strands such as essentialist, constructionist, and Marxist ecofeminisms. This paper presented only two strands from these diverse trends: an essentialist ecofeminist reading of Aeschylus’ *The Eumenides*, followed by an anti-essentialist (constructionist) ecofeminist revision. In so doing, it pinpointed

the diversity that is to be encountered within this field, as it continues to grow both theoretically and politically, thus offering continuous visions and revisions.

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