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Ecofeminist Perspectives in Barbara Delinsky's *Looking For Peyton Place*

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Abstract:

Ecofeminism is a young and expanding discipline that tightly connects the two theories – Environmentalism and Feminism. Since it has been developed as a concept in 1970s, ecofeminism has never been an independent theory. It has undergone numerous metamorphoses in the hands of several ecofeminists, who explores the relation between nature and woman through literary texts. This paper has the purpose of understanding this ecofeminist theory with specific application to Barbara Delinsky's *Looking for Peyton Place* (2005). The novel revolves around Annie Barnes, the female protagonist of this novel, who returns to her native town after her mother's death. The reason for her return is to unveil the mystery that her mother's death especially her fatal illness. Through her investigation Annie finds that there is an environmental cause— the mercury poisoning from the Northwood mill. The rest of novel deals with how as an ecologist she protests against the authority of the mill to save her people from the pollution of toxic waste. Since the novel bears issues relevant to gender and ecology, it stands as a literary exemplar of ecological feminism.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Capitalist Patriarchy, Gender and Ecology

Ecofeminism is a young and expanding discipline that tightly connects the two theories – Environmentalism and Feminism. Since it has been developed as a concept in 1970s, ecofeminism has never been an independent theory. Several books have been written on ecofeminism and on its relationship to other disciplines like essentialism, liberalism, dualism, marxism and many more. It has undergone numerous metamorphoses in the hands of ecofeminists like Ivone Gebara, Vandana Shiva, Susan Griffin, Starhawk, Paula Gunn Allen, Greta Gaard, Karen Warren and Andy Smith. So, much has been written on ecofeminism and its interconnections. But the application of this theory in literary texts with regard to gender studies

remains unexplored. Therefore this paper has the purpose of understanding this ecofeminist theory with specific application to Barbara Delinsky's *Looking for Peyton Place* (2005).

Barbara Delinsky, author of *New England*, has written more than eighty novels and her works have been translated into over a dozen foreign languages. Her novels have an expanding circle of admirers in United States and abroad. Born in 1945 in Boston, Massachusetts, U.S., Delinsky went to Tufts University to study for a Bachelor's Degree in Psychology and to Boston University for a Master's Degree in Sociology. Then for few years she has worked as photographer and reporter in the *Belmont Herald* newspaper. Most of her novels concentrate on marriage, parenthood, sibling rivalry and friendship. Her popular works include *A Woman Betrayed* (1991), *A Woman's Place* (1997), *Coast Road* (1998), *The Vineyard* (2000), *Family Tree* (2007), *Sweet Salt Air* (2013) and *Blueprints* (2015).

Delinsky's novel *Looking for Peyton Place* that is taken for the present study, is set in Middle River – a picture-perfect New Hampshire town. True to its name, the town sits on a river midway between the Connecticut and the Androscoggin. The novel revolves around Annie Barnes, the female protagonist of this novel, who is a bestselling novelist herself. Living in Washington, she then returns to her native town after her mother's death. The reason for her return is to find answers to the strange circumstances of her mother's death especially her fatal illness. Through her investigation Annie finds that the people of the Middle River appear to have much more illness than the normal. She suspects that there is an environmental cause—the mercury poisoning from the Northwood mill, which is owned by a most popular family in the town, The Meades. The rest of novel deals with how she protests against the authority of the mill to save her people from the pollution of toxic waste. Having outlined the plot of the novel, due emphasis will be laid on a Marxist ecofeminist perspective which offers a critique of capitalist patriarchy that forms the core of the novel.

Under capitalism, as sociologist Karl Marx points out, the capitalist in the name of production and profit compromises the sustainability of earth's natural resources as well as the human lives. He says that,

Capitalist production, therefore only develops the technique and degree of combination of the social process of production by simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth—the soil and the worker. (qtd. in Thomas 47)

Here Marx succinctly delineates the detrimental effects of capitalist production on human and on soil fertility. This notion forms the central plot of this novel *Looking for Peyton Place* with two ecofeminist issues — firstly, the contamination of toxic waste in the environment and secondly, its terrible effect on health of the people especially women, children and marginalized.

At the outset of the novel, Annie Barnes sets out to Middle River to unveil the mystery that surrounds the death of her mother, Alyssa and the sickness of her sister, Phoebe. In the prologue itself she says, “The only reason I was in Middle River was to find an explanation for my family's illness ... I wanted the truth about why my sister was sick and my mother was dead”

(Delinsky 10). This personal motive of her mission later turned into her mission for the whole community of the town.

Finding a connection between women and nature forms the core of ecofeminist theory. We come across this perspective even in the beginning of the novel when Annie finds solace in the midst of nature, the woods, the ripe oak, the pungent hemlock, the moist air, and the silent flow of river. Her return to her native place reminds her affinity with its environment as well as with her cat, Barnaby. When she says “there is nothing like a cat’s purr. I had missed this.” (Delinsky 12), the readers are reiterated with the affinity between women, nature and animals. Thus Anne Archambault aptly says in her article “A Critique of Ecofeminism” that “If we believe that women are connected with nature and possess the character traits necessary for preserving the environment, then it follows that they are most qualified to save the earth.”(Archambault 25)

From the pages of *Middle River Times*, a local newspaper of the Middle River Town, Annie gets to know that a lot of people are sick and many with the symptoms of like her mother. In her inquiry with Doctor Tom Martin, she finds that Mercury poisoning is the reason for her mother’s illness and also for the illness of the town’s people. Mercury poisoning is the serious health hazard which will lead to many health problems like defects in the nervous system, miscarriages, sperm toxicity, fetal related problems, hyperactivity, muscular dystrophy, autism in young children and many more. Although this toxic affects human in common, women and children are the most vulnerable to it. The only source for the mercury pollution in the town is the Northwood Paper Mill as its waste goes right into the river, the lifeblood of Middle Riverites. The mill is owned by the Meades, the powerful authoritative family in the town. This family stands for the Capitalist Patriarchy, which always looks for short term profits exploiting the nature for its raw materials and the labour for its production. Leaping one step further this authoritative Meades make the common people as victims of their vicious greed.

Vandana Shiva, a physicist and environmental activist in India, published *Ecofeminism: Reconnecting a Divided World (1993)* along with Maria Mies, a German, Marxist Sociologist. In this book the authors connect the capitalist-patriarchal economic system with the oppression of women and the destruction of nature. They affirm that ‘myth of development’ is responsible for the degradation of the natural world. Their argument is that Man’s hunger for progress, and the dominant global forces of capitalist patriarchy, legitimized the exploitation of nature. However in all such cases women, according to them, were always the victims of environmental crisis who never took part in planning for environmental destruction.

The Capitalist patriarchal power is visible throughout the novel. No one in the town of Middle River dares to question or act against the power of the Meades. Annie Barnes needs evidences to bring the crime of Meades into limelight but when she inquires the people about their sickness they refuse to heed her because of their fear of Meades’ power. This even is the

case with her sister Sabina and the sister's husband Ron. Ron says, "You don't understand the power the Meades have. They can ruin us." (Delinsky 121) Both work in the Northwood Mill where Sabina manages the computer system and Ron works in the maintenance department. If they found being worked against the mill, they would be fired. They are threatened of their livelihood. Annie also receives many threatens from the Meades, when they sensed her purpose. She receives threats to her family, to her property and to herself. Sandy Meade, the Northwood Mill owner, using his influence in the town ordered Marshall Greenwood, the police chief, to "hassle her." He wants to intimidate her and so she is monitored wherever she goes. She is humiliated and harassed by the police chief in many circumstances. He called Annie a rabble-rouser and at one instance she is even vandalized. For instance, the four tyres of her car were slashed, when she parked it outside a hotel — violence against her property. But she never gives up and continues in fighting for justice. She bears these harassments like the Mother Earth bears the atrocities of humans. Here Delinsky brings out Annie's concern over the environment and over the health of the town people through her determination in protesting for justice.

Being an American makes Delinsky to be aware of the capitalism and the oppression of men over women and nature. It is power, hegemony, wealth and man's greed of the well-developed countries lead to the ill-treatment of women, nature and the underprivileged. However this doesn't imply the entire community of men from the developed countries. There are also men who possess the qualities of women and nature. To prove this Delinsky tries to show two types of men in the novel. The first type of men includes Sandy Meade, and his son, Aidan Meade. They are truly the emblems of Capitalist patriarchy. Delinsky portrays them as money-minded and possessors of huge ego. Sandy Meade, especially, is a genius at creating spin and making it stick. It's a natural marketing skill. The two men benefit from the environment and make use of the labour but have no genuine care for the both.

Paper mills like Northwood take wood and turn it into paper. Part of the process entails using bleach to make the paper white. Traditionally mercury was used in the process but mercury is extremely toxic. When it is released from these power plants as waste, it fouls air, landscape and water — the three basic elements of survival. Government regulations allow for certain amount of pollution but Sandy Meade exceeded that amount in his mill. As per the law, Sandy Meade should have shifted this mercury waste to an authorized toxic waste disposal area which proved to be costly. As Sandy Meade and Aidan thought it would cut into their profits they went for illicit disposal. They just filled up the mercury wastes in drums and buried them under the Clubhouse, the Gazebo and the day care center in the Middle River. The primary factor in choosing these places for dumping the toxic waste is that it will be less suspicious if there is an enquiry in future and also even if there is any leak or contamination, the Meades are out of risk from the toxins. Only the women, the children, working class people and the underprivileged are going to be affected by this. This act of the Meades illustrates the egocentric attitude of capitalist patriarchy where they will do anything and everything to safeguard them even at the cost of other

lives. The profit-based system like this is the vital cause for the exploitation of natural world and the woman world. In the novel unfortunately the mercury waste under the clubhouse and Gazebo spilled — a major spill. These major exposures to Mercury lead many of the Middle Riverites to a chronic exposure including Annie's mother and her sister. Instead of taking responsibility the Meades burnt the two places to cover up the issue from the public eyes and this absolved them from responsibility.

The second type of men is exemplified by Tom Martin and James Meade. Tom Martin is a doctor and the director of the Middle River clinic. He is the one who treated Annie's mother and is the first person to suspect a problem at Northwood. Through his research on his patients he observed that Mercury poison could be the cause of illness. However he doesn't reveal this opinion to the patients because he is also aware of the power the Meades possess. For he says to Annie:

I can state my opinion, and even point to a pattern, but there are those who'll say I'm crazy, and they might just be powerful enough to destroy my credibility in the town ... the Meades own this town. (Delinsky 34)

Here Tom worries about his credibility but this doesn't mean that he is self-centred. The underlying fact is that he is in a precarious position. He knows he is the best doctor in the town. In contrast to doctors like Elliot Rollins, who overmedicates his patients and Nathan Yancy who has bogus degrees, Tom Martin is completely dedicated to his patients. And this made him say to Annie that, "I'm hog-tied ... if I give up my practice to crusade for the cause, who will take care of the people here?" (Delinsky 33) Thus this dedication to his patients endears him to Annie as a permanent friend.

The second example in the line is James Meade, the elder son of Sandy Meade. Although he belongs to the capitalist patriarchal family, he has an ethic of caring for women, babies, their health and environment. Most ecofeminist postulate that nurturing is a quality genetically common to women, nature and female animals. For example the reproductive qualities of natural world are similar to the women's world. Women conceive and give birth to the children as like other species – animals give birth to babies and plants produce the offspring. However this nurturing capacity can also be found among men. It is evident in the novel through James Meade who is caring and affectionate towards his daughter, Mia. Mia's mother April wanted to abort her but James passionately said he wanted the baby as he wanted to be a parent. After Mia's birth he took care of her like a mother. Annie describes his nurturing capacity as follows:

He genuinely enjoyed feeding and playing and bathing, and if there was a bad diaper ... he never asks anyone to do that, he just did it himself. (Delinsky 349)

His care and affection is expressed in many parts of the novel. By giving an example of a man like James who can bring up a child, Delinsky posits that men too have the nurturing quality.

However it is this feminine attribute and the radical nature of James, subjects him to be marginalized by his father Sandy Meade and also estranges him from his brother. James says about their father-son relationship to Annie in the following lines,

He and I don't see eye to eye on things, and the more I push, the more he marginalizes me. So I have a choice. I can let myself be marginalized so much that I'm no good to the company. (Delinsky 288)

These lines claim that men who possess the qualities of women will also be marginalized by the paternalistic societies. Like Annie he too cares for the environment and worries over the devastation that the toxic waste creates on people's health as this is evident when he motivated Annie to continue her mission. He says:

You'd be righting a wrong. You'd be finding out why your mother died. You'd be doing something good for all the people who live in Middle River. If nothing else, think of the children. Mercury is devastating in children. (Delinsky 133)

Because of these characteristics, Annie accepted his love and they jointly fight for the justice. By portraying Annie's relationship with men like Tom, a friend and James Meade, a lover, and basing these relationships on dedication and determination to save the people and the ecosphere, Delinsky wanted to show that men can also work with women to save the earth. Unlike feminism which is gender biased, eco feminism is neutral.

In the later part of the novel Sabina also joined in the mission of Annie. Knowing her sister is committed to a good cause Sabina also volunteered her in that. As a reaction she is fired from her job in the Northwood mill by Aidan Meade which shows how he is abusing his power so arrogantly. Eventually her husband Ron is furious with her and refuses to understand her. He accuses her of being irresponsible to let the job go like that. Since Sabina is the major breadwinner of the family Ron worries over her part of salary. Here Ron is worried over the money whereas Sabina is worried over the community. Through these characters of Ron and Sabina, Delinsky portrays the common nature of men and women.

As stated earlier, the recurrent theme of the novel is Annie's mission to save her community from the environmental degradation. She once emphasizes her motives to James Meade that,

What I want is for Northwood to finally take responsibility for two very serious mercury spills, compensate the people who've been hurt, and make sure it doesn't happen again. (Delinsky 286)

By the end of the novel she is also joined by the Middle Riverites in her protest and even succeeds in it. In the Board Meeting of the Northwood, they accepted their culpability of improper toxic disposal and she is given assurance that the victims will be compensated and the

last every bit of mercury waste dumped by the mill will be removed. This end of the novel given by the author, Delinsky, is well reflected in the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth adopted in 2010 at a Bolivian conference. Its obligations to Mother Earth, “guarantee that the damages caused by human violations of the inherent rights recognized in this Declaration are rectified and that those responsible are held accountable for restoring the integrity and health of Mother Earth.” Thus Annie’s victory at the end of the novel provides a hope that women can take the lead to save the earth.

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