

Ecofeminism in Doris Lessing's *Mara and Dann: An Adventure***Najla R. Aldeeb**Language Center, Batterjee Medical College
Jeddah, Saudi Arabia**Abstract**

Doris Lessing's *Mara and Dann: An Adventure* (1999) is a fantasy novel with focus on nature. Lessing portrays a world in which oppression by a male-dominated society is at the root of countless problems. It depicts the effects of global warming in the future emphasizing that the domination of women is the core of all crises in the environment. The novel implies that women are able to lead as most of the female characters in the novel play the role of the leader starting from Daima, the woman who protects Mara and Dann as children, to Orphne the woman who heals Dann from addiction. Applying Greta Claire Gaard's (1993) principles of ecofeminism to literature classifies and justifies the cause of the movement (p. 20). This paper sheds light on Gaard's four types of ecofeminism in Lessing's *Mara and Dann: An Adventure*: liberal, culture, social and socialist by discussing the apocalypses, patriarchal legacy, pathetic fallacy and radical orthodoxies as features of ecofeminism.

Key words: apocalypses, ecofeminism, pathetic fallacy, patriarchal legacy, radical orthodoxies

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Introduction

Doris Lessing's *Mara and Dann: An Adventure*, published in 1999, is a winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature. The novel is difficult to be classified into one category, which endows it with one of the characteristics of postmodernism. Gendusa (2014, p. 135) categorizes Lessing's *Mara and Dann* as an adventure not only because the word "adventure" is written in the title but also because the novel represents the heroine's quest. Wilson (2013) categorizes it as a "utopic text, a combination of utopian and dystopian ... [it] satirizes civilizations of past, present, and future while revealing multicultural greediness and blindness" (p. 3). Sperlinger (2017) states that Lessing's *Mara and Dann* is a didactic story teaching the reader about the connectedness between humans and nature (p. 300). It is perceivable from the novel that humans, males and females, are able to develop if they believe in the ecofeminist philosophy as the main solution for having a better world.

The impossibility to pin down a work into a single category and the combination of many techniques are two of the strongest hints of postmodernism. Setting the novel in the deteriorated Africa, "Ifrik", in the distant future reflects the author's prediction of the degradation of the future. Nevertheless, there is still hope in the future by making the hero and heroine able to reach their destination. The link between women's suffering and the worsening of the environment gives the novel an ecofeminist reading.

This paper discusses *Mara and Dann*'s apocalyptic world with its significant social and environmental problems. It also deliberates the patriarchal legacy which makes men superior to women and form women's stereotype. The paper examines the link between women, men, birds, trees and other elements of nature in the novel and analyses the personification of birds and trees as a style of pathetic fallacy. Challenging the orthodoxies in the novel is another form of corruption; the novel gives an indirect message that violating the rules of nature can affect not only humans but also nature.

Ecofeminism Definition

The term *ecofeminism* was coined in 1974 by "the French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne, who called upon women to lead an ecological revolution to save the planet" (Merchant, 1992, p. 184). It is a combination of the prefix *eco-* and the noun *feminism*. According to Davis (1992), the prefix *eco-* represents *ecology* and is derived from the Greek word *oikos*, which means *family, family's property, or house*, in other words, the Earth (p. 290). Consequently, the term ecofeminism indicates a connection between household and the Earth. This connection is established by women, because they can preserve their houses and the planet Earth (Sandilands, 1999, p. 4).

Merchant (1992) describes ecofeminism as a natural theory that links women to nature and emphasizes the role of each creature including women. She discourages the dominance of men on women, and encourages serene concord and ecological understanding among all living things on Earth. Merchant states that there are four types of ecofeminism: liberal, cultural, social and socialist. Liberal ecofeminism facilitates positive changes in the government and state affairs. Cultural ecofeminism shifts the concept of women and nature in society and endeavors to correct the stereotypes of women and the nature. Social ecofeminism fosters equality for all living things on Earth including nature in order to establish harmony in the world. Finally,

socialist ecofeminism condemns Western philosophy and its capitalist activities; also, it calls for a revolution to save the environment.

Although some scholars consider ecofeminism as a theory, others classify it as a philosophical movement that calls for eliminating all forms of injustice, including injustice against women and the environment. Ortner (1974) compares women to nature arguing that both are raped by the male rule (pp. 67-87). In other words, women and nature are both oppressed by the patriarchal society. Thus, ecofeminism is a green movement which urges women to see their similarities with nature and to protect it for the coming generations.

Ecofeminist Principles

The principles of ecofeminism show that it is a green philosophy as it requests social changes. The first principle is the reformation of all systems in the society, so the movement raises awareness to promote these changes. Another principle is enhancing sympathy towards all creatures not only women. Ecofeminism calls for eliminating all forms of divisions like male/female or culture/nature. Also, the movement assumes that banning all forms of oppression and exploitation can be achieved if authority is distributed equally in the society (Gaard, 1993, p. 20).

Ecofeminism in Lessing's *Mara and Dann*

Mara and Dann live in the distant future, on Earth thousands of years from now. The novel fantasizes the Ice Age as a result of the ecological voracity of today's society, causing fatal drought to the Southern land of "Ifric." In the Author's Note, Lessing writes: "*Mara and Dan* is a reworking of a very old tale It is set in the future, in Africa (it is) an attempt to imagine the consequences might be when the ice return" (pp. vii-viii). The whole place is afflicted by significant natural disasters: the center has nonstop drought and the northern part is permanently covered by a coat of ice. Mara and Dann are respectively seven and four when they become orphans, so they are brought to a place called The Rock Village and looked after by Daima, a female character. A few years later they begin their epic journey from the centre of Ifrik to its northern part where there is more water and consequently more food. Throughout their journey, Mara and Dann have to fight in order to survive; they encounter all kinds of primitive peoples who live in very poor conditions.

Social Ecofeminism

According to Gaard (1993), social ecofeminism is the result of feminist movements in various areas including politics and labor. It seeks to end oppression and to develop equality highlighting the idea that equality cannot be accomplished unless there is harmony in the world. Achieving this harmony requires the collaboration of males and females because the degradation of the environment affects women and then their children, which in turn affects men (pp. 9-12). The principles of social ecofeminism are demonstrated in Lessing's *Mara and Dann* in its apocalyptic world with its serious future damage and destruction: "All around was this enormous, flat country covered with grass, a yellow dying grass Fish were dying in the water, which was hardly enough to cover them" (p. 10).

People in this world live in semi-tribal colonies and behave aggressively. They lose contact with all scientific knowledge and they lack any familiarity with culture or art. Some

cities were splendid, but now they are either destroyed or submerged by floods. The unfriendly nature makes it difficult for people to inhabit the center of Ifrik as there are giant spiders, water dragons, enormous lizards and huge beetles which can bisect and divide a child with their pincers. The novel depicts a frightening vision of the future of our planet. It raises awareness of nature in which everything is vital; thus, Lessing plays the role of an ecofeminist and calls for social change, which must be made by all members of the society.

The novel also illustrates the interconnectedness of women and nature. Corruption is rampant in all the societies encountered by Mara and Dann. In every stop the siblings face a natural disaster: drought, flood, or change in climate. The more the female characters are oppressed, the more aggressively nature responds. In the first journey, which is from the Rock village to Chelops, Mara disguises to be a boy, which emphasizes the idea of the patriarchal society and the oppression of women. She knows that achieving recognition and surviving necessitates changing her identity and wearing boys' clothes:

she felt the knife blade sliding over the bones of her skull and saw the horrible lumps falling into the sand. She kept quiet still for fear of being cut Her head was as smooth and shiny as a bone or a nut. (p. 83).

Disguising as a boy is the only way to protect herself in a society dominated by men as women are marginalized. One of Gaard's principles of social ecofeminism is that humans should serve nature and reserve the natural differences and ecological balance (Gaard, 1993, p. 20). In her novel, Lessing plays the role of a social reformer who preaches people saying indirectly that there is no possibility for women to be free and the ecological crisis to be solved in a society full of oppression.

Socialist Ecofeminism

Carlassare (2000) argues that socialist feminists are committed to reveal the causes of oppression and domination and they incorporate the Marxist feminism. Women receive less payment than men and serve as outlets to male frustration through violence and rape (pp. 89-106). Socialist feminism also scrutinizes the role of the family in the oppression of women. Lessing's *Mara and Dann* illustrates women's systematic oppression through highlighting the patriarchal legacy and emphasizing the role of women as incubators. This ideology is engraved in childhood by family members.

In Charad, Mara becomes a spy. She is kidnapped to be a "breeder". The theme of breeding reflects the submission of women. Women are considered incubators in all societies. Again Mara pretends to be a man and wears soldier clothes. The motif of disguising as a boy also shows neglecting women in the African society. Mara is discovered and taken to another house for females. The Mahondi mistress Ida always loses children in pregnancy. Mahondis set a rule that men can marry two women to have more children; nevertheless, the babies die of hunger. To have more children, they set another rule that men can marry three women. They do not care about women's feelings. They ignore women's refusal. Mara gets married to Meryx, the son of the tribe's chief. Mara escapes for survival because of poverty and infertility in Chelops. However, in Goidel she is arrested and dealt with as a breeder: "Well, you must go back to prison. If your husband does not claim you within a week, then you will go to the breeding

programme" (p. 224). She gives "the two women gaolers" (p. 225) two gold coins and asks them for abortion to hide her fertility; otherwise, she is exploited in a materialist world that deals with women as possessions.

When Dann becomes addicted to "the poppy", he gambles Mara away on a roll of the dice; this action demonstrates dealing with women as objects with no feeling or voice. Having no voice is one of the elements feminism deals with, and it is supported by ecofeminism or the oppression of the environment. Women and nature are injured concurrently by patriarchal dominance. Lessing portrays a world in which oppression by a male-dominated society is at the root of countless problems.

Cultural ecofeminism

Cultural ecofeminists believe that women are associated with the environment; hence, they are sensitive to nature. The link between women and nature is clear in Lessing's use of pathetic fallacy, "a literary term for the attributing of human emotion and conduct to all aspects within nature. It is a kind of personification that is found in poetic writing when, for example, clouds seem sullen, when leaves dance, when dogs laugh, or when rocks seem indifferent" (Abrams & Harpham, 2012, p. 269). In pathetic fallacy, the writer ascribes the human feelings of his or her characters to inanimate objects or non-human phenomena surrounding them in the natural world. In *Mara and Dann*, Lessing depicts the thirst that Mara feels as the thirst that all inanimate creatures around Mara feel. In describing the bird, the narrator says, "It was so thirsty: Mara could feel the dryness of its mouth in her own" (12). Mara sees the bird "so weak" because she is weak. As Mara is thinking of water, she imagines, "These thirsty trees must have been thinking of all that water rushing past, just over the ridge, but they could not get to it" (18). Throughout the novel, Mara attributes whatever she feels to either animals, birds, or plants in nature.

The cultural ecofeminism movement aims at changing the stereotypes of women and nature. (Carlassare, 2000, pp. 89-106). It seeks spiritual, personal, and material changes. For instance, it endeavors to end capitalism. Kira exemplifies oppressed women who seek social transformation. She is an orphan from an inferior branch. She has been taken into the kin as a child, but she has never felt part of the kin. This shows the hierarchy in society. When Mara meets Kira, the latter is one of the wives of the Mahondi chief, but she has escaped, leaving her baby to Ida. She feels marginalized and ignored not only by men, especially her husband, but also by the other women in the society. She gets married to a black man, which shows that she is plagued by being a woman and being poor; she is doubly marginalized. Kira falls in love with Dann, but she prefers her "nice little house, life and poppy" (p. 219). Her insistence on continuing with the black man reflects her need for a safe place to live in.

Another feature of cultural ecofeminism is the change of values and the revolution against the systems. Lessing challenges the orthodoxies; she contends the bond of sister and brother and the institution of marriage. Although the story shows the strong relationship between the sister and brother, Mara and Dann, some events show that Dann is hard and selfish especially when he eats all the food without leaving anything to his sister. When they go to Bilma, a large trading and powerful city, but not the main city of the North Lands, Daulis helps Mara by marrying her on paper and paying mother Dalide. In Bamila, Mara discovers the new Dann, the real Dann, her enemy. Mara sees him coming along the street with Bergos and a new

man, a Mahondi. The three men sit down at a table well away from her, but she knows Dann has seen her and is pretending not to. He asks Mara to give him her money. He gambles away everything and loses his money. He gambles Mara, as if he were possessing her, and they leave Bilma to go to Kanaz, a cold place. In Tundra, she becomes sick and she dreams of Daima, Crethis, the Rock Village.

Mara and Dann find an isolated house where Felissa and Felix live. They tell Mara and Dann that they are the last princess and prince from the Royal family. They tell them that their real names were Princess Shahana and Prince Shahmand. They tell them that they have to marry to get children and rule Ifrik again. Mara considers them insane as it is against nature to have children from Dann. When she finds Dann tempted to do what Felix asks him, she asks him, "Dann, are you going to rape me?" She reminds him that he gambled her in Bilma. She tells him that he would not make her a prisoner but the other Dann would. This incident shows Dann's willingness to break the bond of sister and brother; again near the end of the story he goes back to this desire. He asks, "Mara, why can't we be together? We ought to be together ... But now you've got Shabis" (403).

Another feature of cultural ecofeminism is the change in the relationship between the husband and wife; it is not respected or considered something sacred any more. This is revealed in the stories of betrayal that Larissa gives. The first one is about a woman called Mam Bova who hates her husband and tries to seduce a handsome youth who rejects her, so she takes poison and dies. The second story is about a beautiful, powerful woman called Ankrena who similarly hates her husband and leaves him for a handsome soldier and commits suicide by throwing herself under a machine, "running on a parallel rail, but this vehicle lacked freedom of movement and was soon superseded by ancient versions of the skimmer" (p. 166). The third story was about Mam Bedfly, who was a young female slave, who falls "in love with a sailor from across the sea" (p. 166). Since they do not comprehend the notions of sea, ocean, and ships, she feels abandoned, and kills herself. Lessing revolts against some behaviors through some love stories. The old myth about a girl called Jull and a boy called Rom, modelled on Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, who are from different clans, shows that even the meaning of love has changed. Jull and Rom fall in love and kill themselves because the clan disapproves. Another story illustrates the corruption and the changes of norms. A young girl wants to marry a handsome young man instead of an old rich man chosen by her father, but instead of killing herself, she is imprisoned forever in a temple. The ecofeminist movement shows that the unexpected becomes the norm in a corrupted world. The last story is that of a famous singer called Toski who befriends a young man escaping from the police because he is intriguing against an unjust king. In exchange for the promise of freedom for the young hero, Toski sleeps with the Chief of Police, but he betrays her, and the famous singer kills herself. This story shows the unethical world that does not respect any relationships or systems. Challenging the orthodoxies in the novel is a double-edged weapon. It demonstrates the corruption of the society, and it implies the necessity to go back to the radical orthodoxies because all people who break the bonds in the novel are punished. This is an implication that these relationships are sacred and should not be challenged. It is a warning against violating the rules of nature.

Liberal ecofeminism

Tong (1989) defines liberal feminism as women's ability to preserve their equivalence through their own activities and choices to correct the belief that women are, inherently, incapable physically and mentally (pp. 1-5). Merchant's (1992) view of liberal ecofeminism is that nature is a partner and people should have sympathy with nature as well as with other individuals. Humans should not show discrimination and care about each other regardless of sex or class. She encourages mutual respect, and calls for changes in the government and state systems.

Lessing's *Mara and Dann* discusses the corruption of the government and people who have power, and this is the main reason of Mara's escape. Han, the old woman, who owns the boat they take from Majab, is the navigator. She is so tough and aggressive that Mara thinks she looks like an animal. She demands another fee from them all, and their hatred seemed to feed her. When refugees attack the boat, she throws them bread over which they fight. In Charad the soldiers attack the boat, and she is "knocked down and disappeared among scuffling, kicking and stamping feet" (p. 238). She is killed by the soldiers and her money bags are scattered. Mara dives forward and snatches one up and then returns to her place so fast. In the Tundra, Mara sees sun traps not working and says, "if Han were still alive, she could probably make them work again. She was the last person to know the secret" (p. 230). Han's death reflects the elimination of the evil, which asserts the necessity of hope.

Mara and Dann can be read as a political novel; it has one of the elements of liberal ecofeminism as it comments on the sins and foibles of governments and systems. It depicts the negative impact of corrupt rulers: war, slavery, sexism, and racism. Mara's affliction is because of a power struggle in her family. The struggle over who rules causes the separation between seven-year-old Mara and her younger brother Dann. Mara ferociously cares for her brother in a remote village of neo-Neanderthals. The corruption of rulers and systems result in the siblings' hardships: Dann becomes addicted to "the poppy" and gambles Mara away on a roll of the dice; Mara works as a spy and is kidnapped to be a "breeder."

Conclusion

Ecofeminism is a movement that has many perspectives; it is an attempt to restore the pure, natural environment and fair way of living by raising awareness of the consequences of oppressing women and destroying the environment. Its main principle is that human beings are connected with all creatures in nature, so it promotes the significance of abolishing any harm against people or the environment. Ecofeminism links the oppression of women to the oppression of nature.

Adamson et. al. (1988) state that socialist ecofeminists suggest cooperation as a solution because it empowers humans to gain their rights. They agree with social ecofeminists that equality paves the way to achieve harmony in the world. However, cultural ecofeminists seek to change the stereotypes of women and nature by eliminating the patriarchal legacy (Carlassare, 2000, pp. 89-106). They agree with liberal ecofeminists that equality between men and women can be accomplished through political reform, if women lead and have a role in governments.

As a postmodern novel, Lessing's *Mara and Dann* depicts the social, socialist, cultural, and liberal ecofeminism since it reveals social, political, and ecological complications. The novel

challenges the stable ideologies and systems such as the bond of sister and brother and the institution of marriage. It relates all human and nature conflicts to practicing oppression and challenging the rules of nature. The novel implies that women's oppression, corrupt governments, and many other environmental problems can be solved if authority is distributed equally in all societies.

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