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### **The Intersection of Feminism and the Environmental Crisis**

Contemporary literature continues to, directly and indirectly, address gender disparities in feminist societies. In recent times, dystopian works that highlight questions of gender have been popularized, while feminist utopias have seen less of the limelight. Oftentimes, these works point to the convergence of environmental issues with the fight for gender equality. Does this insinuate a cultural shift towards a feminist cacotopia? While the answer to this is not yet clear, there is clarity surrounding the fact that the increasingly urgent climate crisis is deeply intertwined with social issues such as the feminist debate. In this essay, the basic contentions of ecofeminism, such as reproductive rights and defying the patriarchy, will be discussed in relation to the environmental crisis, and a futuristic feminist idyll will be hypothesized.

A wide range of literary genres explores gender disparities through lenses that allow us to examine aspects of our society that perpetuate gender inequalities. In the words of Val Plumwood, “feminist theory is the most innovative and truly living theory in today’s academics” (vii). Two particularly potent ecofeminist works are Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) and Barbara Kingsolver’s *Flight Behavior* (2012). Each of these novels reflects the idea that women’s rights are deeply connected with the environment, or more specifically, women’s lack of rights are deeply connected with the environmental crisis.

Margaret Atwood’s speculative fiction novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a dystopian piece that presents a patriarchal society. The setting is a dystopia that is not far removed from modern-day, a place called Gilead. Officials of Gilead, all of whom are men if you can believe it, agree that the path to bettering the world is through population control. They run a totalitarian

society in which they force conception upon fertile women through what is essentially rape. This is the result of an unnamed environmental disaster that occurred prior to the events of the story. Any viable fertile woman, who was not previously part of the upper class, is forced to become a Handmaid to assist upper-class couples with procreation. Class status is determined by whether or not a woman was married to a man who holds authority. Handmaids of Gilead experience a stripping of their rights, where they are obliged to serve solely as reproductive vessels. This is the basic context of their role, but the Handmaids in red are certainly a representation of the oppression of women.

Women's compromised reproductive rights is where the environmental crisis is incorporated in the novel. A woman's fertility is almost always associated with a symbol that can also be linked to nature; such as flowers, birds, and other animals. Fertile women are often depicted in a scene that is blooming with nature. Women and nature have been connected in this way for centuries, and symbolism for fertility is one of many ways that the two are bonded. However, when women and girls are exploited in harmful ways, another striking similarity between women and nature is evident. For centuries, humanity has been exploiting nature's resources, and the consequences of our irresponsible actions loom over us. This exploitative similitude is what *The Handmaid's Tale* deals with, as the dystopian society trades off women's rights to solve the problem of a degrading environment. It should not be a controversial statement that women's rights should not have to be compromised to save the environment. But this is the question at the center of the ecofeminist debate. On many levels, everything in our world is interconnected. The idea that true environmental rights cannot exist without equal gender rights is an ideology that has been embraced in recent years. Through this lens, *The*

*Handmaid's Tale* is a clear example of a warning that we are heading towards an environmental collapse that is accompanied by an increase in patriarchal tyranny and injustice.

Just as *The Handmaid's Tale* follows a female protagonist as she navigates a male-dominated society, Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* also outlines the journey of a female protagonist. However, the two novels explore the same topic in contrasting ways. Environmental destruction, along with a dangerous patriarchy, is the cause of women's oppression in *The Handmaid's Tale*, whereas discovering the environmental crisis is liberating for the protagonist in Kingsolver's novel. *Flight Behavior* explores the transformation that Dellarobia, the main character, goes through, as a result of becoming more environmentally conscious. At first, Dellarobia is resentful of her current life, unhappy and finding being a stay-at-home mom to be "the loneliest kind of lonely, in which she was always and never by herself" (Kingsolver 84). She finds solace in striving to understand more about the natural world and uses her absorption in this newfound interest to escape the feeling of being trapped by her daily familial duties.

The stereotype that a woman's sole duties consist of being a wife and taking care of a family is well established. Initially, Dellarobia embodies this role and does not feel as though she has any sort of freedom. The symbolism in the novel is, once again, what subtly ties womanhood and nature together. Dellarobia's life changes one day when "unearthly beauty had appeared to her" (Kingsolver 15). Once she realized that the "forest on fire" she had seen was actually butterflies, she feels "blind...unreceptive to truth...[as if] she had shuttered her eyes and looked without seeing" (Kingsolver 52). Her emotions overwhelm her, as she had missed an opportunity to absorb the beauty of the scene. However, the scene is truly representative of something quite the opposite of beautiful. The butterflies are only present because their homes are being

destroyed, and their beauty is not meant to be enjoyed by those in the Appalachian Mountains. The migration patterns of the butterflies had been disrupted by a natural disaster, and their existence on the planet is threatened by increasingly uninhabitable climates. Dellarobia's encounter with the millions of Monarch butterflies can be likened to a spiritual awakening; her journey to a stronger sense of environmental and self-awareness is sparked by the butterflies' presence.

Just as the monarchs seek an escape from a life unworthy of living, so does Dellarobia. Once she realizes the severity of the butterflies' situation, her determination to protect the species ignites a dormant part of her; provoking her journey to self-awareness. The seemingly beautiful scene of fiery butterflies actually stands for struggle and disaster, just as one may view Dellarobia's physical appearance and semi-functional family to stand for a put-together life. In reality, she is internally misguided, as the monarchs were. As she recognizes the suffering of the monarchs, Dellarobia embarks on a soul-searching peregrination to reach a sense of self-fulfillment. Her expedition is successful; the novel concludes with the image of the monarchs flying "out to a new earth" (Kingsolver 433) as Dellarobia is on the path to higher education. It is crucial to note the intersection of Dellarobia's personal awakening with her realization of the environmental crisis. These two events are simultaneous, allowing for a deeper reading through an ecofeminist lens.

Each of the novels discussed belongs to relatively different genres, but both address a similar theme. Despite entirely unique plots, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *Flight Behavior* (2012) can both be read through an ecofeminist lens that contributes to the underlying themes and messages of the novels. *The Handmaid's Tale* extends a warning to society regarding the dangers associated with compromised reproductive rights, while *Flight Behavior* urges readers to

explore their own vital role in our shared ecosystem. Carolyn Merchant said it best when she points out that “many environmentalists see the loss of wilderness as a decline from a pristine earth to a paved, scorched, endangered world. Many feminists see a nature once revered as mother now scarred, desecrated, and abused, and women as the victims of patriarchal culture” (2). *Flight Behavior* deals more directly with the environmentalist aspect of the ecofeminist discussion, while Atwood’s piece is an immediate reflection of the feminist debate. As discussed, *Flight Behavior* follows an aspiring scientist as she navigates through environmental crisis realizations that lead to self-reflection, which triggers significant change for the female protagonist. Contrarily, the environmental crisis sparks a patriarchal takeover in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, resulting in an immense loss of rights and increased oppression of women. These are both consequential works to understand the “links between women’s oppression and the domination of nature” (Plumwood 1). Atwood and Kingsolver each manifest the distinct ways in which the environmental crisis and the feminist movement are interconnected issues; one cannot be solved without a solution to the other.

It is not rare to come across a proposition of a utopia that strives for gender equality *and* addresses environmental quandaries. However, it is rare to see cooperative action to achieve the two. There is a benefit to hypothesizing such a scenario, and I found it stimulating to imagine a world where reality revolves around ecofeminist values; especially when “we do live in a world increasingly and distressingly like the feminist dystopias” (Plumwood 7). The civilization I envisioned has unique characteristics that were inspired by readings such as those previously discussed. My goal was to consider an “ecological feminist analysis of these problems..to advance [my] understanding” (Plumwood 10) of the contemporary ecofeminist debate. The following is an excerpt from the hypothetical society of “Vielle Angleterre”:

Picture this: it's 2060, ten presidential terms have passed since the Trump Era. Women and other minority groups were set back decades after Donald Trump's four year reign. Politicians have since taken advice from some of the greatest works of speculative fiction, and transformed society into what now appears to be a woman's world...

I am finally falling asleep in my rickety wooden framed bed, high above the ground outside, when I am made aware of chaos that is erupting below my windows. I live on the top floor of a women-only complex, and looking outside my glass walls, I see that there are men on the outside trying to get in. They must be angry about the new legislation passed earlier tonight. Knowing that they will never find a way in, I climb back into bed and readjust my pillows so that the noise outside is muffled.

The next morning, it's as if I had dreamt the intrusion. There is no sign of violence outside or within our quiet building. I make my way down to the cafe for breakfast, greeting my neighbors and friends as I go. The TVs are all broadcasting a segment about the new Paraphernalia Law. Banned paraphernalia now includes any merchandise or other items suggesting support of past misogynist political figures, including but certainly not limited to American President Donald Trump, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Brazil's health minister Ricardo Barros, European Parliament member Janusz Korwin-Mikke, and Russian President Vladimir Putin. These men have all publicly boasted anti-women statements in the past, causing seemingly irreparable damage to unity in our world. But since, what has now become known as Trump's era, women have united globally to reinvent gender equality standards, and the feminist fight has erupted and become uniformly relevant on a global scale. It's like Margaret Atwood once wrote, "women united for a common end!" (Atwood 162), except we aren't "helping one another in...daily chores...each performing her appointed task" (Atwood 163), and we aren't promoting the division of society through the oppression of minority groups. We are united to destroy the perceptions of women being property...

The men that were attempting to break into my building last night, who qualify as the exceptions mentioned above, were likely part of the radical group who call themselves “ANRCHEE.” Members of this group are all men, or male-identifying individuals, who are wholeheartedly opposed to the laws that have been imposed to protect women and girls. Interesting, right? Well, they felt that *their* lives and *their* freedoms were in jeopardy when they could no longer enter a women-only complex, walk alone after dark, make decisions about women’s bodies, or carry lethal weapons. It might sound like I’m joking when I say that people are *actually* opposed to these regulations, but I’m not. They truly believe they make the world a better place when they are wreaking havoc and encouraging destruction.

Anyways, it is widely known and accepted that works of literature have been warning and guiding us throughout the years. *Parable of the Sower* warned us about the potentially dangerous impacts of the wealth gap. The radicalized structure of suffering and violence being one effect, which equates to drastic lifestyle disparities. Life outside of “the walls” is an entire world unbeknownst to those inside (Butler 58). The walls may imply “supposed wealth and privilege” (Butler 50) to outsiders of our district, but inside, it is (apparently) truly a fight for survival and livelihood. To us, walled neighborhoods are indicative of only one thing: crime. On the rare occasion that a citizen finds themselves passing by a walled community, the happenings of the inside are well concealed and invisible to the outside world. However, each day we learn more about the day-to-day activities of the men inside these walls...

Now you have seen into just a small window of what life could be like in 2060. Just 40 years from now, which equates to about the lifetime of a rhinoceros. Not that a rhino’s lifespan is super relevant, but just saying. So this hypothetical feminist society promotes equity amongst all groups, and more importantly, works towards the fulfillment of the lives of its citizens. However, there is still a bit of polarization between genders. This is a result of opposite perspectives of basic rights, which we currently experience on the daily. So, is it possible to reach a point where all of the population agrees on one way of operating? Doesn’t seem like it. This hypothesized

“Vielle Angleterre” makes steps in the right direction with the idea of labor camps that focus on revitalizing the environment, but even with this, there is still the issue of an unequal path to success. What it comes down to, I guess, is choosing your battles. (Mulcahy)

Ruminating on a potential civilization that challenges well-established societal norms was an immersive experience. This essay intended to expand on that rumination by specifically highlighting the intricate relationship between femininity and nature, and more significantly, environmental rights and women’s rights. It is conspicuously clear that one cannot exist without the other, and different genres of literature, along with other forms of media, continue to incorporate this ideology into their overarching themes. One alternate form of media that tends to redefine feminist ideology is music.

Music is a creative outlet that is universally accepted as a rich part of culture. Especially in recent decades, female artists have embraced femininity in increasingly original ways. Maggie Rogers, Julia Michaels, Olivia O’Brien, Alicia Keys, and Ariana Grande are just a few powerhouses who produce music tailored to depict the feminine experience. Alaska. If The World Was Ending. God is a woman. Natural Woman. All of those songs were created or covered by powerful female artists who strive to bring light to the struggles and successes of being a woman.

Music, and pop culture in general, is an aspect of feminist culture that raises a potential answer to Val Plumwood’s crucial question: “Is ecofeminism giving us a version of the story that the goodness of women will save us?” (7) Pop culture, particularly music, boldly serves us the answer that no, in fact, humanity cannot rely on “the goodness of women.” Women are powerful and intrepid. Women continue to persevere and do not settle. Women are deeply and intrinsically connected to nature. These are indisputable facts that are all significant factors of the feminist debate; it is of paramount importance to recall these facts when attempting to answer questions



surrounding feminist theories. Female artists continue to defy oppressive stereotypes and ensure it is well known that humanity should not, and can not, rely on women alone to save itself. We must simultaneously address the equally important quandaries of basic human and environmental rights in order to come to a cohesive conclusion about questions of justice.

Bringing the ecofeminist discussion to light is extraordinarily important in making strides towards an overall better world. We undoubtedly know that “narratives form our reality” (Merchant 2). Our narratives currently tell stories of feminist dystopias and environmentally abhorrent, oppressive societies. To propel ourselves towards progress surrounding justice, we need to rewrite our narratives to include manifestations of equality. And with that, it has been made clear that we need to strive for equalities beyond the discussion of gender. Our narratives also need to address the vital role we all play in the environmental crisis. It is not a linear journey, and once this is universally recognized and accepted, humanity will be on a better path to true justice.

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