

Revisiting Ezra Pound: An Ecofeminist Approach to “The River-Merchant’s Wife: A Letter”

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Abstract

The paper focuses on one of intrinsic studies of literary works called ecofeminism. For the object of the current research, the author chooses one of Ezra Pound's poems, as is known to all, The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter. The author uses descriptive and analytic method in this paper. As is discussed, the author analyzes the potential ecofeminism by reading this poem carefully and giving a special attention for the lines that express and convey ecofeminism. Meanwhile, the author uses description and figure of speech analysis to build a concrete and poetic artistic conception in this poem. The findings suggest Ezra Pound spent a lot of conception and thinking on the description of environmental vision, including women and nature. On the one hand, the writing vision is tangible, evidenced by integrating his realistic living surroundings and the artistic conception in this poem. On the other hand, the expression of this poem is emotional, which, to a certain degree, evokes contemporary sensitivity to ecology and the concern on women, even the present social and environmental challenges, and the links between nature and literary that have become increasing obvious in the literary studies. The description of the natural surroundings of the poet prompts his deep awareness of environment, which can be looked upon as a potential ecofeminism.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Pound's selected poems, nature and women, artistic conception

1. Introduction

Literature has raised in the twentieth century; an increasing trend has appeared that literature has progressively represented great on environment. Many researches regarding the link between artistic practices and nature have emerged. These provide the author a rare chance to conduct an ecofeminist analysis of literary works that deal with nature and women. According to French scholar Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book titled *Le féminisme ou la mort* (1974), ecofeminism theory is also of great significance in advancing in literary studies in South-eastern Asia (Toupin, 2003). As is universally acknowledged, a harmonious interconnectedness between human beings and nature runs through the whole society, from the past till the present era (Badoux, 1974). The premise of this paper is based on the acknowledged view that there are no ways to keep the unity of human beings and nature nature at bay. Hence, it gives rise to the significance of this paper which is to focus the bond between human beings including women and nature as embodied in this selected poem of Pound. Similarly, the utilization of ecofeminism will undoubtedly contribute to the process of realizing the harmony within dissonance in various natural settings presented in this poem. This paper discusses the relationship between literature and the nature and women. It is, though, still in its infancy in Pound's Poetry and appears to need a further discussion in literature in an ecofeminist lens.

It is well-known that Ezra Weston Pound was an American expatriate poet and critic, and he is a major figure in the early modernist movement in poetry. It is unquestionable that he became famous for his role in developing Imagism. In reaction to the Victorian and Georgian poets, Imagism favored such a linguistic phenomenon that the unadorned imagery, tight language, and a strong correspondence should be expressed, especially when the correspondence between the verbal and musical qualities of the verse and the expressive mood. The best-known works of Ezra Pound includes *Ripostes* (1912), *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920), and his half-way 120-section epic. The *Cantos* consumed his middle and late career to go on, and was finally published between 1917 and 1969.

Here the author takes precedence over one of Ezra Pound selected poems, *The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter*, for it embodies a potential Ecofeminism through ecofeminist lens. When it comes to ecofeminism, Early Life of Ezra Pound has to be mentioned, he was born in Hailey, which was an original and great wildness. Ezra Pound was the only child of Homer Loomis Pound (1858–1942) and Isabel Weston (1860–1948). Both of his parents' ancestors including his grandfathers and grandmothers had emigrated from England in the 17th century. It is obvious that the living environment of him and his ancestors had something to do with nature, of course, women included.

Ezra Pound (1885-1972) is a pioneering figure in “imagism” of the poetic literature. He is arguably in the discussion of the ecofeminist poet, but some of his selected poems representing a potential ecofeminism regarding to human’s relationship with nature and women. He embraces the natural surroundings as the primary source of inspiration for some poems and uses varied depictions of natural things to further his poetic creation, which can explain the reason why he chose a green and pleasant living surrounding when in Italy. His poem, *The River-Merchant’s Wife: A Letter*, exemplifies his green and environmental sensibilities and his awareness of close relationship with the nature and human. this paper will examine this poem from the perspective of ecofeminism. It uses an ecofeminist lens to examine the poet’s environmental poetic vision as expressed in this selected poem of Pound.

As a Chinese Saying goes, there are at least two optional things about human destiny that are difficult to choose. The first not to be chosen is what family one is born into. It seems that a man comes into the world naked with nothing, and it is just like a tree that is sown on the ground. If an excellent seed is lucky enough to be sown on the fertile soil and carefully cultivated, it grows vigorous and flourish. But in reverse, if a seed is planted on a barren land or dry desert, as you might imagine, it is likely to be difficult to grow, and even worse wither. Therefore, the moment when a person falls to the ground, he actually determines the inequality of the starting line of his life. The second factor is that one cannot choose the time and place in which one is born. It is universally acknowledged that different times, and different countries will naturally have different backgrounds and living environments. To sum up the above: if a person wants to achieve a high career level, he who is not only relies on his own wisdom and efforts, but also depends on the era he lives, geographical environments, surrounding people and all other conditions. Ezra Pound published his first poem at age 11 in a Philadelphia newspaper, maybe the early brilliant gift on poems motivated him to write in the first place. This is why we have chances to do various studies on Ezra Pound. When Ezra Pound was young, his living environment was close to nature, and there are a variety of fruit trees: pears, peaches, cherries, etc. in the front yard, and apple trees and swings in the backyard. The place where one grows up should have an impact on what one chooses to do later in his or her life. Philadelphia is not where Pound was born, but he spent his childhood and adolescence there. The days and he spent in Philadelphia and his later life abroad, in Italy, which can be said that he was wholly emerged in a harmonious environment, providing nutrition for his thoughts as well as for his poem creations. In short, it is clear that Ezra Pound’s early life helped to shape him as a great poet, and thus it provides a great number of opportunities to do some research on Pound’ poems of whom the author is such a one, but the author’s paper differentiates from others is ecofeminist view. Therefore, the author endeavors to bridge this gap by analyzing the poem *The River-Merchant’s Wife: A Letter* from an ecofeminist perspective.

2. Literature Review

There are a number of studies that have been carried out on this particular poem. Ashim Chutia once published an article on International Journal of Management, Mamtar Chithi and the River Merchant’s wife: A Comparative Study in the year 2020(Chutia, n.d.). He emphasizes on analyzing the Imagist technique, combined with the discursive method which he uses as a contrast. The study suggests that narratives are more like fictional writing, as it is almost impossible to objectively recount a person’s development and experiences, no matter how hard a writer tries to follow academic rules or plan carefully. This article even highlights the reality that poetic production is often embedded with so many fictional elements as to make it a precarious reality. Poetic works are quite subjective ones because they are filled with people’s subjective wishes and how they choose to remember things. In this particular poem, readers get to learn about the characteristics of the merchant’s wife from a variety of fragments of repetition and neat antithetical verses. Of course, comparative writing method to do research on this poem may sometimes add some confusion to understand its text. This confusion makes it difficult for the narratives of Chutia, which seems to run in the same mould, like what most writers do, because their memories are governed by their ideologies and value systems in most of the time. Even the way he chooses to remember things makes it rather subjective.

Yu Hailing established Verbal Art in Translation: A Hasanian Perspective on *The River Merchant’s Wife: A Letter*(Yu, 2021), which shows that poetic text is always biased. The author attempts to analyse how a theory of verbal art can be applied to language arts translation to resolve the controversy over the quality of translation of literary works. Take Pound’s *The Wife of a River Merchant: A Letter* as an example, which was translated by Li Po, an ancient Chinese poet, from Changan Xing(Ying, 2021). Although Ezra Pound’s translation has been praised for its poetic beauty, it has also been criticised for its “errors”. Analyses from Hassa’s perspective show that both evaluations are justified. In addition, the author also realized the use of translation elements to highlight values in the poem. In short, the researcher has concluded that nature is given a lot of weight in this particular poem.

Alaa Kareem Abed (Abed, 2023) further conducted another study on this. In the famous Imagist poem '*In a Subway Station*', Ezra Pound, as it was, repeats the phrase '*petals on a wet black branch*' in order to evoke thoughts of nature, of women, and to make the reader reflect deeply on the beauty and transience of life and to leave a vivid impression of the communion between nature and women, though the word “women” doesn’t appear in the poem. In the same way, in *The River Merchant’s Wife: A Letter*, Ezra Pound repeats the phrase “*I’ll be back*” to emphasize the merchant’s commitment to his young wife, and his desire for an enduring love. Meanwhile the poem expresses the merchant’s longing for the reunion of his beloved wife and his good wishes. The lines of the poem enhance the emotional impact of it, creating a sense of urgency and intensity that draws the reader into the world of the poem. This multi-layered, repetitive narrative is both challenging and rewarding for the readers. Such distinctive narrative techniques are often seen as an attempt to create a literary time machine that transports the reader into a remote and serene literary-historical situation, immersing one in the sights, sounds, and ideas of the era.

Moreover, GP Fang(Fang, 2021) studied the poem, *The River Merchant’s Wife: A Letter* from a dolorous standpoint. It is a poem about love and parting between a merchant’s wife and her husband from the young to the old. The author writes the poem from a woman’s point

of view. In this woman's monologue, she recounts her childhood memories of meeting her husband, her married life and her husband's departure, expressing her deep love and longing for him. In this poem, the author skilfully relates many scenes from the woman's life, clearly showing the readers a plump and picturesque life scene integrating into the development of the woman's emotions towards her husband at different ages of her life. Fang holds the opinion that the merchant and his wife have a very deep emotional connection with each other through the descriptions of the lines of the poem, which helps to better portray a woman who misses her husband very much.

Based on the aforementioned critical studies on the poem, *The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter*, it is apparent that none of the researchers have the intention to regard this particular and fair poem from an ecocritical point of view though presenting the element of nature. As we can read this poem, it is constantly appreciated and analysed in those different critical studies. Therefore, the current poem is intended to enrich the gap in the academic field, approaching this poem from an ecocritical perspective.

Ecocriticism as a Lens

About the rise of ecocriticism, Banerjee gave a brief explanation of ecocriticism, who held the view that William Rueckert coined the word, "ecocriticism" first in the year 1978. The term came about because people were trying an attempt to shorten the "ecological literary criticism" phrase, and they increasingly got aware of it in the late twentieth century (Banerjee et al., 2020). It makes sense, therefore, that ecocriticism is being taken seriously as people begin to become more aware of the significance of ecological wisdom and the connection between humans and nature, ecocriticism advocates the application of ecology, the ecological concepts to the study of literature as well, as William Rückert points out in his essay, "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996a).

This approach is concerned with the connectedness between humans and nature in literature. It assumes an earth-centred approach in the research of literature (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996a). In the context of ecocriticism, ecocritics are concerned with the recreation of nature in literature and the manipulation of the natural environment to play a certain part in literature itself. For instance, the use of specific physical settings in a poem is of significance in shaping the themes of the poem itself. This is why ecocritics are always concerned with natural elements in the literature regardless of the fact that they may seem tiny or less impotent.

It has also been suggested by Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) that "human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and be affected by it" (p. 19), emphasizing the fact that human culture is seen as an entity that is directly linked to the material environment and that the two influence each other. The term interconnectedness has also been used to explain this phenomenon. It has been argued that at the crux of ecocriticism is the interconnectedness that exists between nature and human culture, particularly the cultural elements embedded in our language and literature (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996b). Hence, ecocriticism can be comprehended from two perspectives, on the one hand, in literature, on the other hand, in the physical environment. Actually, its theoretical standpoint lies in the negotiating between humans and nonhumans (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996a).

What's more, it is claimed that nature is not merely a platform to represent human story but rather a positive actor in the drama itself (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996a). Nature is no longer considered as a passive recipient of human development but it is currently an participant, who will have influences on human beings in a directly or indirect way (Walther, 2022). In a specific physical environment, no matter how slight a change, that may make a big difference on human beings. This is the viewpoint of ecocriticism, and the important role nature plays in human's life. As is showed, it's not what the previous researchers thought to be. It is an all-encompassing theory that all that exists in nature lives in an intricate web of interrelationships and that no entity is independent (Nashikkar, n.d.). All people that participate in the universe will interact with each other, and come about various effects according to their behaviors.

As is known to all, Ecocriticism is centred on the study of literature and the elements of nature. It is claimed by (Wu, 2021), generally, ecocriticism helps us attach importance to relationship between human society and the physical environment. Of course, the level of measurement depends on examining the causes of the ecological crisis. Analysing the interconnections between nature and human beings helps in identifying the problems related to the ecological crisis. It seems to be interesting that to some extent, the interconnectedness between nature and human beings makes human beings a complex part of the environment. This perception also takes us to the understanding of the eco-intelligence, which is how humans are managing their relationship with the natural surroundings.

3. Analysis and Discussion

Actually, the poem *The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter* is originated from a Chinese Poem Chang Gan Xing. Ezra Pound studied, reproduced, and edited it in Ezra Pound's Selected poems (Chang et al., 2023). The idea of harmony within dissonance is predominant in this poem. Ezra Pound did indeed manipulate nature in various ways to help him achieve the intention that he wanted this poem in the first place. In order to challenge the tradition and reform the stale poetic style, Ezra Pound put forward the requirement of being as concise as possible in the use of language, striving to be concise and clear, presenting the truth of things and objects, and resolutely not to engage in meaningless pretenses or ostentation. In addition, in order to avoid the author's influence on readers' subjective feelings and moral judgments to the maximum extent, the poet also restricts the choice of words, using simple and implicit words to describe the objects, so that readers can feel the emotion expressed in the poem, rather than what the poet tells the reader should feel. The first verse describes the innocent playful movements and behaviors of a boy and a girl in a lively manner full of ecological situation. The following is the first part of the poem:

While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead
I played at the front gate, pulling flowers.

You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,
 You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.
 And we went on living in the village of Chokan:
 Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.

Actually, this poem describes various stages of life of the river merchant's wife, through the vivid and specific aspects of the life, a vivid picture is depicted in front of the reader (Ying, 2021). Detailed things and scenes in the nature with the image of the specific description and general summary add the poem the beauty of ecology. For example, in the first lines of the first verse, "*While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead/I played at the front gate, pulling flowers/You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse/You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums*", the innocent playful movements and interactions of the two little lovely kids are described in a lovely manner. As is read, the lines at the beginning of the poem draw a picture scrolls of a folk children, an innocent girl and a little pure boy playing frolicly. This is yet another example of how human's life is inextricably integrated with nature, especially the physical environment and the description of the girl. It seems that everything is affected by nature in one way or another.

The following two parts describe the merchant's newly marriage and the grief of parting with her husband.

As fourteen I married my lord you
 I never laughed, being bashful.
 Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.
 Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back.
 At fifteen I stopped scowling,
 I desired my dust to be mingled with yours.
 Forever and forever, and forever.
 Why should I climb the lookout?

"*as fourteen I married my lord you*" tells a newly married girl at her young age, and it describes the girl's timidity when she gets married, which is very delicate and real. The following two lines "*Lowering my head, I looked at the wall/ Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back*", using the description of expressions and actions, a vivid and the most precious affection is presented. It seems as if a little and shy bride appeared in front of the readers, and her newly wedding life were unfolded in front of us. In the next lines, "*At fifteen I stopped scowling/ I desired my dust to be mingled with yours*", the parting feeling of the young women in the countryside is even furtherly described, and the mood of the lines has a sharp contrast and a turning here, the woman is looking forward to the arrival of her husband. By showing a young and pretty woman integrated in the green nature, a unique writing skill and deep ecofeminism are combined.

In the following eight lines, through the description of the changes of the seasons and different natural scenery, the image of a young woman who misses her husband travelling far away, a gentle wife seems like a vivid beauty jumping out on the paper.

At sixteen you departed,
 You went into far Ku-to-en, by the river of swirling eddies,
 And you have been gone five months.
 The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.
 You dragged your feet when you went out,
 By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses,
 Too deep to clear them away!
 The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.
 The paired butterflies are already yellow with August
 Over the grass in the West garden;
 They hurt me. I grow older.
 If you are coming down through the
 narrows of the river Kiang,
 Please let me know beforehand,
 And I will come out to meet you
 As far as cho-fu-sa.

This verse is also written about the love and the parting of the merchant's wife and her husband. It is just as described in the first verse of the poem, the young woman paddles against the long wind and sand river to wait for her long-lost husband. This description of the

woman's feelings is delicate and gentle, like the spring in the mountains, flowing, twisting, and turning smoothly, leaving countless feeling for the reader to imagine. The young woman's sorrow and the description of the nature somehow affect the readers' emotion.

This poetic picture containing a lot of detailed depicting is very prominent, and rich in artistic effect. The author pays attention to the changes of women's psychology at different stages, and through the description and integration of women and natural scenery, the whole picture is full of a sense of ecological beauty. Besides, nature also somehow affects one's emotions. The poem shows a woman at various stages of her life, through the vivid and specific sides of the life. A vivid picture is unfolded with the abstract and specific description of natural things and generalization, such as "You dragged your feet when you went out/By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses/

Too deep to clear them away" shows the inner world of the merchant's wife and her rich and deep feeling for her husband, which is profoundly moving and evocative, and is full of care and understanding of ecofeminism. The expression of the lines here is key to combining the woman and the nature, and the interconnectedness between human beings and nature is clearly portrayed.

There are also lines in the second half verse whereby nature is greatly interconnected with human beings as is showcased in the poem, "The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind/ The paired butterflies are already yellow with August/ Over the grass in the West garden/They hurt me.I grow older. " It seems that somehow the woman's life is interlinked with nature. The leaves, wind of the autumn, the butterflies in August and a woman filled with grief of the parting with her husband all show a grief peace in the nature, which is very much a perfect example of seeking harmony in dissonance in the nature and human beings.

The ending lines, " If you are coming down through the/ narrows of the river Kiang/ Please let me know beforehand/ And I will come out to meet you/As far as cho-fu-sa", If the beloved one is back, regardless of strong wind and deep river, the deep concern for her husband's safety and missw will drive the woman to meet her husband. The gentle and delicate feeling of the woman is also depicted correctly, and the feeling of poetry and natural scenery are integrated. It raises the issue that what one sees in nature may be a challenge, while in the eyes of beloved ones, even more and greater challenges may seem like a piece of cake. Similarly, one may feels sad when they are placed in a nice scenery and vice versa. Everything seems to be affected by nature in one way or another.

4. Conclusion

Through the analysis of a poem from Ezra Pound's selected Poems, *The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter*, by Li Po, the great Chinese poet, this study reveals that there is no fixed and orderly point of view when discussing and analyzing a literary work, and it is as with poetry, too(Zheng, 2022). Everything is constantly changing under the influence of circumstances. So, it seems interesting that everyone is destined to find harmony in discord. Through the analysis of this poem, we find in many lines of the poem that there is a close relationship between nature and human beings, and there is a mutual influence between them. There is a bit of me in you, and a bit of you in me, and the both need each other. The current study showcases that in human life, in the creation of literature, we should not ignore nature. It is in every aspect, like an active participant in human life. The author's current study also strives to provide some crude and immature insights into the interpretation of women's connection with nature. In short, this paper is only centered on a poem, which inevitably lacks certain limitations and persuasiveness. It is sincerely suggested that a similar or different approach could be adopted for further study of other selected poems of Ezra Pound.

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Authors contributions

Shang Jingmei and Hamoud Mohsen were responsible for introduction, literature review and the analysis and drafting the whole manuscript and also revising it. Zhang Hongmei and Wang Jijun were responsible for the discussion, conclusion and proofreading. All the authors read and approved the final draft of manuscript. All of them also revised it and agreed with the comments provided by the editor and reviewers of the journal.

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