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Solar Storms as a Representative of Eco-feminism

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The paper discusses the novel Solar Storms (1997) by Linda Hogan in the context of eco-feminism. The exploitation of nature, and women likewise, has a common and interlinked theme for the eco-feminists. The healing powers of natural cultural landscapes following a history of 500 years of colonial and cultural oppression and genocide of the American Indian tribes forms the background of the chilling tale. The paper helps shed light on the oppression and subordination of women and ought to be read in conjunction with the brutal and merciless environmental degradation.

Key Words/Terms: nature degradation; women oppression; Medusa’s gaze.
1. Introduction

Feminism is probably as old as the human race. From writers such as Sappho in ancient times through persuasive writers across the centuries such as Georges Sands (Aurore Dupin), Mary Montague Wortley, George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) and Simone de Beauvoir (*The Second Sex*, 1949, transl. Parshley, Penguin, 1972) we observe a continuum of what is known in psychology as the ‘masculine protest,’ a dissatisfaction among women with the role thrust upon them in male-dominated cultures. Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) can be taken as the springboard of modern feminism, which had its most strident votaries during the second half of the twentieth century, and which continues today to offer values, perspectives and linguistic insights set against traditional ones. Critics of feminism might note with some justification that feminist writing tends to be either tiresomely plaintive in tone, or aggressively hypercritical of the patriarchal dilemma, and that it does little to offer viable alternatives. Despite several centuries of good arguments from a long list of perceptive women, and about a century of accusatively forceful ones since the suffragette movement in recent times, things have actually changed very little in so-called developed societies, where conditions are supposed to be good, and not at all in underdeveloped ones, where, surprisingly, conditions might be slightly better, at least for some strata of women.

We observe a step forward in the movement known as eco-feminism, which had its beginnings in the nineteen seventies. It is synthetic in its approaches rather than atomistic, finding a significant degree of parallelism in the damage that dominant men inflict not only on the environment, but on subordinate men and women as well, the product of a relentless bureaucratic instinct to categorize, regulate, homogenize, control and order things around them. This moves the traditional feminist arguments away from a somewhat psychotic tendency to blame all
men, as though there were some conscious, deep-seated, collective masculine conspiracy to debase woman. Social class and the power game affect not only women but also men who belong to lower classes, so the all-important factors of power, money and status need to be introduced in recognition of the fact that in most societies, upper-class women receive better treatment than lower-class men. However, other than the power game, there is an undeniable urge among men to ‘tame’ the environment and remake it to suit their needs. Industry, which has given us many amazing machines, has also plundered, depleted and polluted the world. In the name of progress several valuable species have vanished, whole breathing forests have disappeared and innumerable acres of good earth have been tarred over with ugly things called roads. Eco-feminism takes note of the downside of development.

2. Hypothesis

The research is carried out keeping in view the following hypothesis. There is a strong and close link between the exploitation of women and nature.

3. Literature Review

Apart from the works of Virginia Woolf (*A Room of One’s Own* is especially relevant because of Woolf’s anticipation of later findings in psychoanalysis and feminist literature) and Simone de Beauvoir (*The Second Sex* is a good, objective study of the typecasting of women in a masculine ethos) as mentioned earlier, the author has derived much of her knowledge of recent trends from writings such as *Eco-feminism: Women, Animals, Nature*, by Greta C. Gaard, (1993), *Ecological Feminism* (1991) by Stephanie Lahar and *Gyn/Ecology*, by Mary Daly (1978). The author’s background reading in feminism is quite wide, but it should be noted that the field is already very large and is expanding day by day. There is no doubt that some writings are repetitive, negatively emotional, occasionally self-contradictory and over-stated--as noted earlier,
writings of this nature damage the cause instead of supporting it.

4. Methodology (Data collection and analysis)

The author acknowledges a general debt to Alice Jardine, *Gynesis: Configurations of Women and Modernity* (1985) and to Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (1985) from whom she has taken the statement ‘…it does not much matter which ‘couple’ one chooses to highlight: the hidden male/female opposition with its inevitable positive/negative evaluation can always be traced to the underlying paradigm…’ (pp.104-5) as her starting point in applying some kind of theory to the understanding of the work under review. Binary oppositions in the structuralist mould might seem old-fashioned today, but there are fundamental and inescapable binary implications in the female/male relationship, in the ethos that supports it, in the dominant male/subordinate male relationship and in the dominant male/environment relationship that continues to ravage the world in the name of development. Eco-feminism is not only a step forward in the history of feminism, it provides a well-reasoned platform for social reform and environmental activism. It is good to hold a mirror up to those who rule the world (nearly always men), so that they become aware of their own depredations—they tend to gallop along heedlessly, quite sure that what they do is the right thing. There are many ways of reflecting this, one of which is fiction. This is what the author will consider in the following analysis.

The author’s primary source of data is the text itself. She has highlighted areas of interest relevant to her general approach. Some of the author’s comments are found side by side with her selections, and she has supplemented these with findings given at the end in the light of feminist writings, with special reference to eco-feminism. *Solar Storms* is an eco-feminist study of the healing powers of natural cultural landscapes following a history of 500 years
of colonial cultural oppression and genocide of the American Indian tribes. The novel discusses the psychic and political conflicts of the native cultures with the dominant hierarchical culture by drawing a parallel between the protagonist Angel’s emotional and political conflicts with her abusive mother and the history of abuse of the American Indian tribes and non-human biospheres. Though Angel’s healing is through her reconnection with her matrilineage in her original, natural, and cultural human and nonhuman biospheres, it is not what Schultermandl calls her ‘intact matrilineage’ (p.74). The novel mirrors two ruptures in her lineage in connection with the abuse of the American Indian tribes. Angel is victimized by her mother, Hannah, who was born to Loretta, a victim of the settlers. Together they echo the Medusa trio of nasty mothers, though the third escapes the fate of turning into a gorgon because of her healing in the natural cultural environment in Solar Storms.

Loretta’s character reminds the readers of Medusa who represents male fears of sovereign female wisdom, devouring female sexuality and the castration threat. Her distinct body odor, the sweet almond of cyanide, mirrors Medusa’s serpent-like charms. This cyanide odor identifies her as an Elk Islander, the people who were so starved that ‘they ate the poisoned carcasses of deer that the settlers left out for the wolves’ (Hogan, p. 38). Both men and women are attracted to Loretta’s terrifying beauty, haunting strangeness and telescopic, unblinking, poisonous looks that remind the readers of a snake’s hiss, and combine with long brown fingers, red lips and a sexy blue dress. Loretta awakens male and also female qualms about Medusa, a symbol of the devouring or toothed vagina that refers to male primordial fear of a woman’s ability to sexually amputate him during sex. Solar Storms’ gorgon mirrors the same fear of devouring female sexuality that has existed in many different cultures: China, Polynesia, Persia, Libya, Africa, Rome, and ancient Greece throughout history.
According to Agnes, Loretta’s people’s treacherous deaths and the realities of her physical and sexual abuse by male settlers were the reasons behind her loveless, belief less, conscienceless ways of hurting others (Hogan, p.39). In *Solar Storms* (1997), Loretta, an embodiment of the settler’s deeds, represents sexuality, anxiety and death just like Medusa whose snake-like hair reflects the patriarchal fear of the binary ‘Other’ and of castration. In Medusa’s traditions, this novel celebrates Loretta’s vengeful sexuality and charm of punishing men who obtain her favors and violate the sanctity of native lands. She is cursed and turned into an ugly serpent-like character that controls people with her gaze just like Medusa.

The legacy of ‘settlers’ deeds’ was ‘blood-deep’ and ‘history-deep’ and was passed down to Angel’s mother, Hannah, who smelled of the same bitter almonds and ‘had empty eyes’ at age ten (Hogan, p. 40). Her character mirrors a recurrence of the history of suffering and abuse that transforms her into a conscienceless creature like her mother. Loretta and Hannah are the gorgons who unnerve their enemies. They first internalize and then learn to externalize their suffering on others and continue the conventions of the settlers in order to escape their pain. Hannah’s destructive semblance, cutting and killing the dog (Hogan, p.104), parallels the character of Stheno (Anath), the second in the Medusa trio who killed more people than Medusa. (In her ways she is like Anath, the goddess of war and death, who dismembered Mot, the god of death). In *Solar Storms*, Bush and Husk express their fears of Hannah’s ability to kill her own daughter, Angel. Husk says, ‘A glacier gives off what it can’t absorb, blue light and beauty, and that you [Angel] were the light given off by your mother’ (Hogan, p.105). Her tribe was pleased that Hannah drifted away without her child, but Angel was put into foster homes by the settlers thus breaking the ancient bonds between the human and nonhuman biospheres – land, animals, and people. Angel returns to restore these
bonds for her healing as she can hear the inner language of her blood communicating to ‘the rest of nature’ (Hogan, p.57). Unlike the two gorgons in her matrilineage, Angel does not reflect the character of the third in the Medusa trio, Euryale (Athene or Ath-enna). Angel’s character is a reversal of the vengeful characters of Loretta and Hannah.

The problem is resolved through her spiritual bonding with the motherland and its matriarchal structures that initialize her healing coming to full humanity with the location of the missing link of her matrilineage, Hannah.

Angel overcomes the uncertainty, anger, and fears of her mother. She says, ‘I would one day understand my mother’ and ‘take in the fact that we were those who walked out of bullets and hunger … rages and wounds’ (Hogan, p.105). The path that Angel believed was closed between her and her mother (Hogan, p.230) is paved through a symbolic parallel between Hannah’s tortured body which is covered with scars and a collective history of genocide and real trauma. Hannah’s dark and empty house is a symbolic portrayal of the collective memory, history, and myth of her people. This collective memory becomes the site of Angel’s struggle. The healing effect of the bonded human and nonhuman environment of Hannah’s house, an indifferent man and yet another hospitable man, leads Angel to meet her mother with compassion, and to comfort her pathos by taking up the responsibility of Hannah’s new baby. At this stage, she ‘unperforms’ Medusa’s archetype of nasty mother and escapes and ends the Medusa trio by not externalizing her suffering on her mother. Schultermandl says in her ‘ability to look at her mother beyond the normative ideals of motherhood/womanhood,’ Angel liberates herself from the patriarchy (p.78). Her act mirrors female agency, and a willingness to confront the patriarchy with her healed gaze. It enables the construction of a highly political subject—challenges the notion of identity—who and what we are.
Woman’s agency and intellectuality signify recovery from patriarchy denying production of stereotypical femininity making her an undesirable subject to man. This recovery gives her the strength to not be a vulnerable victim of an oppressive culture but to face it. Angel’s healing generates another picture of Athene, the goddess of intellect and invention, who resists the revengeful charms and helps Perseus to kill Medusa. Another positive aspect of Angel’s healing is reflected in her independence of the need of Perseus to kill inside her an unforgiving gorgon of the trio. Angel’s independence, like her matrilineage, introduces challenges to gender and racial stereotyping: it signifies lack in display of need for men for survival and healing, empowers Angel, and disrupts bourgeoisie power relations.

Angel’s recovery from the Medusa legacy, agency, and empowerment are through her reinitiation into an original matrilineage in her natural cultural human and nonhuman biospheres. The new Angel identifies with the aboriginal ecofeminist web of the Spider Woman who represents intricacies, integrations, and wholeness of the Native American cultures. Schultermandl calls this web, ‘an interfemale nexus in a society dominated by patriarchal institutions.’ (p.77).

*Solar Storms* bears an inherent sense of female identity and matrilineal ancestry that believe in mobility and action to preserve the healing powers of the motherland and fighting the gravity of the colonial legacy. The power of matrilineal memory is channeled as a counter strategy to patriarchal social order, play of ignorance and erasure of history. The matrilineage provides textual, temporal, and spatial links between present and past times for healing purposes. The matrilineal texts create a vital link to construct Angel’s gendered racial identity.

Angel becomes an era image to describe the individual and collective experiences pertaining to the
burden of a history of social repression, colonialism and cultural pedagogy. Angel’s healing helps her overcome this burden through agency and redefined subjectivity. Braidotti argues that the woman's act of redefining subjectivity includes: ‘the ongoing reappropriation by women of our identity, our sexuality, our intellectual power’ (p.256). She also hints at the significance of ‘physical mobility’ in ‘subjectivity-making’ (p.256). The new Athenaic Angel is an active subject, rather than a stereotypical object. She identifies with the native environment and becomes environmentally active. Angel’s political consciousness and spiritual rebirth give her the strength to fight for the preservation of native human and nonhuman biospheres and environmental justice against the construction of the hydroelectric dam. She gains the support from her people, but the settlers entitle them with fixed identity tags of ‘dark outsiders whose lives have no relevance to them’ and call them terrorists ‘reversing the truth’ (Hogan, p.283). This comment mirrors the dilemma of a history of trauma and a conflict of inherent geographical interests of the two cultures.

Like other eco-feminists, Hogan emphasizes the need of an organic equilibrium through maintaining the bonds between human and nonhuman nature to benefit the native tribes and the human race. Castor finds this political and emotional controversy very similar to the Hydro-Québec Project and calls it a postmodern literary dilemma that challenges the basic systems of belief throughout the globe for its inability to make a direct reference (p.158). Instead, the novel uses the notions of blood memory, ancestral landscapes and ‘hunger maps,’ the legacy of a shared inner language to speak to land and animals and ‘the language animals and human had in common’ (Hogan, p. 170) to emphasize the natives’ struggle for the preservation of both the human and nonhuman biospheres which are connected from the beginnings and can even humanize Medusas. Angel says, ‘My beginning was Hannah’s
beginning, one of broken lives, gone animals, trees felled and kindled. Our beginnings were intricately bound up in the history of the land’ (Hogan, p. 96). This knowledge comes from an inner language of the blood and turns her into an active subject for preservation of an ancestral landscape and restoration of the environment. In this manner, Hogan again establishes a parallel between Angel’s recovery and the recovery of her motherland.

Angel’s activism makes Solar Storms a protest novel. Its parallel narratives of personal and collective confrontation to abuse and recovery are an expression of Hogan’s continuing interventionist practice into subversion of patriarchal social order. Homi Bhabha argues that ‘it is from that tension [of the social order]—both psychic and political—that a strategy of subversion emerges’ (p.121). Hogan’s literary strategy mirrors sufficient tension and aims at subverting the cultural imperialism of the colonizer through borrowed aestheticism or the use of the tools of patriarchy as the natives move from oral to literary traditions. Fanon theorizes three phases of evolution of intervention, i) assimilation of the culture of the occupying power, ii) decision of the disturbed native to remember what he/she is, and iii) fighting phase in which he/she shakes the people. In the case of the first two gorgons in Solar Storms, the assimilation of abuse in the first phase results in the dissemination of abuse. It is only in the case of Angel that we see an assimilation of the positive values of patriarchal culture that she uses as tools against patriarchy when she remembers her true identity and enters the fighting phase. Fanon says:

Past happenings of the bygone days of his/her childhood will be brought up out of the depths of his/her memory; old legends will be reinterpreted in the light of the borrowed aestheticism and a conception of the world which was discovered under other skies … sometimes it is dominated by … allegory; but often too it is symptomatic of a period of distress and difficulty, where death is
experienced, and disgust too. We spew ourselves up; but already underneath laughter can be heard (p.37).

*Solar Storms* (1997) digs down in the personal and collective memories to interweave themes of genocide, female tragedy and trauma, Medusa’s laughter, death, struggle, and healing. Hogan uses a meta-narrative to explicate stories about the neglect and abuse of female children and native people and land by the settlers. The novel unwinds to suggest interventionist ways of recognizing and recollecting historical events and situations that symbolically connect personal tragedies to the collective. These events and situations constitute crucial components of the stories of negotiation of several socially constructed binary oppositions between men/women, native/nonnative people and cultures, matriarchy/patriarchy, life/death, peace/violence, humans/animals, and human/nonhuman biospheres. These binaries persistently attack *Solar Storms*’ readers with racial and social stereotypes of disproportionate social structures and economies that Hogan aims at subverting.

5. Conclusion

The empathy of Hogan’s conflict with the human imposed suffering is explored through the parallel histories of Angel and the American Indian tribes to connect the global reader to the Native in pan-tribal traditions. Hogan confronts patriarchy with her political testimony against a history of trauma and neglect and invites her readers to enter her intellectual space, act upon the bewildering collective experience of history, and see its parallel in the memories of Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Rwanda, Bosnia, India, and the contemporary Middle East. *Solar Storms* connects the notions of human liberation to liberation of nature to benefit the entire human race. It interrogates the politics of the colonizer for denying the colonized the right to confront or look into his eyes, and proposes the presence of a critical oppositional gaze. This oppositional gaze has
long been a strategy of resistance and an assertion of agency.

Angel’s agency confronts Freudian stereotypes of woman as castrated male and the primordial male fear and desire to castrate and destroy Medusa. The use of the confrontation transgresses the traditional signification process in which the subject and the object become inverted. Hogan strategically re-appropriates positions of the text that has been used to colonize and subject the native. She confronts the politics of sexism, racism, euphemism, essentialism of fixed identity tags, oppression, discrimination, silence, and invisibility. Her protagonist, Angel as active speaking and gazing subject interrogates the symbolic. Hogan’s authorship is an appropriation of the tools of the master, of the experience of being objectified by the colonial community. She uses his language and means to strengthen her cultural and spiritual heritage. The healing of Medusa like the character Angel brings agency into a rereading of the past, rather than an active presence finished in the past. Solar Storms acts as novel of memory, presenting signs of violence, healing, survival, and agency; connotes memories through oral tradition; uses itself as metaphor for community, testimony, and women’s power of resistance.
References


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