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An Ecofeminist Approach to Adrienne Rich's Poem

“Diving into the Wreck”

Adrienne Rich'in “Diving into the Wreck” Adlı Şiirine Eko Feminist Bir Yaklaşım

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Adrienne Rich's poem “Diving into the Wreck” (1973) through ecofeminist criticism. Rich's ecopoetry questions assumptions about feminine subjectivity and female consciousness, patriarchal abuse, and indifference regarding women. With the androgynous persona in the poem “I”, Rich moves beyond the limits of gender and sexes to give room to form female subjectivity. Persona in the poem starts to explore and express her feminine identity and sexuality by figuratively “diving” into a wreck and exploring an underwater world. The persona escapes to nature, because both nature and women are exploited by dominant destructive forces.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Diving, Femininity, Androgyny.

ÖZ

Bu çalışmada Adrienne Rich'in şiirlerinden olan “Diving into the Wreck” (1973) adlı şiiri eko feminist eleştiri bağlamında incelenmektedir. Rich'in doğa şiirleri, kadın tarafsızlığını ve bilincini, ata erkil suistimalini ve önem vermeme varsayımlarını sorgular. Şiirdeki androjen (çift cinsiyetli) karakter “ben” ile birlikte Rich, dişi öznelliğine yer verebilmek için toplumsal cinsiyet ve cinsiyet sınırlarının ötesine gider. Şiirdeki karakter dişi kimliğini ve cinselliğini mecazi bir şekilde deniz altı batığına “dalarak” ve deniz altı hayatını keşfederek ifade etmeye başlar. Kişi doğaya kaçır; çünkü hem doğa hem de kadınlar tahrip edici kuvvetler tarafından sömürülmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Eko feminizm, Dalmak, Kadınlık, Androjenlik (çift cinsiyetlilik).

INTRODUCTION

Adrienne Rich's post-feminist poetry “Diving into the Wreck” (1973), illustrates a woman's journey down to the depths of water as an inner journey to the depths of feminine psyche beyond the boundaries of gender to get rid of the social limitations of

patriarchal society. Rich's poetic vision examining the cultural and patriarchal discourse becomes not only woman-centered but also nature-centered to show how human and non-human subjectivities are similarly marginalized. In this respect, Rich's poetry deals with issues of ecology to demonstrate the relationships among human subjectivity, cultural discourse, and nature. It is perhaps best to interpret Rich's poem through an ecofeminist criticism, because the tendency of the poet moves from radical feminism to ecofeminism. This does not mean that ecofeminism and feminism are two separate entities; there is a correlation between the two, as Mary Mellor states, "most ecofeminists follow radical feminism in identifying patriarchy, and particularly western patriarchy, as the main source of global ecological destruction Above all, male/men/the masculine is valued as against female/woman/the feminine". (Mellor, 1997, 1-2) In the light of this view, I will attempt to analyze Rich's poem "Diving into the Wreck" through an ecofeminist lens, because her ecopoetry questions assumptions about feminine subjectivity and female consciousness, patriarchal abuse, and indifference regarding women.

First, I will examine the main trends of ecofeminism before contextualizing the poem. I will find out how ecocriticism emerged and then discuss the tenets of this approach to develop a theoretical basis for ecofeminist critical response. Lawrence Buell (2005) as one of the main sources of ecofeminism provides information about the emergence of this post-modern criticism. Ecofeminism is a term first pronounced by French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in the 1970s, but the movement first developed in United States in the 1980s (Buell, 2005, 139). Since ecofeminist literary criticism explores female perspectives on nature, it is common for women to be associated with nature, because the domination and exploitation of them is the problem that ecofeminists wish to eliminate. The key idea that ecofeminists assert is the connection between the domination of nature and the domination of women by a patriarchal, usually Euro-western, society. (Eaton, 2005, 11). Janis Birkeland also draws attention to oppression of both women and nature because they are considered as "lower orders": " 'Culture' (order) was the male domain, while 'nature' (chaos) was conceived as female and

included women as a caste, slaves, indigenous peoples, nonwhite races, and animals” (Janis, 1995, 178-180). Armbruster defines ecocriticism in terms of domination of women by patriarchy: “the oppression of women and the destruction and misuse of nonhuman nature within male-dominated cultures” informs “the social construction of these connections [women and nature] and to understand that different women experience them in different ways” (Armbruster, 2000, 211). Serpil Oppermann points out the emergence of postcolonial ecocriticism and new feminist ecocritical studies by emphasizing “the globalization of social injustice” (Oppermann, 2011, 16) and its engagement with “environmental justice movement” (Oppermann, 2011, 16), queer theory and transnational human experiences. Most of the ecofeminists clearly emphasize environmental exploitation and social oppression as related to social constructs that exist with patriarchal values and power relations.

As ecofeminists emphasize domination and oppression of women by patriarchy directs women into different experiences. We may observe such experiences of women in the subject matter poem. In Rich’s poem “Diving into the Wreck”, the woman persona tries to get rid of her social limitations and oppressions of the patriarchal society by escaping to the heart of nature where she finds freedom. Metaphorically, she is in relief and can take a deep breath under the water in peace: “you breathe differently down here” (Rich, 1973, St. 5, 8). There is a quest for female identity and in this case gender, class, and race play an important role in questioning the existence of an individual in the society. It is most significant that there is a kind of inevitable re-unification of the exploited women and nature in terms of ecofeminist view. According to Noël Sturgeon, ecofeminism “articulated the theory that the ideologies that authorize injustices based on gender, race, and class are related to the ideologies that sanction the exploitation and degradation of the environment” (Sturgeon, 1997, 23). This idea is parallel with the idea explaining the function of the ecofeminist criticism as “to eliminate gender inequalities and hierarchies in a way that valu[e] the environment and articulate parallels between women’s and environmental exploitation” (Buckingham, 2004, 153). In all of those

definitions, “nature” and “woman” become two significant terms for ecofeminists, because both are subordinated and excluded by the same systems of oppression.

As the nature is represented by women according to this criticism, the persona in “Diving into the Wreck”, who dives into her own nature, starts to explore herself to express her feminine identity and sexuality. Rich writes passionately about feminist freedoms and emancipation by conveying these values to the reader through a persona who is “diving” and exploring an underwater world. Rich identifies concepts such as reality, memory, myth, and journeys while the speaker is diving alone both to discover her feminine identity and to reconstruct her femininity: “I am having to do this/ not like Cousteau with his / assiduous team/ aboard the sun-flooded schooner/ but here alone” (Rich, 1973, St 1, 8-12). Pamela Annas signifies this as a reconstruction where the poet “renames the self, connects parts of the self and puts the self back together” (Annas, 1982, 12). Similarly, Nahid Mohammadi draws attention to the concept of “androgynous” which she describes as the first female selfhood in her dissertation. She states that “with androgynous, Rich moves beyond the limits of gender and sexes to give room to form female subjectivity which existed before male definitions came to distort it” (Mohammadi, 2007, 101). As a matter of fact, androgyny plays an important role in contextualizing the feminine being in Rich’s poetry. Before correlating androgyny to ecofeminism, I propose to focus on the definition of what androgyny is.

“Androgyny” is an ancient word taken from the Greek word “andro” (male) and gyn (female) and “defines a condition under which the characteristics of the sexes and the human impulses expressed by men and women are not rigidly assigned” (Taylor and Hall, 1982, 348). Gender stereotype in most of the culture points out that masculinity and femininity are thought as two separate entities: if one was perfectly masculine, one had no feminine traits, and vice versa. However according to androgyny there is a duality of nature “in which people sought their other halves to reunite in mating and find a sense of wholeness” (Richmond-Abbott, 1992, 10). Accordingly, masculinity and femininity are not polar opposites but they are independent evaluates, for instance masculine properties can be found in feminine girls, or vice versa. In this sense,

androgynous individual identifies with both desirable masculine and feminine characteristics. Moreover, they are free from gender role limitations. Androgyny makes a person more flexible, self-esteemed, creative, and socially skilled (Jones, et al. 1978, 298-313).

The persona in the poem, the androgynous “I”, takes her “camera”, “knife-blade”, “absurd flippers”, “awkward mask” and dives into the depths of the ocean. Through this journey of self-discovery, the speaker takes a camera to capture the real truth behind history represented by the “book of myth”. According to James McCorkle the “I” is a “disembodied marker and does not establish an identity or ethos” (McCorkle, 1989, 109). This forms a mask to the condition of women “in the quest for self-knowledge and the history of the feminist project” (McCorkle, 1989, 109). Symbolically, the persona dives deep into her unconscious to explore her feminine identity and the wreck of the suppressed female tradition. In fact, she searches for “the wreck and not the story of the wreck / the thing itself not the myth” (Rich, 1973, St. 7, 2-3). According to this view, the perception of women’s history, their mythology, and their consciousness should be redefined and perhaps revised.

Rich draws attention to the need of women’s reviewing their cultural and patriarchal discourse preventing their abilities: “and this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society” (Rich, 1979, 35). The androgynous “I” is the result of the “wreck condition” of women and with the unification of both sexes, Rich moves behind the boundaries of gender to get rid of gender limitations. In this way, Rich integrates “the male and female into a holistic vision of the human” and this represents “her first attempt to define what it means to be female” (Vanderbosch, 1984, 112-13). As Mohammadi puts forward, the androgyne appears as “a new way of shaping unconscious identity for the female consciousness” (Mohammadi, 2007, 102). Rich combines two halves of humanity—male and female—together to get rid of gender limitations and “sexual polarization and the prison of gender toward a world in which individual roles and the modes of personal behavior can be freely chosen . . . androgyne

seeks to liberate the individual from the confines of the appropriate” (Heilbrun, 1973, X). In this respect, gender limitations are overcome by the unification of “the merman” and the “mermaid” in the poem:

This is the place.

And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair

streams black, the merman in his armored body.

We circle silently

about the wreck

we dive into the hold.

I am she: I am he. (Rich, 1973, St 8, 1-7)

The persona tries to integrate the gaze of the male “other” into her own identity still the merman has an “armored body”. The persona desires men and women be equal in her world, because in female consciousness women are mentally and psychologically possess all the capacities of their male peers. This idea is emphasized in the last stanza: “we are, I am, you are” (Rich, 1973, St 10, 1-2). This is where feminism is accepted and the persona feels comfortable while she goes down the sea, which “pumps [her] blood with power”. The idea that women are equal with men makes a woman powerful. Since the nature has been feminized according to the ecofeminist view, the persona celebrates her feminine being escaping to the nature in order to get rid of the burden brought by the patriarchal society.

Rich concentrates on woman-centered community trying to liberate her thoughts from the tensions of gender, and she goes beyond the boundaries of sexes using a natural setting where persona finds freedom in expression to “formulate a new consciousness” (Jeffs, 2003, 99). As for the location, Rich prefers to go down deep into the ocean in this poem or wilderness in her other poems to avoid social responsibilities and dictates of society. This is why she escapes to nature: there is an integration of nature with culture in which the persona belongs to, because as ecofeminist critics point out both of them

are exploited. The persona came “to see the damage that was done” (Rich, 1973, St 6, 1), “the evidence of damage / worn by salt and sway into this threadbare beauty” (Rich, 1973, St 7, 6-7), pointing out woman “whose drowned face sleep with open eyes / whose breasts still bear the stress” (Rich, 1973, St 9, 1-2) and who are in fact “the half-destroyed instruments” (Rich, 1973, St 9, 6) in a patriarchal society.

Ecofeminist criticism pays attention to all forms of subjectivity human or non-human. In other words, it builds a bridge between socio-cultural discourses and non-human beings, as is clearly seen in Rich’s poetry. As Mary Mellor suggests in “green movement” and “deep ecology” there is a connection between the mistreatment of the environment and the oppression of women. According to Mellor,

the green movement starts from the basic tenet of ecology, that all living organisms must be seen in relation to natural environment. . . . Ecofeminists tend to share the perspective of deeper greens that humanity is not just reliant on its physical environment, but that the natural world, including humanity, should be seen as an interconnected and independent whole. This raises fundamental questions about the socio-cultural human world in relation to the nonhuman world, including humanity’s own physical existence. (Mellor, 1997, 1-2)

In the light of this perspective, the persona in “Diving into the Wreck” experiences the “deep ecology”, the persona keeping “close to the side of the schooner”, “otherwise / it is a piece of maritime floss / some dry equipment” (Rich, 1973, St 2, 4-9). She goes down the unknown depth of the ocean prepared and well equipped: “First having read the books of myths, / and loaded the camera, / and checked the edge of the knife-blade” and putting on “the body-armor of black rubber /absurd flippers / the grave and awkward mask” (Rich, 1973, St 1, 1-7). The journey she intends to take consists of non-human world and non-human bodies. She explores natural environment of the underwater world:

I stroke the beam of my lamp
slowly along the flank
of something more permanent
than fish or weed (Rich, 1973, St 6, 6-9)

First the air is blue then
it is bluer and then green and then
black I am blacking out and yet
my mask is powerful
it pumps my blood with power
the sea is another story
the sea is not a question of power. (Rich, 1973, St 4, 1-7)

There is only light gradation of color to inform the reader that she entered the water. She is not there to achieve power, because the female unconscious is not there for power conflicts, she has already got the power coming out of water pumping her “blood with power”. In fact, there is no boundary in the ocean “and there is no one / to tell me when the ocean / will begin” (Rich, 1973, St 3, 10-13). Rich feels free in the sea and she sees the sea as a place where “you breathe differently” (Rich, 1973, St 5, 8) and “have to learn alone to turn [your] body without force/in the deep element” (Rich, 1973, St 4, 8-10). She is all alone apart from the patriarchal society represented by “Cousteau and his assiduous team” (Rich, 1973, St 1, 9). She is diving “alone” to celebrate her feminine being with a cheerful solitude. This foregrounds isolation and solitude of women in society in pursuit of quest and discovery of femininity. She leaves the social identity behind to enjoy nature in this solitude.

The last stanza sums up the condition of women and depicting the nature of this journey down deep the ocean. "We are, I am, you are / by cowardice or courage / . . . / carrying a knife, a camera / a book of myths / in which / our names do not appear" (Rich, 1973, St 10, 1-2, 5-8). McCorkle suggests that the persona discovers the cause of the wreck: "the exclusion of her name, of women's names, of their discourses, from the text, dicta, or mythos of culture" (McCorkle, 1989, 110). The exclusion of her name representing the situation of all women, the speaker wants to raise a collective consciousness for all women. She tries to present the oppressive dichotomies, human and nonhuman, imposed by culture. In other words, she is referring to women because most of men are glamorized to be what history is all about. Rich reveals the beauty of nature and its implication in terms of the feminine self; she does not offer a solution. However, Rich also draws attention to injustices in terms of social or gender issues in the poem. Both women and nature become "wrecks" attempting to survive in all conditions. Still, there is a proto-ecofeminist desire to liberate "the thing itself", most probably both women and nature from domination of destructive forces.

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GENİŞ ÖZET

Bu makelenin amacı Adrienne Rich'in şiirlerinden olan "Diving into the Wreck" (1973) adlı şiirini eko feminist eleştiri bağlamında incelemektir. Rich'in bu post-feminist şiiri bir kadının kendi iç dünyasındaki seyahatini mecazi olarak deniz altındaki bir batığa dalmakla biçimlenir. Bu seyahat esnasında ana karakter bilinçaltında yatan dışılık psişenin farkına vararak ata erkil toplum tarafından belirlenen toplumsal kural ve cinsiyet sınırlarının ötesine giderek ata erkil toplum baskını aşmaya çalışır. Rich'in şiir vizyonu, kültürel ve ataerkil söylemi sorgulayan kadın odaklı bir bakış açısı olmakla birlikte aynı zamanda doğa merkezlidir. Eko feminist eleştirmenlerin de belirttiğine

göre hem kadın hem de doğa göz ardı edilen, ikinci plana atılan ve önemsenmeyen varlıklar olarak görülmekte ve baskın erkek hegemonyasında dışlanmaktadır. Şiirde de olduğu gibi kişi kurtuluşu insanlar tarafından sürekli tahribata ve yok edilmeye mahkûm bırakılan doğaya kaçmakta çare bulmaktadır.

Bu çalışmada öncelikle eko feminist eleştirinin ne olduğu ve eko feminizmin ana eğilimleri üzerine tartışım. Daha sonra cinsiyet rolleri ve bu şiirde ortaya çıkan androjen (çift cinsiyetli) kavramını ele aldım. Eko feminist yaklaşım teorik olarak tartışılır ve bu eleştirinin önde gelen isimlerinin fikirleri incelenir. Şiir, eko feminist bağlamda detaylı olarak incelenir ve sonuçta kadının ve doğanın tahrip edici güçler tarafından sömürüldüğüne dikkat çeker.

Androjen kavramı Rich'in şiirlerinde kadın kimliğini kavramsallaştırmakta önemli bir rol oynar. Androjen "ben", kadınların "yıkılmış"lığının bir sonucudur ve her iki cinsiyetin de birleşmesi ile Rich cinsiyet sınırlılıklarından kurtulmak amacı ile toplumsal cinsiyet rollerinin ötesine gider. Böylece Rich, erkek ve kadını kutsal bir insanoğlu olarak bütünleştirir ki böyle bir durum, kadın olmanın ne demek olduğunu tanımlar. Rich, dişi ve erkek ayrımını cinsiyet kısıtlılıklarından kurtulmak için yapar. Androjen, cinsiyet kutuplaşmalarını, kadın ve erkeğin şiirde de görüldüğü gibi "deniz kızı" ve "deniz adamı" olarak birleştirerek cinsiyet sınırlılıklarını ortadan kaldırmayı amaçlar. Eko feministlere göre, bu zayıf görünen her iki birim aslında toplumun ve dünyanın en önemli parçasıdır ve onların özgürleştirilmesi en büyük hedef kabul edilir.