

Naturally towards nurture: The Eco feminist trailblazers in ‘Grandma Gatewood’s Walk’ and ‘Wild’

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ABSTRACT

‘Grandma Gatewood’s Walk’ speaks of the hike that Ms. Emma Gatewood undertakes, a hike through the Appalachian Trail, the world’s longest footpath, at the age of sixty seven, in 1955, leaving behind her household of eleven children and twenty three grandchildren from Gallia County, Ohio. She escaped from her thoughts and memories of an abusive marriage. She became a celebrity and was captured by leading newspapers; she escaped from the abuse of her husband only to find kindness in strangers and the terrain. Years later Cheryl Strayd undertakes a hike of the Pacific Crest Trail in 1995, she escaped the memories of her mother who succumbed to cancer and also escaped her own self that she did not recognize. She writes that she regained herself in the midst of nature. Both these women go on these long and exhausting hikes only to feel rejuvenated and exhilarated, they reinvented themselves to become heroes in the eyes of the world. Her book ‘Wild’ inspired many women to take this hike as a sport. This commonly became famous as the ‘Wild’ effect.

The experiences of these two women is very different from one another yet equally awe-inspiring, the beauty of the experience is that they found in the wilderness the most precious thing that they had lost deep down, a connection with themselves.

Ecofeminism movement explores the interconnection between women and nature, mainly oppression of women and nature by patriarchy. Women were denied access to the wilderness as it was mainly dominated by men. This paper attempts to compare the two books ‘Grandma Gatewood’s Walk’ by Ben Montgomery and ‘Wild’ by Cheryl Strayd and analyse them from an ecofeminism critical theoretical viewpoint.

KEYWORDS: Ecofeminism, Gender, Gender Geography, Feminism, Patriarchy

Grit of steel

A grandma of many grandchildren and a mother of eleven children who was used to the life at farm and household chores, Ms. Emma Gatewood decides to ‘take a walk’ from the responsibilities and also the memories of the abusive marriage that she was in for the longest period of time in life. She hand stitched a draw string bag from denim at home and filled it with everything she felt she would require for the long walk that she would take. She kept a shower curtain to protect her from rain.

She left on May 3 1955, she had often thought of taking the hike while tending to the garden at home. This is very symbolic of the fact that a woman is much stronger than she is perceived to be. She had a wild spirit and wanted to be set free in the menacing looking wild than be contained in the beautiful garden at the home backyard. She had saved up working at a nursing home. She started with no ammunition or gears whatsoever not even a tent or a sleeping bag. She had prepared herself mentally much more than physically. The Appalachian Trail drew her towards it; she knew that the world, beginning with her own children would ask her ‘Why?’

The ‘Why?’ was a well prepared answer that she would tell the world, ‘For a Lark’ but she knew deep inside the abuse the horror of the beatings that she had borne for years together, the pain of the broken ribs and finally the trauma she carried with her as a memento of the marriage.

She was accustomed to the hard life as a farm hand but she did not get accustomed to the beatings that her husband gave. She was a determined woman who wrote poems which got published in the newspapers; she loved the wild

nature as she resonated with the spirit that roamed free. She waited till she felt that the fledglings had all fled from home to become one with the wild spirit which often called out to her.

Her husband PC abused her physically and verbally as he wanted to establish his power over her and the household, he got them into lot of debts and sold away good amount of land and moved the family over to smaller and lesser fertile lands. Emma worked hard on these lands and developed them too. The oppression in her life was a visible effect of male domination over female.

She escaped this man long ago but not the trauma that he had caused her. She took a course that was misunderstood region stitched together on love and danger¹ much like the fragment of the life that she carried within herself. Many had walked the trail before and she decided to follow suit and this trail made her a pilgrim.

A pilgrim who was undertaking a pilgrimage within herself.

She takes to the wilderness like it was her home, she felt much more at home on the trail than she had felt at her own home. The abuse and oppression had taken a toll on her physically as she looked small and at one point of time she had broken ribs, she had rebelled against her husband and had landed up at jail because he complained against her, her first experience with strangers being kinder was when the police officer knew that a woman with broken ribs had no place in a jail and he had dismissed the case.

She encounters a man who is sceptical of her hiking alone and questions whether her family approves of it, this is evident of the domination of the male gender over the female and over the terrain too as a man is often not questioned similarly. She was among the minority or rather the first woman who was attempting the hike of this trail alone. She was captivated by a picture of the trail that she had seen at a doctor's office and since then she had hoped to try it as it was mentioned as one of the seven wonders of the outdoorsman's world. It clearly showed the dominion of man over the trail.

After a few miles she feels that she had over packed and emptied some of the contents, this is symbolic of nature indicating the baggage she was carrying as a woman and in the suffocating marriage that she was tied too. She wrote in her diary that she was fine if this place saw the end of her and it was as good as any, nature was already suggesting that she end her old self who endured pain and embrace the new one who would emerge stronger.

Ecofeminism theory suggests the symbiotic relationship between women and nature; both are fertile and capable of nurturing hints Karen Warren in her book *Ecofeminism: Women, culture and nature*². As she progresses in the walk a set of men even exclaim that they wouldn't want their mother doing that. It is ironical that the power of a mother is undermined she is the one who cares, nurtures and makes them strong but all that the mother can offer is used by the men and then they treat her like property by dictating to them what is to be done. Nature too is used for resources by men and then left barren to fend and repair itself. Carolyn Merchant establishes this theory in her book *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and Scientific Revolution*³

Her children at home had witnessed her abuse but the trail offered her an opportunity to heal and emerge as a strong woman whom the same children embraced proudly. They carry on her name as a family legacy. The healing effects of nature is not an unknown concept in pagan religions which also consider nature divine, ecofeminism rejects the dualistic western idea that earth and its beings are separate as mentioned by Jamie Thompson in *Ecofeminism: The Path towards Healing the Earth*⁴

Emma Gatewood was a classic example of victim of abuse who had nowhere to escape until at the age of sixty seven she decided to escape to her real mother, the wild nature. She walked when America was lauding of its automobile exploits, there were visionaries who had predicted that the art of walking would be lost in future but Emma became a beacon of hope and inspiration for all those who wanted to use their two good legs and save the trail from urbanized development. Emma's journey and the book became one of the major reasons for saving the Appalachian Trail from automobile destruction. She was one woman who inadvertently saved herself and the trail from more oppression and exploitation. Her journey clearly portrays woman and nature oppression and finally the connection.

Strayd yet Focussed

In 1995, Cheryl Strayd decides to walk the Pacific Crest Trail, she completed the hike and wrote a book called

¹ Montgomery, Ben. *Grandma Gatewood's walk: The inspiring story of the woman who saved the Appalachian Trail*. Chicago Review Press, 2014.

² Warren, Karen J., ed. *Ecofeminism: Women, culture, nature*. Indiana University Press, 1997.

³ Escayol, Maria Antònia Martí. "The Death of Nature: Women, ecology and scientific revolution." (2020).

⁴ Thompson, Jamie. "Ecofeminism: the path towards healing the earth." *Dialogue & Nexus* 4.1 (2017): 8.

‘Wild’, which was later made into a movie that won many Oscars; she inspired many to undertake that hike which came to be called the ‘Wild Effect’. She suffered from the memories of her mother who succumbed to cancer. Her mother was a victim of abuse; her father beat her and exercised his power over her.

Cheryl led a life devoid of long term emotional connections; she had multiple boyfriends and finally married, only to cheat on her husband as she felt the void within her. She resorted to drugs for gratification. She knew deep down that she was neither the person that her mother would be proud of nor the one that her mother had raised.

The abyss inside her grew deeper until she decides that being within the human society wouldn’t help her cause, she had once seen the Pacific Crest Trail photos and write up and felt a strong calling towards it. She decides to take the hike and packs her bag with the best available resources for a hike. She describes that the hike was a life transforming one for her, what she couldn’t find in the materialistic society she found in the heart of the wilderness. Her journey also challenged traditional gender roles and challenged the gendered terrain, which is ironical as a terrain should be gender free and free for exploration by individuals as each of us perceive it in our own sense of the world beyond and inside us. Terrains too are controlled and restrained by man and limited by societal norms which are imposed on genders and the genders exploring the previously chartered places. Any person exploring the terrain by day and the same at night without or with very less human interactions creates a bond with the nature of that place as mentioned in *Textures of Geography – Exploring humanist geographies*⁵

Cheryl is quite emphatic about the spiritual transformation that the hike had on her persona which she writes in her book. Karl Sineath in *Ecofeminism in Feminist thought*⁶ says that women are related to nature hence the debasement of women is considered to be the debasement of nature.

The book vividly describes the journey she takes and how she felt connected with herself in the nurturing hands of the terrain. The abuse that she carried within her was more her mother’s than hers. She had seen her mother being abused by her father as a young child. She was closely attached to her mother and could empathize with her. The mother called her children her army. Cheryl being a soldier couldn’t fight for the mother but she carried the trauma within herself. She claims that she was agnostic towards religion and God, the surprising aspect is that she found a spiritual connect where there were no religious rituals.

Cheryl’s mother was used and abused by the father and then had left her bereft of everything but her mother raised her children by herself. This is the viewpoint of ecofeminism as well, man uses nature, abuses her and leaves her bereft of all resources but nature and women are resilient and that’s what is clear in the book ‘Wild’.

Women’s ecofeminism spirituality: Origins and application to psychotherapy⁷ emphasizes that within Christian communities there is a concept of ‘Divine Feminine’ that integrates the Christian ideologies and the ideology of Goddess Spirituality. Spirituality based on the divine feminine is ecofeminism spirituality, stemming from both feminism and environmentalism as quoted in *Spiritual Ecofeminism: Towards Deemphasizing Christian Patriarchy*.⁸

She says that the hike was no less than hell, with each step she was pushing against gravity and the gravity of her own thoughts which was very fearful until she embraced the loving grace of Mother Nature.⁹

Mother Nature

The concept of considering nature as ‘Mother’ is not an alien or unknown concept. In Hinduism and other old religions this is an ideology which forms the basis of the religion. In Hinduism the highest power that is responsible for all creation is ‘Shakti’ the primal power of all creatures and the universe as well, Shakti is the name of woman a feminine power that is the basis of creation. Nature is regarded as this power that is capable of creating, nurturing and sustaining life. Nature is capable of repairing itself and also the creatures that belong to it. Devi is also another name given to nature and all that belongs to it, Devi is also a feminine power and the protector mother, she also blesses every creature who takes refuge in her, says Andrew Harvey in ‘Universal Mother’. The

⁵ Adams, Paul C., Steven D. Hoelscher, and Karen E. Till, eds. *Textures of place: Exploring humanist geographies*. U of Minnesota Press, 2001.

⁶ Sebastian, Rohit Joseph. "Re-reading Mahasweta Devi's Bayen: Identifying the Pangs of Patriarchy from the Lens of Spiritual-Ecofeminism." *EDITORIAL BOARD*: 22.

⁷ Santamaria-Dávila, J., et al. "Women's ecofeminist spirituality: Origins and applications to psychotherapy." *Explore* 15.1 (2019): 55-60.

⁸ Ottuh, Peter. "Spiritual Ecofeminism: Towards Deemphasizing Christian Patriarchy." *Abraka Journal of Religion and Philosophy* 1.1 (2021): 51-72.

⁹ Strayed, Cheryl. *Wild: A journey from lost to found*. Atlantic Books Ltd, 2012.

divine feminine: exploring the feminine face of God, throughout the world.¹⁰

Cheryl connects to this great spiritual mother after struggling against the forces within herself and struggling against the rough terrain, she accepts the raw power of Mother Nature, it is a symbiotic relationship that evolves between them, Cheryl is wild, not groomed herself for days at length but was completely embraced by mother nature and she nursed her back to health.

When viewed from an ecofeminism point of view, the terrain was not abused but was dominated by male hikers much more than female hikers, in that way we can witness the gendered domination, this shows complete control, like the way her mother was controlled and dominated by her father. Like nature, her mother too was dominated but not damaged, the typical traits of ecofeminism is visible here as it shows complete domination over land and women: here it can be asserted that this is clearly visible in the life story of Cheryl's mother which Cheryl carries within herself as generational trauma.

Conclusion

The hike that the two women took up and completed became world famous stories; the books that were written became a source of inspiration for many others to either discover their innate powers or to just complete a hike for a lark. Emma Gatewood, found solace in the lap of nature during the hike on the Appalachian Trail, she was a victim of physical and verbal abuse. A woman with broken ribs was drawn towards the wild nature which symbolically lured her towards rehabilitation. This healing forms the basis of earth based traditions as mentioned by Starhawk. P in Feminist Earth based spirituality and ecofeminism. Healing the wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism.¹¹ Gatewood also indirectly helped save the Appalachian Trail from the onslaught of the automobile revolution and inspired many to walk and be more connected to the elements of nature.

Ecofeminism is a philosophy that is concerned with relationship between women and nature and is also associated with man and his dealings with women and nature. Man uses women and nature for his needs and also to establish supremacy, ecofeminism has been further explored by critics and it has been found that Ecofeminism has the potential to lead the way in the healing of the earth and perpetrating a culture of sustainability as mentioned by Ecofeminism: The Path towards Healing the Earth Jamie Thompson¹².

Ecofeminism as a philosophy asserts that oppression of women is related to oppression of nature with the same patriarchal attitude says Maha Abdel Monei Emara in her paper Anita Desai's Fire on The Mountain: An Ecofeminist Reading¹³. Emma had given herself completely to her family but her husband took to abusing her six months into her marriage, she did not see any way out of the situation as she wasn't independent. Man treats woman as the 'other', this is how he treats nature as well, asserts Simone De Beauvoir in her book 'The Second Sex'¹⁴. In the book it is clearly established that this Grandma who is a victim of abuse finds spiritual healing in the healing hands of the wild nature.

Cheryl resisted the dominant forces of nature but eventually gave in as she felt at home in the wilderness, she was a witness to the abuse that her father inflicted upon her mother and she carried the trauma, until she found a connect within herself. The Pacific Crest Trail accepts her with all her baggage and unloads it; here she is not a direct victim but the one who has internalized it. Feminists like Maureen Devine in Woman and nature: Literary reconceptualization¹⁵ believe that woman is not just a victim of men but of patriarchy, nature is treated the same way by men, they establish their victory over it, hence treating both as objects.

These two women who were victims of patriarchy found their inner strength in the lap of nature thus reinforcing the concept of women nature interconnection. Ungar Elizabeth in her work 'Mother Goddess as Mother Nature'¹⁶ states that this balance is similar to ecofeminism movement which establishes that we need to connect back to Mother Earth and be mindful of the actions towards all beings.

¹⁰ Harvey, Andrew, and Anne Baring. The Divine Feminine: Exploring the feminine face of god throughout the world. Conari Press, 1996.

¹¹ Starhawk, P. "Feminist, earth-based spirituality and ecofeminism." Healing the wounds: The promise of ecofeminism (1989): 174-185.

¹² Thompson, Jamie. "Ecofeminism: the path towards healing the earth." Dialogue & Nexus 4.1 (2017): 8.

¹³ Giri, Dipak. Woman-Nature Interface: An Ecofeminist Study. AABS Publishing House, Kolkata, India, 2019.

¹⁴ De Beauvoir, Simone. "The second sex." Classic and Contemporary Readings in Sociology. Routledge, 2014. 118-123.

¹⁵ Devine, Maureen. "Woman and nature: literary reconceptualizations." (1992).

¹⁶ Ungar, Elizabeth. "Mother Goddess as Mother Nature." (2023).

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