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Pagan Ecofeminism: A Study of Alice Munro's "Princess Ida"

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore Alice Munro's short story, "Princess Ida" from an ecofeminist lens. "Princess Ida" is one of Munro's stories from 1971 short story collection, Lives of Girls and Women. The paper uncovers the elements of paganism, one of the strands of ecofeminism, present in the story. It offers pagan ecofeminist study of the text by opposing monotheistic religion and embracing any religion that worships the earth, nature, or fertility deity, such as the various forms of goddess worship or matriarchal religion. It establishes a connection between earth-worship and the Gaia hypothesis. The present paper attempts to underline that Earth as a living organism, like any other living thing, invariably tries to exert constant or stable conditions for itself (homeostasis). And these exit groups and beliefs that come under the category of earth religion, such as paganism, a polytheistic, nature-centered religion; animism, a doctrine that all natural objects and the universe itself, have souls. Munro associates many female characters with primordial vitality, renders them with pagan and mythic qualities, constructs a narrative of female goddess figures, signifying pantheistic religions of the primitive world. The paper exhibits how Munro's character withdraws herself from the masculine Christian mythology and is drawn towards pagan religious context of Astarte and Isis where both woman's and earth's life-giving powers are associated and respected.

Keywords: pagan ecofeminism, Egyptian Isis, monotheism, polytheism, primordial.

Ecofeminism is an activist and academic movement that unpacks the vital connection between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature. Ecofeminists thrive on the feminist principle of equality between genders, and embraces the holistic view of the world to examine the relationships between humans and the natural world. They underline the ways both nature and women are treated by patriarchal society. The term Feminism was coined by the French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974). Ecofeminist theory propounds that a feminist view of ecology does not place women in the dominant position of power, but rather calls for an egalitarian, cooperative society in which there is no one dominant group. There are many branches of ecofeminism, with different approaches and studies, including liberal ecofeminism, pagan ecofeminism, vegetarian, ecofeminism, and social/socialist ecofeminism (or materialist ecofeminism). Interpretations of ecofeminism and how it might be applied to social thought include

ecofeminist art, social justice and political philosophy, religion, contemporary feminism, and poetry.

Ecofeminism examines the connections between women and nature in culture, religion, literature and iconography, and talks about the parallels between the exploitation of nature and the domination of women. These parallels include but are not restricted to considering women and nature as property, viewing men as the curators of culture and women as the curators of nature, and how men dominate women and humans dominate nature. Ecofeminism underlines that both women and nature must be respected. Charlene Spretnak has offered one way of categorizing ecofeminist work: (a) through the study of political theory as well as history; (b) through the belief and study of nature-based religions; (c)) through environmentalism (6).

Pagan ecofeminism is a branch of ecofeminism, and is widely known among ecofeminist authors and activists, such as Kate Sandilands, Starhawk, Carol J. Adams and Marti Kheel. It is not associated with one particular religion, but encompasses ancient traditions, such as the worship of Gaia, the Goddess of nature and spirituality. The only hostility towards Christianity, or towards any other religion or philosophy of life, is to the degree that its institutions have affirmed strongly to be "the only way" and have sought to deny freedom to others and to suppress other ways of religious expression and belief. Pagan, on the other hand, manifests a great respect for nature, a feminine viewpoint, and an intention to build strong community values. Pagans hold the right of individuals to interact personally with the divine. One of the most usual opinions is the divine presence in nature and regard for the natural order of life. Spiritual growth is associated to the cycles of the Earth and considerable emphasis is kept on ecological concerns. Generally used personifications of divinity are Mother Earth and Father Sky/Sun. Many Pagan traditions are explicitly reconstructionist in the way they intend to recreate many of the lost rituals of the ancient traditions, including holy days and seasonal rejoicings. Pagans not only value nature, but also worship a variety of gods and goddesses. In this way, Pagans seek to hold their ancestry in high esteem through Pagan traditions.

Typically, Munro depicts, in perceptible stages, a manifold vision of principal character's life as she passes through varied phases in her life, from girlhood to womanhood but gradually as her life converges with that of her mother, her aunts, uncles and that of society, it acquires its own prominence, worth and place, and the main character becomes unintentionally an agent of the other's transformation. Through these unintentional mentors and in her own encounters

with sex, birth, and death, she delves into the dark and bright sides of womanhood. Woman associated with nature is rendered subject of oppression in the male dominant society, where she ceases to have her rights and equality to raise her voice against men for being treated as secondary citizen and slave. The protagonist deals with the restricted vision of ignorance and near madness, knowledge and belief in God. She makes out at a very early stage of the socializing process that sex ascertains her relations to others. She being the girl is expected to assist her mother in the house, rather than assisting her father and brother in the fox pens ("Boys and Girls"). She is expected to be obedient and yielding to authority, gentle in behaviour, and modest about her achievements. Society admires and keeps a boy who exhibits intellectual promise in high regards, while a bright girl is considered a suspect. All along she remains an astute, mindful and recorder of truths in small-town life. The result is a powerful, moving, and humorous demonstration of Alice Munro's unparalleled awareness of the lives of girls and women.

"Princess Ida" is a story about protagonist, Del's mother, Addie whom other people seemed to think of as a "wild-woman." It is a story of Addie's childhood, education, assault at the hands of her own brother, and her stance against religion. Munro tells the story of a woman who forswears the world of men. She gives an account of Addie's eccentricities: the way she drove all over the roads of Wawanash County selling encyclopedias; the way she wrote letters to the editor concerning women's rights and education; the way she wrote essays with "long decorative descriptions" and published them in the newspaper under the pen name of "Princess Ida." And earlier Del despised all of what her mother used to do. But with the passage of time, as she learns more, Del undergoes a change of heart from humiliation to curiosity to empathy towards her mother. Del's aunts made her mother the subject of ridicule, making fun of the mud on her boots, of the "beetles she had on her dress" and the letters she writes to the editor. Addie was too firm on getting registered in the Great Books discussion group, and when that disappointed her, she joined a correspondence course on the Great Thinkers. Addie rented a place in town so that her children could go to school in town. There's a cheering congruence in the arc of Addie's struggling life. Poverty or not, university or not, Addie is resolute to gain knowledge.

The narrative unfolds that Addie came of age in a house "where a murder had been committed." It has a symbolical meaning in that the hopes of girls and women, were crushed to bits. Addie dreamed of going to high school, but she was neglected by her parents, maltreated and perhaps raped by her brother, and prohibited to go to high school. In an act of surprising bravery, Addie ran away and worked in a boarding house to make school

education happen. Her ardently religious mother, being "in the last demented stages of Christianity," had given away a legacy of $300 that could have otherwise financed Addie's college. Instead, Addie's mother had purchased Bibles to distribute among the poor. Although Addie tells this cured her of religion, what really matters is the way Addie's witty remark conceals her intense disappointment. All that Del knows about Addie's youth comes from Addie. Del states that her mother's story moved from tragic captivity, mental anguish to bold, rebellion and escape.

In the concluding segment of the story, Addie's abusive older brother makes an unanticipated visit from the States. Long gone, his visit is another assault. He re-drafts the past, rendering the uncaring mother a saint, rendering the farm arcadian, and making the barn where he "tortured" Addie non-existent. He rescripts himself to be a tender-hearted man, and he makes a special $300 bequest to the sister he abused in the barn, as in half-hearted atonement and alongside acknowledgement of what the money might have meant to Addie. In letting Del to listen to his version of things, Bill's narrative is nothing but rescript, nothing but a mask. He re-enacts his assaults with his assaults on the truth. His story-telling is a kind of rape of consciousness.

Isis is the name of the ancient Egyptian goddess and is known as the goddess of love and fertility. Like Isis, whose name Del's mother scolds her for remembering as a god, rather than as a goddess, Addie is depicted as the priestess of her early childhood, symbol of powerful mother as well as a prototype of intellectual womanhood. Devotees worshipped Isis as the perfect mother and, additionally, as the patroness of nature and magic. Slaves, sinners, artisans and the downtrodden were friends to her but at the same time, maintaining balance, she'd also listen to the prayers of the wealthy, maidens, aristocrats and rulers. Isis is also referred to as the defender of the dead and goddess of children. Addie drives throughout the country: "She drove our thirty-seven Chevy over all of the highways and back roads of Wawanash County . . . " (73). She always favours the poor and the destitute, Negroes, Jews, and Chinese and women; she despises intoxication and shows zero acceptance towards sexual looseness, obscene language, disorganized lives and ignoramus persons. These are the objectives why she is working to clear out the Flats Road from the immensely subdued and underprivileged people by selling encyclopaedias to them. Kate Sandilands in *Ecofeminism and Its Discontents* holds the view:

> The Goddess tends to be constructed in a way which reifies characteristics considered to be "feminine" in contemporary Western constructions. She is the ultimate cosmic mother: lifegiving, gentle (unless her children are threatened), perfectly aware of

> herself and her offspring (a form of "maternal omniscience," if you will) (*The Trumpeter*, 93)

These attributes of femininity serve as a prototype against which to build one self. Just as Christ is believed as a means of redemption, the Goddess comes to embody and personify all that is sacred. The title of the story, "Princess Ida" is related to mother's pen name, which she uses for a column that gets published in the local newspaper. "Princess Ida" makes a reference to Alfred Tennyson's poem "The Princess," in which the royal heroine establishes a college specifically for the education and emancipation of women. Addie unweariedly writes editorials to local newspapers; her letters pertain to local issues of the society or related to those in which she promotes education and the rights of women. She also writes editorials opposing mandatory religious education in the school. All of her above writings are published in the Jubilee Herald-Advance over her name. Some are published in the city paper for which she uses her nom de plume, Princess Ida. They consist completely of elaborated portrayal of the idyllic rustic from which she has run off. Though Del remains unclear regarding her mother's refusal of romantic love and her slightly prudish attitude towards sex, mother still exert influence on her. Del flitters between an image of her as a goddess of sorts, a "priestess" (89) and a comic calamity, but it is a former conception that succeeds out.

In his poem, "The Princess," Tennyson openly stands up for rights of women to acquire higher education by establishing a college totally managed by and for women entirely and exclusively, and simultaneously illustrating the progress of the leader of college into a nurse and eventually an angel in the house. Alice Munro in her "Princess Ida," demonstrates a mother figure, who pens letters to the newspaper to endorse women's higher education, sets about on the high roads of rural Ontario to sell encyclopaedias door to door to introverted farmers, but every now and then reverts to the values of domesticity and her small town. The narrator in Tennyson's poem, who is quite evidently Tennyson's persona, puts together a summer's tale with a heroic female figure: "And make her some great Princess, six feet high/Grand, epic, homicidal" (Tennyson, "The Princess"). The narrator adapts to the situations of his visiting an adjoining estate to draw a portrait of the princess which is in alignment with the spirit of the place:

> Heroic seems our Princess as required—
> But something made to suit with Time and place,
> A Gothic ruin and a Grecian house
> (Tennyson, "The Princess")

The portrayal of Munro's female character is also perceived of as a diversified image in which the romantic and the classical coexist. This is the depiction of the mother's stand for the education of the peasant population:

> And in the meantime there was my mother, gamely lugging her case of books, gaining entry to their kitchens, their cold funeral-smelling front rooms, cautiously but optimistically opening fire on behalf of Knowledge. A chilly commodity that most people grown up, can agree to do without. But nobody will deny that it is a fine thing for children. My mother was banking on that. (*Lives,* 73-74)

The portrait is based on heroic elevation and summon up classical images of a war goddess who is attributed with Athena's or Hippolyta's fighting spirit and concurrently Ulysses' heedfulness and shrewdness in an environment which is near to Gothic, with "cold funeral-smelling front rooms," but located in the backwoods of rural Ontario instead of the Apennines. The comparison of both women to warriors cannot go unrecognized: Tennyson's Ida is associated with the most handsome warrior in the Trojan War: "A Memnon smitten with the morning Sun." Munro's Addie is demonstrated as opening fire on her potential customers. Both of them are advocating the cause of women's rights. As Tennyson's Princess states, she wishes: "To lift the woman's fallen divinity/Upon an even pedestal with man" (Tennyson, "The Princess"). Likewise, Munro's Addie reprimands her daughter Del with desiring to hide her brains under a bushel to fall in step with small town ideas about the place of women in society in the mid-twentieth century. Ida and Addie are both depicted as battling against the constraints imposed upon women in their respective circumstances. In both cases their determination and resolve are ambiguously endorsed by their respective narrators, who portray the heroine as a woman of mettle and grit who is praise-worthy, but concurrently they critique and openly burlesque her.

Going against the beliefs of Tennyson who provides a comprehensive description of the transformation of Princess Ida and her final resettlement into normative orthodoxy, Munro abstains from permitting Addie to convert into a symbol of silenced womanhood; nonetheless, the methodology of both the writers remains to almost the same degree ambiguous. The Princess Ida's metamorphosis is so uncertain that it has been decoded as a strategy of being secretive and she herself as an expression of crypto-feminism in the Victorian age. Addie's disapproval is equally confusing and unclear. There seems to be a perception of an unresolved mystery ciphered in the very buildup of Munro's story since it culminates on a dilemma and a suspended resolution: "There is an Egyptian god with four letters" said my mother, frowning at the crossword, "that I know I know, and I cannot think of it to save my soul" (*Lives*, 101).

The young narrator's offering as an answer is "Isis." Carolyn Merchant in *Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* revolves around revisiting earth-rooted spirituality, and a revitalized interest in poetry, statues, images, and rituals surrounding ancient earth goddesses, the Egyptian Isis, the Greek goddesses Demeter and Gaia, and European paganism. Addie is one of the most logical and rational voices developing under the umbrella of ecofeminism, an incipient movement, part ecology, part self-made religion. Notably, ecofeminists establish, with their monthly biological cycles, that women somehow resonate more with the earth and the cosmos than men, and more women should implement the ecology movement. Women being fundamentally peaceful, ecofeminists quite often talk of primitive times, when the earth was led by matriarchy, and a millennium went without any war. Here, Alice Munro is also seen turning to matriarchy to save the people of Ontario and earth, in general, from war that is going on, and men like Addie's brother, Uncle Bill. The narrator's mother keeps recalling childhood memories in which she depicts herself tormented by her own brother, even amounting to rape and unleashing pain and suffering on her mother (Del's grandmother) and animals. Marti Kheel in *From Heroic to Holistic Ethics* quotes what Carolyn Merchant points out:

> The image of the earth as a living organism and nurturing mother has historically served as a culturally constraint restricting the actions of human beings. One does not readily slay a mother, dig into her entrails for gold, or mutilate her body….As long as the earth was considered to be alive and sensitive, it could be considered a breach of human ethical behavior to carry out destructive acts against it. (253)

Many times the death of the Beast is believed to announce the arrival of light and order. Henceforth, the chief Babylonian god, Marduk murders his mother, the goddess Tiamat, the cosmic whale-dragon or great serpent, and from whose body the universe is originated. Both Christianity and Judaism sustain the dragon-killing tradition. This custom of dragon slaying was transformed from Gods and heroes to saints and archangels. And, in modern era "Man" is considered equivalent to or even greater to God. And woman's place in the natural order governs her societal and religious roles, according to the literalist understandings of the Bible. The writings of St. Paul, as stated by Carolyn Merchant, are taken to mean that a woman should never take over authority from a man, should not teach, and should be silent in her subjugation (*Death*, 147).

Ecofeminists discard the Judeo-Christian tradition on number of reasons, foremost amongst which is its focus on male's special connection to the divine. As Addie states, her brother would conceal her mother's bibles which she has instructed to distribute to the heathen, in the granary. Towards the end, Addie seemingly joins hands with ecofeminists in renouncing

religion and recalls how she is cleansed of religion forever by her mother's extremism who outlays on bibles.

Munro very well brings forth the idea how paganism entertains harmony with the rhythms of our great Earth and considers the Earth as their equal by advocating humans are neither above nor separate from the rest of nature. She holds the view that all are part of a web of life, and are fully interconnected with the biosphere. This connection to all living beings is perceived as spiritual and sacred. And successively it furnishes a framework that Pagans can use to fuse their religious beliefs with environmental activism. It urges for getting back to ancient perceptions of the earth by paying heed to ancient wisdom, for instance, spinsters, old Aunts and grandmothers. Munro fathoms that divine figures exist not as transcendent beings, but as immanent beings in the present realm, intending that divine figures exist within each of us, and within nature. Munro has brilliantly underlined establishing a truly sustainable culture by transforming the systems of domination and exploitation that threaten our future into systems of symbiotic partnership supporting our ecosystems.

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