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Ecofeminism in Octavia Butler's *Parable of The Sower* (1993) and Doris Lessing's *Mara and Dann: An Adventure* (1999)

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the Degree of Masters in Literature

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Abstract

Ecofeminism is a movement that combines the feminist ideals of gender equality and women's rights with ecological issues. Hence, important connections exist between the exploitation of women and environmental destruction within male-dominated cultures. Patriarchy, capitalism, and the misuse of nature are issues that have deeply affected ecofeminism and, consequently, ecofeminist theory. This thesis aims at studying *Octavia Butler's Parable of The Sower* (1993) and *Doris Lessing's Mara and Dann: An Adventure* (1999) from an ecofeminist perspective. The techniques of both Butler and Lessing are highlighted in a close analysis of their works through the scope of ecofeminism, post-apocalyptic techniques and mythology. The theoretical frame of the ecofeminist analysis depends on modern studies and theories of renowned scholars such as Greta Gaard, Karen Warren, and Carolyn Merchant. The social ecofeminist theory is accentuated in relation to Murray Bookchin's social ecology and post-apocalyptic approach. Moreover, the exceptional relation between the cultural ecofeminist approach and modern myth theories is introduced through the writings of Joseph Campbell, Christopher Vogler, Carl Jung, Eric Neumann, and Northrop Fry. This thesis uses a wide range of theories to stress the importance of empowering women as social reformers and modern mythmakers.

Key Words: ecofeminism- social ecofeminism- social ecology- cultural ecofeminism- post apocalyptic- modern myth

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Introduction

The idea of women's empowerment is one of the most controversial issues all over the globe. It is defined as supporting women's self-esteem, ability to make their own decisions, and right to influence societal change for themselves and others. Female empowerment is frequently associated with distinct eras of the women's rights movement in Western countries. The first wave of feminism, which began in the 19th and early 20th centuries and included suffrage as a significant component, is divided into three waves. The sexual revolution and the role of women in society were part of the second wave of the 1960s. Moreover, the 1990s are frequently cited as the start of third wave feminism.

Women's empowerment has a strong relation with issues of gender equality, the right to qualified education, the right to work, and the right to express themselves freely in different fields of life. It is a standpoint against the patriarchal power that negates women's right to rule and lead. Women around the world continue to face major obstacles and they are traditionally underrepresented in positions of authority and decision-making. The main goal of women's empowerment is to get rid of all the taboos relevant to underestimating women's abilities and limiting them to specific scopes of life, already determined by men.

Empowering women is the right way to developed, progressed and liberated communities. Women's empowerment is vital for the health and development of families, communities and nations. Women can realize their great potentials when they are protected, fulfilled and productive. They can contribute their abilities to the workforce while also raising happier, healthier children. They can also contribute to the development of sustainable economies, as well as benefit society and mankind as a whole.

Sameera Maiti points out in her book *Women Empowerment and Development* (2016) that Women's empowerment through gainful employment is an important component and instrument of development in every country. No country can be considered developed if half of its citizens are badly disadvantaged in terms of fundamental needs, livelihood possibilities, knowledge access and political voice (74). The elimination of gender discrimination is a necessary conclusion for guaranteeing gender equality. Women's lack of economic empowerment not only stifles growth and poverty reduction, but also has a slew of additional negative consequences for children, including poor educational and health results. Thus, education is critical to ensure that women have economic, social and political influence.

Similarly, in her book *Education and Women's Development* (2021), Dr. Savita Mishra reveals that education and women's empowerment cannot be separated; She states, "the empowerment of women would result in overall development of society both at micro and macro level. Active participation of women in economic activities and decisions, would contribute to overall economic development"(25). In other words, the active participation of women in social life is the gate to general progress in social, political and economic fields. In his book *Women Empowerment Emerging Dimensions and Issues* (2019), Dr. Shailesh Singh clarifies the importance of women's independence and their ability to make their own decisions away from any pressure and oppression. He focuses on gender equality in the work field and, consequently, on women's rights to be in a higher position with their determination and hard work (54).

Since all the perspectives of life are interconnected with the social role of women and the call for empowerment, the significance of this thesis is to trace the intersection between women's empowerment and nature's empowerment. The thesis tackles the growing phenomenon of relating women to nature and highlighting their common issues from an ecofeminist point of

view. As previously illustrated, women's empowerment includes eliminating all shapes of violence, inequality and degradation. Ecofeminists stand for the empowerment of all the living creatures against the patriarchal system. Accordingly, writing about ecofeminism is a powerful tool to stress women's empowerment.

This thesis examines women's empowerment in relation to ecofeminism through analyzing two novels: Octavia Butler's *Parable of The Sower* (1993) and Doris Lessing's *Mara and Dann: An Adventure* (1999). The analysis will be in the light of Karren Warren (1947-2020) Greta Gaard (1960-), and Carolyn Merchant's (1936-) theories of social ecofeminism and cultural ecofeminism. Women's empowerment as social reformers and modern mythmakers will be discussed through the lens of modern theorists such as Murray Boockchin (1921-2006), Joseph Campbell (1904-1987), Christopher Vogler (1949-), Northrope Frye (1912-1991), Eric Neumann (1905-1960), and Carl Jung (1875-1961).

Doris Lessing (1919-2013) is a British novelist and noble prize winner. Her unique vision of modernity has marked her status among the most significant British authors of the late 20th century. Lessing's fiction consists of a wide variety of subject matter ranging from feminism to psychological fiction to racism and post-colonial narratives. Although Lessing was born to a British family, her childhood in an African colony opened her eyes to issues of racism, discrimination and the brutality of the British colonization. Butler and Lessing's literary works are directed to the minorities, the segregated communities and the powerless voices. They aim to empower and reform their communities.

Among Lessing's most acclaimed novels are *The Grass is Singing* (1950), *The Golden Notebook* (1962) and *The Children of Violence*, a five novels series (1952-1969). *The Grass is*

Singing is a postmodern novel about the racial politics between whites and blacks in a British colony. It chronicles an emotionally immature woman's quick marriage to an unsuccessful farmer and her subsequent mental decline, murder and colonial British society's reaction to it. *The Golden Notebook* is, with no doubt, the most well-known fiction of Lessing. The novel tells the narrative of the writer Anna Wulf, her four notebooks and her quest to bring them all together in a fifth, gold-colored notebook. Her work focuses on societal and mental deterioration. The novel includes anti-war and anti-Stalinist elements, as well as a comprehensive assessment of communism and the Communist Party in England from the 1930s to the 1950s.

Inspired by Lessing's childhood experiences, the three works are an epic exploration of the hardships of colonization, racism, politics, religion and feminism. While these three works are the main advocates of Lessing's fiction, this study focuses on her less known but equally fascinating work of ecofeminism. In her novel *Mara and Dann: An Adventure* (1999), Lessing's portrayal of natural catastrophes through Ice Age, flood and drought all stand for the most profound and clandestine aspirations of the human spirit. Lessing creates a science fiction story about the future. Her plot depicts the story of Mara and Dann, a sister and brother, moving from one place to another in a futuristic Africa or as she calls it "Ifrik". She traces the destruction, oppression, and injustice that they face through their journey. Lessing builds a relation between Mara and nature. Mara and Dann learn to survive the dangers of a life threatened by an unforgiving climate and menacing animals. Eventually, they search for a place with enough water and food to support human life. Traveling across "Ifrik", the siblings enter cities full of crime, power struggles and corruption. This opens their eyes to how societies function.

This novel is not only remembered for its literary style or interesting characters but also for the virtuosity of its storytelling. Throughout the narrative, there is a wistfulness that borders on reverence for the ancients' enormous intelligence. However, this is countered with a realization of the environment and the creation of apocalyptic war machines. They meet this blood thirst and the ambition for power repeatedly as they go over a wrecked continent in search of water and food.

Octavia Butler (1947-2006) is a well-known American author of the 20th century. She is famous for science fiction novels and short stories. Butler was born to a black American family and raised as an orphan. Because of her dark skin, Butler experienced a tough childhood in a racist community. It is often said that this background had a great influence on her future writing career. While Butler's novels cover a wide variety of topics and subject matter, it can be asserted that most of her works share a bleak, gloomy and deeply psychological ambiance. Butler published two novels in the mid-1990s that became known as the Parable or Earthseed trilogy. The volumes describe the Earthseed community's struggle to survive the socioeconomic and political collapse of 21st-century America as a result of poor environmental stewardship, corporate greed and the widening income gap. Alternative philosophical perspectives and religious interventions are proposed as remedies to such issues in the books. Unlike Lessing's novel, *The Parable of the Sower* is Butler's most famous novel.

The first novel in Butler's series, *Parable of the Sower* (1993), introduces Lauren Oya Olamina, a teenager protagonist who lives in a dystopian California in the twenty-first century. Lauren, who has a disease that makes her experience every physical pain she sees, battles with the religious beliefs and physical seclusion of her hometown of Robledo. She creates the "Earthseed" belief system, which envisions a future for humanity on other planets. Lauren and

two other survivors go north after Robledo is destroyed and Lauren's family and neighbors are slain. Lauren moves her new group to Northern California, branding it Acorn and recruiting members from various social backgrounds along the way.

Butler gives Lauren, the protagonist, all the right to speak, express herself, criticize, and even establish a new religion. Her heroine is powerful and authoritative. She has an extraordinary power like Greek goddesses, which is hyper-empathy that enables her to feel others' emotions of joy, pain, sadness and happiness. She has the upper hand over the masculine world and she is trying to help everyone through her beliefs and values. In her novel, Butler stresses that women have their own quest and a journey to fulfill. At a young age, Lauren finds herself responsible for a group of people trying to survive the destruction in her city and trying to establish a community believing in a new religion, "Earthseed". She sees herself as a savior of her society. So, she stresses people's need to look for the future not to restrict themselves to the past. This is a subject of controversy between Lauren and her father.

In contrast to her father's nostalgic feelings, Lauren believes in the power of the unknown and that people should accept their present conditions in order to change the future. Butler creates a sophisticated plot, especially by writing it in the form of a diary. In an interview, Butler admits that she wrote her novel as an autobiographical work. Moreover, she chose the novel to be a diary in order to be free in adding intertext material; such as, prose, poems, notes, and religious quotes. Hence, the final work is a collage of different media to serve Butler's ideologies. Butler's 1998 novel, *Parable of the Talents*, is set sometime after Lauren's death and is told through excerpts from Lauren's journals that are interspersed with Larkin's commentary. It tells the story of right-wing fundamentalist Christians invading Acorn, Lauren's attempts to

survive their theological re-education, and earthseed's ultimate triumph as a community and a doctrine.

Butler and Lessing use the apocalypse in *Mara and Dann* and *The Parable of the Sower* as a means of unveiling reality from their perspective. They possess an intriguing inclination for cataclysm which they explore meticulously starting from their very first works of fiction. However, the authors' longing for catastrophe is not founded upon destruction itself, but rather in an attempt to surpass the limits of human existence. Hence, Butler and Lessing utilize themes such as destruction and disaster to convey messages for future generations. These particular messages not only include sharp critiques against human nature but also serious insights concerning irresponsible human behavior.

The two novels are fantasy stories with a strong focus on nature and women's role in a post-apocalyptic setting. Butler and Lessing depict a universe where tyranny by a male-dominated society is at the foundation of a slew of issues. In their novels, they illustrate the future repercussions of global warming and highlight that women's oppression is at the root of all environmental catastrophes. The plots imply special focus on women's empowerment and how female protagonists as Mara and Lauren are capable of leading and creating new communities. Mara and Lauren, the two heroines, live in the far future on an earth that is not the earth that the readers are familiar with. Climate change has caused the face of the earth to change and with a shortage in water and food, the genes of the human race have been changed. Although the two novels do not introduce zombies or imaginary visions of humans, people's attitudes and reactions do not follow the norm. In *Mara and Dann*, the story imagines the Ice Age as a result of society's ecological voracity, resulting in a deadly drought in the southern continent of what Lessing called "Ifrik." "Mara and Dan is a retelling of a very old tale," as Lessing writes in the

author's note. It takes place in Africa in the future. It is an attempt to imagine what might happen if the ice returns" (VII-VIII).

Similarly, in *Parable of the Sower*, people live in a destroyed world due to climate change. They are forced to live in walled cities to feel safe and secure. Poverty, crime, misery and death are the only things people are familiar with. Likewise, Mara lives in a demolished community and the entire region is beset by natural disasters: the center is ravaged by drought, and the northern section is permanently encased in ice. When Mara and Dann become orphans at the ages of seven and four, they are taken to a place called the Rock village and cared for by Daima, an old woman. They begin their epic trip from the center of "Ifrik" to its northern half, where there is more water and hence more food, a few years later. Like Mara, Lauren lost her mother at a young age and lived with her stepmother. Her father was the one who takes care of her and teaches her everything she knew. Though he was the one who opened her eyes to reading books and writing her thoughts, he did not accept her ideas and her new thoughts about religion. However, she lost her father before the beginning of her journey and this motivated her to find her true self and to create her independent personality. Mara and Lauren must fight to survive during their journeys; they come across a variety of primitive and dangerous people who live in deplorable conditions. The disappearance of the patriarchal masculine authority over them marked the beginning of their journeys of independence and freedom.

The contribution of this thesis lies in the relations between ecofeminism and other theories as social ecology and mythology. In this regard, Liu Ying Zuo's (2011) dissertation entitled *Ecofeminism in Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook and Mara and Dann: An Adventure* restricts her analysis of ecofeminism to Lessing's works and the general idea of ecofeminism in the two novels. On the other hand, Melissa Vargas's (2009) dissertation entitled *Confronting*

Environmental and Social Crisis: Octavia Butler's Critique of the Spiritual Roots of Environmental Injustice in her Parable Novels is limited to the religious and spiritual ideas discussed in the parable novels. Like Zuo's dissertation, it does not introduce a comparison between the two different writers. The two novels are densely packed with religious and political tones, as well as subtle references to a variety of other topics and critical schools. Dealing with ecofeminism in general and the social and cultural ecofeminist approach in particular in Butler and Lessing's two novels under study brings in new perspectives on the topic. Thus, the thesis follows a different pattern of analysis from what was achieved before.

This thesis is divided into three chapters and a conclusion. Chapter one is to scrutinize ecofeminism comprehensively and chronologically. The chapter reveals the development of the ecofeminist theory within a wide spectrum from its early examples until the era of modernism. This section will also analyze the emergence and development of social ecofeminism and cultural ecofeminism as ecofeminist sub-genres. This chapter will focus on literary principles and the founding scholars and leading theoreticians of the school. Furthermore, the chronological development of ecocriticism, as formulated in the first, second and third waves by Lawrence Buell will be discussed. Notions that have flourished from these movements such as deep ecology, social ecology and mythology are also to be studied thoroughly in order to establish the necessary framework for the analysis of Butler and Lessing's novels.

Chapter two will delve into the subgenre of social ecofeminism. This section will discuss how and to what extent the two writers make use of the natural apocalypse and the characters' relationships with one another. The two novelists associate evil, greed and selfishness with human behavior and juxtapose human-centered thought with ecocentrism. It is worth noting how the authors ridicule the roles of humans on this planet by means of a natural disaster. Butler and