

Silenced Voices in Canadian Fairy Tales: Interrogating Nature, Gender and Ecofeminism

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Abstract

The communities impacted by the onslaught of colonialism project question silence and oppression. The same is visible with the indigenous community in North America. This paper searches the Canadian past through *Canadian Fairy Tales* by Macmillan, who collected the stories while traveling through the landscapes of Canada. The stories metaphorically represent the state's natural geography, a non-Canadian and non-native writer's perspectives of the land, and the past account of those indigenous people whose voices are never heard. Folktales and fairy tales often represent the truth of the land, culture, and traditions. However, it is impossible to feel the land's rawness in this case. Though the original indigenous voices are unheard in this case, the semi-representation is done by Macmillan in the text *Canadian Fairy Tales*. Nevertheless, this paper focuses on the Mother Earth Discourse, a concept of Ecofeminism, to explore nature and its relation with the indigenous people and to search if the native's voice is silenced in the select stories focusing on how women's voices are dominated and the significance of women's representation in the landscape in particular. Herein, Aves-Eve and Fauna-Fem, two essential tools of Mother Earth Discourse, are used to investigate Canada's women and indigenous representation, contrasting rural Indian folktales.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, indigenous oppression, fairy tales, oral tradition, silences

“Modern-day archaeology and anthropology have nearly sealed the door on our imaginations, broadly interpreting the North American past as devoid of anything unusual in the way of great cultures characterized by people of unusual demeanours.”

-Vine Deloria

Introduction

In the oral traditions of Native Americans, the basic folkways and mores are transferred to younger generations through story and song and conveyed ceremonially inappropriate settings. In telling the stories, elders highlight the give-and-take relationship between humans and the rest of the natural world. The stories, legends, and myths express a responsibility to maintain good relations among the different parts of nature, including

plants and animals, because all of it is considered alive and to share in the power given to all of creation. The ongoing relationships that started at the beginning of time, and continue through the telling of cultural stories and songs, are embedded in the places that have given rise to the reports, creating a circular, ongoing world. Folklore is the bedrock of Native American culture; this oral history explains and records vital aspects of their society, such as stories of creation and the norms and mores of the various tribes. Culture is distinctly an element of geography, as where and how people lived shaped their civilizations.

Cyrus Macmillan collected 26 stories in *Canadian Fairy Tales* based on Native American folk tales across Canada without indicating the original tribe of each level. These stories are based on nature creation myths as the readers get to know Canada's natural geography with the book's publication in 1922. By identifying the complicated net of ecological, sociological, economic, and cultural chaos created by the existing dominant systems that suffocate nature and human beings alike, these fairy tales as Mother Earth Discourse recognize the scope of indigenous people's simple stories that offer hope to mend the systems and knit a web of harmony and peace. It is identified as a tool in building a society by establishing a paradigm that links the environment and women's voice to form the Mother Earth Discourse. It is also an instrument of the social construction of reality. (McConnell-Ginet and Eckert 208). The paper contrasting women's and men's approaches to discourse suggests that women may be especially suited to produce significantly new meanings. Because this possibility depends on the development of a shared new outlook, it might be better promoted in the cooperative mode of discourse than in the competitive, where less attention is paid to the other. To investigate this discourse, the paper focuses on the following stories: "The girl who always cried," "The songbird and the healing waters," "Sparrow's search for the rain," "The mermaid of the Magdalenes" and "The tobacco fairy from the Bluehills."

The plant that emanates from the interface branches out into motifs, relationships, concerns, worldviews, consciousness and expressions, and flowers into the Mother Earth Discourse. As an integrated framework, the ecofeminist-linguistic interface provides a space to connect, interconnect and reconnect with the life-affirming narratives of the rural, the indigenous, and the native people. Women who narrate tales incorporate nature into their cultural discourse to provide a new definition of reality. The Mother Earth Discourse brings into line people's beliefs with a holistic approach to life. (Porselvi 32) This paper considers two motifs to explore the Mother Earth Discourse in the selected fairy tales; the tools are Aves-Eve and Fauna-Fem, which enquires about the bird and animal images focusing on the women and indigenous people's representation in particular.

Aves-Eve motif

The images that draw a link between women and birds are called the *Aves-Eve* kind, which forms the fifth kind of motif of the Mother Earth Discourse. (Porselvi 145) The significant features of *Aves-Eve* images in fairy tales are as follows: women communicate with birds in both the literal and metaphorical sense; they consider the birds as their relation, for example, brother, sister, or mother; the birds become surrogate parents to women and

men in distress; women nurture the birds and the birds, in turn, nurture the human beings; birds signify power and independence and offer hope to women who are enslaved by the patriarchal systems. It is easy for the readers to identify the feathered creatures and women characters in the *Canadian Fairy Tales* in the selected stories "The songbird and the healing waters," "The girl who always cried," and "Sparrow's search for the rain."

"The songbird and the healing waters" describes the story of a wife who is about to die of a non-curable plague that brings excellent sorrow in Canadian villages. Her husband comes to the rescue when he is advised by an ugly-looking older woman that he should search and follow the sweet song of a bird who dwells close to the healing waters in the far East. He follows the singing bird and finds healing water to save his wife. In this way, the Mineral Springs, the places of Healing Waters, came upon the earth, bearing health and happiness wherever they rise and always accompanied by the songs of birds." (Macmillan 171). In this story, the readers can quickly identify the sick wife with the singing bird asking for the husband's help to save her life. "In Aves-Eve, the birds are found near the woman character. Women understand the language of birds. Some stories portray the bird as a surrogate mother, while others present the bird as a child to a childless woman. Birds serve as a link between women and the natural world" (Porselvi 145-146). The Aves-Eve image can be identified in the story when the singing bird connects the wife and the natural world.

In "The girl who always cried," the readers see a different Aves-Eve motif. Then the story shifts to the always-weeping girl whose neighbours are disturbed by her always-crying nature. Disturbed by her always crying nature, one of her parents, a great magician, wishes to give her away to the Owl-man. Eventually, the Owl-man comes to abduct her, and she is prisoner in the woods, where she is forced to be the Owl-man's wife. "Now I have a wife at last. I shall be alone no more, and the people will not now think I am so queer. So he took her to his underground house by the stream. That night the people noticed that the girl's cries were no longer heard" (Macmillan 84). One day she manages to run away from the woods but is followed by the Owl-man, who partially destroys her house. The girl's magician guardian takes vengeance by converting the Owl-man to a complete owl who will cry for his wife for the rest of his life and his daughter into a Fish Hawk who will never have enough fish to satisfy hunger. "Now, I will take vengeance.

He said to the girl, "You have done me much harm too, and you have brought all this trouble upon me. Henceforth you will be not a girl but a Fish-Hawk, and you will always cry and fret and scream as you have done before, and you will never be satisfied." (Macmillan 88). The story projects the Aves-Eve motif and violence with the girl's conversion to a Fish Hawk for no reason. Apart from being nagging in nature, the story cannot justify the girl's crime for such punishment.

The story is similar to the Nagaland folktale "The girl who understands birds." The story narrates a "farmer who often sends his daughter for water, and the girl would take her time wandering through the jungle. There she made friends with the birds and soon learned their language. The birds often talked about how wicked humans were and how they

mistreated the animals of the jungle. Nevertheless, the birds mostly talked about the weather. The girl was very pleased that she understood the birds well because the birds seemed to be experts at predicting the weather.” (Adhikary 37). In this folktale, a little girl appreciates the language of the birds.

However, quite ironically, the father fails to understand his daughter. “But father said the girl, “it is true. I heard the birds say so, and the birds are my friends. They never lie, either.” The girl’s father became angry with her. “Understand the birds, indeed! You lazy girl,” he cried, “all you want to do is hang out in the jungle all day so you can shirk the farm work” (Adhockery 37). The father, representing the patriarchal society, ignored his daughter’s words. The tale focuses on the twin themes of speech and silence. The story highlights the need for woman’s expression. On many occasions, women are silenced for being irrational when in reality; they are intuitive and communicate deeper level of eco-sensitivity. A woman’s relationship with the natural environment is considered absurd. The father uses violence against the birds and toward his daughter. The mother is also silenced. The father kills the birds and forces the daughter to eat the soup. “Eat the soup, or we will beat you severely, said the little girl’s father. Her eyes became dull and clouded. Soon, the little girl could not understand the birds anymore; she became dull.” (Adhikary 40). The girl’s insanity and terrible condition symbolize a threat to women and the environment. As identified in these tales, Aves-Eve motifs reinforce birds’ inherent worth and relationship with women. However, the father figure in both stories represents the rationalist male-dominated society that punishes the child for being irrational. “The communication between the birds and the eco-sensitive human beings portrayed in folktales indicates the lacunae in the minds of people in the civilized society.”(Porselvi 149). The Canadian story showcases the patriarchal violence in the discourse of nature, where the girl is trapped in the woods and later in the body of a Fish Hawk, similar to the Nagaland folktale where the girl is being punished for spending time in the woods and communicating with the birds.

The story “Sparrow’s search for the rain” describes a beautiful daughter of a wealthy, wise father, whom many suitors desire. The suitors cannot satisfy her taste in choices, and after getting rejected, they plan to attack the maiden and ask the character Whirlwind to hit her down. “So they vowed that they would somehow break her proud spirit and bring her sorrow because of her ideas and her decision to stay single all her life. One of the great men of the village was Whirlwind. The young men looked at her plight, and they all laughed loudly, and the girl was very ashamed.” (Macmillan 189). The maiden seeks help from her father, who made Whirlwind and his friend Rain banish from the state. Eventually, the state faces a situation of no wind and no rain. They blamed the maiden and revoked the banishment, and the Sparrow came to the aid. He searches and brings back Whirlwind and Rain to the land in return for the assurance that they will never be hunted down for recreation or food. “And the Chief said, “Because of your success, you will never be hunted for a game or killed for food... Moreover, to this day, the Sparrow-people know when Rain is coming, and to signal his approach, they gather together and Twitter and hop along and

make a great hub-bub, just as they did when their ancestor found him using his down-feather in the olden days. (Macmillan 194).

In this story of *Canadian Fairy Tales*, the readers see the opposite image of the Aves-Eve concept. Herein, the Sparrow acts opposite the women's character and trades his life's assurance for the maiden's self-respect by bringing back her molesters to the land. The Sparrow is also important in the Indian Tamil folktale "Where do the Sparrow live ."In this folk tale, a sparrow couple builds a nest among the corps on a farm, and "when the sparrows flew away to fetch food, the children who took care of the cattle took the little ones to play with. The sparrows returned to the nest. The young ones were missing. The mother sparrow started weeping. The father sparrow comforted the mother sparrow and said, Next time, we will go to the bamboo forest, and you can lay the eggs there. There we will be safe. The children steal the young ones. Second, the sparrows build their nest in the bamboo trees. The bamboo trees catch fire and burn the nest. When the sparrows flew away to fetch food, the wind blew heavily. The bamboo trees rubbed one another and caught fire. Finally, the sparrows request the Sea King to protect their little ones. The king of the sea was surprised to see the tiny sparrows taking refuge in him.

Nevertheless, he also decided to play a trick with them. The king hid the little ones when the sparrows flew away to fetch food." (qt in Porselvi 153). Both stories project the situation of "sparrows in jeopardy in the world of environmental chaos as in these stories. Sparrows do not find a safe and secure environment to live in." (Porselvi 152). Furthermore, both stories depict the position of Sparrow as insecure as a woman in society; the position is highlighted in "Sparrow's search for the rain," where the daughter of an influential person is not secure enough free to choose her suitor and becomes the target of a male chauvinistic society who prefers her molesters over her. Though the image of the Sparrow is against the maiden's situation, its insecurity to be hunted down anytime by anybody places the maiden and the Sparrow on the same bench proving the Aves-Eve motif. Aves-Eve images reinforce the eco-sensitivity of women towards other living organisms on this planet. In these stories, Aves-Eve's images identify the strength women and birds derive from wild nature. Undeniably, these oral tales provide an account of the woman-bird communication in the oral discourse in India and Canada. The closeness of women with nature is identified in *The Girl Who Understood Birds*, "The girl who always cried," "The songbird and the healing waters," and "Sparrow's search for the rain."

Fauna-Fem motif

The Mother Earth Discourse is a way of identifying woman-environment issues that prevail in contemporary society. Fauna-Fem symbols highlight the relationship between women and animals with the following features: women share a unique bond with animals; they protect the animals in distress, and they are, in turn, saved by the animals; they symbolize the inherent power of nature that is found in both animals and human beings; the women relate to the animals by understanding their consciousness; the animals represent the benign qualities of Mother Nature in fairy tales. Fauna-Fumitories can be read as parables,

fables, or allegories, with animal characters representing the worldviews and consciousness of the native storytellers. In the Mother Earth Discourse, the animals are subjects and not objects. According to Donovan, such a preconception will restore the text's absent referent as a "thou" (Gaard and Murphy 74). Fauna-Femsymbols reiterate the 'I-Thou' relationship between a woman and animals in her environment. However, a cruel version of the Fauna-Fem motif is visible in the story "The mermaid of the Magdalenes."

The story starts with a description of the barrenness of the native land, Canada, and shifts to describing the commodification of nature which is fish (sardines). Eventually, as the fish grows lower in number due to the increase in the sale of canned fish, the fish clan plans to revolt and break a shipping container full of canned fish. The canned fish reach the seashore and maiden wishes to eat canned fish but cannot open the sealed can and seeks help. A Lobster hears her and drags her to the ocean as a prisoner of a Merman for her desire to eat fish. There the merman slowly and painfully transforms her into a mermaid. "He determined to punish her, and he resolved at once upon a crafty trick. He came out of his hiding place and, waving his claw politely, he said, "Fair lady, I can open the box for you; give it to me and let me try." One thing is certain—she never came back to land." (Macmillan 128). The story reveals the domination in the underwater world that results in revolting against commodification but cannot do much harm to the materialistic world and instead punishes the maiden for her desire to consume commoditised nature. An opposite picture is painted in the Gujarati folktale "The Porcupine Daughter." Herein, a little girl transforms into a porcupine to teach her greedy father a lesson. The daughter expresses anguish, "Dear father, you cheated our mother, the earth, and she cursed me and turned me into a porcupine" (Adhikary 91). The little girl considers the earth as her mother and accepts the chastisement. The story also suggests the way farmers treat porcupines in Gujarat. "The Kunabi began to weep. "Oh, poor child, my greed brought you to this pass. Henceforth let no Kunabi injure or kill you or any of your kind. Let all porcupines be welcome to anything they like in our fields." That is why, in Gujarat, porcupines are never hunted or killed, and they are allowed to eat whatever they like from the farmers' fields; and the porcupines cry sounds like the weeping of a human child." (Adhikary 92). According to Edward B Tylor, an English anthropologist, primitive people attributed to the elements, animals, plants, rocks, personalities, and souls, which became the crust of folklore. He believed in animism, which recognizes the presence of a spiritual element or the soul in all living creatures. Folktales with animal characters have been read as allegories since ancient times. The little girl's transformation into a porcupine and the revolt of the fish clan confirm the indigenous belief in the consciousness of nonhuman living beings on this earth.

Nevertheless, herein, *Canadian Fairy Tales* show a less sensitive woman, ready to compromise nature, yet both "The Porcupine Daughter" and "The mermaid of the Magdalenes" punish the female characters only for the harm to nature. In contrast, the male characters are responsible for canned fish and the killing of porcupines. Hence, both stories state women's responsibility as a protector of nature. In failed duties, they are punished for

no reason, just like the canned fish and porcupines, highlighting the Fauna-fem motif between females and animals.

Silenced nature behind commodification

Prior to colonization, the Native people led an Edenic life, with nature being both the governing principle as well as the demigod. The rich oral tradition comprised stories, myths, rituals, and legends around the discourse of existence and survival. Stories are a rich reservoir of any oral culture's cultural tradition, representation, and identity. Environment plays a pivotal place in the North American literary landscape. As Paula Gunn Allen has written explicitly, "We are land-is the fundamental idea embedded in Native American life and culture" (Porter, 2012, p. 65). It constitutes their notion of the self. The Mother Earth Discourse does not talk about the relationship of nature with the women only but also with the indigenous people who are intricately connected with nature. *Canadian Fairy Tales* not only record the representations of women's voices in the stories but also illuminates the representation of silenced voices of indigenous people. All of the book's stories are written, delving deep into the natural geography of Canada and the native people; hence, representation is unavoidable.

The story "The tobacco fairy from the blue hills" gives glimpses of colonial domination when the author describes the family "A man and his wife and two little children were living long ago on the shores of a lake surrounded by large trees, deep in the Canadian forest. As the children grew up, they became more beautiful and gentle each day until the old women of the tribe said, "They are too good and lovely for this world; their home is surely elsewhere in the West." (Macmillan 122). Everyone considers him learned, and he spent his life helping the tribe. The concept of colonial hegemony is visible as the author writes, "he worked hard and did all the good he could for the weakest and the poorer people of the tribe." (Macmillan 123). When he grows old and misses his younger days, it is the native people's turn to reward him. He meets the fairy of the indigenous land who served him with a magical substance. "I am one of the Little People from the distant blue hills," said the tiny boy. "I have been sent to you with a precious gift," answered the little man... You have done many noble deeds, and you have always gone about bringing good to others. Moreover, I have been sent to you with a gift to help you pass the time more pleasantly" (Macmillan 125). The fairy of the Blue Hills introduces him to the Tobacco plantation and smoking that will keep him more active and busier. The fairy also asks him to teach tobacco to the native people for their good. The fairy gave him a large pipe and said, "Dry these leaves, place them in this pipe, and smoke them. You will have great contentment, and when you have nothing to do, it will help you to pass the time away, and when no one is with you, it will be a companion. However, the little man said, "Teach other old men how to use it so that they may possess it and enjoy it too." In this way, tobacco was brought to the Indians in the old days" (Macmillan 127). Besides tobaccoplantations, commodification is also visible in the fish business in the story "The mermaid of the Magdalene's." "Far off the north-east coast of Canada is a group of rugged islands called the Magdalenes... However, although the islands are barren of grass, flowers, and trees, the waters around and between them are rich

in fish. Tobacco plantation and trading with fish are part of colonial discourse and also an introduction to the commoditization of nature; hence the story points the westernization by introducing tobacco subsiding natural herbs, ailment of the native place and canned fish replacing the natural habitats of the native people. The pictures in these stories aptly merge with Reshma Ranjith's concept of Ecofeminism and capitalism as she says, "Ecofeminism can be seen as a feminist approach to nature or ecology, which unmasks and tries to dismantle the abstract framework of the supremacy, oppression, commodification, etc. The scaffold of hierarchy and despotism, colonization of nature and marginalized humans, as well as the commodification of women and nature, is being exposed and denuded by Ecofeminism." (18).

Conclusion

To conclude, in the selected stories, *The Mother Earth Discourse* challenges the shallow ecological understanding of the materialist community. Also, it promotes a deep ecological understanding of the land and human consciousness that work together for the planet's well-being. *Canadian Fairy Tales* are written while travelling, and stories are deeply connected with nature portraying geographical descriptions of Canada. In this portrayal, the readers are introduced to the past of Canada and the natives who live deep in the heart of mother earth, whose reminiscence is shimmering in the fairytales. The stories metaphorically describe to the readers what Canada had and the voices silenced with time. Porcelli, in her work *Nature Culture and Gender*, mentions the phrase "seeds of silence" while explaining the Mother Earth Discourse that aptly fits in the decoding of *Canadian Fairy Tales*. However, Porselvi's explanation of the concept describes the treatment of women's voices only; in contrast to the explanation of Porselvi in the selected stories of *Canadian Fairy Tales*, the native people's voices, who live in the deep core of nature unaware of westernization, are silenced.

The Native Literary Renaissance in post-1960 not only engendered group consciousness. Moreover, solidarity also paved the way for writing themselves into existence. These writers explore how Native people construct the environment and landscape that contribute to the story and often become a character in the story. The landscape plays a vital role in their work. Many environmental issues affect natives, such as mining, ranching, development, loss of native plants and animals, and water diversion to other inhabited areas. Their writing explores the relationship between land injustice and native people. In doing so, indigenous writers rewrite their oral tradition by integrating the stories of their elders, regeneration stories, myths, and trickster figures as part of critiquing the appropriation of the same by the dominant discourses. In the present scenario, *Canadian Fairy Tales* offers a broader perspective of relating the discourse on the silences of the indigenous communities as part of a larger construct of marginalization perpetrated on them in the making of the country's geographical construct and historical representation.

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