

## AN ECOFEMINIST STUDY OF JHON KEATS'S *ISABELLA*

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### Abstract

My aim through this article is to propagate that Keats is an important figure in nature writing. Keats's dialectical love between natural world and intelligence results in different understandings among critics. Some put emphasis on his love toward nature and some on the opposition between nature and his thoughts. Keats's poetry nature is always considered to be female. The poet has dealt with the issue of women and nature in his poem *Isabella or the Pot of Basil* (1818). The Beautiful story of *Isabella* he took from Boccaccio, an Italian writer of the fourteenth century. from this ecofeminist study of some of Keats's poems is to say that it reveals that he highlights a female speaker's appointment with nature. He focuses on the small, the local, and the nearby and not the typical kinds of nature issues that men often emphasize. This is clear as he takes on the character of an animal or even a plant in some of his poems. This interconnection with nature is manifested through many ways in Keats's poems and he treats every part in nature as if it is a mutual creature that has a soul.

**Key words:** *Isabella*, Ecofeminist study, Ecology, Nature.

Ecofeminism is a perception that efforts to study the exploitation on of nature as a consequence to the exploitation of women. The influence that is manipulated over nature causes damage that is parallel to that resulting from oppression of women. Man belongs to the earth in much the same ways as plant life do. Man is also a part of the ecosystem of the earth and dependent upon it for his survival. Ecology is the lessons of the interrelationships of living things to one another and their nearby atmosphere. The most significant difficulty that man faces today is the squalor of land and surroundings and its penalty on human survival. The word ecology has Greek extraction. In simple words *Oikos* means *home*, which by conservatory mean the whole occupied earth. *Logos* means *reason* or *study*. The tree was considered blessed from very early times. According to ecofeminists, this symbolic connection between natural world and mother seems to highlight and admire the motherly individuality of natural environment, laying stress on the generous resources of the earth which seem never to be fatigued. A famous ecofeminist Karen J. Warren has rightly said:

These hierarchically organized value dualisms include reason/emotion, mind/body, culture/nature, human/nature, and man/woman dichotomies . .

. whatever is (historically) associated with emotion, body, nature, and women is regarded as inferior to that which is (historically) associated with reason, mind, culture, human (i.e., male), and men. (*Ecological Feminist Philosophy* xii1996)

Ecology has been a very diacynotive characteristic of various an enthusiast literature also. Ecofeminism foregoes a back-to-nature come close to and instead incites a wake-up call to humankind. As one of the chief poets in British Romantic period, Keats is an important figure in nature writing. Keats's dialectical love between natural world and intelligence results in different understandings among critics. Some put emphasis on his love toward nature and some on the opposition between nature and his thoughts. Keats says:

The poetry of earth is never dead:  
When all the birds are faint with the hot sun,  
And hide in cooling trees, a voice will run  
From hedge to hedge about the new-mown mead.  
(<http://poetry.poetryx.com/poems/336>)

At a very accurate level, this poem invites the reader to contact nature, to be close to the natural world with mind and sanity instead of doing technical studies in books. This paper attempts to take an in-depth study of Keats's *Isabella* from an ecofeminist perspective. The poet has dealt with the issue of women and nature in his poems.

*Isabella or the Pot of Basil* (1818) is a narrative poem by John Keats adapted from a story in Boccaccio's *Decameron* (IV.5). The Beautiful story of *Isabella* he took from Boccaccio, an Italian writer of the fourteenth century.

Keats was concerned to it not so much by the act as by the obsession involved, but very much more dwelling on the psychological feature. The name "basil" comes from "basileus", the Greek word for king. As in India Tulasi is seen as a symbol of the goddess Lakshmi and worshipped. Basil is a symbol for love in Italy. It is said that if a man wishes to marry a woman, he calls higher her with basil in his hair. Keats's women character *Isabella* is lover of environment. Ecofeminism stands for the union of the original ecology movement or the 'deep ecology' and feminism. In this poem Keats describes the miserable condition of women through nature. As Keats starts the poem Fair Isabel, poor simple Isabel!

Fair Isabel, poor simple Isabel!  
Lorenzo, a young palmer in Love's eye!  
They could not in the self-same mansion dwell  
Without some stir of heart, some malady;  
They could not sit at meals but feel how well  
It soothed each to be the other by;  
They could not, sure, beneath the same roof sleep  
But to each other dream, and nightly weep.  
(*Isabella*, Stanza 1, 1-2)

In the portrayal of *Isabella*, her first loving passion of love, her pain of anxiety giving way to dull despair, her sudden wakening to a short period of frantic action, described in stanzas of incomparable dramatic force. She probes the psychological recesses of an individual quest of life itself, trying, thus to draw the meaning and purpose behind the thinking pattern of an individual. We can see in these lines:

Forgot the stars, the moon, the sun,  
And she forgot the blue above the trees,

And she forgot the dells where waters run,  
 And she forgot the chilly autumn breeze;  
 She had no knowledge when the day was done,  
 And the new morn she saw not — (Isabella, Stanza LIII. PP.443-449)

The story of *Isabella* is a love based tragic story. Not fairly consistently happy are the images of the cruel brothers, and of Lorenzo as the young lover of Isabella. He loves her truly but Isabella's brothers do not like it. There is an inclination to exaggerate both their cruelty and his gentleness. In this poem Keats describes *Isabella* loves for a person who is in the service of her three merchant brothers. The brothers do not like that their sister should make such a low match. The youth lover is murdered and his head is buried in a pot of Basil and the girl *Isabella* waters the pot with her tears. Keats's depiction of masculinity is one that charms synonymously with cruelty and oppression. In the following lines he says:

And at the last, these men of cruel clay  
 Cut Mercy with a sharp knife to the bone,  
 For they resolved in some forest dim  
 To kill Lorenzo, and there bury him.  
 (Isabella, Stanza XX11pp. 173-176)

The following events, that is, the murder of Lorenzo and his covert burial in a forest, further disclose the cruel degree of male control and indifference towards the feelings and emotions of the female. Isabella's helplessness to her destiny embodies the helplessness of femininity, completely at the mercy and authority of the male. Isabella was told that Lorenzo had had to make a long journey abroad.

They told their sister how, with sudden speed,  
 Lorenzo had ta'en ship for foreign lands,  
 Because of some great urgency and need  
 In their affairs, requiring trusty hands. (Isabella, Stanza XX1Z)

A woman is to be quietened with hollowness and deceitfulness, and kept away from reality. By means of such falsehood she would be forced to bend over before the will of the male and patriarchal order. Keats describes the reality that Isabella's lover was murdered by her own brothers:

There was Lorenzo slain and buried in,  
 There in that forest did his great love cease;  
 Ah! When a soul doth thus its freedom win,  
 It aches in loneliness –is ill at peace  
 As the break-covert blood-hounds of such sin:  
 They dipped their swords in the water, and did tease their horses  
 homeward, with convulsed spur,  
 Each richer by his being a murderer. (Isabella, Stanza- XXVIII.)

So my attempt through this paper is to show the terrible and pathetic condition of women in patriarchal society through Keats *Isabella*. Woman in traditional patriarchal society is deemed inferior to man. While we emphasize the caring characteristics of women, their individuality as independent human beings and independent subjects is forgotten.

According to Greta Gaard :

Ecofeminism's basic premise is that the ideology, which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality and physical abilities, is the same ideology which sanctions the

oppression of nature. Ecofeminist theorists consider the interconnections between sexism, the domination of nature, racism, specialism and other social inequalities. (9 Aug. 2012)

*Isabella's* condition was so miserable when so many months pass, and her lover does not return. Isabella doubts and mourns the departure of her lover. Isabella's sorrow once again points at the helplessness of the female in the absence of her love. The woman is not the free 'valued other' but exhausted us by the male, so in the nonappearance of that love from the world, she completely loses her own individuality, and wishes to die.

The dreams reveal the truth to Isabella. One day, she falls asleep, tired, and Lorenzo's bloody ghost appears before Isabella. He tells her that he has been murdered by her brothers and point to the place of his burial, which he describes by its trees and plants. The ghost, still in love, asks her in suffering to shed her tears on the earth to console him in his grave.

Saying moreover, "Isabel, my sweet!  
 Red whortle-berries droop above my head,  
 And a large flint-stone weighs upon my feet;  
 Around me beeches and high chestnuts shed  
 Their Leaves and prickly nuts; a sheep-fold bleat  
 Comes from beyond the river to my bed:  
 Go shed one tear upon my heather-bloom,  
 And it shall comfort me within the tomb. (Isabella, Stanza XXXVIII.)

So there Isabella goes with an old nurse. They find out the body of Lorenzo because it was buried in clay soil, and decide to cut off the head. Upon returning home, Isabella wrapped it in a silk scarf, perfumed with Arabian flowers, and place it in a garden pot, inside which soil is added and seeds of basil of Salerno are sown. She finds comfort in seeing the plants grow from the flesh of his beloved. She cares overanxiously for the basil and waters them with her tears. The basil grows beautiful, fragrant, much better than Florence's. In Keats's poetry nature is always considered to be female. The brethren, see that every day she is in most horrible circumstances, and assuming her ill, in her custody and devotion of the basil plants -that flowered as if by magic, and made her apart from the world. Keats describes beautifully:

And, furthermore, her brethren wonder'd much  
 Why she sat drooping by the Basil green,  
 And why it flourish'd, as by magic touch;  
 Greatly they wonder'd what the thing might mean:  
 They could not surely give belief, that such;  
 A very nothing would have power to wearn  
 Her from her own fair youth, and pleasures gay,  
 And even remembrance of her love's delay. (Isabella, Stanza  
 LVIII.)

Considering Isabella's despair to get well the ship, they seek the roots below to find out the cause for such vigil. So they see inside Lorenzo's head, and afraid to be discovered, they flee to Naples. Isabella dies shortly after in pain. The gloom in which she is kept in by her brothers, represent the unawareness and lack of femininity under patriarchal control. As Keats says:

And she had died in drowsy ignorance,  
 But for a thing more deadly dark than all.  
 (Isabella, Stanza XXX1v, 265-66)

It is true that Keats's nature poetry can assist readers get pleasure from nature and I have been attracted by his beautiful description of the natural scenes. And it is also true that Keats always worships nature as a faith and praises every beautiful form in it. Keats's positive formulation of the power of poetic adulation, in so far as it can be seen in his poems. Keats raises more questions through the poem than it answers. Bate remarks:

The 'Romantic ecology' reverences the green earth because it recognizes that neither physically nor psychologically can we live without green things: it proclaims that there is "one life" within us and abroad, that the earth is a single vast ecosystem which we destabilize at our peril (*Romantic Ecology*.40)

As an important element, "Mother Nature" or "Mother Earth" is a common expression in Romantic poetry. In this way we limit the role nature plays to the reproducing and treatment role the mother plays. This relationship between nature and motherhood lastly results in human utilization and destruction of the natural environment. Hence the ecofeminist supporter is a combination of women's movement with the ecological movement since women and nature have undergone a similar experience—being dominated by men.

He uses the female pronoun "she" to depict nature and in "Expostulation and Reply" he uses "Mother Earth" to mean the natural environment. Keats also complains against brutal treatment of natural creatures. In the first half of the poem, with feminine terms Keats shows the impolite masculine domination of the natural scene.

Later Keats seems to apologize for his impoliteness and in the last part of the poem he described the reality. To Keats the natural world has the immortality that man lacks but forever quests and only through the purgation of the natural scene can man possibly get close to that immortality, which comforts him and soothes his sorrow.

Through an ecofeminist lens, the research uncovers Keats's deep and steady communion with nature. It also finds out that most of his poems are infused with themes and imagery from nature which are used for his philosophical, spiritual, and even religious meditation:

The term "ecofeminism" combines ecology with a feminist concern for the presentation of women and nature in literary texts. An Ecofeminist critic emphasizes the connection between women and nature. They have to search for and analyze the previously mentioned connection. They also may investigate the oppression of women and the overexploitation of Nature a premise which derived from patriarchy. (2008)

The ecology of his poems presents his own emotions and ideas as fully essential to nature. Keats continues to present other images of this link between the self and the natural world. These images are interwoven. He also raises religious, theoretical, and religious questions which are answered through nature. To conclude from this ecofeminist study of some of Keats's poems is to say that it reveals that he highlights a female speaker's appointment with nature. He focuses on the small, the local, and the nearby and not the typical kinds of nature issues that men often emphasize. This is clear as he takes on the character of an animal or even a plant in some of his poems. This interconnection with nature is manifested through many ways in Keats's poems and he treats every part in nature as if it is a mutual creature that has a soul. He understands their language. He listens, hears, and speaks to animals, plants, rains, stones, grass...etc.

All dual relationships are closely connected to environment. Aldo Leopold advocates:

We should develop the ethic that “has its origin in the tendency of interdependent individuals or groups to evolve modes of co-operation. The ecologist calls these Symbioses (202).

These connections reveal environmental rules and conflicts in environmental sense. Keats is not only an aesthete, but also an eco-poet, for his ecological feelings derivation extremely in his heart, when he describes of natural world and enjoys the unadulterated natural loveliness. Keats’s works are most harmonious, most beautiful chorus, ceaseless living forms performing the wonders of nature. Keats has skillfully intertwined his love for nature with his concern for society.

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