

**AN ECOFEMINIST STUDY OF SOME  
SELECTED POEMS BY MARY OLIVER**

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**Abstract:** This research proposes a modern approach in studying the poetry of Mary Oliver using schemes that intertwine ecocriticism with feminist criticism . It investigates the relationship between women and the natural world and their reciprocal influence.

Through an ecofeminist lens, the research uncovers Oliver`s deep and constant communion with nature. It also finds out that most of her poems are infused with themes and imagery from nature which are used for her philosophical, spiritual, and even religious meditation. Nature is proved, according to Oliver, as the only positive medium for personal heading .

دراسة اثنا- بيئية في قصائد مختارة للشاعرة ماري أوليفر

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**خلاصة:** تقدم الدراسة اتجاها نقديا حديثا لدراسة قصائد الشاعرة ماري أوليفر من خلال الدمج بين اتجاهين أو مقتربين نقديين هما النقد النسوي والنقد البيئي. تستقصي الدراسة العلاقة بين المرأة والعالم الطبيعي والعلاقة المتبادلة فيما بينهما في أشعار الشاعرة قيد الدراسة. وتكشف عن ارتباط أوليفر الوثيق والدائم بالطبيعة كما يظهر ذلك بوضوح فيما توظف الشاعرة من صور وأفكار تستقيها من عالم الطبيعة لتستخدمها في تأملها الفلسفي و الروحي والديني. تحاول الدراسة أن تثبت أن الطبيعة تشكل بالنسبة للشاعرة الوسط الايجابي الوحيد الذي تجد فيه النفس البشرية راحتها وشفاءها واستقرارها.

The term " ecofeminism " combines ecology with a feminist concern for the presentation of women and nature in literary texts. Ecofeminist critics 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 .<sup>1</sup>

Noël Sturgeon in his book *Ecofeminist Nature* defines Ecofeminism as "a movement that makes connections between environmentalisms and feminisms"<sup>2</sup>

It is not only this but more as Greta Gaard suggests , "more than a theory about feminism and environmentalism, or women and nature....,[it] approaches the problems of environmental degradation and social injustice from the that how we treat nature and how we treat each other are inseparably linked ."<sup>3</sup>

*The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996), by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm , is a collection of selected essays on the ecological approach to literary studies. It signals the emergence of this new type of literary criticism. Glotfelty writes, "ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment." <sup>4</sup>

Michael J. McDowel declares the concerns of any ecological literary criticism .He says that a critic can search for images and metaphors and their implications in a literary text as they are related to nature. A second concern is about the modification of genres and modes "such as pastoralism to incorporate...an understanding of the complex relationships within nature." The third concern is about the method the writers may use .<sup>5</sup>

McDowel states that a useful method of application is the study of nature and character in interaction. Such an analysis may begin by

investigating the roles that the narrator or the point-of-view character plays in the landscape or in nature.<sup>6</sup>

This research investigates ecofeminist aspects in the poetry of Mary Oliver. She was born in 1935 in Ohio. She currently lives in Province Town. She wrote almost a dozen books of poetry and prose. She has published many collections of poems. She has received many awards and honors. She has gotten London Literary Award for Poetry (1998 ), the National Book Award for Poetry (1992) for her collection *New & Selected Poems*, the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry (1984) for her collection *American Primitive*, a Guggen Leim Foundation Fellowship (1980), and the Shelley Memorial Award (1969-1970) of the Poetry Society of America. Her poems are filled with imagery from nature. Her poetry is considered as a guide to the natural world. "She finds the self only strengthened through an immersion with nature."<sup>7</sup>

It is clear that "The ecology of her poems presents her own emotions and ideas as fully integral to nature."<sup>8</sup>

Mary Oliver emphasizes the connection between nature and herself (as a woman). She sometimes loses her ego boundaries. There is also an experience of interaction and participation in many of her poems . She believes that this interconnectedness comes from a strong belief that everything in nature has a soul and is alive. She believes that nature is an equal partner of humans. She writes :

I believe in the soul – in mine ,and yours and the blue jays, and the pilot whales. I believe each goldfish flying away over the coarse ragweed has a soul , and the ragweed too, plant by plant, and the grains of earth as well. Not romantically do I believe this, nor poetically,

nor emotionally, nor metaphorically ...but steadily,  
lumpishly , absolutely .<sup>9</sup>

A close investigation of Oliver`s Poetry is sure to reveal this. In "Some Questions You Might Ask ," she asks questions about the soul and its nature " Is the soul solid, like iron?" <sup>10</sup> and " Who has it, and who doesn`t?" (1.4) She urges everyone to think seriously of the fact that there is no difference between a human soul or any other creature, plant , or inanimate thing that lives on earth, "Why should I have it, and not the anteater?" (1.14) She assures that all have souls whether camels, trees, blue iris, stones, roses...etc. "Sleeping in the Forest" presents the same idea. The earth is a female:

I thought the earth  
Remembered me , she  
Took me back so tenderly , arranging  
Her dark skirts , her pockets  
Full of lichens and seeds .

( ll.1-5 )

Oliver feminizes nature as a caring mother. The earth mother image brings the reader into the stereotypical world where the mother nurses the babe with flowing nutrition , sustains her dependents with gusts of energy , soothes her "beloved" with her body, and infuses her passion in growing beings. Interconnectedness between Oliver – the female poet – and nature is so strong to a degree that it is revealed in explaining two aspects: The first one is that she realizes her relationship with nature as part of nature. She understands its language and whispers. She personifies everything in nature. In "Aunt Leaf," she speaks to the leaves:

Dear aunt, I`d call into the leaves

And she'd rise up , like an old log in pool ,  
And whisper in a language only the two  
Of us know  
The word that meant follow,  
(11.5-8 )

Oliver turns to be a leaf among the leaves, a friend. They –she and the leaves–will fly like birds into the trees freely and cheerfully leaving "the duty town." (1.11) Nature, for Oliver, is like a wonderland. She changes to be a fox, a snake, a fish or an "old woman made out of leaves." (1.31) She hears even the whispers of water. In "At Blackwater Pond," she says about the "waters" from which she drunk, "I hear them/Deep inside me" (11.6-7). The second aspect which manifests Oliver`s constant communion with nature is shown in some of her poems when she takes on the persona of anything in nature whether an animal or a plant. "Her speakers do not experience difficulty in blending with nature...which emulates Oliver`s own ability to easily commune with nature." <sup>11</sup>

She declares clearly this idea in "We Belong to the Moon" as she says "The most thought among us dreams/Of hurrying down...into the body of another."( 11.49- 50 )

*American Primitive* is her collection of poems which

offer many bodies for us to inhabit , we can become by turns , bear , fish , whale , swamp , and pan . We can run with the fox, fly with the owl , dig with the mole , and finally losing all outward form , dissolve into the totality of nature.<sup>12</sup>

She is the bear in "The Hong Tree" that tries to get honey

And so at last I climbed

The honey tree, ate  
The bodies of bees that could not  
Get out of my way,... ( 11.1-7 )

**This oneness is also evident in "The Fish"**

... Now the sea  
is in me: I am the fish , the fish  
glitters in me; we are  
risen, tangled together , certain to fall  
back to the sea. ( 11. 13- 17 )

**She travels with the leaves which would change her into a fox, a snake,  
or a fish.**

**Oliver continues to offer other images of this connection between the  
self and the natural world. These images are interweaved.**

Have you ever tried to enter the long  
black branches of other lives  
Fried to imagine what the crisp fringes,  
full of honey hanging  
From the branches of the young locust trees , in  
early summer feel like ? ( 11.1-3 )

**So, "In poem after poem, Oliver`s purpose is to call us into the  
presence of the sacred in the raw other of nature in which she is not  
afraid to lose herself. " <sup>13</sup>**

**All these poems, which are only examples, show Oliver`s desire to be  
another and to immerse in and become a part of the natural world.**

**Vicki Graham asserts that**

The speakers in Oliver`s poems not only  
exhibit a "powerful compulsion...to become  
and behave like something else" ; they also act

out the process of becoming something else. <sup>14</sup>

For Oliver and the speakers in her poems, this unbreakable relation and connection is her own way to salvation , redemption , and a way to God . It is her means to understand the world and to cope with it. She also raises spiritual , philosophical , and religious questions which are answered through nature. Her poetry is "articulating a sophisticated mystical spirituality through her embrace of the natural world."<sup>15</sup>

In her poem "Work," Oliver identifies herself as a "woman sixty years old and of no special courage/who is engaged in a little conversation with God"(11.1-2) through her commitment to "stare at the world." (1.6) The renewal is a current theme in Oliver`s nature poetry. It is through nature that she turns to be something better. She "rose and fell , as if in water" (1.15) till she vanishes "into something better."(1.18) This is a process similar to the religious idea of baptism. The river`s "other side / is salvation" (11.24-25) In "Flare," nature is the place where everyone gets comfort and release from pain and grief. There, grief will be absorbed and "be green also /like the diligent leaves."(11.9-10) She also finds comfort in "Such Singing in the Wild Branches"

Are there trees near you,  
And does your own soul need comforting ?  
Quick, then – open the door and fly on your  
Heavy feet ;... ( 11.38-40 )

Oliver believes that leaving nature and being away from its lap causes pain. In "The Moth," she describes herself running in a pastoral scene filled with energy and unable to stop since if she does

"the world / can't be saved / the pain was unbearable." (11.18-22)  
Meditation and pensiveness are two of Oliver's sources to find solace and consolation and to know the world and live in it. "Daisies" suggests a way to achieve this which is being part of nature in order to know "What the world is, for example / and what it means." (11.3-4)  
She is like a Sufi poet who delves deep into the essence of things. This is revealed in "Where does the Dance Begin, Where Does it End?"

Don't call this world an explanation , or even  
an education

Where the Sufi poet whirled , was he looking

.....

To the centered everything ( 11.12-13,14-15 )

"Blackwater Woods" presents three rules for anyone to live in this world: " To love what is mortal/to hold it.../And where the time comes to let it go." (11.31-32,35) Nature also, for Oliver, is the light that guides anyone to God. "Five A.M. in the Pinewoods" teaches the way that anyone should follow in order to pray. It is through walking in nature which makes the one meditate and aspire to be close to God,

When I walk,

I was alone.

I was thinking.

So this is how you swim inward,

So this is how you flow outward.

So this is how you pray. ( 11.31- 36 )

Being part of nature is the only prayer that Oliver knows. "The Summer Day " clarifies what the prayer is :

I don't know exactly what a prayer is

I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down



into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass

(11.11-13 )

In " Morning Poem," everything in nature is a prayer itself " each pond with its blazing lilies / is a prayer heard and answered." (11.29-30) So nature is her medium for personal heading as well as religious meditation.

By encouraging us to imaginatively inhabit the non-human, [Oliver`s] poetry recalls us more fully to our own humanity and to a recognition of the divinity in all creation.<sup>16</sup>

### **Conclusions**

To conclude from this ecofeminist study of some of Mary Oliver`s poems is to say that it reveals that she emphasizes a female speaker`s engagement with nature. She focuses on the small , the local , and the nearby and not the typical kinds of nature issues that men often emphasize. She gets outside herself and loses her ego or at least she reduces her ego boundaries. So, there is a mutual interaction and participation. This is clear as she takes on the persona of an animal or even a plant in some of her poems. This interconnection with nature is manifested through many ways in Oliver`s poems: She treats every part in nature as if it is a mutual creature that has a soul. She understands their language. She listens, hears, and speaks to animals, plants, rains, stones, grass...etc .

Oliver is in constant communion with nature to a degree that she finds redemption , salvation and comfort in all its parts. For her, understanding nature is the only way to understand the world in

which she lives. This understanding is considered as a kind of meditation and as a prayer which leads to God.

**End Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> Andrea Campbell, *New Directions In Ecofeminist Literary Criticism* (Cambridge Scholars publishing, 2008 ), p.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Campbel, p. vii .

<sup>3</sup> Greta Gaard, "Women, Water, Energy: An Ecofeminist Approach," *Organization and Environment*, 14:2 (2001), pp 157-172.

<sup>4</sup> Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold fromm (ed), *The Ecocritism reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Georgia: The university of Georgia Press, 1996), p.viii.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Serpil Opperman " Ecocriticism : Natural World in the Literary Viewfinder," *Journal of Faculty of Letters*, 16:2 ( December 1999 ), p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> "Mary Oliver" ([URL:http:// en.wikipedia.org/wikiMary-Oliver](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary-Oliver))

<sup>8</sup> John Elder, "Mary Oliver`s Questions," *The American Nature Writing Newsletter*, 5:2 ( Fall 1993 ), p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> Mary Oliver, *Winter Hours* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), pp. 107-8. <sup>10</sup>All references to Mary Oliver`s poems are from a PDF of her poems found on this site ([URL:www.morning – earth. Org](http://www.morning-earth.org)). (1.1).

<sup>11</sup>Jennifer Yaros, "Nature and the Self: Dickenson, Bishop, Plath, and Oliver." *Valparaiso Poetry Review: Contemporary Poetry and Poetics*. x:1 (fall/winter2008-2009).

<sup>12</sup> Vicki Graham, " 'Into the Body of Another,' Mary Oliver and the Poetics of Becoming Other, " *Papers on language and Literature*, 30:4 (fall 1994), pp.352- 3.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Bidget Keegan, " Women, Gender, and Religion, " *Journal of Religion and Society*, series 5 (2009 ), p.149.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p.148.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p.154.

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