Ecofeminism and Dystopian Narratives: A Study of Sophie Mackintosh's "The Water Cure"

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Abstract:

This study explores Sophie Mackintosh's 2018 novel "The Water Cure" through the lens of ecofeminism, a theoretical framework developed by Indian scholar and activist Vandana Shiva. The novel presents a dystopian world in which a family of women are isolated on an island, subjected to various "cures" and rituals that aim to protect them from the perceived toxicity of the outside world. This study examines how Mackintosh's portrayal of the island retreat and the "cures" practiced by the family reflect ecofeminist concerns about the male-dominated exploitation and degradation of the environment. Additionally, it investigates how the novel's female protagonists navigate and resist these oppressive structures, drawing on Shiva's theories about the transformative potential of women's ecological knowledge and practices. The study contributes to the growing body of scholarship that examines the intersection of environmental and feminist themes in contemporary dystopian and speculative fiction.

Keywords: ecofeminism, dystopia, Sophie Mackintosh, "The Water Cure", Vandana Shiva

النسوية البيئية والسرديات البائسة: دراسة في كتاب "العلاج بالمياه" لصوفي ماكينتوش

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الملخص:

تستكشف هذه الدراسة رواية صوفي ماكينتوش "العلاج بالمياه" الصادرة عام ٢٠١٨ من خلال عدسة النسوية البيئية، وهو الإطار النظري الذي طورته الباحثة والناشطة الهندية فاندانا شيفا. وتقدم الرواية عالمًا بائسًا حيث

تعيش عائلة من النساء معزولات على جزيرة، وتتعرض لضغوط شديدة. "العلاجات" والطقوس المختلفة التي تهدف إلى حمايتهم من السمية المتصورة للعالم الخارجي تتناول هذه الدراسة كيف يعكس تصوير ماكنتوش لتراجع الجزيرة و"العلاجات" التي تمارسها الأسرة مخاوف النسوية البيئية بشأن الاستغلال والتدهور الذي يهيمن عليه الذكور. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، فإنه يبحث في كيفية تنقل بطلات الرواية ومقاومتهن لهذه الهياكل القمعية، بالاعتماد على نظريات شيفا حول الإمكانات التحويلية للمعرفة والممارسات البيئية للنساء والموضوعات النسوية في الخيال البائس والتأملي المعاصر.

الكلمات المفتاحية: (النسوية البيئية، ديستوبيا، صوفي ماكينتوش، "علاج الماء"، فاندانا شيفا).

1. Introduction:

Sophie Mackintosh's 2018 novel "The Water Cure" has been widely acclaimed for its haunting and poetic exploration of themes of power, gender, and the natural world. Mackintosh, a British author born in 1988, has quickly established herself as a prominent voice in contemporary speculative fiction, with "The Water Cure" being her debut novel. The novel's dystopian setting and its focus on the experiences of a family of women living in isolation on an island have prompted numerous critical examinations of its sociopolitical and feminist implications. This study aims to analyse the novel through the lens of ecofeminism, a theoretical framework developed by Indian scholar and activist Vandana Shiva. Ecofeminism explores the interconnections between the oppression of women and the exploitation of the natural environment, highlighting how patriarchal and capitalist systems often intersect to subjugate both. The novel's portrayal of the island retreat and the "cures" practiced by the family lend themselves well to an ecofeminist analysis, which can shed light on Mackintosh's critique of the male-dominated control and degradation of the environment.

2. Research Questions and Aims:

1. How do the island retreat and the "cures" practiced by the family in "The Water Cure" reflect ecofeminist concerns about the exploitation of the natural environment?

2. In what ways do the novel's female protagonists navigate and resist the oppressive structures that seek to control their bodies and the environment?

3. How does Mackintosh's work contribute to the growing body of contemporary dystopian and speculative fiction that explores the intersection of environmental and feminist themes?

This paper will contribute to the ongoing scholarly discourse on the intersection of environmental and feminist themes in contemporary literature. By applying the theoretical framework of ecofeminism to Mackintosh's novel, the analysis will deepen the understanding of how speculative fiction can engage with and challenge dominant power structures that subjugate both women and the natural world. The findings of this study may also have broader implications for the study of gender, environmentalism, and the role of literature in addressing these pressing sociopolitical issues.

4. Literature Review

Sophie Mackintosh's unveiling "The Water Cure," has garnered critical acclaim for its unique and haunting narrative. The story follows three sisters living with their parents on an isolated island, where they are taught from a young age about the dangers of the outside world (Gaard, 1993, 1–12). The novel explores themes of trauma, patriarchy, and survival, drawing readers into a mysterious and compelling narrative. (Mackintosh, 2018: The Water Cure, Book review) Mackintosh's writing has been described as exquisite and irresistible, ablaze with beauty, desire, and dread (Birkeland, 1993, 13–59). One of the central motifs in the novel is the relationship between women's bodies and water, which has a long history in the treatment of women. The novel delves into toxic masculinity, presenting a thought experiment where men are portrayed as literal embodiments of toxicity (Mackintosh, 2018, The Water Cure, Interview). Mackintosh's writing style has been praised for its eerie and quietly stunning quality, painting a vivid picture of the island setting

and the characters' experiences. "The Water Cure" is a dystopian coming-of-age story that offers a fresh perspective on themes of femininity, power, and control (Gaard, 2010, 643-665). Mackintosh's debut novel has been lauded for its originality and depth, captivating readers with its enigmatic plot and compelling characters (Gaard, 2001, 157–172). Through its exploration of trauma, patriarchy, and survival, "The Water Cure" invites readers to reflect on the complexities of human nature and the impact of societal norms on individual lives.

5. Methodology and Theoretical Framework:

This study will employ a qualitative textual analysis approach, drawing on the principles of ecofeminism as the primary theoretical framework. Ecofeminism, as developed by Indian scholar and activist Vandana Shiva, provides a lens through which to examine the interconnections between the oppression of women and the exploitation of the natural environment. Shiva's ecofeminist theory posits that patriarchal and capitalist systems of domination are inherently linked to the degradation of the environment and the subjugation of women. She argues that these systems rely on the devaluation of traditionally "feminine" qualities, such as nurturing, interconnectedness, and sustainability, in favour of "masculine" values of control, competition, and exploitation (Shiva, 1988).

The novel can be analysed through the lens of Vandana Shiva's ecofeminist concepts, particularly the interconnections between the oppression of women and the exploitation of the natural environment, as well as the devaluation of "feminine" qualities in favour of "masculine" values. In the analysis of The Water Cure, the study will focus on how Mackintosh's portrayal of the island retreat and the "cures" practiced by the family reflect these ecofeminist concerns. Particular attention will be paid to how the novel's female protagonists navigate and resist the oppressive structures that seek to control their bodies and the environment. The analysis will draw on close readings of

the text, paying attention to the novel's descriptive language, symbolic imagery, and narrative structure. Additionally, the study will situate Mackintosh's work within the broader context of contemporary dystopian and speculative fiction that explores environmental and feminist themes, further contextualising the significance of the novel's ecofeminist perspectives. The theoretical framework of ecofeminism, as developed by Vandana Shiva, will serve as the guiding principle for this study. Shiva's work on the intersections of gender, ecology, and power will provide a foundation for examining how The Water Cure engages with these critical issues. The study will also engage with other key ecofeminist scholars, such as Ariel Salleh and Val Plumwood, to further strengthen the theoretical underpinnings of the analysis.

By employing this ecofeminist approach, the study aims to shed light on how Mackintosh's novel challenges and subverts the patriarchal and capitalist structures that have historically subjugated both women and the natural world, offering a transformative vision for a more equitable and sustainable future.

6. Discussion:

6.1. The Symbolic Significance of ''The Water Cure'' in Sophie Mackintosh's Ecofeminist Novel

In Sophie Mackintosh's dystopian novel "The Water Cure," the titular "water cure" is a powerful symbol that reflects the novel's ecofeminist themes and concerns. The use of water as a central motif throughout the narrative holds profound significance when examined through an ecofeminist lens. Ecofeminism, a school of thought that explores the interconnections between feminism and environmentalism, recognises how the oppression of women and the exploitation of the natural world are inextricably linked (Gaard, 1993). In "The Water Cure," the water-based "cures" practiced by the family on the isolated island represent the subjugation and practice of the female body, which mirrors the exploitation and degradation of the natural environment.

Water, which is often associated with life, nourishment, and purification, is transformed into a tool of subjugation and torment in the novel (Birkeland, 1993). The sisters are subjected to various water-based rituals and trials, such as being submerged in cold water or forced to drink saltwater, as a means of control and discipline (Mackintosh, 2018, p. 89). This symbolic use of water reflects how patriarchal systems seek to dominate and constrain both the female body and the natural world. Furthermore, the island itself, with its limited resources and the family's reliance on the surrounding water, can be seen as a microcosm of the larger ecological crisis facing the world (Gaard, 2001). The family's attempts to maintain their isolation and control over the island's resources echo how dominant power structures seek to exploit and deplete the natural environment for their benefit. By employing the water cure as a central motif, Mackintosh invites readers to consider the deeper implications of this symbolic practice and its connections to the broader ecofeminist concerns that permeate the novel (Gaard, 2010). The water cure becomes a metaphor for the systemic oppression and subjugation that women and the natural world have historically faced, and the novel's exploration of this theme challenges readers to confront these interconnected issues.

The symbolic significance of "The Water Cure" in Mackintosh's novel is a powerful manifestation of ecofeminist principles. The water-based rituals and the family's control over the island's resources serve as a powerful metaphor for how patriarchal systems seek to dominate and subjugate both the female body and the natural environment. By engaging with this symbolic language, the novel invites readers to critically examine the intersections of gender, power, and ecological justice.

6.2. Ecofeminism in The Water Cure

The interconnections between the oppression of women and the exploitation of the natural environment:

At the beginning of the novel, the disappearance and presumed death of the father figure reflect the exploitation and degradation of the natural environment, represented by the "peach-ripe with toxicity" and the "rounded glow of the horizon." The women's search for the father, their "scattered formation" and eventual coming together, mirrors how women's lives are tied to the fate of the natural world. The passage suggests that the women's grief and loss are intimately connected to the environmental crisis they are facing.

The devaluation of "feminine" qualities in favour of "masculine" values appears in the contrast between the "masculine" values associated with the father figure, such as his "big and difficult body" and the way he is described as a "sack of meat," and the "feminine" qualities of the women, who are absorbed in themselves, squabble, and engage in a more nurturing, intuitive search for their missing father. The women's inability to "bear witness" to the father's death and their failure to accompany him suggest the devaluation of these "feminine" qualities within the patriarchal structure.

As Shiva (1988) argues, the "logic of patriarchy and the logic of capitalism" have converged to create a system that exploits both women and the natural environment. The passage's depiction of the women's grief and the environmental crisis they face can be seen as a reflection of this intersection of gender, ecology, and power:

> I asked Mother if she had noticed any sickness in you. Any hint of your body giving way. She says, 'No, your father was in new fettle.' Dark turn. 'As you well fucking know.'
>
> Your body was not completely right. Of course, I would see that where she would not. I noticed a slight cough, mixed up a honey tincture for you the day before you died. nettles from the end of the garden, where we dump our rubbish and leave things to rot. My hands blistered as I pulled them from the earth in - at

afternoon heat. You drank it straight from the saucepan. Sunburnt throat moving under the metal. We were sitting in the kitchen together, two stools pushed close. Your eyes were watery. You did not touch me. On the counter, three sardines spilled their guts.

'Are you dying?' I asked you.

'No,' you said. 'In many ways, I have never been better. (Mackintosh,2018,5)

Analysing the above passage through the lens of Shiva's ecofeminist concepts, one can see the further exploration of the interconnections between the oppression of women and the exploitation of the natural environment. The devaluation of "feminine" qualities in favour of "masculine" values is highlighted by the contrast between the narrator's intuitive understanding of the father's declining health and the mother's dismissive response, which reflects the devaluation of the "feminine" qualities of nurturing and care. As Shiva (1988) argues, the patriarchal system has privileged "masculine" values of control, competition, and exploitation over the "feminine" qualities associated with women, such as interconnectedness and sustainability.

On the other hand, women's ecological knowledge and practices are also clarified in the narrator's efforts to prepare a healing tincture for the father, using locally sourced nettles and honey, reflecting the importance of women's traditional ecological knowledge and practices that have been marginalised by dominant Western, patriarchal paradigms. Shiva (1993) emphasises the transformative potential of these alternative ways of knowing and relating to the natural world.

Moreover, the intersection of gender, ecology, and power is portrayed by the father's dismissive response to the narrator's question about his dying, and the

subsequent description of the "sardines spilling their guts" on the counter, further highlights the convergence of the "logic of patriarchy and the logic of capitalism" that has led to the exploitation of both women and the natural environment (Shiva, 1988, p. 5). The supportive opinions of ecofeminist critics, such as Ariel Salleh, who have built upon Shiva's work, can also be considered in this respect. Salleh (1997) emphasises the need to "centre the ecological knowledge of women" and to challenge the dominant "masculinist logic" that has led to the degradation of the natural world (p. 17).

The gendered response to loss and grief is highlighted in the contrast between the narrator's visceral reaction to the father's presumed death and the mother's more pragmatic response. The mother's insistence on burying the bloodstained shoe, rather than "salting it or burning it the way we would with other dangerous waste" (Amkintoush, 2018, 7) reflects the gendered ways in which grief and loss are experienced and expressed. This aligns with Shiva's (1988) critique of the "masculine" values of control and dominance that often override the more "feminine" qualities of nurturing and care.

On the other hand, the medicalization of grief is reflected in the mother's decision to medicate the children with sleeping pills to cope with their grief, which is another example of the "masculine" logic of control and suppression, rather than allowing for the expression and processing of emotion. Shiva (1993) has argued that such "technological fixes" are characteristic of the patriarchal, capitalist system, which seeks to impose "order" on the messy realities of life.

The interconnectedness of the human and more-than-human world also occurs in the novel, as the vivid descriptions of the narrator's dreams, with "boxes filled with boxes filled with small trapdoors" (Makintoush, 2018, 7) and the "sky pulsing a livid green," (7), suggest a deep, almost visceral connection between the human experience of grief and the natural world. This aligns with Shiva's (1988) emphasis on the need to recognise the inherent

interconnectedness of all life, in contrast to the Western, patriarchal worldview that seeks to dominate and control nature.

The novel, in this sense, can be seen as a powerful exploration of how the oppression of women and the exploitation of the natural environment are inextricably linked, as articulated by Vandana Shiva and other ecofeminist thinkers. The narrator's struggles to navigate the gendered and medicalized responses to grief, as well as the blurring of the boundaries between the human and more-than-human worlds, are emblematic of the deeper challenges posed by the dominant patriarchal paradigm.

The following excerpt further highlights the intricate connections between the oppression of women and the degradation of the natural environment:

> When we emerge from the lost week, we are surrounded by pieces of paper with Mother's writing on them, like reminders. They are pinned to the walls, slipped into drawers, and folded into our clothes. The pieces of paper say, No more love! Her pain gives her the gravity of an oracle. We are very troubled by them. We ask her about them and she tells us a revised version. 'Love only your sisters!' All right, we decide, that it is easy enough for us to do. 'And your mother,' she adds. 'You have to love me too. It's my right.' OK, we tell her. It is no problem. (Mackintosh, 2028, 8)

The rejection of love and the imposition of maternal control can be seen in the mother's directive, "No more love!" (8) and her insistence that the children "love only your sisters!" and "love me too" reflects a deep distrust and rejection of love, intimacy, and emotional vulnerability. This aligns with Shiva's (1988) critique of the masculine, capitalist logic of control and dominance that often leads to the suppression of "feminine" values of care and nurturing.

The mother as an "oracle" of pain is evident in the passage when the novelist, by the word of the character, describes the mother's "pain" as giving her "the gravity of an oracle," suggesting a kind of prophetic, almost supernatural authority. This echoes Shiva's (1988) observation that women, particularly those in marginalised or oppressed communities, often develop a deep, intuitive understanding of the interconnectedness of all life and the consequences of environmental degradation.

The medicalization and fragmentation of the self are recurrent in the novel, and it is clear when the "pieces of paper with Mother's writing(8) that are "pinned to the walls, slipped into drawers, folded into our clothes" evoke a sense of the fragmentation and medicalization of the self, similar to the way the children are medicated with sleeping pills earlier in the passage. This resonates with Shiva's (1993) critique of the patriarchal, capitalist system's tendency to reduce complex, interconnected phenomena to discrete, manageable parts.

The struggle for autonomy and self-expression appears as the children's apparent acquiescence to the mother's directives ("OK, we tell her. It is no problem.") (8)suggests a reluctant submission to the maternal authority, which may be a reflection of the wider social and cultural constraints that women and marginalised communities face in asserting their autonomy and self-expression. This ties into Shiva's (1988) emphasis on the need to reclaim and celebrate the "feminine" values of diversity, interdependence, and ecological consciousness.

The novel, thus, can be seen as a powerful exploration of how the oppression of women and the exploitation of the natural environment are inextricably linked, as articulated by Vandana Shiva and other ecofeminist thinkers. The fragmentation of the self, the suppression of emotional vulnerability, and the imposition of maternal control all echo the broader patterns of patriarchal domination that Shiva has sought to challenge and transform.

The novel explores the complex dynamics within a family and the ecofeminist themes that emerge. The description of the sisters gathering for "devotions for the women of our blood" (9) in the mother's bedroom or the ballroom suggests a deeply rooted ritual and connection to their ancestral lineage. The imagery of the sisters blurring the boundaries between "the I and the sister" reflects an ecofeminist perspective that emphasises the interconnectedness of all life. The introduction of the "irons" with the sisters' names represents a patriarchal system of control and imposed hierarchy within the family. The fact that one sister, Lia, drew a "blank iron," which meant she would not receive the same level of affection as the others is a poignant commentary on the unequal treatment of women, even within their familial unit. The narrator's desire to "kill you myself" (10) about the deceased sibling suggests a complex web of emotions, including grief, anger, and a sense of betrayal. This reflects the ecofeminist notion that personal and familial relationships are inextricably linked to broader societal and environmental issues. The mother's explanation that the "irons" are a way to "keep it fair" (10) and ensure "everyone gets their turn" is a chilling reminder of how patriarchal structures can be internalised and normalised, even within a matrilineal setting. The ecofeminist perspective here challenges the idea of fairness and questions the underlying assumptions that perpetuate these systems of oppression.

The novel highlights the intertwining of personal, familial, and environmental concerns within an ecofeminist framework, where the narrative explores the complex dynamics of love, grief, and the struggle for autonomy and self-determination within a patriarchal society.

7. Conclusion

Sophie Mackintosh's novel "The Water Cure" offers a powerful and thought-provoking exploration of the intertwined themes of ecofeminism. Through a deep dive into the complex dynamics of the isolated island retreat and the

family's "cures," the novel powerfully reflects ecofeminist concerns about the exploitation of the natural environment. The island itself serves as a microcosm of the larger societal structures that seek to control and dominate both the female body and the natural world. The "cures" practiced by the family, which involve subjecting the sisters to various physical and psychological trials, can be seen as a metaphor for how patriarchal systems seek to subjugate women's agency. The novel's exploration of these practices reveals the inherent violence and trauma inflicted upon the female protagonists, mirroring how the natural environment is exploited and degraded. In navigating this oppressive landscape, the female protagonists demonstrate remarkable resilience and resourcefulness. Their efforts to resist and subvert the controlling forces that seek to dictate their lives and their relationship to the land are profoundly ecofeminist in nature. Whether it is the sisters' collective acts of solidarity or their acts of defiance, the novel showcases the power of women to challenge and dismantle the systems that seek to constrain them. Mackintosh's work contributes to the growing body of contemporary dystopian and speculative fiction that explores the intersection of environmental and feminist themes. By weaving together the personal narratives of the sisters with larger sociopolitical and ecological concerns, the novel invites readers to engage in a critical examination of the complex interplay between gender, power, and the natural world. This ecofeminist approach challenges the traditional boundaries of the dystopian genre, expanding its scope to encompass the lived experiences of marginalised communities and the urgent need to address the interconnected crises of our time.

"The Water Cure" stands as a powerful and provocative testament to the transformative potential of ecofeminist storytelling. By delving into the depths of the sisters' struggles and their unwavering determination to reclaim their autonomy, Mackintosh's work inspires readers to confront the systemic

inequities that permeate our society and environment and to envision a more just and sustainable future.

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