

# Dorothy Wordsworth's Ecopetics in the Floating Island at Hawkshed, An Incident in the schemes of Nature

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper is an analysis of the poem, "Floating Island at Hawkshed, An Incident in the schemes of Nature" by a female romantic writer Dorothy Wordsworth whose works were marginalized in the literary field. The poem is one of the excellent examples of ecopetry or can be called an ecological narrative. An ecopoet tries to know more than the human world and value the powers of nature that is uncontrollable and unknowable to the human world. It tells the story of an island that is disappeared. The poem is her firsthand experience with the natural world and born not out of imagination. The poem also enables us to understand the representation of material sublime in romanticism that is practiced by women writers in Romanticism.

**Keywords: Ecopoetry, material sublime, feminine romanticism**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Presently there is an increase in climate changes as a result of environmental degradation caused by human intervention. The environmental consciousness became a major concern in the Romantic period in the history of English literature as it witnessed the consequences of industrialization. It was also a time when nature poetry or environmental writing gained wide acceptance because of the great concern for preserving the environment. The paper is an analysis of a poem written by a female Romantic writer, Dorothy Wordsworth, whose poetry was marginalized in the arena of male Romanticism. Dorothy wrote many poems with themes from nature but none of them got wide popularity and she remained unknown. While analyzing her poems, it can be understood that how Dorothy paid too much attention to the even minutest details of nature and its creatures.

Present day environmental literature still focuses on the contributions made by the six male poets of Romanticism, so it is inevitable to read and understand the environmental literature produced by a woman writer of the Romantic age. Dorothy wrote many poems born out of her own experiences of interactions with nature. This paper wants to read "Floating Island at Hawkshed: An Incident upon the Schemes of Nature" is an excellent example of an ecopoem and thereby elucidating the poetic talent inherent in her poems. Dorothy never sustains an authorial voice in her poems unlike her male contemporaries and her

poems are the experiences of a woman living in countryside. Her poems allow us to understand a woman's perception of nature and natural phenomena. This ecopoetry will definitely invoke eco consciousness. Eco poetry is a similar genre that challenges the patriarchal world view that men should dominate nature. It also argues that people should respect and value others including both human and non-human nature. Scott Bryson in his *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction* says "Ecopoetry offer a vision of the world that values the interaction between the interdependent...desires, both of which are attempts to respond to the modern divorce between humanity and the rest of nature". (qtd Fisher Wirth xxviii)

Dorothy praises the nature's qualities for care and nurtures all forms of life. The scheme of nature is entirely different from human beings and its powers go beyond human comprehension. The poem depicts the interconnectivity with human and non-human creatures with nature, because when the island has disappeared, all the amenities also vanished.

The duty of an ecopoet is to create a kind of awareness in people in order to make them dutiful towards their environment. The first thing can be done is to change human beings from the centre of the ecosystem thereby making a bio centric and ecological interconnectedness between human beings and non-human nature. Human beings should consider them as a part of the nature. Such an attitude would bring respect and value for everything in nature. Another poet, Ed Roberson defines ecopoetry as "It occurs when an individual's sense of the larger Earth enters into the world of human knowledge. The main understanding that results from this encounter is the Ecopetic: that the world desires do not run the Earth, but the Earth does run the world". (qtd Fisher Wirth xxx)

Dorothy Wordsworth's "Floating Island at Hawkshed, An incident in the schemes of nature" is one of her most accomplished poems written during the 1820s and was published during her lifetime anonymously along with her brother's poems. It is believed that the idea of the island has been evolved from her visit to Scottish loch, an island. William Knight observes that the "Floating Island" is in Derwent water. The tone of the poem is melancholic. The island represents life and death. She wants to assert the supreme power of nature that man cannot imagine. She believes that the nature destroys as well as recreates the island. The poem praises the island's natural ability to recreate what is destroyed. In Dorothy Wordsworth's writings, there is a particular space for shelter and home. She praises the great capacity of the island to preserve all forms of life. The island shows nature's capacity to sustain life. Her poem offers a version different from her male contemporaries, she writes in a quite simple and plain style without adding the colours of imagination. Kenneth R. Cervelli, in his *Dorothy Wordsworth's Ecology* quotes James McKusick's opinion that the Romantic poets were instrumental in creating a new holistic way of perceiving the natural world. (47)

The poem begins with the description of powers of nature that work harmoniously. The Island is lost and cut off by wind. Meena Alexander observes in *Women in Romanticism* that the poem enacts a symbolic

destruction of substance. The island, a tiny slip of earth is cut loose by the wind ...undermined it and brought into an autonomous existence. (109)

Dorothy begins the poem with rich nature imageries:

Harmonious powers with Nature work

On sky, earth, river, lake and sea:

Sunshine and storm, whirlwind and breeze

All in one duteous task agree (1-4)

The poem has an undertone that “a destructive will beneath the randomness of natural power.”(109) Dorothy attributes some human qualities to nature because every object in nature has a certain task to perform. She observes the natural phenomenon or the non-human nature in a non-dominating way. She observes the beauty of innumerable trees and warbling birds and records them as they are. The island is a place of nourishing all forms of life. Suddenly it is destroyed invokes the message that the man is unaware of the natural powers. Readers are witness to death. The island exists no longer. Dorothy wrote “it is the property of fortitude not to be easily terrified by the dread of things pertaining to death.” (qtd Alexander 110) Her way of representation is very different from her male contemporaries. Unlike masculine writing, that dominates others both human and non-human nature. The poem is about the existence and extinction of the island. Susan M Levin in *Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism* notes, implied throughout this poem, which presents nature not necessarily as explicable but as observable, is the notion that too many people gaze vacantly at nature and so remain unaware of its complexity.”(114) Dorothy’s material sublime takes up a stand to respect and value otherness. She never makes a realm of spiritual or even intellectual plain; instead she observes the physical landscape. Dorothy’s narrative is based on her observation as a woman and she considers herself as a part of the ecosystem.

This is one of the characteristics of feminine romanticism that stresses the engagement with the workings of nature. Levin also agrees that her mode of description is feminine and Dorothy is portraying the destructive possibilities in nature. When the island disappeared, all the forms of lives depended on it also vanished. Anne K Mellor and Freeman found difficult to incorporate both ambivalent forces found in Dorothy’s *Floating Island*. The poem is born out of her own experiences in the natural world. The poem is a feminine discourse and also an example of what John Pipkin says in “The material Sublime” experienced by women writers in the Romantic age. He says, “those moments either when the physical world announces itself within the textual gesture toward transcendence, effectively disrupting the act of suppression, or which the sublime experience is based. (600). For many women writers in the Romantic age, their sublime is connected to the material world.

Food, Shelter, Safety there they find

There berries ripen, flowers bloom;

There insects live their lives and die:

A Peopled world it is; in size a tiny room (13-16)

The island is an ecosystem that gives food shelter and safety for all kinds of creatures and rich with flowers, fruits and people live there and die. She calls it as a tiny room. Dorothy presents the cyclic nature of life and death. The whole community is depending on the island for everything. Death is an inevitable thing hence the cyclic nature of life continues. This is an excellent example for domestic ecology suggested by Kenneth R Cervelli. Jonathan Bate also suggests that verse making is language's most difficult path of return to the *oikos*, the place of dwelling, because metre itself-a quiet but persistent music, a recurring cycle, a heartbeat-is an answering to nature's own rhythms, an echoing of the earth itself. (qtd Cervelli 66) Dorothy's poetic talent is evident in presenting the entire web of life in a "tiny room" of insects and a "peopled world" and completely absorbing the life cycle of the island. The poem is not a story but it tells that the island as an ecosystem. The island has disappeared but she hopes that its lost fragments will fertilize some other ground. Dorothy makes the island as the centre image of her poem.

Dorothy concludes the poem as she understands the very cyclic balance of nature.

Buried beneath the glittering Lake!

Its place no longer to be found,

Yet the lost fragments shall remain,

To fertilize some other ground (25-28)

Dorothy Wordsworth concludes the poem by talking about the death of the island. But she is very confident that the island will regain its form out of its fragments. She has a clear knowledge about the workings of nature. The essence of the poem is what Karl Kroeber says "an ecosystem is a constantly self-transforming continuity". (qtd Cervelli 66) Dorothy Wordsworth, an avid naturalist, never fails to recognize simple minutest things in nature. Like her journals, her poetry is also her encounters with the wonders of nature. Ann K Mellor has also stated that Dorothy's writings often concentrate on her domestic and rural environments. The self that emerges in the poem "Floating Island at Hawkshed is interactive, absorptive, constantly changing and domestic. (qtd Cervelli 2) In other words her sense of self is connected to the real natural environments. Her writings are products of her everyday experiences in nature. The poem is also about her own fear and marginality as being a woman and writer in the period in which she lived. Meena Alexander states that she perfectly evokes a marginal existence, its inner resources helpless when faced with powers that can displace and destroy. If there is hope in her poem, it lies under water, the lost fragments preserved there". (111) There is a possibility of regeneration. Maria G Kutrieh in the Aesthetics of Dorothy Wordsworth observes that "Dorothy Wordsworth consciously turned to Nature and found in its sweetness, a solace and comfort signifying joy and belonging quite in contrast to the melancholy signifying loss and displacement" (60) Like the island Dorothy Wordsworth had a displacement from nature to the lonely room where she found the unusual harmony.

The poem is often cited as an excellent example of nature writing .The poem has some sort of ecological awareness .The poem gives the message of creative and destructive powers of nature that is often a mystery to the human world. The island is removed by water. Dorothy presents the island as a home for miniature creature like animals, birds and insects. People live there like living in a tiny room. The passing away of island is the inevitability of death, but here death is not at the end.She believes in the regenerating capacity of the island thereby she seeks consolation. The poem has some sort of autobiographical tone because she wrote this poem even after experiencing some tragic death or it may be her own futuristic vision about her death. The poem concludes with a prayer of hope and consolation. The poem represents the metaphor of the cycle of life like birth-death –regeneration.Dorothy remembers the changes happened to the island over the time.

The poem can be the result of her observations on nature. The poem is her interaction with the outer world. It invokes Dorothy's belief in the afterlife. Stephen Bygrave in *Romantic Writings* notices that “the poem has been read by feminist critics as a type of manifesto of an alternative model of subjectivity to that provided by male Romantic poets”. (200)Dorothy uses “I “for the first person in the poem brings her subjectivity, identified with the presence of the island. The phrases like ‘a slip of earth ‘and its severance from the security of the shore parallels her own marginalized condition in the male dominated society and her status in her own family. In other words Dorothy is ‘selfless angel ‘in the house, managing her domestic concerns. The island is a place of wide range of activities –it’s a ‘peopled world ‘supporting birds, berries, flowers and insects. Dorothy has an innate likeness to domestic space for she uses ‘a tiny room’. (200-201)Dorothy's thoughts are often haunted by her want of a home –a shelter. The island is a metaphor for the speaker's identity. Anne K Mellor states in *Romanticism and Gender* that the poem presents a “self that doesn't name itself as a self”. (156)

This poem is not about her own unique experience. Dorothy calls the reader's attention to the island. The island is a network of interconnectedness. It has disappeared which means the death of the island. Dorothy never stops here as she believes in the continuance of its fragments.Stephen Bygrave says “there is a buried narrative here, which tells of a self that is other than monolithic, transcendent self characteristic of some male Romantic writers. This female self doesn't seem to have an essence, a love identity, but is subject to change and constituted through a series of relations” (201)) Dorothy never wanted to be a poet and she calls her poems as verses and moreover her literary talents were submerged in the literary achievements of her popular brother, William Wordsworth.

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