



# Eco-Consciousness: Remapping The Self In Marilynne Summers Robinson's *Housekeeping*

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**Abstract:** Nature is a living entity like human beings. Nature's role has been vital to the development of human self. Everyone develops his or her own sense of place through life which which determines why does one love or feel homely and safe in some regions while apprehensive and alienated in others. The identity of any person gets immensely affected with his surroundings because the place leaves an indelible impact on the person and he responds unconsciously for the impact. Marilynne Robinson has through her works tried to probe about man's relation with nature exhibiting nature as a site for self-discovery. Her characters experience their own realization of self in order to experience God by interacting with the environment. Robinson's philosophy of nature suggests that every self has a deeper bond with all forms of life and an understanding of that brings then the realization of being. In *Housekeeping* the protagonist Ruth breaks away the traditional perception of nature and reaches a new understanding of her own self.

**Keywords:** *self-discovery, environment, realization, traditional*

The psychological traumas, ethics, humanism, environmental concerns, racism and deprivation are the themes in Robinson's fiction. These problems have become inseparable in human life and influence the tone of social institutions. They constitute an intention to inflict pain to the self, society and humanity. Robinson's predictions to overcome the human suffering, requires humanistic feelings for others. She insists on selfless love and acceptance of fellow beings, as a solution for the betterment of the society in reality. Ethical realism is a philosophical introduction to ethics that centralizes the philosophical issues of morality. The author stresses that virtues must be mastered in order to lead a good life on earth.

Gilbert Harman advocates the specific view of morality which turns out to be relational facts about the reasons for actions and about the acceptance of social conventions. His social custom theory is: "Morality is

constituted by the rules, whatever they are, the society enforces” (94). Society accepts and adheres to conventions because they benefit and get benefitted from other human beings. Harman’s theory states that, an individual benefits from an accepted societal moralistic conventions, which gives him reasons to act ‘morally’. He says: “Morality gives people reasons to do things if an ethical theory is to be adequate, it must explain why this so” (91). Such version of Harman’s custom view is the Social Convention Theory. It shows how morality gives people reasons to proceed with their beliefs and actions. Gilbert Harman’s critical theory of ‘Ethical Realism’ has its base on *The Nature of Morality*. It is systematically virtuous and is the most conservative, modest, simple and generalized.

Harman addresses the moral issues of the best explanation, in terms of maximizing explanatory coherence with the minimal change. The reasonable explanation of the reports of moral observations includes the existence of the moral entities. Ethical realism assumes the reality of moral facts at the observer’s psychology and explains the report of moral observations. Concrete ethical concepts such as, promising, courage, kindness and honesty provide rich and finely-grained evaluations. They prove that ethical realism treat virtues as valuable at all worlds. Marilynne Robinson stresses that virtues must be mastered in order to lead a good life on earth. The concepts of traditional virtues are descriptive in her novels where compassion plays a casual role. The conventional families and code traditions of the novel explore behaviors that open the boundaries of ethics in ordinary life.

Robinson reminds her readers that ‘housekeeping’ is a regime of small kindness, to make the world salubrious, savory and warm. *Housekeeping* becomes a radical metaphor, in which Sylvie leaves a conventional female identity. She has created several identities and one to be greatly noted is the Good Samaritan. The expectation differs among Robinson’s characters because housekeeping and homelessness are starkly opposed to each other at different views in the novel. These two dispositions are predominantly represented with different characters. The aunts of the narrator, Lily and Nona, take care of the girls, after the death of Sylvia Foster. It symbolizes ‘housekeeping’ and later, they could not accept the responsibility of guardianship at their young age. The literal care for the children in the town of Fingerbone was impossible for Sylvie to occupy the dual position of a housekeeper of the homeless. Martha Nussbaum, the American philosopher in *Upheavals of Thought* deals with the discussion of emotions in regards to ethical behavior. According to Nussbaum, emotions and ethical behaviour cannot be separated but interrelated. Exploration towards ethical life, truthfulness and the way of the world cannot be separated from the subjective, “instead of viewing morality as a system of Principles to be gasped by the detached intellect, and emotions as motivations that either support or subvert our choice to act according to principle, we will have to consider emotions as part and parcel of the system of ethical reasoning” (12). Emotions frame an individual’s moral reasoning, ethics and judgment.

Ethical theory cannot be separated from the theory of emotions. Nussbaum’s deconstruction of the cognitive elements of compassion can be applied as a hermeneutic interpretation of Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* and *Home*. The theory of ethical realism elaborated that there must be a reason or cause for man’s deeds and behaviours in the society. Robinson emphasises reality in its own appropriate scale to itself. God’s wisdom is expressed in the universe and this world is the revelation of God himself. Man is God’s creation, centralized with reality and this world is appreciated through the aesthetic quality of human perception. Human experience induces aesthetic

pleasure and the ability to experience the aesthetic pleasure depends on the signature of the divine. The interaction between humanity and divinity manifests itself in the world.

Robinson's novels realize the sacred mystery at the experience of every individual. The democratic ideal shapes the relationship of oneself with the others. The outcomes of democracy involve her writings, which is deeply religious. She identifies religion with a mystery and with an openness of anti-foundationalist uncertainty. Her writings prove her devotion in understanding uncertainty and ambiguity and her traditional statements asserts the ethical values in human beings; created at God's image. Religion is employed to the very conventional idea of God's creation of human beings of his own image. The limitlessness of human potential is argued for human potentialities. She fights against the modern idea, that human beings have grown oppressively selfish and the world has become dull, at the ethical values. The religious values are used in her writings to rescue the society from narrow mindedness and create the new way of living, ethically stable. She wants to remind her readers the biblical imperative of the respectful generosity towards the poor and the strangers. She insists on the religious affiliation, family values and she wants to correct the misconceptions that have sedimented into truths. She reminds the ethical values of the past generations that can guide the present generation. *Lila* narrates God's touch of the grandfather of Reverend Ames' shoulders, which is unforgettable and instructs to serve the people who are clutched of racial discrimination.

Robinson's views on American culture that grants equal safety and real autonomy shall bear its best fruits if people follow the ethics of respecting, educating, informing and trusting each other. But people have fallen short of openness due to the threat of the current economic climate and the ideology of austerity. The death of human imagination for the integrity and mystery of other lives frames Robinson's theme. She takes the dual role of the housekeeper and homelessness and familial values that helps her to strike as good. The traditional family alone way is exempted and 'family' with nation and religion is recommended. She defends the unconventional familial situations and protects single mother, who are criticized as a perverse defense of the traditional family.

Robinson voices for decent working house and reasonable pay towards the issue of single mothers, who hold their life and sacrifice their future, for the sake of their children, who are abandoned at many circumstances. Her respect for such human beings rejects the idea of sympathy, which is inhuman and more dangerous. Her definition towards democracy coincides towards the attitude of openness to the mystery of the individualistic experience, appreciation of strangers in reality; she combines the posture of direct perception with an abiding attentiveness which eschews fundamentalisms and certainties. Beyond the dispositional definition of democracy, she intervenes with democracy and the ethos of homelessness. Her argument is based on the fact that literally away from houses or spaces are not homelessness.

The protagonists of Robinson, namely elderly Reverend Ames, the narrator John Ames and Jack, voice against the racial prejudices due to their mode of perception and their ways of their living. They reject racial injustice and insist on the ethical values towards the mode of life experience, related to the ability for a democratic life - where other's opinions should be respected and not to judge other ways of life.

Robinson's characters explore the failures of morality in an active struggle for a peaceful complacent community. They take up courage for the ethically good to move from disappointment to actively working, to make the world, not a better place, but a place for everyone to live in. Robinson's novels end at the reflections on forgiveness and blessings. She claims to be truthful in love or the world might lose its hope of its survival humanistically. Robinson insists the value of love and believes that love does not depend on one's merits. She defends the same truth in *Gilead*. She has written her novels, not for the sake of writing but to advocate Christian faith, love and compassion. Her readers appreciate her works for the beauty of earthly existence. Robinson directs her reader's attention to ethics in reality and makes them receive it as the gift of the world.

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