

‘NATURE’ IN THE TIME OF POLLUTION: STUDYING ECOFEMINISTIC CONCERNS IN THE ANIMATED MOVIES OF DISNEY AND STUDIO GHIBLI

ANCHAL

Ph.D. Scholar

Punjab University, Chandigarh

Abstract

Humans' technological advancements for a comfortable life had to be put on trial when natural disasters, climate change and pandemics became an irrefutable outcome of the scientific amelioration. Inger Andersen states that environmental problems not only lead to an ecological implosion but also to a societal implosion, which leads to a rise in criminality, migration, and internal conflict. The codependent relationship between humans and the environment is irrefutable. Numerous environment conservation movements testify to the inherent relationship between nature and women, the reason being the closeness towards nature women had and have due to their gender roles. The impact of ecological degradation is similar on the whole earth irrespective of national borders. Andrew Staton stated that improving human relations can solve all problems. In the present work by studying the ecofeministic concerns in the selected animated movies, namely Wall-E and Spirited Away by Disney and Studio Ghibli respectively, the interdependence between the changed 'nature' of human relations and the degradation of 'nature' (environment) will be studied.

Keywords: *ecocritical turn, ecofeminism, wall-e, spirited away, humanity, ethics, apocalyptic imagery, renewal*

The excessive meddling with and extraction of natural resources results in natural disasters, climate change, pandemics and epidemics which have questioned humanity's lifestyle and moral values. As a result, instead of restricting it to a topic of natural sciences, Harvard University Professor and Ecocritic, Lawrence Buell states, "the responsibility for addressing the problem or constellation of problems, will increasingly be seen as the responsibility of all human sciences" (699). With the rapid industrialisation and technological growth literary works alluding the environmental decadence were making an effort to spread awareness among humanity. In the twentieth century, mass media emerged as the predominant mode for transmitting information. By the end of the 90s internet flourished in many countries making the audience an active participant. Altering perceptions, values and even behaviour, various sociologists

studied the remarkable impact of mass media on societies. The emergence of animation gave the film industry a breath of fresh air. As per *Global Animation, VFX & Video Games Industry: Strategies, Trends & Opportunities (2020-25)*, the amelioration and evolution in the technique of animation increased global consumption of animation, VFX and video games. The present study explores the ecofeministic concerns in the world-renowned animated movies, namely, *Spirited Away* (2001) and *WALL-E* (2008). The selected animated movies bring forth a futuristic world taking a nostalgic peek towards its past with a hope of retrieving the lost ecological balance and humane relationships.

Once Walt Disney said, that animation "can explain whatever the mind of a man can conceive... [It's a] means of communication yet devised for quick mass appreciation" (qtd. in Arete). *WALL-E* presents

lonely robot on a post-apocalyptic Earth, performing the menial job of collecting garbage like a Sisyphian task; and *Spirited Away* tells the story of a spoilt materialist girl who is on the way to a new house with her family, unintentionally gets transported into a world of Kamis, these wonderfully woven animated movies signal a warning for humans to evaluate their way of living. In *WALL-E* a post-apocalyptic Earth that is swamped with garbage where humans have shifted to a Starliner named Axiom, around 700 years ago, lives a single robot left behind to clean their mess. The robot, Waste Allocation Load Lifter: Earth Class (WALL-E) lives with his cockroach and has developed a personality after watching the 60s videos he had found in the garbage. WALL-E having a pet cockroach reverses the roles between living and non-living beings. *WALL-E* put forth the future that capitalism and commodification will bring. Earth is covered with trash emblemizing the mindless hoarding of humans owing to capitalism's manufactured desires. In a video, the CEO of Buy N Large condemns sustainability and harmony and snobbishly asserts that excessive manufacturing gives him the pleasure of offering more to the consumers. The humans of Axiom have not changed their attitude regarding consumerism. On Axiom, seconds after when Al announces that "Blue is the new red" (00:41:44) all the humans sipping their lunch, eyes on their screens, and moving on their hovering chairs, change their attire from red to blue. On Axiom, the capitalist structure makes all the choices for humans because they believe consumption is freedom an idea promoted by BnL. These instances highlight ecofeminist warnings against modern consumerism's environmental implications.

Like *WALL-E*, Studio Ghibli's *Spirited Away* also brings to screen the issue of a materialistic mentality that severs humans from nature, creating a

vicious cycle of work and consumption. The world of *Spirited Away* is based on the premise that material possessions define status leading to deranged relations and a polluted environment. Travelling in an expensive car and wearing Western clothing, Chihiro's family is shown to have quite limited knowledge about their own culture. When the family enters the tunnels and finds an abandoned amusement park, the parents decide to eat in a restaurant that seems to be empty. Ignoring Chihiro's insistence to not eat in the suspicious restaurants, the father boasts, "Do not worry, I've got credit cards and cash" (00:09:10). The parents are unable to resist themselves and indulge in their rapacious eating. The scene stands as a metaphor for the absence of values and dignity among parents, all they are concerned about is their materialist desires and economic ability to afford whatever they desire. The gorging of food stands as a metaphor for the drastic consumerist behaviour mainly presented through the avaricious eating of the parents and NoFace. The greed turned the parents into pigs and NoFace into a huge monster. Elaborating on the scene, Miyazaki mentions that "there were people that turned into pigs during Japan's bubble economy (consumer society) of the 1980s, and these people still haven't realised they've become pigs" (Gold). The consumerist profit-oriented society of *Spirited Away* is an excellent example of defamiliarization, where the animated movie is a twisted reflection of contemporary society. The unsuccessful venture of the bathhouse, Chihiro's inability to connect with her own culture, and the corrupted matriarch of the bathhouse are some of the instances that underscore the failed fusion of "the two ideologies" where the traditional bathhouses have "been reduced to a kitsch tourist trap polluted with neon signs and anglicised words" (Hill 27-35). Through the movie, Miyazaki criticised the notion of Western influence undermining Indigenous culture

and nature. Miyazaki has given a fresh perspective to the derogatory representation of female characters (shojo) in Japanese cinema. Earlier “the Shojo [young girl] is typically linked with consumption, either as a body consumed by males whose dreams seem to revolve around non-threatening school girls”, the modern Japanese media incorporated “darker and more complex traits” in the shojo characters (Napier 170). Miyazaki condemned the mindless consumption of such shojo characters and presented shojo characters who were not as cute and stylish but carried strong opinions. In *Spirited Away*, Miyazaki created a liminal world where nature and women are independent and influential.

The present study attempts to uncover the reason behind the subjugation of women and nature as well as underscores the resolutions provided in the selected texts. The strong bond between women and nature is based on the premise that “both are identified with femininity” (Cuomo 7). The characteristics of loving, caring and nurturing are considered feminine traits shared between women and nature. There is still an exploitative attitude towards women and nature, under the guise of selfless sacrifice. *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (1975), delineates that when in a societal structure if women and nature are subjugated for several decades, one cannot expect the liberation of women and rectification of ecological issues to happen rapidly and simultaneously. Consequently, Ruether urges that “the demands of the women’s movement and those of the ecological movement” must be united “to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of this society” paving the way for ecofeminism (204). Carolyn Merchant, in *Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (1980) argues that before the seventeenth century, nature was regarded as a nurturing mother, but the rapid influx of

scientific and technological developments began to treat nature as a machine. She underscores the shift of humanity from an organic to a mechanistic model to justify the exploitation of nature. The selected animated movies underscore this deranged relationship between human and nature and bring to life a society that nostalgically recalls their Indigenous tradition of treating each being as an equal. In the present study, both the selected texts present a world where a culture of hoarding things and consumerism has changed the face of humanity, which, in extension, is bound to have a devastating impact on nature.

In *WALL-E* Stanton depicts an unconventional female character who is technically a robot but as the movie proceeds, the robot (EVE) acquires humane emotions and becomes the female protagonist of the movie. EVE a high-tech directive robot enters Earth to find extraterrestrial Vegetation so that humans can recolonise the Earth. On her mission, she scans the land by flying over the garbage-covered Earth with grace and speed. Though the robots are not gendered, when WALL-E introduces himself to EVE the scene indicates an impending heterosexual affection between the two robots. EVE’s physical appearance resembles much like a white egg which represents fertility. When WALL-E brings the seedling in front of EVE, she carries the seedling inside of her and automatically goes into sleep mode as if she is protecting the sole hope for humans by keeping it safe inside her. EVE “transports the first post-apocalyptic plant inside of her, making her the carrier of organic life on Earth, a plant that enables human evolution” (Madureira 87). The scene where AUTO, a robot representing Axiom’s capitalist structure, tries to steal the plant from EVE gives an impression of capitalist society’s desire to control a woman’s womb or nature. To save humans’ last hope for returning to Earth, EVE fights with AUTO, Go-4 and many other

robots illustrating a protective motherly relationship between the plant and herself. The humans on Axiom are shown living a controlled and robotic life deprived of relations and emotions, EVE being a robot learns all the humane emotions from her visit to Earth signaling an emotional awakening among all the beings of Axiom.

Studio Ghibli's *Spirited Away* also underscore a co-dependent relationship between women and nature. Chihiro's empathy for the soot spirits and the stink spirit justifies an inherent bond between women and nature, due to their marginalised position in a capitalist world. Though Chihiro, at the beginning of the movie, is a spoilt, stubborn and timid girl as she travels through the liminal world of the bathhouse she dwells into her unconsciousness and comes out to be a responsible, empathetic and courageous person. As Chihiro leaves her parents for their orgy of eating, she finds a bathhouse within the premises of the abandoned theme park. The bathhouse is a liminal world where the Kami spirits come to relax and rejuvenate. The bathhouse is owned by the matriarch, Yubaba. Yubaba lives in affluence on the top floor of the bathhouse whereas other workers share rooms and are given minimum wages for their survival. The bathhouse metaphors the class division of a capitalist society where Yubaba's witchcraft is an allegory for capitalism (Ogihara-Schuck 2014). Haku, Yubaba's wingman, suggests Chihiro get a job from Yubaba otherwise she will turn into a pig suggests that "in Yubaba's world, one must always live with the constant threat of being completely devoured" because of the lack of societal interdependence (Miyazaki 272). The moment Yubaba gives the job to Chihiro she magically changes her name from Chihiro to Sen, making Chihiro her property. The process of robbing someone of their real name stands as a metaphor for the exploitation of the working class where their identity is under the control

of their owner. Yubaba has stolen all her employees' names, Haku being one of them. The reason behind Haku's inability to recall his name is an incident of the extinction of the Kohaku River as the river's passage is crowded with concrete buildings. The movie depicts that the animistic gods have "turned into emphatically fleshy, decadent, quasi-aristocrats anxious only to be pampered and fed choicest of the dishes" displaying the "rampant consumption to which post-industrial societies are enslaved in a demoralising fashion" (Cavallaro 139). The deities being a part of the capitalist structure is Miyazaki's attempt to underscore the deep-seated materialist ideology in the present society.

Both the selected movies highlight that capitalism promotes homogeneity and hierarchy by condemning diversity and equality. In *WALL-E*, the Starliner Axiom follows the hierarchical rules set by megacorporation Buy N Large. The dystopian world of Axiom resembles a lot George Orwell's *1984*, where the attitude of WALL-E and EVE is similar to the rebellious attitude of Winston and Julia. These dystopian worlds which at first give an illusion of technological supremacy and luxury are turning humans into mindless consumers. The arrival of WALL-E and the seedling on Axiom is considered an act of pollution, as these two can bring change and diversity to the monotonous world of Axiom. In Axiom, the children are being taught by robots, people lack any kind of physical activity leaving them with feeble bones and every human eye is stuck on their respective screens leaving them no time for humane emotions and relations. Similarly, in the bathhouse of *Spirited Away* when Chihiro enters the bathhouse a frog spirit feels her presence through her odour and announces that the bathhouse has been polluted by the presence of a human. The homogeneity of the surroundings suggests a distanced relationship between human and

non-human nature. When Chihiro tries to clean the stink spirit, which later turns out to be a noble river spirit, the amount of waste material coming out of it underscores how nature is treated like a garbage can.

Though technological advancements can achieve economic growth, human apathy towards nature cannot assure a brighter tomorrow. Vandana Shiva asserts that extreme intrusion of science and technology has adversely impacted nature and women causing the “death of feminine principles” and “maldevelopment”. Shiva asserts that “Maldevelopment militates against equality in diversity and super imposes the ideologically constructed category of Western technological man as a uniform measure of the worth of classes, cultures and genders (4). The selected movies underscore that humans as consumers completely devoid of any physical relation with nature will bring a societal system of oppression based on the unequal distribution of power and privilege. Ecofeminists hold the “value of care, love, trust, and appropriate reciprocity” in the highest esteem for having a harmonious co-dependent relationship among beings (Warren 33). Carolyn Merchant reinforces an ethic of partnership which calls for humans and nonhumans to take equal responsibility and cooperate to form dynamically balanced alliances. The partnership ethic “avoids gendering nature as a mother or a goddess (sex typing the planet), avoids endowing either males or females with a special relationship to nature ... [it] means that both women and men can enter into mutual relationships with each other and the planet independently of gender. (“Partnership Ethic”). Instead of perpetuating the age-old gender-based hierarchy of giving women the utmost responsibility for the upliftment of nature, Ecofeminism embraces “an ethic of caring and web-like human-nature relationship” (Merchant 205). Various scenes in *WALL-E* and *Spirited Away* appreciate the

co-dependent relationship among all beings and condemn a life centred on productivity. The opening scene of *WALL-E* depicts the Kessler effect becoming a reality, barren lands, dried water resources and Earth without humans, as a consequence of a world that caters to human greed. *WALL-E* finds the plant and gives it to EVE. *WALL-E* risks his life and memory multiple times in the movie to protect the seedling. When EVE puts the seedling into the Holo-Detector, a sense of mutual assistance is invoked by involving machines and humans (irrespective of their gender) to help give the plant to EVE. The scuffle between AUTO and Captain McCreamakes Axiom tilt, at this time to save some children from banging to the other side of Axiom, Mary with the help of John catches all the kids symbolising that to save the future we all need to have interdependent relationships. Though the movie promotes the ecofeminist belief in inculcating indigenous knowledge of farming and forestry into environmental ethics, strengthening a humanitarian relationship between nature and humans, by the end of the movie many scenes showcase machines assisting humans in farming, providing water resources and lighting fires. *WALL-E* to some extent favours Alex Steffen’s concept of bright green environmentalism where technology is considered potentially helpful in ecological matters (qtd. in Madureira 51).

Studio Ghibli’s *Spirited Away* encourages a sense of mutual assistance and humane relationships through Chihiro’s journey of self-transformation through which Miyazaki attempts to promote the value of “diversity, interdependence, sustainability, cooperation, and renewal” (Vance 134). Miyazaki has encouraged these values by evoking the traditional Japanese principles of Mottainai and On. The principle of Mottainai values the complete utilisation of a product, which is shown

through the scene of stink spirit, and the principle of On “signifies a sense of moral indebtedness” (Bean). When Chihiro finds the bathhouse while visiting the abandoned theme park, Haku warns her and tries to get her out of the theme park. Haku is the first character of the bathhouse from whom Chihiro receives care and empathy. Earlier a self-centred and materialist girl Chihiro learns from Kamaji and Lin the quality of being selfless. Chihiro’s first act of taking responsibility is witnessed when she takes the task of cleaning the stink spirit. Though she falls into the stinky and muddy water still she shows concern for the degraded condition of the river spirit. The stink spirit after being cleaned changes into a white dragon and gives Chihiro a magic ball as a token of gratitude. Chihiro has saved the magic dumpling for her parents’ rescue, but her moral indebtedness dictates her to save Haku and NoFace first. While returning from Zeniba’s cottage Chihiro recalls that Haku is a river spirit who once saved her from drowning. At this moment, she recollects Haku’s real name (Kohaku River) and becomes Haku’s saviour. These scenes underscore the relationship of mutual care and dependence between humans and nature.

Ecofeminists believe that equality among all beings can be achieved “through overturning economic and social hierarchies that turn all aspects of life into a market society” (Merchant 206). Both the selected movies promote the message of interdependence, equality and the ethic of care by encouraging indigenous values and forgotten traditions. Andrew Stanton, the director of *WALL-E*, mentioned that he never intended to make an environmental-themed movie, he believes that for an apocalypse to happen “disconnection is going to be the cause” (L’Ecuyer). Like Stanton, Miyazaki has also emphasised remaining connected with one’s culture and encouraged humane relationships. *WALL-E* and *Spirited Away* reject all forms of

dualisms that originate from “Western modes of rationality that operate as interlocking systems of domination” (Merchant 207). Hence the animated movies while presenting a mirror to society envision a humane decentralised society.

Works Cited

Primary Sources

1. Miyazaki, Hayao. *Spirited Away*. Fathom Events, 2001.
2. Stanton, Andrew. *WALL-E*. Disney and Pixar Animation Studio, 2008.

Secondary Sources

1. Arete. “Animation can explain whatever the mind of man can conceive: Why use Animation for your Health Campaign?” *Medium*, 21 Dec. 2022. Doi: <https://aretestories.medium.com/animation-can-explain-whatever-the-mind-of-man-can-conceive-why-use-animation-for-your-health-531c34a58bee>
2. Bean, Travis. “Spirited Away (2001): The Definitive Explanation.” *Colossus*, New School Critics, doi: [filmcolossus.com/spirited-away-2001-explained #NaN](https://filmcolossus.com/spirited-away-2001-explained/#NaN)
3. Buell, Lawrence. “The Ecocritical Insurgency.” *New Literary History*, vol. 30, no. 3, 1999, pp 699-712. JSTOR, doi: [jstor.org/stable/20057562](https://www.jstor.org/stable/20057562).
4. Cavallaro, Dani. *The Animé Art of Hayao Miyazaki*. McFarland & Company, 2006, P. 139.
5. Cuomo, Chris J. “On Ecofeminist Philosophy.” *Ethics and the Environment*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2002, pp. 1-11. *Project MUSE*, doi: [10.1353/een.2002.0016](https://www.projectmuse.com/doc/10.1353/een.2002.0016).
6. *Global Animation, VFX & Video Games Industry: Strategies, Trends & Opportunities (2020-25)*, 5236328, 2022, URL: <https://www.researchandmarkets.com/reports/5236328/global-animation-vfx-and-video-games-industry>.
7. Gold, Corey. “Studio Ghibli letter sheds new light on Spirited Away mysteries”. *Sora News* 24, 14

- jul 2016, Accessed on 5 april 2024. <https://soraneews24.com/2016/07/14/studio-ghibli-letter-sheds-new-light-on-spirited-away-mysteries/>.
8. Hill, Michael. "Stylistic analysis of Spirited Away." Japanese HSC Extention course support material 2009-2013, New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2008. Doi: [quia.com/files/quia/users/bakersensei/ext_japanese1.pdf](https://www.quia.com/files/quia/users/bakersensei/ext_japanese1.pdf)
 9. L'Ecuyer, Jonathan. "An Oscarshout-out: 'WALL-E' director Praises Rockport Teacher in acceptance speech." *Gloucester Times*. 27 May 2012. doi: <https://gloucester-times.com/punews/local-story-054221319.html#selection>
 10. Madureira, Marco Andre Valente. "WALL-E and the De-Greening Cycle." *Ecocriticism in Disney/Pixar WALL-E and the De-Greening Cycle*. Universidade De Coimbra, 2012, pp. 81-90.
 11. Merchant, Carolyn. "Ecofeminism". *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World*. 2nd ed, Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group. 2005, pp. 193-222.
 12. ---, "Partnership with the Earth." *Science and Nature: Past, Present, and Future*, Routledge, 2018, pp. 266.
 13. Miyazaki, Hayao. *Turning Point, 1997–2008*. Trans. Beth Cary and Frederik L. Schodt. San Francisco: VIZ Media, 2008. Pp. 235-300.
 14. Napier, Susan J. "Matter Out of Place: Carnival, Containment, and Cultural Recovery in Miyazaki's "Spirited Away". *The Journal of Japanese Studies*, 2006, vol. 32, no.2, pp. 287-310. Doi: [jstor.org/stable/25064646](https://www.jstor.org/stable/25064646)
 15. Ogihara-Schuck, Eriko, *Miyazaki's Animism Abroad: The Reception of Japanese Religious Themes by American and German Audience*, McFarland & Company, 2014.
 16. Ruether, Rosemary. *New Women, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation*. New York: The Seabury Press, 1975.
 17. Shiva, Vandana. *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*, Kali for Women, 1988
 18. Warren, Karen J. "Introduction to Ecofeminism." *Systemic Alternatives*, 2016, pp. 33. URL: systemicalternatives.org/2016/10/24/introduction-to-ecofeminism/