

Ecofeminism in Thea Astley's *Drylands*

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ABSTRACT

Australian multi-award-winning novelist Thea Astley was a great writer in promoting feminism and ecofeminism in her later years' writing. This paper analyzes her fourth Miles Franklin award novel — *Drylands* from the perspective of ecofeminism. From analysis, it draws a conclusion that Astley makes a lot of efforts to raise readers' awareness that her women characters' liberation depends on their economic independence but it will be a hard and long way to achieve the final emancipation of women and total equality between women and men.

INTRODUCTION

Thea Astley (1925-2004), an multi-award-winning Australian novelist, a prolific writer, one of Australia's most celebrated writers, published 16 works of fiction during her lifetime. She has won the Miles Franklin Award 4 times—in 1962 for *The Well Dressed Explorer*, which established her reputation as a sharp-eyed satirist of Australian social mores, in 1965 for *The Slow Natives*, in 1972 for *The Acolyte* and in 2000 for *Drylands*—her final novel. In 1989 she was awarded the Patrick White Award. Other important awards include the 1975 Age Book of the Year Award for *A Kindness Cup*, an award from the James Cook Foundation for Australian Literary Studies in the early 1980s, the 1986 ALS Gold Medal for *Beachmasters*, the 1988 Steele Rudd Award for *It's Raining in Mango*, the 1990 NSW Premier's Prize for *Reaching Tin River*, 1996 Age Book of the Year Award and the FAW Australian Unity Award for *The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow*. In 2002, she was given a special award for her lifetime achievement at the New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards.

Susan Sheridan notes that Astley was “the only woman among the leading modernist novelists of the postwar period” (Sheridan, 2016, 54) and the only woman who ‘published consistently throughout the 1960s and 1970s, when

the literary world was heavily male dominated’ (Sheridan, 2016, 2). Meanwhile, influenced by women's movement in the United States and innovative American short-form writers such as William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, and Ernest Hemingway, Astley's work began to show her feminist ideas and receive American attention and she undertook a number of residencies in the United States. This paper is going to explore her ecofeminist ideas in the last novel *Drylands* published in 1999.

DIFFERENT DEFINITIONS OF ECOFEMINISM

Ecofeminism is a broad movement with so many varying strands and sub-strands it almost defies definition. It merged feminism with the crisis of the ecosphere, which was an evolving crisis in the 80s and beyond. Ecofeminism emerged as part of the 1970s feminist movement and is believed to be coined by French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne's term ecofeminisme, which appeared in 1974 in *Le féminisme ou la mort*, where d'Eaubonne calls for a feminist revolution to assure global ecological survival. (Howel, 231) The term represents women's potential for bringing about an ecological revolution to ensure human survival on the planet. (Diamond, 100).

Ecofeminism argues that there is a connection between the oppression of women and the domination of nature by a patriarchal society. d'Eaubonne holds patriarchal systems and male power responsible for "the destruction of the environment and for the accelerated pollution that accompanies this madness, bequeathing an uninhabitable planet for posterity" (d'Eaubonne 1981, 64). The ecological revolution that d'Eaubonne charges to lead requires destruction of male power to make way, not for female power or matriarchy, but for new egalitarian gender relations between men and women and between humans and nature (d'Eaubonne 1981, 66–67).

Rosemary Radford Ruether, an ecofeminist theologian, features the interplay of feminism and ecology in her definition of ecofeminism, according to her, "Ecofeminism brings together these two explorations of ecology and feminism, in their full, or deep forms, and explores how male domination of women and domination of nature are interconnected, both in cultural ideology and in social structures" (Howel, 233).

Janis Birkeland, an ecofeminist environmental planner, sees ecofeminism as the logical conclusion of feminism that "theorizes the interrelations among self, societies, and nature" (Birkeland 1993, 17–18).

There is not a consensus definition of ecofeminism, but there is something in common. As their definitions of ecofeminism indicate, ecofeminism refers to an interconnection between women and nature, domination of women and the domination of nature. It argues that there is a connection between the oppression of women and the domination of nature by a patriarchal society. Unless women are saved, the future of humans on earth will be gloomy.

Ecofeminists are not merely concerned with liberating women and nature. They also care about the whole planet with all its creatures, including human and nonhuman. It argues for achieving social and environmental justice through liberating women and nature.

ECOFEMINISM IN *DRYLANDS*

Drylands was first published in 1999, with this novel Astley won her fourth Miles Franklin Award, shared with WA famous poet Kim Scott for *Benang*. The whole novel was set in a small Queensland town whose name gives the book its title. According to the author, this was a town to escape to, rot in, vanish in—cut off from other towns by gravel roads and sorghum acres and sheep paddocks. (*Drylands*, 116) "It wasn't really a town. It was more a hesitation in the road." (*Drylands*, 257) *Drylands* is dying in its bootstraps. The novel intertwines 6 stories in which the unfortunate inhabitants suffer not only from the usual Australian draught but from a spiritual draught as well (Adelaide, 167)

The book was bleak. Lamb finds this novel bleak and in an interview after its publication Astley said: "I might have to agree—maybe I was feeling bleak." At the same time she wrote it (Lamb, 301). The novel's mood is closely related to the actual life of the author herself.

From its beginning, the novel shuffles us through a series of scenes that focus on different characters but all with something in common: their marginalization, their unhappiness, loneliness, frustration, and their compulsion to escape both

literally and emotionally. (Adelaide, 173) It mainly focused on the misfit, the outsider and the loser in life. The novel is hard to read and understand not only because of Thea Astley's unusual arrangement of the languages and sentences, but also because of its fragmented stories and inconsistent characters. As a reader, I do find it hard to sort out the clue or line to connect all the chapters and stories, thus in this sense, it is fragmented. But in the perspective of ecofeminism, evidence is easily found in the stories.

Women's sufferings from family and surroundings are seen everywhere. Where there is oppression, there is resistance. Women characters find ways to show their independence, and in a sense, their hard struggle to break away from family and husband's control is striking though most of it is heartbreaking and ends up a failure. Here are some typical examples.

In the second story, a literate woman stranger from the city named Evie came to the small town *Drylands* and noticed that nearly one-third of the population there could not read or were ineffectual readers—and most of them were chaps. The town was a cultural desert. She called herself an intruder. She planned to teach women some knowledge of arts but unfortunately only four women (namely Win, Paddy, Lannie and Ro) were eager for culture. Evie swallowed disappointment at the lack of takers. She watched the four women's eager faces, noted their worn hands, and understood the isolation of the small place that drove people to seize any opportunity for escape from humdrumery. She noticed that the four women were playing truant from husbands who regarded their activity as female folly. They were fighting the darkness (*Drylands*, 81). Were they successful?

She told them to help each other. Their eyes lit up with possibility because this day was different with the pleasure of simply cutting loose from the ordinariness of the other-day grind in this simplest of ways (*Drylands*, 83). Their bonds strengthened. They gained some sort of power and strength. Evie taught them not only musical knowledge but also readings, setting the simplest assignments (*Drylands*, 87). She taught the four women to have their own ideas and enjoy the happiness of being free from family burdens and endless chores. She encouraged them not to be simply milkers, tractor drivers, cleaners, cooks, gardeners from morning till night and they should be themselves doing something new in life. Evie instilled them with the classics by world-famous figures such as Chekhov, Hemingway and Carver. She was anxious to enlighten these women by music and books.

But something unpleasant happened and interrupted their short enjoyment. One day, they were sitting in the shade of the pepper trees over tea and sandwiches when a truck pulled up on the road with an angry screech of rubber and two men got out of the truck and came close to them. They were Win's and Ro's husbands. The two men showed their violence in dealing with their wives. Ro's husband cursed the teacher from the city. He did not allow Ro to attend the class and dragged at her arm, he jerked her up roughly, then he drew his arm back like a paddle and swung his palm forward in one savage movement that cracked the bone of her cheek. The poor woman let out a small scream and fell forward, her hands digging at the grass. He used his boot to nudge her

shoulder as she lay, nudged, drew back and drove in harder. Ro was beaten seriously. What terrible and terrifying domestic violence!

Woman's place was at home and she was not allowed to get out of the family to attend any class, take part in any activity or have her own ideas. Evie advised Ro not to stay with her husband and take a refuge on the coast and she should do something for a change, for Evie ended her unhappy marriage due to the months of disillusion with a gambler's broken promises, the poverty, the debts and the emptied bank accounts. All had hardened her and she detested it. Luckily she had finally walked out of all of the misery and left the dreadful man. She looked at the ruins of the day, the discarded lunch, the injured woman, the broken but loving attempts to assuage, Evie was eager to help those four women in her own way but due to the influence of deep-rooted patriarchy, her strength was not powerful enough to save them out of the great misery. The town was so small that everyone knew each other. No one could help women in dealing with the domestic violence, the police wouldn't act and they always took the husband's side in these matters. In their words, women wouldn't do anything to upset a mate (*Drylands*, 93) Women were possessions of men and they were in an inferior position and they could not protect themselves, nor the police, nor anybody else! That was a vicious circle. Who would be their rescuers? God help those who help themselves. Only when women themselves take actions to resist against men's merciless control and persecution, can they emancipate themselves. That's to say, the emancipation of women depends on themselves.

In this story, all of Evie's efforts proved useless and she could not talk Ro into giving her own time to think a way out, learning from her personal experiences in marriage, Evie wanted to save them from their misery, and she was eager to arouse their awareness of self-power, self-respect, self-confidence and self-value, but all in vain. Finally she had to leave the town. At the end of the story, the five women's efforts ended up a failure and they could not change their fate of being oppressed by their husbands.

As time went by, a woman began to realize her desire for a change in life. She took actions to resist against man's control. She was Lannie Cunneen, a typical housewife, and in the above mentioned story, she was one of the four women who took the classes taught by Evie. Her daily work for twenty years was to take good care of her husband and 6 boys. One day she was fed up with all the boring chores of having prepared 9328 lunches and drove all morning and the whole afternoon aimlessly forgetting until she stopped on a small knoll overlooking a beach. She wanted a place of her own without any disturbance and she made it. She fell asleep lulled by the steady rhythm of water breaking on the sand below. She did enjoy the moment of quietness until suddenly she was woken up by two coppers and was brought back to the police station where she said nothing except keeping giving them numbers in thousands. After her husband Fred came, she was sent to a therapy clinic to seek treatment from a psychiatrist. She was regarded as a neurotic for she kept mentioning numbers. Lannie said, "I have six (boys),

all school age. I have made rough estimates of the numbers of dinners, breakfasts, lunches, washings and ironings over twenty years of bliss (here ironic). My husband won't allow boys to give a hand. He says it's women's work. He believes a woman's place is in the home. (*Drylands*, 212) Permanently." Women are not treated as equal as men and their roles are just housewives, laborers and carers of the family.

After marriage, Fred did not want her to work, so she gave up her job and was confined to her family although she worked at a commercial radio station quite well with the potential for advancement for something better. In the case of Lannie, she was not allowed to work and her career came to an end, but she did not yield to such an unfair fate. She wanted a change in life and wanted to prove her own value and won respect from others. In the clinic, she was advised by the psychiatrist to receive a month of treatment for rest, medication and a complete change of scene. At the same time, the psychiatrist advised Fred to employ a housekeeper. Fred refused his suggestion due to the high cost.

Take the emotional change of Lannie as an example. She enjoyed the rest of staying at the clinic. She enjoyed having meals brought on trays. She read sometimes but mostly sat in the small courtyard of the clinic and stared into space. She completely enjoyed her quiet time in the clinic and did not want to go back home (*Drylands*, 218). She lived a life totally different from her past life of twenty years. Fred insisted Lannie should go home. Here is their conversation.

Lannie—"I want a job".

Fred—"You've got a job. Looking after your family".

Lannie—"Not that sort of job. A change of job. A change of direction. Look! I've spent twenty years of my life cooking washing ironing cleaning and I want something else. (Please notice there is not any comma among all the things done by Lannie, which indicates that she kept on doing all the tedious housework day after day and year after year for twenty years. The author did not use any punctuation to show that Lannie was made busy doing various chores at home and did not have time of rest.) I'm sick to death of your telling them that's women's work. You make that simple fallacy all men make—you are physically more powerful, therefore you have total power and because you have total power you assume you are more intelligent! (Women were considered less powerful and less intelligent than men. Men were considered creatures of intellect and reason. Man's superior intellect was considered permission enough to exert power over women. Here man justifies his right and superiority over women.) That's your mistake, jumping from muscles to brains. A mistake or cunning. So you proceed to shove and bully and treat wives like peasants. Well, this wife anyway. I'm sick to death of doing nothing but clean up after you all. I don't want more babies. I want a job that pays me something."

Fred—"You are mad. The things you are saying. Bloody mad." (*Drylands*, 220-221)

According to the conversation, it is clear that Lannie is victimized by patriarchy which is at the core of Western thought and justifies men's action, resulting in the exploitation of women. To him, woman is a mere possession to be

controlled and owned. Provider of money in the family makes Fred think he can own everything in the world. Woman is like the material object created to satisfy the needs of man. Woman does not have an independent personality and her self-value. Her place is at home, and her job is taking care of the whole family, doing all kinds of chores, serving man and children. Thus, Lannie could not break free from the cage set by her husband and 6 boys. Fred considers her a personal possession.

But for Lannie, she was eager to have the ability to have a voice of her own. Escape her husband's domination was her priority. She did not want to surrender to her husband's oppression and began to realize the necessity of being brave enough to resist his control. Thus, she took more actions to prove her own power. Gradually she was aware of her power. She used it for protecting herself and reclaiming her right as a woman. She avoided being controlled and tamed by her husband. Lannie left the clinic without telling anyone and lived in a hotel in the town of Drylands in preparation for job seeking. The fact was that she had been out of the workforce for twenty years, though it was impossible to land a job, she persisted in her stubborn way. She approached the local radio station, neatly dressed and achieved an interview with the personnel manager who seemed uninterested in her explanation of her background in commercial broadcasting twenty years before. In spite of such indifference, Lannie insisted on saying that "I'll do anything. Make tea, clear up back clerical work, answer telephones, organize appointments, do research. I can handle a computer. I'll do it for a junior wage." That means she degraded herself by getting any kind of paid work even if paid low. "General dogsbody, is that what you want?" Lannie answered "That's what I want." "Me. She thought. Me". Here the capita Me indicated that she was independent and she was free from any control and oppression. In her words, she wanted a life. Just a bit of life outside kitchen and the wash-house. When she was told by the personnel manager of the radio station she could start work the next day, she was so excited and eager that she responded she could start immediately with zeal. She began to reorganize her life and decided to take her car so that she could work every day. It proved that she settled in at work and she was efficient. She gained her self-confidence and self-respect from her colleagues, what's more, she enjoyed a day spent in the company of adults and they raised her wages. Through her great efforts, she was successful! Her story told us that a woman could be successful

and independent and free of man's control by working and earning her own wages and living. Economic independence guarantees her independence of personality and helps her win dignity and self-respect that she hasn't enjoyed for the past twenty years.

The author did a great job of raising awareness to the need of liberating women. Although the whole novel was bleak and showed readers a gloomy picture, nearly all the efforts by women characters ended up a failure, it did not give a successful way of liberating women, yet it did give readers the slightest hope of building women's self-respect, self-value and self-confidence by learning and earning their own living and by thinking independently.

CONCLUSION

Thea Astley wrote about the victimization of different women characters in different ways. She did not end the novel at a very hopeful and victorious note. She showed sympathy for women and their fate indicating that there was a hard and long way to go for women to achieve liberation through economic independence and struggle against men's oppression. Unless women are saved, the future of humans on earth will be gloomy.

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