
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Study of Women-Nature Connections of *The Rabbit Hutch* from the Perspective of Ecofeminism

Xiuzhen Zeng

Southwest Jiaotong University, Chengdu, China

Corresponding Author: Xiuzhen Zeng, E-mail: 1684415991@qq.com

| ABSTRACT

Tess Gunty is one of the most recognized contemporary novelists in America. Her debut novel, *The Rabbit Hutch*, is a mesmerizing work reflecting the individual struggles to survive and connect in a decadent modern society where everyone seems to be isolated from the outside world, whether physically or spiritually. Ecofeminism emphasizes that women and nature are closely connected as they are considered to be in an inferior status and, therefore, oppressed and dominated by men in the patriarchal society. This study intends to focus on what kind of interconnectedness of women and nature is presented in the novel and further provide an analysis of their twin domination and oppression by the male agencies of *The Rabbit Hutch* within the Ecofeminist theoretical framework. The novel offers ecofeminist narratives that illustrate the objectification and commodification of women and nature and exhibit the dangers of men's master mentality and masculinized exploitation towards women and nature. The study concludes that oppressed by patriarchal agencies, women and nature formed a mutually supporting relationship. Under value dualism and hierarchical oppositions, women and nature are instrumentalized or commodified by the dualistic ideologies adopted by patriarchal agencies.

| KEYWORDS

The Rabbit Hutch, Ecofeminism, women-nature connections, instrumentalization.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 01 May 2024

PUBLISHED: 17 May 2024

DOI: 10.32996/ijts.2024.4.2.1

1. Introduction

Tess Gunty is an American novelist born in 1993 in South Bend, Indiana. She is the youngest recipient of the National Book Award for fiction since Philip Roth won in 1960. Gunty graduated from the University of Notre Dame and earned a master's degree in Creative Writing from New York University. In her works, Gunty exhibits a unique writing style and reveals the beauty, complexity, diversity and contradictions of the American Midwest. Critics commented on Gunty's writing skill, praising that "Gunty is a master of the artful phrase" who "makes powerful use of language along the way."

In 2022, Gunty published her first original novel, *The Rabbit Hutch*. The novel's main setting is the titular Rabbit Hutch, a run-down apartment complex. The story follows several characters, including Blandine Watkins, Todd, Jack, and Malik. Under multiple crises concerning ecology and existence, all of these characters struggle to feel human connection in a world that has shuffled them around. In this piercing novel, Gunty wants us to question not just what we owe one another in moments of crisis but also how we create crises in our daily lives. The novel is well-received by the readers and critics. It won numerous awards, including the National Book Award for Fiction, Barnes and Noble Discover Prize, Waterstones Debut Fiction Prize, etc. Publishers Weekly ultimately named *The Rabbit Hutch* one of the top ten books of 2022, regardless of genre.

2. Theoretical Basis

Ecofeminism came about as a result of the combination of the feminist movement and the ecological movement. The term was initially introduced by a French feminist named Françoise d'Eaubonne in her work *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* in 1974. In its essence, ecofeminism is open to diverse perspectives and ultimately denies a unified definition. All ecofeminists agree that there are important connections between the oppression of women and that of nature. However, the woman-nature connections alleged by different scholars are sometimes competing, sometimes mutually complementary or supportive. Cultural feminism emphasizes the natural connection between women and nature as exclusive and unique and supports the concept of "Mother Earth" and "femininity of nature". Scholars such as Vandana Shiva believe that women are naturally and biologically closer to nature than men. This claim is rejected by some ecofeminists since they consider this idea falls into the trap of male/female dualism, which is "an alienated form of differentiation, in which power construes and constructs differences in terms of an inferior and alien realm" (Plumwood 1993, p. 42). Constructivist ecofeminists like Simone de Beauvoir and Sherry B Ortner also reject the essential connection between women and nature by stating that the connection is a mere social creation and not natural. They emphasize the essentialist and negative impact of connecting women with nature as this could alienate her from culture by widening the man-woman and culture-nature binaries. Ecofeminists noticed that patriarchal civilization has constructed dualism and hierarchies that link women and non-human nature in a category of "subordinated others." The value dualism interiorizes women and nature by naturalizing women and feminizing nature. Women are considered to be related to nature and emotions, while men are related to culture and reason. As Karen J. Warren (1987) notes, women are often described in animal terms, such as "cows, foxes, chickens, serpents, bitches, old bats, pussycats, bird-brains," and "Nature is often raped, mastered, conquered, controlled and mined" (p. 3). Despite the different propositions from various scholars, at its core, ecofeminism holds that the oppression of women is interlinked to the oppression of nature with the same masculine-centered assumptions and practices linked to patriarchal agencies. The identification of such connections will help to challenge the patriarchal ideology of domination over women and nature.

Gunty's novel provides ample evidence that the women-nature concerns are at the core of her fictional writings, considering that the women-nature interconnections are evidently present in her work. The male characters exhibit the master mentality towards women and nature. Due to its relatively new release, the novel has not yet received enough academic attention. Through the in-depth analysis of the novel from the unique perspective of ecofeminism, the deep-rooted cause for the dualistic treatment of women and nature can be revealed, which will bring enlightenment to the study of the text so as to enrich the study of the novel.

3. Discussion and Analysis

3.1 The Interconnectedness of Women and Nature

Ecofeminism notes that women and nature share similarities and connections under the oppression of the patriarchal agencies, and investigation of the two together can shed light on what can be done to ease their oppressive force for both parties. This women-nature interconnectedness is evidently exhibited in Gunty's work if carefully examined. Ecofeminism acknowledges that nature and women share a similar historical status under the domination of patriarchal men, so they can find comfort and support in each other. Blandine, the main female character of the novel, is a child of Vacca Vale born and raised. From the author's brief narrative, we learn that she had a tough life going to one foster family after another, with her mother addicted to drugs and her father in jail. Her situation is worsened by her gender, "No one has it easy in the Vacca Vale system, But Blandine had it the worst, being so smart and female" (Gunty, 2022, p. 40). Beautiful and vulnerable, violence inflicted on Blandine from male identities is frequent and common. Blandine chose the self-enforced exile from society to protect herself. The valley in the natural space revitalizes Blandine and gives her the peace she yearns for. She loves to read in the open meadow of the valley. It is "the place she ever loved" (Gunty, 2022, p. 86) because "it is always vacant, and the bird song is loud", and most of all "she feels safe" (Gunty, 2022, p. 291). Over the years, she has developed a strong attachment to the natural world. When she is hurt by other people, the meadow is where she goes to make herself feel better. This enjoyment of nature is one of the few things Blandine holds herself entitled to have. So, it explains the rage she felt when she learned about the revitalization plan, which will transform the valley to generate avenues. The interconnectedness between woman and nature is not only manifested in Blandine's strong affinity towards nature but also reflected in their mutual protection for each other. Blandine gains safety and strength in the protection of nature; in return, she rises as an active fighter to protect the natural world. The urban revitalization plan promises to repair the destruction of the city at the lush expense of destroying a park called Chastity Valley, which Blandine considers "the last good thing in Vacca Vale." (Gunty, 2022, p. 19). Blandine holds a strong inclination to protect nature. She followed relevant information about this revitalization plan and successfully sabotaged the launching ceremony of the revitalization plan by pouring a bag of animal bones, dirt she collected from the valley and fake blood through the vent of the convention. The revitalization plan was postponed by this mysterious attack. She even approached one of her male roommates, Jack, whom she had been avoiding, to gain information on one of the initiators of the revitalization plan, Maxwell Pinky and intended to set a similar trick to threaten him, hoping to further prevent the revitalization plan. Nature gains an opportunity to survive under Blandine's efforts. When Blandine discovered a little wounded sheep in the valley, ignoring its awful smell, she helped the goat to survive. She considered the goat as her close friend, and she bravely stood in front of the poor goat to protect it when her male roommates tried to stab the goat. Though

nearly being stabbed to death, the goat is safe under her protection. Under the violence from the male parties, women and nature comfort and support each other.

In the text, women are often associated with animals. As Warren (2000) suggested, by associating women and animals where animals are seen as inferior to humans, the inferior status of women is reinforced and authorized. There are several textual instances suggesting that Blandine is animalized by male identities. Blandine's high school music teacher, James Yager, took advantage of Blandine's innocence, only using her body for sexual purposes. Blandine's attempt to enter his life was perceived by him as a sloshing "hamster in a swimming pool" (Gunty, 2022, p. 73), whose action seems futile and absurd. Therefore, James's master mentality and superiority towards Blandine, who has been animalized and inferiorized, is revealed. The animalizing of women is most exemplified through the same violence women and animals receive from the male party. When Blandine bumped into the scene where her three male roommates tried to kill the goat she rescued, she was shocked and terrified. Despite the dangerous situation, she bravely dove in front of the goat and shielded it. Her ferocity and animal-like speed surprised them. However, as perceived by the male members, her resistance seemed insignificant and futile since a small cat could not win a fight over human beings. The textual evidence such as "You never saw her coming. She moves like a cat" (Gunty, 2022, p. 243) or "She was screaming like an animal" (Gunty, 2022, p. 244) suggest that Blandine is dehumanized and pushed to the inferior state of animals from the male perspective. When Blandine tried to free the goat, Jack, one of her roommates, tackled her down and ripped her strip. Under this teamwork, she was eventually stabbed nearly to death by another roommate, Todd. When they can't hurt the goat, they hurt Blandine as a suitable subsidy to achieve their purpose. Women are animalized by the male party; thus, they see no difference between the goat and Blandine. It can be seen that, in many ways, women and nature are closely interconnected. This kind of interconnectedness between women and nature is not so biological and inherent but rather constructed and acquired. As being relegated to an inferior state, women and nature are inevitably violated and oppressed by the patriarchal mindset in a male dominated-society.

3.2 The Instrumentalization and Exploitation of Women and Nature

Ecofeminists have realized that both women and nature have been in a position of being subordinated to and dominated by men. The instrumentalization and over-exploitation of women and nature are prevalent in the text. Blandine, formally named Tiffany, is subjected to continual sexual violence. Before she was seventeen, the text hinted that she was often sexually harassed by men. Before her sexual experience with James, "everyone who touched Blandine relished it precisely because she didn't" (Gunty, 2022, p. 88). When she was in her first year of high school, she was targeted by James. "In this equation, the variable of Y could be a producer...X could be his employee, his stepdaughter, a wild plot of land, but he must believe X is his...This time, Y is a man named James Yager...This time, X is a seventeen-year-old named Tiffany Watkins" (Gunty, 2022, p. 68). In this relationship, James is the master identity, while Blandine is the inferior one owned by him. As soon as James saw Blandine, he got excited because she was "insecure, cerebral, and enraged", anyway so "suited for prey" (Gunty, 2022, p. 68). Blandine is thus objectified and deprived of subjectivity from the beginning of their relationship. To James, Blandine was a "recreational drug", a "bad habit" (Gunty, 2022, p. 71). In school, he gave her special attention, asked her to stay late, and demanded extra practice. Blandine irresistibly fell in love with the man who made her feel loved. For the first time, Blandine thought she could have a bright future with James. However, her dreams were soon ruthlessly shattered by James. As the instrumentalizing identity "deems the Others as only useful to the Self as a means to an end" (Skof & Hawke, 2021, p. 163), James only deemed Blandine as a useful instrument to achieve his end. Instrumentalism, as a form of objectification, according to Plumwood (1993), is an important corollary of radical exclusion and incorporation. Blandine is instrumentalized into a useful resource for James "to preserve his youth" (Gunty, 2022, p. 87). The male identity wants to consume the female body to meet its end. After he had sex with Blandine and considered the end of him accomplished, Blandine was immediately cut out of his life. The erotic conception of the female body and the determination of its status as only a source of sexual gratification testifies to the incorporation and its corollary instrumentalization of women. Another girl named Zoe, who's a lot like Blandine, also fell for James' trap. "If Tiffany believes that she is the only one they injured, she is even younger than he thought" (Gunty, 2022, p. 86). The word "they" indicates that there are more "James", hence further proving the prevalence of the instrumentalization of women in such a society.

It is generally held by ecofeminism that what men do to women, they do to nature. Nature, same as women, contains "goods and services", people "will try to extract those goods and services without her permission" (Gunty, 2022, p. 203). Nature is often conceptualized by patriarchal agencies as a background and presented as passive and static. As Harvey (1996), an American ecologist and environmentalist, points out, "We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us" (p. 120). The ecological crisis in the novel comes about as a result of a masculine capitalist society that regards nature in instrumentalist terms. Back in the 19th century, the once dominating car manufacturing factory Zorn Automobile was established in Vacca Vale, which brought great economic development to the city. "For decades, Zorn Automobiles was a miracle, a heartbeat, an empire" (Gunty, 2022, p. 107). In the relentless expansion of the business, the company polluted the whole city with dark chemical smoke. "Before the report even found IDHH, the benzene has already ascended as a gas into the Vacca Vale air, polluting houses, workplaces, schools, and churches" (Gunty, 2022, p. 107). Along with the economic development, great damages had been done to the city, to

the natural spaces, and inevitably to its people. "But the real punishment wouldn't surface until it was too late to prevent them: anemia, miscarriage, birth defects, infertility, bone marrow dysplasia. Lymphoma. Leukemia" (Gunty, 2022, p. 107). After the fall of the local empire, the people here are left with broken bodies and mentality. The city Vacca Vale now ranks top one of the "ten American Dying Cities" (Gunty, 2022, p. 66), characterized by over-consumption, unchecked corporations, and environmental abuse, indicating the "disposable attempts at human ascendance" (Gunty, 2022, p.104). Under this context, the pursuit of material wealth is still highlighted; valuing money over nature has caused such exploitation of natural resources to the degree of depletion. Without any measures to save the deteriorating environment, people invade the natural territory with industrial farmland. It inevitably becomes a chemical assault, leading to "a patina of health desperately concealing and sealing a future of dust. Of drought. Of lifeless dirt that no machine, chemical, company, or person can defibrillate" (Gunty, 2022, p. 105). As a result, the five-hundred-year flood struck Vacca Vale twice in two years, further damaging the whole area and threatening the lives of people in this city. Developers even pounced on the opportunity, planning to take advantage of the "natural beauty" of Vacca Vale to turn this city into a "bad imitation of Silicon Valley" (Gunty, 2022, p.108). The value dualism indicates that the "upperside is an end in itself, but the underside has no such intrinsic value, is not for itself but merely useful, a resource" (Plumwood, 1993, p. 53). As the superior upperside with a master mentality, men have denied the intrinsic value of nature and view it as an instrument to fulfill their purposes, therefore further damaging nature in an irreversible manner. "Obvious to the plan, the factories loom and groan. Rusty and trapped in their expired power, they march to the east until they vanish into the hallowed glimmer of the Valley" (Gunty, 2022, p. 108). Ecofeminism is not against using nature's resources to the benefit of humanity, but it is concerned about the misuse and abuse of nature's qualities of giving and nurturing. This over-exploitation of nature without any consideration for the future is criticized from an ecofeminist view.

Anthropocentric culture regards nature and animals as similar objects and lacks consciousness, which is unique to human beings. As an integral part of nature, animals, too, are instrumentalized and homogenized by men. In the text, many wild animals, including the three-toed sloth and the peregrine falcon, are driven on the verge of extinction due to "illegal mangrove destruction, climate change and poaching" (Gunty, 2022, p. 34). Disturbed by human activities, wild animals are expelled from their natural habitat and keep "stumbling into yards, confused and hungry. Drinking from sprinklers" (Gunty, 2022, p. 105). The hunting of animals is generally accepted in the mainstream society. In the banquet of the opening ceremony of the new development plan, people are encouraged to eat what they have hunted from the surrounding area. The instrumentalization of animals is further strengthened by man's killing animals for pleasure, where they are reduced to mere bodies. Some animals, such as mice, rabbits, and pigeons, are brutally killed by Blandine's male roommates on a regular basis with various methods just for the thrill of killing. The killing of animals, irrespective of their species, by male members of the society establishes homogenization of the inferior in the master's needs and purpose. The killing for pleasure reveals the tyranny of the master identity, which controls, objectifies and commodifies the inferior, which is against Warren's (2000) assumption that "nonhuman animals and/or nature are morally considerable" (p. 74) and deserve our respect. This incorporation and instrumentalization of animals correspond to the conception of human centeredness, which holds an insensitivity to nature, especially to animals. It can be concluded that under value dualism and hierarchical oppositions, women and nature, including animals, are reduced to an inferior state by men; thus, the intrinsic value and subjectivity of women and nature are ignored or denied by men. With master identity, men perceive women and nature as mere objects or resources to achieve their ends. Therefore, women and nature receive the twin objectification and exploitation from the patriarchal setup without any moral consideration.

4. Conclusion

The novel *The Rabbit Hutch* presents a contemporary desolate society that is characterized by overconsumption, depletion, and decadency, where individuals are struggling to survive. In such a context, the woman-nature connections are well manifested. To begin with, women and nature tend to connect and protect each other under the twin oppression from the male party. The patriarchal figures also reinforce the women-nature connections by associating women with animals where animals are considered inferior to human beings, thus justifying and authorizing their mutual domination and oppression. In the presence of oppressive agencies, the use of violence against these inferiorized identities is still common. Women like Blandine Zoe, in one way or the other, are the direct victims of patriarchal figures like James. These women, against their will, are reduced to mere bodies for sexual gratification by the male identities. At the same time, man is mastering nature. Driven by economic purpose, the whole region of Vacca Vale suffers from over-exploitation and severe environmental pollution, which further degrades the whole area. Animals, too, had been expelled from their habitat and turned into commodities and instruments to fulfill man's needs. Some animals are pushed to extinction due to the destruction brought by man. The objectification and exploitation of these identities occur when the master identities reduce them to their own needs, rendering women and nature alike meaningless without any moral consideration. In the novel, Gunty wonderfully presents the interconnectedness of women and nature and the twin oppression from the patriarchal agencies. The strong denouncement of the unjust exploitation and sympathy for the unfortunate experience of women and the nature of the author is revealed, thus affirming Gunty's ecofeminist consciousness.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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