

Full Length Research Paper

"Grief for what is human, grief for what is not": An Ecofeminist Insight into the Poetry of Lucille Clifton

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This paper seeks to present an understanding of Lucille Clifton's poetry through the theory of ecofeminism that finds a connection between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women. According to ecofeminists, among all the human groups threatened by the devastation of the environment, women in particular are exposed to the greatest dangers. This can be seen in the births of deformed babies, miscarriages due to radioactive waste, and serious health problems affecting the woman, the family, and society in general. Some ecofeminists have even gone further asserting that women have a greater appreciation of the connection between nature and humanity. Accordingly, this keen awareness which makes women more attentive than others to ecological problems nominates them to speak for the environment and defend it against abuse and mistreatment. As a woman whose roots go back to Africa, Clifton depicts nature in her poetry as being oppressed in the same sense that both women and African people have been subjugated. Thus, she connects nature to history showing how the environment, women, blacks, the colonized, the poor, and children are exploited and dominated. What Clifton yearns for in her poetry is a community born out of love rather than of oppression. Therefore, she calls on all voices of the community to be recognized and heard. Through an ecofeminist lens, this paper finds that Clifton weaves into her poetry an insight that acknowledges the interconnection of all living entities on earth and emphasizes that each being, whether human or nonhuman, has a purpose to fulfill in the world.

Key words: Clifton, ecofeminist, grief, human, insight, poetry.

INTRODUCTION

*Begin with the pain
of the grass*

....

*and pause for the girl
with twelve fingers*

who never learned to cry enough

*for anything that mattered,
not enough for the fear,
not enough for the loss,
not enough for the history,
not enough
for the disregarded planet.*

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....
then end ...
with time's bell tolling grief
and pain,

....
grief for what is human,
grief for what is not.

(Clifton, 2000, pp. 30-31)

A widely respected African-American poet, Lucille Clifton (1936-2010) fosters an ecofeminist aesthetic through which she can reimagine the world and suggest new insights into caring for our 'disregarded planet' whose mistreatment by human hands provokes 'grief' and brings to mind other forms of oppression such as the exploitation of women, people of colour, and other subjugated groups. In her work, Clifton adopts a poetic vision that includes the whole universe, human and nonhuman, "making room for everyone's sorrow, every survivor's noble blight" (Holladay, 2004b, p. 4). This paper seeks to present an understanding of Clifton's poetry through the theory of ecofeminism that combines ecology and feminism into a single philosophy in which women writers play a key role in defending the environment, voicing the pain endured by the oppressed, and calling for a kind of dignity for all beings.

Black experience, family life, and the female body are the main concerns of Clifton's poetry. Proud of her African roots, the poet praises her ancestors' capacity to resist oppression and survive economic and political racism. Furthermore, Clifton (1987a) claims that she was named after her great grandmother, Caroline Donald, who—according to the poet—was the first black woman to be brought at the age of seven from West Africa to America as a slave (p. 276). It is worth noting that Clifton was born with an extra finger on each hand. Lupton (2006) points out that the poet associates "this congenital difference with European witchcraft and with Egyptian royalty" (p.10). Clifton (1987a) writes:

I was born with twelve fingers
like my mother and my daughter
each of us
born wearing strange black gloves. (p. 166).

Remarkably, Clifton's poetry raises ecological concerns presenting a keen awareness of the threatened status of the planet. In her poetry, Clifton calls for interconnection not only with nature, but also with her African heritage and her femaleness. As Hooks (1993) points out, "Black self-recovery takes place when we begin to renew our relationship to the earth" (p.182).

Ecofeminism: An Overview

The term "ecofeminism" was first introduced in 1974 by

French feminist philosopher Françoise d'Eaubonne in her work *Le Feminisme Ou La Mort (Feminism or Death)* in which d'Eaubonne called upon women to lead an ecological revolution to save the planet (Kaur, 2012, p. 385). However, ecofeminism as a movement "first developed in the 1980s in the United States" where feminists injected a new insight into the new theory by arguing that both women and nature could be liberated together (Buell, 2005, 139). Prominent among scholars and critics who have provided a solid framework for ecofeminism and contributed to its development are Judith Plant, Susan Griffin, Ynestra King, Rosemary Ruether, Carolyn Merchant, Janis Birkeland, Karen J. Warren, Maria Mies, Mary Daly, and Lori Gruen.

The common thread among ecofeminists is that the patriarchal power in society oppresses both nature and women. This interconnection between the mistreatment of nature and the degradation of women is the core of ecofeminism. In this sense, "the rape of the earth, in all its forms," to quote Plant (1989), "becomes a metaphor for the rape of woman, in all its many guises" (p. 5). In *Women and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*, (1978), Griffin discusses the close connection between women and nature, revealing how the female speaker feels proud of having her roots in the earth:

I know I am made from this earth, as my mother's hands
were made from this earth, as her dreams came from this
earth and all that I know, I know in this earth, the body of
the bird, this pen, this paper, these hands, this tongue
speaking, all that I know speaks to me through this earth
and I long to tell you, you who are earth too, and listen as
we speak to each other of what we know: the light is in us
 (p.227).

Obviously, the ongoing degradation of the planet, the unprecedented rate of pollution, the extinction of species, the hazards associated with releasing genetically engineered organisms into the environment, the escalating rise of atmospheric greenhouse gases, global warming as well as the problems associated with exponential human population growth are only some in a long list of environmental crises that threaten the whole world (Fox, 1995, pp. 3-4). These disasters have resulted in what Schiffman (2013) calls "environmental grief," grief for the plight of our environment and the ecosystems around us (p. 8). However, it is not enough for us to feel sorry for the natural world. Rather, an action must be taken; otherwise we will destroy the planet, "our own terrestrial nest," to quote Schiffman (2013) who wonders, posing two different options:

What will emerge from the environmental crisis? Will it
galvanize the humanity to find a way to live in harmony
with the natural system of the air, the water, the soil, and
the biosphere which support us? Or will we continue
down our present suicidal path, laying waste to the
earth's limited resources and ultimately destroying our

own terrestrial nest? (p. 9)

It seems that 'humanity' has chosen the first option and decided 'to find a way' out of this ecological problem. Therefore, there have been public outcries and organized protests against the abuse of the environment all over the world where women in particular have played a vital role, simply because they are the most concerned ones, the ones who are more likely than other members of society to 'bear the consequences' and pay the price. This can be seen in the births of deformed babies, miscarriages due to radioactive waste, and serious health problems affecting the woman, the family, and society in general. As Mellor (1997) puts it,

Ecological impacts and consequences are experienced through human bodies, in ill health, early death, congenital damage and impeded childhood development. Women disproportionately bear the consequences of those impacts within their own bodies (dioxin residues in breast milk, failed pregnancies) and in their work as nurturers and carers. Some ecofeminists have gone further and argued that women have a greater appreciation of humanity's relationship to the natural world, its embeddedness and embodiedness, through their own embodiment as female (p. 2).

This is also the viewpoint of Warren (2000) a famous ecofeminist who sees that among all the human groups threatened by the devastation of the environment—the blacks, the colonized, the poor, the elderly, children—there are "those who belong to the female sex, who face the greatest risks and suffer immeasurably greater damage compared with those who belong to the male sex" (p. 2). Accordingly, this keen awareness which makes women more attentive than others to ecological problems logically nominates them not only "as the vanguard speakers of environmental malaise," Sandilands (1999) points out, but also "as the vanguard of the forthcoming ecological revolution to clean up the earth" (p. xi). Put another way, women's concern for nature is rooted in their concern for the health and well-being of their families in particular and of their society in general. This is what the women writers who advocate ecofeminist thought determinedly assert:

Because we have traditionally been mother, nurse, and guardian for the home and community, women have been quick to perceive the threat to the health and lives of our families and neighbours that is posed by nuclear power proliferation, polluted waters, and toxic chemicals (as cited in Sandilands, 1999, p. xi).

If women are particularly affected by environmental degradation, society in general—including men—also bears the consequences of this ecological disaster. For example, pollution, nuclear war, unclean water, toxic

chemicals, greenhouse gases and the disappearance of green areas certainly have bad effects on all members of society who, regardless of their gender, may fall prey to bad health, dangerous diseases and early deaths. However, due to the fact that women traditionally perform the role of mother and home-maker, they are often more conscious of threats to the environment; consequently, they assume a more protective role in regards to preserving the environment for their children. Diamond and Orenstein (1990) argue stating that "because of women's unique role in the biological regeneration of the species, our bodies are important markers, the sites upon which local, regional, or even planetary stress is often played out" (p. x). Thus, the process of nurturing and caring for children becomes an essential mechanism that enables women to express the current ecological crisis and speak for a humiliated environment. In this sense, the 'biological' role achieved by women supports their environmental struggle and justifies their lead in defending nature.

Fully convinced that the abuse of nature and the oppression of women "often stem from the same root" (Stein, 2000, p. 201), ecofeminists maintain that if a culture is inclined to mistreat its human counterparts, it is highly likely it will mistreat and degrade its natural environment as well. Addressing the same issue, King (1983a), one of the leading figures whose theoretical works have placed a foundation for the ecofeminist philosophy, argues that the struggle for women's liberation must be a struggle for nature as well, adding that the degradation of nature should not be viewed as separate from the humiliation of women, basically because both are subjugated by the same oppressor, namely, patriarchal culture:

We believe that a culture against nature is a culture against women. We know we must get out from under the feet of men as they go about their projects of violence. In pursuing these projects men deny and dominate both women and nature. It is time to reconstitute our culture in the name of that nature, and peace and freedom, and it is women who can show the way. We have to be the voice of the invisible, of nature who cannot speak for herself in the political arenas of our society (p. 11).

Ruether (1975) also thinks that time has come for women to change the scene by creating new insights into saving both the oppressed women and the mistreated planet. In *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation*, she encourages women to take the first step and start the process of change. First, the writer makes it clear that there can be no liberation for women and no protection from the current environmental disaster within "a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination" (p. 204). Then, she comes to clarify that under all these ruins of patriarchy always lie a hope. Like King, Ruether is

completely sure that 'it is women who can show the way' and solve this crisis. According to Ruether, this can be achieved by uniting "the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movement" in order to "envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of ... society (1975, p. 204).

Merchant, an influential ecofeminist, published a significant book that was regarded in the 1980s as a decisive turning point for ecofeminist thought. In *The Death of Nature. Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution (1989)*, the writer reveals the historical links between women and nature. Furthermore, the author draws attention to the idea of 'nature as female,' bringing to mind the ancient identity of nature, especially the earth, as 'a nurturing mother' depicted as

a kindly beneficent female who provided for the needs of mankind in an ordered, planned universe. But another opposing image of nature as female was also prevalent: wild and uncontrollable nature that could render violence, storms, droughts, and general chaos. Both were identified with the female sex and were projections of human perceptions onto the external world. The metaphor of the earth as a nurturing mother was gradually to vanish as a dominant image as the Scientific Revolution proceeded to mechanize and to rationalize the world view. The second image, nature as disorder, called forth an important modern idea, that of power over nature. (p. 2).

One of the most important issues often handled within an ecofeminist context is the idea of dualisms upon which the present worldview is based. According to ecofeminists, the dualisms that exist within the patriarchal structure such as "masculine and feminine, yin and yang, male and female, dark and light, nature and culture, primitive and civilized" are completely false, Cuomo (1998) argues concluding that:

Feminists, and ecofeminists in particular, have identified hierarchical dualistic thinking as endemic to systems of dominance and subordination typified by Western power discourses. These discourses define women, people of color, nature, and anything that comes to be associated with these as subordinate and less valuable (p. 136).

As the above extract reveals, ecofeminists believe that viewing the world in hierarchal dualisms leads to an automatic assumption of subordination, and the consideration of one concept as positive and the other as negative. That is to say, while one term is regarded as good, it follows that the other--its opposite--must be bad. Therefore, these dualisms have resulted in what Mellor (1992) describes as "a one-dimensional public world devised by men in their image embodying culture, mind, science, reason, and materialism, eclipsing and suppressing women in a private world associated

negatively with nature, body, folk knowledge, emotion and spirituality" (p. 54). Sharing the same perspective, Birkeland (1993), a well-known ecofeminist, affirms that the dualistic conceptual framework of patriarchy "supports the ethic of dominance and divides us against each other, our 'selves,' and nonhuman nature" (p. 20). As a result, ecofeminist thought comes to address the needs of both human and nonhuman subjects, revealing their suffering and giving them a voice. In this way, ecofeminism, rather than highlighting nature as the most important agenda, grasps all forms of life viewing the universe as an interconnected whole.

The conclusion that can be drawn from the discussion adopted above is that ecofeminism provides us with a new insight into "being human on this planet with a sense of the sacred, informed by all ways of knowing – intuitive and scientific, mystical and rational," King (1990) states promoting an ecofeminist way of thinking that calls for "a dynamic, developmental theory of the person – male and female – who emerges out of nonhuman nature, where difference is neither reified nor ignored and the [reciprocal] relationship between human and nonhuman nature is understood" (p. 117).

Clifton's Poetry: An Ecofeminist Insight

King's assertion that ecofeminism can open a new possibility for us to be 'human on this planet' echoes the ecofeminist message implied in the poetry of Lucille Clifton who, adopting a similar vision to King's, states in an interview with Michael Glaser, "I would like to be seen as a woman whose roots go back to Africa, who tried to honor being human" (Glaser, 2000, p. 328). In this sense, Clifton keenly yearns for the coming of that moment when we become 'human,' able to feel for all the oppressed on earth. Outstandingly, her poetry highlights the interconnection of the world, drawing attention to what she calls "the bond of live things everywhere" (1987a, p. 49).

"The environment...seems to me in danger;" so replied Clifton when asked about the reason behind devoting much of her poetic energy to environmental issues (Holladay 2004a, p. 195). As a woman with African roots, Clifton depicts nature in her poetry as being oppressed in the same sense that both women and African people have been subjugated. This meaning is embodied in a short untitled poem from her collection *Good News about the Earth* (1972). The poem reads as follows:

*being property once myself
I have a feeling for it.
that's why I can talk
about environment,
what wants to be a tree,
ought to be he can be it.
same thing for other things
same thing for men. (p. 2)*

Describing herself as 'property,' Clifton refers to the fact that she is both a descendent of African slaves who have endured racial oppression, and a woman who has undergone male domination. According to her, these attributes endow her with the ability to feel and speak not only for her fellow women and black sufferers, but also and more importantly for the nonhuman nature that is mistreated and humiliated by the same patriarchy. Being a black woman, or rather 'being property,' the poet sees herself as a fitting spokesperson for what Sandilands (1999) calls "environmental malaise" (p. xi). Significantly, Clifton's comparison between female oppression or human enslavement on one hand and environmental exploitation on the other invites the human race in general and women in particular to save nature from its subjugated position. In the above quoted poem, Clifton thinks of nature itself as 'property,' as enslaved by humankind. That is why she asserts that she can express its pains and defend its rights, simply because both are victims of oppression. In lines five and six, the poet maintains that the nonhuman others have their rights to exist side by side with human beings. This idea is also extended in the last two lines of the poem, 'same thing for other things / same thing for men,' which reflect the comprehensive scope of Clifton's poetic vision that recognizes the right to life not only for the natural world as seen in 'what wants to be a tree, / ought to be he can be it,' but also for 'other things' and even for 'men' themselves, the symbol of masculinist domination and authority. This is indeed an integrated vision that grasps the whole universe and highlights the harmony of all living things.

Responding to the ethics of ecofeminism, Clifton becomes aware of her responsibility as a woman writer in facing environmental degradation. In an untitled poem from *Mercy*, a book of poetry published in 2004, she addresses the human oppressors who mistreat nature telling them that they will bear the consequences:

the air
you have polluted
you will breathe
the waters
you have poisoned
you will drink
when you come again
and you will come again

the air
you have polluted
you will breathe

the waters
you have poisoned
you will drink (p. 72)

The lines maintain that the polluters will pay the price for their mistreatment of the environment. In a tone of

challenge, the poet confirms that when such abusers of nature return, and sure they 'will return,' they will have no choice but to 'breathe' the same air they have polluted' and find no water to drink but the water poisoned by their own hands. In this poem, Clifton uses repetition in such a clever way that the reader becomes trapped between the 'polluted' 'air' and the 'poisoned' 'waters'. According to Clifton, the universe is running out of patience with the human race because of people's unwise behaviour and unthinking treatment of the planet. This is what the poet affirms in the following lines:

the patience
of the universe
is not without
an end

so might it
slowly
turn its back
so might it
slowly
walk away

leaving you alone
in the world you leave
your children (2004, p. 73)

This time, Clifton warns humans to stop abusing nature otherwise the universe, a type of higher power, will abandon humankind, and 'slowly / walk away.' The humans' maltreatment of nature is undoubtedly responsible for this abandonment. The final stanza of the poem intensifies the dilemma of humanity in case the universe turns 'its back' and decides to 'leave.' In this case, the future generations of humanity will be 'alone / in the world,' without the "kindly beneficent" universe and its support "for the needs of mankind," to quote Merchant (1989, p. 2).

Protest against cutting down trees in southern Maryland is the theme of 'the killing of the trees,' a long poem in which Clifton (1991) attempts to defend 'what is left of life / and whales and continents and children and ozone and trees'--all things endangered by science and progress:

the third went down
with a sound almost like flaking,
a soft swish as the left leaves
fluttered themselves and died.
three of them, four, then five
stiffening in the snow
as if this hill were Wounded Knee (p. 39)

Expressively, the lines portray the ripping of the tress that are strongly rooted to the ground in a dramatic scene in which the reader feels as if he is listening to the trees

going down, one by one: 'three of them, four, then five.' While falling down, the trees produce a sad sound that resembles cracking and split as if they are moaning for being disconnected from their mother land. In addition, a soft, hissing sound accompanies the trembling leaves as they fall down receiving death. In the last line of the above stanza, 'as if this hill were Wounded Knee,' Clifton compares the bulldozing, or let us say 'the killing,' of the trees to the famous Wounded Knee Massacre that took place in 1890 when U.S. military troops attacked the North American Indians. According to Robertson (2014), the attack was so horrible that:

many women and children...were cut down by deadly shrapnel from the Hotchkiss guns. The rest fled under withering fire from all sides. Pursuing soldiers shot most of them down in flight, some with babes on their backs. One survivor recalled that she was wounded but was so scared she did not feel it. She lost her husband, her little girl, and a baby boy. One shot passed through the baby's body before it broke her elbow, causing her to drop his body. Two more shots ripped through the muscles of her back before she fell. (para. 2)

In this way, Clifton connects nature to history showing how the environment, women, children, and the colonized are exploited and oppressed.

According to Clifton's ecofeminist vision, what further connects women and nature is the fact that both are victims of male domination. This is what the poet indicates in the last section of 'the killing of the trees':

*so i have come to live
among men who kill the trees,
a subdivision, new,
in southern Maryland. (1991, p. 40)*

Clifton herself is a witness of the abuse of nature. It is worth noting that the poem is based on her personal experience. Interviewing Thiers, she points out:

I wrote that poem when I first moved to St. Mary's County. I lived in a new development and had just come from California, where cutting down trees for no reason is just not done. But men were cutting down trees as if it were something wonderful; there seemed to be no feeling for preserving the landscape. (Thiers, 1998, p. 20)

Clifton writes in the poem, "I have brought my witness eye with me," implying that she has recorded the details of that tragic story in which

*what is left of life
and whales and continents and children and ozone
and trees huddle in a camp weeping
outside my window and i can see it all
with that one good eye. (1999, p. 40)*

The poem ends sadly depicting nature and its human and

nonhuman entities gathering in their defeated 'camp,' 'weeping' and feeling conquered by masculinist oppression and exploitation. As the poem reveals, Clifton's sense of grief at seeing the deliberate destruction of nature implies an ecofeminist insight that is concerned not only for the earth at large, but also for all creatures in this universe.

From an ecofeminist standpoint, Clifton's poetry emphasizes that all beings are worthy of life. The final section of *Mercy* (2004), 'the message from the Ones,' opens with an untitled poem reading as follows:

*the universe requires the worlds
to be
each leaf is veined from the mother/ father
each heart is veined from the mother/ father
each leaf each heart has a place
irreplaceable
each is required to be (p. 69)*

Clearly, the first line summarizes the whole poem as it confirms that the universe allows all forms of life to exist and live in harmony. But, what disturbs this harmonious atmosphere is man who always tries to dominate and exploit other lives. The lines emphasize the interconnection of all living entities on earth and reveal that each being has a place and a purpose to fulfill in the world. Clifton's deep ecological assertion that 'each leaf each heart has a place / irreplaceable,' points to the integration of all creatures. Remarkably, the connection between 'leaf' and 'heart' as both of them are 'veined' suggests the strong bond between what is human (heart) and what is nonhuman (leaf). It is noted that each of the two words consists of three sounds: two consonants and a vowel (/hɑ:t/, /li:f/) as if the poet implies that both the human and the nonhuman are equal in many, if not in all, things. The last line of the poem, 'each is required to be' refers to the interdependency of biotic systems and life-forms. In this poem, Clifton develops a voice calling for "future wholeness with ethical responsibility for the other" (Kriner, 2005, p. 187). From an ecofeminist point of view, what Clifton achieves in this poem is a quest for a kind of knowing that extends beyond knowing the self to understanding "the complexity of any self and the need for more connection and communion among humans, and between humans and nonhumans, across differences in the world at large" (McCormick, 2012, p. 88).

In this sense, Clifton adopts an ecofeminist perspective that goes in harmony with Birkeland's call for resisting a dualistic way of thinking which splits us against each other. Thus, in her rejection of dualistic attitudes, Clifton tries in her poetry to reweave new stories that recognize and value the biological and cultural variety which maintains all life. Ostriker (1996) refers to this ecofeminist position arguing that Clifton "assumes connection where the dualisms of our culture assume separation – between self and other, human and nature, male and female, public and private, pleasure and pain" (p. 308).

Instead of the 'either/or' philosophy, Clifton adopts the 'both/and' thinking and consequently resists dualistic split and fosters interconnection. The ecofeminist insight into her poetry not only promotes human relations with the environment and the broader world but also "emphasizes connections," argues McCormick (2012), "and dissolves differences between people....ask[ing] us to see with collective eyes, to see beyond singular notions of the self" (pp. 86-8).

A careful reading of Clifton's poetry shows that she does not confine her poetic scope to a one-sided view of the world based on only gender, race, culture, or any other issue. Rather, she adopts an inclusive ecofeminist stance comprised all levels of agency, intertwined and interacting with one another. Accordingly, she calls on all voices of the community to be recognized and heard. Related to this issue is the idea that many of Clifton's poems are untitled; this may denote something; it seems that the poet does not want to confine herself to a narrow title that may hinder her wide-ranging vision and restrict her voice within the limits of a specific topic. Rather, she wants her poetic voice to be a communal one, addressing everyone and attending to everything.

In an untitled poem in the last section of *Mercy* (2004), Clifton draws attention to the human relationship that connects people together, urging everyone to come back to the nest of human intimacy:

*you are not
your brother's keeper
you are
your brother
....
you are not
your sister's keeper
you are
your sister yes (p. 68)*

As shown above, the lines underline the rejection of the 'either/or' ways of thinking and promote the 'both/and' approach implied in the speaker's' affirmation of the importance of living in connection with others. When the poet says 'you are / your brother,' she suggests that you are not yourself or you are not a single self. Put another way, she wants to say that both you and your brother are connected in one integrated self. This stage of interconnection is preceded by another stage in which differences dissolve between the two selves in order to reach the stage of integration. Likewise, the final stanza of the poem also affirms the interconnection between the addressee's self and his sister's. That Clifton devotes another stanza to 'the sister' is indeed evocative; this may stand as a reminder for the male addressee that he is not 'his sister's keeper,' but he himself is his own sister whose self has been dissolved in his, forming one incorporated self instead of two separate ones. Accordingly, he should neither think of the idea of dominating his sister nor

perceive his relationship with her in a dualistic view that separates them as male and female. Significantly, the stanza about the sister, unlike that about the brother, ends with the adverb 'yes.' This adds more assertion to what the poet is actually posing throughout the stanza, specially drawing the addressee's attention that his relation with his sister is based on integration and respect rather than disparity and exploitation. In brief, what Clifton yearns for in her poetry is a community born out of love rather than of oppression.

It is noted that Clifton often employs unusual techniques in her poetry. For instance, she is fond of using small letters in positions that require the use of capital letters. This can be seen in the following lines:

*we have dropped daughters,
afrikan and chinese.
we think they will be beautiful. we think
they will become themselves. (2004, p. 15)*

Likewise, the first person singular pronoun is repeatedly used as a lowercase letter 'i', as in "won't you celebrate with me / what i have shaped into a kind of life? i had no model. / born in Babylon / nonwhite and woman / what did i see to be except myself?" (1991, p. 25). Also, rules of punctuation are scarcely followed in Clifton's poems. These lines present an example:

*only to keep
his little fear
he kills his cities
and his trees
even his children oh
people
white ways are
the way of death
come into the black
and live. (1987a, p. 57)*

In addition, Clifton mostly uses few strong stresses per line. To consider this poem:

*x x / x
in this garden
/ x
growing
/ x x x / / x
following the strict orders
/ x x x /
following the light
/ x x / x x
see the sensational
/ x x / x
two-headed woman
/ / / / x
one face turned outward
/ /*

one face
 / x x / x x
 swiveling slowly in. (1980, p. 185)

As the above example indicates, the maximum number of strong stresses per line is four as shown in line seven. Some lines, like the first and the second, have one strong stress only whereas the rest of lines contain just two or three.

The use of such technical devices--the lowercase instead of capital letters, the small letter 'i', the few strong stresses per line, and the scarce use of punctuation marks--encloses Clifton's poems with a sort of humbleness, one suggests, and hence makes them appear suitable and fitting to address those who are oppressed and dominated. As Bryson (2002) argues, we should adopt a sense of "humility in relationships with both human and nonhuman nature" (p. 6). Thus, once we feel modest towards the natural and human world, we become aware of the present environmental catastrophe that threatens all forms of life on the planet. However, some critics see that the abandonment of regular techniques and the use of irregular ones may be seen as an expression of objection and dissatisfaction. For example, Holladay (2004b) states that "black activist poets were reacting against the political and literary establishment, and one way to do that was to reject the conventions of standard English" (p. 19).

In *Next*, a collection of poems published in 1987, Clifton expands her ecofeminist awareness to deal with the destructive impacts of war on both nature and man. Her two poems, 'I. at nagasaki,' and 'I. at gettysburg,' stand as a strong opposition to war and the chaos it causes. Obviously, Clifton starts each of the two titles with the subject pronoun 'I' that seems to stand for the poet who places herself in each scene as if she is giving an eyewitness account of the two historical events. The first poem, 'I. at nagasaki,' refers to the bombing of the Japanese city Nagasaki during World War II, bringing the threat of nuclear war into a sharp focus. Imagining herself as a survivor of the bombing, Clifton (1987b) narrates:

*in their own order
 the things of my world
 glisten into ash. i
 have done nothing
 to deserve this,
 only been to the silver birds
 what they have made me.
 nothing (p. 24)*

The speaker recounts how her world has completely been ruined and turned into 'ash.' Indeed, the destruction has been dehumanizing for all involved. Abusively, the bomber planes, recognized by the narrator as 'the silver birds,' have reduced her and her surroundings to 'nothing' though she has committed no crime and has 'done

nothing' to meet such an end together with the innocent inhabitants of her defeated city. The U.S. leaders have given 'their own' murderous 'order' and thousands of human and nonhuman creatures have been killed. Statistics about the impact of the bombing on people and the environment are indeed horrible. The atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki killed about "39,000" people, and injured an estimated "25,000," stated the report of the Manhattan Engineer District of the United States Army describing the effects of the bombing of Nagasaki in August 1945 as follows:

Total destruction spread over an area of about 3 square miles. Over a third of the 50,000 buildings in the target area of Nagasaki were destroyed or seriously damaged. The complete destruction of the huge steel works and the torpedo plant was especially impressive. The steel frames of all buildings within a mile of the explosion were pushed away, as by a giant hand, from the point of detonation. The badly burned area extended for 3 miles in length. The hillsides up to a radius of 8,000 feet were scorched, giving them an autumnal appearance....Houses and other structures were completely destroyed while fires broke out everywhere. Trees were uprooted and withered by the heat. (The Avalon Project, 1946)

In the second poem, 'I. at gettysburg,' Clifton alludes to the American Civil War (1861-1865) that was waged due to many causes the most important of which was slavery that was prohibited in 'free' states whereas it was allowed in 'slave' states. The uncompromising differences between "the free and slave states over the power of the national government to prohibit slavery in the territories that had not yet become states" was the main reason behind that war (McPherson, 2014, para. 3). Remarkably, the human and nonhuman cost of the Civil War was beyond all expectations. Often described as "America's bloodiest conflict," the war resulted in the horrible death of more than "620,000" persons, "roughly 2% of the population" of America at that time in additions to "hundreds of thousands" more who were left injured or "died of disease" (Civil War Casualities). Moreover, the war caused massive environmental destruction at Gettysburg:

With massive amounts of dead bodies, humans, and animals, battlegrounds became a major transmitter of disease...Much farmland was destroyed by many things during the civil war. Houses, barns, outhouses, were blown to pieces by canons and other means of weaponry...if the houses and fences were not totally destroyed by a battle itself, they were ripped down and used for firewood on both sides of the war....Also, due to the destruction of a lot of land in the south, it led to many changes in the Post Civil War Era. The landscape was drastically effected due to deforestation and spreading of

crops that countered the destruction of the war. (Zinno, 2009, paras. 11-12)

'I. at gettysburg' refers to Clifton's imagined experience at a 'farmland' where the 1863 battle of Gettysburg, one of the harshest fights of the American Civil War, took place. Clifton (1987b) writes:

*if, as they say, this is somehow about myself,
this clash of kin across good farmland, then
why are the ghosts of the brothers and cousins
rising and wailing toward me in their bloody voices,
who are you, nigger woman, who are you? (p. 23).*

As the narrator explains, it was said that this conflict was related to her, 'this clash of kin across good farmland.' However, she discovered that the matter was more complicated than she had first imagined; it was a serious fighting, a civil war, between soldiers belonging to the slave states and others fighting for the free states. Fighters on both camps were compelled to fight against each other, and the result was a tearing civil war. In a horrifying scene, 'the ghosts of the brothers and cousins,' who seemingly were black fighters and therefore of the same 'kin' to which the speaker belongs, suddenly went up and in a moaning voice asked her a significant question, 'who are you, nigger woman, who are you?' As defined in dictionary, the word 'nigger' though "sometimes used by black people as a mildly disparaging way of referring to other black people" is "one of the most racially offensive words in the language" (Definition of *nigger* in English). The speaker was shocked and disappointed because her identity as a black descendant has been overlooked by the very people who were supposed to share her the same origin. She did not expect that the black soldiers would not be able to recognize her. This is the message of the poem: people of the same clan are no longer connected or related together but are so divided and so separated that they do not know each other.

If this is the case among people of the same 'kin,' then the split among members of society in general is of course sharper. For Clifton, white patriarchy is responsible for this separation among American people. Her view is in agreement with ecofeminist thought that identifies "patriarchy, particularly western patriarchy, [not only] as the main source of global ecological destruction," but also as the main reason behind the sharp "division of society" (Mellor, 1997b, p. 5) Despite the pain undergone by the blacks whose 'bloody voices' were heard in each Civil War battlefield, the poet is greatly disappointed to face the depressing truth that "many white men still have little understanding of the people whose enslavement precipitated the Civil War" (Holladay, 2004b, p. 44). Obviously, racism stands as one of the central issues Clifton poses in 'I. at gettysburg.' It was the main cause of the bitter Civil War that shattered the balance of the

American community and divided its people into two separate poles. As Feagin (2001) puts it:

In the United States racism is structured into the rhythms of everyday life. It is lived, concrete, advantageous for whites, and painful for those who are not white. Each major part of a black or white person's life is shaped by racism....One of the great tragedies today is the inability or unwillingness of most white Americans to see and understand this racist reality. Among whites, including white elites, there is a commonplace denial of personal, family, and group histories of racism. Most do not see themselves or their families as seriously implicated in white-on-black oppression, either in the distant past or in the present. Referring to themselves, most whites will say fervently, "I am not a racist." (p. 2)

Carr (2000) argues that ecofeminism "brings new insights to bear in the ongoing...struggle against...violence, to secure the...dignity and security of all human beings" (p. 15). Addressing this ecofeminist insight, Clifton's poem titled 'jasper texas 1998' depicts the violence and racial intolerance that people inflict on one another without any consideration for the victim's dignity. The poem tells the tragic story of James Byrd, a black man who was chained to the back of a pickup truck, dragged to his death by three white men, and left in front of an African-American cemetery in Jasper, Texas. During the ordeal, Byrd's head and right arm were severed from his body. As the poem opens, the reader observes how Clifton cleverly gives voice to the dead, imagining that Byrd's head 'was chosen to speak' for the rest of his body:

*i am a man's head hunched in the road.
i was chosen to speak by the members
of my body. the arm as it pulled away
pointed toward me, the hand opened once
and was gone. (2000, p. 20)*

The lines vividly draw a real picture of Byrd's death taking the reader to an actual scene in which the dying man was giving his last breath. The reader feels as if he is really watching Byrd's head being separated from his body, his arm 'pulled away' and his hand 'opened once' and then closed forever. That the head and the arm in particular were the cut off organs is very suggestive. It seems that the poet tries to convey the idea that the white killers not only want to wipe out the intellectual power of the blacks, symbolized by the head, but also wish to ruin their physical capabilities represented by the arm, especially the right arm. Additionally, the poet specifically chooses the head to speak for the other organs of the body as if Clifton likes to say that the blacks' cause and quest for social justice are so clear in the 'head' of each black person that he can fluently express what his fellow blacks need and yearn for. Also, 'the arm' that was severed and victimized by the white murderers seems to stand for all

the oppressed blacks. More suggestively, the arm 'pointed toward' the head as if asking it to tell the arm's tragic story and get back its right from those who dominate the blacks and exploit them.

Undoubtedly, the horrible way in which James Byrd was killed stirred the anger of the poet who came to ask furiously:

*why and why and why
should i call a white man brother?
who is the human in this place,
the thing that is dragged or the dragger? (2000, p. 20)*

It is clear that the voice is Clifton's. As the lines indicate, she deals with the issue of racism in an explicit way. For her, the racial oppression practiced by the white Americans against the blacks went beyond all limits. The oppressors have left no space for any settlement. That is why the speaker finds it difficult, if not impossible, to 'call a white man brother.' Then, she poses a second question saying who is acting humanely: the murderer or the murdered, the subjugator or the subjugated, 'the dragger' or 'the thing that is dragged?' Of course, these questions need no answers because it is known that the oppressed in general adopt a more civilized behaviour than their oppressors who in most cases lack the minimum of the appropriate conduct. As usual, Clifton surprises us with her careful choice of words. When she refers to 'the dragger,' she only uses one word which means that the doer is a human being. However, she does not use the single word 'dragged' or even the phrase 'the person who is dragged' in order to refer to the victim; instead, she uses the phrase 'the thing that is dragged' to indicate that the action of dragging and oppression practiced against the helpless black man has nullified his humanity and turned him into a powerless being, a thing that can do nothing. This of course signifies the huge impact of the crime committed against James Byrd. The poem ends with a note of sadness as the poet mournfully states, "i am done with this dust. i am done" (*Blessing the Boats* 20). Here, Clifton points out that it is a shame for the American society to permit such savage practices of violence and attitudes of racial intolerance. From an ecofeminist perspective, the poem stands as a reminder for the American people in particular and the human race in general that Byrd's death has reflected a narrow-minded outlook unable to accept the other or acknowledge the sacred bond that connects all humans together. Commenting on the poem, Lupton (2006) refers to the great effect the poem has had on the hearts and minds of the Americans:

Although people may have forgotten the newspaper or television accounts of the execution of James Byrd...these atrocities live on in the words of poets...As long as it's taught, the horror cannot be diminished. The story is told, is taught again and again and again. 'jasper

texas 1998' is now part of the American literary history and will reach its audience for generations (p. 89).

Ecofeminism, as previously argued, provides women with a particular stake to speak not only for the exploited environment but also of for the other victimized groups in society including children. In 'alabama 9/15/63,' a poem from the *Blessing Boats* collection (2000), Clifton, moved by her ecofeminist 'stake', reacts to the tragic death of four young girls who were killed in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama on September 15, 1963. The poet ironically asks:

*Have you heard the one about
the shivering lives,
the never to be borne daughters and sons,*

the one about Cynthia and Carole and Denise and Addie Mae?

*Have you heard the one about
The four little birds
shattered into skylarks in the white
light of Birmingham?*

*Have you heard how the skylarks,
known for their music,
swooped into heaven, how the Sunday
morning strains shook the piano...? (p. 21)*

The poem starts with the ironical question, 'Have you heard the one about / the shivering lives, / the never to be borne daughters and sons ...,' as if the poet is going to tell a joke, while she in fact speaks about one of the most tragic events, the death of four little innocent creatures who lost their lives without any sin committed by them. In the second stanza, the poet clarifies that 'Cynthia,' 'Carole,' 'Denise,' and 'Addie Mae' are the names of the tragic heroines of her heartbreaking tale. The ironical question posed by the poet at the beginning of the first stanza is also repeated at the start of the third and fourth stanzas, forming a refrain that not only adds music to the lines, but also characterizes the satirical, sad tone of the poem and emphasizes its atmosphere of grief and disappointment. In a very clever use of the language, Clifton compares the pure young creatures to 'four little birds' devastated by the huge power of the explosion which, metaphorically pushing the children up, made them look like 'skylarks' singing in 'the white light' produced by the detonation. More importantly, the blast of the bomb blew their pure souls as well as the music of the piano they used to play on Sundays into heaven. It is known that skylarks are famous for singing while flying. So, the comparison between the blown up girls and the flying skylarks is very suggestive. In addition, the poet's description of the four young girls as 'four little birds,' creates a connection between those victimized children and nature, another site on which man inflicts his domination and abuse.

It is noteworthy that the four young victims were African-Americans who went to attend a Sunday school in the Church when a racist placed a dynamite bomb in the basement of the place. The attack was carried out by the Ku Klux Klan, "a terrorist group whose members were responsible for atrocities that are difficult for most people to even imagine" (Bond, 1998, p. 4). The death of the four children in such a horrible way makes the poet unable to turn a blind eye to white patriarchy that oppresses the black Americans and even kills their innocent children. In fact forgetting such painful events is not an easy matter. This is what McKinstry (2011), a survivor of Birmingham Church Bombing, maintains in the introduction to a book she devotes to the incident:

Almost half a century has passed since the Klan bombed Sixteenth Street Baptist Church at 10:22 on Sunday morning, September 15, 1963, and my four young friends died agonizing deaths....I tried hard to forget the senseless deaths, the inhumane injustices...For almost five decades, I had not been able to muster the courage, nor the composure, to publicly record the stories that have become such a dark part of our nation's past. I had struggled to forget these stories, to rid them from my head and heart. They proved too horrible, too painful, to dredge up to memory (pp.ix-x).

In his well-known poem, 'To a Skylark', Shelley (1993) writes, "Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought" (p. 60). This meaning truly applies to Clifton's 'Alabama 9/15/63.' Recording the details of a highly agonizing tale, Clifton's poem stands as one of the 'sweetest songs whose writer has really succeeded in making us feel for the suffering of the four young girls, the sorrow accompanying their unbearable death, and the desire inside everyone that the world can hopefully close the gloomy page of racism which terrifies people and deprives them even of their offspring. This is Clifton's ecofeminist note in 'Alabama 9/15/63,' a powerful purification of our feelings and a realistic reminder that we should commit ourselves to lead a life based on love and understanding and not on hatred and exploitation of those who share this world with us whoever they are, mainly because

*all life is life.
all clay is kin and kin. (Clifton, 1987b, p. 22)*

CONCLUSION

To sum up, Clifton skillfully weaves into her poetry an ecofeminist insight that articulates the grief which plagues us all and at the same time speaks for an environment "so stressed, so endangered by human hands" (Scigaj 1999, p. 2). The diverse topics handled in her poetry including nature, women, blacks, children, and other victimized groups point to an ecofeminism that calls attention to the importance of ethics in our treatment not

only with human beings but also with the natural world with its various species. From an ecofeminist point of view, the main theme in Clifton's poetry is the connection between the exploitation of nature and the domination of women. Another significant topic is women as guards of nature and leaders of an ecological revolt. Other issues that are frequently raised in her poetry and often discussed within an ecofeminist scope are pollution, deforestation, nuclear war, racism, and violence against children.

A key ecofeminist message in Clifton's poetry is that all entities in this world are worth living, simply because the universe grasps all creatures and allows space for everyone and everything to exist and lead a life. Outstandingly, Clifton's poetry resists dualistic attitudes, challenges male patriarchy, reimagines the world, and creates new metaphors and insights into recognizing our world in a more conscious, interactive way. If ecofeminism stresses the idea that we must acknowledge that all subject positions have power and voice in society, then Clifton undoubtedly aligns with this philosophy in her poetry which constantly gives the chance for all marginalized or unnoticed groups to be recognized and heard. Aware of her ecofeminist position as a spokesperson of our ill-treated environment, Clifton defends nature against human abuse illuminating the need for adopting a relationship with the nonhuman other based on respect and appreciation.

Generously, Clifton's poetry grants humanity a second chance to redeem itself and learn how to accept the other. It is true that we--humans--have abused nature, dominated women, promoted racism, subjugated the poor, and killed children; even so, all is not lost and the future is still possible. If we learn to communicate with each other and acknowledge the value of being interconnected with both the human and the other-than-human on this planet, we can then unmake the current world and start anew. These are Clifton's last words to us:

*what has been made
can be unmade
....
it is perhaps
a final chance (2004, p. 74)*

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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