

THE DEADLY NURTURING ACT: AN ECOFEMINIST READING OF KRISTIN HANNAH'S *THE GREAT ALONE*

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ABSTRACT. In the scope of ecological-themed literature, many argue that female figures are closely related to the essence of nature rather than men due to some particular feminine features like giving birth and the act of nurturing. Another similarity between these two notions is their inferior positions in modern patriarchal societies where men dominate both nature and women. A text that possibly bears this particular issue between women, nature, and men is Kristin Hannah's *The Great Alone* (2018). The text follows the story of Ernt Allbright's family that moves from Seattle to the wilderness of Alaska. Throughout the story, the physical environment of Alaska plays a vital role in the progression of the conflicts between the characters. Hence, this research attempts to analyze the hierarchy between men, women, nature, and culture in *The Great Alone*. In analyzing the topic within the object of this study, Plumwood's theory of dualism is used as the primary framing tool. In motion with Plumwood's dualism, this research uses qualitative descriptive method and close reading technique as the main strategy to collect the data from the object. The results show that both women and nature are still considered inferior beings from the perspective of the main male character. However, the chronological conflicts of the story show that women and nature are the ones that reside on the dominant side.

Keywords: dualism; ecofeminism; fiction; nature.

TINDAKAN MENGASUH YANG MEMATIKAN: PEMBACAAN EKOFEMINIS *THE GREAT ALONE* KARYA KRISTIN HANNAH

ABSTRAK. Dalam lingkup sastra bertema ekologi, banyak yang berpendapat bahwa sosok perempuan lebih erat hubungannya dengan hakikat alam daripada laki-laki karena beberapa ciri feminin tertentu seperti melahirkan dan aksi mengasuh. Kesamaan lain antara kedua hal ini adalah posisi inferior mereka dalam masyarakat patriarki modern tempat alam dan perempuan didominasi oleh laki-laki. Sebuah teks yang mungkin memuat isu khusus antara perempuan, alam, dan laki-laki adalah *The Great Alone* (2018) karya Kristin Hannah. Novel ini menceritakan tentang keluarga Allbright yang pindah dari kota Seattle ke pedalaman Alaska. Sepanjang cerita, lingkungan fisik Alaska memainkan peran penting dalam perkembangan konflik antar karakter. Oleh karena itu, tulisan ini mencoba menganalisis hirarki antara pria, wanita, alam, dan peradaban dalam *The Great Alone*. Dalam menganalisis topik ini, teori dualisme Plumwood digunakan sebagai teori utama menganalisis objek penelitian. Bersamaan dengan dualisme Plumwood, tulisan ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif dan teknik pembacaan dekat sebagai strategi utama untuk mengumpulkan data dari objek. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa baik perempuan maupun alam masih dianggap sebagai makhluk inferior dari sudut pandang tokoh utama laki-laki. Namun, konflik yang dihadirkan dalam cerita menunjukkan bahwa perempuan dan alam adalah yang berada di sisi dominan.

Kata kunci: alam; dualisme; ekofeminisme; fiksi

INTRODUCTION

It is quite a conventional knowledge that humans and nature are inseparable matters. It can be understood that humans are part of nature itself, as humans are included in food chains, can be classified based on the biological kingdom, and live side by side with the physical environment. The idea of distinguishing humans from other natural forces began to appear along with the development of civilization. At this point, the term anthropocentrism had been globally distributed. Anthropocentrism refers to the view that humans are the most significant or central entity of the universe (Gaard 2017: 28). As an apparent output, nature became more and more inferior in humans' perception. This view can be safely argued as the one that is responsible for many

ecological problems like the extinction of a particular species and global climate change.

In the literary world, nature or physical environment is a matter that has been massively and continuously discussed throughout time. Tracing back to the era of romanticism, the depiction of nature in literary works can primarily be based on the sense of longing and nostalgia in which the industrial era began to separate humans from nature (Goodman 2008: 197). In this modern era, ecological-themed texts continuously appear and the criticism towards them has also been rapidly developed. The birth of ecocriticism is considered the landmark of literary criticism of ecological literature. There are also some significant branches from this major movement, including ecofeminism, the intersection between ecocriticism and feminism.

In the scope of ecological-themed literature, many argue that female figures are closely related to the essence of nature rather than men due to some particular feminine features like giving birth and the act of nurturing. This view is also adopted by global society as a feminine word like “mother” is permanently embedded to describe nature like in “mother nature.” Another similarity between these two matters is their shared inferior positions where nature is inferior to culture from an anthropocentric point of view, and women are inferior to men in a patriarchal society (Plumwood 1993: 21). One literary text that possibly bears this particular issue between women, nature, and men is Kristin Hannah’s *The Great Alone*. In addition to being longlisted for Best Historical Fiction at the 2018 Goodreads Choice Awards, *The Great Alone* spent four weeks at the top of the New York Times Fiction Best Seller list.

The story tells the struggle of Leni, Cora, and Ernt Allbright. Ernst is a former prisoner of war who just returns from the Vietnam War. The war changes him from a loving father figure to someone who drinks all the time and cannot maintain any job. Then, he has an idea to move to an outpost in the Alaskan wilderness along with his family to find his old self, a passionate social man and a loving father figure. Another purpose of the move is to deal with the traumatic memories resulted from the war he was participated in. Leni and Cora have no choice but to follow Ernst’s decision. Yet, it turns out that Alaska is quite different from their expectation. Throughout the story, the physical environment of Alaska plays a vital role in the progression of the conflicts between the characters. On some occasions, nature somehow moves in motion with Leni and Cora’s struggle. Hence, this research proposes a research question: How does *The Great Alone* picture the hierarchy of men versus women and nature versus culture?

In answering the aforementioned research question, this research utilizes the concept of dualism coined by Val Plumwood, one of the most prominent theorists in the branch of ecofeminism. In one of her books, she stated that ecofeminism is a discourse that rejects the superiority of reasoning, humanity, and culture (Plumwood 1993: 7). The rejection surfaced as the aforementioned matters created a hierarchy that devalued other elements of the universe. The concept of dualism itself was critically acclaimed for looking through the superior and inferior traits of men, women, nature, and culture. Within the hierarchy of ecofeminism tropes, Plumwood argues that the superior traits follow some characteristics that are stereotypically possessed by men, including masculinity, rationality, and culture. On the other hand, the inferior traits follow characteristics like femininity, submissiveness, and irrationality

(Plumwood 1993: 24-28). Hence, those contrasting features oppose the idea of equality proposed by feminist movements. Thus, the concept of dualism is a suitable framing tool to identify and analyze the state of domination and subordination in literary works, including the object of this research.

In terms of related studies, there have already been several studies that also discuss ecofeminism in literary works. Brault (2008), for instance, challenges the traditional view of wilderness through the illustration of Sylvia, the protagonist of *A White Haron*. The results show that wilderness could also be viewed through the action of silence. That silence itself is a passive action commonly explained as one of the feminine traits, and it traditionally appears as a sign of inferiority. However, Sylvia’s silence is the main reason she is able to break free from the traditional patriarchal hierarchy (Brault 2008: 89).

Using Plumwood’s instrumentalism, Tyler (2008) analyzes the aspects of nature and women in which she argues that Hemmingway does not view logging in a neutral manner. In a sense, logging is an action that considers nature a mere instrument for developing culture and civilization. Similar impressions also appear in rape and spousal conflicts that assign women as the instrument to fulfill lust or to maintain the cycle of life (Tyler 2008: 69).

Another related study that also discusses the issue of ecofeminism is by Nelfita et al. (2021), whose aim is to comprehend the values of ecofeminism in Tere Liye’s *Si Anak Pemberani*. According to the findings, Tere Liye’s novel contains ecofeminist values. Natural ecofeminist values are the most prominent in the text since there is a vital interaction between women and nature. Spiritualist ecofeminist ideas are underrepresented because the connection between spirituality and ecology is regarded as a mystical notion that is no longer relevant in modern culture (Nelfita et al., 2021: 107).

Apart from the aforementioned related studies, there are also some other notable works worth to be mentioned in the scope of ecofeminist literary ecocriticism, such as Bowlin’s attempt to view Flannery O’Connor’s piece as a work of environmental activism (2002), Schultermandl’s examination over the importance of an individual’s original physical environment (2005). Although this research utilizes a similar approach to the aforementioned related studies, there are some gaps that this research can fill. In this case, the object of analysis is distinctive in that the case within the object is also different from the texts that had been analyzed.

METHOD

In motion with Plumwood’s dualism, this research uses qualitative descriptive method to

frame the issue of nature and women within *The Great Alone*. By means of qualitative, the research will not chiefly deal with numerical and statistical data. Indeed, qualitative research is concerned with researching information in as many forms, primarily non-numeric, as possible (Blaxter 2001: 23). As for the data source, two kinds of primary data sources are used in this research. The first one is the primary data source which is the novel itself. The secondary data source consists of articles, books, and other forms of academic work that may help to support the discussion on the issue of nature and women in *The Great Alone*. Plumwood's *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993) is considered the most significant secondary data source as it also functions as the theoretical background of the analysis. In collecting the data, close reading technique is used as the primary strategy. After the data are entirely collected, the data are clustered based on the traits of superiority and inferiority. Sequentially, the clustered data are used to identify the dominant and submissive sides. Then, the result is linked to the chronological conflict of the story to determine the role of nature and the way it is linked to the female characters.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Ernst and the Culture of War

Since the beginning of the story, it is explicitly explained that Ernst Allbright is a man with an unhealthy behavioral pattern. It can be proven by how often the word "rage" is paired with Ernst. However, it is also explained in the story that before the Vietnam War, Ernst was a different person. He was a loving husband and a proper father figure. As the change occurs after the war, it is quite apparent that war is the factor that changed him.

In the discussion of ecocriticism, things like war and colonialism are forms of culture that also contribute to the development of civilization (Plumwood 2005: 20). Hence, the war also has superiority traits that Plumwood mentions. The aspect of masculinity is clearly presented in the culture of war, as the majority of the participants are men. Using terms like "manpower" in measuring combat capability also enhances the sense that war is a male practice. Then, in terms of the trait of controlling, war may affect the future ranging at individual, national, and even global levels. As for the case of *The Great Alone*, the Vietnam War is clearly the greatest controlling entity of the story. In this case, it is the one that changes Ernst, the reason to move to Alaska, and the reason why Leni lost her former caring father figure. Therefore, it can be perceived that culture, including war, resides on the side of the dominants.

Looking closer at the relationship between Ernst and war, it can be seen that the discourse of masculinity between these two entities is tightly related. While the war itself is masculine because men practiced it, it may also function as a sign of masculinity. In this case, Ernst is often portrayed wearing his military jacket, although there is no urgency whatsoever. At this point, it seems like the jacket functions as a sign to show people that he had attended the war and later may also be a signifier of bravery and masculinity. That is to say, going to war bears the spirit of heroism and is considered a variation of American Masculinity (Ireland, 2008). In the case of Ernst, although the war highly harms his psychological state, he still takes pride in the fact he went to the Vietnam war. Occasionally, he also brings up his military experience to gain control of his wife and daughter, who do not undergo such experience.

At this point, it can be understood that war and Ernst are the dominant entities who possess superiority traits. However, there is a slight difference between these two representations of superiority. In this case, while the domination of the war is absolute, Ernst's domination is limited to several points. Not to mention that the changing personality of Ernst is proof that his experience in Vietnam War dominates him. This domination then invokes Ernst's rage. As he cannot unleash the rage back toward the thing that dominated him, he must find another way to achieve relieveness. Thus, it comes back to his main motive in moving to Alaska, to find peace (Hannah 2018: 16). His decision represents the idea of instrumentalism that is usually practiced by the dominating entity. According to Plumwood (1993: 60), "instrumentalism is a mode of use which does not respect the other's independence or fullness of being, or acknowledge their agency."

Instrumentalism is manifested by how Ernst is only concerned with his own goal to find peace and assumes that Alaska's wilderness only consists of peacefulness. Along with this idea, he fails to acknowledge the danger of such an environment. And at the same time, he forces her family members to follow him and fulfill this false belief that would put them in hazardous situations. In another part of the story, Ernst takes a beating from a villager of Kaneq, Tom Walker. Walker insults Ernst and physically beats him. Being humiliated in such a way invokes his rage for one more time, as evident in the following:

"There was still a bright pink mark on his ear, like a burn, where Mr. Walker had taken hold and hauled Dad outside and humiliated him. "Mama took Leni by the hand and led her across the yard and into the cabin. She shut the door hard behind them. "He's going to hurt you," Leni said. "Your dad is a proud man. To be humiliated in

that way..." Seconds later, the door banged open. Dad stood there, his eyes bright with alcohol and rage (Hannah 2018: 169).

From the excerpt, it can be seen that Cora is aware of Ernt's situation and can predict what will happen to her and her daughter. Similar to the case of war and Alaska, Ernt cannot project his rage toward Walker and ends up beating entities that are more submissive than him to gain a sense of relief.

Leni, Cora, and the Wilderness of Alaska

Moving on to the next segment, the discussion follows the counterparts of men and culture are women and nature. Within *The Great Alone*, there are two main female characters; Leni and Cora Allbright. A nuanced picture of similarity shared by these two characters and nature can already be seen in the previous segment as both function as instruments that revolve around Ernt Allbright's desire. Apart from this similarity, there are also other similarities that are going to be discussed in this segment of the discussion.

One aspect commonly associated with women and nature is the sense of beauty. In an actual manner, beauty is one of the characteristics of femininity. In Plumwood's dualism theory, she explains that beauty is still considered one of the inferior elements (Plumwood, 1993: 79). The reason for this argument is that sense of beauty has a high possibility of elevating the objectification towards the subjects, either nature or women. Throughout history, there have been many cases of abuse to both women and nature where the sense of beauty has a role in shaping the perpetrators' motive. The sense of beauty is also associated with nature and women in *The Great Alone*. In this case, it can be seen through how the characters illustrate Alaska's image at the beginning of the story. Ernt illustrates Alaska as a place of freedom where he can stand by his own feet without facing the ugliness of society. Meanwhile, Cora and Leni picture Alaska as a spectacular and magical place filled with "white mountains that ran the length of the horizon, knife-tip points pressed high into a cloudless cornflower-blue sky" (Hannah 2018: 43). That being said, Alaska has a sense of beauty that attracts the characters.

Similarly, the women characters of *The Great Alone* are also occasionally attributed with such characteristics as pretty and beautiful. Just like nature, the women's beauty also leads to attraction. One of the examples is in the case of Leni and Matthew. These characters are initially explained in the manner of neighborhood friends and classmates. Their relationship slightly changes, and it is initiated by Matthew's appraisal of Leni, where he confesses that she is the only pretty girl of his age in Kaneq

(Hannah 2018: 79). Another female character, Cora Allbright, is also attributed to this particular feminine trait, as evident in the following:

"Leni wondered if Mama knew how beautiful she looked, standing there in her form-fitting pants, with her blond hair blowing in the sea breeze. Her beauty was as clear as a perfectly sung note and as out of place up here as an orchid. Yeah. She knew exactly how beautiful she was. And Mr. Walker saw it, too. "Can I get you something to drink?" he asked Mama. "Is a beer okay?" "Why, sure, Tom. I'd love a beer," Mama said, letting Mr. Walker lead her toward the food table and the cooler full of Rainier beer" (Hannah 2018: 88).

In the case of Cora, her beauty invites other male characters to conduct flirtatious acts. From the excerpt, it can be perceived that Mr. Walker is attracted to the beauty of Cora, which then lead him to make an approach to her. This output becomes problematic as it triggers a number of conflicts between her and Ernt, her husband. Until this point, it can be understood that women and nature have a similarity in terms of beauty characteristics, which invite other entities to approach them.

Aside from the beauty aspect, according to Plumwood (1993: 19), women and nature are attributed with inferiority traits like submissiveness and irrationality in the traditional patriarchal system. The trait of irrationality in this context may be described as either the state of being emotional due to nurturing characteristic or the state of being unpredictable that surpasses the logical sense (Plumwood: 24). A typical example of irrational traits is the picture of wilderness. Wilderness is one of the four environmental areas that gradually move from nature to culture. Wilderness is considered the purest form of the physical environment, followed by the scenic sublime, the countryside, and the domestic picturesque (Barry, 2002: 253). Irrationality is embedded in both the wilderness and women due to the idea that the presence of culture and men aims to civilize and tame the unknown to a state that can be accepted by rationality. However, throughout history, there have been numerous events where nature could not be civilized and ended up becoming a deadly threat to civilization. This idea is exceptionally presented in *The Great Alone* as some characters got damaged by natural forces.

The first case appears when the Allbrights attempt to raise chickens and goats for their sustainability in the winter. One night, a pack of wolves ravages their barn, leaving nothing but scattered blood. At that moment, Ernt is out of the house and unable to solve the problem. The point in this case is that Ernt, the one who proposed the

idea, attempts to civilize the wilderness of Alaska. As conventionally known, farming and raising animals are the initial point of the history of human civilization. Apart from this event, natural forces also play a role in the death of a middle-aged woman who slipped on a frozen lake and the incident where another character named Matthew is struck by a bolt of lightning that results in severe brain injury (Hannah 2018: 133 and 336).

Matthew is a boy whom Leni meets in Kaneq, and both of them are involved in a kind of romantic relationship. Later in the story, Leni finds out that she is pregnant because of her sexual encounter with Matthew. By this time, Leni was eighteen years old by the time she realized that she is pregnant, which means that she undergoes teenage pregnancy. In the context of ecofeminist reading, pregnancy means an attempt to maintain the cycle of life with the final goal of giving birth to the next generation. However, teenage pregnancy has been considered a complicated thing, especially in modern human civilization. Historically, the decline in teenage pregnancy had started since the 1970s, and the decline was highly supported by two of the presidents of that period, Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter (Spitz et al., 1987). Hence, the inclusion of the teenage pregnancy issue in *The Great Alone* possesses a profound contextual meaning to the condition of that particular period.

In the story, Cora shows a sign of support for Leni's pregnancy and her will to keep the baby. It is explained in the story that Cora's agreement is based on the shared experience both as a woman and mother (393). However, both of them are aware that Ernt, who is the embodiment of culture and rationality in this story, will strongly oppose Leni's decision. As the time of revelation comes, their fear accurately manifested.

"She pushed Mama aside and went to him, saw his surprise as she neared him and said, 'I'm pregnant.' She never saw the hit coming. One minute she was standing there, staring at her father, and the next minute his fist hit her chin so hard she tasted blood. Her head snapped back, she stumbled, lost her balance, crashed into an end table, and fell to the floor. As she landed, she thought, oddly, He's so fast. 'Ernt, no!' Mama screamed. Dad unbuckled his belt, pulled it loose, came at Leni. She tried to get up, but her head was ringing and she was dizzy. Her vision was off" (Hannah 2018: 366).

From the excerpt, it can be understood that Ernt expresses her disagreement through violence. As Leni's mother, Cora attempted to stop the violent act by all means. At this point, both of them are struggling to keep their child from Ernt. This action resembles

the inferior traits explained by Plumwood, in which nurturing is a characteristic shared by women and nature. The scene then ended with Ernt lying dead after Cora shot him twice from his back (Hannah 2018: 367).

Looking back to the first inferior trait being discussed in this segment of discussion, nature and women are attributed to irrationality. Leni and Cora's action resembles the deadly characteristic of nature, such as the ravaging pack of wolves and the lightning strike. This deadly act occurs as the response to Ernt's attempt to tame and civilize them based on his rationality. At this point, it can be understood that the embodiment of culture and power ended up dying at the hands of entities that were considered inferior rather than him. Hence, it can be argued that *The Great Alone* attempts to challenge the traditional hierarchy between men versus women and nature versus culture.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, by utilizing Plumwood's dualism, the hierarchy of men versus women and culture versus nature of Kristin Hannah's *The Great Alone* can be revealed. The discussion shows that both women and culture are still considered inferior beings from the perspective of the main male character. However, the chronological conflicts of the story show that women and nature are the ones that reside on the dominant side. Ernt's rationality and attempts to civilize the wilderness are in vain as they are greatly opposed by the natural forces and the female protagonists. In protecting their nurturing instinct, both nature and the female protagonists became deadly entities and resided in the dominant position. This deadly output can be viewed from various perspectives, and indeed, not all of them may view this output as a positive thing. However, in the context of dualism and hierarchal position, the deadly characteristic of both the women and nature in *The Great Alone* portrays a significant challenge to the traditional dualism hierarchy. To some extent, this kind of value of the text makes it a capable piece for strengthening or empowering movements that challenge the subordination of women and nature.

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