



Patriarchal Power and Nature: An Eco-Feministic Study of Sara Macdonald's In a Kingdom by the Sea

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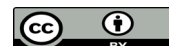
Abstract

Using the theoretical framework of ecofeminism, this article examines the intersection of feminism and ecology in Sara MacDonald's novel *In a Kingdom by the Sea*. The study explores how the novel critiques patriarchal power structures by portraying women's lived experiences and their relationship with the natural environment. Drawing on Karen J. Warren's ecofeminist theory, the analysis highlights the parallel processes through which women are marginalized and nature is exploited within patriarchal societies. The article emphasizes how MacDonald's narrative resists systems of domination and challenges hierarchical dualisms such as man/woman and nature/culture. By deconstructing these binaries, the novel reveals the interconnected oppression of women and the environment. The study argues that *In a Kingdom by the Sea* presents an ecofeminist vision that promotes harmony, care, and ethical responsibility toward both women and nature.

Ultimately, the article demonstrates that MacDonald's work not only critiques gender-based and ecological injustices but also offers an alternative perspective that foregrounds mutual respect, sustainability, and interconnectedness. Through an ecofeminist lens, the novel emerges as a powerful literary response to contemporary social and environmental concerns.

Keywords:

Ecofeminism, Feminism and Ecology, Sara MacDonald, In a Kingdom by the Sea, Patriarchy, Karen J. Warren, Women and Nature, Environmental Exploitation, Gender Oppression, Literary Eco-Criticism.



Introduction

Macdonald's stories include captivating characters. Her books include several plotlines that connect the characters. One could think her characters are worldwide. She set most of her books in Pakistan and Pakistani culture in Pakistani cities and Cornwall, her hometown. Her works often include natural motifs, expressing her passion for nature and family. MacDonald finds that nature is the best remedy for one's inner turmoil. She uses comparisons between humans and nature to argue.

Traveling to Pakistan inspired MacDonald's novel "*In a Kingdom by the Sea*". She recounts her condition and experience. The crisis impacts Pakistan, her marriage, and her life. Gabriel, the protagonist, emerges stronger and more self-aware from her struggles throughout the story. Keeping a positive attitude in difficult situations may boost optimism and happiness. Gabby is discovering herself by conquering societal and psychological boundaries.

Karen J. Warren's ecofeminism concept sheds light on the struggles faced by a woman in a dominated society. Where the only concern of a woman is to be "herself". Ecofeminism prioritizes the environment. Therefore, there is a double obligation: first, to criticize male prejudice in ethics wherever it appears, and second, to construct ethics that are not biased against men's interests. An ecofeminist philosophical quilt will include patches constructed by quilters in different social, historical, and materialist contexts.

Background of the Study

Ecofeminism developed as a response to the realization that social injustice and environmental degradation are deeply interconnected. Rather than treating ecological destruction as a purely scientific or economic problem, ecofeminist thinkers argue that environmental harm is rooted in social systems that normalize domination and hierarchy. Women, particularly in marginalized communities, are often the first to experience the consequences of ecological damage, whether through loss of livelihood, declining health, or restricted access to natural resources.

As a critical and interdisciplinary approach, ecofeminism examines how patriarchal structures shape both gender relations and human interaction with nature. These structures rely on value hierarchies that privilege masculinity, rationality, and control while devaluing femininity, emotion, and ecological interdependence. Such hierarchies are embedded in political institutions, economic systems, cultural practices, and ethical frameworks, reinforcing the marginalization of women and the exploitation of the natural world.

Ecofeminist scholarship challenges dominant dualistic thinking, particularly the division between culture and nature. This division constructs humans especially men as superior and entitled to dominate both women and the environment. By exposing the moral assumptions underlying this worldview, ecofeminism seeks to dismantle the ideological foundations that justify inequality and environmental harm.

Within literary studies, ecofeminism provides tools for analyzing how narratives represent women's experiences in relation to nature, power, and resistance. Literary texts often reveal how patriarchal values are internalized, contested, or transformed through personal relationships and encounters with the environment. This study adopts an ecofeminist perspective to explore how *In a Kingdom by the Sea* reflects and critiques these interconnected systems of domination.

Literature Review

Ecofeminism emerged as a significant theoretical framework in the late twentieth century, linking feminist critique with environmental ethics. The term was introduced by Françoise d'Eaubonne, who argued that patriarchal systems of control contribute simultaneously to ecological destruction and the subjugation of women. Since then, ecofeminist scholars have expanded this framework across philosophy, activism, and literary criticism.

Vandana Shiva and Carolyn Merchant emphasize the historical and material dimensions of ecofeminism, highlighting how capitalist and scientific worldviews have treated nature as a passive resource and women as subordinate labor. Their work illustrates how environmental exploitation and gender oppression reinforce one another through economic and ideological systems. Greta Gaard and other ecofeminist literary critics further examine how literary representations often associate women with nature, either reinforcing stereotypes or offering opportunities for resistance.

Material and corporeal ecofeminists such as Ariel Salleh and Stacy Alaimo extend this analysis by focusing on embodied experience. Their scholarship investigates how women's bodies and ecosystems are similarly exposed to harm, regulation, and control. This approach shifts ecofeminism away from symbolic associations alone and toward lived realities shaped by political and environmental conditions.

Karen J. Warren occupies a central position in ecofeminist theory through her development of ethical ecofeminism. Rather than focusing solely on symbolism or cultural representation, Warren emphasizes the moral dimensions of oppression. She introduces the concept of the "logic of domination," a pattern of reasoning that legitimizes the subordination of one group by framing difference as inferiority. Her work provides a framework for understanding how hierarchical thinking sustains injustice across gender, environmental, and social contexts.

While existing scholarship has explored ecofeminist themes broadly, fewer studies apply Warren's ethical framework directly to contemporary travel-based or autobiographical fiction. This study addresses that gap by applying ethical ecofeminism to *In a Kingdom by the Sea*, examining how personal narrative reveals the moral failures of patriarchal systems and gestures toward alternative ethical possibilities.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs ecofeminism as its primary theoretical framework, drawing specifically on Karen J. Warren's ethical ecofeminist philosophy. Ecofeminism examines the interconnected systems that sustain gender inequality and environmental degradation, arguing that both are products of patriarchal structures grounded in hierarchy and domination.

Warren's framework is particularly useful for literary analysis because it shifts attention from symbolic associations to ethical reasoning. She argues that oppressive systems rely on conceptual dualisms such as male/female, reason/emotion, and culture/nature in which one side is privileged while the other is devalued. These dualisms support moral hierarchies that justify control, exclusion, and exploitation.

Central to Warren's theory is the critique of the "logic of domination," which links perceived difference to moral inferiority. This logic does not merely describe inequality; it actively legitimizes it by presenting domination as natural or necessary. Within patriarchal societies, this reasoning governs social relationships, family structures, and cultural expectations, shaping how women understand themselves and how they are treated by others.

By applying this framework to *In a Kingdom by the Sea*, the study analyzes how patriarchal ethics operate within the narrative and how the female protagonist's experiences expose their limitations. The framework also allows for an examination of resistance not as overt political rebellion, but as ethical refusal, emotional awareness, and reconnection with relational values that challenge domination. Ecofeminist theory is founded on the premise that the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature are not separate phenomena but interconnected outcomes of patriarchal worldviews. These worldviews prioritize control, productivity, and hierarchy while dismissing care, interdependence, and ecological balance. Ecofeminists argue that such value systems normalize violence against both marginalized groups and the environment.

Karen J. Warren emphasizes that ecofeminism must be understood as an ethical intervention rather than merely a political or cultural critique. According to her, patriarchal societies construct moral frameworks that privilege masculinity and rationality, rendering femininity and nature as passive, inferior, or expendable. This ethical imbalance makes domination appear morally acceptable. Ecofeminism challenges this framework by advocating relational ethics grounded in care, mutual respect, and contextual understanding. Rather than promoting domination over nature or others, ecofeminist ethics emphasize coexistence and responsibility. Women's lived experiences particularly their dependence on natural resources and their roles in sustaining life offer alternative ways of understanding moral responsibility.

In literary contexts, ecofeminist theory enables readers to recognize how narratives expose the moral contradictions of patriarchy. When female characters reconnect with nature, memory, or emotional awareness, they often resist the logic of domination imposed upon them. These moments reveal ecofeminism not merely as a critique, but as a transformative ethical perspective that values life, connection, and sustainability.

Patriarchal Norms and Power Structures

Sara MacDonald critically examines and questions patriarchal norms and power structures via the utilization of the protagonist, Gabriella's, experiences in Pakistan. The narrative elucidates the challenges encountered by women within a societal framework characterized by the predominance of patriarchal norms and expectations. When Rahim was telling Gabriella about his marriage, he said, "I chose her" (p. 264). Further, he says, "I choose Leila for my wife. My parents, they are very pleased, and Leila's parents, they are even more pleased that I have chosen her ..." (2019, p. 264). This shows the dominance of male chauvinism. In the Pakistani community, women are seen as a commodity to be purchased. The novel effectively achieves this objective by utilizing the information supplied. Carolyn Merchant, in her work "The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution" (1980), challenges the dualistic thinking that divides civilization from nature and genders.

The portrayal of Gabriella's journey in the narrative serves as a means to critically examine the patriarchal norms prevalent in Pakistani culture. Gabriella, as the principal character, functions as a lens through which these societal norms are analyzed and evaluated. The protagonist's challenges within her marital relationship and the cultural constraints she encounters while residing in Pakistan provide insight into the ways in which conventional gender norms and power structures can inhibit personal autonomy and liberty.

The author discusses Gabriella's increasing understanding of gender dynamics through her encounters with Pakistani women, which provide her with insights into the existing power disparities based on gender within the country. When Gabriella meets Massima, Birjees, and Samia. Through active participation in substantive dialogues and observation of the limitations experienced by these women, she acquires a more profound comprehension of the patriarchal standards that govern their existence. This heightened level of consciousness causes her to engage in introspection over her own circumstances and the similarities she possesses with these ladies.

A critical analysis of patriarchy and power via narrative through an intricate interplay of Gabriella's individual struggles and the wider socio-cultural backdrop of Pakistan, the novel presents a discerning analysis of patriarchal hegemony. The text underscores the importance of societal transformation, encouraging readers to critically examine and confront gender-based injustices and power dynamics that impede women's autonomy and advancement.

Woman and Nature

Ecofeminism emphasizes the parallel forms of domination imposed upon women and the natural world within patriarchal societies. In *In a Kingdom by the Sea*, women are portrayed as existing within rigid social boundaries that deny them autonomy, mirroring the way nature is treated as an object to be controlled and exploited. Female characters are expected to conform

to prescribed roles, suppressing their desires and identities in order to meet social expectations imposed by family and culture. This restrictive framework reinforces the belief that women, like nature, exist primarily to serve others. The novel illustrates how such assumptions deprive women of agency, particularly in matters of education, employment, and personal choice. Gabriella's experiences highlight the tension between individual aspirations and societal constraints, revealing how patriarchal values limit women's self-expression while normalizing their dependence. Ecofeminist theory interprets this relationship as more than symbolic; it reflects a structural pattern in which domination is justified through cultural norms. The exploitation of nature parallels the marginalization of women, both rooted in hierarchical thinking that values control over care and utility over sustainability. The text suggests that resistance to these norms requires a re-evaluation of power structures that uphold inequality.

Through its depiction of women's struggles, the narrative calls attention to the interconnected oppression of gender and environment. By challenging patriarchal assumptions, the novel aligns with ecofeminist thought that advocates balance, mutual respect, and ethical responsibility toward both women and the natural world.

Discussion and Key Findings

An examination of "In a Kingdom by the Sea" reveals a complex connection with gender norms, which reinforces traditional gender norms. Some characters challenge these traditions, while others follow them. Leila and Samia crossed their arms in front of the patriarchy to demonstrate. The story shows how women struggle and dream in a patriarchal society, criticizing gender norms. The tale also reinforces gender norms by showing those who follow rules.

The study explores gendered power imbalances in relationships, institutions, and culture. This examination examines how patriarchy dominates female characters and affects their autonomy and decision-making. The study shows characters exercising authority or questioning power structures, underlining the complex navigation of power in gender interactions. Power relations between class and ethnicity affect the story's representation of power. Moreover, the female characters demonstrate feminist resistance and courage via their acts and words. Protagonists face opposition to feminist ideas and individual empowerment in isolated communities and societal norms. Female characters empower themselves and challenge oppression in the analysis. Feminist discourse is complex, and narrative echo chambers may magnify or change the above cases. Gabriella followed her intuition and challenged her marriage. Dominique revealed her and Gabby's emptiness to close the gap.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that *In a Kingdom by the Sea* presents a critical exploration of patriarchal dominance through its portrayal of gender relations and environmental consciousness. By applying an ecofeminist framework, the analysis reveals how systems of power operate simultaneously upon women and nature, reinforcing patterns of control, exclusion, and marginalization.

The novel exposes the limitations imposed on women's autonomy while illustrating their gradual awareness and resistance within oppressive structures. These personal struggles reflect broader social realities in which patriarchal values shape both human relationships and attitudes toward the environment. The narrative thus underscores the ethical consequences of domination-based worldviews.

By foregrounding interconnected forms of oppression, the text contributes meaningfully to ecofeminist literary discourse. It encourages readers to reconsider dominant cultural assumptions and to imagine alternative models grounded in equity, care, and sustainability. Ultimately, the novel affirms that challenging patriarchal systems is essential not only for gender justice but also for fostering a more balanced relationship between humanity and nature.

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