

# An Ecofeminist Reading of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*

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## ABSTRACT

*Lady Chatterley's Lover* is a controversial and also one of the most important works of D.H. Lawrence. Lawrence lived in an era when the industrialization gained complete triumph. Lawrence witnessed the environmental degradation, alienation of human nature and the suffering of women. This paper attempts to interpret the novel from the perspective of ecofeminism, by analyzing how Connie gets rebirth inspired by nature, how industrialization makes people alienated. Ecofeminism is a combination of feminism and environmental movement emerged in the 1970s. Ecofeminists deem the patriarchal dualism as the root of oppression and exploitation of nature and women. Lawrence was far-sighted to call people's attention to the importance of natural, social and spiritual balance. The thesis is made up of four parts. The first part gives a brief introduction of Lawrence and the background of his age, including the literature review of the novel. Part two is the introduction to the theory ecofeminism. Part three mainly analyzes men's domination over woman and nature and how the protagonist Connie fights against patriarchal society by her identification with nature. The last part is the summary of Lawrence's ecological thoughts. It points out the practical significance and possible guidance to current environmental issues and female issues.

**Keywords:** D. H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Ecofeminism, Patriarchy.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

David Herbert Lawrence (1885-1930) is one of the most distinctive and significant writers. As a prolific author, his writing ranges from fiction, poetry to travel essays and other works. His works are widely read and commented. It is undeniable that Lawrence is a representative of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in English literary world. His last novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is a summary of his works. It fully presents the author's exquisite artistry and profound thought. However, it's called "pornographic writing", and it has been banned for more than thirty years for its indecency. D.H. Lawrence suffered a lot from criticism since the initial publication and could not be understood by people for decades. As a victim of industrial civilization, Lawrence focuses on the relationship between human and nature, man and woman under the natural and social disasters caused by industrial revolution.

### 1.1. The Natural and Social Background of Lawrence's Age

A writer's work is often related to one's life experience and certain socio-cultural background. In Lawrence's era, the British social economy went

through depressions. Great changes took place in Lawrence's age and a pastoral England was replaced by an industrialized one. All the factors had a deep impact on Lawrence's creation of the novel.

#### 1.1.1. Natural environment in Lawrence's Age

Lawrence's hometown Eastwood locates in the middle of England, at the centre of a large coalfield. Mentioning midland, beautiful landscapes would spring to mind: beautiful woods, clear rivers, singing birds and so on. That was the past of Lawrence's hometown, yet great changes happened to the natural environment soon. After the Victorian Period, the primitive land gives way to industrial activities as digging, mining and deforesting. People tried every means to exploit the natural resources to get more money. Therefore, nature was seriously devastated and it resulted in imbalance of the environment at Lawrence's time.

Lawrence elder brother William died of pneumonia and Lawrence himself had bronchitis when he was born. However, it isn't a coincidence; it's the result of environmental deterioration. The factories burning coal discharge lots of harmful gas and dust. In Lawrence's rest life, he always seek for an ecological environment

to cure his lung disease, but still dies of the same sickness finally, failing to escape from the pollution of industrial civilization. The environment of England in his middle-age became worse, owing to the damage. Lawrence witnessed the great change, the decaying and fading Eastwood. The beautiful woods and vast land disappeared and the sky was left gloomy, earth barren. He depicted it in details in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. In Chapter Two, when Connie first came to Tevershall, the author describes an unpleasant scene:

From the rather dismal rooms at Wragby she heard the rattle-rattle of the screens at the pit, the puff of the winding-engine, the clink-clink of shunting trucks, and the hoarse little whistle of the colliery locomotives. Tevershall pit-bank was burning, had been burning for years, and it would cost thousands to put it out. So it had to burn. And when the wind was that way, which was often, the house was full of the stench of this sulphurous combustion of the earth's excrement [1].

This description is a vivid portrayal of the natural environment in Lawrence's time. He disliked the polluted Eastwood and spent the last 10 years of his life wandering between Italy, France, Germany, Australia, the American Southwest and Mexico, seeking for fresh air and an ideal spiritual home to his deteriorating health.

### 1.1.2. The Socio-cultural Background of Lawrence's Age

D.H. Lawrence lived at a time of great change. World War I broke out during the heat of an aggressive industrialization. The war brought further changes in the economic, political and social situation. As a remedy for the debt of war, they developed heavy industries to stimulate the recovery of economy. People exploited the natural resources without considering their damage to the environment. Social change and economic development are closely related with the innovation of technology, and production of large-scale energy.

Industry not only changed the nature, but also changed people's thoughts. They no longer cherish the wild nature as before. Their crazy exploitation of natural resources is just for the immediate interests. The relationship between capitalists and workers became increasingly tense. The coming of the General Strike in May 1926 was caused by the coal-owners' attempt to reduce wages and increase working hours in order to survive a declining in the industry. Industrialization also brought the fundamental changes in women's life. Women could work as the man which relatively gave them social freedom and financial independence. Some of the repressions that had bounded female sexuality were removed. People's cultural concepts changed greatly after the war. When Lawrence went back to England for a short visit in 1926, he witnessed the

numbness of the local people, and it made Lawrence realize there wouldn't be any better change without further move to reshape and change people's conception. Soon after his England visit, he began to write *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. In the opening lines of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Lawrence writes "Ours is essentially a tragic age, so we refuse to take it tragically. The cataclysm has happened, we are among the ruins, we start to build up new little habitats, to have new little hopes." (5). He expressed his criticism of the mass-destructive war and the side-effect of the industrial mechanism.

### 1.2. Literature Review of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*

*Lady Chatterley's Lover* was first published at Florence privately in July 1928, and it was openly published in 1959. Lawrence narrated the story that the heroine Connie found love and sexual satisfaction with her husband's gamekeeper Mellors. Because of the sensitive theme of sex, there are different voices about it. Some attack it as mere pornography, other critics consider it a serious work of literature and embrace it. It appears different study focuses and critical methods. A feminist Kate Millett (1934-) criticizes, in her *Sexual Politics* (1977), the novel as male chauvinism, while Carol Dix holds differently on this view. The book arouses much controversy but the mainstream of the critics recognize its value. Edmund Wilson praises Lawrence's good mastery of the language in describing the scenes of sexuality. He speaks highly of Lawrence as a bold pioneer in free pure sex, breaking the traditional restraints, and offering a serious and healthy look at the relationship between men and women. Wilson holds: It may, in fact, probably be said that these scenes in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* contain the best descriptions of sexual experience that have yet been written in English.[2] F. R. Leavis (1895-1978) described: "Lawrence is, before all else, a great novelist, one of the very greatest, and it is as one of the major novelists of the English tradition." [3] Leavis also believes Lawrence "relates his special theme with great power to the malady of industrial civilization". [3] E. M. Forster (1879-1970) also regarded it as "the greatest imaginative novelist of our generation." Arnold Bennett admits a "admirer of Lawrence" and hold that "no finer work has been done in our time, than Lawrence's finest." [4] Critics of the world study Lawrence's writings from different perspectives, such as aesthetics, religion, psychoanalysis, symbolism, post-colonialism, linguistics, feminism and so on. From the survey of debates and criticism on *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, the focus is on the theme and treatment of sexuality in the novel. However, we can't ignore the author's deep concern on environmental crisis and the alienation of mankind. Lawrence's anti-industrial civilization is obvious. In his view, the industrial revolution of

capitalism makes profit at the cost of ravishing the nature. Lawrence's farseeing ecological awareness mainly embodied in his appealing of the harmony between the nature and human, man and woman.

Chinese studies on *Lady Chatterley's Lover* generally fall into four categories: themes, translations, artistic techniques as well as different research methods like psychoanalysis, archetypal criticism, ecocriticism. One of the famous monographs on Lawrence, from a professor in Xiang Tan University, called *The Study of D. H. Lawrence— His Life, Works and Thoughts* (1996), covers multifold significant academic achievements on the study of Lawrence both in and out of China. Another Chinese expert Professor Liu Xianzhi compiles *The Anthology of D. H. Lawrence* (1991). It collects many critical writings of important critics. Professor Feng provides a new approach on the studies of D. H. Lawrence. In recent years, Doctors come to the systematical research on the novel: Weimin Li from the perspective of the three versions of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Fuguang Miao from ecocriticism. However, the critics have not paid enough attention to the ecofeminist study of his works and there are still much room for the further study.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1. Brief Introduction to Ecofeminism

When we talk about ecofeminism, we should first know ecocriticism. Ecocriticism or ecological literary criticism are a combination of ecology and literature. Ecocriticism tries to deconstruct anthropocentrism, while the target of ecofeminism is to deconstruct both anthropocentrism and androcentrism. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* evoked women's consciousness of environmental crisis; coincidentally, the women's movement in the 1970s intertwined and combined with environmental movement. Ecofeminism, as a branch of feminism, is related to ecology, originated in the 1970s and flourishing in the 1990s. The term "ecofeminism" was first coined in 1974 by a radical feminist Francoise d'Eaubonne (1920-2005) in her book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort*. Ecofeminism is a new critical school out of the ecological crisis, belonging to interdisciplinary studies. According to Ariel Salleh, ecological feminism, is "a recent development in feminist thought which argues that the current global environmental crisis is an outcome of patriarchal culture"[5] According to Greta Gaard in her book *Ecological Politics: Ecofeminists and the Greens*, ecofeminism is based on the theory that the oppression of women and the oppression of nature are fundamentally linked. During the mid-1990s, theorists began to name the various branches of ecofeminist thought. It offers us a brand-new perspective for our understanding and settlement to gender, environment and development issues.

### 2.2. Major Schools of Ecofeminism

Up to now, there are various forms and streams of ecofeminism, so it's difficult to generalize all the theories concerned. Scholars still have different opinions about the division of ecofeminism. According to Greta Gaard, there are radical ecofeminism, liberal ecofeminism, social ecofeminism, activist ecofeminism, womanism and spiritual / cultural ecofeminism [6]. This classification is mainly according to its different sources of feminist thought. Each of the stream focuses on different perspectives, but they have much in common. Radical ecofeminism, influenced by radical feminism, aims to overthrow patriarchy by opposing gender roles and movement. Liberal ecofeminism is originated from liberal feminism, and it argues for "using liberal feminist strategies to address environmental problems" [6]. Social ecofeminism advocates the liberation of women through overturning economic and social hierarchies. Social and socialist ecofeminism ground their analyses in capitalist patriarchy and economic systems. They tend to change the current social systems and political institutions. According to another scholar John Barry, ecofeminism can be classified into the following three groups: essentialist ecofeminism, materialist ecofeminism, and resistance ecofeminism.

### 2.3. Main Principles and Characteristics of Ecofeminism

Though belonging to different schools, the major goal of ecofeminists is to eliminate hierarchies and deconstruct the logic of domination. They wish ecofeminism's constructive worldview could replace hierarchical dualisms. From socialist feminism, it draws an understanding of the processes and structures of power and domination. From radical feminism, it takes the critique of the masculinity of dominant culture and the aspiration to replace it, to affirm what has been denigrated [7]. For liberal ecofeminists, they focus on the individual's inner change instead of overturning the social system. Ecofeminists think women have a closer relationship with nature than men. On the social and physical level, women are involved in farming lands, child-raising and caring for nature, so they infer women are naturalized. The first critical strategy they share is to deconstruct androcentrism and anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism is believed by some to be the central problematic concept in environmental philosophy. It draws attention to a systematic bias in traditional western attitudes to the non-human world [8]. Another agreement of ecofeminists is that they think man's twin domination over women and nature prove both of them are regarded as Other. The twin domination are connected and environmental efforts are integral with work to overcome the oppression of women.

### 3. ECOFEMINISM THOUGHT OF LAWRENCE IN THE NOVEL

Similar to ecofeminists, Lawrence was against the patriarchal society for its domination imposed on women and nature by industrialization. Lawrence identifies himself as an ecofeminist for his sympathy and love for both nature and women. His ultimate goal is to establish harmonious relationships between man and woman, man and nature. That is the embodiment of Lawrence's ecofeminism thought in the novel. The paper tries to illustrate from the following aspects.

#### 3.1. *Man's Twin Domination over Woman and Nature in the Novel*

Ecofeminists argue that women and nature have been subjected to a shared history of oppression by patriarchal dualism in culture. Patriarchy and dualism are closely related: the building up of the latter is also the construction of the former. Patriarchy views nature, animals and women are objectified and invaded. But ecofeminists reject any claims of primacy for one form of oppression or another. With the approach of ecofeminism and a text-based analysis, this part will explore and analyze the victimized situation of Connie and nature, tracing the roots of their oppressed position.

##### 3.1.1. *Man's Domination over Connie*

In the novel, patriarchal dualism is well-demonstrated in creating the protagonist. Connie, a beautiful and well-educated woman, lived an easy life before her marriage. She marries a landowner Sir Clifford, who becomes impotent after honeymoon by war. In the cold family, Connie becomes a victimizer of patriarchal society, confined by her duties as a wife. She is restricted in the house by looking after her husband and treating their guests. Connie is unfortunately enough because of the lack of the sexuality in the age in full flower. She can't get spiritual or physical satisfaction for years; what's more, Clifford teaches her to keep away from sex and asks Connie to read his meaningless writing all day long. There is nothing to distract her at Wragby Hall. Often "she had to be quiet as a mouse, not to interfere with the immensely important speculations of these highly-mental gentlemen. But she had to be there. They didn't get on so well without her" (33). Sometimes she is only allowed to be an honest listener in men's conversation. Connie is under Clifford's domination which stifles her and makes Connie a walking dead. She wants to escape from "the dreadful, carrion-bodied people" (79).

What's worse, despite of disability, Clifford asks Connie to produce an heir for him, the self-centered man just regards her as a breeding machine. Enslaved by the rules and regulations, Connie always behaves

well. She thought sacrificing and devotion to be her obligations. She plays different roles to Clifford: wife, servant and sometimes hostess—perform well in front of male celebrities to entertain them. Being crippled, he gives Connie no freedom and understanding; on the contrary, Connie has been trapped, according to the text: "She was not even free, for Clifford must have her there ... depended on her with terror, like a child, almost like an idiot" (103). In spite of the possession of the noble social status, the life in the house is mechanical, and it makes energetic young Connie withered. It is the industrialized world, the patriarchal society that turn Connie into a bored, lifeless woman. Through depicting these two characters, Lawrence consciously condemns the patriarchal conceptions and androcentrism.

##### 3.1.2. *Man's Domination over Nature*

Although using and developing natural resources is an essential condition of human's existence; however, it's not the reason for human being's abuse and destruction of our land. Lawrence presented the nature destroyed by men in their pursuit of profit in the process of industrialization. Connie witnesses man's domination over nature. Through her eyes, one can see the ugly Tevershall, the polluted air and burning mining areas. Generally speaking, man's domination over nature is conceptually rooted in transcending dualism. In *Genesis*, God says to Adam: "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth"(Genesis 1: 26). This probably provides a religious and conceptual theory for man's superiority to others. It's no wonder when Clifford sees a small mole, he wants to kill it and squashes the little yellow cups of the creeping-jenny. He places himself in the position of the Master of nature. He is wealthy enough, but he still exploits or makes the colliers exploit the land.

The estate Wragby Hall of Clifford can first exemplify the great destruction done by local colliers. The history of Wragby, near a fine park of oak trees, traces back to the middle of the eighteenth century. It must have been a beautiful place for a good mood and physical health. Wragby now is severely contaminated by the industrial mechanization. Not far from it there is a "chimney of Tevershall pit, with its clouds of steam and smoke", and "rows of wretched, small, begrimed, brick houses" (13). Connie can hear "the rattle-rattle of the screens at the pit; the puff of the winding-engine, the clink-clink of shunting trucks, and the hoarse little whistle of the colliery locomotives"(13). Lawrence depicts one of the places that "Sir Geoffrey had cut during the war for trench timber. The whole knoll, which rose softly on the right of the riding, was denuded

and strangely forlorn” (39-40). The entire description creates a striking image of human’s ravage done on the land. The remaining nature and woods are marginal, still in danger. The author describes Clifford’s walks in his wheelchair in the wood:

The chair puffed slowly on, slowly surging into the forget-me-nots that rose up in the drive like milk froth, beyond the hazel shadows. Clifford steered the middle course, where feet passing had kept a channel through the flowers. But Connie, walking behind, had watched the wheels jolt over the wood-ruff and the bugle, and squash the little yellow cups of the creeping-jenny (172).

Clifford can trample the flowers arbitrarily, for he never cares about the value of flower under his iron chair. Connie shows resentment of his damage to poor flowers. As an industrialist, Clifford represents the doer of the damage to nature in Lawrence’s time. The wood, a symbol of nature, means nothing but a property in Clifford’s eyes. In Chapter 13, they walk again in the wood, seeing a mole which has swum out to the soft yellow earth, he says “unpleasant little beast, we ought to kill him” (174). These details show he is so incompatible with the nature. By the novel, Lawrence criticizes people’s ignorance of environmental justice by their abuse of nature during their pursuit of benefits.

### 3.2. *The Combination of Connie and Nature*

In the novel, there is a beautiful forest not far away from Wragby Hall. The images and symbols in the novel mapping the relationship between the protagonist Connie and the wood. Connie has always identified herself with the wood. Lawrence gives us a naturalized woman -- the symbolic representation between woman and nature is vividly shown that Connie is “naturalized”, and vice versa, nature is “womanized”. Lawrence himself once admitted this novel are full of symbols, the house, the wood, the hut, and paralyzed Clifford are part of it. In the letter to D.V. Lederhandler in 1929, Lawrence said: “Yes, the paralysis of Clifford is symbolic...I do not deliberately work symbolically, but by the time the book was finished I realized what the unconscious symbolism was”[9]. By detailed text analysis, we will find why Connie chooses to unite with nature to revolt against the patriarchal domination and how she gets her liberation and rebirth from nature.

#### 3.2.1. *Connie’s Identification with Nature*

Throughout human history, nature is portrayed as feminine. The earth as mother is a universal metaphor. Ecofeminists argue that women’s identification with nature lies in their physiological connection with bearing baby and child care. The close connection also comes from their shared history of oppression by a patriarchal society. Labor division and their

reproductive role make women sensitive to the change of environment and closer to nature in early human social patterns. In the story, Connie positively identifies her fate with nature. The naturalized female Connie finds hope in dead life with the guidance of nature. The key to understand the ecofeminist awareness established by Lawrence lies in Connie’s identification with nature and return to the natural world. Connie instinctively links her fate with the nature, so she worries about the well-being of the forest. Lawrence also depicts her: “She was like a forest, like the dark interlacing of the oak-wood”(129). In Lawrence’s novel, Connie has a closer relationship with nature than Clifford. Connie likes the wood and cherishes the beautiful flowers and animals in nature. “She hated breaking the flowers” (80). While Clifford often compares flowers and animals to female, in his eyes, violets are Juno’s eyelids, and windflowers are unravished brides. Connie reunites her connection with the nature; hence, she finds comfort in the soul. When the nature is in a devastated situation, Connie shows her sympathy with it and when she is in a withering situation, the forest provides a sanctuary for her. In the novel, the fate of the wood and Connie’s fate are under the control of Clifford. Connie has consciously come to wood and identified herself with nature. The hut provides her with a bridge to recover her instinctive humanity and the woods provide a place for Connie’s salvation.

#### 3.2.2. *Connie’s Awakening and Rebirth in Nature*

At the beginning of the story, Lawrence portrayed Connie’s looking: “Constance, his wife, was a ruddy, country-looking girl with soft brown hair and sturdy body, and slow movements, full of unusual energy. She had big, wondering eyes, and a soft mild voice, and seemed just to have come from her native village” ( 6). Firstly, her image is natural, pure and innocent like a naïve girl. But Connie soon becomes a totally different woman, depressed, cheerless, after she becomes Clifford’s private property. Connie realizes she will die in the lifeless and passionless family. She needs help from outside; when she goes to the woods, Connie gets comforts and obtains tranquility. In Lawrence’s novel, the wood is an “Eden” unravished by man. She can enjoy solitude of staying alone, breathing the fresh air and appreciating the beauty of the flowers and trees, she finds her root nature in woods. It is the wood that quickens Connie’s awakening and leading to Connie’s coming back to life.

Connie plants herself in the nature, and they become inseparable. The wood awakens her. From the passive acceptance to an active identification with the nature, Connie goes through her life from spiritual death to rebirth. It is obvious that the heroine intuitively

corresponds to the rhythm of the seasons, from the blooming spring to the thriving summer:

Connie went to the wood directly after lunch. It was really a lovely day, the first dandelions making suns, the first daisies so white ... the forget-me-nots were fluffing up, and columbines were unfolding their ink-purple ruches, and there were bits of blue bird's eggshell under a bush. Everywhere the bud-knots and the leap of life! (154).

Connie first feels the return of beautiful spring. Her fate coincides with the nature and her life varies with the changing season. She is sensitive enough to the changing environment and integrated with nature to experience her identity together with the forest. As a witness of the destruction done to nature by man, Connie is finally aware of the same oppressed situation of woman and nature.

Someday the game keeper goes into Connie's sight. In contrast to Clifford's cold loveless heart, Lawrence describes Mellors as a tender and free-spirited man, full of vitality. He symbolizes the child of nature. Like a hermit, he keeps away from the ugliness of the outside world, something like Thoreau's life along Walden. He is not only sympathetic toward Connie, but also loves animals and protects the woods. Seeing Mellors taking shower, Connie's sexual consciousness comes to waken, and the instinct make her find herself which has long been lost. They make love on the ground, until this time Connie finds her orgasm for the first time. Until the very moment, Connie revives with a new life. The wood that paves the way for her rebirth and sex is the bridge for Connie to get her rebirth. Lawrence pointed out that a harmonious relationship should be based on the share of inner desires as both Connie and Mellors are hungry for salvation from the cold mechanical world. Connie's unification with Mellors is not simple sexual satisfaction, but a full exchange of two isolated souls. When Connie is pregnant by Mellors, he decides to divorce and starts a new life with his lover. Returning to nature, they both get rebirth and walk out of the spiritual wasteland.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

D. H. Lawrence, as a qualified spokesman of nature, expresses deep concerns to the problematic world in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. His thought, the solution to global ecological crisis is never too easy to approach completely. By the approach of ecofeminism and text-based analysis of the novel, Lawrence's concerns about the relationship between man and nature, man and woman, his natural and social ecological thoughts are clearly interpreted. Lawrence's description of the plight of woman and nature in the novel shows his great concerns about the feminine and natural world dominated and oppressed by man. The identification with nature is the first step of Connie's liberation from

Clifford's control. During Connie's awakening, the wood provides a shelter and a bridge for her. Connie's final revolt against Clifford's domination is not achieved until she unites with Mellors, child of nature. She finally gets her rebirth. The thesis explores the value of this classical novel and the contemporary significance of Lawrence's foresight. As man has done so much harm to nature, it's high time we realized that we were not the center of the world. In the 21st century, we have to learn to establish more harmonious relationships between humans, human and nature. Balance and coexistence are what Lawrence taught. It's of great significance to reread *Lady Chatterley's Lover* from the ecofeminist perspective. It is hopeful to give a possible guidance of current environmental issues and female issues, and also to give the readers a better understanding of the novel.

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