



Nature's Guardians: Ecofeminist Struggles and the Interconnected Biosphere in *Woman at War*, *Whale Rider* and *Princess Mononoke*

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Abstract

*This research paper investigates the portrayal of ecofeminist themes and the symbiotic relationship between humanity and nature in the films *Woman at War* (2018), *Whale Rider* (2002), and *Princess Mononoke* (1997). Through a close reading informed by ecofeminist theory, the study analyzes how these narratives center female or feminized figures as catalysts for ecological resistance and cultural renewal. The protagonists-Halla, Paikea, and San-embodiment a defiant response to environmental destruction and patriarchal authority, each confronting industrial, colonial, or mythic forces that seek to dominate nature. The films construct a vision of the biosphere as a living, interconnected system where human and non-human entities coexist in fragile but vital balance. By integrating indigenous cosmologies, spiritual dimensions, and acts of civil disobedience, the films articulate a shared ecological ethic grounded in empathy, relationality, and reciprocal care. This research ultimately demonstrates how cinema can serve as a powerful medium for articulating ecofeminist resistance, revealing the deep interdependence between gender justice, environmental stewardship, and the reimagining of a more sustainable and equitable world.*

Keywords: ecofeminism, ecocriticism, symbiotic, ecology

Introduction

Humanity has long relied on nature to satisfy both material and aesthetic needs. Yet, over time, this relationship has become increasingly imbalanced as man has come to view nature as an entity to be subdued, exploited, and often destroyed. The anthropogenic impact on Earth has led to a host of environmental crises, including global warming, pollution of air, water, and soil, ocean acidification, climate change, the destruction of the ozone layer, melting ice caps, and widespread contamination. These pressing issues have arisen from human activities such as the accumulation of plastics, the use of fertilizers and pesticides, fossil fuel combustion, and deforestation, among others.

In response to these challenges, ecofeminism emerged as a movement in the late 1970s and early 1980s, fueled by the momentum of various social movements and protests, including second-wave feminism, ecocriticism, anti-war and anti-nuclear activism, and the burgeoning green movement. Ecofeminism, as a specific branch of ecocriticism, builds upon the broad framework of ecocriticism, which examines the relationship between humans and the natural world. By intertwining environmental and feminist concerns, ecofeminism emphasizes the interconnectedness of the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women, both rooted in patriarchal systems of dominance. This connection enriches ecocriticism by adding a gendered dimension, highlighting how patriarchal structures contribute



to both environmental degradation and the marginalization of women. The term “ecofeminism” was first coined by French feminist

Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974, who introduced the concept of “*écologie féminisme*” to emphasize women’s potential to spearhead an eco-revolution.

“Ecofeminists focus on interconnections between the domination /oppression of women and the domination /oppression of nature.” -Lisa Kemmerer, *Sister Species*

Kemmerer’s insight captures the core of ecofeminism, an interdisciplinary approach that explores the deep-seated connection between women and nature, emphasizing their shared history of oppression under patriarchal systems of control and dominance. The exploitation of women and the degradation of the environment are two sides of the same coin, rooted in a patriarchal worldview that prioritizes dominance, control, and hierarchy over care, cooperation, and interdependence.

Historically, women in cinema have often been confined to stereotypical roles, such as love interests or supporting characters, which primarily serve to reflect and reinforce traditional gender norms and power dynamics. These limited portrayals contribute to a narrow and often distorted understanding of women’s lives and experiences. Feminist critics challenge these representations, advocating for more diverse, complex, and empowering depictions of women on screen. Representation in cinema goes beyond the mere inclusion of characters; it involves how they are portrayed, the roles they occupy, and the narratives that surround them. This portrayal reflects societal norms, values, and power dynamics, making representation a multifaceted and complex issue that intersects with identity, diversity, inclusion, and social justice.

Woman at War centers on the formidable female protagonist Halla, a choir conductor who leads a double life as an eco-activist. Halla’s mission is to disrupt the operations of a Rio Tinto aluminum plant in the Icelandic highlands, which she views as emblematic of corporate environmental destruction. The film opens with a striking scene where Halla sabotages electricity pylons and wires, effectively cutting the plant’s power supply. Halla’s character is complex and multifaceted, embodying both the

nurturing and warrior aspects of ecofeminism. Her actions reflect a deep commitment to the environment, as she takes on the role of a guardian, using her inner strength and resourcefulness to challenge the industrial interests threatening the natural world. The film also explores the duality of Halla’s life through her relationship with her twin sister, Ása. Both women are childless and approaching the age of fifty, each having chosen different paths in life. Halla teaches choir, connecting with others through music, while Ása teaches yoga, focusing on inner peace and spiritual well-being.

It’s been four years since Halla and Ása applied to be adoptive mothers, and during this time, Halla has not been idle. She has been waging a secret, one-woman war against the corporate forces that are devastating her beloved Icelandic highlands. These corporate entities, symbolized by the aluminum plant, are portrayed as part of a larger global problem - using the mask of globalization to justify environmental degradation.

In *Woman at War*, subtle yet powerful visual cues add depth to Halla’s character and her mission. For instance, the images of Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi hanging on the wall of her home symbolize her alignment with figures who led monumental struggles for justice and freedom. This detail suggests that Halla perceives her actions as part of a larger, significant battle - one that, like those of Mandela and Gandhi, could lead to far-reaching and impactful consequences. Throughout the film, Halla’s determination and resourcefulness are vividly portrayed, especially in scenes where she runs miles across the Icelandic countryside to sabotage an electrical grid, armed with nothing more than a bow and arrow. This weapon choice is not merely practical; it is rich in symbolism. The arrow connects her to the Greek goddess Artemis, the protector of the wilderness and the embodiment of a powerful, independent woman who defends nature. This reference elevates Halla’s actions, framing her as an eco-warrior whose fight is both deeply personal and mythic in scope.

The film’s climax poignantly illustrates the destructive impact of human actions on the environment. When Halla reaches the orphanage to adopt Nika, she finds it flooded - symbolizing



the broader ecological damage caused by human activities and multinational corporations. As Halla's bus is halted by the overflowing waters on her way back to Iceland, the flood serves as a stark visual metaphor for the consequences of environmental neglect and exploitation.

In the film *Whale Rider*, we encounter a nuanced representation of gender dynamics through the character of Kahu Paikea Apirana. Portrayed by Keisha Castle-Hughes, Kahu is a twelve-year-old Maori girl who aspires to become the chief of her tribe - a role traditionally reserved for men. Her struggle highlights the deeply entrenched gender stereotypes within her community, particularly as her grandfather, Koro, insists that only men should fulfill this leadership position. Kahu's journey is a poignant exploration of gender inequality within her tribe, where patriarchal values dictate the roles and responsibilities of individuals based on gender. Her relationship with her grandfather Koro underscores the film's examination of male dominance and the societal assumptions that perpetuate gender-based discrimination. According to feminist scholar bell hooks, "Patriarchy is a social system where males hold primary power and predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege, and control of property" (39). Kahu's challenge to these roles reflects a broader critique of patriarchal norms that dictate leadership and authority based on gender.

Her relationship with the whales is portrayed almost as a form of communication through inner prayers or thoughts. The film captures this connection with a poignant quote from Koro: "If you have the tooth of a whale, you must have the jaw of a whale to wield it," (00:54:01). This statement reflects the traditional belief that possessing a whale's tooth symbolizes not just physical strength but also the quiet, determined power necessary for leadership.

The film *Princess Mononoke* delves deeply into themes of environmental destruction and ecofeminism, offering a profound commentary on the complex relationship between humans and nature. Nature, as depicted in the film, serves as both a generous provider and a resilient survivor. The film underscores the tension between human progress and the preservation of natural ecosystems. This idea

resonates strongly in *Princess Mononoke*, where the destructive impacts of human activities on the environment are portrayed with striking visual and thematic clarity.

In *Princess Mononoke*, the destruction of nature is primarily driven by industrial forces, exemplified by the ironworks that exploit natural resources for development. The film's narrative illustrates the consequences of unchecked progress, aligning with the concept of "Sustainable Development" as articulated by the World Commission on Environment and Development in *Our Common Future* (1987). Sustainable development advocates for balancing current needs with the preservation of resources for future generations, ensuring that development does not come at the expense of environmental degradation.

San, stands in stark contrast to Lady Eboshi. She is a human raised by the wolf goddess Moro after being sacrificed by her parents. While Lady Eboshi symbolizes the relentless advance of human industry, San represents a deep connection with the natural world, fighting to preserve the forest and its creatures from the encroachments of technology. This conflict between San and Eboshi is central to the film's exploration of ecofeminism, where the struggle for environmental justice is intertwined with the fight against patriarchal exploitation.

Together, these films illustrate the intertwined struggles of women and nature against oppression, offering a compelling vision of women as protectors and restorers of the natural world. As Charlene Spretnak argues in *States of Grace*, "The ecological crisis is a spiritual crisis, and it is a feminist crisis." These films echo this sentiment, demonstrating how women's experiences and perspectives are essential to addressing the complex challenges facing our planet.

Symbiosis is defined as "the interaction between two or more different organisms living in close physical proximity, typically to the benefit of both." This concept, rooted in biological sciences, reflects a relationship where entities are mutually dependent for survival. The films *Woman at War*, *Whale Rider*, and *Princess Mononoke* vividly illustrate this principle, exploring the complex and beneficial interactions between humans, animals, and nature.



Ecocriticism examines the relationship between humans and the natural world as depicted in literature. It focuses on how environmental issues, cultural attitudes towards nature, and ecological concerns are represented and analyzed in literary works. A primary aim of ecocriticism is to explore how individuals and societies interact with and respond to environmental and ecological aspects. This critical approach has gained prominence in recent years, reflecting heightened societal awareness of environmental destruction and rapid technological advancements. As Cheryll Glotfelty states, "Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (22). Known by various terms such as "green studies," "ecopoetics," and "environmental literary criticism," ecocriticism is characterized by its broad scope and interdisciplinary nature.

In *Woman at War*, the symbiotic connection between humans and nature is vividly illustrated through the character of Halla. The film explores this relationship by highlighting Halla's profound bond with the natural world and the lengths she goes to preserve it. Her unwavering dedication to protecting the environment underscores the interdependence between human actions and the well-being of nature. As Halla confronts various challenges and risks, her actions reflect a deep-rooted love and commitment to Mother Earth. Despite facing numerous obstacles and even severe injuries, she remains steadfast in her mission, embodying a powerful example of ecological symbiosis. Halla's relentless pursuit to safeguard the environment despite personal sacrifices emphasizes the inherent connection between human survival and ecological preservation. This dynamic aligns with Tim Morton's view that "ecology is not just about understanding nature; it is also about understanding the interconnectedness between humans and their environment" (56). Halla's story in the film illustrates how human well-being is intricately linked to the health of the natural world, reinforcing the concept of symbiosis.

In *Whale Rider*, several scenes poignantly illustrate the deep, unaltered bond between Paikea and the whales. The film utilizes close-up shots to underscore this connection: the close-up of a whale's eye and a baby's eye serves as a powerful symbol

of their shared destiny. These visual motifs are not just artistic choices but carry significant meaning. For instance, the close-up of the crying baby's green eye mirrors the close-up of the whale's eye, creating a profound parallel between the two. This mirroring effect humanizes the whale, reinforcing the connection between Paikea and the natural world.

In *Princess Mononoke*, the narrative deeply engages with themes of ecofeminism and symbiotic relationships through its richly animated world and its complex characters. The film begins with Ashitaka, a young warrior cursed by a boar demon as he defends his village. This curse propels him on a journey to find a cure and uncover the root of the conflict threatening his world. As Ashitaka ventures into the forest, he encounters Lady Eboshi, the leader of Iron Town. Eboshi represents the antithesis of environmental respect, as she orders the destruction of the forest and its inhabitants to fuel the expansion of her industrial town. This conflict between nature and industrialization underscores the film's exploration of the destructive impact of human activities on the environment and highlights the central ecofeminist theme of the interconnectedness between human actions and natural degradation. The film personifies nature through characters such as the Forest Spirit and the Boar God, stressing the importance of protecting these entities. By giving life and voice to natural elements, Miyazaki transforms the landscape into an active participant in the narrative, inviting viewers to see nature not merely as a backdrop but as a vital, living force.

The portrayal of women characters in films plays a significant role in shaping societal perceptions and values. Films, as cultural artifacts, reflect and influence the beliefs and issues of the societies they depict. Accurate representation in cinema is crucial, especially for marginalized communities, as it validates their existence and experiences. When marginalized groups see themselves authentically portrayed, it fosters empathy and understanding among audiences, leading to greater compassion and potential social change.

Together, these films advocate for moving away from anthropocentric and patriarchal viewpoints towards a more comprehensive and inclusive perspective that respects both women and the Earth. This study allows us taking powerful call to action



for the protection of nature, urging both individuals and communities to take meaningful steps towards environmental stewardship. By analyzing these films through an ecofeminist lens, the study highlights the critical role that personal and collective actions play in addressing environmental degradation. The film thus promotes the need for respectful coexistence and underscores the critical role women play in defending and preserving the natural world.

In *Woman at War*, the theme of symbiosis is explored through Halla's deep connection with the Icelandic landscape, which she passionately defends against industrial threats. Her actions go beyond environmental protection; they focus on preserving the balance between human life and nature. In *Whale Rider*, symbiosis is central to Pai's connection with the ocean and her role in revitalizing her tribe's cultural and environmental heritage. Her relationship with the whales represents the crucial interdependence between humans and nature, illustrating the cultural identity and ecological health are deeply linked. *Princess Mononoke* explores the theme of symbiosis by examining the fragile balance between humans and nature. The film depicts the clash between industrialization and the forest as a quest for equilibrium. San's determined defense of the forest and Ashitaka's pursuit of peace emphasize the importance of mutual respect between humanity and the environment. Ultimately, the film suggests that true harmony can only be achieved when humans recognize and maintain their symbiotic relationship with nature, ensuring the well-being and survival of both.

By reflecting on the insights provided by these films, the study calls for a reassessment of existing practices and policies, urging the adoption of measures that prioritize both the planet's health and the welfare of future generations. Hence, these films hold contemporary relevance as they address pressing global issues like environmental degradation, social justice, and the ongoing struggle for gender equality, offering critical insights and inspiration for today's challenges. The study is contemporarily relevant because the themes of environmental degradation and struggles of women are included in it.

These films inspire a deeper understanding of our shared responsibility to protect and cherish the natural world and its myriad forms of life, urging

us to forge a path toward a more harmonious and balanced coexistence.

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