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**AN ECOCRITICAL APPROACH TO  
CHAUCER'S REPRESENTATIONS OF MARRIAGE AND  
FEMININITY IN "WIFE OF BATH'S TALE"**



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**ABSTRACT**

The aim of this paper is to approach Chaucer's the Wife of Bath Tale using an ecocritical and ecosocial perspective. I will seek an answer to the basic questions of how nature is represented in the tale and how it reflects upon social life and power struggle between the sexes. The social structure of Chaucer's world was changing rapidly at the time he wrote the *Canterbury Tales*. A new middle class was emerging, and Chaucer was a member of middle class himself. He was interested in understanding and analyzing the roles of different members of the society.

**KEYWORDS**

Marriage, roles, ecocriticism, femininity, nature

## RESEARCH PAPER

### INTRODUCTION

Though the scope of this study is limited to the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, in *Canterbury Tales* Chaucer depicts a world in which nature and women are dominated and exploited by males. Males abuse women physically, psychologically or financially. This being one of the overarching theme in "Wife of Bath", Chaucer actually tries to present women and men as equal beings and rebelling the hierarchical dynamics between men and women through the lens of marriage, Chaucer transforms women into the authoritarian position and provides us with an interwoven picture of the world in which natural and the social/cultural are closely interdependent.

In various parts of the tale, it is maintained by the Wife of Bath that there are double standards for men and women and the women are treated unfairly, though the same behavior is morally and socially acceptable for men. Thus, in order to restore their rights and escape cruelty by men, women try to assert their powers on men in many aspects such as the sexual life, marital status and economic power. Instead of women financially dependent on their husbands and burdened with heavy responsibilities (Baştan 22), we come across self-sufficient women whose ontological position is not dependent on men. Chaucer depicts this by touching upon many similarities between nature and womanhood that can be understood through some basic events in the tale: the rape of a defenseless maid by the knight, the knight's seeking for an answer to be able to escape punishment, his finding the answer in a remote untouched nature and his yielding to nature in the end. All these events symbolize the impotence of men to exert control over nature and women, though initially it may seem so.

Even though there are not direct references to natural landscape apart from the point when the knight meets the old women in a distant road near a forest, a close reading of the tale gives us hints about how nature and womanhood are similar. This forest, according to Rudd, is a "liminal space, not in the forest but alongside it, indicating the chance of salvation open to the summoner at this point(34). The summoner gets the right answer here, he somehow finds redemption from his sin in this untouched, virgin place. Therefore, Chaucer brings to an equilibrium to a world spoilt by patriarchy. When the knight also goes through the final predicament of choosing either to get married to a beautiful but deceitful or old but loyal wife and he leaves the choice to the old hag, the order gets restored because the hag transforms into a beautiful young lady on her own wish. The implicit message here then is that the patriarchal

culture distorts the natural order either through cultural or religious norms; however, nature asserts itself finally.

The Wife of Bath proves a very good example as to how women lived in the fourteenth century. The official role of women in that society was actually being in a subservient position; they had no rights in government and little education and they were suppressed by the law, the church and by their immediate male relatives. They were in a sense “oppressed” and exploited by the patriarchy, just as nature is. Women were trained to be meek, learn good manners, domestic duties and carry out religious duties. They were deemed to be good so long as they served the needs of men and fulfilled their sexual desires, gave birth to children, which were her main duties in life.

The church itself was antagonistic towards women, since it perceived them as the inspiration to lust, encapsulated in the image of Eve whose sexuality was seen as the origin of all sin. Women were therefore preordained as inferior to men and their submission to their husbands was seen to be founded unassailably in God’s law not man’s. Women were therefore not without hope of redemption, however, for the Church offered, as the opposite to Eve, the Virgin Mary, who was docile, humble and chaste. Thus a moral dualism prevailed in the medieval Church’s image of women: the cult of the Virgin Mary ran parallel with a powerful attack on female sexuality.(Wyne-Davies 13).

Perhaps the case that would best exemplify this is while on one side church deemed marriage as holy and the medium to form a family, in social practice and as in the case of the Wife of Bath marriage only implied possession of the women by men. To put it another way, women were regarded as a commodity, just like nature is. Marriage was much of an economic contract mostly accepted between families rather than individuals and took into account commercial and landowning interests. The Wife of Bath exemplifies this view when she interprets the marriage contract as the ownership of bodies.

That man shall pay unto his wife his debt?

Now wherewith should he ever make payment,

Except he used his blessed instrument? (130-2)

When he's pleased to come forth and pay his debt.

I'll not delay, a husband I will get, (152-3)

As with marriage, the law treated a woman as the property of her husband, rather than protecting her personal interests. This is particularly true of rape, which was seen as the crime of theft against another man’s material rights, and not a case of physical attack on the woman.

If the rapist was proven guilty, he faced some punishments like blinding, castrating and death. If the rapist offered to marry his victim all charges ended. If she was a peasant then he was only fined. Attitudes to rape are very important for understanding the Wife's tale, which begins with the sexual assault, by a knight, on a young maiden. Rape here may act as a metaphor for absolute male domination over women, which Chaucer uses through the Wife of Bath's Tale.

If we turn back to the central heroine of our discussion, who is namely the Wife with her striking features such as claiming to be very experienced due to her five marriages or implying too much self-confidence while uttering that she can use her body as a weapon against men to escape their sovereignty, we can say that she is an important figure for challenging patriarchal ideologies because she belongs to a specifically privileged group in medieval English law: the unmarried or widowed, but financially independent, woman. However, marriage puts a blow on a woman's independency as she will be restricted by her husband on almost all affairs.

The Wife may be thought as an ironical depiction of a strong and independent woman, a member of an antifeminist literary tradition that she attempts to adapt to her own uses. She may also be seen as a positive representation of independent womanhood, a kind of protofeminist making the best life that she can for herself in a repressive, male-dominated society. "And which other medieval woman has generated as much uncertainty as to how she may be interpreted: as a feisty protofeminist, as a fully realized psychological character, at once brave and pathetic, or as a nightmare of misogynist stereotyping" (Larrington2).

In order to have a deeper insight about this complicated and dualistic character of the Wife of Bath, the following quote should be carefully looked into: "She is so vividly feminine and human, so coarse and shameless in her disclosures of the marital relations with five husbands, and yet so imaginative and delicate in her story-telling, that one is fascinated against his will and beset with an irresistible impulse to analyze her dual personality with the view of locating, if possible, definite causes for the coexistence of more incongruent elements than are ordinarily found in living human beings" (Curry 30). The kind of woman we encounter while reading the prologue is so much of a manipulative one that can do everything for the sake of holding power at her hands against men, yet on one side has a history of torment by men.

Still, here we see a woman who is not torn in submissiveness to men, takes pride in being a woman and quite confident about herself when marriage and sexuality are at stake. From an ecocritical perspective, we can say that Chaucer idealizes the Wife of Bath by implicitly

resembling her to Mother Nature, which will restore itself even after undergoing times of harassment. Chaucer depicts women in a manner through which he can emphasize equity of genders by a mentioning of female dominance over men in an ironical style.

The stated theme of the prologue is “the woe that is in marriage,” but at the outset marriage is seen as a source of power. The Wife repudiates virgin purity as a standard of female value, and presents herself as a kind of nature-figure, an embodiment of fecund sexuality. She then shifts abruptly to the stock role of shrewish and conniving wife; is led to acknowledge the rejection and dependency that have bedevilled her later years; but ends by describing her victory over a truly worthy antagonist, her fifth husband, a young clerk whose main weapon in their battle for sovereignty is an exhaustive knowledge of ancient, patristic, and medieval teachings on the inferior and reprobate status of women. (Wetherbee 77).

Men only value women according to their physical appearance and youth, ignoring their virtues and good sides. Perhaps this is the fact that can explain the reason why the power dynamics between men and women is actually established through a sexual link. If we project this to understand the ecocritical facet of the tale, men acts as rapist against nature, he makes use of it to achieve his own ends; however, nature runs its own course.

If this was not so, women and nature would be so defenseless against men and patriarchy. In other words, as men value female sexuality and the altruistic quality of nature, the oppressed females and nature somehow acquire social dominance over men through the aspects without which men cannot exist. Moreover, as Miller also points out, Chaucer’s central concern in the Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale, namely the exploration of what it would be like to come into a sense of oneself as a woman, where the terms of that self-understanding are largely given by the patriarchal construction of “woman” as, among other things, a commodified sexual object” (Miller 195).

The prologue of the tale is highly dependent upon the long medieval tradition of antifeminist texts. Paradoxically, Alison, the teller of the tale embodies antifeminist beliefs while seemingly resisting them as well. For instance, her repeated marriage clearly mocks the clerical teaching about the remarriage of women. She also has many other times in which she defies the Biblical teachings or interprets the Scriptures according to her own ends. While doing all these, she forces the reader to understand that it is actually the sexual lust of men

that create such women having the authority to govern the estate. In a similar vein, it is the unending possession desire of men that leads nature to keep itself wild.

Actually, in the tale too what the Wife tries to achieve is making people accept that relationships can only survive if there is equality between sexes, just as nature can remain intact so long as men do not see as an item of possession. This ideal of her can be overtly seen both in the tale and the prologue. For instance, we know that her fifth husband was cruel. When he read her from a book of wicked wives, the wife tore three pages of the book and the husband struck her. But luckily, this leads to the man's realization that he must submit to her and they enter into a new kind of relationship in which they are on equal terms and behave towards each other respectfully and with kindness.

After that day we never had debate.

God help me now, I was to him as kind

As any wife from Denmark unto Ind,

And also true, and so was he to me.

I pray to God, Who sits in majesty,

To bless his soul, out of His mercy dear! (WBP 822-27)

As can be seen from the quote above, the Wife's understanding of an ideal relationship is also reflected in the tale. This understanding is perpetuated in the tale by the question "What thing it is that women most desire." (905), through which it can be emphasized that women are paid little attention. All that happened between the knight and the hag in the tale also shows the wife's intention to give the message that submission to the desires and needs of women does not necessarily result in the male being dominated. Actually, the end result is again two people who are happy in their love and respectful of each other's power, regardless of how the appearance is. In this point of choice and giving the woman power, the knight gains both choices and both become happy together, which in turn implies the Wife's intention to show that limiting and ignoring women's opinions are never preferable things, while letting women govern men or show the options may have many returns.

"My lady and my love, and wife so dear,

I put myself in your wise governing;

Do you choose which may be the more pleasing,

And bring most honour to you, and me also.

I care not which it be of these things two;

For if you like it, that suffices me."(WBT 1230-1235)

## CONCLUSION

The end of the story is happiness for everybody. However, it is inevitable not to perceive the sarcasm and derogatory incentive in the narrator's tone, in which she may be trying to mean that the only way for true happiness in man's relation with nature and women is to recognize these two as independent sovereign figures. Man can become happy only if they can achieve this. For instance, the wife explains that she got on well with her husband after he recognized her firstly as a human, not as a female on whom the sexual appetite can be satisfied.. Beneath her clever thinking and wise rhetoric, there is a woman who has grasped the importance of equality, fairness and the value of balance in relationships. If this balance gets distorted, unhappiness inevitably prevails. Whatever criticism is made against her, her attitude should be evaluated within the context of those times in which women were drastically in need of being valued as non-inferior beings in a world permeated by anthropocentric interpretations of religious texts so as to be able to justify men's exploitation and otherization of women and nature.

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