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Book Review: Sheherazade's Daughters: The Power of Storytelling in Ecofeminist Change

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***Sheherazade's Daughters: The Power of Storytelling in Ecofeminist Change* by Barbara Bennett. 2012. Peter Lang: New York. Pp viii+193. \$75. ISSN 1056-3970**

Reviewed by Neelam Jabeen¹

The title of the book, *Sheherazade's Daughters*, serves as a metaphor for Barbara Bennett as she looks at the power the stories of the female authors have, to bring a change, just Like Sheherazade of *Thousand and One Nights*. Bennett has a PhD in American literature and is a teacher of contemporary literature in North Carolina University and has authored four books before this. Bennett has also devoted her time to wildlife conservation.

In *Scheherazade's Daughters* Bennett looks at the works of selected female authors to see how their works are instrumental in creating an ecofeminist consciousness among the readers at large. The work is divided into six chapters. The introduction is followed by three chapters devoted to the ecofeminist study of the representative fiction of Margaret Atwood, Barbara Kingsolver and Ruth Ozeki. Chapter five deals with memoir and autobiography and the representative authors are Terry Tempest William, Janisse Ray, and Sandra Steingraber. Chapter six studies selected works of Isabel Allende, Ana Castillo, and Toni Morrison to investigate how magic realism can be used to spread ecofeminist consciousness.

In Chapter One, "The Power of storytelling", Bennett establishes how important storytelling can be to bring about an "ecofeminist change" in the society. She starts off with telling the tale of Sheherazade that later serves as a consistent motif of the entire work. She considers all the female authors whose works she analyzes here, as daughters of Sheherazade who continue to tell convincing tales that can have influence enough to bring changes on the national level. Bennett then gives an overview of Ecofeminism, briefly talking about its tenets and characteristics and then relating it to how literature is an important medium for disseminating ecofeminist consciousness. Bennett, like every ecofeminist believes that all forms of oppression are linked and that domination of women and nature is connected. "Cooperation and balance" rather than "dominance and hierarchy" are the only hope for survival of the societies.

Chapters Two, Three and Four follow a similar pattern. Each of these chapters is devoted to one female fiction writer and her two or three representative works that are considered as best examples of ecofeminist readings by Bennett. Chapter Four, that studies Ruth Ozeki's works is perhaps the most compelling of the three. Bennett chooses to discuss those works of Ozeki that are concerned with one of the most important subjects of ecofeminism—food. Bennett explores Ozeki's awareness of the effect that her works have and how she writes with the intent to create the desired effect. The title of this chapter, "Truths That Alter Outcomes", is also significant in this regard as it is a phrase borrowed from Ozeki's own work. Bennett analyzes two of Ozeki's novels, *My Years of Meat* (1998) and *All Over Creation* (2003). She believes that in *My Years of Meat*, Ozeki has purposefully chosen the protagonist to be a documentarian, like Ozeki herself, for the documentaries are meant to "teach" and this way Ozeki can achieve her purpose of educating her audience through fiction. While analyzing the work, Bennett focuses on how the

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protagonist, Jane Takagi-Little educates herself step by step of the “hazards of the meat industry” in the US. The work is replete with information that the reader might never pay attention to otherwise even if it was presented in the news. The analysis helps Bennett draw a connection between animals and women and look at it not merely as a “literary conceit” but as a reality because women and animals are given the same drugs; to fatten faster in the case of animals, and to make the fetus grow in the case of pregnant women. On the broader level, the analysis also focuses on the “gluttony” of the American consumers and how the meat production companies want the same to be inculcated in Japanese consumers, in the context of the novel.

Bennett sees Ozeki’s *All Over Creation* as a continuation of her concerns for food and food production in the US. In this work too, as Bennett sees, the author continues her teaching project as she uses one of the main characters Frank Perdue to teach another character about the hazards of the pesticides. Overall, Bennett looks at this work as propagating the idea of man meddling with nature and trying to play God. Bennett also focuses on the optimism that Ozeki has in both of these works because ecofeminists, Bennett stresses, are determined to bring a change and not be content with the way things are.

Chapter Five “Memoir and Autobiography: ‘Grace Among Spiders’”, looks at a different aspect of storytelling. Bennett considers autobiography and memoir as another compelling way of storytelling to initiate a change as some people might not be as convinced by the fiction as by the real life stories. Terry Tempest Williams’s *Refuge: An Unnatural History of family and Place* is, as Bennett considers, one of the best tales of a person’s life that can raise ecofeminist consciousness among its readers. In William’s personal tale Bennett finds the “ecofeminist manifesto”. It best reveals women’s connectedness to nature and how women and men respond differently toward nature. Bennett sees in William’s work that men are not essentially excluded from the relationship with nature but they often “choose” to. William’s mother’s death not only brings to William the realization of the “cycle of life” but it also changes her father’s and brother’s perception of life and death. On a broader level, this tale recounts how the government’s plans of atomic experiments in Utah desert affected lives of many, especially women who suffered from breast cancer including William’s mother and her aunts. Besides these, Bennett traces in this work almost every subject that ecofeminism stands for—land, animals, birds, trees, water, biodiversity, and religion.

Chapter Six, “Magical Realism: ‘defiant Magic’” details another way of storytelling that Bennett thinks can bring change. Where made up stories of the fiction and the real life scientific proofs of the memoirs might fail, magic realism may play its part to assert what ecofeminism struggles to do. Bennett relates the “supernatural” element of magic realism to the “spiritual” component of ecofeminism. She admits that among the best authors who use magic realism are usually men but the “ecofeminist change” that Bennett talks about, only comes with the stories told by the female authors. Isabel Allende is one such author, Bennett asserts. *The House of the Spirits* (1982) is one of the three novels that Bennett chooses to analyze. On the surface level, the story appears to be reflective of the political upheaval that Allende’s experienced during her life in Chile. Through the techniques of magic realism, as Bennett, observes, Allende hits upon many of the ecofeminist issues. Almost all the women in the novel practice magic that enables them to exert their power and prove their strength that ecofeminists would wish to happen. It is this spiritual aspect of the story that makes it a good ecofeminist read according to Bennett. Man/woman dualism is also evident as men are represented as powerful and authoritative as compared to women who are weak and dependent despite the fact that women are given a unique status in the novel. The politically corrupt men even kill the goddess like character. Bennett also

traces women-nature connectedness in the work. The animal imagery relates to the cruelty of men toward animals and women. These women stop speaking but they continue to tell their tales via writing. Bennett observes how Christianity gets challenged in favor of the spirituality these women have.

Scheherazade's Daughters is a great contribution to the ecofeminist discourse. However, for a novice in ecofeminist theory, the work might not be very useful, as it does not follow any specific model for the ecofeminist analyses of the works of various writers. At some places, Bennett does introduce the ecofeminist aspect that she traces in the works but at some points, the discussion seem to be very general and not specifically about ecofeminist issues. This inconsistency of the style makes it a bit more difficult to follow. So the book clearly appears to be meant for an audience who are very much aware of the ecofeminist discourse in literature, so they can then clearly see how female authors are doing their job of creating ecofeminist consciousness among their readers. Overall it does contribute to the conversation of the role that female authors are playing in bringing about the “ecofeminist change” in the society. In fact, this book also creates consciousness about how to use tales to bring change.