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# The Affinity Between Women And Nature In Eugene O'neill's Desire Under The Elms: An Ecofeminist Approach

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**Abstract:** The current study investigates the interconnectedness between femininity and nature as illustrated in Eugene O'Neill's Desire Under The Elms. It tackles the materialistic exploitation of nature as a facade of the patriarchal subjugation of women. The study examines the relationship between gender and ecological domination and investigates how the objectification of women and the exploitation of nature are interconnected in Ephraim Cabot's patriarchal household and perpetuated by the oppressive Puritan heritage. Moreover, the exposes the patriarchal dualistic connections that associate women with nature and men with social order and demonstrates how these correlations are interrelated with several binary structures. In Desire Under The Elms, women and nature are represented as inextricably allied; they are life-giving forces, fertility symbols, and maternal sources hindered by patriarchal prejudice and the oppressive Puritan heritage. By divulging the Ecofeminist theory, the study explores how the protagonists' natural surroundings have shaped their identities and influenced their choices. The study also scrutinizes how the male protagonist, Eben Cabot, suffers from perplexity of gender identification coupled with an Oedipal fixation that cloud his attitude towards nature and femininity. Finally, it proposes the inevitability of deconstructing the oppressive patriarchal heritage and recognizing humanity as an indispensable part of nature.

**Keywords:** Ecofeminism; Femininity; Fertility; Gender; Maternity; Nature; Patriarchy and Puritanism.

## I. Theoretical Framework: Conceptualizing Ecofeminism

### I.1. The Lens of Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism investigates how women and nature are interrelated. It represents a crucial constituent of the feminist movement and is mainly concerned with tackling the interconnection of oppression between women and nature; it associates the subjugation of women, as a marginalized group, with the oppression of nature by the tyrannical patriarchal systems.

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Women's culturally ascribed inferior status in patriarchal societies lies underneath all aspects of social interaction and is perpetuated by the social system and the economic structure.

Ecofeminism aims to investigate the development of social inequalities and ecosystems by exploring how and when gender and other types of differences become entangled in environmental problems. Ecofeminism appeared in the 1970s and was first coined by the French feminist critic Françoise D' Eaubonne. In her Introduction to Feminism and Ecology, Mary Mellor (1997) defines Ecofeminism as:

> A movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women. It emerged in the mid-1970s alongside second-wave feminism and the green movement. Ecofeminism brings together elements of the feminist and green movements while at the same time offering a challenge to both. It takes from the green movement a concern about the impact of human activities on the non-human world and from feminism the view of humanity as gendered in ways that subordinate, exploit and oppress women.[1]

Ecofeminism is mainly concerned with investigating how the connection between the human and the non-human worlds is materially and culturally constructed. In 'The Nature of Gender: Work, Gender, and Environment', A. J. Nightingale (2006) suggests that:

> Gender has long been recognized as an essential factor in environmental problems. However, as the feminist theories about women and gender have evolved, so have conceptualizations about gender and nature, resulting in a central controversy within Ecofeminism and related literature about a significant relationship between women and natural environments.[2]

Ecofeminism is also preoccupied with exploring how this correlation between women and nature is intrinsically intertwined with gender egalitarianism and environmental justice. Elaborating on the connection between nature and humanity, John Barry(2007) states that:

> Nature can refer to both human and non-human issues, properties, processes, and entities. Thus we can say that every living thing (both human and non-human) has its particular 'nature', as in a more or less limited set of innate dispositions, characteristics, and impulses. At the same time, nature can also refer to the totality of the non-human world, making it synonymous with the natural environment.[3]

The oppression of women and nature is profoundly implanted in all realms of the patriarchal culture. Moreover, the structure of the social and cultural order in patriarchal societies perpetuates the subjugation of women and the mistreatment of nature. Accordingly, the interconnectedness between the objectification of women and the exploitation of nature is a profound, persistent, and universal issue. Simon De Beauvoir added an insightful remark regarding men, women and Nature, and how they correlate in the process of oppressing women. She states: "Man seeks in Woman the Other as Nature and his fellow being. But we know what ambivalent feelings nature inspires in man. He exploits her; and she is the source of his being and the realm that he subjugates to his will." [4] Ecofeminism, in this respect, is mainly concerned with the degenerating affinities between women and nature; both are

subjugated, objectified, colonized, exploited, and oppressed by the capitalist patriarchal system. According to Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies (2014):

> The capitalist patriarchal world system is built upon and maintains itself through the colonization of women... and of nature, which it is gradually destroying. As feminists actively seeking women's liberation from male domination, we could not, however, ignore the fact that 'modernization' and 'development processes and 'progress' were responsible for the degradation of the natural world. We saw that the impact on women of ecological disasters and deterioration was harder than on men, and also, that everywhere, women were the first to protest against environmental destruction.[5]

Moreover, 'the relationship of exploitative dominance between man and nature, and the exploitative and oppressive relationship between men and women that prevails in most patriarchal societies, even modern industrial ones, were closely connected'.[6]Hence, associating oppressed women with nature helps achieve a better perceptive of ecological and societal injustices and encourages support and commonality.

The fundamental principle of Ecofeminism, as stated by Greta Gaard in her introduction to Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature, is that 'the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature'.[7] On the Other hand, in The Good-Natured Feminist: Ecofeminism and the Quest for Democracy, Catriona Sandilands (1999) defines Ecofeminism as being not only 'a theory and movement which bridges the gap between feminism and ecology, but which transforms both to create a unified praxis to end all forms of domination'.[8] According to Plant,

> Making the connection between feminism and ecology enables us to step outside of the dualistic, separated world we were all born in. From this vantage point, this new perspective, we begin to see how our relations with each other are reflected in our relations with the natural world. The rape of the earth, in all its many guises, becomes a metaphor for the rape of women. In layer after layer, the sick society is revealed, a society of alienated relationships all linked to a rationalization that separates 'man' from nature.[9]

In 'Feminism and Ecology: Making Connections', Karen Warren (1987) has noted:

> As I see it, the term Ecofeminism is a position based on the following claims: (i) there are important connections between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature, (ii) understanding the nature of these connections is necessary to any adequate understanding of the oppression of women and the oppression of nature; (iii) feminist theory and practice must include an ecological perspective; (iv) solutions to ecological problems must include a feminist perspective.[10]

### I.2. The Culture/Nature Divide

Feminist theorists explored the dualistic connections that associated women with nature and men with society or culture in the mid-1970s. Moreover, these correlations were related to several binary structures: men being rational and women being emotional, women being nurturing, and men being competitive. For example, in her study 'Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?', Sherry B. Ortner (1974) states that:

> (women's) pan-cultural second-class status could be accounted for, quite simply, by postulating that women are being identified or symbolically associated with nature, as opposed to men, who are identified with culture. Since it is always culture's project to subsume and transcend nature, if women were considered part of nature, then culture would find it 'natural' to subordinate, not to say oppress, them. ... women are seen 'merely' as being closer to nature than men.[11]

In their introduction to Women and Nature? Beyond dualism in Gender, Body, and Environment, Douglas A. Vakoch and Sam Mickey (2018) elaborated on the issue of dualism stating:

> One of the crucial insights of ecofeminists is that the human/nature dualism intersects with the dualism between men and women. Just as the human/nature dualism is used historically and presently as justification for human subjects exploiting the natural world as mere objects, the man/woman dualism is used as justification of exploitive attitudes and actions of men toward women. Subjectivity is attributed predominantly to maleness, while femaleness and femininity are objectified.[12]

In conclusion, Ecofeminism represents an amalgamation of feminist studies and ecological concerns. It is a rejection of the multiple forms of subjugation that result from the patriarchal dominance over women and nature and the patriarchal dualistic connections that associate women with nature and men with social order and demonstrates how these correlations are interrelated with several binary structures.

## II. Methodology

The current study adopts an Ecofeminist analytical approach to explore the interconnectedness between women and nature, correlate men's domination of Nature and their oppression of Women, and investigate how the objectification of women is interconnected with the exploitation of nature in Eugene O'Neill's Desire Under the Elms. This method helps allocate the dynamic correlation between women and nature.

## III. Discussion

### III. 1. Patriarchy and Puritanism as Oppressive Forces:

In Desire Under the Elms, the harsh setting, represented by the deadly isolated New England farmhouse built under the massive elm trees, suggests the ruthlessness of its inhabitants. The family's patriarch, the seventy-five-year-old Ephraim Cabot, cruelly struggles to assert his authority and impose his will on the other family members. A lack of empathy characterizes Cabot's personality. Cabot's Puritan heritage represents the dominating factor behind his cruelty and lack of compassion. Taylor (2009) suggests that human beings turn to cruelty for a multiplicity of reasons and 'otherization' plays an essential enabling role in the infliction of cruelty and understanding the phenomenon. She states: 'Cruel behaviour is rational, that is, it is done for reasons which seem good to the perpetrator at the time'.[13] This conception of cruelty applies to the oppressor patriarch, Ephraim Cabot, who justifies exploiting his children and his dead wife and inflicting suffering on the entire family. His son, Simon, complains: 'We've worked. Give our strength. Give our years. Plowed 'em under the ground- [he stamps rebelliously]- rottin'- makin' soil for his -crops'!.[14]

In Desire Under the Elms, the father's tyrannical attitude towards his family leads to aggression and cruelty on the part of his sons, who continuously rebel against their father whose hunger for territorial possession surpasses family harmony. Ephraim Cabot is an egocentric manipulative, Machiavellian objectifier who has enslaved his sons and his dead wife, Eben's mother, and worked her to death. Cabot, the embodiment of the oppressive New England Puritan tradition, forces his family to live under a fanatic religious code built on a hardened version of God.

> CABOT: When I came here a fifty-odd year ago- I was just twenty an' the strongest and the hardest ye evr seen- ten times as strong as fifty times as hard as Eben. Waal-this place was nothin' but field's o stones. Folks laughed when I tuk it. They couldn't know wat I knowed.[15]

Cabot constantly attempts to vindicate his actions and seek assurance from his victims that his actions are sincerely and ethically motivated by moral conviction, not based on personal sadism. It is evident that 'the focal point of O'Neill's plays is to unmask the ambivalent individuals who have hidden themselves behind an idealized self'.[16] According to David W. Sievers (1955), 'O' Neill creates prototype of the primal father, hard, all powerful and ruthless'.[17] Cabot is conditioned by his puritan heritage. He believes that man must suffer in order to attain individuation; accordingly, he does not try to renounce the hard life of suffering and insists on living on the rocky farm:

> CABOT: I could o' been a rich man—but somethin' in me fit me an' fit me-the voice o' God sayin': "This hain't wuth nothin' t' Me. Git ye back t' hum!" I got afeerd o' that voice an' I lit out back t' hum here, leavin' my claim an' crops t' whoever'd a mind t' take em. Ay-eh. I actooly give up what was rightful mine! God's hard, not easy! God's in the stones! Build my church on a rock—out o' stones an' I'll be in them! That's what He meant t' Peter! (He sighs heavily—a pause.) Stones. I picked 'em up an' piled 'em into walls. Ye kin read the years o' my life in them walls, every day a hefted stone, climbin' over the hills up and down, fencin' in the fields that was mine, whar I'd made thin's grow out o' nothin'—like the will o' God, like the servant o' His hand. It wa'n't easy. It was hard an' He made me hard fur it. [18]

The above quotation emphasizes the idea that Cabot perceives God in terms of his own ego and adopts a brutal version of his merciless god. Voight (1992) suggests that Cabot believes that 'he has an intimate and exceptional knowledge of divine will'.[19] Cabot identifies himself as a God-chosen instrument and unconsciously adopts the role of his cruel, unrelenting version of God, who is as hard as the stones of the farm. Cabot is not a God-fearing man; he is a lecher and a miser who cares for nothing but the rocky farm, which represents a portion of himself. Cabot's love for the farm exceeds his love for his children. The egocentric aspect of his personality is exposed when he prefers to see the farm burning rather than let his heirs inherit it. In Desire Under the Elms, O'Neill tragically illustrates the destructive hunger for territorial possession that can rob a man of love, pitting father against son, husband against wife, and lover against lover:

> (Eben appears outside, slamming the door behind him. He comes around corner, stops on seeing his father, and stands staring at him with hate.)
>
> CABOT: (raising his arms to heaven in the fury he can no longer control) Lord God o' Hosts, smite the undutiful sons with Thy wust cuss!
>
> EBEN: (breaking in violently) Yew 'n' yewr God! Allus cussin' folks—allus naggin' em!
>
> CABOT: (oblivious to him—summoningly) God o' the old! God o' the lonesome!

> EBEN: (mockingly) Naggin' His sheep t' sin! T' hell with yewr God! (Cabot turns. He and Eben glower at each other.)
>
> CABOT: (harshly) So it's yew. I might've knowed it. (shaking his finger threateningly at him) Blasphemin' fool! (then quickly) Why hain't ye t' wuk?
>
> EBEN: Why hain't yew? They've went. I can't wuk it all alone.
>
> CABOT: (contemptuously) Nor noways! I'm wuth ten o' ye yit, old's I be! Ye'll never be more'n half a man! (then, matter-of-factly) Waal—let's git t' the barn. [20]

In Desire Under the Elms, the patriarchal system, coupled with the puritan heritage, represents an oppressive and asphyxiating entity that thwarts the desires and ambitions of the human beings. Peter, Cabot's elder son, expresses this condition saying: 'Here-it's stones atop o' ground, atop o' stones-making stone walls year atop o'year- him "n" yew "n" then Eben- makin' stone walls fur him to fence us in'.[21] The male characters in the play are either egocentric, enigmatic, and disdainful, or aloof and detached. Cabot is alienated from his family by his selfishness. On the other hand, Eben is alienated by his hate for his egocentric father and his urgent desire to avenge his mother's death. Eben says: 'I'm getting' stronger. I kin feel it growin' in me – growin' an growin'– till it'll bust out–!.[22]

The Cabots typically act according to their egoism. After long years of slavery on their father's farm, Simon and Peter, Cabot's elder sons, who have grown tired of the rocky life their father has imposed on them, break family ties, and consequently escape from their tyrannical father.

> PETER: The's gold in the West, Sim.
> SIMEON: (still under the influence of sunset — vaguely) In the sky!
> PETER: Waal — in a manner o' speakin'— thar's the promise. (Growing excited) Gold in the sky —in the West - Golden Gate -California! Goldest West! - fields o'gold!
> SIMEON: (excited in his turn) Fortunes layin' just atop O' the ground waitin' t'be picked! Solomon's mines, they says![23]

The Cabots' exploitation of each other takes a concrete, physical form; Ephraim Cabot's elder sons steal his money and escape from the farm. Attack and defence colour the relationships among the family members, who share the same physical existence but are separated and imprisoned in their egocentricity, unable to feel the positive meanings or establish a conception of what the word 'home' implies. The interaction in the patriarchal environment of the drama is characterized by aggression and, more importantly, by the oppression of women and nature, which is an essential characteristic of patriarchal societies.

### III. 2. The Subjugation of Women as a Façade of the Oppression of Nature

In Desire Under the Elms, the oppression of nature represents a façade of the subjugation of women. The current study investigates how the physical setting affects the characters in Desire Under the Elms and influences both their internal psychological state and external social interaction. It depicts the status of women in their social and natural environments and the representation of different types of femininity from an Ecofeminist perspective. The landscape plays a significant role in Desire Under the Elms and is best imagined in its connection with the people inhabiting it. It affirms nature's idiosyncrasy by refuting its boundaries within human predictions. The locale or territory provides the force for the protagonists' attainment of identity. It represents the environment that entails cultural artifacts – the

economic, ethical, social, and religious aspects of people's surroundings. The elm trees represent the most important symbol in the play. In their book By Women Possessed: A Life of Eugene O'Neill, Arthur and Barbara Gelb (2016) suggest that 'O'Neill indented the trees to deepen the play's fraught atmosphere; he emphasized that the trees played 'an actual part in the drama', along with the farmhouse and 'might almost be given in the list of characters'.[24]

Even though they are not stated recurrently throughout the drama, the elm trees perform a fundamentally significant role. O'Neill's elms give to this place a geopathic atmosphere; this is a place of deadly suffocation that will inevitably affect its dwellers. According to Srivastava (2016), the elms have an emblematical implication:

> They appear to protect and at the same time subdue the house. There is sinister maternity in their aspect. They brood oppressively over the house; they can be compared to 'exhausted women resting their sagging breasts and hands and hair on its roof. When it rains, their tears trickle down monotonously and rot on the pebbles.[25]

O'Neill's vivid description of the elm trees highlights the profound affinities between the subjugation of women and the oppression of nature in patriarchal societies. Eben's mother died after a prolonged life of objectification. She was exploited in gruelling farm labour; accordingly, the oppressed elm trees represent the dead woman's worn-out, exhausted spirit, which strains the house and weighs heavily on its inhabitants. Eben is obsessed with his yearning to conciliate his mother's spirit and retaliate against her untimely death. The maternal principle dominates the two male characters, Eben and Ephraim, through Maw's unseen but felt presence.

In Desire Under the Elms, Cabot's exploitation of his family is not confined to his children; it is the cause behind the death of his ex-wife, who 'got too used t' bein' too tired'. The off-stage female character, Eben's dead mother, performs an essential function in the drama as she illustrates the subjugation of women in patriarchal societies. Cabot's religious fanaticism drives him to suppress the maternal principle and oppress femininity. This attitude is well illustrated in his relationship with his dead wife; he has never treated her as a human being but rather as a ghost. O'Neill's awareness of women's subordination and marginalization in the patriarchal social structure, their confinement in the Puritan heritage, and their exhausted powers in everlasting domestic responsibilities are well illustrated in depicting Eben's mother as a ghostly woman and associating her with the exhausted elm trees. In this context, the interconnectedness between oppressed nature and subjugated femininity is illustrated by the elm trees, which:

> symbolize the maternal forces in the life of some characters, and they are to be contrasted with the stone walls, which symbolize the paternal forces. The sickly greyish stone- colour stands for sombre, hard Puritanism, while the green hue of elms stands for the vegetative, life-affirming forces denied in Cabot's home since the death of Eben's mother. The elms signify not only the dead mother of Eben but the wrongs done to her. They signify the dead woman's unselfish love and the love-lessens of Cabot and Cabot's two sons.[26]

In patriarchal societies, women are regarded as instrumental objects whose conventional function is to endow men with a sense of power, exaggerate their superiority, and promote their autonomy through entire submission. Such degenerating views prevailed during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and established discriminatory patriarchal ethical values. Eben's dead mother was forced to submissively adheres to the stereotypical image of femininity. In 'O'Neill's Ghostly

Women', Suzanne Burr (1989) suggests that 'even death does not provide peace or freedom. It is as if O'Neill wants us to see a direct connection between the mother's exploitation and her ghostly unrest after death. Trained to be a slave to her husband, she remains in perpetual bondage as a restless ghost'.[27] Eben expresses the restlessness of his dead mother's spirit as follows*:*

> She' d come back to help- come back to bile potatoes- come back to fry bacon- come back to bake biscuits- come back all cramped up to shake the fire, an' carry ashes, her eyes weepin' an' bloody with smoke an' cinders same's they used to be. She still comes back- stands by the stove that in the evenin'- she can't find it natural sleepin' en' restin' in peace. She can't get used to bein' free- even in her grave.[28]

The illusion of the existence of the mother's ghost is suggested by Eben's words and behaviour as well as the supernatural atmosphere in the parlour, which deepens the lovers' feeling of the existence of the ghostly woman. Abbie tells Eben: 'When I fust come in-in the dark-they seem'd somethin' here', Eben says, 'Maw'. Abbie continues: 'I kin still feel –somethin''. Eben instinctively says, 'It's Maw'. The scenery symbolically indicates the dominance of the dead mother; the exhausted elm trees represent the debilitated woman who seeks revenge over her oppressive husband, who has, instrumentally, objectified her. The dead woman has gone through a long-lasting life of enslavement, subjugation, surrender, and marginalization.

### III. **3. Eben's Perplexity of Gender- Identification**

The dead mother's ghost haunts Eben and makes him assimilate the deprivation and suffering inflicted on her by his tyrannical father. Eben's duality of gender- identification distorts his vision of women and nature. His temperament is wholly determined by his heredity, which is 'a combination of his mother's softness and lack of will, combined with his father's aggressiveness and obstinacy'.[29] Eben, the agent for vengeance, is obsessed with his mother as an irresistible maternity force. He identifies himself with his mother; by avenging her death, he unconsciously avenges himself. Eben is the living incarnation of his mother's suffering. When Abbie tells him that he looks like his father, he says: 'I hadn't like him! I'm Maw every drop o' blood' (Desire Under the Elms, p. 28).[30] In Desire Under the Elms, Eben 'seems to be as in awe of his father's strength and his puritanical and Calvinist philosophy that 'God is hard, not easy!' as he is against it. The prolonged cohabitation between father and son indicates a sign of subjection and a source of conflict'.[31] Eben is torn between contradictory and conflicting gender-related forces in his psyche; while he tries to achieve union with his mother via identifying himself with her as a victim, he is still 'the dead spit 'n' image o' (his) father', as Abbie tells him.[32]According to XIE Qun (2010)

> Eben's frustration about his identity originates from the double inheritance of his parents. While Eben is shaped by the utilitarian egoism of his father, he also carries the influence of his mother. Eben's mother is depicted as a woman of loving nature. .... Her death symbolizes the absence of altruistic love and benevolence. But her influence is still present at the farm, as the play shows, either in the form of the image of the protective elms, or as an invisible ghost in the room. Eben's identification with his mother unwittingly reveals his longing and affirmation of selfless love.[33]

Eben's provocation springs from this duality of gender identification. His twofold heritage makes him swing between paradoxical personal traits; while he has inherited his father's egocentric utilitarianism, he possesses his mother's devotion and compassion.

> Cabot: [looks after him with a scornful pity]. Soft-headed. Like his Maw. Dead spit 'n' image. No hope in him! [ he spits with contemptuous disgust] a born fool! [then matter of factly] waal – I'm gittin' peckish .[ He goes toward the door.][34]

The maternal and paternal forces are at war within Eben's psyche. His identification with his mother suggests an intense longing to return to the primal mother: nature. O'Neill's portrayal of his protagonist as possessing feminine and masculine characteristics and Eben's duality of gender identification indicate the dramatist's awareness of the contradictory forces at conflict within the human soul. In her Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension, Doris V. Falk (1974) imagines Eben as wearing 'two figurative masks- one ruthless and self-centred like his father, the other sensitive and hungry for beauty and love as his mother was'.[35]In Contours of Time, Bogard (1972) has observed that Eben is in search for his identity is motivated by his urgent need to fit in:

> He seeks the same identification with nature and moves listlessly in alien places, the kitchen, the world of women where he can sink no roots. His desire brings him into inevitable conflict with more hardened souls whose needs are less because they are aware of less.[36]

Before the intrusion of Abbie in the Cabots' domain, Eben had been preoccupied with the idea of revenge. However, due to his inherited weakness, he has postponed it and submissively surrendered to and assimilated the feminine-gender role that he has acquired from his mother. Having taken his mother's place as a housekeeper, he believes that Abbie has violated his domestic role. In this respect, Abbie does not steal only his mother's place in the household but rather his own position. Identifying himself with his mother, Eben says: 'It was on'y after she died I come to think o' it. Me cookin'- doin' her work- that made me know her, suffer her sufferin''.[37]. According to Flath (2014):

> Eben seems to come from a mixture between the father and the mother. On the one hand, Eben feels an incestuous desire for his stepmother and, on the other hand, an incestuous hatred. A curse also seems to have been inherited from Eben's dead mother, who, though never seen, hovers over the action of the play like a ghost. The description of the 'crushing jealous elms' squeezing the house indicates this quite clearly. The characters constantly say that there is 'somethin'' out there, however intangible it might be.[38]

### III. 4. **Femininity and Nature as Life-Giving Forces**

Women and nature are maternal, fertile, and life-giving forces. These qualities illustrate the interconnectedness between femininity and nature. According to Salleh (2018), 'feminists should not fear the double-edged metaphor of Mother- Nature. This nexus both describes the source of women's power and integrity, and at the same time exposes the complex of pathological practices known as capitalist patriarchy'.[39]Barry (2007), on the other hand, suggests that 'the association between women and nature has produced sets of hierarchies, dualism or binary oppositions'.[40] According to this hierarchical dualism, nature and femininity are regarded as inferior to culture and masculinity. Culture is perceived to be male-created and male-dominated. It represents structured order, logic, rationality, and discipline. On the other hand, the physiological, reproductive, and nurturing aspects of femininity make women interconnected with nature, impose an inferior marginalized status on women, and isolate them from the cultural realm. Like nature, women reproduce, are life-givers, and nurturing. In Desire Under the Elms, Nature is associated with maternity.

'Desire Under the Elms' is a terrific title for O'Neill's drama because it illustrates the interconnectedness between women and nature through the use of fertility symbols. Maternity is represented by the enormous elm tree, while patriarchy is symbolized by the stone wall of the sickly greyish stone farmhouse. The visible contradiction between the shady dull-coloured house and the bright green of the elms symbolizes feminine fertility as opposing Puritan sterility. Since the death of Eben's mother, the maternal life-affirming force has faded. Eben's dead mother is associated with the elms. In Desire Under the Elms, the two elm trees symbolize Maw's oppressive and influential maternal force, which often goes invisible but has a powerful impact on the male characters. They signify the dead woman and the oppression and subjugation she has experienced during her miserable life in the deadly farmhouse. Her oppressive maternal energy is felt looming over the other characters, like the shade of the elm trees. The elms represent nature and the thwarting of nature; while they represent the dead mother's unconditional love and sacrifice, they may represent the growing guilt that has haunted the house since her death.

Nature stands as a maternity symbol in Desire Under the Elms. When Abbie tells Eben, 'Nature'll beat ye', she unknowingly predicts that nature's maternal force will triumph over the life-denying Puritanism as an act of retribution; Eben has not accepted Abbie until he identifies her with his mother. The threat of the female intruder in Desire Under The Elms is also the threat of incest. Abbie seduces Eben in the parlour, a room he associates with his mother. This idea is spelled out explicitly and straightforwardly in language as well as action. Abbie says*:*

> [Both her arms around him— with wild passion.] I'll sing fur ye! I'll die fur ye. [Despite her overwhelming Desire for him, there is a sincere maternal love In her manner and voice- a horribly frank mixture of lust and mother love.] Don't cry, Eben! I'll take yer Maw's place! I'll be everythin' she was to ye! Let me kiss ye, Eben! [She pulls his head around. He makes a bewildered pretense of resistance. She is tender] Don't be afraid! I'll kiss ye pure, Eben— same's if I was a Maw to ye— an' ye kin kiss me back's if ye was my son— my boy— sayin' good—night' me.[41]

Moreover, Abbie speaks metaphorically of their increasing desire likening it to the growing elm trees. The trees symbolize the maternal principle that has been suppressed in the Cabot house. Nature dismayed and hindered by Puritanism is a further noteworthy symbol in Desire Under the Elms. The elms represent, in particular, nature thwarted and suppressed by Puritanism, symbolized by the stony farmhouse. All the female characters in the drama carry certain aspects of the fertile Earth Mother; they are in harmony with nature, and accordingly, they are associated in one way or another with the elms.

O'Neill's description of the elm trees as appearing to 'protect and at the same time subdue' indicates that both Maw and Abbie equally display a maternal power that nurtures and, at the same time, dominates, overcomes, or triumphs over the male characters. For instance, in their initial physical interaction, Abbie proposes to mother Eben and at the same time be his lover; Abbie definitely, both nurtures and dominates Eben. Hence, the two enormous elms symbolize both the onstage and off-stage female characters' power over their male counterparts. Like the giant elm trees, which put the Cabot farmhouse in eternal, smothering, the maternal force in Desire Under the Elms is so powerful and substantial that it can dominate the men's circumstances and put them in stumbling blocks.

Even though Eben's mother dies some years before the play begins, her oppressed maternal power is still looming over the other characters in the same motherly manner in which the elm trees loom over the Cabot farmhouse, keeping it in an eternal shadow. Surprisingly enough, the proud macho

character, Ephraim Cabot, cannot tolerate the tangible presence of the ghostly woman he has worked to death. He feels her ghost oppressively haunting the house. He communicates this queer feeling to Abbie saying: 'An' mebbe I suspicioned it all along. I felt they was somethin' unnatural--somewhars--the house got so lonesome--an' cold--drivin' me down t' the barn--t' the beasts o' the field. ... Ay-eh. I must've suspicioned- somethin''.[42]The atmosphere in the farmhouse, Cabot's territorial possession, is so frightening, suffocating, and unnerving that he frequently chooses to sleep out in the barn with the animals. He finds it more comfortable to be unified to nature.

Abbie, on the other hand, represents an equally oppressive, maternal force. O'Neill's description of the elms in the stage directions as possessing sinister maternity aspects indicate that they emulate Abbie in many respects. First, she lures both Cabot and Eben into her primarily 'sinister' plan to possess the farm; then, as she develops an authentic obsessive love towards Eben, she becomes much like the elms that keep the farmhouse masked in darkness.

While Cabot alternates between worshiping nature and objectifying it, his sons share his desire for the off-stage female character, Min, a whore whose attraction for them is also coloured by her maternal qualities. The description of the prostitute helps us understand the patriarchal attitude towards women and nature as illustrated in Desire under the Elms:

> EBEN: Waal-thar's a star, an' somewhar's they's him, an' here's me, an' thar's Min up the road in the same night. What if I does kiss her? She's like t'night, she's soft 'n' wa'm, her eye kin wink like a star, her mouth's wa'am, her arm's wa'm, she smells like a wa'm plowed field, she's purty…Ay-eh! By god A'mighty she's purty, an' I don't give a damn how many sins she's sinned afore mine or who she's sinned 'em with, my sin's as purty as anyone on 'em![43]

Eben's description of Min indicates that she is both a fertility symbol and a mother figure. She is a mother substitute for all the Cabots who rebel against their patriarch to possess her. Eben, in particular, is involved in an Oedipal conflict with his father to possess all maternity symbols; his mother, Min, and later Abbie. He says: 'She may 've been his'n... and your 'n too—but she's mine now!'.[44] Thus, both off-stage women, Eben's s dead mother and Min, the prostitute, represent the maternal principle and affect the entire family structure through their unseen but felt presence in the male-dominated household.

The characters express their attachment to the maternal principle that has been evoked with the arrival of Abbie. This attachment is not limited to the younger generation represented by Eben; it has its seeds in the father; Cabot is longing for the primal mother. Cabot's extensive reference to cows as a symbol of fertility is a powerful illustration of his maternal attachment. At the same time, he tries to associate the cows with Eben to indicate the feminine aspect of his son's personality, who is 'so thunderin' soft— like his Maw',[45] and who 'li never be mor'n half a man'.[46] Cabot says to his wife *:*

> CABOT: It's warm down to the barn— nice smellin' an' warm— with the cows. [A pause.] Cows are queer.
> ABBIE: Like you*?*
> CABOT: Like Eben. [A pause.] I'm getting' to feel resigned to Eben- Just as I got to feel 'bout his Maw. I'm getting' to learn to b'ar his softness— jest like her. I calculate I'd almost take t' him— if he wasn't such a dumb fool![47]

Paradoxically enough, Cabot, the representative of patriarchal authority, needs warmth; he needs a

mother: 'It seems that Mother lurks in all the rooms, and Mother, we come to realize is what Ephraim needs, without being conscious of it'.[48] Accordingly, he resorts to the cows, which represents a maternity symbol. Conversely, Abbie is a symbol of the earth mother, 'always invoking the forces of nature full of natural desire and passion and vitality representing the Dionysian urges that clash against the Puritan stoniness of the man'.[49]Cabot's attachment to the cows, which give him comfort and escape from the coldness of the house, symbolizes his longing for the primal mother*:*

> CABOT: It's cold in this house. It's They's thin's about the dark- in the corners. [He pulls on his trousers, tucking in his nightshirt, and pulls on his boot.]
> ABBIE: [Surprised] Whar air ye goin*?'*
> CABOT: [Queerly] Down whar it's restful-whar it's warm— down to the barn. I kin talk to the cows. They know. They know the farm an' me. They'll give me peace.[50]

By the end of the drama, Cabot establishes a connection between the cows and himself. Finally, he sets the cows free in order to free himself *:*'To hell with the farm. I'm leavin' it! I've turned the cows and other stock loose. I've druv 'em into the woods whar they kin be free! By freein''em, I'm freein' myself'.[51] However, a feeling of restoration of the maternal principle is evoked in him due to Abbie, who promises the beginning of a new life*.*

In Desire Under the Elms, the conception of 'home' is associated with the issues of maternity, femininity, and nature. It serves as a reincarnation of maternal security, achievable only through the ultimate return to the peace of the mother's womb, which symbolizes security and privacy. Homes are always associated with maternity. Cabot's house has lost much of its maternal significance due to his wife's death. The setting of the play illustrates a sterile patriarchal atmosphere, where femininity is repressed. However, the maternal principle is restored by Abbie, who represents a fertility symbol, who brings the life force once again to the stone-like, sterile patriarchal house.

### III. 5. Oedipal Fixation and the Conception of Nature

The issue of maternity and maternal fixation is associated with the Oedipal element in Desire Under the Elms. The dramatic world of Eugene O'Neill has its basics in psychoanalysis. O'Neill portrays the convoluted and contradictory impulses of his characters. In Literature of America, An Illustrated History, Peter Conn (1989) describes Desire Under the Elms as: 'A story of repression, passion, adultery, and murder unfolds within the walls of cheerless nineteenth century New England Farmhouse. The setting is at once starkly realistic and a symbolic stage for the dramatization of the subconscious'.[52] According to Edwin Alexander Engel (1993), 'Eben Cabot's repeated plaintive appeal to his Maw is the earliest indication that O'Neill was to enlist the services of the Mother in the struggle against the father and against God'.[53]A psychoanalytic reading of Desire Under the Elms reveals Eben's deep love for his mother, for the memory of his mother, 'prods the hatred he feels for the husband who abused her. His love for his mother also blends into his desire for his father's new wife, who allows him to act out the Oedipal triangle'.[54] Thus, Desire Under the Elms illustrates a commiserate yearning for the oppressed maternal principle, coupled with abhorrence and detestation towards the paternal. Gassner (1973) states that:

> there is no drama of O' Neill's in which an intense love relationship is presented as creative or satisfying. The deepest emotional drive in his plays is based on a father-daughter, mother-son relationship. Their passion is necessarily evil because it is incestuous, yet it is unavoidable because it is the condition upon which they are born.[55]

Desire Under the Elms illustrates the influence of Freud's psychoanalytic theory on O'Neill. Commenting on the Oedipal element in the play, James William Flath (2014) writes: 'In his artistic trajectory, this is probably the play where his obsession with the father-son rivalry and hatred really takes root'.[56]The impact of Freud on O'Neill is exposed in the quasi-incestuous relationship between Eben and Abbie (his mother's substitute). The Oedipal content and implications are explicit since Eben exposes his love for his birth mother. He cannot exorcise his dead mother's image; accordingly, he cannot escape her domination:

> Eugene O'Neill selects the ancient 'Oedipus myth' to structure his play, Desire Under the Elms, and at the same time to show the psychological impact of the dead mother on a longing son. It is the tragedy of human desire, which means an emotional desire for aid. The principal subject of the play is Cabot's son, Eben. The desire of the mother is essentially manifested in an idealized and exalted mother. Eben looks to his mother as an ideal figure, engraved in his mind.[57]

He is now drawn to a mother replacement. Eben's union with Abbie allows him to get revenge against his father for making his dead mother's life so miserable and to be reunited with a mother/woman as well. No doubt his harshness with his stepmother results from his fear of incest, just as his attachment to the farm, which reveals his attachment to the maternal principle in nature, would seem at least partly to indicate a desire to return to the primal mother and the womb. The guilt which accompanies incestuous feelings that Eben seems to overcome, of course, is part of what has already led him to denigrate women.

All the characters in Desire Under the Elms are related to nature in some way or another. Abbie associates Eben with imagery of nature. O'Neill correlates Eben with a wild creature. To expose his exuberant desire, Eben is described as similar to a 'prize bull', a 'calf', and a 'prize chicken'. On the other hand, Cabot is caught by the dreadful animalistic impulse for territorial possession. Moreover, when Abbie and Eben are involved in brutish sensuality, they are shown as two creatures longing after desire and avariciousness. However, Abbie acts as an irresistible force of nature that brings fertility to the 'cold', sterile patriarchal house*:*

> Hasn't the sun strong an' hot? Ye kin feel it burnin' into the earth- Nature- makin' thin's grow- bigger bigger- burnin' inside ye- makin' ye want to grow- into somethin' else- till ye are joined with it- an' it's your 'n- but it owns ye- too- an' makes ye grow bigger- like a tree-like them elms[58]*.*

The above quote illustrates Abbie's strength as a fertility symbol and the Cabots' patriarchal sterility. Abbie represents a maternal natural force that brings life back to the dying home. In his portrayal of the character of Abbie, O' Neill has adopted a unique perspective that topples the traditional categories of wild nature:

> Abbie's seduction of Eben indicates how nature triumphs over Puritanism. This seduction is purely a retributive act. When Abbie compares sexual desire to the growth of the elm trees, she draws attention to them as symbols of nature, the nature that Cabots suppressed. Here, the elms represent the nature thwarted by Puritanism (strictness in beliefs and practices). Nature can be suppressed, but not for long. It takes revenge upon its oppressors. Hence, the elms come to represent the brooding and ultimately triumphant fate.[59]

### III. 6. Nature and Maternity

Ariel Salleh (2018) emphasizes the idea that the feminine reproductive act is both life-affirming and supporting. She claims: 'As distinct from men's lot, women's labouring activities are designed to protect life'.[60] Cabot has been trying all his life to suppress the maternal principle, but this life-giving force, this irresistible natural phenomenon, is restored with the intrusion of Abbie into his patriarchal domain. In 'From Trial to Triumph (1913-1924): The Early Plays', Margret Loftus Ranald observes that: 'Ephraim has returned from his latest spring- wandering with a young bride through whom he can restore his own fertility and that of the farm'.[61] Abbie, the representative of fertility, stands against the background of puritan sterility. She challenges the Cabots' expectations and changes their pre-established views concerning femininity; Cabot's aggressiveness is transformed as he experiences the incarnation of fertility and the beauty of nature in his new wife; he becomes poetic: 'Yew air my Rose o' Sharon! Behold! Yew air fair; yer eyes air doves; yer lips air like scarlet; yer two breasts air like two fawns; yer navel be like a round goblet; yer belly be like a heap o' wheat'.[62] Abbie's interconnectedness with nature is highly emphasized in this metaphorical depiction; she is fertile and maternal like nature.

On the other hand, Eben's first interaction with his father's new wife is characterized by open and direct insult. He reproaches her and categorizes her as whore. According to Falk (1974), Eben 'is drawn to Abbie not by love, but by lust, greed, and the desire for revenge'.[63]Abbie's intrusion into the Cabot domain in Desire under the Elms precipitates a crisis in the male world that she has invaded; she disturbs the patriarchal assumption of male superiority and female inferiority. In Desire Under the Elms, Abbie's intrusion frustrates Eben's dreams of restoration in the sense that it represents a violation of his predicament, emotions, and expectations. Dreams of his anticipated happiness, his intense yearning of possessing the farm, turn into ruin and desolation:

> Abbie: (savagely seizing on his weak point) Your'n? Yew mean -my farm?
> Eben: I mean the farm yew sold yerself fur like any other old whore- my farm!
> Abbie: (stung - fiercely) Ye'll never live t'see the day when even a stikin' weed on it'll belong t'ye! (Then in a scream) Git out o'my sight![64]

Abbie creates feelings of mixed love, hate, and fear in Eben, but his sexual desire for her and his yearning for mothering combine to make him helpless before her efforts at seduction. Hence, Abbie wins precarious control of the entirely male-dominated family. Abbie has a strong personality, which prevents her from submitting to the male moral code, and allows her to impose her own will. He is threatened by her measured reactions, as well as her motherly treatment of him. He helplessly discovers that she is the incarnation of the force of nature; accordingly, he yields to her importunate seduction. Abbie's presence challenges the Cabots' assumption that women should be denied access to everything, including their bodies. She violates conventional patriarchal authority by controlling the men who have tried to gain control over her. In doing so, she destroys the hierarchal structure of power dynamics within Cabot's patriarchal domain, assumes a dominant position, and obliterates male expectations. An incestuous desire for Eben has driven Abbie. However, this desire is transformed into a sincere passion that drives her to sacrifice her newborn baby to prove love.

Moreover, after Abbie treats him motherly, Eben accepts her as an irresistible fertility force of nature. Thus, Abbie's seduction of Eben is both sexual and maternal. Eben believes that the mother's ghost achieves revenge against Cabot by luring Eben and Abbie to 'the grim, repressed' parlour, where they feel her presence. When Abbie seduces Eben saying, 'I take your Maw's place', he is terrified, supposing that the maternal ghost may be upset as Abbie has violated and usurped her position. Nevertheless, he concludes that his mother's ghost can achieve revenge against his father through his

physical bond with Abbie. This physical connection starts first as a kind of desire for possession in Abbie and a desire for revenge in Eben, but throughout the drama, it turns out to be true love as the characters involved become able to transcend their current situation.

### III. 7. Abbie as a Fertility Symbol

While the male protagonist in O'Neill's drama is overwhelmed by distrust, anxiety, and insecurity, Abbie has a greater degree of control and authority. She recognizes that Eben's aggression against her is a mask that hides his patriarchal insecurities as a motherless grown-up child. The powerful maternal aspect of Abbie's personality is made potential when she approaches him; he discovers that she is potentially dangerous. The interconnectedness between nature and women in this context illustrates the role of women as a source of fertility that cannot be demolished.

Contrary to Eben's ghostly mother, Abbie rejects a life of objectification. According to Suah Kim (2014), 'objectification was socialized in patriarchal and masculinist societies immersed in a power over hierarchy of male domination'.[65] Instead of being controlled by the males in the household, she challenges male expectations and transforms the attitudes of Eben and Cabot concerning femininity and nature. Abbie represents a maternity force and a fertility symbol in Cabot's sterile patriarchal context. She is both rejected and desired. She symbolizes not only a conflict of contradictory domestic attitudes but rather a conflict of opposing cultural perspectives. Abbie, the outsider, has struggled to break the chains of her alienation and become part of the circle of life. She can break the shell of the self and bring herself to an awareness of the meaning of human existence. Abbie exteriorizes her internal struggle and rejects the Puritan conception of femininity. She becomes the catalyst of struggle when she threatens the discriminatory patriarchal ideology. Abbie is the vital rebellious spirit of the flesh that has escaped from the death-in-life cycle imposed on her by the life- denying Puritan heritage; she breaks away from the winter, the elderly Cabot, to Eben's fertile spring and achieves the welding of all aspects of nature femininity. Abbie represents a life-giving force and irresistible natural phenomenon that triumphs over the limitations of patriarchal ideology represented by Cabot, who has been trying all his life to suppress the maternal principle. As he experiences the incarnation of fertile nature in Abbie, Cabot's aggressiveness is transformed. He has changed his attitude towards femininity and nature; he speaks poetically to Abbie and sympathetically mentions Eben's dead mother.

Abbie evokes male insecurity and confusion about their patriarchal identity. Being aware of her feminine role, Abbie initiates these grown-up patriarchal figures into matriarchal consciousness. After the sexual interaction with Eben, she brings back the maternal life force to the lifeless Cabot house when she 'sticks her head out' the parlour window and flings open its shutters. Abbie successfully washed the dirt of Puritanism off the Cabot household by performing a primary domestic role and washing the family dishes. Abbie's intrusion into the male-dominated household and her conception of physical nature proves the absurdity of puritan philosophy and shifts Cabot's interest from the metaphysical Puritan ideal, with its stress on the hereafter, to the actual physical existence. She deploys her maternity and sexuality to gain power and territory, and it is through the physical interaction between Abbie and Eben, the maternal principle is restored; Abbie brings back the life force to the lifeless Cabot house. With the intrusion of Abbie, Nature has been restored, and the life force is no longer suppressed.

## IV. Conclusion

Gender domination is entangled with environmental issues. According to the Ecofeminist theory, patriarchal societies have established a culture/nature dualism where males are allied with culture attributable to being intellectual and rational, while females are associated with nature due to being

emotional and irrational. One of the most detrimental consequences of this dichotomy is establishing a discriminatory hierarchal social structure.

In the current research, exploring the interconnectedness between women and nature in Eugene O'Neill's Desire Under the Elms has provided a vigorous visualization of nature. The study has demonstrated how Ephraim Cabot is chained to his Puritan heritage and the patriarchal cultural standards entrenched in the American society and characterized by cruelty and sexual asymmetry. His antagonistic attitude towards his subordinates, his dead wife and his sons, illustrates this adherence. Cabot strives dreadfully to affirm a gendered identity as a man, as implied in the patriarchal social norms of sexuality and gender roles. On the other hand, Eben is disturbed by his gender dichotomy and lack of an identifiable sense of the self; his split identity symbolizes the correspondingly disjointed society.

The male characters in Desire Under the Elms belong to a tradition of masculine dominance inherited from the patriarchal cultural heritage and the conventional social norms of sexuality and gender roles that reinforce the dichotomy between men and women. While Patriarchal societies advocate a gender system that glorifies masculinity at the expense of femininity, the dramatist questions the destruction of the ideology of power and dominance underlying the traditional image of manhood to deconstruct the patriarchal myth of masculinity and the conventional structure of the patriarchal system associated with violence and sexual asymmetry.

Finally, the study has adopted an Ecofeminist critical approach in analyzing Eugene O'Neill's Desire Under The Elms with particular emphasis on gender oppression, subjugated femininity, and their correlation with the oppression of the natural world in order to spotlight how both the male and female protagonists interrelate to and interact with their natural surroundings. O'Neill highlights his female protagonist's struggles in her attempt to transcend her marginalized status. Hence, O'Neill is critiquing or even deconstructing the American myth of masculinity. His work questions the possibility of obliterating the ideology of power and dominance underlying the traditional image of manhood. Tackling O'Neill's Desire Under the Elms from an Ecofeminist standpoint, the research proclaims that societies that achieve gender equality are in harmony with nature.

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