

## An Analysis of the Bridge of Madison County from the Perspective of Eco-feminism

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### Abstract

The Bridge of Madison County is a love novel of describing extramarital love, Love and kinship have become inextricable knots in the story of The Bridge of Madison County, people not only feel pity for short, sad and beautiful love between Robert and Francisca, but also they are finally moved by their souls together at the same time. The author of this thesis aims at finding out harmonious relationship between human and nature and harmonious relationship between men and women in The Bridge of Madison County, which are literature performance of eco-feminism in the novel. Under the guidance of Theory of Eco-feminism, Robert James Waller puts Robert and Francisca in the environment of nature, and thus subtle relationship between women and nature and ecological consciousness in this novel also arouse people's thinking.

### Keywords

The Bridge of Madison County, Eco-feminism, Women and nature.

### 1. Introduction

Robert James Waller, a famous American modern novelist, is known for his works in literature as well as his works in photography and musical field. *The Bridges of Madison County* and his 1995 novel, *Puerto Vallarta Squeeze*, have been already made into motion pictures. *The Bridge of Madison County* is his representative work, and it was recognized by a lot of people since it was published, which shocked the world to some extent. The writer tells a sad and beautiful extramarital love story between two people in a soft and elegant way. Francisca in this novel is bored of trifles in married life, and there is a lack of passionate life for a long time, thus she desires to seek for freedom. The writer of *The Bridge of Madison County* combined feminism and natural environment together to explore existence or lack of female consciousness in this book from the perspective of eco-feminism, and he also has a better understanding of Francisca from the common sense of women in order to pay more attention to confusions of modern women as well as their pursuit of freedom and equality. The significance of this paper is to make an analysis of female images in *The Bridge of Madison County* from the angle of eco-feminism so as to have a better understanding of inner struggle as well as pursuit of freedom and love of the females in *The Bridge of Madison County* under such social background.

Waller does not make moral evaluations on love between Robert and Francisca in *The Bridge of Madison County* against readers, and Francisca chooses the latter one when facing the choices between love and responsibility. The author describes the whole process of extramarital love between Robert and Francisca from meeting and falling in love to breaking up, but actually Francisca did not have the right to choose love and freedom under the depressed social background, and the author also wants to arouse people's attention to loyalty, eternity and rationality of love from shamed extramarital love.

### 2. Literature Review

Chuang Lu makes one study of the dramatic dialogues from the perspective of discourse analysis with Grice's Cooperative Principle, the Conversational Implicature, Leech's Politeness Principle and

Brown and Levinson's Face-saving Theory in *The Bridge of Madison County* to explore the personalities of the heroine Francesca and the hero Robert and their relationship in specific context of situation. By the qualitative and quantitative methods, Robert's gentleness, warm-heartedness and open-mindedness are presented, so are the Francesca's loneliness, fragility and bravery. Their relationships change with the dialogues also.

Li Wei analyzes the stylistic characteristics and the artistic value in *The Bridge of Madison County*, and she believes that distinct stylistic features is one of the important reasons that why *The Bridge of Madison County* is so popular in the world as it comes out. The poignant and touching love story is impressive, but the ingenuity of narrative perspective and narrative technique of the novel and clever applying of the figures of speech make the work better than other American contemporary novels in the artistic value. The careful analysis and serious experience of *The Bridge of Madison County* in the literary characteristics, can help correctly analyze the text, improve our English level, feel love and life, and rediscover Chinese and western culture from new angles standing in the new era.

Hu Jing analyzes the mistranslation in *The Bridge of Madison County*. For English and Chinese language belong to different language systems, they have considerable differences in their thinking, content and expression form. These characteristics bring many challenges to the English-Chinese translation. Inevitably, in the process of transformation of the two kinds of language, there will be some mistranslation phenomenon. Hu Jing takes *The Bridge of Madison County* as the corpus, and analyzes some common mistranslation phenomenon in English-Chinese translation, trying to find out its reason and give the referential translation to more profoundly understand the original text. Hu Jing thinks that translation is related to the dimensions of the different language system, not only involving the specific dimension of vocabulary, grammar and syntax, also involving living habits, culture, environment and many other aspects, such as thinking, so the translation is not easy and it is necessary for us to analyze and study deeply from the macro and micro aspects of different language in detail, profoundly understanding the similarities and differences among them, trying to reduce mistranslation phenomenon due to different language system and different cultural connotations.

Shi Fengcai discusses the novel from the perspective of Darwinism and analyzes the characteristics and the discourses of Kincaid and then it can prove that Waller is indeed affected by Darwinism, while, he does not believe in it completely as he shows his faith in God at the same time. Meanwhile, people should also pay much attention to the theory of Freudian in *The Bridges of Madison County*, and the author recons that Waller adopted both Darwinism and Freudian to describe the love between Kincaid and Francisca in *The Bridges of Madison County*.

Ed Korthof reckons that the story is presented as one story about true love, which can survive total separation intact and unharmed. The idea of free love was one attempt to reimagine and recreate the idea of love, to make it go beyond the narrow effect romantic love generally has. One of the problems with romantic love is that it is not social, beyond two people. It can affect them, sometimes in good ways but sometimes in bad ones, but it will not generally involve anyone else — except possibly children. And the idea of free love — that love is natural and should be given freely to whoever wants it — has been influential, but ultimately not successful by itself. But it does point out that the idea of love can be used for different ends, and that love is political. Ed Korthof thinks that love can be constructive and it can also be destructive. What Ed Korthof wants to argue for is a less mystical, religious understanding of it. People fall in love for reasons which are often comprehensible, and people generally stay in love because people are getting what they want out of the relationship. Sometimes it is more pleasant not to come to terms with that, but it is important, even necessary, to try.

Anders Tolland analyses the character Francesca Johnson in the movie *The Bridge of Madison County* from the perspective of virtue ethics and asks whether she is virtuous or weak-willed. Anders Tolland also discusses if her situation can be described as an ethical dilemma and he takes an example from fiction and discusses what can be said about it from the perspective of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics. The example is Francesca Johnson from the movie version of *The Bridges of Madison County*.

Anders Tolland does not claim that virtue ethics is the only way to look at this example. In fact, the very person Anders Tolland has stolen the idea of using this movie as an example in ethical discussion from, Nina Rosenstand, puts it under the heading “Kant’s Deontology”. A good work of art lends itself to many different interpretations.

### 3. Theoretical Basis

#### 3.1 Theory of Eco-feminism

“Eco-feminism” was first introduced by a French writer called Françoise d’Eaubonne. In her book, *Le Feminisme ou la Mort*, Françoise d’Eaubonne first used this term. In her book, Françoise d’Eaubonne manages to draw public attention to women’s potentials for an ecological revolution. And Françoise d’Eaubonne argues that the twin oppressions of women and nature are closely connected with each other and women cannot be liberated without the liberation of nature. Simply speaking, eco-feminism is a movement with joint efforts of environmentalists and feminists. Greta Gaard defines it like this:

Eco-feminism is also a kind of practical movement for social change arising out of the struggles of women to sustain themselves, their families and their communities. These struggles are waged against the mal-development and environmental degradation caused by patriarchal societies, global capitalism, and multinational corporations. They are waged for environmental balance, heterarchical and matrifocal societies, the continuance of indigenous cultures, and economic values and programs based on subsistence and sustainability.

Just as Greta Gaard puts it, the basic premise of eco-feminism is that the ideology authorizing oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species, is the same ideology which sanctions the domination of nature. The same ideology is called the patriarchy or the oppressive conceptual framework, as in Karen J. Warren’s terms. It refers to a set of basic beliefs, values, attitudes, and assumptions which help explain, maintain, and “justify” relationships of men’s unjustified domination over women, over human others and over nature. Eco-feminists reject the patriarchal thoughts of denigrating women and nature. They believe that patriarchal civilization has already constructed dualism and hierarchies that connect women and non-human nature in a category of subordinated others. They argue that dualism sets up hierarchical thought structure and a dichotomous world of subject and object. Dualistic thinking, eco-feminists believe, is inherent to patriarchal thought, which portrays the world as a system of binary oppositions of dominant and subordinate terms. In the light of this dualistic thought, men are valued as the measure and master of all things, while women and nature are merely instruments for men. The subjugation and exploitation of women and of nature are both in the hands of the male hierarchy. For eco-feminists, the dualistic thinking leads to men’s superiority and dominance over women and nature.

#### 3.2 Important Eco-feminists and Theories

The past few decades have already witnessed an enormous interest in both the women movement and the ecology (environmental) movement. And many feminists have argued that the goals of the two movements are reinforcing mutually; finally they involve the development of world opinions and practices which are not based on male-biased models of domination. And a lot of Eco-feminists did their job to develop the Eco-feminism and to fight against for women.

Carolyn Merchant, an American eco-feminist philosopher and historian of science, is best-known for her theory on *The Death of Nature*, while she identifies the Enlightenment as the era at that time science began to atomize, objectify and dissect nature, foretelling its eventual conception as inert. Carolyn Merchant’s works were important in the development of environmental history and the history of science. In 1980, Carolyn Merchant published *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*, a highly influential book. In *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*, Carolyn Merchant criticizes the humanity’s self-imposed scientific ignorance and tries to uncover the historic connection between the domination of nature and that of women. Carolyn explains that her study seeks to examine the values that are associated with the images of

women and nature as they relate to the formation of modern world and their implications for our lives nowadays. She advocates the needs to reexamine the formation of the world opinion and the science that, by reconceptualizing reality as a machine rather than a living organism, sanctioned the domination of both nature and women.

In *Nature, Self, and Gender: Feminism, Environmental Philosophy, and the Critique of Rationalism*, Val Plumwood explains that the key to the problem of the women-nature connections in the west world is to find rationalism, the long-standing philosophical tradition that affirms the human or nature dichotomy and a network of other related dualism, such as, masculine/feminine, men/women, and reason/emotion, and spirit/body. Val Plumwood criticizes what she explains as “the standpoint of mastery,” a set of views of the self and its relationship to the other associated with capitalism, colonialism, sexism, racism and the domination of nature. She draws on feminism theory to analyze this standpoint, and she argues seeing the other as radically separate and inferior, the background to the self as foreground, as one whose existence is secondary, derivative or peripheral to that of the self or center, and whose agency is denied or minimized. She identifies the human or nature dualism as one part of a series of problematic, gendered dualisms, including human/animal, mind/body... male/female, reason/emotion, and civilized/primitive.

Australian sociologist Ariel Salleh writes on social ecology and eco-feminism. As one of co-editors of the international journal *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, her works at gendering dialogue between advocates of eco-feminist and eco-socialist politics. In *Living with Nature: Reciprocity or Control*, Ariel Salleh documents women’s involvement in the environmental movement and argues that it is a patriarchal belief system that maintains and justifies the invisibility of what women do and the continuing destruction of the natural environment. According to Salleh, the rationale of the exploitation of women and nature has been uncovered by the eco-feminists’ analysis of patriarchy. What is needed, she argues, is that the unconscious connection between women and nature needs to be made conscious and “the struggles for equality of women and ecological sustainability are interlinked.”

Vandana Shiva plays a vital role in the global Eco-feminist movement. In *Empowering Women*, Vandana Shiva suggests that a more sustainable and productive way to agriculture can be achieved by reinstating a system of farming in India which is more centered on engaging women. She advocates against the prevalent patriarchal logic of exclusion and claims that a woman-focused system would change the current system in a rather positive manner. And in this way, Indian and global food security, can only benefit from the focus on empowering women by integrating them into the agricultural system.

The work of eliminating oppression of women and nature motivate the eco-feminists to restore a proper environmental ethics and rebalance the patriarchal dualistic thinking. In *The Bridge of Madison County*, Robert James Waller reveals a patriarchal dualistic world that oppresses and dominates both femininity and nature, and combines the liberation of nature with the liberation of women from the dominance of the patriarchal framework.

## **4. An Analysis of Eco-feminism Consciousness in The Bridge of Madison County**

### **4.1 Eco-feminism Consciousness Reflected in The Bridge of Madison County**

#### **4.1.1 Harmony between Women and Nature**

Are women really closer to nature than men? Eco-feminists believe that the male-dominated culture has created the bond between woman and nature. It is the woman and nature’s shared oppression within the male-dominated western culture rather than biology or essential identity that constructs a special closeness between them.

Francesca is a farmer’s wife and nature is her working place. She lives in a small town in Winterset. She had remained in the hills of south Iowa. When she first met Kincaid, she had been sitting on the front porch swing, drinking iced tea, casually watching the dust spiral up from under a pickup coming

down the country road and she was barefoot, wearing jeans and a faded blue work shirt with the sleeves rolled up, shirttail out. From the description of her appearance, the author of this thesis knows that she is working on the farm at that time. After Kincaid asks her way to the Roseman Bridge, she surprises herself by saying "I'll be glad to show it to you, if you want." Then Francesca, farmer's wife leads Kincaid coming to the covered bridge.

It was quiet. A redwing blackbird sat on fence wire and looked it at her. A meadowlark called from the roadside grass. Nothing else moved in the white sun of August. Here it is quiet and beautiful and nature provides a good foundation for the romantic story between Francesca and Kincaid. After Kincaid takes some pictures, he walks to Francesca and gives her a small bouquet of wildflowers, black-eyed Susans. This is the first time that Francesca has received flowers from a man, and she felt something inside of her again. Nobody gave her flowers, even on special occasions. Coming back from the covered bridge, Francesca invites Kincaid to have supper with her. Then they prepare for the supper. Now Waller writes that clouds had moved up in the west, splitting the sun into rays that splayed in several directions. When they finish preparing for the supper, again Waller writes that a white sun had turned big red and lay just over the corn fields. Through the kitchen window she could see a hawk riding the early evening updrafts. The atmosphere is warm and harmonious and they have a happy talk. As they talk on, the evening turned blue, light fog brushing the meadow grass. and their supper is over, so Kincaid suggests having a walk out in the meadow. Just in the meadow they communicate with each other very well and find that they have mutual interest and understanding. Therefore after Kincaid leaves, Francesca writes a poem of Yeats and asks Kincaid to come back again. From now on they both feel that their relationship is a little special and a romantic story will happen. Finally with her face buried in his neck and her skin against skin, she could smell rivers and wood smoke, could hear steaming trains chuffing out of winter stations in long-ago night times, could see travelers in black robes moving steadily along frozen rivers and through summer meadow, beating their way toward the end of things. Here "rivers", "wood smoke" and "summer meadow", all these mean that in fact they are closer to nature.

However, their union is short, only four days. Francesca's husband will come back. Faced with this situation, Francesca needs to make a decision whether she should follow Kincaid leaving this small town or continue to stay here to live a lifeless life with her husband Richard. In fact in her heart surely she wants to leave and stay with Kincaid. But because of the responsibility, what she chooses is to go on living with her husband. To some extent, leaving this small town and staying with Kincaid means she wants to leave away from nature. Living with her husband means she goes back to the nature.

#### **4.1.2 Harmony between Men and Women: Francesca and Richard**

Kincaid is a photographer of having a short marriage, loving nature, loving arts, pursuing perfection. And his temperament is a little bit strange. This is just consistent with Francesca's dream. Francesca is a village woman who has received a higher education, loves literature and arts, has an Italian descent, cherishes American dream, has romantic ambience, but has lived a plain life. Therefore, their love is inevitable: This passionate love is what Kincaid has expected, and this passionate love is what Francesca has been pursuing for a long time. In the hope of fulfilling her girlhood dream Francesca comes to the small farm in Madison County along with her husband Richard Johnson. Although life in Iowa is stable and quiet, it is quite different from her girlhood dream. What she says is the true revelation of her feelings within her heart that has been repressed for a long time by reality. It's the voice of her cherished girlhood dream representing her instinctive desire that has been repressed long. The reality in life is quite different from her girlhood dream and her interest. This discrepancy can be seen from the different attitudes towards the poetry of Yeats between Francesca and the students in the local school of Madison County. After the first supper with Kincaid, Francesca talks with Kincaid on the pasture. Kincaid recites one line of Yeats' poem: The silver apples of the moon/The golden apples of the sun. Francesca answers immediately that W. B. Yeats. 'The Song of Wandering Engus.' Kincaid says that Right. Good stuff, Yeats. Realism, economy, sensuousness, beauty, magic. Their conversation reveals that Francesca and Kincaid have mutual interest and understanding and they



both like the poetry of Yeats. Francesca agrees with Kincaid's comment on Yeats. She thinks that he had said it all, right there in five words. Francesca receives a good education in Italy and gets a comparative literature degree there. She loves literature, so she can understand and get along well with Kincaid. The discrepancy between the reality in modern society and her girlhood dream reveals the irreconcilable struggle between modern civilization and individual's instinctive desire. The fact that Francesca's girlhood dream has long been repressed and her sense of loneliness reveal that modern civilization imposes great restrictions on the individual and restrains the free fulfillment of individual's instinctive desire. Hence Francesca and Kincaid have the same experience and have attracted each other in spirit.

In the daily life, Francesca only plays the role of serving Richard, but she can't get the same reward of life. Being captured in the lifeless village, she becomes uneasy and withering. But the first sight of Robert Kincaid gives Francesca a kind of warmth and his energetic natural body stimulates her female unconsciousness. When Francesca sees Kincaid bathing, she is shocked at the sight, for curiously enough, and she watched him soap his face and shave. When she sees him taking pictures, she feels that for the first time in ever so long, she grew wet between her legs just watching someone. For the first time, Francesca comes to be aware of the existence of a body so alive and revealing something mysterious but truer and deeper. It must be this regained awareness of body and flesh that prompts Francesca to do what she has not done for a long time. After Kincaid leaves, she strips off her clothes before a mirror and examines her own body inch by inch. Her hips flared only a little from the children, her breasts were still nice and firm, not too large, not too small, belly slightly rounded. She couldn't see her legs in the mirror, but she knew they were still good. She should shave more often, but there didn't seem much point to it. However, her husband Richard almost completely neglects her. Richard was interested in sex only occasionally, every couple of months, but it was over fast, rudimentary and unmoving, and he didn't seem to care much about perfume or shaving or any of that. It was easy to get a little sloppy, which makes her feel immensely depressed and hopeless. She realizes that she has been swindled out of her first youth with its neglect of the body as an essential human reality. Deep in her heart, this being unjustly treated consumes her, and turns into dissatisfaction, which prompts her union with Robert Kincaid. In her sexual relations with Robert Kincaid, Francesca discovers that another self was alive in her. Namely, she gets rebirth again. She, who had ceased having orgasms years ago, had them in long sequences now with a half-man, half-something-else creature.

## **4.2 Reasons of Tragedy of Francesca in The Bridge of Madison County from Eco-feminism**

### **4.2.1 Long-term Repressed Life**

Richard's control over Francesca is obvious and ridiculous. Francesca is withering though she is young. Francesca is not born in America. As an Italian war bride, she comes to America along with her World-War II veteran husband Richard Johnson and settles on her husband's small farm in the south Iowa countryside. When she was a girl in Italy she had already revealed her rebellious spirit which was shown in her girlhood dream. Francesca is born in a traditional Italian family, but she is not traditional within her heart. Her instinctive desire has driven her to do something that is irreconcilable with her family background and social conventions. Her wild, reckless tours of the underside of Naples reveal that her affair with the professor is dominated by the pleasure principle without any consideration of the social influence at that time. Although she is rebellious, she cannot escape from the great power of social influence. At last under the great pressure of the disapproval of her parents, she breaks up with the professor. Her rebellious action reveals that since her girlhood she has already had a rebellious spirit dominated by her instinctive desire that is against social conventions and moral restraints. The hard press of reality brought her to the recognition that her choices were restrained.

Francesca is a rebellious girl in her heart, and she wants the romantic love. However, obviously Richard cannot give her passionate love. Richard is a typical representative of patriarchy. He is a typical male representative who holds the patriarchal oppressive conceptual frameworks. He exerts

his dominations on both nature and women. He considers nature as inert matter, exploits natural resources excessively, subjugates animals under his will. As a husband, Richard is engaged in the chores on the farm all day and he has little time for emotional exchange with his wife. During the twenty years of their marriage, he almost knew nothing about the needs of his wife. What Richard is more concerned about is the annual agricultural output and income, the price of the farm products, the weather, the government plans, but he never talks about art and love. Richard is completely industrialized and loses the emotion unique to the human beings. Eventually he became the material in the human society. For human beings, what they need most is the more intense relationship, the sense of intimacy, a kind of acceptance and affirmation. What Richard and Francesca lack are such relationship, the intimacy, the acceptance and the affirmation. This reflects that in modern society, men are busy in pursuing the material comforts, but at the same time, they gradually lose their universal concern and respect for others, gradually lose the ultimate concern for human beings.

#### 4.2.2 Weak and Comprised Personality

Personality of Francisca is still weak, and her female consciousness has been defeated by this kind of weakness during every struggle. The first time of comprise was to give up her first true love due to extensive opposition of her parents. They did not have economic basis at that time. Thus it was reasonable to give up this love. The second comprise of her was to come to the United States with her husband, and she had been already a teacher there, but her husband required her to give up this position. She did not insist her own idea, and she gave up the opportunity of economic independence. The third comprise was that she had to give up her true love again. Francisca has been pursuing female freedom and equality, but she still cannot get rid of traditional concepts when the true love is coming. Subordinate status of women has been deeply rooted in her mind, although she did not love Richard she still could not give up present life. Although she has been crazy for Robert' love, she were still not sure about their future. Thus she chose the latter one between dream and reality. Therefore, it can be said that female consciousness of Francisca still has some limitations, and her love between Robert must be a tragedy. Her female consciousness is a kind of platonic spiritual pursuit the same as her love.

## 5. Conclusion

The study of Waller's novel from eco-feminist perspective helps us gain a new visibility into Waller's great concern with the relationship between men and women, and between men and nature. His successful interweaving of his love for nature with gender concern in *The Bridges of Madison County* provides us with the possibility and necessity to reread this great novel from an eco-feminist perspective. His fictional treatment of gender relationship and human-nature relationship presents the 21st century readers references to the pressing environmental problems and social conflicts.

Waller's awareness of the inappropriateness of the traditional gender role division and his efforts to dismantle the traditional dichotomy prove that he is not a numb, unfeeling stranger in the feminine world but a writer who is much concerned with the proper relationship between men and women, human and nature, and his eco-feminism sensibility gradually reveals that as he pursues, probes, suggests a possible version of a new type of gender-relationship, he finally expands this ideal to human-nature relationship.

Similarly, Waller's nature outlook and his concept of human-nature relationship also experience a process of progressing, from nature as an object to nature as a subject. Through this process human realizes his transformation from merely an interloper or casual observer of nature to an integral part of the wild, an active participant. Waller seeks to convey that human society could be ecologically sustained only when the mutual inter-dependence is established as the model of relationship between human and nature. His views the relationship between men and nature and that between men and women should be one of reciprocity and inter-dependence, rather than of hierarchy and domination, surely falling into the eco-feminist stance. For the lack of latest materials on related studies and immature personal academic capacity, this research paper is far from being adequate. The textual

analysis is not so accurate or thorough. Moreover, besides gender relationship and human-nature relationship, other issues presented in the novels such as inter-personal and social justice and fairness, animal images, the connectedness between the female characters and eco-feminist goddess can all be the topic for eco-feminist literary studies.

All in all, *The Bridge of Madison County* suggests that men are able to join the ecosystem while women should give the rein to their positive role in social and environmental protection activities to contribute to the establishment of a new type of relationships among the people, between male and female, human and nature. Only in this way can it be possible to resolve ecological crisis and develop a sustainable harmonious society.

Firstly, the thesis analyzes the eco-feminism in *The Bridge of Madison County*, but the thesis should have done more researches about it making some comparison with other researches because there are many researchers who have studied the eco-feminism in *The Bridge of Madison County*. That is the object of the research in further study. Secondly, because of the limit of researching materials, the thesis cannot include all of aspects relating to this research, for example, the thesis did not describe other researches about the eco-feminism in other novels or works, which should be complemented in further study. Thirdly, the thesis just uses eco-feminism to analyze *The Bridge of Madison County*, and it lacks the advantages and disadvantages of eco-feminism in analyzing one novel, because all of the theories have their limits while exerting in one works, for example, the author maybe uses the theory deliberately in analyzing one work and subjectively expresses his own idea about the subject, which should be considered in further study.

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