

Recycling and Reviewing Relationships in David Williams' *The Burning Wood*: An Eco-feminist Perspective

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One of the topical findings that H.G. Wells had dealt with, a century ago, in his *The Time Machine* (1895), presents the argument that too much comfort and affluence and an uncaring selfish heart that has no concern for the other leads to indolence and retardation of human progress to the point of self-annihilation. Wells' science fiction may become prophetic in modern times from the unmitigated steps of destruction of the planet's life system by the so-called "rational" mankind, but truly, a savage of civilization. The ending of his time-travel evokes a sense of dismay, trepidation and horror over what our future generations are going to have to live with, if each one of us is not watchful and worthy today:

The darkness grew apace; a cold wind began to blow in freshening gusts from the east, ... Beyond these lifeless sounds the world was silent. Silent? It would be hard to convey the stillness of it. All the sounds of man, the bleating sheep, the cries of birds, the hum of insects, *the stir that makes the background of our lives*—all that was over... I saw the black central shadow of the eclipse sweeping towards, me ... *The horror of this great darkness came on me (emphasis mine)* (Wells 86).

The sinister and grim picture of a lifeless and "natureless" future, making one ruminates deeply on the need for eco-preservation, gains greater value as the recent publishers of Wells' book convey the ominous fact that "this book has been printed on recycled ecological friendly paper. What Wells attributes to evolutionary social disenchantment can be extended to the planetary world of margins and exploitation of the "other;" the dangers of corrupting the earth and its environment is no different from that extended to man and his human relationships that threatens to darken the earth's civilization with the threatening power of self-generated evil.

Darkness is an archetypal force, an intimidating and "phenomenally" destabilizing spiritual phenomena that gives greater meaning to light. Darkness, paradoxically "illuminates" our limitations, which we fail to see, refuse to recognize or even worse, ignore to be instructed upon in the light of day. The patriarchal providential power of creation had once said, "Let there be light;" hence darkness, metaphoric or literal, could never have

been an agent of progress. But God, no doubt an “authority” on progress by paradox, in placing the “untouchable” amidst the “touchables” in the “paradise of Eden” never wanted man to be self-complacent. Eden, like Xanadu, was inevitably, a place of margins like the “promised land” of Canada to immigrants across the oceans. As evinced by Canadian literary historians like W.H. New and R.F. Klinck, the land of Canada is a mosaic of ‘wanton’ wilderness, climatic extremes, painful paradoxes and an assortment of ambivalences. The Canadian’s view of nature, both human and elemental, is rather different from that across the Atlantic. As implied by Margaret Atwood in her *Survival* (1972), caught in the web of an unfriendly nature the average Canadian mind refuses to see Nature as benevolent and God as a protector, even as it wantonly wishes to perceive both as “tricksters.”

Though feminism has been a considerably popular and much-discussed topic on the literary agenda of all nations, the term “eco-feminism” has so far been assumed to be an exotic, and peculiarly unrelatable area of literary interest (and sometimes an unpalatable nonliterary topic to some) of recent origin and rare insight. The birth of eco-criticism finds its roots in the birth of environmental literary studies, as mentioned by Cherryll Glotfelty in her editorial introduction to the anthology *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996), in the mid-eighties through Frederick O. Waage’s editorial collection of essays entitled *Teaching Environmental Literature: Materials, Methods, Resources* (1985), based on Barry Commoner’s first law of ecology that “everything is connected to everything else.” Glotfelty goes on to emphasize that “various sub-fields like environmental ethics, deep ecology, eco-feminism and social ecology have emerged in an effort to understand and critique the root cause of environmental degradation and to formulate an alternative view of existence that will provide an ethical and conceptual foundation for right relations with the earth” (xxi).

Janis Birkeland, in her essay “Ecofeminism: Linking Theory and Practice,” appearing in the anthology *Ecofeminism, Women, Animals, Nature* (1993) edited by Greta Gaad, discovers eco-feminism to be “feminism taken to its logical conclusion, because it theorizes the inter-relations among self, societies and nature” (17/18). She defines eco-feminism as “a value system, a social movement, and a practice, but it also offers a *political analysis* that explores the links between androcentricism and environmental destruction... [it begins with]... the realization of the exploitation of nature and intimately linked to Western Man’s attitude toward women and tribal cultures” (18). David Williams’ *The Burning Wood* (1975) is a novel of such conflicts between Man, Matter and Spirit; between Fundamentalist Puritanism in the form of Grandpa Cardiff and the vitriolic Auntie Bee, and the profane and marginalized nature’s sons of the soil, the Cree Indians, forced to ape and adopt a white way of life. William’s novel pleads for the need for trust, acceptance and accommodative interrelations with the other in a world of inevitable interdependence and multiplicities and relative truths. The central idea is “caring for the other is caring for self; a notion that lends religious connotations to human coexistence with his environment both physical and spiritual.”

Eco-feminism, a term that Williams was probably unaware when he wrote *The Burning Wood*, is an area of recent inter-related literary study gaining currency in the modern globalized world of wastes and wantonness and is greatly concerned with the exposition of the mindless misuse and heartless exploitation of the earth's human and biological resources. It demands dignity and discretion in the treatment of Nature, with which the very existence of mankind is intimately bound. The feministic tag to the topic is more to remind one of the domination, marginalization and the power of politics of dispossession encountered in the gender biased human order, and extended to the natural order, where the earth is envisioned as "woman," the female creative principle, the womb, and very motherhood. Susan Griffin in *Ecofeminism and Meaning* emphasizes the fact that "women are not biologically or metaphysically *closer to nature* (emph. mine)" (Warren 213) not equal to nature but "essentially" the productive part of nature even as man should have been its providing part. Ecofeminism in general "begins with the fact of natural existence ... [aiming] towards nature as a reality . . . that the social construction (exploitation, destruction) of nature is implicit in and inseparable from the social construction of gender points out how uncaring man plays the dominant and destructive role of the patriarchal power of domination and exploitation of the 'other' in a world of interdependent relationships. Eco-feminism is therefore the voice of a combined human and non-human minority protesting against the abuse of the essence of life in the painful relationship between man and his environment. It stresses more on the ways and means of stabilizing and sustaining the earth's fast depleting life resources. Care should be taken against any affective fallacy that should mislead the literary critic to look on eco-feminism as directly and merely related to gender studies. Therefore in the study of eco-feminism care should be taken not to background the challenges of the earth at the cost of a fore-grounded merely feministic façade that flouts and fights against all dominating and threatening sources of authority. Derrida's brilliant insight that neither meaning nor definition can reside in one word alone, that "sense of the word relies on other words, all containing histories, traces of a self-containing, self-sustaining system resembles the idea of an ecosystem" (Warren 216). The worldview of Williams, and his pluralistic world of interdependent and connected multiplicities, is no different.

Authority in the name of the patriarchal usurpation of leadership and power has been a recurrent motif in Canadian fictions. For example, Gabrielle Roy's *The Road Past*, Altamont Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*, Ethel Wilson's *Swamp Angel*, Hugh Garner's *The Silence on the Shore*, Hugh MacLennan's *Each Man's Son*, James Reaney's play *Colours in the Dark* and David Williams's *The Burning Wood* and *Eye of the Father* are a few among many. Many such writings speak of the exercise of power within and across gender and culture, and their monopolizing and marginalizing impact in human relationships both personal and public.

Of these, David Williams is a writer with a difference. His primary concern is in establishing the paradox of life especially the Canadian prairie life, on a national and global

canvas. Concerned with history and the evolution of hierarchy in mankind, and the need for racial and religious accommodation, he is a radical writer of a socio-religious fiction that demands the need for living and letting others live through self-scrutiny, moderation, and acceptance of the other. The feminist's perspective is one of the many ways in which his novels may be studied. Margaret Clarke in her article "Realizing the Feminine Self," speaks of how David Williams's books "work at defining masculinity, not in heroic or antiheroic terms but in terms of its place in a more integrated world view, a more feminine world view" (88).

The whole earth and all creation on it glorifies some known or unknown authority whom some call God the Creator while a few want to associate it to the marvel of evolutionary science. But whatever be the salutatory outcome of creation or evolution, the fact remains that integration or wholeness is a divine reality and not just some religious or utopian dream; that sin is not in "worldly" people failing to be "spiritual" but springs from all that denies, damages or divides wholeness. Therefore anything that disturbs natural equilibrium or the creative cycle can be treated as a negative, destructive and deplorable force, be it the relationship between homosapiens of the same or different gender, or theirs, in turn with nature.

In recent global negotiations, the agents of authority and power (patriarchal prescriptionists, if they may be called so) have moved from economic to environmental issues, for they now foresee that all the wealth and power that one can amass will be of no use if there is no 'life' to live it by. Thanks to the proliferation of weapons of war and industrial toxic effluents, the people of the world have always been kept under a suspended death sentence. Careless or uncaring handling of scientific wisdom, as well as its unconcerned imposition will make most rivers on the earth toxic like that of the Thames, the Rhine and Poe, and leave most lands like Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The greater and implicit need for environmental awareness has risen since the last century due to the interplay of various factors. It has been found by Marc Williams that there is a dialectical interplay between poverty and environmental degradation. Water and air pollutions, deforestation and soil erosion, and the build up of hazardous wastes threaten ecological development. The most decisive factor, in the evolution of a concern on environmental issues, has been the role played by Green Movements like the Green Peace and Chipko, which have ensured international coverage, on the interdependence of environmental and social issues. The Bhopal gas tragedy, the Chernobyl leak, the oil spills and the Red Sea and the depletion of the Great Barrier Reef, all contributed to a growing fear, and subsequent awareness, of the fragility of our eco-system and its greater impact on human life and welfare. The discovery, in 1985, of huge holes in the ozone layer above the Antarctica, and warnings from scientists about the dangers of global warming, are no more met with scepticism, for mankind has experienced the effects of El Nino and La Nina in flash floods and furious forest fires. The need to respect and protect planetary life has risen even as the need to respect and recognise the role of women in a male world has been recognised, through the movement of feminism, in recent times.

Feminism, like Romanticism, has resisted definition and has come to mean differently to different people who wish to make the best of their own cause. Feminism is a movement that sprung from the fear and anger of being left out, let down and belittled. It saw women as a minoritized, misused and misrepresented gender, socio-politically “corralled” in metaphoric socio-religious ghettos, decrowned and disfranchised. In a world of misguided preferences and prejudice, dominators are thought to be a higher order of being than the dominated, just as Grandpa Cardiff’s views of the Indian. It takes Joshua’s kind to realize that endangered earth means endangered Indians and by extension endangered humanity. Over simplification of the feminine diversity may result only in creating another myth of woman/man. If physiology is the clinical mapping of the body, then ecology is the scientific mapping of the earth and the patterns of nature and their relevance to the peoples of the earth; each to the other. Eco-literatures and eco-criticism therefore become necessary scientific studies of the eco-system in relation to man and his role in the conservation such that all life may continue to exist in interdependent harmony.

Between these two complementary fields of study we find that, in the past years, feminism has flourished relatively well and the rightful place of women in society steadily reinstated. On the Contrary, our eco-system has slowly and steadily deteriorated from depletion to dilapidation to disenchantment. The amount of care and concern nourished on the status of women on earth has not been equally, if not more, directed to the sustainer of their voices of protest—Nature. It is even lamentable that a percentage of women, all over the world indirectly or directly help in the marketing of wild-life product like ivory, tiger tissues, perfumes from the musk of oxen deer or bear, consumption of dolphin and whale meat, furs of mink and fox. They are the cosmetic fashion “Bees” that Williams witnesses for us.

Each of the chapters of *The Burning Wood* caters to major elemental images like fire, wind, water, sky and earth and each of the women in Joshua’s self-realization enacts an elemental trait. David Williams speaks through his protagonist, Joshua Cardiff, who feels victimized and set a side by his own for being different. Joshua is “conditioned” by the environment around him, especially the “native” earth more than the white education, and the women, more than by the men, who think he ought to have traced and shaped his life to each of their expectations. The fiery Auntie Bee, burns him with her vitriolic words which become the destructive force that metaphorically marginalize him from his homely paradise, while the earth-like Helga, his mother, believes in being a true child of Christ, and hence patient and forbearing in line with her Christian faith, “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Williams 4). His grandmother, who could have done something for him, is like the sky; she is all pervading but, like the cosmic forces, pleads selective amnesia when he seeks her help to prove his innocence when accused of stealing Grandpa’s “humbugs.” His first blind date Leah Kajicek is like water and teaches him to be the universal solvent with its magnificent powers of sustaining life; she educates him to be spiritual and “gentlemanly,” while all the time his mind is pre-occupied with the various strategies to adopt in seducing

her. The next, Mrs. Robinson the camp-cook, is the human component of these elemental influences and educates him on peace-making and plain existential humanism. The last, Lulu the Cree sister of his Indian friend Thomas Singletree, as against the sustaining purity of the motherly earth, is the wild wind across a tarnished earth in need of redemption as much as it redeems those who rely on it, capable of annihilation as much as capable of sustaining life. Thus, in the "making of Joshua," Williams is not working at defining masculinity in heroic or anti-heroic terms but in terms of its place in a more integrated world-view, a more natural and elementally "feminist" world-view that both redeems as much as in need of redemption themselves. Joshua's attempt to discard the influence of his grandfather is his emotional sème of flouting authority and resisting overbearing domination. Damaged by the scorn of pseudo-superiority around him, he becomes a disoriented and distressed individual who attempts to recreate his life in the only way he believes to be close to his mother's Christian faith of loving one's neighbour, for blessed are the peacemakers—the Indian way which he believes to be "close to nature," to be more specific in an earthy way. Beginning with the "killing of the trees," by the prejudiced and sadistically destructive Cartier brothers, and ending with the so-called altruism of Grandpa Cardiff's construction of the saw-mill to "help" the "forest people" "economically," Joshua is thrown into a world of ironies and paradoxes and surfaces to breathe the paradox of salvation. The title of the novel, *The Burning Wood*, is a composite and conscious integration of man, nature and creation; an authorial reconstruction of the first ever revelation of God to fallen man in the Book of Genesis—at the 'burning bush.' The restructured title is narratively significant, for God revealed himself before man to give authority over men for the first ever revolution for freedom from bondage. Even as "the burning bush" is the sacred sign of authoritative hope, where the medium itself becomes the message, "the burning wood" is the modern sign of a new revolution; this time against hypocritical patriarchal authorities in a world that needs redemption, a world where the eternal neighbours are man and his planetary home. The adjective "burning" suggests the burning of passions of lust and possessive desire as evinced by Eliot in *The Waste Land* (1921). It suggests the Buddhist world-view of everything in this world being set afire by desire, supported by the confessional mood of St. Augustine who refers to the biblical Joshua as a high priest, a brand plucked out of fire (Zechariah 3:2). Anthony Aspler, referring to this, suggests that the noun "wood" connotes the dual symbols of crucifixion in the novel: the Christian and the pagan, White and Indian. Both acts recognize the phases of sin and suffering, of unredeemed man, and end in the awaital of a salvation: one dying for the other to be resurrected and thus resurrect others, and the other resurrecting a vision in order to "die" into a sacred cause and thus seek "a spiritual readjustment" (Aspler 64).

The Burning Wood also connotes the act of burning forests to clear land for agriculture by the whites, as well as the burning away of the life-line of the Crees and thus, earth itself. The title gathers greater significance when Grandpa Cardiff sets out to destroy the Indians' cultural life in the name of saving their material life, by cutting down trees to be

hewed at a saw mill in which these Indian are to be given employment. Joshua views this as a patriarchal diabolism; the use stealth in destroying the Indians with their own hands and be applauded for it as a bonus. Joshua witnesses the role model leaning on commerce more than compassion. The Francophone Cartiers, like their “mechanical caterpillar,” prove to be inhuman machines of ruthless, even sadistic, destruction hiding, ironically, their “unfeeling ways” (Williams 50) behind a mask of music, even as the Anglophone Cardiff hides his dislike of the Crees in a mask of religious concern. Both are anti-ecological voices of “gentleman-killers” for, ironically, they are “real gentlemen with anything but a tree” (47) even as the Fundamentalist Grandpa is a real gentleman with anything but a Cree.

As much as the topic of the Cree Indians forms the paradoxical periphery of Grandpa Cardiff’s fears, the destruction of the forests and trees forms the analogical base of contention for Joshua’s justification of his defense of both. The Indians represent the slowly dissipating cultural tradition of the past; the symbolic displacement of a “totemic” structure replaced by technology in the form of an environmentally destructive sawmill. The woodland is the Indians home; by giving them a “job” of cutting down trees Grandpa is feared to destroy their land and their cultural lives. Joshua’s belief that his Grandpa is hurting the Indians instead of helping them with the saw-mill is the realization of his own margins set by his family for being the freak “bald child,” “crowned” so, supposedly, for the evils of his great-grandfather. The sins of the father would logically fall on the head of his children, and children’s children.

Reinhold Kramer in his essay “Canada then Scatology, then the Novels of David Williams,” referring to the topic of “Canada-as-gap” (182) defines a border as “not a connection but an interval of resonance” (180) and believes that “the recourse to other histories of production, consumption, power and ideology may, conversely, be read as flight from our own historical works” (182). Man’s greed to possess and his egotism to control have resulted, historically in the driving of the first stake of many such stakes of claim, literally and metaphorically, into the bosom of the earth. Staking a claim is the human version of an animalistic urgency to mark one’s territory by the act of excretion. An animal knows and holds “its territory by wasting” carefully while the human violates cultures by mindless scarring of the earth. The modern necessity to recycle in order to remove is the inevitable outcome of laying waste a good and healthy relationship with nature. Modern cultures can be known only by their wastes and a scared rivers of life poisoned by greed.

Williams uses this metaphor of marking territory (the laying of fences by the whites, and the Indian urinating on the snow) across cultures thus tracing the marginalisation of the native that haunts Canadian history as much as the mainstream imposition of “marking” one’s anti-ecological signature in the “clearing” of native forests, or the “cleaning up” of the “pagan soul” as demonstrated by Grandpa Cardiff. Williams’ protagonist, though fallible and weak, is nonetheless a person of strength in his impartial outlook on a common humanity and espies true heroism in self-appraisal before “apprising” the other. Thus, Joshua “goes Indian in order to mitigate a growing sense that his Christian culture has betrayed its ideals” (Kramer 182). When a culture called him a thief, Joshua sensed his own

marginality in that culture. Whether “humbug” or “land,” it had been given by a supreme authority and Joshua believes it to be relevant for all. Indiscriminate use of this gift results in destruction and dismay on all sides. The question of “authority” and its relativity, therefore forms an important topic of discussion in the novels of Williams, and its logical and psychological extension implicates the authority of the “Creator,” be he human or divine. This radicalism of thought has, “unfortunately,” outlawed Williams in the eyes of some of the conventional and orthodox critics.

The Burning Wood is about relating reality and relationships—human and elemental—and the need for accommodation in all. Williams, like Horace, who exposes human follies and hypocrisies inevitable in all mankind, irrespective of colour, creed or country. William’s is of the belief that the whole earth, all creation, and not just humankind alone, needs salvation; salvation ironically from man himself. In line with his faith in the relativity of life and the reality of inter-connectedness of the earth and mankind, his novel deals with the need for respecting the other; for wholeness through integration is a divine creative reality and not just some religious or utopian dream. The existentialist in Williams believes in the faith that matter or the real is primarily important in order to appreciate the essence of the ideal. In other words, the earth with all its functional beauty has to be preserved and protected in order that the essence of creation is appreciated for all time to come. It is crucial that new ways be found for healing the dangerous splits that threaten the planet—between religion and science, between discursive knowledge and intuitive wisdom, between individual missions and corporate license, between selfish profiteering and selfless preservation.

The questions that underlie appropriate ecological decision-making, which William raises namely, how does the world of multiplicities of human relationships work? And what is right or wrong, or evil or good, therefore, have to be addressed in a relative and interconnected context. The modern ecological crises confronting us clearly marks what happens when empirical knowledge is divorced from question of meaning and value. Williams’ novels discuss this issue on the need to care, to comfort and to heal the wounds made by man on man and man on nature. He presents the fact that good “earth keeping” (*oikologia*) begins with good “home keeping” (*oikonomia*); in arousing the awareness in every man, woman and child the need for erasing emotional margins and creating conducive climates of co-existence. Thus, recycling and restructuring human relationships and creating a fairly conducive climate of co-existence are interconnected themes of *The Burning Wood*.

The Earth Summit in Rio, in June 1992, placed environment and development at the centre of international politics. It also brought to focus the patriarchal benevolent role of the developed countries over the developing countries in a new light over the global management of forests. The developing countries pointed out that it would be an act of direct interference in the sovereign rights of the developing countries and hence it was a protectionist policy. Amidst such a global concern over our eco-system the voices of eco-entrepreneurs, such as ours, should supply the moral, intellectual and emotional support

through such seminars and dialogues and discussion. Hence, care should be taken that in fighting for and standing for what we believe to be right, we must not blindly ignore or hide out our wrongs. Even the interpretation of the Canadian landscape by literary critics of Canadian writing is envisioned as a cold, vast, inhospitable wilderness where many generations have sought to eke out a living against overwhelming odds. This “monstrous” depiction of Nature, as propagated by Atwoods’ *Survival* though warrants a certain amount of truth, provides only one side of the picture. Frye, in *The Bush Garden* (1971) speaks of how literary analogies of the Canadian environment are presented in terms of the human fear of nature; at the same time there also is in Canadian Literature a romance with natural imagery where serenity and tranquility are included in the Canadian perceptual canvas.

Williams believes in the relativity of events and the relativization of truths. His world-view does not assume anything to be superior to the other, but believes in the co-existence of an inter-related, inter-textual and interdependent world existing as structural binaries such as man/woman, natural/supernatural, sacred/profane, light/darkness, the langue and parlor of an ever generating creation and generated re-creation. In Aldous Huxley’s utopian novel, *The Island*, written soon after his dystopic *The Brave New World*, the author comes out with his world-view that the ideal can be experienced and realized in the real and only through the real world. The same is the concern of Williams; the world of margins and mainstreams, of centers and peripheries, of earth’s destruction and the toiletization, are literal and metaphoric wastes that have to be consciously recycled if the future of human and natural worlds are to be redeemed.

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