

Blurred Boundaries: An Ecocritical Study of Mary Zimmerman's *Metamorphoses*

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Abstract

Ecocriticism is a critical approach which studies the relationship and interdependence of human beings and natural environment. It emerged in 1990s as a response to growing concerns towards environmental degradation and the impact of human activities on natural environment. The play *Metamorphoses* (1996) by Mary Zimmerman is a theatrical adaptation of Ovid's classical myths. The play offers a rich source to analyse the theme of transformation and the nature- human relationship through ecological perspective. The paper explores and analyses the portrayal of nature and the link between nature and human actions. It depicts how human actions affect the ecological balances and challenges the anthropocentric approach towards nature. It studies the blurred boundaries between body and landscape, myth and ecology. The play depicts nature not as a backdrop but as an active agent in carving the identity and fate of characters through its language and repeated motifs like birds, animals and water. The paper highlights how the play ultimately invites a reconsideration of humanity's place within a dynamic and entangled natural world by accentuating transformation as both a narrative device and an environmental metaphor.

Keyword: Ecocriticism, Myths, Human and Non- Human relationship, Ecological balance, Motifs.

1. Introduction

The paper examines the play *Metamorphoses* (1996) by Mary Zimmerman through an ecocritical perspective. It places the natural world at the centre of human existence rather than treating it as a passive setting. It questions the idea of superiority of humans over nature and also highlights the role of literature in representing the relationship between the natural environment and human beings.

The study explores natural environment and humans as a part of same continuous cycle, instead of representing them as two disparate entities. The primary objective is to analyse the relationship of natural environment and humans as a theatrical device. The theme of metamorphosis is mostly examined in mythic and psychological framework, while its ecological implications particularly blurred boundaries between humans, animals and forces of environment remain underexplored. The Literature review also reveals that concepts like environmental instability, performance literature, and environmental imagination have rarely been connected to the play. Therefore it is imperative to address these critical gaps by analyzing the play through ecocritical framework in order to demonstrate how the play reimagines the relationship between human and natural world beyond anthropocentric boundaries.

2. Understanding Ecocriticism

The ‘control of nature’ is a phrase conceived in arrogance, born of the Neanderthal age of biology and philosophy, when it was supposed that nature exists for the convenience of man.

Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*

The last few decades have witnessed a rapid surge in the degradation of natural environment. Human activities have led to the deterioration of the atmosphere. Erratic monsoons, prolonged summers and shortened winters are the results from humans’ exploitation of natural resources. This has led to a time where our environment is at stake. With the growing environmental degradation, writers have also started raising their concerns and sharing their opinions through their writings. This concern gave rise to a critical literary movement in 1990s.

Ecocriticism is defined as “the study of relationship between literature and the physical environment” (15) in the work *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996). The word was used to denote a critical approach which was started in the late 1980s in the USA and in the early 1990s in the UK. The term ‘ecocriticism’ was first coined by William Rueckert in his most acclaimed work *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* in 1978. Etymologically the word ecocriticism is derived from Greek words ‘eco’ from ‘oikos’ which means household or earth and ‘logy’ from ‘logos’ means logical discourse. Lawrence Buell defines ecocriticism “as a study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist’s praxis.” (430)

Ecocriticism as a movement was started much later in the twentieth century after the emergence of activists and legal cases about pollution and urbanization all over the world. It is a branch of literary and cultural studies that probes the interrelationship between humans and their natural environment as depicted in literary and cultural texts. The prime focus is to examine or to investigate how literary texts depict, mould and challenge human attitudes towards nature. It places the nature at the centre, exploring how these texts might influence the way readers perceive and relate to natural world, rather than treating it as a mere backdrop or setting. As Cheryll Glotfelty states:

Ecocriticism is a critical approach to literature and culture that focuses on the relationships between human beings and the natural world. It emerged in the 1990s as a response to growing concerns about environmental degradation and the impact of human activity on the planet (18).

Ecocriticism aims to examine, explore and study the nature writing texts. It seeks to explore new literary canons by including texts which highlight environmental awareness, ecological concerns and the role of literature in shaping culture and society. It studies and highlights the attitudes of humans towards non-human entities in different periods. It also examines the shifts in the attitudes of people toward natural environment with the changing times. It studies how urbanization, industrialization and other development have impacted the natural world. Ecocritical perspective examines the impact of development in literary texts and also increases awareness among people at the same time.

Moreover the study also seeks to establish a link between literary studies with environmental activism. It explores how literary texts can create awareness among people and it also has the power to influence their attitudes towards nature. It inspires readers to support conservation and sustainable practices. It interprets the underlying meaning within the literary texts that reflect patriarchal, human centred

approach towards nature and other non- human entities. Ecocriticism reveals how literature can reinforce and challenges the domination of nature, women and non- human world, promoting a healthier and respectful relationship with the natural environment.

Many research studies have been done on *Metamorphoses* through the lens of theatrical innovation, mythological adaptation, psychological representations of transformation, comparatively little attention has been given to the play's ecological dimensions. Daborah Garwood in her research paper "Myth as Public Dream: The Metamorphosis of Mary Zimmerman's *Metamorphoses*" published in *A Journal of Performance and Arts* (2003) discusses the portrayal of the classical myths achieved an extraordinary visual representation through magical realism. A Master's dissertation by Jared M. Dorotiak titled "Transformative Intersection: Theatre and Adaptation in Mary Zimmerman's *Metamorphoses*" submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University, Ohio examines Zimmerman's play as a case study for adaptation theory. It explores how the theatrical representation of these myths brings memory change among readers. Most researchers examine and analyse the central pool of water primarily as theatrical device; however insufficient studies interpret water as an active ecological presence that shapes memory, identity and human relationships. Similarly the theme of metamorphosis is mostly examined in mythic and psychological lens, while its ecological implications particularly blurred boundaries between humans, and the elements of nature remain underexplored.

3. *Metamorphoses*: A Thematic Overview

Metamorphoses (1996) by Mary Zimmerman is a theatrical adaptation of Ovid's narrative poem *Metamorphoses* (8th CE). It is a rich text for ecocritical study due to its complex interplay of myths, transformation and the elemental power of nature. The play not only depicts the metamorphosis of characters but also explores the dynamic and interdependent relationships between humans and elements of nature. The play was first produced in 1998 and later running successfully on Broadway in 2002 at the Circle in the Square Theatre. It retells 11 classical, timeless myths from ancient Greek and Roman Mythology that centre on the theme of transformation. Rather than presenting a continuous story, Zimmerman weaves together several myths into a unified theatrical experience. The play explores themes like love, loss, greed, sacrifice, identity and relationship with nature.

The 11 classical myths like Alcyone- Ceyx, Orpheus- Eurydice, Eros- Psyche, and Baucis- Philemon, etc. connect the whole play through the concept of transformation. The transformation depicted is not only physical but also emotional, spiritual and psychological, where characters are changed by love, grief, desire, loss and suffering. A pool of water dominates the stage throughout the play acting as a powerful symbol of change, renewal life and transformation. Almost all the characters in the play go through some emotional and physical transformation around the pool of water. It also blurs the boundaries between human beings and nature depicting 'human- nature interdependence' as characters transform into birds, tress and animals while natural entities take human form.

The theme of love appears in different forms like parental love, romantic love and unconditional love. Parental love is depicted through the story of king Midas who readily accepted any solution to turn his daughter from the gold statue to human form. While the story of Orpheus and Eurydice depicts unconditional love between partners. The themes of loss and suffering are depicted through different

characters. Characters like Ceyx and Alcyone depict loss and suffering; they endure loneliness and disappointment before finding peace and acceptance. The play shows that grief is a natural part of life and healing often brings a better understanding and emotional maturity towards life.

The use of different dramatic techniques triggers the idea of ‘environmental imagination’ so that the readers can reconsider their relationship with the natural world and recognising the fluidity of ecological systems. As an adaptation, the play not only illustrates transformation as a magical change but as a reminder that humans share an intimate bond with nature and are prone to the same cycles of growth, suffering, decay and renewal.

4. Beyond Backdrop: Water as an Active Agent in the Play

One of the most striking features is the presence of a pool of water on stage in the play. It is used not just symbolically but physically throughout the performance. It is not just a stage prop but a symbolic motif; it functions as a character in its own way. It interacts with human character, advances the plot, reflects emotional states and provides a means for transformation. It is capable of healing and provides a locus of change, memory and emotion, embodying the fluid and cyclical nature of life. By positioning the element of nature at the heart of theatrical experience, the play challenges the anthropocentric worldviews from an ecocritical perspective.

The change and transformation happens in or around the pool in almost every myth. The transformations that occur whether physical, emotional or spiritual are nearly always accompanied by immersion in or contact with water. For example, in the story of King Midas, transformation occurs both physically and spiritually. When granted the power to turn everything he touches into gold, he soon realizes that his power is a curse. He is unable to eat, drink and even touch his beloved daughter without dire consequences. His redemption can come through immersion in water. He is instructed to bathe in the river Pactolus, which will wash away his power and restores his humanity. As Bacchus instructed king Midas in the play:

BACCHUS: Walk as far as the ends of the earth. Look for a pool of water that reflects the stars at night. Wash your hands in it and there is a chance that everything will be restored. (19)

The act of bathing in water is symbolic, representing a spiritual cleansing and relinquishing of greed. Here water becomes a symbolic natural element through which Midas is not only purified but turned into a more compassionate and grounded version of himself.

The pool of water also functions as a physical and symbolic boundary that shapes the relationships of characters and drives narrative. In the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, the pool acts a boundary between living and realm of dead. The pool is symbolic of river Styx which separates two realms and marks Eurydice’s sudden transformation into spirit. It is evident from the lines:

EURYDICE : Far away
Dark before the shining the shining exit- gates,
Someone or other stood, whose features were
Unrecognizable.

[She looks back to HERMES, and then slowly turns and walks always, back to the underworld.]
(48, 49)

Here water is represented as a barrier between life and death. Orpheus must cross the river Styx to reach the underworld. The water becomes a threshold and blurs the boundaries between the realms. It emphasizes the fragility of love and inevitability of loss. The boundary also represents nature's authority over human's desire and intention. It depicts ecological constraints over human agency and how nature works according to natural principles which are beyond human control. The unfulfilled desire of Orpheus to get his wife back demonstrates natural systems authority and integrity which cannot be manipulated according to the wishes of humans.

The pool of water plays a multifaceted and active role in the myth of Alcyone and Ceyx. It functions as a separator, destroyer and eventually a vehicle of transformation. The whole narrative revolves around the power of the sea over human lives. Here the pool of water is the symbol of separation. The sea is a physical barrier that Alcyone must cross to reunite with her husband Ceyx.

It also acts as a destroyer when engulfs the ship of Ceyx and claims his life. The water destroys the ship which demonstrates the destructive force of natural elements. It depicts water as a powerful entity that can overpower human's will and intentions. From an ecocritical lens it describes natural forces demands respect and cannot be controlled or dominated by human beings. As Ceyx says:

CEYX: He thinks in an oddly abstracted way that the waves are lions crazed with hunter's wounds, or that the ship is a besieged town attacked by a horde of madmen.

HENCHMAN AND CEYX: One would think that the heavens were crazed with lust

CEYX: to join the turbulent sea (23, 24)

The pool of water works more than being a stage setting in the play. It is an active agent or a prominent element of nature to witness ecological justice. It depicts if humans try to overpower forces of nature then they have to face the consequences. In the story of Erysichthon, although the punishment, his eternal hunger was not caused by water but it serves as the witness or a visual backdrop to see ecological justice. The episode of Erysichthon portrays water act as a symbol to highlight humans' relationship with nature and the consequences they face after violating the sacred principles of nature. When Erysichthon desecrated the sacred grove loved by Ceres, he was punished by Ceres getting eternal hunger as a curse. Ecological destruction can be seen in the lines:

ERYSICHTHON: Cut it down.

NARRATOR: Sir, that tree is centuries old-----

ERYSICHTHON: We need the wood, cut it down.

NARRATOR: Sir, this is sacred; and this tree is loved by Ceres. (33)

Erysichthon's greed and the subsequent consequences allegorically emphasize environmental deterioration driven by human's ignorance and consumption. Zimmerman depicts the contemporary ecological disturbance and imbalance lead to destruction of self. This reverberates strongly with

ecocritical concerns about capitalist exploitation of natural resources and long term consequences of ecological disturbance.

The positioning of water at the centre of the stage makes it an active witness of sacrilege. The waters mirrors the act of chopping down the trees symbolizes that nature itself is a witness of all the exploitation and overarching misuse of the ecosystem. The eternal hunger and the subsequent devouration of his family members highlight the plight of humans. Their inconsiderate and self-indulging attitudes can lead unimaginable consequences.

These myths offer profound insights into our contemporary environmental crises. They serve as guide for navigating climate emergency. They highlight the impact of human activities on our natural environment which resulted in hurricanes, mountain high waves, ice sheets collapse, ocean acidification etc. As Timothy Morton states in his book *The Ecological Thought* that Ecology depicts all beings are interconnected and humans are not the separate masters of nature. So, it is our responsibility and sacred duty that we should not exploit the elements of nature. We should lead a sustainable life and respect all the forces of nature.

Another important perspective that can be examined through ecocritical framework is the 'human-nature interdependence' through transformation. The several myths staged in the play depict that human beings and nature are interconnected to each other. Their interdependence is constantly shaped by relationships, emotions, and the forces beyond their control.

5. Human- Nature Interdependence and Transformation

Zimmerman showcases the deep interconnectedness between humans and nature in the play *Metamorphoses*. It depicts that no human can exist alone and also explores that transformation is not only a physical change but an emotional, psychological and spiritual process. It depicts transformation as a powerful expression of interdependence of humans and natural environment.

The play shows transformation as a process through which humans magically transforms into different forms of nature such as birds, animals and trees. These transformations emphasize and symbolize that human beings are inseparable from natural environment. The play repeatedly challenges the notion that humans hold superiority over nature. It portrays nature as a living force that responds emotionally and morally to human behaviour. One of the best examples is Erysichthon, who faces the fury of gods when he chopped down the whole forest in his greed. As a punishment he was cursed with eternal greed which consumes him completely in the end. This is seen in the lines:

NARRATOR: He will destroy himself.

[ERYSICHTHON goes to the tray, takes off his shoe, places his own foot on the plate, and raises the knife and fork.]

CERES: Bon appetite. (40)

Through this myth Zimmerman highlights the environmental consequences of human activities and environment destruction. Erysichthon curse highlights self- destructive nature of humans to dominate

natural environment. This episode means that human beings are dependent on nature, and when they violate the principles of nature then they ultimately face the fury of nature.

However, the story of Baucis and Philemon depicts a completely contrasting picture of harmony between human and nature. The elderly couple led a simple and contented life in their simple abode. The act of welcoming two strangers in their house and sharing their modest resources with them, depict their kindness and humility. The strangers later revealed as gods who reward the couple for their kindness and transform them into trees. The wish was granted in the lines:

NARRATOR TWO: The gods granted their wish. Arrived at a very old age together, the two stood at what had been their modest doorway and now was a grandiose façade.

ZEUS: And Baucis noticed her husband was beginning to put forth leaves and bark. They were turning into trees. They stood there, held each other, and called, before the bark closed over their mouths,

PLILEMON AND BAUCIS: Farewell. (82)

The transformation from human beings to trees is highly symbolic from an ecocritical perspective. It blurs the boundary between humans and elements of nature. It shows the best way to lead a life in this natural world is the harmonious coexistence of humans and forces of nature. The transformation from human form to trees as a reward from gods is highly suggestive. It emphasizes the fact that ecological balance can only be achieved when humans respect the resources of nature.

Another episode of transformation occurs in the story of Myrrha where she also transforms into a tree. The story is about Myrrha who is strongly attracted towards her father and attempted the sin of establishing physical relationship with him. Overwhelmed by guilt and emotional shame, she pleads to god to transform her into an entirely different form. As she says:

MYRRHA: O Gods, I pray you, change me; make me something else; transform me entirely;
Let me step out of my own heart.

VERTUMUNUS: Someone must have heard her prayer-----for she did change. (60)

The transformation in the story of Myrrha depicts both escape from the societal world and reintegration from the natural world. Rather than to stay in the mortal world she prefers to become the part of the natural environment. It highlights the idea that nature possesses solace and healing powers. According to ecocritical perspective nature offers alternative forms of existence beyond rigid human systems and the story Myrrha delineates this idea.

Therefore the play portrays transformation as an evidence to show the interdependence of human beings and natural forms of world. From an ecocritical perspective humans are deeply interconnected to natural world emotionally and spiritually. People who respect the natural forces live in harmony and those who try to overpower natural forces experience destruction. Human beings can only coexist harmoniously with nature when they treat it with respect.

Another perspective that can be studied from ecocritical lens is the representation of myths creates ecological consciousness. These writings force people to think beyond their personal day to day routine and convey the message of leading a sustainable life.

6. Understanding Environmental Imagination in the Play

The term ‘environmental imagination’ was popularized by Lawrence Buell in his seminal work *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture* (1995). It delineates how literary and artistic works shape our perceptions and environmental awareness. For Buell the “the environmental crisis involves a crisis of imagination, the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imagining nature and humanity’s relation to it” (2). The play invites modern audiences to reconsider their relationship with nature by retelling these classical myths in a contemporary theatrical context.

One of the most important aspects of environmental imagination is the interconnectedness between humans and nature. There is a blur boundary between these two entities as the characters in the play transform into natural elements like trees, birds, stone, and transform into water. The fluidity of the transformation in the myths mirrors the fluidity of ecological changes. It depicts the contemporary environmental changes like loss of biodiversity and environmental degradation is the results of human activities.

The play also connects the concept of environmental imagination with the fragility of human life. The different myths depict the human centric approach throughout the play. Human characters often behave as powerful force in different stories. They try to establish their dominance over natural world, however get punished when they become proud, greedy and destructive. King Midas’ greed over material power, Eryscithon’s destructive act of cutting down whole forest etc. are punished by nature. These myths suggest that human beings cannot separate their well- being from the condition of natural world around them. The stories depict flaws like pride and the desire to dominate nature can become the reasons for the suffering of mankind. Stories of King Midas, Orpheus and Eurydice, Myrrha etc imagine nature as morally responsive. It is capable of punishing the wrongdoings and also offers solace and escape from rigid societal structures.

The play does not present nature as simply peaceful and benevolent. It can be serene, beautiful and life-giving and on the other hand it can be mysterious, dangerous and destructive. The retelling of such ancient classical works encourages people to reconsider their relationship with the outside natural world. The play makes people aware that dominance over natural world can only lead to destruction. The audience is encouraged to develop respect and humility towards nature, rather than viewing it as a resource that they can control.

Zimmerman has used a wide range of dramatic techniques to make the play life- like. The varied techniques give a dramaturgical experience to all the readers. She uses music, lighting, minimal scenery, narration, and pool of water to transform Ovid’s ancient myths to modern theatrical experience. All these techniques help readers to connect emotionally with the play.

The use of pool of water is the most distinctive technique throughout the play. It symbolizes the water as an entity which reinforces the idea of metamorphosis and dynamic nature of life. It represents the idea that nothing is permanent in life. Just like the characters in the play, human beings are a part of continuous cycle of life. They undergo different stages like birth, purification, desire and death.

Zimmerman also uses narration as a technique as the play is a collection of different classical myths rather than one continuous narrative. The narrator moves the audience from one story to another without giving elaborate exposition. This dramatic element also emphasizes the significance of storytelling. It also highlights the idea that these age- old myths have existed for centuries and still hold uncontested relevance in the contemporary times. The play opens with the lines:

[A WOMAN is kneeling by the side of the pool, looking at her own reflection. She looks up and addresses the audience.] (5)

The use of music, lighting and limited stage props contribute significantly to the emotional atmosphere of the play. These different elements help to establish the mood, signal a transition between stories and also intensify the moments of love, loss, and grief in the play. Instead of treating each myth as an individual unit, these techniques contribute to the sense that all the stories belong to one larger exploration of human experience. It is evident from the lines:

[At this point, the narrative divides among several members of the company. They enter and exit variously, carrying illuminated candles in wooden, which stand in for all the items they will mention. They hand these bowls to BAUCIS and PHILEMON, or place them in the water themselves. The scene is active: The entire surface of the water becomes the “table” being set with illuminated candles.] (79)

7. Conclusion:

From an ecocritical point of view, the play portrays nature as a very powerful and compelling entity deeply interconnected with human existence. It demonstrates that human actions inevitably affect natural environment while in turn nature responds, retaliates and influences human life. It also places nature at the centre by challenging the human centric approach throughout the play. The central pool of water is not just a theatrical device but a living agent that symbolize fluidity, transformation and emotional depth. Water symbolizes the power to absorb, cleanse and purification. It also reinforces the idea of interdependence of human and natural environment emphasizing the notion of ecological harmony essential for coexistence and spiritual well- being. The artistic portrayal of all the perspectives encourages audience to develop deeper awareness of their relationship with the environment and to restore the ecological balance.

The contemporary world faces crises like increase in green- house gases, excessive pollution and consumerism etc resemble the destructive human behaviour in myths. The story of King Midas showcases the capitalist behaviour of contemporary people. It can be interpreted as the warning against excessive use of non- renewable resources and endless material desire. Hence the retelling of ancient myths bridges with the present day ecological concerns, showing that environmental irresponsibility can have long lasting impact.

The relevance of the play also lies in the fact that it promotes empathy towards natural environment. Zimmerman uses the theatrical experience of audience to make them think about, environment, human limits, and power of artistic creation in the contemporary times. Art has the power to make people think, reconsider and act accordingly. By using the concept of transformation, it emphasizes the idea of

interdependence of humans and natural world. The play encourages audience to reimagine their bond with the elements of nature. It highlights the idea they are the part of this natural world not a separate entity.

The research paper is highly relevant in the contemporary times as it brings together concepts like performance studies, ecocriticism, retelling of classical myth and environmental humanities. The study of the play *Metamorphoses* from an ecocritical perspective also offers a way to challenge anthropocentric views and human negligence towards natural environment. It also depicts how the stage craft and performance can encourage audience to think about ecological problems and their responsibility to solve the same. By connecting ancient myths to contemporary ecological thought, the paper establishes the relevance of myths in current environmental discourse. It emphasizes dramatic text can address current environmental crises and also encourages theoretical discourse in ecocriticism and literature.

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