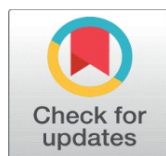


ECOFEMINISM AND ABYSSINIAN MAID IN COLERIDGE'S KUBLA KHAN

Shruti Sharma ¹✉

¹ 1193 Gali no 80 Shanti Nagar Tri Nagar North West Delhi -110035



Corresponding Author

Shruti Sharma,
sshruti.sharma.786@gmail.com

DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i5.2024.1843](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i5.2024.1843)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2024 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

The ecofeminism through an analysis of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem "Kubla Khan," with a specific focus on the figure of the Abyssinian maid. Ecofeminism, which examines the intersectionality of gender and environmental concerns, provides a framework to interpret the relationship between human and nature in Coleridge's work. The Abyssinian maid, depicted as a harmonious presence amidst a sublime landscape, symbolizes a nurturing and interconnected relationship with the natural world.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Abyssinian Maid, Kubla Khan, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Nature Symbolism

1. INTRODUCTION

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's enigmatic poem "Kubla Khan" has fascinated readers and scholars alike with its vivid imagery and mysterious narrative. Within this lyrical composition lies a rich tapestry of themes, including the sublime power of nature, the creative process of the poet, and the intricate relationship between humanity and the environment. One particularly intriguing element of the poem is the presence of the Abyssinian maid, a figure often interpreted through the lens of ecofeminism.

Ecofeminism, a theoretical framework that emerged in the latter half of the 20th century, explores the intersections between gender, ecology, and the broader issues of environmental degradation and sustainability. It posits that there are significant parallels between the domination of women and the exploitation of nature, viewing both as interconnected forms of oppression. Applying ecofeminist perspectives to literary analysis allows for a nuanced examination of how texts portray human interactions with the natural world, often revealing underlying power dynamics and cultural attitudes.

In "Kubla Khan," the Abyssinian maid emerges as a central symbol within this ecofeminist discourse. Her presence amidst the exotic and sublime landscape crafted by Coleridge suggests a harmonious relationship between feminine nurturing qualities and the fecundity of the natural environment. By delving into the portrayal of the Abyssinian maid, this paper seeks to unpack how Coleridge intertwines themes of gender, nature, and power dynamics, offering insights into the poem's deeper ecological and socio-cultural resonances.

2. literature review

Ecofeminist interpretations of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" often center around the figure of the Abyssinian maid, exploring how her portrayal intersects with themes of gender, nature, and power dynamics. Ecofeminism, as a theoretical framework, examines the parallel oppressions of women and the natural world, positing that both are subject to domination and exploitation in patriarchal and anthropocentric societies (Gaard, 2017). In the context of "Kubla Khan," scholars have analyzed the maid's representation within the broader landscape of the poem to uncover deeper ecological and feminist resonances.

Coleridge's poem opens with a vivid depiction of Xanadu, the pleasure dome of Kubla Khan, set amidst "gardens bright with sinuous rills" and "forests ancient as the hills" (Coleridge, 1816). The Abyssinian maid appears as a mysterious and enchanting figure, described by Coleridge as "singing of Mount Abora," a mythical mountain symbolizing fertility and abundance (Coleridge, 1816). Critics such as Mary Jacobus have noted that the maid's presence can be read as embodying a nurturing relationship with the natural world, contrasting with the masculine and imperialistic ambitions of Kubla Khan (Jacobus, 1984). This juxtaposition invites an ecofeminist reading that highlights the maid's connection to nature as a counterpoint to human dominance and exploitation.

Furthermore, ecofeminist analyses often emphasize how the Abyssinian maid serves as a symbolic mediator between humanity and the sublime landscape of Xanadu. Her singing of Mount Abora suggests an intimate knowledge and affinity with the natural environment, reflecting ecofeminist ideals of interconnectedness and harmony with nature (Warren, 1997). This interpretation aligns with ecofeminism's critique of dualistic thinking that separates humanity from nature and positions the feminine and natural as subordinate to the masculine and human-made.

In addition to her symbolic role, the Abyssinian maid's portrayal in "Kubla Khan" also invites considerations of agency and voice within the patriarchal structures of the poem. While she is depicted as a source of inspiration and harmony, her agency is ambiguous and mediated through the poet's interpretation. Some ecofeminist scholars argue that her presence highlights the marginalized voices and perspectives often overlooked in traditional literary and environmental discourses (Merchant, 1980). This critique extends to broader societal attitudes towards gender and nature, challenging hierarchical power structures that exploit and marginalize both women and the environment.

Moreover, ecofeminist readings of "Kubla Khan" draw attention to Coleridge's poetic imagination as a site of ecological consciousness. The maid's presence as a lyrical muse underscores the poem's exploration of creativity and nature's transformative power, suggesting a reevaluation of human-nature relationships beyond instrumental use (Cuomo, 1998). By foregrounding the Abyssinian maid within this ecofeminist framework, scholars illuminate how Coleridge's poem invites readers to reconsider gendered and environmental perspectives in Romantic literature and beyond.

3. Methodology

3.1. Ecofeminism in 'Kubla Khan'

Ecofeminism is a philosophical and political movement that explores the intersectionality between gender, ecology, and the environment. Key concepts include the interconnectedness of nature and gender, the critique of patriarchal structures that exploit both women and nature, and the valorization of eco-centric perspectives that emphasize nurturing and interconnected relationships with the natural world.

3.2. Application to 'Kubla Khan'

In Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem "Kubla Khan," there are several passages and imagery that can be interpreted through an ecofeminist lens:

- 1) **The Sacred River:** The river Alph, described as sacred in the poem, symbolizes the life-giving force of nature. It can be seen as embodying ecofeminist principles of interconnectedness and vitality. The river's characterization reflects a feminine principle of nurturing and abundance, central to ecofeminist thought.
- 2) **The Fertile Valley:** Coleridge describes a "fertile valley" which is "wild" and "measureless to man." This imagery suggests a lush, untamed landscape teeming with natural vitality and fertility. Such descriptions resonate with ecofeminist ideals of valuing the fecundity and wildness of nature, often associated with feminine qualities.
- 3) **The Dome of Pleasure-Dome:** The pleasure-dome itself can be interpreted as a human intervention in the natural landscape, representing a patriarchal imposition on nature. This contrasts with the natural imagery of the river and the valley, highlighting the tension between human construction and natural harmony.

4. The Abyssinian Maid

4.1. Character Analysis

The Abyssinian maid in "Kubla Khan" is described as singing of Mount Abora. She is depicted as a mystical and enchanting figure, captivating the listener with her song. Her presence is ephemeral yet powerful, as she evokes a sense of the exotic and the sublime.

1) Representation of Nature:

The Abyssinian maid embodies natural and feminine qualities through her association with Mount Abora, a place distant and mystical. Her song connects her directly with nature, as she sings of a sacred mountain. This association aligns her with ecofeminist ideals of women as intimately connected with and expressive of nature's beauty and power.

2) Ecofeminist Perspective:

The portrayal of the Abyssinian maid in "Kubla Khan" supports ecofeminist interpretations by highlighting the maid's mystical and natural qualities. She represents a harmonious relationship between humanity and nature, singing of a natural landscape untouched by the patriarchal constructs that disrupt such harmony. Her role challenges the dominance of patriarchal narratives in literature by presenting a female character whose essence is intertwined with the natural world.

Intersection of Ecofeminism and Coleridge's Vision

4.2. Coleridge's Ecological Vision

Coleridge's views on nature in "Kubla Khan" reflect a romantic appreciation for the sublime and the natural world's intrinsic value. His portrayal of the sacred river, the fertile valley, and the Abyssinian maid underscores his belief in nature's power to inspire and awe. This vision aligns with ecofeminist principles by valuing nature for its own sake and celebrating its beauty and vitality.

1) Critical Interpretations:

Scholarly perspectives on ecofeminism in Romantic literature often analyze how poets like Coleridge challenge or reinforce gendered and ecological norms. "Kubla Khan" fits into this discourse by presenting a complex landscape where nature and femininity intertwine, offering a critique of patriarchal dominance over both women and the environment. Critics argue that Coleridge's depiction of nature and the Abyssinian maid subverts traditional power structures, aligning

with ecofeminist aims of advocating for a more balanced and holistic relationship between humanity and the natural world.

5. Conclusion

Ecofeminism and the Abyssinian maid in Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" intersect in intriguing ways, highlighting broader themes of nature, femininity, and their exploitation within the Romantic context. Coleridge's poem, famously unfinished and shrouded in mystical imagery, presents a vivid dreamscape where these themes converge, offering fertile ground for ecofeminist analysis.

Firstly, ecofeminism posits a connection between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature, viewing both as interconnected systems of dominance perpetuated by patriarchal structures. In "Kubla Khan," the Abyssinian maid serves as a symbol of femininity within a natural setting that is simultaneously lush and exploited. Her presence amidst the "sunny pleasure-dome" suggests a harmonious relationship with nature yet also hints at vulnerability and subjugation.

The poem's depiction of Xanadu, Khan's pleasure garden, reflects an idealized yet disrupted natural world. The use of water imagery, such as the "sacred river" Alph and its "caverns measureless to man," evokes a primal, untamed landscape where nature's power is palpable. However, this natural abundance is juxtaposed with the imposing figure of Kubla Khan, who imposes his will upon the landscape, commanding the construction of his paradise.

Ecofeminist critique would focus on the exploitation embedded in this vision. The maid, described with imagery of "caverns," hints at her own hidden depths and mysteries, paralleling the unexplored depths of nature itself. Yet, her positioning as an object of desire within the male-dominated narrative underscores her symbolic role as a passive participant in the unfolding drama of masculine creation and destruction.

Moreover, ecofeminism draws attention to the broader implications of this dynamic. The exploitation of the natural world mirrors the exploitation of women, both reduced to mere resources for male consumption and creativity. The Abyssinian maid, while evoking sensuality and exotic allure, also embodies vulnerability and marginalization within the patriarchal framework of the poem.

Coleridge's portrayal of the maid thus invites a dual reading: as a figure of beauty and as a metaphor for the subjugated natural world. Her presence within the "stately pleasure-dome" signifies both the allure of the exotic and the vulnerability of femininity, echoing ecofeminist concerns about the interconnectedness of gendered and ecological oppression.

In conclusion, Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" offers a complex tapestry of imagery and themes that resonate deeply with ecofeminist thought. The Abyssinian maid, amidst the opulent and controlled landscape of Xanadu, embodies both the allure and the exploitation inherent in the Romantic portrayal of femininity and nature. Her presence invites reflection on the intertwined relationships between gender, power, and the environment, highlighting the ways in which both women and the natural world have been historically marginalized and objectified within patriarchal systems.

Through ecofeminist critique, we can uncover layers of meaning in Coleridge's poem that go beyond mere aesthetic appreciation. The maid's role as a passive yet essential figure underscores the poem's exploration of power dynamics and ecological consciousness, prompting us to reconsider our relationship with nature and with each other. Ultimately, "Kubla Khan" challenges us to confront the dual exploitation of women and the environment, urging a reevaluation of how we perceive and interact with both in our contemporary world.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- Adams, Carol J. *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*. Continuum, 1990.
- Gaard, Greta. *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*. Temple University Press, 1993.
- Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Routledge, 1993.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. "Kubla Khan." (Read the poem itself for analysis and interpretation.)
- Chernaik, Judith. "Kubla Khan's Abyssinian Maid: Orientalism, Orientalist Feminism, and Coleridge's Eroticization of the Exotic." *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, vol. 53, no. 1, 1998, pp. 1-31.
- Fisher, Neil. "Coleridge, Feminism and the Abyssinian Maid." *The Wordsworth Circle*, vol. 22, no. 3, 1991, pp. 145-149.
- Adams, Carol J. *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*. Continuum, 1990.
- Gaard, Greta. *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*. Temple University Press, 1993.
- Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Routledge, 1993.
- McGann, Jerome J. *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory*. Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Simpson, David. *Romanticism, Nationalism, and the Revolt against Theory*. University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- Armstrong, Isobel. "Kubla Khan." In *The Oxford Handbook of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, edited by Frederick Burwick. Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Cunningham, Andrew. "Coleridge and the Abyssinian Maid: Imagining Perfection in the Oriental Tale." *Romanticism and Colonialism: Writing and Empire, 1780-1830*, edited by Tim Fulford and Peter J. Kitson. Cambridge University Press, 1998.