

Natalie Baszile's *Queen Sugar*: An Eco-critical Reading

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Eco-criticism now, was Romanticism then. Authors, then, praised and boasted nature and its beauty through their works during the romantic age. Now, nature took part in the works and merge along with the contexts. Though ages have passed the admiration and dominance of Nature, over humans and literature are still persistent. Eco-criticism is the critical study of nature and natural elements through literature. Nature has always been a provider, sometimes a destructor; but, neither of those changed the dependence of humans on nature for their lives and livelihood. Humans try to tame nature for their existence and for the materialistic gains, but, nature does not always provide things as expected. In the West, people were very dependent on nature, for their personal and material gains, especially women.

Materialistic feminism is a feminist theory that seeks to understand the capitalist sources of women's oppression. Women were denied material wealth that could be inherited or provided, and no one cared. Feminists who spoke up for themselves liberated themselves. Women took over campaigns and movements, spreading the desire for freedom across continents. Feminism had evolved through several phases and waves. Women of all types and oppressive traits have been adopted as a result of these changes. However, all phases regarded material wealth as a necessary trait for all women to possess, namely financial stability and material independence.

Eco-criticism along with Materialist feminism (Materialist Eco-feminism) gives a different aspect for the contemporary literary study. This study presents women, who are dependent on nature, natural elements, and its sources for material development and stability. Women, especially in the West, were so dependent on nature for their lives and livelihood. Most of the occidental countries, adopted farming as one of the primary sources of income for the family especially, women. But, they had a lot of obstacles from humans as well as the more than human elements. Despite the century being so modern with people possessing great idealistic thoughts and conducting revolutionary movements to enhance women, they were still opposed and oppressed. The development of a woman is still seen as a threat to the dominating people.

The novel *Queen Sugar* by Natalie Baszile is set in the twenty-first century. Charlotte Bordelon, an African American single mother, moves her eleven-year-old daughter Micah from Los Angeles to tropical Louisiana. After her father died unexpectedly, she inherited 800 acres of sugarcane land. She realized that cane farming is always a White man's business. She was, however, strong enough to persevere through the difficulties and achieve her objectives. She also takes care of her family's needs as well as her own. She continued through, dealing with every issue in her family, community, and nature while also reinventing herself.

Charlotte Bordelon's first few weeks in Louisiana did not go as planned. She had a rocky start because her father's farm manager left to work in an oil mill. She didn't see why she was there because she knew nothing about farming and had little money to invest. She was already feeling alienated in the white environment. She enlisted the help of Prosper Denton, an experienced farmer who agreed to manage her farm while also teaching and assisting her throughout the novel. Her presence in the area aggravated the local farmers, who were eventually White men. Others were more concerned on her decision to farm her father's property.

In the main dining room, group of White men ... crowded around tables.... Except for the three waitresses flitting from table to table, Charley was the only women. Except for the cooks, whose faces she saw through the cutout in the swinging door, she was the only Black person.

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... Charley tried not to bump against any chairs as she followed. Still, men glanced up, eyed up curiously as she passed. What made her think she could waltz in here and take up with this crowd like one of the gang? (Baszile, 87).

Men do cane farming in the south of Louisiana. Men were so dominant to let women amidst their job. However, Charley managed to do farming in the inherited land despite some of the bothered colonial, patriarchal men. Men in the locale, especially landlords or men of influence couldn't tolerate the presence of Charley as a fellow farmer. They preferred showing upper hand behavior than supporting her and called her 'black chick', and they also abused her body and her colored skin.

"So, Miss Bordelon ..." Landry squinted out over the crowd. "You sure are a long way from Los Angeles. You do much surfing when you were young?"

"Some", Charley managed. Her hands felt pasty. Sweat trickled down her back, into the waistband of her jeans.

... "A black surfer chick." His gaze slid down to her breast and then down to her crotch and he grinned. "I'm trying to picture that" (Baszile, 160).

The Third World countries were colonized for hundreds of years; the colonizers not only looted the wealth but also managed to imprint the traits of oppression in people's minds, i.e., colonizing the mind. So that, even though people acquired freedom and belonged to a republic nation, the thoughts of oppression still reflect in the minds. People convinced their minds that they belong to a part of the past oppressed society, by which the thoughts reflect often, when encountering certain scenarios. Especially women in the past were so oppressed not only by. Women acquired dual independence, one for her nation; other for herself. So the women of the Third World countries reflect the thoughts of double marginalization. With all these thoughts going on, the oppressed ones are perseverant and bold enough to stand against it. For a moment, they were taken back with the thoughts of oppression and brought back their strength together to resist it.

Charley stood very still. She was hot and cold at the same time. She had wondered when this day would come, because you don't move to a tiny Louisiana town, way out in the middle of nowhere, and expect life to be a stroll through the park; you couldn't expect to be the only woman in an industry filled with men and not think someone would eventually say something stupid; you couldn't ignore the long, dark, tortured history of Southern race relations, or pretend everything would be fixed overnight.... But you could be brave ... what it meant to be Black in the South, and this might as well be 1945 with Jim Crow and lynchings and Ku Kluxers burning down Black merchants' stores and running families out of town.... Because it was like your father said, *You have to bring ass to kick ass* (Baszile, 160-1).

Charley was a newbie to the town and to the business. She hardly knows things about farming, but, she had the will to learn and develop her land. Farming is a tough business, and was believed to be done only by men. Despite the odds, Charley had the guts to proceed what she aspired. She knew the prolong history of the ill-treatment and the prejudices about the colored people in the southern parts. Therefore, she had to be cautious while making every decision. Any mistake she make will bring chaos upon her. She had her father's land and his motivational words that let her stride through the torments, in and out of the sugarcane field. Several good White men assisted her throughout the journey and taught many things on the way.

The White men who assisted her not only gave assistance with man power, but also with financial knowledge, gifting high quality crops and field expertise. Money played a crucial role in her exhaustive career; she had to sell her father's woodcutter statue in order to make money for harvesting the crop, but, unfortunately it was stolen by her brother Ralph Angel to take revenge on his sister for the inheritance of the land and was acquired later after the demise of her brother. Not just humans, but also nature played its part in the sufferings of Charley, by a downpour that ruined half the crops.

Financial stability mattered a lot in the lives of women who aspire to pursue and achieve a dream. Especially, if the dream troubled the dominant society, questioning the patriarchal prejudices like Charley's aspiration towards farming. From the beginning she faced a lot of shortcomings due to the lack of money and knowledge about the field. However, her determination towards attaining her goal and her untiring hard work resulted fruitfully in some ways than her expectations. This paper leans upon the aspects of various theories, thus, putting a tri-angular insight upon *Queen Sugar's* protagonist and the personal and the social events of her life.

Works Cited

Baszile, Natalie. *Queen Sugar*, USA, Penguin Books, 2014.