

ECOFEMINISM AS A PEACE INITIATING ANTI-WAR CRUSADE IN STARHAWK'S *THE FIFTH SACRED THING AND WALKING TO MERCURY*

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Abstract

“Man can hardly recognize the devils of his own creation.”

Albert Schweitzer, German/French philosopher (1875-1965) (Nhanenge, 1)
Starhawk, a renowned ecofeminist unfailingly recognized ‘war’ as the devil created by patristic stupidity of human beings and propounds its futility and destructive effects on the humanity and on the nonhuman nature as well. Her works like The Fifth Sacred Thing, Walking to Mercury, The Earth Path and Spiral Dance are loaded with the philosophy of maintaining sustenance and harmony with nature. She has always ardently sponsored global peace throughout her works. Significantly, in her select novels The Fifth Sacred Thing and Walking to Mercury, her philosophy of worldly wisdom frames a constellation of anti-war, antinuclear ideologies as well as the eradication of injustice to the oppressed classes and nature adhering to an interconnection between their oppression that is termed as ‘ecofeminism’.

Keywords: *ecofeminist, The Earth Path and Spiral Dance, Walking to Mercury*

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Starhawk, a renowned ecofeminist unflinchingly recognized 'war' as the devil created by patristic stupidity of human beings and propounds its futility and destructive effects on the humanity and on the nonhuman nature as well. Her works like *The Fifth Sacred Thing*, *Walking to Mercury*, *The Earth Path* and *Spiral Dance* are loaded with the philosophy of maintaining sustenance and harmony with nature. She has always ardently sponsored global peace throughout her works. Significantly, in her select novels *The Fifth Sacred Thing* and *Walking to Mercury*, her philosophy of worldly wisdom frames a constellation of anti-war, antinuclear ideologies as well as the eradication of injustice to the oppressed classes and nature adhering to an interconnection between their oppression that is termed as 'ecofeminism'.

In a sense, this paper unveils how the unflinching anti-war concerns intermingle in *The Fifth Sacred Thing* and *Walking to Mercury* with all its pros and cons for intertwining a web of glaring war issues. Hence, this attempt would be a sure venture to comprehend *The Fifth Sacred Thing* and *Walking to Mercury* as intricate symbols of anti-war concerns linking with the devastation of natural environment thereby suggesting remedies to avoiding damage and reconstruction of nature. The research also explores the realm of war as not only a scientific problem but, equally a cultural and a social problem. Therefore, an effort being made intends to dismantle the select fiction in terms of war and its enormous disadvantages as responses to the environmental crisis as well as impacts thereof on humanity.

Prominently, the war and resultant violence entitles to a few of the major crises that the existing age gets affected by. The crises of war and the consequential spread of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction with mounting military expenses have almost taken the toll of entire globe. Secondly, the crisis of expanding misery of hunger and poverty has occupied the

world. Thirdly, natural devastation, multiplying pollutions, destruction of ecosystems and endangering of some of the earth species have attracted attention. Finally, the repression and refusal of fundamental human rights attempt to prevent oppressed classes from blooming their full potentials. All these vibrant issues are correlated and conjoined to increase the profundity of the havoc that the world is confronting today. At this juncture, Starhawk advocates for the everlasting human values and human welfare through her ecofeminist earth based spirituality by focusing the horrors of war.

The terrifying effects of all types of wars including numerous destructive stratagems have been stated and interpreted in her novel *Walking to Mercury* by Starhawk. Her elaboration finds a desired space in *The Fifth Sacred Thing* also. In *The Fifth Sacred Thing*, a character Lily Fong, one of the pioneers of the ecofeminist movement raises the alarming issue of ‘germ warfare’ in the Council Meeting. Being a woman, she is scared by the dangers of germ warfare that in recent times has been developed as a war strategy for killing opponent soldiers and common citizens also. At another instance, Bird and Littlejohn, two more characters in the novel, entered the TOXIC TERRITORY formed by nuclear reactor and demarked as radiation area. Anyhow Bird manages to escape the South where he was arrested and kept as a ‘war hostage’. After escape from the South Bird and Littlejohn found themselves in between the natives of Slowtown and the Irish Hills, where once a nuclear reactor was being run. They enquired how the people still lived in the reactor prone area where many people died of cancer due to radiation. The people of the North have attempted to lower consequences from war that are tremendous. In *The Fifth Sacred Thing*, the people of the North deliberately intend to consider the futility of war as it is expressed by Lily Fong:

“War is the greatest waster, as much in the preparation for it as in the waging of it. We learned that, at least, from the last century, as that same military drained the country and destroyed our true wealth. But we have nothing left to waste, We would have traded an uncertain future for sure misery and still not have been able to withstand the armed might of the stewards.”(Starhawk, 154)

Apparently, Lily Fong demonstrates the worthlessness of war. She dismantles that the weapons and machinery do not ensure to generate security and peace, when it is observed that the world insists on ‘more and worst destructive weapons’ as strategies of war. Next significant war tactic highlighted in the novel mentions of ‘raising people on hormones and steroids’ for

gaining strength to fight more vigorously. The discussion between Madrone, one of the chief narrators of the novel and pirate Isis, another proponent of ecofeminism in the novel acquaints us with the war tactic to bred runners, racers and soldiers who are grown on certain hormones and steroids. Despite being aware of the dangers of steroids and boosters, the industry is run continuously. Isis informs us, "All the Stewardships have their own teams of racers, their own training farms and breeding contracts. It's an industry. So is the gambling." (Starhawk, 185) It's exclusively going against nature that in turn is proved worthless due to man's inability to conquer nature. The matter is brought for discussion in the council meeting of the Defense Council. The Defense Council Members are all women and hence are aware of the side effects of war. They overwhelmingly touch the necessity of avoiding war. They sternly justify their stance analyzing that they rightly want to follow a distinct way of battle. Woman due to the ethic of care attributed to her is always capable of underpinning the horrors of war and hence admits that it is not right to 'fight fire with fire'. (Starhawk, 238) Certainly, 'an eye for an eye' would make the whole world blind. Thirty Fourth President of America, Dwight D. Eisenhower, in the same vein, expresses his contempt regarding the losses and futility of war.

"Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. The world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, and the hopes of its children.... This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron."(Nhanenge, 6)

The chief narrator Maya Greenwood conveys how Lily Fong admits that the nine elderly women constituting the Defense Council have learned from history and its mistakes that war is a waste of human and environmental resources. She meticulously admits and stresses the frustration confronted by the common masses over the loss of wealth in the war. Besides, she weeps for the tremendous loss of blooming lives of young men and women and how all their resources and ingenuity have been poured down the hole of war after war. The wars including the Cold War, the Vietnam War, the Middle East Latin America war, riots in burning ghettos, big wars, small wars and endless preparation for nuclear war, are all reinforced wars and have spoiled the human resources beyond limits. Lily Fong pants with exhaustion how the rulers

waged nuclear testing over them, gifted disasters like cancer and other harmful diseases with lifelong sufferings and then denied responsibility. She portrays a deadly picture of how the lands of the indigenous Indian people have been poisoned and life affirming rivers have been transformed into radioactive sewers. The devastating policies continued over a long period with a glimpse of peace and in this process got ruined, almost everything was decayed. Consequently, the totally depressed and hopeless Lily Fong haunted with impending environmental and human destruction enlists the horrors of war. She states,

And meanwhile we decayed. When I was born, when I grew up in the fifties, we believed our country was the land of opportunity, where nobody was doomed to remain poor, where every person of good will had a chance to rise. By the time my child was born in the nineties, beggars were crowding the streets of every city, accosting shoppers in the malls. There were camps of homeless in the parks and empty lots, young people going to war with each other for drugs and booze and a few bucks. Our compassion eroded faster than the topsoil, and when we began to notice the earth changes, the droughts and the warming and the die-offs of the animals, the hole in the ozone layer and epidemics of strange diseases that showed our own immune systems faltering, when we still had a chance to save so much and avert the worst of what followed, we continued to distract ourselves with war. (Starhawk, 239)

Lily Fong an ardent ecofeminist philosopher in *The Fifth Sacred Thing* presents a series of the horrifying ill effects of all kinds of war. The potential of her deliberation can be escalated with Dorothy Sayers' (British author) comment reflecting the futility and harmful impacts of war,

“War is a judgment that overtakes societies when they have been living upon ideas that conflict too violently with the laws governing the universe.... Never think that wars are irrational catastrophes, they happen when wrong ways of thinking and living bring about intolerable situations.”(Nhanenge, 3)

Dorothy Sayers pinpoints the core instigation behind war. All kind of intolerance and patriarchal dominance are the main culprits behind the reinforcement of war. Consequently, it is demanded of mankind to follow tolerance and humanity as a first step towards generation of sustainable peace. Under the leadership of Lily Fong, all women join hands to peacefully protest

against the war. They adhere to the Gandhian principles of nonviolence and noncooperation. One can't simply forget Gandhi saying, "Possession of arms implies an element of fear, if not cowardice.... Nonviolence ...is a weapon for the brave". (Nhanenge, 3)

Starhawk, the veteran of anti-war and anti-nukes movement has sufficiently portrayed the horrors of Vietnam War in her novel *Walking to Mercury*. The sufferers of Vietnam War were women and children prominently and that's true of every war. The world very well remembers the striking reality of Vietnam War that was entailed by the American Government on Vietnam against the wish of common American citizens. The then American President Johnson exposed the American policy as it is sarcastically revealed in a comment by a character in this fiction, Rob. He exhibits, "Violence is the American way." (Starhawk, 240) And, thereafter, the world evidenced the tortures inflicted upon the Vietnamese citizens by the American army. These horrors constitute various ways culminating in the death penalty, children even were not spared. US military piled horrors upon the Vietnamese in the form of 'Tiger Cages.' To manifest straight forwardly, Vietnam War was an arms trade. Janis Birkeland, an Australian who has been active in peace, environmental, and social justice movements for many years can be substantially quoted in this concern, she elaborates, "The arms trade is for all practical purposes, a global extortion and protection racket. It operates just like that other male enclave, the illegal drug trade, only the damage is far greater, affecting not only immediate lives but the global ecosystem." (37) According to Jimmy Carter, the Thirty Ninth President of America, and recipient of 2002 Nobel Peace Prize, trade of war is nothing but a political theory of intrigues backed by patriarchal dogmas. He can be quoted in this regard, "We cannot have it both ways. We can't be both the world's leading champion of peace and the world's leading supplier of arms." (Nhanenge, 9) Ekins P., the author of *A New World Order: Grassroots Movements for Global Change* also expresses a similar view regarding the politics behind war when she comments, 'Wars are therefore, likely to increase as long as political leaders perceive security as coming from the barrel of a gun.' (Nhanenge, 11) The recipient of 1921 Nobel Prize in Physics, Albert Einstein's thought runs equally parallel and can be taken as an eye-opener. He says, "You cannot simultaneously prevent and prepare for war." (Nhanenge, 10)

It is said that everything is fair in war and love though war is an epitome of immorality. Heinous crimes are committed by the culprit military forces during war. It is the same America

which erased Hiroshima and Nagasaki from the world map and boasted to be the saviour-messiah of the world, was far ahead in committing war crimes during Vietnam War. Arbitrary crimes like rape, massacres of civilians, bombings of civilian targets, Tiger Cages, murders of prisoners' horrible torture strategies like theft, arson, property destruction, spoiling and poisoning the fertile land and grains were deliberately inflicted. In the anti-war demonstration rally in which the protagonist-a Vietnamese woman victim-unveiled the cruelty piled upon by American Government and army. Even innocents were strangled to death due to the value dualism practised by American bureaucracy. It is conveyed by Johanna to Sheba in *Walking to Mercury*, through her letter. She reveals,

But then this Vietnamese woman got up on the stage. She was so tiny you could hardly see her above the crowd, and she had spent five months in the tiger cages, these pits that are so small you can't lie down or stand up or move very much. They just throw you down a little food to eat and hardly any water in the broiling heat and you have to go to the bathroom right there where you are. And Sheba, they had tortured her, because they thought she had been helping the Vietcong. They'd whipped her on the soles of her feet and burned her breasts with cigarettes. (Starhawk, 32)

Maya, the chief protagonist, got involved in the active crusade against war, after recognizing the horrors that ferociously affected the life of American ordinary citizens losing their kins in the enforced Vietnam War. It was inferred that a commitment to end war was required. One of the characters Daniel put it this way, "And not just ending the war," Daniel said gesturing with his lit cigarette, "but changing the system, that makes war possible. Inevitable." (Starhawk, 237) Overall it can be agreed that 'action alone isn't enough, it requires timing and strategy and an overall revolutionary programme'. (Starhawk, 237) The need of revolutionary stratagems was emphasized that was strongly supported by Daniel, an active member of the anti-war demonstration group. He stated, "Because, frankly I think events are proving that we cannot stop the war without a revolution. War is inherent in this system. It's the fruit on the tree of capitalism. We have to cut down the tree to prevent the fruit from growing." (Starhawk, 259-60) Similarly, Reminiscences of Cambodian war can be recollected when Cambodia was invaded under the leadership of Richard Nixon. Cambodia felt a victim of America's capitalist mentality like Vietnam and during the last year of war there were over five hundred political bombings. It was

the worst experience for the citizen of both the sides. As the most harmful war strategy has been implied by America when the geographical areas of Vietnam were venomous by using chemical defoliants as a strategy of 'chemical warfare', and were eradicated of its natural resources. Among them, 'the most destructive substance for both people and nature was one called Agent Orange, which contained dioxin'(Nhanenge,9) Following inscription reflects on the dark vulnerable reality of the abuse of chemical defoliants and their breath taking impacts on women's health particularly:

The U. S. efforts to defoliate Vietnamese landscape with Agent Orange during Us-Vietnam war, as for instance, was treated as synonymous to raping of Vietnamese women or burning of children in the Napalm bombing. The high toxicity of soil due to defoliation gave birth to myriad health problems, which the women resisted by organizing a ban to the use of pesticides and other pollutants in soil, water and air. These resistances organized by women against ecological disruptions, influenced the growth of green politics and the emergence of green parties in European countries like Germany and France. (Mitra, 134)

As the protests were organized by women against ecological destructions, likewise Starhawk's chief protagonist Maya in her *Walking to Mercury* engages herself in activism and anti-war demonstrations, indeed her entire group devotes to anti-war crusades. Maya's lover Rio joins the anti-nukes group 'Grains of Truth' near the 'Nevada Test Site' to protest against the nuclear tests due to the long lasting adverse effects of nuclear energy on human lives. Nevada Test site is a U. S. Department of Energy reservation located in Southeastern Nye County, Nevada, about sixty five miles North West to the city of Las Vegas. The site was established on 11 January 1951 for the testing of nuclear devices, covering approximately, 1360 square miles (3500km²) of desert and mountainous terrain. The Nevada Test site contains 28 areas, 1100 buildings, 400 miles (640 km) of paved roads, 300 miles of unpaved roads ten helicopters and two airstrips. Mercury is the base housing and office area for NTS and Yucca Mountain is the radioactive disposal site. A numerous anti-nuclear protest in the U. S. captured national public attention during the 1970s and 1980s. Literature is the mirror of society becomes apparent when the chief protagonist Maya in *Walking to Mercury* gets actively involved in these antinuclear

demonstrations along with other characters Rio's comment reveals the intensity of Nevada Test site Protests.

“In April of 1988, thousand of concerned citizen form all over the United States will converge on the Nevada Test Site to express their opposition to nuclear war. In this critical election year, it is more vital than ever to take a stand. Join us in the desert for two weeks of actions to stop the Department of Defense form carrying out its planned series of below ground nuclear tests. Raise your voice for peace!”

-COMMITTEE TO BAN NUCLEAR TESTING FLYER.²⁰ (Starhawk, 427)

The revolutionaries in the demonstration attempted to escalate the consequences of nuclear war with a chant: “One, two, three, four, Nobody wins in a nuclear war!”(Starhawk, 438) Maya Greenwood, the acclaimed writer and activist, the protagonist, has been invited by the Nevada Test Site to support the peace movement. Maya confirmed about the establishment of the Nevada Test Site as a product of patriarchal mindset basically was an intrinsic follower of peace and healthy environment. In the same vein, can be accessed Janis Birkeland's view, ‘As 90 percent of violent crime is perpetrated by men, and nuclear weapons are a product of the male mind, a gender-blind perspective can only mislead us in our efforts to put an end to militarism.’(35) With her endeavour to put an end to all kind of violence, Maya endlessly strives for environmental protection. She conveys her mother of her intention, “I want everything to change. I want a different world to be in.”(Starhawk, 234) She entails her determination to transform the world at any cost. Maya assures us of her aim in life when is interrogated by Rio,

“What I know, I had to go to the edge to find,” she said finally. “I've always thought of my work was to bring the magic back into the world, the everyday. To open people's eyes and ears to hear the voices of the land, to listen to what's around us. Like you said in your letter, long ago-to know that the wind and the rain and the rock are reaching for us.” I believe we have to learn to reach back, or we'll die. We're dying now. (Starhawk, 443)

In this way, Maya admits the immeasurable damage that we have done to mother earth, through the forced wars, nuclear power plants, nuclear reactors, cutting down the forests, reposting nuclear and chemical wastes on mountains. She introspects how all these have added to the amount of pollution and destruction. The following incorporated comment displays the glaring

issue profoundly affecting the women and children primarily. ‘Many writers note that toxic pesticides, chemical wastes, acid rain, radiation and other pollutants take their first toll on women, women’s reproductive systems, and children.’(Gaard, 5)

Since, the world today badly needs alternatives to endless crises of wars which have been gradually befalling a destructive downfall in the natural global issues, this research will startle the readers to develop awareness for reconstruction of the world by way of alarming the people in the context of practising humanity and avoiding war, thereby saving nature. A utopia of a world without war is decisively hoped through this thought process framing a beautiful picture of a society in harmony with nature and humanity. Subsequently, it would be a gentle push to practise people what is ideally imagined to protect and restructure environment by saying ‘No’ to war. Besides, ‘peace in the world requires a fair distribution of the global wealth’,(Nhanenge,11) as a war is fought with a patriarchal mindset to grab the property and strength of others including environment, however environment cannot fight for its own rights and it becomes the duty of sensible citizens of this planet to save environment for global sustainability.

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- Note:** The figures related to Area Details of ‘Nevada Test Site’ have been referred from Wikipedia, the free Encyclopedia- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nevada_Test_site
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