

Mother, Earth

In literature and in life, women are often connected to nature with allusions to fertility and an assumed predisposition to nurture. While this link should be viewed as a symbol of the inherent strength and beauty women possess, systems of repression, like the patriarchy, seek to control something they consider lesser because of a stronger tie to the natural world. Silas House's *A Parchment of Leaves* is filled with examples of how both womanhood and the earth's natural resources are treated as elements that are to be sought after, restrained, and exhausted. Vine, as the leading lady and protagonist of the story, will be the focus of my analysis—her connection to and representation through Appalachia a perfect example of how the link between women and nature is wrongly perceived as a weakness.

While researching the tie between Vine and Appalachia from a feminist perspective, it quickly became apparent that Ecofeminism was already an established theory, even though the theory's experimental period left it with quite a few interpretations. The term was coined by a French author in her attempt to demonstrate the connection between the repression of women and the abuse dealt to the environment. Since its creation, "ecofeminism" has encapsulated everything from women in third world countries who are facing deteriorating environmental conditions in their role of food gathering, and the off-balance, destructive hierarchy that results from creating a patriarchal value system of culture over nature. However, one of the most central aspects of this theory is that "[t]here are important interconnections among the unjustified domination of women and other human Others, and the unjustified domination of nature" (Pierce, 63). I have focused on this guiding tenet of Ecofeminism as a starting point for my literary analysis of *A Parchment of Leaves*. My Ecofeminist interpretation looks at the rich imagery and detailed metaphors surrounding the character of Vine, who is "othered" as both a

Cherokee and a woman, and the Appalachian setting that emphasizes each character's tie to the land, allowing the reader to get a heightened sense of the patriarchy's despotism of environmental and gender issues.

At the beginning of the novel, the readers are introduced to Vine from the perspective of a man's gaze. Even the first description of her is tinged with nature and hearth: "[The men] could think of nothing but her eyes—round and black as berries—and her brown arms, propped up on the slats of the paling fence. They saw her strong jawbone curving toward her chin, her blue-black hair flapping behind her like clothes hung out to dry" (House 3). Her captivating appearance is so important because it is what prevents the men from successfully harvesting the mountain for Tate Masters, the white man who supposedly "owns" the land. The parallel between Vine and the unharvested land in this chapter is that the patriarchy values purity and virgin women, and society in general appreciates the beauty of a forest not yet bearing the gashes deemed progress. The paradox is that both women and forests are cherished only in relation to what they can provide; once the timber is cut and the woman deflowered, both are seen as having lost some unrecoverable virtue. As a young Cherokee woman, Vine begins the novel both estranged and coveted by the white men in equal measure, just as her beloved Redbud Camp appears to Tate Masters.

The duality of wanting to possess or control something but subsequently destroying or undervaluing its significance is a quandary that Vine consistently faces. Many of the men Vine encounters appreciate her beauty, but Masters refers to her as a "[s]tupid Indian" (House, 79). Her physical appearance, which had previously garnered her adulation, classifies her now as an uncivilized "other." Vine's Cherokee status creates a sense of alienation within her from the land her family has called home for generations. When Vine tries to show her daughter Birdie the

land of her ancestors, she is accosted by a man who personifies the “black smoke puffing” from mountain-wreaking machines (241). Tate Masters accuses Vine of trespassing on the very spot where her father built the family house with his own two hands, the place where Vine realizes that “[t]here was no mark of the people who had lived here. Of the families. Of my family” (239). Masters is not living co-dependently with the land, as Vine and her family did. He lords over his property from a place high on the mountain and travels around in a smoke-belching, vehicle. Masters has no perception of the “what has come before” on this land. He cannot sense the Cherokee roots of Vine’s great-granny Lucinda and the tribes that had preceded even her. Vine’s connection to the land is stated outright as she talks about her ancestors, but the symbolism used by House suggests a living, spiritual tie to nature that encompasses her being.

After she marries Saul Sullivan and leaves her home, the metaphor of Vine and the Redbud tree emerges. Vine now has her own house in God’s Creek, but she has transplanted a Redbud tree from her childhood home to keep her company. She says; “I talked to it every day, willing it to live. I knowed that trees that were moved out of season usually wilted up, but I was determined that this one make it” (39). After she is transplanted out of her family’s land, Vine herself needs the will to survive the lustful attention of her brother-in-law and the friction misunderstanding causes in her marriage. Nevertheless, Vine becomes that tree and flourishes despite the hardship she finds in her new home.

Though she initially is welcomed into the Creek, when Vine does discover adversity, it often comes in the form of danger to her emotional well-being and physical safety. In a traumatic event that is the catalyst for Vine’s months of guilt, self-doubt, and distance from her loved ones, Aaron, the aforementioned covetous brother-in-law, breaks into Vine’s house while she is asleep and violently sexually assaults her until she is able to defend herself with a fire poker. House

writes with vicious detail that, “[h]e rocked his hips against me hard, and there was a sharpness that stung like fire” (161). Aaron tries to rip away every right that Vine has to her own body. Instead of listening to his wife’s claim that his brother was acting inappropriately toward her, Saul has refused to believe ill of Aaron, which left his wife unsupported. Vine is a strong woman who is capable of coming to her own defense, but her attacker spirals out of control and is able to catch her off guard. Vine’s persecution by Aaron resembles the beginning of the novel when Masters attempts to get the Cherokee land under his control. Tate Masters is responsible for what can be described as a “rape of cultural lands,” as he seeks to exert dominance and rob the earth of its natural resources and rob the native population of their safe haven for his own selfish benefit. Aaron’s desire is also to claim what he feels is rightfully his—by force if necessary—and Vine, like Redbud, is considered by the patriarchy as an object to be dominated.

The importance of researching the destruction experienced in equal measure by women and nature is not merely to provide the listener with a record of depressing similarities, but to promote awareness of the possibility for rehabilitation from patriarchal thinking. To research and write about a significant problem is a step in the right direction, but “Ecofeminism is an environmentally—ethical concept that is not only trying to find the causes of the destruction of the environment and to ‘treat’ the effects, but also tr[ying] to solve the problem that led to the cause” (Ćorić). *A Parchment of Leaves* is an appropriate book to analyze when trying to find a solution to patriarchal thinking because, though the connection between the environment and women is a common feature of most cultures, an Appalachian perspective on women and nature is typically different from other patriarchal models.

Vine’s connection to nature does not just give her strength when she moves to God’s Creek, it also contributes to her recovery and mental health after Aaron’s attack. Though she has

experienced such a traumatic event, Vine knows that she needs to be happy, if only for her daughter, Birdie. Vine says, “Air and light healed me, over and over. I got to where I depended on it. When I was feeling my worst, I would step out into the yard and put my hands on the branches of the little redbud” (House 182). Her connection to nature anything but a weakness, Vine demonstrates that being close to the earth not only has the power to support, but also to rehabilitate; however, it is not Vine who needs to be recovered from the grip of patriarchal thinking.

Vine’s husband Saul has never been one to commit to one side or the other; he considers Vine an equal and loves her dearly, but chooses to see no wrong in Aaron and picks blood related family before his wife. Not only can traces of a patriarchal hierarchy be seen in his familial priorities, Saul participates in an unsustainable practice of tree harvesting by cutting down entire mountainsides in order to support the war effort. Though it pays the bills and supports his family, this type of deforestation just goes to show how a toxic attitude can travel between the connection associated with women and the environment to negatively impact all parties involved.

The turning point for Saul is when he begins to send Vine letters from his job on the mountain. Just as he felt uneasy with Aaron’s treatment of Vine but didn’t do anything about it, in his first letter home he writes, “We have cut down all the trees atop this big mountain. It is the ugliest thing you have seen in yore life” (93). Through writing to his wife Saul grows as a person, expressing his feelings as he wouldn’t in a regular conversation. He knows that his work has created “a place give over to the devil” (179). Similar to the awareness that recklessly cutting down mountains of forests is not a practice in which he believes, Saul chooses to follow Vine instead of pursuing loyalty to his brother. He is just one example of how it is not only the women

who need a connection to the environment, and that respect for women comes with respect for all living things.

The link between women and nature is a time-honored literary tradition that is frequently found in present-day culture. To the patriarchy, both forces are viewed as resources to be exploited and monopolized by greed and cruelty. For the women in *A Parchment of Leaves*, an Ecofeminist theory is useful for interpreting the different forms of exploitation they and the Appalachian/Cherokee land encounter on a daily basis. By treating women and the environment as quantifiable resources and devaluing any connection between them, members of the patriarchy create unsustainable hierarchies that treat culture and nature as dualities instead of codependent establishments. Authors like Silas House, who give a voice to women and the environment, are taking a stand in not only treating the effects of patriarchal thinking, but also treating the cause that led to the problem. It is by getting their voice out into the public that people who are “othered” feel validated, and by learning from a different narrative understanding is followed by respect. It could be that “the secrets to life [are] written on the surface of leaves, waiting to be translated” (70), but until we learn to value women and nature, we will never be able to interpret the message.