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URBAN LIFE VERSUS RURAL LIFE IN MELISSA HARRISON'S: AT HAWTHORN TIME

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ABSTRACT

City is regarded to be separate from nature, whereas countryside is thought to be close to nature. Industrial production is assumed to be the primary activity of city dwellers; however countryside dwellers are mainly engaged in agricultural activity. As a result, the countryside dwellers have a strong and symbiotic relationship with nature while city dwellers' connection with nature dwindles day after day. This article aims to illustrate the relationship between man and nature in *At Hawthorn Time* by Melissa Harrison with regard to ecocriticism. In the novel, Harrison compares London to a village entitled Lodeshill and portrays the modern lifestyle of the city and countryside. She also draws our attention to the influence of technology on the countryside. As in the modern countryside machines have taken over farm-labors, farmers have sold their properties and are looking for employment in the city. The story unfolds around four main characters; this paper examines their lifestyle in the city and countryside. In addition, each character's connection with nature is investigated.

Key Words: Urban vs. Rural, Human beings, Nature, Technology, *At Hawthorn Time* and Melissa Harrison.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this era of fast development and growth of technology, everything has changed. In the past, most people opted for living the simple and idyll life of the countryside. However, now it is on the contrary, most people prefer the hectic life of the city. And this has dwindled human beings relationship with nature. Nevertheless, the development of technology has affected the simple lifestyle of countryside as well. Melissa Harrison, in *At Hawthorn Time*, presents a clear-eyed picture of a modern countryside called Lodeshill which is located somewhere towards the north of London. She informs mankind of the changes and transformations that have taken place in the countryside, where nothing is in its place. Machines have replaced the farm-labors and farmers have sold their properties. And now due to this, the people of the countryside are demanding employment outside the countryside.

Harrison blames the politicians for the privatization and urbanization of the countryside. She considers this process as a great loss. A loss of simple, peaceful and idyll life of countryside. The writer also expects a disaster but not a natural disaster; a man-made disaster which is human beings disconnection with the natural world. She also blames technology for our disconnection with the natural world. In addition, she warns us about the impact of machines on the soil, nature, and environment. As farm machines harm soil and cause pollution. Besides, she reminds us of the history of mankind and nature as it dates back to the ancient times. In the ancient time, mankind lived like animals in harmony and at peace with nature. The author reminds us that we are part of nature, therefore; we should not be alienated from nature. We are interrelated, as our actions leave an impact on the environment and nature. Harrison also warns us of the power of nature so as not to underestimate the power of the nature.

2. CITY VERSUS COUNTRYSIDE

Melissa Harrison, at the beginning of her novel, *At Hawthorn Time*, introduces the readers to the lifestyle of the city and modern countryside. The story unfolds around four main characters; their lives intersect in a village called Lodeshill, a remote village in the north of London. Firstly, Harrison introduces two main

characters, Haward and Kitty, who are married couples and retired. Kitty has a desire, which is painting. They have lived their whole life in London, and now in order to fulfill Kitty's desire, they want to leave London and move to the countryside, Lodeshill. Haward is unsure about the move; he does not want to move. And they do not know much about the lifestyle of countryside; as they have lived their entire life in London.

On the other hand, there are the other two characters; Jamie and Jack. Jamie is nineteen years old, and is a countryside dweller. He has spent his entire life in the village but still struggles in the countryside and faces difficulties in the modern countryside. He wants to leave the countryside but there some obstacles and family issues, as his parents are suffering from chronicle diseases. He thinks that he does not belong to the countryside. Harrison portrays that there are misfits in this world as Jamie because he believes that he belongs to the city, but on the contrary, he has lived his whole life in the village. He sees himself misfit out there "Just to be able to go where I like, he thought. Just to live how I see fit. I do not do any harm, God knows; and there are plenty out there that do. So let me go now, please; just leave me be" (Harrison 4). Meanwhile, Jack is a vagrant farm-worker who arrives in the village so as he can find a seasonal farming work. He has escaped London and moved to Lodeshill.

At the first instance, Harrison makes a comparison between urban and rural life. In addition, she highlights that with the growth of technology and the lifestyle of the countryside has changed. She starts the novel by introducing the readers to the grimy pavements of London "it was a mild, damp night in April when he escaped the city, though the forecast predicted fairer weather to come. It had rained a little, earlier in the day, and the moist night air has called out snails in their thousands to dot the grimy London pavements in ill-fated hordes" (Harrison 1). As stated, the writer gives us a picture of the modern city of London; she tries to display how London looks like. Moreover, she stated "he escaped the city" which can be interpreted as a way of telling the readers that the city life is like a prison. This is also an indicator that she does not prefer the city life at all. Harrison goes on to tell us about the ugly scenes of city life by stating "grimy London pavements in ill-fated hordes" the writer uses London metaphorically to describe the city life in general. So, based on this, the author does not prefer the busy and hectic lifestyle of the city.

On the other hand, Harrison starts every chapter with a stunning description of landscape, nature and countryside. Although, she is well-aware of the lifestyle of modern countryside and the changes that have taken place in the countryside "There was some lovely countryside up that way, quiet and slow and unvisited, and not too busy with day trippers-not like Cumbria or Cornwall. It was an in-between and unpretentious place" (Harrison 5). As it is stated, the author uses some charming and attractive words such as lovely, quiet, slow, unvisited, and not too busy, to give us a clear picture of countryside and describe the beauty of landscape in the countryside. In addition, she used Cumbria and Cornwall, which are two counties located in the north and south of England as being too busy. On the contrary, she describes the countryside life as an idle life. In this light, it has been made clear that the writer prefers the countryside life even with its all transformations and changes. So, the countryside has left an impression on her. One can see the beauty of the natural world by reading the beginning of each chapter of her novel, as she starts each chapter with a stunning description of landscape and nature.

In the realm of literature, the dichotomy between urban and rural life has featured in the works of great writers and poets such as, William Blake, William Wordsworth, Robert Southey, and so on. The argument is that even the writers do not agree with each other on this issue. They have different views. As some prefer the life of the city, while some others opt to the life of the countryside. In this light, William Blake in his famous poem *London* gives us the description of London "I wandered through each chartered street / Near where the chartered Thames does flow / A mark in every face I meet / Marks of weakness / marks of woe / In every cry of every man / In every infant's cry of fear / In every voice / in every ban / The mind-forged manacles I hear" (Blake 40). As it is understood, William Blake blames the lifestyle of the city of London as a metaphor for the urban life and the rapid changes that have taken place in the city. For him, the idea of the city is apocalyptic. Meanwhile, Robert Southey, a writer and critic, describes the environment in the city of Birmingham, and states that "the noise ... is beyond description ... the filth is sickening ... active and moving, a living principle of mischief, which fills the whole atmosphere and penetrates everywhere" (Bunce 15). As it is clear, Southey uses Birmingham as a metaphor for urban life and describes its environment as horrible.

On the contrary, William Wordsworth in his poem *Composed upon Westminster Bridge*, praises the city of London and states "Earth has not anything to show more fair / Dull would he be of soul who could pass by / A sight so touching in its majesty / This city now doth, like a garment, wear / The beauty of the morning; silent, bare / Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie / Open unto the fields, and to the sky"

(Wordsworth 1-8). For Wordsworth, the city is still beautiful as he praises London in such a stunning way. There are many other authors and poets who have written about urban life and rural life. And they have different views on this topic. However, in *At Hawthorn Time*, Harrison regards the city life as a source of pollution and disconnection with nature meanwhile; she praises the countryside life and calls it simple and idyll.

3. HUMAN BEINGS CONNECTION WITH NATURE

The history of human beings relationship with nature dates back to the ancient times when human beings lived like animals in harmony and at peace with our ecosystem. Time has passed and the relationship has changed. In *At Hawthorn time*, Melissa Harrison interweaves nature with each of the main characters and shows their relationships to it. So the relationship is either a positive or a negative one. For instance, Jack has a close relation with nature. The novel starts with Jack leaving London to Lodeshill “ Growing ever more unloosed from what seems to sustain the rest of us, more stubborn with every arrest and stranger and more elliptical in his thinking, Jack became, with the passing of decades, less like modern man and more like the fugitive spirit of English rural rebellion. Or – to some, at least – mad” (Harrison 2). As stated, Harrison uses “less like a modern man and more like the fugitive spirit of English rural rebellion” the author portrays that the modern man has a weak connection with nature compared to the rural man. And this is an indicator of countryside dwellers’ close connection with nature.

On the other hand, Haward and Kitty have left London and moved to the countryside. Haward did not want to move to the countryside but to fulfill Kitty’s dream, he leaves London. Haward feels like an outsider, while Kitty enjoys her time out there and loves painting the countryside. Furthermore, there is Jamie who has spent his entire life in the countryside, now he dreams of leaving the countryside and move to the city. In *At Hawthorn time*, Melissa Harrison portrays that mankind and other creatures are at ease and in harmony when they have a close connection with the natural world or when they immerse themselves in nature. But the writer realizes that in this era of modern technology, human beings connection with nature is dwindling, therefore, she predicts a disaster, not a natural disaster but a man-made disaster. She also notifies us of the changes that have taken place to our natural world and their impacts on nature and environment.

Being well- aware of the human beings disappointing connection with nature, other figures and writers have featured this topic in their works. For instance, Commoner, in his book, *The Closing Circle nature, man and technology*, blames technology for our disappointing connection with nature “A runaway technology, whose only law is profit has for years poisoned our air, ravaged our soil, stripped our forests bare, and corrupted our water resources” (Commoner 4-5). And Richard Louv, defines human beings disconnection with nature as a modern epidemic and calls it “nature-deficit-disorder”. He also believes that this alienation from nature has resulted in social problems and lack of environmental awareness. He also believes that due to the development of technology children tend to spend more time indoors and less outside and it leaves a negative impact on them as it can cause mental, physical and social problems. In his book Ricahrd Louv again blames technology for the disconnection of children with nature “I like to play indoors better, 'cause that's where all the electrical outlets are” (Louv 10). So, it has been made clear that the relationship between man and nature is a fragile relationship and technology is regarded as one of the main factors for this alienation. Moreover, one of the prominent physical geographers to show concern with human’s brittle relationship was Somerville:

Man’s necessities and enjoyments have been the cause of great changes in the animal creation and his destructive propensity of still greater. Animals are intended for our use, and field-sport advantageous by encouraging a daring and active spirit in young men; but the utter destruction of some races in order to protect those destined for his pleasure, is too selfish, and cruelty is unpardonable: but the ignorant are often cruel. A farmer sees the rook pecking a little of his grain, or digging at the roots of the spring corn, and poisons all his neighborhood. A few years after he is surprised to find his crop destroyed by grubs. The work of the Creator are nicely balanced, and man cannot infringe his Laws with impunity (Goudie 493).

So everything is connected to everything else in this world. Given these points, human beings should not be disconnected with nature. Because humans are part of the natural world. Nevertheless, the importance of nature in mankind’s life is undeniable. Human beings always feel superior to everything else in the world, but by having a good connection or interaction with nature, they learn to be in relation to everything. On the contrary, having a bad relationship makes humans to feel in control over the natural world and other things. According to E.O. Wilson, an American ecologist, “the relationship between human beings and natural

world is an innate relationship” (Wilson 5). Therefore, he coined the term “biophilia” to refer to mankind tendency to be associated with nature.

Throughout the history, human beings have been a part of nature. Even in the ancient times, humans were completely dependent on nature. Nature has been the source of their lives; they gained their food and needs from the wild animals and nature. Furthermore, the religious books, such as holy Quran and Bible reaffirm the need to have a close relationship with nature, and state that mankind should interact with nature so that they can feel closer to God. All in all, human beings are in need to reconnect with nature. In the novel, Melissa Harrison reaffirms this reconnection through the two main characters, Haward and Kitty. As they move from London to Lodeshill in the north of London. There has to be reconciliation with nature. One cannot avail himself from nature. Because human beings and nature are interrelated; they have a strong impact on each other.

Another interesting point in the novel is machinery versus farm labors. Throughout the novel, there is a continuous dichotomy between urban life and rural life, between past and present, between individualism and dualism, between poverty and wealth, between old and new, and also between machines and farm labor. There was a time when machines did not even exist and farming was done on the hands of human beings. But with the new developments, it dramatically changed. Developments have brought environmental crises. Industrial revolution, made new changes in the field of agriculture. Harrison, in the novel states that machines have taken over workforce in the modern countryside of Lodeshill. Therefore, people in the countryside seek employment in the city. The author regards it as a loss, a loss of land. And again sees it as a misfit. The countryside has become a place where people cannot find jobs; and the use of these heavy machines has caused pollution and harmed the soil. This was totally different if compared to the past. In the past, Agriculture was a natural process and was done on the hands of mankind without harming the soil. But now, Humans are doing their best to destroy nature, soil and environment. Agriculture is damaged by what the new technology has brought in. As the new machines are destroying our land, causing pollution and degradation of our ecosystem. On the other hand, there is a process of privatization and urbanization in the countryside “there was a steady concentration of land ownership into the hands of wealthy because over time the small farmers had gone into debt to the large landowners” (John Robert McNeill 29). The wealthy have bought the land from the poor, they use heavy machines. As a result, farmers have lost their jobs in the countryside.

4. CONCLUSION

Melissa Harrison in *At Hawthorn Time* introduces the readers to the modern urban lifestyle and rural lifestyle. In addition, she highlights how human beings relationship with the natural world has changed. The author censures the lifestyle of the city as it has kept human beings away from nature. Through the novel, there is always a conflict between the past and the present. She portrays that in the past, the relationship was deeper and stronger; on the contrary, nowadays it is weaker. She also reminds us that the connection between human beings and nature dates back to the ancient times when mankind lived like animals in harmony and at peace with the natural world and nature was the source of their needs. However, now with the advancement of technology this relationship is dwindling day after day. The writer gives us a clear-cut picture of the modern countryside, where nothing is in its place. Machines have replaced workforce and farmers are seeking employment outside the countryside. Therefore, she blames politicians and government for the privatization and urbanization of the countryside. Basically, Melissa Harrison in *At Hawthorn Time*, gives us a cautionary note to rethink about our natural world, warns us against the changes that have been brought in by the new technology and urbanization. She also believes that some of these changes are inevitable but mankind should not be as alienated as they are. Therefore, she seeks reconnection and reconciliation with our natural world. Throughout this study, I came to the conclusion that those who live in cities have a dwindling relationship with nature; on the contrary, countryside dwellers are in touch with nature and have a symbiotic relationship with nature.

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