

ECO-FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES IN ALICE BORCHARDT'S DEVOTED: EXPLORING THE INTERCONNECTION BETWEEN THE FEMININE AND NATURE

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Abstract

Alice Borchardt's "Devoted" delves into the negotiation of the androcentric principle. The protagonist, Elin, is notably dynamic, skillfully manipulating nature and gender to craft her own identity. The novel exemplifies an eco-feminist stance, featuring a frontier setting marked by adventurous confrontations with malevolent forces. Borchardt deserves commendation for exploring frontier politics before defining a distinct feminine identity. The eco-feminist elements within the novel highlight a conscious and original sense of belonging. Through its abundant natural imagery, the novel encourages a new understanding of the self, transforming estrangement into feminine autonomy. The narrative is deeply intertwined with various eco-feminist themes, particularly emphasizing a pure, authentic, and natural feminine self, distinct from the corrupt male-dominated order. It naturally gravitates towards environmental politics, which Borchardt perceives as an intrusion upon the female body.

Keywords: *andró*, eco-feminism, enslavement, wilderness, reconciliation

Alice O'Brien Borchardt (October 6, 1936 – July 24, 2007) was a writer of fiction oriented in history. She was initially recognized as the sister of the novelist Anne Rice. She was

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a writer of historical fiction, fantasy and horror has written seven novels namely: *Devoted*, *Beguiled*, *The Silver Wolf*, *Night of the Wolf*, *The Wolf King*, *The Dragon Queen* and *The Raven Warrior*. Anne Rice, in an introduction to *Devoted*, cites Alice Borchardt as an inspiration for her own fiction and an early collaborator in imaginative excess. Like the Brontës before them, the sisters' childhood was spent sharing a dream world peopled with heroes, heroines, pirates, and aliens. *Devoted* may presage the author's potential. It reads as though she were shaking the tree of her imagination to get a fruit in the form of one story which can hardly contain all the fruitful ideas that fall. Tenth-century France is a land where the Forest People, who worship pagan gods, are disappearing. Christianity is arriving with a new God and new rulers. And brutal Viking Northmen is swarming from their warships to annihilate villages and ransack the land.

Elin, a daughter of the Forest People, was mistress of the forbidden powers granted by the old gods. Owen, the warrior-bishop, was his people's last hope against the invading Viking horde, and against the powerful ruler who would betray them. Owen, Bishop of Chantalon, risks his life to save Elin, a forest girl of sorceress like powers who has escaped the Viking camp where she was enslaved. Through their union, Borchardt explores the conflict between paganism and early Christianity and the flagrant inequalities between men and women, the nobility and the lesser born, and people with different beliefs. These large themes make the story overlong, sometimes threatening to take it over.

Viking raiders are terrorizing the region; their menace is exacerbated by Count Anton and his bastard son Gerlos, who collect tributes from the people for the Vikings but keep part of the confiscated riches for themselves. Betrayed by his friend Reynald, Owen is captured by the Northmen but quickly saved by his Saxon henchman Enar and a band of Elin's "forest people." Later, Elin's mystical powers curse Reynald to his death and bring on a storm to defeat the northern invaders. Borchardt effectively conjures life in an outlying era and mystical forest.

Alice Borchardt's *Devoted* has been inextricably linked to many of ecofeminist contents specifically ecofeminism is inclined to an innocent, genuine and a natural feminine self-withdrawn from the corrupt Male order. It turns up spontaneously towards environment politics,

which is perceived by Alice Borchardt as an intrusion into the female body. *Devoted* is essentially a creative treatise which informs the epistemology if man's guilt eventuated out of his dismantling nature's structure.

andró is a term related to man's tyrannical claims over woman. The term further informs the male justification of the ideology of destruction. The male hegemony gains a prophetic stature of dictating terms. Significantly, feminists hold the prophetic stature as only enunciating anarchy. Herein lays the predicament of male authority. Borchardt's *Devoted* stands steadfastly pitted against the anarchic *andró* operating in tridimensional pattern.

Alice Borchardt's *Devoted* has been invested with the negotiation of the *andró* principle. No wonder, Elin comes as a constantly mobile protagonist who manipulates nature and gender in such a way that she is able to forge an identity. The novel manifests ecofeminist position by providing a frontier scenario punctuated by adventurous encounter with evil. We can appreciate Borchardt for having ventured into frontier politics before carving out an exclusive feminine identity. She projects a situation as observed by Vera L. Norwood:

In the typical frontier scenario women either avoided wilderness or were forced to venture onto the frontier by more adventuresome husbands. Women were thought to be more comfortable in rural, cultivated nature—in civilized gardens. Women's experiences in nature became problematic only when they were forced by men to acknowledge wilderness as an aspect of environment; they were not perceived to experience any of the ambivalence to settlement of the frontier landscape that men did and do. (*The Ecocriticism Reader* 324)

As the novel progresses, Elin is increasingly motivated by her husband Owen who is a Bishop. Owen has been subsumed by an anarchical male structure and hence he is not able to overcome the destructive forces which come in the name of Viking warriors. The Vikings indulge in sea robbery, enslavement of women carried out through the molestation of women slaves. Elin is a victim of rape. She is left to die. Nevertheless, Elin manages to escape and also

helps the Bishop Owen to get rid of the evil Viking pirates. Bishop Owen denounces Order to marry Elin who he believes will restore peace to the Christian community.

Elin is a woman of the Forest. She is nourished, as she says by the crystalline rivers. She asserts that she has been nourished by the spirits of nature. Elin, even as a child has been developed to progress by virtue of separation from civilization. She is independent as a child. Hence, Elin is bestowed with the realization of selfhood. Nature comes as the first law. As a result, she is able to manipulate the masculine claims. She decisively breaks loose from the bloodletting male ventures in order to create and maintain a strong sense of feminine identity.

Alice Borchartd creates a unique situation of nature which comes as the backdrop to the novel. The following passage is an illustration:

The spring lay amid the beech trees crowned yet with the golden leaves of autumn; they formed a ring around a smaller grove of ancient oaks within. The water bubbled out from the foot of a giant oak and flowed over a boulder forming a pool at its base. The chill of autumn hadn't yet touch the velvety grass that ringed the pool and small white flowers still bloomed, stars amid its emerald lushness. Looking up at the gnarled yet still green branches of the oaks laced above and the rough, mossy boles of the trees that surrounded them, he wondered if this place ever knew winter at all, or spring for that matter. It seemed timeless, nestled in the breast of its enormous guardians. (*Devoted* 25)

Elin is a child of nature. Hence, naturally she is an epitome of innocence. Encapsulated by nature's innocence and its strong will to determine, Elin handles challenging situations. In the novel, we find her forgiving one of the Viking pirates who have once attempted to kill her husband.

She reflects the divine character of nature which is one creation of God. This is how Alice Borchartd clothes Elin in all nature's prestine glory. The following passage attests to the point:

She had no soap, but made do with fine sand that every footfall stirred from the bottom, picking it up in handfuls and scrubbing her body with it until her skin burned. Next the hair. She took the knife, found a suitable branch, fashioned a rude comb, and used it to tear the knots, burrs and tangles out almost viciously. Then she formed two braids, one on each side, and fastened them across the top of her head to hold the long fall of the rest of her hair back. (*Devoted* 21)

Elin is a representative of the people of the Forest, who never cheated any of those who trusted. She attends to people who are injured and in her world “milk sours in the jar, and rats and mice do get into the grain” (124).

Alice Borchartd’s *Devoted* is a radical reaffirmation of American ideology centered on a natural aversion to nature. America is a nation of concrete jungles created in the name of civilization. Also the nation is characterized by the puritanical notion satanic wilderness. And here Michael Branch’s observation warrants mention:

During the eighteenth century the confluence of several currents of European thought helped to mitigate the American aversion to wild nature expressed by the Puritan icon of “the howling wilderness.” Of primary importance was the influence of deism, the rationalist “natural religion” that held that the creator’s hand was evident in the intricate perfection of the natural world. (*The Ecocriticism Reader* 283)

Elin irrevocably *the other* creates her subject yoked to the people of the forest. I suggest that Borchartd begin to co-ordinate the feminine with nature subject which delivers the human experience. This is one condition of reconciliation which is the result of the feminine pain and resistance. The eco-feminist strain in the novel informs conscious and an original sense of belonging. The novel, which is replete with Nature elements, motivates a new understanding of the self which turns estrangement to feminine autonomy. As Alice Borchartd illustrates:

“No,” Elin said, “she cannot be worshiped because she is always present. The rivers and wells flow from her breast, and all life rises from her womb, and returns to it. She nourishes, protects, feeds, clothes, and kills. The spirits and the Gods are her children. But it is only polite to make an offering. Who knows, she may acknowledge my greeting.” (*Devoted* 126)

Elin as a child of nature is able to formulate a feminine personality. Also, she is able to dismantle the inherent ambivalence towards female body. She fits very well into the argument of Sherry B. Ortner who says: “Woman’s physiology, social roles and psychic structure combine to place her in a position perceived to be nearer to nature than man” (*The Ecocriticism Reader* 73). Consequently Elin’s identity is possible only because of her intimacy with nature. In this regard it is worth quoting Vera L. Norwood:

Survival in a hostile natural environment is an eco-gratifying achievement and feeds the achievement-oriented male psyche, enabling men to return to civilization and improve their culture. Thus, nature is preserved because it is useful to culture. Men’s ambivalence to the destruction of nature stems from this sense of the potential loss of a useful setting for a specific, and important, cultural drama. (323-324)

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