

***Blood is Comforting; Exploring Womanhood and Nature Through
Australian Women's Writings***

by

Marianna Marmaridou

In many narratives, as in *The Pea Pickers*, *For Love Alone*, and *Sugar Heaven*, female authors explore themes of self-identity, body image, and femininity, often reflecting their observations of the surrounding natural environment. Nature serves as an inspiration for both the female narrators and the authors themselves. After engaging with each of these texts, I felt compelled to reflect on my own experience of womanhood and connect it to these narratives. In this piece, I will reflect on the reasons behind each textual or pictorial choice taken in this project, mainly on how the poetic language used by each narrator unveils the association between nature and selfhood, femininity, and gender dynamics.

Nature's calming and reflective effect on the female soul appears in the texts; nature is both romantically represented, soothing, and hypnotic, as well as mystical, dark, unknowable, and unreachable. The balancing between such contradictory qualities mirrors the warm and nurturing yet unknowable duality of femininity. What is perceived as silenced and unknowable in the feminine psyche is a carefully concealed "abject," or as Marta Tužnik describes, "something of an inexpressible," something that feminist art aims "to delve deep into," as it "is unclear, somewhat blurred and even inexpressive" (Tužnik 186). The feminine duality of softness and resilience, pain and perseverance, is a topic ignored, along with the erasure of female multidimensionality. Female self-representation in the text is focused on demystifying such cases of the "abject," allowing first-hand access to their inner feminine self. All three texts strive to demystify the coexistence of softness and pain within the very nature of the feminine

body and psyche. These emotions permeate the texts and serve as one of the primary inspirations behind my creative piece.

The depiction of natural landscapes features a recurring theme of red imagery; the color red consistently appears throughout all the texts. In *The Pea Pickers*, the "trees crimson," "roads red," and "saplings bloody" (Langley 510) express the balance between the beauty of nature and its rawness, creating associations between red and blood, alluding, in my interpretation, to the inescapable femininity linked to menstruation. In *The Pea Pickers*, the protagonist, a cross-dressing woman isolating herself from gender expectations, cannot escape from nature despite the beauty of the landscape, lulling her in a spiritual seduction of her spirit. Additionally, Jean Devanny paints a complex mental portrait of an entirely enticing and overpowering natural landscape in *Sugar Heaven*, noting the "rose satin" coloring of the "dark hills" (405). In *For Love Alone*, Teresa reflects on the "blood in the trees" (480) as she contemplates her life, love, sexuality, and relationships with men. As Sherry Booth observes; "women novelists connect landscape and identity in metaphor, using natural landscapes to represent the female body and characters' sexuality" (Booth 334). This "blood in the trees" (Stead 481) Teresa is contemplating could symbolize change, growth, sexual maturity, or an urge towards violence. By projecting their characters' emotions onto nature, these authors use the natural world as a tool for emotional development, catalyzing deeper reflection on identity and gender.

The women in these narratives grapple with the suffocating expectations imposed by the societal structures they inhabit, often struggling to connect with men or challenging the significance of marriage in their lives. In *For Love Alone*, Teresa observes how the natural landscape transforms into "bodies rolling together in shaky unions" (Stead 480); she further considers her perspectives on sex and marriage with men. Girls are described as "northern summers," akin to "a hunter without a forest" (481), racing against time and diminishing opportunities, with the relentless pressure of the "desire, fear, or ridicule" (480) from others

looming over them. With men described as "tropical summers" (Stead 481), having access to potential partners throughout the entirety of their lives without facing social repercussions; female sexuality is implied to be accepted as natural only when, it is "creative, life-giving, fertile, nurturing," according to Kari Marie Norgaard (205). On the other hand, "masculine nature is violent, aggressive, and competitive" (Norgaard 205). Devanny and Langley also delve into this intricacy of understanding men and experiencing relationships with them. Dulcie's disinterest in Hefty, her challenge in connecting with him, and the subsequent shame she feels, as depicted in *Sugar Heaven*, highlight this theme. His masculine display, characterized by the "knotting of the muscles of his great arms" (Devanny 403), fails to captivate her. Instead, she finds greater allure in the "rose satin" (405) of the landscape she observes, which moves her far more than his "full of silk" (403) physique. The women in all these narratives find the society of men suffocating, searching their own space, feeling more liberated by themselves, enamored by the wild landscape around them.

The meditative self-reflection practiced by these characters triggered a similar ruminative process for me when I was putting the piece together. Within the collage, I also added a few lines of my writing. I reflected on the familiarity of blood, its link to womanhood, and the female experience of the reality of living within a menstruating body where blood, a traditionally violent image, is something expected, something that symbolizes life, the life that already exists and the hope of new life to come. The goal was to naturalize this "abject" image, that is, according to Tužnik, "both revered and cursed at the same time" (Tužnik 181). For Tužnik, "blood is both fascinating and an object of worship but it is also feared; contact with it is avoided" (181). In a traditionally masculine narrative, menstrual blood gets avoided altogether; how does a feminine perspective treat such an integral part of the very body a woman inhabits? I linked the different shades of red to the cycle of life enveloping the feminine body and how, in this merging, woman and nature become one. To connect *Sugar Heaven* with

Pea Pickers, I've referenced a painting titled *Builder* by Vladimir Serov, a key figure in Soviet Socialist Realism. The recurrence of physicality and bodily strength emerges as a significant theme throughout *Sugar Heaven*, drawing inspiration from the Socialist Realist movement. The image of the female worker evokes the seasonal pea-picker sisters from Langley's narrative. I should credit some of the pictorial references used in the collage; among the pictures, there is an older version of a printed copy of the *Pea Pickers* and a personal photograph of the author, Eve Langley, with her sister. Taking inspiration from the sisterhood thematics of *Pea Pickers*, I also used imagery taken from the 2018 HBO adaptation of Joan Lindsey's *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, where the young schoolgirls resting in an Australian forest also appear in harmony with the wild, surrendering to the natural mysticism Langley alluded to.

Throughout all the texts, the presence of women, their bodies, and their thoughts permeates the descriptions of the landscape, wildlife, and the essence of Australia itself. As a female reader, these authors have enriched my understanding of selfhood, nature, and connection with other women. They have influenced how I reflect on my identity and surroundings, as well as how I creatively express this understanding.

Works Cited

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