



Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi
The Journal of Social Sciences Institute
Yıl/Year: 2019 – Yaz / Summer Sayı/Issue: 44
Sayfa / Page:41-51

ISSN: 1302-6879 VAN/TURKEY

Makale Bilgisi / Article Info - Geliş/Received: 13.05.2019
Kabul/Accepted: 15.06.2019 - Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article

**COMMODIFICATION OF
NATURE IN *SILA***

***SİLA'DA DOĞANIN
METALAŞTIRILMASI***

Doç. Dr. Aydın GÖRMEZ

Van Yüzüncü Yıl Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi
İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü

ORCID: 0000-0001-7148-9630, aydingormez@hotmail.com

Necip KARABULAK

Van Yüzüncü Yıl Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü
İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı ABD Tezli Yüksek Lisans Öğrencisi
ORCID: 000-0002-9934-1571, necip.karabulak@hotmail.com

Abstract

When different ecological movements are examined, the common view is that nature is faced with various threats and needs conservation in a rapidly modernizing world. Capitalism with its instruments constitutes a threat to ecology. In this respect, commodification of nature is one of these threats, and frequently analyzed in the context of eco-criticism, a literary theory, and linked with politics and deep ecology as well. It is also of vital importance in society to consider to what extent the moral dimension of the commodification of nature is concerned or thoroughly evaluated. From this point of view, the share of reason and will is inevitable for every individual of the society in seeking for a solution against ecological problems in general. As a result of this reality, in the industrialized world, where ecological interests are ignored, ecological sensitivity and consciousness in the face of commodification of nature are gradually diminishing. In this sense, Karl Marx's political ecology and deep ecology, providing a philosophical point of view bring a different dimension to commodification. The purpose of this study is to explore the commodification of nature via politics and deep ecology in *Sila* by Chantal Bilodeau.

Keywords: Sila, ecocriticism, commodification, political and deep ecology.

Öz

Farklı ekolojik akımlar incelendiğinde ortak kanı, hızla modernleşen dünyada doğanın birçok tehdit ile karşı karşıya kaldığı ve korunması gerek-



tiğidir. Bütün kurumlarıyla birlikte kapitalizm ekoloji için bir tehdit unsurudur. Bu bakımdan doğanın metalaştırılması da bu unsurlardan biridir. Edebi bir teori olarak ekokritizm, politik ve derin ekoloji ile ilişkilendirilen bir konudur ve edebiyat eleştirisi içinde sık sık yer almaktadır. Toplumda doğanın metalaştırılmasının olarak ahlaki boyutunun ne ölçüde gözetildiği ya da etraflıca değerlendirildiği önem taşımaktadır. Bu açıdan ele alındığında genel olarak ekolojik problemlere karşı çözüm noktasında toplumun her bireyi için aklın ve iradenin payı kaçınılmazdır. Ekolojik çıkarların göz ardı edildiği bu gerçekliğin sonucu olarak makinalaşan dünyada doğanın metalaştırılmasına karşı ekolojik hassasiyet ve bilinç giderek azalmaktadır. Bu anlamda Karl Marx'ın politik ekolojisi ve konuya felsefi bir bakış açısı kazandıran derin ekoloji metalaşma olgusuna farklı bir boyut getirmektedir. Bu çalışmada Chantal Bilodeau'nun *Sila* adlı eserinde doğanın metalaştırılmasının politika ve derin ekoloji bağlamında ele alınması amaçlanmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sila, ekokritizm, metalaşma, politik ve derin ekoloji.

Introduction

Throughout history, nature has been one of the most significant issues both in literature and science. It has sometimes been the subject of the novels, as in Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, or poems as in Robert Frost's *The Gift Outright*. However, after the 1950s, writing on and about somehow led to a new field of study called 'ecocriticism' to recognize the interconnectedness of all living beings and ecological matters on Earth.

Ecocriticism stands for a bridge between literature and environment. For Cheryl Glotfelty, one of the earliest contributors to ecocriticism, it is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (1996: xviii), and "takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies" (1996: 8). Yet some questions need to be answered in this respect: Is ecocriticism only the relationship between literature and the environment? For most ecocritics, literature is a means to study environmental issues and comprehend environmental values. They argue that there is a strong connection between literature and the physical environment and that literature tends to be a great resource to examine nature. Serpil Opperman takes the issue a step forward claiming that "... at its best ecocriticism uses literature as a pretext to study environmental issues and evaluates relevant texts according to their capacity to articulate ecological contexts" (Opperman, 2006: 111). Lawrence Buell describes it as opposed to what Glotfelty calls "a multiform inquiry extending to a variety of environmentally focused perspectives" (Lloyd, 2003: 180). Then, it seems unlikely to articulate that ecocriticism has only a single definition, and thus, it needs further elucidation and understanding.

All in all, the debate on the limits of ecocriticism, as a literary the-

ory, is going on but it is no doubt that the very primary goal of ecocriticism is believed to raise an awareness about current environmental problems including any kind of pollution to global warming in the Arctics. In conclusion, ecocriticism is such a broad field of study that it not only deals with literature and environment but also paves the way for other disciplines to have a direct intervention.

The work *Sila* (2015), in the light of the information mentioned above, conveys experiences from human and animal life through a different style of struggle for nature and it is the first play of The Arctic Cycle (totally eight plays) addressing the issues as to the impact of climate change on the Arctics. This paper aims to go into details regarding ecocritic concerns shown in *Sila* by Chantal Bilodeau. Commodification of nature is another point in the play utilizing political and deep ecology.

Sila

The play *Sila* deals with climate change and a strong interconnectedness of lives on a Canadian island called Baffin in the Arctics. To be able to get the drift of the play, we first need to define and analyse the meaning of *Sila* in different and broader contexts. *Sila* means climate, air and breath in Inuit language; however, it is more than we think when we delve into the term and play. To begin with, Mama, mother polar bear in the play tries hard to prepare her daughter (paniapik) for a demanding life and *Sila* is described in the way that life is dependent upon breath, which is regarded as a Creator, and *Sila* encompasses everything around us with that breath (2015: 43).

When we take a closer look at Inuit culture and language, we can encounter different views on it. Senior citizens in the region could traditionally explain *Sila* affirming that all life on Earth rests upon either its compassion or brutality and it is considered to be either rewarding or punishing on all living creatures. To illustrate *Sila*'s point, in this sense, Najagneq, one of the Inuit shamans, implies that *Sila* has such a powerful side that it reaches people not through words but through certain weather conditions like snow, rain or storms, some of which are feared by man. It sometimes comes through sunlight, still seas or little, pure kids. He also remarks that at the point when times are great, *Sila* does not interfere with what people are doing so long as they do not misuse life, hence staying away from them. With regard to its appearance and existence, he is of the opinion that no one has seen *Sila*, and it is mystically together with people and far away as well (Leduc, 2010: 21-22).

As mentioned above, *Sila* is a determinant in every aspect of life, when examined thoroughly, and makes an explicit reference to God for

Inuit people and it is hard to define. As in Inuit traditions, considering that cultures and beliefs have interacted with each other for ages, we see Paramatman or Brahman as gods in the Hindu theology. With this in mind, we come across a similar discourse closer to this meaning in Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "The Over-Soul" denoting that the nature we live and rest in is consubstantiated with Over-soul, which refers to the fact that man is created through its presence (Atkinson, 1950: 262).

Commodification of Nature

Commodification, at its basic sense, is the transformation of any item that is non-commercial into a commodity. However, it can be applied to anything from nature, ideas, persons, cultures, religion to goods, services and even languages, which indicates that the term 'commodification' is of paramount significance as a burning question since it has an infamous connotation.

Beyond its simple definition, commodification is strongly related to Marxist geography and political ecology. Coined by Frank Thone in 1935, political ecology is a discipline analysing the relationship between political, economic and social elements with environmental issues and thus politicizes them. In other words, it argues about what is wrong with social and environmental changes, and that these changes must always be resolved through a more appropriate, less threatening and less exploitative way. Similarly, Paul Robbins draws an analogy between the characters Jekyll and Hyde denoting that political ecology, on one hand, essays the role of identifying the primary causes of environmental changes, on the other hand, it looks into some substitutes, alterations or effective human initiatives for making environment a better place against the threats of exploitation (Robbins, 2011: 20).

According to Marxist political ecology, there is apparently a close connection between ecology and economics, and since this case cannot be considered separately from materialism, it is inevitable to articulate that the Marxist economy focuses rather on the exploitation of labor and nature. As an example, Marx tells us that value comes from labor and, when viewed from a capitalist point of view, value and labor turn into a commodity, which means that all the earnings are claimed by the boss without labouring for it. When we consider the same system for nature, we are faced with the fact that capitalist companies exploit nature and ignore labour. Therefore, as quoted in Robbins, Marx argues that ecological movements fight against capitalism by turning "all progress in capitalistic agriculture" into the progress in the art "not only of robbing the laborer, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time,

is a progress towards ruining the more lasting sources of that fertility” (Robbins, 1990: 638).

It is also essential to probe the positive and negative views that criticize Marx’s political ecology. While, in fact, some put forward the idea that there is no connection between Marx and ecology, and there must be a certain rejection of the ecological adaptation to the socialist point of view, others claim that the system has already been ecologically interwoven and thought to be related to the ecological movement as John Bellamy Foster argues that Marx’s perspective on life was profoundly and methodically ecological, which stemmed from his materialistic point of view (2000: 8). Foster continues to support his idea stating that it is, indeed, aimed to get the hang of the scope of ecology and touch on its significance today (2000: 1). On the other hand, “Marxism is eclectic, and it is a futile attempt to make it ecological” says Bookchin, claiming: “Either Ecology or Marxism!” (Kayaoglu, 2003: 25).

Ecological issues are shown to have some political dimensions in the play. Jean and Thomas have not seen each other for many years though they are close friends. Jean, who is a climate scientist with a specialty in sea ice, returns to Canada after a long research and gets into conversation with Thomas, who works at the Marine Communications and Traffic Services for the Canadian Coast Guard as an officer. Thomas states during this conversation that it is of capital importance to struggle for the region where polar bears are travelling, but Jean implicitly states in French that it is not just a matter of territory and warns Thomas about maintaining a political stance:

JEAN

You think it’s a matter of territory?

THOMAS

Yes. It’s about national security, control, diplomatic relations and most of all, money.

JEAN

That sounds like politics. (2015: 16)

Since Thomas is preoccupied with money so as to dredge a channel in the Arctics and melt science and politics in a pot, the answer given to Jean might be a sign of commodification of nature. In other words, as seen from the dialogue above, capitalism and the commodification of nature are close to each other, and the influence of politics is clear. To Jean,

science must go beyond politics, but since politics uses it as a tool in the exploitation of nature, he often gives Thomas a warning: "...I learned my lesson: science and politics don't mix. And I'm a scientist so let me focus on the science. Others can do the politics (2015: 14). Yet Thomas's capitalist thoughts galvanize him into action and he tries to gloss over these ideas convincing Jean to see the point from the same perspective:

Somebody's gonna drill, Jean. If it's not us, it'll be the Americans, the Chinese, the Arabs, whoever the fuck, but somebody's gonna drill. There's too much money at stake. If we wanna maintain sovereignty over our Arctic territory, we need to establish a strong presence. Nunavut is huge. It has a very small population: point zero one person per square kilometre to be exact. There's practically no one around to say, "Uh-uh, not here, this is ours." (2015: 16)

In this sense, it is an absolute reality that unrestrained capitalism does not recognize geography, and anywhere suitable for exploitation is a value for it. Thus, Neil Smith's expression regarding the brutality and inevitability of capitalism is noteworthy, as he asserts that capitalism has the power or ability to transform everything from the earth's surface to atmosphere in the world (Smith and Harvey, 2008: 79).

The first question we have to ask here is: Is Thomas right? Throughout centuries colonial countries have been exploiting the natural wealth and the underground resources in the lands where people are left uneducated or desperate. It may be remarked that modern capitalism, which is regarded as a substitute for colonialism, is treacherous even for languages in general. For instance, surprised by the fact that Jean, working there in the field for fifteen years, has not known the Inuit language yet, Veronica provides a thought-provoking answer: "Colonialism has a sneaky way of leaving its traces. Qallunaat (white man) got the land but the Inuit managed to infiltrate the language" (2015: 40). That is why, Thomas justifies his intentions saying "either we will exploit or they will... Taking the lead in exploiting our resources is one way to assert sovereignty. Having you, a CANADIAN and one of our most prominent scientists, doing research is another. It shows that we're interested. It shows that we care. And as a bonus, it'll benefit the Inuit. You should think about that" (2015: 16). Attempting to put the pressure on Leanna (climate change activist), Thomas keeps on seeking a way out to make his plans legal: "The way I see it, if Nunavut wants to address its problems, it needs to develop its economy" (2015: 21). Thomas's pretext that the economy must develop in order to address regional problems is to open the door to the exploitation of nature. There-

fore, if nature is to be considered only a commodity, should we define it as “produced for sale on the market” as Polanyi does? However, Karl Polanyi explains the relationship between nature, money and people in that labor and human activity are counted interchangeable terms and not “produced for sale”, besides, human activity is an indispensable part of life itself, and then he correlates the same between land and nature, focusing on the fact that money is used only as a means of having the power that is not mostly produced, yet subsisting via financial institutions (Polanyi, 2001: 75-76).

Whether nature exists for humans is one of the questions in the play. In this respect, *Sila* contains remarkable messages that the human being should develop an ecologically deep point of view as well as putting ideas into practice. Then, let us first touch the starting point of the deep ecology; Arna Naess contributing to the field of ecology with the term *ecosophy T*, defines the term ‘deep ecology’ for the first time in 1973, in a magazine called *Inquiry*: “Rejection of the man-in-environment image in favour of the relational, total-field image” (Naess, 1973: 95). Deep ecology values nature more by rejecting human-centered nature (which at the same time considers human beings as part of the global ecosystem) and it is, in its essential features, against the shallow ecology that leads people to exploit (by legalizing) the natural resources for economic welfare. Moreover, shallow ecology is inadequate to preserve nature in the long run. Four of the eight principles presented by Deep Ecology Platform are of great value because in the play, there exist certain parts with reference to the relation between nature and human. The richness and diversity of life forms are values in themselves and contribute to the flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth:

- 1) Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.
- 2) Present human interference with the non-human world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening
- 3) Significant change of life conditions for the better requires change in policies. These affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures (Naess, 1989: 29).

There are two significant parts of the play summarizing the principles of the philosophy. The first one is the striking message that mother polar bear (mama) gives to her daughter (paniapik) while describing *Sila*. Thinking of the place where we live as just a piece of land and possessing it exceptionally or illiberally is the hint addressed to humans to demonstrate their fallacy: “But *sila*’s gift is not ours to keep. We may use our breath while we roam the land but we must surrender it once we pass from the

land. Creatures who are lonely are the ones who hold on to their breath as if it were theirs and theirs alone” (2015: 44). From this perspective, Aldo Leopold, one of the most prominent environmentalists known to be a great contributor to the deep ecological movement, makes it clear that people view land as a commodity on which they rely too tight to abandon, thereby suggesting that they count it as the place they do not capitalize on but use with affection and esteem (Leopold, 1949: 8).

Leanna’s speech for the industrialized countries can be regarded as an integral part of the play’s climax. Her daughter Veronica, who has lost his son Samuel as a result of a suicide, holds Leanna and environment to account. Although Leanna repeatedly files petitions revealing unfavourable conditions in the region, she does not get any response. To be able to raise awareness she appeals to those at the podium: “As we all know, average temperatures in the Arctic are rising twice as fast as in the rest of the world. Industrialized countries that do not recognize this and take action to reduce their emissions violate our basic human rights to life, health, culture... (2015: 63). Despite her struggle, the truth is deferred by politicians as is the case in real life: “Even if 90 percent of humanity developed a high degree of identification with other life forms and openly acknowledged their intrinsic value, this might not stop governments from implementing policies resulting in large-scale extinctions and further destruction of wilderness and habitats” (Reed and Rothenberg, 1993: 74). Similarly, Thomas’s pressure on Leanna at times causes her to get stuck between politics and environmental sensitivity: “Look, I appreciate what you’re trying to do. And I’m not saying I’m personally against it but taking a public stand on this would be political suicide... I can’t in one breath talk about protecting the Arctic and, in the other, lay out a plan for dredging a channel right in the middle of it!” (2015: 20). Tossing her notes aside with a heavy heart, Leanna extemporaneously delivers an exemplary speech:

The real issue is not climate change ... How warm, how cold ... how much water, how much ice ... what animal species will make it, and what islands won’t ... No. The real issue has to do with something much more fundamental: our own humanity ... So you may tell me that the world’s economic survival is more important than the well-being of a small Arctic nation. You may tell me that anxiety and fear and depression are a matter of personal choice, not of environmental stewardship. You may tell me that drug abuse and ... teenage suicide... are by no means a sign of degradation of the Arctic. But I am here to tell you otherwise. (2015: 63-64)

And then she puts an end to her speech with a striking message in

the hope that exploiting countries will face the facts and, to some extent, be able to take action:

The real issue is not and will never be climate change. The real issue is that we have lost part of our humanity. We have lost our capacity to care ... The U.S. may or may not recognize a violation of human rights. But unless we open our hearts and embrace not just people we love, but people we don't know, people we will never meet, and people who are not even born yet, we will never value our species enough to make sure it survives. (2015: 64)

The deep ecology movement as a philosophical stance tries to encourage people to take initiative. Arna Naess's reply to the question "*what are people supposed to do with this ecosophy T?*" is a similar way of solution given in the play: "They will change to some extent their way of thinking, and, I hope, their behavior, as well. Certain people already have ways of acting and attitudes such that they will feel at home in ecosophy T, but they might not be able to articulate them" (Reed and Rothenberg, 1993: 99-100).

Recently deep ecology has been criticized and found ineffective since it practically tends to trivialize human-centered approaches (anthropocentrism) and treats ecological matters in an ethical way. In addition, it simply cannot play a crucial role in becoming an appreciable force in ecopolitics issues. John Barry, in this context, ascertains the rupture between political ecology and philosophy claiming that deep ecology remains incapable of supporting political calls and instructions, for it is based on an incorrect interpretation of anthropocentrism, an interpretation that has little regard for incorporated and social aspect of ethics (Barry, 1999: 12).

Conclusion

The surprising growth of technology and industry, and the increasing consumption of societies are the 21st century realities. However, it has become inevitable for communities to be exposed to commodification in all spheres and suffer numerous changes. The same holds true for nature. The inability to redress vital balance between man and nature and the alienation of man from nature has constituted one of the most important challenges facing us today- so much so that man thinks of nature as merely a commodity and politically destroys it for his own interests. With its basic principles, ecocriticism ascribes relevance and a value to nature studies in certain fields such as arts, economics, politics and literature and proposes a solution. In this respect, ecocriticism, which in essence has a relationship with environment and literature, is consequently inclined to be more productive as an interdisciplinary field, increasing its significance day by day.



Sila is regarded as one of the first plays focusing on the Arctic Circle in terms of environmental issues, namely ecocriticism. It examines the devastating desires that have begun to form, or aimed to degenerate, the future of local Inuit population and the Canadian Arctic in general. Set on Baffin Island in the territory of Nunavut, the play stages a climatologist, an Inuit activist and her daughter, two Canadian Coast Guard officers, an Inuit elder and two polar bears. Representing all those whose surroundings are in danger threatened by cruel capitalistic urges, the personae see their values challenged and their lives are plotted. All the struggle they experience makes their lives complicated and hard to continue. Combining Inuit myth and contemporary Arctic policy, as well as and three different languages, *Sila* tries to show the universality of the ecological deterioration.

The play presents critical issues about how nature is commodified and politics contribute to it under the light of Marx's political ecology. In particular, it is revealed that the countries that are exploiting environment prefer to remain silent when it comes to nature, and continue to violate human rights. The play *Sila* emphasizes that nature is commodified and intricate with political ecology. Thomas displays a capitalist behaviour throughout the play, whereas Leanna is involved in a struggle for nature as an activist. With the play, the key messages are given to human beings such as the traces of the philosophical point of view reflected by the deep ecology as well as its practical impact cannot be overlooked. Besides, the play shows the deep interconnectedness of human and animal lives, and as a result, they become closely intertwined, which can be taken as the hallmark of the play.

References

- Atkinson, B. (1950). *The Complete Essays and Other Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. New York: Random House Inc.
- Barry, J. (1999). *Rethinking Green Politics: Nature, Virtue, and Progress*. London: SAGE.
- Glotfelty C. and Fromm H. (1996). *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Lloyd , D. (2003). *Shakespeare Matters: History, Teaching, Performance*. Newark: University of Delaware Press.
- Foster, J. B. (2000). *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Kayaoğlu, M. (2003). *Politik Ekoloji ve Teorik Öncülleri*. 1 Mart 2018:

<http://www.teorivepolitika.net/index.php/okunabilir-yazilar/item/343-politik-ekoloji-ve-teorik-onculleri>

- Leduc, B. T. (2010). *Climate, Culture, Change: Inuit and Western Dialogues with a Warming North*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press.
- Leopold, A. (1949). *A Sand County Almanac - And Sketches Here and There*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Naess, A. (1989). *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Naess, A. (1973). The Shallow and The Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement. A summary, *Inquiry*, 16 (1). 95-100.
- Opperman, S. (2006). Theorizing Ecocriticism: Toward A Postmodern Ecocritical Practice. *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 13 (2), 103-128
- Polanyi, K. (2001). *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Reed P. and Rothenberg D. (1993). *Wisdom in the Open Air; the Norwegian Roots of Deep Ecology*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Robbins, P. (2011). *Political Ecology, A Critical Introduction*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell Press.
- Smith, N. and Harvey, D. (2008). *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.