

**ECOFEMINIST STUDY OF MARGARET FULLER'S
*SUMMER ON THE LAKES IN 1843***

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Abstract: The present paper concerns itself with a great American feminist-writer Margaret Fuller. It is a critique of patriarchal industrial society. It is an expression of ecofeminist's concern for environmental degradation triggered by rapid industrial and technological growth. It deals with her encounter with the external world, and her responses to the rapid material development in America. The article unfolds her concerns for humanity in general by endorsing a simple way of life, the idea which she shared with her friends Emerson and Thoreau, the great figures in American transcendentalism. This article is primarily about her delicate, feminine love for nature that she considered the only sustenance in her life.

Keywords: nature, ecofeminism, materialism, development, transcendentalism, capitalism

Ecofeminism is a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women. It emerged in the mid-1970s alongside second-wave feminism and the green movement. Ecofeminism brings together elements of the feminist and green movements, while at the same time offering a challenge to both. It takes from the green movement a concern about the impact of human activities on the non-human world and from feminism the view of humanity as gendered in ways that subordinate, exploit and oppress women (Mellor 1). Maria Mies and Vanda Shiva in their introduction to *Ecofeminism* argue that:

Th(e) capitalist-patriarchal perspective interprets difference as hierarchical and uniformity as a prerequisite for equality. Our aim is to go beyond this narrow perspective and to express our diversity and, in different ways, address the inherent inequalities in world structures which permit the North to

dominate the South, men to dominate women, and the frenetic plunder of ever more resources for ever more unequally distributed economic gain to dominate nature...

...everywhere, women were the first to protest against environmental destruction. As activists in the ecology movements, it became clear to us that science and technology were not gender neutral; and in common with many other women, we began to see that the relationship of exploitative dominance between man and nature, (shaped by reductionist modern science since the 16th century) and the exploitative and oppressive relationship between men and women and prevails in most patriarchal societies, even modern industrial ones, were closely connected...

If the final outcome of the present world system is a general threat to life on planet earth, then it is crucial to resuscitate and nurture the impulse and determination to survive, inherent in all living things.... (2-3)

The fate of nature had been linked to the fate of women. Feminist theoreticians have argued endlessly over this issue of interlinking woman and nature. While some like Vandana Shiva state that nature in its essential form as *Prakriti* is integrally linked to the organic existence of woman, many other postfeminists argues against this view as nothing but another facile move by the ever-powerful patriarchy to surreptitiously hold back the identity of the woman.

Summer on the Lakes, in 1843 is Margaret Fuller's first original book-length work, the product of her journey to the Great Lakes and western prairies in 1843. This book is not only an intensely personal account of Fuller's inner life during the summer of 1843, but also an expression of her ecofeminist concerns. Fuller shared with the Transcendentalists the belief that internal travel—what Emerson called travel within the mind—was the most significant kind. In 1843 Margaret Fuller, already a well-established figure in the Transcendental circle of Emerson and Thoreau, traveled by train, steamboat, carriage, and on foot to make a roughly circular tour of the Great Lakes. *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843* was Margaret Fuller's journey through far western frontier in mid-nineteenth-century America. In this book Fuller appreciates all aspects of nature and grieves for degradation of human existence due to patriarchal development projects. She believed that excessive use of science and technology tamed and exploited nature, and robbed the society of all human sensibilities. Thus, the patriarchal pattern of society subjected both women and nature to subordination, oppression, exploitation and misery. Her travel away from New England to visit such places as Niagara Falls, Mackinac Island, Rock River and Illinois, is indubitably a larger journey that Fuller was making in her mind towards an ecofriendly simple way of life. Hence, *Summer on the Lakes* occupies a pivotal position as far as her eco-vision is concerned. The whole array of sketches,

poems, stories, anecdotes, dialogues, reflections, and accounts of a leisurely journey to the Great Lakes is a reaction against the material and industrial development that was taking place in America in general, and in and around New England in particular.

Nature had been a source of comfort for Fuller since her childhood. She looked to it for sustenance in the midst of her demanding academic activities. She would take refuge from her academic endeavours in the quiet beauty of her mother's garden. According to Kornfield, Fuller wrote in her private journal:

I loved to gaze on the roses, the violets, the lilies, the pinks; my mother's hand had planted them, and they bloomed for me. I culled the most beautiful. I looked at them on every side. I kissed them, I pressed them to my bosom with passionate emotions, such as I have never dared express to any human being. (11)

Her only times of solace when facing the physical and emotional pain of academia were her transformative forays into her mother's garden where she could enjoy the beauty of plants and flowers. In the midst of the exceedingly demanding male pursuits deemed appropriate by her father, Fuller was able to relish the feminine refinements of her shadowlike mother's delicate and sensitive nurturing nature. Steel writes, "Her mother's garden provided a welcome refuge from the strain of academic recitation in her father's study; and, in later years, flowers became powerful maternal symbols in Fuller's essays and poetry" (128).

Thus, Fuller finds nature most intimate to her, and it is nature only she identifies herself with. Fuller all through her life was aware of a bounty of love, kindness and the resources that nature has showered upon us, and thus made us eternally indebted to it. But she was also aware of the exploitative patriarchal society's amnesia to nature's charity that we are all blessed with.

The technological and industrial history of the United States describes the country's emergence as one of the largest nations in the world as well as the most technologically powerful. The availability of land and labour, the diversity of climate, the ample presence of navigable canals, rivers, and coastal waterways, and the abundance of natural resources facilitating the cheap extraction of energy, fast transport, and the availability of capital all contributed to America's rapid industrialization. Most historians agree that the period in which the greatest economic and technological progress took place began at the end of the eighteenth century, and due to this technological and industrial development the nation was transformed from an agricultural economy to the foremost industrial power in the world.

Science, technology, and industry not only profoundly shaped America's economic success but also contributed to its distinct political institutions, social structure, educational system and cultural identity. American values of meritocracy, entrepreneurship and self-sufficiency are drawn from its legacy of pioneering technical advances.

However, this material progress resulted in the spiritual degeneration of American society. It could not bring about the ultimate well-being of society but rather had an adverse effect on it. Therefore, the leading American transcendentalists, Emerson, Margaret Fuller and Thoreau, articulated a protest against self-centred, commercialized American society, while voicing their concerns for the spiritual well-being of humanity in general.

In *Summer on the Lakes*, Fuller consistently differentiates between the materialistic or utilitarian motivations of settlers, on the one hand, and the spiritual or aesthetic aims of tourists on the other. Her trip took place between 1837 and 1844, which was a period of widespread questioning of the historical progressiveness of capitalism. Her assessment of socio-economic maladies focused on the idea that a materialist, instrumentalist and rationalist civilization had lost touch with the organic "laws of nature." *Summer on the Lakes*, then, is structured by the tension between a vision of a just society rooted in nature and the stark reality of America's westward expansion.

Thus *Summer on the Lakes* presents a strangely contradictory picture of the physical setting of the western settlements, a picture by turns disparaging and idealizing. Through much of the narrative, the frontier is a ravaged landscape, a place "where the clash of material interests is so noisy" that religion and spirituality are almost forgotten (12). The conventional elements of the picturesque have been destroyed by the advance guard of capitalist expansion. Alongside this ecological damage, *Summer on the Lakes* details the social destruction the settlers have left in their wake, displacing and impoverishing whole native tribes. More, the text focuses closely on the isolation and alienation, especially for women, bred by the societies the settlers have built.

In *Summer on the Lakes* there are several passages of description, such as those concentrated in Fuller's account of the Rock River country, west of Chicago. This Illinois material is a kind of gauzy vignette inserted into what is elsewhere sharply focused on the seamy side of the capitalist region. Fuller describes the region as possessing great grandeur. In addition, it is a restorative retreat the equal of which Fuller feels she may never see again:

Ye fairy distances, ye lordly woods
I go,—and if never more may steep

An eager heart in your enchantments deep,
Yet ever to itself that heart may say,
Be not exacting; thou hast lived one day;
Hast looked on that which matches thy mood
A tender blessing lingers o'er the scene,
Like some young mother's thought, fond, yet serene,
And through its life new-born our lives have been. (54)

Given her intense literary activity during the preceding few years, it may seem unsurprising that Fuller experienced personal renewal on the prairies and in the forests of the West. But the Rock River country is a social utopia rendered in the idiom of the picturesque:

[It] bears the character of a country which has been inhabited by a nation skilled like the English in all the ornamental arts of life, especially in landscape gardening. That the villas and castles seem to have been burnt, the enclosures taken down, but the velvet lawns, the flower gardens, the stately parks, scattered at graceful intervals by the decorous hand of art, the frequent deer, and the peaceful herd of cattle that make picture of the plain, all suggest more of the masterly mind of man, than the prodigal, but careless, motherly love of nature. Especially is this true of the Rock River country. (37)

This enchanted landscape is markedly empty of both architectural monuments to the old-world ruling class and the hedges that were the main mechanism of early capitalist agricultural rationalization in New England. What remain are the stylized pastoral settings of the neo-classical country estate, settings that were dedicated exclusively to leisure activities. In this countryside where both social hierarchies and labour are invisible, Fuller finds what she told Emerson she was looking for: "There was a peculiar charm in coming here, where the choice of location, and the unobtrusive good taste of all the arrangements, showed such intelligent appreciation of the scene, after seeing so many dwellings of the new settlers, which showed plainly that they had no thought beyond satisfying the grossest material wants" (39). Here in the Rock River country, Fuller and her friends felt "free to imagine themselves in Elysium [and] the three days passed here were days of unalloyed, spotless happiness" (39). This place was once inhabited by the native Indians whose traces could still be perceived and who had lived in complete tune with nature: "The Indians who chose the most beautiful sites for their dwelling, and whose habits do not break in on the aspect of nature under which they were born, we feel as if they were rightful lords of a beauty" (39).

The idea that Fuller's portrait of the Rock River country offers a heuristic glimpse of an ideal can be combined with a line of inquiry to which Kolodny makes a brief allusion. She

notes that Fuller “recognized in the fertile and well-watered grasslands a potential economic refuge from the hard scrabble farms of her native New England, where sons fled to the cities or the frontier to seek a livelihood and daughters left home for fourteen-hour days and slave wages in the proliferating textile mills and shoe factories” (Kolodny 115). The rapid development of capitalism in New England in the decades of Fuller’s youth had changed the region from an agrarian colony into a thriving centre of industrial production. It had also sharply intensified both the rural poverty and the urban exploitation that Kolodny suggests were at the back of Fuller’s mind. This total transformation of her home is the key to understanding Fuller’s apparent contradictions (quoted in Newman).

Summer on the Lakes was a polemical reaction to negative assessments of the early nationals of the USA that had been published in the preceding two decades by, among others, Harriet Martineau, Frances Trollope, and Charles Dickens. These Victorian travellers had commented extensively on the crudeness of the frontier, the brutality of slavery, and the provincialism of the Northern cities. Fuller criticises them for their focus on the real rather than the ideal. In *Summer on the Lakes*, she “describes an actual world in terms of its potential, [because, for her] the realist absorption with the present ... militates against the exploration of the possible” (*British* 197). But she sets out to do more than defend the American experiment against these non-specialist detractors. She also attempts to answer what Thomas Carlyle--in *Chartism*, his 1840 assessment of social progress under capitalism--called “the Condition-of-England question” (151). Carlyle suggests that the fantastically productive textile mills of England’s industrial cities are as sublime as the most famous of American natural scenes: “Hast thou heard ... the awakening of a Manchester, on Monday morning, at half-past five by the clock; the rushing off of its thousand mills, like the boom of an Atlantic tide, ten-thousand times ten-thousand spools and spindles all set humming there,—it is perhaps if thou knew it well, sublime as a Niagara, or more so” (quoted in Newman).

Fuller, like many others in New England, valued Carlyle’s sharp analysis of the class tensions in Old England’s capitalist social order. On the first of June, 1843, she was at Niagara Falls, and she wrote to Emerson about the book she had been reading there, Carlyle’s *Past and Present*. This volume (which Emerson had just arranged to have published in the US) extended *Chartism*’s diagnosis of “the bitter discontent grown fierce and mad ... of the Working Classes of England” (151). Along with his revulsion at the impoverishment of the urban working class, *Chartism* had also recorded Carlyle’s horror of “the mob”-- of, in other words, the working class’s efforts at self-emancipation. *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, a lecture

series published the next year, had prescribed an authoritarian cure for the condition of England. Two years later, *Past and Present* combined diagnosis and cure. Carlyle begins *Past and Present* by maintaining that:

England is full of wealth, of multifarious produce, supply for human want in every kind; yet England is dying of inanition. With unabated bounty the land of England blooms and grows; waving with yellow harvests; thick-studded with workshops, industrial implements, with fifteen millions of workers ... and behold, some baleful fiat as of Enchantment has gone forth, saying, "Touch it not, ye workers ... no man of you shall be the better for it; this is enchanted fruit!" (qtd. in Newman).

Fuller also valued Carlyle's forecast of danger, but she was not so enthusiastic about the solutions he offered. In her letter to Emerson, she writes:

There is no valuable doctrine in [Carlyle's] book.... His proposed measures say nothing. Educate the people. That cannot be done by books, or voluntary effort, under these paralyzing circumstances. Emigration! According to his own estimate of the increases of population, relief that way can have very slight effect. He ends as he began; as he did in *Chartism*. Everything is very bad. You are fools and hypocrites, or you would make it better (*Letters* 128).

Summer on the Lakes, Fuller's answer to the Future-of-America question, begins with a chapter that describes an eight-day visit to Niagara Falls and that operates as a parable about aestheticist and utilitarian ways of seeing and valuing nature. Upon arriving at the Falls, she finds that her appreciation of the scene is blocked by the mediation of reproduced images and the tourist conventions that governed such encounters: "When I first came here I felt nothing but a quiet satisfaction. I found that the drawings, the panorama, &c. had given me a clear notion of the position and proportions of all objects here; I knew where to look for everything, and everything looked as I thought it would" (14). The book is her encounter with the American landscape at large. At Niagara Falls she writes:

For here there is no escape from the weight of a perpetual creation; all other forms and motions come and go, the tide rises and recedes, the wind, at it gales and gusts, but here is really an incessant, an indefatigable motion. Awake or asleep, there is no escape, still this rushing round you and through you. It is in this way I have most felt the grandeur—somewhat eternal, if not infinite. (13)

She captures the flatness of this moment by comparing herself to "a little cowboy" she once saw looking at "one of the finest sunsets that ever enriched this world" and saying

gruffly: “that sun looks well enough” (4). In order to uncover a satisfying meaning in the prospect of the Falls, Fuller experiments with various customary modes of perception:

All great expression which, on a superficial survey, seems so easy as well as so simple, furnishes after a while, to the faithful observer its own standard by which to appreciate it. Daily these proportions widened and towered more and more upon my sight, and I got at last a proper foreground for these sublime distances. Before coming away I think I really saw the full wonder of the scene. After a while it so drew me into itself as to inspire an undefined dread, such as I never knew before, such as may be felt when death is about to usher us into a new existence. (4)

After abandoning the picturesque, with its painterly conventions of “position and proportions,” Fuller here tries the alternative tradition of the Burkean sublime, in which natural scenes trigger intense emotional responses. Finally, on “Table Rock, close to the great fall”, she experiences a fulfilling moment of sublime immediacy: there “all power of observing details, all separate consciousness, was quite lost” (5).

But just when she has at last discovered a satisfying perspective on the Falls, she is interrupted in the rudest way possible. A “man came to take his first look. He walked close up to the fall, and, after looking at it a moment, with an air as if thinking how he could best appropriate it to his own use, he spat into it” (15). This interruption, she writes, “seemed worthy of an age whose love of utility is such that [it would be no surprise to see] men coming to put the bodies of their dead parents in the fields to fertilize them...” (ibid). The spitter’s rushed, homogenizing way of seeing is directly linked to what he sees: a nature whose sole purpose is appropriation for personal profit; his crude realism and his utilitarianism are two sides of the same coin. Disgusted, Fuller tries to drown out the image of this utilitarian by losing herself again in an awe-inspiring whirlpool at the base of the falls. There, the “river cannot look more imperturbable [and seems] to whisper mysteries the thundering voice above could not proclaim...” (15). The reason why Fuller’s reaction is so strong is because she has come to Niagara Falls precisely to escape a New England ruled by utility, by the spirit of commerce. She represents this land where “buying and selling were no longer to be counted on” as Eden before the Fall, as a place where nature “did not say, Fight or starve; nor even, work or cease to exist; but merely showing that the apple was a finer fruit than the wild crab, gave both room to grow in the garden” (38). In this land of natural plenty, there is neither property nor commerce: “there was neither wall nor road in Eden [and] those who walked there lost and found their way just as we did” (40). Fuller is travelling through the American imperial frontier at the moment when it is being settled and developed at the

most breakneck pace. But she sees the land as a poet, “adding the beauty and leaving out the dirt” (18). She makes believe that she is lost in order to experience nature’s beauty and blind herself to the ever-present reminders of the degraded commercial world she has left behind.

Fuller’s initial disappointment and poetizing response are only the beginning of the story. What is unique about *Summer on the Lakes* is that, just as her journey takes her for the first time beyond the physical bounds of New England, she also crosses ideological borders in search of a mode of optimism built out of these disappointing materials, a mode of optimism that goes beyond the limits of the transcendental idealism she has brought from home. She attempts “to woo the mighty meaning of the scene” by using her perspectival experiments to clear the foundation for a carefully built hope (18). Susan Belasco Smith notes that “the closest Fuller comes to defining such a worldview [is in a] long meditation on the character of the medieval Flemish nobleman Philip Van Artevelde” (*British* 202). Fuller describes him as “no thin Idealist, no coarse Realist, but a man whose eye reads the heavens while his feet step firmly on the ground” (64).

Fuller’s approach to Rock River offers several glimpses of what is to come. First, she again finds that she has to experiment in order to learn how to appreciate the landscape properly. She begins by attempting to see the immense prairies as sublimely monotonous, but in the end finds that they are no more than infinitely dull. After a time, though, she begins “to love because [she] began to know the scene, and shrank no longer from ‘the encircling vastnesses’” (Fuller 21). Intimacy with a place, particular knowledge of the material world, she suggests, engages her more than responses generated by homogenizing conventions. Fuller’s nature is both a concrete material world and immanently divine. And if there is any hope of transcending the crude utilitarianism of the America of her time, she intimates, western settlers would do well to harmonize themselves with nature’s simultaneously physical and moral truths. Fuller finishes this preliminary essay by driving home her point with a negative example, a comic anecdote about “a young lady who showed herself to have been bathed in the Britannic fluid...by the impossibility she experienced of accommodating herself to the indecorums” of a roadhouse, because she refuses to adjust to the world around her.

In the description of the Rock River country that follows, Fuller gives a picture of the kind of society that might be built by a community of people who have learned to harmonize themselves with nature. She begins with a visit to the “large and commodious dwelling” of an “Irish gentleman,” where she establishes a series of complex distinctions between those who can and cannot make such adjustments: “There was a peculiar charm in coming here, where the choice of location, and the unobtrusive good taste of all the arrangements, showed such

intelligent appreciation of the spirit of the scene, after seeing so many dwellings of the new settlers, which showed plainly that they had no thought beyond satisfying the grossest material wants” (29). Old World aristocrats like this absent gentleman are sensitive enough to fit their dwellings into “the natural architecture of the country,” whereas the vast majority of settlers “do not see it at all” and build slovenly “little brown houses” (29). However, both aristocrats and commoners occupy land that once belonged to others: “Seeing the traces of the Indians, who chose the most beautiful sites for their dwellings, and whose habits do not break in on that aspect of nature under which they were born, we feel as if they were the rightful lords of a beauty they forbore to deform” (39). The natives are natural aristocrats whose rights have been forcibly extinguished by the democratic mass of settlers, who “do not see” the beauty of nature at all: “it breathes; it speaks in vain to those who are rushing into its sphere” (*ibid*). The westward progress of these settlers “is Gothic, not Roman, and their mode of cultivation will, in the course of twenty, perhaps ten, years, obliterate the natural expression of the country...” (*ibid*). Imperial expansion, with its displacement of natives and radical transformation of the landscape, may be painful to contemplate, but it “is inevitable, fatal; we must not complain, but look forward to a good result” (*ibid*).

After quietly making this suggestion, Fuller sketches a portrait of the seedbed of that future republic. To begin, she reaches for a rhetorical peak, describing the auspicious natural beauty of the area around the town of Oregon. Again she sees a natural cathedral:

Here swelled the river in its boldest course, interspersed by halcyon isles on which nature had lavished all her prodigality in tree, vine, and flower, banked by noble bluffs, three hundred feet high, their sharp ridges as exquisitely definite as the edge of a shell; their summits adorned with those same beautiful trees, and with buttresses of rich rock.... Lofty natural mounds rose amidst the rest, with the same lovely and sweeping outline, showing everywhere the plastic power of water,—water, mother of beauty, which by its sweet and eager flow, had left such lineaments as human genius never dreamt of. (42)

In this “capital of nature’s art,” there are still many traces of a native village, whose inhabitants had been “driven away” only quite recently: “As usual, they had chosen with the finest taste”(33). Surveying the site, Fuller grieves for the natives as noble predecessors, marked by a “Greek splendor,” to whose spirit their Roman conquerors should turn for guidance. The picturesque beauty and historicity of the place, she believes, bodes well for the community that will grow there. Viewing the area from above, she writes: “I think I had never felt so happy that I was born in America. Woe to all country folks that never saw this spot,

never swept an enraptured gaze over the prospect that stretched beneath. I do believe Rome and Florence are suburbs compared to this capital of Nature's art" (33). What could appear to be jarring patriotism is part of Fuller's vision of Nature as the ground of an ideal society.

Summer on the Lakes, in 1843 is a critique of American capitalist society in the mid-nineteenth century. Fuller's journey out of New England to visit such places as Niagara Falls, Mackinac Island, and Rock River, Illinois, is symbolic of her longing for a simple, eco-friendly and sustainable existence. However, it also has a symbolic significance. It is, at least in part, an intensely personal account of Fuller's own inner life during the summer of 1843.

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