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Schizoanalysis and Carnophallogocentrism in Lauren Groff's *The Vaster Wilds*

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Abstract: *The Vaster Wilds* is a novel produced by the well known American author Lauren Groff and was published in 2023. The paper attempts to study this survivalist work by Groff, in associations with the perspectives and reasoning theories of schizoanalysis and carnophallogocentrism. Groff has crafted an early American captive narrative where her protagonist provides the perfect subject position for the reader to view and analyze the adventurous survivalist stories from a female perspective thereby making her a female version of Robinson Crusoe. The story is set in the winter of 1609 where the lived-experiences of the protagonist who is an orphan servant girl and her escape from a colonial settlement are portrayed in a manner which is both raw and brutal. The book has been previously reviewed, by many insightful perspectives, as a remarkable survivalist account that foreshadows the worries of climate change and the vulnerability of human civilization along with its anxiety. The paper aims to visualize the protagonist as a “desiring machine” (Deleuze & Guattari), a term used by the theoretical perception of Schizoanalysis. There are many instances in the novel where the patriarchal reasoning in the form of carnophallogocentrism can be observed in its extreme level as well. My attempt in this paper is to apply the theoretical frameworks of Schizoanalysis and Carnophallogocentrism to highlight how Groff manages to create a complex and richly rhizomatic female position who at first adheres to Carnophallogocentrism but eventually transforms and embraces new forms of subjectivity and challenges the fixed notions of female identity while blurring the boundaries of expectations. The aim of the paper is to make theoretical observations to study the trauma, vulnerability as well as the complexities of female subject position in association with the concerns of ecosophy, nomadology and rhizomatics of selfhood.

Keywords: *Schizoanalysis, Carnophallogocentrism, Identity, Performativity, Subjectivity*

Introduction

Groff's *The Vaster Wilds* is set in the winter of 1609 where the lived-experiences of the protagonist who is an orphan servant girl and her escape from a colonial settlement are portrayed in a manner which is both raw and brutal. The girl embarks on a journey of self-actualization despite her struggles in the wilderness. The major concern of the paper is not only to throw light on her victimized position but also to show her own development as a 'schizoid self' along with her changing attitudes toward 'carnophallogocentrism'. The text may seem to focus on the vulnerability of human civilization along with its anxiety in the face of the apathetic vaster wilderness. But the aim of the paper is to place the text within the framework of Schizoanalysis and Carnophallogocentrism. Therefore, by employing the Schizoanalytic concepts of 'desire', 'becoming' and 'lines of flight'(abstract machines), the protagonist can be interpreted as a person with 'schizoid identity' who undergoes a transformative journey in the wilderness as she recognizes and becomes more aware of her place within the vaster realm of the universe. In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze explains how "What the schizophrenic experiences, both as an individual and as a member of the human species, is not at all any one specific aspect of nature, but nature as a process of production" (3).

Schizoanalysis is a concept developed by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and the Psychoanalyst Felix Guattari. It started as a critical response to traditional psychoanalysis, particularly the work of Sigmund Freud. In essence Scizoanalysis is a theoretical framework that challenges the notion of a unified, fixed and coherent selfhood. Instead it proposes the postmodernist idea that the self is an entity which is fragmented, fluid, multiple and remains constantly shifting/ changing. It is argued by Deleuze and Guattari that traditional psychoanalysis tries to cure an individual (generally a patient with mental illness) by forcing him/her to conform to societal norms and expectations. But Schizoanalysis encourages the belief that individuals are supposed to free themselves from the rigid attitudes of forced conformity by embracing contradictions and the blurring of boundaries. Some of the major aspects of this theory can be comprehended with the understanding of the specific concepts like 'Desiring machine', 'abstract machines', 'BWO'(Body Without Organ), and 'lines of flight'. Using these above mentioned concepts, Schizoanalysis not only rejects the theory of 'Oedipus complex' but also decenters the notion of humans having a fixed self. It focuses on the new forms of subjectivity involved in the identity formation, not only of a schizoid identity (a patient) but also of human self in general. Following this theoretical approach, human 'self' is defined in association with 'desire' because the concepts of 'self' and 'desire' are interconnected. The 'self' is formed by the experiences of its 'desire' while its 'desire' is channeled by what the 'self' is. Therefore the 'self' is defined by Schizoanalysis as a 'desiring machine'. According to postmodern concept, the self is always influenced and constructed by the surrounding which includes the other humans as well as the non-human living

beings. Schizoanalysis puts focus on the factors (abstract ideas and thoughts) that are created when an individual interacts with its surrounding individuals, non-human living beings and the natural environment. These created ideas are called ‘abstract machines’. Under this theory, a human ‘self’ is taken into consideration in the form of a schizoid identity which is constantly being influenced by other ‘desiring machines’ and ‘abstract machines’. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the flow of experiences from one desiring machine and abstract machine to the other desiring machine, functions like a network of subjectivities which contributes to the construction of an individual self while this individual self is also a ‘desiring machine’. With this approach the human self is then called a ‘BWO’ (Body Without Organ) because the limitations caused by the identification of organs are no longer relevant. A man blurs the distinction placed on him by gender identity when he finds the characteristics of his own mother being intrinsically inseparable from his subjectivity. His anatomical limitations are overlooked in consideration of his complex psyche where the ‘flows of flight’ occur and turn him into a ‘BWO’. Schizoanalysis proposes the idea that the self is an entity which is fragmented, fluid nomadic, rhizomatic and constantly shifting. It puts more emphasis on the role of ‘Desire’ in human life and uses it as the basis of ‘identity’. Following this theory, more emphasis is given on decentering the notion of the fixed gendered self. By emphasizing the importance of desire, becoming, and lines of flight, schizoanalysis offers a more complex and dynamic understanding of human subjectivity involved in identity construction. According to Philip Goodchild,

Schizoanalysis, then, is a form of social analysis according to abstract machines, lines of flight or deterritorialisation, regimes of signs, the stratification of molecular elements or their destratification, and planes of consistency. It maps the social unconscious according to its movements and intensities of desire. [...] so that lines of experimentation or becoming may be constructed through a reassembling of the abstract machines that lie between the strata and produce them. (168)

The other theory which has been applied in the paper is Carnophallogocentrism which is also linked with postmodern ideology. Carnophallogocentrism is a term coined by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Derrida uses this term against the traditional western philosophy which had placed emphasis on male supremacy, reason, masculinity and the dominance of human existence over animal life. Derrida, asserts that “carnivorous sacrifice is essential to the structure of subjectivity and vital to our modernity” (as qtd. In Fancione). Accordingly, “The act of eating meat reflects the dominance of a masculine discourse he called “carnophallogocentrism”, a sacrificial structure of thought that elevates the carnivorous male to a position of centrality within Western culture” (Tait 53). It is further elaborated in the following words by Baumeister:

Given the strong structural parallels between Carnophallogocentrism and the primal parricide- which figures human civilization as the historical product of a founding event of patriarchal violence and sacrificial ingestion- attending to Derrida's treatment of the primal parricide helps us fill out his view of carnophallogocentrism and so better appreciate the breadth of his approach to the historical relation between humans and other animals. (Baumeister 51)

It highlights how Western thought has often prioritized reason and logic over instinct and subjectivity by reinforcing patriarchal norms. This notion is also associated with the devaluation of animal life. Obviously, Derrida's aim primarily was to challenge the dominant patriarchal ideology by encouraging a more flexible attitude that is more inclusive of the concerns of not only the 'self' but also the 'other'. Basically the term 'Carnophallogocentrism' is created by combining the term 'phallogocentrism' with 'carnism'. While phallogocentrism describes how western tradition is based on the ideology of having masculinity and man as its center, 'Carnism' simply is the belief that human beings are superior to animals and have the right to exploit and consume them. Thus, western philosophy has been rooted in Carnophallogocentrism which supports the idea that men are superior to both women and the other non-human beings and they have the right to possess and consume them using brutality. Carnophallogocentrism is viewed as "intersecting patriarchal dominations of women and animals that produce the sovereign Western subject" (Madsen 2). This tradition has been criticized for its role in perpetuating systems of oppression, including speciesism, sexism, and environmental degradation. Lauren Groff's novel *The Vaster Wilds* and its protagonist with her schizoid identity offer a contradictory and challenging exploration of these issues, transgressing the dominant structures of carnophallogocentrism while offering a vision of alternative relationships between humans, animals, and the natural world.

Analysis

The novel opens with the escape of an unnamed orphan girl from the colonial settlement of Jamestown in 1609. The place was plagued by famine and disease which resulted in most of the people dying while the remaining settlers are driven to both despicable and desperate behaviors. While the girl stayed in the colony, she was looking after the sickly child of her mistress. The name of the child was Bess who couldn't survive the harsh conditions of the starving settlement and died. Being an orphan, the girl had been living in an unhealthy and unfriendly environment throughout her life but what drove her finally to leave the settlement was a horrendous act of cannibalism that she witnesses after the death of the child named Bess. She was being chased by an evil man who was caught in the act of devouring dead humans. With only a few belongings like a hatchet, a flint, a coverlet, and a pewter cup

she escapes into the wilderness with the belief that beasts could never be more dangerous than the starved and immoral men. She was frightened by what had transpired before her, while her ardent faith in God made her hopeful as she ventures into the cold apathetic and vaster realm of the wilderness.

Before the girl left for the forest she saw her mistress and the minister who were both consuming the corpse of the dead child's brain. The act of cannibalism can be viewed as the ultimate manifestation of Carnophallogocentric attitude where the mistress engages in a desperation- fueled consumption of human flesh representing the dominant worldview which privileges self sustenance over everything else, reinforcing the ideology where the consumed 'other' is ruthlessly exploited. The scene can also be viewed as a manifestation of the 'state of exception' (Agamben, 1998) that characterizes the colonial settlement, wherein the norms and laws of civilized society are suspended, and individuals are reduced to a state of mindless beasts that are governed by the primal desires of self-preservation. The scene not only exposes the gruesome and dark realities of the colonized settlement of Jamestown during the early 1600s but also comments on how regardless of gender identity, human civilization succumbs to immorality when driven to the extreme desperation. This idea is brutally depicted by the fact that the exhumation and butchering of the child's corpse is done before the sight of its own mother (the mistress) who is reaching for the morsel of her own child's body with tear-stricken eyes. The girl's (protagonist) horror and paralysis represent the traumatic impact that she had to endure before making the decision of leaving the settlement in favor of wandering into the wilderness.

After she enters the forest, the narrative moves back and forth to describe her past in the civilized society and her struggles in the wilderness until her body finally gives way to diseases including smallpox and she dies. The brutally honest depiction of her subjugation in the civilized world which was followed by her isolated struggles in the wilderness with no human empathy makes the narrative quite fatalistic. The aim of the research is to put more emphasis on her identity as a woman beyond her struggles. By applying the theory of Schizoanalysis and Carnophallogocentrism, the woman can be viewed as going through a transformational journey. At the beginning of the novel she seems to constantly adhere to the notion of carnophallogocentrism in two ways: first as a victim and then as a predator herself. But eventually her growing intellectual awareness makes her embrace the aspects of a schizoid subject when her real transformation begins. And this transformation enables her to resist against the oppressive systems of carnophallogocentrism before she leaves the world.

Her struggle continues as she enters the wilderness and battles against hunger and the unfavorable environment where getting food becomes a constant concern for her. At the beginning she consumes food in the form of berries and roots which prove to be insufficient to satiate her hunger. At this point, she decides to turn into a predator herself and feast upon the other animals to survive.

Previously she was empathetic to the suffering of the others because she could identify with them. But extreme hunger turns her brutal when she finally decides to take the life of the ‘other’ with her own hands, kill and consume them. Her adherence to the beliefs of Carnophallogocentrism is heightened which is apparent in the scene where her brutal killing is very similar to the scene that occurred before her escape. She seems to have become as brutal as the minister with the only difference that the consumed being in the later scene are baby animals instead of a human baby. The scene as worded in the text is as follows:

She pushed her hand in and brought out five squirming pink baby squirrels, which she killed one. Then, even within this mother squirrel’s sight, feeling deeply ...and made a fire and roasted the baby squirrels, which were so tender that their bones melted as she chewed them...Thank you squirrel, she said to the furious thing that was now barking at her, perhaps in grief. She thought it wanted to leap upon her and bite her to death; its fury was justified, but it did not have the courage to come near. (Groff 40)

Afterwards, she separates a duck from her family to kill and eat her; sometimes she consumes raw meat as she had brutally made kebabs out of the baby squirrels. Her actions in all of these instances could be viewed as a manifestation of the patriarchal values and behaviors within her psyche which have always been associated with traditional masculinity. By engaging in these violent and dominant actions, the protagonist is, in effect, performing a kind of toxic masculinity that reinforces the notion of human supremacy over the natural world. This behavior is particularly noteworthy given the protagonist’s female subject position, highlighting the ways in which patriarchal norms and values can be internalized and perpetuated by individuals across the gender spectrum. Furthermore, her actions can be seen as a form of carnophallogocentrism, wherein she asserts her dominance over the natural world through violent and exploitative means. This behavior reinforces the notion that humans are superior to and separate from the natural world, rather than being interconnected with and dependent upon it.

But due to her schizoid self, she was capable enough to distance herself from her own actions and adherence to carnism which results in the manifestation of a split personality within her. She develops a fragmented self created out of her multiple desires. In order to understand a schizoid identity, “Simon suggests understanding the individual as a relative reality- ‘merely the result of a phase in the being’s development’ – instead of a completed totality. Thus individuation could be viewed as ‘a partial and resolution manifested in a system that contains latent potentials and harbors a certain incompatibility with itself’ (Tasmin 271).

Schizoanalysis focuses on the blur of the boundaries between an individual self and the non-human beings that surround the individual. Thus, Deleuze proposes that

...we make no distinction between man and nature: the human essence of nature and natural essence of man become one within nature in the form of production or industry, just as they do within the life of man as a species. ...Not man as the king of creation, but rather as the being who is in intimate contact with the profound life of all forms and all types of beings, who is responsible for even the stars and animal life, and who ceaselessly plugs an organ-machine into an energy-machine, a tree into his body, a breast into his mouth, the sun into his asshole: the eternal custodian of the machines of the universe. This is the second meaning of process as we use the term: man and nature are not like two opposite terms confronting each other- not even in the sense of bipolar opposites within a relationship of causation, ideation, or expression (cause and effect, subject and object, etc.) rather they are one and the same essential reality, the producer-product. (1983: 4-5).

In schizoanalysis, the distinction between the human subject and the non-human world of both the living and non-living is blurred. The girl possesses a schizoid self that blurs the boundaries between desires of her own self and the other. While wandering into the forest, the girl often humanizes the wilderness despite its apathy. Her deliberate connections with the wilderness and the other animals only increases as her journey lengthens:

She became aware of eyes upon her. And though she imagined that they were the hostile eyes of men, they were in fact the eyes of the forest itself watching this new form of creature with its wheezing breath and crashing footfall and bitter human reek, all the night birds and the roaming creatures stilled in silent wonderment as the girl went past. (Groff 9)

The girl is a 'desiring machine' who struggles psychologically due to the inner conflict between two opposite desires created by two divided selves within her. Her desire for survival and adherence to carnophallogocentric beliefs holds one of her 'selfhood' while there remains the manifestation of another 'desiring self' which is compelled to identify with her prey. It was this self that identified with the desire of her prey and was compelled to think of letting the duck go and not separate the female duck from her family because the later self is created by her admiration of the happy family of the duck. This self identifies with the female duck that was lying by the side of her eggs and the male duck. Looking at the male duck, the girl is reminded of her own lover whom she had lost earlier. She ponders:

In the morning, he would awaken to find his dream of mate and nest and ducklings had been robbed of him in the night; he would find himself lonely, and he would wail with the sound of a trumpet and flap his wings and burst up into the sky because his grief could find no other outlet than in flying. She felt a pang in imagining this, for she herself had known the confused search for one now gone (Groff 51)

The humanity within the girl allows the ‘flows of flight’ and perceptions from the family of the duck to the girl and act like ‘abstract machines’ to make her empathize with the duck and his desire. But her hunger forces her and she eventually gives in and brutally kills the duck, succumbing to her brutal and hungry self. It should be noted that “deconstruction tends to be most promising to environmental questions when it shows responses to the call, not primarily for a new ethics, but for far-ranging analysis of our conception of politics.” (Fritsch 21) The novel's portrayal of the protagonist's relationships with animals and the natural world offers a powerful critique of carnophallogocentrism. By emphasizing the importance of embodied experience and the interconnectedness of all living beings, Groff's novel challenges the dominant Western tradition of speciesism and anthropocentrism. The girl's perspective undergoes a transformative journey, precipitated by her struggle to survive in the wilderness. Initially, she adheres to the dominant anthropocentric worldview, which posits human supremacy over the natural environment. She even confronts the unforgiving and indifferent forces of nature but with the assimilation of other ‘desiring machines’ surrounding her, she experiences a profound shift in her perspective. This epiphany is marked by her growing recognition of her own vulnerability and insignificance within the vaster wilds. Her newfound awareness of her place within the natural world serves as a counterpoint to the anthropocentric ideology she previously had adhered. This transformation creates the conflict between human exceptionalism and the reality of human vulnerability in the face of an indifferent and often hostile environment. Ecosophy emphasizes the importance of recognizing the intrinsic value of non-human life and the need for humans to adopt a more humble and reciprocal relationship with the natural world. Arne Naess, the Norwegian philosopher who coined the term "ecosophy," defined it as a "personal philosophy of ecological harmony and responsibility" (Naess, 1973). The girl's journey in the novel can be seen as a process of becoming, wherein she gradually sheds her anthropocentric worldview and embraces a more ecological and relational understanding of herself and the natural world.

As the narrative progresses, the girl's empathetic self becomes more dominant. Her desire to identify with the natural environment and the creatures in it, contribute to the change in her perceptions while complimenting her continuous identifications with both the living and non-living non-human beings. In one of the scenes she comments of this dissolving characteristic: “She stared at the antlers until she felt them seared into her, so that she could later imagine them upon the back of her eyelids

when she wanted to summon a surge of melancholy” (Groff 31) . She further personifies her belongings:

In the firelight, she took all of her good things out of her sack to care for them, because they were the only friends she had and they each had begun to grow some character. The hatchet was blunt but as faithful as a dog, the knife was two-faced and angry but always read, the flint was taciturn, the sack bemused, the coverlets pacific, the pewter cup overeager and a little greedy. Off her feet she took the twin boot, her best two friends and the most doughty...(Groff 47)

Her identification makes her challenge the patriarchal and anthropocentric ideologies as she begins to embrace a more reciprocal and embodied relationship with her surroundings and recognizes the interconnectedness of all living beings, comprehending her own existence within the vaster realm of the wilderness. She begins to acknowledge the idea where the distinction between the ‘self and the other’ is blurred. She comes to recognize the interconnectedness of all living beings and the blur of the boundaries between the humans and the non-human animals. The recognition is exemplified in two of the significant scenes: one with a dead fish and the other with a bear. She develops a habit of identifying with the creatures she eats and the creatures that might devour her. Both of the situations, of being a consumer and the consumed were equally welcome to her. Once after eating a large fish she had to cross a thinly iced river which threatens her safety. At this point, she acknowledges the fact that:

It was not sad to her, this idea of the river gathering her dead body up into its dark hands and carrying it bumping under the ice all the way down into the great bay, where the larger and more vicious fish would find her and eat her up, just as she had eaten the fish that thrashed within her guts now...fish were higher form of life. There would be poetry in the repetition: fish into girl, girl into fish. Perhaps the eternal chain of being was not a chain at all but a ring, one life not ending where the other begins but all souls overlapping (Groff 24)

Next such scene occurs with a mother bear. In the wilderness, she meets a mother bear with her two baby bears. The baby bears play with her while their mother begins to approach the girl, sensing danger to her children. At this point, the girl extends her hands in surrender to the mother bear entertaining the thought that she could happily accept the fact being consumed by the bear because it makes no difference whether she is the consumer or the consumed. Here the girl accepts the concept that it makes no difference if the bear consumes her just as it had made no difference if she (desiring machine) was the consumer of another animal (other desiring machine). She even wishes to become a part of the mother bear and by extension becoming a part of the natural world of the forest. The mother

bear didn't harm her and went away with her babies but the scene metaphorically represents the dissolving of a human psyche into other beings in almost a decisive level. The protagonist's embrace of the idea of becoming-animal and becoming-woman illustrate the ways in which desire can be both a creative and destructive force, highlighting the need for a more complex understanding of human subjectivity. This act of surrender can be seen as a form of "becoming-animal" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980), wherein the protagonist's sense of self is dissolved and reconfigured through her relationships with non-human animals. By desiring to be consumed by the bear, the protagonist is, in effect, expressing her desire to become a part of the bear's body and, by extension, part of the natural world. As explained by Deleuze and Guattari in the book *Anti-Oedipus*,

Desiring machines are binary machines , obeying a binary law or set of rules governing associations: one machine is always coupled with another ... Desire constantly couples continues flows and partial objects that are by nature fragmentary and fragmented. Desire causes the current to flow, itself flows in turn and breaks the flows (5).

Here the flow of desire from the bear to the girl makes her identify with the self of the bear. According to Schizoanalysis,

Doubtless each organ machine interprets the entire world from the perspective of its own flux, from the point of view of the energy that flows from it: the eye interprets everything – speaking, understanding, shitting, fucking- in terms of seeing. But the connection with other machine is always established, along a transverse path, so that one machine interrupts the current of the other or “sees” its own current interrupted. (6)

The protagonist's schizoid identity can be seen as a manifestation of desire's deterritorializing force, which disrupts the rigid, patriarchal structures of Christian dogma, allowing her to forge new, rhizomatic connections between human and non-human, self and world and thereby create a new, fluid, and inclusive relationship with the universe. This transformation underscores the protagonist's shift from a 'fixed self', based on dominance and control to a 'performative self', based on surrender, vulnerability, and interconnectedness. Through this transformation, the novel offers a powerful critique of anthropocentrism and the dominant Western worldview, instead positing a more ecological and relational understanding of the self and the natural world. Her life transforms as: “a life no longer lived on the basis of need , in terms of means and ends , but according to a production, a productivity, a potency, in terms of causes and effects” (Deleuze 1998: 3) The task of schizoanalysis is

that of tirelessly taking apart egos and their presuppositions; liberating the prepersonal singularities they enclose and repress; mobilizing the flows they would be capable of

transmitting, receiving, or intercepting; establishing always further and more sharply the schizzes and the breaks well below conditions of identity; and assembling the desiring-machines that countersect everyone and group everyone with others (as qtd. in Ajvazi).

Conclusion

The Vaster Wilds blends the philosophical concerns of environmentalism with the subjectivity of a woman. The novel situates the protagonist outside a civilized society and gives a vivid picture of the complexities faced by her when she comprehends the miniaturization of the human existence in the face of the vaster wilderness. By applying the theoretical frameworks of Schizoanalysis and Carnophallogocentrism, the paper explores the complex knots of desire that control the protagonist and the narrative in general. The aim has been to foreground the rhizomatic nature of desires and selfhood that is minutely portrayed by Groff in the novel. The unnamed protagonist is a schizoid subject who is constantly made to acknowledge the desire of the 'others' along with her own which makes her aware of the interconnected webs of desire that governs the universe. Her gradual submission to the vaster web of these abstract desires enables her to resist the dominant ideologies of patriarchy and carnophallogocentrism.

The aim of the paper is to highlight the elements in the novel that challenge the western philosophical tradition based on reason and male supremacy. Through a close reading of the lived- experiences of the protagonist whom Groff has placed in the middle of the vaster environment, the paper attempts to show the deconstruction of western dominant ideologies of patriarchy and carnophallogocentrism when a vaster perspective of the world is taken. By employing the schizoanalytic concepts of desire, becoming, and lines of flight, the unnamed protagonist offers a remarkable implication for human relationships with the natural world. The girl is made by Groff to break away from the colonial settlement thereby escaping the fixed territory of human civilization. Her comprehension of the surrounding remains in a continuous flux due to the nomadic condition which enhances her rhizomatic behaviors even further. *The Vaster Wilds* is a significant contribution by Groff that acknowledges the complexity of a female psyche which is both multifaceted and embracing of environmental sustainability. The novel not only criticizes the idea of human superiority over Nature but also offers a Schizoanalytic understanding of human self that is based on desire and empathy.

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