

# Nature Bound by the Female Body: Humans and Nature in Olive Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm*

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## **Abstract**

In my paper I am trying to answer the question: does Lyndall have to die in Schreiner's novel *Story of an African Farm* in order to achieve unity with nature? I argue that the definition of nature that Hannah Freeman introduces leaves the heroine, Lyndall, with only one option: death. I draw on Raymond Williams to define "nature" as a complex idea with varied definitions. I then use Karl Marx and Jason Moore to discuss how some critics may disagree with Freeman and argue instead that nature and humans are already unified. I suggest that the moon in the novel complicates their version of "the web" by equalizing nature and human-made objects, but favoring some humans over others. In opposition to Freeman's argument that humans are not together with nature, I suggest that it is not that humans themselves are unnatural. Rather, the restrictions humans impose on each other limit a person's ability to connect with nature and even other people.

**Keywords:** The Story of an African Farm, Olive Schreiner, Nature, Society, Gender, Colonialism, Landscape

Hannah Freeman's article "Dissolution and Landscape in Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*" outlines Lyndall's desire to become one with nature. The Victorian society she lives in, however, restricts Lyndall by expecting her to follow the "Victorian Angel" model of femininity, where a woman was supposed

to remain pure until marriage and spend the majority of her time within the domestic sphere. Lyndall attempts to rebel against this constricting ideology, but the only way she is able to free herself from society is to free herself from her body by dying. This is because her body informs the society of her gender, race, and her social status. Freeman argues that it is only through death that Lyndall is finally able to remove the social pressures placed on her by her physical identity. By leaving her body behind, Lyndall is able to remove herself from social classification. When she escapes from society, she becomes closer to nature. The landscape in the novel is also being constricted. The main setting of the book is on a farm, a piece of land that has been harnessed, and reshaped by human hands. It becomes an artificial “nature,” or a “nature harnessed through manmade apparatuses” (Freeman 22), that fits colonial expectations. The female body and the landscape, then, are interconnected in a colonial reading of this text. Both are kept from being what and who they “naturally” are because of the bindings placed on them by Victorian society until the moment of Lyndall’s death. However, dying seems to be an extreme measure to take in order to achieve unity with nature. Other critics argue that humans are already intrinsically embedded within nature, so death would not necessarily bring humans any closer than they already are. In the context and definition of nature by Freeman in *Story of an African Farm*, death is the only way for Lyndall to achieve unity with nature because it allows her to escape from the social constraints that have been placed on her.

As “Nature” is a word with many varying definitions, the word itself needs to be contextualized within the novel. According to Raymond Williams, nature “is perhaps the most complex word in the language” (Williams 219). One meaning of nature is the “quality and character of something” or someone, but it can also mean “the inherent force which directs either the world or human beings or both” or “the matter of the world itself” (219) including or excluding human beings. Nature “is a word that carries...many of the major variations of human thought” (224) and has a long philosophical tradition. Nature and humanity have existed in a state of strained balance for as long as humans came up with the thought of “nature”. Without nature humans would not exist, and without humans the *idea* or *concept* of nature would not exist either because nature does not see itself as its own identity. In this way humans have also created “nature” by naming and defining it, and therefore nature is just as much a part of us as we are of it.

Philosopher Karl Marx separated humans from animals as a “species being” (Marx 75). As opposed to being a species, Marx insinuates that man is more advanced because of his ability to reason and understand that he is a man, but Marx still maintains that “man is a part of nature” (75). Not only is nature “his direct means of life” (75) but also that “[m]an *lives* on nature – [meaning] that nature is his *body*, which must remain in continuous intercourse if he is not to die” (75). This means that humans are a direct product of nature as they reproduce. Humans also constantly digest organic material for survival and create waste, both while alive and through the process of decay after death. They also surround themselves with both organic and inorganic natural material in order to create dwellings, clothing, and other items essential for human survival. In this way “nature appears as *his* work and his reality” (76). So, for Marx, it is in life and while men are farming and creating their own worlds through nature that man and nature are united and death is simply a continuation of this cycle. He is, however, careful to specify that there is a difference between labor in the case of farming, as an act to feed people (for survival), and laboring to make money. Farming to feed oneself and others is a natural progression and a means to survival while farming for profit is part of the capitalist economic system, which removes the humanity, and therefore nature, from the work. In this case death, which would remove the human spirit from the system of capitalism, allows a person to return to nature.

For Jason Moore there are two ways that people interpret nature and how nature interacts with society and vice versa. Nature (with a capital ‘N’) is the “external, controllable, reducible” (Moore 3) definition that facilitates capitalism. A sense of ‘othering’ occurs between human and nature where humanity interacts with nature as if they are not a part of it. In this way there is no guilt by people who irresponsibly use nature and its resources, and this ideology also allows for societies to speak up against money-hungry organizations. Nature with a lower case ‘n’, however, is the “web of life” (3) that puts humans as a “force of nature” rather than a force working against nature. People, in this definition, exist as part of the web rather than against the web. Moore argues that “[t]he two acting units – humanity/environments – are not independent but interpenetrated” (28) in every aspect. In this way everything a human does, including capitalistic endeavors, are “humans making environments, and environments making human” (28). Death is then an unnecessary part of unification with nature as humans are already tied to it.

The fact that Schreiner starts *The Story of an African Farm* by using nature, in this case the “full African moon” (Schreiner 47) and its light, as a character with a voice and gaze allows for both a capital “N” and lowercase “n” reading of nature. Though the moon has no eyes or way to verbally communicate with the readers, the readers see the first images of the farm through the “gaze” of the moon by what it “describes”. The moon is not necessarily anthropomorphized, which is to say the moon does not actually take on any human qualities. There is no claim to human emotions, it is simply able to cast its light and what is lit up is told to the readers. The moon does not display favoritism between the shrubs growing on the ground, the man-made tools and buildings or the people sleeping on the farm. All of these objects that exist are rendered equal by the moon, and nature seems to view them simply as part of the landscape. This agrees with a Marxist or Moore “web-of-life” reading in that all these man-made objects that are created for the survival of the people living on the farm are not described as objects out of place by nature. An alternate reading appears, however, when the light shines on the sleeping inhabitants in the buildings. The moonlight does not explicitly alight on Tant’ Sannie who “rolled heavily in her sleep...and dreamed bad dreams,” of choking on food she had earlier that day (Schreiner 47-48). This contrasts with how the moonlight interacts with the sleeping Em and Lyndall. Although Em is not described as a necessarily beautiful child, “the loving moonlight hid defects” (48) present in Em’s physical being. Lyndall, like Em, is chosen in some way by the moon and “belonged of right to the moonlight” (48). At this point there seems to be a sudden change in how the moon perceives the organic and non-organic beings on the farm. The way nature is blind to Tant’ Sannie other than noting she is a consumer does not make her equal to the child who the moonlight seems to love and the one who belongs to it.

Freeman deciphers this moment as an example of how “nature”, present in *Story of an African Farm*, and people have grown apart. However, there are characters present who want to reunite with nature. In this case “Nature” with a capital “N” is present, but there are individuals in the novel that want a lowercase “n” connection. Nature is not just the moon but the landscape that is subject to colonization and capitalism as the inhabitants use the landscape “merely as a resource at their disposal” (Freeman 23), which is an “abuse of the natural world” (23). The natural landscape, or previously uncultivated land that was present before the colonizers, has been altered in an effort to control and harness the

“wildness” and to mold nature into something that society deemed as worthwhile. To colonial humans, a farm is more productive and helpful to their survival than uncultivated wilderness. By creating the farm, humans have imposed something unnatural to the landscape. Although Marx and Moore have argued that a farm is part of nature because people are part of nature, Freeman suggests that the farm is unnatural because the people working on the farm have separated themselves from nature.

At this point it is integral to understand that Freeman does not think that people (as a physical entity) are unnatural, but the social ideas and restrictions created by people are. Colonists strive to control the landscape in the same way that they tried to control other people, through the “manipulation of people and their environment. . . oriented towards mastery and greed” (23) but are met with resistance by the things and people they are trying to master. Lyndall is a character who struggles to find balance between what society tells her to be and who she wants to be. Lyndall was expected to behave in a certain manner as well as to strive to be a specific type of woman in the Victorian era. The character Em embodies that ideal. She was the “Victorian Angel” who represented what a typical Victorian young lady should strive to be. Em would rather think about marriage and rearing children than going to school or trying to work outside of the farm. Lyndall “protested that woman were regulated and confined to particular activities in society because of their sex,” (Freeman 26) rejecting the Victorian “ideal woman” and strove to become more knowledgeable. Though she wants to become educated, her only option is to attend a finishing school, which taught her to become the “Victorian Angel” image that she wanted to avoid in the first place. Limitations are placed on Lyndall because of her physical identity, or her body, based on her race, gender and class. Her body is what informs the rest of her society on how to see and treat her. Lyndall’s true self or true nature, the person she would be if she did not have these unnatural restrictions limiting her, is constricted within her physical body. She believes that the injustices that she suffered are a result of the “limitations of her womanhood, physically as well as socially” (Freeman 19). Although she strives to act outside of the Victorian norm for women, her body limits her from being able to obtain those goals.

Freeman argues that it is during her death scene that she is finally able to release herself from the constraints of her body placed by society and join the aspects of nature that are still free from the constrictions of humankind. During

the moments of her death she picks up a mirror and is able to watch herself pass away. The physical body is what went first; she loses feeling in her fingers and then she is unable to speak. As she dies her eyes close and her spirit, her true self and true nature, is able to escape and join the Grey Dawn that approached, creeping over to her body. Like the moon at the beginning of the book, the Grey Dawn is not under the command of humans, it is “a substance that lacks physical form and becomes one” (Freeman 28) with her spirit. Lyndall’s spirit, which was kept bound by her body, is released as her body dies, and “as her body begins to break apart. . . she becomes ‘part of the landscape’” (28). Her body remains on the ground, the part of nature that man is able to harness. While Marx and Moore may argue that the limitations placed on Lyndall were done by people who are part of nature (and therefore the imitations are of a natural progression), Freeman argues that the limitations are unnatural. By placing limitations on the body, society becomes “an obstacle to union with a larger whole” (Freeman 26). It is “natural” to have different physical forms, whether it is gender or race, but that should not limit a person’s ability to be part of the whole society. If the limitations are being placed, then people are actually “being molded, the final physical product determining and limiting one’s course in life” (27).

Critiques are prone to read Lyndall as a “New Woman” who rebels against the normal social expectations of women during the Victorian period. Freeman, however, argues that analyzing Lyndall only through a gender lens can “risk overlooking her place in a colonial context” (19). In *Story of an African Farm*, Lyndall serves to highlight the socially constructed bindings placed not just on woman, but also on nature. Her body and gender are viewed and controlled in the same way that nature is by the colonists. Lyndall strove to find ways to remove the bindings that held her true nature inside of a construct of man-made limitations. When she died, she is able to release herself from those bindings and from Victorian society’s pressures. Whatever left her body was able to leave behind the constricting labels that the body brings, like gender, race, and class. Nature, too, is able to escape from human control in the form of the moon and the Grey Dawn. Although other critics like Karl Marx and Jason Moore have suggested that humans are already part of nature and should not be described as separate, they agree that the idea of man’s mastering of nature is a natural process. The union of Lyndall’s spirit and the Grey Dawn towards the end of the novel allows readers to see a relationship between human and nature, where one side is not trying to

master the other, and the two together are simply joining cooperatively. When this unity is achieved, humans can no longer categorize each other solely based on their physical qualities. The relationships between people, then, become balanced with different races and genders able to work together without one side trying to dominate the other. When people achieve a balance with nature, they are able to find a way to achieve balance with each other.

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