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A Deconstruction of the Feminist Overtones in Ada Limón's The Hurting Kind

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Abstract

The aim of the research is to explore Limón's relationship with nature as manifested in The Hurting Kind from a feminist lens. Being a qualitative study, it analyzes selected poems using textual analysis as a research method alongside a conceptual framework comprising deconstruction and feminism as a lens of literary criticism. The research has aimed to explore the binary opposition not as it applies to men and women but to animals and women and the way the two are not in direct conflict but rather runs parallel to one another in their very 'otherness'. In doing so, a potential new angle for deconstructing female oppression to its roots is introduced and touched upon. Moreover, the research has also delved into the intimate emotions of Limón, the poet, as she experienced them in crafting the poems particularly selected for this study to further cement the foundation that it seeks to challenge.

Keywords: Ada Limón, Animals, Deconstruction, Feminism, The Hurting Kind

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A Deconstruction of the Feminist Overtones in Ada Limón's *The Hurting Kind*

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Abstract

*The aim of the research is to explore Limón's relationship with nature as manifested in *The Hurting Kind* from a feminist lens. Being a qualitative study, it analyzes selected poems using textual analysis as a research method alongside a conceptual framework comprising deconstruction and feminism as a lens of literary criticism. The research has aimed to explore the binary opposition not as it applies to men and women but to animals and women and the way the two are not in direct conflict but rather runs parallel to one another in their very 'otherness'. In doing so, a potential new angle for deconstructing female oppression to its roots is introduced and touched upon. Moreover, the research has also delved into the intimate emotions of Limón, the poet, as she experienced them in crafting the poems particularly selected for this study to further cement the foundation that it seeks to challenge.*

Keywords:

[Ada Limón](#), [Animals](#), [Deconstruction](#), [Feminism](#), [The Hurting Kind](#)

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Introduction:

Background

Deconstruction

Deconstruction is an approach to literary and philosophical criticism founded by Jacques Derrida in the 1960s that not only purports to analyze literature with an eye for—essentially—deconstructing the vital parts of it but aims to apply the same to political institutions as well. The term is believed to have been first appropriated from Heidegger's use of the word "destruction" in *Being and Time* and, superficially, challenges the fundamental concept of binary oppositions upon which, Derrida believed, the

entirety of Western society is upheld. In doing so, it also challenges the hierarchal nature of such a system in which one extreme is inherently understood to be superior to its counterpart e.g. when considering "light" and "dark" as two opposing forces, light is automatically taken to be something good and virtuous and, thus, better. Even beyond the philosophical underpinnings of such tendencies, deconstruction takes a closer look at the way language is spoken, listened to, and understood, with the conclusion that language is no more unanimous than human nature itself, that even the simplest words hold vastly different meanings for different people. In other



words, deconstruction tears down previously held beliefs with the presupposition that what is said isn't as critical to extracting meaning as what is *not* said. Fairly controversial for its time, deconstruction as a theory has retained its reputation into the present age with varying degrees of censure attached to its legacy throughout the field of liberal arts and beyond.

Deconstruction and Feminism

The overlap between deconstruction and feminism is not immediately obvious. However, according to Bernard Duyfhuizen, there is more in common between these two schools of thought than one might think. In the words of Duyfhuizen and others, "Both seek to displace purposes of critical inquiry restrictive conventions and ideas that implicitly or explicitly exclude concepts threatening conventional logocentric and anthropocentric epistemologies" (1984). There is an inherent need in both deconstruction and feminism to essentially disassemble the status quo by illuminating certain aspects of it that have long been held, without just reason, to be the default against which any outliers must always be measured i.e., masculinity is the default against which femininity, both as a concept and as a language, finds its definition; without it, it ceases to have meaning, which evinces the problematic assertion that "woman" owes its very existence to "man".

It is the very same problematic connection that the feminist strain of deconstruction seeks to dismantle. "Woman" is defined in her relation to "man", a practice that follows from the tenets of deconstruction as originally laid down by Derrida (Poovey, 1988). However, Derrida has challenged the preconception of "binary opposition" altogether so that neither should take precedent and that the entire foundation upon which opposition—from which stems identity as we recognize it in relation to another—is built. The logical conclusion of deconstruction, according to Poovey (1988), is that the very concept of womanhood is a social construct that is dependent, not upon biological makeup or social experiences, but upon the context within which it is represented. Subsequently, to say that women as a collective group

have been oppressed minimizes the scale of the problem.

The mention of oppression as it has been experienced by women is particularly compelling for it introduces another angle into the feminist lens through which deconstruction is currently being assessed. Ultimately, Poovey (1988) arrives at the conclusion that to limit womanhood in a strictly binary system is to deny the unique circumstances of historical women that first became the rallying point for feminism. Differences in regard to race, sexual orientation, and class—to name a few—cultivated all sorts of women who suffered oppression to varying degrees and in wildly different ways. It is vital to acknowledge this because—once again borrowing from deconstruction—oppression as a phenomenon can mean different things to different people. What one person might perceive to be oppression, for example, could be the norm for another, and thus nothing worth inciting change over. Alternatively, victims themselves, if not made aware of the subtleties of the term and how it can change forms across spatiotemporal bounds, may find themselves becoming more and more like the oppressors enforcing a status quo that would continue to inflict harm. Thus, deconstruction here becomes vital as it challenges the very base upon which mainstream feminism is thought to be upheld—in particular what we call "white feminism" that applies to only a very select group of people—though Poovey (1988) advises against letting one overlap the other.

Duyfhuizen (1984) further expands on this when he says that most of the work done in the field of deconstruction from which feminism could reasonably extract bits and pieces advantageous to its cause has been laid down by male writers, not females. Deconstructionist writers are traditionally inclined to acknowledge female writers in passing only, citing Vincent B. Leitch as an example. In the book *Deconstructive Criticism: An Advanced Introduction*, the critic Barbara Johnson is mentioned by her last name only, thus upholding an intrinsically patriarchal tradition in which the "proper name" is the one that completely erases any marks of femininity (Leitch, 1983). Taking this a step further, Duyfhuizen

states how “Studies of sexist language have shown us that the most prevalent form of sexism in our language is the conventional use of “he” as the mark for an indefinite referent” (1984). Indeed, any unidentified person is immediately assumed to be a he; unless the person should happen to possess some characteristics not typically associated with the male mien, in which case the usage of feminine pronouns is carried out in a way that is distinctively scornful and disparaging. Citing further examples from the article by Duyfhuizen (1984), we have phrases such as “you may presume she is hostile to deconstruction” and “the critic, a dispersed subject, playing the clown and idiot, champions error so as to undermine the rules of culture, which assign her a fixed role in the controlled exchanges of knowledge and power”—in the latter example, the critic, while acknowledging the possibility of being female, is made out to be a “clown” and “an idiot” in no uncertain terms. It is definitely a matter of contention as to whether the same caustic language would be used so easily to describe the critic’s particular method of work if it were a “he” and not a “she”.

Deconstruction, Feminism, and Marxism

As opposed to Leitch, Michael Ryan’s take on deconstruction and feminism is considerably more appealing, according to Duyfhuizen’s assessment. Borrowing from Ryan’s *Marxism and Deconstruction* (1982), Duyfhuizen studies the larger scope in which feminism is presented against the backdrop of Marxism, which is yet another theoretical perspective having much in common with both feminism and deconstruction in the sense that all three possess—both individually and collectively—the amazing potential for radical intertextual and extratextual critical reading that would challenge and eventually break down “the insular enclaves of many university departments of literature” (Duyfhuizen et al., 1984). From this quotation, the intent to inculcate change within the physical world rather than within the restraints of academia is immediately made obvious. Deconstruction—as the locus from which feminism and Marxism are being dissected here—is not simply a “deconstruction” of the written word to no other

extent than to provide another venue from which it may be read. Rather, if applied to its fullest ability, the aim of Deconstruction as a theoretical perspective is to inspire a unique strain of thinking that seeks to question the status quo in the hopes of discovering a better and richer alternative that does not depend so wholly on the rigid hierarchies of the binary system in which one must always be held inferior to another—the male–female binary and its legacy of oppression stand as one of the most prominent examples in this case. Case in point, Ryan is quoted as saying, “Similarly, Marxism allows for the study of the opposition in the context of economic production, where again a hierarchy of value for labor has operated to the detriment of women” (Duyfhuizen et al., 1984). Women have historically been discouraged from seeking out well-established careers that could contribute both to the economy of the country and of the household; indeed, in effectively cutting them off from any means of making their own money, women were made entirely dependent on the male figures in their life, so much so that, say, leaving an unhappy or an outright abusive marriage was rendered impossible because she would then have no means of supporting herself or her children. In introducing the concept of economic suppression resulting from the very binary opposition being sought to dismantle, Marxism further contributes to the poignancy of feminism as it leans on deconstructionist criticism to help dismantle some of the more ill-informed myths circulating it.

Male–Female Binary

On a different note, dismantling the male/female hierarchy is crucial from a feminist point of view as it would allow for the reading of previously excluded texts by women to be perused both for their literary merit and for their significance “in reconstructing our cultural sensibility along non-sexist lines” (Duyfhuizen et al., 1984). The quoted phrase refers to an underlying sexist strain that governs the unconscious cultural sensibilities traversing borders; whether or not we practice it intentionally, the norms of gender binarism have instilled in us a proclivity to prioritize the male over the female, which has seeped into our reading habits and shaped the way in which

we carry out analysis and criticism. By dismantling the restraints of binarism, such hierarchies would be rendered obsolete, and text would be able to be perused freely without being confined to a male or female mien. Despite the seemingly abstract notion that this evokes, Duyfhuizen denies this is merely a reclamation project; rather, he states that this is very much a strenuous action that seeks to force open restricted channels of communication once thought to be rendered unserviceable by an overwhelmingly male majority that used to be the established norm (1984).

Though it is not an over-arching theory in use here, Duyfhuizen borrows from the reader-response school of criticism when he brings up Jonathan Culler's inquiry of "What difference does it make if the reader is a woman?" (1982). This shifts the focus of attention away from the identity of the writer—which we previously discussed in terms of the gender binary and how their being a male or a female determined the way in which their writing was received—and onto the reader. However, Culler, [1982](#) denies that it should have any impact on the actual practice of reading itself.

Criticism of Deconstruction

Not much has changed in the basic tenets of deconstruction as a literary theory since its conception. Lamichhane ([2024](#)) sums it up succinctly: "Derrida's deconstructionist approach criticizes the tenets of dominant discourses, such as capitalism and Marxism, and challenges binary opposition. Deconstruction focuses on the interplay between languages and texts and their meaning" (p. 38).

Similarly, in response to its oft-repeated criticisms of ignoring the truth in favor of a parsed fabrication, Sediq ([2024](#)) notes:

Contrary to its seemingly destructive nature, this method is characterized not just by dismantling the foundations of the study area but by a process akin to separating and restoring a real building to its original materials, ultimately leading to the construction of something new. (p. 8)

This is not to say that deconstruction ignores the truth; in fact, it presents it in a new light so that it may

be judged from novel angles and produce something new to add to the discussion.

It is imperative to understand the true aims of deconstruction if one is to put it to use in a critical undertaking.

The Limits of Deconstruction and Modern Feminism

Inge Konik ([2023](#)) states that the biggest criticism of modern-day liberal feminism is that, instead of seeking to break new ground, it is content to retread the well-worn paths of pre-established economic and political frameworks, "seeking power and equal opportunity in highly exploitative institutions and entities embedded in the neoliberal system". There is considerable overlap between individualism and feminism in twenty-first-century thinking, leading to the pitfalls of "identity politics", "something which 'scarcely fosters social interaction across differences [and] on the contrary ... encourages separatism and group enclaves" (Konik, [2023](#), p. 72).

On the other hand, it cannot be denied that feminism continues to fight an uphill battle. Goetz and Mayer ([2023](#)) conclude in their book *Global Perspectives on Anti-Feminism* that, due to deconstructivist feminism's inclination to attack "the alleged naturalness and implicitness of gender dualism and heteronormativity", anti-feminism has, in turn, launched campaigns against the passing of further LGBTQ+ reform, fully indicating its capability to enact—or, in this case, hinder—societal change and lock society in a stalemate.

Circling back to Derrida anew, Stocker ([2024](#)) remarks "For Derrida ideas of justice in relation to truth and sincerity are necessary to communication, though they can never be realized in full, and this gets to the heart of deconstructive ethics". If we take the preceding example, Stocker ([2024](#)) further states that "the tension between necessary ideals and their necessary impossibility is one way of understanding deconstruction" i.e., the necessary ideals in this case pertaining to a fully-realized society in which all strata of people receive similar, if not identical, levels of treatment and the necessary impossibility of this being

achieved due, in no small part, to issues such as miscommunication or what not.

This isn't to say that feminism, or deconstructivist feminism, hasn't made any headway at all since its conception. On the contrary, it is encouraging that it has managed to hold onto some semblance of relatability despite changing times, indicating its continued significance.

Analysis

In the following, deconstruction will be applied to the feminist overtones present in *The Hurting Kind*, a collection of poetry published in 2022 by Ada Limón, the 24th Poet Laureate of the United States. Divided into four sections—each corresponding to a season—the collection immediately calls to mind Derrida's claim of Western society's phallogocentric ideals, which are at once opposed by Limón's female-centric perspective. As a result, one of the foremost tenets of deconstruction is fulfilled within the very make-up of the poems in that Limón has wrested the locus of attention away from the male and toward the female, thus turning the axis of perspective away from the familiar and toward something that is—relatively—unfamiliar. From a contemporary perspective, this shift may not, perhaps, be all that jarring since it has become a long-accepted fact that women can, and do, write and contribute to literary canon. In Limón's case, however, further qualifiers may be necessary for a clearer context: she is the first Latina to be made Poet Laureate of the United States, giving her a position of considerable seniority from which she speaks both as a woman grown and as a girl-child, the latter of which lends so much texture and richness to Limón's present poetry under consideration, tinted as it is through the lens of her upbringing as she remembers it.

The dichotomy of Girlhood and Womanhood

The dichotomy of girlhood and womanhood is a recurring theme throughout the poems in *The Hurting Kind*, with Limón alternating between dissecting her younger self through the eyes of her present one and finding echoes of the same in her life as she lives it now.

In “A Good Story”, she is reminded of a story her stepfather used to tell her when she was little, on days when she was feeling a little too much of everything, which she wraps up in a single line in her present voice: “The body is so body” (Limón, 2022). At the surface level, if read from the perspective of someone much younger, this may not be considered all that deep. The body is a body and there is nothing more to it, even if it has been somewhat awkwardly articulated. From a maturer perspective—and a decidedly deconstructionist one—it becomes much more interesting to speculate about constricting the meaning of the word “body” to itself. If the body is “so body”, it begets asking after what it is *not*. It is not an abstract concept, an ephemeral thought on the wind, or something without form. In establishing its separateness from these very things, perhaps Limón is feeling overburdened by everything the body *is*. She supplants this with vivid imagery: “Today, my head is packed with cockroaches, dizziness, and everywhere it hurts. Venom in the jaw, behind the eyes, between the blades” (Limón, 2022). The point, once again, lies in what has not been explicitly stated here, that if the body were not so body—so firmly rooted in physicality—it would not be possible for Limón to suffer from such anguish. The tribulations of womanhood are interrupted with a recollection from girlhood, of her stepfather offering her, sick with heartbreak, comfort in the shape of a small pizza. The ensuing epiphany: “Maybe I was just hungry” can apply both to the memory and to her present situation (Limón, 2022). The body, with all its complications, can sometimes boil down to something as simple as needing nourishment. Even that, however, cannot only be limited to food; Limón specifically mentions a yearning for “human kindness”, which can be as small as her stepfather's pizza or as simple as the fondness she feels for her dog and her cat napping on either side of her.

Animals and Womanhood

“Glimpse” is another poem that explores Limón's dual role as a girlfriend and as a “new” girlfriend. Here, however, she goes one step further and uses her cat to study the nature of this duality from the outside looking in. Because the cat was familiar with the

previous girlfriend, Limón wonders about the extent of this familiarity, whether or not the cat acknowledges her as her own person or whether it just sees her as a replacement for the girlfriend that is no longer “of the earth”. Limón makes explicit mention of the fact that the cat belonged to her husband’s ex-girlfriend, removing Limón herself completely from any original claim of ownership. She wants to ask the cat whether it is genuinely fond of Limón or if it is simply remembering her previous owner; what is left unsaid, perhaps, is whether Limón’s husband harbors similar feelings, whether he loves Limón for who she is or because she is a convenient replacement for someone who is no longer here. If deconstruction is all about taking a text apart by the very bones, then the surface-level meaning of “Glimpse” becomes something much more introspective, when something we haven’t done before rings of familiarity all the same because we are merely filling out a predetermined space left empty by someone else. The question then becomes whether or not we are appreciated for ourselves or for the role we adopt. Limón offers no answer at the end of this poem and perhaps she does not really need to; perhaps it is simply enough to set the gears of the mind in motion, to offer a “deconstructed” view of humanity—and, subsequently, of femininity—which questions the nature of the connection between individuality and collectivity.

“Glimpse” isn’t the only poem in which an animal motif is used to represent something much deeper. “Give Me This”, for example, uses a groundhog to represent Limón’s feelings of being trapped in her own body and of being denied even the simpler pleasures of life. She likens her suffering to, “Barbed wire pulled out of the mouth, as if demanding that I kneel to the trap of coiled spikes used in warfare and fencing” (Limón, 2022). The mention of warfare is a direct contrast to the peaceful imagery evoked by the groundhog, suggesting a fundamental conflict between Limón’s true reality and the reality she wishes were hers. Even so, she manages to find a small bit of joy in watching the groundhog, capping the poem off with the lines, “She is a funny creature and earnest, and she is doing what she can to survive” (Limón, 2022). Perhaps the “she” she refers to is the groundhog; perhaps she is talking about herself. It’s

particularly interesting that she repeatedly uses animals as a means of escapism within her poetry; to her, animals represent a kind of careless freedom she herself could never acquire, not the least because she is a human being trapped in a body that is constantly expected to undergo so much.

The following poem “Drowning Creek” continues in the same vein, with Limón remarking upon the self-assuredness of a belted kingfisher she sees when she is driving by in her car. Though she wishes she could stop and marvel at its beauty, she is long past it. The bird here is representative of the smaller things in life that Limón finds herself too otherwise preoccupied to enjoy. Moreover, although she is turning over this revelation in her mind, the bird itself thinks no more of it than it would of, in Limón’s words, “history’s bloody battles” or “why this creek was called Drowning Creek” (Limón, 2022). In one breath, she juxtaposes the worst of humanity with its more prosaic facets, paradoxical wording that keeps up until the end of the poem. Limón is both “certain” and “certain of nothing”; there is a “solitude to the world” she couldn’t even begin to understand and yet she would die for it. Whether or not this final sentiment is something she would do freely or something she is expected to do remains ambiguous; what is clear, however, is the matter-of-fact tone in which it is conveyed.

“And, Too, the Fox” is yet again Limón remarking on the carefree nature of a fox even as it chases a squirrel; although it is hunting it for food, it does not seem to think of it as “work” but rather as “play”. The fox lives a rather paltry life, consisting of only the bare necessities which, to an outside perspective—particularly that of a human—may not appear to be all that much. Indeed, Limón makes excruciating note of the fact that the fox doesn’t care for much at all, a statement which might appear to be said in a disparaging manner at first glance but upon further inspection speaks to the fox’s freedom from the shackles of all the never-ending “what-ifs” plaguing ordinary people. Indeed, once the fox is gone, he would no longer care about whatever is done in its absence.

The Hurting Kind is not only limited to its metaphorical treatment of animals; Limón goes

further to encapsulate nature as a whole in describing her inner feelings and how they relate to the world around her at large. Her use of language is especially telling in how she repeatedly references the things in nature that may be particularly lacking in her own life. The indifference of the fox, for example, contrasts with the overwhelming heartbreak of her fifteen-year-old self and her mother's self-assured attitude sets the precedent for how the horses will react to her presence in a similar mien in "Intimacy", something the speaker finds herself incapable of emulating. The "otherness" that is referenced at the end of this poem is left ambiguous; whether or not the speaker is remarking upon the otherness of herself and her mother from the horses as a separate species is left to the reader's interpretation. However, perhaps Limón means to take the very concept of "otherness" as a story or as a matter of course, and not something that should necessarily have some moralistic tether attached to it to justify its existence. Womanhood—often taken in parallel with, if not exactly equal to, the alienating notion of "otherness"—requires a similar treatment i.e., that it is not a consequence of a larger agenda but a natural occurrence. In accepting it as such, in treating it with the same "smooth indifference" one might anything else, femininity may not appear to be as strange as it is made out to be at times. This is, of course, but one interpretation of Limón's poetry and how, in deconstructing something as mundane as the poet's uncertainty around horses, we can trace it back to her uncertainties regarding her own gender and her place in the world. In "Instrumentation", especially, she expresses a desire to become completely unrooted from the earth and to make a kind of music "even death cannot deny". The jawbone of an animal long dead becomes a metaphor for legacy and posterity; moreover, the common man cannot identify the gender of an animal through its bones alone. Reminiscent of Limón's earlier lamentation about the body being "so body", perhaps stripping it of flesh completely and leaving only the bones behind is her answer to the overwhelming sensations that she finds so cumbersome.

Ending Thoughts

In summation, several examples of Limón's close affinity with animals can be discovered within *The Hurting Kind*. This stands true even as the poet has favored flora over fauna in deepening her intimate connection to it, yet it is not completely wrong either to assume she sees more of herself—or at the very least the version of herself she wishes she were allowed to be—in the ordinary animals around her.

Conclusion

The Hurting Kind presents an atypical view of womanhood which has been analyzed using a theoretical framework inspired by overlaps between deconstruction and feminism. Limón has exemplified through several poems her innate desire to be free to express the kind of physical, instinctive, and careless behavior associated with animals and has stated her physical body to be one of the reasons she feels so trapped. It is interesting to note she has not made explicit mention of the male sex in the poems that have been dissected for this research—her stepfather is an exception because he is not contrasting Limón herself in "A Good Story"—and that the traditional male-female binary system has been eschewed in favor of one that introduces the animal as an opposition to the woman. If the animal is carefree and has no obligation to care about the intricacies of the human world, then the woman is taken to be the opposite, in which Limón finds her tragedy.

Recommendations

The present research may serve to open up further avenues of discussion as to how womanhood can be further analyzed about how animals are conceived of, both within an abstract domain and a scientific one, to form a well-rounded understanding of the 'otherness' that alienates us from the man-made world at large. Further analysis in this strain can potentially captivate the interests of those not particularly aligned with literary studies and expand the domain within which the topic can be studied to its fullest extent. Ada Limón's *The Hurting Kind* can serve as one of several original texts that can help form the basis of such an undertaking.

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