

Reconnecting Women and Nature: An Ecofeminist Reading of *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo*

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Abstract

This paper explores the ecofeminist lens in the novel *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo* by Ntozake Shange, focusing on how the text intertwines themes of nature, gender, and cultural identity. Through the lives of its three central characters—Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo—the novel reflects the complex relationships between women, their environments, and the forces of oppression that shape both. By examining the characters' connections to the land, their healing practices, and their struggles against patriarchal and colonial systems, this paper argues that Shange's narrative presents a powerful critique of environmental degradation, social injustice, and the silencing of marginalized voices. The analysis highlights how ecofeminism, as both a theoretical framework and an activist stance, resonates throughout the text, proposing a vision of solidarity between women and nature that transcends racial and cultural boundaries. In this context, *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo* emerges as an ecofeminist work that not only questions the exploitation of natural resources but also celebrates the resilience and agency of women in reclaiming both their heritage and their environment.

Keywords: Women, nature, ecobeminism, *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo*

Introduction:

In the introduction to *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* by Ntozake Shange, ecofeminism emerges as a central theme that intertwines the relationships between women, nature, and spirituality. The novel weaves these elements into the lives of three sisters—Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo—whose experiences and personal growth are deeply influenced by their connection to the natural world and their understanding of their own identities as Black women. Through their stories, Shange explores how gender, race, and ecology converge, emphasizing the importance of nurturing the environment and women's roles in maintaining and cultivating these connections.

Ecofeminism, as presented in the novel, rejects the dualistic thinking that separates humanity from nature, instead presenting an

integrated vision where the well-being of women and the environment are intertwined. This is reflected in the sisters' interactions with the land and the ways in which their familial and cultural roots are deeply tied to the earth. Each sister represents different facets of this connection, with nature not just being a backdrop but an active force in shaping their emotional, spiritual, and personal growth.

Sassafrass, the eldest sister, represents a kind of spiritual communion with nature, as she seeks to reclaim and understand her ancestral connections to the earth. Her journey symbolizes the ecofeminist belief that the healing of the planet is inherently tied to the healing of women, particularly women of colour, who have historically been marginalized and disconnected from their cultural heritage. Cypress, on the other hand, embodies a more grounded and

pragmatic connection to the environment, where sustainability and preservation of natural resources are central to her life. Her work and her relationship with the earth are driven by a desire to create a more harmonious world.

Indigo, the youngest sister, grapples with the internalized struggles of growing up in a society that imposes rigid expectations on women and the environment. Her struggle is symbolic of the way both women and the natural world are often objectified and commodified in capitalist and patriarchal systems. Through Indigo's eyes, the novel critiques the exploitation of both the earth and the bodies of women, suggesting that true liberation comes from dismantling these systems of oppression.

At its core, *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* emphasizes the need for women, especially Black women, to reconnect with the natural world in ways that are not just physical, but also deeply spiritual and emotional. Through ecofeminism, the novel promotes the idea that women can find empowerment through the reclamation of their relationship with nature. The novel also challenges the dominant narratives that place women and nature in subordinate positions, proposing instead a vision of resilience, interconnectedness, and healing.

In conclusion, ecofeminism in *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* is a dominant and transformative theme that underscores the novel's broader exploration of identity, autonomy, and resistance. Shange uses the sisters' stories to invite readers to reconsider the ways in which environmental justice and women's liberation are inseparable, offering a profound commentary on how Black women can shape and redefine their relationship with the world around them.

1. Connection Between Women and Nature:

Throughout the novel, nature is not simply a backdrop; it is an active participant in the emotional and spiritual lives of the characters. The title itself—*Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo*—evokes plant species, linking the women to the land and suggesting a deep, organic connection to nature. Each woman's relationship with the natural world reflects ecofeminist principles of unity between women and the earth.

For instance, Sassafrass, the eldest of the three sisters, is closely tied to the themes of regeneration and growth. She is an artist who paints vibrant, earthy landscapes, showing how her creativity is linked to the rhythms of nature. Her ability to transform and reinvent herself is symbolized by the cyclical patterns of nature, mirroring ecofeminist ideas of healing through a return to natural and feminine wisdom. Sassafrass' identity as a woman and as an artist is rooted in the earth, reinforcing the ecofeminist belief that women, much like nature, have the capacity for both destruction and renewal.

Cypress, the second sister, embodies a different connection to nature—one that focuses on nurturing and healing. Her sensitivity to the environment reflects an ecofeminist view that women, especially those of marginalized communities, have historically been caretakers of the land. Cypress practices herbal medicine, an ancient form of knowledge passed down through generations. Her healing skills connect her to ecofeminist traditions that value women's roles as custodians of natural knowledge and resources. Her actions in the novel reflect a conscious effort to resist the exploitation of both

women and nature by patriarchal forces, as she seeks to heal both personal wounds and environmental degradation.

2. Nature as a Space of Resistance and Healing:

In ecofeminism, nature is often seen as a site of resistance, where women reclaim their power from oppressive structures. Shange's novel vividly demonstrates this through the sisters' experiences. Indigo, the youngest of the three, represents a radical break from conventional societal norms. She seeks empowerment through her relationship with the land and her decision to live a life outside the constraints of traditional gender roles. Indigo's journey is both a physical and spiritual one, as she explores how to balance her individuality with the collective strength of her ancestors. Her connection to nature is a space for healing, allowing her to reclaim parts of herself that were once lost or suppressed by societal expectations.

In the novel, Indigo's pursuit of self-discovery involves not only a rejection of the oppressive forces that try to define her but also an immersion in the natural world. For example, when Indigo returns to the woods and the natural surroundings of her childhood, she finds solace and a deeper understanding of her identity. Her reconnection to the earth becomes an act of defiance against both colonialism and patriarchy, as she refuses to allow these systems to define her destiny. This aligns with ecofeminist ideals that celebrate the power of women to resist through both individual and collective actions, with nature serving as a space of empowerment.

3. The Healing Power of Women's Knowledge and Practices:

Ecofeminism celebrates women's knowledge of the environment and natural systems, and *Sassafrass*, *Cypress*, and *Indigo* draws on this theme through the representation of various traditional healing practices. *Sassafrass*, *Cypress*, and *Indigo* are all involved in different ways with the preservation and transmission of knowledge that connects the human body to the land. *Cypress*, in particular, embodies the ecofeminist figure of the healer—someone who is not only attuned to the natural world but also uses that knowledge to challenge systems of domination.

Cypress' use of herbs and natural remedies symbolizes ecofeminism's focus on women's roles as caretakers of life. By rejecting the industrial and medical systems that often commodify both women's bodies and the environment, she reclaims power. Her herbal knowledge challenges the mainstream medical establishment, which is often linked to colonial and patriarchal structures that seek to dominate both the body and the earth.

Sassafrass' artwork also reflects a reclaiming of power through the use of natural motifs. Her creations celebrate the earth and its many forms, reinforcing the ecofeminist argument that art and nature are interconnected. Her artwork becomes a tool for resistance, a way to resist the hegemonic forces that attempt to silence Black women's voices and suppress their connection to their cultural and natural roots.

4. Critique of Colonialism and Patriarchy:

At the core of ecofeminist thought is a critique of the intersectionality of oppression, particularly the ways in which colonialism, patriarchy, and environmental

degradation are interconnected. In *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo*, Shange critiques the way colonial forces have exploited both women and the environment. The novel's ecofeminist ethos is evident in its critique of these structures of oppression, particularly through the lens of race and gender. For example, Sassafrass's struggles with the art world's exploitation of her work mirror the environmental degradation caused by capitalist exploitation. Both women and nature are commodified and used for profit, while their voices and autonomy are marginalized.

Moreover, the novel examines how Black women, in particular, have been doubly marginalized—by both racist and sexist structures that deny them agency over their bodies and their environments. The characters' journeys reflect a form of resistance that seeks to decolonize not just the land, but also the bodies of women,

affirming their right to both self-determination and a harmonious relationship with nature.

Conclusion:

In *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo*, Shange offers a profound exploration of ecofeminism through the interconnected experiences of her three protagonists. The novel illustrates how nature, identity, and power are intertwined in the lives of Black women, who navigate and resist the twin forces of patriarchy and colonialism. By centring the wisdom of women in harmony with the earth, Shange's narrative aligns with ecofeminism's call for a world where both women and nature are valued, protected, and respected. Through the healing practices, artistic expressions, and acts of resistance of her characters, Shange provides a narrative that is both a reclamation of cultural identity and a call to action for environmental and social justice.

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