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Araştırma Makalesi

AN ECOFEMINIST ANALYSIS OF MARY SHELLEY'S *MATHILDA*: THE FEMALE NARRATOR WRITING HER OWN TABOO FICTION

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Abstract

Re-reading Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's novelette, Mathilda, in the twenty-first century from an ecofeminist perspective sheds a new light on contemporary criticism, opening up multifaceted perspectives. There was a critical moment in British literary history when Elizabeth Nichie transcribed Mathilda from the microfilm of the manuscript and published it in 1959, which unveiled this piece of revolutionary taboo fiction suppressed for over a century by the author's male relatives, chiefly Shelley's father, William Godwin. Written in 1819-1820, Mathilda is the only work completed during Shelley's lifetime. It is an artfully crafted epistolary work depicting the traumatic confessions and suicidal tendencies of the protagonist, Mathilda, a woman who isolated herself from society by integrating herself with nature due to her father's confession for his incestuous passion towards her. Regarded as an underrated work, Mathilda has often been interpreted from biographical and incest-related perspectives by literary critics, which relegates its literary merits although it is in accordance with feminist and ecological theories and feminine writing. This paper, avoiding biographical accounts and the author's life experiences and with theories consistent with those of ecofeminism, intends to show how nature functions as an effective instrument for the female writer to fictionalize her taboo story. By blending ecofeminism with feminine writing, this paper also investigates the interplay between woman and nature, and navigates how a female character courageously relocates her taboo story on a textual level from a feminist perspective in a natural setting, challenging the male-dominant Romantic tradition of the nineteenth century.

Keywords: Mary Shelley, Mathilda, Ecofeminism, Taboo Fiction, Nature, Feminine Writing.

MARY SHELLEY'NİN *MATHILDA* ADLI ESERİNİN EKOFEMİNİST ANALİZİ: KENDİ TABU KURGUSUNU YAZAN KADIN ANLATICI

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Öz

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley'nin kısa romanı *Mathilda*'yı yirmi birinci yüzyılda ecofeminist bir bakış açısı ile yeniden okumak, çok yönlü bakış açılarıyla çağdaş eleştirilere ışık tutar. *Mathilda*'nın taslağının, 1959 yılında Elizabeth Nitchie tarafından mikrofilminden kopyası çıkartılarak basılması, İngiliz edebiyat tarihinde bir dönüm noktasıdır. Başta babası William Godwin olmak üzere, yazarın erkek akrabaları tarafından yüzyıldan fazla bir zaman saklanan eserin basımı, devrim niteliğinde bir tabu kurgusunu gözler önüne serer. 1819-1820 yılları arasında yazılan bu eser, Shelley'nin hayattayken tamamladığı tek eser olma niteliğine sahiptir. Ustaca kurgulanan eser, babasının kendisine karşı beslediği ensest sevgisini itiraf etmesinden dolayı, toplumdaki kendisini soyutlayıp doğayla bütünleşerek yaşayan ana karakter *Mathilda*'nın travmatik itiraflarını ve intihar eğilimini betimleyen mektuplarını içerir. Hak ettiği kadar daha az değer gören *Mathilda*'nın, edebiyat eleştirmenleri tarafından genellikle otobiyografik açıdan ve ensest temasıyla ilişkilendirilerek yorumlanması, eserin edebi değerlerini azaltmaktadır. Oysa bu eser, feminist ve ekolojik kuramlar ve kadın yazını ile de bağdaşmaktadır. Bu makale, analizini biyografik bağlamın ve yazarın yaşam deneyimlerinin dışında tutarak ve ecofeminist kuramları ele alarak, kadın anlatıcının kendi tabu kurmacasını yazmasında doğanın nasıl etkin bir rol üstlendiğini göstermeyi amaçlar. Ayrıca bu çalışma, ekofeminizmi kadın yazını ile harmanlayarak, kadın ve doğa arasındaki ilişkiyi de araştırır ve kadın karakteri, kendi tabu hikayesini, feminist bir bakış açısıyla ve doğayla ilişki içinde cesurca kurgulayarak ve on dokuzuncu yüzyıl erkek egemen Romantik akımının geleneklerine karşı gelerek yazınsal düzeye nasıl taşıdığını tartışır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Mary Shelley, *Mathilda*, Ekofeminizm, Tabu Kurmacası, Doğa, Kadın Yazını.

INTRODUCTION

“...my pleasures arose from the contemplation of nature alone, I had no companion. . .” (*Mathilda*, p. 35)

The British novelist, essayist, biographer and travel writer Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1797-1851) is a unique female figure and one of the leading representatives of the second-generation Romantic era. Shelley was the daughter of two radical intellectual parents, William Godwin, a leading philosopher and a political figure of that time and Mary Wollstonecraft, a feminist writer and the author of *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), the classic manifesto of sexual equality. Even though much of Shelley's reputation is derived from her famous gothic novel, *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818), a significant example of science fiction, she left a profound body of work in British literature; she wrote several novels, such as *Valperga* (1823), *Lodore* (1835), and *The Last Man* (1826), and a number of travel books chronicling her travels including *History of Six Weeks' Tour* (1817) and later, *Rambles in Germany and Italy* (1844).

Mathilda, written between August 1819 and February 1820, during Shelley's juvenilia years, is the author's second piece of fiction and the only work completed

during her lifetime. First published posthumously in 1959, it is an epistolary novella and a romantic tragedy portraying the perception of life by Mathilda, the eponymous heroine. The embellished language with long and rhythmic sentences gives the sense of a poem. Mathilda's narration is a memoir written in long letter form to a specific addressee, Woodville, a young poet, to express her grief and sufferings.

The work narrates the life of Mathilda, a woman who alienated herself from society owing to her unconventional upbringing. Upon the death of her mother, Diana, her father is devastated and abandons her for 16 years, passing on her parental custody to her cold-hearted aunt. Deprived of parental love and affection, Mathilda grows up in the exotic landscapes of Scotland and walks about her estate in Loch Lomond, where her only friends are the flowers, birds, mountains and woods. After mourning for the demise of his beloved wife, Mathilda's father returns in her teen years and at first gives his daughter the affection she craves. After they share happy times together for a while, Mathilda's aunt dies and they return to London, where her parents once lived. Then, despite their consanguineous connection, her father confesses his incestuous feeling of love towards her; however, feeling remorseful over his confession, he commits suicide by drowning himself in the ocean. Upon the death of her father, Mathilda feels traumatized and guilty and falls into depression, unhappiness and suicidal tendencies which results in her isolating herself from society. She befriends Woodville, who lost his fiancée, Elinor, to an ailment and withdrew himself from society in the woods; he strives to save Mathilda from her anguish and eventual suicide. Sharing the common loss of the person they loved most, the two become friends and spend time among nature to mutually express their sufferings. Mathilda reveals to him the dark secrets she has long kept to herself: her father's incestuous passion for her as well as the suicidal tendencies and emotional sufferings caused by this traumatic fact. At the end of the work, Mathilda dies from a sickness.

This paper, avoiding biographical accounts and author's life experiences and with theories consistent with those of ecofeminism, intends to show how nature functions as an effective instrument for the female writer to fictionalize her taboo story. By blending ecofeminism with feminine writing, the paper also investigates the interplay between woman and nature, and navigates how a female character courageously relocates her taboo story on a textual level from a feminist perspective in a natural setting, challenging the male-dominant Romantic tradition of the nineteenth century. In *Mathilda*, the narrative voice, by constantly interacting with nature, crafts her narrative as a story within a story in an epistolary form and places the female as the subject and the male as the object to invert the oppressive dichotomies of the Romantic era. The revelation of *Mathilda* after more than a hundred years intrigued both ideal readers and literary critics, opening up multiple perspectives for creative interpretation.

A 140-YEAR-OLD WORK OF TABOO FICTION UNCOVERED

There was a critical moment in the mid-twentieth century when Elizabeth Nitchie transcribed Mary Shelley's novella, *Mathilda*, from the microfilm of the manuscript¹ that belongs to Lord Abinger² at Duke University and posthumously published it in the journal *Studies in Philology* in 1959.³ Despite the persistent efforts of Shelley, the work was intentionally kept secret for more than a century by her father, William Godwin, as he found the story pernicious. It was not only Godwin who concealed the work; some other male relatives and acquaintances also continued to suppress the publication of the novella at the time due to its themes of suicidality and incest.⁴

The theme of incest is often regarded as an esoteric term while it is also a popular theme in the history of Western society. It was a favourite topic in the Romantic period; however, many romantic poets treated it as an unintentional and unconscious act, and narrated it through an unreliable narrator with little evidence. From the intertextual aspect, in Lord Byron's closet drama, *Manfred* (1817),⁵ the Byronic protagonist Manfred feels remorseful over an untold sin related to his beloved sister, Astarte, from the past. Another work revolving around the theme of incest is M. G. Lewis' *The Monk* (1796), which narrates the unintentional relation of Ambrosio with his sister, Antonia. Analogously, Percy Shelley, in *The Cenci* (1820), depicts the incestuous relation of Count Cenci with his daughter, Beatrice.

Mathilda has mostly received critical attention focusing on biographical and psychological interpretations engaging in parallels to reveal the author's life experiences. Biographical analyses have often been directed to identify the three main characters, Mathilda, her father and Woodville, as forms of Mary Shelley, William Godwin and Percy Shelley, respectively. Moreover, the story of Diana, Mathilda's mother who died soon after giving birth to her, was often related to Shelley's mother

¹ The original manuscript of *Mathilda* is currently located in the digital collection of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, England. <https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/02cddd3b-0383-41c6-9dfc-bee7f75a6553/>

² "A hereditary custodian - and cataloguer - of Mary Shelley's letters and manuscripts, [Lord]Abinger was chairman of the Keats-Shelley Memorial Association." (In Andrew Roth, "Lord Abinger," 2002, (para. 3). For more details, see <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2002/nov/02/guardianobituaries.obituaries>

³ For more information about the posthumous publication process of *Mathilda*, see Michelle Faubert's "On Editing Mary Shelley's *Mathilda*," 2017. <https://broadviewpress.com/editing-mary-shelleys-mathilda/>

⁴ The act of incest in *Mathilda* occurs not in the actual physical, but in the emotional dimension between Mathilda and her father.

⁵ Like many criticisms of *Mathilda*, George Gordon Byron's *Manfred* has often been interpreted from biographical accounts by tracing Byron's incestuous affiliation with his half-sister, Augusta Leigh.

who also died while giving birth. Psychological readings, on the other hand, relate the work to the author's parental and familial sufferings. To give an example, it was written during the traumatic period of the author, in the wake of the death of her two children, William and Clara. However, I would argue that analysing the text from such perspectives obviously not only diminishes the literary merits of the novella, but also underestimates the narrator Shelley crafted meticulously.

Biographical studies on *Mathilda* begin with the literary contribution of Elizabeth Nitchie, "Mary Shelley's *Mathilda*: An Unpublished Story and Its Biographical Significance" in 1943.⁶ Later, in her "Introduction" to *Mathilda*, Nitchie affirms that "[t]he biographical elements are clear [in the novel]. *Mathilda* is certainly Mary herself; *Mathilda*'s father is Godwin; Woodville is an idealized Shelley" (1959, p. 15). As for the thematic analyses, commentators have often interpreted the text from the angle of incest between *Mathilda* and her father and traced the author's feelings towards her father. Nitchie also expounds some parallelisms between Shelley and her protagonist:

Like *Mathilda* Mary was a woman of strong passions and affections. . . Like *Mathilda*'s, Mary's mother had died a few days after giving her birth. Like *Mathilda* she spent part of her girlhood in Scotland. Like *Mathilda* she met and loved a poet of 'exceeding beauty' . . . This story was the outlet for her emotions in 1819. (Nitchie, 1959, p. 15)

Anne K. Mellor describes *Mathilda* as a reflection of her "deepest and most ambivalent feelings toward her father" (1988, p. 193). Mellor also suggests that the novella "both articulates [Shelley's] passionate devotion to her father and takes revenge for his cruelty toward her" (p. 194) and that the work represents the author's "desire both to sexually possess and to punish her father" (p. 195). Terence Harpold describes the work as a "profoundly autobiographical work" (1989, p. 52).

It would be easier to interpret the text from biographical angles and ground the main theme as incest as well as relate the plot to the author's relationship with her father. However, I would argue that *Mathilda* does not merely revolve around incest and carnal love; it accommodates various related themes such as female oppression in nature, feminine writing and suicide, portraying the dark sides of human nature. If we put aside the biographical accounts as well as the "so-called" personal experiences of the author regarding the leitmotiv of incest, and focus on the embodiment of the title character, *Mathilda*, who acts as a fictive persona, the work offers the modern reader an inimitable source with a wide range of possibilities of interpretation. Above all, *Mathilda* is a work narrated by a female character who courageously writes a work of taboo fiction in the Romantic era. Thus, analysing the text from ecofeminist perspectives and surveying the female narrator's fictionalizing her own taboo story in

⁶ See Elizabeth Nitchie's "Mary Shelley's *Mathilda*: An Unpublished Story and Its Biographical Significance," *Studies in Philology*, 40(1943), pp. 447-462.

relation with nature would paradigmatically open up alternative routes for contemporary criticism.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF ECOFEMINISM

Ecofeminism was first coined by French feminist writer, ecologist and civil rights activist Françoise d'Eaubonne as *l'eco-féminisme* in her *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* in 1974,⁷ in which she expounded the consequences of the exploitation and oppression of women in relation to nature by Western patriarchal society. In her influential book, d'Eaubonne argues that there are many similarities between the patriarchal oppression of women and the suppression of nature, which leads to environmental demolishment and that the concepts of feminism and environmentalism would bring about a new metamorphosis. D'Eaubonne does not virtually valorise nature or women; rather, with a humanist insight, she rejects the human inclination that places Man at the centre of the universe and seeks to reveal the correlation between women and nature. The theoretical scope of ecofeminism has evolved since then, seeking to explore not only the relationship between the oppression of nature and women, but also to raise awareness about the need to liberate both for the female and the natural environment. Thus, the ecofeminist revolution has focused on suggesting an alternative worldview challenging the patriarchal dualism, such as male/female, culture/nature, and body/mind.

Karen Warren, in her influential book *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters*, approaches ecofeminist theory from a more holistic perspective and discards the entire forms of oppression and domination; she suggests that the scope of ecofeminist ethics must be “anti-sexist, anti-racist, anti-classist, anti-naturist, and opposed to any ‘ism’ that presupposes or advances a logic of domination” (Warren, 2000, p. 99). With regard to the initial point of ecofeminist theory, Warren suggests that “the dominations of women, other human Others, and nonhuman nature are interconnected, are wrong, and ought to be eliminated” (p. 155). Based on what Warren argues, Chris Cuomo, in her article, “On Ecofeminist Philosophy” that

[Warren’s ecofeminism] includes sophisticated analyses of gender, race, and colonialism, and it is fundamentally linked to struggles for global justice and ecological flourishing. Perhaps because the grounding assumptions of ecofeminism resonate so deeply with women’s and community struggles around the world. . . (2002, p. 9).

Ecofeminism is a dual concept blending ecology and feminism; its scope of philosophy accommodates diverse approaches and aspects that can be used in literary analyses. As an interdisciplinary area of inquiry evolving from various fields, ecofeminism addresses topics including the equation between women and nature,

⁷ Françoise d'Eaubonne’s *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* was translated into English as *Feminism or Death* by Ruth A. Hottell in 2022.

female oppression on the earth, animal liberation, environmental effects on women, feminization of nature and gender-based ecologies and draws insights from feminism, ecocriticism, gender theories, and psychoanalysis, among others.

The ecofeminist philosophy is based on the belief that there is a close correlation between women and nature and that perceiving this connection is vital to navigate ecological and feminist aspects in literary analysis. Since ecocriticism solely fails to explicate this nexus either practically or theoretically, it is significant to maintain an ecological aspect in feminism and a feminist aspect in ecology. What mainly distinguishes feminism from ecofeminism is that while feminism is anthropocentric—human-centred—ecofeminism has a holistic precept situating nature at the centre of the universe encompassing humans. Social ecofeminism explores women's existence connected to nature within the social sphere, emotional ecofeminism investigates women's inner and emotional states within the natural scenery. Spiritual ecofeminism, on the other hand, is related to ancient religious beliefs illuminating the connections between nature and women within the biblical ideologies. From the binary aspect, it critiques patriarchal religious views placing the male as the subject and the woman as the object.

With regard to the close interconnectedness between women and nature, Vandana Shiva suggests in *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Survival in India* that "Nature is symbolized as the embodiment of the feminine principle on one level, and she is nurtured by the feminine on another level in order to produce life and other sustenance" (1988, p. 37). In this sense, women are an inseparable part of nature within their lives, which might be explored in their verbal and textual narratives, like our heroine, Mathilda.

AN ECOFEMINIST ANALYSIS OF MATHILDA

Mathilda is an artfully crafted work, unfolding the confessional narrations of the eponymous narrator; however, it is an underrated novella although it even though it incorporates feminist and ecological theories and feminine writing. Designed with adorned language and melodramatic dialogues and letters, this incestuous romance both intrigues and horrifies its readers; it is more than a father's confusing emotions and an unrequited love towards his daughter. Mathilda is a character of the Romantic age, dependent on paternal authority, but unlike the conventional gothic narration, she pens her story and unfolds her dark secrets, ignoring all consequences. Although she performs the leading role as a victim of incest, she undertakes the leading role in the story; she rejects to name her father, ensuring her feminine voice is the primary source of the information. According to Kathleen A. Miller, "

Although Shelley's novella appears to relate a conventional female gothic narrative of a young woman victimized by her father's incestuous desire, it leaves open the possibility that, in fact, it is Mathilda, rather than her father, who wields control over the novel's gothic script. Throughout the narrative, she imagines and then

orchestrates a series of female gothic encounters in order to gain development. (2008, p. 292).

Although being abandoned and oppressed by her father and her aunt, whose names she never mentions, Mathilda calls herself to be an “offspring of the deepest love” (*Mathilda*, p. 33) and displays “the greatest sensibility of disposition” (*Mathilda*, p. 33). What accompanies her is the natural environment surrounding her. She enjoys spending time with animals, storms, rain, flowers and clouds; as she grows and becomes mature, she sustains her romantic child-like disposition. From the intertextual perception, Shelley’s protagonist can be associated with a Wordsworthian perception of nature performing as a nature-lover Wordsworthian child; she loves picking flowers by rivers, climbing mountains and rowing a skiff on the lake: “the child of the woods, the nursling of Nature’s bright self. . .” (*Mathilda*, p. 90).

The Romantic poet William Wordsworth expresses his views about his love and appreciation of nature in a letter written to his sister, Dorothy, between September 6 and 12, 1790: “I am a perfect Enthusiast in my admiration of nature in all her various forms” (In Hill, Alan G., 1984, p. 16). In his “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*” (1798), Wordsworth also highlights the influence of nature and rural life on human desires and development, suggesting that “[l]ow and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity” (In Gill, 1984, p. 597) and that “the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature” (p. 597).

In that sense, nature accompanies Mathilda during her period of maturity—while growing up in her aunt’s estate—she finds herself lonely and serene, but at the same time independent within the natural spaces:

As I grew older my liberty [i]ncreased⁸ with my desires, and my wanderings extended. I wandered for ever about these lovely solitudes, gathering flower after flower. . . Ond’ era pinta tutta la mia⁹. . .singing as I might be the wild melodies of the country, or occupied by pleasant day dreams. My greatest pleasure was the enjoyment of a serene sky amidst these verdant woods. . . (*Mathilda*, p. 35)

Overlapping points of ecocritical and feminist aspects are dominant in the text. Ecofeminists believe that, as Janis Birkeland suggests, “we cannot end the exploitation of nature without ending human oppression, and vice versa” (1993, p.

⁸ The word “encreased” in the original source was corrected as “increased” as it was thought to be a typographical error.

⁹ Here, in relation to Mathilda’s perception of life as colourful as flowers while she is in nature, Shelley intertextually inserts a reference to Dante’s episode of Matilda (Matelda) from “Purgatorio,” Canto 28, *Divine Comedy*. The name of the title character, “Mathilda,” is an allusion to Matilda with whom Dante meets gathering flowers in the Garden of Eden. in “Ond’ era pinta tutta la sua via” (ITA): “With which her pathway was all painted over” (ENG). See the whole canto with its English translation at <http://dantelab.dartmouth.edu/reader?reader%5Bcantica%5D=2&reader%5Bcanto%5D=2>.

19). Mathilda's contact with nature also exacerbates her complex relations with her aunt. Feeling oppressed in the society she lives in, she feels vulnerable and takes shelter in a natural setting. From the binary perspective, the role of Mathilda is different from those of gothic and romantic heroines. As Susan Bernardo suggests, "Mathilda becomes both the villain and the victim" (2002, pp. 48-49); she goes through an intellectual transformation upon being subjected to her father's confession about his incestuous desire for her.

NATURE AS AN ASYLUM FOR MATHILDA

As a physical and psychic space, nature plays an important role in the text; it serves as a bystander onto whom Mathilda projects her intense feelings and inner struggles. *Mathilda* is beyond a nature novella depicting natural components and witnessing to events. Rather, it embodies a more complex narrative structure accruing in multiple sensory layers; it is the setting where the narrative voice fictionalizes the taboo story within the fiction. Although nature is often represented in literature and culture as a relieving, healing and beatific space, in *Mathilda* it does not merely exhibit its tranquilizing and healing powers; it harbours both comfort and agony and serves as an asylum for Mathilda functioning both as a therapeutic and a threatening space for her.

Mathilda's love of nature reflects the Romantic theme of the work; she is deeply attached to nature: "How dear to me were the waters, and mountains, and woods of Loch Lomond now that I had so beloved a companion for my rambles" (*Mathilda*, p. 43). Nature is the space where Mathilda's dramatic perception of life actualizes; deprived of parental affection since her infancy, Mathilda grows up in a dreamy natural environment where she befriends the woods, flowers, trees, and birds. Since she has been in a close contact with natural environment since her childhood, it becomes a theatrical stage where she is the main actor: she rows on the lake, picks flowers, climbs mountains and speaks to animals. Cognizant of the power of natural scenery, she obsessively longs for her absent father. Upon her father's return, nature becomes a crucial setting where Mathilda would unite and happily spend time with her father: "I visited with my father every delightful spot, either on the islands, or by the side of the tree-sheltered waterfalls; every shady path, or dingle entangled with underwood and fern" (*Mathilda*, p. 43). Then, after her father's incestuous confessions and eventual suicide, nature becomes an unsafe and hostile place serving as an asylum which harbours her traumatic feelings, suicidal tendencies, and sufferings. She senses that she is included in a "wide ocean of despair" (*Mathilda*, p. 46) and "on a barren rock." (*Mathilda*, p. 46)

Nature also reflects Mathilda's mood, which is driven by her experiences, mirroring her psyche; it takes the form of the narrator's frame of mind. Constantly changing facades of nature influence Mathilda's mood: "yet I loved all the changes of Nature; and rain, and storm, and the beautiful clouds of heaven brought delights with them" (*Mathilda*, p. 35). One day she feels peaceful and the next day anguished.

When nature shifts with the changing seasons and weather patterns, Mathilda's mood also changes. Thus, nature is also a metaphor reflecting Mathilda's spiritual condition as her "spirit seemed to ride upon the winds" (*Mathilda*, p. 97). When a tragic event occurs in Mathilda's life, she secludes herself from society to find a space of peace. She considers the spiritual aspects of life and death, but becomes deeply familiar with her sorrow while she is within nature. Mathilda's contact with nature exacerbates her state of mind as well as her complex relations with her aunt, Woodville and particularly her father; it affects the power dynamics in relationships. Therefore, nature serves as the female side of the novel projecting the personification of Mathilda: "I was confined to Nature and books" (*Mathilda*, p. 97).

All components of nature become a reflection characterizing the ideal image of her father. During the period of infancy that she spends in a remote Scottish estate with her guardian aunt, who possesses a cold discipline refraining from the emotional nurturing which is vital for her to develop self-assurance, nature represents an isolated space that she resorts to find tranquillity and relief from aunt's heartlessness. In her letter, she confesses her hateful feelings about her aunt: "I believe that with-out the slightest tinge of a bad heart she had the coldest that ever filled a human breast: it was totally incapable of any affection. She took me under her protection because she considered it her duty" (*Mathilda*, p. 32).

Being aware of nature, Mathilda takes shelter in nature to heal herself. However, as she considers herself as a victim of incest and an oppressed woman, she uses nature to regain her power. When she feels like an oppressed woman or a sexual object, she takes refuge in the lap of nature. On the other hand, nature functions as a space presaging misfortune and catastrophic events. Mathilda perceives the strike of lightning as an anticipation of her fate as well as a representation of her father's death. Likewise, she senses the shattering tree as a portentous signal for the death of her father. Therefore, Mathilda's perception of nature has both a therapeutic and a distressing effect.

In the final scene of the work, Mathilda performs her epilogue; she is subjected to isolation on the heath in Scotland: "In solitude only shall I be myself," (*Mathilda*, p. 34) she expresses. She describes her life as a "tragic history" (*Mathilda*, p. 21) and thinks that she would find peace in death, so she bids farewell to her true friend, Woodville, by associating natural elements with her death: "Farewell, Woodville, the turf will soon be green on my grave; and the violets will bloom on it. *There* is my hope and my expectation; your's are in this world; may they be fulfilled" (*Mathilda*, p. 140). While recalling her childhood years, she expresses how she feels "reconciled to solitude," (*Mathilda*, p. 34), quoting from Wordsworth's 1798 poem, "She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways": "I lived in a desolate country where / — — — there were none to praise / And very few to love. (*Mathilda*, p. 34).¹⁰

¹⁰ Shelley quotes a reference to the third and the fourth lines of Wordsworth's 1798 poem, "She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways": . . .there were none to praise / And very few to

TABOO NARRATION ON THE TEXTUAL LEVEL

On the threshold of the Victorian era, when the incest is regarded as a taboo subject in society, Shelley's narrator inverts the ideal layers of Romantic norms and writes about her taboo fiction in her own language even though she experiences traumatic events. She indicts the oppressive society she has lived in by considering the male as subject. Instead of covering what she has experienced and remaining engrossed in her grief, she decides to reveal herself to challenge the lack of narrative autonomy in society. What Mathilda fictionalizes constitutes a vital nexus within the larger narrative:

This was the drama of my life which I have now depicted upon paper. During three months I have been employed in this task... Now my tears dried; the glow has faded from my cheeks, and with a few words of farewell to you, Woodville, I close my work; the last that I shall perform. (*Mathilda*, p. 138)

Mathilda wisely depicts her life in an epistle form by merging reality with artistry; she wishes to leave a trace behind through her text, which reveals her perception of life. What empowers her is her disregard of male voyeurism and her courageous act to disclose the introspective tragedy she experiences with her father—the emotional incest story.

As Diane Long Hoeveler, in “Mary Shelley and Gothic Feminism: The Case of ‘The Mortal Immortal’” puts it, “[t]he female victims earned their special status and rights through no action of their own but through their sufferings and persecutions at the hands of a patriarchal oppressor and tyrant” (1977, p. 152). In this sense, Hoeveler situates *Mathilda* in the female gothic tradition by saying “gothic feminism . . . is embodied in the sense of herself and female body as a void, an empty signifier, a lure into the cycle of painful birth and disappointing death” (1977, p. 183). Thus, Mathilda shifts from a passive victim to a courageous and an unflinching writer disclosing her father's incestuous passion towards her. In this way, she takes control of her own narrative, blurring the lines between reality and fiction. She takes her traumatic experience to the textual level, which transforms her intellectually.

CONCLUSION

In the coterie of the patriarchal literary canonicity represented by male poets, such as Wordsworth, Byron, Blake, Coleridge, and Percy Shelley, Mary Shelley, as a revolutionary female figure, contributed to the development of British Romanticism and Gothic fiction with her literary works. As a prolific female figure ahead of her time, Shelley brought a new insight to the Romantic tradition as well as sophistication

love” to lay emphasis on her loneliness. See the full version of the poem, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45549/she-dwelt-among-the-untrodden-ways>

to the Gothic tradition, crafting not only the first science fiction novel, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, but also *Mathilda*, the taboo fiction narrative depicting the story of a woman's tragic history and existential struggle after finding out about her father's incestuous feelings for her. The text was concealed for one hundred and forty years by Shelley's father and subsequently by other male relatives and was harshly criticised at the time it was released. Besides the themes of incest, nature, parental abandonment and suicide, the text is a significant example of feminine writing unveiling the taboo fiction.

In view of the historical context, the women of the nineteenth century were expected to be moral and virtuous; they are often depicted as fragile, obedient and prone to illness. What makes Shelley different is that she decentres the force of patriarchy and produces a rebellious female figure engaged in the act of writing. *Mathilda* is beyond the conventional gothic heroine; she is not an archetypal *femme fatale*,¹¹ nor a submissive and obedient character. While she fits the traditional image of the gothic heroine, whose disempowerment is evident at the beginning of the story, she then turns into a female figure rebelling against patriarchal culture and undergoes an evolutionary transformation which occurs in her social and intellectual levels. She cannot be categorized by one particular characterization; she is a complex character. However, what makes reading the work uncomfortable and challenging is not the dark mood, but the shifts and inconsistencies *Mathilda* experiences due to the incest-related tragedy involving her and her father, thus leading her to decide to put it down on paper instead of keeping it to herself.

In this paper, it is my argument that focusing on biographical accounts and the author's life experiences may not merely justify the unique text Shelley's narrator crafts, which limits multidisciplinary trajectories. Therefore, reading the text from an ecofeminist angle would open up more creative literary routes to contemporary feminism and ecocriticism. In this sense, the paper merges ecofeminism with feminine writing. By surveying the connection between woman and nature, as well as feminine writing and taboo fiction, the present study exhibits how a female character in the Romantic age bravely relocates her taboo story to the textual level in a natural setting from a radical feminist perspective, which challenges the male-dominant Romantic tradition of the nineteenth century.

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¹¹ *Femme fatale* is a French word expression "fatal women," usually identified as a character in Romantic and Gothic literature representing sexuality and femininity. Among the examples of the other *femme fatale* characters are "Lamia" (1820) by John Keats (1820) and "Christabel" (1797) by Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

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