

211工程建设学术成果系列  
北京外国语大学2007年博士文库系列

# 寻找母亲的花园

美国四位西部女作家的  
生态女权主义解读

翟润蕾 著

*In Search of Mother's Garden:  
An Ecofeminist Study  
of Four Major Works  
by Western Women Writers  
in the United States*



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# Abstract

The Western myth was formed near the end of the nineteenth century. It defines the American identity through the existence of the frontier, and is composed of three pioneer ideals: conquest, discovery, and personal development. Influenced by the Western myth, Western American literature in the early twentieth century is mainly characterized by the similar description of both nature and women in the West. Nature is feminized and has three stereotypes (mother, virgin, and mistress) that share a lot of similarities with the images of women in the West. These stereotypes categorize the images of nature and women in the West, making both the “silenced” others to be conquered in the Western myth. However, these stereotypes cannot reflect truthfully women’s life in the pioneering West, and a new perspective could only be obtained if we turn to the works written by Western women writers.

This dissertation studies Western women writers’ response to the Western myth. It includes four major works written by Western women writers: Dorothy Scarborough’s *The Wind*, Edna Ferber’s *Cimarron*, Willa Cather’s *My Antonia*, and Mary Austin’s *The Land of Little Rain*. These four works mainly deal with life, especially women’s life, in the American West from 1880s to 1920s. Since women and nature in the West are the two basic elements in these works, my dissertation therefore focuses on the relationship between women and nature in the

West, discusses how Western women writers question or even challenge the stereotyped images of women and nature in the Western myth, offer their own interpretations, and eventually rebuild their Garden of Eden by reestablishing their relationship with the West.

The conclusion is that Western women writers have a double vision that comes mainly from their identity as both women and Western writers in the United States. They could on the one hand examine the American West through women writers' point of view, and on the other hand understand the Western life from regional writers' perspective. With such a double vision, they can see more clearly the root problem in the Western myth—the Self/Other dichotomy that appears in the forms of man and woman, white and nonwhite, human and nonhuman creatures. With this privileged standpoint, Western women writers have successfully reconstructed the Western myth, in which the paradise is no longer based on the conflict between the conqueror and the conquered. It becomes instead the Mother's garden in which biological and cultural diversity could be ensured. Through their works, one can also see a different West. It includes not only the wild open land but also the domestic sphere. It is no longer a West that solely belongs to the male conquerors. It is instead a West that is constructed not only by men but also by women and other ethnic groups in the West. It is hoped that by such a discussion I can contribute to the studies of Western women writers in the United States, and a gap may be filled in this research area in China.

**Key Words:** the Western myth   ecofeminism   nature   women  
the Mother's garden

## 摘要

美国西部神话产生于西进运动之后。它以发现西部、征服土地、寻找自由为出发点，是美国人对自我身份的一次重新界定。受到西部神话的影响，20 世纪初的美国西部文学对自然与女性的描述有许多相似之处。自然被女性化，其形象被大致归为三种原型：母亲、处女以及情妇。这三种原型与女性在西部神话中所承担的角色极为相似，体现了自然与女性在西部神话中共同的“他者”身份。同时，二者的模式化原型也剥夺了女性与自然在西部的发言权，无法真实而全面地反映西部拓荒生活，展现拓荒女性的生活面貌。相反，美国西部女作家却为我们提供了一个全新的视角。她们往往不愿接受女性与自然在西部神话中的原型形象，并通过自己的作品对西部神话提出质疑。笔者正是以此为切入点，研究美国西部女作家是怎样处理女性与自然的关系，并以何种方法重塑女性与自然在西部的形象的。

本篇论文主要研究美国西部被神化时期，即 1900 至 1930 年间四位重要的美国西部女作家的作品：多萝西·斯卡伯勒的《风》、埃德娜·费伯的《西马罗恩》、薇拉·凯瑟的《我的安东尼亚》以及玛丽·奥斯汀的《少雨的土地》。这四部作品描述的都是从 19 世纪 80 年代到 20 世纪 20 年代美国西部拓荒者的生活状况，特别是女性拓荒者的生活状况。论文以女性与西部的关系为主要研究对象，运用生态女权主义理论，对所选的四部作品进行文本细读。论文旨在阐明美国西部神话是一部男性神话，它从本



质上排斥和歧视作为“他者”的女性与自然，而美国西部女作家因为其独特的视角在作品中质疑、甚至挑战西部神话，否定神话中女性与自然的三种原型，并通过构建女性与西部的和谐关系重塑女性与自然的形象，重建女性在西部生活的伊甸园。

本篇论文的结论是美国西部女作家因为其女性与西部作家的双重身份而在文学创作中呈现出明显的双重视角。她们不仅可以从女性的角度来分析问题，也可以从西部作家的出发点来审视社会现象。美国西部女作家的双重视角使她们能够更加清楚地看到西部神话中存在的问题，看到神话中征服与被征服的二元化观点：男性的白种人在神话中永远都是征服者，而女性、其他族裔的人以及与自然相对应的自然永远都是被征服的对象。这种二元化观点遭到许多西部女作家的质疑，她们在自己的作品中挑战“我者”与“他者”的对立，在平等的基础上重建女性与自然的联系，从而构建了一个能与自然和谐相处，真正属于所有人的西部花园。通过以上所选的四部作品，读者亦可看到一幅更加丰富、立体的西部生活画卷：西部不再只是荒原，家庭生活的女作家的笔下得以展现；女性也不再是弱者，她们对西部的贡献得以肯定，而其他族裔的移民拓荒者以及印第安人亦在西部文学史中找到了原本属于他们的位置。笔者希望，本文的发表可以推动美国西部女作家及作品的研究，同时亦可填补国内这一研究领域的空白。

**关键词：**西部神话 生态女权主义 自然 女性 母亲的花园

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## Introduction

Talking of American frontier and Western writers, people would usually think of James Fenimore Cooper, Mark Twain, Owen Wister, Bret Harte, Frank Norris, Jack London, John Steinbeck, Hamlin Garland, etc. Women writers are generally excluded from such a category with only a few exceptions like Willa Cather, Mary Hunter Austin, Mari Sandoz, or sometimes Virginia Sorensen. Many more have been neglected or even forgotten in the literary history of the American West. A good example can be found in the first edition of *Twentieth-Century Western Writers*. Among all the entries in this book, less than 10% deal with women.<sup>1</sup> Another example can be seen in Golden J. Taylor's *A Literary History of the American West* published in 1986. While nearly fifty writers are discussed and analyzed in details or even individual chapters, only five women writers are included. There seems to be very few women writers to depict the American West. Nor can their depictions attract any serious critical attention.

However, careful research would tell us that women writers have always been active in telling their own stories of the American West.

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<sup>1</sup> The first edition of *Twentieth-Century Western Writers* was published in 1982, and in its preface, C. L. Sonnichsen has introduced Western writings not only by white Americans but Native Americans, Mexican-Americans, and African-Americans. Yet, there is a notable omission: the story of women's contribution to Western letters. In the preface to the second edition (1991), Christine Bold has made a detailed discussion of the invisibility of women's Western writing in American literary history. For details, see Christine Bold's "Preface to the Second Edition," *Twentieth-Century Western Writers*, pp. xv-xxi.

They began to describe what they saw and how they felt as soon as they stepped on the new land. They might have attracted some attention when their works were first published, and yet they would soon be forgotten in the male literary canon of the American West. Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* was published just one year after Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*. It was a bestseller in its day, and yet it dropped from sight early in the twentieth century. It is only until recently that the book has been recovered as one of the earliest frontier novels by an American woman. Caroline Kirkland is credited with being the first writer exemplifying frontier realism in her fiction. Her *A New Home—Who'll Follow?* puts women onto the central stage within the frontier scene and becomes one of the first examples in stating women's role in the pioneering movement. Yet, she was not even included in Taylor's *A Literary History of the American West*.

The exclusion of these women writers from the male literary canon could be explained by the following reasons. Firstly, westering women<sup>1</sup> in the nineteenth century preferred diaries, letters and autobiographies in depicting their life in the West, and these literary forms were generally marginalized in the literary canon. Secondly, westering women, especially in the nineteenth century, focused their attention on the depiction of domesticity, which contradicted with the general tone of heroism and independence that people expected to find in works describing the frontier. Last but not the least, westering women, because of their female perspective, responded to the Western

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1 Sandra L. Myres, in her *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800-1915*, uses this phrase to describe those women who left their hometowns to settle in the West in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

myth differently from men and thus could not cater to the male critics. Due to the above reasons, women writers in the West are generally believed to be “disqualified” from entering the male literary canon, and the literary history of the American West becomes accordingly a history of the American male writers and their male Western heroes.

A similar problem exists in the history of the American West. In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner read before the American Historical Association at Chicago his famous essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” which is now regarded as one of the most influential pieces of writing about the West produced during the nineteenth century. Turner’s central contention was that “the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward explain American development” (1). This proposition, for the first time, places the West onto the central stage in American history and has an undeniable influence upon the later generations. However, just as Sandra L. Myres says, “Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontiers were devoid of women” (8). Turner’s pioneers are explorers, fur trappers, miners, ranchers, and farmers, all of whom are male. Women generally disappear in such a discussion. Decades later, Henry Nash Smith published his *Virgin Land*, another important work on the American West. Yet, again, the discussion of women pioneers occupies less than 5% of the whole book. Influenced by these critics, many historians thereafter continued to interpret the Westward Movement in masculine terms. A survey in 1974 of standard textbooks used in college and university courses in Western history concluded that these texts all come close to ignoring women entirely (Myres 9).

The interest in the history of women pioneers began around the 1940s and 1950s when a few serious studies of westering women were published. Frontier women, for the first time, became the focus of public attention. Yet, based primarily on government documents, newspaper articles, and men's accounts, these studies interpreted frontier women generally as overworked and discouraged drudges, and failed therefore to picture them fairly and objectively. In the 1960s and 1970s, several critics went a step further in arguing that the frontier worked against women rather than offering new opportunities as it did for men, and some even made the conclusion that women "were physically, as well as socially and emotionally, unable to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the frontier" (10). Influenced by these critics, women were then generally believed to be a passive element in the history of the American West.

However, in the 1970s and 1980s, the women's movement flourished in the US. Some important works were then published, and women's position in the Westward Movement began to be reexamined. In 1979, Julie Roy Jeffrey published her *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1880*. Different from the earlier critics, Jeffrey portrays frontier women as spirited participants who were able to take advantage of some of the opportunities offered in the new country. For the first time, the stereotypes of frontier women were challenged, and people saw them not as men's dependents but as individual groups. In 1982, Sandra L. Myres published *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800-1915*. Her discussion of the women images in the West is even more comprehensive and thoroughgoing. Contradicting the traditional stereotypes of women images of the

west, Myres argues that just like men westering women came from different backgrounds, had different experiences, and responded to frontier conditions in different ways.

In 1983, the first Women's West Conference was held in Sun Valley, Idaho, and thus came another important book named *The Women's West* (1987). The articles included in this collection represent pioneering efforts to reexamine the West through women's eyes. Challenging the traditional Western myth, *The Women's West* rejects the customary emphasis of traditional Western history on the nineteenth-century frontier, discovered and defined by Anglo men, and instead starts the construction of a new Western history as complex and varied as the people who lived it. The book is of importance because it highly values the women's perspective in evaluating traditional Western history, and the sources it uses vary from women's diaries and letters to autobiographies and novels.

In the discussion of women's contribution to the Westward Movement, one of the most important critics in the twentieth century is Annette Kolodny, who is now mainly remembered for *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* and *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860*. Published respectively in 1975 and 1984, these books explore how differently women pioneers responded to the landscape from men from 1630 to 1860. Kolodny argues that the relationship between the female speaking subject and the land is conceived not in terms of the psycho-sexual fantasies of rape and conquest familiar in works by male writers, but in terms of fertility, sustenance, and nurture—or the absence of these qualities. Such an



argument challenges the traditional land-as-woman metaphor in the Western myth and is frequently quoted by later critics.

Influenced by these critics, some editors, in the fall of 1975, suggested to members of the Western Literature Association that one of the special topics at the annual meeting scheduled for Western Washington University in October, 1976, be “Women, Women Writers, and the West.” The interest in women writers and the West was so intense that the book *Women, Women Writers, and the West* was published in 1980, which includes ten papers read at that meeting and eight solicited between then and the fall of 1977. The discussion in the book includes not only writers like Willa Cather and Mari Sandoz but also some long forgotten writers like Dorothy Scarborough and Gertrude Atherton. For the first time, women and women writers became a focus for the American Western literary study. Many women writers, from then on, were recovered and reevaluated, and their works began to receive serious critical attention.

In recent years, people discuss Western women writers by dividing them into different periods, different regions, or even different writing styles. In 2003, Julie Danneberg published *Women Writers of the West: Five Chroniclers of the American Frontier*, in which five women writers are discussed and analyzed. Focusing on the period from the end of the 1800s to the beginning of the 1900s, Danneberg writes about how these five remarkable women (Helen Hunt Jackson, Jessie Benton Fremont, Louise Clappe, Mary Hallock Foote, and Gertrude Bonnin) succeeded in describing the frontier life when female ambition was considered a flaw, not an asset. In 2004, Cathryn Halverson published *Maverick Autobiographies: Women*