

Yayın Geliş Tarihi: 29.04.2024
Yayına Kabul Tarihi: 08.11.2024
Online Yayın Tarihi: 12.12.2024
<http://dx.doi.org/10.16953/deusosbil.1475699>

Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi
Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi
Cilt: 26, Sayı: 4, Yıl: 2024 Sayfa: 1443- 1454
E-ISSN: 1308-0911

Araştırma Makalesi

THE REVIVAL OF MEDUSA IN TED HUGHES'S CHILDREN'S NOVELLA *THE IRON WOMAN* IN THE ECOFEMINIST CONTEXT

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Abstract¹

British author and poet Ted Hughes's The Iron Woman, a sequel to The Iron Man, is one of the children's literature works awaiting to be discovered as a noteworthy ecofeminist work. The aim of this study is to explore the association between the Medusa myth and Hughes's The Iron Woman, examining their shared roles as female resistance and empowerment within an ecofeminist context. Within the angle of gender, power dynamics and nature, the analysis reveals an innovative approach to the novella, which depicts how the imperishable mythological heroine Medusa is revived in an ecofeminist context. The study indicates how the heroines are similar to each other not only in terms of their physical features but also their insurgent natures and ways of punishing men to resist. In this regard, the study asserts that while evoking cultural awareness both for children and adults, The Iron Woman creates a reminiscent of Medusa in an ecofeminist manner. Therefore, the study sheds an ecofeminist light on the association between two female protagonists, examining the title character, the Iron Woman, as the revival of Medusa in a new context.

Keywords: *The Iron Woman, Medusa, Ecofeminism, Resistance, Nature.*

Bu makale için önerilen kaynak gösterimi (APA 6. Sürüm):

Erdem Ayyıldız, N. (2024). The revival of Medusa in Ted Hughes's children's novella *The Iron Woman* in the ecofeminist context. *Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, 26 (4), 1443- 1454.

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¹ Ethics committee approval is not required for this study.

TED HUGHES'UN *DEMİR KADIN* ADLI KISA ÇOCUK ROMANINDA MEDUSA'NIN EKOFEMİNİST BAĞLAMDA DİRİLİŞİ

Öz

İngiliz yazar ve şair Ted Hughes'un "Demir Adam" adlı eserinin devamı niteliğindeki "Demir Kadın" başlıklı kısa romanı, dikkate değer bir ekofeminist eser olarak keşfedilmeyi bekleyen çocuk edebiyatı eserlerinden biridir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, Medusa efsanesi ile Hughes'un Demir Kadın başlıklı kısa romanı arasındaki ilişkiyi, ekofeminist bir bağlamda kadın direnişi ve güçlenmesi gibi ortak rollerini inceleyerek araştırmaktır. Analiz; cinsiyet, güç dinamikleri ve doğa açısından bakıldığında, ölümsüz bir mitolojik kadın kahraman olan Medusa'nın ekofeminist bir bağlamda nasıl yeniden canlandırıldığını tasvir eden kısa romana yenilikçi bir yaklaşımı ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışma, kadın kahramanların sadece fiziksel özellikleri açısından değil, aynı zamanda direnişçi doğaları ve karşı koymak için erkekleri cezalandırma biçimleri açısından da birbirlerine ne kadar benzediklerini ortaya koymaktadır. Bu bağlamda, çalışma Demir Kadın adlı kısa romanın hem çocuklarda hem de yetişkinlerde kültürel farkındalık uyandırırken ekofeminist açıdan Medusa'yı anımsattığını ileri sürmektedir. Bu nedenle çalışma, roman başlığı karakteri olan Demir Kadın'ı Medusa'nın yeni bir bağlamda yeniden canlandırılması olarak ele alarak iki kadın kahraman arasındaki bağlantıya ekofeminist bir ışık tutmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: The Iron Woman, Medusa, Ekofeminizm, Direniş, Doğa.

INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Known as a twentieth-century English poet and storyteller, Ted Hughes (1930–1998) had another significant aspect shadowed in his career: his being a children's literature author. However, he was chosen as "Poet Laureate for the recognition of the seriousness and importance of writing for children by the creation of a Children's Laureate" in his last year before his death (Gifford, 2009, p. 80). He succeeded in finding the ground shared between children and adults (Hollindale, 1997, p. 47) through nature, "providing psychological/spiritual blueprints" (Kazzer, 2005, p. 107). Thus, "when writing for children he could pursue his themes without having to get through the defenses put up by adults, the assumption was that he was developing the same interests as in his writing for adults" (Gifford, 2009, p. 76). *The Iron Man* (1968) and *The Iron Woman* (1993) are two noteworthy children's novels by Hughes.

The Iron Man, which is available in six different languages today, has been read at primary schools as one of the most popular texts in the United Kingdom since its release. It is abounded with fascination with machines, space and the conflict

between machines and the nature represented through the Iron Man and the farmer's son, Hogarth. All the items associated with masculinity in the sexist thinking, ranging from machinery and weapons to the Iron Man as a masculine warrior, accompanied by a farmer's son called Hogarth, in the novel *The Iron Man*, are replaced by nature, which is associated with production and women in ecocritical thinking. The rebellious female figure, the Iron Woman, is accompanied by a factory worker's daughter, Lucy, in the novel *The Iron Woman*, even though Hogarth and the Iron Man appear as Lucy's supporters in the novel. Revolving around a teenage girl named Lucy and the title character, the Iron Woman, the novel raises environmental awareness among both adults and young readers. Thus, unlike *The Iron Man*, which is concerned with weapons, *The Iron Woman* gives a message about waste (Gifford, 2009, pp. 75-78).

The Iron Woman is a science fiction novel centered on around the title character and a teenage girl, Lucy. The Iron Woman is an iron giantess who, suffering from toxic waste being thrown into the river for a long time, emerges from a marsh to punish people who cause the environmental destruction. Lucy finds her in a desperate situation, covered in chemicals, and revengeful against uncaring capitalist minds polluting the environment. The Iron Woman rises out of the marsh as the representative of all sea creatures suffering from the waste of the factory nearby to destroy the factory and its ignorant workers. The novel indicates how the title character's "destructive energy provoked by human ignorance and abuse can be turned into something good" (Kazzer, 2005, p. 104). Lucy asks Hogarth for help in seeking a solution to prevent the Iron Woman from harming her father, who is also one of the factory workers. Rising out of a swamp, the Iron Woman turns factory workers into swamp creatures so that they can comprehend their suffering because of their toxic poisoning of rivers and animals. Her physical depiction, rebellious nature and way of punishing people throughout the novel remind widely of the known Greek mythological character, Medusa.

The Medusa myth has fascinated the West since antiquity (Foster, 2003, p. 183). Medusa is one of the Gorgon sisters, and is known for her beauty. She is raped by Poseidon and then punished for that by Athena, who turns her into a monster-like woman with her snake hair evoking fear rather than passion and love. In another perspective, indeed, victimised Medusa turns out to be a victimiser, taking revenge from any gaze upon herself by petrifying the men looking at herself. She is punished by Gods but indeed, she indirectly retaliates any gaze upon herself through this way of punishment. Although killed by Perseus at the end, Medusa keeps her vitality through her gaze, representing her "deadly power" (Foster, 2003, p. 181). Drawing a parallel between Medusa's rebellious nature, and the Iron Woman's revenge, this study aims at examining Hughes's novel *The Iron Woman* as the revival of Medusa's gaze in an ecofeminist context. Thus, the study reveals a profound exploration of the association between the rebellion of the Iron Woman in Hughes's novel and the

Medusa Myth, analysing their parallel roles as representatives of female empowerment and resistance within an ecofeminist context.

Ecofeminism, which has been “both an activist movement and a theoretical discipline” since its advent in the 1970s (Sepetoğlu, 2014, p. 1), associates the exploitation of nature with the oppression of women, confirming that all kinds of oppression based on gender, class and race strengthen the oppression of nature (Gaard, 1993, p. 1). Therefore, ecofeminism deals with the exploitation of nature as a feminist issue. In this regard, ecocriticism and feminism intersect through activism in ecofeminism (Glazebrook, 2002, p. 13) because ecocriticism struggles for the liberation of nature, while feminism fights for the liberation of women from mistreatment. The premise they both rely on is to deconstruct the binary oppositions, including “man/woman” and “culture/nature,” set by patriarchal thinking. Both nature and women, who are associated with nature because of their roles as child bearers and carers are exposed to the exploitation of patriarchy because of the increasing power of industry, science and technology, thus capitalism itself. Hence, the colonisation or rape of the female body in the feminist approach refers to the colonisation or rape of nature in ecocritical thinking. Ecofeminists deal with both women and nature in relation to patriarchy and capitalism, as both systems operate as “interactive, mutually reinforcing, and inseparable for the purposes of feminist analysis” (Carlassare, 2000, p. 92). In this regard, ecological issues are socially and culturally handled through ecofeminism, considering the oppression of nature and women as related. Therefore, ecofeminism is applied in this study to decipher the return of Medusa through the title character of Hughes’s children’s novella, *The Iron Woman*.

THE IRON WOMAN: AN ECOFEMINIST VERSION OF MEDUSA

Dating back to ancient Greek philosophy and revived and strengthened in the Renaissance period, Western humanism promoted anthropocentrism, patriarchy and any other dichotomies justifying “the misogynist treatment of women and the destruction of the nonhuman environment and animals as the unprioritized parties” (Baysal, 2022, pp. 214–215). Thus, considering the exploitation of women, animals and nature as the primary concern of ecofeminist critics, Hughes’s selected novella, *The Iron Woman*, stands out as an ecofeminist critic of European humanist thinking. The study draws allusions between the Medusa myth and *The Iron Woman* in terms of their female title characters’ resistance to the prevailing system.

Although the myth of Medusa has different versions, ranging from Hesiod to Ovid, it remains the same in its main framework. The Greek name “Medusa” refers to “the ruling one” in philological terms, and the adjective “gorgos” is translated into English as “terrible,” “fierce,” and “frightful” (Dexter, 2010, p. 25). Medusa is one of the winged monsters called the Gorgons, but the only mortal one. The beautiful mythological character Medusa, as a representation of female

sexuality, is victimised by a mythological god, representing the male gaze, and then punished by Athena as this deeply insulting sexual intercourse occurs in her temple. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Medusa is told to be a beautiful priestess of Minerva/Athena. With her beautiful hair, she catches the eye of many mythological characters such as the god Poseidon/Neptune. "One day Neptune [Poseidon]/ Found her and raped her, in Minerva's [Athena's] temple" while praying (Ovid, 2018, p. 106). The line expresses a lack of love and passion, expressing the action of rape. The reason why Athena punishes Medusa instead of Poseidon is that Poseidon is an older and more powerful god than Medusa (Albert, 2021, p. 145). Athena punishes Medusa, who has just been raped and deprived of her virginity, by turning her into an ugly creature with snake hair on her head who is empowered to petrify men who gaze at herself. Her seductive eyes are transformed into fierce, bloodshot globes that terrify those who see her. Thus, the patriarchal pen leaves the rapist unpunished, but the rape victim suffering. However, Athena's punishment turns out to be a force for Medusa to become "the ruling one" (Dexter, 2010, p. 25) over the men harassing her, as her name suggests, and thus she gets control of her own body and life until her death.

Indeed, Medusa is empowered while being punished and Athena's underestimation of Medusa is repaid by Medusa's revengeful return to the patriarchal order. This punishment to oppress her, indeed, enables to set her free (Bowers, 1990, p. 217). Medusa responds to the male gaze through her petrifying gaze, which refers to resistance to the patriarchy. Thus, the female gaze of Medusa overwhelms the male gaze. In this regard, the Medusa myth portrays a potent image of female empowerment and resistance. Medusa's transformation into a Gorgon, known for her lethal gaze, is emblematic of her defiance against male authority. At this point, it is indispensable to mention the French feminist Hélène Cixous's deconstructive reading of the Medusa myth in one of her key texts, *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1976), in which she argues that Athena's punishment is indeed a way of empowerment for Medusa, inspiring all the oppressed women. (pp. 875-893)

Medusa seems to be revived in Ted Hughes's *The Iron Woman*. Hughes considers the level of communication "[c]lothed in story and myth" through the Goddess in the shape of a mermaid, witch, madwoman or even nature to be essential for ecocritical fiction, which depicts the response of the Goddess' laws/nature to the human misuse of natural resources (Kazzer, 2005, p. 102). Although the name "Medusa" is never referred to in the novella, which is a science fiction product of a technologically-advanced period away from mythology, the enormous figure of the title character on the front cover of the novella by Faber & Faber (1993) has snake-like hair and an unpleasant green complexion, which recalls Medusa. Both Medusa and the Iron Woman are similar to each other in appearance as female monsters. Considering that a monster is described as a being transcending any categories belonging to human beings or animals (Golyn, 2020, p. 11), Medusa becomes a "feminine monster" (Dexter, 2010, p. 25) when she is punished by Athena. Although

Medusa is not mentioned with any details related to herself, in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, her tale begins with the words, "She was very lovely once, the hope of many" (Ovid, 2018, p. 106). The line indicates that she has lost her beauty and is no longer the hope of suitors, her status as a lovely woman in society is lost after her hair is replaced with snakes. It is told almost as a tragedy because losing her beauty means losing the very thing that made her something in society when her beautiful hair is replaced with snakes. Snakes are often associated with evil women since Eve, who is seduced by Lilith under the cover of the snake. Considering that Eve gives up Heaven to embrace knowledge in the worldly life ordered by patriarchy, Medusa also seems to give up her innocence and turn out to be a resistance force against patriarchy. In this regard, she becomes "a symbol of female power stepping outside its bounds" (Golyn, 2020, p. 143) until her death.

The Iron Woman is described to be similar to Medusa with her hair composed of "huge coils of wires in a complicated arrangement" (Hughes, 1993, p. 19), reminding snakes on Medusa's head to cast out the men who are fascinated with her beauty. In this regard, the Iron Woman's enormous head that is "crowned with reeds" (Hughes, 1993, p. 6) draws allusion to Medusa's head covered with snakes. She is identified as "a sort of human-shaped submarine," "not a robot" but "the real thing" (Hughes, 1993, p. 34) conveying the suffering sea animals; "the cry of the insects, the leeches, the worms, the shrimps, the water skeeters, the beetles, the bream, the perch, the carp, the pike, the eels" (Hughes, 1993, p. 39). In ecofeminist thinking, the Iron Woman is the embodiment of the dualisms and, in Gaard's words, "feminizing nature and naturalizing or animalizing women has served as justification for the domination of women, animals, and the earth" (1993, p. 5). Thus, all devalued things associated with women, nature, body, emotion and animals are juxtaposed with all valued things related to men, culture, the mind and the human beings in the novella. In similar to the Medusa myth, *The Iron Woman* represents, in ecofeminist context, how "the culture as separated from nature is settled around sexual distinctions, dogmas and prejudices, and projects the way of how *anthropos* societies originally evolve" (Baysal, 2021, p. 173). In this regard, the novella represents the philosophy of ecofeminism through the title character's struggle for nature.

Athena's punishment about Medusa's hair is similarly executed by the title character in *The Iron Woman*, transforming the hair of the men, who abuse nature, into white irreversibly. This transformation remains unchanged to remind the men of the irreversible damage they have left on nature. The echoing impact of the sound of the sea creatures' pain remains in their ears, making them think deeply. Thus, the female rage is reflected in the most terrifying faces of the title characters, who are converted into a symbol of the fight against men. The detrimental impacts of environmental pollution and degradation of women and animals are associated with the ecofeminist juxtaposition of feminism, environmentalism and animal liberation (Gaard, 1993, p. 5) in the novella. The men who survive the Iron Woman's punishment undergo transformation, with white hair indicating their knowledge. Eve

and Medusa's knowledge about the patriarchy through snakes is reversed with factory workers' grey hair because of their knowledge about the patriarchal capitalist forces causing a lot of harm to the nature and sea creatures.

Both Medusa and the Iron Woman have somehow been violated by men; thus, both of them revenge specifically on men. As noted by the critic Silverman (2016), Medusa has no female victims (p. 117). Both Medusa and the Iron Woman become horrific figures, victimising only men who attempt to victimise them. The patriarchal interpretation of Medusa through her "profound sexuality and physicality that cannot be purged from her matriarchal origins," unlike the spiritualised images of some women, especially the Virgin Mary (Bowers, 1990, pp. 218–219) draws parallels to the capitalist patriarchal violation of the woman who is recreated as an iron one with snake-like hair constructed by electronic wires. Considering that power holders often seek for a victim to exploit (Balkaya, 2020, p. 726), both Medusa and the Iron Woman are victimised by male power holders. In this context, both women are desecrated by their male perpetrators; while Medusa is raped by the seagod Poseidon, the Iron Woman is violated by the toxic materials, spread into the river. Both characters are protestors against the violation of the Western man, who declares himself superior to women and nature. The Iron Woman is the protestor of "man's devastating crimes against Nature, Nature defined not only as the earth and its life forms, powers and processes, but also as the female in all its manifestations, and as the 'natural man' within the individual psyche" (Sagar, 2012, pp. 1–2). Considering that the Goddess represents Hughes's "the inner' moon world" (Kazzer, 2005, p. 103), the Iron Woman is the voice of his feminine side against the destructiveness of the patriarchy on nature. Thus, the Medusa myth and the Iron Woman portray the female resistance against anthropocentric and androcentric norms, reinforcing the oppression of women and nature.

Another allusion between the Medusa myth and *The Iron Woman* in the ecofeminist context is that both Medusa and the Iron Woman are confined in their female origins after victimisation. Medusa is raped and then imprisoned to Goddess Athena's temple, which stands for the womb. The critic Seeling (2002) interprets the temple as the virgin goddess Athena's body, arguing that the rape of virgin Medusa in her temple body "represents the deflowering of the daughter by her father. Athena's rage at the violation of her temple-body is displaced on Medusa" (p. 898). Likewise, the Iron Woman seems to have dwelled under a marsh, representing the womb of the Earth. Like Medusa's victimisation and confinement in the temple, the Iron Woman seems to be victimised and confined to the exploited nature. Thus, both the temple and nature are violated by the greedy and exploitative nature of humans. Although the marsh is located in the river, which is under the protection of the seagod Poseidon in mythological terms, it seems that Poseidon, as a male god, fails to protect it. Lucy finds the canal waterless and polluted and it turns out to be "a rubbish dump" (Hughes, 1993, p. 32) with "rusty bicycle wheels, supermarket trolleys, bedsteads, prams, old refrigerators, washing machines, car batteries, even two or

three old cars, along with hundreds of rusty, twisted odds and ends, tangles of wire, cans and bottles and plastic bags” (Hughes, 1993, p. 32). The Iron Woman rises from the depth of the polluted river to take the revenge of nature on all men by paralyzing the polluters as Medusa does to her harassers. At the beginning of the novella, the Iron Woman’s emerging out of the marsh is portrayed as a baby being born out of her mother’s womb. She appears “amid gurglings and sucklings” (Hughes, 1993, p. 5) as follows: “Already the head was out. It still didn’t look much like a head—simply a gigantic black lump, crowned with reeds and streaming with mud. But the mouth was clear, and after that first wailing cry the lips moved slowly, like a crab’s, spitting out mud and roots.” (Hughes, 1993, p. 6)

Another parallelism between Medusa and the Iron Woman is their way of punishing men. Both of them transform men physically into an altered state. The Iron Man’s transferring his power into the Iron Woman’s body is a reversal representation of Medusa’s being raped by Poseidon because this time, the action is not weakening and violating rape, but an empowering action. The scene is told as follows: “That spinning dark column of scales touched the Iron Woman with its drill point. It touched the top of her head. Immediately her body seemed to begin to disappear. Actually it began to vibrate... As she vibrated, that whirling tower of darkness and scales was pouring into the Iron Woman. And as it poured into her, she seemed to grow.” (Hughes, 1993, p. 49) The expression “grow” is interpreted as the growth of the Iron Man’s baby in the Iron Woman’s body as the growth of the winged horse Pegasus and giant with a golden sword called Chrysaor in Medusa’s body as a result of Poseidon’s rape. Similar to Medusa, turning her male gazers into stone, the Iron Woman transforms the men into sea creatures like eel and remain so until they experience the same pain and suffering as them and recognize who they are actually. The spelling impact on factory workers is also created through Lucy and Hogarth who sense the Iron Woman’s sound of agony and all poisoned creatures under the water. Lucy initiates a chain reaction in the factory by touching the manager of the factory and turns the workers into “high-voltage scream batteries” (Hughes, 1993, p. 41). The upper-class-managing patriarchal forces also undergo transformation to comprehend the sufferings of nature because of their greedy policies. The Company Secretary becomes “a giant eel” (Hughes, 1993, p. 107), the Prime Minister “a six-foot-long dragonfly larva” (Hughes, 1993, p. 121) and Lucy’s father is transformed into “a giant newt” (Hughes, 1993, p. 121). The transformed men are forced to live in the river they have polluted and to taste the poison they have spread as a threat to the living animals there. The transformed men release bubbles from their mouths, forming a huge eight or ten-eyed spider-like cloud. This mysterious influence is spread out of the factory throughout all the country via this supernatural animal, the spider-god of Wealth, which describes itself as “the spider-god of more and more and more money” (Hughes, 1993, p. 134). Repetitive use of the capital “money” is noteworthy for the hunter spider, representing the money-lover capitalist forces violating nature as well. Collaborating with the Iron Man, the Iron Woman fights

against the spider-cloud. Their victory over this strange creature represents that men have changed in mind; thus, the spell is broken, and the men become human beings again. In this regard, the novella plays the role of an “urgent, and didactic, ecological intervention” (Roberts, 2006, p. 177) via the Iron Woman in an ecofeminist context. While Medusa’s petrifying gaze is a kind of ecological retribution against the harm done to nature, the Iron Woman’s transforming punishment, similarly, is a way of taking nature’s revenge on destructive human actions. This is the revenge of the damaged reproductivity of nature and women such as the Iron Woman and Medusa against patriarchal forces. Both Medusa and the Iron Woman release their bodies and souls from the restrictions, in which women are like “caged birds, imprisoned in wifehood and motherhood” (Silindir, 2011, p. 76). Therefore, the Iron Woman’s ecofeminist attitude towards the anthropocentric domination over nature excludes women, which makes the thread of the Medusa myth, in which Medusa also excludes women from her castigation.

Both the Medusa myth and *The Iron Woman* urge men to become aware of what they caused. Medusa gorgonizes men, who look into her eyes, as a punishment to see what they have disregarded or othered. To watch involves discrimination, objectivation and commodification, thus degrading through a hierarchal order and leaving a gap between the watcher and the one that is watched, whereas to see is associated with attention, regarding and subjectivation, thus putting that thing or person at the same level as the one in action and closing the gap between them, if they have any. In this regard, Medusa’s punishment represents a feminist reaction against patriarchy, considering women as bodily entities to be watched for sexuality. This reaction is, at the same time, a way of empowering Medusa and other women to become subjects of their bodies and lives as people who are to be seen rather than objects to be watched. (Cixous 1976, pp. 890-893)

The Iron Woman maintains the Medusa’s resistance in a similar way centuries later. Birdwatchers are mentioned several times in Hughes’s novella. Gifford interprets them as “the inhabitants of the countryside in the novella” (Gifford, 2009, p. 78), watching rather than seeing because of their detachment from nature and living creatures in nature. Like Medusa, the Iron Woman transforms the inhabitants of that environment from watchers, who have been alienated from nature, to seers who regard the importance of nature. In this context, the mother bird found dead on her eggs reminds Medusa’s petrified victims and foreshadows the serious damage men have left to nature and the living creatures. It may also represent the abuse of women, causing infertility. Although the reason why the mother bird has died is unclear, its death is associated with environmental problems caused by selfish capitalist men’s acts of pollution (Hughes, 1993, pp. 11–12). Nature and all the things belonging to nature such as the mother bird are damaged losing their productivity just like the productivity of Medusa, violated by a male god. It is the feminine power that shakes the men with the reality to preserve and respect nature for all humanity in the novella.

CONCLUSION

Ted Hughes's *The Iron Woman* provides an insight into the connection between environmental crises and male oppression within the ecofeminist context. Considering that ecofeminism is concerned with the simultaneous liberation of all oppressed groups, the novella calls for action against the oppression of both nature, women, working people and animals at the same time. In this aspect, the novella articulates the challenge against anthropocentrism which is annihilating all life in the world. The novella revives Medusa as an agent against the destroyers of nature. The patriarchal dominance is resisted through female empowerment once again in *The Iron Woman*, displaying the interconnectedness of gender and nature. Within the angle of gender, power dynamics and nature, the analysis reveals an innovative approach to the novella, which depicts how imperishable mythological heroine Medusa is revived in an ecofeminist context. The study indicates how the heroines are similar to each other not only in terms of their physical features but also their insurgent natures and ways of punishing men to resist the patriarchy. In this regard, the study asserts that while evoking cultural awareness both for children and adults, *The Iron Woman* creates a reminiscent of Medusa in an ecofeminist manner.

Conflict of Interest and Contribution Rate: The author does not declare any conflict of interest. The article has one author and the author's contribution rate is 100%.

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