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Queering the Spiral: Ecological Disruptions and Fluid Identities in Junji Ito's *Uzumaki*

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Abstract

Queer ecology challenges heteronormative and anthropocentric constructions of the natural world by questioning fixed binaries and rethinking the idea of the “natural.” This paper applies queer ecological theory to *Uzumaki*, the horror manga by Junji Ito, set in Kurouzu-cho, where a spiral curse consumes residents through grotesque bodily transformations and environmental decay. The spiral functions as a disruptive force that collapses distinctions between human and non-human, male and female, natural and unnatural. Episodes such as the snail transformations, mushroom-linked infants, and entwined lovers illustrate the fluidity of identity within ecological systems. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s analysis of sexuality and power, Catriona Sandilands’ articulation of queer ecology, and Rachel Stein’s environmental justice perspective, this study argues that the spiral operates as a queer ecological agent, destabilizing compulsory heteronormativity and anthropocentric dominance while reimagining nature as a space of fluid coexistence.

Keywords: Non-normative Bodies, Fluid Identities, Binary Resistance, Biocentrism, Queer Nature.

Introduction

“Your worm is your only emperor for diet: we fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots.” - William Shakespeare

In an anthropocentric worldview, humanity is positioned at the top of existence, inherently superior to natural world. This ideological dominance has justified the exploitation of nature and constructed rigid hierarchies of power, dividing those who wield control from those who are systematically marginalized. Such a framework reinforces systems of oppression and perpetuates cycles of exploitation and erasure through order and dominance. Queer ecology is

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a retaliation against such ideological dominance by arguing that the ecosystem accommodates and celebrates queer spaces.

Theoretical Framework: Queer Ecology, Power, and the Politics of Nature

Queer ecology is an emerging field of study that challenges heteronormative and anthropocentric views of the natural world. It recognizes the fluidity and diversity of identities in both human and non-human realms and aims to foster inclusive and sustainable relationships with the environment. The origins of queer ecology can be traced back to Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1975), where he explored the social construction of sexuality and power. Foucault observes that modern regimes of power conceptualized sex through a "biology of reproduction" and a corresponding "medicine of sex" (Foucault 54). Building on Foucault's insights, scholar Catriona Sandilands expanded these ideas to develop the foundation of queer ecology, bridging the gap between ecological thought and queer theory. In her ground breaking essay "Queer Ecology," she defined the term as:

a loose, interdisciplinary constellation of practices that aim, in different ways, to disrupt prevailing heterosexist discursive and institutional articulations of sexuality and nature, and also to reimagine evolutionary processes, ecological interactions, environmental politics in light of queer theory. (Sandilands 169)

This articulation of queer ecology emerges from earlier ecofeminist critiques of hierarchical dualisms. Greta Gaard argues that ecofeminist critique must identify the "linked dualisms of white/nonwhite, financially empowered/impooverished, heterosexual/queer, and reason/the erotic" (Gaard 116). The analysis of these shared structures of marginalization, as emphasized by scholars, is central to queer ecology.

The Spiral as Disruption of Binary Systems

The disruption of the binary system through a world of nature-made chaos in Junji Ito's *Uzumaki* makes the work an excellent study from the lens of queer ecology. *Uzumaki* is an eco-horror manga series (Manga refers to a diverse range of comic books and graphic novels that originate from Japan, mostly in black and white) published serially from 1998 to 1999. Consisting of 3 volumes and a total of 20 chapters, it explores the unsettling story of the residents of Kurôzu-cho, a fictional town slowly consumed by a mysterious and terrifying obsession with spirals. This unnatural curse manifests in disturbing ways, twisting both the environment and the people into grotesque forms. The story is told from the perspective of Kirie Goshima and her boyfriend, Shuichi Saito, who were the first to discover that Kurôzucho is cursed by the spiral shape. The graphic novel reaches a doomed end with humans twisting themselves into spirals, accepting the wrath of nature and its chaos.

The concept of the spiral as a curse or dominant force makes it an agent that disrupts the binary structures that existed in the village of Kurôzu-cho. Here, the spiral represents nature or its inherent spirit that reorders the world from an anthropocentric view to biocentrism. *Uzumaki* is written in an episodic manner that portrays the effect of the spiral on people from different aspects of life, like commoners, students, mothers, and even criminals. The spiral symbolizes chaos and fluidity, by which the characters undergo horrific body transformations,

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blurring the lines between human and non-human forms. As Timothy Morton argues, “queerness is installed in biological substance as such” (Morton 273).

In the first chapter, the first person to be affected by the curse is Mr. Saito, father of Shuichi, whose fixation culminates in a grotesque death, where he twists his body into the shape of a spiral. This event exemplifies how the spiral subverts human control, consuming the individual and reducing the body to an extension of a larger, incomprehensible force. It can also be conceived as an art of letting go of the rigid binary system established by patriarchal, capitalist systems and embracing their inner desires. Thus, Mr. Saito acts as a trigger that led the community of Kurôzu-cho to be consumed by the hypnotic spiral, letting them be what they want.

Snails and the Collapse of Gender Binaries

A major criticism against queer communities arises from the notion that such relationships are uncanny or unnatural, as pointed out in Sandilands’s essay:

the effeminate homosexual and the lesbian gender invert were not only seen increasingly as against nature but also sometimes considered symptoms of the toxic underside of industrial, urban, and increasingly cosmopolitan modernity. (169)

In Junji Ito’s *Uzumaki*, the author tries to break away from this conservative thought by pointing to the fact that relationships between the same sexes are common in many species and are not unnatural but rather fundamental. He points out this phenomenon exactly in Chapter 8, where a high schooler named Katayama turns into a snail due to the curse of the spiral. His fellow classmate Tsumura bullies him, as Katayama was often slow and different from the rest. The curse spreads to Tsumura too, and the school puts both of them in a cage together, where they begin to mate and lay eggs. This chapter showcases the fact that the spiral allowed them both to come out of their suppressed selves and be together, even though they belong to the same gender. Thus, the spiral lets them escape from the constraints of societal structure and disapproval, and by the end of the chapter, they begin to live together in this new form or identity in a forest far removed from their village.

Their teacher, Mr. Yokota, on the other hand, tries to crush the eggs and utters, “It’s disgusting! It’s unnatural! We can’t let these creatures breed” (35), portraying blatant anthropocentrism and aggression trying to decipher nature in a way that benefits him. As Rachel Stein writes:

By analyzing how discourses of nature have been used to enforce heteronormativity, to police sexuality, and to punish and exclude those persons who have been deemed sexually transgressive, we can begin to understand the deep, underlying commonalities between struggles against sexual oppression and other struggles for environmental justice. (7)

Junji Ito’s choice of snail for transformation in this chapter is truly significant, as snails are hermaphroditic organisms possessing both male and female reproductive systems. It challenges the rigid binary categorization of sex and gender prevalent in heteronormative frameworks. Joan Roughgarden notes, “diversity reveals the evolutionary stability and

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biological importance of expressions of gender and sexuality that go beyond the traditional male/female binary” (Roughgarden 23).

In the context of queer ecology, their existence exemplifies the fluidity and diversity of biological identities in the natural world, demonstrating how nature itself resists simplistic categorizations. Thus, snails in this chapter represent the fact that queer identities are also part of nature, and the claim of being unnatural is the result of humans’ inability to accept anything different or alien from their said ways. At the end of the chapter the teacher also transforms into a snail depicting that no one can escape from their actual self even if they express aggression against it.

Mushroom Infants and Liminal Life Forms

In Chapter 11, titled ‘The Umbilical Cord’, Itō portrays how the babies born in the village were strange as their umbilical cords grew into mushrooms. These newborn babies represent the ‘other’ or ‘queer’, a result of the cursed spiral, which defies binary narratives as they become one with nature. Mushrooms, as organisms that defy easy categorization, resonate with queer ecology’s focus on fluidity and interconnection. They occupy a liminal space in nature, breaking down organic matter while facilitating new growth. In this context, the mushroom represents queerness itself, a force that disrupts norms and introduces complexity and ambiguity into what is traditionally viewed as a straightforward process. Therefore, these infants symbolize a new generation that defies the traditional heteronormative narrative, where non-binary identities are embraced as part of nature. Also in this chapter Kirie is haunted by the sound made by the infants as piercing through her ears. This serves as a symbol of new generation voicing their needs, claiming their place in society.

Hair, Desire, and Adolescent Identity

Itō also portrayed queer identities in teenagers subtly, reflecting the identity crises and anxieties experienced by them through Chapter 6, titled ‘Medusa’. Here, Kirie’s hair begins growing uncontrollably, curling into spiral shapes and developing a life of its own. The hair starts competing with the hair of Sekino (her classmate), hypnotizing and draining their life force. Kirie’s hair, infested by the spiral, becomes a site of queer invocation, disrupting traditional notions of beauty and identity. For Sekino, the hair represents both an object of desire and a reminder of her own inadequacies. Her fixation on surpassing Kirie’s hair growth can be interpreted as an attempt to align herself with Kirie’s otherness, driven by an attraction that she may not fully understand or acknowledge. The spiral’s ability to awaken latent desires and fears within characters underscores the queerness of this dynamic. This aspect is fully understood by the conversation between the two girls where Sekino comments, “I envy you. Everyone who looks at you is captivated. I should watch out...not look too much” (171). Hence, the work explores how the spiral, by extension natural forces, could bring out sexual identities that were latent before.

Entwined Lovers and Transgressive Becoming

Another such exploration can be observed in Chapter 5, titled ‘Twisted Souls’, where the illfated lovers Yoriko and Kazunori mimic the act of entwining like snakes that they

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witnessed at the beginning of this chapter. This was a way to escape from the clutches of their parents, who were against their relationship. Their desire to become one another transcends the romantic, reflecting a deeper queer longing to inhabit the other's perspective and existence. This longing aligns with Trans narrative, where identity is seen as dynamic and evolving rather than static. Their fusion, while horrifying, symbolizes a rejection of societal norms that dictate separation and opposition, particularly those rooted in the feud between their families. The curse gave these characters a chance to transcend the rigid identity of a human dominated world through nature.

Dragonfly Pond and Biocentric Reordering

The dragonfly pond in this manga is a powerful natural force where the spiral curse is assumed to have originated. It serves as a force of destruction and has a hypnotic power to attract and drown the living and non-living entities of the village. The pond's mysterious whirlpools suggest a rejection of the existing system and the need to rearrange the entire village in adherence to the structure of the spiral, thus creating an inclusive environment in tune with nature. In Chapter 18, Kirie and Shuichi decide to explore the bottom of the pond as it dries up. Their search indicates an exploration of a new, transformed system that is not constructed on the basis of binaries. They discover that the only way to escape from the loops of the spiral is to become a part of it by accepting the world from a biocentric perspective, as portrayed in the next chapter. Shuichi comments, "It's like cursing us for being underground, hidden from all the eyes up there. But every so often, every hundreds or thousands or ten thousand years, it can reach the people above ground and even though its builders are gone... maybe it's still building itself" (195). This very scene challenges the notion of queer identities as unnatural or uncanny. It highlights that these identities have always been part of nature, existing for centuries but marginalized on the basis of otherness. Ito calls for a drastic change in thought processes to demystify the idea of queer communities as being against nature.

It is indeed significant to study what the spiral stands for altogether. It can be seen as the disruptive natural force, a violent retaliation against the exploitative nature of man. The way the curse manifests in people differs from one another. The people who are slow become snails, and the greedy criminals manifest into storms. Even in such chaos, the law of coexistence of predators and prey in nature remains intact. The snail eaters in Chapter 17 indicate how queer lives are often in the hands of greedy people who devour them for their own needs, just like the way bureaucracy objectifies and discards the lives of the community. When an individual becomes part of the LGBTQ community, the world views them as less than human. Therefore, this chapter criticizes the dark and ugly side of the anthropocentric world dominated by patriarchy.

Cosmic Spiral and Expansion of Queer Ecology

The last chapter of Uzumaki is an extra episode, separate from the main plot. Here, Shuichi and Kirie witness the fact that the entire galaxy, where life originates from, is also part of this spiral. The recurring presence of the spiral within galaxies highlights its role as a destabilizing force that disrupts established order. This chapter extends the concept of the spiral

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as a 'queer agent' beyond the terrestrial, demonstrating its operation on a cosmic scale by connecting the human and non-human, the earthly and the celestial. Galaxies, with their fluid, dynamic forms, exemplify a rejection of fixed, linear trajectories. This resonates with queer ecology's embrace of fluidity in identity, relationships, and ecological systems. By incorporating celestial phenomena into the narrative, this chapter challenges the conventional boundaries of queer ecological thought. It paves the way to evaluate the scope of reading queer ecological perspectives, keeping in mind the role of cosmic forces in nature.

Conclusion

The significance of this study lies in its ability to demonstrate the intrinsic relationship between queer identity and the natural world by challenging the prevailing notion of their inherent separation. The theory breaks away from the system of binaries and puts forward the need to create a space for queer identities as equal members of the environment. As a contemporary theoretical framework, the scope for this study is broad and multifaceted. Junji Ito's *Uzumaki* presents a compelling narrative that profoundly challenges conventional understandings of identity, the natural world, and humanity's relationship within it. The manga's pervasive spiral motif, body horror, and the blurring of boundaries between human and non-human serve as a critique of anthropocentric, heteronormative, and rigidly binary systems that have long dominated human thought. Ultimately, *Uzumaki* compels readers to re-evaluate their assumptions about individuality, identity, and humanity's role within the ecological order.

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