

Analysing the Concept of Ecofeminism in Selected Indian English Novels

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Abstract

Ecofeminism is a theory that links the fair sex with ecology. It puts parallel the exploitation of nature and women by the dominant counterparts. Women share the values of nurturing, breeding and creating with nature. The present paper endeavours to relate the domination over women in the patriarchal society to the destruction of nature by encroachers. It seeks to outline the symbiotic relationship of nature and women, as to how women preserve nature which in turn helps to heal them. The paper will cite novels by modern Indian women like *Fire on the Mountain* by Anita Desai, *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy and *Nectar in a Sieve* by Kamala Markanday to bring in light the plight of Indian women, oppressed by the weight of stereotypical norms and their seclusion or alienation in nature. The paper gives a brief explanation of post colonial male capitalist ideology to study its negative impact upon nature and women.

Keywords: exploitation, patriarchal, symbiotic, stereotypical, seclusion, capitalist

The term ecofeminism seeks its origin from the West; it was coined by a French critic Françoise d'Eaubonne. It is relatively a new phenomenon which aims to study the relationship between nature and women. Firstly in the way that both are creators and care takers and secondly how both have been oppressed, dominated and exploited. In the male chauvinistic society, both women and nature are seen as inferior, other and commoditized, in the name of holistic development and progress. Ecofeminists believe that destruction of nature and altering of lives of women is interrelated. Women throughout the history played a significant role in various nature drives like Chipko movement, Narmada Bacchao Andolan, because of their innate connection with the mother nature.

Elizabeth Lee in "*Victorian Theories of Sex and Sexuality*", there were two human natures corresponding to the masculine and the feminine because of this principle of separate spheres.

There was an anabolic nature which nurtured energy versus a katabolic nature which released energy corresponding to feminine and masculine natures or temperaments respectively. These two words are scientific words which we see in biochemistry and biology. Anabolism means the building up or synthesis and catabolism means disintegration or breaking down. Women through these imagery/metaphors are builders while the Victorian men are destroyers. Similarly Anita Desai in *Fire On The Mountain* portray men as symbol of hatred, brutality and arrogance.

In 1987, the American philosopher, Karen Warren wrote an influential article “Feminism and Ecology: Making Connections” in which she urges feminists to turn their attention to ecological problems and to recognize the connection between environmental degradation, sexism and other forms of social oppression.

Karen J. Warren in her book *Ecological Feminism* (1994), adds that ecofeminism is also “cross-cultural” in that it encompasses “the inextricable interconnections among all social systems of domination, for instance, racism, classism, ageism, ethnocentrism, imperialism, colonialism, as well as sexism” (p. 2). Thus ecofeminism endeavors to show the parallel forms of domination, which reciprocally reinforce each other and lead to the degradation of life and the destruction of nature

The Australian philosopher Val Plumwood, focused on the nature of dualism in *Feminism and The Mastery of Nature* (1993). For her, dualism is linked to others forming oppressive connections bound and characterized by rejection and denial. Dualism is not just hierarchy but a way of thinking that makes equality and relationships unattainable. A dualism is a relationship of separation and dominion. Religion, philosophy, science, social models sexual standards education and economics reinforce this logic of dominion that assumes men’s existence in the foreground and drives women into the background. Similarly, Peter Hay in *A Companion to Environmental Thought* points out that, “patriarchy is a gender-privileging system of power relations... masculine values are regarded as ‘species-defining’, whilst the feminine is marginalized and trivialized.

This has led to the categorization of women and values associated with the feminine as ‘Other’...” (p. 73-74). In *The Second Sex* (1974), Simone de Beauvoir discusses at length on woman as the ‘Other’, which clarifies this very basic assumption about women.

Fire on The Mountain tells the dramatic story of Nanda Kaul who after her husband's death retires in a cottage up the mountain at Carignano in Kasauli. There she creates a space of her own and embraces a life of solitude, privacy and confinement. Equipped with the bare necessities, accompanied only by Ram Lal, the cook, Nanda loves Carignano for its barrenness and isolation, its steep heights, scary ravines and slopes and becomes one with this desolate landscape. This reveals a kind of interconnectedness, considered as symbiosis, a basic form of relatedness between women and nature. Throughout all phases, the woman is either contained by or containing others. Nanda lives out her old age in isolation in a Himalayan town Kasauli away from the world she knew as a wife and mother, not because of any religious or social responsibilities but "out of vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation" (p. 30). "If Nanda Kaul was a recluse out of a vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation, her great granddaughter was a recluse by nature, by instinct: she does not arrive at this condition by a long route of rejection and sacrifice, she was born to it simply" (p. 48)

From the very beginning, Nanda is associated with a pine tree connoting her wish for solitude up on the heights of the mountain. She wants to be rooted in a particular space with no other attachments or responsibilities. Though running from the past and building a new world of her own, Nanda still remains the prisoner of her painful memories, "She was grey, tall and thin in her silk sari made a sweeping, shivering sound and she fancied she could merge with the pine trees and be mistaken for one. To be a tree, no more and no less, was all she was prepared to undertake" (p. 4).

The God of Small Things, views the hierarchy of dualisms between men and women, development and underdevelopment as an ideological justification for domination. The novel is a portrayal of the destructive impact of global capital on postcolonial Indian society, whose ongoing toxic development causes disaster to the environment and impoverishment of the disempowered, calls for social, economic and environmental justice for oppressed women, marginalized human beings, and nature. The river in Ayemenem serves as a symbolic background indicating the economic condition of people and their livelihood, as well as ecological environments. Estha, upon returning to Ayemenem after a 23 year absence, finds that the old History House – an abandoned house once owned by Kari Saipu, an Englishman who had an affair with a native and shot himself – has been renovated as a luxury hotel for tourists, bearing a new name, God's Own Country. As this name suggests, the updated modern hotel epitomizes a developed modern India. However, walking down along the river dam, Estha witnesses the ecological degradation and toxicity caused by the state development plan. Roy cynically calls the hotel a "smelly paradise" (120), thereby implying the ambivalence of

development economics and their problematic impact on nature and people living along the river.

In Kamala Markandaya's 1954 novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*, the heroine, Rukmani, is forced onto the threshold of a rapidly changing India marked by the centralization of power, increased economic activity, and urbanization. Unlike her neighbours, who "threw the past away with both hands that they might be the readier to grasp the present," Rukmani "stood by in pain, envying such easy reconciliation" (29). *Nectar in a Sieve* chronicles Rukmani's attempt to retrieve and recuperate those elements of her rural life that she feels most deeply about, namely her sense of community and connection with the land. Her struggle to maintain dignity and control over her life reflects some of the complex ways in which rural women of the global South negotiate modernity. A symbiotic relationship is thus established, in theory at least, between the farmers/producers and nature. The farm soon becomes the centre of their lives, and Rukmani finds her passion in tending the land. Rukmani's journey is an example of 'making do' in the face of industrial, social, political and economic changes. Her decision to return to the land, and her desire to share that life with those she cares about constitutes her response to these changes. Through the act of gardening Rukmani develops the type of closeness with the land represented in early ecofeminist writing on the body and spirituality. At the same time, her acute dependence on the land for survival reveals a vulnerability that troubles the celebration of this closeness. In the end, however, Rukmani does favour this precarious direct relationship with nature over the alienation of city life.

To conclude, it can be asserted that all three works are perfect examples of ecofeminist novels and study the dual oppression of women and nature. The novels portray women as creators and preservers and how nature heals them in return from stereotypical oppression of male dominated society. The paper has studied various dimensions of ecofeminism and aims to highlight and hence diminish the oppression towards nature and women in the name of progress.

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