

Reweaving the Web: An Ecofeminist Lens on Contemporary Literature

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Abstract: This present paper aims to analyse some specific contemporary literary narratives through an ecofeminist lens mirroring the twin exploitations of women and nature in patriarchal capitalist society. Ecofeminism is a theoretical framework that posits how the domination of women and exploitation of nature are interconnected. Ecofeminists hold the view that patriarchal dualistic thinking is more responsible behind the oppression of women and exploitation of nature. As per this dualistic concept the one side- men, culture, mind, and reason is deemed superior and the other side- women, nature, heart, and emotion is regarded inferior. Considering women and nature as the “other”, patriarchal systems justify violence, control, and exploitation against them giving priority of mind and reason over heart and emotion in making decisions of developmental works in the name of modernization and urbanization. Drawing from the ecofeminist theories advanced by Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies, Bina Agarwal and Greta Gaard, the study interrogates how patriarchal structures simultaneously exploit women’s bodies and natural landscapes. The study illustrates through Arundhati Roy’s two novels- *The God of Small Things* (1997), and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), and Kamala Markandaya’s *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954). Each text is examined by foregrounding the voices of the marginalized characters especially women and some other non-human entities showing resistance narratives to reconfigure human-nature relationships. Methodologically, the research employs close textual reading complemented by ecocritical discourse analysis from gendered lens. Findings demonstrate that ecofeminist perspectives not only expose the gendered dimensions of environmental degradation but also illuminate pathways toward more equitable, sustainable development favouring justice for women, nature, and other non- humans.

Key Words: contemporary literature, ecofeminism, patriarchal system, environmental degradation, female subjugation, social and environmental justice.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Ecofeminism as a critical framework that has been gaining attention in literary studies for its unique perspectives. It mainly focuses on the interconnectedness of the exploitation of women and other marginalized characters and the destruction of environment together. The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (2010) defines Ecofeminism as “a philosophical and political theory and movement which combines ecological concerns with feminist ones, regarding both as resulting from male domination of society.” The Webster’s New World Encyclopedia (2013) writes, “Ecofeminism is a movement or theory that applies feminist principles and ideas to ecological issues”. Through these definitions, it can be drawn that ecofeminism, using a gendered lens, explores the deep connections between the oppressions of women and the degradation of the natural world within patriarchal societies. It posits the same hierarchical and dualistic thinking that justifies male control over women, and environment. Ecofeminist approach challenges patriarchal structures and the exploitation of the environment advocating for the liberation of both women and nature. Its development and contemporary relevance as a theory can be traced as both oppression and revival. Many contemporary works like Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997) and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), and Kamala Markandaya’s *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) can be analysed through ecofeminist lens to understand how the destruction of nature affect the lives of women.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

It is believed that the term ecofeminism was coined by the French writer Francoise d’Eaubonne in her book, *Le Feminisme ou la Mort* (1974), but the roots of ecofeminism can be traced back to various movements and intellectual traditions, including feminist activism, environmentalism, and postcolonial thought, influenced by thinkers such as Rachel Carson, who highly remarked the detrimental effects of pesticides in her book, *Silent Spring* (1962).

Ecofeminism gained momentum as women began to recognize their marginalized role in environmental discourse. In 1970s, scholars and activists began to recognise the parallels between the exploitation of women and the degradation of the environment. They assert that the domination of nature and the subjugation of women are interconnected manifestations of patriarchal power dynamics.

In 1980s, Ecofeminism had become a popular movement largely due to some renowned feminist theorist works including Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature: Woman, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (1980), Ynestra King's *What Is Ecofeminism* (1987), and Vandana Shiva's *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (1988). These ecofeminists raised questions about how belief systems allow the exploitation of the earth and linked this to the oppression of women. Another important ecofeminist Rosemary Radford Ruether in her foundational book, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (1992) says that if women want to be liberated and free, they will have to think the need to end the domination of nature. Greta Gaard in her famous book, *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism, Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy* (1998), she says that the struggles of women are to sustain themselves, their families, and the common unities. The struggles are waged against the mal- development and environmental degradation caused by patriarchal societies, multinational corporation, and global capitalism. Altogether, ecofeminists advocate for environmental balance, hierarchal and matrifocal societies, the continuance of indigenous culture and economic values. In Ecofeminism the two distinct school of thoughts emerged in late 1980s: Radical ecofeminism and Cultural ecofeminism. Radical ecofeminism argues that patriarchal ideologies and beliefs equate nature and women so that both can be oppressed, exploited, and commodified. On the other hand, Cultural ecofeminism lays stress on the association between women and environment as both have the common values of production and nurturance. This shared experience makes women more aware and alert to the destruction and degradation of the environment.

Ecofeminism emerged in India through grassroots activism like the Chipko movement and the Narmada Bachao Andolan, where women led protests against ecological degradation. Women in Uttarakhand's rural areas played a crucial role by hugging trees to prevent their felling by commercial loggers. This movement, often seen as the first major expression of ecofeminism in India, was driven by the rural women's reliance on forests for their livelihoods. Narmada Bachao Andolan was led by Medha Patkar. This movement was fought for the rights of tribal and rural communities displaced by the construction of Sardar Sarovar Dam. The themes like environmental degradation, pollution, and displacement found expression through various genres of literature such as fictions, essays, plays, and poetry in varied languages. This was reinforced through the scholarly work *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development* (1988) by Vandana Shiva, a prominent thinker who has written extensively on the connections between patriarchy, ecological destruction, and the negative impacts of policies like the Green Revolution and highlighted the link between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature. According to Shiva, the capitalist ventures are highly motivated by the patriarchal ideologies and beliefs that justifies the superiority of the masculine and the oppression of the feminine and thus enabling the exploitation of both nature and women. Shiva calls this the western model of 'maldevelopment' that has made the living environments in much problematic state in many places of the world. Other influential scholars Bina Agarwal and Vrinda Karat have also significantly contributed to this discourse, articulating how women and the environment are similarly subordinated in a patriarchal system. Later Arundhati Roy, and Mahashweta Devi infused their works with the themes of ecological consciousness and feminist critique, highlighting the exploitation of both women and nature by patriarchal and capitalist structures. Their works depict the struggles of women as intertwined with the struggles for the environment and against the patriarchal thoughts for capitalist gain. Indeed, ecofeminist literature in India has challenged dominant paradigms and advocated for social and environmental justice.

3. OBJECTIVES:

This present paper aims to analyse some specific contemporary literary narratives through an ecofeminist lens mirroring the twin exploitations of women and nature in patriarchal capitalist society. The study illustrates through Arundhati Roy's two novels- *The God of Small Things* (1997), and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), and Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954). Each text is examined by foregrounding the voices of the marginalized characters especially women and some other non-human entities.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This research paper employs close textual analysis. The research is based on the primary sources as well as the secondary sources including relevant books, articles and some e-contents downloading from some authentic websites. Drawing from the ecofeminist theories advanced by Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies, Bina Agarwal, and Greta Gaard, the study interrogates how patriarchal structures simultaneously exploit women's bodies and natural landscapes.

5. RESULTS:

Findings demonstrate that ecofeminist perspectives not only expose the gendered dimensions of environmental degradation but also illuminate pathways toward more equitable, sustainable development favouring justice for women, nature, and other non- humans. The people of patriarchal capitalist mindset may become more sensitive towards the marginalized beings and reconfigure their relationships with the natural world.

6. DISCUSSION:

a) Ecofeminist Lens on Arundhati Roy's works, *The God of Small Things*

Arundhati Roy's works, *The God of Small Things* (1997) and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) powerfully link gender oppression with environmental destruction, as interconnected facets of patriarchal capitalist systems. Her activism in several movements including Narmada Dam protests mirrors her literary focus on marginalized communities, showing how nature, like women, becomes a silent witness to injustice, while her narratives often use ecological decline as a metaphor for societal decay and the violation of feminine agency, advocating for holistic ecological and social justice. Her novel, *The God of Small Things* that explores environmental degradation and social hierarchies in Kerala, using the polluted river and the landscape to reflect the intertwined lives and struggles of characters. Roy makes the readers contemplate about the pitiable situation of the marginalized beings especially women and tribals. She criticizes the building projects destructing the natural world in the name of development and modernization. She argues such projects affect the lives of people and in general and women in particular in the contemporary societies. Such damaging effects on the marginalized community provide the ample space to analyse the text from an ecofeminist viewpoint.

The setting of the novel is Ayemenem, a fictional place in Kerala, which was an unpolluted place with fresh water running through its Meenachal River and the environment was overflowing with green leaves, flowers, and fruits but lost its charm with the gradual urbanization of the place. The degradation of Ayemenem metaphorically stands for the ultimate deterioration of the Ipe family. In the family, Pappachi (John Ipe) lives with her wife, Mammachi, their son Chacko, and their daughter, Ammu. Ammu is blessed with twin children- her son, Estha, and her daughter, Rahel. Like the Meenachal River Ammu's life is in the miserable state in the fiction. She struggles very hard to survive and sustain in patriarchal society but all her efforts turn fruitless. She faces sheer discrimination and domestic violence at her home. Her father, Pappachi does not allow her for higher education thinking it 'an unnecessary expense' whereas his son, Chacko has no such restriction. Even in her marriage Ammu is betrayed by her husband who forces her to sleep with his English boss. Out of her utter disappointments, she leaves her husband, and along with her children comes back to her parents, hoping that they will accept and take care of them but, again she feels disillusioned. She is treated with much indifference in the Ayemenem House.

Ammu faces the discriminating behavior in another case as well. When her relationship with Velutha, an untouchable, comes to light, it is considered a big sin. All the family members think that she has denigrated the reputation of the family. She is chastised severely, and Velutha is accused of the murder of Sophie, her niece. The Dalit, untouchable boy is badly beaten in the police custody and thus he dies in very pathetic condition. When Ammu knows about her lover's death, she leaves her house and comes to Allepy where she also meets her tragic death. Thus, she falls prey to the patriarchal society. On the other hand, in the same type of her brother's case, the matter is not only ignored, saying it "Man's needs" (Roy-TGST, 160) but also a separate entrance in his room is made for his female visitors to satisfy his sexual hungers. Roy tries to convey that the favored situation for the male is just due to the dualistic mentality of patriarchal society.

Just as patriarchy has spoiled the life of Ammu, in the same way, patriarchal, capitalist thoughts have done to the Meenachal River. Now the River has become an epitome of horror. The river is now flooded with industrial and domestic waste. It "smelled of shit and pesticides bought with World Bank loans. Most of the fish had died. The ones that survived suffered from fin-rot and had broken out in boils" (Roy-TGST, 14). Fishermen's livelihood has got spoiled. Air pollution has spread all around. It remains no longer a favorite spot for the local people. However, earlier it was flowing with its very clear water, "Grey green with fish in it. The sky and trees in it. And at night, the broken moon in it" (Roy-TGST, 203). The current state of the Meenachal River embodies a symbolic character representing the turbulent often tragic lives of characters especially Ammu, Velutha and the local people. Roy vigorously criticizes the developmental works at the cost of environmental degradation as it has very disastrous impact on the local poor people and the surrounding environment. To an ecofeminist, the silent suffering of women in patriarchal society can be equated with the silent endurance which nature is showing due to its reckless abuse since long.

b) Ecofeminist Lens on Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

Arundhati Roy's second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) got published 20 years after his first novel. The novel portrays patriarchy, capitalism, and environmental devastation as intertwined with the exploitation of the marginalized beings including women, Dalits, transgender, birds, animals, and nature. Through an ecofeminist

perspective this paper examines how Anjum, a transgender character and the landscapes suffer under capitalists' unsustainable systems, advocating for holistic justice for all- people, planet, and other non- human beings. Anjum's parents have not been supportive since she took her birth. She faces indifference in the family and extreme hostility in the society as well. The remarkable trait of her personality is that she is a great lover of nature. Her relation with nature is based on mutual love, nurturance, and dependence.

The novelist has raised the intertwined exploitation of the natural world, women, and animals. She has great concerns for animals in Delhi Zoological Park where a gibbon is living on a tree because of the unbearable condition of the cage and a hippo is compelled to swim in the polluted water of pond. To make the situation worse, they are also teased by the visitors. Susan Griffin condemns this androcentric attitude. She has shown the great concerns about the ill treatment of animals. She argues that all humans and non- humans consume the same sunlight, air, and water, and so they should have equal rights to survive. Such ill treatment by them come from their superiority complex that make them consider about the animals to be inferior and thus, destined to be suffered. The author also shows how the unethical development and urbanization push the animals' existence in a precarious condition. It becomes evident when she refers to an incident of Hauz Khas in South Delhi 'where a cow that had died- burst- from eating too many plastic bags at the main garbage dump' (Roy-*TMUH*, 264). The author wants to convey that an animal should eat green grass but eats plastic bags and die; it happens just because of the polluted environment and contagious atmosphere of the urban areas. Even today the situation is not favourable. Every day animals are dying from eating plastics and several other toxic, synthetic items from garbage. Such hazardous situation is caused by the rapid, blind deforestation for development and urbanization.

The author also criticizes the scientific experiments with chemicals on birds and animals. The hens are frequently injected in the poultry industry "to increase the efficiency of egg production" (Roy-*TMUH*, 299). Greta Gaard also condemns testing toxic chemicals on the poor creatures in laboratories for more factory farming suppressing the natural processes of production:

"these hazardous chemicals are often initially tested on laboratory animals to determine levels of toxicity; this practice, together with the enormous environmental costs of factory farming and meat eating, demonstrate the linkages between environmental degradation and the oppression of nonhuman animals (speciesism)" (Gaard, 5).

Roy has condemned the capitalists' concept of extracting the maximum benefits from animals and natural resources, prioritizing profit over resource depletion, ecological damage, and harming indigenous, local communities. Thus, anthropocentrism and modernism have led to environmental degradation which has ultimately pushed women, tribal people, peasants, birds, and animals to an extremely miserable state. Donald Worster, an American environmental historian considers our ethical system stands a big threat to the social and environmental justice: "We are facing a global crisis today, not because of how ecosystems function but rather because of how our ethical systems function..." (The Earth, 15) Of course, the concept of modernization at the cost of the environmental degradation has a very negative impact on the local, marginalized people, and several other non-human beings. Materialistic and 'so called' progressive people have victimized the natural world through their callous and insensitive tendencies.

c) Ecofeminist Lens on Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*

The paper also illustrates through Kamala Markandaya's poignant novel, *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954). It shows how industrialisation disrupts nature putting Rukmani, the protagonist into extreme poverty, health risks, displacement, and cultural loss. The study also explores her resistance and resilience through all odd situations in her life. The novel examines how excessive greediness of human beings is causing the maximum harm to nature which results in the exploitation of human beings in general and women in particular. Women are much closer to nature than men as both have several common qualities such as, nurturing, sustaining life, giving food, reproduction, resilience, and adaptability. Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies (2014), too, hold that the impact of the destruction of natural resources is more on women than men. They point out:

"we could not, however, ignore the fact that 'modernization' and 'development' processes and 'progress' were responsible for the degradation of the natural world. We saw that the impact on women of ecological disasters and deterioration was harder than on men, and also, that everywhere, women were the first to protest against environmental destruction."

Women are more sensitive towards the destruction of the natural vegetation as they are more dependent on nature for food, nutrition, water, fuel etc. When nature is harmed, women (especially poor women and rural women) get more affected. Rukmani like other girls had dreamt of a grand wedding, but her dream does not come true. Being the fourth daughter, nothing was left with her parents for her marriage. At an early age of twelve, she is married to Nathan, a tenant farmer. Rukmani has seven children: a daughter, Ira and six sons- Arjun, Thambi, Murugan, Raja, Selvam, and Kuti.

The charm of the simple, pastoral life is badly destroyed with the introduction of a tannery in Rukmani's village. Though the tannery initially proves beneficial to the village people in giving them employment, but its influence in the

village proves very hazardous in the long run. With the passage of time, the tanning expands widely and many agricultural lands have got disappeared. Many new buildings have been constructed. It has completely vitiated the natural beauty of the village. Many kinds of problems have escalated such as, filth and dirt all around, noise pollution, air pollution, price rise, prostitution, and many types of un-social and anti-social activities. Rukmani's two eldest sons, Arjun and Thambi have to set out for Ceylon in search of other jobs after they were removed from the job in the tannery for being accused of fomenting labour trouble. Her other son, Raja is beaten to death when he is caught of stealing in the tanning factory. Her eldest daughter, Ira is left alone by her husband as she has been unable to bear him a child. Now she is compelled to work as a prostitute to sustain herself. Nathan has to leave the village in search of some job as his landlord has taken the lands from him for being unable to pay the rent. His landlord has decided to sell his lands to the owner of the tannery. He mournfully says: "The land is to be sold. We are to move. Sivaji came this morning. He says there is nothing to be done. The tannery owners are buying the land. They pay good prices" (Markandaya, 143). Taking his wife, when he reaches the town, they come to know that their son Murugan has disappeared leaving his wife alone. Nathan and his wife want to return the village, but they cannot as they have no money. They start working as stone breakers. After a few days Nathan dies, leaving his wife alone. Like Nathan many farmers have lost their lands. Thus, the tanning factory has destroyed the whole ecosystems of the village and the ethical values of the innocent, simple villagers.

To an ecofeminist, the establishment of the tanning factory symbolizes the destruction of the natural world and the disintegration of Rukmani's family hand in hand. Women are in fact more affected than men due to the reckless destruction of nature. However, Rukmani has tried to show her resistance and resilience through her hard work. She grows beans, brinjals, chillies, sweet potatoes, and pumpkins. Being very close to nature, she loves her farming works from the core of her heart. She cares for her land as her own child. She also has considerable knowledge about farming works and other things. She says: "Dung is too useful in our home to be given to the land, for it is fuel to us and protection against damp and heat and even ants and mice. Did you know that?" (Markandaya, 34). She also loves animals and birds of her surroundings. Indeed, her 'live and let live' attitude and quiet resilience give an ecofeminist hope.

Ecofeminists hold the view that patriarchal dualistic thinking is more responsible behind the oppression of women and exploitation of nature. It is the hierarchy of dualism that legitimizes the random exploitation of women and the merciless destruction of nature by men. As per this dualistic concept the one side- men, culture, mind, and reason is deemed superior and the other side- women, nature, heart, and emotion is regarded inferior. Considering women and nature as the "other", patriarchal systems justify violence, control, and exploitation against them giving priority of mind and reason over heart and emotion in making decisions of developmental works in the name of modernization and urbanization. The "other" category includes some more entities. According to ecofeminists the "other" includes not only women and nature, but animals, "Third World" people, the lower class, as well, in other words all the marginalized categories. (Gruen 1993, p. 80)

6. CONCLUSION:

To sum up, many contemporary authors including Arundhati Roy, Kamala Markandaya and Indira Sinha have addressed the interconnected issues of the destruction of natural resources and the exploitation of women and other marginalized beings. They view that the natural world has got badly affected through the process of 'maldevelopment' and urbanization which have led to the ecological destruction and environmental degradation which result in the sufferings of all the underprivileged class – rural and poor women, tribal people and other non-humans. This is for the same reason ecofeminists emphasized the need of dismantling the oppressive systems of patriarchal capitalist society, and cultivating a culture of care, respect, and interdependence with natural world through a holistic and inclusive approach.

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