

**DISCOURSES OF FEMINIST ENVIRONMENTALISM (ECOFEMINISM)
IN FICTIONAL WRITINGS OF CONTEMPORARY INDIAN WOMEN
NOVELISTS**

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ABSTRACT

This paper will explore the elementary tenets of ecofeminism in India in reference to both activism and fiction that unambiguously forefront women. In Indian subcontinent growing protests against environmental destruction and struggles for survival and existence have highlighted the interconnections of feminist perspectives along with nature. I will try to conceptualize this debate within the Indian environmental movement and would attempt to see whether the issue of environment has been taken up by the Indian women's movement. At the same time, how the Indian women novelists of modern time have symbolized this issue in their literary texts.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Environmental, Indian subcontinent

Introduction

The intimate consociation of nature and literature is depicted in the literary works of poets and writers of all ages, belonging to different cultures of the world ubiquitously. The aim of the ecocritics is to illustrate the aforementioned rapport of nature and society as contextualized by the writers in their works. In this frame of reference, the terms which have gained utmost importance are ecology and ecocriticism. According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, "Ecology is the branch of biology that deals with relations of organisms to one another and to their physical surroundings". According to *Wikipedia*, "Ecology is the scientific study of interactions among organisms and their environment". In the present day scenario, Ecology portrays the manner in which plants, animals and humans are linked to each other and their habitat. This consanguinity is virtually complementary so that any imbalance in one disturbs the

other automatically. Unwittingly, changes in the environment have impinged upon civilization so intensely that it might lead to its absolution from the face of earth. Hence, the concern for ecological subjects has become a crucial issue today.

Literature renowned for imitating the contemporary problems could not have remained untouched from this concept. This uprising threat to humanity from unceasing misuse of our ecosystem has seized the attention of the writers in recent past. The textualization of aforementioned environmental problems in literary works has given rise to a new division of literary theory, namely ecocriticism. According to *Wikipedia*, “Ecocriticism is the study of literature and environment from an interdisciplinary point of view where all sciences come together to analyze the environment and brainstorm possible solutions for the correction of the contemporary environmental situation”. The term ecocriticism has its origin in William Ruckert’s essay, “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” published in 1978. It was still in a dormant state in critical terminology prior to the 1989 Western Literature Association (WLA) meeting, when two scholars Cheryll Glotfelty and Glen Love emphasized for its use in critical meadow which eventually had been practised as the study of nature writing. The establishment of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) in 1992 became a milestone in the evolution of ecocriticism in an authoritative aspect.

The publication of two influential works i.e. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm and *The Environmental Imagination* by Lawrence Bull, inaugurated its substantial foundation as a literary critical theory.

Ecocriticism explores and analyzes, texts on nature writing to add to the catalogue in literary and cultural studies, environmental awareness in literary texts, illustration of human- non human relationship and socio- political framework which includes Marxist, Ecofeminist and other approaches for contextualizing literary and cultural works.

However, the most important approach with in ecocriticism and ecological activism is that of the ecofeminists. According to Oxford *Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, “Ecofeminism is defined as a philosophical and political theory and movement which combines ecological concerns with feminist ones, regarding both as resulting from male domination of society.” According to Webster’s *New World Encyclopedia*, “Ecofeminism is a movement or theory that applies feminist principles and ideas to ecological issues”. It is one of the forms of feminism which has emanated through the amalgamation of feminism and environmentalism. The term ecofeminism was coined by the Françoise d’ Eaubonne in 1974. She used it “to call upon women to lead an ecological revolution to save the planet” (Merchant 184).

The perception of equating women with nature antedates to the times of archaic classical mythology. Nature is portrayed as a woman as its fundamental functions encompasses reproduction and nurture. Similarly women’s duties are contemplated as natural to her. Thus, the liaison of nature and women is best described by the phrase: - Nature naturalizes women and women feminize nature. One approach to discuss the relation between women and nature is to interpret the coextensive demeanor they have been wielded into in patriarchal society. Women’s role has been to fulfill the demands and aspirations of men. Correspondingly, nature is supposed to have an innate constitution of catering to human needs. Hence, both women and nature are exploited by men leading to a mutual association between oppression of women and deterioration of nature.

Ecofeminist theory originates from this vital hypothesis that both women and nature are uniformly harassed by male dominating society. The central claims which constitute the heart of this analysis are:-

- The coercion of both women and nature are annexed.
- To unearth the aforesaid association in order to explain both the oppression of women and nature.
- Feminist analysis must cover ecological vision.
- A feminist context must be an element of any proposed ecological solution.

A profound investigation at each of these claims will highlight the concerns of ecofeminism.

Specifically, ecofeminists evaluate the affiliation between tyranny of women and nature by targeting the hierarchies created by mind/ body, nature/ culture, male/ female and human/ non- human bifurcations. The ambition is to reconceptualize the aforesaid consociation in non-hierarchical, non patriarchal ways. Therefore, ecofeminists anticipate a *de novo* vision of the world which would place the oppressed entities of ecosystem as co- members of the ecological populace.

Indian Environment Movement: Feminist Perspectives

India is a country with diverse range of ecosystems encompassing Himalayas in the north and plateaus in south as well as lively Sunder bans in the east and Thar Desert in the west. In due course of time, these ecosystems have been vigorously affected due to population boom and perversion of mankind. The male dominated society in Indian culture has marginalized nature as well as woman for fulfillment of their needs since the ancient times. According to Hindu mythology, it is believed that in adolescence a woman should be under her father's regulation, in juvenescence under her husband's and when her husband is deceased, under her sons, denying her any autonomy.

The correlating functions of woman and nature further supplements their association in ecological context. Hence literature in India could not remain untouched from these core- issues. The impact of environmental degradation is imperative on women due to her contiguous connection with nature. This has prompted several writers to conceptualize female identity in relation to nature. Thus, ecofeminism in India has emerged as a vigorous movement parallelizing conservation of environment with improved living standards for women.

The huge repertoire of women-led environmental activism has accorded Indian woman a singular stature in ecocritical writings. One of the successful examples of elemental or primordial environmentalism in India is the Chipko Movement, originated in Garhwal region of Uttaranchal in Uttar Pradesh. The conception of tree-hugging was adopted to curb activities such as deforestation, lumbering and mining. This movement was a consequence of severe turmoil emanating in local women who were influenced the most by state-level verdicts leading to environmental deterioration. Recently, other women who have done pioneer work for environmental issues are Medha Patkar, Mahasweta Devi, Arundhati Roy and C.K Janu.

Medha Patkar is involved in Narmada Bachao Aandolan, a social movement against the Sardar Sarovar dam being built across the Narmada River in Gujarat. The woman who has recently been in limelight for combating for an environmental cause is C.K Janu. Her movement was against the infringed agreement between the Adivasis and state government to grant 500 acres of land to each Adivasi family.

Such women-led movements in India have paved the way for several Indian women novelists to include environmental issues along with exploration of female subjectivity in the literary canon. As many of the novelists are unwaveringly interested in environmental activism, their role is crucial to this project. Unfortunately, ecocritical writings from a country like India which has a history of environmental activism even before the emergence of ecocriticism as an academic discipline in the western world have generally not been reconciled with in the ecocritical field. Hence, contemporary Indian women's writing needs to be acknowledged to voice its concerns about environmental deterioration and to explain how the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women are intimately entwined.

Alternate Notions: Feminist Environmentalism in Indian Writings

The Indian women writers from the twentieth century onwards, whose literary works have advocated the concept of ecology in relation to woman, include Kamala Markandaya, Mahasweta Devi, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Usha K.R, Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai. The critical analysis of the literary texts of abovementioned novelists from an ecofeminist perspective might add to the scanty literary catalogue on ecocriticism in contemporary Indian women writings.

Kamala Markandaya, an esteemed novelist of the modern Indian fiction was born in 1924 and graduated from Madras University. She wrote nether an anony Purnaiya Taylor and shifted to Britain after India's Independence. The soul of her writings is about the cultural conflicts between Indian metropolitan and rural societies. *Nectar in a Sieve*, her first novel was a best-seller and was recognized as a noteworthy book by the American Library Association. Most of her novels deal with the concepts of alienation, poverty, and starvation and exploitation alongwith acclaiming feminist perspective by adopting woman as the central character.

Nectar in a Sieve is structured around a female character named Rukmani whose life deals with the tensions between the bucolic village life and invasion of industrialization on the land as well as its inhabitants. Landscape as a physical and geographical entity essentially attributes in the lives of the women in the novel. Hence, this text has successfully represented through female characters the relation of environmental deterioration and women's exploitation, thereby exemplifying the ecofeminist point of view.

Another novel of Kamala Markandaya, *The Coffer Dams* revolves around a dam to be constructed over a turbulent hilly river in India. The male characters in the novel are shown as rational, materialistic and objective while the female character Helen is delineated as a fascinator of the tribal wilderness and a nature lover. Here, literary and feminist theories will explore the interpretation of nature-woman relationship.

One more famous Indian-English fiction writer who holds a peculiar stature among the contemporary Indian women novelists is Anita Desai. As a writer, she has been nominated for the prestigious Booker Prize thrice and received a Sahitya Akademi Award in 1978 for her novel *Fire on the Mountain*. Her major achievement in the literary field was winning the Guardian Prize for *The Village by the Sea*. Most of her literary works explore the insurgency against patriarchal or male dominated community which obstructs the way of the oppressed individuals from becoming independent through cultural ideologies imposed on them. The representation or symbolism of nature in relation to women characters in her works allows the reader to discern unfathomed spheres of the female ideology.

Her first and renowned work *Cry, The Peacock* embodies the pivotal connection between nature and human portraying woman as a cardinal character. The icons in the novel zoological, botanical or physical correlate with the feelings, actions and states of mind of the characters, particularly woman with in the ecological framework.

Fire on the Mountain revolves around three women characters namely Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das. The response of these characters to different situations in life has been externalized with natural images to proliferate their inner consciousness. The novel depicts the darker shades of nature and the concurrent alliance of the darker aspects of the women concerned. Therefore, this novel makes it clear that ecocriticism envelops not only ecological issues, but also those natural icons that contribute to a relevant connection between human and non-human relationships.

Usha K.R. has been writing fiction for over two decades. Her short story ‘Sepia Tones’ won the Katha Award for short fiction in 1995. Another contemporary novel by Usha K.R i.e. *Monkey-Man* covenants with the correlation that women have with urbanization and development. This fictional work integrates the dimensions of urban obsession, emphasizing that the urban environment can be a space for both construction and destruction. Using evocative prose that imitates her deep understanding of human nature, Usha K.R. explores into the lives of her characters and their unpredictably linked destinies in a city that has grown from a ‘Pensioner’s Paradise’ to the frenetic hub of the country’s IT industry.

The other eminent and well-known novelist is Arundhati Roy, born in 1961 in Bengal. She won the Booker prize for her debut novel *The God of Small Things* in 1998, becoming the first Indian woman to have won this prize. Although she has always denied being a feminist yet most of her works disclose at many places her feminist viewpoint. She has given eminence to ecology and subalternity as the major themes in her novels.

Her most acclaimed work, *The God of Small Things* depicts the relationship created between women and nature, ascertaining the ways both are oppressed by the patriarchal society. The novel interprets the deterioration of the fictional village of Ayemenem as an apologue for the corruption of the Ipe family. The pollution of the river Meenachal and the rehabilitation of the History house as a tourist harbor are the centric points in authorizing the association between ecological exploitation and gender discrimination.

Kiran Desai is the voice of a younger generation of Indian writers who write in English, many of whom live in self exile. She was honored with the Betty Trask Award for her debut novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* at the age of only twenty seven. Another novel which gave her eminent success was *The Inheritance of Loss* for which she was awarded with the prestigious Booker Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award. Desai’s work is known for its rich and colourful language and combines the elements of diaspora faced by the Indian people due to British colonialism and globalization.

Hullabaloo in the Gauva Orchard presents a fictitious small town called Shahkot in North India. The central character, Sampath Chawla is compelled in to being a holy man inspite of himself. The novel depicts the aftermath of ecological or natural disasters on culture and civilization. It portrays the problems generated due to man’s encroachment upon the natural order of things and demonstrates that the affinity amongst humans and animals is stronger than human vis a vis human.

Conclusion

To sum up, as a unique approach to the practice literary criticism, ecofeminism gives increased consideration to literary representatives of feminist environmentalism. This approach shifts critical focus from social relations toward natural relationships and views the oppression of female and environment as intertwined. It has led to realization that the liberation of women cannot be achieved in isolation from the larger struggle for preserving nature and life on this earth.

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