Ecofeminism in Indian English Literature: Role of Women Writers and their Concerns

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***Abstract*—This paper is an attempt to review the works of Indian English writers through the lens of Ecofeminist theories. Ecofeminism is a new kind of philosophy that views the oppression of women and the degradation of nature as interconnected. According to this point of view, women are more connected to nature than men. In the Indian context, this is more so because here nature is referred to as 'mother nature', further strengthening the idea of interconnectedness. Indian literature gives us many examples to believe that women share a close bond with the nature of oppression and marginalisation. This paper provides an insight into various writings by Indian women writers to understand their role in strengthening the movement in the Indian subcontinent.**

***Index Terms*—*Ecofeminism, Philosophy, Women and nature, Oppression, Degradation*.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Women and nature share an unseen bond, an ambivalent relationship that many writers have tried to explain through their writings for a very long time. Actually, many writers tried to explain it through their writings even before the term Ecofeminism was introduced. One can feel and track its presence in many of the ancient Indian texts written before 1974, when the term was coined by a French author. The term ecofeminism was first used by French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974. This philosophy states that there is a connection between the abuse and dominance faced by women and the same kind of destruction tolerated by nature. Nature and women are both seen as dominated by patriarchal norms. According to this concept, there exists an ambivalent relationship between women and nature; both are the primary agents of life. Both hold the capability to produce and nurture. Also, both face exploitation and degradation under the hold of patriarchal norms. This paper is an attempt to understand the elements of ecofeminism in Indian literary fiction as well as non-fiction.

Indian culture has always given importance to the worship of nature. Ancient literature revolves around texts full of praise and respect for nature and its power. There are four *Vedas*: the *Rigveda*, *Samaveda*, *Yajurveda* and *Atharvaveda*. These *Vedas* talk about the conservation and preservation of nature. During Vedic times, people had regard for natural amenities, and they used to follow conservation ethics. Following Shloka *(1/90/6,7,8)* from the *Rigveda* tells us how human beings are related to nature: "**madhu vātāḥ ṛitāyate madhu kṣaranti sindhavaḥ mādvih naḥ santuṣadhi. madhu naktamutusāsu madhumatpārthiva rajah madhu kṣorastu suryah mādhirgābo bhavantu naḥ"** (qtd in Dey 4874). It means: "Environment provides bliss to people leading their life perfectly. Rivers bless us with sacred water and provide us with health, night, morning, and vegetation. The sun blesses us with a peaceful life. Our cows provide us with milk. The plant ecology has great importance in keeping the environment in balance. Not only this, the *Vedas* also say that 'planting a tree is equally beneficial as having ten sons" (Dey 4874).

Indian literature is not only praiseworthy for its nature it also holds equal respect for women. In Indian culture, women are worshipped as Goddesses. There are numerous books and essays written on the power that a woman holds. And numerous texts place women on the same pavement as nature. This paper is an attempt to discuss the concept of Ecofeminism with respect to some selected works of some female writers of Indian origin. Along with Raja Rao, R.K. Narayanan and other male writers, Indian female writers like Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Kamla Das, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, and others have explored the concept of ecofeminism in Indian society very well. This paper explores the concept of ecofeminism in the works of Vandana Shiva, Anita Nair and Anuradha Roy. Though they differ in their writing style, their writings have some unique features. One of this uniqueness lies in their way of portraying their women characters and their affection towards nature as a whole. Through close reading of some of their texts, the present scholar understands how these women writers have conceptualised this issue in their literary texts.

II. VANDNA SHIVA

Vandana Shiva is not an unknown name in the field of Ecofeminism. In fact, she is the pioneer of the ecofeminist movement in India. She, along with Maria Mies, authored a book titled *Ecofeminism* in which they thoroughly discuss the concept and its relevance to present-day society. In many of their works, they talk about the materialistic thought of the Western world and how it develops at the cost of nature and women. "Violence against nature, they argue, is intimately linked with Violence against women in an objectifying scientific world view premised upon supposed binary oppositions between man/woman; man/nature; north/south; industrial/indigenous; and organised around domination and capitalist accumulation" (Shiva and Maria 59).

Shiva strongly favours the role of women in the conservation of biodiversity. According to her, women work in various sectors and perform a variety of tasks that allow them to have a close relationship with nature. Jyoti Chowdhury opines, "Shiva argues that "women's work and knowledge is central to biodiversity conservation and utilization both because they work between 'sectors' and because they perform multiple tasks." She further asserts, "The author throws light upon various dichotomies which have often raised questions in our minds as development practitioners. She elaborates upon how the dichotomy of productivity and un-productivity have been identified in association with changes in society."

Vandana Shiva, in her book *Staying Alive,* says that women are seen through the lens of gender. According to her development of technology has eventually led to the degradation of the environment and the underdevelopment of women. In her book *Staying Alive*, Shiva presents Indian women as the saviours of nature and traditional Indian thought about nature. She writes:

> Ecological destruction and the marginalisation of women, we know now, have been the inevitable results of most development programmes and projects based on such paradigms; they violate the integrity of one and destroy the productivity of the other. Women, as victims of the violence of patriarchal forms of development, have risen against it to protect nature and preserve their survival and sustenance. Indian women have been in the forefront of ecological struggles to conserve forests, land and water. They have challenged the Western concept of nature as an object of exploitation and have protected her as Prakriti, the living force that supports life. They have challenged the Western concept of economic production of profits and capital accumulation with their own concept of economics as production of sustenance and needs satisfaction." (xv)

Vandana Shiva has been a part of various ecological movements. In many of her interviews, she has always mentioned that she learned her physics from a formal university, but her knowledge of ecology is due to her various endeavours in the Himalayan Mountains. Vandana Shiva blames development as responsible for the degradation, as there has been asymmetric participation of women in the process; they bear the cost of development but are deprived of its benefits. The same is the case with nature. Nature is the base for all development but is overlooked when it comes to its redevelopment or conservation. Thus, Vandana Shiva is a strong believer and supporter of ecofeminism. She has played a big role in its development in present-day Indian society as well as literature.

III. ANITA NAIR

Anita Nair has written many stories, short stories, collections of poems, children's stories and novels. Her stories deal with Indian society and its norms in a very thoughtful manner. Her novel Ladies Coupe is one of her most well-known novels. Another novel, *The Better Man,* is also well-read and has the capacity to bind readers with its storyline. Her novels are social documents that portray Indian women as less equipped and in a deprived state in a patriarchal society. She talks about the role of marriage; to her, marriage is a social need, and women are always at the commodity end of this institution, that is to say, they are used like commodities and have fewer rights than their male counterparts.

In her novel Ladies Coupe, she narrates the story of four married, one rape victim and one unmarried woman and thus provides an analysis of the cultural, psychological, social and economic set-up of Indian society. The novel describes women in the following tone, as described by Krishna R.N. and Jha. P.:

> Aged forty-five and the background demanding her to be a spinster, she feels lost without having a companion and being exploited by her sister. The novel roams through the memories of Akhila, interconnected by the storytelling of fellow passengers and their empathy towards each other. The Coupe becomes a platform for them to express themselves and support each other. A bond of sisterhood is suddenly created among the women from different caste, class and age. The story of Marikolanthu, a Dalit woman, remains unique and reveals the multiple layers of exploitation she has faced in her life by being a woman, minor, Dalit, and poor. Akhila finally decides to resume her old romantic relationship and take a bold stand in her life. (Krishna and Jha 105)

This bond of deprivation can be seen among all the women of society. All of them share a common story of oppression and misuse. The characters of the stories and their ways may be different, but the ultimate conclusion of all stories remains the same.

> In *Ladies Coupe,* Akhila felt being used by her own family. She feels like a scapegoat whom everybody looks up at for their own need of money and nobody cares about her desires and needs. Marikolanthu the woman from a lower cast was denied her right to fight against the wrong done to her by a upper cast, she was held herself responsible for whatever had happened to her. Sheela the young girl learned a lot about the norms of the patriarchal society at a very young age due to her surroundings. Margaret had to start a silent fight against her husband to save her own self-concept and Janaki Devi felt helpless without being in the care of some male family members. Thus, the story presents how society wants women to live a life trapped in the clutches of societal norms. (Roy 105)

In *Better Man,* too, Anita Nair presents a challenge to the patriarchal set of Indian society. She presents the controlled, exploited and deprived life of her female characters in a very explicit way. Valsala, the wife of the aged Prabhakaran, breaks the rules of society to fulfil her own wishes. She was fed up with her state, she wanted to have a life full of expectations, pleasures and charms, but it occurred to her that she would grow old with her husband and thus would remain deprived of happiness. So, she gets into an illegitimate relationship with her neighbour. To her, morality never demands prison. So, she felt no guilt in breaking the unseen ropes of norms and rules. For her, leaving life happily becomes more pleasurable than leading it according to others. To quote Dr. Patwari Yadav here:

> As a matter of fact, she is aware of the fact that every woman needs the energizer of love, freedom, equality and sex. She puts forth the new issues of woman's sexuality and gender. She justifies herself as, "I am just forty years old. I don't want to be pushed into old age before it time. I want to live I want passion. I want to know ecstasy, she told herself, night after night" (Nair BM: 130). Valsala emerges as a "New Woman". She breaks the rules of the traditional Indian society. She finds it perfectly ok to have extramarital relations and is sexually satisfied with her affair with her neighbour, Sridharan. She was not guilty of it. Valsala tries to have an identity of herself and thus she goes against the traditional set of values. Thus as stated by many critics "Valsala resorts to freedom not only psychologically but sexually too. When she resolves her inner conflicts, she is able to conquer self-identity. (2)

Another character Anjana too tries to break the bounds of norms and was able to get support from her father. She made them realize how important it is for a woman to get love, respect and care from their husband and other family members. In these two novels we see that Anita Nair has tried her best to give her female characters full autonomy and freedom to act according to their desires. She has beautifully talked about the rights of women through the picturisation of her characters. Not only that, her characters are able to meet the standards of world literature. Akhila in Ladies Coupe and Valsala in Better Man emerges out to be new woman in the patriarchal society just like the character of Nora of Ibsen in A Doll's House. They are able to find their individualities after spending a deprived and suppressed life.

IV. ANURADHA ROY

Anuradha Roy is a novelist, journalist, editor and a co-founder of an independent press. She has five novels to her credit. She has won many awards for her writings; her novel was long-listed for the Man Booker Prize. Her themes revolve around natural surroundings and the emotions of her characters. She holds a great affinity towards human emotions. Her novels mostly have a well-defined natural setting where her characters can feel related and safe. In her novel *The Folded Earth*, Maya feels connected to the natural atmosphere of Ranikhet. Her husband had died, and there was no one whom she could look towards for herself. So she found solace in Ranikhet, which gave her peace and an escape from the difficulties and nuisances of her life. "On every side there are mountains and forests, stretching many miles, … you can see the five pyramids of the Pacha Chuli, which are at Nepal's door" (Srivastava and Shailendra 22).

Anuradha Roy has aptly described the surroundings as creating effects on the individuals around. Her character in the novel, like Maya, Puran, Charu and Diwan sahib, all found peace and happiness in the lap of nature. Diwan Sahib, the landlord of Maya, found the children of Ranikhet to be fortunate enough to be born there. He says that "They must put their ears to the earth and rocks and hear them breathe. Because here in Ranikhet the rocks do breathe" (Srivastava and Shailendra 18). In her first novel, *An Atlas of Impossible Longings*, Anuradha Roy was able to present a relationship of friendliness between human beings and their surroundings. A woman is always able to develop stronger bonds with her surroundings and other human beings. She develops unseen threads of relationships within her heart. Any kind of disturbance or distance from her heartfelt relationships and surroundings affects her deeply. To quote P. Kalaiselvi from her writing on Ecofeminism here:

> As a result of women's role in both creating and maintaining/nurturing life, women develop softer ego boundaries than do men, and thus they generally maintain their connectedness to other humans and to nature, a connection which is reaffirmed and recreated generationally. Men, on the other hand, psychologically separate both from their human mother and from Mother Earth, a process which results in their desire to subdue both women and nature in a quest for individual potency and transcendence. Thus, sex differences in the development of self/ other identity in childhood are said to account for women's connectedness with, and men's alienation from, both human and nature.

In her novel, *Roy* starts the story with Amulya, who feels no aggression or grief in leaving his hometown and easily leaves everything behind (his relations and his surroundings) in search of a new fortune in a new city. However, his wife was not able to communicate her desire and thus grew aggressive inside and almost became insane. While Amulya was enjoying the new taste of his growing status, she was continuously on a fall into a deep well of hidden thoughts, desires and wants of social affinities. According to Killian Lara:

> Her symptoms emerge as a jaw-dropping tendency to curse at and insult everyone around her, and then failing utterly to remember her transgressions. Their two sons, wrapped up in their studies and making their own way in the world, fail to notice. Eventually, Amulya is forced to lock Kananbala up in her room, away from the world and with only her view onto a property owned by a British couple to keep her company.

Not only Kananbala, her daughter-in-law, Shanti, was suppressed by her continuous taunts, too fell into a deep sea of depression due to the lack of a companion with whom she could share her thoughts. She died of the traumas she had to face during her pregnancy. Her daughter, Bakul too lonely to feel that her childhood found a companion in Mukunda, the orphan boy. Separation from Mukunda affected her a lot; she was never able to move on in her life. While Mukunda was able to accept the change of time, and tried his best to float in the sea of the unknown. He got married in the hope of a good fortune, while she spread rumours to avoid her marriage, just to get him back in her life (Roy 127). Thus, this novel, like other writings of Roy, digs deeper into the emotions of women and their love for their surroundings, their deep affection towards relations and their devotion towards their relations.

V. CONCLUSION

Women have been assigned a special duty by the creator, which is to bear the future progeny of the human race. A mother is the greatest marvel of all the wonderful things created by God. From the day life took its first breath on the earth till date, the duty of taking care of life, nurturing it and providing it with selfless love rests on the shoulders of a mother. Indian folktales and songs are full of praiseworthy words describing the brave, sacrificing and loving women who have done a lot to maintain the decorum and dignity of Indian society.

Indian women writers have aptly taken this responsibility of describing Indian women through their writings. They openly discuss the problems faced by Indian women and the possible solutions to them. All three writers discussed above have done a great job by writing for the most important part of society. Vandana Shiva, Anita Nair and Anuradha Roy are the prime faces of change in the status of Indian women, along with many other writers like Anita Desai, Sarah Joseph, Kamla Markandeya, Arundhati Roy, Mahasweta Devi, Mridula Sinha and many others. However, despite all this effort made by these writers, sometimes we find many adversities in the living conditions of women. So, there is still a long way to go. Indian women writers should keep on bringing forth these issues related to nature and women in their writings.

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