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## Negotiating Ecofeminism: An Indian Perspective

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**Abstract:** Ecofeminism considers gender inequality, climate change, social injustice, etc as the tools for masculine dominance in society. It also draws attention to the fact that womenfolk have been adversely affected by various issues related to the environment. The harm caused to the ecology can not be revived with the same mental thinking that is solely responsible for its creation. Environmental crisis and subjugation of women are the results of a prejudiced mindset that always puts men over nature and women. Ecofeminism has been an offshoot of feminism. From time immemorial women have been considered an object of lust and comfort. Taking possession of land and women was equally considered a matter of pride for men. Feminist studies have revealed that subjugation and the secondary position of women in society have resulted from crooked male thinking and lust for women and power. This paper is a humble attempt to through light on the basic tenets of 'Ecofeminism' from the Indian perspective.

**Keywords:** Ecofeminism, ecocriticism, environmentalism, gender, marginalization

Ecofeminism has over the years emerged as a vibrant branch of literature. It is relatively a new and underdeveloping theory that propounds the interrelation between women and nature. It is a part of a broad area of ecocriticism. It originates from the combined ideologies of feminism and environmentalism. Ecofeminism considers gender inequality, climate change, social injustice, etc as the tools for masculine dominance in society. It also draws attention to the fact that womenfolk have been adversely affected by various issues related to the environment. Reports gathered by national and international bodies reveal that women have less monetary resources at their disposal and greatly rely upon natural resources in their day-to-day lives. Hence they are more prone to environmental risks. French feminist Francoise d'Eaubonne coined the term "Ecofeminism" in 1974. She observes that suppression of women, disenfranchisement, people of color, and poor conditions are inseparably linked to environmental degradation as these evolve as a result of masculine dominance. We can trace the origin of ecofeminism in India with the advent of the 'Chipko movement' in which 27 tribal North Indian women tried to

save thousands of trees by hugging the wood traders from cutting down.

Many ecofeminists come into the scene over the years. We can name women such as Maria Mies, Vandana Shiva, founder of the Research Foundation for Science, Technology, and Ecology, Carolyn Merchant, writer of "*Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*". Apart from them, Val Blumwood, Greta Gaard, Susan Griffin have contributed a lot in this field. Vandana Shiva in her seminal book *Ecofeminism* argues that "the marginalization of women and the destruction of biodiversity go hand in hand" (Shiva 78). She finds commonality in gender oppression and environmental degradation. Women are vulnerable and have a specific location in monoculture capitalism. Shiva thinks that the revival of the feminine principle is the solution to the environmental crisis and subjugation of women. The harm caused to the ecology can not be revived with the same mental thinking that is solely responsible for its creation. Environmental crisis and subjugation of women are the results of a prejudiced mindset that always puts men over nature and women. Vandana Shiva is always against the feminine ideology of gender equality that excludes the feminine principle of nature. Shiva's proposed solution is based on interdependence and it is this interdependence that can work as a panacea for destruction and exploitation created by the western capitalistic hegemony. She feels that science, technology, and the field of knowledge are to be negotiated by a non-patriarchal paradigm. Revival of feminine sensibility is not the only solution to the marginalization of women but it also prevents dominance over nature.

Ecofeminism has been an offshoot of feminism. From time immemorial women have been considered an object of lust and comfort. Taking possession of land and women was equally considered a matter of pride for men. Feminist studies have revealed that subjugation and the secondary position of women in society have resulted from crooked male thinking and lust for women and power. Patriarchy forces women to be submissive and permits males as tools of subjugation.

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The struggle of women irrespective of boundaries and nationality has resulted from the degradation and deterioration of Mother Earth. Human beings start ruining the earth since their creation. Likewise, women have been used as an object of possession from ancient to the present day. The legacy of wound and injury to the land as well as women go unsalted which sustain all human beings and flora and fauna. The more fertile and productive land bears more fury; similarly, more assertive women have to struggle for their identity and survival in the patriarchal society.

Ecofeminist literature has historically portrayed that exploitation of nature and women go side by side and both are seen as the victims. It is a well-known fact that any harm to nature is ultimately harmful to women because women are very close to nature. The ecofeminist concepts of women in fact “retain the patriarchal stereotypes of what men expect women to be “(They).....freeze women as merely caring and nurturing beings instead of expanding the full range of women’s human potentialities and abilities” (Biehl 15). “The use of metaphors of women as ‘nurturing’-like the earth and of the earth as female abound are regressive rather than liberating women” (Biehl 17-19).

These points overlook the fact that nature, gender, and culture are "historically and socially constructed and vary across and within cultures and periods" (Agarwal 123). This inherent idea puts women in a homogenous class across the boundaries. It "fails to differentiate among women by class, race, ethnicity and so on" (Agarwal 122).

We find the resonance of ecofeminism in Kamala Markandaya’s novel *Nectar in a Sieve*. The story of the novel shows that Rukmani and Nathan till the land of landowner Shivaji and earn their bread and butter for their family. They are very attached to the land emotionally. Rukmani suffers questions of survival and identity crisis when the landowner decides to sell the land. This story reminds us of the plight and suffering of landless women. Arundhati Roy rightly observes: "Why is it that the dispossession and eviction of millions of women from land which they owned and worked are not seen as a feminist problem?" (Arundhati Roy, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story*, Web source).

Rukmani develops an intimacy with nature at the beginning of the novel. She utters:

While the Sun shines on you and the fields are green and beautiful to the eyes and your husband sees beauty in you whom no one has seen before and you have a good store of grain laid away for hard times, a roof over you and a sweet stirring in your body, what more can a woman ask for.....?" (Markandaya 47).

These lines clearly show that Rukmani's content of life is closely related to nature and harmony of life depends on the harmony of nature. Besides Rukmani, other women characters in the novel show their deep inclination to mother earth. For instance, Kali looks after Rukmani's garden when Rukmani is pregnant. Kali feels disturbed when she comes to know that Nathan kills a cobra that surfaces in Rukmani's garden. This incident shows Kali's concern for living things in the surrounding area. Moreover, the reaction of Rukmani after the birth of a baby child shows the patriarchal mindset in the prevailing society. Her subdued feelings are revealed in the following words:

I turned away and, despite myself, the tears came, tears of weakness and disappointment; for what woman wants a girl for her firstborn? (Markandaya 89).

Patriarchal society believes that a girl is nothing but someone who “would take with her a dowry and leave nothing but a memory behind” (Markandaya 17). Possession of a woman's individuality serves the intention of Patriarchy.

Arundhati Roy’s novel *The God of Small Things* is a perfect example of ecofeminist critique. Roy vehemently criticizes environmental exploitation and shows the interconnection between gender suppression and environmental exploitation in the novel. Pablo Mukherjee, for instance, says about Arundhati Roy “any serious political and cultural consideration is thus always already environmental (Mukherjee 18). Roy outrightly rejects the justification for environmental exploitation and the oppression of people as the parameter of progress and development in postcolonial India. The oppressive mechanism is very much expressed through the inter-caste love of the prime protagonists Ammu and Velutha in *The God of Small Things*. Roy’s depiction of suppressed women and exploitation of lower caste people by the dominant section of the society is evidence of ecofeminist

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elements. Velutha who is a carpenter knows more than anyone else about a machine but this fellow does not utilize his skill to ravage nature because he lives in nature. Velutha to get his love swims to another part of the river to meet his sweetheart, Ammu.

His feet touched the muddy riverbed. As he rose from the dark river and walked up the stone steps, she (Ammu) saw that the world they stood in was his. That he belonged to it. That it belonged to him. The water. The mud. The tree. The fish. The stars. (Roy 315)

Natural things like insects, rivers, and the environment create a bond between nature and human beings. The fusion of Ammu and Velutha and their rebellion against social and economic exploitation cement their relationship. Ammu and Velutha's physical relationship is assumed as a revolt against social hierarchy. When Velutha's father Vellya Paapen informs Mammachi about the relationship of Ammu and Velutha, Ammu is kept locked in the bedroom "like the family lunatic in a medieval household" (Roy 239) and Velutha is dismissed from the work of Ayemenem house. Repression of Velutha does not end here. Police officer, Thomas Mathew, after receiving a complaint, arrests Velutha and takes hVelutha to the police station, and beats him to death in front of Estha and Rahel, the children of Ammu. Suppression of women and torturing of lower-class people galvanize the oppressive mechanism of patriarchy.

We have witnessed many struggles and protests against the deterioration of earth, countless exploitation of natural resources, big dams for hydro projects, pollutions,

global warming so on and so forth but the participation of women in these issues is not significant. Persons like Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva have focused deeply on this issue and discussed it to a considerable extent. The women's movements that emerged in the 1970s were preoccupied with urban issues. It could have been more vibrant if the 'women' were not considered as a homogeneous class and the environmental issue relating to women of different regions were given adequate attention. Ecofeminism has got its space as a dominant patriarchal discourse in recent times.

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