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Ecofeminism in Indian English Fiction

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ABSTRACT

*Ecofeminism depicts movements and philosophies that link feminism with ecology. It is believed that the term was coined by the French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book, *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974). Ecofeminism connects the exploitation and domination of women to the environment, and argues that there is a connection between women and nature. Ecofeminists believe that this connection is illustrated through the traditionally 'female' values of reciprocity, nurturing and cooperation, which are present both among women and in nature. Additionally, Ecofeminists draw connections between menstruation and moon cycles, childbirth and creation etc. Ecofeminism is an interdisciplinary movement that calls for a new way of thinking about nature, politics, and spirituality. Ecofeminist theory questions or rejects previously held patriarchal paradigms and holds that the domination of women by men is intimately linked to the destruction of the environment. This paper will present the special connection women have to the environment through their daily interactions as this connection has been ignored in the society predominantly. Women in subsistence economies who produce "wealth in partnership with nature, have been experts in their own right of holistic and ecological knowledge of nature's processes." The novels considered range from early ecofeminism to urban ecofeminism: *Nectar in a sieve* (1954) by Kamala Markandya, *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) by Anita Desai, *A Riversutra* (1993) by Gita Mehta, *The God of Small Things* (1997) by Arundhati Roy, *The Madwoman of Jogara* (1998) by Sohaila Abdulali, *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* (2008) by Anuradha Roy and *Monkey-Man* (2010) by Usha K.R. The paper will project the essence of Ecofeminism in the works of the above mentioned renowned authors. This paper seeks to outline the lineage of ecofeminism in India in terms of both activism and fiction that explicitly foreground women. It marks a case to be built for women writers, and why they are important for the field of literature and environment in an age of accelerated and globalized technological development. While outlining ecofeminism as a field and the forms it has taken in India in both activism and writing, the paper presents the fact that women's relationship to the environment is ambivalent, thus disputing the dualism of nature/culture and yet straddling the grey area between these two binaries. This is particularly highlighted by women writing Indian fiction in English. A brief explication of the nature/culture dualism will be given to contextualize this study and to explain how the dualism affects upon notions of a gendered (ecological) citizenship.*

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Ecofeminism is a concept which has been in circulation for some time but is still at a nascent stage. The related fields of ecocriticism and ecofeminism have been dominated by a typically Euro-American point of view till date, and both fields do not address the issue of ecofeminism adequately, where both fields need to recognize "the "double-bind" of being female and being colonized" [1]. A ecofeminist perspective would involve the coming together of ecocriticism and ecofeminism into one analytical focus, where it would be necessary to recognize that the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women are intimately bound up with notions of class, caste, race, colonialism and neo-colonialism.

In discourses of purity concerning environment literature and criticism, women as the colonized, have been "repeatedly naturalized as objects of heritage to be owned, preserved, or patronized rather than as subjects of their own land and legacies" [2]. It is important then to bring together feminism and environmental issues so that continuing imperialist modes and colonialist attitudes of social and environmental dominance can be challenged [3]. If we were to look at some of the postcolonial countries such as those in Africa and South Asia, particularly India, we realize that these nations have a history of environmental activism and movements even before ecofeminism emerged as an academic discipline in the Western world.

Women-led environmental activism and writing in India In India, the Chipko movement has gained iconic status and is now cited as a highly successful example of grassroots environmentalism in India. This movement is also key for the way in which it mobilised women. This movement brought about the concept of tree-hugging to stop activities such as deforestation, lumbering and mining. The movement

originated in the Garhwal region of Uttaranchal in Uttar Pradesh, India. The state's increasing commercialisation and underdevelopment of the Garhwal region was instrumental in the conceptualisation of this movement, where local women were affected by state-level decisions such as granting private contractors harvest rights for the trees to manufacture cricket bats. Due to excessive deforestation, the year 1970 saw its most devastating flood and equally destructive landslides.

In more recent times, other women who have led environmental causes and movements are Medha Patkar, Mahasweta Devi, Arundhati Roy and C.K. Janu. Medha Patkar heads the Narmada Bachao Andolan, a social movement consisting of tribal people, adivasis, farmers, environmentalists and human rights activists against the Sardar Sarovar Dam being built across the Narmada river in Gujarat, India. Mahasweta Devi, both an activist as well as a well-known feminist writer, has dedicated much of her activism and literature to the cause of betterment of tribal people and their environment in India. Arundhati Roy, best known as the Booker Prize winner of *The God of Small Things*, wields her passionate pen for causes ranging from the Narmada Bachao Andolan, to nuclear testing in India, and to the support of the separatists' demand for aazadi (freedom) in Kashmir. The latest woman to come under spotlight for fighting for an environmental cause is C.K. Janu, as recent as the year 2003 onwards, an adivasi woman occupying the Muthanga forests in North Kerala. This was to protest the breached agreement between the adivasis and the state government to provide 500 acres of land to each adivasi family. The figure of C.K. Janu as an adivasi woman leading the cause has given the movement a dimension of subaltern identity politics in addition to social justice and ecological balance.

In light of such developments in India, it is then surprising that most of the ecocritical writings and activism from this country are not included in the environmental literary canon. Activists and women writing postcolonial Indian fiction in English have generally not been accorded much attention in the ecocritical field. A case then needs to be built for why women writers are crucial to this project.

Many Indian women novelists not only explore female subjectivity in order to establish an identity that is not imposed by a patriarchal society, but their work also retains currency for making social issues a key part in their novels. Indian women's writing, especially from the twentieth century onwards, is starting to be viewed as a powerful medium of modernism and feminism. Indian women authors writing in English such as Kiran Desai and Arundhati Roy have earned international renown by winning prestigious awards such as the Booker Prize, and their presence in the English-speaking literary world cannot be ignored or sidelined. Indian women authors in the present milieu have begun to voice their concerns on globalization in India, and its impact on gender and family relations as well as the environment understood in its broadest sense

Ambivalent relationships of women and environment in Indian fiction by women

We now come to women writing Indian fiction in English and the environment. This section will try to answer why it is important to look at postcolonial ecofeminism in the writings of Indian women authors, and what it is that these writers have to offer to the ideology, theory and the lived material reality of women in and of the environment.

The novels considered range from early ecofeminism to urban ecofeminism: *Nectar in a sieve* (1954) by Kamala Markandya, *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) by Anita Desai, *A Riversutra* (1993) by Gita Mehta, *The God of Small Things* (1997) by Arundhati Roy, *The Madwoman of Jogare* (1998) by Sohaila Abdulali, *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* (2008) by Anuradha Roy and *Monkey-Man* (2010) by Usha K.R.

With the exception of Arundhati Roy, no other Indian female writer has been mentioned in the field of ecofeminism. Starting with Roy then, the deterioration of the fictional village of Ayemenem emphasizes and reflects the moral corruption of the characters, especially of the Ipe family, in the larger narrative. The salient motifs of the pollution of the river Meenachal and the History House are focal points in depicting ecological abuse in conjunction with Ammu and Velutha's gender and caste discrimination in Kerala. If Ammu remains ever hopeful for a better tomorrow, tomorrow also being the word on which the novel ends, Baby Kochamma, on the other hand, becomes the strictest enforcer of love laws and social norms. Maimed by the love and loss of the priest, Baby Kochamma reacts in the most negative manner to the inter-caste love affair. Significantly, she states her profession as an ornamental gardener, and her garden is in shambles once she takes to living her life vicariously through television. It is against this backdrop that the sibling incest takes place, a haunting image of the grotesque that Roy employs throughout the novel.

Even before the phenomenal success of Roy's novel, earlier feminist writers such as Kamala Markandya and Anita Desai have also written about women and the environment. These writers, while writing about specific and private lives about women, nonetheless make deeply political statements about social issues and Indian society at large. The focus on the specific and the private is one reason why women writers

from this category are often overlooked and not taken seriously. Markandya's *Nectar in a Sieve* and Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* both portray the darker shades of nature and the simultaneous conjunction of the darker aspects of the women concerned. Rukmini and her family nearly starve to death when nature is unpredictable and there is a drought in Markandya's novel. While Rukmini accepts the lot that is meted out to her, her daughter Ira is forced into prostitution due to their dire financial state. Ila Das's rape in Desai's novel is mercilessly carried out in the darkness of the fields that are supposed to sustain life. The atrocities that the women suffer in Desai's novel find their culmination in Raka who sets the forest on fire in the end.

More contemporary novels such as Abdulali's *The Madwoman of Jogare*, Mehta's *A River Sutra*, Anuradha Roy's *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* and Usha K.R.'s *Monkey-Man* deal with the relationships that women have with urbanization, development and the city. The opportunities that the city presents to the women has echoes of the rhetoric of globalization—equal opportunities for all. Such relationships do not sit comfortably with the dualism of nature/culture. The shift from rural to urban spaces shows that postcolonial ecofeminism is not a static theory, isolated to wilderness or countryside landscapes alone. These novels also incorporate the dimensions of urban paranoia and madness, a manifestation of coping with the tensions of globalization and development, highlighting that the urban environment can be a space for both creation and destruction.

Indian women's fiction on the linkages between women and the environment then adds on to the corpus of theory of development and ecofeminism. In a particular reference to the strain of cultural ecofeminism and Vandana Shiva, the works of these women writers subvert the notion that women and the environment are simplistic and monolithic categories. These writings posit the women and the environment in both positive and negative ways. The unquestioning acceptance of the woman-nature link, especially in the Indian context, or in the Third World per se, does not hold. The idea that since women are most severely affected by environmental degradation, they therefore have "naturally" positive attitudes towards the environment is shown to be contested through these writers.

The disruption and transformation of the static dualism of nature/culture into a more dynamic and dialectical relationship between the two sides of the binary is pivotal to gender inclusiveness in terms of women's material position as (ecological) citizens and valuing women's (care) work which "naturally" links women to caring for the earth. Concepts such as women's (ecological) citizenship and women's labour emerge as ways to bypass stereotypes of nature/culture and in themselves break down the dualism. The nature/culture dualism, one amongst many such operational dualisms in theory as well as lived reality, does not recognize the female citizen as an occupant of multiple identities and a pluralistic notion of a gendered ecological citizenship. Urban spaces and the city involve myriad implications for women as urban inhabitants of the environment and their right to both that environment and the city.

In conclusion, I have shown that it is necessary to disrupt the nature/culture dualism that aligns women to nature unquestionably. Disrupting the dualism posits the women in an ambivalent relationship with nature, while straddling the grey area between the two binaries. Much of the ecofeminist theory and women-led activism does not allow such an ambivalence to emerge. Women writing Indian fiction in English highlight this ambivalent relationship that women have with the environment, thus providing an important counterpoint to both theory and activism. This study is an intervention into a field in which women's writing has not been taken seriously, and Indian women's fiction resists and intervenes in dominant models of discourse and lived experience.

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