

RESEARCH ARTICLE**Postcolonial Ecofeminism in Indian Novels in English**

Dr. Priyanka Singla,

Associate Prof. of English,

Government College for Women, Hisar

Abstract: This paper seeks to outline the lineage of postcolonial ecofeminism in India in terms of both activism and fiction that explicitly foreground women. It argues for 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, it also argues 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. Postcolonial ecofeminism is a concept which has been in circulation for some time but is still at a nascent stage. 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.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Post Colonialism, Indian Women Writers in English, Indian Fiction.

Postcolonial ecocriticism focuses on the intersection of postcolonial and environmental issues. Many critics, particularly from the strain of deep ecology, have asserted that post colonialism is inherently anthropocentric and ecological concerns are secondary to other discourses that have historically contributed to racial discrimination. Ecocriticism, on the other hand, has been criticized for ignoring such a history of colonialism thereby giving rise to 'universal' environmental and bioethical concerns. In discourses of purity concerning environment literature and criticism, women as the colonized, for example, 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 postcolonial and environmental issues so that continuing imperialist modes and colonialist attitudes of social

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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 ecocriticism emerged as an academic discipline in the Western world. This is indicative of the fact that environmental consciousness in the postcolonial world in terms of activism precedes the formation of ecocriticism as a discipline.

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 Eco critical 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 Eco critical 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

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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 side-lined. 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.

Cultural Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism argues that there are important connections between the domination and oppression of women and domination and exploitation of nature by masculinist methods and attitudes. The term ecofeminism was coined by Francoise d' Eaubonne in 1974 in the book *Feminism or Death*. The strand of ecofeminism predominant till today is cultural ecofeminism. Developed in the 1970s, “cultural [eco]feminism reclaims women-nature connections as liberating and empowering expressions of women’s capabilities to care for nature” [4]. The women-nature connections that hold particular importance for cultural feminists are “embedded in deep social and psychological structures...resurrection of pre-patriarchal religions and spiritual practices ...[thus] making women’s ways of knowing and moral reasoning better suited to solving environmental problems” [4]. Cultural ecofeminism has its fair share of critics. Ynestra King, for example, says that “cultural ecofeminism by itself ...does not provide the basis for a genuinely dialectical ecofeminist theory and practice, one that addresses history as well as mystery. For this reason, cultural/spiritual feminism...is not synonymous with ecofeminism in that creating a gynocentric culture and politics is a necessary but not sufficient condition for ecofeminism”. [5]

Such criticisms of cultural ecofeminism are based on the notion that this particular framework reinforces sex-role stereotyping. As such, it is seen as making “essentialist, universalist and ahistorical” [4] claims about women and nature. Therefore, although cultural ecofeminism’s strength lies in that it is seen to be a deeply woman-identified movement that celebrates distinctive characteristics about women, it does not take into account that “men can also develop an ethic of caring for nature” [6]. Furthermore, cultural ecofeminism discounts the fact that women’s lives and identities are “socially constructed, historically fashioned, and materially reinforced through the interplay of a diversity of race/ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, age, ability, marital status, and geographic factors” [4]. Women as a category are homogenized and their distinctive characteristics are romanticized. Indian physicist and environmental activist VandanaShiva’s work comes closest to cultural ecofeminism in the Indian context. Shiva asserts that “while gender subordination and patriarchy are the oldest of oppressions, they have taken on new and more violent forms through the project of development” [7]. She argues for the recovery of the feminine principle—*Prakriti*—to counter the destructive effects of the Western model of development, which she calls mal- development.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

She defines *Prakritias* “the feminine principle as the basis for development which conserves and is ecological. Feminism as ecology, and ecology as the revival of *Prakriti*—the source of all life” [7]. Shiva characterises mal- development as “a paradigm that sees all work that does not produce profits and capital as non- or unproductive work” [8]. Shiva convincingly argues and shows that the Western model of development, or mal- development, “has been violent for many people, especially women and local environments” [9], as the violence that arises from such a model “is rooted in the patriarchal assumptions of homogeneity, domination and centralisation that underlie dominant models of thought and development strategies” [10].

Shiva’s claims, although useful in critiquing certain paradigms of development and globalisation which question Western biases in values and models of progress, however, do indeed come across as reductive and anti-developmental in several instances. For example, she says that “[t]he visibility of dramatic breaks and rupture is posited as progress. Marginalised women are either dispensed with or colonised” [10]. While recognising that capitalism, progress and development have problems, it is not productive to use the development paradigm as a scapegoat for all of society’s ills or to dismiss it completely as Shiva does. Women are, in fact, much more ambivalently placed in relation to colonialism, development, nature and culture than Shiva allows. Furthermore, Shiva’s positioning of women in India with regards to questions of ecology and development also comes across as problematical, with a tendency to homogenise and essentialise the women. In explaining the feminine principle, she says that “[w]omen in India are an intimate part of nature, both in imagination and in practice” [10] and that by virtue of this fact, they have a privileged access to the feminine and sustaining principle. To further cement her point, she claims that “Third World women, whose minds have not yet been dispossessed or colonised, are in a privileged position to make visible the invisible oppositional categories that they are the custodians of” [10]. Such claims are problematic on multiple levels. Firstly, Shiva romanticizes the Third World Indian women in question here, completely obscuring the rural-urban divide between them as well as the conditions of poverty the rural women live in. Such celebratory romanticization has the effect of invisibilising the wretchedness of the conditions of their lifestyles and the “work that gives Third World women their supposedly superior cooperative and ecological sensibilities” [10]. Furthermore, Shiva’s overarching argument of the feminine principle *Prakritiis* steeped in Hindu Brahminical philosophy, thus putting forth a didactic one-dimensional religious framework opposing the mechanistic scientific viewpoint of the West. Her uncritical use of (Brahminical) Hindu imagery is likened by some critics to the “saffronising” cultural nationalism in India where upper caste Hindu notions, symbols and metaphors are used to push for a nationalist agenda which can come across as fanatical in nature (Nalunnakkal,3). Women from other (minority) religions in India (Muslim, Sikh, Christian, etc.) are not taken into account in Shiva’s predominantly Hindu paradigm of thought. Shiva’s rigid argument also does not accommodate the effects of the

RESEARCH ARTICLE

developmental paradigm and environmental degradation on different groups of men in different ways.

Socialist/Materialist Ecofeminism

The seemingly “natural” alliance of women in India with nature and the way they have negotiated environmental movements is better explained by Bina Agarwal and Ariel Salleh. Agarwal contends that women do suffer in gender specific ways from environmental destruction due to capitalist patriarchy but that their “natural” relation to the environment is “not as Vandana Shiva would have us believe, but simply because [the women’s] position in society is such that they are most the most affected by environmental decline, and consequently most interested in resisting it” [9]. Salleh cites that “on international scale women, undertaking 65 per cent of the world’s work for 5 per cent of its pay, effectively are “the proletariat”” [14]. With those statistics, she brings together historical materialism and Eco socialism, and stresses that “since the interest of *women as a global majority* lies in challenging existing productivity structures, women as an economic underclass are astonishingly well placed to bring about the social changes requisite for ecological revolution” [14]. Salleh further asserts that “women are not „closer to nature“ than men in any ontological sense. Both women and men are “in/with/of nature”, but attaining the prize of masculine identity depends on *men distancing themselves* from that fact” [14]. Agarwal’s and Saleh’s claims are important here because not only do they expose the falsity of the claim that women are “naturally” aligned to nature and the environment, but their claims also refute the “authentic cultures” that ecofeminists such as Shiva and those from the West bind the Third World women into. The upholding of Third World women as bearers of an “authentic culture” gives rise to an idealized, celebratory and romanticized vision of poverty and Third World women as a homogeneous category without considering factors such as class, caste and various other traditional constituents. Chandra Talpade Mohanty warns against such a constructivist glorification and idealization of the Third World Woman, a view that Agarwal shares as well.

The second distinct stream within ecofeminism is socialist/materialist ecofeminism. It is my contention that socialist/materialist ecofeminism strikes a middle ground with both material and spiritual aspects, that is, socialist/materialist ecofeminism shows how the connections between women and nature are embedded in social constructivism as well as biological predisposition. This particular framework also takes into account an analysis of capitalism and patriarchy (capitalist patriarchy) to explain the domination and oppression of women and nature. Socialist/materialist ecofeminism sees environmental problems as “rooted in the rise of capitalist patriarchy and the ideology that the Earth and nature can be exploited for human progress through technology” [15]. This proceeds on from the notion that it is men who are responsible for labour in the marketplace and women bear the responsibility of labour in the domestic sphere of the home. By virtue of the fact that the women’s main domain of labour is the home, it is unpaid labour and therefore subordinate to men’s labour in the marketplace. This is in direct

RESEARCH ARTICLE

contrast to the fact that a large percentage of the world's work and labour (at home, farms, sweatshops, etc.) is actually performed by women. In socialist/materialist ecofeminism, nature and human nature are viewed as being historically and socially constructed, therefore connections and interactions between humans, nature, men and women "must be grounded in an understanding of *power* not only in the personal but also in the political sphere" [15]. What this elucidates is that relationships between women and nature are steeped in social, material and political realities.

For Carolyn Merchant, one of the central questions in socialist/materialist ecofeminism is "what is at stake for women and for nature when production in traditional societies is disrupted by *colonial* and *capitalist* development?" [6]. Here, the potential of socialist/materialist ecofeminism when combined with postcolonial issues comes to the fore to offer a more thorough critique of issues of domination, gender, class, race and so on. In the present situation, questions of neo-colonialism, development (specifically a Western model of development), and globalisation can be fruitfully invoked with the coming together of these two theoretical frameworks—socialist/materialist ecofeminism and postcolonial ecofeminism.

Thus far, I have discussed that the need for a materialist postcolonial ecofeminism arises due to the insufficiencies of postcolonial ecocriticism in considering the issue of androcentricism. Postcolonial ecocriticism merges women with the larger ecological self, erasing women's distinct histories, identities and positions. Ecofeminism, on the other hand, while considering the issue of androcentrism at length, fails to consider postcolonial concerns, in particular issues of neo-colonialism, race, uneven development and globalization.

Ambivalent Relationships of Women And Environment In Indian Fiction By Women

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 River sutra* (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. The novels and essays to be discussed have been chosen for highlighting issues and themes which are considered urgent and pertinent in the postcolonial and environmental context. Apart from foregrounding Indian women writers, the novels and essays in question also "call for a carefully case-based, historically contextualised analysis of contemporary social and environmental problems" [18]. At the same time, the texts draw attention to issues of gender, caste, class, race and positing the writings as a site of resistance to prevalent attitudes and social practices that not only denigrate specific human individuals (both women and men) but also non-human entities. Women have the ambivalent relationship with the environment through the filter of women writing Indian fiction in English. 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 of their novels. Indian women's writing, especially from the twentieth century onwards, is

RESEARCH ARTICLE

starting to be viewed as a powerful medium of modernism and feminism. The form of the Indian novels by women allows for a more intimate reading situation and experience than poetry, and allows time for more complex issues to emerge than the form of a poem. 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 side-lined. Elleke Boehmer states that “postcolonial women writers from India...are equally concerned to bring fore the specific textures of their own existence. Both as women and postcolonial citizens they concentrate...on their own “distinct actualities” [and] often this is a political commitment” [17]. One reason why Indian women writers are often overlooked is because of their seeming interest in the very specific and private worlds of the women they write about. But 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. Therefore, while their writings may seem very specific and private, they do make a strong statement of political commitment. The ambivalent relationship that women have with the environment bring to the fore the existential and material crises of the women as well as of the environment. The materiality of nature is also emphasized, where nature does not just passively exist in the background. There is a consensus in much contemporary ecocriticism that the environment consists of nature, landscapes and spaces, and all of these are socially constructed to give it a meaning, and meanings are determined by power and discourses. Such a view, however, reinforces the anthropocentricity that most Eco critics and environmentalists strive to break away from. There is a conflict in viewing the environment as being dependent on human cognition and language, and the “existence of this world [as] largely independent of human social life” [19].

With the exception of Arundhati Roy, no other Indian female writer has been mentioned in the field of postcolonial ecocriticism or ecofeminism. Critics taking up an ecocritical reading of Roy’s novel have often left out the gendered aspects altogether. 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.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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.

IlaDas'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 Abdulla's *The Madwoman of Jogare*, Mehta's *A River Sutra*, Anuradha Roy's *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* and UshaK. 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

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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, it can be said 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.

References

- C. Andrea (Ed.), *New Directions in Ecofeminist Literary Criticism*, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008.
- N. Rob, "Environmentalism and Post colonialism," *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*. ed. by A. Loomba, S. Kaul, M. Bunzl, A. Burton, and J. Esty. Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2005.
- H. Graham and T. Helen, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, London; New York: Routledge, 2010.
- K. J. Warren, "Feminist Theory: Ecofeminist and Cultural Feminist". *International Encyclopaedia of the Social and Behavioural Sciences*. Available at <<http://www.sciencedirect.com>>. Accessed 15 December 2011.
- Y. King, "Healing the Wounds: Feminism, Ecology, and the Nature/Culture Dualism," *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*, ed. by I. Diamond and G. F. Orenstein, San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books, 1990.
- C. Merchant, *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Liveable World*, New York; London: Routledge, 1992.
- V. Shiva, "Development, Ecology and Women," *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism*, ed. by J. Plant, Philadelphia, USA: New Society Publishers, 1989.
- K. J. Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2000.
- R. Braidotti, E. Charkiewicz, S. Hausler, and S. Wieringa, *Women, the Environment and Sustainable Development*, London: Zed Books Ltd, 1994.