



Ecofeminist Reading Of Select Indian Classics

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Abstract

Ecofeminism is a twentieth century academic discipline which is a feminist concern with ecology. It is easy to trace the history of ecofeminism than define it because ecofeminism is an umbrella term that encompasses many diverse schools of thought drawing on numerous disciplines and these schools of thought contradict each other. Despite contradictions what unite ecofeminists is their common goal of restoring the quality of the natural environment and providing quality life to the living and non-living inhabitants of the planet. The concern for environment is inherent in Indian culture as evident from the ecofeminist reading of the select Indian classics namely, Valmiki's epic Ramayana, Kalidasa's famous play *Abhijnanasakuntalam* and Tagore's play *Raktakarabi* (1924).

Introduction

In recent times ecology has become the central concern of almost all academic disciplines. Whether it is law, religion, science, sociology, management or tourism- all make effort to grapple with the question of ecological crisis. Literary studies are no exception to this. The concern for ecology is also reflected in the emergence of new areas of studies such as ecocriticism. The term ecocriticism was first used by the US critic William Rueckert in 1978. It lay dormant in the critical vocabulary till 1989 the Western Literature Association conference when it was revived by Cheryl Glotfelty. Since the early 1990s ecocriticism, also known as Green Studies, has gained prominence. An important milestone in the development of ecocriticism is ecofeminism. Ecological feminism, popularly known as ecofeminism, is the feminist concern with ecology. In other words, if feminism deals with women, ecofeminism deals with both women and nature. Like other critical theories, ecofeminism has produced fresh insights on literary works. The present paper aims to study some very famous and ancient Indian literary works, acknowledged as the classics of Indian Literature, from an ecofeminist perspective. The focus of the paper is three-fold: to find out the nature of ecofeminism present in the selected classics, to analyse the nature of connection between woman and nature in these texts and to assess the relevance of the ecofeminism present in these texts in today's world.

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to discuss in brief the history and the concept of ecofeminism.

Ecofeminism: The Concept and its History

It is easy to trace the history of ecofeminism than define it because ecofeminism is an umbrella term that encompasses a large number of diverse schools of thought drawing on numerous disciplines and these schools of thought contradict each other. The term 'ecofeminism' was coined by the French author Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Feminisme ou La Mort* in 1974. In this book, she devoted one chapter entitled "The Time for Ecofeminism" to depict the issues of ecofeminism. This chapter was not translated in English till 1994. So naturally, most of the early ecofeminist works in English do not mention the contribution of d'Eaubonne. According to Eaubonne, it is important to synthesise two movements, Feminism and ecology "to

remake the planet around a totally new model” (d’Eaubonne 175). For d’Eaubonne the term was meant to describe how the human race could be saved by women initiating an ecological revolution, as a way to counter the oppression of women that is one and the same as the oppression and destruction of nature. In other words, women can decenter patriarchy by challenging the exploitation and destruction of ecology by human beings. In 1974 was also published Sherry B. Ortner’s seminal essay “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?” This essay highlights the basic tenet of ecofeminism that is woman and nature are closely related. Ortner explains, in terms of structuralist anthropology, the presence in diverse cultures of the idea that women are subordinate to men. Women generally are given-and take- an inferior status in society because patriarchy believes that women are closer to nature and like nature they need to be tamed and domesticated. Simplified, one can say that through her body and through the social roles that are conferred upon woman because of her body, she is equated with nature. Culture, as opposed to nature, has purpose. Ortner remarks it is not only “[.....] distinct from but superior to nature, and that sense of distinction and superiority rests precisely on the ability to transform to ‘socialize’ and ‘culturalize’ – nature.”(73).

Rosemary Radford Ruether’s *New Woman New Earth – Sexist ideologies and Human Liberation* (1975), Susan Griffin’s *Women and Nature – The Roaring Inside Her* (1978) and Carolyn Merchant’s *The Death of Nature – Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (1980) are some of the important works on ecofeminism. None of these text actually articulate ecofeminist views however they give important historical evidence for the Western association of women with nature.

Another important landmark in the history of ecofeminism is the first ecofeminist conference- “Women and Life on Earth: A Conference on Eco-Feminism in the Eighties” – in March, 1980, at Amherst, Massachusetts, USA. The conference was the result of the meltdown at Three Mile Island which prompted large numbers of women in the USA to come together. The conference was about the connection between feminism, militarism, health, and ecology. Ynestra King who organized the conference believed that,

Ecofeminism is about connectedness and wholeness of theory and practice. It asserts the special strength and integrity of every living thing. For us the snail darter is to be considered side by side with appetite for tuna, and the creatures it may fall on with Skylab. We are a woman-identified movement, and we believe we have a special work to do in these imperiled times. We see the devastation of the earth and her beings by the corporate warriors, and the threat of nuclear annihilation by the military warriors, as feminist concerns. It is the masculinist mentality which would deny us our right to our own bodies and our own sexuality, and which depends on multiple systems of dominance and state power to have its way (qtd.in. Mies and Shiva 38).

Thus, it can be said that ecofeminism is not only an academic movement but also a social movement which puts the theory into practice. The other important examples of the practice of ecofeminism are: the Green Belt Movement in Kenya where women planted hundreds of thousands of trees by hand in degraded lands. The Chipko Movement in India where women hugged the trees to save them from cutting and preserved precious fuel resources for their communities. Narmada Bachao Movement is quite known for its efforts to save the river Narmada and its ecosystem from destruction caused by construction of dam on it. These examples show that ecofeminism is a worldwide movement dedicated to the continuation of life on earth.

As stated earlier, the different strands of thought in ecofeminism makes it difficult to singularly define ecofeminism yet one definition that would be acceptable by all ecofeminists is the following:

Ecofeminism is a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women. It takes from the green movement a concern about the impact of human activities on the non-human world and from feminism the view of humanity as gendered in ways that subordinate, exploit and oppress women.(Mellor 1)

The different schools of thought within ecofeminism are radical ecofeminism, cultural or spiritual ecofeminism, social/socialist or materialist ecofeminism and vegetarian ecofeminism. Radical ecofeminists contend that the dominant patriarchal society associates nature and women in-order to subordinate both. According to radical ecofeminists the patriarchy associates women and nature to reduce both only as a commodity while men have been seen as capable of establishing orders. This division of characteristics encourages the exploitation of women and nature as cheap labour resources.

Cultural ecofeminists believe that women are closer to nature than men because of their physiology and social roles. Cultural ecofeminism encourages an association between women and the environment. They highlight that women have a more intimate relationship with nature because of their gender roles (family, nurturer, and provider of food) and their biology (menstruation, pregnancy, and location). Spiritual ecofeminists believe in the sacredness of nature and holism of humanity and everything living. Spiritual ecofeminists encourage reestablishing the nature-based religion and goddess and nature worship as a way of redeeming both the nature and women’s instrumental and subordinated role. Social ecofeminists treat nature and human nature as socially

constructed and subject to analysis in terms of race, class, and gender. The critics belonging to these branches of ecofeminism agree, as rightly pointed out by Amanda Baugh in her paper “Gender”, that the ecological crisis and women’s issues are one and the same, one cannot be rectified without the other. But they disagree on the nature of relationship between women and nature. While most of the ecofeminists like Vandana Shiva, Susan Griffin, Sherry B. Ortner consider the connection between woman and nature natural or essentialist, there are critics like Janet Biehl, Ynestra King, Janis Birkeland who view the connection between woman and nature as man made. Despite contradictions what unite ecofeminists is their common goal of restoring the quality of the natural environment and providing quality life to the living and non-living inhabitants of the planet.

This brief introduction to ecofeminism provides a sufficient framework to analyze the selected Indian classics from an ecofeminist perspective.

Selected Indian Classics: An Ecofeminist Reading

The three Indian classics to be studied in detail are: Valmiki’s epic *Ramayana*, Kalidasa’s famous play *Abhijnanasakuntalam* and Tagore’s play *Raktakarabi* (1924). The *Ramayana* is a household name in India and needs no introduction. The *Abhijnanasakuntalam* is based on a story in Adiparva in the *Mahabharata* known as Sakuntalopakhyana. The play picks up the main thread of the epic-story i.e., the love between Dusyanta and Sakuntala and polish it, twist it with new strings. Tagore’s *Raktakarabi* translated as *The Red Oleander* is a play about one Yaksha-king Makarraaj who has an insatiable lust for gold and a frail rustic girl Nandini.

Nature occupies a very significant place in the *Ramayana*. The poet Valmiki has described at length the various objects of Nature throughout the *Ramayana*. It is quite surprising that the epic contains description of forty-two mountains, forty-two rivers, nineteen lakes and ponds, twenty-six forests, ten gardens and the four oceans. Similarly, all the contemporary birds, animals, marine organisms are mentioned in the epic. (See Chauhan, Chapter 3). The same is true of Kalidasa’s play Kalidasa has always expressed himself against the background of nature. Each of his works- particularly *Rtusamhara* and *Meghaduta* – breathes of nature. Every act of *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, except the fifth act, has its setting amidst nature. In the first act a black-spotted deer, with its neck turned and hinder part of the body contracted, gallops fast for the fear of the arrow of the King Dushyant. The hermitage breathes of natural beauty and Kalidasa vividly describes its creepers like Navamalika, trees like Kesara, Saptaparna and the hovering Bhramara. In the third act, Sakuntala is to be found on the bank of the river Malini, in a creeper-bower enclosed by canes and where the cool breezes blow with the fragrance of lotuses. The consequent acts of the play are replete with attractive descriptions of nature such as the description of the hermitage of the Sage Marica which abounds with trees like Mandara, kalp-vrks and Asoka and lakes with the golden lotuses.

In these two classics nature has been portrayed in different hues not as a non-living, passive object but as a living presence rather a divine presence. Thus, it can be said that spiritual ecofeminism pervades both these classics. The reason being that these classics are rooted in Hinduism. In the past few years, Hinduism has emerged as the green religion because of its emphasis on the divine oneness of nature and human race. The reverence for nature present in Hinduism has made it the focal point of the efforts to solve the environmental crisis. Hindu religion is being explored from the ecological perspective for the last two decades. Some noteworthy works in this context are: Vandana Shiva’s *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* (1988), Lance E. Nelson’s *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India* (1998), George Alfred James’ *Ethical Perspective on Environmental Issues in India* (1999), Christopher Key Chapple and Marry Evelyn Tucker edited *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky and Water* (2000) and Vasudha Narayanan’s “Water, Wood and Wisdom: Ecological Perspectives from the Hindu Traditions” (2001). Western Christianity “de-sacralised” and “instrumentalised” nature (Szerszynski 1) and bears a substantial “burden of guilt” for the environmental crisis that resulted (White 1206). Lynn White, a professor of medieval history, shook the academic world in 1966 with his address that was later published in 1967 entitled *The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis*. His comprehensive historical analysis of Christian thought established a discourse on Christianity and the environment. White predicted a “worsening ecological crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man” (1207). Hindu religion worships nature called Prakriti as goddess who “is divine, immanence and has potential power” (Narayana 4). Earth is revered as mother goddess and is worshipped as Lord Vishnu’s consort in many temples in South India. Rivers in India are gendered feminine and worshipped as mother goddesses. In the *Ramayana* there are several instances where rivers are worshipped. Sita, Rama and Lakshman worship the Sarayu River,

the Ganga and the Yamuna rivers. Rama and Lakshman enter the Sarayu to leave this world and return to Vishnulok. Sakuntala also has great affection for nature. She never drinks water without watering the trees. She does not pluck tender flowers despite her fondness for ornaments. She treats deer as her children and looks after them. Before leaving the hermitage, she embraces the Vanajyotsna creeper and leaves it under the care of her friends.

Hindu religion propounds the idea of cosmic harmony. The harmony between human beings and Prakriti is a part of it. The texts on *dharma* earnestly exhort people to practice nonviolence toward all beings. Any act of violence against nature is sin and is followed by suffering and punishment. These ideas are enshrined in the *Ramayana*. In Balkand there is description of a pair of Kronic birds. When the male bird is killed by a hunter, Valmiki utters a curse for the hunter. Rama suffers after killing the golden deer as Sita is kidnapped by Ravana. Ravana who kills the bird named Jatayu while returning to Lanka with abducted Sita also suffers for his deeds. Sakuntala's deep love for nature is reciprocated by nature. When Sakuntala leaves Kanva's hermitage to go to Hastinapura to meet Dusyanta, the peacocks give up their dance; the deer throws away the half-eaten morsels of Darbha grass and trees shed tears in the form of leaves. In the *Ramayana* when Rama separated from Sita is full of sorrow and grief, Nature is depicted in sad mood. These classics depict nature as companion of human beings sharing their joys and sufferings. The woman protagonists of these classics, no doubt, share a close bonding with nature. Sita is born from the mother earth and finally merges with her. She has a biological relation with nature. Sakuntala though daughter of the sage Visvamitra and the heavenly nymph Menaka is abandoned by her parents in a forest where she was fed by birds before she was carried by Kanva. She is nurtured by nature. Both Sita and Sakuntala are victimized by culture. Sita spends most of her life in forests and after being abandoned by Rama is named Vandevi by Valmiki and gives birth to her children in forests. Sita defies culture by not returning to Ayodhya with her sons and embracing her mother earth. Sakuntala due to the effect of the sage Durvasas' curse is not recognized by Dushyant. She goes to the hermitage of sage Kashyapa and gives birth to her son. It is not only women who have intimate relationship with nature. Rama belongs to Suryavansh i.e. Sun is his ancestor. He along with Lakshman lives in forests and the time spent in forest is the time of regeneration. Vayudev is depicted as the father of Hanuman. Rama fights against Ravana with the help of monkeys i.e. Vanar Sena. He worships rivers, oceans and other objects of nature. When Bharat along with sage Vashist goes to the hermitage of sage Bhardwaj, he goes on foot so that the flora and fauna of the hermitage is not disturbed. There are many other examples that illustrate that the characters in these classics loved nature, revered nature and nature was an integral part of their lives. Therefore, ancient India was free from the problem of environmental crisis. How modern India caught the disease of environmental degradation and has moved away from the ecofeminism of these classics need separate discussion. But Tagore's play *Raktakarabi* answers to this question to some extent.

Raktakarabi is an adaptation of Valmiki's *Ramayana* by Tagore to suit his times. The preface to the play clearly underlies that Tagore saw Valmiki's epic in new perspective. For him, the *Ramayana* was not the war between Ravana and Rama but between Ravana and Sita. He writes:

In the tretayuga Ravana the powerful king with enormous ambition and greed used to capture many gods and goddesses and make them work for his pleasure. But in midst of his anti-god prosperity suddenly appeared a woman and the epic ended with the triumph of virtue (qtd. in Ray 164).

He further remarks:

The Swarnalanka may, indeed, be traced in various places of the world, and at various levels there are thousands of evidences that Swarnalanka is a thing precisely of our times. (qtd. in Ray 164).

Thus, for Tagore Ravana is an epitome of materialism, capitalism, imperialism and his swarnlanka represents to him the capitalist, industrialist and imperial regime. Sita, a bhumi-kanya, represents the benevolent aspects of nature, the agricultural value system, the colonized. In the play the Yaksha-king Makarraaj is a new avatar of Ravana who remains inaccessible behind the hard metal walls of his Yakshaspuri. But he exercises complete control over his people, exploits them for gold and destroys nature in the process. He is defied by Nandini who is symbolically suggested to be the daughter of the earth through the ripe corn-ears colour of her dress. She refuses to comply with the dictates of the Yaksha regime. The end of the play suggests that Nandini's rebellion would bring revolution and shatter the Yaksha's regime.

If Tagore could make the ecofeminist strain in the *Ramayana* relevant to his age, why not we in our times. It is high time that we revive the nature ethics of the Indian classics to deviate the ecological disaster that looms larger on the whole humanity. To conclude, the study of the Indian classics from ecofeminist perspective reveals that ecofeminism is a new term for an ancient wisdom which has been present in Indian culture since time immemorial. This wisdom has been marginalized by the West through colonialism and globalization. With the discourse of ecofeminism Indian wisdom has started to move from margins to center.

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