

Cultural Ecofeminism *The Book of The Hunter*

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Cultural Ecofeminism projects the relationship between nature and women. From the past, women have a spiritual knot with nature. This well-knit bond never allows anybody to separate women from nature. There is an intimate relationship between women and nature both psychologically and physiologically. Women are the nurturer and provider of food to the family. The life cycle of a woman and nature can co-exist (eg. menstruate, pregnancy and lactation). This association leads woman to connect directly to the natural world. The intimacy with nature makes women allows sanctity and degradation of the environment.

Cultural ecofeminism is a different perception of radical ecofeminism. Cultural ecofeminist encourage and celebrate the feminine role around them. They ignore the biological differences. They view feminine qualities with nature. They think that nature is suppressed like women. Thus instead of rejecting the connection between women and nature, cultural ecofeminists focus to create an alternative women's culture to rectify ecological problems. This culture is based on the feminine characteristics inter-connected to nature which is so long devalued by the patriarchal society.

The bond between nature and women has created an ecological ethics, which is based on care and correlation and woman's spirituality movement. Both the ethics of care and spirituality of women pave way to a solution of ecological crisis which the world is facing. Ynestra king says, "cultural ecofeminism analyses environmental problems within its critique of patriarchy and offers alternatives that could liberate both women and nature".

Women are closer to nature because of their social roles. Women are the care takes of the society. The society has given a high pedestal for nature. They worship nature as well as women. They compare earth, water, fire and moon with woman. This esteemed place is given to woman because they are the protectors, caretakes and provides of the family. Woman creates

a bond between nature and society. They are the social structure connecting land to people. It is women who collect firewood, fodder and food for her family.

The cultural ecofeminism reinforces the concept of mother earth and femininity of nature. The stance towards natural world begins from the instinctive reactions in male and female psyche. In CojellTeenaSandeep quotes Elizabeth Gould Davis' book, *The First Sex* where it is stated.

Man is the enemy of nature to kill, to root upto level of, to pollute, to destroy are his instinctive reactions whereas women is the ally of nature, and her instinct is to tend to nurture to encourage healthy growth and to preserve ecological balance(5).

Cultural eco feminists have an idea that the traditional female values like preservation, destruction and sacrifice are present both in women and nature. Woman's bodies are intertwined with natural cycle. The society considers women and nature as sacred figures because they are the life living and nourishing source of existence. In the olden days women centred societies existed. During the king's rule they gave prime importance to protect nature and women. They respect women's knowledge and administration. Women become the prime sufferers of the degradation and forest depletion.

Cultural eco feministscelebrate women's biological roles like mothering and nurturing. The different phases of a women's life cycle are represented as equal with nature. They stress the point that woman's work and knowledge is a key to biodiversity, conservation and utilization because they perform multiple tasks in the society. In most cultures women are the custodians of biodiversity. They produce, reproduce consume and conserve.

In India women are the major producers of food interms of value, volume and hours they worked. Women prove their importance even in daily work with natural world. In farming, dairying and forestry they prove their sustainability. As Vandana Siva points out

When women conserve seed, they conserve diversity and therefore conserve diversity and therefore conserve balance and harmony. Navadanya or nine seeds are the symbol of this renewal of diversity and balance, not only of the plant world, but of the planet and of the social world (EF.169).

In Hindu culture this Navadanya symbolizes Navagraha, so they are considered as sacred seeds. In Karnataka akadi is a main cereal crop. The woman of Karnataka takes all decisions relating to the akadi crop. So these biological resources have social, ethical, cultural and economic Values. Woman expresses a relationship between plants and planets, between cosmic harmony and agricultural harmony captured in Navadanya.

Vandana Siva quotes a slogan from an Adivasi woman “MatiDevataDharamDevata (EF 100)” means soil is our Goddess. It is our religion. They think that the soil is their culture. It provides sustenance. It links to their ancestors. They are ready to sacrifice their life but not their mother earth. The soil is not a mere factory of production. It is their soul. Such a cordial and divine affection, the people have with nature.

In the Third world, women are the farmers. But it is invisible. Women work more than man. Her working hours is longer than man. The input of female labour is more than two thirds of the population. Majority of Indian women are not simply ‘housewives’ but farmers. Women are the innovators and protectors of seeds and resources.

The society worship women because of her perseverance and sacrifice. We call our nation as mother India and BharathMadha. The spiritual leaders of India like Aurobindo and Ramakrishna say that the mother as a symbol of a country represents, love for all the citizens. She is the source of energy. It is the duty of the virile sons of India to protect her mother. Men worship women Goddess Kali for virility Goddess Saraswathi for knowledge and Goddess Lakshmi for wealth. Thus women hold a divine place in the society.

In Indian Literature there are so many writers who write to promote conservation of nature and woman. Among those writers Mahaswetadevi has a special place because she works for the revival of the indigenous people and nature. Though she talks about the suppression of women and nature, she expresses her regard for nature and women in her novel The Book of the Hunter. The novel, which is set in the sixteenth century Bengal, centres around the life of two couples brahmanMuhundaram and his wife and Phuli and Kalya. In this novel the Shabars (the hunters) and the Brahmans holds a high regard for nature and woman. She describes the contented life of the Shabars. Their life is eco-centric. The Shabars never like to mine out the abundant wealth of nature. According to Danko in The Book of the Hunter, “Bring me this,

Bring me that, the forest would be exhausted. They are all Abhaya's creatures

(TBH130). Woman in Devi's novel *The Book of the Hunter* are very intelligent and talented.

They are the preserver and destroyer like the Westwind. Mukunda, the upper

class Brahman witnesses his wife's calm and collected nature. He marvels at the excellent advice

his wife offers him now and then.

The people of India create a bond with nature. They sense nature in each and every life of woman. Mukunda, the protagonist, leads a happy life in Ararha village. He put forward a reason for his happiness He sees nature as his mother not only Mukunda but the shabars of Ararha village also. Mukunda expresses his gratitude by saying:

How could I? The one who gave me birth was my mother: the land of my birth was also my mother, Ararha gives me life sustaining food, and thus is another mother. Does a child ever abandon its mother? (TBH 45)

Such a mother, child relationship is seen in every aspect of the novel. They highly respect nature and women.

The Indians particularly the Shabars have always enjoyed a close bond with nature. They share a deep intimacy with their forest habitat similarly the shabars also maintained a kinship with forest and their environment. They think that they are the blessed ones because they live in the bosom of the forest. They believe that their Goddess Abhyachandi will guard them and the deity provides them their needs. The forest and the shabars are inseparable. Nature showers blessings and fearlessness to them. They consider the forest as their mother. Their strength lies in the belief of nature is shown by Devi's words. "A shabar is where the jungle is" (TBH 86).

Devi clearly picturizes the life of the Bengalis in 16th century. She throws light on the old ways of travelling, farming celebrating festivals, Danewal Renu Bhadola says in quarterly English journal, "This novel comments on the demographic, geographic and socio-economic transformation of society" (37).

The upper class Brahman's long observation of nature teaches them to recognise the climatic condition of their place. This knowledge is the asset of their community. Mukunda's uncle Ganesh learns all the techniques of nature by calculating with his fingers. They express

their knowledge about nature through oral lore. The knowledge of nature is transferred from person to person and generation to generation. This knowledge helps them to practice a ritual or belief in farming or agriculture. Mukunda is eager to know how Ganesh knows about rain with so much of certainty. Ganesh immediately replies,

If the light fortnights ninth day sees too much rain. That year will never see rain again, But when there's just a drop or two paddy grows to great, great height. The fish multiply day and night (TBH 6)

Though Ganesh never goes to school, he has a vast store house of knowledge about the soil, plants, animals, birds and the sky. He knows the saga of the soil. He advised Mukunda not to underestimate even the tiny insects and weed, because each and every plant and animal has merit of its own. Further he says "the soil held everything in itself" (TBH7). He talks about the medicinal values of the plants. Each community has its own ideas about nature. Their working pattern, belief, rituals differ from others. Their attitude towards nature is cordial. Because of their set of rules in their life pattern they form a separate tradition and culture. This tradition is the backbone of their culture. This rituals and beliefs are followed from generation to generation.

Mahasweta Devi's picturisation of Mukundaram's life she uses references which is derived from a folklore. This folklore has a socio-cultural significance. The innumerable routine stories are told by their ancestors. It motivates the group psychology, their life style and helps to build their identity. The stories of Mukundaram's fore fathers inspires him to remind their duties of his family, it motivates him to write further. So the knowledge of their birth place is not only a pride but helps to construct their identity. Mukunda's mother reverberates.

Your grand father was Jagannath Mahamisa, knowledgeable and talented man indeed! He ate only vegetarian food and spent his days worshipping Gopal, One gained merit merely by setting one eye upon him! He had wide renown as if he was the all-embracing sun! (TBH14).

These brahmans not only respect their forefather's dignities but they have a deep faith in their mother's words. They expect blessings from their mothers whatever they do. They believe that because of their mother's blessing only they are honoured at the king's court. After

Mukunda's mother's death he feels as if his Daibaki (mother) is with him always. During his slumber his mother consoles him. Ravan the Dom of the cremation ground weaves the fabric between a son and a mother. He opines

Take a good long look, Thakur. The more you look, the sooner you'll be able to detach yourself. You were once bound to your mother's body with 32 arteries and Veins, and even now you are attached to her in your heart (TBH4)

The propinquity with nature influences them to plant auspicious trees around their houses. They consider Shenora and Aslesha trees as inauspicious trees planted only in the cremation ground. Through the character Ganesh, Devi captures a wide knowledge of farming. One can get this deep knowledge through experience and from their fore fathers. He explains what type of soil will bear what type of vegies. He further says the radish needs cotton-soft soil, sugarcane grows only in dusty soil that flies aloft. The earth is ready to give abundant wealth to those who show reverence it. It gives all kinds of fruits and grains, but that also needs its own type of soil.

The Shabars are the children of the jungle, because they told that they live in the lap of the jungle (TBH 52). They believe that they lead a courageous life. Mother Nature gives them the courage to face all the hardships. She protects them under her wings. They not only have a divine relationship with flora but also with fauna. They love the wild animals of Chandir Bon forest once the palace elephant went mad, it is Tejota who cures it with some herbs.

The Shabars are not educated like Mukundaram. He recites poems related to nature. He feels proud to say that his Ganesh uncle will foretell the coming of rain by sniffing the air. He compares Ganesh uncle with Lord Shiva. The Shabars like Kalachand doesn't know about Lord Shiva. They only know nature. Nature is their God and Nature is everything. They go with nature and live with Nature. Kalachand immediately retorts that:

TejotaKalyaShabar's mother. There's nothing that old woman doesn't know..... well, you ought to know Around here we respectTejota a great deal. She can point out medicine herbs to the kings doctor, you know. And the Shabars really act like they're somebody too! (TBH 55)

But the educated and civilized people like Mukunda don't believe the talents of the forest dwellers. He is very arrogant and proud about his knowledge. His prolonged study of sanskrit texts makes him believing that knowledge comes from formal learning by reading books. Kalachand further explains the relationship of the Shabars with Abhayachandi, the forest God. They transfer their knowledge from generation to generation. The Goddess of Abhayachandi, blesses with seven pots of riches. They have their own set of rules to worship Abhayachandi. They never allow the king to worship the Goddess. As Devi rightly says, "Their ways and rules are different. They don't treat the king as their king, and they don't bow to great a brahman" (TBH 56).

The Shabars don't need anything surplus. They are satisfied with what they have. They put their faith in nature. Nature gives abundance of wealth to them. They never starve. They enjoy their life. The Shabars never store food for their future. Their everyday life is a miserable one. Though it is a miserable life, they never lose their faith. They don't want to destroy nature for their happiness. They want to conserve nature because it is their God. It is their protector. It is their Xavier. They mind their work and perfectly lead satisfied life.

Thus cultural ecofeminists revalue, celebrate and defend women and nature what the patriarchy has devalued so far.

Work Cited

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