



POSTCOLONIAL ECOFEMINIST CRITICISM: AN OVERVIEW

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Postcolonial ecofeminism is a more recent trend in contemporary critical theories. It is the newest variety of feminism. It has the potential to bring feminist insights to environmental ethics in the context of postcolonial realities. It has contributed a great deal both to activist struggle and to theorizing the link between women's oppression and the domination of nature. In post-colonial cultures an ecofeminism perspective would involve the coming together of postcolonial ecocriticism and ecofeminism where it shows that all social movements related to nature, culture, mind, body have a common denominator – the denominator of revulsion against domination. It means that the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women are intimately bound up with the notion of class, race, caste, colonialism and neo-colonialism. Like other postcolonial critics, Eco feminists also try to reclaim a woman centered vision which directly opposes the androcentric world view of life. This woman-centered vision of survival with the co-existence and interdependence of nature finds literary expression in the fiction of many postcolonial women writer in India. The works of Kamla Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Nair, Sarah Joseph, Anita Desai, Gita Mehta, Arundhati Roy and Usha K.R are enriched with the essence of ecofeminism especially with its postcolonial lineage in the Indian socio-political and cultural milieu. The present paper seeks to explore relevant ecofeminist theories and perspectives of post-colonial cultures in terms of both activism and fiction that unambiguously forefront women. The paper also 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. The analysis would also highlight the vision of life on the earth as an interconnected web that defies all hierarchies.

Ecofeminism is an activist and academic movement that sees critical connection between the domination of nature and the exploitation of women. The term ecofeminism, first used by French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974, was hailed as the third wave of feminism. Ecofeminism, as Karen Warren notes, is an umbrella term for a wide variety of approaches. One may be socialist ecofeminist, cultural ecofeminist, radical ecofeminist, etc. Although the categorization of ecofeminism is a contested point, what holds these disparate position together is the claim that as, Karen Warren writes, "there are important connection between the domination of women and the domination of nature." Thus ecofeminism is a social and political movement, which unites environmentalism and feminist activism. Ecofeminists echo the very perception of radical ecology that the domination of nature entails the domination of human being along lines of gender, race and class. The

late 20th century has identified ecofeminism as a movement that speaks for women, environment and all the marginalized groups of post-colonial cultures. There are two major wings of ecofeminism, which are of prime importance in defining the connection between woman and nature.

Cultural/Spiritual Ecofeminism emphasizes on the natural connection between women and nature and supports the concept of 'Mother Earth' and 'femininity of nature.' They argue that traditional wisdom of preserving and protecting nature as well as respecting women should be practiced in our contemporary society. Cultural ecofeminism's strength lies in that it is seen to be a deeply woman-identified movement that celebrates distinctive characteristics about women. Furthermore, cultural ecofeminism discounts the fact that women's lives and identities "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" (Warren). Women as a category are homogenized and their distinctive characteristics are romanticized. Indian ecofeminist Vandana Shiva's works comes close to cultural ecofeminism. 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. She defines *Prakriti* as "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" (3) In her book, *Staying Alive : Women, Ecology and Survival in India* Shiva argues how women's special connection to the environment through her daily interaction with it has been ignored. The devaluation of contribution from women and nature goes hand in hand with the value assigned to acts of colonization as acts of development and improvement. Cultural ecofeminists strongly argue that in postcolonial cultures male ownership of land has led to domination culture which manifested in food export, overgrazing, exploitation of people and an abusive land ethic in which animals and land are evolved only as economic resources. The same is true of forest. The second distinct stream within ecofeminism is socialist/materialist ecofeminism. In the postcolonial cultures, it shows how the connection 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 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" [4] Socialist ecofeminists, like Karen J Warren and Maria Mies, focus on the critical analyses of the western philosophies of 'development'. Maria Mies writes about this nature-culture dilemma. "Since the age of Enlightenment and the colonization of the world the white Man's concept of emancipation, of freedom and equality, is based on dominance over nature and other peoples and territories. The division between nature and culture, or civilization, is integral to this understanding. From the early women's movements up to the present, a large section of women has accepted the strategy of catching-up with man as the main path to emancipation. This implied that woman must overcome within themselves what had been defined as 'nature', because in this discourse, women were put on the side of nature, whereas men were seen as the representatives of culture" (5)

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, and class, race and so on. It means that the question of neo-colonialism, development and globalization can be fruitfully involved with the coming together of postcolonial ecofeminism and socialist ecofeminism. Ecofeminists argue that there is a connection between woman and nature that comes from their shared history of oppression by the patriarchal western society. The western patriarchal way of thinking is based on dualism. Dualism is a world view that splits mind from body, spirit from matter, male from female, humans from nature. The patriarchal mindset is often referred to by academics as the dominant/subordinate duality paradigm. Vandana Shiva asserts that the modern model of development that is being imposed by the west is inherently patriarchal because it is fragmented, anti-life, opposed to diversity, dominating and delights at the ‘progress’ based on nature’s destruction and women’s subjugation. One of the most significant phenomena of our times is the globalization of the world economy. But this global market integration creates conditions of homelessness and translocation of people and cultures. Dams, mines and energy plants and military bases-these are the temples of the new religion called development. But what is sacrificed at the altar of this religion is nature’s life and people’s life. The sacraments of development are made of the ruins and desecration of the soil. They are based on the dismantling of society and community, on the uprooting of people and cultures. Vandana Shiva argues that “development means the ecological and cultural rupture of bond with nature and within society; it has meant the transformation of organic communities into groups of uprooted and alienated individuals, searching for abstract identities” (5) For communities that derived their sustenance from the soil, it is not merely a physical property but a source of all meaning. In tribal and peasant societies, cultural and religious identities are derived from the soil, which is perceived not as a mere factor of production but as the very soul of society. Many tribes in India like Hill Maris tribe in Bastar see soil, as their home, the universe of plants, animals, trees and human beings. It is this interconnection and coordination of human beings, nature material and non-material and the non-human other that Eco feminists have been striving to achieve and reweave.

Ecofeminism in postcolonial cultures like India has emerged as a vigorous movement parallelizing conservation of environment with improved living standards for women. The huge repertoire of women led environmental activism has accorded Indian woman a singular stature in ecocritical writings. One of the successful examples of elemental or primordial environmentalism in India is the Chipko Movement. The conception of tree-hugging was adopted to curb activities such as deforestation, lumbering and mining. This movement was a consequence of severe turmoil emanating in local woman who were influenced the most by state level verdicts leading to environmental deterioration. Recently, other woman who have done pioneer work for environmental issues are Medha Patkar, C.K Janu, Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy. Such woman-led movements in India have paved the way for several Indian woman novelists to include environmental issues along with exploration of female subjectivity in the literary canon. One may argue that woman in the fiction written by Indian woman writers have an ambivalent attitude towards nature. Their self-alienation and existential crisis are highlighted through this ambivalent attitude, positing the women in the midst of both nature and culture, where each is thoroughly

implicated in the other. In fact, woman is much more ambivalently placed in relation to colonialism, development nature and culture. It is very important to look at postcolonial ecofeminism in the writings of Indian women novelists. The Indian women writers from the 20th century onwards, whose literary works have advocated the concept of ecology in relation to woman, include Kamla Markandaya, Mahasweta Devi, ShashiDeshpande, Sarah Joseph Anita Nair Arundhati Roy. Concomitantly, their works highlight the issues and themes which are considered pertinent in the postcolonial and environment context. Their text draw attention to the issue of gender, class, caste race and posting the writings as a site of resistance to prevalent attitudes and social practices that not only denigrate specific human individuals (both men and women) but also non-human entities. The postcolonial women novelists not only explore female subjectivity in order to establish an identity that is not imposed by a patriarchal society, but their works also retains currency for making social issues a key part of their novels.

KamlaMarkandaya's novel Nectar in a Sieve (1954) has successfully represented through female characters the relation of environmental deterioration and women's exploitation, there by exemplifying the ecofeminist point of view. Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve and Anita Desai's Fire on the Mountain (1977) both portray the darker shades of nature and the simultaneous conjunction of the darker aspects of the women concerned. Rukmani and her family nearly starve to death when nature is unpredictable and there is a drought in Markandya's novel. While Rukmani 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 field that is 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.

ShashiDeshpande's novel The Dark Holds No Terrors emphasizes her attitudes and approaches to women and nature. In this novel, Sarita's mother expressed her anguish and the gender-bias through the natural element, sunlight which she feels as a barrier for women's beauty or for their fair complexion. Sarita during her childhood finds peace and comfort in the mango groove. In this novel there is one incident (the explosion of the factory) which shows the parallel relationship between the violence against nature and women. The explosion of factory is the root cause of Sarita's problem. While construction of factories and industries is actually violence against nature. Arundhati Roy's best seller The God of Small Things (1997) is a fine example of postcolonial ecofeminism or ecocriticism. Critics taking up an ecoritical reading of Roy's novel have often left out the gendered aspects altogether. In this novel, 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. More contemporary novels related to urban ecofeminism such as SohilaAbdulali's The Mad Woman of Jogare (1998), Gita Mehta's A River Sutra (1993), Anuradha Roy's An Atlas of Impossible longing (2008) and Usha K.R's Monkey-Man (2013) deal with the relationships that women have with the urbanization, development and the city presents to the women has echoes of the rhetoric of globalization- equal opportunity for all . Such relationship does not sit comfortable with the dualism of nature/culture. The shift from rural to urban species shows that postcolonial ecofeminism is not a static theory, isolated to wilderness or countryside landscapes alone. So these writings posit the women and the environment

is both positive and negative ways. The unquestioning acceptance of the woman-nature link, especially in the Indian context or in the third world perse, 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. So it is necessary to disrupt the nature / culture dualism that aligns women to nature unquestionably.

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