

Eco- Grief: A Gendered Tussle in the Narratives of Women Labourers on NH-22 and Sarah Joseph's 'Mazha'

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In the distance she could hear the suppressed sobs of the rain bursting out over mountain passes. "Oh God!" she muttered, pressing her hands hard against her breasts. "I want to cry, cry like this screaming, tearing rain." She pressed her cheeks hard against the iron bars of the window. Then she fell back, helpless, on the broad windowsill sat there, her head pressed against her knees. (Joseph 562)

Sarah Joseph in a rather short narrative as that of 'Mazha' expiates that nature and daily life construct a seamless web, wherein a nurturing, female-identified earth is considered to be the root of all life. As Carolyn Merchant says, "one does not readily slay a mother, dig into her entrails for gold or mutilate her body" (Seager 1993). The popular view that Mother Nature is sacrificing, affectionate, caring, and bountiful was overshadowed by the view that nature is a fearsome, wild woman who must be controlled by knowing her. Knowing leads to the construction of the androcentric vision of both Nature and Women. Men of science struggled to subdue nature/woman, to know her secrets, to tame her wilderness and to put nature to work in the service of human enterprise As Seager notes, "the literature of male adventures involve metaphors of raping the wilderness, penetrating virgin lands, conquering a capricious Nature, mastering the wild and subduing untamed lands" (Seager 1993).

Henry David Thoreau wondered "Where is the literature which gives expression to Nature...I do not know where to find in any literature, ancient or modern, any account which contents me of that Nature with which even I am acquainted" (Thoreau). In response to that incapability of literature to converse with nature, Thoreau took it upon himself "to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil – to regard man as an inhabitant or part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society" (Thoreau). And that literature which concerns itself with the real world of Nature

and with the diverse ecological aspects of nature-representations in certain works of art is come to be termed as an eco-literature. “In the literature of the last hundred years is to be found attempts to reconnect deeply and lastingly with nature’s voices” (qtd. in Martinez 1).

Ecocriticism is an inclusive term wherein Nature and ecology express larger contexts of significance and focuses upon the inter-relationship between nature and literature and analyzes the works of art from an environmental perspective. The ecological criticism especially concerns itself with the inherent distinction between nature and culture where nature is intimately connected with the human culture and culture in itself is rooted in the world of vivid Nature. For Jonathan Bates, not only culture is embedded in nature but nature is also interconnected with culture. Both Nature and culture mutually influence and affect each other. This distinction between nature and culture represents the postcolonial ideology where Culture takes the form of a master that always dominates and exploits the natural world and Nature becomes the slave of culture being continuously mutilated and tamed by it. The culture always progresses by stamping upon nature and crushing it under its feet through a constant indulgence in wars and all sorts of conquest that leads to the destruction of the natural environment.

Val Plumwood in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993) categorizes ‘dualism’ as an alienated form of differentiation in which power construes and constructs differences in terms of an inferior and alien realm. The master subject thus repudiates diverse forms of existence in the name of global economy and laissez-faire. The other-ing of nature is like initiating a detonator. In one of the dialogues between the siblings and the father, Joseph explores how the master subject repudiates any association with nature whatsoever in order to other it. Furthermore, any claims to attach oneself to a non-emotional physical object would only invite repercussions pertaining to one’s health. Thus the nurturing nature is to be feared and tamed when the former is vulnerable. Joseph notes:

“Please open the door,” his son whimpered, holding his trousers up with his left hand and clutching a paper boat in his right one. The boy tugged at him again. “Achha!”

“What is it?”

“The door...”

“The door?”

“Open it for us, please.”

“What for?”

“We want to set our boats afloat...”

“Boats! What nonsense! You’ll get wet and catch fever. Boats indeed!” (Joseph 563)

Starting from the point of time when stones, trees, and animals were deified, to the description of nature as a spontaneous source of benign happiness, to a time when acquisition got the better of all humanitarian values and wrecked havoc on the environment – the ethical approach to nature needs to be revised and subverted with times. Today when ecology has been ruthlessly damaged – be it through carbon emissions, pollution of sea water, deforestation or other sheer materialistic concerns, ethics need to be given a pragmatic perspective. An ethical appeal can no longer be limited to what is good or bad but what is right or wrong. This would provide a perspective to analyze situations within in a cogitative and imaginative framework. The Basil plant and the woman complement each other. In ‘Mazha’, Padma is grieving the loss of an ineffable sort of resource that only her psyche could comprehend. She is touted to be a frenzied, embarrassing, and crazy woman by her husband. But it is all within her that becomes a corollary to the brewing typhoon outside. The woman’s and nature’s retort to the mighty master is inherently essentialist in theory. In practice, a woman might have numerous ways of mourning the loss of her ‘self’ in the loss of nature.

The western sky was heavy with clouds. A deep haze covered the hills in the distance. The downpour left her helpless, unnerved. There was nothing to be done about it, she consoled herself.

“Why am I crying?” she asked herself. (Joseph 564)

Indian civilization draws sustenance venerating the soil as sacred and inviolable. The Atharva Veda invokes the prayer to Prithvi, the Earth:

“Let what I dig from thee, O Earth, rapidly spring and grow again.

O Purifier let me not pierce through thy vitals or thy heart.” (Shiva SDE)

In *Soil, Not Oil*, Vandana Shiva postulates that India is in a see-saw contest between a sustainable culture based on ensuring the living energies of biodiversity and the sacredness of species and a non-sustainable and inequitable culture based on fossil fuels. “The sacred cow symbolizes a biodiverse culture and a living economy.” (Shiva ZED) Throughout India, ficus trees have been planted along roads to provide shade. If a

road had to be widened, it would go around the ficus trees. Humans had to adjust their activities to protect them. The livelihoods of the poor were inviolable under Article 21 of India's constitution, which guarantees the right to life. Today the car has become inviolable. Man replaced nature by taking over the latter's singular attribute of causing a change.

I have attempted to save literature from being reductive and merely politicizing the beats of physical space and inquire into the ways in which nature is relegated to a space assigned for a third-world woman. Donna Haraway in *Primate Visions* finds a parallel between 'orientalism' and primatology. The appropriation of the construction of man from woman or culture from nature in order to further the dualism reinstates the beginning of nature/culture/gender divide at this juncture. Quoting Vandana Shiva again, she lays bare the psyche:

"We will dig so deep and so violently, we will bulldoze so brutally, on such a large scale and at such a high speed, that we will tear through your vitals and your heart, ensuring that nothing can grow from you again." (Shiva *Ecowatch*)

The sadness we feel about environmental problems, including synthetic chemical and ionizing radiation contamination, climate change and global warming, deforestation, desertification and species extinction—as a result of human hubris, greed, and the exploitation of our earth's precious resources. This is what I understand by 'Eco-Grief'. A tussle between land and its acquisition by private conglomerates and corruption in execution of the land reforms have disrobed nature. She is made and remade like Dopdi Mejhen of Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*. The corporations like GMR, GVK, GR Infra, and others are the Senanyaks of the white collar criminal coterie. Bloomberg Report says that if 100 million rich Indians want to live like their Western counterparts it would take more resources than the world has to offer and the attempt would force their brothers and sisters to give up their water, their land, their homes, and their livelihoods. The superhighway and the automobile are the ultimate cultural symbols of non-sustainability and ecological exclusion. (Shiva *SDE*)

This is where the patriarch in 'Mazha' channels his guilt by reinstating the 'wilderness' in Padma as the basis of a flawed progeny. Padma's state is astonishing to him and thus he abandons the idea of understanding her nature. He prefers a scientific term of a 'Grey Area' wherein he closely observes Padma's movements from a safe distance.

"Let him be. There's nothing can be done. Children'll always take the lead one gives." (Joseph 564)

The master-subject interaction in the story dwells on the man's negligence of the woman's 'care-economy'.

"Do you intend to come in out of the rain?" her husband asked, raising his voice in anger.

"No I want to get wet."

"So that's it is it?" Perhaps it was his sarcasm, perhaps his contempt, she did not know what, perhaps it was all she hated in him, that made her step out into the middle of the yard. (Joseph 564-65)

In another incident, he acts like an imperialist who isolates himself completely from the scene initially and hits at the weak chord scathingly. 'Mazha' tackles with the repressed identity of a woman as well. When he calls her a "Whore" he dispenses his assumed right of abusing a woman and a woman's celebration of nature. On the contrary, Padma is overwhelmed by a murderer's frenzy and hence in the angst of being mutilated, she crushes the little bird in her hand whose nestling she picked up near the Basil plant. She recalls her state of mind like a person grieving the loss of ecology. She undergoes Eco-Grief.

It seemed to her that the wet plumes were stuck to her palm. Disturbed, she rubbed her hands together.

The birds flew around her, agitated. She recalled her revulsion. It disturbed her, that response. It was not what she wanted. Deeply pained, she lifted her hands and covered her face. (Joseph 565)

This is what one can put as feeling ashamed for the loss of ecology. Such passions sprung in Padma but it also furthered the scope to discuss and align Eco-awareness and Ecophobia with it.

The idea of roads as "lines on the palm" as opined by Atal Bihari Vajpayee has been actualized in a way that now the lines seem to be the "scars". We have cemented the erasure of our fate from our soil, our land, and our ecology. It cements an apartheid enabling the rich to drive at high speeds on highways built by cutting through villages and forests, tearing down homes, farms, and trees. They drive through without even

seeing the brothers and sisters whose livelihoods they are robbing. Superhighways are not our destiny or the lines on the nation's palm. They are graveyards of cement and coal tar, which are burying our soils, farms, and villages.

The paradigmatic shift from eco-awareness to ecophobia allows us to read environmental responses in cohesion with feminist and queer theories. They offer the concepts of domination and resistance. Simon Estok in *The Ecophobia Hypothesis: Re-membering the Feminist Body of Ecocriticism* suggests an alternative way of looking at these theories and demands a shift from calling them “intrinsically biophobic” to “explicitly feminist, resolutely queer, and keenly aware of masculinity memes” (Gaard 9) The rhetoric of environmental change has long served a tool to carry out revolutionary change. The ‘Chipko Movement’ offered a narrative to women in resistance against the unethical treatment of nature. Women have long been associated in close proximity to nature and hence had to face the maximum wrath of the colonial and imperialist tendencies. The shift, however, reminds us of the loss of eco-awareness in the construction workers. What is startling to note here is that the women who sacrificed their life in order to save the trees were illiterate as well. Thus what comes across as a cogent point of discussion is whether the loss of eco-awareness is caused by monetary benefits or the fear of speaking against the tide. The silence is a voluntary act of expression further silenced by the fear of losing livelihood. This germinates ecophobia. This fear is not the fear of nature as such; it is a fear to voice nature. Joseph notes:



The nestling was rolling around near the basil plant in the yard. Bending down, she picked it up. Muddy water swirled round her legs. It was wet and shivering and had almost no feathers. She felt disgusted--- more disgusted, really, than sorry --- at the sight of the birds cicling the suppotta tree, their wings flapping. Disgust , but also contempt for herself because she felt that way. (Joseph 564)

The women labourers discussed in the following section of the paper find it queer to deliberate upon the perilous sojourn they have embarked upon. The argument thus remains open-ended. The second section of the paper would reflect upon the gendered tussle on the highly ambitious projects of the Govt. of India. As a research initiative to study the ‘development’ that the Central Government and the Govt. of Himachal is screaming for quite some time now, the project I have undertaken is the expansion of NH-22 from Parwanoo

to Shimla to four lanes. I must say the glorification of the roads and the promises seem far fetched. The reality is absurd. Proper planning and safety measures are like spam emails that we don't mind sliding under the carpet in this country. Environmental threat is an imminent cause of worry making the growth inequitable and calamitous.

The victimization and marginalization of women who look after this construction site are in a form of an artifice. These so-called 'unskilled' women labourers while living in harsh climatic conditions throughout the seasons, are expected to be adept like the 'Bhadra Mahila' in and out of the construction site. Padma in 'Mazha' is once made to remember her gendered obligations by her husband. He says:

“Such arrogance doesn't become a woman. Understand?” (Joseph 566)

In the name of safety, they are not even provided boots designed to walk on gravel. Quite often they complain of cuts and glass pieces piercing through their feet. On inquiring about the reason to stand up for this kind of nonsense, the typical reply Rani, a labourer and a mother of five, the fifth one being only a couple of months old was nerve-racking. She cited pay-parity to be an issue which might not seem strange to acknowledge that it exists because even Jennifer Lawrence the Academy Award Winner wrote an open letter about it. The real cause was far beyond one's imagination. Rani fears expulsion not only from the job but also from her patriarch husband. I, therefore, call Rani ecophobic.

Human ecology and queer sexuality might seem to be an incompatible match but Carolyn Merchant's Ecofeminism flourished out of feminist separatism intertwined with biological essentialism. However, nature is a process, not a product of the phallic authoritarianism. Just like 'femininity' is a process of being and not a product of certain attitudes and fashion. Queer ecology, therefore, mulls over the construction of an 'inside-outside' space by heterosexist indulgence appropriating nature as a closed system. Nature retorts in its primitive fashion. This narrative of defiance of heterosexual authoritarianism makes it comprehensible to find a parallel between nature and alternative sexualities.

All life forms protest against the boundaries in which they inhabit. The healthier defiance leads to equitable co-habitation of all the wilderness. In a society, that speaks of all inclusiveness and representation of all would not find the environment to be around them but rather obliterate the term environment and just acknowledge its existence in their existence. Else it would just be as Timothy Morton in *Queer Ecology* call it a “strange distortion” (Morton). “Strange distortion” is Shelley’s phrase in his poem “The Triumph of Life” for the emergence of Rousseau as if from a tree root (line 183).

I propose to repudiate essentialist construction of gender. Most plants and animals are hermaphrodites initially having capabilities to be intersexual before being bisexual and bisexual before being heterosexual. Nature celebrates hybridity and man essentializes nature pronouncing it as a closed system. What Sir Francis Bacon in his essay “The Masculine Birth of Time” envisages to achieve is exactly what is engrained in the psyche even today. Denying diverse nature of gender, he also, in fact, strengthened the argument of silencing the other in the name of scholarship.

On interviewing another woman named Babli, who hails from Sitamarhi district in Bihar explained to me the violation of their capacities at the workplace. She is reared like a mule day in and out at bare minimum wages which are insufficient to pay back her debts. She showed the cramped site barely three by two feet space on the construction area itself wherein she and twelve other women take bath. She is a woman defying all odds, bathing, and undressing in public supervision. And how it acts as a corollary to the rape and plunder of the so-called Mother Earth. The ripping-open of the genitals of the Mother Earth in the name of development makes it essential to carry out an Ecological and Ecofeminist reading of the dream projects of the Indian Government. To dissolve the gender/nature/culture binaries, it becomes even more relevant to render voice to the voiceless women trampling one of the highways such as NH-22. The hybrid outlandish outgrowths such as women protests against exploitation of nature, LGBT pride parades, Slut-Walks etc. are unfortunately all weeded out by the silencing mechanism of neolithic elites. One cannot overlook the proposition that Ecology and Queer Theory are intimate. It is rather barbaric to see man’s involvement in queering the ecology. We need to take into consideration that ecology is queer so long as queer is part of the ecology. Hence the better and advanced concept of approach would have to be Queer Ecology.

The women in question here are not just victims of the sum total of the relations of production. Vandana Shiva maintains that women and nature complement each other in the essay “Woman in Nature”. She also adds that reduction of nature to the status of a third-world woman and her incapacitation to the point that she becomes voiceless in spite of the fact she knows a thing or two about ecology is heart-breaking. The women labourers discussed in the paper have one thing in common i.e. their inability to recite. Nature is forced to take up the role of a test tube for women to carry out experiments on it. These are the women who voluntarily would never dare to carry out such over-ambitious and disastrous projects if their vocal chords were not cut out. It further opens another argument that with the death of the nature meaning complete obliteration of a woman if nature/woman binary is to be believed. That means with the onslaught of mechanization of nature, women do not stand a chance to speak as loss of nature would result in loss of history. Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” from *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (1988) states that:


“the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow...” (Spivak)

The ‘unskilled’ tag is one of the markers to snuff out the uprising in gender/ nature/culture consortium. Women thus are not merely supplementing nature biologically but also acting as a preserver or a storehouse to have access to its riches in times of need. This is where stems the idea of Shiva’s Navdanya.


Navdanya began in 1984 as a program of the Research Foundation for science, Technology and Ecology (RFSTE), a participatory research initiative founded by the scientist and environmentalist Dr. Vandana Shiva, to provide direction and support to environmental activism. "Navdanya" means "nine crops" that represent India's collective source of food security. Navdanya is a member of the Terra Madre slow food movement. Navdanya is a network of seed keepers and organic producers spread across 16 states in India. Navdanya has helped set up 54 community seed banks across the country, trained over 500,000 farmers in "food sovereignty" and sustainable agriculture over the past two decades, and helped set up the largest direct marketing, fair trade organic network in the country. Navdanya has also set up a learning center, Bija Vidyapeeth (School of the Seed) on its biodiversity

conservation and organic farm in Doon Valley, Uttranchal, north India. It has criticized genetic engineering. Navdanya claims to be a women-centered movement for the protection of biological and cultural diversity. (Navdanya)

Shiva is fighting against the labor of women and nature going invisible because androcentric corporations produce a culture that women are unskilled laborers and that nature is not productive enough and requires the constant interference of man. Women as migrant workers in the Himalayas could not report sexual abuse for the fear of losing job and husband's name. They have to deal with the voyeuristic passes hurled at them. And not just that what was already stated in the previous section of the paper was that women with no boots face occupational hazards. So there isn't basically anything they can do. They cannot speak. They cannot share. They are not allowed to feel. They are trodding in the eco-grief that is looming large on all of us in one form or the other. Padma in 'Mazha' feels that the products of nature (her children) are vulnerable at the hands of a patriarch. What most disappoints her is that she succumbs to the pressure and often carry forward the germ of androcentric vision of nature and gender. It is, therefore, Joseph points out:



“Their sleeping faces brought back memories of the nestling. She felt that she had twisted Suresh's neck and crushed Sudha's tender bones. Again, she rubbed her hands together in distress.” (Joseph 566)



The base of this endeavour is a hope; a hope to arouse passions in mankind to contain sabotaging of nature and women. Development needs to recover itself from the phallic taxonomy of 'maldevelopment'. Marginalizing feminine play in nature in order to destroy the women-nature dialectical bond ensures a colonizing 'other' exercising control over both of them. Woman's body in the third world is perceived as a site of contest, conquest, domination and destruction by not only the Occidental powers but also the Brown Sahibs. In the same way, FDI alone is not responsible for scavenging the fruits of our Mother Nature. Women and Nature reproduce and thus boost the economy, building relations of production across global markets. Ecofeminism harps upon bringing cataclysmic changes in the gender/nature/culture category. It fails with the interplay of hierarchical dualisms. The challenge to philosophy is to replace practices that currently feminize

nature and naturalize women and constructs a detrimental fate for both of them. Therefore an activist stance like that of Vandana Shiva is a pre-requisite in order to wipe out challenges that hamper the gender/nature/culture unison.

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