



ECOFEMINISM IN THE WORK OF ADITY KAY

A STUDY THROUGH THE READING OF EMPEROR CHANDRAGUPTA

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ABSTRACT

While we live in a world that is increasingly heading towards technological advances, but on the other hand, it is also leading towards unchecked ecological crisis. The kind of development agenda for most nations has been detrimental to the environment for the eternity. Further, the anthropocentric values and belief of humans have resulted in the double subjugation of both nature and women. Thus, today a new form of literature has emerged with a focus on the link between oppression of both gender and nature which came to be known as Ecofeminism. It has located reading into an activist framework.

While significant works on Ecofeminism have been dedicated in the Western literature, research in Indian English literature remains barren. Therefore, the main objective of this methodological study is to explore these beliefs that have shaped our knowledge systems and understand the drifting apart from our ancient Indian beliefs. The study also wishes to explore the relationship between how women and nature are disrespected in a similar way. Data will be generated from the in-depth analysis of "Emperor Chandragupta" by Adity Kay through the lens of Ecofeminism. The analysis will reveal that both women and nature have been subjugated by men. At the core of Adity Kay's writings is the reconciliation of man and nature against countless acts of suffering. The proposed findings suggest that even in the 21st century, we have not come far from the patriarchal thoughts of our ancestors. Furthermore, there should be certain corrective measures to save them both from any kind of tyranny.

INTRODUCTION

Man and nature are fathered by the same almighty. The history of the life on earth is the history of interaction between man and nature. But man has always kept himself above nature. He was wronged by the thought that everything around him is present for his purpose. The most alarming assaults of man's power is the contamination of our natural resources with lethal chemicals. In a similar fashion, man has also pushed women to the margins. He was seen as a representation of culture and was believed to have domination over them. Ecofeminists brought into forefront that both nature and women have been othered by Men. All eco-feminists rest on the fundamental notion that human culture is related to material world, it is impacting nature and is being impacted by it.

The phrase "l'eco-feminisme," which Francoise D'Eaubonne first used in 1984, emphasizes the need for women to bring about an ecological revolution. She also used the slogan "Feminism or death" to argue that the phallic order is the cause of two threats to humanity: overpopulation and the depletion of natural resources. All ecological criticism shares the fundamental belief that human culture is interconnected with the physical world; both influencing it and being influenced by it. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman.

Environmental well-being has been an important component of Oriental theology since pre- Vedic times. During the 1970s, the Indian government started to cut trees in the Himalayan region. Women came forward and embraced the trees and placed their bodies against the axes of the contractors due to which the government had to take a step back. This came to be known as The Chipko Movement and Vandana Shiva considered this the basis of the beginning of Ecofeminism in India. Apart from that, the Appiko movement in the Western Ghat regions of Karnataka and the Girnar movement in Gujarat and Goa have been successful.

CONCEPT OF WILDERNESS CHANGED OVER TIME

Since the novel is hypothetically based on the Kautilyan society; it gives a fair share of idea about the people of the age. The Kautilyan society used to be an ideal “janapada”- a land that can be easily defended. It had a lot of productive land with cultivable fields. Agriculture was the most important activity. It was capable of producing a wide variety of commodities. Therefore, it could support the native population as well as the immigrants who came in the times of trouble in their own countries. Those were the times when livelihood was more important than life. They would usually talk about environment that is present to serve humans often forgetting that we are a part of it- co-existing with them.

The organic processes of life and their correspondence to the ancient belief systems draws attention in the work of Adity Kay. The way the rawness of emotions and harshness the characters face is not far from the natural state of a human being. It depicts the relationship of people and the place they inhabit. Since the nature previously was supposedly present in abundance, the characters of the novel- especially belonging to the Nanda tribe would use them to their benefits.

The novel “*Emperor Chandragupta*” is the biographical overview of the rise of Moriya synonymously also known as Chandra and later Chandragupta Maurya. In the beginning of the novel, our protagonist faces a lot of humiliation in his life. He is unaware of his father’s whereabouts. His mother was wrongfully manhandled and Moriya, was too young to understand the situation around him. It was later in life, when he could grasp the entire situation, Chandra came to know that his father was either in the dungeons of Nandas or was already heavenly abode. The reason behind his abduction was him merely trying to save peacocks.

THE PLOT OF THE NOVEL

It has been a century long practice of uprooting native indigenous people from their ancestral lands resulting in annihilation of cultures of the world. Previously, patriarchal society believed in the general logic of human domination of nature. Colonial nature writers in USA represented land as female, which was ready to be acquired. The narrative also highlights the journey of the Nandas, current rulers of Magadha were intended on destroying forests. Their sole aim was to collect more elephants for their mighty army and use it for their benefits. They wanted to destroy the tribes that lived in it in order to acquire more land signifying their power.

Against a historical and pastoral setting, the story of the rise of Chandragupta as an emperor is being narrated. In the opening of the book, Moriya was acting as a king while playing with his friends. Even as a child, he would not harm any member of nature. It shows how he deserves to become a king; unlike the present rulers of Magadha.

He belonged to the tribe of peacock- tamers, Moriyas of the Pippalivahana, and was oblivious to the legacy that was rightfully his. Here his father was the chief. He believed that their tribe was meant to protect birds and prevent any harm that was befalling on them. Birds, according to him, were meant to roam free- in the wild. They should never be trapped or hunted down. The author deftly conveys how capitalist and patriarchal rule are ubiquitous. The author focuses on the welfare of the people and animal welfare simultaneously as her character says- “All creatures- animals and birds and all of us too- are meant to live in harmony.”

METAPHOR OF GREEN PEACOCK

Moriya lived in perfect harmony with their ecological environment. In the light of the sun shimmering through the canopy of trees, Moriya finds a green peacock, which remains a symbol in the entire novel. It wasn’t easy

to track the bird and only the chosen can find it. In Moriya's case, his father had taught him to listen to the sounds of forest. After his father's death, green peacock remained a symbol of hope in his entire life. The beauty of the peacock assures him with a mysterious strength. The peacock and the other birds were the special upkeep of the Moriyas. They believed that they were the keeper of the birds and forest. Peacock's feathers were used as quills. Their eggs are ingredients for potions that cure the most resilient diseases. Their beauty and grace gave happiness. The tribes tame them in order to add up to the king's glory. They provided a livelihood to the tribe.

However, Dhana Nanda and the entire Nanda clan had been villainous in treating this beautiful creature. The entire Moriya tribe had been afraid of the king's ruthlessness. The calls of forest creatures were the only sounds punctuating the heavy silence that lingered around the father and son. When the Moriya tribe had made its decision to leave the forest that had provided their livelihood for generations, Moriya's father had wandered away. It was later when Chandragupta was on the run that he came to know about the entire sequence of his father's kidnapping. Dhana Nanda had once placed the most difficult compromise before the chief of peacock tamers. The meat of the wild peafowl is the most delicious food on earth. He could have had his men back only if he would have supplied them with the peacock meat. This was when his father had decided to surrender. Otherwise, the Nandas' greed would have never been assuaged and their tribe would be forever enslaved to them. As Chandra says- "Animals kill because they need to, but we do so because of the evil in us..."

INTERCONNECTEDNESS BETWEEN MEN AND NATURE

Kay compared human world with the natural world. Her vision in this novel is ecocentric and not anthropocentric. Moriya could read the elephant tracks just as his father had showed him. He would pause to listen to the sounds of forest, sniff the air, and break small dried branches to make their way back easier. The inhabitants of the tribe never feel a sense of anxiety because of the greenery. He would take up moments to watch the beautiful green peacock. On the other hand, when he was in danger, peacock would call him from the forest. He also knew that the peacock didn't lead him in vain. This is when an unnamed old man advised him to return home when he was roaming around since his life was in threat. Hence, he had to leave before everything around him crumbled down.

In this journey to Pataliputra, Moriya is joined by the mighty Chandragupta. While Vishnugupta was a master strategist and manipulator but he remained in the hands of destiny. He is paying the price of his overweening confidence. Dhana Nanda, the new king disrespected Vishnugupta as he felt his father, Bimbisara was deceived by men like Chanakya. He could not handle the insult by Dhana Nanda and was thrown out of Pataliputra's gates. In a blinding moment of clarity, Chanakya found objectivity in life. It was Moriya of the tribe of peacock tamers that would write Magadha's history anew. Chanakya will lead him to success.

VALUES EXPRESSED THAT ARE CONSISTENT WITH ECOLOGICAL SYSTEM

What differentiated Moriya from all the other rulers of the state was him being in tune with nature and would always treat both nature and women with respect. For this particular reason, he was loved as the emperor of his people. When Moriya was leading a nomadic life with Chanakya, he made use of the learnings that he had received from ajivikas. His toes caught a sharp thorn resulting in a wound. Immediately, he reached for the basil plant which was once worshipped. After massaging it in his wound, the coolness soothed him.

In another stance, a sage had been meditating for a while when Moriya's gaze was stagnant at him. He could observe how the animals of the forest enjoyed sage's calm and serene presence. Snakes slithered by the man even as Moriya watched; birds danced on his shoulder and pecked his ears.

While absconding with Chanakya, in Viratnagara, Chandra was asked to join the army where he would be taking care of horses. Lions had come to Magadha as entertainments. They were concealed in their cages covered with cloth. Mahapadma would not have allowed them otherwise and therefore, a special enclosure had been built for them. Lions were special to the goddess the Nanda worshipped. Mahapadma would fight them and the scratches he sustained would be washed with their blood. However, Chandra felt that those animals were never meant to be in the cage.

One fine day, Chandra spotted a lion. It was old and alone, a creature left to himself. “The lion had staked his claim to this territory... The creature lifted his head and opened his mouth.” He suddenly felt defenceless and tightened his grip on his sword. However, Chandra then saw the smear of red, a patch spread in irregular circle. The lion was wounded. It was against his ethics to leave someone wounded. He felt that it would have been cowardly to leave lion to its death. He clamped its wound with his hands and felt the lion’s warm blood flow over his hand. Looking into the creature’s eyes, he felt a deep kinship with it.

At this point of time Alexander was trying to conquest entire Bharatavarsha. He asked him to brief him about his encounter with the lion. After listening to his story he replied- “That is how a conquest should be. That you win over a creature, anything, even land, not by force... but something else.” After listening to his story, Alexander even after being the most powerful conqueror of the world, having the most powerful army was not interested to move forward in conquering Magadha. The death of his confidant had already escalated his ill-health and after a few days he succumbed to his sickness.

Chandragupta with Chanakya was on a hunt to acquire power by acquiring more states. Malayketu wanted Chandra to prove his worth. He then led him to the courtyard to let him fight with a mad mahout, an elephant. On his third attempt, he jumped into the enclosure where the elephant stood. At this moment, both the elephant and Chandra were at par with each other. Chandra finally won the battle. This moment epitomized his courage and bravery. With his win, he won the trust of the sastropajivi-srenis which included the resourceful Bharata. Upon his guru’s advice he made allies of the small enemies of Magadha.

While the forests of Pataliputra had elephants that the empire needs. Elephant paths and tracks were chalked out by elephant-herders who will provide for the empire. Everyone who has anything to do with the forests will lead lives decided by the state and the king who rules it. “All animals smelled almost the same, he realized. They smelled of the earth and of death an life.”

In order to prove his might to the people of Pataliputra and succeed the throne, which had been the suo-motto of both Chanakya and Chandragupta; Chanakya devised a plan to force feed the forest creatures with poison. The poison would simmer inside the birds as they were cooked and the unwary soldiers of the Magadhan army who ate them would meet the terrible death. The rumour would then spread like fire that they are incompetent to work for the people of Pataliputra.

Chanakya had been utilitarian in his ends that he had forgotten the means to reach to that level. We do not hurt the forest’s creatures by force-feeding them poison;” replied Chandra to his devilish plans. But they wanted to restore Magadha to its most glorious state, restore it to its rightful claimant and remove that debauched weakling who rules there now. There can be no going back and he convinced Chandra of the plans. With the death of their people, the defeated soldiers bowed and hailed to their new king. Dhana Nanda escaped from his city.

With this Chandragupta rose to the throne. He had also conditioned his father in law to treat the tribes of the bird-tamers and falconers well and fairly because they are the subjects of this land too.

WOMEN PORTRAYED IN THE NOVEL

Nature and those closely associated with nature, such as women, have been othered by the dominant. It has become a passive recipient of capitalistic exploitation for centuries. For centuries, they have been subjugated. In the novel, during the rule of the Nandas women who belonged to the free tribes were made slaves for life. They were passed from one Nanda prince to another. Prince’s lust never satiated. As Moriya described- “He heard the wind blow, the breathing of a thousand and more creatures in the forest, the sound of a leaf drifting down. He knew that if he listened carefully, he would hear a woman crying. That was the sound of injustice.”

Kay’s women characters share fatalism. They are helpless to resist providence. All are equally subjected to a tragic destiny that operates inside power structure and all of them have influenced Moriya in some way or the other. Moriya’s mother, Mura, had a voice in her family decisions. When the entire tribe blamed his father for absconding, Moriya wanted to confront the member of his tribe. But his mother’s warning glances were enough

for him to be warned. She taught him that there is a time for everything and this was no time for rage. Later they were warned by a messenger sent by Chanakya that Moriya's father was taken away to the dungeons of Nandas. His mother had been an extremely nurturing woman and when she got to know about the threat her son possessed; she asked him to join Chanakya in order to perish in life. The only education that she gave his son was to run back to nature when he feels unsafe.

Chanakya was of the belief that women are a distraction to men who are rising to power. On a fine day, Moriya was searching for a blackbuck to be hunted. He wanted to prove himself and killing a blackbuck was a symbol of true warrior. It was difficult to catch since they were swift moving animals. But he remained successful in his hunt. However, protectors of blackbuck came running towards him- riding out from the desert were six stern-faced men brandishing spears, their turbans glinting silver and gold. They were men of the deserts and protectors of blackbucks. Pointing their sharp spears at him they accused him of killing a sacred animal. He had probably committed a sin by hunting them. While being under arrest by the tribe, he meets the daughter of the chief. For the first time ever Moriya felt the need to be with a woman. It made him feel vulnerable yet exhilarated. However, he was warned against being in a relationship with anyone by Chanakya because he wanted Moriya to focus in his goals. Somehow, women were always considered as a distraction for men and were advised to stay away from them.

On another instance, one of the spies had previously informed him about the princess of Dhana Nanda who was rumoured to be the loveliest of all but very arrogant and had not yet found her match. After Dhana Nanda's escape, she asked Chandra if he was in search of his father. She was trying to save their lives, yet not giving up her regal pride even for a moment. The royal women of Pataliputra never flinched from or concealed their desires. They were used to being obeyed. Dhana Nanda tried to kill her with his sword and that was when Chandra pulled her back. He opted to rescue her. Unlike Chanakya who considered her a poison and tried to stop Chandra to help her, Chandra replied- "A soldier does not kill women, especially unarmed, defenceless women." She was called Durdhara.

Chandragupta knew enmity would soon grow between the two people he was closest to- one, his teacher whom he had known since his youth, and the other, an elusive, haunting woman whose secrets he would never know. He fell in love with her and made her the queen of Pataliputra. Durdhara became the new queen of Magadha. Their alliance had been extremely political which ensured that no more violence will take place inside Magadha. Durdhara, on the other hand, resented Chanakya's presence.

As a woman of 21st century, Aditya Kay has provided her female characters with a voice. Durdhara was a woman of her own volition. She was never a victim of her husband's decision making. One day she was lost while her usual visits to the monastery. Malayketu, a villain, had planted a revenge on her to avenge the king. She had been abducted on her way back to the monastery, where the road was deserted. While Chanakya wanted the king to be at a distance from the queen, however Moriya was against his beliefs. She demanded respect and Moriya promised her the same.

Chanakya was regularly poisoning Chandragupta in order to make him immune to death by his enemies. However, unaware of his strategies Queen Durdhara tasted a bit from the king's plate and was immediately hospitalised. This happened when she was expecting her first child. He was angry at the way Chanakya's master plan came up front. "At least she died a queen. Destiny could have willed it differently."- is what Chanakya replied to save his image.

After Durdhara's death, Moriya re-marries again with a political motif. He meets with Helen. Helen was Seleucus's daughter. She was described as a sprightly young maiden, who often disregarded her mother's advice. She accompanied her father on long campaigns. She loved riding out into the cold deserts and also loved mountain air. It was clear that she loved her freedom.

Chandragupta saw her chained to the bed; as if Seleucus feared she would run away any moment. In order for Chandra and Seleucus to run the empire peacefully, the later asked Chandra if he could accept his daughter as his wife. This would cement their agreement. It was also his indifference to his wife that brought him a second one only as a prize to acquire more power. This is how the declaration of peace would be perfectly synchronized.

“I am no one’s property, declared Helen.”

Helen was aware of the rules and regulations of being a queen and chose to not follow it. Queen had to set an example for the rest of her kingdom. This is what was expected of her. However, she questioned everything that went against her independence. Along with destiny, duty is an intrinsic part of a man or woman’s life. But she questioned the entire system and traditions who had carved rules, regulations, and expectations for women only. “Why only the queen? Why is it the lot of women to suffer for us?”

The proud Arab stallion she was seated on trotted forward, in spite of her best efforts to turn him around, and nuzzled against one of the other horses. Chandra looked at the bruises she had left on his arms and hands which was a result of her father chaining her with thick anklets and tie her braid to the bedpost, lest she slip away. Her father tried to tame her spirit. She wanted freedom from her father, and he understood why she ran away often. It was simply to escape bondage.

One fine day when Chandragupta was marching to conquer new lands, it came into his recognition that his queen went missing. His messenger informed him that she is with Megasthenes. The king grew angry and ordered to escort the queen to her chambers. She was ordered to not be allowed to step out until he returns. His behaviour was similar to Seleucus’s chaining his daughter. “A woman wasn’t a piece of land to be conquered,” Chandra thought to himself.

AGING AS A PART OF NATURE

We learn from nature how ‘everything grows old and everything is renewed. During the end of the novel, Chandragupta had reached the final stage of his life and wanted to give a few lessons to his son. He was aware of the transient nature of life itself. He believed every king rules in a different way and wished that his son would have time to look at birds, trees and wild animals. Further his reign would be a peaceful one with no worry about wars. As he says- “Life is ephemeral, and true happiness is realizing you are a part of whole, never separate... A little creature lived by the simple attachments it had formed; did it behove a human being to do the same?”

He had left Helen on her own placing no restrictions upon her. Unlike her father who had chained her to the bed, Emperor Chandragupta made sure to treat her with respect. He made sure that she doesn’t feel caged as a wife or a queen. He prayed that the women of his state would find their liberation and peace.

The novel began with the metaphor of a peacock. It symbolized luck and prosperity. By the end of the novel, Chandragupta retired from his rule and passed on his throne to his son. He would then spend rest of his life in nature and it became the sole source of his happiness. He ‘had learnt enough about the forest to sleep in peace as snakes brushed passed him, as elephant herds thundered past and leopards slithered down the mountain slopes. Once animals had been in his mercy and he had understood them- now he found himself among them, hoping they would understand what his presence among them meant. He was mostly left alone and in that quiet solitude, he had learnt once again of the wisdom of animals. The novel again ended with the presence of a peacock. “He felt that he can walk the darkest of valleys, pass flower-filled gardens, ford the deepest rivers, and the peacock would always be somewhere ahead... but somehow always near enough.”

DO MEN WRITE ABOUT NATURE DIFFERENTLY THAN WOMEN DO?

The story of Chandragupta Maurya has been the centre of a lot of historical fiction. While the male writers have always focused on the trifling matters of the history; Aditya Kay has laid her focus on the emotions that her characters go through. Her characters battled not only with the supreme odds around them, but they also fought a battle within. Having a first hand experience as a woman, Kay has placed nature as the focus of her writings.

CONCLUSION

Nature makes the world a beautiful place to live in. Great men have taught us that true power lies in the understanding that life and death assure continuity of the universe itself. In the wake of global warming, there is a need to rebuild human society that is in balance with the nature. As Anne Cameron says in her essay, 'First Mother and the Rainbow Children', "We all have a right to live on this Earth. We have a right to be free and to live in balance with nature, a part of nature, not apart from nature. We have the right not to be separated from our Mother, and we have the duty and obligation not to have our Mother destroyed by patristic stupidity.'

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