

Women and Environment: Postcolonial Ecofeminism, Activism and Women Writing Indian Fiction in English

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Abstract. This paper seeks to outline postcolonial ecofeminism in India in terms of both activism and fiction that explicitly foreground women. I also argue 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. This is particularly highlighted by women writing Indian fiction in English. An explication of the nature/culture dualism will be given to contextualize this study and to explain how the dualism affects upon notions of a gendered (ecological) citizenship.

Keywords: Indian fiction, Activism, Ecofeminism, Postcolonial, Ambivalence, Dualism, Citizenship

1 Introduction

This paper seeks to outline the lineage of postcolonial ecofeminism in India in terms of both activism and fiction that explicitly foreground women. I argue for a case to be built for women writers, and why they are important for the field of literature and environment in an age of accelerated and globalized technological development. While outlining ecofeminism as a field and the forms it has taken in India in both activism and writing, I also argue 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. This is particularly highlighted by women writing Indian fiction in English. A brief explication of the nature/culture dualism will be given to contextualize this study and to explain how the dualism affects upon notions of a gendered (ecological) citizenship.

Postcolonial ecofeminism is a concept which has been in circulation for some time but is still at a nascent stage. The related fields of postcolonial ecocriticism and ecofeminism have been dominated by a typically Euro-American point of view till date, and both fields do not address the issue of postcolonial ecofeminism adequately, where both fields need to recognize "the "double-bind" of being female and being colonized" [1]. A postcolonial ecofeminist perspective would involve the coming together of postcolonial ecocriticism and ecofeminism into one analytical focus, where it would be necessary to recognize that the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women are intimately bound up with notions of class, caste, race, colonialism and neo-colonialism.

Postcolonial ecocriticism focuses on the intersection of postcolonial and environmental issues. Many critics, particularly from the strain of deep ecology, have asserted that postcolonialism is inherently anthropocentric and ecological concerns are secondary to other discourses that have historically contributed to racial discrimination. Ecocriticism, on the other hand, has been criticized for ignoring such a history of colonialism thereby giving rise to 'universal' environmental and bioethical concerns. In discourses of purity concerning environment literature and criticism, women as the colonized, for example, have been "repeatedly naturalized as objects of heritage to be owned, preserved, or patronized rather than as subjects of their own land and legacies" [2]. It is important then to bring together postcolonial and environmental issues so that continuing imperialist modes and colonialist attitudes of social and environmental dominance can be challenged [3]. If we were to look at some of the postcolonial countries such as those in Africa and South Asia, particularly India, we realize that these nations have a history of environmental activism and movements even before ecocriticism emerged as an academic discipline in the Western world. This is indicative of the fact that environmental consciousness in the postcolonial world in terms of activism precedes the formation of ecocriticism as a discipline.

1.1 Women-led environmental activism and writing in India

In India, the Chipko movement has gained iconic status and is now cited as a highly successful example of grassroots environmentalism in India. This movement is also key for the way in which it mobilised

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women. This movement brought about the concept of tree-hugging to stop activities such as deforestation, lumbering and mining. The movement originated in the Garhwal region of Uttaranchal in Uttar Pradesh, India. The state's increasing commercialisation and underdevelopment of the Garhwal region was instrumental in the conceptualisation of this movement, where local women were affected by state-level decisions such as granting private contractors harvest rights for the trees to manufacture cricket bats. Due to excessive deforestation, the year 1970 saw its most devastating flood and equally destructive landslides.

In more recent times, other women who have led environmental causes and movements are MedhaPatkar, Mahasweta Devi, Arundhati Roy and C.K Janu. MedhaPatkar heads the Narmada BachaoAndolan, a social movement consisting of tribal people, adivasis, farmers, environmentalists and human rights activists against the SardarSarovar Dam being built across the Narmada river in Gujarat, India. Mahasweta Devi, both an activist as well as a well-known feminist writer, has dedicated much of her activism and literature to the cause of betterment of tribal people and their environment in India. Arundhati Roy, best known as the Booker Prize winner of *The God of Small Things*, wields her passionate pen for causes ranging from the Narmada BachaoAndolan, to nuclear testing in India, and to the support of the separatists' demand for aazadi(freedom) in Kashmir. The latest woman to come under spotlight for fighting for an environmental cause is C.K Janu, as recent as the year 2003 onwards, an adivasi woman occupying the Muthanga forests in North Kerala. This was to protest the breached agreement between the adivasis and the state government to provide 500 acres of land to each adivasi family. The figure of C.K Janu as an adivasi woman leading the cause has given the movement a dimension of subaltern identity politics in addition to social justice and ecological balance.

In light of such developments in India, it is then surprising that most of the ecocritical writings and activism from this country are not included in the environmental literary canon. Activists and women writing postcolonial Indian fiction in English have generally not been accorded much attention in the ecocritical field. A case then needs to be built for why women writers are crucial to this project.

Many Indian women novelists not only explore female subjectivity in order to establish an identity that is not imposed by a patriarchal society, but their work also retains currency for making social issues a key part in their novels. Indian women's writing, especially from the twentieth century onwards, is starting to be viewed as a powerful medium of modernism and feminism. Indian women authors writing in English such as Kiran Desai and Arundhati Roy have earned international renown by winning prestigious awards such as the Booker Prize, and their presence in the English-speaking literary world cannot be ignored or sidelined. Indian women authors in the present milieu have begun to voice their concerns on globalization in India, and its impact on gender and family relations as well as the environment understood in its broadest sense.

1.2 Cultural ecofeminism

Ecofeminism argues that there are important connections between the domination and oppression of women and domination and exploitation of nature by masculinist methods and attitudes. The term ecofeminism was coined by Francoise d'Eaubonne in 1974 in the book *Feminism or Death*. The strand of ecofeminism predominant till today is cultural ecofeminism. Developed in the 1970s, "cultural [eco]feminism reclaims women-nature connections as liberating and empowering expressions of women's capabilities to care for nature" [4]. The women-nature connections that hold particular importance for cultural feminists are "embedded in deep social and psychological structures...resurrection of pre-patriarchal religions and spiritual practices ...[thus] making women's ways of knowing and moral reasoning better suited to solving environmental problems" [4].

Criticisms of cultural ecofeminism are based on the notion that this particular framework reinforces sex-role stereotyping. As such, it is seen as making "essentialist, universalist and ahistorical" [4] claims about women and nature. Therefore, although cultural ecofeminism's strength lies in that it is seen to be a deeply woman-identified movement that celebrates distinctive characteristics about women, it does not take into account that "men can also develop an ethic of caring for nature" [5]. Furthermore, cultural ecofeminism discounts the fact that women's lives and identities are "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" [4]. Women as a category are homogenized and their distinctive characteristics are romanticized.

Indian physicist and environmental activist Vandana Shiva's work comes closest to cultural ecofeminism in the Indian context. Shiva asserts that "[w]hile gender subordination and patriarchy are the oldest of oppressions, they have taken on new and more violent forms through the project of development" [6]. She argues for the recovery of the feminine principle—Prakriti—to counter the destructive effects of the Western model of development, which she calls maldevelopment. She defines Prakritias "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 [6]. Shiva characterises maldevelopment as "a paradigm that sees all

work that does not produce profits and capital as non- or unproductive work” [7]. Shiva convincingly argues and shows that the Western model of development, or maldevelopment, has been violent for many people, especially women and local environments [8], as the violence that arises from such a model “is rooted in the patriarchal assumptions of homogeneity, domination and centralisation that underlie dominant models of thought and development strategies” [9].

Shiva’s claims, although useful in critiquing certain paradigms of development and globalisation which question Western biases in values and models of progress, however, do indeed come across as reductive and anti-developmental in several instances. For example, she says that “[t]he visibility of dramatic breaks and rupture is posited as progress. Marginalised women are either dispensed with or colonised” [9]. While recognising that capitalism, progress and development have problems, it is not productive to use the development paradigm as a scapegoat for all of society’s ills or to dismiss it completely as Shiva does. Women are, in fact, much more ambivalently placed in relation to colonialism, development, nature and culture than Shiva allows.

Furthermore, Shiva’s positioning of women in India with regards to questions of ecology and development also comes across as problematical, with a tendency to homogenise and essentialise the women. In explaining the feminine principle, she says that “[w]omen in India are an intimate part of nature, both in imagination and in practice” [9] and that by virtue of this fact, they have a privileged access to the feminine and sustaining principle. To further cement her point, she claims that “Third World women, whose minds have not yet been dispossessed or colonised, are in a privileged position to make visible the invisible oppositional categories that they are the custodians of” [9]. Such claims are problematic on multiple levels. Firstly, Shiva romanticizes the Third World Indian women in question here, completely obscuring the rural-urban divide between them as well as the conditions of poverty the rural women live in. Such celebratory romanticization has the effect of invisibilising the wretchedness of the conditions of their lifestyles and the “work that gives Third World women their supposedly superior cooperative and ecological sensibilities” [10]. Furthermore, Shiva’s overarching argument of the feminine principle Prakriti is steeped in Hindu Brahminical philosophy, thus putting forth a didactic one-dimensional religious framework opposing the mechanistic scientific viewpoint of the West. Shiva’s rigid argument also does not accommodate the effects of the developmental paradigm and environmental degradation on different groups of men in different ways, different religions, and caste discrimination.

Such essentialism and stereotypes of women and nature gives rise and credence to the nature/culture dualism. In dominant modes of patriarchal thought, women are linked closer to nature and men are identified as being closer to culture. Nature and women then are both seen as inferior to culture and men. The impact of such dualistic thinking, where hierarchies are set up between dominance and submission, is that “the inferiorised group... must internalise this inferiorisation in its identity and collude in this low valuation, honouring the values of the centre, which form the dominant social values” [11]. Therefore, the categories of culture, men, coloniser claim for themselves reason, rationality and universal humanity, and nature, female, and colonised inherit for themselves primitivism, emotionality and animality.

Such dualisms are also linked to the Western philosophy of ontology and epistemology, where women are said to be ontological beings, “implicitly relegated to the realm of “being” ” [12] because they are associated with intuitively and organically knowing the ways of nature and thus are considered the best candidates for earth care. This relegates the realm of epistemology to men who make and create knowledge and history. The production and creation of such knowledge and history, and their further divisions into niche subsets and areas, is “a tool of ideology” [13] that invisibilises creation of knowledge by women. It is therefore imperative that a materialist critique is undertaken along with postcolonial ecofeminism for “a social movement, the feminist movement, and for knowledge” [13, original emphasis], because what is at stake here are intertwining webs of politics, economics and systems of knowledge and value.

According to Michael Zimmerman, it is “not only men but also women [who] have been distorted by the effects of patriarchies” [8]. To expand this point further, Murray Bookchin also notes that both women and men alike “have been implicated in the epistemologies of rule and hierarchical constructions of social reality” [8]. What this means is that all of us—from children to adults—are constantly socialized in and through dualistic and hierarchical structures of thought and social practice. This, in turn, implies that not only do we need to accommodate dualism and essentialism in our lived reality and in theory, but also throw up the space in-between, that of ambivalence and ambiguity, for discussion and contestation. The notion of ambivalence needs to be further explored through the filter of works of the Indian female writers, and apart from the physical landscapes and spaces, this particular spatiality of ambivalence emerges for urgent consideration.

At this point, I would like to revisit my argument that I had posited earlier on. I am arguing that women in the fiction written by Indian women writers have an ambivalent attitude towards nature. Their self-alienation and existential crises 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. Therefore, even as women defend nature, part of them prefers the safer, tamer side of things. Hence, women, nature, development and globalization are not straight-forward and linear categories that either complement or contradict each other in totality. Globalization is then best seen as a contradictory development (a term that eminent materialist feminist critic Meera Nanda uses as well) where it integrates women into the myriad spheres of global capitalism, and simultaneously loosens the grip of traditional patriarchy on the women. Therefore, a total rejection of globalization or modernity as called for by some ecofeminists is not a very compatible framework because globalization is not necessarily a bad thing. The concepts of development and globalization, nature and women, need to be thoroughly examined and deconstructed through teasing out tensions between notions of ambivalence, spatiality (rural to urban spaces, private and public spaces, etc) and the spiritual and material aspects of ecofeminism.

1.3 Ambivalent relationships of women and environment in Indian fiction by women

We now come to women writing Indian fiction in English and the environment. This section will try to answer why it is important to look at postcolonial ecofeminism in the writings of Indian women authors, and what it is that these writers have to offer to the ideology, theory and the lived material reality of women in and of the environment.

The novels considered range from early ecofeminism to urban ecofeminism: *Nectar in a sieve* (1954) by Kamala Markandya, *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) by Anita Desai, *A River Sutra* (1993) by Gita Mehta, *The God of Small Things* (1997) by Arundhati Roy, *The Madwoman of Jogare* (1998) by Sohaila Abdulali, *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* (2008) by Anuradha Roy and *Monkey-Man* (2010) by Usha K.R.

With the exception of Arundhati Roy, no other Indian female writer has been mentioned in the field of postcolonial ecocriticism or ecofeminism. Critics taking up an ecocritical reading of Roy's novel have often left out the gendered aspects altogether. Starting with Roy then, the deterioration of the fictional village of Ayemenem emphasizes and reflects the moral corruption of the characters, especially of the Ipe family, in the larger narrative. 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. If Ammu remains ever hopeful for a better tomorrow, tomorrow also being the word on which the novel ends, Baby Kochamma, on the other hand, becomes the strictest enforcer of love laws and social norms. Maimed by the love and loss of the priest, Baby Kochamma reacts in the most negative manner to the inter-caste love affair. Significantly, she states her profession as an ornamental gardener, and her garden is in shambles once she takes to living her life vicariously through television. It is against this backdrop that the sibling incest takes place, a haunting image of the grotesque that Roy employs throughout the novel.

Even before the phenomenal success of Roy's novel, earlier feminist writers such as Kamala Markandya and Anita Desai have also written about women and the environment. These writers, while writing about specific and private lives about women, nonetheless make deeply political statements about social issues and Indian society at large. The focus on the specific and the private is one reason why women writers from this category are often overlooked and not taken seriously. Markandya's *Nectar in a Sieve* and Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* both portray the darker shades of nature and the simultaneous conjunction of the darker aspects of the women concerned. Rukmini and her family nearly starve to death when nature is unpredictable and there is a drought in Markandya's novel. While Rukmini 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 fields that are 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.

More contemporary novels such as Abdulali's *The Madwoman of Jogare*, Mehta's *A River Sutra*, Anuradha Roy's *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* and Usha K.R.'s *Monkey-Man* deal with the relationships that women have with urbanization, development and the city. The opportunities that the city presents to the women has echoes of the rhetoric of globalization—equal opportunities for all. Such relationships do not sit comfortably with the dualism of nature/culture. The shift from rural to urban spaces shows that postcolonial ecofeminism is not a static theory, isolated to wilderness or countryside landscapes alone. These novels also incorporate the dimensions of urban paranoia and madness, a manifestation of coping with the tensions of globalization and development, highlighting that the urban environment can be a space for both creation and destruction.

Indian women's fiction on the linkages between women and the environment then adds on to the corpus of theory of development and ecofeminism. In a particular reference to the strain of cultural ecofeminism and Vandana Shiva, the works of these women writers subvert the notion that women and the environment are simplistic and monolithic categories. These writings posit the women and the environment in both positive and negative ways. The unquestioning acceptance of the woman-nature link, especially in the Indian context,

or in the Third World per se, 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.

The disruption and transformation of the static dualism of nature/culture into a more dynamic and dialectical relationship between the two sides of the binary is pivotal to gender inclusiveness in terms of women’s material position as (ecological) citizens and valuing women’s (care) work which “naturally” links women to caring for the earth. Concepts such as women’s (ecological) citizenship and women’s labour emerge as ways to bypass stereotypes of nature/culture and in themselves break down the dualism. The nature/culture dualism, one amongst many such operational dualisms in theory as well as lived reality, does not recognize the female citizen as an occupant of multiple identities and a pluralistic notion of a gendered ecological citizenship. Urban spaces and the city involve myriad implications for women as urban inhabitants of the environment and their right to both that environment and the city.

In conclusion, I have shown that it is necessary to disrupt the nature/culture dualism that aligns women to nature unquestionably. Disrupting the dualism posits the women in an ambivalent relationship with nature, while straddling the grey area between the two binaries. Much of the ecofeminist theory and women-led activism does not allow such an ambivalence to emerge. Women writing Indian fiction in English highlight this ambivalent relationship that women have with the environment, thus providing an important counterpoint to both theory and activism. This study is an intervention into a field in which women’s writing has not been taken seriously, and Indian women’s fiction resists and intervenes in dominant models of discourse and lived experience.

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