

## **Title : Ecofeminist Readings of Select Novels by Markandaya, Desai and Roy**

**Abstract:** The two most important issues that the world faces today are: violation of human rights (in terms of gender, race, class and caste) and environmental degradation. A new critical understanding is needed to connect the dots, to form a theory that can answer diverse issues and create a world of equality for all. Ecofeminism can be the answer to having a theory that can address diverse issues and give us a solution. Primarily it talks about the relationship between women and nature and also it is a reaction against the traditional approach of that bond. Traditionally both are seen as caring and nurturing entities, sacrificing entities. There runs the risk of essentialism. Ecofeminism is a reaction to that. It establishes that the bond between women and nature is complex and multi layered. It questions human understanding of progress and development. It recognises that forms of domination are interconnected and the forces of domination are fundamentally similar. Ecofeminism believes that Liberation of one is incomplete without the liberation of the other. The texts by Indian women authors namely, Kamala Markandya, Anita Desai, Anuradha Roy reflect an eco-consciousness. They present women in nature and how they form a close knot bond. I explore the characteristics that categorise these works as ecofeminist.

This has been the primary aim of this research to find out ecofeminist aspects present in the select works by the above mentioned women authors and also to see how their works contribute in finding out gaps in mainstream theory. They also propose some solutions to the gaps.

I start (**Chapter 1**) with an explanation of the term “Ecofeminism” and its primary aims. I have also given a brief description of India’s environmental movements where women have taken up pivotal roles. I enquired into the source of the idea of “Man over Nature”. I have talked about the Bible, the renaissance, the enlightenment period and showed how these movements in history created the concept of man being superior to nature and all other marginal entities. This has been the origin of the Western knowledge system that views other knowledge systems as unscientific and thereby unreliable.

I have then talked about those theorists namely, Adorno Horkheimer, Marx, Engles, Mercuse who showed How systems of traditional knowledge create dichotomies. How the dominant power structure create the divide between man and nature? Ecofeminist critics namely Carolyn Merchant, Bina Agarwal, Maria Mies, Vandana Shiva, William Leiss have also criticised the western concept of “man over nature”. It is for them the capitalist patriarchy that has to be blamed for the exploitation of nature and the others.

They believe:

- 1. Women liberation is not possible within the context of the existing systems (Capitalist Patriarchy): King, Merchant
- 2. The male patriarchal capitalist attitude that views both nature and woman as the inferior other is the reason for their oppression and exploitation : Mies and Shiva
- 3. They talk about a “Feminine Principle” within Nature. By accepting the elements of divinity in nature ecofeminists aim to do one thing: saving nature: Francoise d' Eaubonne, Hazel Handerson, Starhawk, Shiva.
- 4. Women are more susceptible to the negative effects of environmental catastrophes than males are. In order to fulfil their roles in the household, women often engage in activities that bring them into intimate contact with nature: Bina Ararwal
- 5. Women and the natural world have a link, and the fight for ecological justice and feminist movements have a similar platform. For Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies ecological issues are gender issues.

In their works women authors have exhibited a unique eco-consciousness. They have explored the relationship between women and nature in diverse backgrounds, they have critiqued the western idea of modernity and proposed alternate ideas of modernity that is not essentially exploitative.

Next I have explored how women characters in the texts relate to nature (**Chapter 2**). Women relate to nature on spiritual level and also in the level of materiality. In Markandaya the women share a spiritual bond with nature. Their access to the land is essential as well for the well being of the children. On the other hand their access to the land gives them financial security as they can sell the garden produces in the market. Thereby the small economic structures are also maintained. In Roy there is a similar spiritual bond that has been shown through the characters like Maya, Charu and her cow, of Puran and the abandoned fawn. In Desai the bond is explored in a private setting. Here the protagonist belongs to the upper class and seeks refuge in nature. Nature for the women is their only solace, an escape from the clutches of patriarchy. There are women who also relate to nature on a personal level. They are aware of the damages caused by industries to nature and the need for movements for eco-justice. The findings of this chapter are:

1. The bond between women and nature is not a simple or straightforward one rather a complex one.
2. Not all women connect to nature.
3. Women from different backgrounds relate to nature differently.

#### 4. Spiritual and material bonds both surface.

In the next chapter (**Chapter 3**) my aim is to show that the prevalent idea of “modernity” is a Western idea. When the projects of modernity are introduced into the villages of India it results in devastating consequences. Land is forcibly taken away from the people. The land is polluted because of the use of the harmful chemicals. It loses potency. The access that women used to have in their land which ensured their financial independence and in turn the health of her family is now compromised. Biodiversity is affected. Small scale economic systems are destroyed. Thus when nature is exploited women suffer the most. There lies a connection. Women are looked upon as a commodity, and thus physical violence is inflicted on them. The literary texts provide us with instances of when projects of modernity are implemented in terms of development and progress only a handful of people are benefitted. The common people, the working class people suffer as they lose their livelihoods. Their ancestral lands are forcibly taken away. They are forced to become industry workers. And finally mass displacement takes place. In a harsh world of the city many even lose their lives. The findings are:

1. The victory of modernity inevitably involves the destruction of nature as well as of human and non-human lives that are connected to and dependent upon nature.
2. Mastery over nature is achieved through technological development. This leads to the mastery over man as well.
3. Technological rationality causes social conflict as it is linked with the creation of weapons of mass destruction, control of human behaviour and so forth.
4. Natural resources are destroyed as a result of the total lack of ethics ingrained in this body of knowledge.
5. It diminishes nature's status as a living being to that of an inert substance.
6. Other knowledge systems are viewed as unscientific and unreliable.

The next chapter (**Chapter 4**) shows that the forms of domination are intertwined. There is a common thread of oppression: a force that dominates nature also suppresses women, people of other races and classes (Intersectional Ecofeminism). We witness that when nature is affected all other marginal beings are equally affected including women. Thus the liberation of women is not possible in isolation. Aim of this chapter is to demonstrate that the dominant male patriarchal capitalist attitude is at the heart of both the subjugation of women and the exploitation of nature's resources. In literature we see that the men are controlling the lives of the women. The same attitude is directed towards nature as nature is being controlled by powerful men. Unspoiled, wild nature is being tamed to construct military base, housings, and factories. The same patriarchal force is at work in both the domination of women and nature. The findings are:

1. Struggle for class justice and the struggle for eco-justice are intertwined.
2. The lower classes suffer the most when nature is damaged because they lack the resources to adapt to the changing environment.
3. The lives of those in lower socioeconomic strata are likewise changed when nature is damaged. Since they are being pushed deeper into poverty, class distinctions are upheld and strengthened.
4. The poor and the indigenous communities suffer the most as a result of having to deal with the effects of modernization. They must deal with the hazardous waste these manufacturers produce, must abandon their ancestral lands, and must seek employment in factories that have ruined their way of life.

The next chapter (**Chapter 5**) shows that the socially constructed categories of "woman" and "animal" are comparable in the sense that both are regarded as the subordinate partner in dualisms that pit man against woman or man against animal. They both serve the symbolic functions of being useful for the patriarchal system. Before modernisation enters we witness special human animal bonds that can be explained in terms of love, care and respect. They were viewed as conscious beings. But as soon as modernisation creeps in these animals are viewed as resources, objects of lab experiments. Animals are part of our natural world thus the exploitation of animals causes damage to the entire natural environment. Animals exhibit social and emotional complexity which can form deep, meaningful and subtle relationship. They are portrayed as spiritual beings, able to love, care for, and communicate with other people. They are portrayed as beings capable of consciousness and reflective thought (Markandaya, Roy). These bonds are special bonds that can only be explained in terms of love. In Desai we witness that lab experiments are conducted on animals. After being killed, they are abandoned in the wild. The animal is also undermined by the capitalist patriarchal mindset that rules over women. These two concerns are connected. The findings are:

1. The operation of a capitalist society seems like the transformation of one living being into a product that is non-alive. The animal is turned into a commodity by society for the sake of market exchanges.
2. The goal of modernity is to wipe out as many underrepresented communities and groups as possible, and it uses scientific evidence to legitimise this objective.
3. Ecofeminist aim is to raise awareness regarding animal ethics.

In the final chapter (**Chapter 6**) I have listed the gaps in mainstream theory that the texts point to. These are:

1. An unquestioned acceptance of the relationship between women and nature.

2. Acceptance of eastern cultures as eco-centric.
3. The bond that ecofeminists point out is not always a homogenous bond. It is dynamic and therefore cannot be explained in simple terms.
4. The aspect of cultural relativism is absent in mainstream ecofeminist theoretical framework.
5. The role of eco-conscious men is also not addressed.

I talk about how the literary texts of these writers become sites of resistance that question and critique the dualisms such as man/woman, culture/nature. These women writers have dealt with the multiple layers of this connection between nature and women in different ways. Desai explores the bond in a private space; her world is a domestic world where women from different background relate to nature differently. Roy on the other hand has chosen to explore the connection in an urban setting. She voices her concerns on globalization in India and its impact on gender and family relations as well as the environment understood in its broadest sense. Markandaya explores the bond in a rural setting. They question traditional representation of both women and nature. They raise issues about gender, class, social injustice and sexuality. They show that the relationship between nature and women is a complex one, not a monolithic or straightforward one. They have exhibited that not all women of the Eastern cultures relate to nature. They have shown that men can exhibit similar eco-consciousness.

The shift from rural to urban space shows that postcolonial ecofeminism is not a static theory, isolated to wilderness or countryside landscape alone. It also shows that in the study of ecofeminism ecology is not always an external environment, a big outside that we go into. It's a study of interrelationship.

