

Womanizing Nature or Naturalizing Femininity: An Eco-feminist Reading of *Nectar in a Sieve*

• *Bidisha Pal

Abstract

Nature is often attributed with motherly or feminine qualities of being repressive, submissive, tender, reciprocating and nurturing persona. This very basic thought gave birth to the Ecofeminist philosophy: the idea of a connection between feminism and ecology. The proponent of Ecofeminism Francois d' Eaubonne has cited arguments about the apparent relationship between nature and its exploitation with the violence and oppression of the women. *Nectar in a Sieve* by Kamala Markandaya vividly presents the depiction of the vandalizing and suffering of nature and women in the texts in the hands of masculine forces.

Starting from the protagonist Rukmini, other female characters in the story also fall into the prey of torture, suffering, infertility and various torments. This also cites the nature/culture binary in many sequences of the novel. Very often the characters seem to give up but in the next moment they show a good amount of patience and tolerance and eventually survive from the situation. Just like the nature suffers in the hands of science and technology but finds the way of survival. The central character Rukmini is the worst sufferer so in a way she seems to be more in empathy with the nature.

Sometimes the assimilation is so obvious that it may often be said to womanize the nature or naturalize the women to reciprocate the feelings of each other in a similar way. Various themes of the novel i.e. birth, education, economic crisis, occupation, marriage happen in such a manner as to throw challenges to the nature itself and so very often have also to face retributions from nature.

Keywords: *Ecofeminism, Francois d'Eaubonne, Exploitation, Vandalizing, Empathy, Assimilation.*

Womanizing Nature or Naturalizing Femininity: An Ecofeminist Reading of *Nectar in a Sieve*

“As a fond mother, when the day is o’er,
Leads by the hand her little child to bed---
So Nature deals with us, and takes away
Our playthings one by one, and by hand
Leads us to rest gently...”

Nature, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

“Ecological feminism is the name given to a variety of positions that have roots in different feminist practices and philosophies. These different perspectives reflect not only different feminist perspectives (e.g., liberal, traditional Marxist, radical, socialist, black and Third World), they also reflect different understandings of the nature of and solution to pressing environmental problems.” (Warren 1987). Often it has been seen that most of the movements related with nature or environment got the women leaders as their associative counterparts. For example: Medha Patkar who was an active member of Narmada Bachao Andolan is still working with a mass base in tribal and peasant communities in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat and supports groups with more than 30 centres all over India with the coalition of NGOs in more than ten countries known as Narmada Action Committee. Vandana Shiva, another activist of Global Ecofeminist Movement suggests that a more sustainable and productive approach to agriculture can be achieved through the reinstating a system of farming in India that actively engages the women.

Advocating against the prevalent “patriarchal logic of exclusion”, she claims that a woman-focused system can change the current system of society in a positive manner. As Rosemary Reuther wrote in 1975 in her book:

“Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of this [modern industrial] society.” (204)

Despite labeled as feminist they all have spun the same thread of ecofeminism in their writings and showed very often the connection between the nature and the women. In

India however the connection is very obvious as the first civilization started here based on the very river Sind and the same river has lost its importance with the advancement of that civilization. According to Greenpeace International Survey (2007), a quarter of the forest lost in the last 10,000 years has been destroyed in the last 30 years. Less than 10 percent of the planet's land area remains as intact forest landscapes.

A common claim within Ecofeminist literature is that the patriarchal structures justify their dominance through binary opposition, these include but are not limited to: heaven/earth, mind/body, male/female, human/animal, spirit/matter, culture/nature and white/non-white. Oppression is reinforced by assuming truth in these binaries and instilling them as 'marvellous to behold' through religious and scientific constructs. The condition of a major portion of women is also deteriorating day by day in the name of dowry, abuse, rape, sexual harassment, eve teasing etc. Female foeticide is still a very prevalent incident that leaves forever curse upon the womanhood.

Some eco-feminist critiques show that the dichotomy between women and men and nature and culture creates a dualism that is too stringent and focused in the difference of women and men. The ecofeminism strongly correlates the social status of women with the social status of nature, rather than the non-essentialist view that women along with nature both have feminine and masculine qualities have often been seen as less worthy, nature is also seen as having lesser value than culture, or the qualities involved in these concepts. Most fundamental to ecofeminism is the insight that the culture/nature dualism of western culture is gendered: that is, men and masculinity are associated with culture and culture is valued, whereas women and femininity are associated with nature and both are devalued. These linked valuations lead to hierarchy, which is then used to justify the dominations and women, nature and all those associated. But is the culture/nature gender dualism of western culture relevant in eastern cultures as well?

Nectar in a Sieve by Kamala Markandaya is a novel that deals with the basic connection between nature and women. This is a story of Rukmani whose life is surrounded with her husband and family. Throughout her life she has to face suffering, torments of infertility, scarcity of food, negligence and so many more

tribulations but she bears with those very patiently just like the Mother Nature who caresses her children without any expectation day by day.

Nectar in a Sieve is a relatively short novel that introduces the Western students to life in rural India and the changes that occurred during the country's British colonization. Throughout the novel we see the conflicts between a traditional agricultural culture and a burgeoning industrial capitalist society. The novel touches on various social phenomena: the importance of traditional culture, people's reluctance to change and the impact of economic change.

One important theme in the novel is the pangs of childbirth. Both Rukmani and her daughter suffer from infertility and they have to take the help of artificial process of production by the hand of Dr. Kenny. Like Rukmani, Ira is a victim of 'patriarchal exclusion'. Her husband drives her out for her failure to give birth a child, she takes up into prostitution and then her mother brought her to the same Dr. Kenny who once treated her and now he tends to cure Ira.

Here the clash of nature and nurture makes itself all the more prominent. The privilege of determining what is considered scientific knowledge has been controlled by men. Bondi and Miles have argued about the medicalization of childbirth. Bondi says that the medicalization of childbirth has changed the natural process of childbirth into a procedure dependent on specialized technologies and appropriate expertise. Irawaddy has gone under that strenuous process and is able to give birth to a child finally but unfortunately the child Sacrabani suffers from being an albino which is also against the natural colour. Ironically the child cannot bear the rays of the sun, another natural element and the prime life giver to him. This may point to the very fact that the child is not born out of natural affection but a forceful bi-product of Ira's prostitution.

The proverb: 'All things come to those who wait' may be applied to Rukmani but waiting does not reap very much sweet fruit to her. She has to lose her husband Nathan at last who always remained the sole partner of her patiently bearing. Coleridge's remark, "*Work without Hope draws nectar in a sieve, And Hope without*

an object cannot live"¹ has been a recurrent motif all through the story until at last Rukmani finds Puli who stays with her at the days of utmost struggle and probably remains with her at the end of the story. Ironically the son is also not natural that means not the biological son but an adopted one.

Nature has suffered in the hands of men; she is replenished with the scars of exploitation just like the women who are supposed to be the vulnerable creatures just like the nature. They also suffer in the hand of men. *The Colour Purple* by Alice Walker is a novel that deals with the problem of a usual and unnatural relationship between a step father and his daughter whom she always addresses as Mr._. To whom she bears two children forcefully but unfortunately she has to be part with them. Engelhardt, Elizabeth S. D pointed out:

“Humans are not conceived of as separate from and superior to the world around them...humans and nonhumans together are part of the total ecology.....related to much ecological, environmental, feminist and environmental feminist activism. Yet...differs...argues that race matters, gender matters, class matters, and that all of us have complicated identities...closer to the environmental justice movement in its anti-essentialism than it is to some ecofeminism (3-4).”

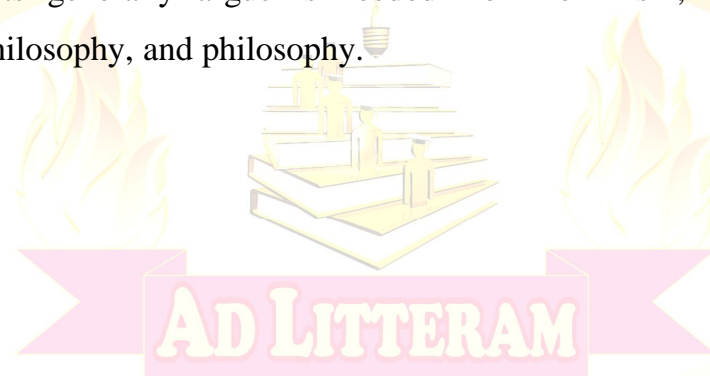
(Warren etc.)

The incident where a tannery is build up in the village shows another standpoint of the binary of nature and culture. It is the most spine-chilling event for the innocent people of the village and they fall under the clutches of unemployment as they know nothing except farming. The tannery snatches away the life of Raja, the beloved son of Rukmani. In another moment the author shows the lives of other female personalities of the novel that are Kali, Kunthi and Janaki who seem to be very much forceful and boasting initially but at the end destroyed in the hands of nature while Rukmani is the sole survivor. It is their typical *hubris* that brings their tragic fall. They go against the natural rule by supporting the tannery in the village which is contrary to the natural surroundings to the village.

¹ The epigraph comes from the 1825 poem “Work without Hope” by the English romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The epigraph puts forth the ambiguous question whether the characters actually have hope. The preceding parts show that Coleridge’s speaker is hopeless. The epigraph captures the central tension of the book: the beginning and the end of the book never explicitly tells us that Rukmani and her family suffer in vain.

In other words the novel is a chimera of materialistic ecofeminism that also connects some institutions of power, labor and property as the source of dominion over women and nature. The connections are very much obvious in case of Rukmani and her daughter Irawaddy who are the utmost victims of this materialistic ecofeminism in terms of production and reproduction.

Perhaps the most serious challenges to mainstream philosophy are at the level of conceptual analysis and theory. Ecofeminism raises significant issues about the philosophical conceptions of the self, knowledge and the knower, reason and rationality, objectivity, and a host of favoured dualisms that form the backbone of philosophical theorizing, even the conception of philosophy itself. These notions will need to be re-examined for possible male-gender bias. The challenge to philosophy is to replace conceptual schemes, theories, and practices that currently feminize nature and naturalize women to the mutual detriment of both with ones that do not. That is what ecofeminists generally argue is needed from feminism, environmentalism, environmental philosophy, and philosophy.



Work Cited:

1. Bondi, Evan, Miles Maria and Shiva Vandana. *Ecofeminism*. Halifax: N.S: Fernwood Publications, 1993. Print.
2. d'Eaubonne F. *Le feminismeou la mort*. Paris: P. Horay, 1974. Print.
3. Engelhardt, Elizabeth S.D. *The Tangled Roots of Feminism, Environmentalism, and Appalachian Literature*. Athens: Ohio UP, 2003. Print.
4. Reuther, Rosemary Radford. *New Woman/ New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995. Print.
5. Shiva, Vandana. *Staying alive: women, ecology and development*. London: Zed Books. 1988. Print.
6. Warren, Karen. *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on what it is and why it Matters*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000. Print.

