

The Occult Feminine: Ecofeminist Renderings in Fact and Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Discrimination, Oppression, Exploitation are the expressions that we encounter repeatedly in the present milieu. In the patriarchal society that we live in, we witness the Macho Man subduing and exploiting Woman and Nature alike, for the gratification of his Need and Greed. Women and Nature are both creators and nurturers. The inherent femininity in a Woman is as much mirrored in Nature. It is this ethereal connection that a Woman and Nature share that Ecofeminists have sought to establish and popularize. Ecofeminism originated from the idea that various forms of repression are interlinked, they follow the same pattern and hierarchy be it the human world or the natural world. Ecofeminists believe that until and unless Man unlearns this habit, the exploitation of women and destruction of nature won't cease. Environmental Degradation leads to the erosion of Human Rights as well because we need a healthy environment to survive and realize our potential. Devastation of the ecology and economic iniquity go hand in hand. We have had forest land, tribal reserves being usurped by the powers that be, in the name of development and progress. There are many accounts of strife and revolt against the repressive tendencies of the state and private organizations. Women have been invariably in the forefront of such struggles, for the preservation of their own identity as well as the conservation of Nature. The human tendency to ignore the rights of other constituents that make up this natural world is the root cause of the conundrum mankind is in today. Literature, be it fiction or non-fiction mirrors life in myriad ways. This paper intends to collate Ecofeminist excerpts from literary works and real life struggles to conjure up a montage that reinforces womankind's intimate bond with nature.

Keywords- Tribal, Nature, Ecofeminism, Exploitation, Interconnectedness, Struggles, Preservation, Empowerment, Activism, Patriarchy.

I. INTRODUCTION

Mother Nature and Mother Earth, these gendered nomenclatures, have existed since time immemorial, which in turn fortifies the connect between the two. Ecofeminists believe that the biology of a woman helps her uncover the mysteries of nature. A woman cares for the environment just like she nurtures her own family. This makes her a torchbearer of sustainable development, protecting and safeguarding the realm she lives in for future generations. Indigenous

women have been in the forefront of many rebellions against those who threatened their lives, livelihood and ecosystem. India is the world's second largest home to tribal people. These forest dwellers live in tune with the ecological order, preserving and conserving Mother Nature. 'Adivasi's a blanket term used to designate the tribes in India, meaning the original inhabitants or the indigenous people. There is a plethora of literary works in English and translation that portray the essence of women and nature, which in turn reveals the bond they share and the subjugation they endure, as mutually

reinforcing. There are many writers of fiction and non-fiction who are proponents of these tenets that congregate into the Ecofeminist Theory. Real life Green warriors from the indigenous communities, Dalits, social and human rights activists crusading to defend this Life force that permeates man and nature alike, need to be lauded and supported, to ward off a near certain Apocalypse.

II. EVOLUTION OF ECOFEMINISM

Simone de Beauvoir in her groundbreaking work on feminist doctrine, "The Second Sex", postulates that a woman is always considered second to man, as the "Other", her identity is determined in relation to a Man, never complete in herself. (Beauvoir, 1952) Virginia Woolf in her essay, "Professions For Women", has opined about the inner voice that troubles women, terming it the "Angel in the House "The Angel is the self sacrificing, intensely sympathetic, charming, pure and tender woman the society expects them to be. We all hear this angel's voice in our ears. When we decide to own our voices and speak our minds, the Angel needs to be silenced. Woolf thus claimed," I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her..... I acted in self-defense. Had I not killed her she would have killed me". (Woolf, 1942) It is from many such feminist thoughts that Ecofeminism took shape.

Ecofeminism as a theory was introduced in the 1970's. Francoise d' Eaubonne is credited as its first proponent. Her "Feminism or Death "was a milestone in ecological philosophy and feminist movement of the early 1970's. (Eaubonne, 1974)The movement further developed with the UN Declaration of the Decade For Women,1975-1985.Ecofeminists believe that women and nature are both an oppressed lot. Man treats them as his personal fiefdom. They draw parallels between the domination of women and exploitation of nature. Cultural institutions like family, marriage, religion and culture all underpin the same hierarchy. The binaries of the powerful and the powerless, primary and the secondary, the first sex and the second sex, all augment the same dichotomy that demarcates the Feminine into insignificance.

Gayatri Spivak in her essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak', has said that the Subaltern has no History and cannot speak, the Subaltern as Female is even more deeply in the Shadow. Subaltern implying subordinate, marginalized, one who only takes orders. (Spivak, 1988).Vandana Shiva, the noted Indian Ecofeminist, in her book, 'Staying Alive: Women ,Ecology and Development', mentions that the worldview that causes environmental degradation and injustice is the same worldview that causes a culture of male domination, exploitation and inequality for women (Shiva, 1989).Ariel Salleh ,an Australian Ecofeminist and Sociologist has opined that there is a parallel in men's thinking, between their right to exploit Nature and their

exploitation of Women (Salleh, 1997).Greta Gaard in her article-'Women, Water and Energy: An Ecofeminist Approach', says that the manner we treat nature and how we treat each other are inseparably linked. (Gaard, 2001)

III. MAN Vs WOMAN AND CULTURE Vs NATURE

Statistics show that Men are more inclined to cultivate tree species that create wealth, whereas women veer more to tree species that produce food and medicine. On one hand, since primeval times we have seen men indulging in hunting and killing animals, destroying the ecology to build industries, whereas on the other hand we see women prone to sustainable existence through water conservation, waste management and energy efficacy in their dwellings. The association between forests and women goes deep. Trees nourish the habitat, in a similar way as women provide a bedrock for their family and community, with their innate ability to create, care, protect and heal.

Ecofeminists claim that Patriarchy dominates the environment and women alike. Men uphold Culture whereas Women uphold Nature. It is the inherent dichotomy between the sexes, physiologically and psychologically which creates these dispositions. Men are considered as providers and Women as creators /caregivers. To provide he has to exploit and utilize the resources available. So, the roles assigned to the genders by the established religious orders, society and patriarchy are the root cause of repression and domination.

Women in phallogocentric society has no voice. She is the subaltern. Being empowered is something she can only hope for. So, she ends up as the voiceless, silent subaltern. Thus, Gayatri Spivak argues that the subaltern cannot speak for herself as the double bind of colonialism and patriarchy silence her. In the postcolonial societies a woman, especially an Adivasi woman is twice marginalized and twice oppressed, considering the lack of education, opportunities and backwardness in the areas she inhabits.

IV. ECO WARRIORS

Tribals and tribal lands are both under threat of annihilation at the hands of vested interests. India faces a unique dilemma between Development and Industrialization on one hand and Environmental concerns and Tribal Rights on the other. Tribals are forest dwellers who are in sync with the ethnocentric ecological order they inhabit. They think of the forest as an exclusive habitat that is in consonance with the Feminine, thereby preserving Mother Nature. The connection between Feminism and Environmentalism can be discerned by the assertion that women suffer higher risks of environmental degradation than men. Increased deforestation leads to inefficient water cycles,

which results in less precipitation and water scarcity. So, the Adivasi women have to travel far and wide to collect firewood and water for their daily needs.

Tribals share a unique and complex relationship with their land, it is the essence of their being. When people from the mainstream society infringe on these lands for exploiting its resources, they are in fact decimating the vital energy that permeates this domain. Tribals have been self-sufficient since eons, living off the forest without utilizing it beyond recovery. Interaction of the tribes with the conventional society, voluntarily or involuntarily, upsets their natural way of life. Tribals were traditionally into Nature worship or Animism. When the doctrines and hierarchies that is associated with established religions is forced upon the tribes, to acculturate them, they feel lost, so they either strike back blindly or reconcile to their fates.

There are many instances of tribal conflicts with mainstream entities in a bid to safeguard their rights and traditional way of life:

Mayilamma-An uneducated Eravala tribal woman from Kerala led a peaceful protest for two years against the capitalist giant Coca-Cola and won. Her village of Plachimada was affected by the Coca-Cola plant, established in 2000 there, as the waste released from the plant polluted the tribe's only water source. The plant shut down consequently in 2004. (Pariyadath, 2018)

C.K Janu-Belongs to the Adiya community of Wayanad, Kerala. Her ongoing struggle for land rights to the landless tribals in Kerala continuous to this day, as even though the government agreed to their demands, no action's been taken yet. (Bhaskaran, 2003)

Anna Kujur-An Adivasi leader from the Sundergarh district of Odisha, has helped over 30,000 Adivasis to claim their land and forest rights. She gathered the tribals from the forest hamlets and made them understand the importance of land titles.

Women are spearheading these tribal rights movements, for they are the ones who have to bear the brunt of ecological disasters the most.

V. ADIVASI PLIGHT IN THE STORIES OF SOWVENDRA SHEKHAR

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, is a Doctor and Author from Jharkhand. His collection of short stories, 'The Adivasi Will Not Dance', was banned by the Jharkhand Government for what it felt was a graphic portrayal of the lives of the Santhal tribe in the present times. The plight of the santhali women portrayed in the stories and the consequences of industrialization in the name of development, intimidated those in the corridors of power. The book was shortlisted for the Hindu Prize and he is the recipient of the Sahitya Academi Yuva Puraskar. Shekhar expressed that the ban shook him, but he'll continue to write fearlessly because that's what writers should do, tell their own stories. (Shekhar, 2015)

In the eponymous story of the collection, we find that the santhals have lost most of their farmlands to mining companies. They wanted to grab as much land as possible, dig as many mines as possible and extract all the coal. They earn so much from these lands but what the santhals get in return is tatters, diseases and bare bones. These rich people are only interested in the tribal lands. They want the santhals to sing and dance at their weddings and nothing else. "They too want to make us forget our Sarna religion... We are losing our Sarna faith, our identities, and our roots. We are becoming people from nowhere" (p. 173) From the given extract we see the identity crisis the tribals go through when their lives are turned upside down. Their lands are usurped, their beliefs are ridiculed and are coerced to convert, offered incentives to do so, but in the end left in the lurch.

"It is this coal, sir, which is gobbling us up bit by bit". (p. 174) The earth has turned black with the soot; trees bear black leaves. The stones, rocks are all black. The children are covered in fine black dust." "Only our eyes burn red, like embers." It shows the effect of mechanization and commerce in the erstwhile pristine tribal lands. The tribals watch helplessly the seizure of their lands and lives, with silent rage in their hearts. There was no powerful voice among the santhals. The tribes are fleeing their places of birth. "We only know how to escape". (p. 176) The feeling of resignation is evident in the lines. Unable to fight the might of the aggressors, they flee. The music, dance and songs passed on from generation to generation is sacred to the tribe. Hunger and Poverty is forcing them to sell what is sacred to them.

The women are raped, some sell their bodies...their plight turning them vulnerable. In spite of all this- "in the name of Adivasi culture and Jharkhandi culture, it is necessary to make the Adivasis dance...the onus of singing and dancing is upon the Adivasi alone" (p.179) Even though the district administration have asked the tribals to vacate their lands, farms, everything to make room for a thermal power plant, they are still expected to sing and dance for the very people who are responsible for their predicament. It was the President who was the guest of honor for the day, the Adivasi troupe-master, Mangal Murmu addressing him asked, if they have a reason to be happy and to sing and dance. The power plant for who's foundation laying ceremony the President had come was to be the end of all the Adivasi. "We have nowhere to go, nowhere to grow our crops. How can this power plant be good for us? And how can we Adivasis dance and be happy? Unless we are given back our homes and land, we will not sing and dance. We Adivasis will not dance. The Adivasi will not" (p. 187)

The bond between the tribe and their land is not materialistic. It is something bestowed to them by their ancestors. So, they are morally and ritualistically bonded to it and invariably it becomes their duty to hand it down

to their descendants. Forceful imposition and assimilation that they are subjected to, disturbs, disrupts and destroys the only way of life they know. They are chained and tamed to mould them the way the state wants, scripting a new history that doesn't belong to them.

In another one of Shekhar's stories', *Merely a Whore*', the setting is a coal-mining town Lakkhipur. The discrepancy yet similarity in the lives of both men and women portrayed, is striking. Men laboring for hours, shirtless, sweaty and sooty, in the underground caverns of the Earth and Women laboring just as naked and sweaty with the semen and perspiration of men, in the abysses above. This is the drill they follow every day, every week, year after year. Everything is for sale here. Yet another story in the anthology, 'November is The Month of Migrations', we find the Santhals leaving their lands and farms behind to catch the train to Bardhaman in West Bengal, every November. They would work in the fields of the Zamindars there, planting rice and other crops. We see the utter despondency of the Adivasi woman, Talamai, who sells her body for two cold bread pakoras and fifty rupees to a jawan of the Railway protection force.

In 'Sons 'we have Yo, who'd planted a mango tree nineteen years earlier, so that her grandchildren could enjoy the fruit it bears in the future and remember her each time they ate it. Though the seed of the tree came from the best mango tree in town, the tree refused to bear fruit. In spite of that it was allowed to flourish and occupied a substantial place in the backyard. It was a home to various species, crows, mynahs, squirrels, chameleons, ants etc. And that kept them from cutting the tree down. So we see how a woman intrinsically thinks of her offspring's and future generations when she creates something, she sees generations ahead. In 'Eating with the Enemy', there are two friends, Sulochana and Subhadra who suffer abuse at home and decide to end their lives. They ran from home and ended up just a kilometer and a half away, on the banks of the Subarnarekha river. They envisage innumerable ways to end their lives. But in the end they hugged each other and cried like never before. Then they walked down to the Subarnarekha, washed their hands, splashed water on their eyes and faces, dried and made themselves presentable and, promising to always be there for each other even during trying times, they walked back to their homes. Here the river motif serves as a rejuvenating element, that cleanses their body and mind. It is like a passage and journey into a new world. Here it symbolizes a change in our approach, mindset and attitude. Nature playing the part of a Redeemer, saving these women.

The commodification of women's bodies is highlighted in some of the stories. When the author says, "fresh meat always attracts more flies" (p. 146) in the story, 'Merely a Whore', he isn't just alluding to a female body. It is also the pristine, untouched Nature

that is being ravished and desecrated here by vested interests. The Patriarchal, Capitalist society is characterized by this repression and exploitation. Both Women and Nature are rendered helpless and vulnerable, they are taken as a resource to satisfy the Man. They are utilized and raped in their own ways.

VI. RURAL INITIATIVES FOR CHANGE

Women are society's only hope because it is they who restore with love and compassion what men destroy.

Maria Mies, a sociologist and ecofeminist, says that since women are more involved than men in daily life, they get more involved with the elements of nature. (Mies, 1987)

In Piplantri, Rajasthan there is a custom to plant 111 saplings in the village every time a girl child is born. The family has to ensure that the plants survive and grow corresponding to the girl's growth. Villagers there have been practicing it for 15 years, it has helped the village to increase its green cover. The Initiative was launched to take care of two major social Issues- Afforestation and Empowerment of the Girl child. It is a unique way to teach the villagers the importance of both Trees and Girls.

In Nuasahi, Odisha the villagers faced severe water shortage during summer. It wasn't so a few years back. They found that the catchment area wasn't getting enough water due to rainwater runoff. Deforestation had accelerated the scarcity. They along with the Forest Department decided to plant trees that has water and soil holding capacity. All this was done voluntarily by the tribes. It is seen as a way of contributing to the future, food and water security of their offspring's, when climate changes and global warming have made the situation precarious for all. They realized the urgency to take action now, as one of the woman from the Maa Changudi self-help group opined, that a few decades ago water didn't come with a price. It was free and available to all in ample quantity. In the present times we have to pay for water. It won't be long before this precious natural resource depletes to a terrifying level, threatening our subsistence.

VII. CONCLUSION

Homo Sapiens are a vital part of the ecosystem. The connect that Man has with Nature cannot be ignored. We should realize that we were as much an accident of history like all other living beings, a product of many chance events. We are not a privileged lot who can go on plundering Nature with impunity. We are a part of the whole. The damage we inflict on the ecology will in due time come back to haunt us. The ecological disasters that we witness around us should wake us from this self-induced stupor. The Power plants, Industries,

Dams and Infrastructure activities taken up in the geologically sensitive zones violate environmental laws and protocols. Deforestation leads to decrease in forest cover, less rainfall, climatic changes, global warming, erratic weather patterns, melting of glaciers and resultant flash floods. Nature is unleashing its fury in more ways than one for the rampant abuse she is subjected to.

Women's Rights and Environmental Rights cannot be separated. Women traditionally don't have land rights in many communities but they are the ones who tend to it. The destruction of water and forest resources adversely affects the woman primarily as the onus of household duties is on her. Though development and progress is a necessity for mankind, if it is left unchecked and unbridled, would herald annihilation of the nature that cradles us. It is only when the basic outlook of Man changes towards his fellow beings can he change his attitude towards Mother Earth. The discrimination that humans commit on the basis of caste, race, sex, color ...needs to be rectified first, if we are to treat Nature and Environment, fairly. The earlier we recognize and act on it the better, as it is critical for our existence. The imminent Ecological Apocalypse, would else be the Dawn of Doomsday for the entire Human Civilization.

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