

Questioning the Gender of Nature: Analyzing the Pervading Sexism in Concepts Related to Nature

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ABSTRACT

The conflated feminine identity of Mother Nature exposes the play of these hegemonic enterprises that concurrently tyrannizes nature and woman. They are expected to be always available to men and quench their desires. These kinds of rhetoric naively create an imbalanced gender identity, where woman eternally holds the position of the subjugated 'other'. The glorification of the reproductive worth of woman and nature leads to the demonization of female identity as well. The terminologies rendered to nature are often suggestive of the qualities expected of women from patriarchal structures. The reification of the feminine in nature leads to the creation of terms like "barren soil", "mother earth" and "fertile land". Instead of simply breaking the allied ties of women and nature, there is a need to identify the struggles of both the structures separately. Therefore there is a need to deconstruct the gendered conceptions of earth.

Keywords: Ecology, Femininity, Hegemony, Ecofeminism, Feminism

The term Ecofeminism was first used in the book 'Feminism or Death' by the French activist and scholar, François d'Eaubonne. She addressed the importance of a feminist perspective in reading

issues related to gender and the environment. Ecofeminism, as a discipline strives to explore this intersection between nature and women in terms of the oppressive and exploitative treatments they face on day to day basis. An American ecofeminist activist says:

Ecofeminism is a practical movement for social change that discerns interconnections among all forms of oppression: the exploitation of nature, the oppression of women, class exploitation, racism, colonialism. (Gaard)

The parental correspondence associated with nature as the mother earth is confusing and perilous at the same time. However the hazardous, tendency of gender stereotyping and socialization through sexist language are, it is oftentimes forgotten. This premeditatedly reinforces the patriarchal gender norms and beliefs. Although ancient traditions and kinds of literature have referred to the feminine incarnations of nature, the predominance of the references like 'mother nature' has little connection to these antique cultures and spirituality. The pervasive nature of certain stereotypical notions has made smooth inferences of certain sexist ideologies and meaning conferred upon language. Ecologists and feminists have together discussed the perils of the feminization of nature. Nature is eternally associated with feminine attributes of life cycle like procreation and fertility. Nature and women are together portrayed as embodiments of creation and continuity. Woman, who facilitates the interminable journey of life cycle gets compared to the changing seasons of nature.

“So on her fares, and to the border comes
Of Eden, where delicious Paradise,
Now nearer, crowns with her enclosure green”

“Of goodliest trees loaden with fairest fruit,

Blossoms and fruits at once of golden hue”

(Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book 4, lines 131-3, 147-8)

The etymological origin of the term ‘mother nature’ dates back to 1266 C.E. However in the 13th century B.C.E, this concept was for the first time introduced in Greek writing. Nature has irrevocably been imagined in feminine forms since ancient times. Nature goddesses were plenty in number and forms since the 3rd millennium B.C.E. viz. Ceres, Diana, Faunus, Persephone etc. Enlightenment philosophers and artists further exemplified this female imagery in nature. Nature is often crudely illustrated as the clichéd motif of the repressed female figurine as depicted in literature, popular culture, and mainstream political and ecological movements. She is the personification of nurturing and the revitalizing values of the natural world. Both these entities stay within their marginalized identities they were rendered with since earlier times. In Catherine Roach’s 1991 essay titled ‘Loving Your Mother: On the Woman-Nature Relation’, she identifies the potential threats in this regularization of concepts that establish a direct connection between nature and woman.

There is an adamant tendency towards this anthropomorphizing of nature as a woman represented through the lens of motherhood or womanhood. These concepts vehemently encourage the hegemonic concepts of womanhood. Furthermore, the submissive and ever-abiding mother images exacerbated by the patriarchal entities regard mothers as the caretakers who endure everything. This conflated feminine identity of Mother Nature exposes the play of hegemonic enterprises that concurrently tyrannizes nature and woman together. Mainstream discourses represent them as figures expected to be always available to men and quench their desires. These kinds of rhetoric naively create an imbalanced gender identity, where woman

eternally holds the position of the subjugated 'other'. The glorification of the reproductive worth of woman and nature leads to evident demonization of the female identity.

Societal hierarchizations indiscreetly place nature within the victimized position, similar to women. The human conceit regarding the position of self above nature leads to situations of ecological disparity. An Eco-feminist ideology primarily purports to break these forms of domination where humans are placed at the locus of identities. Environmentalists like Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies have highlighted the place of women in the worldwide ecological assertions. However, conventional notions have asserted that:

nature is subordinated to man; woman to man; consumption to production; and the local to the global, and so on. Feminists have long criticized this dichotomy, particularly the structural division of man and nature, which is seen as analogous to that of man and woman. (Mies and Shiva 5)

The intrusion of industrial culture leads to a situation where nature was subcategorized and was used merely for the benefits of its inhabitants. Nature was thus altered and exploited. This situation can be held in similarity to the exploitation of female bodies and reproductive abilities. The terminologies rendered to nature are often suggestive of the qualities expected of women from patriarchal structures. The reification of the feminine in nature leads to the creation of terms like "barren soil", "mother earth" and "fertile land". Instead of simply breaking the allied ties of women and nature, there is a need to identify the struggles of both the structures separately. Therefore there is a need to deconstruct the gendered conceptions of earth. When these productive qualities are exemplified in the writings of women and nature, they are further placed within the subjugated positions of gender expectations. Men and nature of dominant control they hold within the industrial productions and female bodies lead to situations of

environmental extermination and overpopulation. Women are often depicted and presented as “irrepressible” and “disturbing”, qualities that are attributed to the extreme natural events as well. Societal issues and environmental topics are innately connected and Robert A White asserts that:

qualities of nurturance, intuition, and emotional sensitivity, which many believe to be more associated with the feminine principle, are the qualities most needed in healing our relationship to nature. The emergence of environmental awareness and the equality of women show parallel development. (White 109)

These terminologies and rhetoric become one of the reasons for the creation of an unbalanced gender stratum. Sexist terms and references pervade the mainstream discourses. Therefore there is a need to acknowledge the subjugating tendencies within which nature and women are both oppressed. The deconstructing of these terminological references is thus vital to fight the gendered conceptions prevalent in society. The modification of these linguistic patterns can seem incongruous at first but could lead to significant changes in the long run.

Literature played an important role in the establishment of female identity in natural representations. This was especially found in the romantic writings of the period, namely in poetry and travel writings. The feminized nature was presented as the beholder of the same qualities of a pious woman and vice versa. In contrast to the self-sufficient, coherent, industrial and assertive man, women were expected to be kind, refined, virtuous, domestic, simple and attractive. They were essentially portrayed as the antithetical symbols of femininity that considerably varied from the masculine ones. These feminine qualities bestowed on nature were constantly represented in travel writings of the period which were essentially gendered specific. Early travel writers were mostly men and they constantly bestowed feminine traits upon nature.

These travel writers who traveled often associated women and nature to create proximity with feminine nature. This feminization leaning of travel writers also indicated the repressed sexual desires of them. Laura Mulvey in her 1989 work titled 'Visual and Other Pleasures' discusses the way women are represented as the subject and men as the Supreme Being.

The woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning.” (586)

Post-Independence India saw a sensible acknowledging of female-oriented issues like female education, their economic independence and the general wellbeing of women. With the advent of widespread education in Kerala, activists and artists began inculcating intellectual amenities into the discussions of social issues. A proper apprehension of ecological issues and the subservient social positioning of women lead to the emergence of Ecofeminism in Kerala. Western Feminist movements played an important part in this persuasive intellectual change. However, Ecofeminism is a tool rarely used as a literary device alone but also as a device of social activism. Sugathakumari, K R Meera, Anita Nair, Sarah Joseph are among the major women writers who inculcated the element of ecological consciousness in their works. Sugathakumari attains the predominant position among the pioneers of ecofeminist writings in Malayalam literature. She began her writing career as early as the 1950s. The various social, cultural and regional factors that contributed to the making of her ideologies and perspectives testify her relatively long literary career. Her childhood and maternal home situated in Aranmula in Pathanamthitta district invariably contributed to her ecological sensibility and theological viewpoints, which she illustrated through her works. Her theological convictions were greatly

influenced by the culture and religious practices she followed since childhood. The activism and ideologies she expounded through her works paved way for a renewed ecological consciousness in regional literature. She truly marked the beginning of an ecological renaissance in Malayalam Literature. Beyond this stripe of ecological consciousness, Sugathakumari never deviated from a stable style of writing. She remained within her inclined stature of romanticism and optimism when her contemporaries explored the arena of literary experimentations.

In her work '*Kaavu Theendalle / Don't Spoil the Sacred Groves*', she expresses her deep commitment to nature and its serenity that she detests spoiling.

We have to play without polluting the groves around the house as it was believed to be the treasure house of underground water . . . the dark foliage that flourished the area around our home offered a habitat to biodiversity ranging from ants to snakes. The grandmothers of the house would always remind, 'don't upset the groves, we'll go short of drinking water. . . .' These sacred groves were a miniature form of the evergreen forests, that served as gene pool. Our ancestors protected a kind of gene pool around their house even before they knew that the groves functioned as gene pools. In Kerala, the groves were a common topographical feature in most of the houses. They were the dear abode of the 'serpent goddess', but they never multiplied in number and still brought all other pests under control. The groves were an instance of a balanced ecosystem (Kaavu Theendalle /Don't Spoil the Sacred Groves 11-14, 62).

Nature remains to be an entity invariably silenced by humans. Writers like Kamala Das have termed the nature 'blind' and 'deaf'. Christopher Manes, an activist says:

Attending to ecological knowledge means metaphorically relearning —the language of birds- the passions, pains and cryptic intents of the other biological communities that surround us and silently interpenetrate our existence. (Nature and Silence, The Reader 25)

Marginalized communities are often given representative voices in popular discourses to address the necessity of acknowledging the oppression they face. This subsequently upholds the importance of teamwork, nurturing and humanitarian considerations that binds the world together. Each culture provides separate attributes to its inhabitants. These cultural implications vary and differ on many different levels. This, in turn, creates an awareness of less privileged cultures among the dominant ones. The studies about Ecofeminism:

includes in its analyses of women-nature connections the inextricable inter-connections among all social systems of domination, for instance, racism, classism, ageism, ethnocentrism, imperialism, colonialism, as well as sexism. (Warren 2)

Woman and Nature are over and over again contrasted and substituted with each, based on the common grounds of oppressive tendencies they face. Proper awareness of the actuality of these hierarchal structures and a combined effort to de-hierarchize the working of a society can alone ease the prevailing issues. Ecofeminists encourage the recognition of the differences within society and the celebration of these disparities. Therefore the entities occupying the position of the 'other' have to be respected and acknowledged to maintain the disheveled Earth.

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