ECOFEMINISM IN THE NOVELS OF KAVERY NAMBISAN

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Abstract

Ecofeminism, as the name itself indicates, links feminism with ecology. It believes that the oppression of women is interlinked to the oppression of nature with the same patriarchal attitudes and practices. In my paper I would focus on Ecofeminism in the selected novels of Kavery Nambisan, a promising south Indian Novelist. She portrays the lives of woman against the backdrop of their rural setting. As Environment and feminism are the two ideologies that are intertwined the theory of Ecofeminism, so also a fine combination of environment and feministic outlook can be seen in her novels.

The Great Indian Novel has undergone a tremendous transformation in the last two decades and it has curved a niche for itself in the world literary scene. The contribution of women novelists to the Indian Novel in the Post Colonial era, especially in fiction, has been phenomenal. Women have come forward in a big way to give voice to those experiences that have remained silent under certain dominant cultural forces or have been forced out of existence. Arundhati Roy , Anita Desai, Kiran Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri won accolades all over the world.

Kavery Nambisan is a promising south Indian Novelist with great creative potential. She hails from Coorg of Karnataka. She is a surgeon by profession who knows the area around Coorg very intimately as she knows the human body. Each novel of hers is unique in its own way. She began her literary journey with her “The Truth (almost) about Bharata” which is a campus novel. Her “The Scent of Pepper” is an elegiac novel which is a sprawling saga about the Kaleyanda clan. The next two novels, Mango-coloured Fish and On Wings of Butterflies, sagged under their polemical weight. “The Hills of Angheri “ is a simple narrative which tells the story of strongly determined girl Nalli. Her next novel “The Story that must not be told” was shortlisted for the Man Asian Literary Prize in 2008 and also for the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature in 2012. In her latest novel “A Town Like Ours” , Nambisan takes into the lives of rural and small- town.
The delineation of women characters are of special interest in her novels. She writes about the lives of women against the backdrop of their rural setting. As Environment and feminism are the two ideologies that are intertwined in the theory of Ecofeminism, so also a fine combination of environment and feministic outlook can be seen in her novels. Hence, in this paper, I intend to study the novels of Kavery Nambisan in an ecofeministic perspective. Before that it is important to study the evolution of theory of ecofeminism and its relevance at international and national levels.

ECOFEMINISM - EVOLUTION & THEORY

Feminist thought gained impetus from Women’s Movement of 1960s. Though Mary Wollstonecraft’s “A Vindication of Women’s Rights” (1792) was the first treatise on women’s inequality in society, it took a long time for the culmination of feminist thought. After 1960s feminism developed in different directions with the influence of theories of Marxism, Post Structuralism, Deconstruction and Post colonialism and thus, it acquired different shades. A combination of feminist and ecological thinking resulted in the birth of one of the feminisms called “Ecofeminism”.

The term Ecofeminism was coined in 1974 by Francoise d’Eaubonne in her book Le Feminisme ou la Mort [Feminism or Death published in 1974]. In 1993 essay entitled “Ecofeminism: Toward Global Justice and Planetary Health”, Greta Gaard and Lori Gruen outlined the “ecofeminist framework”.

Some theorists call it as third wave of feminism while some of them put it in the general category of ecology. But with globalization and urbanization in the present world, its trajectories have become varied. As there is no one feminism so also there is no one specific ecofeminism. As Ken Warren puts it “An Ecofeminist perspective is thereby structurally pluralistic, inclusivist and contextualist, emphasizing through concrete example the crucial role context plays in understanding sexist and naturist practice”.

Some of the eminent voices of ecofeminism are Rosemary Radford Ruether, Ivone Gebara, Vandana Shiva, Susan Griffin, Alice Walker, Starhawk, Sallie McFague, Luisah Teish, Sun Ai Lee-Park, Paula Gunn Allen, Greta Gaard, Karen Warren and Andy Smith.

Ecofeminism is based on the precept that the domination and oppression of women is directly related to the social mentality that leads to the abuse of natural environment. As such the ecofeminism sees a parallel between the devaluation of earth and the devaluation of
women. It further postulates that all forms of oppression are connected and that structures of oppression must be addressed in their totality. Oppression of the natural world and of women by patriarchal power structures must be examined together or neither can be confronted fully. These socially constructed oppressions formed out of the power dynamics of patriarchal systems. Thus, the goal of ecofeminist philosophy is to develop alternative, non-dominating solutions that will value, celebrate and defend women and nature thereby building a safe, secure and better societies.

ECOFEMINISM-INDIAN CONTEXT

Ecofeminism in the west is chiefly related to gender and environment in ideological terms. In India it is more complex as the environmental conservation and struggles for survival point out the fact that caste, class and gender issues are closely interlinked. We can view ecofeminism in different perspectives thus enhancing its scope.

Indian societies are chiefly agrarian in nature and hence, women who play a vital role in agricultural operations are closely related to their environment. They have an intimate knowledge of nature. But with the colonial intervention and capitalist development, production in traditional Indian societies was disrupted. It resulted in a capitalist economy dominated by men. Women were pushed into the domestic sphere and were made responsible mainly for reproducing the work force and social relations. Thus the identity of women was totally messed up.

Under the capitalist system, reproduction is subordinate to production, and the sustainability of nature is ignored. Under socialism however production is to satisfy people’s need, not people’s greed. According to this view, in the transition to socialist ecology, the priorities of capitalism would be reversed with emphasis on reproduction and nature, rather than production being central. Thus reproduction of life itself becomes the focus of these ecofeminists.

The most famous advocate of ecofeminism in India is Vandana Shiva. Though her approach appears to be of radical nature, her critique of the entire development model and its effect on environment, positions her in the category of ecofeminists of socialist framework.

Shiva critiques modern science and technology as the root cause for the perpetration of violence against women and nature. This resulted in a shift from the traditional Indian
Philosophy which sees nature as a living and creative process, the “feminine principle”, from which all life arises. Under the disguise of development nature has been exploited mercilessly and the feminine principle was deprived of its erstwhile functions of activity, creativity and sanctity of life, but was considered passive and as a mere resource. This has led to marginalization, devaluation, displacement and ultimately the dispensability of women.

Through her analysis, Shiva brings out the connections between the different development perspectives, the process of change brought about by the development and its impact on the environment and the people dependent on it for their subsistence.

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When the relationship between environment and female characters of Nambisan are examined through the ecofeministic lens, Nanji’s portrayal in “The Scent of Pepper” attracts us the most. Two aspects of the novel “The Scent of Pepper” are interesting. One- the picturesque and tranquil nature of Coorg. Coorg is famous for coffee plantations and hilly areas inhabited by robust people who identify themselves as nature’s people. Here, Nature is treated as a force to reckon when the coffee yield decreases as the ancestors have been angered, “There will be no escaping the anger of our ancestors. Kodugu will be punished”. Different festivals are celebrated to rejoice the nature’s bounty and power.

Two - the character of Nanji. Nambisan integrates the character of Nanji seamlessly into the novel and every character is related to her. Nanji enters the family of Kaleyanda’s by marrying Bailyanna. She is not even asked her consent before her marriage but she is simply discarded off by her family as a waste commodity. In spite of that Nanji proves her mettle and emerges as a strong woman. She dutifully begets 13 children (reproducing children is considered the sole purpose of a woman) but finally lives with Subbu who is born with a pair deformed legs but becomes perfect later.

What is more interesting about Nanji is her perfect control of her internal and external environments. She has an insatiable thirst to work. No sorrow can stop her from working relentlessly. Like mother nature, she is bestowed with enormous patience with which she deftly handles her household work and agricultural operations with equal ease. Moreover, she feels her roots strongly fixed in Coorg. Nambisan’s nativity and interconnectedness with Coorgi environment translates effectively into the shaping of Nanji as she is always seen working the pliant soil with her hands and making it as worthy as possible. Through the
character of Nanji, Nambisan appreciates the great strength of Coorgi women to withstand all suffering and hardships and their capacity to outlive their husbands.

Nanji takes the first step of extending her domain from cooking to the external environment. Thus a sense of responsibility and unbreakable bond with her environment are the qualities that Nanji displays throughout her life.

The entry of British planters into the place creates a turbulence in the internal and external environments of Nanji. The wife of British Planter Clara gets attracted to Baliyanna. Of course, both Baliyanna and the British Planter die later leaving Clara to leave for England. The British Capitalism disturbs the traditional society of Coorg in all ways. Coorg gets commercialized and people start adoring and emulating the culture of the British blindly.

Earlier people used to love trees but now people started cutting down trees and the fine sensibility that they had was lost. The capitalist concerns ruined nature and it is constantly stripped to support man’s development and nourishment.

Amidst all this, Nambisan has portrayed the character of Nanji so well that becomes a magnet that draws the attention of the reader towards her strength, integrity and practical approach to her life. The life of Nanji is very much connected with nature and her culture. She also succeeds in developing in her son Subbu a fine sensibility towards nature. He also feels a strong emotional bond with his place and is contented to stay there and carry on the agricultural operation at Coorg. But he feels sad at Coorg getting commercialized and people undermining nature in moving towards materialistic and hedonistic thought.

Moving on to Nalli in The “Hills of Angheri”, is like moving on to another generation of women. Nalli is a village girl who strongly determines to become a doctor and struggles in her way to reach her goal. She is always in love with the beautiful hills of Angheri and likes to be with them throughout her life. She wishes to start a hospital in her own village and serve her village people.

Nalli’s journey of becoming a doctor compels her to leave the village of Angheri. But she remains bound to its expansive landscape alternately turbulent and gentle throughout her life. She is caught in between the demands of her career and the lure of the complex life of the village, to the ins and outs of medical training and the trials of the medical life. But she never forgets her roots. This is in fact the prominent feature of the characters of Nambisan.
If Nalli of “The Hills of Angheri” is ambitious, Shari of “Mango-Coloured Fish” is confused about her identity in the society. Discomfort of a woman in the highly structured society is the main theme of mango coloured fish. In dominant patriarchal societies like those in India, a woman acquire identity only with her marriage. In such societies there is a little room for a woman’s self identity. Moreover, the criteria for marriage are wealth and social security. Love is not an essential requisite.

Shari’s mother is a dominating personality who consistently wants her daughters to be like her. Shari’s older sister is a “perfect daughter” and her older brother is not a perfect son. So also Shari is also not a perfect daughter. In a state of confusion Shari sets on a journey to understand what she wants to escape from. This confusion is a typical characteristic of an educated woman in our societies where a woman’s social personality is created at the cost of her individual personality. They are caught in a dilemma between the traditional organized life filled with role playing and the western influenced modern life.

Nambisan makes Shari’s narration move on in a confessional mode and emphasizes myth of beauty, insincerity of upper-middle class aspirations and an obscure pursuit for meaning in life. There is a radical rejection by the protagonist Shari of traditional female role and the pretense of happy family.

The suffering of women in the hands of higher sections of the society and their pitiable situations in the slums are best exposed in “The story that must not be told”. Sitara happens to be the dwelling of unending suffering of the slumdom. Nambisan gives several instances where women are subjected to more and more pain and suffering. The suffering gets solution oriented in her “On wings of Butterflies” where a determined young woman in Panjim sets out to unite “the world’s largest minority”, women to fight against their suffering. It creates ripples in the lives of thousands across the country: teenagers, career women, housewives and many.

Thus the novels of Kavery Nambisan encompass the various issues of women in relation to their environment(internal-external, rural-urban) and try to find out solutions for themselves or for the society.
References:


