

An Eco-Feminist Reading Of Selected Stories of Sara Joseph

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ABSTRACT: *co-feminism represents the union of deep ecology and feminism. Eco-feminism can be perceived as a practical movement for social change that discerns the inter-connection among all forms of oppression. Sara Joseph, the Malayalam writer, is a feminist and an activist. She shows strong eco-feminist pre-occupations in several of her stories. Her collections of stories such as 'KaadinteSangeetham' (The Music of the Woods) and 'KaadithuKandaayoKaantha' (Have you Seen the Woods, my Love) hold forest in their titles themselves. For Sara Joseph, feminism is a tool to attack all forms of injustice. In theStories of Sara Joseph we can see a writer full of concern for the degradation of Women and Nature.*

KEY WORDS: *Eco-feminism, Injustice, Degradation*

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Eco Feminism is an environmentalist perspective that figures gender into the analysis of why and how human presence threatens its own environment. The primary aim of this movement is to eliminate all forms of dominations. In fact eco-feminism represents the union of Deep Ecology and Feminism. Deep Ecology examines the symbolic, psychological, and ethical patterns of destructive relations of humans with Nature and examines how to replace this with a life-affirming culture, while feminism concentrates on the connection between the domination of Nature and Women?

Simon de Beauvoir was the first Feminist who wrote on the Nature –Women link (the Second Sex). She pointed out that it was in the male-dominated cultures that Nature became theOther. The woman was found to be similar to Nature and thus she too became theother. Thus both nature and woman became strange to Men who believed that he was building up cultures by making Nature yield to him/by transcending the womanish instincts. Thus developed the binaries between Mother Nature on the one hand and man-made culture on the other. According to Beauvoir, Man's destruction of Nature is psychological too, for man wants to forget his dependence and indebtedness to the mother who gave him life and brought him up. The power to create belonged only to woman and Nature; the man-made culture is Man's effort to transcend the natural creativity of woman/nature. Destroying the woods and mountains of Nature, he built up civilizations to prove his ability to create

Eco Feminism can be perceived as 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 etc. This connection is illustrated through the female values of reciprocity, nurturing and cooperation which are present both among women and in Nature. Against binary divisions such as self/other, culture/nature, man/woman, humans/animals, and white/non -white, eco feminist theory asserts that human identity is shaped by more fluid relationships and by an acknowledgement of both connection and difference.

Vandana Siva in 'Staying Alive' suggested that, "Women, the third world and nature become under developed, first by definition and then through the process of colonization, in reality"(p.40) Francois de Eubonne, the French Feminist who established "Ecology-Feminism Center" viewed that man was responsible for the damage caused to earth and that only woman could save the earth from him. Eco-feminism aims at creating a world without gender distinctions –a world that will see both men and women as human beings...More recently, the eco feminist theorists have extended their analysis to consider the interconnections between sexism, the domination of Nature(including animals),and also racism and social inequalities. Consequently, it is now better understood as a movement working against the interconnected oppressions of gender, race, class and nature.

But radical Feminists are of the opinion that the identification of women with Nature, reinforces the Earth Mother stereotype and thereby revives the "essentialism" and 'romanticization' of women they have fought

so hard. In spite of them, eco-feminism has now developed into four major divisions –Spiritual, Social, Cultural and Socialist – all the four resisting the Colonial Power Politics of man over Nature and Woman alike.

Eco-Feminism simultaneously celebrates the interconnectedness and diversity- life is a web, not a hierarchy; within it diversity is essential for both healthy ecosystems and healthy societies. We are all different, but no one's difference is more important than another's. Since our very differences are valuable, all forms of domination are unhealthy. But it must be mentioned here that all Feminists do not approve of Eco-feminism. For instance, Janet Biehl considers eco-feminism to be incoherent, contradictory and sharply at odds with itself.

Many of the Writers in Indian Literature drew inspiration from Nature. In the words of Vandana Siva in 'Staying Alive', women in India are the intimate part of Nature, both in imagination and in practice. At one level, Nature is symbolized as the embodiment of the Feminine to produce life and provide sustenance (p.37). If the Romantic writers were attracted by the sensuous beauty of Nature and founded pathetic fallacy, the Modernists were attracted by the cruel side of nature-nature as unsympathetic with man's predicament. The post-modernists are aware of the predicament in which man has placed Nature. In 1990's, by the coming of consumerist cultures, destruction of environment increased day by day, for the victims of this culture lacked foresight into the future. Among the major women writers in India who write in English, Anitha Desai, Arundhati Roy, Kamala Markandeya and Kiran Desai are some who have been praised as Writers who have ecological concerns. But perhaps more of ecological concerns can be found in the Writers of regional Languages in India; they remain invisible due to lack of translations of their works.

In Malayalam fiction P.Valsala is held to be the first woman to show concern for environment. Her debut novel 'Nellu' (The Paddy) as well as some of her stories like 'Varalcha' (Drought), and 'Panguru Pushpathinte Theyn' (the Honey of the Panguru Flower) show strong eco-feminist features. Sara Joseph is yet another Woman Writer in Malayalam who shows strong environmental concerns in her stories. In the stories of other Women Writers such as Chandramathi, A.S Priya, Gracy, K.R Meera and so on. Issues of ecology figure more as an undertone than as an overt concern. This may be because they are writers rather than activists. But, Sara Joseph is a feminist and activist and hence strong eco-feminist preoccupations can be seen in several of her stories. Her collections of stories like 'Kaadinte Sangeetham' (the Music of the Woods) and 'Kaadithu Kandayo Kaantha' (Have You Seen These Woods, My Love?) project the forest in their titles themselves.

Chavunilam (Dead Land), one of her best stories, portrays the dead face of Earth, killed by the fighting brothers who were in cited to fight each other by some bearded persons dressed in, ochre-shade clothes on one side and long white-liveried priests on the other. They make the Earth the land of dead. Here the words of Susan Griffin seem to find an echo. "We are the bird's eggs, flowers, butterflies, rabbits, cows, sheep's; we are caterpillars, we are leaves of ivy and springs of wallflower. We are women. We rise from the wave, we are gazelle and doe, elephant and whale, lilies and roses and peach, we are air, we are flame, we are oyster and pearl, we are girls, we are women and Nature. And he says, he cannot hear us speak. (Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her).

The fighting 'brothers' refuse to hear the voice of Nature; it is the Mother who hears it and resurrects the land. True to Eco-feminist theories, Sara Joseph makes the woman, the savior of the Nature. The mother in the story, delivers her third baby on the blood-smearred soil and makes him plant the seed of the Bread Tree (Appa Maram). It can easily be connected to the Eco-restoration Movement of the Eco-Feminist, where women take the initiative in making dried-up rivers and trees reborn.

The inter-connectedness between Nature that is destroyed and the woman who is dominated can be seen in Sara Joseph's stories. In 'Shaapayaanam' (The Journey under Curse) the woman characters' name is significantly, Bharathi Amma, and her journey is in search of pure water for her husband and children. She cannot use the water in the well of Koman Nair as she finds in the water long strands of girls hair and broken pieces of their nails-interconnecting the exploitation of Woman and Nature by the Man. In 'Ashoka' and 'Thaykulam' Sara Joseph tells the subverted story of Seetha. Seetha is born of the Earth, and as such, is the Daughter of the Earth. The wrong done to her by both Rama and Ravana is automatically linked to the degradation found in Nature.

The classic example for eco-feminism is Sara Joseph's story 'Vanadurga' which equals the destruction of Nature with the destruction of Women. Vanadurga is the family deity of Anita, and Anita preserved the name Vanadurga to be given to her daughter whenever a daughter would be born. But she is forced to engage in a fight with her sister Sushama, regarding a boundary dispute over the rights on their ancestral land. Sushama wins the case legally and cuts off all the 'useless' trees in her share of the property. When the trees fall one by one, Nature seems to weep and rain comes down as her tear drops.

When the night sets in, Anita sits alone in her house, tired as she had not eaten anything on that day and has an encounter with a thin little girl. Anita finds her wearing a grey dress torn from neck to knee, soaked in the rain, shivering like a leaf, shaking with fear; the little girl is bleeding from a wound on her throat and also from between her thighs. As Anita tends to her wounds, the girl announces her name as 'Vanadurga' –the name of

Anita's beloved Bhagavathi, her Goddess, Mother of all colors in the world (p.96). Anita tries to feed her, but she cannot eat, as her mouth is bleeding. Next morning Anita takes her to a hospital as she had high fever and was coughing and groaning. The doctor curses 'the beasts' who have reduced the little girl to this state. Durga succumbs to death and Anita places the little body in her share of the land where a statue of Buddha with shattered head lies sleeping covered in the soil. Anita lays Durga on the wet Earth covered with wind, rain and leaves. Nature thou art, and to nature returns.

The story ties the plight of nature with that of a little girl who undergoes the same exploitation. The sufferings and the problems of both the Nature and the woman have been described beautifully by the writer. As Vanadurga's body is covered with wind, rain and leaves, the union of exploited woman and exploited Nature is complete.

In 'Nilavu Ariyunnu' (The Moonlight Knows) the protagonist is a man, but the story reveals the ecological concerns of the writer. Unnikrishnan, a resident of Mumbai, is going about on his search of pure water. He feels that everything is unclean and has to be cleansed in water. He thirsts for water, but sees blood everywhere – under the tram and the bus, on the road and rail. When he returns from the office, he rubs his feet on the hard stone to remove the blood stains, and he bruises his legs. When he gets his salary, he washes all currency notes. Before kissing his wife he washes his mouth. When he writes to his mother, he finds the words coming out unclean and he washes the pen. He wants to go back to his village, and, when he reaches there, he takes the holy texts and idols from the prayer room to the well and starts washing them. Unnikrishnan wanders crying along the river glistening in the moonlight. "He thirsted for water, like a mad dog driven away from memories and liquids (p.3). At the end of the story people go searching for Unnikrishnan, but he has already cleansed himself drowning in the river.

Mazha (The Rain) is another story dealing with both women and nature. It is the story of Padma, who like rain that wails and screams, weeps thinking of her life. Her husband is a hard hearted fellow, engaged in his own activities, completely ignoring the mindscape of Padma. While her children are busy, making 'vanjis' (little boats) to play in rain, Padma tries to console herself. Suddenly she sees a fledgling, not even the size of a hen's egg, soaked and shivering in the rain. It reminds her, of her little daughter and she picks it up. Padma's husband gets angry at her and shouts at her. She too bursts out, enraged – "I'll be dead, killed! By all of you! (p-130). Frustrated, she crushes the fledgling and kills it. The story ends when she sees the fledgling on her daughter's little face and the sin she has committed pins her down. She hates herself, and being isolated and lonely, she wants to die. Here, the woman is the rain that comes down in torrents, but she is unlike the rain as she cannot express her pent-up emotions. She longs for love and support from her husband, but he never bothers even to understand her. He exploits her body and does not care for the mind. The crushing of the fledgling hints at the extremity to which a woman, frustrated and helpless, can go. But Sara Joseph seems to stress the role of mother here, as Padma sees her own daughter in the crushed body of the little bird.

Sara Joseph writes fearlessly about the gender-based, the marginalized and the body-bound woman in her stories. Her women characters rebel against the family and all establishments. Feminism, for her, is a tool to attack the injustice against women in society. And as an eco-feminist, she equates woman and nature and finds the injustice to one as the injustice to the other. In the stories analyzed above, reveal a Writer full of concern for the degradation of Women and Nature. Man's exploitation of both is portrayed with alarming sincerity by Sara Joseph in her stories.

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