

ECO FEMINIST INTERVENTIONS IN KERALA: A JOURNEY THROUGH MALAYALAM LITERATURE

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Abstract:

Nature and Women have been intertwined through a web of living and providing, connected through work, mind and body. Ecofeminism which explores this intersection between women and nature through philosophy and daily living concentrates on the domination and oppression of women and the exploitation and degradation of the natural world. The western theoretical notions of ecofeminism and its different tenets framed a proper grounding for the emergence of Ecofeminism in Kerala. The paper makes an attempt to trace the advent of ecofeminism in Kerala and its impacts on the various genres of Malayalam literature. Through the analysis of the ecofeminist interventions by women in Kerala, the paper also tries to argue that ecofeminist ideologies and practices are not restrained to the western movements and writings and alone.

Key Words: *Ecofeminism, Kerala, Women, Nature.*

Since time immemorial Nature and Women have been intertwined through a web of living and providing, connected through work, mind and body. The roles of women as mothers and caretakers of nature, Mother Earth and Goddesses have been flushed out through time. Historically women have had a faint access power in the outside world, they had been excluded from the mainstream and their roles were always seen as secondary. Rather it can be said that women have been generally submissive and gentle as nature has been. Ecofeminism which explores this intersection between women and nature through philosophy and daily living concentrates on the domination and oppression of women and the exploitation and degradation of the natural world. According to Greta Gaard, an American ecofeminist scholar and activist, the basic premise of Ecofeminism is that “the system which sanctions oppressions such as those based on race, class, sexuality, physical abilities is the same system which authorizes the oppression of nature”.

The fundamentalist ideologies of deep ecologists, the romantic appeal of the spiritual ecologists, the ecological overshadow of the social and the socialist ecologists, the environmental principles and contemporary science are all effectively used in the making of Ecological feminism or Ecofeminist theory which is exactly the integration of the feminist and ecological principles. According to Karren J Warren, the characteristic nature of Ecofeminism is ecological, feminist and multicultural. Defining this relationship between feminist and ecological thinking, the eminent French feminist Francois d' Eaubonne coined the term Ecofeminism in her 1974 book *Feminism or Death* where she has explained the important role of feminism in addressing environmental and gender issues. Eaubonne asserts that the male control of industrial production and women sexuality leads to the twin crisis such as environmental annihilation and overpopulation. Against the timid ecologists who fought for environmental protection, Eaubonne insisted for an 'Egalitarian Management' free from the masculine centered activities of patriarchal society. Hence ecofeminism is not defined as a specific demography or theory where as it is an ideology of the integration, sustainability and protection, of earth and mankind.

The economic prejudices and values set against women and nature generally classify them as

unproductive. It is generally believed that production take place only when it is intervened by technology which can destroy life. A stable clean river is not considered to be a productive resource unless it is developed with dams. Women, who use the river to quench the water needs of family and society, are not engaged in a fruitful labour unless replaced with engineering skills or services of water management. Natural forests too stay infertile till they are urbanized into a monoculture plantation of lucrative sort. Organic farming based on earthly cycles of renewability is considered unproductive as it breeds poverty. Gy of the integration, sustainability and protection, of earth and mankind. In *Staying Alive* she echoes:

The displacement of women from productive activity based on the expansion of development was rooted largely in the manner in which development projects appropriated or destroyed the natural resource base for the production of sustenance and survival. It destroyed women's productivity both by removing, land, water and forest from their management and control as well as through the ecological destruction of soil, water and vegetation systems so that nature's productivity and renewability were impaired.(1988:21)

Kerala, located in the tropical Malabar Coast of south western India is comparatively small when compared to other Indian states. The census of India studies that Kerala has a literacy rate of 94 percent in which female literacy fraction is higher. The composite multicultural tradition of Kerala characterized by 'Unity in diversity' is apparent in various fields such as arts, literature, religion, architecture and language. The land has also contributed immensely to the diverse fields of music, painting, sculpture, theatre and handicrafts. The National Geographic Traveler has called Kerala as 'one of the ten paradises of the world' for its illustrious eco tourist initiatives, attractive backwaters, beaches, and mountain ranges and for its distinctive cultural tradition. Kerala state's tourism outlines encourages 'ecologically sustained tourism' which centres on regional traditional customs, wild adventures, volunteering activities promoting local population. The biodiversity of Kerala is rich with the paddy fields, plantation crops, coconut groves, spice gardens, tropical rain forests and moderate climate. The flora and fauna of Kerala is a home for a variety of plant and animal species. Thus the pristine natural beauty of Kerala ensures a proper survival of the ecosystem.

The Ministry of Environment and Forest Department reports that the main hazards to Kerala's natural biodiversity are infringement to forest territory, plundering, unlawful gathering of non-timber, forest flames, deforesting and sand mining. All environmental disasters largely affect women and children and unprivileged sections that are the most vulnerable and hence they play a vital part in administering and conserving the biodiversity, land, water and the natural resources. Kerala had a long heritage of women involvement in preserving and protecting natural with pioneers such as C.K Janu, Sugathakumari, Mayilamma Sebastian and Sarah Joseph. Vanadana Shiva affirms that women in Plachimada, a small Kerala village in Palakkad were successful in closing a Coco Cola plant. Plachimada Village situated in the 'rice bowl of Kerala', Palakkad district faced severe water shortage when the Hindustan Coco Cola Beverages Limited got sanction to set up a bottling plant. The plant was within the premises of the paddy fields, which required ground water for agriculture. The setting up of the plant had adverse effects as the water turned blackish making it unfit for drinking purposes. There were similar incidents in the Kasargode district of Kerala with the spraying of a dangerous chemical pesticide in Cashew plantations called Endosulfan. Rajendran states that the revelations of Rachel Carson in *Silent Spring* regarding the hazardous impacts of using chemical pesticides were then not given attention. Her findings seemed to be true decades later with the happenings in Kerala. The aerial spraying of Endosulfan was a threat to the human and non-human world.

An Anti-Dam Movement which surfaced a new start in ecological preservation in Kerala is the

Silent Valley Project. Silent Valley forest is a biodiversity hotspot surrounding the Western Ghats of Palakkad district, Kerala. The forest is rich with unusual and rare species, birds, butterflies and natural flowers and fauna. The Kerala Government's decision to build a dam in Silent Valley for Hydro Electric Power project raised criticisms and remonstrations from scientists, academicians, NGO's, KSSP (Kerala ShastraSahityaParishad) and PrakirtiSamrakshnaSamiti (an organization of writers) and Silent Valley team as it could disturb the biosphere. The indigenous tribes and Adivasi women rebelled for the preservation and protection of the forest as they mainly depended on the forests produces for their living. Women took active interest in the movement and the verses of the Malayalam poet Sugathakumari instilled in women the urge to safeguard nature. Thus the Anti-Coca Cola strife of Plachimada, the Silent Valley Movement and the Anti Endosulfan Movement are paradigms of women's participation in environmental preservation that attach to the fundamental tenants of ecofeminism.

Ecofeminism (ParisthithikaSreevadam) is an emerging literary field in Kerala and although at present there are numerous writers who pursue the ecofeminist lane, there are no many critics who employ it as a literary device. The social positioning of women, her economic independence and her dignity has attained greater ascendancy in the society after the independence. With the execution of widespread universal education in Kerala women have commenced to affirm their rights and their presence is seen in literature and in other cultural genres. But nonetheless the mainstream political Parties of Kerala like the Congress party and the Marxist Communist Party have not made any significant mark in creating environment awareness or in addressing cardinal affairs of the present day existence. The ecological consciousness in connection with the awareness about the inferior status of women is the cause for the surfacing of ecofeminism in Kerala. The flowering of the feminist writing with a definite distinctiveness and strength began in Kerala in the later decades of the twentieth century with the influence of the western feminist movement. Similar movements which took place in Kerala with the intention of women's liberation couldn't condition the mainstream society as they were mainly urban centered and were limited to marginal groups. These acts had made notable invasions in the social, political and the literary life styles of Kerala.

The protest for the conservation of rivers, natural world and animals, the fight against sex scandals, demolishing of hills and opposing mining in paddy lands are all ecofeminist concerns. The literary writings too saw the growth of Ecofeminism. Valsala, P. Chandramathi, MadhaviKutty, K R Meera, Sugathakumari, Arundathi Roy, Anita Nair and Sarah Joseph are known as the few ecofeminist writers in Kerala. Gita's works *KannadikalUdakuunnathenthinu* (Why Should we break the Mirrors) and *DevadoodikalManjupovathu* (The Divine Emissaries Fade Away) are the two seminal works on ecofeminist literatures in Kerala. The gradual progress of ecofeministic concerns was mentioned in P.E.Usha' *SthreevadavaumParisthithiyum* (Feminism and environment) and in Dr .S. Saradakutty's chapter titled *Paristhithikasthreevadam* (Ecofeminism). Ashitha, Priya, Dhanya Raj, V.Shyama, Sithara, V.M.Girija, Kanimol, Sushama, and Prameela Devi are some of the recent writers who explored ecofeminist stylistics in their writings. Their works of all these writers mirror the power of women's emotions in relation to nature and inspire them to sustain and conserve the biosphere as they are the ones who are mostly afflicted by degradation of the environment.

Short stories formed the most striking branches of Ecofeminist writings and a number of writers have enhanced this stream. The various thoughts rendered through the short stories like, depicting nature as a source of relief, the identity of women in the form of Mother Earth, the effects of western developmental patterns all inculcates in us a love for the land, rural community, customs and values. Sarah Joseph's *Papathara* was a milestone in her fictional career as well as in the field of Malayalam shorts stories. Conversant by a deep sagacity of empathy, these stories illustrate her hostility to all edifices and institutions that ratify power whether it is the domestic, the ecclesiastical, or the bureaucracy and strives to naturalize coercion wherever it occurs. A palpable return to the nestles of nature and its preservation is

also evident in her stories. P.Valsalamaki uses the scenic beauty of Wayanad, as the fictional locale for all her short stories. Her stories *Venal Mazha* (summer showers) and *prayanam* (Journey) highlight the experiences of the radical leftists of Kerala who fought for the forests and also showcase the want to resist the annihilation of the environment. *Erandakalis* said to be the best ecofeminist short story where a river gets pictured as an ecosystem and the life of the protagonist too runs smoothly in its rhythmic flow. The greed for industrialization and sex, obliteration of river and deforestation were the serious subjects raised in the story.

P.Chandramathi, another ecofeminist writer of Kerala is known for her techniques of allusions and symbolism. She uses humour as a tantalizer of women's' liberation. Her stories *Aryavarthanam* and *Devigramam* warn us against the adversities of the western cultural and traditional ethics on Kerala culture and also trace the pitiful face of women subjugated by the androcentric culture. Certain feminist writers like Priya A.S, Sithara Dhanya Raj, Shyma and Ashitha have tried for novelty and variety but cannot rise to the rank of Sarah Joseph and Valsala. Elsy Tharamangalam, a diasporic writer has published a collection of short stories named *VazhukunnaJeevikaludeDevatha* (the Goddess of Slimy Creatures) and *VelichathinteGopuram* (The Tower of Light) awakens our consciousness of excessive anthropocentrism and how it becomes hazardous for survival. All the short stories bring forth the notion that Mother Earth is not for extirpation and exploitation but for a peaceful sustenance of themselves, families and societies.

Sarah Joseph, P.Valsala, M.T.Vaudevan Nair, Sethu, V.P.Shivakumar and E.V.Sreedharan are some of the writers who made momentous contributions to ecofeminist fiction. Malayalam fiction emerged primarily to correct social evils and to present images and descriptions of a virtuous and upright society. From the eighteenth century poetess ManoramaThampuratty to the contemporary short story writers like Chandramathi, A.S.Priya, and Sarah Joseph charts the emergence of the female voice in the domain of fiction. Saraswathi Amma's brave voice against the oppression of women laid a feminist foundation Malayalam fiction, and assailed male chauvinism even as it challenged the complacent, subservient, and stereotypical woman. Generally novel writing by women in Malayalam occupy very low profile. Given this, Sarah Joseph deserves special attention for carving out a niche for herself with her first novel *AlahayudePenmakkal* (Daughters of God, the Father). Many of Sarah Joseph's works display a rich assortment of motifs and characterization known for its ecofeminist perceptions. We find the origins of a holistic ecofeminist theology in the novel *AlahayudePenmakkal*. It tells the story of the endurance of women triumphing against all odds like the androcentric developments which includes the exclusion of the underprivileged. The novel creates a mythical world view with its thematic unification of the Catholic liberation theology and ecojustice of the feminine principle.

The evolving communal dynamics and the varied issues affecting Wayanadan Adivasi communities and their ties to the land helped P Valsala flush out more fictional works in ecological and feminist arenas. The novel *Nellu* (rice) published in 1972 depicts the scuffles and struggles for survival of the poor tribal folks in remote Villages where nature turns to be both inimical and welcoming at times and very often have passive significance in the natural life of the people. In an interview, P.Valsala states that her father was an employer in the Wayanadan agricultural farm, so the natural produces and the aroma of agricultural crops would forever linger in her house. The curiosity to know more about tribal clan and their lifestyles helped her create a sentimental and affectionate bond with the region. *Koomankolliis* another novel which is written in the form of *Nellu*. The predicament of women during riots and their search for self-realization are the central focus of her novels *Vilapam* (Lament) *Arum Marikunilla* (Nobody dies) and *Adigalam*. Hence most of her writings reflect the plight of Adivasi women and their fight against the exploitation and subjugation exerted by the dominant upper class. *She attempts to integrate the significance and need for preserving soil, trees, water and ecological sustenance through the ecofeminist portrayal of characters.*

The shift from rural to urban spaces shows that ecofeminism is not a static theory, isolated to

wilderness or country side landscapes alone. The dimensions of urban paranoia and madness, a manifestation of coping with the tensions of globalization and development highlight that the urban panorama also can be a space for both creation and destruction. From these studies it is clear that the women folk in Kerala are seen making momentous contribution to ecofeminist standpoints as it is a multicultural theory that tries to tie together all varied types of repression. The empowerment through Kudumbasree and self-groups in Kerala made women less reliant on men for their living. Women partake in agriculture, food cultivation, manufacturing eco-friendly goods for day today use, and promoting awareness among society. They also participate in the issues of the downtrodden and the deprived communities along with the environmental issues to end all forms of patriarchal dualism that jeopardizes the society.

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