Eco-Feminist Perspective

Select Works of Kamala Das and Sugathakumari

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Dr. Jishamole Alex

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Foreword

The text titled *Eco-Feminist Perspective: Select Works of Kamala Das and Sugathakumari* by Jishamole Alex is initiated by the need of the hour in a society where the discourses of the women and the nature are alike ridiculed and thwarted. The book is an attempt to "see into the life of" the textual world of both Kamala Das and Sugathakumari and to discover the tenuous strands of similarity between them in an otherwise distinct world view. What connects both is the primacy of nature in their literary expressions where the wholeness of the world is indeed dependent on the harmony of nature and celebration of female body. This scholarly work provides a thorough analysis of the factors that marginalize women and nature and discuss how sensitive writers represent and react to them. The Eco aesthetic history of Indian and Malayalam Literature is also surveyed to provide the necessary context for the emergence of these writers. The significant aspect of the book is that it does not stop with the appraisal of issues that befall both nature and women; instead it suggests a revival of the Vedic concept of the union of Prakriti and Purusha and the 'ethic of care' as a sure remedy for the contemporary atrocities on women and nature as suggested in the writings of Kamala Das and Sugatha Kumari. This requires shifting the position of and the perspective on women and nature by its liberation from the ideology of patriarchy and reclamation of the space *non pareil* in the cosmic scheme of things. This book is indeed a pointer to those voicing the cause of nature and women. Dr. Jishamole Alex has undoubtedly made her contribution to the narrative of nature and women in this sincere and

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impassioned expression of her eco-feminist stance. I wish Dr. Jishamole Alex's debt work all success.

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Preface

This book titled *"Eco-feminist Perspective-Select Works of Kamala Das and Sugathakumari"* focuses on the nature of representation of women and ecology in the Eco-feminist perspective with the 'female body' and 'landscape' as extended metaphors of Nature. Kamala Das who for her open and uncanny literary delineation of the female body and feminine longings have been accused as the 'Queen of Erotica' and an unbiased journey into her literary world brings to light how female body becomes a metaphor for Nature in her writings. Her memoirs recount the lost glories of the matriarchal culture that thrived in a pristine milieu. A probe into her highly autobiographical memoirs reveals how she experiences an ecological epiphany in the serene Nalapat environs, which is also an affirmation of the Earth-Women association that Eco-feminism extols. Her short stories are the other works where she exposes the debased female body, as a social inscript, so construed by patriarchy and she makes her rebel heroines make a war cry against their stereotyped existence.

Sugathakumari, one of the most acclaimed writers in Malayalam and an environmental and social activist presents nature as a context and co-text in her literary works which also include a set of non-fiction essays, a genre specific to Ecofeminist literature. This work investigates the nature of the perception of Nature, as pure and polluted, in the various phases of her literary career.

Both these writers celebrate the female body as a metaphor for Goddess/ Nature where violence is supplanted by worship. Through her works, Das attempts to 'unscript' the scripted 'inscripts' of patriarchy about the female.

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Landscape as a metaphor is employed in the analysis of Sugathakumari's concept of Nature which in turn is extended to the pristine Nature/debased Nature binary to negate violence which is used a construct in the context of ecological development.

Since it is a comparative and an interdisciplinary study, I have listed all the primary works of both the writers chosen for study. Required portions from the vernacular writings of both these writers have been translated by me for citation for which the English translations are not available.

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I can never thank enough my beloved husband Jobin Joseph for inspiring and patiently bearing with me all through this venture. I remember fondly my little son and daughter who showed great understanding and made such sacrifices to help me pursue my task. I thank my dear mother for her great emotional support. I wish to dedicate this work to the fond memory of my dear departed father whose dreams I endeavour to fulfil.

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Jishamole Alex

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Redefining Ecofeminism: The Indian Scenario

Introduction

As Indian heritage cradles many of the postulates preached by Deep Ecology from time immemorial, it adopts Ecofeminism as a springboard for human survival and well being in the revised context of modern world. To understand this new equation of Man/Woman/Earth, it is imperative that one traces the pattern underlying the evolution of Indian feminism and its journey toward Ecofeminism.

Mapping out the history of 'women's expressive aesthetic' (Shahani & Shoba 3814), against the Indian background with all its social, linguistic and cultural complexities, is at once a nerve – racking yet interesting proposition. Homi Bhabha argues that "nations...fully realise their horizons in the mind's eye"(1). Shashi Deshpande says, "I am a writer, and happen to be living here. So I write about the part I live in and what I get from this place. It is India,yes,but there is also Karnataka, South India, Bangalore, call it Jayanagar if you want to. Certainly not India"(web). There are many other similar views on these diverse cultural streams, that roll the nation into one. To Raja Rao "India is not a country (*desa*); it is a perspective (*darsana*); it is not a climate, but a mood (*rasa*).... And in that *rasa* he that liveth, liveth in India" (17- 18).

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India cannot claim an indigenous genre of national literature because of its unusual cultural position and its exposure to a current of foreign influences from time to time, with some of them having deeply engraved on the nation's canon making. As a result, the prevailing practice here is to endorse, what is proposed and promoted by the Western academia and institutions.

> [But] it cannot, and should not, be read as the literatures of Canada, Australia or New Zealand are read. Being historically, ethnically, racially and culturally different, this intellectual discourse of the subcontinent needs to be read differently—that is, according to perspectives and theories that allows space for examining indigenous cultural configurations, subaltern expressions, gender constructions rooted in space/ place, and hybrid linguistic structures (Rahman &Ansari 24-25).

Among this complex and complicated literary procedures which include both writing and reading, one may find it tough to locate the place of women, either as writers or as readers. Just as the world's history of women's writing was often black-listed and sidelined by the patriarchal forces (who monopolised the cultural scenario), the Subcontinent too offers no different paradigm. Almost all genres, ranging from poetry to drama, suggest that the spectrum of Indian women's writing is splendid and vibrant, from the pre-historic period itself, to the days of post-colonialism and 'third world environmentalism'(Shiva qtd in Shoba 47) of today.

Women's writing in India, like its male stream has been subjected to all kinds of influences, both cultural and social, native and foreign, facilitated by an unprecedented exposure in all the fields related to women's enterprises from the domestic sphere to the social tier. The most telling drawback has been the dearth of a historical link and the insufficiency of suitable and helpful tools in delineating the track of their literary output and the nature of their literary perceptions further heightened by the misplaced ideologies or political

manipulations at different times.

> While a plethora of women's fiction (in Indian English) gets published and marketed, there is the absence of a serious, sustained body of feminist literary theory — theory that can provide some basis for a critique as its Anglo-American-French counterparts have offered the last two decades.... A contributing factor to this rigorous lack of women's fiction in English might lie in the fact that the privileged English writer writes mainly (though necessarily always) from a privileged position to the privileged English-speaking reader and consequently such a writer's concerns would be issues of mainstream feminism. Such a body of writing might not therefore lend itself readily to alternative feminist criticism which attempts to look at women's writing as writing from the margin (Shahani & Shoba 3813).

The time is ripe to assert their independence, as the Nation now owns a rich and distinct body of women's writing and related literary enterprises, some of which have even bagged many international titles, mostly for the portrayal of regionalism, like Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* (1997). The demand to evolve an indigenous method becomes a dire need to analyse what has been left unread and unnoticed hitherto, purportedly pointing to a revision of the existing canons for the sake of a better understanding of the newer happenings, both in theory and praxis.

The cartography of the Indian subcontinent is very colourful and unique, with each state and its vernacular nurturing a special cultural atmosphere within their circumference. Literary surveys testify that from the prehistoric period onwards the nation had a distinct genre of women literature, but these women of genius always stood in subservience to the dominating mainstream. Unlike the other known ancient civilisations, India was a fertile soil to many religious reformations and a contested seat for many

dynasties and legacies which in course of time have had their bang on the field of women's writing too.

The propagation of these ideas and principles in the *Vedas,* later led to many religious revivals and its waves made its mark not only on spiritual but also on the social, political and literary realms and had its repercussions on women's writings too, often signalling a historical recuperation. But the dismaying truth is that these literary output by women too remained latent or unexplored even in the revivalist surge. Satchidanandan opines:

> We now have a substantial body of women's literature, the roots of which go well into the past, from the nineteenth century and early twentieth century writers like Swarnakumari Devi and Ras Sundari Devi of Bengal, Ramabai Ranade and Lakshmibai Tilak of Marathi and Bandaru Acchamamba and Tallapragada Viswasundarama of Telugu, to the seventeenth and eighteenth century writers like the long-suppressed Muddupalanai of Telugu, Sanciya Hosanamma of Kannada, Bahinabai of Marathi and Mahlaq Bai Chanda of Urdu, to the devotional poets of 12th to 15th centuries like Akkamahadevi of Kannada, Mirabai of Gujarati, Rajastahni and Hindi, Gangasati and Ratnabai of Gujarati, Janabai of Marathi, and Atakuri Molla of Telugu. . . (37).

The next instance of women's writing dates from the Sangam period (ca. 100B.C.—A.D. 250). *Abithana Chintamani* is the first encyclopedia on women's literature which states that the Sangam poetry too bears testimony to a woman's special mode of life, with all the tender feelings and images as her attributes. Sangam literature does not speak much gender politics, probably because of the influence of a goddess cult and also because the Dravidian culture granted women a supreme position.

Even language was appropriated by the privileged. Sanskrit, was considered to be the language of divine descent.

History testifies that many women "such as the talented Avantisundari, the wife of Rajasekhara, a nineth-century poet were forbidden to use Sanskrit as this prestigious classical language was generally regarded as the language to be used exclusively by male Brahmins" (Dasgupta 74).

The Bhakti movement of the 15th century was another major religious development of the modern times and it produced many literary experimenters among women like Mirabai. Meera Bai claims a supreme position among those writers because of her devotional hymns and her rejection of the prevailing modes of worship with males officiating all the rituals. Her popularisation of the Krishna Myth might have definitely influenced her modern successors both Kamala Das and Sugathakumari.

Women were to assume the role of historians, as evident from the example of the Mugal emperor Humayun's sister Gul Badan Begum (1523 -1603) who wrote the monumental work *Humayun Nama* (1587) which traces the history of Humayun's rule. The work in Persian was translated by Annette Beveridge, who was surprised to estimate it as "the most valuable record of the contemporary period"(Tharu &Lalita I.100). These women of letters helped to evolve certain great societal notions like the angel /lamp of the house, as propagated by the banned late 17th century Kannada writer Sanciya Honnamma's monumental work *Hadibadeya Dharma* (*Duties of a Devoted Wife*).

The Indian life was to witness the greatest influence upon it by now, through the arrival of the British. Both the country's unlearnt men and its cocooned women were cast as females. Maud Diver, a prominent Anglo- Indian writer remarked about India as "a woman – country . . . aloof, yet alluring, like one of her own purdah princesses" (Sen39).

The vernacular literature of the time amply reaffirms the fact that certain perceptions about woman as a social construct was approved by the patriarchy then. In fact their contributions along with the Gandhian notion of Mother India, was to mould "a mother-centred nationalism" which

continued to gain strength even after the achievement of Nationhood and serves till date the unrecognised axial point of Indian feminism.

Malavika Karlekar argues that Gandhi "invented the 'tradition' of new femininity, . . . to use her traditional qualities to build a new positive image" (qtd in Shah 2). In fact the essence of the Gandhian viewpoints has been influential in shaping Indian feminism in many ways:

> Gandhi's views on women and their role in society are not very different from those of the19th century reformers, in some other important ways he marks a crucial break from the tradition. The most crucial difference is that he does not see women as objects of reform, as helpless creatures deserving charitable concern. Instead, he sees them as active, self conscious agents of social change (Kishwar qtd in Shah 3).

The pre-independence phase was a period of high wave regionalism and extended patronage from the different local rulers who were fond of maintaining the intellectual discussions. To this group belongs works like Raj Lakshmi Debi's *The Hindu Wife or The Enchanted Fruit* (1876), and Krupabai Sathianandhan's *Kamala: A Story of Hindu Life* (1894) and *Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Life* (1895). Santa and Sita Chatterjee's Bengali novels *Tales of Bengal* (1922), *The Cage of Gold* (1923) and *The Garden Creeper* (1931) were translated into English (73).

Gandhiji's notion of Mother India added a new contour to the position of women that valorised the female power. This prompted many women to come to the forefront of the Indian Freedom struggle. Gandhian ideology of Mother India was a reworking of the ancient epistemology that symbolised "woman as *prakriti* or the regenerating force. . . having the innate values of motherhood, patience and endurance" (Sethi 18-19). Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's patriotic song *Vande Matharam* rendered a further emphasis to this ideal preached by Gandhi. It is argued that feminism as a movement is

rooted in the specific 'national history and culture' (Shah 2). While the Gandhian concept helped to attract many women to the forefront of the freedom movement, the British programmes of social reformation including women's education helped to redeem their deprived position. The abolition of *Sati* (1829), that'had no Vedic precedent' (Tharu &LalitaI.150), the HinduWidowRemarriage Act (1856*)* and the Age of Consent Acts of 1860, 1891 were some measures in this regard.

These reforms aimed at recasting and reshaping the minds of Indian women through education. It also helped to evolve the Indian concept of womanhood—'the Bengali *bhadramahila* (genteel woman)'which is somewhat a parallel to the emerging western "New Woman" as Urquhart (148) famously described it.

The founding of 'The Indian National Congress' was also a prominent step that thrust women to the frontline of national politics. Organisations like Women's Indian Association and All India Women's Conference (AIWC), popularised the concept of women's education.

Jana Everette identifies the following five factors that have had their influences in the making of the Indian women's movements:

"(i) The hierarchical caste system, (ii) The Hindu religion, (iii) The joint family system, (iv) Islamic rule and (v) British colonialism" (Shah5).

But it is to be remembered that all these early phases of evolution within Indian feminism got submerged into the greatest fight that the nation was putting forth, the independence struggle. With the strands of 'feminism and nationalism closely intertwined', the Indian scene had a different climate for the women's liberation here. Romila Thapar comments:

> Women's Lib does not have immediate relevance to the Indian social situation.mIt is the product of an urbanised middle class with a large

> number of women trained in professions as a result of expanding educational opportunities whose professional skills are wasted by their having to limit themselves to domestic work (Shah7).

Gandhi believed that women's soft temperament could be highlighted as a fitting tool to propagate the ideal of non-violence. Many women provided their emotional support to the freedom fighters. Rajani Alexander views:

> . . . . All over India, countless women . . . in myriad ways dealt with the introduction of new and external stimuli into a domain normally insulated from all those, the home. Much of women's involvement in the Independence movement was of this nature— based on community and home (qtd in Shah 8).

The impact of Gandhism and the influence of the Indian National Movement could be the causes attributed to the estrangement of Indian Feminism from its Western counterparts. The Gandhian influence was also something that went into the veins of the authors chosen here for study, namely Kamala Das and Sugathakumari. Kamala Das'parents, V.M.Nair and the poet Balamaniamma were higly patriotic and were the strict followers of Gandhian simplicity. Gandhi was yet another 'god'to his contemporary Indians, as scribbled by Das in her *Balyakalasmaranakal*: "That afternoon, while my grandmother was working on the *Charka*, I asked her "why do we have Gandhi's photo in every room"? Isn't Gandhiji, a God for us"?, she replied(565). Elsewhere she remembers how the patriotic fervour filled the very atmosphere of her residence in Calcutta and Nalapat. The women of Nalapat denounced the luxury of Silk dress, and used to wear the white khadar. Das' father would remind his children to hold Gandhian principle of austerity as their dear ideal. In *Varshangalkku Munpu* Das recollects how her mother lived an ascetic life amidst luxury in their Calcutta residence (806).