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[www.the-criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com)  
[criterionejournal@gmail.com](mailto:criterionejournal@gmail.com)

***Water, the Cry of Women and the Ganges***  
**(From Ecofeministic Perspective)**

**Madhavi A. Moharil**  
Dept. of English  
Rajkumar Kewalramani Kanya M.V.,  
Nagpur.

A sensitive mind possesses a capacity to feel the pains in the society. Literature is the mirror image of the social set up. Literary Theories and Criticism are the results of the continuous speculation of the talented and matured minds. A man is the creation of the Nature. But unfortunately in the material world, he is losing touch with his creation. Such detachment with Nature paves the way to Eco-criticism in modern literature. Eco-criticism focuses on the impending danger due to man's assault on its creator. Eco-feminism is one of the finer branches of the Eco-criticism. Eco-feminism is the result of oppression of the women by the patriarchal set up of the society. Some Literary creations have made their marks with the presentation of the prevailing social oppressions by the dominant groups. The paper presents the pathetic condition of the river Ganga and the novel 'Water' by Bapsi Sidhwa in the light of Eco-Feministic perspective.

**I**

To uproot the lacuna in the society, literature and criticism are considered as the best tools. Not the red revolution but the thought revolution can bring a drastic and positive change in the social set up. In the age of globalization, computerization and industrialization, the ecosystem is seen in danger. As a result, Eco-criticism is regarded as one of the finer branches of criticism which focuses on the impending danger if man continues to kid with the Mother Nature.

Though the term Eco-criticism existed in 1990, its roots can be found in history. Various literary personalities of different ages have fused literature and environment together in different respects. But previously literature played the part of the background to enhance the effect of the situation. Today, concern to environment is changed. With the growing materialism, the man is seen detached from the Nature and is reluctant to keep the pure Nature as it was. The result can be seen in the disturbance in the cycle of Nature. This concern to Nature is depicted through the modern term 'Eco-criticism' in literature. To expand the spectrum of the term Eco-criticism from literary point of view, Michael P. Branch explains,

Eco-criticism is not just a means of analyzing nature in literature: it implies a move towards a more biocentric world-view, an extension of ethics, a broadening of human's conception of global community to include non-human life forms and the physical environment. Just as Feminists and African American literary criticism call for a change in culture --- that is they attempt to move the

culture toward a broader world view by exposing an earlier narrowness of view - --- so too does ecological literary criticism advocate for cultural change by examining how the narrowness of our culture's assumptions about the nature world has limited our ability to envision an ecologically sustainable human society. (Estok)

The concept of Eco-criticism has formed a new perspective with the term Eco-feminism. It describes movements and philosophies that link feminism with ecology. The term is believed to have been coined by the French writer, Francoise d' Eaubonne in her book, *Le Feminism ou la Mort*. In India, Vandana Shiva is considered to be the modern Eco-feminist. In literature, Nature plays an important role. Sometimes it is directly woven into the plot of the literary piece and sometimes it is symbolically used to enhance the effect of the poem, novel or the drama. Bapsi Sidhwa's famous novel *Water* is the best example of the same where Ganges, the sacred river in India is metaphorically used.

The paper aims to highlight the mythological significance of the great river Ganges, its barren condition in present scenario and the barrenness symbolically presented by the feminist writer Bapsi Sidhwa in her renowned novel *Water*.

## II

In Indian culture the river Ganga has a great mythological significance. In India the river Ganges has been placed in the list of 33 crores of Indian deities. According to the famous myth, the presence of the Ganga in the human form can be found in the great Indian epic the Mahabharata. She is the wife of Shantanu, the King of Hastinapur. But while living the life of a human being she is suffering from the curse. Under this curse she is supposed to drown her seven sons. So at the time of marriage she takes a promise from Shantanu not to ask her the reason behind her cruel deed. But after the death of seven sons Shantanu fails to control himself and asks her the reason behind her cruel act. As a result, Ganga shoulders the responsibility of the eighth son Devavrata (Bhishma, the prominent figure in the Mahabharata) to Shantanu and leaves the King and the Kingdom and again takes the form of the holy river Ganga, providing the 'life' in the form of water.

According to another famous myth, Ganga used to live in the heaven but Bhagirath, the great sage takes painstaking efforts to bring Ganga on the earth for the human beings. As the river incarnates from the heaven, its water has very special qualities. It is considered to be miraculous which has the capacity to cure the diseases of the man. Taking a dip into the water of Ganga is considered as the liberation from all the sins committed by the human beings. But today, this great Ganga is seen in the pitiable condition.

The Gangetic basin is the largest river system in India, draining almost a quarter of the country. The Ganga (Ganges) rises from the Gangotri (Glacier) in the Garhwal. Himalayas at an

elevation of some 4100 metres above the sea level under the name of Bhagirathi. The river Ganga occupies a unique position in the mythological and cultural ethos of India. From times immemorial, the Ganga has been India's river of faith, devotion and worship. Millions of Hindus accept its water as sacred. Even today, people carry treasured Ganga water all over India and abroad because it is considered as 'holy' water and known for its 'curative' and medicinal properties. However, the river is not just a legend; it is also a life-support system for the people of India. It is important because:

- The densely populated Ganga basin is inhabited by 37 percent of India's population.
- The entire Ganga basin system effectively drains eight states of India.
- About 47 percent of the total irrigated area in India is located in the Ganga basin alone.
- It has been a major source of navigation and communication since ancient times.

The Indo-Gangetic plain has witnessed the blossoming of India's great creative talent. (Hespanhol)

In spite of the significance of Ganges in Mythology, due to its polluted condition the purity of Ganges is spoiled. Avinash Panikkar in his report discloses the following information of the rivers of India.

The Ganga basin the largest river basin of the country, houses about 40% of population of India. During the course of its journey, municipal sewage system from 29 class I cities (cities with population over 100000), 23 class II cities (cities with population between 50000 and 100000) and about 48 towns, effluents from industries and polluting wastes from several other non-point sources are discharged into the river Ganga resulting in its pollution. The NRCD records, as mentioned in audit report, put the estimate of total sewage generation in town along river Ganga and its tributaries and 5044 MLD (Million Litres per Day). According to the Central Pollution Control Board Report of 2001, the total waste water generation of the Ganga basin is about 6400 MLD. Many towns on the banks of Ganga are highly industrialized. Most of the industries have inadequate effluent treatment facilities and dump their wastes directly into the river. (Pannikar)

To reduce the pollution and to clean the river and to restore the water quality of the Ganges, GAP (Ganga Action Plan) was formed in 1985 by National Ministry of Environment and Forest. But for the positive changes it requires public participation and disciplined and responsible authority.

### III

On the canvas of English Literature, the new writers have niche a special corner for themselves by their realistic writings. Bapsi Sidhwa is the name in this regard is of great significance. Out of her five novels, one of her novels, *Ice Candy Man* is picturized by the

talented Dipa Mehta. Sidhwa's another celebrated novel *Water* is based on the movie 'Water' by Dipa Mehta. The novel depicts the story of a girl of six years, Chuhiya. She is the victim of inhuman traditions and practices of the society during the period of independence. At the age of eight, Chuhiya becomes a widow, after the death of her 41 years old husband. Chuhiya hardly remembers being married to the man. But traditions demand that she has to accompany his dead body to Varanasi where he will be cremated and she is expected to live in a widow's ashram on the banks of the Ganga. The plot of the novel is woven around Chuhiya and her friend young, beautiful Kalyani, a widow who is exploited as a prostitute. Chuhiya also is raped but at last she escapes from the hell. The life of the widows at ashram is presented effectively. The female protagonist is the product of the society but when their rights are crushed under the heels of the society, they break the so called norms and live with dignity.

In the novel, Water is used metaphorically. The water of the Ganges is considered as sacred. The people have faith that by taking a dip into the water of the river Ganges, all the sins will be washed off. But on the banks of the Ganges the purity of the innocent Chuhiya is seen spoiled. The cry of the Ganga for polluting the purity of the medicinal water by the people and the cry of Chuhiya for the inhuman treatment she receives from the society is the same. On both the levels, the innocence and purity seem to be helpless in the hands of the society. The Nature creates life and protects the same. The woman gives birth to the child and maintains the presence of human species on the earth. Both the elements take care of their creation and devote themselves for their upbringing and protection. But in turn what do they get? Tarun Mukharji has wonderfully described the relevance of the Ganga in the context of the plot as,

The metaphorical and metonymical use and the multilayered connotations of the river are integral to the plot. Besides reflecting the shifting moods of the characters and the twists in the narrative tandem with the changes in Nature, the river operates at once as a regenerative element as well as a purifying agent; it is the resting place for tired bodies, the last sip for the departing soul and a site of rituals for both marriage and death; it is a source of hope where Chuhiya floats a boat to carry her home and of hopelessness when it bears both Kalyani and her as object of lust. (Mukharji)

Such evil practices are followed in various parts of the country even today. The decreasing number of the girls and the sex ratio are the proof of the same. The pain and suffering of the widows during the time of independence has been aptly brought out by Bapsi Sidhwa in her novel *Water*.

In an interview Dipa Mehta stated,

Water can flow or water can be stagnant. I set the film in the 1930s but the people in the film live their lives as it was prescribed by religious text more

than 2,000 years old.... To me I think traditions should not be that rigid. They should flow like the replenishing kind of water. (Mery)

In the novel, Narayan falls in love with Kalyani and her life seems to be full of hopes and pleasures. She even imagines her better future. This state can be compared to the beautiful floating water of the river Ganga. But at a particular mode she ends her life by committing suicide. She dreams to marry Narayana and to live a peaceful and contented life with him. But when she realizes that Narayana is the son of Seth Dwarkanath who exploited her, the dreams shatter into pieces. The presentation of the emotions of Kalyani speaks volumes when she writes,

‘But I do need to ...’ Kalyani said and abruptly broke off midsentence. Torn between the need to make him understand why she had to turn back and not wanting to reveal the ugly truth, she was at a loss.

‘Then please try,’ said Narayana

‘I can’t....’ She said. Then looking desperately at him, Kalyani gave him as much of an answer she could. ‘Ask your father,’ she said simply

‘What’, Mystified, Narayan could not imagine what his father had to do with Kalyani’s determination to turn back. As a glimmer of comprehension dawned at the edges of his mind, he was overcome by a deep foreboding. (172)

Kalyani does not have any shelter now. She goes back to ashrama but reluctant to follow the same old hollow life. She does not want to marry Narayana because she thinks that the marriage would saddle Narayana’s noble family with a daughter-in-law whose every living moment would bring disgrace and dishonor to their house. As a result she selects the way to commit suicide.

After the suicide of Kalyani, Madhumati selects Chuhiya to replace her as an income source. Along with Gulabi she sends Chuhiya to Seth Bhupindernath’s mansion. The innocent Chuhiya is drugged and exploited there. The event when Kalyani commits suicide and the event when innocent Chuhiya is raped, these two events are the metaphorical presentations of the pollution of purity. On one hand the single dip in the water of the river Ganga is considered to be washing off the sins of the life and on the other hand on the banks of the same river such inhuman practices are followed.

#### IV

In the novel the river is presented as a background. When the wonderful and delicate love between Narayan and Kalyani flourishes, the river seems to respond the calm and beautiful moments in this way,

The river was a dark ribbon, except for the temple fires it reflected. Wisps of white smoke curled up against the black, starpricked sky. A boat glided silently along the river. A gentle breeze carried to her the haunting, long-drawn-out notes of a flute. She stilled to listen, certain it was the same bansuri player she and Gulabi had heard in the boat that other night. (122)

When Kalyani is seen in disillusionment and helplessness, it is the river which is the only one which shelters and consoles her like a mother. Kalyani prefers to take a calm sleep in the lap of the mother Ganga. The river is known for purity and sacredness. Similarly the river possesses the capacity to heal the wounds of a child. The sacred and pure Kalyani is imbibed by the river without any complaint or grudge.

She bent to splash her face with the sacred water that flowed from Shiva's head, and smeared it over her face and hair. She clasped her hands in prayer for a moment. Then she calmly walked into the river until her short hair floated in an inky stain on the water.

Ma Ganaga had claimed her daughter. (178)

After Kalyani, it is Chuhiya who is the second choice of Madhumati as an income source. She sends Chuhiya to the 'rich customer', Seth Bhupindernath. When Shakuntala comes to know about the calamity on Chuhiya she becomes restless. She takes unconscious Chuhiya to the banks of the holy river and tries to console her. Shakuntala is moved by the state of Chuhiya.

There is a great similarity with the noble river Ganges and the innocent and intelligent Chuhiya. The river is worshipped and has a special space in Indian Mythology and minds. But due to brutal and inhuman practices it is polluted in past and due to carelessness it is polluted in present. Women and Nature are the victims of patriarchal social set up and male dominance. Patriarchy has been trying to control and conquer over the female existence. The modern man also aims to control and conquer the Nature. The pain and misery aroused due to this dominance resulted into revolt. Some revolts effectively affect and bring a change in the contemporary society. As a result such movements niche a special corner on the canvass of Literature. The theory like feminism voices the suppressed cry of the women. Similarly, the Eco-feminism focuses on the alarming condition of the nature with that of the pains suffered by women in the prevailing period. The sensitive minds feel the pain and sufferings of the suppressed and effectively pen out in the literature to bring awareness in the society.

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