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Ecofeministic Perspectives in the Global Warming Narrative: A Challenge to Neo-Liberal Globalisation

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Abstract:

In the 21st century, the occurrence of anthropogenic natural disasters has increased drastically due to unethical human intervention on the planet. The most critical among them that needs to be addressed on war-footing is global warming which is threatening the very existence of life on earth. Today it is a well acknowledged fact that neo-liberal globalisation is instrumental in escalating the environmental degradation and the ensuing disintegration of non-human species and subsistence living of indigenous communities especially women. Ecofeminism, a derivative of ecocriticism which is considered as an alternative for ancient wisdom is very relevant in today's context.

This paper based on the catastrophic fiction, *Neeraliyan* by Ambikasuthan Mangad, the environmental writer from Kerala, investigates how Olive Ridley turtle, a particular species from the aquatic ecosystem, faces the threat of extinction due to global warming and other human activities associated with modernisation. It goes on to explore the interconnected victimisation of women following from the crisis and then establish that the selected ecofeminist literature has the potential to challenge globalisation which is achieved through the criticism of patriarchal capitalism, hierarchical dualism, and mal-development. Finally it underscores the necessity of adhering to an environmental philosophy and an overall change in the attitude towards non-human environment. There is no doubt that the narrative evidences of this kind will make an impactful intervention in the ongoing political and economic debates on the causes and effects of global warming.

Keywords: Anthropogenic, global warming, neo-liberal globalisation, ecocriticism, ecofeminism, patriarchal capitalism, hierarchical dualism, mal-development

Introduction

The catastrophic effects of global warming have begun to get manifested in terms of drought, flash flood, rise in the sea level, ocean acidification, and extinction of flora and fauna. The impact of global warming in India is becoming visible in many areas - agriculture, fisheries, tourism, forests, mangroves etc. In a country like India where majority of the population depends on nature for their subsistence living, the impacts of climate change will be a matter of grave concern. It is not only humans but other species are also under threat from global warming due to shrinking or loss of habitats and scarcity of water and food. Being a capital driven phenomenon with economic development as its agenda, economic globalisation and its derivative capitalism promote industrialisation and urbanisation

aggressively and has contributed immensely to the dispersal of pollution in land, water and air through an instrumentalist approach to other sentient beings. The recently developed critical practice of ecocriticism joined the literary discourses critiquing globalisation to expose the extent of planetary damage and ways to curb the same. According to Richard Kerridge, ecocriticism “seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis” (qtd. in Garrard 4).

Ecofeminism, a derivative of ecocriticism which is considered as an alternative for ancient wisdom is very relevant in today’s context of globalism. Ecofeminism is a philosophical and political theory and movement which combines ecological concerns with feminist ones, regarding both as resulting from male domination of society. The term ecofeminism was coined by the French feminist Francoise d’Eaubonne in 1974. Practically ecofeminism is the subsistence perspective based on the lived experiences of women, in meeting the day-to-day challenges of life and it works towards a healthy planet for the entire humanity by putting up resistance against the patriarchal capitalist forces. Ecofeminists see that andro-centricism and not anthropocentrism is the root cause of environmental problems. A multipronged critique of neo-liberal globalisation within the theoretical framework of ecofeminism – a confluence of variegated conceptual strands such as liberal, radical, cultural, and socialist – could contribute for the movement that work towards creating a verdant planet and a genderless society.

The fear and anxiety on the horrific impact of global warming on the planet has led Ambikasuthan Mangad to the creation of *Neeraliyan*, the fictional narrative illustrating the annihilation of the species of Olive Ridley turtles due to global warming. He traces how the eponymous hero, Neeraliyan, a male turtle and his female counterpart Bhagavathi, become the victims of globalisation. *Neeraliyan* is the story of endangered Ridley turtles in as much as it is the story of the fisherman – Thankoottan and his wife Sudhamani. To attribute this text as a model for the catastrophic literature, the antithetical approach between literature and science is subverted which opens an insightful ‘culture-nature’ discourse where science comingles with aesthetics to enlighten on the burning issue. The writer has dextrously woven the real images captured from his neighbourhood, Venneri in Kasaragod, Kerala where the habitat preservation of turtles are undertaken with the help of the Department of Forestry.

The plot unfolds mainly in the house of Thankoottan and Sudhamani who have devoted their life for the conservation of Olive Ridley turtles. The thematic foci rest on the detrimental effects of human-induced global warming on the Ridleys. The writer has documented it with precision and authority. The researcher, Akhil who is staying with the couple to study on the reproductive pattern of Ridleys, also provides the backbone to the story, as science is needed to validate the knowledge on global warming’s impact on aquatic creatures. Olive Ridley’s reproduction is intricately connected to the atmospheric temperature. With the increase in global temperature, unable to hatch, Ridley eggs rot and perish. The issueless Thankoottan and his wife used to find solace in taking care of the turtle babies. When the shocking revelation comes from Akhil that Ridley turtle will not come to Venneri any longer for laying eggs, they lose the only purpose in their life and stand

benumbed on their future as well as the future of the planet. Mangad constructs parallelism between non-human animals and women through Olive Ridley and Sudhamani, and exposes the victimisation of the ‘others’ under capitalist patriarchy.

Victimisation of Olive Ridley Turtles

“A white-bellied eagle flashed into the earth as a sliver of lightning from the dark womb of the sky. Circling above that lonely shack which looked like night’s folded hands, it announced in a long, saw-like screech, “See! The light has come” (Mangad 27). The text thus begins with an ominous tone - the hovering of scavenger bird, white-bellied eagle on Venneri beach which portends some kind of destruction and disintegration. The white colour as well as the predator bird stands for western capitalist economy that crushes nature and all its beings. Following this the writer provides the visual imagery of injured turtles whose flippers are cut from the propellers of modern trawlers which serves to enlighten on the negative aspect of modern science and technology. The disturbing imagery of the trawlers is a powerful reminder of the damage caused by these modern fishing machines. They have taken over the traditional and nature- friendly wooden boats to increase the catch for export that boosts the capitalist economy. “In Orissa, more than a hundred thousand dead turtles have been counted since the 1990s; and ten to fifteen thousand dead turtles are washed ashore each year, predominantly due to trawlers. Researchers have documented that ten to twenty turtles can be trapped and killed during a single trawl” (Shenoy, Berlie and Shanker 95). All these facts point finger at the callousness of the modern economy while implementing changes for profit.

Until now only the natural predators of ocean, such as sharks and whales were threat to these turtles. But with the mechanisation in fishing, humans have become the greatest danger to be feared. The reductionist science has become the cause of violence in nature and it robs the earthlings off their lives. Socialist ecofeminist, Carolyn Merchant blames its knowledge in Vandana Shiva’s *Ecofeminism*. “In investigating the roots of our current environmental dilemma and its connections to science, technology and the economy, we must re-examine the formation of a world view and a science that, reconceptualising reality as a machine, rather than a living organism, sanctioned the domination of both nature and women” (24). Science and technology apart from churning out solutions for human crises pose new threats to the survival of human and non humans on the planet. Throughout the world sea turtles have to face mounting threats mostly from civilised humans.

The present predicament of turtles could also be taken as a metaphor for the impending annihilation of human race at the end of wide spread modernisation. To substantiate this, Mangad draws parallelism between Neeraliyan and Thankoottan, as both of them are unable to have a sexual relation with their respective counterparts, Bhagavathi and Sudhamani. “Bhagavati was moving slowly in circles. . . . Neeraliyan, straining hard, swam towards her. They kissed passionately on the lips and whispered to each other for some time. Then he tried to mount her but every attempt failed” (Mangad 27). The femininity of both the females are unable to reach its fulfilment in motherhood which is evident in Sudhamani’s words, “How I wished to have a child! My ill-luck! By now I have scooped up at least ten

thousand baby turtles with these hands and released them alive into the sea. But I never got a child for myself” (30). Mangad, the ecocritic, has drawn the nature-human parallel very skilfully. Sudhamani carries a deep disappointment in place of a baby just due to her husband’s impotency.

Thankoottan’s non-patriarchal attitude is highlighted when he accepts his limitation and encourages (in gestures) his wife to have a baby from another man after realising his wife’s desire to become a mother. The notion of equality between genders comes out very strongly in Thankoottan, when he respects his wife’s femininity and the yearning for its fulfilment. And when Sudhamani forces Akhil to give her a baby, she adds, “he likes you very much”, to underscore the participation of her husband in putting across such a request. In contemporary times, when the femininity of a woman is looked at as a sexual object to satisfy men’s desire for the body, Mangad as a feminist constructs the image of femininity and masculinity so gracefully and differently to keep man and woman; body and soul in an equitable relationship. He subverts the dominion of man over woman and mind over body.

It is worth to note how the foregrounding of the ‘other’ has been done by Mangad with imagination and innovation. No other ecofeminist could paint such a beautiful imagery to underscore the idea of the oppression of nature and female sex. The following quote from Neeraliyan reminds that the existence of females are always under threat whether human or non-human as they are hunted by predator males. They continue to take peripheral positions in the ‘andro-anthropo-centric world’.

Of all the animals that live in sea and on land, the female sea turtle is the most unfortunate one. She is not fated to experience motherhood. She cannot lay eggs in the sea. The fish will eat them. What if she comes to the land to lay eggs? She has to cover them with sand and rush back to the sea. Otherwise, predators will eat her. She has no luck at all . . . cannot brood over the eggs, will never know whether they hatched at all, never get to recognize her own children or a chance to caress them . . . (Mangad 30)

Considering the threat on the turtles unleashed by humans, there is a need to bring awareness on this, among local and global populations. According to the turtle researchers, involving local communities – the persons living on the beaches, the same habitat where Olive Ridley turtles come for hatching – is very important for the conservation programmes to yield results. There is a need to raise the awareness of the young men in the fishing community to protect the turtles and their nests near their homes. Point 136 of UNFCCC, Paris report articulates the requirement for local communities to support global warming mitigation in a holistic approach by equipping themselves with the scientific knowledge and new technology.

Mangad emphatically mediates the importance of preserving the non-humans whether in land or ocean, for the future of the entire planet. He uses his writing to inform and persuade everyone that conservation ethics has to develop in the consciousness of each individual. Thankoottan, the protagonist is the poor, lone eco-soldier or green warrior whose

life's mission is to protect maximum number of turtle eggs from human predation; care them till big; nurture injured ones to health. He goes for patrolling the beach armed with the stout branch of a thorny shrub as a self appointed guardian of turtles. Any turtle egg thief if got caught by him would receive thrashes without any compassion. Fearing the deadly blows, thieves stopped coming to Venneri. In Dee berry's green vision "Green warriors get their strength from being who they are...It is to act boldly, forthrightly and do what needs to be done, to leap boldly into the future" (Eaton & Lorentzen 221). As the modern man's environmental engineering is going to leave the planet hot and barren and thus unfit for living, the planet is craving for eco-warriors like Thankoottan.

There is a sea change in the sea bed today due to the unethical human activities on the planet. The number of humans tampering with the earth is increasing. The human induced pollutants are proved to be the culprits of the destruction of aquatic animal and plant lives. In the recent times, the injustice done to the aquatic biome does not stop with warming and acidification of the ocean and contamination from industrial effluents and oil spills. Discarding garbage and polythene in the sea and ocean adds threat to the marine lives. Turtles especially, mistake the coloured polythene bags as jelly fish and eat them. Many of them die because of that as they don't know to spit. In one of the cases, as recollected by Sudhamani, "a week earlier it was Thankoottan who had brought home a turtle with a similarly swollen stomach. But it was already dead. They informed the Forest Department, as the rules demanded. The officers came along with a doctor. When the stomach was cut open during post mortem, everybody was shocked. A huge lump of plastic bits, weighing nearly two-three kilos! The doctor confirmed it was the cause of death" (Mangad 30). Turtle Researchers document that "Accidental ingestion of plastics has been documented to indirectly cause death due to poisoning or starvation because of the inability to swallow food due to blockage of the food passage by these materials" (Shenoy, Berlie and Shanker 99). Humanity, equipped with the advanced knowledge in science and technology is on a mission to conquer nature.

The socialist ecofeminist, Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature* points finger at Bacon as the pioneer of the construction of an environmentally destructive world view in which "the image of an organic cosmos with a living female earth at its centre gave way to a mechanistic world view in which nature was reconstituted as dead and passive, to be dominated and controlled by humans" (qtd. in Gerrard xvi). It is high time to go back to Arne Naess' Deep ecology which propagates the ideology that the well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on earth has value in itself and that humans have no right to reduce the richness and diversity of life forms except to satisfy vital human needs.

The modern men with their never-satisfying need (greed) are unable to resist themselves from finding new ways to satisfy their desires. The impetus given to tourism sector in the world arena itself proves nothing but the self-centred nature of the *nouveau-riche* who are immersed themselves in enjoyment disregarding the nature and the marginalised people. Tourism has erected modern, entertainment centres on the beaches of developing countries like India to attract tourists. This has turned the 'dark nights' in to 'white nights'

which has adversely impacted the nesting and hatching of Ridley turtles. After identifying the relation between light and nesting, conservationists have made interventions in some coasts, for example, Gahirmatha and Rushikulya in Orissa and prevented the installation of lights during the nesting times. In *Neeraliyan*, Mangad writes poignantly, “when the baby turtles come out, “dazzled by the light, they became confused and huddled together and they will struggle to find the sea” (Mangad 29). The imagery of the helpless baby turtles ‘huddled together’ is apt to create empathy in the supposed ‘stewards of nature’, who have disregarded the ‘embeddedness’ of plants and animals on the planet.

Of late, the female turtles seem to abandon the Indian coasts, including Kerala, because of the developmental activities related to tourism and other sectors that have disturbed the natural habitats of these non-human animals. Mangad effectively portrays how the neo-liberal economy gives precedence to production of capital over the reproduction of non-human animals. And it is the aim of socialist ecofeminists to bring back the significance of ecology and reproduction over production of capital. The need for a gender analysis while addressing ecological problems gets clearer with the understanding of the predicament of the Olive Ridley females.

Subjugation of Woman

Mangad does not circumscribe his ecofeminist narration with the perils of anthropocentric civilisation on non-human animals, but extends it to the miseries of the marginalised women, the victims of andro-centric patriarchal society to elaborate on the gendering of environmental degradation. Mangad points out that transporting the turtle babies in buckets and leaving them in sea is Sudhamani’s job. She does not opt for the ‘job’, but Thankoottan assigns her to it, irrespective of whether she likes it or not. Through this Mangad substantiates the idea that the institution of marriage is conceptualised to smoothen the lives of men. In *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan talks about the helplessness of women and how societal tradition restricts her to domesticity which is considered as a feminine trait. Friedan says, “Over and over women heard in voices of tradition and of Freudian sophistication that they could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity” (15). For Thankoottan who adheres to the societal norms regarding marriage, wife is just the caretaker of his valued possessions - Olive Ridelys. When his sisters left home after their marriage, Thankoottan marries Sudhamani to guard the eggs when he goes for fishing. What the writer attempts to articulate here is that the victimisation of animals deepens the sufferings of women from indigenous communities as they have to work extra hours for the protection of hapless creatures. Vanadana Shiva argues in *Staying Alive* that “With the violation of nature [non human animals included] is linked the violation and marginalisation of women, especially in the Third world. Women produce and reproduce life not merely biologically, but also through their social role in providing sustenance”(42). The new developmental paradigms brought about by capitalism rather than empowering women, re-endorse the oppressive conditions of their existence. The confirmation of this comes from Sudhamani only when she says, “he never permitted me to go out to sell fish....My life, like a female turtle’s, is spent neither on land nor in the sea...” (Mangad 30). These words indicate the humdrum life of the poor woman at home.

Drawing an analogy between Sudhamani and female turtle, the writer affirms the oneness of human and non-human animal. He is also trying to lay bare the ideology of domesticity that takes away a woman's right to work outside the house and thus an infringement upon her freedom. This ideology disguises and justifies women's subordination to men. The patriarchal society with its euro-centric ideology upheld the Cartesian binaries and constructed 'gender roles' for their own benefit. Judith Butler in '*Gender Trouble*' postulates the idea that it is the 'performativity of the body in situation' which determines gender of an individual. It is apparent that the hegemonic centre in the society as well as home decides what role an individual should perform. This verifies the fact that gender is socially constructed. It relegates women to the home while denying them access to public space and thwarting every attempt to find a job. Socially constructed gender always associates women to domesticity to subjugate her – a ploy of patriarchy to maintain inequality among genders.

Marginalisation of Nature

Mangad's penchant for details regarding the omnipresence of inequality between human and animal comes out clear when he highlights the unique migratory pattern of turtles, one of the wonders in the natural world which was hitherto neglected by the anthropocentric world. "They grow up while travelling through continents for ten thousand kilometres. The female turtles would come back to the same beach for laying eggs even after six to ten years... Don't you think this a greater wonder than the great wall of China?" (Mangad 29). The financial indicator of capitalist economy – GNP (Gross National Product) – assigns value to only things that are man-made and enter the market economy for profit and devalue greater things in nature that sustain the planet Earth. Socialist ecofeminists have always been critical of the reductive and instrumental outlook of modern science and capitalist economy.

With the unprecedented warming of the planet the Ridley turtles have become almost extinct. Temperature plays an integral role in the reproduction of Ridelys. Lower temperatures produce males and higher temperatures produce females. The pivotal temperature (i.e. the temperatures that produces equal numbers of males and females) varies among species and populations, but is usually around 28- 32 degree Celsius. Towards the end Akhil the researcher says

Turtles won't come here anymore to lay eggs . . . Only around fifteen baby turtles have hatched so far. They're not very healthy either. Nearly four hundred of them should have come out of these three holes. Earlier most of the baby turtles that hatched here were males. For some years now, most have been females. When the temperature goes down, male turtles are born but if it's between 29 and 34 degrees, all the babies will be females. A great wonder, not found among any other animals! (Mangad 31)

Sooner or later the verdant planet Earth is going to collapse because of the non harmonious relationship between humans and nature. It is proved beyond doubt that majority of the green house gas emission is from the developed nations. It is the callousness and

insensitivity of the economically privileged society that has led to global warming and the associated endangering of turtles. Now, the survival of the non-human species is in the hands of economically under privileged fishermen like Thankoottan. Through this revelation, Mangad, the radical ecofeminist strongly argues for the breaking of the hierarchical binary – western/local and rewrites it by giving the local a more responsible, ‘big brother’ image from an ecological perspective (remember the self appointed Big brother, the U.S.).

He also re-writes the concept of sex in this text. Sudhamani for the right reason (to have a happy married life with Thankoottan) takes responsibility instead of Thankoottan. Here the agency has shifted from man to woman which is the writer’s strategy to subvert the binary – man/woman. In the ecofeminist framework, the two categories- nature and women are victimised and both are interconnected. *Neeraliyan*, as an ecofeminist text projects turtles (representative of nature) as the victims of globalisation with reference to the anthropogenic global warming primarily contributed by the imperial capitalist nations. When the woman from the local fishing community is entrusted with the duty of nurturing the injured turtles and turtle babies at her husband’s behest, she gets entrapped in the victimhood imparted by patriarchy and capitalism. The socially committed writer, Mangad exposes, proposes and politicise the victimhood of the marginalised very effectively and the ecofeminist in him goes on to subvert the hierarchies—human/animal, man/woman, and occidental/oriental.

Significance of Literary Narratives During Planetary Crisis

Mangad’s narrative on the extinction of Ridley, reveals the dystopian reality embedded in the real-seeming unreal, materialistic world of today. The reference of eagle and lightning in the opening sentence is a proleptic device used to hint at the upcoming event – the extinction of turtles, explicitly stated by the character of Akhil. Mangad uses this to throw light on the phenomenon of globalisation which is making its presence with the false promise of progress, as denoted in “the light has come”, where as in real, like a lightning it is striking the unprotected communities on the beach including non-humans. It is high time, the world realises that each person is complicit in the development of capitalist system which is decimating the diverse species on the planet. However, they blithely ignore the fact that loss of one link in the chain will alter the vibrant life on the verdant planet. Therefore a holistic approach of ‘live and let live’ is urgently expected of the humans towards other humans and non-humans. In order to have a human- animal inter community, the world has to work towards “re- negotiating the boundaries” between species, created by none other than humans.

In today’s times, when increasing ecological devastation disproportionately threatens the existence of the individuals, families, societies, nations and the world; when international forums are not committed adequately to respond to the threat; it is left with the discourses in different disciplines to articulate the implications of an imbalanced planet on the living system. Patrick D Murphy writes in *Persuasive aesthetic ecocritical practice: Climate change*, “ the mind numbing statistics of the current great extinction of animal and plant life, the slow death of forests and the acidification of oceans” (xiv) have not received the due attention and interest of public as it is warranted. He adds that an aesthetic construction like

literature still holds a sway on individuals to alter their ideological perception through intellectual and affective engagement. To date, what is proved most effective in tackling the environmental crisis is the scientifically informed exploration of ecological degradation in literature as seen in the success of Rachel Carson's *Silent spring* which led to the ban of DDT. To ensure that this message reaches the world, all literatures on nature has to be re-configured with apocalyptic symbols from human and non-human animal world. The environmental health of today is just opposite to what it was in the past. The present 'time' and 'space' demand an entirely new kind of human-animal representation in all literatures.

Through his work *Neeraliyan*, Mangad is not only writing for the endangered world of Olive Ridley turtles but also trying to instil environmental ethics and values related to nature conservation. It makes sense to look at what Lynton Cladwell says, "the key to generating an effective system of protection for the trans-national marine commons is neither scientific nor institutional but cultural: commitment to a better environmental philosophy (Buell, 218). No doubt, this writer's ultimate aim lies in invoking the readers to protect the non-human world through the symbol of Ridley turtles and for this he adopts the fact finding methodology to integrate the largest concern of the century – global warming, to provide a global perspective to the local tragedy.

Conclusion

When the world at large is grappling with global warming and the resulting extinction of a wide variety of species, Umberto Eco's words echo louder than ever before – "we have to recognise the evidences through which the world speak to us like a great book" (23). Promptly understanding the signs provided by nature, Mangad, the socially committed writer has woven the aesthetic net of *Neeraliyan* in which the trapped existence of turtles are displayed with succinct and vibrant imageries drawn from natural and scientific worlds. According to spiritual ecofeminist, Charlene Spretnak "The crying need right now – if we have any hope of charting a postmodern, post-humanist, and post-patriarchal transition to the Age of Ecology – is for a new philosophical underpinning of civilization. We need an eco-philosophy that speaks the truth with great immediacy in a language that everyone can understand" (7). This is exactly what Mangad attempts to do in *Neeraliyan* and he succeeds in igniting a green-spark in the minds of the common readers on the importance of ecologically-informed practices in day-to-day life and thereby to engage in an anti-capitalist critique.

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