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**Discourse of the Oppressed: An Ecofeministic Reading of Arundhati Roy's
The God of Small Things, Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green* and Manjula
Padmanabhan's *Escape***

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Abstract:

The prime objective of the paper is the analysis of how woman and nature are dealt with in the novels of Indian women writers. It also focuses on how women of various social, economic and cultural backgrounds interacted with their environment. Besides, it underscores the role of these oppressive discourses in tackling the plights of the oppressed and empowering these oppressive masses from the sidelines to the mainstream of the society. Selected Indian women writers are considered here for analyzing their treatment of women and nature in their fictional writings. Ecofeminists point out that women and nature are often depicted as anarchic and illogical, while men are delineated as rational and ordered thereby having the capability to control both women and nature. These concerns of the writers can be seen in the writings under study which includes *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, *Escape* by Manjula Padmanabhan and *Gift in the Green* by Sara Joseph's.

Keywords: Oppression, Ecofeminism, Patriarchy.

The term oppression is synonymous with destitute, enslaved, exploited, tyrannized, burdened etc. Oppression is the way by which certain groups organize to protect their position as dominant groups thereby making life miserable to the less privileged ones. They exercise their power and authority in an unjust and burdensome manner thereby subjecting the oppressed to harsh and authoritarian treatment. Individuals experience oppression because they are part of a group that is defined on the basis of certain characteristics like gender, race, class, ethnicity, nationality etc. Oppression is the root cause for many of the serious conflicts taking place across the world. The conflicts can be religious, racial, between sexes, between governments and citizen etc. Violence need not be visible and subjective; it can be invisible and symbolic operating through languages, discourses and beliefs.

At this point it is sensible to reflect upon Foucault's discourse analysis which is an approach that studies how language is used as a form of resistance by those who are in power. This form of discourse is a source of resistance to those who are in power and they exercise this power upon whom they dominate. This language or discourse plays a significant role in the oppression of 'the other' (Wollstonecraft 80). The plights of the marginalized and destitute are

given a voice in the discourses of the oppressed. Oppressive discourses thus illuminate this tragic and pathetic situation of the downtrodden such as the blacks, the dalits, women, nature etc.

It is presumed that the western construct of dualism or binary opposites perpetuates oppression. It is a concept which divides the orders of the world into opposite pairs where one is privileged and the other is marginalized. This paper makes a study on a few major ecofeministic women's writings in India.

Ecology is the study of environment, its changes and conservation. It is concerned with the relationship between the living organism and its natural environment. Ecocriticism as a separate movement of literary criticism developed during the 1990's. Ecocriticism studies the relationship between environment and literature or how man's relations with his environment are depicted in literature. In an age of environmental destruction, ecocriticism can be seen as a response to the need for humanistic understanding of our nature and environment. A major part of environmental destruction is due to man's distancing from his natural environment. Ecocriticism finds its strongest advocates today in feminist and gender studies. This gave rise to ecofeminism or ecological feminism, a term coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974 which links ecology with women.

The oppression of both women and nature are a social construct born out of the power dynamics of the patriarchal society. Ecofeminists assert that the patriarchy gather power through the creation of dualistic hierarchies or 'binary opposites' (Holyn 406) like male/female, culture/nature, mind/body etc. In the construct of such dualism women occupies the downside position of each pair. Thus women are considered more akin to nature rather than culture, to mind rather than body, illogical rather than logical. This attitude on the part of patriarchy gives them a self proclaimed license to appropriate and exploit nature and women as they like. Men in their hasty life to gain more ignore the valuable contributions made by women and nature. They dismiss or consider irrelevant the help rendered by their wives, mothers and sisters. Likewise they disregard the fact that nature and natural resources play a crucial role in their lives. Instead of seeing them as significant aspects of living, they are just seen as mere resources or commodities catering to their needs.

According to the ecofeminist Vandana Shiva the exploitation of nature and the marginalization of women are done by men in the pretext of development without realizing the fact that they are moving towards not development but mal-development (5). The privatization of land for the generation of revenue displaces women from possessing land of their own. Also the cultivation of commercial crops for monetary gains reduces the availability of food grains. The vast destruction of forest cover for this purpose also results in ecological imbalances. Women start reacting against such patriarchal practices and also raise their voice for the preservation of nature and its resources. They challenge the western construct of patriarchal dualism by which they dominate both women and nature and see them as objects of exploitation. According to this concept both marginalization of women and degradation of nature go hand in hand. Men displace

women from the domain of development branding them as unproductive. Similarly they consider nature as unproductive unless men themselves involve in harnessing its resources.

Women have always been in the forefront in matters regarding ecological conservation. One of the earliest initiatives by women in India to protect environment is led by a woman named Amrita Devi who resisted against king's men when they attempted to cut down trees of her village. This inspired another well-known movement namely *Chipko* movement with Sundarlal Bahuguna as its leader. It practiced Gandhian methods of non-violence and *satyagraha* by hugging trees to stop activities like deforestation, lumbering and mining. Another remarkable aspect of the movement is the significant role played by women in its activities. This is because women are mostly affected by the degradation and destruction of environmental resources.

Vandana Shiva argues that a sustainable approach to farming can be attained by advocating a system of farming that is more centered on engaging women. She says that it is the feminine principle which is the basis of development and conservation of ecology. The exploitation of nature and subjugation of women arise from the subjugation of this feminine principle which will ultimately lead to a disharmony between both men and women and nature leading to total destruction. She explains how women are special to her environment though her relation to it are unacknowledged by the male sector (5-7). Medha Patkar, another prominent environmental and social activist was on the forefront of the Narmada Bachavo Andolan movement which protested against the construction of a dam in Narmada that has far reaching ecological consequences.

Men are blind towards the silent and invaluable work done towards sustenance by women and nature as they consider them as passive and marginal. The only way to attain liberation of this downside pair is by dismantling such binary opposites or else such disparities exist as long as there is this humanity and universe. Ecofeminist writers try to highlight the humiliation and disgrace faced by both women and nature through their writings and attempt to find practical solutions for the emancipation of these two marginalized pairs. As it is unlikely to include almost all the ecofeministic women's writings in this paper, this investigator tries to assimilate a few major Indian ecofeministic women writers and their writings in this oppressive discourse study. This paper sets out to explore how woman and nature are dealt with in the writings of Arundati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* and Sara Joseph's *Gift in Green*.

Arundati Roy is a writer, essayist, political activist and environmentalist. She is the winner of the Man Booker Prize award for her semi autobiographical novel *The God of Small Things*. The book chronicles some of her childhood experiences and events in her maternal

grandparents' village in Ayemenem. She worked alongside activist Medha Padkar against the Narmada Dam Project for which she received widespread criticism. She also raised her voice against many industrial and developmental projects that posed as a threat to our environment. The environmentalist bent of mind of the writer is revealed to the readers' right from the opening page of the novel. She makes a detailed and minute observation of nature and surroundings in and around Ayemenem.

The country side turns an immodest green. Boundaries blur as tapioca fence, stalk root and bloom. Brick walls turn moss green. Pepper vines snake up electric poles. Wild creepers burst through laterite banks and spill across the flooded roads. Boats ply in bazaars. And small fish appear in the puddles that fill the PWD potholes on the highways. (1)

In the novel, Roy also concentrates on subaltern issues concerning women and dalits. Being a subaltern in gender, Ammu, the daughter of Reverend John Ipe has to face marginalization not only from her drunkard husband but also from her own family. The protagonist Ammu is not an ordinary woman but a woman capable of breaking the orders of society by revolting against customs and traditions and marrying a man of her choice from a different caste. She marries a Bengali Hindu contrary to the wishes of the family. But her marital life becomes a failure when her husband turns a drunkard. She could not withstand him any longer when he asks her to have a sexual relation with his white boss in order to get a promotion in his job. Ammu returns to Ayemenem house as a divorcee and mother of twins, Estha and Rahel. She leads a life of an outcaste in her own house. The Syrian Christian inheritance law prohibits her from inheriting any family property. The children are also despised by others in the family owing to their hybrid roots. But Ammu breaks all social and caste norms by being sexually involved with an untouchable named Velutha. Velutha being an untouchable is discarded by all the other upper classes. They even detest him being employed in Ammu's brother, Chacko's pickle factory. Later he is doomed to a tragic death due to no fault of his and simply because of him being an outcaste. Ammu goes to the police station to defend his innocence. It was a bold action quite uncommon from the part of an upper class woman.

Though a third person narrative, it is through the eyes of Ammu's daughter Rahel that Roy expounds her environmental concerns. After twenty three years, Rahel returns to her ancestral home in Ayemenem to meet her twin brother Estha, who has grown silent over the years. Roy's pen makes Rahel a keen observer of nature and natural phenomena. In Ayemenem, she is welcomed by the June rain. She observes the rain that lashes Ayemenem house and its surroundings.

Heaven opened and the water hammered down, reviving the reluctant old well, greenmossing the pigless pigsty, carpet bombing still, tea-coloured puddles the way memory bombs still tea-coloured minds. The grass looked wet-green and pleased. Happy earthworms frolicked purple in the slush. Green nettles noded. Trees bent. (10)

Another significant aspect which Roy points out is the pollution of the Meenachalriver. The river bed is contaminated with dirt and filth. Children defecate directly into the river bed and the smell of shit wafted all over Ayemenem on warm days. The growing hotels and resorts nearby try to screen off the dirt from entering their premises by building tall walls but are helpless with the smell. It shows the act of irresponsibility on the part of men towards nature. Whatever happens to his environment he is thoughtless and is only concerned with expanding his business sector. Through these narrations Roy points her finger at the pathetic state of God's own country and echoes her concerns with regard to environmental degradation. It also shows man's insensitivity towards nature and his inherent greed to amass wealth thereby polluting and exploiting nature. Estha and Rahel used to swim, play and ride boats across the river. Years later the river has a devastated appearance. Rahel remembers the fearful nature of the river during her childhood. Despite the June rain, it is "no more than a swollen drain now" (124). Now it has lost its power to evoke fear. It is now covered with garbage and plastic wastes which the river ferried to the sea.

Another character whom Roy portrays as a lover of green is Baby Kochamma, Rahel's grand aunt. Holding a diploma in ornamental gardening, she nurtures a beautiful garden in front of Ayemenem house and spends her afternoons in the garden. Perhaps she finds repose in nature after a tedious life journey of a Roman Catholic nun from which she derived no satisfaction. She renounced the garb of a nun and returned to Ayemenem and began her passion for ornamental gardening. Arundhati Roy also strikes at the growing influence of technology upon mankind which makes people insensitive towards their surroundings and nature. When Rahel returns to Ayemenem after 23 years, she could only see the dead remains of Baby Kochamma's ornamental gardening and Baby Kochamma is now fully engrossed in the television set installed in her dining hall.

Arundhati Roy focuses on the issues of both women and nature along with the trauma of dalits in her novel and the writer's ecofeministic bent of mind is revealed in each and every reading of the text.

Sarah Joseph is a well known feminist writer, social activist and environmentalist. Almost all her works including her prestigious novel *Alahayude Penmakkal* abounds in addressing the issues of the marginalized people and the ill effects of ecological destruction in the name of

development. The work under study here is her novel *Gift in Green*. Here the elements of ecofeminism are so strong and profound and emanates from each and every pages of the novel. *Gift in Green* revolves around Aathi- a serene island of water bodies and mangrove trees where the people live blissfully under the grace of the holy shrine of Thampuram. The native people of Aathi make their livelihood by engaging in alternate farming (pokkali farming) and fishing. The water bodies are so pristine and crystal clean which provide the people with abundant fish and mussels. People live in close touch with the nature and in return nature provides them in plenty.

Aathi has a strong tradition of storytelling which the people host it with awe and respect. In one of the story telling episodes, the story teller narrates the story of a young woman and her child who are abandoned in a lonely desert by her husband for no fault of hers. Here the man becomes a stereotypical representative of a patriarchal male character who has every right to pronounce his authority upon his wife. Though helpless in an unknown desert with meager food and water, Hagar tries every step to safeguard the life of her child which is remarkable of another's selfless love and affection for her child. Hagar and her child's protection lie on the shoulders of her husband who has now abandoned her. At this critical juncture, it is nature in the guise of a bird who leads her to a spring when both the child and she were on the verge of death. Nature knows that women are their eternal protectors and thus Hagar becomes the protector of the water body and she is so adamant that not a single drop of water in it be wasted.

There are many strong women characters in the novel who nurture a deep affinity with the nature and surroundings around them. Prominent among them is Kunjimathu who is 52 years old. Her life is surrounded by the water bodies. She is devoid a life sans Aati and its clear water bodies. While Kunjimathu stands as a strong ecofeministic character in the novel, Kumaran, her ex-lover is a representative of the male dominant society who despises his roots (including land and family) for his money minded selfish pursuits. With false promise of a better life with him in future, he robs Kunjimathu of her virginity before leaving Aati. Thus Kunjimathu becomes one among the many victims who are lured into a physical relation in the pretext of true love. Men see women as a commodity for just sensual pleasure thereby undermining the value of true love that women cherish in their heart. But Kunjimathu was sincere to Kumaran which is evident from her being a spinster all through her life. With the money secured by her father for her marriage, she bought the land that Kumaran sold before leaving Aati. She works hard on the land earning a livelihood not only for herself but also for the old and decrepit parents of Kumaran. This is a good instance of a woman's eternal bond with the land which she never despises.

On the contrary, Kumaran's mind grows narrow with the accumulation of money. He marries a woman of his choice and lives a blissful and joyous life unmindful of his past relations and roots. Kumaran lures the young men of Aati with promises of a better life and

money in the town and the poor men easily fall a prey to his vicious deeds. Almost all the women characters portrayed in the novel along with a few men exhibit a strong connection with their land and nature. They are always ready to forsake their lives to safeguard and protect Aati from being a land of sewages. They are adamant that they never leave Aati and resort to protect their homeland from being converted into a commercial township. Formation of township necessitates destruction of vast areas of forest belt which is sure to cause adverse effects upon the ecosystem. Also it pollutes the clear water bodies with garbage and wastes affecting the people who depend upon them for their livelihood.

Sarah Joseph represents the character Shailaja as a strong minded woman who is stern in her action against the evil minded forces represented by Kumaran and his team. She braves to leave her husband's household on the very day of her marriage when she learns that the water bodies and surroundings of her new home are contaminated with shit and filth. She works headstrong with others who wish to protect the natural beauty and serenity of Aati. The pale young girl whom the story teller Noor Muhammed meets occasionally in the water and sometimes in the midst of the forest is yet another women character who exhibits a deep concern towards the pollution of water bodies and depletion of forest cover. Noor Muhammed once spots her crying, for the clear water she sees everyday has turned filthy and muddy. She earnestly cleans the water bodies which are polluted with plastics and other waste materials. She feels sick at the sight of her environment turning polluted.

The woman story teller who reaches Aati along with her daughter Kayal strongly believes in the healing power of nature. Kayal, who is sexually abused at a tender age of five, loses her liveliness and chirpiness and is always a moody and wailing child. The pristine clear water bodies and the beautiful and serene nature of Aati revive Kayal into an active, enthusiastic and charming young child. By portraying Kayal in all her liveliness in the latter part of the novel, Sara Joseph draws before us how nature cures human illness when we fully devote ourselves in the healing power of nature.

The method of narration implied in the novel is so realistic and natural that quite often we can visualize the waterlogged island Aati and the filth and dirt afloat the water right before our eyes. Through these observations, it is apparent that in addition to the treatment of feminine sensibility in her novels, Sara Joseph makes her novels a platform to point at the readers the far-reaching effects of ecological destruction that is so impending in the very nearby future.

Manjula Padmanabhan is an author, artist and children's story writer who belongs to that generation of women writers who are not fettered by the chains of traditions and conventions. Her novel *Escape* though appears to be taking place in a fantasy world, points a sharp finger at the social issue of female infanticide that was much prevalent in our country.

The focus of the novel is the tension and trauma faced by Meiji as a single female left behind in a land ruled by males. Also it gives us a picture on how the excessive use of nuclear power and technology contaminates the land, water and natural resources. The military Generals (who are clones to each other) rule the world and exterminate every single female from their world except Meiji who lives unnoticed in the company of her uncles. The generations are created by cloning, ignoring the reproductive power of women. They denounce womanhood and view them as "Vermin Tribe" (237). They never attribute any role to be played by women in their lives thereby wiping them completely out from their world. According to the General, "Females are driven by biological imperatives that lead them to compete for breeding rights. Whereas collectives breed cooperatively. In order to control breeding technology and to establish the collective ethic we had to eliminate them" (271).

Meiji is a prisoner since birth and is forced to live in disguise as a boy. Her growth is retarded by administering hormone suppressant. Meiji lives unaware of her gender. She is inaccessible to any knowledge about woman for she has seen only her three uncles since her birth. The novel exposes the pathetic situation of a female in a male dominated world who is denied the freedom of self awareness. They see both woman and nature as unwanted elements and take every step to suppress and dominate them. The fertile land has been converted into a barren land owing to excessive radioactivity. In one instance, when Meiji and her uncle Youngest decide to run away from this country, they wear radioactive pressure suits in order to escape from the harmful radiations. By portraying Meiji as the last woman and the future world engrossed in harmful radioactivity, Manjula Padmanabhan mocks at the modern man's pursuit behind technology and development without keeping a watchful eye on these shortsighted changes. Radioactive materials are very useful source of powerful energy if we harness it properly. But in the long run, it may prove fatal both for the human beings and animals. Nuclear radiations are strong enough to wipe out every single living being from this universe. Looking at these perspectives Manjula Padmanabhan's novel *Escape* can be viewed as an ecofeministic text.

Ecofeminism has its distinct and significant position in the oppressive discourse study. Power and dominance are innate and emanates from every social and political structure. It is the power dynamics which played a significant role in the oppression of the less privileged. The notion of less privileged or marginalized is actually a social construct by which they are decentered and marginalized as 'the other'. The oppressive discourses in general tried to analyse the humiliating and disgraceful position of the oppressed and also probed how these oppressed masses reacted to such embarrassing conditions. By making a generalized probe into various oppressive discourses in literature this investigator tried to give a general outlook on various such oppressive discourses in fiction writings like the dalit writings, diasporic literature, literature of the black, feminist writing, ecofeminist writings etc. with an emphasis on ecofeminist fiction writings. All these writings encompassed the trauma of the oppressed.

Ecofeminism linked ecology with women on the basis of a relationship that is highly interconnected. This paper has made a probe into a few ecofeminist fiction writings and came to a conclusion that there exists a strong bond between woman and nature and different women interact and respond differently with their environment. But the act of the female characters in these novels seeking refuge in nature as the last resort of hope reinforced the fact that the relationship between women and nature are bonded firmly and are never estranged. It also reiterated the notion that both women and nature are equally marginalized and demoralized by the patriarchal dominant society.

Arundathi Roy, the environmentalist and social activist made her novel *The God of Small Things* a vehicle to expound her views on ecofeminism. Reflecting through past and present, she gave vent to her concerns regarding environmental degradation especially the pollution of the river Meenachal and the sad and pathetic state of God's own country. She also portrayed Ammu, the central character as a bold and defiant woman who broke the rigid patriarchal and caste norms of the society by marrying against her families wish and later associating herself with an untouchable named Velutha. Her sexual communion with Velutha that took place at night in the open nature also illustrated the fact that Ammu was quite unprotected and insecure within her family, but found secure in the embrace of Velutha out in the lap of nature. As a woman who was neglected and marginalized in her own family, she made this association as a strong weapon of defiance against the established social orders of a society that turned a blind eye towards the rights and sensibilities of a divorced woman.

In Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape*, both women and nature received the same kind of treatment at the hands of the males (Generals) who ruled the world. Nature has turned barren owing to excessive use of radioactive elements and women had been totally exterminated as reproduction is done by cloning. In both these cases, the reproductive capacity of women and nature are not given their due importance and are cast aside as unwanted elements. As a result the land which was once the centre of fertility has turned barren and women had become totally extinct.

Sara Joseph's *Gift in Green* paints a realistic picture of how man's greed elevates the gap between him and nature and at the same time women kept a deep and everlasting bond with her nature. The women of Aati are true lovers of nature and are ready to forsake their lives for their land and water. While at the same time, men like Kumaran are blindfolded with greed and overlooked their roots and turned their traditional homeland into a commercial city.

In view of analyzing these texts, it became apparent that in all these novels considered the women are victimized and traumatized to the margin by the patriarchy who are responsible for their inferior status in the society. Irrespective of whether they were rich or poor, belonged

to high class or low, the status of women were always inferior to that of their men folk. The only way out for them to escape from this humiliation was to seek refuge in nature, an entity which received similar blow and mistreatment as them. All the women characters portrayed in these novels had gone through a tragic life journey of exploitation and dishonor and sought refuge in the lap of nature for ultimate solace and happiness. This strengthens the ecofeminists view that women established a strong and eternal bond with their nature unlike men who exploited nature for their own selfish needs.

Women's activism and measures taken by the government have resulted in providing equal opportunities to women in the fields of education, politics, equal pay etc. leading to a change in the outlook of the society towards women. The clarion call of the environmentalists and the alarming state of the environment like the global warming, depletion of ozone layer, earthquakes, tsunami and other natural hazards had awoken the awareness of people towards the protection and care of their environment. Women environmental activists like Vandana Shiva, Medha Patkar, Arundhati Roy have played significant roles in initiating many environmental drives and have also successfully motivating and mobilizing women towards these moves.

The ecofeminist women writers by portraying the issues of both women and nature in their fictions foreground their pathetic state so as to make an awareness of their situation along with a steady revolution in their state. These narratives not only entwined a theory on feminism and ecology but also tried to problematize their situation seeking possible solutions for the uplift of both women and environment. They threw light on the irretrievable damages that man has inflicted upon this environment which will unquestionably lead to a situation when the technology and development that man has created till date will prove futile. Distancing of women and nature from the mainstream development will prove fatal in the nearby future. What these ecofeminist fictional writers by positing women and environment in their novels laid bare before us is to create a well balanced, just and substantial social order by developing a harmonious relationship between man and woman and man and nature. This would definitely necessitate a deconstruction of the western construct of patriarchal dualism and hierarchical structures that is the basis of all power structures dominant in the society.

These texts are therefore a sight for the plurality of the discourses of ecofeminism. These discourses by highlighting a constant struggle for justice and honour are promising enough to make their stance felt in the society aiming at the betterment and growth of the nation. They are of course a beacon of light and hope to those sections that are marginalized and silenced for years. The upcoming generations should be inspired by these writings and should abstain from practicing any sort of oppression for themselves.

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