

Negotiating Gender and Nature: An Ecofeminist Reading of Geetanjali Shree's *Mai: Silently Mother*

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Abstract:

The French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne coined the term ecofeminism in 1974 by combining the words "ecology" and "feminism" to convey the connection between gender and environment and the shared oppression of women and nature under patriarchy. The study aims to analyze Geetanjali Shree's novel *Mai, silently mother*, through the lens of ecofeminism, focusing on the intersections of gender, memory and resistance as articulated by influential feminist theorists Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies in their concepts of "Maldevelopment" and "Subsistence." The paper explores Mai's silent resistance and fostering resilience, which parallel the ecological process of regeneration. The central character of the novel is Mai, who functions as a metaphor for nature and an embodiment of Nurturance, strength and resistance often attributed to nature's silent yet regenerative force. The study argues that patriarchy dominates and confines Mai to domestic spaces, much like nature is exploited within male-dominated socio-cultural systems. In the novel, Mai's silenced life is narrated through the perspectives of her daughter and son, reinforcing her symbolic position as a quiet yet enduring force of nature. By linking women and nature, the paper demonstrates how Shree redefines power not as loud domination but as quiet endurance, reflecting the shared struggles of women and nature, both of which resist in their own way.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Vandana Shiva, Mai, Geetanjali Shree, Patriarchy, Mal-development, Subsistence Ethic.

Introduction

The term ecofeminism is the amalgamation of two words: ecology and feminism. Ecofeminists emphasize the intrinsic relationship between nature and women. In an age of environmental crisis, ecofeminism, as a branch of feminism, examines both women and nature as subjects of domination and exploitation within patriarchal structures. Across the world, humanity faces ecological threats for which human beings themselves are largely responsible. Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies argue in the book *Ecofeminism* that “Ecofeminism is about connectedness and wholeness of theory and practice” (14). They further assert:

Whenever women acted against ecological destruction or/and the threat of atomic annihilation, they immediately became aware of the connection between patriarchal violence against women, other people and nature, and that: In defying this patriarchy we are loyal to future generations and to life and this planet itself. We have a deep and particular understanding of this both through our natures and our experience as women. (Shiva and Mies 14)

Geetanjali Shree is a prominent Hindi novelist known for her experimental narrative style and her exploration of feminine experiences within postcolonial India. She is regarded as one of the most compelling contemporary voices in Hindi literature. Her novel *Mai, Silently Mother* centers on the life of a woman named Mai. Through the perspective of her daughter Sunaina, the narrator explores the intersections of gender, identity, and resistance within a patriarchal framework, drawing a parallel between the exploitation of women and the exploitation of nature under capitalist and patriarchal systems. The novel explores the complex lives of women in a patriarchal society.

2. Theoretical Framework

Ecofeminism, as a theoretical framework, provides a critical lens to examine this kind of texts by establishing the interconnection between the exploitation and domination of both nature and women. Prominent western ecofeminists such as Carolyn Merchant in *The Death of Nature* and Val Plumwood, in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, explore how women and environment are subordinated within patriarchal systems based on western dualisms such as man/woman, mind/body, reason/emotion, and culture/nature. Indian feminist thinker Vandana Shiva along with German ecofeminist Maria Mies, extends this critique to postcolonial contexts. They prioritize the concepts such as “subsistence practices” and “ecological wisdom,” while critiquing the notion of “maldevelopment,” to resist capitalist and patriarchal domination.

2.1 Western Ecofeminism: Carolyn Merchant, Val Plumwood, Greta Gaard

Carolyn Merchant

Carolyn Merchant’s groundbreaking work *The Death of Nature (1980)* marks a foundational moment in ecofeminist criticism in the west. She argues that the rise of industrial capitalism transformed nature from a nurturing, organic entity into inert, mechanistic matter. This conceptual shift justified environmental destruction, economic inequality, and the marginalization of women.

Val Plumwood

Another Australian philosopher and ecofeminist writer, Val Plumwood in her book *Feminism and the mastery of Nature (1993)* critiques the dualistic structure of western philosophy that hierarchically opposes these dualisms – man and woman, culture and nature, mind and body, reason, and emotion. She demonstrates how these dualisms sustain systems of domination that subordinate both women and the natural world. In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Plumwood asserts:

The dualistic distortion of culture and the historical inferiority of women and nature in the west have been based, as we have seen, on a network of assumptions involving a range of closely related dualistic contrasts, especially the dualism of reason and nature, or (in a virtually equivalent formulation), of humanity and culture on the one side and nature on the other. (33)

Greta Gaard

The prominent feminist Greta Gaard in her essays like *Toward a Queer Feminism* and *Ecofeminism Revisited*, argues that ecofeminism is a movement that reveals the interconnected system of exploitation and domination of both women and environment. She presents ecofeminism as a political and intersectional movement for justice. (Toward 115; Ecofeminism 30).

2.2 Indian Ecofeminism: Vandana Shiva and the Chipko Movement

Ecofeminism in India is not a new philosophy. The root of this philosophy can be traced to ancient *Sankhya* philosophy, where concepts such as *Prakriti* (nature) and *Purusha/Shakti* (spirit) are discussed. Our ancient sages and great philosophers articulated an inseparable bond between nature and the feminine principle permeating existence.

Thus, ancient philosophers cum sages laid a significant foundation for ecofeminist thought viewing nature as sacred and feminine as worthy of reverence. A deep spiritual connection to nature is seen in the worship of rivers and other natural elements in Indian culture. Women are associated with *Prakriti* and *Shakti*, which suggests a powerful connection between women and the natural world.

Vandana Shiva is one of the influential Indian feminist scholars and environmentalists. She completed her Ph.D. at University of Western Ontario. Her research focused on the foundations of quantum theory. She later returned to India and was inspired by the Chipko

Movement which emerged in 1970s in the village of Mandal in western Garhwal Himalaya, Uttarakhand (then part of Uttar Pradesh). In this movement, more than three hundred village women hugged trees to prevent them from being cut down by the non-local contractors. This event became historically significant and developed as a model of feminine ecological resistance.

Vandana Shiva, in her book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Survival in India* interprets this event as not merely as an environment protest but as a spontaneous expression of women's ecological consciousness deeply rooted in the concepts of *Prakriti* and *Shakti*. In *Staying Alive*, Vandana Shiva asserts, "It is these two distinct knowledge and economic systems which clashed in 1977 in Adwani when the Chipko movement became explicitly an ecological and feminist movement. The women, of course, had always been the backbone of Chipko and for them the struggle was ever the struggle for the living, natural forest" (72). Thus, Women in the Chipko Movement were not only protecting trees but also safeguarding the principles of life, nurturance, and sustainability.

In the novel *Mai, Silently Mother*, Mai (mother) is represented as a metaphor for nature-enduring, nurturing, giving, protective, yet exploited and degraded in return by human beings. This paper examines how this novel of Geetanjali Shree can be analyzed through ecofeminist concepts such as "maldevelopment" and "Subsistence," where endurance, care, and nurturance function as forms of resistance to the domination of both Nature and women.

The research question of this study is how do the female characters in *Mai, Silently Mother* reflect ecofeminist thought by negotiating the intersections of gender, nature, and resistance through their domestic, social, and ethical practices enacted through silence?

2.3 Linking “Maldevelopment” and the “Subsistence Perspective” in Shree’s *Mai, Silently Mother*

In her book *Staying Alive*, Vandana shiva focuses on the concepts of “maldevelopment” and “subsistence.” These two terms are closely interrelated. She defines “maldevelopment” as false model of progress imposed by capitalist system led by patriarchal society. This concept degrades nature and demeans women’s traditional role as nurturers, which forms part of their subsistence role. In the book *Staying Alive*, Vandana Shiva states:

Precisely because more growth in maldevelopment has meant less sustenance of life and life-support systems, it is now imperative to recover the feminine principle as the basis for development which conserves and is ecological. Feminism as ecology, and ecology as the revival of Prakriti, the source of all life, become the decentred powers of political and economic transformation and restructuring. This involves, first, a recognition that categories of ‘productivity’ and growth which have been taken to be positive, progressive, and universal are, in reality, restricted patriarchal categories. When viewed from the point of view of nature’s productivity and grow, the women’s production of sustenance, they are found to be ecologically destructive and source of gender inequality. It is no accident that the modern, efficient, and productive technologies created within the context of growth in market economic terms are associated with heavy ecological costs, borne largely by women. (6)

In *Mai, silently mother*, Geetanjali Shree explores the life of Mai, a traditional mother, as observed through her daughter, Sunaina’s perspective. Here, Mai represents women in patriarchal society who have been silenced, much like nature itself. The role of a mother is rendered invisible. Her daily work is undervalued. Her world is confined to domestic duties and responsibilities, such as; cooking, feeding, caring, nurturing, which are regarded as

subsistence work. In the book *Ecofeminism*, Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies observe, “Nature’s economy- through which environmental regeneration takes place – and the people’s subsistence economy – within which women produce the sustenance for society through ‘invisible’ unpaid work called non-work – are being systematically destroyed to create growth in the market economy” (75). The capitalist system exploits both nature and women by devaluing subsistence work, and such work is labelled as unproductive. In *Ecofeminism*, Shiva, and Mies further states:

The production boundary is a political creation that, in its workings, excludes regenerative and renewable production cycles from the area of production. Hence all women who produce for their families, children, community, and society are treated as ‘non-productive’ and ‘economically inactive.’ When economies are confined to the marketplace, economic self-sufficiency is perceived as economic deficiency. The devaluation of women’s work, and of work done in subsistence economies of the south, is the natural outcome of a production boundary constructed by capitalist patriarchy.

(xv)

3. Negotiating Gender and Nature in *Mai, silently Mother*

3.1 Mai as an Ecofeminist Figure

Mai is the embodiment of Prakriti, or nature. Her daily work is not merely labour but a duty comparable to the role of the nature itself; silent sustainer of life. Like nature, Mai nurtures her children and cares for all family members despite being ignored and insulted. This silent endurance mirrors mother nature’s resilience in the face of exploitative and destructive human actions carried out in the name of unlimited development. Geetanjali Shree represents Mai as a metaphor for nature who is enduring and nurturing despite exploitation by humankind.

Just as in the Chipko Movement, where women embraced trees and risked their lives to protect them from being cut down, Mai embraces her family and nurtures them despite personal suffering. Thus, her endurance becomes a silent yet persistent protest against the exploitative logic of patriarchy that reduces women to invisible labour.

3.2 Domestic Space as an Ecology in Miniature

The term “*Ecology*” derives from Greek words *Oikos* and *Logos*. *Oikos* means house or dwelling place and *Logos* means study. Thus, ecology literally refers to the study of household of nature. If we consider home as a micro-ecosystem, family relationships are sustained through the cycles of care, nourishment, and nurture.

Mai’s life is devoted to care, protect and nourishment. She finds strength in sustaining others. Her physical, emotional, and moral labour transforms household into an ecology in miniature.

In the novel, Geetanjali Shre transforms the domestic space into an ecological sphere. The home is not merely a passive setting but a living ecosystem in which Mai embodies the feminine concept of *Prakriti* and the ethical force of power of *Shakti*. The novel conveys an important message: irrespective of place, whether home or nature, sustaining life is the strongest form of resistance. Nita Kumar, the translator of *Mai, Silently Mother*, observes, “The house is metaphor for domination, repression, and freedom, at different times. The food is metaphor for choice, service, and modernity in various contexts. Clothes are multivocal, the body can symbolise diverse states of being. Language, speech, silence tell us more than they seem to on the surface (195).

4. Silently Mother: Resistance, Care, and the Ecology of Silence

4.1 Silence as Ecological Resistance

Silence is often perceived as a sign of resilience or passivity. However, at times it becomes a powerful, and ecological form of protest. Mai's quiet act of sustaining life is more effective than loud protest in a world structured by exploitation and domination of the vulnerable. Mai chooses silence as a form of resistance against injustice, and her resilience and moral strength redefine silence as an ecological and transformative power like nature's silent regenerative process of survival. In *Mai*, Shree writes, "She was bent over right from the start, a silent spectre moving around, taking care of everyone's needs" (7). Nita Kumar, observes that "Even when there is no speech, the assumption that speechlessness is not a choice is unjustified, again and again, that silence is a weapon. It can be used to aid or hinder" (178).

Silence is also the language of nature. Mother Earth regenerates silently; rivers flow, forests heal, seeds sprout without proclamation. In a similar way, Mai's silence echoes self-renewing rhythm of nature, subtly disrupting patriarchal aggression.

4.2 The Subsistence Ethics in Practice

The word "subsistence" refers to survival through care and ecological continuity and "ethic" denotes moral worldview centered on nurturing and preservation. The concept of the subsistence ethics is articulated by Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies. It signifies life-sustaining activities such as farming, gardening, nurturing, and caregiving which are devoid of industrial growth. These life-sustaining practices emphasize sufficiency rather than surplus.

This subsistence ethics in practice is visible in daily acts of nurturing, caring, and conserving. These quiet yet sustaining gestures function as forms of resistance to both patriarchy and ecological destruction. In short, subsistence ethic practice means living in peace with nature through nurturing, conserving, and sustaining life. In the novel, Mai's nurturing

and caring, gardening may be specified as domestic labour or subsistence work. Regarding gardening, Geetanjali Shree writes, “There were vegetables, greens, cereals, mangoes, guavas at the time. Jackfruit dishes and pickles were made even then. But when mai put her touch on the garden, there was a new womanly blossoming” (88).

Such domestic tasks are often dismissed as these are devoid of creating any capitalist wealth in large scale, which is frequently responsible for the destruction of ecosystems and livelihoods. Mai, sustains the lives of her family by absorbing pains reconciling contradictions, much like mother nature. Her resilience becomes an ecological metaphor. despite her social suffocation, Mai does not abandon her nurturing role, her duty. This spiritual resistance aligns with the subsistence ethic, which gives value to fulfilling necessity rather than productivity

4.3 Redefining Strength and Agency

Redefining strength and agency require rethinking power not as domination or loud assertion but as resilience, silence, and the ability to sustain life under oppression. The novel challenges traditional binaries of power such as man/woman, culture/nature, power/care, speech/ silence, and reason/ emotion. The novel challenges patriarchal binaries that define strength as masculine power and instead presents nurturing and sustaining life as the highest form of strength. Women’s traditional roles are more powerful than the masculine expressions of domination. Women strive to sustain life like nature, whereas patriarchal systems promote ecological destruction and domination. Despite being insulted, dominated, and exploited within the family, Mai holds it together, absorbing chaos much like nature itself. She values life, harmony, and peace by following her ethic of silence, care, and forgiveness. Her strength is ecological as she sustains the fragile ecosystem of the domestic sphere. Endurance becomes her highest form of resistance enabling her to preserve the spirit of the household even when everything around her is falling apart. Reflecting on Mai’s philosophy, Sunaina recalls, “Mai

had shown me a bird in the sky who was trying so hard to fly in one place, 'look,' in that infinity if a sky the bird was flapping its wings without going anywhere. The whole sky was the birds. but what use was it? What use was an empty endless sky?" (Shree 64).

5. Conclusion

Through a synthesis of western and Indian ecofeminist thought, Carolyn Merchant's ecological critique, Val Plumwood's theory of dualism, and the concepts of maldevelopment and subsistence articulated by Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies, Shree's *Mai, Silently Mother* stands as both ecological and feminist text, and thus a profoundly ecofeminist work. Like nature, Mai's resilient resistance to patriarchal exploitation transcends direct confrontation. Shree's portrayal of women negotiating gender, nature, and resistance demonstrates how literature can embody ecofeminist traits without separating gender from nature. Ultimately, Women from the Himalayan Garhwal to domestic sphere, remain the primary custodians of life sustaining both human and ecological worlds. In this way, *Mai, Silently Mother* situates itself firmly within the framework of ecofeminism.

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