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Ecofeminism and Women's Writings in English: An Indian Overview

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Abstract:

Women play a great role in the conservation and preservation of nature and the natural surroundings. They have a great sense of cleanliness and neatness of the premises where they stay with their sibilants. A woman at her heart is caring mother and so the earth too as she is the source of the survival of not only the humankind but of the whole living paraphernalia, the biotic existence. Both women and the earth are known for their love and care for their dear ones. Women are closely related to the earth because of the fact that they are co-sufferers. Man's interference in the affairs of nature had a direct impact on the earth and women. The relationship of women with nature can be analysed on two levels, i. e. the physical and the spiritual or the aesthetic. On the physical level it is evidenced that both of them are the victims of anthropocentric ideology. Both of them are exploited by men for the sake of their physical needs and have direct reciprocal effect of the ills done to them. Women at large, particularly from *aadivasi and Dalit* locale suffer from the deterioration of the natural resources as it affects the environment. The reseeded of natural resources brings an additional strain on women. Women depend for their daily needs on subsidiary forest products such as firewood, wild fruits, fodder and medicinal herbs. These products are the bounty of Nature serving as an eternal source for sustenance and health care in the form of *Ayurveda*, a comprehensive, scientifically proven herbal therapy developed and established by *Rishis* like *Ptanjali, Dhanwantary, and Shakyamuni*. A few of the forest products serve as a source of livelihood and a cause for the sustenance of the rural growth and economy. Felling of the trees on a larger scale for commercial purposes affects the living standards of the village people and disturbs the bioregional features of the territory including the damage to the organisms, the flora and the fauna. Women happen to be an inevitable community without whom the idea of social economic and moral development cannot be conceived at all. Confined to the routine household chores women could hardly compete with men so long as the literary output was concerned during the 1850s. Looking at the history of social reform in India, it is realised that women responded to the movements launched for their empowerment irrespective of the bitter social criticism of the contemporary orthodox people. The efforts taken in this regard by the great reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya and proper in Maharashtra reformers like Mahatma Phule, Krantijyoti Savitribai Phule, Karmaveer Vitthal Ramji Shinde, Mharshi Dhondo Keshav Karve, Karmaveer Bhaurao Patil and others would be remembered for ever.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Indian, women's writings, empowerment.

In the recent times it is seen that women have conquered almost every field by displaying their talent and ability. There is hardly any field today where women are not holding important portfolios including the government and the private establishments. They are imparting their respective duties effectively. A few of them are the best of creative minds writing a variety of literature. i.e. fiction, poetry, autobiography and autobiographical novel. Indian Writings in English have come of age with almost two generations of an outpour in various genres. Writers like Kamala Das, Kamala Markandeya, Surojini Naidu, Suniti Namjoshi, Gauri Deshpande and . . . others. Apart from the writings in English, writings in regional languages like Marathi, Hindi, Gujrathi, Punjabi, Bengali, Urdu, Tamil, and Kannada etc. are equally prolific in their themes and treatment of Indian culture, tradition and heritage. They are rich with a variety ranging from short story to novel in prose and other forms such as oral narratives exploring into the ethos of Indian history and culture. Many of them are based on myths, legends, songs and fables having deep connections with Nature. These writings need to be studied in the light of the premises of ecology and environmental challenges posed by the postmodernist culture which is based on the principles of utilitarian ideology. Women's writings in English in the initial phase were lured to a great extent by the flavour of British cultural standards. Women who could write during this phase belonged to a specific higher middle class, seldom aware of the plight of the majority of the women population who belonged to the lower middle and the lowly class. Their writings dealt with the themes of repression on the institutional level like child marriage, and female child abuse, dowry, prohibition of women's education, personal ambition to attain higher goals, passion for power, politics, arranged marriages and enforced widowhood etc. Writers like Toru Dutta, Kamala Das Gauri Deshpande, Suniti Namjosi and Chhitra Narendra could be cited for the sake of an example writing in the mode as above. They remained confined to the domain of a few women who belonged to upper middle class and could hardly invoke through their writings the discontent and the agony of the lower-middle class and the lowly caste women who were victimised by the so called patriarchal hegemony and the plight of women who were trapped in the traditional religious orthodox social order which was essentially based on the philosophy of Manu who treated women on par with an object meant to be utilised, used and thrown away.

Late in the twentieth century i. e. around the 1980s that women from various other communities and castes particularly the middle class and the downtrodden communities started coming up with their writings with an authenticity of emotion, experience and thought. These women focussed on their personal plight like the predicament of a single woman or a spinster, sexual exploitation, physical and psychological repression on account of being a low caste woman, but ambitious and striving for self empowerment.

During the last four decades majority of women came up with their autobiographical writings. Through these autobiographies they explored the concerns of women related not only to their womanhood but also their hopes and aspirations as an independent persons contributing in the growth and development of that particular caste, community, society and

ultimately the nation to which they belong to. The autobiographies of black women the Indian Dalit women have challenged the standards claimed by the male hierarchy particularly in the realm biographical and autobiographical and the literary genres such as prose, poetry, drama and novel in America, India and elsewhere in Asian countries like, Pakistan, Srilanka and Bangladesh. Writings of women writers like Alice Walker in the West and Taslima Nasreen with her novel like *Lajja* (Shame) published in 1993, have set the new standards and created a place of their own. The autobiographies in Marathi by Dalit women writers like Kumud Pawde, *Antahsphot*, (Self Revelation) Mukta Sarvagaud, *Mitaleli Kawade* (Behind the Closed Doors), Bebi Kamble, *Jeena Amucha* (Our Miserable Lives) and Shantabai Dani's *Ratrandin Amhaa* (Our Perennial Worries), (as I have translated the titles into English), depict elaborately their grievances, agonies, plight and protest against their victimization pertaining to the biased Hindu social order based on castiest discrimination.

Women writing in regional languages are also equally prolific in the flow of the genres as above. Literatures written in Marathi, Hindi, Gujarati, Tamil and Telugu need to be translated into inter territorial languages and also a few of their masterpieces in English. When women from various strata of society and the Dalit women were writing about their plight, on the other front there was an intense reaction against the victimization of women in the form of feminist activism that was reflected on various levels such as education, literature, religion, and politics. This resulted in the outbreak of women's movements for the attainment of their identity as an independent and an inevitable part of the mainstream social hierarchy based on the principle of equability and the constitutional rights. As a consequence of it the image of a woman as it appears in the contemporary literature has undergone a drastic change. Women writers have moved away from the stereotype and traditional portrayals of women in fiction, women enduring and self sacrificing, women characters searching for identity in the traditional male dominated hierarchy are gradually being replaced by women who strive for the assertion of their ambitions against all odds and succeed at any cost. The ecofeminist movement in literature and literary criticism represents the coming together of women and environmental feminists. Womens' movements, their writings and spirituality, all have a very deep connection with the well being of the earth and all forms of life that our ecology and ecosystem supports.

There are specific implications that convey the similarity between the two movements i. e. environmentalism and ecofeminism. Both imply overexploitation and over utilization, suppression and oppression. The ecofeminist literature in the West lays emphasis on and tries to conceptualise woman's relationship with environment on the basis of repression and exploitation. Feminist environmentalism strives to reconstruct and redefine the identity of a nurturing mother which implies the mechanism of dominance in terms of the patriarchal hegemony.

While pointing out the common thread between the degradation of environment and the suppression of women Vandana Shiva observes,

Both have their origins in patriarchal power coupled with capitalist greed with disastrous consequences. (Hindustan Times, 18.11.04)

Shiva believes that it is the woman who happens to be the immediate sufferer of the consequences pertaining to all kinds of ecological imbalances such as scarcity of water, energy resources like firewood, food, fodder and the amenities of daily use. Emergence of feminist environmentalism is attributed to women's awareness and their relationship with environment. While commenting on this relationship Bina Agarwal observes,

The ancient identity of Nature as a nurturing mother links women's history with the history of the environment and ecological change. In investigating the roots of our current environmental dilemma and its connections to science, technology and the economy, we must re-examine the relationship of women with nature as living organism rather than a machine. (Agarwal: 1992:122)

According to Khoshoo

Indian women no matter whether they are literate or illiterate belong to higher or lower social groups are generally more educated than men as far as environment is concerned. (Khoshoo: 1992:119)

Women writers in West try to relate the repression of women to nature in terms of exploitation of labour, mind and body. As Nature is exploited of her resources, the women too are exploited of their labour. As a body of a woman is treated as an object meant to be enjoyed so the earth also is treated as an object and exploited of her resources just for the sake of physical comfort.

In Indian context the term ecofeminist environmentalism does not stand for the exploitative strand only. It connotes the gesture of sacrifice in every act of giving, the giving which is not always looked at as an exploitation by both the giver and the receiver. Indian literature has got a very deep affinity with the land, the culture, its religion and tradition which is thousand of years old. As it has been pointed out earlier, Indian culture and literary tradition are as old as the scriptures like *Vedas* and *Upanishadas*. In this tradition there has been a tremendous emphasis on Nature and environment in terms of its bounty, beauty and spirituality. The bounty was never meant to be over-exploited and beauty was never meant to be over enjoyed. Nature for Indian literature serves as an everlasting source for spiritual enlightenment. In this regard the literature written by Indian women poets like Indira Sant, Bahinabai Choudhari, , Sarojini Babar, and women ascetics like Muktabai, Janabai like Kanhopatra Janabai, Muktabai, and their male counterparts like Saints like Sant Dynaneswhwar, Tukaram Maharaj, Namdeo Maharaj Sant Chokha Mela and are treated as a critique on the relationship between not only god and man and man and man but also man and his environment and the Nature. Indian folk literature written, read and dramatised to a great extent in various of its genres such as *Owee*, *Bharud Bhedic* and songs sung on the

occasion are a rich treasure that could be studied for restructuring and strengthening the bond between man and Nature.

Folk literature in Maharashtra is rich in form, variety and expression. Folk tales and literature have got a close relationship with myths and archetypes dating back to *Gunadhaya* and *Shalivahana*. Tribal literary tradition in Maharashtra and in Uttar Pradesh is equally rich in variety and heritage. Folktales in Marathi are broadly categorised into three categories, i. e. mythical tales about deities and saints, fairy tales, and legends, fables, parables, and the stories about creation. The reason for the survival of these tales was that its purpose was twofold i. e. entertainment and imparting of social and moral wisdom. It was for this reason that they were told by one generation to the next with uncommon vigour and interest and survived for generations to the present day. Scholars like N G Chapekar, Kamala Deshpande, Anusaya Liamaye Shridhar Ketkar, Sarojini Babar have rendered the authentic interpretations of some of the best folksongs in different forms and modes. Some of them depict various seasons like Spring, Monsoon etc. under different categorical names like *Varshagite*, (songs marking the arrival of monsoon) *Shravangite* (songs marking the arrival of Spring) and songs sung on special festive occasions such as *Bhondolyachi Gani*, *Bhulabai Gauri Geete*. Scholars like V K Ranade, Durga Bhagwat, Anuradha Potdar, C. S Karve have made valuable contribution to the study of these in the tradition of Marathi Folk literature. (Ameresh Datta: - 2005:1304)

The entire folk literary tradition with its panoramic variety could be undertaken for a study like this i.e. ecofeminist study with a major focus on the aesthetics of ecology and environment. On the contrary the Western attitude to Nature was purely based on the utilitarian ideology having least concern for the other aspect of it. Nature for them has always remained a subject of material fulfilment whereas for us it was more than it. For us it was a source of aesthetic pleasure and spiritual enlightenment with deep respect and an uncommon understating of the favours it had been bestowing upon us in various seasonal expressions. It has been the great source of our inspiration and insight into phenomena of the forms of life, other than the human beings, and their contribution to the total life supporting systems that have been responsible to maintain the balance between the binary forces of nature i. the reconstructive and the destructive, creating a deep feeling and respect for 'the otherness' and the cosmic wisdom. It is this otherness or the concern for others happens to be major theme of ecocritical study in general and the Nature studies in particular.

To sum up it could be said that the writings of Indian women in English and other regional languages could be brought under the discipline and studied from the above perspective. Majority of these writings particularly poetry and fiction is loaded with values we need today to make ourselves morally upright, emotionally balanced and intellectually invincible. Apart from the regional folk literature and the literature of the Saints (*Sant Sahitya*), the Nature poetry in Marathi written in the early fifties by poets like *Balkavi* Thombre, Yashwant Manohar, Kondwilkar, Khandekar, V. V. Shirwadkar, Madhav Julien and others could be explored for its poetic beauty and bounty with relevance to the environmental aesthetics. The magnificent ancient Indian literary heritage in its multitude

such as the *Jatakas*, stories, fables, myths and mythologies and stories based on religious scriptures also could be treated as a source of ecoliterature. Thus, the sources as above could be exploited for restructuring the syllabi at all levels of education in order to create respect for Nature and shape the creative imagination of the students. As it has been stated earlier, they are the pillars of the future of our country. Advanced studies in ecology and environment should not remain under the academic rigor of the departments of Natural Sciences only. Studies related to these and for that matter every other discipline related to the aspect of our ecosphere should be made open for study under the departments of languages, literatures and the departments of comparative literatures under interdisciplinary mode of education.

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