

## **Ecofeminism in the Novels of Sarah Joseph and Anita Nair**

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**Abstract:** *In the context of India or any other developing/under developed countries, ecofeminism is vital to unveil the exploitations and invasions over our ecology and its resources by the developed countries in the names of globalization, urbanization and development. At the same way, gender issues can be questioned and analysed by looking into our relationship towards nature, other living beings and the opposite sex/sexual minorities. Ecofeminism as an ideology and movement finds that the oppression of women is interlinked to the oppression of nature with the same masculine centered attitudes and practices concerning to the patriarchal society. Ecofeminism has its roots in literature also. In my research, I would be focusing on the selected novels of Sarah Joseph and Anita Nair, which are enriched with the essence of ecofeminism especially with its post-colonial lineage in the Indian socio-political and cultural milieu, as a means of resistance to the invasion of land and life, towards the hope for the possibility of an eco-friendly and gender just world order. The aim and main objective of my present study is analysis and interpretation of the textual and conceptual essence of ecofeminism in brief in the selected novels of Sarah Joseph and Anita Nair. To achieve this, it is essential to explore relevant ecofeminist theories and perspectives through a thorough and vast literature survey.*

**Keywords:** *Ecofeminism, Ecofeminist literary criticism, Novels of Sarah Joseph, Novels of Anita Nair, Feminism.*

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

In the context of India or any other developing/under developed countries, ecofeminism is vital to unveil the exploitations and invasions over our ecology and its resources, by the developed countries in the names of globalization, urbanization and development. In the same way, gender issues can be questioned and analysed by looking into our relationship towards nature, other living being and the opposite sex/sexual minorities. The marginalized are the first victims of any form of devastation or disasters; therefore, analyzing this connection is essential. Marginalisation geometrically increases to form a multiple layered structure when some of the combinations like women, children, disabled, poor, black and dalit intersect. Vandana Shiva in her book, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*, criticizes the western ideology of development and its negative impacts on women and nature in the third world countries. She calls this patriarchal Western concept of development as ‘mal development’ as it is least concerned with the well-being of all human beings and other living beings deprived of their position in the society. In the book *Ecofeminism*, Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies criticize the existing theories and practices and propose a practical as well as ideological ecofeminist perspectives rooted in sustainability to practice in everyday life.

Ecofeminism has its base in literature also. Ecocriticism and feminist literary criticism have contributed to the linguistic as well as literary aspects of theories and ideologies in literature. Ecofeminist literary criticism is not new, but still it is at a formative stage, especially in the

context of post-colonial literature. In my paper, I would be focusing on the selected novels of Sarah Joseph and Anita Nair, which are enriched with the essence of ecofeminism, especially with its post-colonial lineage in the Indian socio-political and cultural milieu, as a means of resistance to the invasion of land and life, towards the hope for the possibility of an eco-friendly and gender-just world order. The main objective of my present study is analysis and interpretation of the textual and conceptual essence of ecofeminism in brief in the selected novels of Sarah Joseph and Anita Nair. To achieve this, it is essential to explore relevant ecofeminist theories and perspectives through a thorough literature survey.

This study attempts to focus on the selected novels of Anita Nair and translated novels of Sarah Joseph, which are written on the premise that empowerment of women is the ultimate and essential necessity. The novels raise the fundamental issue of the impact of invasion (social, political, economic and psychological) on women and environment, in an ecofeminist perspective. It seeks to bring out the major ecofeminist theories, especially in the Indian context and tries to analyse the novels with the light of that. This research area is not extensively researched so far. It is, thus, a fresh and original area to be explored. The present research work is interdisciplinary in character, and its scope is indeed wide.

## **2. ECOFEMINISM IN THE NOVELS OF SARAH JOSEPH AND ANITA NAIR**

### **2.1. Theoretical Background**

Ecofeminism as an ideology and movement finds that the oppression of women is interlinked to the oppression of nature with the same masculine centered attitudes and practices linked to the patriarchal society. The eminent French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne while coining the term 'ecofeminism' in her 1974 book *Feminism or Death* has explained the important role of feminism in addressing environmental and gender issues. Gradually, it has grown out of the definition of mere women and environment. The late 20<sup>th</sup> century has identified Ecofeminism as a movement that speaks for women, environment and all the marginalized groups, including queers. There are three major wings of ecofeminism, which are of prime importance in defining the connection between woman and nature.

Cultural/Spiritual Ecofeminism emphasises on the natural connection between women and nature as exclusive and unique and supports the concept of 'Mother Earth' and 'femininity of nature'. They argue that traditional wisdoms of preserving and protecting nature as well as respecting women should be practiced in our contemporary society. Vandana Shiva describes in her book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* that "Forests have always been central to Indian civilization. They have been worshipped as Aranyani, the Goddess of the Forest, the primary source of life and fertility, and the forest as a community has been viewed as a model for societal and civilizational evolution. The diversity, harmony and self-sustaining nature of the forest formed the organizational principles guiding Indian civilization; the *aranya samskriti* (roughly translatable as 'the culture of the forest' or 'forest culture') was not a condition of primitiveness, but one of conscious choice." (Shiva, 53)

Mary Daly, who is a radical lesbian feminist, in her much critically acclaimed book *Gyn/ecology* analyzes the concept of femininity, its origin and roots. She explains, with the help of theology, that how notions of virtuous womanhood have arrived and perpetuated which forms the basis of patriarchy. Susan Griffin and Starhawk write on the spiritual woman-nature connection. Constructivist ecofeminists like Simone de Beauvoir and Sherry B Ortner rejects the essential connection of women and nature by stating that the connection is a mere social creation and not natural. They emphasize the essentialist and negative impact of connecting women with nature as this could alienate her from culture by widening the man-woman and culture-nature binaries. In her book *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir points out how man is equated with culture and women, nature, animals etc are separated from it.

Socialist ecofeminism stands somewhere in between Cultural and Constructivist ecofeminism. It neither accepts nor rejects the natural connection between women and nature, by de-emphasizing the connection. Socialist ecofeminists, like Karen J Warren and Maria Mies, focus on the critical analysis of the western philosophies of 'development'. Maria Mies writes about this nature-culture dilemma:

Since the Age of Enlightenment and the colonization of the world the White Man's concept of emancipation, of freedom and equality, is based on dominance over nature, and other peoples and territories. The division between nature and culture, or civilization, is integral to this understanding. From the early women's movement up to the present, a large section of women has accepted the strategy of catching-up with men as the main path to emancipation. This implied that women must overcome within themselves what had been defined as 'nature', because, in this discourse, women were put on the side of nature, whereas men were seen as the representatives of culture. (Mies, 65)

Queer Ecofeminism envisions a wide spectrum of gender ranging from superman to superwoman, including lesbians, gay, bisexuals, transgenders and cyborgs, and emphasize their connection towards environment. In the essay "Toward a queer ecofeminism", Greta Gaard points out that

The goal of this essay is to demonstrate that to be truly inclusive, any theory of ecofeminism must take into consideration the findings of queer theory. Similarly, queer theory must consider the findings of ecofeminism. To this end, the essay examines various intersections between ecofeminism and queer theory, there by demonstrating that a democratic, ecological society envisioned as the goal of ecofeminism will, of necessity, be a society that values sexual diversity and the erotic. (Gaard, 137).

Another queer ecofeminist Donna Haraway explains it further in her book *A Cyborg Manifesto* that "It is also an effort to contribute to socialist-feminist culture and theory in a post-modernist non-naturalist mode and in the utopian tradition of imagining a world without gender, which is perhaps a world without genesis, but may be also a world without end." (Haraway, 292)

### 2.2. Novels of Sarah Joseph

Sarah Joseph is considered to be one among the most renowned contemporary female writers in Kerala, India. She has published six novels and a number of short stories, even though her literary career started by writing poems. She is considered to have contributed 'Ecriture Feminine' stream in Malayalam Literature, which literally means 'Women's writing'. It continued as a movement, which paved the platform for women writers and critics to meet and form a fraternity. Sarah Joseph is considered to be the God-Mother of this movement in Kerala. Being a Feminist, activist and Malayalam Professor by profession, she founded Manushi- an organization of thinking women. She engages the whole field of Gender Theories through creative writing. Her writing focuses on the marginalized, deprived, misinterpret and misused women as well as environment.

Sarah Joseph's first novel *Aalahayude Penmakkal* was published in 1999, which grabbed prestigious awards like Central Sahitya Academy award, Kerala Sahitya Academy award and Vayalar Award. She has published *Maattathi* and *Othappu* in 2003 and 2005 respectively so as to form a trilogy. *Othappu* has been translated into English by Valson Thampu which got Vodafone Crossword Translation Award in 2009. Her fifth novel *Aathi* and its English translation *Gift in Green* were written and published simultaneously in 2011. *The Vigil* is translation of her novel *Oorukaaval* based on the character Angada from Ramayana. For the present study, I have selected three novels of Sarah Joseph which are translated into English.

***The Scent of the Other Side***: This novel depicts the story of a woman unveiled; both literally and metaphorically. It is the zealous search of a woman for her sexuality and spirituality and the inter connection between those two seemingly contradicting phases. Through the struggles and realisations of the protagonist Margalitha, Sarah Joseph proposes that realization of womanhood is a spiritual process and human spirituality could flourish through feminine virtues. It is a revelation to the invasion of institutionalized trade in the name of God, religion and spirituality. The novel questions how one's own calling could be addressed to light the inner flame through realizing the soul of womanhood and selfhood. It explores the possibility to attain spirituality naturally through the celebration of womanhood, body and sexuality, rather than denying their needs and essence. Margalitha's yearning for finding godliness outside the closets of convent and releasing herself to the nature and natural life processes is narrated and amalgamated with the concept of ecofeminism.

When she left Kasseessa's house and was deserted from the society, she chose to go to the woods to meet Father Augustine. The peaceful, healing atmosphere of wilderness helps her to ease the

pain and move forward in life. She makes love to Karikkan, proclaiming her feelings towards him and nurses Naanu who has evoked motherliness in her. She has brought back weak and fragile Naanu to life by providing him with more to the pure, cosmic nature. She also witnesses Augustine's struggle to build a water reservoir uphill for marginalized people living there who have difficulty in getting drinking water. This evidently creates a spark in Margalitha to face the world boldly and confidently for choosing a life of her own.

***Gift in Green:*** It narrates the story of Aathi, an island which lies with its natural beauty and primitive purity untouched by the outside life. Kumaran, who has left Aathi for a better life, comes back after years to transform Aathi into a city, for a huge profit. Conflict of people, while facing threats of pollution, diseases, displacement and migration and their forms of resistance to the invasion are the central parts of the novel. The novel points fingers at the various kinds of invasions, ecological destructions, aftermath of environmental degradation, and the possibilities of a united fight against human right violations.

By narrating the unique practices and eco-friendly culture of Aathi, the novel opens up possibilities for life practices based on mutual love and care, respecting Mother Earth. Story nights in Aathi, selling and buying land strictly to the inmates of the place, not allowing greedy developers to put their feet in the land, preservation and sustainable use of natural resources etc are channels of independence and empowerment for the people. When certain people go out of these rules, the whole village had to pay for the huge loss and catastrophe. Even, those who have gone after development and modernity could not find peace or comfort in that. Gitanjali comes to Aathi seeking a cure for her daughter Kayal's mental turbulence and Shailaja leaves her bridegroom and his polluted village to remain attached to the purity of Aathi. The irony of Shailaja's village getting more polluted later on than that of her husband, points to the critical analysis of environmental destruction and its huge and wide-spread negative impact on the whole living and non-living system. *Gift in Green* is a novel with a warning; it emphasizes the need to understand development not only as physical, but also as the well-being and happiness of people, the foresight needed for any activity concerning environment and the impact of invasion over nature and women. There is a nameless female character in the novel, which is the village herself. The plight of the village is depicted through her worries, anguish and helplessness.

***The Vigil:*** The novel is based on Angada's conflict while forcibly assigned to him, the duty of finding the wife of his father's murderer. He is afraid inside because he is legally eligible to be the next king and, thus, Sugriva's enemy. The novel describes the huge ecological destruction due to the building of Sethu (bridge) in order to conquer Ravana and regain Sita. While building the bridge, thousands of trees, hills and rocks were uprooted. In the Ramayana, it is described that they were waiting to be uprooted for Rama and Rama demanded their sacrifice. When a habitat is destroyed, millions of living beings associated with it will be finished. The same thing happened with sea life also. And when we ask the question why the bridge is being built, the answer is, 'for a war'; destruction for another destruction. *The Vigil* is a novel written against wars, or any kind of invasion.

Angada is not a human being; he is a monkey. His connection towards nature is more than any human being. His father Bali has loved trees and made it a point to ornament his land by planting trees. Queer Ecofeminist elements are concerned while narrating Angada and his mother Thara. Thara's plight was to get married to Bali's brother Sugriva once when he announced that Bali was killed in a fight with a monster. She then re-married Bali when he returned back without getting hurt in the fight. But when Rama killed Bali, she had to marry Sugriva. She had bitter hatred and hostility towards Sugriva. Yet she went to his bedroom every night to ensure her son Angada would not get killed. Sita, in Angada's eyes, is also depicted in the novel with all her wounds and hurts after being asked to prove her chastity. Sarah Joseph has written this genre of novel after constantly thinking from the side of the underprivileged or the subalterns while reading the Ramayana. After all the environmental destruction and death of a number of people, including Ravana and soldiers, Rama regained his wife. It was not out of love, but for regaining honour. The novel continuously asks the question: what do we gain out of wars?

### 2.3. Novels of Anita Nair

Anita Nair is a Bengaluru settled writer and ex-columnist from Kerala. She has published various novels, short stories, collection of poems, children's stories and travelogues. She is well known for her novel *Ladies Coupe* (2001), which was translated into more than twenty-five languages all over the world. It narrated the lives of six women who happened to share a coupe in a railway compartment. Her major novels on women, environment and empowerment that I have taken for the present paper are her first three novels, namely *The Better Man* (2000), *Ladies Coupe* (2001) and *Mistress* (2005) which are majorly written in the premise of Kerala like Sarah Joseph's works.

***The Better Man:*** Anita Nair's first novel narrates the story of Mukundan, who after retirement from Government service, has come back to his native place in Kerala. The novel records his voyage through memories, regrets and revelations. He takes back his old house where all his childhood memories lay and makes Bhasi, an outcast painter, to help him with the renovation, which starts questions on his evolution to become a better man like his father. Anita Nair's character portrayal, expressions and plot make the novel rich and earthy. The novel also focuses on one's connection to his/her land and legacies and the attachment which continues for a life time. The major female characters in the novel, their controlled and exploited life, their yet achieved boldness and actualization are narrated along with the insecure and confused life of Mukundan.

Anita Nair, as a person, believes that there are no particular connection between women and nature that men do not possess. She, ideologically, does not support any kind of essentialism, but feels that women are more affected by both the positive and negative impacts of nature. According to her, "[W]hether it is environmental protection or anything, women are the primary agents of change. Whatever rules are made, ultimately, women are the practitioners of change as they are engaged with the daily aspects of life in a daily basis. ....[W]omen, whether they belong to rural or urban areas, they can initiate change." (Krishna and Jha, 148)

***Ladies Coupé:*** The novel narrates the life stories of six women travelling in a Ladies coupe, each of them describing their life to Akhila, the protagonist, who is travelling to find out what she really wants in life. Akhila is a scapegoat for her family, as she has taken all the responsibility of her mother and siblings when her father died. Even though she is an income generating source, most of the time she is not receiving social independence. Aged forty-five and the background demanding her to be a spinster, she feels lost without having a companion and getting exploited by her sister. The novel roams through the memories of Akhila, interconnected by the story telling of fellow passengers and their empathy towards each other. The Coupe becomes a platform for them to express themselves and support each other. A bond of sisterhood is suddenly created among the women from different caste, class and age. The story of Marikolanthu, a Dalit woman, remains unique and reveals the multiple layers of exploitation she has faced in her life by being a woman, minor, Dalit, and poor. Akhila finally decides to resume her old romantic relationship and take a bold stand in her life.

***Mistress:*** The novel roams around the contradicting and complimentary life situations of travel writer Christopher Stewart, a Kathakali dancer whom he meets in Kerala named Koman, and the niece of Koman, Radha, who happened to be locked up into the traditional housewife's role. Stewart's and Radha's affection for each other, perplexed situation of Radha's husband Shyam and Koman's life story and his relationships, are slowly revealed in the story. The novel repeatedly questions paternity ranging from Stewart to the unborn child of Radha. Written against the background of Kathakali, repressed emotions of characters are unveiled through Navrasas or the nine emotions of Kathakali in the novel. Simone de Beauvoir in her famous book, *The Second Sex*, analyzes the social identification of women as the 'Other'. The title of the novel 'Mistress' itself states the dubious status of a woman who is opted out from the prime position.

The three major female characters in the novel namely Saadiya, Angela and Radha who belong to different time and space, yet connected to one another, as they can be roughly introduced as Koman's mother, Chris mother/Koman's ex-girlfriend and Koman's niece/Shyam's wife respectively, are getting affected by the shift of environment from their natal place to marital life. But they deserve their distinctive identity that is not essentially attached to these titles in the

novel. While defining them, it is crucial to comprehend how their identity as ‘woman’ in the society, devoid of space and time, is inevitable in analyzing their actions and reactions. Saadiya was too young and capable of opting life to death. Angela managed not to lose grip out of her life, because she was emotionally and intellectually balanced. And Radha never cared for society or anyone else. She married Shyam just to get away from the memories of her old love. But her education, experiential wisdom with age, and comprehension of self-actualization, enable her not to take life as it comes. Here, Radha’s individuality overpowers her female ‘insecurities’ constructed by society.

### **3. CONCLUSION**

Sarah Joseph and Anita Nair are not only finely interweaving various ecofeminist and feminist theories in their novels, but also seeking possibilities and solutions for empowerment of women and environment. They clearly picture before us the irreparable aftermaths that can germinate from the oppression of women and nature and spread to the future like a terminal disease, which can put the whole development and technology that *man* has created till this date, into question. They also suggest that only through changing our day-to-day relationships and activities towards more harmony and sustainability, we can contribute to the well-being and overall empowerment of the whole ecological system. The literary aspects of these novels have to be explored in detail, by liberating them from the limitations of a research paper. The linguistic links can also be identified and analysed for a deeper study.

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