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Mirroring an Eco-Critical Analysis of Nature, Society and Life through Literary Glass

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Abstract:

Human beings have a quest to find their roots and be a part of the environment that they belong to, but at the same time, they exploit nature to its fullest. This work attempts to analyse and explain from a literary viewpoint, the process of cultural and economic development that has led to the ongoing global ecological crisis.

Keywords: Nature, crisis, global, repercussions, Environment, Technology, Ecological Imbalance, Hazards, Ecofeminism.

Introduction:

Environmental concerns and issues associated with it had affected many people across the world. Interrelationship between human beings and environment thus becomes all the more accentuated and this is perceptible and in fact visible today in many literary texts. Literature serves as a vehicle of knowledge and information, a section of which deals with nature, mankind and animals, particularly with regard to their interconnection and interdependence.

The paper tends to present this link between society and environment from an eco-critical perspective called “Eco criticism” and it’s by product “Eco feminism.”

Main Study:

Ecocriticism is a branch of literary criticism which is being discussed worldwide as an interdisciplinary study of literature and it attempts to study the attitude of mankind towards nature. (Sahu 23) It is an interdisciplinary approach where all sciences come together to analyse environment. The ecocritical theory is concerned with how human being's relationship with his physical environment is reflected in literature whereas ecofeminism talks of the connection between woman (as part of the society) and environment. The main aim of the Ecocritical Theory is to understand nature, environment and its role in shaping the character of individual and its effect on society—man as its unit and *vice-versa*. It spreads awareness about environment, ecology, climate, etc. through literature. It has always been the best medium that has explored the innate relationship between society and nature. Ecology and ecocriticism have thus become important terms in today's literary expressions.

The literary text taken for reference here is Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*. It portrays how the advent of industrialisation in the name of economic progress hinders the growth of the rural society. The paper attempts to critically analyse the generalised opinion about modernisation and its impact and the ecofeminist view on nature and male dominated society.

There is a close relationship between nature and literature which has been reflected by writers and poets throughout different cultures across the world. A variety of novels, poems and other expressions of literature have depicted issues concerning nature. The literary text which has been referred to in this paper is *Nectar in a Sieve* by Kamala Markandaya, an eminent woman writer in Indian English Literature. Kamala Markandaya employs herself with the basic concern of an ecologist through her narrative by lamenting over the destruction of landscape. Her novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) retrieves and reclaims the mislaid connection between man and land.

Markandaya renders the impact of un pitying industrialization from a subaltern point of view by disclosing the consequences of the so-called urbanization or modernization on the aboriginal destitute peasants and those belonging to the members of the indigenous middle-class in the society. She in particular portrays the after effects of the complete denial of the agrarian society, which leads to the ill-usage of the land that fosters the economic threat of starvation and forces people to accept working conditions that they otherwise would not admit.



She writes, “Nature is like a wild animal that you have trained to work for you. So long as you are vigilant and walk warily with thought and care, so long it will give you its aid; but look away for an instant, be heedless and forgetful, and it has you by the throat.” (Chakravorty 42) Nature is shown as both the destroyer and the preserver in this story. The destructive feature of nature in this novel is seen in the pitiful condition of the villagers due to the rain, storm and drought. Rukmani, the narrator of the novel, reveals the tragic vagaries of nature which spoils the sweet harmony of a peasant’s life.

The advancement of the tannery in Rukmani’s village marks a period of transition for her as well as in the lives of many of the villagers who are primarily cultivators and this change is very rapid, disorganized and violent. It relapses the village beyond recognition and this switching from a farming commune to an industrialized materialistic community frightens Rukmani.

One effect of the establishment of the tannery in the village examined by Rukmani is that the prices of goods in the local market rise substantially, increasing the fissure between different classes of people—the landowners, moneylenders and the peasants. This in turn nourishes certain social evils. The tannery becomes an agent to the commodification of women’s bodies as it gives rise to activities such as prostitution. Irawaddy, the only daughter of Rukmani, ultimately resorts to immorality to feed her family and to save her brother from dying of starvation. Her decision to become a slut is the outcome of the changes that occur under the impact of modernity and industrialism where she thinks that the preservation of life is more important than the observations of the so-called moral values, which are even unable to feed her family. The novel thus talks of the social evils like theft, prostitution etc that modernisation brings along with it.

The only solution recommended by the writer is return to nature. The novel is critically relevant and instructive in the context of the deliberate violence committed on nature in the name of achieving rapid economic and social advancement. Our common attitude of estimating a nation’s progress in terms of the increasing number of shopping malls or technology companies is put to question here.

Analysis:

It is explored through the eco-critical reading of the novel that nature is superior and when it comes to show its power, man is forced to accept nature’s bounty and adversity. The natural calamities that guide the narrative of the novel shows that no matter how much man tries to assert his domination on nature, nature refuses to accept it silently. The selfish

industrial class tries to fulfil their own motives without thinking about the poor as well as the environment. Thus, it can be said that industrialisation has had its harmful effects on nature as well as the society.

In spite of the above, it needs to be asserted that we cannot form a general opinion against industrialisation as environmental activists hold. I partially agree with Markandaya and activist Vandana Shiva who hold a complete “maldevelopment” and “antidevelopment” view about scientific technology with negativity in its entirety. But at the same time I would also like to state that in this fast developing world an agrarian society cannot be the sole basis of survival. Industrialization has gained importance in today’s world. It has not only brought along evils with it but also many goods. It has contributed to the economic growth of the country and given us a stand in today’s fast moving world. What I need to state is that a mixed pattern of development is the requirement. Anything in its extremity is harmful. If the setting up of tannery in the novel brought many evils on one hand, the establishment of a hospital (which again was a symbol of modernity) in the village proved beneficial for the villagers, a view to which Markandaya agrees to towards the end of the novel.

Furthermore, a complete denial of modernisation and industrialisation (in the form of the tannery in the novel) ignores the enthusiastic and welcoming responses of some of the rural women in the novel (for example that of Kunthi, Janaki and Kali). There was rather a logical reason for these rural women for not denying modernisation and industrialisation as they were already starving to death and fighting each day of their life for sustaining themselves and their families. The advent of tannery had brought along job opportunities for the villagers and given a ray of hope of raising their standards of living and lifting the mass of labourers and peasants out of the morass of economic deprivation and social degradation of hunger and poverty. Markandaya initially asks her readers to either support the agrarian structure or industrialization in the name of economic growth. But towards the end of the novel she gives a glimpse of her broad vision when she agrees that both are necessary for the survival of man.

Therefore, an agrarian society as well as industrialisation is required for the growth of the economy but what is more important is that a balance needs to be maintained between the two because whenever the balance between man, nature and civilisation is disturbed, the result will be an ecological tragedy. Similarly, we need to keep a balanced opinion as well about development as both agrarian and industrial structure are the two wheels of economic growth.



Another most important approach within eco-criticism and ecological activism that has been portrayed in this text is that of Ecofeminism. Ecofeminism is an off shoot of eco-criticism. It is a movement or theory that applies feminist principles and ideas to ecological issues. Francoise'd Eaubonne coined this term 'Ecofeminism' in 1974 as a philosophical movement combining feminist and ecological thinking.

She used it "to call upon women to lead an ecological revolution to save the planet". (Sheoran 387) Proponents of the movement claim that there exists a relationship between sexism, the domination of nature, racism, and other characteristics of social inequality.

As a social movement, ecofeminism regards the oppression of women and nature as equal. The movement is now understood as working against the interconnected oppressions of gender, race, class and nature. It is also a central concept in ecofeminism that male ownership of land has led to patriarchy, a dominator culture.

It is a firm belief among some ecofeminists that the identification of woman with nature is a source of strength. Therefore, any oppression of women is also seen as part of environmental degradation.

The insight of placing women at par with nature relates to the times of archaic classical mythology. Nature is portrayed as a woman as its primary function encompasses reproduction and nurture. Women's role has been to fulfil the demands and aspirations of men. Correspondingly, nature is supposed to have an innate constitution of catering to human needs. Hence, both women and nature are exploited by men leading to a mutual association between oppression of women and deterioration of nature. (Sheoran 387)

Bhartender Sheoran in his article "Discourses of Feminist Environmentalism (Ecofeminism) in Fictional Writings of Contemporary Indian Women Novelists." states that ecofeminist theory originates from this vital hypothesis that both women and nature are uniformly harassed by male dominating society. The central claims which constitute the heart of this analysis are:

- (a) The coercion of both women and nature are annexed.
- (b) To unearth the aforesaid association in order to explain both the oppression of women and nature.
- (c) Feminist analysis must cover ecological vision. (388)

According to Hindu mythology, it is believed that in adolescence a woman should be under her father's regulation, in juvenescence under her husband's and when her husband is deceased, under her sons, denying her any autonomy. The male dominated society in Indian culture has marginalized nature as well as woman for fulfilment of their needs since the

ancient times. Taking reference of the novel again, we find that Markandaya's Rukmani as well as her daughter Ira being treated in the same way by society as nature is treated. Ira is deserted by her husband because she cannot bear a child. Just as a barren land holds no importance for a man, a woman who cannot bear a child is not accepted in the purview of Indian society. This text has successfully represented through women characters the relation of environmental deterioration and women's exploitation, thereby exemplifying the ecofeminist point of view. The novel has also drawn attention to the fact that in the present world the more important problem is exploitation of land rather than the exploitation of race and class. In this context, Priyadarshini, in her work "Whim of Nature - a Comparative Study of Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* and Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*" opines that the problems of social ecology have their roots in the problem of ecology. Nature, gender, race and class interrelated. The social and the ecological cannot be separated.(6)

Gurpreet Kaur, in her article "Women and Environment: Postcolonial Ecofeminism, Activism and Women Writing Indian Fiction in English." states that Indian physicist and environmental activist Vandana Shiva's work "Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development" comes closest to cultural ecofeminism in the Indian context. Here, Shiva asserts that "while gender subordination and patriarchy are the oldest of oppressions, they have taken on new and more violent forms through the project of development. (Kaur 31) The total disapproval of modernity by Shiva and most post-developmentalists expresses a lament against this globalization of the capitalist mode of production.

Ecofeminism observes that environmental problems are rooted in the rise of capitalist patriarchy and the ideology that the Earth and nature can be exploited at one's will for human progress through technological means. There is a notion that it is men who are responsible for labour in the marketplace and women bear the responsibility of labour in the domestic sphere of the home. By virtue of the fact that the women's main domain of labour is the home, it is unpaid labour and therefore subordinate to men's labour in the market place.

Here, I wish to express my disagreement to the view of ecofeminists that both women and nature are uniformly harassed by male dominating society and that the male class is solely responsible for the ecological disturbances. This expression is not anti-feminist as I wish to draw attention to the fact that women are also a part of the modernisation process in today's world and hence a play a part in this global ecological crisis. I oppose the ecofeminist view that it is only men who have got all the power. Women too have enjoyed this power. Many queens have ruled over England and the process of modernisation has its roots in England. Today, we find women as head of the states as prime minister and chief ministers.



We witness many women as CEOs of corporate units who are contributing to industrialisation and enjoying the same power as men. We also have women as scientists who have had a key role in the making of nuclear bombs and weapons. So, men alone cannot be held responsible for the depleting environmental conditions and both together as a part of the society need to work in harmony to maintain ecological balance.

Conclusion

To conclude, it can be said that advancement in technology is creating an imbalance in nature which is harmful for human beings themselves. If we take practical examples, droughts in Markandaya's novel are still a hassle in India. Farmers are committing suicide on a large scale leaving their unhappy families behind to fend for them, shows that man can never rise above nature. The irony of the scenario is that human being thinks that it is controlling nature but nature asserts its power over them from time to time. We are created by nature and trying to hold the reins of nature is a futile action. Nature cannot be taken for granted. It shows a lot of patience and benevolence but to an extent.

We can therefore, concede here that for a better world to exist, humans need to establish a harmonious relationship with nature and assume responsibility towards reducing the ecological imbalance so created. We need to realise that nature is more powerful than man and it is we humans who are dependent on nature for our survival and not *vice-versa*. If nature is a preserver, it is also a destroyer. Lack of respect for nature and its reckless exploitation can lead to our facing the wrath and agony of nature in the form of droughts, floods and earthquakes as has been witnessed by us in the recent past.

Our emphasis on ecology ought to bring the society to a new awareness of their special responsibility to be better stewards of the earth. Ecocritics challenge the readers to a spiritual understanding of social responsibility. The earth and its resources belong ultimately to God establishing Nature-Man-God relationship.

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