

Women, Nature and Injustice: Unravelling the Theme of Exploitation in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*

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Abstract

Ecofeminism is a combination of the insights of feminism and political ecology. It explores the parallels that exist between nature and women, and argue that women are more transparent and receptive towards ecological problems and ever-increasing environmental concerns. In light of this, Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing* and Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* explores how patriarchy exploits women and nature, and also maintains a constructive and critical approach against patriarchal hegemony that persists in the world. Women and nature since the very inception of times have been tirelessly used for utility purposes and the paper tends to expose how both have been commodified by man's insatiable greed. The study also delves into the man-made myth that women are close to nature and men to culture and society. This stereotyping is strengthened to a point where women is seen as a reflection of nature, and men as reflection of culture. The dichotomy that exists between nature and culture, further reinforces the distinction between man and woman, thereby taking women nearer to nature and at the same time driving men away from it. However, because of women's ability of giving birth and care-taking, they share similar attributes with nature, which is fundamental for the sustenance, growth and enrichment of mankind, not in one way but in abundant ways. Women, like nature are procreative or reproductive, which means both possess the ability to give life. But at the same time, the degradation, conquest and control of earth is often deeply tied to the marginalization and subservience of women. The paper therefore, besides exposing the ways leading to exploitation of women and nature, also demonstrates how literature and ecocriticism can be useful in raising consciousness and creating awareness about the current environmental issues which can result in producing eco-friendly future generations.

Keywords: ecocriticism, feminism, patriarchy, dichotomy, gender roles, stereotyping, culture, hegemony, class-exploitation, marginalization, ecological degradation.

Ecofeminism is a literary movement that attempts to build the harmonious relationship between the animate and inanimate objects of the planet earth. It also seeks to expose the various intricate ways in which the exploitation of women and nature takes place. It also traces the historical link or affinity between nature and women and also their similar state of being exploited and suppressed from ages due to man's utility and need based purposes. Ecofeminists view ecology as feminist issue and strive towards creating an awareness about rising environmental degradation and also how women and nature must not be exploited.

They see men and patriarchal institutions responsible for environmental degradation and women's abjection. The research paper attempts to explore the uniformity between nature and women, their exploitation from the common source and also the age-old control and dominance of man over nature and woman. Besides this, the study also looks at how women and nature resist against man's dominance and seek liberation from it. Ecofeminism does not eliminate men or ostracize them but rather calls for respect between all sexes and their mutual reverence for nature. It demands that all people of the globe must work towards ecological sustainability.

Literature has always discussed and explored nature in its entirety. The literary theory that studies the interaction between humans and nature is called eco-criticism. Although, the concept and theory of ecofeminism was originally postulated in West but it also came to be very well implemented and reflected by the writers of other cultures and countries, the glaring example of which is an Indian writer Kamala Markandaya. Her novel *Nectar in a Sieve* adds a new direction to the discourse of ecofeminism. The novel has been analyzed to seek answers for fundamental questions like, what is nature? who is a woman? What is the relation between women and nature? and what is ecofeminism? And what are the main arguments of the Western and Indian ecofeminism? It also answers how ecofeminism becomes a meeting point for two different theories, i.e., feminism and ecology. It propounds the notion that women become the firsthand victims of environmental degradation due to their close connect with nature and also their dependence on it (Merchant, Plumwood, Shiva). Kamala's *Nectar in a Sieve* is a tragic novel that presents the idyllic picture of rural India and also the introduction of industry and modern scientific technology. There is a portrayal of establishment of tannery in an Indian village which results in the disruption of people's lives, especially the women's lives and also leads to disruption of pastoral land. The novel views institutions like patriarchy, capitalism, globalization as the root cause of the exploitation and marginalization of women and nature. Tannery in the novel depicts the patriarchal attitude that encroaches upon the cultivated land

and destroys it. Kamala Markandaya likens the introduction of tannery in the village to two different groups of men, one that of foreman, workers and overseers and the other type includes landowners for example the Zamindari system. Men in the novel represent the modernization, industrialization and rapid change and development. The establishment of tannery results in the desecration of the idyllic life of village. There is a drastic difference in

the village before and after the introduction of tannery in the village. Before tannery, the village is serene, calm, unstained and unpolluted whereas after its establishment, village becomes full with bullock carts loaded with stones, cement, bricks, iron, piles of ropes and hemp. This new set up disturbs the agrarian culture of the village. Tannery also changes the mind set of young generations in the village as they begin to believe that they should no longer carry on their ancestral profession of land tilling and instead feel attracted towards earning easy money by the means of working in the tannery. Gradually, the functioning of tannery in the village creates havoc and yields negative consequences. The adaptation to modern technology and subsequent loss of traditional modes of work results in many peasant women feeling compelled to take up prostitution due to hunger and starvation. Rukhmani's neighbor, Kunthi starts up the prostitution business to end her hunger and also the hunger of her family. Another character Ira, who is left by her husband due to her infertility also makes up her mind to take up prostitution. Kamala Markandaya not only represents the exploitation of women but she also presents how women turn out to be the nurturers and saviors of nature. Rukhmani, the female protagonist in the novel symbolizes the third world peasant woman who is closely associated with nature. She nurtures the land just as a mother caresses and nourishes her child. She views tannery as a disaster or catastrophe that can befall upon the people of village. Her reaction and critique to the introduction of tannery in the village represents the ecofeminist concerns. Also, her close association with nature is seen in her regular practice of nurturing plants and sowing seeds in the garden. She takes immense pride and joy in seeing the pumpkin, sweet potatoes, brinjal and chilies growing around.

The research also aims to study Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and to explore the causes and ways of exploitation of women and nature and also the resistance of the two against patriarchy and male hegemony. Atwood in *Surfacing* exposes how women's identity and existence is devalued in an inherently patriarchal set-up. Through her highly engrossing fictitious work, she portrays the harsh reality of women and how their needs are muffled. She represents the miserable predicament of western women. The novel's setting takes place in Canada, featuring a town bordering Quebec. Largely, it also surfaces the regular motifs of the conflict

and tension between Canadians and Americans. *Surfacing* emerges as a piece of work that rebels against sexism and male chauvinism. The protagonist in Atwood's novel is a young woman who in the first half of the novel appears as a victim but later turns out to be

victorious in discovering herself and thereby liberating herself from the tight clutches of patriarchal codes operant in society. In a journey to find her missing father, she ends up finding and discovering herself. Atwood exposes how woman's body is seen as an object of immense pleasure and a source of entertainment. Atwood also presents the unequal binary of how male sex is considered as superior or supreme whereas female sex as secondary and inferior. While the unnamed female protagonist represents the female instinct, David on the other hand represents the male, patriarchal instinct in the novel. David becomes symbolic of patriarchal ideology that believes women should only learn "how to switch on the T.V and switch off their heads, that is all they should know" (Atwood 129). David largely represents a society that believes women are only capable of performing household chores, taking away from them the agency to think beyond some already determined goals of home making, care taking and child bearing. David is a male character who commits physical violence and abuse upon his wife Anna, whom he treats only as a slave to satiate his physical and household needs. The female protagonist is unnamed because she represents how women in patriarchal societies have no individual identity. Their independent existence is not allowed to flourish and that is why the female narrator in the novel has not been given a name. David's exploitation of women and the imposition of his control over women could be also be seen when the narrator, her boy friend Joe, and the couple David and Anna are all together on an island, David demands from his wife, Anna to take off her clothes so that he could click the pictures for his film "Random Samples". This controlling behaviour of David towards his wife represents how he uses her to suit his own materialistic designs and how he does not consider her human enough. In the act of filming her naked body for his film, he clearly sees her as an object to be exposed and exploited. The act becomes more humiliating as Anna does not want to get naked for being filmed, it goes against her will and he does not seek her consent for it. David on the other hand, views Anna as his property to be used just the way he desires and in as many ways as possible. To film the erotic nature of her body, he forces her, stating, "come on, we need a naked lady with big tits and big bass . . . we all love it, you ashamed of it? That's pretty stingy of you, you should share the wealth" (129). The use of the word 'wealth' and also the mention of various organs of body leads to the commodification of women's bodies.

The imbalance in the natural environment creates many impediments in the pattern of living a healthy life. It is the unending greedy human needs and activities that deteriorates the

natural set-up. Nature is often likened with women as it is often called mother nature. Women and Mother nature are so much glorified that both are considered worth worshipping. However, in reality, both are exploited at all possible levels. The exploitation of women and nature is best represented by Atwood in *Surfacing*. She represents the commercialization of women and nature in her novel. Atwood represents how profit driven Americans lack concern towards nature which has led to the environmental deterioration. The journey of the female protagonist in search of her missing father leads her to the exploration of the conditions of nature which she finds similar to the conditions of women. Her search reveals to her how nature like women too has become acute victim of man's cruel authority. She views Americans as exploiters who violate and plunder all the natural wealth and resources of the fruitful land of Quebec. She feels dejected for the ways in which animals are ruthlessly killed and natural habitat is disrupted by Americans for their amusement, pleasure and profit. She feels hurt to the core when she finds Americans hunting fish and killing herons for the purpose of fun and gaming. She sees it as an act of violation of norms of nature. the killing of heron is also seen as a metaphor for killing or damage of protagonist's psychology. This destruction of women's psychology and nature is due to the oppressive and exploitative nature of men.

Works Cited

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