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Eco-Phenomenology: An Analysis of the Communion between Women and Environment

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Abstract

Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary study that focuses on the relationship between literature and environment. Indian literature has to its credit so many writers who explore universal subjects along with issues and problems peculiar to India. Vimmi and Shrimati, the protagonists of Parthasarathy's *Ashes and Wisdom* and Sudha Murty's *Gently Falls the Bakula*, respectively, are the suppressed women who crave to find their real selves. Environment plays a major role in their lives both in realization and redemption. The theoretical aspect of the paper focuses on Eco-phenomenology, the space that obliterates the subject object notion and develops participatory intimacy. Environment paves the way for establishing feminine identity – Shrimati's association and analysis of places give a concrete stature to abstract ideas and reassure her scholarship; Vimmi's contact with the outer world brings out the artist in her.

Keywords

Ecocriticism; Phenomenology; Eco-phenomenology; Women; Environment; Indira Parthasarathy; *Ashes and Wisdom*; Sudha Murty; *Gently Falls the Bakula*.

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Literature, the microscopic version of the macroscopic universe, houses in it the multidimensional approaches of worldly wisdom. The World Literature is a marvelous accumulation of varied perceptions and is known for its rich cultural discourses. A literary scholar is gifted to peruse the intellectual deliberations of the writers, critics and researchers and there is easy access to different ideas, debates and criticisms worldwide through its pages. The power structure has always a pivotal role to play in the lives of human beings or in the fate of a nation/society. While the mid-twentieth century raised its voice against the domination of women, the latter part of the century gave voice for ecological issues. Thus androcentric and anthropocentric ideas were questioned and an appraisal of the prevalent ideas in those fields was attempted, not only by women but also by men. Feminism, Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism paved the way for analyzing the relationship between man and woman, human beings and nature, woman and nature respectively. But in all the three, man plays a vital role as he is responsible for subjugation of both woman and nature.

In ancient times, man led his life in tune with nature. But in due course his stance altered owing to the extension of his comfort zone. Power structure was designed making a particular sect of the society elite and dominant. Passion for monetary benefits ensued resulting in suppression and exploitation. Thus man started to exploit nature for his own benefits without realizing the fact that he is also a component in it; he started to oppress women without realizing that he is complementary to her. In this history of dominance both woman and nature have been tolerant quite for some time and when they could suffocate no more, they started revolting, each in their own way. These two objects of suppression

have affinity with each other and the current paper explores their communion through ecocriticism.

Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary study that focuses on the relationship between literature and environment. It comprises expertise opinions and solutions to ecological crisis. Creative literature, at times, casts a critical outlook owing to the theme dealt in. Indian literature has to its credit so many writers who explore universal subjects along with issues and problems peculiar to India. South Indian literature owns the two prominent figures Indira Parthasarathy and Sudha Murty whose contribution to the literary realm is rich and commendable. Vimmi and Shrimati, the protagonists of Parthasarathy's *Ashes and Wisdom* and Sudha Murty's *Gently Falls the Bakula*, respectively are the suppressed women who crave to find their real selves. Environment plays a major role in their lives both in realization and redemption. The theoretical aspect of the paper focuses on Eco-phenomenology, the space that obliterates the subject object notion and develops participatory intimacy.

Shrimati, the protagonist of *Gently Falls the Bakula* aspires to become a scholar in history but is fatally entrapped in the marital net. Being subservient to her husband, she exploits all her intelligence and shrewdness for the development of her husband's business while her craving for history is deep buried inside. Similarly Vimmi, the protagonist of *Ashes and Wisdom*, is just a symbol of pride and possession to Arun who is not even aware of the 'other' Vimmi – the artist. The two protagonists, Shrimati and Vimmi are astute personalities who have become (un)willing scapegoats at the marital altar by sacrificing their real selves. It is their passion that blinds their vision for a short period. Their selfless services are exploited and they become symbolic of forced severance from the environment. Both have the inner urge to be connected with nature as their passion for knowledge and creativity demands such unity. Vandana Shiva comments about the plight of such women thus:

Women's knowledge and work as integrally linked to nature are marginalized or displaced, and in their place are introduced patterns

of thought and patterns of work that devalue the worth of women's knowledge and women's activities. This fragments both nature and society. (66)

Thus societal codes restrict women's desires and individual talents by drawing a boundary line which compels them to oblige to the patriarchal norms thus prioritizing men's needs and commands.

The cravings of Shrimati and Vimmi have become repressed desires. Unable to cope up with the artificial environment, they suffocate and long to be in contact with the real world. While culture becomes their restrictive measure, eco-phenomenology stirs the underlying longing and makes the subdued undercurrent gush out of the cultural boundary. David Wood defines Eco-Phenomenology in his article "What is Eco-Phenomenology?" thus: "Eco-Phenomenology is the pursuit of the relationalities of worldly engagement, both human and those of other creatures" (213). Eco-phenomenology is an emerging field that scrutinizes the relation between or inter-influence of phenomenology and ecological philosophy. Brown and Toadvine emphasizes the special feature of Phenomenology thus: "Phenomenology is set apart from other theoretical methods by its unique capacity for bringing to expression, rather than silencing, our relation with nature and the experience of value rooted in this relation" (xii). In addition to this, Brown comments on the space provide by phenomenology to ecological philosophy as, "phenomenology makes possible a new philosophy of nature respecting the integrity of everyday experience" (14).

Wood further says that eco-phenomenology would "activate and reactivate the intricate articulations and relations of things, restoring through description, through dramatization, a participatory engagement (bodily, imaginative, etc.) with things" (www.chegg.in). The protagonists undergo such experiences in their lives – for Shrimati the participatory engagement is 'bodily', that is her contact with the places of historical importance where she feels oneness and for Vimmi the participatory engagement is 'imaginative', the artist's paradise. Thus environment paves the way for establishing feminine identity – Shrimati's

association and analysis of places give a concrete stature to abstract ideas and reassure her scholarship; Vimmi's contact with the outer world brings out the artist in her.

Vimmi leads a normal life with her husband Arun and she is expected to play the role of a typical Indian wife. Soon she realizes that she is not an ordinary woman. Though she attends parties and functions for the sake of her husband, she develops an aversion towards such artificial atmosphere. At one such party, her confession to the artist Damodaran about her cravings to find her self is a symbol of woman seeking a way to be connected with nature. Art/discourse is the medium of expression for a person in revelatory state. The person tries to picture the inexplicable feelings stimulated when he/she comes in contact with a particular environment. On an insulting remark from Arun, Vimmi recollects Bharathiar's poem, "A fledging fire, I saw/ I put it in the hollow of a forest tree" (Parthasarathy 54) and she immediately senses the very atmosphere that she paints the scenario of the poem impulsively. Her body becomes the 'chair' where the demarcation between subject and object dissolves and creates a fine reverberation of artistry. Erazim Kohak relates the idea of Merleau-Ponty's concept of "flesh" (*chair*) as: "So the chair that I see not only in my imagination but presume to exist even when I close my eyes can be said to have a *transcendent* existence, that is, reaching beyond my imagination into space-time" (27). Vimmi's elated moment is similar to the referred to transcendent existence. This incident underscores the connectivity prevailing between woman and nature. While recollecting the poetry's lines, Vimmi closes her eyes and "She experienced the ecstasy of reducing all the old garbage to ashes. She immersed herself into herself and drowned in an ocean of bliss" (Parthasarathy, 55) – the title *Ashes and Wisdom* thus gains significance as a woman burns her reluctance and slavery to ashes thereby providing a clean space to her heart and mind to accumulate wisdom.

The anthropocentric attitude not only exploits nature and woman but attempts to separate them. This is revealed through the character Arun who has

double standards in his life – personal and official; he wants a woman like Radhika to improve his business and he does not mind about the carefree life she leads but he wants his wife Vimmi to be ideal and docile according to cultural norms. He could not even think of Vimmi going for a job while he employs women in his office for official benefits. So, according to the comfort zone of men, women's positions are decided in the society. Men like Arun assume women to be passive and inefficient without realizing the fact that the talent in them, if not given proper expression, might make them go crazy as referred to by Alice Walker:

... exquisite butterflies trapped in an evil honey, toiling away their lives in an era, a century, that did not acknowledge them, except as “the mule of the world.” They dreamed dreams that no one knew-not themselves, in any coherent fashion-and saw visions no one could understand. (401-402)

The women who fight against such opposing forces walk out of the hostile environment and opt to stay connected with the natural environment as it relieves them from all pain that they underwent. After Vimmi departs from Arun, for the first time she feels elated at seeing the outer world with a vision anew: “Vimmi stood near the wall and looked down, at the iridescent blooms of light as far as the eye could see. ‘It is a beautiful sight!’” (Parthasarathy, 60-61). The exclamatory remark is not just a comment but it signifies the unification of senses that an artist in general, a woman artist in particular feels. Her aesthetic experience on seeing the outer world and the paintings of Damodaran which “came up like bubbles in water, in layers, one after another...” (63) is akin to Allen Carlson's view:

Thus aesthetic experience of the natural environment is not simply a matter of looking at objects or “views” from a specific point. Rather, it is being “in the midst” of them, moving in regard to them, looking at them from any and every point and distance and, of course, not only looking, but also smelling, hearing, touching, feeling. It is being

in the environment, being a part of the environment, and reacting to it as a part of it. (35)

While environment and art stimulate eco-phenomenology in Vimmi, places and history offer Shrimati the same experience.

Shrimati's affinity towards the environments does not stop with aesthetic experience but goes a step further to know the history of the places. This attitude is nurtured by her mother right from her childhood. It is clear that the importance of ecology and its places is instilled deep in a mind by a woman by ordinary ways without any theories to substantiate. It further reveals how women are naturally connected with nature. Alice Walker too acknowledges that she has inherited the talent of the art of story-telling from her mother in "In Search of My Mothers' Gardens" thus: "But the telling of these stories, which came from my mother's lips as naturally as breathing, was not the only way my mother showed herself as an artist" (408). She further observes, "Guided by my heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength-in search of my mother's garden, I found my own" (409). Shrimati's statement sounds similar to that of Walker and it is inferred that Walker's observation is not unique to Black American women but it is universal.

When Shrimati has grown up, she becomes passionate about history; starts detaching it from the emotional point of view and becomes more aware of the facts as a true historian. She steadily progresses from aestheticism to criticism. The experience of the former and the mastery of the latter settle upon eco-phenomenology that her discourse reverberates in perfect harmony between the two worlds. While Brown and Toadvine examine the interdisciplinary influence of phenomenology and ecological philosophy, they opine that, "Phenomenology opens a space for the interdisciplinary examination of our relation with nature, for a scrutiny of the historical and institutional construction of the "natural," and even of the role this concept plays in the formation of our cultural and self-identities" (xii). Shrimati's examination and analysis of the making of the historical places and monuments, and her deep

knowledge in the cultural history of India come in line with this new space provided by eco-phenomenology.

Shrimati's passion for history could be perceived by a history professor Mr. Collins as he sees an aspiring historian in her. When she acts as guide to him to historical places, she feels elated as she comes in contact with the environment. Her exalted state and bubbling enthusiasm while narrating the historical importance of the places like Fatehpur Sikri, Agra, Ujjain, Mandu could very well be comprehended by Mr. Collins and "Shrimati explained everything from two perspectives, one from the local folk tales and the other from important historical events" (Murty, 112). The historical facts and incidents come alive through her vivid description as there is a perfect interplay of the subject and the object. Stephan Lahar talks about the influence of the environments thus: They contain natural forces, phenomena, and objects that become basis of religious and cultural symbols, and offer other opportunities for expression of human creativity through interactions with the nonhuman environment. (91)

Mr. Collins advises her to take up research in America as it is an apt platform for aspiring scholars like her. But unfortunately her husband Shrikant does not give space for the historian at the right time. Owing to his promotion and shift of places, Shrimati goes on postponing her wish to pursue higher studies. She even undertakes a job that she does not like to support Shrikant in his financial crisis. She leads a dreary life with Shrikant and she becomes an efficient personal assistant to him sacrificing her desires. She reaches a saturation point that she decides to leave Shrikant forever. The Bakula tree, which witnessed the romantic episodes of Shrimati and Shrikant, symbolizes their love and the author hints at the break of their relationship by making the Bakula tree gently fall towards the end. Shrimati justifies her decision thus:

I cannot live in this kind of an atmosphere with these artificial values. I require to breathe fresh air. I do not want to live as your shadow. I want to find my own happiness. Shri, if I had not been sensitive and bright, I wouldn't have had to suffer such loneliness. I

could have enjoyed your wealth. When I was thinking about my life so far, what my goal has been, I have realized what I want. (Murty 161)

Shrimati, like Vimmi, separates from her husband not for her selfish mottos, rather her self is exploited and is not given due recognition. So she seeks the place where her communion with environment could become stronger.

The two protagonists decide to assert their individuality revealed through eco-phenomenology. They are able to give shape to the fine emotions created at that space – one through art and the other through discourse. Vimmi and Shrimati are frustrated by the parties and the plastic smiles as they are artificial, moreover instrumental in boosting up their husband's business. They consider such occasions as waste of time contrary to the ideas of Arun and Shrikant. They realize that their place is not amidst gossipers and merry-makers but in the circle of intellectuals. They both love to relish the intrinsic worth of the outer world rather beholding instrumental ideologies prevailing around them. Their new footing symbolizes their innate potentiality and ability, the stimulating factor being nature. The non-natural world cannot hold them longer and finally they land upon the place where their feet, mind and heart should be. Thus the communion between women and nature is emphasized through eco-phenomenology. Women's duty is to be aware of the connection and to stay connected to gather real knowledge and wisdom.

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