

Ecofeminism in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson and Maya Angelou

Bajjnath Gupta *

Associate Professor & Incharge,
Department of English,
DSN Postgraduate college, Unnao, U.P. India.

ABSTRACT

Women instinctively feel drawn towards nature. They bear a unique kind of kinship with each other. Whenever women find it hard to endure their suffering, they tend to turn to nature for solace like two sisters/ friends trying to help each other cope with difficulties of life and come out of them. Since both of them have been exploited by the patriarchal system for its own various purposes, they can be viewed as the victims of the same oppressor. Women, despite all their beauty of body and brain, have been forced to yield to the malevolent male forces, while nature has been violated to promote culture. This binary of male/ female and nature/ culture has not gone down well with a majority of women writers. They claim equality with men as both are born equally. They object to being brought up differently. This different upbringing exposes the meanness and hypocrisy of our society. They have voiced their concern about this unfair treatment of women and expressed their preference for the company of compassionate nature to that of callous men. The present paper seeks to define Ecofeminism and trace its evolution as well as endeavours to evaluate the elements of Ecofeminism in the poetry of Emily Dickinson and Maya Angelou.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, women, nature, environment, patriarchy.

Ecofeminism, as a term, represents a deliberate conflation of "ecology" and "feminism," and its foundational premise rests upon the recognition of an innate connection between women and nature. Gendered objects and even nature have been traditionally constructed under similar cultural frameworks, as their major asset, which is their ability to generate and raise. In the mainstream sociopolitical discourse, women are assigned to be caregivers and custodians of the household domain, with the environment being depicted as a source of unlimited reserves to be exploited in human interest. This parallel placement leaves them at the same time exposed to the same systems of oppression. In patriarchal capitalism, the attributes of reproduction and

Author: Bajjnath Gupta

Email: bngkuhu@gmail.com

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renewal matters, which are traditionally attributed to femininity, are not only undermined but they are also taken advantage of. Similar to the way the Earth is being subjected to logging, mining, and pollution, women are also subjected to objectification, silence, and subordination to a male dominated economic order.

The name of the term dates back to the French feminist philosopher Françoise d'Eaubonne whose book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort* (Feminism or Death) of 1974 inaugurated a systemic critique. Her arguments in that text are that commodification of the environment, women, people of colour, and the poor, are all by products of one system of patriarchy and capitalism driven by domination, extraction and hierarchy. Every life and the planet itself are viewed as the means to be exploited and devoured by the system. When D'Eaubonne stressed that ecological crisis and gender oppression cannot be discussed separately, she laid the unmoveable center, on which the modern eco-feminist theory swiveled.

Eco-feminism is thus a specific division of feminism, which predicts the close interconnection of nature and women. Opposite to divergent feminist streams that lay emphasis on legal privileges or labour rights, eco-feminism argues that women oppression and environmental degradation are both oppressions that cannot be separated because both are based on patriarchal logic of control. This theoretical structure did not form in empty space and was formed at the intersection of three historical movements of the 1970s and 1980s: the feminist movement to challenge the structures of gender inequality; the ecological movement to cry out the destruction of nature; and the peace movement to fight the realm of militaristic domination. With the increasing opposition to dual oppression, eco-feminism became the intellectual factor that expressed these two combined struggles.

This term gained wider publicity with Ynestra -King, a leading feminist author who in her article *What Is Eco-feminism?* published in *The Nation* in 1987, criticized the American worldview. King encouraged people to re-evaluate the highly ingrained belief systems that both endorse environmental destruction and subjugation of women. She insisted that the two phenomena are not independent dilemmas that have two distinct solutions, they are symptoms of a cultural malaise that justifies domination based on gender, race, class, and species. This article thus redefined eco-feminism as a scholarly interest to an immediate ethical call to action that demanded a radical reevaluation of the relationship between humankind and the earth as well as with each other.

Ecofeminists such as Karen Warren give a very critical analysis on the patriarchal structure whereby the patriarchal structure is seen to be the root cause of the immense imbalances experienced in contemporary society. The system promotes the idea that it is inherently necessary to control every single aspect under it, i.e. women, nature, and the environment, since the system focuses on the dominance of male authority and concentrates the power across the males. Warren argues that this blind appetite towards domination has directly triggered the crisis of ecological imbalance which in turn has culminated in the universal and existential danger of climate change. The reasoning is clear, the same mentality, which justifies the women subjection, approves the exploitation of the natural world, as well, where both one and the other are expendable tools.

All this philosophy, in one, strong statement, Warren gave with his now famous cursory statement: Nature is a feminist issue. She explains the relationship by referring to the language itself, the language, through which we express assumptions rooted in culture. The Earth is called Mother Earth, nature Mother Nature, fertile land is glorified and desolate land is rejected. This is no accidental occurrence in words, but a pattern that gradually feminizes nature and makes it a nurturing and reproduction machine and evaluates its value through its utility. These metaphors reflect the way women are also treated mostly as being worthwhile only due to their reproductive and caring abilities.

Due to the strict interconnection between the subjugation of women and the exploitation of nature through these identical metaphors and cultural appraisals, eco-feminism, as a matter of course, is not an offshoot but a component and necessary element of feminism itself. Warren says that we need to fight to liberate women, and therefore the earth. The overlapping wordplay promotes the impression of empowerment and utility as the only standards of value to both the environment and the women.

Moreover, Warren and other eco-feminists reduce this dual oppression to an original account in the history of traditionality and the West. Women and nature have been continuously consumed as disorganized, unreasonable, and savage powers which should be controlled outside. The civilizing project in this view is the imposition in these chaotic components of order, rationality, and discipline. The same way wildness is domesticated, cleared and made fruitful, the female emotionality and unpredictability is also checked with male reason and power. This ideological positioning acted as a strong rationale to the subordination of both and establishes that the subjugation is not oppressive, but a charitable and missionary move towards

bringing sanity and order to the anarchic and the unreasonable. Hence, women control and mastery of nature came to be the twin projects at the core of the patriarchal civilization, the heritage of which we still struggle to deal with.

Val Plumwood, an Environmental philosopher and Ecofeminist, draws a parallel between the treatment of nature and women. Men are regarded as superior to women and civilization to the wildness of nature. Therefore, both men and civilization seem superior and patriarchy acquires the status of "villain behind the ecological crisis"(11). Traditionally, both are believed to be created to be useful to men. This idea has its roots in the Bible in which Eve was created from Adam and for Adam, while Paradise was created for Adam to live in and enjoy.

Many Ecofeminists argue that capitalist patriarchy is utilitarian in its approach to life and the world. Therefore, they categorize everything and everyone as per their utility in the social system. They have created a binary system like male/ female, nature/culture, white/ black, and rich/poor etc. in which the male, culture, white and rich are placed higher than the female, nature, black and poor respectively, from the perspective of their utility. And, so, they are given authority to control and exploit them to their advantage and turn them into something useful, even though they wreak havoc upon them in the process. This system puts one group in the position of power over the other group which is unnatural as all are equally created by God and everyone and everything is useful in their own way and, so, are equally important in the scheme of God. These utilitarians forget that nobody and nothing is oppositional to each other. Rather, they are all complimentary to each other's existence and survival.

Ecofeminists opine that women have a close affinity with nature. Therefore, they should be involved in the decision-making of environment-related issues. Some women of developing countries strongly believe that nature is a living goddess and so she must be respected and revered. And, since women are similar to nature, women deserve to be respected and treated with honour as well. In their book, 'Ecofeminism', Mies and Shiva stress the need for nature to be 'healed' rather than 'bruised'.

Early Ecofeminist writing only documented that both nature and women have historically been linked together and it sought to break this old tie and separate the two. Rosemary Ruether, a theologian and one of the founders of Ecofeminism, stressed the need for women to separate themselves from nature if they wanted liberation. She made an appeal to the feminists and environmentalists to work together to put an end to the patriarchal system that is essentially

responsible for their exploitation, subjugation, oppression and unequal socio-economic relations in the society.

During its intellectual development, Ecofeminism has been divided into two main theoretical camps including Radical Ecofeminism and Cultural Ecofeminism. The representatives of the radical branch argue that the first way in which patriarchy mixes the notions of nature and womanhood, and then goes further to demean them. So they stress the need to sever women from nature for the welfare of both. They have both been seen as commodities with negative traits that can be put in order and to some use by the patriarchy. This kind of categorisation has led to their exploitation as cheap labour and resources.

While Radical Ecofeminism lays emphasis on the separation of nature and women, Cultural Ecofeminism favours their coming together as they have a close affinity with each other. Women's gender roles as one who gives birth and nurtures and their biological traits (their menstruation, pregnancy and lactation) naturally equate them with nature. Therefore, any harm to nature and the environment hurts them more than men. While some Ecofeminists are against this kind of division of Ecofeminists, others want the world to consider nature as a deity and there should be only one religion and it should be based on nature. However, Plumwood is of the view that linking nature with femininity is "regressive and insulting"(20).

Having discussed the origin, perspectives and kinds of Ecofeminism, the paper now moves towards tracing Ecofeminist elements in the poetry of women poets like Emily Dickinson and Maya Angelou .

Emily Elizabeth Dickinson(1830-1886) is one of the greatest American poets belonging to the 19th century. She was a recluse who lived her life in seclusion avoiding visiting people. She wrote 1800 poems most of which remained unpublished in her lifetime. Though she avoided people in her life, her poems are visited by numerous readers across the world and are admired for their brevity and beauty. Her brief poems are pregnant with meaning and they deal with such themes as the loveliness of love, beauty of nature, dreariness and ephemerality of life and blessings of immortality.

Her poem, "I'm Nobody, Who are You?" is a classic example of Ecofeminism as it draws parallels between woman and nature as both are treated as 'Nobodies'. Being an introvert, she always disliked making her presence felt by croaking unnecessarily like a frog which may be interpreted as a masculine creature that is boastful. She writes:

I'm Nobody! Who are you?

Are you- Nobody -too?

Then there's a pair of us!

Don't tell they'd advertise-you know !

How dreary -to be-Somebody!

How public -like a Frog-

To tell one's name-the livelong June -

To an admiring Bog(260)!

Dickinson's poem, "Some Keep the Sabbath Going to Church" suggests that she is a spiritual woman who does not believe in rituals. This poem echoes the belief of those ecofeminists who are in favour of establishing a nature-based religion. Forgetting her birth into Calvinism and her Puritanical training, she prefers to be a "worshipper of nature" like the great Romantic poet, William Wordsworth. To her, an orchard is like the dome of a church where she can offer her prayers believing that they will be heard. To her, a song bird like Bobolink is like a member of a choir singing a song of prayer. Her clergyman is not a human being but God/ Nature. Her idea of worship is so unworldly and so imitable. Nature is her Goddess and Sexton, a bellringer/ gravedigger is a singer like the Bobolink. She says:

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church -

I keep it, staying at Home-

With a Bobolink for a Chorister-

And an Orchard, for a Dome-

Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice -

I, just wear my Wings-

And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,

Our little Sexton-sings.

God preaches, a noted Clergyman -

And the sermon is never long,

So instead of getting to Heaven, at last -
I'm going, all along (324).

Like Radical Ecofeminists, Dickinson feels a close affinity with nature and she feels ecstatic in the vicinity of the meadows, flowers, bees, butterflies and is drunk with the delight of being under the sky. Dickinson writes:

I taste a liquor never brewed-
From Tankards scooped in Pearl-
Not all the Frankfort Berries
Yield such an alcohol!

Inebriate of air am I-
And Debauchee of Dew-
Reeling -thro' endless Summer days-
From inns of molten Blue -

When "Landlords" turn the drunken Bee
Out of the Foxglove's door-
When Butterflies -renounce their "drams"-
I shall but drink the more!

Till Seraphs swing their snowy Hats-
And Saints- to windows run-
To see the little Tippler
Leaning against the -Sun(214)!

Karen Warren's concept of 'Mother nature' and 'Mother earth' foreshadowed in Emily Dickinson's poem "Nature, the Gentlest Mother" in which she describes Nature as a mother who is never angry with any of her children even though they are feeble or wayward. She nurtures all her children and even her scoldings are mild when her children commit a mistake. She treats all her children with love and care of a mother:

Nature-the Gentlest Mother is,
Impatient of no child -
The feeblest- or the waywardest-
Her admonition mild-
...
When all her children sleep,
She turns as long away
As will suffice to light her lamps,
Then bending from the sky

With infinite affection
And infiniter care,
Her golden finger on her lip,
Wills silence everywhere(790).

Another poet, Maya Angelou, a great black American writer famous for her work "I know Why the Caged Bird Sings(1969) and winner of Pulitzer prize, in her poetry critiques anthropocentrism and points out its exploitative impact on nature and women, especially black women. She holds patriarchy responsible for the oppression of women and degradation of nature. Being a black woman, she and others of her kind were treated as objects rather than human beings. They were, as Aquinas puts it, used "to preserve the species or to provide food and drink"(qtd in Plumwood 19). They were treated as slaves to cater to the needs of the privileged class and they can call no one as their own except Mother nature. Angelou, in her poem "Woman Work" writes:

Fall gently, snowflakes
Cover me white
Cold icy kisses and
Let me rest tonight. Sun, rain, curving sky
Mountain, oceans, leaf and stone
Star shine, moon glow
You're all that I can call my own(23-29).

The so-called idea of the Black woman being a doubly marginalized person is the most important because it allows seeing that her oppression is not just cumulative but compound, a unique and combined sense of alienation. She is both dehumanized by racist discourses that type her and made silent by patriarchal discourses that disregard her. In this perspective of extreme social marginalization, nature is not as a background, but becomes a refuge, a place of genuine recovery and inclusion. In contrast to human institutions which are characterized by hierarchy and exclusion, the natural world is characterized by the principles of reciprocity, cycle of renewal and innate values, which provide the marginalized subject with an environment where she is neither judged nor oppressed, but simply exists in relation to something bigger and more lasting.

The claim of the greater affinity a black woman has with nature than a white woman is especially insightful and based on a complicated history. To the white woman, particularly in a pastoral tradition of the West, nature had long since been created as a location of harmonious domestic rest, an ideal garden to be admired or a landscape to be domesticated, in her own distinct and intimate domain as the angel of the house. This connection which may seem significant, is usually mediated with the prism of her privileged status in a racial hierarchy. In her case, the attachment to the earth can be radically different by the Black woman. It can be traced down to the ancestral affiliations, to an earlier time in colonial history in which she did not own the land, but she was related to it and she lived by it. It is, too, anguished in the savage crucible of American slavery, where her body was as much a subject of violent manipulation as the land, but an object in an intimate, compelled familiarity with the earth, which she and her ancestors she had tended, nurtured, and survived by. This common story of violation and not defeated creates a connection of great empathy and unity. Nature is not just a picturesque sight, it is a com-sufferer, a silent spectator of history, an ancestral memory and strength, which a white woman, who stands in other end of the power structure, cannot experience as much.

Such a strong, almost spiritual bond is perfectly summarized by the famous poem of Angelou, *Still I Rise*, which you so rightly refer to as a declaration of the strength of Black women. The poem deals with the storms and the oppressive forces that are meant to destroy her spirit. Every line of the poem turns around the strongest refrain: *Still, I will rise*. The speaker appeals to her oppressors directly, admitting that they tried to shoot her with their words, cut her with their eyes, and kill her with her hatefulness.

What is genius about your interpretation is that you have connected this human strength to the natural world. Angelou is not merely stating she survives, she is also matching her accent with the most basic and untouchable things of the universe. She proclaims that she will become dust that arises and falls, back to the primal constituent of creation; that she will be the sun, the moon, the bodies that regulate time, light and tide, whose movements are so dependable and uncontrollable that they are inevitable and will always come back with fresh energy.

This is not a weak hope but the universe is confident. When Angelou equates her personal renaissance with the natural phenomena, she is putting forward the idea that the spirit and the strength of Black women is not only a characteristic of humans, but it is a law of nature. The tyrannical powers are of a transient nature, and are created by man; her aspiration to rebel is everlasting and unavoidable as the sunrise. The dream of mutual liberation you have spelled out by Angelou is the one of a river contaminated by pollution clearing itself in due course, of a forest that grows in a fire, the Black woman, with that inexhaustible, grand, empathetic attachment to the earth herself, is the one who has an inherent, insurmountable power to heal, to spring and to reestablish herself as the center of her own life and history. The last lines of the poem do not just represent a personal triumph, but are a sign of a universal and universal rebirth.

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But, still, like dust, I'll rise.
...
Just like moons and like suns
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise(1-4, 9-12).

The main assumption that is common among all ecofeminists is that women and the natural world are both victims of a patriarchal, male-dominated social structure. But there is a major difference in strategies between the Radical and Cultural Ecofeminists that is based on the doctrine. Radical Ecofeminists assume a conscious rift between nature and women arguing that the historical confusion of the two serves as a trap of patriarchy that disenfranchises both

categories. They insist that the liberation of women requires going beyond this connection so that they can achieve real equality. Cultural Ecofeminists on the other hand brag about the intersection of the feminine with the natural and that women must continue to acquire the affinity with nature as a way of agency and as a defense against the destructive elements of capitalist patriarchy. Nevertheless, notwithstanding this tactical difference, both schools are brought together in their violently pious conceit of nature as Mother Earth or Mother Nature, as a motherly, life-giving power.

The works by Emily Dickinson and Maya Angelou can be viewed as the vivid examples of these ecofeminist values, despite the fact that their social statuses are quite different. Dickinson is the best example of the Cultural Ecofeminist position. Nature is no longer background and a Goddess, and in her poem, she offers herself to Goddess as a devout worshiper. She projects religious iconography onto nature, and speaks of an orchard as the dome of a church and the singing of birds as a choir singing together. These descriptions put nature on the highest level of adoration. More importantly, she also becomes the female embodiment of nature, the Gentlest Mother, the one who brings love and care to all of her children, without any discrimination and judgement. To Dickinson, nature is the ultimate mother figure, which provided an uncritical support and spiritual satisfaction in a society that tended to close in and misinterpret her.

It is the racial and sexual oppression that helps Maya Angelou to make her ecofeminism. The popular metaphor she uses, the caged bird, is the direct reflection of her experience as a Black woman because life itself is a curse, and being a Black woman is a curse, in its turn. She is not only marginalized by patriarchy where women are silenced, but by white women who, even despite the same gender as her, reinforce racial hierarchies and proclaim racial superiority in skin colour. This multiple alienation drives her to find an ally and she discovers that it is only nature that is absolutely on her side. Nature is a reliable companion and source of confirmation in a society that seemingly seemed to be placed against her. Nevertheless, Angelou poetry is never lamentation of being a victim. It is the ode to strength: she states that her life cannot be destroyed by any evil force, however mighty. She is a phoenix rising out of her own heavy load, a symbolic repetition of the processes of nature itself, of birth and death.

Thus, poetry embodied by both Dickinson and Angelou is full of ecofeminist examples. In the case of Dickinson, nature is a kind, goddess mother that provides spiritual solace to social realities. To Angelou, nature is a constant companion that recognizes her value in a racist and sexist world. Both poets, in times of oppression by the society, go to nature and discover what society deprives them of: the unconditional acceptance, the ultimate comfort and the promise of the revival.

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