

Nature-Women Proximity: An Eco-feminist Reading of S.R. Harnot's *The Reddening Tree*

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ABSTRACT

In an era of ecological crisis, Eco-feminism is the only hope of retaining ecological balance in our modern world. The core thoughts of Eco-feminism are Mother-Earth, strength and integrity of every living thing. It also promises the discourse that cares for Mother Earth. It aims at exploring women-nature proximity. Women and nature have been two entities having calm nature fulfilling the required needs of men since the ancient times. However, culture is considered as superior to nature as men over women in our society. Defending nature and women, it has become the need of hour to save human civilisation. The present paper entitled "Nature-Woman Proximity: An Eco-feminist Reading of S.R. Harnot's 'The Reddening Tree'" is an attempt to have a disinterested view of hierarchical stratification of culture over nature and subsequently of men over women. It also explores how the human race can be saved by women and men collectively.

Keywords: Eco-feminism, Gender, Culture, Nature and Hierarchy of society.

Eco-feminism is a holistic belief that aims at focusing on care and concern for Mother Earth, love for the intrinsic value of all life and interdependence of living and non-living beings on this earth. It interrogates the difficulties that women and nature face on account of exploitation, suppression, destruction and indifference by hierarchal system or patriarchal structure of society. It motivates human beings to integrate their collective

strength. Eco-feminism can be defined in many ways. According to McMillen, “the term was coined in the seventies by the French author Françoise d’Eaubonne. For d’Eaubonne the term was meant to counter the oppression of women and to defend Nature from the destruction by men” (Tollefsen 90). The ecological balance and the preservation of ecosystems is a prime objective of Eco-feminists. The late 20th century witnesses Eco-feminism as a movement speaking for women, nature and marginalised group.

Eco-feminist theory originated from the proposition that both woman and nature have been worst sufferers at the hands of Men in patriarchal society. This theory envisages that the harassment of both nature and women be eliminated. It promises a discourse that focuses a peaceful coexistence of woman and nature and both are equal sufferers and share the pains of each other very naturally. Feminist analysis covered the shared experiences of women and nature with a new vision. More specifically, Eco-feminists evaluate exploitation of women and nature by targeting the hierarchies created by culture, male, society, higher caste etc. The main focus of the theory is to reconceptualise the treatment of women and nature in non-hierarchical and non patriarchal ways. Peter Barry says that “eco-feminists re-read major literary works from an eco-centric perspective with particular attention to the representation of the natural world” (Barry 264). The emphasis is on the preservation of ecosystems and advocated the principles of liberating women and nature from the ditches male-oriented society. Eco-feminists believe that human race can be saved by men and women with their revolutionary fervour to avoid such oppression which is harmful to nature. The present paper will be analysed through Eco-feministic framework.

In India, environmentalism began to be perceptible when the huge gamut of woman took part in the Chipko movement to protect forests from deforestation. These women hung to the

trees in an act of protest so that loggers could not cut them down. These groups of women showed their resentment against the oppressors with their physical strength and presence. On the other hand women like Medha Patkar, Mahashwata Devi, Arundhati Roy and C.K. Janu came forward taking environmental issues in their literary works.

Besides, a few Eco-feminists look upon nature as Goddess and Devi. In this regard Vandana Shiva describes in her book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* that "Forests have always been central to Indian civilisation. They have been worshipped as Arangani, the Goddess of the forest, the primary source of life and fertility, and the forest as a community has been viewed a model for societal and civilisational evolution. The diversity, harmony and self-sustaining nature of the forest formed an organisational principles guiding Indian civilisation, the Anaya Sanskrit (roughly translatable as 'the culture of the forest' or forest culture') was not condition of primitiveness but one of conscious choice" (Shiva 53). However one can have a glimpse of nature's role in novels, plays and poetry of Indian literature. The following are a few significant writers' works as examples to delineate nature and her role or importance in the lives of human beings.

Kamala Markanda's novel *Nectar in a Sieve* reveals how the psyche of Rukmani, the protagonist is made strong by reviving elements of her families' rural life and having a strong sense of belonging to their land. While travelling in the bullock cart to the city after being landless, Rukmani expresses her compassion, concern and attachment to the land. This is how Rukmani recalls her early married days: "While the sun shines on you and the fields are green and beautiful to the eye, and your husband sees beauty in you which no one has seen before, and you have good store of grain laid away for hard times, a roof over you and a sweet stirring in your body what more can a woman ask for?" (Markanda 8).

A glimpse of relationship between nature and women is also perceptible in *Cry, The Peacock*, Nature images in *Cry, The Peacock* expresses the emotional world of Mayashe protagonist. Her pet dog Toto has been used as animal image introducing the theme of alienation and the death motifs as the primary indicators of Maya's psychic disorder: "All the day the body lay rotting in the sun. It could be moved on to the veranda for, in that April heat, the reek of dead flesh was overpowering and would soon have penetrated the rooms crows sat in a circle around the corpse, and the crows will eat mything-entails ey, mything" (Desai 34).

Amitav Ghosh with his work the *Hungry Tide* (2005) tried to highlight ecological issues in India. He reveals how the conflict between nature and man becomes the root cause of destruction in Sunderbans. He tries to warn human beings against the obvious exploitation of nature. He advocates that such countries where tides, landslides, floods and harsh landscapes are in abundance, death comes in many forms. "At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrains hostility to their presence, of its cunning and resourcefulness, of its determination to destroy or expel them. Every year, dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles" (Ghosh 7).

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* highlights the connection between nature and women. She divulges how women and nature have been victims in the patriarchal society. The novel elucidates "the deterioration of the fictional village of Ayemenem as the apologue for the corruption of the IP family. The pollution of the river Meenachi and the rehabilitation of the History house as tourist harbour are the centric points in authorising the association between ecological exploration and gender discrimination" (Sheoran 390).

Kiran Desai's *Hullabaloo in Guava Orchard* depicts the horrible consequences of ecological imbalance on culture and civilisation. It highlights the problems caused by man's violation upon the natural order of things.

Recently, a lively instance of climate change is perceptible in Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement*. The writer says that how his father had to flee from his native village owing to flood caused by Padma River. He says that "the great river suddenly

changed course, drowning the village; only a few of the inhabitants managed to escape to higher ground. It was this catastrophe that had unmoored our forebears; in its wake they began to move westward" (Ghosh 4).

Above all, novels such as Abdulali's *The Madwoman of Jogare*, Metha's *A River Sutra*, Anuradha' Roy's *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* and Usha K.R's *Moneky-Man* have a glimpse of the relationships that woman have with globalisation, urbanisation, development. How women are prepared to get adjusted in cities which is supposed to be a space away from natural sights.

Coming to the writer and his work 'The Reddening Tree' taken for the present study, one can observe and analyse him through the prism of Eco-feminism. S.R. Harnot is one of the writers in Himachal Pradesh who left no stone unturned in narrating folk culture in a very vivid way. He has published seven collection of short stories in Hindi and one novel namely *Hidimb*. Several of his works have been translated into English due to their huge demand in public. 'The Reddening Tree' is a translation of Harnot's Hindi short story 'Lal Hota Drakhat'. Later it was translated into English by Meenakashi F. Paul.

Moving forward, 'The Reddening Tree' is a pathetic story of a poor Brahmin family in Himachal Pradesh. Mathru, the protagonist in the story had a small piece of fertile agricultural land. Being a poor, he had to mortgage most of its part to pay the wedding of his elder daughter, Kamli and for the ritualistic wedding of tulsi (a plant). Mathru had to work hard by doing other odd jobs in order to earn money so that his younger daughter may get married. One can notice two things still pending at his home. The first, his younger daughter was still unmarried and the second one, the peepal tree which was also his sacred duty to make arrangements for its ritualistic marriage. Now Mathru had only a small piece of land left behind. Time had come for him to mortgage it in order to arrange the wedding of Munni and peepal tree.

Munni, the youngest daughter of Mathru gets pensive when she comes to know that her parents are too poor to make arrangements for her marriage. In order to make free her parents of their worries, she takes a strong decision regarding marriage without spending a penny. For marriage, her thoughts were only dreams. She takes it as a game and plays like dolls. One day, early in the morning, she secretly goes to the field and gets married with Peepal tree. Innocently, she believes that she had passed the test by getting married with the Peepal tree in the same way as the students pass in their exams. In this process, she reminds how tota panchhi proved to be a symbol of success in her real life. She thinks that by marrying the peepal, she feels her parents won't have to spend money on her marriage and on the marriage of peepal. Above all, she thinks that her parents would not have to face any humiliation for not doing their ritualistic duty towards the peepal tree.

Generally speaking, nature includes sun, moon, water, trees and birds collectively. The relationship between human being and nature has been co-operative since the beginning of the world. However, this relationship got clouded with the development of human beings. The excessive scientific development brought about a large scale suffering and destruction to nature. Women and nature shared the suffering collectively caused by man-made strategies. On account of shared sufferings women began to feel comfortable in the company of nature. In the story, Munni, the protagonist feels similar freshness when "the morning sun comes freely to Munni's door. By this time she is up and about and has already freshened up. She is used to waking up before the sun, for there is not lazy bone in her. She has got her energy and hardworking spirit from her mother Munni is charmed by the morning sun. Sunshine approaches in bits and pieces from distant vales. It sojourns briefly at the fields, threshing floors, and granaries, tarries at the new and not so new houses of the villages, and pauses at the footpaths... These moments are treasured by

Munni. She comes into the yard, to devoutly great the sun God. She covers her head respectfully with a dupatta and folds her hands in devotion (The Reddening Tree 65). The above lines are indicative of that fact how a woman or girl is in a state of ecstasy in nature's company. Munni pays respect for Mother Earth with felicity. She enjoys the objects of nature around her and adores them with love and respect. Eco-feminists believe that like the leaves of plants, Mother Earth Relationships are organically connected to one another and provide nourishment to all living beings in the environment (Porselvi 37).

In Indian philosophy and literature, nature is looked upon as Goddess or Devi. It is considered as life-giving just like a mother. The role of nature is the same as that of a mother in bringing up a child. The relationship and love between a girl and nature is perceptible in the story where Munni "is careful not to grasp the lota with her fingertips for she knows that a vessel is held in this way only for ablutions. Instead, she places the lota on the palm of her left hand and covers it with her right. Her first pursuit in the morning is to offer water to peepal bhagwan" (Reddening Tree 65). The above lines are indicative of the fact that how Munni pays respect to peepal tree and considers it as a living creature. The relationship between the two seems to be passionate, understanding plight of each other. "The oral tales that explicate tree-woman relationships are termed as woody-woman tales. These narratives highlight the proximity between the woods (trees) and woman. The collective strength of trees and woman are emphasized by these stories" (Porselvi 36). The above mention collective strength of nature and women is surely enough to fight against the male-oriented strategies which are hurdles in their way of leading lives. It is also reflected that nature and women nurture people and other non-human living being around them. Women and trees having qualities of selflessness emphasizes Eco-feministic belief.

Eco-feminists believe that “nature, being projected as the all-giving mother, does not expect a return; it merely goes on giving (Nayar 293). In the story Mathru, the male protagonist seems to be Eco-feminist discharging his duties towards nature. It is reflected when one or the other of the village elders would endorse his view, “Oh Mathru, you are right. You are very fortunate and will never want to anything, you will see only don’t give up your dharma, your faithful duty. Water, the peepal religiously and see that you never forget’. Then another village elder would refer to the wedding of the tulsi plant and Mathru would float in the air with joy” (The Redding Tree 66). The above lines reflect that Mathru discharge his duties selflessly. He expects nothing in return while making arrangements regarding wedding of tulsi plant. He brings up tulsi as his own daughter. It has been observed that the tulsi plant is as much nearer to him as his own other two daughters. Such a passionate love for a plant reflects his being Eco-feminist.

Biologically, nature and women are sensitive and have fallen victims to men for time immemorial. Both have faced equal suppression, sharing pain just like members of a family. In the story, the villagers ask Mathru that “you arranged the tulsi’s wedding just like a daughter. To tell you the truth friend, only fools are taking birth in our community now. They are only interested in earning money and more money.

But Mathru, you saved not only your honour but ours as well. You could rightly say that you are the father of three daughters not just two” (66). The writer says that Mathru considers tulsi as his own daughter just like his two daughters, Munni and Kamali. The above lines reveal that there is a sisterly love among three sisters. Linda Vance argues that “eco-feminism considers woman and nature as ‘sisters’ based on the shared oppression of woman and the non-human world” (Nayer 294).

In the story, Mathru seems to be against those who speak against nature. He appears to be angry when his wife advises him that the marriage of peepal is not important for them. In one

situation “Mathru did not appreciate his wife’s advice. He frowned: Talk sense, woman! What do you know about scriptures? Is there anyone else in the village fortunate enough to have a peepal born in their field” (The Reddening Tree 70). The above lines are reflective of the fact that our scriptures guide us how to preserve nature. Mathru rebukes his wife for not following religious rituals which are part and parcel of scriptures. The key note of Eco-feminism is embedded in the psyche of Mathru when he acts in accordance to the values of nature.

Eco-feminists believe that society and culture is anti-nature. It is our scriptures which have been preserver of nature since ancient times. In the story Mathru says that “A daughter is a responsibility, the peepal is a religious duty. Mathru fears he would lose face in the community if the daughter’s wedding were not impressive and if the peepal remained unmarried” (70). The above statement by Mathru reflects that we need to learn from our scriptures how to preserve nature. It is a religious duty of everyone to adore peepal tree. It is also considered as a rich source of oxygen. It gives life to many people. So the role of peepal tree is like life-giving.

The association between tree and women is characterised by women’s identification of their self with the intrinsic value of tree. Women consciously try to protect the trees for various reasons. They empower the trees and the trees in turn, empower them. It is because both trees and women have been objects at the hands of materialist consumerist society. A similar situation appears in the story where Munni is seen talking to peepal tree. In the manner of a child, Munni laughed and said: “You are getting married, you know! Then she laughingly poured the water on its body. She turned back, and told it, ‘I am also getting married.’ Perhaps she wanted to ask the tree who would offer it water after she was married and gone to her husband’s home. She took another look at the peepal. The rustly leaves made a

sweat sound. The gentle breeze poured music into her ears. She had begun to like peepal more than before (73).

Eco-feminist ideology suggests that a woman, a child and a bird can have their own inherent worth in them. They are independent of any kind of hierarchical systems. The bonding between a girl and a bird is reflected in the story where Munni “was drawn to a little Tota Panchhi (a ladybird) sitting on a flower. She picked it up and placed it on her palm. Then she shifted it to the top of her right forefinger, she pointed the finger upto the sky and recited: ‘fly away panchhiya, pass or fail” (74). These lines epitomise that the life of Munni is full of confusion, complexities and disorder. She tries to get out of the confusion by sharing a few minutes with the Tota Panchhi, it reveals that Tota Panchhi flew away deciding the fate of Munni and pointing that she must come out of her complexities. So the bondage of a bird and a girl is the essence of Eco-feminists.

After having analysed ‘The Reddening Tree’ through Eco-feminist framework, one can observe that S.R. Harnot emphasised on Mother-Earth, enhancing the simplicity of life. The indigenous men and women, the narrators and the narrated in the story embody simple living and promote earth-centered values in day to day life. The writer tries his best to understand ecological balance which is being suffocated by the existing dominant systems. It has been observed that honest and strong women, men fight for the rights of nature when Mother-Earth is in a state of distress. The writer seems to be simple and honest fighting for the rights of nature, voiceless ones and marginalised group. It has also been discovered that nature is the supreme teacher. Mother-Earth teaches human being how to be calm and contented as in the case of Munni when she learns a lot from Mother-Earth. Nature appears to her just like her own mother who never expects in return. This kind of love between mother and daughter, between two sisters and between human being and nature is the chief feature of Eco-feminism. This is what the

writer wants to convey a message through the story to human beings. Conclusively, such narratives pave a way for many writers, scholars and even masses to preserve nature and women who are alarmingly in jeopardy today.

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