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Ecofeminism in India: Struggles and Perspectives

Edited by Madhura Joshi

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INTRODUCTION

In India as well as in the Global South, activists and the rank and file of ecological, social, political, decolonial, feminist movements have changed the relations between humans and nature as well as economic, social and gender relations. The contributions in this volume were initially presented as papers during the annual conference organised by the *Société d'Activités et de Recherches sur les mondes Indiens* on the theme *Ecofeminism in India: History, Struggles, and Perspectives* on the 28th and 29th May 2021. The articles are anchored in sociological and anthropological fieldwork, literature, and poetry. They contribute through their different perspectives towards environmental history, past and present conceptions of nature and women, while revealing some of the pioneers in the struggle for the preservation of natural resources and famous events connected with ecofeminism.
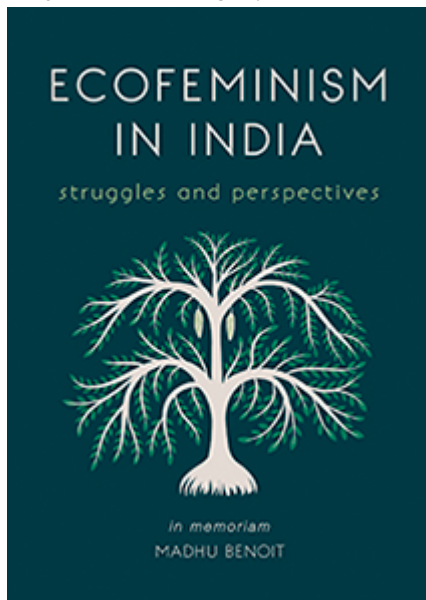
Tree of Life
© Jamie Alexander

The cover design is an adapted version of the Tree of Life. This tree is often a central element depicted in Warli paintings, a ritualistic art of the Warli tribe of northern Maharashtra in India. Given the destruction of forest cover that is being witnessed in the 21st century, and for this volume on Ecofeminism in India, it seemed an appropriate reminder of the soothing presence of trees, which are the very important life providers and sustainers of ecosystems across the world.
It also hails the Chipko Movement, one of the emblematic moments of women's resistance against the felling of trees. On behalf of the SARI, we thank Jamie Alexander, who designed this front cover.
This volume is dedicated to the memory of our much loved and admired colleague, Madhu Benoit.

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Ecofeminism in India: Struggles and Perspectives

Introduction

L'écoféminisme en Inde : combats et perspectives

Madhura Joshi

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TEXT

On behalf of the SARI, I dedicate this volume to our beloved and departed colleague, Madhu Benoit, former Vice President of the association SARI, who worked at Grenoble Alpes University.

1 In addition to the COVID-19 crisis, which may become one of the defining "before/after" moments in contemporary life, the years 2017 to 2022 might be remembered in the future as the ones being punctuated by natural or unnatural catastrophes. Hurricanes and tornadoes in the Indian and Atlantic oceans, forest fires in Australia, France, and other parts of the world, floods in India and Pakistan to name a few natural disasters, were among the images of the climate-related disorders which could, in Ghosh's (42) words, represent "the environmental uncanny" playing itself out.

2 Worldwide efforts to restore forest cover and agroforestry (Vidal) notwithstanding, climate-change can no longer be taken for science fiction. Fiction itself has progressively incorporated climate change-related concerns, and particularly migration as objects of reflection and representation of the realities of people living in different settings and contexts.

3 Changes affecting individuals' everyday lives have the potential of opening the floodgates of resistance. On the ground, eco-activists of the young generation across the world have been protesting against the inaction of official bodies in tackling the issue of environmental protection. The resulting anguish can sometimes find refuge in action

and in words. Neologisms thus gain currency with their capacity to express thoughts. In English, the terms eco-grief and eco-anxiety have entered common parlance and others (Gachman) are being created to express specific association of ideas (blissonance: bliss and dissonance, gwilt: when you cause plants to wilt because you're trying to conserve water, etc.) emerging from feelings about the environment and climate change.

4 A globalised economy heavily dependent on natural resources and global supply chains, with agriculture, urbanisation and industrial activity, mass movements of people, dumping of waste across the planet and in the oceans, and the extinction of already endangered species are commonplace in the media images that form part of our daily lives. The underlying idea is that of the depletion of natural resources with overconsumption and the increasing inequalities in distribution and access to resources pushing the limits of sustainability. Violence towards nature is an inherent part of this process of exploitation in growth-led economies.

5 Feminist thought has demonstrated the links between intensive capitalist mode of functioning and patriarchal societies. Women's rights, be it concerning the inheritance or possession of land, access to education, marriage and divorce, or remunerated employment, often narrate a violent story. Thus, the acquisition of rights by women has been an ongoing struggle and in the matter of rights, nothing can be taken for granted. It is a mined terrain, linked to several other issues, as we read the history of struggles of the ideas and issues concerning the human population not only in local settings but also around the world. In the past few years, civil society movements with the involvement of youth for climate brought about a new turn in women's movements with the environmental issues capturing the headlines of journals.

6 As early as 1974, one of "the pioneers of the degrowth movement" (Goldblum), Françoise d'Eaubonne coined the term *écofeminisme* associating women and ecology in this neologism. It expressed dissent with the forms of knowledge or established views about growth-led economics. Moving away from questions of power, violence and exploitation, d'Eaubonne through her thought and work sought to transform the relations of human beings with nature by

adopting a respectful stance towards women and nature. Both were seen as endowed with birth-giving powers.

7　Often explained as the combating of the strained relation between the domination of nature and the subjugation of women, especially in patriarchal setups, ecofeminism becomes a mark of asserting the self as being involved in the stance of preservation of natural resources. It also carries an inherent belief in the emancipatory potential of the term and the meanings that are loaded in the different strands of ecofeminism, even when these seem to be at odds with each other.[1]

8　With survivalist and neo-fascist movements surging across the world and adding the ecological cause to their stew, it appears that ecology and the environmental cause is the preserve of neither ecofeminist nor Left movements (Dubiau). Different political and social movements have adopted ecology as an excuse, a reason, a canvas for action in a world where the access to natural resources, food sovereignty and affordable prices of commodities, knowledge and science, are interlinked issues. In the case of India, development and infrastructure have been leitmotifs for the possession of land and the environmental destruction that has ensued. At the same time, production and use have been causes of conflict and debate within communities (grazers, cultivators, farmers, village communities etc.) closely working with the environment (Gadgil and Guha 245).

9　According to the 2011 census, about 70 per cent of the Indian population lives in rural India and about 30 per cent lives in urban areas; 50 per cent of the overall labour force is dependent on agriculture.[2] Although in rural India 73 per cent of women workers depend on agriculture, only 14% of the landowners are women (Agarwal 2021a). Women landowners have, in some ways, made a mark for themselves,[3] by introducing organic farming and fishing activities, and by innovating in the forms of governance of group farms and cooperatives that run food-related businesses. Nevertheless, the question of access to loans becomes difficult (Kerketta) if a person does not own the title to the land or an identification in official records. This is the case, for example, of the Adivasis or people belonging to indigenous communities, who have not always lived sedentary forms of life.

10   Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* signalled public health concerns related to the disturbed and damaged ecosystems through the use of pesticides in farming and through the disposal of waste in nature by industrial complexes. In India, farmers caught in a debt trap committed suicide as a last resort and in recent years, media and independent reports have documented these tragic events. Throughout the 20th century, there has been uprising and struggle against the imposition of intensive agricultural practices or the allocation of land by the State for the implantation of factories and dams on sites from which people are displaced or their access to resources hampered.

11   The latest among these struggles has been the farmers' resistance across the country and more specifically in the capital New Delhi (2019-2021) to the imposition of Land Laws in India, which led to the government withdrawing the Bill in 2021. The contention of the farmers was that the deregulation of food prices would endanger access to food and grains at affordable prices. Issues related to the pollution of ground and river water were also the causes of dissent, the awareness of which made consensus within the movement possible. Women played a key role in this movement to preserve land and resources from pollution, and encroachment for "development" purposes. The perspectives that women have created for themselves through innovative agricultural practices, taking the lead in organic farming and fishing, creating group farms (Agarwal 2021b), foraying into cooperative farming, and creating seed collectives [4] show the potential of creating new human relations with a different vision. Subsistence (related farming and other activities) can also be a form of resistance and vital for the survival of the planet (Pruvost).

12   Indian cities face the challenges of urbanisation reinforced by the migration of labour unable to find accommodation, or basic amenities. The urban bourgeoisie, living a seemingly comfortable life, is not always spared by power cuts or water shortages, resources that form the basis of infrastructural development programmes. Yet even in urban environments, the celebration of popular festivals, linked to lunar movements, the cycle of agricultural activities, change of seasons and linking astral positions to rites of passage in the lives of individuals witness a profound link with nature by considering humans to be a part of the alignment of the universe.

13   Joining the global concern about the preservation of biodiversity, fundraising initiatives by individuals and corporate entities, charities and foundations, for instance, to "save soil"[5] and to recreate forest cover[6] have induced urban populations, in some ways, to sit up and take notice of, if not to get involved in, environmental issues. Even before "greenwashing" and "pinkwashing" became trendy through Corporate Social Responsibility imperatives leading to investments in the environmental and women's causes, individuals and organisations working for social causes to complement or fulfil the absence of state programmes had already been involved in environmental preservation.[7]

14   In order to address the issues related to the presence of women in the environmental cause in the Indian context, the *Société d'Activités et de Recherches sur les mondes Indiens* (SARI) devoted its annual conference held in May 2021 to the theme of "Ecofeminism: History, Struggle and Perspectives".[8] Papers were presented in French and English by researchers working on the Indian and Latin American contexts in the field of literature and social sciences. This volume of *Représentations dans le monde anglophone* incorporates some of the texts presented during the conference.[9]

15   The texts presented here are English in form, vernacular in their content and global in their outreach. One could also say that multilingualism is the undercurrent in the Anglophone world in general and the Indian context in particular. Which language to use in order to effectively communicate or make one's voice heard, is a question for engaged activism.

16   This volume certainly does not pretend to address all the issues related to Ecofeminism in India but attempts to provide glimpses into the struggles and perspectives of the movements to preserve natural resources. The recognition of women's everyday activities which are not necessarily accounted as work but which are essential to all that constitutes economic activity in the urban or rural areas is not acquired *suo moto*. Be it collecting forest produce, weeding, planting, reaping, threshing, weaving, winnowing, farming, gardening, collection of waste, decorating, or be it in caregiving, when it comes to human relationships or with nature, as the term ecology denotes, women work closely with the environment. The migration of women

into low-pay-high-value jobs such as nursing, construction, giving care has been consistently recorded by literature and the social sciences. With the failure of international summits to take urgent steps to contain climate change, the need for state intervention to regulate farming, an economic activity dependent on climate, is made all the more necessary (Nigam), as is that of activists involved in the movement against the Land Laws.

17   Emblematic among the ecofeminist movements and the one setting an example, was the Chipko movement against the felling of trees in the forests of Himachal Pradesh. This women-led movement to save forests had become an inspiration for environmental movements. Furthering the environmental cause, Vandana Shiva's endeavour to create seed collectives, in order to share and (re-)create seeds for farmers to gain independence from the power of multinational companies imposing genetically modified seeds, chemical fertilisers and pesticides, among other products, has gained worldwide recognition.

18   Women's movements in post-independence India have had several turns, and have taken up issues related to women's emancipation and freedom of choice. The history of women's activism in India cannot be dissociated from other social movements and the politics of development. As we can read from **Caroline Michon**'s work in "**Women's movements and environmental activism in India: theoretical reflections based on the study of New Delhi**", environmental activism in this city has been a part of the agenda of women's movement, without the term "ecology" being actually used to describe the actions undertaken. Since the 1980s, several issues have been addressed by women's and feminist organisations filling in the gaps of public policy, or raising awareness on issues of concern such as pollution, disaster management, provision of means of livelihood to the displaced, gender inequality and violence against women, recognition of the right to urban living for slum dwellers and the poor.

19   Based on fieldwork in the Uttara Kannada District in Karnataka, **Manisha Rao**'s text "**Rethinking the Ecofeminist Discourse: View from the Western Ghats, India**" documents a local community-led movement to save the forests on which the spice garden economy

depends. People who participated in the Appiko Movement in the state of Karnataka in the 1980s continued to have a strong affinity with the movement, which later on led to the creation of collectives, exchange forums and social and economic activities related to agroforestry and farm produce. In the face of rampant privatization of the Commons and environmental destruction, the ecofeminist discourse in this local context needs to be seen from a feminist political ecology perspective.

20   Published in 1998, Kiran Desai's novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, is set in the early 1990s, and it hints at the liberalisation of the Indian economy and throws up the question of the future of the country as the narrative unfolds in mysterious ways. In "**Eco-humanism in Kiran Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998)**", **Lydie Le Moine** analyses how Kiran Desai's debut novel adopts magic realism to tackle environmental issues and how an imbalanced relation to the environment affects communities. While doing so, the novel calls for an ecohumanist approach.

21   Amitav Ghosh is one of the prolific voices in contemporary writing in English on issues of environment and climate change in his fiction and essays. In "**Critical Ecofeminism in Amitav Ghosh's Fiction: From *The Hungry Tide* to *Gun Island***", **Maria-Sabina Draga Alexandru** presents Ghosh's writing, which documents the continuity and discontinuity between worlds, the transmission of knowledge over the centuries and the question of losing and finding vital links with humans and nature. By looking at the importance of the women characters in his fiction, Maria-Sabina Draga Alexandru's text traces the author's endeavour to critique oppressive neo-colonial practices that endanger the environment and renders the lives of the underprivileged all the more vulnerable.

22   If ecofeminism as a movement gained prominence in the second half of the 20th century, attempts to rethink everyday household ecology and technology had already been a subject of imagination in the work of Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain, an author whose texts presaged the emergence of both spiritual and political ecofeminisms. **Leslie de Bont's** text entitled "**An Ecofeminist Foremother? Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's oneiric representation of nature, technology and gender roles in 'Sultana's Dream'**" introduces the reader to a

feminist author writing in Bengali and English at the beginning of the 20th century. The locus of the powerful prose of Hossain is not just playful criticism of male attitudes; it also presents a contrast with an imaginary land with and for women, and their relation to technology, nature and gender roles.

23   How do Chipko and Appiko movements continue to have a resonance in discourse even if methods of resistance have changed? "***Many Faces of Madness*: Mindless Destruction with Snapshots of Preservation**" brings together two perspectives on struggles in the local ecofeminist movements in two settings in northern India. The forced eviction of Adivasis or indigenous communities and the anguish of departure to a point of no return is expressed through Jacinta Kerketta's poetry of disruption. Her poetry in Hindi throws up questions for the reader, and also the State, concerning the preservation of *jal, jangal, jameen* (water, forests, land). Language and militant engagement become vectors for social change, as documented in *Sudesha* dedicated to one of the women leaders of the Chipko movement, for whom language was one of the ways of cementing solidarity through informal exchange groups during the resistance to the felling of trees, as has been studied by **Madhumeeta Sinha**.

24   If language is a terrain of domination, it is also that of emancipation, as can be heard in the Hindi slogan of the women's movement in the 1980s and 1990s in India:

> *Hum Bharat ki Nari Hai, Phool Nahi Chingari Hai.*
> We are Indian women; not flowers, but sparks of fire are we.

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NOTES

1 For instance, "materialist" as opposed to "essentialist", and "Third World Environmentalism" contrary to "First World Environmentalism", as we will see in the papers of this volume.

2 https://www.competitionreview.in/blogs/2020/12/19/urban-rural-divide/. Accessed 17th November 2022.

3 The inspiring stories of some of the women farmers were released in a publication of the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare in October 2020: https://agricoop.nic.in/sites/default/files/Success%20Story%20_%208.pdf. Accessed 23rd November 2022.

4 For instance, Navdanya, a seed collective was begun by the well-known environmentalist Vandana Shiva along with the initiative and participation

of local farmers: https://www.navdanya.org/site/latest-news-at-navdanya/698-our-publications. Accessed 5th January 2021.

5   https://www.ishaoutreach.org/en/save-soil. Accessed 2nd December 2022.

6   For example, the Sadhana Forest initiative to preserve natural resources near Puduchery in South India https://sadhanaforest.org/. Accessed 2nd December 2022.

7   For example the work of the social activist Baba Amte and his wife Sadhanatai Amte in the state of Maharashtra, which is continued by their son Prakash Amte and daughter-in-law Mandakini Amte https://www.lokbiradariprakalp.org/. Accessed 2nd December 2022.

8   This conference was organised online with the support of Université Toulouse 1 Capitole and the Laboratoire Cultures Anglo-Saxonnes EA 801, Université Toulouse 2 Jean Jaurès on the 28th and 29th May 2021. I thank the editorial board of *Representations in the Anglophone World* for having accepted this project of publication of some of the texts presented at the conference.

9   A second thematic volume on Ecofeminism including papers from the Indian and Latin American contexts is to be published in the journal *NaKan* in 2023-2024.

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Women's Movements and Environmental Activism in India: Theoretical Reflections Based on the Study of New Delhi

Les mouvements féministes et l'activisme environnemental en Inde : réflexions théoriques à partir de l'étude de New Dehli

Caroline Michon

OUTLINE

TEXT

1   From November 2020 to the end of 2021, after the Indian Parliament passed the Indian agriculture acts (also known as Farm Laws or Farm Bills 2020), farmers initiated massive protests in New Delhi. Their main criticism was levelled against precariousness due to the withdrawal of the State from market regulation, and against policies favouring large companies and multinationals.

2   Women farmers held a central and singular place in these demonstrations by articulating their experience in term of gender, class and caste (Bolazzi *et al.* 20), namely the lack of recognition of their economic participation, the difficulties they faced in terms of land ownership (Agarwal *et al.*, "How Many" 4) and their exclusion

from decision-making roles within local and national institutions.[1] Indeed, while women account for nearly 80% of the Indian agricultural workforce, they remain largely absent from the discourse and policy measures regarding agriculture, including agricultural land and legal acknowledgement of their work (Agarwal, "Green governance" 3). As a matter of fact, women are more affected than men by environmental degradation and the privatization of land, mainly because they are largely dependent on the commons for the provision of food and water for the household (Agarwal 10). These mobilizations highlighted, once again, the specificity of gender issues in rural areas and the gender-based aspect appeared as an echo of contemporary women's environmental struggles since the 1960s.

3   Women's environmental struggles in India could be considered as a part of a broader movement called the Indian women's movement. Initiated at the end of the 19th century, the women's movement has gone through several phases of expansion and backlash. In its contemporary form, the women's movement in India could be described as a national network with permeable borders composed of formal and informal groups (women's and feminist organizations, autonomous organizations, professionalised organizations, platforms, political women's branches, student unions, trade unions), social workers and activists struggling for equality. This national women field cause (Bereni) is based on several ideologies and branches of feminism including environmental women's movements.

4   Of course, using the term 'feminism' in Third world countries and especially in India is a major issue. Feminism in the form of socio-political movements and ideologies for gender equality is one of the conceptions that is associated with it worldwide. However, its diverse variety of beliefs, shapes, and agendas could explain the unwillingness of a number of women to use it to describe themselves. In India, the debate around whether or not women's collectives and activists should define themselves as 'feminist' is part of the colonial and postcolonial debate. For some activists, feminism in India is considered too tied to its Western origins and colonial legacy (Kishwar). Furthermore, feminism might not reflect the diversity and the specificity of the contemporary women's anti-patriarchal mobilizations because of its 'westernness'.

5   Discussions on the relevancy of feminism in India characterizes the debate around ecofeminism. Some activists like Vandana Shiva advocate for a local Indian ecofeminism. This movement has sprung from the idea that women are intrinsically linked to nature because of their dependence on it. In this version of ecofeminism, the patriarchal violence against women is compared to the exploitation of nature. For some others, ecofeminism is not relevant in the context of India (Nanda WS2; Agarwal, "Gender and environment" 119). Among other things, they make the point that ecofeminism in India has remained blind to the multiple identities that shape women's experience (caste, class, religion) and has neglected the material aspect of domination and labour.

6   In this essay based on field research on urban women's movement in New Delhi conducted between 2012 and 2016, I wish to highlight the deployment of women's environmental movement in India and underline the debate around ecofeminism as it has taken shape through discussions among women activists in New Delhi and the connection between feminism and environmental issues.

Women's struggles for environmental issues in India, a long *herstory*[2]

7   In India, the social and political environmental coalitions have a long *herstory* of mobilization. Environmental concerns have been rooted in social and development concerns because of the significant impact of environmental destruction on people's lives. The environmental movement in India is an umbrella term covering a variety of local and national mobilizations claiming for the conservation and improvement of the quality of the environment (Gadgil and Guha). At first glance, these conflicts seem to assemble people from different backgrounds, castes, classes, genders and religions. However the study of local struggles shows that most of the time, environmental conflicts oppose the rich and the poor, the upper castes and lower castes and women against men (Guha and Martinez-Alier 4).

8   Throughout the history of the environmental movement, the concern about environment may have varied, but the most dramatic conflicts have been around the access to natural resources such as forests, land, water and air, with issues of pollution, restriction of access to local communities, and privatization. Within India, since the 1980s rapid industrialization and urbanization for the purpose of economic development have exacerbated the trend of alterations in the environment but also social inequalities (Sethi). For the past decade, lots of Adivasi and Dalit communities from rural areas have been displaced because of the construction of big dams or the privatization of communal lands (Benbabaali 138).

9   Environment management based on social, economic and health considerations is described as "utilitarian conservationism" by Sunita Narain, as opposed to the concept of "protectionist conservationism" which prevails across paradigms of environment management in the western world. Broadly, because of their dependence on water, firewood, food, medicinal plants and so on, marginal groups or local communities have been directly affected by the destruction of forest and close environments. The mix of poverty, dispossession of rights and health concerns brought about by climate change, deforestation and soil and water pollution have generated awareness amongst the most affected population regarding the need to maintain a sustaining balance between environment and development. It has also highlighted the importance of communities' participation in resource governance (Sahu 7).

10   The attention paid to the social, material and political contexts of these environmental justice movements enlighten some differences in the origins, between Western and Southern environmental movements (Guha and Martinez-Alier 16). Collective mobilizations of disadvantaged people mostly from the global South could be theorized as "environmentalism of the poor" (4). According to this approach, nature-based conflicts had their roots in peasant and rural communities struggle over access to and exploitation of resources. As opposed to the "environmentalism of the poor", in the West, environmental issues were mostly related to the protection of nature, the management of outdoor recreation areas and the creation of safe living spaces to counter-balance concretization and urbanization of spaces, also known as "mainstream environmentalism" or "first world

environmentalism". One of the offshoots of which is the violent displacement of poor people in the name of wildlife conservationism and the protection of the natural habitats of animals (Baviskar, *Uncivil City* 120). While "first world environmentalism" ignored environmental harms affecting the poorest, the "environmentalism of the poor" is rooted in social movements advocating for environmental justice (Guha and Martinez-Alier). While the distinction has been relevant in many ways, the study of women's struggles in urban centres such as Delhi shows a coexistence of these two strategies in Northern and Southern countries.

11 In India, while environmental issues have not been considered central by feminist movements for a while, women's mobilizations and the environmental movement are tied by social and political concerns. Women play a paramount role in the management, conservation and use of natural resources. Despite serious limitations in access and control of these resources, women are mainly responsible for gathering and supplying food for their households, along with collecting water and firewood for heating and cooking. Environmental degradation intensifies women's burden by making their tasks more difficult and time consuming (Agarwal, "Gender and environment" 124).

12 In the 1970s, women came out to participate in environmental movements in several parts of India (Agarwal, "Gender and environment" 145), one of the most famous and globally celebrated ecofeminist agitations being the Chipko movement. While at its beginning, agitations were mostly led by local men workers claiming their rights over benefits of the forests in several areas of the Himalayas, women took the lead of the movement after thousands of houses were destroyed by monsoon floods exacerbated by deforestation. Women appeared at this time as immediate victims of environmental destruction not only because of the loss of their house and goods by floods but also because of the State selling out the right to use of neighbouring forests to external companies and local workers. By embracing the trees to protect them, women from the Chipko movement created a new method of struggle and became the symbol of the ecofeminist movement in India (Jain 1791).

13   Following these demonstrations, that spread all over India, in 1980, the Indian State decided to decentralize environmental governance to local communities by amending the Indian Forest Act. The joint forest management programme gave the priority to local communities on forests' exploitation and conservation. In spite of this, while some men were associated with the decision-making process, it appears that this programme had a limited impact in creating a significant shift in decision-making dynamics between men and women (Agarwal, "Green governance" 51). Indeed, studies conducted in 2000 exposed the ongoing process of women's exclusion from decision-making around the preservation of forests and from the formal economy.

14   Environmental protests were also related to the displacement of people due to the construction of dams. These conflicts arose for instance around the Tehri dam in Uttarakhand (1967), the Koel-Karo dam in Jharkhand (1973), the Subarnarekha dam in Bihar (1979), the Ichampally dam concerning the states of Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra and Telangana (1983), and the Narmada Bacchao Andolan in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra (1990) (Gadgil and Guha 72). Once again, these social movements highlighted the correlation between environmental degradation and impoverishment (Agarwal, "Gender, Resistance and Land" 81; Pattnaik *et al.* 2). Dalit, lower castes and Tribes have been the primary victims of land privatization, evictions, displacements and environmental degradation (Fernandes 88), worsened by the deregulation of the market economy and privatization (Gadgil and Guha 34). Among them, women have been disproportionately hit by environmental destruction and privatization.

From environmental feminism to ecofeminism in India

15   Since the end of the 1980s, due to environmental concerns and concomitant to the rise of ecofeminist theory and practice in different parts of the world, interest in the women-nature relationship has grown in India. Despite the variety of ecofeminist analyses (including those who do not claim to be part of this movement) and internal debates, ecofeminists all over the world

share a wide understanding of the gendered dimension of ecocide, based on the nature-culture division and the correlation between gender violence and the domination of nature.

16 The term ecofeminism was coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974, and mostly forged as theories in the West (Sale; Warren). According to Karen Warren, ecofeminism is a plural space of practices and texts, that brings women activists together around an analytical approach based on

> the position that there are important connections—historical, experiential, symbolic, theoretical—between the domination of women and the domination of nature, an understanding of which is crucial to both feminism and environmental ethics. (Warren 125).

This position is also shared by the leading pioneers of the ecofeminist movement in India like Vandana Shiva, for whom "the violation of nature is linked to the violation and marginalization of women, especially in the Third World" (Shiva 41). At the heart of Vandana Shiva's analysis, is the idea that the exploitation and degradation of nature is connected to the subordination and oppression of women. She connects this violence with the growth of the capitalist economy and patriarchy in the colonial context. From her perspective, patriarchal capitalism simultaneously sustains the 'non-recognition' of women's traditional ecological knowledge and contribution to the economy as workers and farmers and deprives women of their rights over their bodies (Mies and Shiva 33).

17 The overexploitation of nature negatively affects women's health and food security, and also increases gender violence and domestic burden. The perception of nature by modern sciences and international development projects as something that needs to be controlled and exploited, is compared by Shiva to men's domination and subjection of women's bodies (14). Underlying her criticism of modern science is the idea that before colonization, Indian women and men had an egalitarian relationship with nature, considered as a living and creative process (*Prakriti*) associated with feminine principles (*Shakti*) (Shiva 38). She ends with the perspective that the "feminine principle" is the central key for women to "stay alive" and oppose the system.

18   Despite the high visibility of Vandana Shiva's analysis of patriarchal science and the traditional power of women, some aspects of her work have been challenged by activists and scholars both inside and outside the women's movement. In India, the term ecofeminism is criticised as being gender essentialist and not paying attention to the plurality of women's identities (Agarwal "Gender and environment" 119; Nanda WS2). The glorification of traditional power of womanhood is also shared by the Hindu nationalist movement, which at the same time tends to associate India to Hinduism, and by extrapolation, englobing Indian women as being Hindu. Thus it denies the secular nature of the Indian culture and prevents from the questioning of its patriarchal practices (Dietrich, "Women, ecology and culture" 79). Moreover, the romanticization of the past often makes the environmental debate caste-blind by not recognizing the dependence of Dalits on natural resources and their central role in nature preservation (Omvedt, "Dalits"; Sharma 47).

19   For Bina Agarwal, who advocated the use of the term "feminist environmentalism", the link between women, men and nature should be understood in their materiality and singularity ("Gender and environment" 146). On the one hand, women and men's connection to nature is related to the context and the local history. On the other hand, the intersectional dimension of identities makes it difficult to speak of female power as a unique identity. This criticism comes along with the rejection of the idyllic vision of Southern countries before colonization, and the lack of consideration of the plurality of religious identities in India or its caste hierarchy (Agarwal 125; Sharma 47). In addition to this, for Meera Nanda, Vandana Shiva's rejection of modern science as a western patriarchal paradigm, contributes similarly to the naturalization of patriarchal customs and beliefs but it also denies women's autonomy and feminist epistemological production (WS2).

20   In the shadow of theoretical debates, environmental concerns in practice have been limited to rural areas for many years, enhancing the discourse on an Indian rural tradition (Gadgil and Guha 103). However, India's urbanization coupled with climate change and growing pollution, has given rise to a mix of mainstream and local environmentalism in cities. As usual, women have played a critical

role in the politicization of social and environmental concerns by driving local and national actions.

The women's movement in New Delhi

21 Historically, New Delhi has had a bustling culture of protests. Now at the epicentre of India's political power, New Delhi offers a high national and international visibility to protest movements. Since the middle of the 20th century, many farmers, workers, Dalits or women's mobilizations mainly from the northern part of India, have taken place in Delhi (Gadgil and Guha 61; Kumar 130; Omvedt, "new peasant" 127).

22 In the late 1970s, in New Delhi, several feminist groups emerged in response to dowry deaths (women killed by their husbands' families over not bringing enough wealth from their homes) and gender violence faced by women inside and outside the private sphere. In a concomitant manner, India was also marked by agitation against rape (Gandhi and Shah 273). Composed mostly of urban women from middle and upper classes, feminist collectives claimed the "autonomy" of their groups from any political parties and trade unions. Driven by the momentum of this period of awareness, feminist and women's collectives undertook a large range of actions based on a plurality of concerns (campaigns against dowry, rape, low wages, land rights, the gender-blind nature of development projects) (Gandhi and Shah 23).

23 A few years later, at the beginning of the 1990s, the local movement experienced a paradigm shift in a disturbing political context. While suddenly women's issues were brought at the forefront of international and national concerns, India experienced a social, political and economic turn marked by economic liberalization, the rise of Hindu nationalism and an exacerbation of communal conflicts.

24 The adoption of neo-liberal economic reforms in India at this time deeply impacted the women's movement. The market deregulation and the privatization of industries and several sectors including welfare services, resulted in State withdrawal from social responsibilities and the opening of the country to international

investors (Biswas 4407). Concurrently, in order to assist in development projects, international institutions provided funds to reduce discrimination against women, seen as an obstacle to development. In line with the principle of revitalizing civil society that prevailed at that time, they turned toward women's civil society organizations to drive women's emancipation program and local communities' development (Bernal and Grewal 302). Because of the massive influx of development funding targeting poor women, lots of professionalized, funded organizations close to Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) were founded in cities like Delhi. While benefiting from the decentralization and delegation of State power to the civil society, organizations had to demonstrate their professionalism and meet the standards of international institutions which led to the incorporation of managerial and professional structure in funded organizations (paid employment, 9 to 5 working hours, internal hierarchy, fund-raising) (Menon 242). Unlike most of local women and feminist organizations which had a political and/or strategic approach of women's liberation, funded organizations were pushed to adopt a practical approach of development, based on social and economic empowerment with projects related to access to education, healthcare, food, etc. (Mitra 66; Molyneux 232). This increased number of funded organizations working on women's development could be described as an NGOization of the women's movement. NGOization is not only the increase in the number of NGOs but also the worldwide deployment of the liberal ideology of development and the adoption by political movements of the tools and discourses of international agencies (Alvarez 176; Roy, "Beyond NGOization" 97). In many ways, NGOization is related to the globalization of gender (Cîrstocea *et al.* 11), which refers to the international adoption and circulation of the concept of gender and related terminology by international institutions and the institutionalization of struggles for gender equality.

25   In cities like Delhi, NGOization has led to a homogenization of practices inside the women's field but it doesn't mean that at the local level, political approaches no longer exist. As a matter of fact, professionalized organizations dedicate a large part of their time to apply for grants, to promote women's access to school and basic amenities. While professionalization has become a standard for most

of the activists (Menon 176) working in the women's development sector, a number of feminist and women's organizations have tried to challenge local patriarchal ideologies by supporting grassroots mobilizations. In the meantime, the post-1990 social and political context has catapulted new mobilizations around gender-related issues in India focusing on issues of freedom, choice and desire while denouncing the latent violence in the Indian society. In hindsight, the fear of depolitization caused by institutionalization has been questioned by the emergence of a new generation of activists bringing new concerns and practices into the movement.

26   This period was also marked by the growing visibility and militancy of caste politics. Lower caste women, including Dalit, challenged the woman subject of feminism. While denouncing the upper caste and middle-class domination on the women's movement, these women founded their own women's collectives to address gender issues related to caste as well as religion (Dietrich, "Dalit movement" 57; Arya and Singh Rathore 26). The will to build an all-inclusive type of feminism in India based on an intersectional approach of gender, has paved the way for a new approach of identities and struggles for equality.

27   In the late 1990s, growing AIDS Awareness in India and the availability of monetary resources finally helped legitimize discussions on sex-related matters outside the heteronormative framework. While men were first targeted, it also offered support and legitimacy to lesbian women who were asked by some women's organizations not to raise their issues inside the women's movement (Menon and Nigam 131; Dave 120). The democratization of the conversation around sexuality has also been facilitated by the explosion of audio-visual media, internet and cellular phone, combined with a rise of consumerism and increased mobility. For Nivedita Menon and Aditya Nigam (86) this social and economic turn has led to the rise of a "new economies of desire" mostly in cities.

28   The intensification of new aspirations has resulted in variations in membership, priorities and practice within the women's movement. The new generation of women, men and transgender people entering the movement in the 2000s have politicized new demands related to freedom, desires and gender identities. They have been taking the

streets to defend rights and denounce sexual violence, harassment, gender discrimination, gender wage gap and to reclaim freedom to move and act. Like previous movements, which raised significant issues in the past, this new generation of activists is facing hostile backlash from the government as well as from the neo-conservative and right-wing forces. After the Nirbhaya case (2012) in Delhi involving a gang rape in a bus which led to the death of a young student, people came out in the streets of Delhi to protest against the inaction of the state, the attitude of police and the society as a whole which condones violence against women. In 2014, the Kiss of love protest denounced moral policing. The Happy to bleed movement began in 2015 to counter menstrual taboos and stigma in India and the #Metoo movement in 2016 have become in a few years, the symbol of this new wave of struggles for equality where the politicization of intimacy is linked to the exposure of ongoing gender violence (John, "#Metoo" 138).

29   As we can see, the history of women's activism in India is inseparable from the history of the growth of neoliberalism, development politics, but also workers, Dalit and environmentalist movements.

Women's activism in Delhi and the environmental cause

30   Yet, for a long time, the impact of cities on environment and agrarian peripheries received little attention (Soni 78). The belated interest in ecological issues in urban areas seems to be the result of the distancing of agricultural considerations from everyday life and the prevalence of a modern approach implied by policy development (Sethi; Green et al. 267). But due to the increasing air and water pollution, government and citizens have started to consider the impact of environmental degradation on people's health and lives.

31   Ecological awareness first appeared in the 1990s around environmental injustices (Baviskar, *Uncivil City* 56). At that time, air and water pollution, access to resources and affordable and decent housing became a matter of public concern. Nevertheless, instead of bringing more equality, many cities set on new policies that have increased inequalities. In the urban context, ecological issues go

hand-in-hand with gentrification and politics of cleaning up the cities of the poor (Baviskar, "Violence and Desire"; Bhan).

32   The undergoing transformation of Delhi into a "world-class city" since the 1990s has worsened social fragmentation and social exclusion (Baviskar, *Uncivil City* 47). Whereas the urban development policies have fostered the emergence of a new middle class claiming rights over urban citizenship and governance (Ghertner 176), it has also intensified segregation and eviction of the poor (Dupont, "The Challenge of slums" 78). Indeed, while the most disadvantaged people bear the brunt of environmental dangers, a lot of urban environmental policies are anti-poor, justified on the side of policy-makers by environmental concerns (Baviskar, *Uncivil City* 4; Bhan 218).

33   Urban environmental conflicts at the local and national levels show two different and concomitant approaches to environmental issues. On the one hand, the policies implemented in the city aim to improve the living conditions of the most affluent populations, by providing them safe spaces for gathering and active recreation. On the other hand, because of the State withdrawal from development policies, NGOs have become the main actors of policies development targeting poor and vulnerable people with palliative care policies. Consequently, it reinforces inequalities regarding access for poor citizens to the "right to the city". This concept covers both the citizens' right to access resources and infrastructures, to participate in urban governance, to be safe and the recognition of their civil and political rights (Dupont *et al.* 2). While the spectrum of environmental approaches and concerns is broader than that, these two trends have been dominant in cities like New Delhi.

34   The way in which environmental issues have emerged in cities such as Delhi explains in part the way in which women's and feminist organizations have embraced environmental problems. Since the 1980s, a large number of women's and feminist organizations have established their headquarters in New Delhi in order to benefit from the proximity of central power and institutions (Michon 34). Together, they politicized women's issues at the national level and led many battles for equality. In the 1990s, because of the healthcare and social services privatization, professionalized organizations have

become the main actors addressing questions related to women's poverty and poor living conditions including environmental issues.

35 In Delhi, environmental issues have been raised quite early in the 1980 by women's and feminist organizations through both the analysis of the way in which gender shapes women's relation to nature and the denunciation of the insanitary living conditions of women. Since the 1980s, women's organizations and activists in Delhi have taken actions by three different and complementary ways to address ecological issues.

36 First, when political or climatic tragedies occur, many activists and organizations come together to help victims in the various states of India. They mainly help women and children who are the most affected by providing essential goods, such as food, clothes and medicines. They also send equipment or financial aid, teach children, help women to organise canteens and support them. This is what happened, for example, after the Bhopal explosion in 1984 or during the flooding in Uttarakhand in 2013, in Gujarat in 2015, and in South India and Kerala in 2019. These humanitarian responses to environmental disasters are to some extent the consequences of the growing participation of NGO in the implementation of State development policies. Consequently, women's organizations have had to fill in the gaps in the State policies by endorsing social responsibilities.

37 At the crossroads of feminism and environmentalism, the second type of women's organizations campaigns focus on resource-less women. The denunciation of their vulnerability and the implementation of development campaigns are the two main types of work run by women's and feminist organizations. In most Indian cities, women living in slums face everyday problems to access water, food and other resources. The lack of access to basic amenities tends to generate greater inequalities between men and women. Because of the gender division of labour, women and girls are predominantly in charge of water and fuel collection, cooking and taking care of the household. This reproductive work and its repetitive nature is further burdened by the decline of resources, considerably shortening the time they have available for school, work or self-care. In addition to this, the absence of urban sanitation has a direct impact on women

health and increase the risk of (exposure to) violence (Datta, "The Intimate City" 323). The gender environmental perspective through the prism of poverty adopted by women's organizations since the 1990s is linked to the development-based strategies of the international institutions. The international politics of development adopted in the 1990s, called "Women, environment and development" (WED) (Green *et al.* 260) have promoted sustainable development projects based on economic growth, social inclusion and environmental sustainability. In some respects, the changes in emphasis and approach by the NGOization of the women's movement could be a lens for the analysis of the way environmental issues have been endorsed by women's organizations. However even if practical gender interests ride over strategic gender interests[3] (Molyneux 232), the study of the everyday practices shows that a large part of these organizations tries to raise women's consciousness about gender inequality.

38 The third environmentalist approach of women's organizations relates to violence against women and men belonging to the most precarious categories in the context of urban sanitation and beautification policies. Urban development plans, which are considered to be tools for controlling pollution and improving the quality of urban life, are accompanied by the eviction of shanty towns from city centres, the relocation of polluting companies and a ban on individual polluting practices (fires, burning of waste, old cars, construction activities) (Chakravarty and Negi 204).

39 Since the 1990s, the way poor people are viewed has changed, with a move towards the criminalization of poverty. Several studies have shown that actions carried by the middle classes in the name of environment are often "othering" pollution, by attributing the causes of pollution to the poorest (Véron 2096). By doing so, they associate air pollution, waste management, noise and visual pollution practices with lower class along with the "irregular" use of public space (Baviskar, *Uncivil City* 47; Anjaria 393).

40 Moreover, in the past couple of decades Delhi witnessed an increase of rural to urban immigration leading to the growth of unauthorized settlements colonies or slums. While migrants have been part of the development of Delhi economy and also provided essential services

to middle and upper classes, most of the time they have not been seen as relevant citizens in Delhi (Dupont, "nomades" 29). Since the 1990s, the Delhi authorities enforced masterplans with the target of fighting pollution and making the city more attractive for middle and upper classes. These operations of beautification (Dupont, "Slum Demolitions" 79) led to the destruction of several slums and unauthorized colonies, and the resettlement of some of them at the Delhi borders (Dupont *et al.* 9). For many of the residents who were displaced, this spatial segregation resulted in unemployment, loss of the solidarity network and their isolation from urban infrastructures like the metro or bus services.

41   Between 1996 and 2005 the Delhi government, under pressure of a Supreme Court Order, decided to close hazardous factories and relocated polluting industries outside the city (Baviskar, *Uncivil City* 60). The closure or the shifting of these industries had a major impact on workers who lost their jobs or had to move with their families. Furthermore, the attempt to clean Delhi's water and air was not a long-term sustainable solution. It mainly moved the problem outside Delhi in areas that are no longer limited to industries because of spreading of urban areas and workers migration towards them.

42   In response to this, women's organizations based in Delhi like Jagori, Action India, and Action Aid have launched campaigns with displaced populations with the aim of lobbying for the recognition of their rights as legitimate urban citizens. In practice, women's organizations are helping local residents who were displaced to obtain water tanks and to access electricity or sanitation. By doing so, women's organizations are creating together with women residents a safe space where women can feel confident to address and combat inequalities and gender violence.

43   While women's and feminist organizations have tackled issues that cut across gender, poverty and the environment, during my fieldwork undertaken between 2012 and 2016 in Delhi, I found that in most of the publications and on the field, activists hardly ever addressed climate change and nature-based concerns directly. However, by reclaiming women's rights to live free from violence and discrimination, to own property, to access food, sustainable livelihood and to be educated, women's organizations have been

providing a framework to address the gender dimension of environmental degradation.

44   The reason why ecology was something that was hardly ever discussed by fieldworkers or activists in Delhi could be found in the way environmentalism was embedded in discourses in national and international institutions and local governments. In cities like Delhi, environmentalism focused on fostering development rather than addressing social justice and basic needs. In addition, environmental laws have often failed to protect the poorest and people from communities that were bearing the brunt of urbanization policies. Accordingly, it could also explain why ecofeminism had until now, found little resonance in the Indian women's cause.

45   In recent years, in urban and rural areas, a new generation of activists belonging to a younger generation have got involved in environmental political struggles because of the rise of climate anxiety (Hickman *et al.*; Singh, "Indian Youth"). Built on previous environmental and feminist struggles, youth activists claim their belonging to feminist and environmentalist movements while supporting Dalits, Muslim and peasant struggles. By doing so, they enjoy a certain visibility expanded by the political opportunity provided by the transnational environmental youth activism. Once again, young women have been path leaders of demonstrations by raising a range of political issues about feminism, caste and ecology. For instance in 2017, Ridhima Pandey took legal action against the State after the 2013 floods in Uttarakhand. She accused the State of being responsible for the mishandling of the crisis. The same year, in the fishing village of Allapad in Kerala, a young girl took action against mines and soil erosion. In 2019, for several weeks students from the organization "Friday for the Future" marched into the city to denounce State inaction against the climate crisis.

46   In July 2020, despite the mediatization and being symbolically associated as hope for the future, some of the youth activists were attacked and charged by the police for conspiracy against the government after supporting the farmers' protests and adapting an activist kit distributed by Greta Thunberg (Chen). A few days later, it was the turn of two other activists, Shantanu Muluk and Nikita Jacob, respectively involved in the Save Mollem movement and Extinction

Rebellion India groups (India today) to be arrested and accused of conspiracy with pro-independence Sikh groups. Like feminist organizations, these groups are mostly characterized by urban roots and the fact that their members belong to the middle classes. However, we may wonder if this new generation of activists who claim to be part of the transnational environmental network advocating for climate justice will provide a space for the rise of a national urban ecofeminism where women from disadvantaged background could be heard.

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NOTES

1 https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/farm-laws-women-and-men-are-standing-shoulder-to-shoulder/article61437509.ece. Accessed 16th November 2022.

2 *Herstory* is a term used by feminist scholars to emphasize the role of women in history.

3 Practical gender interest is seen by Maxine Molyneux as a direct response to women's need that doesn't necessarily go hand-in-hand with structural change whereas strategic gender interest is based on a political analysis, the purpose of which is to overcome inequalities and oppression (233).

ABSTRACTS

English
In India, the peasant mobilisations in 2020-2021 appeared as an echo of contemporary environmental struggles since the 1960s. The lead of these mobilisations taken by women has brought the gendered dimension of environmental and equality struggles in rural but also urban areas to the forefront.
New Delhi as a capital is a major space of engagement for social and women's movement. Since the 1970s, women and feminist organisations have been politicizing equality issues at both local and national levels. Although mobilisations in the cities enjoy a greater visibility, the space for women's issues is made up of multiple movements that influence each other and sometimes aggregate.

The visibility of women's environmental struggles for equality in the last few years, led me to question the links between rural and urban women's movements and the way environmental issues are addressed in these spaces.

Français

En Inde les mobilisations de paysans en 2020-2021 ont fait écho aux luttes en faveur de l'environnement menées depuis les années 1960. La présence des femmes comme fers de lance de ces manifestations a remis au premier plan la dimension genrée des luttes pour l'environnement et l'égalité dans le monde rural et le monde urbain.
En tant que capitale, New Delhi est un espace où l'engagement des femmes dans le mouvement devient possible. Depuis les années 1970, les femmes et les organisations féministes ont politisé les questions concernant l'égalité au niveau local ainsi qu'au niveau national. Même si les mobilisations dans les villes sont devenues plus visibles, l'expression des problèmes vécus par les femmes se fait via différentes mobilisations qui s'influencent mutuellement et qui parfois se rejoignent.
La question de la visibilité des luttes pour l'égalité et l'environnement menées par les femmes m'a amenée à étudier les liens entre les mouvements dans le monde rural et le monde urbain et à m'interroger sur les questions environnementales qui se posent dans ces espaces.

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Rethinking the Ecofeminist Discourse: View from the Western Ghats, India

Repenser le discours éco-féministe : vue depuis les Ghâts occidentaux en Inde

Manisha Rao

OUTLINE

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Introduction

1 The connections between women and nature have been the focus of research attention in recent years. In Western and Indian thought, there are a number of metaphors that link women with nature. Nature is described as 'Mother earth' and the destruction of nature is described in terms of violence like the 'rape of the sea' or 'rape of the earth' (Shiva, "Staying Alive"; Datar; Mies & Shiva, "Ecofeminism"). Women have been in the forefront of a number of protest movements over the environment. In the early 1970s, some of the now well-known environmental movements swept India: at Silent Valley in Kerala against the setting up of a hydroelectric power project, the Chipko Movement in the Garhwal region against the logging of wood for a sports goods factory, the Narmada Bachao agitations against the setting up of hydroelectric power projects in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra & Gujarat. More recently, anti POSCO, Gandhamardhan, Baliapal agitations have protested against the setting up of dams, forest cutting, large mining projects for iron-ore, bauxite or setting up nuclear missile test range in Orissa state. The Jenu Kuruba tribal communities stand against eviction from a tiger reserve and for their land rights (Times Of India), have had women in the forefront of protests.

2 Besides these movements, there are a number of lesser-known ones where communities have struggled collectively against all odds to regain control over productive natural resources and to defend their livelihoods and lifestyles (Kothari). This paper attempts to understand one such lesser-known movement, the 'Appiko' chaluvali (to hug movement, in Kannada) of Uttara Kannada district (UKD — an administrative bloc, situated in the Western Ghats) which took place in the 1980s in the southern state of Karnataka to protect the local forests on which the local communities are dependent for their livelihood. While doing so, it will examine what role gender plays in

understanding environmental issues; whether there exists a close connection between women and nature uniformly across nations, regions and communities. The paper begins with a review of the multiple and competing approaches to understand the relation between gender and nature in the main tenets of ecofeminism. With an exploration of the alternatives suggested through feminist environmentalism, these relations are then examined in relation to the Appiko chaluvali of UKD. Finally, the paper attempts to rethink the discourse on ecofeminism and suggests the need to look at the women and nature discourse from a feminist political ecology perspective. The paper argues for the need to understand the ecofeminist discourse somewhat differently within India and the Global South.

Gender & environment: differing perspectives

3   Ecofeminism refers both to movements and to a set of ideas that are at the intersection of feminism and radical environmentalism. It points to the historical, material and ideological connections between women and nature that are both subjugated and dominated. It puts forward a worldview that believes in the care and diversity of all life forms (Terreblanche 163). Movements labelled as 'ecofeminist' like the Green-belt movement in Kenya, Chipko movement in India, the anti-militarist movement in the U.S. and Europe, the movements against the dumping of toxic wastes in the U.S. are dedicated to the continuation of life on earth. They reflect the politics of resistance at the nodes of power that plays out at the micro level. Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*, that heralded the second[1] wave of the environmental movement in the U.S., highlighted the harmful effects of pesticides like DDT and the toxic landscape produced by industrial capitalism and the military. Inspired by direct action movements, ecofeminism claims to contribute to an understanding of the interlinkages between the domination of people and nature by sex, race, class and caste.

4   The ecofeminist movements emerged in the West in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a product of the peace, feminist and ecology movements. The term ecofeminism was coined by the French

feminist Francoise d'Eaubonne in 1974 appealing for a complete reconstruction of the relations between men and women as well as humans and nature. Ynestra King developed it further pointing to the interconnectedness of theory and practice and highlighted the devastation of the earth by corporate groups as feminist concerns. It is the masculinist mentality that dominates women and nature and which depends on multiple systems of state power and dominance to have its way. The first ecofeminist conference, entitled "Women and Life on Earth: Ecofeminism in the 80s", was organized at Amherst, Massachusetts, USA (Spretnak). It examined the connections between feminism, militarism, health and ecology and was followed by the formation of the Women's Pentagon Action, a feminist, anti-militarist, anti-nuclear war weapons group. Protest movements at the grassroots level against ecological destruction, threat of atomic destruction of life on earth, new developments in biotechnology, genetic engineering and reproductive technology, highlighted the connections between patriarchal domination and violence against women, the colonized non-Western, non-White peoples and nature. It led to the realization that the liberation of women cannot be achieved in isolation from the larger struggle for preserving nature and life on this earth. The philosopher Karen Warren ("Feminism and Ecology") points out that ecofeminism is based on the incorporation of multiple perspectives of those whose perspectives are typically omitted or undervalued in dominant discourses, in developing a global perspective on the role of male domination in the exploitation of women and nature. It emphasizes the crucial role that context plays in helping one understand sexist and naturist practices (Datar).

5   Ecofeminism highlights the existence of important connections between the oppression of women and oppression of nature. The nature of these connections needs to be understood in order to understand the oppression of women and nature (Warren). Carolyn Merchant ("Radical Ecology") claims that for the cultural ecofeminists, in patriarchal society, women and nature are closely (biologically) associated and both are devalued. Within the patriarchal conceptual framework, all those attributes associated with masculinity like 'mind', 'reason', 'rationality' are given higher value or status or prestige than those associated with femininity, like 'body',

'emotion', resulting in 'hierarchical dualisms' (Warren, "Feminism and Ecology"; Tong and Botts).

6   Ecofeminists are of the view that it is the "logic of domination", in association with value-hierarchical thinking and value-dualisms that sustains and justifies the twin domination of women and nature (Warren, "The Power and Promise"). For ecofeminists, therefore, the domination of women and nature is basically rooted in ideology. In order to overcome this, one needs to reconstruct and reconceptualize the underlying patriarchal values and structural relations of one's culture and promote equality, non-violence, non-hierarchical forms of organization to bring about new social forms. According to the ecofeminists, one also needs to realize the interconnectedness of all life processes and hence revere nature and all life forms. This essentialist strand of (cultural) ecofeminism celebrates the relationship between women and nature through the popularization of ancient rituals centred on the Mother Goddess, the moon, animals and the female reproductive system that was dethroned by an emerging patriarchal culture with male gods to whom the female deities were subservient. Nature was further degraded by the Scientific Revolution of the 17th century, that replaced the nurturing earth with the "metaphor of a machine to be controlled and repaired from outside […] The earth is to be dominated by male developed and controlled technology, science and industry" (Merchant, "Radical Ecology" 191). So these ecofeminists argue against the dominant view that women are restricted by being closer to nature, because of their ability to bear children. In fact, women's biology and nature are seen as sources of female power to be celebrated. The personal is the political, and hence the female private sphere is just as important and applicable to the male public sphere. Humans should not try to control nature, but work along with it and must try to move beyond power-based relationships. This would mean integrating the dualisms on the polarization of the male and the female in one's conception of reality. Importance should also be given, the ecofeminists argue, to the process rather than only to the goal. One needs to change the patriarchal nature of the system by withdrawing power and energy from patriarchy (Gaard, *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals and Nature* 16-20). Ecofeminist theory has brought

into sharp focus the fact that violence against nature and women is built into the dominant development model.

7   Feminist scholar Vandana Shiva (*Staying Alive*) argues against modern science and technology as a western, patriarchal and colonial project, which is inherently violent and perpetuates this violence against women and nature. Pursuing this model of development has meant a shift away from traditional Indian philosophy, which sees *prakriti* (Nature) as a living and creative process, the "feminine principle", from which all life arises. Under the garb of development, nature has been exploited mercilessly and the feminine principle was no longer associated with activity, creativity and sanctity of life, but was considered passive and as a "resource". This has led to marginalization, devaluation, displacement and ultimately the dispensability of women. Women's special knowledge of nature and their dependence on it for "staying alive", were systematically marginalized under the onslaught of modern science. Shiva, however, notes that Third World women are not simply victims of the development process, but also possess the power for change pointing to the experiences of women in the Chipko movement.

8   Gabriel Dietrich points out that Shiva seems to presuppose a society that is democratically organized, where people own sufficient land to survive on its produce. She seems to treat caste factors and political options as non-existent and neglects the realities of hierarchies, subordination, patriarchy and violence within traditional tribal and peasant communities. Shiva is also criticised for considering Third World women as being implicitly closer to nature. Besides, the notions of "Shakti" and "Prakriti"[2] are posed as representative of Indian philosophy as a whole. One can point out that for Shiva, the "feminine principle" is largely expressed in Hindu terms.

9   Feminist scholars, such as Cecile Jackson or Janet Biehl have argued that this ecofeminist perspective is "ethnocentric, essentialist, blind to class, ethnicity and other differentiating cleavages, ahistorical and neglects the material sphere" (Jackson 398). Ecofeminist literature portrays as self-evident that any harm to nature harms women equally, since women are seen as closer to nature than men. None of the ecofeminist literature attempts to establish this linkage through concrete evidence or strong argument. These ecofeminist images of

women, in fact "retain the patriarchal stereotypes of what men expect women to be. [They] [...] freeze women as merely caring and nurturing beings instead of expanding the full range of women's human potentialities and abilities" (Biehl 15). It locates the domination of women and nature mainly in ideology, thereby neglecting the "interrelated material sources of dominance based on economic advantage and political power" (Agarwal 122) as well as the gender division of labour and distribution of opportunity. Critics like Susan Prentice argue that emphasizing the special relationship of women with nature and politics imply that what men do to the earth is bad, unlike women, thereby ignoring the fact that men too can develop an ethic of caring for nature.

10 Socialist ecofeminism on the other hand locates the oppression of women and nature as a product of capitalist patriarchy. It is the patriarchal relations of production and reproduction that subordinate women and the capitalist relations of production that exploit nature. Since both women and nature are used and exploited as resources, their emancipation can come only with the complete restructuring of society that is based not on profit but on sustainable development. What these arguments seem to overlook is that concepts of nature, culture and gender are "historically and socially constructed and vary across and within cultures and time periods" (Agarwal 123). This essentialism presents women as a homogeneous category, both within countries and across nations. It "fails to differentiate among women by class, race, ethnicity and so on" (122).

Alternatives to ecofeminism

11 Bina Agarwal argues against the ecofeminist perspective and instead advocates a "feminist environmental" perspective. It is rooted in material reality and sees the relation between women and nature as structured by gender and class (caste/race) organization of production, reproduction and distribution. Women's relation to the environment is socially and historically variable. Women, particularly in poor rural households, are both victims of environmental degradation as well as active agents in movements for the protection and regeneration of the environment. They act in both positive and negative ways with the environment. Hence, the unquestioning

acceptance of the woman-nature link is unacceptable. The growing degradation of natural resources, both qualitatively and quantitatively, the increasing appropriation by the state and by private individuals, as well as the decline in communally-owned property, have been primarily responsible for the increased class-gender effect of environmental degradation. Besides, the decline in the commons that are managed collectively by local communities, the growth of population, the increasing loss of local knowledge systems due to the increase in mechanisation of agriculture have all led to the environmental degradation that have deleterious effects based on class and gender.

Feminist political ecology perspective

12   Endorsing the analysis of feminist environmentalism, feminist political ecology (FPE) that emerged in the 1990s as an offshoot of Third World political ecology perspective (Rocheleau *et al.*), highlights the intersections of gender, race, caste and class that shape environment relations. Emphasis was laid on the gendered processes in relation to three main themes:

- first, the gendered nature of knowledge production challenging value-neutrality of Western science and the benefits of local indigenous knowledge produced through women's everyday interactions with nature;
- second, the gendered rights in terms of the institutional arrangements that influence women's ability to use, own and manage the environment;
- and third, political activism of women getting organised for collective action with the aim of environmental well-being (Rocheleau *et al.*; Moeckli and Braun).

13   Rather than adopting the essentialist lens through which a feminist analysis of environment is seen, FPE looks at the power relations inherent in people's access to and control of resources. It emphasises the idea that women too can be creators, knowers and producers of knowledge. Further, issues of social equity and social justice are emphasised in this approach, which focuses on the imbalance of power relations. FPE helps in the gendered analysis of how

knowledge is produced and the way power and politics influence the use, access and distribution of resources. It helps in a gendered analysis of grassroots environmental action (Rao "Gender and the urban commons"). Women tend to play a crucial role in grassroots environmental action, even if men are formally in charge. One will examine these aspects through the case study of the *Appiko* (to hug) movement of the Uttara Kannada district of Karnataka in the Western Ghats of India.

Discussing local actions in the Uttara Kannada District

The Region: Uttara Kannada District (UKD), Karnataka, Western Ghats, India.
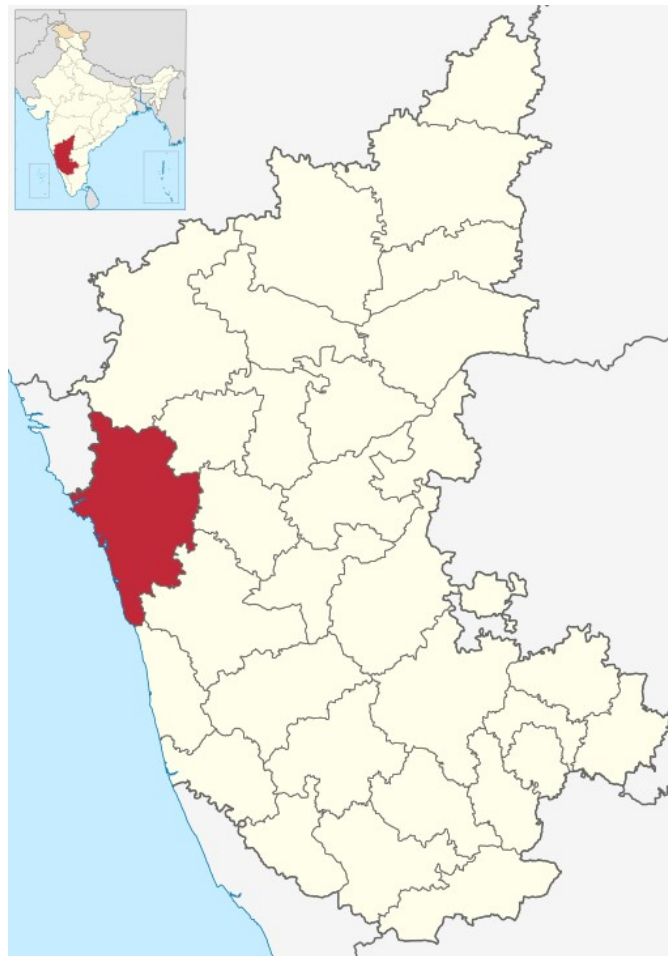
Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Karnataka_UK_locator_map.svg

14 Source: The UKD is one of the most densely forested districts of the state of Karnataka in the central Western Ghats in India. The UKD has three distinct topographical areas: the narrow coastal zone; the hilly, forested or *Malnad* zone; and the plains of the eastern zone or *Bayaluseeme* that is contiguous with the Deccan plateau. The UKD lies in the Western Ghats, one of 36 global biodiversity hot spots and is renowned for its richness in wild and domesticated biological diversity. Forests, a dominant feature of the UKD, have been an integral part of the livelihoods of the local farming communities. The spice garden agroforestry processes are crucially dependent on the forests. Collection, consumption, and sale of Non-Timber Forest Produce account for 33% of the rural household income in the district, making these practices important to local livelihoods. Known as the water tower of the peninsular region, these forests are also the catchments of important rivers originating there. In recent years however, there has been a decrease in the mean rainfall to -17 mm which is related to the decrease in forest cover from nearly 80 per cent in the 1970s to approximately 48 per cent in the UKD (Kajal).

Spice gardens and agroforestry practices

15 The rich biodiversity of the Malnad region of the Western Ghats supports crops such as areca, pepper, cardamom, and many other spices. Hence, any damage to the biodiversity of this region affects the spice gardens adversely. Traditionally, the spice gardens are cultivated in the valleys amidst the thick deciduous forests, thus reducing the requirement for irrigation during the dry season. Horticulture is the main occupation of the region, with rice grown in a few locations at the bottom of valleys and irrigated flatlands. Since there is abundant rainfall during the four months of the rainy season (June-September) in the highlands of the Western Ghats, the prevention of soil erosion and management of water resources are of primary importance for farming. This is done by building storm water drains to channelize the fast flow of rainwater, and by constructing small ponds and tanks for water conservation. The farmers have created sustainable and ingenious farming practices. Spice gardens are multi-layered consisting mainly of rows of areca

trees (*Areca catechu*) that support a black pepper vine. Between rows of areca palm, banana is planted and between two areca trees, cardamom is planted. This multi-storey plantation of areca nut, cardamom, pepper, and banana makes optimum use of available sunshine. Spice trees of cinnamon, nutmeg, and cloves are also planted intermittently. The roots of the trees are covered with dry leaves that prevent the growth of weeds and promote the growth of pepper and destroy other harmful fungi. It is an environment-friendly technology, which gives good economic returns (Bellekeri; Rao "Gender and the urban commons").

16   The agroforestry practices developed involve animal husbandry as well as dependence on forest wealth, particularly the *Soppinabettas* (the leaf manure forests) lands that are extremely important for the growth of the spice gardens. Local farmers have been recognized for their exemplary animal husbandry practices. Veda Hegde of Neernhalli village (Personal interview during fieldwork conducted in August 2017) successfully runs a large dairy farm with a number of cows and buffaloes, including the local "*Malnad Gidda*" variety. She has encouraged a number of farmers in the district to start dairy farms along with spice gardens. Her efforts were recognized at the regional as well as the international level. Among the accolades she has received are the (Karnataka) Best Farmer award, the American Spring & Pressing Works Ltd. (ASPEE) Agricultural Research and Development Foundation Award and the Swarnavalli Matha Best Woman Farmer Award.

17   In this region, the Havyak Brahmins are (the dominant) farming community who specialize in raising areca and spice gardens. Other (non-dominant) communities such as Halakki Vakkals, Gram Vakkals, and Kumri Marathas specialize in paddy cultivation while also doing areca and spice gardening. The harvesting, processing, and marketing of the areca and spices is a labour-intensive process that involves skilled labor sought from within the village or outside. This is carried out largely by the Kare Vokkaligas, Halepaiks, Devadigas, Upparas, and the poorer Vokkaligas and Marathas who work as agricultural laborers in the gardens. The men do the job of adding fresh soil, manuring, mulching, as well as the skilled job of harvesting areca nuts and spraying fungicides. Women are involved in the labour-intensive process of collection of dry leaves from the betta lands and placing

these on the roots of the areca palm so as to retain the moisture in the soil.

18   Women's labour, both within and outside the household, is part and parcel of the agro-ecological system. Shyamala Hegde of Vaddinkoppa, spouse of environmental activist Pandurang Hegde (Personal interview during fieldwork conducted in August 2017), emphasized that farming requires cooperation and involvement from both men and women. Many women also maintain kitchen gardens that provide them a supply of fruits, vegetables, tubers, and flowers, which they exchange and market as well. These may not have the high exchange value of the areca and spices but are of high use value. Spice gardens are significant in the regional economy as they are linked to a wide range of agro-industries generating employment. Karnataka state contributes a major share in the production of areca nut in the country. Against this background, one will examine the emergence of environmental movements in the UKD.

Appiko movement: interlinkages between environment and livelihood

19   The daily lives and livelihoods of the people of UKD are intertwined with forests and environment. As pointed out in the earlier section, the spice gardens of the Malnad region are dependent on the surrounding forests for their maintenance (Bhatt *et al.*). The local communities have developed innovative farming techniques such as S*oppinabetta* lands and constructed the forests over generations. What is portrayed by development specialists and historians is the degradation and destruction of ancient forests due to recent human activity (Morrison and Lycett) whereas the local communities have used and looked after the forests as they are, which among other things, is their source of livelihood.

20   In the pre- and post-liberalisation (1990s) period a number of forestry, and infrastructural projects were implemented in order to develop a 'backward' region. However, these programs catered to commercial requirements of the state rather than local needs. This

resulted in resource exhaustion and several protest movements. Well-known among them is the Appiko movement of the 1980s (Rao "In the margins") that questioned the development project of the state.

21 In the post-liberalization period, developmental projects have posed a direct threat to the environment of the district. The infrastructure projects, hydro-power projects, increase in leases provided for manganese and limestone mining post the 1980s, the nuclear power project, and the naval base and port development have impacted the forests of the Uttara Kannada region and altered its fragile ecosystem (Ramchandra *et al.*). As the conservation biologist K. Korse from Sirsi points out, vast tracts of pristine forests have been submerged due to hydel and other infrastructure projects, and the displaced families are leading precarious lives. Farmers in the district are thus trapped in the collaboration between the rampaging market forces and state development projects. There have therefore been protests by the local people expressing concern for the environment on which their livelihoods depend.

Remembering and identification of/with the Appiko movement

22 The Appiko chaluvali was spearheaded by the Havyak Brahmins, an 'upper caste' farming community of the region on seeing the devastation of the forests caused by the local plywood factory that had been granted permission by the Forest Department to fell trees. The entire livelihood of the Havyak Brahmins was dependent on the spice garden economy that was closely interlinked to the existence of the forests. They saw to it that the forests were well-maintained since the agricultural economy of the region was dependent on it. Here one can see that the environment and livelihood issues are closely interlinked and hence it is difficult to make a clear dichotomy between the two issues. This can be seen in the various environmental movements in India as well which originated in the struggle in order to maintain the use and control of natural resources, whether it was in relation to land, forests, water or even ponds and wastelands. The major issues were control, accessibility and use between the state and commercial business interests on the

one hand and the interests of the rural poor on the other (Sharma, Omvedt). When the local plywood factory began felling trees, devastating the forests, the local villagers were alarmed.

23   The villagers in the Malnad region were mobilized and they protested the felling by hugging the trees and not allowing the woodcutters to cut them (Hegde). The Appiko chaluvali played an important role in saving the forests of the Western Ghats. During discussions with the activists (fieldwork in the late 1990s) in trying to find out the role and participation of people in the movement in terms of caste and gender, M.N. Hegde, an activist of Gubbigadde village said,

> The Appiko movement ran on donations in kind. The villagers nearby provided food and drink. The people would go to the forest in batches and keep vigil day and night. This way the villagers' work in the gardens would not get disturbed. The agriculture of this area is entirely dependent on the forests. If the forests are not there, then the whole economy of the area is gone. Hence protection of the forests is crucial. The farmers here do not need to be taught the relation between forests, water, soil erosion etc. The farmers here grow a mix of crops like areca, cardamom, pepper, banana, paddy, sugarcane, and vegetables. This way they are totally self-dependent. Besides the Havyaks, other castes like Naiks, Karivokkaligas and others also participated in the movement. There was no difference between people on the basis of caste, class or religion. Everyone got together to protect the forests" (Personal communication, 2017).

24   Anant 'Appiko' Hegde, an activist (who identified with the movement and hence adopted 'Appiko' as his middle name) with the movement, highlights the enthusiasm and vigour of the people in the movement. He narrates an incident during the movement when the contractors were to load trees already felled into a truck. The Appiko activists set up camp beside it and refused to let the chopped wood be taken out of the forest. Women actively participated in this and kept vigil at night as well and did not allow its removal, explaining to the forest officer that the forests for them meant 'water, air and soil' and not only 'money'.

25   Describing the efforts and sacrifices made by women to participate in the movement, Gange (mother of a labourer who worked in the spice gardens of the Havyaks) said that they hugged the trees in the forests.

They would complete their household care work like cooking and go into the forests. They would take it in turns to graze the cattle. She said that they also participated in the agitation against the Kaiga Nuclear power plant line that was to cut through thick forests. But since it was a project of national importance and for the benefit of the larger public, the forests had to be sacrificed. Pointing to the need and dependence of women from the local communities on forests for food, fodder and fuel, Gange challenged the policies of the forest department that catered to commercial and national needs rather than local needs (Rao, "In the margins").

Gender and environment in the Appiko movement

26   Against this background, one will examine whether the participation of women in the Appiko movement was a historical accident or the product of ecofeminist practices and ideology or a particular leadership strategy. The attempt is also to understand whether women's participation has in any way changed their position within their family and community, and whether it has really brought about a qualitative change in the consciousness of both men and women in that part of Karnataka. What one observes is that while women participated in the movement in large numbers, they did it at the behest of the male leaders of the movement and their husbands. Women participated actively and also led the movement from the front in case of police action. It is pointed out by some of the male activists interviewed, that the women's involvement in the Appiko Chaluvali was 'spontaneous'. Emphasis was laid on the fact that the region has a legacy of women's involvement in movements since the independence movement (Halappa).

27   However, although women have been actively involved in the movement, it was not out of an 'innate feeling of closeness to nature' per se as argued by ecofeminists (Shiva; Mies and Shiva). Women participated actively in the movement and were fully supported by their family members. They participated in the protests and sit-ins held; they went for *shibir* (camps), cooked meals for those staying in the camps and so on. Their participation in the movement was within the given patriarchal set-up. It has not led to any radical changes in

their position within the family and community. However, it has increased their consciousness regarding the environment, the need to have environment-friendly agricultural practices, and regarding policies of the State Forest Department.

28   The women do have an interest in environmental protection. Their everyday lives are dependent on the use of natural resources from the forests that are used for their households as well as cattle. It is shaped by the gender division of labour and their material reality rather than being associated with any innate feeling of closeness to nature as pointed out by Agarwal. One should not look at women of the region as an undifferentiated and 'tokenistic' category, but situate them within the local power and authority hierarchies that disadvantage them within the wider social relations (Jewitt 125).

29   In recent decades, a lesser known but growing economy, which is the home garden agroforestry, has grown in the shadow of the areca-spice garden economy of this region. The gendered practices of the home gardens run mainly by the women of the community provide the vital everyday inputs for the household in terms of vegetables, tubers, medicinal plants, fruit and flower-bearing plants, enhancing household food security, nutrition and well-being. Traditional crop varieties and useful plants are conserved through these 'living gene banks' in the home gardens maintained largely through the labour of women. Though the produce from the home gardens is high in use-value it is low in terms of exchange-value. Women have initiated *Deremela* (flower festivals), the seed collectives, and marketing cooperatives that have given them a sense of empowerment and fulfilment as well as provided a source of vital inputs for the family kitchen. It is in the context of mapping the cultural and developmental contours of this region that one tries to understand the gendered practices of the local communities. It is their knowledge of local plant and seed varieties that have been developed and used for exchange as well as for sale. These kitchen gardens provide the much-needed diverse food stocks that help them tide over difficult circumstances. They have also provided for meeting the dietary needs while at the same time providing cash incomes to the women. It has helped to diversify the home income. The areca-spice gardens are largely a male-dominated agricultural economy. Women on the other hand 'assist' their male counterparts in farming by

providing agricultural labour during the processing of the areca nut and other spices. The kitchen gardens are a fine example of how these women (belonging to Havyak, Hallaki Vokkaligas, Naiks, Siddhis and other caste groups) assert themselves over their independent spaces by engaging in environment preservation activities through social exchange.

Conclusion: connecting the dots

30   How does one analyse the women's involvement in the Appiko movement and their recent efforts to preserve the biodiversity of the region along with looking after their own needs of livelihood and food self-sufficiency? Is the category 'woman' a universal category or do we need to understand the ways in which gender, caste, class and nature are constructed in and through each other? Do we understand it in terms of the essentialist ideas of ecofeminism of women's innate closeness to nature and their special relationship with nature? Do we understand it in terms of the feminist environmental notions of paying attention to the material bases of women's lives? Do we understand it from the perspective of feminist political ecology and the deconstruction of the household and denaturalisation of the relationship between environment and gender?

31   The Appiko movement and women's involvement in the movement in the early 1980s as well as now, must be seen in the context of a changing plantation economy, the people's dependence on the forests for prosperity and the harsh realities of the struggle for survival of the local communities, rather than in purely ecofeminist terms. While there is no lack of firewood and Minor Forest Produce in the densely forested region of Uttara Kannada district, the drought-like conditions in the recent years are a cause of worry. Women's work in the spice garden economy is immense and requires the work of both men and women. It has to be done hand-in-hand with men and women. Women's knowledge of plants and the requirement of vegetables, tubers, fruits and flowers for the household are encouraged in terms of their kitchen garden agroforestry processes. Since this does not clash with the larger social sanctions, the women are encouraged to start small enterprises like starting a nursery and growing tree saplings and flowers; bee keeping (that is encouraged by

the Government too) and sale of the produce in the market or through *melas* (festivals or fairs where they sell their wares).

32   From a feminist political ecology perspective, one can see how the power relations work where the less productive and less valued kitchen garden agroforestry practices of women are encouraged by the family and society, while the commercially valued areca and spice garden economy is with the men. Seed collectives have brought together women of different caste, class and ethnic groups to share their embodied experiences of environmental degradation and efforts at rejuvenation. Through their collective experiences, they have come together to nurture the biodiversity of the region as well as celebrate their knowledge and experiences together.

33   Women's involvement in the movements to save the forests of the region as well as their kitchen garden agroforestry practices points to the fact that women too can be creators, knowers and producers of knowledge. As it has been highlighted by the feminist political ecology perspective, it is important to examine the gendered nature of environmental access, use, management and resistance. Hence, what is required is a context specific, situated analysis for a nuanced understanding of the interrelation between nature, gender, class, caste and region. The exploration of the region is important as there tends to be a predominance of women in struggles over environmental justice throughout the Global South as highlighted by the work of feminist political ecologists. As seen in the Appiko movement of Karnataka, while men may have been in charge of the movement, women played crucial roles in the struggle reflecting the gendered dimensions of environmental access, use, management and resistance. Thus this context-based study has tried to establish connections of a local ecofeminist movement in India without recourse to essences [of nature/culture; man/woman] with the way women appropriate public spaces for themselves through economic and social exchange.

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NOTES

1 The first wave of the environment movement that started in the late 18th century was marked by three streams: one was the Back to the Land movement that emerged as a moral and cultural critique of the industrial revolution; the second was based on scientific conservation that worked within the framework of development; the third was the wilderness idea that combined science, morality and aesthetics (Guha).

2 'Shakti' & 'prakriti' emerge from Indian cosmology and the ideas of the production of the world through the play of destruction and creation. *Shakti* is the dynamic and creative force that emerges out of this and is the source of everything and pervades everything. *Shakti* is manifested as the feminine principle of 'prakriti' or nature. "Nature, both animate and inanimate, is thus an expression of Shakti, the feminine and creative principle of the cosmos, in conjunction with the masculine principle (*Purusha*), Prakriti creates the world" (Shiva *Staying Alive* 38). Thus *purusha* and *prakriti* are a duality in unity that are not opposing each other but rather complement each other.

ABSTRACTS

English

Literature on Ecofeminism in the West is based largely on ideological terms. In India and the Global South, the ecofeminist discourse needs to be understood somewhat differently. One needs to analyze the ecofeminist discourse in the context of the growing protests against environmental destruction and the privatization of the Commons. In this paper I propose to analyse the *Appiko Chaluvali* (movement) of the Uttara Kannada district of the Western Ghats of India that took place in the early 1980s. The movement was led by the local communities to protect the forests on which the spice garden economy of the region depends. Even at present times, the women of the region have tried to forge a sisterhood across lines of caste, class and ethnicity to come together to solve their problems and to take initiatives such as creating seed collectives and cultivating kitchen gardens thus subverting the dominant betelnut economy. It is in this context that one would like to critically analyse the discourse on ecofeminism. The attempt would be to rethink the discourse on ecofeminism from a feminist political ecology perspective and to propose a context specific variant of the Global South.

Français

La littérature sur l'éco-féminisme en Occident a une forte dimension idéologique. En Inde et dans les pays du sud, le discours éco-féministe doit être envisagé de manière différente, et analysé dans le contexte de la montée des luttes contre la destruction de l'environnement et la privatisation des biens communs (*commons*). Dans ce texte je propose d'analyser le mouvement Appiko Chaluvali du district de l'Uttara Kannada de la région des Ghâts occidentaux qui a eu lieu dans les années 1980. Ce mouvement était mené par les communautés locales pour protéger les forêts dont dépend l'économie des jardins d'épices. Les femmes de cette région maintiennent encore une forme de solidarité qui dépasse les barrières de castes, de classes sociales et d'ethnicité et s'entraident pour résoudre des problèmes et pour mettre en place des initiatives telles que le collectif pour les semences, et la création de jardins potagers pour contrer la culture intensive de la noix de bétel. Nous tenterons de repenser le discours sur l'éco-féminisme dans une perspective d'écologie féministe politique et de proposer une variante spécifique au contexte des pays du sud.

INDEX

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Eco-Humanism in Kiran Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998)

L'éco-humanisme dans Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard (1998) *de Kiran Desai*

Lydie Le Moine

OUTLINE

TEXT

1   *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998) is Kiran Desai's first novel, which obtained the Betty Trask Award given by the Society of Authors to first novels by writers under the age of thirty-five coming from the UK or the Commonwealth. In 2000, Kiran Desai explained in an interview with journalist Catherine McWeeney that her inspiration came from reading an article in the *Times of India* about a hermit who had lived in a tree until his death. There are also undeniable

reminiscences of *The Guide*, published by R. K. Narayan in 1958, which also tells the story of a likeable manipulative conman turned guru. What makes Desai's novel unique, though, is both the socio-economic context when it was published, as far as India is concerned, as well as her literary and ideological choices. *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* is a modern tale about conformity, identity, sense of place and belonging, empowerment, ecology and globalisation. It is told with irony and quirky humour, weaving whimsical, incongruous and farcical situations with poetic descriptions of oneness with nature, disguising a perspective on human ecology that is far from optimistic under the colourful varnish of magical realism.

2   Ecology, from the Greek word *oikos* — a place to live — is the study of the interaction between people and their dwelling and is not limited to specific environmental issues such as global warming or pollution. In fact, at the core of the novel lies a conception of human ecology that mostly owes to a certain strand of eco-feminism. Eco-feminist theory has evolved along various lines as research and activism developed, which will imply briefly reviewing the tenets of an approach that is now quite diverse. My aim is to show how Desai makes her reader look beyond the usual standpoints of ecofeminist theory. She even challenges them through characters and situations that reflect the specific human ecology of a small Indian town, making them at the same time familiar and unexpected.

3   The fact that the protagonist of the novel is a man does not make the reference to eco-feminism irrelevant. It only bears the premises of further developments focused on a specific manifestation of human ecology not just limited to the concrete space where the characters evolve and interact. Indeed, some situations rooted in symbolism and magical realism allude to a wider level of human interactions that go beyond the local scene and are connected with eco-critical and ecofeminist issues, namely, the impact of capitalism, globalization and even neo-imperialism on small communities. Associating the return of Coca-Cola to India to Sampath's access to public fame is no random quirk (67). Through this unexpected narrative choice that calls for further analysis, Desai teases her reader's curiosity while indirectly guiding it towards a specific horizon of expectation.

Places, characters and issues

4   The novel is set somewhere in the foothills of the Himalayas in the imaginary town of Shahkot and in a guava orchard, a former private property now unexploited: "part of an area reserved [by the Government] for the national forest" (50). Both places are "border spaces". Shahkot is a town small enough to hold onto the habits and mindsets associated to rural spaces but big enough to display urban advantages and what they imply for the inhabitants in terms of behavioural change. The orchard is a reminder of man's grip on nature. Yet, as it is no longer kept, it is assimilated to the wilderness on which it borders.

5   The title refers to what happened after Sampath Chawla, the main character, decided to escape from his parents, his sister and his routine in order to live in a tree. Each member of the Chawla family, and even Shahkot's inhabitants, end up affected by Sampath's decision. His name means "wealth" or "good fortune", yet those words somehow belie the kind of person he is in the first place: certainly nice but lazy, a failure at school, at home and at work, self-centred, eccentric, craving for a life free from responsibilities, constraints and conventions, who ends up thinking that his freedom and inner completion will be found only by living far from everyone and at one with nature. He then decides one day to "leave the world, a world that made its endless revolutions towards nothing" (48) and settles in a tree in an abandoned guava orchard. He starts posing as a guru to keep his distance from society and preserve his freedom by faking being a seer. In fact, his wise proverbs are inspired by what he learnt about the inhabitants of Shahkot while, as a bored post-office clerk, he would kill time reading their letters before they were delivered (66, 75). His father's exploitation of his celebrity may have brought temporary wealth to the family and fame to the town; however, what happens to Sampath in the end could hardly be deemed "good fortune", unless it is understood in a twisted and problematic way.

6   The rest of the family is as colourful as the protagonist. Sampath's parents cut two radically different figures. Kulfi, whose name refers to a dairy-frozen dessert — sweet, destined to melt or be eaten — does not fit society's expectations, like her son. She seems mildly

insane and, as the novel unfolds, becomes more and more obsessed with food and cooking unique dishes for her son only, which leads her into a quest for rare if not incongruous ingredients that finally turns into a hunt, which, as I will show later, pertains in exoticist imperialism and, as far as her relationship with her son is involved, vicarious infanticide. Mr Chawla, the father, is everything his wife and son are not: controlling, demanding, disciplined, down-to-earth, and greedy. He soon turns his son's situation into a profitable capitalist venture and encourages frantic consumerism among Sampath's devotees. He is completely at a loss to properly understand his wife and son and their awkward behaviours. Pinky, Sampath's younger sister, is self-centred, strong-willed, and mostly focused on her good looks to maintain "her position in bazaar society" (81). She is not interested in doing "anything useful for modern India" (80), as her father expects from her. Pinky's world is as different from Sampath's as Kulfi's from Mr Chawla's. Each member of the Chawla family seems to embody a different take on individualism and its aspirations. None of them is spared by Desai's sharp style. In their own way, they are all a mix of normalcy and eccentricity, the latter progressively taking over the former, which contributes to creating an atmosphere that remains familiar to the reader while at the same time drifting towards disconnection from reality and finally magic.

7   Because of the novel's reliance on magic realism to tackle environmental issues, elements from the fauna and flora might as well be considered characters, just like the human ones. Indeed, appearing in chronological order, the guavas, the orchard and the monkeys are crucial elements to the plot. It is a guava Kulfi gave to her son that provokes an epiphany in Sampath at the beginning of the novel (46-47), an epiphany that foretells what the reader is left to imagine has happened to him in the end (207-208). The orchard is a reminder of man's hold on the environment but also a sign that nature always takes back what is not exploited anymore. Sampath does not flee the world to live in the jungle, as an aspiring hermit heading to the solitude of the wild would, and his escape to the orchard is only circumstantial, motivated by the annoying chatter of the old woman sitting next to him in the bus as he is leaving town (49). Yet, the orchard is immediately associated to inner spiritual peace (50), a trait further accentuated as soon as Sampath

starts acting as a guru, delivering apophthegms that come to be known as "the Sermon in the Guava Tree" (73), which instantly alludes to both Buddha's first Sermon after his awakening and the Sermon on the Mount (Mt, 5-7), making the old orchard a modern syncretic Indian version of the garden of Eden with a guava as the fruit of knowledge. This religious subtext will provide matter for discussion in the light of the conflicting standpoints at play when it comes to ecofeminism, nature and religion. The monkeys, which lived in the town then joined Sampath in his orchard, are a reflection of what happens in the human world when balance is lost. They act as a kind of ecological barometer that validates or invalidates human actions, embodying the consequences of the disruptions caused by the humans. The monkeys are Sampath's partners in harmony with nature but also symbols of the environment disturbed by man, for example, when they loot the town for alcohol, threatening man's world order because of man's inconsequence, as Sampath reckons when they come back to the orchard: "It was the fault of those who brewed liquor that had turned the langurs into alcoholics" (140)

8   The disastrous interaction between nature and culture in the case of the drunken monkeys is one of the multiple occurrences of the openly eco-critical stance of the novel. Its indictment of man's anthropocentric attitude towards nature calls for a reappraisal of the binary opposition "nature-culture" that would avoid simplistically opposing urban and rural worlds or associating women to nature. Feminism is certainly an underlying theme of the novel, with its depiction of women freeing themselves from social conventions in their own ways, yet the issue is not exactly dealt with along the usual lines of gender equality criticism. The novel was published at a time when ecofeminism as a theory was gaining momentum in India, thanks to the works and commitment of writers — who were sometimes also activists — like Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies (2014, 1st ed. 1993), Bina Agarwal (1994), and Manisha Rao (1996), to quote a few, all of them contributing to theorizing ecofeminism along different lines of thought. Focusing on Sampath, Kulfi and Mr Chawla, I will show how *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* challenges a certain form of ecofeminism by staging complex and ambivalent male and female characters and their equally complex and ambivalent relationship to the environment, often in unexpected ways.

9   From the beginning of the novel, Sampath is associated to decisive environmental matters. His birth seems to have finally set off the long-awaited monsoon rains that ended a severe drought supposedly related to geostrategic tactics and environmental problems all over the world:

> 'Problems have been located in the cumulus that have become overly heated,' read Mr. Chawla from the newspaper. 'It is all a result of volcanic ash thrown up in the latest spurt of activity in Tierra Del Fuego.'
> And a little later he reported to whomever might be listening: 'The problem lies in the currents off the West African coastline and the unexpected molecular movement observed in the polar ice-caps.'
> And: 'Iraq attempts to steal monsoon by deliberately creating low pressure over desert provinces and deflecting winds from India.' (1)

10   Later, Sampath's new status in Shahkot — his re-birth — is also indirectly associated to environmental issues and globalization. His settlement in the guava tree is advertised by the local news bureau as the manifestation of "unfathomable wisdom" (67) and reported along an awkward mix of news all related to environmental issues, the last of which cannot fail to startle for bringing a realistic touch in a text written as a fable and for the consequences on the environment the reader may know it implies: Coca-Cola coming back to India (67). Global capitalism and its consequences on the environment seem to lurk over Sampath's combined return to nature and access to public fame. Never again in the novel will the American brand be mentioned, yet it somehow warns the reader about forthcoming developments about capitalism leaving its negative mark on the environment, with Sampath as the unwilling catalyst of those events. His reputation as a guru soon turned into a source of profit for the whole family — with dire consequences on the orchard — only confirms what was foreshadowed by the reference to Coca-Cola.

Nature, culture and finding oneself

11   *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* is about finding one's place, defining one's identity (Escobedo de Tapia 175) and, ultimately, about social

ecology. In this process, nature plays a decisive role as a place to live and to be experienced. It is a place that has to be discovered and not conquered. The second step implies adapting to it as much as possible and not immediately turning it into a commodity only suited to human needs. Then comes a new perception of nature's rhythms and workings that may leave room for a certain degree of awareness: one that emerges from deeply feeling oneself in harmony with one's environment. Desai's novel could be deemed "nature writing" as it describes what happens to people according to their degree of integration with the fauna and flora. It depicts various human perceptions of nature and their consequences on the different characters' lives, providing the reader with the ecology of the specific milieus that Shahkot and the orchard are. As the novel unfolds, human affairs and environmental issues become more and more intertwined and reach final unexpected open-ended conclusions. Desai is no idealistic nature lover, though. She does not discard the pastoral ideal of return to nature and oneness with it but she chooses the incongruous to highlight its limitations. When it comes to Kulfi and what she represents, Desai, following an even more critical streak, openly challenges the notion of "Mother Nature" that supposedly closely associates women and nature. Analysing how Sampath and Kulfi relate to nature then provides the elements to discuss how the novel hints at ecofeminism and whether it suggests its own view of ecology.

12   Sampath and his mother Kulfi respectively embody the ideal of "oneness with nature" and the concept of "mother nature". Yet, the pastoral bliss of the beginning (50-51) evolves into something that "turned [Sampath's] stomach, now that the whole business was not light-hearted anymore but mean and complicated" (186). Despite the disturbance introduced by the affluence of tourists and believers soon channelled and commercially exploited by Sampath's father, the "Baba of Shahkot" never loses his desire for oneness with nature. On the contrary, Sampath's experience intensifies, making him feel more connected with his natural environment as his senses grow "sharper", allowing him to be:

> acutely aware of every tiny sound, every scent and rustle in the night: the stirrings of a mouse in the grass, the wings of a faraway

> bat, the beckoning scent that drew the insects to hover and buzz somewhere beyond the orchard. (203)

What could be just another version of blissful pastoral retreat is pushed to its limits. Sampath finally turns into a guava, the most radical escape from the human world Desai could imagine to satisfy her character's obsessive longing for oneness with nature:

> They looked here. They looked there. Up and down the guava tree. […] Its painfully empty cot. But wait! Upon the cot lay a guava, a single guava that was much, much bigger than the others, star-based, weathered. […] On one side was a brown mark, rather like a birthmark… (207)

13   The brown mark refers to the birthmark Sampath donned on his cheek. His fate, despite all the poetically enticing descriptions of his discovery of inner peace in contact with nature, does not look enviable. He has become a cut fruit, taken care of by the Cinema Monkey who protects him from humans, but in the light of the monkey's erratic behaviour earlier in the novel, one can suppose the guava will only end up being eaten, or if not, soon rot. Oneness with nature at the cost of one's humanity and possibly one's life does not make the concept attractive. It is as if Desai was warning against a conception of oneness with nature that lacks balance and leads to an extremist rejection of the human world that is quite sterile. However, there is another possible reading that makes Sampath's metamorphosis look inevitable and almost desirable, yet with as grim a conclusion as with extremist environmentalism. Indeed, his transformation may appear as the only way to protect both his new way of life and his monkey friends. The hunt planned by Mr Chawla and the authorities is not motivated by the will to preserve Sampath's peaceful retreat. It is only to put an end to the monkeys' disturbing interferences in the commercial exploitation of his popularity. Disappearing by turning into a guava will radically end everything. Enduring capitalism's toxic effects or becoming a guava is presented as the only alternative, but in both cases, alienation seems inevitable, even though assimilation to a fruit is described in attractive terms when Sampath has an epiphany about what could help him find his true self at the beginning of the novel:

> He stared at the fruit, wished he could absorb all its coolness, all its quiet and stillness into him. […] 'What should I do?' he said […] giving it another desperate shake. 'I do not want a job. I do not like to live like this,' he wailed… And suddenly, before his amazed eyes, the surface of the guava rose even more and exploded in a vast Boom! […] Up on the rooftop, Sampath felt his body fill with a cool greenness, his heart swell with a mysterious wild sweetness. He felt an awake clear sap flowing through him, something quite unlike human blood. […] His heart was big inside his chest. (47)

Not only does he experience being inhabited by a new force that seems to provide him with a new self, he also knows what he will be looking for from now on. To his mother, sorry for the spoilt guava, who is asking whether he would like an egg instead — an allusion to the cosmic egg of many cosmogonies? — he answers: "'No, I do not want an egg,' he said. 'I want my freedom.'" (47) The quest that led Sampath to an orchard imbued of idyllic properties, until Mr Chawla's greed turned this paradise into an extension of the city, shows the limits of a return to nature that forgets our condition as "environmental beings belonging to a social landscape" (Escobedo de Tapia 176). Inadequacy to relate to the "social landscape" finally turns the "environmental beings" Sampath and Kulfi into human beings disconnected from their own humanity, each one in different ways.

A contrasted approach to human ecology

14   Sampath's narrative is ironical, perhaps even a bit sceptical when it comes to deep ecology, yet it remains quite approbatory about back-to-nature aspirations. Kulfi's narrative, however, delivers sharp criticism towards some tenets of ecofeminism. Desai makes Kulfi an embodiment of the notion of Mother Nature that associates women to nature, life and procreation. What makes Desai's vision quite critical, though, is the way Kulfi's connectedness to nature evolves from quirky to problematic and finally monstrous. At the beginning of the novel, the association Kulfi-Sampath-Nature is clearly stated. She breaks waters and gives birth to Sampath as the monsoon rains finally hit Shahkot and relieve everyone from a drought severe

enough to have caused food shortages. It makes Kulfi look like a caring and nurturing being, embodying an essentialist conception of women that was validated by some Western or Indian ecofeminists (Rao 128, 130). However, this conception was branded a patriarchal approach by others (Rao 128), as reflecting views inherited from androcentric religious systems neither really respectful of women nor of nature (Kaur 386). The novel does not associate religion or spirituality and women, so there are no religious roots to Kulfi's obsession with feeding her son and cooking new dishes for him only. Her obsession becomes her sole characteristic, making her a caricature of the nurturing woman in tune with nature, who evolves from a pregnant woman having pregnancy-related cravings to a predator of the environment. However, Kulfi's peculiar association to food and cooking makes the traditional assignment of women to the kitchen her path of escape from conventions, normality and reality. As for Sampath, there is a dream Kulfi aspires to fulfil: expressing her culinary creative self, which is impossible in "her tame life in Shahkot" (K. Desai 76). Sampath's escape from town finally frees her from her conventional life. As she settles in the orchard with the rest of the family to take care of her son, she soon experiments a deeper relationship with him and with her natural environment at the expense of her relationship with the rest of the family from which she gets progressively estranged:

> Here, in the orchard, the hold of other people on Kulfi and her awareness of them retreated even further, and, like Sampath, she discovered the relief of space. [...] All around her was a landscape she understood profoundly, that she could comprehend without thought or analysis. She understood it like she understood her son, without conversation or the need to construct a connection or maintain it. Pinky was a stranger to her [...] But Sampath, she knew. She knew why he was sitting in a tree. It was the right place for him to be; that is where he belonged. (78)

15   The exclusive mother-son relationship only encompasses nature and not the rest of the family or the community, whom Kulfi candidly suggests to poison, were they intent on forcing Sampath to live in a hermitage and not in his tree anymore (128). Yet, she finally becomes so absorbed in her feeding task that she paradoxically disconnects

even from her son as she becomes obsessed with cooking a monkey, not realising it would hurt Sampath who has adopted them as much as they have adopted him. Cooking a monkey would symbolically mean infanticide, as Sampath somehow assimilates to them, not to mention the sacrilegious aspect of the project according to Hindu tradition. Her link to nature is not related to identity, as it is for Sampath, but to activity. For her, nature is not a dwelling place, as it is for Sampath, it is a place to be exploited. On that point, she does not differ from her husband who turns the orchard and its surroundings into a source of profit. Kulfi's association with nature finally appears to be destructive: she is shown dreaming of conquering the world only to satisfy her desire of new exotic ingredients:

> She was the royal cook of a great kingdom, she imagined. There, in some old port city, ruthless hunters, reckless adventurers, fleets of ships and whole armies lay at her beck and call, were alert to her every command, her every whim. And sitting in a vast kitchen before an enormous globe, imperiously she ordered her supplies, sent out for spices from many seas away […] She sent out for kingdoms to be ruined, for storehouses and fields to be plundered and ransacked. She asked for tiger meat and bear, Siberian goose and black buck. […]… and monkeys! Monkeys! Oh, to cook a monkey! (154-155)

The underlying challenging of certain arguments of ecofeminism, that the West is the root of all the evils that struck the third world, is quite obvious in this extract. Preying on the environment is neither a Western wrong nor a male-only misbehaviour. The initial association between Kulfi and Nature proves to be defective. It is no use to "understand" nature (78) if, in the end, it leads to abusive exploitation. Kulfi exemplifies the limitations of certain ecofeminist arguments that tend to stiffen dualisms and dichotomies. Through her character, Desai certainly challenges what Vandana Shiva wrote in *Staying Alive*:

> Women in India are an intimate part of nature, both in imagination and practice. At one level, nature is symbolized as the embodiment of the feminine principle and at another, she is nurtured by the feminine to produce life and provide sustenance. (37)

16   There is nothing nurturing in the way Kulfi exploits the natural resources to feed her son. Even the connection between gender and environment at the heart of Shiva's version of ecofeminism seems to be challenged here as it is a woman who dreams of plundering natural resources to meet her mission as the nurturer not of a community but of only one person. Although associated to Mother Nature at the beginning of the novel, Kulfi proves to be, in the end, neither motherly nor as respectful of nature as her son: "The profusion of greenery and space exhilarated her. And while it reduced her son to a happy stupor, it incited her into a frenzy of exploration" (K. Desai 100). Kulfi's paradoxical and unconventional behaviour challenges the usual attribution of roles in some ecofeminist theories: her extravagant recipes are the expression of her free if not deranged spirit, as she is soon considered mad by the rest of the Chawla family (63), they do not have anything to do with being a nurturer in tune with nature.

17   In her article "Introduction to Ecofeminism: An Indian Perspective", Sanjukta Bala suggests that a specific form of ecofeminism is being devised by Indian female writers who are redefining the tenets of the initial theory in order to avoid simplification and address more openly the complexity of the issue by "questioning some of [its] standpoints" such as:

> 1. An essentialist connection between women and nature.
> 2. An unquestioning acceptance of the connection as monolithic and simplistic without recognizing that women's position in different cultures and societies can alter or change the modes of this connection.
> 3. The "purity and authenticity" of third world cultures that celebrate the connection. It does not take into account the social hierarchies inherent in such cultures and issues of class, race or gender.
> 4. Absence of the male voice.
> 5. Modernity and its negative impact on nature and human behaviour. (191)

Bala bases her argument on the studies of novels by Kamala Markandaya (*Nectar in a Sieve*, 1954), Anita Desai (*Fire on the Mountain*, 1977), and Anuradha Roy (*The Folded Earth*, 2011). No doubt that *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* belongs to the same

category with its fluid references to spiritual and materialist approaches of ecofeminism — the spiritual being linked to Sampath, a man, and not his mother, who looks more like a counter-example of how a specific strand of ecofeminism considers women.

Human ecology or ecofeminism?

18 *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* also exposes the complexities of environment-related issues and the greed and incompetence that result in disturbing the ecological balance. Sanjukta Bala considers the novels she analyses as signs of a new form of literary ecofeminism that is "Indian by nature" because it shows India as "a real world of struggle, sufferings, economic imbalance, material inequality, sexual discrimination and survival" (192). Desai's novel also exposes similar plights of Indian society, adding religious bigotry, the pettiness and incompetence of the Army, the Police, the Civil Service and the scientific elites to the list. However, as she chooses to focus not on a single female character but equally on Sampath and Kulfi, and to a lesser extent, Mr Chawla and Pinky, "ecofeminist" may not seem an appropriate denomination for the novel. As for deciding whether *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* belongs to Indian or global literature, it is a debatable issue addressed by Erin Fehskens in her 2013 article.

19 Taking Sanjukta Bala's arguments into account makes the term "ecofeminist" not relevant enough to characterise *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard.* The novel may hint at ecofeminist theories, yet, their categories seem too limited to match the complexity of the characters and situations it depicts. Following on Bala's steps, Sangita Patil, in *Ecofeminism and the Indian Novel* (2020), reminds her reader that the umbrella term ecofeminism "focuses on the philosophical, practical and analytical study of the exploitation of women and nature" (13), which leads her to identify three main tenets of ecofeminism:

> The first, women are exploited by patriarchal development attitude because of their close association with nature and dependency on it. Second, women are saviours of nature. Lastly, women are life givers, nurturers and caretakers of nature. (17)

None of the women in Kiran Desai's novel match these criteria: Ammaji, the grandmother, Pinky, Miss Jyoti, Sampath's ex-colleague at the post-office, and the ice-cream vendor's sisters and cousins show no sign of interest in nature whatsoever. It even seems that they are portrayed as such only to challenge ecofeminist representations within a narrative otherwise rooted in concern for ecology and feminism. The female characters are no activists; yet, each in their own way attempt at getting rid of the constraints society imposes on them. A specific link to Nature may — as for Kulfi — or may not — as for Pinky — be of use in their attempts to free themselves. Such characterisation echoes Sangita Patil's suggestion that it is "appropriate to look at ecological crises more as a general human problem than merely as a gender problem" (6). The ecological crisis staged in the novel is indeed related to social, economic and personal more than specific gender issues.

20 For Patil, the ongoing conflicting debates about ecofeminism make it difficult to devise a theoretical frame that would take all viewpoints and contexts into account. That is why she proposes to reconceptualise ecofeminism. In fact, she discards the term and suggests replacing it by "eco-humanism". After analyzing Indian novels usually considered as representative of Indian ecofeminism — as Sanjukta Bala did — she comes to the conclusion that even though the main characters are women struggling with the dire consequences of patriarchal rule combined with environmental disasters due to rugged industrialization, men also are victims of the same circumstances. Such reconceptualization stems from observing the controversies and reproaches addressed to the different strands of ecofeminism that seem to be unable to propose an inclusive discourse about women and about how to deal with the environment. The accusations of dualism or essentialism are inevitable when one forgets that "women" are not a homogeneous group, as Bina Agarwal made it clear when she devised her theory of "feminist environmentalism" (1992) — also a refutation of some of Vandana Shiva's arguments and statements. According to the different classes, cultures and castes they belong to, women's relationship to the environment is not the same (Kaur 2012). Reconceptualising ecofeminism into eco-humanism may prove a debatable solution to solve the theoretical conflicts of ecofeminism, as humanism is itself

the field for much argument. Yet, the move provides valuable reading keys for Desai's novel. In Patil's opinion, the current perception of humanism is no longer an anthropocentric one, it is a perception "that is inclusive of all natural species [and] claim[s] that human beings have no right to destroy nature" (144), a theoretical frame she also calls "post-humanism". This conception fits Desai's approach of human ecology at large, and more specifically when dealing with the environmental impact of capitalism on individuals and communities. First when she associates Sampath's access to public fame to the arrival of Coca-Cola in India (K. Desai 67), then when she describes how Mr Chawla turns the orchard into a profitable business venture (29, 90, 118) and finally, when she suggests a way-out to what looks like a dead-end.

Market economy and globalization

21 In a novel whose tone is deliberately one of folk tale, magical realism and false ingenuity, references to the real world have all the more impact. In *Hullabaloo*, such references involve globalization, Indian consumer society, through the mention of real products whose ads hang around Sampath's tree (126), and, to a lesser extent, as details in passing, Bollywood films (85) and playback singers (196). The most significant historical reference is mentioned at the end of chapter 7, after Sampath used his ill-acquired knowledge to trick the visitors of the orchard into thinking that he is a spiritual man blessed with supernatural wisdom and not an eccentric man shaming his family. The event that turned Sampath into a dignified hermit and nosy onlookers into devotees is then reported in the local newspaper along with news about economic and environmental issues, current and prospective:

> There it was — a modest column introducing Sampath to the world, along with scarcity of groundnuts, an epidemic of tree frogs and the rumour that Coca-Cola might soon be arriving in India. (67)

22 The name of the brand provides a time indication that contextualises Sampath's story: Coca-Cola, driven out of India by protectionist laws

in 1977, came back in 1993, at a time when the country was shifting towards economic liberalisation. The name of the company is also associated to the criticism its return to India soon raised among environmentalists, struggling for the preservation of groundwater resources in the rural areas where the plants were set up. The juxtaposition of the different events could be interpreted as lacking any relation of causality; yet, they all share the characteristic of being linked to the environment. What the name Coca-Cola conjures up in terms of environmental damage cannot fail to come to the reader's mind. In terms of textual coherence, the return of Coca-Cola to India at the end of chapter 7 is directly followed by the revelation that strikes Mr Chawla at the beginning of chapter 8, which draws an implicit parallel between Coca-Cola returning to India and him making plans to exploit his son's popularity:

> It was at this point in time that Mr. Chawla had a realisation — all of a sudden, with a tumble and rush of understanding — a realization so quick and so incredible in nature that his heart was caught in a constant state of pounding: Sampath might make his family's fortune. They could be rich! How many hermits were secretly wealthy? How many holy men were not at all the beggars they appeared to be? How many men of unfathomable wisdom possessed unfathomable bank accounts? (68)

India was a considerable market bound to expand the revenue of the American company. Similarly, Sampath's reputation as a holy man made it an asset to be commercialized for the greater good of the family's bank account. Mixing greed and reference to religion as a pretext for the accumulation of wealth, Mr Chawla, head of the family, embodies patriarchal fast capitalism, preying first on his own son, whose name acquires a fiduciary value once his father starts commercializing his picture. In both cases, be it Coca-Cola coming back to India or Sampath's reputation turned into a good to be commercialized, the toll on the environment is heavy.

23   Erin M. Fehskens, in her analysis of the novel as global literature, quotes a series of studies on the impact of Coca-Cola bottling plants in India, which showed how harmful they were, particularly in terms of draining groundwater resources (6). As the family relocates in the orchard, Mr Chawla makes illegal arrangements condoned by the

community to prevent their urban habits from being disturbed by rural inconveniences: he taps "the hospital electricity lines" and gets "gushing water all day long" after siphoning a public water pipe (K. Desai 90), acting with the community resources with the same disrespect for the environment as Coca-Cola in the 1990s wherever they set their plants. He takes hold of the area and intends to transform it as an estate agent would:

> He envisioned a whole complex with a temple and dormitory accommodation for travellers designed to suit modern tastes in comfort, a complex that would be a prize pilgrimage stop and an environment that he could keep control of. (127)

24   The orchard is at the periphery of the town, yet central for its prosperity. For Fehskens, such redistribution of goods and power makes "*Hullabaloo*'s narrow geographical scope [expand] allegorically to represent a globalized centre and periphery" (5), with Mr Chawla standing as "another, more rapacious and extractive allegorand of Coca-Cola's policies of its bottling plants" as well as "an allegorization of national government and multinational corporate mismanagement" (7). The transformation of the orchard into a pilgrims' and tourists' venue has dire consequences on Sampath's new dwelling:

> Sampath looked and found no help in the faces of his family. How much had changed since he had first arrived in the orchard such a short time back. How quickly it was becoming more and more like all he hoped he had left behind forever. Ugly advertisements defaced the neighboring trees; a smelly garbage heap spilled down the hillside behind the tea stall and grew larger every week. (K. Desai 181)

For Mr Chawla, the disfigured orchard only prefigures the end of his commercial venture and beckons for him the moment to face his responsibilities, which he cannot accept:

> The orchard had disintegrated into a sorry state and he knew his life there was in danger of drawing to a close. […] There was something more: a terrible sadness and a feeling of vulnerability he did not wish to investigate […]. To think of such things, he was sure, would mean

> drilling holes in his watertight heart: all sorts of doubts would pour
> in and he would be a lost man. (179)

25   Facing his inner truth being impossible for Mr Chawla, he carries on
regardless with his project of managing Sampath and the monkey
issue as he would a company, which results in Sampath literally
leaping out of humanity and anthropocentricity by becoming a guava.
Sampath's radical metamorphosis suggests that there is no liberation
from exploitation of man and environment by man. Only a radical
transformation of our way of interacting with the environment could
achieve it, a transformation inspired by a post-human and deep
ecological perception of who we are — which Mr Chawla refuses
to do — and of how nature should be acknowledged — which is
exemplified by how Sampath relates to nature:

> If only it would reach out and claim him instead. If he stayed here
> long enough within reach of its sights and sounds, might it not enter
> him in the manner landscape enters everything that lives within it?
> Wouldn't the forest descend just this bit lower and swallow him in its
> wilderness, leaving his family, his devotees, to search fruitlessly for a
> path by which they might follow? (143)

Sampath's expectations are met in the end. Whether his example
opens a new path to his family and devotees is unknown but it
indicates that he has evolved and found — albeit in an awkward
way — what he was looking for at the beginning, despite the
disturbances to his quest caused by his father's greed and the visitors'
devotion and curiosity.

26   Desai's indictment of global and local capitalism does not stage any
group of environmentalists or activists because what is presented as
reprehensible and even stifling in the novel is Shahkot itself, with its
petty rules which led Sampath to flee the city and made his sister
want to elope. As long as Sampath lives alone, his environment is
preserved. The disruption of the natural order of the orchard is only
the result of the malfunctioning of the community, commoners and
authorities, men and women, all equally driven by various kinds of
greed. The novel explores different modalities of relationship with
the environment and deals less with the preservation of nature than
with the re-discovery of a way of life attuned with it, which would

shape personal identities and bring balance to the community. The unexpected turn of events at the end suggests that finding this balance is problematic, unless radical change is implemented.

27   Sampath and Kulfi embody two ways of being deeply related to nature, to the point of disappearing in it, albeit in a different way. Sampath finally manages to live perfectly in accordance with nature's rhythms by becoming a fruit and Kulfi, whose only activity has become exploiting and exploring nature, gets lost in her venture: she is not seen returning from her quest for a rare orchid native of the West Indies, the last ingredient she needs to cook a monkey for Sampath. She lost herself in her dream of grabbing ever more natural resources whereas Sampath lost himself in his aspiration of being absorbed by nature.

28   Although Sampath and his mother remind us of some ecofeminist tenets, they also challenge them by showing that men are not the only ones who predate the environment or that women's idealistic association to Nature may prove arguable. The aim is to highlight the fact that an imbalanced relation to the environment affects the whole community. Consequently, environmental awareness in such cases should rather be linked to eco-humanism rather than ecofeminism in order to broaden the perspective and bring about emancipation from dualisms suggested by some ecofeminist approaches.

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ABSTRACTS

English
Kiran Desai's novel revolves around several connected issues: the environment, man's anthropocentric attitude towards nature, eco-criticism and a reappraisal of the binary opposition "nature-culture", to quote a few. Feminism is also an underlying theme. However, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998) is not a novel that would be straightforwardly deemed "ecofeminist" despite its obvious eco-critical stance and its depiction of unconventional women. It rather hints at a peculiar form of eco-humanism in an allegorical and sometimes derisive tone.
Sampath, a likeable dreamer-dubbed-guru by public opinion, and his mother Kulfi, maybe a less-likeable dreamer obsessed with food and one-of-a-kind cooking, allow the reader to look beyond the opposition between nature and culture, to challenge traditional gender roles but also some

tenets of ecofeminism in order to suggest another approach to human ecology that would be free from anthropocentrism. While exploring and analysing the characters and the setting, I will explain why it matters that the writer chose to associate Sampath's access to public fame to "the rumour that Coca-Cola might soon be arriving in India" (67).

Français

Le roman de Kiran Desai s'articule autour de plusieurs thématiques interconnectées : l'environnement, l'anthropocentrisme, l'éco-critique et la réévaluation de l'opposition entre nature et culture, pour n'en citer que quelques-unes. Le féminisme fait également partie de ces thèmes sous-jacents. Toutefois, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998) n'est pas un roman que l'on pourrait qualifier sans hésitation d'éco-féministe, malgré son évident point de vue éco-critique et ses descriptions de femmes non conventionnelles. Il fait plutôt allusion à une forme bien particulière d'éco-humanisme, sur un mode allégorique et parfois railleur.
Dans cet article, je souhaite montrer comment Sampath, un aimable rêveur adoubé gourou par l'opinion publique, et sa mère Kulfi, une rêveuse peut-être un peu moins aimable, obsédée par la nourriture et la cuisine hors norme, invitent le lecteur à dépasser l'opposition entre nature et culture, à remettre en cause les rôles traditionnels liés au genre ainsi que quelques idées fondamentales de l'éco-féminisme dans le but de suggérer une autre approche de l'écologie humaine, libre de tout anthropocentrisme. J'analyse enfin pourquoi il importe que l'auteur ait choisi d'associer la subite popularité de Sampath à « la rumeur que Coca-Cola allait bientôt s'implanter en Inde » (67).

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Critical Ecofeminism in Amitav Ghosh's Fiction: From *The Hungry Tide* to *Gun Island*

L'éco-féminisme critique dans la fiction de Amitav Ghosh : de Hungry Tides *à* Gun Island

Maria-Sabina Draga Alexandru

OUTLINE

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TEXT

Setting the ground: Amitav Ghosh's green postcolonial novels[1]

1   In recent times, theoretical discourses built around the growing diversity of the global world have increasingly acknowledged the need to respect the rights of human and non-human life alike. Postcolonialism, which had come of age in the nineties, having accomplished its mission of writing back to the former centres of empires,[2] has since developed a productive dialogue with ecocriticism. In their editorial to a 2008 special issue of the journal *Interventions*, dedicated to "Green Postcolonialism", as well as in their subsequent collection *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2010), Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin accuse colonial empires of genocide and environmental destruction in the colonised lands. They point out the mutual benefits that a dialogue between postcolonialism and ecocriticism could bring:

> As several of the contributors to this issue note, environmental studies can learn much from postcolonial theory, while the general neglect of environmental issues in postcolonial studies sorely needs to be addressed. (3)

Such a dialogue can take place productively in literature, a powerful framework of reflection on the world through its individual stories. Amitav Ghosh's novels *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *Gun Island* (2019), the focus of this article, are such literary examples. As I will aim to argue, the two novels also lend themselves favourably to a critical ecofeminist lens, as the female protagonists' key instrumental input

foregrounds the positive impact of female (and feminist) agency in situations of environmental crisis.

2   *The Hungry Tide* focuses around Bengali American cetologist Piyali Roy, or Piya, who travels to the Sundarbans to study Gangetic dolphins, famously known to be dwelling in the area in large numbers. There, she comes across a different dolphin species, the Irawaddy (*Orcaella brevirostris*) which is akin to the killer whale (*Orcinus orca*) inhabiting the Puget Sound of the Pacific Northwest of the United States, in the vicinity of which she had grown with her unhappily married parents. As she pursues her research, she bonds with local people such as Nilima, the founder of the Badabon trust, which supports poor women without means, Kanai, her nephew, owner of a translating company in Delhi, and Fokir, the fisherman who takes her around the Sundarbans in support of her research and dies protecting her from a deadly tornado. Following his death, Piya commits to supporting his wife Moyna and their child. The Sundarbans have taught her not only about the dolphins' behaviour, but also about how similar the local people's issues are to the surrounding endangered environment.

3   In *Gun Island*, years later, we come across Piya and Nilima again, as well as Kanai, Moyna and a growing Tipu (Fokir's son), who has not benefited much from the spoiling offered him by Piya. Tipu is, in fact, like a typical western teenager, at odds with everybody (especially the traditional society of the Sundarbans) and in search of his own journey. The perspective in the novel is enriched through the presence of a narrator-protagonist, Dinanath — or Deen, as everybody calls him — a rare book dealer who commutes annually between Brooklyn and Calcutta and who, at the outset of the novel, is recovering from a disturbing breakup. An important thread in the novel's plot is the legend of Bonduki Sadagar. Deen initially connects this character to the legend he studied during his PhD research and calls him the Gun Merchant. This Gun Merchant is originally believed to have built a shrine dedicated to the snake goddess Manasa Devi, but then, through a more accurate translation, he turns out as "the merchant who went to Venice". The legend of the mysterious Gun Merchant changes as Deen goes along his path of discovery (and self-discovery), with the help of the three strong female figures that change his views on the world: Piya and Nilima (who continue the

journeys started in *The Hungry Tide*) and his Venetian friend Giacinta Schiavon. Considering their strong individualist trajectories and successful professional paths, as well as their commitment to the environment, I will argue that the three of them hold ecofeminist views and reflect Ghosh's own commitment to the environment. Moreover, it is profitable to read the two novels by employing a critical feminist lens, which highlights Ghosh's message that the world of the humans and the natural environment should be treated with equal respect.

Addressing colonial damage: the benefits of critical ecofeminism

4   Critical ecofeminism, as promoted by theorists such as Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies or Greta Gaard, capitalises on the mutually benefiting parallels that can be drawn between inter-human gendered relations and the relations between humans and the natural world. If green postcolonialism highlights the connections between the history of colonial empires and the abuses committed by humans on nature, critical ecofeminism points out that these humans usually represent western patriarchal mentality and builds a set of critical tools against their indiscriminate oppression. Maria Mies (a Germany-based social scientist active in the feminist movement) and Vandana Shiva (an India-based theoretical physicist active in the ecological movement) decided in the early nineties to write a book together, and published the first edition of *Ecofeminism* in 1993.

5   *Ecofeminism* is a book authored by two people engaged in a dialogue across their respective disciplines. It is mostly composed of parts written by each of the authors separately, in response to similar questions, and with one common Introduction explaining the genesis of the book. As they confess in their individual introductions to the 2014 second edition, their solutions to the various problems tackled by their respective movements were strikingly similar, and so it was productive to connect them (Mies and Shiva 3). As Ariel Salleh, a fellow ecofeminist, notices in her Foreword to the 2014 edition of *Ecofeminism*, Mies and Shiva agreed on a shared commitment to "women's efforts to save their livelihood and make their communities safe" (Mies and Shiva ix). Women's "natural" drive

to care for nature therefore comes from their dependence on the environment for the good of those they mother and generally nurture. But, as Shiva insists, women and nature also share a similar exposure to patriarchal violence: "the rape of the Earth and rape of women are intimately linked" (Shiva, in Mies and Shiva xvi).

6 Amitav Ghosh's recent non-fiction book *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021) calls for an increased awareness of the reality of pollution and climate change, largely due to centuries of reckless colonial exploitation, as also suggested by Huggan and Tiffin's concept of green postcolonialism. This is also in tune with Maria Mies's "myth of catching-up development", which prompted Western colonialism to impose universally a "model of 'the good life'" that emulates "the affluent societies of the North: the USA, Europe and Japan" (Mies, in Mies and Shiva 55). This was backed up by the scientific reductionism of the age of the Scientific Revolution (Shiva, in Mies and Shiva 22) and often had destructive effects across the nature/culture divide in societies where this divide had been a lot milder before. What Maria Mies calls capitalist-patriarchy becomes a system universally imposed by colonial empires, which "interprets difference as hierarchical and uniformity as a prerequisite for equality" (Mies and Shiva 2). The disparities between this model and the previous ways of life of the colonised non-European countries where it was applied led indiscriminately to disasters in the respective countries. One such disaster was the Banda genocide, caused by Dutch settlers in the Banda islands in 1621 with the purpose of gaining complete control over the cultivation of nutmeg trees in the Bandas. This genocide is Amitav Ghosh's starting point in a historically aware discussion of the contribution of colonial imperialism to the current climate crisis.

7 Ecofeminism addresses such issues by combining gender activism with a care for the environment. It highlights a shared vulnerability of women and nature (the more so as women have often traditionally been regarded *as* nature). Its value as a tool for addressing disparities and injustices across disciplines is emphasised in Australian philosopher Val Plumwood's discourse of *critical* ecofeminism, taken over by Greta Gaard and enriched with a critique of all forms of oppressive normative laws, coming from queer studies. Greta Gaard's queer ecofeminism adds the awareness of gender as being socially constructed and, therefore, of human intervention in nature as being

oppressive. As early as her 1997 article "Toward a Queer Ecofeminism", she outlines the similarities of all oppressive "-isms", along similar lines to Ghosh's critique of the ongoing oppression of colonialism, which continues since *The Shadow Lines* (1988):

> At the root of ecofeminism is the understanding that the many systems of oppression are mutually reinforcing. Building on the socialist feminist insight that racism, classism, and sexism are interconnected, ecofeminists recognized additional similarities between those forms of human oppression and the oppressive structures of speciesism and naturism. An early impetus for the ecofeminist movement was the realization that the liberation of women — the aim of all branches of feminism — cannot be fully effected without the liberation of nature. (Gaard, "Toward a Queer Ecofeminism" 114)

8   In the article, Gaard shows that ecofeminist theory explores "the connections among many issues: racism, environmental degradation, economics, electoral politics, animal liberation, reproductive politics, biotechnology, bioregionalism, spirituality, holistic health practices, sustainable agriculture, and others" (115). Critical ecofeminism provides a more incisive analysis of the similar kinds of wrongs coming from the various forms of oppression at work in the contemporary world. In tune with Gaard, in a collection dedicated to ecofeminism and meant to reflect the field's multidisciplinarity and multidirectional historical roots, Karen Warren insists that "there are important connections between how one treats women, people of color, and the underclass on tone hand and how one treats the nonhuman natural environment on the other" (xi). Warren suggests that, more than an emancipatory social movement, exporting the task of feminism into nature activism, ecofeminism becomes a form of deep ecology that uses models borrowed from the feminist movement to address various forms of inequality present in society as much as in nature. An anticolonial, non-dualist form of thinking, ecofeminism prompts a recognition of the fact that all forms of oppression and emancipation share very similar features.

9   Creative fiction and non-fiction provide an auspicious framework for thinking about the world and the environment, as, I will argue, is particularly the case in the work of Amitav Ghosh. By "creative",

I mean to refer to Ghosh's way of addressing the concerns of the environment and society through a kind of direct essayistic analysis which relies on narrative scenarios for exemplification. Such is, for instance, the case in *The Great Derangement* (2016), where the account of Ghosh's own experience of the tornado that hit Delhi unexpectedly in March 1978 is the starting point of a complex historicised discussion of climate change. At the same time, however, it also becomes the ground on which a parallel discussion around the inadequacy of the realist novel form to address the current realities of our world is built. To Ghosh, writing a novel and writing a reflective essay about the current concerns of the world are cognate endeavours. Coming in the wake of the long tradition of oral and written storytelling in India (where the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are archetypal repositories of everything that ever happened or will happen in the world)[3] he resorts to a kind of narrative knowledge, which involves knowing and acting upon the world through listening to, telling and writing stories.

Humans and non-humans in the Sundarbans

10   Ghosh's fiction is a space of reflection on the world that benefits from the power of persuasion granted by the concrete, narrated evidence of case studies. In *The Hungry Tide*, the stories told by humans do not always make sense, as in the case of Kanai, the owner of a translation company, fluent in six languages, who however does not always manage to communicate very well with either his aunt Nilima or his new acquaintance Piya. The novel suggests more than once that human languages are not always the best media for successful communication. In the chapter entitled "Words" we discover that Piya's not knowing Bengali is due to her emotional refusal to learn the language in which her parents were always fighting (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 89). Yet with Fokir, whose native Bengali she cannot speak, Piya finds a bond that comes close to the one she establishes with the dolphins whose behaviour she studies.

11   The dolphins have their own stories, which Piya gradually learns to decipher. At the beginning of her research in the Sundarbans, she realizes that not everything is as she had expected and that the

predicament of people is not completely different from that of the dolphins:

> That these waters had once contained large number of dolphins was known beyond a doubt. Several nineteenth-century zoologists had testified to it. The "discoverer" of the Gangetic dolphin, William Roxburgh, had said explicitly that the freshwater dolphins of the Ganges delighted in the "labyrinth of rivers and creeks to the South and South-East of Calcutta". This was exactly where she was and yet, after hours of careful surveillance she had still to spot her first dolphin. Nor had she seen many fishermen: Piya had been hoping that the trip would yield a few encounters with knowledgeable boat people but such opportunities had been scarce today. (43-44)

While it is a surprise to Piya that she comes across a different species than expected — the Irawaddy, rather than the Gangetic, dolphin — she discovers that the dolphins had found ways to adapt to adverse circumstances by migrating between fresh and salt waters. But she also realises that people are as much victims of changing circumstances as the dolphins were. Like human migrants, dolphins adapt and sometimes provide clues to people's stories. But humans are also sometimes defeated by the adversity of the environment, as is the case with Piya's mother, who dies of cancer in an America that had not provided her with a home, or with Fokir, who has to choose between saving himself and saving Piya. For Piya, America does provide the freedom she needs as a female scientist, but it is her native Bengal where she goes for fieldwork. In the process, she also begins to understand who she is and how she may forge her own path. The connection between the two cetacean species living in the waters by which her family had been dwelling (the Sundarbans and the Puget Sound) becomes relevant and provides clues to her life and career.

12   Despite the lack of a common language, Piya builds a strong bond with Fokir, the local Dalit fisherman who takes her around the Sundarbans looking for dolphins and finally dies while protecting her. This leads her to forming a family of sorts with Fokir's wife Moyna and his son Tipu. Despite her efforts, this family is as unsuccessful as her parents' had been, with America being equally confusing to Tipu as it had been to her mother. While Tipu finds his own way in life by

overcoming the difficulties of his own migration journey (to Italy), Piya does eventually find the promise of emotional fulfilment through her budding relationship with Deen at the end of *Gun Island*.

13   In the fluid land of the Sundarbans, alternative worlds are built through stories. In *Gun Island*, stories coming from different directions, which interact and flow into one another, are the basis on which the novel is built. It is, actually, the legend of the Gun Merchant that triggers all the other threads of the plot. As Deen's Venetian friend, the *Professoressa* Giacinta Schiavon (or Cinta, as he calls her), argues, stories are not the monopoly of humans (traditionally thought to be "storytelling animals"), but, on the contrary, the terrain that unites them with animals:

> What if the faculty of storytelling were not specifically human but rather the last remnant of our animal selves? A vestige left from a time before language, when we communicated as other living beings do? Why else is it that only in stories do animals speak? Not to speak of demons, and gods, and indeed God himself? It is only through stories that the universe can speak to us, and if we don't learn to listen you may be sure that we will be punished for it. (141)

14   This act of connecting the whole chain of being through stories takes the dolphins' stories further. In *Gun Island*, stories travel from East to West, from the Sundarbans to Venice and to Los Angeles and, last but not least, between narrative texts. Thus, *Gun Island* is not technically a sequel to the plot of *The Hungry Tide*, though Piya's presence is important in both. But the two novels certainly follow from each other on the level of the ideas on which they are based, as well as of the environment-oriented parallel plot. One trigger of the plot of *The Hungry Tide* is the absurdity of the fact that the Bengal tiger, a protected species, suddenly becomes more important than the people living in the Sundarbans. The questioning of this status quo is continued in *Gun Island* in a much vaster system of transgenerational, transhistorical and even trans-species connectivity, placed in similar relations of endangering and protecting one another. The problem raised here by Ghosh is similar to one that fuels Greta Gaard's need for critical ecofeminism:

> In Minnesota, migrant farmworkers arrive and depart seasonally, like the butterflies. But these migrants are not treated the same. While most Minnesotans don't see the Mexican migrant farmworkers who pick up to 85% of the food eaten in the United States, the annual migration of Monarch butterflies from the Oyamel trees of Mexico's Michoacan forests to the lakes and rivers of Minnesota is eagerly anticipated, celebrated, and tracked. (Gaard, *Critical Ecofeminism*, vii-viii)

15   That humans can be less visible than certain non-human species seems absurd and yet this is a central issue in the emerging genre of climate fiction. *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island* are both connected to it. In their article entitled "A Short History of Climate Fiction", Andrew Milner and J. R. Burgman argue that "climate fiction is a subgenre of science-fiction rather than a distinct and separate genre", and that it is

> first, because its texts and practitioners relate primarily to the sf 'selective tradition'; and, second, because its texts and practitioners articulate a 'structure of feeling' that accords centrality to science and technology, in this case normally climate science. (1)

The implications of such observations are that, like science-fiction, cli-fi often allows unlimited powers to the author's imagination to construct narrative spaces whose complexity benefits from the unleashed powers of fantasy. This certainly is the case with Amitav Ghosh, whose novels of ideas, fuelled by the author's academic background in anthropology, employ fantasy in plots that borrow elements from science-fiction and even detective fiction to make their environment-oriented points.

16   Both novels here discussed problematise the increasingly flawed relationship between humans and the environment by placing in the centre of their plots female protagonists of different generations and backgrounds. In *The Hungry Tide*, Nilima (the local activist and founder of the Badabon trust) and her younger friend Piya build a sustainable plan to protect and coexist with the Sundarbans. In *Gun Island*, Piya, now a middle-aged marine biologist, while still very attached to an aging Nilima, forms a connection of sorts with Giacinta Schiavon, the older Italian academic who provides a

narrative of history that parallels and to a certain extent explains Piya's narrative about the environment. Both novels share an approach to the plot which problematises human hierarchies and genealogies through the lens of the environment, reminding one of Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's "green postcolonialism".

17   Green postcolonialism, as a development of postcolonial ecocriticism, provides an opportunity to examine relationships between humans, animals and nature in postcolonial literary texts. The point is to show that

> human liberation will never be fully achieved without challenging the ways human societies have constructed themselves in hierarchical relation to other human and non-human communities, and without imagining new ways in which these ecologically connected groupings can be creatively transformed" (ii).

Huggan and Tiffin thus prompt a reconsideration of the ways in which we position ourselves with respect to animals and the environment and how nature interferes with our actions and decisions. Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* is to them a notable example of green postcolonialism in literature, where

> International pressure to protect the endangered Bengal tiger results in the brutal eviction of human refugees who have settled on one of the many islands that form the 'tide country' of the vast Ganges delta. These settlers, already 'displaced persons' from Bangladesh and elsewhere, have illegally occupied an island within the boundaries of the tiger sanctuary. (4)

18   Apart from healing nature, green postcolonialism is thus about healing human interaction. Piya's observation in *The Hungry Tide* on decisions about the environment is relevant to this concern: such decisions cannot be made by "footloose experts" like herself without consulting and involving

> the people who live here … And for myself I know that I don't want to do the kind of work that places the burden of conservation on those who can least afford it. If I was to take on a project here, I'd want to be under the sponsorship of the Badabon Trust, so the local

> fishermen would be involved. (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 327, qtd. in Huggan and Tiffin 5)

19   Ghosh's work has always been pervaded by an ecological perspective on the world, not only on the level of content, but also that of narrative technique and character building. This involves a radical rethinking of human interactions in an ecological light in the work of this global writer, who is currently one of the most visible representatives of contemporary Indian writing in English and of global English-language writing. Ghosh's fiction is reputedly a fiction of fluid borders, to the point where his 1998 novel *The Shadow Lines* has long been an emblem of the concept itself. He writes at a time when we can no longer talk of separate, discrete cultures, when all cultures have "histories of border crossings, diasporas and migrations" (Clifford 7). This relates to an interest in the dynamic of cultures and in cross-border movements, in the ever-changing nature of identity rather than in the rigid categories responsible for dividing people. Proclaiming the fluidity of all borders also implies recognizing that many categories formerly perceived as strict (ethnic or national identity, caste, gender, religion, etc.) are, in fact in a perpetual process of becoming.

20   The psychology of Ghosh's characters is also influenced by this fluidity. As Robert Dixon puts it:

> The characters in Ghosh's novels do not occupy discrete cultures, but 'dwell in travel' in cultural spaces that flow across borders — the 'shadow lines' drawn around modern nation states… [They inhabit] a discursive space that flows across political and national boundaries, and even across generations in time. (10 and 18)

They are complex, modern, mobile characters in constant movement and change, with an understanding of human relationships and values that goes far beyond contextual conditionings. This is true in particular of his female characters, whose complexity very often turns them into exemplary figures or guides. In *The Hungry Tide*, Nilima lives in Lusibari in a kind of symbiosis with the human and natural world of the Sundarbans. She is a kind of spirit of the place:

> At the age of seventy-six, Nilima Bose was almost circular in shape and her face had the dimpled roundness of a waxing moon. Her voice was soft and had the splintered quality of a note sounded on a length of cracked bamboo. She was small in height and her wispy hair, which she wore in a knot at the back of her head, was still more dark than gray. It was her practice to dress in saris woven and crafted in the workshops of the Badabon Trust, garments almost always of cotton with spidery borders executed in batik. It was in one such, a plain white widow's sari, thinly bordered in black, that she had come to the station to receive Kanai. (26)

Even though she married for love, defying the rules imposed by Indian society at the time, Nilima seems to always have been the stronger one in the couple, opposing her practical common-sense to her husband's more dreamy, poetic nature. For all this reversal of the usual gender dichotomy, however, she reaches a deep understanding of the Sundarbans as space of mystery and of the lives of people who live there, which makes her the ultimate authority to turn to. When Piya arrives, equipped with Western confidence, knowledge and technology, Nilima, with her strong personality that everybody looks up to, teaches her the first lesson about another, intuitive kind of knowledge (which Kanai and Fokir also share to a certain extent). Without it, any scientific approach to life and the environment, no matter how well informed, is deemed useless. It is originally Nilima's guidance that sets Piya in the right direction. Years later, in *Gun Island*, we meet Nilima and Piya again, having built a very strong bond. Nilima is still the matriarch who understands the Sundarbans better than anybody else, while Piya's scientific knowledge backs up her more intuitive one. For Deen, the book dealer who gets involved in a whole quest in the depths of the Sundarbans, guided by the mysterious figures of Manasa Devi and of the Gun Merchant, Nilima embodies the spirit of the mysterious waterland and is the only one who has access to its true hidden meanings.

21   The parts played by the Piya-Nilima encounter in *The Hungry Tide* follow a kind of master-apprentice pattern that endures in time and migrates into *Gun Island.* In *The Hungry Tide*, Piya is initially a young scientist and researcher who, for all her best intentions, is exposed to error and sometimes makes mistakes that are not easy to fix. Nilima is the wise problem-solver, who understands what it means to make

sacrifices, since in her youth she gave up her caste to marry the man she loved. She has since committed to a much wider endeavour of helping people in need, through the Badabon trust, which she runs. Both characters are strong, educated, independent-minded women with progressive views. Their inherent (while not at all aggressively militant) ecofeminism reflects Ghosh's own views on the need to grant equal importance to all that has life.

Gun Island: spatial and temporal eco-connectivities

22   On the level of metanarrative environmentalist discourse, *Gun Island* finalises the journey started in *The Hungry Tide*, through a plot whose cause-effect logic operates more in terms of fantasy, magic and myth than realist causality. It would be thus fair to say that *Gun Island* represents Ghosh's practical attempt to find a solution to the crisis of the realist novel signalled in *The Great Derangement*. In *Gun Island*, Nilima appears less as an active leader of people and more as a repository of ancient knowledge. Piya's original adherence to scientific knowledge alters throughout the novel under the impact of Nilima's wisdom, as well as through the encounter with a third powerful female figure, the mystical humanist Cinta. As for Deen, the narrator-protagonist, he is in search of the historical truths of the legend of the Gun Merchant and the shrine of Manasa Devi, the goddess of snakes in the Sundarbans, but, in fact, through them, he is searching for himself. The focus on Deen as first person singular narrator in the novel creates a useful distance from the female protagonists. Their actions are thus put in perspective, while the male narrator, victim of repeated sentimental failures, acknowledges his own emotional vulnerability from the outset of the novel. Deen's personal quest becomes, by virtue of his narrator function, the guiding narrative thread of the novel. It is also an allegory of the quest of a confused humanity in search of a lost ancient knowledge that used to provide more balance than scientific knowledge ever could. Thus, to a certain extent, he is an alter-ego of the author, in his double hypostasis as an anthropology researcher and imaginative writer. He is also a representative of contemporary humanity in search for meaning in a world of global interconnectivities that

proves to have existed for ever, through movements of populations that announced contemporary migrations.

23   Deen's insecurities and vulnerabilities make him open to advice from the three women who have, in turn, learnt the lessons of life. Of them, two — Nilima and Cinta — have drawn their conclusions and are wiser than him. The third, Piya, is engaged herself in personal searches that are quite similar to Deen's, which makes them compatible with each other. Women figures possess various kinds of knowledge in the novel, and this is the case not only on the human, but also on the superhuman level. Thus, the mystery behind the Gun Merchant, the historical and symbolical target of Deen's searches, is connected to Manasa Devi, the female goddess of snakes. Through the ubiquitous snake symbolism in the novel, from the Sundarbans to Venice and California, Manasa Devi is an underlying presence throughout the novel.

24   Deen's most direct mentor, as he confesses himself, is Cinta, the old friend to whom he owes his job as an ancient book dealer in Brooklyn. The Venetian *professoressa* has managed to outgrow personal tragedy (the death of her husband and daughter in a car crash) through developing her own version of an esoteric understanding of the world. This situates her own predicament within a coherent historical narrative that unites Venice with Salzburg, California and the Sundarbans, based on the conviction that the most important form of knowledge is narrative knowledge. At a conference in California where they meet, Cinta explains to Deen:

> In the seventeenth century no one would ever have said of something that it was "just a story" as we moderns do. At that time people recognized that stories could tap into dimensions that were beyond the ordinary, beyond the human even. They knew that only through stories was it possible to enter the most inward mysteries of our existence, where nothing that is really important can be proven to exist — like love, or loyalty, or even the faculty that makes us turn around when we feel the gaze of a stranger or an animal. Only through stories can invisible or inarticulate or silent beings speak to us; it is they who allow the past to reach out to us. (140-141)

25   These stories are associated with certain spaces in which the novel's characters are projected. If for Nilima and Piya those spaces are

located primarily in the Sundarbans, Cinta has a more complex makeup, as her academic profile rightfully requires. She is a born and bred Venetian and she is also a specialist in the history of Venice. On the other hand, she has been grieving for the tragic death of her husband and daughter for many years. Consequently, Ghosh constructs her as a spiritual seeker for the meaning of life, engaged in a perpetual quest in which her academic interests mingle with a mystical version of her own personal trajectory and of world history. Through these interests and preoccupations, Cinta also becomes a guide for Deen, who is engaged in his own personal quest for meaning. He has been a lifelong mourner for the death of a woman he loved in his youth and has been having difficulties finding his own place in the world. His encounter with Cinta and, later in his life, with Nilima and Piya, as well as his increasingly committed pursuit of Bonduki Sadagar's legend, help him find a meaning in life that he has long lacked.

26   *The Hungry Tide* focuses around the general idea that those who should decide on the fate of the Sundarbans should be the inhabitants of the area and not various foreign instances who think they are in a better position for decisions. In contrast, *Gun Island* is somewhat too ambitious in its attempt at treating everybody — the protagonists, the South Asian refugees in Venice and even Cinta's niece Gisa's dog Leola, tragically bitten by a yellow sea snake in California — on a par. Indeed, the dog's death is perceived by Gisa, her partner and their two African adopted children (who stand proof for the couple's desire to act for good in the world) as an event as tragic as her husband and daughter's death was for Cinta in the past (144). This is all the more so as the yellow snake's lethal bite reminds us of Tipu's narrow escape from death after being bitten by a cobra earlier in the novel (84).

27   Cinta establishes cultural and historical connections between Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* and Deen's Gun Merchant, whose name, *Bonduki Sadagar*, comes to be translated from Arabic as "the Merchant who visited Venice" (152). Her intricate argument is, at least to a certain extent, based on a speculation that reminds one of Milner and Burgman's above-mentioned argument that climate fiction borrows from science-fiction the rich, even excessive use of imagination. Yet, in his other famous play set in Venice, *Othello*,

Shakespeare does stress the fact that, at the time, Venice was the most cosmopolitan place in Europe, with people coming literally from everywhere. While noticing the influx of Bengali immigrants into contemporary Venice (among which we recognize familiar characters such as Tipu and Rafi), Cinta reminds Deen that Bengalis have been settling in Veneto for a long time, which proves that refugee crises are not only a phenomenon of our days (156).

28 For all its obvious speculative propensity, *Gun Island* should by no means be interpreted as a failed realist novel. It is rather an intellectual project based on fantasy narrative, which seems to be meant to prove the coherence of the world through the many connections between remote times and places. Its plot draws, to a great extent, on the ideas built by Deen and Cinta and exchanged in their sophisticated conversations. There is little that is realistic in *Gun Island*, with the very exception of the important world-affecting issues the novel brings up. One of them is the question of climate change to which the wildfires in California are connected. Their proportions are only suggested by the psychological impact they have on Deen. He sees a flying snake he immediately associates with the threat of what Ghosh would call a "deranged"[4] ecosystem turned evil. Another one is the wrongness of doing violence to animals, represented by the Californian scene of the dog's death from a snake bite (144). This recalls the above-mentioned similar scene where the protagonist was a human, Tipu, supported by the same threatening snake symbolism.

29 The three scenes thus become connected, as part of the same riddle that surrounds the trajectory of Deen's life. Their common snake symbolism places them under the sign of Manasa Devi, the snake goddess of the Sundarbans whose shrine Deen visits at the beginning of the novel, in search of the Gun Merchant. This brings us back to the ecofeminist conception that underlies the novel: the snake goddess becomes an epitome of the mystery behind all reality, but also of all the strong women that surround Deen and guide him towards the fulfilment of his journey.

30 Finally, the question of contemporary refugees is skillfully weaved into the novel's denouement and also brings Cinta's journey to a peaceful end, which she finds in being reunited with her daughter in

death. The refugees' predicament finds its place in the intricate scheme of the novel through the similarities that Cinta finds between refugees and the great travellers that, centuries before, had set out from Venice to explore the world:

> 'Sometimes I ask myself,' she said, 'what would happen if those great Venetian travellers — the Polos, Niccolò de' Conti, Ambrosio Bembo — were to come back to the Venice of today? Who would they have more in common with? Us twenty-first century Italians, who rely on immigrants to do all our dirty work? The tourists, who come in luxury liners and aeroplanes? Or these *ragazzi migranti*, who take their lives in their hands to cross the seas, just like all those great Venetian travellers of the past?' (240)

The young migrants that are here referred to provide connections between the past and the present, as well as between Bengal and Venice (where Bengali is a language commonly spoken). Like the great explorers of the past, they have the courage to face radical dislocation in search of a dream of a foreign land or of a better life. This capacity for dreaming is, for Cinta, the mentor figure in the novel, the key to a true understanding of what it would take to make the world a better place.

31   The last two chapters of the novel openly resort to fantasy, introducing a whole set of props that do not lend themselves to easy explanations. One of them is the halo of birds that crowns the arrival of the refugee ship, explained scientifically by Piya as bioluminescence. The phenomenon is made possible in this part of the world by the unusual bird migration patterns caused by climate change (309), yet does create a magic effect that goes beyond explanation. Another kind of such prop is the Madonna of La Salute, which has a history that connects the Christian faith with pagan ones. It originates from Heraklion in Crete and is thus connected to Asasarame, the Minoan goddess of snakes (244) and so, by extension, with Manasa Devi too. Cinta's friendship with Deen also has a connection to Manasa Devi, whose presence is pervasive throughout the novel:

> Now at last I had an inkling of why she had chosen to bestow her friendship on me: it was as if she had had an intuition that someday

> we would bring each other *here*, to this juncture in time and space
> — and that not till then would she find release from the grief of her
> separation from her daughter. In that instant of clarity I heard again
> that familiar voice in my ear, repeating those words from La Salute
> — *Unde Origo Inde Salus* — 'From the beginning salvation comes,'
> and I understood what she had been trying to tell me that day: that
> the possibility of our deliverance lies not in the future but in the
> past, in a mystery beyond memory. (312)

This can be interpreted as a clear reference to Dipesh Chakrabarty's
concept of 'The Climate of History' in the 2009 article of the same
title, in which, without a true knowledge of history, there is no way to
understand the present and oneself. This conclusion, somewhat
contrived as it may sound, launches a powerful message that we must
search in the past for answers to the great problems of the present,
since nothing is new in the world. The novel ends with Deen having
reached a deeper understanding of life and the world, but also a
fulfilment he never had before. But, as protagonist and narrator of the
novel, the answers he finds are to a great extent the answers found
by the whole group of refugees on *Lucania*. The promise of a future
with Piya establishes for Deen a symbolical continuity of the female
guidance in his life, as Piya actually takes over Cinta's guiding role.
But in the bigger picture, this re-establishes the continuity of a
female principle of coherence in the world, represented by the snake
goddess Manasa Devi and her avatars of different historical times (the
Minoan snake goddess, Santa Maria della Salute or, for that matter,
the many snakes that feature in the novel). This ultimately signals an
urgent need for humanity to make an effort and turn the evil in the
world to a good account.

Conclusion: the Sundarbans, fiction and consciousness raising

32   Beyond the interference of world organizations wishing to protect
the environment, Ghosh's Sundarbans in *The Hungry Tide* and
Gun Island (with the latter novel extending the symbolism of the
Sundarbans over many other spaces) stand for a world in which all
that has life becomes equal and should be treated with equal care.
This is the ultimate message of the goddess Manasa Devi and the

shrine connected to the mysterious Gun Merchant (Bonduki Sadagar) in the title. Ghosh thus crowns his endeavour of using the novel form to voice his ecological concerns and thus his call for an erasure of categories of exclusion such as castes, genders and social class. *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island* thus powerfully propose an erasure of artificial boundaries in a world which is in fact full of continuities, as suggested by the ubiquitousness of a protective female principle proclaimed at the end of the novel.

33 Reading Ghosh through a critical ecofeminist lens, as well as acknowledging the author's own indebtedness to the all-encompassing democratic views of ecofeminism, is justified not only by the importance of female characters in his novels. The author may not be a declared ecofeminist as such, but his commitment to the environment in his fiction and non-fiction certainly signals a search for a more thorough critique of oppressive neo-colonial practices that damage nature and the less privileged categories of people alike. Critical ecofeminism provides more incisive ways to approach the dangers of capitalist-patriarchal sacrifice of humans, non-humans and the environment to an indiscriminate, blind drive to economic growth. Ghosh's writing is equally categorical in exposing the neo-colonial reasons behind the damage brought to the environment and to disadvantaged local populations. His writing ultimately launches an insistent call to a necessary ecological awareness that should govern policies towards nature and humans alike.

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NOTES

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2 See Salman Rushdie's article "The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance" (1982), which alludes to George Lucas's 1980 film *The Empire Strikes Back* from the *Star Wars* series to suggest that the eighties were a time of consolidation of postcolonial literatures, which responded to the

literary canons of former colonial empires through their own strong literary voices. This dialogue is relevant to the former colonial languages that were adopted by force of law or habit by the elites.

3 I have discussed the re-performance of the oral and written tradition of mythical storytelling in significant part of contemporary Indian writing in English elsewhere (Draga Alexandru 2015).

4 As suggested by the title of Ghosh's essay *The Great Derangement*, which meditates on the dangers of climate change.

ABSTRACTS

English

In recent times, creative fiction has increasingly been read as a framework for thinking about the world and the environment. This article argues that Amitav Ghosh's novels set in the Sundarbans, namely *The Hungry Tide* and especially its sequel *Gun Island* reflect the author's critical views about the impending need to improve the relationship between the human world and the natural one. Both novels use as centres of the plot female protagonists of different generations and backgrounds, who provide a critical perspective on and knowledge of this process. They are also (in different ways) at the same time protective of local traditions and progressive. In Ghosh's own version of critical ecofeminism in the two novels, these women build a sustainable plan to protect and coexist with the Sundarbans. In his own narrative approach, Ghosh agrees with Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies and Greta Gaard's complex discourse, ultimately meant, beyond feminism as such, to celebrate equality across all boundaries.

Français

Le roman devient de plus en plus un cadre de réflexion sur le monde et l'environnement. Cet article soutient que les romans d'Amitav Ghosh situés dans les Sundarbans, *The Hungry Tide* et particulièrement sa suite, *Gun Island*, reflètent ses vues critiques sur la nécessité imminente d'améliorer la relation entre le monde humain et le monde naturel. Les deux romans ont des protagonistes féminins de différentes générations et origines, qui apportent une perspective critique basée sur leur connaissance de ce processus. Elles sont aussi, de manière différente l'une de l'autre, protectrices des traditions locales et progressistes. Dans la version de l'éco-féminisme critique propre à Ghosh dans les deux romans, ces femmes élaborent un plan durable de protection et de coexistence avec les Sundarbans. D'une manière narrative propre, Ghosh est d'accord avec le discours complexe de Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies et Greta Gaard, qui vise finalement, au-delà du féminisme en tant que tel, à célébrer l'égalité par-delà toutes les frontières.

INDEX

Mots-clés

éco-féminisme critique, monde globalisé, post-colonialisme vert, Sundarbans

Keywords

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An Ecofeminist Foremother? Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's Oneiric Representation of Nature, Technology and Gender Roles in "Sultana's Dream"

Une aïeule éco-féministe ? La représentation onirique de la nature, de la technologie et des rôles de genre dans « Le Rêve de Sultana » de Rokeya Sakhavat Hossain

Leslie de Bont

OUTLINE

TEXT

1   The questions raised by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's narrator in "The Peasant's Sorrow" clearly echo one of her most famous texts, "Sultana's Dream", which, as the overwhelming number of recent critical pieces suggests, is deceptively simple.[1] "Sultana's Dream" first appeared in *The Indian Ladies' Magazine* in 1905. As Sultana, the narrator and protagonist, dreams of Ladyland, a country where men are "where they ought to be […], shut […] indoors" (4-5), she marvels at the harmonious relationship between all female Ladylanders and their natural environment. Not only does "the whole place look like a garden" (4), as she exclaims to Sister Sara, her guide in Ladyland, but all technological innovations rely on a reasonable and sustainable use of the surrounding natural resources, which foreshadows Arne Næss' concept of ecosophy (1989).[2] According to Hasanat, the story

> transforms into an ecofeminist's vision for a harmonious world where Woman lives only under Nature's care. For the wishful utopist narrator, Nature and her abundant resources offer alternative power source and thus open the door to a new world where Woman and Nature stand as the unmistakable agents of power. (Hasanat 117)

2   At first sight, "Sultana's Dream" might seem like "an unexpected text, written by a Muslim woman from colonial South Asia" (Chaudhuri 108)[3] and it might similarly seem anachronistic to speak of ecofeminism when examining a text written and published in the early twentieth century. However, the story's sense of agency and subtle depiction of the interactions of environmental and gendered issues resonate with the life and other works of Hossain and with late twentieth and early twenty-first century concerns.

3   Hossain is often portrayed as a tireless advocate for women's rights and education in the Indian subcontinent during the time of the British rule (Quayum, *Essential* xxiv-xxv). That she was also a writer who wrote in a number of genres, developing a distinctive literary style and a wry sense of humour is no mean feat. "Her essays have been compared with Mary Wollstonecraft's (in tone and content) and her fiction with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's" (Sengupta 2). She has also been called an inheritor of the Bengal Renaissance (Quayum, *Foremother* 47) and of the *jagaran* movement[4] and quite logically found an audience in the "Bengali language publications [that] flourished in this period" (Sengupta 17). If the turn of the century also witnessed the emergence of other influential feminist writers and activists, such as Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati or Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, as Ray notes in her fascinating *Early Feminists of Colonial India*, Hossain's wide range of interests and multifaceted activism in female education, paid work, religion, social class, hygiene, anticolonialism and agriculture stand out.

4   Drawing on Mies and Shiva who advanced that "ecofeminism is a new term for an ancient wisdom" (3), I will explore the ecofeminist dimension of this "utopic science fiction that shows a strong adherence to a feminist ecocritical narrative long before utopian fiction, science fiction or ecocriticism offered to establish any links with gender politics" (Hasanat 115). I aim to demonstrate that the most innovative aspects of the text lie both in its multi-layered

approach to ecofeminism, which boldly redefines key terms such as strength, power or home, and in its aesthetics. In other words, I hold that Hossain uses the fruitful ambiguities of dream narratives so as to put forward a feminist eco-fiction that engages a complex relation to both technology and space.

An early, fictional example of a pluralistic ecofeminist utopia

5   The story's double representation of an ecological utopia and of a feminine society has led many critics to suggest that it enacts ecofeminism as its key principle or premise before the term was even coined by d'Eaubonne in 1974. For instance, Lakhi holds that "nature becomes the means through which everything Rokeya considers negative in Bengal can be overcome" (17) while Chaudhuri asserts that the story relies on a "perfect ecological equilibrium" (109), referring to the importance of fruits as the key food in Ladyland, as well as to the Ladylanders' focus on a balanced use of natural resources. However, the story's articulation of utopia, dream-narration, political discourse and critique of colonialism produces a pluralist ecofeminist discourse that articulates defining trends of ecofeminism (spiritual v. political ecofeminism (Mies & Shiva 16) or essentialist v. material ecofeminism [5] (Gaard 2011)) and actually anticipates twenty-first century attempts at reconciling them. [6]

6   These diverging ecofeminist concerns come together in the story where nature is feminine, generous, spiritual and beautiful as much as it is political. This is conveyed by the internal focalisation and the embedded narratives: as Sister Sara guides Sultana through Ladyland, readers rely on Sultana's dream, reactions and questions and witness a dialogic experience of an ecofeminist ideal. A conversation between Sultana and Sister Sara fittingly exemplifies Hossain's encompassing approach to ecofeminism, despite its seemingly straightforward structure and nearly allegorical content. As Sultana argues that an elephant's brain is bigger and heavier than a human's and that a man's brain is bigger than a woman's (9), she relies on what Mies and Shiva called essentialist ecofeminism. By contrast, Sister Sara refers to circumstantial considerations as she explains that "women's brains are somewhat quicker than men's" (9) and that women just had to

wait for the right opportunity to find a way to evade *purdah*, embrace natural resources and develop their own system.

7   This pluralistic proto-ecofeminism plays a key role in the story's politics and aesthetics. We first find hints and signs of spiritual ecofeminism in Sultana's repetitions of terms such as "beauty" or "harmony", which reinforce the dream-like, or perhaps heaven-like, quality of the text and contribute to its utopic dimension that breaks free from the repression of *purdah*. The religious or spiritual dimensions in the story are indeed grounded in the characters' relationship to their environment. Even though there is no detailed description of the Ladylanders' spiritual practices, Sister Sara suggests that their faith and religious habits stem from their idealised ecofeminist organization (12). This is in line with Hossain's other essays, such as "God gives, man robs" (1927), in which she defends religious practices that are equalitarian, adapted to and respectful of one's context. In addition, there are very few challenging questions (even if the text is riddled with exclamations signposting Sultana's enthusiasm and desire to know more), and the narration somehow evokes religious texts, parables or allegories that foreshadow, among others, spiritual ecofeminist essays and fictions relying on a Mother Nature figure (such as Mies and Shiva's "female principle", 17).

8   Interestingly, this essentialist and spiritual approach is not solely that of Sultana, the external onlooker in Ladyland. Features ranging from the importance of motherhood embodied by the text's most powerful figure, the Queen, the sole mother of the text (who is shown walking with her daughter in her garden) to the grandeur of botany and horticulture (which rank first in the Queen's political agenda) are also thoroughly endorsed by Sister Sara, whose perspective triangulates supposedly diverging approaches and highlights the complexity and richness of Ladyland's oneiric settings. And that botany (i.e., the aesthetic and sustainable care of gardens) is referred to as a properly valued feminine art, does point to the essentialist or spiritual approach of femininity depicting nature as a compellingly positive environment that is closely associated with femininity. According to Paul, this approach is actually the opposite of "radical feminism that locates the source of oppression in women's biological capacity for motherhood" (41). It is, however, akin to what Mies and Shiva termed "the subsistence perspective" (xxix), which is a long-term vision and

praxis that aims at sustainability through the promotion of feminine values and connectedness to nature (Schultz 67).

9   As examples of these feminine values, community and sorority are the pillars of Ladyland, with Sister Sara patiently talking Sultana through the premises of her country's politics. This led Hasanat (121) to draw a parallel with Audrey Lorde, who famously pointed out that women's

> need and desire to nurture each other is […] redemptive, and it is within that knowledge that our real power is rediscovered. It is this real connection which is so feared by a patriarchal world. Only within a patriarchal structure is maternity the only social power open to women. (26)

While the Queen and Sister Sara guide Sultana through "the famous universities, […] their manufactories, laboratories and observatories" (12), Hossain's text displays the wide range of perspectives that are being offered to female characters whose dominating position is also described as a product of logic and rationality, with a high level of details that complicate the initial spiritual premise. In the utopian world that Sultana dreams of, the feminine use of nature is actually derived from a gradual liberation movement that relies on science and research. Sister Sara explains that the Queen first promoted education programmes for every girl, which enabled women to escape male domination simply by making the best of natural resources. As the women in the story become the sole decision makers, they pledge to only trade with countries that do not exploit women. This is a textbook example of what Mies and Shiva call political ecofeminism, which relies on social organisation and progress through female values and ecology. A group of female scientists in Ladyland became able to "stop rain and storms" and "accumulate water from the atmosphere in pipes"; as a response, another group strove to "collect as much sun-heat as they wanted. And they kept the heat stored up to be distributed among others as required" (8-10). Their use of natural resources clearly aims at collective welfare, with protection and resource sharing as the two main subgoals.

10   Hasanat observes another consequence of these technological inventions:

> women seem to have shifted their focus from domesticities of life to scientific discoveries and education: The female fertile form […] seems to have reinvented herself here through her connection with and power over fertile aspects of Mother Nature" (121).

The essentialist and spiritual ecofeminism in the story is thus more than a mere starting point and thereby refines Mies & Shiva's dichotomy. Noting that "Nature" is capitalised in the story, Lakhi claims that "Nature for Rokeya, as it was for the Romantics, is presented as a work of art, a healing power, a refuge from the artificial constructs of civilization, the true place for women and a source of energy and comfort" (18). However, in the story, women are actively working with Mother Nature but still abide by its communal values: "We dive deep into the ocean of knowledge and try to find out the precious gems, which nature has kept in store for us. We enjoy nature's gifts" (12). Hasanat therefore concludes that in Ladyland

> the whole environment is woman friendly, Nature works for the benefit of women's progress and provides women with the resources they need to implement a harmonious relationship between science, women and environment, and instead of Mother Nature, it is women in Ladyland who control the climate and the whole ecosystem. (121)

11   In Ladyland, female agency and autonomy are indebted to a sustainable, knowledgeable and pleasant use of natural resources. The message here is that for women, knowledge, comfort and environmental care are political. In addition, this distinctly political subtext foretells many debates around the notion of agency and authority. First, the anticolonial tone, especially in the Queen's short speech at the end of the story, has been noted by many (Lakhi 2006, Chatterjee 2018, Rahman & Sarker 2018, Sengupta 2020, etc.). It also echoes Hossain's other writings in which she advocates cultural and educational independence from Western values (for instance in "Education Ideals for the Modern Indian Girl" published in 1931 in *The Mussalman*). Rahman and Sarker also explain that the story provides us with

> an escape from the battered cities and ranting countryside that Hossain feels in colonial India. […] India was then forcibly transformed from being a country of combined agriculture and manufactures into an agricultural colony of British manufacturing capitalism. (3)

12   This articulation of colonialism and environmental changes is perhaps one of the most innovative discourses in the story, which focuses on the organisational power of ecofeminism and stands out as a particularly rich response. As Ray (2011), Bandyopadhyay (2018) and Sharan (2020) have noted, the industrialisation of Bengal induced major changes in landscape and sanitation and all three authors observe that deforestation, along with water and air pollution were rampant during the British rule. That the Bengal Smoke Nuisance Act was enacted in 1905 clearly shows that air pollution arising from industrial furnaces and fireplaces in towns was already identified as a concern. Sultana's comment that she "found no smoke, nor any chimney" in Sister Sara's bright and clean kitchen can also be read within that context. [7]

13   The complexity of the story's underlying political and ecofeminist message is also perceptible in a critical dispute about the Ladylanders' use of natural resources, with Chaudhuri arguing that everything in the story can be explained in terms of advanced technology while Hasanat indicates that Ladylanders are actually "abusing nature's bounty" (121); as such, they enact

> [what would later] happen in Western society: modern chemistry, household technology and pharmacy were proclaimed as women's saviours, because they would 'emancipate' them from household drudgery. Today we realize that much environmental pollution and destruction is causally linked to modern household technology. (Mies & Shiva 7)

14   The story's considerable reliance on electricity might make environmentally aware twenty-first-century readers somewhat uncomfortable but its emphasis on solar heat, and most importantly, its overall focus on balance and harmony point to another direction. Similarly, other critics disagree about whether the story is a female illustration or a refutation of Francis Bacon's well-known thesis about

the domination of nature.[8] In the story, "women undoubtedly usurped that masculine space as they defied the masculine notion of power by gaining control over both man and nature" (Hasanat 115) but I argue that they do not "shake nature to her foundations", be it only because of their insistence on collective well-being and social progress. Instead, as Rahman and Sarker suggest, the text contains a multi-layered dialogue "moving spatial boundary of nature and women's freedom" (5) and actually shaking *male* domination to its foundations, as we shall see in the following section, which aims to examine the story's redefinition of phallogocentric concepts and modes of being (Paul 37).

Home as a locus for ecofeminist emancipation and exploration

15 The story's dialogic rendition of an ecofeminist utopia brings about a gendered reversal of the masculine power over nature. But beyond the enlightening dialogue between Sultana and Sister Sara, the story also engages in an unexpected dialogue with set dichotomies, which destabilises gender roles or norms. For example, power is actually "brain power" (10) and "strength" refers to the women's harmonious adaptation to their natural environment. Lakhi sees another crucial reversal in Hossain's story, namely that:

> *Sultana's Dream* transforms the feminized site of the home into the very nation itself. This is very different from the way it is constructed in the exclusionary discourse of nation-formation as the women's sphere. The home becomes the outside world and, ironically therefore, precisely where women belong. (3)

The extension of the domestic space, i.e., a place of comfort and welfare, really fits with the story's overall values and politics. Csikszentmihály defined home as being

> much more than a shelter: it is a world in which a person can create material environment that embodies what he or she considers significant. In that sense the home becomes the most powerful sign of the self of the inhabitant who dwells within. (123)

16   In Lakhi's account, "such a perspective highlights the enormous potential for developing contextualized histories in which femininity itself is not just subject to, but constitutes relations of race, class, sexuality and religion; it cannot be confined to its 'proper' domain of male-female relations" (6). Expanding on this argument, I consider the characters' proto-ecofeminism as another component in the construction of female identity in Hossain's text. In that respect, the concept of place-identity proves particularly useful. Proshansky and his colleagues coined the term place-identity, to describe the "physical world socialization of the self", or the self-definitions that are derived from places (57). Place-identity can contain an affective, emotional and behavioural dimension. Cuba & Hummon add that place-identity is

> an interpretation of self that uses environmental meaning to symbolize or situate identity. [The concept] answers the question Who am I? by countering Where do I belong? [...] Place identities are thought to arise because places [...] provide a significant framework in which identity is constructed, maintained and transformed. (112)

In the story, Ladylanders seem to have developed a solid place-identity that goes beyond the confines of the *zenana* or of the domestic home as female characters have an informed, collective and relational identity that fully includes their natural environment. Ladylanders aim at comfort and practicality, with the roads forming a "soft carpet" (4) and even their means of exchange and communication are convenient and green, nurturing and empowering with the flying cars preventing road accidents and allowing for a splendid bird's-eye view that embodies the Ladylanders' critical distance and perspective. Not only does the story show the importance of space as a component of identity but it also explores the potential benefits of a positive and eco-friendly relation to space on feminine identity and growth.

17   That is why Lakhi argues that "the outside world becomes the real home, with nature taking on the characteristics of the very home which women are meant to manage; in this outdoor home the ornaments are tomato plants and creepers" (Lakhi 17). Thus, Ladyland is a home, but it is also a progressive space, a locus of subversion, reflection and experimentation. Unlike Bachelard's famous claim, [9]

Hossain's utopian text explicitly subverts Bachelard's temporal limitations; it exposes the gender bias in spatial studies and somehow anticipates twenty-first-century environmental feminism (which responded to Betty Friedan's exclusive focus on domesticity and paid work). As Lakhi has it, home is actually the "liberating impulse" in Hossain's story (8), whether it is the eco-friendly kitchen or the plant-based ornamental arrangements, or because these domestic endeavours are depicted as part of a broader system designed to empower women whilst guaranteeing sustainable and comfortable interactions with the natural environment.

18   These "playful" numerous lexical and spatial reversals have made both Chaudhuri and Hasanat argue, however differently, that the text "radiates with the quiet confidence of strong women who betray neither the aggression nor the cruelty usually associated with power" (Chaudhuri 109; see also Hasanat 115). For example, Sultana laughs at the male criticisms that had previously described female science as "a sentimental nightmare" (9), following Sister Sara's demonstration of the power and efficiency of Ladyland's women-led research precisely because it had teamed up with nature.

19   That the women derive their confidence, strength and power from their educated and respectful relationship to nature is perceptible on several levels. First, education and a scientifically-based use of nature enabled the women to get rid of the enemy nations waging war on them (as they used sunrays to blind their enemies). Second, the text's "disapproval of idleness and sloth" with Sister Sara mocking men who pretend to work but "dawdle away their time in smoking" (6-7) stands in sharp contrast with the Ladylanders "never sit[ting] idle" (12). Their attitude helped them to get rid of conflicts, Sara claims, and to reach comfort through their nature-based technologies. For example, electricity enables Sister Sara's roof to open like a lid and lets her take a shower whenever she wants, while fountains sprinkle water from the atmosphere when the heat becomes unbearable (10). All in all, the constant references to research and knowledge reveal that the women's system is flexible, adaptable, efficient and empowering. Last, the Ladylanders' rational and research-based use of nature helps them foster a strong sense of morals. Sister Sara explains that their "religion is based on Love and Truth" (12) which is why Paul points out that the queen values only knowledge and not the traditional signs of

power (37). Being inclusive and constructive, rather than competitive and productive, is perhaps the key value in the story's ecofeminist system. As Sengupta has it:

> What constitutes being "mannish" (the word Rokeya uses) is not simply a reversal of roles. For instance, there is a great emphasis put on science, aesthetics […], and scientific cooking as the domain of women. While war is considered a part of the moral world of men, Universities and knowledge production expand only under the leadership of women. (34)

20 Crucially, the segregation of men raises questions and leads Bhattacharya to call the story a dystopian fantasy (2006); it also implies that we should not read it as a political manifesto nor as a reformist essay (even if Hossain's husband famously had called the text "a terrible revenge", but had done so with utmost pride, Quayum, *Essential* xxii). Instead, I aim to show that the story is a unique combination of fable, science fiction, satire and utopia. The following section will thus hold that Hossain's story eludes easy categorisation in both form and content: because it relies on a dream narrative, it is dialogic more than it is definite. As such, the story seems to apply utopian thinking, less as a destination and more as a means of actually being in the world. This is evidenced by the blurring of the home / outside and dream / reality dichotomies which associates feminist and ecosophical concerns. In other words, the story's dialogic bent provides a political and an ethical framework for ecofeminist action through its innovative representations of consensus, cooperation, sustainability or respect.

Writing an ecofeminist dream

21 The stylistic and narrative devices of Hossain's dream-narrative and their relations with the ecofeminist politics have attracted little critical attention. Dreams are, however, a recurring literary device in first-wave feminist short fiction with Annie Denton Cridge's *Man's Rights or How would you like it?* (1870) or Olive Schreiner's *Dreams* (1891) as two of the most extensive examples. Dreams enable writers to explore discrepancies and circumvent censorship while constructing possibly endless alternate perspectives. That is why

Sultana, the main character's seemingly powerful name, is rather paradoxical given that she is being passively guided through the text. Despite the onomastics and despite her abilities for critical thinking, she comes out as an enthusiastic (albeit docile) character. The story is indeed punctuated with fertile contradictions, which contribute to the construction of the text's complex discourse. For instance, unlike what the opening sentences imply:

> One evening I was lounging in an easy chair in my bedroom and thinking lazily of the condition of Indian womanhood. I am not sure whether I dozed off or not. But as far as I remember, I was wide awake. (3)

the title of the story unambiguously indicates that Sultana is dreaming. As a dreamer, she might thus be considered both as an unreliable narrator whose psyche fabricated the oneiric content and as a perfectly authoritative source with a self-referencing oneiric material. To say it differently, the story relies on the polysemy of dreams, which imply both desirable and displaced narratives.

22   This oneiric dimension has mostly been documented through psychoanalytical approaches (Lakhi 2006; Yeasmin & Sayed 2019) as well as with references to cultural and religious studies (Murphy 2015). In addition, in her fascinating analysis of the recurrence of the waking dream in Hossain's work, Sengupta explains that:

> Unlike the explicit (and at times didactic) style with which she tackles girls' education or the strict gender segregation, questions of imagination and composition are addressed more obliquely through […] the metaphor and the frame of the waking dream. (22)

23   Following Sengupta's analysis, we could say that Hossain deliberately resorts to Sultana's dream as a metonymical device, or as a metaphor for the act of writing from a female point of view. That Hossain was "openly rebuked for her writing and forced to self-censor" (*ibid.*) should be taken into account when considering the aesthetic of uncertainty that playfully frames the text and is concentrated in the following line: "I am not sure if I had fallen asleep, but I believe I was awake" (3). The story also points to other feminine creative crafts,

knitting and needlework, which enact patience and delicacy and might work as another metaphor for female writing and expression thereby refining Barthes' analysis of the text as textile.[10] As Sultana admires Sister Sara's tasteful embroidery, the latter declares: "a man has not patience enough to pass thread through a needlehole even" (6), proposing that, when it comes to creating arts or a stable and sustainable environment, feminine equanimity is actually a more dynamic value than stereotypically male attitudes.

24   Clearly, through its distinct endorsement of stereotypical feminine values, Hossain's story does not aim at psychological realism or oneiric verisimilitude; instead, the dream sequence is used as a literary device that combines fantasy, displacements and reversals as strategies to subvert aesthetic and social categories. This is in line with analyses of later pieces of feminist utopias in which "female characters retreat into the interior space of the mind" (Kumar 98) thereby creating an intimate safe space that enables them to experiment and explore. If Hossain does not go as far as to portray altered states of consciousness that waver between madness and utopia, as a deliberate strategy to avoid patriarchal censorship while instilling doubt (Fancourt 2002), the combination of dream and utopia in "Sultana's Dream" essentially anticipates Piatti's conceptualisation of "projected places", which

> can be seen as genuinely literary concept […]. Although they are not settings, sequences of action can also be linked within the frame of projected places: Past action, planned action, action that might be desirable. (185)

25   Ladyland is indeed much more than a background setting as it contains the seeds for political and social reform: because of its oneiric dimension, the country is presented as a desirable or safe space for both readers and the protagonist, thereby playing a central role in the fictional economy. Through its engagement with proto-ecofeminism, the story topples aesthetic categories and develops new forms of interaction between characters and settings, with nature being the central organising principle without being associated with an explicitly spiritual practice. As such, Ladyland can also be read as an example of the Platonic Khôra, a "place, space, receptacle, container, […] in which paradigma unfolds and the

cosmos is created" (Wilde 99) or "the middle ground between the visible world and the eternal ideas or else the medium through which the deal models are copied in sensible bodies" (Mingarelli 83). That Plato links the Khôra to the nourishing countryside and to dreams in *Timaeus* makes it a particularly relevant tool for reading Hossain's text.[11]

26　Such connection is also perceptible in the Ladylanders' alluring relationship with their natural environment, which also incarnates the quest, described by Macé, that underlies all reading experiences and aims at helping readers to come to terms with the alterity depicted in fictional texts (45). To say it differently, through its idealised and oneiric depiction of nature and of a feminine system, the story forces both Sultana and the reader to try to make sense of an unknown, yet desirable world that still challenges core landmarks of social identity. Similarly, Lakhi suggests that:

> *Sultana's Dream* ignites a double quest for home: first, a return to the primal repressed desires for equality, respect and freedom present in every purdahnishin Bengali woman's mind, the desires which were women's real homes. The second quest for home lies within the tale itself since Rokeya transforms the entire nation or Ladyland into women's home, literally taking them out of the uncanny home of Bengal's zenanas. (10-11)

27　These quests also rely on satire and defamiliarisation. For example, the overarching trope of more or less symmetrical dual inversions (with women dominating men; Mardana v. zenana; honour v. liberty; night v. day; dream v. wakefulness etc.) is particularly rich, and points to a *reductio ad absurdum*, establishing the absurdity of domination over women and nature. This is achieved through the text's use of mostly invisible forces (such as air and electricity), which become yet another symbol of the women's "brain power". If Lakhi convincingly contends that "the fantastic traces the unsaid and unseen of culture, that which has been silenced, and made invisible: women's real homes" (21), I argue that Hossain's dream narrative works on a larger scope. By representing the oneiric organisation of liberated female characters, the text also helps uncover a systemic domination over women and nature while fostering openness and developing a holistic response.

28   That is why Lakhi explains that Hossain "uses alienating techniques which use jarring symbols that demand an end to superimposed illusions" (18), and she further holds that:

> Rokeya's aim is to estrange women readers from their familiar surroundings, or make the familiar uncanny and awaken in them their potential for transforming their present condition. Indeed, it is this strategy of defamiliarization which shocks Sultana into a realization of the strangeness and mutability of all that she had taken for granted. (18)

Even if I agree with Lakhi (as well as with Chatterjee's work on defamiliarisation in Hossain's story), I argue that Hossain's story subsequently unfolds a skilful familiarisation process through which readers are guided to the text's oneiric logic.

29   This familiarisation works as a strategy of the reader's involvement. As readers, we gradually discover the feats of Ladyland and, along with Sultana, we appreciate its inner coherence and are made to review our "horizon of expectation" (Jauss 22). Sultana's emotional responses first express surprise but quickly betray her enchantment ("the idea is marvellous" 12) as she begs Sister Sara to provide her with more details ("please let me know how you carry on land cultivation..." 12). While Bagchi imparts that Hossain "plays with [processes] of self-formation and processes of gendering" (127), I reason that these processes are aimed at readers and that Hossain's text aims at destabilising readers and at progressively conveying a compelling egalitarian message that stems from this defamiliarisation. Referring to what she called the "prolepsis approach", Paul wrote that the story shows "how women-centric societies can exist, not in the absence of male members, but despite their presence; and how such societies can be built on models of co-dependency and mechanisms of mutual support" (44). What the story emphasises is that these mechanisms need to be explored through the safe space of fictional and dreamlike experimentations first. Through its recurring uses of liminal moments (such as dialogues, dreams and defamiliarisation processes) as well as rich articulations of modes and devices, the story also conveys the possibility of co-dependency between humans and nature provided that women, like

men, can dream and experiment with fiction, with the ethics of care and with nature.

30 Hossain was not just a social reformer with a keen awareness of gender and environmental issues, but also an innovative writer experimenting with the powers of fiction. That is why this story is both a convincing example of feminist and utopian science fiction and an eco-critical answer to androcentric attitudes, as it relies on the fruitful ambiguities of fiction both as a means to depict this intricate and intimate connection and as a vehicle for exploration.

31 In his now classic study, Kumar argues that there is "a fundamental contradiction between religion and utopia", because "religion [is] typically an otherworldly concern; utopia's interest is in this world" (10). This is in line with Touraine who explained that "utopia began only when society abandoned the image of paradise. Utopia is one of the products of secularization" (29). Yet "Sultana's Dream" challenges these supposedly western (and perhaps masculine) labels: precisely because of its oneiric basis and settings that displace and remodel social, political and environmental issues, Ladyland is constructed as a direct response to the realistic world without being a product of secularization as it both criticises and integrates religious or spiritual habits, discourses and experiences. In addition, even if the story depicts an idealised relation to nature, the rest of Ladyland's premise does not really convey an ideal or a fully desirable world *per se*. As Hasanat noted "such an audacious attempt raises more questions than it can answer, especially when the questions that are raised are yet to be asked by her fellow contemporary women" (114). These questions include Hossain's educational and religious concerns, but also feminine depictions of dreams or eco-fantasies, and an invitation for more female narratives showing the richness and complexity of the history of South Asian feminism. "*Sultana's Dream* too addresses not just an undifferentiated patriarchy but one that intersects with religion and community; family and kinship; and nature, ecology and development" (Chaudhuri 112).

32 The systemic vision of oppression and its oneiric response foreshadow more recent works on ecofeminism and on social and environmental psychology (presaging studies or concepts such as

intersectionality, place identity or gender and environmental risk perception for instance), which really point to its relevance for 21st-century readers. That "Sultana's Dream" also drew recent critical and artistic attention (with Durga Bai's illustrated edition of the story published by Tara Books in 2014 or Chitra Ganesh's linocuts exhibition at the University of Michigan in 2018) suggests that Hossain's text might eventually engage in the ambitious dialogue it had sought to open on feminine imagination, ecofeminism and female spaces, whether they are utopian or projected. All in all, Hossain's story, and other ecofeminist utopian narratives, might then be read as a feminist and literary version of Foucault's heterotopia, a locus of exploration and experimentation with a variety of ecofeminist currents, that is, in Foucault's words, one of those places that

> do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. (3)

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NOTES

1 My title is derived from a brilliant collection of essays entitled A *Feminist Foremother*: *Critical Essays on Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain*, edited by Quayum & Hasan in 2017 and one of the most comprehensive references on Hossain written in English.

2 In her study of ecofeminism in Indian fiction, Patil (2020) gives us an overview of the many ecological attitudes and relationships to nature and defines ecosophy as "a philosophy of ecological harmony and equilibrium within human beings and nature" (Patil 11). In this paper, I will argue that Hossain's story develops a feminist ecosophy.

3 Bharati Ray also shares her surprise (xi).

4 "A term often used by Muslim writers literally meaning awakening [...] from the late nineteenth century and the birth of the Muslim women's movement from the early twentieth century" (Ray 44). Historians like Amin and Ray have noted the proximity and resemblance between the "new type" of Muslim and Hindu gentries that emerged at the turn of the century (Amin 1996; Ray 44). To our knowledge, only Mukherjee (2019), drawing from the study of Sarkar (2008) has explicitly studied Hossain through the prism of "the nationalist representations of Muslim women as 'backward' and 'victimised' whose "relation to the category of 'modern, ideal, Indian woman'" (Sarkar 49) was intrinsically associated with the image of a Hindu, upper caste, middle class *bhadramahila*, who were celebrated as signposts of 'progress' and 'enlightenment' among Bengali *bhadrasampraday* (Sarkar 49)" (Mukherjee 5).

5 "Cultural and spiritual feminists celebrate the liberatory potential of 'feminine values,' even as they acknowledge that many such attitudes are historically imposed upon women" (Salleh 9). By contrast, "political ecofeminists" tend to focus more on systematic change, on education, and on developing new tools towards inclusive environmental education and action. See also Lahar 93 and Mallory 309.

6   For instance, later ecofeminist scholars revisited Mies and Shiva's groundbreaking theorisation and distinguished between the "universal and the particular in ecofeminist ethics" (e.g., Kao 2010), investigating the application of Western concepts, such as the woman-nature connection, to other cultural contexts or developing a typology of these woman-nature connections (Eaton & Lorentzen 2003). In the final chapter of her fascinating book entitled *Ecofeminism and the Indian Novel* (2020), Patil shows how late twenty-century and early twenty-first century fictions "reconceptualised ecofeminism" but I claim that in pre-conceptualising ecofeminism in ways that both anticipate and differ from Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (2009) for example, Hossain's story also develops an ecofeminist ethics and praxis.

7   Similarly, Lakhi notes that "the dark, coal-fired kitchens of colonial Bengal are replaced in Ladyland with a hygienic outdoors where 'the kitchen was situated in a beautiful heart-shaped vegetable garden'" (Lakhi 19).

8   "The discipline of scientific knowledge, and the mechanical inventions it leads to, do not merely exert a gentle guidance over nature's course; they have the power to conquer and subdue her, *to shake her to her foundations*." (Bacon 93. Italics mine)

9   "It is a good thing for us to keep a few dreams of a house that we shall live in later, [...] so much later, in fact, that we shall not have time to achieve it. For a house that was final [...] would lead to thoughts—serious, sad thoughts—and not to dreams. It is better to live in a state of impermanence than in one of finality." (61)

10   Following Barthes' famous essay "Le Plaisir du texte" (1973), the feminine dimension of this trope has been extensively documented by Roussillon-Constanty and Dickinson (2018) for example.

11   According to Botz-Bornstein (173-174), the khôra is "the place" is a third kind of being which overlaps with neither being nor becoming. It advances a "logic other than that of the logos" and that is "neither 'sensible' nor 'intelligible'" (Derrida 15). The point which interests me most, however, is that in the *Timaeus*, Plato suggests that because the discourse on the *khôra* is not purely "logical", it would be "like a dream" (52b).

ABSTRACTS

English

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's 1905 short story "Sultana's Dream" depicts a utopian alliance between nature, science and women. As Sultana dreams of Ladyland, a country where men are "where they ought to be […], shut […] indoors", she marvels at the harmonious relationship between all female Ladylanders and their natural environment. Not only does "the whole place look like a garden", but also all technological innovations rely on a reasonable use of the surrounding natural resources. While the story presages the emergence of both spiritual and political ecofeminisms, the characters' connectedness to nature and virtuous interactions with the natural world largely depend on science and technology. I argue that this marked difference from other ecofeminist utopias partly derives from Ladyland's effort to educate all girls — an endeavour that clearly stems from Hossain's life and works. I then document Hasanat's claim (2013) that the women in the story defy "the masculine notion of power by gaining control over both man and nature." Last, drawing on Chaudhuri (2016) and others, I examine how, despite its potentially satirical and dystopic dimensions, Hossain's oneiric story develops a complex alternate way of articulating technology, nature and gender roles.

Français

La nouvelle de Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, « Le Rêve de Sultana » (1905) dépeint une alliance utopique entre la nature, la science et les femmes. Alors que Sultana rêve de « Ladyland », un pays où les hommes sont « où ils doivent être […] enfermés », elle admire les relations harmonieuses entre toutes les habitantes de Ladyland et leur environnement. Si « tout ici ressemble à un jardin », les innovations technologiques, elles aussi, reposent sur une utilisation raisonnée des ressources naturelles environnantes. Ainsi, alors que la nouvelle annonce l'émergence des éco-féminismes spirituels et politiques, elle se distingue d'autres utopies éco-féministes de par l'influence qu'exercent les sciences et techniques. Cette différence prend source dans la représentation de l'éducation des filles, directement inspirée du parcours personnel de Hossain. Cet article vise ainsi à explorer comment la nouvelle renverse la notion masculine de pouvoir en représentant un pouvoir féminin exercé sur la nature. Il s'agit ensuite d'examiner comment, en dépit des dimensions satiriques ou dystopiques, le récit onirique d'Hossain repose sur un modèle riche et inédit d'articulation de la technologie, de la nature et des rôles de genre.

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Mots-clés

Hossain (Rokeya Sakhawat), Sultana's Dream, éco-féminisme, Bengal, utopie, récits de rêves, purdah, rôles de genre, identité de lieu, science

Keywords

Hossain (Rokeya Sakhawat), Sultana's Dream, ecofeminism, Bengal, utopia, dream narrative, purdah, gender roles, place identity, science

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Many Faces of Madness: Mindless Destruction with Snapshots of Preservation

Madhumeeta Sinha

OUTLINE

TEXT

1   In this paper,[1] I bring together two temporally and spatially separated lands as well as the struggle for conserving the forests and lives of the people there. My attempt in presenting the narratives of resistance by women in these different lands, situated faraway from each other (the foothills of Himalayas in the Uttarakhand region is the first territory and the red soiled tribal region of Jharkhand is the

other one) looks at a concern similar to both: that of environmental preservation.

2   This feminist account traces the biography of Sudesha, one of the major protagonists of the Chipko movement through the documentary film *Sudesha* (1983) and the poetry of Jacinta Kerketta, a writer, journalist, activist, who through her biting poems lays out the values, histories, memories and concerns of her people with acute sensitivity, and irony. Sudesha Devi and Jacinta Kerketta are from two different times and from varied locations but they are similar in relation to their concern for environment and are committed to the cause of preservation of nature. Sudesha, during her struggle, worked with the community on an everyday basis and created a movement to protect the forests in the 1970s. Due to her education and powerful writing, Kerketta is lending her voice to take up the issues of the tribal people, particularly from Jharkhand, to the national and international level and is keeping the environmental concerns alive today. One aspect which has a strong resonance between the two protagonists of my paper is their strong opposition to the idea of development which treats the local rural poor, whose lives are dependent on natural resources, with complete disregard.

3   The Chipko movement is considered as one of the first environmental movements (1973) in the Indian context to protect the forests. It may be interesting to note that the tribal land "Jharkhand" (also the name of a State in India), which means, the forest region, also has a long history of protest against exploitation of its forests. State sponsored exploitation of natural resources and alienation of Adivasi [2] people from economic development processes thus shaped the "social pressures that led to the creation of a politically meaningful Jharkhand region and repeated demands for a separate Jharkhand state". [3] Before I proceed with the specific regional theme, a brief account of the current Indian developmental context is in place.

4   It is quite common to find in contemporary writings on India (in newspapers, novels, academic books) [4] the presentation of contrasting images of the country: the rising number of Indian dollar-millionaires versus the countless millions sunk in poverty and misery; the rapid global expansion of the Indian software and entertainment

industries versus the hurtling trains-without-brakes of farmer suicides and assaults on women; gated communities, high-rise townships, and smart-cities versus collapsing mofussil infrastructure and the canker of slums like exploding supernovas; unprecedented social and territorial mobility versus the resurgence of ethnic and religious hostilities. Given the magnitude and complexities of India's contradictions, it is quite difficult to attempt a detailed account of all the factors shaping "power and contestation" (Menon and Nigam) in India today. What I want to record here, from a feminist perspective, is the difficult relationship between the Indian State and the female citizens in preserving environment. I seek to do this by analysing the "battle" of Chipko, fought for the protection of the fragile ecology in the Himalayan valleys, not against foreign armies but against the state organizations.

5   The feminist ethos of these struggles is the framework, which I derive from the documentary *Sudesha* by Deepa Dhanraj and the works of Jacinta Kerketta, a tribal woman poet from Jharkhand. Taking a cue from *Am I That Name?*, Denise Riley's well-known study of the shifting historical constructions of "women" in relation to other categories used to define personhood, Butler points out:

> If one 'is' a woman that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered 'person' transcends the specific paraphernalia of gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out 'gender' from the political and cultural intersection in which it is invariably produced and maintained. (3)

This does not, of course, imply that Butler proposes a refusal of representational politics—she is all too keenly aware that this would be unviable, since the field of power is based on the structures of language and politics. Her suggestion is that we take what Marx called "the historical present" as a critical point of departure, and "formulate within this constituted frame a critique of the categories of identity that contemporary juridical structures engender, naturalise, and immobilise" (5).

6   The nation-state, the fundamental political unit of the modern world, is a peculiar entity that is both the source and the effect of such juridical power. As Rajeswari Sunder Rajan perceptively notes:

> Living *in* the nation today involves, also, living *with* the state. This is a matter of our being inescapably constituted as citizens — a fact which, in addition to the familiar duties and obligations of civic citizenship, entails every day, existential negotiation with bureaucratic regulations, welfare institutions, and the functionaries of the state; and entails being regulated by and having recourse to the laws of the land. (1)

Sunder Rajan reiterates that the State does not function in a predictably uniform or arbitrary manner, nor does the marginalization of some sections of civic citizenship occur due to a singular trait such as gender; each axis of empowerment / marginalization being built upon other axes. For instance, the status of actual "women" is determined by ways in which the potential for gender equality intersects with the prevailing realities of class, caste, ethnicity, sexual preference, location etc. This well resonates with Butler's argument when she suggests that a system such as universal adult franchise (one citizen, one vote) guarantees equality and grants rights on the one hand; but, on the other hand, it works within limits imposed by the differences built into the category of "woman". What this entails on the ground for a feminist politics is this: "1), the identification of a historical common oppression, or more correctly an oppression both inflicted on women and experienced by them *as women*; and 2), the politicization of this oppression as it becomes the grounds of solidarity and collective struggle in that name" (Sunder Rajan 16).

7   It is this premise on which my analysis of the documentary *Sudesha* (1983) and the poems of Jacinta Kerketta rests in the two following parts.

Part 1: Sudesha Devi – The fight for forest

8   The context of Sudesha's fight is the "Chipko" movement (literally the word "chipko" means '*to hug*' in Hindi) which was founded in India by peasant women who recognized the economic consequences of deforestation of their region. What started as efforts of protecting forests in individual villages became one of the first environmental movements in the Third World. Deepa Dhanraj's documentary *Sudesha* is an account of Sudesha's activism. She led the women of her village to save the forests, thereby challenging the rules of Indian society and women's traditional roles — her courage we see in breaking patriarchal shackles. While she mobilized the women for protests, her husband and in-laws tried to constrain her activities, and the breaking point came after she was arrested by the police and put in jail. The family did not allow her to come back on release. Though the film portrays her abandonment and her consequent loneliness, her transition into a social worker committed to the cause of environment is highlighted. In her interviews the resilience that is demonstrated speaks of a feminist consciousness and an awareness of the patriarchal oppression. In an interview when she speaks of the women reaching the timber auction office and a large police contingent running away at their sight, is a hilarious example of the impact of women's unity in the changed context, on the one hand; on the other, it is a quiet statement of the strength and confidence that Sudesha has gained due to her conviction for the struggle. In other words both concepts proposed by Butler from the quote used earlier: "solidarity" and "collective struggle" can be seen coming alive through her narrative. The women in the movement along with protecting the forests also started taking up mundane issues such as protesting against alcoholism, violence in the family, etc. This awareness of the patriarchal oppression brings the women to fight various battles, some closer to home, or within it. In an interesting conversation, Sudesha mentions that the only time of peace, relaxation and fun that she had was in the prison where there was no house work and food was served three times a day! This again resonates with Butler's idea of the historical nature of exploitation of women by locking them in

an identity trap. Sudesha's ironical statement is an indicator of her new political subjectivity which recognizes the value of her work.

9   Sudesha Devi and Gaura Devi were two popular women leaders in a large sea of women overshadowed by their male counterparts who played an equally important role in securing forests rights and protecting the environment. In 1974, Sudesha spearheaded the women's drive to protect the Rampur forests from contractors, going as far as spending nights amongst the trees in order to shield them from abuse and destruction when the men were negotiating with the government for land compensation. By referring to the trees as '*maika*' (mother's home) the trees became a site of strong emotional bonding and natural ties, and also the act of physical hugging developed a bond between the women and nature. Due to physically hugging the tree, the timber lobby was challenged to shoot the women instead of harming the forests. Ultimately, those sent for felling trees were forced out of the Reni village due to the mass protests by women. For Sudesha, the movement was about conserving the natural resources but it gradually also began challenging the patriarchal social norms. With other women she wanted to protect the environment, i.e. preserve its state. Simultaneously, the women were questioning the status quo, biased in favor of men, and were demanding a role in the decision-making process which directly affected them. A feminist ethos became an important factor in the development of this movement as it highlighted the relationship between the exploitation of both nature and women.

10   This context of women in the Chipko movement calls for a mapping of the concept of "ecofeminism" which highlights the idea of women in movements to conserve environment. The term Ecofeminism can be defined as a "value system, a social movement, and a practice… [which] also offers a political analysis that explores the links between androcentrism and environmental destruction" (Birkeland 18). In India, Vandana Shiva has been the most influential proponent of ecofeminism. In the book co-authored with Maria Mies, they argue that women have an awareness of "the connections between patriarchal violence against women, other people and nature" (Mies 14). However, Shiva has been criticized for her monolithic projection of the category "women" (Dietrich, "Plea for Survival",

Reflections). Other authors too, like, Meera Nanda and Bina Agarwal, have found Shiva's position essentialist and unmindful of differences and devoid of any historical grounding (Rao 128). Taking a materialist position, Bina Agarwal proposes the term "feminist environmentalism". According to her,

> it is critical to examine the underlying basis of women's relationship with the nonhuman world at levels other than ideology (such as through the work women and men do and the gender division of property and power) and to address how the material realities in which women of different classes (/castes/races) are rooted might affect their responses to environmental degradation. (123)

My analysis aligns with this position and locates the resistance movements in Uttarakhand and Jharkhand in the materialist feminist framework.

11   In relation to the discussion of the filmic text it is also interesting to look at the filmmaker's journey. Deepa Dhanraj's film-making career is all about her own feminist concerns, which explains the alliances which she builds with other democratic movements. Dhanraj learned film-making and got interested in independent political documentary. She learned the most important lessons through her association with women's groups that were taking up the causes of poor and rural women workers and placing them within the framework of patriarchy and socio-economic inequality. She was the driving force behind the film-making feminist collective named 'Yugantar', [5] and made four films during the 1980s. *Molkarin* (1981) which is the Marathi word for female domestic help focused on the oppressive working conditions of hundreds of maidservants in Pune. It reported on how they came together to form an organisation to fight for their rights. In a similar vein, her second film *Tambaku ki Aag / The Tobacco Embers* (1982) traced the history of a women's trade union consisting of over three thousand tobacco workers in Nipani, Karnataka. In 1983, she made two interesting and, at that time, unusual docu-fictional films: the first was *Sudesha*, while the second was *This is Not a Mere Story* which sensitively explored the many dimensions of gendered oppression in a middle-class working woman's life (Sinha).

12   *Sudesha* depicts the difficulties that men, under the influence of the contractors and officials, start inflicting on Sudesha, including even in relation to her position in the women's groups. She decides to leave the leadership position and go along with other women. This intuitive sense of what would work for the larger group and the benefit of the common cause, but also her unwavering commitment to the ethics of a community life and safeguarding its interest are of paramount importance for her.

13   Then the question arises: what is the significance of the Chipko Movement? In an easy move, one can talk of the rampant destruction of the environment and massive deforestation in that region and endorse the futility of the movement and the work of leaders like Sudesha. But one could also consider the efforts that have become part of the spirit of individuals and small practices rather than transformative changes which come in the garb of development. Some of these insignificant-looking practices, which have become the guiding forces around the world for policy makers and movements for the conservation of the Earth, are also one of the first instances of ecofeminism. [6] For example, there have been many initiatives for forest management, which can broadly be classified into four categories: the Government initiated Joint Forest Management (JFM) programme; Autonomous Initiatives; Mixed Initiatives (State-cum-autonomous); and People's Movements (Agarwal). The movement also raised important questions like, what are ways to improve the relationship between sexes which in turn could change the lives of women in the domestic setup; how could the awareness of equal sharing of power be instilled in the context of a movement?

14   Some of these issues get raised in the next section again in order to study a somewhat distant and contemporary context mediated by the poetry of Jacinta Kerketta.

Part 2: Jacinta Kerketta – The poetry of protest

> Adivasi history has highly influenced me because this community has always fought against tendencies and forces that have wanted to

> enslave other human beings. Today, the Adivasi community is understanding and fighting against the designs of enslaving human beings in a different way in the name of development and industrialisation... Human beings should be concerned about the lives of these other entities also. This belief keeps Adivasi communities in close contact with nature and strengthens their belief in the life and the right of others to live. That is why, in my poems, I write against that tendency of such forces, which want to enslave humans of a lower class, just for the benefit of a handful of people.

15   The above quote from an interview with Groundxero identifies the philosophy and essence of the poetry of Jacinta Kerketta, some of which I will analyse in continuation of my account of the Chipko Movement. The voice of this woman poet narrates the stories of struggle, resistance and values as a representative of a land and a people, and the issues of development and the injustice taking place in the name of progress. Kerketta is a poet, writer, activist, freelance journalist working in the Jharkhand region of India, which was bifurcated from the erstwhile state of Bihar in 2000. The reason for this division was largely the economic and cultural marginalization of the tribal people over centuries and their struggle to get an autonomous or self-ruled state. That dream remains largely unfulfilled but struggles are on to change the ethos of the ruling classes (Shah; Pati and Singh).

16   Kerketta belongs to the Oraon Adivasi community having and using its own language, Kurukh, but she prefers to write in Hindi. She speaks about this difficult choice:

> People are never worried about why my mother tongue is disappearing but when I say I write in Hindi, they have questions. I write in Hindi because I want to speak to the perpetrators of injustice and violence on my community in their own language. I write in their language so they will know what we think of them. Also it gets translated into English.[7]

She knows the power of writing, including poetry, and is determined to continue. She was born in a village called Khudposh, located on the banks of river Koel in West Singhbhum district in Jharkand, close to

the state of Odisha. Her village is also near the Saranda forest, which is the biggest Sal forest in Asia.

17   In her poem "The Flowers of Saranda", Kerketta invokes the distressing imagery of the "spade" and "pickaxe" in tears while being made to commit the most mindless of crimes akin to digging the grave of the entire humankind by cutting the trees in Saranda forests indiscriminately. These machines are working on official orders, "some scribbled pages", that have far more sinister intentions than these equipments. Giving the nature a defiant yet nurturing subjectivity, Jacinta Kerketta also weaves in an element of hope: "the new dawn brings forth another sweet blossom." The trees which have survived the mayhem give birth to innumerable fragrant flowers which surreptitiously immerse the entire forest area with a vision of regeneration. This personification of the forest for providing "perfume on the sly / strikes at the stench / of the machine and dynamite" though seems like an antagonistic act but for the poet it is the tireless deed of nature for "the greater common good".[8] Thus the poem reminds of nature's commitment towards life forces and the undying commitment of the local Adivasi communities, whom Kerketta represents, for trying to protect these forests. "The Flowers of Saranda" by juxtaposing both, the wonderful act of natural forces and the madness of human beings, appeals to its readers to pick sides in this war for justice conscientiously.

18   Kerketta's central theme provides us with a critical indigenous perspective on the modern development model and the erosion of cultural and communitarian roots. For instance, in the poem "*O Shahar*" (O City)—Kerketta writes,

> Leaving behind their homes, their soil, their bales of straw,
> Fleeing the roof over their heads, they often ask,
> O city! Are you ever wrenched by the very roots,
> In the name of so-called progress?

By invoking the subjectivity of the city, she is forging an alliance with it and circumventing human interventions and the pressure of everyday expansion.

19   Kerketta's poetry is full of metaphors from the forest and nature depicting the intrinsic bonds Adivasi communities have with them.

For Kerketta, knowledge about trees and forests is both simple and profound: to live and to give and these recurring tropes are embedded in her poetry.

20 She recalls, too, the communities' long history of resistance since the Santhal Rebellion in the nineteenth century. Her portrayal of the community is not written as a victim's narrative but an empowering story of survival and resistance. The simplicity of her language and the depth of her critical worldview resonate with many young Adivasi who are experiencing a similar crisis in their ancestral homelands. [9]

21 The rebellion referred to in the quote was led by two tribal leaders Siddhu and Kanhu against the British government and their wily supporters, the Indian landlords in 1855.

22 Let us consider her account of cutting, rather killing trees:

> "Why are Trees cut Down?"
> They want to drag the trees
> into the mainstream
> But do trees uprooted from their land
> Ever become mainstreamed?
> This is why trees are cut down.

This poem brings out the cruelty in the act of mainstreaming. In other words, what would be considered a process of change is in fact the path of doom. And so Jacinta Kerketta explains the paradoxes of life in the short poem, "Waiting" as follows:

> They are waiting for us to become civilized
> We are waiting for them to become human [10]

With Haiku-like precision, Jacinta Kerketta presents us a worldview that touches the pulse of the human contradictions. In this poem titled "Waiting", she depicts the humiliating attitude of the non-tribal people naming her community an uncivilized or barbarous group. She, on her part, quietly asks them to become human beings before thinking of them derogatorily. The title captures the futility of the situation and the uneasy and suspicious nature of the relationship between tribal and non-tribal communities.

23 Kerketta says about her poetry, "I write about the struggles of the Adivasi communities, the oppression they face in the name of development, their trials and their histories".[11] Kerstin Bachtler almost endorsing her views further adds:

> Her special achievement is that she succeeds in grasping the main problems of the Adivasi with an analytical — realist view and depicting them in a few sentences, such as the environment degradation, habitat and ethnic identity.[12]

24 The poet is moving beyond the individual realm to acquire a communal voice. She takes on the responsibility of a representative, to portray the bridge between memories and possibilities. As Chaturvedi rightly pointed out, "while reading the poetry of indigenous writers, one naturally recognizes an epistemological pattern that is composed of interpersonal subjectivity, communal identity and reciprocity with nature" (8). These commonalities are not themes of poems but life philosophies that shape the poetic expression of indigenous writers across the world. Explaining the process, Jacinta Kerketta says in an interview with *Ground Xero*:

> When my own "I" speaks in the poems, then this "I" begins to feel the emotions of any other "I" just as itself. But I want to communicate to the readers this kind of feeling through the "I". I always try to feel the other "I"s and then document them in my poems. In this process of writing with my own and others' — all these "I"s — I can feel the pain of others as "I", and then through these respective "I"s, others can also feel in the same way. We often feel ourselves in others' stories. That's why I have tried to cast this deep feeling in the form of "I" in my poems. In every poem, rather than searching for the other, the "I" is involved in other kinds of "I"s. We have to destroy the illusion that we can stay neutral in front of these things and issues.

In this document itself, she proposes the voice as a coming together of several I's, as is the philosophy of the tribal community.

25 These poems from Jharkhand, resonate with similar concerns as we have seen in the Chipko Movement and Sudesha's fight. This mineral rich land has been providing iron, bauxite, coal, copper, mica and other resources to the rest of the country. Today the Adivasi

communities have lost control over their *jal*, *jangal*, *jameen* (water, forest and land) and are fighting a losing battle.

Conclusion

26 The Chipko and the Jharkhand movements for conservation of forests have brought to the fore the connection between poverty and the degradation of environment. While all objectives have not been achieved and goals may be changing due to the complexity of the struggles, the need for sustainable development has become a common cause for the environmental movements.

27 The protests against development programs have become gendered in nature because of the huge participation and leadership of women. Women can recognize the connection between development and their subservient status in society and this awareness helps them voice their protests in a more nuanced way. As Manisha Rao states:

> Protest movements against environmental destruction and struggles for survival highlight the fact that caste, class and gender issues are deeply enmeshed in it. It is the poor, lower class and lower caste, and within them, the peasant and tribal women, who are worst, affected and hence, they are the most active in the protests. (138)

28 Also, these engagements indicate the needs, and the possibilities, of thinking/acting beyond the framework of individual female victimhood, of pushing towards a conception of politics as a site of renegotiating women's autonomy and prevailing definitions of "norm" and "normality". Dealing with the tensions that undergird this new conjuncture, "the categories of identity" pose a productive challenge to both Indian feminism and the state in its journey ahead.

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NOTES

1 I borrow the title *Many Faces of Madness* from an eponymous documentary film by Amar Kanwar depicting the degradation of environment due to mining, deforestation, water and soil pollution due to industrial waste, destruction of mangroves, etc., in India.

2 The term Adivasi literally means 'initial dwellers' and designates communities which are not always included in the system of classification of castes in India. It is often translated as 'tribe'. Apart from the derogatory sense of the word, the term 'tribe' is politically loaded in the Indian context, given, among other things, the Affirmative Action policy which provides for

a quota of seats in civil service and in education for those belonging to a list of communities officially recognised as 'Scheduled Tribes'.

3   Stuligross quoted in "Political ecology of Jharkhand conflicts" by Sarah Jewitt.

4   The best examples can be found in the novels of Arvinda Adiga and non-fiction writings like those of Rana Dasgupta and Suketu Mehta, which provide ample evidence of the immense gaps in the Indian society. Also the following newspaper reports are but a few examples of the stark contrast between communities in India: https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/rich-poor-divide-in-india-widening-as-economy-grows-report/story-5iyHD5PbJa4kqCw8qBrNsO.html and https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/world-inequality-report-the-rich-poor-gap-in-india-7664916/.

5   Dhanraj started this film collective along with Abha Bhaiyya, Navroze Contractor and Meera Rao.

6   The Chipko protests managed a major victory in 1980 with a 15-year ban on felling of trees in the Himalayan forests of that state with Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India. Since then, the movement has spread to many states in the country, the Appiko Movement in Northern Karnataka, which started in 1983, being one of the best examples.

7   https://www.huffpost.com/archive/in/entry/jacinta-kerketta-nighat-sahiba-kashmir-jharkhand-poems-language_in_5c41f480e4b027c3bbc14a3a. Accessed 9 November 2022.

8   Arundhati Roy has a book by the same name on another major environmental movement in India called *Narmada Bachao Andolan* (Save the Narmada Movement).

9   https://literaturecurry.com/blog-details/52/ten-voices-from-adivasi-literature. Accessed 9 November 2022.

10   The poem "Waiting", translated by Richa Nagar, is part of the collection "*Ishwar aur Bazar*" ("*The God and the Market*"). https://richa.nagar.umn.edu/publications/translations-%E0%A4%85%E0%A4%A8%E0%A4%B5%E0%A4%A6/thirteen-poems. Accessed 9 November 2022

11   https://kavishala.in/@kavishala-labs/know-about-jacinta-kerketta-an-adivasi-young-poet-and-journalist. Accessed 9 November 2022.

12   Quoted in https://second.wiki/wiki/jacinta_kerketta.

ABSTRACTS

English

This article is a brief analysis of two contexts of struggles, and also of celebration of the values of preservation of forests. One of the locations is in the Uttarakhand region well known for the emblematic "Chipko" movement of the 1980s, when women fought the epic battle to protect trees by hugging them. We study the documentary film by Deepa Dhanraj, based on the life of Sudesha Devi one of the leaders whose example brought women together to resist and fight the power of the state. The second location is the state of Jharkhand, which has seen ongoing struggles for conservation over decades. The echoes of the steps of the resistance movement can be heard in the powerful voice of Jacinta Kerketta. The life and work of these two activists present a case for reflection on the imbrication of the personal and the political in the context of social movements.

Français

Cet article présente une analyse de deux contextes de luttes incluant la célébration des valeurs de la préservation de la nature, plus particulièrement des forêts. L'un des lieux où ces luttes se sont produites se situe dans la région d'Uttarakhand, endroit emblématique associé au mouvement « Chipko » des années 1980, quand des femmes se sont dressées pour protéger des arbres en les enlaçant alors que ces derniers étaient voués à l'abattage. Nous analysons *Sudesha*, un film documentaire de Deepa Dhanraj basé sur la vie de Sudesha Devi, l'une des meneuses de cette lutte et qui a servi d'exemple à d'autres femmes pour organiser la résistance et la lutte contre le pouvoir en place. Le second lieu des luttes pour la préservation des forêts depuis plusieurs décennies est l'État du Jharkhand. Jacinta Kerketta a prêté une voix puissante à travers ses écrits à ce mouvement de résistance. La vie et l'œuvre de ces deux militantes est l'occasion d'engager une réflexion sur l'imbrication du personnel et du politique dans le contexte des mouvements sociaux.

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