

A Study of Ecofeminism in the Novel Mistress of Spices

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Abstract:- Ecocriticism which began and slowly became popular in last few decades is the study or portrayal of environment in various forms. Lawrence Buell and Cheryl Glotfelty, Simon C. Estok, Harold Fromm, William Howarth popularized it. It later got branched out into ecofeminism which studies about women and their relation with nature. Several Indian writers right from Raja Rao to R.K.Narayan and modern writers like Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, and Arundhati Roy contributed through their work to this branch of ecocriticism. This paper endeavours to study ecofeminism in the novel *Mistress of Spices* authored by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Chitra Banerjee uses the different elements of nature like fire and water in the entire novel. She uses underwater life, island and ocean as the integral part of setting in the novel and serpents, Sampatti's fire as characters in the work. Spices are interwoven in the novel that are used by Tilo adeptly to cure and heal the Asian community in Oakland. Each chapter is named after a spice. The stylistic features of the novel also has nature and its different elements. Nature becomes an inseparable part of this work and it is presented in all its forms and the complete cycle of creation, preservation and destruction.

Keywords- *Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, Mistress of Spices, nature.*

I. INTRODUCTION

A new study named Ecocriticism started in 1970 but it began as an academic discipline in 1990's. Cheryl Glotfelty, one of the pioneers in the field, has defined ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment"[1] and Lawrence Buell declares that this study must be "conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis." David Mazel adds that it is the analysis of literature "as though nature mattered." [3] The term "ecocriticism" was coined in 1978 by William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." [4] This present paper intended to study ecocriticism and ecofeminism from the perspective of *Mistress of Spices*, written by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The paper first explains ecocriticism and ecofeminism, then it goes on to look at the literature written in India which shows different elements of ecofeminism. Then it examines the elements of ecofeminism in the novel *Mistress of Spices*. Ecocriticism is the study of relation between environment and living organisms. It also studies how these relationships are emulated in literature. There are a number of studies by eminent professors like Lawrence Buell, the pioneer of ecocriticism.

II. ECOCRITICISM

The word ecocriticism is a semi neologism that is to say it is though being used since last few decades, is not very popular or used. The first term in ecocriticism is short of ecology, which is involved with the relationships between living organisms in their natural environment and their relationships with that environment. Ecocriticism is also concerned with the relationships between literature and environment or how man's relationships with his physical environment are mirrored in literature. The ecocriticism purview is very wide as it is not limited to any literary genre. The most widely known eco critics are Lawrence Buell and Cheryl Glotfelty, Simon C. Estok, Harold Fromm, William Howarth, William Rueckert, Suellen Campbell, Michael P. Branch and Glen A. Love. It was only in the 1990's that ecocriticism emerged as a separate discipline although it is a fact that the relationship between man and his physical environment had always been interesting to literary critics. The interest in ecocriticism expanded with time as man co-exists with nature or some environment and it is not possible for man to part ways with environment. As long back the Red Indian leader, Chief Seattle has rightly said that, 'The earth does not belong to man but the man belongs to the earth', and also in the same speech he says, "All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth. Man does not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand of it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself, these kind of speeches and words made people realize that survival of man depended solely on the survival of the earth and the way and the speed with which natural resources are exploited cannot go on unhindered." [5] This realization brought to fore more than ever the study and research on Ecocriticism, which

helps them fight for the world in which they live and also for the urgent need to do something about ecology and environment surrounding them. The end of the twentieth century showed clearly that everyone had to do something to help the Earth survive. Ecocriticism is one of the ways in which humanists fight for the world in which they live. The reflection of that difficult struggle in the area of culture and spirit speaks for the urgency of action or the urgent need to do something in this respect. This unusual and interesting (interdisciplinary) combination of the physical and the spiritual can be seen in ecology and ecocriticism and leads to one aim to save the environment at any cost. Two unlike and diverse disciplines, ecology and literary criticism, are clubbed to evolve the Earth's wellbeing. William Rueckert's in his 1978 essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" [2] uses the word ecocriticism for the first time and it remained passive vocabulary till the 1989 Western Literature Association meeting (in Coeur d'Alene), where Cheryll Glotfelty (Assistant Professor of Literature and the Environment at the University of Nevada, Reno) revived the term. Cheryll's call for an "ecocriticism" was immediately seconded at that same WLA meeting by Glen Love (Professor of English at the University of Oregon) in his Past President's speech, entitled "Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Literary Criticism." [6] Since that meeting in 1989, the term "ecocriticism" has blossomed and is used frequently in articles, papers and academic writings.

III. ECOFEMINISM

Ecofeminism, also called ecological feminism is a branch of feminism that examines the connections between women and nature. Its name was coined by French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974. According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, "Ecofeminism is defined as a philosophical and political theory and movement which combines ecological concerns with feminist ones, regarding both as resulting from male domination of society." [7] According to Webster's New World Encyclopaedia, "Ecofeminism is a movement or theory that applies feminist principles and ideas to ecological issues". [8], it is one of the forms of feminism which has emanated through the amalgamation of feminism and environmentalism. The term ecofeminism was coined by the Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974. She used it "to call upon women to lead an ecological revolution to save the planet" (Merchant 184). "Ecofeminism is a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women. It emerged in the mid-1970s alongside second-wave feminism and the green movement. Ecofeminism brings together elements of the feminist and green movements, while at the same time offering a challenge to both. It takes from the green movement a concern about the impact of human activities on the non-human world and from feminism the view of humanity as gendered in ways that subordinate, exploit and oppress women." [9] Ecofeminism stresses on the way the nature and women are treated by the patriarchal society. They studies foster how women and nature are wrongfully exploited by the lopsided rules of the society. The followers of Ecofeminism propagate to treat earth as sacred and to respect and save the earth. Ecofeminists oppose the hierarchical structure that grants power to men and allows for the exploitation of women and nature. Ecofeminists consider the predicament of nature and women as one and thus try to bring to fore solutions to both. This way of thinking developed into a branch of ecofeminism known as radical ecofeminism. The theorists who believe in this contend that both woman and nature are negatively commoditised and the patriarchal society is responsible for this. Cultural ecofeminists, on the other hand, encourage an association between women and the environment. They contend that women have a more intimate relationship with nature because of their gender roles (e.g., family nurturer and provider of food) and their biology (e.g., menstruation, pregnancy, and lactation). As a result, cultural ecofeminists believe that such associations allow women to be more sensitive to the sanctity and degradation of the environment. They suggest that this sensitivity ought to be prized by society insofar as it establishes a more direct connection to the natural world with which humans must coexist. Cultural ecofeminism also has roots in nature-based religions and goddess and nature worship as a way of redeeming both the spirituality of nature and women's instrumental role in that spirituality. As a recent literary approach Ecocriticism studies "the relationship between literature and physical environment" and answers such questions as, "How is nature represented in this sonnet? How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it? In what ways has literacy itself affected humankind's relationship to the natural world? In what ways and to what effect is the environmental crisis seeping into contemporary literature and popular culture? etc." [10]

IV. ECOFEMINISM IN INDIA

India is well endowed with nature and the worship of nature has been a way of life since time immemorial. People have been worshipping the natural objects like the sun the moon the plants, rivers etc. But with changing times the truculence towards nature has also widened. The male dominated society in Indian culture has marginalized nature as well as woman for fulfilment of their needs since the ancient times. A positive stride towards this parochial society has been the Chipko movement, which has brought to fore the women who in large numbers took cudgels to protest against felling of trees. The conception of tree-hugging was adopted to

curb activities such as deforestation, lumbering and mining. This movement was a consequence of severe turmoil emanating in local women who were influenced the most by state-level verdicts leading to environmental deterioration. Women who were champions of environmental issues are Medha Patkar, Mahasweta Devi, Arundhati Roy and C.K Janu. Many women authors like Anita Desai in her works represents nature or uses symbolism of nature in relation to women characters that allows the reader to detect new and undiscovered realms of Ecofeminism. Her novels like *Cry, the peacock*, *Fire on the mountain* envelops the burning issues of nature and woman. *Cry, The Peacock* represents the vital connection between nature and woman. *Fire on the Mountain* revolves around three women characters Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das. The response of these characters to different situations in life has been expressed with natural images to portray the inner consciousness. The novel depicts the darker shades of nature with a mishmash of darker side of concerned women characters. This novel makes it clear that ecocriticism encircles not only ecological issues, but also those natural icons that contribute to a relevant connection between human and non-human relationships.[11] Arundhati Roy's most acclaimed work, *The God of Small Things* depicts the relationship between women and nature and the way both are oppressed by the patriarchal society. The novel interprets the deterioration of the fictional village of Ayemenem. The pollution of the river Meenachal and the rehabilitation of the History house as a tourist harbour are crucial to the work which leads the way to the association between ecological exploitation and gender discrimination.[12] Kiran Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* portrays the problems generated due to man's encroachment upon the natural order of things and exhibits that the affinity amongst humans and animals is stronger than the relations between men.[13]

V. ECOFEMINISM IN MISTRESS OF SPICES

Multifaceted, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an accomplished Indian American author, poet and professor who combines in her works diaspora, feminism and ecofeminism. One of the works that strongly depicts ecofeminism in her books is *The Mistress of Spices*. This book has been made into a film and was also short listed for Orange prize. In *Mistress of Spices*, Tilo, a specialist in the secret power of spices, dedicates her life to helping those in need within the South Asian community in California. Tilo the mistress of spices is the protagonist of the novel and is trained by the First Mother amongst the nature to use spices as healing power. She was named NAYAN TARA –at birth, the star of the eye, star seer, and also the flower that grows by the dust road. As the cows run dry at the time of her birth she was fed with the milk of ass which helped her in getting the sight and words sooner than others. The author brings her closer to nature and entangles her entire life with different elements of nature from her birth. She was a special child as she had magical powers and used them for the villagers and in return got luxuries of life for her and her family. Out of boredom, discontentment and monotony she sent a calling thought with a gold hook over the waters by which pirates came in search of her and took her away killing her parents and destroying the village with fire. She lives her life with the pirates bringing life and death as the queen of pirates. Her life gets more intertwined with the powers given by nature. As a pirate queen she reviews her life and wants to know her longing and sends a calling thought over the water again. As a result a typhoon comes in the water and she gets released and saved by the serpents of under water. Water and fire become an important part of her life that changes her life from a village belle to a pirate queen and now takes her to an unknown world of spices and magic led by the serpents, she jumps into the water and in the morning she found herself naked on the shore. She is chosen by the First Mother as the spice girl and under the guidance of First Mother she renames herself as TILOTTAMA - It means Life giver, restorer of health and hope. Tilo is the sesame seed of which the flower is so small and straight that mothers pray for their children to have a nose shaped like it. It is golden brown in colour under the sway of planet Venus. Til (Indian name for sesame) when ground into paste with sandal wood cures diseases of heart and liver. When fried in its own oil restores luster when one has lost interest in their life. Tilottama is the most beautiful Apsara in the court of God Indira. She is the most elegant of all dancers. She was crest jewelled among women. Along with her other friends Aparajita - a flower whose juice when smeared on eyelids leads one to victory and Pia - the tree whose ashes rubbed on limbs brings vigour, Tilo passed the ceremony of purification i.e., entering the Sampati's fire. Tilo loves spices, knows their origins, what their colours signify, their smells and even their true names. Their heat runs in her blood. All spices bow to her command, yield their properties and magic powers. Every Indian spice was found in her store and when placed in her hand they speak to her and even direct her at necessary times. SPICE BAZAAR was the name of her shop fitted at the corner. Each chapter of this novel is named after a spice which reveals their powers and their origins. The author spins an astounding story of spices with a mix of nature, where nature becomes an important part of setting and a character itself. The First mother lives in the island where Tilo lands and spends her time among the serene yet mystical island to learn from the old one. The story around spices and the nature- a world full of mystery, set in the dark lustres of an island surrounded by water seems real and scary. From this land of nature Tilo is transported through fire of Sampati- (the Eastern phoenix) to Oakland. Chitra Banerjee uses the elements of nature to transcend the world of nature. "Seamist, the

island cast its pearl light around us.” Later describing the island she says, “The sky is black and smoky. There is no sky, and no sea either.” Each chapter of the novel is named after a spice, which is an eternal part of nature. The author uses similes, metaphors and adjectives from the nature to bring depth to her narrations and descriptions. She describes the other spice girls as “they become water wraiths, spirits of mist and salt, crying in the voice of the gulls”. (34) While the mistresses are leaving the island “We had known it would be hard to leave this island of women where on our skin the warm rain fell like pomegranate seeds, where we woke to birdcall and slept to the First Mother’s singing, where we swam naked without shame in lakes of blue lotus”. (54) Describing the Spice bazaar at Oakland and the skin colour of Tilo she uses the term mud coloured instead of saying brown. While describing sweets she uses similes like Emerald green burfisi, rasogollahs white as dawn, and, made from lentil flour, laddus like nugget of gold. Divakaruni steers her sentences adeptly with antithesis using nature in her novels. “Raven, tonight lay on my windowsill amritanjan, ointment that is like cold fire, hot ice.” (205). Divakaruni has personified few sentences elegantly like ‘But today the light is pink-tinted like just – bloomed karabi flowers’. The protagonist initially known as Nayan Tara used to play in heat-cracked fields behind her father’s house and when she used to be sweaty the land snakes used to shield her from sun. Later when she became a pirate she was called Bhagyavati, at that time her life was saved by the snakes and they used to tell her stories of Nagraj. They were her friends; they used to whisper to her. Later when she became the mistress of spices and was named as Tilotamma she used to feel their presence in her spice store. The use of five elements—the air, water, earth, space and fire the essential parts of nature are interwoven into the story dexterously. The fire of Sampati, the water through which Bhagawati, Nayantara sends messages, the names of mistresses and even the figures of speech used in the novel are eternal parts of nature. Towards the end of the novel a devastating earthquake that symbolizes the Indian philosophy of creation, preservation and destruction completes the cycle but bonds Raven the male protagonist of the novel to Maya, the name given to Tilo by Raven and shows the violent side of nature. ‘Together Tilo and Raven look for the ‘earthly paradise’, a dream world symbolising a utopian existence. “High up in the mountains, pine and eucalyptus, damp odour of redwood, bark and cone” (199). However they realise that a new world can be created from the ruins of the devastated world: “Because there is no earthly paradise. Except what we can make back there, in the soot in the rubble in the crisped-away flesh. In the guns and needles, the white drug-dust, the young men and women lying down to dreams of wealth and power and waking in cells. Yes, in the hate in the fear” (315). This way the cycle of nature also comes to an end from beginning with Nayantara’s creation as a foreseer and further is preserved and reinstated as she goes on to be initiated as the spice girl by the First mother and towards the end all the powers given are taken back destroyed as she breaks the rules of getting emotionally attached with someone and even rebels to take shape as a beautiful lady. The earth quake destroys everything but not her faith to create again from the rubbles. In destruction also the life sprouts again.

VI. CONCLUSION

To conclude, though Chitra Banerjee’s works are studied and analysed more often for the elements of feminism and diaspora this paper studies the elements of Ecofeminism in her work. Divakaruni has used ecofeminism adeptly that makes her narrative interesting, gives depth to her writing and beauty to her stylistic features. This paper can be used to study the different elements of ecofeminism in the novel by literature students and also those interested in studying the connection between literature and environment or ecology. This paper has only limited the analysis to ecofeminism in only one of the works of Divakaruni’s and can be further extended to her other novels and also to the works of other Indo American and Indo Anglian authors.

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