

## Voice for the Silenced Green: An Ecofeminist Reading of Select Poems by Sugathakumari

<sup>a</sup> Archana B, <sup>b</sup> T. T. Thomas

<sup>a</sup> Research Scholar, Department Of English, St. Thomas College, Pala, India

<sup>b</sup> Research Guide, St. Thomas College, Pala, India

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### Abstract

Violence against nature and women is a patriarchal project carried out in the name of development. The paper attempts an ecofeminist reading of the poems: “Veyilvazhi”, “Vidhi”, “Karunyam”, “Oru Pattu Pinnneyum”, “Silent Valley” and “Kurinhpookkal” by the ecofeminist Indian poet and social activist Sugathakumari. The study throws light on the issues like oppression, marginalisation, exploitation and domination over nature and women. “Veyilvazhi” portrays the poet's lament as she is a witness to the pathetic condition of earth which is devoid of spring and rain. She aspires for a rain which wipes away the dirt and tears. “Vidhi” depicts a scene in the court of heaven where the mother earth appears in torn green atonement and complaints against the son who tortures her. “Karunyam” presents an ox which is whipped by man. That animal with hunger, blisters and thirst is also a true representative of feminine folk who are oppressed by men. It expects pity only from the man who sets his knife for slaughtering. The poem “OruPattuPinnneyum” presents the deep anguish of a bird that lost its habitat due to the harmful activities of men. The poem “Silent Valley” throws light on the protest of the poet when the patriarchal authorities plan to destroy the forest. The poem echoes the voice women folk who are highly concerned about need to preserve forest. *Kurinji* plants in the poem “Kurinjpukal” is afraid of humans with the motive to destroy them. The study presents the benevolent face of Sugathakumari who stands as a God mother for the silenced nature as well as women.

**KEYWORDS:** domination and exploitation of nature and women, ecofeminism, Gaia.

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Nature is often portrayed as a feminine figure, fertile and nurturing. At the same time she is considered as an object to be exploited, conquered, subordinated, oppressed and devalued. Ecofeminism is a social movement that examines the connection between women and nature, and prevents the earth from destruction. The Indian poet and social activist Sugathakumari's poems present the maltreatment of nature and women. An ecofeminist reading of her poems “Veyilvazhi”, “Vidhi”, “Karunyam”, “OruPattuPinnneyum”, “Silent Valley”, and “Kurinhpookkal” brings to light the link between the domination of nature and exploitation of women.

Sugathakumari's “Veyilvazhi” presents the pathetic condition of earth which is devoid of rain and spring. The poet is treading along the long way by enduring extreme heat. As a result of the violence unleashed by humans there is no rain and spring. Even the moon burns in dark as the sun. This state is the outcome of a patriarchal project carried out in the name of development. Here the poet is a representative of women folk

and she endures oppression just like nature. Her life is like an injured dog, that is, between life and death. Here nature and women are victims of the rape mentality of men. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* trace “the deep conceptual connections between the mistreatment of women and what some called ‘the rape of earth’”. Citing connections between the mistreatment of women and mistreatment of nonhuman nature”(Cuomo 24).

In the poem Sugathakumari suggests a remedy for the pathetic state: - to love, to pray and to sing. She considers the three deeds as one and aspires for rain in the severe drought. She believes that the rain will wipe away tears, polluted blood and the bitter verse. She expects that a spring will come after the summer. The poem closes by stressing that a rain will come before the spring. Prayers, songs, love and polluted blood will be washed away by that. Here the poet is so close to nature. From the time immemorial it is believed that female folk are close to nature than male folk. Hence they take initiative to eliminate atrocities committed to nature. When violence is perpetrated to nature, women appear as saviours.

In the poem “Vidhi”, Sugathakumari presents a court scene where the mother earth is the petitioner and her son man is the culprit. The judge is the God and he is surrounded by deities. The earth appears there enraged in torn green attire and dry tangled hair. A deity calls her name, describes her as one who endures everything. Ecofeminists regard the earth as a fostering mother, a figure who earns reverence from everyone. Here the poet presents the earth as tormented mother. She complains that her son is death to her. He is so cruel to every being on the earth.

With the advent of commercialisation and industrialization phallogocentric power is exerted upon the earth. And as a result it is exploited, subjected to maltreatment. Sugathakumari laments that men chain elephants, tortures them; some carry dead bodies of young children; some die by poisoning etc. The scene is hectic, there is total anarchy. Not even animals are spared. Some animals are butchered, some wag their tail even if stoned and others are on the brink of extinction. When men arrive forests burn and rivers become dry. The ecofeminist Françoise D’Eaubonne claims that, “the earth, symbol and former preserve of the womb of the great mothers, has had a harder life and has resisted longer; today, her conqueror has reduced her to agony. This is the price of phallogocentricity”(188). In the name of development, the earth is conquered by the male power and she is supposed to endure the violence from him. The poet becomes afraid of the verdict from the God. She raises several questions:- whether there will be fire rain, whether the sun will be extinguished, whether the sea will become quiet, whether there will be rain throughout the year, whether the man will wipe out the entire human race etc. The God finally gives the verdict: - the future generation will have to suffer the result of the deeds of men.

In the poem “Karunyam”, Sugathakumari presents the thoughts of an ox that waits to be butchered. That animal is a representative of distressed nature and women who are victims of devaluation and exploitation. When the ox is whipped, it claims that it too has dreams. It dreams the things denied to it: - a land filled with grass and a pond with a plenty of water. As it rests under a tree it hears a lullaby from a shepherd’s flute. The animal has to endure heat, hunger, thirst and pain of its wound. The poor animal is a

witness to the tails, heads with bulging eyes of dead animals exhibited in the abattoir. An unknown person prepares a knife with mercy. The ox feels great comfort as it will get solace from that unknown butcher. From this it is clear that the value system assigns an inferior status to feminine or natural entities and thus their mistreatment can be justified. Here the animal is silenced by the patriarchal authority. In other words, it is a victim of power.

Ecofeminism evaluates the power politics in the mistreatment of nature and women. Val Plumwood in her *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* analyses the power relations as “an alienated form of differentiation, in which power construes and constructs difference in terms of an inferior and alien realm”(42). Sugathakumari echoes this play of power in “Karunyam”, where an ox suffers the outcome of rape mentality of humans.

The poem “OruPattuPinnneyum” is about a bird with broken wings that sings alone in the stump of a tree. It stands for a feminine figure oppressed by the masculine power. She is in a hostile environment and suffers the aftermath of violence. The bird sings with great effort without moving its injured wings. There is no one to sing along with it. The bird is the lone member of the destroyed forest and a victim of patriarchal rule where control is exerted over weak and helpless beings. The bird consoles itself that she has the company of rain, tree, chillness, shadow, river and grass. There is happiness, dreams and tears in its song. When it sings it forgets the pain of its wings. She embraces the sky with her mind as she can't fly anymore. She sings with its one wing's rhythm. The bird is a member of a damaged environment. There is a link between nature and women, there is also mutual inferiorisation. Here the bird has an inferior status and so it is exploited. She has no value in this earth. The natural world is regarded “...as a dump, as forming the unconsidered, instrumental and unimportant background to ‘civilised’ human life” (Plumwood 62).

Sugathakumari feels oneness with nature and equates feminine self with nature. “Silent Valley” depicts the poet's bond with nature as she raises her voice against the plans to destroy forest. Having realised that Silent Valley is the habitat for many species, the poet wants to preserve that. In the poem she expresses her intense wish to see the forest forever. She considers the forest as her mother and believes that it is the responsibility of a daughter to protect mother. This concept is similar to Gaia, the earth mother. In order to respect the earth and women deities feminists put forward the earth mother concept. The American ecofeminist writer Charlene Spretnak claims that liberation of nature and women is only possible by “... recognition of Gaia as both the earth and the female aspect of the godhead coupled with the removal of patriarchal construction of women as Other” (Merchant 4).

Sugathakumari's ecofeminist stance is clearly visible in the poem “Silent Valley”. The poet sees horror dreams of falling trees and drying Kunthi river. Here the poet urges her fellows to guard the forest and sing for the same, as she and her companions give tongue for the woods. The poet echoes the deep bond between nature and humanity. Chris J. Cuomo claims: “Since nonhuman communities and entities are necessarily, intrinsically bound up with human life and interests, the well being of nature is implied, to at least a minimal degree, in human flourishing. Some degree of nonhuman flourishing

is instrumentally necessary for human flourishing” (63). Towards the end of the poem the poet presents her deep attachment with nature. She drowns in the Kunthi river and calls the forest ‘mother’. Then every tree and leaf responds to the call:-‘child’. S. Rajashekharan claims “Sugathakumari’s poems praise earth, nature and women; shows empathy to them and shares their joy” (143). In “Silent Valley” too she does the same.

The poem “Kurinhipookkal” presents the woe of the poet as she is afraid of the development which may devastate the *kurinhi* flowers that bloom once in twelve years. She is scared of the arrival of man with axe, fire and vulture eyes. She asks whether rubber will replace the plants. She adds that it is the memory of *kurinhi* flowers which soothes her when she is in city. The poems present subordination of nature by masculine power. In terms of ecofeminism women and nature are related to each other in terms of meaning and purpose rather than what they are. Both are deemed to be feminine and hence prone to domination. They are often regarded as a tool for human exploitation and have no singular qualities that make them valuable.

Sugathakumari’s poems portray the mutual dependence between nature and humanity. She raises her voice whenever justice is denied for nature and women. “Veyilvazhi”, “Vidhi”, “Karunyam”, “OruPattuPinnneyum”, “Silent Valley”, and “Kurinhipookkal” present the ecofeminist project of eliminating oppression, devaluation, violence and exploitation of nature and women. Human beings are alienated beings and the external controllers of the natural world. The logic of mastery must be eliminated; otherwise ours will be a ruined planet in future.

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