

Demystifying the Idea of Femme and Nature: An Ecofeminist Reading of *The Quiet of the Birds*

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Abstract

Women have been essentialized at the hands of patriarchy since time immemorial as mysterious beings, thus, overshadowing their true existence. There have been myths, folklores and tales wherein women have been associated with nature or described as birds, rivers, and goddesses. These images have fettered women's identity and refused them the right to exist as unique individuals. The paper intends to shed some light on how Indian writers have this predefined imagery to borrow from where women were equated to nature and birds. Does this correlation still exist and if so what is the stand of contemporary women writers on this image association? This paper analyses the work of prominent Indian English writer, Nisha da Cunha whose collection of short stories titled, *The Quiet of the Birds*, presents the readers certain basic human experiences using images of nature and birds. Nisha da Cunha debunks the age old association of nature/birds and women. Her women characters develop a sense of responsibility towards nature. Her writing reflects the concept of ecofeminism that emancipation of one (women) cannot be fully achieved without the liberation of another (nature).

KEYWORDS: Women, Fiction, Ecofeminism, Nature, Imagery, Indian writings in English

Introduction

In Virginia Woolf's *a Room of One's Own*, there are several connotations of the phrase 'women and fiction'. It can mean women and the fiction that they write or the fiction that is written about them and it may also suggest what defines women and what they are like. In every era of human history, women have been a constant source of discussion. Various myths were spun around them to create a mysterious persona. It is common knowledge that women have been portrayed through certain stereotypical images or represented in stereotypical ways as such the stories about/around them tend to repeat the old associations and reflect a patriarchal discourse. In some earlier forms of fiction, they were reduced to mere objects and symbols. They were either portrayed as self-sacrificing wife, obedient daughter, nurturing mother or worshipped and feared as a deity. It is ironic to note that the life of the average Indian woman does not show any parallels of the goddesses that inhabit the world of Indian mythology. They remain subjugated to the male and their sexuality continues to be a matter of great concern which is repressed through various kinds of social apparatuses. The primary responsibility of a woman was to rear and bear children as motherhood was presented as an idealized concept.

Interestingly enough our society believes that motherhood completes a woman. It is when she achieves motherhood that her true purpose of life is fulfilled. This ideology has raised a series of debates by scholars and women in particular.

Raising a child becomes the sole responsibility of a mother while biologically speaking both the sexes play an equal role during conceiving. The concept of Parenthood is divided into *Motherhood* and *fatherhood* that become two separate terms and one is presented as more glorified and essential than the other, overshadowing the person's individuality (read woman). So the fiction written about women lacked the portrayal of 'real women'. By real woman one may mean a woman as an emotional and cognitive thinking being with a plethora of feelings of anger, fear, love, insecurities etc. It is when you remove these essentialities from their existence that they are shrouded in mysteries. However, the society expects from them to remain young and desirable for as long as possible. Hence, the novels written on or about them reflected women who had unrealistic beauty standards, who defied the laws of ageing and whose entire life revolved around their counterparts without whom they seem to have no purpose in life. This essentialization of womanhood has equated them to Nature which is considered equally mysterious and submissive. Many Indian writers have made use of nature imagery in their writings often using it as a background setting. These writers sometimes describe nature in the form of poetic prose, associating their feelings and emotions with various shades of nature. The association of feminine attribute to nature was questioned and modified once women writers in India or abroad came to the fore. Their writing seems to have attempted a more nuanced representation of the self and its actions.

Woman and selfhood

Even though the nation gained freedom from the foreign rule, Indian women remained stereotyped and subjugated to a large extent. It was with the birth of a nation that the concept of womanhood equivalent to motherhood came into being. The sense of nationalism towards the *motherland* associated feminine attributes to an otherwise gender neutral entity. Just like a woman is pre supposed to be a nurturer, care giver and protector, the image of a nation was construed to be of a woman with all these innate qualities. This gave rise to connotations such as *Bharat Maa*, *Maatrbhumi* (motherland) etc. This image association eulogized motherhood so much so that it curtailed the identity of a woman as an individual. A woman who tried to step out of this ambit was ridiculed or looked down by the society as a misfit. The above mentioned brief discussion of the discrepancy between belief and lived experience continues to stare in the face of the average Indian female and the Indian English woman novelist is not outside the ambit of this peculiar tendency. The woman novelist is witness to the dependence of the female sex on males and the assigned roles she plays. A woman is born as a daughter, brought up as a sister along with her brothers, later in life she is married off to a man, where she looks after his family and raise and bear children, and goes on to live a life granted to her by her husband and moves ahead in the circle of male relations. She, thus, is isolated from her own identity due to her subservient role play. Therefore, Indian writings in English particularly by women that emerged post Independence can be regarded as an attempt to discover the self. This gave a break from the stereotyped portrayal of women characters as weak emotional beings suited for household chores only.

During this period many women writers also published their works highlighting the theme of alienation. Writers like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Nayantara Sehgal and Anita Desai were internationally acclaimed for their works. Nayantara Sehgal in one of her novels *Rich Like Us* (1985) talks about *sati* as a trope for the entrapment of women in conventional marriages. Kamala

Markandaya's novels project the image of the changing traditional society and thus, are reflective of the awakened feminine sensibility in modern India. The women characters of Anita Desai's novels are educated and appear to enjoy freedom of choice, but on a deeper level when analyzed psychologically, they turn out to be frustrated and emotionally dependent. Apart from writing on prevalent themes, a woman writer sets out on a journey of exploring issues and events from memory, experiences and the life surrounding her. In doing so she constructs her own individual world and meanwhile, she also remains alert of the world around her, not breaking from it completely.

Nisha da Cunha is one such contemporary writer who wrote a collection of short stories titled *The Quiet of the Birds*. In her collection she has portrayed women characters from day to day life grappling with fear, despair, romantic longing and isolation. Cunha presents for the readers certain basic human experiences using images of nature and birds. Interestingly enough there has been a tendency of equating women to nature so much so that there have been ancient myths based on this notion. Women have been compared to birds and sometimes the writers or myths have talked about women who transformed into birds. One such known myth is the swan-maiden myth that dates from antiquity. The swan-maiden myth extends its roots in the Hindu tradition in the form of the myth of Urvashi and Pururuva. Urvashi, the nymph, agrees to marry Pururuva, a king of the lunar race, upon a condition that she must never see him naked. But Urvashi vanishes as the condition of her stay on earth is flouted by a trick played by the supernatural beings in heaven. Later on Pururuva finds her in the form of a bird swimming in the lotus-lake along with her companions also turned into birds. One can relate to the elusiveness of birds highlighted through this incident. The elusive nature of birds gives rise to the use of imagery of woman being a bird like figure; elusive and mysterious but at the same time fragile and non resilient.

Use of Nature Imagery in Literature

Nature has formed a strong presence in the works of many poets and other writers since many ages displaying the close relationship between nature and literature. Writers have used nature in their works since many centuries. They have used nature as the backdrop of a setting in their novels against which human drama is enacted. Nature in their novels acted as a passive force which mostly reflected human emotions. For example if a character is grief ridden then the writer would reflect his state of mind in nature in the form of rain or love in the form of spring, anger in the form of thunder and lightning. Some novelists rendered feminine attributes upon nature and so women were also considered to inhabit traits of nature like caring, nurturing beings with emotional appreciation of beauty and a feeling of kinship with animals. Contrary to this image women's relationship with nature is hindered by confining them to domestic life. Lorraine Anderson is of the opinion,

“There is a feminine way of being in relationship to nature. This way is caring rather than controlling; it seeks harmony rather than mastery, it is characterized by humility rather than arrogance, by appreciation rather acquisitiveness.” (Anderson 23)

Women have been projected as epitomes of nature essentially pure, nourishing and unflinching providers of love and care. Just like nature they are looked upon as

mysterious beings lacking rational bend of mind. This view projects them as supremely sacrificial beings who are extremely malleable and can withstand extreme pressure. These images have fettered women's identity and refused them the right to exist as unique individuals.

Some feminist writers such as Dodson Gray and Carolyn Merchant, go against any such practice wherein female attributes are projected upon nature. Ecofeminists argue that there is an important connection between the suppression and domination of women and domination and exploitation of nature by masculinist forces. There is an underlying realization in this theory that the liberation of women cannot be fully achieved without the liberation of nature and vice versa. They both have been considered as silent victims who have faced the wrath of men or manmade instruments of destruction. These ecofeminists are of the opinion that man who considers himself on the pivotal end of hierarchy assumes that he has got the essential right to rule on every other thing he considers is below his command. Centuries of social conditioning has denied women the knowledge of the self. This has led to the rise of the opinion that women are non cognitive beings just like nature and are in the need of domestication, read suppression. Thus, the destruction of environment and historical oppression of women by men are deeply linked. To overcome this one must understand that women and nature are both separate entities with each having the right to exist on its own.

Imposing gender on Nature does not help to understand the mystery of its being. As mentioned earlier, Nature because of its connection with growth and fertility is regarded as motherly. Therefore, a gendered view of nature emerges as opposed to masculinity, which is regarded as aggressive and forceful. If this stands true then one cannot simply neglect the fierce, untameable, wild and destructive attributes of Nature. What happens to the so called attributes of femininity then? Since these are some of the qualities that are associated to masculinity. One must keep in mind that Nature in all its totality is as unique a force as a woman or rather a man. Reflection of one upon another does not help to articulate a better understanding of either nature or women rather it obscures their true self.

However, it is not to say that women writers do not draw on nature and its images. There are many writers who use nature in the form of animals, plants and birds in their creative writings. As a writer who delves into the psychology of her characters, Anita Desai uses the external nature or precisely landscapes, to portray their interior states of mind. In *Cry, the Peacock*, there is lack of communication between Maya and her husband and this inability is effectively canvassed out through the surrounding landscape. Maya compares herself with peacocks in a jungle that fight before mating. In *Voices in the City*, Monish's condition is compared to the misery of the encaged bird pining for her freedom from the house where her life is for the pleasure of others. Freedom only comes to her in the end when she commits suicide. Baba is described as a harmless spider in *Clear Light of Day* and the island people in *Where Shall We Go This Summer*, are described as goats as they listen to Moses. It is interesting to note that Anita Desai has used flightless birds which can be caged easily like the peacock. Hence, reflecting the plight of women characters who are trapped in societal bounds.

De-romanticising Nature in Nisha da Cunha's *The Quiet of the Birds*

Nisha da Cunha's has used Nature and more specifically birds as figures which help her to articulate the self. Nature is described in its most vital sense. She explores a wide range of birds like owl, pigeon, parrot and wild birds which are free to decide their own course of life. In one of her stories titled "Pigeon", Nisha da Cunha uses the image of pigeons that the protagonist kills by twisting their necks at the end of the story. This shows her submission to the daily routine life and kills her own freedom. Nisha da Cunha, despite being aware of the above stated tendencies chooses the world of birds or even natural forces like the sea, wind, trees etc. that play an important role in each story of the collection titled, *The Quiet of the Birds*. Cunha tries to create a new meaning for the hackneyed image of "caged birds" with which women are most often associated with. Her collection of short stories has unabashedly made use of the bird image, using it sometimes as a metaphor and other times as a key character in the story.

Nisha da Cunha has debunked the whole notion of glorifying motherhood as her women characters raise some pertinent questions related to it. The main incident of the story, "The African Bird" is the event of a male parrot laying three eggs and the whole anxiety and confusion aroused by it. Nisha da Cunha through this incident raises some very basic yet substantial questions that have been accepted by society as 'facts' like the male bird's inability to lay eggs. El's daughter shares this confusion with the male bird and empathizes with it suffering terribly, he isn't built that way. To this assertion made by El's daughter, she asks her,

"Who ever gave you the idea that we were built for suffering that particular pain? Let me tell you as usual it's a myth spread by men for men and for women to believe..." (Cunha 107)

Since men with the help of science and technology have mastered things that were once considered impossible like flying and going to space, they have left this particular area and spread the notion that women are the ones who are biologically engineered to produce babies. This particular incident brings to light the whole issue of gender identity. What is feminine about a female and similarly what is masculine about a male? What does it mean to be a man or woman? Whether we are men or women is not determined just by our sex organs. Our gender includes a complex mix of beliefs, behaviors and characteristics. So, the notion of considering females as biologically monitored to reproduce but not males as they don't have the capacity to bear that much degree of pain, is a form of gender stereotype.

Cunha questions the concept of motherhood. Sangeeta Dutta, in her article "Relinquishing the Halo: Portrayal of Mother in Indian Writing in English" can be quoted to understand Cunha's notion of motherhood better. Nisha da Cunha's mothers are human beings first, warts and all, and motherhood is neither glorified nor debunked entirely. To quote Sangeeta Dutta, who explains how women have been trapped in their "holy mother" image,

"The role places the virtuous self-abnegating mother on an exalted position while depriving her of real power – of control over material resources and of rights over her children. Her identity revolves around the wife/mother roles beyond which no individuality needs to be established or recognized... With Sita and Savitri as predominant

models of reference, Indian women are expected to be pure and faithful as wives and self-effacing, loving and giving as mothers.” (Dutta WS84)

Motherhood doesn't come naturally even after giving birth, as Thika, the male parrot in the story “African Bird”, refuses to sit on his eggs to warm them until they hatch. Quite contrary to this notion of motherhood, “he hates them or hates what has happened” (Cunha 108). Thus, she gives a sharp blow to the set gender stereotype of motherhood coming naturally to women.

The title of the collection is quiet ironical as birds are known for their singing and endless chirping. However, Nisha da Cunha uses this ironical title to highlight the fact that birds speak a language alien to human ears, similarly, the words of women fall deaf on the society. The myth of women being the ‘silent sex’ portrays women as described objects not speaking subjects. In another myth about woman's speech is that a woman is considered essentially as a liar. According to this myth woman spoke generally to deceive, as her words do not enlighten the humanity with philosophy or science. Here the word ‘silent’ does not imply that women never spoke, instead they kept talking useless gossip and meaningless chatter which has no significance. However, the logical, smart man did not pay any heed to their lies and nonsense babbling. By the passage of time women became the silent sex, by completely being ignored and not being heard. Feminism fought for this right of women demanding that women be heard and their speech must not be dismissed as idle chatter.

In her short story collection, *The Quiet of the Birds*, Nisha da Cunha has used a language that is very colloquial. She uses short and sometimes sentences of just one word. The repetition of words emphasizes the importance what the character is trying to say. Though when it comes to the female speaker, the sentences appear to contain more repetitive words and they express confusion in her voice. In case of Safia when her father dies, she stopped speaking at all or a few words sometimes. She found the use of words too short to express her feelings and pain. But later when she falls in love with a man, she regains her normal speech. Similarly in “A Nest of Old Feathers”, the Old man mentions to his reader that after the death of her baby sister, his mother stopped talking. The tragedy had a deep impact on her capability to communicate as she was unable to find appropriate words to express her grief. Deborah Cameron in the second edition of her book titled, *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*, echoes the words of some feminists by saying that,

“Silence is a symbol of oppression, while liberation is speaking out, making contact. The contact is what matters: a woman who lies or who is silent may not lack a language, but she does not communicate.” (Cameron 7)

Nature consistently occupies a distinct role in all the short stories of Nisha da Cunha's *The Quiet of the Birds*. She has used Nature as a trope to give shape to the domains of experience that make up her characters which are mostly women. It appears in various shapes and forms and there is an overwhelming relationship between nature and the women present throughout the stories of this collection. At times it acts as a healing agency for their troubles, present in the form of trees, birds and the sea. It becomes an outer symbol for their inner states. In one of the stories titled “African Bird”, El writes to her friend En saying that the “lonely stretch of

beach” where she was now living has been a place of exile for her for so long so that she could stay out of the way of the people to whom she might be a repulsive embarrassment. She would say that it was “a place for my ugly pestering wounds to hide” (Cunha 102). Nature serves as a refuge to El here. The fact that El uses a stretch of the beach to “hide” shows the sense of integration she has with natural surroundings particularly the sea shore which may be said to be providing a sense of continuity to her. Apart from this, Nature is used as refuge, as a resource and as a space of metamorphosis and redemption for most of the characters of the story. In some of the stories they might appear to have been leading a life filled with struggles and restrictions but once they get out of their cocoons they undergo a shift in their attitudes.

In Nisha da Cunha’s stories, men and women respond differently to nature. Sometimes, men just like the women, appreciate and choose to live in natural surroundings, while at other times they do not. In some stories the female characters are closely associated to nature while in other stories they blame the male centric view of ascribing feminine attributes to nature and disapprove of any such notion. Her stories show a reversal of roles, a break from the general notions associated to womanliness, as such she denies the constructed notion of the feminine and questions the validity of such a term. One may go on to say that she treats women *naturally*, and displays the process of having un-learned the traditional notions of femininity to a large extent. Though most of her women characters may be unflinching providers of love, nourishment and care, Cunha does not let association of such images bag them down or essentialize them through such assigned roles.

One can find in these stories a recognition and appreciation of the potential of independent selfhood of woman with all its agonies, conflicts and contradictions. Be it the journey for self discovery, or challenging the traditional and stereotypical roles and disparities, or the urge to transcend domestic boundaries, the women presented in this collection seem to question everything that binds or confines their dreams, aspirations, though their attempts do not always meet with success. Rather than depicting any homogenous, confining or essential image of woman, Nisha da Cunha tries to project her with myriad roles, aspirations and images, conscious of her rights and responsibilities, sometimes falling victim to the circumstances and at other times successfully breaking through the traditional barriers moving ahead to an unknown path of realizing her full potential as an independent human being.

Conclusion

Centuries of conditioning has denied women the knowledge of the self. They have been portrayed as mysterious beings who were seldom equated to nature or caged birds. Nisha da Cunha acts as an iconoclast who breaks the stereotypical representation of women to nature. In her stories nature and women appear as separate entities who do not bleed into each other rather it is more of a symbiotic relationship. Nature and women are sublime in their own identities. They partake in each other’s lives yet retain their individual identities. The women characters of her stories set on a journey to discover the self through nature. However, identities of one do not merge into another because they are allowed to develop identity of self individually and that is what Nisha da Cunha has done effectively.

Her women characters are bold, determine their own destinies after fulfilling (and sometimes failing) the traditional role of a wife or daughter. They challenge the 'highly privileged' status of motherhood (as defined by the society) and are free like birds that might or might not take up to the responsibility of rearing kids throughout their lives. Cunha's stories portray a deep understanding of the fragility of the human condition. Through the voices of various female characters, she expresses the varied situations that a woman falls into and how she finds different ways to survive. The female psyche is constructed the way she sees the environment and situations around herself though she can bear all the pains, she also may chose to deny its acceptance. Just like Nature, that is all encompassing and destructive, she contains both the attributes. She is like flowing water, like a free bird that knows its way out and is considered quiet when there are so many roars inside it.

Years of subjugation has lead to retaliation from both Nature and women. Hence they define their voice and make it a clarion call to break free from the shackles of society. Voice that has been denied to them can be clearly heard in *The Quiet of the Birds*. To some extent, women in contemporary society may be said to have attained their identity of selfhood, but the same does not apply to most women even today. There is no ideal state, so to say, that a woman has seemed to acquire in the present times whereby she still faces oppression, suppression, harassment, violence, humiliation, suffering, etc to fulfill the needs and desires of males.

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