

Eco feminist Concerns in Select Poems of Kalyani Thakur Charal and Jupaka Subhadra

Divyendu M¹, Dr Sreelakshmi N²

¹M.Phil.Scholar, Department of English Language and
Literature Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi Campus, India. Contact:
9495649484 divyanair998@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor (Sr. Gr.) and Research Guide Department of English Language and
Literature Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham Kochi Campus, India. sree3545@gmail.com

Abstract

In India, the repercussions of environmental degradation are firstly and mostly felt by the indigent Dalit women. They are dependent on nature more than any other communities in the Indian subcontinent since their daily lives demand such close interaction with nature and natural resources. An ecofeminist reading shows that the women in the poems of Kalyani Thakur Charal and Jupaka Subhadra have explicit communion with the land, animals and nature. Being the 'others' and the 'oppressed', Dalit women might be able to better identify themselves with nature in their shared ordeals. By uncovering the plight of the tyrannized, these poems herald critical actualities that are to be substantially addressed by the human race. As Vandana Shiva puts it; "We are either going to have a future where women lead the way to make peace with the Earth or we are not going to have a human future at all." The paper aims to understand the role of Dalit literature in conveying feminist and ecological issues from a marginalised perspective.

Keywords : Dalit Poetry, Ecofeminism, Dalit Women's Writing, Nature

Introduction

Dalit literature articulates the realities and struggles of the everyday life of the Dalits. It is not written for the mere purposes of leisure and aesthetics. Because it is the literature of the marginalised group, many dimensions to it discuss their history, culture, hope and freedom.

Dalit studies have been experiencing a newfound interest since the 1990s due to the various reasons that put Dalit lives under the limelight. The efforts of stalwarts like Jyotiba Phule, Namdeo Dhasal and Dr B.R Ambedkar have been pivotal in this respect. Though positive changes have been achieved in the post-independence scenario, caste discrimination is still a reality. It exists in the nooks and crannies of the Indian social psyche, influencing day to day life choices. Dalit writings make an effort to rectify the problems of misrepresentation and underrepresentation of the community in mainstream and popular discourses of the past and present times. With the strings of the narratives in their own hands, Dalit writers get to represent their community in radically new means that could do justice to Dalit identity and dignity. For centuries Dalits have lived 'crushed' and 'downtrodden' lives, as the term 'Dalit' itself denotes. They were the people meant to deal with all the menial and inhumane activities while denied some basic human rights in the deeply hierarchised Hindu society. But when caste and class meet gender, women suffer the most and are marginalised in multiple ways. Dalit women occupy the extreme bottom of society. To rise, they need to fight layers of patriarchal firms along with systemic caste and class discrimination.

Dalit women form around 16% of India's female population (Biswas) and make up a huge part of the uneducated, landless and poor of India's populace. Rape and other violence committed against Dalit women are rampant as a means of punishment or reaffirmation of complete authority over them. "The Centre for Dalit Rights group examined 100 incidents of sexual violence against Dalit

women and girls across 16 districts in India between 2004 and 2013. It found that 46% of the victims were aged below 18 and 85% were less than 30 years old. The perpetrators of the violence came from 36 different castes, including Dalit” (Biswas). Religion also forms a tool in their oppression, as is evident from the sheer number of Dalit girls serving as *Devadasis*. Dalit Feminist literature recounts experiences exclusive to Dalit women, that is different from the experiences of the upper crust of the society and even Dalit men. Society is made aware of the peculiar existence of these women through Dalit feminist writings. For a group that has been silenced for so long, their writings become impertinent in voicing their first-hand experiences.

Jupaka Subhadra is a Dalit woman writer and social activist from Telangana. She is known for her influential poems, short stories and political essays that effectively portray the lives of the Dalit community, especially that of women. *Rayakka Manyam* (short story collection), *Ayyayyo Damakka* (poetry collection) are two of her notable works. She has been a significant impetus for the establishment of *Mattipoolu*, a writers’ forum dedicated to women of minority and backward classes. Kalyani Thakur Charal from Bengal has authored four books of poetry as well as short stories, essays and critical articles. Her works include *Chandalinir Kobita*, *Dhorlei Juddho Nishchit*, *A Poem Against War*, *Aami Keno Charal Likhi* etc. She also brings out a magazine titled *Nir*, dedicated to articulating Dalit daily lives, especially that of women. For Dalit women writers like Jupaka Subhadra and Kalyani Thakur, poetry becomes the ideal form of expression of the accumulated angst and sufferings. Their poems address age-old social issues of the Dalit community in general and Dalit women in particular. While their poems deal with the everyday humiliation and attack on dignity faced by Dalits, they are plentiful in portrayals of environmental issues that can be read along with Dalit women's issues. That's where Ecofeminism becomes an ideal tool because it draws insights from ecology, feminism and socialism. The tenet which sanctions the oppression and exploitation of women based on their caste, class, religious and gender identities is the same tenet that also sanctions oppression and exploitation of every non-human species on earth. Ecofeminists point out such parallels in the oppression of women and nature in their attempt to liberate women from patriarchal systems and nature from exploitive capitalism. Thus, writings from the margins acquire primacy when they also carry environmental concerns.

Aims and Objectives

1. To Trace elements of ecofeminism in select poems of two Dalit female poets, Kalyani Thakur Charal and Jupaka Subhadra
2. To show how these poems communicate defiance against the conventional treatment of nature and women in the Indian context
3. To thus understand the role of Dalit literature in conveying feminist and ecological issues from a marginalised perspective.

Hypothesis

It is widely acknowledged that women suffer both under the Caste system and Patriarchy, but when nature is brought into this discussion, there forms a potent voice. Dalit women's writings address ecological concerns concurrently with their own and the analysis of these select poems confirms ecofeminism as an ideal practice for the combined cause of women and nature. A study conducted on the impact of climate change on Dalits observes; “Dalits and other socially and economically vulnerable sections are especially vulnerable to climate change because of their resource location/ geographic exposure like land ownership in riverine flood-prone areas or rainfed drought-prone areas. Their low incomes and greater reliance for their livelihoods on climate-sensitive sectors, like agriculture, livestock etc further aggravate the situation. Because of their limited adaptap

tive capacity, Dalits are least able to cope with the most severe climate-related hazards” (Bhaduri 14). There is a need for popularising and discussing Dalit ecofeminist writings while concurrently addressing the issues communicated in them. By heeding to the discourses of the marginalised and the oppressed, we regard humanity; not just any particular caste or community.

Research Methodology

Ecofeminism is of considerable pertinence because it is the coalescence of two crucial subjects discussed in current times; ecology and feminism. It is an ideal means to examine the treatment of women and nature by patriarchal-cum-capitalist cultures. Its practitioners explore historical, linguistic and psychological shreds of evidence in the text that elucidate the oppression of women and nature. Ecofeminists like Greta Gaard expose the various ways in which women, children and weaker sections of society especially in third world countries are affected more than ever by climate change, pollution and other detrimental effects of environmental degradation. She comments that ecofeminists can demonstrate that sexism, racism, classism, speciesism, and naturism are mutually augmenting tyrannical systems. They do so by documenting the poor quality of life in the Third World, of people (especially women and children), animals, and the environment. Ecofeminism is based on the idea that the liberation of all oppressed groups must be addressed simultaneously (Gaard 5).

Different strands within ecofeminism have a varied outlook on the connection between women and nature. Radical ecofeminism confirms the special connection as useful in the combined fight against patriarchal-capitalist forces, leading to better treatment of nature and women. Social ecofeminism is however sceptical of such an alliance. This fraction takes the stance that it's problematic to universalise women's experiences with nature since such a consideration subverts racial, ethnic and other differences that dictate such experiences. In this study, such differences existing within ecofeminism are overlooked to have an eclectic framework within which the poems are analysed. The undertaking follows the many ways in which ecofeminism can be applied to Dalit poems to reinstate the need for an intersectional consideration of caste, gender and nature. The exploration will be done within the limits of textual analysis. It is a methodology that is particularly useful in understanding the language, symbols and meanings they create to deliver experiences through texts. The text can be prodded to uncover historical, social, political and cultural connotations. Such a study reveals the larger framework on which the text is based. A textual analysis of the present poems by Kalyani Thakur Charal and Jupaka Subhadra draws the unexplored connection between Dalit literature and Environment consciousness in them.

Review of Literature

Dalit women's literature is commonly explored from the perspective of life narratives and experiences. Other aspects like the gender question, Identity and the quest for truth as revealed in Dalit writings are of much interest to many. Uma Chakravarty's *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens* studies the interaction of one's caste with one's gender and how the latter is conducive to the conception of caste. *Dalit Feminist Theory: A Reader* by Sunaina Arya and Aakash Singh Rathore considers that the only theoretical point of view to address gender-based injustices are caste-based feminist investigations (Arya and Rathore). Many recent studies reflect on new dimensions to these writings that are relevant to the shift from conventional Dalit issues to questions of the present times. *Mapping Dalit Feminism: Towards an Intersectional Standpoint* by Anandita Pan emphasises the need for an 'Intersectional Standpoint' in Dalit feminism and viewing issues from the 'caste-gender angle' (Pan). The article "Financial Distress and Healthcare: A Study of Migrant Dalit Women Domestic Helpers in Bangalore, India" by Nimble O.J. and A.V. Chinnasamy deals with the factors leading to the migration of Dalit women. The study also proposes measures to improve the financial and

healthcare situation of these migrant workers. Mukul Sharma explores the interconnectedness of caste and nature in his book *Caste and Nature: Dalits and Indian Environmental Policies* and research papers like “My World Is a Different World: Caste and Dalit Eco-Literary Traditions.” Similarly, “Organic Womanism in the

Autobiographies of Indian Dalit women: A Study with an Ecofeminist Perspective” by Murlidhar Jadhav looks at autobiographies of Dalit women writers in the context of Indian ecofeminist criticism and organic womanism.

Analysis and Major Findings

Jupaka Subhadra's Telugu poem *Kongu Naa Bocce Miida Kaawalunde Bonta Peggaadu* was first published in 1997. In the poem, the term *Kongu* refers to the end portion of a saree; here of that worn by a Dalit woman. The politics of sari is different for the upperclass and the lower-class women. A poor hardworking low caste woman in India gets immediately identified by her tattered sari. The clothing is also a way to read the close association these women share with nature in oppression as well as suffering. For a hardworking Dalit woman, the saree-end has myriad purposes. It seems to have a life of its own since it becomes a crucial part of everyday activities. The saree-end suffers along with the woman wearing it. They take the blows of patriarchy together:

When my husband reaches out in love or anger

like a ball of butter she always gets caught before I,

to aggression or violence, from those at home or outside, my *kongu* rag
always succumbs first (Subhadra).

The *Kongu* has an emotional value attached to it. The saree-end is the only faithful companion and consolation of hers. But many conceive sari as yet another tool with which patriarchy oppresses women. In the poem, however, *Kongu* can be seen as representative of the environment around the woman, which comprises biotic and abiotic factors. When such a Dalit woman strives hard to survive, nature and natural resources might be the only solace she has. Nature comforts and nourishes her children. The land she works on is the very basis of her existence:

In the fields and the fallow plots, when I grow
tired she spreads out a bed to give me rest,
when my grief streams from my eyes to the
sky she draws my eye back towards herself
like a mother, and hugs them close, my dirt rag (Subhadra).

The proximity of the dirty rag to the woman's body shows her interconnectedness with nature. The *Kongu* is almost like a part of her biological body serving different needs, reaffirming it as symbolic of the woman's deeper connection with the natural world rather than with another human being:

My dirt rag that rolls in my hands, sweat, bed, bones,
limbs in pleasure and sorrow,
my *kongu* rag that sticks to me

in work and song, in crisis and comfort,

like the filth that clings to my feet, the companion

of my life path...slaving like the washerman's stone (Subhadra).

It is interesting to note that the term *Kongu* also refers to a type of wood commonly found in South India. This homonym gives the poem a deeper ecofeminist tone. Here, *Kongu* becomes a symbolic of the shared suffering of women and nature.

Chandalini's Kobita (Chandalini's Poem), by Kalyani Thakur Charal, begins with the narrator leaving behind the marshes, rivers and forests for another settlement. She is doing so because her people are suffering somewhere else, probably in a city, toiling with the hope of building a better future for their family and children. However, malnourishment, hunger and poverty are prevalent in Dalit communities despite location. Women and Children suffer the most. Dalits have always lived their lives in proximity to nature, evidently making it hard for them to leave behind their native land:

I leave behind these marshes and
jungles, The people of the jungle,
Leave behind the
river The forest trail
Far away to my own
people Who shed blood and
sweat I go
To the malnourished children

Of our fallen, battered
forefathers, To my brothers and
sisters
I shall leave behind this land

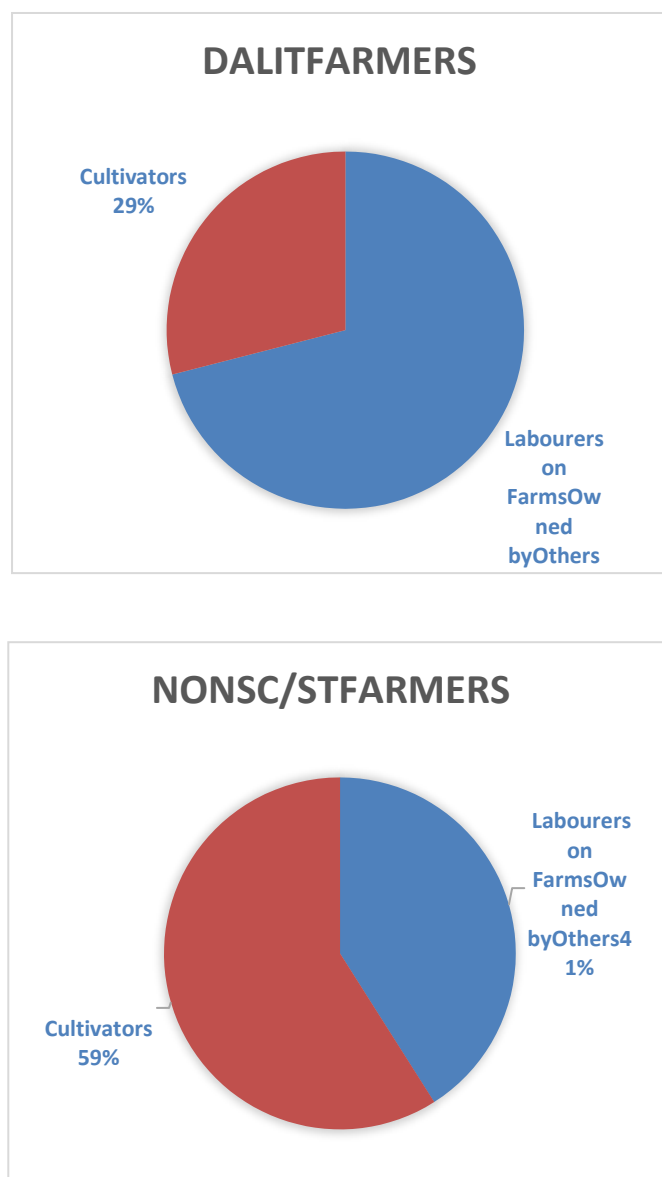
Of four rivers and five settlements (Charal)

The poem thus calls the reader's attention to problems of Dalit displacements from native lands as well as Dalit land rights. Dalit women's land rights are in many discussions still, as is evident from the many incidents of Dalit women's efforts reported from different states across the country like Punjab, Tamil Nadu etc.

"Despite all the rhetoric about land reforms, Dalits have been able to acquire only very small plots of cultivable land. According to estimates, just 44 per cent of Scheduled Castes own land as compared to 74 per cent of upper caste households in rural areas. Fields owned by Dalits are also extremely small. Very few Dalits can acquire non-land assets. For instance, 96 per cent of Dalits do not even own a tube well as compared to 86 per cent of upper caste households. And 52 per cent of Dalits do not even own a buffalo. It is also well known that Dalit women are the worst-off when it comes to land ownership." (Dogra)

Chart 1

According to the 2011 Census, 71 % of Dalit farmers are labourers on farms owned by others compared to 41% of the non-SC/ST farmers.



Source: Stevens, Harry. *Seven Decades after Independence, Most Dalit Farmers Still Landless*. 13 Feb. 2018, www.hindustantimes.com/interactives/dalit-farmers-landless-agricultural-labourers-minimum-support-price/. Accessed 20 Feb. 2021

An article published in *Frontline*, titled “The Importance of Giving Land to Dalits” observes that the “Elimination of landlessness among Dalits can boost the national economy and resolve the problem of unemployment” (Krishnan). Dalit women need to have access to cultivable land. This ensures the poor sections are not further exploited and that they get a fair price for their work. It is often the backward classes and the lower castes that are displaced as part of developmental projects, especially if it involves the clearing of forests and virgin lands. Both Dalits, as well as nature, suffer due to displacement because thenatives look after the forests and the natural resources by following sustainable practices.

Conclusion

Many civilizations, cultures and myths have correlated women with nature. Also, many feminists dismiss this notion as baseless and elucidate their stance. Nonetheless, women often

find themselves at an ironic vantage point that lets them examine this association conceivably better than men. Dalit women are at such a standpoint. Being the 'others' and 'oppressed' themselves, Dalit women identify themselves with nature in their shared ordeals. Because the caste and class structures keep the Dalit women at the lowest level, they are susceptible to exploitation, exclusion and oppression from all sides.

Mainstream feminist discourses however have remained oblivious to the representational needs of underprivileged women in the collective cause for feminism. That is why Dalit women's writings serve as a robust expanse to plant and foster seeds of revolution and dauntless expression. Though much in conversation in recent years, these issues need to be seen with a renewed interest and in a new light. There is a need for understanding Dalit Women's contemporary issues alongside environmental issues, leading to intersectional studies in this respect.

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