



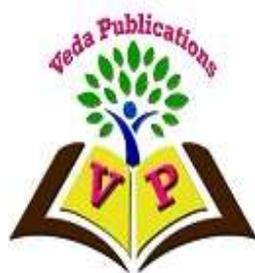
## AN ECOFEMINIST READING OF P.VALSALA'S SHORT STORIES, "TREE AND MAN" AND "THE WILD DUCKS OF THE PEAK"

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### ABSTRACT



Discourse and discussion on environment attain great significance at present as the planet Earth itself has become an endangered one. The attitude of human beings to nature over centuries has resulted in the severe ecological crisis for which no solution has been formulated so far. Materialism and lack of spiritual values have reduced Nature to the level of a mere commodity to be marketed. Ecology as a major stream of thought found space in academic and literary discussions in the Western world with the publication of *Silent Spring* (1962) by Rachael Carson. The fact that Ecological discussions started there with initiative of a woman attains great significance in ecofeminism. Women also have been treated as a commodity and become victims of exploitation in the society. The suffering and struggle for survival of Nature and Women are more or less same. The article focuses on issues pertinent to ecology and women. Two short stories, "Tree and Man" and "The Wild Ducks of the Peak", by a Malayalam writer, P.Valsala, have been taken up for discussion here. Malayalam is the regional language of Kerala, a southern state in India and P.Valsala is a contemporary popular and prolific writer in Malayalam literature.

**Keywords:** *Ecofeminism, Postmodernism, Anthropcentrism, Androcentrism, Descartes- Cartesian, Philosophy.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Ecology has become a major topic of discourse and debate over several decades. It is the "... science that studies the relations of living beings among themselves and the physical environment in which they are evolving". (qtd. in Carolyn Merchant 178). Atrocities on nature which endanger the very existence of the planet, Earth, has been alarmingly escalating every day. Materialism and lack of spiritual values have reduced Nature to the level of a mere commodity to be marketed. The theory of domination of nature found its fullest expression in the Enlightenment era when the old world order of ecological approach to nature was completely replaced by the modern thinking that "... nature could be thoroughly understood and eventually brought under control by means of the systematic development of scientific knowledge through observation, experiment, and rational thought" (Bohm 342). The Cartesian philosophy of Descartes as well as the scientific rationality of Francis Bacon vehemently supported the Renaissance ideal of mechanistic view, which considered nature as a binary opposite to humanity. Various branches of environmental ideologies received serious attention towards the end of the last century. The Frankfurt School of criticism, deep ecology, green politics and economics, post colonialism as well as postmodernism took up for discussion environment issues, directly or indirectly, and all these ideologies strongly resisted exploitation promoted by capitalism and colonialism. The ascent of ecology as a vital area of discussion in the second half of the last century marked the inevitable culmination of the multiple problems triggered by the modernist ideals that have held sway in the West for the last six centuries. Ecology as a major stream of thought found space in academic and literary discussions in the Western world with the publication of *Silent Spring* (1962) by Rachael Carson. The fact that Ecological discussions started there with initiative of a woman attains great significance in the discussions of ecofeminism.

Women also have been treated as a commodity and become victims of exploitation in the society. The suffering and struggle for survival of Nature and Women are more or less same. It is the

modern doctrine of limitless progress based on sheer exploitation that necessitated the emergence of ecofeminism. The concept of ecofeminism evolves out of two important areas of discussion viz. environmentalism and feminism. Both streams are of vital social significance at present. Introduced to the literary arena by French feminist Francoise D' Eaubonne in 1974 for the first time, the term ecofeminism has received various shades of interpretations and meanings in the contemporary literary canons. Environmentalism and feminism rocked the socio-political scenario of the twentieth century. They converged on a plane of rejecting limitless exploitation of both nature and women. Ecofeminism stands against anthropocentrism and androcentrism of the west. It envisages a life of integration, conservation and sustainability of the planet with all its creatures without any discrimination especially between men and women. It is an ideology of unification, preservation, protection and sustainability of life on earth. The tradition of worshipping nature has definitely inspired the oriental ecofeminists to shape their environmental ideologies. An attempt has been made in this paper to examine the shades of ecofeminism in the two short stories of P.Valsala, a well-known writer of Malayalam literature.

## ORIGIN AND GROWTH OF ECOFEMINISM IN MALAYALAM LITERATURE

The Silent valley agitation of the 1970s resulted in the polarization of green thinkers in Malayalam literature. Almost all the frontline writers of Malayalam stood together to fight out the cause of nature. N.V.Krishna Warrior, Sugathakumari, O.N.V. Kurup, Vishnu Narayanan Namboothiri, Ayyappa Panicker, Kadammanitta etc. came together and declared their solidarity to nature. Their commitment to nature did not merely confine to the texts but they succeeded in taking it strongly to the society. The writers, especially women, gradually clubbed environmentalism with feminism. Thus, ecological and ecofeminist ideologies have simultaneous augmentation in Malayalam literature. Environmentalism as well as Ecofeminism has found considerable acceptance in Kerala which imbibes the oriental culture and heritage of seeing women and nature with reverence. This inherited



ecoconsciousness helped Malayalam writers make strong footings on the ground of environmentalism and ecofeminism. When the Malayalam writers grouped together for the cause of Silent Valley, they released the book, *Vanaparvam*, a collection of poems by writers who shared concerns of nature. The book opens with ecologically significant verses from Adharva Veda.

After the initial surge of ecocentric literary movements many other writers like Kamala Das has given new dimensions to ecofeminism. Ecofeminism is seen a recurring theme in the writings of Kamala Das. Neermatalam (pomogranate), Sacred groves and Pannayoorkulam (pond) in the works of Kamala Das have given new literary sensibilities of ecofeminism to the Malayalam readers. Her women, like nature, are at the receiving end and they represent women who are born to suffer at the hands of men. But they always wish to come out of all man made fetters. Later, Sara Joseph, Chandramathi and P.Valsala have become strong voices of ecofeminism in the Malayalam literature. Overtones of ecofeminism heard more in the Malayalam short stories than in other genres of Malayalam literature. Unlike Kamala Das and Sara Joseph, P. Valsala is neither a social nor an environmental activist upholding the causes of both the women and nature. But her short stories and novels present women characters of strong determination and deep ecological insight. Most women writers are very cautious in making their language refined and noncontroversial. But P.Valsala is an exception as she manages to come out of this cocoon of androcentric linguistic paradigms. Ecological messages are conveyed effectively using powerful language. For instance, "Tree and Man", which is considered in this paper, openly says that women of the present generation do not have breast and milk, they depend on milk powder to feed their babies. Valsala uses a language which is powerful enough to convey ecological messages effectively. In her stories, it is women who take ecological position and stand for their protection. In fact, nature and women are the central characters of her stories.

#### **THE SHORT STORIES, "TREE AND MAN" AND "THE WILD DUCK OF THE PEAK"**

The short stories, "Tree and Man" and "The Wild Duck of the Peak" by P. Valsala have been

considered for an ecofeministic reading in this paper. Both the stories are included in the collection of short stories by Valsala entitled *Trees Died of Consuming Poison*, published in 2016. P.Valsala, with a sprawling literary career of over three decades, has contributed considerably to Malayalam literature in the form of novels and short stories. In the story "Tree and Man", P. Valsala sketches an eco-feminist space of her own. "Tree and Man" tells the story of Kunjunni, a man who has not planted even a single tree for the last twenty nine years. He is seen in the beginning travelling in a bus. Kunjunni reaches a village after many years of his urban life, making no progress in life. He gets down when the bus ends its journey in the village where "the smell of the urban waste is totally non-existent". Kujunni is, then, receives two glasses of water for which the shopkeeper doesn't take any cost saying that he water is given by the earth. The village well nearby was dug by somebody in the past. It never dries up and provides water to the entire village. The picture is to be contrasted with the urban life where even drinking water is a luxury. The story abounds in subtle images and messages of ecofeminism. Kunjunni gets a fresh lease of life and energy in the village as he gets pure air, water and ambience devoid of channel discussion which contaminates the evenings of the urban life. When the shopkeeper invites him to the temple in the late evening, Kochunni thankfully refuses it saying that God is there in the roots, green leaves and smile of the Jack Fruit tree. The life in the village transforms his attitude to life and nature. In the beginning of the story he appears as a representative of urban culture devoid of any ecological sensibility. Kunjunni brings with him bundle of cosmetics and other items which are normally used by city bred people. It is with his conversation with a jackfruit tree in village that makes him modify his attitude to life and nature. The Jackfruit tree is personified as a breast feeding mother. The hanging Jack fruits are depicted as her babies. One midnight a herd of wild elephants come and attack the tree, crushing and eating all her baby fruits. Kunjunni is stunned by the sight of the jack fruit tree being brutally ravished by the wild elephants. The Jackfruit tree stands there as an epitome of helplessness, sacrifice and patience.



After this incident Kunjunni(Sankunni) winds up his business in the village and returns to the town much wiser than before. Kunjunni comes to establish the urban culture but he receives an ecological insight from the Jack fruit tree who represents the exploited.

The story brings to the fore very pertinent issues with respect to nature and women. Though the story is centered around Kunjunni, it is the motherly figure of the Jackfruit tree that receives the main attention of the readers at the end. The attack of the wild elephants on the tree will surely haunt the readers for a long time reminding them of the suffering, pain and agony that women are forced to undergo in a male dominated world. In this story, the unscrupulous assault on women and children by men is very effectively articulated by P.Valsala. In her stories men are seen inferior to women in thought and attitude. Her male characters are at times cowards and scared of the external world and nature. They are seen avoiding others as far as possible and totally detached of nature. It is seen that the female characters try to correct and enlighten their counterparts. Instead of establishing the urban culture in the village, Sankunni alias Kunjunni moves out of the village with a little bit of ecological as well as rural wisdom. He gives the hope that the newly acquired wisdom will guide his life and he will try to instill the same into the urban dwellers. The anguish of the Jackfruit tree seems to be an eye opener to Kunjunni. It is this realization that, perhaps, leads to the final departure of Kunjunni from the village. But when Kunjunni walks away, he retains in his bundle a handful of sweet memories also. Instead of the intimidating memories, Kunjunni takes with him the virtue and serenity of the village. It is the figure of an ecologically modified Kunjunni rather than the image of a person who has not planted even a single tree for the last twenty years that steals the readers' mind. In "Tree and Man", P.Valsala with her unique narrative skill and technique, vehemently voices the uncongenial condition of nature and women in the contemporary world of wide spread exploitation and brutality.

The stories of P. Valsala abound in images of nature. Also, the writer presents before the readers contrasting pictures of urban and rural life enabling them to feel the coolness of villages and the

bitterness of towns and cities. Forest, streams, animals and birds render biodiversity richness to her stories. "The Wild Ducks of the Peak" is a beautiful story of ecological experiences. Wild forest, with all its gorgeous beauty is depicted as an ecosystem in the story. Destruction of the nature, plants and birds in the forest, the greed of man for resources and endless progress, devastation of ethnic culture are indirectly but powerfully discussed in the story. It is the story of an expedition by a foreign environmental researcher, Martha, to a dense forest where indigenous people still survive with their humility, love, care and reverence to nature. She loves forest sincerely and is interested in seeing and observing the virgin beauty of nature. The story begins with four statements describing the beauty and serenity of the place. The speaker is enchanted by the dense forest and says thus: "The peak is full of endless thick forest. It is surprising that it doesn't melt or perish in the sunlight of July. The rhythm of the wild river flowing through the valley of the peaks is heard" (Valsala25). As in many of her other stories, here also the central characters are woman, nature and tribes. It is the ecofeminist spirit of the writer that makes her highlight the umbilical relationship across nature, women and the tribes in her stories.

Martha has come to the forest not to collect some rare things from there and to market it like many others do. She is there to take some photographs as part of her research. The encroachment of man on nature and his unscrupulous construction work at the expense of nature are subtly hinted at in the story by a reference to a man made bridge in the forest connecting two hills which were part of one mountain in the past. The recurring image of the wild ducks in story stands for the wild lives who wish to be undisturbed. P. Valsala, in her writing, expresses her strong leniency towards the exploited and downtrodden tribal people who are denied of the right to live in their home land. This story also is an example to show the writer's relentless support to and care for the aboriginals. The environmental researcher comes across strong earthen forts and nurtured forests amidst man made roads. The place belongs to the original inhabitants of the forest, the so called tribal people. The voices of the tribal chiefs who



emphatically declared that their motherland would not be given for vehicles flash through Martha's mind at once. The ethnic people do not keep any relationship with the modern world which does not belong to them now. They just live here as an outdated satellite. This shows the pathetic plight of the natives as well as their strong bond with soil. The challenging and vibrant voices of the past resisting any division of the mother land into pieces of cornbread echoed like drum beats in Martha's mind.

The story ends with the poignant picture of the tribal people who slowly came down to mud banks from their mud forts to collect fresh water from the springs at the fall of night. They happily heard the high pitched voice of the crickets. A brief conversation between Martha and the inhabitants took place then. They looked at and spoke to her with suspicion and contempt. They did not smile at her but only stare at her as though knowing her as a representative of the modern man who ravages nature. They wore traditional caps decorated with feathers and a single cloth with shimmering linings around their waist. Their eyes have the "sharpness of crystal" but voice was as "poignant as wax". The story ends with the picture of the valley filled in by forest trees standing in endless meditation. The story is remarkable for its linguistic splendour as the writer weaves a world of greenness with words. The story looks as a beautiful chain of emerald beads of nature. Also it takes the readers back to the shore of nostalgia and reminds them of a past when culture was not separated from nature. People, then, lived in piety with nature.

### CONCLUSION

Without joining any particular group of ecofeminism, P.Valsala delineates in her writings the ongoing struggles of nature and women for survival. Modernity has not done justice to them. Urbanisation has brought too much causality on nature. The objectification of both nature and women is the result of the changed world view of the male oriented society. Through the character Kunjunni, Valsala seems to say that men do not care for nature and women whereas Martha brings in the picture of a comprehensive ecologically sensitive bioregion. Both the stories, "Tree and Man" and "The Wild Ducks of the Peak", foreground certain key

realities related to ecofeminism. The suffering of the marginalised in the society, including nature, tribes, women and children will continue to exist in the society in spite of widespread campaigns for the protection of women and conservation of nature. On one hand people speak vehemently for the marginalised and on the other they demand material progress of no limits. This double stance exposes the insincerity and hollowness of the entire ecological propaganda of a patriarchal society. To conclude, it can be said that the stories of P. Valsala raise certain pertinent societal questions concerning the exploited and marginalised. These are the questions which the organisations and government are bound to answer. Also the writer conveys profound messages of ecological wisdom that make readers think of changing the present culture of modernity which stands in opposite to nature. The emotional tone and the contemporary relevance of issues discussed by P.Valsala in her stories instil in readers an altogether different sensibility of reading experience.

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