



SYNTHESIZED ANNIHILATION OF WOMEN AND NATURE: AN ECOFEMINIST STUDY OF THE NOVEL BOOK OF GOLD LEAVES

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Abstract

The concern for nature centric discourse had been foreseen several years ago, Noam Chomsky remarked, "nature is neither an infinite source nor an infinite sink," likewise, Simone de Beauvoir's famous argument that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." These revelations are misleadingly interpreted by marked driven world as a mere rhetoric, accounting more synthesized and unjust exploitation of both, women and nature. The extremely volatile and susceptible conditions in conflict affected Kashmir makes women and nature more prone to various kinds of exploitation and annihilation. The tyrant waves of war along with male dominated socio-political narratives have made Kashmiri women to endure the unrecognized pain. Similarly, the present civilizations civilized ecocide of natural resources, has pushed this natural wealth to the verge of extinction. On the one hand, the valleys natural recourses are converted into military training centers, on the other hand, Women caught in the persistent web of violence are facing daily crimes of all sorts. Hence, it becomes contemporaneous to snapshot these exploitations through the lens of ecofeminist discourse. Therefore, the present paper is an attempt to examine Mirza Waheed's novel, the Book of Gold Leaves and to show how nature and women have been made as commodities in conflict torn Kashmir.

Keywords: eco feminism, nature, women, annihilation, Kashmir conflict

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to have a close reading of Mirza Waheed's novel, the Book of Gold Leaves (2014), and to trace elements of ecofeminism in the current novel. The article at the same time, intends to explore how a particular Kashmiri English novelist adds a new dimension to the contemporary Kashmiri fiction, by locating both nature and women as easily available commodities to exploit. Before venturing into the core issue, it will be appropriate first to introduce the contemporary condition of both women and nature in conflict trodden Kashmir.

Kashmir has been known for its natural beauty and commonly regarded as the heaven on earth. The high mountains, green pastures, dense forests and fresh water bodies had once been its adorable garments. But since last three decades due to the persistent conflict, this Eden on earth has become a battle ground between two nuclear nations. Due to this conflict and rapidly changing demands of the global world, the natural wealth is day by day decreasing. Kashmiri's water and forest recourses in particular have been ruthlessly polluted and in fact the famous dal lake has nowadays transformed into an infinite sink. Similarly, Kashmiri women suffer from severe inner crisis and exploitation. In case of Kashmir, both nature and women have seen worst of times in terms of their exploitation and annihilation.

It has been a vivid history, if amongst the God's creation anybody throughout the world suffered the most are the women. In Kashmir context, women not only suffered but have always been condemned to live a dual life, a tortured creature, ignored by historians and neglected by intellectuals. Behind their rosy faces is a history of loss and longing, a tale of death and destruction. They have been forced to solace themselves with the hopes of new



sunshine. With the coming of every new spring breeze, they smell the fragrance of the lost ones. In fact, each passing minute is a reminiscence of their plight in decades long and seemingly never ending conflict. Neither the promise of Ecofeminism, nor the pages of history have yet endeavored to venture beyond their rosy and red faces. Even the smiling tulips have failed to recognize their pain and agony. Each western change and Eastern diplomacy brings a new veil to their faces. In fact, they are the most unfortunate creatures caught between patriarchy and violence, militancy and militarism, death and destruction. The majority of women in Kashmir have seen harshness of the destiny through their own eyes. They have seen how death and destruction leaves behind the 'vast and hopeless deserts'. In this place of every day funerals, nature too mourns. The waves of rivers, the songs of cuckoo, the eco of mountains enjoin with unfortunate mothers to sing memorial dirges of death and destruction. Every day begins with a new obituary and each dusk brings a sad tale, mothers could tell their children in the lap of the night to minimize their own grief. In Kashmir, every cubic inch of the earth is filled with blood stains, the fresh waters too carry these effluents, and even the few falling stars on the vast sky bring sudden tremors and fear of nuclear explosion. In such a place, both noble creatures 'women and nature' are trapped in never ending gyre of conflict, holding one another tightly only to forfeit their existence.

Discussion

Ecological Criticism or to use William Rueckert's coinage 'Ecocriticism' has gained considerable currency in the last few decades, drawing the attention of academics, intellectuals, writers and scientists. Establishing a bond between literature and the natural environment, Ecocriticism envisages a creative alliance between the humanities and the sciences. Therefore, Ecocriticism comes across as a serious, authentic and vibrant

manifestation of the rapidly changing contours of literary studies. In taking, what Glotfelty calls, 'an earth centered approach to literary studies,' it focuses on the contemporary environmental crisis, the possible solutions for the alleviation of this crisis and insists on the need for humans to live in harmony with nature. It challenges the dualistic paradigm of viewing man and nature as separate and propounds a revaluation of the readers' relationship with the environment. The strength of ecocriticism is the impressive range of frameworks which it incorporates within its fold like environmental ethics, deep ecology, eco feminism and social ecology to formulate a view of existence which can help re-examine the relationship between man and nature or even change the ways humans inhabit the earth. (Lily Want).

Patil Sangita Sharnappa observes, "The term ecofeminism may raise the question in our mind as to why women and nature are connected to each other, thus implying the need to study the interface between women and nature. Although some ecofeminists reject this connection (Ortner, 1974), while others emphasize the association between women and nature to be strong (Daly, 1978), most ecofeminists opine that the links between women and nature can be sustained on the basis of ideology, biology (Starhawk, 1989, 2002), ontology (Griffin, 1980), and a history of oppression (Adams, 1994; Eaubonne, 1978; Merchant, 1980; Rutherford, 1975)."

Since the connection of women to the everyday work and environment is more intimate, they are the ones most affected by changes in the ecosystem. Their stake in the environment is, therefore, great (Guh, qtd. in Contemporary Literary and Cultural theory p. 249). The work of the ecofeminists – Vandana Shiva, Mary Mellor, Anel Salleh and others has gendered nuanced readings of the relationship between gender and women. The western notion that regards culture as masculine while as nature as feminine. Nature is imagined as a woman whose basic task include reproduction



and nurture. These are arbitrary qualities framed by man in order to dominate both women and nature as a result men assume and act as though both women and nature are to be exploited.

The Book of Gold Leaves written in 2014 received good response from the readers and was recently Long-Listed for UK's Folio Prize. It is the second novel by the author set in early 90's of Kashmir; the book revolves round a love story between Roohi, a young Sunni (a sect of Islamic faith) woman, and Faiz a Shia (other sect of Islamic faith) Papier Mache artist, set in Srinagar. Najeed Mubarki rightly says that The Book of Gold Leaves largely deals with Kashmiri human experiences during the darkest periods of the '90s, when violence so peaked, was so nakedly savage. (qtd. in chronicling pain of conflict-hit Kashmiris).

The women instead of having "the room of their own" mostly own, a shabby kitchen to decorate it with their sweat and blood. It is their alternate and fabricated universe; a space where dreams fall apart, dogmas reign, reason and rationality is first killed then ruled through marital ties and myths. The monotonousness of daily work in this little space has the magic to lure them till death asks for her stake. In the novel, Mouj, (Mother) and her daughter Roohi, representing female voices, come across several hardships. Mirza Waheed records the plight of Kashmiri women as:

"But never before in her forty years of running the Mir Kitchen has she faced such paucity of means as now... when she had come into the Mir household as a sixteen year old bride, second wife to the grand Mir Mohammed Ali, the sole heir to the house and its riches, both material and spiritual, and fabled artist-trader of Shatoosh paisleys and fine silk saris, she had, for obvious reasons, taken for granted a lifetime of affluence. Now, in her grey years, she spends most of her time in a Kitchen where the only sign of affluence is the enormous vault of copper-and silverware that is opened on festivals or if the Mirs have a

revered moulana over to recite from the Qur'an" (p. 5,6).

Roohi, beloved of Faiz, is also compelled to accept traditional gender roles. Her departure from Women's college, followed by two quite years at the local university, but she now spends her days doing house work, mostly to keep her mother happy, and thinking about her life and place in the world. She makes sure that she wakes up soon after Mummy does, tries to do everything she can to help in the kitchen. She was very eager to pursue PhD, but is rather advised to marry, have children, then die silently and un-noticed. She is counseled to leave the thought of nonsense PhD and a teachers job for which Mahde Shah, the Matric fail education minister, charges five lakh. The family thinks why not spend it on her wedding? (p.17). Her doors to choose her future have been closed, she has only one alternative to marry and become someone's assistant and kill her dreams. The softest spoken Naseem Aunty, annoyed with family decision to marry Roohi instead to pursue PhD, tries to strengthen her courage by sharing her own experiences as:

"I know how you feel, when I was your age, I had the same feelings, the same wounds. I tried my best to follow my heart, but it was a different time, life was hard and the world too mighty, so in the end I had to do exactly as my family wished. I'd already won my big battle by going to the university, doing an MA, and didn't have it in me to fight another war... you are a woman now, Roohi, and inclined more, if I may say so, towards the matters of the heart. Keep your mind alert but do what pleases your soul. Be who you want to be." (p. 20).

The novel portrays not only love and romance in times of Kashmir turmoil, but also pays attention to the environmental exploitation, advocating ecofeminists persistent concern that nature's products and services are also like women's work deemed to be free and available and hence easily exploited. Mirza Waheed highlights the contamination of Kashmiri's fresh water bodies as:



"... he has heard the water here is dirty, unfriendly, the contamination from the city beginning to kill the river life. This used to be fresh-water pool, a reservoir created by the abundance of the lake, which fed the Nallah Mar canal that traipsed through the city. In fact, this is what remains of the canal, a strangulated cripple of that waterway, a sickly reminder of what will, over a generation or two, become a legend, a story the young may or may not believe." (p. 83)

Similarly, due the Kashmir conflict, the large deployment of security forces occupying, most of the natural resorts, raise serious environmental threats. The novelist highlights few of these as:

"Whether it's sheer coincidence or the cunning of the politicians of the past, the truck will begin to enter Downtown near Dalgate and eventually carry on to the Nallah Mar Road, the same road that was once a canal, which carried lotuses for the city's people. Now it must carry this truck and the new 'vehicle' within, meant for Major Kumar's grid." (p.91)

The following passage mocks at the modern technological world, where so called civilized generations are hell bent to destroy the very nature that sustains our existence. It serves as an eye opener for the advocates of human progress at the cost of environmental ecocide.

"The canal once sent cool, fragrant breezes to Nagar, where the Koul's have always lived...no one comes here now, except those dumping their daily refuse. The rich and the poor, Muslims and Hindus, the young and old, all do it. The hospital, the medical school, the sub-divisional police headquarters, and other institutions of excellence have all built man-size underground sewage pipes that pour their toxic effusions into the canal all day." (186).

The two central protagonists, Faiz and Roohi, took arms against the sea of troubles, and silently endured the tyrannies of the times. The clutches of conflict did not let the lovers love to bloom, the enterprise of such fatal union was to shortly wither away like the late autumn chinnar leaves. The turmoil submerged their

mortal dreams to endless depths where no mark of their shattered story could be found. The departing souls, crushed by tyrant tides of time have to say this to the gods of war.

Hame chahiye thha milna
Kissi ahd-e-mehrbaan mein
Kissi khawaab ke yaqeen mein
Kissi aur aasman par
Kissi aur sarzameen mein
Hame chahiye thha milna
(We ought to have met
In another, kinder time
In pursuit of attainable dreams
Below a different sky
Upon a different earth
We ought to have met there) (p.290)

Conclusion

The novel through a well-knit plot examines the central issues raised by ecofeminists. It is a living description in favour of ecofeminists argument that patriarchal society's values and beliefs have resulted in the oppression of both women and nature. This male dominated, one sided thinking, ignores women's work and encourages ruthless annihilation of both. The gender based stratification along with ecocide deserves further special attention in conflict-hit Kashmir, where both women and nature have seen worst of the times. All this need immediate remedial measures and drastic steps are not undertaken expeditiously, a scenario where the island countries of this world may submerge killing millions of people is not a remote process.

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