

WEAVING MEANINGFUL TOMORROWS THROUGH ECOFEMINISM: EXPLORING WOMEN RESILIENCE IN ELIF SHAFAK'S *THE ISLAND OF MISSING TREES* AND SHEELA TOMY'S *VALLI*

ANJU SUSAN GEORGE

Assistant Professor and Research Scholar, Post Graduate and Research Department of English, St
Joseph's College (Autonomous), Irinjalakuda
anjususan@stjosephs.edu.in

ABSTRACT

Climate changes have emerged as the order of the day in the contemporary world. Torrential rains, earthquakes, landslides and tsunamis have become the new normal. Urban population all over the world is bound to experience the perils of global warming soon. Humans have begun to perceive the dimension of their own role in the ongoing crisis of global climate change seriously. The Anthropocene witnesses ecological milestones like the loss of forests, extinction of several unique species, unprecedented floods, sporadic landslides, pollution, depletion of biodiversity, rise in poverty levels and forced migration. It is quite engaging to explore the ways in which contemporary

women authors respond to such sudden challenges. The proposed paper strives to focus on two women authors and their works that are celebrated for a meaningful approach to life through ecofeminism. *The Island of Missing Trees* by Elif Shafak illustrates the unique connection between the human and the plant world and urges the readers towards a complete rethinking of their approach towards plants. It unravels the healing power of nature on human relations that are torn by war and migration. *Valli* by Sheela Tomy traces the relegation of Wayanad towards environmental depletion, illustrating its social complexity and studying its political correctness. Exploitation of the forest led to the enslavement of its people, and as the forest dwindled, so did the culture of the Adivasis, their way of life, even their language. A meditative rereading into these works unravel the close

connection of women and nature and inspires the readers towards seriously pursuing sustainability and responsible living.

Key words: women, climate change, migration, ecofeminism, nature, sustainability, responsible living

INTRODUCTION

Climate change and associated perils are the game changers in all walks of life in contemporary times. Be it art, literature, real estate, agriculture, sports, defence, security, pilgrimage or war, climate decides the plan of action. The unprecedented nature of monsoon and the havoc it creates upsets the lives of millions of people every year. The Anthropocene witnesses ecological milestones like the loss of forests, extinction of several unique species, unprecedented floods, sporadic landslides, pollution, depletion of biodiversity, rise in poverty levels and forced migration.

The recent forest fire that rocked Los Angeles is an evident example of how the nature unleashes its fury on human settlements and how its primal energy remains untamed to human efforts.

The modern world that essentially thrives through materialism, driven forward by technology and innovation, business and science as we know it, remains largely unconcerned about such natural disasters. Post disaster engagements focus on a brief and superficial round of mitigation strategies that address the effects and not the causes. If nature strikes in Wayanad or in Los Angeles, in Tibet or

in Venezuela, the local governments spring into action, harnessing government machinery, facilitating funds for relief and holding discussions on the possible reasons for the mishap. But the basic issues remain unresolved, due to lack of follow up, lack of vision, absence of sustainability in development and a host of political and business interests.

OBJECTIVES

- Understanding climate change as the new normal
- Analyzing humans' roles in ecological depletion
- Assessing patriarchal agendas driven by business and industry
- Exploring literary responses to climate change by select women authors

LITERARY RESPONSES TO ECOLOGICAL CHANGES

At the 2024 United Nations Climate Change Conference or COP 29 held in Baku, Azerbaijan in November, an agreement was reached on financing mitigation to climate change effects and helping developing nations to adopt more sustainable energy sources. The very choice of Azerbaijan as the venue of the conference was controversial, because it is a major oil and natural gas producer and an authoritarian state with excessive corruption. The COP 29 summit stressed on low carbon economies and climate finance to developing nations. Again, when we analyse the situations, ambitious and concrete proposals for sustainable and eco-centric development is missing.

The world, driven by a patriarchal order that is divisive, self-centred and pretentious, continues to revel in its lust for destruction and in the race for power. At this crucial juncture, writers and creative

artists have the pivotal role of stressing the need for nature conservation. Ecological concern has always been a priority for women, as they handle the double roles of birth givers and nurturers with equal finesse. Women authors, keenly aware of ecological changes as they regard the world with utmost sensitivity, express these changes in their works. They sense the dimensions of impending ecological changes instantly and instill in readers a remarkable connection with nature. Two contemporary works of fiction that stand out in their innovative approaches to the human-nature connect are Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* and Sheela Tomy's *Valli*.

A gripping novel that deals with love, war, migration and identity, *The Island of Missing Trees* has a narrative inseparably bonded with nature. Shafak explores the prospects of familial bonding against the backdrop of a fig tree narrator and uses high levels of intimacy with a tree that is literally exists in the middle of the lives of the protagonists. The narrative focuses on the healing power of nature in the lives of human beings who are torn by war and migration. The serenity and calm resilience of the fig tree foregrounds the problematic, almost pitiable and insane world of its caretakers. The island that is referred to in the novel is Cyprus, and the novel is set in the 1970s and 2010s, two periods that are marked by intercommunal violences between the country's Turkish Muslim and Greek Christian communities. There is the subtle presence of a fig tree narrator who offers an ecocentric view to the entire narrative, which is further accentuated by politics(communal violence), myth(water), ecological disaster(mass death of fruit bats) and lepidopterology (annual migration of butterflies). The deft craftsmanship of the novelist is commendable as she uses the nuances of climate change and ecological disorder, along with the psychological trauma of human displacement to weave together an engaging, politically triggering and compassionate novel.

The novel moves back and forth in time and has three narratives. In the 2010s the narrative throws light on sixteen-year old Ada who is painfully coming to terms with her mother's death, unaware of her Cypriot roots. The visit of her maternal aunt introduces the second narrative that unearths the story of Ada's parents Kostas and Defne who are separated by ethnic tensions. The Happy Fig, a tavern run by a sympathetic gay couple is the sole witness of their meetings. It is the sapling of this tree which is cut by Kostas and taken to UK when he reunites with Defne after twenty five years that is the narrator of the third part. The ceremonious burying of the fig tree by Kostas during winter season is a powerful portrayal of the traditions of Cyprus.

"The water sucked up through our boughs is the blood of the earth, the tears of victims, the ink of truths yet to be acknowledged. Humans, especially the victors who hold the pen that write the annals of history, have a penchant for erasing as much as documenting. It remains to us plants to collect the untold, the unwanted. Like a cat that curls up on its favourite cushion, a tree wraps itself around the remnants of its past." (Page 211, Shafak, E. *The Island of Missing Trees*. London: Viking, 2021.)

The way Shafaq portrays the human-nature connect is striking and ethereal as she problematises the pangs of parenthood, teenage, man-woman relationship, communal tensions, migration, home, identity crisis, memory and the innumerable and mundane contradictions of a human world. Through an ecofeminist perspective, Shafaq celebrates nature and finds meaning in existence through the practice of nature connect, thus re-establishing nature as the ultimate solace. She vouches for the tenets of deep ecology as we find the deep and meditative ruminations of the fig tree narrator who calls for a radical shift in the way we treat nature.

The novel *Valli*, by Malayali writer Sheela Tomy weaves a magic of myth and folklore as she narrates the saga of the people of her homeland. High in the Western Ghats in northern Kerala is a blend of greenery, mystery and folklore, replete with the sublime culture of its indigenous people, the Adivasis. Bayalnad - land of the paddy fields nestles in the lap of mother nature and lured traders, colonizers and early settlers from various parts of Kerala. "There was a time when Kalluvayal was a dense, deep forest." (Page 4, Tomy, Sheela. *Valli*. New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2021.). The very first sentence of the novel *Valli* sets the tone for the depiction of a glorious landscape and uncompromising responsibility towards nature.

Exploitation of the forest led to the exploitation and enslavement of its people, and as the forest dwindled, so did the Adivasis' culture, their way of life, even their language. Weaving a mesh of timeless bond with nature, the time between the 1970s and the present, *Valli* unravels the saga of four generations who adopted Wayanad as their home. From a diary left for her by her mother Susan, Tessa explores the story of her family even as she experiences several emotional experiences.

While treading through the mindscapes of the family of four generations, the author experiences togetherness and resilience, rebuke and despair as she takes the readers through experiences as deep and mysterious as the terrains of Wayanad that form the ambience of the novel. The choice of Wayanad as a backdrop gives ample scope for ecofeministic exploration and reinterpretation as it combines the magical aura of a bygone era and offers a peek into its current state of exploitation and commodification in the pretext of tourism. Several local legends like the Unniyachi lore lends a rich cultural aura to Wayanad's traditions. The sheer vulnerability of the village folk of Kalluvayal, each of them

unique in the way they exist, together seek to survive their tough challenges. The women of Wayanad- Lucy, Kembi, Rukku, Isabella, Sara are amazingly drawn to the fragility and beauty of nature and often become champions of survival and conservation. The men like Thommichan, Peter, Padmanabhan, who are mindful of the value of the pristine land break away from the beaten tracks and guard the forests along with Paniyar boys while Father Felix with his soulful sermons awaken the morbid minds of his parishioners to ingenuity. The very names of families and places exude a charming affinity for nature- Anjilikkunnel, Pichakassery, Valliyoorkavu, Manjadikkunnu. The rich folklore and customs of the indigenous community of Wayanad is showcased in the novel, lending it a texture of innocence and charm.

“The women went into the forest and along with them, all the gods of the forest-Kali, Kooli, Kattubhagavathi, Kuttichathan, Muthappan..

At the divine stone at the base of a mighty tree, they laid out tender coconuts, aval, rice and payasam in leaf bowls, offerings to the Gods. Then began the singing and dancing.” (Page 187, Tomy, Sheela. *Valli*. New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2021.)

Sheela Tomy encapsulates the tender spirit and wild charm of Wayanad, replete with its greenery, its silences, its benignity, its elusive nature and its resilience. She explores the human presence in Waynad and empathises with nature as her characters seek to transform the reader from their stories of endurance and resilience. Also written in an ecofeminist perspective, the novel attempts to underline the symbiotic aspect of human-nature existence.

CONCLUSION

Women and nature are intrinsically connected in more than one way. Any depletion of nature will push women to poverty, deprivation and starvation since they are directly connected to nature and natural agents, for the sustenance of the family. They experience the pain of mother earth more deeply than men, as expressed by ecofeminist authors in their works of several forms of fiction. Thus women authors and their imaginative landscapes seek to recreate green spaces that reclaim an intimate connection between humans and nature.

When infrastructural development and business make rapid advances, the very idea of ecological conservation is compromised. Careful planning should be applied to ensure and safeguard the sustainability factor in development. Women authors and thinkers have always applied diligence in portraying the predicament of forests and the indigenous people who inhabit the fringes of forests. Their marginalization and the untold miseries of alienation and cultural insecurities are the byproducts of mindless development. Reclaiming of the green cover and careful and sustainable development are best exemplified by the literary and theoretical responses of women.

While expressing the human responses to climate changes, women authors usher in a lot of accountability and sensitivity. Through their works of meaningful expression, they generate areas of intersectionality that positively seek to change the very dynamics of sustainable development.

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