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The Green and the Feminine: A Deeper Ecofeminist Investigation of Modern Indian Fiction

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Abstract

This paper investigates the various aspects of feminist and subaltern opposition in contemporary Indian writing in the English language, mainly from Arundhati Roy and Namita Gokhale. Both authors work within different but complementary liturgical models, which are all concerned with challenging and destabilizing entrenched power structures, all of which are hierarchical, colonial and patriarchal. Arundhati Roy uses a macro-level postcolonial lens to attack the intermingling of caste, class and state violence. In novels such as *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy draws attention to the harsh social marginalization of subaltern groups, such as Dalits, transgendered people and marginalised women, through both linguistic subversion and black comedy to reveal the effects of the brutal machinery of institutional oppression. Namita Gokhale, on the other hand, bases her stories on the liberal and existential feminist ideals. In her novels, like *Things to Leave Behind*, *Paro: Dreams of Passion*, and *The Book of Shadows*, Gokhale depicts the close psychological worlds of her characters and how they break down the boundaries at home and the mythic stereotypes of women to gain existential independence, education, and equal rights. In addition, the novelists clearly bring in the ecofeminist viewpoints and show how very intertwined are the exploitation of nature and the subjugation of the female body. Roy and Gokhale completely reshape the Indian literary scene, using subversive techniques like the carnivalesque, the self-deprecating joke and the radical revision of Indian historical memory and ancient myths. In the end, their imaginaries tell us that the edges of the society don't only hold the potential for suffering, but also for resiliency, endurance, and deep emancipation.

Keywords: subaltern opposition, existential independence, historical memory and ancient myths

Ecofeminism is a literary movement that essentially claims that the violent exploitation of the environment is inseparable from the systematic oppression of women. In 1974, Françoise

d'Eaubonne theorized this, which she called the "special relation between women and nature". Indian English fiction writers such as Arundhati Roy and Namita Gokhale incorporate the principles of ecofeminism to highlight the harmful effects of both patriarchy and capitalism in modern India. They are oppressive structures that focus on aggressive economic exploitation and inflexible social hierarchies instead of on human dignity and ecological sustainability. The novel, *The God of Small Things* and *Things to Leave Behind*, are used to investigate how female characters and marginalised characters act as natural protectors of the environment. Their literary toils promote an extremely sophisticated concept of social justice, where class and gender are joined with environmental activism.

To appreciate the depth of these novels, one needs to understand the extent to which the female authors place their stories in the context of discourses of the women's environmental movements in the past and the present in India. The Narmada Bachao Andolan is cited as an example of the role of women, especially subsistence women and women living in rural society, in connecting with the earth through a lifeline. Women in these communities are often primarily responsible for managing the limited natural resources of their households, and therefore are most vulnerable and affected by resource exploitation.

In Indian English fiction, there is an active criticism of the male-dominated, capitalist systems, which blindly destroy the environment for economic gain. The body of literature makes an emphatic call for the voices of women to be included in environmental activism as the female writers have an enormous influence in environmental discourses in the era of globalization. Today's novels, therefore, are important instruments for publicizing the interlocking imperatives of climate change and social inequities. These texts illustrate how gender, environmental issues and social justice are approached from an ecofeminist perspective and how the oppression of women and the devastation of the planet are co-symptoms of the same illness.

In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy's natural world is no mere prop to be used to convey a message. It is a character in the story who suffers and is active. Arundhati Roy draws a stark and powerful comparison between the degradation of the river and the violent oppression of her female and subaltern characters. The river is a strong symbol for the untamed and natural world that is constantly being invaded by the artificial and clinical structures of the state and the societal "Love Laws". Divorced single mother Ammu is an outcast and the

family's burden because she is single and childless, while the natural environment is used and contaminated by the capitalist-minded upper class.

The corruption in the novel is just as exact a reflection of the social and moral corruption of the Ayemenem family. This machinery of the state and entrenched caste system exist with a paranoia and ruthlessness that aims to conquer the unruly feminine spirit, and the wild earth. This patriarchal control is depicted as the most important place of the family. Baby Kochamma is a character in this film who upholds the stringent and overpowering regulations of society, serving as an agent of the state at home. Baby Kochamma's obsession with ornamental gardening is interesting because it can be seen as an example of ecofeminism's desire to control nature, a desire shared by the patriarchy. She is the creator of a "fierce, bitter garden", bending the earth and rendering it "unnaturally subservient" to her will, as she does the children, Estha and Rahel. In contrast to organic, free-flowing environment of the marginalised characters is this artificial control over nature.

In Roy's story, Velutha, the untouchable Paravan, is the most powerful ecofeminist symbol. Even though Velutha is a male character, he is perfectly and eloquently identified with the female principle of nature and the elements. Roy says he is the 'Monsoon-bringer' and adds that his presence is like an autumn leaf at night that brought on the monsoons in time. Ammu goes to meet him in the middle of the night, crossing a literal and a figurative divide into a realm all to earth. She places a profound trust in the water, the mud, the trees, the fish and the stars – and she knows he belongs to them, and they belong to him.

Velutha exists above the artificial and corrupt laws of the adult caste society. Instead, he decides to preserve the innocence of nature and the children that love him, who are as delicate and fragile as porcelain. Ammu has a wild and untamed nature that can not be completely broken. She has an "unsafe Edge" as well as a reckless and ferocious rebellion against a smug, ordered, male dominated world. She is a rebellion against the social codes that try to make her invisible: she gives in to the body and to the sexuality.

The tragic climax of the novel is when the state police brutally beat down Velutha to maintain the status quo of the male dominant order. Roy refers to this terrible tragedy as a clinical demonstration of human nature's quest for ascendancy: structure and order take a monopoly on life. This senseless bloodshed is not just the killing of an outcast man. It signifies the highest form of patriarchal and state sponsored destruction of the natural and organic human innocence.

The ones that take advantage of and throw away vulnerable women like Ammu are the same ones that brutally conquer the earth.

In Namita Gokhale's slightly alternative historical and geographical framework, there is a deep intersectional link between gender oppression and environmental degradation. *Things to Leave Behind* is Gokhale's sweeping historical epic about the impact of British colonial modernization on native landscapes and women's lives in the mid-nineteenth century in the Kumaon region. The novel sheds light on the fundamental disorienting mixture of caste, creed and culture in a period of great social change.

Gokhale illustrates the importance of cultural contexts and geographical landscapes in shaping relations between the female characters and the earth. For example, the character Kavita has to deal with the devastating effects of the urbanization on the practice of traditional environment. Colonial and modern structures of power have systematically displaced native women from their traditional roles of land stewards as colonial settlement and development has rapidly taken over every aspect of the land. The novel vividly portrays this clash between the old world and the new: around the Naineetal Lake, six native women, dressed in traditional black and scarlet pichauras, desperately try to purify the water from evil influences. These are women warriors who are protecting the spirit and environment. They make a concerted effort to ensure that their sacred natural environments are not overwhelmed or destroyed by an aggressive and polluting new colonial and patriarchal order that sees the land as a resource that is to be conquered and capitalized on.

In addition to that, *The Himalayan Sanctuary* and *The Healing of the Female Body* is a vivid portrayal of how nature can heal in the novel of Gokhale. In an unforgettable scene of patriarchy, protagonist Rachita Tiwari's face is mutilated forever in a vicious attack of acid, perpetrated as a form of revenge. But, alienated from her past life, her former beauty, and deeply traumatized by the cruel world of the city and the male dominated society, Rachita finds absolute sanctuary in an old house, in the hills of Kumaon a century old.

The majestic landscape of the Himalayas is not portrayed as a backdrop. Rather, the environment is an active, dynamic participant in her mental and physical healing process. Gokhale shows great reverence for the terrain and writes about the many aspects of natural beauty such as tall trees like Deodar, Oak, Kharsu, Rhododendron, and Tiloj and lush green fields called Bugyals. Slowly Rachita integrates her broken down mind with this old, still land.

She watches the tall oaks leaning, strange noises coming out of them from the dark, bark rubbing against sap. She finds that the frost has a beautiful, clean and structured essence, is actively cleansing and calming her clogged and chaotic feelings.

The natural world in Gokhale's fiction provides a protective embrace that is outside of time, that is non-judgmental, that is different from the judgmental, toxic world from which she ran. The wildlife is a source of solace to Rachita and a sense of kinship. It's a cold winter night as snow gently lands on the garden, and a family of black bears with furry bodies and snouts adorned with snow makes its way down from the forest to rest on her veranda. She gazes upon them patiently with her eyes, knowing that this is a beautiful and radical way of living in harmony with the wild, a way of living that is different from the violence she has seen in the city.

The healing sunlight which eventually pierces the mist and lights the towering peak of Nanda Devi gives a sense of rebirth to Rachita. She comes to understand that she is an integral component of creation, surrounded by hurt but unbreakable skin and that she is an essential being who does not require the endorsement of men or society to be there. The book is a feminist theory of complexity that Gokhale defends as Rachita embarks on a painful yet ultimately victorious journey. She shows how the love and wisdom of going back to the earth can utterly dismantle oppressive patriarchy and return absolute female autonomy.

Mountain people, ecofeminism, and the Strength of the Mountain Woman Gokhale: The three books in this trilogy that Gokhale wrote about her trek to the Himalayas always remind readers of the ecofeminist notion that the mountains provide an indomitable strength to those who live there. The Himalayas are the highest and youngest mountains of the world and they engender an aggressive and essential independence among the women who live among them. In novels such as *A Himalayan Love Story*, the pure nature is juxtaposed with great suffering of the female characters. The main character Parvati is thrust into harsh poverty and an unloving marriage, and is deeply connected to the natural world in which she was born.

The tragedy of Parvati's life is magnified by her forced alienation from real love, and she is living in a society that sees the female body as property to be exchanged for social security. Gokhale insists that we see women not as victims, but as living parts of the natural environment, unashamedly desiring and claiming their right to be free of Others' oppression. Gokhale weaves the fates of her female characters into the fates of the Himalayan terrain, so that the earth and

the woman endure together, and they have the power to endure and outlast those that want to destroy them.

Unraveling the Past: Mythology and Historical Memory in Indian English

To really grasp the richness of Indian literature today, you cannot just look at the actual ground it walks on, but also the historical and mythological ground, from which these narratives spring. Novelists such as Arundhati Roy, Namita Gokhale and Amitav Ghosh actively question the past in an effort to comprehend the present. They show that history is no simple time capsule of dates and treaties. Rather, history is a living, breathing force that hunts the marginalized, influences social norms and creates individual identities. These writers re-imagine old myths, defy the boundaries of the nation-state and unveil the untold traumas of official histories, and they demonstrate that the power of remembering can be a potent weapon in the struggle for survival and resistance.

Arundhati Roy brings out the Terrors of the "History House" in *The God of Small Things* and she shows how the prejudices perpetrated thousands of years ago take their toll in the present. Her novel's past is tightly bound up with the "Love Laws," ancient unwritten rules that determine exactly who should love and how much they should love. These laws are not some distant theory but the harsh truths of state and patriarchal violence. These historical edicts doom the fate of untouchable Velutha and of Ammu, a divorcee.

Roy focuses on this theme in the physicality of the "History House. The abandoned colonial estate in the middle of the backwaters of Kerala is the literal and metaphorical focal point of the novel's climax and his violent scene. When the police brutally beat Velutha to death, Roy calls it an event of "police brutality, but more than that, it is human history, masquerading as God's purpose". It is a clinical illustration of human nature's indefatigable quest for ascendancy, which is enforced by the machines of the state that impose historical caste and gender boundaries. The violence is depicted as a 'History in live performance'. This way the tragedy is put on to the reader's agenda and he/she is forced to admit that the subaltern is always under the weight of centuries of entrenched discrimination.

In addition, Roy questions the linear and orderly approach of official history. She is using a style of storytelling that is disjointed, waylaid, and non-linear, much like the way traumatic memories work. Madhu says in Namita Gokhale's piece, which captures Roy's storytelling method, people see their lives in memory, and 'memories are fractured, fractured, almost

always cutting across time'. Roy's novel constantly shifts between time frames, showing that for anyone who suffers systemic violence, the past is not something that one can escape from, a continuous present.

Amitav Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* deals with the colossal traumas of colonialism, partition, and the nation-state, while Roy explores the localized traumas of caste and domestic history. In contrast to the conventional image of the nation as a unified and fixed entity, Ghosh challenges this with his aggressive positioning of the one and the other. He suggests that political borders between countries are "shadow lines" imposed by the politicians to forcibly divide communities with the same culture and history.

This battle of ideas is fought via two main characters: the narrator's grandmother Tha'mma and her brother Tridib. Tha'mma stands for traditional nationalism, as it is militant and intense. She has experienced the struggle for independence herself and believes that a true nation is built by war and bloodshed. A nation is only real if people have "earned his right to be there with blood" and "war is their religion", she states. But her dogmatic attitude towards physical boundaries is broken when she goes back to her hometown of Dhaka. She is amazed to discover that the border is not visible, and that it is rather disorganized than one would expect, and clashing with her nationality. Her uncle Jethamoshai mocks this political partition, saying that he does not believe in such an "India-Shindia" and the logic on which this is based is absurd, as politicians can just create another line, tomorrow.

But Tridib has a different idea—he thinks that moving beyond boundaries is possible through the freedom of imagination—and that's exactly what he does. Tridib is a teacher of the young narrator that the world can only be known through "pure painful and primitive desire", which can take the mind to other worlds and times without the aid of passports or the body. Tridib's worldview infers that history and geography are constructs that can be split apart through humanity and transcultural aspects.

The novel also reveals the huge omissions and distortions in the official historical accounts, as done by Ghosh. In the communal riot in Dhaka, the narrator goes on a quest to know the truth about Tridib's death. He finds almost no mention of this devastating event – it changed his family forever – in the newspapers or public records of the day. The tragedy had been blotted out of the official history. Through this reconstruction of the event by memory, Ghosh

emphasizes the "silence of voiceless events," the ability of personal mnemonic history to be more authentic than the sanitized version that comes from the state.

Namita Gokhale: Myth-Making and the Retrieval of the Female Self Namita Gokhale's exploration of historical memory is based on the themes of Indian mythology and nineteenth-century colonial history, which she uses to create new and radical selves for her female characters. Mythology in Indian culture is not a static and academic theory, but is a living, breathing aspect of life. The great epics such as Mahabharata and Ramayana are the matrix that governs present moral and social values. However, Gokhale steps in to the space to empower women with her own take on these ancient myths.

Shakuntala: The Play of Memory is Gokhale's groundbreaking novel, which completely upends the famous Sanskrit play of Kalidasa. Traditionally, Shakuntala is a passive victim of fate, who suffers and is abandoned with silent grace. But Gokhale's Shakuntala is a strong, independent woman who opposes to be suppressed by social norms. Desperate to escape the loneliness of a marriage to an older man, she longs for adventure, for a life other than this, for the freedom to wander, to be elsewhere, to seek; a freedom usually enjoyed only by men. She leaves behind her family and home to join a Greek horse trader named Nearchus on his journey. She has completely transcended feminine norms and she is the sole proprietor of her body, her desires, and her destiny as Yaduri. Gokhale brings one of the most significant documents in Indian historical literature into a new form—the manifesto for the freedom of women.

Gokhale also undertakes a huge re-evaluation of the mythological nature of Sita. She discusses in the anthology *In Search of Sita* (with Malashri Lal), that Sita is one of the most prominent icons of Indian womanhood and that there is no single, fixed version of her story. Her is made human by her different regional variations, and she is divinised by her canonical texts. Gokhale's role in reopening the discussion about Sita's birth, exile and eventual return to the earth challenges the patriarchal expectation of women's unquestioning submission. She wonders at the injustice that has befallen Sita, and begins a conversation that leads her to reconsider how she views this iconic symbol of victimhood not only as one of incredible endurance, but also an icon of female strength.

In addition to the ancient myth Gokhale explores the colonial history of the Kumaon area in her epic *Things to Leave Behind*. The novel is based in 1856 when the society is experiencing a period of transition within its own history between old and new ways. The novel is set in 1856,

in a society in transition between old and new ways. Bypassing romanticisation of the life on the mountain, Gokhale brings this elemental confusion of caste, creed and culture to life. She shows the characters, such as the spirited Tilottama Dutt, of how native women faced the rapid transformation of the Raj, under no compulsion to surrender their independence and education. Gokhale uses historical fiction to painstakingly chronicle the struggle of women that took place in their domestic and social lives, a struggle rarely mentioned in the historical literature of men. In *The Book of Shadows*, The Hauntings of the Past in "The Book of Shadows" Gokhale delves deeper into the insidious nature of history. After being attacked with acid which almost killed her, the protagonist, Rachita Tiwari, moves to a house built a century ago in the Himalayas. There she finds the journals of the previous colonial dwellers of the home, such as the missionary William Cockerell and the avenging Captain Wolcott. The house itself is haunted by the shadows and ghosts of these residents, and the violence and passions of history have left their mark on the physical space. Rachita comes to understand, "The past holds a tight grip on the future; it tyrannizes the future into repetitive patterns". But Rachita by giving battle to these ghosts of the past and facing the hideous truths of human nature from various eras is able to pull together what's broken in her own mind. She discovers that she is not a victim of historical trauma, and must take charge of her own fate and "cast and recast our lot in every precious moment."

Conclusion

The last statement is true of the novels of Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, and Namita Gokhale, who have pioneered a new course in the exploration of the past which is, in itself, a highly revolutionary exercise. History, when it is simply the power, the state, or the orthodox religions that have created it, is often employed as a tool to enforce boundaries, bolster caste violence, and advocate women's submission. These writers, however, use personal memory as weapon, unravel the intricate matrices of mythology and reveal the artifices of political boundaries, and thereby recover history for the forgotten and the marginalized. From the History House's Rahel and Estha's struggle to confront their past, to the unnamed narrator of *The Shadow Lines* who comes to understand what went on in a forgotten riot, to Shakuntala who emerges from an ancient manuscript to take charge of her sexuality, all these stories suggest that the past must not be ignored, but rather actively confronted. In so doing, they present an engaging and

restorative vision for our present day, thereby allowing the forgotten and muted voices of history to be heard in a monumental space.

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