

**Exploring Women and Ecology: An Ecofeminist Study of the
Writings of Indira Goswami and Sara Joseph**

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Abstract

This paper undertakes an ecofeminist exploration of select works by Indira Goswami and Sara Joseph, two prominent voices from Assamese and Malayalam literature respectively. Ecofeminism, which foregrounds the parallel oppressions of women and nature under patriarchal structures, provides a critical framework to analyze the intersections of gender, ecology, and culture in these writers' works. Goswami's *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* and *Pages Stained with Blood* depict the struggles of widows, caste-based oppression, and the ecological devastation tied to socio-political violence, revealing the deep entanglement of patriarchal authority with environmental degradation. Similarly, Joseph's *Gift in Green* and *Othappu: The Scent of the Other Side* interrogate the exploitation of land, water, and women's bodies in a society shaped by religious orthodoxy and capitalist modernity. By juxtaposing these regional narratives, the paper highlights how ecofeminist concerns transcend geography and culture, offering a comparative lens to understand the shared vulnerability and resilience of women and nature. Ultimately, this study underscores the significance of ecofeminism in re-reading Indian literature as a site of resistance against ecological and gendered marginalization.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Indira Goswami, Sara Joseph, Women and Nature, Patriarchy, Indian Literature

Introduction:

A movement which explores the various scenarios where both women and nature face same kind of oppression by patriarchy is known as Ecofeminism. This research paper will explore such scenarios in select works of two renowned authors Indira Goswami and Sara Joseph. Both these authors belong to different regions and backgrounds. The aim of selecting these two writers is to understand and shed light on various concerns for nature as well as women in different regions and social structures. Indira Goswami is an Assamese writer whose writings exhibit the socio-political oppression in its varied forms. For this study her two novels- *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of Tusker* & *Pages Stained with Blood* are chosen to explore different aspects of Ecofeminism in them. How widows suffer from orthodox culture and in the same way how Nature also face oppression and destruction from male-centered society can be understood through her work. The other writer is Sara Joseph. She is a Malayalam writer who is well known for her several works. Her two famous works *Othappu: The Scent of the other*

side and *A Gift of Green* will be analysed in this paper. Both novels have great scope of exploration with Ecofeminist perspective. *A Gift of Green* is a novel about relationship between people and the land they inhabit. It will explore how environment is affected by development of patriarchal minds and how life of residents of that land is affected? In another novel *Othappu*, the life of a woman Margalitha is portrayed, who belongs to a conservative Christian society. She faces a lot of suppression and restrictions in male dominant society. Nature, in a similar fashion got suppressed and exploited by man. So, through these works the aim is to provide a better understanding of ecofeminist perspective and a clear parallel will be drawn between the two authors.

The present paper is focused on study of select novels with perspective of understanding relation between nature and women. Whenever there is need to understand relation between nature and women ecofeminism is used as a theory. Ecofeminism is comprising of a wide area of theories of feminism and environment and their relation with art and culture. Its central objective is *prima facie* concerned with the mistreatment of women and ecological abasement in the patriarchal world. It combines ecological concerns with feminist one, regarding both resulting from male domination of society. Ecofeminism applies feminist principles and ideas to ecological issues. So, it comes out from amalgamation of feminism and environmentalism. The primary aim of this movement is to eliminate all forms of domination and try to find connection between them.

Research Questions

1. How do Indira Goswami and Sara Joseph depict the parallel oppression of women and nature in their works?
2. In what ways do regional contexts of Assam and Kerala shape their ecofeminist concerns?
3. How can ecofeminism serve as a critical lens to reinterpret Indian women's writing?

Objectives

1. To analyze selected works of Goswami and Joseph through ecofeminist theory.
2. To examine the intersection of patriarchal oppression, women's struggles, and ecological degradation.
3. To highlight shared and divergent ecofeminist concerns across regional literatures.

Methodology

The present study employs a qualitative and comparative literary approach rooted in ecofeminist theory. Primary texts—Indira Goswami's *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* and *Pages Stained with Blood*, along with Sara Joseph's *Gift in Green* and *Othappu*—are subjected to close textual analysis to identify representations of the interconnected oppressions of women and nature. A comparative framework is adopted to highlight both convergences and divergences between Assamese and Malayalam socio-cultural contexts. The analysis is further guided by the theoretical insights of ecofeminist thinkers such as Françoise d'Eaubonne, Vandana Shiva, and Val Plumwood, which provide a critical lens to interpret the narratives. By combining textual, contextual, and theoretical readings, this methodology seeks to

foreground the relevance of ecofeminism in reinterpreting Indian women's writing as a discourse of gendered and ecological justice.

Origin of theory

This term ecofeminism was introduced initially in work of French writer Francoise d'Eaubonne's work *Le Feminisme ou la Mort* (Feminism or death) in 1974. Through her work she claims that root cause of domination of women and nature is patriarchy. She says women are life givers one who preserves life and have concerns for future generations whereas men are one exploitative in nature, he plunders and subordinate both women and nature. Further this concept took its shape in work of Rachel Carson's work *Silent Spring* (2000). The work focused on the threatening aspect of man's technological progress and its unfavorable effect on environment like use of toxic chemicals in the countryside and how wildlife of America is destructed by all this. Various social movements were got hike during 1970's and 1980's which culminated ecofeminism. The mishap at Three- Mile Island in Pennsylvania, where large number of radiations were released from nuclear power plant which forced large number of women in the US to join together in the first Ecofeminist conference- "Women and Life on Earth, a conference on ecofeminism in the 80's" in March 1980 at Amherst, Massachusetts. There comes awareness among women about connectedness between patriarchal violence against women and nature. In 1973 a new movement related to forest protection was seen in Himalayan region of Uttarakhand named Chipko movement. The support for this movement came mainly from the womenfolk. This movement practiced methods of Satyagraha where both male and female played vital role like Gaura Devi, Bachni Devi etc and others. After this in 1977, Green Belt Movement came, it was a non-governmental organization in Kenya focus of which was to promote a positive image of women and their independence. Major work done by this movement is it encouraged women to plant trees in order to combat deforestation and environmental degradation. All incidence related to environment somewhere related to this ecofeminism movement. Leakage of toxic gas from Union Carbide pesticides took place in Bhopal, where women have been mostly affected. So, all these incidences created a awareness about environmental degradation and their harmful impact majorly on women. The theory gets its origin from all these incidents and movements.

Famous ecofeminist theorist

Many theorists contributed to this field of ecofeminism. Western as well as Indian authors have done great efforts to nourish this field. Such as Ynestra King, a North American ecofeminist, established a connection between women and nature, by considering women inferior to male dominated culture and he believed all social practices as root cause of ecological destruction. Mary Daly, American radical lesbian feminist gave her remarkable contribution to the field with her work- *Gyn/Ecology* (1978). Another famous ecofeminist theorists are Starhawk, Carol Christ, Merchant, Val Plumwood, Greta Gard, Karen J. Warren were western theorist. If we talk about Indian theorist its incomplete discussion of Ecofeminism theory without discussing about Vandana Shiva. She is a prominent Indian Ecofeminist thinker and activist who has made major contributions to the field through her works such as

Ecofeminism, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* (2010). She argued through her works that degradation of women and nature is due to the emergence of new world order that is based upon development, Modernization, and advancement in science and technology. She said development is Mal Development. According to her the only path to survival and liberation for nature and woman is an ecological one of harmony, sustainability and diversity, as opposed to domination, exploitation and surplus. After this there have been lots of policy shifts of gender inequality and environmental sustainability.

India is a multicultural and multilingual land where Indian writers have tried to explore and analyze the status of women in the society. Indian writing started with authors like Krupabai Sathianadhan the first English women novelist from India who pioneered the feminist movement in India but her untimely death and the upswing of nationalism soon rendered her writings and subtly laid the foundation stone for women's writing which later emerged as a powerful medium of modernism, feminism and ecofeminism in 20th century. Indian women authors expressed the role and position of women through their writings and also highlighted many concerning issues related to women in our society. Female writers such as Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai discussed problems faced by women in today's male dominant society. While writes like Manju Kapoor, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai have written novels on magic realism, religious fiction and social issues etc.

The connection of men and women and nature can be very well be seen through an ecofeminist lens in several works of Indian writers such as Anita Nair, Arundhati Roy, Kamala Das and Mahasweta Devi who have brought to our notices that there is a sense of bias in viewing men and women as a part of society where woman is seen as more homely, moral, pious, timid, kind, serene and beautiful just like mother nature whereas man is seen as ambitious, Rational, dominant, independent and even arrogant. So, qualities of men seldom relate with mother nature.

Several regional authors also have been active in finding out this contrasting behaviour by aptly working around it. Many north-east Indian women authors such as Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai, Mitra Phukan, etc have contributed and have raised their voices and created their identity out of their boundaries by having invariably dealt with the issues of oppression, subjugation, invisibility, silences and gaps in patriarchy through their works. Indira Goswami is among these north-east writers. While several Malayalam authors also contributed to the field of ecofeminism, they write about women space, nature so nicely in their works. Sara Joseph is good example of such authors.

For this paper I choose two regional authors one is Indira Goswami, an Assamese author and another one is Malayalam Author Sara Joseph.

Indira Goswami

Indira Goswami, known by her pen name Mamoni Raisom Goswami is a prominent author. She born in 1942 in Assam. Her Novel's theme is very fresh and original. Her short stories and novels give readers a taste of life beyond boundaries of Assam as they are set in different locations of India. Her work mostly focusses on the socio-political violence directed

against by the oppressed and marginalized section of society. A great empathy and compassion can be seen in her work when she talks about tough social issues of urban life, the harsh lives of laborers, and the plight of widows in Vrindavan and Assam. She is very discreet and reserved in how she expresses her outrage or displeasure about compelled Rituals and oppressive social norms. Goswami who is regarded as an authority on the Ramayana literature, has received numerous honours for her extensive publications on the Assamese and Hindi Ramayanas including the 1999 International Tulsi Award from Florida International University in Miami. She won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983 for her novel *Mamora Dhora Tarowal*. Her autobiography named *Adhalekha Dastaveja* (An Unfinished Biography) published in 1988 and its English translation have won critical acclaim in India. Her other famous works are *The blue Necked Braja* translated by Gayatri Bhattacharya, *The man from Chinnamasta* translated by Prasanta Goswami.

The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker:

The Novel *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* focuses on different problems faced by widows belonging to the Assamese orthodox community. It is a translated version of Assamese novel *Une Khowa Howda* by Indira Goswami herself. Through the eyes of these characters- Durga, Saru Gossainee and Giribala, this novel ruthlessly exposes the inhuman hardships and cruelties inflicted on Brahmin widows. The focal point of this novel is the socio-economic Self-indulgence that characterised the feudalistic institutions that existed just before Indian independence from British rule. This novel is based on Nostalgic memories of Indira Goswami's own "Sattra" situated in south Kamrup, Assam. Novel talk about opium addiction. People are so much addicted that they can go beyond any limit. This shows they are not aware with environmental effects from these conditions. Opium Cultivation brings serious environmental conditions. It affects the soil and climate of region of area where it grows. The soil becomes dry due to over cultivation of opium and many more effects. The setting of novel is on Brahman community. There are very strict rules for women in the community. Thus, patriarchal dominance is there in community. It seems that task of pleasing god falls only on women and minorities. They are the ones who are primary victim of violence in patriarchal society. Similarly, nature is also primary victim of patriarchal society. Goswami highlights the tough life of women living in strict religious community, how old age groups women are targeted by them? etc. there is a belief that a girl should be married before she reaches to puberty. There is a case when a girl name Eliman married to Brahman, who is opium smuggler. Here both woman and nature are shown as inferior and helpless victims under the dominance of patriarchy. When her husband caught by police, the girl is forced to marry another guy, who has been twice married before. When she refuses, she is punished in return. Thus, through this Goswami wants to represent domination of male dominating society on women, which similarly dominate on nature also. There is various example in novel where all discrimination is with woman only. As in 'Sattra' menstruation is considered to be 'greatest sin'. There is lots of misbeliefs related to this. She presents minute details of pitiful existence of widowed women of her 'Sattra'. There is misbelief that widows are not allowed to leave their home and even

should make them invisible because of belief that their touch will be misfortune for others. In novel, older Gossainee about which Goswami talk has led a troubled life. Her married life was full of grief and often she becomes widow it brought her more worries. Another character Durga, a relative of older Gossainee, treated badly and thrown out of her marital home after her husband's death. All her rights, her property seized by her in-laws and abandoned her at her maternal house. She even didn't fight any legal fight to obtain her share of the property. There is a harsh belief in their clain that respectable women should not step into court as the thieves and criminals would make them impure. Such discrimination is with environment also, nature who nurture human have no care in return. All boundations are on nature like women. Man can use nature as per their greed and all problems in return are only faced by the nature. Other character Giribala also have fate similar to previous characters who also left by her in-laws after her husband's death. When she finds one right man further, society call it affair and they forced to perfrom rituals to purify her. But she refuses that and imitates herself in fire. Saru Gossaine, one of the characters among them also a widow. When she got cheated by villagers who grow paddy on her land. Mahindra a young widower come forward to help her. But in end he also cheated and exploited her. So, there are lot of such examples in Novel, where exploitation of woman is seen at every step of their life. This man not only exploit women but exploit nature too in similar way and dominate over them.

Pages stained with blood:

Another novel by Indira Goswami but this time with different setting. This novel is also originally written in Assamese language and later translated in English by Pradeep Acharya. The novel is about the time of Indira Goswami's assassination in 1984. Whatever the state faced during that time is basic plot of this novel. The time of riots was not easy time for people of that period. The people of that particular area paid the price of damage. The story is described through the lens of a young women who is collecting material for her book. In this novel there can be observed ecofeminist concerns. During riots there were lots of destruction. Burning of buses, shops, personal property etc everywhere. These activities harm environment also, creates pollution, damage of resources. Patriarchal thoughts are responsible for all such destruction. They have destructive thinking which only harm environment. There are few instances where woman is raped by man during such riots also. Man consider woman their property which he can treat in whatever way he like. They only want their joy for that they can destroy life of woman at any extent. Such riots not only face problems of destruction of nature but also exploitation of women's rights. Thus, this novel shows ecofeminist concerns where men were raping women and setting fire to different things thus polluting and degrading environment.

Sara Joseph

She is well known Malayalam novelist, short story writer, political commentator and activist. She has written eight novels, nine anthologies of short stories, five novelettes, numerous plays, books for children, and various non-fiction publications. She has been awarded with many famous awards as the Sahitya Akademi Award, the Kerala Sahitya

Akademi Award, the Vayalur Award, the Crossword Award, the Padmaprabha Literary Award and the O Chanthu Menon Award. Her radical works have inspired and paved the path for subsequent generations of Malayali working women and activists, and her name is inextricably linked with the feminist movement in Kerala. She is a writer who instead of writing about political, social conditions focusses on inner world of women.

Gift in green:

The novel is originally written in Malayalam. The novel is about the story of relationship between people and the land they inhabit the plot of novel rotate around 'Aathi', a serene island of waterbodies and mangroves for 'modernity' and 'exposure' of the big city. Novel deals with how 'Aathi' polluted by people and how nature relates to it. The life of people of island is very pleasant. The character named kumaran, a greedy man ran away from village in city and when after some time he come, he tries to modernize the village but in return he only destroyed its natural resources. Its true whenever we try to bring changes in natural order of something it only brings problems and so does happens with nature also. The greedy nature of man is seen in this novel where he exploits its resources only in need of his wants. Our nature is meant for all and it serves all creatures of universe equally. But greedy human misuse it for its need only and doesn't consider sustainable aspect of nature and overuse its resources. Through her this novel Sara Joseph want to bring such example of environmental destruction. She observes such changes in society and try to bring worst attitude of humans against nature in the novel Gift in Green. Through this novel the Sara joseph echoes the importance of water. Through various characters like Hagar, Kumaran, Shailaja etc talk about environment related issues in Island. Hagar is one who is abandoned with her firstborn by her husband. Through her story writer engraves the reader's perception of water, which is soul creation of earth. In this story we can see how people underrate its importance and take ownership on it which is highly ridiculous. We know women care for nature more than man. This can be seen in work when is search of water she finds it but she allows nomads to take it as she understands importance of water and its need. She understands well that water has its life itself without which no one survives. She is clear that nature is meant for all. So, all this is good example of ecofeminism, where women protect nature and value it more. Even famous ecofeminist Vandana Shiva said," women in India are an intimate art of nature, both in imagination and practice.". There is one example in novel of kunjimathu's father who gives priority to a farmer to marry his daughter. Behind this his belief that working with nature will furnish his all sorts of pleasure.

Othapu: the scent of the other side

Another novel by Sara joseph originally written in Malayalam language and later translated by Valson Thampu. The novel is about a women's yearning for a true understanding of spirituality and her own sexuality. Sara joseph portrays a story of a socially and economically privileged woman who leaves the nunnery, who fights against religious social institutions for the search of her freedom and space in this patriarchal society. It unfolds at many levels to critique notions of class, caste, antiquity and prestige that have over time, eroded the power of

the first church. In novel there is detailed introduction of Jancy James provides rare insights into the work and skilfully sketches the social history of Kerala, the location of the novel. Margalitha is women protagonist of work. It narrates women's journey to the actualisation and empowerment. The malayalam word 'Othapu' comes from Malayalam Bible, its English translation means 'Struggle' or 'cause someone to lose faith and turn to evil ways'. In novel, Margalitha's rebels against the imposed denial of female experiences and feelings for a spiritual search is somehow an example for Othappu for the traditional ND conservative society. She discarded both nun hood and marriage. She wants to extend her charity and services outside the religious cloister and love and togetherness outside the rigidity of marriage. The novels picturises how the conservative society throw stones at a women in search of enlightenment from this marginalised condition. In novel there is lots of instances of women oppression and similar instances are with nature in real world. Human take both woman and nature as for granted and thus exploit them. so, novel is good source to understand all such aspects of ecofeminism.

Conclusion

The comparative study of Indira Goswami and Sara Joseph through an ecofeminist lens reveals the deep-rooted interconnectedness between the subjugation of women and the exploitation of nature within patriarchal societies. Goswami's portrayal of widows in *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* and the violence-ridden world of *Pages Stained with Blood* exposes how patriarchal ideologies perpetuate suffering for both marginalized women and the environment. Similarly, Joseph's *Gift in Green* and *Othappu* articulate how women's struggles for freedom, identity, and dignity mirror ecological degradation under forces of modernity, religious orthodoxy, and male-centered power. Both authors, despite writing from distinct cultural and regional contexts, converge in illustrating that the domination of women and nature is neither accidental nor isolated, but systematically structured within socio-political and cultural frameworks. This paper thus underscores the relevance of ecofeminism as a critical tool to reinterpret Indian literature, demonstrating that resistance, resilience, and the search for harmony lie at the core of both women's survival and ecological sustainability.

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Conflict of interest

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