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ECOFEMINIST LITERARY PEDAGOGY IN INDIA: A ROUTE MAP

KALPANA RAO HULLURU
Department of English
Pondicherry University
hkalp.eng@pondiuni.ac.in

ANGELA EMILY SEBASTIAN
Department of English
Pondicherry University
angela.sebastian899@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to draw a route map for a distinctly Indian ecofeminist literary pedagogy to encourage and equip literature students to address the growing ecological challenges. Ecofeminist literary criticism which remained an extremely marginal presence in Indian academia for over a decade has recently seen a surge of interest with the publication of several edited volumes, papers, books and theses. Many young researchers feel the need to respond to some of the biggest issues around them through their practice of literary criticism. However, a look at the literature classrooms in India shows that ecofeminism, like most other environmental perspectives, suffers from stagnation– it remains a minor point of discussion under "ecocriticism", often perceived as an outdated and essentialist idea by many students. It is this gap in pedagogy that we address in the paper. We attempt to map out the larger concerns of ecofeminism, its emergence in India, and look at how an ecofeminist pedagogy, with its firm roots in activism and intersectionality, can reinvigorate the discussions on regionality, postcoloniality, neoliberalism, and much more in literature classes.

KEYWORDS: Ecofeminism, Literary Pedagogy, Postcolonial Ecofeminism, Intersectionality, Environmental Movements, Ecocriticism, Regionality

RESUMEN *Pedagogía literaria ecofeminista en la India: una hoja de ruta*

Este artículo tiene como objetivo trazar una hoja de ruta para una pedagogía literaria ecofeminista en la India que alentaría y equiparía a los estudiantes de literatura a abordar los crecientes desafíos ecológicos. La crítica literaria ecofeminista, que ha tenido una presencia extremadamente marginal en el mundo académico indio durante más de una década, ahora recibe gran atención con la publicación de varios volúmenes, artículos, libros y tesis. Muchos investigadores jóvenes sienten la necesidad de responder a algunos de los problemas más importantes que los rodean a través de su práctica de la crítica literaria. Sin embargo, una mirada a las aulas de literatura en la India muestra que el ecofeminismo, como la mayoría de las otras perspectivas ambientales, sufre un estancamiento; sigue siendo un punto menor de discusión dentro de "la ecocrítica", a menudo percibida como una idea obsoleta y esencialista por muchos estudiantes. Es esta brecha en la pedagogía la que abordamos en el artículo. Intentamos mapear las preocupaciones más amplias delecofeminismo, su surgimiento en la India y observar cómo una pedagogía ecofeminista, con sus firmes raíces en el activismo y la interseccionalidad, puede estimular las discusiones sobre regionalidad, poscolonialidad, neoliberalismo y mucho más en las clases de literatura.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Ecofeminismo, pedagogía literaria, ecofeminismo poscolonial, interseccionalidad, movimientos ambientalistas, ecocrítica, regionalidad.

Introduction

In India, we are observing a notable rise in literary research that centres on environmental themes. This trend is largely driven by the increasing prominence of environmental issues in public discourse, as well as a burgeoning interest in fields such as Environmental Humanities. Consequently, ecofeminism is experiencing a revival within literary studies, with numerous researchers uncovering vital insights from early ecofeminist perspectives on human interconnectedness with the environment, the inseparability of nature and culture, and the intricate interplay of various oppressive systems. Rather than simply adopting concepts from the Western tradition without question, recent studies engage ecofeminism in conversation with postcolonial theory, regional cultures, and pressing issues related to caste, class, and indigeneity within the Indian context. Notable examples of this emerging trend in Indian ecofeminist literary criticism include Sangita Patil's *Ecofeminism and the Indian Novel* (2019), Sarita Pandey's *Ecofeminism and Indian Women Writing in English* (2023), contributions in the edited volume *Indian Feminist Ecocriticism* (2022), and discussions on ecofeminism in Hindi, Tamil, and Bengali literature featured in *The Routledge Handbook of Ecofeminism and Literature* (2023).

Despite these promising developments, the marginalisation of ecofeminism in Indian academia is starkly highlighted by its lack of representation in educational curricula. A handful of Indian universities, particularly in South India, began incorporating ecofeminism into their undergraduate and postgraduate literature courses in the 2000s, often relegating it to a key term under the broader umbrella of Ecocriticism, which was itself part of Literary Theory courses. This limited inclusion has led to ecofeminism being covered in just one single lecture, with minimal critical engagement concerning literary texts, its historical context in India, various contentions, and recent developments. Unfortunately, this superficial approach to teaching ecofeminism persists today. Many prominent universities have yet to integrate ecofeminism into their literary pedagogy, and specialised courses focused on ecofeminist literary criticism remain nearly non-existent. As a result, students who encounter ecofeminism through this cursory lens often regard it as an outdated theory rooted in essentialist views linking women to nature.

The vibrant and emerging research in ecofeminist literary criticism in India fails to reach the broader student community due to this pedagogical stagnation. This paper aims to address this gap and explore ways to revise literary pedagogy in light of contemporary discourses. The first section delves into the origins of ecofeminist theory, its diverse strands, and recent theoretical shifts. The second section examines postcolonial ecofeminism, assessing its past and potential future. Both sections are crucial

for enriching classroom discussions and setting a foundation for considering Indian ecofeminist literary criticism. The third section specifically investigates the intersection of ecofeminism and environmental activism in India, illuminating why the revival of ecofeminism holds significant relevance in the current context. The concluding section presents a framework for an ecofeminist literary pedagogy, tailored to the Indian context, with each subsection providing a detailed exploration of different facets of this approach.

What is Ecofeminism?

As feminism evolved from addressing sex-based inequality to encompassing a broader framework that tackles issues of subordination, hegemony, intellectualism, and marginalisation, feminists began to articulate a vision of "humanity" distinct from the one traditionally shaped by men (Haraway, 2004: 47). This reimagining of humanity brought concerns about nature into feminist inquiry, prompting questions about what human-nature interactions might resemble in the absence of a "male" perspective on the world. Françoise d'Eaubonne, in her seminal work *Feminism or Death* (1974), examined the intricate relationship between capitalism, patriarchy, women's bodies, and environmental degradation. She coined the term ecofeminism to describe this emerging humanism, which embodies the aspirations of the "feminine masses" and seeks to promote egalitarianism while restoring balance to the world. D'Eaubonne asserted that "pollution, environmental destruction, and runaway demography are men's words, reflecting men's problems: those of a male culture. These terms would not exist in a female culture rooted in the ancient ancestry of the great mothers" (1974: 194-195).

D'Eaubonne's work served as an inspiration to many cultural feminists in the United States who further developed the discourse connecting women and nature, thus laying the groundwork for ecofeminist theory. Mary Daly published *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* in 1978 in which she argued, like d'Eaubonne, that women should rediscover their inherent connection to the earth and all life in order to resist the patriarchal culture that threatens to kill it (1-9). Similarly, Susan Griffin's *Women and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (1978) finds women's connection to the Earth, whom she describes as "sister", to be a tool for the liberation from both patriarchy and ecological destruction (219). These are considered some of the foundational texts of ecofeminism. However, it is important to note that these early works represent only one strand of the highly pluralist framework, namely cultural ecofeminism. Cultural ecofeminists celebrated women's difference from men and posited their "essential" connection to nature through reproductive abilities as the source of women's power. Despite the essentialism and ethnocentrism of cultural ecofeminism being criticised by other

ecofeminists, they became the focal points of the backlash faced by ecofeminism from the late 1980s (Gaard, 2011: 31).

While many critics made ecofeminism seem like a monolithic, exclusively essentialist idea, in reality several strands of ecofeminism understand the relation between women and nature as historically and socially constructed. For instance, Ynestra King, whose 1981 essay "The Eco-Feminist Imperative" is considered a key text alongside Daly's and Griffin's, differed from them in arguing that there is nothing inherently "natural" about women; instead, the historic repression of women and nature in the male culture is what allows a connection to emerge between them (Sandilands, 1999: 18). Similarly, socialist ecofeminist Carolyn Merchant wrote in the preface (1990) to her book *The Death of Nature* (1980) that "the concepts of nature and women are historical and social constructions. There are no unchanging "essential" characteristics of sex, gender, or nature" (xvi). Other ecofeminists like Karen Warren, Val Plumwood and Ariel Salleh, to name a few, were also careful to delineate the socially constructed dynamic behind the double domination of women and nature (Gaard, 2011: 31).

Further, through the 1990s and 2000s, ecofeminism at large shifted its attention from juxtaposing women and nature to exploring the interconnected structures of oppression. For example, in her 1997 book *Ecofeminist Natures*, Noel Sturgeon defines ecofeminism as "a movement that makes connections between environmentalisms and feminisms; more precisely, it articulates the theory that the ideologies that authorise injustices based on gender, race, and class are related to the ideologies that sanction the exploitation and degradation of the environment" (23). Similarly, Catriona Sandilands argues in her book *The Good-Natured Feminist* (1999) that women's connection to nature, whether essential or socially constructed, should not be the driving point of feminist activism that speaks for nature, but the movement's democratic values that are opposed to all forms of domination including sexism, racism, classism, speciesism, heterosexism, colonialism and capitalism (195). By the end of the 2000s, the severe backlash against ecofeminism urged many scholars to place their work under alternate titles like "ecological feminism", "feminist environmentalism", "critical feminist eco-socialism", including "global feminist environmental justice" in the case of Sturgeon, and "queer ecology" in that of Sandilands (Gaard, 2011: 27).

Recently, ecofeminism has re-emerged in the context of the 'material turn' in humanities and social sciences. The term 'materialism' here is different from the earlier forms of materialism articulated in Marxist philosophy. The new materialism emerged in response to the linguistic turn marked by the absolution of social constructivism and the complete neglect of the properties of matter. The new

materialist insistence on the interconnectedness of nature and culture, bodies and the environment, matter and discourse has not only been influenced by the works of early ecofeminists but also opened the door for re-invigorated theoretical engagements with ecofeminism in the last two decades (Grewe-Volpp, 2016). The recent works of Sturgeon, Sandilands, Rachel Stein, Greta Gaard and Stacy Alaimo in edited volumes such as *New Perspectives on Environmental Justice* (2004) edited by Stein, *Material Feminisms* edited by Alaimo and Susan Heckman, and *International Perspectives in Feminist Ecocriticism* (2013) edited by Gaard, Simon C. Estok and Serpil Opperman are a few examples in this direction and collectively represent contemporary ecofeminism which, as Huey-li Li observes, "has made a noticeable shift from prosecuting the double domination of women and nature to redressing inter-related ecological, economic, and social problems ensuing from capitalist globalisation" (2007: 331).

This is a genealogy of ecofeminism, primarily in the United States, as that is where it has been a prominent part of the history of feminism and where much of the theoretical works arose. However, ecofeminism does not have a single origin: the diversity of voices are integral to its project of producing inclusive ways of knowing and being in nature. Women's activism from around the world such as the anti-nuclear and anti-militarist movements in the United States in the 1980s, the peace encampments at Greenham Common (1981-2000) in England, the Chipko movement (1973) in India, Green Belt movement (1977) in Kenya, Plaza de Mayo movement (1977) in Argentina, Native American women's protests against mining, and many more such grassroots movements, have shaped ecofeminism. Classroom discussions that look at ecofeminism strictly through texts from the twentieth century that have been labelled as "ecofeminist" would inevitably end up painting it as a 'thing of the past' with no contemporary relevance. This cannot be further from the truth – ecofeminism has come to be an encompassing theory that examines the nuances of the interconnected existence of all forms of life, non-life, and socio-political formations. This holistic nature of ecofeminism was once considered its demerit (Gaard, 2011: 34). However, in the "Anthropocene" era, marked by the hyper-awareness of human embeddedness in the environment, it turned into ecofeminism's unique advantage.

Postcolonial Ecofeminism

One of the major criticisms faced by ecofeminism was that it was elitist and ethnocentric, a "white women's thing" (Gaard, 2011: 18). Postcolonial ecofeminism has been posited as a counter movement to the primarily white ecofeminism of the Global North that has taken shape under the influence of third-world women's activism and writings. Postcolonial ecofeminism approaches colonialism as an ongoing project that has taken on the shape of neocolonialism, internal colonialism, and settler

colonialism through which it continues to damage nature and thereby impact the lives of women and other marginalised groups of people. Works of postcolonial ecofeminism are characterised by the feminist critique of mainstream Western developmental discourse that exploits the environment and erases the diverse sustainable, indigenous ecological practices of third-world societies. Postcolonial ecofeminism's focus is not so much the "feminisation of nature" but the "capitalisation of nature" by global capitalism and acceding modern States (Li, 2007: 331). One of the major examples of a postcolonial ecofeminist movement is the Navdanya, a movement for seed freedom led by the Indian ecofeminist, Vandana Shiva, which resists the use of biotechnology and intensive agriculture by Multinational Corporations which profit from depletion of seed diversity and subsistence farming in the Global South.

Shiva is one of the most popular figures of postcolonial ecofeminism. She co-authored *Ecofeminism* (1993) with Maria Mies, where they firmly put forward the argument that the marginalisation of third-world women goes hand in hand with the Western, colonial, capitalist and techno-scientific onslaught on biodiversity, and resources such as land, water and forests. Shiva has also authored numerous books such as *Staying Alive* (1989), *The Violence of the Green Revolution* (1991), *Biodiversity* (1992), *Monocultures of the Mind* (1993), *Biopolitics* (1995), *Stolen Harvest* (2001), *Earth Democracy* (2005), and *Soil Not Oil* (2009). She has also been a leading presence at various conferences that facilitated conversations between ecofeminists from across the world, such as "Women, Ecology, and Health: Rebuilding Connections" (1991), conducted in Bangalore. Through her activism and writing, Shiva argues that women, who are the "natural" protectors of ecology and also the custodians of subsistence in third-world agrarian societies, face the worst consequences of biodiversity loss, genetic modification of crops, intensive agriculture, pesticide use and corporatisation. She draws on Hindu concepts to connect the ecological crisis with the marginalisation of women, arguing that the destruction of *prakriti* (the feminine creative force in Hinduism) mirrors women's marginalisation.

Despite her crucial role in spearheading ecofeminism of third-world women, Shiva's brand of ecofeminism has faced several valid criticisms of essentialising women and nature. The critiques against Shiva have played an important role in the later development of postcolonial as well as Indian ecofeminism. An assumption that women are more "natural" than men, third-world women being more so and that all technologies, nuclear power, reproductive and genetic technology, the internet, are all results of the masculine domination of women and nature, and can be found in Shiva's early writings. This idea of "masculinised science" and "feminised nature" and the opposition between the two, faced severe criticism because of its essentialism (Nanda 1991, Roy & Borowiak, 2003: 76).

Sowmya Dechamma observes that Shiva's work often presents an image of India and the third world as an undifferentiated space where difference do not exist. Her predominantly Hindu ideas also ignore the existence of pre-colonial, non-Western hierarchies such as the caste system that impact women and their subsistence (Dechamma, 2009: 101-102). Bina Agarwal who was critical of Shiva's idea of women as the natural protectors of the environment, put forward an alternative politics of "feminist environmentalism". Agarwal writes that "people's relationship with nature, their interest in protecting it, and their ability to do so effectively, are significantly shaped by their material reality, their everyday dependence on nature for survival, and the social, economic and political tools at their command for furthering their concerns" (1998: 80). These criticisms, particularly Agarwal's, were accepted positively by ecofeminists, including in the West, who incorporated these insights into their later work (Gaard, 2011: 35).

As a theory, postcolonial ecofeminism largely draws from the insights of postcolonial feminism and postcolonial environmentalism. The fundamental idea of postcolonial feminism is that, unlike the Western perception of third world women, they are not passive subjects of oppression but active political agents in their own right. For instance, in her famous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), Gayatri Spivak is critical of both Western feminists and third world men for speaking on behalf of third world women while denying their voice. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in her essay "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" (1984) draws attention to the discursive colonisation that presents "third world women" as a monolithic group while erasing their diverse experiences, struggles and resistances. The understanding of third world women as diverse, politically aware and agential people can be seen reflected in the works of many postcolonial ecofeminist scholars. At the same time, their approach to ecology is shaped by the postcolonial environmental discourse which brought together postcolonialism and environmentalism into a dialogue whereby colonialism came to be viewed as both the exploitation of humans and non-humans (Mukherjee, 2010: 5). As a corrective to postcolonial theory's limited engagement with the environment, Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee writes that any field that seeks to explore the global conditions of colonialism / imperialism and neocolonialism must also consider the complex interplay of environmental factors–such as water, land, energy, habitat, and migration–alongside political and cultural categories like state, society, conflict, literature, and the arts (2010: 144). This idea of history, environment, and culture as being interconnected has shaped postcolonial ecofeminism's approach to colonialism and its continuation in various guises.

Ecofeminism and Environmental Activism in India

It was the Chipko movement that initiated the conversation on ecofeminism in India. In 1973 in the Himalayan region of Garhwal, women began hugging the trees of the nearby forest to protect them from loggers. This soon spread across many parts of Uttarakhand and came to be known as Chipko, meaning 'to hug' in Hindi. The movement was preceded by numerous efforts at forest preservation in the Himalayan region, led by figures like Chandi Prasad Bhatt, who founded Dasoli Gram Swarajya Sangh (DGSS) in 1964, and inspired the formation of Van-Panchayats and the Joint Forest Management in India (Majumdar, 2019:68). Unlike the feminist movements, such as the Women's Pentagon Action, or Greenham Commons, that came to be labelled as ecofeminist from the West, Chipko was a community-driven environmental movement which was also supported by men like Bhatt, Sunderlal Bahugua, and Ghanshyam Shailani.

Regarding women's crucial role in the movement, Bahuguna writes: "It is women who redirected the thrust of the Chipko movement from a purely economic demand of the forest dwellers' right to forest resources towards an ecological vision of a stable and mature relationship between man and nature." (1997) This can be seen reflected in the words of Gaura Devi, one of the leaders of the movement, when she states "The forest nurtures us like a mother; you will only be able to use your axes on it, but you have to use them first on us" (qtd. in Parameswaran, 2022: 5). Chipko came to be widely perceived as an ecofeminist movement through the writings of ecofeminists like Vandana Shiva, Karen Warren and Greta Gaard. Shiva wrote in *Staying Alive* (1988) that "Environmental movements like Chipko have become historical landmarks because they have been fuelled by the ecological insights and political and moral strengths of women" (1988: 67). Shiva, and many others who reflect on the movement, approach women's ecological insights as an intrinsic quality whereas most contemporary ecofeminists understand that women's relationship to nature, especially when it is sentimental and affective as reflected in the words of Gaura Devi, arises from their lived experiences. For instance, Karen Warren writes that a movement like Chipko is about "women-other human others-nature interconnection" because in India, like much of the Global South, "forests are inextricably connected to rural and household economies governed by women" (2000: 3). This echoes Bina Agarwal's stance that locates the relationship between gender and the environment in the lived realities of individuals and communities.

After Chipko, India has witnessed several other grassroots environmental movements against the government's ecologically destructive development projects in which women were involved as both

participants and leaders. While they embodied the ecofeminist understanding of the interconnected oppression of nature and marginalised peoples, due to their differences from the Western ecofeminist tradition, they are more aptly understood as eco-socialist movements or environmental justice activism. The following are a few examples: The Narmada Bachao Andolan began in 1985 under the leadership of Medha Patkar, and opposed the construction of a series of large dams along the Narmada River, that posed the risk of displacing numerous communities and submerging large tracts of agricultural land. The protest against the Tehri Dam (1980 to 2004), led by Sunderlal Bahuguna, opposed the construction on the Bhagirathi River. The Save Silent Valley Movement (1973) successfully prevented the construction of a hydroelectric project in Kerala's Silent Valley National Park, preserving one of the world's important biological hotspots. The Appiko Movement in Karnataka (1983) mirrored the Chipko Movement in its opposition to the cutting down of forests for the construction of dams and factories in the Western Ghats.

Though not as common as these movements against government-led developmental projects, environmental justice activism in India has also addressed issues of contamination, its human-health consequences and the corporate exploitation of the environment and people. The movement for justice in the aftermath of the Bhopal gas tragedy of 1984, brought attention to the risks of inviting Multinational Corporations to profit from the labour, land and other resources. Reflecting ecofeminist values, women like Rashida Bee and Champa Devi Shukla were at the forefront of the movement that demanded Union Carbide and Dow Chemicals to clean up the area and provide a "toxin-free environment where they could bring up the next generation without fear of sickness and death" (Mukherjee, 2010: 136). Similarly, activism in the aftermath of the Endosulfan Tragedy in Kerala where children were born with neurological and developmental disorders as a result of in-utero toxic exposure was also primarily led by women who demanded aid, infrastructural support and a toxin-free environment for their children.

It is evident from the above paragraphs that a majority of India's grassroots environmental movements took place before the 2000s. Scholars like Ramachandra Guha have shown that India's New Economic Policy of 1991, which focused on liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation had an adverse impact on the environment as well as environmentalism. The shift towards a neoliberal economy brought numerous highly polluting industries and extractive business models that deepened the economic divide and led to the rapid decline of urban ecologies. This has played a major role in aggravating a large population's vulnerability to climate change. Guha describes neoliberal India as "an environmental basket case– marked by polluted skies, dead rivers, falling water-tables, ever-increasing amounts of untreated wastes, disappearing forests. Meanwhile, tribal and peasant

communities continue to be pushed off their lands through destructive and carelessly conceived projects" (2013: 7). Neoliberalisation also made grassroots environmental movements impossible in the country. In the new millennia, environmental activism was widely painted as anti-developmental and anti-national (Guha, 2013: 4). Meanwhile, the focus of attention in media and public discourse shifted from vulnerable rural communities to the urban centres, where the elite's and middle class's demands for solutions to specific issues came to be understood as environmentalism (Parameswaran, 2022: 10). India is currently witnessing fatal levels of air pollution in its cities, agricultural failure from droughts, frequent floods in different states, landslides and other fatal disasters in the Himalayas and the Western Ghats. It is ironic that at a time of such widespread crisis, there is very little discourse connecting the environment, politics and the specific, but interconnected, vulnerabilities of women, Dalits and tribals.

It is such a discourse that is promised by the re-emergence of ecofeminist thinking in India. Ecofeminism has two unique advantages in this situation– firstly, its holistic viewpoint enables a discourse that addresses issues in an intersectional manner, devoid of compartmentalisation. As strange as it may sound, anything can be the subject of an ecofeminist analysis, from the issue of fast fashion and toxic cosmetics to that of land rights. Greta Gaard writes of an instance where the feminist magazine *Ms.* removed their column on ecofeminism in the 1990s, relegating several titles such as "Toxic Tampons" and "The Environmental Link to Breast Cancer" to its "Health" section. She uses this as an example of how the loss of a term such as "ecofeminism" turned issues of feminist politics into personal issues (2011: 34). It is precisely such depoliticisation and individualisation of socio-political and environmental issues that have become the cornerstones of India's neoliberal society. From the increasing respiratory and reproductive disorders caused by pollution to the livelihood loss among marginalised communities, everything is painted as personal tragedies. An ecofeminist analysis would encourage the politicisation of these issues that are otherwise viewed as incidental and unrelated. Secondly, because ecofeminism is deeply rooted in activism, its revival can aid in shifting the negative perception of environmental activism. Ecofeminists across the world have generally engaged more in undertaking political action rather than indulging in rigorous theorising. Ecofeminism can spark discussions on ethical activism, reinvigorate grassroots movements, form transnational feminist alliances, promote advocacy, and imagine new and effective strategies to hold governments and corporations accountable. As opposed to the exclusive nature of urban middle-class environmentalism in India today, ecofeminism's basic principle of inclusive politics has a better chance of advancing effective resistance to globalised capitalism and patriarchy.

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Teaching Ecofeminism and Literature

Storytelling, be it through any media, has the incredible ability to move its audience and encourage them to take perspectives of identities and positions that are different from their own or what they are accustomed to. For example, not only can it inform a man about the struggles of a woman, a Brahmin about that of a Dalit, or a human being about a pod of whales in the ocean but it also elicits affective responses that can eventually shape ideologies and actions. This is where the political potential of fiction, poetry, films and life narratives arises from. Considering that an important part of ecofeminism is to be able to learn about, and think from, the perspective of "Other" humans and non-humans and to understand how one's existence is inextricably connected to theirs, storytelling plays an important role in ecofeminist sensitisation. Literary studies, which have come to attend to all sorts of narratives, add to the experience of reading, listening, and watching a narrative by facilitating a critical approach to it. The numerous theoretical perspectives in literary studies enable us to detect different aspects of the same text. Ecofeminism, when employed in literary criticism, provides a non-hierarchical, non-dualistic and anti-oppressive framework to engage with how we narrate, perceive and respond to some of the crucial ecological issues of our times. It encourages a reading of texts without compartmentalising the environmental, social and individual experiences — issues concerning air, water, forests, plants and animals are inseparable from injustices in the name of caste, class and gender.

This article claims to see what an Indian ecofeminist literary pedagogy would look like. The basic demand from such a course is that it has to be one that responds to specifically Indian issues, that it should be of contemporary relevance to Indian students. Indian higher educational institutions have traditionally maintained strict disciplinary boundaries in offering courses with the exception of an occasional elective course. It is ideal if a course in ecofeminism and literature can integrate students from various disciplines and spark dialogues fostering debates and discussions that could bridge the gap between academic inquiry and activism. It is crucial that such a course diverges from traditional literature classes to have an impact. Here, we would like to start with some of the questions that are raised at the onset of every similar pedagogic project – what texts should be studied and what should the classes be like?

1. Selecting Texts and Planning the Syllabus

There are a few authors and texts that are frequently associated with ecofeminist reading in literature classes such as the novels of Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Mahaswetha Devi and Rama Mehta. It is necessary for contemporary discussions on ecofeminism and literature to not restrict itself to these feminist, mostly Indian English novels from the late twentieth century. The narratives selected

should reflect the inclusive and situated nature of ecofeminism and they should expose the power structures and hegemonic epistemes that are destructive to human and non-human life. A good rule of thumb here is to select texts that represent marginalised perspectives, which in India includes those from Dalit, tribal writers, especially women from these communities. As Donna Haraway observes, this "seeing from below" is fundamental to feminist practice and even though they are not exempt from critical examination,"Subjugated" standpoints are preferred because they seem to promise more adequate, sustained, objective, transforming accounts of the world" (1988: 584).

It is not necessary to restrict the selection of texts to those by women. Contemporary ecofeminism values women's perspectives not because they possess any essential ecological awareness but rather because within patriarchal societies, they are likely to have higher stakes in environmental issues. In the context of India's grassroots environmental justice activism, many scholars understand women's roles as that of "oikos-carers" (Varma & Rangarajan 2018: 167-168). The Greek word "oikos", meaning home, has been employed by ecofeminists to present a world view where the Earth becomes a household and the relation between the two has been historically mediated by women. Women's relationship with the environment is often the result of systemic coercion within a patriarchal, caste society and hence a site of struggle and resistance. The life narratives of such women are some of the most valuable Indian "ecofeminist" texts. These texts often also provide insights into the strategic essentialism employed by women activists. For example, *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C.K Janu* is the life narrative of C.K Janu, a tribal activist from the South Indian State of Kerala. In the narrative, she describes the forest as a mother, a feminine, nurturing, "oikic" space. However, her feminisation of the forest offers a critique of the displacement of tribals from a sustainable life in the forest to the tribal colonies where they are separated from resources as well as their identity. As Noel Sturgeon observes on "de-essentialising our understanding of essentialism", the strategic essentialising of nature and women by subaltern women activists like Janu can be justified because of their actions (1997: 68-69).

Janu's narrative also draws attention to the need to include texts from different regions of India that are not necessarily written in English. The grassroots environmental movements of India have always been from remote corners, far away from the centres of knowledge production in the country. Hence their narratives are often found in regional languages– several of them have been translated into English in the recent years by academicians. Apart from activist narratives, fiction and poetry from regional languages can also be crucial ecofeminist texts. As human perception of nature is shaped through language and culture, narratives from different regions can present highly varied ideas of

human/nature interconnections. For instance, literatures from the North East of India, which are rarely part of mainstream discussions in the country, often present unique ecofeminist perspectives in the light of the region's largely indigenous, agricultural population, which has also lived through years of insurgency and conflict (Phukan & Vernal, 2022). This includes poetry and fiction by writers like Temsula Ao, Mitra Phukan, Esterine Kire, Janice Pariat and others. Similarly, several novels and life narratives from Kerala offer stark feminist critiques of the Kerala model of development that is often hailed as a success and "hope for the future of the Global South" (qtd in. Varma & Rangarajan, 2018: 167). This includes novels such as Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* (1997), Sara Joseph's *Gift in Green* (2011), Sheela Tomy's *Valli* (2022) as well as life narratives like *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C.K Janu* and *Mayilamma: The Life of a Tribal Eco-Warrior* (2018).

While designing the syllabus, it would be helpful to incorporate texts from the following categories:

- Key theoretical works in ecofeminism from the West and India, especially recent works.
- Indian literary representations of ecofeminism.
- Narratives of ecofeminist activism in India.
- Regional narratives and ecofeminism.
- Ecofeminism, social media and popular culture in India.

2. The Classroom

Offering a course on ecofeminism and following the same methods of a traditional Indian classroom that maintains a hierarchical relation between the teacher and the students, (ie; where the teacher speaks and students listen), is not only antithetical to the spirit of ecofeminism but also blunts the edges of its anti-oppressive politics. Instead, what is necessary is the "mutual synthesis of teacher-student knowledge"– where the teacher is self-reflexive, and students from different backgrounds are given a non-competitive and safe space to co-construct knowledge (Chattopadhyay, 2019). In other words, classroom discussions should be the soul of the course. One way to facilitate fruitful discussions is to lead the reading of each text with a set of questions like the following.

- What is the problem described in the text?
- How does the text approach the problem?
- Does the approach reflect ecofeminist ideas?
- How does the use of language, literary tools, and rhetoric contribute to the ecofeminist reading of the text?
- What does it add to the existing theorisation of ecofeminism in India?
- Are there any issues with the text and if so, what are they?

• How does the text relate to contemporary issues around us and what political insights does it provide?

These discussions can be supplemented not only by theoretical works but also by journalistic writing, media discourses, and personal experiences that would create a sense of contemporaneity and interest in students. Such sources too have to be identified with care as to reflect marginalised perspectives and not reproduce mainstream media's apathy to environmental issues. An apt example of this is the *People's Rural Archive of India (PARI),* a project that is designed to bring stories of rural India to the fore of public discourse. It publishes stories from the ground on the impact of the climate crisis, environmental toxification, political and economic issues and its effects on marginalised people. "Wish I had known there's cancer in the water", published in August 2021 is an article that discusses the health consequences of arsenic contamination in the villages of Bihar with a specific focus on its effect on women of the families. The crux of the article is that "When a mother gets cancer, every single thing [at home] is affected, nor just the mother's health", thereby making room for ecofeminist inquiry (Iyer 2021). Issues like women's health, reproductive health, internal climate migration, loss of livelihood, women's sustainability practices, and food cultures can be timely and relevant topics of ecofeminist inquiry.

Classroom discussions can be a crucial part of adapting ecofeminist theory to the Indian context. One of the major contentions with existing ecofeminist thought in India, especially that of Vandana Shiva and others, is that in focusing the critique on the colonial, capitalist patriarchy, this often overlooks the pre-colonial, Brahmanical patriarchy which is equally oppressive (Dechamma, 2009: 106). As part of the postcolonial project, there is a general tendency in academia to validate caste practices as "Indian culture", and to label them sustainable. This is where uncritical acceptance of several Hindu beliefs and practices as "ecofeminist" becomes counter-intuitive. For instance, a large number of ecofeminists from the West are advocates of veganism since it is an ethical stance against animal cruelty. Whereas in India, vegetarianism is closely tied to caste, where whether one consumes animals or not is a matter of "purity". Dalits, Muslims and other minorities who depend on animal produce as an essential part of a healthy diet are discriminated against and often brutally suppressed within Indian society. As Dechamma argues, "in a country where most women suffer from malnutrition, are anaemic, and pregnant women and children do not get enough nutrients, arguing against meat eating can be a problem when one considers factors like beef is as costly/cheap as dal and more protein rich" (2009: 103). Contentions such as these are essential as they hold the key to developing an

ecofeminism that is distinctly Indian, and literature classrooms can thus become valuable sites for such conversations to brew and erupt as nuances of life are never lost in literature.

Conclusion

Ecofeminism is, to a great extent, not recognised as an idea of contemporary relevance in Indian academia even though there is a growing body of research on the interconnected environmental vulnerability of humans and non-humans, which employs early ecofeminist conceptualisations. Reclaiming the term "ecofeminism", especially in pedagogy, becomes relevant in this context as it can bring numerous concerns together and facilitate the formation of better, holistic solutions. This can help a large number of students and researchers in India who are growing more and more anxious about the challenges of climate change in the form of extreme weather conditions and frequent disasters, widespread pollution of cities and its health consequences, political shifts towards control, growing conflicts and economic challenges. Devising an Indian ecofeminist literary pedagogy means taking these specific issues into account and to selecting texts and guiding discussions in a way that plants "seeds of resistance" to destructive and oppressive power structures, and also enable the imagination towards sustainable solutions. What we have attempted in this article is to put forth suggestions for such a pedagogic project.

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KALPANA RAO HULLURU is former Professor of the Department of English, Pondicherry University, Puducherry, India. She has published extensively, including the recently co-edited volume *Kala Pani Crossings: Gender and Diaspora - Indian Perspectives* (Routledge, 2023). Her research interests encompass gender studies, feminist and cultural studies, literary theory, women's writing, as well as Indian and North American literature.

ANGELA EMILY SEBASTIAN is a PhD Student in the Department of English, Pondicherry University, Puducherry, India. Her doctoral research is on Environmental Reproductive Justice in fiction from the Global South, and she has a deep interest in the intersections of gender studies, cultural studies and environmental humanities.