



Gender, ecology and resistance: An eco-feminist reading of selected works of Vandana Shiva and Kamala Markandaya

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Abstract

Eco-feminism provides an important critical framework for understanding the interconnected oppression of women and the exploitation of the natural environment. It questions patriarchal, capitalist and developmental models that treat both women and nature as resources to be controlled, consumed and exploited. This research paper examines the relationship between gender, ecology and resistance in selected works of Vandana Shiva and Kamala Markandaya. The primary texts considered are Vandana Shiva's *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* and *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace*, and Kamala Markandaya's novels *Nectar in a Sieve* and *The Coffin Dams*. Although Shiva writes primarily as an environmental thinker, activist and theorist, while Markandaya approaches ecological questions through fiction, both writers expose the destructive consequences of development models that disregard local communities, women's knowledge and ecological balance. Shiva explicitly connects the marginalization of women with the destruction of forests, food systems, water resources and biodiversity. Markandaya dramatizes similar tensions through rural women, agricultural communities, industrialization, drought, displacement and large-scale development projects. Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve* and Helen in *The Coffin Dams* demonstrate different forms of female engagement with nature and social transformation. The article states that both authors question anthropocentric and patriarchal systems and highlight alternative values rooted in care, sustainability, community, and ecological responsibility; as a result, their work helps to develop an Indian eco-feminist debate in which resistance involves not just opposition but also an effort to reestablish sustainable relationships among human beings, women, and the natural world.

Keywords: Eco-feminism, gender, ecology, resistance, Vandana Shiva, Kamala Markandaya, nature, development, women, sustainability

Introduction

Human beings and nature are today one of the main subjects in literature, as well as in social and environmental studies. The quick process of industrialisation, the growth of technology, the commercialisation of natural resources and the use of unsustainable development models have changed the way in which communities relate to the environment in which they live and work. At the same time, feminist scholarship has demonstrated that women, in particular those from rural areas, indigenous groups and economically disadvantaged communities, suffer the effects of environmental degradation to a greater extent. Eco-feminism is the area where these two concerns meet.

It combines ecological and feminist ideas and looks at the conceptual and material connection between the subordination of women and the subordination of nature. Eco-feminism is now regarded as a field which studies the connection between environmental deterioration and social injustice as well as the way in which gender is linked to other forms of marginalisation. The Indian situation offers a particular setting for eco-feminism. In rural areas, women's lives have always been closely tied to forests, agriculture, collecting water, storing food and managing household affairs. For many women, ecological destruction is therefore not just a theoretical concern but one that has a direct effect on their own lives, on their families and on society as a whole. Vandana Shiva is one of the most important Indian eco-feminists. In her book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* she examines the relationship between

women, nature and development and maintains that the destruction of ecological systems is closely connected with the marginalisation of women. The book focuses on forests, food systems and water and criticises development strategies that disregard ecological interdependence. Kamala Markandaya also deals with similar issues in her fiction.

Rukmani is a rural woman whose land and agriculture form the basis of her existence and whose family and economy depend on her. The novel shows the effects of drought, poverty, industrialisation and the changes taking place in rural life. In *The Coffin Dams*, Markandaya examines the building of a major dam in a southern Indian setting and the conflict between industrial development, local communities and the natural world. Shiva and Markandaya are thus linked through gender, ecology, development, power and resistance. Their writing encourages us to consider what is now known as the 'progressive' vision while at the same time highlighting the value of local ecological knowledge and sustainable relationships.

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Objectives of The Study

The present research paper has the following objectives:

1. To examine the relationship between gender and ecological exploitation in selected works of Vandana Shiva and Kamala Markandaya.
2. To analyse the representation of women as victims, participants and agents of ecological change.

3. To explore the relationship between development, patriarchy and environmental degradation.
4. To examine different forms of women's resistance to ecological and social domination.
5. To compare Shiva's theoretical eco-feminist arguments with Markandaya's fictional representation of ecological crisis.
6. To highlight the significance of indigenous and local knowledge in creating sustainable relationships with nature.

Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretative and comparative textual approach. Selected primary works of Vandana Shiva and Kamala Markandaya are examined through the theoretical framework of eco-feminism.

The principal texts selected for analysis are

- **Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development***
- **Vandana Shiva, *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace***
- Kamala Markandaya, *Nectar in a Sieve*
- Kamala Markandaya, *The Coffer Dams*

The study also engages with relevant scholarly discussions of eco-feminism and environmental criticism. The analysis focuses on recurring concepts such as patriarchy, ecological exploitation, development, women's labour, indigenous knowledge, displacement, resistance, sustainability and ecological justice.

Theoretical Framework: Eco-Feminism

This is the type of argument that can reinforce standard gender stereotypes. More progress comes from exploring the social, economic and cultural reasons that women may have specific relationships with land, water, forests and food systems.

In this regard, the work of Vandana Shiva is especially important. *Staying Alive* draws women's threads into forests, food chains and water cycles. Argues for ecological mentality based on diversity, sustainability and interdependence.

Shiva's later notion of *Earth Democracy* expands these notions toward justice, sustainability and community control. *Earth Democracy* critiques unlimited capitalism and open access to natural capital while prioritizing inclusion, nonviolence, common shared resources and the commons.

Vandana Shiva: Gender, Ecology and The Critique Of Development

The core of Indian eco-feminist thought is Shiva's *Staying Alive*. Her analysis calls into question the development paradigm that regards nature as a resource to be exploited and marginalized groups as secondary to development. The language of 'maldevelopment' used by Shiva counters the proposed models of development that violate the integrity of the ecosphere in terms of an established exploitation and social differentiation.

This book attempts to tackle the issue concerning the relation between woman and the ecosystems-including the issue of forest, food, water.

For Shiva, ecological devastation is not an isolated issue from the social one. The destruction of forests implies

women-being dependent on them for survival, for example fuel-are traveling a further distance to obtain them. Women may encounter extra burden of housework if water system is ruined. Their food and knowledge, gets diminished when agriculture becomes less biodiversified. Thus there is a gender dimension to environmental devastation.

Also questions the progressive claims of modernity that technology is beneficial. Has questioned modern technology and science which neglects traditional knowledge and society where technology operates. Not against knowledge in terms of criticism to knowledge but instead against misuse of technology by institutions and its application without regards for ecological and social cost.

Key elements for Shiva's ecofeminism are knowledge biodiversity and knowledge diversity.

Societies living in sustainability must incorporate a large array of knowledge including rural knowledge and the knowledge of women; hence Shiva's work moves women away from being silent victims of environmental crisis and turns them into producers of knowledge and carriers of resistance, which relates well to the discussion about resistance. Their fight is not only about 'nature' (in an abstract way) but about "food, water, livelihood, health, community and the generations that are to come". Shiva's *Earth Democracy* is a response building on these grounds and bridging ecological justice with democracy and human rights. Denouncing privatization of natural resources, GFE (genetic food engineering) and resource controlling processes but instead argues for inclusion, nonviolence and reclamation of commons as alternatives.

Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in A Sieve: Woman, Land and Survival*

Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* was published in 1954, and is set in a rural South Indian village at a time of social and economic transformation. Rukmani is the protagonist, whose life is intertwined with agriculture, family, and the land. Nature is presented in both a source of nourishment and uncertainty for the novel. Agriculture depends on rain and droughts, floods, and insects threaten the survival of rural families. Rukmani's life shows how ecological issues can become a social and economic crisis. The land is more than a background to the story. It is the bedrock of the family's survival. Rukmani and Nathan depend on agricultural production and so their relationship with the land is economic and emotional. This relationship is increasingly threatened by modernization. The arrival and development of a tannery changes the social and economic situation of the village. Penguin Random House's reading guide also notes that the tannery begins to destroy Rukmani and Nathan's lives as it expands, and they continue to struggle to feed their family and pay rent on the land. So in the novel there is a tension between rural life and industrial development. Rukmani's experience is one of the gendered ones when it comes to ecological vulnerability. She's poor, hungry, and underpaid in the family and society when she has to keep up with her house. Her work is crucial but is very little appreciated. Her relationship with the land may be viewed from an eco-feminist lens because both her body and the land are sites of social and economic pressure. The land is meant to produce crops just as women are supposed to produce and sustain families. Research has specifically examined *Nectar in a Sieve* through ecofeminism; the novel

connects gender, environmental crisis, and Indian rural life. Rukmani's resistance is not always so dramatic or political. It's usually expressed in endurance, care, labour, and attachment to the land. Her survival is up to all the forces that constantly try to destroy the social and ecological basis of her existence.

The Coffe Dams: Development, Nature and Displacement

While Nectar in a Sieve deals with agriculture and industrialization, The Coffe Dams deals with a large-scale development project. The novel, published in 1969, is about the construction of a dam in the Malnad region of South India. The novel expresses a conflict between different outlooks on nature. For engineers involved in the project, the river is something to be controlled and exploited. The dam is a technological achievement and development. For local communities, however, the river is linked with livelihood, culture, and survival. This difference is also a difference in knowledge systems. Recently, Markandaya has been highlighted in the literature on the intersection between colonial-modern knowledge and local, contextual, and indigenous knowledge. Helen, the wife of the engineer Clinton, is the central character in this struggle. She is constantly upset by the project's focus on structures and engineering at the expense of human lives. Helen's concern for the local tribesmen has been emphasized in the book, and for her husband's obsession with the construction project. From the eco-feminist perspective, the position of Helen is important because she pushes back against the "masculine" model of technological power. The construction project puts human beings and nature in a tricky relationship. The river is powerful and unpredictable. The question of whether the temporary structures should be destroyed becomes a moral question since it will impact the local tribal population. The novel thus challenges our idea that technological progress is always good for society. The environmental issue is simultaneously a gender issue, a class issue, and a colonial issue. The people who hold the technological and institutional power are the ones who are most directly threatened by development. Helen's resistance is an ethical alternative to technological domination. Her concern for the tribe is evidence that environmental responsibility is a matter of empathy and recognition that human beings are interdependent.

Gender and Ecology: A Comparative Reading

Shiva and Markandaya are similar in the way they treat women and nature. Both writers dismiss the idea that environmental destruction takes human beings equally. Women and marginalized people are more prone to environmental damage since their livelihoods are intrinsically tied to natural resources. The other is that both writers question core models of development. For Shiva, huge development can destroy biodiversity, local livelihoods and traditional knowledge. For Markandaya, the tannery in Nectar in a Sieve and the dam project in The Coffe Dams are manifestations of modernization that generate social and ecological tensions. Third, both authors stress local knowledge. Shiva specifically calls for the recognition of women's knowledge and local ecological practices. Women are important knowledge carriers, she says, when it comes to seeds, food, forests and water.

Markandaya's fiction also presents rural and indigenous communities as knowledgeable about their environment. In The Coffe Dams, the local population knows the river through lived experience while engineers treat it primarily with technical calculations. Fourth, both writers attack the concept of dominion. This is how a patriarchal thought-world considers women, as sub-ordinate, nature as an object to dominate.

Women as Agents of Resistance

A crucial theme running through the texts is that the position of women is transformed from victims to agents. Shiva highlights female ecological activism. Her treatment of women in the environmental movement makes it clear that they could be agents in protecting biodiversity, forests and food-water systems. A S also offers an equally potent depiction of women as agents and sources of alternative knowledge and ecological vision, rather than as mere victims of ecological breakdown and suffering. In Markandaya, however, the expression of resistance is less explicit and direct though still significant. Rukmani's agency is demonstrated by her enduring will to survive and love that manifests in her long and enduring relationship with the land even through starvation, suffering, separation, humiliation and betrayal.

Helen's resistance in The Coffe Dams is more ethical and political. She questions the priorities of the development project and develops sympathy for the local people.

So, the two characters represent different aspects of eco-feminist resistance

Rukmani: survival, care, endurance and attachment to land.

Helen: ethical questioning, empathy and opposition to destructive development. Both challenge systems that place economic and technological goals above human and ecological well-being.

Ecology, Patriarchy and Power

Perhaps the most obvious link between ecology and patriarchy is found in this comparative analysis. Each of the patriarchal orders is characterized by hierarchy: man to woman, humans to nature and industrial powers to local people/growth to ecology. Shiva offers powerful indictments of such hierarchies.

According to Shiva, the existing development discourse 'has established men and nature, men and the woman, and the nation state and people-all as subordinate categories.'

Markandaya's fiction enacts such hierarchies by showing interconnections between man and people (interpersonal, personal or institutional). For instance, in Nectar in a sieve, Rukmani internalises the discourse and experiences an agrarian/ecological insecurity all through. As it illustrates, inequality of the sexes is intrinsically tied to ecological vulnerability. Technological development in The Coffe Dams stands for institutional power, demanding from the river, landscape and tribe-what will be conducive to development.

Within this ecofeminist lens ecological crisis becomes issues of both power and justice.

Resistance as An Alternative Vision

We should not define resistance in eco-feminist writing as simple negating. It's also the alternative ways of living are

formed. Shiva advocates: Ecological Diversity; Sustainability; Participation and Protection of the Commons. Through 'Earth Democracy', a theory, she attempts to connect environmental protection with justice, inclusion, and nonviolence.

However, the novels by Markandaya don't provide such a systematic environmental programme. Instead, what the author dramatises are human consequences brought by development projects, so that the reader will question what is meaning of 'progress'. Comparing the two approaches is meaningful. While Shiva frames theories on resistance, Markandaya narrates human consequences on resistance. Shiva makes the 'ecological vocabularies of exploitation' clear to the reader, and Markandaya provide experiences through which readers can get a feel of the emotional, social impact of ecological disruption.

So the comparison can lead to a whole context to read on environmental injustice in India.

Major Findings of The Comparative Study

From the comparative study between Vandana Shiva's work on ecological philosophy and Nayantara Markandaya's fictional representation of developmental projects in India,

following major findings have emerged

1. Gender and Nature The relationship between nature and women is primarily social, political and economic, rather than an essential biological and spiritual connection.
2. Development Discourse in the context of developing India, development programmes often result in unequal outcomes; a progress which benefits the state and large corporate interests at the expense of marginalised populations and security is thus generated.
3. Women's Ecological Expertise The wealth of women's knowledge of their food/agriculture/water/ community systems which can foster sustainable practices in their communities is central in Shiva and Markandaya's works.
4. Local/ Indigenous Knowledge Both Shiva and Markandaya call for the reassertion of importance of local and indigenous knowledge systems, rather than the assumption that the technically modern know-how always holds superiority.
5. It includes not only protest, but also survival, care, an questioning of unethical life; resistance to defend for the community assets, etc.
6. Environmental Crisis is the crisis of Justice The crisis in ecological sphere is never apart from the crises in social, economic sphere. Gender, class, poverty, social justice, displacement, power etc. Cannot be dissociated.
7. Interdependence in Human-Earth Relationship Shiva's ecological idea and Markandaya's depiction of human interaction with nature both highlight the interdependence between humanity and environment, challenging that human is separate from nature.

Conclusion

Common themes between Vandana Shiva and Kamala Markandaya reveal significance of the Indian writing to ecofeminism. Although the writers do not use the same genre and have distinct time-settings, there are common premises with regard to gender, ecology, development and

struggle. Vandana Shiva presents these ideas in a conceptual and politically active frame with explicit explanations in books such as in *Remaining Alive*, where she identifies the oppression of women in relationship to the destruction of natural elements such as trees and water and, further, opposes the conception of development that overlooks any interdependence among the nature. In the *Earth Democracy*, she elaborates on environmental and democratic justice for natural resources and for the commons. Kamala Markandaya, through the fiction, highlights those issues on both local and individual level. The novel *Nectar in a Sieve* narrates on the life of Rukmani who confronts destitution, uncertainty and upheaval created by industrial development, the issue of *The Cofferd Dams* relates the conflict occurring due to large-scale development and the conflict between technological control and local knowledge. Gender, ecology and resistance interact in order for any analysis of ecologic destruction be comprehensive, with regard to the existing social divisions that influence women's disempowerment, their habitat and their socioeconomic conditions. In these terms, both writers are involved in initiating a shift from subjection to care and cohabitation with the environment, an interdependency that is also supported by respect for the wisdom of Local communities. In the period characterised by the worldwide concerns for climate and climate change, loss of biodiversity, scarcity of water and industrial disposals, their novels may prove to be influencing to those for whom social and ecologic justice are integral dimensions. Ecofeminism is neither literary theory nor literary genre. It is an approach to the Ethics of our society, the worldview with which it must address its problems and relationship with fellow beings and the natural surrounding world and that has to include how its members think about themselves as human, women communities and natural environment with Vandana Shiva and Kamala Markandaya showing that survival ecologically and injustice may be achieved only hand in hand, beginning with an awareness of the linkage

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