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Redefining Power: Ecofeminism in Krishna Sobti

Abstract

In the contemporary scenario, Eco-feminism, has gained much significance as it questions the various norms that affect women and environment. Ecofeminism draws connection between women and nature and emphasises the reconstruction of society's conventional gender biased attitude and supports people without any gender based discrimination to end the oppression of both women and nature. This paper is an analysis of the features of ecofeminism in Krishna Sobti's novels *The Music of Solitude* and *Listen Girl*. It aims to find the ecofeminism perspective portrayed in the novels and establishes its relevance in the society that claims for women empowerment, environmental protection and sustainable development. It also points out the reconstruction of gender views and its relation with nature. Further it explores urban tectonics and 'urban ecofeminism' depicted through the novels in contrast with Mamang Dai's 'rural ecofeminism'.

Feminism has been focused upon what is absent rather than what is present, reflecting concern with the silencing and marginalization of women in a patriarchal culture, a culture organized in the favor of men.(Guerin et al. 223).

Krishna Sobti expresses her feminist perspective in her novels which aims the gender identity of women in society and creatively helps to redefine the ideologies of gender that prevailed through ages. She reviews relationships [man- women] and connects women with nature and points out the minority status that women and nature held in the contemporary scenario. This shows that Krishna Sobti is a creative follower and activist of Ecofeminist Movement in literature that questions the perceived notions that oppressed both women and nature.

Change can occur only at the cost of destroying one's place in the world and one's chance for living within a context of relationships. (Miller 247)

Is this change universal to all living / natural entity? The answer will be affirmative when we look back and analyse the metamorphoses that have taken place to villages to small towns and gradually to cities. The reason or name given by humans for the destruction of land and forest wealth is "Development" ignoring the fact that without Nature humans cannot survive. The Time has come to rethink and implement Nature Infrastructure. The relationship of human beings to Nature and between each other has also changed; in many ways people like autonomy. But in this century patriarchal dominance has given way to companionship. Krishna Sobti proves this change from dominance or oppression to companionship in her novel *The Music of Solitude* through the friendship of Aranya and Ishan who live in separate flats in a residential complex in a metropolis. Aranya and Ishan, their true selfless companionship in this world of Stage- "the endless drama of existence" (Sobti, *The Music of Solitude* 1), challenges the perceived notion of Gender which is "constructed" according to Foucault and establishes Gender Equality. The two friends discuss about changing times and their concern about existentialism in urban cities especially in their old age. They think about aging and the end of the life and wonders [when they think of the

rhythm of solitude and silence] especially when they encounter the uncertainties of life's predicaments.

In *The Music of Solitude*, the gender stereotype has been put forward for discussion through the protagonist, Aranya. In her opinion "Sons form the majority in this park. We worry about the minorities"(9). Her feminist concern is revealed through her reference to the "rose- daughter". This personification of rose to daughters establishes the ecofeminist perspective. "Ecofeminism suggests an end to the oppression of women is bound up with ecological values, and that women should be centrally concerned with ending the exploitation of the ecosystem." (Tandon 56). "Julia Kristeva suggests a third space for feminism to operate- the space which deconstructs all identity, all binary oppositions."(58). The "rose-daughter" also reminds us about 'Missing women', a term coined by Amartya Sen. He points out that the missing of women is the worst human catastrophe. When we relate women with nature, the concern about Nature leads us to the ecophilosophy of Arne Naess which proves that philosophy will guide and motivate people to avert ecocatastrophe.

The discrimination based on class, caste and gender can be seen in the novel *The Music of Solitude*:

Of bougainvillea, bright red and pink, and noble Brazilian palms. The ones behind, a lesser breed stand apart [Class]. There are differences even in a park. Mandal's caste politics is in play here as well! [Caste] (4). Discriminating between son and daughter, killing the girl child in its womb and looking for ways to preserve the son. [Gender] (98)

But it should be pointed out that these differences exist only when we accept it. Based on Foucault's notion of power: "Power can only be affectively exerted if people accept the legitimate right of someone to exert power" (Oliver 43); so a need to establish the change in the power relations in society should be focused on. A shift of power relations from human centred to ecocentred and patriarchal domination or hierarchy to gender equality is the key

note of ecofeminists who actively propagate their theme of protecting both women and nature. This transition in the attitude towards equality is evident in the *Listen Girl*, where the mother's words "...ladki. You are not the daughter of a family that discriminates." (83), signifies gender equality, but the mother couldn't forget the fact that her brother was allowed for collegiate education while the girls in the family were taught by "a granthi and a maulvi" (83). The truth is that the girls in the family were not aware of the outcome in those earlier days but self-realisation of modern world women due to the attainment of knowledge had given her liberty. The daughter is alluded to "pine tree" in *Listen Girl* and the mother who considered her as nothing was able to discover the hidden power inherent in her daughter:

When I conceive this daughter of mine, I don't know why I felt so lonely...I felt as though a tall pine tree was growing inside me.

And it was indeed a tree that I gave birth to. It sways in the wind, just sways and dances. There is nothing in its future. But don't consider this girl to be cold. There is fire in her veins. She keeps herself under such control, I wonder how... (85)

Relation between Nature and the human beings, their discourse, whether positive or not can be understood through "...these trees oppose us two- legged ones. Perhaps they are fed with our whimsies" and "...Can it compete with the blare of cars whose wheels move only if petrol is used and paid for? These channels vibrate without taxes." (Sobti, *The Music of Solitude* 5); it suggests the " 'postmodern pastoral' - a posthumanist construction of human relationships with nature that makes more sense in a postmodern world; a vision that is informed by ecological and feminist theories, and one that images human/ nature relationships as "conversations" between knowing subjects"(Legler 229). They truly know each other but pretend to ignore the "other" which remained silent and is considered a minority by the "superior self". It is expressed through the lines: "If only flowers could

speak, would they allow themselves to be sold like this? To be sold. Without uttering a word. Mutely. Perhaps not. They would object to our excesses.”(Sobti, *The Music of Solitude* 55)

The contemporary relevance of this topic can be related with ‘Bachpan Bachao Andolan’. The activists saved many children, both boys and girls, but majority being girls trafficked and sold and assaulted by alluring them, giving false promises like education, job, and marriage –merely a dream to many of the “other”. To them the acquisition of these three terms, education, job and marriage, impart Power. It cannot be confronted. Foucault himself agrees with the connection as he argues: “...in society there is an inescapable connection between power and knowledge. Power requires knowledge to be effective, and knowledge, at the same time, generates power.” (Oliver 38) And both help to attain a secure job and status quo which ultimately settle them safely in marriage relationship without which a girl no longer be considered safe or successful – an ideology about married women. At this juncture Krishna Sobti’s *Listen Girl* is relevant which brought about the concept of “New Women” who are happy to lead a single life or who are happy to liberate themselves or break the shackle- the “glass ceiling” that restricts their free movement, a barrier in their choices and profession. They are not willing to surrender, instead are trying to improve their conditions. As Neenu Tandon quotes “The ‘new woman’ today challenges the traditional notions of ‘Angel in the house’ and ‘sexually voracious’ image” (126). Women believed in their right for intellectual development but at the same time they couldn’t ignore or rather oppose to the family’s concept that marriage and motherhood are the ultimate aim in their life, in India, especially. But it does make sense as it gives meaning to their life if the family stands with her to attain her dreams. On the contrary, we can imagine what happens. A new woman who is single, who is liberated from the familial concerns and relationship is often neglected or rather criticised. The mother in *The Listen Girl* also rebukes her daughter for remaining

single and childless- “You! Neither a mother nor a grandmother. You are nothing, ladki, nothing. Nothing more than a vegetable. A blade of grass. A shard of straw!”(36)

The mother- daughter relationship in *Listen Girl* is a perfect illustration of understanding ‘new women’. The mother couldn’t fulfil her wishes like travelling and mountaineering as she was so much consumed by the daily household chores; so she advises her daughter to snap out of it to pursue her own dreams. The mother advises: “...you stand outside this. Ai ladki, the family takes away all one has...” (9); the daughter is the new woman in the novel. The freedom that men enjoy in this world made the mother wish:

If there’s such a thing as rebirth, then in my next birth, I’d like to be born a man. I’ll then know a warrior on the move controls his women and the family. Don’t laugh. I’m serious. Every woman knows and understands this. (27)

The oppression of parents by their own children may be the reason behind Aranya’s decision to remain lonely in *The Music of Solitude*. Damayanti’s words: “I would be less anxious if I lived alone, like you” (78), “They don’t bother whether I’ve eaten anything, whether I’m ill, whether I need medicine, tests, or a visit to the doctor- I do everything myself”(79), reveals the attitude of this generation towards the older generation. When Ishan assimilates the deep family relations as valuable, Aranya at the same time opposes the idea of joint family in today’s times because she was aware of the pitiful, helpless subjugation of some parents by their sons and daughters. This state made us agree with Aranya’s statement that “The idea of all- encompassing joint family has ceased to exist; it’s a myth in today’s day and age” (66). Even if Ishan glorifies the joint family system as “its roots have succoured our national culture” (66), they both are leading a life of solitude as family happens to be absent in their life.

In *Mamang Dai* we come across rural ecofeminism, as the setting in her novels portray the connection of women in the rural villages with their natural entities especially

rivers. Krishna Sobti's novels in contrast to Mamang Dai's are illustrations of urban ecofeminism as the novel encompasses the depiction of women and nature in city life along with its insecurity. Both women and nature face the insecurity as being the minority among the majority. The use of the term "concrete jungle" is the portmanteau of the artificial transformation or creation of jungle but the jungle referred to by the author is just a "carpet of green grass" in the tiny garden with flowers and creepers. People seemed to be satisfied and are compared as "flock" and are expressed as "they would find themselves gazing at the concrete jungle" (Sobti, *The Music of Solitude* 95). It evokes urban tectonics, the consequential depletion of nature in cities and the life style of the people accustomed to it as if they are unaware of the need for sustainable development. So it is evident that Krishna Sobti's works have contemporary relevance as it propagate ecofeminist perspective that claims for gender equality, women empowerment and environment protection. Thus Ecofeminism is the manifestation of the unrevealed Power in both Women and Nature which can transform and satisfy their destiny.

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