

Representation of Women and Nature in Abhi Subedi's *Māyādevikā Sapanā*

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<https://doi.org/10.3126/litstud.v34i01.39522>

Abstract

The article aims to analyze the depiction of women and nature in Abhi Subedi's play, *Māyādevikā Sapanā* [Dreams of Mayadevi] (2008) from the ecofeminist perspective. The play associates women to nature and suggests that there is similarity between the domination of women and exploitation of nature by men in patriarchy. The female characters of the play criticize the patriarchal gender roles based on hierarchy and dualism. They identify patriarchy as the root cause of violence against women and nature. Ecofeminist critics point out that there are conceptual, symbolic, and linguistic connections between feminist and ecological issues. Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies assert that it is the same patriarchal mindset that dominates women exploits the nature. Carolyn Merchant posits that modern capitalism treats nature as a wild female who needs to be tamed and controlled. Val Plumwood argues that western philosophy, which prioritizes reason to emotion, is the key to oppression of women and nature in the modern world. These critics suggest that feminism should also deal with the issues of nature because the destruction of nature harms women more than it harms men. Thus, ecofeminist perspective is relevant to analyze the depiction of women and nature in *Māyādevikā Sapanā*. The finding of the article reveals that patriarchy is unfriendly to women and nature; and issues of women and ecology are intertwined.

Keywords: Patriarchy, ecofeminism, ecofeminists, dualism, and hierarchy.

Background

Abhi Subedi is a versatile Nepali writer who has over two dozen books on different genres to his credit. Among his published works, *Kārpēt Tā ngieko Ākāśa* [Carpeted Sky] (1999) and *Nibandha Ra Tundikhel* [Essay and Tundikhel] (2007) are the collection of essays and *Sabda Ra Cota* [Words and Wounds] (1997) is an anthology of poems. Though Subedi started writing plays late in his writing career, he is a highly acclaimed playwright in Nepali literature. He has already written a dozen of plays both in English and Nepali;

and many of them have been staged in nation and abroad. His *Agniko Kathā* [*Fire in the Monastery*] (2004), *Māyādevikā Sapanā* [*Dreams of Mayadevi*] (2008), *Bruised Evenings* (2011), and *Dreams of Peach Blossoms* (2012), have been highly acclaimed plays. These plays chronicle the life of the people living in one or the other community, as well as stories which evoke pain and suffering of the people living through a difficult yet important phase of the social political transformation of the nation. According to theatre critic Shiva Rijal, these plays dramatize the difficult situation experienced by Nepali people (“Ādhunika Nepālī” 11). Rijal appreciates the fusion of contemporary themes with the universal issues in his plays.

Along with the contemporary issues, many critics appreciate Subedi’s plays for raising women’s concerns. Evaluating *Dreams of Peach Blossoms*, Sangita Rayamajhi, a feminist critic of Nepal exclaims, “What strikes me most about this play is the depiction of the women’s untold story behind the façade of heritage in moving words of dramatic and poetic subtlety” (112). Subedi in his *Nepali Theatre as I See It* confesses that *Dreams of Peach Blossoms* “is a cultural construct that visualizes the mytho-poetic world of a civilization where women’s woes were glossed over by the dominant liminal rituals” (162). Issues of women are pertinent in his plays. Rijal points that most of Subedi’s plays are written with feminist consciousness (“History and Dreams” 62). Critics appreciate Subedi for providing the way forward to Nepali people in the most crucial phases of the history of their lives.

In addition to women’s issues, his plays foreground the issues of nature as well. Issues of women and ecology and environment are discernable in *Māyādevikā Sapanā*. It explores the harms done upon women and nature in patriarchy. Mayadevi, the protagonist of the play minutely analyzes violence against women and nature in patriarchy during the Maoist War in Nepal. She poignantly reveals that men are the cause of the suffering of women and the exploitation of nature. Traditional gender roles based on hierarchy and dualism treat men superior to women and nature. Masculine gender role ascribed to men encourages them to take part in war and enact violence against women and nature. The play reveals that men’s engagement in war and violence harms women and nature. Thus, this article argues that the play critiques exploitation of women and nature in patriarchy and it is relevant to analyze it from ecofeminists’ perspective. In the process of analysis the article seeks answers to these research questions:

1. What links do women and nature have in Subedi’s plays?
2. How do men dominate and exploit women and nature in the play?

Review of Literature

Subedi's *Māyādevikā Sapanā* has remained popular among the theatregoers. Published in *Tīna Nātaka* (2008), the play, *Māyādevikā Sapanā* directed by Nisha Sharma has been performed in Nepal and India over 40 times. Rijal explores feminist consciousness in Subedi's plays. According to him, Subedi gives voice to women characters who have remained invisible in the history of the nation. According to him Subedi deals with the pains and sufferings of women, their predicament and helplessness that lie hidden in the culture and mythmaking of the nation ("Ādhunika Nepālī" 11). Rijal argues that *Māyādevikā Sapanā* depicts the predicament of women in Nepal during the People's War. It dramatizes the story of an old woman who has lost her son in the War between the state and the Maoist. The play dramatizes the courage, pain and poetic vision of the simple country woman, widow of a war veteran (19).

Rijal in the preface to Subedi's *Sandajuko Mahabharata* comments upon Subedi's characters. He claims that Subedi's plays are female centered plays. In most of them female characters hold the major roles. Rijal enumerates that Maiju of *Dreams of Peach Blossoms*, Bhichhuni Purnima of *Fire in the Monastery*, Mayadevi in *Māyādevikā Sapanā* and the Princess of the *Bruised Evenings* are portrayed as the protagonists of the plays ("Subedīkā Pātraharū" n. pag.) In all these plays the dominant roles are given to women which foreground woman's role in the society.

Subedi in his authorial note in *Tīna Nātaka [Three Plays]*, explains that he has depicted the hidden pain and agony of Nepali people during the Maoist War in *Māyādevikā Sapanā*. He attempts to explore people's self-respect and respect for other people, love and illusion experienced by them during the War (*cha*). The War badly affected the rural people of Nepal. The play is set in a village with only women and children. The only grown up male of the village is the old Lahure, a mentally unstable man. In the absence of grown up males in the family, the women of the village have to do those works which were considered to be only men's work. They had a hard life adapting themselves in these unconventional works. A woman wishes that her son would stop growing so that he would not be recruited for the militia. Subedi believes that the queer desire of the woman shows the predicament of women during the war.

Rita Dhital argues that Subedi has weaved the common consciousness that Nepalis are going through at this time of conflict (para 2). Similarly, Dinesh Rai claims that the play familiarizes the town dwellers with the "turmoil and suffering that rural folks have been putting up with for more than

a decade” (para 2) . These theatregoers suggest that the play makes a lively depiction of the hard times that rural Nepalis have been through. Subedi affirms that the play “dramatizes the predicament of women in the conflict affected areas.” He adds that the play “makes a blend of the raw human suffering and love, affection and pain” (Theatre Hub para 2). It chronicles women’s experiences during the War. Rayamajhi affirms that Subedi places women at the center of his plays “as a powerful pivot round which the plays revolved” (quoted in Davis142). She claims that his plays foreground the positive traits of women like selfhood, confidence and their power for life.

Most of the critics appreciate Subedi’s plays for raising women’s consciousness and deconstructing oppressive patriarchal culture. Written in the high time of Nepali history, his plays portray the hidden pain and suffering of its people and search for meaning in human life. The opinions of these critics help to understand Subedi’s plays in general. However, there are very few reviews on *Māyādevikā Sapanā*. The existing reviews also refrain from making an in-depth study of the play to examine the representation of women and nature in it. Thus, this research tries to fill this research gap by analyzing the play from ecofeminist perspective.

Methodology

The qualitative mode of research is adopted to analyze the text of *Māyādevikā Sapanā* which forms the primary source of information. Corresponding literatures about the play are used as secondary source of information. Ecofeminism provides the theoretical ground for the study. Relevant examples from the play are interpreted and analyzed in the light of views presented by the ecofeminist critics. Since the text is in Nepali, I use transliteration and my own translation based on free translation while taking citations from the play.

Ecofeminism deals with human beings’ relationships to the nonhuman natural world. Ecofeminist critics believe that patriarchy is unfriendly to women and nature and they relate the violence against women and nature in patriarchy. They claim that patriarchal hierarchical, dualistic, and oppressive modes of thinking harm women and nature. One of the earliest ecofeminist historian Carolyn Merchant identifies the culture/nature dualism prevalent in the Western philosophy is a product of scientific revolution. She traces the existence of two opposing images of nature as female in Western philosophy. One is the image of nature as organic, benevolent, nurturing female and the other is the image of nature as female is wild and uncontrollable (1-2). Merchant argues that during the scientific revolution nature as disorder remained dominant and in the process of controlling it men started using it as resources for their use. She observes that the historical shift from an organic to

a mechanistic model helped to justify the exploitation of nature as resource (16).

Val Plumwood agrees that Western anthropocentric perspective treats men as superior to women and nature and justifies the subordination of women and nature by men. “Human-centredness promotes various damaging forms of epistemic remoteness, for by walling ourselves off from nature in order to exploit it, we also lose certain abilities to situate ourselves as part of it” (98). She claims that “human centeredness is not ecologically rational” (100). She points out that human/nature dualism is the cause of ecological crisis experienced by the modern world and suggests that ecofeminists should work out off the time-honored, mutually exclusive value dualisms, especially the culture versus nature dualism.

Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva in their joint work *Ecofeminism* claim that patriarchy associates women to nature and believes that “they could be oppressed, exploited and dominated by man. The tools for this are science, technology and violence” (10). Ecofeminist ethics are grounded in the assumption that the dominations of women and of nature are morally wrong and ought to be eliminated (Warren and Cheney 180). Ecofeminists argue that there are conceptual, symbolic, and linguistic connections between feminist and ecological issues (Tong 237). Thus, ecofeminists suggest that feminists should take the responsibility to solve the environmental problems.

Francoise d’Eaubanne, who coined the term ecofeminism, insists that feminism should interfere in the issues of environment. She points that there are three factors responsible for the environmental degradation. First is the growth of human population, which pollutes the water, the soil, the air and the sky. Second factor is the consumption-production process and its relationship to the environment’s devastation to the point of extinction of its resources. And the last factor is the production of nuclear and other weapons, which threatens the whole earth and its habitants (181). She claims that these environmental unfriendly activities affect women badly and women can take the primary responsibility to solve these problems.

In Subedi’s *Māyādevikā Sapanā*, Mayadevi, the protagonist of the play poignantly examines the sufferings of women and exploitation of nature in patriarchy. She laments that it has never been easy for women in patriarchy. She complains that women suffer either there are men at home or they are not at home. Their life is difficult both in peace and in the war. She also critiques men for exploiting the nature. During the war, the militants hide in the forests. They make fire, blast bombs and destroy the forest. These activities threaten the wild life. The patriarchal mindset, which focuses on control and victory,

damages the environment. The protagonist also critiques the patriarchal prioritization of masculine attributes associated to war and violence to feminine attributes associated to nurturing and caring. Hence, it is relevant to analyze the play from the ecofeminists' perspective. Since the drama studied is in Nepali, I have translated the quoted texts on my own.

Representation of Women and Nature in *Māyādevikā Sapanā*

Desperate Mayadevi laments that it has never been easy for women in patriarchy. She claims that women suffer either there are men at home or not. And women's sufferings gets heightened during the war, as she comments:

Women do every work. They have even started ploughing the field. Climbing the trees they chop off the branches for fodder; what they do not do. They send children to school. It is quite fearful. The poor single women. Women have hardship when there are men, and their troubles increase in the absence of men. Women have no liberty. (18)

Mayadevi's grudges show the predicament of women in patriarchy. She contemplates the scary life of women in the absence of their men. Traditionally, they were protected by their husbands and grown up men in their homes. But now their men have already left the village and they have to protect themselves. They have the fear of being attacked by the enemies. Besides, they have to climb tall trees, plough the field and irrigate the farm, which they are not used to doing. These were masculine works and women were not allowed to do them. But in the absence of men, they have to do those things.

Women doing the masculine jobs stands in opposition to patriarchal understanding of women as weak and passive. According to Plumwood men use stereotype and treat women as other and oppress them. She argues that to counter the method of stereotyping used to dominate women "it is necessary to acknowledge and reclaim continuity and overlap between the polarised groups as well as internal diversity within them. Men can be emotional and do childcare, women can be rational, gay or straight" (103). The way these women conduct both masculine and feminine jobs is a counter attack on traditional gender role division based on masculine/ feminine dualism. It shows that women are as capable as men; but they have been trained differently and they struggle to adjust in their new roles.

But one needs not misunderstand that women led comfortable life in the company of their men; they had hard life. Their hardship has increased in the absence of their men. They have to do the unconventional jobs which were

exclusively for men. Since they have not been trained for those works, it is much too difficult for them to adapt in the changing situation. Mayadevi is the widow of a war veteran whose only son, whom she has raised as a single parent, is lost in the War between the Maoist and the government. Fragile and forlorn Mayadevi has no helping hand. Similar is the condition of other women in the village. All the grown up males have joined the war or fled away from the village to avoid the war. The only man in the village is the one arm ex-army whose mental condition is not stable. In the absence of those men, the women's work load has increased.

Patriarchy is the main cause of these women's suffering. In addition to the double workloads, these women have the fear of being attacked by the enemies. The Maoist militants and the army personnel, who are mostly the males, treat women as weaker beings and intimidate them and make them serve them unconditionally. Plumwood argues that 'hegemonic centrism' creates polarized structure which promotes radical exclusion and homogenisation/stereotyping. "Men are stereotyped as active, intellectual, inexpressive, strong, dominant and so on, while women are represented in terms of the complementary polarity as passive, intuitive, emotional, weak, and submissive"(103). Consequently, men think that they are superior to women and they can dominate them. Likewise, they treat women as objects which they can snatch and use and abuse. They use women's bodies as terrain where they can demonstrate their masculinity. In the play also men treat women as other, the weaker ones who belong to the enemy's camp. In the absence of their protectors they rape and murder them. These all happen to women because of the stereotype patriarchal gender roles.

Set in the war torn village of hilly region of Nepal during the Maoist War, the play dramatizes how women and nature are exploited in patriarchy. It opens with the village women gathering together to discuss the problems that they face in the absence of men in the village. An elderly woman cautions them that men with guns march pass the village regularly. She explains that some of these gunmen visit them with bad intention. They make village women feed them; they also abuse, rape and assault them. She narrates:

Were not you abused and threatened that day by a man in the army clothes, who had also had his food in your house; and tried to rape you? Luckily, she managed to escape from the back. Who knows what would have happened to her! We can say nothing. Now we cannot say where our men are, where they have gone and what happened to them. Now, if any mishaps occur to any of us we need to share. (13)

The extract depicts the problems faced by women during the War. The speaker narrates the scary event from which her neighbor narrowly escaped.

The man in the army clothes not only made her feed him but he had also abused and attempted to rape her. It shows how the violence against women increases in the period of war. In patriarchal thought, women are identified as being closer to nature and men as being closer to culture. Nature is seen as inferior to culture; hence, women are seen as inferior to men (Agarwal 120). The nature culture dichotomy is created by patriarchy to dominate women. Though these women have no direct involvement in the war, they suffer. The fighters, who are mostly men, use force to control women.

Traditional gender roles expect men to be active in killing, taking risks and daring. These expectations lead men to war and violence. In the war, men carry guns and go to the battle field. They kill each other. But the women, who stay back at home, have to pay the repercussion of the war. Because of the war many of them are widows. As single women they have to do all those feminine works like cooking, cleaning and looking after the children and elderly people. These are feminine jobs and they are used to doing these things whereas they are not used to ploughing the fields, climbing tall trees, irrigating the fields during nights. But in the absence of the male members, they have to do these tasks.

Traditional gender roles situate women at the disadvantageous position. Ecofeminist Carolyn Sachs outlines the ways in which women are structurally subordinated by role allocations in rural farm labor.

“Women are prevented from performing key tasks so that they depend on men for resource allocation. Thus, to the extent that women are structurally excluded from key institutions, their power is limited” (87).

On the one hand, these rural women had never been trained to fight against the enemies. On the other hand men think they should loot and capture women as objects in the war. Sense of insecurity hunts them.

The report of Advocacy Forum mentions the precarious condition of women during the Maoist war. During the war most of the youths from the rural areas, were encouraged, forced and abducted to take part in the war. Because of this many villages literally had no grown up or young male population. In the absence of men, the women suffered. The report explains:

During the conflict, women were detained, tortured, raped and killed for suspected association with the Maoists, and also for belonging to the families of security forces personnel. The wives, mothers and daughters of men who were displaced, killed, disappeared or tortured, suffered greatly as a result of the conflict. They had to carry economic and social

responsibilities, acting as both bread winners and care-givers, and defending their families. Some were also active as combatants. (8)

The problems faced by the female characters in the play and the finding of the report show the effects of war on women. Mayadevi also shares that the rural women have been suffered by Maoists cadres and army personnel.

The play written from women's perspectives depicts the untold sufferings of women: their pain and agony, the physical and mental torture they received from the government security forces and from the Maoist cadres. One of the women shares her queer feelings. She wishes that her son would never grow up so that he would not be recruited for the war (14). Another woman says that it is much difficult for them to identify who the fighters belong to: either to the government or to the Maoists. She shares their problems: "Whether they are Nepal government's security personals or people's government's men, it is difficult for us to identify them. The main issue is to protect the young girls" (14). These women do not believe in war. They believe in caring and cooperation. So they critique men's tendency for war and killing. Mayadevi questions the combatants who will feed the elderly people, children and domestic and pet animals if the women leave the village (16). Being superior, the men are engaged in the war and do not listen to women who feed and care them.

Mayadevi's insistence on nurturing and caring matches with the benevolent image of nature described by Merchant. She explains that Nature has been identified "with a nurturing mother: a kindly beneficent female who provided for the needs of making in an ordered, planned universe" (2). But she explains that this organic image of nature has been transformed to inert, mechanic, passive nature that men can utilize for their ends. In the play, the women stand for the organic whole, the nature who believe on coexistence between men and women. But men treat them as inferior beings for their use and exploit them.

Along with the women, in the play nature is also exploited. Birds and animals, too, suffer. They are dispossessed from their habitat. Karen Warren identifies patriarchy as the common enemy for women and nature. She claims that environmental issues are feminists' issues (12). In the same vein, King, explains ecofeminists perspective as: "We see the devastation of the earth and her beings by corporate warriors and the threat of nuclear annihilation by the military warriors, as feminist concern" (10). During the War, the Maoist militias have taken shelter in the forest. They make fire, play the parade and blast bombs. Their activities destroy the forest and kill the wild animals.

Terrified birds and animals run away from the forest. Similarly, the government uses night-vision helicopters and drops bombs in the forests to destroy the Maoists shelters. This activity also terrifies women and animals.

Mies and Shiva suggest that because of women's historic experience of patriarchal violence and, despite this, their knowledge of survival are less likely to forget that nature is not a mere source of raw material (186). They insist that nature is a subject, animated matter, materializing spirit. Mayadevi associates her suffering with those shelter less birds which she sees in the open field by her cottage. She personifies and talks to them.

She correlates the suffering of the birds with the suffering of those women who are suffered by the violent men who kill each other for the sake of power. She feminizes these non-human beings as their vulnerability matches with women's in patriarchy. In this regard women and nature are connected. Mayadevi's outlook towards men's self-centeredness matches to Pulpwood's opinion about human centric perspective. She identifies that the human centric perspective is irrational (100). The suffering of women and the birds and animals in the war suffices that patriarchal social order harms women and nature.

Ecofeminism raises issues of environmental and social justice. Mies and Shiva claim, "The violence to nature, which seems intrinsic to the dominant development model, is also associated with violence to women who depend on nature for drawing sustenance for themselves, their families, their societies" (xvi). Mayadevi tells the gunmen that her life has been devastated by gun and knife (33). She explains that she is familiar to the forest and the songs of birds. She has gone to the forest many times to fetch firewood and fodders. So have the other women. They are close to the earth as they spend more time planting and harvesting on the earth. Similarly, herding the cows and goats they spend time with animals in the forest and in the pasture lands. But because of the war these rural women cannot visit the forest all alone. It is explicit that women depend on nature more than men do for their survival. Explicitly, the destruction of nature have direct bearing to women.

Moreover, Mayadevi resists patriarchal gender roles based on hierarchy. She denies that women are inferior because of their reproductive function. On the contrary, she insists that it is women's natural 'karma.' She suggests that women should proudly declare that they have accomplished their natural task: "I did my job. I did the job of nature" (37). Her proclamation shows the connections between women and nature. Women and nature are connected because of the rejuvenating, life giving force attached to them. Both women and nature suffer because of patriarchal prioritization of control

and victory which leads to war and violence. Mies and Shiva sound true as they explain that guided by patriarchal mindset men think that they can dominate and exploit women and nature. And they use science, technology and violence to tame and control, women and nature. In the play also men use nuclear weapons like bombs, night-vision helicopters, guns to destroy the nature. They use violence to dominate and control women.

Conclusion

The play centers on the issues of women and nature in patriarchy. It deals with the victimization of women in the modern world guided by patriarchy. Men use violence to control and exploit women and nature. In the play, because of men's engagement in the War women's daily life has been threatened. In the absence of grown up males in the village, the women's work load has been increased. They have to do not only the feminine works but they also have to do the tough masculine works. In the absence of grown up males they have also been intimidated, tortured and raped by the Maoist militias and the security personnel. Likewise, men exploit the nature. In the war the Maoist militias have taken shelters in the forest. They make fire, blast bombs and make noise. These activities destroy the forest, terrify and kill the birds and animals. The government night-vision helicopters also terrify women and animals. They are dispossessed of their shelter. These activities show the exploitation of women and nature in patriarchy. Thus, Mayadevi and other female characters protest patriarchal atrocity upon women and nature. The play's exploration and protest of the patriarchal unfriendly activities to women and nature justifies its ecofeminist perspective.

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