

Ecofeminist Reading of Balakrishna Sama's Don't Cut down the Trees, Brother Woodcutter

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Abstract:

Balakrishna Sama's poem, Don't Cut down the Trees, Brother Woodcutter, presents a compelling, environmental concern with socio-cultural reflections. This paper employs an ecofeminist perspective to analyze the poem, exploring the intricate connections between gender and nature. Ecofeminism, as a theoretical framework, posits that the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature are deeply interconnected and rooted in patriarchal structures. The analysis delves into the portrayal of nature as a feminine entity in the poem, drawing parallels between the exploitation of women and the exploitation of the environment. Through characters such as the Woodcutter and the trees personifying as dead mothers, the poem illustrates how patriarchal attitudes manifest in the destruction of nature, echoing the subjugation of women. Furthermore, the ecofeminist perspective unveils the significance of women as agency in environmental activism. Characters like the mother and the Trees symbolize the resistance against ecological destruction, emphasizing the vital role of mothers in nurturing and protecting the environment. By intertwining environmental and gender concerns, Don't Cut down the Trees, Brother Woodcutter underscores the need for a paradigm shift towards a more equitable and sustainable relationship with nature. This ecofeminist reading sheds light on the complex interplay between gender and nature in Balakrishna Sama's poem, offering insights into how literature can contribute to broader conversations about environmental justice and gender equality.

Keywords: Interconnection, nature and women, ecofeminism, patriarchal viewpoint

Introduction

The terminology 'ecofeminisme' (ecofeminism) was coined by a French feminist, Francoise d'Eaubonne in 1974 in her book *Le Feminisme au la mort (Feminism or Death)* which she wrote in 1980. In a research journal, *The International Journal of Literary Humanitis*, Danielle Roth-Johnson writes "In 1974 she wrote *Le Feminisme au la mort (Feminism or Death)*, the first work in which she uses the term ecofeminism to talk about how society's

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disregard for women is comparable to its contempt for the environment" (Roth-Johnson, 5). The statement affirms that the word ecofeminism has come into practice after d'Eaubonne has introduced it in her book *Feminism or Death* during 1970s. Roth-Johnson agrees that d'Eaubonne introduced the term for the first time to study how society disregards nature and women as a similar issue. The advent of the concept of ecofeminism brought worldwide waves to make women more responsible for preserving and caring the nature and natural world. *The Green Belt Movement* of 1977 initiated by Wangari Mathaai in Africa along with the Chipko Movement of 1973 started by Vandana Shiva in India and feminists' involvement in preparing jam from berries sprayed with herbicides and offering the product to the parliament to taste in Sweden in 1999, was influenced by the concept of ecofeminism.

Furthermore, opposing voice of feminists in Uranium processing project in Canada in 2006 and organization of cleaning up hazardous waste sites by housemakers in the USA in 1980s are the imminent examples of the direct influence of the concept of ecofeminism worldwide. All these environment caring initiations are the instances of worldwide movements increasingly known as 'ecofeminism' dedicated to the continuation of life on the earth. The theory of ecofeminism primarily argues on the issue of interrelationship between ecology and women. This theory blends the divergent aspects of women's life with the environmental concerns and similarly the environmental elements are studied in relation to feminine attributes. Moreover, the theory of ecofeminism attempts to establish the very close and intimate relationship between environment and women. Additionally, the theory acknowledges that the feminist and ecological issues are interlinked which prove nature-women affiliation is inevitable for sustaining the existence of both on the earth. Some of the prominent ecofeminist theorists have made various claims to assert that nature and women have interdependent nexus. Among the ecofeminist theorists, Karen J. Warren, an American ecofeminist in her book, *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*, agrees on the concept of ecofeminism by mentioning that "According to ecofeminists, trees, water, animals, toxics, and nature language are feminist issues because understanding them helps one understand the status and plight of women cross-culturally" (Warren, p.4). By this definition, Warren admits that many of the ecofeminists take all the natural entities as the parts of feminism which let people know about the condition of women associating them with cultural values and practices. Further, Warren clarifies ecofeminism as "What makes ecofeminism distinct is its insistence that nonhuman nature and naturism are feminist issues" (Warren, 4). Warren insists that ecofeminism is a quite different discipline that studies the natural components and entire nature conflating them with the issue of feminism. Nature and natural world of animals, birds, insects including other creatures are taken under the consideration of feminist value and issue. Such considerations of natural objects help to connect entire nature with the notion of feminism and their subjugation in the societies where males are treated as superior to nature and women. This paper, however, through the exploration of the nature represented in his poetry and the relation between nature and imagination, tries to demonstrate that Balkrishna Sama's *Don't cut down the trees, brother woodcutter* is the result of human-centered exploitation of nature and this human-centered attitude is what ecofeminism argues against.

Methodology

In this paper, I would explore Balkrishna Sama's *don't cut down the trees, brother wood cutter* dialectical from the ecofeminist perspective. Woman in traditional patriarchal society is deemed inferior to man and her role as a mother is emphasized because being a mother is considered the only function woman has. As Julia Kristeva in "Staba Mater" mentions, "[W]e live in a civilization where the consecrated (religious or secular) representation of femininity is absorbed by motherhood" (Kristeva, 161). While we emphasize the maternal characteristics of women, their identity as autonomous human beings and independent subjects is forgotten. It seems that the only purpose of the existence of women is to be mothers, giving birth to and nourishing the offspring. The value of their life depends on their ability of reproducing and nursing. Likewise, we also hold a similar attitude to nature. As an important element, "Mother Nature" or "Mother Earth" is a common expression in his respective poetry. According to ecofeminists, this metaphorical connection between nature and mother seems to emphasize and praise the maternal characteristics of natural environment, laying stress on the bountiful resources of the earth which seem never to be exhausted. In this way, we limit the role nature plays to the reproducing and nursing role the mother plays. This connection between nature and motherhood finally results in human exploitation and devastation of the natural environment.

Likewise, the ecofeminists advocate a combination of women's movement with the ecological movement since women and nature have undergone a similar experience—being dominated by men. A famous Ecofeminist Karen J. Warren has listed the value hierarchy common in Western culture: These hierarchically organized value dualisms include reason/emotion, mind/body, culture/nature, human/nature, and man/woman dichotomies . . . the values (historically) associated with emotion, body, nature, and women is regarded as inferior to that which is (historically) associated with reason, mind, culture, human (i.e., male), and men. (Ecological Feminist Philosophy xii)

Therefore, breaking down these value dualisms and giving back autonomy to those which have been dominated, such as women and nature, becomes important challenge to ecofeminists. In addition, Camille Paglia in *Sexual Personae* suggests that the connection of women with nature results from their similar procreative power, which is chthonian to the male. In Paglia's opinion, nature is chthonian and art represents human beings' effort to give form and order to this daemonic nature. She also makes use of Nietzsche's idea of the conflict between Apollo and Dionysus in Greek culture and views Dionysus as the ruler of the chthonian and as the potential subversive power against the rigid social norms, which can be represented by Apollo.

The ideas illustrated in the above paragraph mainly came from the first chapter "Sex and Violence, or Nature and Art" in Paglia's book, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New York, 1990). She argues that "western personality and western achievement are, for better or worse, largely Apollonian. Apollo's great opponent Dionysus is ruler of the chthonian whose law is procreative femaleness" And it is true that

Balakrishna Sama always worships nature as a caregiver and praises every beautiful form in it. Yet, is nature's sanctity or the pleasure that nature can give is what we really need now, on the verge of ecological crisis? Isn't it a male appropriation of nature, limiting the function of nature to the nourishing or pleasing role? However, the earth as mother is part of a wider perception of nature as feminine.

Kate Soper, a critic in a critical text, *The Green Studies Reader* perceives a woman as nature and nature as a woman. Soper generalizes nature and women as single entity by attributing their qualities to each other. In a sense of naturalizing women Soper states that "[The] association of femininity with naturalness represents a more specific instance of the mind-body dualism brought to conceptions of nature, since it goes together with the assumption that the female, in virtue of her role in reproduction, is a more corporeal being than the male" (Soper, p.139). The statement suggests that the quality of nature and a woman is to reproduce something new. Moreover, Soper adds that both nature and a woman are physically more capable for reproduction than males. Similarly, to womanize nature Soper declares that ". . . and with this way we may associate a tendency to feminize nature viewed simply as landscape – trees, woodland, hills, rivers, streams, etc. are frequently personified as female or figure in similes comparing them to parts of the female body" (Soper, p.141). The extract signifies that different natural parts and landscapes embody the female features to describe them in different contexts. Soper, in her writing focuses on the idea that womanizes nature and naturalizes women in reciprocity of shared qualities.

Results and Discussion

In Balakrishna Sama's *don't cut down the trees, brother wood cutter* he uses "trees as (dead) mothers" to mean the natural environment, a personification or a symbol of feminine gender, though plurals. In a sense, Sama, like many ecofeminists, rejects the assumption that humans should dominate everyone as subalterns and exploit the natural world for personal profit. Sama personifies the motherly responsibilities of women of the natural world has feminine touch. Here, his notion of nature sounds more caring and caressing like a mother nurturing her children.

The picturesque 'Mother' image brings the reader into the stereotypical world where the mother nurses the baby/child with flowing nutrition, sustains her dependents with gusts of energy, soothes her "beloved" with her body (her arm as the pillow), and infuses her passion in growing beings. Like Sama's "Don't cut down the trees, brother woodcutter".

Outside the house, covering their heads with a veil of white frost,

Bow our dead mothers the trees, dozing, then startled, and silent.

They pass the night dreaming of our sunshine childhoods,

They hear us singing the songs that they taught us.

They wait for us until winter ends.

As soon as Spring comes they spread out their arms,

And begin to summon us, do not cut off those arms,

Brother woodcutter, don't cut down those trees, our dead mothers. (Sama: 17-28)

Despite the wonderful natural world that soothes and inspires the human mind, the poet is troubled because humanity has alienated itself from nature and nature's holy play. He intentionally personifies those natural objects to create a beautiful and peaceful nook in their mind to evade the sorrow in the human world. However, in ecofeminist point of view, the personification of natural objects represents a kind of human domination over nature since we impose on the natural world the human standard of value. Both of them have a great regard for nature's surpassing power and deliberately juxtaposes the comforting nature with the suffering human world, but through imagination, their respective mind chooses, cuts, and reorganizes the natural scene to prove what he believes, that is, nature is pleasant:

As Val Plumwood says, when criticizing pantheism, "Nature is treated as fully sentient and as having, through its possession of spirit, human qualities. In this case there is no recognition of difference. Nature is anthropomorphized in fact or fancy, and the human is taken as the basic model, such a position does not succeed in genuinely escaping a dualistic model" (Plumwood, p.127).

Sama's anthropocentric appropriation of nature can also be seen in the wording they use in depicting natural scenes: *Don't cut down the trees, brother woodcutter* "trees" are plural feminine form:

And so they cannot even plead with us,

But always they protect us from sun and rain,

And seat us on their easy laps,

Then, making us take one footstep upward at time,

Carrying us in their bending arms, they lift us up onto their shoulders

And suckle us from breasts filled with fruits and flowers

They kiss our brows constantly with leafy lips,

Sighing for us, they ooze sap as they weep;

They sigh, they cannot speak to us:

Don't cut down the trees, brother woodcutter, they are our dead mothers. (Sama: 3-11)

What I am trying to stress is that when the poet imposes his/her judgment on the natural world, it implies that he/she still holds a kind of anthropocentric bias in facing nature. What I want to argue against is the subjective/objective appropriation and human-centered depiction of nature. In ecofeminist viewpoint, we should consider nature, instead of as the nourishing mother, as an autonomous being and respect its right of existence. When we choose what can please us from nature and delude ourselves with the false hope that nature will always be pleasant, we are still human-centered and we still hold the human being superior to the natural world.

Conclusion

Sama's attitude towards nature, respectively especially, has its historical background and it may not be really fair to criticize his poems from the currently trending literary perspective and moreover we cannot discredit his literary heights by any monolithic reductionism. Yet, an ecofeminist reading of his poems perhaps can help us get a more judicious attitude toward nature and this is the sole purpose of this paper.

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