

Women, Nature, and Subservience: An Eco-feminist Study of Kalidas' Meghadoot

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Abstract

The article aims to analyze the connections between women and nature in Kalidas' Meghadoot by using an eco-feminist approach. The paper argues that Kalidasa depicts women and nature as equally subservient to men in the ancient patriarchal society, and his purpose in doing so is to foreground the need to equate women and nature and assert their equality with that of men. As a theory, eco-feminism tends to equate women and nature, particularly in the fact that both face domination and exploitation at the hands of men. The eco-feminist critics believe that the issues of women and ecology are interrelated. To deal with this concept the papers borrow theoretical insights from Warren, Miles, and Vandhana Shiva. The finding indicates that nature and women are represented as alike in Meghadoot, as both are treated as feminine and exploited by patriarchal society. The human can live a naturally happy life on earth if the hierarchy between males and females is abolished. Revering women also connotes due respect for nature, and this inspires the male to love nature as a mother. Through this literary work, the poet Kalidasa intends to show the significance of the idea of equality to maintain harmony among men, women, and nature.

Keywords: Eco-feminism, ecology, eco-criticism, dualism patriarchy, culture

Introduction

The Meghadoot by Kalidasa is a poem that arguably emphasizes on the theme of domination of both nature and women in a patriarchal society. This poem includes the clod, as the messenger, and Yasha as the central characters who provide the graphic description of Indian mythological territory and try to show the subservience position of women in Hindu traditional society. The line, "He will come to Vindravana and ravish me" (Kale, P.265) means to say that women are regarded as desire-fulfilling objects of men as women are sexually exploited. Similarly, the line, "natured by

beloved like a son is a young with Mandara Tree” (p.71) gives the image of our patriarchal society as Yasha’s wife in Alkapuri, grows the Mandara tree as a son rather than a daughter.

The portrayal of women is wisely presented throughout the poem and their struggle, patience, devotion, suffering, and subordination in an ancient society are lucidly presented. The scholar, Krishna Chandra Roychowdhury (2010) talks about the poet Kalidasa, as he points out “He became sap of trees, the sparkle of towels, the plumage of birds, and the crimson of the dawn and the silence of the majestic firmament fretted with golden fire” (p. 18)). According to Kale (1969), the writing of Kalidasa expressed the basic idea of human culture which is interconnected to the physical world. The physical world is affecting humans and non-humans and is also affected by both of these. He further states, “Kalidasa stresses environmental justice to a large extends, the logic of domination is implicit in discrimination and oppression on grounds of class as well as species and gender” (p.11).

Eco-feminism is one of the components of eco-criticism. It deals with the relationship between women and nature which particularly deals with the domination of women and the exploitation of nature in a patriarchal society. The term eco-feminism was coined by French feminist Francoise de’Eaubonne in 1974 in her essay *Le Feminisme Ou La Mort* [Feminism or death] within which she argued that overpopulation and degradation of resources were the most critical threats to survival. She called upon women to lead an ecological revolution to turn around the environmental destruction that threatened the survival of humanity.

Regarding eco-feminism, the scholars Alldred & Dennison (2001) state that eco-feminism as a type of feminism deals with human beings’ relationships to the non-human natural world. They believe that women’s and ecological issues are interrelated. The more commonly termed eco-feminism is a conjunction of two words: ecology and feminism while feminist and ecological analysis can be combined, feminists are seen as turning increasingly to theory and environmentalists to action (p.124). Miller reveals that “the eco in eco-feminism refers to the influence of ecology on the eco-feminist movement” (Miller, 1997, p.116). Warren (1991) mentions in her book *Eco-feminism: Women, Culture Nature* that while there are many varieties of eco-feminism, “all eco-feminists agree that the wrongful and interconnected domination of women and nature exist and must be eliminated” (p.315).

Regarding the function of eco-feminism through literature, Warren (2000) points out that eco-feminism explores the relationship between nature and humanity, striving to move beyond the domination both of women and culture and discusses a useful framework for understanding women’s vulnerability in the context of race, class, gender, disability, and power (p.110). Warren describes eco-feminism as like a quilt: an eco-feminist philosopher quest will be made up of different patches, constructed by

quilts, in particular, social, historical, and material content (ibid, p.66). She opposes ecological domination and encourages justice in all spheres. Eco-feminism is the drive to eliminate all forms of domination. In Warren's own words:

The boundary condition society that an eco-feminism must be anti-sexist, anti-classist, anti-naturalist, and anti-racist opposed to any 'ism' that presupposes or advances a logic of freedom of domination. The basic starting point of eco-feminism philosophy is that the dominations of women, other humans, and non-human nature are interconnected are wrong and ought to be eliminated. (pp. 99-155)

The domination of nature and the domination of women are interconnected. The domination of women and the domination of nature are unjustified and have to end. A system of oppression is a social arrangement where interacting individuals and institutions partake in a certain type of power relation namely unjustified power over relation. The next oppression system advocated by Warren is oppression value dualism which is pair made up of elements that opposed and exclude each other in the western context reason and emotion are the elements of one such dualism. In the same line, Ynestra talked about the interest and attitude that is the main reason to dominate others. As he points out:

For the most part, ecologists, with their concern for nonhuman nature, have yet to understand that they have a particular stake yet in ending the domination of women because a central reason for women's oppression is her association with the despised nature they are so concerned about. The hatred of women and the hatred of nature are intimately connected and mutually reinforcing. (p. 118 as cited in Patrick Murphy, 1995).

The king argues that the domination of men over women is the prototype for other forms of domination, but it is unlikely that they can be chronologically separated since they are founded on the same concept of reality. The domination of males over women and nature is the patriarchal habit of perception and identity of interest. In addition, the earth's womb was the matrix or mother, not only of metal but of all living things. According to Yocum (1979), the goal of spiritual devotees is to be completely controlled by the male deity. One can also point to evidence in those texts which indicate that this is how the god conducts himself vis-à-vis his divine spouse. Male domination and female subordination in a marital relationship are important... Men must renounce their masculinity if they would be devotees (pp. 5-19 as cited in Doniger Wendy, 1980).

The Objective of the Study

The article aims to analyze the connections between women and nature in Kalidas' Meghadoot by using an eco-feminist approach. The paper argues that Kalidasa depicts women and nature as equally subservient to men in the ancient patriarchal society, and his purpose in doing so is to foreground the need to equate women and nature and assert their equality with that of men.

Methodology

The qualitative approach has been used as a methodology using interpretative design while scrutinizing the text from eco-feminist perspective as novel is primary sourced of information. Method of analysis is based on eco-feminism that deals with human being relationship to non-human world. To make an interpretation more authentic and valid I draw ideas primarily from Warren (1987), Mies and Shiva (2014), and Plumwood (1997) ideas of eco-feminism. Besides others scholars' ideas have been used while interpreting the text.

Results and Discussion

His poem, *Meghdoot* depicts the story of longing and separation in which Yaksha, a servant of God of wealth has been exiled from home in the Himalayas due to his master's curse as he does careless in his duties. He is alienated from his newly wedded wife due to God's punishment. When he reaches Rama's mountain his wife is left at home in Alkapuri. He takes the help of cloud (chief servant of Indra) to deliver the message to his wife. In this journey, the cloud will across many places to give a message to Yaksha's wife. This is a description of mountains, rivers, flowers, plants, animals, birds, Gods, sun, moon, day and night. This poetry begins in an ancient time when Kalidas placed males at the top of the Verna system and females are placed in subservient positions that fulfilled the needs of males and provide pleasures for their happy life.

The distinctive trait of eco-feminism is that it advocates that environmental issues are feminist issues and feminist issues are environmental issues. The domination of women and the domination of nature are unjustified and have to end. Warren says that most natural entities cannot be oppressed like trees, rocks, mountains, and ecosystems. For her oppression takes place when groups are limited, inhibited, coerced, or prevented from mobilizing resources for self-determined goals by limiting their choices and option. The next oppression system advocated by Warren is oppression value dualism which is pair made up of elements that opposed and exclude each other in the western context reason and emotion are the elements of one such dualism. Female characters in the work of Kalidasa are found benevolent, merciful, meek, submissive, and patience. (Warren, 1987, pp. 99-155). The cause of the curse is to dominate females as Yashya gets cursed by Kuber for giving the flower to Yashya's newly married wife. When Master Kuber does not find a flower to offer to God Shiva he gets angry and curses Yakhya to be separated from his beloved, Bishalakshyi. The images of mountains like *Ramgiri*, *Kailasa*, *Chitrakut*, *Devgiri*, *Udhyagiri*, *Ashoka*, *Bakula*, *Krishna*, *Indra*, *Mathura*, and *Vindravana* are portrayed to give space to masculinity and the role of the female has been limited in the name of rivers and flowers like *Ganga*, *Yamuna*, *Sita*, *Godhavari*, *Saraswati*, *Gambhira*, *Sindu*, *Vetravati*, and *Chipra*. The notion of male

superiority has been given through the religious stress of Ram Sita and Shiva Parvati. The evidence of dualism is found in Meghadoot as the poet presents the same feeling in the given stanza. As he further writes:

Our home there, to the north
 Of the house of the Lord of Wealth
 Is recognizable from afar
 By its arched gate
 As beautiful as a rainbow
 Near to which
 Nurtured by my beloved like a son,
 Is a young with a *Mandara* tree,
 Bent over with clusters of blossoms
 In reach of one's hand (Kale 71)

This extract shows that Yashya directs the way of his home in Alkapuri but interestingly mentions the feeling of chauvinism as the son has been given more importance in the line “Nurtured by my beloved like a son, is a young with *Mandara* tree”. In *Alkapuri*, all family nurtures plants and flowers in the image of sons rather than girls. It shows the culture of Alkapuri that does have a patriarchal society where the son is valued more in this social fabric. The domination of females is deeply rooted even in God's society or in Alkapuri. This is not justified and not naturally and scientifically proven. In the same manner, the scholars, Mies and Shiva (2014) have stressed that “the rape of the Earth and the rape of women are intimately linked –both metaphorically in shaping the world view and materially in shaping women's everyday lives, patriarchy associates women to nature and believes that they could be oppressed exploited and dominated by man (pp.11-18)). They argue that “We are part of nature, not her master and owner... we need to recognize the rights of Mother Earth, therefore, the intrinsic values and living process” (p. 20). The same feeling is found in the poetry as *Gauri* and *Goppinis* are ravished instead of paying due respect to them. We find this in the following stanza:

If that cruelest of men
 Has abandoned me and gone
 Then let him go as he wishes
 My destiny is nothing but conventional duty
 But in this pretense of a dream
 He will come here to Vrindavana
 And ravish me
 What woman could bear that? (Kale 265)

The above stanza reveals that how women are overlooked and confined to a devalued sphere. Their destination is nowhere except the conventional duty to fulfill sexual vigor. After completion of male desire and household work they are abandoned which is the brutality and cruelty of males over females as Kalidasa intends to show the real plight of women in Hindu society. Women are strictly restricted everywhere and stopped from even breathing independently. They are used as a puppet in the hands of male dominating society. In religious places for Hindu people, *Radha* and *Goppinis* are ravished and their identity is not given even in primal society. Women are not presented as a set of image and self-confidence but they are still keeping up their dignity in the oppressive environment as the last lines end with a question mark "What women could bear that?". It proves that all female in *Vindravana* experiences subordination daily in the form of discrimination, disregard, and insult. Plumwood (1997) argues that male identity and virtue are in such a way constructed in opposition to the emotional that the authenticity of male incorporates "the desire to exclude and distance from feminine "(71) as there is a lack of male interest to give the space to female in the Family of God Krishna which is situated in a religious place in Gokula.

According to Yocum (1979), the goal of spiritual devotees is to be completely controlled by the male deity. One can also point to evidence in those texts which indicate that this is how the god conducts himself vis-à-vis his divine spouse. Male domination and female subordination in a marital relationship are important... Men must renounce their masculinity if they would be devotees (pp. 5-19 as cited in Doniger Wendy, 1980). In Hindu culture, *Bhakti* with its emphasis on subservience before god, the meek have a head start and women are as well-trained to be devout. Despite the myth's firm grounding in female-dominated hierogamy, the old Vedic pattern of male dominance surfaces in the central episode:

One day when Taravati was bathing in the river, a sage saw her and was overcome by lust. He said "you must be a goddess or demon who has become mortal to enjoy the pleasures of the flesh you must be Parvati or Sachi, the wife of Indra, she replied "I am a goddess, but merely a mortal queen Taravati wife of kind Candrashekhara "...but the sage cursed you will be raped by Siva his terrifying form and bear him a pair of monkey-faced sons: (p.108).

The information given by the above stanza, the male deity does not create space for the female deity as in the position of Sita in *Ramayana* and the subservient position is fixed on Parvati by Shiva in *Bhagavatgeeta*. In *Meghadoot*, the position of *The Messenger* is given here that gives the dualistic patriarchal structure which favors attributes associated with masculinity and dominates women and culture. The image of the cloud portrayed in the text is guided by a masculinist mindset and the function of women is to bear sons, to serve their husbands so that they can continue their generation or lineage. The reference to mountains signifies the throbbing youth and the role of women is like a flower to beautify them as *Kundan* blossoms, have the

beauty of face rendered yellowish-white with the pollen of *Lodhra* flowers and wear the fresh *Karabaka* flowers in the braids the lovely *Sirish* flowers on their ears and the Nipa flowers that spring things into existence at their approach. (Kale 111). We can look at it in the given stanza:

When he saw Ram Chandra
 Sorry state in separation
 Hanuman crossed even the ocean, o wind
 You or his father
 And nothing seen on the way
 For you traveling on my behalf
 It is no distance from mount Malaya
 To the land of Gauda (kale 105)

Warren claims women in an androcentric society are excluded from or have less access than men to political and economic institutional power and privilege. The role of Hanuman in Ramayana and the role of Yakshya in *Meghadoot* are the same. The suffering of Sita and Yakhya's wife, Bishlakshyini is the same and their plight is vulnerable in religious texts that evidence that the position of women was low to men in society. Bishalakshyini's position is not shown as power as the position of Yakshya and Messenger in Meghadoot. Sita in Lanka misses Rama more than he misses her or rather she can do nothing but miss him in the whole Ramayana in which the female pains as called *Viraha* is portrayed because *Sita* could not tolerate abduction.

Conclusion and Implication

The major concern of this study was to scrutinize Kalidasa's *Meghadoot* from the eco-feminist perspective as it deals with the relationship between women and nature on one hand, and men on the other, particularly to examine the domination of women and exploitation of nature on a patriarchal social order. The major finding of this analysis reveals that both nature and women are dominated and stereotyped by the standard of a typical patriarchal society. The domination of nature and women occurs to the same degree in a patriarchal society where the hierarchies have become chronic. Kalidas has been able to present a realistic picture of women and nature in the ancient social fabric. The role of women has been minimized and subjugated by males whereas nature has been understood as an entity for man to use and explore at his will. The passive role ascribed to them projects them as docile playthings in the hands of a male. Through this literary work, the poet, Kalidasa also intends to show the females as supposedly better caregivers, and more capable biologically than men. But the constructed superiority of the male-dominated society simply overlooks their role and confines them to a devalued sphere. Kalidasa, in the text, has been able to present a lucid picture of women and nature, implicitly instructing the readers to give equal respect and importance to women and nature to preserve the pristineness and equilibrium of creation.

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