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## **DEGRADATION OF WOMEN AND ROLE OF NATURE IN MAHABHARATA**

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Environmental degradation is a crisis of the present age. Juxtaposed with this ecological crisis is the subjugation of women in both developing and developed nations of the world. This maltreatment of nature and women is at the centre of the development projects which does not give priority to sustainability. Ancient Indian texts like the Mahabharata has projected the ecological crisis that comes with anthropogenic activities. Mahabharata is not simply a depiction of feuds and battles, it is also a philosophical account of all that concerns human existence. In my research I shall try to explore the ecofeminist perspectives of the Mahabharata which are often glossed over by the more masculine projects of war and occupation. Ecofeminism as an intellectual practice may be of Western origin but ancient Indian texts are replete with environmental concerns and its impact on women. Studying the retellings of the Mahabharata from the ecofeminist perspective as the ecofeminist discourse helps us to evaluate the present day environmental crisis and the subjugation of women.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Being a literary study, this will focus mainly on analytical method exploring primary and secondary texts. Textual analysis would be the main method used. The Mahabharata and a few selected retellings would be my primary texts and the secondary texts would be the various theoretical works on feminism and ecofeminism, analytical texts on the Indian epics would be my secondary texts. The method of the study involves the analysis of the development of the theory of ecofeminism and the primary texts would be studied in the light of this theoretical understanding.

Carolyn Merchant (1982) considers that the emergence of scientific revolution during the sixteenth and seventeenth century sanctioned the domination of both women and nature. Carolyn Merchant stated that in ancient time the nature that is, the earth was viewed as a living being and was identified with a 'nurturing mother'. In this organic view, the image of the earth as a 'nurturing mother' restricts the destructive actions of human beings towards nature and allows human beings to respect earth. The rise and the development of mechanism during the sixteenth and seventeenth century gave men power to control and dominate both women and nature. In this mechanical view, the female image of nature was viewed as a resource to be subjugated and controlled. The rise and the development of mechanism sanctioned the exploitation of both women and nature.

Karen J. Warren (1993a) mentioned that there are eight kinds of connection that exists between women and nature. Karen J. Warren stated that these connections provide an examination of the kinds of the domination of both women and nature. These connections between women and nature are historical, conceptual, empirical, symbolical, etymological, political, ethical and lastly, theoretical. Some ecofeminists focus on the historical connections which began with the Indo-European invasion, according to some others, in the rationalist tradition and in the classical Greek philosophy, while some trace it during the sixteenth and seventeenth century scientific revolution. Some ecofeminists claim that the domination of both women and nature is rooted in conceptual connections. According to Karen J. Warren (1994), a '*conceptual framework*' is '*oppressive*' when it maintains relations of subordination and dominance. Karen J. Warren mentioned that a '*patriarchal conceptual framework*' is '*oppressive*' when it maintains and justifies male subordination of female.

Vandana Shiva (1988) upholds that modern science and development as Western 'patriarchal projects' is responsible for the subjugation of women and the destruction of nature. During the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe, the scientific revolution and the industrial revolution occurred. Shiva maintains that the emergence of modern science, technology and economic development rooted in patriarchy converted nature from '*Prakriti*', the 'living force' into a machine and as a resource for economic exploitation which sanctioned the denigration of nature and are responsible for current ecological crisis. According to Shiva, 'western patriarchy' is the source of the domination of both women and nature. Women's dependency on nature for their livelihood linked them with nature. So, the destruction of nature is a threat to their survival. Val

Plumwood (1993) maintains that the Western ‘rationalist tradition’ is the source of the domination of both women and nature. The Western ‘rationalism’ acknowledges the ‘dualisms’ which is the cause of the domination of both women and nature.

“Men never think of life. They only want to conquer nature and the enemy,” said a Russian woman after the Chernobyl catastrophe. There has been numerous instances where women led movements against war and occupation, though all of them may not be committed feminists, but could full well draw the connection between war for land, war for property, war for resources, development of war technology and the perpetual oppression of women. Often such movements have highlighted the fact that the present consumerist lifestyle was also a part of the systematic war on nature and women. Miers and Shiva in the Introduction to *ecofeminism* states, “The new developments in biotechnology, genetic engineering and reproductive technology have made women acutely conscious of the gender bias of science and technology and that science’s whole paradigm is characteristically patriarchal, anti-nature and colonial aims to dispossess women of their generative capacity as it does the productive capacities of nature.”

Women in various movements have rediscovered the spirit that joins everything, we may call it the essential spirit. We may call it inter-connectedness. This rediscovery consists of something like the sacredness of all life forms where the Earth is an organic whole in need of preservation and healing. It is a symbiotic earth that would place all life at the centre and displace the male-centric view based on dominance and occupation.

Ecofeminism examines the connection between the oppression of women and that of nature. As Karla Armbruster says, “central to the ecofeminist agenda is the goal of individual, social and ideological change- specifically, change that will improve the cultural standing of women and nature.” Ecofeminists insist that nature is an active subject rather than a passive object which is at the receiving end of patriarchal projects. Ecofeminists find a number of similarities between women and nature. This connection is not because women are closer to nature- which is a myth, but it is because of the similar functions of women and nature.

The ancient Indian texts are replete with illustrations of close bonding between human, animals and nature. As evident in the cultural and religious texts, ecological sustainability has been deeply embedded in its fabric. Ecofeminism draws on the stand that Western concept of development

needs rectification as this development has sustained on patriarchy and the dominance over nature by man. Ancient Hindu scriptures and texts have shown the early picture of what happens in the man versus nature struggle where there can never be any winner. Hindu texts have considered the Earth as an organic being. The concept of Mother Earth or Goddess Earth is sufficient for us to understand the status to which nature has been elevated in Indian philosophy and culture.

As the world witnesses environmental degradation and extinction of a large number of once thriving species and the price that humans and all other living beings are paying for it, it becomes imperative that we delve deep within our ancient texts. The sacredness attributed to nature is central to religious texts like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Even the Vedas and Puranas are replete with concepts that today may be related to environmental consciousness.

The Mahabharata shows deep environmental concerns and a strong relationship between the domination of nature and domination of women by men. The burning of the Khandava can be considered to be a deep ecological crisis which can be juxtaposed with the disrobing of Draupadi along with other incidences where we find similarities between the treatment attributed to women and nature. The retellings of the Mahabharata is another way to bring a renewed emphasis of ecological sustainability as portrayed in ancient Indian texts. The study of retellings bring a new perspective to the relation between women and nature where women are more at 'home' amidst nature as compared to their male counterparts who only viewed nature as 'wilderness' that needed taming.

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