

Shedding the Metaphors: An Ecofeminist Exploration of Nandini Sahu's Short Stories

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Abstract

The paper peeps into the ecofeministic elements present in Nandini Sahu's collection of short stories *Shedding the Metaphors*. Through the textual analysis of these short stories under the lens of ecofeminism, this paper attempts to reveal how Sahu's stories serve as a critique of societal norms and a plea for sustainable practices that honor both woman and the environment. It also unfolds the layers of relationship between women and nature. The paper employs the ecofeminist theory to accentuate the significance of Sahu's work in contemporary discussions of gender and ecology. It is also an attempt to re-read stories of this collection in the light of 'Ecofeminism' which emphasizes the interconnectedness of nature and women. Also, the stories show the way the dynamics of this relationship have evolved over time. Women are given a vital role and value in environmental governance, however; degradation of women is repeated and duplicated in environmental governance too. Ecological Feminism or Ecofeminism is an interdisciplinary movement that brings into light the synthesis of radical movement in ecology and feminism. It also questions the pre fixed gender roles and rejects the patriarchal paradigms and asserts that the domination of women by men is intimately linked to the destruction of the environment.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, patriarchy, incest, exploitation, nature and woman

Nandini Sahu's *Shedding the Metaphors* (2023), is conglomeration of twelve short stories narrating the themes of love, incest, masculinity, gender roles and various taboos prevailing in the society. The characters in these stories are not flat but round. They are complex as they emit out their inner lives, dreams and desires. The characters are not aligned with the norms of society hence making a way against the set rules of this political and patriarchal world. So, there is a comparison and intersection between the personal and the political life of characters. The characters are not ideal rather they are real, humane, flawed and relateable. In most of the stories, the protagonists are female characters and their desires, needs and rebel against suppression is vividly shown in these short stories. In "The Wild Stream", a short story from Sahu's *Shedding the Metaphors*, she writes, "Nature acts as a literary device that reminds the readers of the global ecological crisis and their responsibility towards saving the planet. It is, therefore, apt to read Sahu's short stories for their ecological concerns." (Sahu 235).

The term Ecofeminism was coined by Francoise d'Eubonne, a French feminist in her 1974 book "Le Feminisme Ou la Mort" (Feminism or Death). She argues that strengthening and empowering women is a prerequisite to ecological survival and upgradation. She further explains how patriarchal domination has ill effects on both the women and the environment. This theory has its roots in feminism, ecology and justice movements. In early 1960s, various sects emerged out to highlight the concept of environmental degradation and female vulnerability due to this degradation. These protestants started comparing the poor status of women and degradation of nature as they are closely associated, especially their involvement in activities like gardening, cooking, farming, child bearing and nurturing. In wider sense, ecofeminism involves the interconnectedness of all beings and nature. Ecofeminists use gender to comprehend the multiple relationships between humans and the natural world. Many theorists like Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies etc. think that degradation of women and nature is an outcome of Industrialism and capitalism.

Efforts towards achieving women empowerment and environmental conservation go hand-in-hand and one should

not come at the expense of the other. Ecofeminism developed as a heterogeneous movement spearheaded by women with the participation of men to address issues of gender and preservation of human and non human habitats.(Murphy 1.) Ecofeminist critics and theorists began analyzing the literary texts under the ecofeminist lens to critique the hierarchal structures and dominations of one sect of society over another. This also helped draw attention to the global consequences of the patriarchal mindset and to challenge the imperialist approach of human beings. This paper will unfold the concealed layers of ecofeminism in select short stories from Sahu's *Shedding the Metaphors*. Through the textual anylysis of " A very Different Story", Shadow of a Shadow", "That Elusive Orgasm", this analysis will bring on to the surface the underlying oppression of women and the destruction of the environment and their connection to each other.

Sometimes the characters vividly voice out the concerns of ecofeminism, however; sometimes ecological elements are revealed through the setting of plot and characterization. An ecofeminist reading of these texts will try to deconstruct the binaries and opposites and fostering universal emoathy for all beings, human or non human.

Karen J. Warren, an ecofeminits is of the view that opression of women and degradation of nature are connected due to conceptual framework which is a set of values of beliefs that reflects how one views oneself and the others. This conceptual framework is the result of domination at various levels such as caste, race, age, colour, nationality and religious background. This type of framework that leads to degradation of women is oppressive conceptual framework that eventually paves the way for value dualisms that makes disjunctive pairs in which the pairs are seen as oppositional and exclusive. Karen Warren explains how value dualisms conceptually organize the world in binaries where each side is seen as "exclusive" and "oppositional" while attributing higher value to one side (Warren 6). Val Plumwood critiques the "master model" of the western culture that has long benefited from its superiority over nature. This master identity, as she argues, creates a "dualized structure of otherness and negation"(Plumwood 42).

Sahu's "A very Different Story" has the elements of this value dualism where the protagonist Madhavi has always been unfortunate in her wedding life and was always seen as the other and inferior by her husband.

All these years, she had been a willing prisoner in a trap, without a word of complaint, without anything, that she can call her 'personal need' or 'demand'. Now for the time, ever, she wanted to breathe some fresh air. Was it too much? Was she asking for something unpardonable? Impossible? (Sahu 17) The short story " A very Different Story" from *Shedding the Metaphors* is about a female writer named Madhavi who has been unfortunate in her wedding life because the marriage she has been in lacks emapthy, love, charm, and support she always longs for. After few years of lonliness, she meets a fellow writer at a workshop and soon they both get into a relationship which is something she has always wanted. Soon, she begins sharing her writings with him, sending messages and letters and listening to his worries. As clearly shown, there is no sense of dualism in their relationship. There is no concept of oneslef and one's world. All these traits and elements are found in her wedding life and as a modern ecofeminits, she dissolves her wedding with her first and second husband because both these men fail to uplift her and provider her the favourable environment she deserves. So, to protect her peace, she leaves the life where domestic violence and domination have been a symbol of patriarchy. Sahu's protagonist carries the true essence of womanhood as she possess the courage not to settle for something which is purely inhumane. She stands strong as amidst her pregnancy, she decides to follow her passion and earns herself a fellowship and a Ph.D. degree. Similar was the case with her second husband, who instead of empathising with her, abuses her emotionally and sexually. Therefore, Madahavi emerges as a strong and independent woman who does not compromise her peace and self respect to bear odds of life. Also, she does not give up on her responsibilities and fulfills them with all her dedication. She nurtures and takes care of her son being a single mother without complaints. So, she has traits of not being vulnerable , that's how Sahu's female protagonists are being developed and represented- self sufficient, courageous, optimistic and affectionate. Her definition of 'gentleman' is so authentic and real that she hardly keeps any man in that sphere but fortunately the narrator is one of that kind. She envisions her dreams getting fulfilled with this man. Slowly , she begins admiring him that eventually turns into love and respect. This man is different , devoid of patriarchal ideology while the other men in Madhavi's life has been the puppets of this social construction of gender. So, the narrator has actually dissolved the concept of oppositional dualism and hence there is no 'one and the other' in their relationship. We had slowly stopped, being 'she' and 'me', we had become 'us'. Every one hour, or even less than that, we exchanged messages throughout

life after that. For example, I always knew what she was doing at any given moment, 2000 kilometers away from me. Her telephone was a stand-in proxy for myself, as though my absence never mattered. What was she wearing on any particular day, what had she cooked or which nights she did Reiki, I always knew. I read every poem and story she wrote after that, I read and commented about every interview and lecture she delivered last twenty five years. I was on the phone all the while during her son's twelfth board results, college admission, house warming, her every illness and her son's wedding. I took personal care of every small detail of her life, but from 2000 kilometers away. (Sahu 28).

'Shadow of a Shadow' another short story from "*Shedding the Metaphors*" exhibits the elements of queer theory, hence, naturalizing the unnatural. It is the story of two girls Ragini and Suni, who apparently are roommates but seems to be very close like soulmates. To begin with, Ragini was inspired by the poetry of Sappho, the queer Greek poet, whose sexual desire for her female friends made her "a victim of the state mandated management of compulsory heterosexuality" (Sahu 75) Ragini has always been bothered about the so called 'natural and conventional' ways of society as she has observed her sister Shalini's husband's behaviour towards her wife. Ragini was amazed. A woman has to suffer so much of suppression, mutilation. Censorship and disparagement, only because whatever she thought or freely wrote was thought 'unnatural' by a group of people? But in the norms of Indian Civil Conduct it is quite 'natural' when a woman's soft emotions are crushed on the nuptial bed and she has to undergo marital rape throughout her life! Still she can be called a respectable woman, feeding her limbs to a man whom she might not love, and drying his underwear proudly, lifelong, like the national flag (Sahu 75).

The story took a turn and both Ragini and Suni became a rebel of the naturalness of the patriarchal world. They also question the hypocrisy of the patriarchal world where pre-marital rape is considered normal. Both Ragini and Suni were shocked to the core and were extremely terrified by the barbarian way of the world. They tried to draw a contrast by finding the real naturalness of 'pure love, true love' in each other when they were in an intimate situation. Both of them felt at the moment...that was so natural! Like leaves coming to tree, like flowers blooming in spring or migrating birds reaching their destination every winter, without fail (Sahu 91). Ragini and Suni have their own ways to embrace themselves and over patriarchy. Ragini qualified a prestigious exam to escape the life her sister Shalini had been living; however, Suni became one with the nature by embracing the naturalness of life. "Come and grow in my restive soul, drown me in your blue eyes, mix my breath with your stormy breath" (Sahu 97). The only way she found to escape male dominant world was her attempt to end her life. It is ironical how some beings and ways are considered unnatural by the custodians of the society while disrespecting, degrading and exploiting the nature itself. Gaard shows how this contradiction shows that sexuality itself is a constructed notion. Queer sexualities are charged with the transgression of natural order, while nature is also constructed as a force to be dominated for the culture to prevail. It shows how nature actually stands for the dominant paradigm of heterosexuality, indicating that the unnaturalness of Queer sexualities is a construct (Gaard 27-28). When Ragini and Suni's relationship became public, it was immediately shunned by the society. Their last moments of intimacy with each other became "the last time when they lived" (Sahu 99). Unless we consider the diversity of this world, there can be no liveliness in nature: "There was no wetness in the soil, no shower of light in the mornings. Only there was a rotten, musty, stinking wretched feeling as if they were in a bottomless pit" (Sahu 99). Sahu stories demonstrates a parallel oppression of nature, woman and queer community, nevertheless, the protagonists of her story are unstoppable and bound to stand up for themselves, thus, fighting against all odds of life and society. Ragini's and Suni's desire for each other does not only indicate the nature of their sexualities, but also throw light on the comfort of each other when they have to get along. Their love united them with nature. The exhibition of their needs is a symbol of pure and natural form of emotions prevailing in beings. This can be clearly seen when Suni says, "Oh Ragini! This is love! This is heaven my dear! This is pure love, true love, which you have given me, and I have given you. I love you so much my dear! I would not regret if I die after getting such pure love in my life." (Sahu 91).

Sahu's stories reveal how difficult it is to be resistant when one is abused within the confines of home. Sahu's 'That Elusive Orgasm' reveals the incestuous fraught of a father and his daughter. It shows that patriarchy not only dominates but also exploits women at various levels in myriad ways. It also has the elements of faith that leads to destruction and devastation of a girl's mental and physical health. One can be petrified by the very thought of not being safe at the hands of his own guardians. The story of this girl Jhumpa showcases the ill practices of

incest that have been prevailing since ages, many a times, for the sake of false devotion of imaginary deities. This demonstrates patriarchy being harmful for both nature and woman. Collective exploitation of both can be seen since the time immemorial as woman has been a victim of social practices due to various offerings to nature, gods and goddesses. Nature cannot speak for itself, and so is the woman in this socially constructed sphere of patriarchy. It also shows how patriarchy shape the lives and corrupt the mind of young boys and girls on the very pretext of so called 'faith'. This exemplifies that patriarchy has no respect for nature and woman as many babas in India try to get their hands on young girls and women and be fool them at the cost of devotion and offering. This tradition has been shown by Sahu in this story where the protagonist Jhumpa was exploited sexually by her father. Jhumpa was sixteen when her father started performing puja for a deity. Her half-paralyzed mother was equally responsible for Jhumpa's sufferings. When did Mai's physical paralysis become a metaphorical paralysis for Jhumpa's life, even she couldn't realize. Everything happened so fast, so erratic. (Sahu 102). Jhumpa was a passionate and intelligent girl who was preparing for NEET. One day, she suddenly was stopped from going to school, meeting people and talking to her maid even. As a child, she, definitely, was curious, anxious and frustrated to know about this irrational and illogical decision. She was told that on the behest of the goddess, she would be offered as prasadam to the goddess. My parents were the ardent devotees of some ferocious looking Goddess, whose temple was in the basement of our house. Babai performed pujas there for hours everyday. They did *kumari puja* and *kumari sadhna*. Babai and Mai told me, I was the offering/*prasada* of the goddess and I was a sacred girl (Sahu 105). Jhumpa's mother never questioned her husband and she convinced Jhumpa for the same. Ultimately, Jhumpa started following her father blindly. Her father ruined her life when one night after Mai had slept, he took her for a sacred bath. Once he began cleansing her body, he forced himself on her, eventually, rushing into her while she was bleeding heavily. Jhumpa felt uncomfortable but her father 'Babai' put her to sleep by taking her in his arms. I did as Babai instructed, guided. Mai was asleep in her room. Babai bathed me, touched my breasts and genitals tenderly, and then he vigorously rushed into me when I bled so much (Sahu 106). Eventually Jhumpa also started seeking pleasure in it and could not sleep without performing this ritual. The ill effect of this incest was that the girl never really had an orgasm with her husband. This shows how that exploitation has taken away all her feelings and emotions. Even she was unable to get physically involved with her husband. An elusive orgasm, that was indefinable, subtle, intangible, indescribable, fulfilling, soul-searching. She wanted to experience that every single time she had those rare intimacies with her husband, But she was far from getting that always. Because two creepy hands, a stringent body and some distant fishy odors crawled into her cataleptic and subconscious mind during those moments (Sahu 101). Though she loved and admired her husband Abraham, she was never chaste and lively during their intimacy. Abraham waited patiently for years but all in vain as she was never with her mentally and he was unaware of her past life. One day, she decided to call off her marriage when she came back to India from U.S. She had been an addict to those two hands and because of that she was unable to settle down in her marriage. To fulfill the guilt-filled pleasure, she loved to touch and explore her own body. Even after so many attempts by the narrator, Jhumpa's friend, to save her from the barbarianism, she failed when Jhumpa at last was convinced by her Babai and surrendered herself to him completely. When Babai compelled Jhumpa to open the door, she unwillingly got drawn towards her voice as if that was all she ever wanted. Jhumpa looked Pale. Dazed. Benumbed. Emotionless. Motionless. Weary. Before going towards the door, she disconnected our call and switched off her phone. That night Jhumpa slept peacefully. We knew it (Sahu 113).

Sahu's stories share a deep insight into the societal issues and taboos. Sahu is an ecofeminist in true sense as her writings always reveal the intertwined relationship of woman and nature. Also, as a true ecofeminist, she does not only talk about the binaries but also questions the essentialist ideology of this patriarchal world. Her protagonists are never complaining, meek or docile rather they are sharp, strong, independent and generous. They love, nurture and empower the people around them. Thus, these female protagonists act as a reflection of nature who at some instances rebel and resist and sometimes metaphorically bring on to the surface the juxtaposition of the binaries and highlights the reality of the oppressed encouraging the readers to empathize with them. Theorists like Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies are of the ideology that capitalist patriarchy has worsened the traditional patriarchy. Development was thus reduced to a continuation of the process of colonisation; it became an extension of the project of wealth creation in modern western patriarchy's economic vision, which was based on the exploitation or exclusion of women (of the west or non west), on the exploitation and degradation of nature, and on the exploitation and erosion of other cultures (Shiva 1). Just like Shiva's word, Sahu also attempts to encourage her

readers to think ecologically so that the dignity and position of nature and woman can be protected.

Sahu's stories, thus, reinforce the idea of abolishing the very binaries of this planet where humans are thought to be superior than any other being on this planet. This has a strong opposition to the notion of anthropocentrism. Also, her stories warn the patriarchy not to degrade the status of a woman in the society. This shows that Sahu's stories explicitly reveal another system of domination- androcentricism. Degradation of status here means when during the industrial era, the right to sow seeds was taken away from women and technology was being used, hence, confining women to house hold chores only. 'Development' could not but entail destruction for women, nature, and subjugated cultures, which is why, throughout the third world, women, peasants and tribals are struggling for liberation from development just as they earlier struggled for liberation from colonisation(Shiva 2). Readers are prompted to stop this brutality by Sahu's stories, which encourage people to move toward a sustainable, peaceful economy that values women and the environment. It is crucial that we acknowledge the existence of life on earth in order to maintain the sanctity of all living things and adopt ecological ethics.

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