



Activism to Passivism: Reading Cita's Evolution as an Ecofeminist in Daya Dissanayake's *Thirst*

Nobida Anjum

PhD Research Scholar, Department of English, University of Gour Banga, Malda, West
Bengal, India

Email: nobidaanjum@gmail.com

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Abstract

The ecofeminist movement has for decades been highlighting how gender inequality aggravates environmental crisis. Radical ecofeminists assert that patriarchy strategically equates nature with woman in order to subjugate both as part of the power game. Ecofeminism emerged from the West and became popular the world over. From the global south, the Buddhist intervention, in this respect, with its twin aims of *avirodha* (harmony), and *prajava* (community), may provide a different perspective on climate governance by challenging the dominant discourse of Western dogmatism.

I propose to focus on the noted Sri Lankan novelist Daya Dissanayake and his 2004 novel *Thirst*. In the novel, the unnamed king's lust for power and fame instigates him to rule despotically brooking no resistance from his subjects. So, when the Buddhist monk Tisagutha Thera opposes the dam building project, the king doesn't hesitate to kill the former. However, Cita, the monk's sister, appears as an unexpected champion of the people and leads the mass agitation pitting her patience and truth against the king's power and terror.

In the proposed study, I shall read the novel *Thirst* from a Buddhist ecofeminist perspective, charting Cita's growth as a Buddhist ecofeminist who graduates from fearless eco-activism for *mahajana subasāadhanaya* (mass welfare) to a selfless passivism of *nekkamma* (renunciation). Attempts will be made to highlight the Buddhist leanings of Cita's ecofeminism that evolves through the struggle for mother nature to a withdrawal into the lap of nature.

Keywords: Activism, Passivism, Ecofeminist, Global South, *Avirodha*, *Prajava*, *Mahajana Subasāadhanaya*, *Nekkamma*.

The ecofeminist movement has for decades been highlighting how gender inequality aggravates environmental crisis. Radical ecofeminists assert that patriarchy

strategically equates nature with woman in order to subjugate both as part of the power game. They, further, add that women's oppression under patriarchy is closely connected to the oppression and domination of nature under capitalist, colonial, and modernist forces like Development and Science. They argue that the ecofeminists think that the domination of women and the degradation of the environment are the consequences of patriarchy and capitalism. Capitalism not only nourishes patriarchy and undermines the goals of feminism but also undermines the environment to misuse it as a means of capitalisation. To build an empire of capitalist society, nature has been mercilessly misused: the trees are chopped, the wilds are killed, rivers are dried up, and mountains are cut down. Money and power are two essential elements for spreading capitalism throughout the world. Success of the capitalist system depends on its propensity to reorganize the economy on an international level to secure its own [profit](#) and has always had a direct impact on gender relations. On the one hand, the capitalist system thrives on an old practice of oppression i.e., patriarchy, on the other, it compounds many of its defining characteristics. The oppression of women is a tool which enables capitalists to rearrange the entire workforce according to their own benefit. Capitalists always see women as insufficient and their labour is not treated with much respect; they think women will be easily manageable to provide labour at the low labour costs. In the private sectors, in many multinational companies, in the film industries women are often paid less labor charges than men for equivalent work. Eighty percent of domestic tasks are carried out within the family by women, the greatest proportion of which remains unpaid. For ages, it had been taken for granted as if women were born to perform these tasks. Men and even women accept and develop the idea that women are naturally predisposed to accomplishing domestic chores. From the 90's it came to the scrutiny of the feminist thinkers and they demanded that domestic chores and

rearing babies should be valued. Somehow the capitalist system has never envisaged transforming domestic tasks into professional employment remunerated with a salary and/or by marketable products.

Hence, the capitalist doctrine fails to find out the root causes of suffering that the women and the environment encounter, rather it directly contributes to the oppression and exploitation of the both. Here in lies the relevance of the rise of the ecofeminist movement which tries to analyse the root causes of suffering of women and nature bringing them in a line. Eco-feminism is actually a branch of feminist movement that emerged from the West as a critical subfield within feminist theory and environmental theory. The French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne coined the term 'ecofeminism' in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974). In the 1980s through the publication of various key texts such as Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature* and Susan Griffin's *Woman and Nature* in the United States, and Vandana Shiva's *Staying Alive in India* the concept of ecofeminism rose to prominence. Shiva and Merchant propelled the field forward in the global sphere. Their critical contributions to highlighting the deleterious impacts of patriarchal, colonial, and modernist forces, such as development and science, on both women and nature drew the scholars' attention. A lot of research work had been made on ecofeminism. Within these formulations, both Development and Science are revealed to be dominant social orders which ties to patriarchy and colonialism. Working together, they facilitate the ongoing extraction of knowledge and resources from the Global South to the North, while imposing "masculine" scientific knowledge that displace indigenous, and women's ecological and scientific knowledge in the South. To Shiva, it is necessary to return to the feminine – in terms of practices and knowledges, to overcome the conjoined domination of the man over nature and the woman. From a constructivist perspective of gender subjectivity, we can

consider that the women's interests in caring for nature is not an automatic mechanism related to gender. As the women hold less monetary wealth, they have to rely on the natural environment or resources more. Gradually an indigenous knowledge developed in them. Moreover, in general, women have not historically much accessed to weapons and have traditionally been responsible for taking care and expressing affection to the most vulnerable; children, old parents, patients and so on. They are naturally more compassionate towards trees, domestic animals and also towards wilds. However, being ecofeminist does not simply mean that women are intrinsically more linked to nature and life than men. Though statistically, at an international level, it is true that women are the majority in environmental activism. But it is not the ultimate one, there are examples of men who devote themselves to defending the environment and/or animals and there are the women who have no eco-consciousness. In the novel *Tisaguta Thera*, a Buddhist monk, is a male, the lover of nature who sacrifices his life silently to protect the people and the environment.

In the proposed study I want to focus on the noted Sri Lankan novelist Daya Dissanayake and his 2004 novel *Thirst*. In the novel, the unnamed king's lust for power and fame instigates him to rule despotically brooking no resistance from his subjects. Here the king could have lived anywhere, and we have such despotic leaders in 'democratic' countries even today. Such a person becomes blind to see the consequences of whatever he does. The king is always obsessed with the lust for power and fame. The people's lives are of no value to the King; even the monk's life is not spared. To fulfill his thirst for power he did all the unscrupulous works like destroying flora and fauna, torturing the wilds, killing hundreds of men and women of his country. The king wanted his coronation festival to be observed as a memorable occasion and he did not worry

about what expenses people had to pay. One hundred and twenty elephants draped in glistening armor and decorations led the parade, the entire cavalry of the country was used, a huge number of trees were cut, people were mercilessly killed. The women could not help seeing the bodies of their sons and husbands and brothers who were injured in the battlefield. The young mothers tried to keep their little children away so that they couldn't see the gruesome scene of tortured bodies of their fathers'. Some of the women would be carrying more than the memories of their dead dear ones: "These were the young and better-looking women who had been ravished by the king's men. The scars the soldiers had inflicted would be with the women, both physical and mental, for the rest of their lives." (Dissanayake, 12 and 13) The king confirmed his victory at the cost of suffering that the women and the mother earth had to pay.

But the joy of conquest had lasted for a short while and soon his endless lust for power made him restless again. Again, he wanted to build a gorgeous palace, destroying a beautiful garden which had been constructed by the king's grandfather who spent nearly 20 years building it. His vanity made him believe that he could design a more beautiful landscape and building than what nature could do. The king's decision to construct a palace at the cost of demolishing the garden was atrocious and foolish. Soldiers were appointed to destroy the royal garden for making the new luxurious palace. When the architect was hesitant about the beautiful trees and birds and animals, the king advised "let the creatures find a new home." As there were plenty of trees in the garden, the king ordered them to chop the trees and use them for construction. The king was unhappy with the plan of the architect. Every time the king changed the drawing which made it more elaborate and more expensive. The architect informed the king that the execution of this plan would cover eighteen months at least, but the king wanted his palace to be constructed

within three months without compromising with the quality which would cost three times more and would require more people.

After the completion of these works when the ministers thought that they could at least relax and attend to the day-to-day matters of the kingdom, which had been neglected for so many years, the king became restless for a new project. Now, he wants his name to be carved in gold, in the history of his country. So, he is desirous to build the largest tank in the country. But the construction of the new dam across the river will not only submerge a vast area of the natural forest that covers home to many creatures, but also farmland that people had been cultivating for generations. It would also deprive the people of the city of their water, for their daily needs. The temples and villages would go under water, men's lives and livelihoods would be destroyed. The Buddhist monk Tisagutha Thera opposes the dam building project, so the monk sat for meditation under a tree. None could break up his meditation. The king doesn't hesitate to kill even the monk. The work progressed leaving the rocks falling on the monk, so he was buried alive.

According to the novelist Daya Dissanayake there have always been a few people like the monk Tisagutha Thera who could empathise not only with the village folk, but even with the flora, and fauna. He is a true hero who tries to protect the world, without fighting, but by peaceful means, even to the extent of sacrificing his own life. The people who were gathered around saw the king's brutality. Their silence revealed their helplessness. Only their faces expressed the pain, the frustration and the sadness that were going through their minds. No one tried to hide the tears falling down their faces. Some of them wept loudly. There was one woman, who stood a little apart. Her face didn't show any emotions. The only indication of the turmoil going through her was her clenched fists. She was Cita, the younger sister of the old Thera who had just been so brutally murdered.

She had known him only as a Buddhist monk, and never as an elder brother, because he had already been ordained before she was born. After her father and mother had passed away, she had looked up to the monk, as a father. However, Cita the monk's sister, appears as an unexpected champion of the people and leads the mass agitation pitting her patience and truth against the king's power and terror. Cita's maternal protective instinct transformed her from a lay woman to a saviour of the environment. She evolves as a fearless eco-activist. Cita thought that the monk's sacrifice should not be in vain, his struggle should be continued, and the valley had to be saved. She was prepared to sacrifice her life, but she had learnt a lesson that day, that to this king and all his men, the lives of the countrymen were of no value; not even that of a Buddhist monk. So, she should not throw her life away. She had to be very careful; she had to think; she had to plan to survive long enough to see the struggle through.

Since this research article shows Cita's growth as a Buddhist ecofeminist who graduates from fearless eco-activism for *mahajana subasāḍhanaya* (mass welfare) to a selfless passivism of *nekkhamma* (renunciation), in this discussion, I shall try to highlight the Buddhist leanings of Cita's ecofeminism that evolves through the struggle for mother nature to a withdrawal into the lap of nature. Though it has been argued that Buddhism serves primarily a soteriological or salvational purpose, the Buddhists influenced by an ecological perspective point to the *bodhisattva* ideal. This *bodhisattva* ideal teaches that the highest goals of Buddhism are not personal salvation but it motivates us to embody compassionate awareness and dedicate ourselves to the welfare of all beings. As all the phenomena are the partakers of the same root, they are not separated from each other. Within the Buddhist context, the concept of 'non-self' refers to the fact that the 'self' or the 'I' is absent from the inherent existence of a being. For example, Buddhism teaches that the human

body comprises the five elements of water, wind (i.e., air), earth (i.e., food), sun (i.e., heat/energy), and space (i.e., in the bodily cavities and between molecules, etc.). This means that the body may exist in the relative sense, but it never can exist in the absolute sense because the body cannot be isolated from all of its contributing factors. Just as a wave does not exist being separated from the ocean, the body does not exist being separated from all other phenomena. According to Buddhist teachings, when we look at the body, we should also be able to see the trees, plants, animals, clouds, rivers, oceans, planets, and so forth within us. Thus, the body and indeed the entire array of animate and inanimate phenomena that we know of, cannot be found to exist intrinsically or independently. Buddhist teachings go on to assert that the basic Buddhist moral values include environmental perception in its doctrinal domain. Solving conflicts and problems associated with the natural environment requires sacrificing. A true Buddhist should sacrifice herself/ himself for the sake of *mahajana subasāadhanaya*. Cita sacrifices her personal comfort for the sake of community and environment. Cita organized people of village and city for a movement and made them conscious of danger that they were going to face. The protest led by Cita gathered strength and momentum, after the cruel and inhuman murder of the monk. The awareness among the village folk, about the possible harm of disturbing the ecosystem was very high. They knew how delicately their ecosystem was balanced. The villagers knew that any disturbance or disruption of the delicate balance could cause irreparable harm. Cita had listened to discussions on the environmental impact of the dam among the monk's that she wanted to spread among the village people in simple language. Cita thought it was her duty to alert all and make them aware of the impending threat. Meanwhile, the dam was completed as per the king's order. But the king became angry when he visited the reservoir after the dam had been completed as there was not sufficient water

in it. Engineers gave him a solution that they have to destroy the dam built further up that will allow sufficient water to this reservoir but that will dry up the main canal that divert water to the towns. But the king cared nothing and wanted his *Mahavapi* project as the biggest tank in the country. The canal was dry and it would stop the supply of water to the city soon. Cita decided to meet the townsmen so that she could draw attention of the townsmen to their plight now. This incident could open the eyes of all the people in the town, including the monks in the big temples, who up to now had not shown any concern about the environmental devastation or the suffering of the people of the valley. Even the murder of the monk had passed almost unnoticed. According to the novelist himself, Cita is a true daughter of Mother Earth, who takes up the struggle where her brother had commenced, showing more courage and more determination perhaps shown by her brother. She became successful at gathering people and made the convinced to think over the gravity of the situation. She addressed the townsmen and informed them it was not about the village that she came for but she went there only to warn them about the devastating impact of the *Mahavapi* that the entire city was going to face. A strange type of threat, the merchant countered her by looking at her closely. He had first seen only a beautiful, but shabbily dressed young girl. What he saw now was a girl with an intelligent and brave look in her eyes. To have sufficient water for *Mahavapi*, they breached the dam that diverts water to the city canal. Now the canal has dried up, and very soon all the reservoirs around the city would dry up, she told the merchant, looking straight into her eyes. The first merchant she had met wanted her to face the gathering and talk to the people; several others recognised her from her earlier visits and pushed her forward. Cita was made to climb upon the tank bund to address the people. Several senior merchants and a few monks were already on the Bund. At first the men became restless, when they saw a young woman trying to talk to them. She looked around her. She had

never talked to such a large and angry crowd. There were soldiers a little distance away, their weapons at the ready. She closed her eyes for a moment. She saw Tisagutha Thera seated at the foot of the half-finished bund of *Mahavapi*, she saw the rocks falling on him. She saw the dust slowly settling over the rocks that covered the monk's body. Cita began to speak. She started with the commencement of the Mahavapi project, the damage to the villages and the environment and the protest. She described the murder of the monk minutely to the people.

At the peak point, the movement was hijacked by the prince who was eager to rule the country as soon as possible. He took it as the greatest opportunity to remove the king from his throne. Repeatedly history shows that a movement started with all good intentions for the well-being of all life on earth, is hijacked by the opportunist power hangers. They believe that violence solves all the problems, the majority of the people are often highly emotional and the crafty person could easily sway them to be used to achieve their own goals. Cita wanted to fight against the patriarchal practices of the king's militarism, violence and oppression upon the man and environment. She became disillusioned seeing the repetition of same brutality, same violence shown by the king's son over the king only for power. Being disappointed, Cita quit the movement. Cita walked away slowly as if she was walking away from a society, a society that had lost all human values. Cita had believed that people of her country would behave more compassionately, would follow Buddha's way and would never resort to violence for any reason. Did one crime justify another? All she had wanted was to save their village, their forests and the fields and the birds and the animals in their valley. "She didn't want to see anyone die because of it. No one had the right to take another's life. Life was sacred, whether it was that of a Buddhist monk or a king or a simple peasant, or even a predatory bird soaring high up in the sky looking for its prey." (Dissanayake, 69)

In Buddhist tradition the concept of ecological paradigm depends on the fundamental teachings of interconnectedness, non-violence, and conditionality that contribute to both a practice and understanding of the welfare of the whole Being or Universe. Buddha is someone who gets enlightenment and appears in this world for the welfare of mankind. Buddhism claims that the Buddha engaged in a serious search of what in reality leads to welfare. Ariyapariyesana Sutta tells that he left the mundane comforts of the royal palace in search of the greatest good of mankind leaving the so-called pleasures of the mundane life. So does Cita, she overcomes her personal discomfort and dedicates her life for the service of Mahajana, but when again a mundane life of greed and power entered into her noble work, she quit the situation. she believes that dominating or oppressive behaviour can never be conducive for society and the environment. So, when the king's son manipulated the movement, she made a withdrawal into the lap of nature. Her untiring importunity and unbending attitude in a moment transformed into a passive resistance. Being disheartened she went far away from the society to lead a life of meditation. This is an act of renunciation as she chooses the life of a monk relinquishing herself from the worldly matters.

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