



## ECO-CONSCIOUSNESS: AN INDICTMENT OF EXPLOITATION IN GOGU SHYAMALA'S FATHER MAY BE AN ELEPHANT AND MOTHER ONLY A SMALL BASKET, BUT..

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### ABSTRACT

Examination of ecocritical perspectives has become imminent in the post modern literary works as the ecological exploitation has reached to its culmination. The post modern criticism of literary works has led to emergence of many neo critical studies including feminist criticism, eco- criticism, and cultural materialist criticism and so on and so forth. The eco-critical analysis of texts looks at the eco-consciousness of the writer and its presence in the dramatization of the plot and how it unfolds in the characterization in the backdrop of insatiable exploitation of ecology by man, which is turning out to be an enormous graveyard with vanishing of flora and fauna; hills and vales. The scenario in Telangana, of course a global concern, is no different with truant and scanty rains causing great impact on the agricultural production and the marginalized sections. As Gogu Shyamala hails from the region of Telangana, her writings are a testimony to the ecological changes that are causing a concern to the inhabitants of the region. Her vision of restoring of rural tanks now bears a fruit as the village tanks are being restored in the region to revive the natural habitat. The present paper seeks to touch upon the ecological consciousness on the part of the writer and how this aspect explores the exploitative forces that have undone the ecology of the region. Shyamala universalizes the ecological exploitation in her short stories with a view to bring in the desired change in the attitude of man

**Key Words:** Ecological consciousness, ecological exploitation, insatiable, productive communities, utilitarian, neo-colonialist, marginalized, flora and fauna, inherent harmony

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Gogu Shyamala is a leading writer and activist in Telangana, championing the cause of the marginalized and the exploited in the emerging era of globalization. She published the collection of short stories "Enugantha Tandrikanna Ekulabuttantha Tallinayam" ('Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But..') in

2012, in Telugu. The short stories are translated by individual translators retaining, to the most extent possible, the locale, and the naturalness of the humble characters of the productive community of one of the most exploited sections of Telangana region in India. The title of the collection is a popular rural saying in the region, which means that a

humble mother is far better than a father who may be like an elephant. The title itself spells out the age old wisdom coupled with humbleness on the part of 'Mother'. The stories deal with the lives and struggles of the madiga community most of who are in agricultural operations, labor activities and cleaning practices. For thousands of years they have remained in the state of exploitation and marginalization in the social order. The writer vividly dramatizes the pain, the struggles and the resistance of the humble characters in their unassumed and natural environs in the yawning face of suppression, exploitation and marginalization.

Gogu Shyamala's short stories in this collection mark a difference from her other writings. She focuses on exploring the historical processes and analyzing their repetitive patterns, and seeking explanations for the events of the present. She feels that there is a need to reject idealism and to convert passive situations into active ones and appears to be a prophetic writer in the high-tech twenty first century as she unfolds the trauma of the characters in the backdrop of the degeneration of ecology due to the insatiable exploitation by man. The characters struggle and wade through the ravaged environs with a hope to find some source of succor for living and try to build up an element of resistance against exploitation of both their labor and ecology.

The post modern criticism of literary works has led to emergence of many neo critical studies including feminist criticism, eco-criticism, and cultural materialist criticism and so on so forth. In the words of Kumari Shikha, 'Eco-criticism expands the notion of "the world" to include the entire ecosphere. Eco-criticism takes an earth centered approach to literary criticism.'<sup>1</sup> The eco critical analysis of texts looks at the eco-consciousness of the writer and its presence in the dramatization of the plot and how it unfolds in the characterization in the backdrop of insatiable exploitation of ecology by man, which is turning out to be an enormous graveyard with the vanishing of flora and fauna; hills and vales. The scenario in Telangana is no different with truant and scanty rains due to heedless and rampant exploitation of ecology, causing serious impact on the agricultural production and the lives

of the marginalized sections of the society rendering them traumatic, hopeless and uprooted.

As Gogu Shyamala hails from the region, her writings are a testimony to the ecological changes that are causing a grave concern to the inhabitants. Her vision of restoring of rural tanks is made clear in 'The Village Tank's Lament' as 'the mother tank' bemoans: 'no one will look after me except the laboring castes. Only they need me. The world will run only if our relationship is maintained. The others are after easy money.' Her vision of restoring of rural tanks now bears a fruit as the village tanks in the region are being restored to revive the natural habitat. Shyamala's writings reflect, to quote Dana Phillips 'The constructedness of nature is a basic tenet of postmodernism, post structuralism, and other forms of theory sharing the same feeling of belatedness and the common conviction that representation is always already inadequate'.<sup>2</sup> Shyamala vouches to project the exploitation and degeneration of nature in her writings to open the eyes of the consumerist culture for a happy future free from ecological exploitation.

Of the twelve short stories in the collection, six stories deal with the struggles of the women protagonists and the other six deal with the child protagonists in the backdrop of the exploitation of their labor, land and ecology in the name of caste, purity and orthodox practices that have prevailed in the subcontinent for thousands of years. The writer identifies the 'woman' as the manifestation of 'nature' and instills in her the primordial element of 'resistance' to enable her wade through the exploitation and emerge a 'noble human.' The short stories: 'The Village Tank's Lament' and 'Ellamma is Distressed' intensely explore the avarice and insatiable exploitation of ecology by modern man and lay bare the consequences that are in store for the mankind.

In 'The Village Tank's Lament' she makes the mother tank lament for restoration of her past glory that pricks the conscience of man. Man has enjoyed the fruits of nature with bliss for ages together. But, now a blind avarice has possessed him. Gogu Shyamala shows high inclination towards environment and its protection which is manifested consciously in all of the twelve short stories in the

collection. She universalizes the exploitation of nature and her humble productive children in her portrayal and raises the receding hopes of the reader by appropriately presenting the optimistic views for a happy and harmonious future, as the mother tank says, 'Gangavali koora and gongura<sup>3</sup> sprouted up here and there. On the way home after weeding the fields, women would pick the leaves of these edible greens and bundle them into their saris. With the bundles tucked into their waists they all looked pregnant, and the older women looked really comic'. Now all this is a vanished glory with the vampires of ecological exploitation on the rampage.

The realism in the short stories extensively deals with the exploitation of productive communities who are inseparably associated with nature. The post independent India is marked by the penetration of Western economic forces coupled by the traditional exploitative and patriarchal powers. The urge for amassing of wealth, rapid industrialization, and high scale commercialization have led to unforeseen ecological transformation resulting in exploitation of productive classes, ransacking of villages and destruction of ecology in large scale rendering thousands of people from marginalized sections uprooted. The exploitation of ecology in the words of Nazia Hasan, 'The World War and its unceasing destruction is another example of the capitalist, scientific revolution and colonization, which became the best means of facilitating the utilitarian view of man. It caused an incessant and heedless violation and exploitation of the earth, ecology and environment.'<sup>4</sup> It is a great irony that man is sitting on the powder keg of ecological explosion.

Gogu Shyamala shows her concern for ecology in these short stories and raises the consciousness of the reader. She exposes the exploitative attitude of the upper castes towards agriculture, harvesting and land and lakes in the rural periphery. Kancha Ilaiah says, "The uppercaste philosophy has worked as a weapon to deceive the productive communities and their labor including their productive resources. While it acted as a deterrent to productivity, it deceived and exploited their resources including their ecology, unabated for centuries together"<sup>5</sup> Shyamala is aware of this

deception and sharpens her tools to indict the exploitative forces with her narration. She strongly voices her feelings against the ecological exploitation and natural destruction in the contemporary times. Her serious concern for environment and humanity simultaneously becomes explicit in 'The Village Tank's Lament', which moves the nature-conscious reader to tears.

The 'mother tank' which was spread once in 'thirty acres' is now shrunk to 'thirty square yards' because of the avarice and insatiable ambition of the domineering forces of the village. The lamenting 'mother' makes us aware of the complex matter, tugging at the strings of consciousness to look around us, to have a fresh insight into our life pattern, to rise to the occasion to do something for the restoration of tanks and vanishing brooks. The upper castes are not the only ones with the right to live and enjoy the gift of life by their consumerist patterns. Every living being including the poor, marginalized, and exploited have a place under the sun for a happy living. The powerful should always be careful in not stepping upon them and suppressing their lives thereby causing an imbalance in ecological order.

Shyamala holistically advocates for a balanced ecosystem in her short stories wherein all the living beings should be enjoying the natural space happily. She says that those who are bent on exploiting ecology without any concern for life should realize now, 'enough is enough; it is our own children's future we are destroying!' She wants that all the human beings should realize 'destruction of nature leads to self destruction and nothing can compensate it'. Shyamala alerts us through her humble characters to think about what it means to live with simply on the earth planet without causing destruction to ecology. Her eco-consciousness rises to the level of a 'Mother' towards her child in nurturing it in the face of external challenges posing threat to its natural growth.

The short story 'Ellamma is Distressed' is another gripping story that is also significantly ecology-oriented for it dwells upon the desolation of the once ecologically-rich village. The author's fondness for the ecology rich village amplifies when she says "This year the grain harvest has been good.

There are five bags more than in other years. This was possible only with the blessings of Eedamma." But her fondness wanes after a few years as the exploitative forces turn the village into desolation with their insatiable commercial bent of mind for ransacking mother nature; the narrator groans, "There is no one to care for the deity Ellamma or for the deity of the fields and the village, Eedamma; their shrines lie untended and in despair." As the traditional exploitative forces recede from the village, new kind of alien forces in the name of development lurk the villages of Telangana with a view to turn the lands and the productive environment barren and desolation in the name of modern development based on capitalism and exploitative grounds.

The gradual decline of natural beauty and receding of ecological balance from the rural arena due to the gluttony of the commercial forces, impacts the lives of men, women and children who are inseparable from nature. The protagonist Ellamma's agony and sorrow knows no limits as she remains a mute spectator over the gradual degeneration of ecology and natural means of living of productive communities. Ellamma rose to a proud position of owning twenty acres of land and giving birth to thirteen children, even while facing many odds from the village dominating forces. In the protagonist Ellamma, the writer presents the glorious rise of a woman with her sheer hard work, courage, conviction and love for the family in the natural ecology with her lands yielding a bounty, "she had shifted the hearth to the front yard, and placed it under the neem tree because bags of grain now blocked the passage from the front room to the kitchen." In her we also see the ecological destruction caused by the domineering forces of the village: "Her heart is broken. This very Ellamma is now tired, defeated at the very end of her tether". The capitalist culture that has pervaded every walk of life is opposite nature in many ways. Environmentalism also offers an analysis of economic growth at least in its most destructive ways. It may seem hostile to pleasure of the wealthy and middle classes of the society. The orthodox and casteist forces coupled with neo-colonialist and global consumerist utilitarian forces caused an

incessant and heedless violation and exploitation of the earth, ecology and environment. Ellamma from the humble productive communities too is not spared!

The denouncement of the short story implies that destruction of nature leads ultimately to self-destruction and disappearance of life from the earth planet. The insatiable new commercial forces from the alien lands outshine all humanity in their cruelty towards ecology as the protagonist bemoans, "But today they buy our lands, and tomorrow they will throw us out from our lands. They may even throw us out of this village, and snatch from us the very lives we have known. And who's to say that they'll stop at that?" Shyamala explores the newly emerging human avarice in the post-modern times with her eco-consciousness and concern for the humble man in his/her ecology, who is facing a grave threat from the neo-capitalist forces.

The productive communities have always had a close affinity with nature, life and its fullness. The narration in the short stories reflects the blossoming of flowers, new colors, crops as the expression takes a realistic mode in the rural environment. It is close to physical environment, matters, women, men, children and cattle, such as the earth, things associated with it and the living beings moving in it. It is strongly connected to trees, shrubs, vegetation, birds and cattle, lakes and locks of farmlands fragrance. By presenting these in the narration Shyamala provides great pleasure particularly bucolic beauty to the parched soul of the reader. Her eco-consciousness does not reflect a negative thought, but is an effort to understand the tragedy of the collective mind of today's man, marching towards an unknown destination in search of an unknown pleasure, in the name of progress and development at the cost of ecology.

The murderous and marauding outcome of commercial world is against completeness of man. It has exploited and robbed of the natural order of the women, men and children in the productive communities and confused those who are in the consuming communities much to their discomfort and degeneration. Shyamala is perhaps in agreement with Anton Chekhov who says that the

task of an artist is to present propositions and questions in such a way that others cannot ignore them. In many ways the short stories of Gogu Shyamala in this collection are remarkable and open the eyes of the modern man with regard to exploitation of ecology that is causing destruction to life on the earth planet. The realistic portrayal of the natural manifestations of the earth and the entwined lives makes the short stories captivating. The short stories pulsate with the liveliness and exuberance of the humble characters who often take a retreat to their natural environment in the face of humiliations and sufferance unleashed by the domineering forces in the social life. They draw unknown pleasure and strength with which they make fresh attempts for the collection of left over grains in the fields for staple in order to have sustenance. The characters find a full expression of their latent abilities and blossom in spite of artificial elements of suppression in the name of caste and power with the great energy and enthusiasm they derive from the ecology. Their eco-friendly life makes them to be far away from the anxiety of the exploitative forces.

Shyamala also unfolds the hidden aspects of the persons in the productive communities and their everyday life with the help of cattle, sheep, goats and birds that chirp in the branches. The blessings of environmental beauty and the nourishing power of crops, fruits, herbs and blossoms that crop all the short stories in the collection cause immense pleasure to the reader. All the stories in the collection throw eco-critical perspectives and make the reader grow eco-conscious. It is in this sense we need to understand the feminization of ecological exploitation and its consequences for its inclusion of the marginalized voices that indict the exploitative forces to remodel the patterns of development avoiding ecological destruction which is a post colonial shift in raising of hopes of the mankind for a blissful life. This concern for nature and its protection grows along in all her writings including her political ones.

In portraying the exploitation of nature in its umpteen forms in the collection of short stories, Shyamala transcends barriers and transforms to an eco-feminist. As an eco-feminist she firmly believes

that one also needs to realize the inter-connectedness of all life processes and hence revere nature and all life forms on the earth planet. Human beings should not try to control nature nor indulge in its exploitation, but work along with it and must try to move beyond power-based relationships in order to enjoy the intrinsic harmony that is inherent in nature.

#### Notes and references

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