

## An Ecofeminist Reading to Denise Levertov's Selected Poems

SR. P. J. Alphonsa

*Ph.D. Scholar, Department of English, Stella Maris College, Chennai, (T.N.) India*

### Abstract

In this paper the three poems namely, "A Blessing", "The Spirit Appeased", and "Tragic Error" are interpreted from an ecofeminist perspective which facilitates the understanding of women-nature-culture relationships, characterized by interconnectedness and interdependence of life on this earth. This paper seeks to explore the significance of nature and women by setting the poems "The Cat as Cat" and the "Captive Flower" as a background. It exhibits Levertov's ecological concern and uniqueness. The study draws its secondary sources from the ecofeminist concerns put forward by Maria Mies, Vandana Shiva, Greta Gaard and it is identified as relevant theories in this paper. As a movement, ecofeminism interrogates the problems that women and nature face in an age of exploitation, destruction and indifference and motivates human beings to integrate their collective strength. This paper also attempts to draw attention to the obvious violation of conventional norms and criticizes the human tendency of using Nature only as a metaphor, thereby failing to realize its inherent worth. The connection between women and nature is not overtly expressed by Levertov, but throughout her poems the feminine approach to nature is felt.

**Key Words:** Ecofeminism, Woman, Nature, Interconnectedness, Levertov

In an era of ecological chaos and economic crisis, ecofeminism envisions a holistic approach to life, shaped by theories and practice of feminism. The women-nature relationship, represented in the poems of Denise Levertov confirms the inherent worth and realization of interconnectedness and interdependence of all living beings.

Denise Levertov (1923-97) is an English-born American poet, essayist, short story writer, editor and translator. Although she did not define herself as a nature poet or a feminist, Levertov frequently wrote poetry celebrating the values of nature and nurture from a distinctly feminine perspective. At the outset, this study begins with the understanding of ecofeminist concerns that

unite woman and nature. I attempt to term ecofeminism as a holistic belief system that emphasizes care and a concern for every tiny creature in the universe, reverence for the intrinsic value of all life forms and recognition of interdependence of living and non-living beings on this Earth. Ecofeminism is a philosophy that recognizes the interconnectedness among women, nature and other marginalized groups. It asserts the rights of Nature and women and all oppressed children.

As a life-affirming school of thought, ecofeminism inspires human minds to realize the spiritual element in all living creatures. As a movement, it interrogates the problems that women and nature face in an

age of exploitation, destruction and indifference and motivates human beings to integrate their collective strength. Ecofeminism according to Maria Mies accentuates an in-depth understanding of the world. "It challenges all relations of domination. Its goal is not just to change who wields power, but to transform the structure of power itself" (Gaard 3). The study draws its secondary sources from the ecofeminist concerns put forward by Maria Mies, Vandana Shiva, Greta Gaard and it is identified as relevant theories in this paper. In this paper the three poems namely, "A Blessing", "The Spirit Appeased", and "Tragic Error" are interpreted from an ecofeminist perspective which facilitates the understanding of women-nature-culture relationships, and its interconnectedness on this earth. This paper seeks to explore the significance of nature and women by setting the poems "The Cat as Cat" and the "Captive Flower" as a background. It exhibits Levertov's ecological concern and uniqueness. This paper also attempts to draw attention to the obvious violation of conventional norms and criticizes the human tendency of using Nature only as a metaphor, thereby failing to realize its inherent worth. The connection between women and nature is not overtly expressed by Levertov, but throughout her poems the feminine approach to nature is felt.

The analysis of Levertov's poems are highlighted by laying down the background setting of the poems "The Cat as Cat" and the "Captive Flower". Levertov brilliantly locates her view, the subversion of ecological outlook in the gardening process in the poem "Captive Flower". Gardening is

equated to confining the freedom of a flower. In the name of 'gardening' the persona of the poem tries to confine the freedom of the flower. The flower has its own space and time in its universe, it is quite natural that it follows the movement of the sun, but the gardener in the name of 'arranging', 'ordering' confines its freedom and tries to fully open the "half-open" (21) flower. And by this act, the flower withers and loses its identity and fails to fulfill its mission. So here the gardener is compared to a "jailer" (21) who confines the natural world's freedom. The poem begins by ironically invoking Hopkins's "Windhover" in the lines "This morning..." The Windhover, a wonderful bird flying freely in the air reigning in the domain of the sky stands for freedom, but in Levertov's poem, the flower stands for confinement. Gardening is actually viewed as a pro-environmental activity, but here the perception is subverted brilliantly by the nature poet Levertov.

In this poem 'the flower' can also be compared to women, and 'gardener' as the male dominated patriarchal society. In the name of civilization and protection, they confine the freedom of women and it leads to her life's tragic end. They turn them into "lifeless, controllable matter". "They want to be creators themselves for that they rob women and nature of their subjectiveness" (Mies 45) but the ecofeminist perspective is able to go beyond the categories of patriarchy that structure power and meaning in nature and society (33).

In the poem "The Cat as Cat" the patriarchal world view sees Nature's diversity as "not intrinsically valuable in itself, its value is

conferred only through economic exploitation for commercial gain” (Shiva 164). There is a normal tendency throughout centuries to take nature and its element as metaphor without accepting its inherent worth. In this poem the speaker critiques the metaphorizing tendency especially in literature. The speaker illustrates the nature of cat, its beauty, its activities like “sleeping” “purring” (4) killing squirrels etc. Levertov says that the cat “is a metaphor only if I/force him to be one” (4) that is when we force nature to be a metaphor, unconsciously we are undermining the nature’s worth in itself and declaring its value only in relation to the human beings. But poet persona in this poem openly declares that every living organism in this world has its inherent worth even without connecting to human beings. This is what *Ecofeminism* calls eco spirituality, “The ecological relevance of this emphasis on ‘spirituality’ lies in the rediscovery of the sacredness of life, according to which life on earth can be preserved only if people again begin to perceive all life forms as sacred and respect them as such” (18).

In the poem entitled “A Blessing”, the river is considered to be a source of inspiration for majority of poets. Here the persona is a woman- to whom another woman, possibly a passerby, is talking. The first woman mentioned in the poem is very close to nature; she is “...a woman/herself renewed, her life risen/ up from the root of despair she’d/ bent low to touch,/ risen empowered” (6). The woman has humility in her heart that “bent low to touch” which leads her to be empowered. She is empowered through Nature, and the enlightenment is passed on

from her generation to another through poetic work. River by its very nature flows from one place to another fertilizing the land through which it flows, in the same way, women pass on her knowledge and experience from one generation to another.

In the poem there is a juxtaposition of men and women’s nature. According to Maria Mies, I quote, “Men do not think of life, they only want to conquer nature and the enemy, whatever the costs may be!”(93). In the poem, man chooses “totem tree” and “taproot”(6) which is very useful and valuable, but the selection of women lies in the ordinary things of this world like “...lichen, patiently/ compositing rock, another’s/ needful swamp, the tribal migrations-... and the need/ of each of threatened thing/ to be.” (6). It can be interpreted in two ways. One way is that, her selection is not based on beauty, usefulness or ornamental value but in understanding its worth, its inherent value which in anthropocentric view is considered to be a mere ‘ordinary creatures and things’. Ecofeminism is interpreted as a philosophy that recognizes the interconnectedness among women, nature and other marginalized groups, similarly women care for things, creatures that are marginalized and give them prime importance. Women care for “all beings”, especially endangered species because every ‘part’ whether it is ‘small or big’, ‘useful or useless’, ‘beautiful or ugly’ in anthropocentric view are no more mere things but a part which is interconnected to form a ‘whole’. Woman chooses tribal people, the marginalized who are very closely connected to nature and subverts the whole hierarchal system. For

Vandana Shiva, “ecological feminism creates the possibility of viewing the world as an active subject, not merely as a resource to be manipulated and appropriated” (34).

In the second poem selected for study here named “The Spirit Appeased” there was a wanderer, with a male-centred prejudice who later became aware of the living presence of the so called non-human beings. In the line “And there’s no one there; birds and small animals/ flutter and vanish,”(8) it is clear that the wanderer in the beginning of the poem represents the narrow minded human beings who consider themselves as superior and dominant. For them the presence of the birds and small animals is not felt at all. Though non-human beings are living in the forest, they are purposely overlooked because only human beings are believed to possess life.

In the hut, to his great surprise, just like a mother or wife at home keeps everything ready, so does nature provide him with food, shelter and comfort. To quote “...there’s food, / set to keep warm beside glowing logs,/and fragrant garments to fit him,.../and a bed of heather from the hills” (8). Here we can see that Nature like women perform all their domestic duties as assigned by the patriarchal society. So here women and nature are compared indirectly. Their work is “Invisible’ unpaid work called non-work” (66) by Maria Mies. Though no human presence is felt by the wanderer in the forest, his need for food, warmth and comfort is satisfied by nature. The speaker of the poem mocks at the androcentric attitude. A great deal of emphasis is given in the poem to the domestic work or labour done by women and nature which often goes unnoticed by

the patriarchal society. In Vandana Shiva’s words the “contribution of nature’s, women’s and children to the market economy is neglected and denied (75). It goes largely unrecognized and unrecorded. The feminine qualities of women as well as nature like that of a care taker, provider, nurturer etc are purposely left unseen and taken for granted by the male dominated society. But at last in the poem the wanderer realizes the presence, “finds the absent sage is speaking to him is present”. In the book *Ecofeminism*, Vandana Shiva quotes Claudia von Werlhof, “nature’ is everything that should be available free, and/ or as cheaply as possible. This includes the product of social labour.”(26). “When labour is defined as non-labour, value becomes non-value. Rights non-rights, and invasion becomes defined as improvement”(32).

Selfish men folk will understand the presence of women or nature only when they are in need of them. We can see here a ‘use and throw’ mentality. One’s value or worth is approved only to the extent of how much it is useful to them. But in contrast, Nature and women are described by a very feminine wisdom, a caring presence which always gives more importance to others. On the one hand, the poem attacks men who avoid nature and women as ‘the other’. Men keep women and nature as subservient even though they know the fact that they cannot exist in the universe without the services of women and nature. On the other hand it reminds them to approach the physical existence of the outside world as well as women with great respect and humility.

At last the wanderer understands the presence “now she is looking, you say to

each other/ now she begins to see” (8). Here the focus is not in the literal sense of the line which says that she began to see, rather on the point that he began to realize the ‘facts as facts’ without trying to cheat his own consciousness. In other words, his eyes opened, the inner mind started recognizing the fact that Women and nature are alive and without them ‘he’ cannot survive.

In the poem ‘Tragic Error’ which is the third poem taken for analysis, Levertov delves deeper into the humans who have “looted and pillaged” (12) ‘the earth’s natural resources. The tone of this poem is about the plight of the earth which is desperate. The blame for that wrong, the poem clarifies however, is not the creator’s but of the “machine-men” (Mies 92) who subjugates both nature and women. The whole poem is written from a feminine perspective. The Christian theological writers accepted the mistake of interpreting the Genesis Chapter 1, verse 28 “God blessed them and said to them, ‘be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and *subdue* it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky, and every living creature that moves on the ground” changed the interpretation of the Latin word ‘*subdue*’ as ‘stewardship’ rather than dominion. This changed the interpretation from dominion to stewardship in the ecological world, which shows a shift from the masculine to the feminine perspective. The Lord of universe created this world in its fullness and handed over the task of caretaking to human beings. She suggests that the charge in Genesis of ‘subdue’ the earth is “Miswritten, misread” and that our task should have been “to love the earth,/ to *dress and keep* it like Eden’s

garden”(12). The poem puts forth the fact that the interpretation of the Old Testament in the Bible was misplaced in the story and she showed how God the creator wanted human beings to be “earth’s mind, mirror, reflective source”(12). But men who needed power, position “gabbled” “looted” “claiming indemnity” “pillaged” and disremembered the fact that we are just a thread in the whole web of life. So the “fullness” of the universe is distorted due to the self-centeredness of men. So in order to regain the fullness, the ‘whole’ of the universe ‘male-power-dominion’ attitude should be changed to ‘feminine- humble-stewardship’ mentality.

The reality of a person is always greater, more complex and intimate than the words in which we try to express one’s identity. Levertov’s poems always inspires, foresees and stands as a clear referent for those other women ecofeminist poets who have to deal in their writing with similar problems when trying to access creative power. The essay “The Gods Die Every Day” opines that the poem should not be “used as a weapon, even against an unfriendly world, but it should instead be a means of reaching that world”(21). In an age of environmental crisis, the alternative views given by Levertov’s poems promise hope for the well-being of the natural world and humanity as a whole. She being a nature women poet takes on the role of awakening and engaging the readers to make aware of the inter relationship of all life on earth, and include both men and women to share the responsibility in preserving life on this planet.

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