

Women, Nature and Resistance in The Everest Hotel and The Hungry Tide

Ms. Shinola R^{1,*}, Dr. Joseph Suresh I²

¹Research Scholar – Part Time, Reg No: 241211702017, PG and Research Department of English, Rani Anna Government College for Women, Gandhi Nagar, Tirunelveli – 627008, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli- 627012, Tamilnadu, India., India

²Research Supervisor, Head and Associate Professor of English, PG Department of English, Government Arts and Science College for Women, Sathankulam, Tuticorin- 628604, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli- 627012, Tamilnadu, India., India

*Corresponding author / தொடர்பு ஆசிரியர்: Ms. Shinola R — tamilseminar12@gmail.com

Abstract

The unequal relationship between human society and the natural environment has raised important questions about gender, power, and exploitation. While women continue to face gender-based inequalities in many societies, nature is often treated as a resource for human use. Eco-feminism draws attention to these shared patterns of domination and examines the relationship between women and the natural environment. Allan Sealy's *The Everest Hotel* is set in the small town of Drummondganj in the foothills of the Himalayas. The novel presents Ritu as a strong voice for environmental protection. She encourages women to oppose the illegal cutting of trees, reflecting her concern for the protection of the natural environment. Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* also portrays women who struggle against social limitations and seek to establish an identity of their own. Kusum becomes an important figure in this struggle as she challenges social restrictions while living within the difficult relationship between human communities and nature. This paper examines how Ritu and Kusum respond to social subordination and environmental destruction and explores how their struggles create possibilities for resistance and empowerment among women.

Keywords / திறவுச் சொற்கள்: Eco-feminism; resistance; gender; displacement; nature; environment.

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Introduction

Throughout history, societies have often placed women in subordinate positions and their contributions to life have not always been properly recognized. In a similar way, nature has often been treated as a resource to be used for human needs. Women and nature have long been affected by systems that seek to control and exploit them. This connection between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature forms the basis of eco-feminist thought. The term 'ecofeminism' was coined by the French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974. It brings together feminism and environmentalism and examines the relationship between women and nature. It also draws attention to the similar ways in which women and the natural world have been dominated and exploited. Val Plumwood rightly states, 'Ecological feminism is essentially a response to a set of key problems thrown up by the two great social currents – feminism and the environmental movement' (10). Eco-feminists therefore examine how patriarchal and capitalist structures shape the unequal treatment of both women and the natural environment.

This paper examines Allan Sealy's *The Everest Hotel* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* from an eco-feminist perspective. Both novels present women whose lives are closely connected with their natural surroundings and who face social and environmental struggles. In

The Everest Hotel, Ritu opposes the destruction of forests and encourages local women to protect the trees. In *The Hungry Tide*, Kusum struggles against displacement and political oppression while remaining closely connected to the land and people of the Sundarbans. Through Ritu and Kusum, the novels show how women can become active participants in struggles for nature, land, and survival.

Environmental Setting of The Everest Hotel

The Everest Hotel was once a famous hotel, but it later became a place of refuge for orphans. It is presented as a home where people from different places, with different beliefs and ideas, come together. The hotel is situated in Drummondganj, a quiet hill town surrounded by a rich natural environment. However, beneath its peaceful appearance, the town is affected by various social and environmental problems. From the beginning of the novel, Sealy draws attention to the continuous cutting down of trees in the name of development and civilization.

Chipko Movement: Women's Resistance and Forest Protection

The Chipko movement is a forest conservation movement that began in the Himalayan region of Uttar Pradesh in the year 1973. The Hindi word 'Chipko' means 'to cling to' or 'to hug'. Its important leaders are Chandi Prasad Bhatt and Sunderlal Bahuguna. The movement began as a protest against large-scale tree cutting by timber contractors. Although it was an environmental and social movement, women played an important role in it because they were the mostly affected ones by deforestation. The movement used non-violent methods to oppose the destruction of forests.

Chandi Prasad Bhatt, an environmentalist and Gandhian social activist, founded an organization that encouraged rural people to develop small industries using local resources. In 1973, when the government allotted a large forest area to a sporting goods company, Bhatt led villagers in protesting against the tree cutting by embracing the trees. After several days of protest, the government cancelled the permit and gave back the area for common use. After its success, the local environmentalist Sunderlal Bahuguna began to share Chipko's approach with people throughout the region.

Another major protest took place in 1974 when more than 2,000 trees were marked for cutting. The government sent officials to deal with the situation, but the women, led by Gaura Devi, refused to leave the forest. Their resistance successfully contributed to a ten-year ban on commercial logging in the area. The Chipko movement therefore became closely associated with women's participation in the struggle for forest protection.

Ritu and the Chipko Protest

Ritu is the central character of the novel. She is a young experienced nun and a botanist who is appointed to take care of Jed, a ninety-year-old mountaineer and flower hunter. Jed lives on the top floor of the hotel and writes his own version of 'The Book of the Dead' recording the names of people who have lived and died in Drummondganj. As a botanist, Ritu observes the plants and animals around her carefully. Ritu is deeply concerned about the natural environment around the Everest Hotel. She becomes angry when she sees forest resources being commercially exploited by loggers with the support of local politicians. Instead of remaining silent, she decides to take action.

During one of her visits to the lepers' colony outside Drummondganj, the residents show Ritu around twenty trees that have been cut down by the men working for the government. The logs are kept ready to be transported by trucks. One of the residents tells her that the men will return the next day to cut the remaining trees. Miss Sampson recalls, "Drummondganj wasn't always like this, we hardly needed fans, you know. No dust" (Sealy 34).

Ritu is disturbed by the destruction of the trees. She understands that individual action may not be enough to stop the destruction. She introduces them to the Chipko movement, saying, “Get your women to Chipko, isn’t this where the movement began? If you can’t stop them tomorrow there’ll be nothing here. Let the women try. What have you got to lose? They write as well as you” (Sealy 276).

When Pyare Lal’s men arrive in trucks the next morning to cut down the remaining trees, the women of the lepers’ colony refuse to allow them to continue. They shout ‘no’ and repeatedly say ‘chipko’. They hold on to the tree trunks and use their bodies to protect the trees. Shocked by this unexpected way of protest, the workers stopped cutting the trees to discuss the matter with the villagers. When the men try to convince the women by offering money, Ritu firmly tells them that the land and the trees belong to the public. The men finally leave, but warn them that they will return. Even though the society around her is influenced by male domination, Ritu helps the women understand the importance of standing together. Their actions demonstrate that women can become active participants in the struggle to protect the environment.

The Hungry Tide — Environment and Human Struggle

Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* is set in the Sundarbans, an area covering more than ten thousand square kilometres in the northern part of the Bay of Bengal. The region is rich in flora and fauna and contains the largest mangrove ecosystem in the world. The novel deals with the conservation of the Sundarbans as well as the conflict between refugees and the government. The novel has gained attention for showing the environmental problems of the Sundarbans and the conflict between local people and conservation efforts.

Ghosh describes the harsh conditions faced by the refugees who settle on Morichjhapi island. He states:

The soil bore poor crops and could not be farmed all year round...Hunger drove them to hunting and fishing and the results were often disastrous. Many died of drowning and many more were picked off by crocodiles and estuarine sharks... Thousands risked death in order to collect meager quantities of honey, wax, and firewood. No day seemed to pass without news of someone being killed by a tiger, a snake or a crocodile. (79)

The people living on the Sundarbans islands are also neglected by the state. Their limited access to the outside world makes their lives more difficult. Women in particular face the effects of poverty, displacement and social inequality. The situation reflects the argument made by Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva that capitalist patriarchy is based on power and domination over both people and nature (70).

In *The Hungry Tide*, women play an important role in the story. Among them, Kusum emerges as a significant figure through Nirmal’s writings and the memories of those who knew her. Her story reflects courage, suffering, and a strong connection with the land and her community. Kusum grows up in difficult circumstances. She lives in a society where women have limited power, yet she refuses to allow others to control her life. Unfortunately, she loses her father who is killed by a tiger, while her mother has been sold into sexual slavery. These unfavorable conditions force Kusum to leave her home. As a young girl, she is placed under the care of the Lusibari Women’s Union. Despite the hardships, she refuses to surrender to those who try to control her. When Kusum learns about the refugees moving towards Morichjhapi, she joins them and fights for the sake of the people who were left homeless. She describes how they took refuge on the island of Morichjhapi and recalls, “Once we lived in Bangladesh, in Khulna jila: we’re tide country people... When the war broke out, our village was burned to ash; we crossed the border, there was nowhere else to go...rivers ran in our heads, the tides were in our blood” (Ghosh 164-65). For her, the river, tides, and land are not merely physical surroundings but part of the identity and survival of her community.

Morichjhapi and Kusum's Resistance

When Nilima, a local activist, returns from a trip she informs the people that the government is going to take control of the island in the name of development. The very next day, the government announces that any movement in and out of Morichjhapi will be prohibited under the Forest Preservation Act. The sudden arrival of the police makes Kusum question the priorities of the government. She feels that the authorities are more concerned with protecting wildlife than with protecting the people who live there. Since the Sundarbans is being preserved for tiger conservation, Kusum questions the situation in which people are treated as less important than animals. She asks, 'Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them?' (Ghosh 261-62). She questions a conservation policy that ignores the rights and lives of the people living in the region.

The Morichjhapi incident forms an important background to the novel. In 1979, the refugees were forcibly removed from the island after the government restricted their settlement in the protected Sundarbans area. The violence led to deaths, arrests, and the destruction of homes. The incident shows how both marginalized people and nature suffer when the needs of local communities are ignored. Huggan and Tiffin note that "Environmental degradation often leads to displacement, creating 'environmental refugees' who are forced to migrate due to the uninhabitable conditions of the homelands" (157).

Kusum is killed during the violence at Morichjhapi. Her death makes her a symbolic figure for the refugees who were struggling for a place to live. Through her, Ghosh presents the suffering of people who are denied a secure relationship with land and home. Her resistance therefore shows how the struggles of women and marginalized communities can become connected with struggles over land and the environment.

Conclusion

Both Allan Sealy and Amitav Ghosh present ideas that can be examined through the perspective of eco-feminism. In both novels, women have a close relationship with the land and the natural environment. Their lives are affected by environmental changes, political decisions and social inequalities. Ritu and Kusum respond to these difficulties in different ways. Ritu directly opposes the cutting of trees and encourages women to protect the forest through collective action. Kusum becomes involved in the struggle of displaced people who are trying to protect their right to live on the land. The two novels also draw attention to the relationship between women, nature, power and development. The destruction of forests, the control of land and the displacement of people are connected with larger political and social structures. Women's responses to these problems reveal their courage and their desire to protect their communities and surroundings.

The study of *The Everest Hotel* and *The Hungry Tide* therefore shows that women can be both victims of environmental destruction and active agents in protecting their environment. Ritu and Kusum demonstrate different forms of resistance and show the importance of women's participation in environmental struggles. Their experience encourages the readers to think about development and environmental protection together with the lives and rights of the people who depend on the natural world. The novel thus points towards the need for a more sustainable relationship between human beings and nature.

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