

Chapter-III

Ecofeminism in Dhruv Bhatt's Fictional World:

With special reference to *That Thou Art*

We are called to assist the Earth to heal her wounds and, in the process, heal our own—indeed to embrace the whole of creation in all its diversity, beauty, and wonder- Wangari Maathai.
(qtd. in “A Quote by Wangari Maathai.”)

The above quoted statement by the globally known green activist Wangari Maathai encapsulates the crux of ecofeminism- which is founded on the conviction that in order to empower the environmental conservation campaign women must fight against androcentric forces which have rapaciously exploited the earth and her resources.

Explaining the portmanteau under consideration, the American ecofeminist Karen Warren, in *Ecological Feminism*, explains that ecofeminism is ‘feminist’ as it attempts to remove gender-bias, and it is ‘ecological’ because it clearly acknowledges the prime importance of the preservation of ecosystems (qtd. in Oppermann 20).

Cultural ecofeminists, a group within the broad movement of ecofeminism, believes that because a woman possess an inherent sensitivity to protect life, she must play a key role in determining environmental policies. Some scientific observations also support their claims. For example, endocrinologists opine that the mammalian hormone called oxytocin, which plays a crucial role in the processes of

childbirth and lactation, [naturally/scientifically] strengthens the “bond between a mother and an infant” (“Oxytocin”). The intuitively aggressive stances often shown by human and non-human mothers to save their offspring in the midst of exceptionally risky situations exhibit the force of oxytocin.

Perhaps it is due to the life-preserving instinct accorded to the female consciousness that has stimulated a remarkable number of female voices across the globe, who assertively express genuine ecological concerns through their ecological activism in various domains of life.

It may be reminded here that it was a female activist Rachel Carson, whose much-debated *Silent Spring* ushered environmentalism in 1970s, and whose social activism led to the formation of the well-known EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) in America; and in 1990s, it was Cheryll Glotfelty- another important female ecocritic- who pioneered ecocritical thinking among American scholars.

In Africa, it was Wangari Mathai (1940-2011), whose Green Belt Movement replenished the African soil through plantation of more than fifty-one million trees in 1980s. The Nobel Prize.org page rightly notes that Mathai could envision “tree-planting in a broader perspective” which “included democracy, women’s rights, and international solidarity” (“Wangari Maathai – Facts”).

In India, it is Saalumarada Thimmakka, a 105-year-old woman, being known as ‘A Tree woman’ of India, has been felicitated with Padma Shree in 2019 for planting 8000 thousand trees and 384 banyan trees and nurturing them all like her own children, and for initiating rain-water harvesting system in her village (“The Logical Indian”).

Ecofeminists strongly contend that the problems of women and those of the natural ecology cannot be treated separately because both of them have historically been exploited ruthlessly and illogically by the male-centric socio-cultural and

political power systems. So, in order to ecosensitize the entire gamut of human thinking and operations, what has become inevitable for the mankind is to remove androcentrism from its socio-economic, cultural and political systems.

Ecofeminism is a bedrock of ecocriticism since it has played an integral role in pioneering ecocritical movement itself. Being a synthesis of ecological activism and feminist vision of life, it holds a unique space among all the major variants of ecocritical praxis. In fact, because of its ardent ecological concerns, ecofeminist perspectives definitely open richer scopes to understand the other major ecocritical strands like deep-ecology or eco-sociology with better clarity.

Ecofeminists opine that the roots of the present environmental problematic lie in the patriarchal tendencies which have been trampling voices of the earth and the women since centuries to enslave and exploit them both in order to satiate their parochial goals.

However, when the entire world is struggling hard today to avert the enormous environmental threat of mass extinction, the phallocentric paradoxes which have encouraged humans till now in damaging the very sources of their own survival- i.e., the earth and the women- can no longer be allowed to continue with their ongoing aggressions on the umbilical cord of the survival itself.

Ecofeminists therefore strongly recommend establishing gender equality in all domains of life. They emphasize upon the need to acknowledge the prime significance of ecofeminist voices in the global environmental discourse in order to recover the dangerously deteriorating ecobalance of the planet earth.

Various theories proposed by ecofeminists across the globe do possess a great imaginative potential to transform the social psyche by morally strengthening those working for environmental justice. And, by doing so, just like Bhatt's female

characters do, they clearly establish the immediacy of acknowledging the supreme importance of the female ecosensitivity in the global environmental discourse.

In this chapter, I propose to study as to how select novels by Dhruv Bhatt respond to the global ecofeminist movement. It may be noted that the entire story of *That Thou Art* takes place around the regions of the Narmada river valley, which possesses a rich biodiversity, and which is also enriched by the invaluable eco-wisdom embedded in the tribal ethos.

Since the Indian cultural ethos and Hindu traditions have always held the creative forces like the earth, the rivers and the womenfolk in high esteem, it will be interesting to discover the discrepancies that exist between the cultural conceptions of the female gender fictionalized in the given texts and the actual behavioral patterns we have adopted lately in dealing with our rivers, the earth and their ecological networks. As the fictional world of Bhatt's other novels is also dominated by female characters, their views on Nature and their interactions with the non-human world also offer important insights into the ongoing ecofeminist discourse.

The forthcoming discussion would give a glimpse of the disparate voices and theories which emerge on the glocal ecocritical platform on account of the differences in their spatio-temporal-cultural roots. We will see that though Bhatt's ecofeminist vision differs significantly from the aggressive ecofeminist voices and their approaches to environmental issues, it would be important to see how those disparate voices have the potential to enrich the glocal environmental movement.

But before we turn to assess the select texts in light of ecofeminism, it seems pertinent to examine: the factors which created gender dualisms and its impact on women and nature. It seems also important to trace a brief history of the

growth of ecofeminist movement, concept of the term 'ecofeminism,' its salient features, and the variety of voices emanating from the broad canvas of ecofeminism.

Inferiorizing Nature / Women

Ecofeminism is an offshoot of feminist movement. Simon de Beauvoir's famous assertion of 1949 that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" certainly makes us think about the historical factors which were responsible in forcing the 'second sex' into an inferior position. Feminists hold androcentric thinking responsible for the socio-cultural and political subjugation of women, and ecofeminists attempt to expose the nexus between the subjugation of women and exploitation of nature.

Taking forward the legacy of their forerunners, ecofeminists argue that linguistically and anatomically 'male' is a part of 'female.' Being birth-givers and food-providers, the women and the earth, if compared to men, do possess a superior biological strength, an exceptional instinctive urge and an extraordinary emotional capacity to bear, protect and preserve the life force on the planet earth.

Nevertheless, the image of Adam being the progenitor of Eve in the Biblical myth helped the Western male in assigning an inferior position to women on one hand; and on the other, the Stewardship syndrome helped him subjugate Nature and the earth under his dominion.

In the post-Aristotelian scientific narratives also, superiority of man and subjugation of women have been justified on account of the larger brain sizes of males- although the scientific experiments that have been carried out so far in the fields of neurology or psychology have not yet been able to confirm that the structural distinctions or difference in size of human brains have anything to do with the degree of human intelligence.

In the II chapter also, it is mentioned how in the Western intellectual domain, Baconian empiricism, which continued to reinforce the Aristotelian importance of the so-called male qualities like reason and logic, has also played a major role not only in assigning inferior position to women in the social psyche, but it has also directed scientists to form mechanistic conceptions of nature- which considers natural entities as non-sentient. Later on, these approaches also helped certain industrial/capitalist forces in legitimizing exploitation of women and nature within their national boundaries at first, and the same tendencies have instigated them in colonizing social consciousness and geo-political landscapes of the non-white nations in different ways.

It must be admitted that in the Indian philosophical and literary narratives also, the fecundity of women and the fertility of the earth were often associated with nature; whereas man's comparison with the sky metaphorically placed him in an intellectually superior position in the formation of human culture. Therefore, in the subsequently developed binaries like spirit/body, intellect/instinct and reason/emotion- man became associated with the first set of attributes which was considered more valuable in the utilitarian scheme of human cultures than the second set with which women and nature were identified. Consequently, male supremacy began to be legitimized as man took up the role of harnessing the so-called wild and chaotic energies of the earth and the womenfolk. Indian ecofeminists therefore propose to stop the female subjugation engendered in this way, which has severely damaged ecological balance of India.

However, since the dawn of the twentieth century, feminist voices from all over the world have begun to undermine the unscientific foundation upon which the logic of male supremacy rests. In light of the biological fact that it is the woman who embodies man, women have been debunking the myth of male supremacy by entering into the fields which were previously dominated by male presence.

3.1 Ecofeminism: Conceptual Growth. Varieties. Limitations

As stated earlier, the rationale of ecofeminism is built on the basic tenets of feminism which advocates gender equality by emphasizing the need to adopt an organic world view instead of the fragmented, mechanistic view of life that has potentially harmed the social and ecological equilibrium so far.

In the 1950s and 60s, demanding equal voting rights and equal opportunities in the social spaces, the Moderate/Liberal feminist groups from the white world proposed to form a universal sisterhood on the basis of their shared experience of male dominance. On the other hand, projecting a vertical split in the biological and psychological attributes between male and female sexes, some radical feminists from the white world adopted an extreme approach to this issue and demanded a complete rejection of the male presence from all areas of their lives.

It was in 1974, that the French ecocritic Francoise d' Eaubonne coined the term 'ecofeminism'; and during 1980s it disseminated in the US academia as well as among their European counterparts.

Kathrine Miles accredits Rosemary Ruether, an American feminist scholar and theologian, for appealing for the first time to her fellow American feminist scholars that if they want to liberate women from the unjust patriarchal systems of thought, what they need to do was to channelize their energies also towards ending the unjust human dominion on nature. In 1987, published in "The Nation," Ynestra

King's article entitled "What Is Ecofeminism?" exposed the links between the belief systems that validate exploitation of the earth and female subjugation in the American society. King's appeal popularized the movement and expanded its scope and support ("Ecofeminism").

When the American ecofeminist scholars began to critique the male-centered environmental theories, they also started focusing on the woman-nature relationships within their critical purview. They exposed the fact that like the earth herself, women also faced ecological victimization in addition to their socio-economic marginalization. They protested against commodification of nature and women in the male-dominated economic systems.

Based on the conviction that there is a direct link between the suppression of women and exploitation of the natural resources of the earth, the international ecofeminist scholarship has been enriched today by the diversified writings of important critics such as : Carylann Merchant, Greta Gaard, Susan Griffin, Simon Estok, Ynestra King, Ariel Kay Salleh, Mary Daly, Serpil Oppermann, Kate Rigby, Stacy Alaimo, Slovic Scott, Karen Warren, Carol Adams, Maria Mies, Vandana Shiva, Charlene Spetnak and Katherine Hayles.

These ecofeminists have observed how anthropocentric dualism between human and the non- human worlds took androcentric shades, and the same logic of dominion was extended to create a deep divide between sexes.

Ecofeminists argue that it is the male-centric geo-politics that has drastically failed in maintaining ecological balance; and especially since the post-industrial times, androcentric definitions of economic and political progress have exponentially stimulated the male-centric human consciousness to capture, colonize and exploit the earth and her resources aggressively.

In the beginning, like their feminist counterparts, liberals among the ecofeminists also intended to establish environmental equality between man and woman within the existing systems without disturbing the prevalent socio-economic systems; whereas others who sensed white elitism in that ideology offered a contrary view, suggesting that without bringing a complete change in the present systems of governance and thought patterns, establishing the intended equality is not possible.

So, majority among them now advocate replacement of the linear, patriarchal, hegemonic power structures with non-linear, all-inclusive and de-centralized thinking patterns. A variety of ecofeminist voices argue in different ways that switching over to these gynocentric ways of life from the present androcentric ones is an appropriate alternative to save the earth from further destruction.

In the West, although in the beginning, the sphere of ecofeminist practices remained largely limited to the white elitist voices. But now, its ever-expanding scopes incorporate into its fold multiple feminist voices emanating from various geo-political socio-cultural spaces attempting to address environmental justice issues for communities that have been marginalized on racial, cultural, education and ethnic grounds.

Ecofeminisms: Unity in Diversity

Depending upon their specific modes of ecofeminist concerns, ecofeminist approaches have been segregated by scholars into different rubrics by different critics.

While looking at the environmental problematic from economic point of view, some of the ecofeminists would claim that the root cause of environmental degradation is economic disparity based on gender-bias. The male centered world fails to recognize the worth of women's contribution being offered in the areas like childcare services, domestic chores and some agricultural odd jobs.

Consequently, the financially weaker, ecosensitive female voices fail to offer active participation in formulating pro-environmental policies.

Interconnections among these problems can also be seen in the four sub-categories of ecofeminism proposed by Serpil Oppermann. In an article “Feminist Ecocriticism,” Oppermann divides the field into four groups, namely: (I) Liberal ecofeminism (ii) Cultural ecofeminism (iii) Social ecofeminism and (iv) Socialist ecofeminism.

Oppermann states that liberal ecofeminism proposes to transform human relations with nature from within the existing systems of governance. They propose to establish gender equality in all fields with the help of appropriate laws and regulations. She also notes that the cultural ecofeminists acknowledge that women are instinctively closer to nature than man. However, another group called ‘social ecofeminists’ reject this essentialist argument-which portrays women as earth in a stereotypical motherly figure. Social ecofeminists like Murray Bookchin, Ynestra King and Val Plumwood proposes to break the gender hierarchy which places women in a disadvantageous social and economic position. Socialist ecofeminism is a critique of the capitalist economic structures that relegates women in backward position due to the devaluation of her domestic work in monetary terms (21-22).

Just like Oppermann, K.J. Warren also classifies ‘ecofeminism’ into three groups: (i) ‘Cultural ecofeminism’ and (ii) ‘Social ecofeminism.’(iii) Socialist/Material ecofeminism. Also being known as ‘radical’ or ‘spiritual feminism,’ cultural feminism, projecting the biological, social and psychological proximity with nature, “reclaims women-nature connections as liberating and empowering expressions of women's capabilities to care for nature.” They seek to revive the pre-patriarchal religious sentiments, Pagan religious practices and

Goddess worship to re-establish the dignity of women's procreative powers. 'Social' ecofeminists do not approve of the "essentialist, universalist, and ahistorical" grounds of comparisons the cultural ecofeminists make in order to draw analogies between the images of women/nature.

According to them, women's identities are after all "socially constructed, historically fashioned, and materially reinforced." On the other hand, followers of the 'Socialist/Materialist' ecofeminism opine that women-nature connections are "both socially constructed *and* biologically predisposed." Although it is the women's biology and its identification with nature due to which women have been oppressed, progressive society does not need to endorse biological determinism. What is important is to see how the women-nature relationships are strengthened in their "social, material, and political" contexts ("Feminist Theory: Ecofeminist and Cultural Feminist").

Greg Gerrard in his book *Ecocriticism* also says that ecofeminists would argue that if both- women and nature- are degraded due to their so-called affinities- then it is necessary to assail the patriarchal hegemony by "reversing the terms, exalting nature, irrationality, emotion and the ...body as against culture, reason and the mind" (26).

In her PhD thesis, Mathew Rashmi Lee's reference to the different types of ecofeminisms suggests that the above-mentioned varieties could be regrouped under different nomenclatures such as: Nature ecofeminism, Spiritual ecofeminism, Transformative ecofeminism, Global ecofeminism (10).

Also known as advocates of 'difference feminism', ecofeminists like Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies believe that society must learn to respect women precisely because they are instinctively and biologically closer to nature than men. Being proud of the difference between the feminine and masculine attributes, they argue that due to their aggressive, manipulative and possessive characteristic features, men have waged wars and thus

caused socio-ecological destruction. Males lack ecologically superior qualities like sympathy for all beings and the feminine protective instinct for life forms- which are naturally owned by women. Therefore, the ecologically superior qualities of women and the earth should be acknowledged as a strategy to infuse the pro-environmental female sensitivity in the present masculine power structures.

Limitations and Critique of Ecofeminisms

Interestingly, in “Ecofeminism” Katherine Miles exposes the paradoxical elitism of the white ecofeminists. She states that on one hand they appropriate the “indigenous cultures and religions for the purpose of advancing their own philosophical positions,” and, on the other hand, they endorse luxurious life styles which commodify not only nature but also damage the economic and ecological positions of the same indigenous women located either in their own developed country, or in the other developing/underdeveloped countries. Besides discussing the issues of these economically and ecologically marginalized women, Miles also refers to the practice of including queer theory in ecofeminist discourse, which deals with the marginalization of people having transgender orientations.

While drawing our attention to the limitations of radical ecofeminism on account of its traps of essentialism and anti-scientism, in *Ecocriticism*, Garrard quotes opinions of some ecofeminists like Warren and Biehl, J., suggesting that a balanced feminist perspective on environment must include under its critical gaze both masculinity as well as femininity. Garrard also suggests that due care needs to be taken while adopting the strategy “to reverse the androcentric priority of reason over emotion” since it may lead to anti-scientism as it happened in the case of Mary Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology* (1979) which, according to him, utilizes a “vaguely ‘green’

rhetoric in service of sententious....and unqualified assault on the ‘phallic myth and language’ of science, especially medical science” (27).

However, considering the western utilitarian strategies and techno-scientific exploitation of the natural resources of the colonized countries in the past, ecofeminists like Vandana Shiva would warn the humanity regarding the dangerous environmental implications of the phallogentric thinking that has often governed the techno-scientific discourses as well as the global economic narratives.

Indeed, the strength of ecofeminism lies in the fact that though it includes such a great variety of contrasting and complementing opinions and theories within the umbrella term called ecofeminism, these different ecofeminist schools are nevertheless closely connected by their common program of resisting the inherent patriarchal power systems that damage environment.

In one or the other form, they all underline, as Bhatt’s women characters do, the importance of adopting an all-comprehensive, non-violent, organic world view to protect diversities among people as well as among all the living organisms.

3.2 Ecofeminist Activism in India

When the Oxford dictionary has declared the Hindi word ‘nari-shakti’ (the power of women) as the ‘word of the year-2018’, it is important to see how ecofeminist voices of India have attempted to deal with the tensions arising from time to time out of the perennial ecopolitics being played among ecologic interests and economic forces. At the same time, a brief look at the contribution of the female voices into the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) will also not be out of place here since the entire story of Bhatt’s *That Thou Art* takes place in the Narmada valleys, and majority of all the characters of this text, who are engaged in preserving the eco-sensitive tribal culture, are women.

Ecofeminist activism could be traced in the pre-independent India. If we remember one of the most known episodes of that era, we need to go back to 1730s. Precursors to the globally well-known Chipko Aandolan of India of 1970s were four brave Bishnoi women from Rajasthan: namely Amrita Devi and her three daughters Asu, Ratni and Bhagu. As mentioned in the Bird's-Eye-view of this thesis, when Maharaja Abhaysingh of Jodhpur sent his men to their village to get the plenty of wood he required to build his new Royal palace, these women boldly stopped the king's party from felling the trees. Making them remind the Bishnois' nature-centric religious tenets, Amrita Devi said to the king's men: "If a tree is saved even at the cost of one's head, it's worth it." True to her words, Amrita Devi and her daughters did offer their heads which were brutally axed one by one by the king's men. That bloody incident stirred a robust eco-movement and ultimately the king had to order his men to stop the logging operations ("Amrita Devi").

Drawing inspiration from that historical movement, when Chipko Movement started in 1973, womenfolk of the Himalayan villages played a crucial role in protecting the forests by hugging the trees to save them from being felled by the commercial loggers sent by the sports-goods-manufacturing private companies.

Besides supporting afforestation, as Saalumara Thimmakka did in Karnataka, in the post-independent India, anti-ecological practices like illegal mining, commercial deforestation and animal cruelties were actively opposed by various women activists such as: the Gandhian followers Miraben (the author of *Something Wrong in the Himalaya*), Sarala Behn (the author of *Reviving our Dying Planet*), Bimla Behn, and Radha Bhatt. Some of the other important names in such movements are: Basanti Devi, Kinkri Devi, Maneka Gandhi, Tulsi Gowda, Almitra Patel, Amla Ruia, Champa Devi Shukla, Rashida Bee, Sumaira Abdulali etc.

Today, India has also many notable ecofeminists like Vandana Shiva, Priya Pillai, Arundhati Roy, Megha Patkar, Sunita Narain etc., who have been known globally for their involvement in the grass-root politics for sustainable growth, for their eco-social campaigns as well as for their literary activism.

The Narmada Bhachao Andolan (NBA) (i.e., Agitation to Protect the Narmada) had started around 1985 by the forest-dwelling tribals and the villagers living in and around the Narmada valleys, who were to be affected most by the huge number of dams which were to be built on the Narmada river. Being a human right activist and environmentalist, again it was a female voice of Megha Patkar, who had spearheaded that NBA campaign, along with Baba Amte.

Out of the thirty dams constructed on the Narmada, the largest one is the Sardar Sarovar Dam of Gujarat. Being the second largest concrete dam in the world, its impact on the natural ecology, on the biodiversity and on the socio-economic conditions of the forest-dwellers was supposed to be quite huge. The prospective victims became anxious about execution of the proposed rehabilitation plans of the displaced people. So, the forest tribes and villagers launched a mass movement to halt the construction of the dam. Agitators claimed that such projects must not be approved without consulting the local stakeholders, and without conducting socio-economic and ecologic impact of the same by appropriate agencies.

The NBA drew global attention and consequently the World Bank withdrew its financial support from the project. For some years, the construction work was halted while the supreme court of India deliberated on this issue. However, finally the court permitted the authorities to complete the

project. This decision was taken by a panel of three judges. Two judges voted in favor of construction, whereas the comment of Justice Barucha, who voted against this decision, clearly warned against the gravity of the ecological impact of the project. He stated:

Considering the magnitude of rehabilitation, involving a large percentage of tribals, loss of extensive forest area rich in biological diversity, enormous environmental cost of the project and considering the fact that the basic data on vital aspects are still not available there could be but one conclusion, that the project(s) are not ready for approval. (“Narmada Bachao Andolan vs. Union of India” 4)

In her article “Cost of Living,” Arundhati Roy, the celebrated Indian novelist and environmentalist, also draws our attention to the disastrous ecological impact of the Narmada dam project on the natural as well as the social ecologies of the states of Gujarat, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. She sensitizes the issue of prioritizing the need to focus on redressing ecological tragedies within the state (6).

In January 2015, Priya Pillai, on behalf of an NGO called Green Peace India, was on her way to meet with the British MPs to make a presentation before them about the drastic socio-ecological damage to be borne by a forest region of MP if a London-based company is allowed to start their coal mining project in that area. But government authorities thought that she might damage image of India in England. So, before Pillai’s London flight took off, she was offloaded from the airbus by a government order.

However, in March 2015, the government took decision to deallocate the proposed coalmine. Pursuing her PhD research on the Renewable Energy Resources, Pillai says: “Environmentalism is not a box. All the issues are interconnected. The problem is when environmental activists won’t talk to feminists, or they won’t talk

to Adivasi activists or to minority rights activists and so on” (Cris. “Years After the Spotlight Shifted, Activist Priya Pillai Continues Her Human Rights Fight”).

**Vandana Shiva’s ‘Difference Ecofeminism’ or
‘Cultural’/ ‘Spiritual Ecofeminism’**

In order to remove the politics of gender discrimination from environmental discourse, as discussed above, when some ecofeminists vehemently refuse to accept the stereotypical attributional comparison between women and nature, being Cultural/Spiritual ecofeminist from India, Vandana Shiva, encourages those traditional woman-earth comparisons in order to strengthen their ecofeminist theory from a very different perspective.

In *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*, Shiva begins her third chapter by stating that in India, women “are an intimate part of nature, both in imagination and in practice.” Referring to the exoteric and esoteric traditions of Indian cosmology, she argues that:

the tension between the opposites from which motion and movement arises is depicted as the first appearance of dynamic energy (Shakti).... Nature, both animate and inanimate, is thus an expression of Shakti, the feminine and creative principle of the cosmos; in conjunction with masculine principal (purusha), Prakriti creates the world. (38)

Shiva also notes that Indian traditions worship ‘prakriti’ as ‘Aditi’- which means “primordial vastness, the inexhaustible source of abundance,” and it is also honored as ‘Adi Shakti’- being the “primordial power” whose “creative impulse” - a “will-to-become many (‘Bahu-Syam-Prajayera’)” gives rise to diverse life forms. So, unlike the Cartesian/ Enlightenment conception of mechanistic nature which has

produced rupture between man-nature, according to Shiva, Indian traditions propose that “creative force and created world are not separate”. Their Prakritik forms may look different, but they are interlinked through a common consciousness termed as ‘Shakti’. Quoting from *Kalika Purana*, Shiva says that ““within the apparently inanimate rivers and mountains there dwells a hidden consciousness”” (39).

Establishing the significance of the feminist perspective in the cotemporary environmental scenario that has enriched the Indian cosmic vision as well as the tribal wisdom, Shiva opines that:

The ontological shift for an ecologically sustainable future has much to gain from the world-views of ancient civilizations and diverse cultures which survived sustainably over centuries. These were based on ontology of the feminine as a living principle, and on an ontological continuity between society and nature- humanisation of nature and the naturalisation of society. Not merely did this result in ethical context which excluded possibilities of exploitation and domination, it allowed the creation of an earth family. (*Staying Alive* 41)

Shiva rejects the male-centric narratives of the so-called first world economies that plunder forests and pollute rivers for their profit-driven motives under pretexts of socio-economic development of the less-privileged gender/ social sections.

On the political front, it was Indira Gandhi whose actions showcased how pro-active a female politician could be in her environmental pursuits. It was she who introduced a separate Ministry of Environmental Affairs for the first time in India, and who became the first Environment Minister of India. It was during her tenure

that the Indian political system started showing interest in addressing women-nature issues from eco-social perspectives. For example, the Equal Remuneration Act of 1976 tended to protect socio-economic equality of the women; and, during the same period various acts such as the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972, and the Water Pollution Act of 1974 were also passed.

Issues regarding the negative impact of industrial developments on ecology did come up during her times, but according to Jayram Ramesh, the ex-minister of Environment and Forest (2009-2011), Mrs. Gandhi was the only politician on international platform in 1970s to exhibit genuine sensitivity for environmental protection. In an interview with Lopamudra Ghatak, discussing his documentary book entitled *Indira Gandhi: A Life in Nature*, Ramesh says that Mrs. Gandhi sought advice from the internationally reputed Indian ornithologist Salim Ali on the environmental impact of the Silent Valley Hydroelectric Project on Kunthipuzha River of Kerala, and the Keoladeo National Park of Bharatpur of Rajasthan. Nevertheless, according to Jayram, “the development needs and demographic pressure in India” had made Mrs. Gandhi later considerably anxious about protecting the ecological interests of India.

It is pertinent to note that after Mrs. Gandhi’s assassination, in the wake of the Bhopal Gas tragedy, the Environment Protection Act- an umbrella act- of 1986 was passed under Article 253. This Act empowers the Indian states and the central government to protect human beings and the flora and fauna from industrial hazards and pollutants. However, India seems to be struggling still to deal with incidents like the Vizag industrial tragedy- which took place in May 2020. Such incidents exhibit how industrialists can flaunt environmental norms and ethics in India.

In an article published in 2018, entitled “Environmental Governance: India’s changing scenario,” A.K. Ghosh observes that for the first time in the environmental history of India “there is no separate Union Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC).” Referring to the 25 % budget cut in MoEFCC, and the 2014/2016 amendments that have increased the state governments’ powers to grant environment clearances to the developmental but ecologically controversial projects of mining and river valley, A.K. Ghosh observes that now “India seems to move in a reverse direction” if one remembers the environmental goals which were set in 1980s.

In Bhatt’s fictional world also, the environmental concerns of the women characters and their personal stances to protect existential rights of the non-human entities are indicative of their all-embracing view of life and the Indian cosmic vision they represent; be them Aima and Sansai of *Akoopar*, Vaal-baai and Jaanki of *Oceanside Blues*, or Supriya and Kaliwali Ma of *That Thou Art*. Their approach to the world around them reflect, to borrow Shiva’s words from her above-mentioned quote, “an ontological continuity between society and nature.”

In *That Thou Art*- it is the Narmada river - which integrates each thread of the story. It must be noted that her image as a holy mother - like the planet earth herself- has been identified as a female entity in the social psyche since thousands of years. Considering the presence of the river in whose backdrop the entire story of *That Thou Art* takes place; it becomes pertinent to have a close look at this text from ecofeminist point of view.

In *That Thou Art*, the protagonist’s act of going on a holy pilgrimage around Narmada reflects the actual socio-religious importance of the Narmada River. Devotees, who undertake to complete ‘parikrama’ of around 2600 km,

circumambulate the river on foot from its roots to its submergence into the sea, while passing through the forests and valleys without crossing the river during their entire journey-which used to take more than three years in the recent past.

During the textual interpretation we will see how the trajectory of the protagonist's territorial travel along the river bank in *That Thou Art* provides the author with a huge imaginative canvas to chart a simultaneous inward/outward progress of the protagonist- who continue to imbibe the spiritual heritage, socio-cultural ethos and the environmental wisdom of the tribals he comes into contact with.

Bhatt's Ecofeminism: A Non-Aggressive Blending of the Liberal and Cultural Ecofeminisms

The following study of Bhatt's women characters will surely reveal that their ecofeminist pleas are quite different from majority of the ecofeminist voices and varieties mentioned above. Since they do not directly confront with the existing patriarchal systems, their stance may be classified under liberal ecofeminism. At the same time, as it will soon be discussed here, Bhatt's male protagonists' often compare women with the earth and the goddesses due to the compassion they show for humans and non-humans. On account of the remarkable degree of ecosensitivity displayed by all of Bhatt's female characters, they can also be categorized as cultural ecofeminists.

In the following discussion it will be noticed that instead of taking bold and aggressive stance for protecting the natural and social environments of the vanishing tribal cultures, Bhatt's characters prefer to take indirect methods and persuasive tone to underline the significance of conservation activities.

As discussed in the second chapter, although ecocritics do appreciate the writings that express the authors' ardent love for nature and for the cultures that preserve nature, they would certainly disprove the authors' reluctance to expose the discernable apathy of the power structures and their drastic impact on the natural environs. In this context, one cannot neglect the fact that *That Thou Art*, in which the image of Narmada River emerges as holy mother, does not accommodate a single reference to the NBA. It may be noted that *Tattvamasi* (original Gujarati version of *That Thou Art*) was published in 1988- when NBA, which had begun in 1985, had already caught global attention for its activism to protect Narmada and her eco-cultural environs.

However, it will be interesting to see how the Bhatt's Romantic portrayal of Narmada makes us acutely aware about what we have lost and what we may lose in future if environmental issues are not treated with serious attention.

As stated before, although Bhatt's mode of writing may seem to be lacking the punch of the writers of the literature of 'commitment', as the following discussion would unfold, his persuasive style does succeed in convincing the reader about honoring the power of ecofeminist plea in environmental discourse. The pivotal position the Narmada holds on the literary landscape of *That Thou Art* does indicate her significance in the Indian topography, in the Indian spiritual traditions as well as in the cultural consciousness of India.

To contextualize the ecological and cultural positions of the Narmada in the textual interpretations, at this point it seems necessary to reiterate some information given about her in the article entitled "Narmada River."

3.3 Narmada: Its Ecological, Mythological, Spiritual, Geo-Cultural and Socio-Economic Significance.

The Narmada is the longest river among the three Indian rivers that flows from East to West. So far as the issue of preserving the socio-ecological rhythm is

concerned, it is pertinent to note at the very outset that in addition to being a life-line for a huge human population of Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat, the Narmada also shelters an extremely rich floral and faunal biodiversity that throb along the regions of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat from where she flows.

The Narmada originates from the Narmada ‘kund’ located in the Maikal Hills of the Amarkantak region of Anuppur district of Madhya Pradesh- where the Vindhya and Satpura ranges meet. Before merging into the Arabian sea through the gulf of Khambhat in Gujarat, during her long journey of around 1300 km, it continues to replenish the immensely huge ecoregion through her tributaries and water falls, while quenching the socio-economic needs as well as the physical and spiritual thirst of human beings since centuries.

In Sanskrit, the popular meaning of ‘Narmada’ is: ‘the one whose very sight evokes feelings of pleasure.’ Another name of Narmada is ‘Reva’- which reflects the name of ‘Rati’- one of the most revered deities among the sixty-four ‘yoginies’ (‘joginies’/ ‘matajies’/ Motherly deities), who form retinue of Goddess Durga in the Hindu mythology. In Marathi language, ‘small pebbles’ may be called ‘Reva’; and the same term also implies the sweet murmuring sound of the waters which can be heard in the quiet of the night. Due to her leaping motion through rocks, in Puranas also, Narmada is called Reva- the root word being 'rev'. In fact, the Reva-khandas of Skanda/Vayu Puranas, as their titles suggest, delineate the stories pertaining to her birth and its importance in the Hindu religious contexts, and the Ramayana and the Mahabharata have also referred to her sacredness. According to a Hindu myth, a tear of the Creator of the Universe Brahma had turned into Narmada, while his other tear became the river Brahmaputra. One of the meanings of ‘Amarkantaka’, from where the Narmada begins its journey, is ‘the neck of Lord Shiva.’

Narmada has also been called ‘Shankari’ since in some stories she has been described as a daughter of Lord Shiva and the river Ganga. The round pebbles found on the banks of Narmada are therefore adored as Shivalingam by many Hindu devotees who believe them to be personified forms of the Lord Shiva himself. So, according to Hindu faith, a dip in the Narmada, which holds a very important place among the seven holy rivers of India, has been spiritually empowered to wash away human sins (“Narmada River”).

It is also believed that Adi Shankaracharya met his Guru on her divine banks, and Shankaracharya’s *Narmadashtakam* describes that in the sacred lap of Narmada, numerous water species and birds have thrived; and Rishis have found in her a great source of spiritual peace (*Evergreen Messages of Spirituality, Sanskrit and Nature*).

The biodiversity of the Narmada ecoregions is enriched by more than 275 species of birds and 76 species of mammals. Like many other parks and sanctuaries developed along the bank of the river, the ‘Shoolpaneshwar’ Sanctuary of Gujarat is also rich with exceptional biodiversity. It is a home to sloth bear, Russell’s wipers and kraits, leopards, tigers, owls, hawks etc.

The Satpura and Kanha National parks of the Madhya Pradesh are also a home to tigers and many other endangered species. Described vividly in Rudyard Kipling’s *Jungle Book*, the Kanha National Park, which is one of the best National Parks of Asia, boasts of its remarkable tiger conservation activities. In *That Thou Art*, a man-eater tigress kills Bunga- who is one of the two inseparable tribal brothers jointly known as BittuBunga, and who had jointly created a device to preserve water for their village. A few days after Bunga’s death, the same tigress incidentally gets trapped into the device they had made. The thought of avenging his brother’s killing crosses Bittu’s mind. However, when Bittu finds that the tigress is pregnant, in a moving scene, he rescues her- instead of killing her.

The tribal wisdom in Bhatt's fiction which prioritizes preservation of ecology over human passions also establishes the importance of protecting the social ecology and economic backbone of those tribal communities which have thus been protecting environmental interests of the forests since generations.

3.4 Egocentrism to Ecocentrism: Following the Ecofeminist Tracks

Bhatt's protagonists are not willing at first to leave the comfortable milieus of their respective cities and towns. It is the pressures exerted from outside sources- such as assignments given to them by their higher academic authority (as in *That Thou Art*) or government project (as in *Oceanside Blues*), or financial necessities (as in *Akoopar*)- that push them to enter natural environs of sea shores or a forest region or river valleys respectively. After encountering the people who live amid nature, gradually all these protagonists begin to appreciate their ways of maintaining harmony between human-Nature relationships.

In *That Thou Art*, the protagonist is a youth born in India, who is engaged with cultural studies at an American university. Initially, being a student of Human Resource Development, the protagonist of *That Thou Art* refuses to believe that "wandering among tribals" can help much in "increasing productivity" or in maximizing the potential of human beings (4).

When Mr. Rudolf, his American professor, decides to send him to India to study the tribal culture of the Narmada valley, he clearly shows his unwillingness to do so initially- since the very thoughts of leaving his American friend Lucy's company, going out of the comfort zones of his American modes of life, entering into the unknown forest areas of India, and staying there with the poor tribal folk nauseate him at first.

His reluctance to leave techno-scientifically advanced America, and his initial dislike to go to work with the illiterate tribals of India epitomizes the increased psychological and physical distances between modern city youth and Nature.

His tendency to keep away from Nature would have isolated him from opportunities to learn ecological lessons from the communities living in the forest valleys, whose culture has trained them to preserve natural environs. Nevertheless, since his professor has asked him to go to India, the protagonist has to fly from the USA to Mumbai to Bhopal; and from there he has to travel by train to reach a flag station- from where one Mr. Guptaji escorts him to an Ashrama situated amid the forests of the Narmada valley.

The Ashram that stands on the bank of Narmada is a Tribal-Welfare-Centre managed by a young and educated girl, Supriya Bharatiya. As her surname would suggest, she is an icon of Indian cultural consciousness. By co-operating the tribal folks in discovering new methods of collecting honey from the valley and selling it in the city bazar, in her own way, Supriya attempts to introduce policies of sustainable development among the poor but hard-working forest dwellers.

In her leisure time, Supriya reads Indian epics like the Mahabharata, and by helping those unfamiliar Narmada- 'parikramawasis,' (those who travel on foot all the way around the holy Narmada River), she supports the great Indian cultural traditions that teaches lessons of having a harmonious co-existence between man-man and man-Nature. Boldly fighting against the male-oriented tribal superstitious, she intelligently manages to save innocent youths like Puriya- who was supposed to be burnt alive in public on account of the cruel witch-hunt traditions.

Ganesh Shastri, a Brahmin, well-versed in the matters of the Hindu religion, spirituality and classical music, offers his full cooperation to the 'parikramawasis' and

other activities of the Ashrama. During his free hours, the protagonist attempts to learn to play Tabla from Ganesh Shastri. An eccentric character called Gandu fakir can be found strolling in the jungle at unexpected hours. He has been respected by all the forest dwellers for his compassion for all the poor tribals and his selfless love for all the non-human entities living in the lap of Narmada. To show his mysterious affinity with nature, in the movie *Reva*, he is shown talking to the river and the birds in an occult language. Guptaji is a small businessman having a shop and a house in the town not very far from the forest. He lends money to the tribals without taking their thumbs on paper. On full moon days, he goes to the forest in his jeep where the tribals offer him honey or cucumber in lieu of the interest against the money they borrow from Guptaji.

Before the protagonist comes to India, back in the USA, Professor Rudolf had already advised him to “do some participatory observation” in order to achieve something more than “mere data collection” about the tribal culture (5).

So, the protagonist becomes a part of many important events taking place in and around the Narmada valley. He happens to develop close affinity with the illiterate but most intelligent tribal youths like Puriya, BittuBanga, Tempudiyo and Zurko. He also begins to learn cultural lessons from Supriya and Ganesh Shastri.

Before the protagonist meets Supriya Bharatiya, and gathers her opinions on tribal culture, he happens to come across some other important female figures who leave deep impact on his conceptions about nature. The same pattern repeats in all the three works under consideration: For example, in *That Thou Art*, the protagonist meets the old woman and Puriya in the train before he embarks upon his cultural studies; in *Akoopar*, it is Sansai who guides him into the Gir forest to reach Aima’s home; and in *Oceanside Blues* it is Vaad-baai and her daughter Jaanki- who

welcomes him into the new world and arranges his journey to the estate bungalow-his destination. Symbolically, it is the female sensitivity which introduces Bhatt's protagonists to Natural milieus, and guides them to set off his journey from ego-to-eco consciousness.

What is important to note is that in all the three texts under consideration, Bhatt selects only male characters to make them undergo one or the other kinds of transformations, and in these transformations female characters play dominant roles.

All the three novels mentioned above open and end with dialogues spoken by female characters, whose words contain thematic essence of Bhatt's fiction. They all express essence of the Indian environmental wisdom.

Oceanside Blues opens with a scene in which the protagonist is watching a little girl Jaanaki, singing and playing near a light house on a seashore. As he is unknown to the oceanic terrains, Jaanaki is her local guide to lead her to a hill-top-located temple of a goddess known as 'Shikotar mata.' Sitting on this small hill top, a small flashback into his recent past makes him remember how his heart was overwhelmed by the warmth and hospitality of Jaanaki and her mother Vaal-baai-although he was a total stranger to them.

While entering an orchard in front of Vaal-baai's house, the narrator admits: "My urban sense of propriety made me ask the girl, 'Dear, May I use the bucket?'" Then from Jaanaki he hears the words, which his ears could not believe. Jaanaki tells this stranger : "'Go on, help yourself. Here none'd deny thee a thing.'" The author's inner voice exclaims: "...O little girl! Who are you?... a manifestation of motherhood that encompasses the entire universe in its loving fold and wraps it snug in warmth tranquility and freedom?" (5). *Akoopar* also begins with the words of Aima, an elderly woman, who blesses the Gir forest (7).

That Thou Art begins and ends with scenes in which we find a little girl, offering a corn cob to the starving, half-clad, half-conscious narrator, repeating compassionately: Take this. Come on, eat this” (2).

In *That Thou Art*, during his first train journey to Bhopal, when he sees an elderly woman, his co-traveler, trying to open the window, he helps her in doing so. As he sees the lady throwing a coin through the window into the river Narmada flowing below, the protagonist slides into his childhood memories. He remembers the train journey he had with his Naani Ma many years back. Like the elderly co-traveler, when his Naani Ma threw a coin into the river, she had said: “Oh Narmada Ma, take care of my grandson!” (8). As a child he did not fully understand the rationale behind such an act. But now, when he has grown young, his love of logic does not allow him to approve of such sentimental acts. So, when he hears his unfamiliar co-traveler blessing him and saying, “May Ma Narabda protect you,” he at once argues “Maaji...does a river protect one or does she drown one?” To this, the elderly woman calmly replies, “That depends on each person’s faith, beta” (13). Though at first her reply seems to irritate the protagonist, it immediately opens a new insight for him that a river, like other natural elements, is also alive; and our intensions often determine the quality of her response. Also, while alighting the train, the old lady once again prays to the Narmada to protect the life of the protagonist- whom she has never met before, nor she may even meet him in future (13).

In *Oceanside Blues*, it is Vaal-baai, the poor peasant woman who, cracking her knuckles on her temples, prays to take upon herself “all the miseries that were to befall” the protagonist- who has met him for the first time (6). In *Akoopar*, Sansai leads the protagonist through the labyrinths of the greenwood, passing by the lioness and making him reach to the Maldhari’s ‘ness’. These acts by female characters

explain why both women and rivers have been honored as motherly figures in the Indian traditions.

After parting from the elderly co-traveler in *That Thou Art*, the protagonist boards a night-train to reach a flag station located in a dense forest from where he would travel towards the Ashrama along with Gupataji. Inside the compartment, the presence of his co-travelers- most of them being tribals- irritates the protagonist. There he sees Puriya, a graceful tribal girl with black complexion, singing joyfully some tribal folk song. Before the daybreak, when the protagonist also gets down to the station along with the other tribals, he finds Puriya voluntarily carrying his bedding on her head. The protagonist asks her to leave him alone as Guptaji would come there to receive him. Yet, out of her selfless concern for this unfamiliar newcomer, Puriya refuses to leave him alone in an area- which was frequented by tigers and bears. For the same reason, she is also prepared to accompany him on that spot till the day breaks (16).

Before reaching the Ashrama, Guptaji and the protagonist proceed towards Guptaji's home for a night's stay. Here, the protagonist meets Parvati Ma, Guptaji's mother, whose loving care and practical wisdom has kept the whole family united.

When they enter the house, Guptaji washes his face, hands and feet- a cultural tradition to respect the sanctity of one's temple-like home; and before the protagonist steps into the house, Guptaji asks the protagonist also to finish this ritual. The protagonist says: "I would have been happy if Guptaji had told me to wash my hands for the sake of hygiene and cleanliness." But what annoys him is Guptaji's admission that if they do not do so, "... Maa will not like it" (23). The protagonist does not approve of the idea that an old lady does not allow even her fifty-year-old-son a little freedom from a dogmatic ritual.

In fact, this incident makes him again slide into reminiscences of his childhood days he had spent in a small village in Kutch region at his Naani Maa's home, followed by the death of his mother. He remembers how early in the morning Shantimami, his maternal aunt, also used to arouse him saying: "Bhanabhai, please wake up! If you get up after sunrise, Ba will not like it" (27). In fact, it is the thoughts of his Grandma that predominate the protagonist's childhood memories under whose care and guidance their joint family had remained unified despite weak economic conditions they faced in the wake of his grandpa's early demise. The matriarchal respect offered to his own Naani Maa at that time, and now to Parvati Ma does upset him initially, but the turbulences of his male ego soon subside as he witnesses streams of love flowing selflessly from both of these female figures.

Parvati Ma supervises all the arrangement for the guests' night stay. She sings a lullaby to Supriya and massages his son Guptaji's hair. This grand woman does not fail to offer even the protagonist-a newcomer-to oil his hair. At night, she sings: "... Adi Niranjana akal saroop, Ramji liye Khelan roop, Prithvi ke pavan bhai manashya..." That is to say that since the times immemorial, the 'prithvi'-mother earth- that embraces all life forms are 'saroops' (forms) of the same 'akal saroop' of God-lord Rama. The theme of 'Vasudhiava Kutumbakam', the tune and delicate strength of Parvati Ma's songs sung in the moonlit night leave a deep impact on the protagonist's consciousness. The moonlight suddenly makes him remember his American friend Lucy who has deep interest in the star-formation that one witnesses in the night skies. He imagines Lucy telling Parvati Ma : "Isn't it thrilling to surmise that this endless vast universe has been created from one single reality?" Next morning when he sits to write a letter to Lucy about his experience of the previous night, he does not forget to add: "Lucy, an uneducated old lady in a little village amidst these vast

forests, was singing what the universities and many other learned people are trying to find out or establish through a lot of research and study..." (30,31).

Akoopar begins with Aima's words "'Khama Gayrne'." This elderly 'Maldhari' woman represents environmental wisdom of all the dwellers of the Gir forest, as her words quoted here express a deep sense of reverence and gratitude to the planet earth for bearing and nourishing all life forms in spite of so much burden the earth bears and so many shocks she receives (7). "In this woman's expression of *Khama*," the narrator explains later in the story, "one hears the command to Nature to compensate the losses the earth sustains. It also carries in it the sense of co-existence with the life that suffers from pain on this planet earth" (257).

In *Akoopar*, the protagonist travels across the widely spread regions of the Gir forest along with Sansai for several days in order to accompany her on her mission to detect the lion-trap-setters. The narrator has already witnessed the earth-like strength and the instinctive urge to protect all life forms in Aima, Sansai, Rani, and the Gir forest itself in which they live. So, the author comments that Gir is the "daughter of Ravitachal (mount Girnar)" having a "unique environ" of her own, "ever-alive, ever-enchanting...ever-alluring.... which is known in the entire world through a nomenclature having a feminist gender...and except her name...no descriptions, nor any other names can fully explain her distinctive nature (130).

As mentioned in *That Thou Art*, it is also important to note that the loss of his mother in his early childhood seems to have motivated the protagonist of the tale in seeking motherly warmth in the emotional bond he develops with so many female figures throughout the story. One of such important female figures in the story is 'Kalewali Ma'.

Kalewali Ma: The Mother Earth

Once, while accompanying his American friend Lucy, who also wants to study the culture of the tribals, the protagonist accidentally meets Kalewali Ma, who is another important female character of the novel.

Living in a womb-like cave in the forest valley known as ‘Rani Gufa’ (The Queen’s Cave), Kalewali Ma is a living deity for a tribe called ‘SaathSaali.’ The protagonist knows the secret that the Ma is actually Vanita, Supriya’s mother. Therefore, besides helping Lucy in her cultural studies, the protagonist is also curious to peep into the mystical aspects of Kalewali Ma’s life.

‘SaathSaalis’, according to the Kalewali Ma, are very caring and selfless people who help any strangers who have lost their way in the jungle. In fact, earlier in the story, once, when the protagonist is wounded in the forest, Kalewali Ma asks the SaathSaalis to carry the wounded protagonist to an ayurvedic-practitioner called Keeko Vaid, who cures his wounds.

Seeing the protagonist’s American friend Lucy jotting down a lot many details about the SaathSaalis, Kalewali Ma requests her not to publicize them. Ma again requests her not “to let the world know the name of the place and the way to come here. [as] Very few of us are left. Please see that the whole world does not descend upon us and disturb us” (210).

Kalewali Ma’s statement reflects her ecofeminist anxiety of protecting the local socio-natural environments against the male-centric, money-oriented, aggressive currents of globalization- which can pollute the sanctity of her tribal world by exoticizing the same in the market.

Besides SaathSaalis, Kaliwali Ma is also deeply revered as a protective mother of the entire jungle by all the other forest dwellers. Interestingly, the sanctity of her Rani Gufa is not allowed to be violated by any male figures- except by her 'SaathSaali' escorts and devotees. The warmth of this Gufa protects the innocent witch-hunt victims like Puriya or other similar girls who have been ditched due to the unfair, patriarchal power systems. This is how under the motherly care of Kalewali Ma, this Gufa turns into a symbol of the earth herself, which attempts to guard gender-balance in her own ways so that all her earthlings can continue to carry out their existence.

Protecting Lions and Sharks in *Akoopar*

Sansai's attempts to identify the cruel trap-setters in Chapter-10 of the novel unearth the illegal maneuvers being carried out in the Gir forest to kill lions; and Chapter 20 raises the question of protecting the endangered Whale sharks from the massive, large-scale commercial hunting. The protagonist requests Rani, a lady sarpanch of a sea-coast-village of Ghed-region to convince the fishermen community to stop killing these whales- known as 'Bers' in Ghed- that come swimming long distances from the South ocean to their shore for breeding during specific seasons.

A big Ber cost around one lakh. So, being a leader of the village, for Rani it is difficult to convince the poor and illiterate fishermen to forgo their chances of earning handsome amount of money just in order to show sympathy for the shark. Nevertheless, being a woman, Rani plays her part perfectly well because of the feminine connection she establishes with the situation of the female sharks. She comes to know that the whale sharks that visit their shore are female sharks and they come to the Ghed-region just because the ecology of their region is suitable for them to give birth to their offspring. After spending some time over there, the shark

returns to her original habitat with her new-born calves. It is painful for Rani to imagine these whales being trapped in the fishing nets and losing their lives.

See how Bhatt's depiction of the scene in which Rani addresses the group of fishermen to share this information becomes indeed very important from the viewpoint of ecofeminism:

“So, listen to this and understand the matter, my brothers. The male *bers* do not come to this place. Here come only the female ones, only the daughters. They are here to give birth to their young ones.” Rani paused for some time and looked at the vast expanse of the sea as if trying to bring to her vision some familiar ship far at the horizon. Her heart filled with unbearable pain could be clearly seen reflected on her fair face.

Rani wiped her eyes with end of her *odhani*, looked at all the fisherman and said further, “The pregnant daughters who come to the parental home are caught along with their young ones. Is this fare on our part?”

All the listeners looked at each other, kept looking at Rani. None said anything. Rani added, “I agree that we have our trade and business. We have self-interest. But why would anyone kill the pregnant daughters for a large amount of money? That takes place under the flag of the world temple? Tell brothers, in the name of the deity you believe in- whether it is God, Allah or a Pir. Give your reply to this man who has come here and that's over.”

All of them look down and set in silence.

“I need no reply nor expect anyone to give me reply.” (244)

Bhatt has undoubtedly been able to effectively put across his ecofeminist stance by projecting the human responsibility in sustaining ecobalance through the poignant plea made by Rani.

Narrative Strategies : Juxtaposing Situations of the Helpless Fish and Women

What enhances the impact of this ecofeminist appeal on the reader's imagination is Bhatt's narrative strategy. He puts this scene on page numbers 242-243, i.e., just after narrating the shocking news of the fisherman Kadar's boat being captured by the Pakistanis. Kadar's boat has mistakenly crossed the 'other's' water boundaries. The protagonist, in context of the improved relations between the two countries, tries to console Rani that sooner or later the captives will surely return home. But Rani, feeling as if everything was over and knowing fully aware about the beastly reality regarding what would happen to their women in Pakistan, utters the words that leave the protagonist non-plussed. She says: “The male members would return but not the woman folk.” On realizing the full meaning of Rani's words, the narrator feels “a sharp stab of pain as the naked foot feels when a sharp thorn of babool penetrates the nerves” (243).

Bhatt's combination of poignant depictions and these kinds of narrative techniques enable the reader to vicariously link the conditions of women in Pakistan and that of the Shark whales in India when they cross the man-made water-boundaries under ecological compulsions and economic pressures.

In order to effectively unfold the changing psychological stance of his protagonists about nature, and about his beliefs regarding the dwellers of the forests and river-valleys, Bhatt effectively uses the epistolary method in *That Thou Art*.

Mostly Bhatt has used the Third-Person-Narrative technique to describe the beauty of nature and situational details of certain incidents. Minute details regarding the word-pictures he draws of trees, valleys, rivers, animals and birds in the dusk or in dawn adds not only aesthetic dimension to his narratives, but they also subtly establish the value of environmental preservation in the reader's mind.

While narrating situations through dialogues, in the original Gujarati versions of his works, one may appreciate the fact that Bhatt has taken special care to capture the typical linguistic sounds and dialects of the Maldharies of the Gir-forest, and that of the Kharvas (sailors) of the Ghed-Madhupur region in *Akoopar*. Regional flavors and tonal beauties contained in the dialogues of Sansai, Mer-leader Rani, Puriya, or Vaal-bai add to the linguistic richness of Bhatt's literature.

In *That Thou Art*, we come across the typical language spoken in the tribal belts across the Narmada valleys of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra. *Oceanside Blues* is also full of vernacular expressions of the communities living along the coast of Gujarat. He has also been able to create a mixed sense fear, adventure and thrill through effective narrations of some breath-taking experiences of the protagonists such as: encountering lions in the wild in *Akoopar*, or travelling alone in a boat amid turbulent waters of the sea in a moonlit night when the protagonist does not know swimming as depicted in *Oceanside Blues*. Devotional bhajans sung at night by elderly figures like Guptaji's mother and 'duhas' sung by forest guards like Dhanu create a sense as to how people who live amid nature also learn to celebrate existence by imbibing the musical harmony that might be observed in nature.

The First-Person Narration used in these novels enhances Bhatt's lyrical modes of looking at nature. At the same time, the first-person narration also lends

the authorial voice a typical authenticity which has been enriched by author's direct experience with the geo-cultural terrains he has depicted.

From 'I' to 'We': Ecofeminist Plea

The final goal of human life described in all Indian religions – whether it is Jainism or Buddhism or Hinduism- is spiritual enlightenment. The meaning of Enlightenment in India is that it is a state of consciousness which makes man transcended all kinds of dualisms and discriminations- i.e. the dualisms between man/woman, between man/ animal, material/spiritual, Nature/Culture etc. This kind of progress makes one transcend from the narrow domain of selfishness to the limitless scopes of selflessness. And a selfless person is prone to sacrifice self-perceived notions of progress to protect the environment which embraces all: men-women-animals-birds-plants-rivers-hills and rocks.

The common feature of all the three texts being discussed here is that along with the outward journeys the male protagonists make, Bhatt simultaneously charts trajectories of their internal growth - from 'I' to 'We', from selfishness to selflessness, from 'swa' (self) to 'samasthi' (cosmic self).

As shown on the back cover of *Tattvamasi*, this Sanskrit term has been mentioned in the Upanishad called the *Chhandogyopanishad*. The three words in the title 'Tat-tvam-asi' combine to mean 'I am That.' In the Indian spiritual traditions, 'tat' means the 'Brahman'- the boundless ultimate reality into which each living and non-living entities come into being and get dissolved in the same source at last; 'twam' refers to the limited self of an individual 'I', and 'asi' means 'to be'.

So, the Sanskrit parallel of the classical title *That Thou Art* could be: 'Aham Bhahmasmi'- which is a so-called declaration of 'liberation' from a spiritually enlightened person- who expresses his joy on being liberated from all mental

barriers that separate man from man, man from woman, and the human from the non-human.

Upanishadic values teach us that the individual self of each living entity ('twam' or 'I') is an inexplicable appearance of the ultimate reality ('tat'/ 'Brahman'). It is because of the illusion created out of our spiritual ignorance (known as 'maya' / 'avidhya' in Sanskrit) that the individuals believe that they have an existence separate from the limitless cosmic reality; and, the politics of this 'avidya' drives individuals and societies and nations to join the power games of dominating the 'other' for personal gains.

In fact, the politics of establishing domination start with the game of 'othering.' Some 'other' must be there on which dominion can be established. To single out the 'other,' patriarchy created gender hegemony (man versus woman) on account of the psychological differences attributed to both the sexes.

As discussed before, supporters of Radical ecofeminism opine that to strengthen the environmental conservation movement what the humanity needs to do is to incorporate all-inclusive policies and encourage organic view of life; and because women are usually born with these features, the self-centeredness of man could be diluted if socio-economic equality is established; and more and more ecofeminist voices are included in the political power systems which formulate and implement environmental laws. Bhatt's fictional world clearly shows how the graceful presence, emotional maturity and all-embracing vision of his women characters could naturalize humans and humanize nature.

Cultural/Spiritual ecofeminists like Shiva propose to translate the spiritual equality into social and economic equality. By reviving Goddess worship, they attempt to remove the gender-dualisms that exist in social consciousness, so that

environmental victimization of the marginalized voices- be that of women or that of non-human Nature-could be stopped, and environmental destruction could be minimized.

Bhatt's stories typify the Indian belief systems-in which the motherly image of women/ river/earth/nation/Goddess- occupy a very revered place. The oft-quoted Sanskrit sloka from Atharva Veda 'Yatra Naryastu Pujante Ramante Tatra Devata' suggests that honoring female energies is a precondition to receive blessings of the higher energies. In fact, the unifying power of the women characters in Bhatt's novels that binds families, human societies, cultures and even strangers and non-human elements in one harmonious whole do reflect this ideal very well.

3.5 Eco-feminizing Power Systems

As discussed above, in Bhatt's fictional world, Kalewali Ma holds a power position in the religious consciousness of the forest dwellers. In *Akoopar* Rani is a politically powerful figure of the Ghed region. Supriya manages the Ashrama, who holds a considerable sway over the social consciousness of the Narmada valley tribals. Both Sansai and Aima also hold superior positions in the social psyche of the Gir forest due to their deep concerns for all the entities living in the Gir forest. Guptaji's mother and Naani Ma in *That Thou Art*, or Vaal-baai, Jaanki and Aval in *Oceanside Blues*, or Sonal and Lajo in *Akoopar* leave deep impression on the reader's imagination due to their ecologically mature visions of life.

Their sympathetic but determined ways of dealing with unexpected situations remind us of Shiva's argument that in order to recover ecobalance of the earth, political structures need to be governed by matriarchal rather than the patriarchal power systems.

Bhatt's fiction mildly reminds us that while the fruition of the completed Narmada project is happily being shared mainly in the urban areas, and by the industrial sectors at present – it is good for the entire globe not to ignore the negative ecologic and economic impact on the lives of the marginalized, tribal communities and on the biodiversity.

In Bhatt's fiction, in the presence of the rejuvenating currents of Narmada, and in lap of the forest Gir herself, the male protagonists gradually learn to unlock the treasure of some important ecological and spiritual insights. And, in the company of the selfless women characters, they come to an important understanding that looking at the environmental problematic with ecofeminist sensitivity is an essential feature the humanity has but to imbibe while dealing with any local or global ecological situations.

While looking at the environmental problematic from economic point of view, as discussed earlier, a group of materialist ecofeminists claim that the root cause of environmental degradation is the gender-biased economic disparity. Ecosocialism, another important strand of ecocriticism, also agrees with these ecofeminists who raise their voices against economic disparity; but the focus of ecosocialists largely remains on uprooting the capitalist economic system, which according to them, is the fundamental cause of the present environmental predicament.

Ecosocialists accept that the worth of women's contribution being offered in the areas like childcare services, domestic chores and some agricultural odd jobs must be recognized. Because, after all, the collective goal of environmental equilibrium can be realized only if the states carry out their responsibility of establishing economic and ecologic equality among all of their citizens without distinctions of class and gender. However, as we will see while examining

Mohanty's *Paraja* through ecosocialist lenses in the next chapter, the first and foremost concern for ecosocialists is building a classless society rather than creating a society without gender distinctions. To fulfill this goal, they intend to change those political and economic systems which allow unrestricted powers to a select few which disrupt natural and social ecologies by extracting maximum profit from them both for personal gains and selfish motives.

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