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Mythology as a Tool of Oppression: Cultural Constructs and Ecofeminist Resistance in *Swarga* and *Budhini*

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Abstract

Myths have long been instrumental in shaping cultural narratives, often serving as tools to justify systemic oppression. This paper examines the role of myth in perpetuating environmental and gendered exploitation in the Indian novels *Swarga* by Ambikasuthan Mangad and *Budhini* by Sarah Joseph, drawing from ecofeminist and narrative theories. In *Swarga*, the myth of Jadadhari's curse rationalises the birth of malformed children, deflecting accountability for industrial disasters like endosulfan poisoning. Similarly, in *Budhini*, the wrath of the Sima Bongas is invoked to explain ecological crises such as floods and droughts, masking the impact of the Damodar Valley project on tribal communities. These myths, constructed through patriarchal frameworks, strip affected populations of agency and obscure the culpability of anthropogenic activities. This paper employs Vandana Shiva's and Maria Mies' ecofeminist critique to explore how patriarchal narratives exploit women and nature, while Gerard Genette's narrative theory elucidates the structural perpetuation of such myths. It further highlights the resistance of protagonists like Rupi and Devayani, who challenge these constructs and reclaim agency, embodying Karen Warren's principles of ecofeminist resistance. By juxtaposing mythic oppression with acts of defiance, the study underscores the necessity of reimagining development to harmonise ecological sustainability with social justice. This exploration contributes to contemporary discussions on postcolonial literature and ecofeminism, offering insights into the intersection of tradition, modernity, and resistance.

Keywords: Myth, Ecofeminism, Environmental Exploitation, Gendered Oppression, Resistance

Myths play a central role in shaping how societies understand suffering, morality, and social order. They are not merely imaginative stories but cultural systems that influence belief and behaviour. While myths often provide meaning and continuity, they can also function as ideological tools that legitimise inequality and suppress resistance. When social or environmental crises are explained through myth, human responsibility is displaced, and structural violence appears natural or inevitable.

In postcolonial India, development is frequently framed as national progress. Large-scale projects are justified in the name of growth and modernisation. Within this framework, mythology often intersects with state and industrial narratives to conceal ecological and human costs. Environmental degradation, displacement, and bodily harm are reframed as fate, curse, or divine will. Such explanations protect institutions from accountability and silence affected communities.

This dynamic is powerfully explored in *Swarga* by Ambikasuthan Mangad and *Budhini* by Sarah Joseph. Mangad, a Malayalam writer deeply engaged with environmental politics, bases *Swarga* on the real endosulfan tragedy in Kasaragod, Kerala, where pesticide spraying led to severe deformities and chronic illnesses. Sarah Joseph, a prominent feminist writer, foregrounds tribal displacement and gendered suffering in *Budhini*, situating her narrative within the politics of dam construction and state-led development.

This paper argues that mythology in these novels functions as a tool of oppression. It masks anthropogenic violence and reinforces patriarchal hierarchies. Drawing on ecofeminist theory, particularly the works of Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies, and Karen Warren, along with Gerard Genette's narrative theory, this study examines how myth operates structurally and ideologically. At the same time, it analyses moments of resistance where women interrogate mythic authority and reclaim agency.

Devdutt Pattanaik defines myth as "subjective truth." Myths do not depend on empirical verification. They depend on belief, repetition, and cultural legitimacy. They structure perception and guide interpretation. A myth becomes powerful when it is accepted collectively and transmitted across generations.

Gerard Genette's narrative theory helps explain how such myths are sustained within fiction. Narratives do not merely report events; they organise and frame them. Focalisation, voice, and repetition determine how readers perceive causality. In both *Swarga* and *Budhini*, myth is embedded in dialogue, memory, and communal storytelling. It is not presented as an external belief but as lived discourse.

Ecofeminism provides the critical lens through which this process can be examined. Vandana Shiva critiques development paradigms rooted in capitalist and patriarchal values. She argues that such systems treat nature as a passive resource and women as invisible labour. Development reduces both to commodities. Indigenous ecological knowledge is dismissed. Profit replaces care.

Maria Mies further explains how patriarchy naturalises women's suffering. Women are portrayed as self-sacrificing and resilient. Their endurance is moralised. This narrative hides exploitation and makes suffering appear natural.

Karen J. Warren speaks of "interlocking systems of domination" that connect gender oppression and ecological exploitation. Challenging myth, therefore, is not only intellectual. It is ethical. It disrupts hierarchical thinking and reclaims agency.

Both *Swarga* and *Budhini* illustrate how myth is used to normalise environmental violence and deflect responsibility. Ecological crises are explained as divine punishment or supernatural inevitability rather than as consequences of human action.

In *Swarga*, the myth of Jadadhari's curse explains the birth of malformed children. The villagers believe that divine wrath is responsible for deformity and illness. This belief obscures the real cause. The pesticide poisoning is rarely named openly. Instead, suffering is absorbed into spiritual narrative.

The following is the speech given by the leader in Enmakaje. This speech shows how the sentiments of the common folk are manipulated through mythology.

> "He described the uncompromising struggle he'd been conducting over the past two decades to solve the health problems at Enmakaje. He was sanguine about two things: one, these health problems are nothing but the night of troubles before the dawn of triumph in the land of Enmakaje. He referred to the story in the Puranas in which the gods and the demons tried to obtain Divine Ambrosia that could assure eternal life to the drinker. When they churned the ocean for it, what emerged first was a terrible poison, the Kalakoota - it was necessary before Amrit - Divine Ambrosia - could surface. From this day, he said, the Era of Amrit had begun... all the people of Enmakaje were to become deathless gods." (Mangad 220-221)

Here the politician uses the myth of Kalakoota and other cultural myths to justify environmental exploitation and degradation ofhuman life. The exchange between Panji and Neelakantan foregrounds the oppressive function of myth within the community:

> 'Is God Jadadhari so cruel, Panji? Why are these innocent children being punished thus?' Panji did not reply. When they had walked for some time in silence, he said, 'Chil'ren with big heads, the' wer' many 'ere. Al' died soo', the' don' live lon'. (71)

Neelakantan's question reveals moral outrage and disbelief. He confronts the idea that innocent children could be punished by a divine force. Panji's hesitant and resigned response, however, reflects how deeply the myth of Jadadhari's curse has been internalised. The deformities are not examined as the outcome of environmental contamination but are accepted as part of a supernatural order. In this moment, mythology operates as a mechanism that normalises suffering. It transforms a preventable, human-made disaster into an unquestionable divine act. By doing so, it shields state and corporate responsibility and disciplines the community into silence.

This oppressive structure becomes more visible when Panji turns to Neelakantan with misplaced hope: "'You must save those children. You have miraculous powers... only someone with such powers can live on the hill, that's what people believe'" (74). The belief in miraculous intervention reveals how myth redirects accountability away from systemic failure and towards supernatural expectation. Instead of demanding institutional justice, the villagers seek salvation through imagined powers. Neelakantan's response dismantles this illusion: "'What wondrous powers do I possess? I, who can't even save this child'" (74). His anguish exposes the emptiness of the mythic framework. The supposed miracle-worker is powerless before ecological devastation. Yet the myth persists, compelling the community to invest faith in supernatural rescue rather than confront the structures that caused their suffering. In this way, mythology functions as a tool of oppression. It sustains passivity, diverts anger, and protects the very systems responsible for destruction.

The narrative technique reinforces this deflection. Myth circulates through gossip, ritual, and inherited memory. No authoritative voice interrupts it immediately. This delay mirrors social silence. By the time scientific explanation surfaces, myth has already shaped perception.

From an ecofeminist perspective, this transformation of industrial violence into divine punishment is deeply patriarchal. It renders nature expendable and human bodies collateral. It also disciplines the community into resignation. If suffering is God's will, protest becomes blasphemy.

In *Budhini*, floods and famine are attributed to the anger of the Sima Bongas.

The Damodar Valley dam displaces tribal communities and submerges land. Yet villagers interpret ecological devastation as spiritual abandonment. They lament that the Bongas have turned away from them. However, the mythic explanation shifts attention from state power to divine will. The community internalises suffering.

The act of garlanding Nehru, which symbolically aligned Budhini with an outsider or *diku*, becomes the basis for her cultural condemnation. What was framed publicly as ceremonial participation in a national event is later mythologised within the community as a transgressive "marriage." The manji's declaration crystallises this transformation of political participation into moral offence: "A Santal girl has defiled her clan. She has married a *diku* by putting a garland of flowers upon his neck" (Joseph 123). The symbolic gesture is recast as betrayal, and Budhini's identity is reduced to a site of communal dishonour.

This reinterpretation reveals how mythology operates as a disciplinary structure. The ritual act is stripped of its historical context and redefined within a mythic moral code. By invoking cultural purity, the gram sabha legitimises *bitlaha* (excommunication) as a necessary corrective measure. Budhini is no longer treated as an individual but as a contaminating presence. The declaration that "She should not step on our soil to defile it" (Joseph 126) equates her body with pollution, turning cultural belief into a mechanism of expulsion. Here myth naturalises punishment and silences dissent.

The hypocrisy embedded within this ritualised morality becomes evident in the chieftain's ability to absolve himself: "The chieftain could beg pardon for the misdeed that had taken place during his time and later purify himself" (Joseph 126). Male authority can be ritually cleansed, but female transgression is treated as permanent stain. Myth therefore operates selectively. It protects male leadership while enforcing strict control over women's bodies.

The violence of the *bitlaha* intensifies this oppressive logic. Budhini's punishment is not merely administrative exclusion but public degradation. When "Stones were hurled at her, and the angry young men raced forward. They flung rocks at her as if they were chasing away a rabid dog" (Joseph 130), the imagery reflects how mythic notions of purity justify dehumanisation. The community's aggression is not framed as cruelty but as moral enforcement.

The injustice deepens when one considers the unequal consequences of the event. Robon Manjhi, who also participated in the ceremony, does not face comparable punishment. Budhini alone becomes the bearer of communal shame. The

gendered nature of mythic control becomes unmistakable. Her identity as a woman renders her vulnerable to symbolic redefinition and ritual expulsion.

In this context, mythology does not merely preserve tradition. It becomes an instrument of governance. The reinterpretation of a garland as marriage transforms political ceremony into moral transgression. *Bitlaha* becomes the cultural apparatus through which patriarchal authority reasserts itself. Myth thus functions as a tool of oppression, policing women's bodies and reinforcing communal hierarchy under the guise of cultural preservation.

The consequences of myth-driven oppression are disproportionately borne by women. Positioned at the intersection of environmental degradation and patriarchal control, women experience myth not merely as belief but as a lived structure that shapes everyday suffering.

In *Budhini*, women's lives are closely tied to land, forests, and rivers. Their daily labour—gathering resources, tending animals, and sustaining households—reflects an intimate dependence on ecology. When the Damodar Valley project displaces tribal communities, this relationship is violently disrupted. Hunger, disease, and loss of livelihood follow. Yet these hardships are explained as the wrath of the Bongas. Women are compelled to internalise suffering as divine punishment. Fear and resignation replace political resistance. Rupi observes the devastation and senses injustice. However, social pressure to conform to spiritual explanation isolates her. Resistance carries emotional cost. She risks alienation.

In *Swarga,* women like Devayani are positioned as passive bearers of both ecological and familial suffering. The myth of Jadadhari's curse erases the reality of chemical poisoning and moralises maternal pain. Deformed bodies and reproductive trauma are framed as fate rather than consequence. This reinforces Maria Mies' critique of patriarchal systems that naturalise women's endurance while exploiting their resilience. Women are expected to absorb loss silently, their labour and grief rendered invisible.

Across both novels, myth legitimises gendered oppression by converting environmental violence into spiritual destiny. This process keeps women's suffering private and unpoliticised. Ecofeminism challenges this logic by exposing how patriarchal narratives erase women's agency and ecological knowledge. The novels make it clear that environmental injustice is never neutral; it is structured through power relations that place women at the centre of loss.

Despite the oppressive power of myth, *Swarga* and *Budhini* also depict

moments of resistance. Women challenge dominant narratives by questioning divine explanations and naming human responsibility.

In *Budhini*, Rupi refuses to accept spiritual causality as an explanation for ecological devastation. While the community blames the Sima Bongas, Rupi identifies the dam as the true source of destruction. Her statement that it is the dam, not the river, that drowned the villages marks a critical shift in perception. By naming human intervention, she dismantles the myth that protects state-led development. Her resistance lies in reclaiming the right to interpret reality.

In *Swarga*, Devayani similarly challenges the legitimacy of Jadadhari's curse. She refuses to see suffering as fate and questions the moral logic of a myth that punishes the innocent while shielding the guilty. By demanding accountability for endosulfan poisoning, she rejects the expectation of silent endurance imposed on women.

Karen Warren's ecofeminist framework helps contextualise these acts. By challenging mythic explanations, Rupi and Devayani expose hierarchical thinking and reclaim narrative power. Myth becomes a site of struggle rather than submission. However, resistance is fragile. It does not immediately dismantle systems of power. The novels remain aware of social backlash and isolation. Yet even partial resistance challenges mythic inevitability.

The selected novels challenge the binary between tradition and progress. They show how myth is re-engineered to sustain modern systems of domination. Through Rupi and Devayani, the texts imagine development not as domination but coexistence. Literature becomes a site where oppressive narratives are exposed and reimagined. Myth itself is not inherently oppressive. It becomes oppressive when weaponised. Reinterpretation is possible. Ethical storytelling can restore justice.

Myth masks environmental violence, deflects responsibility, and reinforces gendered suffering. At the same time, the novels foreground resistance. Women challenge myth by naming human agency and reclaiming narrative authority. Their actions reveal that myths are constructed, not immutable truths.

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