

**Nature and Narratives: Voices of Women and  
Marginalization in English literature**

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**Abstract:**

Ecofeminism critically highlights the links between ecological degradation and gender oppression, as reflected in Manjula Padmanathan's story centered on Meiji, a girl suppressed in a patriarchal, dystopian society. Meiji's female identity and natural growth are artificially stunted through chemical intervention, symbolizing how patriarchal control mirrors human domination over nature. Despite being presented as a male, Meiji internally resists, embodying nature's own fight against exploitation. Contrastingly, Gayatri, another key character, resists societal pressures through wisdom and self-determination, carving out her own identity and path, much like nature's unpredictable renewal. Though her independence invites societal hatred and struggle, Gayatri represents hope for social transformation. This paper analyzes these characters through ecofeminist theory, demonstrating how deeply entrenched patriarchal systems oppress both women and nature. The perspectives of Manjula Padmanabhan and Anuradha Roy emphasize the urgent need to challenge and reduce these exploitative ideologies. Ecofeminism thus offers new dimensions for the study of marginalized voices and suggests pathways toward addressing social and ecological injustices, encouraging further research into these intertwined issues in society and literature.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Ecofeminism, Oppression, Resistance. Gender identity, Environmental justice, social transformation, marginalize communities, Exploitation.

**Introduction:**

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Ecofeminism emerged as a critical theoretical framework in the late twentieth century that examines the structural interconnections between the oppression of women and the exploitation of the natural environment. The term ecofeminism was first introduced by French feminist theorist Françoise d'Eaubonne in *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974), where she argues that patriarchal systems responsible for women's subordination are equally implicated in ecological destruction (d'Eaubonne). Ecofeminist theorists contend that hierarchical dualisms—such as culture/nature, man/woman, and reason/emotion—legitimize domination by privileging masculinity, rationality, and human control, while simultaneously devaluing both women and the non-human world (Merchant 6–8; Gaard 1–3).

In the Indian context, ecofeminism has evolved through a close interaction between feminist thought and grassroots environmental movements rather than through theory alone. Indian ecofeminism is deeply rooted in the lived experiences of rural, tribal, and marginalized women whose daily labour is closely tied to land, forests, and water resources. Environmental degradation in postcolonial India—manifested through deforestation, large dams, mining, and industrial agriculture—has disproportionately affected women by increasing unpaid labour, displacement, and economic vulnerability (Agarwal 126–29). The **Chipko Movement** of the 1970s, in which village women resisted deforestation by physically embracing trees, stands as a foundational moment in Indian ecofeminist praxis, demonstrating women's collective resistance to state-driven and capitalist models of development (Shiva 67).

Indian scholars and activists such as **Vandana Shiva**, **Bina Agarwal**, and **Medha Patkar** have further expanded ecofeminist discourse by linking ecological degradation with issues of gender, caste, class, and neo-colonial exploitation. Shiva critiques Western development paradigms for commodifying both nature and women's reproductive labour, advocating instead for biodiversity, sustainability, and indigenous knowledge systems (Shiva 38–42). Agarwal, while engaging critically with essentialist tendencies in ecofeminism, emphasizes women's material engagement with environmental resources and argues for gender-sensitive environmental governance (Agarwal 14). In Indian English literature, ecofeminism thus provides a critical lens to examine how women's bodies, labour, and identities are regulated alongside natural landscapes, reinforcing the argument that environmental justice is inseparable from struggles for gender and social justice.

Ecofeminism provides a crucial theoretical lens through which the interconnected oppression of women, nature, and marginalized communities can be examined in English literature, particularly in dystopian and realist narratives authored by contemporary Indian women writers. As ecofeminist theorists argue, patriarchal ideology constructs both women and nature as passive, exploitable resources, legitimizing domination through social, political, and scientific control. This dual exploitation becomes strikingly visible in Manjula Padmanabhan's dystopian narrative centered on Meiji, whose body and identity are subjected to chemical and ideological manipulation in a society obsessed with male supremacy. Meiji's forced presentation as male and the artificial suppression of her natural biological growth operate as metaphors for the systematic control of women's bodies, paralleling humanity's violent intervention in natural ecological processes. As ecofeminism asserts, such domination reflects an anthropocentric and androcentric worldview in which both nature and female bodies are stripped of agency and reduced to objects of utility (Padmanabhan). Meiji's internal resistance, despite her external compliance, symbolizes nature's silent yet persistent struggle against exploitation, reinforcing the ecofeminist belief that suppression never fully extinguishes organic vitality. This resistance aligns with ecofeminist critiques that expose how scientific and technological "progress" often masks ethical violence against both the environment and marginalized genders, particularly in dystopian settings where authoritarian control amplifies patriarchal anxieties.

Contrasting Meiji's constrained existence, Anuradha Roy's character Gayatri emerges as a figure of conscious resistance and self-fashioning, representing a different but complementary ecofeminist narrative of survival and renewal. Gayatri's refusal to conform to societal expectations of femininity, domesticity, and silence challenges the ideological structures that seek to discipline women into submissive roles. Like nature's regenerative capacity, Gayatri's identity evolves unpredictably, resisting linear definitions imposed by patriarchal norms. Her autonomy, however, is met with hostility, reflecting how societies often punish women who assert independence, much as they exploit and degrade environments that resist commodification. Roy's portrayal of Gayatri illustrates that resistance is not always revolutionary in spectacle but transformative in persistence, rooted in ethical self-awareness and emotional resilience (Roy). Ecofeminism recognizes such resistance as essential to dismantling hierarchical binaries—man/woman, culture/nature,

reason/emotion—that sustain systems of domination. Gayatri's lived struggle thus becomes emblematic of marginalized women's broader fight for dignity and recognition within oppressive social orders.

The narratives of Padmanabhan and Roy must also be situated within the larger tradition of women's writing in English literature, which has historically functioned as a counter-discourse to male-dominated literary canons. As scholars of women's literature observe, female authors have consistently used fiction as a space to critique social injustice, articulate suppressed experiences, and imagine alternative futures (Patil). From early feminist voices to contemporary writers, women's narratives have foregrounded themes of gender inequality, identity formation, and resistance to systemic oppression. Ecofeminism extends this tradition by emphasizing the ethical relationship between humans and the environment, arguing that ecological crises cannot be resolved without addressing gender injustice. In this context, Meiji and Gayatri are not isolated fictional figures but representative of marginalized voices silenced by intersecting forces of patriarchy, caste, class, and ecological exploitation. Furthermore, the representation of marginalized communities in literature, as highlighted by contemporary critical studies, reveals that narrative form itself becomes a site of political struggle. Literature does not merely reflect reality; it actively shapes cultural consciousness and ethical responsibility. As studies on marginalized representation argue, authentic narratives challenge stereotypes and reclaim agency by allowing oppressed subjects to speak from lived experience rather than being spoken for (Rajasekhar).

Padmanabhan's dystopia exposes how institutionalized patriarchy normalizes violence through policy and science, while Roy's realist narrative reveals how social ostracization functions as a tool of control. Both texts demonstrate that marginalization operates through subtle as well as overt mechanisms, making resistance an ongoing, multifaceted process.

Ecofeminism also intersects with subaltern and postcolonial thought in questioning who is allowed to speak and whose suffering is legitimized within dominant discourses. The suppression of Meiji's gender identity echoes Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concern that marginalized subjects are often rendered voiceless by epistemic violence. However, ecofeminist readings emphasize that silence itself

can become a form of resistance, as seen in Meiji's internal defiance and Gayatri's moral clarity. These narratives challenge readers to recognize resistance not only in overt rebellion but also in survival, memory, and ethical refusal. By linking ecological degradation with gender oppression, ecofeminism exposes the structural roots of injustice and calls for a holistic reimagining of social relationships grounded in care, sustainability, and equity.

Methodologically, this analysis relies on secondary sources and employs descriptive and analytical approaches to uncover how patriarchal systems perpetuate interconnected forms of exploitation. Through close reading and theoretical synthesis, the study reveals that literature serves as both a mirror and a catalyst for social transformation. Padmanabhan and Roy's works urge readers to confront uncomfortable truths about power, control, and complicity, emphasizing that ecological and gender justice are inseparable struggles. Ecofeminism thus opens new dimensions for understanding marginalized voices in English literature, offering pathways toward ethical awareness and resistance. By foregrounding women's experiences and ecological consciousness, these narratives challenge exploitative ideologies and imagine possibilities for renewal, justice, and collective responsibility in a world increasingly defined by environmental and social crises.

Nature and narratives intersect powerfully in English literature when women and marginalized communities articulate their lived experiences against structures of patriarchy, caste, and colonial domination. Ecofeminist and postcolonial readings reveal that the exploitation of nature often parallels the oppression of women and socially excluded groups, creating a shared vocabulary of resistance and survival. Indian English literature, in particular, has foregrounded this connection by presenting women's bodies, emotions, and environments as contested spaces shaped by historical, cultural, and political forces. From ancient texts that revered the feminine as Shakti to modern narratives exposing gendered and caste-based violence, women writers and characters have continuously negotiated identity within restrictive social orders (Madhu).

The symbolic association of woman with nature—nurturing yet exploited—recurs across literary traditions, suggesting that domination over land, resources, and female agency stems from the same patriarchal logic. Contemporary novels such as

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* exemplify this intersection by situating personal trauma within ecological and social landscapes marked by caste hierarchies and colonial residues. Ammu's forbidden relationship with Velutha, a Dalit man, not only challenges caste norms but also exposes how both women and marginalized communities are denied autonomy, much like the silenced riverine and rural ecologies surrounding them (Roy).

Postcolonial Indian English fiction further complicates these narratives by highlighting how gender intersects with caste, class, and globalization. As Dr. Sarala Sanap argues, women characters in contemporary novels often occupy liminal spaces where tradition and modernity collide, forcing them to resist oppressive structures while negotiating cultural belonging (Sanap).

This resistance is especially visible in Dalit and subaltern narratives, where the female voice becomes a tool of both survival and protest. Writers such as Mahasweta Devi and Omprakash Valmiki foreground the harsh realities of caste-based exclusion, while women within these texts endure layered oppression due to both gender and social location. Literature thus becomes an ethical space where silenced histories are reclaimed, and marginalized ecologies—rural, tribal, or diasporic—are restored to narrative centrality. Women's writing, whether by Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Markandaya, or Kiran Desai, repeatedly interrogates domestic and social spaces as microcosms of larger power structures, revealing how the private sphere mirrors public injustice. These narratives resist homogenization by presenting diverse female experiences shaped by region, class, and caste, thereby challenging dominant literary canons.

Moreover, the rise of feminist consciousness and digital platforms has expanded the reach of such voices, allowing women writers and artists to bypass traditional gatekeepers and articulate alternative visions of justice and sustainability. The symbolic alignment of women with nature in these texts is no longer merely romantic; it is political, emphasizing resilience, regeneration, and resistance. As Indian English literature evolves, it continues to amplify the voices of women and marginalized communities, transforming narratives of suffering into acts of assertion. In doing so, it not only critiques patriarchal and colonial legacies but also imagines more inclusive futures where social justice and ecological balance coexist.

### **Nature and Narratives: Women, Marginality, and Resistance**

Contemporary English literature increasingly foregrounds the interconnected struggles of women, marginalized communities, and nature, a relationship powerfully illuminated through ecofeminist and tribal feminist perspectives. In Manjula Padmanabhan's dystopian narrative, Meiji's chemically stunted body and denied gender identity symbolise how patriarchal systems exercise control over both female bodies and the natural world, reducing them to sites of exploitation and regulation (Padmanabhan). Meiji's inner resistance mirrors nature's quiet yet persistent defiance against domination. In contrast, Anuradha Roy's character Gayatri embodies an alternative mode of resistance rooted in self-awareness and ethical autonomy; her refusal to conform to social expectations reflects nature's capacity for regeneration and unpredictability (Roy).

These themes resonate strongly with women's writing from India's North-East, where authors such as Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai depict landscapes as living entities intertwined with women's identities and histories. Their narratives reveal how political violence, ecological disruption, and patriarchy collectively marginalize women, while also highlighting resilience shaped by community, memory, and oral traditions (Ao; Dai).

Taken together, these texts challenge centre-periphery hierarchies and underscore that women's voices—especially from marginalized regions—are crucial for reimagining social and environmental justice within literary discourse. ecofeminism emerges as a vital lens in English literature to unpack the intertwined oppressions of women and nature under patriarchal structures, as vividly illustrated in analyses from scholarly papers on Indian English novels and marginalized narratives. In Manjula Padmanabhan's dystopian story, the character Meiji embodies this dual exploitation: her female identity and natural growth are chemically stunted to enforce a male presentation, mirroring how patriarchal control over women parallels human domination of the environment. This artificial suppression symbolizes broader ecological degradation, where women's bodies become sites of control akin to the exploitation of land and resources, a theme echoed in eco-feminist reflections on Indian novels like Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, where female characters' connections to rivers and landscapes contrast sharply with male-driven destruction. Gayatri, another figure of resistance, defies

societal norms through wisdom and self-determination, carving an independent path despite backlash, much like nature's resilient renewal amid exploitation; her story underscores hope for transformation, aligning with ecofeminist calls for challenging hierarchies that marginalize both women and the earth.

Patriarchy's grip extends to marginalized communities, where Dalit women's voices in autobiographical literature reveal intersectional oppressions of caste, gender, and environmental vulnerability, amplifying ecofeminist concerns. Dalit women, often depicted as polluted or impure in colonial texts and even male Dalit narratives, reclaim agency through testimonios that highlight their intuitive bonds with land disrupted by deforestation and scarcity—issues disproportionately burdening rural women as primary resource gatherers. Works like Bama's *Karukku* expose how caste and gender compound ecological injustices, with Dalit Christian women facing exclusion from both Hindu hierarchies and church structures, their bodies marked by "pollution" from menstruation and labor, paralleling nature's stigmatized "impurity." In contemporary novels such as *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh, women's empathy for endangered ecosystems critiques patriarchal greed, positioning indigenous female knowledge as key to sustainability against urban exploitation. These narratives deconstruct binaries between human/nature and masculine/feminine, advocating holistic worldviews where women's resistance—seen in Chipko-like activism—fosters ecological justice.

Environmental degradation intersects with gender oppression in Indian English fiction, urging social transformation through awareness of shared dominations. Novels like *The God of Small Things* intertwine Kerala's polluted rivers with women's marginalization, where Ammu's forbidden love across caste lines reflects nature's subjugation under social taboos, demanding resistance to exploitative ideologies. Globalization exacerbates this for Dalit and lower-caste women, as migration and urbanization heighten vulnerabilities like water scarcity, yet their autobiographical assertions—from Kausalya Baisantri's *Double Curse* to modern retellings—reclaim narratives, emphasizing education and collective "we" voices for empowerment. Padmanabhan and Roy's perspectives, alongside Dalit feminists, highlight how ecofeminism reframes literature to address injustices, promoting pathways where women's agency heals both societal rifts and ecological wounds. By

voicing suppressed communities, these texts challenge patriarchy's mastery, fostering equity for women, nature, and the marginalized.

This literary discourse, rooted in secondary analyses, employs descriptive methods to reveal exploitation's patterns, calling for gender and environmental justice via resistance and renewed narratives.

### **Ecofeminism, Feminism, and Literary Resistance**

Ecofeminism offers a critical framework to examine the interconnected oppression of women and nature under patriarchal systems, a theme deeply embedded in English literature. Feminist literary criticism, which emerged prominently in the 1960s and 1970s, interrogates how gender, power, and ideology shape literary representation, particularly marginalizing women's voices and experiences (Showalter 8). Ecofeminism extends this critique by emphasizing that the domination of women parallels the exploitation of nature, both viewed as resources to be controlled rather than entities with agency. Literature becomes a crucial space where such interlinked oppressions are exposed and resisted.

Manjula Padmanabhan's dystopian narrative exemplifies this ecofeminist perspective through the character of Meiji, whose female identity and biological growth are chemically suppressed to conform to patriarchal expectations. Meiji's forced transformation reflects how nature, like women, is manipulated and reshaped to serve dominant power structures. Despite being presented outwardly as male, Meiji's internal resistance symbolizes nature's own silent yet persistent struggle against exploitation. This resistance aligns with ecofeminist thought, which argues that patriarchal systems seek to regulate both female bodies and ecological processes through control and violence (Merchant 13).

In contrast, the character of Gayatri represents an alternative mode of resistance rooted in wisdom, autonomy, and self-determination. Like nature's regenerative capacity, Gayatri carves an independent identity despite social hostility and exclusion. Her resistance highlights the possibility of renewal and social transformation, echoing feminist literary criticism's emphasis on reclaiming female agency and voice. Such representations challenge traditional literary narratives that often marginalize women or confine them to passive roles (Woolf 74).

Feminist and ecofeminist writers such as Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker have similarly foregrounded women's lived realities while critiquing patriarchal ideologies that sustain inequality and environmental degradation. Morrison's exploration of memory, identity, and motherhood and Walker's focus on resilience and sisterhood demonstrate how marginalized voices resist both cultural and ecological erasure (Morrison 35; Walker 42). These narratives foster empathy and awareness, encouraging readers to question dominant power structures and imagine equitable alternatives.

This study, based on secondary sources and employing descriptive and analytical methods, reveals how ecofeminism enriches feminist literary criticism by incorporating environmental justice into gender discourse. By analyzing women's resistance alongside ecological exploitation, ecofeminism broadens literary studies to include marginalized communities and environmental concerns. Literature thus emerges not merely as reflection but as a catalyst for awareness, resistance, and transformation, advocating for both gender justice and ecological balance.

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