

## Green Shades of Feminity: An Ecofeministic Study of Selected Poems of Sugathakumari and Kamala Das

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### Abstract

The discourse on feminism and ecology is familiar in literary studies as well as in socio-cultural scenario. But it seldom merged with each other-it has probably only been five decades since Indian literature has started discussing Eco feminism. Eco feminism, in short, blends the theories of feminism and ecology. This research paper critically analyses poems of the prolific Indian writers Sugathakumari and Kamala Das who always fought for upholding the women's issues and conserving the nature. The paper aims to study their writings through the lenses of Ecofeminism, to treat them as their unabashed political commentaries on women and nature.

Keywords: Sugathakumari, Kamala Das, Eco feminism, Environment, Women, Poetry.

## 1. Introduction

Ecofeminism is a philosophical and political movement which combines the ideals of feminism and ecology, interpreting both as a result of the patriarchal society. “Ecofeminism is a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women.”(Mellor). The term Ecofeminism was first coined by Françoise d’Eaubonne in 1974 in her contentious work *Le Féminisme ou la Morte*. In this book, she writes about a world devoid of the male domination where humanity dominates everywhere. Ecofeminism establishes an imperishable relation between the exploitation and degradation of the environment and the ill treatment and subordination of women. Rosemary Ruether’s *New Woman /New Earth* (1975), Mary Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology* (1978), Susan Griffin’s *Woman and Nature* (1978) and Carolyn Merchant’s *The Death of Nature* (1980) are some of the early Ecofeminist works which analysed the Nature-Woman relation. *Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?*, a 1974 article by the American Anthropologist Sherry Ortner stated an analogous relationship between women-nature and man - culture. Women and nature are similar in their ability to give births to new life forms. Similarly man and culture are related through production of objects. The first Ecofeminist conference was held at The Meltdown at Three Miles island in the USA. Eco feminists laid an uninterrupted link between women and nature because like women nature too had an ancient history of a nourishing mother. Simon de Beauvoir was the first one to analyse the nature-women link in her book, *The Second Sex* (1949). She pointed out that culture is man-made and in such a society all non-man are designated as ‘Other’. “Ecofeminism is multi-faceted and multi-located, challenging structures rather than individuals.” (Oster). Ecofeminism, as a complex web of diverse cultural structures, consist of different streams based on various aspects.

Cultural or Spiritual Ecofeminism is concerned about the natural connection between women and nature. Both of them are producers and preservers of the world. They are associated with the ancient practice of nature worship. But Eco feminists like Simon De Beauvoir contempt the link between women and nature. They believed that such a relation will further debase the position of women and nature in the society. This is Radical or Constructivist Ecofeminism. Karen J Warren and Maria Mies are Social Ecofeminist who neither accept nor reject the link but they are critical of the Western ideology of 'development'. But Queer Ecofeminism includes all the queer section of the society like lesbians, gays, transgender, bisexuals and their relationship with nature. The social activities in India demonstrate how women stood up in the fight for protecting the environment. Beginning with the Chipko movement we have many instances where women including MedhaPatkar, C K Janu, Arundhathi Roy, and Sugathakumari are some of them who have recently been in the limelight for protecting the environment. Though it began as a social activity but later it broadened into the literary world. *Fire on the Mountains* by Anita Nair, *A God of Small Things* by Arundhathi Roy, Amitav Gosh's *The Hungry Tide*, poems of A K Ramanujan, Sugathakumrai, Kamala Das and an unceasing list of writers can be read under the light of Ecofeminism. Literature is an excellent medium to inculcate sensitivity towards nature and to boost humanity in society. These narrations provide an excellent framework for enlightening society in the domain of Ecofeminism. The exploration of the female body as a new identity along with the social issues plays a key part of these works.

Kamala Das and Sugathakumari are writers of suppressed and silenced voices. Their writings had the immense depiction of the suppressed as well as nature. Most of the works of Kamala Das are confessional auto fiction and she treated the female body in an explicit manner. She was one of the pioneers in India who wrote about the conflicts of female sexuality. Death and love are the two prominent themes in Kamala Das poetry.

Sugathakumari was a pensive poet who fought for nature and marginalised. Though the writers vary in their style and diction, images of women and nature are a leitmotif in the writings of both of them. Kamala Das has associated her emotions with nature whereas Sugathakumari has been an active part in the ecological struggles particularly The Silent Valley and Aranmula Protest and other agitations to bring the subalterns to the front line of the society. “Both these writers seem to argue for a healthy co-existence of Man, Woman and Nature in the interest of a better eco-system and in the interest of a better tomorrow!” (Leena and Alex). The image of modern women fighting against injustices in the society and the disintegration of existing hierarchies can be seen in the poems of Sugathakumari and Kamala Das.

## 2. The Sugathakumari Epoch of Ecological Renaissance

### 2.1 The Rhythm of Life: A Bio-note.

Sugathakumari, an established Malayalam writer and activist, was one of the pioneers of green activism in Kerala. She has sown evergreen seeds in Malayalam poetry, she showed the world that art, nature and human are not differ from each other, but united in a single point. It is she who initiated discussions on environmental feminism in Malayalam, explicitly through her poems and protests. Sugathakumari, born on 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1934, has been at the forefront of environmental and feminist movements in Kerala. She has a distinctive place in Malayalam poetry for her emotional, moral and humanist compassion. Sugathakumari started publishing poetry in the early 1960s. “Muthuchippi” (1961), “Pathirappookkal” (1967), “Irulchirakukal” (1969), “Rathrimazha” (1977), “Ambalamani” (1981), “Kurinjippookkal” (1987), “Thulavarshappacha” (1990) and “Manalezhuthu” (2011) are some of her prominent works. She was the founder secretary of ‘Prakriti Samrakshana Samithi’, and established an organisation named ‘Abhaya’ for homeless women and children. Her commitment to social

responsibility gave her the opportunity to be the chairperson of the Kerala State Women's Commission in 1996. The role she played in the protests against environmental exploitations from Save Silent Valley protest to Aranmula airport issue is greatly appreciable, which made her as an established social activist. Sugathakumari has won numerous awards and recognitions including Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award (1968), Kendra Sahitya Akademi Award (1978), Odakkuzhal Award (1982), Vayalar Award (1984), Indira Priyadarshini Vriksha Mitra Award (1986), Asan Prize (1991), Vallathol Award (2003), Kerala Sahitya Akademi Fellowship (2004), Ezhuthachan Puraskaram (2009) and Saraswati Samman (2012). She also received the first Vrikshamithra award that was instituted by the Government of India in recognition of her contribution to environmentalism. In 2006, she was honoured with Padma Shri, the country's fourth highest civilian honour. She died of Covid-19 in 23<sup>rd</sup> of December 2020.

## 2.2 Notes of the Hardest Rap Beats of Protests: Journey of a Poet-activist

“My profound prayer to Earth is my politics” (Sugathakumari, interview)

Sugathakumari could make a cultural shift in poetry from the romanticized poetical course to the real Indian conditions. Her engagement with poetry, environmental activism, charity works, and socio-cultural initiatives gave her an exclusive position in the socio-cultural spaces of Kerala. She began environmental activism during the early 1970s, and she remained a guardian spirit of wildlife and environment till her death. Her fights for Silent Valley, Attappadi and Aranmula kept back the perils of environmental issues. Sugathakumari's poem *Marathinu Sthuthi (An Ode to the Tree)* has turned into a powerful symbol of the Silent Valley protest. She raised her voice against deforestation and unwanted constructions that ruin the ecosystem. She also agitated against controversial hydel power projects at Pathrakadavu and Athirappilly, and the atomic power project planned at

Peringome in Kannur. She was at the forefront of the protests for justice for exploited women as well. She strongly fought for Nirbhaya, Suryanelli and Walayar rape issues.

She was the intimate green shade over desolate lives and endangered eco-spaces. Her life of agitations was nothing beyond her poetry- what she writes is what she does. Her prodigious concerns on nature in writing often made her to be ridiculed as 'Marakkavi' (tree poet).

### 2.3 The Tao of Sugathakumari Poetry: Reading of Ecofeminism in Select poems

“Her poetry and environmental activism were inseparable. She had showered enormous love and care even to birds and winds. She is an Indian version of Australian poet Judith Wright, an environmentalist, and campaigner for land rights of aboriginal tribes. She refused to remain in the ivory towers of poetry and never hesitated from taking part in protests and struggles” (Remembering Sugathakumari)

Sugathakumari is best known as a poet environmentalist, and her poetry is best known for depiction of divine rapport between man and nature, and pensiveness. Her poetry is the elusive interaction between nature and human. Compassion, empathy, sadness, sorrows and sanguinity are filled in her poems with high subtleness. Pure lyrical quality and strong sense of social commitment are the traits of Sugathakumari poetry.

Sugathakumari used poetry as a tool to express her concerns over environment and oppression of women. Poetry itself was a protest for her, against despoiled ecological and social systems. Her poetry was her political statements. Mother Nature had a special role in majority of her poetic works. It was after the 1970s, i.e. the post Silent Valley protest era, she began to make nature as a dominant theme in her poems. And a huge number of her poetry dwelled on women issues. Depiction of women matters can be seen in her poetry from the beginning period of writing.

The poem *Oru Pattu Pinnneyum* (A Song Again) is one of the most celebrated poems on environment. A bird with broken wings sings alone with pains in the remains of a tree. The bird here stands as the symbol for women, who are oppressed by patriarchy. What the bird suffers after deforestation and other nature exploiting activities becomes the sufferings of women as the aftermath of masculine violence. She is the victim of patriarchal power. The bird says that she did not have any companionships other than rain, tree, river and darkness. She forgets her pain when she sings the song. The broken wing signifies that she cannot fly anymore to touch the high sky, which reminds her of the limit up to which she can go for her dreams and passions. Although she embraces the sky with her melodious song with its one wing's rhythm. What links the bird and women is their inferior status or subjugation to man. It becomes the key to get exploited. It is the capitalism exploit nature whereas patriarchy manipulates women.

In the poem *Vidhi*, Sugathakumari depicts a court scene where the earth is the petitioner, her son man is the offender, and the God is the Judge who is surrounded by deities. The earth enters the court in vague and torn green outfit and intertwined dry hair. In the poem one of the deities describes her name as one who suffers everything. She complains against the son, in which it says that he was harmful to everyone else in the world. At the end of poem the poet becomes afraid of the verdict from the God and she goes for several fearful thoughts as punishments. The God finally gives the verdict that the upcoming generation would have to suffer the consequences of the actions of men. Eco-feminists compare the earth as a women, the mother, and here the poet portrays the earth as tortured mother. The behaviour of men mentioned in the poem symbolises the malice of patriarchy. As said by Leena and Alex, "in the name of development, the earth is conquered by the male power and she is supposed to endure the violence from him. With the advent of commercialisation and

industrialization phallocratic power is exerted upon the earth. And as a result it is exploited, subjected to maltreatment.”

The poem *Silent Valley* is another one which reveals Sugathakumari’s eco-feminist stands. It is about the nightmares that the poet sees- the dying Kunthi River and falling down of trees. The dream haunts the poet. She impulses her companions to protect the woods and wildlife like she does and they willingly follow it. Throughout the poem the profound bond between nature and humanity can be seen, and when it comes to end the poet presents her passionate affection with nature by drowning in the Kunthi River. When she addresses the forest as mother, the leaves of all trees call back her- ‘child’. The response of nature shows the unconditional love for her children in spite of all harsh attitudes from them. Sugathakumari equates the concept of ‘mother love’ of nature with--- of women.

In the poem *Karunyam*, Sugathakumari draws the thoughts of an ox that waits to be slaughtered. The ox is an icon of distressed nature and women as well, who are victims of exploitation. The dreams of the ox also are getting slaughtered. The unknown butcher who kills the animal is the representative of patriarchal authority. The inferior status that the women and natural entities possess is clearly visible from the poem. Both the women and nature are the victims of power. Val Plumwood in her *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* analyses the power relations as “an alienated form of differentiation, in which power construes and constructs difference in terms of an inferior and alien realm”(42).

### 3. Kamala Das : The Love Queen of Malabar

#### 3.1 From Aami to Kamala Surraiyya : A Short Profile of Kamala Das

Kamala Das, popularly known by her pen name Madhavikutty, was an Indian English poet and a leading Malayalam novelist . She was born on 31 March 1934 in Punnayurkulam, Thrissur in Kerala. She was born to VM Nair and Nalappatt Balamani Amma who was a famous

Malayalam poetess. She was influenced by her uncle Nalapatt Narayana Menon, a famous writer in Malayalam. Her oeuvre includes poems, short stories, autobiographies and novels. Her works are notable for open and honest treatment of female sexuality. Das' poems include "An Introduction", "My Grandmother's House", "The Sunshine Cat", "The Dance of the Eunuchs", "In Love", Winter, "Too Early the Autumn", "Sights", "The End of Spring" etc... But her well known work is her autobiography. It was published in Malayalam as *Ente Kadha* in 1973 and later in English- *My Story* in 1976. Her major poetry collection includes *The Descendants* (1976), *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973), *Summer in Calcutta* (1965) and *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* (1996). She has also written short stories including *A Doll for the Child Prostitute* (1977) and *Padmavat The Harlot* (1992). The only novel by Kamala Das is *Alphabet of Lust* in 1977. She won numerous prestigious awards including Kerala Sahitya Academy Award(1968), Kendra Sahitya Academy Award(1985), Vayalar Award(1997), MuttathuVarkey Award(2006) and Ezhuthachan Award(2009). She was shortlisted for the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1984. She died on 31 May 2009.

### 3.2 The Celebration of Fertility in the poems of Kamala Das

In Kamala Das' poetry, the best expression of feminine sensibility and the suppression of the female body in a male dominated society can be found. In the poem "An Introduction" Kamala Das gives a strong remark on the patriarchal society prevalent today.

When I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask  
 For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the  
 Bedroom and closed the door, He did not beat me  
 But my sad woman-body felt so beaten.

The poem is a strong criticism on the callous attitude of the society on girls and marriage. She is asked to confide herself within the four walls. Das' poems are affluent with images which are taken from everyday life. The images of love and sex are predominant in her works. She strongly bashes against the selfishness of the male ego that has tied and subdued the dreams of women.

You called me wife

I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and  
 To offer at the right movement the vitamins. Cowering  
 Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and  
 Became a dwarf. I lost my will and reasons, to all your

Questions I mumbled incoherent replies

The above lines from "The Old Playhouse" show how women are treated in the society. They act as aids just to satisfy the needs of their husbands, father etc. She also wrote about suppressed desires, persecution and inadequacy reflecting the psychological traumas of the poet. Her poems are confessional in tone. Her poems can be equated with that of Anne Sexton and Robert Lowell for the therapeutic and cathartic effect of its confessional tone. She is a representative of the revolutionary woman in the contemporary world. She is against the vices prevalent in society and ask women to stand up and fight against the immorality that is unbearable to women. She is often identified with Marguerite Duras and Sylvia Plath for the directness in her poems. She is noted for her controversial writings.

### 3.3 An Eco-feministic reading of Kamala Das

Though the notes of Ecofeminism cannot be principally found in the works of Kamala Das, she can be considered as a forerunner of Ecofeminist writing in Kerala. A re-reading of the feministic poems of Kamala Das evince that it has an Eco feministic perspective too. She

addresses nature in many of her poems and often compares nature with her woeful situation. Das finds an emotional ally with nature.

Of one thing I am certain  
the forest and I,  
We have something in common  
We do not speak French. (*OSKHS*)

‘French’ as a language is a part of a culture created by the male dominant society. Nature(forest)and herself are separated from this culture because both of them do not play a part in the construction of culture and thereby they find an interrelatedness between them. She upholds that though there are cultural differences that exist in society, nature is always close to her. This is one of the key features of Eco Feminism where women are equated with nature. According to Sherry Ortner,

“woman is being identified with – or, if you will, seems to be a symbol of–something that every culture devalues, something that every culture defines as being of a lower order of existence than itself. Now it seems that there is only one thing that would fit that description, and that is “nature” in the most generalized sense.”

According to Ecofeminist theory the androcentric society establishes hierarchies and dualities. “ Th(e) capitalist-patriarchal perspective interprets difference as hierarchical and uniformity as a prerequisite for equality. Our aim is to go beyond this narrow perspective and to express our diversity and, in different ways, address the inherent inequalities in world structures which permit the North to dominate the South, men to dominate women, and the frenetic plunder of ever more resources for ever more unequally distributed economic gain to dominate nature...” (Mies and Shiva) Anything non- male is considered as inferior and non-productive. The Dualities include white/black, male/female, civilized/uncivilized, traditional/modern, culture/nature etc.. In these dualities, one is considered as superior and

the other inferior. Man is always portrayed as strong physique and dominant and women as soft, tender and fragile. This concept of Ecofeminism is drawn in her poem “The Looking Glass”.

Getting a man to love you is easy  
 Only be honest about your wants as  
 Woman. Stand nude before the glass with him  
 So that he sees himself the stronger one  
 And believes it so, and you so much more  
 Softer, younger, lovelier.

The patriarchal society always wants man to be stronger and superior than all other beings. When the woman stands in front of him, he always wants to feel stronger than the woman whereas the woman is tender and lovely. ‘The Suicide’ is another poem by Das where she draws a nature-woman relation. When she is so desperate she gets relief from nature. She is feeling bereft of her soul and body and sea (nature) acts as her mother and only solace.

The sea's inner chambers  
 Are all very warm. There must be a sun slumbering  
 At the vortex of the sea.  
 O sea, i am happy swimming  
 Happy, happy, happy...  
 The only movement i know well  
 Is certainly the swim.

The act of swimming gets her close to nature and is the only source of sustenance for her. The image of nature as a comforting mother is further enforced through her poem ‘Ghanshyam’. She is sad/alone and invokes God for relief and she is comforted by the melodious songs of a Koel which is a representation of nature. “Ghanshyam/, You have like a

koel built your nest in the arbour of my heart/.My life, until now a sleeping jungle is at last astir with music. These lines are from her poem Ghanashyam. Though Ghanshyam is usually acknowledged as a semi-autobiographical religious poem, this can be read from an Ecofeminist view. 'Silent Jungle' denotes the melancholic and pitiful situation of the woman. Das always connects her emotions with nature because she identifies herself with her environment. Images of sea, forest and birds are recurring in her poems.

According to Dido Dunlop, "Ecofeminism adds that patriarchy devalues women, and therefore devalues nature, because nature is seen as mother. Women and nature get trashed together. Anything patriarchy associates with women is also trashed: caring, compassion, mothering, emotions, looking after nature, valuing life over money. To value nature, we must honour women too, and vice versa." So violation against the female body can be linked to the demeaning of nature. In Das' poems we can see how women were ill-treated by society. "Be kind. You turn me into a bird of stone, a granite Dove, you build round me a shabby room, And stroke my pitted face absent - mindedly while" (The Stone Age)

Eco feminists argued not particularly for women and nature but for the rights of people who were marginalized by the patriarchal society. It includes women, nature, the natives, the black coloured people, animals and all those who were pushed to the peripherals of the society due to their social and economical status. According to Greta Gaard, an Ecofeminist scholar, "ecofeminism is the understanding that women's liberation is entangled with the liberation of all racial, gendered, sexual and ecological 'others' because, in hetero-patriarchal cultures, the oppressed are feminized — which means being seen as less rational and less fully human." ('What is Eco feminism'). Kamala Das in 'A Conversation' writes thus: "I write about the poor and disadvantaged. They are voiceless...little maid servants who are beaten up, little twelve- year- olds fetching pails of water, without even getting proper salaries..." (Closure73). The society has less concern for these people but they are the main

concern for the Ecofeminist. Kamala Das in her works gives a scathing blow on the male dominated society. She writes about her experiences in a first person narrative which is a major characteristic of Ecofeminism. “The Descendants” by Kamala Das is definitely a wakeup call for women and to realise that there is a larger world awaiting them rather than spending time only for mere sex activity. In ‘Advice to Fellow Swimmers’ she reminds her fellow beings that life is a flowing stream and a flow without a destination causes great destruction . Here Das employs the image of ‘water’ to remind men about the life lessons.

#### 4. Conclusion

We are not meek and we are not weak. We are angry- On our own behalf, for our sisters and children who suffer, and for the entire planet- and we are determined to protect life on Earth (‘Caroline Lucas’).

Woman like Mother Earth, relished an esteemed status in various cultures. Feminist theories, from a very early stage itself, has done a revisionary rereading of this concept. An eco-feminist literary discussion deliberates how a writer integrates the environment, gender conflicts, discrimination, and historical setting into a writing. A social-constructionist eco-feminist perspective argues that patriarchal society divides the human from nature, to rule over nature. It is observed “nothing links the human animal and nature so deeply as woman’s reproductive system which enables her to share the experiences of bringing forth and nourishing life with the rest of the living world” (Collard 78)

Sugathakumari and Kamala Das are eminent women writers of all time in Indian literature. Both of their poetries dwelled on women issues, and some of them emphasized more on nature and surrounding ecosystem. It is said that in ecological poetry Kamala Das is derogated as the queen of erotica and other as Marakkavi- tree poet (Leena and Alex). Kamala Das is one of the most prominent writers of the era in Anglo- Indian poetry. She

could reach the Indian literature in the peaks of excellence in international arena. Her works outline the socio-cultural and political maps of Indian society and is a strong critique on patriarchy. Most of her works are the manifestations of existential crisis of women such as *An Introduction* and *The Freaks*. Kamala Das, as a proponent of feminism and female expressions, constantly talked about the psychological patterns of women. An undercurrent of nascent feminism can be seen in Das works, and what makes her different from other womanist writers is that she is keen to address the behavioural and psychological storms that every women possess. Sugathakumari is regarded as the green shade over Kerala's ecological belt, and a writer to reckon with. The Sugatakumari version of feminist literature explores the plethora of various feminine emotions. Sugathakumari, the pensive poet has linked all the feminine conditions and emotions with Mother Nature.

The spirit of optimism is a common trait in the poetries of both. Das as well as Sugathakumari argues for a healthy co-existence of man, woman and nature. Though both of them addressed Eco feminism the way they treated it is utterly different. As Varghese Leena and Jishamol Alex, "Sugathakumari is, in a way, a more ardent critic of all sorts of oppression prevalent in the society, whereas Kamala Das connected it with her own emotions." Hence Kamala Das can be regarded as the cultural eco-feminist and Sugathakumari as the social eco-feminist.

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