



AN ECOFEMINIST READING OF “GARGI’S SILENCE” BY RUKMINI BAYA NAIR

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Abstract: Nature has been always identified with women. Be it feminine traits or the behavioural aspects of a woman, it has been inevitably paralleled with nature. This paper attempts to introspect the Ecofeminist ideologies in the poem “Gargi’s Silence”. The poem narrates the story of Gargi, a great Indian philosopher and Vedic intellect who shut the mouths of great scholars through her silence. Gargi is a character taken from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. Women are generally expected to be calm and gentle in their thoughts and actions, which is a vital characteristic of nature as it symbolizes motherhood and fertility. Gargi was the epitome of both these characteristics of nature. She had the valour to question Yajnavalkya at King Janaka's court in Videha. She consecutively raises questions concerning the very existence of nature and its soul. Gargi’s ‘silence’ has been critically analysed and interpreted by various scholars. She questions the male logic and upholds the wisdom of senses and nature. This paper manifests the male logic and consensus on women’s ‘nature’ within nature and also Gargi’s voice as the voice of suppressed by questioning the so-called male intellects.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Nature, Voice of the suppressed, male dominance.

INTRODUCTION

Ecofeminism is a recent trajectory of feminism. It is a recent development in the discourse of feminism. It is a combination of two perspectives: ecology and feminism. Nature is always associated with human behaviour especially since it is often quoted with feminine attributes. Ecofeminism is an umbrella term which includes three different dimensions i.e. women, culture and nature.

It offers a platform to analyse the representation of nature in literature through gender, race, caste and various aspects of human diversifications. Ecofeminism puts forward a unique combination of literature and philosophical perceptions for investigating nature into different texts of literature. It is also a movement that deals with the suppression of woman and voices the concern for environment.

The voice of the unheard is a key concept of ecofeminism as it expresses the rhetorical questions which female species would be craving to disclose to the world. According to Mary Mellor, “Ecofeminism is a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women. It emerged in the mid-1970s alongside second-wave feminism and the green movement.”

Ecofeminism brings together elements of the feminist and green movements, while at the same time offering a challenge to both. It takes from the green movement a concern about the impact of human activities on the non-human world and from feminism the view of humanity as gendered in ways that subordinate, exploit and oppress women.” This paper investigates the scope of ecofeminism and the various imageries of nature paralleled with the thought provoking questions

of Gargi, (the protagonist of the poem) to Yagnavalkya , the greatest scholar of all time, in the poem ‘Gargi’s Silence’.

Myths and nature are interconnected and have a deep connection with each other because time and again, myths originated from nature .The legends, stories and histories have deep interlinked relations with nature as they provide the background for mythology. Earth is associated with mother, the very nature of human existence is attributed with the pronoun of ‘she’. “Gargi’s Silence” is a poetic extraction of the conversation between Yajnavalkya and Gargi from the sixth Brahmana of Brihadaranayaka Upanishads. Gargi Vachaknavi was a great philosopher and scholar of ancient days. She was popularly known as Brahmavadini or expert in Brahma Vidya. “Gargi’s Silence” is a poem on that same debate between Yajnavalkya and Gargi that happened at King Janaka’s court at Videha.

According to history King Janaka made an argument in which gifts were given to scholars and pious men. Erudite Brahmins from Kuru and Panchala and the famous seeds of learning were assembled at Janaka’s court. At the sight of large gatherings of Vedic scholars, a desire arose in the mind of King of Janaka to know who was the most erudite among the assembled scholars.

So he declared to the gathering that the greater Vedic scholar could take the cows adorned with white gold. Hearing this Yajnavalkya orders his disciples to drive the cows home. A number of Brahmins sprang to their feet and challenged Yajnavalkya’s supremacy. When Gargi daughter of Vachaknu entered into a dispute between Yajnavalkya and her questions made the whole gathering silenced.

After a certain point, Yajnavalkya loses his temper and asks Gargi to stop her questions which were beyond the limits of his intellect. He restrains her from asking furthermore and commands Gargi to lower her voice and remain silent.

ECOFEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM IN “GARGI’S SILENCE”

“Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do...and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags....” (Charlotte Bronte, Jane Eyre)

Gargi rebuked this notion of men by raising imperative questions to Yajnavalkya at the court of Janeka. Rumini Baya Nair begins the poem with fierce emotions of a woman who knows that certain questions doesn't have an answer even from an ascetic like Yajnavalkya and for that a woman needs to wander bare footedly exploring the universe through her untamed silence. The silence of Gargi is personified here, her silence is hidden in the nature among the sea anemones.

She is trying to trigger the female readers to raise queries spontaneously through vigorous silence, through the ocean and world. The relation of women and nature is so much guilded together in the poem that every term she uses to show the encapsulation of women in this patriarchal world is similar to that of environment which is crushed under the desires of human beings. The images of blue sea and anemones reminds us of the deepest desires of women, most of which is restricted from not knowing to the outer world. It is curbed and crumpled by the sharpened words of society.

“Where in the barefoot world you wander? Will go with you Gargi’s untamed Silence. Among the

sea anemone's Agile points of light, blue famed"(Stanza 1) "Gargi's Silence" depicts the inner psychological conflicts of a women through the outer landscape and natural world. Gargi is the embodiment of courage and self-esteem, as she had the valour to rise up and shudder the court of Janaka by raising probing questions to the proud Yajnavalkya and there by leaving unanswerable and hurting his ego. Baya describes that Gargi's questions were like thick soot and black rain and these questions transformed the old wise Yajnavalkya to a toddler.

The contrasting images of mushroom woods ,yellow colour and black soot signifies the changes that take place in the human life when mother nature decides to retaliate the human beings through her silence slowly and steadily. The questions of Gargi shook the intellectual pride of Yajnavalkya, and like a lion he gushes out from the savannah to deal the sharp edged questions of Gargi. Here the metaphors of savannah and lion used to describe Yajnavalkya shows the pride and arrogance of the patriarchal society who enjoys the hegemonic power sitting in the couches of supreme authority. Ecofeminism points out the inseparable relation of a women's emotion and the natural world.

Karen J. Warren provides a concise definition of ecofeminism in her essay "Taking Empirical Data Seriously: An Ecofeminist Philosophical Perspective": "Ecofeminist philosophy extends familiar feminist critiques of socialisms of domination (e.g., sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, ageism, anti-Semitism) to nature ... according to ecofeminists, nature is a feminist issue."

“What is the warp and weft of the world? What lies in the taut weaver’s frame? “These lines show the quest in Gargi to know who the ultimate controller of the world is and she deliberately tries to outsmart Yajnavalkya to make him understand that the warp and weft of world is to unknown to everyone and we are all living at the mercy of protected net created by the nature. Her words have the sheer power to shake the foundations of male supremacy.

Gargi regains her strength and also she is able to create a tension in the court with the ‘self-acclaimed’ Yajnavalkya through provoking questions substantiated with natural images. “Answer, Yagnavalkya! How many oceans deep Is desire? When you touch me, am I sane?...

In mean streets, in the slushy yards of pain

Gargi whispers in Yagnavalkya’s ticklish ear Your metaphysics is shaky! We’re not chained
To Brahman.?

He is a prisoner of our senses”(Stanza 5-6).

Here the images of ocean and bee sting used by Rukmini is a way of presenting nature as an escape of from patriarchy. Gargi is empowered, when she asks the Brahmin scholar Yajnavalkya will you be able to uphold your wisdom and still claim your supremacy after touching me. She is also reassuring the importance of being sane and pure after the touch of an erudite Brahmin.

The comparison of a man’s desire to an ocean shows the helplessness of a man in front of women while seeking pleasure. Gargi grandiosely speaks to Yajnavalkya that it’s not women’s emotions that are subjugated under men but it’s the metaphysics of a men is altered with the proximity of a female.

CONCLUSION

“Gargi’s Silence” can be analysed through ecofeminist reading as it expresses the ‘silence’ of Gargi aloud in the natural world as a victory against the patriarchal world. The intersectionality and interconnectedness of Gargi’s words to the natural world reaffirms her position as a strong individual amidst the court of many men.

In the last stanza of the poem when Gargi ask the question about the origin of language and origin of universe and ask about the Creator of the world, Yajnavalkya is startled and left numb without any answers. “Yours, his, mine, his and then – the last unclaimed Akshara.” Ecofeminist poetry has the power of self-healing, and here Gargi tries to end the dispute and tension between Yajnavalkya by withdrawing herself to the world of silence and maintaining the peace.

Gargi’s ‘silence’ was in fact not the silence created by Yajnavalkya but it was a self-realized submission of herself to maintain the decorum of the court. This aspect of women can be associated with the calmness and serenity of Mother Nature which has the maturity to realize the depth of a situation and provide sustenance to the fellow beings.

Gargi could have easily denigrated the status of Yajnavalkya, but she chose to remain silent and thereby she upheld the values of nature and culture. Gargi wins the argument as she makes use of the environment to strengthen her arguments and also she questions the male logic and also uphold the wisdom of senses and nature.

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