



**UNYIELDING WOMEN AND ECOLOGIES IN *THE MINISTRY OF
UTMOST HAPPINESS***

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Abstract: The history of storytelling has predominantly been an anthropocentric enterprise. Right from the stories of 'The Little Mermaid' to the adult fantasy of *Aquaman*, man always seems to, in the end, have achieved complete control over nature along with all the humans in it, especially the women. This control of and domination over nature and women has been simultaneous due to the anthropocentric, capitalist, feudal and patriarchal structure of the society we live in. In the Indian context, a lot of concerns have been raised on the growing need to conserve the environment. Similarly, empowerment of women in organized and unorganised sectors also seems to be an undebatable concern. However, as undeniably important as environmental conservation and women empowerment is, a reduction of abuse of nature and women is not going to put an end to the violence that is structurally incited. This abuse becomes possible due to the latent sense of supremacy that informs the worldview of cis-men from privileged identities. It is a belief that all nature, all women and all children are inherently weaker, and hence, meant to yield to the desires of men. If not, man has the moral right and obligation to make them yield in one way or the other. Further, when found un-yield-able, these terrains and women will be evacuated or excluded from the mainstream spaces. In this paper, I want to examine the journeys of Tilottama and Anjum- two women who choose not to and cannot yield, in the sense of submitting to the men in their lives and societal expectations from

women, in the novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* by Arundhati Roy. I intend to observe their spatial journey over the course of their lives, and how they eventually end in an ecology that reeks of death. In the novel, the women who don't submit to the patriarchal norms, choose to migrate and make a home out of a graveyard. I believe that this shows that ecology and women are both victims of the exploitative feudal structure of the society. Through the journeys of the characters and their relations to their ecology, I wish to demonstrate how the articulation of resistance or empowerment has to account for the structural freedom of both women and the ecology.

Key words: Ecofeminism, Patriarchy, Social Ecology, Fertility, Domination, Motherhood

Introduction

Ecological crisis, like several academic topics, has been discussed in isolation. Social ecologists like Murray Bookchin have argued that several of our ecological problems are rooted in our social problems. (Bookchin 20) For centuries, man has understood nature as something that is static. The history of Literature and Art are proof of how human beings have imagined nature to be the personification of the idea of unchanging eternity. Be it Wordsworth's anxious desire to control the unruly woods, from the top of a bridge in "Tintern Abbey" or the ever-expanding, well cultivated and pruned fields of "Mr and Mrs Andrews", literature and art have always been used to arouse in man the desire to establish control over this eternally available resource of nature. However, social Ecology proposes to look at nature, not as a static entity but as a "development process". (Bookchin 43) Ecofeminists have drawn parallels between the male desire to control nature and women. The desire to imagine women as static entities with static character traits of love, care and perpetual fertility, is similar to what is desired out of nature.

This essentialization of nature and women is derogatory as well as exclusionary. Women and Nature are both denied any semblance of agency or autonomy towards growth, development and/or change. Further, women and nature are denied an option to be anything but fertile and nurturing. This partial approach to reality seems to be deliberate in the minds of powerful cisgender- heterosexual men regarding women and nature who may either not be (for varying reasons) fertile and nurturing.

Perpetually Productive: Women and Nature

In the capitalist-casteist patriarchal setup we inhabit, questions of labour and economics remain limited to the market realm. The public sphere is understood to be the only sphere of relevance. The activities which are either not performed in the public sphere, or the results of which are not seen to contribute to the public sphere, become as irrelevant as the spheres they are performed in. (Macgregor 286)

It is the public sphere, ripe with the potential to generate profits that is valued by the markets. The parts of nature, abundant with minerals to extract and exploit are celebrated and worshipped. However, the parts of nature which do not lend themselves to the generation of profits are either forgotten or destroyed. For instance, in some cases, large boulders, rocks and plateaus which do not necessarily yield crops are left to rot without anybody to celebrate their (un)productivity. In other cases, these rocks are violently cut through using modern equipments, so that they can be marvelled at by tourists, and this activity of marvelling at rocks can then generate profits. The labour that women perform in domestic spaces, has no avenue to translate into the realm of the market. Women who cannot produce children are culturally caste out and ill-treated. Womanhood is celebrated in the society as long as it remains tied to motherhood. (Davis 6)

Irrational and Unpredictable: Women and Nature

On the one hand, women as well as nature are seen to have the domestic and desirable side to them, while on the other, if left unchecked, they are also believed to wreak havoc at their own will, without any comprehensible provocation. Women and nature both seem to lack rationality; their bodies functioning in an instinctive, primal manner - birthing, menstruating, mating and birthing again. Science, technology and violence are therefore employed to control and exploit both women as well as Nature.

Groomed to be consumable: Women and Nature

Women and nature are both groomed and cultivated in order to be ready for consumption. From the moment a girl child is born, most cultures across the world invest time and effort to better her worthiness in the marriage market. Her body is readied to appeal to the gaze of marriage. Once married (or consumed), she is expected to produce healthy children and spend the rest of her life providing ample care to these children and their father. Nature too is cultivated with all kinds of supplements to make the soil more fertile and conducive to yield. Once the soil is fit to cultivate, crops are sown and harvested. Upon the completion of one successful season, the land is expected to be made ready for the next cycle of yield. In terrains where extraction of rich minerals and metals take place, nature is assumed to be an endless pit of useful resources, that she has been holding onto, only for the man to consume.

Anjum: The Woman who cannot yield

Labelled as Aftab at birth, Anjum fights her desire the first 16 years of her life, to lead her life not as a man, but a woman. Despite knowing about her child being born with a formed and an unformed sex organ, her mother Jahanara Begum, raises her child as a boy. Evidently, her unformed vagina was not enough to keep Jahanara Begum from gendering the child a boy. Moreover, she and her husband had waited years for her to yield a son to carry the lineage forward. They could not give this son up just because the child's may not exactly want to be a son. When Aftab starts to show the traits- "fitrat" of being "abnormal", his father is not

perturbed. He believed that those traits could be suppressed as long as the biological problem could be fixed. The visit to the doctor to get Aftab's unformed vagina sewed up completely is an attempt to impose upon the child's body a notion of "normalcy" that will comply with the gendered world we inhabit. Evidently, when Aftab expressed her desire to live the rest of her life as Anjum, her father did not approve of it. Her father never even exchanged greetings with Anjum once she migrated into the ecology where all "un-fertile" "un-women" lived-Khwabgah. The patriarchal, transphobic society cannot understand the purpose or meaning of a woman who is not fertile and thereby it denies them the status of being a "real" woman. All the transgender women at Khwabgah, occupying various positions in the gender spectrum, are ill-treated by the society. They are forced to beg at traffic signals, dance at strangers' weddings and work as prostitutes in order to make a living. The women who cannot yield are not worthy of any position in the society. Anjum does not inherit her father's house either. The house in the sense of having some market value, forms an ecology worthy of fetching some profit. Anjum, being unprofitable and unyielding is denied any right to be a part of an Ecology that is profitable. Anjum, migrates into Khwabgah- Shahajahanabad's Hijra gharana- the only ecology that lets her be the kind of woman she can, and she wants to be. Khwabgah itself is as discriminated and disrespected in the society as the transgender women living there. In the midst of a heteronormative Duniya, lies a neglected Khwabgah. The streets of Shahajahanabad form an ecology of bounty. There is always meat, food, bangles, vegetables and whatnot being sold to those who need and can buy these products. The abundant availability of commodities makes Shahajahanabad an ecology to be reckoned with, even though it is evidently an area occupied by the less affluent class of people. Khwabgah, on the other hand, offers bodies of transwomen, which do not generate profit into the market. The transgender women do not end up yielding commodities aside from themselves.

Later on in the novel, Anjum finds an abandoned child- Zainaba, at the stairs of Jama Masjid. Her heart yearns to be a mother to Zainaba. However, motherhood does not come easy to Anjum. She first kidnaps, and later adopts Zainaba. Eventually when she does manage to become something of a mother to the little “bandicoot”, Zainaba catches a series of illnesses. Anjum undertakes a pilgrimage to pray for the health of Zainaba and enters an ecology of a devastating pogrom. Upon having returned from the horrors of the pogrom back to her daughter, Anjum’s motherhood becomes one fuelled by paranoia. She makes Zainaba dress and live like a boy, against her will, as the horrors of the pogrom make her see that life as a Hindu boy is much less precarious when compared to life as a Muslim girl. The ecology she inhabits does not permit her to be a “good” mother. Finally, rejected by her own child and her community, she moves into an old, eerie, government graveyard. Here she finds herself “standing like a tree”. The miscreants at the graveyard throw stones at her, but she stands, firm and rooted, until slowly they get used to her presence. She sleeps in between graves. Upon being informed by the authorities that her living in the graveyard was illegal, she tells them that she wasn’t living there, she was in fact merely waiting to die there. The ecology in which Anjum ultimately ends up finding peace and builds a home is one of death, mourning and fear. The world of normates- Duniya, has no place for a “naturally” unyielding women like Anjum. It is in this unyielding ecology of death that Anjum finally truly becomes mother to Miss Udaya Jebeen, the second. It is only a neglected ecology reeking with the smell of death and mourning, which permits Anjum’s somewhat dying self to live in peace. It is only here that an unacceptable femininity is allowed to exist as a woman and a mother.

Tilottama: The woman who doesn’t yield

Tilottama, since her introduction in the novel is seen as someone who does not entirely subscribe to the models of femininity demanded of her. She is seen to be wearing no makeup, exhibiting no coyness, both of which form an essential part of a woman’s desirability. Her hair

is wild and her clothes seem unattractive. She neither seems domestic nor servile. She smokes in public and lives alone in an old crumbling house and drinks tea among the beggars at Nizamabad. She is a woman who does not bother to groom herself in a manner that is considered the norm for all cis gendered women. She does not seem to desire to be desired by the men around her. She leaves even the one man that she did seem to have a romantic relationship with in college. Later, upon being called by the same man who was now married and widowed, she does not hesitate to leave everything aside and rush to Kashmir. She does not seem perturbed by the loss of her chastity or her honour in the eyes of the patriarchal society. When she goes to Kashmir, her promiscuous behaviour is reprimanded. She is taught a lesson by ACP Pinky who believes that shaving the hair off Tilottama's head would be an appropriate penance for a vile woman like her. Later, her decision to subscribe to a normative life of marriage is fuelled not by domestic feminine dreams, but by a need to create a shelter or security, for her to continue her promiscuous travels. She decides to abort the child that she had conceived with a man she was not married to. It is not because of the illegitimacy of the conception, but because of her fear of motherhood that she aborts the child. She steps out of the marriage the moment her husband Naga expresses his desire for a "normal" domestic life with a pinch of "normal" domestic violence. She decides to live alone in a house owned by a man who was unwittingly in love with her. Bounties of both Kashmir and South Delhi are never open for women like Tilottama who refuse to fit into the role assigned to them. When she does choose a kind of motherhood, she does it by kidnapping an abandoned child at Jantar Mantar. Just as easily, she gives the rights of motherhood away to Anjum. Her desire to raise the infant girl does not limit itself within the feminine and nurturing frames of motherhood. Her love for Miss Udaya Jebeen, the second, transcends the love that a woman is supposed to harbour for her child. This kind of love makes it impossible for her to lead a safe life in the heartland of "Duniya". With the help of the other "abnormal" characters in the novel, she too, migrates into

the same graveyard that Anjum had made her home- Jannat Guesthouse. Finally, after a lifetime of travel and migration from one bountiful ecology to another, Tilottama too finds herself at home only at a government graveyard.

Soon this guest house is seen to have turned into a burial ground for those bodies that find no place to be cremated in other legitimate places of burial and remembrance. From the body of the Foreigner dancer, to the body of the New Delhi prostitute, all non-conforming souls find rest at this dejected ecology of death.

Revathy: The Woman who does not want her Yield

Comrade Revathy, who hails from the East Godavari district is fighting for the rights of the tribals to continue the life that they choose to live, regardless of what profits the urban capitalists. In search for the choicest of minerals and natural resources, corporate giants across the world have known to displace the natives and/or tribals who have inhabited these 'profitable' ecologies for generations now. People's movements have taken various forms to fight this destruction of lives of people and nature. Comrade Revathy had dedicated her entire life to such a movement. The ideology through which she resists, requires her to shed the conventional femininity that society imposes upon women . She is one of the people fighting an almost endless war against the state in the dense forests of the "naxal belt" in Central India. She, like her other comrades, has rejected the idea of conventional marriage, family or any other familial ties. However, the identity of a comrade that she dons does not make her immune to the harassment and abuse she suffers because of her identity as a woman. Her body is used as a site of conquest by the police. Her body acts as an indication of plunder and destruction that the state power can cause, if it wants to. On one of her resistance demonstrations, she is caught by the police. The police decide to send a message of threat to her party and display their strength by violating her body. A woman who has rejected the role of a nurturing mother has no place of dignity in the worldview of state actants. She is a mere object to inscribe a

portrait of police's impunity on. Further, when she goes back to her party, they do not particularly seem to remember the fact that she along with being a comrade, is a woman too. The constant pain and bleeding is supposed to be something that she has to put up with, as a matter of occupational hazard. Her emotional trauma is dismissed. She is asked to give "objective details", rather than an emotional rant of the account.

The child born out of this act is not one that Comrade Revathy feels the most conventional form of motherly affection towards. She contemplates murdering the child as she knows that the baby girl is proof her precarity and the harassment she has been subjected to. She also knows that given her political choices and lifestyle, she cannot afford to take care of another vulnerable life. Therefore, she gives up the baby to be taken care of by the seemingly righteous people at Jantar Mantar. At Jantar Mantar, she is initially looked down upon by the residents of Jannat Guest house as well as the other regular inhabitants of the monument. Empathy, therefore, is not the first response a woman like her receives from any quarter. The child born out of this woman, who refuses to accept her yield, also ends up at the Government graveyard. She is named Miss Udaya Jebeen, the second. Of all the people that Revathy encounters, it is only the inhabitants of Jannat Guest house, whom she did not even technically meet, that understand and accept her and her yield.

Conclusion

The graveyard and its inhabitants (dead and living), happen to have been rejected by a world driven by a desire to further its profits by regulating the yields from women and nature. The novel acts as an instance of how women and ecologies that are not fertile, are undesirable and preferably forgotten by the world and its patriarchal interests. (Hooks 53)

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