

A Gynocritical Analysis of Bengali Literature's Nature-Woman Nexus

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Abstract: *The paper entitled "Barsha Basanta Baisakha: A text that conjoins women and nature" examines the interplay between femininity and nature, examining the profound links between female selfhood and natural world in the Odia novel Barsha Basanta Baisakha by Pratibha Ray. Woman and nature both complement each other. The relationship between the two has been prevailing since time immemorial. A woman is soft, bright and strong just like nature. At times, she embodies the fierce nature of Rudra. But it is astonishing to find that a woman's life is tied to a thread and that piece of thread is controlled by a man. From youth to old age, she undergoes male dominance despite her reluctance. The protagonist of the novel reflects these cycles, with her maturation dissected from both a physical and spiritual continuum of growth with the alternation of seasons. The text explores the deeper cultural and spiritual ethos of Indian society through the vivid portrayal of seasons—Barsha (rain), Basanta (spring), and Baisakha (summer). Ray weaves a metaphorical tapestry of nature cycles to the emotional, psychological and societal journey of women. It paints readers with the message of cycles of fertility, rebirth, metamorphosis and resilience of life at large. These comparisons with nature are hidden in shades behind the lives of female spectacles which aggrieved by society but again more powerful than nature. The simultaneous intertwining of nature and women opens up a whole peculiar narrative that seeks to defy all established conventions which pretty much renders Barsha Basanta Baisakha as an eco-feminist text.*

Keywords: Nature, Woman, Ecofeminism, Metamorphosis, Defy

1. Introduction

Ecofeminism is a branch of feminism that explores the relationship between women and nature. This study aims to explore the ecofeminist themes in Pratibha Ray's *Barsha Basanta Baisakha*, focusing on the intersection of gender, class, and ecological degradation through the metaphorical representation of seasons. In a patriarchal culture where male dominance seeps into every facet of existence, the connection between women and nature looms subtly beneath the surface. This study contributes to the field of ecofeminism by examining the cultural and spiritual ethos of Indian society, offering a nuanced understanding of the shared oppression of women and nature. Feminist thinkers and writers have defined this relationship for centuries. Women's experiences have been mirrored by the natural world since ages; both are subject to patterns of exploitation, objectification, and aggression as well as to cycles of creation, artifice, destruction, and rebirth. Beneath the apparent 'masculine' dominance of culture, both nature and women have historically endured, awaiting their inevitable resurgence. In a world where men hold power and influence the scene is one where women's bodies and the environment experience colonization and exploitation side, by side while being stripped of their voices. Patriarchal dominance dehumanizes and perpetuates patterns of oppression and neglect.

Women's experiences are likened to the characteristics of nature as they are torn apart into pieces and reshaped to align with the agendas of those holding authority. Scholars who support Ecofeminism contend that the interconnected oppression arises from a shared origin – the viewpoint that divides humans and nature while glorifying control over care giving aspects of life. The outcomes are profound and distressing – devastation, women's oppression and the disappearance of traditions. The odia text "*Barsha Basanta*

Baisakha" by Pratibha Ray blurs the lines, between women's experiences and natural world to unveil an ecofeminist storyline that connects non-human realms. This book depicts life experiences of a woman in three stages with the changing of season. The three seasons shows the predicaments of a woman which she had to gone through in an andocentric society. By depicting a woman's experiences harmoniously entwined with nature's rhythms the text embodies the belief that the subjugation of women and nature are inextricably linked.

2. Literature Review

Seamlessly weaving the experiences of women and nature, Pratibha Ray's feminist Odia novel *Barsha Basanta Baisakha* (1974) for Control Events. This article formulates some ecofeminist implications of the text, resulting from a reading that emphasizes how women are represented and linked to the climate seasonality in their fight against patriarchal dominion. Ecofeminism was born with the work of scholars like Mary Daly (1978) and Susan Griffin (1976), Carolyn Merchant (1980), Ynestra King (1981), who placed women's oppression next to environmental destruction. The American philosopher, Karen J. Warren, in her article, "*Feminism and Ecology: Making Connections*" tries to point out the environmental degradation and recognizes the connections between women and nature. She writes – "**Women are described in animal terms as pets, cows, sows, foxes, chicks, serpents, bitches, beavers, old bats, old hens, mother hens, pussycats, cats, cheetahs, bird-brains, and hare-brains...**" "**'Mother Nature' is raped, mastered, conquered, mined; her secrets are 'penetrated,' her 'womb' is to be put into the service of the 'man of science.'** Virgin timber is felled, cut down; fertile soil is tilled, and land that lies 'fallow' is 'barren,' useless. The exploitation of nature and animals is justified by feminizing them; the exploitation of women

is justified by naturalizing them". (Karen J. Warren, *Ecological Feminism*).

Ray's work resonates with ecofeminist scholar Vandana Shiva's "*Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development*". The book proposes that three interconnected conferences of development; ecology and gender exist asserting that there is a connection, between the decline of women and nature, in today's society. Shiva criticized the lack of respect for diversity, highlighted the impact of colonization, patriarchy and environmental degradation. She even talks about the 'maldevelopment' in relation with ecofeminism in the Asian countries.

Ecofeminism aims to redefine values and address existing issues. It focuses deeply upon the themes of women's freedom and the liberation of nature, from dominance with Gita Mehta being a notable female writer, in this realm. In her book, "*A River Sutra*" the author discusses nature and raises numerous issues regarding women and their connection, with nature. The stories presented in Gita Mehta's "*A River Sutra*" highlight, as evident in the title, what can be considered the most sacred aspect of every human's life which is nature. According to Gita Mehta, in this book, the Narmada cleanses the lives of people. The lower course of the river is the most feeding stream which actualizes all of them. The river serves as the foundation for the book's stories and is the main source of all the characters. As we can see, it is a river; ecologically it is beneficial as most of the surrounding area depends on it. This river nourishes all of humankind and is a link between the past and present.

Anita Desai is among the most significant contemporary Indian writers who never stop to consider the complex relationship between women and nature. To maintain the vicious cycle of environmental degradation, both women and natural resources were exploited. The title of the novel, "*Fire on the Mountain*," metaphorically describes the destructive forces brought about by human greed and exploitation as if to engulf the very earth and people who lived on it. It explicates how the novel interweaves the lives of women with natural rhythms, and delineates ways in which the exploitation of women parallels the degradation of the earth. This is also a poignant commentary on gender, power, and ecological resilience.

As far as ecofeminism is concerned, the theme resonates with odia author Gopinath Mohanty's "*Amruta Ra Santana*" (1946). The book depicts the interminable tribulations faced by women in the countryside as the environment continues to deteriorate, presenting the duality of women's discrimination and ecological sickness. "*Amruta Ra Santana*" is a saga which celebrates – in an imaginative narrative – the pain and the pleasure, the bliss and the sorrow of one of the oldest known primal societies. The said tribe is the Kondh who are the biggest tribal community in Odisha and considered as one of the most elementary. They inhabit small groups of villages located in the remote hill and forest area in the eastern ghats of ornately Odisha. This novel immerses the reader into the core of the Kondh world and with striking intensity and passion informs him of how the people know the Knodhs' way of living and loving, their

agonies and deaths; how they rejoice in the celebration of life. The scope is immense; however, the focus remains on a few interrelated villages, connected through matrimonial ties. Pratibha Ray's *Barsha Basanta Baisakha* also conveys the idea of ecofeminism which has been incorporated in the above works. It shows the predicaments, loss of innocence of the protagonist in various stages of life through the cyclic motion of three seasons.

3. Objective of the Study

The objective of the study is to identify and interpret the ecofeminist themes and motifs in the odia novel *Barsha Basanta Baisakha*; such as the exploitation of women and nature, and the struggle of agency and autonomy. It traces women's experience and their alliance with nature, exploring the intersections of gender, class, and ecological degradation. The paper can be understood as follows.

The Winds of Change

The season Barsha (Rainy Season) represents chaos and emotional instability. The protagonist Sulagna faces tremendous obstacles and feelings of despair, much like the rains can produce flooding and turmoil. The rains frequently wash away the old, similar to how Sulagna must confront and let go of her past. Rain describes her adolescent; she happens to be an agile girl during her growing youthful days. She has a close relationship with her sister-in-law's brother Raju Bhai. Sulagna had a filial love for her Raju bhai. Her parents sent her to Raju's house to complete her matriculation, as her school was situated away from her house. There she stays with Raju, and his beautiful wife Minu. Sulagna was fourteen years then; she used to sleep with Minu Bhauja and witnessed her intimacy with Raju Bhai. At Sulagna's tender age, she did not understand the relationship between Raju bhai and Minu's bhauja. But at night she knows how Raju bhai loves Minu bhauja while she sleeps in a light sleep. After seeing and hearing all the romantic conversation, it is as if the color of her adolescence begins to chase her. Although she loved Raju Bhai as before, now she was a little shy with him.

She was so beautiful that, even the science teacher Pramod Babu of her school liked her so much that sometimes while studying he would keep looking at Sulagna and their classes would be stopped. Once when Dance Master Ji was preparing Sulagna for a dance program for the role of Radha, Pramod Babu said, "Radha herself is shining so much, why you are applying so many blushes on her?" (*Barsha Basanta Baisakha*, pg 08, translated).

Raju Bhai pretends to be a virtuous man who loves Sulagna as a sister. But he shows his true colors by proposing her to get married to him and establish illicit affairs with him. He did not care for his holy relationship with his wife either. When Sulagna opposed the proposal by valuing their brother-sister relationship, he adds: "the voice of heart is louder than the uttered words. One does not become your brother by just calling him brother" (*Barsha Basanta Baisakha*, pg18, translated). Sulagna was so innocent that he manipulated her so easily and convinced her not to tell anyone about them. With the passage of time Minu bhauja conceived a child. While she was in labor, delivering a child

in hospital; Raju bhai took the advantage of that time and tried to molest Sulagna. Somehow, she managed to save herself by slapping Raju bhai. She ran away. She realized the reality of those beasts that were in disguised of a gentle man. Sulagna lost her childhood innocence and at her teenage she turned into a twenty-five-year-old mature woman.

Hope, Love, and Youth

Basanta (spring) is a season for renewal and regeneration. After the turbulence of the rainy season, it provides Sulagna with a new beginning, allowing her to let go of old burdens and welcome new opportunities. The beauty of spring, with its blooming flowers and rich vegetation, provides a backdrop for Sulagna's introspection. This connection with nature gives her a sense of tranquility and helps her to think about her identity and ambitions. But, the spring is fleeting. During her teenage she recognized spring but youth made her realized the reality of mysterious spring. She became strong and deep. She took admission in college for MSc. Courses, Deepa was her best friend. With the arrival of spring the hope of love sprung like a flower. She had a fondness towards to a handsome young man Debabrata Mohapatra. But her bubbles got bursted. Debabrata has gone to America for higher studies and their love remains incomplete as she got to know about Debabrat's alliance with someone else.

Deepa, Sulagna's friend wanted her to be engaged with her brother Deepak. She tried hard to get them together. Deepak and Sulagna fell for each other, with a commitment of marriage Deepak went to Banaras to get a job of a professor. After getting master's degree, Sulagna went to Delhi for research work through a scholarship. In Delhi she resides with her best friend Deepa and her husband Amarendra, who was a government officer. Deepak come Delhi to meet Sulagna and then they both went on a vacation to Agra while staying in the Taj Mahal hotel Deepak wanted to get intimate with her. Though she loves Deepak, her childhood trauma of Raju bhai does not permit her to trust anyone. To prove her love for Deepak she slept with him like a corpse. Her body became cold and her soul became numb. Deepak promised to marry her but after coming from Mussoorie he surprised her by saying that his father fixed his marriage with someone else. Sulagna became pale, she was impregnated by Deepak, and he told her to abort that child. Sulagna pleads him to marry but he denied and insulted her. She cried for hours and the spring of her life has gone and she remained unwanted.

The Decline of Youth:

The flowers of spring withered by the arrival of Baisakha (Summer Season). This time of year provides warmth and vibrancy. It demonstrates Sulagna's development and the culmination of her experiences. She grows stronger and more confident as she faces life's hardships. The intensity of summer reflects her determination to accept her situation and seek a new path. Her life completely changed. She got married to Dr. Mohapatra who has helped in delivering her illegitimate child. Sulagna was too stubborn that she refused the idea of aborting an innocent life. She did not abort her child, she continues to reside with Deepa and Amarendra and gave birth to a child but Deepa and Amarendra told her

that she gave birth to a lifeless child, to save her from humiliation of society. She became insane and while lying in the hospital bed Amarendra asked her to establish illicit affair with him. He said: "an illicit affair is better than a loveless marriage. Marriage can bring stability to everyone's life but cannot bring fulfillment." (*Barsha Basanta Baisakha*, pg102, translated). The andocentric society made her a harlot of circumstances. Dr. Mohapatra cannot see her insanity; his heart melts by her deep for her child. He lied her that she gave birth to a daughter and she is safe with him. He decided to marry Sulagna. Dr. Mohapatra was none other than her college day's love for whom she had a soft corner. Debabrat's wife died while delivering a daughter. Sulagna was leading a happy life with her daughter; but her married life became monotonous, she married Debabrata for saving herself from societal humiliation, they were acting as a couple in front of society. Later, a storm came into her life in the form of Deepak. Deepak and Debabrata were close friends; both of their kids went to the same hostel for completing their education. Time passes and Sulagna became a social activist, she works for the NGOs and Orphanages to spend her leisure time. While studying in same college Debabrata's daughter Soni and Deepak's son Joyti fell in love. Sulagna was against it, because she only knows that they both are half brother and sister. But the truth has to come out, situation became worst; joyti started hating Sulagna because she was against their marriage. Finally, Deepa confronts her and told her about the truth of her still born baby. Sulagna gave birth to a son and Deepa gave that child to her brother Deepak and his wife to complete their family. Sulagna scattered into pieces; she became hopeless in her old age. She failed to recognize her true identity. As John Keats said "beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes", Sulagna's beauty faded in her old age now nobody is after her. Pratibha Ray adds: "if the tree is bent in green leaves, filled with colorful flowers, everyone stretches out their hands under its shade to be enchanted by its beauty to praise it. But who asks the leafless tree in premature lightning? No one wants it back." (*Barsha Basanta Baisakha*, pg186, translated). Sulagna is the victim of the society who needs solitude in her life.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, the paper highlights the development of a woman's character and harsh experiences through the changing seasons. From Raju bhai to Debabrata, Sulagna has gone through lots of humiliation and sexual exploitation. Raju bhai destroyed her innocence, Deepak tear down her chastity, and Debabrata take away her hope, trust, and identity. Although debabrata gave her an identity of his daughter's mother and his wife; he never liked the growing fondness of Sulagna for his daughter. The men of this apostolic society treated her as a prostitute and made her a victim of circumstances. The text interweaves the experiences of women with the natural world, describing how their lives change according to the changes in the environment and surroundedness. Illustrating the constant shifts between seasons through imaginative descriptions, Ray discloses her character's emotional landscapes from the perspective of their struggle and triumphs. Thus, considering the recurring seasons, her stories also reveal the recurring nature of the women's experience, reinforcing their

resilience and ability to transform. Ray does not simply use nature as an aesthetic part of the text but incorporates it into women's psychological development. The natural landscape becomes a sanctuary for Sulagna where she is free to articulate her most personal thoughts and feelings.

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