



RESEARCH PAPER

Exploitation of Women and Land: An Ecofeminist Study of *Noor* by Sorraya Khan

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Received: May 08, 2021 Accepted: August 10, 2021 Online: August 19, 2021 Keywords: Ecofeminism, Urbanization, Patriarchy, Ecology, Degradation, Exploitation *Corresponding Author safamir123@gmail.com	This research aims to study the exploitation of women and land in Sorraya Khan's <i>Noor</i> . The researcher has attempted to study the elements of ecofeminism which was originally propounded by West, are showcased in the novel. In a post-colonial country like Pakistan, ecofeminism plays a vital role to unfold the degradation of ecology in the name development and urbanization. Ecofeminism as an idea reflects the link between oppression of women and land caused by urbanization, militarization and development. It focuses on unfolding the streaks of ecofeminism in the novel with post-colonial perspective. Furthermore it concludes that healing can only be done by initiating the process to bring change in the patriarchal system of oppression. This interdisciplinary research work has a wide scope for future researchers in the field of ecology, feminism, biodiversity and ecofeminism.

Introduction

In a post-colonial country like Pakistan, ecofeminism plays a vital role to unfold the degradation of ecology in the name development and urbanization. In the same way, gender based discrimination can be addressed and analyzed by looking into the human relationship with nature and other marginalized people in the society. The victimization of marginalized and their vulnerability to the disasters, make it essential to analyze this connection. Marginalization and patronization of women is the result of inequality of power distribution between men and women within a society. Vandana Shiva argues that "humiliation of women and the destruction of earth go hand in hand" when the environment is fragmented with the productive demands of capitalism, it is a woman who becomes vulnerable to

marginalization and other disaster happening in a region (Shiva, 2010). According to Shiva(1993) all the developments made in under developed countries are the result of influence of colonial power for the materialistic gains. The industrialization of rural areas effect lands and the people belong to it. The destruction of natural land and resources make the female deprived of their privilege to find solace in nature. Literature plays an important role in defamiliarizing reality, reflecting human nature and enacting social change. Eco criticism deals with the nature writings and themes of ecology. In the context of post-colonial literature, Ecofeminist literary criticism is not a new notion but still it is at a developing stage.

In this paper, the researcher focuses on the selected novel of Sorraya Khan which is true portrayal of ecofeminism. The novel exhibits the relation between feminism, militarization, healing and ecology. It showcases the contribution of war in exploiting the land and female bodies in the name of nationalism and so called patriotism. The main objective of the present research is textual analysis and conceptual interpretation of the selected text from ecofeminism perspective. This research seeks to bring out the eco feminist theories in post-colonial context for the textual analysis of the novel. The novel is written in the backdrop of civil war happened in Pakistan after getting liberation from English colonial rule. This research area needs to be explored as it has not been researched to great extent.

Ecofeminism in Noor by Sorraya Khan

Theoretical Background

Ecofeminism appeared globally in the second half of the 1970s from cross cultural research on social justice and environmental issues. At that time, several innovative texts shed light upon the commonalities of marginalized structures on the basis of gender, culture and the environment (Lauwers, 2016). Mary Daly (1978) in her book *Gyn/ecology* establishes a connection between feminist ideology and environmentalism. By mentioning the oppression women experienced in history and under cultural influence including Chinese foot-binding, genital mutilation act in Africa or witch-hunting in Europe. She stresses the existence of a connection between environmental and feminine plight. Daly also draws attention to the male dominated treatment of women's bodies as she underscores the need to redefine the concept of relationships to environment as well as to the women.

Though at the same time Griffin in *Woman and Nature: The Roaring inside Her* (1978), she denounces the idea that women are, supposedly, closer to nature and, conditioned to be like nature itself, subjected to male domination. In general Ecofeminists apply feminist analysis to environmental issues arguing that feminism and environmentalism are inherently connected. But Warren asserts these connections are "historical (typically causal), conceptual, empirical, socioeconomic, linguistic, symbolic and literary, spiritual and religious, epistemological, political, and ethical" (Warren, 1996).

In the beginning, Ecofeminism was associated with the idea that women and nature are connected in several significant ways because both were identified with femininity. This femininity, associated with characteristics including fertility to vulnerability to male subjugation, was viewed as an ecological development that is violently degraded in patriarchal society. Eco feminists therefore presented a connection between women and nature because, they share similar characteristics such as as fertility creativity, equally important and valuable, and both are controlled and humiliated by male dominated society (or “patriarchy”). Moreover, practices, and institutions influenced by capitalism stir up and justify their violation (Cuomo, 2002).

Initially Eco feminists viewed the connection between women and nature in a positive connotation. This idea needed to be re-conceptualized, because female bodies having individual will, cannot always be associated with goodness. So claims about unique connections between women and nature cannot be categorized as a universally truth. On the other hand, in Ecofeminist *Philosophy*, Warren claims that “sexism, racism, and the degradation of the natural world are connected” highlights the material effects and conditions contributing in violation and degradation of nature and women. Warren (1987) establishes connection between feminism and environmentalism by telling how feminism is led by cultural and social change. Warren (1997) asserts, deforestation, consumption of water, farming, industrialization and the rise of environmental pollution are linked to feminism because understanding them gives the clear picture of the status and exploitation of women in different cultures. Her data establishes that women are more dependent on nature than men in terms of food, fuel, fodder, and products for the home including building materials, household utensils, gardens, dyes, medicines, and income. Thus women lives are more effected when it comes to degradation of nature (Warren 1997).

Warren's views on ecofeminism introduce new ways of nonviolent acts by acknowledging value of woman and nature. Her perspective leads to new disciplines of both feminism and environmentalism to direct a new order in the world that requires changing contemporary views on nature is, human, and ethics. Warren, highlights how persecution and men empowerment are interconnected and can only be resolved collectively, because it presents the empirical data in order to raise objections about the impact of globalization and capitalism on poor environment and on women's lives. She urges to think of the progressive and innovative ways to bring an innovative change in contemporary crises of politics and environment (Glazebrook, 2002).

Warren’s view on ecofeminism is strongly connected to oppression because it is more reliable and verifiable than any other moral theory (Cuomo, 2002). In 1993, Warren stresses the idea that spiritualities of ecofeminism provide which leads to an individual effort and commitment to bring a great transformation in patriarchy. This is the process of healing from the wounds caused by patriarchy on women and

nature. In 2000, she argues further that ecofeminist spiritualities are a way to survive while living in a patriarchal society. They have ability "to intervene in and creatively change patriarchal (and other) systems of oppression" (Warren, 2000). Spiritualities involve power, in particular the power to move from "unhealthy, life-destructive systems and relationships to healthy, life-affirming" (Warren and Cheney, 1991, p. 75) and they are a tool to avoid nonviolent action and destruction.

The term "postcolonial ecofeminism" has been used as a literary analysis tool, but it is not effective because it uses the usual Western ecofeminism perspective to analyze postcolonial texts. According to Youngsuk Chae(2015), the fusion of post-colonialism and eco-feminism form post-colonial eco-feminism. This definition of postcolonial ecofeminism ignores the inconsistencies provided by the examples of non-Western women's relationship with nature. The unique relationship between women and nature in postcolonial society can be examined in more detail. Because of the dual relationship between postcolonial women; they must also be critically questioned. Not only gender, but also class, race, religion, geography, and politics can affect these relationships. In order to present a cultural diversity and biological transformation, ecofeminism can play a vital role on literary, social and environmental level. Ecofeminism make it easier to understand the complex ideas when apply to literature. Talking about these issues make it less problematic when addressed at individual level.

For this study, the researcher has selected a novel written by Pakistani author in post-colonial text to highlight the oppression of women with nature. This interdisciplinary research work has a wide scope for future researchers in the field of ecology, feminism, biodiversity and ecofeminism.

Results and Discussion

Sorraya Khan's *Noor*, entails effects of war on women living in a patriarchal society. The novel is set in the backdrop of civil war. Khan presents in the novel, how war leaves its implications on socio economic life of individuals particularly women. During the 1971 war, Ali, a young West Pakistani soldier, finds a child of lost bewildered along a pavement in Dhaka. Ali decides to adopt this orphan child, Sajida, to Islamabad and looks after her as his own child. After his return, Ali, like almost all soldiers, never speaks of his contribution in the war. He believes, "his story, the sum of horrible details" is "neatly stored away" (Khan, 2003, p. 63) and is better not to reveal. It is a story of violence and destruction caused by war on nature and women both. Ali's mother, Nanijaan, too, never questions him about the past. Sajida finds goodness in Ali as he has given her a life and security. As she was very young in Dhaka her memories of her childhood are bleak and forgotten, and she faintly remembers her fisher folk family which was lost in the devastating cyclone and war times. The novel exhibits the horrors of civil war caused by capitalism, the fragility of women and nature in war times, and the astonishing power of healing.

Noor (1954), exhibits the patriarchal attitude in the form of civil war caused by capitalism, depicted as the root cause of exploitation of women and nature by

encroaching on cultivated land and the age-old agrarian culture. The economical aggression and militarization in East Pakistan by West Pakistan show the horrible effects of war on the social and economic lives of people living in war torn area. In the novel, Khan stresses on women's gendered experience of war. She highlights the circumstances of war making the women and environment the most vulnerable. The story centers on Sajida, (A Bengali child) who gets adopted and brought to West Pakistan after Liberation war in 1971. Sajida marries Hussein who stays unaware of Sajida's trauma of witnessing horrors of war including rape, exploitation, hunger, disease, death and humiliation. Throughout the novel, Sajida is left in bewilderment. To get rid of these dark memories, it's an uphill task for the sensitive souls and Sajida being herself was a very sensitive person. She was the victim of patriarchy who was forced to stay in with a male dominated household.

"What does it mean to be handpicked by a person, an armed person who adopts but give you at the very outset?" The Earth so good it did not even need seeds. The land is black like the people" (Khan, 2003, p.84).

Despite being married and having three children, Sajida is unable to speak about the trauma she has experienced in the war torn land. Sajida's silence is related to nature of being a woman under a cultural paradigm in society especially in eastern patriarchal system. Sajida is controlled by the norms applied by the patriarchal mindset in accessing the nature of being woman that influence her. He tormented her psychologically to the great extent. After some years of their marriage Sajida has learned to hide her thoughts from Hussein as it can be seen in the very first chapter that she does not discuss her dreams with him that is the very reason why she never reveals her "secret" that is Noor and Sorraya Khan describes her mental state so:

"It had been years since she'd discussed her dreams and where they come from with Hussein" (Khan, 2003, p.14).

The reason behind keeping her thoughts to herself and that is "her husband would certainly have thought of her as a mentally unstable person." if she told him about her dreams and definitely will scold her angrily. Such behavior of Hussein made their nuptial breach to get wider with the passing time until he abandoned Sajida alone for five years. Rather it's not only Sajida whom he exploited but his daughter, Noor also. Soon after her birth when he comes to know that his daughter is suffering from Down syndrome, he eventually starts ignoring her even does not want to see her daughter in the room as Sorraya Khan puts it: "I want her out of this room, he declared" (Khan, 2003, 45).

Just because she was not like boys he avoids her as much as he could and not only Noor he deserts his wife too for a long period of five years. He never acknowledges love of her daughter which makes her wait for him daily on the door, rather he tries his best to ignore her by not even looking at her. His indifference stops him nowhere and he even tears apart drawings of Noor from wall, breaks

frames of her paintings by letting his briefcase fall on them. The behavior of Noor's father shows his patriarchal attitude as he fails to give his daughter an identity by accepting her as her daughter and appreciating her art work. Moreover the text discloses:

"Hussein picked up drawings scattered about the house, bunched them into tight balls, and threw them in the garbage" (Khan, 2003, p.44).

It's not just that he avoids her rather such behavior is a metaphor for the suppression of the hidden gift of Noor who can peer into the past and future and paint it magnificently. She paints the memories of her mother, father and grandfather in several of her paintings. Hussein couldn't bear that his daughter should make her own identity by painting past and future so he tries to dissect her identity by tearing apart her paintings from wall. The ecofeminist idea of the harmony between the woman and nature is also revealed through the subjugation of female characters. The paintings of Noor (Sajida's daughter) aggravate the intensity of the traumatic incidents of female victimization and land destruction, which all the characters repress. Noor's paintings are a window to the horrible past full of horrific memories of war times. Moreover even though Hussein knows that Noor has this peculiar gift he insists Sajida to turn Noor up to music or something else than painting. Sorraya Khan tells us his disturbance over her talent in the following words:

"Although Hussein had reconciled himself with Noor's talent and he was no longer bothered by her galleries on the walls of the house, there was something about her talent that remained unsettling to him" (Khan, 2003, p.202).

The three major character including Nanijan, Sajida and Noor in the novel get affected by major environmental shift from their native places to an entirely new places. Sajida longs for a distinctive identity as she continuously asks questions about war happened in her native land. She recalls the natural beauty of her native land and the time spent with her family in East Pakistan. The maltreatment of woman in the patriarchal society can also be seen through the character of Nanijan (Ali's Mother). The daily beating of Nanijan by her husband shows a man's view of familial patriarchy.

"Ali's father grabbed her from the back, twisting her shoulders around, until her face was level with his. He wrapped his hands around her neck and then he punched her, slamming her face against the wardrobe" (Khan, 2003, p.87).

Adding to the trouble is the fear that always haunts Nanijan that if she tells anybody about it or if anyone else might guess, he would certainly take on her life as he threatened her frequently. The relationship between Nanijan and her husband explains the oppression of internalized patriarchy. Khan casts light on Nanijan's suppression, her pathetic condition and her husband's cruelty:

"Then there were other beatings, countless others, most of which took place in the bedroom when the children were sleeping, the servants were resting, the old, blemished walls her only witness" (Khan, 2003, p.88).

The novel confirms the viewpoints of most of the renowned ecofeminists that women are invested with a mission to save and nurture nature. Chris Cuomo, an American ecofeminist, observes, "Environmental ethics can benefit by incorporating feminist insights on the limitations of traditional philosophical conceptions of ethics" (Cuomo, 1998, p. 35). This key feature of ecofeminism can be studied through Sajida, the principal protagonist of the novel who, as representative of the third world woman peasant, is very much associated with nature. Sajida and her native land Bangladesh both are subjected to war aggression, militarization and exploitation in caused by capitalism and so called civilization.

Sajida's intimate and intricate relationship with nature is portrayed through her dreams and a series of flashback she gets from Bangladesh. The entire novel is the epitome of an ecofeminist stance. Indeed, Sajida continuously dreams of the landscapes of Bangladesh. The characters of Sajida, Nanijan and Noor show their affection towards nature throughout the novel. The controlled and exploited lives of all female characters run parallel with the exploitation of land.

Surrendering to deep sleep, Sajida's dream grew more vivid than they had ever been. She pictured the landscape of East Pakistan- Bangladesh now (Khan, 2015).

Sajida's abnormal daughter has also a peculiar relationship with nature as whenever she starts crying loudly her cries lessened when got close to tap water. Since water is a segment of nature so this makes Noor a perfect example of the intrinsic relationship of nature and woman. Her paintings comprising of natural imagery, dead fish, buffalos, boats and flood present her strong bonding with nature. Every time she paints an image though distorted but it takes her mother back to the old times. It actually compels her to think about her family which she lost during natural disaster in East Pakistan. On Sajida's confusion and curiosity about her past, Ali remains deliberately silent. But after a series of event and a continuous resistance, Ali decides to open his heart to Sajida. He talks about all the happenings of war in East Pakistan.

Vandana Shiva thinks that the exploitation of women and nature is due to a developmental attitude in the form of the scientific revolution and a reductionist paradigm which she equates with male development: "Development has meant the ecological and cultural rupture of bonds with nature, and within society, it has meant the transformation of organic communities into groups of uprooted and alienated individuals searching for abstract identities" (Shiva, 2010, p. 99).

Khan describes how the violation of the land is parallel with the violation of people, especially women, and true healing will only come about with the

acceptance of trauma. Rape in wartime is then depicted as a male bonding exercise of war (Norridge, 2012). This kind of exploitation of women by men in power when they are most vulnerable is characteristic of a masculine society where women are viewed as sexual objects. As the land of Bangladesh experiences great havoc in the war of liberation disrupting everything including women and nature. Khan reveals the atrocities of triggered by man over the land and nature. She gives a vivid description of the ecological beauty of Pakistan in flashbacks which serves as a glaring contrast between ecology before war and chaos brought upon it after war. Ali reminiscences the beauty of East Pakistan (Bangladesh):

“From above in the airplane, there was no question East Pakistan was beautiful. Lush and green the way West Pakistan never was, even during monsoons” (Khan, 2003, p.113).

This beauty of East Pakistan, lacking in West Pakistan was transformed into rubble in the brutal time of war – manmade disaster. Some of the paintings of Noor are symbolic in this regard e.g. she paints a boat and some dead, rotting fishes in it which shows the deplorable condition of nature. In another painting she paints a dead buffalo which is yet another symbol of the destruction of nature.

Man humiliates nature in the name of progress and industrialization led by deforestation. As Carolyn an environmental historian Merchant asserts appropriately:

“Prior to the seventeenth century, nature was conceived on an organic model as a benevolent female, a nurturing mother; after the scientific revolution, nature was conceived on a mechanistic model as a (mere) machine, inert, dead. On both of the models, nature was female” (Merchant, 1980, p.234).

Ali who represents patriarchal attitude with degradation of nature according to his will as Hussein does to Sajida. Ali uses nature and spoils the ecological beauty of that area by building a house there. The character of Nanijan represents innate connection of woman with nature. Her intimacy with nature has been portrayed considerably:

“The rooftop gateway was Nanijan’s solace...Nanijan would call the boys or Sajida to her roof and in the evenings they would watch the stars and moon and planets set above the fading outline of the hills. Much to her dismay, her expensive view shrank, even as she moved her folding chair from one corner to the next to hold on to glimpses of it” (Khan, 2003, p.56-57).

Here phrases like “Nanijan’s solace” and “her roof” refer to the kind of peculiar relationship Nanijan shares with nature. Moreover the name “Ali’s sector” given to the area Ali builds his house in is a denotation of colonial attitude he adopts towards nature. The degradation of nature by Ali is as similar as the degradation of Sajida by her husband.

Warren (2000) asserts that all forms of oppression including classism, ageism and sexism, intersect to show that the oppression of women parallels the domination of nature. The novel reveals women's humiliation with no bounds in the form of rape, abduction and murder. Ali recalls various rape incidents of women by soldiers during wartimes occurred throughout the novel. Ali witnesses, rape as an inevitable accompaniment of war. Khan shows how the body of women is considered to be a national property. The exploitation of Bengali women by Pakistani army is a symbol of nationalism and belonging. Ali who refuses to rape the girls after an officer ask him to do so. The images of the victimized woman full of blood, haunts Ali for the rest of her life. After returning from East Pakistan, he decides not to marry and remains silent. He feels the pain of having traumatic memories of war every time he confronts Noor and her paintings. "The implements used to do this, the scissors, pens, a metal ruler, speckled with blood, lying to her side. The nib of the fountain pen was missing...I could see her opening in the blood" (Khan, 2003, p.183).

"He pulled and stretched the breast that was large and firm until it sprayed a stream of milk...Then he forced his rifle into her mouth, tore her sari, and sat on top of her. When he was done, he stuffed his belt between her legs letting the oversize buckle catch and tear, laughing at how cleverly he had leashed her" (Khan, 2003, p.76).

The novel exhibits the destruction of land and women bodies under the circumstances of war in the form of rape, violence and resource depletion. To conclude, the ecofeminist dimension in Noor is made conspicuous through the relationship between the woman and the natural elements and through the link between nature and culture. The affinities between the women and nature are manifested through women's victimization in patriarchal system. According to Brian Morris, the destruction of land caused by economic development has affected human relationships as well. In the novel, the relationship of Sajida with her husband, Noor with her father, Ali with his mother clearly demonstrate the hollowness and lack of empathy. As the story moves on, Ali fails to understand the purpose of war as he thinks of himself as a mercenary. But Ali after returning from war refuses to consider the female body as an inferior creature and adopts a Bengali child, Sajida as his daughter.

Conclusion

The novel does sheer justice with the ideology of ecofeminism and how the collateral damage can devastate the lives of women who witness horrible experiences oppression in various forms. The novel exhibits war, a manmade calamity as an inevitable accompaniment of degradation of women and land. It clearly pictures the irreversible loss that can sprout from exploitation of women and nature. But as Warren suggests true healing can only be done by initiating the process to bring change in the patriarchal system of oppression. It can only be done by taking small steps and changing our perception towards our relationship with nature and women.

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