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SHALLOWS IN THE DOE EYES; AN ECOFEMINIST READING OF N.S  
MADAVAN'S 'LITANIES OF DUTCH BATTERY'

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**Review**

The paper is an ecofeminist reading of N.S.Madhavan's debut novel *Litanies of Dutch Battery* in which the novelist tries to blur the boundaries of nature/culture dualism to give voice to the survival instinct of the female characters, especially of his protagonist Jessica. She is subjected to sexual harassment and oppression from the patriarchal society which represented by the imprints that the writer describes from the island of Lanthan Bathery and surrounding lagoons. Madhavan portrays how the spirit of resistance and pliability of Jessica acts as a metaphor for that of nature and vice versa. He also tries to disclose that the legacy of subjugation of nature is as same as the exploitation and dumbness imposed by the male centred society over women. Both of them reduced to assailable state of being manipulated by the norms of dominant classes. This study analyses such interconnections between women and nature and closely examines the exertion and perpetuation of power and domination of patriarchy through the use of power structures which are based on binaries. Finally it traces the attributes of a social

system that put forward the oppressive attitude of the male dominant society towards nature and women.

**Abstract**

The connection between nature and man is inseparable. Nature is the elixir for social life. All the cultural, mental and social aspect of human life is directly or indirectly related to nature. Ecofeminism has some have specialization in this way. It examines the relationship between soil and nature and similar destruction and exploitation that both inflict. N.S Madhavan's novel examines such a relationship. In a male-dominated society, Jessica, Lanthan bathery and the surrounding water are subject to a number of victimization and destruction

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Humans have the perennial, notional and somatic connection with the environment in which they live. Rely on it

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for the survival generates the ineluctability of togetherness to live as a whole and a perplexed connection between psyche and elements in our ecology. We have formal knowledge about evolutionary biology, but at the same time prone to break the strands that interlinked us with nature. Modern world denies the message continuity of the deep connection and the dependency. There is disconnection embedded in modern concept about our relationship with nature. We need domination in both human and non human spheres. Detachment from the nature normalizes this domination.

Eco feminism however rejects this naturalization which supported by the reason and rationality because the so called reason depends on the laddering binaries such as culture/nature, man/woman, white /black. In these binaries one is always secondary or less important than the other. As in culture/nature and man/woman, culture and man are always on high rank according to enlightenment reason of human race. So eco feminism argues women are far better than the man to understand the ecological destruction and exploitation because they are subjugating the same in a male dominated society. Patriarchal violence against the woman equalizes them with nature which is under the power and ill treatment of humankind.

Eco feminism advocates for woman and nature by postponing all the political,

social and spiritual overtones of patriarchal society. It contemplates the desolation of ecosystem by man as the mirroring of the turpitude of male domination over women. The strong cognizance about the natural devastation led American feminists of 70s to the view that both the woman and land are same. As the phallogocentric society uses the lexicons like 'virgin', 'innocent' and 'meek' to acknowledge the womanhood in a woman. Our art, tradition and culture use the same to address 'the mother earth'.

So according to ecofeminism, woman and nature are subject to all kinds of vices and exploitations in the same manner. Nature and culture are intertwined. Arts and discourses are adequately restored land as the embodiment of womanhood. All that nature and woman have to offer is common. The land and woman share all the torture, the stigma, the privilege and the worship that the man commits. In the light shed by this fact, ecofeminism views the non human ecosystem represents the women's social status. The literature convicts the philosophy of ecofeminism, it is the relation between women and nature. The cognizance about the future environmental crisis also emphasises on this connection. The manners in which we treat both of them, further lead to devastation and suppression in whole. Both women and nature share the same experience due to the biological rectitude.

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In Indian context the so called development is only a tool for accumulating wealth which operates through the oppression of both woman and nature. Such debilitated growth creates inequality among the two genders in the society .It also corrupts consonance of male with both nature and female and penetrates in their thought and action. Ecofeminism tries to unveil such operations against women and nature occurred through development. Therefore, humiliation of women and destruction of nature have a deep connection. Both woman and man have equal rights and position in the society. But the pseudo development erases the female from the social main streams and causes incursions on nature also.

Literature is the reflection of life. It acts as a mirror for life and also presents nature's connection to human race. Literature describes nature as the master and man as the disciple of it. Thus literature reflects the human life against the background of nature and the behavioural patterns of the characters towards the nature. Such writings help to identify the position of woman in the society and the contemporary culture on which our society rely upon .Writers with such insight has been analysing the chronicle of demureness of female and the masculine power that prevailed over human culture right from the beginning. By observing the writers who present natural calamities in different phases

of life we can comprehend the amenable response of ecofeminism in Indian arena because their writings reflect the perplexing correlation between woman and environment.

In Indian literature, fiction seems to be the strongest medium to present the feminist, ecofeminist ideas .Although most female writers support these women empowering literary theories, they have only a few male representatives such as Amithav Ghosh to support and disseminate. The works of Anita Desai, Mahaswetha Devi, Anita Nair, Arundathi Roy and Kiran Desai depict the wondering reciprocity of nature and woman. *Litanies of Dutch Battery* with same stamp delineates the tableaux of nature and woman coming together.

There have been a large number of Malayalam novels in the past which boldly portray the inseparable relationship between woman and nature .The novels of Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, a veteran writer and Jnanpith winner, are born out of the warmth of unfathomable propinquity between soil and human race. Chirutha in his novel *Randidangazhi* is the embodiment of the nature. The same link of ecofeminism is visible in the novels of Sarah Joseph .In her novels, *Aathi*, *Mattathi* and *Aalahayude Penmakkal* she has coined the characters with nature.' Ecriture feminine' is the term we can used to identify the correspondence between woman and their environment in her novels. Her novels can be seen as a

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record of female perspectives made in Malayalam over time. *Litanies of Dutch Battery* pursues the same theme but completely different proffering. N.S.Madhavan's Jessica is a heroine who has moulded herself beyond the traditional concepts in the Indian society which has been established according to the male interests. In his 1997 novel, through Jessica, Madhavan narrates the lives of a number of women who were stranded on the island of Latin Battery and subjugated to exploitation and enslavement. Jessica narrates the story of island before she was born –the moments of emptiness-as well as the text of masculine power and exploitation that dilating with her. The novel begins with two incidents that disturb a seemingly calm island, Lanthen Bathery.

I was born on 24 April 1951 ,the year when eighteen smallpox vaccinators from Eranakulam arrived in our delta ,across the Vembanad backwater looking for new borns .No sooner did the islanders see the vaccinators' flotilla of machwa boats embark from other shore they bolted their doors. (Madhavan 1)

An invasion from Eranakulam and the birth of Jessica would be going to sway the later days of the island .The island was afraid of vaccinators. Jessica was born just as their *machwa* boat set sail for the quiet island with smallpox vaccine. According to

Jessica, her birth was deliberately delayed by her mother that should be happen before Easter. Metilda delayed her delivery because she wanted baby within her forever. It symbolizes the inextricable link between nature and woman, the resonating the power of nature on woman to be the part of itself. Jessica's birthday was also the day, when:

Clear water had set in the brackish river Periyar. (Madhavan 6)

It is also a journey to an in expugnable place. As the Periyar returns its marine salts to Arabian Sea, Jessica's birth heeds the nature. Jessica sees the water she had reclined and the water of Periyar as equal .She does not detach from nature.

Jessica and nature become one as she appraises every moment since her very birth.

I braced myself to be born .like a ship entering the azhi , I moved my head to the fore. In my mother's pelvic girdle I paused, lingering in the ennui of a journey's end. (Madhavan 12)

This is how Jessica looks at the moment she is going to erect her identity .she describes the separating moment from the purity of nature with the words like pause and ennui .It also has been said before that:

Thus my life began in stealth and silence. (Madhavan 11)

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Madhavan uses these words to bespeak her ego as a woman perhaps because she came from a sterile and unadulterated nature into a male centred conventional society. Jessica is born in a stable. Metilda hides in the stable from the vaccinators and gives birth to the baby which turns the island upside down. She cries by calling Lissie cow. Matheus Asari later says that Lissie cow stopped giving milk after witnessing Metilda's labour. Lissie cow is an image for the repercussions of the trauma of women that affects nature. When Jessica first arrives in the outer world other than her own, she encounters another visage of nature that she is going to be a part of.

The wax coloured bag that held me burst and the waters oozed all around me. Suddenly, I was about to learn of many things; the acidity of the earth, the snows at the poles, rain in the eastern mountains, and dolphins that dart out of the backwater's surface like sudden ideas in the mind. I knew about music and silence. When I realized that I was going to be naked at birth, I knew about sin and purity. The water which I lay blended with cow's urine. (Madhavan 39)

Jessica is born in to the world of the people 'who helped Metilda to give birth'. She says that the umbilical cord that Anniamma cut off, sent the message of a

broken bridge. Jessica must have received messages of that indissoluble bond between woman and nature which has been temporarily severed. As the Magi come to see the Son of Man, Michael and Francis and Santiagu come to the born Jessica and give gifts. Before leaving the room, Santiagu returns and asks if it is a boy or a girl. Anniamma removes the cloth that covers the baby to make sure it is a girl. Luck, misfortune and destiny of Jessica is determined there. In the next paragraph, Jessica compares her femininity to many things. She realizes that it is at same time pure, impure, taboo, punishment and transgression. Then Jessica describes the day of baptism as:

Two days before I was to get a name, by which I would be identified. (Madhavan 44)

The baptism gives her many female names to enter into the society. Jessica has named after Matilda's rag doll from which she learned to rear. It determines the womanhood of the girl. She is born to caress and serve. Jessica gets female saints' names which are considered to be the symbols of tolerance and sacrifice and glorified by the patriarchal society. And then by the name of her godfather Edwin. The meeting with the Gravedigger Pappy at the end of the service again leads to the inseparable link between nature and human beings. Father Pilathose reminds that baptism and death are one and

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the same and these are the two periods when the bond with the nature is indivisible.

Johnson's story of defecation of dove on Jessica's head contains the feminine by law and the covert connection between woman and soil. Vicki aunty rubs egg whites and turmeric powder on Jessica to whiten her black skin thusly inserting her into the aesthetic mensuration of male postulation. The naive question Johnson asks when he sees the turmeric water in the bathtub flowing into the banana field, unobtrusively connects the female and the soil. And also the innocent revolutionary salute *inkula .....zindaba* that Johnson says while washing pigeon shit on Jessica's head foreshadows Jessica's impending revolution.

It is not fortuity that Jessica's first memorable cinematic experience was a film about nature that did not have a single human actor. Messages sent by 'the broken bridge' may have reached her invisibly. And:

The day I saw my first movie, I also learned for the first time about being a woman-although, inside the urinal, I stood up and peed. (Madhavan 108)

Jessica realizes that femininity is something that should only move along the line set by society and that it should be maintained even where the least basic needs are done in private. Jessica puts every moment of her life close to the island. The island's self is at times Jessica's. When she

loses the hold of father's hand in the procession for the church festival, she feels:

Fear come over me, of death, of isolation, like the people of Lanthan Bathery, after the last boat departed at night. (Madhavan 116)

That night, the woman in Jessica blows all the philosophies to the ground and raises the question that muted an entire community of men.

Is Family Life Good or Bad? (Madhavan 118)

In a society where women are only the second rated, even an ideology which propagating socialism and freedom cannot given a satisfying answer to Jessica. Even before the Confessional she is convinced by herself that touching her private parts is not a sin.

If my flesh carried sin, why did it comfort me? (Madhavan 129)

Jessica recognizes the natural inclinations of the flesh by deviating from the unrealistic conditions created by social norms. The perversions of the human mind and the lusts of the body seek their own unique lands. The fertility of nature and the fertility of the body are interrelated. Economic development that harms nature is a manifestation of man's relentless will and desire for power. Madhavan paints it in marking the development avenues of Kochi

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.Her hatred towards Pushpangadan who invades on her only for the sake of lust, is the protest against the loveless existence. Men ride roughshod over the nature to swank their immense power. It is not only nature but woman too become prey for him.

As moss vines clinging to the island Jessica's memories and life are embracing its flora and fauna. The construction of the hydrogen balloon and the snafu that created by the maths test were known to the nature. It was the island, not the people that put an end to Jessica's grief. Jessica often discovers the compassion of nature.

Instead of going home .I proceeded towards the boathouse to the south of Dutch Palace. Nothing stirred except the sun in the sky and I. The boat house, jutting into the river was open. It was my sanctuary, where I talked to myself. (Madhavan 135)

The day before she is decided to be implanted to Ernakulam and the night she hears 'Neelakuyil"s story, nature has the same mindset as Jessica. The island itself becomes Jessica. The electricity coming from Pallivasal and the guests and vaccinators who are coming to *machwa* boats are deforming the serenity and humility of island. The birth of Wellington Island, the siren of the Tata Company and the cranes of merchant ships question the very existence of the island. Just as Jessica

discovers the inseparable natural connection, she also resists anyone who tries to destroy them both. When others accuse her for blasphemy, she protests through defecating in church property and tearing down the papers which contain Pushpangadan's life consuming hard work to disprove a theorem as an answer for his attempt to molest her.

Usually I was not scared of the night. However, two months into the boat building activities, I stopped looking at western river through the window at night.(Madhavan 211)

Boats represent masculinity. They symbolize the dominant group that includes Jessica's father and grandfather. Jessica is not afraid of nature but her comfort. The first time watching of *chavittunadakam* reminds her of the environment itself:

I felt *chavittunadakam* was a giant whale trapped in shallow waters.(Madhavan 232)

Jessica is at times calm, excited and angry as the water around the island. After her tutor's rape attempt she gets typhoid which is an epidemic transmitted through water. But she strongly believes that it is due to his crack of seduction. Here Madhavan gives hints about the pollution of water due to commercialization and also about the bond between nature and woman .We can picked up many examples that point towards the polluted water that lie around the island.

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Father Pilathose builds a toilet for the fishermen to prevent their defecation in the church property. But the toilet opens to the west river. Lanthen Bathery surrounded by water but they have the scarcity of drinking water. It implies in the digging of a bore well in Jessica's neighborhood.

Jessica menstruates at the boat dock. It frustrates her. She compares tightening of her restraints due to her puberty to gravity. Her hatred towards Pushpangadan who invades on her only for the sake of lust is the protest against the loveless existence. She connects Pushpangadan's invasion to the arrival of Australians in Kochi. Jessica says that she could feel the impuissant Kochi on that day. The humiliated mind longing for the love and support as a ship on the port of Cochin.

All the attacks on Kochi can be seen as the trauma of Jessica. She is an invaded soil. Jessica gets sick and dreams of the Dutch, the Portuguese, the Chinese and the Arabs who captured Kochi in ages. Then she sees a quiet morning in Lanthen Bathery and a woman in the dream. They are inter connected and the embodiment of nature itself. Pushpangadan's attempt of seduction doesn't call for any action from the elders. She reacts to the fact that his rape attempt only resulted in her loss. The last part is about the Indo-Pakistani war. In the front of human enmity, nature becomes helpless and wounded.

Jessica's hysteria is a must in society. Punishment imposed by the male society on the woman who caused the death of Pushpangadan. After Jessica's world dwindles to her, the island stays with her all the way to the water. Once again, the intruders in Kochi can be seen trespassing into Jessica's thoughts. Jessica hallucinates herself as the lighthouse and the Statue of Liberty in the peak of insanity at least as a freedom of authority over her own body. For her it is an escape from the oppression and torture. The victims here are women and soil who are subjected to encroachments. Even at moment of shock treatment, Jessica smelled the lake that surrounds the island. She turns as the water in the River Periyar. There is no release for her from nature.

The first chapter titled 'To Be' and the novel ends with the chapter titled 'Omega'. The Omega not only carries the meaning as the last part but is also used to indicate the delicate qualities of the female. 'Babul Mora', another chapter title also evokes feminist thinking. Birthplace of a woman is the nature itself. The chapter titles 'Seasick', 'Body' and 'Watermelon Years' are the names that bear nature and woman. The bodies may be two but existence is one. Madhavan's debut novel presents the possibilities of an eco - feminist reading at the confluence of devastation of nature and protest against disgrace. Jessica has the woman's defense and revenge. And she adds a green face to feminism.

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Children's attitude toward Chang is an evidence to show their non discriminating mind towards nature. While Jessica, Metilda and Rosie have to take on cliché roles in the male centred society, economic, political and social changes occurred to the island; the surrounding lake and nature go parallel through the stories of Edwin and Louis Asari Madhavan's novel ends by drawing on the history of the conquest of nature and the encroachment on female identity. In the end we reached to Jessica's words to Johnson:

'I feel we are helpless' (Madhavan 283)

Jessica connects to the island and the water bodies around it, when she is disturbed. She finds solace and consolation in nature. The descriptions about the picaresque landscape of Lanthan Bathery and Kochi are dispersed widely in the novel. Lanthan Bathery is the totality of all biological beings and human and non human things are living together in a harmony there.

Madhavan deftly ties the bond between nature and woman. All the great civilizations sprang up on the banks of rivers. Rivers support the lives on earth and always equalled to women who have the role of nurturing. In all patriarchal societies, women are subjugated to the oppression and subordination. It has a direct link to the nature world .There is a construction of such a world in this novel that stands parallel to the oppressed lives of the female characters.

Political, social and economical understanding of power is based on the structure of the inequalities. Madhavan tries to destabilize and rearrange such power structure through narrating the connection between the devastation of nature and the existential issues of woman.

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