Ecofeminism in a Regional Frame: The Impact of Maldevelopment and Displacement as seen in Leo Joseph’s “Sunlight” and Raj’s “Innocence”.

Anita Balakrishnan
N. Sivagami

The French feminist Francoise d’Eaubonne who first coined the term ‘Ecofeminism’, contended that male control of production and of women’s sexuality causes the twin crises of environmental destruction through surplus production, and overpopulation through surplus births. D’Eaubonne focuses on a number of issues that would become central to the ecofeminist movement: the crisis of modernity as the ecological cost of ‘progress’ became apparent; a critique of (western) ‘patriarchal man’ as the cause of that crisis; a call to women/female/the feminine/ feminism to be the agent(s) of change; a seeming prioritization of ‘the female agenda’, but a commitment to a non-gendered egalitarianism rather than ‘power’ to women’. D’Eaubonne believes that it is patriarchy rather than men per se that cause these problems. She asserted an affinity between woman/femaleness and a benign attitude to the natural world that patriarchal man appeared to lack, while looking to social changes to resolve the problem. Mary Mellor notes that this “mixture of a near-essentialist conception of a woman-nature affinity and a non-gendered outcome is one of the most complex ‘weavings’ of the ecofeminist web”(44-45)

D’Eaubonne’s seminal essay gave rise to several varying streams of ecofeminism in countries around the world. Ecofeminism in the United States of America drew on two main streams: the spiritual feminism which stressed the ‘natural’ affinity between women and the natural world and the radical political perspectives grounded in Socialism and Marxism. Socialism and Marxism are much more strongly represented in Europe and Australia, while these countries downplay the spiritual dimension. Increasingly this trend has become apparent in the United States with the spiritual ecofeminists adopting a socialist politics. However, ecofeminists of all hues envision women playing a key role in the transition from an unsustainable to a sustainable world, although their approaches to the mechanism of change
may differ. While spiritual ecofeminists assert the power of the Eternal feminine in Nature, socialist ecofeminists encourage the challenging of the gender-blindness of male-dominated political organizations.

While ecofeminism was identified in its early years with white women from the developed world, Indian ecofeminist Vandana Shiva is one the most influential voices to emerge from the developing world. Shiva uses the term ‘Maldevelopment’ to refer agricultural technologies that are unsustainable and reproductive technologies that interfere with the integrity of women’s bodies. As Shiva states in her acclaimed book *Staying Alive*(1988), “The recovery of the feminine principle is an intellectual and political challenge to maldevelopment as a patriarchal project of domination and destruction, of violence and subjugation, of dispossession and the dispensability of both women and nature”(14). Maldevelopment, for Shiva, has been created by the North’s imperialist imposition of modernity on the whole globe. The ‘twin pillars’ of this models are economic development and modern scientific knowledge. As a result, the world is becoming effectively a ‘monoculture’ with a consequent loss of diversity of plant and animal life and of peoples and cultures. At the heart of this development is violence, a violation of nature and women: “The violence to nature as symptomatised by the ecological crisis, and the violence to women, as symptomatised by their subjugation and exploitation arise from this subjugation of the feminine principles … from being the creators and sustainers of life, nature and women are reduced to being ‘resources’ in the fragmented, anti-life model of maldevelopment”(6).

While there is much that is valid in the ecofeminists’ analysis of the adverse impact of colonialism on the natural resource base, and in their critique of the hegemony of international trade, consumerist production and technological fixes, environmental activist and scholar Sumi Krishna points out that not all development is patriarchal and anti-women. Furthermore, Krishna finds problematic the ecofeminists’ assumption that female biology endows women with a monopoly over holistic and ecological knowledge that men lack. This biologically deterministic view has been critiqued by progressive feminists who contend that if intrinsically humane qualities like nurturing of people and nature are rooted in women’s reproductive capacities, then it would follow that men are biologically incapable of such knowledge and nurturance. Such a politics is seen as pernicious by critics of Shiva’s views.

Vandana Shiva’s notable contribution to ecofeminism is that she relates the ‘feminine principle’ in nature to women’s key role in forest based food-gathering and subsistence agriculture. As Sumi Krishna observes, however, there is “considerable historical evidence to show that there is no simple division of labour by sex. In India, neither gathering nor the traditional knowledge production had been women’s exclusive domain. Women relate to nature not because of their biological distinctiveness as women, but
because of their gendered role in the household and community” (329). Krishna also takes issue with Shiva and Maria Mies’s argument that traditional and subsistence economies which satisfy basic survival needs are not poor. She believes that such reductive arguments reflect a strange blindness to the human dimensions of poverty.

There exists in Tamil literature a well-established tradition of associating human emotions with the five tiṇai landscapes in the love poetry of the cangam age. In more recent times, however, there have been relatively fewer such analyses that trace the connections between human lives and specific landscapes. Despite this lacuna in the current research, Tamil writers have addressed the damaging impact of modernity on the peaceful lives of people in a given society in several novels: Rajam Krishnan’s Kurinjithen (1960) (translated as When the Kurinji Blooms), Sa Kandasamy’s Saaya Vanam (1968) (translated as The Defiant Jungle) Kokilam Subbiah’s Thoorathu Pachai, (translated as Mirage), Dr V. Irai Anbu’s Athankarai Oram (1997) (translated as On the Banks of the River), Arivu Mani’s Paazhu Nilam (2010) (The Ravaged Land trans. mine). There are also several short stories that explore such vignettes of the interactions between humans and the ecosphere. Dalit writing in Tamil is particularly rich in depictions of the solace derived by these socially-marginalized peoples in a life lived in harmony with nature. Celebrated Dalit writers Poomani, Imayam, and Bama have all written novels that probe into the various dimensions of the social ostracism that impels the Dalits into the depths of nature, away from the hierarchies of mainstream society. Bama’s second novel, Sangati, in particular, is significant in its depiction of women deriving strength from solidarity with other triply-disadvantaged Dalit women. It serves as an important milestone in Dalit literature as it paves the way for the emergence of ecofeminist themes in Tamil writings. In a nascent stage as yet, ecofeminist concerns in Tamil literature have emerged in the short stories of some emerging writers.

The present study seeks to analyze two short stories in Tamil by contemporary writers Leo Joseph and Raj, titled “Vellicham” (“Sunlight” trans. mine) and “Pachai Mannu” (“Innocence” trans. mine), respectively. Rob Nixon in his essay “Environmentalism and Postcolonialism” notes the preponderance of American writers and critics in environmentalism studies relating to literary studies. This study seeks to redress such imbalances through the focus on two Tamil short stories thereby challenging the “exclusionary ethics of place” posited by Nixon (237).

The short story “Vellicham” (referred to hereafter as “Sunlight”) reflects the predicament of a micro-entrepreneur like Saradambal and the exigencies of her survival due to the devaluing of her labour. This calls for a reevaluation of women’s work with respect to ecofeminist principles. Women must unite the demands of the women’s movement with those of the ecological
movement to envision a radical reshaping on the basis of socio-environment relations and the underlying values of society.

Maldevelopment in economic growth ruptures the co-operative unity of man in nature and ultimately the whole universe is brought to the brink of destruction. It is often believed that “Activity, Productivity, Creativity which were associated with the feminine principles are expropriated as qualities of nature and women, these are transformed into exclusive qualities of man. Nature and women are turned into passive objects, to be used and exploited for the uncontrolled and uncontrollable desires of alienated man. From being the creators and sustainers of life, nature and women are reduced to being “resources” in the fragmented, anti-life model of maldevelopment”. (Shiva 1988: 6)

Maldevelopment is intellectually based on a reductionist category and each project has a fragmented nature that has intensified the climatic and seasonal changes and displaced women from productive work. On the contrary the feminine principles are non-violent and acting in it to sustain life by maintaining mutuality of relationships and they attempt to create holism and complexity.

The development caused by indigenous knowledge and culture will gain prominence and lead to new approaches which pave the way to create opportunities and emerge out successfully. At the same time to sustain oneself on the earth and to emphasize the relationship existing between development and sustenance, in relation to human livelihood on the planet becomes essential. There is a need to evolve a sense of relevance appropriate to real situation especially within the context of the rapidly changing technologies and social trends of the time.

In female-headed families striving to eke out a living, these women have to earn enough for food, education and healthcare. For all of them, the meager wage is absolutely insufficient to meet their requirements. The protagonist of the story, Saradambal is the mother of three children, two daughters and one crippled son. Her innocent husband was penalized and put in jail. Her family had lost the male-head and she was forced to take the position of breadwinner. The wife of Motchathar, a village businessman was kind, considerate and understood the predicament of Saradambal’s family. She allowed her to stay in a lonely house away from the busy areas. The house is in a dilapidated condition where there are no windows and only a front door. She has to sell appalams and other home made products to run her family. Her profession is highly dependent on the climatic conditions. The money that she earns is invaluable as it help in running the family thereby preventing their starvation.

As noted ecofeminist Vandana Shiva succinctly argues in her book Staying Alive “Women are devalued first, because their work co-operates
with nature’s processes, and second, because work which satisfies needs and ensures substance is devalued in general. Precisely because more growth in maldevelopment has meant less sustenance of life and life-support system, it is now imperative to recover the feminine principle as the basis for development which conserves and is ecological”(7) Society often insists that they must assume responsibility for their children both as primary care givers and as economic providers but it does not provide the minimal essential resources to do so. Even women who pursue such job opportunities often cannot afford to because of lack of affordable and lack of health insurance these factors prevent them from achieving success in their respective professions. In the process of selling the home made products Saradambal leaves her children under the care of Sundaram her second daughter. Sundaram had to look after her baby sister and mentally retarded brother. Due to heavy rain, Saradambal was forced to stay at home and her daughter Sundaram felt cheered due to the company of her mother.

As there was incessant rain over many days, Saradambal was unable to prepare her products. She was hopefully waiting for sunlight and her daughter had been pestering her about this. She optimistically comforted her daughter by saying that it would be sunny tomorrow.

On the fourth day, there appeared to be some sunlight in the beginning. Sundaram, had appreciated the dappled sunlight falling on the mist, leaves, flowers and various objects with deep admiration. On the evening of the fourth day, she found very little food for her family. She had small amount of rice but it was covered with red ants. She washed the rice thrice and cleaned the ants from the food. She fed the small amount of food to her daughters and she was left without any for herself.

Saradambal hopefully anticipates that the continuous rain may subside and she could go out to sell her homemade products but to her dismay, she saw the sky was full of thick clouds and it was threatening to rain heavily in a few minutes. She heard the rattling noise of the rain and she wept. Her tears rolled down over the floor mingling in the rain water and flowing over the streets. The fluctuation in the seasons which causes erratic rainfall for days together had brought her family to the brink of starvation. A micro-entrepreneur like Leo Joseph’s protagonist, Saradambal who was dependent upon the vagaries of nature for the preparation of her appalams and other food products was reduced to starvation due to the unseasonable heavy rainfall. This climatic change caused by maldevelopment has wreaked havoc on the life of this family who tried to make a living by sustainable methods.

Sustainable development can be more effectively carried out by providing an environment with economy and social comfort for the present generation without compromising the safe environment, economy and social comfort of future generations and by retaining the natural balance of the living environment, and economic factors and social comforts of the global populace at large.
The displacement of nature caused by maldevelopment prevents women from productive activity. As Vandana Shiva asserts “While gender subordination and patriarchy are the oldest of oppressions, they have taken on new and more violent forms through the project of development. Patriarchal categories which understand destruction as ‘production’ and regeneration of life as ‘passivity’ have generated a crisis of survival. Passivity, as an assumed category of the ‘nature’ of nature and of women, denies the activity of nature and life.” (1988: 3)

Feminism and ecology are being interpreted as revival of ‘prakriti’, the ultimate source of all life that becomes demoralized and decentred through the powers of political, economic and technological transformation and restructuring. Women’s productivity is a measure of producing life and sustenance but that kind of productivity has been invisible and merely reflects the domination of modern patriarchal economic categories which see only money and profit but no life.

The displacement of peasant labour due to the encroachment of their traditional lands by commercial interests has intensified their struggle for survival. The women and children who are left behind when the men are displaced are often doubly disadvantaged as they are not only reduced to a single parent family but they also have to eke out a living from a degraded ecosystem. In this context, Vandana Shiva (1993) argues that the tragedy of displacement due to development projects is compounded because the affected bear the cost but have no share in the benefits. In case of women, of course they have even lesser access. They are mere passive recipients in the fallout. Vandana Shiva puts the other facts in a very strong way by saying that women’s underdevelopment was not due to insufficient and inadequate participation, rather it was due to their enforced but asymmetric participation whereby they bore the cost but were excluded from the benefits.

The protagonist of the short story “Pachai Mannu” (referred to hereafter as “Innocence”) is a young mother named Pachai, who valiantly tries to collect a bundle of twigs to sell at a meager price to a local merchant. It was a scorching hot day and the young woman carries her sick baby on her back and tries to collect the twigs. As she straightens the small bundle of twigs on her head, she tries to comfort her hungry squalling infant. The child had a boil on its stomach and would not be quieted. Pachai had hoped to collect a large bundle of twigs so that she could divide it and sell four bundles for twenty-five paise each. But the denuded, parched forest did not yield much. She was completely alone, as her husband had gone to the city to earn enough to repay a petty loan. But in his innocence he had been cheated by the moneylender, and Pachai had neither any news of him nor had she received any money. With her meager earnings she was unable to even afford any broken rice to cook gruel for herself and the baby. Left defenseless against the commercial interests that were inexorably grinding her into starvation, she becomes one of the “new poor” posited by Vandana Shiva.
This “new poverty” threatens the very survival of millions on the planet as illustrated by the plight of Pachai.

The lives of the protagonists in these two stories reveal their extreme vulnerability to the forces of commodity capitalism and modern development. Their lives serve to validate Shiva’s view that “when commodity production as prime economic activity is introduced as development, it destroys the potential of nature and women to produce life and goods and services for basic needs” (1988:7). The categories of ‘productivity’ that devalue women’s work, particularly that work which cooperates with nature’s processes and provides sustenance, are found to promote gender inequality as well as being ecologically destructive. These stories reveal that modern, energy-intensive and productive technologies that are created within the framework of market economies often cast a dark shadow of poverty due to displacement and climate change. Such a finding would seem to validate Shiva’s view that the devaluation of women’s work, because it cooperates with nature’s processes and because work which provides sustenance is devalued in general. Shiva calls for a valorization of the feminine principle as the basis of development that conserves and is ecological. Writers of regional literature attempt to recuperate through such narrative encodings, those voices that had been subjugated by the forces of commodity capitalism. Tamil literary discourse proves to be in the vanguard of such critiques of the gendered dichotomy between ‘productive’ and ‘non-productive’ work based on money and price as the only measure of economic worth.

Works Cited:

Dr. Anita Balakrishnan  
Associate Professor of English  
Queen Mary’s College, Chennai-4

N. Sivagami  
Faculty of English, TILS, Chennai-4