



NATURE, GENDER, AND THE POETIC VOICE: ECOFEMINIST PERSPECTIVES IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY

Dr. Anjali Abraham

*Assistant Professor, Department of English, M.A College Kothamangalam, Dist. Ernakulam,
Kerala, India*

Abstract

This study unveils the intersection of ecofeminist theory and Indian women's poetry through a critical study of Meena Alexander, Mamta Kalia, and Sukrita Paul Kumar. Drawing on foundational ecofeminist thinkers such as Carolyn Merchant, Vandana Shiva, Val Plumwood, and Greta Gaard, the paper studies how gender, ecology, and identity converge in poetic expression. Meena Alexander's work emphasizes ecological belonging in exile and memory, Mamta Kalia foregrounds women's ecological labor within structures of patriarchy, and Sukrita Paul Kumar fuses body, land, and sacred ecology. By situating their poetry within ecofeminist frameworks, this study demonstrates how Indian women's writing not only critiques exploitation but also articulates visions of resilience and interconnectedness. By situating their creative works within ecofeminist discourse, the paper argues that literature becomes a powerful site of ecological and feminist intervention, offering insights into issues of sustainability, justice, and care. The paper concludes that ecofeminism, as enacted in these texts, is both a critique of power and a practice of hope.

Keywords

Ecofeminism, Indian Women Poets, Meena Alexander, Mamta Kalia, Sukrita Paul Kumar, Gender and Ecology, Literary Criticism, etc.

Full Article

Ecofeminism has emerged as a critical framework for understanding the interconnected oppressions of women and nature. The theory asserts that the subjugation of women and the exploitation of the environment are not separate phenomena but products of similar hierarchical systems. Literature, as a cultural medium, often mirrors and critiques these structures, enabling readers to question dominant paradigms of gender and ecology. This paper examines the works of three Indian women poets—Meena Alexander, Mamta Kalia, and Sukrita Paul Kumar—through an ecofeminist lens. Their poetry highlights the predicament of personal and ecological narratives, showing how women's experiences of marginalization resound with ecological deprivation. In doing so, these poets not only critique patriarchal and capitalist structures but also propose alternative visions of care, interdependence, and resistance.

Ecofeminism has attracted wide scholarly attention since the late twentieth century. Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the scientific Revolution* (1980) and Vandana Shiva's *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (1988) remain foundational texts, linking historical shifts in science and development to the dual domination of women and nature. Maria Mies and Shiva's *Ecofeminism* (1993) offered a radical critique of



capitalist patriarchy, inspiring both activists and scholars. Val Plumwood's *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993) further sharpened the philosophical underpinnings of ecofeminism, highlighting the dangers of dualistic thinking.

In the Indian context, Bina Agarwal's *A Field of One's Own* (1994) provided a materialist critique of essentialist ecofeminism, showing that women's ecological roles are shaped by caste, class, and region. Scholars have also explored how Indian women's movements, such as Chipko, embody ecofeminist principles by linking survival struggles with ecological conservation. Critics argue that women's writing often foregrounds themes of embodiment, land, and survival that resonate with ecofeminist thought. Indian English poetry, in particular, has been read as a spot where gender, ecology, and postcolonial identity intersect. While poets like Kamala Das, Imtiaz Dharker, and Arundhati Subramaniam have been studied for their ecological themes, the works of Meena Alexander, Mamta Kalia, and Sukrita Paul Kumar remain underexplored from an ecofeminist perspective. This paper seeks to address this gap by situating these poets within the ecofeminist discourse, thereby contributing to both feminist literary criticism and environmental humanities.

Ecofeminism emerged in the late twentieth century as an interdisciplinary movement that linked ecological concerns with feminist critique. The term itself was coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le féminisme ou la mort* (Feminism or Death), where she argued that patriarchal systems of domination threatened not only women but also the environment (d'Eaubonne, 12). Since then, ecofeminism has developed into a diverse and dynamic body of thought encircling philosophy, activism, literature, and cultural criticism. Its vital insight is that the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature are interconnected, but the approaches to this insight vary across disciplines and regions.

Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature* (1980) provided an early historical basis for ecofeminist thought. Merchant argued that the Scientific Revolution replaced earlier organic models of nature with mechanistic ones, transforming the earth from a nurturing mother into a machine to be dominated (Merchant, 41). This change, she contends, coincided with new ideologies that reduced women to passive and domestic roles, reflecting a larger patriarchal logic of control. Vandana Shiva expanded this critique in her significant work *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development* (1988). For Shiva, rural women in India embody ecological wisdom through practices such as seed saving, water management, and forest conservation. Modern development models, she argues, not only devalue this knowledge but also exploit women's labour while destroying ecosystems (Shiva, 56). Shiva famously connected this critique to activism, pointing to the Chipko movement of the 1970s, where rural women in Uttarakhand protected forests by embracing trees, as a symbol of ecofeminist resistance. Greta Gaard's *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* (1993) brought together feminist and ecological concerns with issues of sexuality and animal rights, widening ecofeminism's scope (Gaard, 89). Val Plumwood's *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993) added a philosophical dimension, critiquing the dualistic thinking—mind/body, male/female, culture/nature—that structures Western thought. According to Plumwood, such binaries normalize domination and devalue those placed on the “nature” side of the divide (Plumwood, 67).

Ecofeminism is not a single unified theory but a collection of perspectives. Scholars often distinguish between two broad aspects: Firstly, Cultural Ecofeminism – which emphasizes symbolic and spiritual connections between women and nature. It often draws on goddess traditions, indigenous spirituality, and archetypes of female creativity. While this approach highlights alternative cultural imaginaries, critics caution that it risks essentialism by suggesting that women are “naturally” closer to nature (King, 103). Secondly Materialist Ecofeminism – which focuses on political and economic structures that link gender and ecology. Maria Mies and



Vandana Shiva's *Ecofeminism* (1993) argues that capitalist patriarchy exploits both women's labour and natural resources, particularly in the Global South (Mies and Shiva, 42). Materialist ecofeminists see women not as symbolic protectors of nature but as active agents in struggles over survival, rights, and justice. Both branches contribute important insights: cultural ecofeminism emphasizes the need for symbolic transformation, while materialist ecofeminism grounds its critique in social and economic realities.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality, though developed in the context of U.S. legal studies, has become crucial for ecofeminism. Intersectionality insists that gender oppression cannot be understood in isolation from race, class, caste, or colonial histories (Crenshaw, 149). Ecofeminism that ignores these differences risks universalizing "woman" as a homogeneous category. Black feminists such as bell hooks have underlined that ecological struggles in African American communities are inseparable from racism and economic marginalization (Hooks, 72). Similarly, in South Asia, Bina Agarwal has critiqued essentialist ecofeminism for romanticizing rural women. In *A Field of One's Own* (1994), Agarwal demonstrates that women's relationships to land and resources vary by caste, class, and region (Agarwal, 112). She calls for a political ecofeminism that focuses collective rights and local contexts rather than abstract notions of universal sisterhood.

By incorporating intersectionality, ecofeminism avoids essentialism and gains relevance across diverse contexts. This is particularly important for postcolonial studies, where women's ecological struggles are shaped by histories of colonial extraction, caste hierarchies, and globalization. Literary studies have played a vital role in extending ecofeminist thought. Literature not only reflects cultural attitudes toward nature and gender but also provides imaginative spaces to envision alternatives. Alicia Puleo argues that ecofeminist literary criticism uncovers metaphors and narrative strategies that link gendered oppression with ecological exploitation (Puleo, 59). Patrick Murphy suggests that ecofeminist literature emphasizes relationality and community over individualism (Murphy 94). In the Indian context, writers such as Mahasweta Devi, Kamala Das, and Arundhati Subramaniam explore themes of land, body, and survival in ways that resonate with ecofeminist theory. Ecofeminist readings of such works reveal how literature can function as cultural critique and ecological intervention. Poetry, in particular, lends itself to ecofeminist analysis because of its condensed imagery and affective power. Ecofeminism has not been free from critique. Some scholars argue that equating women with nature reinforces stereotypes rather than dismantling them. Others contend that ecofeminism lacks theoretical consistency or coherence because it draws from too many disciplines.

However, contemporary ecofeminism has evolved in response to these criticisms. By incorporating perceptions from queer theory, posthumanism, and new materialism, it has expanded beyond simple woman-nature parallels. Scholars like Stacy Alaimo and Donna Haraway have emphasized interdependence, relationality, and material agency, allowing ecofeminism to connect with broader ecological debates about climate change, biotechnology, and the Anthropocene (Alaimo, 88; Haraway, 102). Ecofeminism remains a vital theoretical framework for linking gender justice with ecological sustainability. From Merchant's historical critique to Shiva's activism, from Plumwood's philosophy to Agarwal's political economy, ecofeminism offers a diverse toolbox for analysing oppression and imagining alternatives. For this study, ecofeminism provides the lens through which the works of Meena Alexander, Mamta Kalia, and Sukrita Paul Kumar can be read as both feminist and ecological interventions. Their poetry resonates with ecofeminist commitments to care, justice, and interdependence, showing how literature participates in the struggle for a more sustainable and equitable world.

Meena Alexander's poetry reflects the complexities of migration, memory, and fractured identities, but beneath these personal and political themes lies a deep ecological consciousness.



Her work often interweaves the fragility of human life with the precariousness of the natural world. In *Illiterate Heart* (2002), Alexander writes, “I would know the water’s voice /the speech of air among trees/the roots of silence I carry in my body” (Alexander, 54). This passage resonates with ecofeminist critiques of dualism. Alexander dissolves the boundary between body and environment, suggesting that memory and identity is sustained through ecological relations. As Plumwood argues, resisting hierarchical binaries requires recognizing human embeddedness in the natural world (Plumwood, 67). Alexander’s work enacts precisely this dissolution, showing how ecological belonging is integral to diasporic survival. Her poems also critique developmental violence, particularly the erasure of local landscapes. In *Raw Silk* (2004), she writes of rivers that “no longer run clean” and forests “gutted for fire” (Alexander, 22). Such imagery aligns with Shiva’s argument that capitalist development undermines both ecological and cultural survival (Shiva, 56). Alexander’s ecofeminism emerges not in overt activism but in her poetic insistence that exile, ecology, and memory are inseparably intertwined. Mamta Kalia is known for her sharp, often satirical voice that critiques patriarchy and middle-class Indian life. Yet her poetry also contains subtle ecofeminist undercurrents, particularly in its attention to women’s everyday negotiations with scarcity, survival, and labour. In her poetry collection *Tribute to Papa*, she recalls, “My mother measured every drop of water/boiled lentils with care/ counted grains as if they were gold” (Kalia, 15).

Here, ecological scarcity is linked directly to women’s labour of sustenance. Kalia’s focus on her mother echoes Shiva’s recognition of women as custodians of subsistence knowledge (Shiva, 72). Yet, unlike romanticized images of “women as closer to nature,” Kalia presents this ecological labour as exhausting and undervalued—a burden produced by patriarchy and poverty. In another poem, “After Eight Years of Marriage,” she notes, “We live by adjustments/patching holes in roofs/ cooking on stoves that choke us with smoke” (Kalia, 7). This imagery reflects materialist ecofeminism, which emphasizes the structural conditions—poverty, inadequate technology, patriarchal neglect—that link women’s oppression with ecological degradation (Mies and Shiva, 42). Kalia’s poetry critiques not only patriarchal dominance but also the socio-economic frameworks that force women into unsustainable relations with their environment.

Sukrita Paul Kumar’s poetry is perhaps the most explicitly ecofeminist of the three. Her poems foreground the body as a site of ecological label and resistance. In “Rowing Together” (2018), she writes, “The river runs in my veins/tides rise with my breath/and every wound carries the smell of earth” (Kumar, 44). This intimate linking of body and ecology echoes Merchant’s recognition of organic worldviews that value interconnectedness (Merchant 41). For Kumar, the ecological is not external to the self but embedded in bodily rhythms, wounds, and healing. Her poetry also reflects intersectionality, acknowledging how ecological struggles are shaped by displacement, caste, and gender. In *Dreams Come Home* (2005), she recalls refugee women who carried “bundles of seeds, stories of rain, and broken gods” across borders (Kumar, 29). This aligns with Crenshaw’s insistence that feminist analysis must attend to intersecting axes of identity and oppression (Kumar, 149). For Kumar, ecology is always already political, marked by histories of migration and violence.

Kumar’s ecofeminism is also spiritual without being essentialist. In *Without Margins* (2016), she invokes the goddess figure not as a timeless archetype but as a fractured symbol of resilience, “Her body is a forest burned/ yet green shoots stir in the ash” (Kumar, 63). This imagery demonstrates what cultural ecofeminists call the revaluation of feminine symbols, while also aligning with materialist concerns about real ecological crises. Kumar’s poetry thus integrates body, ecology, and spirituality into a holistic ecofeminist vision. While Alexander, Kalia, and Kumar approach ecofeminism differently; their works converge on key themes. Alexander highlights ecological belonging within exile and memory, Kalia exposes the material burdens of



women's ecological labour, and Kumar fuses body, land, and sacred ecology. Together, their poetry demonstrates the richness of ecofeminism as a framework for literary analysis. Alexander resonates with Plumwood's critique of dualism. Kalia embodies Mies and Shiva's materialist ecofeminism. Kumar bridges cultural and material ecofeminism, situating ecology within both body and history. Their works collectively suggest that ecofeminism is not an abstract theory but a lived reality, articulated through poetic language that critiques, resists, and reimagines relations between gender and ecology.

Ecofeminism offers a powerful context for rethinking the intersections of gender, ecology, and literature. By foregrounding the embodied, ecological, and political struggles of women, it challenges both patriarchal structures and exploitative ecological practices. The poetry of Meena Alexander, Mamta Kalia, and Sukrita Paul Kumar demonstrates how literary texts can articulate ecofeminist insights through personal memory, everyday labour, and sacred symbolism. Alexander emphasizes ecological belonging as integral to diasporic identity, revealing how exile and environment intertwine. Kalia exposes the burdens of ecological survival placed upon women, aligning with materialist ecofeminist critiques of poverty and patriarchy. Kumar, meanwhile, situates the female body as a site of ecological and spiritual resilience, offering a vision that merges cultural and material ecofeminism.

Together, these poets show that ecofeminism is not a singular theoretical lens but a diversity of perspectives grounded in diverse experiences of gender, ecology, and culture. Their work reveals that poetry is not only an aesthetic practice but also a form of ecological consciousness and resistance. In bringing ecofeminist theory into dialogue with their writing, this paper demonstrates how Indian women's poetry contributes to global conversations on feminism, environment, and justice. Thus, ecofeminism is not merely a critique but also a practice of hope—one that envisions sustainable, equitable, and interconnected futures for both women and the natural world.

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